

2008 Expert Roundtable on Canada's Experience with Pluralism

Religious Pluralism in the Public Sphere in Canada

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Summary

This paper explores religious pluralism in Canada's public sphere, tracing Canada's shift from Christian to multi-faith pluralism. At the time of Confederation in 1867, Canada strived to accommodate Catholics and Protestants. Starting in the 1960s, waves of immigrants, particularly from outside Europe, pushed Canada to develop a new form of religious pluralism – one that could accommodate world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and Shintoism. Canadians today tend to regard faith a private rather than public matter. The place of religion in society and the evolution of religious pluralism in the country remain sources of unease. The author discusses recent issues such as faith-based arbitration in family law, debates over the appropriateness of wearing the hijab or carrying an orkirpan in public spaces, and the printing of cartoons considered blasphemous by some Muslims. The paper suggests that the Canadian public remains relatively uninformed about the complexities of modern religious pluralism, in part because of the popular media's inability or unwillingness to delve deeply in religious expression and accommodation.