

# “MOST OF TODAY’S TEEN-AGERS LAUGH ABOUT GOD”:

## *Youth, Secularization, and the Sixties in British Columbia*

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**I**N 1963, MEMBERS OF Canada Young Life, a non-denominational Christian outreach organization focused on “communicating the gospel to teens of high school age,” spoke at a luncheon hosted by the Victoria Kiwanis Club. One of the speakers described Young Life’s “novel” approach of going “to the teen-ager” rather than expecting young people to come to it, and of trying to “get to know them and talk to them on their level.” Young Life, which was active in Victoria schools during the 1960s, aimed to enhance the appeal of Christianity to youth and to stem the apparent exodus of young people from the churches. Appealing to young people was no easy task as, according to one Young Life speaker: “Most of today’s teen-agers laugh about God and turn their back on the church.”<sup>1</sup> Canada Young Life members were not alone in expressing such concerns. Between the late 1950s and mid-1970s, an era commonly referred to as the “long sixties,” cultural observers in Canada and beyond often remarked upon, and fretted about, religious decline among the young.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have shown that many young people turned

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<sup>1</sup> “Most Teen-Agers Laugh about God,” *Victoria Daily Times*, 10 April 1963, 25.

<sup>2</sup> On religion, secularization, and the “long sixties,” see Callum Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012), 29; Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, “‘Even the Hippies Were Only Very Slowly Going Secular’: Dechristianization and the Culture of Individualism in North America and Western Europe,” in *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe: 1945–2000*, ed. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 3; and Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. On the concept of

away from the churches during that era, but we know little about youth perspectives on religious belief at the time.<sup>3</sup> Why did so many young people seem to disregard or dismiss organized religion during the long sixties? And did they indeed “laugh about God?” This article considers these questions within the context of Canada’s westernmost province. It explores why, how, and to what extent BC youth turned or stayed away from religion between the 1950s and 1970s, foregrounding the experience of those who not only rejected institutional Christianity but who, in that era or over time, denied, or became indifferent to, religious belief.

During the long sixties, critics of all ages lambasted the churches as irrelevant, hypocritical, and out of touch with the changing times. Among BC youth, the rejection of organized religion, and especially the churches, fulfilled rather than defied cultural expectations and was part of the broader revolt against authority and established tradition that resonated at the time. Unprecedented numbers of young people in British Columbia and across Canada rejected institutional religion during the 1960s and 1970s, but approaches to religious belief were more uncertain and contested. British Columbia was the most secular of Canadian provinces, and the long sixties was an era characterized by change and rebellion. Even within this comparatively secular, rebellious context, unbelievers continued to face social disapproval. While they were in some ways expected to challenge established religion, young people were subtly and overtly discouraged by their families and the wider culture from eschewing religious belief entirely. Often finding little support for their nascent unbelief, young people who doubted religious belief in that era were, at least in the short term, apt to become religiously indifferent rather than openly nonbelieving. For some, such indifference turned to firm unbelief or atheism later in life, when family and cultural pressures to believe had diminished. This article explores the secular journeys of BC youth, highlighting their widespread rejection of institutional Christianity and their more gradual drift from religious belief. Such journeys both reflected and shaped the deep currents of dechristianization and

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the “long sixties” in Canada more generally, see Lara Campbell and Dominique Clément, “Time, Age, Myth: Towards a History of the Sixties,” in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, ed. Lara Campbell, Dominique Clément, and Gregory Kealey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 40, 63; Callum Brown, “What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?,” *Journal of Religious History* 34, 4 (2010): 478; Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 69; and Bruce Douville, “Christ and Counterculture: Churches, Clergy and Hippies in Toronto’s Yorkville, 1965–70,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 47, no. 95 (2014): 749, 753.

secularization, and the persistent silencing of unbelief, that characterized Canada's religious culture during the postwar decades.

This article is based on fifty-two semi-structured oral history interviews with fifty-five people conducted in the Kamloops and Greater Vancouver regions between June 2015 and March 2017. Interviewees were located primarily through newspaper advertisements requesting participants who denied, or were indifferent to, religious belief between the 1950s and 1970s. Most of those interviewed for this project are white and of European descent, and grew up in at least nominally Christian households.<sup>4</sup> I draw on interviews with twenty-six females and twenty-nine males who lived in British Columbia for all or part of the 1960s and 1970s, with most residing, for some of that time, in the Interior or Lower Mainland region. The class and educational backgrounds of the interviewees vary widely, and their birthdates span between 1935 and 1963; a significant proportion – 87 percent – were born in the 1940s or 1950s. This article focuses on young people, defined broadly as individuals in their teens and twenties. As scholars have shown, “youth” means different things across various historical contexts. I draw on interviews with individuals who fit certain empirical parameters of age, but I also consider how the malleable constructs of youth and generational opposition were used to engage with, and sometimes to impugn, religion. Young people in the past, and interview participants in the present, often framed their views on religion in ways that made use of what historian Tamara Myers refers to as the “symbolic potential” of youth.<sup>5</sup> Young British Columbians contributed in distinctive ways to postwar trends of dechristianization

<sup>4</sup> One interviewee was raised in a Jewish household. Interviews, which were conducted by myself or by one of my research assistants, were with forty-nine individuals and three couples. The interview transcripts are currently in possession of the author and will be archived in Thompson Rivers University's open access digital repository, TRUSpace, at the completion of this project. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity of participants. I approach the oral histories with what Kristina Llewellyn calls a “respectful skepticism,” seeing them not as transparent windows on the past but, rather, as cultural constructions mediated by and through the present. See Kristina Llewellyn, “Productive Tensions: Feminist Readings of Women Teachers' Oral Histories,” in *The Canadian Oral History Reader*, ed. Kristina Llewellyn, Alexander Freund, and Nolan Reilly (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Myers, “Local Action and Global Imagining: Youth, International Development, and the Walkathon Phenomenon in Sixties' and Seventies' Canada,” *Diplomatic History* 38, 2 (2014): 292. On “youth” as a contingent cultural construct, see Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 13; Stuart Henderson, *Making the Scene: Yorkville and Hip Toronto in the 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 37–8, 47; and Cynthia Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of a Modern Canada, 1920–1950* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 1–6.

and secularization, offering incisive critiques of established religion that at times played deliberately upon the generational divide.

Capturing why, how, and even whether BC youth turned away from religion between the 1950s and 1970s requires immersion in a range of primary sources. I draw not only on oral histories but also on quantitative materials for insights into the demography of religion and the trajectory of religious change in postwar British Columbia and Canada. To explore wider discourses on youth and religion during the era, I consulted a range of secular and religious newspapers in both the provincial and national contexts. Given my focus on irreligion among youth, it made sense to examine the records of groups that were especially invested in this issue – namely, the Christian churches and secular humanist organizations. Despite their contrasting perspectives, the churches and secular humanist groups shared in trying to appeal to young people through the postwar decades, and, as such, their records reveal much about constructions of youth and secularity at the time. In this article, I attend to discussions not only about but also by youth and to how young people themselves understood and challenged religion in all of its forms. Along with the oral histories, periodicals associated with the counterculture and produced by young people are revealing of the place and meaning of religion within the wider youth culture. I examined countercultural material at the national level as well as British Columbia-based papers, including the *Georgia Straight* and various student newspapers.

I join scholars of the long sixties in eschewing a strictly decadal approach in favour of a more fluid, imprecise time framework. Such a framework captures the extent to which the substantial changes of the 1960s, religious and otherwise, transcended the bounds of that decade.<sup>6</sup> The growing historiography on resistance and social change in Canada during the long sixties includes some recent work on the relationship between youth and religion in that era. Bruce Douville's work on Christianity and the counterculture is at the leading edge of this emergent scholarship; as well, Stuart Henderson devotes considerable attention to the role of religion in his fascinating work on 1960s Yorkville, a cultural "battleground" that had, in his view, "an ambiguous, even paradoxical relationship with God."<sup>7</sup> While Henderson and Douville focus on Toronto,

<sup>6</sup> See Hugh McLeod, "Reflections and New Perspectives," in *The Sixties and Beyond*, ed. Christie and Gauvreau, 455.

<sup>7</sup> Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 101, 213; Douville, "Christ and Counterculture," 747–74; Bruce Douville, "And We've Got to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden: The Jesus People Movement in Toronto," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* 19 (2006): 5–24; and Christie and Gauvreau, "Even the Hippies." For further work on protest and social change during the long sixties in Canada see, for example, Joan Sangster, "Radical Ruptures: Feminism,

many other studies centre on the national context. The distinctive history of British Columbia during the long sixties has drawn comparatively little attention.<sup>8</sup> The historiography of religion and irreligion in the province is also relatively scant, although it has been growing in recent years.<sup>9</sup> The rich literature on secularization in Canada has focused less on religious belief and more on the decline of religion in public life.<sup>10</sup> In addition to putting unbelief at the centre of the story, my work offers a regional perspective on the scholarship on religious change during the sixties, most of which has explored secularizing trends at the national and international levels.

Several historians have identified the sixties as a critical turning point in the decline of Christian dominance throughout much of Europe and North America. Scholars generally agree that the 1960s was a time of decisive religious change, but there are debates about the nature and extent of this change, and about whether dechristianization occurred gradually over the postwar decades or abruptly during the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

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Labor, and the Left in the Long Sixties in Canada," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40, 1 (2010): 1–21; Bryan Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); several articles in Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford, eds., *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945–75* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008); Patricia Jasen, "Student Activism, Mental Health, and English-Canadian Universities in the 1960s," *Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 3 (2011): 455–80; Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth*; and Michael Boudreau, "Hippies, Yippies, the Counter-Culture, and the Gastown Riot in Vancouver, 1968–1971," *BC Studies* 197 (Spring 2018): 39–65.

<sup>8</sup> Exceptions include Kathleen Rodgers, *Welcome to Resisterville: American Dissidents in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014); Megan Davies, "Women Unafraid of Blood: Kootenay Community Midwives, 1970–90," *BC Studies* 183 (Autumn 2014): 11–36; and Dominique Clément, *Equality Deferred: Sex Discrimination and British Columbia's Human Rights State, 1953–84* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> For studies on the history of religion and irreligion in British Columbia see, for example, Lynne Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Tina Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Norman Knowles, "Christ in the Crowsnest: Religion and the Anglo-Protestant Working Class in the Crowsnest Pass, 1898–1918," in *Nations, Ideas, Identities: Essays in Honour of Ramsay Cook*, ed. Michael Behiels and Marcel Martel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57–72; and Bob Stewart, "'That's the BC Spirit!' Religion and Secularity in Lotus Land," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1983): 22–35.

<sup>10</sup> Key works on secularization in Canada include David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900–1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); and Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> For studies that explore religious change and dechristianization in postwar Canada, see, for example, Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*; Christie and Gauvreau, *Sixties and Beyond*; Gary Miedema, *For Canada's Sake: Public Religion, Centennial Celebrations, and the Re-Making of Canada in the 1960s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); Catherine Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian*

My work suggests the importance of considering these questions within regional as well as national contexts. The sixties saw a sharp decline in institutional religious affiliation among Canadian youth, but the decline was comparatively less dramatic in British Columbia due to that province's long history of detachment from organized religion.<sup>12</sup>

"THE GREAT HEADACHE OF THE CHURCH TODAY":  
INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE "YOUTH PROBLEM"

Born in Alberta in 1948 and raised in Enderby, British Columbia, Caroline abruptly rejected the Catholic Church of her childhood at the age of seventeen, when her father died in a tragic accident. She recalls resisting her mother's efforts to get her to church: "My mother fought with me over it and tried to physically make me get in the car to go to church, but I wouldn't do it."<sup>13</sup> Like Caroline, Barbara remembers battling with her mother over church involvement. Born in 1956, Barbara was six years old when she moved with her family from Jasper to Kamloops. She remembers that it was "almost a fight" for her mother to get her to go to Sunday school. As a pre-teen, Barbara decided to stand her ground: "I can remember maybe ten, eleven, twelve, in there somewhere, just putting my foot down and saying I'm really not interested in going to Sunday school. I'm not interested in participating. And her finally giving up the, you know, the 'thou shalt go' [*laughs*]."<sup>14</sup> Most of the interviewees in this study were exposed to some religion in their childhood, ranging from sporadic attendance at Sunday school to regular churchgoing with their families. Unlike Caroline and Barbara, however, few recalled outright conflicts with their parents on the subject of religious partici-

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*University, 1920–1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); John G. Stackhouse, "The Protestant Experience in Canada since 1945," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760–1900*, ed. George Rawlyk (Burlington: Welch Publishing, 1990), 198–253; and Mark Noll, "What Happened to Christian Canada?," *Church History* 75, no. 2 (2006): 245–73. British historians Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod have taken the lead in foregrounding the importance of ordinary people to secularization; they are also at the forefront of debates about the pace and timing of postwar dechristianization, with Brown identifying the sixties as an abrupt turning point in the decline of Christian practice and McLeod proposing a longer, more gradual trajectory; McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*; McLeod, "Reflections and New Perspectives"; Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001); Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh Gate: Pearson, 2006); and Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*.

<sup>12</sup> See Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 85–87; Kurt Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World: The Canadian Experience* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 54; Block, *Secular Northwest*, 55–56; and Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*.

<sup>13</sup> Caroline, interview by Steve O'Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 9 June 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 30 May 2016.

pation.<sup>15</sup> Walter, who was born in Penticton in 1942, avoided any such conflict by waiting until he moved away from home to stop attending church. He said that after leaving home, religion “just stopped being part of my life.”<sup>16</sup> A few of the interviewees shared Walter’s experience, but many more turned away from organized religion before they left home, while still under parental authority. Ron reflected on his experience with religion as a child growing up in Terrace during the 1950s: “My parents took me to church and they never really forced me to go to church with them very much. I think they did a few times, but then I guess they felt it was voluntary from then on.” Asked when it became “voluntary,” Ron replied: “Probably twelve, thirteen, something like that. I started to get a little more rebellious then, so chances are they wouldn’t have had any luck with me anyways.”<sup>17</sup> Like Ron, many narrators recalled that during their pre-teen or teen years church involvement became voluntary or, in the words of one respondent, at least “reluctantly optional.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite variations in their narratives, most of the interviewees recall having arrived at a clear rejection of organized religion, particularly institutional Christianity, as pre-teenagers, teenagers, or in their twenties.<sup>19</sup> They were certainly not alone in turning or staying away from established religion during the long sixties. As several scholars have shown, organized religious involvement and affiliation declined substantially in Canada during that era.<sup>20</sup> According to the Census of Canada, the percentage of Canadians claiming to have no religion increased from 0.4 percent in 1951 to 4.3 percent in 1971, a proportionately larger increase

<sup>15</sup> Only two of the interviewees were raised without any religion. Several interviewees described their parents as essentially “non-religious” or as not particularly religious, but most of those still attended Sunday school as children. Ten interviewees recalled having had a conflict (or several conflicts) with their parents on the issue of religious involvement.

<sup>16</sup> Janet and Walter, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 13 December 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Ron, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 9 July 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Joe, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 24 May 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Forty-five of the fifty-five individuals interviewed clearly rejected organized religion as pre-teenagers (ages ten to twelve), teenagers, or in their twenties. Of the remaining ten, two sharply rejected the church in their childhood, and the remaining eight described having drifted from, rather than clearly breaking with, organized religion during their youth. Three of the interviewees returned to the church when their children were young, if only for a brief time, and one interviewee returned to the church as an adult and remains an active member.

<sup>20</sup> See Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*; Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 73–87, 107–9; Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*, 273; Noll, “What Happened to Christian Canada?”; and William Katerberg, “Consumers and Citizens: Religion, Identity, and Politics in Canada and the United States,” in *Rethinking Church, State, and Modernity: Canada between Europe and America*, ed. David Lyon and Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 291.

than at any other time during the century.<sup>21</sup> Gallup Poll data indicate a decrease in weekly church and synagogue attendance in Canada from 67 percent in 1946 to 44 percent in 1970; claimed church affiliation also dropped significantly, from 82 percent in 1957 to 48 percent in 1975.<sup>22</sup> In a recent study, Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald draw on extensive quantitative data to document the sharp decline in church affiliation and involvement in postwar Canada. They show that Canadian churches of all denominations “hemorrhaged members” after the “inflection point” of the 1960s and that many baby boomers, particularly those who were born after the mid-1950s, “very suddenly” rejected churches they had attended as children.<sup>23</sup> In Canada as elsewhere, this exodus from the churches was especially apparent among the young. The younger generation (those between the ages of twenty and thirty-four) was also overrepresented among the growing number of Canadians claiming “no religion” or “no religious preference.”<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of age or other demographic categories, British Columbians have long been more likely than those in other provinces to claim no religion; this distinction was evident in the nineteenth century, persisted through postwar decades, and remains in the present day. In 1951, 2.2 percent of British Columbians claimed no religion, compared to 0.4 percent of Canadians. By 1971, the percentage of the population claiming no religion had increased to 13.1 percent in British Columbia and to 4.3 percent nationally.<sup>25</sup> Levels of church involvement have also been consistently lower in British Columbia than in other provinces. For instance, in 1956, 31 percent of British Columbians claimed to attend

<sup>21</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 10, table 5, 1951; vol. 5, part 1, table 5, 1971. See also Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 162–65; and Block, *Secular Northwest*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 85–87, 109; and Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, 16 April 1960; 18 August 1965; 25 April 1970.

<sup>23</sup> Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 69, 197.

<sup>24</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 1, part 4, table 7 and table 8, 1971. On the decline of practising Christianity among postwar youth, see Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 63–64; Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 30, 168–89; Douville, “Christ and Counterculture,” 748; and “Religion Waning Says Gallup Poll,” *Canadian Churchman*, July–August 1969, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 10, table 5, 1951; vol. 5, part 1, table 5, 1971. “No religion” was not included as a separate category in the 1961 census. In 1981, the “no religion” response was changed to “no religious preference,” but British Columbia’s distinct secularity persisted. In that year, 7.4 percent of Canadians claimed “no religious preference” compared to 20.9 percent of British Columbians. See *Census of Canada*, vol. 2, provincial series, table 5, 6, 1981. On British Columbia’s distinct secularity, see Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*; Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, “Religious-Secular Polarization Compared: The Cases of Quebec and British Columbia,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 46, no. 2 (2017): 166–85; Block, *Secular Northwest*; Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life*; Stewart, “That’s the BC Spirit”; and J.E. Veevers and D.F. Cousineau, “The Heathen Canadians: Demographic Correlates of Nonbelief,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 23, no. 2 (1980): 199–216.



church weekly, compared to 61 percent of Canadians.<sup>26</sup> The long-standing character of British Columbia's secularity made the religious declines of the long sixties less jarring in that province than elsewhere in Canada. As historian Callum Brown has shown, the collapse of churchgoing in postwar Canada was least striking in British Columbia due to that province's long history of distinctly low levels of church attendance.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the gap between province and nation in the size of the "no religion" population narrowed somewhat over this period. In 1951, British Columbians were five times more likely than the average Canadian to claim no religion, but by 1971 they were only three times more likely.<sup>28</sup> Despite such narrowing, the unique secularity of British Columbia persisted throughout this period, and was especially apparent among the young. In 1971, 17.9 percent of British Columbians between the ages of twenty and twenty-four claimed no religion, compared to 6.3 percent of Canadians in that same age group. While a striking 20.7 percent of Vancouverites aged twenty to twenty-four claimed no religion in 1971, this was not an exclusively urban phenomenon; rates of no religion were comparatively high across both rural and urban areas of the province.<sup>29</sup> In 1981, the proportion of the Canadian population aged twenty to twenty-four claiming no religious preference was 9.0 percent compared to 25.9 percent in British Columbia. While rates of no religious preference were especially high among young people in Vancouver at 28.2 percent, such rates far exceeded the national average in all towns and cities across British Columbia.<sup>30</sup>

During the long sixties, Christian leaders across Canada voiced ever-growing concerns about declining church involvement among the young. National church periodicals regularly published articles on such topics as "Why Teenagers Snub the Church."<sup>31</sup> In 1967, the Catholic *Canadian*

<sup>26</sup> Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*, 54; Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 85; and Hans Mol, "Major Correlates of Churchgoing in Canada," in *Religion in Canadian Society*, ed. Stewart Crysdale and Les Wheatcroft (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), 241–42.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 85; Bowen, *Christians in a Secular World*, 54; and Block, *Secular Northwest*, 55–56.

<sup>28</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 10, table 5, 1951; vol. 5, part 1, table 5, 1971.

<sup>29</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 1, part 4, tables 8 and 9, 1971; vol. 1, part 3, bulletin 3, table 11, 1971.

<sup>30</sup> *Census of Canada*, vol. 2, provincial series, table 6. In 1981, British Columbians aged twenty to twenty-four were far more likely to claim "no religious preference" than their counterparts elsewhere in Canada, regardless of where they lived in the province; levels of "no religious preference" among those aged twenty to twenty-four, which were 16.9 percent in Calgary, 11.6 percent in Toronto, and 5.4 percent in Halifax, reached 19.8 percent in Kamloops, 20.7 percent in Kelowna, 23.7 in Prince George, and 27.1 percent in Nanaimo.

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Bagnell, "Why Teenagers Snub the Church," *United Church Observer*, 1 September 1966, 12–15, 45. See also J. Stanley Glen, "Confront the Teenagers!," *Presbyterian Record* 84, no. 9 (1959): 12–13.

*Register* identified the alienation of youth from the churches as the “most serious problem facing the Church today”; a year later, the author of a report in the *Western Canada Lutheran* declared that the “great headache of the church today is the Youth problem.”<sup>32</sup> BC churches echoed their regional and national counterparts in bemoaning the “youth problem.” As the author of a 1967 Anglican diocese of BC report queried: “Why is the Church unattractive to young people?”<sup>33</sup> Although not unique to the sixties, concerns about the limited appeal of the churches to young people took on special urgency in that era due to the immense demographic and symbolic significance attached to youth. Church discourse both reflected and shaped the broader cultural obsession with the “younger generation,” which was named by the American magazine *Time* as “Man of the Year” in 1966.<sup>34</sup> While teenagers elicited much concern, attention increasingly turned to young adults as university enrolments grew and the youth counterculture burgeoned.<sup>35</sup> Christian commentators lamented the “anti-church mood” among university students and penned articles on such subjects as: “Is the church losing out on campus?”<sup>36</sup> British Columbia universities were often singled out as especially secular. In a 1957 letter regarding the work of the Student Christian Movement at the University of British Columbia, an Anglican chaplain noted: “UBC is probably by nature and constitution the most secular Campus in Canada.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in 1961 the *United Church Observer* reported:

<sup>32</sup> “Youth and the Crisis of Church,” *Canadian Register*, no. 36, 4 November 1967, 1; Inga Simonsen, “Spotlight on Synod Convention: Impressions from a Delegate,” *Western Canada Lutheran* 5, 6 (1968): 1.

<sup>33</sup> C.H.B., “Youth and the Church,” *BC Diocesan Post* 2, no. 25 (1967): 2. In that same year, the *Victoria Colonist* reported on an ecumenical meeting of “laymen, church wardens, synod delegates and presidents of youth and women’s groups” to discuss strategies for bringing youth back to the church. See “With Young in Mind: Four Big Questions,” *Colonist*, 17 February 1968, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Dominique Clément, “Generations and the Transformation of Social Movements in Postwar Canada,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 42, no. 84 (2009): 363; Stuart Henderson, “They’re Both the Same Thing? Transnational Politics and Identity Performance in 1960s Toronto,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, no. 2 (2011): 37; and Douville, “Christ and Counterculture,” 748. On concerns about the absence of youth, and particularly young men, from the churches in the nineteenth century, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century Small Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 36–37.

<sup>35</sup> Henderson, “They’re Both the Same Thing?,” 44–46; and Campbell and Clément, “Time, Age, Myth,” 15.

<sup>36</sup> “Where Is the Road to Youth?,” *Canadian Register*, 25 November 1967, 3; and Donald Collier, “Is the Church Losing Out on Campus?,” *Presbyterian Record*, February 1963, 4. See also Michael Bryan, “Youth and How Narrow-Minded Atheists Are Capturing the Campus,” *United Church Observer*, 1 March 1965, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Percy Watney Papers, box 479, series: Anglican Theological College, file 4: correspondence, Chaplain to the University-Anglican, letter to Mr. Frank Thompson, Huron

“Responsible ministers say that as one moves west, campus agnosticism increases more. At the University of British Columbia ... it is said to be at its peak.”<sup>38</sup>

The concerns of church leaders about the secularization of youth were fuelled in the 1960s by a growing hysteria over the emergent youth rebellion. In 1965, a writer for *Maclean's* magazine warned that many young people “are choosing to opt out – it’s their phrase – from home, school, church, marriage, steady employment, all the institutions.”<sup>39</sup> In British Columbia, concerns about disaffected youth centred primarily on Kitsilano, a district that, due to its large hippie population, was, according to a 1967 article in the *Vancouver Sun*, at risk of becoming a “psychedelic slum.”<sup>40</sup> To stop young people from opting out of the churches, church leaders and members in Vancouver and beyond regularly experimented with new forms of gathering and worship designed to appeal to youth. In 1969, after concluding that “traditional Sunday worship simply was not meeting their need,” members of a Vancouver United Church initiated an “experimental service” for all ages and replaced traditional Sunday school with study sessions that “began and ended with worship that included biblical drama, contemporary music and art.”<sup>41</sup> Church leaders

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College, London, Ontario, 17 December 1957.

<sup>38</sup> “Agnostics on the Canadian Campus,” *United Church Observer*, 1 November 1961, 9. See also *BC Catholic*, 18 March 1965, 4; United Church of Canada, British Columbia Conference, minutes (1965), 292–93; United Church Archives–Vancouver, Student Christian Movement – UBC Branch, box 3: Student Christian Movement, file 67: Advisory Board, minutes etc., 1968–1967, “Student Christian Movement in the University of British Columbia,” 3 June 1965, 5; and Joan Godsell, “Week of Prayer Turnout Small, But That’s Enough,” *Ubyssy*, 15 January 1965, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Jon Ruddy, “Stop the World – They Want to Get Off,” *Maclean's*, 1 November 1965, 20. On 1960s youth rejecting organized religion as part of the “establishment,” see Brown, “What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?,” 475; and Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> “Psychedelic Slum Feared,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 May 1967, 10. See also Daniel Ross, “Panic on Love Street: Citizens and Local Government Respond to Vancouver’s Hippie Problem,” *BC Studies* 180 (Winter 2013–14): 11–12; Lawrence Aronsen, *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010), 6–7; 19; Kirsten Emmott, “Love Hippies and Fourth Avenue,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 April 1967, 6; “Give Heave-Ho to Hippies, Suggests Ratepayer Chief,” *Vancouver Sun*, 25 April 1967, 3; “Hippies Turn to New Drug,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 September 1967, 2. While concerns about youth centred on Vancouver, Victoria’s burgeoning hippie population also drew concern. See “Biggest Hippie Invasion Due,” *Victoria Colonist*, 27 February 1968, 28; and “Harness Energy, Curb Ills Mayor’s Hopes for Youth,” *Victoria Colonist*, 9 January 1968, 15.

<sup>41</sup> “The Church That Scrapped Sunday School,” *United Church Observer*, 15 December 1969, 36. On church efforts to reach out to youth during the long sixties in British Columbia and beyond, see Douville, “Christ and Counterculture,” 748; Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 65–72, 104–6; With its February 1967 edition, the *Canadian Churchman* introduced a new supplement for youth called “Trend”; United Church of Canada, Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report* 40 (1965): xvii; Loren Lind, “You-Me Spells Brotherhood,” *Globe and Mail*, 6 January 1968, 50; “Message with a Beat and Dissent from the Floor: Wandering Minstrels

also sought to connect with young people by incorporating contemporary, hip jargon into their writings and sermons. For instance, in 1970 an Anglican writer adapted a popular countercultural phrase to urge his readers to accept Jesus: "Let us turn on the power of his spirit, let us tune into his love for all mankind, let us drop out of this 'plastic' world and return to the fundamentals of God's word."<sup>42</sup> During the late 1960s and the 1970s, church leaders prepared sermons, lectures, and workshops on subjects such as "the psychedelic generation," "chemical comforts," and "the gospel according to St. Marshall and St. Timothy (McLuhan and Leary, that is)."<sup>43</sup>

In 1967, an Anglican and United Church minister in Vancouver joined forces to stage a "psychedelic service," a church service designed to simulate the experience of taking LSD. The service included pop music, "swirling coloured lights projected on the wall," and dancing. Advertised as an opportunity to take "A Trip in the Church," the psychedelic service was not without controversy. Following the service, the Anglican bishop issued a letter condemning it and demanding that all clergy gain prior permission for any future experimental services.<sup>44</sup> A few months later one of the ministers who organized the service, Reverend McKibbon, resigned from his position to, in his words, "seek Christ of the streets." In a post-resignation interview with the *Ubysey*, McKibbon indicated that the controversy over the psychedelic service had "poisoned" his relationship with his congregation, particularly its older members. When asked if he planned to return to the church, McKibbon answered in the negative, criticizing "his church's inability to face modern society." He declared: "Everywhere I look, I find that the really loving, sensitive

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Win a Home at St. Andrew's Church," *Globe and Mail*, 20 January 1968, 10; Stephen Brown, "Eco Notes," *Georgia Straight*, 15–22 April 1970, 9; "Hippies Conduct Service," *Vancouver Province*, 19 August 1967, 12; "Church Invites Hippies," *Vancouver Province*, 24 April 1968, 32; "Churchmen Get Together to Help Diggers in Distress," *Vancouver Province*, 30 September 1967, 2; *Vancouver Sun*, 5 November 1966, 11; "Clergy Get Hip," *Vancouver Sun*, 1 February 1967, 5; and "Knock Down the Cathedral: That's How to Save It," *Vancouver Sun*, 15 January 1972, 6.

<sup>42</sup> "A New Religion ... The Hippie Movement," *BC Diocesan Post*, February 1970, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Provincial Archives of Alberta, Unitarian Church of Edmonton, acc. 87.90, box 3, file 51: Unitarian news, 1966–1967, *Edmonton Unitarian*, 8 May 1967, 1; Provincial Archives of Alberta, Unitarian Church of Edmonton, acc. PR1983.328, box 1, file 5: annual reports, 1956–73, fifteenth annual meeting, 26 January 1969; and Glenbow Archives, Unitarian Church of Calgary Records, acc. M7508, box 19, file 278: newsletters, *Quest*, 30 April 1967, 2.

<sup>44</sup> "Church to Swing It," *Vancouver Sun*, 24 November 1966, 16; Al Donald, "What's New in Church? Frug, Poetry, and a Go-Go," *Vancouver Sun*, 26 November 1966, 29; "Spotlight on LSD: Some Church Experiments," *Canadian Churchman*, January 1967, 1; W.G. Portman, "That 'Psychedelic Service': B.C. Experiment Ends in Communications Row," February 1967, 1, 2, 7; and *Victoria Colonist*, 25 November 1966, 1.

and concerned people are outside the church.”<sup>45</sup> In 1966, an article in *Maclean's* described the emergence of a “new breed of cool clergy,” ministers who, like McKibbon, embraced and promoted aspects of the youth counterculture. As the controversy over the “psychedelic service” indicates, these hip clergymen presided over congregations that were, in fact, divided on the counterculture and in which generational tensions simmered. Such congregations included those who were skeptical of the hippies, opposed to the new moral codes, and resistant to changes in religious programming. In the view of one critic, the “cool clergy” are “so busy coming on like swingers ... they’ve forgotten that it’s what’s Up There that counts.”<sup>46</sup>

“I WANTED TO BE A PERSON OF MY GENERATION”:  
YOUTH AND THE REJECTION OF ESTABLISHED RELIGION

Despite their efforts to reach across the generational divide, religious leaders did not reverse the exodus of youth from the churches. In his work on Yorkville during the sixties, Stuart Henderson aptly cautions against “reducing the conflicts in and over the Village to an ideological war of position between a young, hip bloc and an old, stodgy monolith.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, we must be careful not to characterize the disputes over religion during that era as a simple case of young secularists versus old traditionalists. To do so would be to gloss over the complexity of religion during that time and to overlook not only strands of spirituality in the youth counterculture but also of critical discourse on organized religion among the older generation. While it oversimplified lived experiences, what historian Cynthia Comacchio calls the “rhetoric of generational opposition” was often invoked during the long sixties, and in memories of that era, to render organized religion irrelevant to the young.<sup>48</sup> Caroline, who we earlier learned rejected her mother’s attempts to get her to church, related her departure from the religion of her parents at the age of seventeen to the wider youth rebellion: “It did seem like there was a crack in the

<sup>45</sup> William Portman, “Priest Quits Parish: Seeks Christ of the Streets,” *Canadian Churchman*, April 1968, 24. See also Norman Gidney, “Priest Resigns: Parish Didn’t Like Views on Sex, Politics and Religion,” *Ulysses*, 27 February 1968, 2; *Humanist in Canada*, Late Winter, 1968, 2; “Quitting Priest Launches His Search for God,” *Victoria Colonist*, 9 March 1968, 14; and Douglas Collins, “Rev. McKibbon Says Goodbye,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 March 1968, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Thomas Allen, “The New Morality,” *Maclean's*, 15 October 1966, 22–23. On the mixed reaction of congregations to new forms of worship, see also “The Church That Scrapped Sunday School,” *United Church Observer*, 15 December 1969, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> Comacchio, *Dominion of Youth*, 11.

establishment; there was an opening into which we could dare to think how we wanted. We felt obligated to express ourselves; we were going to be the new ... different people from our parents, definitely, because they certainly did not have that when they were young.” Caroline reflected on the significance of her decision to leave the church: “I became very independent, very self-sufficient. I made decisions and choices based on my wanting to have experiences that were all my own. I wanted to be a person of my generation.”<sup>49</sup> Caroline was not alone in linking her rejection of organized religion to the cultural changes of the sixties and in framing that rejection in terms of generational opposition. The idea that it was natural for young people to rebel against institutional religion, especially during the sixties, recurs throughout the oral narratives. As one respondent matter-of-factly remarked about his rejection of organized religion: “as a teenager you learn to reject what your parents and the authorities around you have told you.”<sup>50</sup>

Born in Connecticut in 1948 and raised in New York, Hannah moved to Toronto in 1969; a year later she moved to Vancouver because, in her words, “this is where it was at if you were hippie-trippy.” Religion became irrelevant to Hannah when she joined the hippie scene: “It was just like something we discarded, it wasn’t relevant to us anymore. Yeah, I guess that’s the best way to put it, it just wasn’t part of our lives, it wasn’t relevant.” In Hannah’s view, being part of the counterculture meant being against all aspects of the establishment, including organized religion:

So, there were a lot of things – like we were the counterculture – there were a lot of things we were against. So, there’s this long list of things we were against. And, it’s just like as a matter of course we were

<sup>49</sup> Caroline, interview by Steve O’Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 9 June 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Michael, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 17 July 2016. See also Brenda, interview by Steve O’Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 23 July 2015; Maria, interview by author, Kamloops, British Columbia, 23 March 2016; Cynthia, interview by Jeannine Worthing, Kamloops, British Columbia, 7 July 2015; Douglas, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 11 May 2016; Thomas, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 25 May 2016; Pamela, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 July 2016; Cheryl, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 6 July 2016; Paul, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 13 July 2016; Judith, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 21 June 2016; Ron, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 9 July 2016; Jeffrey, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 8 August 2016; Edward, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 June 2016; Keith, interview by author, Kamloops, British Columbia, 6 July 2016; Frank, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 September 2016; Greg, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 4 October 2016; Janet and Walter, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 13 December 2016.

against the establishment, we were against organized religion, we were against big business, we were against the police, you know, all this stuff, we were against the war. So, it was not that you'd say that you were, it was more that it was a given that all that stuff was like not for you, kind of thing.<sup>51</sup>

Bob, who was born in the early 1950s, similarly attributed his dismissal of organized religion, at least in part, to his involvement in the counterculture. He recalled: "When I was eleven or twelve I can remember praying to a statue of Mary in my bedroom at night before I went to bed and I was visited by a couple of different priests from the Scarboro Foreign Mission Society and I was being groomed to go into that ... and then the sixties hit. Basically that's what happened and I started getting involved in that movement." Bob described the impact of the counterculture on his life as transformative: "It impacted my person, who I am. It changed everything, in every way ... I became, much more combative, opinionated, and rebellious."<sup>52</sup> Most of the interviewees spoke in more general terms about the impact of the sixties counterculture on their religious views. Beyond attending a few anti-war demonstrations in 1967, Walter, who was born in Penticton in 1942, was not actively involved in the youth movements of the time. However, he echoed others in connecting his own drift from organized religion to the youth counterculture, which he described as "a breaking away and knocking down a lot of the things that I didn't like, and religion was one of them."<sup>53</sup>

According to historian Dominique Clément, only a minority of Canadian young people identified as political radicals or hippies during the sixties, but many "supported social movements by adhering to the movement's basic principles in ways that affected their everyday lives (and the lives of others)."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, while few of the interviewees in this study were actively involved in countercultural or social movements during the long sixties, most recalled welcoming and identifying with such movements. Levels of engagement with the counterculture varied by place. Jerry explained why, in 1973 at the age of nineteen, he decided to move from Newfoundland to British Columbia: "Well, that was the

<sup>51</sup> Hannah, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 27 September 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Bob and Susan, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 10 May 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Janet and Walter, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 13 December 2016. Sixteen of the interviewees were actively involved in youth and/or protest movements of the sixties, and many of those attributed their rejection of religion at least in part to that involvement. I use the term "counterculture" broadly to refer to the various strands of youth protest and rebellion against established tradition during the long sixties. On the term "counterculture" as somewhat nebulous and "incoherent," see Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Clément, "Generations and the Transformation of Social Movements in Postwar Canada," 367.

California of Canada. From my perspective. I thought, 'Oh, this is going to be where the hippie scene is, where the counterculture is going to be.' And I was right about that."<sup>55</sup> While sometimes associated with British Columbia as a whole, the "hippie scene" varied in nature and extent across the province. As a young man in Vancouver during the late 1960s, Philip began to question established religion partly because, in his words, "the hippie movement, the counterculture, was very strong in Vancouver. There was a lot of openness to different ideas."<sup>56</sup> Unlike the interviewees who came of age in Vancouver, those who spent their youth in the smaller towns and rural areas of the province recalled feeling somewhat peripheral to the counterculture. As a young woman in Salmon Arm, Maria "sort of played around with the hippie thing a little tiny bit" but felt detached from the youth counterculture by virtue of her location: "I was too disconnected. I was way back from Salmon Arm bush league. I think if I had been from Vancouver or some place that was more connected, I'd have been right there."<sup>57</sup> Pamela, who was born in 1955 and raised in the small Kootenay Lake community of Procter, likewise recalled being aware of, but not actively involved in, the counterculture:

I was certainly aware, and we all dressed with tie-dyed T-shirts and flowers in our hair [*laughs*], but I wouldn't say that ... I think just our conversations, probably the way we dressed, yes, the music we listened to, how we spent our time, probably was a benign movement in itself. We were just accepting that this was a new way of living.

Pamela regularly attended church with her parents as a child but grew increasingly critical of organized religion in her pre-teen years and stopped attending church in 1968 at the age of thirteen. When asked whether the youth movements of the sixties affected her decision, she replied: "They cemented that I had the right to question it, and secondly that it was okay not to believe in any one particular thing."<sup>58</sup> Like Pamela, many interviewees, whether they came of age in Kitsilano or Kamloops, recalled the 1960s as a time when it became increasingly acceptable to question institutional religion.

<sup>55</sup> Jerry, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 12 December 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Philip, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 30 June 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Maria, interview by author, Kamloops, British Columbia, 23 March 2016

<sup>58</sup> Pamela, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 July 2016. Callum Brown argues that the 1960s changed "no religionism" from a "deviant, skulking, almost hidden, tiny minority, to a slowly swelling, brash and insouciant crowd." See Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 60.



The narrators in this study shared in rejecting organized religion in their youth, and many indicated that the broader cultural changes of the sixties helped to make that rejection possible. Of course, oral histories are ongoing cultural constructions rather than unmediated repositories of a static past. Memories of religious rebellion during the sixties not only reflect unique, individual experiences but also shared, popular representations of, and cultural nostalgia for, that era. As historian Lynn Abrams notes, inherent “to almost all oral history interviews is the interplay between individual memory and collective or social memory.”<sup>59</sup> Inflected with the popular tropes of youth rebellion and generational opposition, the narratives in this study are revealing not only of individual, lived experiences of irreligion but also of the broader, collective memory of the sixties. That era looms large in the memories of present-day unbelievers, often appearing as a turning point in journeys away from religion. For several female interviewees, such journeys were also connected to the emergent women’s movement. A few explicitly associated their turn towards feminism with their turn away from Christianity. For Darlene, becoming involved in the women’s movement during the 1970s increasingly made Christianity untenable: “I became a feminist and I couldn’t see how you could be a Christian and a feminist at the same time. I mean that didn’t jive.”<sup>60</sup> Brenda admitted that, while she “wasn’t really a radical feminist,” her views on organized religion were influenced by the growing women’s movement. She recalled: “So that whole movement ... as you moved into it to see how women were kept down by churches in my mind, particularly the Catholic Church, I just seriously started questioning it altogether and to me it was like power and control.”<sup>61</sup> Such sentiments were not unique to the interviewees in this study. As early as 1963, a writer for *Maclean’s* called for an end to “sexual prejudice” in the Christian church and complained that the subjugation of women within the church was “driving the ablest and best educated women out of organized Christianity.”<sup>62</sup> Criticisms of

<sup>59</sup> Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 99. See also Llewelyn, “Productive Tensions,” 148.

<sup>60</sup> Darlene, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 3 October 2016. Of the twenty-six women interviewed for this project, seventeen recalled being turned off by the patriarchy of organized religion.

<sup>61</sup> Brenda, interview by Steve O’Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 23 July 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Hill, “Let’s End Sexual Prejudice in the Christian Church,” *Maclean’s*, 16 November 1963, 84. See also “Women Not Equal in Church,” *Vancouver Sun*, 15 June 1967, 47; and “Catholic Women Seek Equality: ‘Suffragettes’ Ask Church Vote,” *Vancouver Sun*, 8 July 1967, 14. On the connections between feminism and irreligion in the sixties, see Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*; and McLeod, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 176–87.

religious, and particularly Christian, patriarchy also regularly appeared in the countercultural press. As a writer for the *Georgia Straight* declared in 1968: "It is hard to underestimate the complicity of western religions in solidifying the myth of feminine inferiority."<sup>63</sup>

Most of the female interviewees in this study were not active in the women's movement; however, many recalled that as young women they became increasingly aware of, and resentful towards, the sexism of religious doctrines and institutions. Born in 1953 and raised in Fort Nelson, Judith attributed her repudiation of the Catholic Church as a teenager, in part, to the rise of feminism: "It may have had a little bit to do with the age I grew up too. Because that was when the feminism thing was happening. And the Catholic Church could not be called good for females." As a young woman, Judith grew increasingly critical of the patriarchy of the Christian church:

When you go to church, you know, well, you can't be a minister, you can't be an altar boy, and then you have the thing of, you know, females are supposed to be very chaste. Boys are supposed to, doesn't matter. Girls are ... if you get pregnant you are a whore, you are terrible. Then they'll send you to a home for girls where all they're interested in is saving your baby, because you know, you're a lost cause. Oh but you can't have birth control information, because that's against the church. So everything is stacked against the females.<sup>64</sup>

While Judith spoke about such restrictions in general terms, Audrey experienced the full force of the sexual double standard when she became pregnant at the age of fifteen and was expelled from both her school and the United Church choir. Enduring such a "social injustice," especially considering that the boy involved faced no consequences, "totally changed" Audrey's life and reinforced her bitterness towards the church for its "distinct prejudice against women."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Bob Cummings, "Come, All Ye Women," *Georgia Straight*, 8–21 March, 10. See also *Pedestal*, May 1972, 15; August 1972, 3; April 1973, 2–3; *Georgia Straight*, 24 June–1 July 1970, 5; 4–11 November 1970, 9; 10–17 March 1971, 15; and 14–20 March 1969, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Judith, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 21 June 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Audrey, interview by Jeannine Worthing, Kamloops, British Columbia, 24 June 2015. Criticisms of religious patriarchy intersected with the growing challenge to outdated views on the body and sexuality – a challenge fuelled primarily by youth. See George Bowering, "The Indecent Treatment of Indecent Exposure," *Georgia Straight*, 6–12 September 1968, 9; Bob Cummings, "Morality Is a Three-Headed Goddess," *Georgia Straight*, 10 April–2 May 1968, 8–9; Bob Cummings, "Pope Thinks on Pill," *Georgia Straight*, 9–22 August 1968, 5; and Doug Sanders, "Homosexuality and the Law: The Mysterious Case of Everett Klippert," *Georgia Straight*, 27 September–3 October 1968, 10, 11, 17. On the intersections between youth, sexuality, and the "New Morality" during the sixties, see Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 226;

The unfair treatment that Audrey received when she became pregnant turned her off the church for good. She recalled: "I just saw the hypocrisy in all of it. You know, what they're preaching was, you know, love and tolerance and understanding and not what they were practising."<sup>66</sup> Audrey was not alone in pointing to the hypocrisy of established religion. Most of the narrators in this study identified the hypocrisy of religious people and institutions as key to their decision to reject organized religion. Like Audrey, some experienced religious hypocrisy within their own families and communities. Joan recalled that her aversion to organized religion was inadvertently instilled by her grandfather, who was at once a "big shot" in the church and "not a nice man." She reflected: "My grandfather, that was what really turned me off, you know, I mean if this man who is so religious and, you know, every second word was 'God' and 'Jesus' can be such a jerk, then how can I believe in what he believes in, you know? I was very young when I figured that one out."<sup>67</sup> While some narrators recalled specific encounters with religious hypocrisy, many more spoke on the subject in broader terms. Rose's explanation of why she turned away from established religion was typical: "There's no one event that stands out in my mind, but seeing the hypocrisy of a lot of, you know, Sunday Christians certainly turns me off."<sup>68</sup>

In highlighting the issue of hypocrisy, the interviewees invoked what was perhaps the most widely circulated criticism of mainstream Christianity during the long sixties. It was, for instance, a central charge made by Pierre Berton in his 1965 bestseller, *The Comfortable Pew*.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the 1960s, Canadian church commentators worried that the absence of

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Christie and Gauvreau, "Even the Hippies," 4; Douville, "Christ and Counterculture," 753; Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 127–71; Robert Thomas Allen, "The New Morality," *Maclean's*, 15 October 1966, 22–23; and Christabelle Sethna, "'Chastity Outmoded!': *The Ulysses*, Sex, and the Single Girl, 1960–70," in *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945–75*, ed. Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 289–92.

<sup>66</sup> Audrey, personal interview by Jeannine Worthing, Kamloops, British Columbia, 24 June 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Joan, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 6 July 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Rose, interview by Steve O'Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 2 July 2015. Fifty of the fifty-five individuals interviewed subtly or explicitly impugned the hypocrisy of organized religion; some referred in outright terms to the issue of religious hypocrisy, while others spoke more generally of their disdain for the harm done in the name of religion.

<sup>69</sup> Pierre Berton, *The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment in the New Age* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965). See also John Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963); Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 223; J. Paul Grayson, "'Remember Now Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth': The Quiet Religious Revolution on a Canadian Campus in the 1960s," *Historical Studies in Education* 23, 2 (2011): 106; Miedema, *For Canada's Sake*, 4, 36; and Nancy Christie, "'Belief Crucified upon a Rooftop Antenna': Pierre Berton, the Comfortable Pew, and Dechristianization," in *Sixties and Beyond*, ed. Christie and Gauvreau, 321–50.

young people from the pews was due, in part, to the widespread association of the churches with hypocrisy. In a 1967 letter to the *Canadian Churchman*, a young man blamed Anglicanism's lack of appeal to youth, in part, on the "irrelevance, hypocrisy and archaism of the church." A year later, that same paper printed an article on the exodus of young people from the church, a state of affairs that the author attributed partly to the issue of hypocrisy.<sup>70</sup> Although it was predominant, the charge of hypocrisy was one criticism among many that comprised the broader challenge to the Christian churches in Canada during the sixties. In 1961, the author of an article in *Macleans* entitled "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>71</sup> In that same year, a *Macleans* editorial acknowledged that to refer to Canada as a "Christian country" was exclusionary and "arrogant."<sup>72</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 religion editor of the *Victoria Daily Colonist* observed in 1965: "It has become a national pastime in Canada these past months, of clerics as well as agnostics, to lambaste the church as out of tune with Christ and with the modern age."<sup>73</sup>

While they drew on and fuelled the growing challenge to institutional Christianity, BC youth were not entirely of one mind on religion. That young people held varied perspectives on Christianity is evident in the somewhat playful run-in between a hippie-led "be-in" and a Christian youth march in Vancouver's Stanley Park in April of 1968. As the *Vancouver Sun* reported: "The Christians, people from the ages of 12 to 30 years from 12 denominations and 60 churches, poked fun at the hippies with their placards – Why go to pot when you can go to God, and with Heaven in

<sup>70</sup> *Canadian Churchman*, May 1967, 18; Arnold Edinborough, "Getting the Boat Off the Sandbar," *Canadian Churchman*, July–August 1968, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ralph Allen, "The Hidden Failure of Our Churches," *Macleans*, 25 February 1961, 50. See also *Macleans*, April 17, 1965, 63; "Church Rebellion Grows," *Daily Colonist*, 10 February 1968, 18; Robert Collins, "A 'Christian Underground' for Clergy Who Quit the Churches," *Macleans*, August 1969, 5; *Daily Colonist*, 28 January 1966, 12; June Callwood, "Is God Obsolete," *Macleans*, 6 August 1966, 7–9, 31–32, 34; "Atheists Aid Church," *Vancouver Sun*, 11 April 1967, 5; "Organized Rebellion Spreads within Canadian United Church," *Calgary Herald*, 10 February 1968, 22; "Fewer Seek Priesthood Training," *Daily Colonist*, 2 March 1968, 10; "Is God Dead? Cleric Basted by Theologians," *Daily Colonist*, 28 January 1966, 12; and "Ministers Getting Fed Up," *Daily Colonist*, 6 January 1968, 12.

<sup>72</sup> "Editorial: Since When Has Canada Been a Christian Country?," *Macleans*, 11 February 1961, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Ian Arrol, "Why They Go to Church," *Victoria Humanist* [reprinted from the *Daily Colonist*] 5 (June 1965): 8. See also United Church of Canada, Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report* 41 (1966): 18; and "Church Must Change or Fade Away," *Vancouver Sun*, 10 May 1967, 3.

your heart, you don't need Heroin in your veins."<sup>74</sup> Notwithstanding the efforts of Christian young people, youth and countercultural discourse of the time tended to be deeply critical of established Christianity. In 1965, a scathing critique of Christian hypocrisy and irrelevance appeared in the UBC student newspaper, the *Ubysey*. "Christians are self-righteous asses," the author exclaimed. "And liars, and hypocrites, and perpetrators of an irrelevant, incoherent, dead faith that nobody ascribes to anyway." The author concluded: "It'd be nice to have a lot fewer Christians and a lot more human beings. In today's church, you can't be both. So to hell with churches."<sup>75</sup> Vancouver's underground paper, the *Georgia Straight*, also took frequent aim at the hypocrisy of the churches, as in the following comment on Vancouver's housing shortage: "Also guilty of human indifference are the 'Christian' churches who thump the bible rather than live by it. Each of these edifices of hypocrisy has a basement and washrooms that could be used to help people. Those that do try to help are as scarce as true Christians in Christianity."<sup>76</sup> Through the 1960s and 1970s, the *Georgia Straight* variously referred to Christian proselytizers as "Christ-crusaders," "religion-ranters," "God-peddlers," "bible-clutchers," "Jesus-jousters," "bible-blusterers," "scripture-screamers," "religious hucksters," and "bible-beaters."<sup>77</sup> At once scathing and humorous, such disparaging labels worked to further entrench the divide between youth and institutional Christianity.

During the late sixties and early seventies, the countercultural press often called church people to task for their unchristian attitudes towards nonconformist youth. In 1970, the author of a letter to the *Georgia Straight*

<sup>74</sup> "Be-In Was a Sock-In," *Vancouver Sun*, 15 April 1968, 23. On the engagement of countercultural youth with spirituality, see Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 101; and Douville, "And We've Got to Get Ourselves Back to the Garden."

<sup>75</sup> John Kelsey, "The Palace Voice," *Ubysey*, 23 November 1965, 4. According to Douville, despite their engagement with spirituality, "most hippies were either hostile or indifferent to institutional Christianity"; see "Christ and Counterculture," 753.

<sup>76</sup> Bob Cummings, "And Still Nowhere to Sleep," *Georgia Straight*, 9–22 August 1968, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *Georgia Straight*, 28 January–4 February 1970, 11; 21–28 January 1970, 12; Bob Cummings, "The God Peddlers," *Georgia Straight*, 29 November–5 December 1968, 17; 4–11 March 1970, 10; 25 March–1 April 1970, 10; and 22–29 April 1970, 8. For further criticisms of institutional Christianity, see "A.D. 2000, Carl Rogers," *Georgia Straight*, 17–30 May 1968, 8–10; Bob Cummings, "Church Spirit Poorer Than the Poor," *Georgia Straight*, 14–27 June 1968, 10, 13; Chris MacLeod, "Seasons Greetings," *Georgia Straight*, 17–24 December 1969, 18; 7–14 January 1970, 15; 22–29 April 1970, 2–3; and Daniel Burston, "The Tragedy of Institutional Religion," *Alternative to Alienation*, June–July 1974, 15. In the *Georgia Straight*, criticism of the provincial Social Credit government was often interlinked with criticism of institutional Christianity. For example, a 1969 editorial condemned the "ultra-conservative-religious-puritanical government of Premier Plugged-in-to-God Bennett." See *Georgia Straight*, 17–24 September 1969, 8; 13–20 August 1969, 10–11; and 8–15 October 1969, 14.

complained about the “hounding and harassing” of young people in Vancouver:

The white, Anglo Saxon Protestants of Vancouver are angry. Their smug, complacent, apathetic way of life has been upset by the antics of a few young people requesting a bite to eat and a place to sleep. According to these bigoted, hypocritical, good church-going citizens these are unreasonable demands in one of the richest countries in the world.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to impugning the hypocrisy of “good church-going citizens,” countercultural writers often likened disaffected youth to Jesus. As one *Georgia Straight* author declared in 1968: “In reality, if Jesus Christ were to walk the streets and preach his message in almost any Christian country today, he would be arrested along with the other ‘commies, idealists, agitators and misfits.’”<sup>79</sup> Countercultural discourse on the hypocrisy of institutional Christianity was shaped by notions of “authenticity” that resonated among youth of the era. As historian Stuart Henderson has shown, during the sixties many white, middle-class young people rejected what they saw as a “falsified version of reality” in the suburbs and sought a more authentic experience.<sup>80</sup> Mainline church involvement was widely associated with inauthentic, suburban conformity. Philip reflected on the religious lives of his parents in North Vancouver during the 1960s: “They were religious the way in which ... they were suburban. We lived in a split-level house. We had a car. We had a lawn. I mean, and going to church just went along with all those other things.”<sup>81</sup> Likened to “having a lawn,” churchgoing was, in Philip’s recollection, just a taken-for-granted part of postwar suburban life. The charge of inauthenticity and hypocrisy was levelled at church people not only in countercultural papers but also by youth who may never have read such papers or involved themselves in the youth movements of the day. Greg described his rejection of the church as a teenager during the 1970s: “My dad would say, ‘so and so down the street is a complete knob and he’s a crook at work, or business or whatever.’ And I’d say, ‘but that was the guy who was the lay preacher at our church.’ Alright, well fine, that sets that one up for failure too.”<sup>82</sup> Like Greg, several interviewees described arriving at an awareness, in

<sup>78</sup> *Georgia Straight*, 29 July–5 August 1970, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Bob Cummings, “The God Peddlers,” *Georgia Straight*, 29 November–5 December 1968, 17. On likening Christ to hippies and disaffected youth, see *Georgia Straight*, 22 March–4 April 1968, 11; 25 April–1 May 1969, 2; and 4–11 March 1970, 10.

<sup>80</sup> Henderson, *Making the Scene*, 9, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Philip, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 30 June 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Greg, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 4 October 2016.

their youth, of the hypocrisy or inauthenticity of organized Christianity and its adherents.

While they reproduced widespread criticisms of established Christianity, young people did more than merely echo the views of others; rather, they often deliberately framed their opposition to organized religion in generational terms and used the trope of old age to dissociate youth from the churches. For instance, in 1968, *Georgia Straight* author Bob Cummings referred contemptuously to the churches as “societies of the old.” According to Cummings, the “most fortunate old people are those who can believe in religion. It is with these that the church fulfills whatever purpose is left for it in a modern world – a refuge for those who have no other hope but a belief in the supernatural.”<sup>83</sup> Countercultural writers were not alone in invoking the rhetoric of generational opposition to dismiss and disdain the churches. In addition to describing religious rebellion as naturally inherent to youth, many of the interviewees called up specific memories of being turned off, in their younger years, by the stodgy un-hipness of organized religion. For instance, Cynthia, who was born and raised in Burns Lake, remembered that when she moved away from home to attend college in Prince George in 1969, Christianity came to seem old and irrelevant: “That’s when I thought, ‘What is this God BS?’ I mean – because I didn’t understand the bible. I just – to me it was just something completely old and it wasn’t pertinent to my life and I couldn’t figure out how it fit into going to college.”<sup>84</sup> Andrew offered a typical explanation for his turn from organized religion during his youth: “It was cool in those days not to be affiliated with mainstream religions.”<sup>85</sup> Many interviewees described their detachment from organized religion in generational terms and recalled and reproduced notions of the churches as bastions of hypocrisy and refuges for the aged. Like Caroline, who rejected the church to be “a person of her generation,” many young people helped to undercut the power and privilege of institutional Christianity by disassociating it from, and rendering it irrelevant to, youth.

“IT WAS JUST A KIND OF GRADUAL WEARING AWAY”:  
THE ROAD TO UNBELIEF

As we learned earlier, Bob abruptly rejected the Catholic Church as a teenager in the late 1960s. Like many others at the time, Bob was turned off by the hypocrisy of the church, especially its support for the American

<sup>83</sup> Bob Cummings, “The Yesterday People,” *Georgia Straight*, 26 July–8 August 1968, 12–13.

<sup>84</sup> Cynthia, interview by Jeannine Worthing, Kamloops, British Columbia, 7 July 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Andrew, interview by Jeannine Worthing, Kamloops, British Columbia, 24 June 2015.

intervention in Vietnam. He reflected: “Are we not supposed to be killing women and children in Vietnam? Isn’t that a bad thing to be doing that? Well, no, they’re communists, so it’s okay to kill communists, children. So I started to have a lot of doubts about it and probably around the age of fifteen or sixteen I think I started going into full rejection mode because it just was so hypocritical.” When asked how or whether his thoughts on religion changed after he left home, Bob replied: “I think I was eighteen or nineteen and my religion didn’t change, just went away. I just didn’t do it anymore. I didn’t think about it.” For several years after leaving home, religion “wasn’t an issue” in Bob’s life and he “didn’t think about it much.” Eventually, Bob came to identify as an agnostic because, in his words: “I think the term ‘atheism’ was kind of a bad word. I didn’t describe myself as an atheist, for a long time I said I was an agnostic because as soon as you say ‘atheist’ people say, ‘Ohh, you eat babies.’” Bob began to engage more purposively with questions of religion in his fifties, when he became, in his words, a “full-blown atheist.”<sup>86</sup> While unique in its details, Bob’s narrative mirrors many others in this study in its general trajectory and key themes. Most of the interviewees clearly articulated their reasons for turning or staying away from religious institutions, and most who were involved in such institutions departed from them quite abruptly as teenagers or young adults. By contrast, the road to unbelief tended to be more gradual and less certain.<sup>87</sup>

While institutional religious involvement declined sharply in Canada during the postwar era, changes to religious belief were more moderate. A 1947 Gallup Poll reported that 95 percent of Canadians claimed to believe in a God. By the mid-1970s, the level of belief in Canada had dropped to 89 percent.<sup>88</sup> According to an Angus Reid survey conducted in 2000, the percentage of Canadians reporting belief in a God had dropped only slightly, to 84 percent, with the lowest level in British Columbia at 75 percent.<sup>89</sup> That same survey identified professed belief as highest

<sup>86</sup> Bob and Susan, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 10 May 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Callum Brown similarly found that postwar journeys to affirmed atheism and humanism tended to be gradual, and embodied long periods of not thinking about belief; see his fine oral history study *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

<sup>88</sup> George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935–1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 698; and Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, 8 January 1969, 2. For further discussion on statistics on unbelief in Canada, see Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 164; Hans Mol, *Faith and Fragility: Religion and Identity in Canada* (Burlington: Trinity Press, 1985); and Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishers, 1987), 88.

<sup>89</sup> Angus Reid Poll, 21 April 2000. Reginald Bibby’s 1985 survey also identified British Columbians as less likely than those in other provinces to claim belief in a God. See Bibby, *Fragmented*



among those fifty-five years of age and older at 89 percent, and lowest among those between eighteen and thirty-four at 70 percent. There are scant statistics that address regional variations in belief during the postwar years, but national surveys indicate that British Columbians were less likely than other Canadians to call themselves religious, and less likely to see religion as an important and relevant part of their daily lives.<sup>90</sup> However, even within the uniquely secular context of British Columbia, open expressions of unbelief and atheism were relatively rare during the postwar years. As we have seen, most of the interviewees in this study had arrived at a clear rejection of organized religion by their teens or twenties. Few, however, recall having decisively rejected religious belief, much less having claimed a nonbelieving or atheist identity, by that age. Even most of those who never held any religious beliefs only came later in life to acknowledge their unbelief explicitly and to identify as non-believers or atheists.<sup>91</sup> In our conversations, many respondents expressed their continued aversion to irreligious labels. As Ron remarked: “I just don’t label myself. But I don’t believe that there is a God.” He went on to say: “It’s not really important what I am. But I guess I’ve always been an atheist.”<sup>92</sup> Ken, who was born in 1955 and raised in Coquitlam, declared that he would “probably be somewhere between agnostic and atheist” but that he is “not really big on labels.” He said: “I know what I feel and what I believe and that’s good enough for me.”<sup>93</sup>

Historian Hugh McLeod aptly notes that the secularizing currents of the postwar era did not immediately turn “believers into atheists.”<sup>94</sup> While few of the interviewees in this study openly identified as non-believers or atheists during the long sixties, many recalled intensively questioning aspects of religious doctrine and, often, the very idea of God, during their youth. Douglas, who was born and raised in Oliver, remembered that as a pre-teen in the late 1950s he “started to question

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*Gods*, 88. More recently, a 2017 Angus Reid survey identified British Columbia as home to the highest proportion of nonbelievers at 27 percent, compared to 19 percent in Canada. See “A Spectrum of Spirituality: Canadians Keep the Faith to Varying Degrees, But Few Reject It Entirely,” Angus Reid Institute, 13 April 2017. See [http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017.04.12\\_Faith\\_Wave\\_1\\_Part\\_1.pdf](http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2017.04.12_Faith_Wave_1_Part_1.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> See Stewart, “Religion and Secularity,” 23; Block, *Secular Northwest*, 97–100; and *Report of a Survey of Canadians’ Participation in Organized Religion* (Montreal: Data Laboratories Research Consultants, 1977), 184–85. A 1969 Gallup Poll found that younger people were less likely than older people (those over fifty) to hold belief in a God. See Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, 15 January 1969.

<sup>91</sup> Six of the interviewees never held any religious beliefs.

<sup>92</sup> Ron, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 9 July 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Ken, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 July 2016.

<sup>94</sup> McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, 241. See also Christie and Gauvreau, “Even the Hippies,” 24.

the validity of the things in the bible such as Noah's ark." The fact that his questions went unanswered ultimately turned Douglas off religion. He recalled: "I remember asking Reverend ———, I guess I was eleven or twelve years old, how did you get a couple of polar bears to the ark and he had no answers for me. There was absolutely no religious aspect from about then on other than occasional funerals or whatever."<sup>95</sup> Pamela, who was born in 1955 and raised in the Kootenays, also recalled a time of deep religious questioning in her youth. She remarked: "Somehow I just couldn't get the whole immaculate conception thing to go down. And then I started looking at timelines for the bible, and I was about thirteen, and I thought, 'No, I'm taught at school that Darwin has got it right.' And that made sense to me." On her reasons for rejecting religion, Pamela reflected: "Just the incongruity between the facts that I was learning and what I was expected to believe that I didn't believe was based on fact."<sup>96</sup>

Many narrators recalled that when their theological questions went unanswered they became dismissive of, or indifferent to, religion. George, who was born in Ontario in 1946 and moved to Kamloops in 1972, reflected on a conversation that he had with a minister as a teenager:

I was asking him questions about the proof of the existence of God, the story of Jesus and his resurrection, and he finally said to me that he couldn't answer all of my questions, and that there were some things one had to simply accept on faith. I trusted this man a good deal and appreciated his advice, but I think one could call me agnostic from about that point onwards.

Between his teenage years, when for a time he intently questioned religious doctrine, and his fifties, when he became an affirmed atheist, George gave little attention to religion. He recalled that religion "wasn't a big deal" in his life during that period: "I didn't sit and ponder and ponder and ponder."<sup>97</sup> According to historian Callum Brown, the "no religionism" of the 1960s had "less to do with principled atheism, free-thinking, or secularism, and more to do with disinterest in religion."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, most of the interviewees in this study described gradual journeys to unbelief, which included long periods of disinterest in belief or religion. Asked when she came to identify as agnostic, Hannah replied: "Probably in my forties, when I was trying to figure it out for the kids. Up to then

<sup>95</sup> Douglas, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 11 May 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Pamela, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 July 2016.

<sup>97</sup> George, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 23 June 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 62, 28.

it was not even something that was like in my awareness, because it was not part of my life.”<sup>99</sup> Although he was exposed to Christianity as a child, John rarely gave religion much thought until he was in his late twenties, when a friend queried him on his belief in God: “Somebody said to me, ‘Why are you talking about this God? Why do you believe in God?’ ... And I thought, ‘Well, that’s a good question.’” He continued:

I just started to think that, yeah, that’s right. There isn’t a God. And then I started to get interested to educate myself, in evolution, starting with Charles Darwin et cetera. And that’s how I’ve gone, along that road, gently, for the last fifty years ... I didn’t turn away aggressively. I just realized why do I go along with this belief that there’s a God – it wasn’t affecting my life, it wasn’t even in my life at the time.<sup>100</sup>

Like John, most of the interviewees turned “gently” rather than “aggressively” or abruptly away from religious belief. Regardless of whether or not they once held religious beliefs, most described journeys to outright, expressed unbelief that were gradual, tentative, and involved substantial periods of religious disregard or indifference. As Philip commented regarding his own loss of religious beliefs: “It was just a gradual kind of wearing away.”<sup>101</sup> That the road to unbelief was often gradual reflects, in part, the persistent silence around atheism and unbelief through the postwar era. It became increasingly acceptable during that era to challenge established religion and to dismiss or simply ignore religion. However, discussions about doubting or denying religious belief remained uncommon. Positive or even neutral stories about atheism and unbelief were rare to see in the cultural media of the time, even in sources that were often deeply critical of established religion such as countercultural and student papers.<sup>102</sup> Many interviewees commented on the silence and obscurity around unbelief, and particularly atheism, during the long sixties. Several pointed out that the very term “atheist”

<sup>99</sup> Hannah, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 27 September 2016.

<sup>100</sup> John, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 1 June 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Philip, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 30 June 2016.

<sup>102</sup> On the silence around atheism and unbelief in postwar Canada, see Tina Block, “Ungodly Grandmother: Marian Sherman and the Social Dimensions of Atheism in Postwar Canada,” *Journal of Women’s History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 132–54. During the first half of the 1960s, *Ubysey* columnist Jack Ornstein regularly commented positively on atheism and unbelief, which often sparked some controversy and stood as an exception to the more general silence on these issues. See the following articles by Ornstein: “An Open Letter from God,” *Ubysey*, 8 March 1963, 4; “Who’s God?,” *Ubysey*, 25 October 1963; and “Happy Atheist,” *Ubysey*, 14 February 1964, 4. For criticism of Ornstein’s atheist views, see *Ubysey*, 31 October 1963, 4; *Ubysey*, 26 November 1963, 4; and *Ubysey*, 18 February 1964, 4.

was neither widely used nor well understood at the time. Ian, who was born in Vancouver in 1956, recalled:

I don't think that the word "atheist" was in my vocabulary probably until I was in my thirties. Because either you were a believer or you were a non-believer. I understood what "agnostic" meant, but I don't know at what point that terminology became sort of mainstream, you know? When I was growing up, either you were a Christian or you were a heathen, right? That's pretty much how it was.<sup>103</sup>

Sharon, who was also born in 1956, speculated about how people might have reacted had she called herself an atheist in the seventies: "I think in the seventies people would've been stunned. I think a lot of people wouldn't even know what the word meant, to tell you the truth."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, Jerry remarked that he would have been met with incredulity had he said that he was an agnostic, or that he doubted or disbelieved in God, in that era: "If I would have come out and made a statement like that in a conversation with a group of people somebody would have burst out laughing or something."<sup>105</sup>

Those who openly denied the existence of God during the long sixties risked being seen, in the words of one interviewee, as "far out."<sup>106</sup> According to Ken, if one said they were an atheist or agnostic in that era, "people would've first of all maybe not understood what that meant, and secondly, once they did understand, they would probably take a bit of a dimmer view of the person."<sup>107</sup> As Ken's comment suggests, the possibilities for identifying as an atheist during the sixties were limited not only by the silence on the subject but also by a lingering stigma against unbelief. Although the Cold War furor over "atheistic Communism" began to gradually wane during the 1960s, nonbelievers continued to face silencing and social ostracism.<sup>108</sup> Most of the interviewees recalled the negative connotations that atheism and unbelief held when they were young. They remembered that the term "atheist" was associated with immorality and considered to be "scary," "nasty," and "dirty."<sup>109</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Ian, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 4 July 2016.

<sup>104</sup> Sharon, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 26 May 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Jerry, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 12 December 2016.

<sup>106</sup> Edward, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 June 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Ken, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 5 July 2016.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, *United Church Observer*, 1 May 1951, 4; *BC Catholic*, 15 February 1951, 6; *Canadian Churchman*, 18 October 1951, 315; and *Nanaimo Free Press*, 11 May 1951, 2.

<sup>109</sup> Bob and Susan, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 10 May 2016; Gary, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 8 June 2016; and John, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 1 June 2016. Forty-seven of

As Paul recalled: “Back in the sixties, if you were labelled an atheist, there was something wrong with you. That was a bad word.”<sup>110</sup> Several opted, for a time, to call themselves by the more socially tolerable label of “agnostic.” As Rose remarked: “I used to say ‘agnostic,’ because ‘atheist’ sounded I guess socially unacceptable. I mean, I’ve always been an atheist [laughter].”<sup>111</sup> Others recalled being open about their unbelief in certain contexts but not in others. For instance, Frank was open about his atheism when among fellow students at the University of British Columbia in the 1960s but was “always very careful” at work and “with parents of girlfriends or other friends for that matter, because it could be quite a sensitive topic.”<sup>112</sup> While atheism elicited particular alarm, it was also socially unacceptable to identify as a nonbeliever or to admit that one doubted or disbelieved in God. Through the sixties and seventies, the Humanist Association of Canada reported on instances of discrimination against atheists and nonbelievers, and noted that many kept silent about their unbelief so as not to risk alienating friends, family members, and employers.<sup>113</sup> In 1964, a reader of the *Victoria Humanist* lamented that, in Canada, “a person who admits he does not believe in God is looked upon as if he had a crippling disease.”<sup>114</sup>

Most of the interviewees recalled that it became easier, over time, to voice their unbelief. Born and raised in Chilliwack, Jim never held any religious beliefs but only came to admit that openly as he grew older. He said: “I think when I was younger I was a little bit afraid to say out loud that I was atheist or, you know, to adamantly say that there is no God, but I think I am just more sure of it now at this point in my life.”<sup>115</sup> Barbara also became more certain of, and open about, her unbelief over time: “I do remember as a young person, you know, in the seventies,

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the fifty-five interviewees either explicitly mentioned, or alluded to, the negative perceptions of atheism and unbelief during the 1950s through the 1970s.

<sup>110</sup> Paul, interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, British Columbia, 13 July 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Rose, interview by Steve O’Reilly, Kamloops, British Columbia, 2 July 2015. Members of the Canadian humanist movement occasionally recommended promotion of 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. See C.S. Wormald, “Humanist Raps City Clergy,” *Victoria Humanist* 2, 13 (1966): 16.

<sup>112</sup> Frank, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 September 2016.

<sup>113</sup> British Columbia Archives, Marian Noel Sherman Papers, box 6, newspaper clippings, file: notes and clippings re: atheism, 1963; *Victoria Humanist* 4 (April 1965): 12; *Humanist in Canada*, 3 (Late Winter 1968): 22; *Humanist in Canada* 13 (Summer 1970): 23; *Vancouver Province*, 21 September 1963, 15; *Colonist*, 16 December 1962, 1–2; *Colonist*, 28 December 1962, 1–2; *Colonist*, 6 January 1963, 10; and Sylvia Fraser, “What Makes an Atheist Tick?” *Star Weekly*, 11 September 1965, 6.

<sup>114</sup> *Victoria Humanist* 2 (December 1964): 2.

<sup>115</sup> Jim, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 19 May 2016.

eighties, nineties, whatever, I can remember not feeling comfortable sharing my view. Feeling like I would be looked down on or not thought well of. I mean today I'm totally comfortable with that."<sup>116</sup> Many interviewees similarly described becoming more comfortable over time in acknowledging and expressing their unbelief. While most attributed this to a confidence gained through age and experience, such growing openness also reflects broader shifts in Canadian society. Atheism and unbelief contravened dominant norms during the long sixties, but there were signs of change. In 1964, a controversy erupted when a Dutch immigrant couple was denied Canadian citizenship due to their atheism.<sup>117</sup> The decision to deny citizenship to the couple based on their atheism sparked wide protest, and ultimately the decision was overturned. One reporter commented, with a note of surprise, on the support received by the Dutch couple: "Editorials roundly denounced the rejection of their citizenship application as flagrant discrimination; most church leaders praised the Dutch couple's honesty, and affirmed their right to become Canadians; an overwhelming percentage of the mail they received was openly sympathetic."<sup>118</sup> Given this response, the reporter concluded that atheism was no longer an "undercover evil" and had become "at least officially tolerable" in Canada.

Despite indications of change, wider cultural pressures to believe, or at least to not openly disbelieve, persisted through the long sixties, even in the comparatively secular context of British Columbia. The silence around unbelief was evident not only in the wider culture but also within families. Neil remembered that when he admitted to his mother that he did not believe in God, she said: "I haven't brought you up right."<sup>119</sup> Neil was one of only a few interviewees who recalled discussing their doubts or disbelief with parents or other family members. When asked if he was open about his atheism, Gary replied: "Yeah, except I am guilty of suppressing my thoughts sometimes when it can make things uncomfortable for people unnecessarily, so why mess around. Like Mom, I don't talk about it with Mom."<sup>120</sup> Most of the interviewees had family members who disdained or ignored the churches, but few knew of anyone

<sup>116</sup> Barbara, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 30 May 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Miedema, *For Canada's Sake*, 16; *BC Catholic*, 25 March 1965, 4; Jim Hume, "Citizenship Refused Atheist Immigrants," *Edmonton Journal*, 24 July 1965, 1; and *Victoria Humanist* 5 (June 1965): 3. A 1965 Gallup Poll found that only 27 percent of Canadians agreed with the judge's verdict to deny citizenship to the Dutch couple based on their atheism. See Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, 5 June 1965.

<sup>118</sup> Sylvia Fraser, "What Makes an Atheist Tick?," *Star Weekly*, 11 September 1965, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Neil, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 29 September 2016.

<sup>120</sup> Gary, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 8 June 2016.

who was openly nonbelieving. An exception is Thomas, who recalled that having an atheist uncle influenced his own eventual adoption of unbelief: "I respected his views, and he was the first person I heard self-describe as an atheist."<sup>121</sup> Unlike Thomas, most of the interviewees knew no one who was openly unbelieving during the 1960s and 1970s, a time when belief in God went relatively unquestioned in their families and communities. As John reflected: "Everybody was religious in those days. They all believed there was a God, I think. Pretty well everybody, except probably the more educated that were thinking about it. Otherwise you didn't really think about it. It was part of life."<sup>122</sup> A recurrent theme in the narratives, even those that tell of little explicit family pressure around religion, is that moving away from home allowed religion to fall away completely. Queried as to how or whether his views on religion changed when he left his parents' home, Daniel remarked that religion was "not an important factor" in his life anymore.<sup>123</sup> Several interviewees likewise recalled that moving out of their parents' home allowed them to stop giving even nominal attention to religion. However, for most, it would be several years, and in some cases decades, before they openly identified as nonbelievers.

In 1973, at the age of nineteen, Jerry moved from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Vancouver, partly to get away from the Catholic culture in which he was raised. He said: "I felt actually, in some sense, that it wasn't just the culture of Newfoundland that I was part of, that I wanted to escape but it was the religious trappings of that culture. And I think that was the breath of fresh air that I felt when I was here and the people I met here. I knew none of them had this shadow."<sup>124</sup> With its robust counterculture and long-standing culture of detachment from organized religion, British Columbia allowed young people like Jerry to rather comfortably escape or dismiss the churches during the 1960s and 1970s. In that era, church leaders grappled with the "youth problem," the mainstream press reported widely on the growing challenge to institutional Christianity, and countercultural papers regularly derided established religion and disassociated it from youth. To reject organized religion at the time was, particularly for young people living in Canada's most secular province, to conform to broader cultural expectations. However, even in the comparatively secular context of British Columbia, atheism and unbelief continued to be silenced and stigmatized. In both

<sup>121</sup> Thomas, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 25 May 2016.

<sup>122</sup> John, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, British Columbia, 1 June 2016.

<sup>123</sup> Daniel, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, British Columbia, 21 June 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Jerry, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, 12 December 2016.

province and nation, deep currents of dechristianization coexisted with ingrained, widely held assumptions about the universality of religious belief. Such currents and assumptions shaped the secular journeys of BC youth – journeys that typically involved abrupt departures from institutional Christianity and more gradual, hesitant disengagements from belief. They may not have “laughed about God,” but during the long sixties many young British Columbians rejected churches they saw as hypocritical, patriarchal, and irrelevant, and some intently questioned, and eventually abandoned, religious belief. In so doing, they were at the forefront of making both the province and nation a more – though not a wholly – secular place.