

Findings from discovery research for the S-VOX Foundation

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Introduction

This paper summarizes the findings of the discovery research conducted in order to inform the programming of the S-Vox Foundation. It assumes that the goal of the foundation is a pluralistic Canada, where individuals not only tolerate, but engage with difference. The paper begins with a description of the context in which the foundation will be working, continues to outline the needs and how they might be addressed by the foundation, and concludes with recommendations and next steps.

Methodology

In addition to reviewing the literature, we spoke with 34 people from a number of different sectors.. We included people from the following fields:

- Academic
- Public Service
- Foundations
- Other non-profits
- Faith/spirituality organizations
- Journalists

This research has been compiled after conversations held in Toronto, Ottawa, Victoria, and Vancouver. Initial conversations revealed geographic differences, and so this research will need to be updated to incorporate findings from Quebec, the Prairies, and the Atlantic provinces as we continue. We initially developed a set of interview questions for our meetings, but we have found that an informal conversation focusing on the following three topics proved more useful:

- Insights into religion, faith, and spirituality in Canada
- Challenges for youth in Canada
- Young people's relationship with religion, faith and spirituality

This report also incorporates findings from S-VOX's cross-country series of conversations with young people in 2010.

A brief note on young people

The millennials are a unique generation. They are generally characterized by an increased familiarity and use with communications, media, and digital technologies. Economic prospects for the millennials

in developed countries are worrisome. Although Canada fares better than the USA and many European countries, youth unemployment rates are on the rise. In 2009, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 was 15.9%, the highest rate it had been in a decade. (News, 2009). In August 2011, the unemployment rate for this age group was even higher at 17.2% (Lu, 2011).

Our conversations with those that work with youth revealed insights into how this is shaping the mindset of this generation:

Some characterized this generation of young people as one who is inheriting a world of economic, ecological and political crisis. They are worried about the lack of jobs, and what that will mean for their futures.

Others worked with young people who were concerned about meeting basic needs, including housing and food (Sidhu, 2011).

There was also a sense that for many young people the future that doesn't compute, and that there is a sense of urgency that to make things better. They are looking figure out how to live given the world they are inheriting. The internet is allowing for some social justice, in that it allows for speedy organization and access to information, but young people are looking to discover answers for how the world can get out of this fix. The Occupy movement speaks to this reality. (Lazn, 2011)

Young people learn best when they are engaged and active. They care about social issues, and want to do something about them. The work that the foundation funds should rely on young people to identify the problems they see and propose solutions. Whatever the programming,, young people want to learn through engagement and activity.

At the same time however, young people are not joiners. They are more interested in leading change than belonging to organizations. They will show up but not sign up. They are looking for ways to learn what they need to know to have an impact, and acquiring the tools and skills they need to do so. In this regard they are resourceful and self-reliant.

In addition, though young people rely largely on the internet for information, many are lacking media literacy skills. Many young people do not have the skills to decipher research from ideology, and don't know the importance of primary sources (Dodds, 2011). This becomes especially problematic when dealing with religion and spirituality, where young people might be especially vulnerable.

Finally, this note on young people should not be taken as the reality for all millenials in Canada. The influences of socio-economic class and geography cannot be ignored, and any programming the foundation funds should ensure extensive youth involvement if it is to be successful.

The foundation should consider all of these realities in developing grants programming that meet the needs addressed below.

Part I: Context – faith and secular realities

The literature and the interviews revealed that the foundation will be working in a landscape characterised by three important realities.

First, Canada is becoming less religious, but more religiously diverse

The foundation will be operating in a Canada where religion is changing. First, though the majority of Canadians still identify with a faith tradition (81%) Canadians are becoming less religious. From 1985-2004, the number of Canadians who reported no religious affiliation or did not attend any religious services rose from 31% to 44% (Clarke & Schellenberg, 2006, p. 2).

This trend is more pronounced for young people, who have always been less religious than the population at large. The number of young people aged 15-29 who either had no religious affiliation, or attended no religious services increased from 37% in 1985 to 52% in 2004 (Clarke & Schellenberg, 2006, p. 1). For the first time, more young people in Canada were not affiliated or didn't participate in religious services than otherwise.

Though formal participation and religious affiliation for young people is no longer the norm, religion and spirituality are still relevant for many. When asked about the importance of religion in their lives, 34% of young people placed a high importance on religion, and 20% said that religion was moderately important to them (Clarke & Schellenberg, 2006, p. 6). This suggests that declining religious affiliation and participation in religious services may simply reflect a movement away from organized religion for some youth, with many remaining interested on a more individual level, though there may be a number who continue to identify and participate in more traditional ways.

At the same time, Canada is becoming more religiously diverse. The past decade saw declining participation in mainline denominations such as Catholic and Protestant, but participation in other religious traditions, including Evangelical Christian and Muslim, doubled over the same period, largely due to immigration (Fadden & Townsend, 2009, p. 4). For young people, religious diversity is the new reality. Studies with second-generation young Canadians show that though they are likely to reinterpret the religions of their parents and adapt religious practices, they continue to maintain ties with religion and their religious communities (Beyer, 2008).

Finally, the foundation should keep in mind that religion plays out differently across the country – BC is the least religious province with almost 60% of residents either not having a religious affiliation, or never attending services. The Atlantic Provinces are the most religious, with 77% of the population attending religious services at least occasionally (Clarke & Schellenberg, 2006).

Second, religion is still a taboo subject for discussion in Canada

Religion is a taboo topic in Canada's public discourse. In order to reduce religious discrimination, secularization relegated religion to private life and eliminated religion from the public discourse. At the time, it was a positive step towards equality. However, a number of things in recent years have made our discomfort with discussing religion problematic, which suggests that it may be time to move to a post-secular society.

First, as mentioned above, the increase in religious diversity in Canada makes a public discussion about religion necessary. Many religions include public expressions of belief that can bump up against societal rules and regulations that were created for a population that was largely Christian. The most basic example of this are debates over whether Sikh men should be exempted from the requirement to wear helmets when required by law. However, because secularization in Canada effectively eliminated discussion about the role of religion in public life, policymakers and other stakeholders in Canada either ignore or refuse to address the issues related to multiculturalism, immigrant integration, and social justice (Seljak, 2008). The result has been policy-makers dealing with situations like this on a case by case basis, and the media sensationalizing the issues. The Commission on Reasonable Accommodation in Quebec and the resulting public dialogue is another example. As issues like this emerge more frequently, we will need to understand and negotiate religious differences more intelligently and as a matter of course, not only at the state level from a policy perspective, but also, at the level of daily, personal conversation between citizens.

Second, we are beginning to see religion referenced more often in political dialogue and conflict, both internationally and at home. From seemingly harmless references to God in political speeches, to ideologically based cuts to funding for social programs in Canada and abroad, there is debate about whether policymakers are religiously motivated. There are also suggestions that political allegiances among immigrants are changing due to sociocultural issues. A thoughtful conversation about religion and how it influences our values and our politics (both historically, and currently) is necessary if we are to come together to solve domestic and international issues. The politicization of religion abroad also has had consequences for diaspora communities in Canada, with international conflicts being the basis for local tensions. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and Hindu-Muslim tensions in India and Pakistan are just two examples.

Third, and perhaps most immediately important, religion is increasingly becoming a line across which discrimination occurs in Canada. Though ethnicity continues to be the most common motivation for hate-crime, religiously-motivated hate crimes reported to police has been on the rise, more than doubling from 173 in 2007, to 410 in 2009, the latest date for which data is available (Brennan & Dauvergne, 2011). Seven out of ten of these crimes in 2009 targeted those of the Jewish faith, with most of the remainder targeting those of Muslim and Catholic faiths. The average age of those accused of hate crimes in general was 27, though heavily weighted toward those of younger ages.

Young people who participated in the Foundation's 2010 focus groups acknowledge the taboo: "It's almost like religion has become a dirty secret. It's like politics; nobody wants to talk about it because everyone has a different view." (Focus Group Participants, 2010)

Third, there is interest in spirituality and inner life in the general population – including the youth - and among researchers.

There is evidence of a growing interest in spirituality in the general population and on the part of young people specifically. Perhaps as a result of the declining interest in organized religion (through which many youth once derived meaning and purpose), our interviews suggested that more young people are identifying as spiritual but not religious (Bramadat, 2011). Anecdotal evidence from student life professionals supports this conclusion, with a large increase in interest in non-denominational meditation groups and spiritual counselling on university campuses (Lock, 2011) (Chambers, 2011).

At the same time, there is academic research that examines the relationship between spiritual well-being and happiness (Holder, et al., 2010), as well as health (Cotton, et al., 2005). These studies show that overall well-being is linked to spiritual and existential well-being, and that these links are present regardless of religious belief or practice.

Part II: The needs to be addressed

Canada has done better than most (if not all) countries in managing its diversity. At the level of the state and individual interactions, we have been largely (though far from completely) successful at living in ethnically and racially diverse communities. However, as mentioned above, increasing religious diversity brings with it not only fellow citizens who may look different and sound different, but also citizens who may have different beliefs about the world we live in, which also manifest themselves in different ways of behaving in society. Recent debates about Sharia law in Ontario, and the recent ban on wearing the niqab (Muslim face veil) during citizenship ceremonies are examples of religious differences that can cause heated debates about values in the Canadian public sphere.

Though Canada's multicultural policy has cited religion since its introduction in 1971, in recent years it has been acknowledged that dealing with religious diversity under Canada's multiculturalism policy will be much more challenging than either ethnicity or race. A recent report commissioned by Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2010 named "adapting multiculturalism to religious diversity" the top real and unresolved issue for multiculturalism in Canada (Kymlicka, 2010).

A shift from the idea of multiculturalism to the idea of pluralism may be the way forward given that religious diversity has to do with differences in not only the way we look, but in what we believe. Diane Eck of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University defines pluralism as more than diversity alone; rather it is the energetic engagement with diversity. It is also more than just tolerance; it is actively seeking understanding across lines of difference. Rather than leaving our identities and our commitments behind, pluralism means holding our differences, even our religious differences, in relationship to one another. Finally, pluralism is based on dialogue. This does not mean that everyone at the table has to agree, but rather that there is a commitment to being at the table (Eck, 2006).

So what issues were identified by the literature and conversations that need to be addressed in order to move us toward a pluralistic Canada?

Lack of knowledge about religions other than Christianity

The fact that religion has been out of the public discourse for many years in Canada, combined with the fact that we are ill-equipped to talk about religion with our neighbours and friends, has meant that we know relatively little about the major faith groups, apart from Christianity (Geddes, 2009). Rather, we are a population informed on religion largely by the media. This has implications for young people not only in their ability to speak about religion in public life, but also in the way they perceive others. They can also be victims of the adult population's inability to understand the complexity of religious communities. We lack a common language and terminology essential for dialogue.

An example of the latter is the case of a young Muslim woman who was sexually assaulted twice in a Toronto school in which she was a student in 2006. When made aware of the incident, the administration did not report it to the police, for fear that the young woman would be further victimized by her religious community if they learned about the sexual assaults. Though their intention was to protect the young woman, clearly that the administration failed to do what was necessary based on their perceptions of the young woman's religion. When the incident was investigated in 2008, the charges against the perpetrator (and the administration) were dropped, because the police investigation was hampered due to the length of time between the investigation and when the incident was reported.

Given the increasingly diverse religious environment in Canada, we all need to be more knowledgeable about religion and the complex ways it interacts with identity in order to avoid the above happening again. This is especially true for young people, who will be living in a Canada that will only get more religiously diverse.

It is impossible to speak about the implications of a low level of knowledge about religion in Canada, without mentioning Islamophobia. With an increasing number of immigrants coming to Canada from countries with populations that are largely Muslim, and the constant narratives in the media about the politicization and radicalization of Islam, much of the work to be done here lies in creating a distinction between radical Islam, and the Islam practiced by the vast majority of Canadian Muslims. Research conducted by Environics confirmed that only 50% of the general public had a positive view of Islam, and that 42% of Muslims between the ages of 18 and 29 had had a bad experience due to their race, ethnicity or religion (Adams, 2009).

This need for basic knowledge about religion as it relates to maintaining a cohesive society has been confirmed by others. The recent introduction of a mandatory elementary and high school curriculum on Ethics and Religious Culture in Quebec is a good example. The curriculum aims to familiarize young people on Quebec's religious heritage (including both Judeo-Christian traditions and Native spirituality), have them become open to religious diversity so students can be open-minded about its contribution to

Quebec society, and for youth to be able to thoughtfully locate themselves in the landscape of beliefs (Milot & Tremblay, 2009). A number of universities offer courses on religion in the public sphere as well.

Community organizations are also taking on the task of educating the public about the complexities of religion and its intersections with identity. For example the Canadian Council for Muslim Women produced an educational toolkit on the experience of Muslim women in Canada that demonstrates the multiple interpretations of faith and identity for Muslim women in Canada.

However, there is much work to be done to increase the general level of knowledge about religion and its role in both public and private life, especially given the complex ways that religion intersects with identity, politics, and race. For the foundation, there is a need to support young people in the development of this kind of work, both at the level of general knowledge about religion for the young people in general, but also community-driven work that supports youth in interpreting their own complex identities.

A secular/religious divide?

The general lack of understanding about the role that religion plays in the lives of the majority of Canadians (and just under half of young Canadians) can be seen as contributing to a divide between the secular and the religious when we examine the extremes at both ends. By ignoring religion when we talk about politics, identity, and values, we are creating a generation of young people (like adults) who are unable to have open and constructive conversations about religion and spirituality, even though many youth are informed by them in their lives, and other are curious to know more. "I think it's a bad thing that you can't even talk about religion in schools anymore (Focus Group Participants, 2010).

Whereas much work has been done in the interfaith arena, bringing together young people from various faith groups, addressing the misperceptions that exist between those who are secular and those who are religious is also important. On the one side, religious communities may not understand from where the non-religious get their morals and values. A recent study from UBC showed that those who are religious consider atheists considerably less trustworthy than those of other faith groups (Withrow, 2011). On the other side, the non-religious may be guilty of dismissing religion as simply a cause of violence and conflict, despite the religious motivations for many social goods in Canada, including healthcare and education (Hamilton, 2011) An Ipsos-Reid poll in 2010 found that only 36% of Canadians felt that religion was a source for good (Anon., 2010). The public conversation about religion contributes to these misperceptions, because it is largely dominated by the extremes at both the secular and the religious ends. A glance at the comments section in articles that reference religion in any of Canada's major online news sources confirms that there is clear ignorance on both sides (eg Andersson, 2011).

There is a need to acknowledge these perceptions and debunk them. For the religious, it is necessary to cultivate an understanding of the sources of morals and values outside religion (nature, science, art

etc.), and for the non-religious, an understanding that religion does contribute to well-being, both for individuals, and for society.

For the foundation, there is an opportunity to contribute at two levels. First, by bringing together those who do have these misperceptions to clarify them, and second by contributing to a public conversation with a voice that reflects the opinions of the moderate on both the religious and secular sides.

Ignorance of religion and spirituality in programming for young people

There have also been consequences of the crossing trajectories of secularization, increasing religious diversity, and an increase in interest in religion for young people served by community organizations.

For those working on multiculturalism and immigrant integration programming, secularization has meant that their religion, a core part of identity for some young people has been left unresolved in this work. Both funders and youth-serving organizations highlighted the absence of religion, spirituality, and values in this kind of community programming, and the absence of funding available for this work. Where programs focussed on immigration and multiculturalism, they incorporated culture, ethnicity, and language among other aspects of identity, but tended not to address religion in their work. This was due to lack of tools and skills to address religion sensitively, lack of awareness about what the implications might be for some youth, and also as a response to funding agencies that specify that programming be secular. Some forward thinking organizations do run this type of programming (working with Muslim young women, for example), but often leave out religion when reporting to funders in order to remain eligible for funding.

Programs outside the multiculturalism sphere delivered to and by young people also cited the need to bring religion and spirituality into their work. Those working with Aboriginal young people, for whom spirituality can form a core part of their identities, have long acknowledged this need (Sidhu, 2011). Indeed, the excellent work being done by and with aboriginal young people on healing and reconciliation can provide both inspiration and best practice when thinking about incorporating spirituality into community-based work as a component of holistic health for young people.

In addition, youth-workers dealing with incidents of trauma and working with youth coming from difficult life experiences reported the need to draw on religious and/or spiritual frameworks in order to cope with the situations they were faced with. Being able to share these frameworks, and acknowledge them in conversations with funders and other youth-serving organizations was also considered to be very important for the young people doing this work (Katz, 2011).

Organizations working with young people need to build their capacity to not only deal with faith issues when they arise, but also to incorporate religion and spirituality into their programming. Funders also need to acknowledge that there are times when it is effective to include religion and spirituality in this work, and allow for this in eligibility requirements. For the foundation, there is an opportunity to fund capacity-building work for community organizations working in this area, as well as work with other funders on changing their own funding requirements.

Who is doing related work?

There are many organizations working with young people in each of the spheres of religion, spirituality and pluralism, though it was difficult to find any that sit at the intersection of the three. We were able to locate only one funder in Canada of programming that focussed on religious pluralism, EmbraceBC's Interfaith Bridging program. The program was created in reaction to the attacks on the twin towers on 9/11 as a way to prevent what could have potentially resulted in faith-based community divides. All of the work funded by the program focusses on bringing together two or more faith communities on education or action based projects.

Other organizations that focus on pluralism, such as the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (international) and the Interfaith Youth Core (USA) provide direct programming for young people, as opposed to being funders and grantmakers. Both of these organizations take a definitive position on religion and interfaith work as forces for good, combatting the often-heard narrative that religion is for the large part violent and divisive.

The Global Centre for Pluralism, set up as a partnership between His Highness the Aga Khan and the Canadian Government, will also be undertaking its own programs, focussed on learning from societies (like Canada) where pluralism has traditionally worked well, and disseminating that knowledge in societies where there are current or emerging conflicts. Though the approach is a balanced one, the centre will primarily focus its work internationally and on policy-level interventions, drawing from Canada as a best practice.

No funding organization in Canada has taken a balanced, pragmatic approach to religion and spirituality in society, with a focus on pluralism. Though academics and journalists have been arguing for a more intelligent and nuanced approach to dealing with the issues identified in this report, and more research is being done on the relationship between spirituality and well-being, there is still a noticeable absence of evidenced-based youth-driven work that addresses these needs, and brings religion and spirituality into the public conversation.

There are opportunities for the foundation to increase religious literacy among young people, bring together young people who may be divided along religious lines, and increase the ability of community organizations to incorporate religion and spirituality in their work where it can increase the effectiveness of their programming.

Conclusions & Next Steps

This research identified three broad issues that could be addressed by the foundation:

- a lack of knowledge among Canadians (young and old) about religion, other than Christianity

- a divide between the secular and the religious at the extremes which leads to lack of mutual respect and understanding
- an ignorance of religion and spirituality in many of the community-programs carried out by other organizations for young people

It also provided some insights into the youth who will be participating in the programs that the foundation will be funding:

- many are uncertain about the future, and concerned about employment, and about global issues like the environment
- they learn best when authentically engaged in the work, identifying their own needs and proposing solutions
- many do not want to join organizations, but rather participate in ad hoc movements and dialogue/conversations
- many are reliant on the internet, but are not necessarily media literate, i.e. lack critical judgement

A preliminary scan of the work already being done revealed many organizations working on relevant programming with young people, but an absence of a funding organization dedicated to working at the intersection of these issues.

The next steps for the foundation will be to consider these issues alongside the foundation's mandate to determine where it should focus its efforts.

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