

**The Nature and Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Canada: Examining Reginald  
Bibby's Renaissance Thesis**

by

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## **Abstract**

Previous research suggests that Canada has become a largely secular nation, with most Canadians limiting their religious life to what sociologists call "private spirituality." Recently, Reginald Bibby has argued that Canada is experiencing a religious renaissance, evidenced in increased involvement in religious organizations. In this thesis, I explore Bibby's past and recent research, the influential theories of secularization put forth by Peter Berger, Rodney Stark, and Steve Bruce, the increasingly common distinction made between organized religion and private spirituality, and various methodological problems common to the sociology of religion. I contend that religion in Canada today is fragmented and that many of Bibby's methodological practices and interpretations are suspect, raising doubts about the adequacy of his renaissance thesis and his optimism about the potential future of mainstream religious organizations. Similar to Kurt Bowen, I argue that while we must be aware of the potential religious renaissance among the "committed," we must be equally mindful of the real decline in the proportion of Canadians who are "committed" members of religious organizations.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Author's Declaration.....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Tables .....	vii
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>SETTING THE CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>CLARIFYING KEY CONCEPTS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>REGINALD BIBBY'S ANALYSIS OF RELIGION IN CANADA .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>FRAGMENTED GODS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>What was taking place in Religious Organizations? .....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>What was occurring in the culture of Canada? .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Religion &amp; Culture: Closing the Gap .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<b>UNKNOWN GODS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>What was taking place in Religious Organizations? .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>What was occurring in the culture of Canada? .....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Religion &amp; Culture: Closing the Gap .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<b>RESTLESS GODS AND RESTLESS CHURCHES .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>What is taking place in Religious Organizations? .....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>What is occurring in the culture of Canada? .....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Religion &amp; Culture: Closing the Gap .....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Are we really witnessing a Renaissance of Religion? .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<i>SETTING THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT: THEORIES OF SECULARIZATION .....</i>	<i>48</i>
<b>PETER BERGER.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Theory of Human Nature and Religion.....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Theory of Secularization.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<b>RODNEY STARK.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<i>Religious Rewards and Costs .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Theory of Secularization.....</i>	<i>63</i>
<b>STEVE BRUCE.....</b>	<b>68</b>
<i>Religious Beliefs and Practices in Britain.....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>New Age and Eastern Religion .....</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Charismatic Movements .....</i>	<i>74</i>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<i>ORGANIZED RELIGION AND PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY: THE CANADIAN CONTEXT .....</i>	<i>80</i>
<b>CONCEPTUALIZING ORGANIZED RELIGION AND PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>ORGANIZED RELIGION .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<i>Reasons for People Avoiding Religion in Favor of Spirituality .....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>The Need for Organized Religion .....</i>	<i>93</i>
<b>PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY: RENAISSANCE, SECULARIZATION, OR CHANGE? .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>107</b>

<b>CHAPTER 5 .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<i>METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....</i>	<i>108</i>
<i>NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES .....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>MEMBERSHIP AND AFFILIATION .....</i>	<i>112</i>
<i>CATEGORIZING RESPONDENTS .....</i>	<i>118</i>
<i>LONGITUDINAL DATA .....</i>	<i>124</i>
<i>SUGGESTIONS FOR GATHERING DATA IN THE FUTURE .....</i>	<i>126</i>
<i>CONCLUSION .....</i>	<i>132</i>
<b>CHAPTER 6 .....</b>	<b>134</b>
<i>CONCLUSION: SIGNIFICANT ADVANCES IN STUDYING RELIGION.....</i>	<i>134</i>
<i>SOME UNRESOLVED ISSUES .....</i>	<i>142</i>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>145</b>

## **List of Tables**

2.1	Interest in Ultimate Questions (1980)	19
2.2	Conventional Religious Commitments (1980)	20
2.3	Unconventional Religious Commitments (1980)	21
2.4	Mystery and Meaning (1990)	29
2.5	Weekly Attendance Patterns in Protestant Congregations	34
2.6	Weekly Attendance Patterns in Mainline Protestant Congregations	35
2.7	Meaning and Purpose (2000)	39
2.8	Happiness and Suffering (2000)	39
2.9	No Attendance, Affiliation, or Belief (2000)	41

## **CHAPTER 1**

### *The Research Questions*

In this thesis, I seek to address three related and prominent questions currently in the sociology of religion. My overarching concern is whether modern Western nations are becoming more secular. Many people think so because of the decline of organized religion (e.g., church attendance). However, others doubt that societies are becoming fully secular, pointing to evidence of continued private spirituality (e.g., belief in God). In order to address this first issue though, we need to answer two further questions. First, what exactly is organized religion and private spirituality, and what is the relationship between the two in Canada? Second, can there be a renaissance of religion in Canada, as some argue, without a strong presence of organized religion?

To understand why these questions are sociologically pertinent relative to Canada and to the rest of the modern Western world, I begin by providing an overview of the religious landscape in Canada. This summary subsequently sets the context for comprehending two of the main conceptual issues addressed throughout this thesis—secularization, and organized religion and private spirituality.

### **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

Historically, Canada was a conventionally religious nation (see Choquette 2004; Clark 1948; Murphy and Perin 1996; Noll 1992; O'Toole 1996; Rawlyk 1990, 1994; and Van Die 2001). Both Catholics and Protestants reflected high levels of religious beliefs and practices, especially in areas of religious membership and church attendance. Within the last forty years, however, religious life has changed dramatically in Canada. Recent research into the nature and extent of religion in contemporary Canada, and most other modern Western nations, indicates

that fewer people are choosing institutional forms of religion to express their religious and spiritual needs (Beyer 1994, 2000; Bibby 1987, 1993; Bowen 2004; Bruce 2002a; Davie 1994, 2002b; Emberley 2002; Grenville 2000; Luckmann 1967; Lyon and Van Die 2000; Rawlyk 1996). More specifically, many Canadians are abandoning regular attendance at religious services. Yet, even though many Canadians seem to have deserted the traditional religious organizations, most individuals have not forsaken some of the basic metaphysical and ethical questions that religion has traditionally addressed.<sup>1</sup>

Explanations of these changes in Canada have focused on the fragmentation, growth, and decline of religious beliefs and practices (Bibby 1987, 1993; Rawlyk 1996), the heightened interest in spirituality (Emberley 2002), the impact of globalization on religion (Beyer 1994), the emergence of postmodern society (Inglehart 1997), and the changing relationship between church and state (Lyon and Van Die 2000). Two of the most contemporary and competing explanations, however, suggest that people in the modern Western world are still quite religious (Bibby 2002; Finke and Stark 2005) or increasingly secular (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002a). These two positions are the focus of this thesis.

In his most recent book, *Restless Gods* (2002), Bibby claims that perhaps Canadians have not abandoned institutional forms of religion to the degree once thought, and that Canada is currently experiencing a renaissance of religion. For example, many Canadians still turn to religious groups for rites of passage, despite claiming to have no religion (2002: 65). Weekly attendance in Conservative Protestant congregations has increased since 1990 (2002: 73), weekly attendance in Mainline Protestant congregations has stabilized since 1990 (2002: 75), and despite

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Bibby highlights in *Restless Gods* (2002) that Canadians continue to ask questions about the meaning and purpose of life (2002: 96-102), about happiness and suffering in life (2002: 102-13), and about life after death (2002: 114-33). Many Canadians also believe in God or the supernatural (2002: 138-46), or even claim to have experienced God's presence (2002: 146-56), and a high percentage of Canadians pray privately (2002: 156-64).

decreased membership numbers, the remaining percentage of teens in Conservative Protestant congregations who are members and also attend weekly services is increasing (2002: 85-88). Additionally, the actual numbers of Catholics outside Quebec attending services weekly since the 1950s has moderately decreased, which for Bibby is a possible sign of hope that attendance at Catholic services may begin to increase (2002: 78). Further, membership in non-Christian religious groups has increased (2002: 83).

In addition to organized forms of religion, Bibby (2002) also argues that Canadians continue to show high levels of private spirituality. For example, Canadians ask questions about meaning and purpose in life (2002: 96-100), about happiness and suffering (2002: 105-12), and about life after death (2002: 116-22). High percentages of Canadians also claim to believe in God, to have experienced God, and to praying in private (2002: 143-58).

Many social theorists, however, are suspicious of Bibby's thesis, particularly his optimism about the current and future potential for religious organizations. How much weight can we place in Bibby's interpretation of the latest data? Is the evidence convincing enough to emphatically conclude that a "renaissance" is underway, or are Bibby's conclusions premature? Should the term "renaissance" be followed by a question mark instead of a period?

The need to pursue these questions generally, and with regard to Bibby's work specifically, is twofold. First, these questions are, in some way, central to any current study and evaluation of the nature and extent of religion in the modern world. These questions are aimed at gaining further knowledge about individuals and social institutions in the modern world, about the role that religion plays in the modern world, and about the relationship between religion and other social institutions in the modern world, key focuses for all sociologists of religion. Second, Bibby's work has been and continues to be at the center of sociological inquiries into the religious beliefs and practices of Canadians. Over the last thirty years, sociologists, the general

public, and religious groups have granted Bibby's research authority. To his credit, Bibby has used this authority to make significant advances in measuring and evaluating the religious life of Canadians. However, Bibby's methodology and his analysis of the data that led to his renaissance thesis are questionable. Yet, people have contested Bibby's work.<sup>2</sup>

Assessing the strength of Bibby's conclusions is best done in the context of the broader debate about secularization. Is the world becoming more religious or less religious and which social factors contribute to either reality? Three positions have commonly arisen in response to this question. First, some have concluded that rationalization, industrialization and urbanization, and institutional differentiation, all aspects of the larger process of modernization, have led to the inevitable secularization of society (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002a; Luckmann 1967; Martin 1978; Wilson 1967).<sup>3</sup> For those who take this position, secularization is understood as the "process whereby religious thinking, practice, and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson 1967: 14).

Others, most notably Rodney Stark and company (1985, 2000, 2005), suggest that the processes of modernization actually fueled higher levels of religiosity. In particular, Stark contends that religious pluralism, the heightened presence of religious innovation and revival, increased levels of personal piety, and the conscious weighing of religious rewards and costs by individuals—all consequences of a rational modern world—have actually prevented the secularization of society.

A third position is that, despite the decreased role of organized religion (e.g., attendance at religious services), many continue to "[believe] without belonging" (Davie 1994). Some

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<sup>2</sup> The main exception is Canadian sociologist Kurt Bowen who, in his recent book *Christians in a Secular World* (2004), openly tackles Bibby's renaissance thesis.

<sup>3</sup> This is obviously an oversimplification of the modernization processes that contribute to secularization. For a more comprehensive understanding of modernization, see the theorists cited in the body of this text. In addition, see Bowen's (2004: 3-22) summary of secularization theories.

interpret this statement to mean that society is secularizing in some ways (e.g., organized religion), but not in others (e.g., private spirituality) (see Bowen 2004). Others suggest that this statement refers to the changing nature and scope of religion, from organized religion to private spirituality, but without any sort of evaluative statement to that transformation (Rawlyk 1996: 62; Wuthnow 2001: 312).

In some respects, both those who argue that Canada is increasingly secular or increasingly religious are correct. By no means can we argue that Canada, in the traditional sense, is an overly religious nation, since we have observed considerable decline in traditional measures of religiosity, such as church attendance and religious membership. Conversely, we cannot altogether proclaim that “God is Dead” (Bruce 2002a), since there remain many signs of private belief and spirituality. To help unravel the complexities of this situation, I focus my attention on the comparative analysis of the three main theories of secularization developed by Peter Berger, Rodney Stark, and Steve Bruce. These theorists are particularly important because their paradigms have been the basis for attempts by other social theorists to gain an understanding of secularization in the modern world. Moreover, these theorists build on and respond to each other’s theories while coming to different conclusions.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

To shed light on the research questions of this thesis, particularly whether Canada is increasingly religious or increasingly secular, I structure the next five chapters in the following way. In chapter two, “Reginald Bibby’s Analysis of Religion in Canada,” I compare, discuss, and analyze Bibby’s findings and conclusions in *Fragmented Gods* (1987), *Unknown Gods* (1993), *Restless Gods* (2002), and *Restless Churches* (2004), based primarily on his surveys of the religious, social, and cultural opinions and values of Canadians since 1975.

Chapter three, “Secularization: Setting the Theoretical Context,” includes a summary, comparison, and critique of Peter Berger, Rodney Stark, and Steve Bruce’s contrasting and influential theories of secularization in the modern Western world.

In chapter four, “Organized Religion and Private Spirituality: The Canadian Context,” I examine several of the different conceptions of organized religion and private spirituality. I also consider why Canadians are abandoning organized religion, what the social consequences for Canada are if this pattern continues, and whether the continued interest in private spirituality supports Bibby’s renaissance thesis, the secularization paradigm, or the views that religious beliefs and practices are simply changing.

In chapter five, “Methodological Critique and Suggestions for Further Study,” I build upon Steve Bruce’s (2002a: 186-203) critique of methodology in the sociology of religion. I contend that we need to consider further critiques regarding numbers and percentages, membership and affiliation, categorizing respondents, and longitudinal data to improve our sociological gathering and analysis of data on religion in Canada. I also provide alternative suggestions for gathering extensive qualitative data in the future.

In the final chapter, “Conclusion: Significant Advances in Studying Religion,” I reiterate why I think Bibby’s renaissance thesis is dubious, and I discuss some logical points of departure for pursuing the themes of this thesis in the future.

## **CLARIFYING KEY CONCEPTS**

Whether theorists argue that Canada is increasingly religious or secular, there is an underlying assumption that we are examining, in part, the relationship between religion and

culture.<sup>4</sup> For example, consider the ongoing debate about the role of religion in the public sphere, or discussions in religious organizations concerning their effectiveness in culture (see Lyon and Van Die 2000). Some wonder whether Canadian's religious beliefs and practices actually influence the broader non-religious culture. Others question if the non-religious culture influences how Canadians live out their religious beliefs and practices. In reality, we are probably witnessing both of these options. Consistent with either the implicit or explicit goals of most sociologists of religion, one of my goals in this thesis is to explore some of these questions in hopes of adding clarity to the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. Therefore, it is necessary that I provide a clear conceptualization of what I mean by religion and culture, which I will do shortly. However, to begin, it is useful to highlight a few points regarding religion and culture as discussed by three central classical theorists: Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Richard Niebuhr.

Weber (1963: 60-65) is famous for his distinction between church and sect. By church, Weber refers to the religious group that readily accepts the surrounding culture and experiences little tension with culture. Sects, on the other hand, are religious groups that set themselves apart from culture and are at odds with culture.

Ernst Troeltsch (1960: 381, 798-99), Weber's student, builds upon Weber's classification by describing the church extreme as a non-exclusive, elite, and objective group that accommodates the surrounding culture. Troeltsch characterizes the sect extreme as an exclusive, lower class, and relationally oriented group hostile towards culture. However, Troeltsch adds a third category, mysticism. By mysticism, Troeltsch refers to a group of people who are not concerned with dogmas, sacraments, ethics, organizations, religious authorities, or relations

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<sup>4</sup> Religion and culture have also been compared using other terms. Examples include religion/church and the surrounding environment, religion/church and the world, and religion/church and society. Although different people in different settings use these terms, these terms more or less hold similar meanings across contexts.

among believers. Instead, this group of people is interested in being uninhibited by others, religious or otherwise, when pursuing individual religious quests.

In his classic *Christ and Culture* (1951), Richard Niebuhr expands both Weber and Troeltsch's paradigms further. Consistent with the two extremes of religious groups that either accommodate or reject culture, Niebuhr examines the relationship between Christ or religion, if you will, and culture, in terms of five possible relationships: Christ against culture (the religious group is good, the culture is evil), Christ of culture (culture assimilates religion), Christ above culture (religious and cultural laws are necessary, although each resides on a different level), Christ in paradox with culture (religion is the source of justice and wrath, grace and mercy, in a corrupted world), or Christ transforming culture (religion transforms and restores the existing culture to religious values).

Of course, I am aware that religion itself is a manifestation of culture (Geertz 1973). But I am also conscious of the tradition of thought cited already that deals with the tension between religion as a form of culture and the rest of culture, a distinction that seems explicit in Bibby's work and among religious groups trying to sort out how they are and ought to be in relationship with the non-religious sectors of society. Even though it is not the role of a sociologist to resolve this dilemma, it is necessary for the sociologist to examine closely this dilemma for the following reasons. Sociologically, it is clear, for example, that in the case of Islamic fundamentalism or the Christian right in America that religious beliefs and practices, particularly religious views about culture, have had an impact on other social institutions. For instance, the terrorist attacks of 9-11 have significantly transformed the political, economic, judicial, and civil landscape of many nations. At a less extreme level, religious beliefs about issues such as euthanasia, homosexuality, or abortion have also impacted how the media depicts the world, and educational and political institutions shape it.

The religion-culture relationship is also sociologically relevant to the evaluation of the legitimacy of the renaissance and secularization theses. The way religious groups perceive their relationship with culture (and vice versa) is one criterion, at least for the reference group, for concluding whether religion is experiencing a renaissance or is undergoing secularizing forces.

In light of this preamble, the obvious question remains: what do we mean by religion and culture? Although Neibuhr uses the word “Christ” instead of “religion,” I think that some useful parallels exist between his definition of Christ and our concept of religion. When using the term “religion,” in the context of the religion-culture dichotomy, I am referring to a group’s *shared* beliefs and practices relative to a common figurehead who serves as the group’s authority. This authority “does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds” (Neibuhr 1951: 28). Accordingly, members of a religious group seek to “teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them” (Neibuhr 1951: 29).

Culture is probably the more confounding term of the two. At a basic level, when contrasting religion and culture, most in religious circles believe that culture is represented by all things not inherently religious or sacred, things that are either Godless or anti-God in nature (e.g., media, politics, or education). More simply, those individuals and institutions whose actions are not directed towards religious ends can, in this case, be classified as part of culture. This general interpretation of culture guides my analysis of the relationship of religion and culture throughout this thesis.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware of Durkheim’s (1915) distinction between the “sacred” and “profane,” and Malinowski’s (1954) between “symbols” and “rituals,” to name a few, that offer ways to understand how humans attribute sacredness to profane, or non-sacred, objects. But such discussions, although they are related to how one may distinguish between religion and culture, go beyond the scope of my analysis.

In addition, although Neibuhr (1951) does not provide a concise definition of culture, he does outline several noteworthy characteristics for conceptualizing culture that should be mentioned. First, interactions among humans are the basis for culture. That is, culture is social (1951: 32). Second, culture is marked by human achievement, thoughts and material things that humans create (1951: 33). These creations are for the benefit of their creators, and to be preserved over time (e.g., in ideologies and institutions) (1951: 36-37). Finally, culture consists of diverse values (1951: 34-39). The goal for people in a specific culture is to balance the inevitable tension that arises when unique individuals, distinct institutions, and various interests collide.

Keeping in mind the overall objective of this thesis—to evaluate whether Canada is becoming increasingly religious or increasingly secular—distinguishing between religion and culture raises another conceptual quandary that must be addressed: the distinction between organized religion and private spirituality. This difference is central to this thesis and is the focus of chapter four. For now, I will note three reasons why examining organized religion and private spirituality is sociologically relevant to the research goals of this thesis. First, sociology is rooted in the study of social institutions (i.e., which institutions make up society; what is the function of each institution; how does each institution operate independent and alongside other institutions; and how are institutions changing?). Not surprisingly, the degree to which religion is manifested in institutional settings impacts the ways that individuals think and behave in other social settings. For example, some people’s religious beliefs and practices influence the familial, educational, political, economic, and judicial realms of society. Therefore, whether sociologists are directly interested in religion or not, they ought to have some vested interest in research on organized religion, in Canada and elsewhere.

The second, and equally important, reason concerns religious groups and institutions themselves. Many who regularly practice their faith in institutional settings are concerned about Canadians' lack of interest in organized forms of religion. In turn, Canadian religious groups are concerned with how to draw people more effectively into acquiring and practicing their faith in religious organizations. This thesis clarifies the complex factors that religious groups must wrestle with in reaching people in culture.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, examining the relationship between institutional and non-institutional religion in Canada helps us make sense of a larger issue: are modern Western nations becoming more secular? In placing Canada in the context of these questions, we might wonder whether the future of religion in Canada is more likely to follow the trajectory of the higher levels of religiosity in the United States or the higher levels of secularity in Western Europe (Lyon & Van Die 2000). Although this thesis may not yield a clear "yes" or "no" answer, the analysis improves our understanding of the criteria by which we can evaluate whether Western nations are, in fact, secularizing.

For these reasons, I think that it is worthwhile to reiterate a question that will hopefully guide the reader through every chapter of this thesis. Can we conclude that societies are not becoming increasingly secular, even though organized religions are playing an increasingly limited role in them, because there is evidence of an increasingly strong role of private spirituality in many people's lives? In other words, can there be a renaissance of religion without a strong presence of organized religion? In response to these questions and to the other guiding research questions of this thesis, it should be clear that I am arguing four things.

First, I am unconvinced that Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion, particularly organized religion, as proposed by Bibby. Second, I agree with Berger and Bruce that secularization is occurring both internally and externally of religious institutions. Third, the way

in which people conceptualize religion and spirituality, and the way that people make sense of the role of religion in society will directly determine whether Canada is religious, secular, or both.

Fourth, the questions and levels of analysis used in surveys and interviews need to be modified to better capture the nature and extent of religious life in contemporary Canada. Together, these four positions advance our understanding of the relationship between religion and culture, in general, and organized religion and private spirituality, in particular.

### **SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In his introduction to *Identity and the Sacred* (1976: x), Hans Mol declares “it is becoming a habit of scholars in the sociology of religion to present an autobiographical account of their ideologies in introductions. I think it is a good habit. It helps readers to understand (and explain away, if they so desire) whatever pro- or anti-religious biases they encounter.” Likewise, while I am fully aware that this thesis is a sociological exercise, it is appropriate that I provide a brief autobiographical sketch of my own religious background to clarify, in addition to the sociological reasons already discussed, some of the primary objectives of this thesis.

I write as a devout Christian who was socialized (and still practices) in the Evangelical Protestant tradition. Growing up as the son of a preacher, I was exposed to the many elements of religious organizations. I learned about the politics, the leadership roles, the missions and visions, and the strategies for evangelism in religious organizations. Moreover, I have been and currently am involved in various leadership positions in the local church, which has fueled my interest in the apparent gap between religion and culture, and organized religion and private spirituality.

Although I do not claim to be even a lay theologian, I am deeply interested in how Christians and all other religious groups live out their beliefs and practices in the context of Canadian society. In part, this interest has come out of a personal dissatisfaction with the personal piety, or lack

thereof, of many who attend weekly religious services. Further, I have witnessed the general struggle among many weekly attenders to live out their faith during the days between weekly religious services. On the other hand, as one who is committed to an organized religious group, I am concerned about the significant decline in weekly attenders since the 1950s. Hence, my interest in understanding the differences between organized religion and private spirituality, and how the two can possibly come together in the Canadian context.<sup>6</sup>

Before delving into the substantive portion of the thesis, I should make the reader aware of two further things. First, I repeatedly reference and cite Christianity when discussing religion in Canada. This practice simply reflects the past and continued dominance of Christianity in the religious life of Canada and most sociological analyses of religion in Canada. Second, social scientists should be aware that most religious people (particularly Christians) contend that religiosity pertains to matters of the heart (e.g., the quality of one's beliefs and practices are of primary importance). However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to empirically measure the subjective elements<sup>7</sup> in one's religious life.<sup>8</sup> We must rely on empirical measures<sup>9</sup> of religiosity. Certainly, even empirical data can be misleading, as people's outward expressions of religiosity can mask inner hatred, bitterness, jealousy, and impatience. Nevertheless, measuring people's

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<sup>6</sup> To a degree, I think it is advantageous that I am an "insider" who is young and actively involved in leadership in a local congregation. My younger age and regular involvement in religious organizations is an advantage for asking questions and offering observations that complement those of the theorists examined in this thesis (see Robert Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals* (2002) for an insightful comparison of traditional, pragmatic, and younger evangelicals' approach to the social world and to religion). Of course, to counter any fears that my religious background would be a hindrance to fair and systematic analysis, I have intentionally sought out several individuals—religious, non-religious, and some who are indifferent towards religion—to engage my thoughts as I formulate this thesis. Moreover, the assistance of my supervisory committee has aided in the quest for this thesis to be an accurate, sociological, and thought provoking analysis of religion in Canada and the modern world.

<sup>7</sup> By subjective, I am referring to the internal, unobservable, and immeasurable aspects of one's religious life.

<sup>8</sup> The one exception, perhaps, is to gather data using interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, and case studies of people an individual spends the most time with (e.g., family, coworkers, or neighbors) to somehow assess whether one bears the fruit (e.g., love, patience, or peace) of his or her religious faith. These methods go beyond the scope of a Master's Thesis and are also very difficult for gathering valid and reliable scientific data.

<sup>9</sup> By empirical, I am referring to external, observable religious practices.

religiosity empirically is probably the best we can do to reliably capture a sense of their religiosity.

Although the research questions of this thesis grow out of personal interests, the issues are at the center of current sociological inquiries into the nature and extent of religion in contemporary Canada and the modern world. Recognizing my own biases and experiences as a practicing Christian, my primary goal is to sociologically explore the religious beliefs and practices of Canadians in the context of the wider secularization debate.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### *Reginald Bibby's Analysis of Religion in Canada*

Reginald Bibby is well known for his research on religion and culture in Canada. Every five years since 1975, Bibby has led research projects aimed at measuring the social values and views, intergroup relations, and religious beliefs and practices of Canadians.<sup>1</sup> These longitudinal studies led Bibby to publish three main books on religion (for sociologists primarily)—*Fragmented Gods* (1987), *Unknown Gods* (1993), and *Restless Gods* (2002). Bibby also wrote two books, more specifically for religious leaders in Canada—*There's Got To Be More* (1995), and *Restless Churches* (2004). In addition, Bibby has circulated national surveys to Canadian teens, conducted every eight years since 1984. Data gathered from these surveys were discussed in three further books—*The Emerging Generation* (1985), *Teen Trends* (1992), and *Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (2001).

Although Bibby did not explicitly frame his analysis in the following way, I have identified three questions that seem to capture Bibby's attempt to remain relevant to both sociologists and religious leaders in Canada: what was taking place in religious organizations, what was occurring religiously in the surrounding culture, and finally, how could the gap between religion and culture be closed? Within the context of these three questions, the purpose of this chapter is to clearly present Bibby's conclusions, how his interpretations have changed with time, and his current assessment of religion in Canada.

I preface this chapter by saying that I have a great deal of respect for Bibby's contribution to the sociology of religion. Bibby's access to high numbers of Canadians and his continual dissemination of results have significantly advanced our understanding of the nature and extent of

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<sup>1</sup> Each survey ranged from 10-20 pages in length, 300-400 variables, and 1,500-2,000 participants. All surveys were stratified by province and community size, and weighted for province, community size, gender, and age. Recently, Bibby completed gathering his 2005 data.

religion in Canada. However, although many have referenced Bibby's research over the years, few have ever challenged Bibby's conclusions. With respect and care, my goal in this chapter is to present two challenges to Bibby's research (I leave a third challenge to chapter five), particularly regarding his latest renaissance thesis. First, I disagree with Bibby's constant questioning of religious groups for the failed connection between religious organizations and Canadian culture. In this chapter I argue that it is, in fact, Canadians themselves who are partially or mostly responsible for the failure of religious groups and culture to meet. Second, I contend that Bibby's greatest error is turning from his original "fragmented" thesis. I support this claim by illustrating how the Canadian approach to religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is similar to that of the Canadians who responded to Bibby's surveys in 1975, 1980, and 1985.

## **FRAGMENTED GODS**

In his book *Fragmented Gods* (1987), Bibby analyzed nearly twenty years of research on the religious beliefs and practices of Canadians from three national surveys and various denominational studies. After carefully examining the data, Bibby concluded that the gods were "broken into pieces and offered to religious consumers in piecemeal form" (1987: 50). The reasons for this fragmented religion were twofold. First, Canadians have applied the cultural traits of specialization and compartmentalization to their religious beliefs and practices by "drawing very selectively on religion" (Bibby 1987: 1). Second, the "dominant religious groups offered highly specialized items—isolated beliefs, practices, programs, and professional services" (Bibby 1987: 1). In short, religion was frail, religion was in pieces, and reconnecting these fragments looked improbable.

*What was taking place in Religious Organizations?*

All religious organizations faced a unique problem in the 80s: they were growing

numerically (measured by membership and, in some cases, weekly service attendance), but not proportionate to Canada's increasing population (Bibby 1987: 13).<sup>2</sup> This overlooked reality was important because local congregations interpreted numerical growth as an indicator that religion was gaining a strong hold on society, when quite the opposite was true. More and more Canadians, numerically and proportionately, were, in fact, staying away from local congregations irrespective of their religious affiliation. The sociological question was what impact, if any, did the “numbers up, proportions down” situation have on religious groups in Canada? Bibby offered different answers for Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Other religious groups.

In Protestant settings, paying off rising building loans was more difficult with a shrinking proportionate hold on the Canadian population. Those committed to Protestant groups invested their time in raising money rather than growing programs or churches. These financial and human resource strains significantly limited the potential for Protestants to gain a larger share of the Canadian religious marketplace (Bibby 1987: 12-16).

Within Roman Catholic settings, Vatican II's modernization of the Catholic Church resulted in relaxed approaches by many to doctrine, moral expectations, and participation in various religious rituals (Bibby 1987: 18-19).<sup>3</sup> In Quebec, increased emphasis on industrialization and specialization, combined with increased power by the provincial Liberal party, aided the separation of church and state (1987: 20). As a result, the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec no longer had power over education, health care, or social services.

Although Bibby did not discuss Other faith groups extensively, he pointed out that the proportion of Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, and Hindu affiliates decreased relative to the Canadian

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Protestant congregations increased from 3.4 to 3.8 million weekly attenders between 1950 and 1960. However, this numerical increase translated into a decrease from 43% to 38% of the overall Canadian population (Bibby 1987: 13). Furthermore, 4.6 million Protestants were typically not in weekly services in 1950, compared with 6.2 million in 1960 (1987: 14).

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, many more left the Catholic Church because the Church did not modernize enough.

population (1987: 22). Bibby referred to cultural assimilation as a plausible explanation for the decline of affiliates in Other faith groups.

Regardless of religious groups not growing relative to the Canadian population, Canadians were not entirely detached from religious organizations. Stable numbers continued to identify with religious groups (Bibby 1987: 48), including over 90% of children who, as adults, continued to identify with the religious group of their parents (1987: 49). Furthermore, many adults had a high level of respect and confidence in religious organizations and religious leaders (1987: 53).

These latter findings, paradoxical to the “numbers up, proportions down” reality, led Bibby to conclude that “the key to understanding the Canadian religious scene lay in resolving the apparent contradiction between exodus on the one hand and the persistence of religion on the other” (Bibby 1987: 23).

#### *What was occurring in the culture of Canada?*

In order to understand religious organizations and their role in culture, Bibby assessed what was taking place culturally and spiritually in society.<sup>4</sup> Canadian culture had undergone significant period of rationalization, modernization, and industrialization leading to a specialized society. The economy consisted of specialized divisions, individuals had specialized roles (e.g. parent, coworker, coach, friend, etc.), and social institutions specialized in particular areas. Bibby indicated that a specialized society caused fewer people to view religion as a system that could inform all of the different sectors in life. If religion was to play a significant role in people’s lives, Canadians needed to resolve potentially conflicting assumptions and values between their roles (Bibby 1987: 139-42). However, instead of resolving such conflicts, many Canadians chose

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<sup>4</sup> My choice of the term “spirituality” is intentional given the distinction between religion and spirituality that I explore in chapter four.

to keep their various roles, including religion, fragmented and separate from all other roles. For example, when asked how important religion was in predicting how they thought or acted, only 18% of Canadians said “very important” (29% for those who regularly attended religious services).<sup>5</sup> Bibby (1987: 140) summarized religious fragmentation in the following way:

Fragments...[seemed] to work. For example, retaining belief in God [meant] that one [could] still have recourse to prayer. Continuing to believe in life after death [gave] one a measure of hope in the face of bereavement. The use of religious fragments [permitted] one to retain some central elements of belief and practice without requiring a high level of role consistency. Commitment [did] not resolve the problem of role conflict; fragment adoption [did].

Indicative of the cultural values of specialization, fragmentation, and consumerism, pieces of spirituality were present in Canadian culture. Bibby discovered that some Canadians asked ultimate questions, held conventional religious commitments, participated in unconventional religious practices, observed religious rites of passage, and continued to hold affiliation with religious groups, while having only nominal ties to specific religious organizations.

First, people asked ultimate questions, defined as "issues pertaining to the meaning and future of our existence" (Bibby 1987: 62). More specifically, Canadians asked questions often or sometimes about suffering (92%), life after death (88%), the purpose of life (85%), the existence of God or the supernatural (84%), and ways to find happiness (83%)—all of which were questions that religion traditionally answered.

**Table 2.1** Interest in Ultimate Questions (1980)  
*% of Canadians who have ever thought about the following issues*

Suffering	92%
Life after Death	88%
Purpose of Life	85%
Existence of God or the Supernatural	84%
Ways to find Happiness	83%

<sup>5</sup> These percentages were well below the 47% of Canadians who identified their educational level as very important and the 31% who stated their occupation (Bibby 1987: 151).

Second, many Canadians held conventional religious commitments. Nearly 90% believed in God or a higher being (Bibby 1987: 65), almost 70% believed that Jesus was divine (1987: 66), and approximately 60% believed that there was life after death (1987: 67). Just about 50% of Canadians even claimed to have experienced God or the supernatural (1987: 70), and roughly 50% of Canadians believed that they could identify various Judeo-Christian knowledge items (e.g., Ten Commandments) (1987: 71). These beliefs were, for some, supported by various conventional religious practices. For example, nearly 75% of Canadians prayed on occasion,<sup>6</sup> almost 20% prayed before meals on a daily basis, and approximately 10% read a scriptural text several times a week or more (1987: 68).

**Table 2.2** Conventional Religious Commitments (1980)

Believe in God or a Higher Being	88%
Believe that Jesus was Divine	67%
Believe that there was life after death	58%
Experienced God or the Supernatural	44%
Identify Judeo-Christian Knowledge Items	50%
Prayed on Occasion	77%
Regularly prayed before Meals	22%
Read a Scriptural text weekly or more	9%

When comparing these last three measures of religiosity, I would point out that as each activity required more time and energy, people practiced less. For instance, people could pray while participating in other activities (e.g., working, driving, or gardening). Praying before meals, on the other hand, required that people set aside a regular, focused time to pray. Finally, reading scripture required more time and undivided attention, compared to the previous two measures of religiosity. My analysis is supported by Stark and Finke's (2000: 48) conclusion that time and

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<sup>6</sup> One criticism against Bibby, which I discuss at length in chapter five, is his cut off points for interpreting data. Rather than emphasizing that 75% of Canadians prayed only on special occasions or more, I, like Steve Bruce (2002a), believe it is more accurate to depict that 40% of Canadians prayed several times a week or more.

energy are the two most common factors preventing people from joining religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>7</sup>

In total, 20% of Canadians believed in God, believed in the divinity of Jesus, believed in life after death, prayed on occasion, claimed to have experienced God's presence, and knew who denied Jesus (Bibby 1987: 73). Bibby classified these 20% as the "committed." Accordingly, 80% of Canadians either adopted various religious beliefs and practices in fragments or did not embrace any beliefs or practices at all. Bibby identified these 80% as the "uncommitted."

The third sign of religion's presence in culture was unconventional religious beliefs and practices. Some Canadians believed in astrology (35%), in extra sensory perception (61%), in communicating with the dead (22%), and in psychic powers for predicting events (63%) (Bibby 1987: 74). More people also read their horoscope on occasion (75%) compared to those who read the Bible (45%) (1987: 74).

**Table 2.3** Unconventional Religious Commitments (1980)

Believed in Astrology	35%
Believed in Extra Sensory Perception	61%
Believed in Communicating with the Dead	22%
Believed in Psychic Powers	63%
Occasionally Read their Horoscope	75%

Fourth, Canadians observed religious rites of passage (e.g., birth, adulthood, marriage, death). At the time of filling out Bibby's survey, nearly 70% of Canadians had already turned to religious groups to perform baptisms or weddings, while another 15-20% expected to do so in the future (Bibby 1987: 76). In addition, roughly 50% of Canadians already observed confirmations or funerals in religious settings, while another 13% (confirmations) and 45% (funerals) planned

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<sup>7</sup> This point was particularly important for most Canadians who felt that they did not have enough time to do the things that they wanted each day (Bibby 1987: 173).

to do so in the future (1987: 77). With many Canadians looking to religious groups to perform rites of passages, Bibby suggested, and rightly so, that religious groups had key opportunities to engage the spiritual and religious quests of Canadians who typically did not attend religious services.<sup>8</sup>

However, perhaps the most telling story about the fragmented approach of Canadians to religion came from answers to the following question on Bibby's (1987: 84) surveys:

Some observers maintain that few people are actually abandoning their religious traditions. Rather, they draw selective beliefs and practices, even if they do not attend services frequently. They are not about to be recruited by other religious groups. Their identification with their religious tradition is fairly solidly fixed, and it is to these groups that they will turn when confronted with marriage, death and, frequently, birth. How well would you say this observation describes you?

Forty-five percent of Canadians not attending services regularly (representing 75% of the population) responded "very accurately," while another 33% replied "somewhat accurately." Clearly, these numbers supported Bibby's conclusion that Canadians continued to be broadly religious because they identified strongly with certain religious traditions, even if they were only dealing with their religion in a fragmented manner. Despite Canadians' nominal levels of religiosity, a gap existed between Canadians' fragmented religious beliefs and practices and organized religious settings. If religious institutions were to continue their operation in Canada, Canadians' fragmented pieces of religion needed to be connected with religious institutions. This dilemma was the focus of Bibby's third theme.

### *Religion & Culture: Closing the Gap*

Understanding the signs of religion in religious organizations and in culture, Bibby identified two factors that contributed to the gap between religion and culture. First, Bibby (1987:

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<sup>8</sup> Some religious groups refuse non-religious or non-affiliated people who would like to observe rites of passage in a religious setting. Other religious groups see these occasions as opportunities to share their faith. This highlights, yet again, the tension that religious groups and culture face in their ongoing relationship.

111, 134) challenged religious groups who asked culture what religion should look like, instead of telling culture what religion was. Using a market-model approach,<sup>9</sup> Bibby examined structure and competition, as well as specialization to illustrate the ways in which religious groups fostered fragmented religious beliefs and practices in its members. It is important to note before discussing each concept that in many cases religious groups did not purposely “sell out” to culture, “selling out” was a byproduct of attempts by religious groups to better engage culture.

To begin, Bibby (1987: 118-20) explained that religious consumers compared music styles, programs, doctrines, and preaching styles and religious organizations responded with enhanced programs, leadership teams, facilities, and marketing. In simpler terms, religious groups competed for members by offering the biggest and best programs, facilities, and leadership. The sociological concern for Bibby, and I agree, was whether religious organizations were so caught up in attracting many people that they actually failed to lead individuals to the divine. Were religious groups fulfilling their primary religious function in a structurally differentiated society?

Bibby (1987: 125-31) suggested another way that religious groups mirrored secular culture: religious organizations offered specialized beliefs and practices. For example, congregations emphasized beliefs of holiness, predestination, justice and wrath, or grace and mercy often at the expense of other beliefs. In addition, to engage non-religious people, many religious organizations offered sports, knitting, cultural, exercise, or musical clubs.<sup>10</sup> Bibby’s point was that religious groups were further feeding consumerism and specialization to

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<sup>9</sup> A market-model analysis of religion is based on the assumption that religion is a product that must be supplied by religious groups to consumers who want religion (see Stark and Finke 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Most religious groups assume that these clubs are catalysts for religious people to build relationships with non-religious people, eventually leading to the conversion of many. If we tested this assumption empirically, I suspect many would be disappointed. If these cultural groups are not actually leading to new converts, we must ask sociologically what function these clubs have. Are these clubs fulfilling cultural functions, religious functions, or both?

Canadians, limiting Canadians' ability to have a holistic and life encompassing appreciation for their religious faith.

Bibby (1987: 134-36) recognized a second reason for the gap between religion and culture—the people in culture. Canadians felt that their religious wants were satisfactorily met in the religious fragments that they adopted. Canadians also felt that their personal needs (e.g., affluence, leisure time, or family) were adequately fulfilled outside of religious organizations.

Bibby (1987: 134) offered the following assessment:

I asked inactive Anglicans pointedly if there was anything the Church could do to bring them back. The most frequent response—offered by more than 30%—was simply 'no.' They, along with actives, had acknowledged that the Church had usually been there whenever they had sought help. In fact, some indicated that the Church had been there even when they hadn't particularly sought help! In the light of their generally favourable views of the Church and its role in their lives, the response was puzzling at first. Upon more reflection, the response began to make sense. If the inactives wanted to attend services more frequently, I guess they would. But from the cold standpoint of a 'cost-benefit' analysis, most of the inactives were already getting an acceptable fragment return from the Church. The question 'what would it take to bring you back?' was therefore fairly meaningless to many inactives; they are content with things pretty much the way they are. It is perhaps analogous to asking people, 'What would it take to get you to eat five meals a day?' and having them answer, 'I don't want to eat any more than three.'

Together, these two realities meant that Canadians did not want any overarching religious system to inform all of their social roles and responsibilities.

The challenge in closing the gap between religion and culture, as introduced near the beginning of the thesis, was that some religious organizations accommodated culture while others rejected culture. Bibby suggested that neither response was adequate for the Canadian situation and, thus he proposed a third option. Bibby (1987: 261) challenged religious groups to target the God, self, and societal needs found in every human. Regarding one's awareness of God, Bibby (1987: 263) suggested that all humans wrestled with issues of meaning and that religious groups needed to connect people's quests with the transcendent. At the level of self, Canadian culture was increasingly emphasizing self-help and self-potential. Bibby (1987: 265) encouraged religious groups to stress that individuals were created in God's image, and with this

understanding, individuals could realize and fulfill their God given potential. Finally, at the societal level, Canadians desired relationships more than anything else in life. In addition to relationships between individuals and the divine, Bibby (1987: 266) pushed religious groups to promote social relationships between humans. Bibby's conclusion was that if religious groups targeted these three areas, religious organizations would remain true to their core functions in society (to provide meaning for individual's relationship with God, themselves, and others), while aptly meeting the religious needs of those in culture.

## **UNKNOWN GODS**

*Unknown Gods* (1993) presented and analyzed data similar to that found in *Fragmented Gods* (1987), although, with the addition of a 1990 survey. Bibby echoed that Canadians were increasingly interested in mystery and meaning and that many had unchanging ties to certain religious organizations. However, in more direct ways, Bibby criticized religious organizations for failing to capture the religious needs and wants of Canadians. The gods were unknown to both Canadians and religious groups.

### *What was taking place in Religious Organizations?*

Canadian data continued to illustrate that, without exception, church attendance and membership significantly declined between 1957 and 1990 across regions, community size, gender, educational background, and age categories (Bibby 1993: 10). Within Catholic settings, church attendance continued to decrease, while those who did attend were aging, the number of priests and religious leaders in Canada was declining, and the cost of running religious organizations continued to increase (1993: 5). Despite these realities, some believed there were signs of hope for religious organizations with baby boomers returning, new immigrants arriving, the "unchurched" being recruited, and interest in new age beliefs growing (1993: 12). In each

case, Bibby demonstrated why such hopes were sadly mistaken.

As baby boomers returned to churches in the United States, many believed the same would be true north of the border. In reality, older baby boomers (born in the first decade following World War II) increased in weekly attendance by 7% between 1975 and 1990, though much hope could not be placed in these increases since this group was drawing closer to death than younger generations. Younger baby boomers, on the other hand, born during the second decade after World War II, decreased in attendance by 13% between 1980 and 1990 (Bibby 1993: 16). This decreased attendance was combined with the fact that younger baby boomers exposed their children to Sunday school less and less (decreasing from 60% in 1957 to 25% in 1990) (1993: 19).

Second, Bibby dismissed the assumption that most immigrants brought other world faiths to Canada. In reality, most, if they were religious, came as Christians. In fact, most immigrants who came with a strong religious faith, “[followed] the lead of other Canadians in becoming highly selective consumers in their ‘use’ of religion” (Bibby 1993: 28).

A third point for hope was that religious groups evangelized the “unchurched,” those who rarely or never attended religious services as children. Bibby (1993: 29-32) rejected this idea by highlighting that only 2% of weekly attenders had little to no exposure to religious services as children. Bibby added that the number of those with limited or no contact with religious groups as children, who attended religious services weekly later in their life, actually decreased between 1975 and 1990.

Finally, many presumed that increased interest in New Age thought and involvement with new religious movements was reason to conclude there were signs of continued interest in religion in Canada. Aside from low numbers identifying with new religious groups, Bibby (1993: 48-52) questioned the validity of new religious groups who lacked a concentrated core of values,

beliefs, organizational structure, and membership. Bibby wondered how much momentum new religious groups could really gain in a country that was emotionally and psychologically attached to Christianity and that stigmatized new age values as deviant.

In addition to these unfulfilled hopes, Bibby (1993: 59) pointed out that religious organizations were losing authority in society, people were losing confidence in religious groups, and religious organizations were losing influence over culture. Beginning with religious authority, 40% of Canadians believed that ministers should deal with only religious or spiritual matters, and not social, economic, or political issues (1993: 64). In short, religious beliefs and practices did not have authority over all spheres of people's lives.

To complicate matters, Bibby highlighted that Canadians were also losing confidence in religious leaders and organizations. Scandals over abuse, rape, marital infidelity, and homosexuality within religious organizations contributed to a steady decline in the number of Canadians who had a great deal or quite a bit of confidence in religious leaders (decreased from 60% to 37% between 1980 and 1990) (Bibby 1993: 73).

It was, therefore, not surprising that religious groups failed to influence people's lives. Only 18% of Canadians identified religion as very important for predicting the way they thought and acted (Bibby 1993: 80), while 26% identified religion as very important to their life (1993: 83). In comparing the committed and uncommitted groups, Bibby noted little difference regarding the values of honesty, integrity, or character (1993: 85). Moreover, virtually no difference existed between those who were or were not happy (94% of Canadians were very happy) (1993: 88).<sup>11</sup> Within religious groups, over half of committed people held more liberal

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<sup>11</sup> Many religious people believed that a core function of religion was to bring happiness and joy to humans. Clearly people in Canada were finding happiness outside of religious groups, which challenged, perhaps, an inaccurate assumption within religious groups towards culture. If people were content outside of religious groups, the task for religious groups was how to convey the necessity of their beliefs and practices to Canadians.

rather than conservative views towards issues of abortion, homosexuality, or pre-marital sex (1993: 87). Consequently, Bibby's concluding concern was "not just the drop in the number of practicing [religious people but] also the impoverished faith of the participants" (1993: 93). It was abundantly clear that religious organizations were failing to play a significant role in culture and they lacked importance among those who were committed.

*What was occurring in the culture of Canada?*

Bibby (1993: 115) suggested that mystery, meaning, and religious memory characterized the presence of religion in culture during the early 90s. The greatest mystery facing humanity was death, a key theme that religion traditionally addressed. Forty-four percent of Canadians were concerned a great deal or somewhat about dying (1993: 124), and 68% believed that there was probably life after death (1993: 127). However, Canadians' interest in mystery was not exclusive to issues of death. Eighty percent believed that God existed, 44% maintained that they had experienced God, 38% suggested that they could contact the spirit world, 59% indicated that they had some psychic powers, 34% claimed that astrology was true (1993: 132), and over 50% claimed to have experienced precognition or mental telepathy (1993: 120).

Bibby (1993: 144) believed that Canadians, who desired greater fulfillment in life (85%), raised questions of life's purpose (85%), and wondered about the existence of suffering (80%) were searching for meaning in life.

**Table 2.4** Mystery and Meaning (1990)

<b>MYSTERY</b>	
Concerned about Dying	44% <sup>1</sup>
Believed that there was Life after Death	68%
Believed that God Existed	80%
Experienced God	44%
Could Contact the Spirit World	38%
Had Psychic Powers	59%
Believed that Astrology was True	34%
Experienced Precognition or Mental Telepathy	52%
<b>MEANING</b>	
Desired Greater Fulfillment in Life	85%
Raised Questions of Life's Purpose	85%
Wondered about the Existence of Suffering	80%

<sup>1</sup> From 1985 survey

Finally, the religious memory of Canadians was an important finding of Bibby's work in *Unknown Gods* (1993). Many Canadians continued to identify with the religious tradition of their parents, including 48% who were not actively involved in their religious group, but indicated that their religious heritage was very, or somewhat, important to them (1993: 152). Also, of those who were not actively involved, only 18% never attended religious services. The remaining 82% attended 2-3 times a month or less as children (75% attended once a month or less) (1993: 160).

In light of this data, Bibby (1993: 167-68) offered the following conclusion:

Ironically the common putdown to the effect that 'he only goes to church for weddings and funerals and at Christmas and Easter' misses a critically important point: *he is there and something is happening*. Identity is being reaffirmed; life is being given meaning; memories are being constructed...Ongoing identification, latent commitment, and cultural legacies all point to the fact that religion continues to be a very real part of the memories of Canadians.

In making this observation Bibby tried to provide as optimistic a reading of the data as possible. However, like the people who put individuals down for behaving this way, I am reluctant to conclude that religion was playing a real part in the lives of Canadians. Where is the conclusive evidence to support that those who attend religious services occasionally, but still maintain affiliation, are allowing, or would like, religion to play a real part in their lives? What

about the countless number of Canadians who claim to practice private spirituality, but choose to have no affiliation with a religious group? Where can we find the data to suggest that religion is real for these groups of people?<sup>12</sup> Maybe more specific data is needed to support Bibby's above statement.

Bibby (1993: 170) summarized his findings on mystery, meaning, and religious memory by identifying five types of religious people. Active affiliates (24%) were those who identified with a religion and attended nearly every week or more. Marginal affiliates (27%) were those who identified with a religion and attended between 2-3 times a month and several times a year. Inactive affiliates (39%) included those who identified with a religion and attended once a year or less. Disaffiliates (8%) included those who did not identify with a religion, but whose parents did identify with a religion. Finally, non-affiliates (2%) were those who, alongside their parents, did not identify with a religion.

### *Religion & Culture: Closing the Gap*

Bibby indicated that the gap between religious organizations and culture could be closed if religious groups addressed structure, product, and promotion and distribution problems. Structurally, Bibby had four concerns. First, Bibby (1993: 187) was troubled with religious groups' heavy emphasis on untrained volunteers who were limited in the time that they could give to the congregation. Second, structural autonomy and variations in theology and consensus made it difficult for religious groups to have a "concerted co-ordinated impact on Canadian life" (Bibby 1993: 192). Third, varying messages from within the same religious community on issues such as drinking, homosexuality, birth control, gender equality, and divorce sent mixed messages to Canadians. Religious groups, therefore, walked a fine line of being "sufficiently flexible to

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<sup>12</sup> In chapter four I look at these very questions, using data examined by Bowen (2004) during the mid-90s. I chose to look at this data later, given the overarching conundrum of organized religion and private spirituality.

accommodate members who [believed] that certain changes [were] necessary, while at the same time reaffirming the position of the tradition” (Bibby 1993: 206). Fourth, controversies over sexual abuse, sexism, and the ordination of homosexuals bothered many Canadians. Thus, religious organizations needed to improve their poor image in Canadian culture (1993: 208).

In terms of the product supplied by religious groups, Bibby seemed to change his tune from *Fragmented Gods* (1987: 111), where he then suggested that:

Canada’s religious groups [were] largely responsible for the country’s drop-off in attendance. The main reason [was] that the groups [had] responded to social and cultural change by offering religion as a range of consumer goods. Rather than saying to culture, ‘this is what religion is,’ they [had] been much more inclined to say to culture, ‘what do you want religion to be.’

Bibby contrasted this statement with the following in *Unknown Gods* (1993: 222): “the disparity between Canadians’ apparent receptivity to spirituality and their lack of interest in organized religion reveals that the country’s religious groups have not done a particularly good job of getting in touch with people’s wants and needs.” Specifically, Bibby (1993: 225-28) questioned religious groups that did not engage issues of reincarnation, psychic powers, communicating with the dead, or out of body experiences. The problem for conventional religious groups, in particular, was that these unconventional religious beliefs and practices did not intersect with the beliefs and practices of their group. Consequently, religious groups had to continue to wrestle with how they would engage culture: by accommodating, rejecting, or finding a middle ground.

Another concern of Bibby’s (1993: 228-30) was that religious groups did not help to instill self-affirmation and hope in a troubled culture—a suggestion that he made in *Fragmented Gods* (1987: 265). Although Bibby’s point may have been valid in the early 90s, Protestant churches, in particular, are increasingly emphasizing “positive thinking” and “the power within” (e.g., Lakewood Church in Texas and the Crystal Cathedral in California). Thousands of people attend these services weekly, seeming to affirm Bibby’s notion that individuals are searching for

self-affirmation in religion. Conversely, many within religious groups are worried that the emphasis on self-affirmation overshadows other core doctrinal themes such as sin, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Some, as will be clear in the next chapter, view this reality as evidence of internal secularization in religious organizations. Once again, we are reminded of how religious organizations are constantly forced to identify the extent to which religious content should be adjusted to engage Canadian consumers.

How churches marketed and distributed religion made up Bibby's third critique of religious groups. Bibby (1993: 276) confronted religious organizations for continuously distributing their product to the committed 20%, forgetting the remaining 80%. For example, in many religious settings leaders focused on church growth, church planting, finances, and volunteerism, often at the expense of reaching the inactive or non-affiliates. However, in addressing religious groups that did market to the remaining 80%, Bibby suggested that instead of marketing aimlessly, religious groups should begin by targeting those affiliates loosely connected to their religious organization (e.g., those who attend at seasonal services and rites of passage).<sup>13</sup> Bibby's conclusions were logical and many religious groups actually heeded Bibby's challenge. Nonetheless, as groups accommodated culture to reach loosely connected affiliates, few new committed followers were yielded. Thus, for religious groups to increase numerically and proportionately, they needed to focus on a central question: what other ways can religious groups effectively market their product to loosely connected affiliates?

In addition to these criticisms by Bibby towards religious organizations, there remains one suggestion that as a practicing Christian I believe religious groups would benefit from greatly. Bibby (1993: 223) suggests that religious groups cannot try to be like department stores

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<sup>13</sup> Bibby (1993: 256-62) did not negate the need for religious groups to also rely on word of mouth, door-to-door canvassing, flyers, newspapers, or television. However, connecting with affiliates was the best place to begin.

that provide everything to all people, sacrificing excellence for the sake of mediocrity. If religious organizations are to heed this suggestion from Bibby and be more effective in reaching Canadians, I suggest that religious groups must constantly evaluate the following four questions. What are the central beliefs and practices of our religion? How can we best ensure that our members live out these beliefs and practices? What are we currently doing or not doing that prevents these beliefs and practices from being lived out? Finally, what changes can be made that are both true to our central values, but also meet the needs of the surrounding culture? Although these questions may appear theological, which they are in part, these questions are also very sociological. At the heart of these questions, I am pushing us to understand what the functions of religious groups are, and how these functions can best be fulfilled. In other words, in a specialized society, how can religious organizations maximally contribute to the smooth operation of their own group as well as the broader society? In reality, even if religious organizations ask and resolve these questions, Canadians may still resist greater involvement. This is a theme that I peruse in the next section.

## **RESTLESS GODS AND RESTLESS CHURCHES**

*Restless Gods* (2002) is a summary of findings from surveys conducted in 1995 and 2000. In contrast to his first two books, Bibby's (2002: 4) main premise is that Canada is experiencing a "religious and spiritual renaissance...new life is being added to old life," evidenced in areas of organized religion and private spirituality.<sup>14</sup> The renaissance, Bibby argues, is because the gods

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<sup>14</sup> Organized religion and private spirituality is a distinction that I make throughout this thesis. Generally, organized religion refers to those beliefs and practices associated with institutional forms of religion (e.g., church attendance), and private spirituality is akin to private beliefs and practices, independent of formal accountability to a larger creed or congregation. Most accept and promote the above dichotomy in public discourse, often favoring the term "spirituality" over "religion" when discussing religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, most acknowledge intentionally discussing spirituality as something that is completely detached from all organized forms of religion. I discuss this important distinction between religion and spirituality at length, including the expansive literature on the topic, in chapter four.

are restless with the gap between religious groups and culture and, therefore, they have taken things into their own hands. In *Restless Churches* (2004) Bibby once again challenges religious groups to help the restless gods in capitalizing on the apparent renaissance of religion in Canada.

*What is taking place in Religious Organizations?*

Bibby (2002: xii) triumphantly proclaims that “organized religion is making something of a comeback” among Protestants, Roman Catholics, Other faith groups, and even those with no religious affiliation. Starting with Protestant groups, Bibby (2002: 77) illustrates that despite national decreases in attendance across all religious groups since 1990, among 18 to 34-year-old Protestant affiliates, there was a 6% increase in weekly attendance between 1990 (20%) and 2000 (26%), and among 55+ year old Protestant affiliates, there was a 5% increase in weekly attendance between 1990 (29%) and 2000 (34%). Despite a decrease in the proportion of 15 to 19-year-old Protestant affiliates relative to the Canadian population between 1984 and 2000 (35% → 22%) (2002: 86), there was an increase in the percentage of those attending services weekly between 1984 (26%) and 2000 (48%) (2002: 88). Bibby (2002: 184) also adds that seventy-six percent of all Canadians think that religious groups still have a role to play in Canadian lives.

**Table 2.5** Weekly Attendance Patterns in Protestant Congregations

<b>Age</b>	<b>1990 National</b>	<b>2000 National</b>	<b>1990 Protest.</b>	<b>2000 Protest.</b>
15 to 19	23% <sup>1</sup>	22%	26% <sup>1</sup>	48%
18 to 34	15%	12%	20%	26%
35 to 54	24%	16%	24%	22%
55+	39%	30%	29%	34%

<sup>1</sup> From 1984 survey

In Mainline Protestant congregations, weekly attendance leveled off at 18% in 2000 compared to 16% in 1990 (2002: 75).<sup>15</sup> Among Canadian teens affiliated with mainline congregations, the proportion of Mainline affiliates decreased between 1984 and 2000 (22% → 8%); however, those who are affiliated are more committed than teens of past decades (23% attending weekly in 2000 compared to 17% in 1984) (2002: 77). Furthermore, among 18 to 34-year-old mainline affiliates, there was a 4% increase between 1990 (9%) and 2000 (13%) in those saying that they attend religious services weekly (2002: 76).

**Table 2.6** Weekly Attendance Patterns in Mainline Protestant Congregations

Age	1990	2000
All Mainliners	16%	18%
15 to 19	17% <sup>1</sup>	23%
18 to 34	9%	13%

<sup>1</sup> From 1984 survey

Conservative Protestants show greater signs of a renaissance than Mainliners. Since 1950, the percentage of Conservative Protestant affiliates has stabilized relative to the Canadian population (8%), resulting in a numerical increase of 1.4 million, from 1.1 million in the 1950s (Bibby 2002: 73). Between 1957 and 2000, Conservative Protestants who attend services weekly increased from 51% to 58% (Bibby 2002: 73).<sup>16</sup> Among all Protestant teenagers, there was an increase in the percentage identifying as Conservative Protestant between 1984 (26%) and 2000 (54%) (2002: 87). Moreover, 51% of those identifying as Conservative Protestants attended services weekly in 1984, compared to 70% in 2000 (2002: 88). Finally, 60% of all Conservative

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Bowen (2004: 33) argues, and I agree, that Bibby's interpretation of the data is misleading. These percentages of mainliners attending services reflected mainline affiliates. When comparing mainliners attendance patterns with the Canadian population as a whole, mainline attendance clearly continued to decrease. I say more about this methodological problem later in the thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Yet, two pages later Bibby cites a different survey that, between 1990 and 2000, shows a two percent decrease in weekly attendance by Conservative Protestants (50% down to 48%).

Protestants who attend monthly or more believe that their churches are growing (p.74).<sup>17</sup> Bibby attributes these combined signs of growth to Conservative Protestants' vitality, their successful socialization of children to the denomination, and the loyalty of their members even when people are geographically mobile (2002: 72-73).

In Roman Catholic settings, membership relative to the Canadian population lingered between 43% in 1871 and 45% in 2001 (Bibby 2002: 78). Outside Quebec, although weekly attendance decreased from 75% to 32% between the 1950s and 2000 (2002: 78), the number of members, not proportion of members relative to the Canadian population, remained the same. Within Quebec, despite weekly attendance plummeting from 80% in the 1950s to 20% in 2000 (2002: 80), the actual number of weekly attenders had decreased only slightly, two million more Quebecers identified as Roman Catholic, and 40% of active Catholics suggested that their parishes had remained the same size (30%) or were growing (10%) in recent years (2002: 80-81).

Other faith groups grew from 500,000 to two million members between the 1950s and 2000 (Bibby 2002: 83). Even though numerical growth did not equal proportionate increases in involvement (weekly attendance decreased from 35% in the 1950s to 7% in 2000 (2002: 84)), the proportion of teen affiliates associated with Other faiths, relative to the Canadian populace, increased from 3% in 1984 to 14% in 2000 (2002: 86). Furthermore, teens increased their weekly attendance from 13% in 1984 to 21% in 2000 (2002: 88).

Finally, to support his renaissance thesis, Bibby (2002: 85) discredits the sharp increase in the "no religion" category (from 12% up to 20% between 1991 and 2000) for two reasons. First, the "no religion" category was not an available option on surveys until recently, so this category

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<sup>17</sup> Methodologically, it is disconcerting that Bibby adjusts the reference groups to support his renaissance thesis. For example, he uses weekly attenders when discussing teenagers and monthly attenders when referencing adult Conservative Protestants. More consistency in Bibby's reference groups would certainly add reliability and validity to his renaissance thesis. I discuss these points further in chapter five.

was bound to grow in recent surveys. Second, Bibby (2002: 65) posits that most in the “no religion” category will “re-acquire” their parents’ faith when turning to religious rites of passage. Thus, the “no religion” category is not a true life-long category for many.

I agree with Bibby that increases in weekly attendance at Conservative Protestant congregations may show that a Canadian religious renaissance is occurring. However, I wonder how we should interpret the stabilized attendance patterns in Mainline congregations, the stabilized membership numbers in Catholic settings, the slow down in the decrease in Catholic attendance at Mass, and Bibby’s overall emphasis on numerical growth rather than proportional decline (see table on the following page for a summary of Bibby’s evidence of a religious renaissance in religious organizations). Is it fair to conclude that these realities support a rebirth of religion in Canada or is it more accurate to conclude that Canada is not secularizing as much as once thought? The above data alone is not convincing enough to conclude that a renaissance is underway. Perhaps we can better discern the credibility of Bibby’s renaissance thesis by examining what is going on in Canadian culture.

## *Bibby's Evidence for a Religious Renaissance in Canada's Religious Organizations*

- *All Protestants*
  - Despite national decreases in attendance across all religious groups since 1990, among 18-34 year old Protestant affiliates, there was a 6% increase in weekly attenders between 1990 (20%) and 2000 (26%), and among 55+ year old Protestant affiliates, there was a 5% increase in weekly attendance between 1990 (29%) and 2000 (34%) (2002: 77)
  - Despite a decrease in the proportion of 15-19 year old Protestant affiliates between 1984 and 2000, there was an increase in the percentage of those attending services weekly between 1984 (26%) and 2000 (48%) (2002: 88)
  - Seventy-six percent of all Canadians think that religious groups still have a role to play in Canadian lives (2002: 184)
  
- *Mainline Protestants*
  - Despite the decreased proportion of affiliates in Canada since the 1950s, there is a stabilized core of weekly attenders in 2000 (2002: 75)
  - Among 18-34 year old affiliates, there was a 4% increase between 1990 (9%) and 2000 (13%) in those saying that they attend religious services weekly (2002: 76)
  - Among 15-19 year olds, despite a decreased proportion of affiliates in Canada since 1984, there was a 6% increase in weekly attendance between 1984 (17%) and 2000 (23%) (2002: 77)
  
- *Conservative Protestants*
  - Stabilized percentage of affiliates relative to the Canadian population since 1950, but a numerical increase of 1.4 million, from 1.1 million in the 1950s (2002: 73)
  - Of those affiliated, there was an increase from 51% in 1957 to 58% in 2000 of weekly attenders at religious services (2002: 73)
  - Sixty percent of those who attend monthly or more believe that their congregation is growing (p.74)
  - Among 15-19 year old affiliates, there was an increase in weekly attendance from 51% in 1984 to 70% in 2000 (2002: 88)
  - Among teenage Protestant affiliates alone, there was an increase in the percentage identifying as Conservative Protestants between 1984 (26%) and 2000 (54%), and an increase in the percentage of Conservative Protestant teens attending weekly services between 1984 (51%) and 2000 (70%) (2002: 87-88)
  
- *Catholics Outside of Quebec*
  - Despite a significant proportionate decrease in weekly attendance since the 1950s, there has been an increase in the actual numbers of weekly attenders by 2000 (2002: 78)
  
- *Catholics Inside of Quebec*
  - Despite a substantial proportionate decrease in weekly attendance since the 1950s, there has been a minimal decrease in the actual numbers of weekly attenders between 1990 and 2000 (2002: 80)
  - Thirty percent of active Catholics indicate that their parishes are remaining the same size, and 10% suggest that their parishes are growing (2002: 81)
  
- *Other Faith Groups*
  - A 2% increase of Canadians identifying with Other Faiths between 1871 (2%) and 2000 (4%), and a numerical increase of 1.5 million between the mid-50's (500,000) and 2000 (2 million) (2002: 83, 85)
  - An 11% increase in 15-19 year olds identifying with Other Faiths between 1984 (3%) and 2000 (14%) (2002: 86).
  - Among 15-19 year old affiliates, there has been an 8% increase in those attending weekly services between 1984 (13%) and 2000 (21%) (2002: 88)

*What is occurring in the culture of Canada?*

In addition to increased signs of organized religion in Canada, Bibby (2002) recognizes several indicators of religious vitality in Canadian culture. First, Canadians are interested in questions about meaning and purpose in life. Nine out of ten participants ask how the world came into being (2002: 96), 86% believe that there is a basic order to the universe (2002: 178), while even more Canadians are troubled about life's purpose (an increase from 52% in 1975 to 58% in 2000) (2002: 97). Although 40% believe that there is no answer to the meaning of life, 76% of those 40% maintain that life has meaning beyond what we as humans gave to it (2002: 100).

**Table 2.7** Meaning and Purpose (2000)

Ask how the world came into being	90%
Believe there is order to the universe	86%
Troubled about Life's Purpose	58%

Second, Canadians have concerns about happiness and suffering. Ninety percent think about how to experience happiness and over 95% think about why there is suffering in the world (Bibby 2002: 105). Of significance is the 84% who believe that God or a Higher Power cares about them, despite the existence of suffering in the world (2002: 111). Furthermore, 70% maintain that injustices will be made right again (2002: 112) and 94% believe that when life is not going well, it will get better (2002: 176).

**Table 2.8** Happiness and Suffering (2000)

*% of Canadians who have ever thought about the following issues or believe these statements to be true*

Think about how to experience happiness	90%
Think about the existence of suffering	96%
God or Higher Power cares about them	84%
Injustices will be made right again	70%
When life is not good, it will get better	94%

A third area of interest for Bibby and Canadians is life after death. This common theme to religious groups is on the minds of nine out of ten Canadians (Bibby 2002: 116). Between 1975 and 2000 there was a slight increase (65% to 68%) in those who believed in life after death (2002: 119). In addition, of those who never attend religious services, 70% raise the question of whether there is life after death, while 50% believe that there is life after death (2002: 122).

Bibby makes an intriguing observation about Canadians who ask questions about meaning and purpose, happiness and suffering, and life after death. Since 1975, there was a decrease in the percentage of Canadians who asked these ultimate questions often, and an increase in those who no longer ask these ultimate questions (Bibby 2002: 133). Dismissing possibilities that Canadians had resolved these issues or put them off to another point in their life, Bibby once again questions religious groups and their inability to supply sufficient answers to inquisitive Canadians. To illustrate his point, Bibby (2002: 135) alludes to a Roman Catholic in her early twenties who has no idea what will happen after she dies. Bibby suggests that she is not alone.

Nonetheless, as Canadians wrestle with difficult questions they have not abandoned belief in God or the supernatural. Belief in God remained around 80% between 1985 and 2000, including 73% of Canadians in 2000 who believe that God cares about them personally (Bibby 2002: 143). Alongside belief in God, approximately 50% in both 1975 and 2000 claimed to have experienced God's presence (2002: 147). In addition to belief and experience, many Canadians increasingly prayed in private weekly or more (11% in 1975 increased to 47% in 2000) (2002: 158).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bibby makes several conclusions concerning those who pray in private before meals. First, people pray because they want to, not because they are forced to. Second, praying reveals belief that God or a higher power exists. Third, the content of people's prayers (e.g., help, forgiveness, gratitude, or reflections on life) communicates various characteristics of God or the higher being listening to the prayer.

Bibby's final indicator of religion in culture is found in those who never attend religious services, do not claim any religious affiliation, and do not believe in God. Within this group of Canadians, 70% believe that injustices will someday be made right, 94% claim that when life is not well it will get better, 68% believe in life after death, and 86% contend that there is a basic order to the universe (Bibby 2002: 181). In short, Bibby stresses that even those who are completely irreligious show signs that the transcendent is at work in culture.

**Table 2.9** No Attendance, Affiliation, or Belief (2000)

Injustices will be made right again	70%
When life is not good, it will get better	94%
Believe in life after death	68%
Believe there is order to the universe	86%

*Religion & Culture: Closing the Gap*

As Bibby proclaims a religious renaissance, he makes a daring and optimistic statement in *Restless Gods* (2002: 220):

55% of adults who are currently attending services less than monthly say they would 'consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious groups if [they] found it to be worthwhile for themselves or their families'...15% offer an unequivocal 'Yes' to the receptivity query, while 40% say, 'perhaps.' However the good news for religious groups is that only 45% of Canadians who attend services less than once a month say they are *not open* to the possibility of greater involvement.<sup>19</sup>

However, Bibby proposes that there are ministry, organizational, and personal factors that keep many from greater involvement in religious settings (2002: 220-224 and 2004: 48-51).

Concerning ministry factors, Bibby (2002: 220) challenges religious groups to better meet the personal, spiritual, and relational needs of Canadians. Specifically, religious groups need to give

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<sup>19</sup> I think there are some significant methodological problems both with this question and with Bibby's interpretation and analysis. I discuss these matters at great length in chapter five.

wisdom to Canadians on how to live their lives, and also help individuals feel loved, connected, and cared for in a community.

Organizationally, Bibby (2002: 221-22) suggests that religious groups need to change their presentation and style to include better preachers, leaders, music, and programs (e.g., for children and youth), give more attention to culturally relevant issues, and strive for greater inclusion of women. Although Bibby's points may be valid, I would point out that recently children and youth programs have been at the top of church priority lists. Many religious groups are also making incredible strides to provide better preaching, lively music, and creative and relaxed worship settings. Further, some religious groups are lowering the exclusivity of their beliefs (e.g., beliefs about homosexuality, gay marriage, women in leadership, etc.). There definitely is no shortage of options for Canadians in choosing congregational styles. It may be too early to tell, but if Canadians *really* want the things that Bibby suggests, why haven't they pursued greater involvement in religious groups that have accommodated culture? Perhaps, as Bruce (2002a: 71-73) suggests, people do not really want greater involvement in religious organizations.

With respect to personal factors, Canadians cite getting married, having children (Bibby 2002: 222), and different and less busy schedules (2002: 224) as catalysts for eventually attending religious services. I have a couple of concerns with these factors. First, if people choose not to get involved in a religious group until they are married or with children, how can the supply side be to blame? Second, although I am sympathetic with those whose work schedules did not permit regular attendance at weekly services, many Canadians communicate their priorities when citing that their lives are too busy for greater involvement in religious organizations. If Canadians truly want a more central place for religious organizations, they could, as with any other aspect of life (e.g., family, work, sports, or leisure), adjust their

schedules. Perhaps not enough time has passed to support my suspicion, but at present, I am not convinced of Bibby's (2002: 225) conclusion that "all is well on the demand side. It is the supply side that poses the problem."

In addition to ministry, organizational, and personal factors, Bibby (2004: 53-66) presents two other areas that religious groups need to address: rediscovering God, and understanding and utilizing religious identification. First, acknowledging that many believe in God, some have experienced God, many pray, and spirituality pervades Canadian culture, Bibby (2004: 54) concludes that "God has grown impatient with the churches, and has chosen to accelerate a supplementary but more effective strategy: relating to people directly." For religious groups to reach Canadians, local congregations need to take seriously, and not downplay or minimize, the role of the gods in Canadian lives outside of religious organizations.

Second, Bibby (2004: 58) highlights his "single most important finding after 30 years of studying religion in Canada...religious identification." Bibby vigorously opposes religious groups that dismiss Canadians who identify with a religious group (affiliates), indicate no intention of switching to another religious group, and yet show no real signs of participation in the religious group. Bibby (2004: 62-65) repeats that Canadian congregations have to do whatever it takes to target their affiliates first and move outward to non-affiliated Canadians.

#### *Are we really witnessing a Renaissance of Religion?*

To conclude this section, I want to highlight two reasons why I am not entirely convinced that Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion, particularly in organized religious settings. First, I think that current Canadian religious beliefs and practices are isolated and very similar to those measures of religiosity that Bibby used as evidence to argue that the gods were fragmented in 1987. Second, I think that Bibby's methodological interpretation of the latest data is

questionable. I will limit this immediate discussion to my first concern that will also be further supported in the coming chapters. I leave my second concern to chapter five where I offer a focused discussion on Bibby's gathering and interpretation of the latest data.

In arguing that religion in Canada today is highly fragmented, I point to four pieces of evidence. First, in *Fragmented Gods* (1987: 84), Bibby heavily emphasized the following question to support his fragmented thesis:

Some observers maintain that few people are actually abandoning their religious traditions. Rather, they draw selective beliefs and practices, even if they do not attend services frequently. They are not about to be recruited by other religious groups. Their identification with their religious tradition is fairly solidly fixed, and it is to these groups that they will turn when confronted with marriage, death and, frequently, birth. How well would you say this observation describes you?

In the 1980s, 45% of Canadians not attending services regularly responded "very accurately," while another 33% replied "somewhat accurately." In Bibby's 1995 survey, 46% answered "very accurately," and another 31% said "somewhat accurately."<sup>20</sup> From the 1995 survey, it seems rather clear that Canadians self-admittedly adopt fragmented religion in similar fashion to the 1980s, failing to connect their private spiritual quests with organized religious settings. The fact that Bibby emphasized the above survey question to support his 1987 findings, yet he fails to even mention the updated 1995 findings in *Restless Gods* (2002) suggests to me that this apparent fragmented approach to religion contradicts the renaissance thesis. Further, even if Bibby did publicly acknowledge the above findings, the religious faith of those who opt for fragmented and private forms of spirituality is generally less consequential than those who are more actively involved in organized religion, as Bowen's (2004) analysis of consequential religion reveals.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This finding is from Bibby's raw data, accessible at [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

<sup>21</sup> In chapter four, I examine Bowen's (2004) evidence that supports his claim that the religious faith of those more actively involved in organized religion tends to be more consequential than those less involved in organized religion.

Second, 47% of Canadians suggested in 1995 that ministers should stick to religious matters, setting aside social, economic, or political issues.<sup>22</sup> This finding compares to 40% who believed the same in 1990—a statistic that Bibby highlighted in *Unknown Gods* (1993: 64). Assuming that consequential religion is one that informs all of life, which I argue, Bibby (1987: 5, 42-43, 266; 1993: 93; 2004: 14-15, 73) supports, and Bowen (2004: 65, 281-83) contends, this finding that many Canadians want religion to remain separate from their other social roles is problematic. In no way am I, or the others, suggesting that religion should rule the state. But rather, religion should at least inform how individuals make their political, economic, and social decisions, which is partially what Bowen (2004) captures in his analysis of religion in Canada. In 1987, Bibby interpreted this Canadian compartmentalization of social roles as a clear catalyst for fragmented religion, which was troubling if religion was to play a prominent role in the lives of Canadians. I am suggesting that this problem still faces the Canadian religious landscape today and, hence, I have doubts about how consequential religion is in Canada, and whether we can actually conclude that Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion.

Third, when asked in 1995 if their pattern of attendance at religious services had changed in the last five years, 9% said that they had increased, and 17% indicated that they had decreased.<sup>23</sup> This finding is self-explanatory, raising further suspicions about Bibby's renaissance thesis, particularly in organized religious forms.

Fourth, in 1995 Canadians were asked about their interest in spirituality over the last five years, and 20% expressed that their interest had increased, while 8% indicated a decrease.<sup>24</sup> Although one might be quick to suggest that this finding supports Bibby's renaissance thesis, I would make clear the distinction in public discourse between religion and spirituality. Most

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<sup>22</sup> This finding is from Bibby's raw data, accessible at [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

<sup>23</sup> This finding is from Bibby's raw data, accessible at [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

<sup>24</sup> This finding is from Bibby's raw data, accessible at [www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com).

associate private spirituality with those beliefs and practices that are completely detached from organized religious settings, especially regular attendance at religious services. Therefore, this heightened interest in spirituality seems to refute the renaissance thesis in organized religious settings. Moreover, those who practice private spirituality to the exclusion of organized forms of religion tend to have a less consequential faith than those actively involved in organized religion—points supported both by Bibby (1987) and Bowen (2004), which I discuss at length in chapter four—which further discredits Bibby’s renaissance thesis in organized religious settings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Two things are clear from Bibby’s extensive research. First, the relationship between religion and culture is of paramount importance in Canada—we cannot understand one without understanding the other. Without question, Bibby presented a solid case for the persistence of religion in Canadian culture. However, when we look at Bibby’s assessment of religious organizations in Canada, the results are a little fuzzy. I demonstrated why his most recent conclusions regarding religious organizations are subject to further review, which I will expand upon throughout this thesis. I also proposed that Bibby’s first thesis that religion in Canada was fragmented appears to be true today, primarily evidenced in the multiple signs of private spirituality in culture at the expense of involvement in organized religion. The most interesting conundrum that arises from Bibby’s work, thus, is how religion and culture can come together in Canada. Bibby repeatedly offers suggestions for religious organizations to implement to improve their relationship with the culture of Canada. I, on the other hand, suggest that maybe Canadians are more responsible than many may have thought. Beneath either position, it is clear that at the heart of the sociology of religion, sociologists must examine what the current relationship between religion and culture is and what the representatives of religion and culture believe the

relationship should be.

Second, Bibby's analysis of religion raises important questions about how we determine how religious or secular a society is. For example, when evaluating if, in fact, Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion, should we look to data on attendance at religious services, the views of religious affiliates, or belief in a higher being. These three measures reflect three potentially different groups of people: those involved in organized religion, those who are connected to organized religious groups without being actively involved, and those who hold remnants of religious belief independent of organized religion. Bibby certainly stressed all three areas throughout his writings. But I contend that he unconvincingly argues in *Restless Gods* (2002) and *Restless Churches* (2004) that affiliates will become active members if only religious groups meet their needs, thus advancing the renaissance of religion in Canada. If affiliates do not increase their activity in religious organizations to the degree that Bibby hopes, as I suspect they won't, how might we interpret religion in Canada? Will religion continue to experience a renaissance of religion as Bibby suggests, or will we see the further secularization of Canadian society, or at least changes in the form of people's religious beliefs and practices? I pursue answers to these questions in the next two chapters.

### CHAPTER 3

#### *Setting the Theoretical Context: Theories of Secularization*

In the last chapter, I suggested that Bibby's renaissance thesis was questionable and that we must not altogether eliminate the secularization paradigm. In this chapter, I center my attention on theories of secularization, which I maintain provide a solid backdrop and reference point for further evaluating Bibby's renaissance thesis. Without question, a vast literature exists that traces the spread of secularization throughout the modern Western world since the mid-nineteenth century (e.g., Berger 1967, 1999; Beyer 1999; Bruce 2002a; Dobbelaere 1981, 1985, 2002; Finke and Stark 2005; Martin 2005; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000; and Wilson 1982, 2001). Since it would be easy to get sidetracked in this sea of literature, it is worthwhile to narrow our focus, concentrating on three prominent theories of secularization developed by Peter Berger, Rodney Stark, and Steve Bruce.

It is important to understand Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) because of his significant influence on later social theorists who study secularization. Berger argues that secularization in modern Western nations can be explained by looking at social processes of rationalization, pluralism, privatization, and subjectivization. In this chapter, I argue that Berger is correct in his assumptions about secularization and that pluralism, in particular, is a key catalyst for secularization.<sup>1</sup>

Stark's ideas, as stated in Stark and Bainbridge's *Future of Religion* (1985), Stark and Finke's *Acts of Faith* (2000), and Finke and Stark's *The Churching of America* (2005), are

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that Berger (1999: 1-18) recently turned his back on many of the propositions that follow in this section. In particular, Berger now agrees with Rodney Stark, as will be seen later in this chapter, that the world is more religious now than ever before. Berger (1999: 6-7) provides evidence of the resurgence in groups that are increasingly passionate, attentive to sacred time, and supportive of traditional sources of authority. The two exceptions to religious resurgence, Berger notes, are Western Europe and Western-type higher educated individuals, especially in the humanities and social sciences. I reference Berger's recent conclusions in this chapter where appropriate. However, given that his recent conclusions are limited to eighteen pages of a book, I feel that it is necessary and more worthwhile to focus on his original 1967 thesis.

integral to the secularization debate because of his unwavering opposition to proponents of secularization. Stark contends that the world is actually becoming more religious, as a result of people's rational religious decisions, religious pluralism, and extensive personal piety. Even though I agree with Stark's basic premise that people choose to pursue religious rewards and pay religious costs, I disagree with his belief that religious pluralism necessarily leads to greater levels of religiosity.

Finally, Bruce's *God is Dead* (2002a) is significant because he is a contemporary theorist who vehemently opposes Stark's position. Bruce asserts that liberal, modern, Western societies are highly secularized. I agree most with Bruce who contends that, aside from low levels of religiosity in his native Britain, expressions of New Age, Eastern, and charismatic religion are further reflections of secular culture and not the revival of religion.

The purpose of this chapter is to unravel and discuss points of convergence and divergence among these theories, for a more comprehensive understanding of secularization in the modern Western world. Although each theorist presents elaborate material on secularization, I have identified aspects to their theories that provide a basic understanding of secularization relevant to the goals of this thesis. Much more could certainly be said about these theories, but not for the purposes of this thesis.

## **PETER BERGER**

In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967: 107), Berger argues that secularization, defined as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols," is occurring in modern Western society. Berger supports his position by examining the complex interplay of specific social processes—rationalization, pluralism, privatization, and subjectivization—that contribute to the increasing secularity of society. In this

section, I present Berger's underlying theory of human nature and religion, a cornerstone for interpreting his theory of secularization, and then I develop and discuss his theory of secularization.

### *Theory of Human Nature and Religion*

Influenced by Max Weber, Berger's (1967: 3) theory of religion is rooted in the premise that human life is a long world building exercise. In this exercise, humans and society constantly shape each other, as evidenced in a cycle of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (1967: 4). Briefly, externalization is characterized by human contributions (physical and mental) to the world. Objectivation is the independent existence of these human contributions to the world. Internalization is the transforming of objective reality into subjective consciousness. To make this process understandable in concrete form, consider a religious group that is pondering the use of drums in their worship services. This idea begins with someone, who shares that idea with another and through a social process arrives at a collective decision to implement drums into weekly services. In other words, a person externalizes the idea of using drums in services, and through the social process of discussing the idea that leads to the actual use of drums each week, the idea is objectivated. In turn, all people who now are part of the religious services with drums internalize the use of drums, which may lead to future ideas that they want guitars, or they don't want drums anymore, etcetera. This cycle, Berger contends, is ongoing.

Aware of this process, Berger (1967: 4) recognizes that humanity is limited by the fact that we are born "unfinished." Humans, unlike animals, are born with instincts that are "both underspecialized and undirected toward a species-specific environment" (Berger 1967: 5). Whereas animals are born complete with the ability to meet their basic needs (e.g., food and shelter), humans are born incomplete, and we need social interaction to learn how to survive in

our environment.<sup>2</sup> In order to have successful interaction, however, there needs to be broader social order and rules. It is from this pre-existing social order that the human becomes complete through the acquiring of knowledge, successful social interaction, and ultimately, stability. The major problem that arises for humans though is their dependence on culture for stability. Culture, given its dialectical relationship with humans, is inherently subject to change and, therefore, is unstable.

The human problem becomes more complicated when considering that no matter how society tries to impose order for individuals, there are certain aspects of life that are chaotic, uncontrollable, and fall outside the social order. For example, the world is filled with suffering, accidents, human infliction, death, crime, and war. The result is that humans experience anomie, limiting one's ability to function as an individual or as a contributing member to the broader society. Berger (1967: 22) contends that these experiences of anomie cause numerous people to earnestly seek to "impose a meaningful order upon reality." More clearly, many search for a shield against the terrors and chaos of life (e.g., death). Since human bonds and socialization with particular individuals inevitably end for all, humans need to look beyond relationships for a constant, never ending protector against feelings of anomie. This source, Berger contends, is religion.

Religion has a unique capacity to "relate the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality...to locate human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference" (Berger 1967: 32, 35). As part of the world building exercise that connects individuals and culture, people turn to religion, which creates a "sacred" cosmos to help explain, justify, and contextualize the social order (Berger refers to this process as legitimation) (1967: 29). Berger (1967: 25) describes the sacred as "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that we are social beings is a key difference that Berger emphasizes between humans and animals.

and yet related to him.” Berger (1967: 26) goes on to add that the sacred “addresses itself to [humanity] and locates [one’s] life in an ultimately meaningful order.” In particular, religion provides people with theodicies, ways to find meaning in the face of painful experiences such as sickness and death. Individuals surrender themselves to the transcendent in hopes that “the pain becomes more tolerable, the terror less overwhelming, as the sheltering canopy of the nomos extends to cover even those experiences that may reduce the individual to howling animality” (Berger 1967: 55). In short, people turn to religion to find meaning (order), not necessarily happiness, in the face of life’s tragedies (chaos).

Berger concludes his theory of religion by recognizing that people’s desire to stave off anomie, through the use of religion, entails that they experience alienation. In the context of Berger’s (1967: 85) theory (as opposed to Marx’s theory of alienation), alienation refers to individuals who forget “that this world was and continues to be co-produced by [them].” Berger argues that people’s use of religion is inherently alienating because individuals project the happenings of the social world, particularly the tragic events of life, onto a larger order of existence that is supposedly beyond their control. As individuals legitimate the uncontrollable events of life in this way, they consequently forget their creative role as active contributors to a meaningful social world. Berger concludes that alienation is the price that individuals pay to fend off anomie, and that individuals and societies constantly struggle to find a balance between the two.

This brief summary of Berger's theory of religion could be expanded greatly. I have limited it to capturing some of the highlights of Berger’s theory to set the context for understanding how rationalization, secularization, pluralism, privatization, and subjectivization have evolved in Western society, which is the focus of the next section.

## *Theory of Secularization*

Berger (1967) argues that the secularization of the modern Western world can be attributed to the affinity<sup>3</sup> of processes external and internal to religion. Many discussions of secularization have traditionally focused on external factors such as rationalization, the division of labour, capitalism, and the industrial economy which have resulted in the separation of church and state, the expropriation of church lands, the removal of education from religious authorities, and the decreased role of religion in art, philosophy, literature, film, and architecture (the very things that reflect people's views of the world) (1967: 107). Berger, following Weber, focuses his analysis of secularization on factors internal to religious groups that have had a secularizing impact on society. Specifically, Berger (1967: 108) examines how fewer people view the world through a religious lens because of developments stemming from the historical roots of Christianity in the ancient religion of Israel and the Protestant Reformation.

Berger (1967: 111) begins by suggesting that Protestantism, when compared to Catholicism, is quite bare. For example, Protestants reduce the sacraments to a minimum, place less significance in miracles, lessen the scope of the sacred in reality, and eliminate intercession through the saints. Put simply, Protestants distance themselves from many elements of the mystery, miracles, and magic found in Catholicism, with the primary intention of placing greater emphasis on the majesty and sovereign grace of God.<sup>4</sup> However, for Berger (1967: 111), this distancing by Protestantism from Catholicism is also akin to individuals distancing themselves from the constant permeating presence of the sacred in this world. That is, as Protestants perceive a clear break between the transcendence of the divine and the fallen nature of humanity, they are left responsible for their own relationship, through grace, with the divine. The key for Berger is

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<sup>3</sup> Weber uses this term to describe how a set of factors, in combination, results in some social process or reality.

<sup>4</sup> Weber describes this distancing as the “disenchantment of the world.”

whether Protestantism itself is the catalyst for these changes, or if Protestantism has its roots in something earlier that was secularizing in nature. Berger concludes the latter, specifically the features of transcendentalization, historization, and ethical rationalization in the religion of ancient Israel.

To understand these changes in the religion of the ancient Israelites, Berger (1967: 113-15) stresses that the reader must first understand the cultural context from which these changes occurred. The Israelite religion rose up in the face of Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, both cultures that stressed uniformity between the empirical and supra-empirical worlds. This emphasis meant that all events on earth were connected to the realm of the gods. In the event that individuals displeased the gods, humans would experience negative ramifications (e.g., their crops are flooded) before performing a ritual to please the gods again (e.g., give a donkey to their neighbor). The key for Berger, however, is that individuals found meaning in any experience, good or bad, on earth because of the strong interconnection between the human and the sacred. All things were given meaning, which made one's worldview safe against the threats of anomie. With this understanding, Berger goes on to discuss transcendentalization, historization, and ethical rationalization.

By transcendentalization, Berger (1967: 115-17) means that God is perceived by the Israelites as one who intervenes in the human world, but lies beyond the cosmos. God transcends time and space, has no visible form, and is set apart from humanity and the rest of creation (humanity is also set apart from creation), yet He still plays a prominent role in the events of the physical world. Accordingly, the Israelites have an abstract, metaphysical perception of the one, true, transcendent God, compared to the concrete, physical, local gods found in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian context.

By historization, Berger (1967: 117) refers to the world as “the arena on the one hand of God’s great acts...and on the other of the activity of highly individuated men.” Contrary to Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious culture, where the gods dealt arbitrarily with individuals and rarely made reference to past events in history, Israelite religion is based on a historic, linear perception of God’s interaction with humanity (i.e., the further one reads into the Old Testament, the more references one finds of past events or encounters between God and people). The ongoing relationship between God and the Israelites was characterized by God acting from outside the observable realm, while people acted as free individuals towards others and towards God—a significant shift from Egyptian and Mesopotamian communal and tribal based relations between humans and the gods.

Berger links the above two features by discussing ethical rationalization. As the Israelites were aware of their individuality apart from the transcendent God, and they were consciously sensitive of the historical covenants that they previously made with God that would shape their future, the Israelites began to impose a system of rationality on all of life. The Israelites became methodical in how they related to God, rationalizing their every thought and behavior in hopes of glorifying God in all that they did (Berger 1967: 120). Berger suggests that the secularizing aspect of this ethical rationalization was that as the Israelite tried to order life with God, over time, the rationalization of life became an end in itself. People became so wrapped up with rationalizing life, that they forgot their original religious purposes for rationalizing life. In a sense, ethical rationalization worked against continued belief in God. Hence, Berger argues that transcendentalization, historization, and ethical rationalization in the religion of ancient Israel were the seeds for secularization in the modern Western world.

In addition to these internal processes, Berger also discusses external processes of secularization in the forms of pluralism and privatization. Similar to Bibby’s observations (see

the last chapter), Berger recognizes that processes of rationalization, modernization, industrialization, and structural differentiation give rise to both religious and social pluralism. For instance, in order for societies to increasingly become rational, modern, and industrial, political structures are set up to encourage and foster the political and economic happenings of a nation. This focus of the nation-state entails that political structures are no longer agents for endorsing or enforcing any particular set of religious beliefs and practices, as many traditional societies had done in the past. Since many nations do not have a state-sponsored religion, it becomes almost inevitable that multiple religious groups coexist within in a single country (i.e., no one is forced to adopt a certain set of religious beliefs and practices). In this way, religious groups are left to compete with each other for the allegiance of citizens. Furthermore, since no particular religion is sponsored by the state, religious groups also have the heightened task of competing with multiple social institutions (e.g., economics, family, politics, education, etc.) for people's loyalty. Therefore, religion, formerly a "leading" institution, now becomes a peripheral one (Berger 1967: 130). The consequence of both religious pluralism and differentiation, Berger suggests, is privatization.

Religious privatization means that, as a peripheral and secondary institution, religion is reduced to being practiced within the family or one's social relationships, but not in any public spheres such as political or workplace settings. For Berger (1967: 134, italics added), the privatization of religion entails that religion no longer fulfills one of its greatest functions, to provide a "*common* world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody." More clearly, religion is compartmentalized into a sub-world and its practice is fragmented, in much the same way that Bibby described in 1987.

Berger suggests that religious groups respond to the above challenge by competing with other religious and secular groups for individuals' attention, participation, and commitment.

Consistent with any secular marketing plan, religious institutions are increasingly rational and bureaucratic (Berger 1967: 140). As committees form, personnel are put in place, and public relations become central, religious groups seek pragmatic, charismatic, activist, and people oriented leaders. Berger's (1967: 140-41) concern with these marketing efforts is that religious groups abandon central religious values, such as theological or religious training, for the sake of rational, bureaucratic ways. For example, religious leaders view their positions as CEOs that manage rather than shepherd people.<sup>5</sup> Berger's point is that the boundary between the religious and the secular is diminished.<sup>6</sup>

In marketing, religious groups also pay attention to the wants of people immersed in secular culture. For instance, since religion is not valued for the most part as a public institution in modern society, people desire for religious content to speak to their private, moral, and therapeutic needs. To meet these needs, religious groups sometimes respond with increasingly liberal interpretations of doctrine. Berger's (1967: 146) main concern and I agree, is that if religious groups place prominence on the desires of those with a secularized consciousness, over time religious groups will secularize from within. The challenge for religious groups is to balance how much religious content should cater to the dominant culture, while remaining steadfast to the principles of the religious group.

Berger outlines two ways that religious groups try to tackle this problem—through standardization and marginal differentiation. By standardization, Berger (1967: 148) refers to religious groups whose products are homogenized to capture a target audience more effectively. For example, religious groups may standardize and heighten themes of love, peace, social

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that many lay people in positions of religious leadership (e.g., deacons or elders) are business people by occupation, perhaps enhancing the secularizing fears that Berger mentions.

<sup>6</sup> A current example of this tension is in the Catholic Church. Many are calling for increased involvement by lay people, while others believe that more lay leadership would decrease the boundary between those “set apart” for religious leadership and those not called to occupational and vocational religious leadership.

harmony, and social justice—common themes for most religious groups. Although religious groups standardize their product, they also try to emphasize marginal differences to communicate that they are different from both other religious groups and culture (1967: 149). Therefore, groups accentuate holiness, liturgy, circumcision, scripture, baptism, or speaking in tongues—features that might be exclusive to a particular religious group.

As religion is both privatized and marketed, Berger is concerned that religion is relativized and subjectivized too<sup>7</sup>—both secularizing processes. For example, Berger (1967: 157-58) notes that in some Protestant settings, emphasis on pietism leads individuals to rely on emotions and subjective consciousness as the measure for religious legitimacy. Consequently, individuals do not compare their subjective religious knowledge, beliefs, practices, and experiences against a set of objective dogma that formerly legitimated people's religious convictions (e.g., the scriptures or codified theology of a religious group). These changes are secularizing because they challenge, for many, the plausibility of their religious beliefs and practices. That is, people's individual religious beliefs and practices are always considered relative to another's individual views. In turn, it is difficult for people to share a common consensus or worldview, thus making it unlikely that religion is socially significant (I say more about this topic in the section on Bruce).

Ultimately, Berger asserts that privatized, relativized, and subjectivized religion, in the context of pluralist societies, yields a crisis of legitimacy where individuals question if religion can, in fact, be a plausible, objective, overarching system of meaning. In part, the continual changes to religious structures and content convey a level of religious instability and uncertainty. Therefore, some question how legitimate it is to place credibility in an unstable institution? This

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<sup>7</sup> "Subjectivization" refers to the breaking down and de-objectivating of dogmatic structures and religious content (Berger 1967: 157).

problem is magnified when multiple worldviews, religious and secular, compete for people's attention and devotion. How does one discern which religion is correct and legitimate?

Furthermore, why should one give religion an elevated status in life when religion seemingly is the cause of immense pain and turmoil in the world (e.g., war)—the very things religion is to protect one from? Beneath these questions, individuals are also troubled by the problem of theodicy. How legitimate is the worldview that everything on earth, especially the chaotic and destructive realities, is connected to an unseen sacred and divine being that permeates all things?<sup>8</sup>

Answering these questions undoubtedly goes beyond the scope of this chapter. However, being aware of these questions illustrates the challenges that religious groups face in a pluralistic culture, where religion is privatized, relativized, and subjectivized. Furthermore, these questions reveal the dialectical relationship between individuals and culture; as individuals act, culture is transformed, in turn impacting individuals. I agree with Berger that pluralism is, perhaps, the greatest threat to higher levels of religiosity. Although I sympathize with religious groups who face the challenges of privatization, relativism, and subjectivization, Berger is right in suggesting that religious groups are advancing these processes from within. I develop my position further in the section on Bruce, where Bruce expands on many of these points brought forth by Berger.

## **RODNEY STARK**

Contrary to Berger's 1967 thesis, Stark and Finke (2000: 59-61) fervently oppose theories of secularization, particularly five common elements found in most secularization theories. Those five points of contention include the idea that (1) modernization is the causal engine for secularization, (2) secularization includes a loss of personal piety and religious belief, (3)

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<sup>8</sup> For Berger, like Weber before him, this question of theodicy is primarily about finding meaning in suffering rather than relief from suffering. This belief is consistent with Weber and Berger's assumption that meaning creation and maintenance is religion's central function in society.

heightened emphasis in science leads to secular societies, (4) secularization is irreversible, and (5) secularization applies to all religious groups. To the contrary, Finke and Stark (2005) claim that the modern Western world is actually becoming more religious with time, especially in the modern age. Working from a market-model framework, Stark supports this position by discussing religious pluralism, the presence of religious revival and innovation, and the strong presence of personal piety.

Before examining these themes, however, it is necessary to look at some of Stark's assumptions about human nature, specifically pertaining to religious rewards and costs. These assumptions provide the context for Stark's theory of secularization, in addition to being relevant to the guiding research questions of this thesis. Although Stark's research on religion is vast, this section is based on material from Stark and Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion* (1985), Stark and Finke's *Acts of Faith* (2000), and Finke and Stark's *The Churching of America 1776-2005* (2005).

### *Religious Rewards and Costs*

Stark's guiding premise is that humans are rational (Stark and Finke 2000: 85). In the context of religion, being rational means that humans make religious decisions by weighing rewards against costs. Stark indicates that people's religious decisions result in "exchanges" between humans and the gods.

Stark specifies two types of religious rewards: rewards in the afterlife and rewards on earth. Beginning with rewards in the afterlife, Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 6) believe that "the single most urgent human desire" is "life after death." Stark and Finke (2000: 85) add that religion "is the only plausible source of [life after death] for which there is a general and inexhaustible demand." Even though many would intuitively agree with Stark, and the numerous

studies conducted by Bibby indicate that people do, in fact, think about life after death, can we conclude that thinking about the afterlife equals desiring the afterlife? What evidence does Stark or others have to support the “desire” or “demand” elements of Stark’s thesis? Answering these questions could go a long way to discerning if religion or spirituality will continue to persist among Canadians, for example.

Despite claiming that afterlife rewards are the most valuable, Stark and Finke (2000: 89) assert, "empirical rewards from the gods play a very significant role in generating and sustaining faith."<sup>9</sup> Stark illustrates his point with four propositions regarding exchanges between humans and the divine. Each of these exchanges enhances the legitimacy that people place in the afterlife, gods, and supernatural.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, these exchanges are, in some cases, earthly rewards (e.g., peace of mind, hope, comfort, and community), which I highlight when applicable.

First, Stark and Finke (2000: 97-99) suggest that the reliability, responsiveness, and scope of power of the gods are key in generating and sustaining the faith of humans. The more the gods respond to the prayers of their followers, fulfill their promises as outlined in the scriptures, and increase the scope of their power, the more likely people will commit to the supernatural and place confidence in the reality that the afterlife exists.

The second proposition concerns the quantity and quality of others' beliefs in the supernatural and the afterlife (Stark and Finke 2000: 107). Stark claims that as individuals know others that share the same beliefs, they place greater validity in the fact that rewards in the afterlife do actually exist. Moreover, shared beliefs typically alleviate individuals from feeling anomie or alienation, common feelings for those holding religious beliefs dissimilar from others.

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<sup>9</sup> This statement, which I agree with, is especially true in highly rational, technological, and educated societies.

<sup>10</sup> Supernatural is defined as the "forces or entities beyond or outside nature that can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces" (Stark and Finke 2000: 90). Gods are conceptualized as "supernatural 'beings' having consciousness and desire" (Stark and Finke 2000: 91).

Third, people's confidence in the existence of rewards in the afterlife is strengthened as they participate in religious rituals, defined as "collective ceremonies having a common focus and mood in which the common focus is on a god or gods" (Stark and Finke 2000: 107).

Fourth, and finally, people experience increased confidence that afterlife rewards exist based on one's private encounters with the gods or supernatural (e.g., prayer, mystical experiences, and miracles) (Stark and Finke 2000: 109-10).

Assuming that these religious rewards are what people seek, Stark and Finke (2000) presume that people will incur many or most of the following four religious costs: extended exchange relationships, exclusive exchange relationships, extensive religious commitments, and expensive religious commitments. An extended exchange relationship, commonly understood as delayed gratification, entails that individuals and groups make periodic payments (e.g., reading scriptures, praying, tithing, volunteering, etc) over an extended period of time in anticipation of receiving a highly desired reward in the afterlife (2000: 99).<sup>11</sup>

An exclusive relationship with one God and exclusive way of living, typically practiced by Christians, Jews, and Muslims, is another religious cost common to many (Stark and Finke 2000: 100, 142). Stark and Finke (2000) describe exclusivity in terms of a continuum of tension between religions and the rest of society. By tension they mean the "degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the 'outside' world" (Stark and Finke 2000: 143). Low-tension groups (e.g., churches) usually have lower standards and levels of commitment and, thus, are more difficult to differentiate from the surrounding culture. High-tension groups (e.g., sects) are committed to high standards of religious belief and practice, setting high religious expectations (e.g., distinctive clothing and strict observance of religious

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<sup>11</sup> Stark mentions that people create explanations (formerly classified as compensations by Stark and Bainbridge 1985) for obtaining rewards in the afterlife, despite their inability to verify such rewards on earth—a true act of faith.

customs) that exclude “free riders.”<sup>12</sup>

Those in high-tension groups are characterized by extensive and expensive commitments. Extensive commitments are ones that have a vast range and depth of impact on an individual’s life (Stark and Finke: 144). In other words, people's religious beliefs and practices inform all aspects of their lives. Expensive commitments are the "material, social, and psychic costs of belonging to a religious group" (Stark and Finke 2000: 144). For example, people sacrifice time, money, job opportunities, relationships, sleep, or their own life for the sake of their religion. Stark maintains that both extensive and expensive commitments are costs that people endure over an extended period of time if they believe that their exclusive religion is rewarding both on earth and in the afterlife.

Stark and Finke (2000: 146) conclude their ideas on religious rewards and costs by claiming that the lower the tension of one’s religious beliefs and practices, the more distant, impersonal, and unresponsive the gods are. Stark’s conclusions about the differences between high and low-tension religious groups cause me to raise two possible realities occurring in religious groups. One is that high and low tension groups perceive different religious rewards, thus impacting their religious commitments on earth. The other reality is that high and low tension religious groups perceive the same religious rewards, but believe that different costs are required to attain such rewards. Although Stark and other social theorists do not satisfactorily resolve these issues (see Brodin 2003), a closer examination of Stark’s theory of secularization helps to shed more light on the religious decisions that people make.

### *Theory of Secularization*

Stark’s theory of secularization is an application of his preceding premises. To defend his

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<sup>12</sup> An example of a “free rider” is one who only attends religious services at Christmas and Easter, but expects others to continue the operation of the religious group throughout the year (Stark and Finke 2000: 147-50).

position against the secularization paradigm, Stark examines the concepts of religious pluralism, religious renewal and innovation, and personal piety. Beginning with pluralism, Stark and Finke (2000) oppose Berger, arguing that religious pluralism actually fuels higher levels of religious commitment. Stark's position is based on his analysis of religious pluralism and monopolies in two regions of the world: America and Western Europe.

Stark contends that levels of religiosity are quite high in the United States. Stark's explanation lies in the existence of pluralism and competition in the United States. With the separation of church and state, Stark (2000: 219) suggests that religious groups openly compete for people's allegiance. As in the economy, competition involves suppliers (i.e., religious groups) sharpening their product to maximize the number of potential consumers. For example, religious groups enhance various doctrines, styles of leadership, music styles, programs, and criterion for membership. As religious groups improve their quality of religion, Stark (2000: 223-28) believes that people respond with greater commitment (measured by levels of religious donations, membership in religious groups, church attendance, Sunday school attendance, and volunteerism). According to Stark, individuals think that religious groups, who improve their product, actually have better rewards, justifying greater commitment and religious costs. In more cases than not, Stark believes that these religious groups are high in tension with culture.

Stark may be correct in his interpretations of pluralism and competition, but I hesitate, for two reasons, to fully accept that people are attracted to religious groups that supposedly offer greater rewards and expect higher levels of commitment in a competitive religious marketplace. First, presuming, and I do, that many more people are "believing without belonging" than believing and belonging, one might conclude that people are actually trying to gain the most for the least. In other words, however people make sense of religious rewards, many seem to conclude that prayers alone, for example, are sufficient to attain the desired religious rewards.

Furthermore, what are the rewards that people perceive as greater in higher tension religious groups? I am not satisfied that Stark sufficiently answers these questions. Hence, I think that we need to examine people's perceptions of religious rewards and costs more carefully.

Second, as Bowen (2004: 16-17) notes, Canada has an increasingly unregulated religious economy; however, we have seen less involvement in the churches over the last fifty years. Of course, we see evidence that some Conservative Protestant congregations, which generally require more of their members than more liberal congregations, are growing in Canada. But in light of Berger's material and Bruce's theory in the next section, we must cautiously question if such growth is a response to Conservative Protestant congregations offering secularized forms of religion. I discuss this possibility in greater detail later in the thesis.

In any event, Stark (2000) continues to build his case by illustrating three weaknesses of religious monopolies in Western Europe. First, in societies where religion is sponsored by the state, Stark (2000: 230-31) highlights that clergy receive guaranteed pay by the government, independent of the number of weekly attenders. According to Stark, guaranteed pay is a catalyst for lazy clergy without incentive to grow a vibrant congregation.

Stark's first point must be challenged. Although a digression from sociology, many theologians and religious people would argue that clergy fulfill a vocational calling, separate from monetary compensation. However, assuming for a minute that these theological assumptions are incorrect, I could imagine countless jobs that would require less work of an employee for significantly better salaries. Whichever argument you prefer, there is reason to doubt Stark's first point.

A second and related point, since religious groups are financially supported by the state, those attending religious services are not needed to fund the operation of the church (Stark and Finke 2000: 231-32). Stark believes that this situation leads to lazy members who claim religious

rewards without paying religious costs. I would counter Stark's position by highlighting that many other religious costs (e.g., prayer, reading religious texts, or volunteering) are incurred, aside from tithing, for people to attain religious rewards.

Third, Stark (2000: 199) points out that when religion is state sponsored, religion is highly integrated into non-religious spheres of society (e.g., politics, economics, education, and health). Stark believes that close ties between religious and non-religious institutions leads to religious groups living in low tension with the surrounding culture. For Stark, low-tension gives rise to low commitment levels.

The second main theme, and perhaps the most important, in Stark's secularization theory is his discussion of religious revival and innovation. Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 435) are aware that religion is not always sufficiently supplied by conventional religious groups (e.g., churches and denominations). Even though many are quick to conclude that ineffective supply of religion gives rise to secularization, Stark posits that religious revival and innovation are two common responses that actually reverse the possibility of secularization.

Religious revival is characterized by new religious groups that reassert unique and distinct elements (i.e., beliefs and practices) of an existing religion before the original religious group strays too far from its foundation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 444-48). These groups are traditionally called "sects," and often exist in high tension with the surrounding culture (e.g., Mormons). Religious innovation, on the other hand, refers to attempts by some to create new religious traditions that better suit the present culture (this usually occurs when conventional religion is declining) (1985: 435-39). These groups are identified as "cults," and are also in high tension with society (e.g., Scientology). With more culturally relevant doctrines and presentation styles, cults are attractive to consumer's discontent with current suppliers of religion.

However, the crux of Stark's rejection of the secularization paradigm lies in the

following. Both Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 437-44) and Stark and Finke (2000: 205-07) maintain that, over time, strict observance of certain beliefs and practices wanes in sects and cults, leaving sects and cults to look no different from most conventional religious groups (who are in low tension with society). As religious groups decrease their tension with culture, Stark believes that individuals and groups grow discontent with “cheap imitations” of sects and cults. The result is that new sects and cults emerge. Those new groups that arise eventually lower their tension with society, prompting the emergence of new groups again. Stark contends, therefore, that secularization can never fully develop because the cycle of new religious groups rising and falling will never cease; people will always demand the rewards that religious groups offer. Put simply, secularization, for Stark, is not about society becoming progressively less religious, but rather about the cyclical rise and fall of different types of religions, like companies in an economy.

The third and final reason for Stark rejecting the secularization paradigm is his belief in the persistent religious beliefs and practices in conventional and unconventional religious settings. Differing from most, Stark and Finke challenge those who argue that Western society has increasingly secularized since the advent of modernity (2000: 61-68). They argue that most societies were not all that religious two or three centuries ago, so how could a society secularize? In fact, Finke and Stark (2005) argue that people have become more religious with time. They provide an array of data from around the world that shows the increasing number of congregations, clergy, seminarians, new religious movements, and missionary efforts per congregation. Further, they provide evidence of an increase in the number of religious adherents, church attenders, and those, particularly scientists (countering a common argument by secularization proponents), who hold religious beliefs (Finke and Stark 2005; Stark and Finke 2000). This is not the time or place to spell out Stark’s data, except to highlight that his measures

of religiosity are sporadic, inconsistent, and subject to further review. I say more about these limitations in chapter five.

## **STEVE BRUCE**

In *God is Dead* (2002a), British sociologist Steve Bruce provides a sound contemporary synthesis and analysis of the secularization paradigm. Contrary to Stark, Bruce (2002a: xii) firmly contends, “liberal industrial democracies of the Western world are considerably less religious now than they were in the days of [his] father, [his] grandfather and [his] great-grandfather.” Without assuming that a “Golden Age” ever existed, Bruce (2002a: 3) argues that secularization is evident in the following ways:

The declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs.

Bruce expands on this conclusion by creating an intricate twenty-two variable secularization paradigm.<sup>13</sup> Even though I will not attempt to examine each of Bruce’s twenty-two variables, I think we can capture the core of his theory by examining three of the topics he discusses in *God is Dead*: religious beliefs and practices, New Age and Eastern religions, and charismatic movements in Britain.<sup>14</sup>

### *Religious Beliefs and Practices in Britain*

Contrary to Stark, Bruce (2002a) argues that religion currently has less authority over

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce’s (2002a: 4) paradigm is structured under six areas that include rationalization, religious organization, economy, society, polity, and cognitive style. Although the content of his book is excellent, I am not convinced that his dynamic model is explicitly used or applied throughout his writing. Therefore, I have chosen not to discuss each variable in detail, but rather will focus on the central themes that Bruce raises.

<sup>14</sup> Although Bruce (2002a: 204) focuses his study of religion on Britain, he acknowledges, like many do, that higher levels of religiosity exist in the United States. However, Bruce argues that religion in the United States typifies many secularizing traits found in other liberal, modern, Western societies. Bruce identifies a shift from otherworldly to this-worldly salvation, greater emphasis on individual choice, and increased therapeutic orientations to religion.

people in Britain than in past generations. Bruce (2002a: 62-73) supports this claim with empirical evidence on church attendance, church membership, Sunday school attendance, the popularity of religious rites of passage, the number of full time clergy, the popularity of religious beliefs, and the size of new religious movements.

Over the last 150 years, church attendance in Catholic and Mainline Protestant congregations across Britain decreased significantly (Bruce 2002a: 63).<sup>15</sup> However, similar to Canada, attendance slowly increased in evangelical circles, although, not enough to offset the decline in Catholic and Mainline churches. Bruce (2002a: 67-68, 70) notes related declining trends over the last 100 years in church membership (down from 27% to 10%), Sunday school attendance (down from 55% to 4%), and the observing rites of passage (decrease from approximately 60% to roughly 20%). Furthermore, as the total British population doubled over the last 100 years, the number of full-time clergy decreased by 25% (2002a: 69).

In light of Bruce's observations, some, such as Grace Davie (1994), argue that many still "[believe] without belonging." Bruce (2002a: 71-72) refutes Davie's thesis by highlighting that 17% less people believed in a personal creator or God in 2000 than in the 1950s. In the same period, there has been a 25% increase of those explicitly stating that they do not believe in God. In no way are these measures exhaustive, but these measures suggest, in part, that perhaps people are dropping their belief along with their belonging.

In addition to declining beliefs and practices, Bruce (2002a) asserts that religious groups in Britain, intentionally or unintentionally, secularized when trying to engage culture more effectively. Using a garden metaphor, Bruce discusses the need for religion, a distinct cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Since Bruce compares data from different sources specific to Scotland, England, Ireland, and Wales, it is simplest for me to provide Bruce's overarching conclusions for the remainder of this chapter, rather than getting lost in the specific data. For actual percentages see the pages noted in the body of this text.

product, to be cultivated and protected from secular culture. If religious institutions accommodate too much to culture and, thus, are embedded in secular culture, religion ceases to be religion.

Bruce's (2002a: 147) position is that religious groups have allowed their protective fence to be taken down, resulting in "religious observance decaying, unusual beliefs being abandoned, once-important behavioral marks of membership being dropped, and the boundary between the community of the faithful and the rest of the world being eroded."

To illustrate his point, Bruce (2002a: 141) refers to the Church of Scotland, which gave control of its schools to the government, resulting in the schools becoming more secular. Bruce (2002a: 142) also alludes to religious groups who abandoned distinct religious signs and symbols in their rituals and buildings. In addition, Bruce (2002a: 142) also identifies Eastern religious themes (e.g., Ayurvedic medicine) that are commodified as "cool." Finally, Bruce (2002a: 143-44) comments on Catholics who reject the authority of the Pope, who marry non-Catholics, and who fail to observe various eating and dietary customs. Although Bruce does not specify the direction of these secularizing changes (i.e., whether religion or culture first initiated the secularizing changes), he (2002a: 142) is clear that people are attaching less and less religious significance to religious beliefs and practices.

### *New Age and Eastern Religion*

Responding to another of Stark's (1985, 2000) assumptions that people form sects and cults when religious needs are not met in conventional settings (i.e., churches), Bruce (2002a) acknowledges the increased presence of many non-Trinitarian congregations (e.g., Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, and Christian Scientists). However, Bruce (2002a: 70) cautions Stark that the numerical increase of New Religious Movements accounts only for one-sixth of those lost in

Trinitarian congregations. Concerning those who claim to adopt New Age beliefs,<sup>16</sup> Bruce (2002a: 79-82) illustrates that low percentages of people actually practice their New Age religion, with even less claiming that their religious practices are important to their life.

Even if high numbers of people do believe and practice their New Age and Eastern religion (e.g., astrology, meditation, fortune telling, shiatsu massage, Yoga, and crystals), Bruce contends that such religious activities are reflections of modern social values—individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism—perpetuating the secularization of liberal, modern democracies. Beginning with individualism in New Age beliefs, Bruce (2002a: 82-83) suggests that many believe that the individual is innately divine, holy, and good and, thus, reject religious authority. This belief is a significant departure from traditional Western religious views that separate God as good and humanity as bad, and where humans can only become good by submitting themselves to the will and authority of God. Many New Agers also maintain their right to selectively choose from a collection of eclectic beliefs and practices (2002a: 83-84). Aside from problems of conflicting assumptions between various beliefs and practices, this attitude challenges many claims by religious groups of religious particularism and exclusivity—themes that I discuss in chapter four. In addition, New Agers contend that personal health, wealth, and self-confidence are the ultimate goals of religion (2002a: 85). These goals deviate from most traditional religious groups that emphasize religious beliefs and practices for God's sake, and any sort of gains in health, wealth, or self-confidence is a byproduct. These few examples illustrate, for Bruce, that New Age religion is one that accommodates to a secular culture's desire to adapt religious beliefs and practices to individual differences and

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<sup>16</sup> Most theorists acknowledge that it is difficult to attain an accurate count of those belonging to New Age groups given the unclear measures for association. Most accounts of membership are educated estimates.

preferences—a dramatic shift from traditional religion where people adjusted their thoughts and behaviors to that of God and the religious group.

Bruce also identifies ways in which Westerners stress individualism when adopting Eastern religion. For example, in the East, “holism” is grounded in ideas of individual insignificance, humility, and calmness in the face of joys and sorrows in life. Westerners, on the other hand, import the idea of “holism,” and inflate the greatness of one’s inner, all encompassing, divine nature (Bruce 2002a: 131-32). Bruce’s concern is that Westerners, who implement Eastern religious beliefs and practices, secularize Eastern religious principles to fit the mold of Western individualism. Put simply, if Westerners are trying to live out Eastern religious themes, then they need to abandon their “Westernization of the Easternization of the West” (2002a: 131).

In addition, Bruce (2002a: 132-33) points out that Westerners improperly adapt the concept of “discipline” from the East. In the East, extreme levels of discipline are necessary to bring about peace and harmony with one’s surroundings. In the West, most are attracted to forms of Buddhism (e.g., Soka Gakkai) and Hinduism (e.g., Transcendental Meditation) that require minimal time and change of lifestyle, yet still promise true peace and harmony (2002a: 132-33).<sup>17</sup>

Bruce (2002a: 134) appropriately summarizes Western adaptations of Eastern religion to Western values of individualism in the following statement:

The self is autonomous and very important. The individual consumer decides. The busy seeker after enlightenment adopts the same efficiency-seeking attitude to compensating for the ills of modernization as he or she does to getting on in the modern world.

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<sup>17</sup> I would add to this last point that discipline and personal piety are problematic within Western monotheistic traditions too. Many believe that a five-minute devotional before work serves their religious needs and enables them to be kind and loving to others throughout the day. As I alluded to in the last chapter, fewer Canadians are practicing disciplines that require more time and energy, and fewer Canadians are prioritizing their time for religious practices such as attending religious services or reading religious texts.

In other words, Western individualism is grounded in accommodation and in using religion as a therapy to make people more effective in the work place, with minimal discipline required.

Bruce's (2002a: 87) second and related area of concern is Western rejection of authority. In Western societies, most people take offense when those in authority infringe on individual rights. Hence, New Age and Eastern religion, characterized by little accountability, authority, organized dogma, or formal community, is appealing (e.g., paying for a religious product such as palm reading without any strings attached). For organized religious groups whose members meet regularly under the guidance of an authoritative leader, these New Age and Eastern views are troubling because they challenge some of the foundational premises for the existence of organized religious groups (I expand on these challenges in the next chapter).

The final area of discussion for Bruce (2002a: 86) is relativism. In an age of pluralism and competing, conflicting religious views, those adopting New Age and Eastern values maintain that one set of religious beliefs is no better than another. Clearly, religious groups that resolve the religion-culture dilemma by rejecting more than accommodating different religious or cultural views are at odds with the New Age relativistic perspective (e.g., see recently elected Pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's homily that began the April 2005 conclave).

In total, Bruce (2002a: 91) is adamant that religion characterized by individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism is "diffuse religion."

Diffuse religion...elicits only slight commitment and little agreement about detail. It thus makes a shared life unlikely. Diffuse religion has little impact. It has little effect even on its adherents. It does not drive its believers to evangelize. Finally, it is vulnerable to being diluted and trivialized.

Intentionally or unintentionally, Bruce points to some of the same conclusions that Stark arrives at. Religious groups that have low tension with society (e.g., New Age and Eastern religious groups) yield members not willing to make extended or expensive commitments to an exclusive

god. The result is that people's religion is not extensive. I pick up on this theme of "diffuse religion" in the next chapter.

### *Charismatic Movements*

Bruce is aware that spurts of religious renewal and restoration do occur in religious groups, as Stark claimed (1985, 2000, and 2005). However, Bruce (2002a) differs from Stark in that he does not believe that the eventual waning of a religious renewal and restoration inevitably yields another revival. Although time will tell regarding charismatic movements—the primary example of recent religious rejuvenation—Bruce suggests that similar to New Age and Eastern religious movements, the charismatic movements, intentionally or unintentionally, spread modern cultural values.

By way of introduction, charismatic movements arose largely in response to stagnated Christian institutions that were hierarchical in nature, driven by observing rules and laws, and detrimental for individuals experiencing what they call "freedom in the spirit" (Bruce 2002a: 168-73). In response to the previous religious climate, charismatic congregations offer less routinized and formal services in non-decorative and iconic settings. Charismatic groups are perceived as more liberal (in terms of religious beliefs and practices), tolerant, "happy-clappy," and healing oriented (2002a: 173).<sup>18</sup>

Even though charismatic movements have been attractive to many recently, Bruce observes two secularizing signs within charismatic movements, not found in traditional conservative Protestant movements. The first is the emphasis on personal experience, rather than shared doctrine (Bruce 2002a: 179-80). Bruce contends that it is difficult for individuals and religious groups to hold shared beliefs and interpretations of religious experiences when

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<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive understanding of charismatic movements see Anderson 2004, Burgess and Van Der Maas 2002, Cox 1995, Martin 2002, and Poewe 1994.

experiences vary so greatly between people. If groups cease to have common beliefs and experiences, Bruce questions how long such religious groups can really survive.<sup>19</sup> Bruce (2002a: 180) also raises the point that charismatic movements focus almost solely on a personal relationship with Jesus. Bruce's concern here is twofold. The emphasis on the personal relationship leads to religion being a therapeutic, inward focused meaning system—functions that he and others argue are not central to religion (2002a: 180). Individuals then tend to lessen the separation between Jesus and humans (e.g., many young people, in particular, view Jesus as their “homeboy”) (2002a: 180-81). The sense of awe and reverence towards the divine seems to be lost.

Although Bruce does not pick up on the following, I think that people's yearning for authentic relationship with Jesus is another indicator of social and structural differentiation. As people increasingly feel disconnected from others at work and home, religion functions to connect people in physical and spiritual community. In light of Bruce's concern that religion becomes therapeutic in nature, I wonder whether these authentic relationships fulfill the modern need for community or if authentic relationships merely exist to meet psychological needs? If people were truly seeking community in religious settings, would we not see more people participating more frequently in religious services, small groups, or volunteer projects? These questions prompt many other questions related to the complex interplay of religion, community, and therapeutic needs that should be addressed in further research. Specifically, what is the function of religion and are these points raised by Bruce legitimate threats to the ultimate function of religion?

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<sup>19</sup> To reiterate Berger's terminology, subjectivization and individualism become significant realities in an experience-based charismatic movement.

The second secularizing feature of charismatic movements, for Bruce (2002a: 180-82), is the emphasis on the individual self. Similar to those who misguidedly adopt Eastern concepts of “holism” in the West, Bruce contends that those in charismatic movements inflate the value and worth of the self. When comparing the origin of charismatic groups to the last three decades, Bruce observes a substantive shift in the demographic features of charismatic adherents, specifically Pentecostals. Until the late twentieth century, most Pentecostals came from working or lower class families. For these individuals, being filled with the Holy Spirit, a central feature of Pentecostalism, was perceived as spiritual compensation for physical deprivation. Recently, however, well educated, middle and even upper class individuals have increasingly filled Pentecostal congregations. This group, Bruce asserts (2002a: 181), maintains that being filled with the Holy Spirit is “proof that they are actually pretty marvelous, divine confirmation of the very positive image they already have of themselves.” Bruce’s point is that, although there was an element of focusing on the self and individual experiences among Pentecostals in the early twentieth century, there has been an accelerated shift towards highly individualized beliefs and practices among Pentecostals in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Bruce (2002a: 185) concludes his thoughts on charismatic movements (and New Age and Eastern religions) by saying that these religious expressions, which many claim are signs that society is not being fully secularized, do not actually “refute secularization; [they] show how it works.” In other words, religious groups are fostering cultural values (i.e., non-religious values and hence secular values) of individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism. The following analysis and application of these points to the Canadian context all illustrate Bruce’s views.

In many respects, I think that the Canadian values of individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism are being fulfilled in Conservative Protestant congregations, possibly explaining the slight increases in attendance in recent years. For example, although many contend that

megachurches stress cell groups as a means to foster authentic and accountable community, the reality is that many of the thousands in megachurches go unnoticed and unaccounted for each week, illustrating my very point (see Bibby 2002: 207-08; Bowen 2004: 242; Stark and Finke 2000: 154-67). People are attracted to megachurches because it is easy to hide and foster individual beliefs and practices, independent of formal accountability to others, a doctrine, or a religious leader. Consider the shift in songs used in churches these days. Formerly, hymns were aimed at declaring the characteristics of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Now songs are directed at individuals' expressing their passion for a generic being,<sup>20</sup> which could easily be confused with love songs on the radio. Recent books are also aimed at providing people with five to seven solutions (like Dr. Phil) to resolving personal struggles, often taking people further away from the scriptures and other-centered living. Moreover, ponder the lack of religious symbolism in religious buildings, or even the architecture of newer religious buildings being built. There is nothing to signify that religion is a separate institution in society, but rather that religion is an institution that can feel and look like your local mall, warehouse, or working corridors. At the most basic, physical level, religion is presented as an institution that does not have a distinct, authoritative element. I could go on, but I have raised the general point. I whole-heartedly agree with Bruce and Berger that secularization does not occur outside of religious groups only. Secularization, in many cases, takes place within the religious group too. Although this paragraph may come across as a theological rant, I would argue that, in fact, we are gaining insight into larger issues of how institutions change to meet the needs of individuals in order to achieve a more stable and balanced society.

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<sup>20</sup> From personal experience, it is becoming less common to find songs that specifically say Jesus or God. Instead, songs include the words "Him" or "You," with capital letters starting the unspecific nouns. One must wonder if this is a sign of religious groups and songwriters giving in to relativism.

## CONCLUSION

These three theories of secularization once again highlight the centrality of the problematic relationship between religion and culture in the contemporary sociology of religion. As opposed to Berger's (1999) recent observation of heightened levels of religion, I agree with Berger's (1967) original conclusions that processes of secularization, both internal and external to religious organizations, have and continue to occur. Berger offers an insightful analysis of the secularizing impact that pluralism, privatization, and subjectivization have on religious groups, aiding us in our larger quest to assess if, in fact, Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion. More specifically, Berger's material helps us to understand why, I would contend, religion continues to be fragmented in Canada and why fragmented religion seemingly works.

As I said earlier, I am not convinced by Stark's evidence that the world is becoming more religious (with the exception of maybe the United States). However, I do agree with Stark's notion that people make religious decisions by weighing costs and rewards—a basic, yet invaluable observation. Moreover, I think that Stark's assumption needs to be at the heart of whether Canada is increasingly religious or secular. Assuming for a minute that many are actually becoming more religious, many people still remain who are not religious (i.e., are secular). Given that the overwhelming goal of religious groups is to convert such people, I contend that religious groups will be more successful in converting the masses, if they tap into how non-religious people make sense of religious rewards and costs. We need to ask people—highly religious, slightly religious, and non-religious—how they compare religious rewards and costs. Pursuing answers to these questions will help us to account for how people *choose* to be religious. Furthermore, answering these questions may shed light on the larger societal issues of people's priorities in life and the means through which people fulfill their priorities.

Finally, Bruce's theory, similar to Berger's, indicates that current religious expressions,

both institutional and non-institutional, are actually further manifestations of a secularized consciousness and culture. I agree. Although not as common fifty years ago, many would currently propose that private spirituality (e.g., New Age and Eastern religion) is legitimate and consequential for people's lives (Beckford 1992). Furthermore, many would suggest that the elements of charismatic religion that Bruce identifies as secular are equally legitimate and consequential. Conversely, many within religious organizations would argue that these various expressions of private spirituality are not legitimate. These opposing views are the springboard for examining organized religion and private spirituality in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### *Organized Religion and Private Spirituality: The Canadian Context*

Religion and spirituality (defined later) are, perhaps, two more common topics of discussion both in modern day popular culture and, also, increasingly in the sociology of religion. Bookstores are filled with resources on topics ranging from New Age to spiritual self-help, coffee shops are inundated with conversations about finding the inner self and reaching for the transcendent, and recent sociological literature reveals heightened interest in the religion-spirituality distinction. However, as I suggested in chapter two, many Canadians interested in spiritual matters are failing to connect their private spiritual quests with organized religious settings. Canadian political scientist Peter Emberley (2002: 15) supports this assertion: Canadians are yearning for “a personal, not an institutional God...an inclusive, not a discriminating God.” Emberley’s observation typifies a larger change in language and meaning in Canadian culture, a shift where many are abandoning the term "religion" in favor of a more generic and acceptable term, "spirituality." Although sociological research into this distinction has increased in recent years, this area of inquiry remains in its infancy and continues to be a central topic of research (e.g., Bruce 2002a; Emberley 2002; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Wuthnow 1998; Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999).

In this chapter, I seek to answer four specific questions that will advance our understanding of the religion and spirituality debate, and more importantly, how this debate contributes to our assessment of whether Canada is increasingly experiencing a renaissance of religion or not. First, I am interested in exploring the differences between organized religion and private spirituality. What do people mean when they use these two terms and what are the similarities and differences between the two? Second, why are Canadians abandoning organized religion for private spirituality? In other words, what are the push and pull factors that result in

lower participation in organized religion compared with private spirituality? Third, given that many Canadians are staying away from organized religion, what social consequences might Canada face if this pattern continues? Finally, does the increased presence of private spirituality in Canada support Bibby's renaissance thesis, the secularization paradigm, or simply that religious belief and practices are changing?

## **CONCEPTUALIZING ORGANIZED RELIGION AND PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY**

Until fifteen years ago, the general public and academics alike used the terms religion and spirituality interchangeably. When using these terms, most had in mind people who attend religious services regularly, pray frequently, and read the scriptures consistently. However, as more and more Canadians have turned away from organized religious groups, Canadians have slowly identified religion and spirituality as separate things. Each term has acquired unique connotations and implications.<sup>1</sup>

At the most basic level, religion is associated with organized and institutional religion (e.g., church attendance), and spirituality is akin to private beliefs and practices, independent of formal accountability to a larger creed or congregation. Even though this brief description would be sufficient for many in the broader Canadian culture, it is worthwhile to briefly present the sociological conceptual landscape that lies behind most people's use of "religion" and "spirituality." This section is based on an eclectic selection of books, chapters, and articles, many of which I referenced in the introduction of this chapter.

In 1967, Thomas Luckmann published a classic in the sociology of religion, *The Invisible*

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<sup>1</sup> For many not involved with organized religion, the term "religion" is associated with previous bad experiences, often related to rules and regulations embedded in organized religious settings (Arnett and Jensen 2002: 463-64). However, even those involved with religious organizations are also rejecting the term "religion" (see Cavey 2005). For example, most within Christian settings prefer to emphasize their personal relationship with Jesus, rather than speak of "religion" or even "spirituality."

*Religion*. In this book, Luckmann outlines the perils of modernity for religion, specifically religious organizations, and argues that religion would become increasingly invisible, or private. Even though Luckmann was not the first to examine the implications of modernity for religion, Luckmann's work in the 60s set the condition for numerous sociologists to explore the role of organized religion and private spirituality in the modern world. Following the publication of Luckmann's book, most writings indicate that spirituality is a sub-element of the broader term religion. Therefore, it is appropriate that I begin by conceptualizing organized religion, followed by a closer look at the more difficult and problematic term, private spirituality.

In examining contemporary academic writings, one will find that organized religion is frequently linked with terms like formal and institutional religion (Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999: 895, 901), conventional religion (Bibby 2002: 195), and official religion (Luckmann 1967: 76; McGuire 2002: 104). Others have equated organized religion with being churched (Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005: 8), and participating in rituals (Hervieu-Leger 2001: 162). Further, researchers have discovered, primarily through interviews, several other themes that people associate with organized religion: for example, structure, institution, leadership, power, status, conformity, social, traditional, doctrinal, dogmatic, and restrictive (Hood 2003: 249; Marler and Hadaway 1999: 294; Wuthnow 2001: 306, 313; Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott 1999: 901). For the sake of simplicity, and since most in Canadian culture use the following term, I use "organized religion" to delineate religion from spirituality.

In his latest book, *Restless Gods* (2002: 194-202), Bibby gives some attention to the religion and spirituality debate, providing an excellent summary of Canadians who tend to be involved in organized religion. In the areas of religious belief, practice, experience, knowledge, and behavior, Bibby identifies this group as "conventional." Bibby finds that conventional Canadians typically believe in God, Jesus, life after death, and they hold strong moral and ethical

positions on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, or euthanasia. They emphasize regular attendance at religious services, formal membership, participation in religious sacraments (e.g., baptism and communion), and regular times of prayer. Conventional Canadians highlight their personal relationship with Christ and the subsequent peace experienced from that relationship. In the area of religious knowledge, Canadians have an inner and external awareness of God's presence, knowing that He answers their prayers. Finally, they believe that their religious behavior is centered on living life according to God's way, and in turn, helping other people.

Before continuing to discuss spirituality, it is important to know that those involved with organized religion tend to equally identify themselves as spiritual. That is, those connected to organized religious groups also implement aspects of private spirituality in their own lives. However, one cannot assume that the opposite scenario is true. Those who practice private spirituality do not necessarily value communal religious beliefs or practices in organized religious settings. Having stated this difference, let us proceed to discuss the nature of spirituality.

Spirituality is a more difficult term to conceptualize compared to organized religion, largely because spirituality is a relatively newly defined term in public discourse. Nevertheless, social researchers have provided an array of terms and expressions to try to describe the core features of spirituality. Some theorists have talked about privatized religion (Beyer 1994: 70), invisible religion (Luckmann 1967), less conventional religion (Bibby 2002: 195), interior religion (Hervieu-Leger 2001: 162), individual or non-official religiosity (McGuire 2002: 105, 113), and believing without belonging (Davie 1994). Others have characterized spirituality as consisting of inclusiveness, intimacy, personal experience (Hood 2003: 249), experimentation with unorthodox beliefs and practices, low involvement in communal exercises to develop one's faith, and high interest in mysticism (Fuller 2001: 6). In the Canadian context, Emberley (2002:

48-63) adds that individuals long for the primordial elements of spirituality. Canadians, particularly baby boomers, desire a spirituality that is pure, uncompromised, respected, peaceful, holistic, reverent, egalitarian, democratic, affective, sincere, and authentic. I have chosen to summarize and synthesize these descriptions under the term “private spirituality,”<sup>2</sup> a term that I think adequately captures the essence of many discussions about spirituality.

Once again, Bibby (2002: 194-202) provides us with a useful description of those who practice less conventional or private forms of spirituality.<sup>3</sup> Bibby’s analysis includes areas of religious outlook, practice, experience, knowledge, and behavior. Less conventional Canadians maintain that there is some force beyond the observable world that influences the physical world. They generally practice meditation and reflection as they seek peace of mind and answers to the purposes of life. This group normally experiences oneness with the earth, leading to a greater sense of peace and connection with all living and non-living things. They demonstrate knowledge of things observable and unobservable and of a greater power. Regarding behavior, the less conventional group focuses on nurturing one’s soul, while also accepting others and one’s self.

Although the differences between religion and spirituality are not necessarily black and white, there remain some widely accepted religious beliefs and practices that tend to fit into one of these two categories. I have alluded to some of these measures of religiosity in previous chapters, but it is useful to explicitly identify some of these differences in the context of Canada before proceeding in this chapter. Concerning organized religion, people generally think of attendance at religious services, religious affiliation, involvement in small groups or formal

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<sup>2</sup> Some may struggle with my use of “private” since common spiritual beliefs and practices are not necessarily private (e.g., various new religious movements and New Age spirituality communities). These criticisms are fair. However, as noted by Bibby (2002: 199), Bruce (2002a: 79-82), and Bowen (2004: 238, 279-81), the number of people who practice spirituality and restrict it solely to private beliefs and practices far outnumber those who connect their private spiritual quests with formal communities.

<sup>3</sup> For further descriptions of those who practice private spirituality, see Bowen’s (2004: 18) discussion of seekers, and Fuller (2001: 2) and Stark, Hamberg, and Miller’s (2005: 8) material on the unchurched.

accountability groups, tithing, and volunteering for the local religious organization. Those connected with religious organizations also tend to take on many of the central orthodox religious beliefs common to the religious group. In the Canadian context, we found in chapter two that attendance at religious services has declined over the last number of decades in some religious settings (e.g., mainline Protestants and Catholics), with perhaps some signs of growth in some Conservative Protestant groups. Further, we saw signs of nominal increases in the number of religious affiliates in Canada, while also seeing increases in the “no religion” category. The area of small groups (some prefer to call these “cell groups”) is a relatively new phenomenon (10 years old) in many congregations, and so data in this area is extremely limited. Nevertheless, we know from Bibby’s 1995 survey that 9.5% of Canadians were involved in a small group, although Bibby never mentioned in *Restless Gods* (2002) the percentage of Canadians involved in small groups during his 2000 survey. Additionally, we must be aware of charitable giving and volunteering in Canada, which is one of the focuses of Bowen’s *Christians in a Secular World* (2004). Bowen provides ample evidence that those who are “committed” to a religious faith tend to give more to charities (even excluding tithing to their religious group) as well as volunteer their time to both religious and non-religious agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Private spirituality is a much more difficult and evolving term with which to pinpoint certain religious beliefs and practices. At its most fundamental level, private spirituality is characterized by those beliefs and practices that do not require or necessarily involve interaction with others. For example, in chapter two I presented Bibby’s (2002) optimistic hope for religious groups in Canada based, in large part, on the substantial signs of private spirituality among

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<sup>4</sup> For example, 47% of the very committed, 35% of the less committed, 28% of seekers, and 25% in the non-religious category said that they had volunteered for a local community organization (religious or non-religious) over the last year (Bowen 2004: 144). When asked if they made a charitable donation over the last year, 91% of the very committed, 88% of the less committed, 83% of seekers, and 70% of the non-religious had (2004: 165). Bowen provides more extensive data than these two measures, but the patterns observed above are true for all other measures that Bowen uses concerning volunteering and charitable giving.

Canadians. Bibby provides evidence that Canadians are interested in questions about meaning and purpose in life. Nine out of ten participants ask how the world came into being (2002: 96), 86% believe that there is a basic order to the universe (2002: 178), while even more Canadians are troubled about life's purpose (an increase from 52% in 1975 to 58% in 2000) (2002: 97). Although 40% believe that there is no answer to the meaning of life, 76% of those 40% maintain that life has meaning beyond what we as humans gave to it (2002: 100).

Bibby (2002) also notes that Canadians have concerns about happiness and suffering. Over 90% think about how to experience happiness and over 95% think about why there is suffering in the world (2002: 105). Of significance is the 84% who believe that God or a Higher Power cares about them, despite the existence of suffering in the world (2002: 111). Furthermore, 70% maintain that injustices will be made right again (2002: 112) and 94% believe that when life is not going well, it will get better (2002: 176).

Another area of interest for Bibby (2002) and Canadians is life after death. This common theme to religious groups is on the minds of nine out of ten Canadians (2002: 116). Between 1975 and 2000 there had been a slight increase (65% to 68%) in those who believed in life after death (2002: 119). In addition, of those who never attend religious services, 70% raise the question of whether there is life after death, while 50% believe that there is life after death (2002: 122). Nonetheless, as Canadians wrestle with difficult questions they have not abandoned belief in God or the supernatural. Belief in God remained around 80% between 1985 and 2000, including 73% of Canadians in 2000 who believe that God cares about them personally (2002: 143). Alongside belief in God, approximately 50% in both 1975 and 2000 claimed to have experienced God's presence (2002: 147). In addition to belief and experience, many Canadians increasingly prayed in private weekly or more (11% in 1975 increased to 47% in 2000) (2002: 158).

Finally, among those who never attend religious services, do not claim any religious affiliation, and do not believe in God, 70% believe that injustices will someday be made right, 94% claim that when life is not well it will get better, 68% believe in life after death, and 86% contend that there is a basic order to the universe (Bibby 2002: 181).

In short, contrary to organized religion, private spirituality is a prominent feature of Canadian religious life. However, as I mentioned earlier, there are still some grey areas concerning what counts as organized religion or private spirituality that probably necessitate further research in the future. For example, consider the basic separation between religious beliefs and practices. Some practices can be performed with others and other practices are carried out alone. Beliefs, on the other hand, are ultimately private matters. But, beliefs can also be shared with others either in the immediate context or over a long period of history. These differences raise the question of whether our understanding of organized religion is solely connected to those practices that require the presence of others, or whether someone can hold religious beliefs without communal practices, and still be considered to be strongly connected with a religious organization. These questions lead us to ponder the relationship between religious organizations and people's desire to find community in the modern world.

One thing that separates organized religion from private spirituality is the element of community. Many individuals maintain that religious organizations exist, in part, for people to experience spiritual, emotional, and social forms of community. However, when we consider religious membership or tithing for example, what is inherently communal about these practices? Or, consider the upsurge of the megachurch, primarily in the United States. Many individuals come and go to a large church without ever speaking to another person. Do these realities count as community? This discussion of community probably leads to further questions about the larger sociological debate about community. Namely, how have people's conceptions of community

changed from traditional to modern to postmodern society? How do people search for community, and do they search for community through institutions in ways that had not anticipated or desired when the institutions were first created (e.g., religious organizations exist to lead people to the divine, however, some people use religious organizations to form community)?

Other questionable areas of religious belief and practice include the Internet and religious television programs. Individuals use the Internet to converse with others about spiritual matters and to research various aspects of their faith. In a sense, individuals' involvement on the Internet is private, yet there is a certain element of community with the inclusion of email, chat rooms, and blogging. Similar observations could be made for those who watch religious television programming. Again, some time should be dedicated elsewhere to pursue questions of community and the Internet. How are people's relationships changing with the advent of the Internet, and how do these changes impact people's expectations of others when living in community? For example, are people more upfront with people on the Internet versus verbal dialogue? It is safe to say that some of these beliefs and practices probably share an element of both categories, and that further research into these areas may help to clarify the issues.

## **ORGANIZED RELIGION**

### *Reasons for People Avoiding Religion in Favor of Spirituality*

After offering a conceptual comparison between organized religion and private spirituality, it is logical that we explore why people are pushed away from religious organizations and attracted to private spirituality. I begin by examining the first theme. In chapter two, I outlined a recurring assertion put forth by Bibby concerning people's lack of involvement in organized religion: religious groups, he argued, are primarily responsible for Canadians failing to

connect their private spirituality with religious groups. Bibby supported his position by illustrating how religious groups failed on a number of counts by offering fragmented religious pieces (1987); they failed to address issues of meaning, self-potential, and personal relationships (1987); they failed to collectively offer a consistent message of love and hope to Canadians (1993; also see Emberley 2002: 12); they fell prey to ongoing scandal, and charges of abuse and corruption (1993); they failed to meet the ministry, organizational, and personal needs of Canadians (2002); and they consistently failed to target their affiliates (1993, 2002, 2004).

In turn, I suggested that, although Bibby is correct in suggesting that a number of these factors do affect Canadians' religious decisions, we cannot forget to account for factors independent of the religious organizations that influence the religious decisions of Canadians. For example, it may be that Canadians have not tried very hard to have their ministry, organizational, and personal needs met through religious organizations (Bruce 2002a). Perhaps Canadians feel that their religious needs can be met better beyond the borders of the existing religious organizations. Possibly Canadians believe that the religious rewards that they pursue do not require all the costs associated with involvement in religious organizations (e.g., regular attendance at services, baptism, tithing, or membership).

There are also cultural values that contribute to both people's desire to avoid religious organizations and their intent to pursue private spirituality. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, Bruce (2002a: 82-87, 12-21, 180-82) points to the cultural elements of individualism and rejection of authority, relativism, pluralism, and tolerance. I want to briefly build upon these conceptions in comparing organized religion and private spirituality. To begin, Stark, Hamberg, and Miller (2005: 7) contend that, unlike people connected to organized religious settings, those who practice private spirituality appreciate that they do not require a common creed (belief system), a congregation of people who follow a particular creed, or an

identifiable leader. In fact, as many social theorists note, private spirituality is premised on the reality that people can freely pick and choose from an array of creeds, doctrines, and belief systems, even if their assumptions are seemingly contradictory. Furthermore, this category of people rejects that authorities should hand down truth, favoring instead a personal pursuit of truth and the supernatural, uninterrupted by human measures.<sup>5</sup>

Several theorists also note that private spirituality, rooted in individualism and the rejection of authority, is closely related to people's desire for personal therapy and perfection of the self (Bibby 1993: 52; Bruce 2002a: 134; Hervieu-Leger 2001: 164). For instance, individuals use private spirituality to improve their health, well-being, vitality, beauty, and effectiveness in the workforce. Many think, "if I only do yoga, meditate, pray, or believe in a holistic cosmos, then I will be a better person physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually." Attitudes such as these, Fuller (2001: 156) suggests, are indicative of a larger tendency for private spirituality to be associated with this-world, as opposed to the other-world. People are increasingly focused on the gains and benefits of living a good and full life on this earth, rather than pondering death and the afterlife—themes that many might propose are central to organized religious groups.

Bruce (2002a: 240-41) indicates that relativism, pluralism, and tolerance—largely consequences of societies becoming increasingly liberal, industrial, and democratic—are central values in society that facilitate people's interest in private spirituality and their disenchantment with organized religion. As fewer children are socialized in a particular religious tradition, lower numbers of teens are turning to organized religion, and societies are decreasingly under the influence of religious monopolies, Bruce argues, that people are more prone to adopting eclectic

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<sup>5</sup> Some may be surprised to know that many inside religious organizations also maintain that their private beliefs supersede any beliefs taught by their religious organization (Bowen 2004: 229; Emberley 2002: 11; Grenville 2000: 216; Hervieu-Leger 2001: 173; Rawlyk 1996: 78).

beliefs and practices that foster the cultural values of relativism, pluralism, and tolerance.

Fittingly, Emberley (2002: 195-96) summarizes the beliefs and practices in question as constituting a type of “fusion faith.”

Fusion faith is a medley of traditions, forms of worship, devotional practices, spiritual experiences, and religious beliefs. Like fusion cuisine, it takes the best from each tradition and blends all these prime ingredients into a new concoction, often with a panache that makes the original seem dry and outworn. By necessity, it is antinomian—impatient with custom, adaptable, often brooding and apocalyptic, and rarely does it persist over time. Fusion faith is oblivious to the fact that there are gross contradictions and incompatibilities between its elements, favouring dynamism and drama over coherence and subtlety. Like all the fusion trends in ascendancy throughout popular culture, fusion faith is often aesthetically stylish, seductive, and arousing.

In light of these points by Bruce and Emberley, I am led to consider a related, but relatively unexamined, reason for people both abandoning organized religion and being attracted to private spirituality: exclusive religion. On December 2, 2004, Crossroads Television System aired a documentary by *Listen Up*, directed by Lorna Dueck, entitled “Renewed Religion: Is the Church in Canada Relevant Today?” As part of her documentary, Dueck interviewed four Canadians who identified themselves as spiritual, but not religious, in search of reasons why Canadians either abandoned or currently avoid religious organizations. The overwhelming response of those interviewed was their discontent with religious groups who claim to have an exclusive truth that encompasses particular religious beliefs and practices that ought to guide every aspect of life (also see Fuller 2001: 6). Religious groups that do not acknowledge the validity other religious or spiritual beliefs and practices further bothered these individuals, who I think reflect the views of a large majority of Canadians.<sup>6</sup> These responses lead me to conclude what many may see as obvious: Canadians seem to prefer universal and inclusive religions compared to particular and exclusive religions.

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<sup>6</sup> These sentiments return us to a central theme of chapter two, the relationship between religion and culture. In particular, should religious groups resist, accommodate, or find a balance between the two extremes in trying to reach Canadians? This question is more relevant for theologians than sociologists and should be pursued elsewhere.

When the differences between organized religion and private spirituality are compared, it is interesting to note the overtones of particularism, exclusivity, and higher levels of tension with society found in organized religious groups and the more universal, inclusive, and low levels of tension among those practicing private spirituality (see Bowen 2004: 225; Stark and Finke 2000: 142-54). For example, in traditional Christian doctrine, an exclusivist religion, people lay claim to belief in a particular God (Jesus Christ), where particular beliefs are required (e.g., belief that Jesus died on the cross for humanity's sins), particular commitment levels are expected (e.g., involvement in the local congregation, in the community, *and* in developing one's personal spiritual life), and conflicting positions are held with the broader culture (e.g., open opposition to gay marriage or abortion).<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Canadians who practice private spirituality prefer to reference belief in a higher being or the sacred, with little or no acknowledgement of particular names or characteristics of the gods. Those who restrict their faith to private spirituality rarely adhere to a clear set of beliefs and practices that they fully share with others. Rather they tend to accept combinations of potentially conflicting religious beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming that I have correctly interpreted the religious preferences of Canadians, how are we to interpret Stark's (2000: 151-54) assumption that people are attracted to religious groups that are more exclusive and live in greater tension with society, and less concerned with groups that are less exclusive and live in lower tension with society? It appears, from looking at the Canadian situation, that Canadians, in fact, find religious groups who are less exclusive, less demanding, less life-encompassing, and groups who are in low tension with culture more

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<sup>7</sup> However, even in religious groups there is recent reason to be concerned about exclusivist positions. Bowen (2004: 230-31) reveals that nearly 75% of Catholics and Mainliners believe that all religions are equally good and true, and further, that they reject that those who do not accept Christ as their personal Saviour can never go to heaven. Bowen adds that many in religious congregations maintain that their personal values supersede the teachings of their church.

<sup>8</sup> Given the Canadian emphasis on peacekeeping, neutrality, hospitality, and friendliness, I am not surprised to see similar traits of universalism, inclusiveness, and low-tension relations with others manifested in religious settings.

appealing.<sup>9</sup> However, Stark's secularization thesis is premised on the reality that people will gradually shift away from high-tension groups, only to return to higher tension groups. It may be too early to tell, but if Stark's assumption is correct, maybe Bibby is accurate in suggesting that a renaissance of religion is beginning to emerge. Possibly, the pendulum is swinging in the opposite direction. More time, data, and analysis are certainly needed to test these claims, but wherever the pendulum currently is, religious groups need to constantly question whether they remain in high tension, hoping to attract new converts, or whether they should reduce their tension with society in order to grow their organizations. This question will, once again, force religious groups to identify their core doctrines and clarify which positions are subject to review given the cultural setting of Canada.

### *The Need for Organized Religion*

If people continue to abandon organized religion, and they either maintain or increasingly turn to private spirituality, we need to ask what the social implications for Canadian society will be. However, to answer this question, we must first understand the context by exploring why religious organizations exist in the first place. To begin, as Thomas O'Dea (1966) states, the most foundational reason that religious organizations exist is to carry on the message and practices of the original charismatic leader of a group of people. Religious beliefs are put into writing, practices are embedded in rituals, the experiences of original followers are "re-presented" (O'Dea 1966: 40), and a group of people agree to follow a code of ethics or morals, all in accordance with the founder's mission. In short, organizing religion is a way of objectivating the original subjective attitudes of the believers.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on Bruce's (2002a) analysis of religion in Britain, I would contend that Britons are also attracted to these religious groups who are less exclusive, less demanding, less life-encompassing, and groups who are in low tension with culture.

Second, religious institutions exist to offer specialized functions that are not offered or met in others social spheres (e.g., economics, politics, education, or law) in a differentiated, modern society (O’Dea 1966: 36). Religious organizations provide people with resources to pursue the divine (Stark and Finke 2000: 103).<sup>10</sup> For example, religious organizations offer weekly worship services, small groups, prayer groups, conferences, lectures, and books to achieve the above goal. Although not unique to religion, as religious organizations lead people to the divine, they are equally trying to offer guidance for people’s everyday life rooted in the religious beliefs, practices, and assumptions of the religious group.

Third, O’Dea (1966: 40) points out that religious organizations help individuals go through the changing stages of life (e.g., birth, marriage, death), which more often than not raise feelings of powerlessness, chaos, and uncertainty—core areas that religion addresses. This point is supported by Bibby’s data that I outlined in chapter two.

In total, O’Dea (1966: 54) summarizes that religious groups exist to provide stability, continuity, standardized religious beliefs and practices, and ways to adjust to the values and ideas of society. In a sense, O’Dea suggests many of the same principles that Berger discusses. Religion exists to provide people with ways to experience order amidst chaos and stability in the face of instability. By leading people to the divine, religious organizations help individuals to enter a cosmic rhythm that ties the various components of the world together. In short, religious organizations aid individuals in staving off anomic experiences.

Assuming that religious organizations continue to have a limited role in Canadian society, there are four implications for Canadian society that I think ought to be considered. First, as Berger’s (1967) material reveals, humans constantly find themselves in uncontrollable situations such as accidents, natural disasters, diseases, and war. While it is true that Canadians seem to be

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the assumption for religious groups is that a divine being exists.

content to pursue the sacred in their own way, shape, and form, there remains continued evidence that people still turn to religious organizations to perform funerals, or to religious leaders for counseling and wisdom at times of grieving (e.g., during the weeks following 9-11) (Bibby 2002; Bowen 2004). My point is that as people turn to a doctor or dentist, a trained specialist, to address physical ailments, there remains a need for religious specialists to help meet the spiritual needs of Canadians—a point repeatedly and correctly noted by Bibby. If religious organizations cease to exist, or at the very least, continue to decline in their presence in Canadian society, we will find that many individuals will struggle to adequately negotiate the natural life process of a loved one's death. In turn, individuals might experience any range of emotions that may, in fact, affect people's effectiveness in their family, employment settings, personal relations, and overall life. For these reasons, trained religious specialists and religious organizations are needed to address areas that other spheres of society are not equipped to address.

Second, Bibby (2002: 210-19) highlights the countless relational struggles among Canadians, heightened especially for those who are not actively involved in a local congregation. For example, Bibby points out that few parents' worry about their children, most parents and teenagers argue frequently, and many Canadians are concerned about problems in their marriages (also see Bowen 2004: 116). In addition to relational struggles, Bibby shows there is mounting concern about questions of morality and civility in Canada. High percentages of Canadians believe that everything is relative (70%), many maintain that Canadian values are changing for the worse (56%), and half of Canadians believe that the low levels of participation in organized religion is having a negative impact on Canadian society (Bibby 2002: 217-19). Bibby is concerned with where people will learn morality if they are not learning it in the religious organizations, the educational institutions, the family, the media, and the workplace.

Bowen (2004: 288) echoes Bibby's concerns, suggesting that with growing percentages of Canadians identifying as non-religious, there is reason to be concerned about declining life satisfaction, declining concern for people, family, and relationships, and increasing marital problems. Bowen (2004: 71) reveals that 52% of the very committed, 43% of the less committed, 44% of seekers, and 38% of the non-religious are very satisfied with life in general.<sup>11</sup> Regarding relationships with friends or family, Bowen (2004: 122-39) indicates that those who are more committed to their religious faith tend to have more close relationships, while also placing greater importance on making those relationships a priority in life. Concerning marriage, Bowen (2004: 115) illustrates that 17% of weekly attenders, 19% of monthly attenders, 30% of rare attenders, and 37% of those who never attend had been divorced at the time of a 1996 Reid survey.

Volunteering and charitable giving is a third area where organized religion impacts society. In Bowen's (2004: 142) recent book *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience*, he illustrates that 94% of Canadians believe that voluntary and charitable organizations play a major role in making communities better places. Accordingly, Bowen (2004: 143-63) reveals that Canadians who are very committed to their Christian faith actually volunteered more of their time (47%) than those less committed, particularly those who are seekers (28%) or not religious at all (25%). While most might assume that the very committed would volunteer their time for the local congregation, which is true in many cases, the very committed actually volunteer more time in non-religious agencies (35%) compared to those who are not very committed to a religious tradition (32% of the less committed volunteered, 27% of seekers volunteered, and 25% of the non-religious volunteered). Moreover, the very committed

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<sup>11</sup> Bowen (2004: 44) categorizes and compares four groups of Canadians. The very committed attend services weekly and define themselves as religious, or at least believe that religion is important to them (20%). The less committed attend one to three times a month or attend weekly, but say that religion is not very important to them (12%). The seeker category includes those that say that religion is important to their life, but rarely or never attends religious services (28%). Finally, the non-religious rarely or never attend religious services and indicate that religion is not important to them (40%).

are once again recognized by Bowen (2004: 165-181) as the group that gives most often, and the most amount of money to charities.<sup>12</sup> Again, while the very committed give most of their money to local congregations and denominations, this group also gives more money to non-religious agencies when compared with seeker or non-religious categories of people.

Bowen continues by pointing out that, although a large part of money given to religious organizations is used to either maintain or build onto existing facilities, the purpose for these expenditures is for religious buildings to be centers of non-religious activities (e.g., boy scouts groups, alcoholics anonymous groups, or shelters for the homeless). Further, religious groups spend a significant portion of their money on religious clergy, which, when compared to nations that have a state sponsored religious monopoly, saves governments a lot of money and time fulfilling certain social responsibilities. For example, religious clergy provide counseling and teaching resources, and help to meet physical needs (e.g., shelter, food, and clothing) in ways that either are in place of or complementary to secular social agencies. Bowen's point is that without organized religious groups, governments and individuals would have to substantially increase their efforts to fulfill some of these basic societal functions.

The remaining implication concerns religious organizations and individuals more than society itself, but should still be raised in the context of this discussion. Stark and Finke (2000: 113) argue, "vigorous efforts by religious organizations are required to motivate and sustain high levels of individual religious commitment." Bruce (2002a: 20) goes one step further and argues that the "privatization of religion removes much of the social support that is vital to reinforcing beliefs, make the maintenance of distinct lifestyles very difficult, weakens the impetus to

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<sup>12</sup> These measures are in terms of the levels of activity and giving in the previous year. Ninety-one percent of the very committed, for example, made a charitable donation over the last year, averaging \$518 per donor. This percentage slid down to 70% for the non-religious, and an average of \$89 per donor among the non-religious (Bowen 2004: 165).

evangelize and encourages a *de facto* relativism that is fatal to shared beliefs.” As people participate in religious services, small groups, accountability groups, Sunday school classes and lectures, individuals are regularly reminded of their beliefs, practices, and obligations to their faith. Stark (2000: 138; 2005: 5) believes that participating alongside others informs people’s religious decisions, often resulting in greater levels of commitment and confidence in a distinct, shared set of religious beliefs and practices. Bowen’s (2004) latest findings supports this assertion. Canadians who regularly attend religious services are more prone to practicing the various elements of private spirituality than those not attending regular religious services (also see Bibby 2002: 159, 162).

Put simply, involvement in organized religion helps to reinforce private spirituality, which helps to strengthen people’s involvement in Canadian society (e.g., volunteering and charitable giving). If people practice private spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion, Bruce (2002a: 91-103) suggests that problems occur with regard to maintaining religious commitment, consensus, the impact of beliefs (both social and individual), the reproduction of beliefs and practices, and their integrity. More clearly, Canadians with diffuse or fragmented religion will fail, or at least struggle, to have a concerted, sustained effort in shaping society along moral and social lines. Hence, Bruce concludes, “God is Dead.” Although it remains uncertain, if Bruce is correct, the larger question is how long will private spirituality continue to linger before that too disappears? Can private spirituality be consequential in informing all of one’s life?

These points raised by Bruce lead us to a necessary discussion about what exactly we mean by consequential religion. How do we assess whether or not religious beliefs and practices are influencing Canadian’s way of life? Further, is there evidence that those who regularly participate in organized religion have a more consequential faith than those who limit their

religion primarily to private spirituality? In part, the above section has helped to address these questions. However, further evidence from Kurt Bowen's *Christians in a Secular World* (2004), in the areas of well-being and personal values, intimate relations, civic responsibilities, and public life and social values reveal that, in fact, those strongly associated with organized religion have a religious faith that appears to be more consequential. Although there is neither time nor space to discuss each individual measure within these categories, I will highlight some of the key measures that Bowen uses.

Beginning with personal values, when asked if they were very happy, 59% of the very committed, 42% of the less committed, 46% of seekers, and 38% of the non-religious responded "yes" (Bowen 2004: 71). Fifty-two percent of the very committed, 29% of the less committed, 39% of seekers, and 29% of the non-religious claim that it is more important to understand their inner self than to be rich and successful (2004: 85). When questioned if they would get even with someone who harms them, 15% of the very committed, 27% of the less committed, 21% of the seekers, and 33% of the non-religious said "yes" (2004: 94).

Concerning personal relationships, when asked if a man should refuse a promotion at work if it means spending too little time with his family, 61% of weekly attenders, 53% of monthly attenders, 52% of rare attenders, and 50% of those who never attend agreed (Bowen 2004: 123). When asked the same question, but regarding women, 70% of weekly attenders, 63% of monthly attenders, 60% of rare attenders, and 57% of those who never attend agreed (2004: 123). When Canadians were questioned about their relationships with neighbors, 73% of weekly attenders, 71% of monthly attenders, 65% of rare attenders, and 58% of those who never attend have weekly or more frequent contact with neighbors over the last twelve months (2004: 136).

In the area of volunteering and charitable giving, I have already provided some data. However, there is some further evidence that should be presented, particularly regarding

volunteering and charitable giving to secular organizations.<sup>13</sup> For example, at the time of a 1997 survey, 35% of the very committed, 32% of the less committed, 27% of seekers, and 25% of the non-religious volunteered in a secular organization over the last year (Bowen 2004: 157). Further, the very committed averaged 158 hours, the less committed 123 hours, the seekers 135 hours, and the non-religious 131 hours in volunteer time over the last year (2004: 157). In giving to secular charities, 78% of the very committed, 77% of the less committed, 78% of seekers, and 68% of the non-religious made a charitable donation over the last year (2004: 173). Moreover, the very committed averaged \$143, the less committed \$83, the seeker \$88, and the non-religious \$73 in donations over the last year (2004: 173).

Finally, Bowen (2004) examines differences in people's public and social values. When asked if they voted in the last federal election, 82% of the very committed, 81% of the less committed, 75% of seekers, and 72% of the non-religious had (2004: 184). Regarding ethics, Canadians were asked if they would cheat on their taxes if they had the chance. Eighty-eight percent of the very committed, 81% of the less committed, 82% of seekers, and 70% of the non-religious maintained that this behavior was not ethical (2004: 204). Canadians were also questioned about whether they have an important responsibility to help poor people in countries around the world. Eighty percent of the very committed, 76% of the less committed, 66% of seekers, and 51% of the non-religious agreed (2004: 210).

Based on the data examined by Bowen, three conclusions can be made. First, it is safe to conclude that, generally, those who are more actively involved in organized forms of religion tend to have a more consequential faith than those not actively involved in organized religion, especially the non-religious.

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<sup>13</sup> I am limiting this section to secular organizations given that most not associated with organized religion will not volunteer their time or give money to religious organizations.

Second, without discrediting the first finding, there are slight variations between respondents in the two middle categories, which, at times, leave those in the middle categories more similar to the very committed and at other times to the non-religious. However, as Bowen recognizes, the two middle categories are more characteristic of those who practice private spirituality (i.e., minimal attendance at religious services). In short, despite the slight similarities between the middle categories and the very committed, on the whole, there is not much similarity between the very committed and those not as committed. Those who are not very committed tend to have a less consequential faith than those who are very committed and actively involved in a religious organization.

Third, we must always keep in mind that, although those who are very committed are showing high signs of consequential religion, the percentage of Canadians in the very committed category has decreased significantly over the last fifty years. This finding is especially important for those debating about whether Canada is increasingly religious or secular. To resolve which is the case, should we look at the smaller proportion of Canadians who have higher levels of religious belief and practice, or the larger proportion of Canadians who hold nominal levels of religious belief and practice? This quandary is the basis for pursuing the next section about whether strong signs of private spirituality support that Canada is experiencing a religious renaissance or continued secularization.

By making the above observations, it is useful to explore if these religious preferences are merely correlated, or if there is some type of causal relationship taking place. Is religion shaping people's tendencies to act in certain ways, or are those behaviors leading people to be more religious? As Berger (1967: 5-10) suggests, the answer is probably both, however to shed light on this situation, I present Bowen's (2004: 279-81) three point conclusion about the future of religion if many more Canadians prefer to limit themselves to private spirituality or no religion at

all. First, as the categories of very committed and less committed Christians decline, one would suspect that the seeker category would increase. However, instead of the seeker group increasing, the no religion category has increased. In short, Bowen is not convinced that people will be returning to organized religious groups, which based on the above data, means that religion will not be all that consequential in the future for many Canadians.

Second, Bowen (2004: 279-81) reveals that seekers are much less prone to believing or regularly practicing various forms of private spirituality, especially when compared to the very committed. Examples include belief in God (67% versus 91%), belief that one has an intense personal relationship with God (55% versus 88%), belief that spirituality is important to them (35% versus 78%), and belief that they have spiritual needs (58% versus 79%) and that their interest in spirituality is growing (18% versus 43%). Moreover, smaller percentages of seekers actually pray regularly (53% versus 89%), read religious literature (11% versus 69%), or express interest in the New Age (15%).

Third and finally, Bowen demonstrates that seekers in Canada are more similar to the non-religious than the religious in terms of their attitudes and behavior. The examples provided above support this claim.

Bowen's analysis seems to suggest that participation in organized religion generally causes people to be more involved in society (e.g., volunteering and charitable giving), which does not appear to be the case for Canadians who primarily practice private spirituality. Furthermore, as Bowen hypothesizes, if involvement in society were to lead to greater involvement in organized religion, then we should theoretically see an increase in participation in organized religion, and we have not, nor should we expect so in the future.

Stark, Hamberg, and Miller (2005: 19) effectively capture the social problems posed by the turn to private spirituality and away from organized religion:

Unchurched religions lack authority, both moral and intellectual. *Creedless* religions impose no standards—individuals are truly expected to be their own philosophers or theologians and the concept of ‘sin’ is either very vague or entirely absent. Religions without *congregations* cannot exert social pressure to observe the moral order, even if they maintain a creed. Therefore, the lack of creeds and/or congregations causes unchurched religions to have little or no social impact. Put another way, where unchurched religions predominate, the result is a culture in which religion plays, at most, a very peripheral role.

## **PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY: RENAISSANCE, SECULARIZATION, OR CHANGE?**

Is the growth of private spirituality indicative of a religious renaissance, increased secularization, or just a change in how religion will be in the future? Answering this question is rather subjective, and influenced by one’s biases, past experiences, and current framework for viewing the world (see Lambert 1999). Therefore, my purpose in this section is to highlight a few of the different paradigms and assumptions that may impact how individuals or groups assess the situation.

In order to conclude that a renaissance of religion is occurring, we need to be clear about whether we are talking about organized religion or private spirituality, since the two terms have different meanings for most. Assuming that we are discussing a renaissance of spirituality, which is what many implicitly suggest, we need to have evidence revealing that substantially more people are pondering issues of meaning and purpose, for example, today than in past generations. Clearly, this first assumption is not true. Evidence of private spirituality has been found throughout the centuries in literature, media, and popular culture. Further, those who argue that there is an increased interest in New Age forms of spirituality must deal with Bruce’s arguments, and the low numbers and percentages of people actually identifying with and practicing New Age principles.

Of course, Bibby, who seems to be the main person arguing for a renaissance of religion in Canada, is trying to augment his renaissance thesis with a second assumption: in addition to

the continued presence of private spirituality, religious organizations are being rejuvenated as Canadians return to their congregations. I do not need to repeat my concerns over Bibby's second assumption, only to suggest that his assumption is presumptuous and subject to further review.

Given these distinctions, Fuller (2001: 154) suggests that private spirituality has become the norm rather than the minority in the modern religious landscape. I agree. However, my agreement with Fuller is not based on a perceived increased interest in private spirituality among Canadians. Rather, I maintain that the decline of involvement in organized religion since the 1950s (even if there are modest signs of a renaissance in recent years) has facilitated a shift in balance that has allowed private spirituality to become the norm. In other words, as Canadians have been "put off" by organized religion, they have come to favor the more generic expressions of private spirituality.

Contrary to this first position, to argue that the world is becoming increasingly secular, based on the preference for private spirituality at the expense of organized religion, is to assume that religion is meant to inform all aspects of people's lives. Most religious groups take this position, and even Bibby in *Fragmented Gods* (1987) and Bruce in *God is Dead* (2002a) note that fragmented or diffuse religion generally fails to inform all of life. However, many who practice private spirituality claim that spirituality is equally important to their overall life. But as Bowen argues, with regard to well-being and personal values, intimate relations, civic responsibilities, and public life and social values, most who practice private spirituality are far less successful in connecting their religious beliefs with their actions.

Even so, though Bowen (2004) provides numerous examples of ways in which the very committed differ from the less committed, it is still valuable to ask what counts as consequential religion. What do we mean when we talk about religion informing all of life? Many assume that because individuals attend religious services that their religion is consequential. In part, this

assumption is true. However, in many ways those who attend services fail to privately practice central principles of their faith. For example, very few Christians read their Bible on a regular basis, a supposed cornerstone of their faith. As I proposed in chapter two, people's lack of attention to reading scripture is a symptom of a lack of discipline—Canadians prefer to practice those elements of private spirituality that require the least amount of discipline. My proposition rings true with Stark and Finke (2000: 100) who, amidst their discussion that people usually seek religious groups that are more exclusive, highlight that people prefer to minimize their religious costs and delay their religious payments to receive religious rewards. They continue on to suggest that people's social networks play a significant role in influencing the extent of one's religiosity. Hence, if one's close friends tend to minimize their religious costs or delay their religious payments, then one is also likely to limit the extensiveness of their religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, although not central to this thesis, I question the usefulness and effectiveness of megachurches where people are less likely to have close social networks inside the religious groups, which is proven by Stark and Finke (2000: 154-62) to lead to lower levels of religious beliefs and practices when compared to smaller congregations.

Does this lack of discipline in private spirituality suggest that their religion is not consequential? Conversely, do we conclude that because some practice private spirituality to the exclusion of involvement in organized religion, that their faith is not consequential? These questions can be answered, in part, by returning to my earlier point about religious rewards and costs. Conceivably, those practicing private spirituality perceive different religious costs involved with consequential religion compared with those practicing in organized religious settings. Maybe volunteering and charitable giving, for example, are not a part of what it means to live a life that is guided by one's own spirituality. We need more research in this area and I attempt to provide guidance for how this might best be done in the next chapter.

Finally, one may conclude that the increased presence of private spirituality and the decreased role of organized religion in society reflect a larger cultural shift in the forms and expressions of religion (Rawlyk 1996: 62; Stark, Hamberg, and Miller 2005: 14; Wuthnow 2001: 312). In many ways, this observation and conclusion is correct. However, contending that religion is merely changing forms does not prevent us from the need to still assess, using the questions raised in the previous two paragraphs, whether these changes lean more towards the renaissance of religion or the secularization of society.

I am dubious that there is a renaissance of religion, for the reasons stated previously. However, I cannot conclusively contend that Canada is increasingly secular either. I completely agree with Bibby who suggests that there is great potential for religious organizations to capitalize on the affiliate and private spirituality markets in Canada. However, I am not content to accept Bibby's interpretations that religious groups have failed to accurately read the marketplace, in part, because I am not convinced that Canadians have provided an accurate depiction of their true thoughts towards religious organizations. This critique is developed further in the next chapter on methodology. For now, it is sufficient to suggest that if, after interviewing Canadians and pushing them further for more honest answers, we discover that Canadians still reject religious organizations, then we must conclude either that Canada is increasingly secular, based on the view that private spirituality is not consequential, or Canada remains religious, because most people have not abandoned their various beliefs and practices associated with private spirituality. We may arrive at the conclusion, which I am increasingly convinced of, that Canadians are, contrary to Bibby's popular belief, rather content to limit their religious and spiritual needs to being met through private spirituality.

## CONCLUSION

We have compared the differences between organized religion and private spirituality for the purposes of gaining a better understanding of how religious or secular Canadian society is. There is no question that deep-seated cultural factors of individualism, rejection of authority, relativism, pluralism, and tolerance all contribute to the current Canadian preference for practicing private spirituality. But I provided several examples of how a decreased presence of organized religion in Canadian society could prove harmful to the social fabric of Canada, which ought to be of interest to sociologists and even the non-religious.

In light of this discussion, some could certainly speculate, as Bowen does, that the future of religion in Canada is not bright. Bowen (2004: 64-65) suggests that the decline of young people fully or partially engaged with organized religion, and the increased numbers of young people identifying as non-religious, suggests there is little reason for optimism that organized religion will rebound in the near future. Moreover, most Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations are aging. Bowen might be correct. But I think there are some central questions that have gone unanswered in the sociology of religion, particularly in response to Bibby's criticisms of how religious groups have supplied religion to Canadians, which will help us to further understand the distinction between religion and spirituality and their future roles in Canadian society. I turn my attention to these matters in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### *Methodological Critique and Suggestions for Further Study*

Methodological criticism is rarely a point of focus for many in the sociology of religion, but I contend it is central to discerning whether Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion or continued secularization. One theorist, however, who did recently devote attention to criticizing methodology is Steve Bruce in *God is Dead* (2002a: 186-203). In his tenth chapter, Bruce tackles four specific methodological problems in the sociology of religion, including the vague and leading questions used by researchers in gathering data, how researchers tend to interpret possibly secular responses as religious, the contestable cut-off points used by scholars when they sort data, and how researchers are too tolerant of respondents who evade survey and interview questions.

Concerning the first, Bruce (2002a: 187-89) openly challenges theorists such as Bibby who use leading questions about meaning and purpose to illustrate that most people think about meaning and purpose and, therefore, are demanding to have spiritual needs met. Bruce suggests that maybe people do not desire to have their concerns about meaning and purpose met through reference to the transcendent or supernatural. Rather, people might be looking for secular, empirical means (e.g., money, employment, or politics) to have such concerns met.

In light of my concerns that Canadians have not responded to religious groups who have changed their product to better service consumers, I am inclined to agree with Bruce, but we probably need more time and data to further test his suspicions.

Regarding his second criticism, Bruce is suspect of those who interpret the privatization of religion, or the increased focus on private spirituality, as evidence that religion is either changing in form or that the world is certainly not secular. To the contrary, as illustrated in chapters three and four, Bruce argues that these signs of private spirituality are really indicative

of wide spread secularization throughout the modern Western world.

The focus of this chapter, however, is on Bruce's third and fourth points regarding cut-off points used by researchers in quantitative studies (e.g., surveys), and the need for researchers to push respondents further for more honest and accurate answers when gathering qualitative data (e.g., face-to-face interviews and focus groups). Under four headings, numbers and percentages, membership and affiliation, categorizing respondents, and longitudinal data, I apply Bruce's methodological critique to Bibby's work. Many other sociologists of religion are equally guilty of these shortcomings, but Bibby's work is central to the sociology of religion in Canada. In all four of these areas, the focus of my critique is Bibby's interpretation of the data, which in many cases is directly related to the convoluted survey and interview questions he uses and his failure to push respondents further for more accurate and complete answers in the form of face-to-face interviews. At each point, I offer alternative suggestions in the hope that we can gain a more satisfactory picture of religion and spirituality in Canada. As I highlighted at the end of chapter one, the lens through which people interpret the same set of data has tremendous impact on whether we conclude that Canada is experiencing a religious renaissance or further secularization.

## **NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES**

The distinction between numeric versus percentile data is one that I discussed briefly in chapter two, but one that I want to expand on here. By way of a quick review, in 1987, Bibby (p.13) emphasized that many religious groups were falsely interpreting the numeric growth of local congregations in the 1980s as a sign that religious groups were gaining momentum in Canadian society. Bibby stressed that religious groups and sociologists alike must focus on percentile data as a more precise and accurate read of religion in Canada. Conversely, in 2002,

Bibby (p. 78, 80, and 83) cites increased or stabilized<sup>1</sup> numbers in Catholic and Other faith settings as partial evidence for the renaissance of organized religion in Canada (see chapter two of this thesis for specific data). More importantly, however, these numbers are contrasted with clear declines in percentile data, leaving me to question the validity of Bibby's interpretation of the numbers.

To begin, I think that both types of numerical and percentile data are useful in giving the reader a more complete answer to a particular research question. However, I would add that Bibby's original assertion that we look primarily at percentile data is the most accurate when trying to assess the nature and extent of religiosity in Canada. My reason is simple, but should not be overlooked. Consider for a moment that a number of local congregations are growing, numerically, as many religious leaders claim is taking place. From this brief statement, it would seem logical to conclude that religious groups are, in fact, increasing in their influence in society. However, if we think about the equally, if not more rapidly, growing number of people abandoning or avoiding local congregations, our picture becomes a bit clearer. Although a numerical increase took place in religious organizations, a larger increase took place outside of the religious context. Put simply, it is actually the secular realm that gains in influence in society, not religious groups. In reading these comparisons, one must be clear that we are discussing religion in Canada, not one's local community. If one were to study various pockets of society in Canada, we might find both a numerical and a proportionate increase in congregational involvement. However, we cannot be deceived into thinking that proportionate growth in a few communities' means that religious groups are experiencing a renaissance in Canada, this simply is not true at present.

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<sup>1</sup> More accurately, Bibby actually shows slight decreases in actual numbers in Catholic settings, but his overall point is that the mass numerical decrease has stabilized.

The discussion of numbers and proportions leads to a related topic of quality versus quantity in religious organizations. Some scholars place an emphasis on the multitude of Canadians who are affiliated with a religious group, but whose religious and spiritual practices are nominal at best. In many respects I think that Bibby's *Restless Gods* (2002) is a prime example of this position, even if Bibby might actually argue that people's religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are not nominal. Others emphasize the few Canadians who are really committed to a religious tradition, but whose level of religion and spirituality is much more extensive. In some cases, Bibby provides evidence of this position too. Similarly, in *Christians in a Secular World* (2004: 22), Bowen, readily rejects the "proposition that Christianity today is socially insignificant, though [he] would quickly add that the percentage of Canadians who are active Christians has declined substantially since the 1950s." Put simply, although less people believe and practice their faith, those who are, are doing so to greater degrees than in past generations. Further, although many cite the signs of private spirituality ("seekers" according to Bowen) as evidence that religion is playing a real role in society, Bruce (2002a: 91) with his discussion of diffuse religion, cautions that those in the seeker and non-religious categories are not actually believing or practicing their faith in a way that is socially significant as traditionally defined. That is, their faith is not manifested, for the most part as we have already seen, in areas of well-being and personal values, intimate relationships, civic responsibilities, and public life and social values, or private spiritual practices.

My reason for raising this point of quality versus quantity is simple. Depending on which end of the spectrum one gives greater weight, drastically different interpretations can be given to the nature of religion in Canada. Bibby (2002) tends to emphasize the quantity of religious affiliates who are not abandoning their religious roots, which is part of his evidence for concluding that Canada is experiencing a religious renaissance. Bruce (2002a) tends to stress the

lack of quality in people's religious beliefs and practices, leading to his conclusion that the world is becoming increasingly secular. Bowen (2004), on the other hand, provides a strong awareness of both positions, which results in an interpretation with which I agree with. Specifically, based on the latest data and various interpretations, we must be skeptical of the renaissance thesis, but not content to conclude that secularization has triumphed. Fewer people are actively involved in religious organizations, but those who are, are involved in greater ways than in the past. I completely agree with Bibby that the gods are stirring among Canadians, but this stirring cannot be the grounds for concluding that a renaissance of religion in Canada is underway.

## **MEMBERSHIP AND AFFILIATION**

It is no secret that Bibby has always emphasized the centrality of the religious affiliate<sup>2</sup> to the religious landscape of Canada. In *Fragmented Gods* (1987: 48), Bibby acknowledged, "despite their increasing tendency to stay away from worship services, Canadians are not abandoning the historically dominant groups." In *Unknown Gods* (1993: 155), Bibby indicated, "regardless of their participation levels in religious groups, most Canadians still include religion as part of how they define themselves." Finally, in *Restless Churches* (2004: 62-65), Bibby reiterates the central importance of Canadians who identify with a religious group, indicate no intention of switching to another religious group, yet show no real signs of participation in the religious group.

In light of these observations, I want to raise a few points for methodological consideration. First, one must be aware that membership lists in religious groups include a large proportion of people who are no longer involved in that particular group (Bowen 2004: 26-28, 48). As an active participant in a religious organization, I am well aware of the fact that in most

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<sup>2</sup> By affiliate, Bibby (2004: 62-65) is referring to those Canadians who identify with a religious group, indicate no intention of switching to another group, yet show no real signs of participation in the religious group.

cases, when people leave a religious organization they do not call their religious group and request that their name be removed from the membership list. Yet, somehow religious membership always comes up in the literature as a common measure of religiosity used to illustrate the level of religion in a society (see Bibby 2002: 11, 22, 63; Finke and Stark 2005). I consider this use of religious membership problematic given the fact that many members are not actively or, in many cases, remotely involved with their religious group. How much information do we really glean from membership numbers? I am not suggesting that we do away altogether with this measure. I am only suggesting that we not place as much emphasis as has been done in the past on this measure of religiosity.

Affiliation, which is slightly different than membership, since people can identify or affiliate with a group without being a formal member, is really at the heart of Bibby's (2002 and 2004) latest renaissance thesis. Bibby identifies two main areas of support for his assertion that the religious affiliate is, perhaps, the source of great hope for the continued renaissance of religion in Canada: the openness of affiliates to greater involvement in religious organizations, and their desire to have rites of passage performed in religious settings.

Concerning the first area, Bibby put the following question to respondents who attend religious services less than once a month: "would you consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious group if you found it to be worthwhile for yourself or your family" (2002: 50). Fifteen percent responded "yes," 40% replied "perhaps," and the remaining 45% said "no." By combining the "yes" and "perhaps" categories, which I contend, like Bruce (2002a) and Bowen (2004),<sup>3</sup> are extremely liberal and misleading categories, Bibby's conclusion is that 55%

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<sup>3</sup> Both Bruce and Bowen contend that more conservative measures and interpretations of data are necessary so that the reader is not intentionally or unintentionally misled. Further, since most religious groups tend to be more conservative in their expectations of religious beliefs and practices, it is only fitting that the interpretation of data is similar to the breakdown that one would find within the reference group of study.

are considering the possibility of being more involved. If we use the 15% instead of the 55% as the cut-off for interpreting the percentage of Canadians who are really interested in greater involvement, we come to a very different conclusion.<sup>4</sup> The picture is not as optimistic, but I think more realistic. In suggesting these things, I am assuming that some within the “perhaps” category may actually be open to greater involvement. Accordingly, I am presuming that some within the “perhaps” category are also definitely not interested in greater involvement. Bibby’s interpretation, by collapsing the categories, overextends the data and places false hope and optimism where there is none to be conclusively found. In the future, we should probably eliminate the middle category and insert some additional categories—“yes, perhaps” and “no, but possibly”—that may better measure the degree of people’s desire for greater involvement, which is what I think Bibby is after. Unfortunately, in Bibby’s latest 2005 study, the question reads the same as in past surveys.

Another problem arises with Bibby’s question concerning what people mean by “greater involvement.” Using an open-ended question, Bibby asks respondents on surveys to indicate what kinds of things would make greater involvement worthwhile. Bibby (2002: 220-21; 2004: 48-51), as I discussed in chapter two, identifies that religious groups need to do a better job of meeting the ministry, organizational, and personal needs of Canadians. Without repeating the nature of these areas, I want to bring forth some unanswered questions that raise doubts about accepting Bibby’s analysis. Relating to ministry factors, in what ways have respondents pursued avenues to have their ministry needs met? More specifically, if Canadians are looking for religious communities to offer love, community, wisdom on key life issues, and a strong moral environment, how have Canadians reached out to have such needs met? Have Canadians attended religious services, small groups, Sunday school classes, or any other type of ministry settings? If

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Macdonald (2005: 46) makes the same critique of Bibby in his article in the *Presbyterian Record*.

so, how many times have they attended? Did they try once or twice and then give up or did they earnestly try to have their religious and spiritual needs met through religious organizations?

When asking these questions, I agree that religious group's still need to constantly improve their ability to meet Canadians' ministry needs. However, I think that we need to equally acknowledge that the average Canadian must also do their part in reaching out to the local congregation.

Without hesitation, these questions need to be asked in face-to-face interviews and focus groups, and respondents need to be pressed a bit further to gain a more complete picture of the ministry factors that Bibby discusses.

Organizationally, Bibby highlights that Canadians are in search of groups that are less formal, doctrinal, and distant from the everyday Canadian, a leading reason why many opt for private spirituality over organized forms of religion. However, acknowledging that many religious groups, Conservative Protestants in particular, have transformed their services to be more "seeker friendly," I am unconvinced that these organizational factors should be given as much credence as Bibby and others give to them. Again, we need more extensive qualitative data to clarify these questions. Why, if there are many options of extremely liberal to ultra conservative congregations, are Canadians not finding any congregation that meets their organizational criteria? When Canadians say that they are open to greater involvement, what is the intensity of their desire? In other words, how hard have Canadians truly searched for a religious group or congregation that would lead to their greater involvement? Again, I do not question the legitimacy of Bibby's survey question or people's "yes" response; I am merely indicating that perhaps people's openness to greater involvement in religious groups is not that consequential, because it is passive. People might be open to greater involvement, but not to the degree that they will extend themselves to make that involvement a reality. If this is the case, then what importance should we attribute to this data?

In the area of personal factors, I struggle to accept that the supply side, the local congregation, is responsible for Canadians' not becoming more involved. Some Canadians suggest that when they have children, they will return to the churches so that their children are raised in moral settings. Other Canadians indicate that if they worked less, then they would have time to be more involved in religious organizations. However, somehow Bibby concludes from these factors that religious groups are the problem. Once more, we need to press respondents in face-to-face interviews and focus groups for more complete answers concerning the underlying personal issues that keep Canadians from greater involvement. After all, if Canadians are waiting to have children, or they are hoping to have different work hours, in order to increase their involvement in religious organizations, why not call a spade a spade: Canadians are simply not interested in giving organized religion a more central role in their lives. Using Britain as his test case, Bruce (2002a: 195) reveals that the top four reasons for people not going to church include "too busy," "not interested," "boring," and "old fashioned." The top two reasons tend to affirm my suspicion and Bruce's that many are simply indifferent towards religion, particularly organized religion. The latter two reasons seem to be mere excuses since, as I said earlier, many groups have made significant advances in these areas. If my assertions are accurate, which we need more time to explore, it is improper to interpret the data to mean that religious groups are failing Canadians in the area of personal factors.

Bibby's second main area of focus concerning religious affiliates is rites of passage. Bibby has repeatedly argued throughout his writings that religious affiliation is important to the many Canadians who turn to religious groups for rites of passage. In making this claim, Bibby (2004: 29) fittingly recognizes that "such a pursuit of religious rites would reflect the pressures of relatives and friends. But in other cases, it would be 'more than just for mom'—driven by a sense that somehow 'God needed to be brought in' on what was happening." I respond to this statement

in two ways. First, how do we know that Canadians are looking to God as motivation to have their rites of passages performed in religious settings? Conversely, how do we know that people are giving in to familial or cultural pressures? We do not, since there is no systematic research on the topic. We need to ask respondents, using qualitative research methods, about their reasons for either turning to religious groups in the past, or expressing a desire to do so in the future, to observe rites of passage. Second, if religious affiliates do actually believe that God has a role in their rites of passage, but they are not actively involved in religious activities throughout the rest of their life, how are we to interpret their observance of the rites of passage in a religious setting? Do these behaviors merely further Bibby's original thesis that religion is fragmented in Canada, or do these behaviors support Bibby's renaissance thesis, or at least refute the secularization paradigm? These are questions that I think have gone unanswered in the sociology of religion, and need to be addressed more closely and thoroughly in face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

In summarizing his findings on religious affiliates and predicting the future of religion in Canada, Bibby (2002: 69-70) suggests that "it seems to make good sense to assume that since most of the well-established organizations are going to persist, along with large numbers of their affiliates, it will only be a matter of time before they experience rejuvenation." In my mind, something is not adding up. Canadians have always held their membership and affiliation numbers, and turned to religious groups for rites of passage. Further, Canadians have always believed and practiced various measures of private spirituality that Bibby cites as evidence for a religious renaissance. Nevertheless, organized religious groups have, more or less, seen a continual slide in active involvement over the last fifty years. What does Bibby see in Canadian culture and the religious landscape that would lead to the conclusion that rejuvenation seems inevitable? Given the activity, or lack thereof, of religious affiliates in Canada, I am inclined to

agree with Bowen (2004: 48) who, contrary to Bibby, excludes the religious affiliates of Canadian groups “from the ranks of the Committed because [he thinks] the religious identification of this 43% of Canadians is more a matter of historical memory than one of on-going concern and involvement.”

## **CATEGORIZING RESPONDENTS**

A common problem within the social sciences is attaining widespread, agreed upon definitions for social scientific and everyday terms. In the sociology of religion, theorists have constantly wrestled with how “religion” should be defined; usually along the lines of substantive versus functional definitions (see McGuire 2002: 8-15). Scholars have also struggled to use consistent measures within their own data, or between one another’s data, in advancing our understanding of religious beliefs and practices (see Bibby 1987, 1993, 2002; Bruce 2002a; and Finke and Stark 2005 for a wide range of measures used to gauge various elements of religious beliefs and practices). My purpose in this section is to provide a sample of various categories that researchers (Rawlyk, Fuller, Bibby, and Bowen) have recently used from quantitative data to describe and analyze religion and spirituality. My concern is that with different measures of religiosity being used and different categories being created for interpreting the data, researchers are coming to fundamentally different conclusions, often adding to the confusion, surrounding religion in modern society.<sup>5</sup>

In his analysis of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s, the late George Rawlyk (1996: 115) offered three categories to describe those who practice private spirituality, and two categories for those connected to religious groups. Beginning with private spirituality, the first grouping includes those who hold religious beliefs (e.g., belief in God), but do not pray, read the

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<sup>5</sup> This problem is one that Bowen (2004: 101, 206) admits is a hindrance to his own research when conducting secondary analysis on multiple studies conceptualized and operationalized by different researchers.

Bible, or attend religious services. The second grouping consists of people who believe in an ultimate being and accept some basic Christian concepts. The final group contains those who occasionally pray, attend church, or read the Bible. In the area of organized religion, Rawlyk uses attendance at religious services. The first group includes those who attend weekly or monthly. The second group includes those who attend occasionally or never.

In Robert Fuller's (2001: 2-4) analysis of religion and spirituality, we find three groups of unchurched people. The first group includes secular humanists. They often rely on reason and common sense at the expense of supernatural assumptions. The second group includes those who attend religious services either regularly or infrequently, but have no formal membership ties to a religious group. Finally, there are those who are spiritual, but not religious. This group usually pursues religious questions outside of organized religious settings.

In 1987, Bibby (p.73) identified two groups of Canadians. The “committed” were those who believed in God, believed in the divinity of Jesus, believed in life after death, prayed on occasion, claimed to have experienced God’s presence, and knew who denied Jesus. Conversely, the “uncommitted” included those who either adopted various religious beliefs and practices in fragments or did not embrace any beliefs or practices at all. In 1993, Bibby (p. 170) increased his number of categories to five. Active affiliates were those who identified and attended nearly every week or more. Marginal affiliates were those who identified, and attended 2-3 times a month to several times a year. Inactive affiliates were those who identified but only attended once a year or less. Disaffiliates did not identify, their parents did identify, and they attended less than yearly. Finally, non-affiliates did not identify, nor did their parents and they attended less than yearly. In 2004, Bibby (p.62-63) kept the same categories that he used in 1993, but he modified the marginal affiliates to include those who attend bi-monthly to monthly, and the inactive affiliates to include those who attend less than monthly. In my mind, these slight adjustments

were wise given the problems that arose from placing those who attend three times a month (forty-eight times a year) in the same category with those attending several times a year (roughly six times a year).

When comparing Bibby's three sets of categories, I am struck by the quantity and variability of measures that Bibby used in his first set, and the lack of measures used in the latter two sets. One has to wonder how much weight we can place in interpretations of categories that are intended to capture the core essence of religiosity in Canada, but are confined to attendance patterns and religious affiliation. When comparing Bibby's recent conclusions with his 1987 observations, it is obvious that the less stringent the measures are for categorizing Canadians, the more favorable the conclusion regarding religion in Canada is. I tend to favor Bibby's original categories, which are definitely broader, but methodologically, are more precise and give the reader considerably more information about the levels of religiosity among Canadians.

Bowen's *Christians in a Secular World* (2004: 44), which is a comprehensive examination and more recent analysis of some of Bibby's work, includes four categories for analyzing the levels of religiosity in Canada. The very committed attend services weekly and define themselves as religious, or at least believe that religion is important to them. The committed attend one to three times a month or attend weekly, but say that religion is not very important to them. The seeker category includes those that say that religion is important to their life, but rarely or never attend religious services. Finally, the non-religious rarely or never attends religious services and indicates that religion is not important to them. Bowen's distinctions are similar to Bibby's latest categories of affiliates and are equally subject to criticism for the brevity of the measures used to distinguish them. That is, Bowen fails to account for a wide range of religiosity measures (e.g., private prayer, religious experience, or involvement in small groups) when assessing the strength of religiosity in Canada.

However, it is worth mentioning that Bowen (2004: 43), who appears to use more sophisticated statistical analysis in his writings compared to Bibby, offers a methodological critique of his own concerning the categorization of religious beliefs and practices in regression models. Bowen criticizes researchers who collapse separate variables into one overarching category. An example includes collapsing church attendance, prayer, and scripture reading, each on a five-point scale, into one overarching measure of religious practices on a fifteen-point scale. If all we see is that a person rates nine out of fifteen on this scale, we have no specific detail of what forms of religiosity a person is more prone to practicing. This reality is especially problematic given that we discovered in chapters two and four that more people pray than attend church than read scriptures, suggesting that those religious practices that require more energy and discipline are actually practiced less and less by Canadians—a finding that we could not examine if these items were collapsed. For the reasons above, I fully agree with Bowen on these points, while also recognizing the unpopularity of this view among many quantitative sociologists. Assuming that there is an increasing distinction between organized religion and private spirituality among Canadians, we risk losing appropriate analysis and understanding of religion in Canada by glossing over individual measures of religious beliefs and practices. In particular, when using regression models, there are many cases where measures of private spirituality or organized religion do not “hang together” well with other measures statistically, despite their strong substantive correlation.<sup>6</sup> In these cases, I agree with Bowen that it is both statistically and substantively wiser to avoid forcing the creation of regression models.

In light of these various conceptualizations, operationalizations, and interpretations of

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<sup>6</sup> More clearly, variables typically associated with organized religion and private spirituality have a spurious relationship in higher level multivariate and factor analysis procedures. While I am not aware of successful multivariate statistical models that both avoid a spurious relationship and help to address the research questions of this thesis, I am somewhat skeptical that any model could be constructed for the reasons aforementioned.

religiosity in Canada, I propose a scale that is a hybrid of Bibby's original scale in *Fragmented Gods* (1987) and the ones that both Bibby (2002) and Bowen (2004) have used more recently. I suggest that we use three overarching categories, mostly applicable when sorting through quantitative data—organized religion, private spirituality, and the non-religious.<sup>7</sup> Under organized religion, I continue with the themes of Bowen's categories, and include the very committed and the marginally committed. The very committed includes those who believe in God, attend religious services nearly every week, pray daily, read their scriptures nearly every day, claim to have experienced God, and say that religion is very important to their life.<sup>8</sup> The marginally committed includes those who believe in God, attend religious services once or twice a month, pray weekly, read their scriptures weekly, claim to have experienced God, and say that religion is somewhat important to their life.

One obvious omission in these categories is religious membership. I omitted membership because individuals are placing less and less importance on being a member, even though they meet all of the criteria of the very committed. Religious membership is certainly a common indicator for religious involvement in a religious group. However, even people inside religious organizations emphasize the fact that their faith informs all of life in many of the areas that Bowen discusses (e.g., civic responsibilities and social values), which I outlined in chapter four. Therefore, the very committed tend not to place great emphasis on religious membership. Moreover, those who limit their religious beliefs and practices to private spirituality see no need for being a member of a religious group.

Another measure that I have intentionally left out is religious knowledge. As Bowen

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<sup>7</sup> Bowen (2004: 18) uses terms that are similar in principle, but under different headings—committed and seeker.

<sup>8</sup> Ideally, I would like to include a question about tithing. However, here too we come into a numbers versus proportions dilemma. For example, a person may give considerably more money than another, but in proportion, is actually giving less. I am not sure that this measure would achieve the intended goal of broadening our inclusion of measures of religiosity across religious groups, but this measure should maybe be considered more extensively as a regular question in the future for congregational studies within a religious group.

(2004: 42) points out, there is great variation between religious groups concerning religious knowledge items, and even variation between liberal and conservative spectrums within the same religion. For these reasons, I thought it most appropriate to restrict the measures to generic terms that could transcend all or most of these differences. However, if one were to conduct a study for a particular religious group, it would be advantageous to possibly include particular religious knowledge items, as well as some other initiation markers for a religious group (e.g., baptism or confirmation).

In the area of private spirituality, I would propose two categories—seekers and private pursuers. Seekers believe in a higher power, attend religious services for Christmas, Easter, or rites of passage, pray weekly, occasionally read religious material, but not necessarily religious scriptures,<sup>9</sup> and say that religion is somewhat important to their life. Private pursuers include those who believe in a higher power, attend religious services for Christmas, Easter, or rites of passage, pray weekly, occasionally read religious material, but not necessarily religious scriptures, and say that religion is not very important to their life.

Finally, the non-religious category includes those who may or may not believe in a higher power, but never attend religious services, pray, read religious material or religious scriptures, and claim that religion is not important to their life.

I am sure that with time my classifications will be modified, but I think that these new categories answer a number of methodological problems that I have discussed in this chapter. First, these categories are more extensive than most categories currently used in the sociology of religion. Second, these categories do not place as much emphasis on membership and affiliation,

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<sup>9</sup> This distinction between religious material and religious scriptures is an important one that I think most researchers confound in their survey questions and analysis. I suspect, as is empirically supported in chapter two, that most people do not actually read their religious scriptures on a regular basis, although many may read religious material (e.g., magazines, books, etc.). My point is that researchers should not continue to mix these two variables within one question. They are two separate measures and ought to be treated as such.

which I consider to be unspecific and misleading indicators of religiosity. Third, these groupings are a little more restrictive and less liberal, taking the suggestions of both Bruce (2002a) and Bowen (2004) into account, in trying to gain a more accurate and detailed description of religion in Canada. Finally, these categories account for the heightened distinction in the sociology of religion between organized religion and private spirituality.

## **LONGITUDINAL DATA**

One of Bibby's greatest strengths is that he has the resources, the reputation, and the resolve to gather longitudinal data on Canadian social and religious beliefs and practices, and then publicly offer interpretations of his data. In *Fragmented Gods* (1987), Bibby documented and commented on three national surveys and countless other sources from the previous thirty years—a real breakthrough for the sociology of religion in Canada. However, in *Unknown Gods* (1993), Bibby referenced one additional survey, offering little new information and reinforcing that religious groups needed to sharpen their supply of religion to Canadians. In *Restless Gods* (2002), Bibby uses two further national surveys as the basis to conclude that a religious renaissance is occurring in Canada. Without discrediting the legitimacy of Bibby's latest surveys, one has to wonder if two surveys within a six-year time span are sufficient to conclusively argue that the Canadian religious landscape is changing so dramatically. In part, I understand Bibby's need to be optimistic since he undeservingly attained the label of "Bad News Bibby" after his previous two books. However, I find it surprising that Bibby would offer such optimism, especially in light of the fact that in *Restless Churches* (2004: 11) he criticizes journalists who look at one survey showing low levels of Canadian involvement in organized religion and automatically conclude that Canada is a secular nation. I think that Bibby's critique of some journalists is very accurate, leaving me leery of accepting his strong pronouncement of

hopefulness on the basis of only two surveys. If Bibby's 2005 study reveals further evidence that religious groups are actually connecting with the private spiritual quests of Canadians, then he will have a stronger base of longitudinal data to support his renaissance conclusion, and one that would leave me more convinced.

This discussion of how many surveys are sufficient to offer a conclusive interpretation is related to another methodological area that I think is relevant to the broader sociology of religion and sociology as a whole. Namely, how many years must we observe a certain change in social or religious values before we can conclude that social change has occurred—five, ten, fifty, or one-hundred years? For example, when one reads Finke and Stark's (2005) *The Churching of America: 1776-2005*, Finke and Stark use over two hundred years of data to support their position that America has become more churched and religious with time. In Berger's *The Desecularization of the World* (1999), he discusses how, over the last thirty years, the world has actually become less secular and more religious. Steve Bruce (2002a) discusses the context of religious history in Britain over the last twelve centuries, but focuses his attention on evidence of secularization in Britain since 1850. In Bibby's analysis of religion in Canada, he compares membership numbers since 1871, but confines most of his data comparisons to a period from the mid-1950s onward. In each of these examples, theorists made methodological decisions to use a specific time period as a reference point to begin their analysis. In many cases, the data available to them determined when the time period would begin, and in other instances, clear shifts in social values shaped the time period of reference. The merits of specific decisions can be debated, but in principle the decisions are not problematic.

However, a dilemma arises when theorists shift their frame of reference within a larger argument for either the secularization or renaissance of religion. For example, throughout *Restless Gods* (2002), Bibby provides ample evidence to try to support his renaissance thesis. In

some cases, he compares how a religious belief or practice has increased among Canadians between 1950 and 2000. For other measures of religiosity, he compares between 1975, 1984, 1990, or 1995 and 2000. More troubling, however, is when researchers extend the starting reference date back to reveal an increase on some variable, when in recent years the level of belief or practice has actually decreased. For example, Bibby (2002: 78, 85) states that the Catholic proportionate hold on affiliates in Canada went from 43% in 1871, to 42% in 1941, to 45% in 2001, and he uses this trend as evidence for his renaissance thesis. But a closer look at his tables reveals that he fails to mention that there was a steady decline from 47% in 1961, to 46% in 1991, and 45% in 2001. These numbers are surely miniscule and not legitimate evidence of increased secularization. However, my point is that the reader is left to wonder if, perhaps, there is uncertainty among social researchers about how long is long enough to conclude either that a society is increasingly secular or religious. Why, in the above example, did Bibby not use 1961 as his reference point, or why did he choose to use 1990 as a common reference point to show the beginning of the religious renaissance in Canada? Why are some reference points highlighted and others omitted? I am aware that certain data from further back enables Bibby and others to make their points more dramatically. Nevertheless, this reality does not relieve us from asking the above questions. Further, in asking these questions, I am not taking away from the potential of a religious renaissance in religious organizations. I am simply indicating that we need more time and data to support Bibby's renaissance thesis. I am not convinced that two surveys, measuring ten years of Canadian social life, is sufficient to conclude that Canada is experiencing a religious renaissance.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR GATHERING DATA IN THE FUTURE**

In light of the various theories and ideas that I have explored thus far, I want to offer some

very specific suggestions for gathering data in the future, primarily in the form of qualitative data. Some of these suggestions are first mentioned in this thesis here, while others will be ones that I have already discussed briefly, but will expand upon here. First, given Bibby's assertion that the Gods and the churches are restless, I suggest that we examine two further hypotheses, one of which may be correct.

**H1:** If Canadians are genuinely interested in greater involvement in organized religious groups, and assuming that religious groups have changed to meet many of the demands of Canadians (e.g., ministry, organizational, and personal), then maybe Canadians are, in fact, the restless ones.

**H2:** If Canadians are not really interested in greater involvement in organized religion, but they provide answers suggesting that they are, then we might conclude that Canadians are simply content to practice private spirituality and that the gods, the churches, and the Canadians are not restless.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, we need to push respondents in face-to-face interviews and focus groups to provide more complete and descriptive responses about the reasons for their lack of involvement in organized religious groups. In what ways have respondents tried to get more involved, and to what degree did they try? In pressing respondents, one possibility is that we may discover more accurate and honest reasons for why people are not more involved in religious organizations—reasons that have not actually been accounted for by religious organizations or individuals themselves. Conversely, we may find, as Bruce suspects, that people simply do not want to be involved in any form of organized religion and are rather content to practice their private spirituality. If this latter finding is true, the question does not become a problem of supply or demand, but rather, a matter of interpreting the implications of a widespread contentment to more or less abandon organized religion. This topic is certainly worthy of further research and deserving of an entire book in the future.

Somewhat related to this first point, researchers need to be more intentional in exploring the reasons behind Canadians turning to religious groups for rites of passage. Interview questions

such as “why do you get married in a church,” “why did you hold your father’s funeral at a church,” or “why did you baptize your child,” are all questions that will give us more precise information than simple survey data. Unless Canadians indicate that they have religious reasons for turning to religious groups for rites of passage, I’m not convinced that we can place as much emphasis as Bibby does on rites of passage as a sign that religious organizations are a prominent feature in Canada. Furthermore, if religious affiliates do actually believe that God has a role in their rites of passage, but they are not actively involved in religious activities throughout the rest of their life, how are we to interpret their observance of the rites of passage in a religious setting? Do these behaviors merely further Bibby’s original thesis that religion is fragmented in Canada, or do these behaviors support Bibby’s renaissance thesis, or at least refute the secularization paradigm? Whether we discover that people turn to religious groups for religious reasons or cultural pressures, we will undoubtedly gain significant insight that could either eliminate or affirm Bibby’s ongoing emphasis on Canadians turning to religious groups to perform rites of passage.

In addition, as a participant in a religious group, I am well aware that religious groups strongly believe that rites of passage and other special occasions such as Christmas and Easter are prime opportunities to evangelize the “lost.” Although many religious leaders and lay members hope that “seeds” will be planted in the hearts of visitors, how many of these individuals actually convert either suddenly or gradually? I would presume that there are anecdotal stories throughout religious groups, but how many of these “seeds” are actually bearing fruit? I am not sure what the answer to this question is, but we might benefit from tracking such people empirically, using surveys, over the years to see if such people actually become active. Doing so would help religious groups know if they are effective in evangelizing, while also aiding the larger sociology of religion in determining the role that rites of passage play for Canadians.

Third, I think that we need to give careful attention in the future to how we categorize respondents. In part, this is a problem of the actual questions used on surveys. In researching for this thesis, I came across countless measures of religiosity both within a single text as well as between different theorists. Not only are different measures used to support scholar's conclusions about religion in society, but theorists try to measure the same phenomena (e.g., church attendance) with different ways of asking questions (e.g., "Have you attended a religious service in the past seven days?", "How often do you attend religious services?", and "Other than Christmas and Easter, how many times have you attended a religious service in the last year?"). In many ways it would be ideal to have an overarching survey that all researchers such as Bibby, Bowen, Bruce, and Stark could refer to. Having such a compilation would enable researchers to compare apples with apples, rather than apples with oranges. While this possibility is not likely, future surveys should probably include many of the various questions used on different surveys, but are never all captured on one survey.

In addition to the actual questions used on surveys, I contend that social researchers might also benefit from using an overarching categorizing system for analyzing quantitative data. In particular, a categorizing system that encompasses the wide range of survey measures currently used that, in turn, allows researchers to more effectively engage (positively or negatively) each other's work. I do not claim that my creations of categories earlier in this chapter are the best, but I think that my suggestions move us in the direction towards a more holistic understanding of religious beliefs and practices. In my mind, the more holistic our interpretation of the data, the better we can assess whether Canada is becoming increasingly secular or increasingly religious. Furthermore, the more holistic we are in our interpretations, the greater our ability will be to discern more of the differences between organized religion and private spirituality.

Fourth, considering Stark's constant emphasis on religious rewards and costs, we need to

ask respondents, again through the use of face-to-face interviews and focus groups, very direct questions about such matters. What specific religious rewards do people associate with private spirituality compared to organized religion, and how do their conceptions of religious costs vary between the two settings? Stark has already provided us with distinctions between rewards in the afterlife and rewards on earth, but we are left with little precision as to the nature of these rewards. Do people perceive different types of rewards in the afterlife, or is there just one reward involved? What exactly are the rewards on earth for being religious? Is the reward greater health, wealth, community,<sup>10</sup> peace of mind, or hope amidst tragedy? Furthermore, how do religious texts and leaders make sense of religious rewards? Is the only reward life after death, or should people expect rewards on earth?

Additionally, what are the religious costs associated with attaining religious rewards? One has to assume, based on the distinction between organized religion and private spirituality, that people believe that different “payments” are required to receive the religious reward that they are pursuing. For example, is church attendance required? What about reading the scriptures or praying regularly? For those in organized religious settings, there is the belief that attendance at religious services is a necessary part of growing closer to God and receiving possible life after death. However, those who limit their religious beliefs and practices to private spirituality are consciously or unconsciously suggesting that attendance at religious services is not necessary to receive their religious rewards.

I propose that we ask these questions of those strongly connected to religious groups, those who are marginally affiliated with religious groups, those who claim to practice private

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<sup>10</sup> I think that many search for community and long-lasting relationships in religious groups. However, I think that this search is indicative of a widespread struggle and, perhaps, longing in culture for meaningful relationships. This topic of community is one that is and ought to be examined more in the larger discipline of sociology, recognizing that these searches for community in religious groups are symptomatic of a larger problem in society.

spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion, and even those who claim not to be religious. Asking these different groups of people will help to shed light on the differences between organized religion and private spirituality. Responses will further our understanding of why Canadians infrequently connect their private spiritual quests with organized religious settings. Pursuing answers to these questions will also help us to determine if Canadians are restless to have their religious and spiritual needs met, or if they are rather content with their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Additionally, we may gain greater insight into the apparent shift in focus from other-worldliness to this worldliness (see Bruce 2002a; Fuller 2001; Lambert 1999) in religious groups and individuals, which is also related again to the larger issues of organized religion and private spirituality.

Fifth and finally, we must explore Bruce's contention that religious organizations are catering to a secular consciousness by offering content that reflects the secular cultural values of individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism and tolerance. Acknowledging that Conservative Protestants are the sole group gaining in proportion to the Canadian population, one must question if Conservative Protestants have secularized or watered down their content and presentation to Canadians. We need to conduct face-to-face interviews and focus groups of key leaders in growing Conservative Protestant congregations, and seek insight into what changes they made to facilitate numerical growth. Have they changed their structure, their physical setting, their focus in sermons, their programs, or anything else? Remaining consistent with Stark's terminology, are religious groups becoming more or less extended, exclusive, extensive, and expensive in hope of attracting more people? These questions all continue the ongoing inquiries in the sociology of religion concerning the relationship between religion and culture, and specifically, the degree of tension that religious groups experience in relation to culture. Seeking answers to the multitude of questions raised here may add credence to Bruce's

assertions, or they may add weight to Stark's position that groups who are more extended, exclusive, extensive, and expensive often yield greater numbers. In my mind, only further data and time will help to clarify Bruce and Stark's positions.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding this chapter, I am keenly aware of the great contribution that people like Bibby, Bowen, Stark, and Bruce have made to the sociology of religion. Each, in their own way, has added to our knowledge of religious beliefs and practices in important ways. However, there remain some key areas of methodology that need to be given increased consideration to further the work of these scholars. Together, the areas that I mentioned are primarily the dilemmas of interpreting data, which inevitably leads us to a discussion of subjectivity versus objectivity in the social sciences. This is neither the time nor place to enter the debate; however, I will mention that there is something refreshing about Bruce's latest work *God is Dead* (2002a) and Bowen's *Christians in a Secular World* (2004), since they tend to call things the way they are. Their interpretation of the data and questioning of people's emphasis on private spirituality shed light on what seem to be obvious conclusions, and yet ones rarely mentioned before in the literature. I certainly side with Bruce and Bowen that we need to use more restrictive and conservative measures and interpretations in dealing with quantitative data so as not to overextend the data in the ways that Bibby may be guilty of in *Restless Gods* (2002). On the other hand, I am sensitive to the fact that measures and interpretations can be so conservative that nobody seems to appear religious. There is a fine line that researchers must be more careful in considering.

In addition to the interpretation of data, however, I am firmly convinced that we need to further explore the issues that I raised in the previous section using qualitative data. By interviewing Canadians face-to-face and asking questions about their future involvement in

organized religion, their purposes for observing rites of passage in religious settings, their conceptions about religious rewards and costs, and the possible adaptations of religious organizations to meet a secular consciousness, I think we can make significant headway in clarifying the larger issues of secularization, the renaissance of religion, and the role of organized religion and private spirituality in society, that guide this thesis.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### *Conclusion: Significant Advances in Studying Religion*

In this thesis I sought to assess the validity of Reginald Bibby's latest renaissance thesis, outlined in *Restless Gods* (2002). In chapter two, we discovered some of the changing interpretations that Bibby has offered regarding the Canadian religious landscape. In 1987, Bibby indicated that people's religious beliefs and practices were fragmented in Canada, and in 1993, Bibby suggested that the gods were unknown to both religious groups and Canadians. However, contrary to his previous findings, Bibby's (2002 and 2004) most recent argument suggests that Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion, evidenced both in settings of organized religion and private spirituality.

To test and provide the context for understanding Bibby's renaissance thesis, I explored theories of secularization put forth by Peter Berger, Rodney Stark, and Steve Bruce. I also devoted a chapter to exploring the differences between organized religion and private spirituality, an increasingly common theme in the sociology of religion. Combined, the contents of chapters two, three, and four are the basis for my uncertainty concerning the legitimacy of Bibby's renaissance thesis.

First, I argued and supported in four ways that religion today is actually more similar to Bibby's original 1987 "fragmented" thesis. I referred to the following survey question that Bibby relied upon heavily in *Fragmented Gods* (1987: 84) to conclude that Canadians were failing to connect their religious and spiritual needs with organized religious groups:

Some observers maintain that few people are actually abandoning their religious traditions. Rather, they draw selective beliefs and practices, even if they do not attend services frequently. They are not about to be recruited by other religious groups. Their identification with their religious tradition is fairly solidly fixed, and it is to these groups that they will turn when confronted with marriage, death and, frequently, birth. How well would you say this observation describes you?

The similar findings between 1987 and 1995 in those who responded “very accurately” or “somewhat accurately” seem to suggest that Canadians are continuing to adopt religion in fragmented ways. Based on the above response to this, the comparison of organized religion and private spirituality in chapter four, and Bowen’s (2004) discussion of consequential religion, also outlined in chapter four, it appears that fragmented religion is more or less indistinguishable from private spirituality, and both tend to be less consequential than organized forms of religion. Furthermore, Bibby’s failure to even mention the results of the above survey question in *Restless Gods* (2002) leaves me evermore suspicious of his renaissance thesis.

I also highlighted a 7% increase between 1990 and 1995 (40% → 47%) in the percentage of Canadians who believe that ministers should stick to religious matters, setting aside social, economic, or political issues. Assuming that religion is to inform all of life, which I argue, Bibby supports, and Bowen contends, this finding seems to suggest that many Canadians still want religion to remain separate from their other social roles. Considering that religious leaders are trained specialists (like a doctor or dentist) who exist, in part, to lead people to the divine and to live out a consequential faith, I find it disconcerting, based on the above finding, that Bibby argues that Canada is experiencing a renaissance of religion in religious organizations.

Third and fourth, I pointed to the self-admitted decreased attendance at religious services of many Canadians between 1990 and 1995 (9% increase, and 17% decrease), and the dramatic increase in Canadians’ interest in spirituality between 1990 and 1995 (20% increase, and 8% decrease). Considering the common distinction made between “religion” and “spirituality” by many today, and given the lower levels of consequential religion characteristic of those who practice primarily private spirituality (as discussed by Bowen), I am inclined to think that Canadians still value fragmented forms of religion to a much greater degree than Bibby is willing to admit. Further, the above findings seem to fly in the face of Bibby’s renaissance of religion

conclusion, particularly in organized religious settings. This said, I should reiterate that I do not doubt the strong presence of private spirituality in Canada. I have primarily argued that we cannot conclude that a renaissance of religion has been occurring in organized religious settings and further, that it is inaccurate to argue that a renaissance of religion has occurred in Canada based on private spirituality, since private spirituality has existed at relatively high levels for decades in Canada.

In addition to my contention that religion remains fragmented today, I pointed to four methodological concerns with the way Bibby gathers and interprets data. I questioned Bibby's confusing mix of numbers and percentages, relative to the overall Canadian population, in interpreting the data. I agree with Bibby's (1987: 13) argument that researchers and religious groups should give greater attention to growth in religious groups based on percentile growth, relative to the Canadian population, rather than numerical growth. This is why I am suspicious of Bibby's (2002: 78, 70, and 83) recent use of data showing numeric growth, but proportionate decline, to support his renaissance thesis.

I also challenged Bibby's constant emphasis on religious membership and affiliation as the basis for greater optimism about future growth in religious congregations. Aside from the fact that I think Bibby misleadingly suggests that 55% of Canadians are open to greater involvement in organized religious groups, I remain skeptical that Canadians actually desire greater involvement. I am not convinced that Canadians are providing researchers with the full story concerning their desires to have ministry, organizational, and personal needs met in religious organizations. Furthermore, I am uncertain of Bibby's constant emphasis that Canadians will turn to religious groups to perform rites of passage, which he suggests is a sign that there is a demand for organized religion. Throughout history, most in Canada have turned to religious groups to perform rites of passage, so why does Bibby suddenly think that these observances will translate

into a greater demand for organized religion? I think that we need better interview data to better understand why people are really staying away from organized religious groups, and the reasons behind people turning to religious groups to observe their rites of passage.

Third, I addressed issues of categorizing respondents within the sociology of religion as being problematic for interpreting religious beliefs and practices in Canada (and elsewhere for that matter). In turn, I provided suggestions for three overarching categories and five sub-theme categories of Canadians—organized religion (the very committed and the marginally committed), private spirituality (seekers and private pursuers), and the non-religious. The very committed includes those who believe in God, attend religious services nearly every week, pray daily, read their scriptures nearly every day, claim to have experienced God, and say that religion is very important to their life. The marginally committed includes those who believe in God, attend religious services once or twice a month, pray weekly, read their scriptures weekly, claim to have experienced God, and say that religion is somewhat important to their life. Seekers believe in a higher power; attend religious services for Christmas, Easter, or rites of passage, pray weekly, occasionally read religious material, but not necessarily religious scriptures, and say that religion is somewhat important to their life. Private pursuers include those who believe in a higher power; attend religious services for Christmas, Easter, or rites of passage, pray weekly, occasionally read religious material, but not necessarily religious scriptures, and say that religion is not very important to their life. The non-religious category includes those who may or may not believe in a higher power, but never attend religious services, pray, read religious material or religious scriptures, and claim that religion is not important to their life.

Fourth and finally, I asked how many years we must observe a certain change in social or religious values before we can conclude that the change has occurred. In the context of Bibby's renaissance thesis, I am not convinced that we can conclusively argue that Canada is

experiencing a renaissance of religion based on two surveys conducted in a six-year span. I think that Bibby is premature in his conclusions and that we need more time to conclusively support his assertions.

To summarize my above conclusions, I am suggesting that the evidence is not convincing enough to conclude that a renaissance of religion is taking place in Canada. However, I propose several suggestions for gathering qualitative data in the future that may add weight to Bibby's latest position, or that may add credence to those who argue that Canada is an increasingly secular nation, at least when we look for signs of Canadian involvement in organized religious groups. First, we need to push respondents further in face-to-face interviews to provide more complete and descriptive responses about the reasons for their lack of involvement in organized religious groups. In what ways have respondents tried to get more involved, and to what degree did they try? We may discover more accurate and honest reasons for why people are not more involved in religious organizations—reasons that have not actually been accounted for by religious organizations or individuals themselves. Conversely, we may find, as Bruce suspects, that people simply do not want to be involved in any form of organized religion and are rather content to practice their private spirituality. Either way, we need more precise and extensive data to test Bibby's claims regarding these areas of inquiry.

Second, researchers need to be more intentional in exploring the reasons behind Canadians turning to religious groups for rites of passage. Why are Canadians turning to religious groups to observe weddings and funerals? Whether we discover that people turn to religious groups for religious reasons or cultural pressures, we will undoubtedly gain significant insight that could either eliminate or affirm Bibby's ongoing emphasis of Canadians turning to religious groups to perform rites of passage.

In addition, as a participant in a religious group, I am aware that religious groups strongly

believe that rites of passage and other special occasions such as Christmas and Easter are prime opportunities to evangelize the “lost.” However, are people actually becoming more active after observing a rite of passage in a religious setting? Tracking such people over time will help religious groups know if they are actually effective in evangelizing, while also aiding the larger sociology of religion in determining the role that rites of passage play for Canadians.

Third, considering Stark’s constant emphasis on religious rewards and costs, we need to ask respondents very direct questions in interviews and focus groups about such matters. What specific religious rewards do people associate with private spirituality compared to organized religion, and how do their conceptions of religious costs between the two settings vary? Do people perceive different types of rewards in the afterlife, or is there just one large reward of the afterlife? Is the only reward life after death, or should people expect rewards on earth? What exactly are the rewards on earth for being religious? Is the reward greater health, wealth, community, peace of mind, or hope amidst tragedy? Furthermore, how do religious texts and leaders make sense of religious rewards?

Additionally, what are the religious costs associated for people to attain their religious reward? One has to assume, based on the distinction between organized religion and private spirituality, that people believe that different “payments” are required to receive the religious reward that they are pursuing. For example, is church attendance required? What about reading the scriptures or praying regularly? For those in organized religious settings, there is the belief that attendance at religious services is a necessary part of growing closer to God and receiving possible life after death. However, those who limit their religious beliefs and practices to private spirituality are consciously or unconsciously suggesting that attendance at religious services is not necessary to receive their religious rewards.

These questions need to be asked of those strongly connected to religious groups, those

who are marginally affiliated with religious groups, those who claim to practice private spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion, and even those who claim not to be religious. Asking questions of these different groups will first help to shed light on the differences between organized religion and private spirituality, and why Canadians infrequently connect their private spiritual quests with organized religious settings. Pursuing answers to these questions will also help us to determine if Canadians are restless or content in having their religious and spiritual needs met outside of organized religious settings. Additionally, we may gain greater insight into the apparent shift in focus from other-worldliness to this worldliness (see Bruce 2002a; Fuller 2001; Lambert 1999) in religious groups and individuals, which is again related to the larger issues of organized religion and private spirituality.

Finally, we must explore Bruce's contention that religious organizations are catering to a secular consciousness by offering content that reflects the secular cultural values of individualism, rejection of authority, and relativism and tolerance. We need to interview key leaders in growing religious congregations, and seek insight into what changes they made to facilitate numerical growth. Have they changed their structure, their physical setting, their focus in sermons, their programs, or anything else? In Stark's terms, are religious groups becoming more or less extended, exclusive, extensive, and expensive in hope of attracting more people? These questions all continue the ongoing inquiries in the sociology of religion concerning the relationship between religion and culture, and specifically, the degree of tension that religious groups experience in relation to culture.

To conclude this chapter, I return to the questions with which I began chapter one. First, are modern Western nations becoming more secular? Similar to Kurt Bowen (2004), I think that we must be aware of the potential religious renaissance among the "committed," but equally mindful of the proportionate decline of the "committed" in Canada. Given the ongoing presence

of private spirituality, I cannot justify claiming that “God is Dead” as Bruce (2002a) does. However, the lack of convincing evidence that Canadians are returning to religious groups leaves me hesitant to agree that there is a renaissance of religion either. Nevertheless, unlike Bruce (2002a: 3) and Bowen (2004: 274), I do not subscribe to the view that private spirituality will inevitably wane because of low levels of involvement in organized religious groups. I agree with Berger (1967) that most humans almost inevitably turn to some form of the supernatural to help shelter them from the terrors of life (e.g., death), creating, perhaps, an inexhaustible demand for the gods or supernatural, but not necessarily the religious organizations that have achieved dominance in Western societies.

In addition, presuming that I am correct that Canadians do not desire exclusivist religions, I tend to agree with Berger’s (1967) comments regarding pluralism, privatization, relativism, and subjectivism, and Bruce’s (2002a) additional observations concerning individualism, rejection of authority, and tolerance. I think it will be increasingly difficult for religious organizations to be successful (in terms of growing proportionate to the national population) in a liberal society that places so much emphasis on these values.

Second, what exactly is organized religion and private spirituality, and what is the relationship between the two in Canada? I think it is safe to suggest that most Canadians are choosing to meet their religious and spiritual needs through private spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion, even if some believe that there is increased involvement in organized religious settings. The greater concern, I think, for the sociologist of religion and Canadians in general, is the consequences for Canada if Canadians continue to practice private spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion. I think the reasons that I discussed in chapter four are compelling enough to cause even the non-religious person to stop and think about the social costs of the decline of organized religion in Canada, even if private spirituality persists.

Finally, can there be a renaissance of religion in Canada without a strong presence of organized religion? I do not need to belabor the point, but I am not convinced that we can have a renaissance of religion in Canada without a stronger presence of organized religion in Canada; private spirituality has always existed in Canada, the apparent signs of organized religion in Canada are questionable, and the level of consequential religion in those who practice private spirituality is not sufficient to support the renaissance thesis.

I believe that my conclusions are convincing. However, I want to end this thesis by providing an additional piece of evidence that ultimately adds to my uncertainty regarding Bibby's renaissance thesis, especially in organized religious settings. At the outset of *Restless Gods* (2002: 4), Bibby pronounces that Canada is experiencing a "religious and spiritual renaissance...new life is being added to old life," both in organized and non-organized religious settings. However, later Bibby (2002: 183) states "Canadians may be hungering for the gods but that is hardly to say they are hungering for the churches." Bibby (2002: 218) goes on to add that "growing percentages of Canadian parents have not been active in religious groups, nor have they been encouraging their children to participate...the decline in participation in organized religion is nothing less than a serious problem for life in Canada." Put simply, I think that Bibby is resting his renaissance thesis, in large part, on the presence of private spirituality, which when compared with his previous 1987 and 1993 findings, is not all that new. Of course, Bibby maintains that private spirituality is a great source of hope for future involvement in organized religious settings, which I completely agree with. However, these findings and hopes cannot be the basis for concluding that a renaissance of religion is occurring in Canada today.

### **SOME UNRESOLVED ISSUES**

In addition to my suggestions for gathering data in the future, there are unquestionably

many other possible related topics and tangents that one could pursue in light of the contents of this thesis. Although time and space do not permit me to pursue these topics in a Master's thesis, it is at least worthwhile for me to highlight my awareness of them as possible points of interest for future research. First, people's interest in private spirituality to the exclusion of organized religion is most likely symptomatic of larger social changes in individual's perceptions of social structures, organizations, or institutions. Perhaps functions that were once fulfilled by certain social institutions are now being met in other ways for individuals, resulting in decreased involvement in various social institutions. I am aware that literature exists on this topic (see Bruce 2002b; Giddens 1990, 1991; Putnam 2000), which is certainly a worthwhile avenue to pursue to shed greater light on the conclusions of this thesis.

Perhaps a discussion on the role of community and relationships in the modern world is valuable for the larger debate about the role of religion in society. As I suggested earlier, many are turning to religious groups to find community, which is certainly a sign that many struggle to find community in their neighborhoods, work places, and even families. What does community look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and how does that impact how people either attach to or distance themselves from religious communities?

Third, the role of the megachurch is increasingly common in the United States, and to a degree in Canada. This under examined phenomenon needs to be explored to better understand what it is about large churches that many find so attractive. I think that pursuing an answer to this question will further our understanding of cultural values in the West, which in turn are impacting many who attend larger churches. Although, as I suggested earlier, I suspect that people's attraction to large churches is symptomatic of people's preference for individualism, anonymity, and low levels of discipline and authenticity in forming meaningful relationships.

Even though I know that literature exists that compares religion in Canada with the

United States, Europe, and even Australia (see Davie 2002a; Lambert 2004; Lyon and Van Die 2000; Martin 2000; Reimer 1995, 2000, 2003; Stark and Finke 2005), I think it would also be beneficial to address issues of social institutions, community, and megachurches in the context of some of the modern Western nations. I think that exploring these issues in a comparative manner could ultimately aid us in better understanding issues of secularization, religious revival, organized religion, and private spirituality. Again, exploring these issues is not only beneficial for the sociology of religion, but also for the broader discipline of sociology.

I suspect that future interview data on the issues that I suggested in the previous section may inevitably lead to some of the points raised in this section. I hope that I am right because I think that we have much to learn from acquiring a sounder sense of the religious, spiritual, and life experiences of Canadians. We will arrive at a more sophisticated and detailed account of what religion and spirituality really looks like in Canada, without offering potentially misguided hope or despair about the future religious landscape in Canada.

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