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## Who's the 'We' in 'Our Whole Society'?

*Justin Tse K. H.*

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The conference, Our Whole Society: Bridging the Religious-Secular Divide, took place on March 22-24 at the University of British Columbia's campus at Robson Square in the downtown of Vancouver, British Columbia. The conference organizers pulled together a variety of civil society groups, academics, and government officials to deliberate on postsecularism, public policy, and the common good in Canada.

It is usually considered in bad taste to wax critical of the common good. But as the introductions began for the 'Our Whole Society' conference on March 22-24 in Vancouver, BC, it hit me that it was hard to understand to whose commons the 'common good' refers. Who are 'we'? How many of 'us' are there in 'Our Whole Society'? Are we basically all 'liberals,' signing off on a mythological social contract that states in the fine print the overlapping consensus we call 'Canadian values'? As I hope will become clear, my critical questions have a theoretical aim, which is to say that it's irrelevant whether I liked or disliked the conference because it will become apparent by the end that I got a lot out of it and that I'm glad I went.

To put it candidly, I'm glad I went because being at Our Whole Society required a tremendous amount of intellectual labour on one question: who are 'we'? As a conference, we were told that 'we' had been discussing the contributions of faith groups to the 'common good' since 2013 at McGill University. What the 'common good' meant was that we were not going to engage in the dichotomies of "religious" versus "secular," "good" versus "bad," "public" versus "personal" (the last of which struck me as oddly conflated with 'private'). We were going to have a different kind of conversation, one where faith groups were part of 'civil society.' The task was urgent: Truth and Reconciliation's Marie Wilson told us that religion informs the process of reconciliation because 'values are spiritual in nature,' a 'collective vocabulary.' It was also primal: Rabbi Yosef Wosk said that we had to get to the 'sacred geography' that lies behind Canada to rediscover the foundations of Canadian society. The idea of Our Whole Society was to bring the various sectors of civil society into the room for a 'deep, very deep' discussion about religion, which the think-tank Laurier Institution (our hosts) reminded us remained 'divisive' because of the proliferation of faith convictions across our society. 'We' were expected to be the representatives of civil society – faith groups, academics, think tank members – to bring about a new Canadian consensus about religion from below, as it were.

The thing about civil society, though, is that – at least in both the classical Aristotelian, Hegelian, and even Habermasian senses – it's supposed to denote a metaphorical kaleidoscope of societal groups that push up against the power of the state from below. There's supposed to be a line between civil society and the state: on one side are Canadian citizens while the government is on the other side, and there's a productive tension between the two.

This is where the 'we' gets confusing. Regent College's John Stackhouse argued that Canadian secularism was a 'pragmatic secularism,' a 'secular act of nation-building' that began with Confederation in 1867, forming a new nation to 'let Britain off the colonial hook and keep the Americans and their Civil War out.' To form a nation, standards – albeit lowest common denominator ones – needed to be set, especially the standard that the various ethnic factions of Canada needed to 'tolerate' each other. Tolerance, then, is (for Stackhouse) a bona fide Canadian shared value, an abstract concept that holds Canadian society together. This means that if religious communities are teaching their members to be intolerant, their activities could be construed as seditious, threatening the Canadian body politic that thrives on tolerance. What's more, as Stackhouse's co-panelist Rabbi

Lisa Grushcow added in the question-and-answer period, such language was justifiable because citizens in a society are part of something shared, which is why governments evaluate immigrants before they are allowed to be part of this shared society – something that, though neither Stackhouse nor Grushcow actually said it, resembled a social contract.

Here, though, we have moved quite a ways away from civil society. Sedition, social contract, Confederation, body politic: this is the language of the state. Are we in fact the state?

It seemed like we were. Both the Vancouver Sun's Douglas Todd and the Canadian Council of Women's Alia Hogben called for what amounted to the work of the police state to regulate religious communities that opposed international standards of human rights. University of Winnipeg's James Christie not only pointed out that Canada had been racist, but took to task a member of the state, Ambassador of Religious Freedom Andrew Bennett, for representing his 'political masters' as exemplars of religious freedom when the Prime Minister had made snide comments on the niqab back home. We may have been civil society, but we were also constitutive of a liberal state, even (mis)represented by a religious freedom ambassador. We may have been representatives of our various factions and identities in Canadian civil society from the bottom up, but we were also representing the state from the top down.

What accounts for this paradox?

It turned out that what was fudging the boundary between civil society and the state was the presumption that we who were gathered in the room were all liberal. From Rabbi Grushcow to Catholic theologian Shawn Flynn to the University of Victoria's Paul Bramadat, the common sentiment was that we were the usual suspects, the people who would most likely gather at these interreligious events to complain about the conservatives in our own tradition. This was not the first time we had gathered; we have all seen each other and our counterparts in other rooms at other dialogues thinking about how we can make our whole society. The Orthodox Jews, the evangelicals, the conservative Sikhs, Muslims, and (dare I say it) even Buddhists seldom showed up.

And the acknowledgement of that – that, finally – was what was productive about this conference. While there were the usual suspects who celebrated the palpable liberalism in the room, a number of participants lamented that room had not been made for the conservatives within each religious tradition. Indeed, that was the most productive questions of the conference because it ignited the discussion that there is possibly another 'we' in the room, one positioned firmly against the fudging of the boundary between state and civil society. Rabbi Grushcow spoke of it when she claimed common ground with the Orthodox Jewish colleagues she debated in the newspaper, knowing that they read the same Torah and prayed the same psalms. Shawn Flynn spoke of it when he cited the Second Vatican Council, arguing for attention to how ecclesial policy gets unevenly applied among Roman Catholics. The Hudson Institute's Paul Marshall spoke of it when he talked about the origins of secularism in church-state relations, acknowledging that the word 'secular' has an uneasy fit with so-called 'religions' that don't share the same historical genealogy into medieval Christendom. The World Sikh Organization's Balpreet Singh spoke of it when he showed that his organization's legal activities for religious freedom are based on Sikh understandings of the person. Ambassador Andrew Bennett spoke of it when he disclosed his own Eastern Rite Catholic proclivities and said explicitly that his actions as religious freedom ambassador are rooted in the Christian understanding that the incarnation of God as a human being clarifies the dignity of every human person.

It turns out, in the final analysis, that there is a liberal 'we' that fudges the boundaries and a religious 'we' that works from particular, situated rootedness. There is, in short, a we who is not the state. That was why, at the end of the day, the final speaker, the Centre for Pre-Confederation Treaties and Reconciliation's Doug White, was so cathartic. He told his own story of starting out as a liberal indigenous lawyer, believing the myth that 'our whole society' meant that he had equal rights to upward economic, political, and social mobility. All of this was shattered, he says, when he met a

‘real Indian,’ someone so traumatized by the history of indigenous oppression in Canada that he refused to acknowledge people without the same amount of Indian blood as him as a member of the band. It turns out that the liberal ‘we’ is, at the end of the day, an exclusive ‘we,’ one that pastes over histories of oppression – histories that perhaps may account for the conservatisms excluded from the liberal ‘we.’ As I also noted in my workshop on Charles Taylor, this means that I am not here to represent an identity for this liberal ‘we’; I am here to talk about Canada – not to construct a new overlapping consensus and a fresh identity with abstract Canadian values, but to tell its stories truthfully. That’s what Doug White did: he told the truth that accounted for both the exclusions of liberalism and the proliferation of conservatisms.

That is why he got a standing ovation. It’s also why I’m glad I went to this conference.

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