

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

March 24, 2011

One of our members sent me the following link to an article on the web:

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/23/religion-to-go-extinct-in-9-countries-experts-predict/?hpt=C2> (the full text of this article is copied at the end of my words below)

This kind of prediction is not surprising, given the assumptions that lie underneath it.

Yes, the number of overtly "religious" (that is - church-going) people in Canada, including in the United Church, is continuing to decline. However, predictions like this one don't take into account that the decline is in fact slowing, and that attendance and involvement in church is much more complex than membership in such things as Lion's Club or Kinsmen, soccer league or community association. Straight-line projections may have little relationship with what is really going on for the church-goers of today, let alone the spiritual seekers who may not be connected to church right now.

Regardless of the truth or reliability of this prediction, though, it is clear that churches including ours (whether the United Church of Canada or Knox United Church) MUST find new ways of connecting with people. Doing great things on Sunday mornings is no longer adequate to attract or maintain folks' attachment to any church. I believe there is NOT a large group of potential church-goers just waiting to hear about what we're doing at Knox (or any other church). The people who are looking for and attracted to what we are now doing, are mostly already here, or in some other church.

We need to be doing NEW things that will connect with NEW people -- people we would not likely see on Sunday mornings regardless of what we might be doing in that hour or so each week. These people MAY become a new congregation, but it is also possible they may never come together in the sort of congregational model we now see. The church of the future might well be comprised of a number of largely-separated small groups, each with some need or interest being fulfilled by events, programs and activities offered through the base organization of a church. Some of these people MAY be interested in gathering in larger groups to deepen, express and celebrate something they might call faith, but that is not at all clear yet. The "new spirituality" is quite personal and individual, and people of the last two generations -- spiritual seekers though they might be -- are intensely suspicious of large organizations of any sort, including the church.

So out of all this, the predictions in this article may well have some truthfulness about them, insofar as the institutional church of today is concerned. One of our main tasks from within that institutional church, I believe, is to find new ways of being community in a society where "community" can be hard for folks to find. This will involve a whole array of different activities and programs to connect people of similar needs and interests -- programs and activities that on the surface may have little overt "religious" content. We need to grapple with a difficult truth -- what feeds our own spirituality and sense of connection to faith may well be exactly what gets in the way for spiritual seekers today. Shedding some of our current or even traditional ways and understandings that have become huge barriers will be painful and difficult.

Can those of us who are enmeshed in the church of today and all its features find our way to keep at least key parts of it healthy for ourselves and others like us, while also creating and supporting quite different new ways and connections that reach well outside our own experience? That, I believe, will be the real test of the future of "the church". If we can do that dual job, then the church as an organization and significant cultural player will continue, albeit with an increasingly different balance between 'old' and 'new' church. If we cannot stretch ourselves enough to do this, then the church will indeed disappear as a significant element in society, and only from outside the current church will things emerge that will scratch the itch of people's spirituality.

Original Article Text:

Organized religion 'will be driven toward extinction' in 9 countries, experts predict

By **Richard Allen Greene**, CNN

from the CNN *Belief Blog*, March 23, 2011:

<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/23/religion-to-go-extinct-in-9-countries-experts-predict/?hpt=C2>

Organized religion will all but vanish eventually from nine Western-style democracies, a team of mathematicians predict in a new paper based on census data stretching back 100 years.

It won't die out completely, but "religion will be driven toward extinction" in countries including Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands, they say.

It will also wither away in Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland and Switzerland, they anticipate.

They can't make a prediction about the United States because the U.S. census doesn't ask about religion, lead author Daniel Abrams told CNN.

But nine other countries provide enough data for detailed mathematical modeling, he said.

"If you look at the data, 'unaffiliated' is the fastest-growing group" in those countries, he said.

"We start with two big assumptions based on sociology," he explained.

The first is that it's more attractive to be part of the majority than the minority, so as religious affiliation declines, it becomes more popular not to be a churchgoer than to be one, he said - what Abrams calls the majority effect.

"People are more likely to switch to groups with more members," he said.

Social networks can have a powerful influence, he said.

"Just a few connections to people who are (religiously) unaffiliated is enough to drive the effect," he said.

The other assumption underlying the prediction is that there are social, economic and political advantages to being unaffiliated with a religion in the countries where it's in decline - what Abrams calls the utility effect.

"The utility of being unaffiliated seems to be higher than affiliated in Western democracies," he said.

Abrams and his co-authors are not passing any judgment on religion, he's quick to say - they're just modeling a prediction based on trends.

"We're not trying to make any commentary about religion or whether people should be religious or not," he said.

"I became interested in this because I saw survey data results for the U.S. and was surprised by how large the unaffiliated group was," he said, referring to a number of studies done by universities and think tanks on trends in religion.

Studies suggest that "unaffiliated" is the fastest-growing religious group in the United States, with about 15% of the population falling into a category experts call the "nones."

They're not necessarily atheists or non-believers, experts say, just people who do not associate themselves with a particular religion or house of worship at the time of the survey.

Abrams had done an earlier study looking into the extinction of languages spoken by small numbers of people.

When he saw the religion data, his co-author "Richard Wiener suggested we try to apply a similar technique to religious affiliation," Abrams said.

The paper, by Abrams, Wiener and Haley A. Yapple, is called "A mathematical model of social group competition with application to the growth of religious non-affiliation." They presented it this week at the Dallas meeting of the American Physical Society.

Only the Czech Republic already has a majority of people who are unaffiliated with religion, but the Netherlands, for example, will go from about 40% unaffiliated today to more than 70% by 2050, they expect.

Even deeply Catholic Ireland will see religion die out, the model predicts.

"They've gone from 0.04% unaffiliated in 1961 to 4.2% in 2006, our most recent data point," Abrams says.

He admits that the increase in Muslim immigration to Europe may throw off the model, but he thinks the trend is robust enough to withstand some challenges.

"Netherlands data goes back to 1860," he pointed out. "Every single data that we were able to find shows that people are moving from the affiliated to unaffiliated. I can't imagine that will change, but that's personal opinion, not what the data shows."

But Barry Kosmin, a demographer of religion at Trinity College in Connecticut, is doubtful.

"Religion relies on human beings. They aren't rational or predictable according to the laws of physics. Religious fervor waxes and wanes in unpredictable ways," he said.

"The Jewish tradition that says prophecy is for fools and children is probably wise," he added.

And Abrams, Wiener and Yapple are not the first to predict the end of religion.

Peter Berger, a former president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, once said that, "People will become so bored with what religious groups have to offer that they will look elsewhere."

He said Protestantism "has reached the strange state of self-liquidation," that Catholicism was in severe crisis, and anticipated that "religions are likely to survive in small enclaves and pockets" in the United States.

He made those predictions in February 1968.