How Quebec went from one of the most religious societies to one of the least

Americans don’t have to look as far away as Europe for an example of how quickly secularization can come.

by Philip Jenkins in the May 5, 2021 issue

REPURPOSED: The neo-Gothic exterior of St. Jude Church in Montreal was maintained through its transition to what is now Le Saint-Jude Gym and Spa.(Photo © caribb via Creative Commons License)

Religious Americans sometimes look nervously at the rapid secularization of European nations and wonder if something similar could happen to them. The last decade has witnessed a notable drift to the secular in the United States, measured for instance by the substantial rise in nones, those who reject any religious affiliation. Meanwhile, the current pandemic will assuredly have wide-ranging effects on institutions of all kinds.

But we don’t have to look as far away as Europe for an example of a quite sudden and irrevocable decline of religious faith and practice and the general replacement of old congregations by new populations. To see just how speedily an old religious

order can collapse, look no further than the Canadian province of Quebec. This is not to suggest any direct analogies with the present US situation, but rather to stress how quickly an impregnable fortress can crumble.

Quebec in the 1950s was one of the world's most religiously active societies, with a powerful Roman Catholic Church that was regarded as reactionary even by the standards of the time. The French speakers who made up the great majority of the province's population viewed the church as a cherished symbol of cultural identity and survival under what they saw as heavy-handed Anglo domination and exploitation. The province's Irish minority saw just as little reason to challenge that religious order. The Catholic Church utterly dominated large areas of everyday life through its role in health care, education, and social welfare. Weekly mass attendance rates reportedly reached a staggering 90 percent. Churches and pilgrim shrines blossomed, making Montreal the "city of a thousand steeples."

That era found a triumphant material symbol in the glorious shrine of Saint Joseph's Oratory on Mont-Royal. Quebecois French is one of the rare Western languages in which religious swear words carry far more weight than sexual epithets—a point that demonstrates the once-vital force of religion in daily life.

Starting in 1960, Quebec experienced a general cultural and political transformation. New media, higher levels of education, and new forms of political protest combined to support a new national consciousness, with calls for secession from Canada. The religious consequences of this Quiet Revolution were sudden and disastrous for the established order. The state took over many of the functions previously claimed by the church.

Meanwhile, a more confident and educated laity quickly shed their previous habits of piety as levels of church attendance plummeted. Between 1986 and 2011, the proportion of Quebec's population attending church monthly fell from 48 to 17 percent. The weekly attendance rate today is around 4 percent, low even by European standards. The province's dioceses are speedily closing or merging once-thriving parishes. Hundreds of former churches have been demolished or repurposed as homes or commercial establishments. Buildings awaiting such reassignment are described by the creepy phrase *en mutation*.

By all the obvious measures—clerical vocations, the proportion of people being baptized or married in church—secularization has been quite thorough. In 1960,

adherence to church positions made cremation close to unthinkable; today, Quebec's cremation rate is around 60 percent. Barely a third of the people in Quebec say that religion is important to them.

The church has suffered repeated political defeats, in a province that now affirms political *laïcité* on French lines, rejecting any and all public affirmations of religion. In 2019, a controversial new law prohibited public employees from wearing or displaying the symbols of any religion.

The only sign of hope for the churches has been in immigration. In the 1970s, the nationalist government of Quebec announced a special preference for French-speaking immigrants, presumably hoping to attract new arrivals from Western Europe. Few Europeans responded, but the invitation proved very attractive to French speakers from Haiti, Vietnam, and Africa. To its credit, the Quebec government honored its original invitation, making both the province and its churches much more ethnically diverse.

Latino, Filipino, and Arab Christians have made their own contributions. These Global South immigrants gave new life to Catholic churches and shrines that would otherwise have decayed rapidly into bare ruined choirs. Even so, they remain a small minority.

Quebec today is a vastly more advanced and sophisticated place than it was in the 1950s, an era that few but the most reactionary regard with nostalgia. What it has largely lost in the process of change and growth has been institutional religion, and with it much sense of Christian identity. In about a generation, one of the world's most religious societies became one of the least.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Suddenly secular."