

The Canadian Religious Situation

Making Sense of the Census

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The latest word on religion from our census-takers has already begun to generate three main headlines that will continue to be seen and heard across the country over the next few days and weeks. The first is that Canadians are increasingly opting for “no religion.” The second is that growing numbers of Canadians are subscribing to major world faiths other than Christianity. The third is that several “fringe religions” have experienced considerable growth over the past decade.

These three attention-grabbers are being followed by stories that proclaim that the increase in the number of people with “no religion” is further evidence that Canadians are turning away from the nation’s religions of old — indicative even of “Atheism Growing Across Canada,” as one headline in a Toronto paper screeched. The growth of global world faiths is viewed as indicative of Canada’s growing religious diversity. And the success of newer less conventional expressions is seen as the product of large numbers of people turning to non-traditional expressions that allow them to satisfy their increasingly individualistic spiritual quests.

Such widely circulated stories will be assumed to be sound readings of Canada’s religious times. They will be equally believed by average people who don’t claim to know better and academics and religious leaders who think they do. Unfortunately, such interpretations of the census findings will contribute to a severe misreading of religious developments in Canada today.

Single snapshots are obviously valuable in giving us a reading at one point in time: that’s why we all take photographs. But we also know that if we want to understand change, we are well advised to compare the new shots with the old ones, and keep the camera close at hand.

The government of Canada has been gathering data on religious identification every ten years since the first census of 1871. I’ve been gathering fairly extensive data on the religious inclinations of Canadians for a much shorter but important time of religious turmoil, tracking trends through a series of national surveys every five years going back to 1975. Together, the census and survey findings help to provide some perspective to the newly released data for 2001.

1. The “No Religion” Growth.

There’s no doubt about it: the proportion of Canadians who say, “*Nothing*, when asked, “*What is your religion?*” has been on the rise. The 2001 census has pegged the figure of “Religious Nones” (as they are known to social scientists) at 16% versus 12% in 1991. The latest figure is even more impressive when compared to the 4% level of 1971 — the first year that the census-takers literally took “no” for an answer — and 7% in 1981.

On the surface, it seems obvious that Canadians are increasingly rejecting religion, verbalized so poignantly by a teenager appearing with me on a phone-in show a few years back

who described her home as “religion-free.” However, that’s why one needs to keep some film in the camera.

As the new census findings continue to show, people who say they have “no religion” are disproportionately young: 75% are under 45, 40% under 25. In fact, one in four are actually children under 15 whose parents have reported their “no religion” status for them.

I have charted “Religious Nones” through my national surveys for some time now. I can report with some confidence that this tends to be a temporary self-designation in most cases. The vast majority have come from homes where their parents identified with some religion, usually Catholicism or Protestantism. Within five years, about one in three of these “nothings” have become “something”; within ten years, the figure has increased to about two in three. As these predominantly younger people get older, marry, and have children, they typically turn to religious groups for pivotal rites of passage. Their choices are not random: most turn to the identification groups of their parents. When subsequently asked, “What is your religion,” guess what? They no longer are “nothing.”

Today’s 15-to-19-year olds illustrate the pattern well. My *Project Teen Canada* national survey of some 3,500 teenagers in late 2000 found that 24% indicated they had no religion. However, when asked if they anticipated turning to religious groups in the future for a marriage ceremony, 79% of these same teens said “yes”; the overall national level was 89%.

In the midst of going from “something” to “nothing” back to “something,” Religious Nones most certainly are not necessarily atheists. Good grief — 40% of adults and 35% of teenagers who report having no religion not only say they believe in God but say they believe in a God who cares about them. There’s more: some 35% of adults and 30% of teens in this category acknowledge that they pray privately. For the record, about one in three adult and teenage Nones also show up for a worship service at least once in awhile.

A fair reading of the census data reveals that 84% of Canadians continue to identify with religions despite apparent secularization and the availability of a growing number of options. These additional trend findings indicate they soon will be joined by many “temporary Nones” who are currently part of the remaining 16%.

2. Other World Faith Growth.

The new census findings also document the increase in the number of Canadians who identify with major world religions other than Christianity. There are now 580,000 people who subscribe to Islam, more than double the 253,000 figure in 1991. Over the past decade Buddhist affiliates have risen from 163,000 to 300,000, Hindus from 157,000 to 297,000 and Sikhs from 147,000 to 278,000.

It is premature, however, to assume that these major world faiths are making or will make a major dent in the Catholic and Protestant religious monopoly in this country. Measured as percentages of the total national population, the figures are still very small — 2% for Muslims, 1% each for Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs. A cause for pause is that the first Canadian census in

1871 found that about 3% of Canadians identified with faiths other than Christianity, including Judaism. As of 1991 the figure had reached only 5%. The 2001 census figure is only 6%. It may not go much higher.

The census release points out that much of the recent growth in a variety of world faiths has been due to immigration and birth, not the conversion of additional Canadians. Over the long haul, if groups such as Muslims and Buddhists are to continue to keep up with, let alone exceed, population growth, it is critically important that they be able to do what every viable religious group has to do: retain their children. The problem they face is one that is well known to all smaller religious groups ranging from Jews through Baptists: how to avoid religious assimilation. The harsh reality is that their daughters and sons have small pools of only 1-2% of the youth population to draw from when it comes to marital choices; compare that to young Catholics who can select partners from just under 50% of the national population. a figure that soars to close to 90% in Quebec.

So it is that we found in our *Project Teen Canada* survey that by the time young people who had been raised in Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, or Sikh homes were in their late teens, 15% had no religious preference and 6% saw themselves as Protestants or Catholics. Reflecting the lack of reciprocity in the religious assimilation process, less than 1% of teenagers with a Protestant or Catholic parent identified with any of those four Other Faith traditions.

The problem is particularly acute when religious intermarriage occurs. Census data for 1991 show that when Canadians who identify with Other World Faiths marry a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, or even a "Religious None," the dominant tendency is for the children to be raised in the religion (or no religion) of the partner.

The 2001 growth figures for major global religions signal the potential for increased religious diversity. There's no doubt that committed immigrants have brought much energy and new resources to the Canadian religious "market." But until such groups achieve "critical size masses" that contribute to their being able to retain their children, the long-standing Christian monopoly is going to continue. In the meantime, we can expect growing cultural diversification of Catholicism and Protestantism.

3. "Fringe Religion" Growth.

Every new census provides delightful data for people who like to dabble in deviance and champion innovation. If one assumes that large numbers of Canadians are religious dropouts on spiritual quests in an ever-expanding marketplace, what bears watching is where they are turning. It's an interesting and important question. But it also tends to yield a surprising answer.

Between the 1960s and the end of the last century, weekly attendance in Canada dropped from about 50% to 20%. If people had actually "dropped out" of religious groups, one would assume that alternative "religious companies" would have been the benefactors. Yet, census data spanning 1961 through 2001 show that groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-Day Saints, and Unitarians experienced negligible growth relative to the population. The new census has found, for example, that our country of some 30 million people now includes 1,525 individuals

who identify with the highly publicized New Age movement, another 1,525 with Scientology, and a further 850 who see their religion as Satanist. Incidentally, we also have 2,100 explicit humanists, which will be seen by some as “phenomenal growth” since the total represents a 68% increase from 1991. It may be that such groups will expand beyond the fringes of Canadian life and as such are worth watching. But currently they are on the sidelines, as they and other would-be competitors have been throughout the country’s history.

For all the attention being given to the numbers being up for “Religious Nones,” major world religions, and a variety of fringe groups, it’s important to take notice of Statistics Canada’s own lead headline: “Canada still predominantly Roman Catholic and Protestant.” The historically dominant Catholic and Protestant groups continue to enjoy a significant monopoly as “the market choice” of almost 8 in 10 Canadians. In the long run, relatively few of their affiliates switch or drop out altogether.

What’s more, it is not a monopoly those groups are about to lose. In addition to regaining many temporary “Nones” and benefiting greatly from religious assimilation patterns, Mainline Protestants and Catholics have been showing signs of new life in recent years, attracting growing numbers of teenagers and young adults — age groups that evangelical Protestants have been particularly effective in reaching since at least the 1970s.

It all adds up to a lot of activity but, so far at least, a fairly familiar religious mosaic.

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