

Ethos Versus Ethics

Canada, the U.S., and Homosexuality

by

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Abstract

The possible legalization of same-sex marriage has been a source of considerable debate in Canada and the United States in recent years. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the two countries are going in different directions with Canada being far more receptive than the U.S. The obvious question is why? In this paper, the author discusses historical and cultural explanations, including the role that religion may play. Drawing on extensive national survey data in Canada and the United States, he looks at trends in attitudes toward homosexuality generally and at recent findings on same-sex marriages specifically. His analyzes show that, since the 1970s, Canadians have been exhibiting higher levels of acceptance of homosexuality than Americans. However, religious involvement contributes to lower levels of acceptance in both countries, with the levels fairly similar in both settings for evangelicals, Catholics, and Mainline Protestants. Given that the Canadian-American differences in gay-lesbian attitudes largely disappear when religion is controlled for, the author concludes that the higher level of acceptance of homosexuality in Canada reflects not so much a greater emphasis on diversity as lower levels of religious participation. In short, the answer to the question lies with religious teachings rather than different cultural emphases – with ethics rather than ethos. Such findings confirm that in both countries, and the United States in particular, same-sex issues will not be easily resolved.

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of the legalization of same-sex marriage has been a source of considerable debate in Canada and the United States, as well as in a sizable number of other countries. In April of 2001, Holland expanded its definition of marriage to include same sex couples and was followed by Belgium in January of 2003.

However, it is interesting to note that, despite the fact Canada and the U.S are assumed to have highly similar cultures and values, the two countries appear to be going in very different directions on the same-sex marriage issue.

Different Government Responses

On the national political level, Canada's federal government is in the process of preparing legislation that would legalize same-sex marriages.* In sharp contrast, American President George W. Bush has been advocating an amendment to the Constitution that would ban such unions (AP, 2004).

At the provincial and state levels, the differences are pronounced. As of March of 2004, three of the Canada's ten provinces – Ontario (June 2003), British Columbia (July 2003), and Quebec (March 2004) – had legalized gay marriage. At that in time, no American state had followed suit. On the contrary, some forty states had enacted "*Defense of Marriage Acts*" (DOMAs) banning same-sex marriage, and other states had similar legislation pending (Gatehouse 2004:28, Religious Tolerance.org 2004). Vermont was permitting civil unions for gay and lesbian couples and Massachusetts was moving toward likewise legalizing civil unions, while at the same taking steps to ban gay marriage.

Different Experiences and Perceptions

And so it is that in Canada – a country in which homosexuality was an illegal activity until 1969 – some 733 same-sex marriages had been performed in B.C. by the end of 2003, with almost two-thirds of these couples from elsewhere in Canada, the U.S., or other countries (MacQueen 2004:30). In Toronto alone, 1,143 same-sex marriage licenses were issued between mid-June of 2003 and mid February of 2004 (Daly 2004). In Quebec, where the opportunity has only been available since March 19, 2004, a flood of such marriages is anticipated.

* In response to the Ontario provincial court ruling specifically, the federal government has drafted a tentative bill that would permit gay marriages, but has asked the Supreme Court of Canada to confirm that such a bill is constitutional. It also has asked the Court to address the question of whether or not the traditional requirement that a marriage be between a man & a woman is consistent with the Charter. The Court will hear arguments for three days in October; it is expected to take several months to prepare its views, resulting in 2005 release date.

Meanwhile, in the United States, same-sex marriages were being performed in some locales, notably San Francisco. As a result of the mayor's initiative on February 12, 2004, more than 4,000 same-sex couples married within eight weeks through mid-March (Gatehouse 2004:28). However, the state of California has refused to register the marriages.

The Canadian-American differences on the subject can further be seen in public opinion. Polls conducted in each of the countries in early 2004 found that 47% of Canadians are in favour of same-sex marriages, compared to 36% of Americans (Ipsos-Reid 2004; Gallup 2004).

All of this leads to the obvious question: Why the difference between the two countries?

Prevalent Explanations

Efforts to try to make sense of Canadian-American value differences generally and sexual orientation-related issues more specifically have tended to emphasize the importance of historical and cultural factors, along with religion.

Historical and Cultural Factors

For some time, observers have argued that cultural attitudes and policies in Canada and the U.S. have been significantly shaped by emphases that go back to the origins of the two countries. Briefly put, analysts have drawn attention to the fact that Canada grew out of the union of French and British colonies and has spent much of its history trying to consolidate "the two solitudes," while also needing to be cognizant of indigenous peoples and large numbers of additional immigrants from around the world. The result has been a country characterized by an emphasis on the virtues of harmonious diversity – a pluralistic mosaic. Such a model was explicitly championed and enshrined in law in the post-1950s, largely through the efforts of Pierre Trudeau's Liberty Party government. Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms have translated into the celebration of diversity in virtually all aspects of life (see, for example, Bibby 1990, Adams 2003).

In sharp contrast to Canada, the United States, of course, made a dramatic break from England, and set out to establish a distinct nation. Its "charter myth," according to early proponents of American civil religion such as Robert Bellah (1967), included the idea that the country was founded by God to give leadership to the world – a theme that may sound excessively theistic and presumptuous, yet continues to be echoed by the current American President. Of considerable importance, the charter myth has included the idea that truth is to be both pursued and practiced. In America there is an unmistakable emphasis on what is "true" and what is "best."

The net effect of such fundamental historical differences is that Canada tends to encourage social policies that contribute to the successful co-existence of interdependent parts – symbolized by the mosaic and verbalized by the country’s long-standing national goals of “peace, order, and good government.” In contrast, the United States gives far more emphasis to the idea of being a world-leading unified whole – symbolized by the melting pot and verbalized by the nation’s long-standing goals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

So it is that an observer such as Seymour Lipset (1989) has pointed out that the one of the key tenets of the so-called “American Creed” has been individualism, in contrast to the premier importance that Canada has placed on group rights. As one Canadian federal government lawyer recently put it, debates over issues such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage go to the cores of two quite different political traditions. In the U.S. the debates focus on individual liberty; in Canada they focus on equality (Geddes 2004). The outcomes may or may not be the same.

A recent detailed empirical examination of Canadian-American social values by respected pollster and analyst Michael Adams has given “micro” support to such “macro” assertions. His examination of data spanning 1992 through 2000 has led Adams to conclude that “Canadians and Americans are markedly different, and are becoming more so” (Adams 2003:7). He maintains that the last decade has seen Americans “retrench,” whereby they are placing renewed value on traditional ideas and institutions. Canadians, he maintains, have been moving in the opposite direction. He backs up his argument with data showing marked attitudinal and behavioural differences in areas that include religion, patriarchal authority, views of women, family life, conformity, crime, violence, and multicultural and multiracial diversity.

Adams is highly cognizant of personal and regional variations in both countries. Nonetheless, he maintains that, overall, the Canadian national-building theme of compromise and the American theme of conquest are associated with significant differences in how people think and act. Canadians, with few exceptions, are exhibiting a higher propensity for diversity. That inclination extends to the area of sexual orientation. “In America,” Adams writes, “a father whose son comes out of the closet and declares his homosexuality is more likely to say, ‘You are no longer my son.’ In Canada such a father is more likely to find a way to adapt” (Adams 2003:125).

The Religious Factor

Beyond broad historical and cultural explanations, people who are trying to account for the different responses to same-sex marriage in Canada and the United States frequently cite the importance of religion. Here, however, the arguments tend to be very general and speculative,

rather than specific and informed by good data.

For example, observers in both countries – be they journalists, academics, religious leaders, or average onlookers – believe or are led to believe that much of the opposition to same-sex marriages comes from evangelical Protestants, who frequently are referred to as “fundamentalists” and, in the U.S., “The Religious Right” and “born-again Christians” as well. To a lesser extent, devout Catholics are also indicted as being part of the opposition. Polls carried out by reputable companies and news organizations fairly often include some form of the evangelical variable in their analysis of the results – although, curiously, they often omit Catholics, are sketchy on age, and as often as not omit both race and gender, even though researchers know that all of these variables are pertinent to sound interpretations of the polls.

It doesn't only happen on the south side of the border. By way of illustration, a March 2004 front cover story on same-sex marriages in Canada's leading weekly magazine, *Maclean's*, pointed out that the Republicans lost an estimated four million evangelical votes between 1996 and 2000, and went on to say, “The White House's hardline stance on same-sex marriage is designed to bring these people back into the fold” (Gatehouse 2004:28). The article gave considerable attention to evangelical Christian opposition to such marriages, including what were described as “fundamentalist churches in the heart of Georgia's Bible belt.” Turning northward, the *Maclean's* writers noted that Anglican receptivity to same-sex unions stood in contrast to Catholic and evangelical opposition – including a public awareness campaign being mounted by Canada's branch of Focus on the Family (MacQueen 2004:30). However, beyond example and anecdote, minimal actual “hard” data were provided to back up the article's sweeping generalizations.

Still, such widespread assumptions about the relationship between religion and views of homosexuality generally and same-sex marriage more specifically are obviously not unreasonable. While we as academics are prone to treat all of life as a great mystery, some social facts and relationships are virtually self-evident. For example, the reading of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is not a prerequisite to realizing that religion sometimes has an important influence on individuals and cultures. Christian groups historically have denounced homosexuality. Given the dominance of Christianity in both the United States and Canada, it should hardly be surprising that a major source of opposition to same-sex marriage has been Christian groups. Much less emphasized is the fact that, along the way, they can be expected to find anti-homosexual allies in a number of Other Faith groups as well.

What's needed beyond hunches and stereotypes, however, is some specificity and some good analyzes that clarify religion's role in all this. Which religious groups and which individuals endorse

or oppose same-sex unions? How do their views compare with people who are not religiously committed? Further, returning to the central question being raised, to what extent does “the religious factor” help to account for Canadian and American attitudinal differences? Do the two countries’ respective emphases on compromise versus conquest influence the attitudes of religiously committed Canadians and Americans?

This paper is intended to contribute to such clarification.

The North American Religious Backdrop

The Dominant Groups

Throughout their respective histories, the vast majority of Canadians and Americans have shared a common identification with the Christian faith. As readers know well, both countries were settled primarily by Europeans who brought their various expressions of Protestantism and Catholicism to North American shores. They further evangelized large numbers of their indigenous hosts.

Immigration from other countries where Other World Faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are prominent has been extensive in recent years, contributing to some religious diversification – but, to date at least, not very much (Bibby 2000, 2002a). The latest Canadian census in 2001 revealed that close to eight in ten Canadians identify with Catholicism or Protestantism. Some 7% identify with other religions, and 16% say they have no religion. U.S. figures as of 2003 are very similar: just over eight in ten Americans identify with Christianity, a similar 7% with other religions, and a slightly lower 11% report they have no religion.

There are, however, two major differences in the religious makeup of the two countries that have potentially important implications for family and sexuality matters. First, almost 50% of Canadians are Catholic, compared to about 25% of Americans. Second, close to 30% of Americans identify with evangelical Protestant groups (higher if the “Other Christian” category is factored in), versus just under 10% of Canadians. In short, proportionately speaking, the U.S. has far more evangelicals and far fewer Catholics.

	Canada	U.S.
Christian	77%	82
Catholic	43	24
Protestant	29	49
<i>Mainline</i>	21	22
<i>Conservative</i>	8	27
Other Christian	5	9
Other Faiths	7	7
No Religion	16	11

Sources: Statistics Canada, 2001 census; US - The Gallup Poll, March 23, 2004; ML and Cons Prot estimates based on Gallup, November 2003.

It also is important to note that participation levels in the United States are higher than those of Canada. In recent years, the national difference in weekly attendance has been around 5%.^{*} Catholic levels are similar, except for Quebec. Among Protestants, Mainline attendance is higher in the U.S. but evangelical attendance is considerably higher in Canada.

There also appear to be some noteworthy qualitative differences between religion in the two countries that are

relevant to our analysis. Samuel Reimer (1995), for example, has maintained that higher levels of religiosity in the U.S. have “more to do with cultural supports for religiosity than with deeper religious conviction.” He argues that religious devotion among Canadians “is more likely to be based on ‘conviction.’” Whether rich in support or rich in conviction, the outcome in either would be expected to contribute to vitality, increasing religion’s potential to influence individuals and communities in both countries.

Religious Groups’ Views of Homosexuality

Over time, evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics have been highly consistent in endorsing heterosexuality and disapproving of homosexuality. Evangelicals – known sociologically as “Conservative Protestants” – typically have based their position on what they regard as scriptural authority. Roman Catholics have drawn on both the scriptures and Church tradition in explicitly denouncing homosexuality. The glossary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Homosexual acts are morally wrong because they violate God’s purpose for human sexual activity.” For Conservative Protestants and Catholics, marriage is assumed to be limited to heterosexual couples. Here again, evangelicals claim scriptural authority. The Catholic Church’s Catechism explicitly defines marriage as “A covenant or partnership of life between a man and woman, which is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children.”

	Canada	U.S.
NATIONALLY	24%	30
Roman Catholics	30	34
<i>Quebec</i>	21	---
<i>Outside Quebec</i>	38	---
Protestants	29	36
<i>Mainline</i>	18	28
<i>Conservative</i>	64	37

^{*} For reasons that are not immediately clear, recent American Gallup polls have pegged the “almost every week or more” figures considerably higher than NORC’s General Social Survey – in 2003, for example, at 45% nationally, 46% for RCs, and 51% for Protestants. Based on that latter figure, weekly Mainline Protestant attendance would be around 40%, the Conservative Protestant level about 60% (Gallup, March 23,2004). The higher figures, of course, only amplify my argument that attendance is higher in the U.S. than Canada, with the evangelical exception.

A number of Mainline Protestant denominations, notably Episcopalians, United Methodists, the United Church of Christ, and Presbyterians in the U.S. – and their Anglican and United Church counterparts in Canada – increasingly have been inclined to approve of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual preference. In the late 1980s, for example, the United Church of Canada voted in favour of allowing people to participate fully in the denomination, regardless of sexual orientation. In June of 2002, the Vancouver-area Anglican diocese of New Westminster approved same-sex blessings. In November of 2003, the Episcopal Church in the U.S. became the first major Christian denomination to appoint an openly gay man as a bishop when it consecrated Gene Robinson as the bishop of New Hampshire.

However, the opposition that has surrounded such developments has underscored the lack of consensus on sexual orientation that is common even among Mainline Protestant groups. Some observers have predicted that in the American Episcopalian instance, for example, the denomination could be facing its worst split since being founded in 1789. Similar bleak prophecies have been directed at the New Westminster diocese and, for that matter, the Anglican Church worldwide – reminiscent of what the United Church experienced two decades ago in dealing with gay and lesbian ordination.

In Canada it's clear that religious groups, regardless of how vociferous they might be in opposing same-sex marriage, are having to adapt to the cultural ethos of diversity, tolerance, and compromise. But so do gays and lesbians. It is highly significant – and patently Canadian – that the proposed federal legislation is not only aimed at permitting same sex individuals to marry. It also is being written to ensure that religious officials are protected from being compelled to perform same-sex marriages (see, for example, Makin 2004). That's striving for compromise.

Methodology & Procedures

Since 1975 I have been monitoring social trends in Canada through a series of adult national surveys by mail every five years through the year 2000. Each of the six surveys has involved a highly representative sample of approximately 1,500 people, making it possible to generalize to the Canadian population with a high level of accuracy (about 3.5 percentage points either way, 19 times in 20).^{*} Together, these six “*Project Canada*” surveys provide comprehensive data on Canadian

^{*} All six of the surveys have included samples of some 1,500 Canadian adults, selected from communities across the country using stratified and random sampling techniques. Response rates have averaged about 60%; cooperation levels that pollsters obtain in national surveys conducted by telephone or in person are typically around 65%. Discrepancies between sample and population characteristics have been corrected by weighting for provincial and community size, along with gender and age. With appropriate weighting — □ where the samples are reduced to about 1,200 cases to minimize the use of large weight factors — □ the samples are highly representative of the Canadian population and are accurate

life spanning the last quarter of the twentieth century, including measures of religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality (for further methodological details, see Bibby, 2002a:249ff). In addition, I completed a new national survey in late 2003 that focused on what Canadians want from family life. Entitled, *The Future Families Project*, this comprehensive survey had a sample of 2,100 Canadians. It was carried out in collaboration with the highly respected Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa. This latest survey included a large number of items on attitudes toward sexual orientation, including Canadians' views on same-sex marriage.

These surveys provide unique and invaluable trend data on attitudes toward homosexuality, as well as an up-to-date reading on views of same-sex marriage. The surveys also have include a wide variety of religiosity measures, permitting sound explorations into the role that religion has played and is playing in shaping those ideas.

The accessibility of a wealth of American survey data, generated – in particular – by Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (GSS) and The Gallup Organization, further makes it possible to compare many of the Canadian findings with those of the United States. The General Social Survey material is particularly pertinent, since a large number of GSS items have also appeared in all of the Project Canada surveys dating back to 1975.

I want to begin by sketching Canadian and American attitudes toward homosexuality over recent decades, and then proceed to look at those attitudes through the eyes of religious affiliation and involvement in both countries. In keeping with the primary focus of the paper, I will attempt to clarify to what extent “the religious factor” helps to explain Canadian and U.S. differences.

Findings

Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage

One way that survey researchers have tried to explore attitudes toward homosexuality over the years is by using a GSS item that asks respondents for their opinion of two adults of the same sex having **sexual relations**. Between 1975 and 1985, some 6 in 10 Canadians indicated that they felt such relations were “always wrong,” as did more than 7 in 10 Americans. However, a softening of attitudes began to occur in both countries by around 1990 and continued through the end of the century.

within about 3 percentage points either way, 19 times in 20.

By 2000, only 32% of Canadians maintained that same-sex relations were “always wrong” – a dramatic drop from the 63% level of 1975. The U.S. figure also declined, but only to 59% – the Canadian level in 1990. Over the twenty-five year period, Canadian disapproval levels were consistently lower than those of Americans, with the magnitude increasing as the century wound down.

Table 3. Attitudes Toward Homosexual Relations: 1975-2000
*“What is your opinion of two adults of the same sex having sexual relations?”**

		1975**	1980	1985	1990	1995**	2000
Not wrong at all	Canada	14%	16	16	21	34	44
	U.S.	13	15	14	13	23	29
Always wrong	Canada	63	62	62	59	44	32
	U.S.	73	73	75	76	67	59

—
 *The other two response options were “Almost always wrong” and “Sometimes wrong.”
 **The actual US survey years were 1974 & 1994; the item wasn’t included in 1975 & there was no GSS survey in 1995. The data were collected in late 1974. Subsequent tables also use “1975.”

An examination of attitudes over time by age shows that, in both countries, increasing percentages of people in all three major age cohorts have been expressing positive views of gay and lesbian relations. But in each cohort instance, the increases have been significantly higher in Canada than in the U.S. A simple literal cohort analysis suggests that, as adults on both sides of the border are aging, they also are becoming more accepting of homosexual relations.

A variable that is strongly associated with a positive view of gay and lesbian relations in Canada but not in the United States is gender. Canadian women (53%) readily exceed men (36%) in maintaining that homosexual relations are “not wrong at all.” South of the border, gender differences are insignificant.

Table 4. Acceptance of Homosexual Relations by Age and Gender: 1975-2000
% Indicating Homosexual Relations “Not Wrong at All”

	1975		2000	
	Canada	U.S.	Canada	U.S.
NATIONALLY	14%	13	44	29
18-34	22	21	61	40
35-54	12	12	48	30
55+	5	5	24	16
Female	17	14	53	30
Male	11	13	36	28

Source: Canada - Bibby, Project Canada Surveys; US - NORC GSS.

However, in the course of focusing on Canadian-American differences, it’s important not to overlook the overall national pictures. Though Canada is outdistancing the United States, the country as a whole is hardly endorsing homosexual relations: 44% approve, 32% do not, and the remaining 24% have some reservations. Still, the approval level has tripled since 1975. With the aging of the population, it may well characterize a majority of Canadians within a decade or so.

* These trend findings for adults, incidentally, are also corroborated by our *Project Teen Canada* national surveys of youth carried out in 1984, 1992, and 2000. Over that period, the proportion of Canada’s 15-to-19-year-olds who indicated they approved of homosexuality more than doubled, from 26% to 54% (for details, see Bibby 2001 and 2002b).

Data on **same-sex marriage attitudes** is available for a much shorter time-span. As readers know well, the issue was scarcely raised in earlier decades, at least publicly. The last half of the twentieth century was obviously a time when gays and lesbians were pursuing “the basics” in the way of acceptance and civil rights. Marriage wasn’t on the proverbial radar screen of most people – gay, lesbian, or otherwise.

What the available polling shows is that the level of approval of same-sex marriages has remained essentially unchanged since the turn of the century in both countries.

Approval stands at around 35% in the United States and just over 45% in Canada. One would assume that these levels are dramatically higher than they were in previous decades

Consistent with such an assumption, differences by age are striking. In Canada, for example, 60% of young adults under 35 currently say that they approve of same-sex marriages, compared to about 50% of 35-to-54-year-olds and slightly over 30% of adults who are 55 and older. Larger percentages of females than males in both countries express approval of such marriages.

Table 5. Approval of Same-Sex Marriages: 1996-2004
% Approving

	1996	2001	2002	2003	2004
Canada	49%	45	48%	46	47
U.S.	27	35	****	35	36

Sources: Canada – 1996 Angus Reid, June; 2001 Angus Reid, June; 2002 Environics, April; July; 2003 FFP, August; 2004 Ipsos, January. U.S. – 1996 Pew Forum, June; 2001 Pew Forum; 2003 Gallup, October; 2004 Gallup, March.

Table 6. Approval of Same-Sex Marriages by Age and Gender: 1996-2004

	1996		2004	
	Canada	U.S.	Canada	U.S.
NATIONALLY	49%	27	47	36
18-34	67	47	60	50
35-54	49	***	48	43
55+	25	***	33	20
Females	***	***	51	39
Males	***	***	43	34

Sources: Canada – 1996 Angus Reid, June; 2004 Ipsos Reid, January. U.S. – 1996 Pew Forum, June; 2004 Gallup, March & ABC/WPost January.

What again is noteworthy is the finding that within each age cohort and among females and males, Canadians without exception are more likely than Americans to indicate they endorse same-sex marriages. This remarkably consistent pattern of differences could, as Michael Adams argues, be largely the product of differences in ethos. Then again, maybe not.

The Religious Factor

What isn’t yet clear is the extent to which religion is playing a role in Canadians exhibiting higher levels of acceptance of homosexuality than Americans. Two very broad possibilities exist.

- First, if central cultural themes such as cooperation and acceptance of diversity are at work, having a powerful influence on individuals and social life, we would expect that, over time, people who are involved in religious groups – and certainly people not active in them – would be swept up in the tide. In fact, in the case of acceptance of homosexuality, we would expect that if culture is overriding religion, changes should be similar for people involved in religious groups and those who are not. We might call this the “ethos” argument.

- A second possibility is that if people are committed to religious groups that subscribe to ideas that are in conflict with cultural emphases – as frequently is the case with homosexuality, the religious factor would be expected to override culture. Simply put, people would be reluctant to budge. In the latter instance, we have what we might refer to as the “*ethics*” argument, as in religious teachings.
- With respect to *the Canadian-American “differential,”* if Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and evangelical teachings on a topic such as homosexuality are fairly universal, we would expect affiliates of these three Christian “families” to exhibit fairly similar attitudes over time. To the extent they don’t, it can be argued that there is a cultural dimension that is coming into play that is supplementing and/or interacting with the religious dimension. However, if Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Conservative Protestants have a comparable impact on their active people on *both sides* of the border, then the answer to the differential question may well be found in demographics.

The available data on attitudes toward homosexual relations over time allow us to address these three questions.

The Ethos Argument

If the primary determinant of attitudes toward homosexuality is culture, we would expect attitudes to change over time, regardless of the level of participation in religious groups.

An examination of attitudes between the mid-70s and 2000 reveals that the percentage of weekly-attending Canadians who maintain homosexual relations are “not wrong at all” increased from 5% to 18%. However, among Canadians attending services less than weekly, the jump was considerably higher – from 18% in 1975 to 51% in 2000. Clearly religion was having a braking effect on such attitudes. In the U.S., the increase among weekly attenders was similar to Canada’s – from 7% to 14%. What stands out in the American instance is the relatively modest increase as well for people attending less than weekly – from 16% to just 25%, only half the Canadian figure for individuals not highly involved in religious groups. Incidentally, the approval levels for same-sex marriage among weekly attenders are very similar to those for homosexual relations – 18% in Canada and 16% in the U.S (Bibby, FFP 2003; Pew Research Center 2003), suggesting a very high correlation between the two issues. If one doesn’t approve of gay and lesbian sexual relations, one is not about to approve of gays and lesbians marrying.

These findings suggest that when Canadians are not very involved in religious groups, they are strongly influenced by the cultural emphasis on respect for and acceptance of sexual orientation diversity. However, to the extent they are actively involved in the country’s churches, they are highly resistant to legitimizing homosexual relations. In the United States, religious participation is similarly neutralizing changes in attitudes toward homosexuality. But so are other less explicit factors.

The Ethics Argument

As discussed earlier, Christian groups vary in their official positions on homosexuality. For their part, affiliates of these groups also vary in the degree to which they take official and consensus church teachings seriously. Those variations are apparent in the attitudes expressed by North Americans who identify with the three dominant “Christian families.”

The percentage of weekly attending Canadian *Roman Catholics* maintaining homosexual relations are “not wrong at all” moved up from 5% to 18% between 1975 and 1980, with the increase higher in Quebec (6% to 23%) than elsewhere in the country (8% to 16%). But among Catholics attending services less than weekly, the increase was dramatic – from 13% to 52%. In the U.S., the overall increase for weekly attending Catholics during the same time period was very similar to that of Canada – from 7% to 20%. Among American Catholics attending mass less than once a week, the jump was far more modest than in Canada – from just 20% to 30%.

In the case of *Mainline Protestants*, the acceptance of homosexual relations among weekly attenders in Canada moved up from 5% to 29% – compared to 8% to 16% in the United States. For Mainliners who attended services less often, the jump in Canada was from 15% to 46%, versus 14% to 28% states-side.

Table 7. Acceptance of Homosexuality by Religious Identification and Attendance: Canada and the U.S.: 1975 & 2000

% Indicating Homosexual Relations Are “Not Wrong at All”

	WEEKLY				<WEEKLY			
	1975		2000		1975		2000	
	Canada	U.S.	Canada	U.S.	Canada	U.S.	Canada	U.S.
NATIONALLY	5%	7	18	14	18	16	51	25
Roman Catholics	7	7	18	22	13	20	52	30
Quebec	6	--	23	---	10	---	58	---
Outside Quebec	8	--	16	---	16	---	46	---
Protestants	3	7	17	10	15	11	44	20
Mainline Protestants	5	8	29	16	15	14	46	28
Conservative Prots*	3	7 ^x	5	5	22	9	16	25
No Religion	--	--	--	--	45	40**	70	48

*1975 & 1980, 1995-2000 combined due to small N's; **1974 & 1976 combined as well.
^x Sample included only Baptists, although then as now, this did embrace the vast majority of American evangelicals.
 Sources: Reginald W. Bibby, *Project Canada Survey Series*; NORC General Social Surveys.

The *Conservative Protestant* patterns are characterized by stability. In Canada, the proportion of weekly attending evangelicals endorsing homosexual relations changed little over the last quarter of the century – from 3% to 5%. Given that the sample sizes involved are fairly small; the difference over time is statistically insignificant. In the U.S., the evangelical acceptance level also did not

increase during the same period of time, remaining at around 5%. Among evangelicals in both countries who were not actively involved in their groups, there was a slight decrease in acceptance level in Canada (22% to 16%) and an increase from 9% to 25% in the U.S. – bringing less active American evangelicals up to the level of other people who attend services less than weekly.

The Differential Issue

These findings show that involvement in *Catholic* parishes has been having a fairly uniform influence on homosexual attitudes in both Canada and the United States. “The Catholic factor” therefore doesn’t account for overall differences between the two countries. If anything, it should be contributing to a lower level in Canada than the U.S., since attendance levels are similar and the percentage of Catholics in Canada is almost double what it states-side.

The findings for *Mainline Protestants* clearly reflect the fact that Canada’s Mainline groups, notably the United and Anglican churches, have been modifying their positions on homosexuality to a greater extent than their American counterparts. Growing numbers of their active affiliates (29% in 2000 versus just 5% in 1975) are comfortable with homosexual behaviour. On balance, Mainline Protestants are contributing to Canada’s increasing acceptance of homosexuality. However, the direct “contribution” to the pro-homosexual pool is somewhat reduced by the fact that only about 18% of Mainline Protestants are actively involved in their churches.

The *Conservative Protestant* findings document the fact that evangelicals in both countries hold very similar positions on homosexuality. “The evangelical factor” consequently does not account for differences between the two countries.

Discussion

So on balance, here’s what we have. The impact of Catholics and Conservative Protestants on their most active people is similar on both sides of the border. These two religious families are playing key roles in generating opposition to the acceptance of homosexuality. Mainline Protestants in Canada have higher acceptance levels than their counterparts in the U.S., but their impact is reduced by relatively low levels of participation.

These findings tell us a great deal about the some of the major sources of resistance to homosexuality in both countries. A closer look also tells us why these religion-homosexuality patterns account for Canadian-American differences.

As pointed out earlier, some 30% of Americans identify with evangelical churches, and around 40% are weekly attenders. The identification figure may, if anything, be modest. The Gallup Organization, in an April 13, 2004 release, pointed out that around 45% of Americans today consider themselves to be “a born again” or “evangelical” – a figure that the release noted has the potential to significantly influence the nation’s politics (Winseman 2004). In Canada, the attendance level for Conservative Protestants is actually higher than in the U.S., at better than 60%. The problem isn’t active participation; it’s size. Less than 10% of Canadians identify with evangelical groups.

So it is that in the United States, the evangelical giant, combined with the significant presence of the Catholic Church, and a lesser but still noteworthy amount of assistance from Mainline Protestantism, together constitute a formidable opponent to gays and lesbians who wish to be fully accepted, with the same rights as other Americans. Conversely, in Canada the evangelical presence is a committed but petite presence. Mainline Protestantism is less and less an ally. And the Roman Catholic Church, despite its significant numbers, not only finds itself increasingly alone, but also finds itself with a shrinking proportion of highly committed members, especially in Quebec.

Very significantly, the findings show that when Americans are not highly involved in their churches, they nonetheless are considerably more inclined than their Canadian counterparts to be opposed to homosexuality. Personally and culturally, they remain part of a society that – as Reimer noted – is still highly supportive of organized religion. In sharp contrast, in Canada the religiously inactive seem to fairly readily buy into the dominant cultural ethos of diversity – in this case, something of a “moral mosaic.”

As much as we researchers hate to admit such things, these findings suggest that the stereotypes about religious opposition to homosexuality and same-sex marriages are, in fact, very consistent with the facts. North Americans who are highly involved in religious groups are considerably less likely than others to approve of homosexuality. That shouldn’t surprise anyone. Christianity historically has disapproved of same-sex behaviour. Today that position continues to be held by evangelicals, Catholics, and many Mainline Protestants – at both the leadership and lay levels.

The Canadian-American differences, for all the speculation about variant charter myths, cultural emphases, and social policies, appear to be largely the result of differences in religious composition and religious participation – at least when it comes to matters relating to sexual orientation.

The finding that acceptance levels are much higher among younger Canadians than others is not surprising, given that religious participation levels are also lowest among younger adults. Once they are detached from religious groups, they readily adopt a pro-homosexual position.

This does, however, lead to an important qualification, as well as an important implication for where things are headed. Concerning the qualification, this paper has been attempting to assess the role that religious involvement may have in influencing attitudes toward homosexuality and same sex marriage. However, the findings also make it clear that large numbers of people in North America who are not religiously involved are also opposed to homosexuality generally and same-sex marriage specifically. We now can say with some certainty why the involved hold the attitudes that they do. Future research needs to explore some of the sources of such attitudes among “the religiously uninvolved.”

That leads me to the important implication. To the extent that changes in attitudes toward homosexuality and same-sex marriages are going to change, those changes are going to take place primarily among the religiously uninvolved. The reason is obvious: deeply committed traditional Christians, for the most part, are going to continue to subscribe to the heterosexual ideal. They can be chastised, ridiculed, labeled “homophobic,” and so on. But led by evangelicals and Catholics, they are not about to change. They believe that scriptural authority and Church teachings leave them with no choice. As a result, the best that can be hoped for by “the gay-lesbian side” is tolerance and respect – not acceptance. On the other hand, people who disapprove but are not religiously involved do not, on the surface at least, appear to feel compelled to hold their positions. Consequently, that’s the societal segment in which potential converts to a pro-homosexual position will be found.

In the meantime, it will be the tough task of governments in both countries to find ways of enabling people with very different views of sexuality and associated rights to co-exist. The fact that neither position is going to disappear should send a message to leaders who are positioned to bring people together — or tear them apart — be those leaders found in the media, the political arena, or in lifestyle and religious interest groups. This is not a time to have win-lose mentalities, complete with institutional and orientation bashing that will have the effective of polarizing North Americans fragmenting social life. Reflecting on the history and the future of gays pursuing civil rights and civil liberties, Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang (2000:23) offer the observation that “it is quite likely there will be intense conflict surrounding efforts to bring about [further] progress.” Surely better resolutions have to be and can be found.

Conclusion

Max Weber's basis thesis that religion has societal consequences somehow has been largely missed by an observer such as Michael Adams. In his comparison of Canadian and American values, he treats religion solely as a *dependent* variable, the product of social and culture change. He gives virtually no attention to the possibility that, when it comes to social values, religion continues to be an important *independent* variable, capable of influencing people's values. The data in this paper suggest he has made a serious error.

The answer to the question of Canadian-American differences in this area at least seem to lie with the acceptance of religious teachings rather than with different cultural emphases – with ethics rather than ethos. In the preface to his *Fire and Ice* book, Adams playfully acknowledges that “at the age of fourteen I put my Roman Catholic catechism on the shelf and started my subscription to *Time* magazine” (Adams 2003:xi). These findings suggest that he may have made the wrong choice.

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