

Multiple Book Review

A High Stakes Gamble

This review was written while I was on sabbatical in 2003. Three years later the basic points still seem remarkably valid. Indeed, further reading and research has only strengthened my conviction in the basic critiques presented here.

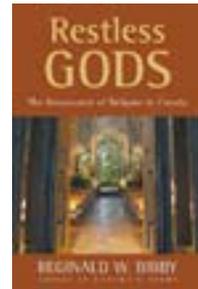
This review discusses three books, with the ideas of each related to the current situation in Canada:



The Death of Christian Britain
Callum Brown



God is Dead
Steve Bruce



Restless Gods
Reginald Bibby

It's a high-stakes gamble. And yet we don't seem to even be aware that we are gambling, let alone how much we have riding on this. The gamble is this – that the situation in the Canadian churches is more like the United States than anywhere else. The books we read, the strategies we follow, the speakers we go hear – all seem to revolve around the untested assumption that what is happening in the States is what we need to be aware of and not what is happening elsewhere. We're gambling. Big time.

Some recent reading, as well as a brief trip to Scotland, has stimulated an even greater awareness of this situation. It seems worthwhile to discuss insights gathered from these books, listed in the order in which they were read: Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001); Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (2002); and, Reginald W. Bibby's, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (2002). The titles are accurate descriptors about the main themes in each book, and thus it is clear that Reginald Bibby is moving in a direction quite different from either Callum Brown or Steve Bruce. Maybe it's because Scotland is different from Canada. Maybe we are more like the United States. Or, maybe not.

Being somewhat a fan over the years of Bibby's research, my disappointment in this book came as a surprise to me. It's not that I want to hear bad news, and the good news which he claims to have discovered is some sort of let down: my problem is that I don't agree that there is good news here. Having read Steve Bruce immediately prior to Bibby certainly contributed to this. Where Bibby sketches briefly one or two elements of the secularization thesis before declaring it to have been abandoned and incorrect, Bruce had

laid out the entire complex thesis and described it. While I may not agree with the secularisation model, working from a richer understanding of it was helpful. Indeed, when I reached the conclusion of *Restless Gods* where Bibby promised to explain how the experts could have been so wrong, I found myself less than enlightened. His discussion of Marx, Durkheim and Freud, seemed irrelevant to the subject at hand. More importantly, it was not clear how this showed that contemporary sociologists had abandoned the secularisation model. Bibby does name some sociologists who have abandoned this model, but doesn't indicate which ones haven't. Nor is it clear on the basis of what evidence some have decided to abandon the model, while others haven't. Perhaps one shouldn't expect this in a popular book – which *Restless Gods* is – but there are notes and references to other sources. Steve Bruce hasn't abandoned the secularization model – and, it is important to understand from Bibby's perspective and the data he has discovered, why Bruce is wrong.

Instead of a careful laying out of all of the places where the secularization thesis has been shown to be incorrect, Bibby points to the research of one main scholar, Rodney Stark, who over the year has worked with a variety of associates. Stark brings economic models to bear on the study of religion, most directly the idea of supply and demand. According to this thesis the demand is always constant, any difficulties must therefore be in how the supply of religion is being delivered. While challenging Stark and his various associates on some points, Bibby essentially accepts this premise – the human “demand for religion is constant; what varies is the supply side” (p. 31). Much of this book represents an attempt to show that this is true in Canada, that Canadians still are basically religious and that their lack of participation in the church is a failure on side of “supply”, the side of the church to provide for the religious needs of the average citizen. Failures in terms of churches are easy to find; but, is Bibby correct in claiming there is a latent interest in religion among Canadians? Three chapters, chapters 4 & 5 followed by an exploration of a theory advanced in the late 1960's by sociologist Peter Berger in chapter 6, are devoted to answering this question. At the end, however, I wasn't convinced. Instead, I kept asking: are these the correct questions? and, are the answers being interpreted correctly? For example, the question “To what extent do you think about the question, ‘What is the purpose of life?’” was posed in the research and respondents were allowed to respond either “often”, “sometimes”, “no longer”, or “I never have”. Is this a helpful question? More to the point, it seems to me a leading kind of question. Who would respond in a survey saying they never have thought about this? Well, nine percent in 2000 (up 1% from 1975), but it strikes me that most people would be reluctant to say this and risk appearing shallow, and it comes as no surprise that 52% responded “sometimes”. Still, as someone deeply concerned about ministry in congregations, I don't know what the responses tell me. I don't know how to act upon this information. Other questions such as belief in life after death, thinking about the origin of life, etc. also don't seem particularly helpful. How could we use this information?

One question which did seem more helpful was the question – “Do you believe that God exists?” Bibby stresses the consistency in those who responded “yes” to belief in God – 81% in 2000 which is close to the 84% in 1995; however, he reaches that number by combining the “Yes, I definitely do” with the “Yes, I think so.” If we look at these

separately, what we see is the “definites” have decreased from 61% in 1985 to 49% in 2000. In contrast, the undecided have grown from 33% in 1985 to 45% in 2000 (this is combining the “Yes, I think so” and the “No, I don’t think so” categories). To be fair, Bibby does note and discuss this in the text. My frustration was that points like this, where I hoped for some explanations or direct discussion, the text instead gave examples for each category. Often the discussions seem to multiply examples rather than deal well with interpreting the data. At one point, Bibby states that:

“these minor demographic and social variations are not as impressive as the finding that these two beliefs about God are held by solid majorities of people across the country, regardless of religion, age, or gender. Together, these responses about God point to an important, pervasive belief among Canadians today: “God exists, and God cares about me.” (p. 144)

Remember, however that these majorities are created when we put together those who say definitely “yes” with those who only said “Yes, I think so”. Even so, only 77% of those aged 18-34 would agree, as opposed to 84% of those over fifty-five. I’m not sure that this is a minor detail. Indeed, it would seem to argue against the idea that religious demand is a constant, even if only in a minor way. It is here that one really misses the questions which Bibby asked in his earlier work such as *Fragmented Gods*, questions related to specific Christian doctrines. Has the number of Canadians claiming a belief in the Divinity of Jesus remained constant over the last fifteen years? Has knowledge of Christian details changed significantly? Both of these questions were explored in *Fragmented Gods* (1987). This would be helpful information to know. As it is, I’m not sure that these questions or the analysis is helpful. I’m not convinced that they prove the author’s point. Indeed – and this is a very important point – far from disproving the secularization thesis, much of this information is consistent with it.

Similarly, there is nothing in Bibby’s findings which is “good news” in terms of people actually becoming involved again in local congregations. Chapter Three “The New Story of What’s Happening in the Churches” does seem to indicate that patterns of worship attendance and activity have stabilized even for mainline congregations. But will those he surveyed who say they pray and say they believe in God, actually show up? If we build it, will they come? Bibby addresses this ...sort of... in chapter 7, “What People Want from the Churches.” Most of the chapter is taken up with a discussion of the role of religious groups in society, spirituality, relational issues, and values. In the one discussion directly related to what strikes me as the vital issue, Bibby returns to the 55% of individuals whom he described in chapter 2 as responding positively to the question whether they would “consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious group if [they] found it to be worthwhile for themselves or their families.” In the discussion, he focuses on the various barriers – essentially, what people would like to see changed in the churches or in their own lives in order to participate. Two things are worth noting: First, there is no one factor that stands out, rather what might attract one individual will drive another away; and, second, the question itself involved a very low level of commitment. “Consider the possibility”. “...if found to be more worthwhile...”. Nowhere is the direct question asked – “suppose the church changed in x way; would you come?” Bibby’s statement that “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” (p. 220, italics in the original) strikes me, not as “good news” but as appalling news. With Forty-five percent of this group, nothing we do matters! The others may be “open”, but what percentage of them will come in the long term? Inadvertently, Bibby may have himself given some insight in his discussion of the impact of the terrorist attacks on the U.S.A. in September 11, 2001. If such cataclysmic events won’t bring people back, then what will? Except, here Bibby cites American commentator George Barna approvingly who, in Bibby’s words, noted that “unfortunately, few of them experienced anything significant enough to keep them there.” The problem, then, remains, not in the demand, but in the supply – even though the evidence of demand is not clearly demonstrated, and I would suggest highly suspect.

In the midst of a high-stakes gamble, being told that everything is really okay, as Bibby’s *Restless Gods* does, is only helpful if the evidence is there. It isn’t. Instead, Bibby relies on the work of Rodney Stark and his associates and one basic thesis – demand for religion is constant. A look at Europe, and most specifically Great Britain, would suggest otherwise. Steve Bruce, head of the sociology department at the University of Aberdeen, is a prolific author and a major figure in both promoting and defending the secularization model developed by sociologists. Rather than a brief description as in *Restless Gods*, Bruce gives the entire model – complete with diagram and commentary in *God is Dead*, and then spends the rest of the book defending the model against various challenges. The book is well written and well argued. Interestingly, one of the main scholars challenged by Bruce throughout is Rodney Stark and the work of his colleagues. (Bruce also briefly challenges some of Bibby’s assertions in *Unknown Gods* (1993); I am indebted to him for some helpful insights.) As an introduction to the secularization model and a lively and fair defence of it, I found this an excellent book. I left the book – not with the kind of dissatisfaction with which I left *Restless Gods* but with a sense that the decline in religiosity in Great Britain and Europe is real and our attempts to pretend that it isn’t, either theoretically or in terms of counter arguments for “growth in spirituality” or “renewal” need to be carefully considered and placed in context. Nonetheless, this doesn’t make this anything but a brutal read for Christians. There is no good news here, no silver lining. What one will find is a clear indication of the nature of the problem: participation is down, and because of this religious memory has died and is continuing to die. The church will continue – religion will play a role in individual lives, but not in society as a whole. That society will be secular, in the sense of divorced from religion. While this may not be the message we want to hear, it is well-argued and explained. There are some other fascinating details in the book. Bruce, contrary to a fairly dominant line in how many Christians interpret the last centuries, does not see the rise of science, and in particular evolutionary theory, having a direct role in undermining faith: “the primary secularizing effects of science came not from its direct refutation of religious ideas but through the general encouragement to a rationalistic orientation to the world that science has given.” (p. 116) The complexity of the argument advanced here and by other sociologists needs to be respected. While I will still want to challenge the explanations as to “why” this happened which the secularization model offers, there is no doubt that the description that it “has happened”. Latent religiosity in Europe seems a wish, not a reality.

Where sociologists advance models, historians tell stories. Callum Brown is not interested in the model of secularization and indeed spends a fair amount of *The Death of Christian Britain* arguing against it, in the sense that he suggests that what sociologists are counting doesn't really matter. What matters, Brown argues, is the place of the totality of Christianity within a society, which he calls discursive Christianity and which he discusses in detail. To vastly oversimplify his argument, what is key to Brown is whether a society thinks of itself as Christian in its overall values, regardless of how many individuals actively participate on a Sunday. Rather than declining over time, Brown argues that Britain moved rapidly and radically in the early 1960s from a Christian to a secular discourse. Even more potently, he argues that the change was primarily among young women. Gender plays a crucial role in his argument. He discusses the way in which in the period from 1800 to 1950 men were portrayed as the weak, tempted ones, whereas women were seen as the vessels of sanctity and holiness. This was, as Brown notes, a dramatic change from the reformation period. He argues "the keys to understanding secularisation in Britain are the simultaneous de-pietisation of femininity and the de-feminisation of piety from the 1960s." (p. 192) Where sociologists have seen secularisation as a long process of decline, Callum Brown argues for a swift, unexpected change. His investigation of the discursive nature of society is fascinating, and helpful. It does matter when a society shifts from thinking of itself as "Christian". That, as Brown demonstrates, has happened in Britain. It has not happened in the United States, where, if anything, public professions of faith seem to have grown in the last four decades. For us, the question is – what about Canada? If the parallel with Canada is accurate then this is a key factor which we need to take seriously. Britain and Europe, not the United States, is thus crucial to our understanding of our place and role in society.

We need to recognize that change has occurred. How dramatic has it been? How do we respond to it? For answers, we have tended to look to the research and writing from the United States. Having travelled in both the United States and in the United Kingdom, I can only state how radically different the place of the church is in these two contexts. Indeed, the description of the rapid secularization of Scotland was dramatically confirmed during my last, brief visit. Whatever theory or theories are correct, whether Brown or Bruce is a better guide, the reality is that an institution (the Church of Scotland) which had the power to force its morality on the society to the extent that swings in public parks were chained up in the early 1960s in order that the sabbath be properly observed is now invisible within Scottish society. Is this where Canadian society is going, or are we closer in our experience to the United States? There is a great deal riding on this, very high stakes. So far if we have been aware of the realities in Europe, we have bet that we are closer to the United States. Reginald Bibby's *Restless Gods* will confirm that bet. Yet, I have my doubts. From what I've seen and experienced, I believe the church in Canada is much closer to that in the United Kingdom and Europe – as well as Australia and New Zealand – although we are slower in reaching their level of secularization. It is time we started looking to Europe, not South. Too much is riding on this gamble for us to do otherwise.

Stuart Macdonald, for the Centre for Clergy Care and Congregational Health © 2006

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