



Public **Religion** in a Privatized **SOCIETY**

The role of Christianity
in secular society.

RAY PENNINGS

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On May 4, 2010, Ray Pennings (Senior Fellow and Director of Research at Cardus) made a presentation to MPs and Senators in the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, Ontario.

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The presentation was a condensed version of the following document. The extra information found in this booklet was prepared by Mr. Pennings to supplement his talk.

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ARPA – Ottawa, May 4, 2010

Ray Pennings, Senior Fellow, Cardus



I am aware of the adage that it is not considered polite to publicly discuss religion or politics. I am also aware from watching Question Period that there is a unique definition of “polite” that prevails in Ottawa. Parliament Hill being the seat of federal politics, I need no defense for raising the subject of politics here. However, religion remains a delicate matter. Even though approximately 90% of the population checks a religion box when asked to self-identify on a survey, with only 30% of the population actively engaged in religious services or activities on a weekly basis, getting beyond safe platitudes on this subject is a journey undertaken with some risk.

Most of us will acknowledge that religious beliefs and networks are indeed factors in the backroom political calculus of our parties and campaigns. Social attitudes and behaviour are shaped by what goes on in the nation’s churches, synagogues and mosques; and so, all politicos must pay attention to them, in some manner. Still, we do not have a broadly accepted public language and framework to seriously engage the public issues that religion prompts. So the typical public discourse amounts to little more than some general platitudes about the important contribution religion makes to the lives of many Canadians, always hastening to add that of course religion is an intensely private matter, and that separating church and state means the subject is really one we cannot talk about in a political context.

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Leaving aside the fact that the concept of “separation of church and state” is an American constitutional concept that Canada’s Supreme Court has indicated does not apply in Canada¹, I want to contend tonight that this approach is both unwise and unsustainable. As I hope to describe in greater detail, some developments of recent decades are forcing us to reconsider the way we deal with religion in Canadian public life.

Leaving aside the nuance for a moment, it might be said that the events of September 11, 2001 are a symbolic turning point that have forced the issue. Prior to 9/11, religion was generally considered to be a private good. We could get away with saying, “What you believe and how you worship is up to you – your faith is a private matter. It doesn’t affect us and we don’t really care. Religion may not be for me, but it, by and large, contributes to good citizenship and encourages people to be honest and moral – traits which are certainly easier to deal with in public life than their opposites.” While hypocritical exceptions were the subject of contempt, religious persons were most likely to be honest, upright, contributing members of society. However, silence was the *status quo*: what you believed, how you worshipped, and the moral choices you made were totally personal matters, and discussing them publicly was almost as inappropriate as discussing what happens behind your bedroom doors. These are simply not things to be talked about in polite company.

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Since 9/11, things have changed. The terrorist attack challenged the consensus. It raised difficult questions about how we deal with the question of freedom when some would misuse that freedom to take away its very foundation. But beyond the obvious and immediate questions, September 11 made everyone realize that even though we didn’t talk much about it then, *private* beliefs had profound *public* consequences.

Although the obvious focus of this concern is minority, militant Islam, its impact is felt on all religion and on the place of religion in society. The polemic arguments such as those raised by Christopher Hitchens in his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* certainly do not have mainstream currency, but an underlying discomfort with orthodox religion of almost any stripe is real in Canada. Whether the discussion involves Muslims, Sikhs, Jews or Christians, one can find not only in the press but also in the general populace a discomfort with public expression of truth claims that might be considered to be exclusive to that faith group. Such claims – which belong to the essence of almost every religion – when made in public are viewed as divisive; and when boldly stated, are labeled intolerant. More and more people no longer view religion as a private good, but rather a public “bad”.

Stating it this way, of course, makes the point but does not provide the necessary nuance and qualification. My sense is that those who would unequivocally make the above statement still form a very small segment of the population. But there are many who would say that “some religions” are harmful and bad, and since we are committed to equality and pluralism, of necessity we need to take great care in dealing with all religion in public.

So why bother opening up this messy can of worms? Clearly this is a tricky terrain to navigate, and those of you who hold public office hardly need to add more complexity to your already difficult challenges. For an organization like ARPA, the answer is self-evident. ARPA’s mission is “to educate, equip, and encourage Reformed Christians to political action and to shine the light of God’s Word to Canada’s municipal, provincial, and federal governments.” But the urgency of this discussion isn’t strictly religious; I want to suggest that there are sociological, historical and legal developments which also force the issue. These developments are not unique to Canada, and I will make some reference to other jurisdictions, but there are Canadian particularities to these questions that do require our attention.

My intent tonight is to provide a survey of the main issues being raised in the current debate, outline some of the practical policy questions that will emerge from this debate, and conclude with some of my own suggestions as to what *public religion in a privatized society* means for religious leaders, political leaders, and society as whole.

A. Framing the Current Discussion Regarding Religion and Public Life in Canada

The subtitle of University of Toronto constitutional expert Peter Russell’s 2004 book is telling: *Constitutional Odyssey: Can Canadians Become a Sovereign People?* In the preface, he notes how his broodings were prompted by a conversation with an American political theorist who opined that “Canadians have not yet founded themselves as a people.”² In a country in search of a founding, the matter of the place of public religion in Canada remains an evolving story and the subject of some debate.

It’s difficult to dispute that religion – understood not just as the private worship practices of individuals but also as the public contribution

to society of identifiable communities – is an ongoing part of this story. Confederation in Canada involved the creation of a national polity within which two separate societies (French Catholic and English Protestant) could unite. The constitutional protection for religious education is just one example in which the place of religious communities was acknowledged. One can look at Canadian history, citing the social gospel movement of the early twentieth century or the relationship of the Duplessis government to the Catholic church. In the broad trajectory of history, Christian faith and practice were among the forces of cohesion that helped bind “a widely scattered people – indeed two peoples – into a prosperous, well-ordered, and reasonably stable nation-state.”³

UBC Professor George Egerton has identified three phases in “the status and functions of religion in Canadian constitutional history.”⁴ In the first phase, which he calls “Christian pluralism” and identifies as the dominant paradigm from before Confederation through the mid-twentieth century, “the Christian religion was central to the defining elements of politics, law, culture and imperial purpose.”⁵ Canadian churches, while competing as denominations, informally “functioned as ‘the conscience of the state’, performing priestly functions (public prayers, rituals, legitimating government authority); pastoral functions (health, welfare, socialization/schooling, chaplaincies); and prophetic functions (guardian of family / sexual morality; temperance crusades, social gospel criticisms of capitalist injustices).” As our post-War national discussions moved towards the subject of human rights, prompted by our own checkered record during the War as well as the passage of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the “Liberal governments of both King and St. Laurent, however, with trans-party concurrence, insisted that human rights must be given an explicit, transcendent religious source.”⁶

The leadership of Prime Ministers Diefenbaker and Pearson marked, according to Egerton, a shift from Christian pluralism to “Religious Pluralism.” “The exclusive Christian language gave way to a more inclusive ‘religious pluralism,’ as political leaders made explicit efforts to include Canada’s Jewish community in the national religious consortium.”⁷ It is useful to note the language of the *Canadian Bill of Rights* passed in 1960, which affirmed “that the Canadian nation is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God, the dignity and worth of the human person and the position of the

family in a society of free men and free institutions....”⁸ The Centennial celebrations and Expo 67 both were organized reflecting “the religious-positive pluralism of the Government.”⁹

The next phase of this history evokes the most contention. Egerton calls it the phase of “secularist pluralism” and notes the defining elements shifted “from religion to language and ethnicity.” The new polity was free from religious foundations. Often quoted in this context are the remarks of Prime Minister Trudeau’s speech to Parliament on December 15, 1967:

We are now living in a social climate in which people are beginning to realize, perhaps for the first time, that we are not entitled to impose the concepts which belong to a sacred society upon a civil or profane society. The concepts of the Civil society in which we live are pluralistic, and I think this Parliament realizes it would be a mistake for us to try to legislate into the society concepts which belong to a theological or sacred order. These are very important concepts no doubt, but they should not by themselves be considered as the sole guide for government.

It is beyond my purpose this evening to carefully delineate the history of the past forty or so years and its implications regarding the public place of religion in Canadian society. Elsewhere I have argued how the accompanying “pan-Canadian consensus” which was embraced by all mainstream political parties in Canada during this period is no longer valid and a new framework is needed in order to make sense of the political shifts we are seeing in the present decade.¹⁰ At this point, I simply want to make three observations that emerge from this cursory survey of Canadian history.

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- (1) The notion that Canadian history is defined by some variation of the “separation of church and state” and that religion has not played a very public role in Canada’s development is an *a-historical* argument.

- (2) Even though it must be acknowledged that the past forty or so years, highlighted by the patriation of the constitution and passage of the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982, mark a defined departure from the previous century of historical development, it is inaccurate to suggest that this marked the elimination of the public role of religion. Although there is little doubt that many would have preferred that the Canadian constitution not include any reference to God, and even though it was the subject of fierce debate, the fact that the preamble ultimately included a reference to the “supremacy of God” is itself evidence that within the electorate, there was a significant segment for which God did have something to do with the public affairs of the nation.
- (3) The ongoing debates that have come to expression not only in morally-contentious public policy matters, but also on questions relating to constitutional process and interpretation, national identity, and the use (or lack thereof) of religious language in official public settings are evidence that even during this period of “secular pluralism,” these are hardly settled questions.

There are three additional dimensions which we need to consider in order to fill in the picture: a sociological, a legal and a philosophic dimension. For many, this survey of history resonates because it parallels widely accepted understandings of modernism. A century ago, sociologist Max Weber coined the term “secularization” which has been understood as the decline of religious belief in the face of rationalization and the scientific perspective.¹¹ In 1967, Peter Berger wrote *The Sacred Canopy*¹² which has widely been referenced for its argument that modernization “necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.”¹³ What makes Berger particularly interesting is that during the nineties, he renounced his own secularization theory. Today most sociologists would agree with Berger that theories of secularization were mistaken in that they conflated two concepts: secularization and pluralization. According to Berger:

Today you cannot plausibly maintain that modernity necessarily leads to secularization; it may – and it does in certain parts of the world among certain groups of people – but not necessarily. On the other hand, I would argue that modernity very likely, but not inevitably, leads to pluralism, to a pluralization of worldviews,

*values, etc. including religion....I would simply define pluralism as the coexistence in the society of different worldviews and value systems under conditions of civic peace and under conditions where people interact with each other.*¹⁴

On the legal front, some appeal to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as transcending this entire discussion and providing a common basis with which Canadians can deal with these questions. In 2002, then Justice Minister Irwin Cotler told the House of Commons that “Human rights has emerged as the new secular religion of our time.”¹⁵ University of Lethbridge political scientist John von Heyking, in a recently published volume entitled *Faith in Democracy? Religion and Politics in Canada,*¹⁶ documents how the concept of human rights is being relied on as the basis for a new “civil religion.” Journalist Jeffrey Simpson has suggested that “The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is the closest thing Canadians have to a canon these days with the Supreme Court justices as legal cardinals.”¹⁷

This survey would not be complete without at least a mention of the important work of McGill philosopher Charles Taylor. He has argued that we need a different understanding of the concept of “secular” in order to make sense of our times. Historically, the concept has been linked negatively to the idea of God. And so, the term has been used to describe either a public space emptied of references or encounters with God or alternatively, the decline of religious practice and belief. In his influential 2007 book, *A Secular Age*, Taylor points out that we are now in an age in which a “self-sufficing humanism” is broadly available. In such a society, secularism must mean a society in which faith “is one human possibility among others” and a “context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”¹⁸ Unless you are prepared to impose a humanism which accepts no goals or allegiance for its citizens beyond “human flourishing” – something that is true of no previous society in history – we need an framework of secularism that allows for religion which he describes in terms of “transcendence.”¹⁹ Unless you are prepared to argue against “religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective,... (as) a strong independent source of motivation in modernity,”²⁰ you need a framework of secularism that allows for the paradigm of religion, even if modern religion looks different than religion of a different era. This is not the place to engage Taylor’s almost 800 pages of philosophic framing regarding this matter.

In more pedestrian terms, reality forces us to engage at least the paradigm of religion and its influence in modern life. We are all believers in one or the other thing, and to say “No” or “I am not sure” to the question of God, is as much a religious answer as to say “Yes.”

So what does the picture look like when we put these dimensions onto a single canvas? After a century of existence in which the public dimensions of religion were broadly understood, Canada along with most of the Western world *has lived as if the secularization thesis were true*. Most believed that modernization of necessity meant the decline of religion, and the past forty years have seen the development of a polity in which religion is understood as primarily a private matter.

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What distinguishes the Canadian experiment from other Western jurisdictions is the fact that during this time, the Canadian constitution was repatriated and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* introduced. Some have attempted to elevate the Charter as the scriptures of a new civil religion, but in the general population, this remains at best a contested approach. As pollster Allan Gregg has noted, the approach of “secular fundamentalism” risks “alienating the moderate middle who otherwise might be receptive to more nuanced and balanced positions.”²¹ Charles Taylor has helpfully pointed out that the very concept of secularism, as commonly used, is not adequate to capture the human flourishing aspirations observable in society, also among many who do not relate to a god as understood by traditional religion.

B. What This Theory Means in Practice

“But,” someone says, “isn’t this the stuff of political theory and academic hypothesis? How does this matter in the ordinary life and everyday politics of Canada?”

There are many answers one could provide to that question. I want to focus on just one example tonight which arises out of a research program that Cardus has been undertaking in the past year. We have

been analyzing the patterns of giving, volunteering and belonging in Canada, using primarily Statistics Canada data, as part of our effort to understand and predict what sort of social organizations will be needed to meet our social needs in the future. From this data, some fascinating trends become apparent which, as I hope to show, cast some different light on the questions relating to public religion in a privatized society.

Few would argue that giving is a very important part of what makes Canada the healthy society it is. From the coaches and volunteers who run the minor leagues in which our kids play hockey and soccer, to the Meals on Wheels programs that deliver help to seniors and shut-ins, to community organizations that promote causes or raise money for hospitals and universities, Canadian life as we know it relies on volunteering for and giving money to these various organizations. When it comes to what keeps this infrastructure going, most of us think of Canada as a generous society and suspect that for the most part, we all take our turn and do our part.

At first glance, the numbers seem to bear this out. Eighty-five percent of us claim to give to charity; sixty-one per cent belong to at least one group or organization, and about a third of us volunteer somewhere. However, the overall positive numbers regarding Canadian generosity mask the reality that less than 30% of Canadians account for 85% of total hours volunteered, 78% of total dollars donated, and 71% of all civic participation. We dig a little further and discover that there is a primary civic core of about 6% of the population who are doing about five times their proportionate share; a secondary group of 23% of the population that does about double their share; and the remaining 71% of the population who carry less than one-third of their proportionate share. While some measure of dis-proportionality is expected, given the different stages of life, resources, and various aptitudes that make up the population mosaic, what is concerning about the current trends is that the patterns are not sustainable.

Researchers tell us that what distinguishes this group which makes up the civic core are not the sort of demographic or life-cycle characteristics which will “automatically” take care of replenishing themselves but rather “certain habits of the heart” that incline

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them to the common good. Members of the civic core have an “otherness” syndrome that causes them to do what they do out of deep convictions. They share a set of beliefs and a worldview that stresses responsibility, connectedness and cultural renewal. They are committed to improving their communities and culture through exercising and promoting personal and corporate responsibility. These citizens are often (but not always) older, religious, and well educated. The significance of this subgroup of citizens to the well being of Canadian society can hardly be emphasized enough. The charitable sector depends on the generosity and civic-mindedness of these citizens for its vitality and for needed resources to serve the most vulnerable in Canadian society. The consequences of this are significant. In an extended dialogue on CBC moderated by Judy Maddren in 2007, Linda Graff and Paul Reed suggested that volunteering in Canada is likely to decline by 1-2% each year over the next decade, with the result that many non-profit organizations – arts, social, health and faith charities – will lose their leaders and sustainers.”²² Some organizations are already beginning to feel the effects.

Cardus has explored the data as it relates to giving, volunteering, and belonging to social organizations, however we did not manage to get parallel data regarding how this relates to the decline in political engagement. There appears to be an anecdotal connection between decline in political participation – in voter turnout numbers or in the numbers who choose to join political parties, for example – and decline in charitable participation. And so the argument deserves at least a ponder, if not further research: perhaps some of our efforts to encourage people to vote might be better directed towards a broader focus on society? As a matter of anecdote, I would observe that those whom I know who are involved in a volunteer or community organization tend to be more politically engaged and tend to vote in greater proportion than those who don’t.

As Rudyard Griffiths pointed out in his 2009 book *A Citizen’s Manifesto*:

Join the dots of these statistics, and the picture that emerges runs completely counter to our own self-image as ‘caring Canadians.’ The majority of us are civic slackers who participate either marginally, or not at all, in the kinds of formal activities that sustain a vibrant and effective volunteer sector, a participatory political culture, and an enriched community life. Put another way, a significant portion

of the population is doing little in terms of day-to-day behaviour to renew the social capital upon which much of the prosperity and social harmony in Canada depends today and in the future.”²³

Measuring the link between giving and religion is an imprecise science. There are various ways to measure religiosity, and the numbers are muddied in that most religious organizations also have charitable status, leading some to argue that we need to disentangle “religious giving” from the equation in order to paint a fair picture. Statistics Canada summarizes the matter this way: “Canadians who are religiously active are more likely than other Canadians to be donors and tend to give more when they donate. Much of the money that they donate goes to religious organizations; but, they also contribute significant amounts to non-religious organizations.”²⁴ Kurt Bowen from the Canadian Center for Philanthropy goes a bit further. The 32 per cent of Canadians who are religiously active contribute 65 per cent of direct charitable donations. As one might expect, this group is responsible for 86 per cent of donations to religious bodies; yet even in the secular sector, the religiously active provide 42 per cent of the \$2.1 billion raised by direct giving.²⁵

And the different tiers of government are beginning to take note. On May 1, 2006 the provincial government of Ontario pledged three million dollars to fight gun violence in downtown Toronto. Dalton McGuinty, Ontario’s Premier, used an event at the West Seventh Day Adventist Church in Toronto to suggest “what we are doing today is drawing upon a resource that government never before in the history of our province has tapped into.” The province recognized that the participation of institutional religion in the public square goes far beyond even the significance of voluntarism and donations statistics.

This leads me to my second example of religion’s public importance. Where would our cities be without the contribution of many church institution groups – the Salvation Army being the most prominent – in providing shelter to the homeless and relief to the poor? What would be the foreign aid contribution of Canada if the activities of religiously minded relief organizations – the Mennonite Central Committee being the most prominent – were not included? How does one measure the value of the religiously-reminded organizations who visit prisoners, actively help in their reintegration into society, and run programs helping those who run afoul of the law become law-abiding citizens?

If we were to go into any Canadian city and begin to measure what would happen if the churches in that city closed their doors and ceased the formal programs of outreach and service to the community, what would be the impact on society? Then there is the service that religious organizations provide to their own members. If the counseling, Meals on Wheels, and youth programs were transferred to society as a whole, what would be the impact? David Ley, an urban geographer has highlighted the importance of institutional religion in providing stability and space for new immigrants to Canada.²⁶ Religious affiliations cut across even the dividing lines of nationality and ethnicity, and build a true social communion.

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The relationship between urban renewal and the Church is more complex, however, than a merely cooperative social service. For my third example, consider the institutional Church as a critical part of public social and infrastructural space. As institutions, faith communities bridge social capital, combining pools of citizens which might perhaps never come in contact. In cities suffering daily the effects of fragmentation, isolation and disintegration, institutional religion provides a significant social cohesion, both to the immediate geographical space, and to the broader region from which its adherents gather. Further, churches invigorate space, relieving the architectural homogeneity of many modern developments. They preserve sacred space for conversation, beauty, and contemplation. Finally, since September 11, and in the wake of New Orleans, we are all aware of the urgent need for critical public infrastructure to respond in the midst of disaster. In each of these cases, and in thousands more around the world, churches served as institutions of mercy and solidarity, to renew, restore and heal the damage and the brokenness of these spaces. And this should not be surprising – churches, and many different religious institutions, are not foreign to these tasks – they are the tasks which give their very existence meaning.

Of course the evidence is not all one-sided. There have been abuses, misuses and mistakes in the name of religion, which have “cost society.” There are also perspectives advanced in the name of religion which unmistakably have as their objective the creation of a society that does not aspire to democratic values. And this presentation is not a defense of everything that takes place in the name of religious institutions. However, it is an argument that any democracy that is worthy of its name must provide space for debate with all voices that raise arguments for the public good, within a democratic framework. The positive contribution of most religious institutions in Canada today is far greater than is generally acknowledged.

Obviously the interplay between religious institutions and society as a whole has proven a difficult subject throughout history. To those who find themselves outside any religious tent, the challenge seems doubly difficult. They will acknowledge that much good happens in the name of religion, but how does one get the good works without the gory religious headlines?

For many these troubling questions have proved unanswerable. Hence, the wisest route seems to be to ignore religion and try to isolate it from any involvement in public life. Of course, that neglect of religious institutions in the public square for the past forty years hasn’t really changed anything. We still must deal with the good and bad. The good works and their social benefits we have described have occurred without public encouragement or acknowledgement. Those aspects of religious life which many would prefer to see obliterated continue on, undeterred by the public shunning. And cooperative church and state efforts are a frightening prospect to those who read the headlines and worried, with some legitimacy, over the role of private religious institutions in public policy. So we must answer finally, what is this institutional religion? Can we trust a cooperative effort with it in a pluralistic civil society? And what gives it its meaning and vitality?

To answer this, let us turn specifically to the Christian church, Canada, and the world’s largest religious institution. The church is an institution like no other. It is an organic institution. Organisms must either be killed or contended with, but they cannot be ignored. There are at least

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three distinct features that combine to give the church her organic character.

The first is a sense of truth. An orthodox Christian perspective begins with the fact that God created the world with a purpose, that evil came into the world when man sinned, and that God intervened with a plan of redemption and that the result of this will be a restoration of creation to God's original purpose. This creation-fall-redemption-restoration framework has clear implications regarding all of life's questions, and provides a story within which the challenges of society – including good and evil – will be met.

The second feature that distinguishes a church is a sense of transcendent participation. There is more to life than meets the eye. The social challenges we face and the public discourses we engage in take place at a down-to-earth level, where the rubber hits the road, but simultaneously *coram deo* – before the face of God. God has an interest in what is occurring in the world, most clearly demonstrated by coming down to earth in human form in the person of Jesus Christ. While this sense of involvement in the divine plan is most intensely realized through participation in the sacraments, every aspect of the Christian life is to be lived out of a sense of “Christ in us.”

The third feature that distinguishes the church is the sense of community. There is no church without community. The church is a body of believers, with a sense of obligation for each other and a mutual duty of service. There is a sense in which this community is felt by separation from society as a whole, a sense of being “called out”, but there is also a sense in which this community is felt through service to the community as a whole, a sense of obligation to show through word and action their belief that the *entire world* was created by, and is loved by, God.

While different faith traditions would articulate in different ways what gives their particular religious institution its vitality, it is clear that membership in a religious institution is something that is experienced differently than membership in a community association or a service club. While this may not be equally or fully understood by those outside of any particular religious tradition, the consequences are real and need to be contended with.

We live in a pluralistic society. While a secularist mindset is alive and well in Canadian society today, so are religious institutions. Even Statistics Canada reports that if “the four dimensions of religiosity – affiliation, attendance, personal practices and importance of religion – can be defined into a simple ‘religiosity index’....40% of Canadians have a low degree of religiosity, 31% are moderately religious, and 29% are highly religious.”^[7] By my math, that translates into a 60-40 split. If there are historic institutions deeply embedded into the fabric of civil society with the moderate to high religious loyalty of 60% of the Canadian public, I would say that makes faith institutions a relevant public dialogue partner.

Further, I am convinced that this concentration of the population has a significant impact on our urban centers, and though the majority of Canadians may be Christians of one stripe or another, we must broaden the dialogue to include atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews and other groups which maintain vital institutions of public significance. While the coloured glasses that we all bring to the dialogue mean that we see something different when we look through the stained glass of contemporary Canadian churches, I am quite convinced that any honest dialogue will recognize something of the positive contribution that an organic vibrant Christian church can make to our shared life together.

The matter of public religion is one of both theoretical but also immense practical consequence. There is a civic oxygen on which Canadian society relies and which is generated in the nation’s churches. I have spent enough time trying to demonstrate that the secularization thesis is empirically untrue but if – let let us hypothesize for moment – it were true, and Canada’s institutions of faith would close their doors, the consequence would be far graver than figuring out how a significant minority of the population would spend the time they presently spend in worship. Like the clearing of the rainforest, it would have sweeping environmental implications to which Mr. Hitchens and his ilk rarely pay attention.

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C. A Path Forward

So what to do with this? Let me conclude with three suggestions for discussion: one directed to church leaders, one directed to political leaders, and a final towards us all as we think about the other institutions of civil society.

To church leaders, I would say that it is important for us to recognize our own complicity in the present state of affairs. Already in 1965, Pierre Berton – hardly someone we would expect as a leading defender for the importance of the church’s prophetic voice – observed:

“Christianity has, in the past, always been at its most vigorous when it has been in a state of tension with the society around it. That is no longer the case.... In the great issues of our time, the voice of the Church, when it has been heard at all, has been weak, tardy, equivocal, and irrelevant.”²⁷ I fear that Christian churches in Canada – and I

speak only regarding this segment because as an elder in one, I am in a position to make a self-indicting comment; I leave it to the leaders of other faith communities to reflect on the extent to which this is true of them – bear a significant responsibility for the church’s public irrelevance. We have catered to a religious consumerism, whereby we served up what our congregants were looking for as we competed with other churches for our share of the religious market, often at the expense of our prophetic witness. We have raised the walls and tried to hide our dirty laundry, arguing that what was happening within the church was a matter of private concern. Instead of admitting that it should be no surprise that the church has to deal with adulterers, tax evaders, and sex abusers – the gospel is for sinners after all – we have tried to hide the facts and protect our image. The church should be known for how she deals with these matters, in a way that shows how mercy and justice come together. Those outside of the church should be able to look at the church as an example of an institution that deals with difficult matters in a way that deserves emulation.

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Lest the forgoing be misinterpreted, I am not indicting the entire Christian church as if there are no examples which deserve emulation. There are clearly lots of good and wonderful stories. My point is simply this: the Christian church in Canada broadly understood needs to understand that the role of the church is not that of a private institution serving her members but that of a public witness, a light set on a hill, which provides a witness not only through the gospel she preaches, but how she conducts her affairs.

The challenge for political leaders is to realize that the present paradigm for dealing with religion in the public square is unsustainable and ultimately injurious. I have already made the point how in our social ecology, a form of photosynthesis takes place which produces the civic oxygen on which we all rely. We need to create a climate for political dialogue that allows citizens to engage in discussion from the wellspring of their deepest held beliefs and aspirations. And if we suggest that such language can only be a framework that excludes God, we aren't just preventing believers from speaking about their faith; we are denying them the right to speak about themselves.²⁸ Surely it violates the fundamentals of our democratic understanding of public life to structure public discourse in a manner that privileges those who have no theistic framework and reduces the majority of the population to secondary participants in the public discourse.

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We are living in a world in which there is “a global resurgence of religion.” Leading international authorities are arguing that the 21st century “is likely to be regarded by future historians as a century in which religion replaced ideology as the prime animating and motivating force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligations, concepts of nationhood, and, of course, concepts and wars.”²⁹ We are being reminded by current international affairs lessons which we ought to know well from our own history, namely that the stuff of constitutions, fair elections, and the other “machinery of democracy” are necessary but insufficient steps to a stable democratic society.

This appeal for a reasonable pluralism in public life that creates space for confessional candor is an appeal for the protection of the various faith communities who want to participate in that conversation (I realize there are some who wish as a matter of faith to disengage from public life, such as the Hutterites and Jehovah's Witnesses and within appropriate parameters, we have historically provided space for such communities to thrive in Canada). The state needs to take great care in the context of such pluralism to provide appropriate protection for various voices. Speaking in the British setting and addressing the issue of an Islamic political party, political theorist Jonathan Chaplin has effectively argued that “a Christian version of procedural secularism will likely be better placed to engage with British Muslims than will a liberal secularist one.”³⁰

What is being suggested here is not a privileged position for those of a Christian faith over against other faiths in the public dialogue. Rather, it is recognition of the fact that *Globe and Mail* columnist John Ibbitson made in a 2003 column: “Canada is blessed to be a liberal democracy, and that liberal democracy is the product of Christian civilization and specifically Protestantism, not Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Confucian cultures.”³¹ On this occasion last year, Dr. Van Dam noted how “toleration is a biblical notion for a multi-cultural society (cf. Matt 7:12; 13:24-30, 36-43).”³²

This call for a robust dialogue in the public square which provides space for those with faith claims to speak candidly into the issues of the day is not a call for the state to in any way become an arbiter of the truth or religious matters. Rather, it is recognition that the very constitutional frameworks which provide the space for dialogue and difference find their roots in notions of what constitutes the “good society” that transcend simple majority opinion of the day. If the moral purpose of the state involves a conception of the “public good” and not simply a forum in which a lust for power can be satisfied, then we must provide citizens with an opportunity to reflect together regarding what that good consists of. And while this requires a religiously inspired candor in the conversation, it also establishes the limits of such conversation. The public square is not equipped to sort through the competing truth claims of the various faith perspectives, be they religious or secular truth claims.

My final suggestion is directed towards the leaders of civil society institutions. In a modern society, it is impossible for the state to deal with all of the challenges that we collectively face. The pluralist nature of our society only increases the complexity of the challenge. It would take another speech to defend the point, but I would argue that a parallel trend to the secularization over the past forty years that I have described tonight has been an increasing reliance on the state to provide programs and services that might otherwise be provided by families, community organizations, business organizations, or other civil society institutions. In part, this has happened as a result of the state stepping into the gap and imposing itself into situations but another part of the story is the fact that civil society institutions have not always been up to the task of meeting social needs.

The challenges of public deficits and debt over the past few decades and the forthcoming challenge of demographics as well as pluralism as we have discussed tonight only mean that there will be a more intense focus on the institutions of civil society in the decade to come. At Cardus, we spend considerable time reflecting on how these changing institutions will together form a new social architecture for our society. We will need to work as a society to ensure these institutions are appropriately structured and resourced with the space to do their task. It also means that these institutions need to step up to the plate and take responsibility, understanding that they exist not simply as a voluntary association of individuals but as civic institutions that have a public task and a citizenship responsibility in their own right. They have a place in the public dialogue and square, not as an extension of the state, but as institutions in their own right, governed by the norms that are relevant to their specific sphere.

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Conclusion

In summary, stripped of the entire nuance my point can be reduced to a relatively simple one. Historical, sociological, legal and philosophic evidence all point to the fact that the secularizing experiment of the past forty years – attempting to shape a public square in which God is neither met nor encountered – is a failure. The suppression of public religion amounts to the clear-cutting of our civic rainforest and is denying us the social oxygen we need as a society to continue. What is required is a paradigm for public discourse that recognizes religion neither as a private good, nor as a public bad, but rather as a vital resource and defining part of every person. We are all religious, whether our faith is theistic or non-theistic. We appeal to transcendent norms, standards beyond ourselves. Without a public conversation regarding how these aspirations contribute to the public good, we reduce ourselves to a collection of individuals sharing a geography but without a framework that can sustain a healthy social environment.

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ARPA has entered the public conversation with the courage to speak out of convictions of the Reformed confessions into the everyday issues of public life. I commend your efforts and suggest what we are doing tonight provides the seeds for starting this important conversation. It is not necessary for all of us tonight to agree on every issue in order to acknowledge that discussing matters which concern us with reference to our most deeply held convictions is a model that serves our country well. To the organizers of ARPA, let me commend you for providing this responsible contribution to the public good. To church, political, and civic leaders, let us take our responsibilities in this matter seriously. Working together and with God's grace, we can develop a polity in Canada where there is space for the contribution of persons of all faiths and a civic discourse on how we can live peaceably and flourish together.

May God bless you each in your respective callings and may God bless Canada.

Endnotes

¹ Former Chief Justice Brian Dickson wrote “In my view the applicability of the (Canadian) Charter guarantees of conscience and religion does not depend on the presence or absence of an “anti-establishment principle” in the Canadian Constitution, a principle which can only further obfuscate an already difficult area of the law.” *Big M Drug Mart* (1985) S.C.R. at 339. At 341 of the same decision, Justice Dickson further stated: “(I)n my view, this recourse to categories from the American jurisprudence is not particularly helpful in defining the meaning of freedom of conscience and religion under the *Charter*.”

² Peter Russell. *Constitutional Odyssey: Can Canadians Become a Sovereign People?* 3rd edition (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004), ix.

³ Mark Noll, *Whatever Happened to Christian Canada?* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2007) 24.

⁴ George Egerton. “Separation and Cooperation within Canadian Pluralism”, Speech to Cooperation of Church and State Conference, June 6-7, 2006 sponsored by the Center for Cultural Renewal. Text of speech available on-line at http://www.culturalrenewal.ca/downloads/sb_culturalrenewal/georgeegertoncalgary.pdf, 5.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

⁸ Ibid, Preamble.

⁹ Ibid, 7, quoting Gary Miedema, *For Canada's Sake: Public Religion, the Centennial Celebrations and the Re-Making of Canada in the 1960s* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Ray Pennings and Michael Van Pelt. “Replacing the pan-Canadian Consensus” in *Policy Options*, (Montreal: Institute for Research in Public Policy, March 2006), p 52-57.

¹¹ This brief sociological summary is drawn from “Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay” by Kevin M. Schultz, *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Vol 8 No. s1-2, Spring and Summer 2008, p. 170-177.

¹² Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967)

¹³ Peter Berger. The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics. (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), p2.

¹⁴ Charles T. Matthews, “An Interview with Peter Berger” in *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Vol 8 No. s1-2, Spring and Summer 2008, p. 152-153.

¹⁵ Hansard (37th Parliament, 2nd session) October 28, 2002.

¹⁶ “The Charter and Civil Religion” in John Young and Boris DeWiel. *Faith in Democracy? Religion and Politics in Canada* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) p. 36-58.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Simpson, “Leave the Prayerbook at Home, Stockwell,” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, March 31, 2000, p A 15.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁹ ibid, 18-20.

²⁰ Ibid., 530.

²¹ Allan Gregg, “The Christian Comeback” in Saturday Night, November 2005, p.22.

²² Quoted in see Ray Pennings and Michael VanPelt with Stephen Lazarus, *A Canadian Culture of Generosity: Renewing Canada's Social Architecture by Investing in the Civic Core and the "Third Sector"* (Hamilton: Cardus, 2008) The data and arguments presented here are more thoroughly discussed in that document.

²³ Rudyard Griffiths, *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto*, (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2009) pp. 43-44.

²⁴ Michael Hall. *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2007 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, p. 28.

²⁵ Kurt Bowen, *Religion, Participation, and Charitable Giving: A Report* (Ottawa: Volunteer Canada and the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 1999) available on-line at http://www.givingandvolunteering.ca/files/giving/en/rp_1997_religion_participation_and_charitable_giving_en.pdf

²⁶ *Stained Glass Urbanism*, (Hamilton: Cardus, 2006). This document was prepared and distributed in connection with the World Urban Forum in Vancouver that year.

²⁷ <http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/060502/d060502a.htm>

²⁷ Quoted in Noll, p. 27

²⁸ This helpful distinction is borrowed from concepts discussed in Thomas

Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20.

²⁹ Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom* quoted in Farr, p. 85.

³⁰ Jonathan Chaplin. *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning*. (London: Theos, 2008) p. 55.

³¹ John Ibbetson, “Keep God in the Calendar,” in the *Globe and Mail*, April 19, 2003.

³² Dr. Cornelis VanDam, *God and Government: A Biblical Perspective on the Role of the State*, (Langley: ARPA, 2009), 12.



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