
A character in one of Margaret Atwood’s short stories compares “religious people” to the indecency of flashers.1 If Joel Thiessen’s research is any indication, a growing segment of Canadians feel similarly offended by Christians engaging them in spiritual matters, perceiving faith to be strictly personal and private.

Director of the Flourishing Congregations Institute and professor of sociology at Ambrose University in Calgary, Joel Thiessen interviewed ninety people to analyze their reports on their own religious experiences. Thirty of these people he categorized as “active affiliates” (people who attend services regularly), another thirty he labeled “marginal affiliates” (nominal Christmas/Easter attenders), and the final thirty he called “religious nones”—those who do not identify with a religious group or attend any services. The data is regionally confined, but Calgary tends to mirror national demographic averages, so some tentative generalization is reasonable.

In a country sorely lacking in religious research, this study offers rich qualitative data, especially on the growing phenomenon of “religious nones.” A quarter of Canadians now identify as religious nones, including one third of teens, and this book offers some fresh insights into their views. The study also demonstrates that active affiliates have distinctively different worldviews from both the marginal affiliates and the religious nones, suggesting Canadians are dividing into camps of those with a thoroughly religious identity and those for whom religion and offence are synonymous.

Thiessen challenges Reginald Bibby’s contention that the demand for religion is constant. Bibby has said that if people avoid church, it is because the churches are boring, out-dated, or insensitive. Thiessen shows, to the contrary, that Canadians who claim openness to church participation if congregations improved their music, preaching, or programs, still lack the time, energy, and will to visit a church.

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Demand for religious resources fluctuates with cultural change, and in this secular age in Canada, people are too preoccupied to consider religious options. They shun anything reminiscent of proselytizing, if they even have any religious memory or community that would bring faith matters to mind.

Religious communication generally offends Canadians, and is consistently perceived in the interviews as pushy, coercive, proselytizing, and in your face. Says one religious none: “I don’t believe in soliciting religion, I don’t believe in, like propaganda around religion … I think it should be more individual. To be honest, I don’t like it when people push their religion onto others. I have a real big issue with that” (122).

For those who hope for a swelling in the ranks of the faithful, Thiessen has little good news. He notes that about 75 percent of Canadians are either marginal affiliates or religious nones, and if the marginal affiliates (what Bibby called “the ambivalent middle”) are going to change, “it is most likely going to be for the religious none end of the continuum rather than the active affiliate side” (174). “Simply put,” he summarizes, “individualism, respect, and tolerance—not religion—are the common social bonds that bind the majority of Canadians.” Even more succinctly, “in Canada religion has, is, and will be on the decline” (176).

Thiessen’s data challenges the “strictness theory.” Strictness theory predicts that the growth of religious groups relies heavily on how demanding their religion is, within a reasonable range, including having some difficult doctrine to subscribe to. This has its limits, but permissive churches require less from their members, and so they get less from their members and carry more “free riders”—marginal attendees who take more than they give. But marginal affiliates and religious nones in Canada are not warm to conservative beliefs or practises. Religious nones especially prize their autonomy. “I have a lot of freedom in terms of what I think and when I think,” said one religious none. Another added: “My Sundays are free; you can watch football easier.” If strict beliefs and practises grow churches, they will not grow with marginal affiliates or religious nones, even if they do miss the benefits of a caring community.
Thiessen mentions that groups like Pentecostals and Mormons are statistically growing (176), but he cites Steve Bruce who claims such “individualist and subjectivist” faith is not sustainable (16). The one profile of a Pentecostal believer comes with the comment that her right-wing politics are the substance of what makes marginal affiliates and religious nones allergic to religion (36–40).

This study is a welcome addition to our knowledge of Canadian religiosity. It is rigorous in its sociology, although pessimistic in its assessment of the potential for religious revival in Canada. A recommended compliment would be the growing “post-secular” literature, which sees increasing public space for religious voices.

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