



Bridging the Secular Divide: Religion and Canadian Public Discourse

Advancing a conversation about religion and Canada's public discourse

*A framework document for the conference, "Bridging the Secular Divide"
McGill University, May 27-28, 2013*

As participants gathered at McGill University in Montreal on May 27-28, 2013 for a conference on "Bridging the Secular Divide: Religion and Canadian Public Discourse," we aspire to advance an ongoing conversation about a constructive and positive role for religion in Canadian society. This document proposes an initial framework for a continuing conversation about religion and Canada's public discourse.

Religion, pluralism and secularism in Canada

Canada has been shaped by the experience of increasing religious diversity, which has been safeguarded by the protection of religious freedom. Religious liberty was protected as early as the Quebec Act of 1774, which upheld the rights of Roman Catholics resident in Quebec to practice their religion freely. In the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, freedom of conscience and religion is identified as

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the first of five fundamental freedoms. Canada's Aboriginal peoples have maintained their spirituality and asserted its role in society, despite efforts made in earlier decades to eradicate these beliefs and practices. Today, changing migration patterns are altering the religious landscape of the country, enriching our country's religious pluralism and prompting new questions about limits on religious freedom. Religion, in all its diversity, is here to stay in Canadian society.

We recognize the value of secular public institutions insofar as they promote equal treatment for all people and prevent one religion from being favoured over others. However, secularism, in a more

extreme form, espouses the restriction of many public expressions of religion. It assumes that religion is inherently exclusionary or divisive, and that democratic civility is promoted by restricting its role to private belief. This is a form of secularism that limits the advancement of our public discourse by excluding perspectives that draw from the insights of religion.

In a country that has embraced values of pluralism and religious freedom, the exclusion of religion from all public discourse would be inconsistent with our heritage. Our challenge is to foster a new spirit of civility and reconciliation within an increasingly diverse society, where we can speak openly together about our beliefs, values and principles and how they relate to the common good – where neither belief nor unbelief are privileged.

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McGill

**Tony Blair
Faith Foundation**

What role for religion in public discourse?

There is general uncertainty in Canadian society about how religion ought to enter into the spaces of public discourse, where the ideas that shape public opinion and public policy are generated. In this paper, we make a distinction between the influence of religious institutions on policy, and the concepts, ideas, language and approaches that have developed out of Canada's religions and which can help to enrich our public discourse. While we recognize the important role that religious organizations have

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played in the provision of social services and development of many secular institutions, it is the latter role that religion plays – as a source of knowledge and wisdom available to everyone – that we wish to emphasize. We think that the insights offered by religion, whether based on spiritual teachings or the experience of people applying them, can contribute positively to the clarification of shared values and thinking on issues of public concern.

Religion enters into Canadian public discourse through the content of interventions by citizens, professionals, civil society organizations, politicians, media and other actors in the civic landscape. Religious perspectives have sometimes been expressed in the public sphere using moralizing or discriminatory language – or in ways that suggest that one religion should be regarded as uniquely authoritative. These contributions have not helped to improve the tone or content of public discourse. Our aspiration is for a more moderate and gracious mode of deliberation, characterized by mutual respect and a search for shared insight and understanding.

We are calling for a new level of maturity in our public discourse, where diverse religious perspectives are part of a rich and dynamic Canadian conversation. Religious voices can help to set a higher standard for civil, respectful, and robust discussions around social issues and public policy – precisely by avoiding self-righteousness, modeling mutual respect and learning, demonstrating appreciation for the value of science, and acknowledging the truth present in the views of others. These are values that will enrich Canadian public discourse, and the role of diverse religions in advancing the common good.

We believe that civic institutions, including media, political parties, government and civil society, benefit from greater inclusion of religious perspectives, when shared in a manner described above. Religious communities often possess a wealth of experience addressing a range of social issues, from education and youth empowerment to restorative justice and reconciliation. Furthermore, as our public discourse is increasingly narrowed by strictly market or utilitarian analysis, religious voices can offer fresh perspectives on the moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions of public issues and priorities – from the crisis of climate change to the challenge of eradicating poverty.

Where do we go from here?

We see this conference as part of an ongoing conversation about the role of religion in Canadian public discourse. This conversation has its genesis centuries in the past, but more recently it has included important initiatives in media, among faith community leaders, and even elected officials, which have all sought to build a broad base of dialogue including all Canada's religions with the aim of fostering a more robust and civil national discourse.

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What unites these initiatives is more than an ethic of interfaith dialogue. It is a belief in the value of participation by Canada's religions in civil society. Through engagement in public discourse, religion becomes even more outward-oriented and concerned with the issues in society and the promotion of the common good. As perspectives are subject to public scrutiny and debate, they may become modified and clarified in conversation with others. We hope that this conference helps to encourage more constructive participation by religion in public discourse on the issues of the day.