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Is it acceptable for a veiled woman to take a citizenship oath in Canada? Should a city council meeting start with prayers? What is the role of religious freedom in Canada's foreign policy? Can a private university require its students to sign an ethical covenant based on religious teachings?

These are questions that have been in the headlines over the past year, and they don't have easy answers. Some argue religion should be restricted to the private world of personal belief, but this understanding of secularism is inadequate in the context of an increasingly pluralistic society.

It is fantasy to expect religion will be removed from public life. More than 75 per cent of Canadians, according to the 2011 Census, declare a religious affiliation. Most of the rest are likely to claim they are "spiritual but not religious."

What is changing, however, is the sheer diversity of belief. Immigration to Canada has contributed new ideas and new practices that continue to transform our social and cultural fabric. Young people are exploring spiritual matters in new ways. What all this means is we need a new and different way to talk about our common life, because the expectations of secularism don't work for most people.

The idea of the secular has its benefits. We don't want to live in a theocracy, in which religion controls politics, and power corrupts belief. Nor do we want the rights of minorities to believe and practice their faith to be trampled on because of a majority view. The promotion of religious toleration, mutual respect, authority of science, and virtue of free thinking has been successful thanks to ideas and practices of secularism.

But taken too far, the removal of religion from all public discourse threatens to marginalize large groups of people and discourage the significant public work of religious organizations and volunteers. A strict secularism undermines the integrity of the spiritual and cultural practices of Aboriginal peoples. It promotes a subtle kind of exclusion that makes groups feel as if they are outside of the mainstream of society, with few pathways to civic engagement. This feeling of exclusion and isolation can promote radicalization. By removing religion from the public sphere, suspicions about minorities can also take root. These suspicions can reinforce prejudices expressed through Islamophobic and anti-Semitic speech and action.

A harsh secularism also diminishes our public life by robbing us of the rich meaning of religious concepts. Our idea of human rights can be traced to religious traditions of thought that maintain the sacred and intrinsic worth of human life. The understanding of a treaty as a sacred covenant, more than a legal arrangement, comes from Aboriginal traditions of thought. If we could learn how to engage religious pluralism more substantially in our public discourse, we could improve civic participation and elevate our national conversation beyond the narrow categories of self-interest and economic utility.

To be a citizen of Canada means more than a passport; it means being part of a whole society. A citizen participates in making her society a better place to live, by working with others for the well-being of the whole. We need to revitalize citizenship in Canada, not through border control and punitive measures, but by embracing a new level of toleration and mutual respect. We need a sense of confidence as a society that diverse religious beliefs and practices (even those we don't understand) can be welcomed into public discourse without threatening social cohesion. Conflicting views are inevitable, and they take time to work out. But somehow we need faith that the collective good is better served by an open and vibrant public sphere, where prejudice and recrimination are set aside, than by a disciplinary system of secular public conversation.

We are collaborating with friends and colleagues from religious and secular organizations alike to convene a conference called: Our Whole Society: Bridging the Religious-Secular Divide, at UBC Robson Square from March 22-24. It aims to make a modest contribution to our vision of a more tolerant, respectful and inclusive public sphere in Canada.

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