

# **RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: THE CANADIAN CASE**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pioneering national adult and teenage survey data are drawn upon to construct a comprehensive picture of religion in late twentieth century Canada, and to offer an informed prognosis regarding religion in the century ahead. As the century's end draws near, Canadians show little inclination to abandon supranatural beliefs, conventional or otherwise. However, they exhibit a decreasing inclination to participate actively in organized religion, while at the same time giving little evidence of turning to Christianity's competitors. Canadians tend rather to retain the Protestant or Roman Catholic affiliation of their parents, but increasingly reject Christianity as an authoritative meaning system in favour of drawing upon belief, practice, and professional service "fragments." Religious organizations, for their part, have been consciously and unconsciously diversifying their offerings in response to such specialized "consumer demands." It is argued that fragment adoption style is fairly predictable in modern societies, reflecting institutional and role specialization. As for the future, social forecast literature is drawn upon to explore indicate the nature, role, and forms religion may take in the twenty-first century. The paper concludes by noting the implications of "the Canadian case" for religion in advanced societies more generally.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Futures That Never Were**

When it comes to religion, social scientists have had less than an impressive record as prophets. The well-known predictions of some of the leading nineteenth and twentieth century observers have not proven to be particularly accurate. Auguste Comte, the so-called "father of sociology," would perhaps be quite shocked to learn that religion has not been progressively replaced by neat metaphysical and positivistic stages. Freud might very well be dismayed to find that the harsh realities of nature and fate are still not being enduring solely with the help of science - that "the illusion" still has a future. Marx, beyond decrying the persistence of conditions producing oppressed creatures, would perhaps be somewhat perplexed to find that the opium continues to have widespread use not only among the deprived but also the privileged. Durkheim, perhaps requires less need for chagrin, in that he predicted religion would persist because of its social impetus. Nevertheless, he probably would be at least a little surprised to discover that "the old gods" he viewed as "dying or already dead" have proven to be remarkably resilient.

More recent prophecies about the future of religion, such as those offered by Americans Daniel Bell and the duo of Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, see religion experiencing a resurgence with the help of the emergence of new expressions. However, there already is good reason to believe their well-known prognostications also may go largely unfulfilled.

### **Canadian Religion: the Bases for Projection**

Forecasting about religion is clearly a perilous activity that has slain not a few social science giants. The founder of The Club of Rome, an organization committed to the human creation of an ever-improving future, for example, has warned against "the inanity of attempting to predict the future." He reminds us that "even the most gifted individual is incapable of foreseeing the complexity of all the elements that combine to shape the future" (Peccei, 1981:12). John Gribbin (1979:11) of the University of Sussex states bluntly that "it is nonsense to talk about 'the' future and describe what 'will' happen." The best we can do, he suggests, is to posit "several possible worlds, depending on the decisions we make deliberately, or the decisions we allow to go by default." Alvin Toffler 1972:4 says today's futurists are wary of dogmatic statements as to what "will" happen. He adds that they focus instead "on the array of alternatives open to decision-makers, stressing that the future is fluid, not fixed or frozen."

Extensive research into the nature of religion in Canada during this century, however, offers a solid database on which to construct some general hypotheses about twenty-first century religion. Further, as a highly industrialized - indeed, post-industrialized nation, Canada may well offer valuable data as a case study contribution to the broader question religion's future in advanced societies more generally. Such is the intention of my observations on the Canadian religious situation.

Since the early 1970s I have been involved in an extensive program of research on religion in Canada. In addition to carrying out regional and denominational studies, I have conducted three national adult surveys in 1975, 1980, and 1985, along with a 1984 complementary national survey of teenagers. To date, the project findings have been published in some 20 articles and a book dealing with the findings of the teenage survey entitled, *The Emerging Generation*. Next year, the cumulative religion material will be released in a book entitled, *Fragmented Gods*.

What I would like to do in this paper is begin by summarizing the state of Canadian religion in this century - its nature, its role, and its forms. Following this twentieth century report, I will draw on the data and some preliminary reviewing of futurists, past and present, to suggest what the nature, role, and forms of Canadian religion may look like in the twenty-first century. I will conclude with some brief thoughts about the implications beyond the Canadian case.

## I. RELIGION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

### Its Nature

There has been a great deal of confusion about what has been happening to religion in Canada during this century. I recently was asked by The Canadian Church Press to give the keynote address at their annual national meeting. They suggested I deal with the possibility that they have been "printing with invisible ink" in recent years - in part, because they have been misreading the times.

The harsh reality is that much of what almost everyone has said and written about religion in Canada over the past two decades has been precariously related to reality. Here, academics have been as unsound as everyone else. The general confusion can be traced to the inaccurate interpretations given to Canada's decline in church attendance. According to a 1946 Gallup poll, 67% of Canadians were attending services weekly. That figure now stands at around 30% for Protestants. As for Roman Catholics, weekly attendance remained at about 85% through the mid-1960s. Today it has dropped to approximately 45%.

In addition to attendance data, the census has revealed a steady increase in the percentage of Canadians who say they have no religious preference - from less than 1% in 1961 to 4% in 1971 to 7% in 1981.

And over the past two decades, church leaders, the media, and academics have been scouring the ranks of evangelicals, Protestant denominations, the new religions, privatized religions, and the "no religion" camps looking for church drop-outs.

What the national surveys have discovered is that few of the alleged drop-outs have ever left home. Some 90% of the nation continues to claim either Protestant or Roman Catholic affiliation - a figure that has stayed fairly constant throughout the entire century. Across generations, more than 9 in 10 Protestants remain Protestants and more than 9 in 10 Roman Catholics remain Catholics. The Christian affiliational ranks are further bolstered by additions from the non-Christian religions, as their members become acculturated and in some instances assimilated.

As for the growing "no religion" category, it has proven to be both a product of methodology and highly transitory. Up until 1971, the census-takers literally didn't take "no" for an answer. The emergence of the category is partly due to the new acknowledging of an old reality. But further, in following the non-affiliated between 1975 and 1980, I found that 1 in 3 returned to the Protestant or Roman Catholic tie of their parents - primarily in response to the need for rites of passage pertaining to marriage and the birth of children.

In short, very few Canadians are dropping their conventional organizational affiliations. The equation of infrequent attendance with religious defection has involved spurious arithmetic and erroneous deductions. As the Toronto Anglican Archbishop colourfully put it in recently relating these findings to his Diocese, "It's not that the people are leaving; it's just that they're not coming."

The reality is that throughout Canada's history, the population has overwhelmingly identified with four major groupings - the Roman Catholics, the United Church and its three denominational forerunners, the Anglicans, and the Protestant evangelicals commonly referred to as the Conservatives. In market model terms, we could say that the nation's religious economy has been dominated by these four major companies. Together they have been carrying out over 85% of the country's "religious business."

An examination of affiliational statistics dating back to the 1891 census reveals that variations over time in the proportional share of the religion market have been relatively minor. The Roman Catholics, largely because of immigration and birth, have grown somewhat, while the United Church and Anglicans have

experienced small proportional declines. The Conservative Protestants have stayed about the same.

Contrary to folk-wisdom, then, the old affiliations are not easily discarded. They typically are inherited with the family name and reinforced by socialization stretching over several generations. In many cases the heritage includes a nationality legacy. Thus it is, for example, that over 75% of Anglicans in the Toronto Diocese who see themselves as inactive nonetheless say being an Anglican is important to them. Very few give any evidence of being within the recruitment reach of other religious groups.

### **Its Role**

While the people of Canada give little indication of abandoning ties with the dominant religious groups, this is not to say things remain the same as the century's end draws near. Canadians in greater and greater numbers are drawing upon religion in consumer-like fashion. There appears to be an accelerated movement from religious commitment to religious consumption.

John Naisbitt (1984:260) has written that in a relatively short time, society "has fractionalized into many diverse groups of people with a wide array of differing tastes and values." The idea of "a multiple-option society," he says, has spilled over into a number of areas, including the family, music, food, entertainment, and religion. In Canada, accelerated institutional specialization has resulted in the tendency for people to look to the Church to provide very specific commodities. Canadians increasingly draw upon the churches and Christianity for isolated beliefs and practices - what might be referred to as "religious fragments". They believe in God, even if they are not so sure about the Divinity of Jesus or the nature of life after death. They find themselves praying once in a while, even if they seldom read a Bible or say table grace. They attend services occasionally, but hardly weekly. And, of course, they look to the Church to provide rites of passage pertaining to birth, marriage, and death.

While somewhere around 40% describe themselves as "committed Christians," the content of that commitment is not just puzzling but suspect in many cases. Only about 20% of Canadians exhibit commitment to a traditional version of the faith - characterized by belief in God, the Divinity of Jesus, life after death, private prayer, the experiencing of God, and a basic knowledge of the Christian tradition. They also readily supplement their conventional Christian menu with an assortment of other supranatural beliefs and practices, pertaining to such areas as astrology, psychic phenomena, auras, possession, and communication with the dead.

What the majority of Canadians appear to engage in is "religion a la carte" - a belief here, a practice there, a Sunday service, a baptism, a wedding, a funeral. Just as a person needs a good dentist, doctor, and lawyer, so it is handy to have access to a minister or a priest.

Significantly, however, beyond a certain investment of time and money, the returns are diminishing. Therefore, Canadians in increasingly large numbers do not attend services every week; presumably many feel that that level of attendance is unnecessary. Interestingly, Huxley, in *Brave New World* (1932:52), only has Bernard attending his "Solidarity Service" twice a month. The same principle seems to hold for money. It is noteworthy that when Canadians are asked why they are no longer as highly involved in churches as they once were, the dominant response is simply that they prefer to spend more of their time on other things. But they are not "drop-outs". It would be more accurate to describe them as "drop-ins".

Religion in Canada is not only characterized by consumption. It is characterized by compartmentalization. The spheres of life over which the churches have authority have diminished in direct relationship to the specialization that has accompanied the industrialization of the nation. One only has to look at Quebec for a modern-day, microcosmic example of the process. The Church that used to have authority in virtually all spheres of life - politics, economics, education, social services, recreation, and so on - that Church

since 1960 has seen its spheres of influence diminish to the point where it now finds itself playing a highly specialized, "religious" role. It still can "speak" to all of life. But its influence has been dramatically reduced. Functionally, the Roman Catholic Church's role in the life of the province appears to be limited essentially to the administering of the Eucharist and the performing of rites of passage.

This specialization of life's spheres is reflected in turn at the level of the individual. The roles Canadians play tend to be highly specialized and precariously integrated. The result is that just as religion has come to have a very specific place in society, so religion has come to have a very specific place in individual lives. At the societal level, it takes the form of specialization. At the individual level, it takes the form of compartmentalization.

I have just recently completed a detailed analysis of over 1,700 active and inactive Anglicans in the Diocese of Toronto. The study has found that, even in the case of Anglicans who see themselves as committed Christians, compartmentalization is widespread. The Church has significance for the personal faith and family life of the committed, but its importance tends to diminish as Anglicans participate in the broader, everyday world of Canadian society. It is difficult to find signs of a unique "Anglican factor," for example, in value formation and the perception of problems, in views of people and in social, economic, and political attitudes.

Such a compartmentalization reality is readily acknowledged. For example, whereas 61% of active Anglicans say the Church plays a highly significant role with respect to their personal faith, the figures drop to 39% for child-raising, 20% for social issues, 13% for leisure activities, and to a mere 4% for political views.

These findings for Anglicans are consistent with findings for Canadians as a whole. Detailed analyses have found little relationship to exist between Christian commitment and characteristics such as happiness and satisfaction, compassion and tolerance, values and social attitudes, personal concerns and sources of happiness. Committed Christians look very much like other Canadians.

The Church instills Christian commitment, and provides belief and practice fragments for "à la carte-oriented" consumers. The Church also continues to have an influence in shaping sexual attitudes - in large part because it remains somewhat unique among existing institutions in taking strong positions on sexuality, versus, for example, simply providing information. And, finally, as already emphasized, the Church still plays the dominant role in providing rites of passage. But its unique impact is clearly very limited.

### **Its Forms**

For their part, the four groups constituting Canada's religious establishment - Roman Catholics, the United Church, Anglicans, and conservative Protestants - have been consciously and unconsciously responding to such market realities. Over time they have gradually enlarged and diversified their "religious menus." They commonly have added each other's "specialties." Social action has been as readily adopted by the conservative Protestants, as charismatic gifts have been adopted by Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

This diversification and enlargement of religious offerings has made it increasingly unnecessary for the affiliates of the established groups to turn elsewhere. Today's Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, and Conservative Protestant affiliate has the choice of being detached or involved, agnostic or evangelical, ascetic or socially concerned, unemotional or charismatic.

However, because infrequent and non-attenders have been mistakenly viewed as drop-outs who have been lost to their original groups, the churches have been slow to make changes in the ways they deliver their enlarged range of services. Instead of devising new methods of ministering to consumer-minded affiliates, the churches have continued to value the sheer regular appearance of people in their buildings as an end in itself. Much of their energies are consequently literally given to "bringing people to church."

In short, there is a serious lag between ministry forms and the Canadian religion reality. American Keith Miller's concern of two decades ago about Christianity's outdated "wineskins" remains highly applicable to present-day Canada.

The result is that old and new media forms, for example, that could be used to communicate with the increasing number of infrequent attenders, have been largely turned inward and used on the already-active. Religious newspapers, magazines and books, along with sermon cassettes, limited television and radio productions, and media campaigns are aimed primarily at those affiliates who are already committed. Similarly, new social forms such as small, informal study groups, including charismatic renewal varieties, have tended to be populated by the initiated, rather than functioning as social links to less active affiliates. Twentieth century Canadian religion, then, is characterized by stability, consumption, and compartmentalization, along with churches whose forms of ministry are in large part oblivious to the current religion reality.

## II. RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The current nature and role of religion in Canada, as I have already indicated, is hardly the product of chance. Modern industrialization has brought with it cultural transformations that have produced a specialized place for religion. Those changes have also created a milieu in which religious fragments are chosen over life-embracing religious systems, essentially because "they work" - because they are conducive to life, twentieth century-style.

In like manner, the shape and place of religion in the twenty-first century will largely depend on the nature of Canadian society. The complexities of that society as seen through the eyes of futurists cannot be adequately dealt with here.<sup>1</sup> However, social forecasters do agree on two central features of twenty-first century life - the acceleration of both available information and technological advance. These two developments, in turn, will intensify specialization at both the institutional and role levels. Religion will feel the consequences.

### Its Nature

Much has been written about "the global village" produced by communication and transportation advances. Almost twenty years, futurist John McHale 1969:12 wrote:

*...we are now in a period when many people think casually in terms of the whole earth. The planet is accepted as naturally as was the earlier conceptual extensions of childhood area, hometown, region, or country.*

Yet, Naisbitt 1984:259ff observes that in the United States, for example, people nonetheless place value on identification characteristics, such as region, ethnicity, and religion. Toffler 1983:161 likewise sees a shift toward "a far greater variety of identifications and groupings."

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<sup>1</sup> For excellent reviews of literary and social science futurists, see McHale, 1969:241-264 and Toffler, 1983:196-198.

Religiously-speaking, Canadians follow the identification pattern, but not by turning to new groups. On the contrary, they show no sign of abandoning their age-old religious affiliations. Those affiliations are tied to social identity and are instilled relatively early. It's not just a matter that adults continue to wear affiliative labels. The 1984 survey of the nation's 15 to 19 year-olds has found that almost 90% also claim a religious group tie. That figure is not likely to decline as this teen cohort, and in turn, their offspring, move into the twenty-first century.

What can be projected with a high degree of confidence is an ongoing drop-off in weekly church attendance. The most notable determinant of adult attendance is parental and church socialization in childhood. Indicative of the ongoing decline of both is the fact that the regular attendance levels of adults and school-age children have decreased from two-thirds to one-third over the last half of this century. Further, there is no support for the assertion that young people who cease to be weekly church-goers during their teenage years make a comparable return to regular attendance in their 20's and 30's. Some do, but most do not.

Together, these findings suggest that, if similar attrition sources to those of the 1950's, 60's, 70's are encountered by present-day Canadians, the drop of two-thirds to one-third between 1945 and 1985 could be followed by a drop from one-third to one-sixth by about the year 2025. Significantly, at present, the percentage of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 29 who attend services weekly stands at about 16%. Further, regular attendance could reach 8% by 2065, and 4% by the year 2100.

Similarly, analyses by age cohort reveal that the consumption of belief, practice, and service fragments - versus identifiable Christian commitment - is considerably more prevalent among younger Canadians than others.

The twenty-first century, then, should see ongoing identification with Canada's dominant Christian religious groups, yet a style of religion characterized by consumption rather than commitment.

### **Its Role**

In contrast to Freud, American observers Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge appear to have strong empirical support for their assertion that humans continue to raise questions pertaining to the meaning of existence and death that, by definition, call for non-naturalistic answers. An Orwellian world where "God is Power" and where there is "no more curiosity" (Orwell, 1966:273) has yet to be realized. Religion's role extends beyond merely "consoling" and "compensating," offering hope" and "promoting charity," and therefore cannot, as in *Brave New World*, be readily replaced by a "soma"-like drug (Huxley, 1958:69). Marilyn Ferguson 1980:361ff has argued in *The Aquarian Conspiracy* that a major spiritual shift is occurring, characterized by a desire for personal spirituality over against traditional religious involvement. Italian thinker, Aurelio Peccei 1981:25, reflecting on the world as a whole, has recently written:

*...humanity, although the prisoner of materialistic motivations, has a profound need for spirituality. It is a visceral need. We humans feel that we are living in a dangerous void, that we must restore communion with spheres that transcend those motivations.*

Canadian national data for both adults and teenagers reveal no decline in the inclination to raise these so-called "ultimate questions" concerning life and death. As long as such questions are asked, and as long as the limits of scientific answers more generally are felt, a market for non-naturalistic, "a-science" explanations of reality will exist.

Accordingly, "a-science" expressions, including religion, seem guaranteed an ongoing explanatory role in the twenty-first century. Given such a market, proponents of an ever-growing number of "products" of what some have called "consumer cults" should be evident. These entrepreneurs can be expected to increase the size of the a-science market by working hard to legitimize their "products." Because of the profit potential, aggressive promotion through the varied available means of mass marketing can be anticipated.

But because of the specialized nature of Canadian life, a-science rivals of religion will probably fare no better than Christianity in becoming more than fragment additions to people's lives. While in some instances they may be resisted and strongly opposed, for the most part one would expect that they will either be ignored or allowed to join the wide variety of non-naturalistic beliefs and practices already supplementing the dominant Christian varieties. The desire for churches to perform rites of passage surrounding birth, puberty, marriage, and death should ensure the a-science supremacy of the existing religious establishment well into the twenty-first century. The 1985 national survey, for example, has found that over 70% of Canadians have had weddings performed for them by the Church, while another 20% - understandably mostly younger Canadians - anticipate the need for such services in the future. In the case of funerals, the past figure is 50%, the anticipated figure 45%.

As for their national and personal influence, the churches can be expected to follow their late twentieth century pattern of officially speaking out on an array of matters, yet having limited impact at the individual level. Canada, like the United States and other highly advanced nations, is increasingly, an "information society." In Naisbitt's (1984:7) words, "we have systematized the production of knowledge and amplified our brainpower. ...we now mass-produce knowledge." The major problem is that the churches represent but one small voice in this information explosion. They have difficulty being heard, being taken as authoritative, and offering something to culture that culture is not already saying to itself.

It may well be, however that, following the prototype of sexuality input success, the churches will attempt to specialize in offering more high-profile ethical and moral viewpoints on developments in a wide variety of Canadian spheres. Beyond the Roman Catholic, United, and Anglican churches, even the evangelical Protestants have been more bold recently - through the National Evangelical Fellowship of Canada - in taking positions on social, economic, and political issues. This general pattern should only continue in the next century.

### **Its Forms**

The twenty-first century should see the country's "Big Four" religious groups continue to diversify their offerings in their conscious and often unconscious efforts to meet the varied product demands of their consumer-minded affiliates.

At the same time, the extremities of this item range can be expected to create increasing tension between advocates of some emphases and others. Thus, the ability to diversify and thereby subsume variant interests - an integrative feature in the twentieth century - may, because of its cumulative nature, become a liability in the twenty-first century. Ongoing product diversity can therefore be expected to be associated with increasing sectarianism. Movements like the United Church Renewal Fellowship, which tried to reform the United Church from within in this century, may well evolve into breakaway groups in the future.

The churches' twentieth century insistence on delivering services in their own buildings should be increasingly challenged as regular attendance continues to decline in the twenty-first century. Dwindling attendance, along with the ongoing desire for rites of passage, should result in gradual changes in building site placement and architecture. Neighbourhood structures will probably give way to regional facilities,

close to major transportation arteries and capable of servicing a large number of geographically-dispersed people. Architecture and personal resources may well be increasingly cognizant of the central role of rites of passage performances.

To the extent the churches can rise above the age-old inclination to equate the sheer appearance of people appearance in their buildings with ministry success, they will have the opportunity of communicating more effectively with their large number of infrequently- attending affiliates.

When they do, they will have a wide range of possibilities at their disposal. John Naisbitt (1984:37) has written that

*We show no signs of lessening the pace with which we introduce even more technology into our society - and into our homes. The appropriate response to more technology is not to stop it...but to accommodate it, respond to it, and shape it.*

The computer specifically, as astronomy and geophysicist Walter Roberts (1969:80) points out, is not a new intruder to be feared, but a resource to be tapped:

*The computer won't be in charge. Like the TV set, the book, and the screwdriver, the computer will remain but a tool for us to use as we will. But the computer of the future will be a tool of unprecedented power. ...It will be a liberating force, if we choose to make it so.*

The cooptation of technology has the potential to dramatically alter both the nature and effectiveness of ministry. Current computer information storage capabilities makes it possible for the churches to keep local, regional, and national records of their affiliates, with unprecedented efficiency.

With their constituents more accurately identified, the churches will be in a position to draw upon new and emerging communication forms. Print, sound, and visual media will be at their disposal. It is conceivable, for example, that clergy visitation in the twenty-first century commonly will be via the so-called "picturephone" (see, for example, McHale, 1969:101). However, Naisbitt 1984:42, for one, questions how satisfactory such a medium will be: "Talking with people via television," he writes, "cannot begin to substitute for the high touch of a meeting...." Naisbitt 1984:19 also sees the day when newspapers "will offer self-selected stocks printed out by individual order each afternoon on individual home computers" as common as today's telephone. In like manner, it may well be that home computers will be a vital future link between the churches and their affiliates.

To be effective, of course, information systems will have to be put to imaginative and creative use, or these media forms will fail to so much as reach the eyes and ears of affiliates, let alone contend with the next hurdle of being interpreted as significant information sources. One communications expert puts it this way:

*The overwhelming lesson of mass communication is that people will accept it only on their own terms. The opportunity of mass communication is technological. The challenge...is that of effectively adapting it to human beings (Pierce, 1968:53).*

## CONCLUSION

The nature, role, and forms of Canadian religion in this century and the next are hardly unique to this country. The industrialization and post-industrialization sources that shape religion in Canada are familiar to many other countries. Consequently, the stability-consumption-compartmentalization pattern should be no less familiar in those settings as well.

Contrary to the prophecies of Freud, "the illusion" does have a future. But there is good reason to believe that religions will be so highly specialized subjective as to be extremely abridged versions of the life-embracing systems envisioned by their founders.

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