



Religion in Quebec by Reginald W. Bibby

Religion à la carte rampant in Quebec *But the problem may lie primarily with the Catholic Church*

During this Easter season, Quebec Catholics will join large numbers of Canadians in attending a service or two. But looks can be deceiving. For the past four decades or so, most Quebecers have been practicing religion à la carte, picking and choosing when to attend and what to believe and practice. However, a major new study suggests that such a picky style is not just the result of Quebecers being fussy customers. It also is a reflection of the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to adequately address the interests and needs of the people in the province.

The study has been carried out by well-known sociologist and trend tracker, Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge and summarized in *The Bibby Report on Catholicism in Quebec*. Drawing on survey findings spanning 1975 through 2005, Bibby notes that attendance at services has plummeted over the past three decades. But almost 2 in 3 Quebec Catholics who attend mass less than once a month say they are open to attending more often if the Catholic Church would make it worthwhile. Most would like to see the Church do a better job of responding to their spiritual, personal, and relational needs.

Until then, most will go on thinking they are Catholics and looking to the Church for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. But most will only show up at Easter, Christmas, and other special occasions.

From the Highest to the Lowest in North America

In charting service attendance habits over the years, Bibby has found that Quebec's attendance level was the highest of any region in North America at over 80% in the 1960s. Today it is among the lowest at around 25%. The drop-off has been led by Baby Boomers and Post-Boomers who have been attending in lower and lower numbers. With the disappearance of older, Pre-Boomers over the next two or three decades, Quebec's monthly-plus attendance level will drop to the lowest of any region in North America – around 15%.

Still, 83% of Quebec residents see themselves as Catholics, only slightly below the 88% figure in 1961. What's more, few are open to switching to other religions. The majority continue to embrace traditional beliefs about God, the divinity of Jesus, and life-after-death. Some 3 in 4 pray privately, close to 2 in 4 at least once a week. Most continue to turn to the Catholic Church for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Less than 15% have stopped attending services altogether.

Religion and Everyday Life

However, when it comes to everyday life and attitudes toward issues such as the use of artificial birth control, premarital sex, divorce, cohabitation, and homosexuality, Quebec Catholics, active and less active, typically disagree with the teachings of the Catholic Church. In general, they are more inclined than their active and less active counterparts elsewhere to feel “*ministers should stick to religion*” and less likely to think their leaders “*should address all of life.*”

Post-1960s Disenchantment

Bibby maintains that the surveys show that the primary reason for the decline in religious participation among Quebec Catholics lies not so much with demand as with supply. “It was not written in the stars that Roman Catholics in Quebec would empty the pews with the dawn of the Quiet Revolution,” he writes. The problem is that large numbers did not feel particularly well served by the Church. As the Church lost its control over life in Quebec from the late 1960s onward, it also began to lose its psychological and emotional control over individuals. As their involvement became increasingly dependent on what the Church added to their lives, rather than on obedience and a sense of duty, many Catholics – led by Boomers and their children – opted to stay away.

Current Receptivity

The latest surveys in 2000 and 2005 show that significant numbers of Quebec Catholics are open to Catholic ministries that can touch their lives and those of their families. But the important qualifier is that they have to find that such involvement is worthwhile, and not simply “what a good Catholic is expected to do.” Duty and deference have given way to a desire for worship experiences and ministries to children and young people, for example, that add something to their lives. It also signals the need for greater dialogue about everyday life.

Bibby points out that numerous observers have spoken matter-of-factly about how religion in Quebec has given way to nationalism. “But,” he argues, “regardless of how important nationalism may be, it cannot displace the gods in providing answers to questions such as what happens when we die.” The survey findings, he says, show that ultimate questions are still being asked and spiritual needs are still being expressed.

The Onus is on the Catholic Church

Of considerable importance, writes Bibby, the vast majority of Quebecers are not open to just any religious supplier. Most are looking to the Roman Catholic Church to provide the emphases and ministries that are in touch with their interests and needs.

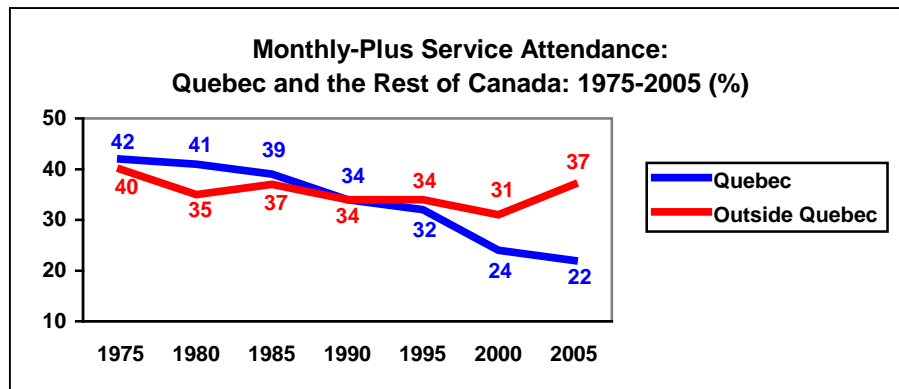
“What remains is to be seen,” he says, “is the extent to which the Church will come through.”

Reginald Bibby holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. He has been monitoring Canadian social trends since the mid-1970s, making his findings available through a large number of media and personal appearances and ten best-selling books. His most recent book, *The Boomer Factor: What Canada's Most Famous Generation is Leaving Behind*, released in October of 2006.

The latest in Bibby's ongoing national surveys was conducted by mail and completed in November of 2005, with 2,400 Canadians participating. In weighted form, the sample is highly representative of the Canadian population and provides results that are accurate within approximately three percentage points of the population figures, 19 times in 20. The Quebec sample for 2005 is comprised of a representative sample of 378 cases, allowing for generalizations to the provincial population that are accurate with about 6 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

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Illustrative graphics



Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series

**Receptivity to Greater Involvement
 by Age Cohort and Gender: 2005**

Among People Attending Services Less Than Monthly

	NAT	RCQ	RCOQ	PROT	NONE
ALL	62%	63	75	71	37
Boomers	64	68	77	74	33
Pre-Boomers	54	58	60	61	29
Post-Boomers	64	55	77	85	43
Women	65	65	77	76	42
Men	60	60	72	72	33

RCQ = RCs in Quebec, RCOQ: RCs outside Quebec

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Boomer Factor*, 2006:202.