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Who's religious?

by Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg

There has been much debate about whether Canada is becoming increasingly secularized. Many argue that institutional religion has a reduced influence on Canadian society. Certainly, religious attendance rates between the late 1940s and late 1990s have declined significantly while the percentage of people reporting no religious affiliation has increased. But does this imply that there is an erosion of individual faith, based on the supposition that attendance rates decrease because people lack the belief that motivates attendance? Well-known social researcher Reginald Bibby asserts that others have been wrong in predicting the demise of religion in Canada because people continue to have spiritual needs.¹

This article uses data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS) to track the religious views and practices of Canadians and identify those groups most likely to be religious. An index of religiosity is developed based on the presence of religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of private religious practices and the importance of religion to the respondent.

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The decline in religious affiliation and attendance

Since the mid-1980s, Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS) has provided insights into Canadians' public religious behaviour by asking about their religious affiliation² and frequency of attendance at religious services, the first two dimensions of religiosity considered in this article. There have been noticeable declines in these measures over the past twenty years.

Between 1985 and 2004, the share of Canadians aged 15 and older reporting no religious affiliation increased by seven percentage points from 12% to 19%.³ In

addition, a growing share of Canadians had not attended any religious services in the previous year, even though they reported an affiliation (19% to 25%). Together, the proportion of adult Canadians who either have no religious affiliation or do have a religion but don't attend religious services increased from 31% to 43% over this period.



Table

Table 1. Religious affiliation and attendance among Canadians aged 15 and older

This upward trend was evident among all age groups and in all regions of the country, although young people and British Columbians were most likely to have weak ties with religious organizations. Indeed, in 2004 over half of Canadians aged 15 to 29 and almost 60% of British Columbians either had no religious affiliation or did not attend any religious services.

Since 1985, a widening divergence in the public religious behaviours of immigrants and persons born in Canada has also emerged. The percentage of Canadian-born 15 to 59-year-olds with no religious affiliation or not attending religious services has increased from 33% in 1985 to 48% in 2004. In contrast, immigrants in this age group have changed very little, from 36% to 35%.⁴ All in all, public religious behaviours among persons born inside and outside Canada became more dissimilar, although this divergence conceals considerable diversity in levels of religiosity among immigrants from different regions of the world.



Chart

Chart 1. Young adults are most likely to have no religious affiliation




Chart

Chart 2. British Columbians are least likely to be religious



Chart

Chart 3. Canadian-born are losing faith, but immigrants stay the same

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Half of adult Canadians regularly engage in religious activities on their own

Public religious behaviour, religious affiliation and attendance, have been declining among much of the population, but this captures only one aspect of peoples' religiosity. To get a more complete picture, private religious behaviour such as prayer, meditation, worship and reading of sacred texts on one's own is examined.⁵ Although some Canadians have little or no connection with religious organizations, the 2002 EDS shows that they do engage in such private religious behaviour either at home or in other locations.

While only about one-third (32%) of adult Canadians attend religious services at least monthly, over one-half (53%) engage in religious activities on their own at least monthly. Eleven percent engage in religious activities on their own a few times a year, while 18% never engage in such activities. (Those who said they have no religious affiliation (17%) were not asked this question on the EDS.)

As with religious attendance, the likelihood of engaging in religious activities on one's own was more prevalent in older age groups. Similarly, individuals in the Atlantic region were most likely to engage in such practices while individuals in British Columbia were least likely to do so. Immigrants were more likely to engage in such activities than persons born in Canada.



Table 2. Frequency of religious practices on one's own, Canada, 2002

[Table](#)

Not surprisingly, individuals who frequently attended religious services were also most likely to regularly engage in personal religious practices. In fact, 75% of Canadians who attended religious services at least monthly also engaged in religious practices on their own on a weekly basis.

Perhaps most striking is the many Canadians who infrequently or never attend services yet regularly engage in personal religious practices. Of those who infrequently attended religious services over the previous year, 37% engaged in religious practices on their own on a weekly basis. And of those who had not attended any religious services over the previous year, 27% engaged in weekly religious practices on their own. Overall this group of adults who regularly engage in private religious practices, but infrequently or never attend religious services, represent, 21% of the adult population.

This pattern was most prevalent among older Canadians. Among Canadians who never attended religious services, 45% of those aged 60 or older engaged in personal religious activities compared with 27% of those aged 15 to 29. Religious attendance is prevalent among people in their 60s but declines as age advances because of factors such as illness, disability and access to transportation. But despite these barriers to attendance, seniors retain their religious attitudes and beliefs and continue to engage in private religious practices.⁶



Chart 4. About one in five adults infrequently engage in or never attend religious services, but do regular religious practices on their own

[Chart](#)

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Is my religion important?


Going beyond public and private religious practices to measure religiosity, a fourth dimension can be added reflecting the level of importance that religion has in peoples' lives. Overall, 44% of Canadians place a high degree of importance on religion in their life.⁷ Again, this is associated with age, region of residence, immigration status and the frequency of public and private religious practices.

Almost half (45%) of those Canadian adults who do not regularly attend services but who engage in religious activities on their own at least once a month place a high degree of importance on their religion. This suggests that more Canadian adults attach a high degree of importance to religion than attendance figures alone would indicate. Not surprisingly, individuals who regularly attend services and engage in personal religious practices are most likely to place high importance on religion (87%). In contrast, only 15% of those who infrequently or never participate in public or private religious practices place high importance on religion.



Table 3. The importance of religion to one's life, Canada, 2002

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Religiosity index

Finally, the four dimensions of religiosity – affiliation, attendance, personal practices and importance of religion – can be combined into a simple additive 'religiosity index'.^{8,9} People may attend religious services or choose religious denominations to please their loved ones, so an index which also captures the importance of religion and personal religious practices may be a better indicator of religiosity.

Individuals with no religious affiliation were assigned a score of 0, while those with an affiliation received a score ranging from 1 to 13. A score of 1 indicates that the person does not attend religious services, does not engage in religious practices on their own, and places no importance on religion. A score of 13 indicates that the person attends religious services at least once a week, engages in personal religious practices at least once a week, and places a great deal of importance on religion. To simplify the analysis of religiosity, Canadians were grouped into three broad categories based on their religiosity index, low (0 to 5), moderate (6 to 10) and high (11 to 13). The group with 'low religiosity' includes persons with no religious affiliation.

Based on these criteria, 40% of Canadians have a low degree of religiosity, 31% are moderately religious and 29% are highly religious.

Again, religiosity is lowest among young people and higher among individuals in older age groups. Men are also much more likely to have low religiosity than women. Across the country, low levels of religiosity are most prevalent in British Columbia. One might guess that the prevalence of Chinese visible minorities in British Columbia may contribute to the British Columbia's low level of religiosity since levels of religiosity (as measured here) are low among this group and they comprise a larger share of British Columbia's population than other provinces. They do in part, but by far the greatest contributor is the low religiosity among non-visible minorities in British Columbia. Nonvisible minorities in British Columbia are one and half times as likely as non-visible minorities in Ontario to have low religiosity (57% versus 38%).

The degree of religiosity expressed by Canadians is associated with the religious background of their parents. Of those who say that neither of their parents had a religion, 85% have a low degree of religiosity and 10% have a high degree. In contrast, of those who say that both of their parents had similar religious backgrounds, 32% have a low degree of religiosity and 33% have a high degree. This is consistent with other studies that show religious parents are most likely to pass their religion on to their children and this occurs most often when both parents have similar religious backgrounds.¹⁰



Table 4. Religiosity index, Canada, 2002

[Table](#)

About four in ten (41%) of the immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1982 and 2001 have a high degree of religiosity, compared with 26% of persons born in Canada. However, there is considerable variation in levels of religiosity among immigrants from different regions of the world. High levels of religiosity are most prevalent among immigrants from South Asia (e.g. India and Pakistan), South East Asia (e.g. the Philippines) and the Caribbean and Central and South America. In contrast, high levels of religiosity are least prevalent among immigrants from East Asia (e.g. China and Japan) and Western/Northern Europe (e.g. France and the United Kingdom) and Eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary).

Chart 5. South Asians are most likely to be highly religious



Chart



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Summary

The last several decades have witnessed an increasing share of the population reporting no religion and a decreasing share reporting monthly or weekly attendance at religious services. However, declining attendance may overstate the extent to which Canada is becoming secularized, since a considerable proportion of Canadians do not attend religious services but do engage in religious practices on their own. Similarly, some Canadians who do not attend services still attach a high degree of importance to religion in their life. This suggests that while attendance rates have declined, many Canadians continue to practice their religion in private.

Consistent with previous studies, young adults are the group with the weakest attachment to organized religion. However, even when other forms of religious behaviour are considered, almost half of Canadians aged 15 to 29 still have a low degree of religiosity. Similarly, most individuals in British Columbia exhibit a low level of religiosity whether this is measured in terms of attendance, personal practices or importance attached to religion. There also appears to be a wide variation in religiosity of immigrants associated with the religious traditions of their country of birth, which may differ substantially from persons born in Canada.

Notes:

1. Bibby, Reginald W. 2002. "Restless Gods — The renaissance of religion in Canada" Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, pp. 58 and 59.
2. For example: Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist.
3. The Census indicates 4% in 1971, 7% in 1981, 12% in 1991 and 16% in 2001 of the population aged 15 and over reported no religious affiliation.
4. This comparison is limited to immigrants who arrived in Canada during the 20-year period from 1982 to 2001.
5. Cornwall, Marie et al. 1986. "The dimension of religiosity: A conceptual model and an empirical test." *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 226 to 244.
6. Broyles, Phillip A., and Cynthia K. Drenovsky. 1992. "Religious attendance and the subjective health of the elderly." *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 152 to 160.
7. A high degree of importance is defined as a score of 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale where 1 means "not important at all" and 5 means "very important." Individuals who did not have a religious affiliation were not asked this question.
8. The religiosity index is obtained by adding a score from each of the groups in the following table (dimensions of religiosity). Those with no religious affiliation were not asked about the other dimensions of religiosity and therefore have a religiosity index of "0". For example, the religiosity index for someone who has a religion (add 1), does not attend religious services at all (add 0), who does personal religious practices on their own at least once a month (add 3) and considers religion to be at an importance level of 1 (add 1) would have a religiosity index of $1+0+3+1=5$, in the low range of the religiosity index.

Religious affiliation No affiliation (0) Has a religion (1)
Religious attendance Not at all (0) Once or twice a year (1) At least 3 times a year (2) At least once a month (3) At least once a week (4)
Frequency of religious Not at all (0) Once or twice a year (1) At least 3 times a year (2) At least once a month (3) At least once a week (4)
Importance of practices on your own religion to one's life Not important at all (0) (1) (2) (3) Very important (4)

9. The giving of time and money to religious organizations were not collected by the EDS, but may also be important dimensions of religiosity.
10. Bibby, Reginald W. 1997. "The persistence of Christian religious identification in Canada" *Canadian Social Trends*, No. 44, Spring 1997. pp. 24 to 28.
 Sherkat, Darren E., Christopher G. Ellison. 1999. "Recent developments and current controversies in the sociology of religion" *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 363 to 394.

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Date modified: 2008-11-21

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