

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

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Introduction

In his *JSSR* article earlier this year, David Eagle 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 don't know about you, but I'm not particularly interested in numbers. And I'm 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 co-opting. 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's why quantitative and qualitative information, along with a wide range of disciplines, play important complementary roles in seeing and understand 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, under-funded 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 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 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 ten 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 weighted for provincial and community size, along with gender, mirrored the Canadian population on other variables, including religion (see Table 1). 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 Series (PCS), 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 like 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, weighted 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 General Social Survey (GSS) figures.

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.

Table 1. Population and PCS and GSS Sample Characteristics, Religion: 1971-2009*

| | 1971 | 1975 | 1981 | 1985 | 1991 | 1995 | 2001 | 2005 | 2009 | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|
| | Census | PCS | Census | PCS | GSS | Census | PCS | GSS | GSS | | | |
| Protestant | 47 | 45¹ | 43 | 44 | 40² | 39 | 41 | 33 | 31 | 34 | 30 | 28 |
| United | 18 | 18 | 16 | 15 | 15 | 12 | 15 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 8 | 7 |
| Anglican | 12 | 12 | 10 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 7 ³ | 6 |
| Presbyterian | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| Lutheran | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Baptist | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| Pentecostal | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 2 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Other | 6 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 8 |
| Roman Catholic | 45 | 39 | 47 | 40 | 45 | 45 | 38 | 43 | 43 | 34 | 39 | 38 |
| Christian unspecified | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 8 | - | - |
| Other Faith | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 8 |
| Jewish | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Other | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 |
| No Religion⁴ | 5 | 8 | 7 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 16 | 14 | 21 | 23 |
| No Response | - | 3 | - | 4 | 1 | - | 5 | 5 | - | 3 | 3 | 3 |

* “Census” Canadian national census; “PCS” Project Canada Surveys; “GSS” General Social Surveys, Canada.

¹Coders placed Orthodox groups in “Protestant” category though 2000; moved to Other Faith” category.

²GSS data set lists only some Protestant (33%) and Other Faith (2%) groups; remainder in residual “Other” (8%); based on “adjacent year” GSS findings, I am estimating the 8% to consist of 7% Protestant and 1% Other Faith.

³Anglican through Pentecostal figures, GSS 2004

⁴Roman Catholic mother: 1975 = 41%; 1980 = not asked; 1985 = 41%; 1990 = 30%; 1995 = 43%; 2000 = 30%; 2005 = 33%

Population sources: Statistics Canada, 1971, 1981, 1991, and 2001 censuses.

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% under the age of 45, compared to 63% 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’s 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 initiation of the General Social Survey (GSS) by the federal government agency, Statistics Canada, in 1985 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, family, 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.

**Table 2. Sample Size and Response Rates:
Project Canada and GSS Surveys**

| | 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.

- The GSS samples consist of people who are 15 and older – as do census data, while the Project Canada samples are comprised of individuals who are 18 and over. My analyses of results when the GSS and census data are limited to adults 18-plus suggests that the differences when excluding people who are 15-17 are only about 1% 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 being treated their responses as missing values. For example, in 1986, when they are included in the service attendance computations, the results are as follows: weekly 28%, monthly 15%, less than monthly 57%. If they are excluded – as Eagle did in computing the GSS figures for 1986 – attendance rises, respectively, to 31%, 17%, and 52%. In short, in 1986, the monthly-plus figure was 43%, not 48% 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 levelled off somewhat in the 90s through about 2005. There are signs that attendance slipped a bit around 2006 but has remained fairly steady since then. The Project Canada surveys pointed to a slight attendance increase between 1995 and 2005 – but so did the GSS.

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.

Table 3. Monthly-Plus Attendance: 1975-2009

| | <i>Approximate Survey Years*</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
| GSS | -- | -- | 42 | 37 | 33 | 29 | 32 | 28 | -- | 28 | 28 |
| PCS | 41 | 37 | 38 | 34 | 32 | 30 | 34 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| CSGVP | --- | --- | --- | --- | 32 | 31 | 32 | -- | 29 | -- | -- |
| WVS | -- | 46 | -- | 40 | -- | 36 | 34 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Angus Reid | -- | -- | -- | -- | 32 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Ipsos Reid | -- | -- | -- | -- | 29 | -- | 34 | 35 | 35 | -- | -- |
| Strategic Counsel | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 34 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Environics | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 41 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Gallup | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 37 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| ISSP | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 31 | 30 | -- | -- | -- | -- |

NB. GSS for 1986: with 10% “no religion” excluded = 48%; with “no religion” included = 43%.

*Years: GSS: as indicated; CSGVP 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007; WVS 1982, 1990, 2000, 2006; Angus Reid 1993; Ipsos 1996, 2003, 2006, 2007; Strategic Counsel 1999; Environics 2003; Gallup 2004; ISSP 2000, 2005

GSS: 1985-1986: *“Other than on special occasions such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?”*

GSS: 1987-1990; Ipsos-Reid 1996-2007: *“Other than on special occasions such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend services or meetings connected with your religion in... [1988 = “1987”] [1989ff = “the last 12 months”]?”*

PCS, Angus Reid, ISSP: *“How often do you attend religious services?”*

Strategic Counsel, Environics: *“How frequently do you attend religious services?”*

Gallup: *“How often do you attend church or synagogue – at least once a week, almost every week, about once a month, seldom, or never?”*

WVS: *“Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?” [World Values Survey]*

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%) than elsewhere (38% to 28%); see Table 4.

- Among *Roman Catholics*, the decline in Quebec during the period was fairly dramatic (44% to 20%), and smaller yet noteworthy in the rest of Canada (53% to 43%).

- *Protestant* attendance over the past two decades has remained very steady (39% in 1989, 40% in 2009). Conservative Protestants have claimed monthly-plus attendance levels that have remained consistently high at around 60-65%. 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% since the mid-90s; 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 42-44% since 1989.

Table 4. 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 |

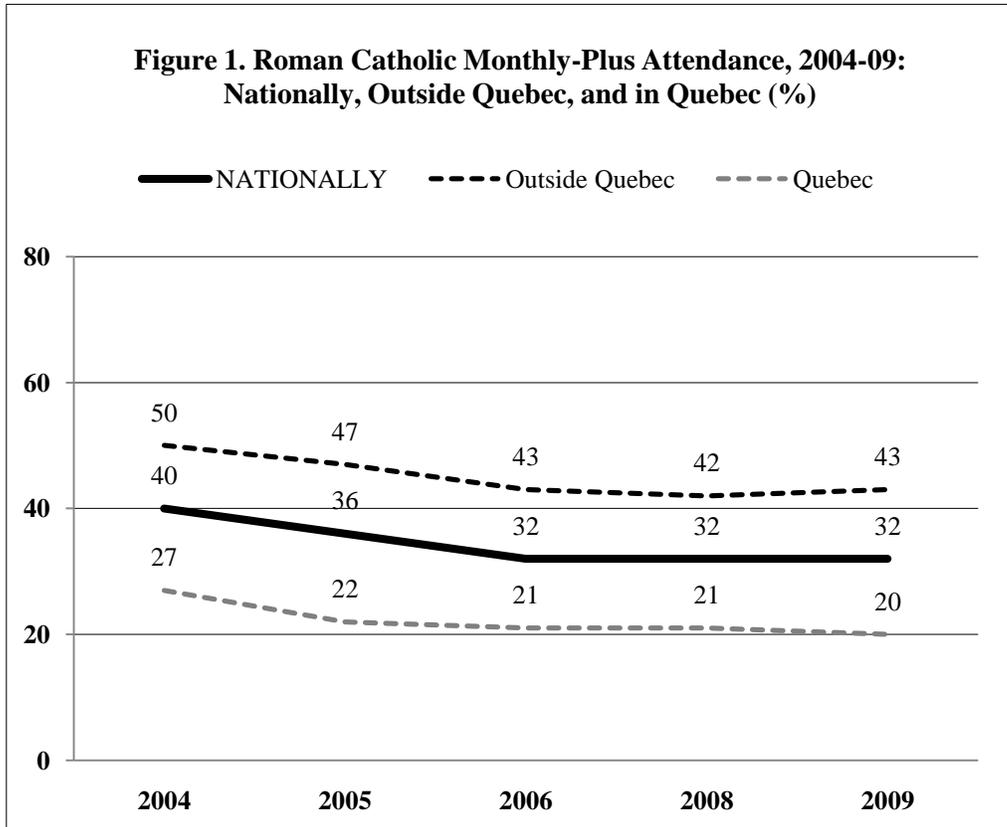
Sources: General Social Surveys (GSS), 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009.

Eagle (2011:193) informs readers that my reports of an attendance increase – signalling the possible beginnings of a religious renaissance in Canada – “are increases *only among Protestant churchgoers*.” Actually, in *Restless Gods* (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 levelling 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 3).

When one looks at the quality of the Project Canada samples and the comparability of the Project Canada survey 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 reweighted 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 and in Quebec. 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 Project Canada survey 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” (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 (2011) 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* (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 clearer to solving the puzzle. In my new book, *Beyond the Gods & Back: The Demise and Rise of Religion and Why It Matters* (February 2011, I have maintained that the current Canadian religious situation is characterized – not so much by either *secularization* or *revitalization* – as *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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