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Restless Gods: the Renaissance of Religion in Canada

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I was struck by the Stevenson-Moessner's inclusive "both/and approach" in her theology of adoption. She speaks of God's rejoicing and God's woundedness (God as mutable and God as passible, etc.), developing the theological image of God as Adopting Parent and as Relinquishing Parent and as Relinquished Child.

She concludes her book with goals that emphasize the biblical doctrine of adoption as a personal message to all Christians, to particular Christian churches, to adoptive and birth parents, and to adoptees. Her purpose is to embolden, encourage, support and legitimize those in the adoption triad. Her book, moreover, offers support, sustenance, and spiritual "signposts" along the journey. As an adoptive mother of a little girl from China, I deeply appreciated *The Spirit of Adoption*, and recommend it for all involved in the adoption process.

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Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada

Reginald W. Bibby

Toronto: Stoddart, 2002

286 pages, \$32.95 Hardcover

Not long ago, I received a phone call from the mother of a 10-year old daughter and a 14-year old son. She wanted to discuss with me some of "the profound and puzzling questions about faith, the church, baptism and the Bible that my children are putting to me." Needless to say, this mother and I have had several exciting, exploratory, and helpful conversations.

How fortuitous that I am having these conversations at the very time that I'm engaging data and insights presented in Reginald Bibby's most recent book, *Restless Gods*. On the basis of sociological research in Canada conducted by Bibby and his research colleagues, the author claims that there are convincing signs of significant

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religious rejuvenation in Canada. Moreover, these signs are evident both inside and outside the churches.

Bibby, a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge, states that “the gods are extremely restless. They are stirring in the churches and in the lives of average people across the country.... Restless Gods documents what is observable ‘on the human side’. In the process, it also attempts to sensitize readers to what could be happening ‘on the other side’. It may well be that one makes sense only in terms of the other” (4-5).

“Since 1975,” says Bibby, “I have been asking Canadians about life as they are living it, through the use of a series of national surveys under the Project Canada banner. They’ve been carried out every five years — in 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 2000 — monitoring Canadian social trends generally and religious trends specifically. These six adult surveys have been complemented by three national youth surveys, completed in 1984, 1992, and 2000. *Fragmented Gods* (1987) ... told the story of the widespread decline of participation in organized religion that took place in the post-1950s. This was largely because cultural conditions had turned Canadians into highly selective consumers of what religious groups had to offer *Unknown Gods* (1993) ... pointed to the important role that religious organizations themselves played in the participation drop-off” (3). *Restless Gods* draws on all this previous research but does so through a different lens, a lens of what Bibby calls “some very good news.” He helps us see that there’s a “renaissance of religion in Canada.” Of course, such an insight is “good news” especially to religious leaders in Canada.

Some of this “good news” comes forward through what Bibby calls “some very bad myths.” Myth # 1 is that “people are switching;” myth # 2 is that “people are dropping out;” myth # 3 is that “people are not receptive” (39-54). Bibby’s research suggests that each of these viewpoints and mindsets is false. On the contrary, the research shows that there is a lot of work the mainline churches could be doing to figure out ways to reach out to those who get labeled as “Christmas and Easter people,” or those who want rites of passage ministries — baptisms, weddings, funerals — or those who are “affiliates” and need to be contacted, invited and served.

“What’s happening these days may or may not have the divine backdrop of restless gods, but developments suggest that the beginnings of a resurgence of organized religion may be taking place in Canada.” (58) What signs does Bibby see? It is clearly recognized

by many respondents that secularization has its limits. Problems of religious organizations — including the Catholic Church and Mainline Protestant churches — have not signaled the end of religion in Canada. In fact, people who are “affiliates” want religion to address their personal, social and spiritual needs. Bibby’s research shows that there is a strong generational loyalty on the part of many interviewees to the denominational choice of their parents or grandparents; when they need spiritual services, they will turn to the church/denomination that they have come to know through their families of origin. When asked the question, “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?”, a large percentage of people said Yes! Of course, it is necessary to discern what it is that would make church more worthwhile.

Bibby does caution: “Canadians may be hungering for the gods but that is hardly to say they are hungering for the churches” (183). Frequently, not much is expected of the churches, but that could change “if people came to believe that religious groups have significant things to offer” (184). Included in the wish list are addressing: “relational issues,” “social concerns,” “spiritual issues,” and “personal matters.” Says Bibby: “All is well on the demand side. It’s the supply side that poses the problem. The belief systems and programs offered by churches and other religious groups are simply not connecting with the people who need them or think they might need them at some point in the future” (225). This is where Bibby’s research is appropriately and extremely challenging. Are the churches ready to participate fully in “the renaissance of religion in Canada?”

As a sociologist presenting “the observable side of religion in Canada,” Bibby says: “The current situation calls Canadian religious groups to ask themselves whether in fact the faiths they value have something decisive to say about ultimate questions relating to life and death” (136). Bibby’s research does show that Canadians “do raise these so-called ‘ultimate questions’” concerning life’s origins and meanings, happiness and suffering, life after death — with an expectation that religious groups have something significant to say on each of these and able to say it in comprehensible terms (93). “Restless churches and restless Canadians badly need to find each other” (226). “One important change,” says Bibby, “that appears to

have been taking place in recent decades is the tendency of people to 'process' ultimate questions faster than in the past" (133).

Restless Gods has a lot to commend itself to Canadians and to religious groups in Canada. In fact, there is a variety of levels at which this text needs to be read, discussed and digested. One could begin with the data presented in the charts, which are presented in an easy-read and interpretative manner, reflect upon them, and tell their story. It would also be a valuable exercise to draw up comparisons with previous Project Canada surveys as well as with findings from research and conversations in 2001-2002 with another two hundred people from across the country. The comparisons at various points in the text with Canada's teens surveys (1984, 1992, 2000), and the generational realities and tensions — all this likewise needs to be grasped and addressed.

Bibby issues the challenges in this manner: "though I have been maintaining that established religious groups have the potential to experience revitalization, this does not for one second mean that revitalization is inevitable. Rejuvenation from within will be the result of people working very hard and very creatively to turn organizations such as the Anglican, United, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches around. Likewise, nothing much is going to happen to reverse the fortunes of Roman Catholicism in Quebec without a major infusion of human and financial resources — including possible cooperative ventures with other religious families and parachurch organizations. As far as I know, the gods don't do it on their own" (240-241).

This is a timely, important and valuable book in exploring what the Canadian mosaic looks like, especially religiously and spiritually, in the beginning of the twenty-first century. I know that I will be using this text in several of my seminary courses. The descriptive presentation of current religious realities for Canadians and their responses to religious groups within Canada — all this and more needs to become a significant part of "bridging discussions" not only within religious groups but with people in Canada. The sociological data presented by Bibby and his colleagues helps all of us recognize better what is distinctively true of Canadians from 1975 to the present.

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