

Canadian Interfaith Conversation: Concerns about the “Charter affirming the values of State secularism... “

The Canadian Interfaith Conversation has been bringing together senior representatives of the world’s faith communities since January 2009, beginning with the hosting of the International Interfaith Leaders Summit. We continue to address together issues of concern for the common good of all Canadians from sea to sea to sea out of positions of deep respect and deep acknowledgement of pluralism.

National representatives of the Interfaith Conversation are concerned by the Quebec government’s proposed “Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests” which, among other measures, would prohibit government employees from wearing conspicuous religious symbols.

Religion is an inseparable part of both Quebecois and Canadian identity. Both the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms uphold religious freedom and the importance of religion as fundamental to human dignity.

Although the stated goal of the proposed Charter is to emphasize and give legal recognition to the neutrality of the state with respect to religion, the prohibition on wearing religious symbols presents an unacceptable restriction on the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion guaranteed in both the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

We question this reference to “neutrality”. The goal of a genuinely secular and “neutral” government surely has to do with its being fair and nonsectarian in its treatment of all citizens whatever their deepest personal commitments, whether religious or non-religious, as long as those commitments do not harm others. If a government were to adopt a position that welcomes the public expression of personal conscience and beliefs, but only if any personal reference to religious belief is suppressed, it would deny to some members of society a freedom enjoyed by others in the exercise of their conscience and beliefs. In such a case, the government would take sides in an unfair and sectarian way. On the other hand, if the government respects those fundamental human rights that have been cherished as important values in Quebec, and articulated in the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms, then the definition of personal and collective identity should derive from the normal evolution of society, including the evolution of religious understanding and practice taking place therein. Identity is formed as all members of society--whether religious or secular-- engage freely in the social processes and public discourses that we associate with pluralism and democracy as well as freedom of expression and conscience. It is not the role of government to determine and fix that identity, whether personal or collective, in advance.

Internationally, Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights affirms that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this includes freedom to change his[orher] religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his[or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

We believe the provision of fair and equal access and services to all citizens is enhanced, rather than undermined, by expressions of the diversity of a truly pluralistic, free and democratic society. It is in the freedom of diversity for all faiths and those of no faith tradition that there is justice for all.

The Canadian Interfaith Conversation encourages the Quebec government to reconsider its proposed ban on religious symbols in the public service. Requiring individuals to abandon certain religious practices and essential parts of their identity creates an atmosphere of intolerance and inequity and will undermine the egalitarianism and the sense of social unity that the Quebec government has stated it desires to uphold with this initiative.

The Canadian Interfaith Conversation is an advocate for religion in a pluralistic society and in Canadian public life. We want to promote harmony, dialogue and insight among religions and religious communities in Canada and with all Canadians, strengthen our society's just foundations, and work for greater realization of the fundamental freedom of conscience and religion for the sake of the common good and an engaged citizenship throughout our country.

To that end, we append to this statement our Charter Vision as respectful participation of the world's faiths in the Canadian Mosaic.

Signed by the following members of the Canadian Interfaith Conversation,

Mr. Zul Kassamali, Vice President, Association of Progressive Muslims of Canada, Pres.Toronto Interfaith Council

The Right Reverend Barry Clarke, Bishop of Montreal, Anglican Church of Canada

The Right Reverend Dennis Drainville, Bishop of Quebec, Anglican Church of Canada

The Right Reverend John H. Chapman, Bishop of Ottawa, Anglican Church of Canada

The Most Reverend Fred Hiltz, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada

Ms. Karen McKye, Secretary General, Baha'i Community of Canada

Rev. Sam Chaise, Executive Director, Canadian Baptist Ministries

Dr. Peter Reid, Executive Minister, Convention of Atlantic Baptist Ministries

Rev. David Rowley, Secrétaire Général, Union d'Églises baptistes francophones du Canada

Rev. Tim McCoy, Executive Minister, Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec

Rev. Jeremy Bell, Executive Minister, Canadian Baptists of Western Canada

Dr. Ronald A. Kuipers, Director, The Centre for Philosophy, Religion, and Social Ethics

Elder David P. Homer, Area Seventy, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Mr. Bruce J. Clemenger, President, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Pandit Roopnauth Sharma, President of Hindu Federation, Spiritual Leader Ram Mandir

Presidents Tom Wolthuis and Dawn Wolthuis, Institute for Christian Studies

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

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The Rev. Prof. Dr. James Christie, Ridd Institute for Religion and Global Policy

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Religions for Peace Canada et Religions pour la Paix - Québec

The Right Reverend Gary Paterson, Moderator, the United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada

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