

Church & Faith Trends



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Mark Noll, *What Happened to Christian Canada?*

A response from a Roman Catholic perspective

by Mark G. McGowan, University of Toronto & St. Michael's College

Mark A. Noll is one of the best known U.S. church historians, and certainly one who is very familiar with the evolution of the Christian churches in Canada. His *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* is required reading for students of religious history on both sides of the border, and rightfully so for its manner of presentation, argument, and research. So when I first read Noll's article, both in its original form in *Church History* and in its current form, published handsomely by Regent College, I did not revert to a knee-jerk nationalist response to the essay such as "What would an American know about Canadian Christianity?"

On the contrary, I was impressed by the manner in which Noll framed the discussion and the provocative questions he posed about the state of the Christian churches in Canada and their recent evolution, or perhaps devolution. The article is ambitious, sweeping across a broad swath of Canadian denominations and mining the work of many notable Canadian historians and theologians in the process.

Noll's presumption is that once upon a time there was a "Christian Canada." I will not take up this issue in what follows, though one should note that if the 1901 census were any indication—when the numbers of professed members of churches were compared with numbers of those actually practising their faith weekly—it was a thin veneer of Christianity, even over a century ago.¹ Noll's primary interest lies in the cataclysmic shift in religious practice in the 1960s, and his analysis focuses upon two churches, specifically the United Church of Canada (as roughly microcosmic of Protestants), and the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec. Though this binary is useful when one paints broad brush strokes, it is problematic when one looks at the Catholic developments in greater detail.

In 1945, at the end of the Second World War, the Catholic Church in Canada did not fall neatly into the "two solitudes" (English-French and Protestant-Catholic). Although Quebec, with a Catholic population in excess of 85% of the provincial total, was clearly the largest portion of the Canadian Church, about one third of Catholics lived outside of Quebec, consisting primarily of Irish, Scots, and a host of European ethnic communities. In 1961, prior to what John W. Grant once termed "the deluge," one would discover, in what might have been thought of as "English-Protestant Canada" or "the other solitude," huge numbers of Roman Catholics living cheek-by-jowl with their Protestant and non-Christian neighbours. In New Brunswick, 52% of the population was Catholic, divided between faithful with Irish and Acadian roots. Other provinces had significant Catholic minorities: Prince Edward Island (46%), Newfoundland (36%), Nova Scotia (35%), Ontario (30%), Saskatchewan (26%), Manitoba (23%), Alberta (22%), and British Columbia (17%). The Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories, though small in numbers of inhabitants, had Catholic populations tallying 27% and 43% of the territorial populations, respectively.

By 1971, the Catholic population of Canada constituted 46% of the total, for the first time outnumbering Protestants, who stood at 44%.² Moreover, as is indicated in David Seljak and Paul Bramadat's recent anthology, *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, the Catholic Church outside Quebec embodied a multicultural mosaic

¹Census of Canada, 1901.

²Census of Canada, 1961 and 1971.

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that was constantly renewed by Catholic immigration. Even as the Catholic Church in Quebec was experiencing significant decline in weekly adherents, births, and authority in Quebec by the 1970s—although hardly at the rate hyperbolized by Denys Arcand! (19)—the Catholic Church in other parts of Canada was being renewed by immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, South America, and Asia. Even today, in the alleged “de-Christianized Canada,” Filipino, Korean, Goan, and Chinese immigrants are renewing Catholic churches in Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, and a host of other Canadian cities.³ In some ways, the story of the evident decline in Catholic Quebec and Catholic developments elsewhere in Canada are two very different narratives not easily accounted for by the “two solitudes” approach to Canadian religion. These are narratives informed by such variables as immigration, integration, socio-economic status, and the limited identity of “region.”

Noll mentions many of the issues at play in terms of the decline in Quebec and leans very heavily on the recent—and, might I add, groundbreaking—research of Michael Gauvreau on the relationship between the Church and the Quiet Revolution. Gauvreau presents a compelling case of the Church being undermined by its own lay movements (confirmed by the work of Louise Bienvenue and Indre Cuplinskas),⁴ which fell under the large umbrella of the Catholic Action movement. Families, students, workers, farm organizations, and intellectuals began to embrace the personalist philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier and became increasingly critical of Church authorities, the dominance of natural law philosophy, and the clericalism that had become a hallmark of French-Canadian Catholic life. This silent revolution from below gathered speed throughout the 1960s, fuelled by rapid political changes and the secularization of traditionally Church-run institutions: schools (a Department of Education had failed in the 1870s, but was re-introduced in the 1960s), health care, and social services. This “revolution” of the laity “from below” tells only part of the story in Quebec. The coincidence of the Second Vatican Council, from 1962 to 1965, had a transforming influence on the Church from the top down. Noll acknowledges this factor (51–52) but does not indicate that Quebec bishops such as Cardinal Paul Emile Léger were leading advocates of reform at the Council (see Bernard Daly’s excellent recounting of the Council)⁵ and were enthusiastic at actualizing the reforms when they returned home after each session. They were not exactly “leaders of the older Catholicism” akin to the Duplessis era (40). What Gregory Baum, Claude Ryan, and David Seljak⁶ each observe is how compliant the hierarchy was as Quebec rapidly secularized, and that the anti-clericalism so evident in parts of Catholic Europe did not resonate as powerfully in Quebec. The hierarchy had been transformed in this period to some extent, but its voice was mute in the polyphony of alternatives—nationalism, separatism, the sexual revolution, consumerism, and modernization.

Perhaps overlooked in Noll’s essay are the influences in the 1960s of two important social phenomena that affected behaviours in all churches in Canada, not just the Catholic: the baby boom and the sexual revolution. The children of the baby boom had been raised in an era of relative affluence, peace, educational opportunity, social mobility, and the culture of consumption. They had been exposed to ideas through new media and raised by screens that had brought them the latest in pop culture, entertainment, new morality, and near instantaneously reported international

³Terrence Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). See essays by Mark G. McGowan, “Roman Catholics (Anglophone and Allophone),” 49–100; Solange Lefebvre, “Francophone Roman Catholic Church,” 101–37; and Myroslaw Tataryn, “Canada’s Eastern Christians,” 287–329.

⁴Michael Gauvreau, *The Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, 1931–1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005); Indre Cuplinskas, “Guns and Rosaries: The Use of Military Imagery in the French-Canadian Catholic Student Newspaper *JEC*,” *CCHA Historical Studies* 71 (2005): 7–28; Louise Bienvenue, *Quand la jeunesse entre en scène* (Montreal: Boreal, 2002).

⁵Bernard M. Daly, *Beyond Secrecy: The Untold Story of Canada and the Second Vatican Council* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2003).

⁶David Seljak, “Why the Quiet Revolution was Quiet: The Catholic Church’s Reaction to the Secularization of Quebec after 1960,” *CCHA Historical Studies*, 62 (1996): 109–124; Gregory Baum, *The Church in Quebec* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1991); Claude Ryan, “L’Église catholique et l’évolution politique du Québec de 1960 à 1980,” *CCHA Study Sessions*, 50 (1983), vol II: 381–402.

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events.⁷ By the late 1960s, it became clear in both French and English Canada that the boomers were “tuning” out of organized religion and the authorities it represented. Whether or not the changes wrought by Vatican II hastened this change is a matter for further deliberation. At first glance, the Council should have had the opposite effect, particularly in its empowerment of the laity, celebration of liturgy in the vernacular languages, emphasis on collegiality among bishops, new enthusiasm for social justice internationally, and de-emphasis on hierarchy in favour of co-responsibility among all in the Church. The Church was selling an “updating” of the institution, but the members of the youth revolution were not buying.

Perhaps the emergence of a sexual revolution as the boomers were coming of age made it difficult for the Church to retain its authority and prominence in the late sixties and early seventies. In 1968, contrary to the advice of the majority on the Commission on Birth Control, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae*, an encyclical letter (his last, even though he died 10 years later) which effectively reverted to natural law explanations of human sexuality. The document declined to extricate unitive from procreative sexual activity and therefore prohibited Catholics from use of the newly available methods of artificial contraception, particularly the birth control pill. Although Paul VI had hoped the encyclical would avoid undermining previous papal statements (*Casti connubii* by Pius XI), and thereby keep papal authority intact, the statement had the opposite effect. Many Catholics were puzzled by the differences between a “time” barrier (natural family planning) and a barrier offered by the pill, or saw this statement as undermining the spirit of the Council, and either ignored it or simply left the Church. Poll after poll has indicated, in Canada and elsewhere, that the majority of Catholics—even church-going ones—disagree with or simply ignore the prescriptions of *Humanae vitae*. Recently, a poll conducted by *The Tablet* and the Von Hugel Institute of St. Edmund’s College, Cambridge University, reported that in the United Kingdom 82% of practising Catholics knew of the Church’s teaching on contraception, but only 15.7% of these thought the teaching was right.⁸ Such a rebuff of the authority of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church was a significant blow against the institution and likely was the thin edge of the wedge in limiting the influence of the institution and its clergy among rank and file Catholics who were now living in an new age, bombarded by conflicting ideologies, new moralities, and the ethos of “liberation” at every turn.

Yet, the sexual revolution and the youth sub-culture emerging from the baby boom were not singular in their corrosive effect on Catholic adherence and practice; they were part of a convergence of issues that have had a dramatic effect on the minds of believers from across the Christian spectrum, in Canada, and elsewhere in the West:

- **Challenge to Authority:** Catholics have not been immune to the scientific assaults on theology and religious belief. The work of the recent evangelizing atheists, including Richard Dawkins, when read without a critical eye, can be damaging to the believer, as can the routine assaults to the authority of Christian ministers as witnessed on television and in the cinema. The Catholic Church has taken unpopular stands on the role of women in the priesthood, divorce, human sexuality, abortion, and euthanasia, all of which have been raised in the secular media from time to time with the Church presented as virtually a social anachronism, and a hindrance to social progress and sexual liberation. The sexual abuse scandals that rocked the Catholic Church in Newfoundland (Mount Cashel), other parts of Canada, and more recently in Ireland and the United States have not

⁷Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁸“Sex and the modern Catholic,” *Tablet* 26 July 2008: 14–15.

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helped the Church's cause. The sordid activities of the few have managed to sully the reputation of the clergy itself and compromise the Church's authority when she least needed such scandal; credible witnesses to the faith are less reported in the public square than those who have proven themselves to be counter-witnesses to the gospel;

- **Mass communications:** Catholics and other Christians are facing an onslaught of information—from the radio and television to the World Wide Web, blogs, email, MSN, and Facebook. These new ideas, opinions, facts, and interpretations are difficult to sift through if one does not have the critical tools and rootedness in the tradition in order to make intelligent decisions about what one sees and hears. Msgr. Dennis Murphy in his little gem *Catholic Education: A Light of Truth*⁹ claims that Catholics in Canada are currently suffering from a religious “amnesia”—a lack of awareness of their faith and its history, traditions, and implications for our world. He sees this as a parental problem (read “boomers”) that has been passed on to new generations of Catholic Canadians, who are unprepared to answer the bold challenges faced by secular humanist thought and a variety of other ideologies, opinions, and ways of living. Hampered by such “amnesia,” unable to mine the gifts and values of their own rich tradition, Catholics tend to “lapse” and the Church as “People of God” is weakened;
- **Acceptance:** Noll's comments about acceptance—once a group is accepted by a host society, it tends to conform and loses its sense of exclusivity—apply well to Canadian Catholics. Throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the boundaries between Canadian Catholics and Protestants were firmly defined; each could, in part, identify itself as not being “the other.” French-Canadian Catholics always had the safety of “the nation” within the political boundaries of Quebec and its distinctive position within Confederation,¹⁰ but Catholic minorities outside of Quebec were more vulnerable to the Anglophone and largely Protestant culture. For English-speaking Catholics (who shared a language with Protestants in addition to many social, economic, and political values), earning respectability and proving one's loyalty to Canada and the Empire were common themes in Catholic life. The Catholic Church's service to Canada in the two world wars, its vociferous anti-communism during the Cold War, its support for and contribution to existing political structures and social questions, led to an easing of relations between what William Grant once called the “two streams” of Canadian life.¹¹ French-Canadian Catholics were at times alarmed by rates of Protestant-Catholic mixed marriage in “English” Canada as evidence of “loss” to the Church. The positive ecumenical movement that emerged from Vatican II further muted the boundaries between Catholics and Protestants.¹² When one throws into the mix, in our own time, Murphy's idea of “religious amnesia,” the drift from Catholicism might also be interpreted as a blurring of boundaries, wherein people regard one religion or set of spiritual ideas as interchangeable with any other;

⁹Dennis Murphy, *Catholic Education: A Light of Truth* (Toronto: Catholic Register Books, 2007), 1–24.

¹⁰Arthur Silver, *The French Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

¹¹William D. Grant, ed., *Christendom Anno Domini MDCCCCI* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1902): vol. I, 81.

¹²Mark G. McGowan, *The Waning of the Green: Catholics, the Irish, and Identity in Toronto, 1887–1922* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), chapter 3.

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- **The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms:** The Charter is not often seen as perhaps undermining the Catholic Church per se. However, a cultural shift has occurred since 1982, wherein the courts and Canadians at large have come to embrace individual rights over collective rights (31); in a Church that has preached since its foundation both individual and collective salvation, the Charter does have serious implications when it comes to conflicts between the individual rights of Catholics and the collective rights and identity of the Church and its institutions. The case of publicly funded Catholic schools (Alberta, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and the Territories) can provide a case in point. How long will “denominational rights” as articulated in statutes for Catholic schools be able to withstand challenges from teachers who—having been either censored or released from their contracts for living alternative lifestyles relative to Catholic teaching—are standing on their Charter rights? Such cases pose grave challenges for the Church and its schools.

The decline in church attendance and belief by Catholics in Quebec and Anglo-Celtic Catholics elsewhere in Canada provides only one aspect of Catholic life in contemporary Canada. New Catholic Canadians are renewing the face of urban parishes across the country. Filipino Catholics do not tend to form national parishes but elect to join territorial parishes and have done so in most of Canada’s major cities. They have introduced new catechetical programs and revitalized many Church-oriented voluntary associations that were once at risk of dying slow deaths of attrition. In national parishes, Korean and Chinese Catholics have burgeoning instructional programs (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) which draw hundreds of Catholic converts each year in major Canadian cities. Another dimension of renewal is witnessed in new programs for youth, inspired in part by the recent World Youth Days and the visits of the late Pope John Paul II to Canada.

Although the developments in the Catholic Church in Canada over the last 50 years have varied according to region, language, ethnicity, gender, and generation, one characteristic of this denomination that appears beyond dispute is the decline in the Church’s public presence in Canada. Gone are the days when a Catholic bishop in Quebec could apply pressure to the government and have the film *Luther* banned from movie houses; gone are the days when Quebec’s radio waves would be filled with the sounds of the Archbishop of Montreal’s evening rosary, or quaint dramas such as *Un homme et son péché*, in which the local curé played such a prominent role in brokering peace in the village; also gone are the times when Catholic and Protestant clergy would officiate at public events in the presence of local, provincial, and national politicians.

Catholic voices are still heard in the public square, but they are heard less frequently and are less prominent amidst the cacophony of competing interests. In a Canada that has become very sensitive to “giving offence” and political correctness, the presence of a religious figure offering prayers might violate the public sense of “inclusivity.”

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A case in point was the commemoration in both Canada and the United States of the victims of the air attacks of September 11, 2001. The United States—that paradigm of the Enlightenment concept of the separation of Church and State—held a memorial at the national cathedral in Washington, DC, with prayers from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish clerics. In Canada—where such separation of Church and State is neither a founding principle nor a reality in many provinces—the memorial at Parliament Hill in Ottawa was outdoors, without a formal religious presence, and prayer was reduced to a moment of silence.

Perhaps there is something to the inference (55–56) that Christianity has passed its values of goodness, mercy, charity, justice, and hope on to a different conception of a communal social order, and, therein, has unwittingly made itself irrelevant in modern Canada. One cannot help wonder how these values will continue to be nourished in a secular and individualistic environment without a transcendent reference point. When Catholic religious orders (and Protestant groups for that matter) operated hospitals and social services, they sustained these institutions with a charism rooted in the gospel and its beatitudes; these can be passed on when an institution secularizes, in the short term, but how are mercy, meekness, justice, peace, compassion, respect for life, and other cardinal virtues modelled and reinforced in a value-neutral environment over the long term? Canadians have yet to work this issue out. In the meantime, Mark Noll has given us much to think about and I, for one, am in his debt. 🍁