

# **The Perils of Pioneering and Prophecy**

## *A Response to Thiessen and Dawson*

**by Reginald W. Bibby**

I am very pleased that Joel Thiessen and Lorne Dawson have taken the time to carefully examine what has amounted to my lifelong work on religion in Canada. There is much truth to the old adage that the worst thing that can happen to a researcher is to have his or her work ignored. Their effort has been thorough, generous, gracious, and helpful. One cannot expect much more of one's critics.

### **The Problem With Being First**

When I undertook my first adult national survey in 1975, I was aware that there had never been a comprehensive, nation-wide survey of religion carried out in Canada. The survey data that we had on religious beliefs and behaviour were limited to a handful of fragmented Gallup poll items. Some had been used as early as the 1940s, but most had not been included in surveys until the 1950s or 60s. They were sometimes repeated in a subsequent survey or two, but often were not. Even service attendance had been pretty much limited to Gallup's standard question, "*Did you happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?*" To put things in perspective, as of the mid-70s, polling firms such as Decima, Angus Reid, and Environics did not exist; Statistics Canada's first General Social Survey was still a decade away.

It consequently was relatively easy to generate pioneering data on religious beliefs and involvement in the country. Beyond that first survey in 1975, I now have completed seven in all, every five years through 2005. They provide extensive and extremely varied trend data on religion in Canada. At the time that *Fragmented Gods* (1987) came out, a friend who reviewed a pre-publication copy of the manuscript phoned and said some kind things, before adding in a soliloquy-like manner, "It just goes to show you don't have to be best – you just have to be first." He probably was more accurate than he realized. But being "first" has had its upsides and downsides.

Positively speaking, it has been gratifying to find that my work over the years has been used so extensively by academics, the media, and religious leaders. However, the flipside is that we all would have benefited considerably if more academics had provided stringent and insightful examinations of my data and thoughts along the way. In the early 1990s, for example, I wrote that my colleague Merlin Brinkerhoff and I had become "increasingly uncomfortable with [the] widespread acceptance of the circulation of the saints thesis," adding that we had been "surprised that for two decades our academic colleagues [had] failed to give the thesis the criticism it so richly deserves" (Bibby 1993:43). The same has been true of my work more generally. Although Thiessen and Dawson claim that some academics have found fault with my methods and conclusions, virtually none of those observations have been expressed to me directly. Moreover, very few have reached me indirectly. The lack of thoughtful critiques of work so widely circulated has not been a good thing. For my part, I've never had any illusions of perfection.

We all would have benefited as well from academics generating more data and more secondary analyses of other people's data that would have served to correct, corroborate, and supplement my findings and observations. Given the central importance of empiricism and verification in science, the dearth of additional data has not helped to move our understanding of religious developments in Canada forward. My lack of illusions about perfection has been matched by the absence of any illusions that I can do it all. Over the years, I frequently have reminded people that I see myself as taking a series of aerial photographs and then trying to make sense of all the photos. There always has been a great need to supplement those aerial shots with up-close, in-depth examinations of what is taking place. Unfortunately, such studies have been fairly rare. I heartily agree with Thiessen and Dawson that more systematic, qualitative research needs to be undertaken.

I would rush to add, however, that my work has not lacked for qualitative input. Throughout my career, I have subscribed to a line from American sociologist Howard Becker who once wrote, there is something wrong with our research if the people we

are describing can't recognize themselves in the descriptions we are providing of them. In addition to drawing on any systematic and sound qualitative data on religion in Canada that have become available, I have relied heavily on the input of what I would estimate to be thousands of people with whom I have been interacting over much of my lifetime. Many have been religious leaders, large numbers active laity. Others have been students, friends, relatives, colleagues, and strangers. Together, as "walking data," they have forced me to rethink, refine, and reformulate my analyses and interpretations, helping me to do all that I can to make sure that I am accurately describing reality as people know it. I frequently remind audiences and readers that I am not very interested in numbers as such; I am interested in ideas. My research therefore involves an attempt to go far beyond merely doing surveys and adding up responses. I want to know how the world works and draw on any sources I can in my attempt to achieve that end.

As a result of supplementing my quantitative data with extensive qualitative contributions, my confidence in my data and conclusions has increased considerably with time. But my thinking is data-driven. And if the data call for a change in my thinking, so be it. I have no vested interest in arguing for something that isn't there. I also do not have any problem acknowledging that I am or have been wrong. I enjoy being an individual and I like to take chances. If I am wrong, so be it. If I think other people are wrong, I am happy to take them on.

Doing surveys five years apart provides one with a fair amount of time to analyse findings and try to make sense of developments. Doing new surveys also makes it possible to clarify old areas and explore new themes that one thinks might be important. Those are the primary reasons why I probed issues like the prevalence of "traditional Christian commitment" and "identification with the fragment hypothesis" in a book like *Fragmented Gods*, and moved on to emphasize the significance, prevalence, and meaning of religious identification and variations in religious involvement in books such as *Unknown Gods* and *Restless Gods*. It was clear that traditional religious commitment, for example, based on the early thinking of Charles Glock and Rodney

Stark, characterizes a minority of the population. But I found both its conception and measurement to be problematic, not only across diverse faiths but also among Christian groups. Thiessen and Dawson are right in noting that the composite measure gave readers information about the religiosity of Canadians. But that religiosity was narrowly "traditional Christian" in nature.

Opting for "less stringent" measures of commitment has been the furthest thing from my mind. Why, as a social scientist, would I do that? Similarly, the "less stringent" motive has had nothing to do with my making increasing use of the "monthly-plus" category in probing service attendance. I have been suggesting the expanded measure needs to be considered because I think it is a better indicator of organizational involvement. "Weekly-plus" attendance is excessively stringent and out of touch with reality. I challenge researchers and other observers to ask themselves why we continue to use weekly-plus attendance as our key measure of religion participation, especially when we all know that people today find it extremely difficult to attend almost any kind of organizational gathering every single week. In my recent work I have not excluded the "weekly-plus" category but rather have included the "monthly-plus" attendance measure. I am simply offering more data, not less, and leaving it up to readers to draw their own conclusions as to which measure is more helpful.

What has been central to my emerging understanding of religion in Canada is the inclination of Canadians to continue to identify with groups. I have in no way abandoned the theme of selective consumption (i.e., the inclination of people to adopt religious fragments). Rather, while continuing to document the prevalence of participation and belief fragments, I have explored the extent to which people are receptive to greater involvement, including trying to clarify what it would take for the less involved to become more involved. Thiessen and Dawson have accurately identified such evolving emphases in my work.

This is my way of saying that the items I have focused on in the surveys are items that address my evolving research interests – including, incidentally, the *"ministers should*

*stick to religion*" item that does make it into *Restless Gods* in detail (pp. 184-190). There is nothing "curious" or mysterious about my "omission" of some other items. If anyone is interested in exploring the prevalence of traditional Christian commitment or Canadians' identification with the fragment assertion, the data are there for the viewing. I haven't given up on such ideas; that's why I have continued to include the items in the surveys. I have assumed the findings have remained pretty much the same over time, and that I can emphasize other matters.

What is of critical importance these days, it seems to me, is not the ongoing tendency of Canadians to adopt religious fragments, but rather their openness to be more involved in religious groups if they found such groups touched their lives in significant ways. That is an empirical question that needs to be resolved with good data rather than secularization rhetoric.

In the course of attempting to understand the receptivity to organized religion on the part of the majority of people, it obviously is also important to examine how the rest of the population is dealing with life and death matters. Thiessen and Dawson's proposal that we "create three categories of respondents: those involved in organized religion, those practicing some kind of private spirituality, and those with no religion," is similar to what I have attempted to do in a recent paper that examines how "insiders," "marginals," and "outsiders" view organized religion (Bibby 2006).

To sum up, there is a need for much more data, including good qualitative data, which can help to fill out and update our readings of the Canadian religious situation. My own measurement choices have in large part reflected changing research emphases that in turn have been guided by the addressing of old questions and the raising of new ones. Those measures have also been informed by cultural changes that have given new meaning to concepts such as group involvement, the use of one's time, and spirituality.

## **The Problem With Positing a Renaissance**

We need to be clear from the outset that I have not had any personal agenda in posing the possibility that organized religion might be showing some signs of new life in the early years of the new century. For the record, I value faith and think that religious groups at their best can contribute to personal and social good. That said, like the proverbial umpire, I call things the way I see them. As we all know well, many observers have been convinced that organized religion has been in decline in much of the Western World for some time, with Canada no exception to such a secularization rule. I merely have noted that the pervasive predictions and expectations that Canadians will increasingly abandon the country's dominant religious groups in a fairly linear fashion needs to be called into question. Why? Because of new information that is emerging.

Thiessen and Dawson ask, "Where was this optimism during the 1980s and 1990s when the statistical picture was much the same?" The answer is simple. Things weren't "much the same." Between 1984 and 1992, weekly teenage attendance dropped from 23% to 18% – but rebounded to 22% by 2000. In the 70s, 80s, and 90s, decreasing proportions of young Mainline Protestants and Catholics outside Quebec indicated that they were actively involved in their churches. By 2000, things had levelled off; by 2005, both "religious families" were reporting modest participation increases among young adults. Of particular significance, contrary to the predictions of the secularization proponents, the national attendance drop has tapered off, and is showing signs of actually edging upward.

My argument for religious revitalization is not only driven by data. A simple theoretical framework that draws heavily on the work of Rodney Stark and his associates leads me to maintain that (1) if people continue to identify with religious groups, (2) are reluctant to turn elsewhere, (3) have interests and needs, and (4) their identification groups respond, such ministry will result in higher levels of participation.

My so-called "renaissance thesis" is just that – a thesis in need of testing. I haven't adopted it; I have posed it. The resolution of the thesis lies with the data emerging from the Canadian religious situation. As a result, phrases such as "signs of hope" or "Bibby's new optimism" or my effort "to accentuate the positive" do not describe either my outlook or intent. I also am more than cautious in anticipating that the situation in Quebec will be turned around in the immediate future. At most, I maintain, signs of organizational life and organizational renewal point to a need to consider rethinking what could be taking place. Incidentally, while I personally am a theist, I hardly would be either so arrogant or so audacious as to try to claim where "the gods" or "God" are in all this. I purposely couch any theistic reflections in terms of "the theistic colour commentator in the booth" (*Restless Gods*) or, when reflecting with a Christian audience (*Restless Churches*), use cautious phrases such as "Perhaps God has grown impatient" rather than the edited "God has grown impatient" phrase that Thiessen and Dawson have attributed to me.

Something unexpected may be happening. Then again, maybe we are only looking at a blip on the secularization screen. One thing is certain: we will need at least fifty years or so before we will know for sure what has been taking place.

Along the way, in attempting to accurately read the religious times, I agree with Thiessen and Dawson that we need to have valid and reliable measures of concepts such as receptivity, and be accurate in our interpretation of activities such as the pursuit of rites of passage. When asking people if they are receptive to greater involvement, an improvement on "Yes," "Perhaps," and "No" would probably be a four-point response (e.g., "Yes, definitely," "Yes, I think so," "No I don't think so," and "No, definitely not"). Ironically, that probably would reduce the percentage of people who are totally closed to greater involvement. I have always been very conscious of the fact that one has to be careful in interpreting the motives for rites of passage (e.g., *Unknown Gods*, 1993:147-151). At minimum, such requests provide religious groups with a point of contact and, in some instances, may signal spiritual quest.

Thiessen and Dawson note that I have been advising "religious groups to do a better job of meeting the ministry, organizational, and personal needs of Canadians." They add, "This assumes that the source of the problem lies with the supply side of religion. We have our doubts." I am not sure why they are so positive about the performances of religious groups, or so sceptical about my findings on receptivity. The 2000 and 2005 surveys have clearly shown that large numbers of Canadians are in fact open to greater involvement. But when they are asked point-blank about what it would take, they maintain that religious groups need to do a much better job of responding to their spiritual, personal, and relational needs. As the person who personally coded those open-ended responses in 2005, I can say with some authority that, in many instances, what people are talking about are minimal performances on the part of religious groups. Until such time as the country's religious groups do a better job of ministering to their affiliates' interests and needs, there is little reason to assume that, across the board, the supply side of religion is coming through. I would maintain that, on the contrary, such an assumption knows little empirical support.

Speaking of empirical support, I am puzzled by Thiessen and Dawson's claim that, "If Canadians truly wish to be more religious, in a conventional sense, then they can adjust their schedules, as they readily do with many other aspects of their lives." Data that I present in *The Boomer Factor* (2006:89) suggest such a claim is precarious. Close to one in two people say that they do not have enough time to do the things they want to do. Large numbers feel pathologically overextended. What I have been arguing happens in the case of religious involvement is that, precisely because people have to make tough choices in favour of what has value, many give religious groups limited time because they have concluded they have limited value.

Thiessen and Dawson go into some detail in questioning my tendency to use numbers versus percentages. I simply would say that such choices are not based on any agenda but rather reflect my effort to accurately analyse the data in light of the questions I am raising. Sometimes absolute numbers are important to emphasize (e.g., the sheer number of Quebeckers who continue to think they are Roman Catholic). If one is talking



about proportional trends, then obviously one should make use of percentages. Both are sometimes enlightening (e.g., showing that the percentage of Conservative Protestants has remained steady since 1871 but, because of population growth, that percentage has translated into significant numerical growth with important organizational implications). As my old statistics professor used to remind us, stats are merely tools to explore good ideas. The real question is, how well do they help to clarify what one is examining? My interest, as I said earlier, lies not with numbers but with good ideas.

A footnote: in the course of working with lots of numbers, it is easy to make some mistakes, and even easier for people to think one is making mistakes. The alleged "contradictory data" on Conservative Protestant attendance between 1990 and 2000 is due to the use of two different data sets (Project Canada and the General Social Survey) and the fact the "CP" category is coded differently. In my discussion of Mainline Protestant adults and teens I simply discuss identification levels versus participation levels. It is not clear to me why Thiessen and Dawson interpret this as my "using [my] data rather selectively." The data speak for themselves.

There is one important omission that Thiessen and Dawson have made in assessing my work. Through 2004 and both *Restless Gods* and *Restless Churches*, I have been arguing that the secularization framework does not adequately account for signs that organized religion could be making a comeback in Canada. In *The Boomer Factor* (2006), I go much further. I suggest that when we stop comparing current levels of participation with the mid-1940s and objectively look at the *current* state of organized religion in Canada, we find organized religion to be relatively healthy. Identification remains at close to 85%; 75% of the populace claim to attend services in the course of a year, 43% over a six-month period. It is difficult to envision any area of social life in which Canadians are more involved. I'm not exaggerating. Statistics Canada data reveal that even the much-maligned, level of active participation in religious groups, along with the sheer number of religious "outlets," are matched only by the sports and recreation

sphere. Involvement in education, service, hobby, and political groups, for example, lags far behind, as do the number of their organizations.

In short, I suggest that if all this "adds up to a bleak situation, one has to wonder what the Golden Age of religion in Canada must have looked like" (Bibby 2006:194). Of course there are some problem areas, notably in Quebec. But overall, religion in Canada today on both the individual and collective levels is exhibiting remarkably good health.

Consequently, at this point I am not simply arguing for the possibility of new life in religious organizations across the country. My assertion is much more radical: I'm suggesting that maybe we have been misreading the religious situation in Canada for some time.

I recently had the opportunity to suggest to a gathering of academics in Britain that observers who were trying to make sense of the Canadian religious scene from the 1960s through the end of the 1990s invariably bought into the applicability of the secularization argument (Bibby 2007). The national attendance drop-off that took place in the post-1960s seemed consistent with the thesis.

Why was it that we did not find ourselves looking to the United States for some religious trend clues, given our extensive cultural interaction with the Americans? Why did we think we could learn more about ourselves by looking at London, Berlin, and Stockholm, rather than New York, Dallas, and Los Angeles? Why were we looking across the Atlantic instead of looking across the border?

The answer, I suggested, is quite simple. In the post-1960s, our social scientists were top-heavy with people who had been European-trained and European-influenced. They read Canada through secularization glasses. Often without good data in hand, they were jamming on the glass slipper, largely oblivious to some hints that it didn't really fit. People exposed to such academics in university and, I would add, theological and

seminary courses, predictably came away wearing similar sets of glasses. As they moved into positions of influence as educators, journalists, lawyers, politicians, and clergy, they assumed that Canadians were becoming more and more secular. In the minds of most, spirituality and organized religion were largely things of the past for all but a dying generation of older folks.

Today, as organized religion shows some signs of new vitality, such a solidly engrained mindset of linear secularization is extremely difficult to alter. Once “everyone knows” that extensive involvement in organized religion is a thing of the past, an individual who provides evidence to the contrary is not taken seriously. In fact, one’s motives may well be questioned and one’s credibility damaged. I should know.

## Conclusion

To return to where I began, I am most appreciative of the detailed critique that Joel Thiessen and Lorne Dawson have provided of my work. They have sensitized all of us to the need to expand our database and conceptual frameworks, develop good measures, and carry out sound analyses and interpretations.

I would challenge readers to be open to the possibility that a modest renaissance of religion might be taking place. That is not really much to ask. The bigger challenge is for those of us who study religion in this country (a) to consider the possibility that we, along with most of our esteemed predecessors, have been viewing the religious terrain through secularization glasses – and (b) to take them off. I suspect that when we do that, we will be surprised at what we see. Who knows, it could issue in a renaissance of religious thought in Canada.

## References

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