

Canada's Data-less Debate About Religion

The Precarious Role of Research in Identifying Implicit and Explicit Religion

by

Reginald W. Bibby
Board of Governors Research Chair in Sociology
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta Canada T1K 3M4
bibby@uleth.ca
www.reginaldbibby.com

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Canadian Society for the Study of Religion
Vancouver – June 2008

*This is a revision of a paper presented at the Denton Conference on Implicit Religion, Ilkley, England - May 2007.
The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Louisville Institute and the Lilly Endowment,
for funding that made the surveys on which this paper is based possible.*

ABSTRACT

Scholars interested in the study of implicit religion often appear to work from the assumption that traditional forms of organized religion have become less pervasive, but that less visible and important religious expressions nonetheless persist. The argument has been particularly pertinent when observers have tried to understand what happens to religion in settings where secularization seems apparent. A somewhat different pattern also warrants examination – where fairly overt or explicit expressions of religion are minimized by individuals and institutions, and defined as “implicit” even though the facts suggest otherwise. In this paper, the author shows how organized religion in Canada has known relative health since at the least the mid-1980s, complete with significant public participation. However, despite the data at hand, the media and most academics have held unwaveringly to a secularization framework, depicting participation in organized religion as being in an ongoing free-fall, with the prevalent message one of decline and insignificance. A considerable gap has consequently come to exist between public perception and reality. The result is that objectively explicit religion has been relegated by meaning-makers to implicit religion – where it is depicted as embraced by diminishing numbers and largely irrelevant to public life and discourse. The author concludes with a discussion of the implications of this “Canadian case study” of perception and deception for an understanding of religious developments elsewhere.

Introduction

Concepts such as “implicit religion,” “invisible religion,” and “privatized religion” are interesting in that, on the surface at least, they seem to be antithetical to science. Proponents of such ideas appear to be arguing that *something that is not readily visible nonetheless exists* – not exactly in keeping with good, hard-nosed, empirically based science.

An intriguing variation on such seemingly precarious takes on religion is one where people minimize readily observable data and maintain that *something that is readily visible nonetheless does not exist*. In the implicit religion instance, the claim is that unrecognized religion exists; in this second instance, the claim is that recognizable religion does not exist.

Both assertions lead to the blunt question: “Do data matter?” When we are specifically attempting to understand religion and religious trends, do we suspend the rules of science? In a more general sense, is our consensual reality simply based on perception, which may or may not have a sound empirical foundation? If that’s the case, then the battle for the mind is one that centres on a battle for perception. Here the so-called “facts” are only one resource in the construction of reality – and not even necessarily among the more important resources. Ideology and theology, for example, may be far more salient sources.

With such considerations in mind, I want to look briefly at the case for the existence of unrecognized religion and the case for the non-existence of recognizable religion.

The Existence of Unrecognized Religion

Arguments for the persistence of “less overt” forms of religion are primarily a response to the reality of secularization. As everyone is well aware, secularization, in its simplest form, refers to the decline in the influence of organized religion. The argument dates back to at least Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, who were joined in the latter part of the twentieth century by highly influential observers such as Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, Peter Berger, Karel Dobbelaere, and Steve Bruce. Dobbelaere (1981, 2002) has offered a helpful clarification of the concept in pointing out that it tends to have three major dimensions – institutional, personal, and organizational. By the 1980’s and ’90s, all three dimensions of secularization were generally recognized to characterize much of Protestant Europe and Canada. The United States appeared to be something of an anomaly.

The secularization thesis has been widely contested. In recent years, it has been challenged by market-oriented critics, notably Rodney Stark and his associates. They have seen the thesis as flawed because it fails to give adequate attention to ongoing religious demands that call for innovative organizational responses (see, for example, Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Finke and Stark 1992, Stark and Finke 2000; for a critique of Stark and Finke 2000, see Bruce 2001).

Privatized, Invisible, and Implicit Religion

But since at least the 1960s, a number of people have maintained that, in the midst of secularization, religion persists. They concede that secularization is readily evident in most highly developed societies, and acknowledge that religion has lost much of its societal influence. Yet, at the level of the individual and often in less obvious ways than in the past, religion, they say, remains significant.

Talcott Parsons (1964), for example, maintained that, even when participation in conventional forms of religion dissipates, religion continues to take on less public, privatized forms. Other observers, including Thomas Luckmann (1967) and Edward I. Bailey (1997), have argued that, because of the integrative function that religion performs in the lives of individuals, it will persist in less visible and less explicit ways. Accordingly, Luckmann suggested to the author in the early 1980s that individuals develop systems of meaning that run like thread through the various sectors of one's life, giving it coherence (Bibby 1987:41).

In coining the term "implicit religion," Bailey (1998:235) pointed out that the concept opens up the possibility of discovering the sacred and the holy within what conventionally might be seen as the secular, irreligious sphere. People who have pursued the idea of implicit religion have explored its presence in such varied places as literature, psychology, technology, medicine, law, acting, dreams, football, human rights, raves, venerated scholars and celebrities, childhood, justice, love, fun, and film (see, for example, *Implicit Religion* and Bailey 2002).

To be fair, researchers who have followed the lead of Bailey, for example, obviously have made an effort to explore the latent presence of religion using empirical methods. Major critics of such efforts, however, would include individuals who are wary of functional definitions of religion. Peter Berger (1965), for example, has been among those who have maintained for some time that empirical explorations based on functional definitions of religion suffer from a basic problem: the process is highly tautological. One defines religion in functional terms, then finds functional expressions of what has been defined, and proceeds to claim evidence for the presence and influence of religion.

If, for example, one follows Luckmann and defines "invisible religion" as some thread-like theme that is woven through the various parts of one's life, one's observation that family life plays such a role results in the circular conclusion that family life is one's "invisible religion." The same is true when someone like Hal French looks at Americans following U.S. pro football and sees them engaging in implicit religion (French in Bailey 2002). Such functional conceptions of religion, Berger (1974:129) suggests, have little value in separating the phenomenon of religion from endless other things. If religion is everything, he says, then it really is nothing, because the near-endless referents – to use his phrase – begin to "look like grey cats on a dark night."

Another criticism that can be directed at those who argue for the existence of unrecognized religion is that advocates are simply refusing to accept what is empirically obvious: religion has been becoming less and less important, socially and individually. The allegation, to paraphrase Durkheim's (1912) description of religion's response to science, is that such individuals are retreating but are not surrendering. Or, to use Freud's (1927) phrase, they, like people sympathetic with religion, are "defending a lost cause."

Spirituality

However, those who have raised the possibility that religious expressions persist in the midst of apparent secularization may well have been vindicated by an important empirical reality. In recent years, extensive academic research and media explorations in settings such as Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand have shown that spiritual interests and needs are extremely common, apart from what is taking place with religious organizations (see, for example, Bibby 2006; Rolheiser 1999; Roof 1999). At the same time, there is considerable evidence that some elements of spiritual quest are being met through links, however fragile, to religious groups. They include select beliefs, practices, and rites of passage, along with family and friendship ties.

The persistence of such pervasive spiritual longings and the wide variety of highly personal ways in which they are being addressed has confirmed that, at least at the level of the individual, the extent of secularization has been grossly exaggerated. Religion persists in the lives of individuals, well beyond their active participation in religious groups. The empirical question is what kinds of forms and expressions such religions take – leaving the door open for the study of privatized, invisible, and implicit possibilities.

In the end – or at least so far – a concept such as implicit religion, writes Roger O'Toole (1993:157-158) may "continue to repel those who identify vagueness solely with vacuousness." Nevertheless, he argues, "Implicit religion has emerged as a crude but useful 'catch-all' device for exploring 'religious' phenomena in contexts far removed from mainstream Christian organizations and well beyond the realms of the traditional world religions."

The Non-Existence of Recognizable Religion

But the debate between advocates of secularization and those who argue for religion's persistence does not only result in claims that the invisible exists. The debate can also take the form of the readily visible being largely ignored or trivialized by key information sources, led by the media and academics. The result is that the dominant societal perception is that religious commitment is not pervasive, when in fact it is. Here the visible is treated as if it were invisible, the explicit relegated to the realm of the implicit. And the committed see themselves as constituting a minority.

In the early years of the new century, such a situation, I believe, exists in Canada.

Evidence of Secularization

It is widely believed that Canada is now a highly secularized country with the argument focusing primarily on the institutional and individual dimensions of secularization. Such pervasive perception among academics is summed up in the title of a paper by respected American historian, Mark Noll, that was published in *Church History* in 2006: "*What happened to Christian Canada?*" In his introduction, Noll (2006:245) writes, "I begin with an assumption that there once was a Christian Canada which is now gone." Similar sentiments were expressed by highly respected Canadian religious historian John Webster two decades earlier. "The unofficial establishment of Christianity," he wrote, "is little more than a memory. ...the life of the nation proceeds almost as if [the churches] did not exist" Grant [1988:241].

Observers such as Noll and Grant and, in Quebec, people like sociologist Jean-Paul Rouleau (1977) and journalist Ron Graham (1990) have emphasized the increasingly specialized and limited roles that religious groups play in life. Such specialization is seen as being in sharp contrast to the pre-1960s when the Catholic Church influenced virtually all of life in Quebec, and the Protestant Mainline in particular exerted considerable social influence in the rest of the country. As far back as the mid-1980s, the Anglican Archbishop of Toronto, Lewis Garnworthy (1984), made this observation:

...we survive – great at Coronations, charming at weddings and impressive at funerals as long as we don't eulogize. We are welcome mascots at family do's and offer respectability to the Christmas cocktail circuit. We grace any community as long as we stay out of social issues and do not change a jot or tittle of well worn liturgy.

Proponents of secularization also give considerable attention to the decline in church attendance as an indicator of the decline of religious commitment among individuals. The starting place for documenting such an attendance drop-off is the first national survey on record that examined service attendance, a poll carried out by the Gallup organization in 1945. According to the reputable pollster, no less than 65% of Canadians over the age of 21 indicated

that they had attended a religious service in a three-week period after Easter. Gallup noted that a comparable poll in the United States spanning four week after Easter had found the American figure to be lower at 58% (Gallup 1945). In Quebec, some 90% of those interviewed claimed they had attended a service during the three-week period.

Over the last half of the twentieth century, Gallup asked Canadians almost annually if they had attended a religious service in a previous seven-day period. During the five decades, national weekly-plus attendance declined from about 60% to 30%; the attendance drop-off was in the vicinity of 90% to 40% for Roman Catholics and 65% to 35% for Protestants.

There also has been an increase in the inclination of Canadians to report that they have “no religion.” In 1961, less than 1% of the population offered such a response. In 1971, when the federal census takers, for the first time, literally took “no” for an answer, 4% of “religious nones” were uncovered. By 1981 the figure had increased to 7% and at the turn of century had increased further to 16%.

Available data reveal that, between 1975 and 2005, monthly-plus attendance fell from around 40% to 35%. The Protestant drop-off was minor during the period; in fact, the proportion of regular attenders among people identifying with evangelical groups actually increased. The primary reason for the decline was the large decline in monthly-plus attendance among Quebec Catholics – from about 50% in 1975 to some 40% by 1995.

Such trend findings seemingly lend strong support to the growing secularization of Canada and Canadians in the post-1950s.

Table 1. Service Attendance of Protestants and Catholics, 1945-1995

“Did you yourself happen to go to church or synagogue in the last seven days?”

| | 1945* | 1956 | 1965 | 1975 | 1985 | 1995 |
|-----------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| NATIONALLY | 60% | 61 | 55 | 41 | 35 | 32 |
| Roman Catholics | 90 | 87 | 83 | 61 | 43 | 40 |
| Protestants | 65 | 43 | 32 | 25 | 27 | 32 |

Source: Gallup Canada. *Estimated from available data.

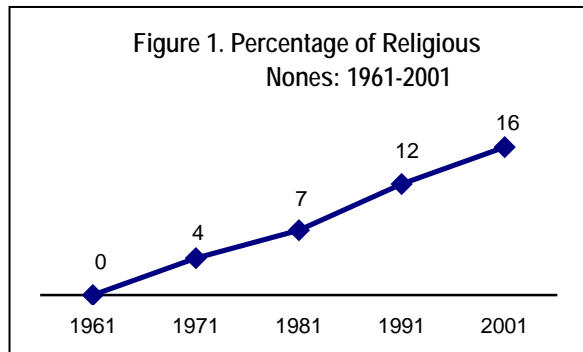



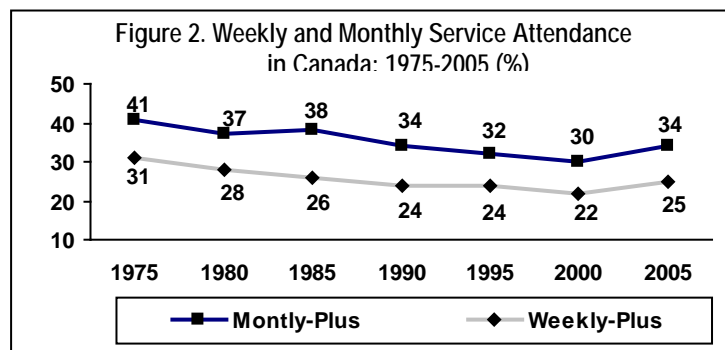
Table 2. Monthly-Plus Attendance by Religion and Region: 1975-1995

| | 1975 | 1985 | 1995 |
|--|------|------|------|
|  Protestants | 41% | 38 | 34 |
| Conservative | 37 | 37 | 35 |
| Mainline | 55 | 67 | 70 |
| Catholics | 34 | 33 | 26 |
| Outside Quebec | 56 | 49 | 45 |
| Quebec | 62 | 55 | 53 |
| | 51 | 43 | 39 |

Evidence of Revitalization

Attendance. However, around the turn of the century, the unexpected happened. Regular attendance among teenagers had dropped from 23% in 1984 to 18% in 1992, but rebounded to 22% in 2000. Among young adults, weekly attendance that had been in ongoing decline since the 1960s levelled off the 1990s and, in the case of some groups, increased. And when people in the pews were asked for their perception of developments, they corroborated the survey “aerial photographs” by acknowledging that many of their congregations had experienced growth in the late 1990s (Bibby 2002:72-91).

In the early years of the new century, such cohort and congregational developments are showing signs of being reflected in overall national attendance figures. Weekly-plus attendance has been essentially level at about 20-25% since the mid-80s. Monthly-plus attendance – perhaps a better measure of regular attendance for time-pressed Canadians – is now similar to what it was around 1990 at close to 35%, very close to what it was in the early 1980s.



Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*, 2006:201.

In short, a cursory look at attendance patterns reveals that current levels are only slightly down from what they were in the early 1980s and have not changed very much since around 1990. Protestant attendance, led by evangelical Protestants, is up; Catholic attendance outside Quebec has levelled off. Consequently the national level has stabilized.

Identification. What has not been in doubt throughout the apparent decline in attendance is the inclination of Canadians to continue to identify with religious groups, primarily groups that are Christian in nature. Roman Catholics have known a large a stable numerical monopoly dating back to the first national census in 1871. Mainline Protestants – largely because of low birth rates and the loss of their immigration pipeline from Western Europe – have shrunk considerably. Evangelical Protestants have remained proportionately stable, while Other World Faiths have grown slightly. As noted earlier, there has been a jump since the 1960s in the proportion of people who say they have no religion.

Table 3. Religious Identification of Canadians, 1871-2001

| Identification | 1871 | 1951 | 2001 |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|
| Roman Catholic | 42% | 43 | 43 |
| Mainline Protestant* | 41 | 44 | 20 |
| Conservative Protestants | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| Other World Faiths | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| Other/unspecified | 7 | 2 | 7 |
| No Religion | <1 | <1 | 16 |

Source: Derived from Statistics Canada census.
*United, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian

On the surface, the growth in the “no religion” category would seem to point to increasing numbers of Canadians rejecting religion. But a closer look suggests such a conclusion might be premature.

- The latest, 2001 census shows that people who say they have “no religion” continue to be disproportionately young: 75% are under 45, 40% under 25. In fact, about 25% are actually children under 15 whose parents have reported their “no religion” status for them.
- Our recent national surveys have found that 2005 survey reveals that about one in three have come from homes where their parents likewise did not identify with any group or tradition. Another one in three have had had Roman Catholic parents, while most of the remainder have Protestant backgrounds, led by Mainliners.
- In following people with no religion over time, we have found that, within any given five-year period, about one in three of them “re-identify” with their parents’ religion; within ten years, the figure increases to two in three. The primary reason is the desire for religious rites of passage relating to marriage, birth, and death.
- Further, the research shows that, when that when people with no religion marry a partner who identifies with a religion, the long-term pattern is for the “Religious Nones” to become “religious somethings.” If they don’t, then the pattern is for their children to be raised in the religion of their partner.


Of course there are exceptions. Clearly some individuals do not subscribe to any religion. Nevertheless, they constitute a minority. For most people, the self-designation of “no religion” tends to be short-lived (Bibby 2006:200-201).

Social Engagement. Statistics Canada, the data-gathering arm of the federal government, released two reports in 2004 that helped to clarify the relative importance of religious groups in Canadian lives. The first was based on close to 25,000 interviews with adults and focused on social engagement. The second looked not at individuals but rather at some 13,000 non-profit and voluntary organizations.

The social engagement survey found there is no single activity in which more Canadians are involved than religious groups activity (30%). It ranks marginally ahead of participation in sports and recreational groups (29%), followed by union or professional group activities (25%). Involvement in school (17%), service (8%), and political groups (5%) lags far behind (Statistics Canada 2004a).

The survey of 13,000 organizations was intended to permit generalizations to the population of all non-profit and voluntary organizations – some 160,000 in all. It found that, by far, “the two largest groups of organizations operate in the area of sports and recreation (21%) and religion (19%).” Arts and culture groups, for example, make up only 9% of all organizations, education and research 5%, health and hospitals just 4% (Statistics Canada 2004b). Projected to the population of non-profit and voluntary organizations in Canada, it means that something in the vicinity of 30,000 religious organizations are operating across the country.

Receptivity. The widespread stereotype that people who are not involved in religious groups are not interested in greater involvement has been dispelled by the Project Canada surveys dating back to the mid-1990s. The latest, 2005 national survey found that 62% of Canadians who attend services less than once a month say they would be willing “to consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious group” if they “found it to be worthwhile” for themselves or their families. Receptivity is fairly even across age, gender, and employment categories, and characterizes a majority of people in every region. However, the important asterisk is that they have to find their involvement to be worthwhile. Asked what they would consider “worthwhile,” they give primacy to the addressing of spiritual, personal, and relational needs (Bibby 2006:202-203).

| | |
|---|-----|
|  | 62% |
| Boomers (40-59) | 64 |
| Younger Adults (18-39) | 64 |
| Older adults (60-plus) | 54 |
| Women | 65 |
| Men | 60 |

Together, these findings on religion in Canada can be summed up as follows.

- There are some 30,000 religious organizations in place – second by a small margin only to the number found in the sports and recreation sector.
- They have more participants than any other kind of organization – even pushing sports and recreation into second place.
- They have a core of 25% of the national population who attend their services every week, 35% every month, and about 45% in a six-month period.
- A total of 84% of the population continues to identify with the traditions they represent.
- Two in three people who are not highly involved are open to greater involvement if they can find that religious groups touch their lives in significant ways.

If that adds up to a bleak situation, one has to wonder what the Golden Age of religion in Canada must have looked like (Bibby 2006:194).

Mind Over Matter – or Dogma Over Data

Canada's national media have continued to tell the secularization story, virtually ignoring the relative health, let alone the resilience and possible embryonic resurgence, of organized religion. Any number of religion articles and stories in recent years readily show "the take" that Canada's major media outlets have on organized religion.

- Belief in God in Canada has remained at over 80% since polling began in the 1950s. Yet, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country, the **Toronto Star**, ran a May **2003** story with the headline, "Atheism growing across Canada." The generalization was based on the release of census data revealing that the percentage of Canadians who say they have no religion had increased from 12% to 16%.
- In a cover story in November of **2003**, **Time** magazine informed Canadians that "Canada is no longer a nation of churchgoers. Attendance at religious institutions is in decline" (Catto 2003). The main article made no reference to one of its own accompanying tables that claimed weekly attendance was at 27% – preferring to use a 21% figure from another survey carried out two years earlier.
- In June of **2004**, a poll by Environics Research found that 50% of Canadians agreed with the statement, "Our society would be better off if people attended church or other religious services more regularly" (CRIC 2004)." Prominent **Globe and Mail** religion writer and secularization proponent, Michael Valpy (2004), summarized the survey results this way: "Canada is bounding along the road toward a secular society, with half the adult population now of the opinion that more regular attendance at religious services would be of no benefit to Canadian society." This was at a time when national weekly attendance was being reported as around 20%.
- In releasing the results of its social engagement survey in July of **2004**, **Statistics Canada** (2004a) indicated that 29% of Canadians were involved in sports and recreational groups and 17% in religious groups. However, astonishingly, the 17% referred only to people involved in specific activities "such as a choir or youth group" and did not include "membership in the respondent's church or religion itself" – despite the fact the survey had found that 30% of Canadians 15 and over attend services at least once a month. Accordingly, in publishing the survey results, a newspaper such as the **Globe and Mail** (Muhtadie 2004) reported that "Most Canadians belong to at least one group or organization, with sports and recreational leagues being the most common and religious groups among the least."
- Over the Christmas season in **2006**, one of Canada's two national newspapers, the **National Post**, ran a weeklong series of articles on the state of Christianity in the country. The lead-in to each of the articles started with the line, "With interest in spirituality on the rise and church attendance in freefall..." (Brean 2006). No data were provided to document the alleged "freefall." Actually, the paper used my most recent findings on beliefs and spirituality – but took a pass on my findings showing a post-90s increase in attendance.
- Around the same time, a widely used article produced by the national news service, **Canadian Press**, announced that, in **2006**, "Pastors and priests face ever more empty pews" (Shackleton 2005). The documentation consisted of observations from select opinion leaders, including best-selling critic of Christian churches, theology, and

scriptural interpretation, Tom Harpur. In a column of his own, Harpur (2003) has written, "The current decline [in church attendance] is a drop in the bucket compared with what's coming. ...all is far from well in Canada's churches. It's the role of false prophecy to cry otherwise."

- In mid-April of **2007**, Canada's premier national magazine, ***Maclean's***, raised the question, "Is God Poison?" (Bethune 2007:39). The author of the article pointed out that in the aftermath of 9/11, which he says "so brutally demonstrated that religious fanaticism is still a force to be reckoned with," a steady stream of best-selling books by atheists including Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Michel Onfray, and Christopher Hitchens. They predictably have been met with enthusiasm by defenders of theism (see, for example, McGrath and McGrath, 2007; Chopra, 2006). On July 1, 2006, the same magazine featured varied findings from my national surveys in a cover story entitled, "How Canadian are you?" In November of 2006 I suggested to the editor and key religion writer – the same person who wrote "the poison" article – that they consider doing a feature on what I described as "the untold story of the health of organized religion in Canada." They passed.
- During the period spanning the Thursday before Easter in **2007** through the Monday after, the country's number one national newspaper, the ***Globe and Mail***, ran 44 items that included the word "Easter." During the five-day period, only seven had a religious theme with only one what could be described as a positive and current portrayal of faith – the Pope's Easter mass in Rome. The dearth of religious material in the paper was all the more puzzling in light of the results of its own on-line poll conducted over Easter. The paper asked the question, "Does the Easter holiday hold religious meaning for you or is it just another day off?" Some 4,000 of the paper's readers responded – and no less than 80% said it holds religious meaning.
- On Easter Sunday, **2007**, the most-watched evening news program on national television, ***CTV News***, featured only one religious item – the Pope's mass in Rome. No Canadian angle or Canadian content was included.
- Easter, 2008, fared little better. Both the ***Globe and Mail*** and ***Maclean's*** used the occasion to highlight a new book by Toronto United Church minister and progressive Christianity advocate Gretta Vosper (2008) questioning the importance of Christians believing in the divinity of Christ.
- In between, the Valpy's ***Globe and Mail*** pre-Christmas story for **2007** carried the title, "Churches come tumbling down," citing declining attendance and concluding, "Canadian Christendom is destined for history's sunset" (Valpy, 2007).
- When Pope Benedict visited Washington, Boston and New York over six days in late April of **2008**, the ***Globe and Mail***, despite allegedly being Canada's national paper to more than 14 million Catholics, didn't dispatch their primary religion reporter (Michael Valpy) to file stories. The paper relied instead on feeds from American sources. Incidentally, the paper sends a reporter to cover the baseball Blue Jays when they make routine road trips to places like Boston and New York; about 2 million Canadians follow the Jays – a fraction of the Pope's fan base.

- And on May 31 (2008), **Canadian Press** released a poll indicating that “fewer than three-quarters of Canadians believe in a god.” The poll was based on a dichotomous response to the question. My own research suggests that had the item simply been expanded to include “or Supreme Power,” the “Yes” figure of 72% (76% with non-responses excluded) may have increased by as many as 15 percentage points. But equally important, response options that allow for some ambivalence either way (e.g., “Yes, definitely,” “Yes, I think so,” “No, I don’t think so,” “No, definitely not”) would have yielded results similar to what we found when we used those options in 2005 – 49%, 33%, 11%, and 7% respectively. The latter figure for clear-cut atheism has changed very little since the mid-1970s.

This brings me back to the question of why the visible is treated as invisible – why positive signs of religion’s health in a country such as Canada are seemingly downplayed or ignored altogether. In the Canadian instance, what’s apparent is that the secularization perspective is widely held, complete with the belief that organized religion is largely a thing of the past. Once in place, such an outlook is extremely difficult to penetrate.

In recent years, Peter Berger (1999:9-11) has acknowledged that, contrary what he once believed, “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions,” he says, “is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”

In addressing the question as to why the secularization thesis continues to be propounded, despite evidence that fails to support it, Berger maintains that there are two exceptions to “the desecularization thesis.” The first is geographical – Western Europe. The second is a subculture of people, especially individuals in the humanities and social sciences. “While its members are relatively thin on the ground,” he says of the subculture, “they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality” notably, education, the media, and the legal system. “What we have here is a globalized *elite* culture,” writes Berger, who can easily fall into the misconception that their views about religion reflect those of their respective populaces. This, he says, is “of course... a big mistake.”

Observers who were trying to make sense of the Canadian religious scene from the 1960s through the end of the 1990s invariably bought into the applicability of the secularization argument. The national attendance drop-off that took place in the post-1960s seemed consistent with the thesis.

So why didn’t we find ourselves looking to the United States for some religious trend clues, given our extensive cultural interaction with the Americans? Why did we think we could learn more about ourselves by looking at London, Berlin, and Stockholm, rather than New York, Dallas, and Los Angeles? Why were we looking across the Atlantic instead of looking across the border?

The answer, I think, is quite simple. In the post-1960s, our social scientists were top-heavy with people who had been European-trained and European-influenced. They read Canada through secularization glasses. Often without good data in hand, they were jamming on the glass slipper, largely oblivious to some hints that it didn't really fit. People exposed to such academics in university and, I would add, theological and seminary classes, predictably came away wearing similar sets of glasses. As they moved into positions of influence as educators, journalists, lawyers, politicians, and clergy, they assumed that Canadians were becoming more and more secular. In the minds of most, spirituality and organized religion were largely things of the past for all but a dying generation of older folks.

To some extent, the secularization outlook has had a self-fulfilling effect. As leaders in various spheres wrote religion off as largely passé, they sometimes contributed to the creation of environments that made ministry more difficult. Such an outlook on religion also demoralized more than a few leaders and laity who, in the words of one Presbyterian minister, "had difficulty escaping the psychological shackles of a secularization mentality" (Bibby 2006:203-204).

Today, as organized religion shows signs of making something of a comeback, such a solidly engrained mindset of linear secularization is extremely difficult to alter. Once "everyone knows" that extensive involvement in organized religion is a thing of the past, an individual who provides evidence to the contrary is not taken seriously. In fact, one's motives may well be questioned and one's credibility damaged.

Here the person who brings data into the wrestling match with the secularization giant gains a new appreciation for those who have climbed into the ring with concepts like implicit religion. Whether one comes equipped with limited data or lots of data doesn't seem to matter. The giant is still in command.

Conclusion

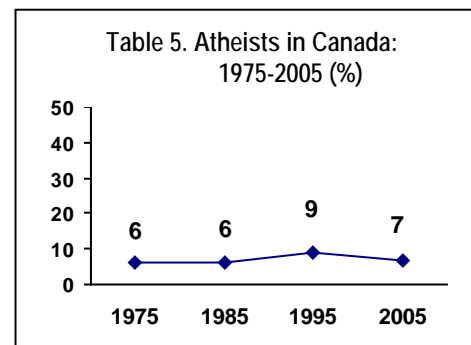
This takes me back to where I began and to a very basic but important theorem: reality is determined by a vote. Applied to religion and religious trends, it means that data are important, but only insofar as data are used as part of the process of constructing social reality. So it is that we can have religions that are invisible, and visible religions that go unnoticed.

Consequently, it is not just the advocate of a concept like implicit religion who faces an uphill battle. The same is true of an advocate of explicit religion who is located in a milieu where explicit religion is not in vogue with the dominant reality-makers. Such individuals are inclined to downplay religious activity, minimize its importance, treat it as practiced by a diminishing minority, and downgrade it to something that is private, personal, and implicit.

This also brings me back to the question the Canadian magazine raised: “Is God poison?” I don’t think the article was a conscious effort to undermine religion – although one does not have to be particularly astute to realize it wasn’t exactly good for the religion business. What the attention given the question does serve to illustrate is that pervasive ideas have social sources.

An old axiom in the social problems literature is that social movements create social problems (see, for example, Mauss 1975). Social problems never exist as self-evident, objective realities. On the contrary, conditions such as poverty or racism, child abuse or sexism have existed in many eras and many settings without being regarded as social problems. The conditions only become perceived as “problems” when groups are successful in convincing a significant number of people that they constitute problems. Such sales jobs in turn are highly dependent upon information sources, notably mass media, led by television, newspapers, books, and, these days, of course, the Internet.

In the early spring of 2007, a researcher for a prominent radio program on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation called. His basic question was this: “Who is interested in Dawkins’ book?” It’s an important question. The national surveys I have been carrying out every five years from 1975 through 2005 have shown that a maximum of 9% of Canadians at any point in the past thirty years have describe themselves as atheists. If that’s the case, who is buying the books?



Maybe people genuinely are raising questions about the merits of religion that resonate with a terrorist and conflict-conscious world. Maybe the books get the attention of the pro-religious majority and particularly the academic and clergy information leaders who feel a need to be current with what the opposition is saying.

But maybe the more important question is why is the media giving so much attention to the atheist authors? At minimum, all the media attention is a major reason for why the books are selling. The extensive media attention also can contribute to the perception that atheism is prominent well beyond its actual numbers.

Whether the dominant public response to the “Is God Poison?” question is “Yes” or “No” will not be based primarily on so-called facts – even if the facts could be identified. The response of the majority will depend on the extent to which some people convince others that religion is or is not a social problem. Perception is always precariously related to so-called “objective reality.”

As scientists, social and otherwise, we are left with a humbling reality. Ultimately, what comes to be viewed as visible or invisible, explicit or implicit, is dependent not on data but on consensus. At best we are allowed to be part of the reality-making process.

References

Avery, Timothy

- 2008 "One in four don't believe in a god." Canadian Press release that appeared in a large number of papers, including the *Toronto Star*," June 1.

Bailey, Edward I.

- 1997 *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*. Leuven: Peeters.
1998a *Implicit Religion: An Introduction*. London: Middlesex University.
1998b "Implicit Religion." P. 235 in William H. Swatos, Jr., Ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Bailey, Edward I. (ed.)

- 2002 *The Secular Quest for Meaning in Life: Denton Papers in Implicit Religion*. Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press.

Berger, Peter L.

- 1961 *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
1974 "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive Versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13:125-133.

Berger, Peter L. (ed.)

- 1999 *Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center/Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Bethune, Brian

- 2007 "Is God Poison?" *Maclean's*, April 16: 39-44.
2008 "The Jesus Problem." *Maclean's*, March 31: 38-42.

Bibby, Reginald W.

- 1987 *Fragmented Gods*. Toronto: Stoddart.
1993 *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart.
2002 *Restless Churches: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart.
2004 *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches Can Participate in the Emerging Religious Renaissance*. Ottawa: Novalis.
2006 *The Boomer Factor: What Canada's Most Famous Generation is Leaving Behind*. Toronto: Bastian Books.

Brean, Joseph

- 2006 "Church of Tough Love." *National Post*, December 23: A1.

Brierley, Peter

- 2006 *Pulling Out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing*. London: Christian Research.

Bruce, Steve

- 2001 "A Review of Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*." *First Things* (February): 35-37.
2002 *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell.
2005 "Secularization." In Robert Segal (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Catto, Susan
2003 "In Search of the Spiritual." *Time*, November 24:72-80.
- Chopra, Deepak
2006 "Debunking 'The God Delusion.'" www.intentblog.com. Seven parts, November-December.
- CRIC Research
2004 "Decline in Number of Canadians Who Believe Religious Practice is Important."
Centre for Research and Information on Canada. Kingston: Queen's University, September.
- Dawkins, Richard
2006 *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Dobbelaere, Karel
1981 "Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept." *Current Sociology* 29:201-216.
2002 *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels*. New York: Oxford.
- Durkheim, Emile
1965 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
Originally published in 1912.
- Finke, Roger L. and Rodney Stark
1992 *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- French, Hal W.
2002 "Religion and Football." In Edward I. Bailey (ed.). *The Secular Quest for Meaning in Life: Denton Papers in Implicit Religion*. Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Freud, Sigmund
1957 *The Future of An Illusion*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. Originally published in 1927.
- Gallup Poll of Canada
1945 "About One Third of Population Found Church Absentees by Poll." News service release,
May 12, 1945. Toronto: Canadian Institute of Public Opinion.
- Garnsworthy, Lewis S.
1984 *The Archbishop's Charge to the 132nd Synod*. Toronto: Anglican Diocese.
- Graham, Ron
1990 *God's Dominion: A Sceptic's Quest*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Harpur, Tom
2003 "Positive spin on religious stats unwarranted." *Toronto Star*, July 13, F7.
- Harris, Sam
2006 *Letter to a Christian Nation*. New York: Knopf.
- Hitchens, Christopher
2007 *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- The Denton Conferences on Implicit Religion
2008 Program for the 31st Conference on Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality,
Ilkley, England, May 9-11.
- Luckmann, Thomas
1966 *The Invisible Religion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mauss, Armand L. (ed.).
1975 *Social Problems as Social Movements*. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- McGrath, Alister and Joanne Coll McGrath
2007 *Dawkins Delusion*. London: SPCK Publishing.
- Muhtadie, Luma
2004 "Canadians trust more in police than parliament." *Globe and Mail*, July 6, 2004.

- Noll, Mark
2006 "What Happened to Christian Canada?" *Church History* 75:245-273.
- Onfray, Michel
2007 *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*. Translated by Jeremy Leggatt. New York: Arcade Publishing.
- O'Toole, Roger
1993 "In Quest of Hidden Gods in Canadian Literature." Pp. 157-172 in W.E. Hewitt (ed.). *The Sociology of Religion: A Canadian Focus*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Rolheiser, Ronald
1999 *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Roof, Wade Clark
1999 *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rouleau, Jean-Paul
1977 "Religion in Quebec: Present and Future." *Pro Mundi Vita: Dossiers* Nov-Dec, No. 3.
- Shackleton, Eric
2005 "Pastors and priests face ever more empty pews in 2006." CP Newswire story, December 20.
- Stark, Rodney
1999 "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60:249-273.
- Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge
1985 *The Future of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stark, Rodney and Charles Y. Glock
1968 *American Piety*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke
2000 *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Statistics Canada
2004a "General Social Survey: Social Engagement." *The Daily*, July 6.
2004b "National Survey of Non-profit and Voluntary Organizations." *The Daily*, September 20.
- Valpy, Michael
2004 "Canadians giving up on religion, poll finds." *Globe and Mail*, September 10, A:8.
2007 "Churches come tumbling down." *Globe and Mail*, December 22, A21.
2008 "Taking Christ out of Christianity." *Globe and Mail*, March 22, A3.
- Vosper, Gretta
2008 *With or Without God*. Toronto: Harper Collins.
- Wilson, Bryan
1966 *Religion in Secular Society*. London: C.A. Watts.
1982 *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. London: Oxford University Press.