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Reply

The Loosening Bond of Religion on Canadian Society: Reply to Bibby

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Interpreting social science data requires empirical rigor, but data never stand on their own. They require interpretive lenses. Sociologists spill a great deal of ink trying to determine the best framework through which to understand the social world. Here I will spill a little more and argue that the past 25 years of survey data on religion in Canada demonstrate a secularization process at work—not secularization as an inevitable process, where religion must decline until it meets its demise—but a historically and contextually conditioned process by which religion begins to loosen its grip on the social world. A variety of features of contemporary life lead to secularization. Most are things as mundane as declining fertility rates, increased social isolation, and a greater time squeeze felt by individuals and families. Occasionally, the more profound realm of competing epistemologies and the clash of worldviews rears its head. Two facets of the large collection of survey data on religion in Canada provide the most compelling evidence of secularization, the decline in rates of weekly (or near weekly) attendance at religious services and the proportion of people identifying with a specific religious tradition. I will tackle each in turn.

Why weekly attendance? Bibby argues that monthly, rather than weekly, attendance ought to define "regular" attendance at religious services. However, Christian traditions (and Christianity is still the major player in Canada) have long emphasized weekly attendance as the expected norm. The fact that modern life has created a situation where attending religious services 12 times a year is now "regular" attendance is indicative of a secularization process at work. If the bonds of religion are loosening, we would expect, and do in fact observe, weekly attendance rates to falling rapidly.

In terms of attendance data, Bibby is right to point out that the GSS made the decision between 1985 and 2008 not to ask people who identified as "no religion" a question about their attendance at religious services. In the Project Canada surveys, the attendance question was asked of every respondent. Missing data present a dilemma. In my previous article, I chose to take a conservative approach—and one that brought the more recent waves of the GSS into closer agreement with Project Canada—and treated these nonresponses as missing. Opting for the alternative approach and coding religious nones as never attending religious services, weekly attendance in Canada has dropped significantly, decreasing from 27.6 percent in 1986 to 18.9 percent in 2005. The proportion of Canadians who report never attending religious services has gone from 18.0 to 43.7 over the same period. Canada has transitioned from a country where less than one-fifth of the population would not set foot in the door of a church or other religious venue in a given year to one where this is the norm for almost half of the population. This change occurred over a mere 22 years.

These trends mirror those in religious affiliation. From fewer than 10 percent in the 1981 census, now nearly one-quarter of Canadians claim no religious affiliation. These are major changes in just a generation. Although signs may indicate that the steep drop in attendance rates

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has slowed (in large part because attendance rates in Quebec, which holds about a quarter of the population, cannot go much lower), the increase in those claiming no religion continues to climb steadily. Once again, these trends fit best within a secularization framework, which posits the loosening of the bonds of religion on society.

I stand by my earlier assertion that due to lower response rates and the nature of updated panel surveys, the Project Canada samples have drifted away from being representative of the religious makeup of the Canadian population. While Bibby asserts that the Project Canada Surveys are highly representative of the population religiously and demographically, my original analysis shows that the raw Project Canada data have a much higher percentage of Protestants and relatively fewer Catholics, which even weights cannot correct. In the unweighted samples, over one-half of the respondents are Protestant (compared to census estimates of about 30 percent of the population). Weights are not a panacea. If regional and gender representation are also desired, then weights may not fully compensate for religious bias in the sample. For instance, in 1990, the weighted Project Canada survey reports the number of Protestants in Canada as 44.0 percent, compared to 30.5 percent in the General Social Survey and 31.6 percent in the 1991 census; (likewise for Catholics, 41.8 percent as opposed to 46.0 percent and 45.6 percent, respectively). This artifact in the data leads to an understatement of the degree of change in religious affiliation and attendance (because Protestants have the most stable characteristics). Here, I should also note that Table 1 in my original article (Eagle 2011:189, Table 1) reported the response rates and sample size of several of the Project Canada surveys incorrectly. Table 1 of Bibby's response contains the correct sample size and response rates.

To summarize, nearly half of all Canadians never attend religious services, a figure that has more than doubled in 22 years. Almost one-quarter claim no religious affiliation, a three-fold increase over the same period. Most of these declines are among Catholics, particularly Catholics in Quebec and in the Maritime Provinces. For a country where an active Catholic religious majority has played a definitive role in politics, culture, and education, these changes signal major societal shifts.

Bibby softens his claim that a religious renaissance might be beginning in Canada. Instead, he argues for a middle ground between the demise of religion and a religious renaissance—polarization between the religious and the nonreligious. To call the combination of an increasing proportion of people who neither identify with, nor participate in, religious services along with a *declining* proportion of those who identify with a religious tradition and attend services regularly polarization is not entirely accurate. Excepting a rapid, drastic fall in religion, what we observe is more accurately secularization. Polarization implies two parties becoming more entrenched in their respective camps. Polarization results when two parties become less tolerant of one another. The data on religion in Canada do not show entrenchment. There is little evidence to suggest that the majority of those who are exiting religious identification and attendance are doing so from a strong and principled reaction against religion. More likely, people are drifting away, not becoming ardent anti-religionists. By the same token, the religiously active are not becoming more strident and less tolerant of their secular neighbors, again something that polarization implies. The bonds of religion on Canadian society are loosening. Secularization, not renaissance, not polarization, best defines the past 25 years of religion in Canada.

References

Eagle, David E. 2011. Changing patterns of attendance at religious services in Canada, 1986–2008. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50(1):187–200.