

# Becoming secular: Biographies of disenchantment, generational dynamics, and why they matter

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## Abstract

In many Western societies, support for policies concerning the secularization of the public sphere or the state often seems to be driven by secularized majority populations considered to be largely homogeneous. In this article, by contrast, I draw on the case of the Canadian province of Quebec to show that, as a fundamental element of conflicts over secularism, secularist activism emerges from particular generational dynamics, especially those of the so-called ‘baby boomers’. My main argument is that while the baby boomers’ collective experiences have shaped their secularist outlook, there are a variety of biographical trajectories and engagements with spirituality that the public image of this generation tends to hide. The article is based on biographical and ethnographic research carried out between 2012 and 2018.

## Keywords

biography, generation, Quebec, secularization, spirituality

## Résumé

Dans de nombreuses sociétés occidentales, le soutien aux politiques de sécularisation de la sphère publique ou de l’État semble souvent être le fait de populations majoritaires et sécularisées, considérées comme étant largement homogènes. Dans cet article, par contraste, je m’inspire du cas de la province canadienne du Québec pour montrer que, en tant qu’élément fondamental des conflits autour de la laïcité, l’activisme laïc émerge de dynamiques générationnelles particulières, notamment celles des « baby-boomers ».

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Mon principal argument est que si les expériences collectives des baby-boomers ont façonné leur perspective laïque, il existe une variété de trajectoires biographiques et d'engagements en matière de spiritualité que l'image publique de cette génération a tendance à cacher. L'article est basé sur des recherches biographiques et ethnographiques menées entre 2012 et 2018.

### Mots-clés

biographie, génération, Québec, sécularisation, spiritualité

## Introduction

According to a cultural narrative that is dominant among both social scientists and the Quebec population, with the onset of the Quiet Revolution, many Quebecers liberated themselves from the shackles of backward and oppressive Catholicism, became secular, and articulated their secular ideals by transforming state institutions and the public sphere (Zubrzycki, 2016).<sup>1</sup> In the context of contestations over Quebec's new religious diversity, it is this generation of Quebecers that is publicly viewed as aggressively secularist, as a group of people who seek to defend the secular society they have built and their historical legacies.

While not necessarily wrong, this narrative tends to obscure the variety of biographical projects, trajectories, and spiritual journeys of members of the post-war generation, as well as the variegated political meanings they attach to their biographical choices and sense of self. In addition, as most public debates over the last two decades focused on the religious identities of immigrants, the spiritual lives of the *Québécois de souche* partly disappeared from sight, allowing them to form a presumably neutral secular whole that remained invisible in public debate.

Over the summer of 2013, Quebecers were deeply engaged in debating the *Charter of Quebec Values* that the newly elected government, led by the sovereigntist Parti Québécois, had promised to present to the public in the fall of the same year. As they would be in the following years – during which various governments would seek to respond through legislation to the general sense that Quebec needed a clearer idea of the meaning of laïcité – Quebecers were profoundly divided over religion's legitimate place and its boundaries. This debate had been animated by the widespread perception that the religious symbols and practices of religious minorities threatened the secular nature of Quebec's public sphere. In this context, I participated in the meetings of the *Association humaniste du Québec*, a secularist activist group, with an aim to better understand its role in shaping the contours, practices, and discourses on laïcité.

One of my first encounters with the group took place at its community center on Boulevard St. Joseph in Montreal's neighborhood of Le Plateau. At this meeting, I also got to know a man I call Pierre.<sup>2</sup> After the official part of the meeting, we all went to have dinner at a nearby restaurant, where Pierre and others got involved in an intense discussion over the question of whether the association was chiefly atheist or rather internally plural and open for agnostics and skeptics. While the discussion was partly sparked by a question of mine, it was clear that this was a topic of long-standing relevance and major

importance for people, as it animated them to come up with complex arguments about the ‘true meaning’ of humanism, agnosticism, and so on. However, the notion that seemed to be shared by everybody was that religion was a form of false consciousness and its influence on society was negative, if not evil.

On the same day, Pierre also agreed to give me an individual interview the following week. For the interview, I went to visit him in his private home in one of the city’s quiet southern suburbs. To my great surprise, his apartment was adorned with numerous statues of religious figures, especially Buddha and the Virgin Mary. On the surface, there seemed to be a stark contradiction between Pierre’s home decor and the atmosphere in the collective discussions of the group, which was usually rather hostile toward religion, especially religious objects. After all, the group was one of the major public opponents of the ongoing presence of a large wooden crucifix above the speaker’s chair in Quebec’s parliament, a symbol which had aroused intense and highly controversial public debates since the Bouchard-Taylor Commission’s deliberations in 2007.<sup>3</sup> And they were also clearly opposed to other religious objects such as the Sikh *kirpan*, Muslim headscarves, or the Jewish *eruv*, whose use and legitimacy had been debated within the highly contested legal framework of reasonable accommodation.

My initial response was to interpret the presence of these religious artifacts as manifestations of Pierre’s cultural habitus in which these religious figures had been secularized and transformed into aesthetic objects – in other words, into objects of secular contemplation rather than religious devotion. After observing the statues for a while, however, I felt that they were indeed more than aesthetic objects. Each figure was placed within a small shrine-like spatial arrangement and, taken together, they afforded the place a tangible spiritual atmosphere. What appeared to enable the presence of these objects in Pierre’s apartment was clearly that this was a private space – a home in which spiritual devotions were an aspect of the individual cultivation of subjectivity, not of collective life. But it was also the privacy of this intimate space which rendered my own presence slightly awkward, as I felt that I had encountered something of a secret that did not fit easily into the rationalist world of Quebec’s secularist activists.

In this article, I go beyond the standard biographical image of the Quiet Revolutionaries in order to reveal the more complex ways in which individual religious biographies and cultural change are mutually shaped. I do so by focusing on a group of secular and humanist activists who have all been involved in recent civil society mobilizations around *laïcité* but have done so on the basis of hugely diverging biographical pathways. Based on the interpretation of biographical interviews and ethnographic observations with group members, I trace the complex ways in which these individuals have reworked their Catholic selves and heritage.

Significantly, even though I focus on people who consider themselves secular, the notion of ‘lived religion’ (McGuire, 2008) is highly useful in emphasizing the dynamic nature of biographical change, highlighting as it does personal journeys, disruptive experiences, and critical junctures. It is precisely the notion that we need to look beyond official religion – religious institutions with their officially sanctioned dogmas, doctrines, and rituals – in order to make sense of religious change in everyday life that informs my approach and is central to the idea of lived religion. In dominant sociological accounts, Pierre would make an appearance as a typical baby boomer secularist, but not as someone

who is devoted to private and individual spirituality. While baby boomer secularism surely is an important political force in Quebec's cultural history, it is also a mirror into which baby boomers look again and again, and which tends to obscure the dynamics of personal spirituality.

The article centers on the analysis of three lives and the biographies through which they have been shaped and narrated. Each of these biographies occupies a corner within a conceptual triangle built around the processes of (1) emancipation, (2) the privatization of religion, and (3) the politicization of religion. This conceptual triangle, I argue, captures the entwinements of the Quiet Revolutionaries' religious biographies as well as the cultural transformations that occurred in Quebec after the Quiet Revolution. Each biography is an ideal-typical micro-historical articulation of at least one of these three processes. As such, they produce stocks of shared knowledge that are stored in the collective memories of a particular generation and mobilized in contemporary controversies over secularism: biographical experiences of secularization-as-emancipation animate ideas around the need for a robust framework of secularism in order to safeguard individual freedom; experiences that are driven by the privatization of religion tend to animate high valorizations of the secularity of public space; and biographical experiences marked by the politicization of religion are typically and quite easily *activated* in current controversies. By the politicization of religion, I mean the ways in which normative claims, directed against both native Catholics and minority communities, that religion is only insufficiently privatized inadvertently turn religion into a political affair. In the eyes of baby boomer secularists, one needs to politicize religion in order to privatize it. Privatization and politicization are thus intimately connected. Importantly, collective knowledges are not uniform, and there are tensions between them. As we shall see, in each of these processes, gender and feminism are central, albeit contested, categories.

Grounded in ethnographic and interview-based research carried out in Quebec between 2012 and 2018, this article emerges from a project on how the biographies of secular activists shape contemporary controversies around *laïcité* (Burchardt, 2017, 2020). I worked with secular activist groups, visited their meetings and the political events they organized, visited members in their homes, and interviewed them. I label as 'secular activists' those people who are either members of or inhabit the cultural vicinity of associations such as *Coalition Laïcité Québec*, *Mouvement laïque québécois*, *Association humaniste du Québec*, *Les Intellectuels pour la laïcité*, and *Libres penseurs athées* and feminist groups such as *Éditions Sisyphé*. All of these organizations seek to counter the remaining institutional privileges of Quebec's Catholic Church, promote secular culture, and advance the separation of religion and the state. As I will show, they also form a specifically generational project. All activists I interviewed are linked through direct experiences of the Quiet Revolution. The members of the movement were mostly born between 1940 and 1960, came of age in the wake of the Quiet, and experienced the fading power of Catholicism during their youth in the 1960s and 1970s. They all have in common the notion of experiencing the Quiet Revolution in terms of a clash between belief and unbelief, and between acquiescence to church power and rebellion. While not all of them engage in spiritual practices, the dimensions I identified are representative of the secular milieu of baby boomers as a whole.

## Religious change in Quebec

Quebec's religious change since the Second World War is only insufficiently described with the notions of diversification and secularization. While these terms are good starting points, there is a need to elaborate on their specific consequences. While Quebec received continuous flows of immigrants throughout much of the twentieth century and even before, the bulk of earlier immigration consisted of Europeans and, with the important exception of Jews, was mostly Christian. As a result, these migrants affected the religious make-up of the population by adding new confessions, but did not introduce 'deep' religious difference. While most of the immigration of earlier periods hailed from Portugal, Greece, Italy, and Eastern Europe, today many immigrants are North Africans, Haitians, Latin Americans, South Asians, and Southeast Asians (Rousseau and Castel, 2005).

However, during the same period, the inherited religiosities of original Catholic populations declined dramatically, giving rise to secular worldviews and new spiritualities. In Quebec, the number of those who participated in the Catholic mass at least once a month fell from 51% in 1975 to 24% in 2005. Within less than 50 years, Quebec had turned from a 'priest-ridden province', as a well-known saying had it, into a hotbed of secularization and a nation with an expressly secular self-understanding. This understanding was the outcome of the Quiet Revolution that signaled the end of defensive, traditionalist French Canadian society and 'the Great Darkness' as Quebec historiography refers to the period of the 1930s until 1959, as its epitome. Intriguingly, however, the number of those who considered themselves Catholic only fell from 83.9% in 1971 to 83.5% in 2001 (Meunier et al., 2010: 89).<sup>4</sup> Because of the history of Catholic domination and subsequent secularization, Catholicism *and* secularism are woven, to varying degrees, into the textures of collective memory and national identity among Quebecers (Mager and Cantin, 2010).

However, there are open questions as to how to interpret these findings and their consequences. Against the idea of a homogeneous secular Quebecois political subject, Meintel and Mossière (2013: 55) have cogently argued that – taken together – secularization and religious diversification have actually given rise to new forms of religious behavior within the majority group (see also Gauthier and Perreault, 2013). While those beliefs and practices are partly nurtured by geographical mobilities and experiences of religious alterity, they remain highly invisible. In this article, I push further the idea that within the presumably homogeneous generation of Quebec's baby boomers, there are competing cultural impulses at work that account for the internal variety of their biographical projects.

Importantly, in Quebec as elsewhere, secularization does not lead to outright and uniform rejections of religion as such. On the contrary, secularization can lead to various forms of religious indifference, even though the politicization of religion in public discourse may unsettle subjective indifference toward religious identities. Equally importantly, the collective effects of secularization are often attenuated in that people may cease to believe in God and participate in religious rituals, but continue to identify with particular religious traditions – in Quebec, chiefly Roman Catholicism – as markers of national belonging and as sources that feed into collective narratives, symbols, and

memories. In order to account for these ongoing identifications with Roman Catholicism and for the ways in which they enable a new politics of national or ethnic belonging among native Quebecers, scholars have proposed concepts such as ‘cultural religion’ (Laniel, 2015; Meunier et al., 2010) and ‘religion as tradition’ (Zubrzycki, 2012). These concepts capture the fact that in Quebec, secularization has reconfigured – but surely not fully dissolved – the nexus between Catholicism and national belonging.

Since the 1990s, political parties, secular activists, feminists, and other social groups have engaged in numerous attempts to push religion out of the public sphere and to deepen its secular nature. One especially fervent of these attempts crystallized around the so-called *Charter of Quebec Values* that the nationalist *Parti Québécois* launched in September 2013 as a central element of its campaign in the run-up to the provincial elections. As two of its key elements, the *Charter* implied the banning of all ostentatious religious symbols for public sector employees and the introduction of the principle of *laïcité* into the *Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The proposal for the *Charter of Quebec Values* sparked a massive public debate, not only in mass media and in numerous street demonstrations and intellectual conferences, but also among people in their everyday lives. Family members began to discuss *laïcité* over breakfast, and groups of friends debated it over drinks in Montreal bars. Colleagues at work, not least in universities, were split over the question of whether the proposal was xenophobic or racist, as those in the ‘pluralist camp’ tended to think, or a solid foundation for a secular and egalitarian public sphere and better suited to Quebec’s culture, as ‘republicans’ and ‘sovereignists’ saw it. Even after the Liberal Party government passed the so-called Religious Neutrality Bill in October 2017, which prohibits face-covering when giving or receiving public services, secularism remained a major issue of public debate. It has become even more so since the landslide victory of the *Coalition Avenir Québec*, a political party founded in 2011, in the general elections of October 2018. According to the party’s electoral campaign, the passing of the Charter of Secularism and the banning of religious symbols for all individuals who wield coercive state power are central elements of its political agenda.

As mentioned above, secular activists have played an important part in these mobilizations. However, as I seek to show below, behind a façade of seemingly homogeneous claims, we find in fact hugely divergent biographical experiences and projects that motivate support for *laïcité*. I argue that generational dynamics are fundamental for understanding biographical trajectories of secularization.

## Theoretical approach

My analysis in this article is inspired by two distinct bodies of theory. First, I draw on sociological theories of biographies in social contexts (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1995). In doing so, I distinguish between life course, or life trajectory, on the one hand, and biography, on the other. Broadly speaking, the first refers to the sequencing of occurrences and events in the life of an individual. In multiple ways, this sequencing or succession is structured by social forces and expectations. Such expectations target not only the timing of marriage and childbirth but also the completing of educational careers, professional advances, and individual economic successes and trajectories. Historically,

social expectations around life courses have been shaped to a considerable extent by religious doctrines. In addition, fundamental markers or ritual passages in life – birth, the beginning of adulthood, marriage, childbirth, and death – have been *religious rituals* (Turner, 1989 [1969]; van Gennep, 1986 [1909]).

Biography, by contrast, refers to the ways in which life courses become subject to thematization or reflections, as well as the *subjective* shaping of one's life course. In this context, it is often critical moments in life and ensuing crises that animate biographical reflection: 'Critical life events trigger biographical work' (Jost, 2012: 126). Central to all forms of biographical becoming are issues of temporality, which manifest themselves through a series of questions that subjects typically feel compelled to address: How did I get here? How did I become who I am? Why are certain things happening to me?

Religious experiences, contexts, and institutions often play important roles in stimulating and addressing these questions. In particular, we find that religious change often operates as a driver of biographical self-reflection. One impressive example of this is the massive proliferation of autobiographical writing that has occurred in Quebec in the wake of the Quiet Revolution in which intellectuals, social activists, and members of the Catholic Church have sought to account for religious change (Baum, 2016; Provencher, 2016; Richard, 1995). At the same time, this writing and the public discourses it nourishes have also contributed to shaping religious change.

In order to understand projects of biographical becoming, I argue that it is useful to combine this approach with theories of collective memory. Following Rosenthal (2010), I suggest that practices of recalling constitute and constantly reconfigure the collective memories of particular cultural groups – such as Quebec's baby boomers – against the backdrop of specific historical circumstances, and that these practices of memory rest on a dynamic relationship between the past and the stocks of knowledge that are passed on through generations and are creatively manipulated by them. Therefore, my aim here is to reconstruct the articulations and mutually formative relationships between individual experiences and cultural history, and to thereby sideline the dualism between micro- and macro-perspectives in the study of religious change. Significantly, the rules that shape practices of recalling and define what is said and what remains unsaid are largely implicit; in other words, subjects internalize these rules and draw upon them in shaping their biographical projects, but the fact that memories are always created anew through each practice of recollection also means these rules are subject to change. I now turn to the analysis of the biographical accounts.

### **Pauline: liberation**

Few biographical accounts lay open the inner tensions of Quebec's Quiet Revolution more clearly than that of Pauline, who was born in 1934 in the small town of Bouctouche, New Brunswick into a middle-class Acadian family. Between 2012 and 2014, I met with Pauline on numerous occasions to discuss recent developments concerning *laïcité* with her and interview her. Initially, I had become aware of her role in Quebec's secular movement because of her contributions to civil society deliberations on *laïcité*, including for the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. After locating the secular activist group of which

she was a member in the town of Trois-Rivières, we arranged an initial meeting at a local restaurant where she began to tell me her story.

At the age of 16, Pauline decided to become a nun. Her parish priest and other members of the parish community had observed her dedication in offering services to the community and the poor and thus felt that she had a natural talent to serve God as a nun. She thus began her probationary period at an asylum of the Order of the Little Sisters of the Poor in Montreal. In this period, she mainly worked with mentally disabled people, for whom she cared and served meals. In her descriptions, she recalled the extremely strict behavioral regime to which she was subjected to as a nun. Pauline lived a life, as she described it, driven by self-denial and submission to internal hierarchies which obliged her to obey her superiors at every moment. This self-denial was ceremonially validated when, in an official act upon the completion of another 3 years of training in Montérégie, she was given her new religious name: Sister Xavier Marie-de-la-Trinité.

Taking vows of chastity and obedience, she officially entered the order in 1955. She was then sent to Paris, where her life was characterized by self-sacrifice and asceticism as she and her colleagues served the poor by offering food collected from affluent families. After 5 years, however, she witnessed how one of her close friends, another sister, fell in love with a priest. After the leadership of the order became aware of this illicit relationship, the sister was threatened with relocation, upon which she took her own life.

Terrified by this experience, Pauline asked her superior to be allowed to enter another order. She therefore joined the convent of the Order of the Carmelites in the French city of Rouen in 1963. There, she began to dedicate her life to prayer and an even more austere asceticism dominated by fasting and sleeping on a bare wooden bench. Finally, this lifestyle took its toll on her health, and she became severely sick with tuberculosis and was admitted to a hospital. This is when her family decided to repatriate her. During this period, she developed severe doubts about the kind of life she had been living: 'It was during that time in the Carmelites that I was awakened, after all those years'. With the support of a chaplain with whom she spoke about her doubts and her increasing unease with monastic life, she prepared for her exit from the order. After the bishop agreed to her transition, she finally returned to the secular world in 1974, at the age of 40.

Subsequently, she began to reshape her biography and reorient her biographical project in radically different ways. Importantly, her choice was not to abandon her beliefs, which at the time – in the historic period of the mid-1970s – had already become a real possibility. Instead, she remained committed to her religious beliefs, but she felt that they needed to be put to scrutiny. In particular, she began to deplore what she saw as the 'negative' quality of Catholic monastic life – a negative view of the human body and a 'negative spirituality' that depended upon the repression of joy and happiness: 'They taught us a contempt [mépris] for the body that was so much in opposition to the natural and supernatural truth of it. I just did not agree with that anymore and so I had to come out'.

In stark contrast to this negative spirituality, she began to develop, first for herself but later also for others, what she saw as 'positive spirituality'. In a small Quebec town, she began to manage a space on unused church premises which she bought for a low price. There, she opened a center for prayer and meditation called the *Centre de Prière*

*l'Alliance*. She began working part-time as a secretary for a chiropractor to support herself while dedicating the rest of her time to giving speeches on spirituality and teaching meditation:

At first, it was a very poor house, you know, but then more and more people came, actually thousands of people, because what we offered corresponded to their own searches and quests. And a lot of people came who were divorced, or homosexuals, so people whom the church didn't want. You see, religion doesn't offer equality to people, but meditation does.

For Pauline, it was important that there was no prize attached. Participation was free, but many people offered donations so that the building could be maintained and bills paid. Initially, church officials were suspicious of her new activities, but the success was so overwhelming that the bishop could not deny her work any longer: 'On the tenth anniversary, we actually held a Mass and the church was full! And so the bishop was pleased'.

Describing the reasons for her decision to return to secular life and the ways in which she developed her spiritual practice, Pauline mobilized a range of concepts, all of which pivot on notions of *autonomy* and *liberation*. 'When you submit yourself to sacrifice as we did in the monastery, you have to die, your own self has to die first', she explained to me.

In a remarkable biographical twist, in 1985, her life changed dramatically once again when she met a Catholic bishop. They first became friends, but over the course of their relationship they fell in love with one another and became enmeshed in a forbidden relationship. They actually planned to elope in the United States, become Protestants, and get married in a Protestant church. However, after a short period of severe illness, her lover passed away from cancer, leaving Pauline feeling sad and disillusioned about God's intractable decisions. She not only lost her faith in God, but also left the institutional and cultural world of Quebec's Catholic Church.

Two very similar experiences with love relationships, which the rules of Catholicism had rendered illicit and disabled, are thus responsible for decisive steps in the process of Pauline's subjective secularization, that is, the disenchantment of her biography. Pauline's story thus highlights the structures of experience and feeling behind Quebec's sexual revolution as one of the crucial dimensions of the Quiet Revolution and the cultural emancipation it spawned. In the first experience, she was the witness of a friend's forbidden love relationship with a bishop; in the second one, she herself became the protagonist of such forbidden love. The first experience initiated the process of her exiting from monastic life, while the second experience – her own love with a bishop – sealed her eventual exit from church life and Catholicism, and thus an exit from a cultural and institutional world that had dominated Quebecois society for most of its history. This powerfully resonates with broader notions of secularization as *liberation*. In one interview, she triumphantly claimed, 'Well, what we [she and the bishop] did was we challenged celibacy!' In her biographical reflections, the institution of celibacy became the metonym for the inner tensions between individual freedom and religious rules that had characterized processes of cultural change in Quebec since the 1960s and which powerfully reverberate in contemporary debates on *laïcité*. For Pauline, celibacy turned into a symptom of institutional failure and a symbol of personal pain on multiple levels.

First, celibacy symbolized the tragic death of her friend, who committed suicide out of her inner troubles caused by the vows of celibacy that rendered her love illegal. Second, it symbolized a system of religious rules that compelled her to consider leaving her church and becoming a Protestant in another country for the sake of celebrating a marital union before God. And finally, it symbolized – in her eyes – the impossibility of reconciling autonomy and religion.

For her, this was especially expressed in the way children got socialized into religious norms and were taught religious knowledge. ‘The church always set the model, for centuries’, she argued:

... and this model was always copied. Children could do nothing but imitate their teachers, and they had to imitate Jesus. But no. You have to go inside yourself, be yourself, develop yourself, your talents, your ways of seeing things and so forth. You have to be independent of all that, of your father, and grandfather. You have to think for yourself.

As we see, the notion of the autonomous self becomes the single most important concept in Pauline’s perspective, with the church and patriarchal kinship relationships epitomizing the structures of a society that denies autonomy to the individual. Therefore, in my interpretation, her biography centers on the concept of liberation, as it is the imagined need for liberation from Catholicism’s backwardness that drives her biographical project – as a project of becoming the subject of her own biography. Her project of emancipation in the realm of intimate life actually came to completion when, in 1995, she fell in love with a man whom she soon after married. They have been living a fulfilled marital life together ever since.

In 1995, Pauline published an autobiographical account in which she revealed her relationship with the bishop. While it caused much public uproar and negative commentary, it also made her biography available to broader audiences and actually began to serve as a medium of self-reflection in Quebecois society. Pauline became a prolific writer who would contribute to many public debates, usually by developing her standpoints from the perspective of her own biographical becoming. In other words, she retells the story of her own suffering from Catholic teachings around self-denial and the oppression of the body in order to warn against the dangers of a return of religion. In 2008, Swiss filmmaker Michel Nussbaumer turned Pauline’s biography into the subject of a documentary movie.

The case of Pauline illustrates the inextricable entwinements of secularization and the politics of intimate and sexual life. It demonstrates how the cultural emancipation that secularization entails is in fact about negotiations of intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003). However, the main domains of these negotiations are not commissions or official politics as in the case of Claire, whose biography I analyze below. Rather, they take place as a politics of private and intimate life that unfolds from autobiographical and other literary genres of communication, has a strong spiritual dimension, and seeks to engage with others – for example, readers – on a horizontal level.

### **Pierre: privatization**

When I interviewed him, Pierre was 63 years old. Born in 1950, he more or less spent his entire life as a resident of the greater Montreal region. For most of his life, Pierre worked

in the human resources section of a multinational company. There, he was responsible for taking care of employees' pension plans and insurances and addressing problems with work motivation and other dysfunctions in the company, but also for recommending people for job promotions inside the company. The most important qualities that this job required, in Pierre's eyes, were sincerity and authenticity:

So many studies have found that people care about this: they care about you being genuine with them, about whether they will be able to rise to the occasion and what you tell them about this. This creates a sense of belonging in the company.

Pierre's reconstruction of his own biographical detachment from Catholicism is fundamentally based on these notions of authenticity and sincerity: in other words, the perception that the Catholic Church as an institution, but also Catholicism as a set of beliefs, was profoundly insincere and therefore stood in the way of human flourishing. His view of his entire religious trajectory is shaped by this idea, such that he has projected his rupture with Catholicism into the early parts of his life.

'I had a very enlightened Roman Catholic upbringing', he told me, 'I actually also believed in it. But okay, I would say that early on I already had doubts about the whole biblical narrative'. Pierre thus began to frame the ways in which his relationship to religion developed around the question of whether religion provided accurate knowledge about the world. This is not entirely surprising, given the strong tendencies in the cultural milieus of organized humanism to reduce religion to a theory about the world, which can be tested and adjudicated. For many humanists, religion is thus not about shared ritual, emotional comfort, or a sense of belonging, but about explanatory accounts of humankind, which are to be found, as Pierre suggested, in the 'biblical narrative'. Pierre's arguments thus illustrate one salient feature of many baby boomers' relationship with Catholicism – namely, the understanding of Catholicism's specific backwardness as borne from its doctrine. He thus suggested: 'I mean, the whole notion of the original sin, this is a basic metaphysical problem, I think'.

Subsequently, he explained to me in great detail why he felt that Catholicism has never been able to solve its 'metaphysical problems' and therefore had to fail:

The whole Augustinian tradition says that we are actually bad, we are bastards at heart, we are wretched and that only grace can turn us into children of God. But Judaism doesn't say that. It says we have the power to make good choices and bad choices. And with that kind of metaphysics you certainly can make a contribution to humankind, to science, arts, literature, and philosophy. Because get out there and you make a difference. But if you are wretched, what can you do? That doesn't motivate you to do anything and to bring the best out of you. With Buddhism it is similar. Buddhism says that the spirit of the Buddha is in each one of us. It says that any living creature has the capacity for enlightenment and that comes naturally.

While listening to Pierre, I felt that he was seeking to render intelligible to me the presence of the religious artifacts that I had seen in his apartment and which seemed at odds with the antireligious discourses that dominated social life in the circles of the humanist association. The bottom line of his elaborations was not to view religious traditions such as Catholicism, Judaism, or Buddhism as religions, but rather as philosophies and ethical

systems that may or may not entail a truth about human life. Interestingly, however, this framing did not lead him into atheism but rather, as we have seen, into a peculiar openness toward other religions with which he compared his Catholic heritage and into a rationalist spirituality of sorts. ‘I developed a deep interest in Buddhism, more or less in my forties, and I really read a lot of books, from the Dalai Lama and others’, he told me. ‘And gradually, through a long and gradual process, I have come to the conclusion that the Buddhist worldview is demonstrably closer to what we can call the truth’.

Importantly, despite the Buddha shrines in his home, Pierre insisted that his interest in Buddhism had nothing to do with the fashionable appropriations of Buddhism by many Westerners and made jokes about people like Steve Jobs, who had returned from his visit to India with his head shaved and dressed in a saffron robe. He did so because he saw these appropriations as inauthentic. And while he only observed Buddhism on a personal level and never joined any organized Buddhist group, his perception of the value of authenticity actually motivated him to join Quebec’s *Association humaniste*. Asked how he got in touch with the organization, he explained,

I just looked them up in the phonebook. I went to a couple of their presentations and was impressed. They are all highly educated. But the most important thing is that there is no double language. There is a strong measure of hypocrisy in many churches. There is what they say and there is what they really mean. And I found that extremely tiring [...] With the humanists, they just say what they mean. They are as they appear. I found them to be straightforward, always, and transparent. And found that very engaging, the complete lack of hypocrisy and the straightforwardness of these people. They are also funny and there is a lot of conviviality.

Eventually, it was the sense of authenticity which he found in the members of the humanist association that drove him to become a member. This same authenticity also became the central criterion whereby he judged Catholicism (and other religions) and on the basis of which he distanced himself from his Catholic heritage. Shortly after becoming a member, Pierre began to actively participate in associational life, mainly by producing videos for promotional purposes. However, he also joined some of the group’s campaigns. He became especially active in the campaign to support victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. As more and more news about the widespread sexual abuse of minors in Catholic institutions had been circulating for more than two decades, the notion of Catholicism as essentially *insincere* appeared as fully vindicated in his eyes and turned into his basic interpretative frame.

In Pierre’s view, insincerity emerges from a particular relationship between the private and the public. Religion becomes insincere for him when it imposes public rules and claims public truths. On the flipside, he reframed philosophy as truth-seeking in the private sphere. The outcome are forms of spirituality that contradict widely held assumptions about humanists. The underlying ethic is that the private realm is the realm of philosophical self-realization, to which public religion is intrinsically inimical.

### **Claire: politicization**

At the time of our first meeting in 2013, Claire was a 58-year-old middle-class woman working in a public relations (PR) agency that offered services to public institutions, but

she told me that she came from a working-class family in Quebec City. Born in 1955 to parents who had five other children and no formal schooling at all, it seemed a privilege to her that she had the opportunity to attend a private Catholic school. Once there, she soon took note of the one Protestant girl in her class, of French Huguenot origin. She recalled that the girl never prayed with them, but instead, guided by the nuns, the class would pray *for her*. In the midst of the ongoing Quiet Revolution, Claire experienced Catholicism as a religion that insisted on its superiority, and she viewed religion more generally as divisive, as this passage shows:

Religion – it was in the sixties what we believed and before that too, long before that. So the Quebec society is very much shaped by this until the sixties and when the sixties came, it was a big liberation for Quebec, the French-Canadian mostly because they were the Catholics, it was a big freedom! We had the *Refuge*, which was an artistic movement at the end of the forties,<sup>5</sup> very important in our district. And when we started the liberation movement it was for the *women*, it was liberation from the *church*, it was liberation from *Canada*. It was in the sixties and the seventies, all was mixed together. And when we had *la Commission des droits de la personne* which is new, you know probably, the organization, the *Charte* was meant to replace religious rules and religious values and to have universal values, and equality between men and women. And we knew at the time, we knew that many of these principles were against what was taught in the religions, so we knew that there was an opposition between them.

Thus, she opened her autobiographical account by suggesting an interpretive frame that set her biographical experiences and choices in the broader context of the historical events of the Quiet Revolution. While, as mentioned above, Claire perceived her enrollment in a Catholic school as a privilege, it still subjected her to a relatively strict set of religious rules. For example, she recalled that in her school, it was unthinkable for a young girl to publicly admit that she was taking birth control pills. One of her classmates actually did so and was subsequently expelled from the school. After finishing her schooling in 1969, Claire continued visiting a Catholic seminary in downtown Quebec City for another 2 years. Therefore, amid the ongoing Quiet Revolution, she still spent a considerable amount of her adolescent life in institutions that were under the control of priests and nuns.

Later on, Claire became acquainted with a French man who would become her husband. During the 1970s, she enrolled in sociology and journalism studies at the university. She thus became a direct beneficiary of the massive expansion of Quebec's educational system and subsequently engaged in a professional career as a communications and PR expert in different state institutions. Thereafter, she and her husband raised four children and were able to enjoy a consolidated middle-class life.

In many ways, Claire's story exemplifies the biographical trajectories of Quebec's activist generation, who reached full political maturity during the 1970s and early 1980s and continuously pushed the frontiers of Quebec's modernity by politicizing whatever they saw as the backward or traditionalist remnants of the 'Old Quebec' of the Grande Noirceur. While she, like many others in this generation, had not personally experienced the Grande Noirceur, she turned it into a form of political consciousness that compelled her into action. She noted, 'We haven't really lived much of that, but our parents did, and this is why we had to do the liberation'. Claire's biography is thus a biography of political

middle-class militancy in which practices of politicization were central to processes of subject formation.

While Claire was skeptical from a young age of the social structures that Catholicism had put in place in Quebec, she was far from a staunch atheist. In fact, though she was not a regular participant in Catholic life, she actually gave in to her husband's wish to have their children baptized. She legitimized this decision by arguing, 'In the village where my husband is from, this was still a very big thing, it was very important for them, and so I said yes'. But she also felt that it was important for her children to know about their own cultural background. 'I wanted them to know their heritage', she told me. 'I think this is something important, so when they visit a museum or when they visit a church, they will know where they are'. In these descriptions, Claire echoed public discourses in which Catholicism is increasingly framed as a collective heritage and whereby it acquires a new status as a secularized collective memory (see also Zubrzycki, 2016).

At the same time, however, the enrollment of her children in school also animated her to politicize, together with others, the ongoing presence of Catholicism in the public school system. With the schooling of her children, she became aware of continuing differences between Catholics and Protestants and the role of religious education. She became a member of the school committee, and in 1985, she became involved in a commission that sought to modernize Quebec's confessionalized school system. Her description also shows the political contingencies of these processes:

We were the only province that changed a constitution to take away rights from the Catholics and Protestants so that our school system wouldn't be religious anymore, so all the immigrants could immerse in the new system, which is supposed to be neutral. It was a big move at the time because many Catholic groups and Protestant groups were very against it, because their rights were in the constitution. [...] Those people felt that they were stolen from, you know, that they were entitled to these rights. But later, most of the society believed that strongly, that to integrate immigrants and to be a really modern society we are to abide by democratic laws and not religious laws.

Convinced by these arguments, Claire subsequently participated in numerous political commissions in Quebec. In the context of controversies over reasonable accommodation, she eventually joined the *Coalition Laïcité Québec*, a civil society organization that mobilizes support for secularism, due to her perception that young people did not understand the dangers of religion anymore because the historical period of religion's cultural and political dominance was too distant for them. The dangers of religion that are hereby implied are their negative impact on women's emancipation, their sexism, and their inability to accept individual freedom. Moreover, Claire felt that most of the reasonable accommodations that Quebecers were supposed to grant to religious minorities undermined women's rights, which were perhaps the most important political achievement of her generation. Therefore, Claire's political activism in favor of laïcité was clearly animated by her desire to safeguard the baby boomers' historical legacy against religious backlash.

The idea of religion as particular and secularity as universal thus turned into the bottom line of her activism. However, for her, the debates around secularism were

problematic because they linked the ‘secularism issue’ with the ‘migration issue’, which she felt was one of the big mistakes Bouchard and Taylor made. ‘It was not at all about immigration, it was about us!’ she remarked. She was clearly conjuring up – once again – the Quebec of the Quiet Revolution, thus proposing as a starting point of reflection a society that was entirely different from the one of today. Drawing on this particular case, one could say that at issue is not so much the question of whether secularists are *against* migrants or their presumed racism (of which Canadians from outside Quebec are very quick to accuse them), but rather the fact that they have no choice but to *sideline* (some) immigrants’ religious needs in order to uphold their inherited vision of liberation, progress, and modernity.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to show how biographical research can illuminate distinct elements of processes of cultural change and secularization. My argument is that there are distinctive biographical trajectories and projects behind the apparently uniform support for robust versions of secularism that Quebec’s baby boomers often seem to espouse. In this context, it is useful to recall Karl Mannheim’s (1952 [1927/1928]) distinction between generation as a social location for shared positionalities of individuals in historical time, on the one hand, and the ‘generation unit’ (Mannheim, 1952 [1927/1928]: 302) whereby individuals actually *become* a generation through the development of a shared consciousness, participation in the same historical fate and events, and the sedimentation of the experience of these events, on the other. Drawing on this distinction, it is clear that, despite the specificities of their biographical trajectories, Quebec’s baby boomers became a generation unit by developing and sharing the same notions of secularization as liberation, seeing themselves as the legitimate and authorized carriers of this process and laïcité as its necessary end product. The point is thus that shared generational experiences are reworked through divergent biographical projects.

The biographical trajectories I have analyzed articulate three distinct historical processes that are central to the Quiet Revolution and the subsequent cultural changes which began in Quebec in the 1960s: intimate and sexual emancipation; the privatization of religion; and the politicization of religion (defined here as the progressive contestation of the presence of Catholic institutions in the public sphere). As I showed, the privatization and politicization of religion are actually not countervailing trends, as is sometimes assumed in secularization theories. Once established as a norm, the privatization of religion becomes a central motive for the political controversies. My central *theoretical argument* concerns the relationship between biographies and *collective memory*: biographical choices typically emerge from some kind of subjective engagement with social expectations and the evaluation of different possible pathways in a given culture. When making choices and interpreting lines of action, subjects mobilize culturally available stocks of knowledge. In retrospect, choices make sense only in relation to these stocks of knowledge, which are thereby reproduced or altered. These entwinements between biographical experiences and cultural knowledge constitute the collective memories of the Quiet Revolution and are, in my view, a key element for understanding the fervor of current debates on secularism (which are often insufficiently understood).

The *political* question is whether Quebecois society is able to create communicative and dialogical spaces in which the collective memories of baby boomers and those of other cultural groupings, milieus, and historical generations can interact and where these interactions produce new knowledge in the light of which biographical experiences can be reinterpreted.

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### Notes

1. This is an expanded and revised version of a text published in Mossière (2021) *Dit et non-dits: mémoires catholique au Québec*. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
2. All names used in the article are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of my informants.
3. The government had commissioned sociologist Gérard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor to take stock of minority–majority relationships in Quebec through these deliberations.
4. For further data and authoritative analyses of secularization processes in Quebec, see Lemieux and Montminy (2000), Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme (2011), and Nault and Meunier (2017).
5. She refers to the movement *Global Refusal*, which published an influential manifesto in 1946 and is considered an important intellectual forerunner of the Quiet Revolution.

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