

Our Whole Society: Reconciling secularism, religion, and the common good

March 22-24, 2015
Vancouver, BC

It is often assumed that a secular society has no need for religion in its public affairs, and that faith ought to be left to the private lives of individuals. And yet, Canadian public discourse is increasingly preoccupied with the role of religion in society. Religious freedom, religious accommodation, the secular charter – these have been the subject of headlines for the past several years.

The return of religion has not been about disagreement or conflict between faiths, it has been about the place of religious knowledge, belief, and practice in our secular, public life. Expectations that religion would recede out of the public eye have been disappointed. Instead of receding from view, religion has reappeared – in some cases, with renewed social purpose. In this new context, what does it mean to be a secular society? Does this mean opening up deliberation and discourse to all voices and perspectives without prejudice, or does it require restricting certain ideas from entering into public debate? How should government and the courts regard the problem of religious freedom in relation to other human rights? In a society that values science and free thinking, what does religion have to add to our understanding of the common good? More generally, what conception of religion does secularism promote, and is this accurate? These questions are not easily resolved in the opinion editorial pages, nor should they simply be left to a few experts to decide. One way or another, they are questions that concern us all.

The purpose of this conference is to bring together thinkers and practitioners to investigate the process of reconciling secularism, religion and the common good. It follows on another conference held at McGill University in 2013, called “Bridging the Secular Divide,” which was animated by similar interests. Our aim is to advance the public discourse on a complicated, but essential topic. Can we have an open public sphere that leaves room for religious language or symbols? How do we avoid creating barriers to participation in Canadian society that divide people and generate resentment and hostility? We need to consider how to create appropriate space for religion in public discourse, and how to do so in a society that is increasingly diverse. We need to build a society that includes everyone – a whole society. Despite the problems of religious conflict that have afflicted humanity, religion has played a vital role in establishing common values, creating institutions for the public good, and fostering a sense of solidarity among people. In other words, religion is neither simple and naïve, nor entirely cultural – it remains a vital feature of modern Canadian society. The question is no longer about ‘keeping it out’ of public life, but how religion can play a constructive role in the creation of a better country.

This conference will take place at UBC Robson Square, an academic setting that provides a space for open inquiry in the heart of downtown Vancouver. In addition to engaging researchers and thinkers, the conference will draw from the experience of practitioners from religious communities and public organizations that work together to advance the common good. Our objective is not scientific or theological – although we appreciate the value of both areas of inquiry – rather, it is to serve a public role: to create a structured space for an ongoing conversation about the role of religion in Canadian public discourse.