

## **“Secular growth: the Canadian experience since 1945” –Tina Block, Thompson Rivers University**

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Over the past few years, I’ve been exploring irreligion – or to borrow Callum’s term – no-religionism in Canada between the 1950s and the 1970s. I’ve been especially interested in regional variations in irreligion, and more particularly – in the distinctly secular history of British Columbia – which was and is the least religious province in Canada, by statistical measures -more recently – I’ve been looking at the rise of unbelief and secular humanism in postwar Canada, particularly in the 1950s through 1970s. Today...I’m going to touch on a few of these areas. I’ll talk a bit about the dramatic decline of institutional religious involvement and affiliation in postwar Canada. I’ll also share some of my work on the development of organized secular humanism, and on the experience of non-believers, in the postwar years. In the decades following World War II, Canada experienced a significant decline in institutional religious affiliation and involvement – however, with respect to religious belief, change has been more gradual. Certainly in the time period that I focus on – the 1950s to the 1970s – religious belief remained quite important to Canadian culture, and non-believers struggled to find social acceptance. Today I’m going to spend some time talking about secular growth – but I’ll also talk about some of the obstacles to that growth – particularly from the perspective of the secular humanist movement in Canada. Although Canada became a far more secular place during these years – secular humanist groups struggled to broaden their appeal, in part, because of the persistent silence and stigma around unbelief.

Let’s start by looking a bit at the decline of institutional affiliation and involvement in postwar Canada. The Canadian religious landscape changed significantly in the years following World War II. The Christian church receded from its privileged place in Canadian public life – and organized religion more generally became less important and relevant in the lives of ordinary Canadians. And yet, through the late 1940s and much of the 1950s...all signs seemed to point in the opposite direction - toward a resurgence of religion in Canada. The immediate postwar years saw a boom in church building and membership across Canada - between 1945 and 1960 - the Christian churches in Canada underwent their largest rate of growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Church groups burgeoned, and Sunday schools burst at the seams. One would suspect that in this context, church leaders would be brimming with optimism - but I found quite the opposite in my research – in church writings of these years, there was actually a deep current anxiety about the apparent superficiality of postwar religious involvement. Canadian church leaders worried that the increase in churchgoing reflected a desire for conformity rather than a real spiritual awakening. As an Anglican official observed in 1957: we are witnessing a “revival of interest in religion,” rather than a revival of “real religion”; a United Church leader echoed this sentiment, claiming that the “back-to-church-boom” was a sign – not of true piety – but rather of the fact that churchgoing had once again become “fashionable.”<sup>1</sup> [SLIDES x2: a couple of comics – that get at concerns about the superficiality of churchgoing; churchgoing – is just about being seen...NOT true piety!]

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<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Churchman*, March 21, 1957, 123-4; *United Church Observer*, MAY 1, 1958.

As it turns out, church leaders had reason to be concerned about the postwar church boom. [SLIDE re: church attendance]. Gallup polls – show that church attendance in Canada experienced a sharp drop between the 1950s and 2001. The number of Canadians saying they attended services in the past seven days dropped from 58% in 1955 to 31% in 2001. There was an even more dramatic decline in levels of church adherence – in 1957 - 82% of Canadians claimed adherence to a particular church – this dropped to 48% in 1975, and 29% in 1990. Turning from statistics on church adherence and involvement – to census data on religious preference - we see a dramatic increase, since WWII, in the number of Canadians claiming to have “no religion.” [SLIDE: no religion statistics] The proportion of Canadians claiming to have ‘no religion’ increased from 0.4% in 1951 to almost 24% in 2011; the largest jump was between 1951 and 1971 – when the “no religion” population increased by over 10x.<sup>2</sup>

As Callum has explored in detail – demographic categories such as age and sex are especially important to understanding the secularizing trends of this era. In Canada as elsewhere - males have been far more likely than females to claim no religion and to stay away from the churches. Prior to the 1960s - the link between piety and femininity was quite strong in the wider culture - women were presumed to be naturally religious, and they were deemed to be responsible for nurturing the spiritual life of the family. [SLIDE – COMIC] as this comic suggests – church leaders often worried that men only came to church when their wives made them – and they often complained about the predominance of women in their congregations. As Callum has shown – the link between piety and femininity began to unravel during the 1960s – reflecting the influence of such developments as the women’s movement and the sexual revolution. Although males continue to predominate among those who claimed “no religion,” the gender gap did narrow during the 1960s and 1970s. The category of age is also very significant to understanding the secularizing currents of this era - no religionism was and is most prominent among the young in Canada – which suggests – although it does not guarantee – that the no religion population will continue to grow in Canada. Demographic factors are very important to understanding secular growth in Canada - and some, such as age and sex, are more important than others; however...it is also the case that the secularizing or de-christianizing trends of the postwar era cut across demographic categories. The rise of no religion in Canada can’t be explained by any single factor alone - since World War II, more and more Canadians have become detached from organized religion - this detachment is broadly based and not anchored to any single category or cause.

I’m not going to bring out any more statistics on this – but I will note that there are several other indicators of the decline of organized religious involvement in Canada during this period - membership levels in church groups dropped, as did attendance at Sunday schools – for instance, between 1960 and 1985, the number of students enrolled in Presbyterian Sunday Schools decreased by two-thirds. [SLIDE – as this comic suggests – this was of great concern to church officials – who worried that parents were choosing sports over SS for their children] While the substantial drop in Sunday school enrolment worried church officials – so too did the apparent rise of “Sunday school orphans” – children who were dropped off at the churches by their non-attending parents. Church leaders looked disapprovingly on those parents who used the Sunday schools as a babysitter. [SLIDE – comic re: brats] From the perspective of church

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<sup>2</sup> *Census of Canada*; Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods and Restless Gods*.

officials – the rise of Sunday school orphans was further evidence of the superficial character of postwar religion. Church leaders also regularly complained about the tendency of people to use the churches for family rituals but not for worship. In 1961, a Canadian Anglican priest, concerned that the churches were being used for “festivals” and “family occasions” but not worship, remarked: “Religion, real religion, isn’t too popular today... Christianity [is being rendered] into something weak and harmless, sentimental and palsy-walsy.”<sup>3</sup>

While postwar church leaders worried about the superficiality of using the churches for family rites and not for regular worship – some present-day commentators see the persistence of such rites in Canada as evidence that Christianity is not, in fact, in serious decline. According to sociologist Reginald Bibby, two thirds of those who say they have no religion will actually re-identify with religion in the course of pursuing rites of passage related to marriage, children, and death. For Bibby this is hopeful evidence that - despite declines in regular churchgoing, Canadians still “want to bring the gods in on major life events”<sup>4</sup> My own research – which includes oral interviews with those who left or never joined a religious institution in the postwar years - suggests that for many Canadians, participating in religious rites of passage had more to do with family obligation than with a desire to “bring the gods in.” Oral interviews enable us to see not only *that* people engaged in such rites and rituals, but *why* they did so. What I found is that many of my interviewees reluctantly baptized their children or were married in churches to placate their families. Such practices were not somehow ‘superficial,’ as church leaders claimed, but neither should they be seen as evidence of a strong faith or religious commitment. While church-based weddings, baptisms, and religious celebrations are rightfully considered elements of popular religion, it’s important to recognize that people could engage in such practices for very secular reasons. Many Canadians – when torn between their own unbelief and the obligations of family - opted to oblige those who were closest to them. Asked why she was married in a church, one woman put it quite simply: “Because it wasn’t my decision, it was...the thing to do. Girls got married in churches, and I’d been a non-conformist all my life - but not to the point where I would hurt my parents”; one of my male interviewees said: we got married in a church because “both mothers thought that we should be married in a church.” Many of the people with whom I spoke gave similar responses – many said they would have preferred a civil ceremony, but felt pressure to fulfill the obligations of family. Many also baptized their children for similar reasons. Most of my interviewees attached little religious significance to the ceremony of baptism – they described it as “unimportant” and “harmless.” The practice of baptism is often held up as evidence of popular religious conviction. Baptism remained a popular practice in the postwar decades, with 90% of Canadians desiring baptism for their children in the 1970s. While some see the persistence of church weddings and baptisms (could talk about funerals as well...) as evidence of a flourishing popular spirituality, my research suggests that for many postwar Canadians, decisions to engage in such practices were motivated as much or more by secular than sacred concerns.

While there are those who see the persistence of religious rites as a sign of the enduring commitment of Canadians to Christianity - my interviews tell a bit of a different story. All evidence suggests that Canada became a more secular place in the years following World War II. There’s no single reason for this – certainly several factors played a part, including increased

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<sup>3</sup> *Canadian Churchman*, January 1961, 10

<sup>4</sup> Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 29

immigration, the sixties youth revolt, and the women's movement. Another factor that very few scholars have looked at in the Canadian context – is the rise of the secular humanist movement. Secular humanist groups burst on the Canadian scene in the late 1950s and 1960s - the rise of the humanist movement both reflected – and helped to further – the secularizing trends of the era. Although it was home to a number of freethought societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Canada was without a single such society by the end of the Second World War. Following the war, the first secular humanist group to appear in Canada was the Victoria Humanist Fellowship, founded in early 1956; the Victoria group was soon joined by the Humanist Fellowship of Montreal, established later that same year, and the Toronto Humanist Association, founded in 1961. While these were the most stable and active of Canada's humanist organizations, the 1960s saw the formation of small groups in several other cities, including Calgary, Vancouver, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Hamilton. In 1967 – a national magazine was established - the *Humanist in Canada* - and in 1968 the national Humanist Association of Canada was formed. Despite ongoing debates about the direction and approach of the movement – Canadian humanists generally shared an understanding of humanism as a philosophy, “the guiding principle of which is concentration on the welfare, progress, and happiness of all humanity in this one and only life.” Canadian humanist groups rejected the concept of the supernatural, and welcomed those who described “themselves variously as secular humanists, non-believers, free-thinkers, rationalists, agnostics or atheists.”<sup>5</sup>

Many local Canadian humanist groups had their start in the informal gatherings of like-minded people. Once established, humanist fellowships continued the tradition of meeting regularly to talk and debate about various issues; in addition to organizing lectures and discussions on topics such as “Humanism and Morality” and “Religion in the Schools,” Canadian humanists actively campaigned for the separation of church and state. They frequently petitioned the government to remove religious practices such as prayer from schools and other public institutions, and urged the revision of laws privileging the Christian churches. Members of the national association and the local fellowships sought to disseminate the humanist perspective through the media, including newspapers, radio, and television; many also produced and circulated printed materials aimed at challenging religion and advancing humanism; for instance, in 1969 the Victoria fellowship prepared a leaflet to be distributed throughout the city which contained the bold declaration: “DO YOU KNOW THAT MORALITY HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH RELIGION? Throughout history, Humanists have upheld the human virtues without recourse to SUPERSTITION or SUPERNATURAL MYTHS. WHY NOT TRY HUMANISM?”<sup>6</sup>

The reach and appeal of Canadian humanist groups widened quite dramatically during the 1960s – this surge both reflected and shaped the growing critique of the Christian churches. In 1961, an article in the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* on “The Hidden Failure of our Churches” acknowledged that “few safe generalizations can be applied to the churches in Canada as a whole. By almost every yardstick their real influence in the secular world is declining fast.”<sup>7</sup> Scattered complaints about the role of the Christian churches in Canadian public life became, by the mid-1960s, a torrent of criticism. As the editor of a local Victoria paper observed in 1965: “It

<sup>5</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, No.16, 1971, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Humanist Fellowship papers.

<sup>7</sup> *Maclean's*, 25 February 1961, 50.

has become a national pastime in Canada these past months...to lambaste the church as out of tune with Christ and with the modern age.”<sup>8</sup> During the 1960s - Christianity’s hold on Canadian culture loosened as church involvement declined and religious pluralism and criticism flourished. It’s perhaps not surprising – given this context - that the 1960s saw a rise of organized secular humanism in Canada. Canadian humanists themselves - recognized that, during the sixties, new spaces were opening up for non-Christian and secularist voices. In 1969, the Humanist Association of Canada reported that there was starting to be “much more open speech about religion.”<sup>9</sup> In 1957, when the Victoria humanist fellowship contacted the daily newspaper to request the inclusion of a humanist perspective on the weekly church page, the publisher responded: “I regret that I must say no, for the obvious reason that it is a church page.” The situation had changed considerably by 1968, when the Victoria group reported: “During the year, we have had much publicity in the press and on radio open lines. Often we get a mention and a voice on the Church page of the local papers. We are regularly invited to put forward our point of view at meetings organized by different Churches.”<sup>10</sup> Other groups echoed the Victoria fellowship in noting a distinct shift, during the 1960s, in media coverage of humanism. In 1967, a representative of the Toronto group remarked: “Almost every night there is something on TV which promotes Humanism”; in that same year, an article on the Montreal fellowship in a national paper was said to garner much “favourable” interest in organized humanism. Prominent American humanist Corliss Lamont was struck by the ease with which Canadian humanists accessed the media; after being interviewed by CBC radio in 1969, Lamont “complained about the lack of such opportunities in the US where, he found, “spokesmen for the churches are preferred to those for Humanism.”<sup>11</sup>

Canadian humanists had cause for optimism during the latter half of the 1960s. In addition to attracting considerable media attention, they established a national organization, increased their membership, and formed several new groups. However, this moment of growth did not last...in fact, during the 1970s, membership levels in organized humanism sharply declined and many local groups disbanded. Part of my research has focused on the struggles of Canadian secular humanists to attract and retain members – and to sustain the momentum of the 1960s. I suggest that - ironically, the difficulties encountered by organized humanism had to do, in part, with the de-christianizing trends of the 1960s. In that decade, humanists joined a wider chorus of voices in their attacks on Christianity’s privileged place in public life. Due in part to such attacks, but also to broader developments such as substantial immigration and the rise of the welfare state, church power and privilege had notably declined by the early 1970s. Not only did religious affiliation and involvement drop sharply during the 1960s - but Christianity receded from its once relatively unquestioned place of privilege in Canadian schools, media, and politics. This recession served to eliminate, or at least to minimize, many of the issues that had galvanized humanists and their supporters.

Canadian humanists debated about how best to attract new members - many worried that the movement’s focus on undermining religion and the churches was turning potential members away. In 1969, a reader of the *Humanist in Canada* questioned the magazine’s anti-religious

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<sup>8</sup> *Victoria Humanist* [reprinted from the *Daily Colonist*], No.5, June 1965, 8.

<sup>9</sup> HAC papers.

<sup>10</sup> HAC papers; *Humanist in Canada*, No.6, Winter Solstice 1968, 14.

<sup>11</sup> HAC papers and *Humanist in Canada*.

content – he wrote: “Words like ‘message of fear,’ ‘superstition,’ ‘mythology’ are most offensive to me. I believe in none of their ideas but do not find it helpful to ridicule religious people...Why be anti-? Why not just be pro-humanism?”<sup>12</sup> Such concerns were echoed by humanists across Canada – humanism must not, one leader insisted, be simply a foil for religion, but rather a “positive and inspiring philosophy of life.” In 1967, the editor of the *Humanist in Canada* responded to ongoing debates among humanists about how, or indeed whether, to challenge religion. He concluded that humanists must continue their work of slaying the “dragon” of religion – he wrote: “We have to accept the role of dragon-slayer, doing battle openly and fearlessly with the human forces that create and operate the dragon. There is room for at least one dragon-slaying article in each issue.”<sup>13</sup>

As membership levels started to decline, debates about the purpose and approach of humanism grew more heated. In their efforts to move beyond an exclusive focus on religion, humanists regularly turned their attention to the wider political issues of the day – but they had difficulty finding common political ground. Concerns for peace predominated in the era, and humanist spokespersons often spoke out against American aggression in Vietnam and in support of the draft resistance movement. Many worried that not only in protesting American aggression in Vietnam, but in criticizing Canadian military involvement, challenging anti-Soviet rhetoric, and calling for the liberalization of certain laws, humanists risked being dismissed as “just a bunch of Reds or Leftists.” Such fears were not entirely unfounded. Following an appearance on CBC television in 1965, prominent Victoria humanist Marian Sherman received a letter from one viewer who at once praised Sherman and disapproved of the “very communistic” tone of the Victoria Humanist magazine: she wrote: “Maybe I am naïve and all humanists are communist supporters but I didn’t get this impression at all from your TV appearance. If this is so I will have to go back to being a plain old atheist.”<sup>14</sup> Similar concerns rippled across the humanist movement. One reader of the *Humanist in Canada* bluntly complained that the magazine seemed “dedicated to Sovietising the world.” Humanists debated not only about specific political issues but about whether to engage in politics at all. While some members felt that the movement should steer clear of politics, most leaders thought it essential that humanists engage the wider issues of the day. In 1967, the president of the Toronto group responded to the demand made by some that humanists stay out of politics: “How can Humanists state that they are interested in value-concepts, so essential for the human being, yet not participate in politics?”<sup>15</sup> Despite such assertions, debates about how or whether to engage in politics raged on...

During the sixties and early seventies, Canadian humanists also regularly expressed concern about the limited appeal of the movement beyond educated professionals. One humanist expressed concern that humanist organizations were regarded as “small, select and aloof intellectual clubs.” Another similarly remarked: “Humanism becomes meaningless if it is held to be an elitist philosophy or understandable only by the university graduate.”<sup>16</sup> Such apprehension about being perceived as an intellectually exclusive club permeated through the humanist movement in Canada. Humanist leaders across Canada sought to broaden the appeal of their

<sup>12</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, Nos. 10 and 11, Winter Solstice 1969, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, No.2, Winter Solstice 1967, 2.

<sup>14</sup> VHF papers.

<sup>15</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, No.2, Winter Solstice 1967, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Canadian Humanist*, January 1965, 1; MNS papers.

movement by shedding their “intellectual cover.” The executive of the Humanist Fellowship of Montreal worried that they were too much of a “talking” society rather than a “doing” society; the president of the Fellowship commented, with concern, about the “lack of common folk and labourers in the group...” and worried about the group being filled with “mostly professional people.” As the Toronto president remarked in a plea for new members: “All I can say is that you don’t need a Ph.D. to know what is good for mankind.”<sup>17</sup> Despite efforts to broaden their appeal, Canadian humanist groups seem – during the sixties and seventies - to have drawn support mainly from the middle and upper middle class professionals.

Humanist groups also struggled to attract young people in this era. They tried to appeal to countercultural youth through the establishment of youth groups and events. The sexual revolution of the sixties was often blamed for the declining interest of young people in religion. Humanists hoped that in advocating sexual freedom and openness, they would attract those young people who were turning away from the churches. Spokespersons for the humanist movement regularly condemned “Christianity’s anti-sex taboo” and challenged “any nonsense about [sex] being shameful, bad, or degrading.”<sup>18</sup> Canadian humanists also promoted openness in sex education, and called for the removal of any stigma against common-law unions; they also frequently challenged legal restrictions on marijuana use. Despite such efforts, humanist groups had difficulty in this time period attracting young people; the available evidence indicates that most humanist members in this era over 40 years of age. While humanists celebrated the flight of youth from the churches, they were frustrated that disaffected youth seemed to have little interest in humanism. While they tried to accommodate and appeal to radical youth, humanists betrayed some discomfort with certain countercultural trends; in the late 1960s, Canadian humanist commentators puzzled about the behaviour of “long haired, strangely garbed young people” – they also occasionally likened psychedelic drug use to religious practice, condemning both as “substitute[s] for healthy experience.” In 1972, one humanist commentator applauded the younger generation’s flight from the churches, but worried that youth were searching “for some easy solution – like heaven – but a different one.”<sup>19</sup> During the 1960s and early seventies – Canadian humanists offered a radical challenge to religious norms, but their discourse on youth was more ambivalent. The Canadian humanist movement’s focus on reason, intellect, and organization contradicted the countercultural privileging of emotion, feeling, and freedom; while many young people were turning away from mainstream religion – for many, it was institutions themselves that were the problem. It’s possible then that the Canadian humanist movement – with its institutional structure – was lumped in with the establishment that many young people were rejecting.

The struggle of the humanist movement to sustain its membership into the seventies had to do, in part, with internal debates about approach – and also with the difficulties it had broadening its appeal to youth and the working classes. This struggle also reflected the wider stigma around atheism that persisted through this era. Between 1945 and the 1970s, Canadians became increasingly and openly critical of the churches and Canada was increasingly defined as an interfaith nation. As Callum and others have shown - while this era was indeed a time of substantial de-Christianization – this does not mean that everyone at once shed their beliefs and

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<sup>17</sup> HAC papers.

<sup>18</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, No.4, Spring 1968, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Humanist in Canada*, Vol.V-3, No.22, 1972, 15.

turned to atheism; in fact – atheism remained quite controversial in Canadian society. The humanist movement struggled to remain relevant in an era characterized, on the one hand, by a rise of religious indifference and, on the other, by a persistent discomfort with atheism. As several scholars have shown, the sharp drop in religious involvement during the 1960s and 1970s was met with only a slight decline in religious belief. The available quantitative evidence suggests that atheism – at least public, professed atheism – was not widespread in postwar Canada. There isn't a great deal of data on patterns of religious belief in the postwar decades – what we do have points to a decline in professed belief among Canadians – but the drop is far less dramatic than for institutional involvement and adherence. A 1947 Gallup poll reported that 95% of Canadians claimed to believe in a God. By the mid 1970s, the level of belief in Canada had dropped to 89%. A more recent Angus Reid survey – in 2000 – reported that 84% of Canadians professed belief in a God.<sup>20</sup>

There is plenty of qualitative evidence to suggest that - despite currents of de-christianization, religious belief remained important to Canadian culture, and atheists continued to face social ostracism. As one reader of the *Victoria Humanist* remarked in 1964, in Canada “a person who admits he does not believe in god is looked upon as if he had a crippling disease.”<sup>21</sup> The *Humanist in Canada* and the national association frequently reported on instances of discrimination against atheists, and many atheists themselves admitted to keeping quiet about their non-belief so as not to risk alienating friends, family members, and employers. As one Brantford humanist noted in 1965: “if there are atheists they aren't admitting it.”<sup>22</sup> My interviewees pointed to the silence that surrounded unbelief in postwar BC and Canada. As one Nanaimo man observed, “people [were] afraid to say they were atheist, even to the census-taker.” Interestingly, those who did admit to their atheism were often met with disbelief - prominent British Columbia atheist Marian Sherman noted that it was difficult to convince people of the sincerity of her atheism. That atheism was often not taken seriously suggests just how far it fell outside the bounds of social convention. Those who called themselves atheists or unbelievers in the postwar era risked not being taken seriously; they also risked social ostracism. In the 1960s, journalists acknowledged that atheism was viewed as a “dirty word,” and that “many people still equate atheism with wickedness.”<sup>23</sup> In their letters to Canadian humanist organizations - atheists across the country described losing friends, jobs, and otherwise “paying the price” for expressing their unbelief. Given the prescriptions against atheism, it is not surprising that even very committed unbelievers often refused to publicly call themselves atheists. To atheist activist Marian Sherman, one Montreal man wrote: “While there must be thousands, possibly many thousands, in Canada who share your views the number who are prepared to call a spade a spade publically (sic), is still pitifully small.” Another letter-writer admitted: “I never talk about my religious attitude, not even with my nearest friend, who is very orthodox indeed. The time hasn't come yet to speak up, but I hope it will... I thought to be...alone in this country in a sensible attitude towards the universe...Now, I...wonder how many free thinkers there are... There could be more than we think, but many are silent.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gallup Polls; Angus Reid.

<sup>21</sup> *Victoria Humanist*, No.2, December 1964, 2.

<sup>22</sup> MNS papers.

<sup>23</sup> MNS papers.

<sup>24</sup> MNS papers.



Many non-believers were grateful to Sherman for breaking the silence and for showing them that there were others who shared their views. As one Ontario woman exclaimed: “My purpose in writing you is to thank you for showing me that I am not alone.” Several people urged Sherman to “keep on doing the good work” despite opposition, and hinted at the relatively large population of silent atheists in Canada; one letter-writer assured Sherman: “we need more like you and I am sure your beliefs are shared by many more people than you can imagine.”<sup>25</sup> The silence around atheism had to do, in part, with fears of social exclusion. One man confessed that he had “been afraid to express” his atheist thoughts “for fear of ridicule”; another admitted: “I reached quite an advanced age before I started to see things in ‘exactly’ the same light you do. However I always lacked the courage of my convictions and was afraid to ‘speak out’.” In their letters, some Canadian non-believers expressed concerns that to speak out about their non-belief would be to risk their financial security. An Edmonton man wrote to Sherman: “Your views... are a striking example of the power of money. Please don’t condemn me for this remark, I am merely making the observation that money is the key to an open mind. Thank you, Madam, for using your financial freedom to be honest. I, along with several millions, have the same thoughts but our living depends so much on how we express ourselves in the presence of our superiors. We live a life of almost continual lies.”<sup>26</sup> Sherman was well off – and she acknowledged that her financial independence allowed her to be open about her non-belief. In 1962, a Victoria reporter interviewed a woman in the city about the atheism she shared with her husband; this woman, who was married to a public school teacher, said that she “thought it wiser to remain anonymous for fear of possible unpleasant consequences.” The woman noted that when a local minister discovered that she and her husband were atheists, “His jaw literally fell open. He said he couldn’t believe it. ‘Your husband is a teacher,’ he said. ‘He is teaching young children. I have to report this.’”<sup>27</sup> In this context – it is perhaps not surprising that the humanist movement struggled to broaden its appeal – some humanists recommended that the movement promote the agnostic rather than the atheist viewpoint, as this would constitute “less of a sudden jump” for those who were beginning to have religious doubts. Humanist groups struggled to recruit and retain members, in part, because to join such a group was to publicly declare one’s unbelief. Despite the secularizing trends of the postwar era, many Canadians continued to fear the consequences that such a public declaration might entail.

To conclude – in the years following World War II – apart from a rather brief church-boom in the late 1940s and 1950s – Canada underwent significant de-Christianization. Canadians became increasingly detached from and disinterested in religious institutions, and the “no religion” population grew substantially. While this change was most apparent between the 1950s and the 1970s, the trend has continued. As Callum has persuasively argued in various contexts – the change that Canada experienced in this time period wasn’t just about the decline or absence of religion, but about the emergence of something new. Larger forces such immigration and multiculturalism were certainly at work here – but we need also acknowledge the efforts of Canadian secular humanists, who did much to erode Christian privilege and to carve out space for non-Christian and secularist voices. I didn’t have time to talk about this in my presentation – but despite their struggles to attract members – secular humanist groups offered important

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<sup>25</sup> MNS papers.

<sup>26</sup> MNS papers.

<sup>27</sup> *Daily Colonist*, January 6, 1963, 10.

resources for non-believers in postwar Canada – they ran humanist Sunday schools, offered alternatives for religious rituals and celebrations, and provided much-needed spaces of fellowship and belonging for non-believers. Although they experienced a drop-off in membership during the 1970s – this drop-off was not permanent; during the eighties and nineties, membership began to grow again and new humanist groups were formed. As we've seen – despite the dramatic decline of religious adherence and involvement in Canada – non-believers, and particularly those who called themselves atheists, continued to feel silenced and to face hostility. There's little doubt that the stigma attached to atheism in Canada has lessened...however, it hasn't disappeared altogether. Just a few weeks ago I gave a talk to a local atheist group in my hometown. At that presentation, a young woman told of the discrimination that she faced just a few years ago, when it was discovered that she and her family were atheists – she was surprised to find that some of her friends were no longer allowed to visit her home, and that some of her neighbours no longer considered her family to be “good people” – that this occurred in a community in British Columbia - one of the most secular provinces in the country – suggests that the secularization of Canada is not yet complete...