

Infidels and the Damn Churches

Irreligion and Religion
in Settler British Columbia

LYNNE MARKS

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Contents

- List of Illustrations / ix
- Acknowledgments / xi
- Introduction: Leaving God Behind? / 3
- 1 A Godless Province? Counting the Infidels and the Indifferent / 29
 - 2 Pie in the Sky When You Die: Political and Cultural Challenges to Religion / 55
 - 3 Manly White Men, Fuzzy Fidelity, and Practical Christians: Blurred Boundaries of Belief and Chasms of Racialized Difference / 78
 - 4 Sundays Are So Different Here: Communities in British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia / 100
 - 5 Could Sodom Be Worse? Christianity, Moral Reform, and the Godless of Vancouver and Victoria / 134
 - 6 Under Siege: Non-Christians, Racialized Groups, and White Women's Rights / 161
 - 7 Subtler and More Dangerous Forms of Error: Metaphysical Religions / 186

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Conclusion: Godless Past and Present / 213

Appendix: Tables / 222

Notes / 234

Bibliography / 291

Index / 311

Introduction

Leaving God Behind?

When I left Toronto and moved to British Columbia during the early 1990s, I had just completed a study of religion in late-nineteenth-century small-town Ontario. I left a province and a city that prided themselves on being cosmopolitan, but where the moralistic Protestant values of an earlier era were not far below the surface. The ugly demonstrations against gay adoption that I witnessed were a reminder – if I needed one – of Ontario’s Christian past and its long cultural shadow. In many ways, British Columbia felt like a very different place. On my drive from the airport to Victoria, I marvelled at the ocean and the mountains, but the rundown housing on the Indigenous reserves that I passed and the blatant anti-Indigenous racism and somewhat more subtle anti-Asian racism I saw in Victoria itself created uncomfortable echoes of my white South African heritage.¹ There were other differences as well. After the “mushy middle” of Ontario politics, I found the explicitly class-polarized nature of BC politics a source of fascination.

The province’s more secular nature was a surprising and refreshing change. Rather than dealing with the dregs of anti-Catholicism that still existed in the subconscious even of many enlightened Ontarians, here I taught many students who were totally unaware of the differences between Catholics and Protestants, and who saw religion as a fascinating, exotic, and unknown subject. As a Jew who deeply values her religious culture and heritage, but who defines herself as agnostic in personal religious faith, and is hostile towards the dogmatism and moralism sometimes associated with such faith, this more secular environment was a welcome one.

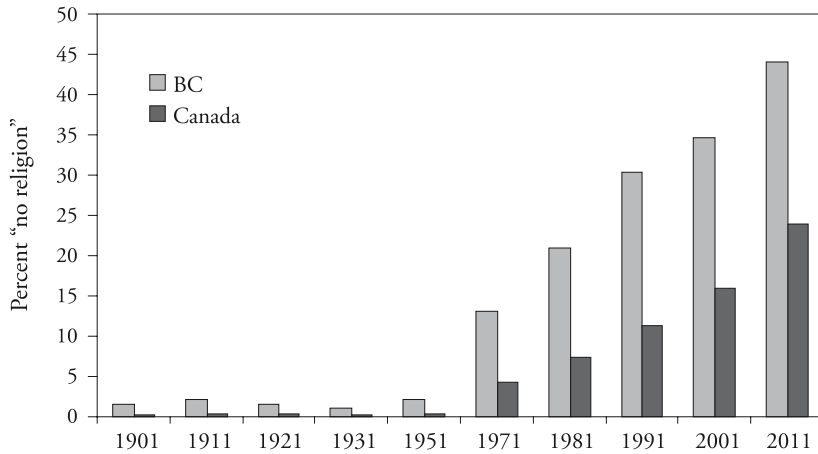
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A few years after arriving in Victoria, I found myself beginning a new project on irreligion and religion in my new home. As I dug deeper in the historical sources, I uncovered some of the roots of what I found distinctive – both positively and negatively – about current BC society entwined in the story I tell in this book.

A common late-nineteenth-century saying declared that men left God behind when they crossed the Rocky Mountains into British Columbia.² This may have been an exaggeration, but it did reflect considerable truth, particularly among white settler men, many of whom came to British Columbia alone to make their fortunes on the resource frontier. Some of these men, who toiled for many hours and low pay in dangerous mines or logging camps, found socialism and loudly and proudly rejected God. Others who toiled beside them did not completely reject God but had little interest in attending church, where ministers bitterly attacked the kinds of fun they enjoyed in their limited leisure time and often supported the economic system that oppressed them. In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British Columbia, many of these white men found a unique freedom to be actively irreligious, whether by abandoning the churches, Christianity, or God himself. This freedom was much less available to, or less sought out by, the white settler women who also made their way to British Columbia in these decades. The many Asian men who came to work in the province's mines and on the railroad enjoyed leisure activities that were similar to those of their white counterparts and were even more roundly condemned by Christian ministers. These men may not have abandoned the religious traditions they brought with them from Asia, but they certainly had no interest in accepting the Christianity offered by a profoundly racist society. As we'll see, ministers had a challenging time in turn-of-the-century British Columbia, trying to impose Christian norms that were taken for granted elsewhere in Canada on the many Euro-Canadians and racialized non-Christian immigrants who had no interest in Christianity.

This book explores the nature of these challenges and thus the origins of British Columbia's greater openness to irreligion. From the 1880s to 1914, the period that is the focus of this book, British Columbia was a less religious place than the rest of the country, a pattern that has remained remarkably consistent over time. BC church involvement rates have been the lowest in Canada for over a century. In the 1901 census, although total numbers were small, British Columbians were ten times more likely than the average Canadian to call themselves atheists or agnostics, or to state that they had no religion. Over the last 110 years, the province has always

FIGURE 1 Atheists and those of no religion as percentage of total population, BC and Canada, 1901–2011



Source: See note 3 for detailed references.

had the highest proportion of Canadians of “no religion” of any province. In 2011, over 44 percent claimed to have no religion, as compared to less than 24 percent of the total Canadian population (see Figure 1).³ A 1996 Angus Reid poll indicated that they were the least likely North Americans to think of themselves as Christian and the least likely to pray regularly; a 2015 poll noted that they were most likely to reject religion entirely.⁴

British Columbia is part of the “unchurched belt” of the West Coast of North America, as church involvement rates in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and California have been consistently lower than in states farther to the east. As we’ll see, a hundred years ago “godless” Americans from these and other Western states contributed to the development of the irreligious culture explored in this book. At the present time, however, the proportion of those who claim “no religion” is far higher in British Columbia than in the West Coast states, at 44 percent versus 26 percent, although these states have the highest proportion of the non-religiously affiliated in the United States.⁵ It is also easier in British Columbia to say that one doesn’t believe in God than it is in the Western United States. Samuel Reimer notes that many Americans have not attended church in recent decades, particularly on the West Coast, but still define themselves as believers. In explaining this, he cites the hegemonic power of the American

culture of religious belief, or “culture-religion,” whereby belief is strongly assumed to be the norm. This ideological context makes it difficult for people to state that they are not believers, even if they have no interest in religious institutions.⁶

A similar “culture-religion” of Christianity was extremely powerful in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Canada, though it was much less influential in British Columbia. BC church leaders were convinced that they lived in the least religious part of Canada. In 1881, the Anglican bishop George Hills lamented the province’s “non-Christian” nature and “constitutional religious apathy.”⁷ Reverend J.W. Winslow, a Methodist minister who was posted to the Nicola Valley in the late 1880s, complained that there were far too many “heads of families whose religious principles are elastic” and who valued “gold and popular freedom from moral and religious restraints far above more noble ‘goods’ that are to be found in the homes left behind in the places from whence they have come.”⁸ In 1899, Reverend E.D. McLaren, pastor of St. Andrew’s Church in Vancouver, observed that in British Columbia there was “a good deal of theoretical infidelity and a great deal of practical infidelity.”⁹ McLaren was not talking about sexual unfaithfulness, but about unfaithfulness to God.

The clergymen who were appalled by the irreligious nature of many British Columbians came from cultures, primarily in Central and Eastern Canada and England, where Christianity was almost universally accepted and was very much a hegemonic discourse. Hegemonic discourses construct systems of meaning that become the common sense “taken for granted” ideas and beliefs through which people in a particular society understand their worlds.¹⁰ This does not mean that everyone in Central and Eastern Canada attended church regularly. Many did not. Many men, particularly single men, did not fully live up to Christian moral ideals, and some individuals and small groups did challenge orthodox Christianity, or even Christianity itself. Nonetheless, as Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau argue, as does Peter Beyer, Christianity in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Canada was the dominant cultural and ideological system.¹¹ Although this was true for most of Canada, it was less true in British Columbia, where irreligion was a much more accepted option.

What exactly is meant by irreligion in this context? This is a very slippery concept, much debated by scholars.¹² The irreligious people who are the focus of this book span a continuum, ranging from those who told the census-taker that they were atheists or “infidels,” thus actively rejecting God, to those who were not involved with a religious institution, generally a church. The broad definition of irreligion used here entails

“beliefs and activities that are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference towards prevailing religion.” This includes either religion in general or “any of its more specific organized forms.” This definition does not assume that all irreligious people rejected God or gods, although many may have, but it recognizes that they were at a minimum indifferent to organized religion.¹³

Irreligion in some form was accepted by a significant component of the BC population during this period, but it did not have the kind of influence it was to gain by the early twenty-first century. Christianity still held considerable social and cultural power, although its hegemony was challenged by a range of forces. Many of these were rooted in the province’s unique demographic and economic makeup.

GENDER, RACE, CLASS, AND THE ECONOMY IN SETTLER BRITISH COLUMBIA

From the beginning of European settlement to well into the twentieth century, non-Indigenous men outnumbered non-Indigenous women in what eventually became British Columbia. An economy based on natural resources drew far more settler men than it did women, even as the nature of the resources shifted. In the early days, furs were the main focus, and the Hudson’s Bay Company controlled British trade with Indigenous people in the region. It also founded Fort Victoria, later Victoria, on the southern tip of Vancouver Island in 1843. In 1858, with the discovery of gold on the Fraser River, thousands of men (and some women) poured into Victoria en route to the gold fields to seek their fortunes, leading the British government to create the new colony of British Columbia on the Mainland during that year. A year later, Vancouver Island was removed from direct Hudson’s Bay control, becoming a separate British colony. In 1866, the two colonies were united as British Columbia, and in 1871 the colony entered Confederation with Canada. For the rest of the nineteenth century, resource extraction remained the basis of the economy. In the early 1860s, the Cariboo gold rush attracted many men from around the world to the BC Interior. Coal mining around Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, and fishing and logging along the coast, also drew many men and some families to British Columbia. Less than 4 percent of the province was suitable for agriculture, so the family farm was much less central to the BC economy than in most of Canada, although agricultural areas certainly existed, particularly on southern Vancouver Island and in the

Fraser Valley; in the Interior, the Okanagan Valley and later the Cariboo and Chilcotin regions became cattle-ranching centres.¹⁴ By the late 1880s and 1890s, silver and other metals had been discovered in the Kootenay mountains of the Interior, leading to an economic boom with the development of major mines and mining centres; and coal mining began farther east, around the Crowsnest Pass.

Vancouver and Victoria were the largest urban centres in the province. In 1901, Victoria was almost as large as its rival, at 20,919 to Vancouver's 26,386, but it lost ground after that. By 1911, though its population had increased to more than 30,000, Vancouver had almost quadrupled in size, growing to over 100,000 people. The next-largest communities were all mining towns: coal-mining Nanaimo had a population of 6,130 in 1901 and more than 8,000 ten years later; the new hard-rock mining communities of Nelson and Rossland in the Kootenays boasted just over 5,000 and 6,000 people respectively in 1901, although a productivity decline in the mines had led to some loss of population by 1911, particularly in Rossland (see map on page xiv).¹⁵ The mining regions of the province, both on Vancouver Island and in the Interior, saw the development of very class-polarized communities, as employers sought to extract resources while maximizing profits. In response to unsafe conditions, low pay, and long working hours, employees organized into militant unions, and significant numbers were attracted to socialist political solutions.¹⁶

The continued focus on resource development meant that among the non-Indigenous inhabitants of the province, men remained in the majority, composing almost 75 percent of the adult non-Indigenous population in 1891, 71 percent in 1901, and 70 percent in 1911.¹⁷ Many were very transient, moving from one opportunity to the next in the boom-and-bust economy, both within British Columbia and beyond. Beginning with the gold rush of 1858, the BC resource frontier attracted a diverse population of men from around the world, and this continued to be true in the late nineteenth century, as the number of settlers grew rapidly. Indigenous people, who had composed the majority of the population into the early 1880s, made up only 16.2 percent of it in 1901 and just over 5.0 percent in 1911.¹⁸ The total population of the province increased from 98,173 in 1891 to 392,480 in 1911. The majority of settlers came from the United States, Britain, and Central and Eastern Canada, as well as in increasing numbers from Continental Europe.¹⁹ Most were defined as white by the racial categories of the time. As today, these categories were socially constructed and subject to change, which is why scholars tend to speak of racialized people, as opposed to people of a particular race, since groups can be racialized differently

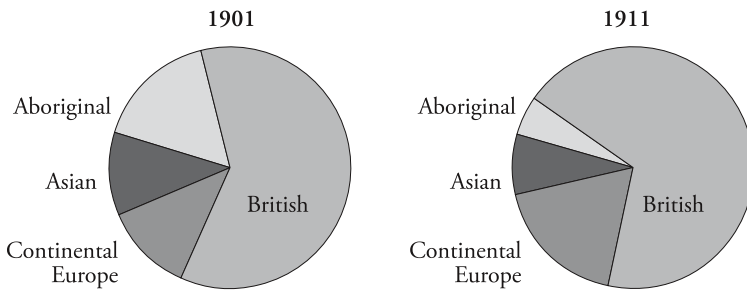
in different times and places. In this period, southern and eastern Europeans, especially the Italians and Slavs who emigrated to British Columbia in growing numbers after 1900, were racialized as “not white” and were therefore not as acceptable as their “white” northern European counterparts. Although they encountered prejudice, they (or at least their children) were viewed as potentially assimilable because they were European and Christian. This was not the case for Asian immigrants.²⁰

Chinese men had begun to migrate to British Columbia in significant numbers with the 1858 gold rush, seeking prosperity for themselves and their families back home. Increasing numbers of Japanese people began coming to the province during the 1890s, although the Chinese remained the majority of Asian migrants. A smaller South Asian migration, largely of Sikhs, began in the early twentieth century. Asian migrants, primarily male, composed almost 11 percent of the BC population in 1901 and close to 8 percent in 1911. Most Asian immigrants who came to Canada during this period lived in British Columbia.²¹ British Columbians of Euro-Canadian origin responded to their presence with virulent racism. Asian workers were seen as an economic threat to the jobs of “white” workers and tended to be racialized as completely foreign and unassimilable. The fact that they were “heathens” who espoused non-Christian religions and showed little interest in converting to Christianity exacerbated the racism and othering that they faced. In British Columbia, they experienced both official and everyday racism, including violence and restrictions on the jobs they could hold and their right to immigrate. By the early twentieth century, all those of Asian origin had lost the right to vote.²²

In the early twentieth century, British Columbia was the most racially and religiously diverse province in Canada (see Figures 2 and 3). By 1911, groups that were racialized as non-white (those of Asian, southern and eastern European origin, and Indigenous people) together composed over 19 percent of its population (Figure 2).²³ The Prairie provinces were the next most diverse, but the largest racialized group on the Prairies by 1911 consisted of (potentially assimilable) southern and eastern Europeans.²⁴ Other than in British Columbia, provincial populations were almost exclusively Christian, except for a small minority of Jews.²⁵

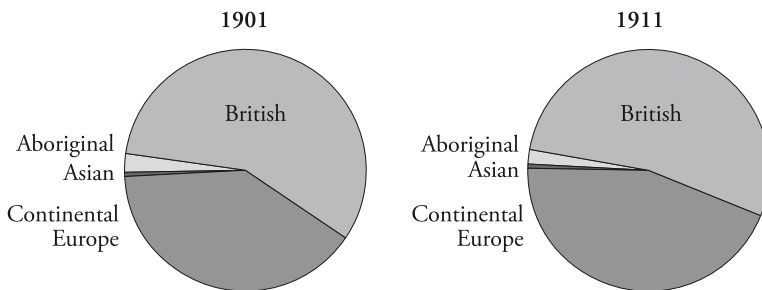
As we will see, the predominance and transience of men among the non-Indigenous population, the class-polarized nature of the workforce, and the racial and religious diversity of the province all help to explain the less hegemonic and more contested place of religion, particularly Christianity, in British Columbia. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the vast majority of British Columbians who defined themselves as

FIGURE 2 BC population by racial and ethnic origin, 1901 and 1911



Source: Data taken from Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS), *Census of Canada, 1901* (Ottawa: Census Office, 1902), vol. 1, Table 11; DBS, *Census of Canada, 1911* (Ottawa: C.H. Parmelee, 1913), vol. 1, Table 9.

FIGURE 3 Canadian population by racial and ethnic origin, 1901 and 1911



Source: Data taken from Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS), *Census of Canada, 1901* (Ottawa: Census Office, 1902), vol. 1, Table 11; DBS, *Census of Canada, 1911* (Ottawa: C.H. Parmelee, 1913), vol. 1, Table 9.

irreligious, or who demonstrated their irreligion by staying away from religious institutions, did not come from non-Christian racialized groups: they were Euro-Canadians. Elsewhere in the country, they would be expected to define themselves as Christian. As noted by scholars of other national contexts, it is perhaps not surprising that the irreligious came from a Christian background, as in defining themselves as irreligious they were reacting directly against, as well as in relation to, Christian norms.²⁶ And as will be discussed below, though many completely rejected these norms, the irreligion of many others was not entirely devoid of echoes or fragments of Christian practice or belief.

SECULARIZATION AND THE SECULAR

Definitions of secularization are much contested but generally refer to a process in which religious institutions lose cultural and social authority in a society, moving gradually from the centre to the periphery of power and influence. At the same time, secularization is also reflected in an increasing abandonment of mainstream religious participation, adherence, and ultimately belief.²⁷ This book explores and analyzes the lower levels of religious belief and participation in British Columbia as compared to the rest of Canada, examining a society in which the churches had relatively less power and influence than elsewhere in the country.

A secularization approach may not be ideal here, however. To become secularized, a culture must first be religious. Was this ever true of settler British Columbia? This book focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the limited work on the earlier colonial period suggests that though the province may not have been “born secular,” as a few scholars have claimed, it was never as religious as Central Canada.²⁸ It seems appropriate to talk about the secularization of British Columbia in the latter decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, when Christian affiliation declined dramatically. However, for the decades covered in this volume, when levels of irreligion remained fairly stable, it may be more useful to speak of the secularization of many of those who migrated to British Columbia (particularly the men who came from more eastern parts of Canada), than of the secularization of the province. To apply a Canada-wide lens, one could say that the largely hegemonic Christian culture of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Canada showed its first signs of secularization in the most westerly province.

The timing, causes, and indeed existence of secularization have been hotly contested in the international context. Some of the best scholarly studies have concentrated on the United States and Europe. Robert Orsi views the many ways in which people adopt and transform various elements of official religious practices, making them their own, as “lived religion” and sees lived religion as having potentially powerful sustaining and transgressive force. Sarah Williams similarly explores the ways in which working-class Londoners used a mix of official practices and folk magic to construct their own popular religion.²⁹ Whereas Orsi and Williams perceive such popular practices and beliefs as valuable resources in their own right, other scholars, both historians and sociologists, see them as way stations on the route to a more secular culture.³⁰ Orsi and other American scholars are particularly resistant to models of secularization, preferring

to speak of religious change rather than any clear pattern of decline. Certainly, the American religious trajectory of recent years has provided much justification for this position.³¹ A more global perspective can also serve to challenge overarching theories of secularization.³²

Scholars of Britain and other parts of Europe, however, have recently seen striking shifts away from the churches, prompting them to explore some form of secularization analysis, although earlier models of secularization, in which it was seen as a process of modernity, an inevitable by-product of industrialization and urbanization, have fallen out of favour.³³ These scholars look into the past for signposts of secularization. Some examine religious and intellectual developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, others find evidence in nineteenth-century working-class shifts away from the churches, and increasing numbers focus on the 1960s as the key decade of secularization. Still others, though recognizing patterns of both religious change and decline, prefer to analyze and seek to explain these phenomena within specific local and regional contexts rather than accepting any overarching model of secularization.³⁴ Canada's own trajectory in the latter decades of the twentieth century does rather confirm the legitimacy of a concept of secularization, but the unique religious and irreligious patterns of British Columbia also demonstrate the value of studying these questions in local and regional contexts. All of this fine work, whether accepting, contesting, or seeking to complicate concepts of secularization, informs my efforts to scrutinize the complex boundaries between religion and irreligion in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British Columbia.

This topic has thus far received very little attention from historians of British Columbia. Most literature on the social history of religion in Canada focuses on Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. A few historians of these regions have discussed popular religious involvement and belief but have said little about irreligion itself.³⁵ Recently, important new work has explored the relationship between irreligion and the left, primarily in interwar Canada.³⁶ Most Canadian work that touches on irreligion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries deals with the "secularization debates," in which scholars contest the timing of secularization in English Canada. Some suggest that Canadian secularization originated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereas others argue for the continued hegemony of Christianity in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century. This literature tends to be Ontario-centred, with some attention paid to the Prairies, and often has a more intellectual than social history bent. Gender is only occasionally a focus of analysis.³⁷

In recent years, scholars have begun to discuss issues of Canadian secularization and secularity in the post–Second World War period. Some have studied Central Canada, but important new work moves the focus westward, concentrating as much on regional secular cultures as on secularization over time.³⁸ Tina Block compares the secular context of post-war British Columbia with that of Washington State, and American scholars of the West Coast unchurched belt also provide a North American framework for the analysis of BC secularism. In *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, a broadly comparative study of secularization, Callum Brown traces the rapid secularization of Canadian society during the final decades of the twentieth century, suggesting that gender was key to this development and that British Columbia was in the forefront of the change, not only in Canada but in the English-speaking world.³⁹

Other scholars have made pioneering contributions regarding the particularly secular nature of British Columbia. The late Bob Stewart wrote an important article on this subject in the early 1980s. Norman Knowles and Stuart Barnard have written valuable local studies of religion and irreligion among BC miners in the Interior.⁴⁰ Vincent McNally has studied the secular nature of the BC school system, noting that British Columbia is the only Canadian province that (until the late twentieth century) never provided funding for separate Catholic schools and that has generally tried to keep religion out of public schools.⁴¹ As early as 1872, the Public School Act ruled that the schools were to be “strictly non-sectarian.” They were to teach “the highest morality” and “no religious dogma or creed.” McNally argues that significant American influence among early BC settlers explains popular pressure regarding the “separation of church and state” in the school system. The religious diversity of the population was also cited as an issue, as was the not-unrelated fact that “British Columbia is unique among Canadian provinces in that it has always been and remains the most unchurched region of the country.” McNally mentions many and various complaints by Catholic bishops, from before Confederation to the late nineteenth century, who challenged the lack of funding for separate Catholic schools and the “Godlessness” of the public schools, which they blamed on the power of the “sect of irreligionists” in the province.⁴²

Other scholars argue that BC schools were more non-denominationally Protestant than they were secular, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries church leaders of all denominations decried the province’s “godless” educational system, which permitted no explicit religious instruction other than the Lord’s Prayer in schools.⁴³ In August 1900, three clergymen, two Protestant and one Catholic, wrote to the *Vancouver*

Province, complaining bitterly about the absence of Bible readings in BC schools. The Presbyterian minister, Reverend E.D. McLaren, argued against justifications for this policy, which had been based on the religious diversity of the BC population, stating that “the fact that Jews, Turks, and infidels are citizens of Canada has never been suggested as a reason for doing away with the oath [on the Bible] in courts of law.” These ministers were very gratified that the Vancouver School Board was attempting to permit Bible readings in the schools, although a number of people who wrote to the local papers, styling themselves “Agnostic” and “Freethinker,” were appalled. Despite the efforts of the school board, the “sect of irreligionists” still seemed to retain considerable political influence. Throughout the following three decades, ministers continued to complain about the absence of Bible readings or other religious instruction in BC schools.⁴⁴

As we will see, the clergy did not limit their complaints to the public school system. Protestant church leaders bemoaned their lack of influence over government policy on a variety of social and moral reform issues, such as Sabbath observance, prohibition of the sale of alcohol, and control over gambling and the sex trade. As discussed in Chapter 5, church leaders were well aware that their lack of influence over legislation was linked to government perceptions that the bulk of voters were not dedicated, moral Christians. Church leaders were very unhappy about this, and as will be evident throughout this volume, the irreligion or religious indifference of British Columbians was a major and frequent cause of lamentation.

In examining other Canadian contexts, some scholars have contended that church leaders’ rhetoric about godlessness had much more to do with their distaste for popular religion and their need to justify their labours to funding organizations, than with actual irreligion.⁴⁵ Such arguments may rely overmuch on discourse analysis, but they do have some relevance for our understanding of clerical whining in turn-of-the-century British Columbia. Certainly, as Chapter 3 reveals, some British Columbians practised varieties of popular religion, straying far – often very far indeed – from the ideal of disciplined, moral, and pious churchgoers. And in the early twentieth century, some BC churches remained at least partially reliant on financial support from Eastern Canadian church organizations, motivating leaders to justify their labours to religious superiors and funders. At the same time, a broad range of empirical evidence provides clear corroboration of many of the church leaders’ concerns about irreligion. A number of lay people, particularly women, also reported being shocked by the irreligion of many British Columbians (as will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4). Quantitative analysis of census records establishes that

British Columbians were much more likely than other Canadians to identify themselves as atheists or as having “no religion.” And various church and government sources clearly demonstrate that they were the least likely of Canadians to be involved in a church.

Nonetheless, one must be careful not to take church leaders’ lamentations at face value, as doing so could lead to the impression that British Columbia was an almost entirely godless place. Levels of hostility or simple indifference to religion were certainly much higher than what church leaders would have experienced elsewhere in Canada at this time. Non-Christian racialized communities and alternative spiritualities were also much more present in British Columbia - further challenging the Christian hegemony that ministers took for granted in Central and Eastern Canada. Given these realities, a little hyperbole is perhaps not surprising.

GENDER, FAMILY, AND THE RESOURCE FRONTIER

There were, however, many strong Christian congregations in the province. They may have felt more embattled than their counterparts in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and other eastern provinces, but they had much in common with them. For example, they consisted largely of women.

Dominant gender ideologies identified women as more moral and pious than men. Women who desired to be respectable had few alternatives beyond the churches, which also offered them both sociability with other women and the consolation of faith. Faith in troubled times could be particularly important for mothers, who were expected to be caring nurturers in a world of high infant and child mortality.⁴⁶ Men could also be found in BC churches, but the majority were married and were inspired to attend, in British Columbia as elsewhere, by a combination of personal faith, wifely piety, at least some acceptance of norms of domestic masculinity, and a wish to display respectability as heads of Christian families who were raising their children on the proper Christian path.⁴⁷

The predominance of women in BC churches, though similar to patterns elsewhere in Canada, is perhaps surprising in light of the province’s skewed gender ratio, with non-Indigenous men far outnumbering non-Indigenous women. It points to the fact that men, especially the many single transient working-class men on the BC resource frontier, were very unlikely to set foot in a church. Although they were the most likely to abandon traditional Christian practices, or to challenge them, they were not alone. Some married middle- and working-class men, particularly

those who were far from their families, were also willing to do so. And together, these men created a provincial culture in which Christian hegemony could be defied in a range of ways: by declaring oneself an atheist on the census, attacking the churches as tools of the employing classes, shunning Sunday services, and/or embracing the “rough” male leisure options of drinking, gambling, and frequenting red light districts.

Men were in the forefront of challenging Christian hegemony in British Columbia. But in some contexts, particularly in centres of labour radicalism, working-class atheist husbands and fathers were joined by their wives and daughters, sharing a class-conscious irreligious culture. Scholars have also noted that, in Britain and the United States, most irreligious people during this period were men, but they have identified a few outspoken activist atheist women who were not necessarily linked to male unbelievers.⁴⁸ In British Columbia, a few women defined themselves as irreligious without being linked to men, but they were not outspoken unbelievers in any forums. However, some were willing to play an active role in more heterodox religious milieus. For women who were not comfortable with a complete abandonment of faith, the challenges to the dominance of Christianity in British Columbia made it more possible for them to embrace, or at least dabble in, a range of alternative spiritualities. Rejecting mainstream religion did not automatically translate to espousing a purely material or rational world view, and thus they sought transcendence in other forms. As a result, alternative creeds have been particularly popular in British Columbia, from the spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the New Age religions of the present day.

For many other Euro-Canadian settler women, church involvement remained a vital anchor, providing faith, familiarity, and female sociability in a new society where they were very much in the minority. Many participated in women’s church-based organizations, as they had in their previous environments. Through these groups, they became key allies of clerical leaders in the social and moral reform movements that attempted to transform British Columbia into something that more closely resembled the Christian and “civilized” societies of Central and Eastern Canada.

Historians have studied the impact of British Columbia’s skewed gender ratio on both Indigenous and settler women. Adele Perry has done important work on this subject in connection with colonial British Columbia and has provided crucial insights into the rough homosocial culture of settler men during this period. Scholars have also explored what the predominance of men may have meant for BC labour activism and socialist

radicalism.⁴⁹ How these men may have helped to shape the religious, or irreligious, fabric of the province has received much less attention.

International literature on gender, religion, and resource frontiers provides useful insights and a broader context for this study.⁵⁰ Laurie Maffly-Kipp's work demonstrates that California's transient, predominately male, and racially diverse mid-nineteenth-century gold-rush society lacked an interest in organized religion, particularly Protestantism, whereas Sandra Frankiel has examined the social factors that explain why many Californians were attracted to alternative spiritualities in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Scholars Marilyn Lake and Patricia Grimshaw have explored the "civilizing" political activism of white Christian settler women, who were a minority in Australia's rough white male culture.⁵²

Other scholars have done important work on the nature of frontier settler masculinity, although most have paid little attention to men's relationship with religion.⁵³ Irreligious BC men were very creative in using masculine norms to oppose Christianity. Some of their challenges were not dissimilar to those of less pious men in other parts of Canada and in Britain, but they took on a particular edge in British Columbia.⁵⁴ Irreligious men regularly questioned the manliness of the clergy, deriding their inability to cope on the frontier, while defining themselves as "real men" – through either their rational atheist socialism or their rough leisure pursuits. They fiercely attacked Christian efforts to enforce temperance and other forms of moral regulation as feminized and effete Eastern affectations. Throughout this book, we see the range of ways in which gender is used as a rhetorical tool, both to shore up and to challenge various religious, irreligious, and heterodox positions, defining them as either manly and rational or as feminine, effete, irrational, and hysterical.

Both internationally and in Canada, historians have examined the role of religion in the family, exploring how Christianity was nurtured in the nineteenth-century domestic sphere.⁵⁵ *Infidels and the Damn Churches* reinforces the perception that transient men who were living apart from their families were likely to abandon their religious practices, particularly in contexts, such as pre-First World War British Columbia, in which being irreligious was a legitimate cultural option. This book also contributes to our understanding of the relationships among religion, gender, and family by scrutinizing families in which one member, generally the husband, defined himself as having no religion; it examines the responses of other family members, particularly wives, for whom irreligion was less culturally acceptable. It explores the fluidity of religious affiliation among family members over time, looking, for example, at what happened to irreligious

men when they married and to widowed women who had associated themselves with their husband's agnostic identity.

RELIGION, THE WORKING CLASS, LABOUR, AND THE LEFT

There have been a number of debates, in Canada and internationally, about the importance, or lack thereof, of Christianity to the nineteenth-century working class.⁵⁶ Focusing on Ontario, some scholars have argued that workers were well integrated into the Christian churches. They have suggested that Christianity was as central to the working-class world view as it was to that of other classes, and indeed more central than identity categories such as class. Others have either ignored the role that religion may have played in the lives of workers or claimed that many workers moved away from the churches as they developed a distinct and oppositional working-class consciousness.⁵⁷ In *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, I took a more middle ground in studying religion in small-town Ontario – noting that Christianity could sometimes serve as a resource for working people in generating an oppositional working-class consciousness, whereas at other times they were active, but generally not equal, participants in broader church communities. Gender, marital status, and local context also made a difference to levels of working-class participation. Young men rarely went to church, although the vast majority still told census-takers that they were Christians. This reflected what I found to be the complex, diverse, sometimes oppositional, but primarily Christian perspective of the Ontario working class.⁵⁸

The relationship between religion and the BC working class was quite different. Although many BC workers did remain pious Christians, many others did not, with significant numbers adopting the socialist critique of religion as the “opium of the masses” and the churches as implements of capitalist exploiters. Early Canadian histories of labour and the left in British Columbia argued that the brutal conditions in the resource towns fostered a particularly radical form of unionism and socialism that was less common elsewhere in Canada. More recent scholars have downplayed this image of BC “exceptionalism,” maintaining both that much of the BC labour movement was less radical and that there was more radicalism elsewhere in Canada than was previously recognized.⁵⁹ *Infidels and the Damn Churches* provides a partial refutation of this scholarship. The relatively high proportion of those who called themselves atheists or said they were of “no religion” in certain strongholds of labour activism, particularly

in the Kootenays, suggests a level of adherence to the radical atheism espoused by the Socialist Party of British Columbia that was much less accepted elsewhere in the country, where left-wing attacks on Christianity had to be soft-pedalled to avoid alienating potential working-class supporters.⁶⁰ The class-conscious atheism of certain popular journalists in the Kootenays further suggests that the BC working class was perhaps more exceptional than we previously believed.

RACISM, RACIALIZATION, CLASS, AND RELIGION

In the 1980s, a battle raged among scholars as to whether race or class was more significant in BC history.⁶¹ Religion was nowhere to be found, as is true in much of BC historiography. Although race and racialization might seem to have won the debate, given their predominance in the literature, I argue here that race, class, and religion all need to be analyzed together. I further speculate that the centrality of both race and class concerns in British Columbia may have helped to establish irreligion as a normalized option in the province, in a way that did not occur elsewhere in Canada. Working-class consciousness fuelled a rejection of the churches and of Christianity for many BC workers. The opposition of at least some clergymen to the exclusion of Asians, when many white workers saw exclusion as crucial to safeguarding their jobs, simply exacerbated this alienation. Virulent prejudice against the province's racialized populations may also have made it easier for working-class white men to see themselves as part of the respectable community, primarily on the basis of their racialized and class identities, regardless of religious affiliations or lack thereof. This book breaks new ground in exploring the relationship between racialization, racism, and irreligion, as it is a subject that is only beginning to be explored in the international literature.⁶²

Although this book suggests that the significance of religion as a marker of inclusion may have been diminished in British Columbia in the face of a deeply racist culture, it also argues that religion and irreligion must be integrated with the other significant categories of analysis used by historians, if we wish to understand the complexity of BC society. This integration already exists in the rich literature on missionary work among Indigenous communities and the Indigenous response to missionization. Religion does make brief appearances in the literature on race and racialization in British Columbia: for example, Patricia Roy and Peter Ward identify the varying positions of Christian ministers on Asian exclusion, and Renisa Mawani

states that Christian beliefs, or their lack, helped to define both the civilized norm and the racialized “other.”⁶³ The present study builds on this work but focuses on new questions, including how the presence of large non-Christian racialized communities helped to undermine the Christian churches’ cultural reach and power in the province.

This book explores the range of religious and irreligious practice and belief in British Columbia, from outright atheism to active church involvement, as gendered, classed, and racialized phenomena. Marital status, transiency, immigration, and ethnic differences are also crucial categories in understanding the province’s religious and secular fabric during this period. This book concentrates largely on British Columbians of Euro-Canadian, and Christian, backgrounds, many of whom discarded their faith, or at least church involvement, upon arrival in the province. These (primarily male) individuals helped to lay the secular foundations of British Columbia by making challenges to Christianity more acceptable and more normalized than elsewhere in Canada. Protestants (or former Protestants) are central to this story. Although many Catholics also jettisoned their faith, or at least their religious practice, others, particularly from certain ethnic groups, found the Catholic Church a source of ethno-religious comfort and community.

Euro-Canadians of previously Christian affiliation are central to the story of irreligion in British Columbia, but the fact that the province was the most racially diverse in Canada also played a role. British Columbians of Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian origin largely rejected Christian proselytism, thus constituting a major obstacle to the hegemony of the mainstream churches. Most Indigenous groups were at least nominally Christian by the turn of the century, but the churches remained anxious about the depth of their conversion. They knew they had a major task in maintaining and enhancing Christian belief and practice among Indigenous people and in eradicating “pagan” elements such as the potlatch.⁶⁴ Indigenous people thus posed another challenge to Christian hegemony in the province, despite the apparent success of late-nineteenth-century missionization. The “godless” and sinful white men who feature prominently in these pages are also very visible in missionary accounts, where they are often cited as major impediments to the full Christianization of the Indigenous peoples.

The complexity of Indigenous people’s relationship to Christianity has been the focus of much impressive scholarship.⁶⁵ However, very little has been said about the complex interplay between religion and irreligion among

settler groups in British Columbia. As traced in this book, some parts of the story are clear: those who occupied the extremes of the religiosity-irreligiosity continuum are readily identified. There were significant numbers of atheist Marxists in the province who fiercely denounced the churches and Christianity as tools of the capitalist classes. And there were many pious Methodists and Presbyterians who regularly attended church, kept the Sabbath, and supported the creation of legislation that would impose Protestant morality on other British Columbians. But many people did not fit either mould. Some might occasionally have gone to church, or at least baptized their children or sent them to Sunday School. Others who never entered a church prided themselves on being “practical Christians” who followed certain Christian moral precepts, and yet others spent their leisure time drinking and gambling but happily joined in a hymn sing led by a travelling missionary in a local bar. Some of these people told the census-taker that they were of “no religion,” whereas others called themselves Methodists, Presbyterians, or Anglicans. In this book, we will explore how they fit into British Columbia’s more irreligious but not totally secular culture.

SOURCES AND METHODS

Infidels and the Damn Churches uses a range of sources and methods. The manuscript census was a key document, and this book would not have been possible without the large national, regional, and city- and town-specific census databases for 1901 and 1911 that have been constructed through the Canadian Families Project and the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure Project, as well as through the ViHistory online database, which includes the entire Vancouver Island manuscript census from 1881 to 1901 and the 1911 manuscript census for Victoria.⁶⁶ Early historical studies that used the manuscript census as a major source were quite uncritical of it, but later scholars have recognized that it is very much a biased and constructed document. As Bruce Curtis shows, census categories reflect far more than a search for the “facts” about particular populations. They also reveal the ideologies, interests, and agendas of the politicians and civil servants who created them. In addition, Curtis demonstrates that we need to look closely at how censuses are actually taken. Who asks the questions, and who answers them? Where should people who are temporarily absent from their permanent homes on census day be enumerated?⁶⁷

The very existence of a question about religion on the Canadian census tells us something about the political dimensions of the country that conducted the census. American censuses do not, and never have, asked any questions about religion, as the US Constitution decrees that church and state must be separate. No such separation has existed in Canada. In Canada, the religious nature of Canadians was seen as closely tied to the moral standing of the country, and data about the numbers and locations of francophone Catholics and anglophone Protestants were crucial political tools.⁶⁸

The enumerators of the 1901 census were told to enter religion of an individual “according as he or she professes, specifying the church or denomination to which the person belongs or adhere, or which he or she favour.” They were told that “if a person is not a member of or does not adhere to or favour any one church or denomination he must not be classed with one or another ... If he is an agnostic, or a non-believer, or a pagan, or a reincarnationist, or whatever his relationship to religion may be, he should be so classed.” They were also instructed not to make inferences, but only to record information as stated by the individuals themselves.⁶⁹ As a result, though most people said that they were Methodists, Presbyterians, and so on, this instruction meant that people were at liberty to tell the enumerator that they were atheists, agnostics, socialists, infidels, skeptics, humanitarians, and a range of other labels. When the census was compiled for publication, many of these idiosyncrasies were collapsed into constructed categories and thus rendered invisible, though the categories of atheist, agnostic, and “no religion” remained. An analysis of the manuscript census reveals the range of choices that individuals made in describing their belief, or non-belief. At the same time, as in the case of mother tongue and other categories that were not always simple in practice, people were required to indicate that they adhered to only one religion.⁷⁰ Thus, people who attended both a Methodist church and spiritualist seances had to choose one or the other, and we should not be surprised if they opted for the more socially acceptable alternative, given that enumerators were usually members of their local community. In other cases, individuals may have felt that they belonged in a certain category, but social pressures may have stopped them from saying so. For example, those who didn’t believe in God but were part of a pious Methodist family might be reluctant to disclose their atheism to a local enumerator, particularly in certain social contexts, such as small-town Ontario.⁷¹ As we will see, at least some British Columbians could be more open about their unbelief than was the case elsewhere in Canada.

The question of who spoke to the enumerator is also important. Enumerators were instructed to talk to every adult in a family, but the “head” of the family was ultimately responsible for ensuring that they received all requested information.⁷² In cases when enumerators spoke only to the family head, would he (or she) always divulge the actual beliefs or adherence of everyone in the house, which could include both servants and boarders? In many instances, male household heads would have been at work when the enumerators called, and thus the census information would have been supplied by the wife and mother, who was more likely to be at home. If religious ambiguity or conflict existed in her family, the information she provided might differ somewhat from that disclosed by her husband, particularly if she was a church member and he was not.

In some cases, census-takers seem not to have spoken to those whom they enumerated, or if they did, language barriers and racism severely limited the value of the information they transcribed. For instance, in the 1901 census for Victoria, one enumerator, a Mr. Phipps, recorded that fifty-four of the fifty-nine Chinese people in his district were “agnostics,” although the Chinese in other Victorian polls were defined by a range of religious categories. This example tells us more about the racism and ignorance of the census-taker than about the religious beliefs of those whom he enumerated. This and other serious problems with the enumeration of racialized groups mean that it is almost impossible to use the census to draw meaningful conclusions about the religious affiliation of racialized groups in British Columbia at this time.

In addition to using the manuscript census (with care) as a stand-alone source, I linked the names of individuals in the manuscript census to identical names in church records for a range of BC communities and, for comparative purposes, for Ontario and Nova Scotia as well. Here, I employed church membership lists, which provide a fairly complete record of the most active participants in most Protestant churches (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of this topic).⁷³ Either because of inadequate detail about certain individuals in church records or the fact that some church members may have lived outside of town and thus did not appear on the local census, not everyone could be linked between census and church list.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the linkages that could be made furnish valuable information about the social backgrounds of church members.

Oral history was also an important source for this book. Because *Infidels and the Damn Churches* spans the 1880s to 1914, I obviously could not conduct oral history interviews myself, but I benefitted from the foresight of those who did so during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. In certain

cases, some context for the interviews and the projects that undertook them was provided, but in other instances little was available. None of these oral history projects focused specifically on irreligion, and many asked no questions about religion, perhaps reflecting the secular nature of this province in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The few projects that did ask about religion were framed by explicit assumptions from interviewers that “we were all more religious in the past.” This may have prompted some interviewees to provide answers that would not disappoint the interviewers. And, of course, as scholars have noted in recent years, oral history interviews, particularly on topics as subjective as religion, tell us at least as much about the nature of memory as they do about “what actually happened” in the past.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, even interview collections with either religious or secular lenses furnish some valuable insights regarding religious and irreligious practices and perceptions. Two collections were particularly helpful. The first was the Coal Tyee Society Oral History Collection, which consists of interviews with people who lived in and around the coal-mining area of Nanaimo. Interviewees were asked directly about religious practice and belief, without any clear agenda on the part of the interviewer, and both religious and irreligious beliefs and practices were clearly articulated. The Imbert Orchard Collection was also very useful; it includes over nine hundred interviews, conducted during the 1960s, primarily with people who lived in British Columbia before the First World War. A number of Orchard’s interviews dealt with religion and irreligion, and although Orchard sometimes seemed to share the “people were more religious then” perspective, some of his interviewees nonetheless provided fascinating information regarding religion and irreligion in early British Columbia.

Although oral history supplied valuable material for this project, written qualitative sources were most central. These included a range of local newspapers, religious papers, and labour and socialist papers from Vancouver, Victoria, and smaller towns across the province.⁷⁶ They also encompassed published and unpublished church reports from various denominations, as well as letters from ministers and missionaries to their superiors. Naturally, these records have a certain bias, but they provide valuable insights about the nature of religious and irreligious behaviour and about clerical attitudes. Finally, I also used published and unpublished reminiscences from people who lived in British Columbia or who visited it between the 1880s and 1914, and a smaller number of letters and diaries. I cannot claim that my selection of these sources was exhaustive, but they were written

by a number of individuals, both religious and irreligious, who made important observations.

THE FIRST CHAPTER OF this volume gives a quantitative overview of the nature of religion and irreligion across British Columbia. It explores both the minority who identified as atheist or as having “no religion” on the 1901 and 1911 censuses, and the far larger group that claimed a religious affiliation but did not belong to a church. This chapter examines the class, gender, ethnicity, and birthplace of those who defined themselves as irreligious, and it looks at their family status, immigrant status, levels of transiency, and regional representation in the province. It also addresses the question of why the racism of census enumerators makes it very difficult to use the census to assess the racialized status of the irreligious.

Chapter 2 undertakes a more qualitative cultural analysis of irreligion in British Columbia, highlighting certain popular and colourful journalists who helped to normalize irreligious discourse in the Kootenays. The chapter also discusses the trenchant and bitter critiques that socialists, syndicalists, and other radical labour activists levelled at Christianity and the churches. The gendered and often racist language that these irreligious opinion leaders employed in their attacks is also analyzed. Some of the most rancorous gendered attacks by the Kootenay journalists focused on Christian efforts to control or shut down elements of “rough culture,” such as drinking, gambling, and the sex trade, which were central to the leisure of most male workers and many middle-class men. This chapter also notes how the strong anti-Asian sentiment in the province made whiteness a key part of most male workers’ sense of respectable social identity, helping more men to discard the Christianity that had once been integral to that identity.

Chapter 3 teases apart the complex and fuzzy religious and irreligious realities of many British Columbians, particularly the transient working-class men who were central to the province’s secular nature. Some were “hardcore” atheists, but many others retained some religious connection, even if it was no more than the desire to have a minister officiate at their funeral. This chapter also explores involvement in fraternal orders as a way of demonstrating that the combined forces of a less religious culture and a deep anti-Asian racism appeared to reduce certain sectarian tensions among the white population, particularly between Catholics and Protestants, which remained acrimonious in the rest of Canada.

Chapter 4 looks closely at church involvement and non-involvement by analyzing case studies of four relatively small BC towns, all in the Interior,

and comparing them to two communities in Ontario and two in Nova Scotia. This chapter further discusses the significance of gender, marital status, class, and transiency to the particular nature of church involvement and non-involvement. Women and family are central to the analysis; though women constituted a minority in the province's population, they were a majority in the churches, often, but not always, drawing their husbands and families with them.

Chapter 5 puts the spotlight on Victoria and Vancouver, looking at both distinctive and shared patterns of religion and irreligion in the urban context. Like the smaller towns examined in Chapter 4, both cities had vibrant church communities. Their evangelical Protestant churches were closely associated with active Christian social and moral reform organizations. At the same time, many more people remained outside the churches than in Eastern Canada. Although local ministers identified Victoria as a non-churchgoing city, it was fast-growing Vancouver that had a significant and concentrated Euro-Canadian low-income irreligious population, primarily of men. This chapter analyzes the churches' less than successful efforts to convert these men on the streets of Vancouver and identifies other struggles between the religious and the irreligious that occurred on the streets of both cities.

Chapter 6 looks at non-Christian communities, primarily in the larger cities. Not all non-Christians were seen as equally threatening – Jews were far more accepted than non-Christian Asians – which points to the complex intersection of religion and race in constructing the “other” in the BC context. This chapter also identifies some possible similarities and differences between Euro-Canadian irreligious men and the province's non-Christian and often racialized communities, also largely male. Rough leisure culture seems to have been a common feature of these groups, but for the non-Christian minorities living in a hostile and racist environment, religious institutions played a range of diverse ethno-cultural roles for the religious and the irreligious alike.

The chapter also explores Christian attitudes toward racialized Asian non-Christian communities and church efforts to convert them. These attempts were relatively unsuccessful, with such failures further weakening the hegemony of the churches.

In seeking to convert the many racialized “heathen” and Euro-Canadian infidels, and to regulate the leisure culture of both racialized and Euro-Canadian men, churchmen needed all the allies they could get. This chapter concludes by scrutinizing their alliances with Euro-Canadian Christian

women, who sought, and received, their support for suffrage rights; churchmen understood that the support – and the votes – of white Christian women were crucial in the struggle to Christianize a racially diverse and not very Christian province.

Chapter 6 identifies some of the rich religious diversity of British Columbia, whereas Chapter 7 examines a particular and significant strand of this diversity. Adherents of “alternative” metaphysical religions such as spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science were a small minority of British Columbians in these years, but they were nonetheless very much over-represented in the province compared to elsewhere in Canada. For some British Columbians, especially women who were uncomfortable with mainstream Christianity, these forms of spirituality provided a more appealing option than outright atheism. Some of these religions, particularly Theosophy, attracted politically activist British Columbians, nurturing their commitment to feminism, class struggle, or anti-racism, and though they claimed links to Christianity, church leaders rejected them as outrages that were as deplorable as unbelief. These New Age spiritualities further undermined the cultural dominance of the Christian churches in the province.

BRITISH COLUMBIA – THE “Left Coast,” or “Lotusland” – is often seen as “out there” in the popular imagination of the rest of Canada. Historians have been less keen on the idea of BC exceptionalism, although chroniclers of the province’s history of racism and racialization have recognized it to some extent. This book argues that the roots of British Columbia’s more secular “exceptionalism” are very evident in the pre-First World War period and were not restricted to any given part of the province. Although it does not claim to be exhaustive, it traces issues of religion and irreligion across the province. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Kootenays may have furnished some of the most colourful and class-conscious examples of irreligion, but working-class Gastown in Vancouver was not far behind, and according to local ministers, Victorians of all classes would rather work in their gardens than attend Sunday service. The coal-mining towns on Vancouver Island had their own versions of godlessness, as well as the highest number of spiritualists (the New Agers of their day). And as we’ll see, many towns also boasted strong church communities, with white settler women playing key roles, as they sought to re-create traditions of faith and female sociability in a foreign and very male context. This book seeks to identify and understand both these average Christians

and their irreligious (and sometimes heterodox) counterparts, finding traces of their lives and beliefs (or non-beliefs) in a range of sources. In this book, we also hear from more high-profile Christian moral reformers and feminists as they battled with atheist journalists, socialists, and “New Ager” for the social and religious salvation of British Columbians in newspapers, streets, churches, and meeting halls across the province. And we’ll see how Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian immigrant groups, in both large cities and smaller towns, more quietly but very clearly rejected the missionaries’ message of Christian salvation, and that the depth of Indigenous conversions remained a source of anxiety for missionaries. Throughout this book and across the province, I trace how a combined assault on Christian hegemony from many directions created a mutually reinforcing cultural space in which irreligion and heterodoxy were far more accepted than elsewhere in Canada.