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RELIGION AND THE CANADIAN CENSUS DATA:  
SOME REFLECTIONS FROM ACROSS THE POND

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*Introduction*

I write as a Caucasian male British Anglican, a clergy person in the Church of England, a practical theologian, and a scholar of global Pentecostalism. I lead an interdenominational evangelical school, which has also been impacted by the changing landscape of Christianity in the UK. We have a mixed and diverse group of students from around the world, accessing education both online and on campus.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I offer some brief reflections from my own context. I intend to describe the basic picture that is present in the Canadian data and identify some possible explanations before suggesting some possible ways of responding to the picture that are constructive for the church. My conclusion summarizes key points and suggests how the conversation might be developed.

*The Canadian Census Data*

The basic picture presented when the 2011 and 2021 data are compared is a sobering one, to say the least. It is clear that Christian affiliation is still in the majority (19.3 million in 2021), which represents just over 53.3 percent of the population. However, this is a decrease in claimed Christian affiliation when placed alongside previous surveys, compared to 67.3 percent in 2011 and 77.1 per-

1. See <https://lst.ac.uk>.

cent in 2001.<sup>2</sup> Roman Catholic Christians dominate (29.9 percent in 2021), while other denominations or traditions are 3 percent or less. Whereas in other contexts, Pentecostals and Charismatics might be outgrowing Roman Catholics, in Canada they are still relatively small at 1.1 percent. What is of interest is that 7.6 percent of the population (or 2.8 million) reported Christian affiliation without any specific denomination, thus suggesting that these people are unaffiliated with regard to specific Christian communities or traditions. In addition, 12.6 million Canadians, or one-third of the population, report no religious affiliation, which is a rise from 16.5 percent in 2001 to 23.9 percent in 2011 and to 34.6 percent in 2021. Immigrants contribute to this number (21.5 percent from 2011 to 2021), but it is boosted significantly by people who have lost their religious affiliation in recent years. Clearly, other religious traditions are growing (e.g., Islam at 1.8 million, 4.9 percent of the population), which is a significant growth from 2011 (2.0 percent of the population), but it is still relatively small as a religious group within the overall landscape. By contrast, indigenous spirituality is relatively tiny (81,000 or 0.2 percent of the population), with the majority being First Nations people.

What is also of note is that in the vast landmass of Canada, these religious affiliations vary considerably. Roman Catholicism is the most widely distributed Christian tradition across all provinces and territories (with the exception of Nunavut). Quebec is just about majority Roman Catholic at 53.8 percent, but this has fallen considerably from 74.7 percent in 2011. The United Church does better in Atlantic provinces, and the Anglicans have a stronger presence in Nunavut, Newfoundland and Labrador. Yukon (59.7 percent) and British Columbia (52.1 percent) are the least religiously affiliated, thus suggesting greater secularization tendencies in these geographical areas. Non-Christians are present in greater numbers in eastern cities and metropolitan areas, for example, Ontario (16.3 percent) and British Columbia (13.7 percent), suggesting that secularization provides a greater degree of

2. The UK Census data of 2021 shows that 46 percent, or 27.5 million of the population describes themselves as Christian. For all data references see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/TS030/editions/2021/versions/1>.

religious plurality. The urban landscape attracts a greater density of immigrants so it is unsurprising that greater levels of non-Christian religions are also present in the urban setting.

### *Explanations*

The data is always useful as a snapshot of what is happening at a given time in a specific context. It answers some very basic “what” type questions. Of course, what it cannot do is answer the “why” type questions. This is where scholars attempt to place data into an ongoing academic conversation in order to understand the explanations of what is happening. Sociologists of religion often discuss various explanations for the reduction in religious affiliation in Western democracies. The most prominent theory is often referred to as secularization and has a number of proponents and different emphases.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the stronger version of the theory that predicted the virtual eradication of religion has not been fulfilled and shows no sign of being fulfilled in the near future. However, the versions of the theory that stress a gradual reduction in formal religious participation over time do appear to have an empirical basis. Over time, each generation is less religiously affiliated than the previous generation. As formal participation in a religion declines so religious illiteracy increases. There is an increasing ignorance of what religion actually looks like from the inside, so to speak.

Those who do profess a religious affiliation are increasingly diverse, and this is especially seen in the growth of non-Christian religions in the global north, especially Islam. Numbers of adherents are still small in terms of the overall population, but over time these numbers will grow, especially if immigration policies continue to allow the flow of migrants from the global south. What is fascinating to observe is that the Pentecostal and Charismatic church migration does not appear to have had a significant impact

3. See the discussions by Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*; Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945*; Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*; Martin, *On Secularization*; Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*; Bruce, *God is Dead*; and Bruce, *British Gods*.

on the religious landscape of Canada, unlike its impact in the global cities in Europe where the growth in Christian affiliation is largely due to African diaspora churches.<sup>4</sup>

There is no real surprise in the growth of the “nones” in a secularized Western context. In Canada, approximately 12.6 million people or a third of the population self-designate as being of no religion, which is a rise from 16.5 percent in 2001 and 23.9 percent in 2011.<sup>5</sup> With increased religious illiteracy comes increased disinterest. What is intriguing is the lack of affiliation with specific denominational traditions for those who do have some Christian sense of identity (affinity with Christianity but not the church). The group that still wishes to be called Christian but on their own terms. This is perhaps what some sociologists have termed “individualization,” namely the idea that the individual stands at the centre of the religiously constructed reality and does not defer to authority outside of the self.<sup>6</sup> When this is linked to a consumerist approach to religion, it leads to what Matthew Guest has called “neoliberal religion.”<sup>7</sup> People in this category float between religious worlds and choose what is convenient and palatable according to their own shifting and developing tastes. What I think is perhaps disconcerting is the fact that this attitude is also present among those who also affiliate with specific Christian traditions, suggesting that socialization is an increasingly important concept for understanding the transmission of Christian beliefs and values.

### *Responses*

It is inevitable that the churches are keen to understand this picture and to formulate their responses because of the importance of their mission in the world. If numbers are reducing at speed, what can be done, or what should be done and why? In any context, num-

4. See Cartledge, et al., *Megachurches and Social Engagement*, 77–80.

5. The UK data shows an increase of 12.0 percent from 25.2 percent or 14.1 million in 2011 to 37.2 percent or 22.2 million in 2021.

6. See Ziebertz, ed., *Religious Individualization and Christian Religious Semantics*.

7. Guest, *Neoliberal Religion*.

bers matter since large numbers are associated with success, influence, and future survival. A number of reflections are offered to the churches in the Canadian context from this side of the transatlantic “pond.”

The British context is probably ahead of Canada by a few years. We are bolstered by an established church, the Church of England, which has certain privileges, but which is also in serious decline, especially outside of cities and among non-Evangelical churches. The churches that are growing tend to be among conservative or charismatic Evangelicals or specialist traditional churches like cathedrals. Other churches, like the Methodist, United Reformed Church, Church of Scotland, and Baptist, are suffering a serious decline in numbers attending worship services. Independent, migrant Pentecostal churches are growing in urban centres but via immigration, not through reverse mission. Reverse mission is claimed by these groups, but there is very little evidence of indigenous, Caucasian British people joining these churches, except perhaps through marriage and in very small numbers. The tension with wider society is especially prominent around LGBTQIA+ matters, and it is expected that the cultural split will be accentuated within Evangelicalism, especially over the next decade, thus potentially leading to further decline among indigenous, Caucasian groups in particular.<sup>8</sup>

My initial response to this data is to say that the churches should not panic. We need to take a long-term view and not a short-term one. The church has grown and declined over centuries, and her experience has been mixed and inevitably so. Personally, I am more concerned with authenticity and identity. The church, in all of her diversity, must be herself first and foremost. If that means that she shrinks numerically, then so be it. If it means that she is out of step with wider culture, then so be it. Jürgen Moltmann, in his book on the cross, identified a dilemma for Christians: either we focus on identity at the expense of relevance, or we accommodate to the cultural context, seeking relevance but

8. See the discussion in Cartledge, “British Pentecostalism and Public Theology,” 108–23.

at the expense of identity.<sup>9</sup> There is, of course, a tension here. Christianity seeks to live out the gospel in a relevant manner, but not at the expense of its identity in Christ. The religious culture war, especially in the USA, has been politicized such that ideological bundles shape the engagement of Christians with society.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps less obviously the case in Canada, but it is still present to a greater or lesser degree. How can our distinctive identity as disciples of Christ inform and shape our participation in society as citizens for the common good? This is an important and urgent question for all of the churches in a pluralistic and secularized context.

Building on this question of identity and relevance, or discipleship and citizenship, it is important to consider the role that socialization or “traditioning” plays in the acquisition of religious identity. Socialization refers to the process by which an individual becomes a member of the group, moving from the outside to the inside and eventually becoming an advocate for the group’s beliefs and values. For many Christians growing up within a church tradition, this socialization proceeds naturally across the generations, as children and young people are raised within the church’s life. However, for many young Christians, they are socialized within a secularized culture as well, leading to what might be termed “faith in two minds.” They belong to a secular cultural mind in their public education, which is in tension with their Christian belonging in their congregational settings. These different sets of values mean that a young person is forced to navigate a path between them and often feels more at home in the secular than the Christian world. With the reduced numbers of young Christians in churches, the peer group support is lessened, and this may have a dramatic impact on whether and how young people are retained within the church.

Finally, it is worth noting the impact that congregations have on their local context. Despite the problems noted above, it is still the case that congregations provide a significant amount of social

9. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

10. See the discussion by Cartledge and Cartledge, “Pentecostals and Social Engagement,” 177–88.

capital within communities, and this benefits them significantly. Social engagement is motivated by faith commitments, and many Christians see their discipleship as being demonstrated in their volunteering and charitable giving outside of the Christian community. This is surely an important point to note. It is the meso-level impact of congregations that is often missed because the analysis of data concentrates on either macro or micro levels of participation. Congregations are an important component in the religious landscape and should be celebrated and resourced by denominations as a significant unit in the maintenance of religious vitality within society.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I have reflected on the Canadian census data in the light of my own interests and previous analysis. It is clear that there are significant challenges for the church in contemporary society, and some of these have been identified. Of course, it is always the case that further research is needed to understand the nuances of the big picture that the census data gives. In particular, more research is required to show how the church can resource discipleship for citizenship in an increasingly secularized and pluralistic context such as Canada. I look forward to reading this research in due course.

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11. See Cartledge et al., *Megachurches*, 333–36.

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