

WHEN THE SAINTS AREN'T MARCHING IN:  
DISAFFILIATION, THE 2021 CENSUS, AND THE CULTURAL  
ZEITGEIST IN CANADA

Sam Reimer

Crandall University, Moncton, NB, Canada

The census data show that by 2021, just over half of Canadians claim some sort of Christian affiliation, compared to two-thirds (67.3 percent) in 2011 and three-quarters (77.1 percent) in 2001.<sup>1</sup> Are these disaffiliates converting to other religions? No, nearly all are becoming religious “nones,” or “nonverts” as Stephen Bullivant calls them.<sup>2</sup> The data show 34.6 percent of Canadians claim no religious affiliation as of 2021, double of what it was in 2001.<sup>3</sup> These numbers may even be optimistic. A recent poll shows that half of Canadians claim no religious affiliation in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

This decline in Christendom can also be seen in church attendance, something the census does not ask. Since at least the 1960s, church attendance declined steadily; weekly attendance has dropped from about 67 percent in 1946 to below 10 percent today.<sup>5</sup> Giving to churches and volunteering are down as well. Canadians are increasingly unlikely to participate in a religious institution. This trend away from churches is widespread across

1. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 11–16. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

2. Bullivant, *Nonverts*.

3. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 11–16. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

4. Hiemstra, “Not Christian Anymore,” n.p.

5. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*; and Reimer, *Caught in the Current*.

many countries, including the US, Britain, Australia, and many European countries.<sup>6</sup>

However, the census tells us that not all religious groups are declining in Canada. Those that are not are mainly benefiting from immigration. Other world religions—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus—are growing mainly because of immigration. Among Christian groups, the group that is clearly growing is Orthodox Christianity, again thanks mainly to immigration. The only other growing Christian category is those who say they are “Christian,” with no other specification.<sup>7</sup> To the best of our knowledge, this is typically an eclectic grouping, made up of both low-commitment (who affiliate as Christian but rarely practice their faith) and high-commitment (active in church attendance and prayer) Christians. Possibly this is an indication that denominational identities are weakening, as people prefer to be known as just “Christian.”

It will not surprise even casual observers of religious trends that Canada is increasingly post-Christian. The question is why? I will point out two important reasons (not an exhaustive list): immigration and a changing cultural zeitgeist. I will discuss the first briefly, and the second in more detail.

Regarding immigration, by 2032, it is predicted that 100 percent our growth will be due to immigration.<sup>8</sup> By 2041, it is estimated that over half of Canadians will be immigrants or children of immigrants, with a much higher percentage in our major cities.<sup>9</sup> Demographically, the religiosity and affiliation of immigrants will be a key driver of religious growth and decline. Immigrants tend to have higher religiosity than non-immigrants,<sup>10</sup> so attracting immigrants to a congregation is important for both growth and vitality. Those congregations located in our big cities (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal) have an advantage because immigrants are

6. Inglehart, *Religion's Sudden Decline*.

7. “The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country’s Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity,” *The Daily*, 26 October 2022, 11–16. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.

8. Government of Canada, “An immigration plan to grow the economy,” n.p.

9. Stats Canada, “Canada in 2041,” n.p.

10. Reimer and Hiemstra, “The Gains/Losses,” 327–44.

still more likely to land in our big cities than elsewhere. Of course, the pre-arrival religious affiliation of immigrants will shape the future of the religious landscape in Canada. Besides Orthodox Christians, significant numbers of Catholic and Pentecostal immigrants are bolstering their numbers of affiliates. Yet, even these groups are losing ground, if not as quickly as other groups that benefit less from immigration (like the United Church or Lutherans).

If 400,000–500,000 immigrants a year cannot reverse the religious decline in Canada,<sup>11</sup> then what is the cause of so much disaffiliation? The typical answer from scholars is secularization; and that is a good answer. Very briefly, secularization theory would posit that religious authority is declining in Canada and other Western countries.<sup>12</sup> Secularization is driven by macro-structural factors like differentiation, where religious influences are removed from other major institutions like schools, politics, economy, media, and health care. As a result, people's public life lacks religious significance, and religion is sequestered to the private sphere of our homes and our weekend activities (privatization). Pluralization is another factor. As our society becomes more religiously diverse, no one religious view has taken-for-granted legitimacy. Berger's *Sacred Canopy* (1967) has been replaced by individual umbrellas.<sup>13</sup> Further, scientific explanations have replaced religious explanations for many things, and modernization and technological advances provide a comfortable (and distracted!) life such that the desire for religious compensators (i.e., rewards in heaven for present suffering) is muted.

Yet, these macro social changes are not the whole story. As I argue in my recent book, cultural factors are also in play.<sup>14</sup> Put succinctly, our dominant culture narrative, the cultural *Zeitgeist*, is pushing us away from institutional religion.

11. Government of Canada, "An immigration plan to grow the economy," n.p.

12. Chaves, "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority," 749–74.

13. Carwana, "Evangelicals." See also Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

14. Reimer, *Caught in the Current*.

Firstly, this is because deference to institutional authorities like politicians, parents, teachers, clergy, and medical doctors is on the decline, while deference to our own intuition is increasing. Authority has moved from outside the person to inside the person. Eminent philosopher Charles Taylor calls this “the massive subjective turn in modern culture.”<sup>15</sup> We are expected to follow the dictates of our own hearts instead of the blindly following the dictates of some religious authority. Canadians are increasingly guided by an inner epistemology.<sup>16</sup> We are told that we are our own source of truth. Society prescribes “following our own path” or “being true to yourself.” Ironically, the authority of social media and the internet, called “algorithmic authority” by Heidi Campbell,<sup>17</sup> seems immune to critique, and Canadians do not seem to realize that this external authority is (mis)shaping them.

As a result of this shift to an inner locus of authority, Canadians feel free to disagree with the official doctrines of a denomination if it does not resonate with what they sense within. “Sure,” a Canadian may think, “we can make use of a church for a time if it helps us on our individual journey toward wholeness, but we feel no sense of loyalty because we have to find our own path.” I suggest that this shift toward inner authority is the greatest barrier to Christian discipleship in our society. It is hard to pass on the faith to the next generation if everyone has to discover their beliefs (and even their identity) for themselves.

Secondly, “religion” (the word itself) has negative connotations for many in Canadian society.<sup>18</sup> For example, the abuses associated with the indigenous residential schools, including the purported discovery of mass graves, have changed the perception of religion. Religion, especially Christianity, actively participated in this abuse and the suppression of indigenous religion and culture. As a result, religious authority is associated with “colonialism” and “oppression” for many. Another example would be the association of religion with what is happening south of the border.

15. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

16. Watts, *The Spiritual Turn*.

17. Campbell, *Digital Creatives*.

18. Watts and Reimer, “Symbolic Pollution and Religious Change,” n.p.

The role of Christianity in American nationalism, kindled by the rhetoric of former President Trump and some conservative religious leaders, has fed this association. “Religion” is symbolically linked with “American.” Since Canadian identity is partly a negative identity (that is, we are not Americans), religion, especially conservative and committed religion, is seen as “un-Canadian.” I could also mention the scandals of religious leaders, which link religion to hypocrisy and greed in the minds of some.

Overall, the point is that the macrostructural changes normally associated with secularization are not the whole story. Cultural changes, like the shift to internal authority and the increasingly negative connotation of religion, also play a role. These changes are symbolic and cultural, and affect people’s feelings toward religion, which also influence their participation in it. The census reveals the surface symptoms of a massive, subterranean cultural shift.

This sounds like mostly bad news for Christian ministry. If clergy are only interested in big churches and full pews, then it is bad news. Clearly, attracting Canadians to church is a tough task if they view institutional Christianity negatively. A more herculean task, I would argue, is to teach Canadians to defer to the external authority of God and the Bible, when the cultural script instructs them to follow the inner directives of their heart.

However, one can also argue that the cultural scaffolding that supported Christianity, and artificially props up church participation, is now gone. This means that people participate in congregations less for conventional reasons and more for reasons of commitment. Possibly the disaffiliation of marginal members, leaving only a committed core, is good for Christianity. As our British co-religionists are learning, Christianity can thrive in the margins of society.<sup>19</sup>

### *Bibliography*

Berger, Peter. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Anchor, 1967.

19. Webster, “2021 Census,” n.p.

- Bullivant, Stephen. *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- Campbell, Heidi. *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Carwana, Brian. "Evangelicals, the Liberal State, and Canada's Family Values Debates: The Struggle to Shape Selves." PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021.
- Chaves, Mark. "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority." *Social Forces* 72 (1994) 749–74.
- Government of Canada. 2022. "An immigration plan to grow the economy." N.p. online: <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html>.
- Hiemstra, Rick. "Not Christian Anymore." *Faith Today*, January/February 2020. N.p. online: <https://www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-Jan-Feb/Not-Christian-anymore>.
- The Daily*. "The Canadian Census: A Rich Portrait of the Country's Religious and Ethnocultural Diversity," 26 October 2022, 11–16. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-001-X.
- Inglehart, Ronald. *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Reimer, Sam. *Caught in the Current: British and Canadian Evangelicals in an Age of Self-Spirituality*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023.
- Reimer, Sam and Rick Hiemstra. "The Gains/Losses of Canadian Religious Groups from Immigration: Immigration Flows, At-

tendance and Switching.” *Studies in Religion* 47 (2018) 327–44.

Stats Canada. “Canada in 2041: A larger, more diverse population with greater differences between regions,” 2022. N.p. online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220908/dq220908a-eng.htm>.

Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Watts, Galen. *The Spiritual Turn: The Religion of the Heart and the Making of Romantic Liberal Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Watts, Galen and Sam Reimer. “Symbolic Pollution and Religious Change: The Religious Imaginary of Anglo-Canadian *Spiritual but not Religious* Millennials.” *Sociology of Religion*, in press.

Webster, Danny. “2021 Census: Christianity can Flourish in the Margins of Society,” 2022. N.p. online: <https://www.eauk.org/news-and-views/census-figures-we-are-not-surprised-but-there-is-work-to-do>.