

Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience

By Kurt Bowen. McGill-Queen's University Press. 264 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Samuel Reimer, Associate Professor of Sociology, Atlantic Baptist University

Kurt Bowen, professor of sociology at Acadia University, pulled together data from eighteen surveys to show that Christian religious commitment still matters in Canada. His book *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience* (McGill-Queen's, 2004) “explore[s] the various ways in which the religiously committed differ in Canada” (22). (By “religiously committed” he means *Christian* religious commitment, simply because most data sets of religion in Canada are not large enough to speak with confidence about smaller, non-Christian religious groups.) None of the data in this book are new. What is new is that someone has taken the time to bring these data together and, in doing so, gives us a valuable bird's-eye view of religion in Canada.

The distinctiveness of religiously active Christians is brought into sharper contrast against the growing secularity of Canada, the focus of Bowen's first chapter. Readers seeking a broader understanding of secularization from the social scientific perspective will find Bowen's overview helpful and accessible. Actually, the whole book is accessible—even for those who are not enamoured by numbers. Bowen successfully avoids unnecessary statistical manipulations and jargon.

The second chapter on religious demography looks at how many affiliates and active participants are within each religious group. As is typical of sociology in this field, Bowen often divides Canadians into religious families and finds that, in terms of percentage of the population that affiliate with each group, Catholics and conservative Protestants are holding their own, while mainline Protestants are losing ground. While other religious groups (Muslims, Hindus, etc.) and “nones” (those with no religious affiliation) are growing quickly, the majority of Canadians are still Christian affiliates. Although most Canadians still belong to some Christian group, however, there has been a rapid decline in church participation for all Christian groups except conservative Protestants. In fact, Bowen expects conservative Protestants to become an “ever more dominant force” within Canadian Protestantism because they are younger, are more committed, and have more people in the pews on any given Sunday than do mainline Protestants. In all this, Bowen confirms the work of other scholars, notably Reginald Bibby.

Let me note a few specifics in this chapter. First, Bowen rightly doubts the apparent decline of Pentecostals according to census data, which is likely due to a sizable number of Pentecostals (and other Protestants) falling into the ballooning “other Christian” category. This situation provides important evidence that the census religion categories need refinement (see “Evangelicals and the Canadian Census,” *Church & Faith Trends* vol.1, no. 2). Second, I have my doubts about the high rates of conservative Protestant switching (nearly 50% leave the conservative Protestant fold and nearly 50% join from outside of it) reported by Bowen based on Angus Reid (1993) data. These numbers are considerably higher than switching numbers reported by Bibby or by researchers of religion in the United States.

In subsequent chapters, Bowen shows that the religiously committed are distinct in both private and public ways. And this is the main contribution of this book. “Compared to other Canadians . . . the very committed are more likely to say they are satisfied with life, happy, and confident they will carry out their plans. They are less worried about money matters, despite having incomes about the same as other Canadians” (99). Committed Christians on the whole are less likely to experience marital breakdown and are less likely to cohabit. It is noteworthy, however, that Bowen finds higher frequency

Church & Faith Trends



February 2008 / Volume 1 / Issue 2

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
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of marital breakdown and common-law unions among conservative Protestants than the religious active in other traditions. He astutely wonders if this is because conservative Protestant groups attract those who have previously experienced marital breakdown or if active conservative Protestant relationships break down at higher rates. The committed are also much more likely to volunteer and give to charitable causes (conservative Protestants volunteer and give the most). They have a larger network of friends and relatives that they feel close to, and are more likely to be members of a small group. In general, Bowen finds religious commitment is good for personal well-being, relationships, and civil responsibility.

While the effects of religious commitment are more discernible in the private sphere than in public life, it would not be true that religious Canadians are less concerned about political issues than are their neighbours. They are similar to other Canadians in terms of which political parties they support, and hold similar attitudes toward capital punishment, the environment, multiculturalism, and the like. While conservative Protestants were more likely to support the Canadian Alliance party in past elections, this party never claimed the majority of conservative Protestants' votes, although this may have changed in the most recent election, in which the Conservatives garnered the votes of about two-thirds of church-attending Protestants (according to Ipsos Reid data). Not surprisingly, conservative Protestants are also distinctive in their lack of confidence in public institutions such as the media and government. An important point here is that if the committed are distinct in their values, it is often related to the priority they place on protecting the traditional family and moral standards. They tend to rate other national issues as lower priority simply because they rate moral issues higher.

The lack of confidence in secular institutions among the committed, and particularly the conservative Protestants, does not carry over in their attitudes toward their churches. The committed are very positive, even uncritical, about their churches, giving them very high ratings overall. This is true even of those who do not affirm all the doctrinal positions of their group (particularly Catholics who don't endorse all the teachings from the Vatican). The committed also consider themselves spiritual people, rejecting the perceived dichotomy between those who claim to be religious and those who claim to be spiritual. Even if some "seekers" and some researchers wish to emphasize the difference between being spiritual and being religious, Bowen's finding supports research in the United States which shows that the committed consider themselves to be both. Regarding belief, most committed Christians in Canada hold to traditional views of God, the Bible, and Jesus. Conservative Protestants distinguish themselves from other committed Christians by being more accepting of exclusive claims for Christianity such as the belief that people who don't accept Jesus as their Saviour will not get to heaven, and in their antipathy for non-traditional sexual practices.

In his conclusion, Bowen reminds the readers of the shrinking numbers of the committed in Canada, and suggests that the future looks dim especially for Quebecois Catholicism, since the number of active Catholics in Quebec is shrinking most rapidly, and those who are active tend to be older. The outlook for mainline Protestantism is only slightly better, followed by a substantially better picture for Catholicism outside Quebec and for conservative Protestantism. The conservative Protestant future is brightest because they have the highest number of very committed adherents (weekly attenders who say religion is very important to them) among the young, even outnumbering young and committed Catholics. However, this optimism is tempered by the fact that the percentage of conservative Protestants in Canada does not seem to be increasing.

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For Bowen, religious commitment matters. As a Christian himself, he is respectful of religion and takes it seriously. This is particularly true of institutional religious commitment, including church attendance. He rejects any claims that religion is not declining in Canada, but is just changing into a less-institutionally-based form of religiosity. He argues, for example, that “religious seekers” have lower levels of private religiosity – like prayer or scripture reading – than the (institutionally) committed, and because their religiosity is privatized, there is no good reason to think that they will revitalize religion in Canada. Overall, the message is that committed Christian religion is good for Canada, and for Canadians.

My criticisms of this book are few. Related to the rather broad stated purpose, the book sometimes seems to work harder at incorporating all the data on religion in Canada than on making a focused argument. In addition, there were times when I wanted to see if differences reported in the data hold up under more rigorous statistical tests, or if change over time can be attributed to aging (change caused by people aging) or cohort replacement (change due to older people dying off and younger people replacing them). Of course, including more statistical tests would limit the book’s appeal to much of its audience, so one cannot have it both ways. In the main, then, Bowen does an admirable job of sure-footedly guiding the reader through mountains of data. In doing so, he has produced one of the best overviews of religion in Canada available to date. 🌱