

Christian Interfaith Reference Group
Canadian Council of Churches

Statement on Religious Freedom

Adopted by consensus September 2016

For Christians, human rights are grounded in the dignity accorded each human being by virtue of having been made in the image and likeness of their Creator.¹ The intrinsic dignity of every human being includes the divinely given gifts of reason and free will. In exercising this reason and free will, individuals are at liberty to choose or change their religion or belief, and to express it either alone or in community with others, publicly or privately, in teaching, practice, worship and observance.²

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms names freedom of conscience and religion first among the “fundamental rights” of the people of this land.³ Even as the Charter describes Canada as a country “founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God,”⁴ we accept the secular nature of the state, and embrace Canada’s pluralistic nature.

In the Canadian context, to be secular means to remain pluralistic. Secularism includes freedom of belief, both in one’s private and public life. Thus there should be no official religion in this country, but neither should there be any form of official atheism.

A healthy pluralism, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of places of worship.⁵

For example, we understand that religious symbols and attire can be intrinsic to one’s religious faith. They cannot be removed at a whim, and the state should normally have no role in regulating their use. Religious extremism is a growing concern, internationally and here in Canada. Placing limits on the religious freedoms of faith communities—especially religious minorities—risks exacerbating feelings of marginalization and exclusion, and may cultivate the very religious extremism such limits seek to avoid. The state should demonstrate impartiality in the crafting and enforcement of the law.

As Christians, we consider as allies Canadians of different faiths—or no faith—who also sincerely seek truth, beauty, and goodness. We believe that these values find their complete expression in the God of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we do not seek religious freedom that is denied to others. Rather, we support a pluralistic society, open to all. We believe that freedom of religion serves both as a check against the potentially coercive power of the state, and as a means of promoting the common good and creating a truly just society.

¹ Genesis 1:26-27; see also *Becoming Human: On Theological Anthropology in an Age of Engineering Life* of the Canadian Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Witness.

² Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18.

³ Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Article 2(a). See also *Mémoire de l’Assemblée des évêques catholiques du Québec sur le Projet de loi n° 60* (de décembre 2013), p. 7.: « Nous comprenons que la laïcité désigne le caractère non confessionnel de l’État qui est, de ce fait, indépendant de toute confession religieuse (...) La neutralité religieuse de l’État signifie que l’État ne favorise ni ne défavorise aucune religion : il n’a ni préférence ni objection en matière religieuse, il est neutre ».

⁴ Preamble to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

⁵ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, §255.