

The Comeback of Organized Religion in Canada

by Reginald W. Bibby [Pre-edited version of "Who said God is dead?" *Globe & Mail*, March 17, 2006:A15]

None of us really expected it. After all, proponents of secularization dating back to Marx, Durkheim, and Freud – along with prominent twentieth century religion-watchers such as Harvey Cox, Peter Berger, and our own Pierre Berton – saw religion as increasingly a thing of the past. People in advanced societies, so the thinking went, move on to more realistic and worthy matters. They focus on life and recognize their mortality. Unlike their predecessors, they cease to long for the presence and sustenance of imaginary gods and the hope of life beyond the grave. The dismissal of the gods accordingly is accompanied by the dismissal of organized religion.

Such a secularization thesis is generally believed to provide a fairly accurate depiction of religious developments in much of Protestant Europe. The thesis also appeared to describe what was taking place in Canada from the 1960s through the 1990s. The first national survey of service attendance I have been able to uncover was conducted by Gallup in 1945. It indicated that Canadian weekly attendance at the time was around 60%, a figure that Gallup pointed out was higher than that of the United States. However, weekly attendance in Canada dropped to just over 30% in 1975, and to around 20% by 2000. Participation declines were particularly pronounced among Roman Catholics, especially in Quebec, along with Mainline Protestants – the United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches.

Elsewhere, during the same fifty years or so, Gallup found that American attendance had remained at virtually the same level as in 1945, at around 45%. In Europe, Britain was coming in at less than 10%, the Scandinavian countries at under 5%. Many observers assumed that Canadian participation levels were headed in the European direction. As the 1990s wound down, it seemed that things were pretty much over for organized religion.

And then the unexpected happened. In 2000, weekly attendance among teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 that had dropped from 23% in 1984 to 18% in 1992 – and was expected to dip to around 13% – rebounded to 22%. After decades of decline, participation levels among young adults under 35 increased among Protestants and levelled off in the case of Catholics.

In the early years of the new century, such gains among younger Canadians are beginning to show up in national surveys of adults. My most recent Project Canada survey, completed in late 2005, has found that weekly attendance now stands at 25% – a modest increase but nonetheless an increase over what was expected by most to be a decline from 22% five years earlier. This is the first time since we began tracking national trends every five years in 1975 that the numbers have gone up. Significantly, other recent surveys have also uncovered increases: Allan Gregg's Strategic Counsel has pegged weekly attendance at close to 30%, a Time/Vision TV survey at 27%. If "monthly-plus" rather than "weekly" is used as the measure of attendance, the figure according to our Project Canada survey is 34%, up from 30% in 2000. A 2004 Gallup poll finding for monthly-plus attendance is an even higher 37% – a level not seen since the early 1980s. Still further, a Gallup poll released this past October found that 43% of Canadians had attended a religious service in the previous six months, excluding weddings, funerals, or special holidays. It is difficult to envision any group activity in the country that comes close to such a level of involvement.

What many people do not realize is that regular attendance among Protestant groups as a whole *did not* decline between 1975 and 2000. While the numerical losses of the United and Anglican churches were getting most of the media's attention, evangelical participation levels soared, resulting in a situation where the monthly-plus total for Protestants was 37% in 1975 and 36% in 2000. The limited data on people identifying with other world faiths suggest that, likewise, they together were not contributing to a downturn in attendance.

The primary reason for the decline in national religious participation? Roman Catholics. Monthly attendance among Catholics dropped off dramatically between 1975 and 2000 – from 51% to 29% in Quebec, and from 62% to 42% in the rest of the country. Since Roman Catholics comprise just under one-half of the Canadian population, quite clearly, "as go the Catholics so go the nation's attendance patterns."

In the past few years, Catholics, particularly outside Quebec, have been giving new attention to youth ministry, the updating of music and worship more generally, and the participation of laity in services. Attendance is still viewed as an obligation – but many leaders seem more conscious of the need to minister well to people who come through the church doors. The result is that there has been approximately a 10% increase in

Catholic attendance outside Quebec since 2000. Although Quebec Catholics have yet to follow suit, the net gains among Catholics has been the primary reason that attendance for the country as a whole is on the rise.

The growing presence in the past two decades of people of other world faiths – notably, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism – has added important vitality to the Canadian religious scene. Evangelicals are flourishing. The Protestant Mainline is finally showing signs of awakening from a forty-year slumber.

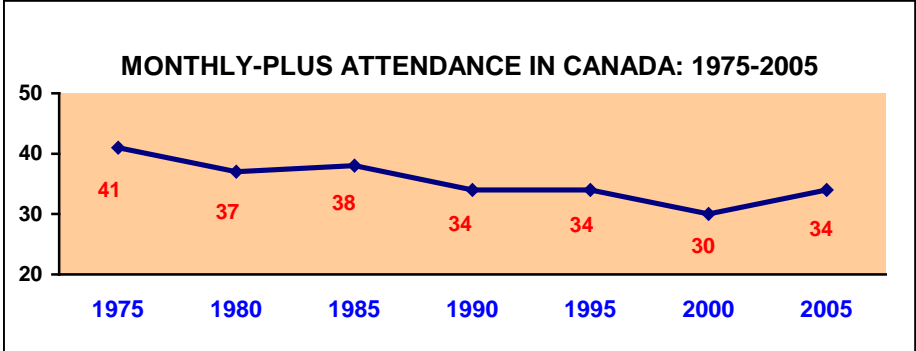
It all is adding up to what could be a significant revitalization of organized religion in Canada. What is clear from the available data is that groups do not lack for opportunity. The 2001 census revealed that 84% of Canadians continue to identify with religious groups. What's more, research indicates that as many as two in three of the remaining 16% who currently say they have "no religion" will actually "re-identify" with the dominant groups in the course of pursuing rites of passage relating to marriage, children, and death.

Still further, some 55% of Canadians who identify with a religious group but attend services less than once a month say they are receptive to greater involvement. But there's a hitch: they have to find that groups touch their lives by addressing spiritual, relational, and personal needs – not exactly unreasonable expectations.

This takes me back to the wise men of old who were predicting religion's demise. They were wrong. There are some questions about life, suffering, and death that seem to call out for the gods. Beyond these and other spiritually-related matters, Canadians continue to value relationships above everything else, but recognize that at times they could use some help in having their children turn out okay, or having the kinds of ties with partners and others that match their aspirations. Who needs to be reminded that, in addition, life, for all its good moments and events, is sometimes more than a little tough? What many people are consequently saying is that they are open to greater religious group involvement – if the result is that their lives are elevated.

Whether the recent attendance upturn turns out to be the beginning of a significant new trend or just a temporary blip in a downward pattern would seem to depend on how well churches and synagogues, temples and mosques, respond.

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Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.