Chapter 2
The Church on the Margins: The Religious Context of the New Atheism

William A. Stahl

We can't just identify "religion" with twelfth century Catholicism, and then count every move away from that as decline

Charles Taylor
A Secular Age

The old ideals and the divinities which incarnate them are dying because they no longer correspond sufficiently to the new aspirations of our day; and the new ideals which are necessary to orient our life are not yet born.

Émile Durkheim
"La conception sociale de la religion"

Atheism is defined by what it is not. Since the one common feature of all forms of atheism is that it rejects religion, the form religion takes in any particular instance will shape the atheism which rejects it. As the old saying goes, there is a difference between Protestant and Catholic atheists. Therefore in order to understand any particular expression of atheism, we need to understand its religious context.

Although charges of "atheism" have been leveled against those who did not subscribe to the official cult since at least Roman times (e.g. early Christians who did not worship the emperor were accused of atheism), as an intellectual movement atheism dates to the eighteenth century. Since then it has taken a wide variety of forms (cf. Sparrow 2012; Amarasingam 2010; Haught 2008; Bellah 1970). This chapter will restrict discussion to the religious context of the so-called "New Atheism" of the twenty-first Century (e.g. Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007).

To speak of "context" is necessarily to paint on a large canvas with a broad brush. The New Atheism is a phenomenon of the industrialized world, particularly of the English-speaking countries. Among industrialized countries, northern and western Europe are characterized by state churches with very low levels of attendance. The

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United States of America and Canada have a pluralistic, denominational religious structure. The United States has robust evangelical and fundamentalist churches, while these groups are a tiny minority in Canada. These differences have led to long debates between secularization and rational choice/religious market theorists. In order to avoid largely unfruitful arguments about European and/or American religious "exceptionalism," empirical data will be drawn primarily (although not exclusively) from Canada. As Peter Beyer argues in a similar situation, "The Canadian case is well suited to this purpose because in many ways it seems to present a hybrid form between Europe and the United States, or at least a third form" (2006, 72).

My argument is that while religion has not disappeared, as classical secularization theory predicted it would, the place of religion in society has changed dramatically over the past half-century. Christendom is over. Structural and cultural changes have moved the church from the centre to the margin of society. These changes, which Charles Taylor (2007) describes as a change in the modern social imaginary from "The Age of Mobilization" to "The Age of Authenticity," describe the context for both religion and the New Atheism in the twenty-first century. Much of both current religion and atheism can be seen as a backlash to these changes.

This chapter will establish my argument over several steps. First, I will very briefly summarize the religious situation in Canada. Second, I will look at two narratives commonly encountered in today's debates which try to explain that situation. While neither has much explanatory power, much of the current debate remains fixated upon these old stories. Third, I will present another narrative that attempts to offer an explanation. Charles Taylor rejects secularization theory, but recognizes that the place of religion in the world is profoundly different today. Structural and cultural changes over the past half-century have moved the church from the centre of society to the margins. I will conclude by evaluating Taylor's theories for what they might contribute to our understanding of religion and atheism today.

2.1 Religion in Canada Today

In the nineteenth century, religion was one of the most powerful and divisive forces in Canadian society. In the 1850s, Protestants and Catholics rioted in the streets of Toronto, Montréal and other cities. Religion faded as the primary badge of identity in the twentieth century but those early conflicts left the country with sharp regional differences and a strong sense of institutional commitment. Unlike the United States, which has always been a land of opportunity for religious entrepreneurs, Canadians overwhelmingly stuck to the institutional churches. From Confederation in 1867 until about 1960, 75 % of Canadians could be found in one of three churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican, or United (or before 1925, those churches which would form the United Church). This hegemonic position allowed these churches to define (each in their regions) the centre of Canadian culture. John Webster Grant (1972) called this the *presupposition of Christendom*.

> What [the churches] most notably had in common, beyond the Christian faith itself, was a conviction that in the main the institutions and values of Western society rested on a

> Christian foundation. They believed in the existence of an entity that over the centuries had come to be known as "Christendom" and assumed that Canada was destined to become part of it. . . . The status of Canada as a Christian nation was never in question, and in practice the churches were regarded more as public than as private institutions. (1972, 213)

It was a conviction shared by both traditionalists and reformers, Protestant Orangemen and Ultramontane Catholics. Grant concludes "Churchmen of all parties assumed that it was their responsibility to impart a Christian content to Canadian nationhood . . . " (1972, 215).

Christendom can be defined as the 1,600-year-long alliance between the church and the state, beginning in the fourth century CE, which gave the church cultural hegemony. It was most clearly institutionalized in northern and western Europe and the areas colonized by these countries.[1] For a millennium-and-a-half Christendom showed remarkable resilience and adaptability. Its institutional expressions varied over time; from the state church of the Roman Empire, to medieval Catholicism, to the territorial churches of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, to the state churches of Europe and the multiple denominations of the United States and Canada. In some countries it also included non-church forms such as civil religion (cf. Bellah 1975; Cristi 2001). A central assumption of Christendom was the equation of the church with civilizational order. It was widely believed that religion was necessary to establish a "moral core" for society, to give the polity a sense of identity, and to legitimate the state. Then, in a relatively short space of time, it withered away. To speak of Christendom became increasingly problematic in Europe after the First World War. In Canada it lasted for another 40 years.

By about 1960, the United and Anglican churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Québec entered a period of steep decline (see Figs. 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). The central question of debate over religion in Canada has been why. But the decline of Roman Catholics in Québec and the mainstream Protestants has not been matched by other religious groups. Roman Catholics outside of Québec—their numbers replenished by immigration—have held their own, while Evangelical Protestants and some new religious movements have grown (Bibby 2009, 2011, 2012; Clark and Schellenberg 2006; Stahl 2007). In the past decade Evangelicals have increased their numbers from 8 to 11 % of the Canadian population (Bibby 2012). Although this is still a small proportion of the population, it is the first significant increase for these groups since Confederation. Immigration has added to the multicultural mix of the country by adding significant numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus. On the other hand, the number of those claiming "no religion" has grown significantly. So any account of religion in Canada has to account for *both* the decline of previously central groups *and* the continuation or growth of other groups. Two commonly encountered narratives have tried to do this but with, I will argue, little success.

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[1] Whether the concept can be applied at all anywhere else is debatable, but beyond the scope of this chapter.

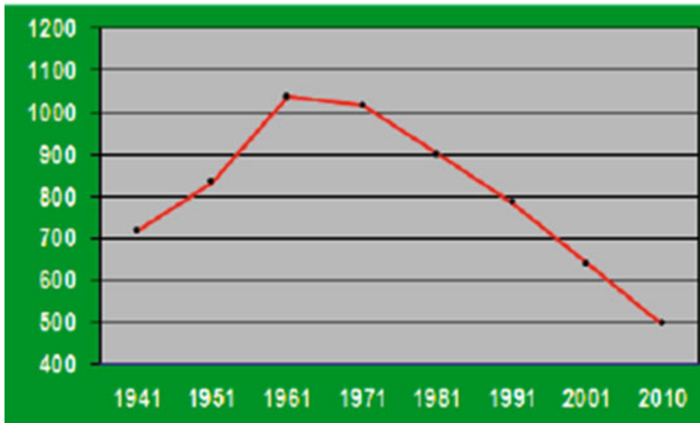


Fig. 2.1 United Church of Canada membership (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

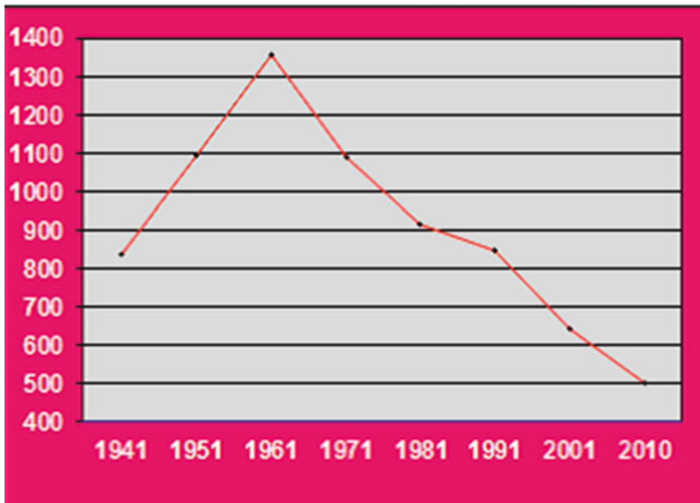


Fig. 2.2 Anglican Church of Canada membership (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

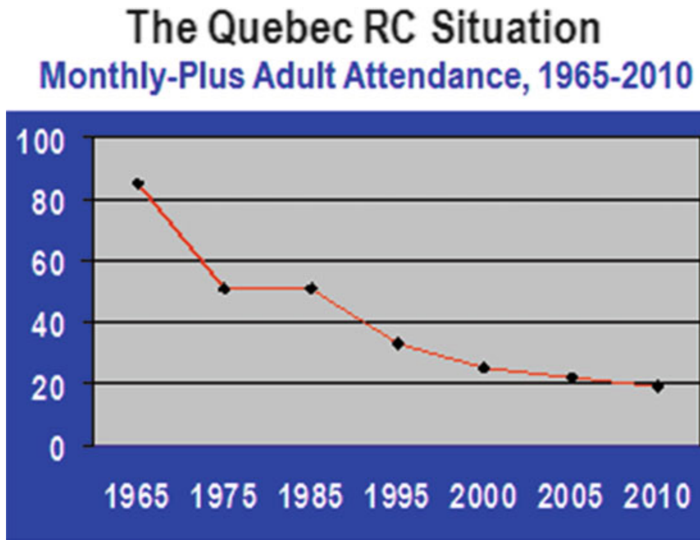


Fig. 2.3 Roman Catholic attendance in Quebec (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

2.2 Two Stories About Decline

As the churches lost their central position in society, two pre-existing narratives have been frequently retold to make sense of this change. Both often operate as unexamined and taken-for-granted assumptions of "the way the world is."

2.2.1 A Narrative of Secularization

One narrative is a story of Progress and increasing rationality in which science replaces religion. Boiled down and simplified, it goes something like this:

> *Before the scientific revolution the world was ruled by ignorance and superstition. Galileo was savagely attacked by an obscuritantist church. After Newton, the Enlightenment—or Age of Reason—began to replace the Dark Ages. Science and technology began to replace religion. As secularization has proceeded, religion has declined and will eventually disappear entirely.*

Going back at least to Condorcet and Comte in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this story has been retold in a multitude of variations ever since. It is the root of secularization theory. Now, secularization theory is itself complex with many variations, but at its core it makes the claim that the decline of religion is universal, inevitable, and irreversible. That is, the decline of religion

is a universal phenomenon which will, eventually, affect all societies. Since religion is seen as incompatible with science and reason, the more the later progresses, the more religion must inevitably give way. And since history is seen as linear, Progress makes the decline of religion irreversible.

This story is almost unquestioned in large portions of today's universities. It is championed by the New Atheists, who see themselves as the vanguard of Reason (Borer 2010; Eagleton 2009). And, as history, it is wrong in nearly every particular.

Today's historians of science question the uniqueness (or even the existence) of the "scientific revolution" (e.g. Shapin 1996). The "war between science and religion" was declared in the late nineteenth century (and then as an anti-Catholic polemic) and read back into the story of Galileo (Stahl et al. 2002). If we look at culture beyond a tiny intellectual elite, there is little justification to call the eighteenth century the Age of Reason, at least before "reason" was spread by Napoleon's bayonets (Blanning 2007). And while science did indeed grow in authority from the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, it generally did so alongside religion, rather than at the expense of religion. But (as we will see) while the authority of religion has declined over the past 50 years, the authority of science has declined as well.

Neither does Canadian sociological data support an unambiguous story of secularization (cf. Thiessen and Dawson 2008; Bibby 2008). As we saw above, mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics in Québec have declined significantly, but other groups have held their own or grown. Times may be hard for the United Church or Anglicans, but they have never been better for Mormons or Wiccans. One should not confuse the fate of the mainstream Protestants with the future of *religion*. There have indeed been major changes in religion in Canada over the past half-century, but change is not the same thing as decline.

So while it is difficult to argue that Canada is experiencing secularization as portrayed by narratives of the progressive triumph of science and reason, nonetheless there have been major changes. In particular, the shift of the mainstream churches from the centre of Canadian culture to the margins requires explanation. Québec is paradoxical in that while the province has the lowest levels of church attendance in Canada, identification with the Roman Catholic Church remains high and the province has the lowest number of those claiming "no religion" in the country (Bibby 2007b). Bibby (2011, 2012) argues that the Protestant decline has primarily been due to changes in demographics. Birthrates in these churches have fallen sharply, changing immigration patterns mean that few reinforcements arrive from abroad, and few of the children they do have remain with the church. Bibby observes: "Simply put, people were not particularly upset with the Mainline Churches and stomped off in a huff. On the contrary, they died and were not replaced" (2009, 2). But that leaves the question unanswered: why did youth abandon the mainstream churches?

Young people in Canada today are the best educated in history. Computers, the internet, and a plethora of electronic devices bring (for all except the poorest) the world's information to their fingertips. If the narrative of science and reason progressively replacing religion were true, we should expect that today's youth

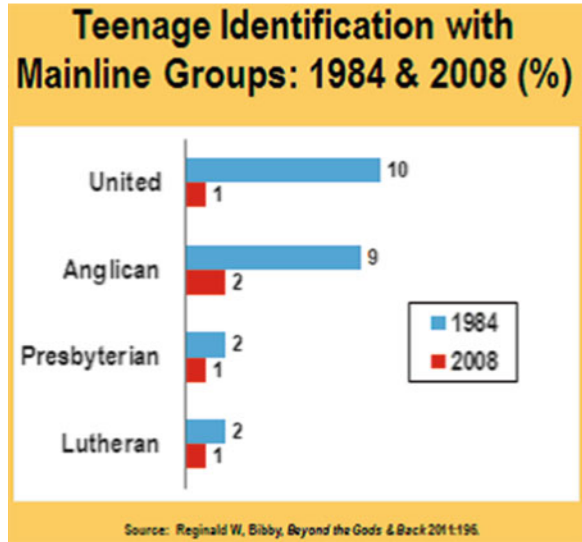
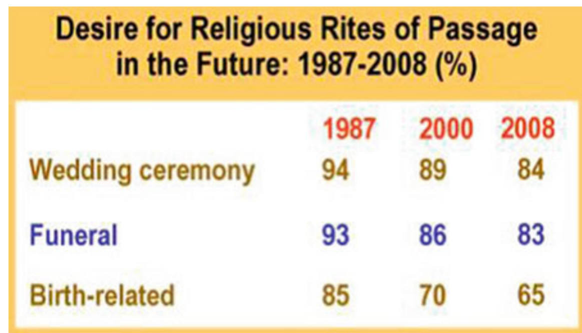


Fig. 2.4 Teenage identification with mainline Churches (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)



Desire for Religious Rites of Passage in the Future: 1987-2008 (%)

	1987	2000	2008
Wedding ceremony	94	89	84
Funeral	93	86	83
Birth-related	85	70	65

Fig. 2.5 Teenage desire for rites of passage (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

would be overwhelmingly secular. But that is not the case. Young people may have abandoned the mainline Protestants (Fig. 2.4), but that pattern does not hold nearly as strongly for other religious groups. As Figs. 2.5 and 2.6 show, desire for religious rites of passage remains high as does expression of spiritual needs (including by more than half of those who rarely attend worship and over a third of those who never attend). One frequently hears young people say "I am spiritual, but not religious." This means that while they have interest in what sociologists and theologians would call "religion," they have little interest in—and frequently show hostility to—the church.

Perhaps most significantly, Bibby's data (Fig. 2.7) shows increasing polarization among young people. The number of teenagers who never attend a place of worship has grown significantly. But the number who do attend weekly is nearly the same. The two middle categories, for nominal and occasional attenders, have declined. The difficulty is that the polarization is not symmetrical. Two-thirds of teenagers have little or no contact with a place of worship; nearly half have none at all.

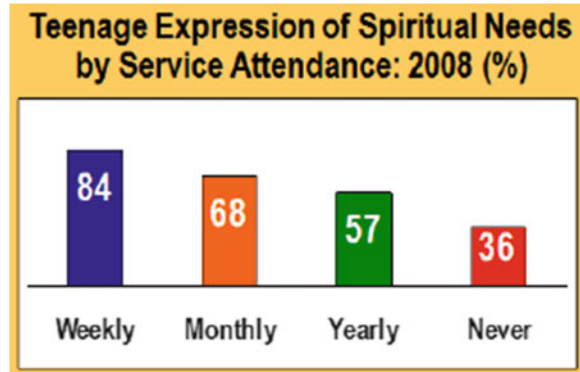


Fig. 2.6 Teenage expression of spiritual needs (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

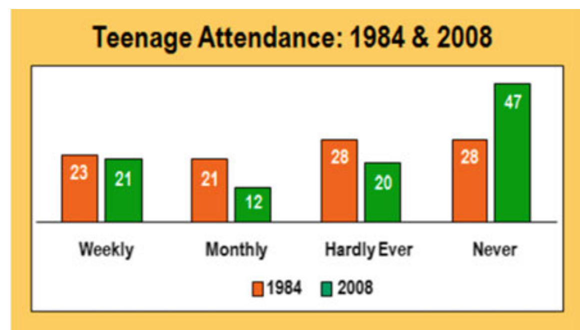


Fig. 2.7 Teenage attendance (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

So the narrative of secularization has little explanatory power. There has been massive change, but religion has not disappeared, nor does it show much likelihood that it will. The tropes of Progress, increasing rationalization, and the triumph of science may be the mainstay of the New Atheists, but their story bears little resemblance to the facts on the ground. Secularization theory is more an ideology than a hypothesis. On the other hand, the decline of those churches which used to exercise cultural hegemony and formed the centre of Canadian society is a significant phenomenon which needs explanation.

2.2.2 A Narrative of Renewal

There is another narrative which is frequently told to explain the situation of the church, this time most often by clergy and theologians. Again, simplified and boiled down, it goes:

> *Religion has always had its ups and downs. As people fall away, they are recalled to the faith by prophets. So the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation renewed the church. So did the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Religion always comes back because human beings are inherently religious and society needs religion to maintain a moral order.*

This story has inspired a shelf of publications on church growth and renewal and a minor industry in speakers and consultants. The one thing these efforts have in common is a notable lack of success.

There are two problems with this narrative. First, it assumes a cyclical view of history which negates social agency. It turns the fact of religious renewal in the past into its inevitability in the future. A second problem (particularly for those who like market metaphors) is that it assumes "demand" for religion is constant, so all that is necessary is to increase "supply." This story assumes that the religious organizations of today will continue indefinitely with no more change needed than a more vigorous stewardship campaign or membership drive. At worst this narrative breeds complacency; at best it offers local solutions to structural problems. Nor should the failure of secularization theory offer much comfort. *Religion* is in no danger of disappearing; evangelical churches and some new religious movements may be growing, but that is not an indication that the mainstream Protestant churches will avoid bankruptcy.

In the end, the effect of these narratives has been to lock debate into the same old stories. Neither of these narratives has much explanatory power because they are answers to the wrong question. Both are stories which try to explain the decline of *religion* (as permanent or temporary) when the more salient question is why certain previously hegemonic groups have declined (but other groups have not). To answer that question fully, one would have to examine the nature of cultural and structural change over the past 65 years. Rather than try to review such a voluminous literature in this limited space, I will analyze Charles Taylor's recent theories which, I will argue, speak directly to the situation of religion and atheism.

2.3 Charles Taylor's Story

Taylor insists that the modern world is a moral order. Traditional societies and the structures of meaning which configured them may be gone, he argues, but modernity is configured through its own structures of meaning. For Taylor, two aspects of this process are crucial. First, any moral order is embedded in a structure or framework, which he calls a *social imaginary*. Second, the process by which one social imaginary is replaced by another is dynamic and ongoing, both through time and across space.

2.3.1 Modern Social Imaginaries

Émile Durkheim said a society is the ideal it forms of itself (1915, 470). Taylor elaborates this, arguing that both social solidarity and personal identity are grounded in an imaginary which constitutes a moral order. He describes a social imaginary as: "The ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with

others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normatively met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2004, 23). A social imaginary is not just an ideology or set of beliefs but "an unchallenged framework, something we have trouble often thinking ourselves outside of, even as an imaginative exercise" (2007, 549). It is a "constellation of background meanings" made up of symbols, myths and other narratives, rituals, and practices which form a structure or framework in which beliefs are embedded. Most of the time these frameworks are unacknowledged, tacit, and taken-for-granted—they are unspoken assumptions about "the way things are." While the *substance* of the modern social imaginary is profoundly different from the imaginaries of previous eras, that does not make it any less a moral order.

2.3.2 Dynamics of Modernity

Taylor argues that modernity is neither linear nor static, nor is it a program to be achieved (as in Walt Rostow's [1971] *Stages of Economic Growth*, for instance). Consequently, there is no one version of modernity. While all modern societies share, to a greater or lesser degree, the elements of the modern social imaginary, each country has its own configuration. Similarly, the process by which one social imaginary is replaced by another is dynamic and ongoing, varying from one historical period to another. The modern social imaginary itself, he argues, has gone through a series of formulations, or *redactions*, from the "Great Disembedding" of the early modern period, to the "Age of Mobilization" of the industrial revolution and world wars, to the "Age of Authenticity" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This dynamism shapes and reshapes social imaginaries. Taylor constructs three ideal types of social imaginaries, which he calls *Durkheimian dispensations* (2007, 486–492). Paleo-Durkheimian refers to the pre- and early-modern world, an ideal type very similar to what Durkheim himself called *mechanical solidarity* (1933/1890). It was a moral order based on conformity and in the early modern period—which Taylor calls the "Great Disembedding"—a bloody attempt to impose discipline on the lower classes (2007, 90–145). The social form of modernity from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the period Taylor calls the "Age of Mobilization," (423–472) is characterized as neo-Durkheimian. This corresponds to what Durkheim called *organic solidarity,* a moral order based on the co-operation of individuals in order to live together in huge economic and political institutions. In the late twentieth century, Taylor argues, a new redaction of the social imaginary developed which he calls the "Age of Authenticity" which he typifies as post-Durkheimian. This moral order is characterized by *expressive individualism*, a personal search for authenticity, unity, integrity, holism, and individuality (507).

2.3.3 Religion in the Age of Mobilization

These changes had enormous effects on religion and the churches, although in more complex ways than told by the stories of secularization or renewal. Taylor identifies four: spirituality, discipline, political identity, and civilizational order. These mark the adaptation of Christendom to the nation state and industrial economy throughout the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Spirituality during the Age of Mobilization shifted from the communal rituals of village life to an emphasis on individual beliefs and interior spirituality. In an urbanizing and industrializing society, adherence of people to the church could no longer be taken as a matter of course—they had to be mobilized into the faith. Consequently during the two Great Awakenings the Evangelical Movement employed new technologies for spiritual mobilization, such as the circuit rider, revival meetings, and Sunday schools (which were initially as much about adult literacy as educating children). While the established churches often resisted these "modern" innovations (e.g. *The Syllabus of Errors* by Pope Pius IX), they too eventually adapted (as in the Tractarian Movement within the Church of England). A second aspect of this changing spirituality was a consequence of the gendered separation of spheres between home and work brought on by industrialization. Religion fell on the "home" side of the divide, which led to a "feminization of piety" (2007, 451) and the growing identification of "morality" with sex and family. Most churches became characterized by a strongly puritanical moral code.

A second aspect was discipline. As states, armies, and corporations grew in size, they needed new levels of organization. Where the Great Disembedding was often brutal, industrial society needed a new form of social control in order to co-ordinate hundreds or thousands of workers at once. As individuals became disembedded from the social control of the village, the churches increasingly began to preach the importance of individual self-discipline. A society of individuals with a high division of labour, as Durkheim saw, required an ethic of self-discipline grounded in co-operation. This was the kind of solidarity necessary to regiment, factory, political party, and nation state.

Third was political identity. The state became the central institution of society as nation states superseded the gunpowder states of the early modern period. An ever-increasing number of individuals came to see themselves as citizens, as people who had rights and an obligation to consent in their governing. Religion became embedded in national society (even in those countries which had legal separation of church and state) while religious belonging, says Taylor, became "central to political identity" (455). Christendom became expressed through the various nations. This was of course the case with the state churches of Europe, but although organized differently, just as effective with multiple denominations in the United States and Canada.

Closely related is the final aspect, civilizational order. Taylor describes this as "the sense people have of the basic order by which they live, even imperfectly, as good, and (usually) as superior to the ways of life of outsiders" (455). From "Toronto the Good" to "The White Man's Burden," this sense of civilizational order legitimized and bestowed a sense of moral obligation upon the nation. While some would call upon this for reform (as in the Social Gospel Movement) it was just as easily used to justify imperial conquest.

Having slowly adapted to the Age of Mobilization, the churches were once again left behind when the social imaginary shifted again in the late twentieth century. Taylor summarizes his analysis:

> Thus the powerful forms of faith wove four strands together in this age: spirituality, discipline, political identity, and an image of civilizational order. These four strands had been present in élite religion in the two preceding centuries, but now this had become a mass phenomenon. They strengthened each other, made a whole. But these tightly organized churches, often suspicious of outsiders, with their strongly puritanical codes, their inherent links, of whatever sort, to political identities, and their claims to ground civilizational order, were perfectly set up for a precipitate fall in the next age which was beginning to dawn at mid-century. (472)

The contradictions within these four aspects would play a key role in the collapse of Christendom at the end of the twentieth century.

2.3.4 Religion in the Age of Authenticity

Taylor calls the Age of Authenticity *post*-Durkheimian. It is characterized by a change in the basis of social solidarity, the most salient feature of which is the rise of expressive individualism. As Taylor describes it, with expressive individualism "the religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand it" (486). Spirituality becomes an individual quest for authenticity.

The Age of Authenticity did not spring up suddenly, of course, nor has the transformation been complete. Institutionally, it arose from the cascading consequences of post-war affluence, mass post-secondary education, and the development of a consumer culture. The growth of the suburbs and high labour market mobility increasingly broke down community ties. The development of cheap, effective artificial contraceptives opened the door to the sexual revolution. Politically, emphasis shifted from party discipline to individual rights. Pluralism became officially recognized in policies of multiculturalism. Culturally, the roots of expressive individualism can be found in the Romantic Movement, but what formerly had been an affectation of intellectual and aesthetic elites had by the late twentieth century become a mass phenomenon. There was a growing emphasis on autonomy and self-realization, which Robert Bellah and his associates (1985) described at the time as "leaving home" and "finding oneself." As they put it: "Leaving home in a sense

involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves. And if that is the case with respect to families, it is even more so with our ultimate defining beliefs" (1985, 65). Identity became a central concern, psychologically, socially, culturally, and politically. This was intensified by the development of the internet and social media which gave individuals an unprecedented ability to express their own ideas and opinions.

Perhaps the best place to see this shift in the nature of social solidarity and what it means for religion would be in the popular music in the 1960s and 1970s which exemplified the shift. Singers like the young Bob Dylan, the Byrds, The Doors and the Rolling Stones articulated the essence of expressive individualism and were (literally) instrumental in spreading it worldwide. Perhaps no group had more influence than the Beatles, and among their music, John Lennon's song *Imagine*. Written in 1971, the song remains one of his most influential. At the closing exercises of the 2012 Olympics it was sung as a hymn—reverently, before a hushed audience, by a choir dressed in white.

Taylor's four characteristics of religion in the Age of Mobilization are changed or notably absent from this music. While the occasional spirituality of this music echoed some of the themes of traditional Christianity (there was a great emphasis on peace and brotherhood), others were unconventional, as in The Doors' *Break on Through*. Institutional religion was ignored or explicitly rejected. There was a great deal of protest in these songs, but no hint of mobilization (to see the difference contrast *Imagine* with, say, the union anthem *Solidarity Forever*). Songs like *Imagine* also caught perfectly the present-orientation of expressive individualism. Any hint of discipline in this music is self-chosen and interiorized rather than institutionalized, let alone externally imposed. Political identity is radically participatory, when it is not rejected altogether. And, as Taylor says, "In the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether 'church' or state" (2007, 487). Christendom is over. Indeed, the notion of a civilizational order itself has become problematic.

But it is at this point that Taylor's story raises some difficulties of its own. The post-war trends of growing affluence in an increasingly middle class society did not continue. By the 1980s incomes for all but the very rich had stagnated and the middle class started to decline. The rise of globalization and neo-liberalism, the outsourcing of industrial jobs and the shifting focus of the economy to the financial sector led to economic instability and, as Michael Sandel (2012) calls it, a transformation from a *market economy* to a *market society*. Culturally, this was accompanied—most strongly in the United States—by a cultural backlash and the rise of fundamentalism.

Over a century-and-a-half ago Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the new (for him) phenomenon of individualism was not the same as selfishness, but it could easily *become* selfishness (1945, II, 104). Durkheim shared that apprehension and was gravely concerned that *anomie*—a sense of normlessness—would undermine the cooperation between individuals which he saw as the essence of organic

solidarity. Taylor does not often address anomie, but he does express some anxieties. "My hypothesis," he says, "is that the post-war slide in our social imaginary more and more into a post-Durkheimian age has destabilized and undermined the various Durkheimian dispensations" (2007, 491–492). But Taylor is not at all clear on what are the limits of the "post-Durkheimian dispensation." Commenting on this passage, Robert Bellah asks: "My question here is, how far can this negative post-Durkheimianism go? At what point does a fractured society, one without common values and increasingly without common norms, cease to function?" (2007). The processes of "leaving home" and "finding oneself" inherent in any quest for an authentic identity risks becoming a never-ending series of departures and new beginnings in which solidarity with a broader community is diminished, replaced by ersatz and transitory associations. Without institutional frameworks, a search for authenticity risks becoming a series of masks or brands, discourse risks becoming mere spin. Widespread anomie may very well be the result. The Age of Authenticity may breed its own discontents. Taylor once criticized some theories for confusing individualism with "the anomie of breakdown" (1995, 32). But what if the "anomie of breakdown" is exactly what we are experiencing in the twenty-first century? As a "post-Durkheimian dispensation," the Age of Authenticity may turn out to be an unstable transition. What effect does this have on our understanding of religion?

2.4 Religion and Atheism After Christendom

Taylor's story is an alternative to the old narratives of both secularization and renewal. Religion is not disappearing, let alone being replaced by science and reason. On the other hand, there is little basis for optimism that younger people will be returning to the churches anytime soon. Those whose identity is formed through expressive individualism are (almost by definition) resistant to being mobilized, religiously or politically. Taylor is cautiously optimistic that religion can adapt, although he sees much of contemporary spirituality as trivial and shallow (2007, 508). But how well does Taylor's story answer the question of why the mainstream churches are declining while other religious groups are holding their own or growing? And how does this help us understand the New Atheism?

The social changes of the past half-century have largely by-passed the mainline churches. While individual congregations here and there have adapted well to new circumstances, as a whole the mainstream churches have continued the forms and structures of the Age of Mobilization. Apart from a few guitars and occasional PowerPoint slides, worship today is much as it was in the 1950s. Shrinking budgets have trimmed programs much more quickly than bureaucracy (the Anglican Church in Canada, for example, has lost over half its members since 1960 but maintains the same number of bishops). But without innovative programs it becomes difficult to attract new people. Most churches have clung to their puritanical moral codes, only to have their strictures on sex, family, and sexual orientation alienate young people.

As their numbers declined, the church's influence on the broader society waned. The mainstream churches have not grasped the significance of the end of Christendom. Taylor says:

> There was a tripartite connection which seemed to many absolutely unquestionable in the past: between Christian faith and an ethic of discipline and self control, even of abnegation, on one hand; and between this ethic and civilizational order on the other. But … this second link has come to seem less and less credible to more and more people. … Now where the link between disciplines and civilizational order is broken, but between Christian faith and the disciplines remains unchallenged, expressivism and the conjoined sexual revolution has alienated many people from the churches. (2007, 493)

To the extent that the churches have remained institutional relics of the Age of Mobilization, their appeal has gradually withered away as younger people have increasingly sought spiritual expression (to the extent that they do so at all) elsewhere. The churches today are on the margin of society. But there is still life on the margins. Some groups (such as the Taizé community) are experimenting with new forms of spirituality. It is possible that some of the mainstream churches may yet outlive Christendom.

Evangelical and fundamentalist churches are equally on the margin of society, but have reacted to the end of Christendom much more aggressively. In large part fundamentalism can be seen as backlash against the cultural transformation that Taylor describes (2007, 510). In North America, fundamentalism has been strongest among precisely those religious groups which were the "most modern" in the nineteenth century, e.g. evangelicals who pioneered new forms of religion during the Age of Mobilization. This gives fundamentalism in North America much of its paradoxical nature. On the one hand, many groups have continued to pioneer spiritual technologies; gathering in megachurches, deploying the latest communication technologies (they earlier pioneered the use of radio and TV for evangelism) and using contemporary music. On the other hand, the content of their message is strongly opposed to the dominant culture. This has two effects.

First, in part fundamentalism today can be seen as a reaction against the forms of expressive individualism characteristic of the Age of Authenticity. These are seen as both immoral in and of themselves (especially anything involving sexuality or changing gender roles) and as an evasion of the self-sacrifices demanded by Age of Mobilization discipline (hence the rage directed against "entitlements"). This moral conflict produces an anger that is easy to mobilize, as the late Jerry Falwell did with the "Moral Majority" in the United States. So the rise of the New Christian Right and the Tea Party movement in the US are protest movements, not the continuation of Christendom. They protest precisely because their values are no longer central to society.

Second, being a self-conscious minority enables fundamentalists to counter rapid social change with rhetoric of "victimization" and "persecution" (e.g. the "war on Christmas") which in turn helps to build stronger identity boundaries and group solidarity. Their social epistemology, based (as they see it) on the literal and inerrant Word of the Bible, fosters a sense of certainty (Stahl 2010). And a stronger group,

clearer identity, and sense of certainty could have great appeal for a declining middle class trapped in anomie and threatened by socio-economic change (cf. Hedges 2006). Hence the nostalgia for a time when booming factories provided secure middle class incomes and the authority of their beliefs and values was unchallenged.

This, then, is the religious context for the rise of the New Atheists. The mainstream churches, which used to define the centre of society, are in decline while religiously-based protest groups grow. But more than just context, this is their condition as well. The New Atheists are both an expression *of* and a backlash *against* the Age of Authenticity.

In some ways, the New Atheism is another expression of the Age of Authenticity. As Christendom declined, a "space" was created for alternative forms of spirituality to become mass phenomena, including atheism. Some atheists in the UK and US have even set up their own "churches," called Sunday Assemblies, where they gather for weekly non-theistic "worship" services (The Sunday Assembly 2014). Atheism became one more choice in a pluralistic culture (Cimino and Smith 2010). When individuals decide their own spirituality, free from—and often hostile to—tradition and institutions, some will choose to have no religion at all. This is consistent with what empirical research tells us about the "religious nones"—they are a protean group without a fixed core or boundaries (Bibby 2007a).

At the same time, the rise of the New Atheists can be understood as a backlash against the changes in values and authority characteristic of the Age of Authenticity. Like the fundamentalists, the New Atheists are also a movement protesting change in authority and values. They differ over *which* values they hold dear. The New Atheists continue to espouse those values of the Enlightenment—reason, skepticism, progress—central to the Age of Mobilization and which they see as under attack.

A central aspect of this has been a relative decline in the authority of science. From Comte to Dawkins, the authority of atheism has rested on the authority of science (Fuller 2010; Eagleton 2009). But expressive individualism undermined the authority of science in exactly the same way (if not yet to the same extent) as it did the churches. Individuals choosing their own beliefs and values could choose to reject science—especially when science became identified with big corporations and the military. In the 1990s some scientists lashed out at what they perceived as threats to the authority of science in the so-called "science wars." Since then the authority of science has plummeted. Today science is trumped by ideology in both the United States and Canada as budgets are cut, labs closed, scientists muzzled, and climate change denied (cf. Turner 2013). The end of Christendom has been paralleled by the retreat of science towards the margins of society as well.

Further, the New Atheists' one-dimensional belief in the authority of reason and science leaves little room for individual authenticity or a quest for meaning. There is virtually nothing of expressive individualism here. Since "religion poisons everything" there is no point in exploration, discussion, or dialogue—religion is mocked and ridiculed. They reject the values of tolerance, pluralism, and mutual respect as (in Hitchens' words), "empty-headed multiculturalism" (2007, 33) and

"the morally lazy practice of relativism" (281). Harris declares that: "the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principle forces driving us towards the abyss" (2004, 15). The values of expressive individualism are seen as dangerous and threatening. In many ways, the New Atheists' social epistemology is the mirror image of fundamentalism (Stahl 2010). They, too, protest because their values are no longer central to society.

Finally, the political dynamic of the New Atheists has changed from that of their forbearers. Nineteenth-century atheism saw its aim as human liberation. The New Atheists are socially and politically conservative. Their writings show little interest in social justice or the poor. They support the Anglo-American wars in the Middle East. They are often accused of sexism and racism (e.g. Watson 2011; Greenwald 2013). Indeed, Islamophobia has become characteristic of the movement. For example, Sam Harris proclaimed "we are at war with Islam" (2004, 109), justified torture, called for ethnic profiling of anyone who "looked Muslim," and argued that, should an Islamist regime ever get nuclear weapons, "the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own" (129). Their politics, like their values, are backlash.

Thus Taylor's account helps us to understand why the mainstream religious institutions which previously exercised hegemony have declined while other groups have not. Christendom is over and the mainstream churches have not adapted to changes in the social imaginary. Although Taylor himself pays little attention to anomie or the rise of either fundamentalism or the New Atheists, extending his theory helps us to understand the success of both these groups as protest movements. Both rage against what they see as threatening challenges to their most central beliefs and values.

Reflecting upon a France divided by an obdurately reactionary Church a century ago, Émile Durkheim wrote: "The old ideals and the divinities which incarnate them are dying because they no longer correspond sufficiently to the new aspirations of our day; and the new ideals which are necessary to orient our life are not yet born" (1973/1914, xlvii). Perhaps today we are in a similar time of transition.

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