OLD GODS, NEW GODS AND NO GODS

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God keep our land glorious and free
- O Canada

Car ton bras sait porter l'épée, Il sait porter la croix
(Your arm can wield the sword, it is ready to carry the cross)
- Ô Canada

Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law
- Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Religion and secularism converge uneasily in Canada. Should the 21st century national anthem of a liberal democracy proclaim faith in a supernatural God? Should it align that God with only one of many faith communities? And can a foundational constitutional document truly be anchored in both the supremacy of God and the inviolate sovereignty of politically legislated law?

While words of an anthem are typically sung in rote, and constitutional preambles scarcely known beyond jurists and political pundits, the tensions between religion and secularism have erupted anew in post-9/11 Canada. Secularists recoil at perceived intrusions of religion into the public realm; religions, particularly minority religions, feel subjected to enhanced scrutiny and criticism. All this in a global context of rising religious fundamentalism and Islamaphobia.

Tensions in Canada have been manifest in many ways and spaces: at their extreme, worshippers gunned down in a mosque; more routinely, numerous public conflicts over values, policies, programs, sites of worship, where the dead may or may not be buried, and what can or cannot be worn (the kippa, the hijab, the turban), especially by those on public payroll.

The nastiness is in keeping with the tenor of the times – the jungle justice of social media, the white-hot anger over women's and gay rights. Our concern here, though, is with the demonization of religions and religious practices, often in the name of secularism, and the incitement to hatred against believers, using the shield of free speech.

Canada comes to this challenge with a distinct history. Indigenous spirituality is by far the most deeply rooted faith and belief system in the territorial space that is now Canada. European colonialism, from its missionary origins five centuries ago, sought to extinguish Indigenous spirituality and supplant it with Christianity. For hundreds of years thereafter, competing Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the Divine vied for recognition and supremacy.

Over the past hundred years — and especially in recent dec-

ades — the rising ranks of both minority religions and declared secularists have enlivened claims and debates over identity, rights and belonging. The Canadian census probes the population's religious affiliation every ten years. The 2011 census revealed the two fastest growing identities were non-religious and non-Christian. The former increased by 14 per cent from just a decade earlier to total 7.8 million persons. Non-Christian religious minorities — most of them newer immigrants — increased by 47 per cent from a decade earlier to a total of 2.7 million. Across the country, there has been a construction boom in temples, gurudwaras, mosques, jamat khanas and other places of worship. At the same time, 22.1 million Canadians identified themselves as Christian, accounting for 67.3 per cent of the population in 2011.

How should this nation of old gods, new gods and no gods co-exist harmoniously? What's to be rendered unto Caesar and what unto God? Questions of boundaries and balance always demand contemporary answers.

This is what we explored at a Ryerson University conference, October 18-19, 2017, *The Many Gods of Canada: Religion, Secularism and Public Policy*. We aimed neither for a theological discussion nor an inter-faith dialogue among priests, rabbis, imams, pundits, etc., as welcome as they were. We tried to steer away from a focus on specific, sometimes passing, flashpoints. Instead we sought to explore foundations and fundamentals at play.

Some of Canada's leading thinkers on the subject explored the challenges, creative encounters and policy options for achieving a shared Canadian identity, rights and reciprocity. Speakers of no religious faith as well as speakers of diverse faiths, values, experiences and social locations grappled with the place of religion in Canadian public life. Their essays, revised for publication here, are sequenced in the order in which they were presented. Some are in 'spoken voice,' others more 'academic.' Also included are some of the lively exchanges that followed the presentations.

John Ralston Saul, author, philosopher, public intellectual, delivered the opening lecture. He argues that Canada has never been a secular place. Some of the evil done to Indigenous peoples was by serious churchgoers — Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Catholics. Indigenous spirituality and knowledge are foundations for a more authentic and resilient Canada.

The next two essays address *Indigenous Spirituality and What Canadians Can Learn From It*. **Chief Richard Atleo** PhD, of the Ahousaht First Nation and Associate Adjunct Professor, University of Victoria, illuminates the power of indigenous spirituality. **Kimberly Murray**, Ontario Assistant Deputy Attorney General, and former Executive Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, speaks of the physical and spiritual violence done to Indigenous peoples by both church and state.

Three succeeding essays explore *Religion and Public Space*. **Dr. Lori Beaman**, Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in a Diverse Canada, University of Ottawa, traces the evolution of religiosity in Canada. **Dr. Paul Bramadat**, Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, explores the combustibility of religious claims for public space and recognition. **Dr. Joyce Smith**, Associate Professor of Journalism, Ryerson University, reflects on religion in the media and the university.

Religion, Gender Equity and Sexual Identity is explored in the next three essays. **Rabbi Elyse Goldstein** writes from a Jewish feminist perspective. **Dr. Ingrid Mattso**n, London and Windsor Community Chair in Islamic Studies at Huron College, Western University, presents a North American Muslim perspective. Toronto City **Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam** calls on all religions to promote LGBTQ inclusion. The panel sparked a lively debate, moderated by **Nathalie Des Rosiers**, MPP for Ottawa-Vanier and former General Counsel for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

The next trio of essays address the challenge of *Balancing Free Speech and Freedom from Hate*. The case for prosecuting religious hate is made by **Dr. Mark Freiman**, lawyer and Past President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, and by **Azeezah Kanji**, Director of the Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto. A contrary perspective is provided by **Dr. James Turk**, Distinguished Visiting Professor, and Director, Centre for Free Expression, Ryerson University.

We are particularly pleased to include two additional readings, selected as top submissions in a student essay contest as part of the conference. Ryerson students were invited to write from experiential or academic perspectives. The winning essays are by **Sara Ali** (Undergraduate) and **Caleb De Jong** (Graduate).

Robust religiosity and staunch secularism are both defining elements of Canadians and the Canadian narrative. The encounter of the two shows no sign of reduced significance for Canadian society — quite the contrary. We at Ryerson plan to continue this debate.