

## Bibby on Civility

**Reginald W. Bibby, O.C., Ph.D.**, holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. On October 8, 2007, Bibby issued a press release on his research titled, “Good Without God, But Better With God?” The response to this press release was both vigorously critical and supportive. *Church & Faith Trends* interviewed Professor Bibby on January 10, 2008, to try to better understand what his research on civility was saying about Canada.

**Church & Faith Trends (C&FT):** Professor Bibby, on October 8th, 2007 you sent out a press release about your research into Canadians attitudes toward interpersonal values. Could you tell us briefly about the larger project this research was part of and how many years you’ve been studying Canadians’ attitudes toward interpersonal values?

**Bibby:** This is part of the Project Canada national survey carried out every five years from 1975 through 2005, and this particular analysis was based on the 2005 survey.

**C&FT:** The media reports that followed this story interpreted your research as a measure of civility. Is this how you understand your research? If so, how would you define civility?

**Bibby:** We were looking for the presence of positive interpersonal relational attitudes here, and we’re arguing that there is a relationship between these attitudes and civility.

**C&FT:** Your research was released in the middle of a season of renewed public bellicosity on the part of atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. A critique that we would like to get your response to is this, taken from an October 11, 2007, *National Post* article, “Social virtues linked to faith,” by Charles Lewis, which says:

Justin Trottier, executive director of the Centre for Inquiry Ontario, a Toronto-based atheist group, thinks the problem with Prof. Bibby’s survey is with the definition of values. He said the categories in the survey fit in the mould of the Ten Commandments, so a religious person’s enthusiastic response to them is not surprising.

“To me, scientific thinking is a value. Critical thinking is a value. Open inquiry is my biggest value,” said Mr. Trottier. “If he made those values—the way atheists would—he would have gotten different responses.”

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

Is the notion of civility that you work with substantially shaped by Judeo-Christian values, or is it in some sense universal?

**Bibby:** I want to be fair to Mr. Trottier—there could have been some difficulty in the way the survey was explained to him when he was responding to it—but what he is saying here is just silly. Mr. Trottier is talking about values in a general sense, but this analysis was looking specifically at civility and interpersonal values. To say they are Judeo-Christian, that’s just nonsense. A sociologist coming along here would likewise simply see these as interpersonal values. I certainly maintain that they are universal.

**C&FT:** Would you then exclude “scientific inquiry” and “critical thinking” from your list simply because they aren’t interpersonal measures?

**Bibby:** That’s right. We have, for example, looked at traits like intelligence and working hard, and success and freedom. It’s just that the focus of the analysis, and therefore the press release focus, was on civility and on the interpersonal realm.

**C&FT:** Dan Gardner, one of your critics, writes the following in an October 17, 2007, *Ottawa Citizen* article:

Worse, Bibby simply assumes a link between what people casually say, what they feel, and how they behave—an assumption belied by heaps of academic research, not to mention plain old common sense. Televangelists would get boffo scores in Bibby’s poll. Does that mean they are models of moral behaviour?

Setting aside Gardner’s invective, could you comment on his critique of attitudinal research and its relationship to behaviour, especially in light of this comment from your press release: “These findings, says Bibby, point to a stark conclusion: ‘To the extent that Canadians say good-bye to God, we may find that we pay a significant social price.’”

**Bibby:** In fairness to what Gardner is saying, the relationship between values and behaviour tends to be a precarious one. We really need to differentiate between *necessary* and *sufficient* causes. For example, for someone to be compassionate we would assume that they also value compassion. Therefore, it’s going to be *necessary* for them to value compassion for that outcome. The confusion lies when we assume that just because someone is valuing compassion they are therefore going to follow through. That would be saying that valuing compassion is a *sufficient* cause for compassionate behaviour. So valuing an interpersonal trait is something that is *necessary* but not *sufficient* for action.

# Church & Faith Trends



Values don't come out of a vacuum; there have to be social sources. And when we look around in Canadian society at the social sources for things like compassion, we don't find many institutions and organizations that explicitly champion compassion, but we do find that religious groups do. So to the extent that religious groups don't have people who are actively involved, at least in the numbers that they have had in the past, we're saying that there is going to be some slippage with respect to the value that's placed on compassion.

But the atheist comes along and says, "We value compassion too." Well, that doesn't negate the argument, that's just arguing there are alternate sources of compassion beyond religious groups, and no one's quibbling with that. We are saying that, in Canadian society as a whole, those other sources are not having the impact that religious groups are in instilling values when people are actively involved.

**C&FT:** We also would like to get your comments on trends in civility indicated by your research. The following table summarizes some of your findings on the importance of values from your Project Canada research.

Interpersonal Values	Percentage of Canadians in Project Canada surveys who indicated these values were "very important"				
	Survey Year				
	2005	2000	1995	1990	1985
Honesty	92	n.d. <sup>a</sup>	89	89	96
Kindness	83	81	79	75	n.d.
Friendliness	73	n.d.	70	70	n.d.
Concern for others	75	71	68	63	n.d.
Politeness	74	76	67	62	70
Forgiveness	75	70	57	55	75
Generosity	55	47	57	52	n.d.

<sup>a</sup> n.d. means no data was available.

Sources: *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style*, (Toronto: Stoddard Publishing, 1995), 28.

*Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, (Toronto: Stoddard Publishing, 2002), 213.

Bibby, press release, October 8, 2007.

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

Overall, and especially if we use 1990 as a baseline, it would seem that Canadians are placing a greater importance on these values now than they did in the past. What do the changes in the reported importance attached to these values mean, especially with respect to these numbers being a measure of civility?

**Bibby:** First off, I would argue that the changes are fairly modest. The good news is that, in contrast to the stereotypes and perceptions that a lot of people have, things aren't getting worse when it comes to values and the interpersonal realm. When we do our cohort analysis, like I've done in *The Boomer Factor*, where we differentiate between Pre-Boomers, Boomers and Post-Boomers, we find that among Post-Boomers interpersonal traits are valued just as much as they have been by people who are Pre-Boomers. And in some areas, such as generosity, we actually find a higher percentage of Post-Boomers valuing the trait than Boomers or Pre-Boomers.

The idea of civility, I would argue, is something that is increasingly taking in Canada. The influence comes, in part, because of the legacy of religious groups, but there also might be some correlation with people valuing interpersonal traits and people obtaining higher levels of education in Canada. I also think many people who are not particularly religious are saying it's increasingly rational to at least try to be decent toward each other.

**C&FT:** Fifty-five percent of Canadians said forgiveness was a "very important" interpersonal value in 1990, a number that rose to 75% in 2005. That would seem to be a fairly substantial increase. Why did we see that change?

**Bibby:** I would like to think that some of what is involved is people realizing that if we simply stress things like zero tolerance and justice, we really weren't offering people much in the way of hope and possibilities. The combination of experience and education has played a role in that. We may have been hard-nosed, wanting a toughening up of things like the old *Young Offenders Act*, with its justice orientation. This was, sort of, the immediate legacy of the whole Trudeau era. I think we now realize that these kinds of realities affect people who we know and family members and so on.

**C&FT:** You mentioned earlier some similarities between Boomers and Post-Boomers. Are there trends that are showing up differently in different generational groups?

**Bibby:** I've looked a fair amount at that in *The Boomer Factor*. A critically important trait of Post-Boomers is their emphasis on balance. Post-Boomers are recognizing that it's very difficult to have it all, and want more balance between things like career and education, and family life and relationships. When it comes to interpersonal values, we're seeing Boomers and Post-Boomers valuing some traits, such as honesty and courtesy, similarly. But in the areas of compassion and generosity, we're finding that there is a slight tendency for Post-Boomers—it's not dramatic—to value these traits more highly than Boomers or Pre-Boomers.

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

There is also a fresh openness to spirituality among Post-boomers. There isn't the negativism that seemed to characterize particularly males that came out of the Boomer era. There is an openness to—openness, and I stress that—greater involvement in organized religion than seemed to characterize some of that Boomer generation, particularly the males. Post-boomers are not gullible but are at least far more open to drawing on what might be good in terms of religion. In the midst of all that, it's so important to understand just how pragmatic they are. They're not just open to religion, but they are open to something that can really touch their lives, and the lives of their families.

**C&FT:** In *Restless Gods* you report on this same question for adults and teens according to whether they attend religious services weekly or never attend. How are weekly attenders different from theists in your work? How do they overlap?

**Bibby:** In succinct quantitative terms, 88% of weekly attenders express unequivocal (“definitely”) belief in God, as do 21% of those who never attend services. Looked at from the standpoint of those who “definitely” believe in God (versus those who “think so”), 45% of those people are weekly attenders, while 10% never attend services. In short, the vast majority of Canadians who are weekly attenders are also theists, close to one half of theists are also weekly attenders, with only about one in ten theists people who never attend services.

As for clear-cut atheists (“Definitely do not believe in God”), just 2% are weekly attenders, while 70% never attend.

**C&FT:** Are there notable differences in how theists and weekly attenders answer these values questions?

**Bibby:** No, because of the high correlation between people in the two categories.

**C&FT:** In *Restless Gods* youth are reported to give less importance to these interpersonal values than adults. Does this mean that they are less civil, or is a growth in civility just part of the process of maturing and becoming an adult?

**Bibby:** I actually have looked fairly extensively at the values-and-age-cohort issue in both *Canada's Teens* and *The Boomer Factor*. The overall pattern points to relatively minor value differences between younger and older adults by the time that younger adults have reached 18–39.

In some areas, such as generosity and tolerance, younger adults—if anything—appear to be slightly more compassionate than older adults. For all the hand-wringing, younger Canadians are looking fairly good when it comes to civility. In part, this appears to be associated with an increase in formal education, which in turn is not negatively related to religious attendance and has little impact on theism.

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

Put succinctly, belief in God remains high, and service attendance is also now fairly stable nationally. Both are positively related to social compassion. Belief and attendance are reinforced, or supplemented, by education. The net result is that the level of civility in Canada remains fairly high. Education appears to be an important source of good interpersonal life but is assisted considerably by religion.

Consequently, if theism or service attendance were to decline significantly, major sources of civility would be lost, as I argued in the press release in October.

**C&FT:** Could you comment on other similar studies carried out in Canada, the United States or elsewhere, and what light these findings shed on your own work?

**Bibby:** There has been very, very little work in Canada looking at the relationship between religion and compassion.

A few years ago, I had a chance to review some of the work that had been done in the United States and was surprised to find that in terms of actual rigid empirical work, some of the earliest work on religion and compassion was only done around 1947–1950. And the reviews tended to be very mixed.

There was some classic work done in the United States at the end the 1960s by Milton Rokeach, a social psychologist, that was featured in the journal *Review of Religious Research*, using some National Opinion Research Center data. Rokeach came down very, very hard on religious groups, maintaining that people who were actively involved in religious groups were less compassionate than everyone else. Rokeach asked why we would tolerate that sort of thing when it comes to religion and not tolerate it in the rest of society. So it's almost like a forerunner of some of the critiques you read about today.

But Robert Putnam, from Harvard, has been looking at the whole notion of social capital and religion's positive contribution. Putnam sees religion bringing people together and elevating lives. He is not negative at all but feels there is, at least potentially, a positive social outcome from involvement in religious groups. Some of this work has been done in the United States, but hardly anything has been done in Canada.

**C&FT:** Why do you think there is that difference? Why aren't Canadians interested in studying this?

**Bibby:** There is a general assumption among academics that religion isn't that important anymore. They've bought into the secularization notion or argument. I think the media has also played a major role. Michael Valpy, who continues to churn out stuff for *The Globe and Mail* that downplays the importance of religion, did it again just before Christmas. There's a very pervasive sense in Canada that religion simply isn't that important, and the works of authors like Dawkins just seem to confirm, for the person who doesn't know much about religion, that we're probably better off with less religion in Canada.

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

There aren't, then, that many academics who are taking good empirical peeks at what, in fact, is happening with the practice of religion or the impact of religion. We've been almost blasé about this alleged big decrease in public participation in religion in Canada. We've been really irresponsible, as academics, to not at least raise the question of whether the apparent demise of organized religion, or the decline at least in levels of participation, isn't having some kind of an impact on civility in Canadian life as a whole.

When we look at sources of civility, religious groups clearly have played a major role in the past, and they still continue to play an important role. And so, to the extent that Canadians are not actively involved in religious groups, there is going to be a definite loss in civility, and in instilling values relating to civility. We need to take a closer look at all that.

**C&FT:** Why is sociology of religion research important for public life in other areas besides measures of civility?

**Bibby:** We need to be exploring whether religion is having an impact on other spheres instead of in an *a priori* sense just assuming religion is not a factor. As researchers, we've been very naïve in understanding the impact of religion in Canada, for example, in politics. In the United States, religion is simply so overt that invariably there is an assumption that religion is having an impact in politics. Think, for example, of the criteria important for anyone who is running for office in the United States.

In Canada, we're not supposed to be overt if we're politicians and we happen to be religious. Therefore, Canadians work naïvely from the assumption that religion is never having an impact on politicians or politics. It would be interesting to survey Canadian politicians to see the extent to which religion is actually influencing what they are doing, the ways they're thinking, and the ways that they vote on issues.

Take our Prime Minister, for example. I'm sure that he has certain values that are influencing how he operates, but he certainly is not being overly public about those religious values, because that's not the Canadian way. Preston Manning, now officially retired from public life, continues to have a real influence in Canada, but he wears his religion in a way that is in keeping with how one can express faith in public life in Canada. If Preston Manning were in the United States, he could operate quite differently.

**C&FT:** Why should evangelicals and evangelical ministry leaders be concerned about sociological measures of civility or sociology of religion research generally?

**Bibby:** Sociology is a way of trying to obtain greater clarity with respect to what is happening in Canadian life. As Peter Berger said some years ago, "Christian commitment involves commitment to clear perception," and so sociology contributes, in turn, to our ability to have clear perception. I grew up in a world where I was constantly hearing people pontificate from pulpits about what's going on, and about where Canadians were and weren't spiritually. But until we go out and actually do some systematic counting we don't know for sure.

# Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

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

**C&FT:** What new work or publications are on the horizon for you? When can we expect to see your next book?

**Bibby:** We're just embarking on a national youth survey and hope to have it completed by early June. What will emerge from that is a new book in the late fall that is tentatively called *The Emerging Millennials: How Our Newest Generation Is Responding to Change and Choice*.

The new book will be building on the trends that have been characterizing Canada between 1975 and 2005. We want to know, in light of all these developments and the stage that has been set by not only by Boomers but Post-Boomers, what we are seeing in the lives of our latest "emerging generation."

**C&FT:** I assume there will be some sociology of religion measures in that study as well?

**Bibby:** Yes. For example in chapter 9 we look at the fact that these days people can believe in God or can take a pass on God. We want to know what young people believe, and whether or not belief makes a difference in areas like civility. In short, we'll be looking at some important issues head-on.

**C&FT:** Professor Bibby, thank you for your time. 🍁