

Immigrants are making Canada a more religious society, survey shows

A new survey shows Canada's high levels of immigration are making the country more religious, heightening the need to respect religion's place in the public square, says Andrew Bennett, a former Canadian ambassador for religious freedom.

The Sept. 13 Angus Reid poll in partnership with [Cardus](#), an Ottawa-based think tank, shows new Canadians are twice as likely as Canadians at large to attend religious services regularly.

"Research shows that foreign born Canadians are more likely to carry with them a faith-based lifestyle which, in recent years, has provided a boost to declining church attendance in this country," says the [survey](#).

"This propensity is borne out in relation to the spiritual continuum. Indeed, four-in-ten first-generation Canadians (39%) are among the most faithfully intense segment – the Religiously Committed. This represents almost twice the proportion of the average population and more than a two-to-one ratio when compared to Canadians whose grandparents were born in Canada (39 per cent to 17 per cent)."



Former ambassador Andrew Bennett

"What is most important to take from those numbers, is that religious belief and the presence of faith amongst Canadians in this country remains a significant part of many peoples' lives, and that the Canadian public square

needs to ensure there is a respect for the diversity of beliefs, not just for new Canadians but for all Canadians,” said Bennett, director of the Cardus Religious Freedom Institute.

The survey shows the proportion of immigrants from non-Christian religions has risen since the 1980s from 29 per cent to 39 per cent.

The percentage of Catholics in that time period has dropped from 31 per cent to 22 per cent, while the number of Protestants has only dropped slightly from 19 per cent to 17 per cent. Those with no religious affiliation have remained at 21 per cent.

Bennett sees those numbers as a sign of Canada’s “deep diversity,” underlying the importance of an “expansive understanding of religious freedom.”

That means the public square must leave room for divergent theological, moral, ethical and ideological beliefs that must not only be tolerated but respected and affirmed, he said.

The survey notes some observers are calling for more government involvement in policies to maintain religious harmony, but Bennett is leery of government control when it comes to religious expression.

“You can’t have kind of a prescribed diversity where diversity is defined by one particular political ideology or theology,” he said.

Respecting the beliefs of others does not mean agreeing with them, Bennett said. “We must have the ability to criticize and to fundamentally disagree with other peoples’ beliefs. It must be done peacefully, and from a Catholic perspective, it must be done with an eye for the imago Dei, that we are made in the image and likeness of God, even if we profoundly disagree with them.”

Bennett acknowledged religious freedom does have limits. “There are reasonable limits on religious freedom.

“Where someone purportedly exercising their religious beliefs calls for actions that are violent or actions that would fundamentally deny the dignity of the human being then we must speak out against those actions, and not only that, and I think there are appropriate limits to freedom of religion in those specific cases,” he said.

While the survey cites a recent Pew Research report that shows Canada is considered a global leader in upholding religious freedom and diverse expressions of religious faith, Bennett said people of faith need to “press governments in this country and the courts to respect freedom of religion and of conscience.”

“We must have a stronger voice on this,” he said. “We’re seeing increasingly that the courts and government are having a very narrow understanding of

religious freedom, that somehow it's only the freedom to worship."

"It's not just freedom to worship; it's the freedom to publicly express your beliefs and act on them," Bennett said.

The survey shows two-thirds of immigrants believe religion is a net positive as opposed to a net negative for the world; while Canadians who immigrated three generations or more ago, are evenly divided.

The survey shows most (eight in ten) Canadians believe Canada does well with the level of religious harmony in the country as well as in its respect for religious minorities.

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from June 13 – 19 among a representative randomized sample of 1,509 Canadian adults who are members of the Angus Reid Forum. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.