

Chapter Thirteen

Religion in the Canadian 1990s:

The Paradox of Poverty and Potential¹

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By virtually every imaginable measure, organized religion in Canada is in serious trouble. Membership and attendance have been steadily declining since at least the beginning of the 1950s. The inclination of Canadians either to place a high value on religion or see it as having a significant impact on life also has been decreasing in the past fifty years. And differences in involvement and commitment by age suggest that the problems facing organized religion will only get worse in the immediate future.

Yet, in the midst of this apparent demise of faith, there are signs that the market for religion remains extensive. Far from abandoning the country's dominant religious groups, the vast majority of Canadians continue both to identify with them and to rely on them for pivotal rites of passage. Belief in supernatural phenomena and interest in questions of meaning remain widespread.

The paradox is that, precisely at a time when organized religion is facing significant problems, the desire for some kind of spirituality is pervasive. In the face of apparent religious poverty, there appears to be so much religious potential. The critical theoretical question is why such disparity exists between what the public seems to want and what organized religion seems to be doing. The critical practical question is what—if anything—can be done to close the gap.

The State of Organized Religion

Decreasing Involvement

The steady decline in the proportion of Canadians who attend services regularly is continuing. The weekly attendance figure that stood at six in ten in the late 1940s dropped to four in ten in 1970, and now stands at just over two in ten.

The attendance decline has been pervasive. Regular attendance that characterized over 80% of Roman Catholics as recently as the mid-1960s now describes only 33%. Just 22% of Protestants are now attending weekly, while attendance among those who identify with no group, along with "Others" has remained fairly stable (see Table 13.1).

TABLE 13.1
Percent Weekly Service Attenders in Canada: 1975–1990*

	1975	1980	1985	1990
TOTAL NATIONAL	31%	28%	26%	24%
ROMAN CATHOLIC	45	41	36	33
PROTESTANT	26	24	25	22
Anglican	24	20	15	15
United Church	28	18	16	15
Conservative	38	52	64	49
NONE	<1	<1	<1	<1
OTHER	17	11	13	15

*Percent who say they attend services "Almost every week" or more. "Other" includes religious non-respondents.

Source: *Project Canada Survey Series*.

Regular weekly attendance is particularly low for the country's two largest mainline bodies, the United and Anglican churches (about 15% attend regularly). It is highest for conservative Protestant groups (46%). Yet even the conservative Protestant attendance boom of the 1980s could be over. As they become more urbanized and upwardly mobile, increasing numbers of these Protestant evangelicals show signs of treating weekly attendance as optional, following the pattern of other Canadians. The sample size is fairly small, however (some 100 cases); further examinations of the attendance patterns for conservative Protestants are required.

Beyond attendance, professed membership in local churches and other kinds of religious groups now stands at 29%—down dramatically from a 1975 level of 48%. Particularly striking is the sharp decline in local parish membership for Roman Catholics in the past fifteen years, from 56% to 28% (see Table 13.2). During that period, Protestant membership has shrunk from 51% to 37%, yet it now exceeds the level for Roman Catholics. The proportion of Canadians who identify themselves as Anglican or United Church, and say they are members of local churches has dropped from about 50% to 35% since 1975. Conservative Protestants, at

over 50%, are still far more likely than others to claim membership in local churches; they do, however, show signs of slipping from their lofty membership heights of the 1980s.

The Marginal Role of Religion

The latest 1990 survey has found that only about one in four Canadians say that religion is "very important to them" (see Table 13.3). This is in sharp contrast to the importance accorded areas such as family life (82% "very important"), a comfortable life (63%), or a rewarding career (50%).

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that large numbers of Canadians do not think that religion should inform either social or personal morality. Some four in ten people say that "ministers should stick to religion and not concern themselves with social, economic, and political issues." Almost five in ten Roman Catholics express this opinion, along with more than three in ten Protestants, and nearly four in ten evangelicals.

As for the personal realm, the widespread cultural emphasis on individualism is readily evident. A resounding 65% of Canadians say that "everything's relative," with one in two maintaining that "what is right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion." When specific areas such as premarital sex and abortion are probed, we find that very large numbers of Roman Catholics and evangelicals are among those who voice approval for these actions—defying the positions taken by their churches (see Table 13.3).

When the vast majority of Canadians turn to religion, they are inclined to be highly selective customers who see religion playing a fairly peripheral role in everyday life.

TABLE 13.2
Percent Religious Group Membership in Canada:
1975-1990*

	1975	1980	1985	1990
TOTAL NATIONAL	48%	42%	36%	29%
ROMAN CATHOLIC	56	47	38	28
PROTESTANT	51	45	43	37
Anglican	50	44	34	30
United Church	52	44	37	35
Conservative	56	53	73	56

Source: Project Canada Survey Series.

TABLE 13.3
Percent Religious Correlates by Denomination: 1990

	NAT (1249)	RC (505)	PROT (535)	ANG (142)	UC (189)	CONS (100)
RELIGION is very important to me	27%	31%	28%	20%	20%	52%
Ministers should STICK TO RELIGION and not concern themselves with social, economic, and political issues	41	46	34	30	31	37
Everything's relative	65	69	58	64	60	52
What is RIGHT OR WRONG is a matter of personal opinion	50	56	43	51	40	35
Approve of PREMARITAL SEX	80	82	73	85	76	50
Approve of LEGAL ABORTION availability when mother's health endangered	95	93	95	97	97	87

Source: *Project Can90* national survey.

The Loss of Confidence

The national surveys through 1990 document a critically important trend. In the face of scandals involving televangelists and sexual charges involving priests, along with the controversy concerning the ordination of homosexuals in the United Church, there has been a dramatic drop in public confidence in religious leaders in the last decade.

In 1980, approximately 60% of Canadians said that they had "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of confidence in religious leaders, a level virtually unchanged from the early 1970s. By 1985, in part reflecting the spillover into Canada of the effects of the troubles of American television evangelists, the confidence level dropped to about 50%. Today, on the heels of further American and Canadian scandals and sexual charges in the Roman Catholic Church, the confidence level has plummeted to 37%. No other Canadian institution—with the sole exception of the much-maligned federal government—has experienced such a severe loss of public confidence.

The confidence drop in merely five years has been 15 percentage points for Roman Catholics, 23 points for United Church adherents, 22 points for

Anglicans and 18 percentage points for conservative Protestants (see Table 13.4). In the case of those with no religious ties, confidence in religious leaders has not fallen, but remains fairly low.

In the light of current attitudes toward leadership, Canadians are highly pessimistic about religion's influence. In 1980, 29% said that they expected religion would gain influence by the end of the century, while another 29% predicted religion would lose influence. Reflecting a noteworthy loss of confidence, in 1990, those people expecting religion to gain influence by the year 2000 dropped to 19%, while those who believe it will lose influence rose to 38%.

TABLE 13.4
Confidence in Religious Leaders: 1985–1990*

	1985	1990
TOTAL NATIONAL	51*	37
ROMAN CATHOLIC	62	47
PROTESTANT	52	32
Anglican	46	24
United Church	50	27
Conservative	68	50
OTHER	30	41
NONE	10	15

*Percent indicating having "A Great Deal" or "Quite a Bit" of confidence.

Source: *Project Can85* and *Project Can90* national surveys.

Age Structure Realities

An analysis of the foregoing findings by age underlines the crisis facing organized religion in Canada. Membership and attendance, along with the value placed on religion and confidence in leadership, differ significantly by age (see Table 13.5). Only conservative Protestants appear to be experiencing a fair measure of success in instilling involvement and interest in their younger people.

Looking at the nation as a whole, it is clear that Canadians fifty-five and over are, by far, more "committed and confident" than others. Given such age variations, barring major, unforeseen changes in the behavior and outlook of younger Canadians, the writing is on the wall: the aging of the population will bring with it an accelerated decline in the country's interest in organized religion.

TABLE 13.5
Percent Religious Involvement and Importance by Age for Select Religious Groups: 1990

	NAT	RC	PROT	ANG	UC	CONS
MEMBERSHIP						
18-34	17%	18%	27%	20%	18%	49%
35-54	31	32	32	31	21	50
55+	42	38	49	39	58	70
WEEKLY ATTENDERS						
18-34	13	16	14	4	5	45
35-54	22	30	19	14	10	40
55+	40	60	31	27	27	64
RELIGION IMPORTANT						
18-34	16	18	20	12	8	44
35-54	23	28	22	13	9	55
55+	45	57	40	32	40	61
CONFIDENCE IN LEADERS						
18-34	28	38	24	14	16	45
35-54	35	44	29	29	23	47
55+	47	62	39	30	38	47

SOURCE: *Project Can90* national survey.

Given that (1) most people who will return to churches after an adolescent hiatus have done so by their mid-thirties, and (2) the involvement levels of teenagers in Canada is even lower than young adults, the membership and attendance patterns of the present eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old cohort give us clues regarding the future of religion in Canada. Projecting their membership and attendance levels some twenty-five years ahead, to approximately the year 2015, this is how the picture would look.

The importance that Canadians will place on religion, along with their inclination to be members of local groups, will drop from today's 30% levels to around 15%. By 2015, weekly attenders will have tumbled from the current 23% level to about 15%.

Such declines will not be minor for the country's religious groups. The percentage drops in membership and attendance will translate into significant numerical losses for Canada's religious denominations. By the year 2015 religious groups in Canada may have only about 5 million members—

compared to a current 7.5 million, and just over 4 million weekly attenders—versus today's 6 million (see Table 13.6).

Although the Roman Catholic Church will remain Canada's largest religious body, it will experience large membership and attendance losses. Relative to the population, conservative Protestants will manage to hold their own, but will not significantly increase their market share.

What looms is a particularly dramatic alteration of the religious landscape of Canada. By around 2015 the previously dominant mainline Protestant denominations will have less local church members than the conservative Protestants. Even more important, their combined weekly attenders will be about one-third of the conservative's total.

The resource implications, in terms of the loss of people, finances, and power with which to engage in ministry, are nothing less than staggering. Life in Canada's twenty-first century looks extremely grim for organized religion.

TABLE 13.6
Membership and Attendance Projections for Select Religious Groups
Based on Membership and Attendance Levels
of Current 18- to 34-years-olds

		NAT	RC	PROT	ANG	UC	CONS
MEMBERS							
1990	% of pop. 26 million	29	13	15	3.0	5.6	3.9
	Number (in 1000s)	7,540	3,422	3,944	780	1,456	1,019
2015	% of pop. 32 million	17	9.0	11	2.0	2.9	3.4
	Number (in 1000s)	5,440	2,707	3,542	640	922	1,098
WEEKLY ATTENDERS							
1990	% of pop. 26 million	23	16	9.0	1.5	2.4	3.4
	Number (in 1000s)	5,980	4,033	2,345	390	624	892
2015	% of pop. 32 million	13	8.0	6.0	.4	.8	3.2
	Number (in 1000s)	4,160	2,406	1,834	128	256	1,008

SOURCES: *Project Can90* and *The Canadian Almanac*, 1991.

The percentage of population estimates for religious groups for 2015 are computed using their sizes as of 1990. Assuming their percentage of the population will shrink by 2015, these projected membership and attendance figures are, if anything, generous.

Meanwhile, Back in the Culture

If that were all that there is to the Canadian religion story, those who value faith and are in touch with reality would be in a state of despair. There is little doubt that organized religion is in serious shape, with its golden years apparently relegated to history. (See Table 13.7.)

But as one looks out on the cultural landscape and watches the dust settle on the grey ruins of much of organized religion, an interesting spectacle can be seen. In the midst of the debris and desolation, a large number of green patches of spirituality can be detected. The temples may be disintegrating, but the grass is far from dead.

At least four indicators of latent spirituality can readily be observed.

Identification

Despite the fact that just over two in ten Canadians now are regular weekly attenders, and just under three in ten profess church membership, over nine in ten nonetheless continue to identify with a religious group. Forty-five percent identify themselves as Protestants, 41% say that they are Roman Catholics, while 4% identify with other groups. Only 10% indicate that they have no religious preference, and past research suggests that as many as half of these are “temporary nothings” who will eventually “re-identify” with the group in which they were raised. Some 95% of Canadians, then, have not relinquished a religious identification.

Some fast facts on these “affiliates”:

- They don't lack for religious backgrounds: 78% say they attended monthly or more when they were growing up, with 66% accompanied by their mothers and 54% by their fathers.
- Close to 90% of those raised as Protestants, Catholics, or Others have retained the religious ties of their parents.
- While only two in ten attend weekly, six in ten do sometimes; just two in ten never attend—and that proportion hasn't changed since at least 1975.
- Almost 90% of nonweekly attending Protestants and Catholics say they have no intention of abandoning their religious traditions. They mean it. Even the 3% who indicate interest in a new movement such as New Age continue to identify with Protestantism and Catholicism.
- Although just 27% may say that religion is very important to them, another 29% add that it is somewhat important; only 19% say that it's not important at all.

- Similarly, religious group heritage is seen by only 20% as very important, but another 28% acknowledge that it is somewhat important; the not important at all figure is just 21%.

TABLE 13.7
Value Placed on Religion and Religious Group Heritage: 1990*

	Religion					Religious Heritage				
	VI	SW	NV	NI	TOT	VI	SW	NV	NI	TOT
TOTAL NATIONAL	27%	29%	25%	19%	100%	20%	28%	30%	21%	100%
ROMAN CATHOLICS	31	36	26	7	100	24	37	29	10	100
PROTESTANTS	29	29	25	17	100	18	27	32	23	100
Anglican	20	27	33	20	100	16	24	35	25	100
United Church	20	31	31	18	100	12	27	37	24	100
Conservative	52	27	10	11	100	35	31	18	16	100
OTHER	36	31	19	14	100	46	24	23	7	100
NONE	2	2	20	76	100	1	2	23	74	100

*Percents Very Important, Some What, Not Very, Not Important at all.
SOURCE: *Project Can90* national survey.

Rites of Passage

Of considerable significance, virtually all of the nine in ten Canadians who identify with religious groups say that they plan to turn to these groups when they need weddings, funerals, and birth-related ceremonies carried out—if they haven't already done so. Further, a national survey of youth conducted in late 1987 found that they anticipate turning to religious groups in the future: 75% for birth-related ceremonies, 80% for weddings, and over 85% for funerals.

Undoubtedly such a desire for rites of passage sometimes reflects cultural habit, on other occasions the seeking out of the appropriate professional who "does such jobs." But clergy are among those who also report that, frequently, the desire for these passage ceremonies also reflects a poorly articulated sense that "God needs to be brought in on this."

The widespread, ongoing demand for religious rites of passage appears to be a second indicator of the fact that the need to satisfy a spiritual dimension of life continues to characterize large numbers of Canadians.

TABLE 13.8
Conventional and Less Conventional Beliefs and Practices*

	NAT (1249)	RC (505)	PROT (535)	OTHER (44)	NONE (122)
CONVENTIONAL					
Existence of God	82%	92%	86%	76%	25%
Divinity of Jesus	75	87	80	45	12
Heaven	70	82	75	50	18
Life after death	68	74	71	61	31
Hell	46	44	58	49	8
Have experienced God	43	54	43	37	7
LESS CONVENTIONAL					
Psychic powers	59	56	65	59	48
ESP	59	56	62	57	58
Precognition	47	55	38	39	49
Spirit world contact	38	41	38	49	26
Astrology	34	39	33	26	22
Will be reincarnated	26	31	21	36	20
Communication with dead	23	29	18	20	16

*Percent indicating they "Definitely" or "Think" they believe in the beliefs and practices listed.
 SOURCE: *Project Can90* national survey.

Beliefs and Practices

At a time when religious leaders are decrying the loss of faith, it is significant that religious beliefs and practices are thriving. Canadians, young and old, continue to endorse traditional beliefs about God, the divinity of Jesus, and life after death. Close to half of the population maintain that they have experienced God's presence, with the same proportion saying that they pray privately weekly or more. A quarter say they read the Bible or other scriptures at least once a month.

To the consternation of many religious leaders, older and younger Canadians also continue to embrace less conventional beliefs. (See Table 13.8.) Yet most appear to treat them, not as alternatives to traditional religion, but rather as "add-ons." About 60% of Canadians indicate that they believe in ESP, while the same proportion maintain that some people have special psychic powers that enable them to predict events. Almost 50% report that they themselves have experienced precognition. Approximately one in three say they believe in astrology; for the record, 88% know their astrological sign and half the population read their horoscopes at least once a month—outnumbering scriptural readers two to one.

Acknowledgment of the reality of things beyond the observable world is remarkably high. Some 40% of Canadians believe that "we can have contact with the spirit world," while 23% maintain that "it is possible to communicate with the dead." And as they themselves contemplate what will happen to them after they die, about one in four Canadians say that they expect to be reincarnated.

Belief in a supernatural dimension of reality is widespread in Canada, and shows no signs of abating. On the contrary, in recent decades, supernatural ideas have gained considerable credibility. They are held without apology by virtually everyone, and viewed as worthy of the attention of filmmaker, journalist, and scientist. It is therefore strange that organized religion has been so inept at capitalizing on such an apparent opportunity.

The Quest for Meaning

A fourth indicator of the interest Canadians have in the spiritual dimension of life is the ongoing inclination to raise questions of meaning and purpose. The author's latest 1990 national survey has found that one in two people express concern about the question of life's purpose. The 1980 survey found that eight in ten reported that they reflect on why there is suffering in the world, while seven in ten reported that they fairly frequently wonder about what happens after death. Further, six in ten said they raise the academic question of how the world came into being, along with the immediate question of how they can find real happiness.

In addition to specific questions of meaning, the 1990 survey has found that the third most prevalent personal concern—behind concerns about money and time—is the feeling Canadians have that they "should be getting more out of life." Such a sentiment may well suggest a receptivity to "something more" than day-to-day existence, offering another signal that the desire to have spiritual needs met does not belong to history. (See Table 13.9.)

Resolving the Paradox

This brings us back to the paradox mentioned at the outset—that at a time when organized religion is facing very serious problems, the interest in spirituality, whether verbalized as such or not, appears to be extremely pervasive. Canadians continue to identify psychologically with religious traditions, feel a need for religious rites, be intrigued by the supernatural realm, and look for answers to questions of meaning.

TABLE 13.9
Percent Select Religious Characteristics by Religious Service Attendance: 1990

	Non-Weekly (934)	Weekly (288)
IDENTIFICATION		
Identify with a religious group	87%	99%
Not inclined to leave the group	81	**
Religion important	44	97
Religious group heritage important	36	89
rites of passage		
Plan have birth ceremonies performed	28	21
Plan have wedding ceremonies performed	30	21
Plan have funeral(s) carried out	60	64
BELIEFS AND PRACTICES		
Believe in God	78	97
Think have experienced God	34	74
Believe in ESP	64	41
Believe in contact with spirit world	41	33
QUEST FOR MEANING		
Concerned about the purpose of life	54	42
Feel should be getting more out life	72	55

**Not asked of regular attenders.

SOURCE: *Project Can90* national survey.

In short, there appears to be a considerable market for the very things that religion historically "has been about." Given what seem to be almost ideal market conditions, the obvious question needs to be raised: why are religious groups facing such a crisis? Why can't the companies "sell" their products when there is every reason to believe that the customers want them?

Two rather obvious possibilities exist. The first is that the companies are not doing a very good job of distributing the products. The second is that they aren't offering the right ones.

Distribution Problems

There is good reason to believe that organizational means-end inversion is fairly common. Simply put, the companies have frequently become pre-

occupied with themselves as organizations, rather than with ministry to the population.

Historically, religious groups have been called to be more than communities in which faith is experienced. They also have been expected to be the means by which faith is shared with outsiders. While being a resource to the initiated, the religious group ideally also ministers to others—providing meaning for those who are raising questions about life's purpose, addressing issues concerning the supernatural realm, giving significance to life's passages.

The problem is that it is easy to lose sight of such an externally-directed role. Since at least Max Weber, observers have drawn attention to the reality of routinization, whereby groups tend to become turned inward, focusing upon themselves as organizations, rather than on the original purposes that brought them into being.

Canadian religious groups, like their counterparts elsewhere in much of the Western world, have often fallen into such a pattern of self-interest. Ask religious leaders about the problems facing organized religion today and chances are good that most will bemoan numbers and finances—rather than their failure to minister effectively to the Canadian populace. Concerns often center upon “church growth” and “church planting,” rather than on addressing the spiritual needs of the people across the country. Success often is measured in terms of simply putting people into a physical building so many days a month, and expecting them to subscribe to belief and behavioral norms, including giving fairly generously of both their time and money.

Further indicative of their insular nature, most local congregations in Canada, conservative or mainline, are highly homogeneous, socially and ethnically. In some rural and small urban churches they have come to resemble “extended family shrines.” Outsiders are not generally attracted to such settings. Equally important, it seems that outsiders also have not been particularly wanted, prior to appropriate socialization, that is.

The net result in the Canadian 1990s is that organized religion has not particularly aimed its ministry at outsiders for more than membership recruitment purposes. Even then, growth by recruitment of insiders has been preferred. Frankly, it is far more cost-effective. Bringing in “sinners” is both tough and hard on resources.

It seems clear that the organization has been prized over addressing the spiritual needs of the country. It therefore is no surprise that a population that is receptive to the major themes of religion has been only superficially touched by Canadian religious groups.

In a literal sense, the two seem to be living in two different worlds.

Product Problems

A second reason for the apparent disparity between spiritual interest and group decline is the abdication of the supernatural and spiritual realms by religious denominations. Part of this problem can be found in the emphasis on rational thought, which has led some to regard the sheer exploration of the supernatural as inappropriate. In lieu of the gods, a spirit world, and life after death, now it seems that highly subjective inward journeys are the stuff of religious quests. The result is a limited connection to churches by Canadians, both young and old, who say in larger numbers that they are puzzled about the purpose of life, think it might be possible to communicate with the dead, and increasingly believe that they themselves will be reincarnated.

In addition to some religious groups downplaying and disowning the supernatural, the old dichotomy between the social and the spiritual has again plagued religion in Canada in recent decades. There has been a very strong social justice emphasis in Canada in the post-1960s. Responding to such a theme, the leaders of the country's largest denomination, the United Church, have led the way in calling for a more just society. Along with other mainline groups, including the Anglicans, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, the United Church has joined voices across the country in championing the rights of women, cultural minorities, and natives. The United Church has also engaged in a highly divisive debate over the ordination eligibility of homosexuals.

While justice attempts are highly commendable, if they are not accompanied by a strong emphasis on things spiritual, large numbers of people are left feeling vacuous. The obvious problem is this: justice issues are being promoted by a wide variety of Canadian institutions and interest groups. People consequently need to be able find a clear fusion of "God and society" when they deal with religious groups. Otherwise, religious groups say nothing to society that society is not already saying to itself.

Significantly, there has been extensive dissension in the United Church over the failure to achieve an adequate justice-spiritual synthesis. That conflict may provide an important tip-off as to why so many Canadians with mainline roots are not bothering much with the churches. Ironically, many find that the attempts at relevance are largely irrelevant.

Toward Turning Things Around

There does, however, appear to be considerable hope in sight. There is a great need for Canadian religious groups to stop blaming the culture, and seize the opportunity at hand. Such a turnaround will include an effort to

rethink what churches are for and to rework expectations as to what is worth pursuing. Some starting places in reaching out to the population might include capitalizing on the ongoing tendency of people to identify with religious groups, along with their desire for rites of passage. Groups also need to be responsive to the widespread interest in the supernatural, as well as to the highly pervasive quest for meaning.

Effective strategies will undoubtedly include recovering a holistic message that speaks to God, self, and society; recognizing the centrally important role of relationships in fostering both commitment and involvement; and being flexible about the use and non-use of physical facilities.

The Market Exists

The paradox characterizing the religious situation in Canada is not something that is unique to this country. Evidence from other highly developed countries, including the United States, suggests that interest in areas historically addressed by religion—the supernatural, the significance of life passages, spiritual quest, the meaning of life—surpasses interest in organized religion. Consequently, there is good reason to believe that problems of means-end inversion and irrelevant relevancy contribute to the apparent anomaly of high spiritual interest and low religious group involvement in many other societies.

Still, religious participation and commitment in the U.S. appears to exceed that of most other countries. Following the rationale just offered, there might be a very good reason. Unlike countries such as Canada, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, for example, the United States has a very large evangelical Protestant presence. About 7% of Canadians identify with conservative Protestants, compared to over 30% of Americans.

To the extent that American evangelicals have the resources, the vitality, and "a product" that is in touch with ongoing spiritual and supernatural concerns, they may be playing an important role in meeting the market demand for such emphases. They thereby may be a key source of the higher attendance and commitment levels in the United States.

Currently, Canada is among the many countries that lack a functional equivalent. The market for religion exists; but the gods have yet to arrive.