

On Good Data and Bad Ideas:

Reflections on Pew's Analysis of "Canada's Changing Religious Landscape"

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In late June, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life released a report entitled "Canada's Changing Religious Landscape." It provides an excellent overview of Statistics Canada data on religious identification and service attendance spanning the 1980s through 2011, complete with many high calibre charts and tables.

The attention that The Pew Forum has given to Canada needs to be greeted on this side of the border with much appreciation, gratitude, and an enthusiastic "thank you!" The report should be downloaded as an important resource by anyone who wants to have an up-to-date snapshot of key numbers relating to identification and attendance.

What is less helpful is the report's central focus on a few select trends that are not favourable to Christianity, resulting in a very truncated picture of Canada's "Changing Religious Landscape" that minimizes the ongoing importance of Catholicism and Protestantism.

My colleague and friend, American sociologist Rodney Stark, quipped at a conference in Lethbridge a few decades back, "We have no shortage of data – we have a shortage of good ideas." To put things bluntly, the Pew report offers us some good data, but some bad ideas. The authors view religious developments in Canada through the old, worn-out eyes of secularization. Such an interpretive framework does not serve us well. Beyond mere academic arm-wrestling, such an inaccurate depiction of the religious situation brings with it the risk of contributing to policy and emotional responses that are not going to be productive.

So let's set the record straight.

According to the Pew report, recent census and survey data generated by Statistics Canada point to three primary "landscape changing" findings that are sufficiently significant that they are allocated the three major headings in the release. First, more people than ever before say they have no religion; second, growing numbers belong to minority faiths; and third, fewer people are attending services on a regular basis. These, of course, are well-known patterns that many observers, including Statistics Canada and yours truly, have been documenting and monitoring for some time.

The three findings, say the Pew report authors, are indicative of the “substantial erosion” in the national shares of Catholicism and Protestantism and the “substantial drop in religious commitment.” Illustrative age cohort breakdowns show identification and attendance to be lowest among younger Canadians.

There is no grand conclusion to the report. But it isn’t needed. The reader is left with the obvious bottom-line: religion, as it has been practiced in Canada, is pretty much en route to being a thing of the past. Christianity is in relentless decline, while non-affiliation and other world faith numbers are on the rise. In the words of the report’s heading, what we are seeing is “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

Again, I would emphasize that the numbers, minus interpretation, are very valuable. Pew’s longitudinal cross-tabulations involving variables such as age, region, gender, marital status, education, and birth place are great to have. Comparisons with the U.S. are also a plus.

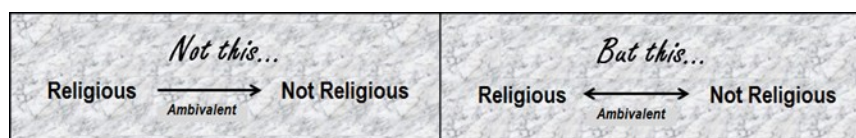
However, there is a major problem with the thrust of the report. In focusing on some important but marginal religious developments, the authors lose sight of the broader Canadian religious scene.

- Yes, it’s important to note that the proportion of Canadians who say they have no religion has increased to around 24%. But that hardly is as noteworthy as the fact that 76% continue to identify with a religion.
- It’s true that changing immigration patterns have resulted in about 9% of Canadians identifying with faiths other than Christianity. At the same time, those who identify with Christian groups is still a much larger, 68%.
- And while monthly-plus attendance has decreased significantly during the last half of the twentieth century, the Statistics Canada data they use show that it actually has levelled off since around 2000.
- Further, the report totally omits religious group trend differences – essential to understanding the Canadian “religious landscape” due to the fact that Catholics outside Quebec and evangelical Protestants are exhibiting considerable vitality, in sharp contrast to Catholics in Quebec, along with United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran Mainline Protestant groups. As I see it, a critically important restructuring of religion is taking place.

In short, the three trends emphasized in the Pew report hardly signal the demise of Catholicism and Protestantism in Canada, let alone the demise of religion more generally. The analysts could have just as readily flipped the coin over and made a case for the ongoing dominance of Christianity, while noting that the level of dominance has decreased somewhat in recent years.

The nature of the Canadian religious landscape by now is fairly clear. As I have attempted to show since the publication of my book *Beyond the Gods & Back* in 2011, a fairly straightforward pattern characterizes religion in every setting on the planet – including, of course, Canada and the United States. Emerging global data generated primarily by Pew, Gallup, and the World Values Survey show that, to varying degrees everywhere, people have three basic responses to religion that constitute a continuum. Individuals variously (1) embrace religion, (2) dismiss religion, and (3) are ambivalent toward religion. The prevalence of these three basic inclinations clearly differs considerably around the world – and also *within* countries, including Canada.

Of considerable importance, the “pro religion-ambivalent-no religion” continuum is dynamic and ever-changing. Outcomes are not written in the stars. The proportions of populations found along the continuum are ever-changing, influenced by cultural, personal, and organizational factors. Secularization can and does occur. But so does religious rejuvenation. Secularization proponents see an ultimate movement from religion to no religion. In contrast, the “polarization” argument that I am posing recognizes the possibility that things can go and do go either way. The religion-no religion story is never over.



Seen through such “polarization” eyes, the growth in the number of people with “no religion” in the United States and Canada that the Pew Forum has documented does not signal the linear-like decline of conventional expressions of religion. The short-term trends do not even necessarily translate into major shifts in the religious landscapes of either country – at least so far. Christianity continues to know a monopoly in both North American settings.

What the Pew reports provide is evidence that the proportions of people who embrace and reject religion are ever-changing. Christianity has been highly dominant in the past. With immigration and secularization, that dominance currently is subsiding. In Canada, for example, as many as 90% of the population identified with Christianity around 1950, compared to around

65% today. The “pro religion-ambivalent-no religion” proportions along the dynamic continuum have been in flux – as they are everywhere across the globe.

But the result is that the “religious markets” here and in the United States are now more open and potentially more lively than ever before. Secularization is anything but inevitable. What remains to be seen in both Canada and the U.S. – as elsewhere – is the extent to which the three “religious inclinations” will change in accordance with an array of determinants, including the responses of their respective religious groups.

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Also of potential interest:

“Nones on the Rise.” An analysis of religion in the U.S. Pew Forum, October 19, 2012.

<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>

A response by Reginald Bibby. “Welcome to Religious Polarization. Alban Institute, November 5, 2012.

<http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=10100>

Reginald W. Bibby. “Religion in Canada is changing, but it’s not being abandoned.” *Globe and Mail*, May 8, 2013. A response to the National Household Survey, latest census-like release on religion.

<http://m.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/religion-in-canada-is-changing-but-its-not-being-abandoned/article11781056>