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Veteran Journalist Kenneth Briggs Explores the Bible’s Diminishing Presence in American Life, Finds an Emerging “Bible-less Christianity”

The Bible may still be the world’s bestselling book, but its prominence in American life has diminished dramatically, says veteran religion reporter Kenneth A. Briggs. In his new book, *The Invisible Bestseller: Searching for the Bible in America* (Eerdmans, \$25.00 hardcover, September 1, 2016), Briggs explores what the fading away of the Good Book means for a nation that once looked to it as a foundational moral guidebook. Even with a reported five billion copies in print, and more than 100 million downloads, the Bible has receded so much from public view that we are witnessing the emergence of “Bible-less Christianity.”

The Bible is now “the most revered invisible feature of our surroundings,” Briggs found while researching the book. His cross-country quest to locate the Bible in American life takes him to a meeting of worried Bible promoters in Orlando; to a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, “the most visible American clearinghouse for academic scrutiny of the Bible”; to the Oklahoma City headquarters of the YouVersion Bible app, which seems on track to reach its goal of half a billion downloads; to a Bible study at a federal prison in upstate New York; and to Dayton, Tennessee, site of the Scopes Trial, among other places. He interviews televangelists, scholars, preachers, pollsters, and everyday people from California to Florida, tracking the role of the Bible in the lives of Christians representing a variety of denominations and traditions.

Briggs identifies two major reasons for the Bible’s waning influence in contemporary America:

- **A drift from a way of life that finds meaning in “higher” things, to one that is grounded in the American success story.** “The Bible is overridden by consumer appetites,” Briggs says. Even some of the most bible-based Christians have drifted away from a dependence on Scripture. “As evangelical Christians rose in socioeconomic status, they entered mainstream American life, where the only real god is money.”
- **The growing inability of people to believe in transcendence.** “The Bible speaks a language of otherworldliness and transcendence that fewer people speak,” Briggs says. A “passionate campaign brief for another world,” it’s become a tough sell to secularized Americans who may no longer be certain that there is another world.

Christianity without the Bible may be difficult to envisage, but Briggs’s investigation uncovered evidence of this phenomenon. “As biblical literacy has decreased, churches have reduced the Bible’s place in worship and congregational life,” he writes. There’s a growing tendency to minimize Scripture and go straight to Jesus: “Fewer people are looking to the Bible for anything these days, yet the figure of Jesus looms as large as ever in the public mind,” Briggs says. “Christianity is retaining a Christ-centeredness that is depending less on the Bible itself and more on a popularized version of Jesus as the ‘World’s Greatest Guy.’”

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Briggs, who tells of how his childhood grounding in the Bible offered him “a bigger picture of what life could be and should be...the most influential gift I ever received,” ends on a note of hope for the essential role Scripture might still play: “Perhaps vital consensus on what it means to find light and hope and to live biblically in that mode of simple piety—is possible. Gleaning the Bible’s essence could coalesce a ‘mind’ that would, as in the early days of the church, challenge the prevailing culture with its own inherent wisdom instead of continuing to mimic and parrot that culture for lack of understanding its own traditions.”

Kenneth A. Briggs is a journalist and commentator who worked for many years as religion writer for *Newsday* and as religion editor for *The New York Times*. His previous books include *The Power of Forgiveness* and *Double Crossed: Uncovering the Catholic Church’s Betrayal of American Nuns*. He currently blogs for *National Catholic Reporter*.

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Searching for the Bible in America***
by Kenneth A. Briggs

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