

Restless Gods and Restless Youth: *An Update on the Religious Situation in Canada*

by

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociological Association
Ottawa - May, 2009

The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Louisville Institute and the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research for funding that helped to make the surveys on which this paper is based possible.

Parts of this paper are based on or drawn from Reginald W. Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials*. Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2009, pp. 162-187.

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of religious developments in Canada in the post-1960s, the author draws on the findings of a major new national survey of some 5,500 teenagers to examine the place of religion in the lives of Canadian youth. The decline in the levels of participation of many of their Boomer and Post-Boomer parents is showing up in the decline of religious identification, involvement, and belief among young people. The findings point to the growing religious polarization of those who value faith and those who do not. Such a situation has emerged in large part because of the failure of three traditionally prominent players to relate well to teenagers: the United Church, Anglican Church, and Catholic Church in Quebec. Nevertheless, large numbers of young people remain open to greater religious involvement, supporting the argument of Rodney Stark and others that "there are some ongoing needs that only the gods can satisfy." What remains to be seen is whether or not current and future religious suppliers will succeed in responding to the interests and needs that persist. Whether the current trend toward religious polarization continues, stops, or even reverses itself would seem to depend primarily on the performance of Canada's religious groups – beginning with how they relate to young people.

Introduction

By now we know that that there is no mystery as to why some individuals opt for religion and others do not. Freud (1962) was right: religion is learned pretty much like the multiplication table or anything else. Scholars who have strained their minds trying to understand the sources of belief and involvement invariably are focusing on the exceptions.

As Peter Berger (1963) observed some fifty years ago, when we are trying understand the sources of ideas, it usually is fairly easy to draw a line from the thought to the thinker to one's social environment. In the case of religious ideas, one's beliefs are typically the product of one's primary groups – starting with family. So it is that religious ideas and practices are passed on from one generation to another. Similarly, families that are not particularly religious beget children who likewise have little interest in religion.

This fairly basic learning model helps us understand what has been happening to religion in Canada since the 1960s.

The Boomer Backdrop

The information we have leads us to believe that organized religion knew considerable numerical strength and influence in Canada from at least 1867 through about 1960.

As the 1950s came to a close, 6 in 10 Canadians claimed they had been in a place of worship in the previous seven days, with the level close to 9 in 10 in Quebec and 8 in 10 among Catholics in the rest of the country. Membership levels in the United, Anglican, and Presbyterian denominations were at the highest levels they had ever been (Bibby 1987:14-17). Religious groups also seemed to have a fair amount of impact on social institutions, particularly in Quebec.

But from the 1960s through 2000, the situation changed fairly dramatically. The 6 in 10 attendance figure dropped to just above 3 in 10, even in Quebec. Formal membership in United, Anglican, and Presbyterian groups dropped by some 25% each – despite the fact that, during the four decades, the Canadian population increased by around 70%. The fourth member of the “Mainline Protestant family,” Lutherans, knew losses, but not as severe.

Evangelical Protestants – typically referred to as “Conservative Protestants” by social scientists – enjoyed better numerical success. They managed to retain their market share of about 8% of the population, but had difficulty expanding any further. The proportion of people identifying with four other major world faiths – Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism – increased from about 1% to 5%, largely as a result of immigration. The percentage of Jews in Canada remained at about 1%.

Significantly, during the forty-year period, the number of Canadians who told the census takers they had “no religion” jumped from less than 1% in 1961 to 16% by 2001.

Declines in the size of the pools of people identifying with various groups can be explained fairly easily in terms of basic demographics – immigration, birth rates, and mortality.

- Mainline Protestants, specifically, saw their number fall dramatically as their immigration pipeline from Britain began to dry up and their birth rates fell – resulting in a situation where they were not producing enough new affiliates to make up for the number who were dying.
- Simply put, people were not particularly upset with the Mainline churches and stomped off in a huff. On the contrary, they died and weren’t replaced.

In the case of broader religious participation, something of a transformation took place with the Baby Boomers. By 1966, the oldest Boomers were entering their 20s, as were the last of the cohort in 1986. The drop-off in attendance between the mid-1960s and 2000 coincided with the Boomers (a) becoming adults and (b) comprising almost 1 in 2 adults between roughly 1981 and 2001.

Boomers consequently were at the centre of the religious participation drop-off. By the mid-1970s, the level of involvement of Boomers in Quebec and the rest of the country had dropped off significantly from that of older adults. It was not a temporary phenomenon: that big decline in Boomer participation remained fairly constant through the end of the century. Contrary to rumours originating in the United States about Boomers returning to church, some returned, but most did not (Bibby 1993:12ff).

	Quebec		Rest of Canada	
	Weekly+	Monthly+	Weekly+	Monthly+
1975	35%	43	29	39
Pre-Boomers	48	52	33	43
Boomers	11	25	16	26
2000	18	23	22	30
Pre-Boomers	35	43	37	45
Boomers	14	21	20	30
Post-Boomers	4	9	10	17

What’s more, as of 2000, the Post-Boomer generation of adults following immediately behind them were even less involved than the Boomers were when they were a similar age in the 1970s.

The reasons many stopped attending on a regular basis are many.

- In Quebec, for example, a significant backlash to the Church’s authority seems to have been a prominent factor.
- Across the country, as growing numbers of women joined the paid work force between 1960 and 2000, time pressures increased significantly in many family settings, leading large numbers of people to become highly pragmatic about religious involvement – a phenomenon also experienced in the United States (Putnam 2000).

- More generally, a mind-shift from obligation to gratification was resulting in Canadians feeling that involvement in any activity needed to be driven by a sense of the value of that activity, versus a sense of obligation or duty (Bibby 2006:58ff).

The Boomer era has seen spiritual needs and fragmented beliefs and practices persist, along with the desire for some rites of passage. But for most Boomers, that's about it. Such is the religious context in which millennials are emerging.

Looking at Today's Youth: Project Teen Canada

Since young people learn religion from adults, they provide something of a mirror of the religiousness of adults – obviously not a perfect mirror but a mirror nonetheless. A series of national surveys that I have been carrying out from the University of Lethbridge provide some important mirror readings. The surveys have consisted of seven “Project Canada” surveys of adults conducted every five years from 1975 through 2005, and four complementary “Project Teen Canada” surveys completed in 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2008.

The surveys have attempted to generate comprehensive information on attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour. The adult samples have averaged about 1,500 people who are 18 and over, and have been highly representative of the adult population. The youth samples have been comprised of teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 who are still in high schools/secondary schools or their equivalents (e.g., CEGEPs in Quebec). These highly representative samples have been comprised of an average of about 3,800 cases.

The most recent youth survey, Project Teen Canada 2008, was carried out between approximately March 15 and June 15 of 2008, with some sample holes filled in the fall. The methodology used in the 1984, 1992, and 2000 Project Teen Canada surveys was replicated. A total of some 5,500 students from about 250 randomly selected schools participated (for full methodological details, see Bibby 2009:214ff).

Together the adult and youth surveys offer considerable information on the direction that religion appears to be going in Canada.

In this brief paper, I want to draw attention to some important trend findings as they relate to four areas: *identification*, *involvement*, *belief in God*, and *receptivity to participation*. I will close by offering some brief observations on what it all may mean for some of the historically prominent religious groups in the country.

Religious Identification

Since at least the early 1980s, there has been a sharp drop in the percentage of teens who express a preference for any group. In 1984, the responses to the question, “What is your religious preference?” 88% identified with a group. Today, that figure is 68%. It is not that groups lack for teenager affiliates – young people who, according to what their parents indicated in the latest census, are in the groups’ “pools.” The problem is that when they are allowed to speak for themselves, many teens do not identify with their parents’ groups.

- The decline in identification has been pronounced among Catholics in Quebec (21% to 9%), and Protestants nationally (35% to 13%).
- Reflecting recent immigration patterns, the proportion of young people who identify with Other Faiths has jumped from 3% in 1984 to a current level of 16%.
- A number of Christian groups have also benefited from recent immigration patterns, as something of a global “circulation of the saints” has been taking place – adding both more people and racial and cultural diversity to their ranks (Bramadat and Seljak 2008:4-5).
- One group that has benefited from immigration is the Roman Catholic Church outside Quebec, where identification figures have been stable since the early 90s.

The inclination for teens to indicate they have “no religion” is highest in the North, followed by British Columbia and Alberta – similar to patterns also found among adults. There has been a significant intergenerational jump in “no religion” in Quebec. Teens in Saskatchewan and Ontario are the least likely to belong to what social scientists refer to as the “Religious None” category.

Table 2. Religion Identification of Teens:
1984-2008

	1984	1992	2000	2008	Census
Roman Catholic	50%	41	39	32	43
Outside Quebec	29	24	23	23	19
Quebec	21	17	16	9	24
Protestant	35	28	22	13	25
United	10	4	3	1	8
Anglican	8	5	3	2	5
Baptist	3	2	2	1	2
Lutheran	2	1	1	1	2
Pentecostal	2	1	1	1	1
Presbyterian	2	1	1	1	1
Other/Unspecified	8	13	11	6	6
Orthodox	--	1	1	2	2
Christian <i>unspecified</i>	--	--	--	3	3
Other Faiths	3	10	14	16	6
Islam	<1	1	3	5	2
Buddhism	<1	1	2	3	1
Judaism	1	1	2	2	1
Hinduism	<1	<1	1	2	1
Sikhism	<1	<1	1	2	1
Aboriginal Spirituality	<1	<1	1	2	<1
Other/Unspecified	2	5	4	2	1
None	12	21	25	32	20

Table 3. No Religion by Region

	Teens	Adults*
NATIONAL	32%	16
North	51	23
British Columbia	44	36
Alberta	38	23
Quebec	37	6
Manitoba	34	19
Atlantic	31	8
Saskatchewan	26	16
Ontario	23	16

*Adult source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census.

As for religious background, 57% of those who say they have “no religion” come from homes where their mother also is not religiously affiliated, 28% are Catholic, 8% Protestant, and 7% identify with Other Faiths – more than half Buddhism.

What is almost breathtaking are the declines in identification experienced by the United and Anglican churches – from 10% to 1% in the case of the United Church, and from 8% to 2% in the Anglican instance. These are ominous signs. Groups that fail to retain good numbers of their offspring have bleak futures.

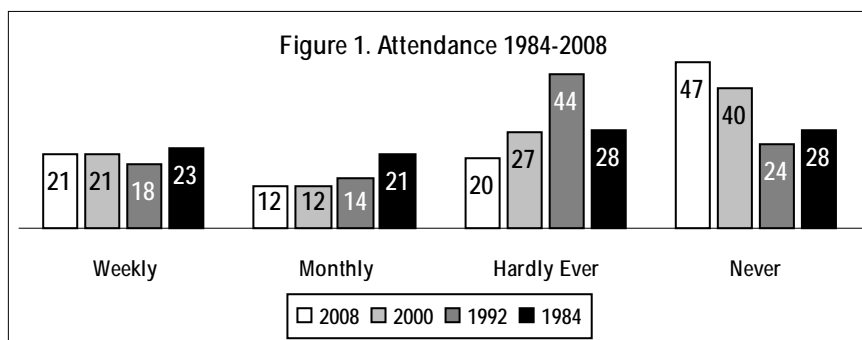
We need to be clear in understanding that it is not that the two large Protestant denominations lack for young people whose parents are United and Anglican. The most recent census data reveal that as many as 8% of teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 come from United Church homes, and 5% from Anglican family settings. That translates into a lot of teens. The problem is that only 1% to 2% self-identify with the two denominations. Simply put, for now, at least, those two groups have lost large numbers of their young people. Similarly, in Quebec, sizable numbers of teenagers whose parents are Catholic do not – at this point – see themselves as Catholic.

Involvement

While 7 in 10 teens identify with religious groups, only about 2 in 10 *attend services* weekly or more, slightly over 3 in 10 monthly or more. Some 14% say they belong to a *religious youth group* – essentially the same as the 12% levels reported in 1992 and 2000.

- *Weekly attendance* is currently about where it has been since at least the 1980s, while *monthly-plus attendance* has changed little since the early 1990s.*

- However, there has been a significant increase since the 80s in the proportion of teenagers who *never attend services* – from 28% in 1984 to a current level of 47%.



What is apparent in these findings is the growing polarization of teenagers who are actively involved in religious groups and those who are not. While the weekly and monthly “market shares” have remained fairly steady for some time, occasional attendance has been increasingly giving way to no attendance.

At the same time, those teens who do continue to identify with religious groups, if anything, are increasingly more likely to be actively involved than their counterparts of recent years. As would be expected, they also are more likely than non-active affiliates to be enjoying their groups. That's hardly surprising: teens – and adults – who participate in religious groups need to find significance in their involvement. Coercion, after all, can only hold up for so long.

So it is that one-third of the 7 in 10 who *identify* with a group indicate they are receiving a high level of enjoyment from their involvement. But some 60% of those who *attend services at least once a month* say they are receiving a high level of enjoyment.

- Levels of enjoyment *differ a fair amount* across groups. Those who identify with either Conservative Protestant (evangelical) groups or Other World Faiths such as Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism report higher levels of enjoyment than Roman Catholics or Mainline Protestants. Young people attending United and Anglican are particularly lagging behind other teens.
- In keeping with what appears to be a strong emphasis on youth ministry and, frankly, entertainment, evangelicals seem to be doing an increasingly good job of making things enjoyable for their youth: close to 70% of evangelical teens say they are receiving a high level of enjoyment from their churches, up about 10 percentage points from previous surveys.

These findings indicate that perhaps as many as 1 in 3 teens across the country are involved in religious groups, with large numbers finding their participation to be gratifying.

Table 4. Service Attendance of Teens by Group: 1984-2008

	% Attending Monthly or More			
	1984	1992	2000	2008
NATIONALLY	44%	32	33	33
Protestant	44	47	60	68
Conservative	68	76	78	91
Baptist	55	74	67	88
Pentecostal	75	74	83	84
Mainline	35	38	42	44
Anglican	30	14	32	33
United	38	13	35	37
Lutheran, Pres	37	49	66	64
Roman Catholic	56	39	37	37
Outside Quebec	62	49	50	47
Quebec	47	25	20	16
ORTHODOX	**	**	**	43
CHRISTIAN <i>unspecified</i>	**	**	65	69
Other Faiths	40	32	40	46
Buddhism	**	23	18	19
Judaism	**	20	23	41
Islam	**	53	50	56
Aboriginal Spirituality	**	22	23	25
Hinduism	**	**	63	61
Sikhism	**	**	**	82
None	7	5	7	7

**N's insufficient to permit accurate and stable percentaging.

Table 5. Enjoyment Identifying Teens Receive from Religious Groups: 2008

% Indicating Receive "A Great Deal" or "Quite a Bit" of Enjoyment

	ALL	Monthly+
NATIONALLY	35	59
ROMAN CATHOLIC	24	46
Outside Quebec	29	46
Quebec	16	55
PROTESTANT	53	72
Mainline	30	52
United	20	33
Anglican	22	29
Other: Luth, Pres. misc	55	82
Conservative	69	75
Baptist	63	71
Pentecostal	67	76
ORTHODOX	50	67
CHRISTIAN <i>unspecified</i>	55	68
OTHER FAITHS	51	70
Islam	66	80
Sikhism	56	57
Hinduism	45	64
Judaism	43	71
Aboriginal Spirit.	43	75
Buddhism	32	55

However, there are perhaps 2 in 3 young people – led by those in Quebec – who have little to do with organized religion. They might be missing out on something. But if so, most don't seem to know what they are missing.

Belief

For years I have been saying that, for all the problems of organized religion in Canada, God has continued to do well in the polls. That's no longer the case.

While more than 8 in 10 teens say that they have raised the question of the *existence* of a God or a higher power, at this point in time, only about two-thirds (67%) have concluded "It" exists. The remainder either "don't think so" (17%) or definitely reject such an idea (16%).

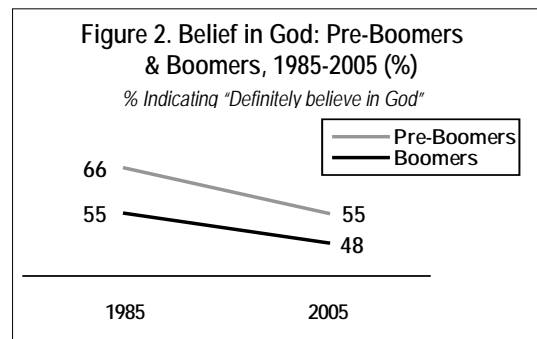
These are not bad "polling" numbers. But they are not as good as God has known in the past, and for a very good reason. Further to my argument at the beginning of the paper, belief in God needs social support. The survey findings readily document the point.

- About 44% of teens who say they *definitely* believe in God or a higher power attend services close to once a week.
- That figure drops to 13% for young people who *think* they believe, to 4% for those who say they *don't think* they believe, and to 3% for teens who say they *definitely do not* believe in God or a higher power.
- Looked at from the standpoint of attendance, 76% of weekly attenders say they definitely believe in God, compared to 52% of monthlys, 34% of yearlys, and 16% of those who never attend.

With the drop-off in the religious participation of Boomers in the post-1950s and the decreasing support for religious ideas, one would expect that there would also be a gradual decline in belief in God. Such has been the case.

But what is particularly important to note is that we are not merely talking about younger people being less inclined than older people to express belief in God. The findings are much more radical: adults who previously expressed unequivocal belief in God in the past are not as inclined to do so now.

- In 1985, 66% of Pre-Boomers said they "definitely" believed in God. The level for Boomers was 55%. The national figure was 61%.
- By 2005, the percentage of Pre-Boomers who said they "definitely" believed in God or a higher power – a slightly more generous measure – had slipped to 55%, the Boomers to 48%, with Post-Boomers coming in at 46%. The national figure was 49%.



- In the case of teenagers, the drop-off in the proportion of young people who “definitely” believe in God has been even more striking.
- In 1984, the figure was 54%; today it stands at only 37% – also a bit generous because of the addition to the belief in God survey item of “or a higher power.” In Quebec the figures have plunged from 55% to 22%

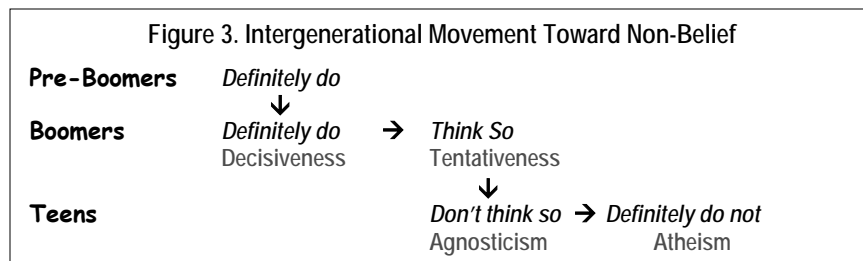
**Table 6. Belief in God or a Higher Power*:
Adults & Teenagers, 1980s & Now (%)**

	ADULTS		TEENS	
	1985	2005	1984	2008
Yes, I definitely do	61	49	54	37
Yes, I think so	23	32	31	31
No, I don't think so	10	11	9	17
No, I definitely do not	6	7	6	16

*1984 & 1985: “God exists”; in 2005 & 2008: “God or a higher power exists”

This is not to say that the remaining adults and teenagers are atheists. But while the adult figure has changed little over time, there has been a sizable increase in the number of teen atheists since the mid-1980s – from 6% to 16% (14% outside Quebec, 25% in Quebec).

It is very important to note that, in Quebec and elsewhere, the adult change has not involved a movement to outright atheism so much as a movement from decisiveness about belief in God to tentative belief or increasing agnosticism. With teens we see what amounts to an ongoing intergenerational shift – from tentativeness to agnosticism, and from agnosticism to atheism.



Receptivity to Greater Involvement

Given that increasing number of adults and teenagers are not involved in organized religion, we have been attempting to probe whether or a measure of receptivity to greater involvement exists. In both 2000 and 2008, we asked teens to respond to the statement, “I’d be open to more involvement with religious groups if I found it to be worthwhile.” In 2000, 37% of those who were attending services less than once a month agreed. Incidentally, in 2005, the comparable figure for adults attending less than once a month was 62% (Bibby 2006:202).

We put the same item to our youth sample again in 2008. This time around, the figure for those attending less than once a month has come in at an almost identical 38% - just over on in three.

That said, it also is clear that there are some teenagers who are not prepared to give religion the time of day. Still, it seems very noteworthy that, even in Quebec, 3 in 10 teenagers have not tuned out the possibility of being more involved.

Apart from whether or not groups will succeed in connecting with young people who are receptive, it's clear that a large number of young people will, on their own, be making contact with a good number of the country's groups. The reason is that many teens indicate they "anticipate" having religious figures carry out some key rites of passage. The percentages have fallen somewhat in recent decades. But the numbers nonetheless, with ease, exceed the current 33% national monthly attendance figure.

- Some 85% of teens say they expect to have a religious wedding ceremony conducted.
- About the same proportion anticipate calling on a religious figure when a funeral is needed.
- And around 65% say they expect to have a birth-related ceremony such as a baptism or christening carried out.

Significantly, the demand for all three rites also remains very high for Quebec teens – despite their very low church-going level.

It may also be worth noting that 54% of teenagers say that they themselves have spiritual needs – very similar to the 58% figure in 1992. Such an expression is predictably higher among weekly (84%) and monthly (68%) service attenders. But it also is something acknowledged by more than one in two teens who rarely attend (57%) and some one in three who never attend a service (36%).

Table 7. Openness to Greater Involvement
"I'd be open to more involvement with religious group if I found it to be worthwhile"

	< Monthly	Monthly+
Nationally	38%	65
Catholic: Outside Quebec	55	67
Catholic: Quebec	30	65
Orthodox Christian	56	63
Christian: unspecified	39	59
Conservative Protestant	35	65
Mainline Protestant	47	62
Other Faith	51	69
Buddhism	56	60
Islam	54	72
Judaism	47	62
Aboriginal spirituality	49	**
Hinduism	30	74
Sikhism	**	63
No Religion	28	53

**N's insufficient to permit accurate and stable percentaging.

Table 8. Desire for Religious Rites of Passage in the Future: 1987-2008

	1987*	2000	2008
Wedding ceremony	94%	89	84
Outside Quebec	94	90	86
Quebec	95	85	77
Funeral	93	86	83
Outside Quebec	93	86	83
Quebec	94	85	81
Birth-related	85	70	65
Outside Quebec	83	67	62
Quebec	94	81	74

*1987 source: Project Teen Canada 2007.

Conclusion

Four decades of trend-tracking reveal that religion in Canada is not what it used to be. A look at this latest national snapshot of the country's teenagers shows that a new picture is emerging in the new millennium that is quite different from the past.

Prior to the 1960s, a majority of close to 60% of Canadians – led by Roman Catholics – were involved in the nation's religious groups. From the late 1960s through the 1990s, that majority evolved into a minority of about 30%. Most of the remainder – comprised primarily of Baby Boomers – continued to constitute “a religious middle” that had occasional ties with the groups and more or less continued to “believe.” But the Boomers as a whole did not give particularly high priority to either their participation or their children's participation in organized religion.

The results are showing up in this latest generation of young teenage millennials. They haven't learned religion like the alphabet. If their Boomer and Post-Boomer parents were straddling involvement and lack of involvement, belief and disbelief, around 40% or more have opted for outright detachment. In addition, close to 20% have opted for disbelief. People in these categories say they never attend. They say they don't believe.

Consequently, on the surface there are signs that Canada is becoming highly polarized religiously. The gap between those who value faith and those who do not has been growing. On one side we have a committed core of around 30% of the population, top-heavy with Catholics outside Quebec, Protestant evangelicals, and people committed to other major world faiths. At least 30% or more of the population is becoming religiously detached. The remainder – perhaps some 40% – is making up “the ambivalent middle.”

In the process, as noted earlier, the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church of Canada, and the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec are having particular difficulties relating well to their 15-to-19-year-old cohorts. Because of the numerical prominence of the three big players, their inability to relate well to their young people is having a negative impact on the religious participation levels of young people in the country as a whole. Again I would emphasize that, all three – and especially the latter – do not lack for sizable numbers of teenagers, as well as people who are older and, for that matter, children who are in their pre-teens. But the current findings point to the reality that these key groups are losing large numbers of young people during their late teen years.

Yet, what is extremely intriguing is the finding that almost 40% of young people who currently are not actively involved in religious groups nonetheless indicate that they are not closed to the possibility of greater participation. Maybe sociologist Rodney Stark (1985) – and people before him dating back at least St. Augustine, and dating after him, such as Ron Rolheiser (2006), are right – that there are some aspects of life that call out for answers that only “the gods can satisfy.” If such observers are reading things accurately, then in Canada as elsewhere, we can expect that the vast majority of people will only say a temporary “goodbye” to religion. In time, most will feel a need to *turn* and in some instances *return* to something that allows them to address life’s ultimate questions, and satisfy their spiritual needs.

But while the survey findings document fairly extensive openness to religious groups, they also reveal that teenagers, as well as younger adults, are highly pragmatic. They have to find that greater levels of involvement are worthwhile – resulting in the enhancement of their lives and the lives of those who matter most to them. Otherwise, their outlook understandably seems to be, “Why bother?”

What remains to be seen is whether or not current and future religious groups will succeed in responding to the interests and needs that persist. Those interests and needs start with children and teenagers – and call for ministries that are solidly in touch with individuals at those early points in their lives.

If Canada’s religious groups fail, the chasm between those who care about faith and those who do not can be expected to grow wider. If they succeed, and address “the restlessness” that seems to be felt at some times by so many, the chasm will shrink.

There we have it: “Restless Gods and Restless Youth.” Maybe the two will meet; then again, maybe not. The key, as always, lies with the suppliers.

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