

Comment

Continuing the Conversation on Canada: Changing Patterns of Religious Service Attendance

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David Eagle's article on changing patterns of religious service attendance appeared in the March 2011 issue of Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. He presented a comprehensive analysis of three data sets that allow social scientists to estimate the rate of religious service attendance in Canada: Project Canada Survey (PCS), the General Social Survey (GSS), and the Canadian Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (GSGVP). Reginald Bibby initiated the PCS in 1975, 10 years before Statistics Canada began conducting the GSS in 1985, and 22 years before the GSGVP began in 1997. He comments on the Eagle article, cautions scholars to be mindful of important methodological differences across samples, and offers his own analysis of trends in religious service attendance.

Keywords: *religious attendance, Canada, survey research.*

In his *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* article earlier this year, David Eagle (2011) provided an important contribution to an understanding of religion in Canada by examining attendance patterns since the mid-1980s. Such clarification is valuable not only to those who are studying religion in Canada, but to those who see Canada as something of a case study that potentially offers insights into religious developments in other settings, including the United States and Europe. I am flattered that he gave central attention to my Project Canada national surveys (PCS). However, those surveys have only been intended to be a modest means to the far more significant end of providing an enhanced reading of religion in Canada.

A personal confession and some brief background information may be of help to readers. I do not know about you, but I am not particularly interested in numbers. And I am certainly not very interested in surveys—not even all that interested in sociology as such. But I am extremely interested in how the world works. To the extent that sociology, surveys, and numbers can help me to understand what is happening “out there,” I believe they are worth coopting. Obviously, they never can tell the entire story. But they can help to clarify at least some parts of it. As we all know, that is why quantitative and qualitative information, along with a wide range of disciplines, play important complementary roles in seeing and understanding the world more clearly.

Trend-tracking was hardly a part of my career game-plan. What today is known as the “Project Canada Survey Series” began with one fragile, underfunded survey in the mid-1970s. During my doctoral studies at Washington State University under the tutelage of Armand Mauss, I was exposed to the landmark religion survey work in the 1960s of Charles Glock and Rodney Stark. Upon my return to Canada, I felt there was value in generating similar information on

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religion in Canada. The survey data that existed were pretty much limited to a handful of items on attendance, beliefs, and attitudes that Gallup had included in its omnibus polls.

I consequently drew heavily on Glock and Stark's "nature, sources, and consequences" themes in carrying out a national mail survey in 1975 from York University in Toronto, where I was a visiting professor for a year. The goal was to generate some very basic, pioneering data on religion. A number of items on diverse topics were also borrowed from NORC's General Social Survey (GSS) in the United States, to make some Canadian-American comparisons possible. The survey carried the innocuous title of "Project Canada" and was completed for \$13,000, cobbled together from a diverse collage of contributors consisting of the United Church of Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Solicitor General of Canada, and the University of Lethbridge. Originally, the survey was intended to be pilot-like in nature, with a sample comprised of an equal number of people in the largest city in each of Canada's 10 provinces. A request from the United Church resulted in the inclusion of other community-size categories. Through the miracle of weighting—a concept mentioned to me in a brief hallway conversation by a prominent York colleague—the 1,917 respondents were recast into a sample of 1,200 people that was highly representative, socially and demographically, of the national population.

THE QUALITY OF THE PROJECT CANADA SAMPLES

What was rather remarkable about that first survey was the extent to which the sample—when weighed for provincial and community size, along with gender—mirrored the Canadian population on other variables, including religion (see Tables S1 and S2, Appendix S1, onlinelibrary.wiley.com). Catholics were slightly underrepresented. But, in light of the fact the sample so closely resembled the population, it might be a mistake to assume Catholics were not included. They may well have been a shade more likely than others to say they had "no religion" or to have ignored the question altogether, given this was not a mandatory government census but a self-administered questionnaire that offered a higher level of anonymity and virtually no coercion. That said, language undoubtedly left some immigrant Catholics out; the questionnaire was available only in English and French.

The first survey was followed by similar mail surveys every five years through 2005—seven in all—evolving into the Project Canada Survey (PCS) Series, complemented in time with national youth surveys in 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2008. Something unique about the adult surveys is that all of the samples from 1980 on were comprised of (a) people from previous surveys and (b) new participants. Consequently, the surveys simultaneously yielded cross-sectional, trend, and panel data. No survey was conducted in 2010; an eighth survey may or may not be carried out in 2015. The 1980 and 1985 surveys were supported primarily by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The surveys in 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005 were funded by the Lilly Endowment and its Louisville Institute affiliate.

As typically happens with a program involving a series of surveys, the quality of the instruments and samples improved over time. It has been possible to progress from gathering basic information on things such as beliefs and practices to focusing on additional emerging issues, such as new religious movements, the nature of spirituality, and growing religious diversity.

With respect to the samples, in 1975, 30 Canadian communities were involved; by 2005, that number had swollen to more than 300. A cursory comparison of population and sample figures shows that the Project Canada samples, weighed down to approximately 1,200 cases to minimize the use of large weight factors, have been highly representative of the Canadian religious population as estimated by census and GSS figures (see Table S1).

Eagle (2011:192) maintains that the Project Canada samples have included "an inordinate number of Protestants"—a strong statement given how closely the PCS figures match the census figures. He could be right. However, the apparent greater presence in the PCS samples of Protestants and underrepresentation of Catholics, relative to the GSS, has been complicated by the

fact that the GSS—seemingly unaware of 2001 census findings—continues to ignore the growing “Christian unspecified” category. Such people may be buried in any number of the GSS categories. Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald (2007), for example, have found that among visible minority Christians the generic “Christian” affiliation is second only to “Roman Catholic”—suggesting, they say, that the self-designation is a distinctly Protestant phenomenon. Incidentally, “generic Christians” also are disproportionately young, with 75 percent under the age of 45, compared to 63 percent of the general population. But even if there are some possible distortions in the Project Canada aggregate figures, as Eagle claims, my analyses over the years have always included extensive Protestant and Catholic breakdowns of the data. Possible group variations have not been ignored.

THE NEED FOR CORROBORATION: THE GSS

Surveys, of course, never provide perfect readings of reality. Sampling and measurement errors are common, while the very nature of a survey—where it simply is a structured conversation—means that what people say and what we can learn is limited as with any conversation, complete with all kinds of evasiveness and distortion. That is why what we learn from survey conversations needs to be corroborated both with other surveys as well as other data collection methods.

I always have made it a practice to try to corroborate my survey findings with those of other surveys. Beyond that, as possible, I have attempted to link survey findings to real-life developments. For example, if I have found a pattern of decreasing participation in a given religious group, I have looked for corroboration in terms of a decline in something like financial resources. It would be unwise and precarious to do anything less.

The 1985 initiation of the GSS by the federal government agency, Statistics Canada, has been a tremendous resource for social scientists. In some ways, it is similar to the American GSS carried out by the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago since the early 1970s. The Canadian GSS has been conducted almost every year since 1985 with varying core themes including time use, education, work, family and friends, health, victimization, and social engagement. The surveys had very large samples of around 10,000 people through the 1990s that have been increased to 20,000 or so ever since. Most of the data collection has been by telephone, although samples sometimes have also included some face-to-face interviews. Questions about one’s religion and service attendance have appeared in every survey.

The General Social Surveys, along with the decennial census item on religious identification, have provided benchmark data on both religious affiliation and service attendance. Declining GSS participation rates serve to remind us that even these surveys do not provide perfect readings. But they—along with similar government surveys—typically provide the most reliable data we have.

Comparisons of survey results frequently have limitations. In addition to the methods of data collection (phone vs. self-administered), some pertinent GSS and PCS differences are worth noting (see Table 1).

- The GSS samples and the census data consist of people who are 15 and older, while the Project Canada samples are comprised of individuals who are 18 and over. When the GSS and census data are limited to adults, 18 and over (excluding people age 15–17), the differences are only about 1 percent or less.
- The attendance item used in the GSS survey asks people to recall how often they attended services in the previous year; the comparable Project Canada item asks people how often they attend services.
- Prior to the 2008 GSS survey, if respondents indicated they had “no religion,” they were not asked how often they attended services, the assumption being that they never or seldom attended. Clearly, these people need to be included when computing national attendance levels, rather than treating their responses as missing values. For example, in 1986, when

Table 1: Sample size and response rates: Project Canada Surveys (PCS) and General Social Survey (GSS)

	PCS			GSS	
	Sample Size	Response Rate (%)	Weighted Sample Size	Sample Size	Response Rate
1975	1,917	52	1,200	–	–
1980	1,482	65	1,300	–	–
1985	1,630	60	1,231	11,200	83
1990	1,472	61	1,251	13,495	76
1995	1,765	61	1,239	10,749	81
2000	1,729	59	1,200	25,090	81
2005	2,400*	56	1,600	19,597	59
2009	–	–	–	19,422	62

*This total includes a supplementary sample of 495 people who were drawn from Alberta in keeping with funding requirements, weighted down to a national sample of 1,600 cases.

they are included in the service attendance computations, the results are as follows: weekly 28 percent, monthly 15 percent, less than monthly 57 percent. If they are excluded—as Eagle did in computing the GSS figures for 1986—attendance rises, respectively, to 31 percent, 17 percent, and 52 percent. In short, in 1986, the monthly-plus figure was 43 percent, not 48 percent as Eagle reported.

WHAT THE SURVEYS SAY ABOUT TRENDS BETWEEN THE 1980S AND NOW

The Project Canada (PCS) and GSS findings on service attendance are extremely similar over time—with the PCS results consistently within the error range of “plus or minus four percentage points, 19 times in 20.” In light of the “David and Goliath” difference in the scale of the two survey programs, such a revelation came as both a source of relief and gratification for me! What’s more, the results are highly consistent with the other polling results. Some have tended to be a bit higher (e.g., World Values Survey, Environics, Gallup, Ipsos), few have come in lower.

Overall, the various surveys point to a decline in monthly-plus attendance through the early 1990s that leveled off somewhat in the 1990s through about 2005. There are signs that attendance slipped a bit around 2006 but has remained fairly steady since then. The PCSs pointed to a slight attendance increase between 1995 and 2005—but so did the GSS (see Table S2).

In short, these findings indicate that there has been about a 15 percentage point drop in monthly-plus attendance in Canada since the mid-1980s. But, much of this decline occurred by the end of the 1990s. Things have not changed much in the last decade or so.

The extensive GSS data sets make it possible to explore some of the demographic and organizational factors associated with these patterns. What is immediately apparent is that the decline in monthly-plus attendance between 1989 and 2009 was far more pronounced in Catholic-dominated Quebec (40 to 19 percent) than elsewhere (38 to 28 percent; see Table 2).

- Among *Roman Catholics*, the decline in Quebec during the period was fairly dramatic (44 to 20 percent), and smaller yet noteworthy in the rest of Canada (53 to 43 percent).
- *Protestant* attendance over the past two decades has remained very steady (39 percent in 1989, 40 percent in 2009). Conservative Protestants have claimed monthly-plus attendance levels that have remained consistently high at around 60 to 65 percent. Mainline Protestants reported a slight decline between 1989 and the early 1990s. However, their collective level of monthly-plus attendance has remained steady at just under 30 percent since the

Table 2: Canadian religious service attendance, 1989–2009

	1989			1994 1999 2004			2009		
	Monthly	Some	Never	Monthly-Plus			Monthly	Some	Never
Nationally	38%	31	31	33	33	31	28	30	42
Outside Quebec	37	29	34	34	35	33	32	27	41
Quebec	40	35	25	32	26	22	19	38	43
Roman Catholic	49	34	17	42	38	40	32	38	30
Outside Quebec	53	32	15	50	50	50	43	34	23
Quebec	44	37	19	35	26	27	20	42	38
Protestant	39	39	22	37	41	45	40	29	31
Mainline	33	43	24	26	30	30	28	34	38
<i>United</i>	32	43	25	23	29	29	26	34	40
<i>Anglican</i>	31	43	26	26	29	26	26	35	39
<i>Presbyterian</i>	38	43	19	32	36	32	34	34	32
<i>Lutheran</i>	37	40	23	33	35	42	33	33	34
Conservative	59	26	15	64	61	64	62	18	20
<i>Baptist</i>	50	33	17	62	57	59	55	21	24
<i>Pentecostal</i>	-	-	-	-	73	73	74	13	13
<i>Other Protestant</i>	62	24	24	65	-	-	-	-	-
Other faith	44	38	18	44	47	46	42	34	24
Other	-	-	-	-	60	57	52	24	24

Sources: General Social Surveys 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009.

mid-1990s; their individual denomination levels of involvement have also changed little in the past decade or so.

- People identifying with diverse *other major world faiths* have exhibited a stable attendance level of 42 to 44 percent since 1989.

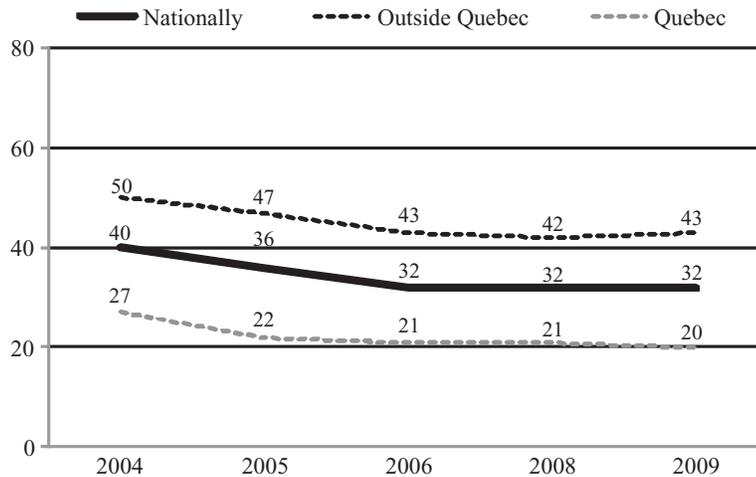
Eagle (2011:193) informs readers that my reports of an attendance increase—signaling the possible beginnings of a religious renaissance in Canada—“are increases *only among Protestant churchgoers*.” Actually, in *Restless Gods* (Bibby 2002:74ff), I supplemented my Project Canada data with findings from the 1990 GSS and the 2000 CSGVP (Canadian Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participation) to say the same thing.

The slight national increase in service attendance, however, was not due merely to Protestants. It also reflected a leveling off of Catholic attendance between about 1995 and 2005. The phenomenon was hardly just a function of too many Protestants in the Project Canada samples. Heavens, the GSS surveys documented the same “modest increase” (see Table 2).

When one looks at the quality of the Project Canada samples and the comparability of the PCS findings, it is clear that Eagle’s (2011:193) warning is excessive and unwarranted: “When the PCS are used to explore religion in Canada, the samples either have to be reweighed to account for the Protestant oversample, or a proportion of Protestants must be randomly removed from the sample to bring the proportion Protestant in line with GSS and Census estimates.” He situates his concerns among what he claims to be “the growing list of critiques of the PCS.” I personally am aware of very few such critical critiques, a point that needs to be underlined in view of the extensive use of the Project Canada findings.

The Roman Catholic situation warrants a closer look. The apparent pattern of linear decline, according to the GSS findings, appears to have halted—at least temporarily—both outside Quebec

Figure 1
 Roman Catholic monthly-plus attendance, 2004–2009: nationally, outside Quebec, and in Quebec (%)



and in Quebec (see Figure 1). Since 2006, attendance levels have remained essentially unchanged. To some extent, this may reflect the infusion of Roman Catholic immigrants from countries and regions such as the Philippines, Latin America, Africa, and China. It also may reflect a measure of ministry rejuvenation within the Catholic Church. But, regardless, the data indicate that, at least in the short-run, Roman Catholic attendance in Canada no longer is in a free-fall.

CONCLUSION

In my book, *Restless Gods*, released in 2002, I argued that my PCS findings—corroborated with those of the GSS and CSGVP—pointed to considerable religious vitality in Canada. Conservative Protestants were growing. Attendance among mainline Protestants and Catholics outside Quebec was stable rather than declining, and I predicted that it would only be a matter of time before signs of Catholicism rebounding in Quebec would begin to appear. Other major faith groups, I noted, were also exhibiting new levels of visibility and life.

I went so far as to suggest that “there is something of a renaissance of religion in Canada” (Bibby 2002:90). The assertion was built on a solid theoretical foundation. Slightly editing the rational choice thinking of Rodney Stark, I maintained that the demand for religion persisted in Canada. But because of the tight religious market, Canadians were extremely reluctant to turn to new suppliers. Therefore, new life would involve the revitalization of the dominant existing groups—led by the Roman Catholic Church. Over time, they would be expected to “retreat, retrench, revamp, and resurface.” The data, I said, point to Canada’s well-established groups showing “signs of slowing, halting, and even beginning to reverse the downward numerical trends of the second half of the 20th century” (Bibby 2002:90).

Some observers have interpreted me as saying much more. Eagle (2011:87), for example, has me proclaiming that “the long downward trajectory in religious attendance has ended, and there is now an observable increase in weekly attendance.” Joel Thiessen (2012) describes me as making the “surprising assertion” that “a renaissance of religion is, or soon will take place in Canada.”

Actually, I never have been quite that dogmatic about an upward participation trend. In *The Boomer Factor* (Bibby 2006:201), I clarified my position:

Over the past decade or so . . . nationally, religious attendance is no longer spiralling downward. In the early years of the new millennium, the numerical decline has stopped. Moreover, there are some signs that attendance is increasing modestly. Does this signal the beginning of a major turn back to organized religion, or is it just a blip on the participation screen? Who knows for sure?

But in fairness to Eagle, Thiessen, and others, the *Restless Gods* subtitle, *The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, undoubtedly connoted more stridency about a turnaround than I had claimed in the book. Still, one should not judge a book by its cover—or title.

Further survey readings over the past decade have offered additional clues about the Canadian religious situation, and now I think I am closer to solving the puzzle. In my new book, *Beyond the Gods & Back: The Demise and Rise of Religion and Why It Matters* (Bibby 2011), I have maintained that the current Canadian religious situation is characterized—not so much by either *secularization* or *revitalization*—by *polarization*. A fairly stable core of people continues to value and participate in organized religion. That stability led me to think that a measure of revitalization (or “renaissance”) could be taking place. At the same time, the proportion of Canadians who do not value or participate in religious groups has been increasing—seemingly consistent with the secularization thesis.

What has been largely missed in all this is the fact that the two inclinations are co-existing, while the size of “the ambivalent middle” has been shrinking. Put another way, Canadians increasingly embrace or reject religion. Because life is dynamic and ever changing, movement in both directions on “the polarization continuum” will continue to take place. But neither inclination will disappear in the foreseeable future. What remains to be seen is the extent to which both will ebb and flow; what remains to be understood are the social and personal sources of such variations.

As I explain in detail with the help of emerging global data sets, there are good empirical reasons to believe that “the Canadian case” is far from unique. On the contrary, religious polarization is characteristic of most settings across the globe where neither religious monopolies nor secular monopolies exist—settings where religious inclinations will vacillate . . . beyond the gods and back.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The following supporting information is available for this article:

Appendix S1. Tables S1 and S2.

Table S1. Population and PCS and GSS sample characteristics, religion: 1971–2009

Table S2. Monthly-plus attendance: 1975–2009

Supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at wileyonlinelibrary.com.

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*Reply***The Loosening Bond of Religion on Canadian Society: Reply to Bibby**

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Interpreting social science data requires empirical rigor, but data never stand on their own. They require interpretive lenses. Sociologists spill a great deal of ink trying to determine the best framework through which to understand the social world. Here I will spill a little more and argue that the past 25 years of survey data on religion in Canada demonstrate a secularization process at work—not secularization as an inevitable process, where religion must decline until it meets its demise—but a historically and contextually conditioned process by which religion begins to loosen its grip on the social world. A variety of features of contemporary life lead to secularization. Most are things as mundane as declining fertility rates, increased social isolation, and a greater time squeeze felt by individuals and families. Occasionally, the more profound realm of competing epistemologies and the clash of worldviews rears its head. Two facets of the large collection of survey data on religion in Canada provide the most compelling evidence of secularization, the decline in rates of weekly (or near weekly) attendance at religious services and the proportion of people identifying with a specific religious tradition. I will tackle each in turn.

Why weekly attendance? Bibby argues that monthly, rather than weekly, attendance ought to define “regular” attendance at religious services. However, Christian traditions (and Christianity is still the major player in Canada) have long emphasized weekly attendance as the expected norm. The fact that modern life has created a situation where attending religious services 12 times a year is now “regular” attendance is indicative of a secularization process at work. If the bonds of religion are loosening, we would expect, and do in fact observe, weekly attendance rates to falling rapidly.

In terms of attendance data, Bibby is right to point out that the GSS made the decision between 1985 and 2008 not to ask people who identified as “no religion” a question about their attendance at religious services. In the Project Canada surveys, the attendance question was asked of every respondent. Missing data present a dilemma. In my previous article, I chose to take a conservative approach—and one that brought the more recent waves of the GSS into closer agreement with Project Canada—and treated these nonresponses as missing. Opting for the alternative approach and coding religious nones as never attending religious services, weekly attendance in Canada has dropped significantly, decreasing from 27.6 percent in 1986 to 18.9 percent in 2005. The proportion of Canadians who report never attending religious services has gone from 18.0 to 43.7 over the same period. Canada has transitioned from a country where less than one-fifth of the population would not set foot in the door of a church or other religious venue in a given year to one where this is the norm for almost half of the population. This change occurred over a mere 22 years.

These trends mirror those in religious affiliation. From fewer than 10 percent in the 1981 census, now nearly one-quarter of Canadians claim no religious affiliation. These are major changes in just a generation. Although signs may indicate that the steep drop in attendance rates

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has slowed (in large part because attendance rates in Quebec, which holds about a quarter of the population, cannot go much lower), the increase in those claiming no religion continues to climb steadily. Once again, these trends fit best within a secularization framework, which posits the loosening of the bonds of religion on society.

I stand by my earlier assertion that due to lower response rates and the nature of updated panel surveys, the Project Canada samples have drifted away from being representative of the religious makeup of the Canadian population. While Bibby asserts that the Project Canada Surveys are highly representative of the population religiously and demographically, my original analysis shows that the raw Project Canada data have a much higher percentage of Protestants and relatively fewer Catholics, which even weights cannot correct. In the unweighted samples, over one-half of the respondents are Protestant (compared to census estimates of about 30 percent of the population). Weights are not a panacea. If regional and gender representation are also desired, then weights may not fully compensate for religious bias in the sample. For instance, in 1990, the weighted Project Canada survey reports the number of Protestants in Canada as 44.0 percent, compared to 30.5 percent in the General Social Survey and 31.6 percent in the 1991 census; (likewise for Catholics, 41.8 percent as opposed to 46.0 percent and 45.6 percent, respectively). This artifact in the data leads to an understatement of the degree of change in religious affiliation and attendance (because Protestants have the most stable characteristics). Here, I should also note that Table 1 in my original article (Eagle 2011:189, Table 1) reported the response rates and sample size of several of the Project Canada surveys incorrectly. Table 1 of Bibby's response contains the correct sample size and response rates.

To summarize, nearly half of all Canadians never attend religious services, a figure that has more than doubled in 22 years. Almost one-quarter claim no religious affiliation, a three-fold increase over the same period. Most of these declines are among Catholics, particularly Catholics in Quebec and in the Maritime Provinces. For a country where an active Catholic religious majority has played a definitive role in politics, culture, and education, these changes signal major societal shifts.

Bibby softens his claim that a religious renaissance might be beginning in Canada. Instead, he argues for a middle ground between the demise of religion and a religious renaissance—polarization between the religious and the nonreligious. To call the combination of an increasing proportion of people who neither identify with, nor participate in, religious services along with a *declining* proportion of those who identify with a religious tradition and attend services regularly polarization is not entirely accurate. Excepting a rapid, drastic fall in religion, what we observe is more accurately secularization. Polarization implies two parties becoming more entrenched in their respective camps. Polarization results when two parties become less tolerant of one another. The data on religion in Canada do not show entrenchment. There is little evidence to suggest that the majority of those who are exiting religious identification and attendance are doing so from a strong and principled reaction against religion. More likely, people are drifting away, not becoming ardent anti-religionists. By the same token, the religiously active are not becoming more strident and less tolerant of their secular neighbors, again something that polarization implies. The bonds of religion on Canadian society are loosening. Secularization, not renaissance, not polarization, best defines the past 25 years of religion in Canada.

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