

Why Canadians Are Turning Away From Organized Religion

A new national study shows that while Canada remains overwhelmingly Christian, Canadians are turning their backs on organized religion in ever greater numbers.

Results from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) show that more than two-thirds of Canadians, or some 22 million people, said they were affiliated with a Christian denomination.

At 12.7 million, Roman Catholics were the largest single Christian group, representing 38 percent of Canadians; the second largest was the United Church, representing about 6 percent; while Anglicans were third, representing about 5 percent of the population.

Observers noted that among the survey's most striking findings is that one in four Canadians, or 7.8 million people, reported they had no religious affiliation at all. That was up sharply from 16.5 percent from the 2001 census, and 12 percent in 1991.

The Canadian trend seems to mirror but even exceed levels of non-affiliation in the United States. A 2012 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life pegged the ratio of religiously unaffiliated Americans at just under 20 percent.

But Pew also has found that more than one-quarter of American adults (28 percent) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion—or no religion at all.

The Canadian study showed that just more than 7 percent of the country was Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist, an increase from 5 percent a decade earlier.

The Muslim population exceeded the 1 million mark, according to the survey, almost doubling in size for the third consecutive decade, and recording the biggest increase in growth of any religion, at 60 percent since 2001.

Muslims now represent 3.2 percent of Canada's population, nudging up from the 2 percent recorded in 2001. Immigration has largely fueled the increase, with the largest share of Muslims coming from Pakistan over the past five years, according to Statistics Canada.

Hindus made up 1.5 percent of the population (up 51 percent); and Sikhs 1.4 percent (a rise of 54 percent).

Both Christians and Jews declined as a share of the population.

Officials in Ottawa stressed that the NHS results, which also examined trends in immigration and ethnic diversity, could be unreliable. Because it was a voluntary survey, it is "subject to potentially higher non-response error than those derived from the census long form," Statistics Canada cautioned.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government abolished the long-form census in 2010 as too intrusive.

Reginald Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge and one of Canada's foremost trackers and interpreters of religious trends, said the NHS findings "do not point to the demise of religion in Canada. But the findings document the tendency of Canadians to reflect the pattern of people across the planet in variously embracing or rejecting religion."