Beyond the Gods
Correlates of Atheism and Theism in Canada

by

Reginald W. Bibby
Board of Governors Research Chair in Sociology
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta Canada T1K 3M4
bibby@uleth.ca
www.reginaldbibby.com

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Material in this presentation appears in the just-released book,
Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion’s Demise and Rise and Why It Matters
The findings point to limited implications for personal well-being and spirituality, but to a significant negative impact on both social well-being and how people deal with death.

In recent decades, Canada has been experiencing increasing religious polarization. While a core of perhaps 25% of the population continues to embrace religion, a growing proportion of Canadians are opting for life without religion.

An important question that arises is the “so what?” question – the implications for the quality of personal and collective life.

The author draws on Canadian national survey data for adults and teenagers and comparative world-wide data to explore the impact of growing polarization on personal well-being, spirituality, social well-being, and responses to death.

The findings point to limited implications for personal well-being and spirituality, but to a significant negative impact on both social well-being and how people deal with death.
Monitoring Trends: Project Canada Survey Series

* 7 Adult…1975 → 2005: > 10,000
* 4 Teen….1984 → 2008: > 15,000

- Readings of
  - Boomers * Pre-Boomers * Post-Boomers
  - Teens  80s  90s  00s  Now

- Together: surveys lots of information on how we have changed & not changed since 1960s
Some Invaluable Emerging Global Data Sources
Chronicling religious trends
The Religious Situation
The Old Story...Secularization
The Attendance Situation

Weekly Attendance: 1950s and Now

- 1945: 60
- 1975: 31
- 2005: 25

The line graph shows a decrease in attendance from 60 in 1945 to 25 in 2005.
“secularization thesis”
The Old Story...Secularization

The Updated Story...Revitalization
“People continue to have needs that only the gods can satisfy” –Rodney Stark

• Demand remains constant
• If some groups fail, others emerge to fill the vacuum
• What changes: the list of suppliers

- **Secularization ≠ end of religion**
- **Secularization stimulates revitalization**
By beginning of 21st century...
The Old Story...Secularization
The Updated Story...Revitalization
The New Story...Polarization
Findings: a major shift has been taking place

✓ Growing nos. turning backs on religion
✓ A significant segment still values religion
✓ But a growing core does not
✓ The size of “the ambivalent middle” shrinking
✓ Situation = increasing religious polarization
✓ Evident with attendance, affiliation, belief in God…
Religion in Canada is far from a thing of the past.

But in recent years, there has been an important momentum shift away from religion.

Non-religion’s market share has been increasing.

Growing numbers of Canadians are living life beyond the gods.
Teenage Attendance: 1984 & 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly Ever</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Polarization Picture

Attendance: Weeklys & Nevers
Identification: Affiliates & Non-Affiliates
Belief: Theists & Atheists
The “So What?” Question

Life With God...
Life After God
1. Personal Well-Being
2. Spirituality
3. Social Well-Being
4. Death
Old Questions...
New Faces...
Initial Question: Coexistence

Polarization & Pluralism
There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.

There's probably a God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.

Join the discussion at wondercafe.ca

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence:
Allah • Bigfoot • UFOs • Homeopathy • Zeus • Psychics • Christ

cfi CENTRE FOR INQUIRY
www.extraordinary-claims.com
1. Polarization & Personal Well-Being
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>_attendance</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93 %</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Outlook by Religiosity: Adults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness: “Very” or “Pretty”</th>
<th>93 %</th>
<th>96</th>
<th>91</th>
<th>93</th>
<th>91</th>
<th>95</th>
<th>92</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marriage/Relationship:</strong> “Very” / “Pretty” Happy</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of your life:</strong> “Very” / “Fairly Satisfied”</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Project Canada 2005 National Survey
Assessment

OVERALL: little difference

It *doesn’t mean* religion
is not an important source
of personal well-being for some people;

it *does mean* non-religious people
just about as likely
to find personal well-being
via other sources
2. Polarization & Spirituality
## Spiritual Needs & Valuing of Spirituality by Religiosity (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTENDANCE</th>
<th>IDENTIFICATION</th>
<th>BELIEF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### “I myself have spiritual needs”

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teens</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel you have spiritual needs?</td>
<td></td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are your spiritual needs currently being met?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes, for the most part</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not really</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not really at all</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual needs being met by service attendance</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of the following describes you best?</td>
<td>Religious and spiritual</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spiritual but not religious</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious but not spiritual</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not religious and not spiritual</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Without religion, *spiritualities* will persist.

What is less clear:
- their *personal & social significance*
- when they are *not linked to*
  - some *identifiable groups &*
  - some *identifiable goals*. 
3. Polarization & Social Well-Being
## Interpersonal Values by Religiosity

% Indicating “Very Important”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ATTENDANCE</th>
<th>IDENTIFICATION</th>
<th>BELIEF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for others</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politeness</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generosity</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for others</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politeness</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment

It *doesn't mean* religion
is the *only* source of civility;
it *does mean* religion
is *one* important source of civility.

If it ceases be present in peoples' lives,
equally effective *functional* alternatives
will *have to be* found.
4. Polarization & Death
### Responses to Death: Adults

“What would you say your primary response is to the reality of death?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ATTENDANCE</th>
<th>IDENTIFICATION</th>
<th>BELIEF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>No Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorrow 26%</td>
<td>33 19</td>
<td>34 25</td>
<td>28 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery 23</td>
<td>21 17</td>
<td>30 22</td>
<td>26 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope 19</td>
<td>9 45</td>
<td>6 22</td>
<td>4 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear 15</td>
<td>13 10</td>
<td>11 14</td>
<td>18 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No particular feeling</td>
<td>17 9</td>
<td>19 17</td>
<td>24 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>100 100 100</td>
<td>100 100</td>
<td>100 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada 2000 National Survey
Assessment

Without religion, the questions will remain.

Without religion, hope seems pretty elusive.
Conclusion
In Sum...
Will the Demise of Religion Make Any Difference with respect to...

NO
1. Individual lives
2. Spirituality

YES
1. Civility
2. Death
Harvey Cox:

“People remain intrigued with the traditional religions, but not with conventional churches. Most are not looking for creeds and hierarchies. They want personal faith. The experience of the divine is displacing theories about it.”

What is less clear is where they can experience faith.
The Old or Something Else?

Durkheim...

“The old gods are growing old or are already dead, and others are not yet born. There are no gospels which are immortal, but neither is there any reason for believing that humanity is incapable of inventing new ones.”
The gods potentially can contribute to life in a number of ways. They can elevate personal and social well-being. They can make us happy, contribute to justice, satisfy our spiritual needs, and make us better stewards of the planet.

So can everyone else.

But in addition to speaking to all of life, and adding to all of life, the gods are unique in that they alone can also speak to death. What’s more, they have some encouraging things to say.

As the people around us, and we ourselves, approach that inevitable and mysterious ending of life, the gods may be our best hope...in fact, they may be our only hope.

Some people will choose to go it alone. Yet, it’s hard to escape the conclusion that there’s really no need for us to experience life and death alone.

That’s why, in the long run, many people may say goodbye to any number of forms of organized religion.

Few of us will say goodbye to the gods.