

Religion À La Carte in Quebec : *A Problem of Demand, Supply, or Both?*

by

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July 2007

Prepared for A Special September Issue on Religion in Quebec
in the journal *Globe*

Edited by
Professors Martin Meunier and Robert Mager

*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

Quebec provides a fascinating case study of secularization and its limits. Prior to the 1960s, this historically Roman Catholic province may have had the highest level of church attendance of any region in North America. Since the 1960s, attendance has plummeted to the point that it now is among the lowest. Many observers assume Quebeckers have given up on religion, holding only to a kind of “cultural Catholicism.” The author draws on extensive census and survey data to show that Catholicism in Quebec remains highly pervasive, characterized by ongoing identification and the selective consumption of the Church’s teachings, particularly with respect to everyday life. However, large numbers of Catholics who have limited involvement in the Church indicate that they are receptive to greater participation – if the Church can touch their lives in significant ways. These findings suggest that a renaissance of organized religion in Quebec is possible but, to the extent it takes place, the key player will be the Roman Catholic Church. What is less clear is whether or not the Catholic Church is both willing and equipped to provide the required response in the foreseeable future. The current situation consequently appears to be a problem – not so much of demand in the form of receptivity to meaningful ministry – as it is a problem of supply.

Introduction

Considerable confusion currently exists concerning the status of organized religion in Canada and the rest of the world. Many academics who were exposed to secularization thinking have maintained that the decline in religion's significance is virtually an invariable correlate of industrialization and postindustrialization. However, even a superficial glance at the religious situation world-wide serves as a reminder that the demise of organized religion has been grossly misread. More than one billion people across the globe currently identify with Catholicism and approximately another one billion with Islam, while other major world religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism continue to have very large followings. Religious vitality is pronounced in countries ranging from the United States through Iran. Predictions of religion's demise have simply proven to be inaccurate.

Most observers of religion in Canada have been slow to catch up with such current realities, mired instead in the outdated secularization mindset and tediously dichotomizing between widespread interest in spirituality and declining involvement in organized religion. What is still either overlooked or minimized are signs in much of English-speaking Canada that organized religion is experiencing something of a comeback – or at minimum has found secure footing. Contrary to common perception, the future viability of religion, led by Catholicism and Protestantism, is not in doubt.

What is far less clear is the state and future of organized religion in Quebec. After knowing centuries of Roman Catholic dominance, the province appeared to experience classic secularization in the post-1950s. Service attendance dropped significantly in the second half of the twentieth century. The Church that once “was the core institution of the nation” (Beyer 1993:137), playing a central role in family life, education, and social services, and further influencing governments, business, and labour, has increasingly been relegated to the sidelines of everyday life in the province. The extent of secularization in Quebec stands in sharp contrast to the United States, and appears to be more pervasive and relentless than what is occurring in the rest of Canada. Still further, Quebec's secularization level – at least at the level of the individual – may be more extensive than what is being experienced in a number of predominantly Catholic countries in Europe (see Manchin 2004). Quebec's current weekly attendance level of 15% is well below the levels found in Catholic settings such as Ireland, Italy, and Poland (over 30%), along with Greece, and Spain (over 20%). It may or may not be significant that the province's weekly attendance figure is now close to that of France (just under 10%).

Clarification of the current religious situation in Quebec needs to be addressed with some good data. Fortunately, we now have a considerable body of information that can help to illuminate what has been happening.

Since 1975, I have carried out Canadian national adult surveys every five years through 2005. These "Project Canada" surveys have been conducted by mail with each having a highly representative sample of approximately 1,500 cases. Together the surveys provide extensive and highly unique data on social trends generally and religious trends specifically, including religious involvement and religious identification (for survey details, see Bibby 1995:143-146 and 2004a:249-254). The latest survey was completed in November of 2005 and has a highly representative weighted sample of 1,600 cases that permits generalizations to the national population that are accurate within approximately 2.5 percentage points 19 times in 20. The Quebec sample for 2005 is comprised of a representative sample of 378 cases, allowing for generalizations to the provincial population that are accurate with about 6 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

The Secularization Story

Proponents of the secularization thesis date 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 including Bryan Wilson, Thomas Luckmann, Peter Berger, Karel Dobbelaere, and Steve Bruce. Not surprisingly, North American academics whose training has involved exposure to such thinking have also been inclined to adopt the secularization perspective. The result is that twentieth century analyzes of religion data in the United States, along with Canada as a whole and Quebec specifically, have typically been coloured by secularization interpretations (see, for example, Stark and Glock 1968; Bibby 1987 and 1993; Rouleau 1977; Beyer 1993).

Simply put, secularization refers, of course, to the decline in the influence of organized religion. Karel 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. Religion loses control over spheres such as education, politics, economics, and health. It frequently is relegated to matters of meaning, morality, and mortality, as well as the performance of rites of passage. At the personal level, individuals are not as inclined as their predecessors to participate in organized religion, and further live highly compartmentalized lives that are not significantly informed by faith. Organized religion still exists, but has a very specific and limited role. Secularization extends to religious groups themselves. They consciously and unconsciously take their cues from sources such as media, education, business, and

government, rather than an alleged “something” that transcends culture. Their structures, ideas, programs, and criteria for success tend to closely resemble those of other organizations.

By the 1980’s and ’90s, all three dimensions of secularization appeared to be highly pervasive in Canada. In Quebec secularization was pronounced on the individual and institutional levels. Yet, as Beyer (1993:144) reminds us, secularization was not readily evident on the third, organizational level. Ironically, the formal Catholic Church – however emasculated and however silent – was left standing, with the potential to move in new directions.

Still, to most onlookers, the Canadian and Quebec religion stories seemed to be fairly straightforward and complete. The title of Mark Noll’s recent (2006) comprehensive historical review of religion in the country sums up the dominant perception and widespread perplexion associated with something now largely lost: *“What happened to Christian Canada?”*

The Case for Revitalization

The major problem with the secularization argument is that religion has not gone away. As Peter Berger (1992:15) has acknowledged, the argument has been “falsified with vengeance.” Religion’s persistence has not come as a surprise to an observer such as American sociologist Rodney Stark. His views have become widely known since the early 1980s, disseminated in numerous works and extensive empirical analyzes that have spanned much of the world (see, for example, Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000).

According to Stark, the needs that individuals have in the course of living out life include some that only “the gods” can satisfy, including adequate answers to ultimate questions relating to meaning and purpose, suffering and death. Since the needs are ongoing, what is in question is not demand but supply – which religious organizations will be successful in responding to such persisting needs. Using a market analogy, Stark acknowledges that “religious firms” will come and go. But because needs persist, the secularization of organizations will see the erosion of some “companies” but result in “market opportunities” for new ones. The net result is that secularization does not lead to the demise of religion. Rather, secularization stimulates innovation. Stark is particularly on the lookout for the emergence of new breakaway groups (“sects”) and new religious movements (“cults”) that will seize the chance to gain market share.

In settings like Canada, where a small number of groups led by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, the United Church, and evangelicals have known a collective monopoly and continue to be groups with which almost 80% of the population identify, Stark’s thinking seems sound but requires some revising. “The religious market” here is very “tight.” It therefore is extremely difficult for new religious entries to make inroads. In such a situation, innovation seems to be dependent not so much on the appearance of sects and cults or even other major world

religions as the revitalization of the dominant existing groups (Bibby 2004:66-72). But if people (1) continue to identify with the established groups and (2) are receptive to greater involvement with those groups, (3) greater involvement would be expected to take place to the extent the dominant groups respond to the needs of their “affiliates.”

In light of Dobbelaere’s three-dimensional view of secularization, it is important to note that Stark tends to emphasize the single dimension of the individual, to a lesser extent the organizational component of secularization, and gives minimal attention to the structural dimension of secularization. For example, he and his associates make extensive use of individual measures like attendance and identification, and also look at the extent to which “religious firms” turn from otherworldly to thisworldly issues. With such data in hand, Stark claims that his findings have sounded the death knell to the secularization argument, and is particularly critical of Dobbelaere and other secularization proponents (see, for example, Stark 1999). However, Stark gives very little attention to systemic forms of secularization, whereby religious groups cease to have significant influence in social spheres such as politics, the economy, social services, and leisure.

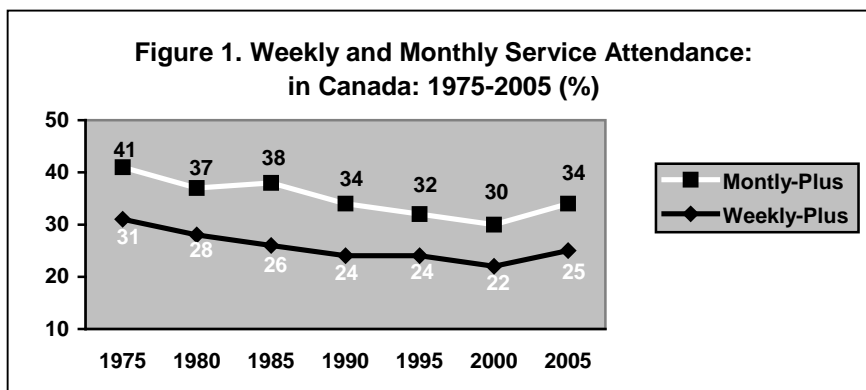
Similarly, proponents of secularization also are frequently less than three-dimensional; Noll (2006), for example gives negligible attention to the individual dimension of secularization, focusing almost exclusively on structural and organizational dimensions, while further posing debateable indicators of secularization, such as pluralism and same-sex marriage, to make the case for the loss of religious influence. The expansion of pluralism would not exactly be seen as a sign of religion’s lack of input church justice advocates and theologians such as Gregory Baum (2005) or Douglas John Hall (1997); needless to say, some United Church and other Mainline Protestant leaders see the legalization of same-sex marriage as a reflection of religious influence, rather than the lack of it.

These dimensions of secularization are important to keep in mind as we look at developments in Canada generally and Quebec specifically. Such a comprehensive view of religious activity brings clarity to the secularization-persistence debate.

Revitalization Outside Quebec

There is evidence that a small increase in religious group participation has occurred in Canada in recent years. Although modest, the upward pattern is extremely important because it contradicts the widely assumed, linear-like downward trend of the secularization thesis. Weekly and monthly attendance levels currently resemble those of around 1990, and are only slightly below the levels of 1980.

More generally, national participation has remained fairly stable for about the last twenty-five years. Depictions of Canada as being a country with “church attendance in freefall,” such as offered recently by the *National Post* (Brean 2006), are simply inaccurate.



A qualitative analysis of why people who are active in religious groups claim they are involved documents a basic but very important point: their participation contributes something significant to their lives. The 34% of Canadians who attend services at least once a month were asked in the 2005 survey, “What is the main thing your religious involvement adds to your life?” While often hard-pressed to isolate “the main thing” versus a number of features, here is what emerged.

- Almost six in ten report that the primary contribution participation brings to their lives is *personal enrichment* in the form of traits such as peace, purpose, sustenance, growth, and hope.
- For some two in ten, the main contribution is what other *people* add to faith and life.
- A further two in ten say that the key addition to their lives is tied to *God and spirituality*, including the development of their faith.

| | | |
|-----------------------------|----|------------|
| Personal enrichment | | 56% |
| Peace | 17 | |
| Purpose | 11 | |
| Sustenance | 6 | |
| Growth | 6 | |
| Hope | 5 | |
| Stability | 4 | |
| Fulfillment | 3 | |
| Guidance | 2 | |
| Other | 2 | |
| The People | | 22 |
| Community, fellowship | 12 | |
| Collective worship | 6 | |
| Other | 4 | |
| God and spirituality | | 21 |
| God-related | 11 | |
| Spirituality | 5 | |
| Strengthening of faith | 2 | |
| Other | 3 | |
| Nothing | | 1 |
| Total | | 100 |

There appear to be some noteworthy variations by religious group

- *Personal enrichment* is the dominant characteristic cited by individuals in all groups – most noticeably Catholics outside Quebec and adherents to faiths other than Christianity.
- In addition, “the people” is of particular importance to Mainline Protestants, *God and spirituality* to Quebec Catholics and Conservative Protestants.

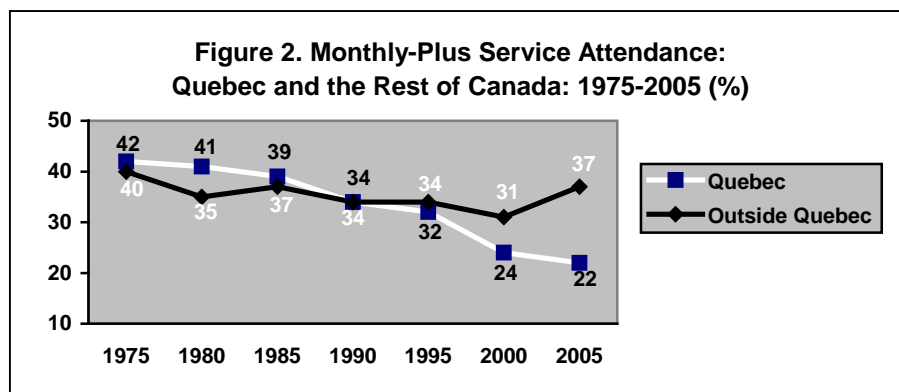
- Additional analyzes not reported here show that variations by age, gender, and congregational size are all fairly small.

| | Personal Enrichment | The People | God & Spirituality | Nothing | Total |
|--------------|---------------------|------------|--------------------|----------|------------|
| ALL | 56% | 22 | 21 | 1 | 100 |
| RCOQ | 63 | 16 | 21 | <1 | 100 |
| RCQ | 48 | 21 | 26 | 5 | 100 |
| ML Prots | 49 | 31 | 19 | 1 | 100 |
| Cons Prots | 52 | 23 | 25 | <1 | 100 |
| Other Faiths | 70 | 23 | 7 | <1 | 100 |

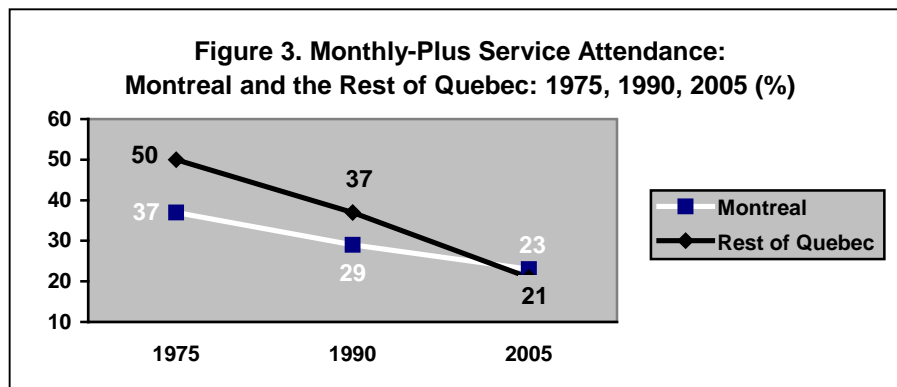
The Attendance Situation in Quebec

The pattern of attendance stability between 1985 and 2005 characterizes almost every region of the country. The monthly plus figures for British Columbia over the two decades have been 25% and 22% respectively, 35% and 41% in the case of the Prairies, and 36% and 38% in Ontario. The Atlantic region figure for 2005 was down to 50% from 62% in 1985 -- but was unchanged from 2000 and still easily represents the highest level of attendance in the country.

The one region where the drop-off has continued steadily over the past two decades is Quebec. In 1985, some 39% of the people in the province claimed they were attending services at least once a month, down only slightly from 42% in 1975. However, by 1995 the figure had fallen to 32%, and by 2005 to 22%. That level is all the more startling when compared to monthly-plus levels that were estimated to be over 80% in the mid-1960s (see, for example, Mol 1976). Indicative of such patterns, Paul-André Turcotte (2001:509) has observed that “regular practice’ in the 1960s meant being present every Sunday of the year”; now “it has come to mean attending Sunday Mass between two and four times a month.”



In the pre-1960s, Cardinal Léger was quoted as saying, “At seven every night, Montreal would be kneeling, saying the Rosary with me” (CBC 1973). A mere decade or so later, Montrealers were leading the province in exiting the Church. By 1975, monthly-plus attendance had dropped to 37% in Montreal compared to 50% elsewhere in Quebec. However, over the next three decades the attendance decline swept over the entire province, to the point that the proportion of people now attending services at least once a month is just over 20% in both Montreal and elsewhere.



This decrease in attendance in the post-1960s has been largely a Baby Boomer and Post-Boomer phenomenon. Looking at Catholics in Quebec specifically, the monthly-plus attendance level of Pre-Boomers (born before 1946) has remained solid over the past three decades at just under 60%. However, attendance among Quebec’s Boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) was about one-half of that of Pre-Boomers in 1975 and has dropped off steadily since then – from about 30% in 1975 to just over 20% in 1990, to near 10% as of 2005. In turn, the attendance levels of the newest generation, Post-Boomers, have closely mirrored those of Boomers (23% versus 23% in 1990; 16% versus 12% in 2005).

| | Quebec | Rest of Canada |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| 1975 | 51% | 62 |
| Boomers | 31 | 47 |
| Pre-Boomers | 59 | 68 |
| Post-Boomers | *** | *** |
| 1990 | 39 | 48 |
| Boomers | 23 | 40 |
| Pre-Boomers | 58 | 60 |
| Post-Boomers | 23 | 42 |
| 2005 | 24 | 53 |
| Boomers | 12 | 47 |
| Pre-Boomers | 53 | 66 |
| Post-Boomers | 16 | 52 |

In contrast to Quebec, Pre-Boomer and Boomer attendance among Roman Catholics outside Quebec has remained fairly steady since 1975, if anything rebounding by 2005 after slipping around 1990. Post-Boomer attendance among Catholics in the rest of the country appears to be slightly above that of Baby Boomers.

These findings show that the current monthly attendance level of close to 25% in Quebec is being propped up by older adults. If patterns continue as they are, the disappearance of Pre-Boomers over the next two or three decades will see the monthly-plus figure for Quebec Catholics drop to around 15% by approximately 2025. That level will be the lowest of any region in Canada and, for that matter, any region in North America.

The Quebec Anomaly

Such findings have led some commentators to proclaim Quebec to be “a religious wasteland” and a number of Protestant evangelical groups to declare the province to be “a mission field” in need of evangelism. Raymond Lemieux (1990) is among those who have suggested that Quebecers now practice “popular Catholicism” which is characterized by Catholicism without a Church. However, additional survey findings indicate that it is extremely precarious to conclude that Roman Catholicism is dying in Quebec, and that new religious entries have the opportunity of making significant market inroads.

Census data and other survey data conclusively show that the vast number of Quebecers still continue to see themselves as Roman Catholics. When regular attendance was allegedly in the 80%-plus range in the 1960s, 88% of Quebec residents described themselves as “Catholic.” Today, with regular attendance closer to 20%, no less than 83% continue to identify with Catholicism.

| | Catholic | Protestant | Other Ctn | Other Faiths | None | Totals |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1961 | 88% | 9 | 1 | 2 | <1 | 100 |
| 1971 | 87 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 100 |
| 1981 | 87 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 100 |
| 1991 | 86 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 100 |
| 2001 | 83 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 100 |

Source: Statistics Canada.

What’s more, few are contemplating deserting the Catholic ranks. Our Project Canada national survey in 2000 asked Canadians if they are open to the idea of switching to another religious tradition. Nationally, 83% said “no,” with the figures 80% for people attending services less than once a week and 92% for those attending weekly or more. Among Quebec Catholics, 98% of the weekly attenders said “no” – as did no less than 97% of those who attend less than weekly through never (Bibby 2004a:44)! Little wonder that groups such as evangelicals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormons have had such difficulty making inroads in Quebec (for details, see, for example, Bibby 2004b:78-80).

Religion À La Carte

For some time now, observers have noted that the selective consumption of bits and pieces of religion has been highly pervasive in Canada as a whole (Bibby 1987). Such a “pick and choose” approach to religion has seemed particularly evident in Quebec for a simple reason: the populace is overwhelming Catholic, yet – beginning with mass attendance – appears to have limited commitment to the Catholic faith. Well aware of the prevalence of selective consumption of religion in Quebec, the Montreal publisher of my book, *Fragmented Gods* (1987), retitled the French version, *Religion À La Carte* (1988).

The latest 2005 Project Canada survey has updated such “pick and choose” inclinations. It shows that Quebec Catholics who are not actively involved in the Church nonetheless resemble more active Catholics with respect to many basic beliefs.

- Almost seven in ten acknowledge that they have spiritual needs.
- Solid majorities endorse belief in God, and further maintain God cares about them personally; what’s more, almost five in ten maintain that they themselves have experienced the presence of God.
- A majority of these infrequently attending Catholics say they believe in miraculous healing, the Divinity of Jesus, life after death, heaven, and angels.
- About four in ten pray privately at least once a week and another four in ten at least occasionally.
- The majority have drawn on the Church for rites of passage relating to birth, marriage, and death – or plan to do so in the future.
- And finally, some 85% of Quebec Catholics who attend services less than monthly say they do attend mass at least once in a while.

| Table 5. Religious Beliefs, 2005: Quebec Catholics & the Rest of Canada | | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| “Do you believe...?” | | | |
| <i>% Indicating, “Yes, I definitely do” or “Yes, I think I do”</i> | | | |
| | Canada ALL | RCQ Monthly+ | RCQ <Monthly |
| God or a higher power exists | 81% | 98 | 89 |
| You yourself have spiritual needs | 73 | 93 | 66 |
| In miraculous healing | 72 | 89 | 70 |
| Jesus was Divine Son of God | 67 | 94 | 71 |
| In life-after-death | 66 | 82 | 74 |
| God cares about me personally | 64 | 95 | 73 |
| In heaven | 64 | 90 | 57 |
| In angels | 62 | 91 | 63 |
| Have experienced God’s presence | 48 | 87 | 47 |
| Pray privately: | | | |
| Weekly-plus | 46 | 88 | 39 |
| Monthly | 8 | 2 | 13 |
| Rarely | 18 | 7 | 25 |
| Never | 28 | 3 | 23 |
| In the past have had the church perform a: | | | |
| Birth-related | 68 | 93 | 87 |
| Wedding | 63 | 83 | 60 |
| Funeral | 43 | 53 | 49 |
| Anticipate turning to the church in future for: | | | |
| Birth-related | 16 | 14 | 22 |
| Wedding | 26 | 17 | 29 |
| Funeral | 53 | 53 | 66 |
| Never attend worship services | 24 | 0 | 16 |

But religion à la carte becomes particularly evident when one looks at the attitudes that infrequently attending Catholics have toward everyday life, compared to the teachings of the Church. Here what is striking is that even Catholics who attend mass at least once a month are also often selective in their adoption or rejection of Church teachings.

To begin with, Catholics in Quebec, active and less active alike are more likely than other active and less active Canadians to endorse the idea of separating faith from life. Asked to respond to the statement, “*Ministers should stick to religion and not concern themselves with social, economic, and political issues,*” some seven in ten infrequently attending Quebec Catholics agree; they are joined by about five in ten Quebec Catholics who attend services more than once a month. Further, Catholics in Quebec, regardless of whether they attend mass regularly or less frequently, are also less likely than their active and less active counterparts elsewhere to feel that religious groups “should be addressing all of life – spiritual, personal, and social issues.”

Such a tendency to delimit and compartmentalize religion is far more common among Quebec Catholics who attend mass infrequently versus those who attend once a month or more. Yet the general inclination to separate faith from life is considerably more pronounced among Catholics in Quebec than elsewhere, regardless of their level of Church involvement.

| | QUEBEC CATHOLICS | | | OUTSIDE QUEBEC | | |
|--|------------------|----------|----------|----------------|----------|----------|
| | ALL | Monthly+ | <Monthly | ALL | Monthly+ | <Monthly |
| Ministers should stick to religion <i>Disagree</i> | 35% | 51 | 30 | 58 | 76 | 47 |
| Groups should address all of life <i>spiritual, personal, & social issues</i> | 34 | 57 | 26 | 43 | 66 | 33 |

Sources: Ministers – Project Canada 2000; Groups – Project Canada 2005.

It therefore should come as no surprise to find that, regardless of attendance, Quebec Catholics who attend mass less than once a month are far more inclined than Canadians as a whole to approve of the use of artificial birth control, premarital sex, divorce, unmarried couples cohabiting and having children, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the availability of a legal abortion when a mother's health is endangered.

What is surprising is that a majority of Catholics in Quebec who attend services regularly endorse most of these same practices or activities – with the exception of homosexuality and, particularly, same-sex marriage. Quebec Catholics, active and otherwise, are less likely than Canadians elsewhere to approve of abortion on demand.

The Christian faith puts considerable emphasis on interpersonal values that, ideally, contribute to civility. An examination of some select values in the 2005 national survey reveals that similar proportions of active Quebec Catholics and people outside Quebec place a high value on honesty and generosity. However, Catholics in Quebec are not as likely as people elsewhere to see traits such as kindness, forgiveness, and concern for others as extremely important.

In every instance, a higher proportion of active than less active Catholics in Quebec place importance on these interpersonal characteristics. That said – and comparisons notwithstanding – these civility-related values are viewed as “very important” by a majority of all Quebecers, with the single exception of generosity, which is highly valued by 44% of Quebec Catholics who attend services less than once a month.

In short, these findings suggest that being actively involved in the Catholic Church in Quebec is associated with a certain amount of conformity to church teachings relating to religious beliefs and practices, along with family life, sexuality, and interpersonal values. However, what is also striking is the extent to which both the involved and less involved appear to selectively draw on what the Church has to say about faith and life, presumably in keeping with personal preferences and choices.

| | Outside Quebec | RCQ Monthly+ | RCQ <Monthly |
|---|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>Approve of...</i> | | | |
| Married: using artificial birth control | 91% | 84 | 94 |
| Premarital sex | 78 | 80 | 92 |
| Couples getting a divorce | 67 | 64 | 90 |
| Unmarried couples living together | 69 | 68 | 95 |
| Unmarried couples having children | 50 | 65 | 90 |
| Homosexuality | 60 | 45 | 74 |
| Same-sex marriage | 46 | 15 | 63 |
| Abortion: mother's health | 92 | 87 | 98 |
| Abortion: for any reason | 45 | 14 | 35 |
| <i>Highly value...</i> | | | |
| Honesty | 94 | 97 | 85 |
| Kindness | 87 | 76 | 69 |
| Forgiveness | 80 | 69 | 53 |
| Concern for others | 79 | 67 | 57 |
| Generosity | 58 | 58 | 44 |

Why is Religion À La Carte So Pervasive?

If this is all there was to the data story, it would be relatively easy to conclude that religion à la carte is rampant in Quebec because of Quebecers. That is to say, selection consumption of Catholicism is the product of factors that have liberated individuals, providing them with the freedom to be demanding and sophisticated customers in all realms of life, including religion. Culture has changed Quebecers, with major implications for what they want from the Church.

Such explanations, however, do not give adequate attention to the role of the dominant religion supplier. In Quebec, that supplier, of course, has been and continues to be the Roman Catholic Church. It is not at all clear, for example, that the Church has changed with the times, providing ministries to the province’s Catholics which are in touch with children, teenagers, and young adults in particular. It also is not readily evident that the Church has been able to remain relevant in the face of changes in family structures, notably cohabitation and children born to common-law couples.

An important research question worth exploring is the extent to which religion à la carte is a reflection, not so much of the lack of demand for religion, but the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to minister well to the diverse interests and needs of Quebecers – a failure of supply rather than demand. Put succinctly, if the Church did a better job of touching the lives of Quebec Catholics, would that result in noteworthy numbers of people being more involved in the Church?

In the 2005 survey, we put the question directly to Quebecers, along with other people across the country who are not actively involved in religious groups. The question read, *“Would you consider being more involved in a religious group if you found it to be worthwhile for yourself or your family?”*

What we found it that 63% of Quebec Catholics who attend mass less than once a month said “yes” or “perhaps.” Of considerable importance, those indicating receptivity include almost seven in ten Quebec Catholic Boomers and just under six in ten Post-Boomers and older, Pre-Boomers. Further, Quebec males and females are just about as likely to say they are open to the possibility of greater involvement – typically in the Catholic Church. The 63% figure holds for both Montreal and the rest of the province.

| | NAT | RCQ | RCOQ | PROT | NONE |
|--------------|-----|-----|------|------|------|
| ALL | 62% | 63 | 75 | 71 | 37 |
| Boomers | 64 | 68 | 77 | 74 | 33 |
| Pre-Boomers | 54 | 58 | 60 | 61 | 29 |
| Post-Boomers | 64 | 55 | 77 | 85 | 43 |
| Women | 65 | 65 | 77 | 76 | 42 |
| Men | 60 | 60 | 72 | 72 | 33 |

Source: Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*, 2006:202.

Asked the important follow-up question, “*What kinds of things would make it worthwhile?*” inactives across the country volunteered thoughts.

- Some four in ten say the key lies with *ministry* that is in touch with their personal interests and needs, including ministries that target children, young adults, and seniors.
- The remaining six in ten are almost equally divided between (1) citing the importance of *organizational* issues, such as the need for changes in style and outlook; (2) the desire for ministries that exhibit *qualities* that they value, including relevance, authenticity and integrity; and (3) noting that the barriers to involvement lie with factors in *their own lives*, along the lines of schedule, time, family, and age and health issues.

Table 9. What Would Make Greater Involvement Worthwhile

Factors Cited by People Attending <Monthly Who Say They Are Receptive

| | |
|---|------------|
| Ministry Factors | 39% |
| e.g., personal interests & needs, specific ministries, God & spirituality | |
| Organizational Factors | 22 |
| e.g., changes in style & outlook; more contemporary, inclusive, equality, better leadership | |
| Ministry Qualities | 20 |
| e.g., relevant, genuine, realistic, interesting, stimulating, lively | |
| Respondent Factors | 19 |
| e.g., schedule changes, involvement of family & friends, getting older, health | |
| Total | 100 |

While the sample sizes are too small to provide more than some initial thoughts, it may be noteworthy that infrequently attending Catholics in Quebec are somewhat more likely than Catholics elsewhere to cite organizational and personal factors as barriers to greater involvement. These findings suggest the desire on the part of Quebec Catholics for style, outlook, and leadership changes – as well as greater Church sensitivity to barriers to participation that include work schedules and a variety of family such as having young children and partners who are indifferent to attending services.

Still, in Quebec as elsewhere, improved ministry is the no. 1 characteristic that Catholics say would lead them to be more involved in the Church.

Table 10. What Would Make Greater Involvement Worthwhile by Religious Group, Age, and Gender

| | Ministry Factors | Org. Factors | Ministry Qualities | Respond Factors | Totals |
|------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|
| ALL | 39% | 22 | 20 | 19 | 100 |
| RCQ | 32 | 28 | 16 | 24 | 100 |
| RCOQ | 52 | 17 | 20 | 11 | 100 |
| ML Prots | 38 | 20 | 17 | 25 | 100 |
| None | 41 | 25 | 20 | 14 | 100 |
| 18-34 | 37 | 25 | 19 | 19 | 100 |
| 35-54 | 38 | 20 | 22 | 20 | 100 |
| 55+ | 45 | 20 | 17 | 18 | 100 |
| Women | 33 | 22 | 24 | 21 | 100 |
| Men | 48 | 22 | 14 | 16 | 100 |

Discussion

The transformation of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec from the early 1960s onward has provided a fascinating case study of secularization. What has intrigued observers such as Jean-Paul Rouleau (1977:9) is not only the fact that the Church relinquished its hold on Quebec society but that it did so with a minimal amount of resistance or conflict. What has intrigued onlookers such as David Martin (1981) is not only that church attendance plummeted but that it happened so quickly. As journalist Ron Graham (1990: 117) has pointed out, "The secularization that had taken place in Europe over a hundred years happened in Quebec in about five years." An aging priest in Denys Arcand's film, *The Barbarian Invasions*, is even more dramatic: "In 1966 all the churches emptied out in a few weeks," he says. "No one can figure out why" (cited in Noll, 2006).

So it is that "The Quieter Revolution," as a CBC television documentary in the mid-70s dubbed it, saw the Catholic Church move to the periphery of life in Quebec, and church attendance drop from the highest level to among the lowest levels of any region in North America. Summing up the situation in the early 1990s, Gregory Baum (1991:25) wrote that Catholicism was "more visible in memories, architecture, public symbols and the saints' names given to villages, towns and organizations" than in the number of practising Catholics.

Our 1975 Project Canada survey shows that the secularization of Quebec was accompanied by a certain amount of resentment on the part of many people who were no longer actively involved in the Church. Over one-half of such individuals who participated in the survey said they were *disenchanted with what the Church had been doing*, while just under one-half also complained about widespread *hypocrisy*. One-quarter reported that *religion had been forced on them as children*, while the same proportion said they had been troubled by *the restrictions religion place on life* (Bibby 2004a:19).

At that point in time, some 60% of Baby Boomers described themselves as "currently inactive but at one time active," compared to about 30% of older, Pre-Boomers. The top reasons just cited for decreased involvement were ranked similarly by both age cohorts. Neither age group saw factors such as *decreasing interest in questions of meaning and purpose* or *the absence of God in time of need* as major reasons for having become less involved. Their "issues" were Church related.

These findings suggest that, contrary to widespread thinking, the primary reason for the decline in religious participation among Quebec Catholics did not lie so much with demand as with supply. Large numbers had not felt particularly well served by the Roman Catholic Church, with their involvement primarily a response to what the Church expected, rather than a

spontaneous response to ministry that was enriching their lives. Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, for example, maintained in his 1985 memoir, *Straight from the Heart*, that the Church had benefited from the fact that Quebecers had been poor, rural, and uneducated and instilled a mentality of grim resolution, gratitude, and obedience. Once the Church began to lose its control over society – education, social services, health, and politics, for example, it simultaneously began to lose its psychological and emotional authority over individuals.

Beyer (1993:141) is among those who maintain that, together, the Quiet Revolution and Vatican Council had an emancipating effect upon Quebec Catholics. As part of the Quiet Revolution, they “questioned the inherited ways of thinking and acting, and removed the Church from its omnipresent and pivotal position.” Beyer maintains the “Second Vatican Council encouraged them to go even further, to change how one went about being a Roman Catholic.” Quebecers who had attended services regularly out of a sense of duty increasingly realized they had a choice as to whether or not to go to mass. Many opted to stay away.

The sentiments of many are summed up in findings from the 2005 Project Canada survey. Among Quebec Catholics, about 90% of Pre-Boomers, 80% of Boomers, and 65% of Post-Boomers agreed with the generalization, “*My parents felt that they were ‘supposed to go to church’.*” Those kinds of sentiments had and continue to have important implications for offspring. In 1975, one Pre-Boomer from Champlain commented, “When I was growing up, I had no choice but to go”; by the time he was in his mid-30s, he was attending once a year. Asked in the 2005 survey to respond to the statement, “*In my mind, people who attend religious services should not go because they feel they have to but because they find it to be worthwhile,*” some 80% of Pre-Boomers agreed, as did just over 85% of Baby Boomers and Post-Boomers.

Such findings, when seen alongside our earlier finding that some 63% of Quebec Catholics who attend services less than once a month are receptive to greater involvement, point to the fact that significant numbers of Catholics are open to ministries that can touch their lives and the lives of their families. But the important qualifier is that they have to find that such involvement is worthwhile. Most are not inclined to attend services more often simply because “that is what a good Catholic is expected to do.” Duty and deference have given way to a desire for worship experiences and ministries to children and young people, for example, that add something to their lives.

This brings us back to argument of Rodney Stark. In Quebec, secularization has not slain religion. Numerous observers speak matter-of-factly about how religion has given way to nationalism: Beyer (1993:141) writes that, today, nationalism “stands as the dominant ideology among Québécois”; Graham (1990:120) goes further in saying that “nationalism replaced

religion.” Historian Preston Jones (2001:252) comments that French Canadian nationalism which was “rooted in Quebec’s Catholic history was transformed into Quebecois separatism as a secular faith.” But in Stark’s thinking, however important nationalism may be, it cannot displace the gods in providing answers to questions such as what happens when we die. Perhaps significantly, Lemieux (1990:163-164) makes the point that the Church, “although grappling with its own quest for identity, remains the natural referent in the quest for meaning of the very great majority.”

The survey findings show that ultimate questions are still being asked and spiritual needs are still being expressed. Catholics in the province, like people elsewhere, continue to have longings for the sacred, to believe, to pray, to experience the gods. Of paramount importance, they see themselves as Catholics. They also continue to look to the Church for rites of passage and for seasonal celebrations of Mass, notably Easter and Christmas – rites and celebrations that appear to play a major role in perpetuating the belief that they are “Catholic” (Turcotte 2001:510-511).

However, they are not open to just any religious supplier. As Beyer (1993:155) acknowledges, to the extent Québécois are “taking their religion à la carte, the dominant menu is still the old one...the one offered by the Catholic Church.”

That’s why, if the forms of religious innovation that are required to offset secularization are to appear, they are going to have to be initiated by the religious group Quebecers are so reluctant to abandon – the Roman Catholic Church. Secularization stimulates innovation. What secularization in Quebec has unveiled is the need for the primary supplier, the Catholic Church, to be innovative in providing the emphases and ministries that are in touch with the interests and needs of Quebec Catholics.

This is not to say that there necessarily will be the proverbial “happy ending” to all this. Why? Because it is not at all clear that the Catholic Church will exhibit either the inclination or the ability to play such a role in the foreseeable future.

An adequate assessment of such prospects is well beyond the scope of this paper. But one can initially see that many Roman Catholic leaders in Quebec and elsewhere have a mindset where they see involvement in the Church as something that is simply expected of practicing Catholics, rather than being conditional on the quality of ministry of the Church.

Apart from inclination, it is not readily evident that Canadian Catholic seminaries, for example, are training priests to assume leadership roles with a strong emphasis on ministry – beyond the celebrating of mass and the administering of core rites of passage. A cursory of glance at the current course offerings of Roman Catholic seminaries across Canada reveals

that relatively little attention is being given to courses that attempt to understand the cultural context of ministry; focus on effective ministry to children, youth, and families generally; address issues relating to the enhancing of worship and music; help priests carry out effective pastoral work; and courses that prepare priests for the large amount of time they will have to give to administrative and organizational tasks. Far more attention is given to traditional core courses that address the scholarly aspects of the priestly role – Biblical studies, theology, archaeology, Church history, and the like.

Pierre Trudeau once wrote that the Catholic Church in Quebec was “content with elaborating theoretical systems, devoid of any objective link with reality and often totally inapplicable to practice” (cited in Graham 1990:115). To the extent that there continues to be any truth in Trudeau’s harsh allegation, things need to change.

Radical though it may sound, the Quebec Church, if it is to connect with the interests and needs of the some five million people who say they are Catholic but are not actively involved, may need to do the unthinkable. The Church may need to learn a basic lesson from evangelical Protestants: if it is to embrace its people, it needs to prepare its leaders to minister well to their varied interests and everyday needs. The Church has to do a better job of ministry.

Conclusion

Contrary to widespread thinking, large numbers of Catholics in Quebec, like Canadians more generally, are not closed to the possibility of being more involved with organized religion. But unless they can become convinced that their lives are enhanced as a result of such increased involvement, they will continue to do what large numbers are now doing, namely, give religion what they deem it is worth – psychological and emotional identification, an occasional appearance, limited financial support, and consumption versus commitment. Functionally, it works out not to desertion or rejection, but to practicing religion à la carte.

It was not written in the stars that Roman Catholics in Quebec would empty the pews with the dawn of the Quiet Revolution. The movement of authority from the Church to the State and the advent of unprecedented individual freedom meant that involvement in the Church no longer was a psychological necessity. Instead, from the late 1960s onward, the decision to be involved was based on the belief that one’s life was better because of one’s ties with the Church. Clearly, for many Quebec Catholics, notably Boomers and Post-Boomers, there has not been a sense that involvement with the Church elevates one’s life and the lives of one’s family. Consequently, now in a position to choose, many Catholics have opted for limited ties.

What will turn things around? Improved ministry on the part of the Church. When, if ever, will that happen? As should be evident by now, the answer, as I see it, lies not with Quebec Catholics, but with the Church.

In a report to Rome in 1974, a group of Quebec bishops wrote that a traditional society had given way to “a pluralistic, segmented, declericalized, secularized, permissive, industrialized, and urbanized society” (Grant 1988:228). In the face of such perceived changes, accompanied by the decline in church attendance and membership in religious orders, along with growing numbers of males leaving the priesthood, historian John Webster Grant maintained that the Church hierarchy responded not with a loud voice but with a deafening silence. That silence, he said, “might be interpreted as a pause for reflection, as tacit acceptance, or simply as a confession of helplessness” (Grant 1988:227-228).

The early years of the new century see significant numbers of Quebec Catholics open to a Church that has something to say and something to bring. It remains to be seen if ministry will break the silence.

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