

## Montreal Interfaith Forum: The Question of Religion in a Secular State

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Montreal, Canada - UPF-Canada held a conference Nov. 8, 2014, in Montreal on the theme “The Question of Religion in a Secular State: Should Religion Be Removed from the Public Sphere?” Mr. Archie Martin of the Mi’kmaq nation welcomed the 60 participants in the Aboriginal tradition by affirming that “aboriginals have always sought peace”. After an introduction to UPF’s goals and objectives by Mr. Franco Famularo, secretary general of UPF-Canada, Mr. Alan DeSousa expressed his pride that UPF is based in the Montreal borough of which he is mayor. Mayor DeSousa posited that religions should communicate with each other in order to create a better community since universal values are to be found in all religions.

Reflections on the theme of the first panel “Secularism and Religion: Is Co-existence Possible?” were provided by Dr. David Koussens (chair of research on religion and advanced modernity at the University of Sherbrooke), Dr. Martin Bellerose (theologian), Jonathan Guilbault, (journalist, critic and editor) and Ms. Danièle De Lorimier (director of pastoral services with the Catholic Church). The general response was in the affirmative as all panelists agreed that secularism was originally conceived in order to assure religious liberty; however, the speakers provided a warning that there is a tendency to associate secularism with an anti-religious bias.

The theme of the second panel, “Does Religion Contribute to Society’s Well being?” was addressed by Anthony Mansour of the Academy of Ecumenists in North America, Daniel Picot of “Religions for Peace,” Father Alain Vallancourt, priest at the Mary Queen of the World Basilica in Montreal, and Mrs. Isabelle Laurin, secretary of the Council of Religious Leaders of Montreal-Nord. They each demonstrated the unique role that faith communities play on the local level and how interreligious groupings can support family development, a sense of belonging, the integration of new immigrants and youth involvement, for example. Also, at the broader international level, religion facilitates communication networks, humanitarian works and the building of bridges between communities and countries.

The afternoon included a discussion guided by Guillaume Tremblay (film producer) and Dr. Solange Lefebvre (chair of the Religion, Culture and Society Department of the University of Montreal) that followed the presentation of the documentary film “Happy Shipwreck” produced by Mr. Tremblay. All noted the challenge of the quest for meaning within a context where being part of a religious tradition is not popular.

Hon. M. Réal Ménard, former member of federal parliament and current borough mayor of Mercier—Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, provided concluding remarks and expressed his strong interest in the themes addressed.



The conference theme was explored in a judicious manner through the perspectives of each panelist. All were clearly reminded that secularism was originally conceived as a form of protection for religious liberty. An analysis of current circumstances and the interpretation of secularism was provided amidst warnings to avoid the pitfalls of deviating from the primary role of secularism and to further develop attitudes that encourage mutual respect for religion and civic leaders were affirmed with a view to preserve a culture of peace.

