

Populism, Politics and Christianity in Western Canada

BRUCE L. GUENTHER

The early part of the twentieth century was a time of significant change within Canada as the country struggled to respond to a massive influx of immigrants, expansion in western Canada, the impact of urbanization, two World Wars, a major drought and economic depression. A variety of new populist initiatives emerged out of this national maelstrom, especially in western Canada where waves of immigrants created a more heterogenous population mix than in any other part of Canada. This essay features three very different populist movements in western Canada during this period, and offers a preliminary exploration of the relationship between Christian faith and culture that undergirded the political involvement of key leaders within these populist movements.¹

The first two movements initially centred around two individuals, the flamboyant William “Bible Bill” Aberhart, and the dynamic “Tommy” or “T.C.” Douglas, both of whom moved directly from Baptist pulpits into elected political offices. Both were charismatic personalities and superb communicators, and both were instrumental in the formation of new political parties in western Canada. Many have assumed (erroneously) that these two men, and their respective political parties – the Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later New Democratic Party [NDP], represented diametrically opposed ideological orientations. The third movement is notable because of the remarkable absence of a political theology. An ethos of cultural “dis-engagement” was nurtured within large parts of the Bible school movement which influenced thousands of evangelical Protestant Christians in western Canada. All three

movements are populist,² all three drew heavily from their roots in Christianity, and all were, in one shape or another, “political” expressions. Different strands of Christian influence, together with different ways of balancing their theological views, the interests of their populist audiences, and the desire for a public venue in which to express their views, resulted in three very different models of cultural engagement.³

William Aberhart and the Social Credit Party

William (“Bible Bill”) Aberhart was born in 1878 in southwestern rural Ontario. His education in several schools prepared him to work as a school teacher and principal.⁴ Aberhart was introduced to dispensationalism as a young adult through one of C.I. Scofield’s correspondence courses. After expressing his desire to enter the ministry but failing to obtain adequate sponsorship from the Presbyterian church to attend Knox College, he accepted an offer in 1910 from a secondary school in Calgary. He eventually became the principal of the prestigious Crescent Heights High School in Calgary where he acquired a well-deserved reputation for his efficient (some would say overbearing) administrative style.

Aberhart’s public presence as an authority on religious matters began with his preaching at Westbourne Baptist Church.⁵ His Bible teaching consisted primarily of a modified dispensationalism. He saw history on a downward course with no chance of recovery short of divine intervention. Not only could the church not arrest the tide of evil, it was itself engulfed by it. Aberhart believed that social conditions would become so desperate with increasing crime, occult practices, heresy and apostasy and widespread persecutions against Christians that the only escape would be a divine evacuation called the rapture, which he taught was imminent. This would set in motion the prophetic clock outlined in Daniel and Revelation, namely the seven-year tribulation that would end with the War of Armageddon (initiated by China and Japan). Aberhart taught “that the true church could not produce a Christian society but rather was to add converts and wait for a rapture.”⁶

How did someone like Aberhart who was committed to dispensationalism, a theological system that generally discouraged political participation,⁷ not only start a political party but also become premier of the province of Alberta? Aberhart loved, in his words, “the power of [a] preacher to dominate people.” The popularity of his Sunday afternoon

classes on biblical prophecy quickly rivalled those of the minister in his church, and gradually outgrew the church by attracting people from other denominations. Eventually Aberhart moved his class, now named the Prophetic Bible Conference, to the Grand Theatre to accommodate the crowd.

The popularity of these public lectures established Aberhart as a public figure in Alberta. More importantly, in 1925, Aberhart reluctantly agreed to experiment with a radio broadcast of his lecture (his initial reluctance was due to his fear that the revenue from his lectures in the Grand Theatre would be lost). His authoritative voice was an instant success and his lectures were eventually broadcast to a radio audience that was estimated at 350,000.⁸ This expanded audience established his reputation as one of western Canada's foremost pioneers in religious broadcasting, and was the key to obtaining the wide-spread support necessary for his subsequent political success.⁹

While seeking answers for the destitute plight of many in his radio audience during the early years of the Great Depression, Aberhart discovered C.H. Douglas' system of economics. Gradually he integrated his own version of Social Credit ideas into his radio lectures as he tried to offer answers to the economic and political needs of the province. This resulted in an increase in his radio audience; many people who had previously dismissed him as a religious lunatic now tuned in to listen to his comments on economics. As one might expect from an evangelistic dispensationalist like Aberhart, the relationship between religion and economics was centred in the responsibility of the individual:

The appeal of God today is for the individual to understand that God's policy is to provide man with a salvation full and free, without money and without price, and then to offer him future rewards for his individual enterprise in the service of God. I am convinced that this is the basic principle of a practical economic system. Government credit, such as advocated by Major Douglas, gives to the individual, who is a bona fide citizen of the Province, the essentials of physical life, such as food, clothing and shelter, and then offers him additional reward for his individual enterprise.¹⁰

At first Aberhart insisted that his role in the dissemination of Social Credit ideas was only intended to educate the general public about

economic alternatives; he assured people that he had no personal political ambitions. As speaking requests began to increase, he organized study groups and produced a series of leaflets explaining in simple terms how Social Credit concepts could be applied to the Alberta situation. In 1934 Aberhart reluctantly agreed to enter the political arena and the Social Credit Party was formed.

With the United Farmers of Alberta in disarray due to a series of sexual scandals, and with the still more socialist CCF appearing on the political horizon, Aberhart led his newly-formed Social Credit Party to a stunning landslide victory in 1935 winning fifty-six of sixty-three seats. Aberhart was succeeded as premier after his death in 1943 by the more moderate Ernest C. Manning, a graduate of CPBI.¹¹ The Social Credit Party dominated the politics of Alberta until 1971.¹²

After becoming premier Aberhart discovered that Social Credit theory was easier to preach than to practice. The SC party advocated a radical economic restructuring of the province – this centralized program was hailed as the panacea of all the world's problems. The system would relieve the banks and other large industrial financial interests of their control of the province's resources and put it back into the hands of the people. The entire plan would be administered by a centralized bureaucracy that would control all aspects of personal and commercial property, finance, production, distribution and consumption – it would be almost impossible for non-sympathizers to buy and sell.¹³ His legislation to take control of banking, finance and credit was rejected by the courts as beyond the authority of a provincial government. Instead of discrediting Aberhart, this rejection only enhanced his image as a defender of the marginalized and economically depressed region against greedy, unscrupulous eastern financial interests. Aberhart did nevertheless manage to introduce some educational reform, and protect at least some farms from foreclosure through debt legislation.

What sort of connection existed between Aberhart's faith and his movement towards politics? The suggestion by some that the Social Credit was essentially the political expression of evangelical Protestantism in Alberta is demonstrably false. Aberhart had alienated himself from many evangelical groups even before he became premier, and studies of the party's membership indicate that the majority of its support came from members of the more established churches (30% of the party's membership were either Anglican or United Church, and only 11% were members of

other religious groups).¹⁴ Moreover, many evangelicals influenced by fundamentalism questioned the value of participating in the political process and suspected that association and collaboration with “papists,” United Church ministers, and even Mormons would inevitably lead to “compromise.” Aberhart’s action appeared to legitimize such fear: Aberhart displayed a remarkable expediency in shedding his religious sectarianism in order to form a broad-based political party by asserting “that a new type of Christianity was about to emerge, with a strong social emphasis, transcending old apostasies.”¹⁵ Everyone who agreed with his Social Credit ideas was readily, and rather indiscriminately, greeted by Aberhart as a “good Christian brother.”¹⁶ And yet simultaneous with such ecumenism in the political arena was a very different approach in the way he ran his church and Bible school: Bible school students, for example, were not permitted to attend any other church, and the minister in his church was not allowed to fellowship with other ministers (by this time Aberhart had appropriated the title of “apostle” for himself within his church).¹⁷

Despite Aberhart’s presumptuous presentation of Social Credit ideas as “an economic movement from God himself,”¹⁸ his political involvement, as David Elliott and others have noted, was antithetical to his previous dispensationalism, which was highly sectarian, separatist, a-political, other-worldly and eschatologically oriented. Aberhart stands out as anomaly among other western Canadian fundamentalists and dispensationalists because of the way he created a political movement.¹⁹ His proclamation in 1942 that those who refuse to improve their society through political involvement as “worse than infidels” is diametrically opposed to his views only a decade earlier.²⁰

What then accounts for this transition from an eschatological worldview famous for its a-political emphasis on separation from the world to accepting a more ecumenical position and propagating a quasi-social gospel that ended up looking like a mild form of fascism?²¹ It may well be that the stories appealing for his assistance during the depressed 1930s initially evoked a sense of compassion, but my sense is that it did not take long until Aberhart was inexorably pulled towards politics more by ambition and egoism than by a religious faith that was interested in finding ways of serving people and communities.²² The prospect of becoming premier offered the ultimate forum within which to exercise power. His authoritarian (even dictatorial) leadership style, his egocentricity, his

inability to work together with others, his increasingly unorthodox theology, are all antithetical to a Christian gospel that calls for self-sacrifice and self-less service.

During his years as premier Aberhart gradually drifted away from his earlier dispensationalism using it more and more as a convenient veneer to advance his political credibility with certain groups.²³ His intense desire to retain power meant sacrificing his dispensationalism on the altar of expediency, although it did continue to colour his perspective on some matters from time to time,²⁴ and an eschatological rhetoric continued to be mixed with his some of his economic and political ideas throughout his political career. While Aberhart's initial economic programme called for radical change, it owed more to a combination of his formidable powers of persuasion and organization, western alienation and Victorian virtues of enterprise and thrift than to a careful, consistent application of any of his eclectic theological views including dispensationalism.

Thomas C. Douglas and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation

Thomas (Tommy) Douglas was born in 1904 into a working-class family in the Scottish mill town of Falkirk. He spent the war years, 1914-1918, living near an industrial area of Glasgow. After the war, the Douglas family moved to Canada where the adolescent Tommy witnessed some of the violent episodes of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. He often hung out at All Peoples Mission, where J.S. Woodsworth had once been superintendent.

In 1924 Douglas enrolled in Brandon College to prepare for ministry within the Baptist church. It was a school situated within a western Canadian agrarian environment that was simultaneously committed to bringing together a liberal theological education, an evangelistic mood and a social Christian emphasis. The school was at the time, according to one observer, a place where "the ideas of the 'social gospel' were in full flood."²⁵ Particularly influential was H.L. MacNeill, a New Testament scholar from the University of Chicago who liberated Douglas from "a literal interpretation of the scriptures."²⁶ Well integrated into the typical liberal arts curriculum was an emphasis on political economy, sociology and ethics which addressed topics like "capitalistic organization," "labour problems," "trade unionism," and "money, credit and banking."

During his college years, Douglas met the woman who eventually

became his wife, and began a lifelong friendship with classmate Stanley Knowles, who later won a by-election for the seat vacated by the death of J.S. Woodsworth. Describing their relationship during their student years, Knowles said: “Brandon was the time when we sorted out our religious and our social thinking. We went in as conventional young men accepting society. We came out convinced that something had to be done to make society more Christian.”²⁷ The Brandon College experience was vitally important in shaping Douglas’ subsequent ministry and political career.

Douglas was ordained a minister at the Calvary Baptist Church in Weyburn, Saskatchewan in 1930. It was a community located in the centre of the dustbowl, hit hard by both drought and unemployment during the 1930s. His desire to help ameliorate the devastating impact of poverty on the people around him brought him into a network of other clergymen, teachers, labour activists and co-op organizers. During this time he wrote, “when one sees the church spending its energies on the assertion of antiquated dogmas but dumb as an oyster to the poverty and misery all around, we can’t help but recognize the need for a new interpretation of Christianity.”²⁸

Douglas’ move into politics was a natural extension of both his Social Gospel ideas and his activities on behalf of the poor in Weyburn. In addition, a violent strike in 1931 in the Estevan coal fields, the near collapse of the newly-formed Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, the inability of the poor to access health care services, and the failure of local labour associations to effect lasting social and economic change, convinced Douglas that it was necessary to enter the political arena. In 1932, Douglas said “I felt that the church could not divorce itself from social and economic, and consequently political involvement, and that just as I ought to be active in relief, in helping the unemployed, helping distribute milk or active in any mental health association, so I ought to belong to a political party and try to do something about these economic conditions.”²⁹

Still somewhat naively confident about the “rising generations” ability “to build a heaven on earth,” the young Douglas began a search for practical political ideas: he endorsed the concept of “socialized medicine”; the application of “the science of eugenics” – he wrote a Master’s thesis criticising the “consummate folly” of allowing “subnormal” people to reproduce; and, like Aberhart in Alberta, adopted certain social credit ideas by arguing for the equitable distribution of abundance to all, fair prices to both the producer and consumer, debt forgiveness and the establishment

of provincial banks. Always careful to distance himself from communism, Douglas defined socialism as that “form of society in which the means of production, distribution and exchange are socially owned and democratically managed in the interests of all the people rather than for the benefit of a few.”³⁰ There was some tension between his view, as a prairie populist, that local voters should have the opportunity to write legislation and vote on it in referendums,³¹ and his simple faith in government intervention (for example, social engineering) to solve complex problems.

Douglas was not a participant at either the official formation of the CCF led by J.S. Woodsworth in 1932 in Calgary,³² or the first national convention in Regina in 1933 where the famous Regina Manifesto was drafted that outlined the CCF plan for transforming the capitalist economic system in a “co-operative commonwealth” by peaceful, democratic means. Douglas became a part of this movement shortly after, but was never considered a radical socialist within the party. He lost his first bid for public office (he was running for a seat in the Saskatchewan legislature),³³ but was successful in the federal election of 1935. In 1944, he returned to provincial politics and, as premier of Saskatchewan, he headed up the first “socialist” government in North America. He remained premier until 1961 when he became the first leader of the national NDP.

The CCF regime in Saskatchewan encouraged co-operative institutions, established state automobile and fire insurance, and socialized electric power, natural-gas distribution and bus transportation. The party gained international attention in 1962 when it implemented the continent’s first compulsory medical care program despite bitter opposition from doctors. He was, unfortunately, not as successful in making good his claim that under a CCF government, the need for taxation would “largely disappear.”³⁴

Douglas maintained his church affiliation with the Baptist Union of Western Canada throughout his life. Despite his share of misguided political decisions along the way, he was a principled politician whose pastoral desire to help people never left him. He never stopped claiming Christian theology as the basis for his political views and objectives: democratic socialism was, according to Douglas, nothing more than “applied Christianity.”³⁵ Douglas consistently argued that he was not merely promoting democratic socialism; rather, he was working for the “Kingdom of God.”³⁶

It is not difficult to see how Douglas’ theological views facilitated

his involvement in politics, however, by the end of his career as a political leader several changes in his theological views were evident. First, by the end of his life, a subtle shift is visible in how Douglas conceptualizes the “kingdom of God.” During his time at Brandon College, he talked about the “kingdom of God” as “a kingdom of the spirit in men’s hearts, made up of righteousness and justice.”³⁷ In an interview during the last year of his life he explained,

Jesus, more than anyone else who lived up to his time, and more than anyone since, epitomized the idea of the value of the individual . . . Jesus was in his day, and he hasn’t been surpassed since, a great moral teacher who recognized man’s place in society, the kind of society that man could build . . . that the great motivating force in society is love for your fellow man . . . and that there is something that, for want of a better term, they call the Kingdom of God, which is simply an association of people who have certain ideas in common.³⁸

By the end of his political career, the kingdom of God had become synonymous with “a society founded on the principles of concern for human well being and human welfare.”³⁹ The reasons for this theological transition remain ambiguous and need further exploration.

Second, increasingly evident in his political career was an intentional pragmatism, perhaps even opportunism, that lay behind his insistence on the compatibility between democratic socialism and Christian moral and ethical principles. Democratic socialism was, according to Douglas, “applied Christianity.” Douglas frequently talked about socialism using biblical terms: for example, “a socialist believed that he was his brother’s keeper; Saint Paul had taught that the strong ought to bear the burdens of the weak.”⁴⁰ Such religious rhetoric was part of a strategy to “lay to rest the demon of ‘the godless socialists’ and to remove the label of ‘Red’ that the enemies of democratic socialism had been attaching to the CCF for years.”⁴¹

The Bible School/College Movement

The Bible school/college movement started in Canada in 1885 with a small cluster of schools in and around the Toronto area. Since then, evangelical Protestant groups have initiated more than 240 such institu-

tions across the country the majority of which were, and still are, located in western Canada. They typically offered a Bible-centred, intensely practical, lay-oriented program of post-secondary theological training. Cumulatively they have influenced the Christian faith of hundreds of thousands of people.⁴² They mobilized and scattered thousands of Protestant church workers, pastors and missionaries to every corner of Canada and the world. Using only one denomination to illustrate the point: in 1963 the Mennonite Brethren estimated that 90% of their missionaries abroad, 86% of their missionaries at home, 59% of their ministers, and 67% of their Sunday School workers had some Bible School training.⁴³

In western Canada alone, prior to 1960, there were at least 106 Bible schools that can be categorized into six denominational clusters: forty-two Mennonite schools; twenty-two Pentecostal schools; thirteen Baptist schools; twelve transdenominational initiatives; six Holiness movement schools; and a collection of eleven denominational schools that did not belong to the other, larger categories. Shortly after World War Two, the cumulative enrolment of all these schools peaked at close to 4,000 students per year.⁴⁴ These schools, and their constituencies, represent yet another form of populism within western Canada.⁴⁵ Although the movement was denominationally diverse, the schools were bound together not only by the unique challenges of geography but also by common problems and strategies for addressing the spiritual and educative needs of their young people, and often also by a remarkably similar theological agenda. Despite their significant influence within Canadian churches and mission organizations, these Bible schools, at least prior to 1960, represent an evangelical model of cultural disengagement. They contributed towards the development of a kind of ghettoized subculture within Canada, what John Stackhouse refers to as a “sectish” disposition or *mentalité*.⁴⁶

The reasons for this “sectish” *mentalité* vary. First, it is due to the fact that most of the groups involved in the Bible school movement were small and relatively young denominations that were still on the periphery of Canadian Protestantism. Many of the upstart denominations in the west were missionary extensions of their denominational counterparts in the USA, and as a result, the international north-south connections were stronger than any east-west national relationships. In addition to limited personnel, the challenges of geography, communication and transportation made building institutions and denominational organizational structures difficult in western Canada.

Second, significant also are the ethnic and linguistic characteristic of groups like the Mennonites, German Baptists and various Scandinavian groups. Together these groups account for almost 50% of the total number of Bible schools in western Canada and more than one-third of the entire Bible school student population in western Canada, second only to the cumulative total of the transdenominational schools. These denominational groups used Bible schools to preserve specific ethnic, linguistic and theological distinctives. While these ethnic preoccupations muted the impact of fundamentalism, it also effectively insulated these groups from participation in the cultural mainstream. It was not until the 1950s that the emphasis on the maintenance of ethnic distinctives gradually began to dissipate. The largest of these ethnic-religious groups, and one of the first to start Bible schools in western Canada, were the Mennonites. Both their strong emphasis on the retention of the German language during the 1930s and 1940s – an emphasis that was bolstered considerably by the fresh influx of well-educated Russian immigrants during the 1920s – as well as their theological prohibitions against involvement with the state (some even felt it was wrong to vote), kept them from becoming politically involved. As groups like the Mennonites began to emerge from their ethnic enclaves during the 1950s and 1960s, they also began to participate in politics.⁴⁷

Third, the wide-spread influence of fundamentalism within the Bible school movement, particularly within transdenominational schools, nurtured an ethos that was, at best, ambivalent towards political involvement. Although examples of militant, or strident, forms of fundamentalism can be found within the Bible school movement in western Canada, generally the Bible schools most influenced by fundamentalism were less defined by militancy than by their emphasis on evangelism, world missions, premillennialism (usually some form of dispensationalism) and personal holiness.⁴⁸

A strong emphasis on the “Great Commission” justified the prioritizing of missionary and evangelistic activity over social activism. The winning of converts became seen as the only essential and worthwhile calling. People like Henry Hildebrand, founding principal of Briercrest Bible Institute, and L.E. Maxwell, founding principal of Prairie Bible Institute, who were arguably the most prominent leaders among the transdenominational schools in Alberta and Saskatchewan by the late 1940s, were not opposed to vocations that included political involvement

– the person who invited Hildebrand to start a Bible school in the village of Briercrest, Sinclair Whittaker, had spent five years (1929-1934) as a member of the Saskatchewan legislature prior to his conversion.⁴⁹ Bible school leaders would gladly make presentations to legislature in order to secure more favourable arrangements for their school. They did not denounce “secular” vocational choices; they didn’t need to, the relatively lower value of “secular” vocational choices was implicit in their theology of mission. It was simply understood that “missions,” that is, full-time participation in evangelistic outreach, was the one vocation that must take priority over all others. Moreover, the energy devoted towards missionary and evangelistic activity frequently left little time, and few resources, for social or political engagement.

The a-political stance of many fundamentalist schools was frequently fortified by dispensationalism. Its profoundly gloomy view of the world provided an interpretation of social and political conditions that seemed to confirm both the futility of efforts at ameliorating social conditions as well as the “despised” minority status of faithful Christians within the world.⁵⁰ The “biblical” pessimism of dispensationalism concerning the value of political engagement offered an authoritative rationale for the maintenance of a “Christian” subculture.

The general suspicion of culture among many evangelical Protestants in western Canada was reinforced further by using the “biblical” language of “holiness” and “separation from the world” to justify and demand adherence to specific codes of conduct. The desire for involvement in politics, art or science, or even establishing relationships with those outside of the subculture created by the school, church or denomination, was often treated suspiciously as “worldliness.”⁵¹ It was simply better to avoid the possibility of “compromise.” Remaining on the periphery of the cultural mainstream was an indication of faithful disentanglement from “the affairs of this world.”

The negative reaction by L.E. Maxwell and Henry Hildebrand during the 1930s to Aberhart’s move into the political arena illustrates well their reticence of cultural engagement and political involvement. Maxwell, for example, “believed the Depression to be a divine judgment on a civilization that had rejected God. They both thought that Christians should vote intelligently and prayerfully, to be sure, but also that Christians had no business trying directly to bring about social reform. The real problem was personal sinfulness, and the real solution was evange-

lism.” Society can only be renewed after individuals have been changed. According to Maxwell, Aberhart’s political platform held nothing distinctly Christian. Still worse, he had forsaken dispensational “truth” and compromised “for the sake of vain politics the supreme evangelical commitment to evangelism.”⁵² Henry Hildebrand considered Aberhart’s departure from his vitally important Bible school work to politics to be a major “step down.” The inability of governments to deal with the root of social problems, this is, “sin,” meant that political involvement was doomed to ultimate failure. “Christianity does not vainly endeavour to cleanse the street,” wrote Hildebrand, “it deals with the foundation. It does not profess to produce a better environment, it gives power to live above environment.”⁵³ The values and priorities that were taught and exemplified in the lives of these two prominent Bible school leaders greatly shaped the ethos among evangelical Protestants in western Canada.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In this essay I have highlighted, in a preliminary way, some of the connections between populism and Christianity in a region that proved to be fertile soil for populist movements in order to emphasize the point that Christianity not only shaped the cultural ethos of central and eastern Canada, but also western Canada albeit in fundamentally different ways. It underscores the fact that a commitment to Christianity is basic to an understanding of many leaders in western Canada. The fact that religious commitments continue to shape the actions of many involved in populist movements in western Canada during the last half of the twentieth – the recent emergence of Preston Manning and many other evangelical Protestants within the populist Reform Party is yet another layer to this story – needs to be explored by social, cultural, political and religious historians. A full exploration of the relationship between the “west as protest” and the religious developments within the region would be a worthy research project.

The three case studies show how different theological orientations not only existed simultaneously within the same region, but also resulted in very different approaches towards cultural and political engagement. Other, more personal, avenues of investigation remain: instructive, for example, is the varied response of leaders to the complexity of societal problems and the pressures of public leadership in a pluralistic society.

Both Aberhart and Douglas made some significant modifications to their former religious views and practices after spending time in public office.

Mark Noll, an American scholar with considerable interest in comparative studies of religion in the United States and Canada, declared that the question of religion in relation to Canadian society is “the most important under-studied story in the religious history of the twentieth-century North America.”⁵⁵ This may be truer of western Canada than any other region of the country.

Endnotes

1. The scholarly work exploring the social and cultural history of western Canada has generally (there are some notable exceptions) isolated economic and political factors and neglected to include religious faith as a motivating force in the analysis of developments on the prairies. If religion is included at all, it has generally been treated as somehow strange and bizarre if not entirely irrelevant (see for example, Gerald Friesen’s *The Canadian Prairies: A History* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987], which, despite its magisterial stature in the field, hardly mentions religion. Similarly, the recent work by John Herd Thompson, *Forging the Prairie West* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], does not mention religion at all). Ted Regehr’s historiographical survey verifies such neglect: only a handful of works mentioned in his article include a discussion of religion (“Historiography of the Canadian Plains After 1870,” in *A Region of the Mind: Interpreting the Western Canadian Plains*, ed. Richard Allen [Regina: Canadian Plains Study Centre, 1973], 87-101). Regehr concludes his survey with a notable appeal for more interdisciplinary cooperation among scholars interested in the Canadian prairies. More encouraging is a similar historiographical survey by R. Douglas Francis in which he encourages studies of religion in western Canada as one means by which to understand the “mental ethos – the intellectual mindset and cultural milieu – of the region” (“In Search of a Prairie Myth: A Survey of the Intellectual and Cultural Historiography of Prairie Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24, No. 3 (Fall 1989): 44-69; reprinted in *Riel to Reform: A History of Protest in Western Canada*, ed. George Melnyk (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992), 20.
2. Definitions of populism vary considerably from a simple description of the folksy appeal of a particular leadership style to a more elaborate description of a political movement that emphasizes the worth of the common people and advocates their political supremacy. Although it is often applied to political organizations that have emerged from regions which feel somewhat marginalized from a larger, collective sense of identity, it can also be applied to

agrarian or religious movements that do not necessarily produce a political organization to give expression to their sense of marginalization (for a discussion of the “problem” of populism see Trevor Harrison, *Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1995], 3-25; and the older article by Peter Sinclair, “Class Structure and Populist Protest: The Case of Western Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 1 (1975): 1-15).

3. Leaders of other populist movements in Canada with strong religious convictions could easily be added to this survey. Although Riel has sometimes been considered insane, Thomas Flanagan’s biography makes a connection between his millenarianism and political views (*Louis ‘David’ Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979]); many leaders within the United Farmers of Alberta (e.g., Henry Wise Wood, William Irvine, Percival Baker, et al) were influenced both by the Social Gospel movement and other religious traditions so that, according to Richard Allen, the party was as much a religious institution as the church (“The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt,” in *The West and the Nation: Essays in Honour of W.L. Morton* [Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976], 174-186); William Herridge, leader of New Democracy has been described as “Christian, Canadian and British” (Sinclair, “Class Structure and Populist Protest,” 15); and Preston Manning, founding leader of the Reform Party, remains a committed evangelical Protestant (Preston Manning, *The New Canada* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1992], 94-109).
4. Aberhart completed a B.A. from Queen’s University by correspondence: he barely managed to pass and he failed both Greek and political science (see Harold J. Schultz, “William Aberhart and the Social Credit Party: A Political Biography” [Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 1959], 9-10).
5. Westbourne was a small mission under the trusteeship of First Baptist Church. The connection with the Baptist Union of Western Canada was terminated in 1926. After a brief period as part of Aberhart’s Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, 60% of the congregation left and joined the Regular Baptists (later known as the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists). Aberhart’s theological eclecticism is evident already during the 1920s as he is influenced by Harvey McAlister’s Pentecostal ideas (David Elliott, “Three Faces of Baptist Fundamentalism in Canada: Aberhart, Maxwell and Shields,” in *Memory and Hope: Strands of Canadian Baptist History*, ed. David T. Priestley (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 173).
6. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 36.

7. For an excellent description and analysis of dispensationalism see Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). See also C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958).
8. He broadcast on CFCN, which identified itself as the “Voice of the Prairies.” It was one of the most powerful radio stations in the country.
9. During the mid-1920s Aberhart extended his influence by starting a publication called *The Prophetic Voice*, an evening school known as the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute (CPBI) – it was lampooned by a Calgary newspaper as the “Calgary Pathetic Bible Substitute” – and a Radio Sunday School that enrolled over 9,000 students at one point (David Elliott, “William Aberhart: Right or Left?” in *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada*, eds. D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort [Vancouver: Tantalus Research Limited, 1973], 21).
10. Cited in Walter Ellis, “Baptists and Radical Politics in Western Canada (1920-1950),” in *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman (Burlington: Welch, 1980), 173. This emphasis on the individual remained a distinguishing feature of Social Credit ideology, and has sometimes led people to assume (erroneously) that it emerged as a “right-wing” political expression that enthusiastically embraced “free enterprise.” Thomas Flanagan and Martha Lee observe, “the movement never gave up its original ‘humanitarian’ intention of assuring a decent standard of living to all. The result was a demand for the state to supplement, but not supplant, the market” (“From Social Credit to Social Conservatism: The Evolution of an Ideology,” in *From Riel to Reform*, 192. Various scholars have noted the similarities between the ideas put forward by the early Social Credit movement and the CCF in Saskatchewan (see Sinclair, “Class Structure and Populist Protest,” 1-15; Elliott, “William Aberhart: Right or Left?” 11-31; and A. Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989]).
11. Although Aberhart is often the first person associated with Social Credit in Alberta, significant also is Manning who served for many years as Aberhart’s assistant and advisor. Unlike Aberhart, he retained many of the evangelical views he had been taught at the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute. After Aberhart’s death, Manning became premier of Alberta, a position he held for twenty-five years, and also took over Aberhart’s radio broadcast (“Back to the Bible Hour”). Following his retirement as premier, he was a member of the Senate for thirteen years. Little work has been done exploring the relationship between his religious and political views (see Tony Cashman, *Ernest C.*

Manning: A Biographical Sketch [Edmonton: N.p., 1958]; Lloyd Mackey, *Like Father Like Son: Ernest C. Manning and Preston Manning* [Toronto: ECW Press, 1997])

12. The Social Credit movement spread to both Saskatchewan and British Columbia. The strength of the CCF in Saskatchewan limited their success, but in British Columbia the Social Credit came to power in 1952 under the leadership of W.A.C. Bennett. In addition, in 1935 the Social Credit movement fielded forty-five candidates in a federal election, winning all but two federal seats in Alberta but only two in Saskatchewan.
13. The significant level of government intervention and control had an eerie resemblance to the end-times prophetic descriptions contained in his dispensational eschatology.
14. For examples of scholars who carelessly make this assertion, see W.E. Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), 156-157; and John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 142-143. See John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Proclaiming the Word: Canadian Evangelicalism Since the First World War" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 1987), 35-36, for an outline of those who have demonstrated this to be false.
15. Aberhart developed friendships with several United Church ministers whose Social Gospel emphases and language were sometimes appropriated for his own causes (see David R. Elliott and Iris Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart* [Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987], 312).
16. Donald A. Goertz, "The Development of A Bible Belt: The Socio-Religious Interaction in Alberta between 1925-1938" (M.C.S. Thesis, Regent College, 1980), 169; and Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*, 177.
17. Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*, 310ff.
18. Cited in Stackhouse, *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, 42. See also Donald A. Wicks, "T.T. Shields and the Canadian Protestant League, 1941-1950" (M.A. Thesis, University of Guelph, 1971).
19. David R. Elliott, "Antithetical Elements in William Aberhart's Theology and Political Ideology," *Canadian Historical Review* 59, No. 1 (1978): 38-58.
20. Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*, 312.
21. See Elliott, "William Aberhart: Right or Left?" 11-31.

22. See Stackhouse for a discussion of the varying interpretations of the relationship between Aberhart's dispensationalism and his subsequent political programme (*Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, 220-221).
23. He apparently became a universalist and even dabbled in a variety of occultic activities (for details see Elliott and Miller, *Bible Bill*, 314). Aberhart was not the only political leader in Canada's history with some private religious eccentricities (for example, Louis Riel and Mackenzie King).
24. Elliott and Miller occasionally comment on the ongoing influence of Aberhart's former dispensationalism particularly in his frequent apocalyptic interpretations of current events, his conversations with foreign dignitaries about British Israelism, and his interpretation of those who opposed his political initiatives as part of demonic conspiracies of the Antichrist (see *Bible Bill*, 117-119, 177).
25. Doris French Shackleton, *Tommy Douglas* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, Ltd, 1975), 31.
26. J. Brian Scott, "Brandon College and Social Christianity," in *Costly Vision: The Baptist Pilgrimage in Canada*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman (Burlington: Welch, 1988), 144.
27. Cited in Joseph D. Ban, "T.C. Douglas and W. Aberhart: A Comparison of their Theological Premises and Social Perspectives," in *Costly Vision*, 76. Similar statements are made by Walter Ellis, "Baptists and Radical Politics in Western Canada (1920-1950), 171-177.
28. Cited in Ban, "T.C. Douglas and W. Aberhart," 77. At the time Saskatchewan was the third most populous province in Canada.
29. Cited in Ban, "T.C. Douglas and W. Aberhart," 80.
30. See L.D. Lovick, *Tommy Douglas Speaks: Till Power is Brought to Pooling* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1979), 70-77; and Andrew Milnor, "The New Politics and Ethnic Revolt, 1929-1938," in *Politics in Saskatchewan*, eds. Norman Ward and Duff Spafford (Don Mills: Longmans Canada Limited, 1968), 151-177.
31. Thomas H. McLead, and Ian McLead, *Tommy Douglas: The Road to Jerusalem* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1987), 39.
32. For more on the influence of Christianity on Woodsworth, see Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Don Mills: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1979); and Allen George Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of

Toronto Press, 1991).

33. He was almost kicked out of the party for having consorted with the Social Credit enemy (McLeod and McLeod, *Tommy Douglas*, 46).
34. McLeod and McLeod, *Tommy Douglas*, 63.
35. Lovick, *Tommy Douglas Speaks*, 21.
36. Cited in Ban, "T.C. Douglas and W. Aberhart," 81.
37. Scott, "Brandon College and Social Christianity," 144.
38. McLeod and McLeod, *Tommy Douglas*, 45.
39. McLeod and McLeod, *Tommy Douglas*, 308. Those who knew him well suggest that Douglas did not attend church as often as he liked people to think that he did.
40. Lovick, *Tommy Douglas Speaks*, 21.
41. Lovick, *Tommy Douglas Speaks*, 21.
42. Even a conservative estimate suggests that more than 200,000 people have spent at least one academic term at a Canadian Bible school or college. In measuring influence this does not include the many who frequently attended week-end teaching conferences sponsored by these schools, or those who were influenced by reading the literature published by these schools, or those who regularly listened to radio broadcasts aired by these schools, or the those who were significantly influenced by alumnae from these schools.
43. See A.J. Klassen, ed., *The Bible School Story, 1913-1963: Fifty Years of Mennonite Brethren Bible Schools in Canada* (Clearbrook: Canadian Board of Education, 1963), 15-16. Another estimate in 1985 suggested that more than 46,500 of the approximately 69,000 Protestant missionaries from North America had been trained in Bible schools/colleges (Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds., *Earthen Vessels: American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], xii).
44. For a more extensive and detailed study, see my dissertation manuscript entitled, "Training for Service: The Bible School Movement in Western Canada, 1909-1960."
45. This was recognized earlier by Donald Goertz who compared the movements started by William Aberhart and L.E. Maxwell, principal of the largest Bible school in Canada during this period ("The Development of A Bible Belt").

46. Ironically, this intentional withdrawal contributed towards the secularization of Canadian society. The examination of secularization in Canada has generally been limited to the study of “mainline” Protestants. Although the reasons for the absence from the public arena varies among the many groups involved in the Bible school movement in western Canada, the impact of their cumulative absence and its contribution to the marginalization of Christianity in western Canada has thus far been overlooked as a consideration in the secularization of Canada (see Brian C. Stiller, *From the Tower of Babel to Parliament Hill: How to Be a Christian in Canada Today* [Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997]).
47. See John Redekop, “Decades of Transition: North American Mennonite Brethren in Politics,” in *Bridging Troubled Waters: Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 19-84.
48. Most of the groups influenced by fundamentalism in western Canada did not share with their American fundamentalist counterparts the same intense sense of crisis with modernism that led to a withdrawal from public life, social concerns and political involvement between 1920-1950 in the United States. Many of the evangelical groups located within western Canada had not been in the country long enough to share the same loss of cultural hegemony that precipitated the fundamentalist movement in the United States.
49. Bernard and Marjorie Palmer, *Miracle on the Prairies: The Story of Briercrest Bible Institute* (Caronport: Briercrest Bible Institute, n.d.), 23ff.
50. See the pointed observations about the social attitudes of dispensationalists made by Walter Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 210-211.
51. See Ian S. Rennie, “The Doctrine of Man in the Bible Belt,” Paper presented at the Regent College Conference, Calgary, February 1974, 9-11.
52. Cited in Stackhouse, *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century*, 43-44. See also Goertz, “The Development of a Bible Belt,” 166-168. Maxwell thought Aberhart had become “worldly in attempting to feed, cloth and shelter people.”
53. Cited in Goertz, “The Development of a Bible Belt,” 184. Aberhart, who rarely allowed criticism to go unanswered, replied, “I wouldn’t give much for a Christianity that has no effect upon the environment of a person. I believe that Christ never intended his followers to withdraw into seclusion from a wickedly moral world.”

54. After noting the relationship between fundamentalism and the agrarian protest movement on the prairies, R. Douglas Francis observed that “a study of the ideas of prairie fundamentalism would greatly assist in our understanding of the intellectual roots of prairie culture and society” (“In Search of a Prairie Myth,” in *Riel to Reform*, 31).
55. “The End of Canadian History?” *First Things* [April 1992]: 29-36.

