



## Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters

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Reginald Bibby, professor of sociology at the University of Lethbridge, is well known for his longitudinal research on the attitudes and behaviours of Canadian adult and teens with respect to religion and society. In his latest book, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters* (2011), Bibby builds on his previous survey findings, including his most recent 2005 adult and 2008 teen survey data, to offer a more precise account of Canadian religious and social values in an ever-changing information and global age. Bibby's guiding thesis is that "when we look at the trend data for everyone – the involved and non-involved alike – what we see is a pattern of growing *polarization* . . . people are either involved or not involved in religious groups, either identify with traditions or do not identify with any, and are either theists or atheists" (pp. 46, 51).

To set the context for the polarization thesis, Bibby uses the opening two-and-a-half chapters to summarize his earlier developed secularization and revitalization arguments. Briefly, Canadian religious groups experienced significant declines in weekly attendance and religious authority following the 1950s, declines that Bibby attributes in large part to changing immigration patterns away from Western (and Christian) Europe, along with broader cultural and value shifts among baby boomers. These include shifts from dominance to diversity, from obligation to gratification, from deference to discernment, and from homes to careers (see Bibby 1987, 1993, 2006). Bibby (2002 and 2004) then surprised many when he offered the revitalization thesis based on 1995 and 2000 survey data. He was more optimistic about the fate of religion in Canada because of increases in weekly attendance patterns among teens and conservative Protestants, along with the slowing of numerical and percentile declines in weekly attendance in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic settings. He also highlighted that many Canadians who do not currently attend religious services weekly say they would attend more frequently if only religious groups would adjust the way that they supply religion (e.g., livelier music and more relevant preaching).

Bibby's polarization thesis, the focus of chapter three, incorporates elements of both the secularization and revitalization theses. Bibby builds his case around three common measurements of religiosity: religious service attendance, religious identification, and belief in God or a supernatural being. In each of these areas, Bibby compares his data from over thirty years and shows that Canadian teens and adults are increasingly polarized between the "religious" and "non-religious" ends of what he identifies as the "polarization continuum." For example, in 1984, 23% of Canadian teens attended religious services on a weekly basis and 28% never attended religious services. In 2008, 21% attended weekly and 47% never attended (p. 45). In terms of religious identification among Canadians aged fifteen or older, 2001 Canadian census data reveal that 43% identify as Roman Catholic (compared with 45% in 1991), 29% as Protestant (compared with 35% in 1991), 6% with non-Christian religious traditions (compared with 4% in 1991), and 16% have "no religion" (compared with 12% in 1991). When asked if they believed in God or a higher power, 54% of teens responded, "Yes, I definitely do" in 1984, and 6% said, "No, I definitely do not." In 2008, 37% stated, "Yes, I definitely do," and 16% indicated, "No, I definitely do not" (p. 49).

When one reads through all the data that Bibby references, there is some merit to the polarization thesis. Depending on the measurement in question, many Canadians do gravitate to the extreme ends of the polarization continuum. However, two significant flaws are readily apparent with the polarization thesis. First, on several



measurements that Bibby uses to build his case, upwards of 50% of those sampled fall somewhere between the extremes. This healthy representation of Canadians in the middle is problematic for an argument that suggests Canadians tend to fall on either end of the polarization continuum. Second, and undoubtedly the greatest flaw of this book, is that it fails to consider an alternative, and arguably more plausible, interpretation of the data: secularization. Without exception, Bibby's longitudinal measurements on church attendance, religious affiliation, and belief in God or a supernatural being point to decreases on the "religious" end of the continuum and increases on the "non-religious" end of the spectrum. Canadian teens and adults are attending religious services less today, more individuals are never attending services, increasing percentages of Canadians claim to have "no religion," fewer individuals "definitely" believe in God or a supernatural being, and more individuals "definitely do not" believe in God or a supernatural being. The polarization interpretation is a welcome change from Bibby's earlier revitalization rhetoric. However, he still glosses over this seemingly obvious and overarching trend of secularization in Canada.

Despite these flaws, Bibby offers a variety of helpful insights about social life in a religiously polarized context. In chapter four he discusses the tensions that arise when fundamentalists of different sorts (the extremely religious or irreligious) collide in a diverse and conventionally tolerant Canada. Bibby shows that Canadians on the extremes really do view the world differently, on topics ranging from organized religion's impact on Canada or the world, to what clergy should or should not address in their sermons, to confidence in religious leaders and religious organizations, to views about homosexuality. An interesting and telling finding is that 31% of all Canadians (including 50% of the non-religious) claim that they would feel uneasy around a born-again Christian (18% responded this way toward Muslims). Though Bibby does not explicitly say so, this finding is likely a function of our geographical proximity to the strong (and negative, in the minds of some Canadians) evangelical presence in the United States and the American media that Canadians are constantly exposed to.

Similar to many sociologists of religion in recent years, Bibby takes some time to address the impact that religious beliefs and practices, or the lack thereof, has on individuals and society as a whole. In terms of personal well-being (chapter five), he demonstrates that one's level of happiness – as measured in areas such as marital or relationship satisfaction, quality of life, or self-esteem – is virtually the same between the highly religious and irreligious. Though the sources of their happiness may vary (and religion is the source for some), most Canadians are quite happy. At the level of social well-being (chapter seven), religiosity does appear to make a difference. When compared with those who are not religious, Canadians adults and teens who are very religious tend to place greater importance on social values such as concern for others, forgiveness, and generosity are less likely to have been in trouble with the police, to be involved with drugs or bullying. Bibby states, "Religion is one important source of positive interpersonal life. Those who are not religious do not lack for civility and compassion. But, collectively, they tend to lag slightly behind Canadians who are religious" (p. 153). He goes on to conclude, "If religion ceases to be practiced by significant numbers of Canadians, some equally effective sources of social well-being will have to be found" (p. 160). Given these broader social implications, even the generalist in sociology who has no interest in studying religion per se may have an interest in this book.

In chapter eight, Bibby charts Canadian responses to death. Overall, belief in life after death remains stable since 1985, including the 50% to 60% of Canadian teens and adults who continue to neither wholeheartedly embrace nor reject the possibility of life after death. As expected, the very religious are more prone to "definitely" believe in life after death, while the irreligious are more likely to say that they "definitely do not" believe in the afterlife. In addition, one-third of Canadians, regardless of religiosity level, are ambivalent about what happens after life on earth, while many actively religious people are confident that there will be some type of rewards and punishments in the afterlife. When asked about their primary emotional response to death, religious people, particularly



conservative Protestants, respond with a sense of hope, whereas most others respond with sorrow, mystery, or fear. In light of these findings, Bibby concludes by saying, “The market for answers to the ongoing, universal question of what happens after we die remains extremely vast . . . the desire for increasing clarity on this critical issue is something most of us want. That widespread desire guarantees a permanent place for religion” (pp. 184–185).

What will the future of religion look like in Canada? In chapter nine (titled “The Comeback,” followed by the first heading, “Why it Can be Expected”), Bibby reasserts his longstanding commitment to the rational-choice position that there is an ongoing demand for the things that religion offers and that if religious groups adequately adjust their supply of religion to meet that demand, then we should anticipate sunnier days ahead. At a more specific level, however, Bibby deals with religious groups in their own right. Bibby infers that Roman Catholicism will continue to benefit from solid identification figures as people turn to the Church for rites of passage and as strong percentages of immigrants arrive as Catholics. Mainline Protestantism has a bleak future, according to Bibby, because, in contrast to the mid-twentieth century, few immigrants today identify with mainline denominations, mainline groups lack effective methods to retain children, they do not adopt a theology centered on evangelism, and they do not offer definitive ultimate answers to big questions of meaning or life after death. On the other hand, Bibby projects that conservative Protestantism will grow in the future as more immigrants identify with this tradition. He also credits conservative Protestants for the attention that they give to effective community, youth, and family ministries that help to keep their own children and to evangelize potential converts. Finally, Bibby expects non-Christian religious traditions (especially Islam) to grow in the years to come, because of immigration patterns, higher birth rates, successful religious socialization mechanisms, and stricter demands on their members. Religious leaders in any of these traditions will find this chapter the most useful in a practical sense, though it is not as elaborate or specific as some of his previous writings.

In many ways, this is Bibby’s best book on religion in Canada to date. This book is more comprehensive than his previous ones, not only because of his own longitudinal data, but also because Bibby, for the first time, includes global comparisons at the end of each chapter. Such data, though lacking rigorous sociological explanation, provide the reader with a descriptive understanding of Canada’s position in the current global religious landscape. This should make this book a worthwhile read not only for sociologists of religion or religious studies scholars in Canada, but also for sociologists of religion anywhere in the world who have an interest in religion in Canada, particularly those in the United Kingdom who tend to include Canada in their global analysis (especially in the secularization literature). An additional strength to this book is that, with the exception of the final chapter, Bibby, upon reflection on his earlier revitalization thesis, admits that “to speak of ‘a renaissance’ might have been to exaggerate developments a bit” (p. 2) – a subtle yet welcome and humble admission.

*Beyond the Gods and Back* is not without its weaknesses. In addition to the interpretation of polarization versus secularization advanced earlier, I raise three points for further consideration. First, the insistence that there is a strong desire for clarity on matters of the afterlife, thus securing a permanent place for religion in Canada, is dubious. An unwillingness to rule out the possibility of life after death differs from saying that people *desire* to resolve these issues or they wish to turn to religion in the process. Bibby’s interpretation seems to go beyond the available survey data at hand. Second, given the notable rise in the “no religion” category and the centrality of the irreligious to Bibby’s polarization thesis, a discussion of what the future looks like for this group would be appropriate. Will this group grow, shrink, or stabilize? Will people grow out of this irreligious phase? This is a pertinent question at the global level too, as places like the United States and various European nations experience historic growth in the “no religion” category. Third, and this is a minor quibble, the logical ordering of chapters five through seven is odd. Chapter six (“Polarization and Spirituality”) stands out given that chapters five



and seven deal with similar topics of how consequential religion is for individual and social well-being. Perhaps chapter six should follow chapter three as a general discussion of current religious beliefs and practices in Canada, before one moves into the chapters that deal with the implications of these beliefs and practices.

Overall, *Beyond the Gods and Back* is a useful, accessible, extensive, and empirically based book that will help scholars and religious leaders alike to think about the past, present, and possible future of religion in Canada – a book that is worth the read.

## References

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