

Religion and Canadian Party Politics

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UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Rayside, David M. (David Morton), author

Religion and Canadian party politics / David Rayside, Jerald Sabin,
and Paul E.J. Thomas.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-3558-9 (hardcover). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3560-2 (PDF).

ISBN 978-0-7748-3561-9 (EPUB). – ISBN 978-0-7748-3562-6 (Kindle)

1. Religion and politics – Canada – Provinces – Case studies. 2. Political parties – Canada – Provinces – Case studies. I. Sabin, Jerald, author II. Thomas, Paul E. J., author III. Title.

BL65.P7R34 2017

322:10971

C2017-901735-7

C2017-901736-5

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Myriad and Sabon by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Joanne Richardson

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca

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Introduction:

Faith and Party Politics in Canada

What sense do we make of these stories?

- Conservative parties in Ontario and Alberta select socially conservative leaders who then repeatedly deny that such beliefs will have any role in party policy.
- Alberta's government resisted lesbian and gay rights for years, but in 2011 the Wildrose Party lost an election in part because of an evangelical candidate's anti-gay extremism.
- Quebec's sovereigntist party has increasingly touted assertively secular policies, but it insists on retaining a crucifix over the legislative speaker's chair and remains silent on generous government funding for faith-based private schools.
- The federal Conservative government excluded abortion from maternal health development aid, but it forcefully spurned pressure from its own religious conservatives to make abortion a domestic political issue.
- Yukon is Canada's most secularized region, but in Nunavut evangelical churches and other forms of conservative Christianity are widespread.

- In British Columbia, the Liberal premier openly professed her faith in a 2013 provincial election almost universally perceived as devoid of religious influence.
- Ontario's Catholic bishops actively campaigned against provincial legislation requiring all schools to recognize Gay Straight Alliances, but then muted their advocacy for fear that it was fueling opposition to full funding of those schools.

In Canadian politics, faith matters. Despite secularization, social liberalization, and a steady decline in denominational distinctions in party choice, faith communities shape our politics in important and enduring ways. The issue of religious diversity, which has influenced public policy in Canada for generations, has taken on new dimensions that shape the internal dynamics of political parties and the conflicts between them. Religious beliefs are not as powerful a force as they once were, but in this book we consider the many ways in which they still influence contemporary Canadian political life

The Core Arguments

We make three core arguments about faith in federal and provincial politics in Canada. The first is that religious faith, and particularly its conservative variants, retains an influence over voter affiliation and party policy differentiation even in a society that has become increasingly secularized over the past half-century. The second is that the lines of faith-based political contention have shifted from a period when Protestant-Catholic divisions mattered politically to one in which disagreement over moral issues is more influential in distinguishing parties and their electorates. The third is that religious and cultural diversification has created a new “axis” of contention centred on the place of minority faiths in the Canadian social fabric. Although this new axis has been prominent in Quebec since the mid-2000s, major party leaders at the federal level largely avoided it in their policies and campaigning until it became a major issue in the 2015 election.

The overarching point is that any understanding of Canadian party politics requires attention to the influence of religious beliefs on party leaders and voters, and of particular faith communities on cementing

old partisan distinctions or creating new ones. At one point this would have prioritized an exploration of Catholic-Protestant differences. In recent decades, it has meant focusing on conflict between moral traditionalists and social progressives across the range of faith allegiances. In the last few years we have had to pay more attention to the growing visibility of ethno-cultural minorities within Christian religious communities and to the partisan reverberations of growth in the size of non-Christian religious minorities. In addressing these questions, then, we need to be mindful of major changes in the religious make-up of Canada over recent decades and in the political relevance of such changes. We are also conscious of the significant differences in the way that faith shapes party politics in the provinces and territories. This suggests to us that not only should we attend to some themes that are applicable across the country but also that we should use detailed case studies of particular provinces or regions to illustrate their distinctive histories and party dynamics.

Declining Religiosity and Changing Family Values

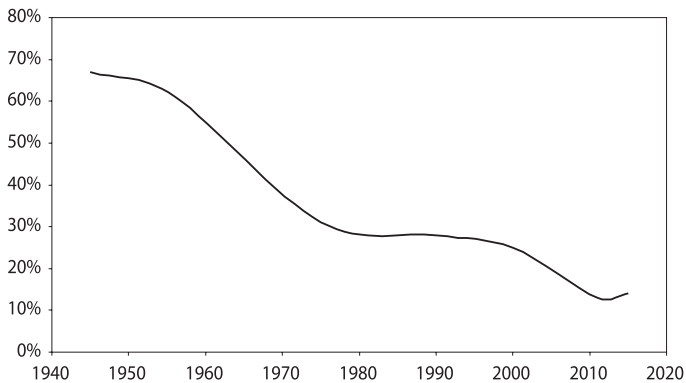
The dramatic decline in religiosity throughout Canada since the 1950s has meant that religious currents in party conflicts often seem to be historical artefacts. Parties differ on the role of government, economic management, environmental policy, free trade, health care reform, education spending, and (in Quebec) the national question. But faith? Even party leaders who are personally religious frequently avoid the subject, delivering at best minor policy concessions to religious conservatives wanting to revive debates over abortion and sexual minority rights. This seems a very different story from that which still echoes through party politics in the United States, where debating such issues remains prominent and expressions of conservative faith are so visible. It is also at odds with a number of European party systems whose major centre-right parties are rooted in a Catholic tradition, however ill-defined that relationship may be. Such contrasts easily translate into a view that religion was never all that powerful a force in Canadian party politics, with the exception of broad denominational affiliations that long ago lost their linkage to serious policy differences, and that now border on the inconsequential.

Secularization, in All Its Meanings

In 1947, a Gallup survey showed that 67 percent of Canadians attended religious services weekly – a figure that rose to 83 percent among Catholics.¹ As Mark Noll points out, this country was “more observant in religious practice and more orthodox in religious opinion than the United States.”² Richard Johnston extends the comparison further by saying that, at mid-century, “Canadians were among the world’s most church-going peoples.”³ As we see in Figure I.1, things then changed drastically, with large-scale abandonment of church attendance especially evident from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Weekly service attendance is now substantially below 20 percent, with one 2015 survey indicating that 14 percent of Canadians attended weekly services.⁴ A 2006 Statistics Canada report shows that fully 40 percent of the country’s population scored “low” on an index of religiosity, with only 26 percent of Canadians born in this country scoring “high.”⁵

When we argue that Canada has secularized, however, we are referring to more than a decline in faith and religious practice. We are also referring to the institutional separation of faith and politics, or what some would call “institutional differentiation.”⁶ At its limits, this change is

Figure I.1 Weekly attendance at religious services, 1945–2015



Sources: Gallup Surveys; General Social Surveys; Bibby, *Fragmented Gods*, 17; Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*, 13, 28, 32; Lindsay, “Canadians Attend Religious Services Less than They Did 20 Years Ago”; “Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape”; and Ipsos Reid, Canadian Online Omni, August 29–September 6, 2011.

characterized by the removal of faith-based practices from the governmental sphere and from publicly funded organizations as well as the elimination of public support for faith-based institutions. There are divergent views about how far Canadian society has shifted in this direction, but there can be no doubt that state authorities have taken on much of the delivery of social and educational services that were once the province of religious institutions.⁷ The role of faith is also diminished in most of those service providers that remain religiously aligned, particularly those whose operations are subsidized by public funds. Such change reflects a shift of public sentiment towards the view that faith is a largely private matter and that church and state should be separate, at least in principle.⁸

Secularization is also manifest in the widespread acknowledgment of the plurality of beliefs in Canada, including greater public (and private) recognition of non-Christian faiths and more acknowledgment of non-belief. Institutional and theological pluralism has, of course, always been a feature of Canadian Christianity, with multiple strands of Protestantism co-existing (often not peaceably) with Roman Catholicism. Over the last few decades, that diversity has been cross-cut with growing populations of ethno-cultural minority adherents to the various Christian denominations, the long-standing visibility of a Jewish minority, a resurgence of First Nations spiritual beliefs, and the more recent growth in numbers of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on. Without ignoring the persistence of discomfort with such diversity among adherents to the full range of faiths, it is fair to say that most Canadians have come to accept religious pluralism as a permanent, and routine, feature of Canadian society. They also broadly accept the principle that the interpretation of faith can vary across groups and individuals, and are comfortable with the absence of faith and faith practice within their communities and among their neighbours. As Kurt Bowen puts it in surveying the state of religion in Canada, “religious adherents today manufacture their own eclectic version of their religious beliefs and duties that their faith entails.”⁹ The powerful force of North American individualism contributes to this process, moulding the interpretation and practice of faith, or its absence, in even the most traditional of communities.

Are there significant regional variations in this pattern of decline in religiosity? In the late 1990s, Kurt Bowen compiled an index of religious commitment, and, as we see in Table I.1, the differences were not radical, with BC and Quebec having somewhat fewer of the very committed, and the Prairies and Atlantic Canada somewhat more. The 2011 census replicates this to some extent, showing that BC in particular stands out for the high numbers who report no religious affiliation. Quebeckers are much less likely to declare no affiliation, although this is unquestionably a result of the many Catholics who have no religious commitment whatsoever but who identify with their religion as an element of their ethnic or national attachment. The 2011 Ipsos Reid poll of attendance at religious services shows just how much less likely Quebeckers are to regularly practise their faith as compared to the inhabitants of any other region. This is congruent with responses to a 2015 Canadian Election Study question on the importance of religion in one's life. On a few questions, British Columbians are noticeably less religious than inhabitants of other English-majority provinces, but Quebec still stands out as the most distinctive region.

Attitude Shifts on Family Values

Secularization, individualization, and a growing acknowledgment of the legitimacy of human rights claims have all contributed to a shift in public beliefs away from what might be called family traditionalism. Of all the issues that have generated public mobilization by faith groups over the last half century, those related to reproduction and sexual diversity have produced the most sustained and politicized contention. For much of this time, analyzing the place of faith in Canadian party politics has required close attention to the policy debates over precisely these questions. Changes in public attitudes on these dimensions speak to the declining hold of traditional religious strictures on public belief systems and suggest that parties seeking to represent family traditionalism have less room to manoeuvre than they once did.

Figure I.2 illustrates changes in family traditionalism by displaying the proportion of Canadians in favour of the view that a woman who wants to have an abortion should be able to have one – a minority view

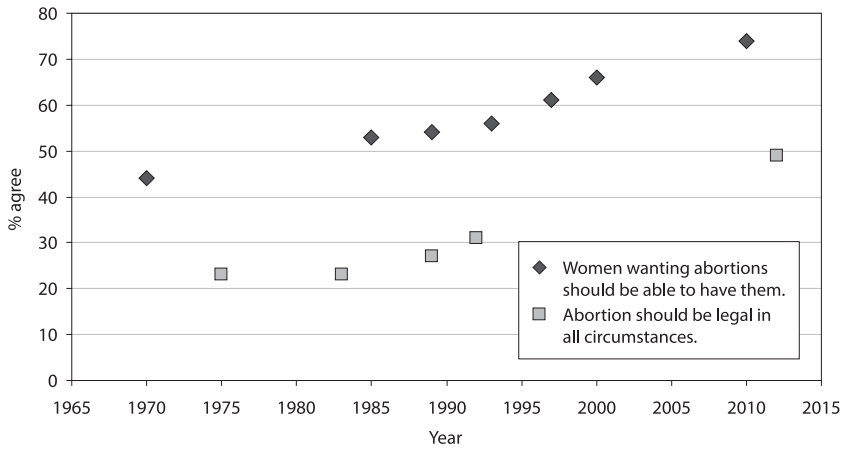
Table I.1 Religiosity by province and region (%)

	<i>Canada</i>	<i>ATL</i>	<i>QC</i>	<i>ON</i>	<i>MB</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>AB</i>	<i>BC</i>
Bowen, 1997								
Very committed	19	26	17	22	23		13	18
Less committed	13	16	12	14	14		8	12
Conservative Protestants as % of committed	21	19	6	17	27		31	38
Canadian Election Study, 2015								
Very important	26	25	15	29	29	29	34	27
Somewhat important	36	35	35	37	35	38	31	38
Not very important	23	22	32	21	23	20	18	21
Not important	15	18	18	12	13	13	16	15
Statistics Canada, 2011								
Christian (including Catholic)	67	84	82	65	68	72	60	45
Roman Catholic	39	41	75	31	25	29	24	15
Non-Christian religions	8	1	6	12	6	4	8	11
Religiously unaffiliated	24	15	12	23	26	24	32	44
Ipsos Reid, 2011								
Weekly attendance	13	18	6	16	14		14	11
Religion defines me as person*	35	35	37	33	36		32	33

* Combines “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree.”

Note: Comparable data are not available for the northern territories, though selected data do appear in Chapter 9.

Sources: Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*, 54–55; Patrick Fournier, Fred Cutler, Stuart Soroka, and Dietlind Stolle, the 2015 Canadian Election Study (dataset), <http://ces-eec.arts.ubc.ca/english-section/surveys/>; Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>; and Ipsos Reid, Canadian Online Omni, August 29–September 6, 2011.

Figure I.2 Attitudes on abortion, 1970–2012

Sources: Gallup polls, Pew Global Attitudes Project; Ipsos Reid; Environics Institute, Focus Canada 2010, 39; Boyd and Gillieson, “Canadian Attitudes on Abortion: Results of the Gallup Polls.”

in the 1970s but, by 2000, one held by two-thirds or more of Canadians.¹⁰ When faced with questions that include an intermediate response saying that abortion should be permitted only in certain circumstances, the results are less positive, but by 2012 half of Canadians held to this unequivocally pro-choice position, up significantly from about one-quarter during the 1980s.¹¹ At the other end of the spectrum, support for a complete prohibition on abortion, covering all circumstances, was never held by as much as one-fifth of the population, and by 2012 it was supported by only 6 percent. A few surveys have asked Canadians if they considered abortion to be morally wrong, and that view is also now a minority sentiment – 40 percent in one 2002 poll, 26 percent in another from 2014.¹² It is worth adding that Catholics are only slightly less likely than others to support abortion access, in contrast to evangelical Protestants, who are more distinctively on the pro-life side of that debate.¹³

Opinion shifts are even more substantial on questions related to sexual diversity. As Figure I.3 shows, a strong majority of Canadians still disapproved of homosexuality through the 1980s, and, as recently as

Figure I.3 Attitudes on sexual diversity, 1975–2014

Sources: Gallup, World Values Survey, Pew Global Attitudes; Langstaff, “A Twenty-Year Survey”; Bibby, “The Bibby Report”; Zwelling, “Canada’s Pulse”; Rayside and Bowler, “Public Opinion and Gay Rights.”

1987, only 10 percent of respondents “approved” of it.¹⁴ By the early 2000s, however, a significant majority of Canadians agreed that “society should accept homosexuality,” and in 2014 this view was held by 80 percent of respondents. Support for same-sex marriage in the 1990s was low but then moved steadily through the early 2000s towards acceptance.¹⁵ An Ipsos Reid survey in 2012 shows that 62 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that “same-sex marriage should be fully recognized and equal to conventional heterosexual marriage,” even when faced with the alternative of same-sex marriage being recognized in civil law but without the same legal weight.¹⁶ Only 18 percent said that such marriage was wrong and should never be legal. Evangelicals and Muslims were the most opposed to same-sex marriage in 2011 (only 24 and 18 percent supporting it, respectively), and those declaring no religious affiliation were the most supportive (88 percent).¹⁷ Catholics differed not at all from the Canadian average.

These dramatic changes in public opinion, on issues that have been among the most hotly contested by faith groups in recent decades, substantially narrow the room for ongoing political debate and reduce

the capacity to embrace moral traditionalism for even the most conservative leaders of the most conservative political parties – at least those with a serious desire to win control of government at election. However, there are several other faith-related concerns that remain unresolved in law and public policy, and about which Canadians remain significantly divided. We shall see that communities of faith, and particularly those that hold traditionalist interpretations of their faith, continue to have significant capacity for political mobilization.

We should note here that accurately gauging the size of Canada's evangelical population is a difficult task. This is important for our purposes since evangelicals have mobilized in large numbers in opposition to abortion and lesbian/gay rights. They are highly likely to attend church and are more than twice as likely as the average Canadian to attach importance to their religion. One challenge in gauging their numbers is that many whose approach to faith is broadly evangelical still practise their religion and formally associate themselves with denominations that are not in any overall sense evangelical. Conversely, many who attend more overtly evangelical denominations may hold beliefs at odds with the official doctrines or dominant political views within those faith traditions. As a consequence, some surveys specifically asking about evangelical leanings have found that they constitute only about 5 percent of the population, which differs significantly from estimates of 8 to 10 percent provided by informed observers.¹⁸ Many other surveys do not ask about evangelical affiliation directly, requiring those of us interested in such questions to use a combination of denominational affiliations widely understood to be evangelical.¹⁹

What about regional variations? We can see in Table I.2 a variety of indicators that social conservatives committed to traditionalist positions on abortion and sexual diversity are in the minority in all parts of Canada. A 2012 Ipsos Reid poll shows that Quebeckers were more supportive of women exercising choice over abortion; those living in the Prairies fell below the Canadian average. This pattern is broadly replicated in the responses to questions on abortion and sexual diversity in the 2011 and 2015 Canadian Election Studies.²⁰ Quebec and Alberta are once again opposing outliers, though with regional contrasts sometimes quite muted. Responses to a “thermometer” score question about attitudes

Table 1.2 Social and religious conservatism by province and region (%)

	<i>Canada</i>	<i>ATL</i>	<i>QC</i>	<i>ON</i>	<i>MB</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>AB</i>	<i>BC</i>
Ipsos Reid, 2012								
Abortion when woman decides	49	46	60	47	42	34	34	52
Canadian Election Study, 2011								
Abortion should be banned	18	30	11	19	29	29	25	13
Favour traditional values (Strongly agree)	27	23	27	24	30	39	36	23
Canadian Election Study, 2015								
Average thermometer reading for lesbians/gays	67	69	67	68	66	69	60	70
Oppose same-sex marriage	30	27	24	32	27	39	40	26
Agree on biblical literalism	35	39	24	39	34	45	39	38

Sources: Ipsos Reid, Canadian Online Omni, June 18–25, 2012; Fournier et al., 2011 Canadian Election Study, and 2015 Canadian Election Study.

towards lesbians and gays, for example, reveal only small variations. The same is also true of support for “traditional values,” though there is clearly room for Quebeckers to “read” that question quite differently than other Canadians.

Confirmation that there are only modest interprovincial differences in public attitudes towards moral issues can be found in David McGrane’s analysis of responses to provincial election surveys from 2011 to 2014.²¹ The average “score” on a four-point index, varying from a progressive “1” to a conservative “4,” varied only marginally between provinces, with, for example, Ontario at 2.51, British Columbia at 2.53, Quebec at 2.64, and Alberta at 2.71. The most conservative provincial average is in Newfoundland and Labrador, with 2.80.

What about regional differences specifically with regard to religious traditionalism? Recall that Kurt Bowen used 1997 data to explore regional variations in overall religious commitment and the proportion of conservative Protestants among them (displayed in Table I.1). Variations in the numbers of committed did not vary enormously, though there were more “very committed” in Atlantic Canada. What was more striking was the comparatively high proportion of conservative Protestants among the committed across the western provinces. The 2015 Canadian Election Study includes a question on biblical literalism, and here we find relatively high levels in Saskatchewan but general consistency in the rest of the country, except for Quebec.

The Ongoing Story of Faith-Based Conflict in Canada

Even with the enormous changes in religious faith and public beliefs over recent decades, policy debates over morality and the place of religion in the public sphere still ignite conflict, mobilize faith communities, and create or perpetuate religious distinctions in voting patterns.²² The issues may change over time: some areas of persistent public contention recede from the partisan arena; appeals become more specifically targeted to avoid excessive publicity; new sources of disagreement are politicized. Party leaders and strategists may now largely avoid explicitly pitching appeals to particular faith communities, or raising questions about the public role of religion, but they will still often shape their messages according to what they believe will resonate with such communities. The 2015 federal election, the 2014 Quebec election, and the 2016–17 Conservative Party of Canada leadership race each threw a spotlight on the issue of public acceptance of minority religious practices, particularly those associated with Islam, all supposedly in the name of gender equality or “Canadian values.” The Progressive Conservative proposal to provide funding to faith-based schools was a central issue in Ontario’s 2007 election, and between 2010 and 2014 the party sided with social conservatives in opposing the provincial government’s re-vamped sexual health curriculum. New Brunswick’s long-standing restrictions on access to abortion became an issue in the province’s 2014 election, ending decades of political avoidance.

The Foundations of Faith-Based Protest

The continued visibility of faith-related issues in Canadian party politics is rooted partly in the continued importance of religion for key segments of the population, even if less so than in the past. It is also based in large measure on the fact that local places of worship constitute an almost ideal grassroots foundation for the mobilization of public engagement. Conservative Protestant advocacy is in fact based overwhelmingly on local churches and networks, taking advantage of regular encounters within communities of believers. They are led by spiritual figures who have a privileged podium from which to deliver calls to action, or they include networks of co-believers that advocates can deploy. Calls to action may not be followed by all – or even most – listeners, but on the right issues, and in the right circumstances, many people will be moved to act. Social movements that rely on other institutions or networks can only dream of such an advantage. Some religious communities, most notably the Roman Catholic, also have a hierarchical clergy, which can ensure that a uniform message is delivered to all churches. Other faith communities with more independent spiritual leaders enjoy the advantage of loyal followers, who frequently have helped choose those leaders.

Religious progressives have some of the advantages that come with a network of local religious institutions, with prominent examples to be found within established Protestant denominations like the United Church of Canada, Reform Judaism, and progressive currents in other religious communities informed by principles of equity and social justice. Such religious settings have provided important voices for rethinking spiritual approaches to issues such as family and sexuality and, in more recent years, to a range of issues related to immigration, social service provision, and Aboriginal reconciliation. In decades past, such currents played an extremely influential role inside the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), in the early years of the New Democratic Party (NDP), and in other parties across Canada. For the last several decades, however, faith-based advocacy on equality and social justice has been overshadowed by that coming from more traditionalist quarters, and certainly it is this more conservative advocacy that has troubled partisan alignments.

Adding to the leverage that is born of such traditionalist faith foundations is the proliferation of interest groups representing those views.²³ There are long-standing conferences of Catholic bishops that intervene on a variety of policy fronts, but since 1985 they have been joined by the Catholic Civil Rights League, an ostensibly independent group but effectively a political vehicle for the bishops. Such groups, and the bishops themselves, can count on the support of nominal Catholics less than ever, but the sheer number of Catholics in the general population means that even the mobilization of a modest proportion can create a loud voice in any party wishing to retain or gain Catholic votes. This applies particularly in those parts of Canada where Catholics form a significant portion of the population or where their overall numbers are large enough for protest to reach an impressive scale. For instance, Catholics constitute about 40 percent of the inhabitants across the Atlantic region, and about 30 percent in Ontario, where their potential for influence is further buttressed by the wide array of Catholic social and educational institutions firmly established in that province. (In Quebec they constitute a 75 percent majority, though very low rates of church attendance and scepticism about clerical involvement in politics substantially limit the leverage of the hierarchy.)²⁴

Evangelical Protestant groups now have a stronger institutional presence than ever, particularly at the federal level. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) is the longest-standing of such groups, formed in 1964. It serves as a primary association for evangelical denominations in Canada and is distinguished from the Canadian Council of Churches, which brings together the Roman Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations, such as the Anglican, Lutheran, and United Churches. The EFC moved towards more regular political intervention beginning in the 1970s, but then expanded its size and professional expertise substantially from the 1990s on.

Focus on the Family Canada, a branch of the large evangelical American group, was formed in 1983 but at first was known mainly around its headquarters in Langley, British Columbia. It developed a national profile in the decades to follow, and, in 2006, it launched the Ottawa-based Institute on Marriage and Family in order to more directly intervene in public policy debates. In 2016, that organization left Focus on

the Family and joined Cardus, a Christian Canadian think tank that had significantly increased its profile from the 2000s on. REAL Women of Canada emerged as a small anti-feminist group in the 1980s, and, although it is not expressly religious, it is now a regular and visible intervener on a range of issues, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights, alongside groups associated with the religious right. The advocacy of such groups is strengthened by Christian broadcasts on Canadian media outlets and the accessibility of American evangelical media for many Canadians. In recent years, they have also been aided by the broader institutional development on the right embodied in the Manning Centre, which was created by one-time Reform Party leader Preston Manning to support conservative and libertarian advocacy. Political leverage is more likely in those parts of Canada with proportionately large numbers of evangelicals, most obviously in southern Alberta but also in BC's Fraser Valley and in southwestern Ontario.

Cardus is one of those groups that has succeeded in bringing together conservative Catholics and evangelicals. The Campaign Life Coalition is another, having been active on the pro-life side of the abortion issue since the late 1970s. It organizes the annual "March for Life" rallies in Ottawa that have become major flash points for social conservative activism, including on the part of pro-life members of Parliament. More recently it has been joined by the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform, though, like Campaign Life, it lacks the institutionalization exhibited by the larger multi-issue Catholic and evangelical interest groups. Specific issues, such as lesbian/gay marriage or, more recently, revisions to the sexual education curriculum in Ontario, will draw support from more than one faith community, and even if they often revolve around single personalities, or last only as long as political controversy is visible in the media, they attest to sustained mobilizational capacity at the grassroots.

Social conservative advocacy campaigns have long claimed to have a broad coalition of support reflecting Canada's ethno-cultural and religious diversity, but the plain truth is that these campaigns have been overwhelmingly rooted in long-established Protestant and Catholic communities – until recently. Over the last decade or so, controversies over the recognition of sexual diversity in schools have witnessed a

growing profile of minority group protests working alongside or in parallel with more established white-dominated groups. This reflects a growth in size of communities such as the Sikh in British Columbia and Muslim in Ontario, and the centrality of schooling to their ambitions for retaining elements of their traditional culture. Such mobilization does not indicate that minority communities are uniformly conservative on such issues, nor that they are linked by stable coalitional links to more established conservative groups, or that the controversies around which traditionalists have mobilized shape partisan leanings. But the multiculturalization of protest around issues like schooling does mean that they have a continued potential to be noticed by party leaders. Such efforts were evident in the outreach conducted by former Conservative Minister of Multiculturalism Jason Kenney at the federal level and more recently by Progressive Conservative Party leader Patrick Brown in Ontario.

Religious minorities have also become more visibly prepared to speak out in defence of their faith and the rights associated with it. This has long been true of the Jewish community, which has a substantial network of institutionalized groups at the national and local levels. B'nai Brith Canada was formed in 1875 as a service and advocacy group. The Canadian Jewish Congress was formed in 1919 and remained a prominent voice until it merged with several other bodies to create the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs in 2011. Group formation among Muslims, who now constitute the largest non-Christian religious group in Canada, has been slower, reflecting the relatively recent immigration of most of that community and its cultural and theological diversity. Indeed, the Muslim Association of Canada was established only in 1997, while the more prominent National Council of Canadian Muslims was founded a further three years later.²⁵ Neither these nor any other Islamic advocacy group at the national or local levels have developed significant institutional capacity, but they have obtained some mainstream media visibility, and, to some extent, they can rely on a now considerable number of local mosques and Islamic centres in all of Canada's major cities. Not all parts of the country are equally likely to have sustained minority advocacy since this depends on numbers that are large enough to build

institutional networks. In Atlantic Canada, adherents of non-Christian religions constituted only 1 percent of the population in 2011, while in Ontario it was 12 percent, and in Toronto 22 percent. In other major cities, non-Christians were 17 percent in Vancouver, 12 percent in Alberta, and 11 percent in Montreal.²⁶

Axes of Political Contention

Three axes of contention mark faith's role in Canadian politics: the denominational divides that were prominent historically and continue to echo in a few provinces; the advocacy by social conservatives seeking to resist the secularization that has so strikingly reshaped society since the Second World War; and conflicts over how to accommodate the immigration-driven diversification of faith communities since the 1970s. Together, these divides have generated debate and conflict across a wide range of issues. Denominational tension between Catholics and Protestants (and at times among Protestants themselves) was the first to emerge and long shaped party systems in Canada – frequently intensified by French-English divisions. The second “axis” of contention, prominent in the early twentieth century and even more in the last quarter of that century, set moral traditionalists from all faiths against social progressives in struggles over questions related to gender, sexuality, and family. The third division pits advocates for the recognition of non-Christian minority religious practices against those who insist on faith being an entirely private matter and/or others who seek (often implicitly) the privileging of Christianity. We use these axes to organize the analysis presented in this book.

Conflict along these axes has not invariably pitted one party against others for, in some cases, party leaders avoid engaging them for fear of inflaming public opinion, alienating voters, or dividing their own ranks. A Liberal party may contain a strong current of anti-clericalism, as was true of the nineteenth-century federal party and the Quebec provincial Liberals throughout their history. However, such parties may also have chosen to sideline that voice for fear of either opening up wrenching internal debate or overtly challenging a once-hegemonic church. The Progressive Conservative party in New Brunswick may

prosper on an electoral foundation that includes many ardently anti-Catholic Protestants but, instead, opt to balance its electoral ticket to bridge entrenched denominational and linguistic divisions. Parties in British Columbia and Ontario may fully realize that there is serious popular disagreement over how far to recognize minority faith practices and how much to eliminate specifically Christian symbols in the public sphere, but leave such issues for local institutions and courts to resolve. Parties on the right that attract disproportionate numbers of religious traditionalists may want to signal their openness to such voices but realize that boldly acting on them would lose more votes than it might win.

Denominational Conflict

For a century and a half, across much of central and eastern Canada, attachment to one Christian denomination – and not to others – mattered greatly for one’s social identity, and often for party allegiance. The most prominent division separated Roman Catholics from Protestants, often enduring through periods when there were no obviously relevant policy issues at stake. In the nineteenth century, as Brian Clarke puts it, “anti-Catholicism was a frame of mind, a cluster of beliefs and emotions that organized people’s perceptions of the world around them and imparted a cultural identity.”²⁷ Through much of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the anti-Catholic Orange Order remained a powerful social and political force in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, and parts of the west. In turn, the Catholic hierarchy emphasized the importance of supporting not just separate schools but a whole array of social institutions and associations designed to encircle the faithful and immunize them from other influences.

Tensions between Protestants and Catholics frequently exploded into violence, at times in parallel with divisions between English and French speakers. Some parties at the federal or provincial levels were dominated by adherents of one faith or the other, or were accused of being so. Other parties were divided internally by tensions between adherents of different faith communities, and, as a result, were forced to carefully consider their positioning in debates that might inflame denominational passions.

For much of the twentieth century, at the national level and in several provinces, where you worshipped remained the single strongest predictor of party preference. At the federal level, the Liberals drew significantly more Catholic voters than did Conservatives, and this remained true even as francophone Quebecers shifted (for a time) to the sovereigntist Bloc Québécois. Outside Quebec, the Liberal preference among Catholics persisted into the twenty-first century, long after there were any federal policy issues explaining this pattern. At the provincial level, Protestant-Catholic political contention remained beyond the Second World War in several regions, most prominently in Ontario and the Atlantic region.

Conflict over the funding and control of separate school systems remained at the centre of denominational contention through much of the first century after Confederation and, in some cases, continues to this day.²⁸ The elimination of denominational school systems in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec near the end of the twentieth century, and a political “settlement” of the Catholic funding issue in Ontario in the mid-1980s, might have signalled the ultimate fading of denominational influences on provincial politics, and, generally speaking, political contentiousness has largely disappeared. Questions remain, however, about what leeway exists for state-funded Catholic schools to deviate from provincial curricula or requirements to accommodate student groups like gay-straight alliances (GSAs), and debate over such rights inevitably ignites calls for the elimination or reduction in public funding for these systems. In Quebec, New Brunswick, Manitoba, and, to some extent, Ontario, francophone interests became conflated with the defence of Catholic institutions, and language then became a more prominent source of conflict than religion itself. But even then religious differences were not swept entirely aside, and we see evidence of such even in highly secularized Quebec.

Religious Traditionalists vs. Political and Social Progressives

In recent decades, the aspect of faith-based contention that has most shaped Canada’s various party systems is that driven by social conservatives collaborating across religious boundaries to resist social change. In their magisterial survey of American religion in the early twenty-first

century, Robert Putnam and David Campbell talk of a political realignment that has relevance to party politics in Canada.

In 1960, religion's role in politics was mostly a matter of something akin to tribal loyalty – Catholics and Protestants each supported their own ... By the 2000s, how religious a person is had become more important as a political dividing line than which denomination he or she belonged to. Church-attending evangelicals and Catholics (and other religious groups too) have found common political cause.²⁹

Canada certainly has witnessed repeated large-scale political mobilizations in response to a perceived threat to traditional values and, specifically, efforts to counter advocacy by the women's movement and sexual minorities. Such views are often reinforced by particular, often literalist, readings of scripture. Debates over gender and sexuality have often become what Janet Jakobsen refers to as "crucial mediating points at the boundaries of religious difference."³⁰ This is not to say that social conservatism is always driven by religion, nor that all people of faith are necessarily traditionalist in their views. As we have already pointed out, reformist currents within a variety of faith communities have at times led the way in calling for a reconsideration of established moral stances. Even among adherents of conservative religious communities we often find pragmatic adjustment to changing social norms, especially among the young, and particularly on questions of sexual diversity.³¹ But in recent decades, faith-driven intervention in political debates has been dominated by social conservatives, and it has been religious conservatives who have been in the vanguard of such intervention.

Their defensive advocacy stresses the timelessness of a particular family form in which gender roles are clear-cut and child-rearing is naturally the province of heterosexual marriage. In this moral view, abortion represents the selfish abandonment of the reproductive responsibilities that lie at the heart of marriage and the family. Homosexual activity, or any other practice that violates established gender norms or imagines changing gender identity, is a threat to this family model and, particularly, to children and young people who may still be uncertain

about or experimenting with their gender identities. For this reason, schools are regularly at the centre of traditionalist concerns.

Moral conservatives will often go beyond family issues and argue for the preservation or restoration of faith practices in public institutions, such as prayers in town council meetings and public displays (such as Christmas trees) associated with religious holidays. In the area of education, they may argue that faith-based schools should receive state funding, and that such support should not compromise the schools' independence. Some will also advocate for the right to conscientious objection in the face of requests for public services that violate moral beliefs, and uphold the right to unfettered free speech in mounting faith-based interventions against those who are seen to undermine traditional values, even if some of their opponents consider these interventions to be hateful attacks.

Evangelical Protestants have often been leading advocates of these traditionalist positions. In doing so they benefit from comparatively high weekly church attendance as well as from media outlets capable of calling them to political action. On some issues, particularly abortion and sexual diversity, evangelicals often work alongside conservative Catholics who are led by bishops and archbishops informed by traditionalist teachings on such questions. There are also indications that this cross-denominational alliance of moral conservatives is being joined by traditionalists within recent waves of migration from countries in which conservative family values still prevail.

Has the religiously led or inspired mobilization of social conservatives led to the sort of political alignment we have seen in the United States? The answer must be in shades of grey. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, parties on the right at the federal level and in some regions did become the only plausible ally for social conservatives who prioritized the kinds of issues we are discussing. This was a direct result of such parties moving sharply right, following in the footsteps of Margaret Thatcher's British Conservative Party and Ronald Reagan's Republicans in the United States.³² In Canada, as we shall see, this move away from the brokerage model that had so long characterized major parties at the federal level and in several provinces was driven primarily

by an ideological commitment to the free market. During the 1990s, this was dramatically evident in Alberta under Premier Ralph Klein and in Ontario under Premier Mike Harris. In the early 2000s, the same radical shift occurred when the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) was forged from the Canadian Alliance (itself the successor to the Reform Party insurgency) and the remnants of the Progressive Conservative Party (PCP).

In none of these cases were social conservative causes prioritized, and there has been no time when Canada has experienced the kind of culture war that has marked American political life. But in all these cases, and others like them, the repositioned parties on the right had a significant number of moral traditionalist supporters. Unlike their American cousins, as Sam Reimer and Lydia Bean point out, Canadian evangelicals were not developing an identity that assumed support for a particular party, and they would never be as widely or as fiercely supportive of conservative parties as white American evangelicals were of the Republican Party.³³ Nevertheless, most Canadian evangelicals tilted that way, and conservative party leaders knew that they had the potential to increase their electoral support within those communities as other parties shifted towards more progressive social policy positions. What we therefore saw was that these parties tailored their appeals to help secure the loyalty of social conservatives and religious traditionalists.

Yet, while right-wing party leaders still look for ways to signal their understanding of traditional social values, the broader process of social change has meant that the room for these leaders to manoeuvre on the hot button issues that motivate such voters has declined dramatically, and they have become increasingly more conscious of the electoral risks of siding too visibly with such groups. There is no longer any significant party in Canada, for example, prepared to explicitly oppose the equality rights of sexual minorities – one powerful illustration being the federal Conservative Party's 2016 repudiation of its formal policy opposing same-sex marriage. This development reflects not only major attitude shifts in the general public, but also a change in attitudes among many religious traditionalists, particularly the young. However, it does not mean that there are no longer any issues that provoke mobilization among social conservatives or that provide opportunities for parties on

the right to engage in such signalling. Prostitution was pushed onto the national policy agenda by a 2013 Supreme Court ruling that struck down existing criminal code regulation.³⁴ Medically assisted suicide also became an issue at both the federal and provincial levels soon afterwards, partly because of court challenges but also due to policy shifts in Quebec. Even if the federal Conservative Party has tried to avoid debate on abortion, on both of these “new” issues, it has allied itself with the most prominent current of morally traditionalist advocacy.

Recognizing Religious Minorities

The third axis of contention, long in the background of Canadian politics but recently more prominent, is rooted in disagreement over the recognition of minority religious practices and institutions. It may seem natural to imagine sustained public and partisan conflict arising from the significant increase in immigration by ethno-religious minorities since the 1970s. After all, we can see clear evidence of anti-immigrant party growth across much of Europe and intensified opposition, among American Republicans, in particular, to illegal immigration from Mexico and all forms of immigration from the Muslim world.

There certainly has been popular opposition in Canada to some instances of minority religious accommodation, for example, in response to the RCMP’s acceptance of Sikh turbans in the 1990s, and the extension to Muslims of an Ontario faith-based arbitration system in 2005.³⁵ In 2015, a federal Conservative policy of barring face-covering garments from citizenship ceremonies was supported by an overwhelming number of Canadians.³⁶ This was especially so in Quebec, where there had been years of sensationalized media focus on “unreasonable” accommodation of minority religious practices.

Some of this sentiment is based on a belief that such practices reflect a failure of immigrant or minority communities to integrate into the existing culture, though some is also directed at religious practices that deviate too sharply from those considered “normal” by the majority. Environics polling in 2016 shows that 54 percent majority of Canadians believed that “too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values.”³⁷ A 2014 survey conducted by Jack Jedwab for the Association of Canadian Studies indicates that 43 percent of Canadians were worried about

the number of immigrants in Canada and that 40 percent agreed that “society is threatened by the influx of non-Christian immigrants.”³⁸ This survey also shows, as do others, that Muslims have become the target of more negative sentiment than have other ethno-cultural minorities. Respondents were asked for their overall feelings towards selected groups. Immigrants as a whole elicited positive sentiments from 66 percent of all respondents, Catholics 70 percent, Protestants 68 percent, and Jews 67 percent, but Muslims only 42 percent.³⁹ Environics surveys indicate that, in 2010, there were about as many Canadians who favoured a ban on wearing headscarves in public places as there were opposed, significantly more than in 2006.⁴⁰

Public concerns about and resistance to religious recognition can also result from the process of secularization. On the one hand, such opposition can be fuelled by frustration over the decentring of Christian practice in public institutions, including court rulings against the statutory designation of Sunday as a common day of pause from work and the use of specifically Christian prayers and physical symbols in public institutions. On the other, those who support such secularizing rulings may fear that the public recognition of minority religions will reopen space for religion in the public square. This fear is amplified by perceptions, broadly accurate, that people in religious minority communities are more likely to attach significance to their religion than are those who identify as Christian. This elevated religious identification of course may constitute a form of ethnic or cultural attachment, but it is also the case that faith itself is more important for those in the minority, particularly among first-generation immigrants. Warren Clark uses Statistics Canada data to show that, in 2001, attendance at religious services among foreign-born residents of large metropolitan areas was about twice the rate of the Canadian-born and that the rate among the former was holding steadily while declining significantly among the latter.⁴¹ Reginald Bibby laments the “devastating fire” of secularism in this country but argues that the growing size of religious minority communities (Christian and non-Christian) has added new life to the old, fire-ravaged forest.⁴² This is precisely what creates anxiety among those who have distanced themselves from their own religious roots, and this is especially so in Quebec.

What about party alignments? In the 2015 federal election we saw the Conservative Party use the issue of the face-covering niqab and fears over “barbaric cultural practices” in an attempt to undercut support for the New Democratic Party and the Liberals, especially in Quebec.⁴³ Likewise, in that province’s 2014 election, the Parti Québécois (PQ) campaigned on a “Charter of Quebec Values” that preyed on anti-Muslim sentiment while claiming only to promote state neutrality and gender equity. Before that, the 2007 Ontario election hinged on contention over a Progressive Conservative promise to extend funding for faith-based schools beyond the Catholic system. But these are not typical stories. Most provincial parties across Canada have not politicized policies related to immigration and the recognition of minority religious rights, with such issues instead generally left for local institutions and the courts to resolve. When Sharia law became a focus of public controversy in 2005, the Ontario Liberals responded by shunting the issue off the political agenda and were supported in that by the two other provincial parties. British Columbia’s very large populations of east and south Asians might have led to the politicization of issues related to minority recognition, but the major parties know all too well that they need to court and not repel voters in those communities. Yes, Quebec has been the only province in Canada where these issues have become the focus of sustained partisan debate. But it is worth noting that everyday accommodation of minority religious practices has become largely normalized there, as it is elsewhere in Canada. The 2017 killing of worshippers in a Quebec City mosque may also provoke thoughtful reflections on recent years of social and political contention over minority religious practices, which may in turn temper partisan debates over these issues.

The major parties at the federal level have traditionally not had major policy differences on immigration, and, more often than not, they have avoided contention over the recognition of religious minorities. This has changed to some extent since the formation of the Conservative Party of Canada in the early 2000s. While in government, even if it maintained traditionally robust levels of overall immigration, the CPC changed rules and procedures in ways that drastically reduced the acceptance of refugee claims, and, in 2015, it actively resisted admitting

Syrian refugees. And, of course, it forced women to remove face veils at citizenship ceremonies. But does this constitute a sea-changing realignment on such issues? Despite the Conservative's 2015 election defeat being in part blamed on its politicization of the niqab and the proposal for a "barbaric cultural practices" hotline, the issues raised in the party's 2016–17 leadership race suggest that such policies continue to be supported by substantial portions of its grassroots membership. Yet at the same time, the CPC has also been quite transparently interested in expanding its electoral support among ethno-cultural religious minorities, recognizing that the significant growth of these populations cannot be ignored and that much of what the party stands for has at least some appeal within these minority groups. Public support for the continuation of Canada's comparatively high levels of immigration also remains widespread. Environics polling shows that, between the 1970s and the mid-1990s, a majority of Canadians felt that immigration levels were too high; however, by the early 2000s, an equally strong majority disagreed with this view.⁴⁴ In 2016, 80 percent agreed that the economic impact of immigration was positive – all this setting Canadians apart from populations in most other Western industrialized countries.

The Blurred Edges of Religious Political Contention

Compiling a catalogue of those political issues that distinguish faith communities from other parts of the population, or that mark out particular parties as appealing to particular religious communities, is not straightforward. Across the span of Canadian history, many Protestants have supported or acquiesced to the recognition of Catholic institutions even as many Catholics have opposed such recognition on anti-clerical grounds. In past decades, and most certainly now, opposition to government funding for separate schools has been fuelled in part by those who sought a unified public school system under no religious influence. The provision of state-funded and regulated child care may well be opposed by many religious conservatives but yet supported by those people of faith who have struggled to find care for their children. Restricting access to abortion or resisting the legitimation of same-sex marriage may have motivated a core of the faithful in many

distinct religious communities, but many others see reproductive issues differently or now believe that such battles are in the past. There has long been a social justice current in evangelical Protestantism, and there are certainly Canadians born of this important tradition who share little of the anti-gay preoccupations of their co-religionists during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Religious minorities invariably contain members who reject the political recognition of what might be argued to be community faith practices and resent religious leaders who claim to be the representational voice of their community. Nor is there any evidence that communities of immigrants with otherwise socially conservative views are disproportionately on the pro-life side of the abortion debate.

Law-and-order issues also must be fit into any analysis of religion and politics. There is no inherent reason that people of faith, even the most conservative among them, would support strengthening law enforcement and toughening sentences, and there are actually good scriptural reasons to oppose such an approach. On the other hand, protecting family members from criminality is woven into the belief system of many religious traditionalists, a view reinforced by a perception that the world's temptations are ever-present, perhaps especially so in a secularized and sexualized environment. The simple truth is that most religious traditionalists in North America also support a law-and-order agenda, and conservative parties in both the United States and Canada realize this. Such support is particularly strong among evangelical Protestants, and, in some respects, may be a peculiarity of the American individualism so deeply embedded in that faith current.

As this discussion of law-and-order issues demonstrates, in all cases in which particular faith groups seem to be leading the charge in policy advocacy, we must ask whether it is really faith that is driving the disagreement and any corresponding partisan attachments, whether it is a vehicle for expressing what are basically social values, or whether religious affiliation is a form of cultural or ethnic identification that stands apart from religious feeling. Classifying yourself as Catholic may be rooted in a trans-generational attachment to historic memories, or it may be more a product of language-group identity than of faith.

Muslim or Jewish identity may be much more about ethnicity or minority status than religiosity, reinforced by majority prejudice. In this way, significant currents of support for particular faith practices in the public sphere may come from an interest in preserving tradition or in protecting ethnic rights.

Causes championed by religious conservatives may attract a large number of secular supporters. Schooling issues have arisen along all the lines of contention outlined here, and there is a long history of faith communities mobilizing politically over what their children are taught, who teaches them, and who controls educational decisions. Conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, between social progressives and religious traditionalists, and between proponents and opponents of religious minority rights have all invoked educational issues. But these debates and struggles draw in a wider set of individuals concerned about how and what children are taught, and about the role that parents play in decisions about schooling. Debates about the funding of faith-based schools are also regularly lodged within broader discussions of school choice, drawing in free market advocates without any interest in supporting religious institutions.⁴⁵

Around any episode of what appears to be faith-based contention, then, the extent to which they are driven by religious beliefs is hard to decipher. The very fact, however, that advocates of one or another position frame it in religious terms, or in coded language widely understood by co-religionists, provides evidence for the claim that religion still matters in Canadian politics generally, and party politics particularly. Association with a faith community still, for many, provides a form of social glue, a set of institutions that provides vehicles for maintaining community networks and mobilizing political advocacy, and opportunities for parties to forge local connections.

Looking Ahead

We approach the questions posed at the outset of this chapter mindful of such complexities and, in particular, of the three distinct axes of religiously inflected political contention that have at one time or another shaped the party systems in different parts of the country. Any analysis of the ways in which religious attachments and beliefs influence party