

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Activist Unbelief in Canadian History

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Canada has a long history of religious unbelief. This paper offers a social historical survey of its organized, activist forms. The radical thought of the Enlightenment was imported in the late eighteenth century, which saw Voltairean deists like Fleury Mesplet criticizing the Catholic Church in the French-speaking colony of Lower Canada. A long tradition of anticlericalism followed in Quebec even though (or because) the Church was massively influential. The rest of Canada saw freethought and rationalist movements, often organized by working-class autodidacts, developing in the nineteenth century with American and British influences. This tradition continued into the first half of the twentieth century when secularists grappled with fundamentalism and the challenge of radical politics. After World War II the language of secular humanism was deployed and organizations were run by highly educated professionals instead. The position of activist unbelief began to change as Canada shifted from being one of the Western world's most religious countries to being one of the least in the latter half of the twentieth century. Unbelief became unremarkable, though the persistence of religion meant that the twenty-first century saw a revival of militant atheism. This survey shows that unbelief was never just a pure philosophical position but has always been shaped by the social status quo it evolved in or was opposing. Nor was opposition ever enough; activist unbelievers inevitably had to offer the undecided a vision of the secular world they were working towards, and this meant getting involved in some form of politics.

Canada has a long history of outspoken religious unbelief. Despite the Canadian reputation for politeness, unbelievers have never been shy in criticizing their religious neighbours, even in the face of government repression or social ostracism. In what follows I draw on the existing secondary historical literature as well as my own primary research on early twentieth-century Canada to sketch out an overview of these movements and the opposition they faced. Because my area of expertise is the period between the world wars this will be covered in more detail but I aim to give the reader a sense of what the existing scholarship reveals about the broader picture of Canadian unbelief and its social context. Unbelief and doubt are not just pure philosophical positions but have always been shaped by the social status quo they evolved in or were opposing. Nor was opposition ever enough; activist unbelievers inevitably had to offer the undecided a vision of the secular world they were working towards.

A brief note on terminology: I use the word “unbelief” as an umbrella term to encompass related forms of opposition to religion, covering more specific words like atheism, rationalism, humanism, secularism, deism, agnosticism and skepticism. It is useful to avoid the partisan or factional connotations of some of the preceding words and to highlight the similarities between different groups. One drawback, however, is the term's emphasis on the rejection of intellectual belief as opposed to other forms

of dissent or non-conformity. To minimize this I use more specific terminology wherever possible.

How far back to the roots of unbelief extend? Indigenous people have been living in northern North America for at least twelve thousand years if not much longer. Skepticism, doubt and spiritual questioning were certainly present in First Nations societies. For example, we find sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French missionaries dismayed that many First Nations people resisted their proselytizing, ignored or rejected their theology, and mocked their sacred rites. (Jaenen 1985, 187–192; Axtell 1985; Blackburn 2000, chapters 4 and 5; Anderson 1991, chapters 1 and 9) Whether a label like “unbelief,” drawn as it is from Judeo-Christian culture, is an appropriate one here, however, is a highly complex question. Rejecting an imposed or alien religion is not the same as rejecting the supernatural altogether. Given this complexity, and the fact that First Nations history is outside my area of expertise, I will acknowledge the potential for skepticism and doubt in indigenous intellectual traditions, but move on to the more recent history of Euro-Canadian belief and unbelief.

The most obvious root of modern unbelief among European settlers stems from the tradition of doubt emerging from a radical wing of the European Enlightenment, and this is the line that will primarily be traced by this article. Enlightenment unbelief ranged from anticlerical deism to more thorough-going atheism. While deists believed in a remote God who designed the universe but then left it alone to unfold by natural law, and atheists rejected the existence of God altogether, both groups

were part of a shared skeptical intellectual tradition that was seen as dangerous by the orthodox. (Anticlericalism, opposition to the church's power and activity in society, was a position that could be held by those who believed in elements of Christianity and those who rejected it wholesale.) This tradition gave rise to later generations of agnostics, rationalists, freethinkers, secularists and humanists, as the tradition spread from country to country and into different social classes. However certain interests remained in common, such as the desire for individual freedom and the drive to separate church from state. Certain key figures, like Voltaire and Thomas Paine, would be widely influential for most sub-types of unbelievers.

The anticlerical, deistic/atheistic component of French Enlightenment thought was spread to a wide audience by intellectual stars like Voltaire and Denis Diderot. (Spencer 2014) This tradition arrived in (what would become) Canada in the late eighteenth century. The most notable representative was Fleury Mesplet (1734–1794), a French printer, publisher and librarian who, in 1776, arrived in Quebec by way of the fledgling United States. (De Lagrave 1997) His two papers, the short-lived *Gazette littéraire* and the more successful *Montreal Gazette*, were edited by the Voltairean lawyer Valentin Jautard, who helped Mesplet spread Enlightenment thought to their readers. The *Gazette* became notably anticlerical in its later years, giving voice to skeptical correspondents and excerpts from the *philosophes*. The paper sought to reform the society around it, campaigning for a reduction in the number of religious holidays in the province on the grounds that they promoted idleness and poverty. It also argued in favour of theatrical performances, which were frowned on by the Church. Mesplet printed sarcastic letters mocking arrogant local monks who lived lives of selfish luxury. One correspondent described seeing a cleric “large of girth and loud of voice” preaching on the virtue of self-denial. The letter ended with the lines “I do believe that you despise Our Lord divine, and only love your fatness, lard and wine.” (De Lagrave 1997, 247) Mesplet also celebrated the arrival of the French Revolution, hoping that eventually Quebec society too would be reshaped along rational, secular lines. His attitudes were at times deemed seditious, however, and he spent several years in prison.

Though Mesplet died in 1794 the anticlerical Enlightenment tradition in Quebec did not. We find it expressed by influential political figures such as the wealthy Louis-Joseph Papineau, who rejected Catholic doctrine in favour of deism. It was given institutional home with the founding of the *Institut canadien* in Montreal in 1844 and the formation of the liberal *Parti rouge* in 1847. The *Institut* offered some of the only competition to Church-sponsored education, hosting lectures on diverse topics and making available a library collection which included anticlerical and deistic volumes. Joseph Doutre, a lawyer and journalist who had publicly declared himself a religious skeptic, became a leader of the institute's radical wing, which did not hesitate from sparring with Church authorities. Bishop Ignace Bourget successfully pressured some members to leave the organization in the late 1850s and condemned it again in 1869. Some

stubborn members, like co-founder Joseph Guibord, refused to leave and were excommunicated. When Guibord died later in that year his widow attempted to have him buried in a Catholic cemetery but faced clerical opposition. Seeing an opportunity to challenge the Church's authority over society, Joseph Doutre pursued the matter legally and sparked a five-year battle that went all the way to the British Empire's highest court, the Privy Council. It ruled in Guibord's favour in 1874. Attempts to bury Guibord were, however, rebuffed by angry mobs, and it was only in late 1875 that he was laid to rest in a concrete-reinforced grave, accompanied by a combined force of over one thousand soldiers and policemen. Bishop Bourget responded by almost immediately deconsecrating the grave and declaring “There rests a rebel who has been buried by force of arms.” (Murphy and Perin 1996, 224–225; Rioux 1976).

Meanwhile, the *Institut* was fading under church pressure. It stopped hosting lectures in 1879 and the library shut down in 1880. The *Rouges* were sidelined by the Reform Party and worn down by constant pressure from ultramontanists (Catholics who pressed for greater Church power and autonomy). At this point the remnants of the party dropped their anticlericalism and became moderate Liberals. Nevertheless, the liberal tradition in Quebec would go on to produce notable anticlerical journalists and politicians like Louis-Antoine Dessaulles (1818–1895), Godfroy Langlois (1866–1928), and Téléphore-Damien Bouchard (1881–1962). (Lamonde 1994; Dutil 1994; Guttman 2009; Dickinson and Young 2008, 185–193).

Religious attitudes varied across the country in the nineteenth century. In contrast to Quebec's strong religious culture, the churches of British Columbia struggled to influence the broader society. Recent settlers were surprised by the religious apathy they encountered, citing a lack of Sabbath observance and church-going along with open immorality on the part of the migrant male workers. Such workers made up a major part of the white population. Explicitly anti-religious hostility was also present; outspoken secularist journalists like Robert Lowery condemned Christianity as absurd, exploitative and effeminate nonsense not worthy of hard-working white men. (Marks 2016, chapters 1 and 4; Barman 2007, 223, 390) There appear to have been a few overlapping causes for this heightened irreligion. For one, British Columbia was a relatively young settler society where the churches had less chance to establish themselves. As noted, young, single men made up a large percentage of the white population, in a time when Christianity was heavily identified with femininity and respectable domesticity. In some areas, miners and other working-class men embraced a militant socialism, which was often paired with a disdain for religion as a defender of the status quo. Furthermore, religious affiliation may not have been as important as an identity marker: Lynne Marks argues that settler society in British Columbia, where indigenous and Asian populations were more visible than in the rest of Canada, tended to identify itself by whiteness, relying on racial categories to create in-groups and out-groups instead of on religion.

(Marks 2016) Whatever the exact combination of causes, this unique regional culture would carry on (with some fluctuations) down to the present day, when religious observance and commitment in British Columbia is markedly lower than in other provinces. (Block 2016).

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw organized unbelief flourish in both Great Britain and the United States, and these movements made their presence felt in Canada as well. The Toronto Freethought Association was organized in 1873. Evangelical Protestants had a strong influence on the city and to counter it local freethinkers campaigned for the taxation of churches, the secularization of education and an end to Lord's Day laws restricting Sunday activities. (Royle 1980, 81) The most famous American freethinker, Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, was brought to Toronto in 1880 to lecture under the auspices of the Association. (Cook 1985, 53) Ingersoll, known by his admirers as the Great Agnostic, moved on from there to speak in eastern Ontario and western Quebec, stopping in major centres such as Ottawa and Montreal as well as smaller towns like Belleville and Napanee. Other rationalist speakers were regularly invited from the United States to deliver lectures and to publicly debate clergymen. (Hawke 1877) The British secularist movement was also influential. In 1882 Canadian freethinkers invited Charles Watts, a prominent British lecturer touring the U.S. and Canada, to come and live in Toronto. He did so in 1883. Under his influence, around this time the Freethought Association changed its name to the Toronto Secular Society. A charismatic speaker and able writer, Watts became the leader of the movement in Ontario, founding and editing the journal *Secular Thought*. After he returned to England in 1891, the magazine was taken over by Toronto publisher James Spencer Ellis. It had a circulation of approximately 800 in 1899 but seems to have declined thereafter and ceased publication by 1911. (Cook 1985, 52).

Canadian freethought was not entirely dependent on secularist leaders from the United Kingdom or the United States. There were local spokesmen such as the skeptical intellectual and bureaucrat W. D. LeSueur, who debated Canada's Christian thinkers in learned journals. A working-class autodidact tradition was also present, represented by atheist activist/beekeeper Allen Pringle or Robert Chamblet Adams, a former sailor. (Adams 1884; Cook 1985, chapter 4) Adams was introduced to religious skepticism by reading Paine's *The Age of Reason*. He struggled with religious questions for many years, but by the time he settled Montreal and set up a business he had arrived at an atheist worldview. Adams was an amateur poet and composed verses on skeptical themes. His "Pithy Creed of Rationalism" read:

Jehovah ranks with Jupiter;
The Bible's Hebrew literature;
Confucius, Jesus both were men;
A future lies beyond our ken.
A miracle do not expect;
Seek nature's cause for each effect.
From man have come all gods and creeds;
Your only saviour is your deeds. (Cook 1985, 60)

Adams also compiled new lists of moral imperatives to replace the Ten Commandments, including "Thou shalt give women equal rights with men." In this he was drawing on a longer tradition of secularist feminism dating back to the early nineteenth century. (Schwartz 2013) Adams organized the Montreal Pioneer Freethought Society in 1880. This later merged with the Canadian Secular Union, which Adams helped lead until his death in 1892. Unbelief existed outside of the larger cities as well; small secularist societies could be found throughout the scattered towns of Southern Ontario. (Royle 1980, 81).

Unbelief was not limited to Christian Canada. Many Eastern European Jews emigrated to Canada between 1901 and 1931, and a significant number turned away from traditional Orthodoxy to embrace a secular life. This typically took concrete forms other than purely intellectual dissent, such as abandoning traditional clothing and food or flouting Sabbath restrictions. For many, embracing a secular worldview was tied up with getting involved with left-wing politics, joining the ranks of the Zionists, social democrats, Communists, or a range of others. Common denominators for these movements were an emphasis on enlightenment through secular education, the use of the Yiddish language and the creation of community culture, typically music and theatre. (Reiter 2016, 18–20, 193) To intervene successfully unbelievers had to offer alternatives to religious culture, and Yiddish was a major component in this endeavour. Pre-war Montreal saw anarchists found a Yiddish language *Ratsyonale Shul*, or Rationalist School, which competed with the Orthodox schools by offering secular inculcation for Jewish youth. (Belkin 1999, 308).

Overall, however, the years between 1900 and 1920 seem to have been a quiet time for organized unbelief in Canada, with little evidence of activity. The situation was likely similar to that in England and the United States, where an older generation of secularists was dying off or retiring, and where many younger activists turned to socialism instead. (Schmidt 2016, 250–253; Royle 1980, 328–334) The religiously-inflected patriotic fervour around World War One also discouraged unbelievers from speaking out. By the 1920s, however, this began to change. For example we find brief mentions of a secularist group in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the early 1920s, called the Canadian Secular Society. The CSS, led by A. McKay Jordan, appears to have been short-lived but it held at least a few meetings on typical rationalist topics. For example, in April 1923 it hosted a local socialist activist, the "Red Dentist" Dr. W.J. Curry, who spoke on evolution. The Secular Society does not seem to have lasted very long, but it was soon joined by more tenacious groups. (*Vancouver World*, 18 April 1923, p. 9, and 19 April 1923, p. 9).

One of the most interesting was to be formed by French-speakers in 1920s Quebec. Since the demise of the *Institut canadien* in 1880, Quebec had not been fertile ground for francophone secularism. Catholicism's influence had been increasing steadily since the mid-nineteenth century in francophone society; the population of Quebec was 86% Catholic as of 1941 (Dickson and Young 2008, 242). The pressure to conform grew through the early twentieth century as a conservative clerical nationalism

came to monopolize francophone identity. Furthermore, despite the spread of urbanization and industrialization, popular piety only increased in intensity during these years. (Murphy and Perin 1996, 234–236) The number of clergymen and those dedicated to religious communities grew from 8,612 in 1901 to 25,332 in 1931. This meant there was one clergyman or dedicated “religious” (such as monks and nuns) for every 166 Catholics in 1901, but one for only 97 by 1931. Most of these “religious” were not cloistered away but worked in various roles in society. The Church thus projected power not just from the pulpit but also in schools, hospitals, and other social institutions. One historian has written that this socio-cultural influence was so overwhelming it “could almost be called a monopoly.” (Linteau, Durocher and Robert, 1983, 454–5).

Despite or perhaps because of this intense religious presence, some Quebecois were determined to resist. In 1925, Albert Saint-Martin, a court stenographer who had been active in radical causes since 1900, founded a new organization, the *Université ouvrière*. The *Université* was Saint-Martin’s response to being expelled from the Communist Party of Canada, for attempting to start a separate wing of the party focused only on Quebec. Saint-Martin still considered himself a small-“c” communist and opened his new “Worker’s University” to radicals of many persuasions. Located in one of Montreal’s poorest neighborhoods, the *Université* offered lectures, debates, and discussion. Lectures, which cost five cents, regularly attracted between three and five hundred attendees. Members were also encouraged to learn how to speak publicly on topics that interested them. One attendee, who worked as a longshoreman, recalled giving a lecture on the problems of Catholic unions, while one of his coworkers delivered a talk on astronomy, complete with pictures. The UO also had a library, the use of which was open to anyone who paid five cents per loan or bought a lifetime membership of one dollar. (Fournier 1979, 21).

What makes this organization relevant to the history of unbelief in Canada? One radical who visited it recalled:

I remember the *Université du Proletariat* [i.e., *Université ouvrière*] and the *Association Humanitaire* in east central Montreal where hundreds of pipe-smoking workers would gather to hear the most violent denunciations of the Church and the capitalist class. When you went up the stairs to the hall, you had to pass a huge picture of Jesus Christ with a knife in his hand dripping from the blood of the worker he was stabbing. And thousands of French-Canadian workers tipped their hats to that picture. (Salutin 1980, 12)

While Saint-Martin’s group did discuss social and scientific ideas, many (perhaps most) of the *Université’s* lectures centred on criticism of Christianity and the Roman Catholic church. Saint-Martin would face criticism not only from outraged Catholics but also from Communists who felt he was wasting too much energy attacking the church when he should be organizing workers. (Weisbord 1983, 15, 45; MacLeod, Park and Ryerson 1978, 141) Regardless, his

viewpoint was that francophone Quebecois would only join the revolutionary cause once they had abandoned their devotion to Catholicism. (Fournier 1979, 27–29).

The suffering of the Great Depression struck Saint-Martin’s community particularly hard, situated as it was in one of Montreal’s poorest neighborhoods. In response, he organized the *Association humanitaire*, a group dedicated to uniting and supporting the unemployed. The Catholic Church was in charge of distributing most social relief; a local parish priest could provide or deny benefits as he saw fit. Saint-Martin and the *Association* wanted the provincial government to take over this task and provide impartial, secular services to all. Thus, members of the *Association* wrote letters to the local bishop renouncing their Catholicism; church officials complained of receiving hundreds of these messages. The municipal government did turn to providing direct relief in 1933. (Lariviere 1979, 50; Linteau 1991, 55–66; Dagenais 2000; Copp 1979).

Saint-Martin’s outspoken opposition to the status quo cost him dearly. The *Université* was raided and vandalized several times by militant Catholic youth, who on one occasion took the entire library into the street and burned it. When he was in his sixties, Saint-Martin himself was attacked and badly beaten by fascist thugs. (Lariviere 1979, 158; Kealey and Whitaker 1993) He was convicted of blasphemous libel, charged fines, and forced to post hefty bonds ensuring he would keep the peace. (R. v. St. Martin 1933) His right-hand man, Gaston Pilon, was likewise convicted and sentenced to a year of hard labour, during which he recanted his atheism and became a fervent Catholic. (R. v. Pilon 1934; Rolliou 1934, 5) Due to these setbacks, and his own increasing age, Saint-Martin was forced into a semi-retirement, though he continued to write on radical topics until his death.

Canada-wide, outspoken unbelief like Saint-Martin’s was still quite unusual. In the 1911 and 1931 censuses, the percentage of those who said they had no religion stayed steady at 0.002%. But these numbers do not tell the whole story. Like Montreal, larger centers in anglophone Canada also witnessed a revival of unbelief in the interwar period. Two small-town Ontarians, Bertram Leavens and William Styles, moved to Toronto after the Great War and created a new group, the Rationalist Society of Canada, in 1926. Leavens and Styles were both working-class men of British descent who had been born and raised in Canada. They got their start speaking in the streets and parks in summertime, before renting downtown theatres for more formal lectures. (“Learned to be Atheist at His Mother’s Knee,” “May Ask for Darrow But Only as Junior,” *Toronto Star*, 24 Jan. 1927, p. 3.; “Bible is Ridiculed by Rationalists,” *Toronto Star*, 17 Jan. 1927, p. 7; Letter to the editor: Robert S. Potter, “Atheists versus evangelists,” *Toronto Star*, 20 July 1931) While Leavens and Styles delivered many lectures themselves they also opened the lectern to other members and visiting speakers. The group’s legal counsel, who also gave lectures, was a man named Lionel Cross, who was originally from Trinidad and had the distinction of being Toronto’s first Black lawyer. (Lewthwaite 2012) Another frequent speaker was Jean Laing, a trade unionist and feminist who

was very active in left-wing causes in the city. (Sangster 1989, 111–113, 143).

The most notorious member of the Toronto group was an English immigrant named Ernest Sterry. He had been introduced to atheism by his mother, an active secularist, and had travelled to New Zealand to spread atheist ideas before finally settling in Canada. Late in 1926 he published a rationalist newspaper, entitled “The Christian Enquirer,” and personally distributed it at public places around Toronto. Along the way he handed it to high-ranking members of the provincial government, who promptly initiated charges of blasphemous libel against him; he was arrested early in 1927. (“Arrest Atheist Editor Charge of Publishing a Blasphemous Libel,” 11 Jan. 1927, *Toronto Star*, p. 1; “Blasphemous Libel is Charged Against Editor of Pamphlet,” *Globe*, 11 Jan. 1927, no page number) One passage which the authorities found particularly offensive read:

The God of the Bible is depicted as one who walked in the Garden of Eden, talked with a woman, cursed a snake, sewed skins together for clothes, preferred the savoury smell of roast cutlets to the odors of boiled cabbage, who sat in a burning bush or popped out from behind the rocks, this irate Old Party who thunders imprecations from the mountain or mutters and grouches in the tabernacle, and whom Moses finds so hard to tame, who in his paroxysms of rage has massacred hundreds of thousands of his own Chosen People, and would often have slaughtered the whole lot if cunning old Moses hadn't kept reminding him of “What will the Egyptians say about it?” This touchy Jehovah whom the deluded superstitionists claim to be the Creator of the whole universe, makes one feel utter contempt for the preachers and unfeigned pity for the mental state of those who can retain a serious countenance as they peruse the stories of His peculiar whims, freaks and fancies, and His frenzied megalomaniac boastings. (Sterry 1926).

The case received a great deal of press attention over the ensuing months and was framed as Canada's answer to the Scopes “Monkey” Trial of 1925. There were rumours that Clarence Darrow, the famous American agnostic lawyer, would come to take up the cause. Ultimately however the task fell to fellow rationalist Lionel Cross, who valiantly tried to defend Sterry. Almost inevitably he was found guilty, and an appeal also failed. The law of blasphemous libel, which stayed in the Criminal Code until 2017, was framed in highly subjective terms. The offence was not clearly defined, except for this caveat: “No person shall be convicted of an offence under this section for expressing in good faith and in decent language, or attempting to establish by argument used in good faith and conveyed in decent language, an opinion on a religious subject.” In practice this meant that if one's goal was to scandalize and to hurt the feelings of Christians, religious criticism became libel. Once Sterry was charged, and admitted that the newspaper was his, there was no way to defend him

before a hostile court, particularly given provocative passages like the one above. Sterry seems to have hoped for a dramatic courtroom showdown to advance rationalism, but while public opinion was divided, the authorities were not impressed and he did not become a *cause célèbre*. The prosecutor and the judge both positioned the rationalist as a threat to the Christian foundations of Canada, and as such a grave danger to the nation. J.S. Woodsworth, a social democratic politician, attempted to have the law of blasphemous libel abolished not long after Sterry's trial, but his motion faced almost universal condemnation by his fellow members of parliament. In their minds, while there was no established church in Canada, it was still a religious state in which the government should defend Christianity.

Toronto's Rationalist Society was not immune to the changes brought by the Great Depression. Starting in 1932, they devoted more and more of their time to lectures on contemporary social and political issues, featuring talks from Communists, labour leaders and social democrats alike. Irreligious themes were not abandoned totally but thanks to the suffering caused by the Depression there was a public appetite for discussion of radical reform. Bert Leavens, who did most of the work in keeping the Rationalist Society active, got involved with Woodsworth's social democratic party, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and in the mid-1930s began running as one of their candidates. This led to the eventual end of the Rationalist Society as his attention was diverted away from it.

Interwar Winnipeg was also home to a successful free-thought organization. Marshall Gauvin founded the Winnipeg Rationalist Society in 1926. Gauvin had been born in New Brunswick to a mixed Catholic/Protestant family. He had a religious upbringing but became a convinced rationalist after his older siblings introduced him to the work of Robert Ingersoll. After much personal study he gave up his job as a carpenter and became a professional rationalist lecturer. He spent time in Toronto, Pittsburgh, and Minneapolis before settling in Winnipeg. He was originally invited as a visiting speaker by the One Big Union, a (mainly local) Marxist organization which had grown out of the great General Strike of 1919. (Milward 1987).

Gauvin lectured at downtown theatres every Sunday evening, except during the summer months. In this era before radio and movies had become major draws, attendance at lectures was a popular pastime. His weekly talks could bring in as many as eight hundred people, though two to three hundred seems to have been the average attendance. He combined wit and a measure of theatricality with the knowledge gained from his wide reading. Gauvin pulled no punches when assailing religion, God, the churches or the Bible. On occasion, he would debunk the sermon a specific clergyman had given the week before, based on his own or another's transcription. Several times he debated local fundamentalists before large audiences. One such event drew about three thousand people. The crowd was excited, with local journalists likening the mood to that at a tense hockey game. Gauvin was effective at capturing public attention and

was regularly criticized for it from the pulpits of local clergymen. (Hanowski 2015).

Unlike the Toronto rationalists, Gauvin's society was structured strictly around him as the regular speaker. Lecturing provided a large part of his income, which mostly came from audience donations. He sometimes spoke on topics of more general interest like history and economics, but these never did as well as his anti-religious themes. (Gray 1935) Gauvin stayed in close touch with secularist movements in the United States. For example, he changed the name of his organization to the Winnipeg Humanist Society in 1935. American secularists, many coming out of the Unitarian churches, had begun using the term "Humanist" as a self-descriptor not long before; the first Humanist Manifesto had been published in the U.S. in 1933. In contrast to these transnational links there does not appear to have been any contact among contemporary Canadian secularist groups.

Based on analysis of surviving correspondence and membership lists, the Winnipeg Rationalist/Humanist Society was made up mainly (about 75%) of white working-class people of English and Scottish descent. Many were skilled workers in the railway industry. While a majority of Gauvin's core constituency was male, women made up a fairly significant component, somewhere between 30 to 40%. A sizeable portion of Gauvin's audiences seem to have been drawn from the working-class militants associated with the One Big Union, who were open to his anti-church message and appreciative of his brand of popular education and enlightenment. (Hanowski 2015).

While Gauvin was somewhat sympathetic to socialism, his ideas about society were largely drawn from the liberal individualism of the rationalist tradition. He clashed at times with the leadership of the strongly Marxist One Big Union, and the membership of the Rationalist Society sometimes found itself pulled between the two orientations. In the mid-to-late 1930s enthusiasm for the Popular Front against fascism championed by the Communists was running high. Gauvin was involved with a local committee in support of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. He also gave increasingly enthusiastic lectures about the Soviet Union and the communist state's efforts to promote secularism and freedom. When the USSR signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany and invaded Finland, Gauvin was horrified. He gave a series of talks on Stalin's crimes and the Soviet Union's betrayal of freedom, talks which split his audience and helped hasten his retirement from active lecturing in 1940. (Hanowski 2015).

Though the interwar surge was over by this point, organized unbelief did not disappear. W. A. Waddell, a local professor, started a rationalist club in Regina in 1939. (Stein 1985) The transition to the language of "Humanism" (as first noted in Winnipeg in 1935) continued as the Second World War began. In 1940, a new association calling itself the Canadian Humanist Group emerged in Toronto. The people involved mostly stayed anonymous, though the few who can be identified, like Eric Aldwinckle, Blodwen Davies, and Frederick B. Housser, were active in Toronto's arts scene. The Humanist Group published an occasional periodical called *MAN*, which focused on presenting an

almost spiritual brand of secular humanism. Its motto was "There is Hope for Man, Only in Man." These publications petered out around 1943. (Hanowski 2015).

Unbelief was still very much a minority position in the postwar period: in 1947, a poll found that 95% of Canadians claimed to believe in a God. Those who said they had no religion had risen slightly, reaching 0.4% in 1951. The postwar era also saw a societal shift towards professionalization that was reflected in the leadership of humanist organizations. The day of working-class autodidact leaders was passing. Doctors were especially prominent in the new formation. In 1946 the doctor and ex-missionary Marian Noel Sherman, who was a committed Anglican, came to believe that God did not exist. Sherman left the church and became a leader of the secular humanist movement in British Columbia. (Block 2014, 140) Another notable unbeliever in the postwar era was Dr. Brock Chisholm, a veteran of the Great War. In the 1930s he began to practice psychiatric medicine and came to feel that religious education was altogether bad for children. But he only went public with these opinions after the Second World War, once his professional status was well assured. When he was appointed Canada's first deputy Minister of Health he very quickly garnered controversy by publicly announcing that children should be told the truth about the non-existence of Santa Claus. He went on to become the first director of the World Health Organization in 1948. (Flynn 2007).

The Humanist Fellowship of Montreal was formed in 1954 by three more doctors, R. K. Mishra, Ernest Poser and Maria Jutta Cahn. The group soon gained Chisholm and Bertrand Russell for its patrons. The Victoria Humanist Fellowship was created soon after in 1956. These organizations would come together to create a national umbrella group for secularist organizations, the Humanist Association of Canada, in 1968. It was formed in part to support Dr. Henry Morgentaler's legal struggle against Canada's abortion laws, by offering an organized secular counterweight to conservative churches who opposed abortion. This was an example of the way postwar humanist groups spent less time directly attacking religious teachings than the earlier rationalists had, and more on promoting progressive values in a secular society.

Postwar humanism was also operating in a rather different social context. On the one hand, they had to navigate the politics of the Cold War, which made atheism virtually synonymous with communism. On the other, beginning in the mid-1960s Canadian humanists saw Christianity start to recede in social importance. Beginning in the 1960s the province of Quebec, long a bastion of Roman Catholicism, witnessed a dramatic shift from a fervently religious group identity to a linguistic, secular nationalism, today known as the Quiet Revolution. (Zubrzycki 2016) The transition in the rest of Canada was perhaps less dramatic but still striking. In the early 1970s, 89% of Canadians said they believed in a God. By 2012 the number had fallen to 66%. Engagement with organized religion was likewise affected; those who said they attended a place of worship at least monthly went from 43% in 1986 to 27% in 2011. Conversely the numbers of those who

said they had no religious affiliation increased rapidly. It stood at 7% in 1971; by 1991 it was 12.6% and in 2011 it was 24%. (Block 140; National Post 2012).

The twenty-first century saw a revival of a more assertive, militant atheism, nurtured in Internet communities and given voice by bestselling books. (Zenk 2013) The collapse of the Soviet Union and the linked diminishment of the “godless communist” trope was one factor, as was widespread outrage over the events of September 11, 2001, which showed religious ideology and violence could still shape world affairs. The Centre for Inquiry, originally based in the United States, opened a Canadian branch in 2007. In the last decade campaigns have been launched challenging the law of blasphemous libel (which was finally removed from the Criminal Code in 2017) and the separate, government-funded Catholic school systems which still exists in some provinces. Contemporary Canadian atheists have also put up provocative anti-religious advertisements and promoted the more confrontational style of the New Atheists in Great Britain and the United States. In recent years the language of political secularism, and its French analogue, *laïcité*, has sometimes been deployed in reaction to the presence of practicing Muslims in Canadian society.

Given the receding power and presence of organized religion in Canadian society, particularly among the young, it remains to be seen what shape organized unbelief will take going forward. New immigrants to Canada are typically more religiously observant than long-time residents, so we may see secularist arguments taken up by their second and third-generation descendants. While organized belief systems are losing adherents, more diffuse spiritualities continue to flourish, which may translate into unbelievers focusing on debunking pseudoscience and free-floating mysticism. It is also possible that a more thoroughly secularized society will result in people losing interest in secularism. Why make the effort to organize and struggle against religion if religion is simply a marginal option that a few people quietly choose for themselves? Of course, religion is still far from being only a private, marginal choice in the early twenty-first century.

Canadian movements have shifted over the centuries, from early skepticism and deism to the humanism and militant atheism in our own time. Unbelief was expressed in different ways, depending on the cultural and social context of the unbelievers, their economic status and their levels of formal education. While we can discern some forms of skepticism and resistance to religion among First Nations peoples, the largest unbelieving tradition in Canada was descended from European Enlightenment-era deism and atheism, by way of freethought, secularism and rationalism. Unbelief was rarely able to limit itself to debunking the supernatural. Because secular activists urged people to live their lives in the here-and-now, instead of postponing their hopes to an afterlife, they had to explain how the here-and-now should be organized. Once religion is debunked, what next? What would a rational society, organized scientifically for maximal happiness, look like? Could humans be liberated from oppression and injustice? Thus, since the days of Fleury Mesplet

in the eighteenth century to the present, unbelievers have always had to grapple with contemporary politics. Some, like Albert Saint-Martin, embraced wide-reaching revolutionary goals, while others sought to change society through more gradual social democratic or liberal reform efforts. Other activists kept their focus on religion, insisting that unbelievers should be pushing back against the influence of religious bodies on Canadian society.

Surveying the broad sweep of Canadian unbelief as we have shows that there are broad patterns to be discerned. The activists of one generation shared some goals and touchstones with those of following generations; the deistic Voltairean thinkers of the late eighteenth century would have recognized their anticlerical descendants, who in turn would have agreed with some of the aims of the freethinkers and secularists who followed them. However, we must also recognize the contingent and local qualities of these movements as well, which were always reacting to the religious and societal norms of their own day. Unbelief was shaped by its resistance to such norms. Indeed, organized doubt in Canada has been in many ways fundamentally oppositional. Some of the arguments amongst “new atheists,” humanists and secular leftists in our own time reflect these foundational questions about what content and goals unbelief should have in a Canada that is increasingly secularized.

Competing Interests

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