

The Secular Northwest

*Religion and Irreligion in
Everyday Postwar Life*

Tina Block



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Introduction

IN 2003, I MET with Joe, who has long considered himself both non-religious and anti-church. In our conversation, he recalled his move to British Columbia during the 1960s. Born in 1932 in northeastern New Brunswick, Joe was raised Roman Catholic and regularly attended Sunday school as a child. At the age of twenty he married, and took a job as a technician with the army, an occupation that involved frequent relocations across Canada. During the 1960s, Joe's work took him to the "hub" of Vancouver Island, Nanaimo, where he settled with his growing family. He and his wife had the first few of their eight children baptized and, in the early years of their marriage, attended church sporadically. Joe recalled that their involvement in the church petered out, in part, because of Joe's growing disenchantment with church hypocrisy. When I asked Joe if his wife shared his views on religion and the church, he replied: "Oh I don't think ... she probably never had any, and neither did I. At first you have that old died-in-the-brain deal, oh I must conform, until you realize that no, you don't have to conform."¹

Neither Joe nor his wife considered themselves Christian, although they were also not atheists. By contrast, another of my interviewees, Frank, began identifying as an atheist as a young child. Born in 1926, Frank grew up in Shelton, Washington, and settled during the 1950s in Seattle, where he worked as a longshoreman. He remained single throughout his life. While his parents were believers, they were not churchgoers; as a youngster Frank was sometimes "corralled" by his neighbours to attend worship at a nearby Baptist church. "My mother never had any objection to that," Frank recalled. "She probably thought it would help me be a good person." As an adult, Frank occasionally associated with Buddhist and Unitarian groups, though he did so for social rather than spiritual reasons. Frank never wavered in his atheism, but sometimes he was less open about it, due to the persistent stigma attached to non-belief. "I didn't stick out my neck, you know," he admitted.² Although

their experiences differed, Frank and Joe, along with the forty-two other individuals I interviewed for this study, were part of the religiously uninvolved majority in the postwar Pacific Northwest. *The Secular Northwest* is about this majority.

In the postwar period, the Pacific Northwest was not populated exclusively by atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and active secularists. This was not a universally secular region, but residents of British Columbia and Washington State were far more likely than other Canadians and Americans to reject, dismiss, and ignore religion, particularly in its organized forms. The unique secularity of the Northwest has drawn frequent comment in the wider media. In 2003, the Victoria *Times Colonist* reported that having “no religion is still the No. 1 religion in BC.” One year later, a Seattle journalist remarked: “In the Pacific Northwest, we’re the most irreligious folks in America.” Prominent pollster George Gallup has suggested that the unchurched character of Washington may, in fact, “be the ethos of the state.”³ The Northwest’s distinct secularity has a long history. According to the Canadian historian Lynne Marks, “in many ways BC was ‘born secular.’”⁴ While scholars have traced the Northwest’s secular culture back to the nineteenth century, and linked it in part to the region’s transient and masculine population, there is no general consensus regarding the roots of this culture. While we still have much to learn about the historical development of Northwest secularity, we do know that people have puzzled about this secularity since the early days of European settlement. Such puzzling intensified in the decades following the Second World War, as secularizing currents deepened and organized religion came under increasing critical scrutiny. Through the 1950s and 1960s, religious leaders bemoaned the “cold religious climate” of the Northwest, and categorized the region as a critical mission area.⁵ Over the years, the secular character of the Pacific Northwest has been the subject of much comment, but little critical investigation.⁶ *The Secular Northwest* is the result of my exploration of this regional phenomenon in the postwar era.

Most Northwesterners did not join, attend, or otherwise actively participate in organized religion in the postwar years. They generally accepted religious non-involvement as normal, and at times even celebrated it as intrinsic to the “hardy” Northwest lifestyle, with its emphasis on self-reliance. Of course, religion is not something that happens only in connection with institutions. Rich and varied spiritual practices took shape outside of, and often quite separate from, religious institutions

in the region. This book focuses on the religiously uninvolved majority, which included non-believers like Frank, but also people like Margaret, who drifted from the church in the postwar years though she remained Christian, and Susan, who disdained organized religion but considered herself deeply spiritual. In the following pages, we will encounter people who rejected or ignored organized religion yet embraced the sacred, as well as people who denied the spiritual altogether. This book, then, introduces us to people with quite disparate histories and experiences. Regardless of their varied social locations and spiritual outlooks, Northwesterners were part of a regional culture that placed relatively little importance on formal religious connections. This was a culture produced and sustained largely by ordinary people in the spaces of everyday life. Although their perspectives on religious institutions ranged from indifference to hostility, my interviewees shared in making non-involvement in such institutions a normal and accepted part of life in the region.

In this book, I investigate the shape, meaning, and significance of the Northwest's secular culture, focusing specifically on British Columbia and Washington State between the 1950s and the 1970s. When I embarked on this project, I did not begin with the question, why was this place distinctly non-religious? Such a question presupposes the existence of a uniform, shared definition of religion. Since no such definition exists, I began, instead, with other questions: Was this region less religious than other places? Or was it just religious differently from other places? In what ways was the region secular, or differently religious, and according to whose definition? From the perspective of Christian leaders, the Pacific Northwest was a distinctly secular place because such a large proportion of its residents stayed away from the churches. Church officials in the Northwest and beyond bemoaned the tendency of people to disassociate church involvement from religiosity. In 1958, an Anglican writer for the *Canadian Churchman* affirmed that those who saw church-going and religiosity as separable were, quite simply, "muddle-headed and incorrect." The writer offered what he considered to be the true definition of religion: "Religion consists of being trained by regularity at church and prayer and a definitely planned spiritual growth and development."⁷ Church-centred definitions of religiosity fail to capture the diverse spiritual experiences that have flourished outside of the institutional realm. Residents of the Pacific Northwest were not always religious in expected ways, and non-institutional forms of spirituality were

prevalent in the region. Scholars have done much to challenge definitions of religion that rely exclusively on church involvement. Secularity, however, continues to be equated with unbelief. Just as church participation is not the sole measure of religiosity, unbelief is not the sole measure of secularity. Few Northwesterners called themselves atheists, or adhered to any formal doctrine of secularism. Many, however, were part of a regional culture that placed little emphasis on organized religion, and that accepted and allowed for multiple, intermittent, and informal ways of engaging and rebuffing the sacred.

Born in 1943, Sandra eschewed organized religion, and described herself as both anti-church and spiritual. She spent most of her childhood in Montana, but eventually settled in Seattle during the 1960s. In our interview, she recalled being struck by the “incredible variety of thought” in Seattle: “There’s all kinds of different churches, there’s all kinds of different political groups, this is a very politically active part of the country. So, anytime someone presents some argument, somebody else says well this is another take on it, and this is another take on it, and this is another take on it. So, it’s very easy to escape from.” Sandra commented on the unimportance of churchgoing to many in the region: “there’s such a large number of people to whom [churchgoing] makes no difference.”⁸ Like Sandra, many residents of British Columbia and Washington were content in their distance from religious institutions and embraced, as part of the Northwest identity, the fluidity of sacred and secular in the region. In this study, I conceptualize secularism in a way that captures both this distance and this fluidity. According to sociologist Barry Kosmin, the study of secularism is a new field that “lacks common language or tools of analysis.”⁹ I use the term “secularism” flexibly, and interchangeably with other terms such as “irreligion,” “secularity,” and “non-religion,” to refer to the many ways that people avoided, resisted, or lived comfortably without religion, particularly in its organized forms. Framed in this way, secularism includes, but does not equate to, unbelief. The concept of religion itself bears no stable, universal meaning. In the following pages, I focus on Christianity, as this was the dominant religious tradition in the region. I do not equate religion with Christianity, however, nor do I take the term to mean any worldview, code of ethics, or system of meaning. Rather, I use “religion” to refer to beliefs, structures, and practices that people associated with the supernatural, the sacred, or the otherworldly, or that, quite simply, they understood to be religious. I have deliberately kept the boundaries of religion open in an effort to

foreground the experiences and understandings of ordinary Northwest-
erners such as Sandra.

The postwar Pacific Northwest was characterized by a secular, or religiously uninvolved, culture, which embodied some common norms and parameters. Many Northwesterners shared in living without, and placing relatively little significance on, formal or organized religious connections. Even those who led and joined churches knew that religious involvement did not confer social acceptance in the Northwest as it did elsewhere. However, Northwesterners well understood that public atheism crossed the boundary of social acceptance. Most residents of the region did not define themselves as atheists or unbelievers, and most at least sporadically participated in religious practice throughout their lives. The region was also home to a significant, and often overlooked, minority of individuals who were ambivalent about or disinterested in religious belief, and who considered themselves neither spiritual nor atheistic. Despite such diversity, most Northwesterners shared a sense that their region was, and should continue to be, a place where formal religious involvement mattered little. Although scholars have explored the ways in which distinct religious cultures, based on shared meanings and practices, have taken shape in various times and places, the secular culture of the Pacific Northwest has drawn scant attention.¹⁰ “Religion matters,” Callum Brown writes, “because it shapes people’s lives.” It follows that denying, doubting, or drifting away from religion also matters. Brown urges historians to take these secular journeys seriously and to treat those who undertook them “not merely as lost flocks of the Christian churches” but as people carving out new, often positive, and decidedly non-religious ways of being in the world.¹¹ In foregrounding the Northwest’s secular culture, this book offers insights not only into how people in the region viewed and approached religion, but also how they imagined their communities and went about their everyday lives. As we shall see, secularity shaped daily decisions about everything from leisure to parenting, and was entwined with regional ideals of tolerance and independence.

Northwest secularity was lived, created, and negotiated by all individuals and groups in the region, but it was understood and experienced differently by people depending on their social location. As the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz-Adler notes, regional cultures embody shared and divisive elements at once: “People understand that they share frames and idioms of interaction (a culture of social relations) and, at the same

time, they know that these sets of practices have different implications for the different actors.”¹² In this book I consider, in particular, the various gender, class, race, and family implications of the Northwest’s secular culture. This culture took shape on two overlapping levels. First, secularity was reproduced in the myths, habits, stories, and symbols of the region. While always partial, contested, and contingent, regional discourses and imagery not only made organized religion an awkward fit in the Northwest but also marked out greater possibilities for secular practice. Second, secularity was made in the homes, neighbourhoods, and other everyday spaces of Northwest life. In daily actions and inactions, ordinary people helped to produce and circulate religious norms and expectations in the region. These two levels reinforced each other: everyday practices gave rise to shared cultural ideas and expectations, and such ideas and expectations framed, and occasionally delimited, individual practice. As scholars have shown in various contexts, the material and discursive realms were mutually constituted.¹³ Northwest secularity was simultaneously made and contested on imaginative terrain and in everyday practices on the ground.

In exploring the secular experiences and identities of ordinary Northwesterners, I am inspired by the growing scholarship on popular religion and the social history of religion in North America and Britain.¹⁴ This scholarship has turned the focus away from religious leaders and doctrines and towards the diverse, complex religious lives of ordinary people in everyday contexts. Recently, the concept of “popular religion” has come under criticism for implying a fixed, impermeable division between elite and working-class, clergy and lay religion. Historian Sarah Williams follows other scholars in pointing to the importance of “releasing the notion of popular religion from too close an association with ideas of class.” Williams suggests that we conceptualize popular religion broadly as a cultural rather than exclusively class-based phenomenon.¹⁵ She joins other scholars in challenging the idea, so prevalent in early studies, that religion was either irrelevant or oppressive to the working classes.¹⁶ Current research on working-class religiosity offers an invaluable corrective to earlier studies, which overlooked religion, or depicted it as invariably antithetical to working-class interests. While many studies implicitly represent the working classes as secular by ignoring the place of religion in their lives, few examine working-class secularity as a subject in its own right.¹⁷ At the same time, we know far more about the role of religion in the construction of middle-class identity than about

the nature and meanings of middle-class secularity, particularly in the twentieth century. There was a significant working-class component to the Northwest's secular culture, but this culture was not produced and sustained by the working classes alone. Although constrained by wider class ideals, middle-class Northwesterners were very much a part of the region's secular culture. Regardless of social class, Northwest residents were not, as often depicted, unwitting secularists. They were creatively and often deliberately secular in ways that accommodated the sometimes contradictory expectations of society, family, and self.

While some scholars use the term "popular religion," others have adopted the newer analytic concept of "lived religion," which is meant to capture the hybrid, shifting character of religion in all spaces of human experience.¹⁸ Scholars of lived religion seek explicitly to avoid placing human behaviour into the discrete realms of sacred *or* secular, elite *or* popular, and other kinds of oppositional categories that have little resonance in the real world. According to Robert Orsi, the study of lived religion moves away from formal doctrines and denominations and "toward a study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture – *all* the idioms, including (often enough) those not explicitly their 'own.'"¹⁹ *The Secular Northwest* contributes to this redirection, but departs from the usual path of inquiry by focusing mainly on how people lived "against" or without religion. Scholars of lived and popular religion have shed increasing light on the cultural meanings of religion, and on everyday spiritual practices, but we continue to know little about what it meant to ignore, disdain, or drift away from religion. Why did so many Northwesterners "live against" religion? How did secularity shape their everyday experience? Did it make a difference if one was a man or a woman, working or middle class, living alone or within a family? It is rare for a historian to ask these kinds of questions of secularity, a subject that is usually approached in relation to cultural institutions and elites rather than ordinary people. In the rich literature on secularization in North America and Europe, the ideas of religious and cultural leaders take centre stage.²⁰ By contrast, scholars of lived and popular religion have shown that answers to the big questions in religious history are to be found not in the theological rafters, but in the practices of everyday life. In decisions about such things as what to do on Sundays, how to celebrate the holidays, and what to tell their children about religion, ordinary Northwesterners produced and entrenched their region's secular culture.

My approach to this secular culture is informed, in part, by the influential work of British historians Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod. Such work breaks new ground in exploring the experience of ordinary people who left, or stayed away from, religion in Britain and beyond.²¹ Brown and McLeod are also part of a growing contingent of scholars focused on that critical era of religious change, the postwar years. Canadian and American scholars have joined their British counterparts in identifying the 1960s as a decade of increasing secularization and declining Christian privilege – as a “hinge” era between the Christian-centric 1950s and the more overtly secular 1970s.²² Scholars have been less attuned to how or whether these postwar changes played out in regional and everyday spaces.²³ National developments in religion did not pass over the Northwest, but they also did not determine the region’s particular religious culture. Both region and nation experienced rising levels of institutional religious involvement in the 1950s, and decreasing levels in the 1960s; despite such developments, the relative secularity of the Northwest remained relatively constant. This does not mean, however, that there was nothing historically specific about the postwar era. For instance, cultural officials and ordinary people in the Northwest reflected upon, and helped to shape, the wider critique of the Christian churches that emerged in the 1960s. People in the Northwest and across both nations encountered new secular currents in the mid-1960s as *Time* magazine famously wondered about the death of God, and authors such as Pierre Berton railed about the self-satisfied, undemanding, “comfortable pews” of the Christian churches.²⁴ While events of religious significance occurred at points through the postwar decades, this era was itself distinct in the wider history of Northwest irreligion. A phenomenon with a deep past, Northwest secularity took on meanings specific to the post-war decades. It was, for example, less tied to labour radicalism and a demographic gender imbalance in the postwar decades than it had been in the nineteenth century. In gender, class, and a range of other ways, Northwest secularity was time- as well as place-specific.

Certain countercultural ideals of the 1960s, such as individualism and anti-authoritarianism, underscored and facilitated the secularizing currents of that decade. Introduced during the 1960s elsewhere, such ideals were longstanding elements of the Northwest’s identity, and were central to its secular culture.²⁵ Many Northwesterners commented matter-of-factly on their region’s indifference to, and disdain for, organized forms of religion. In our interview, Sylvia reflected on churchgoing in her

hometown of Nanaimo: “I don’t think anybody really cared. I think it got to the point where nobody really cared if you went to church. It didn’t make any difference to the people you associated with, or to your work situation.” Although she stopped attending church during the 1960s, Sylvia remained a believer. When I asked her to elaborate on her beliefs, she remarked: “I always felt there was something more.”²⁶ Sylvia was among the growing number of people who, in the postwar era, “believed without belonging.” In addition to the well-known work of sociologist Grace Davie on “belief without belonging,” several scholars have examined the rise of religious “nones” and of the “spiritual but non-religious” in America, Canada, and Britain.²⁷ Such terms are fluid and imprecise, but together they point to the growing popularity of non-institutional forms of religion in the postwar world. Long the region with the lowest levels of religious belonging, the Pacific Northwest was at the forefront of this increasingly common way of engaging religion. The region was home to a wide range of informal beliefs and non-institutional spiritual practices, but also to a great deal of indifference to religion in all of its forms. According to Callum Brown, the new “no religionism” of the 1960s had more to do with growing disinterest in, and indecision about, religion than with atheism.²⁸ Imagined as an open, unconstrained, and anti-authoritarian place, the Northwest proved especially fertile ground for religious disinterest and indecision.

Mark Silk notes that scholars who explore the regional dimensions of religion are “in the business of opening conversations that have barely existed, rather than of having the last word.”²⁹ *The Secular Northwest* joins these emergent conversations and suggests that place mattered to the religiously uninvolved culture shared by British Columbia and Washington State. Place is often treated as a container for wider processes rather than something that is itself in need of explaining.³⁰ While more attention has been given to the geographical dimensions of the sacred than the secular, scholars of religion often neglect the category of place. Samuel Hill hints at the reasons for this neglect: “It may be surprising to many that so apparently private, and perhaps culture-transcendent, an aspect of life is heavily influenced by where one lives, indeed the place to which one migrates.”³¹ As Hill implies, to suggest that where a person lives affects how, or indeed whether, they practice religion, is to acknowledge the extent to which human religious behaviour is shaped by everyday life. This contradicts the ingrained idea of religion as something “transcendent, not present in things,” as something that is separate

from, rather than made by and through, culture.³² According to sociologist Rhys Williams, scholars of religion often ignore place because they focus on Christianity, “a self-proclaimed ‘universalist’ religion that aims to bring its truth to all peoples in all lands, regardless of geography.”³³ Despite entrenched ideas about the universal, transcendent meanings of religion, decisions about the sacred were often grounded in place. Place shapes human behaviour, but it is not a meta-category. Place gives meaning to, but is itself differentiated by class, race, gender, and other social identities.³⁴ The class, race, and gender dimensions of place help to further illuminate regional religious behaviour. For instance, the Northwest’s regional identity was premised partly on working-class values and expectations, including those around religion. In addition, the Northwest was gendered masculine, which not only helped to make religion an awkward fit in the region but also differentiated the secular experiences of men and women. The people who lived in the Northwest were not determined by the region’s secular culture but, rather, helped to make it, and experienced it in class-, race-, and gender-specific ways. Nonetheless, even those who challenged this culture, such as church leaders, recognized its existence and shared an understanding of its habits, possibilities, and expectations: they shared, in effect, a sense of place.

To explore this uniquely secular place, I draw on three sets of primary sources: printed materials, quantitative data, and oral interviews. I delve into a wide range of archival and published printed sources for insights into the values and expectations associated with religion, secularity, and regional identity in the postwar world. I examine extensive local, regional, and national church records, including those of specific denominations such as the Anglican Synod of British Columbia, and those of ecumenical organizations such as the Washington and Northern Idaho Council of Churches. These sources, along with denominational newspapers, offer a lens to view how church leaders in British Columbia, Washington State, and beyond perceived and constructed religion and irreligion in the Pacific Northwest. For an alternative perspective, I turn to the records, correspondence, and newspapers of several Secular Humanist and Rationalist organizations within and outside of the region. Such materials help to further contextualize religion and secularity in the Pacific Northwest. I also move beyond explicitly religious and secularist writings to explore a range of travel literature, popular histories, and local newspapers published in the region during the postwar decades. This wider cultural media offers a useful lens

on the dominant images, symbols, and myths associated with this cross-border region.

Qualitative sources such as popular literature and church records do not offer an unmediated window on the past. Such sources do, however, provide at least a partial view of culture, which, David Hall reminds us, “has multiple dimensions; it presents us with choice even as it also limits or restrains the possibilities for meaning.”³⁵ In this study, I read the words of cultural commentators for what they might disclose about the “possibilities for meaning” in the postwar Northwest. Although they were directed at different audiences and guided by competing ideologies, church, secularist, and popular writings reproduced many common assumptions about the meanings of religion, irreligion, and the Pacific Northwest itself. The lived experience of Northwest secularity cannot be understood apart from how this secularity was imagined. The qualitative sources indicate that secularity was typically imagined as an element of the white, male wageworkers frontier. Cultural commentators shared in disseminating commonsense ideas about the innate piety of women, the natural irreverence of male miners and loggers, and the sacralizing effects of the family. Such ideas were often based more on unexamined essentialisms – on what was already “known” about the religious lives of women, workers, and families – than about what was actually happening on the ground. These ideas were not irrelevant in everyday life but, rather, formed part of the web of expectations that framed religious and non-religious behaviour in the Northwest.

I also consult a wide range of quantitative sources. The published Canadian census is among the most comprehensive of statistical sources on religion for this period. The census illuminates the demography of religion in Canada, and points very clearly to the uniquely non-religious character of British Columbia. In contrast, the United States census does not include questions on religion due to the requirements of church-state separation. To ascertain the religious demography of the United States, it was necessary to comb through several local, regional, and national surveys. For both countries, I consult extensive polls and studies conducted by independent, government, academic, and church organizations. These various statistical sources suggest that British Columbia and Washington State made up a distinctly secular place, especially with respect to religious affiliation and participation. Like other types of historical evidence, statistics must be approached not as disinterested facts but as selective constructions bound to the conditions of their making.

For instance, a typical census or survey question such as “What is your religion?” carries with it a host of normative assumptions, including those concerning the meanings of religion itself. This seemingly straightforward question evokes various social pressures depending on who is doing the asking and responding. Statistical evidence is contingent, shifting, and culturally situated. As sociologist Bruce Curtis reminds us, “censuses are made, not *taken*.³⁶

Postwar churches regularly carried out and commissioned studies to measure various aspects of church participation such as membership and attendance. The impulse to quantify church involvement did not suddenly emerge after the Second World War. As historian David Marshall notes, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Canadian churches undertook a “constant accounting which sought to measure the strength of the church.”³⁷ The churches both shaped and reflected the growing emphasis on, and privileging of, statistical forms of knowledge associated with modernity.³⁸ In the postwar context, church leaders often turned to statistics to determine levels of religious practice, but their confidence in the numbers was belied by concerns that religiosity was unquantifiable. The clergy looked with distrust upon numerical increases in church involvement, and even in professed belief, because true piety – or that “great torture of soul,” as one Christian writer described it – was thought to be beyond measure.³⁹ The statistics drew particular scrutiny during the 1950s, a decade of marked church growth. Commentators from within and outside the churches worried that the apparent revival of religion during the fifties was superficial and conformist. In 1956, a writer for the magazine *Christianity and Society* reflected on rising levels of religious belief: “Statistically, the increased figures are valid enough. But they raise a different question: do people believe more than before, or do they only believe they believe? Or believe they ought to believe?”⁴⁰ In that same year, a United Church clergyman from Toronto reported on “The Problem of Suburbia”: “Everyone likes religion in the suburbs. Church going is almost rampant. Churches are filled twice on a Sunday morning. The admission of new members to church is only equalled by the spate of new church building.” The report went on to ponder if such renewed interest in the churches was merely “a conventional suburban pattern with little or no spiritual meaning.”⁴¹ Similar concerns echoed through other churches. Despite their ongoing production of, and reliance upon, statistics, church officials worried that numbers revealed little about the depth of “spiritual meaning.”

In 1959, a writer for an American Catholic weekly commented on the difficulties involved in measuring religion: “A religious boom is not like one in babies or in business. You can calculate the latter in terms of quantity. It is not always wise to do that with religion.” The writer continued: “what percentage of these people really know what religion is all about? Does it mean for them living a good life, thinking good thoughts, ‘feeling good’ or secure, or a hundred other things?”⁴² Many church officials shared this writer’s suspicion that religion statistics, regardless of their purpose, were fundamentally flawed. For the clergy, the chief problem with religion statistics was that, regardless of what people did or said, few understood what “real” religion actually meant. Despite the normative assessments of church leaders, there is no fixed or universal definition of true religion against which individual levels of religiosity can be reliably measured. As well as causing anxiety among postwar clergymen, the flexible and indeterminate meanings of religion pose methodological challenges for the present-day researcher.⁴³ It is not possible to precisely calculate the religiosity of a particular person, or group, or place, but this does not mean that religion statistics should be abandoned. To categorically reject the quantification of religion is to risk reproducing the assumption that religion is somehow out there, separable from everyday life, forever beyond the reach of empirical study. Church leaders were disturbed by statistics on religion in part because they viewed numbers as too quotidian to adequately represent something that was meant to be transcendent and awe-inspiring. In this work, I resist the impulse to dismiss religion statistics on the basis that they reveal nothing about genuine religiousness. As scholars of lived and popular religion have demonstrated, the search for religious purity is futile: religion “takes life” within language, and at the level of everyday practice.⁴⁴ It is with this level that this study is concerned, and quantitative sources on religion offer one way of getting there.

While religion statistics should not be judged according to some nebulous ideal of authentic piety, they should also not be treated as frozen facts. Religious figures convey particular meanings that, in the North American context, have usually been determined by state, religious, or cultural authorities. Such authorities decide which aspects of religion are worth measuring, and reproduce in statistical form normative ideas about what it means to be religious. Thus, we are apt to encounter quantitative data on Christian but not occult practices, on prayer but not meditation, on participation in churches but not psychic fairs. Statistics on

religion present not only a narrow but also a fixed picture of beliefs and behaviours that are shifting, fluid, and impermanent. As several scholars have demonstrated, conventional measures miss much of the texture and disorder of human experience in the religious realm. According to British historian Callum Brown, religion statistics are “discursively active” rather than hard facts that reveal the religious or secular essence of certain groups or places.⁴⁵ Like all historical sources, they offer an incomplete and selective view of the past. Approached in this way, and not as durable truths, religion statistics provide useful insights into regional and national patterns of religion.

When considered with critical caution, quantitative materials can suggest new lines of inquiry and add further texture to our understanding of the past. In this study, the statistical evidence challenges us to think in new ways about this regional phenomenon. While cultural and religious observers regularly attributed Northwest irreligion to working-class men, the statistics suggest a somewhat different story. The quantitative evidence points to a secularity that was broadly based, rather than isolated to a particular demographic group within the region. Class, gender, and other categories shaped and differentiated Northwest secularity, but they did not determine it. In the Pacific Northwest, working-class men were less religious than their counterparts in other regions, but so too were women and the middle classes. Statistical sources compelled me to broaden my view of Northwest secularity, and to bring new actors into the narrative.

The story of Northwest secularity is further complicated by the oral histories of the region’s residents. This project partly derives from my interest in the secular journeys of ordinary people. It made sense, then, to talk to Pacific Northwesterners themselves. For this study, I conducted forty oral interviews with a total of forty-four people between June of 2003 and March of 2004. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the privacy of the interviewees. I carried out thirty-six interviews with individuals, three with married couples, and one with a mother and son. I spoke with people who were born in 1943 or earlier, and who had lived in British Columbia or Washington State for all or part of the period between 1950 and 1971. The majority of my interviews were conducted in five cities that approximately reflected the statistical average in terms of religious involvement in the region: Vancouver and Nanaimo in British Columbia, and Seattle, Olympia, and Port Angeles in Washington. In total, I interviewed twenty-two people who had lived in British Columbia

during the postwar decades, and twenty-two who had lived in Washington State during that time. The vast majority of my interviewees were white and of European descent. I interviewed an equal number of women and men, and approximately the same proportion of working- and middle-class individuals. Most of my interviewees were exposed to Christian influences as children. Thirty-three had at least one nominally Christian parent, whereas eight described both of their parents as non-religious or atheistic. However, even those with non-religious parents celebrated religious holidays and rituals as children.

I endeavoured to interview people who, between 1950 and the early 1970s, fit one or all of the following criteria: 1) they considered themselves to be non-religious; 2) they did not attend or join a church or other religious institution; and 3) they left a church or other religious institution. While their religious identities varied, my interviewees shared a common sense of detachment from organized religion. I adopted what is often referred to as a “semi-structured” approach to interviewing.⁴⁶ Using a general interview guide, I asked my interviewees questions pertaining to a range of subjects, including the role, if any, of religion in their family lives, their reasons for turning or staying away from organized religion, and their thoughts on the place of religion in the post-war Pacific Northwest. Oral history is increasingly seen as a collaborative exercise involving the input of both interviewer and interviewee.⁴⁷ With this in mind, I used open-ended questions, and sought to allow my interviewees as much freedom as possible to take the interview in directions that were meaningful to them. I made every effort to provide them with detailed information about the interviewing process, and spoke candidly with them about the objectives of my larger project. Of course, as scholars who use oral history have long been aware, no amount of self-disclosure will erase all imbalances of power from the interview situation. The oral narratives in this study do not “speak for themselves,” but rather are framed by my own interests and subjectivity: in the end, the power to interpret rests with the researcher.⁴⁸

There is an extensive, interdisciplinary literature on the merits and limitations of oral history.⁴⁹ In oral history projects, questions invariably arise about whether or not the interviewees are representative. For this study, I located participants primarily through newspaper advertisements. Such an approach does not guarantee a random sample of the population since, as Valerie Yow notes, it “is the articulate who come forward to be participants.”⁵⁰ Although the individuals in this study offer

a range of class and gender perspectives, most of them encountered the world from positions within the racial and religious mainstream. Levels of involvement in all religions, not just Christianity, were comparatively low in the Northwest. However, non-Christians in the region who chose to disengage from religion likely met specific challenges, as they negotiated not only the dominant Christian society but also their own religious heritage. Although I do trace the racial and ethnic constructions of Northwest secularity, I do not pretend to capture the experiences of those outside of the white, Christian majority. Whiteness was central to understandings of regional and religious identity in British Columbia and Washington. Secularity was imaginatively construed as part of the quintessential Northwest identity – a regional identity premised, in part, on unquestioned assumptions of white dominance. Christian leaders and other cultural commentators likened the “godless” Northwest to foreign mission areas, and called upon racial tropes to situate and explain this regional secularity. For the most part, however, a reliance on Eurocentric frontier imagery meant that Northwest irreligion would largely be constructed as a problem particular to the white population.

For this project, I interviewed approximately fifteen individuals who identified as atheists, which is a greater proportion than in the Pacific Northwest as a whole. My atheist interviewees were, and are, more secular than most Northwesterners; their stories offer a rare lens on this small but significant group in the region. My interviews were not limited to active secularists or atheists. I also spoke with approximately sixteen individuals who identified as spiritual or religious, and thirteen who considered themselves neither spiritual nor non-believing.⁵¹ I approach the oral narratives not as unmediated reconstructions of the past but as cultural constructions filtered through the present. Historian Sarah Williams suggests that in oral history analyses, “when the focus of the endeavour becomes the way in which memory is constructed and the manner of the telling is treated as equally important as that which is told, then the way is opened for the source to yield its unique value, which lies in the first instance in its expression of culture.”⁵² In this study, I look not only to what the people said but also to the “manner of the telling” for insights into Northwest culture. For instance, women and men spoke different languages of atheism, revealing the powerfully gendered character of Northwest secularity. Women talked more hesitantly and uncertainly about their unbelief, which, I argue, reflects the influence of persistent ideals of feminine piety. This gender discrepancy, along with

many other subtleties of culture, would be missed if we looked only to statistical and published sources. Oral narratives reveal insights into the ingrained cultural symbolism of this region. My interviewees reproduced shared essentialisms of the Northwest, describing it as an especially rugged, tolerant, independent, and “unchurchy” place. Rather than debating the truth of such assertions, I interrogate them for what they reveal about the regional culture and imaginary. The Northwest’s secular identity emerged, in part, through the stories that ordinary people have told and retold about the region.

In postwar writings, cultural and religious leaders regularly discussed the issue of Northwest secularity, but we rarely hear from the people themselves. Oral history offers a rare window on many otherwise hidden spiritual and secular impulses, thoughts, and practices. American and British scholars have been more apt than their Canadian counterparts to draw on oral narratives to enrich our understanding of popular religion and irreligion.⁵³ Oral history has the advantage of pointing the researcher in interpretive directions that may not otherwise have been considered. So as not to close down interpretive possibilities, and in an effort not to restrain “the messiness that leaks into everyday life,” I structured my interview criteria very loosely.⁵⁴ My interviewees had all left or stayed away from religious institutions, but they ranged from the actively atheistic to the deeply spiritual. I interviewed people who described themselves as unbelievers, but who felt it was important to be married in a church; people who prayed regularly but who considered themselves anti-organized religion; people who went to church only to set an example for their children, and who left the church once their children were grown. The interviews reinforced my awareness that humans rarely fit comfortably into the neat categories that are set out for them. At the same time, the interviews also compelled me to take secularity seriously as an element of Northwest culture. Postwar observers often depicted Northwesterners as unwitting secularists – as a people inexorably drawn away from religion by external forces. The people themselves tell a different story, one in which they are agents, rather than passive observers, of secularism. In the view of many residents, the freedom to be religiously uninvolved was and is a positive and valued element of the Northwest lifestyle.

Northwesterners carved out religious and secular identities in relation to not only regional but also national norms. Most historians explore their subjects within the bounds of the nation-state; borders are regularly

taken for granted, but their meaning and significance is rarely examined.⁵⁵ By adopting a comparative approach, this study brings the border into critical view, and offers new perspectives on the interplay between region, nation, and religion. The border mattered to religious meaning and experience. For instance, public atheism was more prevalent in British Columbia than in Washington due in part to the greater cultural constraints around unbelief south of the border. British Columbians have also been more likely than their Washington counterparts to reject organized religion. For various reasons, there have been wider secular possibilities north of the border. While not discounting national differences, I argue that British Columbia and Washington shared more in common, religiously, with each other than with their respective nations. In so doing, my work challenges the thesis of American exceptionalism. Proponents of American exceptionalism argue that there were (and are) fundamental religious differences between Canada and the United States.⁵⁶ In particular they contend that strict church-state separation has significantly distinguished the United States from its northern neighbour. I argue that region often superseded nation in the religious realm, even when it came to those things considered central to nationhood, such as relations of church and state.

Regions are now well understood to be shifting cultural constructions rather than concrete, stable entities.⁵⁷ There is no general, shared agreement in academic or popular discourse on what constitutes the “Pacific Northwest.” While some use the term to refer to the states of Washington and Oregon alone, others include all or part of the states of Idaho, Montana, and Utah. Historian Richard Brown notes that it is something of a “geographical absurdity” to refer to British Columbia as the Northwest, since from a Canadian perspective this province is in the Southwest. Nevertheless, scholars regularly include all or part of British Columbia in their definitions of the Pacific Northwest.⁵⁸ British Columbia was also often included as part of the Pacific Northwest in the cultural media, tourist literature, and everyday discourse of the postwar era. While recognizing the contingent, contested, and indeed somewhat absurd character of all regional categories, I use the term Pacific Northwest to refer to the cross-border region of British Columbia and Washington State.⁵⁹ As several scholars have demonstrated, the border between British Columbia and Washington was highly permeable, and the two places in many ways constituted shared economic, cultural, and social terrain.⁶⁰ The years following the Second World War brought substantial economic growth

to the region's service and manufacturing sectors, although resource extractive industries continued to predominate on both sides of the border. The population of the Pacific Northwest grew at a faster rate than that of both nations. Both British Columbia and Washington received a substantial influx of immigrants, and both became more ethnically and racially diverse. The Northwest shared in the baby boom, economic prosperity, and other national socio-economic trends of the era.⁶¹ This study is not the first to point to the shared economic and social development of British Columbia and Washington, but the place of religion in this cross-border culture has largely evaded in-depth examination.⁶² British Columbia and Washington shared much not only in the social and economic realms but also in the religious realm. Of course, both the province and the state embody internal divides, including those between country and city, the interior and lower mainland of BC, and eastern and western Washington. Despite such internal diversity, a distinct secularity permeated all areas, groups, and sub-regions of the Pacific Northwest.

My foray into Northwest secularity begins in [Chapter 1](#) with an examination of how this secularity was approached in church discourse. Church commentators constructed Northwest secularity in ways that both reflected and entrenched wider class, gender, race, family, and regional assumptions. In [Chapter 2](#), I situate the secular Northwest in comparative context, and explore the widespread critique of organized religion in the region. Fuelled by the global dechristianizing currents of the sixties, this critique took quick root in the Northwest, a region where formal religious connections seemed to matter little. In [Chapter 3](#), I examine the ways in which class and gender shaped organized religious involvement in the Northwest. There was a significant working-class component to Northwest secularity, but secularism also slipped into more respectable, middle-class domains. Wider, middle-class ideals around churchgoing did not seem to hold the same power in the Northwest as in other regions.⁶³ Like class, gender mattered to the secular journeys of Northwesterners. My work brings a new regional perspective to the historiography of women and religion, and offers a rare look at women who challenged or ignored religion. Scholars have given little attention to the subject of women and secularism.⁶⁴ In an essay calling for more recognition of women's presence in American religious history, Ann Braude states: "In America, women go to church."⁶⁵ Braude correctly points out that women have generally outnumbered men in the churches, and that there is a need for greater attention to women's religious involvement.

At the same time, we know even less about those women who avoided, ignored, or rejected religion, in all of its forms. Although it was construed as a masculine problem, Northwest secularity was produced and sustained by both women and men. It was also nurtured by, and helped to shape, the masculine identity of the region itself.

Northwesterners were more apt than those in other regions to eschew formal religious connections, but few rejected religious belief entirely. [Chapter 4](#) turns from a focus on organized religion to a closer analysis of belief and unbelief. The Northwest's secular culture was characterized by a disinterest in, and antipathy towards, organized religion, but perspectives on religious belief were more varied. Many Northwesterners saw institutions as irrelevant to religious understanding, and the region was at the forefront of the increasingly popular "spiritual but non-religious" category. Atheism was silenced and stigmatized in the Northwest as elsewhere, although this did start to change during the 1960s. Class and gender ideals compelled few to attend church in the postwar Northwest, but such ideals influenced approaches to religious belief. Regardless of class or gender, professed atheism remained rare in the region. However, religion in all of its forms mattered comparatively less in the Northwest, and the region embodied deep strands of religious disinterest, indecision, and ambivalence. Northwest secularity was tied, in part, to regional norms of family, the subject of [Chapter 5](#). Secularity was partially created and disseminated within Northwest households, but the family was also the most common motivator of religious practice in the region. The ambiguities and tensions of this regional secularity were most apparent in the family realm, as Northwesterners struggled to reconcile their own secular impulses with the demands of parents, children, and extended family members.

Although class, gender, and family are important to understanding Northwest secularity, none of these categories alone explains this regional phenomenon. It is not possible to pin down a unitary cause of Northwest secularity, for this was a strand of regional culture that was created and sustained by multiple, overlapping factors. In [Chapter 6](#), I suggest that Northwest secularity was in part a product of place. Religion is often conceptualized as universal, transcendent, and separable from ordinary, worldly things such as geography. However, place was and is central to how religion was understood and experienced.⁶⁶ People encounter religion from specific geographical as well as social locations. In suggesting that place shaped human experience, this study

echoes, but does not replicate, the thesis of “western exceptionalism.” Proponents of western exceptionalism have been criticized for arguing, without adequate comparative evidence, that the North American West attracted and produced an inherently more radical kind of people.⁶⁷ My study departs from this essentialist argument by situating the Northwest in comparative context and, following the work of cultural geographers, conceptualizing place as constructed, shifting, and contingent, rather than stable or natural.⁶⁸ Secularity was not somehow inherent to the land or people of the Pacific Northwest. However, intersecting demographic, historical, and cultural elements did help to make this a place of widespread disinterest in, and detachment from, organized religion.

In the postwar years, as in other eras, Northwesterners were sometimes described as a people who had “left God on the other side of the mountains.”⁶⁹ The Northwest was not a godless region, but there was something distinct about how religion was encountered and understood by those who lived there. In *The Secular Northwest*, I seek to unravel and explain this distinction and to provide new insights into Pacific Northwest identity and culture in the postwar era. Northwest secularity was made in elite, official, and everyday spaces. In its making, this secularity reveals much, not only about Northwest identity and culture but also about the ongoing relations of gender, race, class, family, and place in the wider postwar world. In the following pages, we will learn about the secular journeys of ordinary Northwesterners like Joe and Frank, whom we met at the outset of this chapter. In the process, we will discover that being “on the other side of the mountains” did, indeed, matter to religion and irreligion in the postwar Northwest.