

Religion and Civic Engagement

**Thought piece prepared for the Baha'i Community of Canada
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The relationship between religion and civic engagement is an important theme to consider in the context of Canada's public discourse about strengthening participation in the life of society, promoting pluralism, and addressing problems of radicalization. This paper presents a series of thoughts about several ways in which religion can both support and hinder civic engagement. For the purposes of this paper, religion is viewed as a system of knowledge and practice that harmonizes individual belief in transcendence with a pattern of collective life. These thoughts arise out of the teachings and experience of the Baha'i community of Canada and our reading of the contemporary discourse on religion and citizenship. Our hope is that this exploration of the relationship between these topics will illuminate important dimensions of modern public policy challenges at all levels of government and raise public consciousness of the potential role of religion in civil society.

How religion can support civic engagement

Religion, as we have described it above, connects the individual with God and with a meaningful role in society. An important aspect of religious life is study of sacred scriptures and traditions. These encounters with religious teaching, and efforts to put them into practice, exert a formative influence on citizens' understanding of their personal rights, responsibilities to others, and the public good. Through religious study and practice, one develops a sense of meaning in life that is connected to broader spiritual and social purposes. One way in which we can describe this sense of meaning is as a two-fold moral purpose: to continually improve one's own spiritual condition and to simultaneously contribute to the well being of society. This notion of moral purpose can be found in virtually every religious tradition.

Religion, therefore, can help the individual to see her life as a developmental path upon which her beliefs become consciously manifest in action to improve



the world around her. She recognizes that the world has an influence upon her, but also that she has the capacity to exert a beneficial influence on that world. This can be empowering and it can build resilience to respond constructively to daily challenges. The individual sees injustice all around her – for instance, in the way economic relations are structured and in the prejudice she experiences on a daily basis. However, belief in the possibility of more unified and just society – and in one’s moral responsibility to help bring about those conditions – can lead her to struggle against forces of apathy and lethargy that would prevent her from working to build a different world.

In addition to strengthening the individual’s commitment to work for unity, justice, and the common good, religion can also help to organize social life by bringing people together into communities capable of collective action. Religious communities are often characterized by a variety of activities that range from small group study and devotional gatherings to children’s classes and citywide gatherings. These initiatives are sometimes mistakenly seen as exclusively serving the private interests of religious people. To the contrary, they can help to populate civil society – that realm of public association between the individual and the state – with organized groups that strengthen the fabric of society. They foster the development of social networks and promote relationships of trust and reciprocity, which in turn help to promote greater social cooperation. Social scientists consider the development of this kind of social capital to be central to the functioning of democratic life and the effectiveness of public institutions. It can be eroded by individualism, materialism and over-reliance on certain technologies that can diminish the frequency and intensity of our face-face relationships. The social life of religious communities helps to develop social capital and promote voluntary action among citizens to work for public causes.

Religious teachings also supply language to describe and shape the interdependent relationship between individuals, communities, and institutions in a society. Religious discourse goes beyond the ways of describing social relations, drawn from economics, which emphasize patron-client or producer-consumer relationships. It transcends the political language of social cleavages, polarization, inter-group competition and power struggles among groups with divergent interests. It can supply a range of concepts that describe the civic



virtues of a citizen, the qualities of a good, just, and unified society, and the values of public institutions. Much of this language is coherent with other systems of thought, but it has the unique ability to tap into deep sources of meaning and motivation.

How religion can hinder civic engagement

Despite the positive contributions religion can make to public life, we must also acknowledge that religion, as some understand and practice it, has the potential to hinder civic engagement. First, sectarian groups can promote the creation of inward-looking communities by drawing sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Instead of engaging with society and working for social transformation, inward-looking communities hope to model a pattern of life that might be noticed and emulated by others. At best, this pattern of life fosters indifference to civic engagement, with the primary concern among members being the wellbeing of co-religionists. At worst, this tendency to cultural isolation produces a pattern of life that leads to outright prejudice and hostility towards outsiders.

Second, without an appropriate appreciation for science and rational thought, religious thought can also foster superstition by systematically ignoring the social, economic and political aspects of the world. Climate change, global inequality, and systemic oppression are viewed with denial or fatalism. The basic oneness and unity of the human race is rejected in favour of a version of religious exclusivity that says only some people deserve to flourish. The power of technology and modern medicine to promote human well-being are arbitrarily rejected in favour of some reified or imagined version of the past. Anti-rational habits of thinking can also lead to great social harm. An obsession with metaphysical concerns and esoteric notions can lead to skewed perceptions about society, in some cases leading to radicalism and violent extremism. Groups that believe in apocalyptic scenarios and the division of the world into realms of good and evil have exerted tremendously destructive influences.

Third, religious ideas that are concerned with the well-being of the individual to the exclusion of the rest of society can promote passivity and indifference. Where religious life is understood in therapeutic terms, the individual sees spiritual



practices as methods of self-care. Instead of binding the individual to society, this contemporary form of religious or spiritual practice effectively isolates the believer from the social world to seek solace in personal contemplation.

Religion, politics and citizenship

An underlying assumption of this paper is that religion should be a cause of social good, and that it ought to strengthen the participation of citizens in the life of society. This assumption runs counter to a prevailing narrative about the inevitable or desirable secularization of modern societies. If we reject the secularization narrative, then we are challenged with the task of describing the role of religion in modern, pluralistic societies. The reason for discussing the different ways in which religion can support and hinder civic engagement is to concentrate attention on normative issues related to the role of religion in public life. Those who call for greater space for religion in the public sphere need to recognize the negative tendencies that exist in many religious communities, and focus on efforts needed to rectify them. However, there is a great reservoir of possibility that exists within diverse religions that can be called upon to strengthen civic engagement and public life in Canada. This is a worthwhile effort that calls for a more robust conversation about the relationship between religion, citizenship, and politics.

The role of religion in public life is sometimes framed narrowly to refer only to the participation of religious groups in the contest for power. This strategy of political engagement has shown itself to be fraught with problems. The power of religion to link transcendent belief and social mobilization with worldly transformation is diminished by the kinds of pragmatic compromises often made along the path to political influence. This power is most effectively exercised in the daily lives of citizens, as they contribute to improving their neighbourhoods, communities, and workplaces with conscious efforts to apply the universal moral and ethical precepts of religious teaching. It can be lost when believers explicitly link their beliefs to membership in a political constituency or lobby group that uses divisive tactics to pursue a set of policies. In the past, the more enduring social changes realized by religious groups have been achieved in the realm of voluntary social action and engaged public discourse.



How, then, should we work towards a more positive relationship between religion and civic engagement? What issues need to be addressed by religious leadership and within religious communities, and which ones need to be the focus of public discourse? How do we understand the role of religion in cultivating the qualities of a good citizen? What role should religious groups play in politics, and at what point does their involvement in public policy become counter-productive and divisive? How should religious groups structure inter-faith dialogue differently to promote greater civic engagement? What other spaces exist for this conversation to develop?

The Bahá'í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá'í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá'í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

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