RELIGION IN CANADA IN 2017: ARE WE PREPARED?[1]

ABSTRACT

What major changes have occurred in religion in Canada since 1991, and what might the religious landscape look like in 2017? This article addresses these questions and reflects on whether Canadian society is prepared for the changes that are already well underway in religion in Canada.

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Countless news stories have made it practically a cliché to say that religions in Canada have undergone dramatic transformations over the past two decades. In this article, I provide readers with a brief glimpse behind what many perceive to be common knowledge. I also offer some reflections on whether or not Canadian society is prepared for recent changes and on 2017 demographic projections regarding religious diversity.[2]

First, let us consider very briefly a statistical snapshot of the changes between the 1991 and 2001 census surveys (Statistics Canada only collects information about religion every ten years). Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of Canadians identifying themselves as Christians dropped from 81.8% to 76.6%.[3] The mainline Protestant denominations experienced the most significant declines (Anglicans (-7%), United Church (-8%), Presbyterians (-35%), Lutherans (-5%)),[4] with Protestants as a whole declining from 35% to 29%. At the same time, the percentage of Canadians who describe themselves as Roman Catholics (43%) has declined slightly, although their actual numbers have increased. Finally, many conservative evangelical Protestant denominations are growing rapidly, though in some cases (Pentecostals (-15%), Salvation Army (-22%), and Mennonites (-8%)) there have been notable declines.

Another untold story here is what one might call the "de-Europeanization of Canadian Christianity." Increasing Christian immigration from non-European sources is radically transforming many and perhaps most mainline denominations. For example, major denominations, such as the Roman Catholic and United Churches, are relying increasingly on non-European ethnic minority Christian newcomers to provide their churches with members, funding, and energy.

Two other issues that attracted a great deal of media attention following the release of the 2001 census figures were the massive increases in the number and percentage of Canadians who indicate that they have "no religion" (a category that increased by 43% since 1991, with 16% or nearly five million Canadians describing themselves this way in 2001); and the consistent and significant increases in the major non-Christian religious groups.

Between 1991 and 2001, the number of Canadians identifying themselves as Muslims increased by 129%; the number of Hindus by 89%; the number of Buddhists by 84%; the number of Sikhs by 89%; and the number of Jews by 4%. Although the actual percentage of Canadians who belonged to the non-Christian traditions in 2001 is still modest at 6% of the overall population in 2001 and 3.8% in 1991, almost all of the dramatic increases within these religious communities (with the exception of the increases among Jews) result from immigration; since immigration and refugee policies will likely continue to favour the source countries from which these non-

Christians originate, we can anticipate a continuous growth in both the absolute and relative significance of these communities in the years to come.

The 2017 projections reflect this growth: they estimate that by 2017, the percentage of non-Christians in Canada will be roughly 10%. However, one always needs to be cautious about using traditional survey methods to assess and measure religious beliefs, behaviour, or identity. For example, this study naturally (and necessarily) assumes the retention of religious practice, ideology, and identities over time, so that a person who is born into a Hindu family today is included in the 2017 projections as a Hindu. But, scholars in this area know that the way young people describe themselves changes constantly. In contemporary Canadian conditions in which the dominant culture they are integrating is characterized by a mixture of ersatz spirituality, diffused Christianity, and secularism, this rearticulation of their family's religious heritage will probably change what these adherents mean when they claim to belong to a tradition. This dynamic process of renegotiation ought therefore to change the way outsiders interpret such claims.

While religious communities are growing, we should not assume that someone born into a Sikh family in the 1990s will necessarily think of herself as a Sikh in 2017. In fact, she may join the ranks of the "religious nones," or may marry a Hindu or a Christian and opt to follow the religious path of her husband's family. Conversely, she may identify more strongly with Sikhism than her parents and grandparents. This may be a function of being asked so often to provide explanations for her religious convictions, food choices, clothing choices, and social activities. For that matter, her "orthodoxification" might be the result of racial or religious discrimination in Canada,[5] or of her growing identification with the transnational Sikh movement for an independent homeland.

The tendency for second generation children to modify their inherited or ascribed religious identities is not a new phenomenon, and it is not unique to minority communities. Nevertheless, we need to understand the 2017 projections in light of this process.

We are at a crossroads with respect to the expression of religion in North America. On the whole, youth of virtually all religious traditions are less loyal to these traditions and especially to the institutional expressions of these traditions (churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, etc.) than their age cohorts have probably been for many centuries if not millennia. The theories we have used to predict the future of religion are challenged by the way religions and religious people in Canada and abroad seem to be behaving and thinking in the past decade or two. What is happening is something far more interesting than merely waxing or waning. The 2017 projections are useful and likely accurate, although patient ethnographic research and real-life interactions will be necessary for us to determine the emerging meanings of religious identification.

Now, we might ask ourselves whether or not contemporary Canadian society is prepared for the projected 2017 religious landscape. In order to reflect on this question, I would like to deal very briefly with three issues: Canadian law, policy discourse, and public discourse. [6]

Those of us relatively new to legal discourse would do well to consider the written decisions in cases such as *Trinity Western University v. British Columbia College of Teachers (2001), Multani v. Commission scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys* (2006), *R. v. Big M Drug Mart* (1985), and *Adler v. Ontario* (1996).[7] Whatever one might think of a particular decision or of the broader social and legal context out of which it emerges, one can witness within the highest courts fairly sophisticated and generally progressive analyses of and responses to the intersection of religion and public policy (Berger 2002).[8] The *Charter* and other laws and public policies (notably, the *Multiculturalism Act*), may free – or compel – the higher courts to be more responsive to changes in the Canadian religious landscape than they would be if they had to abide by the more rigid secularism that exists in other liberal democracies. Perhaps, in other words, the major juridical decision makers (at least those in English-speaking Canada operating out of the tradition of British common law) have been nudging Canadian society toward a groundbreaking pluralism in which religiously-based truth and value claims can be taken seriously, even though people who advance such claims must ultimately play by the liberal rules of justice, fairness, and the dignity of all Canadians advanced by the Charter and other pivotal Canadian documents (Berger 2002).

While legal discourse would seem to justify some optimism about Canadian society's ability to respond meaningfully to the changing Canadian religious landscape, public and policy discourses reflect quite a different situation.[9]

Let us first consider the problems associated

with the way of speaking and writing about religion that one finds among some (note: not all) policy makers and others in the elite levels of society. Space does not permit an adequate description of these tendencies (cf. Biles and Ibrahim 2005), but I would suggest that in policy discourse, one finds two related problems.

First, some policy makers in Canada and abroad still embrace a version of the "secularization hypothesis" which affirmed as a universal truth the theory that as individuals and liberal democracies matured, religion would recede from the public sphere, either eventually to vanish altogether or to survive (and perhaps even thrive) in the private lives of individuals. Now that many studies have established that, while religion has changed, it is still very much with us. Most social scientists see this grand theory for the exercise in late enlightenment-era projection and wishful thinking that it was (Swatos 1999; Casanova 1994). Nonetheless, this simple form of the secularization hypothesis is still quite prominent among many members of the social elite who occupy positions of power within the political and policy making arenas.

Second, it is common for participants in policy discourse to frame the religious phenomena to which they are responding in terms of a binary essentialism in which all religions are essentially oriented toward love, peace, kindness, and egalitarianism, so that all violent religious phenomena are by definition not actually religious but are essentially political, economic, or pathological in origin and motivation. Although this "naïve" essentialism vastly underestimates the internal heterogeneity of religion throughout history and around the world, it does produce the positive consequence of safeguarding members of (usually) minority groups.

Of course, there is a more pernicious form of essentialism, in which all religions are perceived to be essentially vehicles for misogyny, cruelty, greed, social control and warfare; in this dark alternative to the naïve approach, all acts of altruism, kindness, creativity and human solidarity one sees in religion are treated as illusions oriented toward duping outsiders and insiders.

As an indication of the extent to which the spirit that motivates the Charter and the Multiculturalism policy has permeated elite policy discourse, the overwhelming majority of Canada's federal, provincial and municipal politicians and policy makers appear to eschew this latter kind of essentialism.[10]

While we might be relieved that our policy makers have not adopted a cynical or pessimistic approach to religious phenomena, it would be wiser by far to reject *all* kinds of essentialism, and to accept instead that religions are like all other human phenomena in that they are constituted by people, ideas, movements, discourses, texts and expressions that are violent, peaceful, misogynistic, egalitarian, progressive, conservative, ugly and beautiful. It is certainly challenging to develop policies that speak to phenomena that are so inherently diverse, but policies geared to a strictly sunny version of a given religion (or religion as such) will fail to help us to respond to the internally consistent and yet utterly opposed expressions of the same religion we find jostling for attention and dominance in the contemporary world (Lincoln 2002; cf. Bramadat 2005).

Although the above two problems are quite evident in Canadian policy discourse, there are some real causes of optimism. Space does not permit a full discussion, so a list will have to suffice: Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage have over the past several years become more interested in funding research and promoting discussions explicitly about religion in Canada and elsewhere; the Metropolis Project has played an extraordinarily important role in encouraging the inclusion of religious issues and religious voices in the research and networking that occur under its aegis; the Department of National Defence has attempted to make its chaplaincy services more inclusive; at the provincial and local levels one sees a similar (though not always consistent) openness among policy makers to taking religious diversity seriously.

It is when one considers public discourse that one encounters some of the most difficult challenges. It is in this discursive arena – an arena, unlike public policy discourse, ungoverned by human rights norms, the *Charter*, elite codes of manners, and the threat of public exposure – that one sometimes comes face to face with extremely discriminatory views. Perhaps what Lois Sweet calls "religious illiteracy" (1997) is not the sole cause of these anti-multicultural attitudes, but I would suspect it is chief among them. Sweet argues that for a variety of reasons, we as a society have decided it is not worthwhile – and even those who think it is worthwhile would still argue that it is not prudent – to teach students about religion. Consequently, we have a general public that knows precious little about a force that now plays a major role shaping Canadian and international society. Since the most

obvious response to ignorance is education, I would argue that Canadian society (i.e., not simply provincial education systems) needs rather urgently to find ways to fill a large intellectual gap that has developed over decades. This will be neither simple nor inexpensive, but if we are serious about engaging the religious ideas, individuals and ideologies that are certain to become even more prominent between today and 2017, we need to equip ourselves accordingly.

In conclusion, I have suggested that post-*Charter* higher court rulings and rationales should lead us to feel optimistic about our capacity to respond to the religious landscape we will likely see in 2017. Policy discourses about religion show significant signs of progressive development, but are often challenged by the lingering effects of secularization and naïve essentialism. The most serious problem is evident in public discourse, where widespread ignorance about religion bedevils efforts to engage complex phenomena constructively.

The relatively flexible and multicultural "Canadian diversity model" is not only a pillar of many Canadians' self-understanding; it is also a major feature of our generally positive international profile. It is probably not too great an exaggeration to say that our success at responding creatively to the challenges posed by religious diversity will in large part determine both the national and international future of this ambitious and unusual model.

Notes

[1] Based on a presentation at the "Canadian Rights and Freedoms: 25 Years Under the *Charter*" Conference in Ottawa, organized by the Association for Canadian Studies. I would like to thank Dr. Jack Jedwab for inviting me to participate in this conference.

[2] See: "2001 Census Analysis Series: Religion in Canada," produced by Statistics Canada. Available at: http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/rel/pdf/96F0030XIE2001015.pdf , and "Population Projections of Visible Minority Groups, Canada, Provinces and Regions, 2001-2017," produced by Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage. Available at: http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/91-541-XIE/91-541-XIE2005001.pdf

[3] For the sake of brevity, subsequent percentages will be rounded to the nearest whole number.

[4] However, as the contributors to *Christianity and Ethnicity* in Canada (Bramadat and Seljak, forthcoming), indicate, in many cases, these figures underestimate the actual losses (and thus crises) in these churches.

[5] Unfortunately, very little scholarly work has been conducted on the types and levels of religious discrimination in Canada. The *Ethnic Diversity Survey* (2003) included some questions related to these issues. See Seljak (2007) and Bramadat (forthcoming) for discussion of the problems with the existing data on specifically religious forms of discrimination.

[6] Although I am interested in the post-*Charter* legal context in Canada, I am by no means an expert in this field. Readers interested in pursuing this issue should consider the writings of Lori Beaman, Benjamin Berger, and M.H. Ogilvie.

[7] All available at: http://scc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/

[8] However, see Beaman (2004 and 2005) for a critique of some exclusionary tactics in higher court decisions.

[9] Public discourse on religion is especially disheartening, and it is perhaps by comparison that legal discourse appears to be so progressive.

[10] As evidence of this, consider what has happened in the recent past when a community leader (such as David Ahenakew) made anti-Semitic remarks.

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