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## Munk debate: Reactions from the audience



(c) Tom Sandler

This evening Tony Blair supported the motion 'Be it resolved religion is a force for good in the world' against Christopher Hitchens in the annual Canadian Munk Debates. Below are some initial reactions from the audience at the debate in Toronto and watching online.

"As an atheist and secular humanist who is working to bridge the religious-secular divide, I was hugely impressed by Tony Blair's constructive, positive vision for interfaith cooperation as a necessity for addressing global conflict in the 21st century. As Blair rightly noted, it is much easier to focus on the negative elements of religion than it is to acknowledge the important contributions religious people have made as inspired by their religious convictions. But if we identify shared values within the various world religions (and humanism) as a means to mobilize people around important global issues, we will be able to make religion a force for good in the world.

I appreciated that Blair did not treat religion as a golden egg, but instead acknowledged its complexities and shades of gray. "Let us not condemn all people of religious faith by the bigotry of some," said Blair, "and acknowledge the good that's come out of religion." Blair pragmatically underscored that religion is unlikely to disappear any time soon, and suggested we find a way to use it to improve the world. All the more, he added: "In a world without religion, the religious fanatics would be gone, but would fanaticism be gone?"

His perspective was optimistic, while I found Hitchens' to be rather one-note. "Along with all the things wrong with religion," said Blair, "is there also something in it that makes the world better?"

Ultimately, I couldn't help but feel that Hitchens was debating against exclusivism and totalitarianism while mistaking it for all religion, while Blair was offering an assessment of the good that religion has done and casting a positive vision for what it might do in the future. Though I, like Hitchens, am an atheist, I am also an interfaith activist who knows from experience that religion can be a force for good, and I was happy to see that perspective represented so well by Blair."

### **Chris Steadman, Non Prophet Status Blog**

"I think it's too simple to say "These religious people do good things" or "These religious people do terrible things" and expect that to settle the argument. This is about large-scale global events (and crises) that can only be solved by the unification of the religious (all types) and the non-religious (all types). Besides, the argument about religion as a force of evil is predicated on the possibility of removing religion from the world - not something likely to happen...ever.

Hitchens nailed the happiness and, indeed, ecstasy, that some feel during moments of deep faith expression. That's something important. For all of the sad history that some religious people have created, they've also left us with a world (and are actively creating a world) where equality, human rights, love, and happiness are fully-shared and celebrated everywhere. Religion is a process, and I'm looking forward to keeping up my end of the work promoting interfaith action and dialogue."

### **Tim Brauhn, Faiths Act Fellowship Alumni**

"Religion playing a positive role is surely a take away

Faith motivating us to do good is something which all of us understand

True religion is about embracing everyone who is different , every religion talks about it

Politics and Religion to play together for the good - Brilliant

People of deep religious faith working together for resolving the problems leads to solving world full of respect and tolerance

Finding a common ground through scriptures is the need of the hour

There is a power higher than human power which gives us humility - I couldn't agree more"

### **Simmi Kher, New Delhi**

"Very engaging and respectful debate about the force of religion for good in the world. Both were very able speakers. The ultimate victory was that good people were given the opportunity to debate one another with such brilliance on such an important topic."

### **Doctor Brian O'Sullivan, Durham Catholic Board**

"The debate was very timely in a world where many issues are entangled with religion. I think it is necessary to debate the role religion should play in society. Hopefully we are providing a means by which the world can become a better world for all through such debates."

### **Dominic Pullano, Adult Faith Ambassador**

"It was wonderful that Tony Blair recognised the role faith plays in building resilience in young people; guiding them to make the right choices and motivating them to make a positive impact in the world. The debate was both stimulating and intellectual. It certainly inspired individuals in the audience to reflect on their own beliefs and practices."

**Varsha Naik, Peel District, Schools, Toronto**

"The most powerful part of the debate for me was the responses on Twitter, and the general power of social media. Whenever any point was made, on either side, I immediately was on twitter discussing with my Muslim, humanist, and Catholic friends what their responses were, and how we can all band together to be forces for good. It doesn't get more inspiring than that."

**Amy McNair, Faiths Act Fellowship Alumni**