

Institutions and Rapid Religious Reversals*

Understanding the Secularization of Canada

PRELIMINARY – DO NOT CITE OR CIRCULATE

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Abstract

Why was the decline of religion much more pronounced in Europe than in the US after World War II? The Canadian case holds the key to understanding these divergent secularization patterns since it is a hybrid case: most of the country followed a pattern of sustained religiosity closer to the US, while Quebec saw a rapid decline of religion similar to many European countries. Indeed, Quebec experienced one of the world's fastest episodes of secularization starting in the late 1950s. It went from being the *most* religious province in Canada to being the *least* religious one in less than two decades. I propose a new formal theory in which such rapid religious reversals are caused by a high degree of interdependence between public institutions and cultural religiosity. Intuitively, a strong interdependence generates a *political multiplier* effect in which more religious public institutions increase the population's religiosity, leading them to support policies that reinforce the religiosity of institutions, and so on. However, a shock can reverse this multiplier effect and generate a rapid shift toward a strongly secular society. Building on the historical literature, I argue that the institutions of the Catholic Church and the provincial state became highly intertwined—a structure that I call *institutional integration*—which created a greater interdependence between religiosity and public institutions in Quebec than in other parts of Canada. I contend that low federal transfers and insufficient recruitment weakened the religious welfare state in the 1950s, which opened the way for a shift in the 1960s to an equilibrium with a strongly secular and generous welfare state along with low cultural religiosity. To substantiate my theory, I draw on existing data sources and build a new dataset with multiple indicators of religiosity by combining 80 historical polls. Furthermore, I critically assess competing explanations. I conclude by connecting my theory to the decline of religion in the US and in European countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Ireland.

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1 Introduction

Why religion declined more in Europe than in the United States in the 20th century is a central puzzle in the literature on the sociology and political economy of religion. Although Christianity had been a vibrant and central part of cultures on both sides of the Atlantic until then, its influence fell much more drastically in Europe, especially after World War II. There is no scholarly consensus as to why and how this happened, and thus, these remain open questions (Bruce, 2011; Norris & Inglehart, 2011).

The Canadian case represents a hybrid between the European and American patterns of secularization (Martin, 2017),¹ and therefore holds the key to understanding their divergence. Secularization dynamics vary greatly within Canada, with Quebec following a European pattern of drastic secularization and the rest of the country following the American pattern of sustained religiosity after the 1980s.

In this paper, I argue that, like many European countries, Quebec inherited a church and state that were strongly *institutionally integrated* relative to the rest of Canada. Quebec's unique history, and the cultural threat facing the Catholic Church and its conquered French-Canadian constituency, led religious and provincial state institutions to become "joined at the hip" in a way that made public institutions and religion highly interdependent (Gauvreau, 2005; Ferretti, 1999; Matte, 2013; Van Die, 2001; Zubrzycki, 2016).

On the other hand, in the other Canadian provinces, church and state institutions were far less intertwined. Although the Anglican, United Protestant, and Catholic Churches historically contributed to public education, healthcare, and welfare, their fragmentation and the stronger influence of the American separation of church and state ideology prevented these churches from integrating into state institutions as deeply as the Catholic Church did in Quebec (Beyer, 1997; Lipset, 2013; Martin, 2017; Van Die, 2001).

To clarify my theory, I propose a model where cultural (i.e., norms, behaviors, values and beliefs) and institutional changes are mutually reinforcing. My model explains a puzzling

¹For the purpose of this study, I focus on secularization in the West as the decline of traditional Christian religious norms, behaviors, values, beliefs and institutions. This is not to be confused with other definitions of secularization (Casanova, 2011; Dobbelaere, 2002).

fact about Canada’s recent history: Quebec’s relative *rapid religious reversal*. Indeed, Quebec went from being the *most* religious province in Canada—and one of the most religious regions in the West—to being the *least* religious one in less than two decades after 1960.

My model is inspired by the theoretical literatures on the dynamic interaction between culture and institutions (Lind & Chen, 2016; Persson & Tabellini, 2021), and social multipliers (Brock & Durlauf, 2001; Glaeser et al., 2003). The key driving force in the model is that a high degree of church-state integration generates a large *political multiplier* that amplifies the effects of individual behaviors on cultural outcomes through political channels, which gives rise to multiple equilibria. Since religious institutions are connected to public institutions, they are heavily influenced by the orientation of public policies and, thus, by the citizens’ vote. This generates a feedback loop that converges to a strongly religious or secular equilibrium: a religious (secular) population supports pro-religion (pro-secular) policies, which in turn promotes religious (secular) attitudes in the population, and so on. Greater integration of the church and state intensifies this feedback loop, leading to increased polarization of the two equilibria. Then, a shock, such as a temporary decrease in the efficiency of public institutions, can generate a radical shift from an especially religious equilibrium to an especially irreligious one. This constitutes a new mechanism for rapid cultural and political changes, which distinguishes itself from existing theories (Acemoglu & Jackson, 2015; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2021; Bikhchandani et al., 1992; Fernández, 2013; Giavazzi et al., 2019; Inglehart et al., 2017; Iyigun et al., 2018; Kuran, 1997; Rubin, 2014; Wheaton, 2020).

My model explains the institutional and cultural transformation of Quebec in the 1960s—known as the “Quiet Revolution”—and the lack of drastic transformation in the rest of Canada. I argue that the weakening of the religious welfare state in 1950s Quebec, due to low federal transfers (Geloso, 2012; Geloso & Chandler, 2022) and insufficient personnel recruitment (Ferretti, 1999; Murphy, 2008), opened the door for an equilibrium shift in the 1960s toward an especially generous secular welfare state along with low cultural religiosity.

The power of my theory is that it can predict such a complex and astonishing rapid cultural, political and institutional reversal from a single parameter: the degree of church-state integration.

I provide evidence for the mechanism underlying my model by building a new dataset combining data from 80 polls (Gallup, 2021; Bibby, 2021). The descriptive pattern that my model explains is seen in weekly church attendance (see Figure 1) as well as other religiosity indicators, such as the belief in Hell and the disapproval of legal euthanasia (see Section 3). In particular, the pattern holds when only comparing Catholics and French speakers across provinces. This fits with previous studies on Quebec's unique rapid reversal in other measures related to religiosity, such as rates of divorce, common-law unions (Laplane, 2006; Pollard & Wu, 1998), religious voting (Bibeau et al., 2023) and birth rates, which experienced one of the biggest and fastest drops in history (Krull & Trovato, 2003).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the following section, I develop the model. In Section 3, I compare the Quebec case to the rest of Canada through qualitative and historical lens supplemented by quantitative evidence. In Section 4, I discuss and rule out alternative explanations. Section 5 concludes with a brief discussion of the lessons from this analysis for understanding the religious trajectory of the other North American and European cases that motivated my study of Canada.

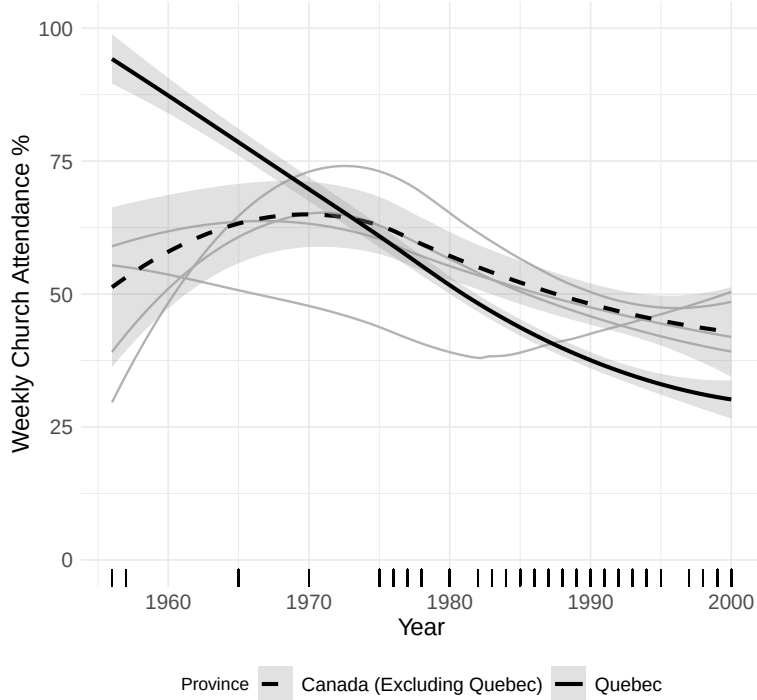


Figure 1: Weekly Church Attendance Among French-Speaking Catholics

Note: I produced this figure using multiple Gallup (Gallup, 2021) and Project Canada (Bibby, 2021) polls. The nonparametric trends and the 95% confidence intervals are computed using loess (local regression) with a standard cubic weighting function and full span. The ticks on the x-axis indicate the years for which data exists. The pale grey lines represent (in increasing order of church attendance in 1956) the Atlantic provinces, the provinces of the prairies, British Columbia, and Ontario.

2 Model

2.1 Setup

There is a unit mass I of citizens i and two parties $p \in \{A, B\}$. The game has two stages: a *cultural stage*, in which individuals decide which cultural type $\omega_i \in \{-1, 1\}$ to adopt, followed by a *political stage*, in which parties propose cultural policies $R_p \in [-1, 1]$ and citizens vote. $\omega_i = 1$ represents being a religious type and $\omega_i = -1$ represents being a secular type.² Similarly, $R_p = 1$ and $R_p = -1$ respectfully represent fully religious and

²One can think of the type as the behavior adopted in society (e.g., going to church, attitudes professed) given fixed preferences and varying social conditions. Nevertheless, although this is a less orthodox approach

irreligious policies. At the end of the game, the citizens' *cultural utility* as a function of their type, the party in power p^* , and the policy implemented R^* is given by:

$$U_i(\omega_i, R^*, p^*) = \frac{h}{2}\omega_i + \epsilon_i(\omega_i) + \lambda\beta\mu(\omega_i R^*) + (1 - \lambda)\gamma + \delta_i(p^*) \quad (1)$$

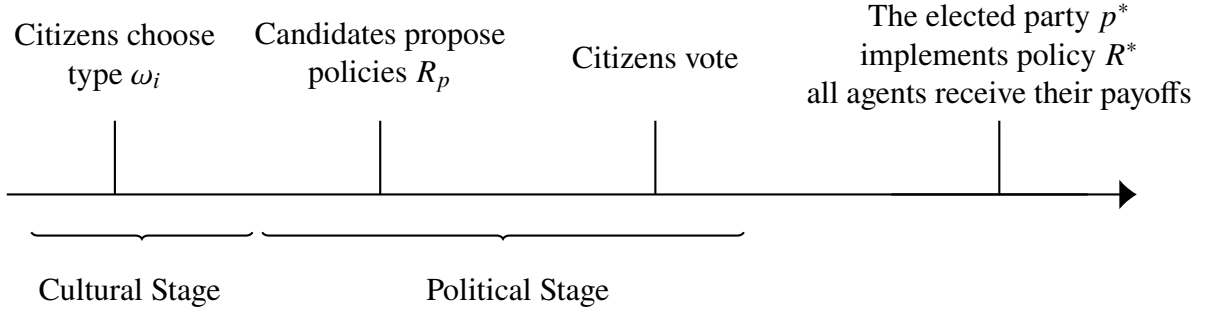


Figure 2: Sequence of Events

In equation (1), the first term represents the *deterministic* direct individual utility commonly shared for being type ω_i ; in other words, the average preference. If $h > 0$, there is a general bias in favor of being type 1, while the opposite is true if $h < 0$.

The second term represents the *idiosyncratic* direct individual utility for being type ω_i . This term captures individual variation in the preference for being religious or not. I assume that $\epsilon_i(-1)$ and $\epsilon_i(1)$ are independent and identically distributed according to a normal distribution $\mathcal{N}(0, \frac{\sigma^2}{2})$, with $\sigma < \frac{2}{\sqrt{2\pi}}$. Hence, $\text{Prob}(\epsilon_i(-1) - \epsilon_i(1) \leq x) = \Phi(x)$, where Φ is the CDF of a normal distribution with mean zero and variance σ^2 .

The third and fourth terms represent the cultural utility derived from institutions. The third term captures the utility obtained from state-integrated institutions, which depends on the cultural alignment of the government and its public goods and services (schools, hospitals, social services, courts, etc.) as represented by $R \in [-1, 1]$. The ideal points of each type are the same as the type itself (i.e., 1 and -1). The closer the government's ideology is to the ideal point of the individual, the higher the utility. However, the closer

in economic models, one can also think of the type as individuals “choosing” their preferences or worldview; see Bernheim et al. (2021). Both interpretations align with my theory.

it gets, the lower the marginal increase in utility; this marginal utility converges to 0 as we get closer to $R = \omega_i$. I assume that $\mu(\omega_i R) = (1 + \omega_i R) - (\frac{1+\omega_i R}{2})^2$, a functional form that has the aforementioned properties, a codomain $[0, 1]$, and leads to convenient simplifications. $\beta \in (0, 1)$ captures the public institutions' efficiency and generosity, with a higher β corresponding to a higher level of public goods provision.

The fourth term represents the utility obtained from independent or private cultural institutions $\gamma > 0$. These can be, for instance, privately funded schools and religious centers, which have the advantage of being immune from political changes. Private institutions also include individual and family "human capital" which can be used to transmit and enforce religious or secular values (Iannaccone, 1995).

The weight parameter $\lambda \in (0, 1)$ captures the relative importance of state-integrated cultural institutions versus independent institutions. This parameter increases with church-state integration since governmental policies, whether they lean more religious or secular, play a more prominent role in individuals' lives. λ is central to my analysis because the higher it is, the larger the *political multiplier* effect.

Strong *church-state institutional integration*, as observed in Quebec and some European countries, results from the combination of two factors. On the one hand, religious organizations and actors take charge of multiple functions of the state, especially those important culturally and socially, such as education, welfare and healthcare. On the other hand, these organizations are made economically and politically subordinate to the state through a direct administrative connection (e.g., they use government-owned buildings or are paid as bureaucrats) or their reliance on state funding.³ With the church having more influence within public establishments, less is invested in private cultural institutions, and people are more reliant on public institutions in their cultural and religious life. This creates an interdependence between religion and state, where state policies greatly influence religiosity by bolstering institutions' religious or secular character, which translates in the

³See Section 3 for how the predictions of the model change with a politically powerful church that has the ability to directly shift policies.

model as a high λ .⁴

The last term captures random individual variation in the preference for the party in power p^* . δ is a *relative* preference for party A since $\delta_i(B) = -\delta_i(A)$. Following much of the literature on probabilistic voting (Persson & Tabellini, 2021), I assume that $\delta \sim U[-\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{2}]$, a uniform distribution centered at zero with density 1.

Agents are forward-looking and anticipate the upcoming political stage when they choose their identity in the cultural stage. Hence, we can solve the equilibrium using backward induction—i.e., we solve the political stage first given a fixed distribution of types ω_i .

Consider the average type $\bar{\omega} = \int_{i \in I} \omega_i di$. For instance, if $\bar{\omega} = 0$, the two types have an equal mass. Equivalently, $k = \frac{\bar{\omega}+1}{2}$ is the fraction of types $\omega_i = 1$. The two parties seek to maximize their chance of holding office. A citizen votes for party A if and only if:⁵

$$U_i(\omega_i, R_A, A) - U_i(\omega_i, R_B, B) = \lambda\beta[\mu(\omega_i R_A) - \mu(\omega_i R_B)] + 2\delta_i(A) \geq 0$$

It is straightforward to show that parties will choose R_p to maximize the average welfare $k\mu(R_p) + (1 - k)\mu(-R_p)$. In equilibrium, we must have $R_A^* = R_B^* = R^* = \bar{\omega}$. Intuitively, since the candidates have to balance the interests of both types of citizens, they propose the policy corresponding to the mean voter preference. Moreover, this is a strictly dominant strategy since R_{-p} doesn't affect the optimal strategy. This aligns with the probabilistic voting literature (Schofield, 2007).⁶ At the end of this stage, one of the two candidates is

⁴This concept, although related, differs from preexisting ones in the literature, like the degree of legal separation of church and state, or state funding of religious institutions.

⁵In case of equality, a citizen is indifferent and can vote for either candidate. However, this will not matter since the citizens' party preferences are distributed according to an atomless distribution. The same is true for the indifference condition in the cultural stage.

⁶It is a simple exercise to show that policy-motivated parties—say, one religious and one secular—would still converge to the mean voter ideal policy. Furthermore, incorporating a mechanism for policy divergence (Calvert, 1985; Wittman, 1977) would not fundamentally alter the model, as candidates' policies would still gravitate around the mean voter. Finally, in the case of Quebec, there was indeed strong policy convergence across parties on the religious/secular dimension. The National Union, in power before the Liberals in 1960, started shifting toward a more secular policy some months before the election (Latouche & Harvey, 2015b), and pursued the liberals' institutional secularization when they got back into power in 1966 (Latouche & Harvey, 2015a).

elected and policy R^* is implemented. This is summarized in the following lemma.⁷

Lemma 1 *The policy implemented is $R^* = \bar{\omega}$, regardless of which party gets elected. Furthermore, candidates play strictly dominant strategies.*

Now, let's consider the preceding cultural stage. Citizens form an expectation R_i^e for the policy implemented in the final stage. Therefore, an individual will choose type 1 if and only if:

$$\begin{aligned} U_i(1, R_i^e, p^*) - U_i(-1, R_i^e, p^*) &= h + \lambda\beta[\mu(R_i^e) - \mu(-R_i^e)] + [\epsilon_i(1) - \epsilon_i(-1)] \geq 0 \\ \iff h + \lambda\beta R_i^e &\geq \epsilon_i(-1) - \epsilon_i(1) \end{aligned}$$

I focus on *rational expectations equilibria*, in which citizens make correct predictions. Therefore, all citizens must have expectations $R_i^e = R^* = \bar{\omega}$ in equilibrium. Given the distribution of $\epsilon(-1) - \epsilon(1)$, it follows that the mass of individuals who will be types 1 is $k = \Phi(h + \lambda\beta\bar{\omega})$. To simplify the analysis, I use the function $\Psi(x) = 2\Phi(x) - 1$, which is a rescaling of the normal CDF. This function now has a codomain between -1 and 1 . Hence, the equilibria of the model are fixed points of the following function:

$$g(\bar{\omega}) := \Psi(h + \lambda\beta\bar{\omega}) \tag{2}$$

Lemma 2 *Equilibrium values of $\bar{\omega}$ are fixed points of the function $g(\bar{\omega})$.*

This fixed point problem admits many solutions, and thus many equilibria are possible. To understand the properties of these equilibria, we must first understand the dynamics of this problem, which can naturally be interpreted in the following way. Denote the iterations of this dynamic process $i \in \mathbb{N}$. Suppose we start out-of-equilibrium with a cultural policy R^0 . Given this policy, some citizens adjust their behavior and we get $\bar{\omega}^1 = g(R^0)$. Then, at the next election, politicians, seeing the change in the distribution of types in the population,

⁷All proofs are in Appendix C.

adjust their policy to $R^1 = \bar{\omega}^1$. Once in power, they modify the cultural alignment of the public institutions, which, in reality, takes a few years. Citizens adjust their type in reaction to this new policy and we get $\bar{\omega}^2 = g(R^1)$, and so on. This dynamic is characterized by the recursive equation $\bar{\omega}^{i+1} = g(\bar{\omega}^i)$. This process eventually converges to a fixed point $R^* = \bar{\omega} = g(\bar{\omega})$. Therefore the public institutions and cultural traits move in interlocked steps. Notice that citizens do not need to keep track of the other individuals' choices, only the policy, in contrast with social multiplier theories (Brock & Durlauf, 2001; Glaeser et al., 2003; Glaeser & Scheinkman, 2000). Hence, the political process centralizes and diffuses information, and provides a clear mechanism for social coordination and, thus, for the multiplier effect.

Theorem 1 *All stationary equilibria are given by fixed points to $g(\bar{\omega})$ and are interior, i.e., strictly between -1 and 1 . There are two cases to consider:*

1. *If $\lambda\beta < \Lambda$ or, if not, $|h| > H$ where H is increasing in $\lambda\beta$, there is a unique globally asymptotically stable equilibrium $\bar{\omega}^0$ such that $\text{sign}(\bar{\omega}^0) = \text{sign}(h)$.*
2. *If $\lambda\beta > \Lambda$ and $|h| < H$, there are three equilibria: $\bar{\omega}^+ > 0$, $\bar{\omega}^- < 0$, and $\bar{\omega}^0 \in (\bar{\omega}^-, \bar{\omega}^+)$ such that $\text{sign}(\bar{\omega}^0) = -\text{sign}(h)$. $\bar{\omega}^+$ and $\bar{\omega}^-$ are asymptotically stable equilibria with basins of attraction $B(\bar{\omega}^+) = (\bar{\omega}^0, 1]$ and $B(\bar{\omega}^-) = [0, \bar{\omega}^0)$. $\bar{\omega}^0$ is an unstable equilibrium.*⁸

⁸If $\lambda\beta \geq \Lambda$ and $|h| = H$, there is a stable equilibrium and a (one-sided) unstable equilibrium. However, this is a knife-edge (non-generic) case.

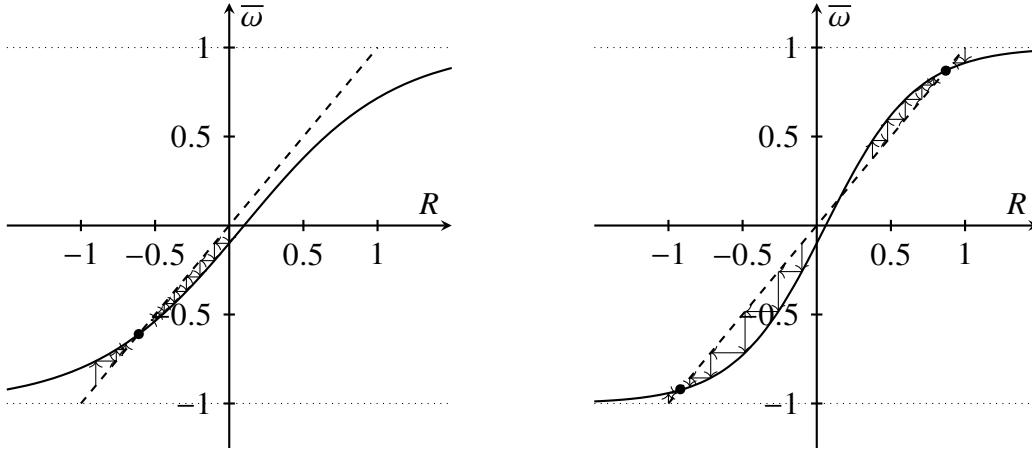


Figure 3: Fixed Points and Dynamics

Note: $h < 0$ on both plots, and the left plot displays case 1 of Theorem 1 while the right plot displays case 2 of Theorem 1. The black dots are the stable equilibria, and the arrows display the steps of the dynamic process.

Theorem 1 says that as long as $\lambda\beta$ is high enough (i.e., the multiplier effect is large enough), and the uniform bias h is not too large in one direction, there are three possible equilibria to consider. There is a positive and a negative stable equilibrium, and the middle unstable equilibrium delimits their respective basins of attraction. If a change in parameter leads to a switch from case 2 to case 1, then if $h > 0$, $\bar{\omega}^-$ is eliminated and there is a smooth transition in which $\bar{\omega}^+$ becomes $\bar{\omega}^0$. Similarly, if $h < 0$, $\bar{\omega}^+$ is eliminated and there is a smooth transition in which $\bar{\omega}^-$ becomes $\bar{\omega}^0$. Henceforth, I focus on stable equilibria as possible outcomes of the game, in line with the population games literature (Sandholm, 2010).⁹ For simplicity, I call stable equilibria simply “equilibria”.

2.2 Rapid Religious Reversals

Proposition 1, which gives a comparative statics result that follows directly from Theorem 1, is key to understanding how this model pertains to cultural reversals.

⁹One way to think about this is to assume that there are tiny shocks that affect the policies proposed in the dynamic process ($R^i = m^i + \phi^i$, where ϕ are small random shocks centered at zero). Hence, the process never stabilizes at an unstable equilibrium. This includes one-side stable equilibria, like the one that arises when $\lambda\beta \geq \Lambda$ and $|h| = H$.

Proposition 1 *All positive stable equilibria ($\bar{\omega} > 0$) are smoothly increasing in $\lambda\beta$ and all negative stable equilibria ($\bar{\omega} < 0$) are smoothly decreasing in $\lambda\beta$. Furthermore, a decrease in $\lambda\beta$, if large enough, can lead to a shift from case 2 to case 1 of Theorem 1, in which case, we conserve the equilibrium with the sign of h ($\bar{\omega}^0 = \bar{\omega}^+$ if $h > 0$ and $\bar{\omega}^0 = \bar{\omega}^-$ if $h < 0$) and all other equilibria are eliminated. If we started in an equilibrium with the opposite sign of h , this change triggers a discontinuous equilibrium shift.*

A higher degree of church-state integration ($\uparrow \lambda$) generates *more polarized* outcomes. If we are in case 1, an increase in λ increases the equilibrium if it is positive and decreases it if it is negative. An increase in λ may also lead to a shift from case 1 to case 2, which implies $\bar{\omega}^0$ becomes unstable and the equilibrium switches to either $\bar{\omega}^-$ or $\bar{\omega}^+$. Then, as we increase λ , the positive equilibrium keeps increasing while the negative equilibrium keeps decreasing; the equilibria are further pushed apart. Intuitively, if public institutions influence culture more, this creates a stronger pressure toward homogeneity within the population, whether religious (types 1) or secular (types -1) individuals dominate. Visually, this increases the S-shaped function above zero and decreases it below zero (see Figure 4).

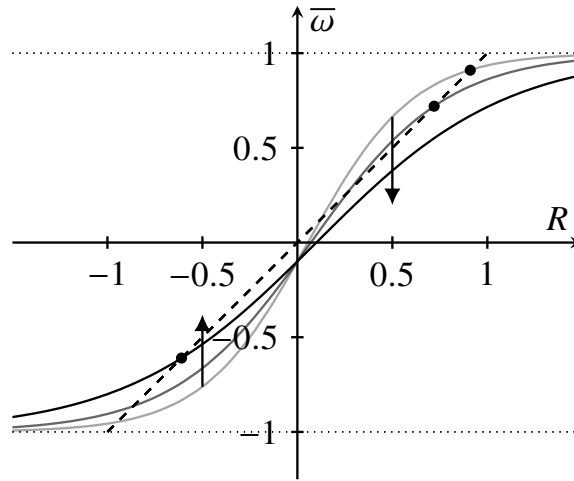


Figure 4: Changes in Equilibria as $\lambda\beta$ Decreases

Note: $h < 0$ and the darker the lines have lower $\lambda\beta$. The black dots in the graphs are the (stable) equilibria.

The integration of religious and governmental institutions is thus a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, the state can help empower religion, which is further supported by a feedback loop that creates its own popular support. Here, the political multiplier increases religiosity. On the other hand, state influence can be used to suppress—or at least cut off—religion from the public sphere and create a vigorously secular society. Hence, the same institutions once used by the state to promote a set of religious behaviors and beliefs can be repurposed to transmit much more secular ones.

To understand how to relate the model to the rapid religious reversal experienced by Quebec in comparison to the rest of Canada, suppose that Quebec only differs inasmuch as it has a higher degree of church-state integration and, thus, a higher λ . Then, if it goes through an equilibrium shift that brings it from the positive (religious) equilibrium to the negative (secular) equilibrium, it will necessarily go from most to least religious in relative terms, both in its policies and culture. This is true regardless of whether the rest of Canada has multiple stable equilibria or not, and whether it is in a positive or negative equilibrium. Different parts of Canada could even be in different equilibria. In all cases, the society with the higher λ will experience a rapid religious reversal precisely when it transitions from the positive to the negative equilibrium. Given the time it takes to change institutions and culture through multiple electoral cycles, it is expected that this shift will take between 10 and 20 years.

Multiple kinds of shock can generate a shift from a positive to a negative stable equilibrium, including a decline in h . However, here I focus on a temporary decline in public institutions' efficiency and generosity ($\Downarrow \beta$) since it fits well with what happened in Quebec in the 1950s, immediately before the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s (see Section 3). Suppose that $h < 0$, then it follows from Proposition 1 that a sufficiently large temporary decline in β can generate a shift from a positive (religious) to a negative (secular) equilibrium (see Figure 4). Since equilibria are locally stable, we remain in the negative equilibrium even after β comes back to its baseline level.

2.3 Extensions

In this section, I propose extensions to the model that highlight how my model relates to additional empirical facts and alternative mechanisms. All explanations and mathematical propositions are in Appendix B.

The Size of The Welfare State: It has been observed that the Quebec welfare state not only rapidly secularized in the 1960s, but also quickly became much more generous than in the other provinces (Geloso & Chandler, 2022). I argue that this is directly related to the historically higher degree of church-state integration. To do so, I extend the model by allowing citizens to vote on the cultural alignment R of public institutions *and* the level of provision of public goods T . I show that in a secular equilibrium, the society with a higher λ should not only have a more secular welfare system but also a more generous one.

Church Political Power: The mechanism through which the church influences the state and society determines whether a rapid religious reversal is possible. Indeed, the church's influence can work through other mechanisms than its integration within state institutions; for instance, it can directly influence the state. In certain European countries, the power of the church was enshrined in the constitution, and the clergy had some control over state legislative bodies (e.g., Poland; Grzymala-Busse, 2015). It was also a powerful lobby. In the model, this would correspond to the church's ability to shift the collectively decided policy in the direction of its ideal point L , which we can assume to be 1 for simplicity. Then, the policy implemented becomes $\eta L + (1 - \eta)R^*$, where $\eta \in [0, 1]$ is the ability of the church to shift policies from the mean voter's ideal point R^* . I show that if η is large enough, an increase in λ no longer polarizes equilibria, but increases all stable equilibria instead, making them more religious. Hence, if the church has too much direct influence on policies and is not politically subordinate to the state, a higher λ can no longer explain a rapid religious reversal relative to a similar society with a lower λ .

Social Coordination Incentives: A person's religious practice choice may be subject to coordination incentives, such as conformism pressures (Bernheim, 1994). For instance, the more people in your community attend church, the more you will be incentivized to do the

same. We can add to the individual utility a term $\frac{\theta}{2}\omega_i\bar{\omega}$, with $\theta > 0$. Then, in equilibrium, we can write the total multiplier term as $(\theta + \lambda)\omega_i$; the social multiplier θ adds up to the political multiplier. Hence, if we compare two societies with similar social multipliers, we still find that the one with the higher degree of church-state integration should experience a reversal in comparison with the other society. In section 4, I argue that a difference in social multipliers between French and English speakers or Catholics and Protestants cannot explain Quebec's relative reversal, and that only a higher degree of church-state integration can.

3 Case Study: Religion and State in Canada

3.1 Church-State Integration

The relationship between church and state took different paths in Quebec, the legacy "state" of New France and Lower Canada, and in the rest of Canada.

In Quebec, the integration of church and state has deep historical roots, which had a persistent impact over time (Acharya et al., 2024). Its origin traces back to the 17th century during the early days of French colonial rule. Religious orders such as the Jesuits and Ursulines played predominant roles not only in welfare and education but also in the governance and administrative functions of the colony, while staying subordinate to state authorities (Ferretti, 1999; Greer, 1997). After the conquest, the British failed to disentangle the Catholic Church from state institutions. Following the Patriotic Rebellions of the 1830s, the British governance allowed, and in some aspects, facilitated further integration of the Church within provincial state institutions (Ferretti, 1999; Matte, 2013; Lipset, 2013). Despite this, the Catholic Church had no legal protection from the state; it was not an official state church. Furthermore, the Church and its French Canadian constituency faced a constant cultural threat coming from the larger and more powerful English Protestant community (Zubrzycki, 2016). Given the looming threat and lack of legal protection, the Church reacted by entangling itself into the provincial state apparatus and using it to transmit

and enforce religious values maximally.

Until 1960, all French hospitals were managed by the Catholics, and all schools were confessional with a "Council of Education" controlled by religious actors instead of a ministry of education (Matte, 2013; Henchey, 1972). These institutions were either public or heavily dependent on public funding. Furthermore, the distribution of social assistance was mostly done by the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, which received most of its funds from the government but controlled how the funds were distributed while preaching Catholic teachings (Ferretti, 1999). Nevertheless, the Church remained subordinated to the state, especially under Duplessis' tenure as provincial prime minister (1936-1939, 1944-1959), during which time he used public discretionary spending to support and, when necessary, pressure religious actors (Ferretti, 2010).

The key components of church-state integration were present in Quebec: a church in charge of multiple functions of the state, while remaining subordinate to it (Zylberberg & Côté, 1993). Consequently, there was little development of culturally influential institutions, such as schools and community organizations, independent from state funding and control. Hence, these could not support religiosity after the state secularized in the 1960s. The historical integration of church and state institutions therefore left an indelible mark on Quebec's institutions and culture; the close connection between public institutions and cultural religiosity remained even after transitioning to a secular social equilibrium.

In the rest of Canada, religious organizations did not have as much importance in public institutions. In all provinces other than Quebec, there had been numerous nonreligious public schools, hospitals and agencies for the distribution of welfare support well before 1960.

Since the British conquest in the late 1700s, most of Canada has been marked by religious divisions between mainline protestants (e.g., Anglicans), evangelists—most of whom came from the US after the revolution—and Catholics from French-Canadian, Scottish and Irish origins. Although the Anglican church tried to become a state church of sorts in Upper Canada, it failed to gather sufficient popular support and political influence. Part of the

political opposition it faced came from the ideology of separation of church and state imported from the US. Catholic communities, and, in particular, French Catholic ones, were present in all provinces. However, their church, being the one of a relatively poor minority group, was not integrated with the state to the same extent as it was in Quebec and, thus, developed institutions mostly independent from it. This led parents to rely more on their own religious capital, and independent religious education and community services. These religious institutions, free from political influence, facilitated the persistence of the population's religiosity outside of Quebec (Beyer, 1997; Lipset, 2013; Lyon & Van Die, 2000; Martin, 2017).

3.2 Institutional Failures and The Rise of The Secular Welfare State

To understand how a radical decline of religion was possible in Quebec starting in 1960, we need to understand what happened in the preceding decade. During the 1950s, the religious system characterizing Quebec came under considerable duress. First, in the first half of the 1950s, federal transfers to the provincial government diminished sharply and reached a record low in 1955. Federal transfers to Quebec fell from 101\$ per person in 1945 to 37\$ in 1955 (Geloso, 2012; Geloso & Chandler, 2022). This reduced the capacity of religious state-sponsored institutions to provide welfare, education and healthcare services. Second, the Catholic Church experienced organizational problems during that decade, most notably recruitment problems. With a booming population, urbanization, and an expanding middle class demanding higher levels of education and more services, the need for workers in the religious system expanded rapidly. However, given extremely low wages and bad conditions—without talking of the sacrifices demanded by a religious life—religious personnel increase didn't match the rise in demand (Ferretti, 1999; Murphy, 2008).

These two factors can be interpreted as a reduction in the efficiency and generosity of public institutions, which, in the model, corresponds to a temporary diminution of β breaking the religious equilibrium (see Figure 4). Then, when federal transfers started to increase again in the late 1950s, they were used to build a strong *secular* welfare state (Geloso &

Chandler, 2022; Zylberberg & Côté, 1993), hence pushing religiosity down instead of up had the province remained in a religious equilibrium. The federal transfers could have been used to support the religious welfare system that existed pre-1960. Furthermore, the Catholic Church could have eventually solved its organizational problems by, for example, giving more responsibilities to religious lay people and increasing their wages. Nevertheless, the Liberal party, supported by the majority of the population, used the federal transfers to push for a complete secularization of state institutions.

Based on available evidence, it doesn't seem that the rest of Canada experienced a change of equilibrium.¹⁰ In fact, the degree of church-state integration (λ) might not have been high enough to generate multiple equilibria. Even if it did, it wouldn't matter for my argument which equilibrium the rest of the country would have been in or if there had been a concurrent equilibrium shift. As explained in section 2.2, the theory would still predict Quebec's rapid reversal relative to the rest of the country, once the religious equilibrium was broken in Quebec.

Although the Liberals' secularization program was foreshadowed by Paul Sauvé's (National Union) "100 days revolution" during his brief tenure in 1959, the secularization of Quebec's public institutions really began with the election of Jean Lesage's liberals in 1960. Consider a few of the policy changes of the following years. In 1961, a secular ministry of education and a secular public hospital network were established. In 1964, The government took control of hospitals and other social services from religious organizations, and the "Parent Report" instigated the secularization of the education system. The liberal regime was interrupted by a return of the National Union between 1966 and 1970, which nevertheless pursued the secularization of institutions started by the Liberals. In 1969, the Quebec government passed the Social Aid Act, which modernized social security and facilitated the secular distribution of welfare benefits. Finally, in 1975, Quebec adopted a new Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, which emphasized the full separation of church and state. These changes occurred at the same time as the rapid cultural secularization

¹⁰New Brunswick is a possible exception since it also experienced a certain secularization of its institutions in the 1960s that can be interpreted as an equilibrium change (Belliveau & Boily, 2005).

of the population (see next subsection), which suggests these the institutional and cultural changes reinforced each other, in line with the dynamics observed in the model during an equilibrium change.

3.3 Quebec’s Rapid Cultural Reversal

The model of Section 3 tells us that a higher degree of church-state institutional integration (λ) in Quebec can explain why it was historically more religious than the rest of Canada, and why it then rapidly shifted to a comparatively less religious cultural and political equilibrium.

To document this change, I built an original dataset by combining 80 polls representative of the Canadian population from Gallup (2021)¹¹ and Project Canada (Bibby, 2021) between 1953 and 2005. My foremost indicator of religiosity is weekly church attendance, a standard measure in the literature and the one for which I have the most data. I complement this indicator with two other ones capturing religiosity at the level of personal beliefs (the belief in Hell, in any form) and attitudes (the disapproval of medical euthanasia under any circumstances, imminent death or suffering). I chose these three complementary indicators since they are closely related to religiosity—euthanasia has historically been strongly opposed by Catholic and mainline Protestant churches—and are present in multiple surveys over an extended period going back to 1960 and before. For all these indicators, we see a clear rapid religious reversal of Quebec in comparison to the rest of Canada (see Figures 1, 5 and 6), which holds in different subsamples (French speakers and/or Catholics; see Figure 7 in Appendix A).

¹¹Disclaimer: the data were collected by Gallup Canada, Inc. Dictionary, and preparation and data cleaning were done by Carleton University Library Data Services, under the auspices of the National Archives of Canada.

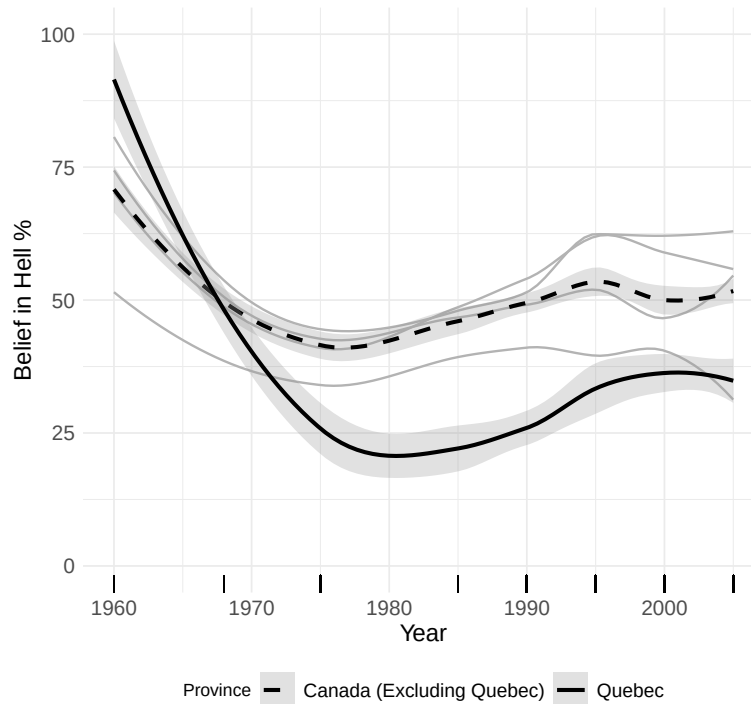


Figure 5: Belief in Hell (Full Sample)

Note: In figures 5 and 6, the nonparametric trends and the 95% confidence intervals are computed using loess (local regression) with a standard cubic weighting function and a 65% span. The ticks on the x-axis indicate the years for which data exists. In this figure, the grey lines represent (in increasing order of the prevalence of the belief in Hell in 1960) British Columbia, the provinces of the prairies, Ontario, and the Atlantic provinces.

The observed rapid religious reversal is supported by an extensive literature in history and sociology (Matte, 2013; Bibby, 1990; Zubrzycki, 2016; Gauvreau, 2005; Christie & Gauvreau, 2013; Murphy, 2008; Grzymala-Busse, 2015). It is also congruent with trends observed in other measures closely connected to religiosity, such as rates of divorce, common-law unions (Laplante, 2006; Pollard & Wu, 1998) and religious voting (Bibeau et al., 2023). Furthermore, birth rates in Quebec are known to have experienced one of the fastest declines ever recorded, hence going through a reversal compared to the rest of Canada and the Western world in general (Krull & Trovato, 2003).

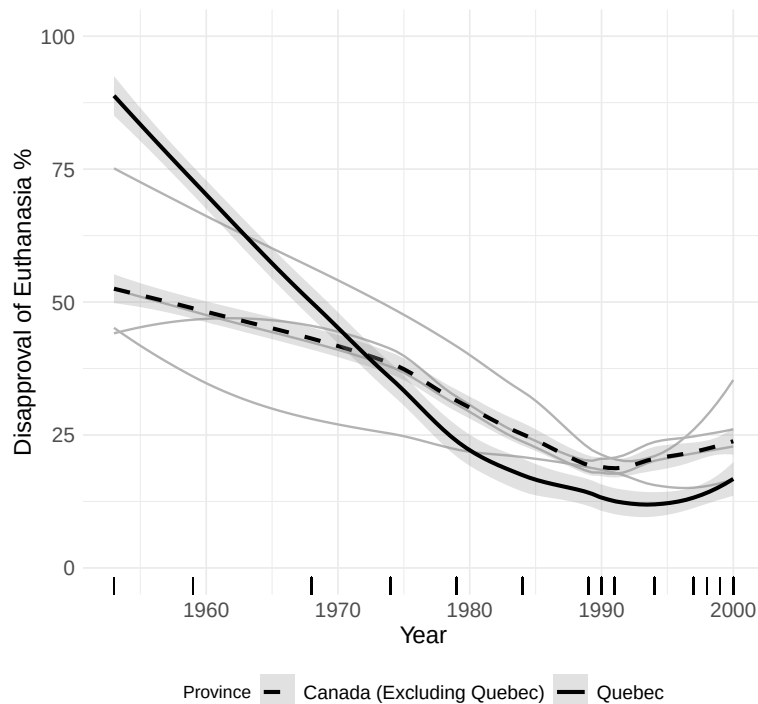


Figure 6: Disapproval of Euthanasia (Full Sample)

Note: The pale grey lines represent (in increasing order of disapproval of euthanasia in 1953) the provinces of the prairies, British Columbia, Ontario, and the Atlantic provinces.

It is quite surprising how fast behaviors and beliefs changed from the late 1950s to the 1980s. For instance, the belief in Hell fell by almost 70% in Quebec's population in 15 years. There are psychological mechanisms that can explain why this change was rapid and why it was directly connected to the concomitant institutional change. First, the strength of the Catholic Church and its ability to enforce norms in every aspect of life may have led to a weak internalization of religious values and behaviors. This can happen when a strong norm-enforcing institution disincentivizes parents from putting effort into the socializing of their children, thus reducing their internalization of norms (Lowes et al., 2017; Carvalho et al., 2024). Then, once the institution is removed, this can facilitate a rapid decline in the adherence to these norms and beliefs.¹² Second, humans pay a *cognitive dissonance*

¹²This is reminiscent of one the conclusion reached by Isabelle Matte (2013) after her anthropological research based on interviews: "If most of them [those who grew up before the Quiet Revolution] wanted to keep 'what is good' in religion (certain values, certain rituals, etc.) and pass on some of these things to

cost when their actions and their environment don't match their beliefs. Hence, when individuals vote for an institutional secularization program or participate in nonreligious public institutions, it is difficult for them to maintain a contradicting set of beliefs (Acharya et al., 2018). This can explain why changes in institutions can generate rapid changes in beliefs and attitudes. Finally, new nonreligious public institutions, especially the school system, socialized individuals to much more secular values, and thus the change in beliefs and behaviors affected new generations and was persistent over time (Carvalho et al., 2024).

4 Alternative Theories

Differential Modernization: Some have argued that Quebec's rapid secularization was driven by its uniquely fast modernization, characterized by a rapid urbanization, economic growth, and increase in education levels through the 1950s and 1960s (Cuccioletta et al., 2011), an argument that aligns with the classic secularization hypothesis (Bruce, 2011; Norris & Inglehart, 2011). Quebec did indeed gradually catch up with other parts of the country on these dimensions after WWII. However, there was no sudden change in trend around 1960 (Geloso & Chandler, 2022).¹³ The only significant trend change at that time was an increase in state spending compared to other provinces, which I argue was used to revamp and secularize the state. In any case, it doesn't seem that Quebec's slightly different modernization process can explain the drastic and sudden changes in religiosity observed in the data.

Sociocultural Multipliers: Apart from its higher degree of church-state institutional integration, Quebec distinguishes itself from other Canadian provinces through its much higher share of Catholics and French speakers. Plausibly, French Canadians or Catholics could possess some unique sociocultural characteristics that created a larger social coor-

their children, often they don't know how to do so, because in their time, the 'system' took care of it." In the original French: "Si la plupart souhaitaient garder 'ce qu'il y a de bon' dans la religion (certaines valeurs, certains rituels, etc.) et transmettre certaines de ces choses à leurs enfants, souvent ils ne savent pas comment puisque, dans leur temps, le 'système' s'en chargeait".

¹³Geloso & Chandler (2022) uses a synthetic control approach to test this hypothesis.

dination multiplier (see section 2.3); this could then explain the rapid reversal observed. For instance, one could argue that the minority status of French Canadians and Catholics increases pressures for cultural homogeneity, hence generating a large social coordination multiplier. Nonetheless, Figure 1 and Figure 7 in Appendix A clearly show that the rapid reversal pattern holds even when we compare French speakers and/or Catholics.¹⁴ A difference in sociocultural multipliers cannot account for these results, while a higher degree of church-state integration in Quebec can. Indeed, since French speakers and Catholics in the rest of the country have a more salient minority status than those in Quebec, we would expect such a multiplier to be stronger there, which should generate the opposite result.

Religious Market Differences: One could argue that the religious market was less pluralistic and competitive in Quebec than in the rest of the country. Indeed, as mentioned previously, religious pluralism contributed to preventing the Anglican church from integrating themselves into state institutions like the Catholic Church did in Quebec.¹⁵ Furthermore, part of the reason why religiosity was better sustained outside of Quebec after the 1960s was because of new evangelical movements that rejuvenated the faith (Lyon & Van Die, 2000). Nevertheless, according to the religious market hypothesis, Quebec should have been less religious than the rest of the country before 1960, when the Catholic Church had a dominant market position, limiting religious supply and innovation. Furthermore, after the decline of the Catholic Church and the liberalization of the religious market, religiosity should have eventually caught up with the rest of the country (Iannaccone, 1991). As shown in the last section, we observe the complete opposite pattern in the data. The religious market theory is therefore clearly insufficient to explain Quebec's rapid religious reversal relative to the rest of the country.¹⁶

¹⁴For the belief in Hell, we are not able to go back before 1960. This limits our ability to tell if the belief in Hell was more prominent before 1960 in Quebec in the Catholic subsample, although we can see it fall much below the rest of Canada immediately after.

¹⁵Note, however, that a religious monopoly is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for church-state integration, as some European examples illustrate. For instance, the Netherlands, a religiously diverse country, had state-integrated religious institutions (Stark & Iannaccone, 1996).

¹⁶Moreover, it has been well-documented that Catholic monopolies have generally performed well in maintaining high levels of adherence in other parts of the world (Diotallevi, 2002; Iannaccone, 1991).

Quebec Nationalism and the Backlash Against the Church: The question of Quebec's nationalism—and at times, separatism—is intimately connected with its religious history. The Quebec population let the Catholic Church become predominant and enmesh itself with public institutions in part because they thought that it would help them protect their identity. Later, in the second half of the 1960s, the decline in religion opened the door for a redefinition of the French Canadian identity around ethnolinguistic and territorial dimensions. This catalyzed the rise of the modern separatist movement.

Some, including Zubrzycki (2016), disagree with this standard interpretation. They argue that the fall of religion in Quebec was due to a *backlash* against the Catholic Church for preventing French Canadians from achieving their independence and growing economically.¹⁷ This could potentially explain the rapid religious reversal observed. Notice that, here, the causality is reversed, with the rise of nationalism causing the decline of religion instead of the opposite. However, this argument fails to account for some critical empirical facts. First, if the religious reversal was due to a backlash against the Church, why did French Canadians remain affiliated with it? Well into the 21st century, the vast majority of them still identified as Catholics (91,9% in 2001) and participated in rites of passage like baptism (Meunier & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2011). In contrast, it is the beliefs (e.g., Hell), the attitudes (e.g., the morality of euthanasia) and the common practices (e.g., weekly church attendance) that went into sharp decline in the 1960s. If the decline of religion were due to a backlash against the Church, we would expect to see the opposite effect: people rapidly disaffiliating from the Church while retaining some of the beliefs, attitudes and practices. Second, survey evidence shows the lack of connection between religiosity and Quebec nationalism and separatism. In particular, the August 1968 Gallup poll asks questions about religious beliefs and views on homosexuality (which is related to religious conservatism) as well as Quebec separatism and nationalism. After a battery of tests, I find no correlation between religiosity and nationalism,¹⁸ in contradiction with what we would expect if the

¹⁷This also relates to the economic literature on cultural and political backlash (Fouka, 2020; Iyigun et al., 2018; Wheaton, 2020).

¹⁸Results available upon request

decline of religion was related to nationalism.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I argued, using a formal model, that the strong institutional integration of church and state in Quebec generated a political multiplier effect responsible for Quebec's rapid religious reversal relative to the rest of Canada. Furthermore, I argued that the change in equilibrium was induced by a temporary decline in the generosity and efficiency of public institutions in the 1950s, due to low federal transfers to the province and recruitment difficulties within religious public institutions. I then provided supportive evidence from an original dataset that combines 80 historical polls, and showed that alternative theories cannot account for the observed empirical patterns.

The Canadian case is useful since it encompasses two contrasting patterns of secularization. On the one hand, most of the country followed a pattern close to the US. Indeed, the US experienced a soft temporary decline of religion in the 1960s, followed by a renewal of religion driven in part by new religious movements (Fogel, 2000). These new religious movements, evangelical for the most part, also had some influence in English-speaking Canada (Lipset, 2013).

On the other hand, Quebec saw a sudden and drastic decline in religion in the 1960s, reminiscent of many European countries. In particular, the Netherlands, known historically as a highly pious Protestant and Catholic society, experienced a similar rapid decline of religion in the 1960s and 1970s (Lechner, 1989, 1996; Martin, 2017). While there was no legal protection for the churches, the education, healthcare, welfare institutions, and many parts of the media were managed by religious organizations until the 1960s (Bryant, 1981; Dekker & Ester, 1996). This is characteristic of societies with strong church-state integration. Akin to the Quebec case, this system experienced inefficiencies in the 1950s before being replaced by a highly generous secular welfare state in the 1960s, a change driven by secular parties gaining in popularity (Van Kersbergen, 2009).

Other cases also exhibit similar patterns. Sweden saw a rapid secularization of its public institutions in the 1930s, which used to be highly intertwined with the institutions of its state church. This led to a decline in religion. Tellingly, Arthur Engberg, a well-known politician at the time, said he wished to “de-Christianise the church through its connection with the state” (Ewert, 2019). Quebec has also been compared to Ireland—another historically highly pious Catholic society conquered by the British—which saw a rapid decline in the cultural and political influence of its Catholic Church starting in the 1990s. However, what seemed to have catalyzed the equilibrium change in Ireland was a series of scandals concerning the Church (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Matte, 2013).

Finally, my work offers a counterpoint to the standard argument in the historical persistence literature (Acharya et al., 2024; Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007), which is that cultural traits endorsed by a strong institution should endure, even after the supporting institution disappears. Yet, my theory posits that with certain institutional structures—such as church-state integration—we should observe the opposite of a persistence pattern: ubiquitous cultural traits should decline rapidly as the backing institution withdraws and become *less* widespread than elsewhere. Moreover, this should happen *precisely* because these traits were previously supported by a strong institution—in this case, a state-integrated church.

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6 Appendix A: Additional Empirical Evidence

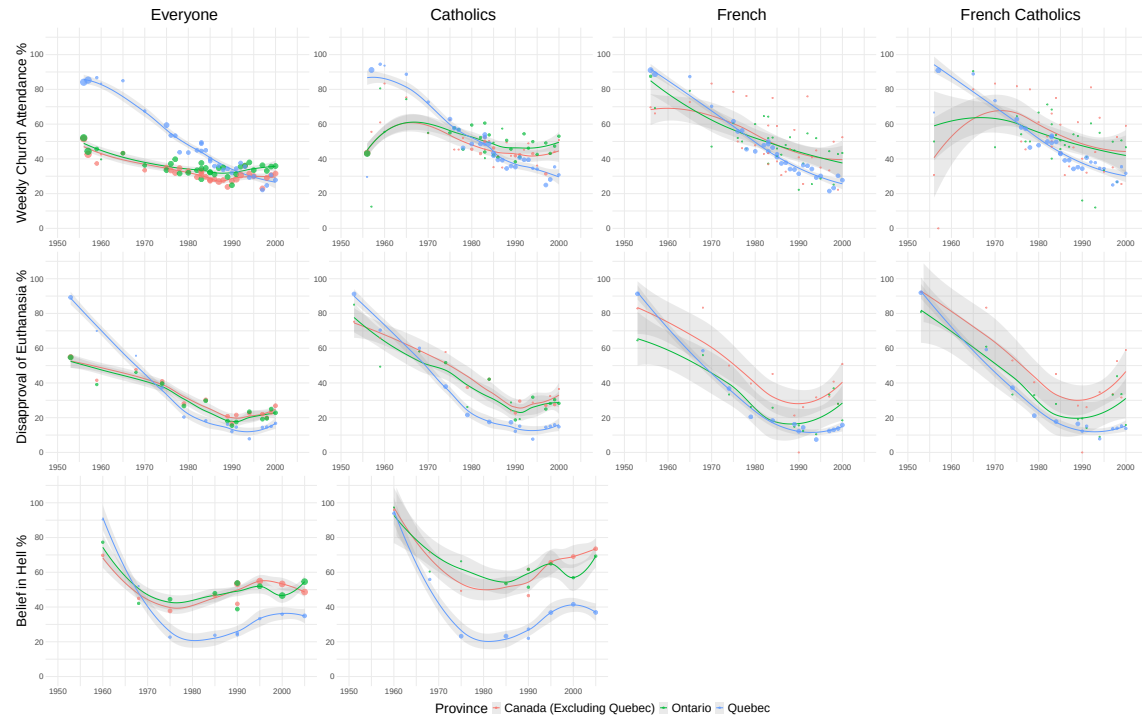


Figure 7: Evidence of Quebec's Rapid Religious Reversal
(Quebec, Ontario and Canada)

Note: Each row corresponds to a different indicator. In descending order, they correspond to the percentage of individuals who: 1) attended church in the last seven days, 2) disapprove of legal euthanasia, and 3) believe in Hell. Each column corresponds to a different subsample of the Canadian population: 1) everyone, 2) self-identified Catholics, 3) those with French as their mother tongue, and 4) French Catholics. For weekly church attendance, it is more informative to compare Catholics (French or not) since, given the importance of Sunday mass, Catholics are more likely to attend church at least once a week. For the belief in Hell, there is not enough data on individuals' mother tongue to generate plots in columns 3 and 4. The nonparametric trends and the 95% confidence intervals are computed using loess (local regression) with a standard cubic weighting function. I use a span of 65% for the first two columns and 100% for the last two columns, which is necessary given the small samples for French speakers outside of Quebec. To help the reader understand the data used to generate these plots, I added points showing the average value per survey for each subpopulation/province. Hence, each survey has three corresponding points and their size is proportional to the subsample size. The smallest points correspond to subsamples of less than 100, then 100-200, 201-300, 301-400, 401-500, and the largest points correspond to subsamples larger than 500. I offer a direct comparison with Ontario in all plots since it is most comparable to Quebec in terms of its economy, population, and size, and its French-speaking and Catholic population is culturally close to Quebec.