# Religion and Immigration in Canada

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*Immigration has played a central role in shaping Canada's religious landscape, historically strengthening Christian denominations and, more recently, contributing to the growth of Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and religious non-affiliation. This article examines the relationship between immigration and religious change using Statistics Canada Census and General Social Survey data. This study examines how increasingly diverse immigration patterns have transformed the religious composition of the population, while religious disaffiliation (particularly among Canadian-born populations) has accelerated Christianity's decline. Despite recent reductions in federal immigration quotas, immigration looks set to remain a major driver of religious diversification in years to come. However, lower immigration quotas may intensify Christianity's demographic decline, increasing the relative importance of religious disaffiliation in shaping Canada's future religious landscape.*

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Immigration has been a key driver of population growth in Canada since the beginnings of sizeable European colonial settlement in the 17th century. Since that period, Canada for the most part has been a land of (often selective) immigration, and socio-demographic groups who have gained from immigration have often been the groups growing in population share in the country. This includes (non)religious groups: immigration has arguably always been the key driver of most religious group growth in Canada, and continues to be so to this day. Sam Reimer and Rick Kiemstra clearly state this fact for the Canadian context when they write: "[…] immigration flow is probably the most important factor for the future growth or decline of religious groups." [1]

It was key waves of European immigration that changed the religious makeup of the population between the 16th and 20th centuries. These key waves include notably the arrival of French Catholics in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Loyalist Protestant migration from America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Irish Catholic immigration during the 19th century, as well as Eastern European Catholic and Orthodox immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries. Beginning especially in the 19th century, there was also the arrival of greater waves of Jewish immigration (although smaller Jewish groups had arrived in the 18th century), and of Muslims. The early 20th century then saw the first arrivals of Hindus and Sikhs.

[1] Sam Reimer and Rick Hiemstra, "The Gains/Losses of Canadian Religious Groups from Immigration: Immigration Flows, Attendance and Switching," Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 47, no. 3 (2018): 327-44.

The 1960s saw another key societal shift that fundamentally changed the Canadian religious and spiritual landscape: the beginnings of immigration reform, which slowly opened the doors to more diverse non-European and non-Christian immigration since. In the 1971 Census, non-Christian religions made up less than 4 per cent of the Canadian population. By 2021, they made up 12 per cent, with Islam being the largest at 5 per cent. The more recent arrival since the 1990s of larger waves of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh immigrants most notably has led government officials, courts, religious leaders, businesses as well as everyday people to re-evaluate the role and the shape of religion in Canadian society: the role and nature of religious spaces in municipalities; of religious holidays and public events; of religion in schools, hospitals, sports and workplaces; and even of what religious freedom means in the country.

In this article, we examine the current-day realities of religion and immigration in Canada. We will also conclude by discussing how recent changes to federal immigration quotas in Canada since 2025 might impact the religious landscape in years to come.

## The Size and Composition of Recent Immigration

To begin by giving a bit of context, **Figure 1** illustrates the net number of immigrants who have been arriving in Canada over the period of 1946-2025, based on data from Statistics Canada[2]. Although there were large fluctuations in the numbers of immigrants arriving to Canada between 1946-1985 (fluctuating between a low of 64,100 in 1946 and a high of 282,200 in 1957), from 1985 onwards these numbers have for the most part steadily increased until present day, with the exceptions of a downturn between 1993-1998 due to the federal government's response to the economic recession of the early 1990s in Canada, and then again in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with the federal government beginning to restrict immigration quotas since 2025, Canada is still accepting a large amount of immigrants, with 483,700 arriving in 2024, 393,750 in 2025; and a projected 380,000 in 2026 and 365,000 in 2027[3]. So immigration is set to continue to be a key driver of population change in upcoming years.

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[2] See Statistics Canada's "Estimates of the Components of International Migration, Quarterly," Table 17-10-0040-01: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710004001&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&cubeTimeFrame.startMonth=01&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=1946&cubeTimeFrame.endMonth=10&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2025&referencePeriods=19460101%2C20251001 (accessed 16 June 2026). These numbers here as well as all those throughout this article include immigrants/permanent residents only, not temporary migrants (international students, foreign workers, etc.). This decision to exclude temporary migrants from tallies in this study was made due to some of these migrants not staying in the country long enough to impact longer-term religious group growth, or in other instances some of these temporary migrants later becoming permanent residents and so are then later counted in the tallies of this article.

[3] See "Notice – Supplementary Information for the 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Government of Canada: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2025-2027.html (accessed 11 February 2026).

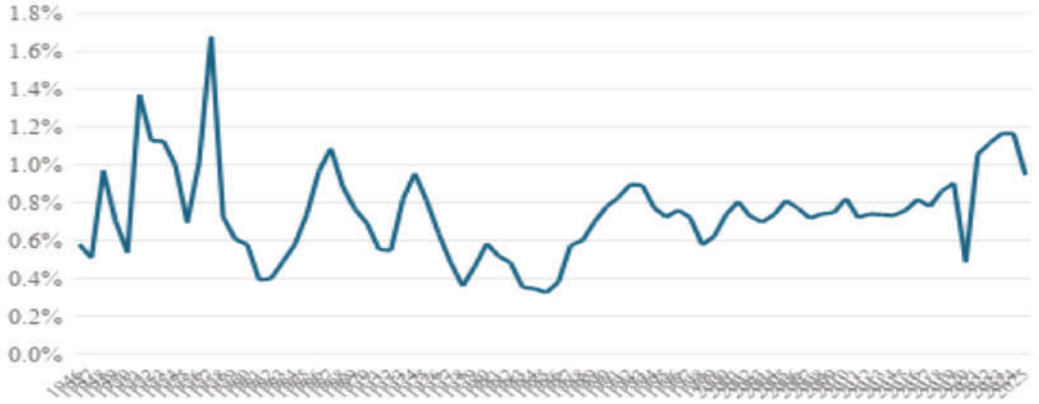



***Figure 1***
*Net numbers of immigration, by year, Canada*

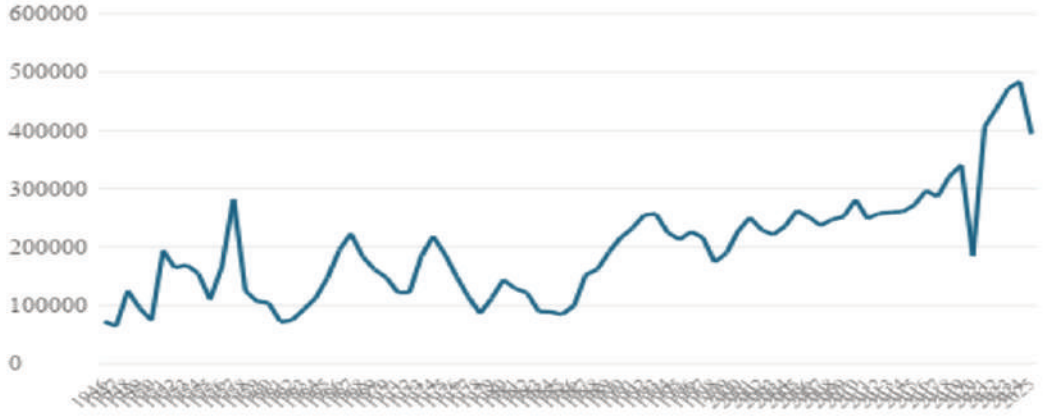



***Figure 2***
*Proportion new immigrants represent in the total Canadian population, by year, Canada*

**Figure 2** in turn illustrates the share of the total Canadian population new immigrants represent each year between 1946-2025. Historically, 1948, 1951, 1958, 1967, 1974, and 1992 were all years when new immigrants represented a spike in total population share; hitting a high of 1.7 per cent of the total Canadian population in 1957. In more recent years, new immigrants' share of the total population has been increasing between 2011-2024, with the exception again in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to reach a recent high of 1.2 per cent in 2024.

In addition to net numbers of immigrants to Canada increasing since the 1980s, and their share of the total population increasing in more recent years since 2011, there is also another important shift in immigration patterns in the country. The source countries of this immigration have changed dramatically since the middle of the 20th century. The results in **Figure 3** show that for the five and a half years between 1956-1961, the vast majority of Canada's immigration (85 per cent) was from Europe.[4] Only about 6 per cent was from non-Western nations, due to tight racial and country restrictions on who could enter Canada at that time. With the relaxing of these restrictions and the introduction of the points-based immigration system in Canada beginning in the late 1960s, immigration has greatly diversified racially, ethnically and religiously since then. In the more recent period of 2016-2021 for example, as the results in **Figure 4** illustrate, only 10 percent of Canada's immigration came from Europe and 3 percent from the USA, with 19 percent instead coming from India, 16 percent from Africa, 12 percent from the Middle East, 11 percent from the Philippines, 9 percent from China, 9 percent from Central and South America, and 12 percent from the rest of Asia and Oceania.[5] This has greatly impacted which religious groups gain the most from immigration: with the vast majority of gains in the middle of the 20th century going towards Christian denominations; and now with Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism gaining much more from recent immigrant composition.

***Figure 3***
*Source world region, immigration to Canada between January 1956 and June 1961*

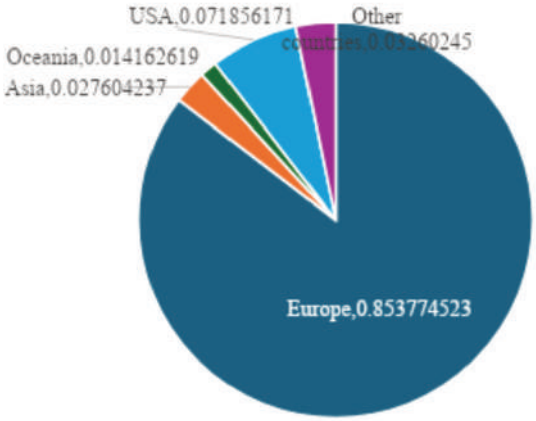
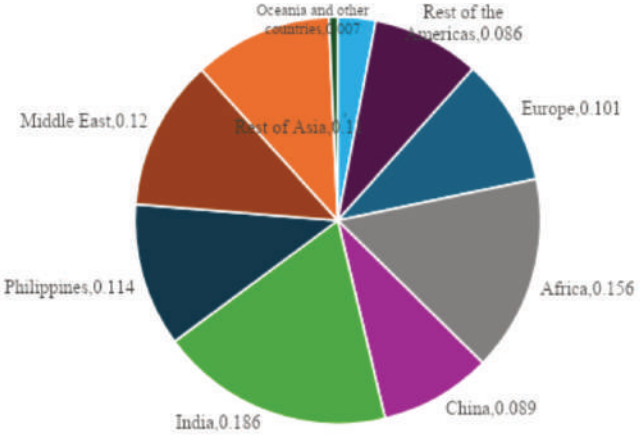



***Figure 4***
*Source world region, immigration to Canada between January 2016 and May 2021*




[4] See Statistics Canada's "Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population," Table 98-316-X2021001: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?LANG=E&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1,4&DGUIDlist=2021A000011124&HEADERlist=,28,24,22,27,23,29,25,26&SearchText=canada (accessed 7 September 2026).

[5] See Statistics Canada's "Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population," Table 98-316-X2021001: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?LANG=E&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1,4&DGUIDlist=2021A000011124&HEADERlist=,28,24,22,27,23,29,25,26&SearchText=canada (accessed 7 September 2026).

***Table 1***

*Immigration statistics by (non)religious tradition, Canada, 2021*

| | % born outside the country | Number of immigrants gained between 2016-2021 |
|---|---|---|
| **Catholic** | 20% | 244,750 people |
| **Mainline Protestant** | 12% | 14,100 people |
| **Other Protestant** | 27% | 42,300 people |
| **Orthodox Christian** | 59% | 46,550 people |
| **Other Christian** | 27% | 34,200 people |
| **Christian not otherwise specified** | 33% | 145,350 people |
| **Buddhist** | 74% | 20,800 people |
| **Hindu** | 77% | 141,400 people |
| **Jewish** | 31% | 7,150 people |
| **Muslim** | 71% | 260,250 people |
| **Sikh** | 70% | 80,250 people |
| **Other religions** | 23% | 9,800 people |
| **No religious affiliation** | 19% | 280,900 people |
| **Overall Canadian population** | 26% | 1,327,800 people |

## (Non)Religious Group Gains from Immigration

Table 1 contains data from the 2021 Census on the ratio of affiliates within a religious tradition who are born outside the country, as well as how many new immigrants have arrived in a (non)religious tradition for the five-and-a-half-year period between 2016-2021.[6] The (non)religious traditions that have a lower rate of affiliates born outside of Canada than the national average (26 per cent) in 2021 include Catholicism, mainline Protestantism[7], the "other religions" category, and those with no religious affiliation. That means that those in the "other Protestant", "other Christian" and "Christian n.o.s (not otherwise specified)" categories, as well as Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism all have higher rates of affiliates born outside the country than the national average. Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism can even still be considered immigrant religions in Canada, in that the majority of their affiliates are born outside the country.

In the period between 2016-2021, Catholicism, Christian n.o.s., Hinduism, Islam and those with no religious affiliation were the traditions that gained the most new affiliates from immigration. Catholicism is the third runner up tradition that gains the most from recent immigration (244,750 new immigrant affiliates between 2016-2021). To get a sense of the importance of these immigrant numbers for Catholicism, Catholics have gained over 5 times more people from immigration over the five-year period of 2016-2021 than they likely have from people converting to this religion over the same time frame.[8] This said, since this tradition also remains prevalent within many Canadian populations born in the country, these new immigrants represent a smaller share of Catholic affiliates overall.

Islam is in second place with a gain of 260,250 new immigrant affiliates between 2016-2021, and this immigration is the main source of growth for Muslim Canadians as a share of the overall population. Muslims have gained almost 46 times more people from immigration than from conversion over this period.[9] Although Muslims also gain from their higher fertility rates as well, the estimated number of Muslim births over the recent five-year period (estimated at 156,400 births)[10] still stands below their immigration gains.

Yet, the "tradition" which has gained the most number of people from immigration during the period of 2016-2021 has in fact been the religiously unaffiliated, with 280,900 new immigrants joining this larger group. Many of these new religiously unaffiliated immigrants are coming from countries where nonreligion is more prevalent, such as from many European and East Asian countries. With nonreligion rates currently climbing in many parts of the Americas and Asia,[11] these gains from immigration among the religiously unaffiliated look set to climb even higher in the years to come. Like with Catholicism though, since the religiously unaffiliated population is so large among those

[6] See Statistics Canada's "Religion by Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration and Place of Birth: Canada, Provinces and Territories," Table 98-10-0343-01: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810034301 (accessed 11 February 2026).

[7] The "Mainline Protestant" category includes Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Church. The "Other Protestant" category includes Anabaptist, Baptist, Methodist and Wesleyan (Holiness), Pentecostal and other Charismatic, and Reformed.

[8] Based on author's analyses with data on childhood religion and (adult) religious affiliation at time of survey from Statistics Canada's 2020 General Social Survey.

[9] Based on author's analyses with data on childhood religion and (adult) religious affiliation at time of survey from Statistics Canada's 2020 General Social Survey.

[10] Based on author's analyses with data on religious group fertility from Statistics Canada's 2021 Census Public Use Microdata File.

[11] Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman and Ryan T. Cragun, Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society (New York University Press, 2023).

born in Canada, immigrants, although numerous in numbers, only make up a smaller share of this unaffiliated group in the country.

## Religious Disaffiliation among Immigrants and their Children

In addition to the diversification of the Canadian religious landscape in recent decades from immigration, another key trend has been at play especially among those born in Canada from Christian backgrounds: substantial proportions of these populations are disaffiliating from their childhood religion. According to data from Statistics Canada's 2020 General Social Survey (GSS), 14 percent of respondents born in Canada were raised in a religion during their childhood, but no longer had a religious affiliation as adults at the time of the survey. The vast majority of these respondents came from a Chistian childhood background.

Although less common among immigrant populations, this disaffiliation trend is nevertheless still present among these populations. Table 2 contains rates of religious disaffiliation from the 2020 GSS by world region of birth. Those born in North America outside of Canada as well as in Oceania and Europe have a similar rate of disaffiliation as those born in Canada (12 - 16 percent); just below is the rate for those born in Central and South America (10 percent); and then those born in Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia all have lower rates of disaffiliation between 2 - 6 percent.

Once again, the vast majority of disaffiliates born outside of Canada come from a Christian childhood background (82 percent according to 2020 GSS data). Among immigrants' children, those referred to as second generation immigrants, an estimated 13 percent have disaffiliated from their childhood religion at the time of the 2020 GSS, and again the vast majority (92 percent) left Christianity specifically.

***Table 2***
*Predicted probabilities of disaffiliation, by world region of birth, Canada, 2020*

| World region of birth | Disaffiliate: childhood religion, but no religious affiliation as adults |
|---|---|
| **Canada** | 14% |
| **North America (outside of Canada)** | 16% |
| **Central and South America** | 10% |
| **Europe** | 12% |
| **Africa** | 6% |
| **Middle East** | 5% |
| **East Asia** | 3% |
| **Southeast Asia** | 4% |
| **South Asia** | 2% |
| **Oceania** | 13% |

## The Impact of Cutting Immigration Quotas, and the Future of Religion and Immigration

Immigration continues to greatly shape Canada's religious landscape. (Non)religious traditions currently gaining the most from immigration include Catholics, Christians without a specific denominational affiliation, Hindus, Muslims, and the religiously unaffiliated. Religious traditions not gaining all that much from current immigration include mainline Protestants, Jews and those in the "other religions" category. Even with the recent federal government cuts to immigration quotas, Canada looks set to still accept a large number of newcomers in the years to come (even though now below population replacement levels): 300,000+/year, compared with below 300,000/year prior to 2018. This likely means a continued diversification of the religious landscape, with growth in population share especially among Muslim, Hindu and Sikh traditions (if the source country composition of immigration does not shift dramatically), tied also to continued low birth rates among most born-in-Canada Christian populations. This growth among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs tied to immigration will simply not be as rapid as it might have been if quotas had not been cut.

This said, the other key trend impacting the Canadian religious landscape may now take more of a prominent role, given the cuts to immigration: disaffiliation among many formerly Christian populations. Although those with no religious affiliation do make large gains from current immigration, as we saw in Table 1, this category will still continue to grow as a share of the Canadian population if disaffiliation among Christian populations continues (as it looks set to do). Many Christian traditions whose affiliates have relatively low birth rates and which are also losing former affiliates to disaffiliation, such as among most Catholic and Protestant groups, will no longer have as many immigrant newcomers to stem some of this decline. Consequently, Christianity's overall share of the Canadian population looks set to shrink more rapidly than it would have done had immigration quotas not been cut.