

OUR WHOLE SOCIETY



**Our Whole Society:
Free to Believe, Responsible to Act**

May 3-4, 2021

Winnipeg, MB
The Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Sponsored by the Canadian Interfaith Conversation

On May 3-4, 2021, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation is sponsoring “Our Whole Society,” the fifth iteration of a conference that aims to foster a new dialogue about the changing role of religion in Canadian society. The conference is held in partnership with the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Previously held in Montreal (2013), Vancouver (2015), Ottawa (2017), and Toronto (2019), the gathering brings together leading thinkers from all sectors of society to consider how insights from diverse experiences and traditions of thought can shed light on the contribution religion makes, both positive and negative, to the many challenges Canada currently faces. Past speakers have included leading Canadian thinkers and writers such as: John Ralston Saul, Solange Lefebvre, John Borrows, Marie Wilson, Bob Rae, and Daniel Weinstock.

In this conference, we are building on an approach to public discourse that seeks to draw on insights from diverse religious and secular traditions of thought to find common ground that helps us to build a society that is more unified amidst its diversity. As we are hosted this year at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, the conference theme invites exploration of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to freedom of thought, conscience, or religion. The same rights are protected under Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and complemented by Article 12(1) in

the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Charter Vision of the Canadian Interfaith Conversation references these foundational texts when it commits to work for the greater realization of the fundamental freedom of conscience and religion for the sake of the common good and engaged citizenship.

We will be meeting in a context shaped by our society's response to the coronavirus pandemic. This disease has left no one in the world unaffected, and our social response to it has raised deep and enduring questions about the values that bind us together. It is timely, therefore, to reflect upon the values and aspirations we hold as a society. These include a belief in human dignity and rights, a shared concern for the well-being of children and youth, and a desire for greater social solidarity. This conference will allow us to explore these themes, as we consider the relationship between being the freedom to believe and the responsibility to act to create a better society for all.

Addressing challenges to freedom of religion or belief

Canada's legacy of protecting religious freedom is mixed. Early on the First Nations of Canada experienced the denial and suppression of their right to freedom of religion or belief. Traditional spiritual and religious ceremonies were banned and suppressed, while the Indian residential school system was designed to replace their own identity with another one. Despite long-standing legal protections for religious freedom reaching back to the Quebec Act of 1774 through to the 1982 Charter, this right continues to be debated in public and contested in court. Furthermore, new challenges are emerging from social media and other on-line platforms, which propagates hatred and prejudice that can generate real-world violence and persecution. What role does protection for freedom of religion or belief play in fostering social understanding in a diverse Canadian society, in fostering reconciliation? To what extent does this freedom extend to protections for organizations, institutions, or even the natural environment? What new and old challenges are facing traditional, religious, spiritual and other communities as they seek to exercise these rights? How should we respond to the growth of religion-based prejudice in Canadian society, especially as it affects Indigenous and minority populations?

Empowering children and youth

The rising generations of young people are preparing to assume greater responsibility for an environment, society, and political framework that are undergoing rapid change. How are they being educated to exercise constructive agency to build a better future? What role does traditional, religious and spiritual education play in equipping them to assume these responsibilities? What are the roles, respectively, of the family, community, public education, and other social institutions in accompanying young people through this process of growth and maturation? What challenges arise in public education and at universities, and how can they be constructively addressed?

Building social solidarity

It seems that almost every social cleavage in Canada is deepening under the pressures of a divisive political discourse. These cleavages can be traced according to region, language, identity, class, or the religious-secular divide. Furthermore, the need to build social solidarity acquires greater urgency in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. What does it take to work across these divides and heal the body politic? What is the potential and actual contribution of religion and spirituality to this process? Where do we see new approaches to addressing inequality, fostering reconciliation, responding to the climate crisis, and building community at the grassroots of society?