
Seeing the Invisible: Ambient Catholicism on the Side of the Road

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The public role of religious objects is highly contested in Quebec, epitomized by the *Charter of Values* in 2013. In this heated political atmosphere, rural Catholics continue to create and care for more than 3,000 wayside crosses. They note that these colourful, fifteen-foot devotional objects often remain invisible to passersby, unless a cross “calls” someone to it. Proceeding from this observation, this article unites studies of material culture with recent work on secularism to argue that the crosses exemplify a form of engagement with secularism that corresponds to what anthropologist Matthew Engelke calls “ambient faith”: religiosity that filters in and out of sensory and conscious space. Extending this idea, I argue that ambient objects exert an authority often missed in studies of public religion, which still focus largely on political discourse and legal codes about marked objects (e.g. the hijab). As ambient objects, wayside crosses are powerful because they ‘act’ on human beings, thereby mediating a dichotomy between “modernity” and traditional Catholicism by laying claim to both at once.

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“A wayside cross is not a wayside cross if it can’t be seen.”

Paulette Duvalier, 68, cross caretaker, Saint-Léon-le-Grand¹

RURAL QUEBEC IS A PATCHWORK OF AGRICULTURAL FIELDS AND VILLAGES criss-crossed with small roads. One drives past gas stations, cemeteries, corner stores, and other staples of rural North America until once in a while something surprising looms into view: a cross nearly twenty feet tall, usually painted bright white, encircled by a colorful garden. It can be plain or elaborately decorated with instruments of the Passion, stylized hearts, or occasionally, Jesus’s body (Figure 1). There are an estimated three thousand such *croix de chemin* across Quebec, cared for by the people who live nearby. Although priests sometimes encouraged their construction, creating and maintaining wayside crosses has always been a voluntary lay practice. Once the original builder passes on or moves away, another, usually self-appointed caretaker steps in, becoming recognized locally as acting in this capacity.

For caretakers, wayside crosses are the product of a relationship with God and a testament to God’s presence in the world. They are also inherently public objects, defined by their visibility. Whether constructed on public land or the corner of a private field, they are always found along roadways. Caretakers cut trees, trim bushes, and occasionally transplant a cross altogether if they feel that it is not sufficiently visible. They also redo a cross’ decorations, making each one a striking, even monumental, religious object, all the more so because it embodies a traditional devotionism rarely seen in the province today. Thus it is odd to hear caretakers say, as they often do, that the crosses are invisible. Their observation is not a metaphor for the decline of Catholicism in Quebec. They really mean it: people look at the crosses and *do not see them*, they say.

This article foregrounds this seeming contradiction—crosses that are highly visible yet somehow invisible—to shed new light on the role of religious objects in ostensibly secular spaces. Public religious displays have produced significant and often acrimonious debate in Quebec over the last decade. Notably, in 2013 the Parti Québécois government proposed a Charter of Values banning *signes ostentatoires* (conspicuous religious signs) in the public sector. While relevant scholarship in Quebec has largely focused on the pragmatics of legal definitions and “accommodation” measures for religious minorities (Adelman 2011; Bouchard and Taylor 2008; Rocher 2011; Roy and Koussens 2014), such debates raise

¹All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.



Figure 1: Wayside cross in Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines with traditional instruments of the Passion: the ladder, lance, sponge, hammer and nails, pincers, and rooster. Photographed in 2010. Courtesy of Monique Bellemare. 167x251mm (72 x 72 DPI).

another equally important question: how does religion take on new forms, including public instantiations, in a secularizing place like Quebec? One answer, I argue, lies in how religion may become ambient—unnoticed yet present, condensing at particular moments around seen/unseen objects like wayside crosses.

For anthropologists of religion, ambience refers to forces that are backgrounded but ubiquitous, filtering in and out of our sensory space, such as sermons broadcast in the street (Hirschkind 2006) or invisible spirits that comingle with the living (Ochoa 2010). Matthew Engelke's recent work on the Bible Society in England offers an especially useful discussion of "ambient faith" in the context of Western secularism.² Engelke emphasizes that in England the normative public sphere is understood to be free of private interests and personal agendas, including religion as it has come to be defined (2013, xxii). Yet the very essence of Christian social relations is that private self-formation *necessarily* becomes public: a Christian has a duty to spread the Good News. The Bible Society team responds by engaging in what Engelke calls "biblical publicity," a conscious negotiation with the secular in order to embed Christianity in a shared public discourse. One way they do so is by producing ambient faith through visual media and aural cues meant to be glanced or overheard. They hang abstract angels in shopping malls at Christmas, for example, or facilitate Bible reading groups in cafes. The "background qualities" of this engagement create sensory connections to and unexpected openings for Christianity in public places (2012; 2013, xxv).

Engelke's work arises from an ongoing discussion among scholars of religion in the wake of the secularization thesis. Following influential studies in the 1960s that presumed religion's inevitable decline, a second generation of work on "secularisms" has repositioned the relationship between the secular and the religious as mutually constitutive (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994; Knott 2005; Taylor 2007, 2009). Building on this work, which has been grounded mainly in philosophy and the study of institutions, a third wave of studies such as Engelke's has begun to explore how contemporary people actually experience and employ the processes of secularism (Bender and Taves 2012, 10), often in ways that can be considered ambient. Religion, in a variety of manifestations, is imbricated in pursuits such as psychology experiments or volunteer experiences (Bender and

²Evangelical Anglicans founded the Bible Society in 1804 and are still its core supporters. I substitute Engelke's term "biblical publicity" with "religious publicity," which is better suited to Quebec Catholicism. I also prefer "ambient religion" rather than "ambient faith," as I am not concerned with disembodied belief but rather with religious practice and material religion.

Taves 2012), politics (Van de Port 2005), consumerism (Moreton 2010), and public rituals (Coleman 2009).

Object display and embodied performance play a pivotal role in this literature, as well as in the many studies of marked public objects associated with minority religions, particularly the *hijab* in Quebec and France (Koussens and Roy 2014; Scott 2010; Selby 2012). Another significant theme explores the continued presence of older religious objects, which may become a focal point for heritage creation, as discussed below, and political protest (Jenkins 2004, 3). Time and again, however, these interrelated fields of research highlight objects insofar as they are instrumental in debates about law, public policy, or philosophy. The actual material things at stake fade into the background. Most studies of secularism, in Quebec or otherwise, remain firmly anchored in the realm of human action and discourse.

My aim, then, is to bring into focus what Engelke touches upon only briefly (2013, xv, 23, 40): how objects qua objects are integral players in the production of public religiosity.³ To do so, I depart from previous scholarship on wayside crosses that examines (human) debates about whether they should be maintained and how (Joly 2008; Simard 2004; Simard and Milot 1994) and focus instead on the interactions between caretakers and their crosses. This human-thing connection is denser and more textured than the subject-object relationship often supposes: things may also “act” as they impinge on, and elicit responses from, the humans around them (Keane 2006; Latour 1999, 176–80; Miller 2005, 11–15). Caretakers emphasize how wayside crosses call people to them, thereby derailing human action or propelling it in new directions. Yet as objects the crosses also remain ambient, situated between seen and not seen. These qualities, I argue, produce a kind of authority often missed in debates about public religion and religious publics in Quebec. In short, while at first the invisibility of public crosses may seem like a problem to be fixed, the fact that they sometimes go unseen is precisely what makes them powerful objects that, according to their caretakers, are fully modern enactments of God’s presence in the world.

CARING FOR CROSSES: HOW CROSSES AND PEOPLE INTERACT

One May morning, Marie-Hélène and I drove to see the cross she maintains. We talked typical cross talk: Had the soil shifted over the

³I do not mean to criticize Engelke’s interpretation of the Bible Society per se, whose motto, as he notes, is “making the Bible heard” (2013, xiv).

winter? Would we find the wood rotting or the screws rusting? Caring for a cross is walking around it, poking and prodding. It is peeling away bits of flaking paint, remaking fragile decorations, supplementing wood with hardier materials such as metal, fiberglass, vinyl, or plastic siding. Caretakers return to their crosses each spring, bringing clippings from their gardens and leftover materials from home construction projects, and over the ensuing months they regularly trim the grass, weed the flowers, and touch up paint.

The rhythm of cross care dates back generations. The first such crosses were probably erected in the early nineteenth century, with a construction high point in the 1940s and 1950s.⁴ Then, like today, they were built by men, flowered (*fleuri*) by women, and blessed by a priest after construction. There has been little scholarship on the crosses since the early 1980s when Quebecois folklorist Jean Simard conducted a comprehensive survey in which teams of researchers fanned out across the province to document the placement and aesthetic features of each one. Drawing on his archived maps, I directed a telephone survey in 2012 to 2013 of 398 parishes across Quebec, of which 199 were found to have crosses. From this sample, I identified four main types of crosses: those maintained by an individual on private land, by an individual on public land, by a municipality, or by a group (e.g., a historical society). Selecting fifteen examples of each, I recorded sixty-two long-form conversational interviews with caretakers and conducted 24 months of intermittent fieldwork (2012–14), often returning to the same sites a number of times.⁵

Based on this multifaceted research, a demographic portrait emerges. Contemporary caretakers are nearly all aged fifty to seventy, builders are men and often farmers or retired construction or wood workers (*menuisiers*). They are self-described *de souche* (of French ancestry) from rural towns or villages, communities where people still “place” each other (Stewart 1996, 201) by surname, parish, and *rang* (groupings of rural houses). They sometimes call themselves “immigrants” if they live in a village other than their natal one, though it may be only a short drive away. In the conversational interviews, 97% of caretakers self-described as believing Catholics and 83% said they go to church at least once a month.

⁴Stone crosses were erected along pilgrimage routes in medieval Europe. Similar crosses were documented in the 1740s along the Chemin du Roy connecting Montreal and Quebec (Simard 2004, 61–72). Locally built wooden *croix de chemin* likely date to the nineteenth century.

⁵About half the interviews were conducted in person and the rest over the phone. They ranged from two hours to a series of conversations over a few days. Interviewees included fifty individuals and twelve members of groups (i.e., historical societies or the Knights of Columbus). I also draw on the *Fonds Jean Simard* at Laval University, my surveys of *Colombien* magazine (1922–2007) and available village weeklies (2006 to present), and an online pictorial archive of 688 crosses compiled by amateur photographer Monique Bellemare.

Marie-Hélène is in her mid-60s and grew up one *rang* from where she lives today. She works on her family dairy farm and as a catechism teacher, among other roles in the parish. She began cross caretaking about five years ago. That day in May, on our way to do the spring clean-up, Marie-Hélène suddenly squinted and peered through the windshield. “Ah no,” she muttered, pulling over and stopping. The wind whipped around us as we scrambled up the embankment to a cross. It was not the one we were seeking, nor was it the one Marie-Hélène maintains. However, her attention was arrested by how the wind shook it and by its brightly painted heart (Figure 2). She put her hand against its base to feel the wood and metal screws, then stepped back and craned her neck. “Look,” she said, as she traced the movement with her hand in the sky: the cross was gently swaying. She bent down and removed some weeds at its base. As we walked back, she kicked the earthen bank rising up from the road where it was perched. Rivulets of loose dirt hit the pavement.

Moments like these illustrate how a cross may “act” and become “ambient,” in Engelke’s sense. The idea that things have a type of agency has thus far remained peripheral in religious studies even since the field’s “material turn” (Hazard 2013; Meyer and Houtman 2012, 4–9). Broadly speaking, theorists argue that objects act by *enduring*, *provoking*, and *organizing*. They endure after their intended use and thus may act by intervening in human behavior in particular places and at particular times. When unnoticed, their placement encourages normative actions (Miller 1987), and, when noticed, they may provoke a sudden emotional response. Objects also organize. By virtue of each one’s placement vis-à-vis others, and the group’s location in a geographic whole, they become decisive enough to catalyze an event, a reaction, an emotion.⁶ Political theorist Jane Bennett offers a well-known example of how this might occur. She begins her book *Vibrant Matter* by describing how she was walking along a street in June when the sun glinted on a black glove in the gutter. Suddenly she was *struck*, as she puts it, riveted by the assemblage of things in front of her—the glove, oak pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap, a stick of wood. “Because of the contingent tableau they formed with each other” they issued a call to her that she did not quite understand (2010, 4–5).

Bennett uses the term *assemblage*, a conceptual model that has proven helpful for scholars trying to bring into focus the “relentlessly interactive” relationship between things, ecologies, places, and beings (Tim Ingold in

⁶I use thing/object interchangeably, but for theorists in this field, thingness refers to the moment when an object exceeds human representation or use. There is also significant debate about whether “agency” should encompass nonhuman entities. Without aiming to resolve this issue, I do find convincing the argument that we can decouple agency from subjectivity (Asad 1993, 16; Hollywood 2004, 524). I avoid using the word “agent” for that reason.



Figure 2: The cross that stopped Marie-Hélène on the roadside, a “croix simple” (simple cross) with a bright red heart. Photographed in May 2013. Author’s Collection. 262x553mm (180 x 180 DPI).

Vasquez 2011, 313; Lane 2001; Morgan 2014).⁷ It is through the mutual interrelation between bodies (glove, human, street, sunshine) that, in Bennett's terms, a vibrant force "makes something happen": she is struck, riveted by what she sees. In analogous ways, caretakers describe being drawn to crosses in "not fully predictable encounters" that rely on an element of surprise (Bennett 2010, 24, 97; Stewart 2007, 1). A cross "acts" when it calls to a passerby and becomes visible to her—for example, when Marie-Hélène pulls over to the side of the road. This call does not emanate from a singular thing (though people refer to "the wayside cross") but from an assemblage of things in a shifting landscape.⁸ Wind, wood, paint, screws, road, dirt. That day, all acted together to draw our attention and delay our movement.

Ambience—the quality of being seen and unseen—proceeds from how things are embedded in assemblages. The things that comprise a wayside cross never physically disappear, of course, but through their interrelation different elements may be foregrounded or backgrounded at particular times. A cross may be invisible to a passerby because of a gust of wind in the trees, the placement of the sun, or a faded coat of paint. Perceiving interactions in this way usefully highlights how actions may be shared across bodies and displaces humans as the sole actors in chains of events. Take, for example, the story of Yvon Laramée and his wife Diane Larochelle, recounted on a plaque at the cross they restored in Saint-François-Xavier-de-Brompton. The cross was first planted on a farm in the early 1930s and maintained until about 2012. Then the farm was abandoned and, says the plaque, "one day, not so long ago, the cross disappeared." In 2013, "after weeks of research, [Yvon] found it, buried (*enfouie*) in an immense cedar hedge. It was broken, hanging between the branches."⁹ Yvon and Diane reinforced it with metal and repainted it white. They moved it a few doors down to their land so they could better

⁷"Assemblage" is often associated with actor-network theory (ANT), an approach arising out of sociological studies of technology that views all things as embedded within social networks structured by material (physical) and semiotic (conceptual) relations. Like ANT theorists, Bennett owes much to Deleuze and Guattari (1987). However, her approach is more open to the phenomenological than is ANT, and is thus more useful in the present context. In Bennett's initial example, the focus on public places and surprise is also highly relevant, and her attention to politics complements work on secularism. These ideas also have important antecedents in anthropology. There is the kernel of them in Durkheim, who noted that humans connect things to one another "mak[ing] them appear to us as function of one another, as vibrating sympathetically in accord with an internal law grounded in their nature" (2008, 180–1). Lévy-Bruhl also noted the role of an often unconscious "stream of sensory impressions" (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 84).

⁸By viewing wayside crosses as a collection of things that are (not quite) a singular object, I differ subtly from David Morgan's concept of the "focal object" (2014). In a general sense, however, wayside crosses could be categorized as focal objects, which Morgan defines as interfacial, visible nodes in networks of human and nonhuman relations.

⁹"Weeks of research" is undoubtedly an exaggeration. The local historical society that made the plaque may have wanted to emphasize the "scientific" process of locating it.

look after it. On its base, they affixed a poem by Diane called *I Am Here*, which addresses passersby in the cross' voice:

I was lost and was found

I was broken and was repaired

I was in the shadow, was put in the sun

I was forgotten, now I know you

You have aged like me

You hid my injuries but I see yours

Typical of many such poems (often by women), *I Am Here* illustrates how crosses “know” and “see” humans, just as humans know and see them. Of course, caretakers by no means confuse humans and crosses. However, they are *like* each other in the sense that, as Bruno Latour has shown, social engagement is a coproductive “program of action” that endows some roles to humans and others to nonhumans (1992, 254). In Quebec, *humans* act by enhancing a cross's visibility so that *it* can act on other humans to produce the type of relationship the poem suggests. Caretakers' role in this complex of actions is to clarify the intentional nature of a cross's construction, which they do by planting colorful gardens, adding reflective tape, or painting a brilliant white frame. Yvon and Diane even uprooted the cross and moved it. Yet human action and nonhuman prescription sometimes align imperfectly (Latour 1992, 235) and despite caretakers' efforts, things go awry. Wood breaks down, foliage grows erratically, and people still routinely fail to see the crosses or recognize them for what they are. Caretakers' neighbors and grandchildren mistake them for telephone poles (also made of felled trees) and television antennae (Figure 3). “Is it for growing beans?” Marie-Hélène's grandson once asked her. In short, the right interaction of factors in assemblage often fails to materialize and a cross “disappears,” as Yvon and Diane's plaque says (Figures 4 and 5).

Caretakers do not expect every person to see a cross at all times but there are grave consequences when no one does because, with some exceptions like Yvon who went searching for a cross he had half-forgotten, *seeing* is how caretaking normally begins. For example, Suzette, 56, lives on a farm in Saint-Lemay-du-Lac, a village of 137 inhabitants. When she moved there after her marriage 35 years ago, she started to notice a cross



Figure 3: When human built objects encroach, passersby may fail to recognize crosses for what they are. Photographed in 2014 in Sainte-Agathe-de-Lotbinière. Courtesy of Gérald Arbour. 677x903mm (72 x 72 DPI).



Figure 4: A cross in the trees along a roadside in Saint-Aimé. Photographed in 2010. Courtesy of Monique Bellemare. 40x53mm (300 x 300 DPI).



Figure 5: Photographic sheet from Paul Carpentier's doctoral research in the late 1970s. Each photo contains a cross. These images offer a sense of driving along rural roads where crosses are hidden among trees, telephone poles, and other objects – and then may suddenly loom into view. F1081-A2, Fonds Jean Simard, Archives de folklore et ethnologie, Université Laval. Author's collection. 106x47mm (300 x 300 DPI).

on the path she walked into the village. It “drew” her (*ça m’a attiré*) and she began to pause there regularly. Slowly, she recalls, she came to love the cross and wanted to care for it. Asking around, she discovered that her brother-in-law’s widow was its caretaker. Suzette offered to help and in the mid-1990s, when the older woman fell ill, Suzette took charge. In 2011, she raised money to restore the cross, followed by a benediction ceremony with the local priest. Driving up for the celebration, I noticed two other crosses within a few minutes of Suzette’s, one almost directly across from our festivities. They were cracked and leaning. I asked her: Why spend so much money on one cross when others needed repairs? She looked at me blankly until I pointed out the one nearby. “I don’t know that cross (*je ne la connais pas cette croix*),” she replied. “It’s not my responsibility. The owners [of the property] probably look after it.” Later, Suzette reiterated that she never notices the other crosses though she passes them daily. They never drew her as did the cross she maintains.

Although Quebecois associate the crosses with “the ancestors,” today only about 10% of crosses are actually maintained by direct family members of the builders.¹⁰ In other words, like Suzette, most caretakers fall into the role after being called by a cross and developing an affective bond with it. Such one-to-one relationships are less pronounced in places where a local organization, usually the Knights of Columbus, maintains multiple crosses. In either case, however, if a cross becomes invisible, stops being cared for, and actually falls, it is “finished,” caretakers say: it is almost as if it dies. In Saint-François-Xavier, the plaque specifies that Yvon found the broken cross still *hanging* upright between the branches, a small but critical detail. Caretakers never repair crosses that fall because of neglect, nor do they plant new ones where one has fallen recently enough that its “body” is still there. Hence Marie-Hélène’s concern about the cross swaying in the wind. It must be stabilized before it is lost.

To view this landscape as do caretakers requires one more element: the decisive factor, they would say. It means expanding the assemblage of nonhuman actants from things like wood and soil to also include God in the interrelationship between entities that catalyzes events. Here the caretakers depart from theorists like Bennett, who make “thoroughly non-theistic” ontological claims about the nature of reality (2010, 16). Their experience is better reflected in a growing body of work on religion that suggests taking “gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human” (Chakrabarty 2000, 16) gives voice to the people for whom these presences are real. In so doing, scholars begin to better acknowledge how, for most people in most places, holy figures are present and act in the

¹⁰This is according to my telephone survey. See above.

world (Orsi 2005, 49; Hollywood 2004; Vasquez 2011, 5). At wayside crosses, this figure is generally God the Father (Carpentier 1981, 373–6; for exceptions, Kaell 2015). The resulting relationship is protective, based on a form of lopsided reciprocity alluded to in Diane’s poem. Humans tend to a cross’s visible (physical) injuries while God-the-omniscient tends to humans’ deeper spiritual ones, whether or not they are apparent to people themselves.

The relationship that unites humans, things, and God is (re)created through regular devotional labor. Once we reached our destination that May morning, Marie-Hélène and I spent the day kneeling in the dirt, pulling up last year’s roots, rubbing our fingertips to keep warm (even in the spring sunshine). At one point, she sat back and turned to me, “Doing this is a prayer.” It is a sentiment I heard many times. Laboring is an especially appropriate form of prayer, given the nondiscursive nature of crosses’ calls and their role beyond the purview of formal liturgy. But while labor *is* prayer, it also creates the conditions for future prayers from passersby, since a well-maintained cross draws attention. This brings us back to the “call,” which for caretakers unites two components: it is a collaboration between physical things that draws the eye, and the presence of God that enters one’s heart. Often, they describe power emanating from the physical object itself, even as they also stress the orthodox Catholic view that God’s power is mediated through the object. The distinction rarely bothers them; they know when a cross is effective and do not need to disentangle why.

By contrast, caretakers readily pinpoint the mechanism by which a call is produced: as evident above, human encounters with crosses are ignited by a *look*. While this sensation parallels Bennett’s encounter with things seen in a gutter, her analogy to being “struck” implies the shock and even violence associated with theories of “the gaze” (i.e., the male or colonial gaze). Religion scholar David Morgan helpfully qualifies this term vis-à-vis religious artifacts. For Morgan, the gaze is the “manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance” that “can [also] run in either direction, depending on the rules in force” (2005, 3–4), making it one component of an interactive relationship (2014, 86). With wayside crosses, the act of seeing typically falls between what Morgan calls a gaze and a glance (2005, 5). Caretakers distinguish it from the more absorbed gaze employed with devotional images at home or in church. Since crosses are public objects on the road, they often produce a gaze-on-the-go as one passes by. Similarly, caretakers distinguish between prayers (longer and more formal, such as a *Hail Mary*) and *pensées*, which often circumvent words altogether, akin to deep but fleeting thoughts. A cross impels a look and thereby stimulates

pensées, which flood the mind unbidden to make passersby suddenly aware of God.

In sum, although caretakers know very well that humans are not crosses and vice versa, their perspective reveals how programs of action (Latour 1992) may be understood as distributed across human and non-human bodies, constituted in and through their relationship with each other. From Quebecois Catholics' vantage point, the key party is God who animates all his creations, is "in" them and also separate from them.¹¹ Because crosses (animated by God) act in the world, they are beyond human control, becoming visible in not fully predictable encounters. This conception of objects impinges on, and speaks to, Western ideas of secular modernity.

SECULARISM, PUBLIC RELIGION, AND THE PLACES IN BETWEEN

The relationships that caretakers promote and foster take place within a charged atmosphere in Quebec, where religion's public role has lately made headlines. Although scholars have problematized assumptions about a binary secular/religious opposition, most people (in the West at least) still perceive their world as colored by what religion scholars Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini call the "traditional secularization narrative" (2008, 4–5). Many Quebecois, including academics, broadly regard secularization as a natural evolutionary process that accompanies modernization (Lefebvre 2005, 6; La Rivière 2014, 36–44; Rocher 2011, 30). It is associated with progress, freedom from religious authority, and increased private choice (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, 4–5).

These ideas arise from a particular cultural context. After the British conquest in 1759, the Catholic Church came to wield enormous influence in French Canada. By the late nineteenth century, it controlled most social services and education and was also essential to a national ideal rooted in a romantic vision of the unchanging peasant farmer (Lucier 2010). All this changed in the 1960s. Fuelled by domestic and international politics, as well as the Second Vatican Council, Quebecois nationalists rejected the archetypal pious farmer and called for a *rattrapage* (catching up) with modernity. French Canada seemed "stuck in time" compared to Anglo North America (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, 6), and many Quebecois (especially intellectuals) blamed the church for having kept them in *la*

¹¹I again reinterpret theories of assemblage, including Bennett's, that describe bodies as mutually dependent. As Robert Orsi notes, Catholics view holy figures as "possess[ing] separate intentionality and will" (2013) and God-the-father, in particular, is not dependent on other beings. For that reason, I use the rather Orsian term "interrelation" rather than dependence.

grande noirceur (the great darkness). The resulting societal overhaul was so massive it was dubbed a “Quiet Revolution.” A primary goal was to divest the church of institutional power. These reforms were also accompanied by a phenomenon of “unchurching” (Meyer 2012, 5) that, although not unique to Quebec, occurred shockingly fast. French Canadians’ monthly attendance at mass fell from 88% in the mid-1960s to under 20% today; weekly attendance at mass, at less than 10%, is now the lowest in North America (Bibby 2008).

Current debates about religion’s place in the public sphere tend to straddle French *laïcité* and Anglo-American secularism (Gunn 2004).¹² A recent example, widely reported and discussed even among cross caretakers, was the Parti Québécois *Charter of Values* (La Rivière 2014, 17–35). In the mid-2000s, a series of inflammatory media stories about Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews in Montreal prompted the Liberal government to commission philosopher Charles Taylor and sociologist Gérard Bouchard to study the problem. In general terms, their 2008 report recommended that conflicts be dealt with on a case-by-case basis in civil society rather than the courts (Adelman 2011, 47, 50). When the Parti Québécois came to power in 2012, they responded by proposing a *Charter of Values* to legally ban conspicuous religious objects in the public sector. The ensuing debates focused largely on religious minorities, notably Muslims, and oscillated between lauding religious displays as a manifestation of “the nation’s plural character” conceived in Anglo-American terms (Promey 2001, 28) and condemning them as a threat to French-inspired state neutrality.

These debates are important in how they “suffused the culture broadly; however, another secularist” commitment more directly impinges on the crosses: *patrimonialisation* or “heritage-making.” Though rarely eliciting much media attention, *patrimonialisation* is equally concerned with managing religious objects in public space by repositioning them as the nation’s shared cultural heritage (Chidester 2012, 91–111; Meyer and De Witte 2013; Nora 1984). For many heritage professionals, it is axiomatic that a religious object (understood to represent private interests *ipso facto* because it is religious) must be desacralized before it can be truly shared by “the public” (Joly 2008, 43; Turgeon and Saint-Pierre 2009, 411, 414). The only major study of Quebec’s wayside crosses was premised on this idea (Simard 2004, 5). *Patrimonialisation* has proven a

¹²The Canadian Charter begins: “Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God.” There is no state neutrality clause. By contrast, the 1958 French constitution begins: “France is a republic, indivisible, secular (*laïque*), democratic and social.” For a discussion by Canadian intellectuals (including Taylor), see “The Charter of Quebec Values” 2014.

tool especially suited to Quebec both because Catholicism has produced a wealth of physical things and buildings now embedded in the landscape and because French Canadians are, quoting Taylor and Bouchard, “a small nation constantly concerned about its future as a cultural minority” (2008, 19). Since the 1990s, the provincial government has shown considerable interest in religious heritage-making as a result.¹³

Thus far, these efforts have targeted wayside crosses largely obliquely: an official inventory classed a handful of crosses as “national treasures” and grants underwrote local heritage societies, a few of which produced tourist maps and completed restorations (Joly 2008; Simard and Milot 1994). A regular stream of government publications and pamphlets also promotes the crosses as examples of a now-obsolete religious devotion. This does not mean that caretakers would shun government money if they knew it was available. In the United States, Catholics have sometimes objected to government maintenance of historic crosses precisely because it implies the secularization of Christian signs (Butler 2011). By contrast, Quebecois caretakers share with heritage officials the conviction that wayside crosses create and reinforce “national heritage,” rooted in a French Canadian rural past. Yet heritage officials (perhaps willfully) ignore that cross caretakers are *also* Catholics, nearly all of whom self-describe as “believing” and most of whom attend church regularly. In short, heritage experts secularize by limiting and containing the meanings a cross can hold, while caretakers insist on a capaciousness that unites multiple layers of belonging: to ancestors, the land, the nation, the church, and God.

Caretakers’ refusal to draw neat distinctions is one form of rejection, as per Engelke, of the “normative public-private contract” that relegates religion to the sidelines of public life. Of course, there are significant differences between the objects and objectives of England’s Bible Society and Quebec’s cross caretakers. The crosses are enormous objects planted deep in the ground. They are “forever,” say caretakers, since nearly 79 percent are reconstructed on the same site, anchoring people to place and reiterating traditional connections between land, church, and family.¹⁴ The Bible Society, by contrast, is a professional team of urban-based experts who aim to meet people “where they are” by employing objects that are portable (the Bible) and transitory (displays or billboards), carefully wording their public interventions to obscure overt religiosity. Where the Bible Society and cross caretakers converge, however, is in how they believe

¹³Since the 1990s, Quebecois *patrimonialisation* programs have grown for a few reasons including a UNESCO-led trend toward heritage protection globally; the church’s decision to sell its buildings commercially; and the impact of *laïcisation* debates in Quebec and France (and related anxieties about Muslim immigration).

¹⁴On changes in wayside cross care and construction over time, see Kaell 2015.

that Christianity should “connect to and even ground all social institutions and networks” (2013, xiv).

In this context, Engelke notes, religious publicity in an ambient mode is a powerful force because, unlike conservative Christians who may seek to actively confront secular politics and culture (Harding 2001), producers of ambient religion always pitch it “as an invitation, not insistence,” thus “fostering publicity [while] respecting privacy and choice” (2013, 24, 59).¹⁵ For the Bible Society, this strategy counters images of evangelical missionaries as pushy and demanding, of the “bible thumping” variety. Focusing on freedom and choice, the Bible Society team finds a way to reclaim their place in the meta-narrative of modernity by showing that Christianity shares its values. In this form, religious publicity paradoxically refuses and internalizes the narratives that secularism has shaped.

These efforts to reposition Christianity are crucial in Quebec and recognizing them offers an important rejoinder to the tendency to dichotomize religion (including “traditional Catholicism”) and secular modernity. Though not dogged by the ghosts of evangelists past, caretakers face a persistent narrative that views Catholicism (both institutional and “popular”) as inherently antimodern, retrograde, and controlling. Rather than confront or contest this narrative, caretakers operate like the Bible Society team: they insert themselves within it. They insist that they too reject the generationally based devotional church that held sway before the 1970s, which most French Canadians now associate with constrictive societal obligations.¹⁶ Drawing on theology born of the Second Vatican Council, they describe how “church” changes and evolves, both institutionally and because of the people who comprise it. “Today,” says Marielle, a 60-year-old caretaker, “when you go to church or to the *croix de chemin* it’s more out of actual reflection, out of conviction.” Andrée, 67, agrees: “Before people weren’t more believing than now. They just followed [the priest or the neighbors]. They went to church, that’s it. Today it’s not in name only.” In this context, it is vital to caretakers that their crosses, which may *seem* like holdovers from the devotional past, be recognized as something new: they are ambient objects and, as such, never “force” people to look at them. Crosses remain invisible until someone *responds* to their call.

¹⁵A group’s ability to “pitch” religion as invitation depends greatly on its social location. Harding, Engelke, and I describe groups that are numerically and/or culturally dominant. Minority groups face major challenges in issuing “public invitations,” which others may construe as idiosyncratic or even a threat. Comparative studies would profitably expand the concept of ambient religion proposed here.

¹⁶Such recollections refer to the ultramontane Catholicism that held sway from c.1840 to 1940, which some scholars classify as a protracted religious revival in Quebec (Rousseau and Remiggi 1998).

PUBLIC OBJECTS AND SPARKS OF FAITH: HOW CROSSES CALL PASSERSBY

Drawing on their own experience of being called, caretakers describe two chief forms of human-cross interaction in the context of other passersby. Jean-Marc Thouin, a Knight of Columbus in the town of Saint-Jovite, describes the first, most common encounter: people “stop at the cross and say an interior prayer.” These are the *pensées* described above, fleeting thoughts that produce a sudden awareness of God. Historically, people used to stop at the cross for the duration of lengthy formal prayers (Figure 6). It was also customary to “salute” the cross with a tip of the hat, thus performing devoutness for one’s neighbors. Today, caretakers underscore that because there is no exterior evidence of a *pensée*, only the passerby knows that he or she has been moved. As such, they view it as exemplifying a new, post-1960s way of being Catholic that rests in personal choices and relational encounters with God.¹⁷

The second form of interaction complicates this perspective. Jean-Marc recounts: “I’ve seen a lot of people who aren’t practicing stop in front of the cross and kneel and confess (*se confier*). . . They were in a state like, depressed. They even confide in me if I am working [on the cross]. [They say] ‘I have sins’ or they make the sign of the cross.” The cross’ ability to move nonpracticing Catholics to a kind of confession anchors them to older forms of practice. It also exemplifies a major difference between caretakers’ idea of “the public” and that of the Bible Society. The latter carefully crafts objects to represent a “generic spirituality” with broad appeal for a public pictured as religiously diverse (Engelke 2013, 43). Caretakers’ conceptions, on the other hand, remain fundamentally monocultural (Zubrzycki 2010). The crosses are understood as a spiritual *point de repère* (point of reference) for an always already French-Canadian Catholic public. As a result, caretakers are sometimes confused if I ask them how they think Jews or Muslims might react. “What does that have to do with the cross?” responded Pierette, 67, “They don’t believe in Jesus, right? So would they even notice it? Probably not. Really, it’s the first time I’m considering it!”

Envisioning the French-Canadian Quebecois public as inherently Catholic means that caretakers fundamentally curtail religious choices by denying, to paraphrase Andrée above, that the previous generation was

¹⁷For researchers, the invisibility of such interactions makes them difficult to assess. I spoke with noncaretakers whenever possible during visits to caretakers’ villages and at group prayers, which sometimes drew onlookers. In Rouyn-Noranda, I spent a Sunday holding small group discussions with volunteers. Mainly, however, I draw on caretakers’ own experiences of being “called” and what they believe they witness in others.

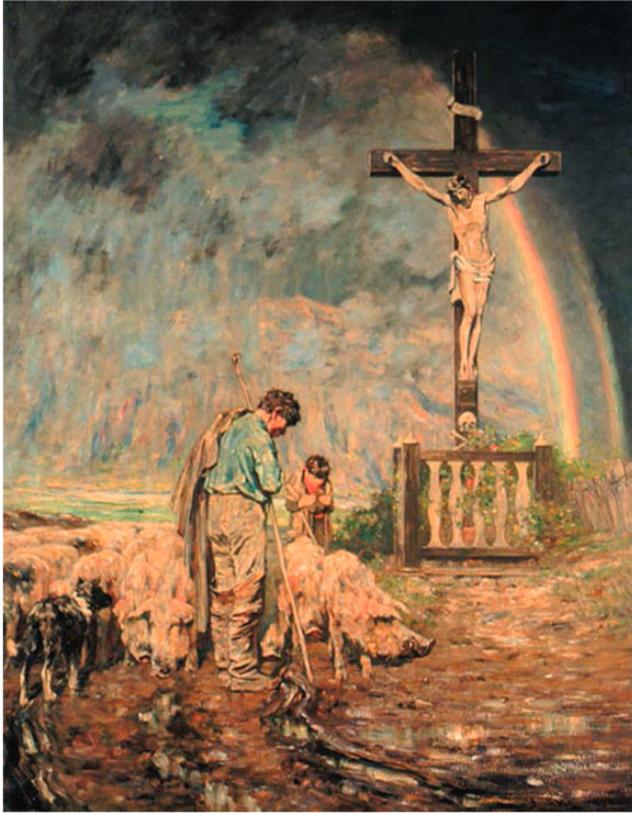


Figure 6: Horatio Walker, *De Profundis* (1916). Before the 1960s, romantic imagery persistently ignored modernization in Quebec, showing instead unchanging rural landscapes and pious farmers stopped in lengthy prayer. Contemporary caretakers consciously work against such images when they describe imperceptible *pensées*. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. 16x20mm (600 x 600 DPI).

“more believing” than people today. Yet they know the facts of French Canadian religiosity, if not precise statistics: fewer than 10% attend church weekly, 92% continue to identify as Catholics, 91% baptize their children (Meunier et al. 2010). In other Western contexts, sociologists interpret statistics like these by concluding that self-identifying as a Christian without believing may denote societal belonging, specifically in how it allows certain historically rooted populations to stake a claim as “from here” in comparison with recently immigrated groups such as

Muslims (Day 2011). While Muslim immigration has also caused significant anxiety in Quebec (Koussens and Roy 2014), caretakers dismiss the implication that because Catholicism does identity work, it is also shorn of belief. Time and again, they offer proof that “people might not go to Mass but they’re Catholics just the same,” as Pierette explains: “Today there are a lot of non-practicing people . . . but when you speak to people often, often they talk about faith. They don’t realize it, but they have it still. It’s different, but it’s still faith. Many young couples absolutely want their children baptised. They are non-practicing but there is still that spark of faith.” Caretakers identify a few key signs of this “spark”: people talk about faith, they do not deny God’s existence, they baptize their children, they go to church for lifecycle events, and they make selfless choices on behalf of their families. Such actions belie any easy separation between belief and identity, or between God, family, and nation. To be part of a Quebecois family is to be Catholic; thus, working hard to raise one’s children “right,” with or without mass, is seen to be a Catholic act.

This is ambient Catholicism, existing everywhere and yet nowhere, and it is in this context that the crosses are crucial. A wayside cross must be able to be seen—though it remains invisible to most people most of the time—in order to allow for the possibility of God. Its background quality is powerful *because it is emergent*. Those are the moments, as Bennett writes, when things in assemblage *make something happen*. The precise intensification of forces at a particular moment—the wood creaks, wind blows, paint gleams, God speaks—rivets human attention. The passerby is caught up in a divine interpellation that beckons when he needs God, whether he knows it or not. He may even drop to his knees in prayer. For caretakers, the reality of publicly active, even insistent, divine presence is thus continually reconfirmed through the cross’s call to strangers and non-practicing family or neighbors.

Because advocates of religious publicity in its ambient rather than confrontational mode engage the putative secular sphere, they also feel its threat. Anxiety peaked in 2013 with the *Charter of Quebec Values*. As a law that targets public religious objects, plausibly it could have extended to include wayside crosses. However, it was the reference to “values” that disturbed caretakers most: the *Charter* seemed like yet another attempt by secularists to deny that God is the *source* of Quebecois values. Their concern was augmented by ongoing litigation, in which some are directly involved, concerning legal restrictions on Catholic education. In the mid-1990s religious education was banned on school property. In 2008, a mandatory “Ethics and Religious Culture” curriculum was introduced, which takes a scrupulously secular approach by equating religion with “culture”



Figure 7: Gathering to bless a recently renovated cross in Saint-Come-de-Linière. The corpus (body) was made in fiberglass by a local artist. Photographed in September 2013. Author's Collection. 270x203mm (96 x 96 DPI).

and relegating Catholicism to a “religious heritage.”¹⁸ It spurred a Supreme Court case that ended in the provincial government’s favor in 2012.

In September 2013, a week after news broke of the proposed *Charter*, I attended a benediction ceremony in Saint-Come-de-Linière, a town in southeastern Quebec (Figure 7). About forty people gathered to watch the priest sprinkle a reconstructed cross with holy water. He concluded the ceremony with, “This cross is for us and for all the generations to come. The cross was a symbol of shame and derision when Jesus was crucified. Now it’s a symbol of *pride*. In Quebec, the Faith is less practiced, we know that. But we are not ashamed. We know that this cross unites us and makes us aware of God, all the people who see it, who pass by it.” Diane Larochelle’s poem, written the same year (2013) and affixed to her

¹⁸The program was widely lauded by scholars and is based on the scientific study of religion honed in universities. See *Government of Quebec 2014*.

cross in Saint-François-Xavier, reflects a similar sentiment. Directly after the lines quoted above, it concludes with the cross addressing the reader directly:

I remember your priests
but I don't hear them any more
I want to hear your voice again
before seeing you go
because I am here
to stay for another 100 years.

The cross acknowledges the human passerby's mobility but also reminds him of impending mortality ("go" being used in two ways) and of the need for publicly raising one's voice in prayer. Echoing the priest in Saint-Come, the cross concludes by reiterating its own role for generations to come.

Scholars have examined the importance of material culture in fraught political situations. In a recent essay, David Morgan expands his work on the gaze with a discussion of "focal objects," such as a saint's relics or a national flag, that create a visible center within shifting assemblages, much as described above. The focal object, notes Morgan, is "an ideologically charged hub that addresses itself to viewers and regards them in a particular way" (2014, 95). Like a prism, it gathers and refracts power through networks of social relations, which explains why iconoclasm is such a powerful political act in that it seeks to destroy not just an object but the connective relations in which it is embedded (2014, 98, 100). In a similar vein, sociologist Geneviève Zubrzycki has offered a compelling interpretation of Quebec's Quiet Revolution as an "aesthetic revolt," arguing that a secular nationalist identity found such wide purchase in the 1960s because the symbols of Catholicism were deployed and then publicly destroyed (2013, 428). Zubrzycki concentrates on the marked, highly visible saint statues in nationalist parades, which are paradigmatic focal objects in Morgan's sense.

As ambient objects, wayside crosses exemplify a type of power that is related but less direct. Zubrzycki helpfully points to Chandra Mukerji's work on Versailles, which partly illustrates what I mean. She argues that the palace garden is a "materially exemplary" object that through its design conveyed the grandeur and order of Louis XVI's court, shaping and

creating collective identities as a result. However, precisely because such objects are not discursive, they rarely generate explicit political opposition (2012, 511). Her insight highlights the difference that caretakers draw between maintaining a cross and, for example, writing angry letters to an elected representative or suing the province over school curricula. Both sets of actions intend to shape or express a collective identity. However, caretakers recognize the latter as human action and direct political protest; they view the crosses very differently. As the Saint-Come priest implies, caretakers conceive of their actions as limited to maintaining a cross. As Diane Larochelle's poem implies, the crosses have their own voices that request (or require) a human response. Caretakers enhance a cross' visibility, but do not control when and how it acts. Nevertheless, they retain faith that those who pass by *will* be moved and united, since the cross beckons when a French Canadian needs God. In these moments, the emergent quality of sudden visibility produces an especially affective form of power that distinguishes ambient objects from the always-seen and expected sacred things in caretakers' homes or churches. Just as importantly, as an object that is continually renewed and re-created, the cross outlives human bodies, projecting this emergent power into a potentially limitless future. Ultimately, then, caretakers and crosses make a very political statement indeed: they deny that anyone can really "secularize" Quebec society or the geographic territory it inhabits.

AMBIENT RELIGION ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD: REENVISIONING SECULARISM IN PUBLIC PLACES

I began with an unlikely premise: an abundantly visible object is often invisible to passersby. This phenomenon is all the more surprising because wayside crosses embody a superlative, explicit Catholic devotionism in a place where the church's legacy is highly contested. While the crosses might therefore easily be mistaken as a sign of reactionary traditionalism, or conversely as evidence of a nonreligious national *patrimoine*, this article argues that they are best understood as a contemporary mode of religious engagement and entanglement with secularism.

My argument begins by attending to how objects like the crosses intervene in public places and human lives. Objects are by no means absent in previous "studies of secularism; however, their presence" is noted mainly in terms of how they generate political debate, legal definitions, and social policies. Further, much of the literature is bifurcated between marked or unmarked objects. In the first instance, many studies (especially in Quebec) examine objects that are highly marked and therefore contested, such as the Muslim hijab or the crucifix in the provincial parliament

(Rocher 2011; Bouchard and Taylor 2008). A second group of studies explores those objects that are unmarked; for example, Catherine Albanese and Tracy Fessenden have each traced how forms of Calvinism became the unspoken “code” for “conditions, institutions and underlying patterns of behavior within the mainstream” of United States society (Albanese 1992, 402) that have become the basis for what is now accepted as secularism (Fessenden 2007, 5). Ambient religion, as I approach it here, is both more attentive to objects themselves and also situated between these two poles: it directs our attention to the *fluidity* between “marked” and “unmarked,” to a religiosity that is backgrounded but publicly present, filtering in and out of sensory and conscious space.

I draw this idea from anthropologists of religion, especially Matthew Engelke’s recent work on the Bible Society in England. However, because Engelke is concerned mainly (though not exclusively) with discourse, I have reoriented his model to more explicitly recognize the role of objects as they coalesce with each other and also with weather, geography, spirits, and humans to make *something happen* (Bennett 2010, 24). Indeed, ambient religion in Quebec—and elsewhere too, I suspect—is impossible without such periodic “condensations” (Ochoa 2010, 33) with and through material things. This brings me to the second part of my argument. Secularization in Quebec, and elsewhere, has not “neutralized” the public sphere, as scholars are aware (Lefebvre 2005). However, thus far missing in debates about public religion is recognition that religious objects may exert a kind of authority *as a result* of being ambient, rather than despite it. This vantage point reveals a few key things about secularism and public religiosity.

First, ambient religion is powerful because it does not rest on an explicit discursive negotiation with secularism through, for example, participation in legal cases or political debate. Rural caretakers do not necessarily shun these modes of engagement, but they have limited resources compared to the professionals in England’s Bible Society or the Quebecois bureaucrats and intellectuals who have shaped policy on religion since the 1960s. Recognizing ambient religion brings into view people like the caretakers who participate in the public reconfiguration of religion in ways less immediately apparent, arising from the interrelationship between humans and things. Caretakers produce religious publicity by responding to a cross’s need for human care: beautifying it, protecting it, stabilizing it before it falls.

Second, ambient religion refocuses our attention beyond those objects that are continually under public scrutiny, such as the Sikh *kirpan*, Muslim *hijab*, and Jewish *eruv* in the ongoing “accommodation” debates in Quebec. Indeed, my contention is that the *interplay* between invisibility

and visibility (that is, ambience) may also make objects powerful. The suddenness of seeing a cross loom up along a perhaps familiar road produces an affective moment of being called out of ordinary life, flooding the mind with a *pensée* about God. Although we often miss seeing such objects in studies of secularism, they in fact deeply challenge assumptions about a secular, neutral public sphere, since that which is ambient cannot be kept private.

Third, ambient religion is powerful because it engages secularism by upholding its tenets while also interweaving Christianity into public spaces. This notion clarifies how the freighted idea of “modernity” operates vis-à-vis public religiosity. For most contemporary Quebecois, including cross caretakers, modernity is defined against the societal obligations of the pre-1960s church and is thus viewed as inextricable from religious choice and private belief. According to caretakers, Catholicism today respects and promotes these values and is therefore modern. Yet they also implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) deny that French Canadian identity is separable from its religious roots: one can be nonpracticing, of course, but fundamentally a French Canadian is a Catholic. This idea partly converges with what sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2002) calls “church-type religious spatiality,” referring to how all people born under Catholic jurisdiction were considered *ipso facto* members of the parish, a theology strongly reinforced in Quebec as a mechanism for survival following British conquest.

My point is that because they are ambient, wayside crosses mediate the dichotomy between modern “choice” and religious roots by laying claim to both aspects at once. They appear and disappear, never “forcing” onlookers to see them, provoking only imperceptible, interiorized *pensées*. At the same time, they mark Quebec’s human and physical landscape as always already Catholic. Once positioned as ambient objects, wayside crosses reveal a realm that is appropriately complex, beyond previous studies by heritage scholars and government officials that presume public crosses are either made modern when they are evacuated of religiosity or represent the last gasp of dying traditionalism. For caretakers, each time a cross calls out from the side of the road it is a momentary materialization of the unalterable bond between French Canadians and God that is nevertheless fully modern. For scholars, it is a reminder of the multiple ways that humans and things coalesce and interact, producing a kind of interconnected and unavoidable ambient religion in even the most putatively secular public places.

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