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The explorers and settlers who came to Canada shared an assumption that a “Christian society” would take shape in the New World. But they also brought with them the rival loyalties of a divided Christendom. Long after the Peace of Westphalia ended the wars of religion in Europe in the 17th century, the competition for souls continued on a number of fronts, among them the race to convert Indigenous peoples, and moral campaigns aimed at infusing Canadian society with Christian values.

Organized religion is now situated in a new world order that is as disruptive to old assumptions about belief and belonging as the social revolution that propelled the European Reformation five hundred years ago. The institutional church faces challenges not only from reformers seeking new forms of spiritual community, but also from those who are indifferent to belonging to any community of faith.

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