

POST-CHRISTENDOM IN CANADA? NOT SO FAST

Reginald W. Bibby

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB, Canada

I was intrigued to learn that a Centre for Post-Christendom Studies has been established at McMaster Divinity College, a school where I have had the privilege to speak and teach on many occasions over the years. These days, my work on what is happening to Christianity in Canada and around the world leaves me with the intense belief that the world and Canada is hardly going in a “post-Christian” direction.

A Sociological Digression: Global Developments

On the contrary, reputable research institutes like the Pew Research Forum tell us that Christianity has been growing dramatically in the past century or so, and will have some three billion adherents by around 2050—slightly ahead of the number of Muslims. In the case of Christianity, the number of Catholics increased from five hundred million to over one billion during the twentieth century, and Pentecostals from essentially zero to half a billion. In Canada, the Christian “market share” has dropped from about 98 per cent in 1867 to 70 per cent today. But because of population growth, Canadian census data from 1867 and 2011 shows that the number of people identifying themselves as “Christian” during that time has risen from just over three million to more than twenty-three million.¹

Of particular importance, while Christianity has experienced numerical decline in the global north—leading to generalizations about secularization and post-Christendom, the decline has been more than offset by significant gains in the global south. In 1900,

1. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*, 45.

Catholic Church membership, for, example, was 75 per cent European and North American. Today, close to 70 per cent of Catholics reside in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The impact is not only being felt in the pews: to a degree never before experienced, Catholic leadership is beginning to come from all over the world.² A poignant example: the election of Pope Francis from Argentina.

One of the leading observers of contemporary Catholicism, John Allen, Jr., has recently written, “Even the most committed agnostic or atheist would have to admit that confident predictions made not so long ago about the inevitable decline of religion have proven stunningly false.” Allen points out that, on the contrary, “the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have witnessed a powerful resurgence of religion as a driving force in human affairs.”³ With respect to Catholic numbers globally, Allen puts things this way: “Anybody who thinks this is an era of Catholic decline needs to get out more often.”⁴

**Table 1. The Ten Largest
Christian Nations**
(Millions)

1. United States	243
2. Brazil	173
3. Mexico	108
4. Russia	105
5. Philippines	86
6. Nigeria	78
7. China	68
8. DR Congo	63
9. Germany	57
10. Ethiopia	52

Source: Pew Research Center
April 2, 2015.

2. Allen, *The Future Church*, 1, 14.
3. Allen, *The Catholic Church*, 4.
4. Allen, *The Catholic Church*, 11.

Renowned American sociologist Rodney Stark has been monitoring religious developments around the world for decades. In 2015 he wrote, “Contrary to the constant predictions that religion is doomed, there is abundant evidence of an ongoing world-wide religious awakening. Never before have four out of five people on earth claimed to belong to one of the great world faiths.” With respect to Christianity specifically, Stark provides extensive global data. He notes by way of illustration that today “there are millions of devout Protestants in Latin America; not so long ago there were none. Even so, Latin American Catholics are far more religious than ever before. Sub-Saharan Africa is now home to more church-going Christians than anywhere else on earth.” And in China, a country that is obviously of pivotal importance to religious trends in light of its size and emigration to various parts of the world, Stark reminds us that millions of people have converted to Christianity in recent decades. Moreover, he is projecting that by 2040—about two decades from now—the numbers will jump from a current level of some one hundred million to more than five hundred million.⁵ In summing things up, Stark writes that “The world is not merely as religious as it used to be. In important ways, it is far *more* intensely religious than ever before.” He points out that, apart from differences in details from place to place, “the story remains much the same: the temples, mosques, pagodas, chapels, and churches are full, and even most people who do not attend say they are religious.”⁶

The Impact on Religion in Canada

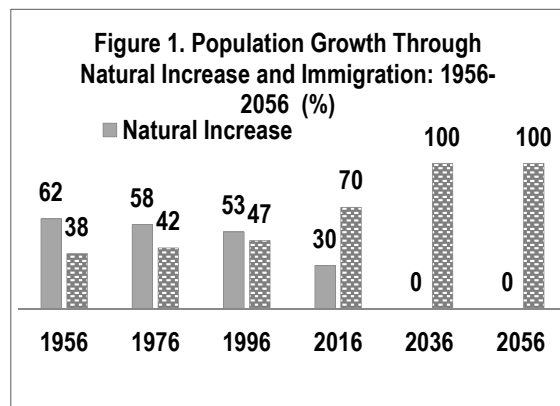
As sociologists, we try to drill into our students the idea that we are not islands unto ourselves. On the contrary, one essential key to understanding who we are, how we think, and how we act lies with our social environments. In parallel fashion, one critically important key to understanding religious developments

5. Stark and Wang, *Star in the East*, location 1416. See Pew Research Center, *Future of World Religions*.

6. Stark, *Triumph of Faith*, location 172.

in Canada is an understanding of our global environment. Whether or not Canada becomes more or less secularized in the future does not lie merely with the rise and fall of its primary religious group players. Of far more importance to the future of religion in the twenty-first century than the decline of historically dominant groups such as the United, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Lutheran churches, is how Canada is going to be impacted by the thousands—or rather, millions—of people who arrive here from other countries.

It is widely known that Canada is facing something of a demographic crisis. Statistics Canada tells us that our natural increase numbers (births minus deaths) is no longer sustaining our population growth.⁷ What's more, through the foreseeable future, things are only going to get worse. The solution? An increase in immigration.



Source: Derived from Statistics Canada 2007. Cat. 91-003-XWE.

As the world comes to Canada in larger and larger numbers, the global religious resurgence—and the Christian global resurgence specifically—is going to have a profound impact on the religious landscape of Canada. Contrary to what many secularization-minded pundits have been saying for years,

7. Statistics Canada, “Canadian Demographics.”

religion remains entrenched in Canadian society. We now are realizing that a secularization interpretation of religious developments is inadequate.

The Secularization Argument

For some time, most observers have assumed that secularization sums up what has been happening to religion in Canada. I myself previously advocated such an interpretation.⁸ Religion's loss of influence seemed readily evident in the dramatic decline in religious participation in the post-1960s, and the parallel decline in religion's impact on Canadian lives and Canadian life.

The data seem blatant. The proportion of people who indicate they have "no religion" has risen from under 1 per cent in 1961 to a current level of about 25 per cent. Over the same fifty-year period, regular service attendance—weekly to monthly—has dropped from over 80 per cent to around 20 per cent. Current age differences in involvement suggest that things may well get worse before they get better. Influence-wise, religious groups and religious ideas are accorded a polite and legitimate place in a pluralistically-minded Canada. But they hardly play a prominent or preferred role in shaping public policy and impacting everyday life.

The secularization thesis articulated by people like Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud in days gone by and updated in recent decades by the likes of Bryan Wilson, Karel Dobbelaere, and Steve Bruce appears to be applicable to many western nations including Canada. With the noteworthy increase in the number of "religious nones" in the United States in recent years, even America—long-regarded as a notable exception—has also been seen as unable to escape the pervasive tide of secularization.⁹

However, the problem with the secularization argument is simple: it doesn't account for the data. Large numbers of people in Canada and elsewhere continue to value faith. If we let

8. See Bibby, *Fragmented Gods*; Bibby, *Unknown Gods*.

9. See, for example, Lipka, "A Closer Look."

Canadians, for example, speak for themselves, close to 70 per cent continue to self-identify as Christians while 5 per cent to 10 per cent identify with other faiths; just one in four say they have “no religion.”¹⁰ That kind of data does not warrant Canada being depicted as “post-Christian.” Observers may not like what self-identifying Christians believe or practice, or how they live out their lives. But to proclaim that they are “post-Christian” and that their daily lives and social settings are “post-Christian” clearly involves judgments that go far beyond what people themselves are saying.

Table 2. Religious Groups: 2011
In 1000s

Roman Catholic	12,811	39%
United	2,008	6
Anglican	1,632	5
Christian (<i>generic</i>)	1,476	4
Muslim	1,054	3
Baptist	636	2
Christian Orthodox	551	2
Hindu	498	2
Pentecostal	479	2
Lutheran	478	2
Presbyterian	472	2
Other Christian	1,561	4
Sikh	455	1
Buddhist	367	1
Jewish	329	1
Aboriginal Spirit.	65	<1
No Religion	7,851	24

Source: 2011 National Household Survey.

Lest anyone thinks I am exaggerating, let me offer some additional survey data that I think are highly pertinent here. In March of 2015, in collaboration with Angus Reid, I asked some three thousand Canadians about the role that faith plays as a

10. Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*.

resource in their personal lives. The item read, “How often do you feel strengthened by your faith?” Some 40 per cent of respondents said that they have such feelings “monthly” through “daily,” led—as would be expected—by about 85 per cent of weekly attenders.¹¹ In addition, no less four in ten also maintained that *what happens in their lives* is determined “a great deal or quite a bit” by God—only slightly below the 45 per cent level who acknowledge the impact on their lives of “other people.”¹² Clearly large numbers of Canadians are far from “post-religious” or “post-Christian.”

In addition to minimizing the reality of significant numbers of people continuing to value faith, observers who have offered projections about the future of religion in Canada have largely overlooked the importance of a critically important variable: *immigration*. Secularization is simply a description of a trend. It is not some singular, linear, tsunami-like force that claims everyone in its wake. Rather the inclination of a society to experience secularization—the loss of religious influence—always coexists with the inclination to experience little change or even a reversal in the form of de-secularization, or what some refer to as “sacralization.” Immigration—the arrival of new people—always has the potential to have an impact on religious situations.

In the last two decades alone, some one million Catholics have arrived in Canada, along with comparable numbers of Muslims. The magnitude of such an infusion of people and resources—given that the new arrivals are typically more religiously committed and more involved than people born in Canada¹³—is potentially game-changing.

In the case of Christianity specifically, things are never over, in Canada or elsewhere. It may not be too strong to take a deep breath and posit something radical: “Post-Christendom” may have regional and temporal applicability. But, in the longer term

11. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*, 76.

12. Bibby and Reid, *Canada's Catholics*, 102.

13. Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 218–19.

in virtually any setting—including Canada—it may be largely a misnomer.

The Reality of Polarization

In recent years, I have been introducing an alternative to the secularization framework in attempting to make sense of religious developments in Canada. It seems to me that a better explanatory framework is *polarization*. The data clearly show that, while a growing number of people are rejecting religion, another solid core of Canadians continues to embrace religion. Simultaneously, a significant number of people are somewhere in “the middle,” neither embracing nor rejecting faith.

These reflections have been accompanied by the generation of some new data. In surveys beginning in 2015, I have put the question of posture toward religion directly to Canadians. While continuing to probe things like attendance, identification, and beliefs, I have asked respondents if they recognize themselves in the polarization continuum categories. They have been given the following statement and question:

Some people say Canadians variously (1) embrace religion, (2) reject religion, or (3) are somewhere in between the two extremes. Where would you tend to locate yourself?

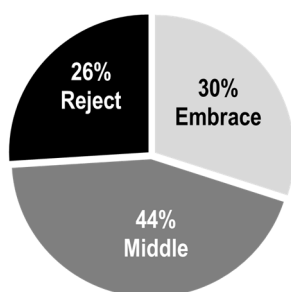
The three response options have been: (1) I am inclined to embrace religion, (2) I am inclined to reject religion, and (3) I am somewhere in between.

In response, some 30 per cent of Canadians have been saying that they are inclined to *embrace religion*. They provide evidence that the days of people being religiously committed are hardly over. But their numbers clearly have been shrinking. About another 25 per cent report that they are inclined to *reject religion*. Located primarily in the “no religion” category, their numbers, as noted, have been growing in recent decades.

The remaining 45 per cent or so acknowledge that they are *somewhere in between* the two positions. A detailed examination in *Resilient Gods* of an array of correlates—such as private and

public practices beliefs, religious experiences, and attitudes toward religion and spirituality—shows that “the Religious Middle” do not see themselves as particularly devout. But they also have not abandoned religion.

Figure 2.
Orientations Toward
Religion



Source: Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 65.

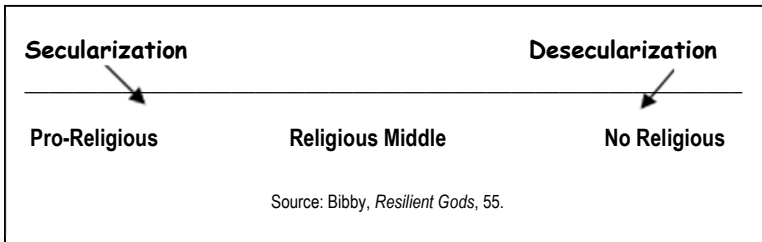
We do not have explicit trend data on those in “the Middle” category. But this is easily the largest of the three categories. For the comparative record, Robert Putnam and David Campbell maintain this segment is shrinking in the United States.¹⁴ Perhaps the distribution and proclivity to adopt one position or the other versus taking a more moderate position is stronger in the U.S. than it is here. Rather than being unique to Canada, the three inclinations are found everywhere in the world—in every country, every region, every setting. People variously embrace religion, reject religion, or take a middle position. Consequently, the primary academic question is the extent to which the three inclinations are found anywhere.

Against such a descriptive backdrop, secularization simply describes the tendency to move away from religion, while de-secularization describes the opposite tendency. Since life is dynamic and ever-changing, the extent to which people take up

14. Putnam and Campbell, *Amazing Grace*, 135–36.

“pro religious,” “no religious,” and “low religious” inclinations is ever-changing as well.

Figure 3. Secularization, Desecularization, and Polarization



It's not a matter of our buying into secularization or rejuvenation (“de-secularization”). Rather, polarization is the backdrop for understanding the dynamic, ongoing inclinations for secularization or de-secularization trends to be taking place. Seen in the context of polarization, it is hardly surprising people have been observing both secularization and de-secularization patterns. One is not accurate and the other inaccurate. Both reflect activity on a dynamic, ever-changing polarization continuum. Four measures of religiousness—attendance, identification, belief, and salience—religion being a part of one’s daily life, demonstrate some noteworthy global differences:

Extremely high levels of religiosity are found in settings such as Thailand, Nigeria, the Philippines, and India.

A *second tier* of high religiousness is found in countries like Brazil, Iraq, Iran, and El Salvador.

A *third tier* includes Mexico, Italy, Poland, and the U.S.

With the *fourth tier*—Israel, Spain, Canada, Germany, Russia, and Australia—polarization is more pronounced.

In the *fifth tier*, religiosity is low. Countries include France, Britain, Hong Kong, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and China.

Some countries such as the Philippines, Pakistan, Greece, and the Ukraine are enigmatic, knowing high levels of salience, identification, and belief, yet relatively low levels of attendance. Japan is characterized by salience and identification levels that fall below belief and attendance.

Table 3. Saliency, Attendance, Identification, & Belief: Select Countries

	<i>Saliency</i>	ID	Belief	Attend
Nigeria	98%	99	99	74
Thailand	97	99	99	69
Saudi Arabia	97	99	99	70
Pakistan	96	99	99	56
Philippines	95	99	99	65
Ethiopia	90	99	99	78
Brazil	89	92	99	49
Dominican Republic	88	99	97	51
El Salvador	88	83	98	65
Iraq	86	99	99	51
India	85	99	98	67
South Africa	85	85	99	58
Iran	83	99	99	47
Greece	72	99	95	33
Italy	70	80	97	48
Mexico	66	95	98	58
Poland	64	92	95	73
United States	66	77	96	46
Ireland	54	94	98	56
Israel	48	98	95	35
Ukraine	47	92	95	24
Spain	44	98	93	31
Korea, Republic of	43	57	71	35
CANADA	43	76	85	27
Germany	40	80	93	30
Cuba	35	90*	75	20
Russia	34*	50*	93	15
New Zealand	33	60	93	26
Netherlands	32	58	90	23
Australia	32	78	84	21
Finland	29	75	97	13
United Kingdom	29	74	91	20
France	27	75	93	19
Japan	26	95	89	29
Hong Kong	25	95	95	19
Czech Republic	25	65	92	14
Sweden	13	75	83	16
China	---	48	73	9

Source: Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 60.

Canada is experiencing a growing level of religious polarization. As such, we stand in contrast to settings that are characterized by both religious and secular monopolies. We most closely resemble countries like the Ukraine, Germany, and Australia.¹⁵

As Pew looks to Canada's future, the 70 per cent of today's population who identify with Christian groups will decrease to 60 per cent by 2050. However, the drop in "market share" will not be due to a significant increase in those who have no affiliation. Rather, the 10 per cent-point drop will be due primarily to the increase in Muslims (4 per cent) and Hindus (2 per cent).

**Table 4. Canada's Major Religious Groups:
2010 and 2050**

	2010		2050	
	1000s	%	1000s	%
Christians	23,470	69	24,640	60
Muslims	710	2	2,260	6
Unaffiliated	8,050	24	10,470	26
Hindus	470	1	1,070	3
Buddhists	280	1	600	1
Jews	350	1	560	1
Other	690	2	1,350	3

Source: Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015.

In short, regardless of the presence and performances of some of Canada's mainstay religious groups, the numerically dominant affiliation will continue to be Christian by the middle of the twenty-first century.

What this means is that the Christian faith is anything but passé in Canada. On the contrary, what is intriguing for the sociologist is to predict or anticipate what religious "entries" will step up and, along with Catholics, respond to this sizable part of the population that will be in the market for Christianity.

15. Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 59–62.

Needless to say, groups—notably Mainline Protestants—who have their eyes on what used to be and what never will be again are not likely to be among the primary players.

In the Introduction to *Resilient Gods*, I wrote that the world is coming to Canada. Our academics and religious leaders have spent endless hours, ink, and computer bytes talking and writing about whether or not the religious sky is falling in this country. In the process, we have been like children huddled in a tent, wondering whether or not there is a leak in the canvas. In the meantime, a major tornado is about to land. Or, conversely, the beautiful weather outside makes it—yes—“an academic argument” as to whether or not the little pin-prick in the tent actually matters.

These days, a global religious revival of tsunami proportions is taking place. Christianity, Islam, and many other major and minor religions are experiencing explosive growth. What we do in the tent matters. But what is happening in the world around the tent matters much more. In concert with immigration, those developments do not point to a “post-Christian” Canada.

Back to Post-Christendom Studies

This takes me back to the beginning of this paper. Global religious developments and ensuing Canadian religious developments provide this researcher and many others with a fascinating ongoing story of religious vitality. Christianity—along with Islam, Hinduism, and a number of other prominent religions—remain not only alive but vibrant in many parts of the world.

As I have pointed out, this unfolding story of religious life is a far cry from the picture that was being painted by secularization proponents such as Durkheim, Marx, and Freud. In retrospect, those three allegedly wise men’s accounts of religion’s demise have proven to be remarkably Eurocentric and badly dated. Nevertheless, many of us were strongly influenced by their accounts and passed them on to our students who in turn spread them to others. We frequently shared those interpretations with religious leaders, and in the process played the role of

messengers of doom who often demoralized the troops and bottled up their creative energies. When secularization is inevitable, who wants to be part of shrinking, if gallant, religious remnants?

Today, as Stark and Allen have reminded us, what is taking place globally is a far cry from such dismal prognostications. This is not an age of demise. Yes, there is considerable carnage in Canada and many western settings as many previously prominent “religious companies” have retrenched and flirted with receivership. But that’s part of the religious world of yesterday. Those “firms” are being replaced by new religious companies with new resources and new energy. In the case of Canada’s Catholic Church, immigration pipelines from all over the world are bringing new people and new resources in numbers and quantities that are unprecedented. As noted, since 2000, more than one million Christians, led by Catholics, have arrived in Canada from other places, adding considerable vitality to Christianity and the Canadian religious scene generally.

So why are we talking about “post-Christendom”? Obviously, I need to be better informed. If we are talking about some kind of Canadian Golden Age, when almost everyone in Quebec and elsewhere identified with Christianity and when life seemingly was extensively informed by Christian ideas and ideals—an era that some might dub “Christendom in Canada”—then, I supposed we could talk about this being a “post-Christendom” period.

However, (1) if people who self-identify as “Christian” continue to constitute a solid majority in an environment that has become more religiously diverse, and (2) most of those “Christians” continue to value faith and see it as an important resource that influences their lives—albeit in a fairly unobtrusive way that is in keeping with “the Canadian way” that religion is supposed to be expressed, it is hardly fair or accurate to describe this as a “post-Christendom” era. Maybe it would be more appropriate, for example, to view it as an era of “Pluralistic Christianity.” It’s true that Christianity no longer—if in fact it ever did—constitutes a numerical or social monopoly in Canada. It now is into something along the lines of a “Phase Two.” But it

remains prevalent, indeed, prominent, and remains important to large numbers of Canadians.

Obviously, we need to continue the conversation. A number of quick questions and a recommendation come to mind:

(1) What precisely do the founders of the Centre for Post-Christendom Studies mean by post-Christendom?

(2) Is the Centre focusing on what is no longer with us versus Christianity's possible nature and place in Canada and elsewhere today and tomorrow?

(3) Is attention being given to global developments which through immigration and communication have the potential to have an enormous impact on Christianity in Canada?

(4) Of central importance, the focus should not be demise but rather ongoing life.

Final Thoughts

I am a sociologist, not a theologian nor an historian, nor a certified prophet. That said, I do have a theology degree diploma on my office wall and I did minor in history, and make extensive use of historical material. I also often attempt to peer into the future.

But I welcome learning more about why "post-Christendom" studies are worth pursuing to the point of establishing the MDCCPCS. Clearly the Centre is the result of some key people feeling passionate about the need for its creation. I look forward to being illuminated.

Thank you again for letting me offer some thoughts, both informed and wild-eyed.

Bibliography

Allen, John L., Jr. *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

———. *The Catholic Church: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Bibby, Reginald. *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Irwin, 1987.

———. *Resilient Gods: Being Proreligious, No Religious, and Low Religious in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017.

———. *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1993.

Bibby, Reginald W., and Angus Reid. *Canada's Catholics: Vitality and Hope in a New Era*. Toronto: Novalis, 2016.

Lipka, Michael. "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones.'" <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones>.

Pew Research Center. *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010– 2050*. Washington, DC: Pew, 2015.

Putnam, Robert, and David E. Campbell. *Amazing Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious than Ever*. Wilmington, DW: ISI, 2015. Kindle edition.

Stark, Rodney, and Xiuhua Wang. *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2015. Kindle edition.

Statistics Canada. "Canadian Demographics at a Glance." Catalogue 91-003-XWE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007.

Statistics Canada. *2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables*. Catalogue 99-010-X2011032. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Modified 2017.