

PROSPECTS FOR CHRISTIANITY AFTER CHRISTIAN HEGEMONY

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Post-Christendom Studies is an appropriate journal for essays discussing recent surveys that measure religion in contemporary Canada. Whether Statistics Canada reporting a sharp decline in Christian identification from 2001 (77 percent) to 2021 (53 percent) and a corresponding rise in “no religion” identification (16 percent in 2001; 35 percent in 2021)—or Cardus-Angus Reid identifying only 35 percent of Canadians as either religiously committed (16 percent) or privately religious (19 percent)—Canada presents a natural case for considering the prospects for Christianity in a post-Christendom society.¹

As a historian working primarily on US subjects, but with also a long-standing interest in Canada, I was accustomed to stress historical differences between Canada, with its Protestant and Catholic varieties of “Quasi Christendom,” and the US, with what might be called a history of “White Protestant Privilege” exercised through voluntary means and a formal separation of church and state.² Now, however, especially with a number of social and cultural developments in the two countries converging, I am inclined to see more similarity between the two societies. In particular, both Canada and the US seem to be experiencing a rapid dis-

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; and Angus Reid-Cardus, “Canada across the religious spectrum” n.p.

2. Noll, *What Happened to Christian Canada?*

mantling of their slightly different forms of “Christian hegemony.”³

The situations, of course, are still not exactly the same. Canada’s Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) has established a national legal provision that is unlikely to become law throughout the *entire* United States. Although religious identification and religious practices differ considerably by region in both countries, no American state has formalized the militant *laïcité* that now prevails in Quebec. Most obviously, all-out media focus on “evangelical” (really, white evangelical Protestant) support for Donald Trump’s radical populism makes this one American religious-political connection much more salient than any of the real, but less obsessively tracked, religious-political connections in Canada.⁴ To be sure, if that US connection would contribute to an actual tide of violence or play a role in sustaining an all-out insurrection, then religious divergence between the two countries would once again loom large.

Despite these and other continuing differences, convergences are strikingly apparent. Although the US has not officially adopted an ideology of multiculturalism, the DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) emphasis, with its own ideal of multiculturalism, has gained unofficial standing in many places. In both countries a common degree of public acceptance of gay marriage is another sign of life after Christendom. Concerning abortion and despite rulings of the US Supreme Court and legislation in several Republican-led states, Americans, in general, seem almost as willing as Canadians to break from the traditional Christian prohibition.

Social scientists have provided specific evidence of convergence by describing a United States rapidly catching up with Canada in religious self-identification. Although American Chris-

3. For a lucid statement describing the “dismantling of the Christian hegemony in Canada,” see Stackhouse, “Anglophone Canada,” 40–51 (quotation, 48).

4. As a check on media enthusiasm, however, a recent survey indicates that US white evangelical congregations are *less* politically engaged than white mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, or Roman Catholic congregations: Public Religion Research Institute, “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval” n.p.

tian identification remains higher and the “none” identification lower, the trend in the Canadian direction is unmistakable. A recent Pew Research Center study records a decline in Christian identity from 90 percent in 1972 to 63 percent in 2022 and a rise in those without a religious affiliation from 5 percent to 29 percent over the same period.⁵

Without the same degree of social scientific precision, the conclusion is nonetheless inescapable that in both societies other concerns (wealth, leisure, entertainment, self-actualization, sport, group identity, group resentments) now exert far more influence than traditional features of Christian societies: concern for virtue (public and private), emphasis on moral guilt and spiritual redemption, prominent attention to theological matters like sin and grace, the practices of prayer and Bible reading, regular church attendance.

Churches and other Christian institutions in both countries have also become targets for their part in subjugating racial minorities. Especially since the report from Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reproach directed at majority Protestants and Catholics for dehumanizing First Nations families in residential schools has become almost as pervasive as the American indictment of white Christians for sanctioning the enslavement of Black people and then supporting systematic discrimination after slavery.

In short, although historical developments are not identical, in both nations, the instinctive deference to Christianity that prevailed as late as the post-War period is no more. Even when Christianity now features prominently, as with attention to white American evangelicals, the evolution of “evangelical” from primarily a religious category to primarily a social-cultural interest indicates the passing of *Christian* hegemony.

In order to imagine a positive place for Christianity in societies where historical forms of Christian influence are gone—or if lingering, strongly contested—it is possible to consider whether

5. Pew Research Center, “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” n.p.

selected features of Christian hegemony can be recast in post-Christian terms, but also whether historical Christian expressions that did not share in cultural hegemony point a way to prospects for the future.

In the first instance, noteworthy Canadian efforts, as by the non-partisan think tank Cardus, have labored to define “school choice” as a just provision for all religious, ideological, or interest-group communities, and not just for schools organized by Christian denominations.⁶ Similar efforts have not been as clearly argued in the US, but they are increasingly present in a range of efforts from Christian authors contending for general “freedom of religion” instead of freedom intending to preserve inherited Christian privilege.⁷

Hidden in survey data charting the rapid decline of Christian identification are also clues for a different way forward for Christianity beyond Christian hegemony. A recent report from Statistics Canada has shown that the rate of Christian self-identity among First Nations Canadians lags only slightly behind the general public (43 percent vs. 53 percent), that for Métis the number (51 percent) is about the same, and that for Inuit it is considerably higher (71 percent).⁸ Similar studies from the Pew Research Center register higher figures for Christian identification among Black and Hispanic Americans than for the population at large.⁹

Examples for what North American Christianity, shorn of Christendom or Christian privilege, might look like now abound. Terry LeBlanc of the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies has explained how First Nation Christians have been extracting themselves “from the confines of Western church traditions and structures, including modes of governance and worship.” In his account, these efforts are expressing a particularly Native Christianity that is not beholden to earlier assump-

6. As an example, See Van Pelt, “Charting New Horizons for Independent Education in Canada,” n.p.

7. For example, Witte, et al., *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*.

8. Statistics Canada, “Religion by Indigenous Identity,” n.p.

9. Pew Research Center, “Faith American Black Americans,” n.p. Pew Research Center, “The Shifting Religious Identity of Demographic Groups,” n.p.

tions about “civilization and Christianity.” Instead they embrace “the triple restorative mandates of right relationship with God and other spiritual powers, right relationship with one another in the human community and right relationship with and relatedness to the rest of creation, of which humanity is but a part.”¹⁰

South of the 54th parallel, Roberto Chao Romero has witnessed a similar move among Hispanic believers who are defining their faith without worrying about Protestant privilege. As he views this process, it is a rebuke to both the Christian right—“white Christian nationalism . . . that conflates the church with US civil religion and rejects immigrant Christians as undesirable newcomers and even illegitimate believers”—and also the progressive Christian left that limits “faith to social activism, while de-emphasizing personal transformation and deep spiritual encounter with the Holy Spirit.” His vision for the Christian future does not require “a complete eradication of Euro-American church traditions,” but rather a “sifting [of] racial sin” that leads to “rebuilding the North American church based upon the diverse cultural treasures of the various ethnic groups which will comprise the US church in the coming decades.”¹¹

In such accounts, prospects for Christianity in the US and Canada do not feature nostalgia, resentment, anger, or fear. Instead, they hold out the possibility that authentic faith need not depend on the structures of the past, whether Canada’s Quasi-Christendom or the US’s White Protestant Privilege. Among other benefits, realizing such a possibility would facilitate opportunities for mutual learning from the many Christian communities around the world that have never enjoyed Europe’s structural Christendom or its North American adaptations. It would also relativize what for believers sounds like the bad news from social scientists and encourage recognition of Christian resources that were neglected when believers were in charge.

10. All references in this paragraph are from LeBlanc, “First Nations Canada,” 38.

11. All references in this paragraph are from Romero, “The Future of Christianity in North America,” 427, 435.

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