

A SOCIOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION AND DEFENCE OF  
SECULARIZATION IN CANADA

Joel Thiessen

Ambrose University, Calgary, AB, Canada

*Introduction*

When Christian missionaries set out for a new location, one of their first tasks is to study the local cultural context and to investigate its local customs, norms, values, behaviours, and language. Part of one's preparations also entails exploring how locals approach the subject of religion. Are people open, apathetic, or hostile toward religion in general or toward specific religions? Have such attitudes and behaviors changed over time, and if so, in what directions? This exercise is intended to help the missionary build bridges for ministering to and with locals.

As documented by sociologist Reginald Bibby,<sup>1</sup> both continuity and change characterize the religious and cultural landscape in Canada over the past half century. For Christian leaders and lay members in Canada who take seriously their task to minister in the Canadian context—a progressively secular nation, as I will argue, where fewer Canadians affiliate or are actively involved with the Christian faith—it is imperative to take the posture of a missionary, and carefully study and understand the Canadian religious and cultural setting. For example, what religion, if any, do Canadians affiliate with? What religious and/or secular beliefs and practices do Canadians subscribe to? In what directions do or might Canadians move on these accounts? How is religion in Canada different from that in

1. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*; Bibby, *Fragmented Gods*; Bibby, *Restless Gods*; and Bibby, *Unknown Gods*.

the United States, where, it seems, many church leaders look for research and resources on church trends, growth, and leadership—a nation with a notably different historical, cultural, political, and religious context than Canada?

It is fitting to begin with the last question raised because the response sets the stage for some of the historical and social realities that Christian groups confront in Canada today. For instance, Catholicism and mainline Protestantism are the prominent expressions of religious life in Canada in contrast to evangelicalism in the United States. In Canada, nearly 40 percent identify as Catholic, approximately 15 percent classify within mainline Protestantism, and another 10 percent identify with conservative Protestantism.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, 21 percent say they are Catholic, 15 percent identify as mainline Protestant, and just over 25 percent say they are evangelical.<sup>3</sup> The fusion of religion and politics is also far stronger in the United States than in Canada, with a decidedly evangelical tone south of the border.<sup>4</sup> Large churches, although not the dominant form of congregational life in the United States, are more commonly found in the United States than in Canada.<sup>5</sup> Liberal values on moral issues are also more common in Canada than in the United States, even among regular churchgoers.<sup>6</sup> Canadians are also less likely to identify with a religion or to attend religious services compared with Americans.

In this article, I will draw on sociological theory and data to paint a fairly sober yet realistic picture of the religious and cultural landscape in Canada at present and in the foreseeable future, one characterized in large part by secularization. The material I use to build this argument is developed more completely in my 2015 book, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. I will then discuss and engage some of the indicators that possibly challenge the

2. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*.

3. Pew Research Centre, "America's Changing Religious Landscape."

4. Bean, *The Politics of Evangelical Identity*; Reimer, *Evangelicals and the Continental Divide*; and Reimer and Wilkinson, *A Culture of Faith*.

5. Bird, "Large Canadian Churches."

6. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*.

secularization argument in a Canadian context, concluding with some preliminary insights from recent research on flourishing congregations in Canada.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Framing*

Two competing theories have long anchored the sociological study of religion: secularization and rational choice theory. For my purposes here, the simplest argument that proponents of secularization theory make is that individuals and entire societies are less religious today than in my parents' generation, whose cohort was less religious than their parent's generation.<sup>7</sup> Secularization theorists offer several explanations for the declining place of religion, most notably pointing toward a range of features of modern social life such as social and structural differentiation, individualism, pluralism, science, and affluence, among other things. It is important to stress that contrary to what secularization critics repeatedly note, secularization theorists do not argue for the inevitable and irreversible decline of religion in modern societies. Secularization theorists merely document that it is more difficult to believe, behave, and belong in modern society, and that while signs of religious life may persist within a secular context, one should not conflate pockets of religious life with a refutation of prevailing secularizing trends.

Rational choice theory, to the contrary, is premised on the assumption that there is an ongoing demand for the things that religion provides (e.g. meaning and purpose in life, life after death) that all but guarantees a strong and permanent place for religion in the modern world.<sup>8</sup> Further, proponents of this theory assert that religious groups compete with one another for religious adherents, sharpening their supply of religion in the process to provide a marketing edge over their religious competitors. When applying rational choice theory in the context

7. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*; Bruce, *God Is Dead*; Bruce, *Secularization*; and Crockett and Voas, "Generations of Decline."

8. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*; Bibby, *Restless Churches*; and Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*.

of struggling congregations, the logic is that if congregations fail to attract or keep members, it is mainly because of faulty religious supply (since religious demand is assumed to be strong and consistent). More pointedly, if churches enhanced areas such as relevant and engaging preaching, better music, more of the right programs, stronger answers to people's questions in life, and more caring and loving communities, then congregations would likely struggle less. This reasoning has long been adopted by churches across Canada and beyond to account for their declining numbers, to scheme possible ways of growing their congregations, and to hold out hope that people will eventually return to greater levels of religious involvement. On the surface this logic makes sense. The trouble, as I will outline below, is that the demand for involvement in religious organizations is not as strong as some have assumed.

To explain why I think secularization is a more accurate and useful concept for thinking about religion in Canada over and against rational choice theory, I turn to existing quantitative studies along with my interview data based in Calgary, Alberta with three groups of Canadians: thirty active religious affiliates, thirty marginal religious affiliates, and thirty religious nones. By active religious affiliates I mean those who identify with a Christian tradition and attend religious services nearly every week. This group represents approximately 15 percent of the Canadian population. Marginal religious affiliates involve those who identify with a Christian tradition and attend religious services mainly for religious holidays and rites of passage. Such individuals tend to attend at Christmas and/or Easter, they get married in a church, and they may baptize their children in a church. This population accounts for about 40–50 percent of Canadians. Religious nones are those who say they do not identify with any religion, and rarely, if ever, attend religious services. This group comprises 24 percent of the Canadian populace.

*A Case for Secularization in Canada*

When I survey the literature on religious trends in contemporary societies, I am continuously surprised by the ability of scholars to talk past one another on the subject of secularization. It seems that the reason for this disjuncture is because academics mean different things when they use the term *secularization*. Karel Dobbelaere, a Belgian scholar, is helpful here because he distinguishes between three levels of secularization—societal, organizational, and individual.<sup>9</sup> Societal secularization pertains to the diminished value, role, and place of religion in the public sphere. For instance, schools, hospitals, or governments once run by religious organizations and principles no longer are. Sociologists refer to this shift as societal differentiation whereby institutions specialize to fulfill very specific tasks within their domain of social life. Organizational secularization relates to secularization from within religious organizations themselves. This may include modernizing religious beliefs (e.g. regarding gender or sexuality) or practices (e.g. attire, food consumption, etc.). Individual secularization involves diminished levels of religious affiliation, belief, and/or practice among individuals. Therefore, when scholars talk about secularization, it is key to be clear about what kind of secularization they have in mind.

*Affiliation, Attendance, and Belief*

I think the evidence to follow points toward secularization at all three levels in Canada, but especially at the individual level. A good starting point for thinking about individual secularization is found in Reginald Bibby's book, *Beyond the Gods and Back*.<sup>10</sup> There he compares Canadian adults and teens along three common markers of religiosity: affiliation, attendance at religious services, and belief in a supernatural being. Bibby shows that fewer adults attended weekly services in 2005 (25 percent) versus 1975 (31 percent), fewer identified with a religion in 2005 (85 percent) than 1975 (91 percent), and fewer

9. Dobbelaere, "Secularization"; and Dobbelaere, *Secularization*.

10. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*, 51.

categorically identified themselves as theists in 2005 (49 percent) when compared with 1975 (61 percent). Conversely, more Canadian adults never attend religious services (23 percent in 2005 versus 18 percent in 1975), do not identify with a religion (15 percent in 2005 versus 9 percent in 1975), and identify as atheists (7 percent in 2005 versus 6 percent in 1975). While the changes are not dramatic, these trends are more pronounced among Canadian teens. In 2008, 21 percent of teens attended religious services weekly in contrast to 23 percent in 1984. However, 47 percent of teens never attended in 2008 compared with 28 percent in 1984. Regarding religious affiliation, 68 percent of teens identified with a religion in 2008 versus 88 percent in 1984. Last, 37 percent of teens self-identified as theists in 2008, whereas 54 percent did in 1984. Conversely, 16 percent identified as atheists in 2008 compared with 6 percent in 1984.

Across every measure for both adults and teens, the “religious” end of the continuum has decreased, while the less religious side has increased. What is most striking is how the figures have changed among Canadian teenagers. Sociological research is clear that, in general, a person’s religious affiliation, beliefs, and involvement in their teen and young adult years is similar to religiosity levels later in life.<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, there may be some ebb and flow to one’s religiosity over the life course, but most settle where they began. Therefore, the data above provide suggestive evidence that if one in two teens never attend religious services, and one in three do not identify with any religion, and nearly one in five do not believe in a supernatural being, we might expect such descriptors to characterize the Canadian adult population in the years and decades to come. Already the figures among Canadian adults are slowly moving in that direction.

11. Dillon and Wink, *In the Course of a Lifetime*; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

*Meaning and Motivations*

The benefit of quantitative data is that it provides a bird's eye view to a larger group of people, although it does not help us to get at some of the underlying meanings and motivations behind human attitudes and behaviour. Case in point, one can regularly participate in a *religious* ritual but do so for mainly *secular* reasons. What is one to make of this possibility? Is this evidence for or against secularization? Following the interpretivist tradition within sociology, and specifically Max Weber's concept of *verstehen* ("to understand"), it is important—at an epistemological level—to examine behavior in combination with motivation for a more complete understanding of religious activity.

In *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*, I explore the various reasons for why active affiliates, marginal affiliates, and religious nones believe and behave as they do. What are the benefits and drawbacks associated with their orientations toward or away from religion? In this section, I draw on a small piece of those learnings from my interviews with marginal affiliates, namely, why do they attend religious services "religiously" once or twice a year?

Marginal affiliates provided me with three common reasons for observing religious rituals for religious holidays and rites of passage: tradition, family pressures, and sacred space. The first reason, tradition, is perhaps the least surprising yet no less significant. People attend each year because they have always done so, and they are not about to stop. Here I think of the United Church of Canada man in his thirties who attends church every Christmas Eve and then goes for Chinese food with his family, and in his mind, the Chinese food is as important as the Christmas Eve service—it is part of the tradition. Second, family pressures are a factor as parents paying for a wedding believe pictures will look nicer in a church, or grandma expresses her disappointment if the family is not together at the Christmas Eve service, or one's in-laws convey their dismay if the new baby is not baptized. Third, some believe that their connection to God is more significant in a set apart sacred space, even if only connecting to God in such a space a couple of times a year.

While many church leaders and some academics may take great hope in the fact that many Canadians continue to attend church for religious holidays and rites of passage, which may result in increased involvement in the future, the reasons for marginal affiliates attending should give us pause. Attending primarily due to tradition or family pressure is not a resounding endorsement for religious and spiritual motivations for observing religious rituals. But what about those who attend to connect to God in a sacred space? This is certainly a stronger indicator of religious motivations for marginal affiliates (see Thiessen and McAlpine 2013), though it begs the question why not attend religious services more frequently if this connection to God in a sacred space is so profound and desirable? This question is not intended to problematize the sincerity or significance of the occasions where people do attend, but simply to note that, perhaps, attending once or twice a year is not necessarily indicative of a strong desire for increased attendance—a theme I will return to shortly.

### *Religious Nones*

Religious nones are rapidly growing in Canada, the United States, and much of the modern Western world. Notable research is being devoted to this group elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> with research starting to pick up steam in Canada.<sup>13</sup> Here I want to briefly summarize five elements to the religious none worldview in a Canadian context, drawing from my interviews with thirty religious nones, and corroborated with other quantitative and qualitative studies.

First, religious nones believe that they are open-minded and free, unlike those who are devoutly religious.<sup>14</sup> By not identifying with a religion, religious nones believe that they are more tolerant, inclusive, and open to a variety of perspectives in ways

12. Bullivant and Lee, “Interdisciplinary Studies”; Kosmin and Keysar, “American Nones”; and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.”

13. Angus Reid Institute, “Religion and Faith”; Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, “Becoming a Religious Nones”; and Wilkins-Laflamme, “How Unreligious.”

14. Also see Williamson and Yancey, *There Is No God*.

that those committed to a religion cannot be. Some go as far as to suggest that this open-minded and tolerant orientation is *more Canadian* than those who are committed to a religion that seemingly closes their minds to different ways of thinking about the world.

Second, religious nones are a heterogeneous group.<sup>15</sup> They adopt a range of religious and secular beliefs and practices. These include a mixture of theists, agnostics, and atheists. Some pray, and others do not. Some believe in the afterlife, others categorically reject any possibility of another life, and some are on the fence. Laced within this diversity are various levels of certainty and confidence in one's beliefs about the supernatural, the afterlife, or the effectiveness of religious practices.

Third, religious nones are adamant that they have meaning and purpose in life apart from religion; religion is only one provider of meaning and purpose in their minds. In response to claims that active religious affiliates may make—that one will turn to religion in times of trouble and desperation—some religious nones went as far as to note traumatic times in their life and how they never once thought to pray or to suddenly desire or believe in the afterlife.

Fourth, religious nones speak about morality as something that is *common sense* and not exclusive to active religious affiliates.<sup>16</sup> While religious nones can appreciate how and why religion may help some to be moral people, religion is not necessary for morality (and often times can be problematic for moral attitudes and behaviors).

Fifth, religious nones are adamant that religious beliefs and practices should not be forced upon others. This framework is explicitly conceptualized within a Canadian disposition of tolerance and diversity that respects differences. Interestingly, the religious nones that I interviewed do not give off the impression that they want to convert others to think about the world in the same ways as they do (a posture that they contrast

15. Kosmin and Keysar, "American Nones."

16. Also see Zuckerman, *Faith No More*.

with *new atheists* and some secularists in the United States who are vying for cultural space against the Christian Right).

Much more could be said about religious nones in general, and in Canada specifically. Suffice it to say that this is the group where the largest learning curve likely resides for many Canadian church leaders. From a sociological standpoint, it would be wise for church leaders as missionaries in the Canadian context to invest in trying to understand religious nones for how they view the world, not how church leaders think or wish religious nones would view the world (e.g. church leaders should not naively assume that religious nones desire the things that Christianity supposedly offers, especially when many religious nones may not even be socialized with the language to think about or articulate such desires).

#### *Greater Involvement*

Given what we know about some of the prevailing religious trends in Canada, including the meanings and motivations behind some religious behaviors plus some of the ways that religious nones view the world, should we anticipate that marginal affiliates and religious nones might pursue greater involvement in religious organizations in the future? Fortunately, research survey over the last few decades helps to give us a barometer. In Reginald Bibby's Project Canada surveys, he asks participants who attend religious services monthly or less if they desire greater involvement in a religious group if they found it to be worthwhile for them and their family. Data from 2005 reveals that 62 percent of Canadian adults who attend less than monthly express an interest in greater involvement.<sup>17</sup> Among teenagers, 38 percent who attend less than monthly indicate that they would be open to greater involvement, along with 65 percent of those who attend monthly or more.<sup>18</sup> What would make greater involvement worthwhile? Broadly speaking, what if a range of ministry, organizational, and personal factors were accounted for? That is, what if congregations offered specific ministries

17. Bibby, "Why Bother," 97–98.

18. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*; and Bibby, "Why Bother."

(e.g. youth or children) of interest to Canadians, provided better leadership, music, or more relevant and engaging preaching, or what if people were less busy or at a different stage of life?

As helpful as this data is, methodologically, survey data only gets us so far. In surveys, it is far easier for respondents to provide socially acceptable responses, or at the very least, what they think pollsters or religious groups may want to hear. On the other hand, interviews enable us to probe people further. For example, if they do desire greater involvement, have they ever tried to find a congregation that fits their wish list? What is the intensity of their desire for greater involvement? Looking ahead, how realistic do they think it is that they will seek out a congregation to attend regularly? What is their response to the reality that there are many religious options available to them?

These are some of the questions that I put to marginal affiliates and religious nones, many of whom had regularly attended religious services in the past but no longer do. Of the sixty marginal affiliates and religious nones in this study, thirty-five say they are not interested in greater involvement, eight say they possibly desire greater involvement, while seventeen express their desire to be more involved in the future. The logical follow-up question is what would make greater involvement worthwhile for them and their family? Seven responses emerged, beginning with the most frequently cited account to the least referenced: (1) if they found and experienced community with other people in a church; (2) if they marry or have children; (3) if religious groups are less exclusive on doctrinal matters (e.g. gender, sexuality, alcohol, salvation, etc.); (4) if religious groups changed their style or format of weekly services; (5) if existing church members lived out their beliefs in tangible ways, such as helping the poor; (6) if a church was closer to where they lived; and (7) if they were less busy.

It is one thing to suggest that one would attend more regularly if these criteria were in place, and another to seriously consider past behavior and available options that may, together, help one to project whether increased involvement is likely. In response to the question “have you ever attempted to find a congregation that meets your criteria outlined above?” only two individuals

responded affirmatively. When I probed interviewees further, noting many church options in the city that seemingly meet their wish list (e.g. there are a range of congregations that include liberal versus conservative theology, good versus bad music, engaging and relevant versus dull and uninspiring preaching, and large and small sized churches)—a reality in urban settings more so than rural ones—they ultimately concluded that perhaps they do not really desire greater involvement in a local church. This conclusion was clearest for me when, for instance, someone noted that, if a church was closer by, they would be more likely to attend religious services regularly. The reality, as I pointed out to them, was that there were three churches in the two-block radius around their home. Simply put, while those who attend monthly or less may indicate on a survey or even at the outset of a face-to-face interview that they are open to greater levels of religious involvement, I am not convinced that we should be as optimistic in interpreting such responses. This is not to say that some will not eventually increase their level of involvement in the short or long term. Certainly, this is the case, and we need much better research to examine the various circumstances that help to explain those who return to greater involvement. But on the whole, there is little reason to expect a reversal of declining levels of religiosity in and through those who supposedly desire greater involvement in a religious organization.

### *Socialization*

To help make sense of diminished levels of religious involvement, including the lack of desire for future involvement, it is useful to turn to one of the most important sociological variables for a person's faith development: socialization within one's family. Sociological research across time, space, and religions consistently reveals the powerful influence that socialization within the home has on a child's religious identification, beliefs, and behaviors as they approach and progress through adulthood.<sup>19</sup> This finding is particularly strong when

19. Bengtson, et al., *Families and Faith*; Dillon and Wink, *In the Course of a Lifetime*; Dudley, "Youth Religious Commitment"; Myers, "An Interactive

both parents share the same religion and level of involvement. Two points of interest stand out regarding socialization and secularization trends.

First, research on religious nones is clear that parents who say they have no religion tend to raise children without religion.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to previous generations where the growth of the no religion category was fueled by apostasy, recent data suggests that the religious none category is progressively growing due to irreligious socialization.<sup>21</sup> This finding, combined with the earlier data that more teens than ever say that they have no religion, suggests that, in the future, it is very likely that the religious none category will grow as more and more religious nones raise their children as religious nones.

And second, and as I recently argued in my article, “Kids, You Make the Choice: Religious and Secular Socialization among Marginal Affiliates and Nonreligious Individuals,” marginal affiliate and religious none parents tend to give their children the choice over what religion, if any, they want to subscribe to. Part of the reason for doing so pertains to the Canadian value for individual choice combined with the aversion to forcing one’s views and behaviors on to another. As marginal affiliate and religious none parents expressed to me, they do not want to force a religious worldview on to their children; doing so would be *un-Canadian*. The impact of this approach to faith transmission seems to be clear: few children will take up faith on their own in the absence of intentional and repeated exposure to religious belief and practice in the home. It is worthwhile to note that this approach to parenting is even making its way into the homes of some active religious affiliates who, when their children are teenagers, give their children the option of whether or not to continue attending religious services weekly. For some who are now marginal affiliates, they attribute the choice that

Model”; Sherkat, “Religious Socialization”; Voas, “Explaining Change”; and Warner and Williams, “The Role of Families.”

20. Bengtson, et al., *Families and Faith*; Kosmin and Keysar, “American Nones”; and Manning, *Losing Our Religion*.

21. Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, “Becoming a None.”

their active affiliate parents gave them when they were teenagers as a key catalyst for their progressive decline in involvement over time. Only time will tell if or how pervasive choice within active affiliate homes will contribute to teens possibly diminishing their involvement in the short or long term, possibly adding to larger secularization trends in Canada.

#### *Organizational and Societal Secularization*

Secularization in Canada goes beyond the individual. Secularization is also present at the organizational level where active affiliates, for instance, are more likely to defer to individual authority versus the authority of their church leaders when deciding what is true or false, right or wrong.<sup>22</sup> Some, like Steve Bruce,<sup>23</sup> point to Christian groups that have modernized their theology over time to accommodate changing social values. The result has been greater openness to alcohol consumption, divorce, women in leadership, and now gays, lesbians, and transsexuals as full participants in congregational life.<sup>24</sup>

At the societal level, Christianity no longer holds the place in public life that it once did. For example, schools and hospitals that used to be run by churches are now run by the state (this is particularly the case in Quebec, post-1960s). Moreover, public debates about religion in a multicultural Canada generally do not seek to elevate the public role of religion, but rather to neutralize it for the sake of equality and not offending the other.<sup>25</sup> For instance, the cultural stigma around saying *Merry Christmas* to eliminating school curriculum on religion (even world religions) typify a Canadian attempt to not offend religious and secular minorities. At the same time, it seems that in the attempt to protect neutrality, secular ideology and ideals are rising to the surface—and this attempt to be as inclusive and inoffensive as

22. Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*; Grenville, “For Him All Things Were Created”; and Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*.

23. Bruce, *God Is Dead*.

24. Note that I am not attaching any evaluative connotation to any of these beliefs.

25. Lefebvre and Beaman, eds., *Religion in the Public Sphere*; and Seljak, “Education, Multiculturalism, and Religion.”

possible has, in fact, resulted in being exclusive and offensive toward some groups in the process (evangelical Christians especially advance this case).<sup>26</sup>

As accurate as I think secularization is to describe and explain the overarching state of religion in Canada, there are also signs of religious life and vitality in Canada. In the following section, I examine some of those indicators that are commonly used to refute the secularization narrative in Canada.

#### *Slowing or Reversing Secularization?*

In his remarkable writing on secularization, Steve Bruce<sup>27</sup> contends that there are two distinct processes that can possibly slow the secularization trajectory: cultural defense and cultural transition. By cultural defense he refers to social groups (e.g. ethnic or national in character) who publicly invoke religion as a way to protect or preserve that group's identity against a perceived or real threat from the *other*. Such movements tend to elevate latent religiosity among those nominally affiliated with that religion, and as such, only really works against secularization when the majority of people in that society share the same religion. For example, one might hypothesize that Catholic identity and involvement could become more central for those in Quebec if English or Protestant influence seemingly jeopardized French Quebecois culture. Cultural transition pertains to groups who turn to religion to help maintain or establish a clear social identity in the face of social upheaval and change. Immigration is an excellent example whereby religion and the religious group may become increasingly important for navigating new social realities. Ethnic congregations, for instance, can become religiously and culturally significant for new immigrants to Canada.

In Canada, there are a few common rebuttals to secularization theory, some of which partially dovetail with Bruce's hypothesis. The first is to point to those who are spiritual but not religious.

26. Haskell, *Through a Lens Darkly*.

27. Bruce, *God Is Dead*.

Rather than constantly looking to institutional expressions of religious life, sociologists need to look elsewhere, which may broaden our conception of how religious or secular Canadians truly are. This is a fair point and worthy of sociological attention. Nancy Ammerman's book, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, is an excellent exposition of how people incorporate spirituality into their workplace, relationships, home life, and conceptions of health and illness, quite apart (for some) from any ongoing formal involvement in a religious community. In doing so, Ammerman delineates a range of descriptors for how spirituality is conceptualized and lived out, such as belief in the divine, connection to nature, mystery and awe to surroundings and experiences, meaning and purpose and connectedness in life events, inner wisdom, ethical spirituality by treating others with compassion, prayer and meditation, and connection to others and the spiritual realm. What is clear in her work, and others who write on spirituality, is that *spirituality* serves as a boundary marker *against* institutionalized forms of religious life and authority, which are interpreted as bad. Rather, spirituality is a statement *for* personal experience and authority that are identified as *good*.

A 2015 Canadian poll<sup>28</sup> revealed that 39 percent of Canadians say they are spiritual but not religious, 24 percent say they are spiritual and religious, 10 percent say they are religious but not spiritual, and 27 percent say they are neither religious nor spiritual. As one would expect, marginal affiliates and religious nones are the most likely to say they are spiritual but not religious, or neither religious nor spiritual. Active affiliates are most likely to be religious and spiritual.

Without evaluating whether *religion* or *spirituality* is inherently better or worse than the other, sociological research suggests that there are qualitative differences in social and civic attitudes and behaviours when comparing people based on levels of religiosity, including attending religious services.<sup>29</sup> For example, the more often someone attends religious services, the

28. Angus Reid Institute, "Religion and Faith."

29. Bibby, *Beyond the Gods*; and Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*.

more likely they are to give money or time to a charitable organization, religious or secular. Strong positive correlations also exist with areas of honesty, concern for the welfare of others, life satisfaction, politeness, and a range of other pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Put simply, the broader social impact of one who is strictly spiritual but not religious does not appear to be as widespread versus those regularly involved in a religious group.

Another response to secularization proponents is to point to the growth of non-Christian religious traditions. When one examines 2011 figures closely, however,<sup>30</sup> the total sum of all Canadians who identify with a non-Christian religious tradition is only 7.2 percent (up from 6 percent in 2001). This is still an impressive and rising figure due to immigration patterns and larger birth rates among many from these religious traditions. But this growth pales in comparison to both the declines in those who identify as Christian (76 percent in 2001 and 67 percent in 2011) and the growth in those who say they have no religion (16 percent in 2001 and 24 percent in 2011). The overall religious affiliation trajectory still points in a downward direction.

This said, immigration is a key contributor to Christianity, most notably Catholics and evangelicals.<sup>31</sup> Growing immigration from the global south and east, the current heart of global Christianity, means that Christianity continues to be the lead religion among immigrants to Canada. The 2011 Canadian census revealed that approximately four in ten immigrants identify as Christian.<sup>32</sup> However, the proportion of immigrants who identify as Christian is diminishing with time, giving way to the next two categories. A similar percentage of 40 percent captures immigrants who identify with various non-Christian religious traditions, led by Muslims at 17.4 percent. Finally, about 20 percent of immigrants say they have no religion. While we know very little about this final category, researchers suspect this is partially fueled by immigrants from Southeast Asia who

30. Statistics Canada, "Immigration and Ethnocultural."

31. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*.

32. Statistics Canada, "National Household Survey."

may view their Chinese culture and religion synonymously, but in the absence of *Chinese* as an option for religious identification on the Canadian census, simply choose *no religion*.

It would be unfair to say that immigration is reversing secularization in Canada based on the figures presented thus far, though immigration is, as Bruce projected, helping many immigrants with cultural transition that is slowing down secularization patterns. Christian immigrants are very devout, and they find strength in their ethnic and faith communities in Canada to help with the transition into Canadian life. Truth be told, Catholics and evangelicals would hemorrhage in Canada if it were not for immigrants. Christian congregations and denominations would be wise to pay careful attention to the impact and possibilities that arise with immigration. Two observations stand out in this respect. First, research clearly reveals that recent waves of immigrants tend to be more conservative than Canadian-born Christians.<sup>33</sup> In practice this means that they attend religious services more frequently, participate in a range of religious practices more regularly (e.g. prayer, Scripture reading), and invoke their faith in various public settings (e.g. with neighbours and in the workplace). Much of the life and vitality in many Christian congregations today is found in settings dominated by recent immigrants.

Second, while we have some knowledge and information on levels of religiosity among second- and third-generation immigrants across religious traditions, the opportunity to learn more remains. At this point it seems that levels of religiosity tend to diminish with each successive generation.<sup>34</sup> Much of this transition can be attributed to tensions over language and cultural values between parents and their children. This is a really important point for the secularization argument, because, while on the surface it may seem that immigration is slowing the

33. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*; Bramadat and Seljak, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity*; and Bramadat and Seljak, eds., *Religion and Ethnicity*.

34. Beyer, "The Future of Non-Christian Religions"; Beyer and Ramji, eds., *Growing Up Canadian*; Collins-Mayo and Dandelion, eds., *Religion and Youth*; and Madge, et al., *Youth on Religion*.

secularization path, it is potentially a short-term stop gap in some contexts. As the overarching affiliation, attendance, and belief indicators revealed earlier point to, the general trends in Canada are still moving in a secular direction.

Several questions stand out, then, for church and denominational leaders. How will congregations respond to and engage with immigrants in their work? Will we see mono-ethnic and/or multi-ethnic congregations? What role will immigrants play in church and denominational leadership? How will Canadian-born Christians interact with and possibly learn from foreign-born Christians? Aside from significant attention given to helping parents with effective religious socialization in the home, the ways that Christian communities respond to these questions about immigration will, in large part, determine their future. Mainline Protestants were the large winners during the mid-twentieth-century immigration stream, and both Catholics and evangelicals have a great opportunity moving ahead.

#### *Possible Optimism from Flourishing Congregations in Canada*

To conclude, a recurring narrative in my sociological writing about religion in Canada is that religious demand is not as strong as some may think it is. I still believe that the evidence supports this assertion, yet this does not diminish the very real and active role that religious supply also plays within the religious marketplace. Some congregations do thrive in this predominantly secular environment.

One of my current research projects, along with three colleagues (William McAlpine and Arch Wong at Ambrose University, and Keith Walker at University of Saskatchewan), focuses on where things seem to be going well in congregational life in Canada, across Catholic and mainline and conservative Protestant contexts. In 2016, we launched the Flourishing Congregations Institute at Ambrose University in Calgary, Alberta ([www.flourishingcongregations.org](http://www.flourishingcongregations.org)). Our aim is to explore congregational life across theological traditions in a distinctly Canadian context. For example, what does one mean when they say that a congregation is flourishing? How does one

define and measure a flourishing congregation? What can we learn, sociologically and theologically, from congregations that are seemingly flourishing? What contributes to a congregation that flourishes? In what ways does flourishing materialize in similar and dissimilar ways within and across theological traditions and geographic regions? Our team spent the spring and summer of 2016 exploring questions such as these via interviews and focus groups with over 110 Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant church and denominational leaders in five Canadian regions (Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Southwestern Ontario, and Halifax). This was phase one of a three-year endeavor that will also include a national survey across other Canadian regions, including Quebec, along with in-depth case studies.

I close by highlighting a few preliminary observations from our initial data collection and analysis, which may offer some hope to congregational leaders grappling with how to not only survive, but thrive in Canadian ministry (for those interested, the *resources* tab on our website contains lengthier papers with some of our initial data and analysis). In no particular order, and based on leaders' self-reports that need to be tested and examined further with subsequent data collection methods and populations (e.g. congregants), leaders from self-identified flourishing congregations discussed the following in their definition and description of flourishing congregations.

These congregations claim to have a vibrant collective spiritual life that includes various environments, practices, and opportunities designed to facilitate meaningful religious experiences with the divine and others. Part of a dynamic collective spiritual life entails that clearly articulated discipleship processes and habits exist, with an ethos that everyone connected to a congregation is somewhere along a discipleship continuum; the congregation's task is to help everyone, from the new convert to those who have grown up in a Christian community, with deepening their Christian faith. Hospitable communities are a key component to welcoming people into a discipleship process, where people are embraced from diverse backgrounds (e.g. social class, gender, race, age, and sexual orientation).

Openness to diverse perspectives, questions, and uncertainty was notably present in millennial-focused congregations that are gaining traction in their communities. For many leaders, a vibrant collective spiritual life is ultimately measured by transformed lives, of which we heard many stories regarding members in their congregations.

At an organizational level, it struck us that many of these congregations have a clear self-identity. They know who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going. They are not trying to be all things to all people. At the same time, these congregations are unafraid to take risks, even if such initiatives do not succeed as envisioned. Such *failures* are interpreted as seeds for possible future ideas that may be more effective. Leadership is certainly integral to a group's propensity to stay focused on doing a few things well too, and to bring others along in the process. In this vein, we heard adjectives such as strategic leaders, collaborative leaders, and spirit-led leaders. Leadership development within a congregation is also singled out as significant for short- and long-term organizational sustainability and success.

Finally, we could not get over how often leaders shared a myriad of stories of their active presence in the wider community. The recurring refrain that we heard was that their communities would notice if their congregation was no longer situated in that neighborhood. Along with this, though not necessarily linked, many congregations had active evangelism strategies often embedded within the Alpha program.

Much research remains into how and why some Canadian congregations flourish in a difficult religious climate—from church plants, to megachurches, to ethnic and multiethnic congregations, and to rural locations. For Christian leaders to make a meaningful impact in Canada, it is essential to seriously examine, like missionaries, the local religious and cultural landscape. Sociologically speaking, it is only with a sound understanding of the secular Canadian context that Canadian church leaders can truly proceed to take sensible, culturally astute, and theologically sound steps forward. The road ahead will not be easy. But as our initial phase of research on

flourishing congregations is revealing, those congregations that can sharpen their sociological analysis of Canadian religious and social life, and then adjust their supply of religion in turn, stand the best chance to flourish in contemporary Canadian society.

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