



Evangelical Alignment in Canada

by Rick Hiemstra, Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism

Measuring Evangelical Alignment

American historian Mark Noll entitled his recent book, *What Happened to Christian Canada?* Noll's title question voices what many Canadian evangelical Christians feel: Christian Canada is a thing of the past. A 2003 Ipsos Reid survey found that 70% of people in conservative churches either moderately or strongly felt there was a bias in Canadian society against the viewpoints that are held by deeply committed Christians.

Recent polling data indicate that there is in fact a substantial and growing gap between Canadian evangelical Christians and their non-evangelical neighbours with respect to attitudes toward evangelical beliefs and practices.

The Christian Evangelical Scale (CES)

When Canadian historian George Rawlyk set out to write *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s*, he teamed up with pollster Andrew Grenville to develop a set of survey questions, called the Christian Evangelical Scale (CES),¹ that could be used to find, or “operationalize,” evangelical Christians. This scale of up to 10 survey questions was developed to find Christians with the characteristics of conversionism, Biblicalism, crucicentrism and activism outlined in British historian David Bebbington’s widely used definition of Evangelicals.² The people the scale found were deemed to be Evangelicals.

In 1995 Rawlyk and Grenville reported that 16% of Canadians were evangelical,³ and in 2003 an Ipsos Reid survey that used the CES reported that 19% of Canadians were evangelical.⁴ Previous estimates of the Canadian evangelical population by sociologists such as Reginald Bibby had come in at around 8%. The jump was as sensational as it was problematic. Embedded in these high numbers was a substantial portion of “Roman Catholic Evangelicals” (22% of the “evangelical” group in 1996 and 34% in 2003), and of the “Protestant evangelical” remainder a smaller group was made up of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons (4% of “Protestant Evangelicals” in 1996 and 3% in 2003). Critics charged that the findings of the operationalization could not be squared with common-sense definitions of “evangelical.”

In 2008 the Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism (CRCE), in consultation with Andrew Grenville, decided to change the language used for reporting the CES findings. No doubt many of the people the CES finds are evangelical Christians. Making that decision based solely on the results of the CES, however, cannot be done with certainty. Therefore the group that previous CES research deemed to be “evangelical” will now be called “evangelically aligned” in CRCE documents, and we will make this substitution in this paper when referring to past CES data.⁵

¹See Appendix A

²David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1–19.

³George Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 224.

⁴Aileen Van Ginkel, “Evangelical Beliefs & Practices: A summary of the 2003 Ipsos Reid Survey Results.” http://files.efc-canada.net/gen/CFT_EvangelicalBeliefs.pdf (Accessed April 18, 2008).

⁵Each question on the CES is scored from 0 (least evangelically aligned) to 3 (most evangelically aligned). Scores from the 8 CES questions used on each survey are totaled and those who score 20 or more out of a possible 24 are deemed to be evangelically aligned. See Appendix A for a more detailed scoring discussion.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

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These surveys make it possible to identify trends among Canadians who are both evangelically aligned and non-evangelically aligned as well as showing the gaps between them.

This paper looks at the responses to CES questions over three national Canadian surveys: the 1996 Ipsos Reid God and Society survey (n=3000); the 2003 Ipsos Reid Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey (n=3000); and the 2007 omnibus Ipsos Reid CHEC/EFC survey (n=1000). (“CHEC/EFC” stands for “Christian Higher Education in Canada / Evangelical Fellowship of Canada”.)

The data for evangelically aligned respondents will be segmented into two groups, Protestants⁶ and Roman Catholics, and compared with data for those who are not evangelically aligned. This will allow us to highlight Protestant/Catholic differences between these groups and the non-evangelically aligned Canadian population.

The growing dis-alignment that we will look at does not mean we are seeing a smaller proportion of evangelically aligned persons in Canada. In fact, the proportion of the Canadian population that is evangelically aligned has been relatively stable in a range between 16% and 19%. (Reginald Bibby, while using a different measure to find Canadian Evangelicals, has also noted that their proportion of the population has remained stable.⁷)

The CES questions are not presented in the order they were asked on the surveys. Rather, we will move from the questions with the strongest to the weakest evangelical alignment within Canadian society. Considering the questions in this order will help us to see more clearly where Canadian society is most and least evangelically aligned.

⁶Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Unitarians and other non-Trinitarian groups are not included in the Protestant evangelically aligned group.

⁷Reginald Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada’s Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance* (Toronto and Kelowna, BC: Novalis and Wood Lake Books, 2004), 39. Bibby estimates, based on Canadian census data, that the evangelical proportion of the Canadian population has stayed relatively stable around 8% since 1871.

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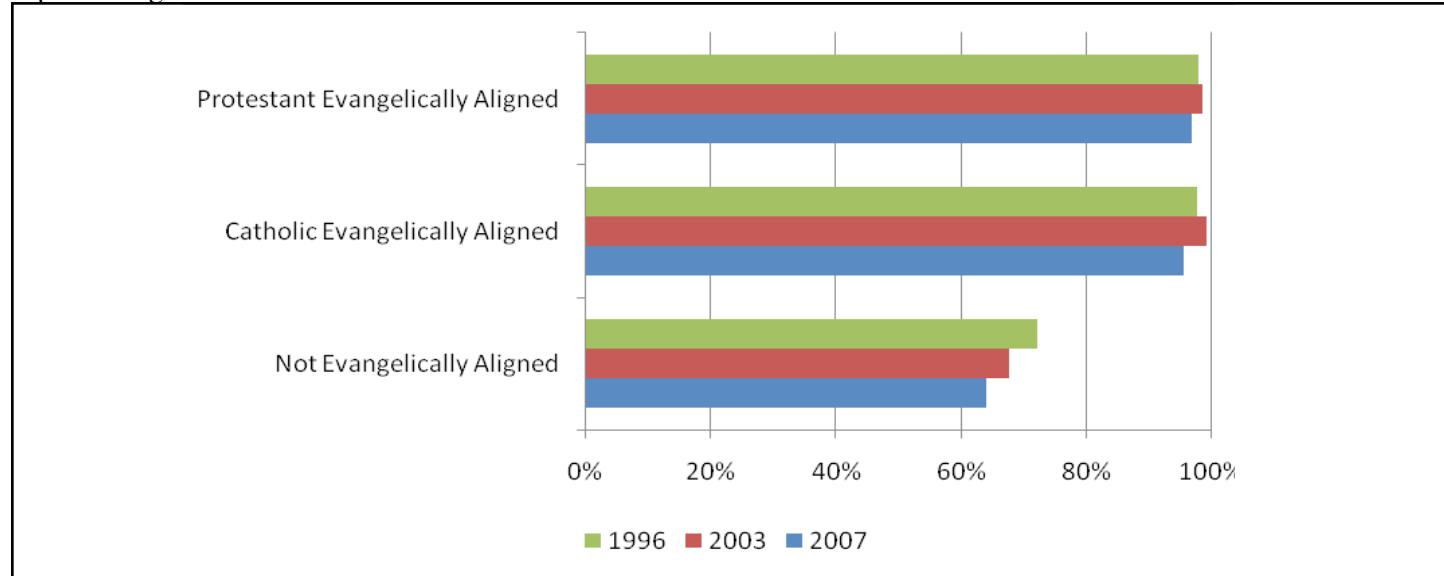
July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

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Trends in Evangelical Alignment

Question 1: “The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times.”

Chart 1. Moderately or strongly disagree with “The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times.”



This first CES question aims to measure God's perceived relevance to Canadians and as such is designed to separate theists from people who we might call “functional atheists.” This question along with the second are negatively scored; that is, a respondent is deemed to be more evangelically aligned, the more he or she is in disagreement with the statement.

While a healthy majority of Canadians (72% in 1996 and 64% in 2007) indicate that God has at least an explanatory role in modern society, the proportion of Canadians who think so is smaller with each successive survey. Viewed graphically (see chart 1) this progressively flagging disagreement forms a step-down alignment pattern for non-evangelically aligned Canadians. This step-down pattern in evangelical alignment is replicated across most of the CES questions for non-evangelically aligned Canadians.

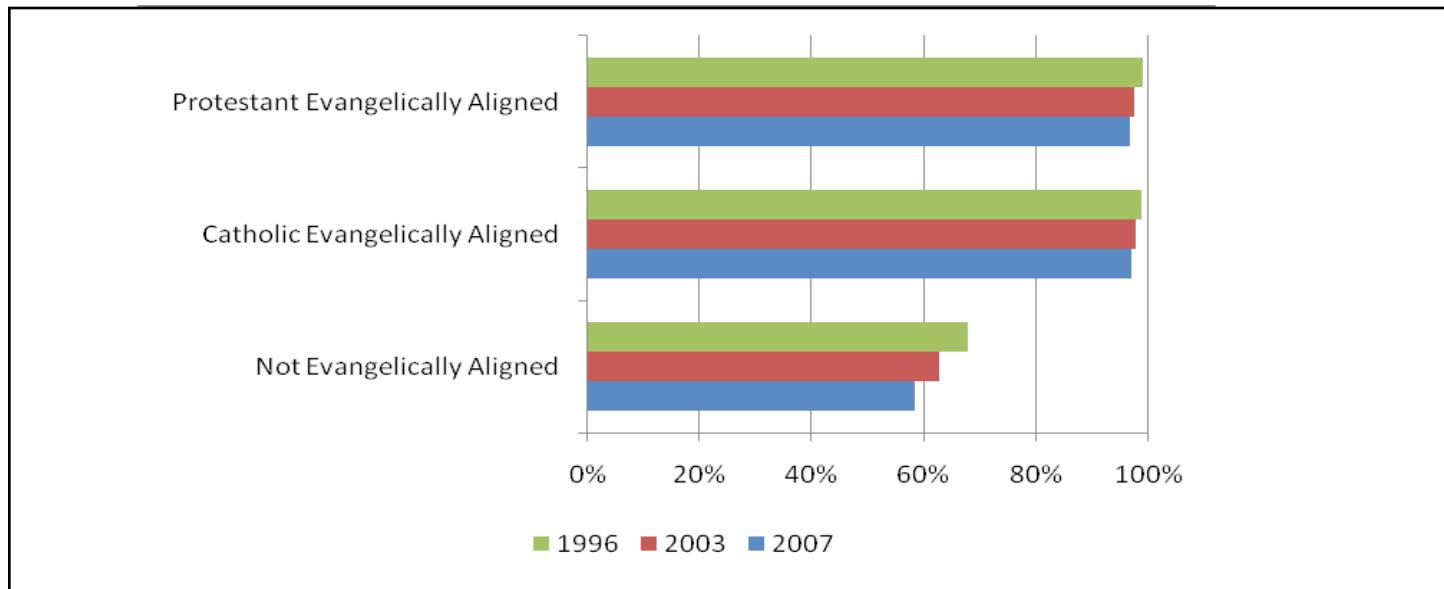
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July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

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Question 2: "In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine son of God."

Chart 2. Moderately or strongly disagree with "In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine son of God."



The step-down pattern among the non-evangelically aligned from question 1 is repeated in this question about Christ's divinity. Still, the level of disagreement with this negatively worded question remains quite high for all Canadians.

Within a culture like Canada's that has a strong and recent Christian heritage, these first two questions are in some sense generic and measure a kind of Christian cultural literacy. For question 2, "In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine son of God," a substantial minority of Muslims, agnostics, atheists and those who described themselves as "other" or "nothing in particular"⁸ also reported either moderate or strong disagreement. Either a substantial minority of respondents misunderstood the question, or their response was not intended to be a confession of Christian faith and orthodoxy.

While 71% of the 2007 respondents either moderately or strongly disagreed with "The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed in these modern times," only 62% of Canadians identified themselves as belonging to a Christian church or denomination, and only 19% were identified as evangelically aligned.⁹ Clearly a majority of Canadians see a role for God although they do not align evangelically on other CES measures.

Question 3: "I believe that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of my sins."

Question 4: "I believe Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but was resurrected to eternal life."

⁸This represents 5 out of 22 Muslims, 15 out of 35 agnostics, 13 out of 42 atheists, 72 out of 156 from the "nothing in particular" group, and 61 out of 87 "others."

⁹The 19% of evangelically aligned represents only Roman Catholics and Trinitarian Protestants.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

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Chart 3. Moderately or strongly agree with “I believe that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of my sins.”

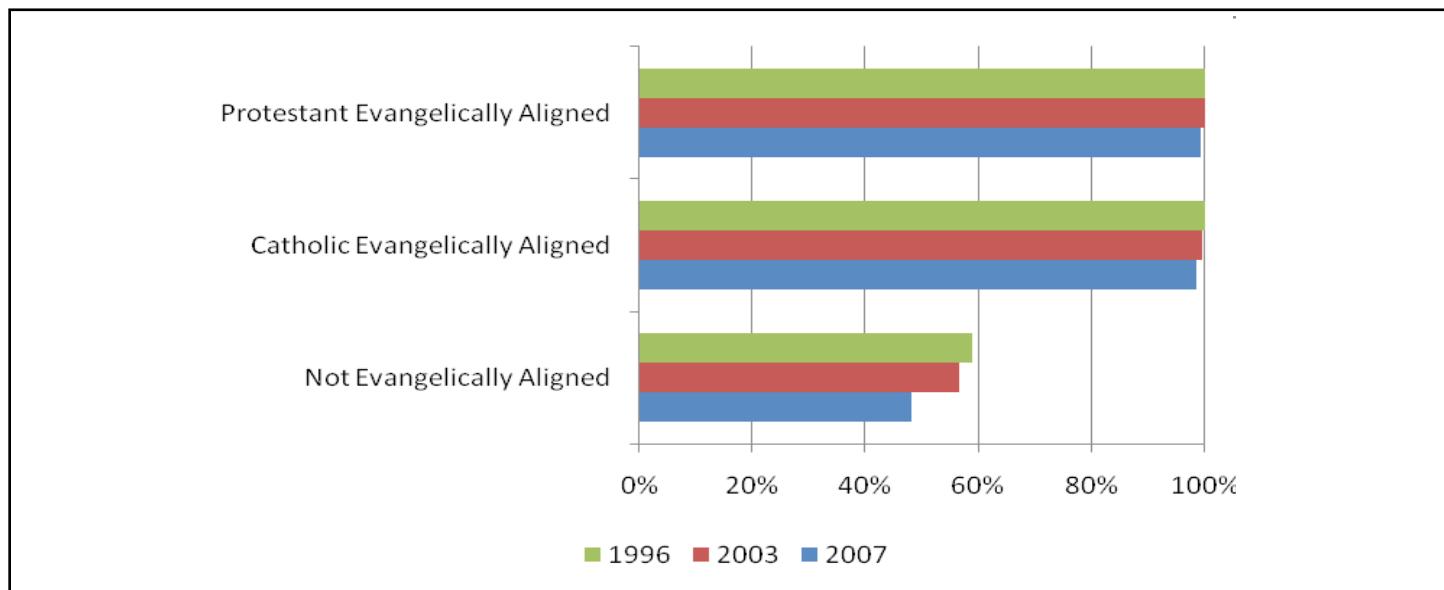
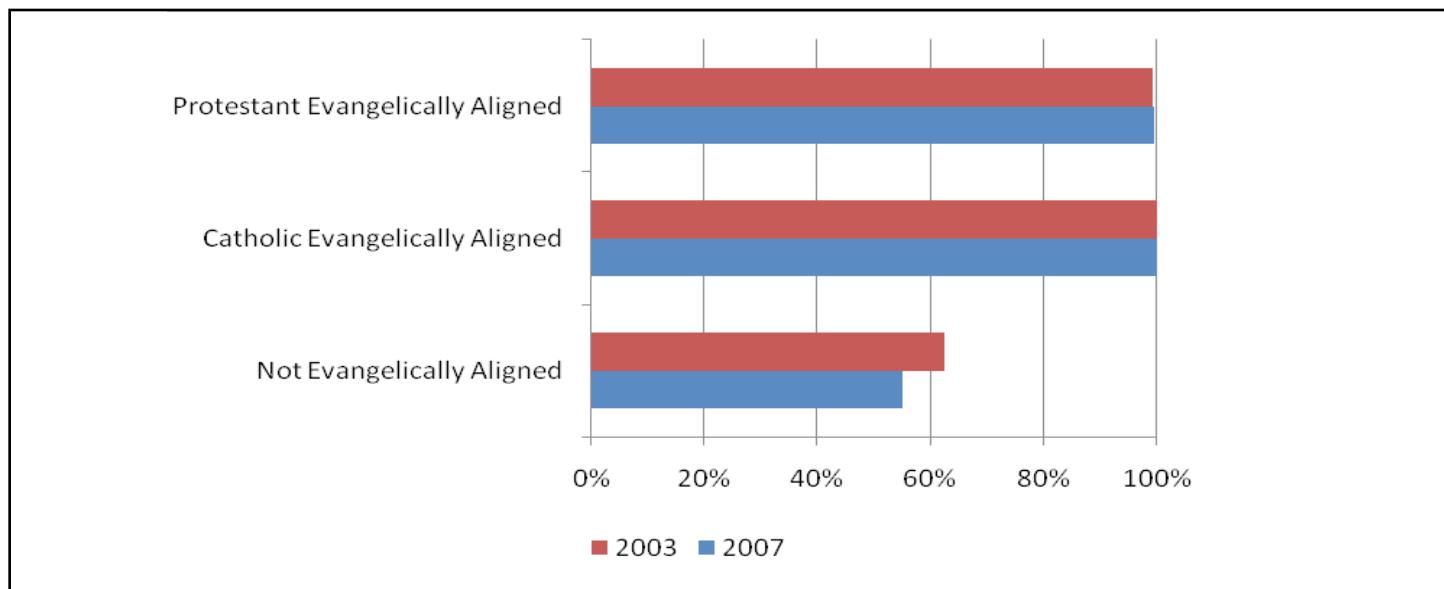


Chart 4. Moderately or strongly agree with “I believe Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but was resurrected to eternal life.”^a



^a The 1996 survey did not ask this question.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

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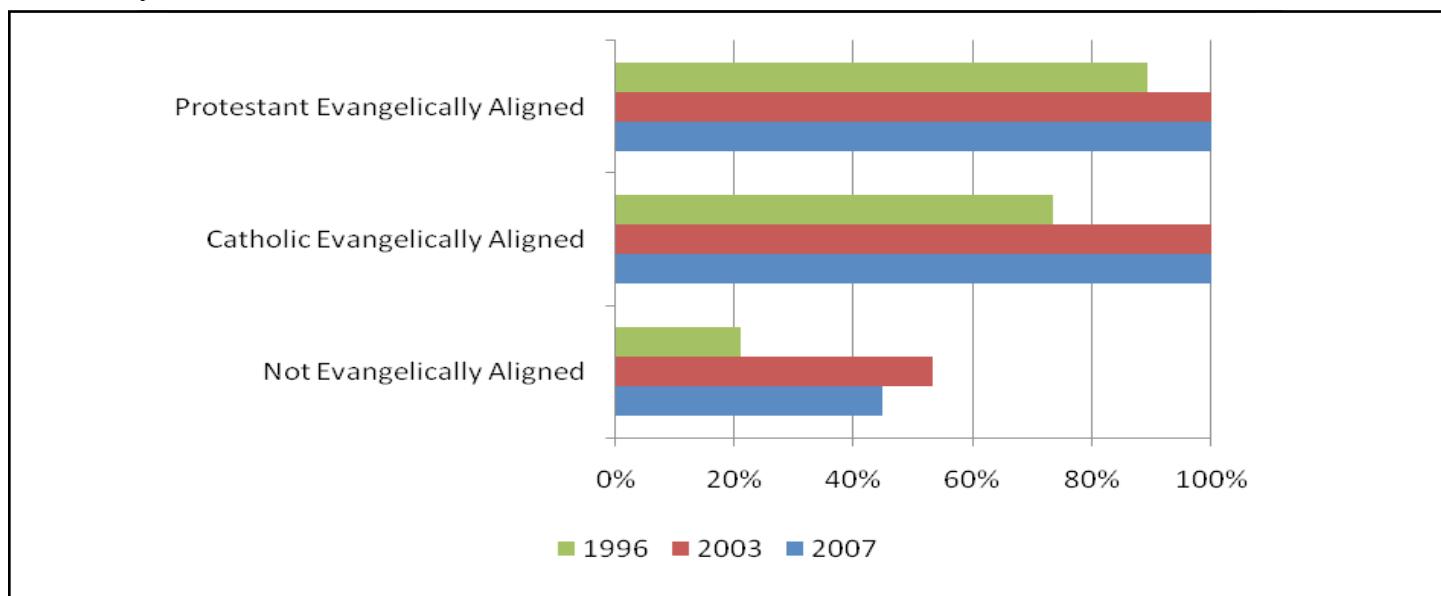
The gap between the evangelically aligned and the rest of the Canadian population starts to grow wider as we proceed to questions of Christian soteriology, or Christ's saving work.

Question 3's statement is posed in the first person, forcing the respondent to make a personal application and leaving less room for objective detachment than the first two questions. In 2007, 59% of all Canadians either moderately or strongly agreed with this straightforward expression of Christian soteriological orthodoxy. When the same question was asked of non-evangelically aligned Canadians the proportion dropped to less than half.

Question 4 also deals with Christian soteriology but does not ask the respondent to make a personal application beyond a confession of belief. This may account for the slightly higher level of agreement.

Question 5: "I believe the Bible to be the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy."

Chart 5. Moderately or strongly agree with "I believe the Bible to be the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy."^a



^a The 1996 survey used this Bible question instead: "I feel the Bible is God's word, and is to be taken literally, word for word."

A high regard for the Bible and its authority for Christian life and practice is a mark of Evangelicalism, but the exact formulation of that high regard varies even among evangelical Christians. Chart 5 presents survey results for two different versions of the CES Bible question. In the 1996 survey respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with "I feel the Bible is God's word, and is to be taken literally, word for word." This question with its language of word-for-word literalism met with less agreement even among those identified as evangelically aligned than the question used in 2003 and 2007. In 1996 only slightly more than 10% of the Canadian population was identified as evangelically aligned (of either the Protestant or Catholic variety), compared with 19% in 2003 and 2007. If the Bible question is factored out of the 1996 CES, then the proportion identified as evangelically aligned rises from 10% to 12%.¹⁰

¹⁰The 1996 CES also included this question: "How often do you read the Bible or other religious material?" If this question is factored out along with the Bible question, then the proportion of the population identified as evangelically aligned jumps to 16.5%.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

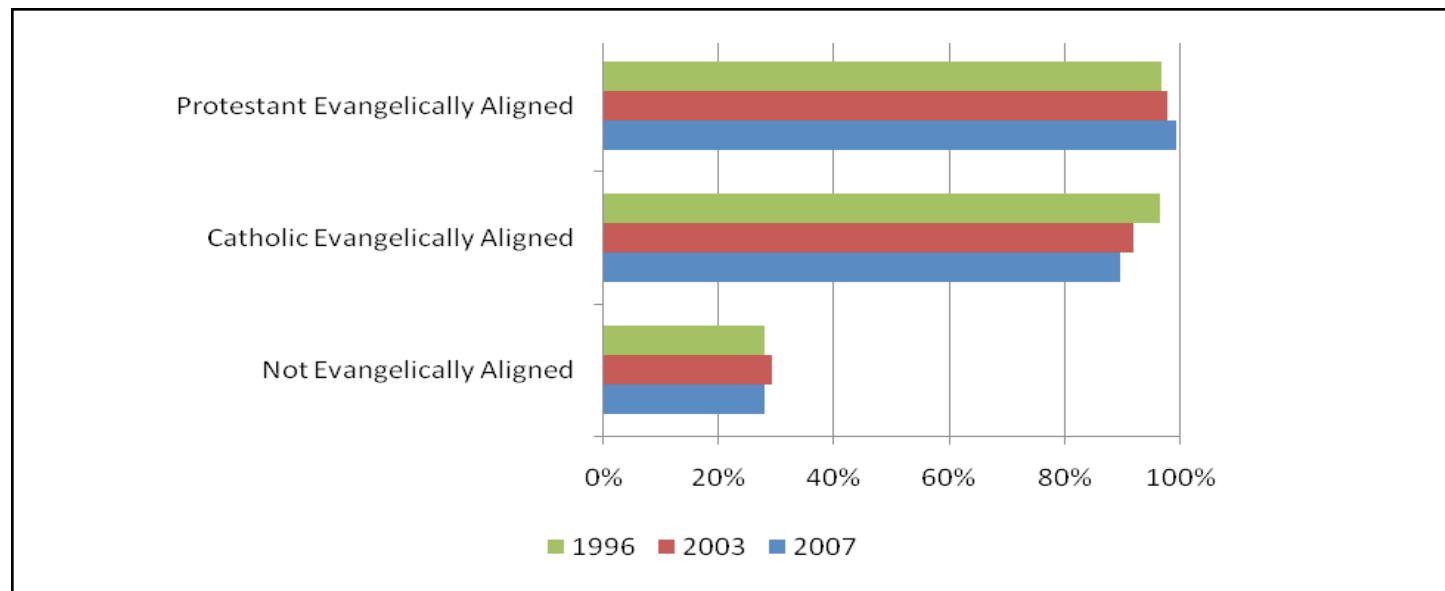
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The CES Bible question was changed following the 1996 survey because it was felt that it did not accurately represent the core Canadian evangelical beliefs about scripture. This question in part highlights cultural differences in Canadian and American approaches to scripture. Thirteen per cent of Canadians strongly agreed with the 1996 Bible question, compared with 35% of Americans. By contrast, 35% of Canadians strongly agreed with the new Bible question with its language of “reliability and trustworthiness” in 2003, and 30% did the same in 2007.

While Canadians were generally in greater agreement with the new CES Bible question, combined strong and moderate agreement fell between 2003 and 2007 from 53% to 45% among those who were non-evangelically aligned.

Question 6: “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.”

Chart 6. Moderately or strongly agree with “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.”



In 2007 22% of Canadians strongly agreed with the statement “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian”; only 6% of the non-evangelically aligned, however, responded the same way. The larger percentage of agreement among Canadians is propped up by the 89% of those who are Protestant evangelically aligned, while 62% of the Catholic evangelically aligned strongly agree with the same question. While the gap between the evangelically aligned and the non-evangelically aligned is large for this question, responses have been remarkably stable for all groups since 1996.

Many Canadians who consider themselves Christian would not use the language of commitment and conversion in combination with that identity. On the 2007 survey 62% of Canadians indicated they were Christian in response to the question, “Do you ever consider yourself as part of a religious tradition?” while only 42% of Canadians moderately or strongly agreed with the statement “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.”

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
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George Rawlyk in his research with the CES in the early 1990s found a similar aversion to similar (but not identical) terminology, an aversion extending even to those who were evangelically aligned:

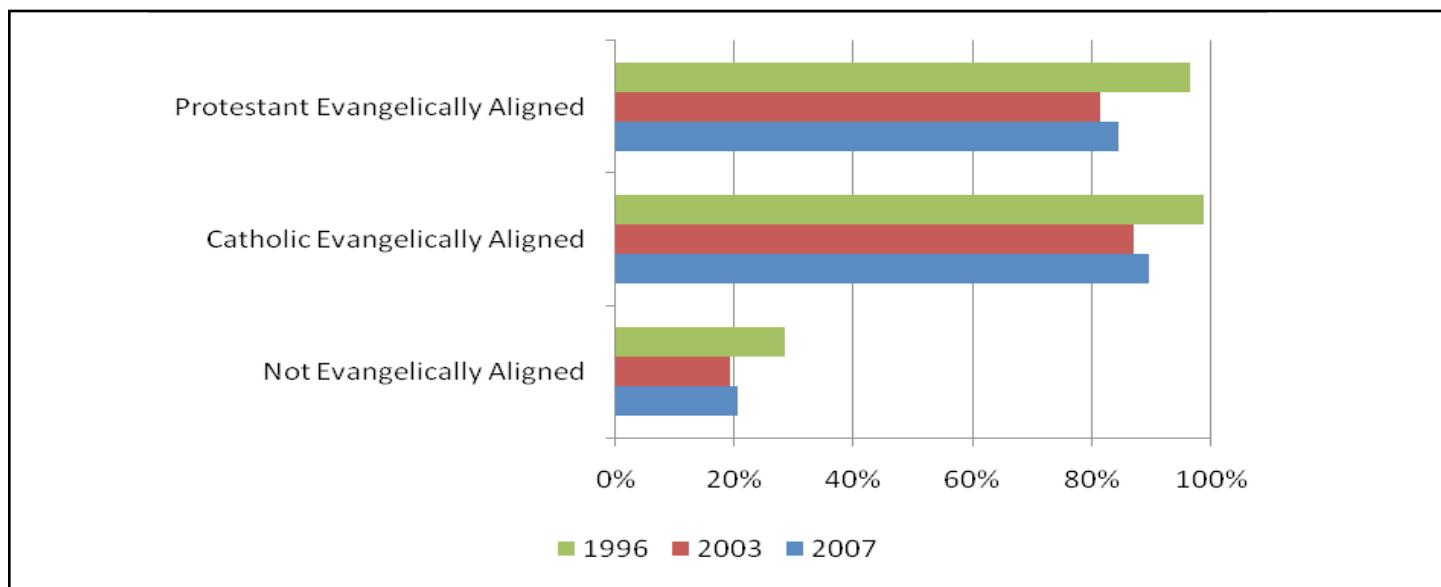
When asked if they [persons who were evangelically aligned] considered themselves to be born-again Christians, 64 per cent of the [Canadian] evangelical sample said yes, 35 per cent no, and 1 per cent “I do not know.”¹¹

Rawlyk then concluded that there was a Canadian cultural aversion to the terminology of being “born again” because of its association with American fundamentalism. Another measure of Canadian discomfort with conversionist terminology in general is seen in the 1996 responses to the CES question. In 1996 only 18% of Canadians strongly agreed with the statement “I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian,” compared with 41% of Americans.

One further ambiguity in this terminology remains, in that many Canadians are the children of Christians and may see themselves as “committed” but not “converted,” since they have not changed from one religion to another. Many evangelical traditions speak of “conversion” as something every authentic Christian undergoes, but not all do—especially paedobaptist churches, which are more inclined to use language of “confirmation” or “appropriation” of the faith by children raised in them, rather than “conversion.”

Question 7: “Other than on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months?”

Chart 7. Answered at least monthly to the question “Other than on special occasions, such as weddings and funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months?”



Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
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Regular church attendance is one of the defining marks of those who are evangelically aligned. Curiously, however, evangelically aligned respondents indicate a growing belief that they do not need to attend church. In 1996, 44% of Protestant evangelically aligned respondents and 54% of Catholic evangelically aligned respondents indicated moderate or strong agreement with the statement, “I don’t think you need to go to church in order to be a good Christian.” By 2003 this level of moderate and strong agreement would rise to 59% for evangelically aligned Protestants and 65% for evangelically aligned Catholics.¹²

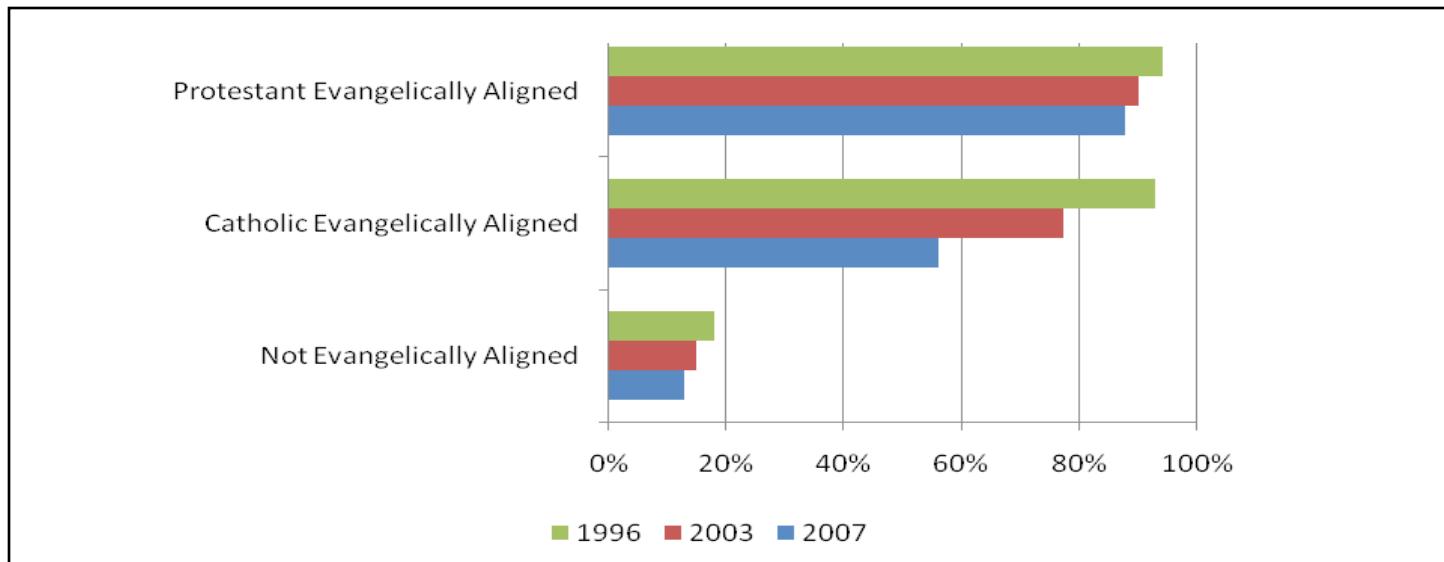
Ironically, the emphasis in some evangelical traditions upon “salvation by grace alone through faith alone” might encourage a negative answer to this question, even among those traditions that otherwise strongly encourage church attendance. (Evangelists routinely proclaim that “living in a garage doesn’t make you a car” and that “going to church never saved anyone.”)

While the evangelically aligned attend religious services more regularly than their neighbours, by 2007 weekly attendance among Protestant evangelically aligned respondents had declined from 83% in 1996 to 64%, and weekly attendance among Catholic evangelically aligned respondents declined from 88% in 1996 to 73% in 2007. This move away from weekly attendance at worship services is also mirrored among the non-evangelically aligned respondents, where 11% reported attending at least weekly in 1996 compared to 8% in 2007. In fact, in 2007 41% of the non-evangelically aligned respondents indicated that apart from weddings, funerals, and baptisms they did not attend religious services at all, and one third of all Canadians said the same.

While the reported attendance gains between 2003 and 2007 are too modest to be significant (see chart 7 above) it does suggest that the decline in attendance between 1996 and 2003 might have been arrested.

Question 8: “I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christian.”

Chart 8. Moderately or strongly agree with “I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christian.”



¹²The 2007 survey did not ask the question.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

When it comes to encouraging non-Christians to become Christian, evangelically aligned Canadians are substantially on their own. By 2007 only 11% of Canadians strongly agreed with question 8's statement and this number falls to 3% among the non-evangelically aligned. Agreement among the non-evangelically aligned has declined from 1996 following the step-down pattern that was mentioned earlier in the paper (see chart 8); however, what is more striking and perhaps surprising is that this same step-down pattern appears among evangelically aligned Catholics and with a much steeper gradient.

This question also highlights cultural differences between Canadians and Americans. In 1996, 13% of Canadians strongly agreed with the statement "I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christian," compared with 33% of Americans. The 1996 survey also found, somewhat unexpectedly, that only 53% of the Protestant evangelically aligned Canadians and 21% of the Catholic evangelically aligned Canadians strongly agreed with the same evangelism question.

The 2007 survey also asked the question "Would you be willing or not willing to invite a friend or acquaintance to a Christian church?" In response, 96% of evangelically aligned Protestants and 93% of evangelically aligned Catholics said that they were very willing or at least somewhat willing to do so. At first this appears to be good news for evangelically minded Christians; however, this question also had the poorest response rate of the survey, with only 35% of respondents answering the question. Even among the evangelically aligned, only 86% of Protestants and 91% of Catholics answered the question. Only one in five non-evangelically aligned Canadians answered the question, thus underlining a general Canadian discomfort with evangelism.

Mean Christian Evangelical Scale Scores

The CES version used in 1996 differed slightly from the scale used in 2003 and 2007. This can make some overall comparisons problematic. But if we isolate the 6 common questions used in all surveys and calculate a mean CES score, we can use this subscale to generate a measure of how evangelical alignment has changed in Canada. The maximum possible score for this subscale is 18. Table 1 provides means and the 95% confidence interval for the mean. The gap between mean CES scores for evangelically aligned Canadians and their neighbours on this six-question subscale is very large, with the non-evangelically aligned mean score coming in at roughly half the evangelically aligned mean score.

The change in the mean scores for non-evangelically aligned Canadians between 1996 and 2007 may have exhibited only a modest drop from 8.48 to 7.23, but it is statistically significant and it is consistent with the pattern we have seen on individual questions.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Table 1. Mean CES scores and 95% confidence intervals out of 18 for the six comparable questions across the 1996, 2003 and 2007 surveys, by evangelical alignment.

	1996 (N=3000)		2003 (N=3000)		2007 (N=1000)	
	%	Score	%	Score	%	Score
Protestant evangelically aligned	9.2	17.22 ± 0.12	13.1	16.41 ± 0.14	12.0	16.56 ± 0.25
Catholic evangelically aligned	2.8	17.09 ± 0.19	7.4	15.92 ± 0.17	6.6	15.72 ± 0.31
Non-evangelically aligned	87.0	8.48 ± 0.17	77.0	7.58 ± 0.16	78.7	7.23 ± 0.27

Each question on the CES is scored from 0 (least evangelically aligned) to 3 (most evangelically aligned). This table presents the sum of scores on six questions, to a maximum of 18. Percentages of respondents for each survey do not add to 100 because of rounding error and the exclusion of non-Trinitarian evangelically aligned respondents.

Conclusions

Increasingly on matters of faith Canadian culture is moving away from evangelical alignment. We can see that non-evangelically aligned mean CES scores for comparable questions have decreased in the step-down pattern identified in the individual questions earlier.

There is a more radical dis-alignment between the evangelically aligned and the non-evangelically aligned when the CES questions have a conversionist emphasis (questions 6 and 8). Apart from these two questions, only church attendance evidences the same scale of dis-alignment. That said, there is evidence that the evangelically aligned themselves are following the culture on these questions, with weakening levels of their own alignment.

If this step-down pattern in evangelical alignment continues, Canadian evangelically aligned Christians and their subculture will, at least for a time, be increasingly strange to their neighbours. Should the evangelically aligned continue to abandon their previous convictions, of course, then the differences will narrow to the vanishing point. For now, it is clear that CES scores for most Canadians on conversionist and soteriological questions suggest a wide and growing discomfort with evangelical conviction and practice. 

Church & Faith Trends

July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada



Appendix A. Comparison of Christian Evangelical Scale Questions from the 1996 God and Society, 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices and 2007 CHEC/EFC Surveys

The Christian Evangelical Scale (CES) is made up of up to 10 equally weighted questions, with each question being scored from 0 to 3. The scoring for each question is outlined below. These question scores are then totaled yielding an overall CES score. Most applications of the CES have made use of just 8 of the possible 10 questions, resulting in a CES subscale where individuals who score 20 or more out of a possible 24 are deemed to be evangelically aligned.

The 1996 God and Society survey differs from the 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey and the 2007 CHEC/EFC surveys. This Appendix sets out the similarities and differences, along with the possible points of comparison. The questions are ordered in the appendix more or less according to how they were presented to respondents on the surveys.

1996 God and Society CES Questions

The following are the CES questions used on the 1996 God and Society survey:

1. The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times. (Reverse scored)
2. I feel that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of my sins.
3. In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine son of God. (Reverse scored)
4. I feel the Bible is God's word, and is to be taken literally, word for word.
5. I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.
6. I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians.
7. Other than on special occasions, such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months.
8. How often do you read the Bible or other religious material.

Questions 2, 4, 5 and 6 were scored as follows:

- strongly agree (3),
- moderately agree (2),
- moderately disagree (1),
- strongly disagree (0).

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Questions 1 and 3 were reverse scored as follows:

- strongly agree (0),
- moderately agree (1),
- moderately disagree (2),
- strongly disagree (3).

Question 7, the attendance question, was scored as follows:

- more than once a week or once a week (3),
- a few times a month or once a month (2),
- a few times or at least once a year (1),
- not at all (0).

Question 8, the Bible and religious material reading question, was scored as follows:

- once a day or more (3),
- once a week or more (2),
- once a month or more, or occasionally (1),
- never (0).

The 1996 God and Society survey also included the following question: Human beings are not special creatures made in the image of God, they are simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution? (Reverse scored). This question was left out the scale for this paper because it was not comparable with the 2007 survey, and according to Andrew Grenville, the creator of the CES, it is not as useful as the other questions in identifying those who are evangelically aligned.

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices and 2007 CHEC/EFC CES Questions

The 2003 Evangelical Beliefs and Practices survey and the 2007 CHEC/EFC survey used the same CES questions. These include:

1. The concept of God is an old superstition that is no longer needed to explain things in these modern times. (Reverse scored)
2. I believe that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of my sins.
3. In my view, Jesus Christ was not the divine Son of God. (Reverse scored)
4. I believe the Bible to be the word of God and is reliable and trustworthy.
5. I have committed my life to Christ and consider myself to be a converted Christian.
6. I feel it is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christian.
7. Other than special occasions such as weddings, funerals or baptisms, how often did you attend religious services or meetings in the last 12 months.
8. I believe Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but was resurrected to eternal life.

Questions 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 were scored as follows:

- strongly agree (3),
- moderately agree (2),
- moderately disagree (1),
- strongly disagree (0).

Questions 1 and 3 were reversed scored as follows:

- strongly agree (0),
- moderately agree (1),
- moderately disagree (2),
- strongly disagree (3).

Question 8, the attendance question, was scored as follows:

- more than once a week or once a week (3),
- a few times a month or once a month (2),
- a few times or at least once a year (1),
- not at all (0).

Church & Faith Trends



July 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 3

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Comparison of Scales

The 1996 survey included these two survey questions, which did not appear on the 2003 and 2007 surveys:

- How often do you read the Bible or other religious material?
- [How much do you agree or disagree that] human beings are not special creatures made in the image of God, they are simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution?

The question on creationism was not incorporated into this analysis because there is not a comparable question on the 2003 and 2007 surveys, and Andrew Grenville, who developed the CES, indicated that it is not as useful as the other CES questions in operationalizing those who are evangelically aligned.

The 2003 and 2007 surveys included this question, which did not appear on the 1996 survey:

- “I believe Jesus was crucified, died and was buried but was resurrected to eternal life.”

This 2003 and 2007 question is similar to the following CES question, which is included on both surveys and focuses on Christology. “I believe that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God provided the way for the forgiveness of my sins.” Survey questions often ask similar questions within the same survey as a way of testing the consistency of answers.

The verb in questions 2 (Christology) and 4 (Bible) changed from “I feel” in 1996 to “I believe” in 2007. The verb in question 6 (evangelism) was maintained as “I feel” from 1996 to 2007.

In addition to the change in verb, the rest of the Bible question was substantially revised from 1996 to 2003. The 1996 survey Bible question used the language of literalism while the 2003 and 2007 question used the language of trustworthiness and reliability. Canadians, including evangelical affiliates, responded more affirmingly to the language of trustworthiness and reliability than the language of literalism. Therefore the two questions are not directly comparable.

The 1996 Bible question and the Bible reading question both receive lower scores than the other CES questions. This has meant that the percentage of those who are “evangelically aligned” in the 1996 data is substantially lower than on either the 2003 or 2007 surveys.