

Canada at 150: Religion seen to have played a positive role in local communities, less so on the national stage

At the national level, the damaging legacy of residential schools lingers

June 29, 2017 – Though the religions of the world are massive, globe-spanning umbrellas for people of faith, the bulk of people's interactions with religion – their own and others – occur at the community level.

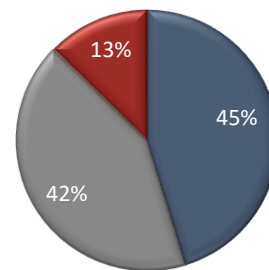
It is through this local lens that a new national study from the Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with [Faith in Canada 150](#), finds Canadians largely pleased with the contributions faith-based organizations have made to their local communities since Confederation. The development of hospitals, schools, and charitable organizations is widely seen as a positive force, especially by those inclined to embrace their own faith.

At the same time, on a national level, the legacy of faith and religion in Canada over the last 150 years has been more mixed. Whether they are devoutly religious or staunchly atheist, Canadians agree that interactions between religious institutions and Indigenous Canadians – most notably the residential school system run largely by Christian churches – have been much more bad than good, and that reconciliation is paramount.

Key Findings:

- One's personal relationship to faith and religion affects one's views on the contributions of religion to Canada's development. Highly religious individuals are much more likely to view such contributions favourably
- Those with a lower degree of religiosity are less likely to be aware of a role played by religion in various aspects of community development, and to hold more negative views if they are aware

What kind of overall impact would you say religious and faith communities have had on the development of your community over the years?



- Very good/More good than bad
- A mix of good and bad
- Very bad/More bad than good

METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from June 14 – 19, 2017, among a representative randomized sample of 1,504 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was conducted in partnership with [Faith in Canada 150](#), and paid for jointly by ARI and Faith in Canada 150. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- Canadians see residential schools as a major black mark on the history of religion in Canada, but other interactions between Indigenous and faith communities are also viewed more negatively than positively

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PART 1: The role of faith in community development

The spectrum of religion and faith

As will become apparent in this report, Canadians' views on the role of religion in their country's history are inextricably linked to their views on religion writ large. There is no such thing as an "average Canadian" when it comes to matters of faith, religion, and spirituality. Rather, as [previous Angus Reid Institute research](#) has detailed, there is a continuum of faith in this country, which this latest installment of the ARI-Faith in Canada 150 research partnership recreates.

The spectrum splits Canadians into four broad segments: The **Religiously Committed**, the **Privately Faithful**, the **Spiritually Uncertain**, and the **Non-Believers**.

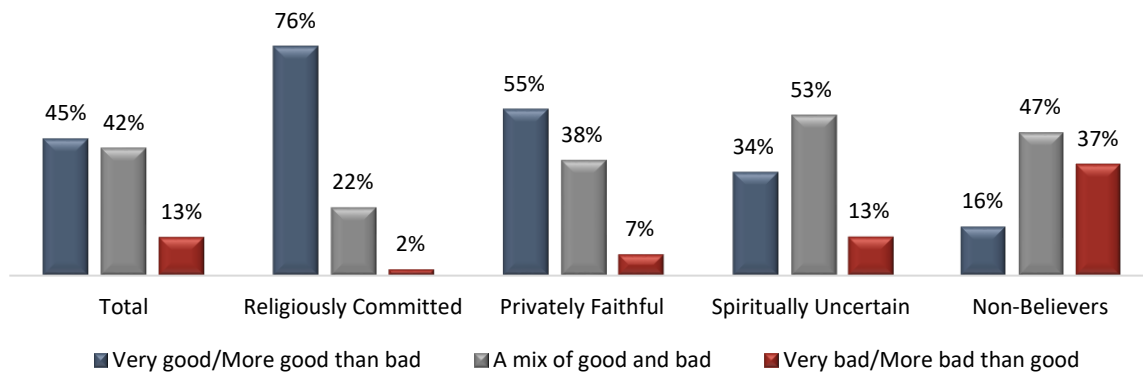
- The **Religiously Committed**, as their name implies, are deeply faithful individuals who attend religious services regularly and get involved in their faith in other ways as well. They tend to be certain that God or some other higher power exists, and they pray to this entity and feel its presence frequently. This segment includes more women than men, and more people ages 55 and older than people in any other age group.
- The **Privately Faithful** are also strong believers in God or a higher power, and most of them also pray regularly. Unlike the Religiously Committed, however, the Privately Faithful are just that: Private. The vast majority of them attend religious services less than once a month, and hardly any of them read sacred texts regularly. Like the Religiously Committed, this group skews older and more female than the general population.
- The **Spiritually Uncertain** are distinguished by their lack of conviction on matters of faith. While the vast majority do not rule out the possibility that God or a higher power exists, only one-in-six (15%) say they definitely believe in such a being. Two-thirds of them pray, but only one-in-ten do so once a month or more. They hardly ever attend religious services. This group includes more young people than the two more religious segments, and includes equal numbers of men and women.
- The **Non-Believers** are those Canadians who doubt or outright reject the existence of God or a higher power, and deny having any personal feelings of faith or spirituality. As might be expected, nearly all of these Canadians do not attend services, pray, or read sacred texts with any regularity. The Non-Believers are the only majority-male segment, and they are the group that contains the fewest respondents in the 55-plus age group.

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Just as they differ significantly in their personal religious beliefs and behaviours, the four segments feel very differently about the contributions of religions and faith communities to the place where they live:

What kind of overall impact would you say religious and faith communities have had on the development of your community over the years?



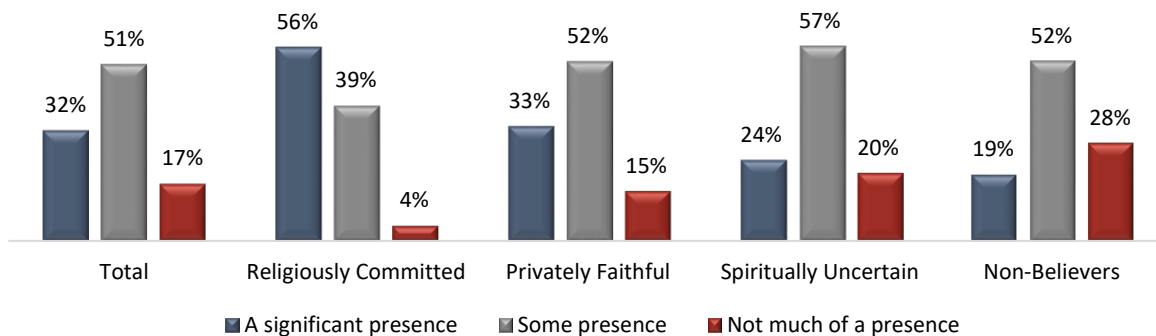
Physical presence

To get respondents thinking about the role of religious institutions in the cities and towns where they live, the Angus Reid Institute asked a pair of questions about the physical presence of religious groups in their communities.

Most Canadians say they see at least some presence from religious and faith communities in their backyards, though the Religiously Committed are notably more likely to say there is “a significant presence.”

Now, let's think about the community where you live. What kind of a physical presence do religious and faith communities have in your own community?

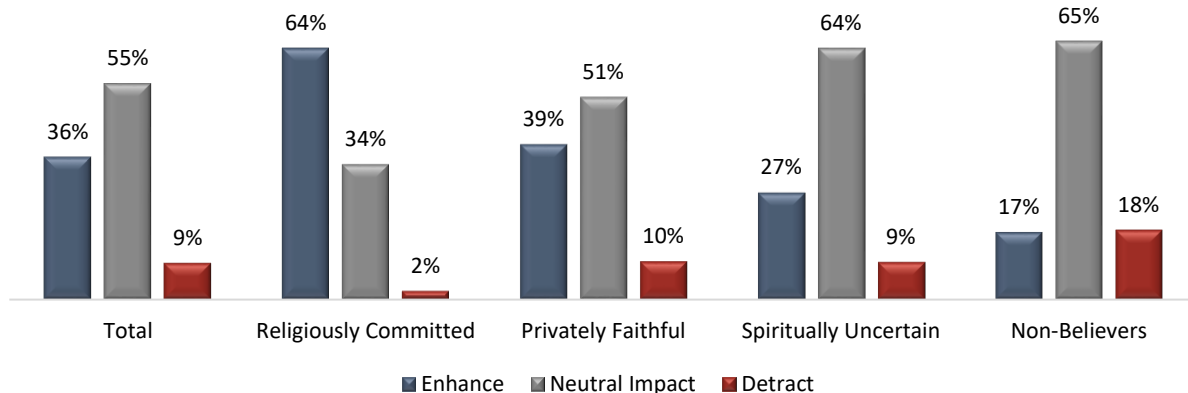
Would you say there is:



Asked whether this presence is a boon or a burden to their communities, most Canadians are inclined to say religious buildings have a “neutral impact.” That said, Canadians are four times more likely to say the places religious organizations have built enhance their communities (36%) than to say such buildings detract from them (9%).

On this question, too, responses vary significantly across the spectrum of religious belief. Two-thirds of the Religiously Committed (64%) say the presence of churches, temples, and the like enhances the place where they live, while the Non-Believers are roughly as likely to say such structures detract from their communities (18%) as enhance them (17%).

And, in your opinion, do those places, including where they are and how they look - enhance or detract from the physical appearance and overall aesthetics of your community?

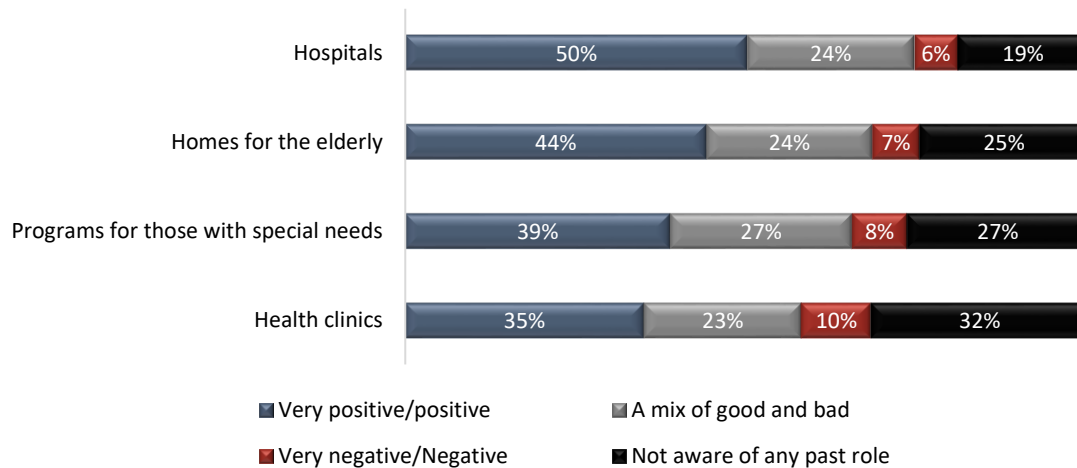


Health care

From hospitals named for saints, to nursing homes specifically aimed at religious minorities, to faith-based in-home care for those with chronic illness, the effects of religion on health care in Canada are far-reaching.

But, as the following graph illustrates, significant numbers of Canadians – ranging from one-in-five to one-in-three – say they are unaware of the past role of religious groups in developing health care facilities in this country. The rest are much more likely to say the influence has been positive or mixed than to say it has been negative:

How would you describe the role of faith communities in the development of the following?



These overall responses belie significant differences across the four segments of the faith and religion spectrum, which are summarized in the tables that follow.

How would you describe the role of faith communities in the development of each of the following?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Hospitals					
Very Positive/Positive	50%	68%	56%	42%	37%
A mix of good and bad	24%	18%	20%	30%	27%
Very Negative/Negative	6%	4%	5%	6%	12%
Not aware of any past role	19%	10%	19%	22%	24%
Homes for the elderly					
Very Positive/Positive	44%	63%	48%	39%	25%
A mix of good and bad	24%	21%	23%	26%	26%
Very Negative/Negative	7%	5%	5%	7%	12%
Not aware of any past role	25%	11%	24%	27%	38%

How would you describe the role of faith communities in the development of each of the following?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Programs for those with special needs					
Very Positive/Positive	39%	54%	46%	32%	22%
A mix of good and bad	27%	25%	23%	29%	28%
Very Negative/Negative	8%	6%	7%	8%	12%
Not aware of any past role	27%	14%	24%	30%	38%
Health clinics					
Very Positive/Positive	35%	56%	41%	26%	18%
A mix of good and bad	23%	19%	20%	26%	27%
Very Negative/Negative	10%	6%	9%	11%	15%
Not aware of any past role	32%	19%	30%	36%	40%

As the table shows, while each group tends to view all four items more positively than negatively, it is the Religiously Committed and the Privately Faithful who are most enthusiastic. Those in the Spiritually Uncertain and Non-Believers groups, meanwhile, profess less familiarity with each health-focused area canvassed, and tend to be more likely to say each one is “a mix of good and bad” or a net negative.

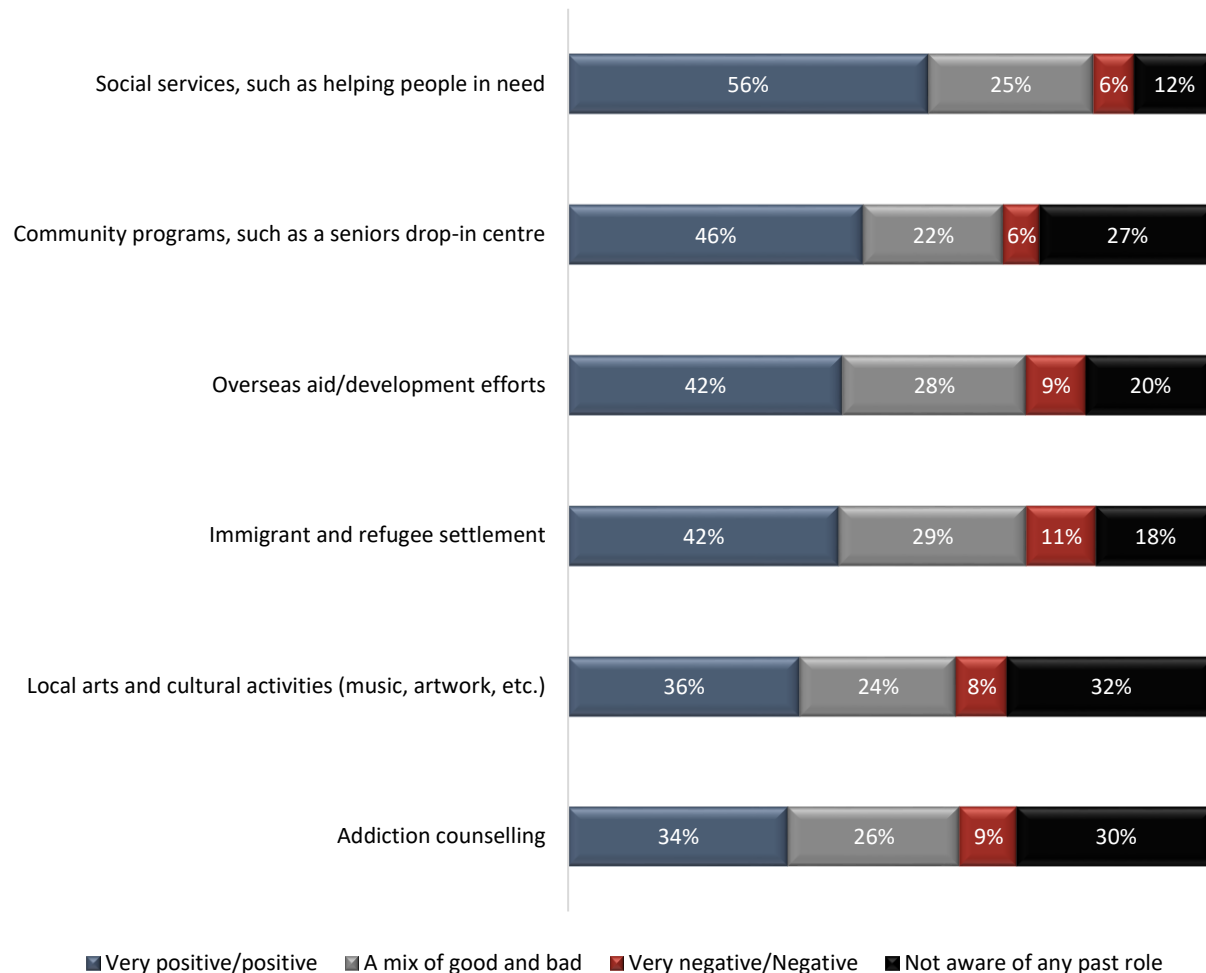
Community contributions

Beyond health care, there are numerous other ways in which religious and faith communities have contributed to Canada’s cities and towns.

Religious organizations often serve as community focal points, providing aid to the poor, sponsoring immigrants and refugees, offering addiction counselling and hosting cultural events.

This legacy, too, is more likely to be seen as positive than negative:

How would you describe the role of religious and faith communities in each of these areas over the years?



The inclusion of “overseas aid” in this list of local impacts of religion is intended to reflect the fact that many such efforts – service trips to developing nations, for instance – are organized by local congregations in specific communities, rather than at a national or international level.

As the preceding graph shows, the provision of social services is the most broadly understood area on the list, as well as the one Canadians are most likely to regard as a net positive.

Again, respondents in all four segments are more inclined to see each item on this list as positive than negative, though the Non-Believers lean this way only narrowly for some items. Tables detailing responses from the four groups follow.

How would you describe the role of religious and faith communities in each of these areas over the years?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Social services, such as helping people in need					
Very Positive/Positive	56%	76%	62%	49%	35%
A mix of good and bad	25%	16%	22%	31%	31%
Very Negative/Negative	6%	3%	5%	7%	11%
Not aware of any past role	12%	5%	11%	13%	23%
Community programs, such as a seniors' drop-in centre					
Very Positive/Positive	46%	66%	52%	39%	25%
A mix of good and bad	22%	16%	19%	24%	27%
Very Negative/Negative	6%	4%	5%	6%	9%
Not aware of any past role	27%	14%	25%	31%	39%
Overseas aid/development efforts					
Very Positive/Positive	42%	65%	49%	34%	21%
A mix of good and bad	28%	21%	26%	35%	26%
Very Negative/Negative	9%	4%	6%	10%	21%
Not aware of any past role	20%	9%	19%	21%	33%
Immigrant and refugee settlement					
Very Positive/Positive	42%	60%	42%	39%	26%
A mix of good and bad	29%	23%	30%	32%	29%
Very Negative/Negative	11%	8%	10%	11%	16%
Not aware of any past role	18%	8%	19%	19%	29%

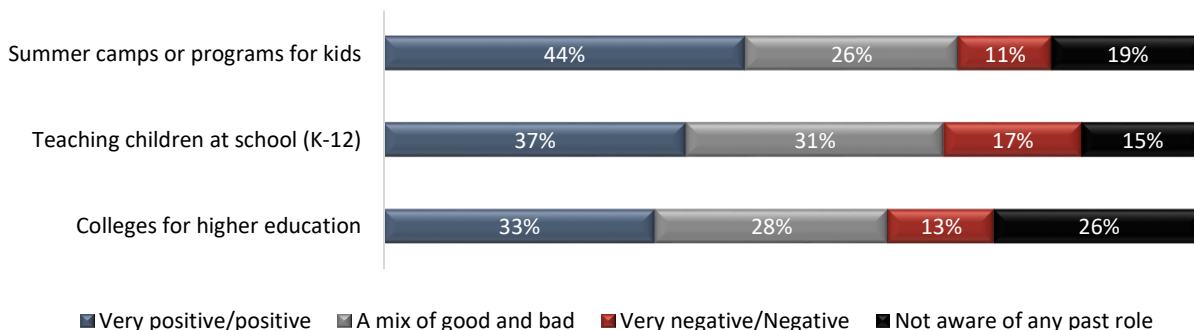
How would you describe the role of religious and faith communities in each of these areas over the years?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Local arts and cultural activities (music, artwork, etc.)					
Very Positive/Positive	36%	54%	41%	30%	19%
A mix of good and bad	24%	21%	24%	26%	23%
Very Negative/Negative	8%	5%	6%	9%	13%
Not aware of any past role	32%	21%	29%	35%	45%
Addiction counselling					
Very Positive/Positive	34%	61%	35%	25%	17%
A mix of good and bad	26%	17%	26%	33%	23%
Very Negative/Negative	9%	6%	6%	10%	16%
Not aware of any past role	30%	15%	33%	32%	43%

Education

The contributions of religious and faith communities to Canada's cities and towns frequently include the creation of educational facilities and programs – many of which are, today, part of the [publicly funded Catholic school systems](#) in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

Overall, Canadians lean toward viewing such contributions as a positive, though this is far from a majority opinion, as seen in the following graph:

How would you describe the role of faith communities in the development of:



Religion's role in education in Canada is more polarizing than some of the items previously canvassed. While the Religiously Committed segment is enthusiastic as ever, the Non-Believers are more likely to say religious primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities, are a net negative than a net positive.

How would you describe the role of faith communities in the development of:					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Summer camps or programs for kids					
Very Positive/Positive	44%	72%	48%	35%	24%
A mix of good and bad	26%	15%	25%	31%	29%
Very Negative/Negative	11%	7%	8%	12%	22%
Not aware of any past role	19%	7%	18%	22%	25%
Teaching children at school (K-12)					
Very Positive/Positive	37%	63%	46%	25%	17%
A mix of good and bad	31%	23%	27%	39%	29%
Very Negative/Negative	17%	8%	11%	19%	32%
Not aware of any past role	15%	6%	15%	16%	22%
Colleges for higher education					
Very Positive/Positive	33%	59%	39%	24%	13%
A mix of good and bad	28%	21%	26%	35%	25%
Very Negative/Negative	13%	7%	9%	13%	28%
Not aware of any past role	26%	13%	26%	28%	34%

PART 2: The legacy of faith in broader Canadian society

Religion's overall influence on Canada and its provinces

Beyond their influence on Canada's local communities, religious and faith groups have played a significant role in shaping the nation at a broader level.

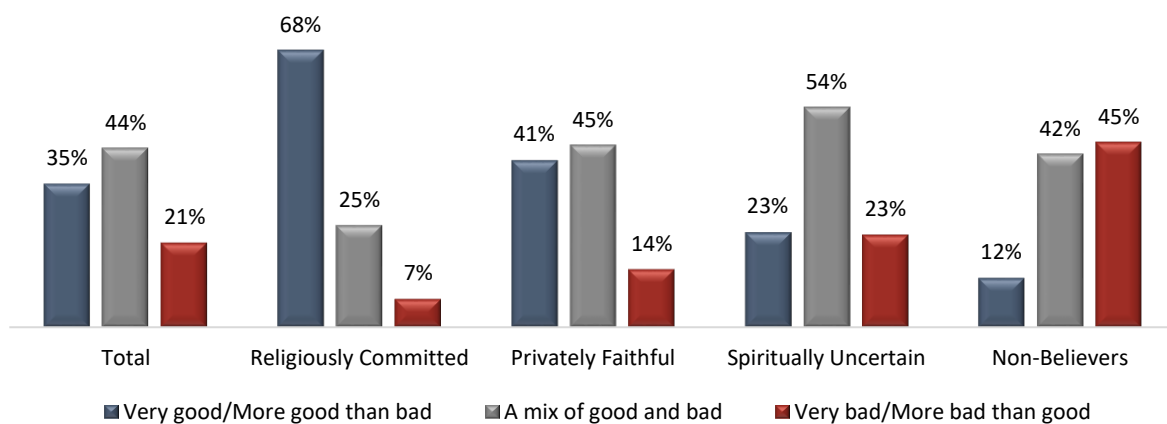
Canadians' views of this overall influence are less uniformly positive than their views of the effects of religion on their local communities. The most common response on this question, as seen in the graph

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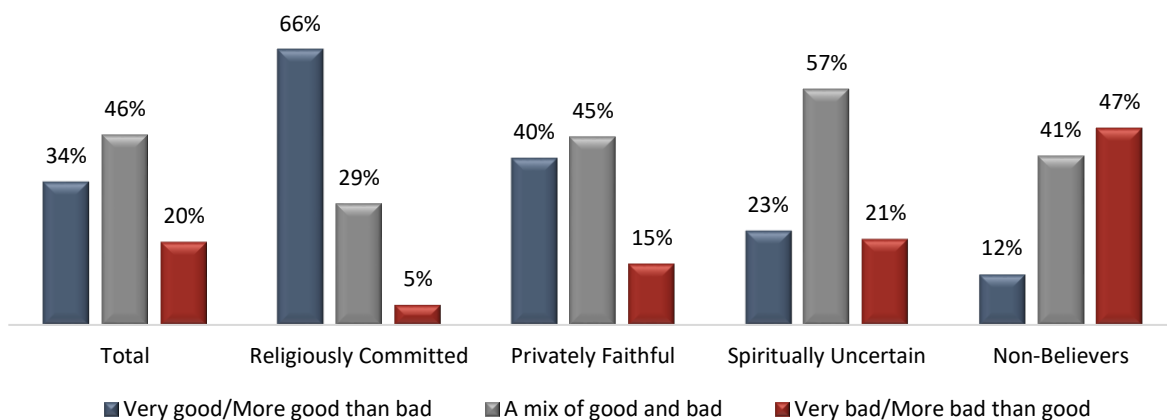
that follows, is that the contributions of religious and faith communities to Canada's development at a national level have been "a mix of good and bad" (44% say this). Among those choosing one side or the other, the percentage choosing good (35%) is roughly one-and-a-half times higher than the percentage choosing bad (21%), with significant variation across the segments:

Would you say that overall the contributions of religious and faith communities in Canada's history and development has been:



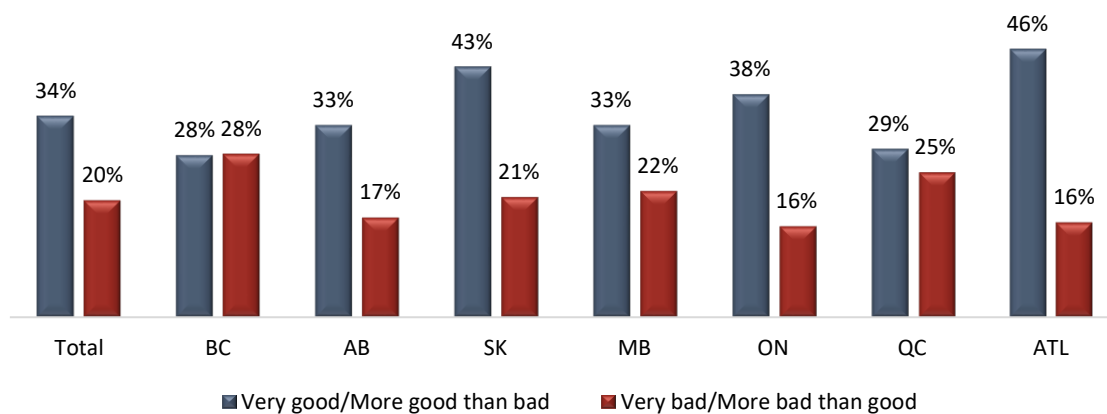
Canadians across the segments feel similarly about the contributions of religion to their provinces, offering nearly identical responses, as seen in the following graph:

Let's think now about your own province. Would you say the overall impact of religious and faith communities on the history and development of your province has been ...



Regionally, Quebec and British Columbia are the provinces least likely to see the influence of religion and faith on their jurisdictions as a positive. Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada, meanwhile, are the regions with the most favourable outlooks, though Ontarians also rate the influence of religion as a net good for their province by a ratio of more than two-to-one:

Let's think now about your own province. Would you say the overall impact of religious and faith communities on the history and development of your province has been:



These findings reflect a longstanding pattern in research about religion in Quebec. Past ARI research has found Quebecers more reluctant to vote for political candidates of minority religious backgrounds, more disapproving of the wearing of religious symbols in public, and considerably less likely to find themselves in the Religiously Committed segment of the population.

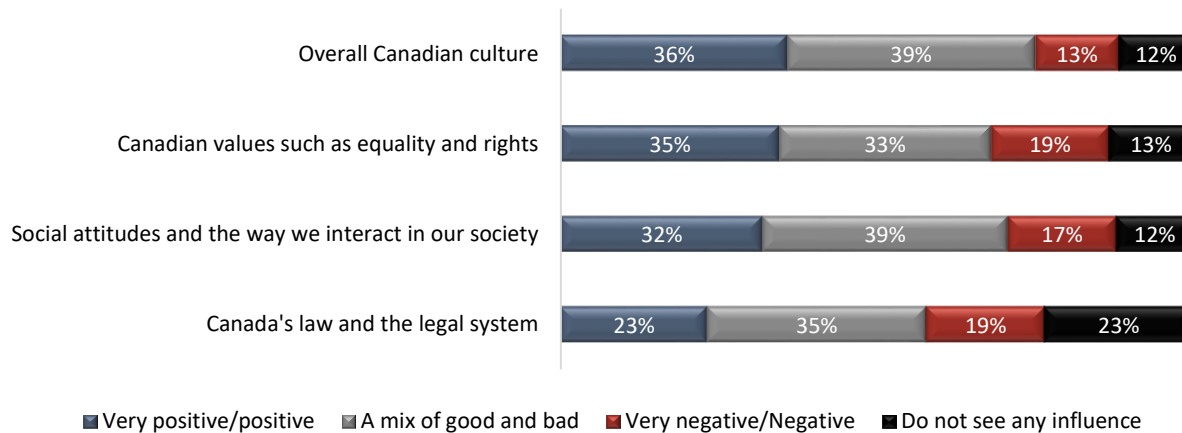
In this survey, Quebecers are mixed in their assessment of the legacy of Canada's religious and faith communities. While Quebec is the province whose residents are least likely to say religion has had a positive effect on their local communities, it is also the province most likely to praise the impact of religious groups in developing hospitals. [See comprehensive tables for greater detail on regional findings.](#)

These responses no doubt reflect Quebec's unique history when it comes to religion and faith – both the significant influence of the Catholic church in the province's development, and the legacy of the Quiet Revolution that sought to end much of that influence.

Impact on culture, law, and values

Just as Canadians tend to be mixed in their views of the overall impact of religion on their country, they also express a range of feelings when it comes to specific aspects of national identity, including religion's influence on Canadian culture, values, and laws:

What kind of influence, if any, do you see from religious communities and faith groups in the following broad areas?



On each of these items, the Non-Believers are at least twice as likely to say the influence of religion has been negative than to say it has been positive – though members of this group are also more likely than others to say they see no religious influence at all. The Religiously Committed, meanwhile, almost unanimously see an influence, and mostly think it's a good one:

What kind of influence, if any, do you see from religious communities and faith groups in the following broad areas?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Overall Canadian culture					
Very Positive/Positive	36%	63%	44%	27%	10%
A mix of good and bad	39%	28%	35%	47%	41%
Very Negative/Negative	13%	6%	10%	14%	27%
Do not see any influence	12%	4%	11%	12%	22%
Canadian values such as equality and rights					
Very Positive/Positive	35%	59%	42%	26%	11%
A mix of good and bad	33%	28%	33%	38%	29%
Very Negative/Negative	19%	9%	12%	21%	36%
Do not see any influence	13%	4%	12%	14%	24%

What kind of influence, if any, do you see from religious communities and faith groups in the following broad areas?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Social attitudes and the way we interact in our society					
Very Positive/Positive	32%	56%	39%	23%	10%
A mix of good and bad	39%	32%	40%	44%	32%
Very Negative/Negative	17%	6%	11%	20%	35%
Do not see any influence	12%	5%	10%	12%	23%
Canada's law and legal system					
Very Positive/Positive	23%	48%	27%	14%	7%
A mix of good and bad	35%	31%	35%	38%	29%
Very Negative/Negative	19%	8%	13%	23%	33%
Do not see any influence	23%	13%	24%	25%	32%

PART 3: Residential schools and Indigenous communities

The legacy of religious involvement with Indigenous Canadians

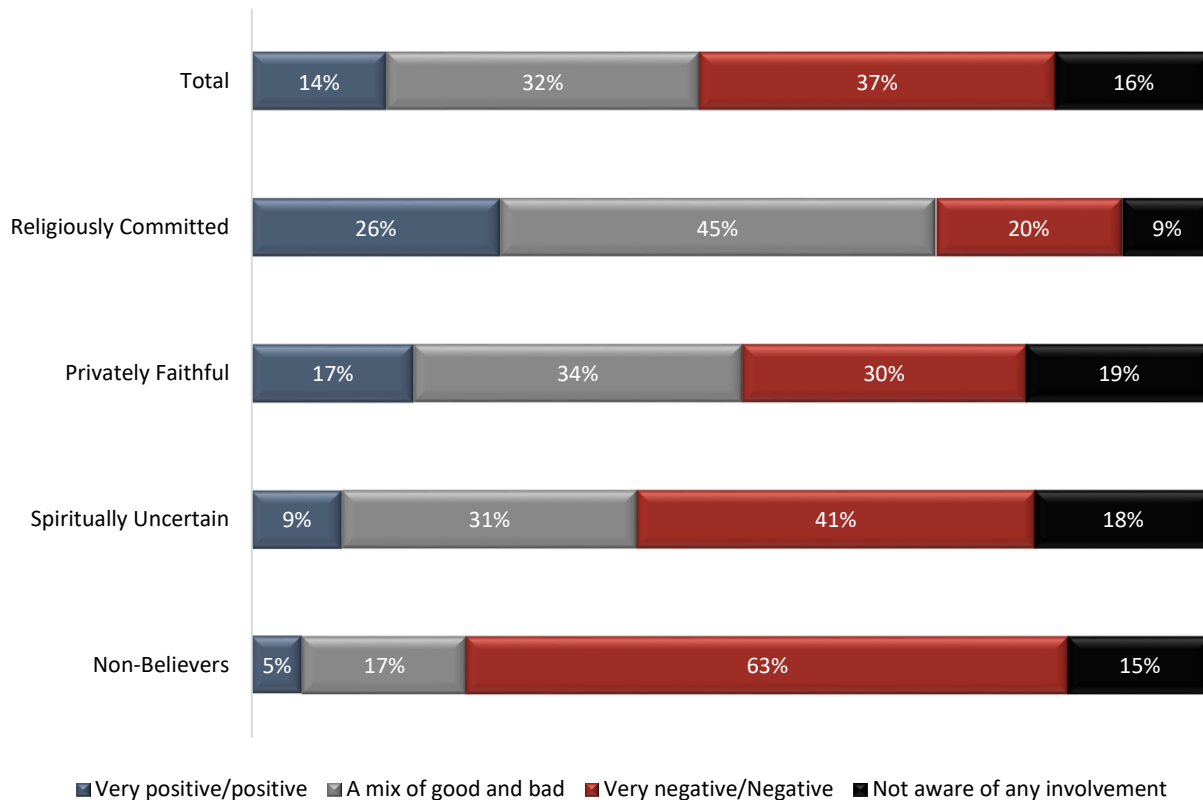
It's easily the most infamous contribution of religious communities to Canada's history. For generations, Canadian churches were largely responsible for managing the federal government's policy of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their home communities and sending them to residential schools.

Children in these schools were often abused, and were prohibited from speaking their native language or practicing their culture. The policy amounted to a "cultural genocide" in the eyes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and 2015 Angus Reid Institute poll found 70 per cent of Canadians agreed with that characterization.

Though this history was deliberately not included in the first question in this survey about the overall relationship between religious and faith communities and Indigenous Canadians, the legacy of residential schools is clearly reflected in the respondents' answers. Canadians say religion's overall involvement with Indigenous Canadians over the last 150 years has been negative or very negative by more than a two-to-one margin.

As seen in the following graph, every group in the index is more likely to profess a negative than a positive influence, except for the Religiously Committed, who are split.

How would you describe religious and faith communities' overall involvement with Indigenous Canadians over the past 150 years since Confederation?



When asked about residential schools directly, Canadians across all four segments are overwhelmingly negative in their assessments. Even the Religiously Committed – though their views are softer than those of the other three groups – are three times more likely to say residential schools were a negative than to say they were a positive.

Among the Privately Faithful, the ratio of respondents saying residential schools were negative or very negative to those saying they represent a positive contribution from religious groups rises to more than four-to-one. Among the Spiritually Uncertain, the ratio is more than ten-to-one, and among Non-Believers it is more than 64-to-one.

When assessing other types of interactions between faith communities and Indigenous Canadians – specifically non-residential education and poverty-reduction efforts – the Religiously Committed hold more favourable than unfavourable views, while the other groups remain more negative than positive, as seen in the table that follows.

And what about these more-specific areas?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Residential schools					
Very Positive/Positive	9%	16%	13%	6%	3%
A mix of good and bad	20%	26%	23%	18%	10%
Very Negative/Negative	58%	49%	50%	62%	73%
Not aware of any past role	13%	10%	15%	14%	15%
Other (non-residential) education of Indigenous Canadians					
Very Positive/Positive	12%	23%	13%	7%	3%
A mix of good and bad	33%	42%	34%	34%	18%
Very Negative/Negative	35%	20%	29%	40%	55%
Not aware of any past role	20%	14%	23%	19%	24%
Other activities and/or community efforts to reduce poverty among Indigenous Canadians					
Very Positive/Positive	17%	32%	21%	9%	9%
A mix of good and bad	35%	36%	35%	38%	24%
Very Negative/Negative	27%	19%	24%	28%	41%
Not aware of any past role	21%	13%	20%	24%	26%

The importance of reconciliation

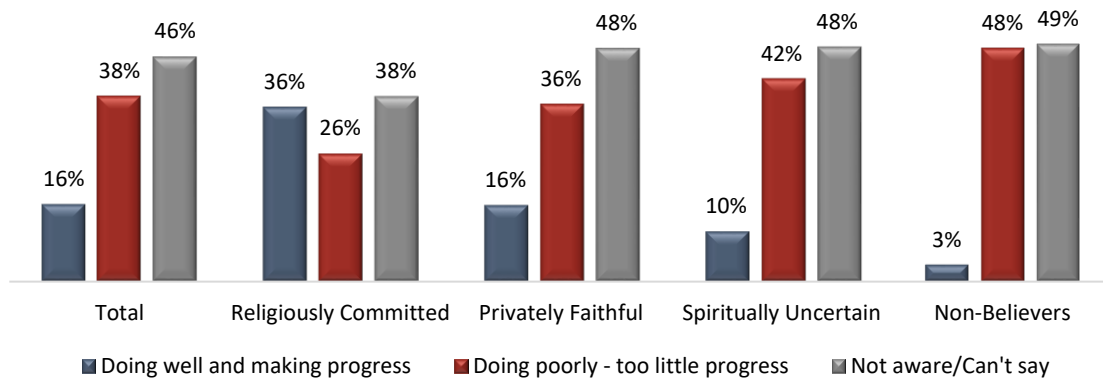
Asked about the need for Canadian churches to work toward reconciliation with Indigenous communities, three-quarters of Canadians (77%) say this is either “important” (37%) or “very important” (40%).

Notably, though they’re less likely to see harm in the past behaviour of religious communities, the Religiously Committed are the group *most likely* to say it’s important for religious communities to work toward reconciliation with Indigenous ones. As seen in the graph that follows, the belief that reconciliation is important tops seven-in-ten across all groups, but reaches 84 per cent among the Religiously Committed ([see religion tables for greater detail](#)).

Asked to assess how Canada’s churches are doing on this goal of reconciliation so far, a plurality of Canadians (46%) say they’re not aware or can’t say. That said, twice as many think churches are doing poorly (38%) as think they are doing well (16%).

True to form, the Non-Believers are much more likely to think churches are doing poorly, while the Religiously Committed are the only group that is more likely to think churches are doing well than to think they're doing poorly in this regard:

And, based on whatever you've seen or heard about this, how would you say Canadian churches are doing so far in their efforts towards reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians?

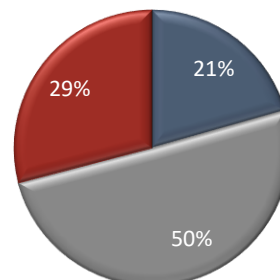


Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [recently requested](#) an apology from Pope Francis for the role of the Catholic church in the residential schools policy – a step toward reconciliation recommended in the TRC's report.

Some one-in-five Canadians (21%) say a papal apology would be “very meaningful” and advance reconciliation in a significant way. Another 50 per cent say an apology would be “somewhat meaningful,” while the rest (29%) say it would “make no difference to reconciliation.”

Justin Trudeau asked Pope Francis to make an apology for the Catholic Church's involvement in residential schools. Do you think a formal apology from the Pope to Indigenous Canadians would be:

- Very meaningful - it would advance reconciliation in a significant way
- Somewhat meaningful - it would make a difference, but so would a lot of other things
- Not meaningful at all - it would make no difference to reconciliation



*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by the four segments of the spectrum of faith and religion, [click here](#).