

RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION IN CANADA:
A Major Empirical Update

by

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ABSTRACT

Since at least the 1960s, Canada has been experiencing considerable secularization, with the Protestant Mainline and Catholicism in Quebec experiencing debilitating declines in participation. The assumption has been that the process would continue in a fairly linear fashion, with religion increasingly relegated to the sidelines of Canadian life in the 21st century. However, the findings of a major new national survey of more than 3,000 people in 2015 add data to an alternative interpretation: polarization. Some 30% of Canadians say that they are embracing religion, 25% are rejecting it, with the remaining 45% reporting that they are somewhere in between the two poles. In this paper, the author re-examines the polarization thesis and examines many of the correlates of people embracing religion, rejecting religion, and opting for a “middle” position – in the process updating many of his earlier assertions in his 2011 book, *Beyond the Gods & Back*.

Introduction

Similar to many other countries in the western world, secularization seemed to sum up the Canadian religious situation well as the 20th century came to a close. Proponents of the thesis, dating back to such luminaries as Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and Freud, all saw religion as giving way to science as civilization evolved. More recently the argument had been echoed and updated by prominent sociologists, including Bryan Wilson, Karel Dobbelaere, and Steve Bruce. Significantly, all of these individuals have been Europeans.

This “old story” about religion is still the story that the media typically tell. In December of 2010, Michael Valpy and Joe Friesen (2010) expressed things this way in the introduction to a five-part *Toronto Globe and Mail* series on the future of faith in Canada: “What we’ve seen is a sea of change in 40 years, a march toward secularization that mirrors what’s happened in Europe.”

The Secularization Argument

As everyone here knows well, simply put, secularization refers to the decline in the influence of organized religion. While the line is not perfectly straight, it nonetheless is linear: secularization proceeds in a fairly relentless and non-reversible fashion.

Dobbelaere (1981), the Belgian sociologist, offered an important clarification of the concept in pointing out that it has at least three major dimensions – institutional, personal, and organizational. The spheres of life over which religion has authority decrease and its role becomes more and more specialized; religion has less and less of an impact on the daily lives of individuals – what Berger (1961) has referred to as “a secularization of consciousness”; and religious organizations themselves are increasingly influenced by society and culture in the way they operate – their goals, their means, their content, and the way they measure success, for example.

By the 1980s and 90s, all three dimensions of secularization were generally recognized to characterize at least much of Protestant Europe, as well as Canada.

The United States, as one of the world’s most advanced societies, appeared to be an important exception to the secularization rule. Such apparent anomaly, however, was readily explained away by many prominent observers, including Berger (1961) and Thomas Luckmann (1967).

They argued back in the early 1960s that, despite high levels of religious participation in America, secularization was already rampant. Their explanation was that it was taking the form of “secularization from within” rather than “secularization from without.” On the surface religion was flourishing; but if one looked more closely, they said, the structures and content of religion in the U.S. were being ravished by secularism. By way of one memorable illustration, Berger (1961) wrote that, when it came to values, “American Christians [held] the same values as anyone else – only with more emphatic solemnity.”

So it was that, even in the case of the United States, prominent observers of the religious scene, including Harvard’s influential Harvey Cox (1965), assumed that secularization was sweeping the country. Indicative of the pervasiveness of the explanation was the fact that, in 1968, even Rodney Stark used the framework when he coauthored the classic *American Piety*, with Charles Glock (1968).

The U.S. religious situation aside, the secularization thesis has been assumed to be applicable to Canada. Observers such as J-P. Rouleau (1977), Peter Beyer (1997), Kurt Bowen (2004), Mark Noll (2007), David Eagle (2011), and the duo of Lorne Dawson and Joel Thiessen (2013) have been among those who have maintained that Canada has experienced considerable secularization since the 1950s. Over the years, I myself certainly concurred, providing considerable documentation in support of the argument in *Fragmented Gods* (1987) and *Unknown Gods* (1993). There didn’t seem to be much more to say. Things appeared to be bad and getting worse for organized religion “up here.”

The Revitalization Argument

What makes life interesting, of course, is when the unexpected occurs. In 2000, a surprising finding emerged from our national youth survey – the third in a series that been carried out in 1984 and 1992. In 1984, we had found that some 23% of teenagers claimed to be attending services on approximately a weekly basis. In 1992, that figure dropped to 18%. When we did the 2000 youth survey, I expected that the teen attendance level would probably drop another five percentage points or so – to around 13%. It didn’t happen.

Instead, we found that the percentage of weekly attending teenagers rose to 21% – reaching essentially the same level as in 1984. Increases took place across all major religious groupings – Catholicism, Protestantism, and other world faiths, with the single exception of Roman Catholicism in Quebec, where attendance continued to drop off.

That surprising national finding resulted in my reflecting on a fairly radical possibility – that a modest resurgence in religious participation might be taking place in Canada. After people like Harvey Cox (1995:xv-xvi) and Peter Berger (1999:2) were acknowledging they had made an error in buying into secularization thinking, and underestimating religion’s resiliency. Maybe I had too.

Subsequent national surveys of adults carried out both by myself and our national data gathering agency, Statistics Canada, led me to conclude that the overall findings suggested “some important new developments are taking place – that there is something of a renaissance of organized religion in Canada” (Bibby 2002:90). Whether or not it continued seemed to be highly dependent on how the dominant existing religious groups responded to readily apparent consumer demand.

Here my thinking was influenced considerably by Rodney Stark.

Stark’s Challenging of Secularization

As everyone here knows well, in the early 1980s, Stark took on the secularization school of thought by posing a fairly simple but creative and provocative argument. It has been variously described as a market model and as rational choice theory.

Put very succinctly, Stark – in collaboration with key associates William Bainbridge (1985), Roger Finke (1992, 2000), and Laurence Iannacone (1994) – maintained that there are some needs “that only the gods can provide” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:7). They pertain particularly to death, along with purpose and meaning – including the meaning of life and the meaning of events in life.

Using a market analogy, Stark argued that the persistence of such questions means that, in any setting, there is a fairly constant market demand for religious responses. What varies is the supply-side. In societies where the religious economy has been “deregulated,” groups or “firms” that have difficulties will lose “market share” to groups that are more vigorous and less worldly.

Consequently, for Stark, secularization does not lead to the end of religion; on the contrary, secularization stimulates innovation. He gave particular attention to the emergence of sects (breakaway groups from existing religious bodies) and cults (new religious traditions); (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:2). So it is, said Stark, that “In an endless cycle, faith is revived and new faiths born to take the places of those withered

denominations that lost their sense of the supernatural” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:529-530).

As for which groups tend to win and which ones tend to lose, the key is costs and benefits. The higher the costs of membership, the greater the material, social, and religious benefits of membership. “People tend to value religion according to how much it costs,” wrote Finke and Stark, and “because ‘reasonable’ and ‘sociable’ religion costs little, it is not valued greatly” (Finke and Stark 1992:238,250). Individuals consequently make “a rational choice” to belong and participate (Finke and Stark 1992:252-255). Conversely, as religious bodies ask less of their members, their ability to reward them declines. In short, the more mainline a denomination becomes, the lower the value of belonging to it, resulting eventually in widespread defection.

Stark and his associates have claimed considerable support for their general thesis, as a result of their research in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

A Canadian Adaptation of Stark

The problem with trying to apply Stark’s stimulating thinking to religious developments in Canada is that things don’t fit all that well. Census data on religious identification spanning 1950 through 2000 reveal two distinct patterns: the stable dominance of established Christian groups and the difficulty new entries have had in cracking that monopoly (Bibby 2002:62ff).

- Between 1891 and 1991, the Catholic share of the population grew while the Protestant share declined. The drop for Protestants, however, was not due to new groups expanding.
- The decrease in the size of their market share instead coincided with a rise in the proportion of Canadians who said they had “no religion” – an increase due in large part to the methodological fact that “no religion” only became an acceptable census option in 1971. The “no religion” figure was 4% in 1971, 7% in 1981, and 12% in 1991.
- During the 1951-2001 period when “the market” seemingly was ripe for newer entries to make inroads, groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter Day Saints made tiny gains.

Table 1. Religious Makeup of Canada: 1891-1991

	1891	1941	1991
Catholic	42	44	47
Protestant	56	52	36
Other	2	3	5
No Religion	<1	<1	12

Source: Canadian census data.

Table 2. Population Makeup of Select Groups: 1951 & 2001 (%)

	1951	2001
Baha’i	**	.1
Jehovah’s Witnesses	.2	.5
Latter Day Saints	.2	.3
Unitarians	.1	.1

Source: Statistics Canada Census Data.

- Further, as of the beginning of the 21st century – by which time the country’s well-established groups had been in numerical decline for some three decades, the actual numbers for would-be competitors were extremely small. For all the media hype about disenchanted and disaffiliating Canadians turning to new options, relatively few in reality seized the opportunity.
- In a nation of some 30 million people, less than 25,000 identified with such highly publicized alternatives as Pagan (including Wicca), with the figures for New Age and Scientology under 2,000. The New Age total in allegedly receptive British Columbia was 690, with the numbers for Ontario and Quebec only 380 and 25 respectively.

Pagan	21,080
Baha'i	18,020
New Thought*	4,000
Humanist**	2,105
New Age	1,530
Scientology	1,525
Gnostic	1,160
Rastafarian	1,135
Satanist	850

*Includes Unity, New Thought, Pantheist
 **Technically not a religious group.
 Source: Statistics Canada 2001 Census.

These data pointed to the fact that we have had and continue to have an extremely tight “religious market” in Canada, dominated by Catholic and Protestant “companies.” New entries have been finding the going very tough.

A more plausible argument that is compatible with Stark’s thesis is that secularization may stimulate not only the birth of new groups but also the rejuvenation of older ones. (for details, see, for example, Bibby, 2002:62ff).

Throughout his work, Stark stresses that religious economies will be stimulated by religious pluralism resulting from “deregulation.” Presumably some of the older companies would go back to the drawing boards in the light of changing times and a more competitive marketplace. In fact, in the last chapter of Stark’s third major work on the topic, *Acts of Faith*, he and Roger Finke acknowledged such a possibility, whereby “the sect to Church cycle” reverses itself. They commented that the literature provided few hints of such a possibility, despite the historical example of something as blatant as the Counter Reformation of the seventeenth century.

They saw a key component of such possible resurgence to be new, highly committed clergy, who in turn call their congregations to commitment and emphasize traditional religious content. Only people like this, they maintained, will be motivated to be involved in declining groups where secular rewards are low. Growth, they theorized, will take place initially at the congregational level, and they provide preliminary data on a number of U.S. groups that are consistent with their argument (Stark and Finke, 2000:259-274).

Long-standing major corporations and other organizations realize that in order to survive and thrive they have to be in an ongoing mode of change. The primary players who occupy the Canadian religious scene are no exception.

As I reminded readers a decade ago (Bibby 2002:68), denominations such as Anglicans, the United Church, Presbyterians, and Lutherans, along with the Roman Catholics in Quebec and elsewhere, are no fly-by-night operations. They have long histories and recuperative powers. They don't just roll over and die. Many are part of durable multinational corporations with headquarters in places like Rome and Canterbury. Such well-established religious groups don't readily perish. They retreat, retrench, revamp, and resurface (Bibby 1993:282).

To sum up: participation declines are neither inevitable nor irreversible. On the contrary,

1. if people continue to identify, and
2. if they are reluctant to turn elsewhere, and
3. if they have interests and needs, and
4. if their identification groups respond,

it will be only a matter of time before the established groups experience revitalization.

Theoretically, it all seemed to make perfect sense.

So What Is It – Secularization or Revitalization?

The last few decades have seen people update and debate the explanatory value of the secularization and market models. By way of a few examples:

- Mark Chaves (1994) of Duke University has maintained that emphasis needs to be given to the decline of religious authority as a key component of secularization.
- Ottawa's Peter Beyer (1997) has argued that the two frameworks are complementary, and that religious developments in Canada specifically can best be understood when seen from both secularization and market model viewpoints.
- José Casanova (1994, 2006) of Georgetown University has echoed Dobbelaere's thinking in similarly calling for the recognition of the personal, institutional, and organizational facets of secularization, and sees much of the disagreement between the secularization and market model perspectives as due to proponents of the former emphasizing institutional changes and the latter focusing on personal religiousness.

- Charles Taylor (2007:21) of McGill, in his highly claimed work, *A Secular Age*, acknowledges that many observers are thinking of these two features of secularization when they are talking about what is secular. But he maintains the key feature of secularity is a new context characterized by what he calls “exclusive humanism” that puts an end to acknowledging things transcendent and “claims which go beyond human flourishing.”
- In a comprehensive review of secularization theories, Jay Demerath (2007:66) offers the stimulating point that secularization “is not a process that sweeps everything sacred before it,” but also can involve *sacralisation* – “the process by which the secular becomes sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge.”

So, if we ask bluntly what best describes religious trends in Canada, which is it? Secularization or revitalization? Is religion in Canada in a downward spiral that dates back to the 1960s? Or are there signs of new life as the country’s dominant religious groups respond to ongoing interests and needs?

Actually, the answer is that both patterns are facets of the dominant pattern that makes much clearer sense of everything: ***polarization***.

The Canadian Religious Reality: Polarization

In charting religious participation trends in Canada, we did what most pollsters and observers of poll data do: we looked at who was attending. The data were highly convincing: around 1950, some 60% Canadians were attending services weekly. By 1975 that figure had fallen to about 30%, and by 2000 to around 20%.

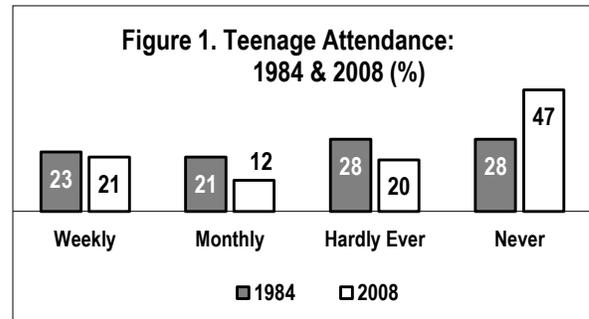
The seemingly obvious conclusion: religion’s importance had decreased significantly. And, further to observers like Dobbelaere, what was happening at the level of the individual was also taking place at the institutional level, where religion increasingly was being experienced on the margins of everyday life. In addition, religious organizations themselves were increasingly looking a lot like other social institutions – and often saying little to society that society was not already saying to itself (Hordern 1966).

But somewhat remarkably, in probing participation trends, what I and so many people failed to do was keep a close eye on everyone – not only the religiously active but also those who are not particularly active or not active at all.

As a result, the photos we had been using to splice together the religion story were incomplete. A lot of key people were left out. And along with them, key information that was essential to our understanding the total situation was missing.

Sometimes it takes a simple empirical observation to stimulate an epiphany. In my case, it was analyzing our Project Teen Canada national youth findings on attendance spanning 1984 through 2008. If one only looks at what amounts to weekly or monthly-plus attendance, the religious situation appears to be remarkably stable.

- As noted earlier, some 23% of young people were attending services on a regular basis in 1984, with the figure for 2008 a very similar 21%.
- A typical and seemingly obvious interpretation would be that things haven't changed very much. Right?



Actually, wrong. When we reset the camera and took a snapshot that included everyone by looking at other responses to the attendance item, what we found was that the percentage of teenagers who said they “never” attend services had almost doubled since the 1980s, from about 25% to 50%. The middle of the attendance continuum had been shrinking.

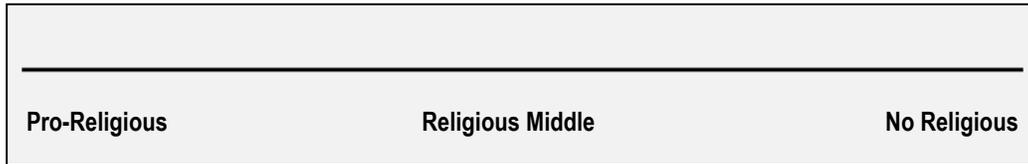
This, everybody, is an example of growing religious polarization.

With the stimulus of that one simple snapshot, everything started to become much clearer. Since the 1950s, there has been an important momentum shift in Canada away from religion. Census data and poll data have told us that the proportion of people who are opting for no religion has been increasing. Growing numbers of Canadians are living life “beyond the gods.” That trend is what has led many of us – actually, most of us – to think in terms of the *secularization* of the country.

However, what tended to be minimized is the fact that, during the same period, a significant number of Canadians continued to value religion. The size of that proportion of pro-religious people, particularly in recent years, has been decreasing but remains sizable. To the extent there have been some signs of stability and even increase, a few of us have raised the possibility that a measure of *revitalization* could be taking place.

When we look at the trend data for everyone – the involved and non-involved alike – what we see is a pattern of growing *polarization*. A solid core of people continue to value faith, a solid core are rejecting religion, and a solid core are in between the two positions.

Figure 2. The Polarization Continuum



I need to emphasize something that I minimized in the first edition of *Beyond the Gods & Back* in 2011. The Canadian religious reality is not just that we have large numbers of people who continue to value faith and growing numbers who are rejecting religion. We also have a large, important segment of the population who constitute “The Religious Middle.” They are neither embracing nor rejecting religion. They show inclinations that are both “pro-religious and “no religious.” Just as Glenn Vernon (1968) recognized some six decades ago that it was important to study “Religious Nones” along with the religiously devout, so in our time it is essential that we give adequate attention to “The Religious Middle.”

One important point to underline. Following observers like Dobbelaere and Casanova, it is easy to assume that because religious organizations no longer have direct influence in realms such as education, social services, politics, and business – such as the Catholic Church had in Quebec in the pre-1960s – that religion no longer has an impact beyond the individual. As people dating back to at least Talcott Parsons (1963) have reminded us, that’s simply not necessarily so.

Religions such as Christianity call on its members to live out faith in everyday life. With pluralism comes fairly explicit rules about the kind of profile that religion can have as people play roles as teachers and professors, service providers, politicians, and business owners and personnel. Advanced societies define how religion can or cannot be expressed. But that is not to say that personal religiosity begins and ends with individuals. Following Parsons’ thinking, people who value faith cannot be excessively overt. But as they live out their lives, religion has the potential to have an impact on lives and life.

Beyond Canada

I am increasingly convinced that *neither secularization nor revitalization theories* accurately describe what is taking place in Canada and elsewhere – including the U.S. Global data make it very clear that, in every society across the planet, religion persists – along with the inclination of some people to bypass religion. And lots are somewhere in the middle.

Therefore, rather than speaking of one-way trends toward secularization or revitalization, it seems to be much more accurate and helpful to see religion and non-religion as the poles of a dynamic continuum. In today's parlance:

- *secularization* then describes the movement away from religion;
- *deseccularization* describes the movement toward religion.

At any point in time, a society's inclination to opt for one over the other will vary, depending on pro-religion and no-religion factors that are organizational and cultural in nature. But the proclivity to opt for religion will always co-exist with the proclivity to reject it, with noteworthy numbers of people comprising something of an ambivalent middle.

The primary academic question is the extent to which populations, at any points in time, tend to gravitate toward one end of the continuum versus the other. The obvious secondary question is why such variations take place.

Table 4. Salience, Identification, Belief, and Attendance: Select Countries

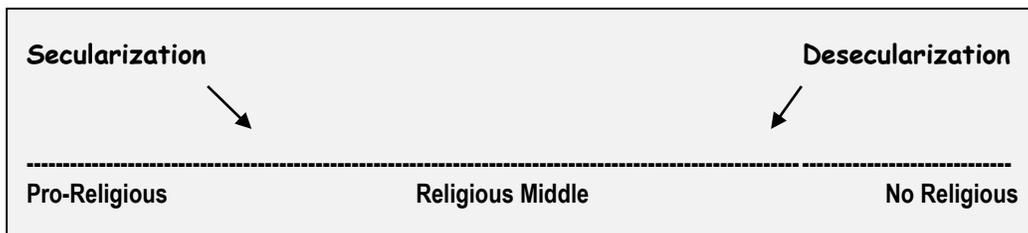
	Salience	ID	Belief	Attend
Thailand	97%	99	98	80
Nigeria	96	99	99	89
Philippines	96	99	99	64
Saudi Arabia	94	99	99	68
Pakistan	92	99	99	56
Ethiopia	90	99	99	78
India	90	99	99	73
Dominican Republic	87	99	97	53
Brazil	87	93	97	49
Iraq	86	99	99	53
South Africa	85	84	99	57
Iran	83	99	99	45
El Salvador	83	83	98	68
Mexico	73	83	97	60
Italy	72	83	82	49
Greece	71	97	96	29
Poland	69	92	96	62
UNITED STATES	65	84	88	43
Ireland	54	94	96	56
Israel	51	96	95	39
Spain	49	84	92	39
Ukraine	46	58	85	23
Korea, Republic of	43	63	98	35
CANADA	41	84	85	26
Germany	40	75	77	30
Cuba	34	90	75	20
Russia	34	52	91	15
New Zealand	33	74	79	27
Netherlands	33	58	74	26
Australia	32	81	83	23
France	30	57	80	20
Finland	29	85	91	12
United Kingdom	27	77	86	20
Hong Kong	24	85	56	19
Japan	24	48	87	38
Czech Republic	24	41	57	15
Sweden	17	75	70	17
China	---	7	60	9

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods & Back* 2011: 59.

To sum up and clarify things, it is not a matter of our buying into secularization or desecularization or polarization. Rather, *polarization is the backdrop for understanding the dynamic, ongoing inclinations for secularization or desecularization trends to be taking place*. People in any social setting – national, regional, or local – will always vary in their inclinations to embrace or reject religion.

Seen in the context of polarization, it is hardly surprising that people have been observing both secularization and desecularization patterns. One is not accurate and the other inaccurate. Both trends are part of movement on an ever-changing, dynamic polarization continuum.

Figure 3. Secularization and Desecularization as Part of Polarization



Through such a framework, religious trends in pretty much any setting become much clearer. Take the United States, for example. The recent growth in the size of the no religion category documented by surveys carried out by Pew (2012) and Gallup (2013) has startled many observers. However, through the eyes of the polarization framework, things are not startling at all. The reason is that so-called “American religious exceptionalism” is proving not to be so exceptional after all (Bibby 2014).

Historically, the religious polarization continuum in the U.S. has been weighted heavily on the pro-religion side. Currently, there is some modest movement in the direction of the no religion side. Such movement in the direction of religion and no religion is universal. The balances are always potentially in flux.

But, as with other geographical settings, the story is hardly final. We need to keep the camera running. The religion markets everywhere are always “up for grabs.” Things are never over. Depending on religious group activity and social and cultural developments, proportional placement on the polarization continuum will be always changing.

An Empirical Exploration of Polarization in Canada

In my book, *Beyond the Gods & Back* that was published in 2011, I posited the polarization idea. Using what amounted to a secondary analysis of a number of Canadian national surveys that I carried out every five years from 1975 through 2005, I attempted to obtain a reading on the extent to which Canadians were embracing religion and rejecting it. I used three so-called objective measures: service attendance (weekly versus never), religious identification (yes versus no), and belief in God or a supreme being (definitely do versus definitely do not).

Since a major focus of the book was “the so-what question” – what are some of the possible implications of Canadians variously embracing religion versus rejecting it, I then proceeded to examine four correlates of the three polarization measures: (1) personal well-being, (2) social well-being, (3) spirituality, and (4) responses to death.

A major omission, as noted, was an empirical examination of people “in the middle” – those who neither were explicitly embracing religion nor rejecting it.

An Important New Survey

In March of 2015, I had the opportunity to carry out a major new empirical examination of polarization and its correlates. I teamed up with the highly respected Canadian pollster and sociologist, Angus, in conducting an on-line national survey with a highly representative panel sample of more than 3,000 Canadians (3,041), making it possible to explore variations among a number of segments of the population. I wrote the questionnaire; the Vancouver, British Columbia-based Angus Reid Institute took responsibility for collecting the data. The sample was weighted as necessary to ensure that it mirrored the demographic and social characteristics of the population, including religious identification.

The survey looked at a wide range of issues, with the questionnaire designed to (a) track responses on some key items over time, (b) provide information on new developments, and (c) explicitly examine polarization and a number of its correlates.

Polarization Patterns

While the survey included items tapping a wide variety of religious variables, it was novel in that it explicitly explored the concept of religious polarization. Respondents were given the following statement and question:

Some people say Canadians variously (1) embrace religion, (2) reject religion, or (3) are somewhere in between the two extremes. Where would you be tend to locate yourself?

The three response options were: (1) *I am inclined to embrace religion*, (2) *I am inclined to reject religion*, and (3) *I am somewhere in between*.

As summarized in Table 5, some 30% of Canadians say that they are embracing religion, about 25% are rejecting it, and the remaining 45% or so indicate that they are somewhere in between the two extremes.

For discussion purposes, I'd like to sometimes refer to the three positions on the religion-no religion continuum as "The Committed," "The Middle," and "The Rejecters" or, alternately, as "The Pro Faith," "The Low Faith," and "The No Faith."

An examination of religious inclination by the three religiosity measures of attendance, identification, and belief in God documents what we would expect – that the correlations are fairly high.

That's particularly true for *attendance*: 83% of weekly attenders say that they are embracing faith – versus just 6% who never attend services.

However, it also is important to note that the relationships are far from perfect. Some 1 in 2 monthly attendees and 1 in 4 who attend only about once a year also maintain that they are embracing faith. Many people who identify with a religion see

themselves in "the religious middle." And while a large number of individuals who express unequivocal belief in God embrace faith, significant numbers locate themselves in the religious middle. That inclination is especially pronounced among people who are equivocal atheists.

		Embrace	Middle	Reject	Totals	r
NATIONALLY	--	30%	44	26	100	
Attendance						.549
Weekly	16	83	14	3	100	
Monthly	7	54	37	9	100	
Yearly	47	24	59	17	100	
Never	30	6	38	56	100	
Religious ID						.468
Yes	79	37	48	15	100	
No	21	2	27	71	100	
God/Higher Power						.578
Yes, I definitely do	41	57	35	8	100	
Yes, I think so	32	17	66	17	100	
No, I don't think so	14	5	46	49	100	
No, I definitely do not	13	1	16	83	100	

Note: the correlations between the 3 religiosity measures: attendance and religious ID .365, attendance and belief .470, religious ID and belief .466.

Looked at from the standpoint of the three religious orientations (Table 6):

- People who *embrace faith* include large numbers who are only a few times a year or less.
- The *Religious Middle* tends to be made up of people who are infrequent attendees who nonetheless identify with a religion and are somewhat ambivalent theists.
- Those who *reject religion* either never or seldom attend services; yet almost 1 in 2 identify with a religious tradition, and, while most are moving away from theism, only 40% are explicit atheists.

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	Totals
NATIONALLY	30	44	26	100
Attendance				
Weekly	43	5	2	100
Monthly	13	6	2	100
Yearly	37	63	32	100
Never	7	26	64	100
Religion ID				
Yes	99	87	44	100
No	1	13	56	100
God/Higher Power				
Yes, I definitely do	79	32	13	100
Yes, I think so	18	49	21	100
No, I don't think so	2	15	26	100
No, I definitely do not	<1	4	40	100

Some Social and Demographic Correlates

The inclinations to be among the pro-religious, no-religious, or low religious differ little by **gender**, and only slightly by either **age** or **education**. Older adults with somewhat lower educational levels are a bit more inclined than others to embrace religion.

What are more pronounced are differences by **birthplace** and **region**. People born outside Canada are more likely than those born here to embrace religion, although there is little difference in the inclination to reject faith. The rejection of religion is highest in British Columbia, while the pro-religious inclination is highest in the Atlantic region and the two prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

	Embrace (906)	Middle (1336)	Reject (799)	Totals (3041)
NATIONALLY	30%	44	26	100
Female	30	48	22	100
Male	29	40	31	100
18-34	28	44	28	100
35-54	25	47	28	100
55-plus	35	41	24	100
Degree-Plus	27	41	32	100
Some PS	28	45	27	100
HS or Less	33	45	22	100
Born in Canada	29	45	26	100
Born Outside Canada	38	38	24	100
Atlantic	38	44	18	100
Saskatchewan	38	42	20	100
Manitoba	38	38	24	100
Alberta	32	43	25	100
Ontario	31	44	25	100
Quebec	24	48	28	100
British Columbia	24	39	37	100

Some Religious and Spiritual Correlates

The tendency to embrace faith is considerably higher among Conservative Protestants (evangelicals) than others. They are followed by other Christian groups outside the Protestant Mainline along with Roman Catholics outside Quebec.

Yet, as I have been emphasizing, fairly small numbers of people who identify with religious groups actually are rejecting faith. That – as would be expected – is most common among those who say they have “no religion.” Yet, even some 30% of people in that category tell us that they have not actually rejected religion but rather occupy the “middle” position between embracing and rejecting faith.

Table 8. The Three Religious Inclinations by Religious Identification and Religion-Spirituality Self-Image

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	Totals
NATIONALLY	30%	44	26	100
Conservative Protestant	70	22	8	100
Other non-ML Christian	47	43	10	100
RC Outside Quebec	42	48	10	100
Other World Faith	31	58	11	100
Mainline Protestant	31	56	13	100
RC Quebec	27	54	19	100
No Religion	2	27	71	100
Religious and spiritual	74	24	2	100
Religious but not spiritual	54	44	2	100
Spiritual but not religious	14	59	27	100
Neither religious nor spiritual	4	40	56	100

Much publicity has been given to the idea that Canadians and many people elsewhere increasingly are “spiritual but not religious.” Individuals who identify with that position are more likely than others to locate themselves in the Religious Middle, although about 3 in 10 are rejecting religion. Fairly predictably, a majority of individuals who say they are “religious and spiritual” are inclined to embrace religion and seldom reject it. In the case of people who are “neither religious nor spiritual,” close to 6 in 10 indicate they have rejected religion; yet 4 in 10 locate themselves in the Religious Middle.

These findings suggest that some 3 in 4 Canadians in all demographic and social categories are *not* explicitly rejecting religion. The much more common tendency is for people to either embrace faith or – to a slightly greater extent – opt for a middle position. ***It seems to me that the identification of the sizable and understudied “Religious Middle” is very important.*** The preference for that position may frequently reflect ambivalence. But it also may reflect a preference to selectively draw on religion, and a reluctance to discard it altogether.

The Middle would seem to be particularly “up for grabs” when it comes to secularization and desecularization influences. It therefore needs to be carefully monitored.

Some Attitudes, Beliefs, and Practices by Inclinations

The empirical existence of these three different orientations toward religion becomes readily apparent when we look at some relevant attitudes.

- The idea that **“morality and good values” are tied to theism and church-going** is solidly endorsed by Canadians who embrace religion, but almost equally panned by the Religious Middle and the Rejecters.
- Yet, the cultural pervasiveness of **the Ten Commandments** ideal can be seen in the fact that a majority of people in all three groupings – even 53% in the case of The No Faith – maintain the Commandments still apply today. That said, the pervasiveness of the idea of **moral relativity** can also be seen in the widespread agreement with the seemingly contradictory claim that “What’s right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion” – endorsed by even 40% of The Committed.
- Differences between the three religious inclinations are sizeable and predictable when it comes to beliefs about religion’s positive **impact on the world** and the **impact of declining religious involvement** in Canada. Here, The Middle is nowhere as negative as The Rejecters. As would be expected confidence in religious leadership decreases as one moves from The Pro Faith to the No Faith.
- **Openness to worthwhile involvement** is surprisingly high – 49% for The Committed, 42% for The Middle, and even 22% for the Rejecters.

What already is standing out in the analysis is the fact that The Low Faith middle is very different from either The Pro Faith or The No Faith. To focus exclusively on levels of high involvement (e.g., weekly church attendance) and to ignore both the non-involved (“the nevers”) and those in between (“the occasionals”) is to clumsily crop the photo and cut out two of the three family members.

Table 9. Some Religiously-Related Attitudes by Religious Inclinations

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	ALL
It is not necessary to “go to church” in order to be moral & have good values	80%	91	95	89
It is not necessary to believe in God in order to be moral & have good values	68	86	91	82
The Ten Commandments still apply today	91	73	53	73
What’s right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion	40	57	55	51
Religion’s overall impact on the world is positive	80	52	15	51
The decline in religious involvement has been a bad thing for Canada	86	44	11	48
I think the growth in atheism is a good thing for life in Canada	10	27	69	33
I have a high level of confidence in religious leaders	61	21	6	29
I’d be open to more involvement with religious groups if I found it worthwhile	49	42	22	39
I prefer to live life without God or congregation	9	31	79	37
I sometimes feel guilty for not being more involved in religion	54	33	8	33

Beyond attitudes, the variations in posture toward religion between the three inclinations are readily apparent when it comes to beliefs. As would be expected, the general pattern is for The Middle to show far more commonality with those who embrace religion than those who are rejecting it.

- **Belief in God or a higher power** is very high, not only for The Committed (97%) but also for The Middle (81%). Even 1 in 3 of the Rejecters indicate they are theists. Similar patterns hold for belief in the **divinity of Jesus**, and the belief that one has been **protected by a guardian angel**. The Middle continues to be distinct in exhibiting fairly high belief levels.
- As we have already seen, **service attendance** is predictably highest among those who embrace faith, is modest among those in the middle, and extremely low among those who are rejecting religion.
- **Private prayer**, however, while very high among The Committed (86%), is also fairly common among The Middle (42%), but relatively rare among The Rejectors (8%). **Table grace** and **Scripture reading** know similar 1-2-3 rankings, but at much lower levels.

We asked our survey participants what “main thing your religious involvement adds to your life.” Understandably, some 56% of those embracing religion offered respondents, versus only 11% of people in the middle, and 4% of those rejecting religion. **God and spirituality** stand out as a runaway no. 1 for The Committed, followed by **personal enrichment** and, thirdly, **the people**.

Table 10. Some Beliefs, Practices and Faith Claims by Religious Inclinations

		Embrace	Middle	Reject	ALL
Beliefs	God or higher power exists	97%	81	33	66
	<i>Definitely,</i> Jesus was the Divine Son of God	92	63	15	59
	<i>Think So</i> You have been protected by a guardian angel	79	59	19	56
Practices	Attend services	56	11	4	23
	<i>Monthly-plus</i> Pray privately/individually	86	42	14	48
	Say table grace	52	16	8	25
	Read the Bible, Quran, or other sacred text	45	9	6	19
Faith Claims	Main thing your religious involvement adds to your life:				
	<i>God and spirituality</i>	33	4	2	12
	<i>personal enrichment</i>	15	4	<1	6
	<i>the people</i>	5	3	2	3
	<i>other</i>	3	<1	<1	1
	<i>not applicable</i>	44	89	96	78
	Believe god cares about you personally	93	64	19	61
Feel strengthened by your faith	79	30	12	40	
Feel you experience God’s presence:					
<i>monthly-plus</i>	68	22	9	32	

More generally, 9 in 10 Pro-Faith Canadians **believe God cares about them personally**, as do more than 6 in 10 Low Faith and 2 in 10 No Faith individuals. As would be expected a large number of those embracing religion (79%) report that they feel **strengthened by their faith** on a monthly-plus basis. But they are joined by 30% of people in The Middle and even 12% of those who are rejecting religion.

Close to 70% of The Committed tell us that they **feel they experience God’s presence** every month or more. That figure drops to about 20% for The Middle and some 10% for the Rejecters. Still, some pretty extensive “Divine stirrings” allegedly taking place.

Some “So What?” Correlates

As one reflects on trends concerning religion in Canada – the extent to which secularization and desecularization are taking place along the country’s religious continuum – the obvious practical question for many observers is the “so what?” question. What are the consequences of for personal and collective life in the country of people (a) being religious, (b) not being religious, and (c) being somewhere in between?

The latest survey allows us to explore some of these “so what” correlates.

By way of an introductory overview, we asked Canadians for their perception of the key determinants of their lives, and gave them a choice of six potential factors.

The rank order and level of endorsement for three person-centred determinants – **“your own efforts,” “health,”** and **“other people”** – were very similar for by religious orientation.

However, asked to rate the importance of factors out of their direct control – **“chance,” “luck,”** and **“God,”** the Pro-Faith, as would be expected, we far more inclined than The Low Faith and No Faith to cite God (82%), and somewhat less inclined to cite either chance (30%) or luck (26%). Chance is viewed as being as salient as other people by the Rejecters, with luck not far behind. Three in 10 of The Middle keep God in the mix.

Clearly Canadians are not hard-line empiricists when it comes to identifying factors that have an impact on their lives. To varying degrees, chance, luck, and the gods are all viewed as possible causal players.

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	ALL
Your own efforts	85	91	93	90
Your health	81	83	87	84
Other people	46	45	44	45
Chance	30	41	47	40
God	82	29	08	39
Luck	26	36	35	33

As with the earlier extensive analysis of “so what” correlates in *Beyond the Gods & Back* in 2011, the second edition of the book is focusing on four major “consequential” spheres, making use of the new 2015 national survey data.

While a detailed examination of all four areas and their extensive indicators is beyond the scope of this short paper, Table 12 is included to provide a brief overview of some of the topics, survey items, and preliminary findings.

- **Personal well-being:** The Pro-Faith tend to report somewhat higher levels of well-being than others. But differences are small. Religion is enhancing personal life for those embracing faith. But those in the middle and those rejecting religion appear to be finding functional alternatives that are contributing to very similar net results.
- **Social well-being:** *broad indicators* of social compassion suggest small differences by religious orientation. But *interpersonal values* like honesty, forgiveness, and concern for others are held by higher proportions of The Pro-Faith and Low Faith. *Behaviourally*, those who embrace faith are more likely than The Middle or the Rejectors to donate to charities and volunteer time. Interpersonally, The No Religious (63%) and Low Religious (44%) express *discomfort around people who are devout*; conversely, The Pro-Religious (41%) indicate *discomfort around people who have no use for religion*. These findings suggest that the decline in the size of the segment embracing religion is perhaps being accompanied by a slight decline in social compassion – attitudinally and behaviourally. Put more bluntly, compassion may be taking a bit of a “hit.”

Table 12. Some Illustrative Impact Correlates of Religious Inclinations: Personal and Social Well-Being

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	ALL
PERSONAL WELL-BEING				
Family life: receive high level of enjoyment	91%	86	83	87
Friends: high level of enjoyment	85	80	79	81
Concerned about fact I should be getting more out of life	38	49	41	44
Loneliness: <i>concerned about a great deal/quite a bit</i>	28	30	24	28
Generally speaking: very/pretty happy with life	91	88	85	88
Generally speaking: very/pretty happy with your marriage/relationship	67	64	64	65
SOCIAL WELL-BEING				
People who are poor have a right to an income adequate to live on	89	85	85	86
We need to worry about our own country & let rest of world take care of itself": <i>disagree</i>	58	50	56	54
Honesty: <i>highly valued</i>	87	84	81	84
Forgiveness: <i>highly valued</i>	72	53	42	56
Concern for others: <i>highly valued</i>	64	51	52	55
Donated money to a charity: <i>in the last month</i>	64	48	50	53
Volunteered time to an organization: <i>in the last month</i>	45	31	27	34
Generally speaking, I feel a bit uncomfortable around people who are religiously devout	24	44	63	43
Generally speaking, I feel a bit uncomfortable around people who have no use for religion	41	19	6	22

- **Spirituality:** with growth in the size of the segment of people who are rejecting religion, one important question has to do with the implications for spirituality. Will people continue to express spiritual needs? And how might they be addressed?

Close to 80% of Canadians continue to pursue age-old quest for happiness. Some 9 in 10 of The Pro-Faith explicitly report that they have spiritual needs, as do 7 in 10 of the Low-Faith and 4 in 10 of the No Faith. Very similar proportions further indicate they see themselves as spiritual versus religious, a self-designated limited mostly to those embracing faith (78%) and to some people in the middle (23%).

Some important additional survey data for Alberta documents what seems to be fairly prevalent: large numbers of people who are rejecting religion or are in the middle are reporting that their spiritual needs are being met (Bibby 2011:125). The spiritual marketplace abounds with consumer options in addressing spiritual needs.

These findings suggest that, regardless of shifts along the polarization continuum, spiritual needs will continue to be expressed, addressed and met. Religion will provide only one pathway.

- **Death:** given its ever-present reality, Canadians and virtually everyone else will continue to ask questions about death and what, if anything, lies beyond death. The question of LAD is raised by large numbers of the Pro-Faith (77%), Low Faith (79%), and No Faith (74%). Large numbers of those embracing religion and those in the middle further express belief in life after death, heaven, and even hell. Some 1 in 2 of The Committed and The Middle maintain we can communicate with the dead, as do 1 in 4 Rejecters. Belief that one will be reincarnated is held by many, including 1 in 5 of those rejecting religion. And lots of people still want religious funerals, even if those in the Middle (34%).

Table 13. Some Illustrative Impact Correlates of Religious Inclinations: Spirituality and Death

	Embrace	Middle	Reject	ALL
SPIRITUALITY				
Think about the question of how can I experience happiness: often/sometimes	74	53	76	76
You yourself have spiritual needs	92	68	38	67
See yourself self as spiritual	78	66	42	63
See yourself as religious	78	23	2	34
Spirituality: <i>very important</i>	59	18	13	29
Religion: <i>very important</i>	54	4	<1	18
DEATH				
Think about what happens after death: "Often" or "Sometimes"	77	79	63	74
Believe In life after death	87	70	35	66
Believe in heaven	94	68	5	63
Believe in hell	73	39	4	42
Believe we can communicate with the dead	45	50	27	42
Think you yourself will be reincarnated	34	38	21	32
It's important to live in the here & now, because this is the only existence we will ever have	37	67	81	62
Have attended a religious funeral in the past year	60	46	28	45
Want to have a religious funeral	80	34	7	41

Here again, some additional data are illuminating with respect to death. In surveys spanning four decades from 1975 through 2014, I have asked Canadians about their primary emotional responses to death. They have been given the choices of sorrow, mystery, fear, no particular feeling, and hope (Bibby 2011:175).

What has stood out in the analyses by service attendance – a variable, as we have seen, that is highly correlated to the inclination to be embracing religion – is that the number one response for those actively involved in groups is...hope.

Canadians and people everywhere will always be in the market for viable, satisfactory answers that allow them to deal with death. The one response that appears to rest with faith and has few market competitors is hope. Not a bad product for any institution to have.

Conclusion

In this paper, what I have attempted to demonstrate is that religious developments in Canada over time are best understood not in terms of a one-way movement from religiousness to non-religiousness. spurts of new life similarly are not best understood as signs of a major change in the direction of revitalization.

Rather, in Canada as in the rest of the world, the inclination for people to opt for religion always co-exists with the inclination to opt for non-religion, with lots of people somewhere in between. Polarization is normative everywhere. What differs from country to country is the extent to which populations are inclined to move in one direction or the other.

Against such a backdrop, secularization describes the movement away from the religion end of the continuum. Conversely, desecularization – sometimes interpreted as revival or revitalization – describes movement in the direction of religion. Depending on social and cultural conditions and the activity of religious groups, the balance always is potentially in motion.

But Rodney Stark, as I understand things, is correct in maintaining that there will always be a market for religion. And proponents of secularization such as Steve Bruce are correct in maintaining that there always be social and cultural factors that lead people away from religion.

What remains to be seen in any setting is the extent to which people opt for religion, for no religion, or are comfortable. What we can predict with certainty is that things along the continuum will be ever-changing.

The important related question is the extent to which such proclivities affect the quality of personal and collective life. As such, the individual and social consequences of people embracing religion and not embracing religion need to continue to be carefully monitored.

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