

# Beyond the Gods

## *Correlates of Atheism and Theism in Canada*



by

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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  
by Reginald W. Bibby, Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2011 (projectcanadabooks.com).*

# ABSTRACT

- 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

GALLUP WorldView

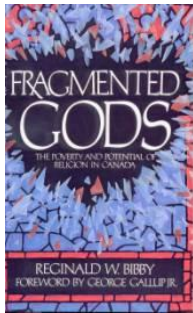


The Pew  
Global Attitudes Project

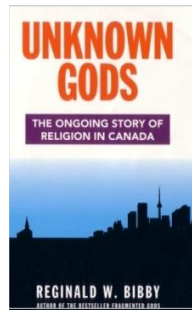


International Social Survey Programme

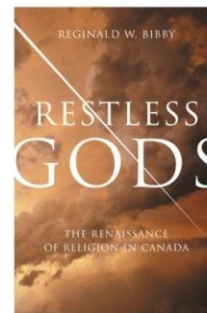




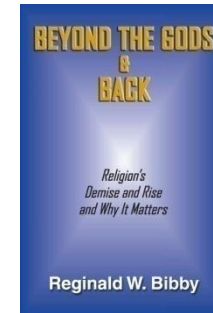
1987



1993



2002

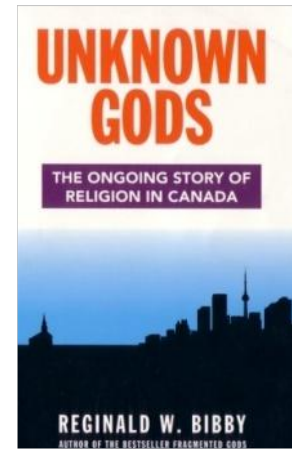
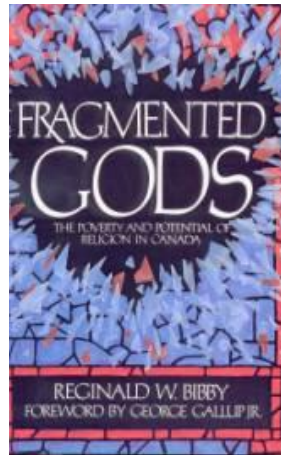


2011

***Chronicling religious trends***

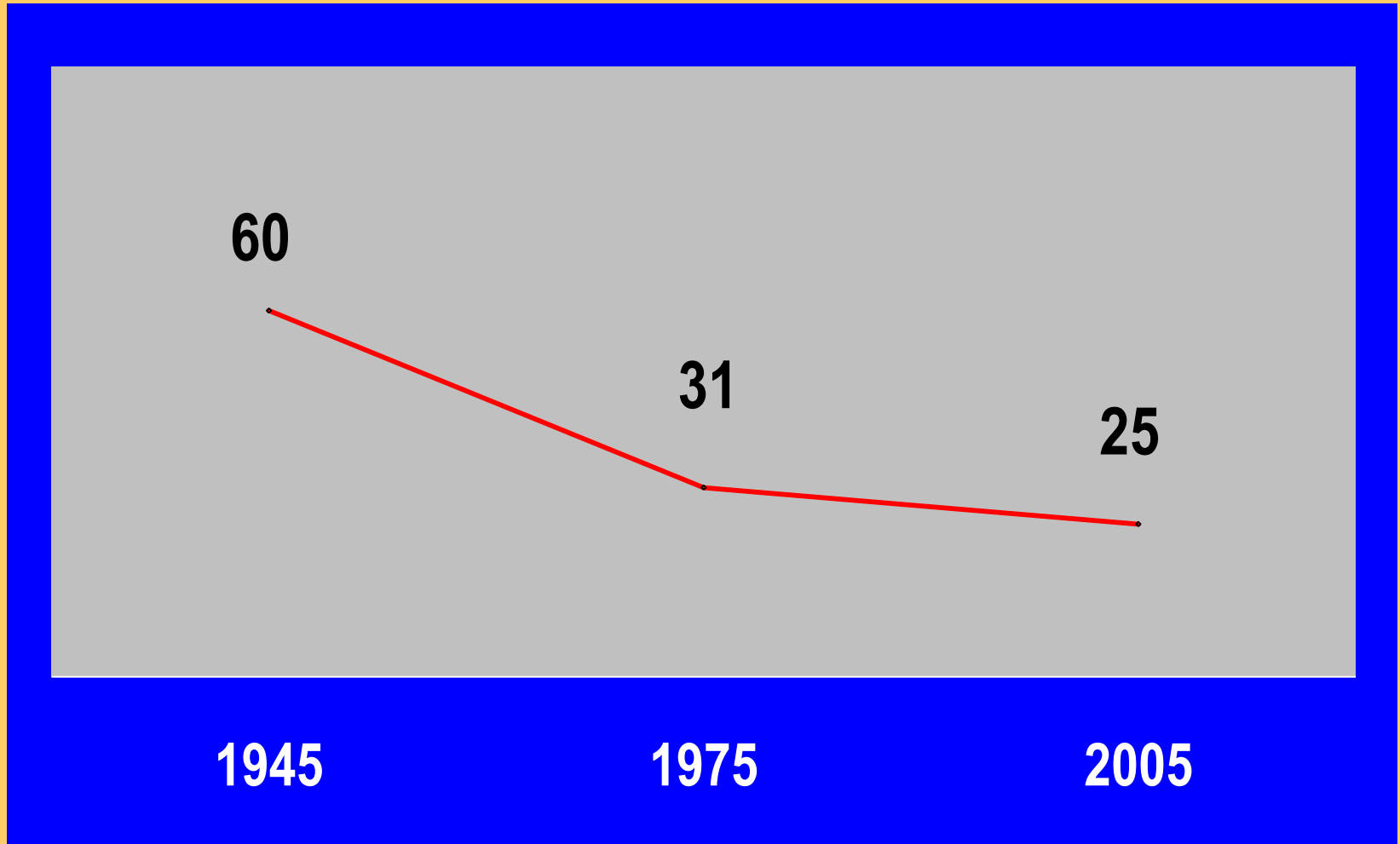
# **The Religious Situation**

# The Old Story...Secularization



# The Attendance Situation

Weekly Attendance: 1950s and Now

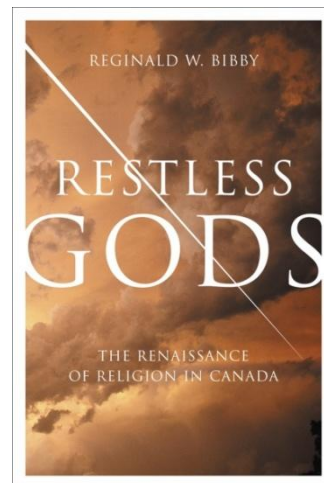




**“secularization thesis”**

**The Old Story...Secularization**

**The Updated Story...Revitalization**

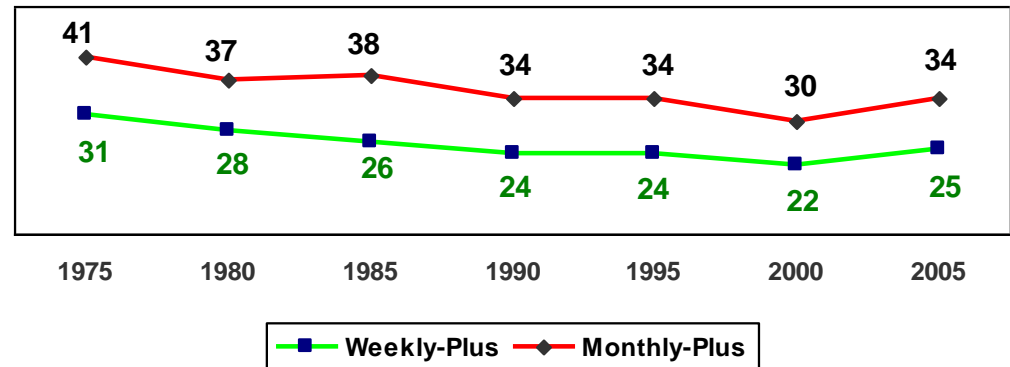
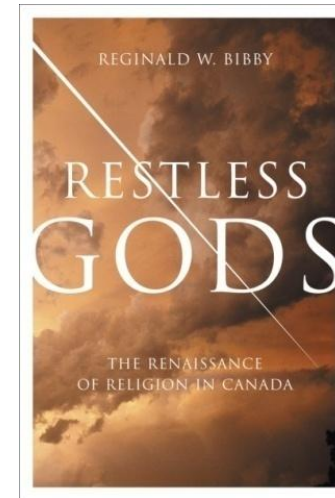
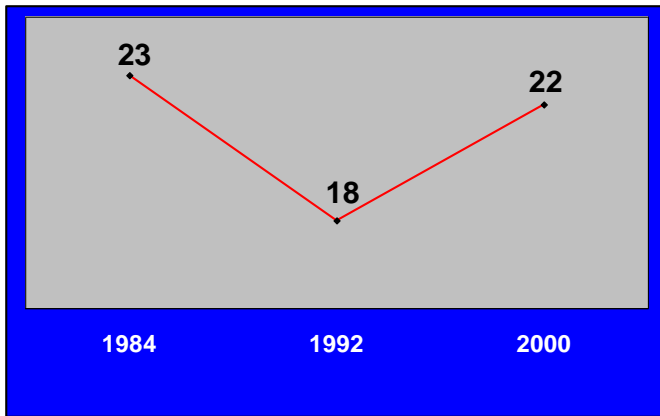


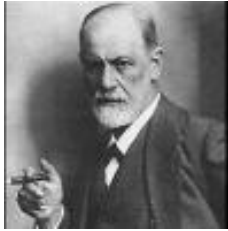
***“People continue to have needs that only the gods can satisfy”*** *–Rodney Stark*



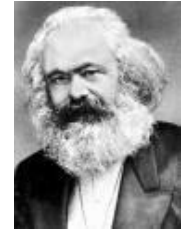
- Demand remains constant
- If some groups fail, others emerge to fill the vacuum
- What changes: the list of suppliers
- *Secularization* ≠ end of religion
- *Secularization* stimulates revitalization

# By beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century...





Linear & Unlimited  
**Secularization**



Inevitable & Increasing  
**Revitalization**



**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...

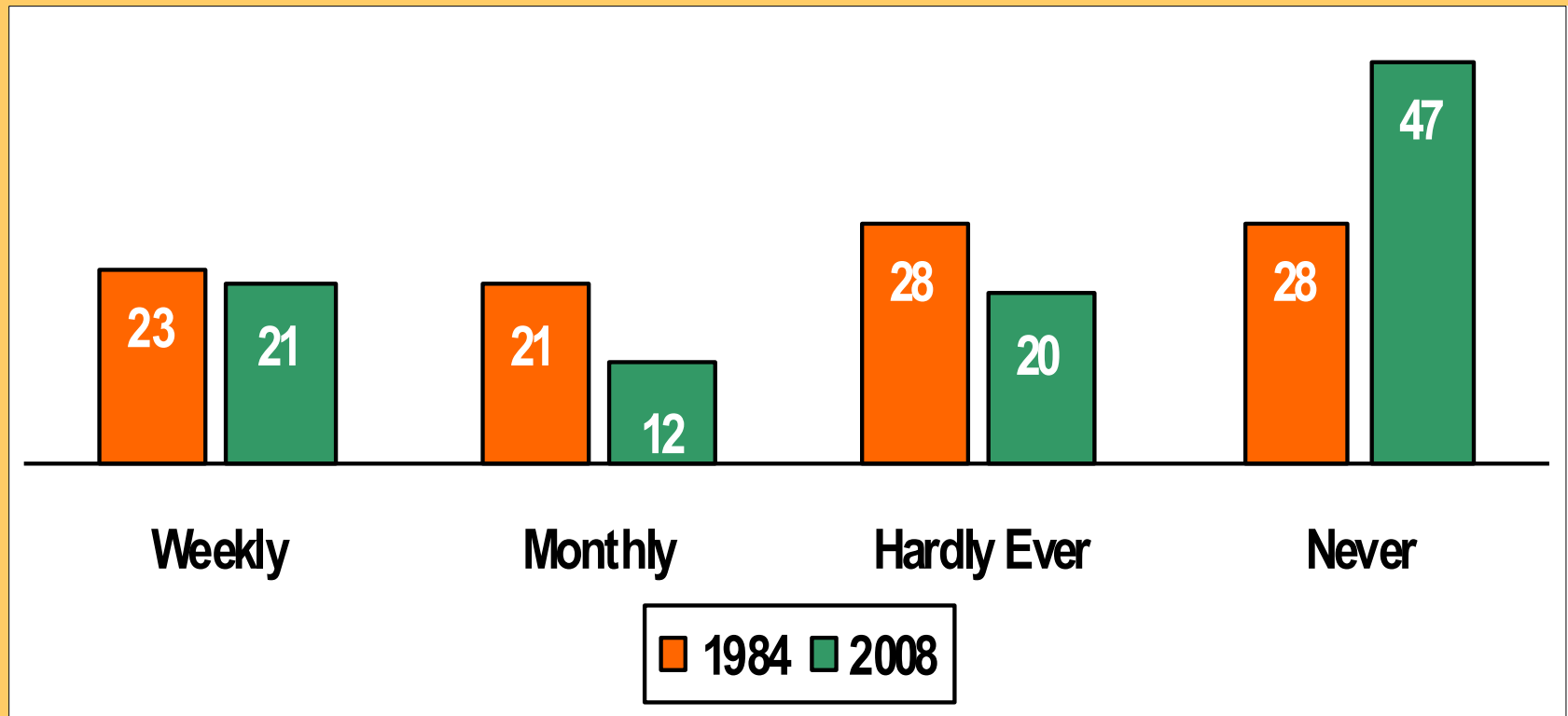
**Religion in Canada is far from a thing of the past.**

**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



# The Polarization Picture

**Attendance:** *Weeklys & Nevers*

**Identification:** *Affiliates & Non-Affiliates*

**Belief:** *Theists & Atheists*

# The "So What?" Question

*Life With God...*

*Life After God*

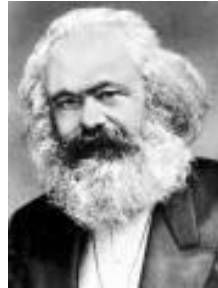
**1. Personal Well-Being**

**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](http://wondercafe.ca) 

**EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS**  
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 **CENTRE FOR INQUIRY** [cficanada.ca](http://cficanada.ca)

[www.extraordinary-claims.com](http://www.extraordinary-claims.com)

# **1. Polarization & Personal Well-Being**

# Outlook by Religiosity: Adults



ATTENDANCE

IDENTIFICATION

BELIEF

Weekly Never

Yes No

Theist Atheist

<b>Happiness:</b> "Very" or "Pretty"	<b>93 %</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Marriage/Relationship:</b> "Very" / "Pretty" Happy	<b>95</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Quality of your life:</b> "Very"/"Fairly Satisfied"	<b>89</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>90</b>

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 (%)



ATTENDANCE

IDENTIFICATION

BELIEF

Weekly Never

Yes

No

Theist Atheist

*"I myself have spiritual needs"*

**Adults**

**72**

**94**

**51**

**76**

**47**

**91**

**27**

**Teens**

**54**

**84**

**26**

**66**

**30**

**82**

**14**

# The Alberta Spirituality Survey

Spring 2010 - Sample 550

<b>Do you feel you have spiritual needs?</b>		<b>82%</b>
<b>Are your spiritual needs currently being met?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>34</b>
	<b>Yes, for the most part</b>	<b>51</b>
	<b>Not really</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>Not really at all</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Spiritual needs being met by service attendance</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>93</b>
	<b>Never</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Which of the following describes you best?</b>	<b>Religious and spiritual</b>	<b>44</b>
	<b>Spiritual but not religious</b>	<b>42</b>
	<b>Religious but not spiritual</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>Not religious and not spiritual</b>	<b>11</b>

# Assessment

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"



ATTENDANCE  
Never Weekly

IDENTIFICATION  
No Yes

BELIEF  
Atheist Theist

## Adults

Honesty	92%	92	96	89	92	89	94
Concern for others	75	72	83	75	75	74	85
Politeness	75	71	80	71	75	63	81
Forgiveness	75	69	88	63	76	65	77
Generosity	55	44	76	45	56	37	67

## Teenagers

Honesty	81%	79	86	77	83	75	86
Concern for others	65	60	74	60	67	54	72
Politeness	64	61	69	58	68	57	71
Forgiveness	60	52	77	51	64	44	72
Patience	44	39	57	37	48	35	55

# 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 to 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?”*



ATTENDANCE  
Never Weekly

IDENTIFICATION  
No Yes

BELIEF  
Atheist Theist

Sorrow	26%	33	19	34	25	28	26
Mystery	23	21	17	30	22	26	22
Hope	19	9	45	6	22	4	23
Fear	15	13	10	11	14	18	14
No particular feeling	17	24	9	19	17	24	15
TOTALS	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

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.***

