

**REGINALD W. BIBBY**

# **RESILIENT GODS**

**BEING PRO-RELIGIOUS, LOW RELIGIOUS,  
OR NO RELIGIOUS IN CANADA**



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## Preface

The exponential growth of information available in the world today means that books and articles run the risk of being obsolete shortly after they appear. It's not a new reality, just a reality that has become all the more accentuated, largely because of the arrival of the Internet in the early 1990s.

I thought that my “gods series” of books did a reasonably good job of keeping up with trends and literature when they appeared in 1987 (*Fragmented Gods*), 1993 (*Unknown Gods*), and 2001 (*Restless Gods*). But the birth of *Beyond the Gods and Back* in 2011 took place at a time when information was exploding at a remarkable rate. In the six years since its release, I have clarified and refined my thinking on religious polarization. I have also generated and been exposed to much new data. As a result, while *Beyond the Gods and Back* is the informing backbone to this book – as reflected in the first two chapters – not much else remains the same.

This book benefits from the availability of considerable new data, both global and Canadian in scope. The two key players for me in recent years have been the Pew Research Center based in Washington, DC, and the Angus Reid Institute in Canada. I am immensely indebted to both, along with Andrew Grenville, my colleague and friend with the Vision Critical research division of the Maru Group, who has played a central role in helping me to generate considerable new survey data.

This book has also benefited from feedback from colleagues and students who used its predecessor as a text. I want to single out Joel

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Thiessen, whose early review of *Beyond the Gods and Back* was extremely insightful and valuable.<sup>1</sup> This book further clarifies key ideas such as polarization and secularization, deletes anything extraneous, and adds fresh and helpful material. The result is not only a new book but a substantially improved one. As I always remind readers, I have no illusions that this book says it all. But I think that it says a lot.

The primary sources of support for my work – and my life, for that matter – remain much the same. At the top of the list are my wife, Lita, and my daughter, Sahara, now 14, who has taken over my office since *Beyond the Gods and Back* but lets me use it once in a while (primarily when she is sleeping). My grown-up sons, Reggie, Dave, and Russ, continue to be major sources of both encouragement and enjoyment, in the midst of doing acrobatics with their own burgeoning families.

I also remain extremely grateful to the University of Lethbridge for having provided me with tranquility and resources for more than four decades now. Many thanks as well to the people at UBC Press – beginning with its director, Melissa Pitts; Emily Andrew, who offered early enthusiastic support; and Holly Keller, who has overseen production of the manuscript – for their positive response to this project as well as their hands-on editorial contributions.

And thanks to you – yes, you – for taking the time to read the book. As always, my hope is that it will stimulate some thought and even elevate life.

Reginald Bibby  
Lethbridge, Alberta  
April 2017

# Introduction

One of the most basic features of sociology that I have always emphasized to my students is the importance of social environments. If we want to understand people in a comprehensive way, then we have to understand the social settings from which they come.

The old cliché that no one is an island carries much wisdom. What we think and how we act are determined in large part by social factors, beginning with the influence of our parents and our friends, what we see and hear, and what we experience. Social environments determine just about everything.

So it is that Canada is not an island unto itself. We all know that our multifaceted culture has been largely the product of people coming here from other places, dating back to the first individuals who – most scholars believe – probably found their way here via the Bering Strait. Our collective life ever since has been shaped by the arrival of new waves of people from around the world.

As seemingly obvious as such a reality is, we sometimes lose our balance and think in insular terms. We get caught up in national, regional, and local developments and lose our global perspective. That is especially true of how we interpret religion, especially organized religion.

Although the Canadian religious landscape has a clear historical imprint in which explicit lines can be drawn from the dominant Catholic and Protestant groups to their predominantly European roots, observers of religious developments have been reading the times with remarkably

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limited demographic perspectives. Ironically, in seeking the input of wise academics, our best scholars have had the naive notion that they can be enlightened by widening the conversation to long-deceased Europeans, like Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and Freud, none of whom ever set foot in Canada (as far as I know), let alone had any way of comprehending our global contemporary times.

Many observers, consequently, have spent considerable time, money, and energy writing about religious ideas that have been of limited accuracy. To our shame, those views and interpretations have also been of limited help to students and others with vested interests in clearly understanding what has been happening. It's time for us to do much better.

Canadian academics and religious leaders spend endless hours, much ink, and many computer bytes talking and writing about whether or not the religious sky is falling in this country. In the process, we have been like kids huddled in a tent, wondering whether or not there is a leak in the canvas. In the meantime, a major tornado is about to land. Or the beautiful weather outside makes it – yes – “an academic argument” whether or not the pinprick in the tent actually matters. These days a global religious tsunami is taking place. Christianity, Islam, and many other major and minor religions are experiencing explosive growth.

For reasons readily identified by Statistics Canada, in the next several decades immigrants will form a higher proportion of the national population than at almost any other time in Canada's history – approaching levels seen during the early European settlement of Canada. The decline in our national population growth by natural increase and the need to offset this decline with accelerated immigration are starting to transform the Canadian religious scene.

What we do in the tent matters. But what is happening in the world around the tent matters much more. That is what this book is all about.

I have written *Resilient Gods* for two primary reasons. The first is the opportunity and need to draw on invaluable new national and global data. The second is my strong belief that the polarization framework that I unveiled in *Beyond the Gods and Back* is enormously helpful in making sense of religious developments in Canada and around the world. The framework therefore needs to be more extensively delineated, documented, and disseminated.

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In the past few years, many important developments have taken place in Canada and elsewhere. They have been accompanied by a large number of rich national and global readings provided by research organizations led by the Pew Research Center, along with Gallup, the World Values Survey, and the International Social Survey Programme. Colleague and friend Rodney Stark has published a fair amount of global data drawn from these sources and carried out the legwork in offering a number of valuable summaries.<sup>1</sup> It has also been a gift to be able to analyze the General Social Survey (GSS) data sets available online for both the United States and Canada.

This book has benefited enormously from numerous data sources, including my own Project Canada national surveys spanning 1975 through 2005. In 2015, I completed a simulation of a new Project Canada national survey by generating data from eight Angus Reid and Vision Critical omnibus surveys. The largest by far was a major survey of religion in March 2015, carried out in partnership with the Angus Reid Institute. This online survey of more than 3,000 Canadians allowed me to monitor an array of religious trends dating back to 1975 and provided important updates on new religious developments in Canada. These surveys are ongoing. Together the data are sheer gold, particularly when placed in the Project Canada survey series.

But beyond the data, another major potential contribution of this book lies in the clarification and use of the polarization framework. Canada is characterized by a religious situation in which a significant number of people continue to embrace religion, a growing number of people reject it, and a large number lie somewhere in the middle. This situation is hardly limited to Canada. On the contrary, it characterizes virtually every country, region, city, community, and group around the world. Everywhere the inclination to adopt religion coexists with the inclination to reject it, with many people typically falling between the two poles. What is fascinating for social scientists to examine is the extent to which the three inclinations are found in any specific setting.

But that's just the starting point. The second intriguing question is "so what?" What are the implications for personal and collective life of people variously embracing religion, rejecting it, or opting for that middle position? On an individual level, do such choices make any difference

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when it comes to personal well-being? Are the devout happier than others? Are those who reject religion more compassionate than others? Are those in the middle more likely to be accepting of believers than those who reject faith and more accepting of atheists than those who value faith? And, on balance, do the three inclinations lead countries and communities and groups to have higher or lower levels of physical and interpersonal well-being – enhanced standards of living, less crime and conflict, more civility and compassion? And how do people with these different outlooks toward religion deal with death?

These central questions concerning the inclinations of and consequences for people today opting for religion, passing on religion, or choosing a middle position are at the heart of this book.

# 1

## The Early Days of God's Dominion

He shall have dominion also from sea to sea.

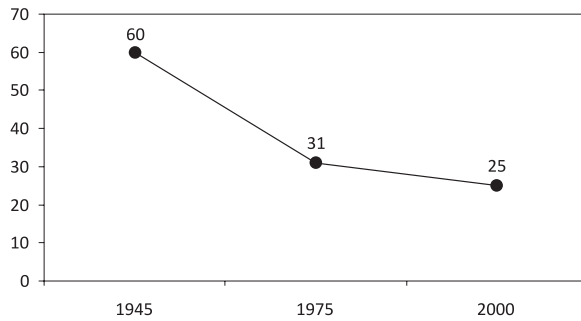
– Psalm 72.8, KJV

Viewing religion across Canada these days is like viewing devastation after some tragedy has hit. It's as if a fire of secularization has devastated much of what, through the early 1960s, was a flourishing religious forest.

Around 1950, national religious service attendance, led by Quebec and the Atlantic region, was actually higher than that of the United States. Churchgoing was relatively high pretty much everywhere. To varying degrees, Protestant and Catholic groups had significant places in Canadian life, as exemplified by the large number of people heading to services on almost any Sunday morning; the “Blue Laws,” which restricted business transactions on Sundays; the Christian radio stations and broadcasts; the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in schools; and the prominence of religion in the lives of community leaders such as Tommy Douglas in Saskatchewan, E.C. Manning in Alberta, and Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger in Quebec.

Now, some 70 years later, that blaze of secularization has destroyed much of religion's presence and influence, as determined by weekly church attendance (Figure 1.1). The collective devotion of the Atlantic

**FIGURE 1.1 Weekly service attendance in Canada (%), 1945–2005**



Sources: Gallup (1945) and Bibby, Project Canada national surveys (1975, 2000).

region has been significantly reduced both by scandal and by modernization. In Quebec, the Quiet Revolution of the early 1960s was accompanied by a “quieter religious revolution” that decimated religious participation and authority. In Ontario, western Canada, and the North, the blaze torched Mainline Protestantism in particular.

However, as is often the case with devastating fires, secularization has not consumed everything. In some instances, there has been scorching rather than torching. Amid the rubble, there are pockets of life – even vitality. Evangelical Protestant churches have been left largely untouched in many parts of the country, as have a large number of Roman Catholic dioceses and congregations and some Mainline Protestant groups.

And just when it seemed that much of the Canadian religious forest was reduced to ruins, new seeds and new plants from other countries began to replenish it. Growing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, for example, have added new diversity and life to the fire-ravaged forest (Table 1.1).

So it is that the Canadian religious situation is characterized today by death and life, disintegration and reorganization, abandonment and participation, aging congregations and youthful congregations, disbelief and belief, and discarding and embracing of religious rituals surrounding

**TABLE 1.1 Canadian identification with select major world faiths, 1991 and 2011**

	1991	2011
Islam	253,265	1,053,945
Hinduism	157,015	497,960
Sikhism	147,440	454,965
Buddhism	163,415	366,830
Percentage of Canadian population	2.6	7.0

*Sources:* Statistics Canada 1991 census and 2011 National Household Survey.

marriage, birth, and death. This book aims to offer a coherent picture of the seemingly disparate patterns of religion in Canada today.

### **Religious Identification in Early Canada**

Historians tell us that the new country of Canada that came into being on July 1, 1867, was collectively a highly religious country. It was a time, wrote historian John Webster Grant, when membership in a particular group “ranked high as a badge of personal identity.” To know a person’s religious affiliation, he said, was to have an important clue about his or her moral and political leanings, school system preferences, and even favourite newspaper.<sup>1</sup>

The First Nations across the country placed considerable importance on spirituality. To varying degrees, they believed in a Creator as the source of everything that lived. Extensive beliefs and forms of worship and celebration existed. By 1867, missionary work had seen large numbers become at least nominally Christian.<sup>2</sup> In some instances, Christianity left room for elements of Indigenous spirituality, resulting in syncretistic expressions of faith.

In Quebec – previously Canada East and earlier Lower Canada – settlement from France dating back to the early 17th century had been accompanied by the arrival of Roman Catholicism. The Quebec Act of

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**TABLE 1.2 Religious identification in Canada (%), early 1840s**

	Upper Canada, 1842	Lower Canada, 1844
Roman Catholic	13	82
Church of England	22	6
Presbyterian	20	5
Methodist	17	2
Baptist	3	1
Jewish	<1	<1
Other denominations	8	1
No response	17	3

*Source:* Census of Canada, 1870–71, cited in Kalbach and McVey (1976, 223).

1774 gave French-speaking citizens the right to practise the Catholic faith and French civil law. At the time of Confederation, the province was heavily Catholic – with observers claiming that much of the public and private lives of Quebeckers was controlled by the church.

In Ontario – previously Canada West and earlier Upper Canada – the arrival of large numbers of settlers from England resulted in Anglicanism being the numerically dominant religion in 1867. Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists were also prominent, in large part because of the magnitude of immigration from England and Scotland. Immigration also produced a significant Catholic presence: the Irish Famine of the 1840s, for example, resulted in the arrival of some 40,000 Irish Catholics (Table 1.2).

The other two British colonies part of the new country – Nova Scotia and New Brunswick – also had a pronounced religious presence. Immigration from France brought Acadians to Nova Scotia, where they coexisted with Protestant immigrants from Britain. The creation of New Brunswick in 1784 occurred in large part because of the arrival of significant numbers of United Empire Loyalists on the heels of the American Revolution.

The influx of large numbers of slaves from the United States via the Underground Railroad added to the early religious mosaic as black

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**TABLE 1.3 Religious identification of Canadians (%), 1871–1961**

	1871	1901	1931	1961
Roman Catholic	42	42	41	47
Protestant	56	56	54	49
Eastern Orthodox	<1	<1	1	1
Other faiths	2	2	3	2
No religion	<1	<1	<1	<1

*Source:* Canadian census data.

Baptists took up residence, particularly in Nova Scotia and southern Ontario.

As the young nation expanded to include Manitoba and the Northwest Territories (1870), British Columbia (1871), Prince Edward Island (1873), the Yukon (1898), Saskatchewan and Alberta (1905), and Newfoundland (1949), the number of people with religious ties also grew.

There is nothing surprising about the early Christian monopoly. It was the direct result of heavy immigration from France, Britain, and other western European countries where Christianity was pervasive – patterns documented thoroughly in two recent valuable works compiled by Paul Bramadat and David Seljak.<sup>3</sup> Religious group numbers, as with the population as a whole, are primarily a function of net gains via immigration and birth, along with intergroup “switching.” The early years favoured Christians.

Immigration consequently played a major role in Protestants and Catholics making up more than 95% of the national population from the time of the first census in 1871 through 1961 (Table 1.3). Over the 90-year period, the percentage of people claiming to have “no religion” never reached 1%.

### **Religious Participation in Early Canada**

Hard data on actual *involvement* in religious groups, rather than mere identification with them, are difficult to locate for the early years of Canada.

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Yet, in describing the religious situation just after Confederation, Grant wrote that “the morale of the churches was higher than ever. They were building larger edifices, devising more effective programs, and successfully shaping the moral values of the nation.”<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, sociologist Peter Beyer notes that things were looking good numerically for organized religion as Canada entered the 20th century. Allowing for more than one service per Sunday, churches had enough seating capacity in 1901 to accommodate more than the total Canadian population – “3,842,332 seats for a total population of 5,371,315.” A survey carried out by Toronto newspapers in 1896 showed that 57% of the available seats in the Toronto area were occupied during any given service.<sup>5</sup>

But church attendance seems to have become even better. The years following the Second World War, the 1940s and 1950s, appear to have been a golden age for church attendance and influence in Canada. According to the first known national attendance poll, conducted by the Gallup organization in 1945, 65% of Canadians over the age of 20 said that they had attended a religious service in a three-week period following Easter Sunday. Gallup noted in its press release that a similar survey it had conducted in the United States around the same time had found that 58% of Americans had attended a service over a four-week period following Easter.

The Canadian poll found that levels here were slightly higher for those 21 to 29 (69%) than for older adults (64%) and for women (73%) than for men (61%). In Quebec, where Catholics made up 95% of the population, 9 of 10 people said that they had been to Mass during the three-week period. The pollster noted that the levels were lower in “some western provinces” than elsewhere and suggested that the levels might have been related to “greater distances to travel.”

The Gallup release concluded with this additional informative statement: “The present survey complements the one conducted by the Poll some months ago, in which ninety-five per cent of Canadians expressed their belief in God; and eighty-four per cent, their belief in a life after death.”<sup>6</sup>

Such high levels of religious participation continued in Canada through the 1950s and 1960s (Table 1.4).

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**TABLE 1.4 Membership in selected religious groups in Canada (1,000s), 1871–1966**

	United	Anglican	Baptist	Pentecostal	Lutheran	Presbyterian	Roman Catholic
1871	—	—	—	—	—	—	1,586
1881	170*	—	—	—	—	117	1,773
1901	289*	368	—	—	—	214	2,256
1921	401	690	—	—	—	351	3,427
1931	671	794	132	—	—	181	4,047
1941	717	836	134	—	—	174	4,806
1951	834	1,096	135	45	121	177	6,069
1961	1,037	1,358	138	60	172	201	8,343
1966	1,062	1,293	137	65	189	200	9,160

\* United figures for 1881 and 1901 = Methodist.

Notes: Anglican figures = inclusive membership; in 1967, for example, full Anglican membership = 657,000 versus 1,060,000 for United. Roman Catholic = approximate full membership based on percentages of Canadian population. Baptist = Canadian Baptist Federation. Pentecostal = Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. Lutheran = Evangelical Church of Canada, Lutheran Church in America, and Lutheran Church-Canada (Missouri Synod).

Sources: Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and United yearbooks; Beyer (1997); Bibby (2002, II); McLeod (1982); Statistics Canada, the *Daily*, June 1, 1993; *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, 1916–1966*.



- ▶ Attendance at Catholic churches appears to have held steady at about 85% both in Quebec and in the rest of the country, while weekly attendance at Protestant churches remained strong at around 45%.<sup>7</sup> This was a time when Cardinal Léger could say this of Montreal: “When I bow to say the evening rosary, all of Montreal bows with me.”<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ Membership in the United and Anglican churches peaked at over 1 million in 1965. During these heady days of the mid-1940s to mid-1960s, the United Church alone built 1,500 new churches and halls.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Other faith groups were growing as well. Between 1941 and the end of the 1960s, the number of Jews jumped from 169,000 to 275,000. During the same period, Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced explosive growth, increasing from 7,000 to 170,000.<sup>10</sup>

The religion business seemed to be booming.

### **Religious Influence in Early Canada**

There is widespread consensus that religion once had an impact on Canadian life. Writers tell us that religion was a central feature in the lives of early First Nations peoples, that they were “deeply committed to religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices” grounded in “communion with nature and a connectedness with all of life.”<sup>11</sup> Religion is also seen as having been an integral part of the earliest Roman Catholic and Protestant settlements.

Religion appears to have had a major place during Canada’s first century, from the 1860s to the 1960s. As one thinks of the past, it is difficult to envision Quebec without Roman Catholics, Ontario without Anglicans or Presbyterians, the Prairies with no evangelical Protestant presence, British Columbia and the Atlantic region without the Church of England.

Religion was blatant in many of our early institutions:

- ▶ A large number of hospitals and social service programs across the country were initiated by religious groups.
- ▶ Individual schools and entire school systems were created by religious groups, notably Roman Catholics.

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- ▮ Universities – including McMaster, Queen’s, Ryerson, Wilfrid Laurier, Ottawa, Montreal, Laval, Acadia, Mount Allison, St. Mary’s, Winnipeg, Brandon, and Regina – were founded by religious organizations.
- ▮ Initiatives to establish fairness in the workplace, including supporting labour unions, were undertaken by many groups, including Roman Catholics in Quebec and social gospel-oriented Protestant denominations elsewhere, notably the United and Anglican churches of Canada.
- ▮ The influence of religious groups was also evident in the public sphere generally and the political sphere specifically. CBC footage of a religious event in Montreal in the 1960s reveals three prominent platform guests: Mayor Jean Drapeau, René Lévesque, and Cardinal Léger.<sup>12</sup>

One obvious reason why religion had significant input into Canadian institutions was because it also had an important place in many individual lives. At its best, religion is supposed to play itself out in everyday life. It is therefore not surprising that, to varying degrees, the faith practices of individual Canadians involved in religious groups had an impact on them, beginning with their families. For example, large numbers of their children were attending Sunday schools or receiving other forms of religious instruction (Table 1.5).

**TABLE 1.5 Frequency of religious instruction of children in Canada (%), 1975–2005**

<i>“How frequently – if at all – do your children attend Sunday School or classes of religious instruction that are not part of their regular school days?”</i>	1975	1990	2005
Regularly	36	28	19
Often	10	7	6
Sometimes	31	26	24
Never	23	39	51

Sources: Bibby, Project Canada national surveys (1975, 1990, 2005).

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