

My Canada Doesn't Include Religiosity

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MICHAEL ADAMS

Comment

There is more to the story of religion in this county than the boxes we check on our census forms, says pollster MICHAEL ADAMS

In the same-sex marriage debate that engulfed Canadians just before Christmas, The Globe and Mail ran comments from two of its more prominent Christian columnists, broadcaster Lorna Dueck and former Reform Party leader Preston Manning. Each, in their opposition to same-sex marriage, made reference to polls that purportedly show strong religiosity in Canada. Ms. Dueck, a producer of Christian television, stated that religious attendance in Canada is at its highest level in 30 years. Mr. Manning wrote that Canada is a "strongly religious" country, where 77 per cent of the population is Christian, and where two thirds describe themselves as religious.

Both of these people are describing a country in North America with which I am familiar -- but it isn't Canada. As I have documented in three books about the evolution of social values in Canada, we've come a long way from the days when six in 10 of us went to church every Sunday and a Catholic could not marry a Protestant without scandal.

Neither the justices of our Supreme Court nor anyone else still lives in the Canada I have just described. It is neither elitist nor "out of touch" to state that Canada is becoming increasingly secular. It's accurate.

Mr. Manning is right about one thing: Most Canadians categorize themselves as Christian when asked to tick a box on their census form. Most of us identify to some extent with the faith in which we were raised -- even if we don't actively practise that faith or even believe in its basic tenets.

Many of us will even claim to be religious. For some this will mean belonging to a faith community of some sort, observing religious customs and codes, or even interpreting a sacred text literally and living according to that interpretation (overlooking, perhaps, any calls for animal sacrifice). For others, the claim of religiosity will simply be an expression of some sense of personal spirituality, the nuances of which a yes-no polling question cannot measure.

A more appropriate way of measuring the religiosity of Canadian society is to inquire about people's religious behaviour and also about the particulars of their beliefs. Gallup finds that 61 per cent of Canadians say they believe in God, but only 28 per cent say religion is very important to them, and just 16 per cent attend religious services at least weekly. An additional 21 per cent attend services at least monthly. The sum of these two numbers (37 per cent) is perhaps the number that causes Ms. Dueck to state that religious attendance in Canada is at its highest level in 30 years, although she did not cite her source.

According to the Pew Center, just 30 per cent of Canadians believe one must believe in God in order to be moral. Environics finds that 69 per cent of Canadians believe in heaven but only 43 per cent believe in hell. In short, there is more to the story of religion in Canada than the boxes we all check on our census forms. The numbers show no evidence of a religious revival in Canada of the sort we see south of the border.

Canadians are about half as religious as Americans, and Canadians' and Americans' divergent views of religion are one symptom of a growing disparity between the two cultures. Our religious tradition in Canada since the arrival of Europeans is indeed Judeo-Christian. This is a historical fact that no one would dispute. But having a little over one third of the population attending church at least once a month does not make, to use Mr. Manning's phrase, a "strongly religious" society.

Mr. Manning believes our Supreme Court fails to properly interpret our own 1982 constitution that recognizes the supremacy of God and the rule of law. But our society was not vastly more religious in 1982 than it is now. Church attendance and belief in traditional values were somewhat higher, but Canada was not so devout or homogeneous that the population would have enjoyed perfect consensus on "God" and God's prescriptions and proscriptions for humankind.

As recently as 1999, when Svend Robinson challenged the inclusion of the word God in the Charter, many Canadians were outraged. But even among those adamant about maintaining a reference to the divine in the constitution, there was no consensus about what that reference implied for Canadian public policy. Like so much of our legal tradition, this word in the constitution is open to interpretation.

Whose God? Yours or mine? And where can this God's word and law be found? Your sacred text or mine? These were questions when the Charter was drafted 22 years ago and they are questions today.

To claim that from the mere invocation of God in our constitution we as a society are bound to implement specific public policies is extremely thorny. The devout Roman Catholic Pierre Trudeau had no trouble liberalizing our divorce laws in 1967.

Even setting aside for a moment the secularity of Canadian society, what about diversity among the religious? The God of the United Church doesn't seem very bothered by the prospect of same-sex marriage.

The God of Presbyterians and Anglicans is divided, and even the God of many Catholics is ambivalent (though the God of the Pope knows where He stands). The God of some Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish congregations favours same-sex unions, while Conservative and Orthodox congregations see no room for debate.

Some Canadians are standing shoulder to shoulder with their coreligionists in the United States, believing they are engaged in the same pitched battle. (Two of the four Christian groups Ms. Dueck cites as leaders in the anti-gay marriage movement in Canada are arms of U.S.

organizations.) But the truth is that, unlike in the United States, 58 per cent of Canadians are in favour of same-sex marriage. Even in our most conservative province, Alberta, whose colourful premier has gone on an anti-same-sex marriage jihad, those opposed to same-sex marriage only narrowly outnumber those in favour (52 per cent vs. 45 per cent). Moreover, the national trend according to age is plain: While support for same-sex marriage is about four in 10 among those over 60, in the 18-to-29 age bracket support it is nearly three quarters (74 per cent).

It is clear what Canadians think about this issue. And no one has yet devised a way to reliably poll God.

Michael Adams, president of the Environics group of companies, is author of *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*.