

May 8-9, 2017

Saint Paul University, Ottawa

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**Building Our Whole Society:
Religion and Citizenship at Canada's 150th**

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The purpose of this conference is to inquire into the relationship between religion and citizenship at the 150th anniversary of confederation in Canada. This initiative builds upon an ongoing effort to foster a new conversation about religion and secularism in Canadian public discourse, which included past conferences at McGill University in 2013 and the University of British Columbia in 2015. These gatherings have brought together civic leaders, academics, public servants, students, religious leaders, lawyers, and engaged citizens to talk about how we can invigorate civic participation through greater inclusion. In 2017, we will meet again in Ottawa to expand and enrich the conversation.

At the time of confederation, Canada was a predominantly Christian country. Most citizens were Christians, and the spirituality and religion of Aboriginal peoples were excluded from mainstream society. Today, however, we are one of the most diverse societies in the world. Most Canadians continue to profess some kind of religious belief, and we have significant populations of every world religion, as well as large numbers of atheists, secular humanists, and the spiritual-but-not-religious. What are the implications of this unprecedented diversity for citizenship in Canada? How do we advance a sense of unity and participation in our collective life?

For many decades, the dominant framework for promoting social unity has been exclusive secularism. This version of secularism aims to remove religion from public life by insisting that it remain a private affair. Public discourse, social action, and politics are policed for mention of religion; influential critics silence even the most reasonable and constructive interventions by insisting that secularism means a society free from religion. Overt expressions of religious identity are met with everyday prejudice and public denunciations. An exclusive secularism promotes unity at the expense of marginalizing many active and engaged citizens. What is the alternative? Is it possible to have an inclusive secularism, which provides space for diverse secular and religious viewpoints and practices to be welcomed into the public sphere without prejudice? Can we advance beyond simple toleration of differences to respect for the diversity of our citizenry? Is there a special role for religious critique in defense of the poor and vulnerable? How can we develop new ways of talking, thinking and acting together that foster a more mature collective life?

To be a citizen means to be a full member of society, with everything this entails: legal status, access to rights, and sharing in a common identity. In a community of citizens, the health of the social body depends upon the active participation of its members. Citizens not only vote, they also organize service projects, mentor younger people, care for their environment, attend to the needs of the poor, and voice their concerns to political leaders. Citizens, through their interaction and conversations, generate the culture and ethos that forms the background to political life. However, powerful social forces also act against the development of an active citizenry by promoting apathy, distraction and cynicism. Advertising and mass culture exalt material consumption to the rank of a virtue, and an obsession with trivial matters diverts our attention from our responsibilities to one another. How can we transcend these destructive forces to work for the common good? What sources of personal motivation and social capital can we call upon to strengthen the Canadian citizenry?

Historically, and currently, religion has been a powerful resource for strengthening citizenship. Many religious teachings help to connect the individual with a sense of social purpose, and encourage service and sacrifice for the common good. What can we learn from these traditions of thought, which describe the qualities of a virtuous person, the characteristics of a good society, and the values of public institutions? Religious communities also help to develop the relationships of trust, reciprocity, and cooperation – building social capital and promoting collective action. How can we draw upon Canada’s religious diversity as a resource for strengthening civic engagement, rather than as a threat to social unity?

We must also recognize, however, that religion can undermine citizenship. Religious groups can become inward-looking communities, more concerned with the welfare of their own members than the progress of society. At best, this pattern of life fosters indifference to civic engagement, with the primary concern among members being the well-being of co-religionists. At its worst, this pattern leads to prejudice and hostility to outsiders. Furthermore, religion that is obsessed with esoteric beliefs and does not include a full appreciation for science and rational thought can lead to skewed perceptions about society, in some cases leading to radicalism and violent extremism. We also cannot ignore destructive patterns of religious life that systematically subjugate women and diminish their participation in the life of society. How do we distinguish between those kinds of religious thought and action that strengthen citizenship from those that undermine it? How should we talk about the negative aspects of religious practice, without stimulating prejudice and hate?

At Canada’s 150th anniversary of confederation, we need to discover a new way of talking, thinking and acting together so that Canada’s religious diversity can become a resource for collective advancement. This conference will convene a range of fresh perspectives from religious and secular traditions of thought, which will help us to think about how to build our whole society and promote a more active Canadian citizenry.