

Humanism in Canada: Canadian Humanism, Social and Political Discourse, Personal Views, and Opposition (Part Two)

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Abstract

Doug Thomas is the President of Secular Connexion Séculière. Greg Oliver is the President of Canadian Secular Alliance. Michel Virard is the President of Association humaniste du Québec. Dr. Lloyd Hawkey Robertson is the Vice-President of Humanist Canada. They discuss: definition of Canadian Humanism;

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Please see the footnotes, bibliography, and citation style listing after the interview.

If no answer existent in the particular question, of the 5 total questions, for the particular leader/interviewee representative of the hierarchs of the humanist or humanistic organization in Canada, then the name does not become included in the responses for the question. Interviews based on open invitations to the leadership for interviews. If not appearing, then the others did not respond to request for interviews. If no appearance in future parts, then no responses provided by interviewees who accepted within the first part, i.e., conflicting demands on attention and time, or organizational resources. All responses in alphabetical order by the first-name first portion or institutional title (in one case).

1. Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With some of the personal background, professional role, the backstory of the organization, pivotal moments and seminal individuals for the organization, change over time of the organization, and the targeted objectives and vision of it, let's cover some the personal and community views of local and national humanism or, at least, humanistic values. What, in one word, encapsulates Canadian Humanism? Please unpack this one word in depth once provided.

Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière: Given the nature and condition of secular humanism in Canada, no one word can encapsulate it.

The best brief description of humanism, and this applies to Canadian humanism as much as to any other humanism, is that it is a philosophy through which one is good without god(s) by following the forty principle doctrines of Epicurus, the twelve principles developed in the Hague in 1952 or variations on those principles such as those listed on the Society of Freethinkers website.

Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance: Just one word? That's a tricky one. I'll go with 'improvement'. Ultimately humanism seeks a holistic and well-rounded improvement of human welfare. Canada has humans.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada: The word I would use is "objectivity." Everything we as humanists stand for including respect, fairness, compassion and reason depend on our capacity to overrule subjective prejudice on the balance of evidence. It is sometimes thought that the Age of Reason began with the Enlightenment; however, the capacity to differentiate between the objective and subjective began much earlier. I have argued that the rise of the world religions during the first millennium BCE was likely a reaction against the earlier emergence of a self that was both individual and volitional. Volitional individuals capable of evidenced-based forward planning represented a potential threat to existing collectivist societies. Although this ability was useful, it was constrained by religious dogma that often included self-renunciation. The Enlightenment released this self from such constraints resulting in a flowering of scientific and humanistic thought. It is this capacity for objective evaluation that allows us to understand what constitutes genuine respect, fairness, compassion and even reason.

Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec: Canadian Humanism is the local expression of a larger concept, Humanism as a modern, universal view about what it is to be human, what to expect and, as importantly, what not to expect as a human being. Although it

is coloured by the specific Canadian life experience of each and every one of its banner holders, from Henry Morgentaler to Martin Frith, its core values remain remarkably sharable by all humanists of Planet Earth. This also means there are no significant differences between Quebec Humanism and the Rest of Canada Humanism, apart, of course, the communication channel peculiarities such as language and, sometimes, preferred references. Perhaps an example will underline the universality of Humanist concepts. Romain Gagnon, who lives in Montreal, has recently published a book: “*Et l’Homme créa Dieu à son image*”. Within months the English version was produced: “*So Man Created God in his Own Image*”. Romain open both books with a quote from a Humanist, a German Jew who lived in the USA, a wonderful epigraph encapsulating the humanist stand:

“Strange is our situation here upon Earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however there is one thing we do know: that we are here for the sake of other men – above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness depends.”

Yes, that was from Albert Einstein. Our ability to extract the best of many cultures is, indeed, a humanist trait and I certainly wish it will stay that way forever.

Of course, there are differences of “priority” between Humanist groups on the face of Earth and within Canada as well. So, currently, Ontario Humanists are concerned about catholic state schools, BC Humanists seem to be more interested in our right to die with dignity and Quebec Humanists have been concerned mainly with the religious bias built in their provincial institutions. But that would hardly be a justification to pretend that Humanists think differently according to their province of residence or even the place of their upbringing.

2. Jacobsen: How does your organization reflect and embody – in values and actions in community – this description of Canadian Humanism?

Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière: SCS follows the principles in its dealings with government agencies by encouraging those in the agencies to pay attention to secular humanist principles and following the human rights laid out by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance: To maintain as big a tent as possible, we decided it would be best if we had no formal affiliation with humanism or freethought. Our narrow mandate leaves the door open for any who share the ideal of secular government, including the religious. But admittedly, most of our members have a non-religious worldview and possess humanist values. And we are motivated by the desire to improve the welfare of Canadians – not unlike the organizations that best epitomize the values of Canadian Humanism previously described.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkey Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada: Humanist Canada embraces the idea that science and reason constitute the best way to understand the world around us, and this is displayed prominently on our website. Science and reason posit a reality outside of our selves which we can know and understand, at least to a proximal degree. This is more than

an assumption. We have used the scientific method for over 400 years to produce a modern human civilization is longer lived, more educated and better fed than any preceding civilization. The scientific method is based on notions of objective thought modelled by ancient Greek, Indian and Chinese science 2,000 years earlier.

The alternative to science and reason is some form of revealed truth. When that revealed truth is attributed to a deity, Humanist Canada has a consistent record: a humanist Canada is a secular Canada. This does not mean that people cannot be religious, but in a secular world the state will not promote a religious belief, nor will it allow the levers of state to be used to promote such belief. The irony is that only a secular state can guarantee equality of expression to competing religions, but that is not the primary goal of our organization. Our goal for a secular Canada is to promote those very qualities of cognition that has permitted human civilization to flourish.

Humanists from across Canada meet regularly in local groups to discuss issues related to the advancement of science and reason. Often these meetings are in the form of self-education on topics and issues of current interest. With limited success, Humanist Canada attempts to network with these groups and share information between groups. Recently, we have hosted a national essay contest for high school students writing on humanist topics. One project that I think has promise involves the development of a national webinar series, and some of these webinars could be hosted by local humanist groups.

Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec: The Quebec Humanist Association, a francophone organisation, came to life much later than the original, English speaking, Humanist Association of Canada (now HC) so it should be no surprise that the fights carried and won by HC pioneers are no longer top priorities for the AHQ. Thus the right for women to choose to have a baby or not, a cause célèbre successfully defended, at a heavy personal cost, by HC first president, Henry Morgentaler, is no longer a hot topic in Montreal, where most AHQ members live. Another article of the Humanist main principles has emerged as a central figure of current Humanism. It is the secularity of the State, as represented by all three levels of government. We, Humanists of Quebec, have come to the conclusion that most of the great and small fights we have been involved with in the past were really the unavoidable, undesirable consequence of a major, anti-democratic, flaw of our governmental system: the influence of religious considerations permeating all our institutions, from top to bottom, and from Newfoundland to Yukon. It thus became evident that we had to aim at the head of this tentacular monster and this is what the AHQ has been doing since its creation, in 2005. This means constant interaction with various branches of the provincial government, mostly the Ministry of education, the opposition parties, the Justice department, and the influencing media. For example we write to la Presse and to Le Devoir fairly often and we do get many of our papers published.

However fighting for a secular state is one thing but, as important, is the building of a supporting community keen on critical thinking. In Quebec, that's what we continuously do through our regular monthly events of significant film screenings and lectures. In addition we now organise thematic larger events once every two years with four or five speakers. We keep our supporters fed with the latest news from the humanosphere through a set of channels: website, Facebook page, a pdf and printed magazine, and Youtube videos (about 120).

3. Jacobsen: How does this description of Canadian Humanism expand into the outreach of the organization outside of the local community into the wider national social and political discourse?

Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière: SCS advocates are aware of the principles of humanism and apply them to their dealings with government agencies. Basically, they respect individual rights and work to gain respect for humanist principles, especially in regards to the Supreme Court of Canada's statement in 1984 that the fundamental right to freedom of conscience and religion protects the right to freedom from religion as much as it protects the right to freedom of religion.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkey Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada: I think Humanist Canada has historically been more successful at impacting on the national discourse than in supporting the development of local humanist groups. I previously mentioned the abortion rights movement as fundamental to our early development. The notion that a fertilized human egg is a life within the definition of criminal law is inherently tied to a supernatural view that the embryo is infused with a supernatural soul at conception. Humanist Canada (at the time, Humanist Association of Canada) took a secular view that decisions on abortion laws should be based on science and reason. Our recent campaign to defund Catholic schools is similarly based on a desire to remove religious privilege in the provision of state funding. There is also a human rights issue tied to the separate schools controversy. The provision of a separate Catholic school system advantages Catholic teachers because they may apply for positions in both systems while non-Catholics are disadvantaged in applying for jobs with the separate system. This is discrimination on the basis of religious belief, and therefore, a violation of human rights although allowed under Canadian law.

Canada has a different philosophical basis than does the United States whose Declaration of Independence states "We hold these truths (the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness) to be self-evident." The evidentiary basis of human rights was alluded to by Chris DiCarlo's slogan "We are all of African descent" which he used as the basis for an anti-racism campaign. From a humanist perspective, rights that are based on science and reason have a more solid grounding than those granted by a divinity. For example, DiCarlo faced a disciplinary hearing because his "we are all of African descent" campaign was thought to be "insensitive" to those of ancestry aboriginal to the America's who believed they had been placed on this continent by a creator-god.

Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec: Whether it is Humanist Canada on Parliament Hill or Quebec Humanist Association in *Commissions parlementaires* in Quebec City, Canadian humanists attempt to sway the current governments toward an effective separation of Churches and State(s). Our action takes various forms, such as parliamentary petitions, memoirs to specific ministries, meeting ministers or opposition leaders, etc. Sometime we win, sometime we lose. Sometime we have to be content with the repealing of a little used, obsolete but still menacing law, such as the blasphemy law in the criminal code, sometime we hit big, like in Quebec, when after years of media pounding by us and our sister organisations, the government decided, in a momentous move, to declare Quebec as a secular state. I'm not sure the Rest of Canada, hypnotized by the religious sign quarrel, realizes the importance of this mere

«one liner». The other great victory of recent years is, of course, the establishment of Right to die with dignity first in Québec, then in Canada. Since 2005, the AHQ has been instrumental in helping to create, man and finance an effective local DWD organisation, the AQDMD.

4. Jacobsen: Apart from the organization, does personal view differ from the organizational bounds of the definition of Canadian Humanism as an individual differentiation? If so, how? If not, why not?

Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance: Since the organization is officially neutral on the matter, my personal views are by definition different.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkey Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada: The Humanist Canada board declined to take a position on Quebec's secularism bill. Those on the board who support the legislation do so from a position that provincial employees should not advance their religious beliefs while exercising positions of power. Opponents of the legislation believe the Quebec bill denies Muslim women, in particular, freedom of expression. On the surface, this appears to be a conflict between two values or "goods," secularisms versus freedom of expression, but humanists are united in the belief that state power should not be used to advance supernatural belief. For humanists the issue is not freedom of expression per se, but whether the law would be used to target an identified minority. If the HC board refused to take a position until it is determined statistically whether the law is being enforced differentially, that would be consistent with a rational and scientific worldview.

Freedom of speech was an issue in the dismissal of Acadia University professor Rick Mehta a couple of years ago. The tenured professor had questioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indian Residential Schools and the practice of using special designated pronouns for transsexual people. If Mehta used his position of power to force students to conform to his belief system, then this would have been an abuse of power. On the other hand, the right for university professors to raise unpopular or controversial positions is protected to ensure that universities do not return to the dark ages of controlled thought. I would argue that this protection is fundamental to science and reason, and the removal of any tenured professor should, therefore, be transparent. I was disappointed that our board refused to ask Acadia for that transparency.

Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec: Personal views always differ somewhat, even on subjects where we all, basically, agree. Making it work is the name of the game, not marking points. So we tend to accept our mutual differences on specific subjects in order not to jeopardize the greater good we are aiming at. We know we are, at heart, humanists. This certainly does not mean we will be willing martyrs for the cause, but we do try to maintain a healthy distance between our personal interests and those of humanity. The doing is its own reward.

5. Jacobsen: Given the definition of Canadian Humanism provided, the internal actions reflecting this to the organizational community, the expansion of this in relationship with the wider Canadian cultural milieu, and the individual difference of opinion (or not), a natural question follows in its antipode, its (Canadian) humanistic polar opposite. What

individuals, organizations, and even Canadian values, stand opposed in the past and into the present of these ideas behind Canadian Humanism?

Doug Thomas, President, Secular Connexion Séculière: The presence of “socially conservative”; that is fundamentalist religious individuals at all levels of government means that we always have to maintain a rational and legally supportable stance in regards to social issues. The assumed right of Christians to impose their religion on the rest of the population often puts on the opposite side of the table from these people. We are careful to make the distinction that we do not oppose their religion or their right to believe in that religion, but that we are opposed to their forcing their religion on others.

The legal construct of Canada has certainly been influenced by religious people in the past. The Criminal Code of Canada, the national anthem, the preamble to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms are all that they are because of the influence, directly or indirectly, of religion.

Our long-term goal is to make all of our governments places where people can participate in decision making on an equal basis, in a neutral milieu without religious interference.

Greg Oliver, President, Canadian Secular Alliance: Related to our mandate specifically, I’d say any individuals or organizations who seek preferential status in society for any religious worldview. Our organization is essentially focused on equality rights – which is among the core principles of liberal democracy. Without secular government citizens who do not conform to the preferred religious worldview cannot truly be political equals. We strongly believe liberal democracy is essential to maximizing human well-being. Of course, by no means would this represent the totality of individuals and ideas opposed to humanist values.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, Vice-President, Humanist Canada: Traditionally, Humanist Canada has been wary of the impositions of religion in undermining scientifically based rational discourse, and I think humanists of all stripes have been effective in countering these impositions. But the public’s belief in science and rational thought has been systematically undermined by at least two more recent threats. First, there is counter-culture that decries things “western” including medicine, diet and lifestyle. What is called “western medicine” is actually scientifically validated practise while so-called “alternative medicine” consists of unproven therapies. Although some of these unproven therapies, such as homeopathy, are of recent and western origin, the claim is made that these treatments are traditional, and “if they have been around for thousands of years they must be effective.” Scientists and medical doctors are then cast as co-conspirators keeping people from less invasive treatment. As I discussed in relation to a previous question, this can have devastating health consequences.

The religious and counter-culture attack on science and reason has been joined by the post-modernist turn in academia, particularly in the humanities. The seminal 20th-century post-modernist philosopher, Martin Heidegger, described intelligent thinking as “degenerate” to be corrected by the thought that is “more primordial.” This has led to a relativist view that there are equally valid “ways of knowing” based on ideological preference. Tom Strong described science as a “white, male way of knowing” in a peer-reviewed journal article. Another well-cited author, Kenneth Gergen, described all quantitative research as ideologically oppressive. Yet, without

science and reason, the resolution of disputes about what constitutes reality ultimately comes down to brute force. Heidegger described himself and Hitler as “Dasien” with the ability to determine ultimate truths beyond those available to science. Religions privy ultimate truth to their deities and those who interpret the will of those deities. I think the upsurge of censorship, “de-platformings,” and even firings in universities is led by post-modernists who, because of their ideological stance, have no other ways of resolving ideological difference. I think humanists should be open to dealing with all challenges to science and reason irrespective of where on the political spectrum those challenges originate. Our civilization depends on it.

Michel Virard, President, Association humaniste du Québec: In short, who or what is opposing our actions? To be frank, direct opposition is relatively rare. When, in 2009, we managed to get the Montreal buses with a side advert stating «Probably God does not exist...» I received a single heinous message while we were expecting a lot of flack. The day before the buses were scheduled to be on the streets of Montreal, my wife was worried we could be the target of nasties. But no such things happened. To the opposite, we got a lot of new members and we received our biggest donation, ever. Even the archbishop of Montreal managed to state publicly something like «everyone has the right to his opinion»! This was the moment we realized the Quebec society was ripe for ... real secularism.

Still, the opposition exists but it is now mostly behind curtains. We find that ethics committees are often packed with religious stalwarts disguised as ethicists, that educational boards are packed with former moral or catechism teachers. We still find invisible cassocks in the media and in the position of power in our Universities. They no longer have a monopoly on what can be said, but they are there, no doubt.

“Humanist” is a rather positively charge word, at least in Canada (not the US!), we get, most of the time, the right to expose our opinion providing we badger the media long enough. This is not a privilege we should sneeze at. We do get insulted sometimes by religious bigots, but also by political bigots from left and right. The major force opposing us is, really, the sheer weight of tradition. We are asking for CHANGE and that is, for most people, a dirty word.

But you also asked: what Canadian values, at large, might be opposed to Humanist values? If one considers that these Canadian values are somehow embedded in our current constitution (or what stands for it...), I would say we, Humanists of Quebec, are in agreement with most of it. There is, of course, this funny God reference in the preamble of the Canadian Charter of Rights. Well, the Supreme Court of Canada has already dismissed it could be used in any way to contradict the articles of Charter, so I won't dig deeper on that. Far more important is the other elements of the Charter which have made waves within our ranks. Contrary to popular belief, there is no unanimity on the meaning and the reach of the principle called «multiculturalism». You have to understand that our humanist roots are in the deeply held belief that all humans should have the same set of basic rights. In other words, those rights are **universal** and may not be curtailed in any way without very good reasons. In particular, they may not be denied by reason of a particular attachment to particular cultural customs. This is why we will defend the rights of women, regardless of their origin, to be autonomous beings, equal to men in rights. However, multiculturalism has been used, even in courts of law, to deny the protection granted to women by the Charter against custom based abuses by members of their own ethnic community. Many

of us believe this is unacceptable and that this Charter article commanding to promote multiculturalism gives a free pass to misogynistic religions. These glaring flaws have led us to give multiculturalism a closer examination.

What we have discovered is that multiculturalism has shaky parts and even shady friends. But first comes first. When and where was «multiculturalism» used first? Nope, it's not in Canada. It became part of the law in Sweden in 1970. As of 2018, 48 years later, or two generations later, 73% of Swedes consider their politic of integration a failure. Yet this is the country which has spent the most to make immigration and multiculturalism a success.

Germany also gave it a try. Her chancellor, Mrs. Merkel declared in 2015: «*Multiculturalism leads to parallel societies and therefore remains a 'life lie,'*» or a sham, she said.

Other countries such as Netherland, Denmark, are rethinking their approach to Cultural Diversity. Cultural Diversity is also a loaded expression: it was used in South-Africa as a fig-leaf for the apartheid based Tricameral system. Even today, in South-Africa, the term multiculturalism is used to prettify the neo-apartheid programs of the white right-wing fringe. So beware: your mileage may vary.

For all its touted virtue, multiculturalism had its critics. Robert David Putnam, the author of “Bowling Alone” and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University conducted a nearly decade-long study on how multiculturalism affects social trust. He surveyed 26,200 people in 40 American communities, finding that “people in diverse communities “don't trust the local mayor, they don't trust the local paper, they don't trust other people and they don't trust institutions,” What is worse, “In diverse communities, **we don't trust people who do look like us**”. In effect “we act like turtles”, trying to shield ourselves. These are harsh words even if Putnam admits this effect tends to disappear over time.

When you look around, now, in 2019, it seems the only country where multiculturalism is not much of a problem is Canada. But the selection of immigration candidates with better credentials than in Europe or the USA may have a lot to do with this relative success. Yes, it may come as a surprise to many that on average, immigrants to Québec are LESS religious than the local population. Quite possibly the effect of a level of education somewhat higher than the local average.

But Humanists are concerned with other questions: how come a successful businessman from Afghanistan, Mohamed Shafia, could convince his wife and his son that killing his own girls was OK? Was he persuaded that «anything goes» in Canada. Did we telegraph the wrong message when the Shafia family landed? Is Canada image one of a country where you can import any tradition and nobody cares? By insisting on an ill-defined “multiculturalism” rather than on integration, are we advertising it's OK to beat your wives? Humanists in Quebec are haunted by those tragic misunderstandings.

Perhaps Canada has been a bit too heavy on the «rights» and forgot that life in society does imply a certain number of «duties», and I don't mean by this that you must merely obey the laws. A country does require much more than simply a set of criminal laws. It needs shared

convictions otherwise it will eventually disintegrate. Multiculturalism is not promoting shared convictions; to the contrary, instead of integrating the existing groups, each new group is adding one more fault line within Canadian society. Granted, some fault lines are not very threatening but others, definitely, are dangerous. How Canadians can forget that the worst terrorist massacres in Canada (329 deaths) had its roots in the rift between Hindus and Sikhs in Canada. This massacre was worse than any of the Islamic terrorist attacks in Western Europe, beating by a large margin the bus-metro attack in London (52 deaths), the Bataclan massacre in Paris (129 deaths) and the trains in Madrid (190 deaths)?

How can we ignore these festering wounds in the social fabric of Canada? Unless we rethink what multiculturalism should mean I'm afraid the future will have some nasty surprises in store for us. Multiculturalism cannot be apartheid!

Could Secular Humanists, who have been leading many of the most significant, workable, social advances in this country, come with a workable solution to this very human problem?

Appendix II: Citation Style Listing

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