

"That's the B.C. Spirit!": Religion and Secularity in Lotus Land

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It does not usually take long for a person moving to British Columbia to discover that - religiously - this is a province unlike other parts of Canada. Upon crossing the Rocky Mountains, many people trade their Bibles for hiking boots, skis, sailboats, and other paraphernalia of the good life. Sunday mornings are for the worship of nature, and the cultivation of the healthy body, rather than for the worship of God. There was a time when I worried about that.

Back in 1975, I wrote a paper on a variety of dismal trends in the United Church in B.C.; I wondered whether we would recover. The prognosis looked bad: Between 1925 and 1975 (if we consider population growth) the membership of the United Church in Vancouver had declined by 57%. Between 1960 and 1975 the B.C. sunday school membership had declined from 75,000 to under 20,000; in Vancouver the sunday school decline was from 25,000 to under 5,000 members.

The effect of putting together this long funeral procession for the United Church in B.C. was somewhat cathartic. It provided the occasion for a few discussions, after which I put it away and stopped worrying.

When I was asked to present something at this Society meeting, with the thought that it would be good to do "something on the United Church in B.C.", it seemed natural that I should resurrect my old paper of eight years earlier at least as a starting point. But it became quickly evident that my previous existential crisis had passed, and that if I was to try again to make sense of the United Church in B.C., I should attempt to examine the broad religious culture of this province, and place the United Church within that, rather than to continue to rummage around in the United Church Yearbook statistics. It seemed necessary to compare the broad religious culture of B.C. with that of the rest of Canada, and to examine our religious character in B.C. in the context of a highly polarized society -- a broad polarization that permeates most aspects of our political and social life.

Perhaps the broadest indication of the tone of our religious life comes to us from the Canadian Gallup Poll. In the most recent poll that gives us a regional breakdown (June, 1980), we find that British Columbians are by far the least inclined to attend a church or synagogue:

Gallup Poll (June 28, 1980): "Did you attend a church or synagogue in the past past seven days?"

Atlantic Provinces	43%		
Quebec	44%		
Ontario	32%	National Average	35%
Praries	35%		
British Columbia	21%		

In another Gallup Poll done on the relevance of organized religion, B.C. was again leader of the pack:

Gallup Poll (May 31, 1978): "Is organized religion a relevant part of your life at the present time or not?"

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>		<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Atlantic Provinces	60%	40%			
Quebec	66%	34%			
Ontario	50%	50%	National Average:	52%	48%
Prairies	46%	54%			
British Columbia	37%	63%			

It is interesting that we find the same phenomenon in the United States as in Canada. In a 1980 American Gallup Poll on Church/Synagogue attendance, the following percentages had attended in the previous seven days:

East	40%		
Midwest	45%		
South	42%	U.S. National Average:	40%
West	29%		

Thus, while we can see that the magical properties of the Rocky Mountains are not so great in the U.S. as in Canada, the pronounced secularization of those who venture west across the Rockies remains significant in both countries.

The secularity of British Columbia is further confirmed when we examine the Canadian census material for 1971 and 1981; let us examine the statistics for those whose religious preference in these two censuses is for "No Religion":

"No Religion" by Canada and the Provinces, 1971 & 1981*. Numbers and % of Population

	<u># in 1971</u>	<u># in 1981*</u>	<u>% in 1971</u>	<u>% in 1981</u>
Canada	929,575	1,788,995	4.3%	7.4%
Newfoundland	2,280	5,605	0.4	1.0
P.E.I.	1,095	3,240	1.0	2.7
Nova Scotia	19,185	34,335	2.4	4.1
New Brunswick	11,885	19,685	1.9	2.9
Quebec	76,685	132,935	1.3	2.1
Ontario	343,685	620,815	4.5	7.3
Manitoba	42,490	76,285	4.3	7.5
Saskatchewan	34,090	60,255	3.7	6.3
Alberta	108,410	260,015	6.6	11.7
British Columbia	287,115	568,170	13.1	20.9
Yukon	1,625	4,680	8.8	20.3
N.W.T.	1,025	2,970	2.9	6.5

*The 1981 census material on religion is preliminary; it is possible that when the data is published in its final form it will be somewhat different than found here. Thus all religious census data for 1981 in this paper should be used with care.

What is immediately striking in this table is that 20.9% of all British Columbians have a preference for "No Religion". This is nearly triple the national average, a ratio which B.C. also maintained in 1971. I think that we need to try to explain this feature of religion in British Columbia before we can begin to get at understanding the peculiarities of the United Church in B.C. The deeply secular character of B.C. is, however, only one side of a religious polarity which exists in this province.

In his paper on Walter Ellis given earlier to this meeting of our Society, Bob Burkinshaw suggests that B.C.'s Conservative protestant population has become proportionately larger since the 1930's than in any other province in Canada.

While B.C. is clearly Canada's leading "secular playland", it may also be true that B.C. is Canada's leading "Bible belt". We have seen that the "No Religion" group in B.C. is now very large. How does it compare with the other religious groupings? And what are the trends for the more conservative Protestant groupings in B.C.? The following table gives us these trends:

British Columbia: Selected Denominations, Numerical & % distributions, 1971 & 1981.

	<u># 1971</u>	<u># 1981</u>	<u>Increase/ Decrease</u>	<u>% 1971</u>	<u>% 1981</u>	<u>% points +/-</u>
Adventist	7,190	9,015	+ 1,825	0.3%	0.4%	+ 0.1
Anglican ✓	386,670	374,055	- 12,615	17.7	13.6	- 4.1
Baptist ✓	64,840	81,850	+ 17,010	3.0	3.0	even
Ch. & Miss. All.	5,610	7,975	+ 2,365	0.3	0.3	even
Chr. Reformed	11,460	14,785	+ 3,325	0.5	0.5	even
Greek Orth.	20,525	21,645	+ 1,120	0.9	0.8	- 0.1
Jehovah's Wit.	42,315	31,520	- 10,795	1.9	1.2	- 0.7
Lutheran ✓	120,335	122,395	+ 2,060	5.5	4.5	- 1.0
Mennonite	26,520	30,895	+ 4,375	1.2	1.1	- 0.1
Mormon	12,670	16,740	+ 4,070	0.6	0.6	even
Pentecostal	35,225	55,095	+ 19,870	1.6	2.0	+ 0.4
Presbyterian	100,945	89,810	- 11,135	4.6	3.3	- 1.3
Roman Catholic	408,330	526,355	+ 118,025	18.7	19.2	+ 0.5
Salv. Army	11,885	12,275	+ 390	0.5	0.5	even
United ✓	537,570	548,360	+ 10,790	24.6	20.0	- 4.6
No Religion	287,115	568,170	+ 281,055	13.1	20.9	+ 7.8

While several smaller religious groups are left out of the above table, there are several things that can be seen. First, the "No Religion" group is now the largest "religious" body in B.C., larger than the United, Roman Catholic or Anglican churches. While the United Church preference figure actually rose by 11,000 in 1981 over the 1971 census figure, as a proportion of the total B.C. population, it dropped by 4.6 percentage points. While it is clear that the Pentecostals have made great gains in the 1970's, rising by 20,000, at the same time the Roman Catholic population grew by nearly 120,000 preferences. The deep decline of the Jehovah's Witness support from 42,000 to 31,000 is likely a

reflection of the internal conflict that this group has experienced in the 1970's. Many of the departed Jehovah's Witnesses have likely migrated to various conservative Protestant groups.

The main and obvious fact of the above table is that overall, the more liberal mainline Protestant churches tended to lose ground, and the more conservative Protestant churches tended either to stay even or to make modest to strong gains. While much more detailed work will be done on this as more census data is released, this table does demonstrate a trend of steady growth of some of the conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic populations, and, on the other side, a dramatic increase in those choosing the secular "No Religion" option.

In the next few pages of this paper I will examine some of the variables that are often used to explain the secularity of British Columbia. It is sometimes suggested that the high "No Religion" response in B.C. can be explained by the ethnic populations, especially the oriental populations who are said to favour "No Religion". And indeed, at first glance this does seem to be a significant variable: British Columbia: "No Religion" by Ethnic Groups. Percentage Distribution for Canada, 1971 & 1981 and British Columbia, 1981.

<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Canada %</u>	<u>Canada %</u>	<u>B.C. %</u>
	<u>1971</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1981</u>
British	5.4%	8.9%	20.3%
Chinese	*	56.8	63.7
Dutch	8.2	10.9	20.3
French	1.1	1.8	14.6
German	5.6	8.0	15.5
Italian	1.3	1.4	6.3
Japanese	*	27.7	36.6
Jewish	3.3	3.7	12.3
Native Indian	2.7	7.3	14.4
<u>Average:</u>	4.3	7.3	20.9

* In the 1971 census data, the Chinese and Japanese groups were lumped with other "Asian" groups; 22% of the "Asians" said they had a "No Religion" preference in 1971.

Several points can be drawn when we compare the "No Religion" and the ethnic variables. First, 63.7% of the Chinese population in B.C. preferred "No Religion."

But the Chinese "No Religion" population in B.C. was only 61,785 out of a total non-religious population of 568,170. If the entire Chinese population were removed from the statistics, it would only reduce the B.C. non-religious population by two percentage points, to about 19%. While the oriental population is a slight factor, it is far from sufficient to explain the difference between B.C. and the rest of the country. Second, we see that it is the ethnic groups from traditionally Catholic countries (Italy and France) that have the lowest "No Religion" response. This is also the case when we saw the distributions of "No Religion" by the provinces: the provinces with the highest Roman Catholic populations - Quebec, New Brunswick and P.E.I. - had the lowest "No Religion" rates. Third, and perhaps most significantly, if we compare the percentage distributions between Canada and B.C. for 1981, we can see that there is a significant difference between the religiosity of all of the groups depending on their geography, rather than their ethnic backgrounds alone. In Canada, 1.8% of the French are non-religious; in B.C. it is 14.6%. In Canada, 1.4% of the Italians are non-religious; in B.C. 6.3% are. So while one must recognize that those of Roman Catholic background tend not to join the non-religious category as easily as do Protestants, there are still other elements that need to be added to the statistical stew before we can begin to see what it is that makes B.C. a religiously peculiar place.

Unfortunately, from this point we will have to make do without the 1981 census data, as only the most preliminary religious demographic data has so far been released. But if we examine the 1971 census data, we might yet begin to make sense of B.C.'s religious - or non-religious - peculiarity.

One revealing dimension is that of looking at the age structure of the religious groups in British Columbia:

Percentage Distributions of Selected Religious Denominations by Age Groups,
Canada and B.C., 1971.

	<u>Total</u>	<u>0-14</u>	<u>15-34</u>	<u>35-54</u>	<u>55+</u>
Canada: Total	100%	29.6%	31.9%	22.3%	16.1%
Canada: No Religion	100	27.4	40.5	21.7	10.4
B.C.: Total	100	27.9	31.1	22.9	18.1
B.C.: Anglican	100	23.7	29.2	23.2	23.9
Baptist	100	28.2	29.0	21.4	21.3
Lutheran	100	25.9	27.1	26.2	20.8
Mennonite	100	31.2	30.0	20.9	17.9
Pentecostal	100	34.0	30.9	18.4	16.6
Presbyterian	100	19.2	24.2	24.6	32.0
Roman Catholic	100	33.0	31.9	22.6	12.4
United	100	28.0	30.8	23.2	18.0
No Religion	100	29.1	37.6	21.3	11.9

The first, and obvious fact is that the "No Religion" group is the highest in the 15 to 34 age range, and the lowest in the 55+ age range. So, very predictably, the non-religious population is predominantly the younger families and single individuals in their twenties and thirties. We can see that the Roman Catholic and Pentecostal bodies who had a higher proportion in the 15 to 34 age range, shared with the non-religious group the highest increase in growth between 1971 and 1981 as we saw earlier. Nevertheless, while the age structure of the non-religious population in B.C. tells us that an inordinate number are between 15 and 34, with the implication that they stand a very good chance of being a growing enterprise, nothing in the age structure explains the proportional difference between B.C. and the rest of the country. Before leaving the age group chart, I must say I was somewhat suprised to see that the Presbyterian Church in B.C. had nearly double the provincial average population 55 and over (i.e. 32%, as compared with 18%).

It is generally accepted that one of the significant variables regarding the "No Religion" response is the urban-rural factor. City folks are more inclined to secularity; country folks are more rooted and perhaps more conservative in their

religious preferences. And indeed, when we compare the urban and rural populations in both Canada and B.C. for 1971, we find that it is generally true as the following table demonstrates:

Percentage Distribution of "No Religion" responses for Canada and B.C., for Urban and Rural Areas, 1971.

	<u>Canada</u>	<u>B.C.</u>
Total Population	4.3%	13.1%
Urban Regions	4.6	13.2
Population 500,000+	5.7	15.3
Rural Regions	3.5	12.9
Rural: non-farm	3.7	13.1
Rural: farm	2.9	11.5

While the above table demonstrates that urban people are more inclined to the secular than are rural people, the remarkable feature is how little the differences are within British Columbia. The rural non-farm population is identical with the total population. What is striking is not the differences within B.C., but rather the differences between B.C. and the rest of Canada: the rural, farm population in Canada is only 2.9% non-religious; in B.C. it is 11.5% non-religious.

The rural-urban dimension also touches on the question of our B.C. "Bible belt". At least some of our Fraser Valley areas were far from swept up in revival, at least in 1971. In Surrey Municipality, while 2.2% of the population were Pentecostal in preference (B.C. average: 1.6%) the "No Religion" population was 13.2%, also higher than the B.C. average of 13.1%. Langley Municipality had a much higher Pentecostal response in 1971: 3.3%, but again, the non-religious percentage was above the provincial average: 13.5%. The point I wish to suggest is not to deny the evident growth in the conservative Protestant population in several centres within the Fraser Valley; it is only to suggest that right within the heartland of the "Bible belt" there is also an even stronger wave of secularity that is overtaking the rural areas of the province just about as much as it is rising in the more urban regions. The urban-rural differences may help to explain the growth of conservative Protestant groups within particular regions or provinces, but they do

not begin to help us understand the differences in degrees of secularity between B.C. and the rest of Canada.

One possible explanation for the secular climate of B.C. is that it is related to the very high degree of migration and mobility in the population of B.C. In fact, parallel to the increasing secularity of Canada as we move from the east coast to the west coast, is the increasing ratio of both migrants into the province and migrants from one municipality to another within the province, as well as people moving within a municipality. Within each province, however, the numbers of people migrating and moving has also been on the rise between 1956 and 1976, as the following table suggests:

Percentage Distribution of Population Age 5+ by Migration, Canada & Provinces.

<u>Non-Movers</u>			<u>Movers</u> (W/in a Municip.)	<u>Migrants</u>	<u>Non-Movers</u>			<u>Movers</u> (W/in a Municip.)	<u>Migrants</u>
<u>Canada:</u>					<u>Ontario:</u>				
1956-61	54.6%	25.2%	20.2%	1956-61	52.1%	26.0%	21.9%		
1966-71	52.6	23.5	23.9	1966-71	50.7	24.3	25.0		
1971-76	51.5	23.4	25.1	1971-76	50.7	24.1	25.2		
<u>Nfld:</u>					<u>Manitoba:</u>				
1956-61	72.5	17.9	9.6	1956-61	56.2	24.7	19.0		
1966-71	65.9	16.9	17.2	1966-71	54.2	23.8	22.0		
1971-76	64.9	18.1	17.0	1971-76	52.1	27.6	20.3		
<u>P.E.I.:</u>					<u>Sask:</u>				
1956-61	71.2	13.7	15.1	1956-61	60.5	20.6	18.9		
1966-71	66.5	14.2	19.4	1966-71	58.9	20.2	20.9		
1971-76	60.1	15.1	24.7	1971-76	56.0	20.4	23.6		
<u>Nova Sc.:</u>					<u>Alberta:</u>				
1956-61	65.9	18.3	15.8	1956-61	47.7	26.1	26.2		
1966-71	61.0	19.6	19.4	1966-71	48.5	24.3	27.2		
1971-76	58.2	20.0	21.8	1971-76	44.4	25.4	30.2		
<u>New Br.:</u>					<u>B.C.:</u>				
1956-61	66.6	17.6	15.8	1956-61	47.1	25.9	27.0		
1966-71	61.9	19.6	18.6	1966-71	42.7	22.8	34.6		
1971-76	57.2	20.8	22.0	1971-76	42.3	22.7	35.0		
<u>Quebec:</u>					<u>Yukon/N.W.T.:</u>				
1956-61	55.6	27.5	16.9	1956-61	31.6	29.8	38.6		
1966-71	55.3	24.4	20.3	1966-71	24.2	34.6	41.2		
1971-76	54.7	23.6	21.7	1971-76			38.6		

What we are trying to get a sense of with this table is the degree of "rootlessness" that populations in different provinces of Canada experience. And we can see that as one moves from the eastern seaboard to the west coast,

and then up to the Yukon and the North West Territories, there is a dramatic increase in migration and movement. While only 34.1% of the Newfoundlanders and 41.8% of the Nova Scotians moved or migrated in the period from 1966 to 1971, the B.C. and Yukon/North West Territories percentages are 57% and 76% respectively.

Let us further examine the migrant population (i.e. those who moved from either one municipality to another, or from one province to another.) In this we will compare the migrants in the age 20-35 age range with all migrants, and compare these with broad religious groupings:

Migrant Population, Total & Age 20-34, by Religious Groupings, Canada, 1966-71.

	<u>All Migrants (5+)</u>	<u>Migrants, Age 20-34</u>
Canada, total pop.	23.9%	39.8%
Roman & Ukran. Cath.	21.6	35.8
Principal Protestant *	24.5	41.3
No Religion & others	30.7	48.9

* Principal Protestant is Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian & United.

In this table we see that not only are there a great many more migrants proportionately in the period from age 20 to 34, but also there is a greater ratio of "No Religion and Others" migrating than in the other religious groupings. While no comparable table for such British Columbia groupings is available, I have no doubt that the ratios on such a table would again be very high. Further, a more detailed breakdown of religious groups would have been very useful, but was not available. I think that the point can be made that B.C. has the highest migration and moving rate among all the provinces, the Yukon and N.W.T., as territories, being the exception. We have seen that the "No Religion" group is both the highest in B.C., and that there is a greater ratio of "No Religion" responses in the age 15 to 34 group. The proposition is quite simply that the "No Religion" group is made up of a high proportion of highly migratory young families and single individuals.

Many people who move to British Columbia are struck by the fact that every one they meet has come from somewhere else. For example, I cannot think of any one in my friendship circle that was born in B.C. except myself. And many who have come here never quite get the feeling that they have "settled in". Their home, or at least their "roots", are somewhere else. Perhaps many people have come to B.C. precisely to get away from their roots, which will often include some kind of previous church activity. And the climate, both in terms of the enjoyment of the weather and the outdoors, and in terms of our cultural mood, permits a great deal of freedom to take or leave religion, and a great many migrants to British Columbia choose to leave it behind when they come here. There are many alternative ways of spending a Sunday morning in B.C.

At the same time we do have our Bible belt seeming to grow stronger with each passing year. This does not conflict with the high degree of secularity within the province. In a climate that provides for freedom from one's roots, there are those who find that such freedom produces great quantities of vertigo; such people desire a religious life and committment that is clear and unambiguous. Many conservative Protestant groups have grown strong by providing sanctuary from the world of relative values. Perhaps it is the very secularity of B.C.'s culture that provides a seed-bed for the more conservative Protestant groups. In fact, it is this deep polarity that characterizes both our religious culture and all of our social and political structures. In B.C. politics, the Liberal and Conservative parties are not endangered species: they are extinct. Our labour - management polarities are infamous across the nation. The indicators of a transient, anomic society are also suggestive of our condition, with B.C. leading the way in the suicide and alcoholism rates among the provinces. The deep polarization at the heart of our life in British Columbia has been a long-standing feature of our history.

Other than the native Indian people of B.C., we have a short history as an immigrant people going back little more than 125 years. Our first immigrants were gold-seekers, and they set the pattern: we came to this region seeking our fortunes in the resource industries, exploiting the land and the seas rather than coming as families of "settlers". With our exploitation of the staple resources, we came to live in single-industry towns, mining camps, bush camps and fishing villages. There were few things that would make us want to settle down, and without the prerequisites for establishing deep religious roots, the transient population has always had a strong secular spirit. Unlike in most parts of the country, neither the major universities nor the schools were founded by the churches. Our argument here is that in B.C. the organized religious institutions are much more marginal to our political and social life than one would find in other Canadian provinces. And while there may be several dimensions which interact to generate the spirit of secularity which predominates here, such as the ethnic mixture, a lower than average Roman Catholic presence, a highly urbanized population, I suspect that it is our long history as a highly mobile, transient, and rootless people that provides the basis for both our predominating secularity and, at the same time, the propensity -- for those who can't stand the rootlessness -- for buying into varieties of "born again" religion that can provide at least gravel for the bumpy ride through life, if not total freedom from the perils of modernity.

In such a polarized religious climate, what does the United Church offer? Is there any real middle ground upon which it can play a useful role? It would seem to me that for many liberal Christians there is little ground upon which to stand. They are marginal observers between warring so-called "secular humanists" and "born again" crusaders, and are attracted to neither party. But in this polarized climate the mainline churches like the United Church seem now to be in limbo, and not so obviously in a state of decline that they were in a few years ago.

Looking at the United Church from the inside, from the picture the statistics in the Yearbooks paint, there is a growing vibrance in the past several years. Much of the terrifying decline in membership of the 1960's and early 1970's has levelled off. If we look at the givings of the resident church membership, we can see a steady increase, even in constant dollar terms in these highly inflationary times. In B.C. the average annual offering is now \$235.00, a modest sum, but a considerable improvement over ten years ago. While the membership continues to decline slightly (as the membership rolls are often more rigorously kept than they were in the past), the average weekly attendance at services is growing steadily, and this state of relative health was certainly not apparent in the ten years prior to 1975, the period I focussed on in my earlier look at the United Church in B.C. The present statistical tables, while not included here, leave me with some grounds for believing the United Church has a future in B.C.

Still, there is a question of what kind of future, given the marginality of the middle ground in all and any mediating institutions in a polarized society. I have no doubt that many mainline church members will in the coming years join either the ranks of the conservative Protestants, or will decide that they no longer have need of any organized religion, and will join the non-religious when the census-taker comes around. Somehow, this whole process does not worry me as it once did.

Nevertheless there is, I believe, something deeply rotten at the heart of the religious culture of British Columbia. We rather pride ourselves on living in a west coast paradise, yet it is a paradise that is on the economic rocks. And in the midst of this some of the most culturally accommodating churches are to be found among those conservative Protestant bodies that manage to preach an Amway gospel of success that in the end seems to me to ironically legitimize the comfort-seeking, self-indulgent lifestyle of a "California North" that is no

longer able to relate to the grim poverty that many of her citizens now experience. If there is a civil religion in B.C., it could be understood by a careful exegesis of the phrase "That's the B.C. Spirit!" "That's the B.C. Spirit!" is a phrase that our present government started plastering on all of its mega-projects in 1982 when we began to wonder if they could ever be paid for. "That's the B.C. Spirit!" is a phrase that affirms the indomitable hedonistic spirit that denies the nightmare of those who can't afford a Jacuzzi yet. The very day I began to think about what I would say here about religion in B.C. there was a wonderfully evocative headline in Vancouver's morning newspaper: "Small Families, 3 Baths: That's the B.C. Spirit." It informed us that the census showed B.C. leading the way with the smallest families and the most 3 bathroom houses in the land. We seek our comfort from bothersome child-raising, and we lay at ease in our multiple hot tubs. Surely we are the chosen.