

'The supremacy of God' does not belong in the Constitution

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The Preamble to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms claims "Canada is grounded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God." (Call it the "God-clause".) This claim is hopelessly confused and it has no place in our constitution. This is true, moreover, whether you are a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Pantheist, an atheist, or someone who has never given one moment's thought to "the supremacy of God" -- much less "recognized" it.

The basic problem with the God-clause is that it runs into an impossible dilemma, given the actual content of the Charter itself. More specifically, what it claims is either meaningless (and therefore worthless), or it has real meaning, in which case it strikes a blow against the very principles that the Charter is in place to protect (in which case it is pernicious).

If the claim that Canada is founded on "recognition of the supremacy of God" has any meaning, then it is both fair and reasonable to ask what exactly is the understanding of "God" in this context? The difficulties here seem obvious. Some, seeing the threat of an unacceptable erosion of basic Canadian values (e.g. freedom of religion), may try to squeeze-in a more "open-minded" reading, and suggest that any and all "God(s)" will do nicely for this purpose. Clearly, however, if this reading was accepted then the supposed "foundations" of our basic values would crack and fragment into a thousand (incoherent) pieces. Foundations like this would wash away like sand.

Faced with this situation the defender of the God-clause may retreat to higher and firmer ground (the ground currently occupied by Tory MP Elsie

Wayne, and an assorted collection of crusading knights from the Reform Party). This is the view that what "we" mean by "God" is (of course) "the Christian God". This position, however, is even less credible than the "anything-goes" (meaningless) alternative.

You don't have to be much of a scholar of theology or history to know that the "Christian God" is a (supreme) Being about which there is little or no agreement among Christians themselves. What/who God is, and how he commands us to live, are matters about which Christians are deeply and widely divided. This includes, by the way, a considerable ambivalence about the role of fundamental values such as freedom, equality and democracy in the order of Christian life. Anyone who believes that clear and secure foundations for our core political and social values can be founded upon the shifting and swirling winds of Christian theology needs to take a closer look at the history, as well as the present circumstances, of the Christian religion.

Beyond this, however, there is the even more obvious problem that many Canadians who do believe in "the supremacy of God", nevertheless do not believe in a Christian God. This includes thousands, if not millions, of hard-working, law-abiding citizens who have made substantial contributions to this country, in the past as well as the present. Are we really going to turn to (all) these citizens and tell them that "their" God has no place in "our" constitution?

The fundamental fact that defenders of the God-clause must face is that Canada includes many people who believe in God but not a Christian God, and many others who do not believe in any "God", and yet all these people share the same core values that are identified and specified in the body of the Charter itself: freedom, equality, and the democratic rule of law. You don't have to believe in (or deny) "the supremacy of God" in order to respect these basic (Canadian) values. This is all the "foundation" that we require for our shared life and destiny as community. Any effort to force these principles into the fractured and disjointed frame of religion will not only fail to secure them, it will betray them.

What should fill the void if the God-clause is removed? Let me suggest the following: "Whereas, the people of Canada, whatever their origins or religion, are united in their common commitment to the fundamental principles of freedom, equality and the democratic rule of law:..." That is a Preamble that every Canadian -- Christian or not -- should feel proud and happy to embrace.

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