

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Bibby, Reginald W.** *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-religious, Low Religious, Or No Religious in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017, 280 pp, \$29.95, paper (9780774890069).

**R**eginald W. Bibby holds the Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. His latest book, *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious, or No Religious in Canada* builds on his “gods series” of books, which started in 1987, with *Fragmented Gods* and culminated in the 2011 release of *Beyond the Gods and Back*. Bibby is perhaps best known for the extensive survey data he has collected since the 1970s and his coverage of Canada’s religious and social values. *Resilient Gods* uses the emerging framework of religious polarization, which argues that the adoption of religion and its rejection coexist on a continuum. As Bibby puts it, he is simply talking about the “inclination of people to embrace religion, reject religion, or occupy a middle position between two tendencies” (53). Although many people fall somewhere in the mushy middle between these two tendencies, the most curious religious (and nonreligious) developments happen at the poles, shining a light on the secularization thesis and its critics.

In some respects, *Resilient Gods* is not so different from *Beyond the Gods and Back* (2011), in that it treads similar ground and frequently makes callbacks to previous work. Despite the occasional feeling of déjà vu, *Resilient Gods* is more complete than Bibby’s previous books in the series, particularly in how it addresses the two major theoretical approaches to religious change—secularization and revitalization. In short, secularization is the process of decrease of religion’s influence in many spheres of social and individual life. Although the United States, being an unusually religious nation, is an apparent anomaly, modernity and religion appear to be mutually exclusive in the rest of the West. Alternatively, secularization has been refuted by the re-sacralization of the West, as seen in modest revitalizations of religious participation in Canada, as well as in global religious developments.

*Resilient Gods* presents a strong case that secularization and desecularization are both occurring, so, rather than the either/or dichotomy of the traditional secularization debate, we may entertain a hybrid perspective. One of the significant criticisms of Bibby’s work on polarization

concerns his use of the term itself, which conjures images of the culture wars of the 1960s or the polarized climate of contemporary U.S. politics. As Bibby acknowledges, polarization is a simple, if confusing, concept (53). An astute reader might suggest that he abandon the concept entirely because of its baggage, but Bibby's explanation of its utility should satisfy even the surliest wordsmith. Mostly, it is not at all surprising that individuals lean towards contrasting positions (religious or nonreligious) along with a continuum of different inclinations. Such a conclusion is, to use Bibby's words, axiomatic. Nevertheless, the concept has generated more heat than its implications, which is unfortunate given that the implications of polarization form the meat of Bibby's conclusions.

Over the course of nine chapters, Bibby describes religious (and nonreligious) change, with much of the early sections providing a history lesson as well as a timeline of Bibby's thought process. Chapter 4, the Polarized Mosaic, is arguably the most important contribution of the work, as it details Bibby's approach to measuring religious polarization and corroborates his plain-spoken rebuttal to much of contemporary sociology of religion's stubborn emphasis on either secularization or desecularization. The remainder of *Resilient Gods* investigates the consequences of religious polarization for personal and social well-being and considers the relationship between religion and spirituality, especially our ongoing need for spiritual fulfillment or, as Phil Zuckerman (2015) puts it—"aweism." Like *Beyond the Gods and Back*, Bibby maintains that religion has a unique standing when it comes to people's happiness though he more closely attends to the secular life in this outing.

Considering the comparatively recent emergence of nonreligion scholarship, Bibby's inclusion of the secular life and secular spirituality as a discussion point is welcome, and his brief examination of atheists' responses to death is compelling, especially in light of the consequences of either pleading ignorance to the question of one's mortality or embracing religion. Regarding social wellbeing, Bibby's inclusion of Jonathan Haidt's work as well as Sam Harris's commentaries on morality, provide nuance to what might otherwise be a typical retread of religion's communitarian advantages.

Given the title of the book, it is not surprising that the final chapter addresses the reliance on religion, predicting the continued demand for the spiritual marketplace. Both major and minor religions will persist, Catholicism remains firm in Canada and shows few signs of decline, and like in his previous book, Bibby projects Islam's continued growth into the future, partly because of immigration patterns. Although it is understandable why Catholics and the varieties of Protestants dominate Bibby's analysis, one gets the impression that Islam is a slow moving

train that never quite reaches its destination. Perhaps we are too far out to appreciate the implications of Islam's revival fully, but Bibby leaves us with little to work with beyond a brief summary of the historic and continued importance of Christian-Islamic relations worldwide (213).

Although *Resilient Gods* at times feels like a merely updated draft of Bibby's previous work, his framework justifies the serial nature of the scholarship. Because of the familiarity of Bibby's interests, readers should have little difficulty applying the general analysis to their work. Additionally, the book is conversational in tone, while also providing more context than previous installments (which often tended to be too descriptive). Sociologists of religion will find much to celebrate in this book, and for those of us who are currently engaged with nonreligion scholarship, Bibby avoids many of the missteps of other scholars who are primarily interested in religion's changing role in the West.

*Resilient Gods* does an admirable job of responding to criticisms of Bibby's previous book, particularly his conceptualization of polarization. One can almost detect a certain amount of exasperation in how he handles those criticisms, but diversions such as encouraging people not to read more into the framework than he intended are amusing and a useful lesson for scholars anxious with a red pen (55). Nevertheless, though *Resilient Gods* cannot be all things to all people, I was struck by the lack of the attention paid to pagans. Given the various transformations of Neopaganism in Canada and around the world, more than a passing census mention seems warranted, especially in light of Bibby's chapter on spirituality and inventories of the spiritual marketplace. Despite this weakness, the book has much to offer budding and seasoned sociologists of religion, providing a valuable reference for understanding Canadian religious and nonreligious trends.

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## REFERENCES

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