

“Crawling with Atheists”: Unbelief at Canadian Universities during the Sixties

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ABSTRACT

Canadian universities were regularly held to be seedbeds of atheism in the long sixties. This article interrogates that claim through an analysis of campus life at a selection of universities across Canada, with special attention given to the University of British Columbia. Drawing on campus publications, secular media sources, religious and humanist writings, and oral histories, this article shows that unbelief was openly discussed and addressed in neutral, sometimes positive, tones on a number of university campuses in Canada during that era. While university life contributed to the gradual erosion of the stigma against unbelief, the persistence of that stigma is evident in the lingering discomfort and periodic controversies associated with atheism on campus. The universities examined here were not crawling with atheists, but they did widen platforms and possibilities for challenging religious belief and helped to un-silence atheism during a period of significant religious change in Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des années soixante, les universités canadiennes étaient souvent considérées comme des terrains fertiles pour l'athéisme. Il s'agit, dans cet article, de remettre en question une telle affirmation à travers une analyse de la vie sur les campus d'une série d'universités d'un bout à l'autre du Canada, avec une attention toute particulière pour l'Université de Colombie-Britannique. S'appuyant sur des publications universitaires, des sources médiatiques laïques, des écrits religieux et humanistes ainsi que des histoires orales, cet article démontre que l'incroyance était ouvertement discutée et qu'elle était abordée sur un ton neutre, parfois positif, sur un certain nombre de campus universitaires au cours de cette période. Alors que la vie universitaire contribuait à l'érosion graduelle de la stigmatisation de l'incroyance, la persistance de cette stigmatisation était évidente dans le malaise constant et dans les controverses périodiques associées à l'athéisme sur le campus. Si les universités examinées dans le cadre de cet article ne regorgeaient pas de personnes athées, elles ont élargi les plateformes et les possibilités de contestation des croyances religieuses tout en donnant une voix à l'athéisme durant une période de changement religieux significatif au Canada.

Introduction

In 1961, a *Maclean's* magazine article identified the university as the "most difficult single testing ground" for the churches. According to the author, "hundreds of Canadians go into the universities every year as professed and unquestioning Christians and come out four or five years later as agnostics, atheists or serious doubters."¹ A couple of years later, a writer for the University of Alberta's student newspaper, the *Gateway*, remarked: "Before I came to this university I was warned that it was crawling with atheists. I doubt whether 'crawling' was the appropriate word but I'll admit I have met a few."² The view that atheism ran rampant on university campuses circulated widely in Canada during the 1960s. In an effort to explain the apparent secularizing trends in Canadian society, commentators from within and outside the churches pointed to the universities as seedbeds of unbelief and to professors as propagators of atheism. Such rhetoric belies the complexity of religion and irreligion on Canadian campuses, but questions about the place and prevalence of unbelief in university life during the nineteen-sixties deserve attention. What part, if any, did unbelief play in the campus experience during the sixties? Did the universities reflect, reproduce, or otherwise engage with evolving views on atheism in the wider culture of the time? This article considers these questions and offers new insights into the interplay between university life and religious change in postwar Canada.

While my research addresses the national context, I give special attention to Canada's westernmost province, particularly to the University of British Columbia (UBC). I consulted alumni publications, yearbooks, president's reports, student handbooks, and Student Christian Movement records at UBC, in addition to student newspapers at a range of universities within BC and across Canada.³ For broader cultural views on unbelief, youth, and university life, I examined several regional and national magazines and newspapers, along with archival and published records of various churches and of the secular humanist movement. A range of census and survey materials were probed for insight into the demography and trajectory of religious change in postwar Canada. I also draw on semi-structured oral history interviews conducted with ninety-one people (forty-two women and forty-nine men) who turned or stayed away from religious belief between the 1950s and 1970s. The interviewees, a majority of whom were born in 1960 or earlier, were predominantly white, of European descent, and had Christian backgrounds.⁴ Approximately 70 per cent of those interviewed attended university for at least a time, and most of those did so in Ontario or British Columbia. While the interviews as a whole reveal broader patterns of unbelief in postwar Canada, of particular interest here are the journeys of those who attended university between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, an era commonly referred to as the "long sixties." I join many other scholars in conceptualizing the sixties broadly, an approach that makes sense given that the trends and currents of that time, religious and otherwise, spilled outside the bounds of the decade proper.⁵

During the long sixties Canada saw a substantial decline in church involvement and an erosion of Christian dominance in the public realm.⁶ Levels of professed religious belief also declined in that era, though more gradually than levels of participation in

institutionalized religion. Historians generally agree that the sixties were a time of major religious change in North America and much of Europe, but there are ongoing debates about the extent, causes, and pace of that change. My work contributes to these conversations by revealing how one aspect of religious change—growing adherence to, and tolerance of, unbelief—took shape within, and in discourse about, the universities. I argue that university life in Canada contributed to wider secularizing currents of the time and played an especially important role in normalizing the rejection of religious belief. On several university campuses in Canada, the subject of unbelief was openly discussed, and addressed in tones that were often neutral and detached from the common (and negative) association with communism. While this may not seem all that striking, such openness about unbelief was unusual in Canada during the sixties, a time when the stigma against atheism persisted, when “godless communism” was regularly disparaged, and when those who disbelieved in God often chose to remain silent so as not to risk social ostracism. Contrary to widely held suspicions, the universities were neither “crawling with atheists” nor actively promoting unbelief. However, campus life at a number of universities included space for non-believers, opened possibilities for challenging religious belief, and helped to unsilence atheism during a period of significant religious change in Canada.

In exploring the history of unbelief, my work joins a growing multidisciplinary scholarship that gives close attention to the subject of non-religion and seeks to better understand the lives of those who have doubted, denied, or remained indifferent to religion. I draw on this work in defining unbelief broadly to include the world views and experiences of all those who “lived their lives as if there is no God,” from the openly atheistic to the religiously uninterested.⁷ Such a broad definition is apt, given that the secularizing trends of the sixties involved a rise not only of explicit atheism but also of religious doubt and apathy. There is an extensive historiography of secularization in Canada, much of which explores the role of religious institutions and leaders themselves in hastening the decline of Christian dominance in the public realm during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸ My work contributes to a burgeoning transatlantic scholarship that shifts the focus to the postwar era and identifies the sixties as a turning point in the processes of dechristianization and secularization.⁹

The part played by the universities in these processes has not gone unnoticed. In the Canadian context, the most sustained scholarly attention paid to this subject has been given by Catherine Gidney, who ably traces the shift in the public voice of Canadian universities from liberal Protestant to a more secular stance by the 1960s.¹⁰ Gidney joins other historians in Canada and beyond in depicting the religious changes of the sixties as at once transformational and part of a longer, more incremental trajectory. As Hugh McLeod notes, the changes of the era did not instantly turn “believers into atheists.”¹¹ My work likewise reveals tensions between old and new, and strands of continuity and change, in the domain of unbelief on Canadian campuses. While there was considerable positive discourse on unbelief at many universities, open discussion about doubting or denying the existence of God

could still spark controversy and evoke concern from the wider community, particularly during the first half of the 1960s. Such controversy and concern, and the very attention given to unbelief, was less evident on Canadian campuses in the 1970s, because the rejection of religious belief had by that time become less noteworthy and more—though not entirely—acceptable both within and beyond the university.

“A Seedbed for Growing Atheists”: Constructing Unbelief on Campus

The sharp decline of organized religious involvement in postwar Canada, particularly during the sixties, is well-documented. Drawing on a range of quantitative data, Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald note that the 1960s “were in Canada a watershed for religious involvement” as “Canadians decisively broke with their long-established custom of churchgoing, and over time a growing proportion of the population eschewed identifying themselves in religious terms.”¹² Church and synagogue attendance in Canada dropped from 67 per cent in 1946 to 44 per cent in 1970, and church affiliation from 82 per cent in 1957 to 48 per cent in 1975.¹³ Meanwhile, the proportion of Canadians claiming to have “no religion” increased from 0.5 per cent in 1951 to 4.3 per cent in 1971, a proportionately larger increase than at any other time during the century.¹⁴ Long distinguished for its secularity, British Columbians had lower rates of church involvement and reported higher levels of “no religion” than residents of other provinces in Canada.¹⁵ Across the nation, younger people, particularly those in their twenties, were especially apt to disconnect from the churches during the 1960s, a trend that continued and accelerated in the 1970s and beyond.¹⁶ The decline in practising Christianity among young people was cause for deep concern among religious leaders and partly explains the attention given in church circles to the secularizing influence of universities. Such attention was also fuelled by the substantial rise in university enrolments during the 1960s, and the wider cultural fixation on youth that characterized the era.¹⁷ Christian observers regularly commented on the growing estrangement between the churches and the universities. As a writer for the *Presbyterian Record* remarked in 1963, “the church and the university which once were such staunch friends and allies have become estranged—so much so that they appear to each other as foreigners speaking unintelligible tongues.”¹⁸ In that same era, a chaplain at the University of Victoria lamented that many “young people think the Church is fuddy-duddy,” while a chaplain at the University of Toronto said that “many students have little interest in the church because they feel it is wedded to the status quo.”¹⁹ The view of many within the churches was that university life helped to explain the growing detachment of young people not only from the church but from belief itself. “The university campus,” remarked a *United Church Observer* writer in 1963, “has been called a seedbed for growing atheists, and students claim there have been few serious attempts to change this.”²⁰

The churches were not alone in spilling much ink during the sixties about the apparent popularity of unbelief among university students. In 1963, a *Gateway* writer took aim at “those yet-immature individuals who declare themselves atheists or agnostics because they believe it is the fashion to do so.”²¹ In that same year, the

sincerity of unbelief on campus was also questioned by a *Calgary Herald* author who declared that “many university students consider it fashionable to call themselves atheists or agnostics.”²² The notion that the unbelief that ostensibly raged on university campuses was more performative than real echoed wider views about the anti-establishment impulses of youth during the sixties.²³ Those who found religious decline troubling seemed to take some comfort in the idea that unbelief was a temporary fad among students, who would surely return to the religious fold soon after graduation. Through the postwar era, the *Vancouver Province* occasionally published questions and answers with evangelist Billy Graham. In 1966, someone asked whether unbelief among college students was “just a stage in their development, or are these young people really atheists?” Graham replied that students who question the existence of God during their college days “are probably temporary agnostics.”²⁴ The principal of Victoria College, Dr. Harry Hickman, also considered religious doubt and unbelief among university students to be temporary. In 1959, the *Victoria Daily Times* reported on Hickman’s response to an article on “free love” that appeared in the University of Victoria student newspaper. Hickman upheld the right of the students to free expression, although in a dismissive and paternalistic tone: “Let us not take too seriously the silly stuff that university students often print in the campus newspaper.” The *Daily Times* author commended Hickman for recognizing “that irreverence is a natural attribute of the university graduate. In the years ahead, the student editors will doubtless move on to atheism, Communism, and Zen Buddhism, and ‘free love’ will seem the most innocuous of their espousals. In time they will grow out of it.”²⁵ As this example suggests, the rejection of religious belief was occasionally depicted as simply one among the many ways that university students, and youth more generally, were bucking tradition during the sixties.

Although sometimes downplayed as fleeting and insincere, the tendency of students to doubt or deny religious belief was widely understood to be a natural part of university life. As a writer for *Maclean’s* affirmed in 1961, “the universities catch young men and women at a time when revolt and skepticism are natural to them. In many cases it faces them with their first real dose of science and non-religious philosophy, and an atmosphere in which nothing needs to be accepted unless it can be proved.”²⁶ Many of the interviewees echoed the assumption that the questioning of received views, religious or otherwise, went hand in hand with university life. Brian, who was born in 1951, reflected on his time as a student at the University of Waterloo during the late 1960s: “That’s the wonderful thing about university and those years—it’s a time period of examination and questioning.”²⁷ Tom, who was born in 1953 and attended the University of British Columbia in the early 1970s, similarly recalled his university years as a period of questioning:

When I entered first-year university and for several years thereafter I did what all university students do which is to debate the meaning of life. Endless hours, I was in residence dorms all the time, and in those discussions, meaning and purpose came up all over the place. Mostly of a political nature. Mostly of a secular nature. But every once and awhile we would touch on whether or not

there was a God. And being liberal and open-minded, which we all espouse to be in university, we never foreclosed any possibility.²⁸

For university chaplains and religious groups on campus, the inherent skepticism of university life could be cause for concern. In 1958, Dr. John Ross, a Presbyterian chaplain at UBC, described as a "problem" the fact that "so much of the university atmosphere tends to critical examination of everything people believe." Ross bemoaned the lack of "positive information to counteract the criticism," and pointed to a need to "work out some rapprochement between the church and the university."²⁹ Other religious commentators criticized the churches for failing to provide students with religious knowledge and faith of sufficient depth to withstand the questioning sparked at university. As the author of an article in the *United Church Observer* about the work of chaplains at universities—"Canada's toughest pastorates"—remarked: "Why do so many students find it hard to believe in God? Almost to a man, the chaplains say the church has not prepared the young student for the impact of university." According to this author, a lack of "adequate teaching on such doctrines as the creation and the resurrection, can be wrecked by agnostic friends or professors in the student's first and second years."³⁰

While the university environment was commonly understood to be conducive to religious questioning, some observers more explicitly called out professors for deliberately propagating unbelief in the classroom. In 1961, an article in *Maclean's* on "The Anxious Years of an Undergraduate" told the story of a student who lost his faith partly because of the influence of a philosophy professor who, in the first lecture of term, declared that "I want to get hold of everything you hold sacred and smash it."³¹ Even more pointed were the words of a Pentecostal minister in Victoria who, in 1968, lashed out at "Godless atheistic professors" for "using science to undermine faith in God when they should be teaching our students that God and science are closely related and there is nothing incompatible between them."³² The sense of dismay that some held about "godless" professors was grounded in the longstanding assumption that universities were responsible not only for the intellectual but also the moral and spiritual development of students. Catherine Gidney argues that up to the early 1960s, Canadian universities "were generally expected to act in loco parentis, with parents entrusting the moral fibre of their children to administrators and faculty."³³ During the sixties, the notion of university as parent underwent substantial erosion, as did the presumption that secular universities would naturally reinforce the moral, Christian values of the home. Parents who wanted this kind of reinforcement would now have to look elsewhere, such as to the churches or other religious institutions. As an Anglican chaplain at the University of Alberta commented in 1967: "Parents may expect the church to protect their child from the atheistic onslaught of the university."³⁴ The fact that some parents might seek to shield their children from the influence of irreligious professors troubled one *Gateway* writer who, in response to the provincial government's proposal to establish an interdenominational university in Edmonton in 1966, remarked: "Too many students would be sent to an interdenominational university by Alberta parents anxious to protect their children

from the dangers lurking in the minds of the anti-religious professors they might meet on a secular campus.”³⁵

“No Position Which Cannot Be Thrown into Doubt”: Doubt, Unbelief, and University Life

That universities were reputed to be full of non-believers during the sixties seems to have been well-known on campuses and among students themselves. Writers for student newspapers sometimes commented, often in a humorous tone, on the notion that campuses were overrun with atheists. For instance, in 1965 the University of Victoria’s *Martlet Magazine* published a satirical article on the “destruction of the Christian society of the Western Man” that concluded with a playful jab at “the atheists who infest our universities.”³⁶ A year later, a writer for the *Gateway* remarked that the Social Credit government’s idea to create a religious university “probably reflects the government’s concern about U of A being a hotbed of atheists and communists.”³⁷ Students also regularly echoed the assumption that to question religion was an expected part of the university experience. As one student commented in a letter to the *Brunswickan* in 1966, “when a person suggests he is an agnostic, he displays the doubting processes which invariably accompany college life.”³⁸ Unlike certain external commentators, student newspapers generally characterized religious questioning in positive terms and applauded those professors who encouraged it. As a writer for the *Gateway* remarked in 1961, “good professors attempt to stimulate thought. Thought leads to questioning. Therefore, a thoughtful student whether he studies history, sociology, philosophy or zoology will consider the question of God.”³⁹ The interviewees also tended to see the diversity of religious views and openness to unbelief associated with university life as a good thing. Marie, who was born in 1948, recalled that when she informed a nun at her Catholic high school during the mid-sixties of her plan to attend University College at the University of Toronto rather than St. Michael’s College, the nun said with surprise, “oh, why would you go there, it’s nothing but Jews and Atheists.” Marie, who by that time was starting to have doubts about her Catholic faith, retorted accordingly: “I said Mother it’s maybe time I met some Jews and Atheists [laughs].”⁴⁰

The extent of unbelief among Canadian university students during the long sixties is difficult to determine precisely. Religious affiliation figures for UBC identify a fairly small proportion of atheists and agnostics among the student population in the early 1960s. For instance, 1.5 per cent of UBC students identified themselves as atheist or agnostic in 1962, and 1.8 per cent in 1963. While UBC was not filled with atheists and agnostics, students at that institution were more likely than British Columbians and Canadians at large to have no religion. According to the Canadian census, 0.5 per cent of Canadians and 1.7 per cent of British Columbians claimed to have no religion in 1961. By comparison, between 1961 and 1963, approximately 10–13 per cent of the UBC student population indicated on their registration cards that they were agnostic, atheist, or had no religion.⁴¹ In the postwar years, UBC increasingly drew students from across BC, Canada, and the world, but the main

source of the student population remained the Vancouver area. The census indicates that, during that era, young people aged twenty to twenty-four in Vancouver were far more likely to claim to have "no religion" than their counterparts in other cities and towns across BC and Canada.⁴² While the secular context of Vancouver likely played a part in fuelling and sustaining currents of irreligion at UBC, such currents were also rippling across many other campuses across Canada. Various surveys at other Canadian universities suggest that levels of irreligion were higher on- than off-campus. For instance, in 1961 the *Gateway* asked 125 students if they believed in God: 83 replied yes, 14 no, and 28 "that they did not know, or qualified their answers."⁴³ In a similar survey a year later, Acadia's student newspaper, the *Athenaeum*, found that 30 per cent of students were agnostic and 4 per cent atheist.⁴⁴ Statistics on unbelief in postwar Canada are scant, but a 1969 Gallup poll found that 4 per cent of the population claimed to disbelieve in God.⁴⁵ These various surveys suggest that the universities were not overrun with atheists, but that university students were somewhat more likely to doubt, disbelieve, or be indifferent to religion than those in the community at large.⁴⁶

In 1967, the UBC student handbook reminded students that they did not have to fill out the religious affiliation card given them at registration: "Somewhere in the mill (it changes each year) there is a card asking your religious affiliation. You do not need to fill it out. Hand it in blank, or write pink pantheist or maoist. Unless you want to be contacted by the church of your choice. Then, of course, fill it out."⁴⁷ As this suggests, surveys of religious affiliation must be approached with caution since the meanings of, and motivations behind, survey responses are never entirely transparent. That student newspapers and handbooks were reporting on, and surveying, religious affiliation and belief does underscore the attention given to such issues on many Canadian campuses during the sixties. Public lectures and discussions on unbelief were not uncommon at a number of universities. For instance, in 1962 McMaster University hosted a panel on atheism with four professors from various disciplines. At the panel, a professor of religion told the audience of 500 students that "the world would be meaningless without God," whereas professors of math and sociology affirmed "that there was room for doubt about the existence of a God," and a professor of philosophy declared that "there was no position which cannot be thrown into doubt, including belief or non-belief in a God."⁴⁸ It was not unusual to see lectures and debates on topics such as "The Impact of Atheism," "Is Atheism Genuine?," "Where Will Agnosticism Lead?," and "Christianity vs. Atheism" advertised in student newspapers.⁴⁹ These sorts of talks were typically organized either by secular student groups and student unions, or by campus religious groups, most often the Student Christian Movement (SCM).⁵⁰

There were sporadic efforts in these years to establish student atheist, agnostic, and humanist groups at some Canadian universities, but most such groups struggled to sustain themselves over the long term.⁵¹ This seemed to result more from general apathy than from the sort of administrative pushback that such groups had faced in earlier years.⁵² As Michiel Horn notes, during the 1960s "the supervision that university authorities had long exercised over campus publications and student clubs

came very largely to an end.”⁵³ While groups focused on unbelief often floundered, that era did see growing efforts to include atheists and agnostics in campus life, a trend that was part of the increasing recognition of religious pluralism at universities and in Canada more generally. Canadian universities became more culturally diverse in the postwar years, but still only about one in ten young people attended university and those who did so were predominantly white and middle class; a majority were also male, although that period saw a steady increase in women’s enrolment. While English Canadian universities drew increasing numbers of Catholic and Jewish students, they remained largely Protestant well into the postwar era. At UBC, for instance, about 73 per cent of students identified as Protestant during the late 1950s, which was comparable to other provincial English Canadian universities such as Dalhousie and Toronto.⁵⁴ Catherine Gidney argues that the transformation effected by religious pluralism on Canadian campuses had less to do with numbers and more to do with a “changing mentality” that involved an increasing recognition of, and engagement with, religions outside of mainstream Protestantism.⁵⁵ That transformation included growing efforts to make space on campus for atheists and agnostics. In explicitly extending an invitation to “atheists, agnostics, and members of all churches,” an advertisement for a Theological Discussion Club at the University of Victoria in 1963 was typical.⁵⁶ Although its activities and influence varied greatly across Canada, the SCM was generally quite active in reaching out to, and making space for, religious doubters and non-believers during the late 1950s and 1960s. For instance, in 1960, the SCM sponsored an “Agnostics Conference” at the University of Alberta that resulted in the formation of a fledgling “agnostic study group.”⁵⁷ The openness of the SCM to those who questioned religion was explicitly noted in the UBC student handbook of 1959: “It is an open movement which meets students where they are in terms of their religious questioning.”⁵⁸ Similarly, a 1961 edition of the *Martlet* affirmed that the role of the SCM was

to promote intellectual reasoning and “scientific” analysis of personal beliefs and principles, together with the testing of these beliefs against the ethical and religious doctrines and creeds upheld by the Christian Church. To this end the Student Christian Movement is open to all: to doubters and seekers as well as to believers, to agnostics and atheists as well as to Christians.⁵⁹

As Bruce Douville notes, during the sixties it was not unusual for members and even leaders of the Canadian SCM to question basic tenets of Christianity, including the existence of God. The SCM, he argues, experienced an “identity crisis” in the mid-1960s due to simmering tensions in the organization between religious and secular aims and between traditional understandings of God and newer ideas espoused by radical secular theologians. Douville shows that while the SCM weathered the crisis and affirmed its Christian basis, over the course of the sixties “fewer and fewer of its participants adhered to core Christian beliefs” and the movement retained a range of perspectives on religion and an openness to religious doubt and unbelief.⁶⁰

The growing inclusion of non-believers is also evident in challenges to the

privileging of Christianity that periodically erupted on Canadian campuses during the first half of the sixties. In 1961, the editor of the *Dalhousie Gazette* criticized the administration's adherence to the "antiquated Lord's Day Act" in continuing to impose various measures "designed to force all students to make some observance of Sunday, even though it may hold no meaning for them." In the view of the editor, such measures undercut religious toleration, which, when held to, "means that no attempt will be made to influence a man's views on religion and Christianity. It means that no inconveniences will have to be endured by a man who is an atheist or agnostic."⁶¹ A couple of years later, a *Gateway* writer objected to student funds being used to establish an interfaith chapel on campus, as "the very term 'chapel' and the inclusion of an organ presupposes at least a Christian atmosphere," and there "are substantial numbers of agnostics, atheists, Zen Buddhists, Hindus and so on on our campus."⁶² In that same year, a *Martlet* editor reported on a debate at the University of Victoria about Christmas displays on campus. According to the editor, just as non-religious people should not see such displays as a problem so long as those who set them up used "only their own time and materials," religious people should not object to the (hypothetical) formation of an atheist club on campus. The editor affirmed that though "it may not be as socially acceptable to campaign against religion as it is to combat lack of religion, there should be no moral distinction made between the two."⁶³ In suggesting that there was "no moral distinction" between religion and atheism, the editor chipped away at the stigma against unbelief that lingered through those years in Canada, both at the universities and beyond.⁶⁴

Most of the interviewees recalled that open expressions of unbelief were uncommon during the long sixties. Many admitted that they stayed silent about their own religious doubt and unbelief so as not to "offend people" or risk social exclusion. John, who was born in 1935, said that because the term atheist "almost became a dirty word," he "probably shied away from" using the term to refer to himself. Others remarked that publicly denying the existence of God was considered "impolite" and would make people "uncomfortable."⁶⁵ The enduring stigma against unbelief partly explains why so many of the interviewees, when they first turned away from religion, simply avoided or ignored religion rather than immediately calling themselves non-believers or atheists.⁶⁶ The silencing and negativity associated with unbelief varied by social context. A few of the interviewees identified the university as an environment in which they felt quite comfortable voicing their unbelief. Frank, who was born in 1940, recalled that while he did not discuss his atheism with his girlfriend's parents or at work, he was open about it during his time at UBC in the 1960s. "I never held back at university, there was no reason to. Or in my fraternity where I was very active," he said.⁶⁷ Several interviewees stated that not only was it rare to hear anyone openly call themselves a non-believer, atheist, or agnostic, but it was likely that many people would not have known what those terms meant at the time. Cheryl, who was born in 1955, remarked: "I don't think I ever knew anyone who identified as atheist up to the late 70s." Karen, who was born in 1953, similarly recalled her surprise when one of her high school classmates during the late 1960s began discussing the non-existence of God: "I'd never heard any of this. I mean I'd never heard it articulated."⁶⁸

The growing inclusion and recognition of non-believers on at least some Canadian campuses during the sixties stood as an exception to the relative lack of discussion and modelling of unbelief in the broader society. When atheism did appear in the wider media of the day, particularly during the first half of the 1960s, it often did so through its association with communism. For instance, in 1960 the *Calgary Herald* shared that local ministers denounced communism as “dangerous because of its atheism,” while in 1961 the *Windsor Star* reported on a high school commencement address at which the speaker, a Chatham minister, warned of the “materialistic atheism” of communism.⁶⁹ Student newspapers played a particularly important role in challenging the stigma against atheism and in questioning the tenets of religious, particularly Christian, belief.⁷⁰ A rarity in the wider culture, identifying as atheist or agnostic was not all that exceptional for writers in the student press. An example of this is seen in an editorial in a 1962 edition of the *Brunswickan* that opened a discussion about a Christian mission with the statement: “We atheists have before us a wonderful chance to take our stand and rise to victory over Christian mythology.”⁷¹ Casual references to being atheist helped to normalize unbelief on campus, as did articles disputing the existence of God. In 1960, a long article in the *Queen's Journal* urged readers to “look neither for praise nor encouragement to a super-human being.” The author suggested the impossibility of reconciling the idea of a benevolent God with the existence of human suffering and evil: “If God is benevolent and omnipotent then how can he allow evil? How can he allow the suffering of the innocent? How can he allow the Inquisition; how could he allow the cruel puritanism of Calvin; how can he allow concentration camps; and how can he allow capital punishment?”⁷² In 1965, a writer for Simon Fraser University's *Peak* set forth a similar argument, saying that “another commonly used phrase concerning God is that he is ‘all-powerful, all-wise and all-good.’ But if this is true, why is there evil? For if He is all-wise He would know how to prevent evil, and if He were all-powerful He would be able to apply his knowledge and prevent the evil.”⁷³ In addition to questioning God's existence, student writers challenged the stigma against those who did not believe in God. For instance, in 1961 the author of an article on “Virtuous Atheists” in the *Queen's Journal* took to task “one of the most pernicious fallacies of our time, namely the assumption that a man who does not believe in God must necessarily be less virtuous than a man who does.” The writer affirmed that once belief in God disappears, “it is very often replaced by a belief in humanity and a profound sense of responsibility.”⁷⁴ Canadian students would not have encountered campuses “infested” with atheists during the sixties, but at a number of universities they would have had quite a likely chance of coming across open, positive discourse on unbelief.

“A Discussion Subject That Is Taboo”: Atheism at UBC

In 1957, an Anglican chaplain described the University of British Columbia as “by nature and constitution the most secular campus in Canada.”⁷⁵ Established in 1908 as a “strictly non-sectarian” institution, UBC evolved within the context of a uniquely non-religious city and province and alongside a distinctly secular K–12 public school

system.⁷⁶ Despite its lingering Christian bias and relatively conservative approach to political and social issues of the day, UBC was at the forefront of challenging the stigma against atheism during the long sixties.⁷⁷ The UBC student newspaper, the *Ubysey*, was especially rich with content on atheism at the time, a fact that can be partly attributed to Jack Ornstein, a columnist for the paper between 1961 and 1964. Calling himself "the happy atheist," Ornstein challenged religious doctrine and disseminated his atheist views regularly in the paper.⁷⁸ In one piece he described belief in God as a "self-delusion" that was caused "by many things, chief among which are fear of death or love of life. Both are emotional reactions to the world — not reasons or justifications for belief."⁷⁹ In his 1961 "Defence of Atheism," Ornstein posited that if an omniscient God exists, he "is guilty for all the pain and suffering that has transpired in the universe." He concluded that "if anyone criticizes me for being 'blasphemous,' or in any way suggests that free 'thought' (I flatter myself) be suppressed at this university, then remember that an omniscient g. KNEW from time immemorial that I was going to write this, therefore I hold him morally responsible, providing he exists of course!"⁸⁰ Humour threads its way through much of Ornstein's writing, such as in one article where he uses belief in the "Great Pumpkin" to parody religious belief.⁸¹ Student responses to Ornstein's pieces ranged from supportive to oppositional and often echoed his playful tone.⁸² For instance, in response to some of the work by and about Ornstein, one student remarked in a letter to the *Ubysey*: "Re: the recent controversy over God and ornstein [*sic*]. I submit, sir, that the question is not whether God exists, but whether ornstein exists. After all, The Ubysey has been noted for perpetrating hoaxes in the past. I submit, sir, that Ornstein may be a creation of the Engineers."⁸³

Open discourse on atheism could still occasionally spark controversy in the sixties, even at an institution with the secular foundation and milieu of UBC. During the same era that the *Ubysey* challenged the negativity and silence associated with unbelief by providing a platform for the "happy atheist," Dr. Peter Remnant, a professor in the UBC philosophy department, offered his own views on atheism in periodic on-campus presentations. One such talk, which he delivered in 1962 to the UBC Philosophy Club, was titled "Atheism: Why I Don't Believe in God."⁸⁴ In the talk, which at points drew "gasps from some in the student audience," Remnant said that "there is nothing in the Bible that proves God exists," and that "he has no proof of the non-existence of God, but he also has no proof of the non-existence of unicorns."⁸⁵ Although not the first such talk he had given, this particular presentation caused a stir, perhaps because it was publicized by the local media. The controversy around this talk may have also been fuelled, in part, by the fact that around the same time another UBC philosophy professor, Avrum Stroll, was reported to have said at a meeting of students that "he doubted if the Jesus of the Gospels ever really existed."⁸⁶ The reaction to Remnant's talk from the campus community was mixed. Michiel Horn notes that concerns about the talk were raised at a meeting of the Board of Governors, but such concerns soon dissipated when the UBC president upheld Remnant's right to speak and re-affirmed principles of academic freedom.⁸⁷ That Remnant faced no official censure reflects broader changes in the post-secondary landscape in Canada.

By the 1960s, universities had become not only more secular and pluralistic, but also more decentralized, due to a gradual decline of presidential authority and an increase in faculty autonomy.⁸⁸ On the UBC campus, one of the more critical responses to Remnant's lecture involved a student proposing a motion to change the name of the philosophy department to the department of atheism. As the *Vancouver Province* reported, "the usually staid atmosphere of the annual meeting of UBC's convocation was shattered Thursday night by a suggestion from the floor that the university set up a department of atheism. Grant Livingston, a former president of the student council, proposed a motion protesting what he called the teaching of atheism under the guise of philosophy in UBC's philosophy department. He said that if the university felt it necessary to teach atheism, it should set up a separate department clearly labelled the department of atheism."⁸⁹ Livingston's cheeky proposal died on the floor due to lack of uptake. A more typical response is seen in the following excerpt from a student letter about the Remnant controversy: "As a UBC student, I resent the attitudes of people who would dictate to the university what it should or should not say. Should not the students be mature enough to decide for themselves whether or not they will 'believe.' The chief purpose of university life is to expose the student to all sides of knowledge."⁹⁰ Most on-campus respondents, even those who were critical of Remnant's views, defended his right to expression and emphasized that universities should be spaces for open dialogue on religion and other issues.

Following Remnant's talk, a *Ubysey* editorial impugned "Bible-spouting theologians" on campus for not having the courage to publicly engage in the ensuing debates. To the author, Christians who stayed silent during the Remnant controversy contributed "to the belief held outside this University community that disbelief in God is a discussion subject that is taboo."⁹¹ That unbelief remained in certain contexts a taboo subject is evident in the reaction of the wider community to Remnant's presentation. The *Victoria Daily Times* reported that "Protestant church spokesmen Tuesday supported the right of a University of British Columbia professor to say there is nothing in the bible that proves God exists. But they didn't agree with him."⁹² While the response from church leaders was generally critical yet measured, the response from certain political quarters was vitriolic. The mayor of New Westminster, Beth Wood, spoke out against the teaching of atheism and communism at UBC, although, according to the *Ubysey*, her words were "mostly ignored" on campus.⁹³ Three members of the provincial Social Credit government condemned UBC for allowing open expressions of atheism by professors. MLAs Tom Bate and Alex Mathew expressed their outrage at Remnant for voicing his unbelief in God, while MLA Phil Gaglardi, who was also a Pentecostal minister, challenged Remnant to a public debate on religion.⁹⁴ Demanding that "teachers who don't believe in God... be fired from BC schools and universities," Bate lamented, "we try to bring up our children to live decent, Christian lives, we send them to Sunday school. Then when they get of an age to go to university, they are taught by professors to believe there is no such thing as God... that all they've been taught in their childhood about God and religion is false."⁹⁵ Gaglardi's arguments during the controversy, like those of Bate, traded heavily on a notion that was rapidly crumbling during the sixties: that universities

could be counted on to replicate and reinforce the moral and spiritual training of the Christian home. As Gagliardi remarked, with indignation: "I don't think that mothers and fathers who make up the populations of this great nation are appreciative of sending their children to places of higher learning and to have someone tell them there is no God."⁹⁶

The UBC chaplaincy reported that the "fire-works" sparked by atheism on campus in 1962 were not "taken as seriously on campus as they were off campus."⁹⁷ Remnant's talk was indeed taken seriously by many in the wider community, evident in the torrent of mostly critical letters to Vancouver newspapers. Several letter-writers expressed regret that a public institution supported by tax dollars would allow professors to, in the words of one commentator, "purvey pollution."⁹⁸ One commentator affirmed that while Remnant may hold his own views on God, "the University of British Columbia is, or should be, a purely educational institution. As a citizen of British Columbia and a taxpayer, I therefore strongly protest his action in using the university and his position therein as the medium through which to express his personal ideas on religion by means of a 'lecture' to more than 1,000 students.... If Dr. Remnant has no consciousness of God, then that is HIS problem and tragedy and he has no right to visit his affliction on others."⁹⁹ In the view of another letter-writer, Remnant's atheism typified "university-level thinking throughout North America" with its detachment from "down-to-earth living" and "lack of any positive convictions."¹⁰⁰ Correspondence involving a couple of student campaigns at the time suggests that British Columbians outside of Vancouver were aware of the Remnant controversy. In 1963, the UBC Student Action Campaign involved 500 students travelling across BC to circulate a petition in support of UBC receiving its full operating grant. The UBC Alumni Association reported that there were some in the BC Interior "who didn't sign because of the 'atheistic professor'."¹⁰¹ In that same year, the UBC SCM sent a letter to graduates in the BC Interior that began: "Recent newspaper reports about the attitude of some professors at UBC toward the Christian Faith have disturbed many people in the Cariboo. As a University graduate you are, of course, well aware of the spiritual tensions and problems of our students at universities."¹⁰² Debates about atheism at UBC in the first half of the 1960s reveal the strands of continuity and change that characterized unbelief during an era of immense religious change in Canada. UBC joined certain other universities across Canada in allowing space for non-believers and helping to wear away at the stigma against unbelief. That permitting open discussions on atheism made UBC, an institution in the most secular city and province in Canada, an object of widespread criticism points to the deep-rootedness of that stigma.

Conclusion

Religion was not replaced by atheism on Canadian campuses during the long sixties. Rather, universities became more pluralistic in that era, and there was growing space and recognition given not only to non-Christian religions, but also, at some institutions, to unbelief. In widening platforms and possibilities for doubting and

disbelieving in God, the Canadian universities discussed here were influenced by, and contributors to, global secularizing currents of the sixties. Historian Callum Brown notes that the religious declines of that period are often dismissed as impermanent. He writes that “in this approach the sixties disturbed religion, turning many young people to atheism and disbelief in a society awash with money, sex, and opportunity, but they returned to faith later in the century.”¹⁰³ Such claims of impermanence are belied by the fact that the secularizing trends of the sixties have deepened rather than reversed, and that the number of those “living their lives without God” and claiming to have “no religion” has continued to grow steadily in Canada as in many other countries.¹⁰⁴ They are also belied by the experience of many of my interviewees, for whom the long sixties—and university attendance itself—constituted one stop on a long, often gradual journey away from religious belief. Philip, who was born in 1955, was relatively unique among the interviewees in directly attributing his atheism to his university studies. He recalled that studying philosophy during his first year at UBC “shattered” his Christian faith, and by second year, he was “just full of Nietzsche” and “pretty much an atheist.”¹⁰⁵ Unlike Philip, most of the interviewees who attended university described that experience as reinforcing, rather than causing, their religious doubts and disbelief. As Roy, who was born in 1953, said, “I think mostly university just confirmed everything. That it’s not necessary to have these beliefs unless you need them.” Janice similarly remarked that attending university “cemented what I already believed.”¹⁰⁶

Although the extent to which unbelief was discussed and accepted on campus varied widely across the country, certain institutions, such as UBC, played a lead role in pushing forward a neutral, often positive view of atheism into mainstream consciousness, and in helping to make it more acceptable to deny the existence of God. Those most directly affected by these ideas would have been among the student body, which remained through this period largely white, middle class, and Protestant, and comprised only about one tenth of the youth population in Canada.¹⁰⁷ But the influence of universities in this regard extended beyond students themselves, as is evident in the regular commentary about these issues in the wider media. The universities examined here were hardly crawling with atheists, but by providing space for open discussion and debate about unbelief and allowing for representations of atheists that were not wholly negative, they played an important role in edging unbelief out of the shadows and normalizing religious doubt and disbelief. The fact that universities continued through the sixties to be impugned by some as hotbeds of atheism, and that when students and faculty voiced their unbelief controversy sometimes ensued, suggests that this was a time of religious continuity as well as change. Strands of both continuity and change are evident in the words of a letter-writer to the *Victoria Humanist* magazine in 1966: “I got a great thrill out of a piece I saw in the ‘Calgary Herald’: an English University was advertising for a professor, and added—‘Atheists not barred’. What a changing world!”¹⁰⁸

Notes

I would like to thank the interviewees for so generously sharing their stories, the anonymous reviewers and *HSE/RHE* editors for their very helpful comments, and the many student research assistants who worked on this project. I am also grateful for financial support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

- 1 Ralph Allen, "The Hidden Failure of Our Churches," *Maclean's*, February 25, 1961, 50.
- 2 Adam Campbell, "Short and Sour," *Gateway*, November 22, 1963, 5.
- 3 Student newspapers examined include: *Ubysey* (UBC), *Peak* (Simon Fraser University), *Martlet* (University of Victoria), *Gateway* (University of Alberta), *Brunswickan* (University of New Brunswick), *Excalibur* (York University), *Queen's Journal* (Queen's University), and *Dalhousie Gazette* (Dalhousie University).
- 4 Interviews were conducted by me or one of my research assistants with eighty-one individuals and five couples. Transcripts of the interviews are currently in my possession and will be archived in Thompson Rivers University's open access digital repository, *Borealis*, when this project is completed. Note that all interviewee names are pseudonyms.
- 5 See Lara Campbell and Dominique Clément, "Time, Age, Myth: Towards a History of the Sixties," in *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, ed. Lara Campbell, Dominique Clément, and Gregory Kealey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 3, 18; Hugh McLeod, "Reflections and New Perspectives," in *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe: 1945–2000*, ed. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 455; and Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 233.
- 6 See Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Gary Miedema, *For Canada's Sake: Public Religion, Centennial Celebrations, and the Re-Making of Canada in the 1960s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); and Mark Noll, "What Happened to Christian Canada?," *Church History* 75, no. 2 (2006): 245–73.
- 7 Callum Brown, "The Necessity of Atheism: Making Sense of Secularisation," *Journal of Religious History* 41, no. 4 (December 2017): 439, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12448>. For recent works in the study of non-religion, see Lynne Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Tina Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Elliot Hanowski, *Towards a Godless Dominion: Unbelief in Interwar Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023); Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020); Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlin, eds., *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts* (New York: Springer, 2015); Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, "Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-Religion and Secularity: The State of the Union," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (2012): 19–27; and Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 8 Key works on secularization in Canada include David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900–1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); and Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).
- 9 On secularization, dechristianization, and the long sixties, see, for example, Callum Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada*,

- Ireland, UK and USA Since the 1960s* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 29; Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, "Even the Hippies Were Only Very Slowly Going Secular': Dechristianization and the Culture of Individualism in North America and Western Europe," in *The Sixties and Beyond*, 3; and Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 10 Catherine Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920–1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004). On the relationship between religion and universities in Canada, also see Aaron Hughes, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020); J. Paul Grayson, "Remember Now Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth': The Quiet Religious Revolution on a Canadian Campus in the 1960s," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 87–112, https://historicalstudiesineducation.ca/index.php/edu_hse_rhe/article/view/3533; Jacalyn Duffin, "The Queen's Jews: Religion, Race, and Change in Twentieth-Century Canada," *Canadian Journal of History* 49, no. 3 (Winter 2014): 369–94; and Patricia Roy, "Something New in Canada': The Coming of Catholics to the University of British Columbia," *Historical Studies* 86 (2020): 25–50.
- 11 McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, 241. Also see Miedema, *For Canada's Sake*, 202; and Christie and Gauvreau, "Even the Hippies," 24.
- 12 Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 224.
- 13 Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 85–87, 109; and Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, April 16, 1960; August 18, 1965; April 25, 1970.
- 14 *Census of Canada*, vol. 10, table 5, 1951; vol. 5, part 1, table 5, 1971. Also see Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 162–65; and Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 49.
- 15 *Census of Canada*, vol. 10, table 5, 1951; vol. 5, part 1, table 5, 1971. On the distinct secularity of BC see Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*; Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, "Religious-Secular Polarization Compared: The Cases of Quebec and British Columbia," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 46, no. 2 (2017): 166–85; Block, *The Secular Northwest*; and Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press).
- 16 See Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 7; Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 30, 168–89; Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 63–64, 109; Bruce Douville, "Christ and Counterculture: Churches, Clergy and Hippies in Toronto's Yorkville, 1965–70," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 47, no. 95 (2014): 748; *Census of Canada*, vol. 1, part 4, table 7 and table 8, 1971; and Tina Block, "'Most of Today's Teen-agers Laugh about God': Youth, Secularization, and the Sixties in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 203 (Autumn 2019): 21–52, <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/191629/188945>.
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- 22 Jamie Portman, "Bearing Witness," *Calgary Herald*, April 23, 1963, 4.
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- 35 John Green, "Interdenominational Universities Kill Academic Freedom," *Gateway*, November 25, 1966, C4.
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- 37 "The Government Strangle Hold," *Gateway*, November 10, 1966, 4.
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- 43 *Gateway*, October 13, 1961, 6.
- 44 "Eastern Survey Shows God is Old Fashioned," *Gateway*, December 14, 1962, 15. Also see *Ubysey*, November 30, 1962, 19; *Brunswickan*, January 22, 1964, 2; and *Excalibur*, April 1, 1976, 1.
- 45 Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, *Gallup Report*, January 15, 1969.
- 46 On comparatively high levels of irreligion among university students during the sixties, see Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 63–64. Grayson found that students at Glendon College differed from their parents in that they were more likely to gravitate to atheism and agnosticism. See "'Remember Now Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth,'" 99.
- 47 *Tuum Est ... and All That* (Vancouver: Alma Mater Society, University of British Columbia, 1967), 12. For further discussion about collecting religious affiliation information from students, see *Ubysey*, October 8, 1965, 8, and *Martlet*, December 5, 1963, 5.
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- 66 See Block, "Most of Today's Teenagers," 43–51.
- 67 Frank, interview by author, Vancouver, BC, September 28, 2016.
- 68 Cheryl, interview by Fallon Fosbery, Kamloops, BC, July 6, 2016; Karen, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, October 15, 2016; Ken (born 1955), interview by Kelsey Hine, Kamloops, BC, July 5, 2016; and Sharon (born 1956), interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, BC, May 26, 2016.
- 69 "Ministers Warn of Commies," *Calgary Herald*, October 17, 1960, 24; and "Easy Way Not Best. Cleric Warns School Pupils," *Windsor Star*, December 11, 1961, 7.
- 70 On the role of student journalism in both reinforcing and challenging religious norms on campus see Horn, "Students and Academic Freedom," 16–21; and Gidney, *A Long Eclipse*, 29.
- 71 Wayne Anderson, "Purely Whimsical," *Brunswickan*, January 12, 1962, 2. Also see Graeme Ross, "Dave the Christian," *Brunswickan*, December 1, 1966, 7; and Don Wells, "An Agnostic Speaks," *Gateway*, October 13, 1961, 6.
- 72 John Kekes, "An Atheist's Answer to Theology," *Queen's Journal*, February 16, 1960, 3. The same (or a very similar) article was reprinted in the *Dalhousie Gazette*, October 4, 1961, 6, and in the *Ubyssy*, January 6, 1961, 4.
- 73 erumpus, "On God's Existence," *Peak*, November 24, 1965, 4.
- 74 "Virtuous Atheists," *Queen's Journal*, January 6, 1961, 2. Also see Douglas Barbour, "Step in the Wrong Direction. Audience Control of CBC Programs," *Dalhousie Gazette*, November 13, 1964, 3; and Don Wells, "An Agnostic Speaks," *Gateway*, October 13, 1961, 6.
- 75 Douglas Percy Watney to Mr. Frank Thompson, Huron College, London, Ontario, December 17, 1957, file 4, Correspondence, Chaplain to the University–Anglican, box 479, series: Anglican Theological College, Douglas Percy Watney Papers, Anglican Provincial Synod of British Columbia and Yukon Archives, Vancouver (hereafter ABCYA). On the secularity of UBC, also see Bagnell, "Agnostics"; *BC Catholic*, March 18, 1965, 4; "Student Christian Movement," 5; and Joan Godsell, "Week of Prayer Turnout Small, But That's Enough," *Ubyssy*, January 15, 1965, 3. Duffin also found a small number of non-believers among students at Queen's University during the twentieth century in her study, "The Queen's Jews," 391.

- 76 Damer and Rosengarten, *UBC: The First 100 Years*, 3, 103–04; and Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 153–54.
- 77 Damer and Rosengarten, *UBC: the First 100 Years*, 105, 226.
- 78 See Jack Ornstein, “An Open Letter from God,” *Ubysey*, March 8, 1963, 4; “Who’s God?,” *Ubysey*, October 25, 1963; and “Happy Atheist,” *Ubysey*, February 14, 1964, 4.
- 79 Ornstein, “Who’s God?,” 4.
- 80 Jack Ornstein, “Defence of Atheism,” *Ubysey*, March 24, 1961, 3; and “Religion—the Big Lie,” *Ubysey*, February 14, 1964, 4.
- 81 Jack Ornstein, “Jack’s Halloween Heresy,” *Ubysey*, November 1, 1963, 4.
- 82 For criticism of Ornstein’s atheist views, see *Ubysey*, October 13, 1963, 4; *Ubysey*, November 26, 1963, 4; and *Ubysey*, February 18, 1964, 4.
- 83 *Ubysey*, November 26, 1963, 4.
- 84 *Ubysey*, November 16, 1962, 8. Remnant’s 1961 talk “I Am an Atheist” did not evoke the same controversy as his 1962 lecture. See *Ubysey*, March 9, 1961, 4; and Ruth Robertson, “Belief in God Matter of Habit,” *Ubysey*, March 16, 1961, 3.
- 85 “‘There Is no God’—and the Replies Roll in,” *Vancouver Province*, November 21, 1962, 7.
- 86 “Atheism Studies Proposed,” *Vancouver Province*, May 17, 1963, 35. For analysis of a controversy around irreligion at Acadia University during the same period, see Horn, *Academic Freedom*, 270–71.
- 87 Horn, *Academic Freedom*, 275.
- 88 Gidney, *A Long Eclipse*, 92–93.
- 89 “Atheism Studies Proposed,” 35. For another response critical of Remnant, see “Bible Not Intended to Prove Existence of God,” *Martlet*, February 19, 1963, 2.
- 90 Letter to the editor from Gary R. Telford, *Vancouver Province*, November 27, 1962. Also see the letter to the editor from Norm McEwen, *Ubysey*, February 14, 1963, 2; and *Ubysey*, November 7, 1963, 5.
- 91 “Sound All-clear for the Theologians,” *Ubysey*, November 27, 1962, 4.
- 92 “Atheist Touches Off Row,” *Victoria Daily Times*, November 21, 1962, 7.
- 93 Fred Fletcher, “History—a Bundle of Trivia,” *Ubysey*, May 30, 1963, 7.
- 94 *Ubysey*, February 14, 1963, 2; and “Gaglardi Asks Atheism Debate,” *Vancouver Province*, February 21, 1963, 5. It is worth noting that Liberal MLA Pat McGreer “defended the UBC professors who stirred up wrath and controversy recently by speaking on atheism and communism. ‘I think they accomplished their purpose,’ he said. ‘They made people think, which is more than we have been able to do with the members of this government.’” See “Education Policy Called Weak, Wasteful,” *Vancouver Province*, February 26, 1963, 5. For an analysis of how changing ideas about sexuality and morality in Vancouver and at UBC during the 1960s contrasted with the values of the conservative Social Credit government, see Lawrence Aronsen, *City of Love and Revolution: Vancouver in the Sixties* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010).
- 95 “Fire Atheist Teachers,” *Vancouver Province*, February 7, 1963, 5; and Arthur Mayse, “In Our House,” *Victoria Daily Times*, February 7, 1963, 1.
- 96 “Gaglardi Asks Atheism Debate,” *Vancouver Province*, February 21, 1963, 5; and Mayse, “Our House.” Social Credit leaders in Alberta similarly impugned the universities for propagating atheism. See, for example, “Where Is the Proof Gentlemen?,” *Gateway*, December 8, 1964, 4.
- 97 M. J. V. Shaver, “Anti-Religion on Campus, 1963,” 1926.
- 98 Letter to the editor from Antipro, *Vancouver Province*, November 27, 1962, 4.
- 99 Letter to the editor from (Mrs.) Ruth D. Golman, *Vancouver Province*, November 24, 1962, 4. Also see letter to the editor from Mabel Hamilton, *Vancouver Province*, February 7, 1963, 4; letter to the editor from W. Alan Nicholson, *Vancouver Province*,

- November 24, 1962, 4; and letter to the editor from J. A. Anderson, *Vancouver Province*, November 27, 1962, 4. For an alternative perspective supportive of Remnant's views, see the letter to the editor from James L. Morris, *Vancouver Province*, November 28, 1962, 4.
- 100 Letter to the editor from Philip Balfour, *Vancouver Province*, November 24, 1962, 4.
- 101 "Close-Up on Backing Mac," *UBC Alumni Chronicle* (Vancouver: UBC Alumni Association, 1963), 16–18.
- 102 Letter from Hendrik Dykman, March 1963, SCM, box 3, file 94, Correspondence-Cabinet, 1961–63, Student Christian Movement, UBC Branch, UCBCA.
- 103 Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 40.
- 104 See, for example, Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*; and Thiessen and Laflamme, *None of the Above*.
- 105 Philip, interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, BC, June 30, 2016. In his study of Glendon College, Grayson found that college studies often did influence students to turn away from religion; see "Remember Now Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth," 108.
- 106 Roy, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, October 20, 2016; and Janice (born 1960), interview by Mackenzie Cassels, Kamloops, BC, July 16, 2016.
- 107 Gidney, *A Long Eclipse*, xx; Gidney, *Tending the Student Body*, 12; Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada during the Thirties* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 28–33; Milligan, *Rebel Youth*, 12–13, 18; and Douville, *The Uncomfortable Pew*, 15.
- 108 *Victoria Humanist*, vol. 2, Late Summer 1966, 13.