

## **Why Bother with Organized Religion?** *A Response to Joel Thiessen*

**Reginald W. Bibby**

In his article, Joel Thiessen may have inadvertently drawn attention to a segment of the Canadian population that particularly warrants watching as we try to understand religious developments in this country. “Marginal affiliates” are people who identify with religious groups but have limited involvement. What is particularly significant about these individuals is that they constitute something similar to a sizable “politically undecided” grouping that is the key to the outcome of an election.

In my latest book, *Beyond the Gods & Back*, I have argued that the current Canadian religious situation is best understood, not in terms of secularization or revitalization, but polarization. A core of about one in three Canadians continue to value faith, while approximately one in three do not. The remaining one-third or so comprise “the ambivalent middle – people who continue to identify with a religion group but are not actively involved. In some of my previous work (e.g., Bibby 1995:49, 2002:49, 2004:63), I have referred to such religiously-affiliated people as “Marginals,” as compared to “Actives,” “Inactives,” “Disaffiliates,” and “Non-affiliates.” As I have recently suggested,

*Movement in both directions of ‘the polarization continuum’ has been taking place and will continue to take place. But overall, nationally-speaking, the two positions have become increasingly entrenched. Neither will disappear in the foreseeable future. What is at issue is the extent to which both will ebb and flow – grow or not grow (Bibby 2011:56).*

That “ebbing and flowing” will depend not only on the retention of people who are explicitly religion or non-religious but also on the inclinations of people “in the middle” – the marginal affiliates – to opt for either end of the continuum.

## **Thiessen's Data Base and Findings**

Joel Thiessen joins the discussion in focusing on this important marginal affiliate category. He writes that I have suggested such people “are interested in pursuing greater involvement” and that “changes to the supply of religion...could lead to a resurgence of levels of church involvement in Canada.” He links my thinking to the so-called “rational choice” school of thought and its foremost proponent, Rodney Stark, where greater emphasis is placed on religious suppliers than consumers.

On the basis of his in-depth interviews with twenty-one marginal affiliates in the Calgary area, Thiessen offers three primary findings.

1. The decline in the involvement levels of these once-active individuals is primarily due to personal (“demand-side”) rather than organizational (“supply-side”) factors. For example, they were too busy, no longer found participation helpful or relevant, lacked social support, or experienced tension.
2. The fact they still were attending services occasionally was due primarily to tradition, family pressures, and the desire to connect with a higher power.
3. When asked, “*Do you desire greater involvement in your religious group?*” only three of the twenty-one people indicated that they clearly did; another two felt there was “a chance” they would become more involved. The dominant sentiment, Thiessen says, was that they did not wish to get more involved. “These findings,” he writes, “at the very least raise questions about how optimistic we should be about marginal affiliates becoming active affiliates.”

Thiessen's primary conclusion is that this lack of interest in greater participation is “determined more by demand-side variables than supply-side concerns” – variables over which “churches have no control.” He even questions whether concern about something like death will twig religious interest on the part of people. For emphasis, he adds that even the three people who seemed to be exhibit “supply side” characteristics had not sought out congregations that might be able to address their needs – “curious,” he writes, “since the things they are looking for can be found in other congregations in Calgary.” Presumably he thinks the sheep should find the shepherd.

Theoretically-speaking, Thiessen says that “the lack of demand for the things that religious groups offer” stands in contrast “to what Bibby and other rational choice theorists have argued.” Methodologically-speaking, he concedes in his concluding sentence, “Of course both religious supply and demand play a role in the religious marketplace. But,” he insists, “the data from this study suggest that we must do a much better job of investigating what it means when someone says, on a survey or in an interview, that they might be open to greater involvement.” Substantively-speaking, he claims that “the preliminary data reported here call Bibby’s renaissance thesis into question.”

His message in one line: we need to focus more on the “demand side” and less on the “supply side.” Translated for purposes of my polarization thesis, the religious or non-religious fate of ambivalent marginal affiliates lies primarily with them rather than the performances of religious groups.

### **The Universality of Demand and Supply**

Hmmm. In making sense of why people access the offerings of any organization, it seems rather prosaic to acknowledge that there are always supply and demand components. No one turns to any organization – or, for that matter, enters into any kind of relationship – without expecting something in return. There has to be demand; there also has to be supply.

Religion does not get an exemption from such a universal reality. People who voluntarily participate in religious groups readily acknowledge that they receive positive things from such involvement. If that’s the case, it is hardly a stretch to assume that people who are not participating need to be convinced that it is also worth their while to be involved. The trick is for religious organizations to provide the things that the less involved and non-involved define as worthwhile.

*Necessary versus Sufficient Causes.* Now, I am not being simple-minded here. The positive performances of religious groups does not result in a collective *sufficient cause*, any more than the positive performances of politicians or professors or cooks guarantees that everyone will, respectively, give them their votes, applaud their lectures, or eat at their restaurants. But positive performances tend to be *necessary causes* in order for people to get votes, be appreciated by students, and have hungry customers come through the doors. Nowhere in my work do I go so far as to say, as Thiessen claims, “If religious groups only adjust the ways that they supply religion, then we should expect marginal affiliates to pursue greater involvement.” But I do maintain that, in order to have the opportunity of having some marginal affiliates become more involved, groups need to be responsive to their interests and needs. Incidentally, he uses phrases like “Bibby’s optimism” – connoting that I personally am cheering groups on. Hardly. I merely am talking about possibilities.

Thiessen’s findings point to a fairly straightforward reality: most of the twenty-one people he interviewed who used to be actively involved are now marginal participants because they do not see much value in greater involvement. They consequently are giving their resources to other things.

*Asking the Right Question.* However, part of the problem is that Thiessen asked people the wrong question. Aware that most had chosen to be marginally involved, he asked, “*Do you desire greater involvement in your religious group?*” That’s like asking people who no longer frequently shop at Wal-Mart if they would like to shop there more often. The answer is a predictable, “No!” That’s not the question I have been using over the years in probing potential receptivity. My item?

*“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?”* Response options: 1 Yes 2 Perhaps 3 No”

I clearly have put the onus on religious groups with the wording of the question. If they could provide ministry that contributes to the quality of the lives of respondents and their families, would people “consider the possibility” of being more involved? What the item is probing is simple but specific: are Canadians still open to religious groups that can come through? Or have they shut out such groups altogether?

By now I have considerable national survey data for both adults and teenagers spanning 1995 through 2008 that support the idea that widespread receptivity to such positive ministry exists among people who are not highly involved. Would every person who says he or she is open actually respond? Of course not – just as relatively few religious groups will provide the kinds of ministry that people view as “worthwhile.” But the point of the findings is that, in the face of apparent rejection and defection, many Canadians who are not actively involved in religious groups have not closed the door on potential involvement. The acknowledged demand is fairly extensive. What remains to be seen is the extent to which suppliers can do everything they can to touch the lives of marginals and others.

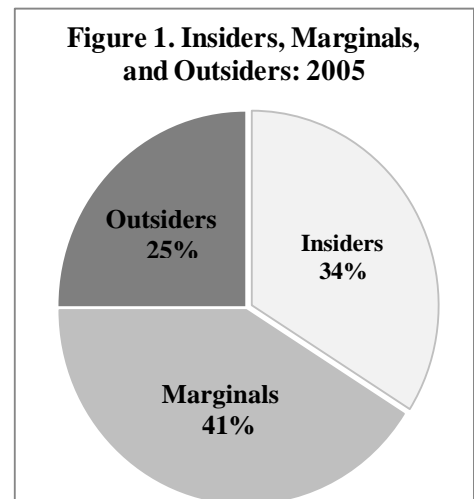
If some suppliers step up, some marginal affiliates can be expected to respond – not everyone, but some. Conversely, if suppliers do not come through, marginals can be expected to gravitate toward total non-involvement. This is not a wild-eyed hypothesis; it is prosaic in terms of axiomatic patterns of supply and demand in any sphere of life. In the case of religion, participation is always the end result of supply finding ways of connecting with demand.

To claim, as Thiessen does, that there is virtually no market demand among people who used to be involved, is neither helpful nor accurate.

## Beyond Rhetoric

But rather than merely getting lost in an unproductive war of words, let me offer some research findings that readers might find helpful. Thiessen asserts in his conclusion that “it is most surprising that no one has even attempted to do qualitative research on this issue.” Actually, that’s not true. Even though my Project Canada national surveys spanning 1975 through 2005 are, by definition, primarily quantitative, they also have included efforts to gather qualitative data, providing questions with open-ended opportunities for people to express their thinking. These are not detailed face to face-to-face conversations, but they nonetheless are brief conversations worth examining. Incidentally, I personally coded the PC 2005 responses to the open-ended religion questions that follow and, with an assistant, recorded the illustrative statements. I wanted a clear, personal sense of what people were saying.

In a specific analysis, I drew on my earlier mentioned work on religious involvement and data from the Project Canada 2005 national survey of 1,600 Canadians to examine the thinking of three categories of people: (1) those highly involved in religious groups, (2) those not highly involved but open to greater participation, and (3) those neither highly involved nor receptive to greater involvement. Almost all of



the people in the first two groupings claimed some form of religious affiliation. For summation purposes, I referred to them respectively as *Insiders*, *Marginals*, and *Outsiders*. The preliminary results were presented at a professional meeting but, because of some demanding personal circumstances, the paper was never submitted for publication review. The highlights are being published here for the first time. The size and scope of the samples involved help to provide a

national and even a marginal affiliate context for Thiessen’s work. Complete details, tables, and data are available in the original paper (Bibby 2006).

**The Insiders.** People in this category were attending services at least once a month. They comprised close to 35% of Canadians. I asked them pointedly, “*What is the main thing your religious involvement adds to your life?*”

The majority of Insiders replied that their religious involvement provided *personal enrichment* in the form of traits like peace, purpose, sustenance, growth, and hope. Some two in ten reported that religion added an important social dimension to their lives through the support and community provided by *people*. A further two in ten cited the themes of *God and spirituality*.

|                      |            |
|----------------------|------------|
| Personal enrichment  | 56%        |
| The People           | 22         |
| God and spirituality | 21         |
| Nothing              | 1          |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>100</b> |

It should surprise no one that individuals who are active in religious groups are virtually unanimous in acknowledging that the supply-side is contributing to the quality of their lives. It is an obvious tip-off on the importance of religious groups having salient things to offer the less involved as well.

**The Actives: What Their Involvement Adds to Their Lives**  
*Some Illustrative Responses*

**Personal Enrichment**  
... A sense of purpose and strengthening and hope...a place to regroup my inner-self and handle the everyday events... contentment, happiness...peace within and joy of living...I feel happier...it gives me strength...a major time commitment, but worth it... love and compassion...peace and serenity...confidence in the future....

**The People**  
...Companionship in my spiritual journey...help and fellowship...a sense of belonging...connection and support...friends and spiritual enrichment...I’m 86 years old and the minister comes to my home every month...gives proper values and teachings to my children....

**God & Spirituality**  
...A connection to God...a place to be safe and grow...it strengthens my spirit which in turn strengthens my relationship with God...an opportunity to collect my thoughts and give thanks for everything I have...communion with God...enrichment of my faith....

**The Outsiders.** As of the 2005 survey, some 38% of Canadians who attended services less than once a month said they were *not* open to greater involvement in religious groups. As noted earlier, these people – dubbed religious “Outsiders” – represented about 25% of the total Canadian population. Some of Thiessen’s marginal affiliates who were not open to greater involvement would have been included in this category. Having indicated their lack of receptivity to involvement, they were asked bluntly, “*Is there any major reason why not?*”

Two in three (227) offered responses. Major themes included negative views about the alleged intolerance and contribution to conflict of religious groups, no sense of personal need, the lack of religious beliefs, negativism about religion generally, and personal factors including lack of time, declining health, and advancing age. In

|                                    |            |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| Negative views of religious groups | 21%        |
| No interest in involvement         | 21         |
| Lack of Belief                     | 20         |
| Personal preference                | 11         |
| Negative Views of Religion         | 10         |
| Personal factors                   | 6          |
| Other                              | 4          |
| No major reason                    | 7          |
| <b>Total</b>                       | <b>100</b> |

general, these tend to be “demand-side” factors, including the sheer rejection of religious groups.

**The Outsiders: Why They Are Not Wanting to Be Involved**  
*Some Illustrative Responses*

**Negative Views of Religious Groups**  
...I have encountered hypocrisy and deceit...the clergy’s discrimination and lack of open-mindedness towards women as priests, divorce and homosexuality...they have aligned themselves with interests that are not mine....

**No Interest in Involvement**  
...Lack of any motivation...no need...I don’t need a religious group to find spirituality... too hokey...I find spirituality in friends, acquaintances, workshops, books, magazines, the Internet....

**Lack of Belief**  
...I’m not much of a believer...I can’t make myself believe; I’d feel like a fraud...we are mammals on a planet of a minor star in a minor galaxy...there is no God...I don’t have faith...Science rules....

**Personal Preference**  
...I have not discovered a religious group that answers my spiritual needs...my absolute refusal to follow any kind of dogma...total liberty to think is for me...we can worship at home or anywhere....

**Negative Views of Religion**  
...Waste of time, don’t need a crutch...I wish people would just be decent human beings instead of fearing some God or retribution...much harm has been done...religion is the root of all evil – wars, famine, hatred, envy....

**Personal Factors**  
...My age (87)...health reasons...too far to drive to church...no time, too busy with family...I’m 84 years old and unable to get myself to church...I simply like focusing my energy towards my studies and my relationship....



**The Marginals.** The 66% of Canadians who were attending services less than once a month were comprised of those who attended several times a year (13%), yearly (15%), less than yearly (15%), and never (23%). In response to the receptivity 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*”), 62% of these said either “Yes” (19%) or “Perhaps” (43%) – suggesting that the door to possible participation had not been closed. They comprised about 40% of the national population.

They were then asked the direct and important question: “*What kinds of things would make it worthwhile?*” These marginals did not lack for ideas – almost six in ten (371) volunteered thoughts.

- Some 40% indicated that the key lies with *ministry* that is in touch with their personal interests and needs, including ministries that target children, young adults, and seniors. Explicit emphases on God and spirituality were important to many, as was ministry that gave attention to community and societal issues.
- Just over 20% cited the importance of *organizational matters* being resolved, notably the need for changes in style and outlook. Specific examples offered included the need for groups to be more contemporary and inclusive, as well as exhibit greater equality toward people generally, starting with women.

| <b>Table 3. What Would Make Greater Involvement Worthwhile (N=371)</b>          |            |
|---|------------|
| <i>Factors Cited by People Attending &lt;Monthly Who Say They Are Receptive</i> |            |
| <b>Ministry Factors</b>   | <b>39%</b> |
| Personal interests & needs  | 17         |
| Specific ministries   | 12         |
| God and spirituality  | 6          |
| Society-oriented  | 4          |
| <b>Organizational Factors</b>   | <b>22</b>  |
| Changes in style and outlook  | 19         |
| More contemporary   | 6          |
| More inclusive  | 6          |
| Greater equality  | 3          |
| Other   | 4          |
| Better Leadership   | 3          |
| <b>Ministry Qualities</b>   | <b>20</b>  |
| Relevant, realistic   | 7          |
| Genuine, authentic  | 6          |
| Interesting, stimulating, lively  | 3          |
| Caring  | 2          |
| Other   | 2          |
| <b>Respondent Factors</b>   | <b>19</b>  |
| Schedule changes  | 7          |
| Involvement of family & friends   | 5          |
| Getting older, children, health, etc.   | 4          |
| Emerging needs  | 3          |

- Another 20% indicated that the key to their being more involved in religious groups is for groups to exhibit *qualities* that they value. They talked about ministries that could speak directly to life and to their lives. Many were particularly wanting to sense authenticity and integrity – not surprising in light of the widespread cynicism toward government and other societal sectors in recent years, as well as the extensive publicity given to abuse and scandal in the churches, including the residential school legacy.
- A further 20% reported that the main reason why they are not more involved in religious groups was because of factors in *their own lives*. Schedule and time problems were noted, along with such things as the lack of involvement of family and friends, aging and health, and the presence of young children. A number of people suggested that, with the passage of time, needs could arise that would result in their becoming more involved again. It may well be that Thiessen’s sample of twenty-one people was drawn disproportionately from this category.

**The Marginals: What They Say Would Make Greater Involvement Worthwhile**  
*Some Illustrative Responses*

**Ministry Factors**

...It would have to add value to my life...more family things...spiritual guidance related to everyday living and practices...get to know the people in my community better...for my family’s well-being...if it was uplifting and added to life...emphasis on the love of God, caring about others, etc. rather than the pomp ceremony and ritual...programs for children...sermons given by a good speaker that are upbeat....

**Organizational Factors**

...Get away from the boring traditional ways and change with the times...a non-judgmental environment that emphasizes spiritual development rather than rules...remove the “old boys’ club” mentality – accept things that are different, such as gay marriage and choice decisions, and offer women a greater role... if the sermons were more relevant to today...a priest that you can understand...no talk of heaven or hell....

**Ministry Qualities**

...A community of faith that is genuine and caring...more up-to-date and relevant sermons, good music, and more local involvement...honesty, a group that really did practice what they preached...more age-appropriate things for teenagers and young adult groups...services that I am able to get something from...finding less hypocrisy...dealing with the real life issues of today...some vitality and positive energy....

**Personal Factors**

...I see myself attending my church again on a regular basis, but right now my life is congested and I have little time for anything else...if I had children and my partner wanted to expose them to religion, it would make my in-laws happy ...if my spouse wanted to go...if someone in the family got something out of it ...make it Sunday afternoon, not morning...if it could have a positive influence on my partner and our children..I .need more time....

## **Conclusion**

The reports of Canadians who are actively involved in religious groups, those who are not, and those who are open to the possibility of greater involvement are consistent: people have to define their participation as worthwhile – adding something to their lives and the people they care most about.

To the extent they do not, Canadians will take a pass on religious involvement. The future of religious participation will depend on the ability of “religious companies” to provide what people believe they need. Such success on the “supply-side” obviously is not a sufficient cause that guarantees organizational success – a reminder that Thiessen offers in highlighting the role of personal factors for some marginals. Nonetheless, the contribution of the supply-side is a necessary cause. Everyone will not respond; but without the supply, why would anyone bother with organized religion?

The good news for Canada’s religious groups is that, for whatever reasons, significant numbers of people continue to indicate that they are open to some life-enhancing things that groups might bring. Therein lies their ongoing opportunity, including the chance to have an impact on the numerical shape of the country’s emerging religion/no religion continuum.

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