

## Faith and Religion in Public Life: Canadians deeply divided over the role of faith in the public square

*Key drivers of division are the religion in question, as well as one's own personal beliefs*

**November 16, 2017** – From the earliest days of human civilization, spiritual practices have been an integral part of daily life in many societies. The modern concept of separation of church and state is a relatively recent development.

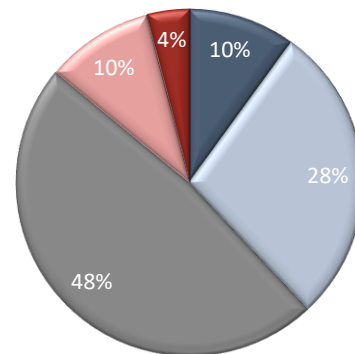
In Canada today, matters of religion and affairs of government generally do not mix – except when they do.

A new, national study from the Angus Reid Institute – the latest installment of a year-long partnership with Faith in Canada 150 – canvasses the intersection of faith and public life in Canada, and finds most Canadians seeing at least a small role for religion in the public square. That said, the size and nature of this role varies depending on one's own personal orientation toward religion, as well as specifics such as which religious group is being considered and what sort of interaction between faith and society is taking place.

Those who are more deeply faithful at a personal level generally have more favourable views of the role of religion in society and a greater desire to see it wield more influence, though even they are skeptical of certain religious traditions and certain government policies dealing with faith issues.

### How would you describe the overall contribution religious and faith communities are making to Canada and Canadian society today?

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



#### METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from October 16 – 23, 2017, among a representative randomized sample of 1,972 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 +/- 2.2 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.

#### More Key Findings:

- Nearly half of Canadians (48%) see religion as contributing “a mix of good and bad” to Canada today, but the rest are more than twice as likely to see religion’s contribution as good (38% do), rather than bad (14%)
- Specific religions are viewed differently, however, with respondents offering more favourable views of Judeo-Christian traditions, especially Roman Catholicism

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- Asked about specific government policies involving religion, a plurality of Canadians (42%) say a non-denominational prayer should be “welcome” at the start of a municipal meeting

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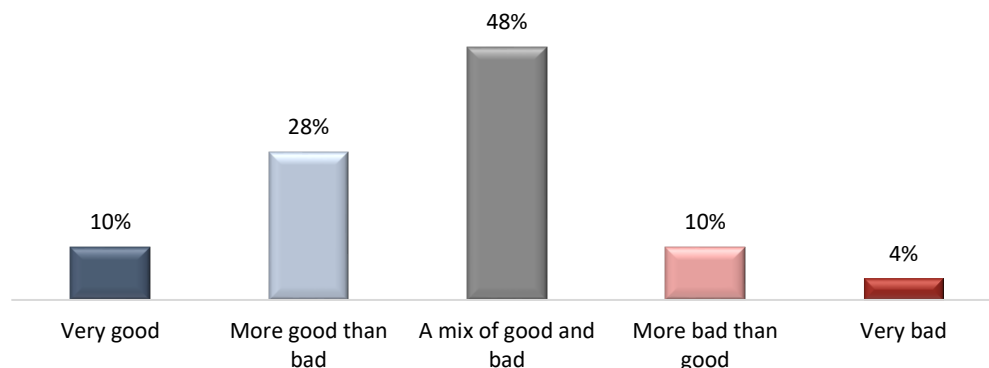
### Part 1 – The big picture on religion and faith in public life

What is the role of religion in public life? Canadians' answers to this question depend on their own personal orientations toward religion and faith, as well as which specific religion is being discussed. Each of these considerations – and the ways in which each one interacts with questions about the role of faith in public life – will be detailed in later sections of this report.

That said, overall responses to some broad questions about the intersection of religion and broader society provide some useful insights with which to approach the rest of the findings of this study.

Asked how they would describe the overall contribution religions and faith communities are making to Canada today, Canadians are two-and-a-half times more likely to say this contribution is a net positive for society (38% say “very good” or “more good than bad”) than they are to say it is a net negative (14% say “very bad” or “more bad than good”).

#### **How would you describe the overall contribution religious and faith communities are making to Canada and Canadian society today?**

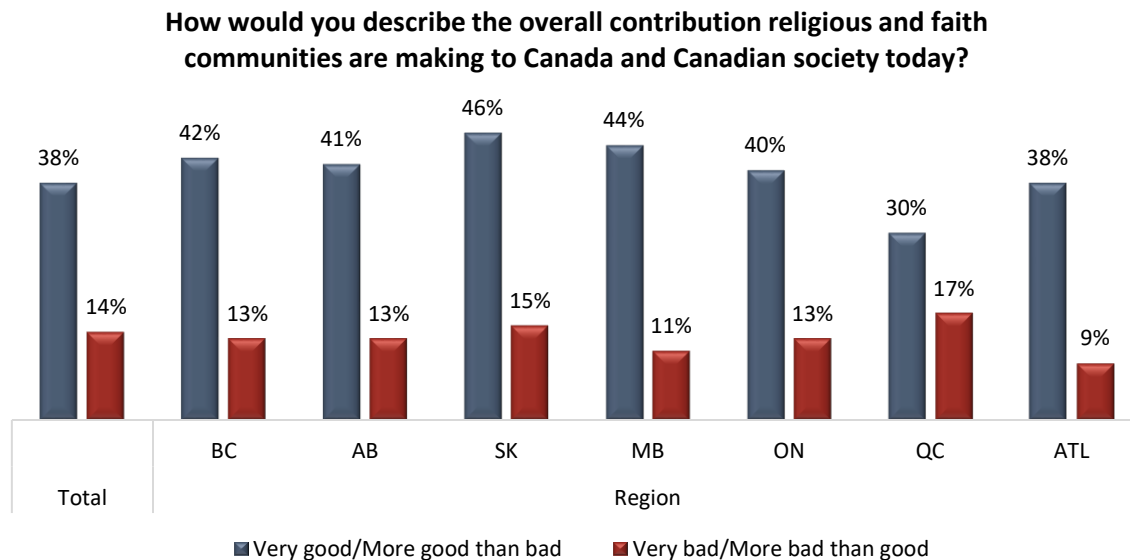


As is often the case in surveys on religious issues, Quebec residents are something of an outlier on this question – though perhaps less so than might be expected given Quebec society's strong emphasis on secularism.

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Most Quebecers (53%) say religion's contribution to Canada today is "a mix of good and bad" – tied with Atlantic Canada for the highest percentage saying this. Quebecers are also considerably less likely than residents of other regions to say religion's contribution to Canada is "good," though more still say this than say religion's contribution is "bad," as seen in the following graph:



Across all other demographic areas, the story is similar. Canadians from all walks of life are more likely to say religion is making a "good" contribution to society today than to say it is making a bad one, but those saying "good" don't reach a majority among any subgroup ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

So, religion's impact on Canada is more likely to be seen as good than bad, but how strong should the influence of religious and faith communities be?

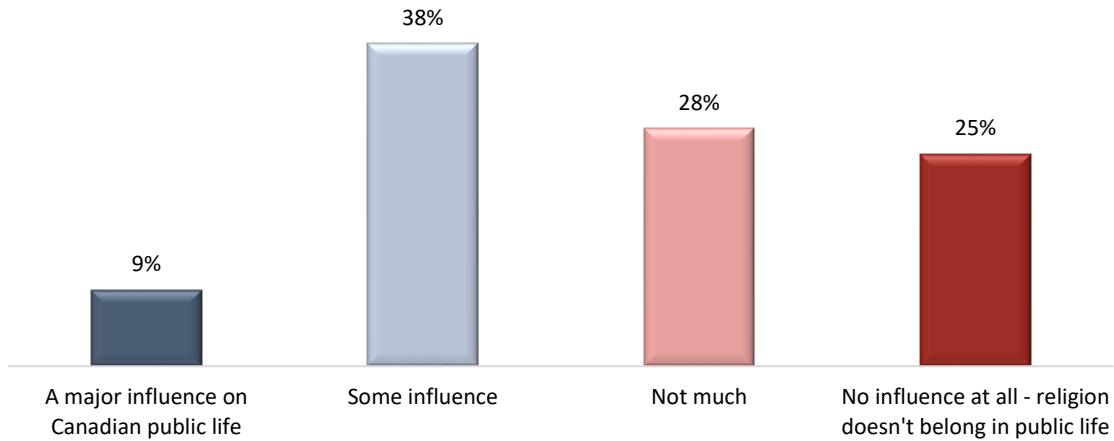
Canadians lean toward the view that religion should have little-to-no influence on public life, and those who say it should have "no influence at all" outnumber those who say it should have "a major influence" by more than two-to-one, as seen in the graph that follows.

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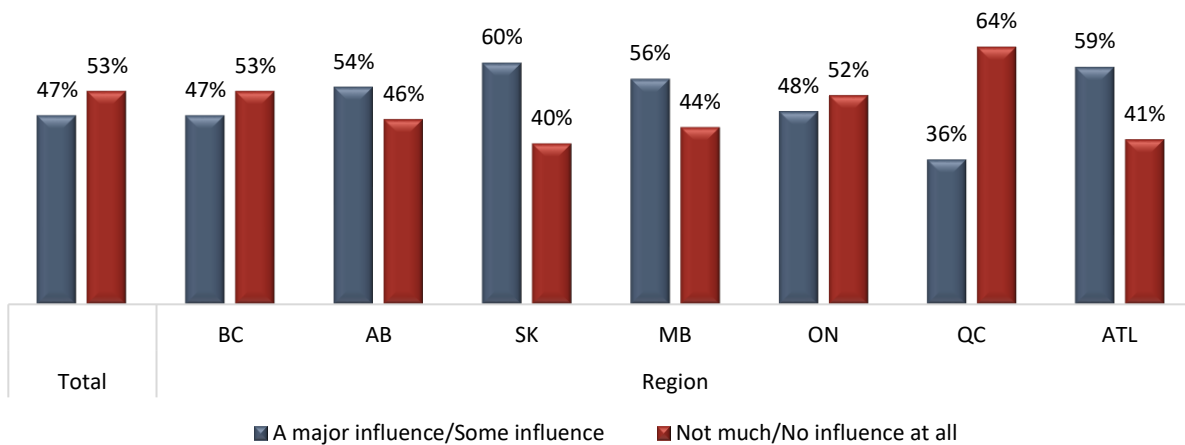
**What would you consider ideal when it comes to the overall participation and influence of religious and faith communities in Canadians public life today? In your view, should religious and faith communities have ...**



On this question, Quebec's distinctly secular perspective comes through more clearly. Nearly two-thirds of Quebecers (64%) say religion should have either "not much" influence or "no influence at all."

More than half feel this way in Ontario (52%) and British Columbia (53%), while every other region of the country leans in the opposite direction, saying religion should have either "some influence" or "a major influence" on public life:

**What would you consider ideal when it comes to the overall participation and influence of religious and faith communities in Canadians public life today? In your view, should religious and faith communities have ...**



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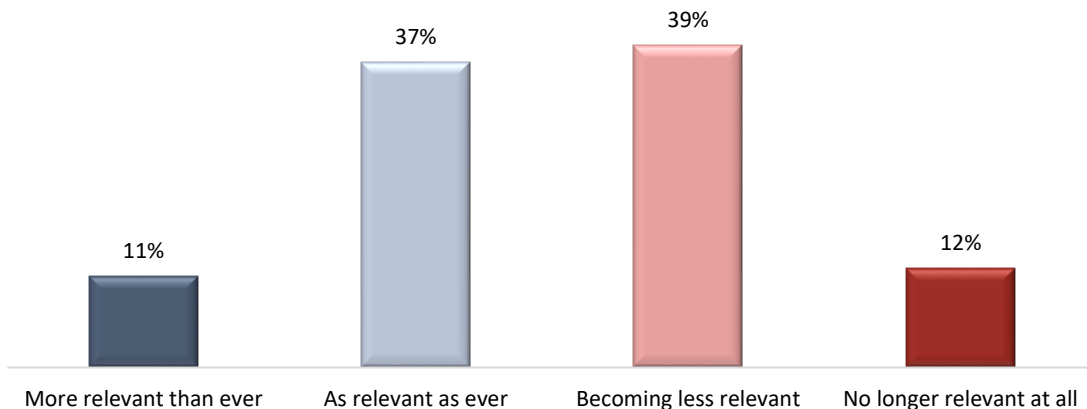
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These two questions – about the contributions of religious and faith communities to Canadian society and the desired influence of such communities – suggest a potential misalignment of Canadians' views. Canadians are more likely to say religion makes a positive contribution to society than a negative one, but they are also more likely to say religion should have minimal influence on society.

These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, of course. One could believe, for example, that religious and faith communities have a positive influence on society through their charitable efforts, but should not be active participants in debates about public policy.

Adding complexity to the overall picture of religion in the public square in Canada today is the fact that Canadians are divided on the utility of religion in addressing social issues. Roughly half of all Canadians (52%) say religious and faith communities are “becoming less relevant” or “no longer relevant at all” when it comes to addressing social issues such as poverty or homelessness. The rest (48%) say such communities are at least as relevant as they have ever been:

**To what extent do you think religious communities and faith groups are relevant to addressing these types of social issues and challenges today?**



## **Part 2 – The spectrum of spirituality**

One of the key drivers of division on the role of religion in Canadian society the continuum of religious belief described in [previous Angus Reid Institute-Faith in Canada 150 research](#) on this topic. This fourth installment of the partnership re-created the four broad segments identified previous reports.

Briefly, these segments are: 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.

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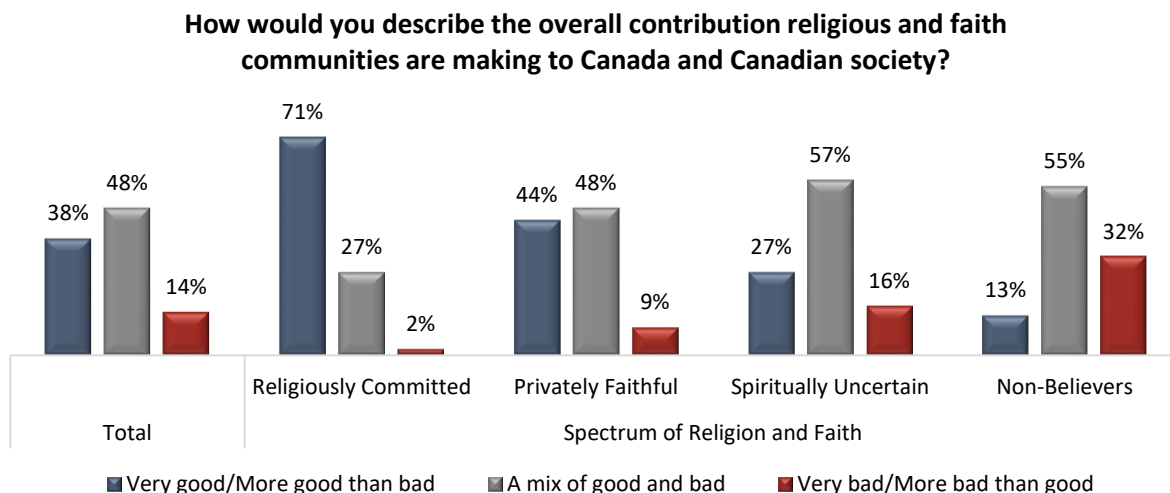
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- The **Privately Faithful** are also strong believers in God or a higher power, and most of them also pray regularly. Unlike the Religiously Committed, however, the Privately Faithful are just that: Private. The vast majority of them attend religious 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.

As might be expected, the more religious segments are more likely to view the contributions of religious and faith communities – of which they are almost certainly a part – to Canadian society as a good thing.

It's notable, however, that only the Non-Believers are more likely to say the overall contributions of these communities are bad than good. In every other group, including the Spiritually Uncertain, those saying "good" outnumber those saying "bad."



In a sense, it is the strong conviction of the Religiously Committed that their communities are doing good – coupled with the relative uncertainty of the other groups – that drives the overall "good" number on this question.

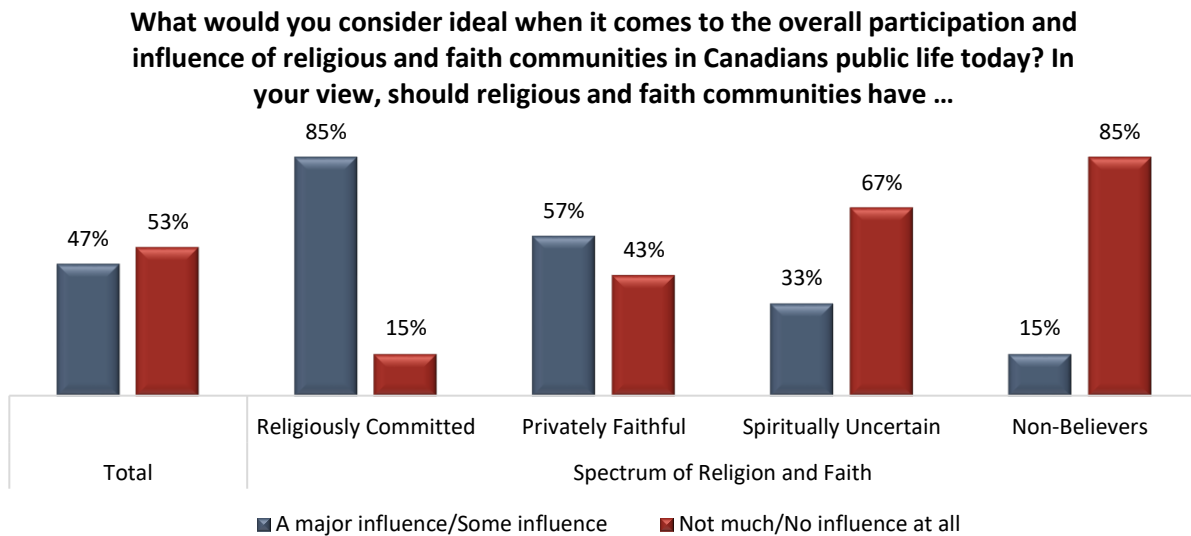
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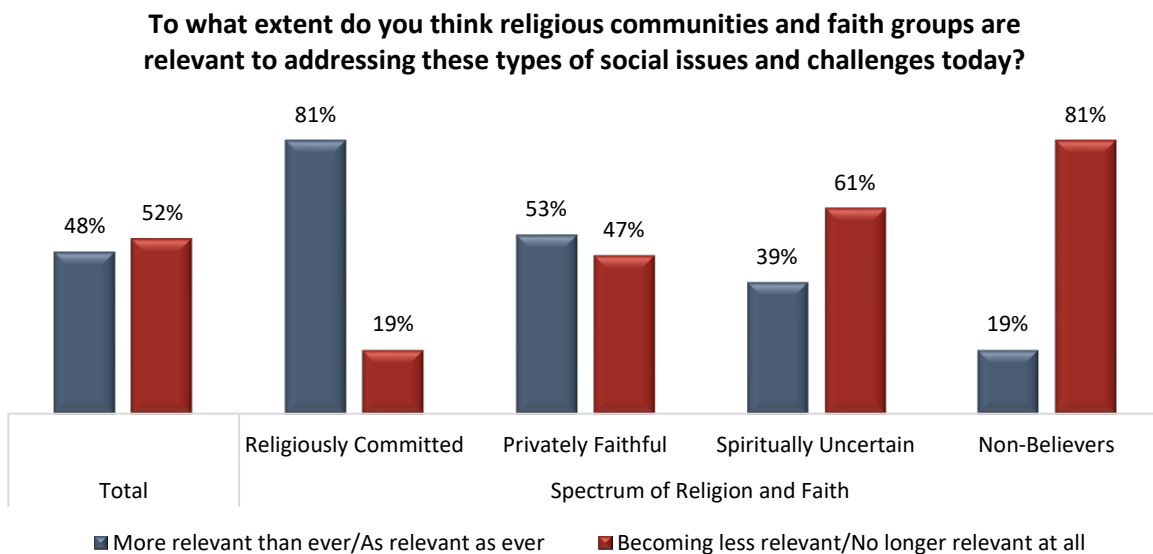
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On the questions about influence and relevance, a different dynamic manifests, with the Religiously Committed and the Non-Believers polar opposites of one another, while the middle groups occupy a middle ground.

The following graph shows responses to the influence question:



And the next graph shows responses to the relevance question:



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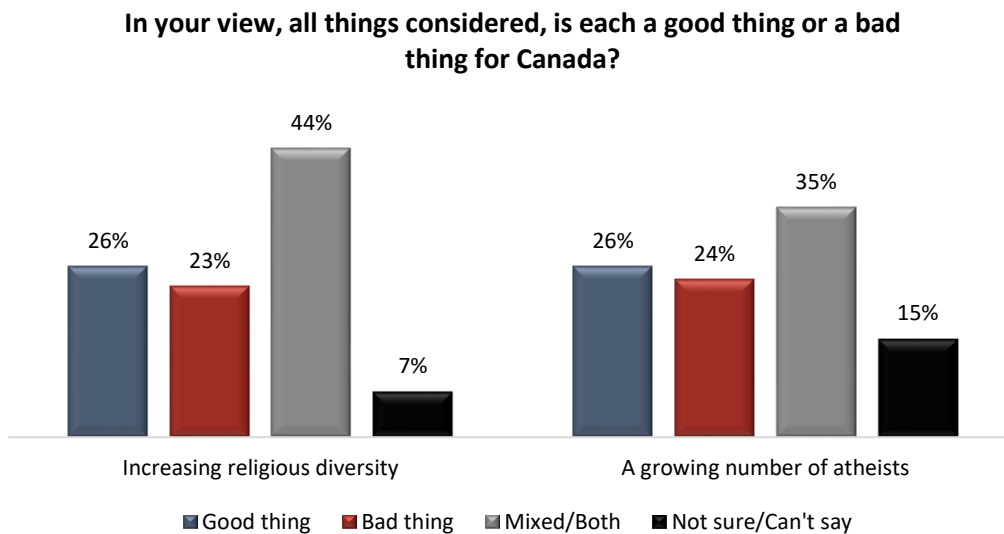
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## Part 3 – Perceived effects of religious diversity

So far, this report has focused on perceptions of religion in the broadest terms, but “religion” in Canada is an umbrella that includes a wide variety of disparate communities, each with its own beliefs and practices.

While Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have historically dominated the Canadian religious landscape, many of these venerable institutions have seen their congregations shrinking in recent years. At the same time, the number of Canadians professing belief in other religions – or no religion at all – [has surged](#).

Asked for their views on these two dynamics – the country’s growing religious diversity and its increasing number of atheists – Canadians are mixed overall. The plurality says each trend is a mix of good and bad for Canada, and roughly a quarter describes each one as just “good” or “bad,” as seen in the following graph:



Notably, opinion on increasing religious diversity doesn’t vary dramatically across the four segments of the spirituality spectrum. The Non-Believers and the Religiously Committed are equally likely to say this trend is a good thing for Canada (31% in each group do).

Responses to the growing number of atheists follow a more predictable pattern, with almost seven-in-ten Non-Believers (69%) saying it is a good thing, and almost six-in-ten Religiously Committed respondents (57%) say it’s bad.

The following table summarizes responses to these two questions across the four segments:

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In your view, all things considered, is each a good thing or a bad thing for Canada?					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Increasing religious diversity					
Good thing	26%	31%	26%	20%	31%
Bad thing	23%	16%	24%	25%	26%
Mixed/Both	44%	49%	42%	46%	37%
Not sure/Can't say	7%	4%	8%	8%	6%
A growing number of atheists					
Good thing	26%	8%	12%	29%	69%
Bad thing	24%	57%	33%	10%	2%
Mixed/Both	35%	24%	37%	45%	18%
Not sure/Can't say	15%	12%	18%	16%	11%

Underlying the division on whether the impact of increasing religious diversity on society is good or bad are diverging views about specific religions.

To measure respondents' perspectives on different religious and faith traditions in Canada today, the Angus Reid Institute asked a series of questions about eight such traditions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Evangelical Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Atheism.

Each respondent was asked about four of the eight at random, with the end result being that roughly half of the sample weighed in on each group.

Respondents were asked about their own familiarity with each tradition, whether they perceived its influence on society as growing or shrinking, and whether they perceived its presence as benefitting or damaging society overall. On each question, significant differences emerge in the way different groups are perceived.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their relatively small footprints in this country, Hinduism and Sikhism are the least understood practices on the list. Catholicism, meanwhile, is the only tradition that a full majority of Canadians (54%) say they understand either "quite well" or "very well" ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

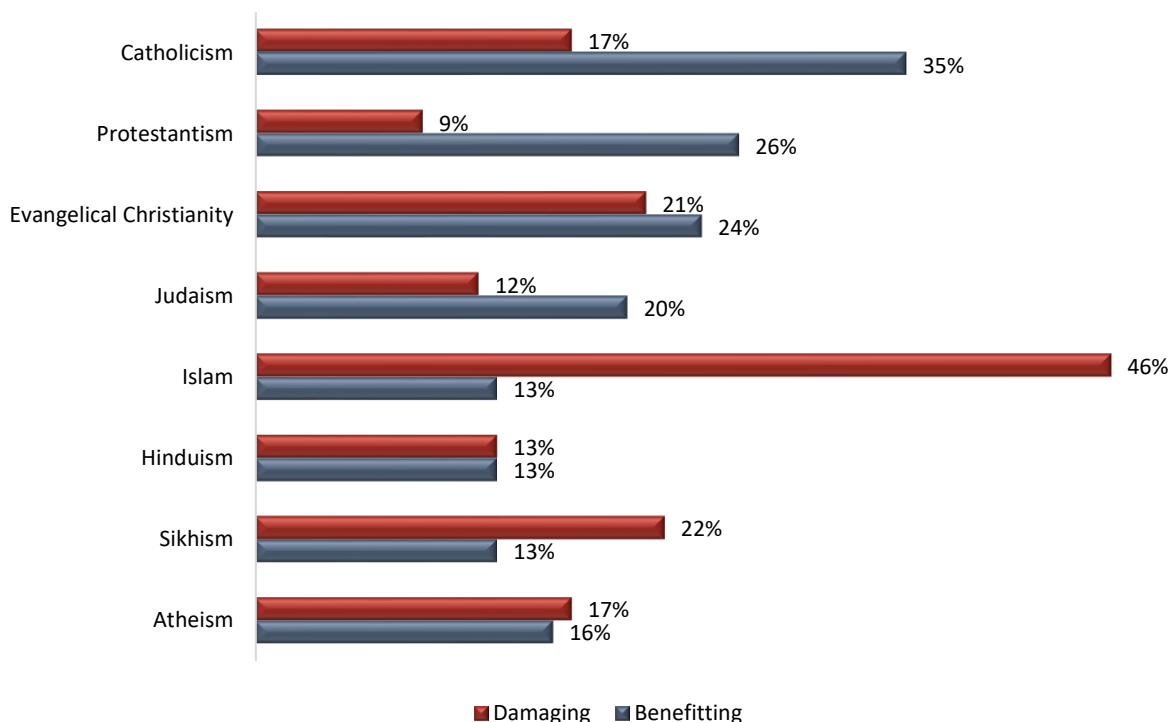
Catholicism is also the religion most likely to be seen as benefitting Canada through its presence in public life – a finding that likely reflects the role the church has historically played in developing schools, hospitals, and other institutions, all of which past research has shown Canadians to view positively.

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No other group tops 30 per cent “benefitting,” and only one religion – Islam – is widely seen to be “damaging” Canada, as seen in the graph that follows. Note that totals don't add up to 100 per cent because respondents were also offered the option to say each group has “no real impact” or to say they were unsure. For full results from these questions, [see comprehensive tables](#).

**In your view, would you say the overall presence of each of these in Canadian public life is benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society?**



Twice as many Canadians say the presence of Islam in their country's public life is damaging as say the same about any other religion, a finding that follows a well-documented pattern in Angus Reid Institute polling in recent years. Namely: if Islam is involved, a significant segment of Canadians will react negatively.

In response to another question in this survey, roughly half of all Canadians (49%) say a woman wearing a niqab – a veil that covers all of the face except the eyes, which some Muslim women wear when out in public – should be “prohibited” from visiting government offices. Another three-in-ten (29%) say such behaviour should be “discouraged but tolerated” ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

The niqab question relates to a law recently passed in Quebec that requires anyone providing or receiving government services to do so with their faces uncovered, effectively banning women who wear niqabs from government offices. Nearly nine-in-ten Quebecers (87%) supported the law when the Angus Reid Institute [asked about it](#) in September, and last month, after Quebec's National Assembly passed the

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law, seven-in-ten (70%) outside that province told ARI that they would support a similar law where they live.

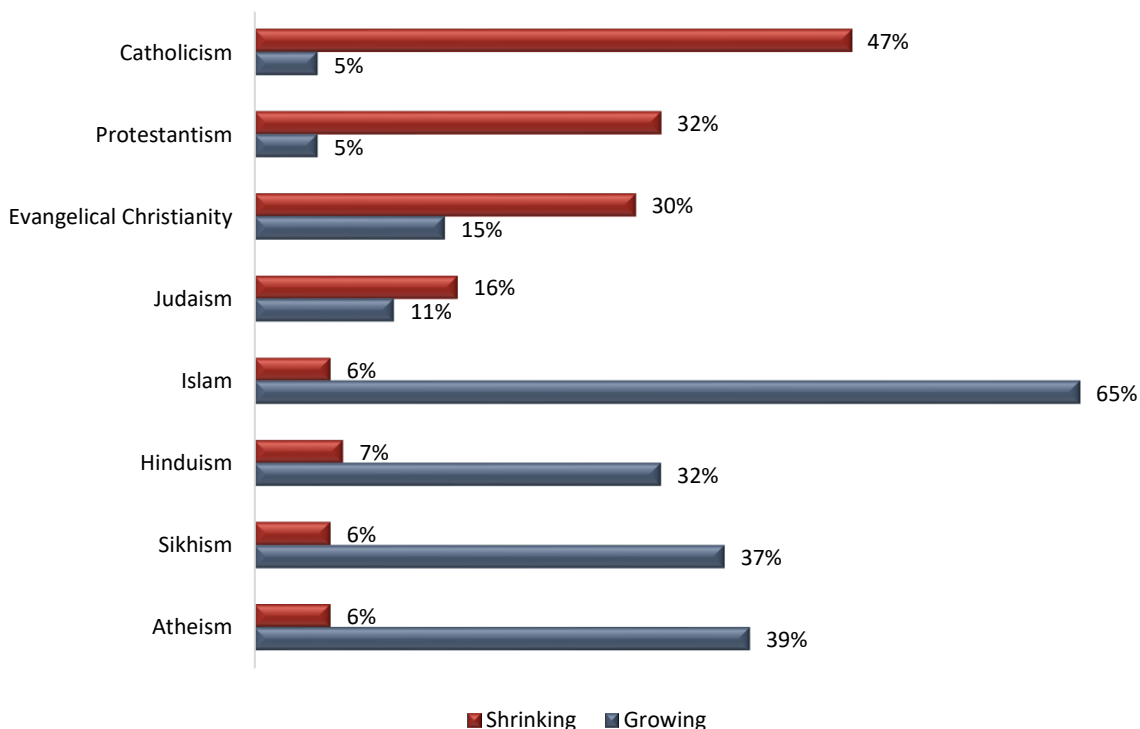
Past ARI polling has also found Muslim religious symbols to be less acceptable to Canadians – both inside and outside Quebec – than symbols and clothing from other religions.

But it's not all about clothing. Large swaths of the Canadian population also reacted negatively to Motion M-103, a non-binding Parliamentary motion condemning Islamophobia introduced by a Muslim MP and approved by a 201-91 margin in March. Asked what they would have done if they were MPs, 42 per cent of Canadians said they would vote against the motion, compared to 29 per cent who would have voted for it (the rest were unsure).

In April, one-third of Canadians told ARI they had a “favourable” opinion of Islam, while 46 per cent said they had an “unfavourable” one (again, the rest were unsure).

Collectively, these findings speak to a widespread unease with Muslims and the Islamic faith in Canada, and this unease is further underscored by the fact that two-thirds (65%) of those asked about Islam in this latest survey say the religion's influence in Canadian public life is growing. No other group tops 40 per cent, as seen in the following graph:

**Would you say the influence of each of these in Canada and Canadian public life is growing or shrinking?**



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These two findings – that almost half of Canadians view the presence of Islam as a bad thing for their country and that two-thirds see Islam's influence in society as growing – suggest an outsized focus on a group that, while growing rapidly, makes up less than four per cent of Canada's total population.

The view that Islam is damaging to Canadian society pervades the four segments almost equally, rising from 40 per cent among the Religiously Committed to 49 per cent among the Privately Faithful, with the two less-religious cohorts in between (see the tables that follow).

The segments follow a similar pattern in their views on the Hindu and Sikh faiths, with relatively small variations between groups on whether each is benefitting or damaging Canada.

As seen in the summary table that follows, the four groups have their biggest differences on Judeo-Christian traditions and on atheism.

Would you say the overall presence of each of these in Canadian public life is benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society?					
(Split sample: Each group asked of approximately half of respondents)					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Catholicism					
Benefitting	35%	65%	38%	27%	16%
Damaging	17%	7%	12%	18%	35%
Protestantism					
Benefitting	26%	56%	24%	19%	11%
Damaging	9%	7%	7%	7%	21%
Evangelical Christianity					
Benefitting	24%	52%	29%	14%	7%
Damaging	21%	15%	12%	22%	44%
Judaism					
Benefitting	20%	42%	18%	15%	8%
Damaging	12%	6%	8%	12%	23%

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Would you say the overall presence of each of these in Canadian public life is benefitting or damaging Canada and Canadian society? (Split sample: Each group asked of approximately half of respondents)					
	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Islam					
Benefitting	13%	21%	12%	11%	5%
Damaging	46%	40%	49%	48%	45%
Hinduism					
Benefitting	13%	19%	10%	16%	4%
Damaging	13%	15%	12%	11%	15%
Sikhism					
Benefitting	13%	19%	13%	10%	12%
Damaging	22%	17%	20%	24%	28%
Atheism					
Benefitting	16%	9%	8%	16%	39%
Damaging	17%	37%	21%	10%	6%

## Part 4 – Religious accommodations in public life

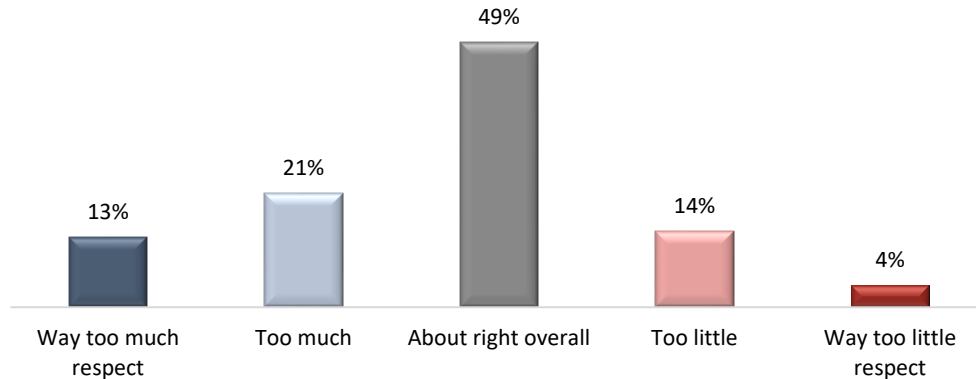
At its core, the niqab debate in Quebec amounts to an attempt to answer a relatively simple question: In a pluralistic, secular society that allows for the freedom of religion, how much should devout individuals be asked to change their behaviour to accommodate the needs of government, and how much should government do to accommodate the religious beliefs of the populations it serves?

Canadians' answers to this question vary depending on the accommodation being considered, but they're more likely to say the federal government is too respectful of religious communities than they are to say it's not respectful enough. It's notable, of course, that roughly half (49%) say government's approach to religious accommodation is "about right overall," as seen in the following graph:

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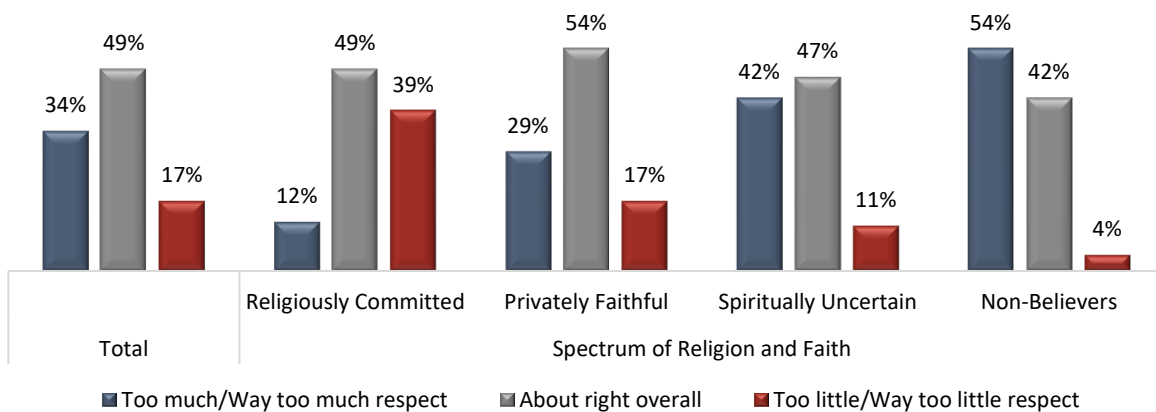
**Overall, would you say the government of Canada generally shows too much respect or shows too little respect for religious communities and faith groups in Canada today?**



The Non-Believers are especially convinced that the federal government shows too much respect to religious and faith communities. A full majority (54%) of this segment says this is the case.

Across other parts of the religious continuum, the plurality say government strikes the right balance, though those saying “too much respect” outnumber those saying “too little” in both the Spiritually Uncertain and the Privately Faithful groups. Only the Religiously Committed are more likely to say government shows too little respect to religion than to say it shows too much:

**Overall, would you say the government of Canada generally shows too much respect or shows too little respect for religious communities and faith groups in Canada today?**



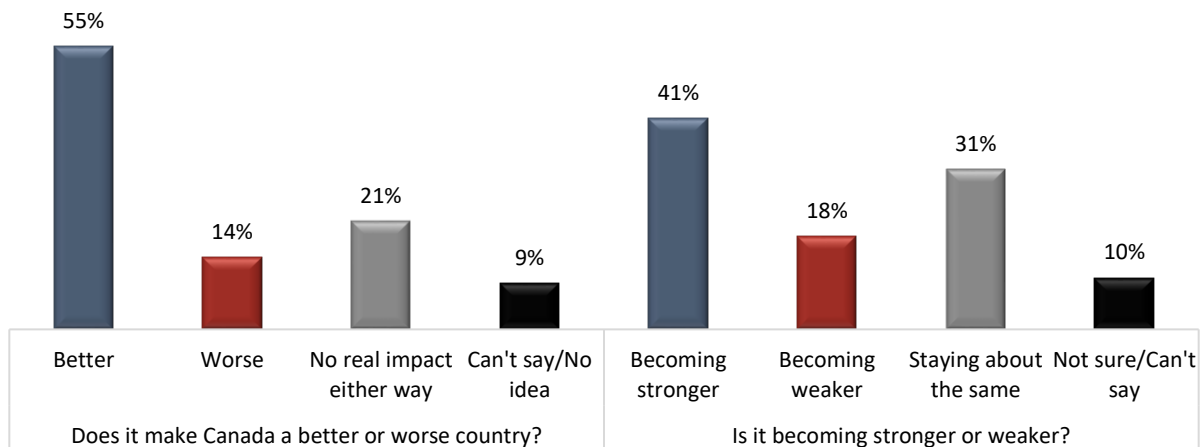
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Asked about the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canadians offer largely favourable views. Most (55%) say it makes Canada a better country, and fewer than one-in-five (18%) say it's becoming weaker. Most say it's either becoming stronger or staying about the same:

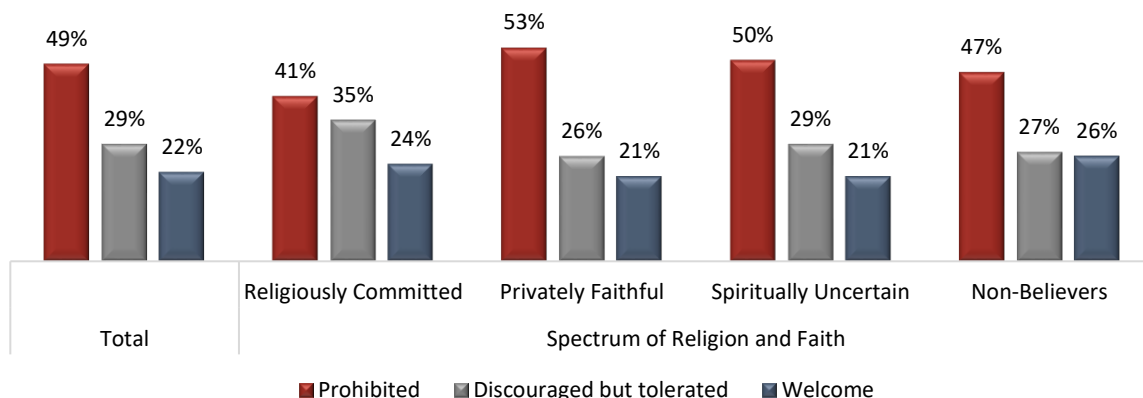
## Views of freedom of religion in Canada:



As mentioned, however, views on specific intersections of religious expression and government priorities vary significantly depending on the situation in question.

The niqab question is a prime example of this. As previously discussed, 49 per cent of Canadians, overall, say women wearing niqabs should be prohibited from visiting government offices. This view is fairly consistent across the spectrum of faith and religious belief, with the Religiously Committed least likely to say such behaviour should be prohibited, but most likely to say it should be "discouraged, but tolerated."

## Should each of the following be prohibited, discouraged but tolerated, or welcome? ("A woman visiting a government office in a niqab")

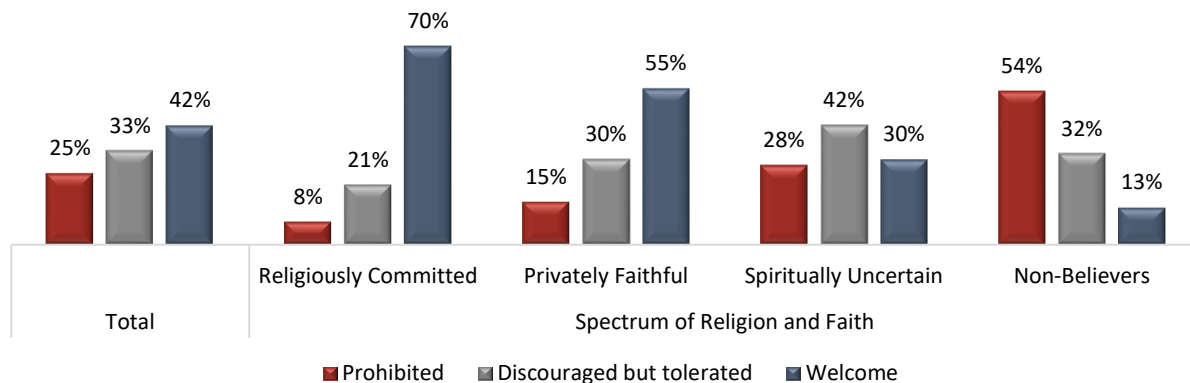


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Compare these responses to those Canadians provide when asked about a municipal government beginning with a non-denominational prayer to god:

**Should each of the following be prohibited, discouraged but tolerated, or welcome? ("A local community council meeting starting with a non-denominational prayer to god for good guidance")**



Canadians are far less unified across the spectrum of spirituality on the question of prayer at public meetings, but they are more favourable toward this practice than they are toward the niqab, overall.

Interestingly, the view of the plurality of Canadians – that beginning a meeting with a prayer should be welcome – does not align with the Supreme Court of Canada's recent ruling on the subject. In 2015, the court ruled unanimously that government must remain neutral with regard to religion, and thus municipal councils and boards must not begin their meetings with prayers. The court's ruling applies to all levels of government, but many provincial legislatures and the House of Commons still begin their sessions with prayers – a result of "parliamentary privilege," which makes Members of Parliament the ultimate authority over the rules and procedures of the House.

Other policy issues involving religion elicit moderate support from Canadians, overall, and spark disagreement between the four segments of the population.

On the tax-exempt status organized religions enjoy, for example, a small majority (55%) of Canadians say it's a reasonable policy that should be kept in place. This is the majority view in every region except for Quebec, where 55 per cent say the policy is not reasonable and should be eliminated:

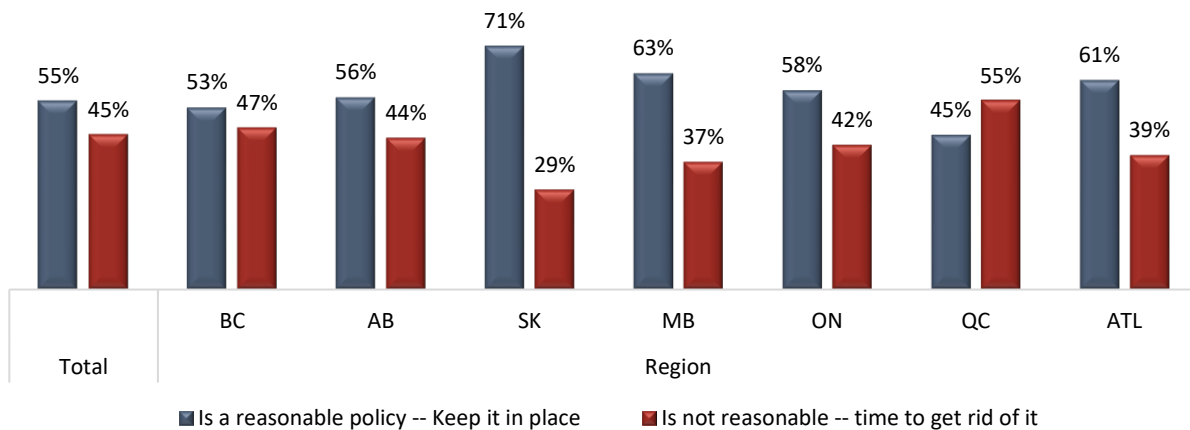
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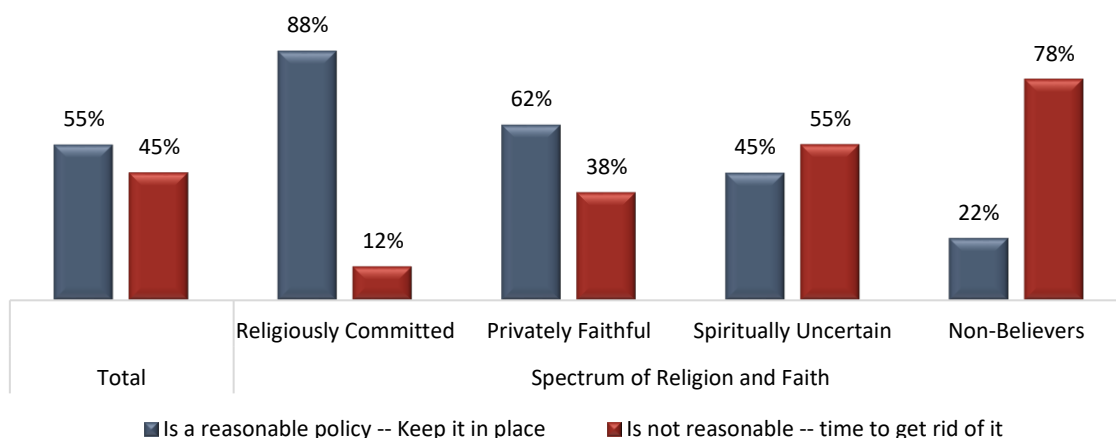
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**In Canada, organized religions qualify for special tax consideration. Would you say this ...**



As might be expected, the Non-Believers segment overwhelmingly says it's "time to get rid of" special tax considerations for religions, while the Religiously Committed overwhelmingly say they should be kept in place:

**In Canada, organized religions qualify for special tax consideration. Would you say this ...**



Responses follow a similar pattern when Canadians consider whether a religiously affiliated nursing home should be required by law to allow assisted dying or be able to object to performing such procedures on moral grounds.

A small majority (55%) say nursing homes should be allowed to object and transfer patients who request physician-assisted death to other facilities, while the rest (45%) say they should be required to perform

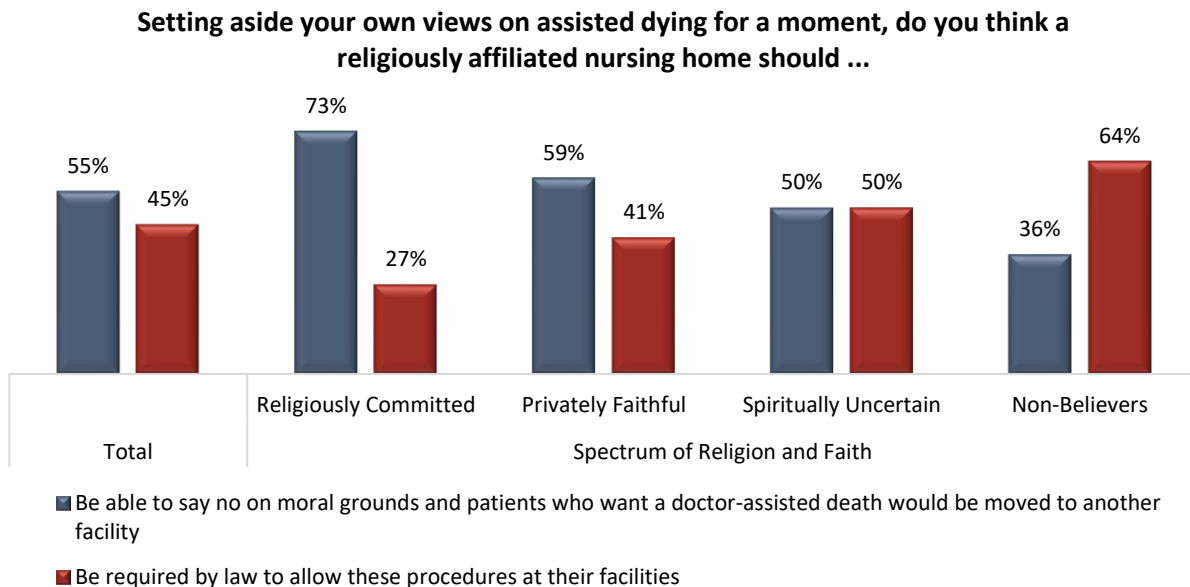
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the procedure. This represents a slight decrease in the number saying objections should be allowed since the Angus Reid Institute [last asked Canadians](#) about this issue last year.

Again, Quebec is the only province where opponents of this religious accommodation outnumber proponents, though it should be noted that Quebecers do so by a smaller margin on this question (51% say facilities should be required to perform assisted death, while 49% say patients should be transferred over moral objections; [see comprehensive tables](#)).

The segments are again divided on this question, with only the Non-Believers expressing a strong preference for requiring religious nursing homes to provide a doctor-assisted death when a patient requests it:



On another issue – the right of Catholic priests to refuse to disclose information told to them during confession – Canadians are far less polarized. More than seven-in-ten (72%) say confession should maintain this privileged status, including most Quebecers and more than half of Non-Believers (see [comprehensive](#) and [spectrum](#) tables).

Considering all of these various accommodations together, most Canadians (53%) conclude that their country “does too much to accommodate” different faith practises and religious minorities today, while fewer than one-in-ten (9%) say Canada doesn’t do enough.

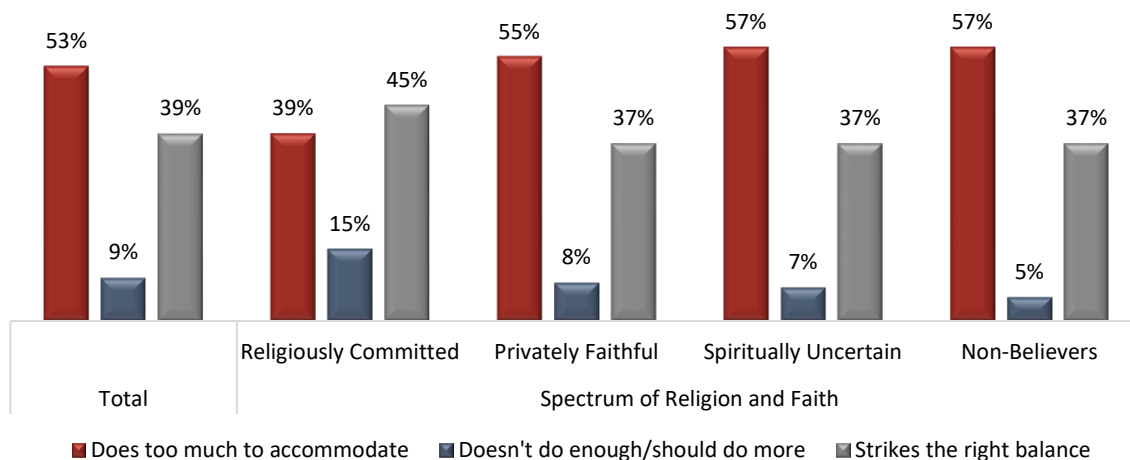
The Religiously Committed are roughly twice as likely as any other group to say their country should be more accommodating, but the number who stay this is still much smaller than the number who say Canada does too much, as seen in the graph that follows.

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Looking at these issues overall and the extent to which Canada accommodates different faith practices and religious minorities today, overall, would you say Canada ...



## **Part 5 – Personal considerations: How Canadians view their own faith in society**

The various interactions between religion and public life discussed so far in this study have all been interpersonal: Either specific instances of religious accommodation, or general assessments of the role of different religions in the public square.

This survey also asked Canadians to consider their own personal religion – if they have one – as well as their own spiritual life in the context of broader society.

Fewer than one-in-ten Canadians of faith (9%) say their religion has “no role at all” in Canada today, but a similarly small proportion (10%) say it has a “major role.” Most are in-between, saying their religious community has “some role” (41%) or “not much” of a role (29%).

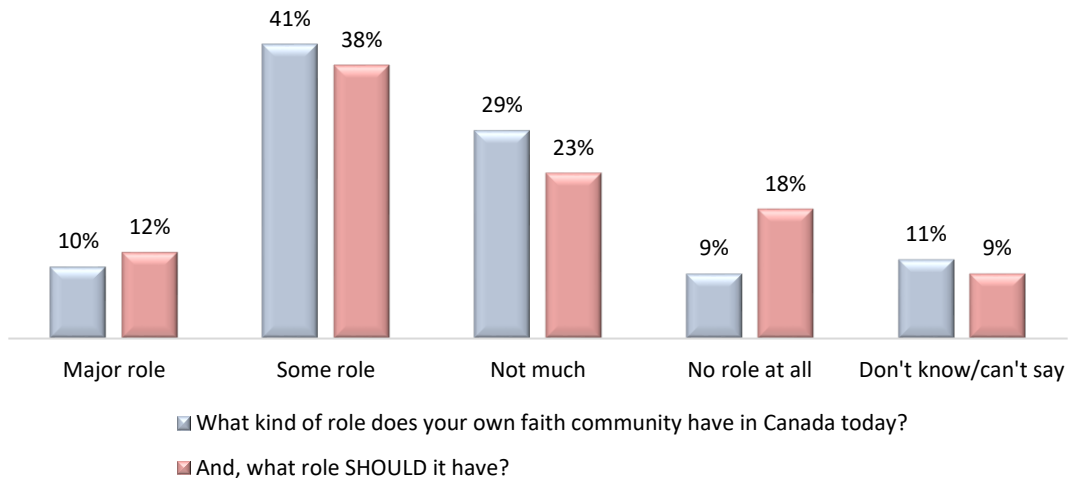
Interestingly, twice as many Canadians who identify as belonging to a religious tradition say that tradition should have “no role at all” than say it actually does have no role in society:

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## Canadian views on the role of their own religion in public life:



One likely explanation for this jump in the number of people saying their religious community should have no role in public life can be found in the spectrum of religion and faith. While most of those in the Non-Believers group claim no religious identity, a significant proportion (37%) do identify with a religion. The majority of those who do (some 24% of the Non-Believers overall) self-identify as Roman Catholics.

As the following table illustrates, nearly half of these Non-Believers say their religion should have no role in public life. The other three segments are considerably less likely to take this position, though it's notable that even the Religiously Committed mostly refrain from saying their religious tradition should have a major role to play (some 30% do).

### To what extent should your own faith community have a role in Canadian public life? Should it have a:

(Asked only of those self-identifying as a member of a religion, N=1610)

	Total	Spectrum of Religion/Faith			
		Religiously Committed	Privately Faithful	Spiritually Uncertain	Non-Believers
Major role	12%	30%	11%	3%	2%
Some role	38%	50%	47%	28%	15%
Not much	23%	9%	20%	33%	26%
No role in public life	18%	5%	12%	26%	49%
Don't know/Can't say	9%	5%	11%	10%	9%

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*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 groups of the spectrum of faith and religion, [click here](#).*

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