



BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR

WRONG IMAGE: Toronto Buddhist Suwanda Sugunasiri says a proposed preamble to the Constitution that

refers to God is inappropriate in the reality of today's multi-faith Canada.

Buddhist protests 'God' in Constitution preamble

By Michael McAteer
TORONTO STAR

God is at the centre of a storm over a proposed preamble to Canada's Constitution.

Written by a small group of conservative Christians, the preamble affirms that Canada is "founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God," the dignity of each person, the importance of family, and the value of community.

The preamble has been accepted by the Beaudoin-Dobbie Committee on a Renewed Canada, as part of a constitutional package that will be considered in future months.

It reflects the view held in the preamble to the 1981 Charter of Rights and Freedoms that says "Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God ..."

Authors of the preamble say the reference to God recognizes Canada's religious heritage and traditions.

And, because God is not defined, they say the reference is broad enough to be acceptable to most Canadians — Christians and non-Christian.

But a leading Toronto Buddhist, Suwanda Sugunasiri, calls the preamble inadequate and inappropriate for the reality of today's multi-faith Canada.

He argues that for a sizable number of Canadians — Christian and non-Christian — its reference to God will conjure up the image of a white, blue-eyed, male God representing at best nothing, and at worst oppression.

"If the preamble acknowledged in some way that there are Canadians of integrity who do not believe in God it would also avoid the unfortunate tone of jingoistic civil religion that is so common in the United States."

— **Rev. Paul Newman, the United Church of Canada's secretary for interfaith dialogue.**

Others, Christian and non-Christian, agree.

Philip Jones, national president of the Humanist Association of Canada, finds references to God unacceptable.

Jones estimates there are about 3 million Canadians who do not believe in the existence of a supreme being or God.

He is encouraging these people to write to Constitutional Affairs Minister Joe Clark calling for a Constitution that "accommodates our national diversity."

Rev. Paul Newman, the United Church of Canada's secretary for interfaith dialogue, has gone on record supporting Sugunasiri's call for a more inclusive preamble.

"If the preamble acknowledged in some way that there are Canadians of integrity who do not believe in God it would also avoid the unfortunate tone of jingoistic civil religion that is so common in the United States," Newman says in a letter to Clark.

"It is a short step from emphasizing our national belief in God to claiming that God is on our side, right or wrong. Nationalism

can use religion the way advertising uses sex. The result is to make religion or sex banal and to damage its integrity."

As a Buddhist, Sugunasiri does not believe in the concept of God. As a Canadian of 25 years he wants a "balanced reference to an inclusive spirituality" in the preamble to his country's Constitution.

"In a country built by immigrants over the centuries, we should recognize both the multi-religious nature of past and present," says Sugunasiri, a Toronto public school teacher.

Sugunasiri's concerns have raised questions about enshrining "God" in the preamble of a Constitution for a country that has become increasingly secular, with a general drop in church attendance and diminished confidence in religious leaders and institutions.

But those who support the current preamble say Canada was built on Judeo-Christian values and principles and that the majority of Canadians still profess belief in God and identify themselves as church members. And these facts should be acknowledged, they argue.

"We now have the possibility of prefacing our Constitution with a clear and concise definition that Christians can not merely support but celebrate," says Rev. Brian Stiller.

Stiller, a Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada minister, is executive director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and one of the preamble's authors.

The fellowship, comprising 28 conservative Christian denominations, hundreds of churches, and 5,000 individuals, is co-ordinating a campaign encouraging people to write to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in support of the current preamble.

Anglican layman Wilbur Sutherland, a resource person for an organization promoting a Christian presence in the public sector, rejects any suggestion that the preamble is intended to treat anyone as a second-class citizen.

Sutherland says the reference to the supremacy of God is a "historical reference to the way

this country was shaped." The preamble, he says, is not binding on the rest of the Constitution.

He helped write it with Stiller; Gerald Vandezande, a Christian Reformed Church member and national public affairs director of the advocacy group Citizens for Public Justice; and Mennonite John Redecop, a Wilfrid Laurier University political science professor.

Sutherland says Conservative MP John Reimer of Kitchener sought Stiller's assistance in writing a Canada clause for the Constitution and the preamble evolved over a weekend in February.

The word "God" he says is not an exclusively Christian and is used by many non-Christians.

Sutherland says he is open to suggestions that would make the wording of the preamble more palatable to Sugunasiri and others who have to expressed concerns.

As chairman of an ad hoc interfaith committee on Canada's future — of which Sugunasiri is a member — Sutherland says he will call a meeting of the group to propose a wording that might meet Sugunasiri's concerns.

Committee member Manohar Singh Bal, secretary of the Ontario Council of Sikhs says that "by and large" he is comfortable with the reference to God in the preamble.

But he says he is open to a rewording that take into consideration the concerns of Sugunasiri and others.

Committee member Karen Mock describes herself as an observant Jew who has no difficulty in acknowledging the supremacy of God. But for the sake of "equity, equality and inclusiveness," she wants the preamble's reference to God deleted completely.

"There are those who do not believe in a supreme being and they are fully fledged Canadians," says Mock, national director for B'nai B'rith's league for human rights and chairperson of the Canadian Multiculturalism Advisory Committee.

"It is possible to have a preamble that is more inclusive," she said.

Committee member, former Anglican Primate, Archbishop Ted Scott, would also like to see the wording of the preamble "widened" to make it more inclusive.

He has already been in touch with a government policy adviser to see if the preamble's wording can be such that it recognizes Canada's multiethnic, multicultural society.