

Canadians split on role of faith in public sphere, survey shows

Most Canadians believe a faith-based upbringing has a positive impact on society even as a significant minority of Canadians would like the country to become more secular, especially in public life.

According to a study that examines the “push and pull” between faith, secularism and the public sphere, a majority of Canadians think religious freedom is a defining aspect of life, but they are not so sure they want religious freedom to express itself in the nation’s politics.

A new Angus Reid Institute study released on Dec. 4 says that the majority of adults questioned for the survey into faith and secularism in public life say they believe in a God, but a significant minority of Canadians want the country to become more secular and question the role of faith in society.

The Angus Reid Institute said the study, conducted in partnership with the non-partisan faith-based organization Cardus, found that strong support for religious freedom in Canada “exists alongside limitations as to how far that faith should extend in public life.”

“While Canadians are nearly five times as likely to say that freedom of religion makes Canada a better country (62 per cent) than a worse one (12 per cent), they remain divided over whether the values offered by faith contribute to improving equality and human rights (42 per cent disagree that they do),” the study states.

“Further, while a firm majority (58 per cent) say that a faith-based upbringing creates better citizenship characteristics, four-in-10 (42 per cent) disagree,” the study says.

Ray Pennings, executive vice-president of Cardus, said the survey indicates a real split between all people of faith and how they view other faiths, and the view of non-religious Canadians towards all people of faith.

In a statement, Cardus said the survey results show “the more religious Canadians are, the more likely they are to take a positive view of faiths different from their own. By contrast, when non-religious Canadians were asked whether various faiths were ‘benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society,’ they took a dim view of every community but their own.”

“When it comes to faith, religion in Canada encourages tolerance of others,” said Pennings. “Non-believers were generally unwelcoming of

all religions, though they seem especially hostile to Islam, Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity.”

According to the survey, the number of people of faith who think that their values and faith is “shut out” from the public sphere is only 23 per cent and most people of faith think that their religious views are respected within Canadian society.

However, Canadians’ opinions about the impact of the Catholic faith on the country are very mixed. “Close to three-in-10 (28 per cent) feel the presence of Catholics in Canada benefits the country as a whole, while nearly the same number (24 per cent) say that Canada is worse off because of Catholicism’s influence,” the survey said.

The survey, which is an annual peek into Canadian mindsets regarding religious faith in public life developed by Cardus and the Angus Reid Institute, says public faith opponents are the most enthusiastic about reducing the role and presence of faith and religion in the public sphere

According to Cardus, public faith opponents prioritized “achieving one’s own dreams and happiness” over “being concerned about helping others” as the best way to live life.

Pennings said the increasing drift towards secularism could have a far-reaching impact.

“Hard secularism carries a social cost by undermining religious freedom and silencing faith – one of the prime motivators for tolerance of others, public virtue, and generosity in Canada,” Pennings said.