

THE END IS NIGH?:
RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN CANADA'S 2021 CENSUS DATA

Taylor Murray
Tyndale University, Toronto, ON, Canada

Introduction

Anyone with even a passing awareness of the church is likely familiar with the trope of the pastor who points toward the day's newspaper headlines to find proof of the approaching apocalypse. In that recognizable imagery, he (because it is often a male pastor) searches for evidence of when the world will end, how it will end, and who will remain, among other questions. When Statistics Canada published its latest (2021) census data on religious affiliation, some Christians may have felt a similar sensation.¹ Across the theological spectrum, the data showed evidence of a significant decline in Christian affiliation. As with the pastor with newspaper in hand, one might ask: could the end be nigh?

In academic circles, few (if any) were shocked by the trend in the census results. In fact, nothing in the data came as a surprise for those who have been paying attention; the numbers have been trending in this direction since at least the middle of the twentieth century. As Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald have documented, there has been a steady decline in “Christian affiliation, membership, and participation” that began in the 1960s and has continued

1. All data from 2011 and 2021 in this essay are from Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey* (2011), and Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population* (2021). Available online: www12.statcan.gc.ca. It also draws on material from “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.

into the present.² The speed and severity of that decline were both yet to be seen, but with the latest round of data, perhaps we have a clearer picture of the future of Christianity in Canada.

Post-Christendom Studies invited a panel of scholars and church leaders to evaluate and reflect on the data published in the census. The next nine papers record those observations; five of them are from Canadians, and four of them are from observers outside of Canada. In order to provide a backdrop to that discussion, this brief introductory essay identifies some of the major “headlines” we find in the data, including the decline of Christian affiliation, the growth and stability of other religions, and the rapid increase in the number of “nones” (those who select “no religion” in the census). This essay explores these topics individually to get a sense of the direction of religion in Canada.

Decline of Christianity

As noted above, the story of Christianity in Canada over the last ten years (and beyond) is a story of decline. While the national population grew from 32,852,320 to 36,328,480 people, Christians dropped from 22,102,745 to 19,373,325—or 67.3 percent of the population in 2011 to 53.3 percent in 2021. Not only did churches lose the battle against population growth, but they also struggled to retain members they already had, either because people were leaving the church or because older members were dying.

A closer look at the individual Christian groups shows how significant the decline over the last decade was. According to the data: Catholics dropped from 39.0 percent of the Canadian population in 2011 to 29.9 percent in 2021 (from 12,810,705 to 10,880,360); the United Church dropped from 6.1 percent to 3.3 percent (from 2,007,610 to 1,214,185); Anglicans dropped from 5.0 percent to 3.1 percent (from 1,631,845 to 1,134,315); Lutherans dropped from 1.5 percent to 0.9 percent (from 478,185

2. Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 11. Scholars have routinely acknowledged this significant change, but they have been unable to agree on how best to interpret it. E.g., Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday* and Bibby, *Resilient Gods*.

to 328,045); Presbyterians dropped from 1.4 percent to 0.8 percent (from 472,385 to 301,400); Baptists dropped from 1.9 percent to 1.2 percent (from 635,840 to 436,940); and Pentecostals dropped from 1.5 percent to 1.1 percent (from 478,705 to 399,025). Perhaps the biggest loss here is in the United Church of Canada, which lost nearly half its members. Among the most significant exceptions to this decline was Christian Orthodox, which saw a modest increase in numbers consistent with the rate of growth of the population (from 550,690 to 623,010; 1.7 percent of the population each year).

Perhaps worth noting, of course, is that the decline in Christian affiliation was not the same in every part of the country. Newfoundland showed the highest percentage of Christian affiliation with 82.4 percent, followed by Nunavut with 73.5 percent, Prince Edward Island with 67.6 percent, and New Brunswick with 67.5 percent.³ In other provinces and territories, however, the numbers tell a different story, as will be noted briefly further below.

Growth and Stability of Other Religions

A second major headline revolves around the growth and stability of non-Christian religions. Many faiths that were once considered “minority” religions have shown significant growth. Among them, the largest over the last decade were as follows: Muslims grew from 3.2 percent of the Canadian population in 2011 to 4.9 percent in 2021 (1,054,945 to 1,775,715); Hindus grew from 1.5 percent to 2.3 percent (from 497,960 to 828,195); and Sikhs grew from 1.4 percent to 2.1 percent (from 454,965 to 771,790). It is important to note that immigration has contributed to these numbers: while immigrants to Canada at the turn of the twentieth century were primarily from Western European (i.e., predominantly Christian) countries, that is no longer the case. Perhaps more interestingly, one will note that for the first time in Canadian history, Muslims now outnumber members of the United Church of

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

Canada. The United Church, which was once considered something of an unofficial state church, had come into being with the understanding that it could play a part in building Canada as a Christian nation.⁴ The fact that it has now been supplanted numerically by Islam provides an interesting microcosm of the story of religion in Canada.

Denomination/ Tradition	2011 Census ⁵	2021 Census ⁶	Difference (+/-)
Total Population	32,852,320	36,328,480	3,476,160
Catholic	12,810,705	10,880,360	-1,930,345
United	2,007,610	1,214,185	-793,425
Anglican	1,631,845	1,134,315	-497,530
Lutheran	478,185	328,045	-150,140
Presbyterian	472,385	301,400	-170,985
Baptist	635,840	436,940	-198,900
Pentecostal	478,705	399,025	-79,680
Orthodox	550,690	623,010	72,320

Table 1: Changes in Christian Affiliation; Statistics from 2011 and 2021 Canadian Censuses

Other religions had a slightly different experience. Traditional (Indigenous) Spirituality grew at a rate that mirrored the population growth, and thus held steady at 0.2 percent (from 64,940 to 80,685). Buddhists and Jewish adherents showed comparable

4. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*.

5. Data from Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey* (2011).

6. Data from Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population* (2021).

numbers from one census to the next (366,830 to 356,975; and 329,500 to 335,295, respectively), though they could not keep pace with the population growth (1.1 percent to 1.0 percent; and 1.0 percent to 0.9 percent, respectively). The point is that while some religious groups have not kept up with the growth of the population, the numbers have remained relatively stable.

Religion	2011 Census⁷	2021 Census⁸	Difference (+/-)
Islam	1,054,945	1,775,715	720,770
Hinduism	497,960	828,195	330,235
Sikhism	454,965	771,790	316,825
Indigenous Spirituality	64,940	80,685	15,745
Buddhism	366,830	356,975	-9,855
Judaism	329,500	335,295	5,795
Total Population	32,852,320	36,328,480	3,476,160

Table 2: Changes in Non-Christian Religious Affiliation; Statistics from 2011 and 2021 Canadian Censuses

Growth of the Nones

Arguably the most significant headline is the sizable growth of those who select “no religion” in the census, commonly called “nones.” In 2011, the total number of nones was 7,850,605, or 23.9 percent of the Canadian population; by 2021, this number had increased to 12,577,475, or 34.6 percent of the total population. With Christian affiliation currently at 53.3 percent, it is clear that

7. Data from Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey* (2011).

8. Data from Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population* (2021).

“no religion” is rapidly closing the gap.⁹ In some provinces and territories, the numbers are much closer, and in the case of British Columbia and the Yukon, nones actually outnumber Christians (52.1 percent “no religion and secular perspectives” versus 34.3 percent Christian in BC; and 59.7 percent versus 35.0 percent in YT).¹⁰

	2011 ¹¹	2021 ¹²	Difference (+/-)
Total Population	32,852,320	36,328,480	3,476,160
No Religion	7,850,605	12,577,475	4,726,870

Table 3: Changes in “No-Religion”; Statistics from 2011 and 2021 Canadian Censuses

What accounts for this change? Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme have identified several factors. Among them, they observe that it has become less socially taboo to identify as non-religious in today’s society. Additionally, for some, religion has become too politically entwined; for others, controversies in the church or negative experiences have been too much to bear. Finally, Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme note that in some instances, the growth in the number of nones is less the result of people leaving the church and more a result of never entering it in the first place: in many cases, there is limited exposure to religion during childhood.¹³ Regardless of the cause(s), the data hints at the future of religion in Canada: the portion of the population that se-

9. Viewing the data another way, in an interval of time where Christian affiliation dropped 14 percent, “no religion” increased by 10.7 percent.

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

11. Data from Statistics Canada, *National Household Survey* (2011).

12. Data from Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population* (2021).

13. The reasons listed above are all from Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 7–12.

lects “no religion” is growing and will likely continue to grow in the days ahead.

Conclusion

The purpose of this introductory essay is not to provide any ground-breaking analysis of the census data; rather, it is to provide a background for the conversation ahead. To that end, it has identified three “headlines” in Canadian religion as demonstrated in the 2021 census data: the decline of Christian affiliation, the growth and stabilization of other religions, and the growth of the so-called nones.

What does this mean for the future of Christianity in Canada? Drawing from the census data, the takeaway here may seem reasonably clear: while not yet dead, some forms of institutional Christianity in Canada are in hospice. But, contrary to the opinion of the newspaper-holding pastor noted above, the future is not all doom and gloom. Do these results mean that Christianity is facing an extinction-level threat in Canada? It is probably not likely. What it does mean, however, is that Christianity may soon take a different form as Canada moves further into post-Christendom.

The following nine essays in this edition of *Post-Christendom Studies* address this relatively uncertain future. When we invited the contributors, we gave them a prompt: what does this mean for the church moving forward? Each author has addressed this question differently and added their own thoughts. In each essay, however, it seems reasonably clear that the newspaper headlines do not always signal that “the end is nigh.”

Bibliography

Airhart, Phyllis D. *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking of the United Church of Canada*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014.

Bibby, Reginald W. *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low-Religious, or No Religious in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017.

Clarke, Brian and Stuart Macdonald. *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada Since 1945*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.

Statistics Canada, National Household Survey (2011). Online: www12.statcan.gc.ca.

Statistics Canada, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population (2021). Online: www12.statcan.gc.ca.

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.

Thiessen, Joel. *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015.

Thiessen, Joel and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme. *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press, 2020.