

Living Feminism and Leaving Catholicism in Victoria, BC since the 1960s

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Vancouver Island University, 2018

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Abstract:

Since the 1960s, religious adherence in Canada has declined with ‘no religion’ slowly taking its place. Although British Columbia has been less religious than the rest of Canada since its early settler days, the currents of postwar secularization can still be assessed. In this thesis, I look at secularization on a denominational, regional, and gender specific scale. Through the oral testimonies of eleven women who were raised Catholic in Victoria, and who left Catholicism in the ‘long sixties,’ I discuss the way the Catholic Sisters of St Ann modeled autonomy for these women in how they were educated within the Catholic church and I investigate how cultural and societal discourse regarding women’s liberation, autonomy and individualism impacted their departure. In leaving the Catholic church, these women joined the ranks of the rising ‘religious nones’ in this region, however their departure from organized religion did not always mean a rejection of belief in a higher power or spirituality, with the majority retaining some form of spirituality throughout their lives. Despite this, their departure from institutional religion and lack of religious socialization for their children influenced the subsequent irreligiosity of their children and grandchildren. I argue that these women engaged with the calls for women’s autonomy in the long sixties, and in their actions influenced intergenerational secularization.

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Introduction

In 1858, the Roman Catholic congregation of the Sisters of St Ann came west from Quebec to establish a Catholic community in the predominantly Protestant landscape of Fort Victoria.¹ By 1973, St Ann's Academy, an all-girls Catholic school and convent built by the Sisters from 1872-1887, had closed its doors permanently and the property was sold to the province of British Columbia.² From the time of its establishment to the time of its closing, the Sisters had worked to build a solid and unified Catholic community in the Greater Victoria region, and were involved in education, health care, and many other public works. Under the pressures of secularization, as religion lost its place as a pillar of Canadian society starting, arguably, in the 1960s, the Academy was forced to close its doors.³ They faced economic struggles with a decline in voluntary public funding for the congregation, experienced a decline in Catholic sisters entering and remaining in the convent, and faced a significant drop in the student body, from 649 students in 1960 to 180 in 1973.⁴

¹ Edith E Down, "Victoria and the Pioneer Sisters," in *A Century of Service: A History of the Sisters of Saint Ann and their contribution to education in British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska* (Victoria: The Sisters of Saint Ann, 1966), 32.

² "The provincial government purchased the buildings and grounds of St Ann's in 1974": Angela Oh, *St. Ann's Academy*, Researched and written for HSTR 355, University of Victoria, 2000, <http://curric.library.uvic.ca/homeroom/content/schools/private/saintann.htm#:~:text=were%20put%20out.-,St.,had%20passed%20through%20the%20school.>

³ "The decision to close St Ann's was made because of high operating costs, declining enrollments, and the advanced age of many of the nuns": Angela Oh, *St. Ann's Academy*.

⁴ Sisters of St. Ann's Archives, *Statistical Data for St Ann's Academy* (February 2020), distributed by Carey Pallister, Province Archivist for the Sisters of St. Ann in Victoria.

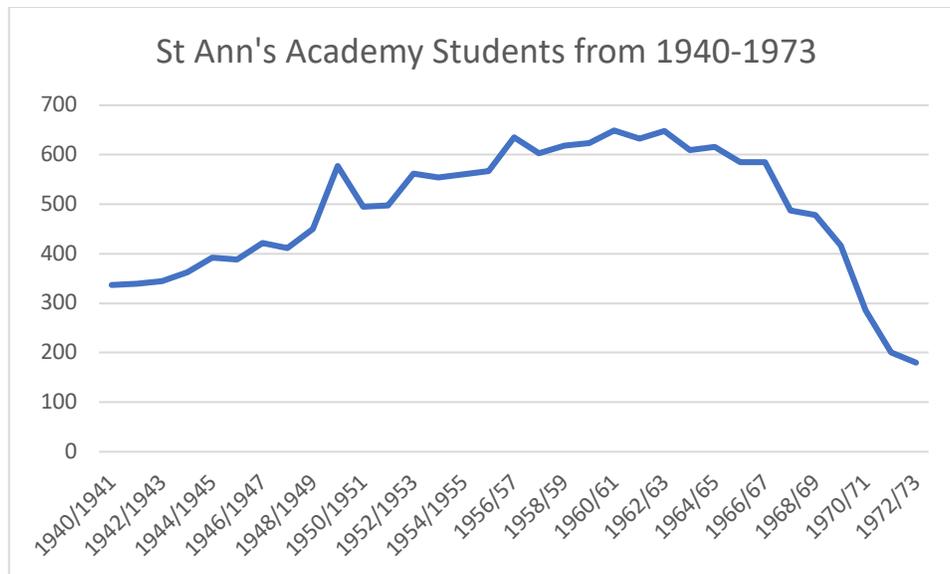


Fig. 1⁵

Scholars have increasingly turned towards the era of the “long sixties”, defined by historian Hugh McLeod as the period between 1958 to 1974, as a pivotal point in the rapid secularization of Western society.⁶ Canadian religious studies scholars Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald argue that the end of Christendom in Canada started in the 1960s and ended in the closing decades of the twentieth century, “as churches lost their social power and their place in the nation’s cultural fabric.”⁷ They further argue that Canadian society has now entered a “post-Christian” era, where “churches can no longer assume that Canadians know, or even care to know, what churches stand for.”⁸ Additionally, social historian Callum Brown has begun to discuss this period of religious decline as an outcome of the concurrent women’s movement and shifting notions of gender, which he calls the “discursive death of pious femininity.”⁹ My

⁵ Sisters of St. Ann’s Archives, *Statistical Data for St Ann’s Academy*.

⁶ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 11.

⁸ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 11.

⁹ Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (UK: Routledge Publishing, 2009), 179.

research aims to situate the closing of St Ann's and the rise of 'no religion' in Victoria since the 1960s within the theoretical frameworks of gender and secularization.

Research Approach and Methods

In this thesis, I look at gendered secularization on a regional level through a project of discourse analysis. I have interviewed eleven women who were raised in the Catholic church and taught by the Sisters of St Ann in Victoria, British Columbia – Maria (born 1949), Ellen (born 1946), Norma (born 1949), Janet (born 1952), Lizzie (born 1949), Mickey (born 1946), Carol G (born 1944), Carol D (born 1957), Lauren (born 1955), Kate (born 1949), and Marie (born 1936). All eleven of these women lost their interest in institutional religion during the long sixties. Ten of these women were born between the years of 1944 and 1957 and graduated from high school in the 1960s and 1970s. One other woman, Marie, was born in 1936 and graduated in the 1950s. While she, too, moved away from institutional Catholicism in the 1960s, her earlier story gives a comparative outlook on how starkly gendered discourse in the Catholic church and in popular culture changed within a decade.

My call for interview participants stated that I was looking for “Vancouver Island women who were raised Catholic but left the Church since the 1960s.” It further stated that, “interviewees must be women born between 1935 and 1955, and who have consciously left the Catholic Church on Vancouver Island since the 1960s – for personal faith, spirituality, or no religion.” My objective was to find women who graduated and entered adulthood during the long sixties, and who contributed to a narrative of secularization in the region. It was decidedly a difficult task to track down such a specific demographic. I began by placing posters in community centres and senior centres, contacting different alternatively spiritual and humanist groups in Victoria, and giving public lectures on the topic of secularization and the Pacific

Northwest in community centres around Victoria. After four months of these tactics and receiving no responses, I found success by posting my call for interviewees in the “Old Victoria BC” Facebook group. This is a public group where community members share images and stories of their memories and of the history of Victoria. Many members of the Facebook group had attended St Ann’s and St Patrick’s schools in their childhood and began forwarding the call on to friends. I had emails coming in within the week, which I eventually had to wrap up as it came time to work on writing this history. It was by chance that the eleven women that I interviewed had all, at some point in their education, been taught by the Sisters of St Ann in Victoria, BC. This changed the trajectory of my research to focus more closely on the role of the Sisters of St Ann and to keep the focus regionally within Victoria.

Through interviewing these eleven women, I investigate how discursive changes within their education, the Catholic church, and the broader culture allowed for a personal evolution of belief beyond the constraints of Catholic dogma. Through their oral testimonies, they reveal their engagement with newfound choice and agency for women in society at the time. Further, they reveal the ways in which their rejection of organized religion did not necessarily mean rejecting belief in a higher power, reflecting the complexity of the secular but often still spiritual landscape of the region. Lastly, this study provides a perspective on the secularizing impact that these women’s departure from religion had on subsequent generations.

Introduction to Historiography

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Western world went through a cultural revolution that had profound effects on both social constructions of gender and levels of religiosity. Following on the end of the Second World War, the 1950s were focused on the rebuilding of a society that had been disrupted by war time. In this postwar era, the economy was growing, there were high

levels of church attendance, and a strong focus on returning to tradition and reconstructing the family model towards nuclear families of faith. This era was marked by social conformity, whereby religious and political institutions were reasonably safe from questioning, as societal emphasis was placed on returning to ordinary life. Come the 1960s, large groups of people, predominantly young people, began to reject many of the conformist beliefs and established norms that were commonly held by society at large. This changing discourse meant that new avenues were opened for unconventional ways of thinking. Two of the more significant cultural transformations of this era were the secularizing of society and the liberated position of women – two changes that historian Callum Brown argues were “intimately and causatively interconnected”.¹⁰ The historiography of secularization in the West contains many debates amongst scholars as to the causes of secularization. While the impact of the women’s liberation movement is but one segment of this debate, Brown goes so far as to argue that “secularization is a woman’s thing,” as will be explained.¹¹

Beginning in the 1960s, surrounded by the increasing secularity of the time, British sociologists began to seriously study the process of secularization – defined by sociologist Bryan Wilson in 1966 as “the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance”¹². These studies asserted that there has been a linear decline of religion relative to the modernizing of society. This assertion made sense in focusing on secularization as it had happened in Britain. However, in turning to the United States, researchers identified a spike in religious affiliation following the Second World War, in a time of modernity and a bustling

¹⁰ Callum G. Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s* (UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 1.

¹¹ Callum Brown, *Lecture at Anglo-American Historical Conference*, London, July 6, 2006, quoted in Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

¹² Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 14.

economy, that didn't fit the secularization narrative. As happens often, Canadian cultural patterns have been more or less conflated with those of the United States. More recently, however, Canadian secularization has begun to be studied separately, as patterns of extreme religious polarization between evangelical Christianity and irreligion occurring in the United States are not occurring in Canada.

In Canada, it has been documented that the cultural changes of the 1960s destabilized the power that institutionalized Christianity had previously held in society. This shift was reflected in a sharp decline in church attendance, and a steady decline in the importance of traditional religious practice and beliefs in individual lives. Further, in Canada, the numbers of those claiming 'no religion' as a religious category have been on the rise since the 1960s, and in British Columbia in particular, this demographic has overtaken traditional religious categories as the number one 'religion.'¹³

Postwar secularization in Canada is still an under researched area. We are living in an era of widespread religious disinterest in Canada, with British Columbia consistently proving to be on the cutting edge of the secularization process. Vancouver Island is currently the most irreligious region of all. Only recently have scholars begun to look at the Pacific Northwest as a geographically specific region of secularization. These studies have analyzed the religious landscape at large, leaving denominational secularization a largely untouched territory. This gap within the literature has yet to be addressed and will be explored within this thesis. My research, which is gender specific to women's experiences, denominationally specific to the Catholic church, and regionally specific to Victoria, British Columbia, will provide a unique interpretive window through which to study patterns of secularization in Canada. This introductory chapter

¹³ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 165.

on the historiography of secularization since the 1960s in the Western world will be divided into three parts: debates regarding the secularization thesis, social histories of secularization, and secularization studies focused regionally on the Pacific Northwest.

Secularization Debates

In the 1960s, sociologists and historians alike were in general agreement as to what secularization was.¹⁴ Where they differed, however, was over the causes of this societal change. Brian Wilson's secularization definition is part of his larger theoretical contribution known as the "secularization thesis."¹⁵ Wilson focuses on the decrease in institutionalized religion through a quantitative analysis of church records. Through this analysis, he argues that secularization is driven by the larger structural process of modernization—the concept of linear social progress in society, that has been always happening, and is ever reaching forward towards some end point of complete secularity.¹⁶ His adoption of this thesis is influenced by the classical modernization theories of social theorists Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim in the late 19th and early 20th century. These social theorists hypothesized in their modernization theories that the social progress of society would include a decline in levels of religious adherence.¹⁷

Wilson argues that what is happening to religion is that in a modernizing world, one "increasingly regulated by devices and machines which operate according to the criteria of efficiency," spiritual aspiration declines.¹⁸ This approach sees the material forces of society bearing down on individuals under the structure of a top-down process, whereby the individual is

¹⁴ For sociologist's early secularization theories, see: Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966); David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Harper & Row, 1978); Steve Bruce, "Towards a General Theory of Secularization," *European Journal of Sociology* 10 (December 1969).

¹⁵ Brian Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society*, ix.

¹⁶ Brian Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society*, ix.

¹⁷ These social theorists were influenced by the Enlightenment ideals of upholding reason and science over religion and faith. See: Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905); Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).

¹⁸ Bryan Wilson, *Religion in a Secular Society*, xvi-xvii.

not granted much agency in shaping society, and instead change is impressed upon them by the larger force of modernization. As this force is fixed and constant, the secularization through modernization thesis presumes a consistent force of change. As will be shown, this argument has been critiqued as being teleological, presuming to know the end of its own analysis. This theory continues to be upheld today, although it has been reshaped and debated with attention to regional differences and historical findings.

Another scholar who upholds the secularization thesis, but in a nuanced way, is sociologist Steve Bruce. In his most recent work, he redefines the secularization thesis as what he calls “the secularization paradigm.”¹⁹ He concedes that what has come of the debates is that there is not one secularization theory, but rather “clusters of descriptions and explanations that cohere reasonably well.”²⁰ He argues that it is modernization which causes religious decline and he does so, as Wilson did before him, through a quantitative analysis of the statistics that show a decline in institutional faith. However, he is also clear that the paradigm does not assert that secularization processes are universally the same, only that secularization is a “long-term decline in the power, popularity and prestige of religious beliefs and rituals.”²¹ While this recognizes regional differences in religious change, his theory does not negate the existence of a long-term, linear, and progressive conception of modernity and its implications on Western society. While this may accord with the steady decline of Christendom in Britain, it does not align with the explicit rise of religious conformity that existed in postwar Canada during a time of industrialized expansion and nation building, followed by a dramatic decline.

¹⁹ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 2.

²⁰ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead*, 2.

²¹ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead*, 44.

Most recent research in the Canadian context of secularization has focused on the importance of the 1960s as the pivotal starting point of religious decline in Canada. However, historian David Marshall has argued that secularization in Canada has been happening since the 19th century. He argues that, as new secular forces of technology, capitalism, urbanization and modern thought rose to compete with the authority of Canada's Protestant churches beginning in the 19th century, the churches undermined themselves in accommodating these forces.²² He is very clear that he understands secularization as "a weakening of the role of religion, but not its absence," and he further argues that, "religion can be a vibrant force and churches can be thriving while secular forces are also at play."²³ Challenging Marshall's argument are historians Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, who argue that attention must be placed on the public authority Canada's Protestant churches held prior to World War II, stating that Protestantism in Canadian life was "the chief harbinger of cultural change before 1940," rather than complacent in its own demise since the 19th century.²⁴ Clarke and Macdonald also challenge Marshall's argument in their book, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*. Through a detailed statistical analysis of census records, denominational records, and national polling on church attendance and belief, they show that, in Canada, "decline in religious affiliation, membership, and participation started in the 1960s and has picked up pace rapidly since then."²⁵ This, they argue, therefore "raises questions about teleology and the inevitability of secularization" as it relates to the dawn of modernity in Canadian history.²⁶

²² David Marshall, "Canadian Historians, Secularization and the Problem of the Nineteenth Century," *Historical Studies* 60 (1993-1994), 73.

²³ Marshall, "Canadian Historians," 60, 73.

²⁴ Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (QB: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), xiv.

²⁵ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 11.

²⁶ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 14.

Clarke and Macdonald do credit sociologist David Martin for his version of the secularization thesis in his 1978, *A General Theory of Secularization*. Martin states, much like Steve Bruce, that while there are in general broad tendencies towards secularization in modernized societies, these can change in light of regional conditions.²⁷ Clarke and Macdonald believe that this allows for the unique situation that took place in Canadian history where there was intense religious revival in the 1950s, despite it being a time of economic prosperity and development. Clarke and Macdonald state, “Martin’s approach allows us to map the pathways of religious change with cultural and historical specificity in a comparative context.”²⁸ Similarly, in *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age*, Canadian religious studies scholar, Joel Thiessen, agrees with secularization theorists such as Wilson and Bruce, while acknowledging regional specificity. He says that in Canada today, “conditions of modernity provide an environment for societal, organizational, and eventually individual secularization to flourish.”²⁹ He further commends these secularization theorists for being “careful to point out that secularization unfolds differently across time and space, depending on a range of historical, social, and cultural factors in local societies.”³⁰ One can then look at the relationship between secularization and modernity without perceiving it as inevitable and linear in all cases, but rather, heavily dependent on the culture of time, place, and space.

Secularization has also had its opponents, who argue that religion in Western society is not declining but polarizing between religion and non-religion. Of those listed above, none debate that secularization is occurring, just under which timeline and which structural and

²⁷ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 14.

²⁸ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 14-15.

²⁹ Joel Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday: The Practice of Belief in a Secular Age* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 23.

³⁰ Thiessen, *The Meaning of Sunday*, 14.

regional pressures it occurs. However, one such sociologist in Canada is Reginald Bibby, who has written a 4-part series on religion in Canada based on his own extensive national quantitative surveys. His most recent work, *Beyond the Gods and Back*, sees not a religious decline, but a religious polarization similar to what has occurred in the United States.³¹ Clarke and Macdonald argue that he misreads the importance of the role of “no religion” in Canada, and of the next generation of unsocialized and unchurched youth. They further argue that churches need to accept that Canada is now a “de-Christianized, post-Christian society.”³²

Social History of Secularization

When Wilson first wrote on the secularization thesis in 1966, he began a debate that was taking place within the academic fervor of the rise of a “new” social history. Social historians became eager to unveil the stories of ordinary individuals in making change. At the same time, the theoretical approach of early post-modernism was becoming more prominent. This saw historians critiquing so-called empirical master narratives associated with modernism that acted to cover and obscure the more nuanced changes that took place in society.

In the late 1980s, an international community of social historians of religion began to take shape, which entailed further conversation between historians and sociologists on secularization. Hugh McLeod was predominant in these conversations, and has been termed the “father of the social history of religion in the late modern period”.³³ In the introduction to their edited collection, *Secularisation in the Christian World*, Callum Brown and Michael Snape explain in brief how in his earlier works, McLeod disrupted the place of secularization. Prior to

³¹ Reginald W Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why It Matters* (Lethbridge AB: A Project Canada Book, 2011).

³² Clarke and MacDonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 239.

³³ Callum Brown and Michael Snape, introduction to *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in honour of Hugh McLeod*, ed. Callum Brown and Michael Snape (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 2.

McLeod, they argue, secularization was a topic that was at once highly generalized in the realm of sociology and limited to case studies on a town-by-town basis by British historians.³⁴ McLeod broadened the scope to study secularization across the Western world, and turned the focus to look from the bottom-up at the role of ordinary people in directing change. Further, McLeod was the first to characterize the period from the 1790s to 1960s as “a distinct phase of European religious history; marked by revolt against the official churches, collapse of religious unity, and the rise of religious polarisation.”³⁵ His work would act to establish the 1960s as a fundamental point of religious transition in the modern world, nuancing the thesis of the long-term linearity of secularization.

Likewise, Callum Brown had a large impact on the social history of secularization. In his first monograph, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000*, he employs a cultural and statistical analysis to display what it has meant to be religious or irreligious in the last 200 years of Christian Britain.³⁶ In this analysis, Brown adopted the periodization of late Christendom as proposed by McLeod—that is the late 18th century to late 20th century, roughly construed. Markedly turning away from the solely quantitative approach of the secularization thesis proponents, Brown, like McLeod, focuses on the voices and stories of ordinary people in history as causes/reflections of cultural and structural change. In this work, Brown attributes religious decline largely to the shifting place of religious institutional power in the lives of girls and women in the 1960s. He points to the importance of what he calls the “discursive death of pious femininity”, arguing that “the reconstruction of female identity within work, sexual relations and new recreational opportunities from the late 1960s, put not just

³⁴ Brown and Snape, introduction to *Secularization in the Christian World*, 5.

³⁵ Brown and Snape, introduction to *Secularization in the Christian World*, 7.

³⁶ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*.

feminism but female identity in collision with the Christian construction of femininity.”³⁷ He further argues that once women began to lose interest in religion, men felt that they no longer needed to keep up the appearance of religiosity, and the secularization process was sped up.³⁸ With gender as a category of historical analysis becoming prevalent in the 1980s, Brown’s work spearheaded work on the intersection of secularization and gender, though not without critique.³⁹

In her article “Gendering Secularization Theory,” religious studies scholar Linda Woodhead also speaks to the significance of analyzing gender differences when discussing secularization. However, she argues that Callum Brown gives too much focus to the personal values and attitudes of the 1960s sexual revolution.⁴⁰ Rather than being a “straightforward revolution,” she argues that “significant continuities and persistent inequalities” between men and women’s work persist – women now do double labour as they continue to carry out unpaid domestic duties, as well as new duties of paid employment.⁴¹ She argues that whether a woman stays religious or not depends on if they have any time left for religious commitment, rather than seeking liberation.⁴² While this argument is more rooted in feminist debates than secularization, Woodhead importantly calls for scholars’ further attention to studying the role of gender in secularization.

In McLeod’s most recent and most influential work, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, he argues that “Brown is unusual in the degree to which he places gender at the centre,” though he does concede that “it has played an increasingly large role in the most recent literature.”⁴³ He is

³⁷ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 179.

³⁸ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 192.

³⁹ Joan W Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075.

⁴⁰ Linda Woodhead, “Gendering Secularization Theory,” *Social Compass* 55, no. 2 (2008), 189.

⁴¹ Woodhead, “Gendering Secularization Theory,” 189.

⁴² Woodhead, “Gendering Secularization Theory,” 191.

⁴³ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 9.

concerned, however, that in focusing on one dimension of social change, Brown's gender-centred work serves to favour one dimension at the expense of others.⁴⁴ His own analysis recognizes the importance of multiple specific social dimensions of change: economic change, the impact of new movements and ideals, the conflicts arising from attempted church reform and theological modernization, along with changes in gender and sexuality.⁴⁵

In this text, McLeod is the first scholar to shift the periodization of secularization studies into the era of "the long sixties"—1958-1974.⁴⁶ He engages in a qualitative, rather than a quantitative approach to the relationship between religion and society, while working within the historical framework of the decline of institutional Christianity. He looks at this decline not as an inevitable outcome of a progressive secularization, but as an outcome of cultural rupture that occurred following the growing tension between religiosity and liberalizing cultural norms in the 1960s. Marking the 1960s as a significant moment of cultural upheaval was integral to new developments in the field of the social history of religion. In critiquing the oversimplification of the secularization thesis upheld by sociologists, McLeod states, "[They] see the events of the 1960s as a perfect illustration of the general secularizing trends in modern societies, but they have seldom addressed the specificity of that decade."⁴⁷ Together, Brown and McLeod began the process of working out what historian Jeffrey Cox describes as, "an alternative master narrative to religious change in the Christian world, one that can be set alongside the hidden and invocatory master narrative of secularisation."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 258.

⁴⁵ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 260.

⁴⁶ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*.

⁴⁷ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 7.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Cox, "Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularisation: A Progress Report," in *Secularization in the Christian World: Essays in honour of Hugh McLeod*, ed. Callum Brown and Michael Snap (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 19.

Both Brown and McLeod agree on the importance of the 1960s as a crucial turning point in religious change; however, as shown above, they differ on its causes and in their approach. Further utilizing gender as a lens for studying religious history, Brown's second monograph, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s*, places women at the centre of an international analysis. Like McLeod's, *Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, this study extends the geographical boundaries of secularization beyond Europe and towards a universality of 1960s secularizing trends in the Western world. Complementing his first work of cultural history, he approaches this study through, primarily, a quantitative and statistical analysis of household and church attendance demographics to argue for the interconnectedness of secularization, changing family demographics, and women's liberation.⁴⁹ Having established in his first book that femininity and piety have been inextricably linked in Western cultural discourse, he now argues that "gender has been the critical category of analysis in the progression of secularisation as a broad life-changing phenomenon."⁵⁰

Brown further establishes a narrative of post 1960s religious change in his most recent book, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West*. In this, he engages in testimonial interviews with 85 volunteers, aged between 40 and 90, and born in 18 different countries, but "[who] all contributed through migration to the kaleidoscopic composition of western society."⁵¹ By analyzing oral testimonies, Brown has drawn up a vision of religious decline in the 1960s as constructed by societal change, where "individual narratives let us see how cultural change works in free societies."⁵² In focusing on the changing discourse, the goal of this most recent text

⁴⁹ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 1.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 259.

⁵¹ Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanist and the Secular West* (UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 2.

⁵² Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 3.

is to further illuminate the agency of individuals in the making of history, showing that “culture is not merely endured by the individual, but is changed by the individual.”⁵³

Perhaps following on the advice of McLeod, in this text, Brown shifts the focus away from only women’s narratives to look at childhood, men’s narratives, and differing ethnicities, as well. Nevertheless, he still dedicates notable space to the role of women and upholds changing gendered discourse as significant in religious change. Evidenced through oral testimonies, Brown hypothesizes a concept of “lived feminism” in relation to religious decline.⁵⁴ He suggests that even if women did not become feminist activists, many women still engaged with the ideas of the women’s movement, “not through reading and learning in feminist tracts or attending consciousness-raising groups of the classic feminist historical narrative, but rather through a determination to affirm their autonomy from prescribed conventional norms.”⁵⁵ He further argues that it is within this context of lived feminism that a life without a God emerges, “a freedom from patriarchy leading to a freedom from religion.”⁵⁶ Thus, a continuation of his earlier argument of ‘the discursive death of pious femininity,’ by way of the growing opportunities for women beginning in the 1960s.

Secularization in the Pacific Northwest

As previously stated, studies of religious decline in the West have tended to focus on Britain, the United States, or a universalizing of the West. There has been a limited amount of scholarship on secularization in Canada. Further, there has been little scholarship on the uniquely secular zone of the Pacific Northwest, though it has become a focus of more recent works. One such historian is Tina Block, whose article, “Ungodly Grandmother: Marian Sherman and the

⁵³ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 19.

⁵⁴ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

⁵⁵ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

Social Dimensions of Atheism in Postwar Canada,” is an engagement with a story of both feminism and non-religion in Victoria, BC in the postwar era. In this article, Block provides a case study of the life of a woman from Victoria whose prominent atheism was unique for a woman in the postwar era. Through an intersectional framework, Block engages in a literary analysis of Sherman’s personal papers and also analyzes segments from the media uproar that Sherman’s atheism had generated. She emphasizes the importance of place and why it is significant that this occurred in Canada, and particularly on Vancouver Island in British Columbia in the postwar period. In line with the arguments of the previously cited scholars of Canadian religion, Block notes, “During the 1960s, Christianity’s hold on Canadian culture loosened as church participation declined and religious pluralism and criticism flourished...By the end of the 1960s, Canada was a different place, religiously, than it had been when Sherman first turned to atheism in 1946.”⁵⁷ Block looks through the lenses of gender, race, nationality, religion, and social class in explaining why it was that Marian Sherman was granted the opportunity to be an outwardly presenting secular woman in this period where woman’s piety was expected. She argues that the social, cultural, and geographical boundaries of Sherman’s life formed a space in which it was possible to be outwardly atheist as an older woman.

Block went on to further her analysis of British Columbia as a secular space in her book, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life*. In this, she engages in a series of oral history interviews to survey the cultural and religious landscape of the Pacific Northwest region between the 1950s and the 1970s, contending that “secularity helped to define the Pacific Northwest identity and was itself produced and entrenched by regional discourses.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Tina Block, “Ungodly Grandmother: Marian Sherman and the Social Dimensions of Atheism in Postwar Canada,” *Journal of Women’s History* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2014), 139.

⁵⁸ Tina Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 144.

Block's work follows on the work of historian Lynne Marks, whose book, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia*, looks at how class, race, and gender relations in the settling of British Columbia established a population with a great openness to irreligion – “a pattern that has remained remarkably consistent over time.”⁵⁹

In *The Secular Northwest*, Block uses the term “lived religion” in speaking of how religion is practiced in day-to-day life in this region.⁶⁰ She looks at the impact of regional space on culture, using a particular linguistic analysis to observe the ways in which religion continued to present itself in varying forms of everyday life, without occurring inside of the space of the church. In contrast, or in addition to, the study of lived religion, Block focuses on how people in the Northwest often “lived ‘against’ or without religion.”⁶¹ She argues that the “imaginative, demographic, historical, and material constitution of the Pacific Northwest” was a place in which secularity was, to a reasonable extent, accepted.⁶² Further, in line with Brown's gendered analysis, Block notes, “Many women decried the sexism of organized religion, and attributed their sometimes painful disengagements from church to the institution's patriarchy.”⁶³

Also writing about religion in the region of the Pacific Northwest are religious studies scholars Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk. In their edited collection, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, they describe the geographical region of the Pacific Northwest as an unchurched region with the highest number of religious “nones”: those claiming no religious identity, but not necessarily atheist. In her introduction to the book,

⁵⁹ Lynne Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 4.

⁶⁰ “Lived Religion” was coined by David Hall and Robert Orsi as a way to think of religion in terms of practices related to specific social contexts on a daily basis. See: Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁶¹ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 7.

⁶² Block, *Secular Northwest*, 143.

⁶³ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 95.

O’Connell Killen describes the population of the Pacific Northwest as “unchurched”, noting that “the single largest segment of the Pacific Northwest’s population is composed of those who identify with a religious tradition but have no affiliation to a religious community.”⁶⁴ Concurring with the work of Block and Marks, O’Connell Killen further states that it has “pretty much always been this way.”⁶⁵ Notably, this text looks at the American states of Oregon, Washington, and Alaska, as it is a part of a larger series of religion and public life in the United States. However, the Pacific Northwest, also referred to as the Cascadia bioregion, geographically includes British Columbia. The province has been excluded from academic works on the “none zone”, though a forthcoming book by O’Connell Killen, along with Paul Bramadat and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, will correct this.⁶⁶

Looking at secularization in a region that is the least religious in all of Canada, where most people do not participate in church, “and never have,” is decidedly a difficult task.⁶⁷ Yet, despite maintaining its secular status in relation to the rest of Canada, British Columbia’s rise in church attendance in the 1950s and concurrent decline in church attendance beginning in the 1960s is still in line with the rest of Canada.⁶⁸ It is the case that British Columbia experienced the same postwar decline as the rest of Canada, while maintaining its position as the least religious place.

Historiography Contextualized

⁶⁴ Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 9.

⁶⁵ O’Connell Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest*, 9.

⁶⁶ Paul Bramadat, Patricia O’Connell Killen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021).

⁶⁷ Patricia O’Connell Killen, conclusion to *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, eds. Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk (California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 169.

⁶⁸ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 8: “Both region and nation experienced rising levels of institutional religious involvement in the 1950s, and decreasing levels in the 1960s; despite such developments, the relative secularity of the Northwest remained relatively constant.

Brown and McLeod have disrupted the master narrative of a linear progressive, centuries-long narrative of secularization and focus their research on the period of the long sixties. Most importantly, these social historians have shown that religious decline cannot be deduced from statistics alone, but rather that it has been contingent on cultural change. Further, they have shown that individuals both endure and generate culture in a mutual exchange. This thesis places the voices of eleven Victoria women in conversation with the shifting discourse of time, place and space, recognizing that quantitative evidence alone does not tell a complete story.

The closing of St Ann's Academy in 1973 appears as a strong example of the decline of Christianity in the Victoria region, and one might expect that the number of Catholics has been in decline since then. However, the number of individuals that selected Catholic on the Canadian Census in the Greater Victoria region has stayed between 12% and 14% of the total religious demographic since the 1960s.⁶⁹ These numbers show that looking at levels of religion by Census alone does not reflect actual religious practices or beliefs. Certainly, it does not reflect the broader secularizing currents since the 1960s: declining numbers of people in the physical pews, declining need for performance of sacramental rights, or the absence of new priests and nuns. Additionally, the steady number of Catholics are a result of immigration patterns from predominantly Catholic countries in Latin America and the Philippines. As O'Connell Killen and Silk explain, "Roman Catholics kept pace with regional population increase, primarily through in-migration".⁷⁰ By comparison, Anglicans in Victoria fell from 39% in 1961 to 8.5% in 2011 as the Anglican church is not generally impacted by in-migration. (See Fig. 2) Finally, and most

⁶⁹ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Table 45, 1961, 17; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 3, Table 13, 1971, 19; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 2, British Columbia Provincial Series: Population; Language, Ethnic Origin, Religion, Place of Birth, Schooling., Table 5, 1981, 5; Statistics Canada, *Religion in Canada 91' Census*, Table 2, 1993, 95-97; Statistics Canada, *2001 Census of Population*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 95F0450XCB2001004; Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011032.

⁷⁰ O'Connell Killen and Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest*, 33.

important to this study, the number of Catholics in Victoria should be considered in relation to the rise of those claiming no religion, which has risen from 2.45% to 50% of the Greater Victoria population since the 1960s.⁷¹ (See Fig. 2)

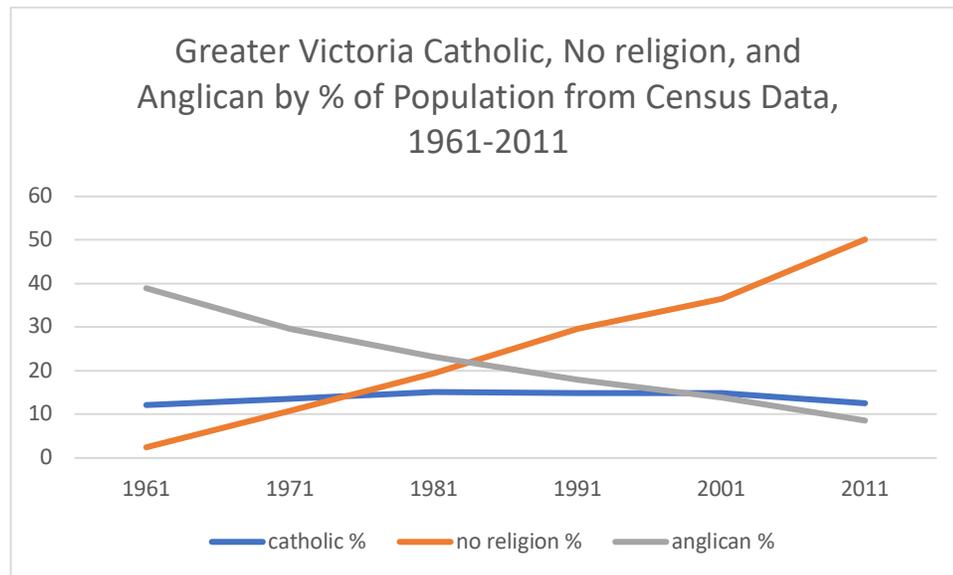


Fig. 2 ⁷²

The fate of St Ann’s Academy shows that the secularizing currents of the long sixties were active in Victoria, even as they occurred within a region that has been more secular than the rest of Canada. Block’s work illuminates the deeply ingrained secular currents that existed in Victoria in the postwar era, though as this thesis will show, pockets of strong religiosity simultaneously existed within the region until the cultural forces of the long sixties acted to unravel them.

⁷¹ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Table 45, 1961, 17; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 3, Table 13, 1971, 19; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 2, British Columbia Provincial Series: Population; Language, Ethnic Origin, Religion, Place of Birth, Schooling., Table 5, 1981, 5; Statistics Canada, *Religion in Canada 91’ Census*, Table 2, 1993, 95-97; Statistics Canada, *2001 Census of Population*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 95F0450XCB2001004; Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011032.

⁷² *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Table 45, 1961, 17; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 3, Table 13, 1971, 19; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 2, British Columbia Provincial Series: Population; Language, Ethnic Origin, Religion, Place of Birth, Schooling., Table 5, 1981, 5; Statistics Canada, *Religion in Canada 91’ Census*, Table 2, 1993, 95-97; Statistics Canada, *2001 Census of Population*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 95F0450XCB2001004; Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011032.

This thesis looks at what changed in religious, gendered, and popular discourse in the long sixties to push society towards this post-Christian era. Additionally, it looks at how that discourse was received, performed, and transmuted by eleven ordinary (formerly) Catholic women over the course of their lifetimes. My approach to secularization echoes that of Block and other social historians, namely Brown and McLeod. Block states that secularization is “not an inescapable force of modernity, but rather something made and defined by actual people.”⁷³ Further, I present secularization as the decline of the importance of institutional religious structures, but not necessarily the rejection of personal faith or spirituality. Additionally, a recent text by Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, with a particular focus on the rise of ‘no religion’ in the US and Canada, discusses the role of individualization on declining religion. They make an argument for an “individualization framework of secularization,” whereby “social transformation specifically occurs as societies gradually embrace individualism, personal autonomy, and choice as prized cultural values.”⁷⁴ As will be shown, the women that I have interviewed had a yearning for individual autonomy, which led to their departure from the church. Consequently, I also present secularization as an outcome of women’s increased agency, freedom, and choice.

To have a complete understanding of why and how this religious transformation occurred, historians need to consider the individual narratives of ordinary people that were central to this change. This points to the importance of qualitative research and the study of ordinary individuals in history. While quantitative research shows the steady rise of no religion, this project of oral history within a distinct religious community tells a much more complicated

⁷³ Block, “Ungodly Grandmother,” 134.

⁷⁴ Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 21.

story of departure from religion. These women's wavering adherence to the Catholic church can be observed through the framework of "lived religion," whereby religion is something that takes place within discursive exchange and at the level of everyday life.⁷⁵ Inversely, their stories can be observed, as Block has done in *The Secular Northwest*, as an inquiry focusing on how people "live against" religion.⁷⁶

Oral History

To address my use of oral narratives as my primary research source, I want to acknowledge that these narratives are constructions of the interview participants' memories, and that those memories are shaped by the cultural values and ideological sympathies of both the interviewer and the interviewee. I further acknowledge that my call for interviewees was specifically looking for women who *left* the Catholic church in the 1960s and 1970s, not those who stayed, which entails a particular negative bias against religion. It is also important to note that three of the women interviewed – Norma, Maria, and Lizzie – went to St Ann's together, remain friends, and share similar opinions of their time in the Catholic church, which entails a further bias in how leaving Catholicism is presented. Additionally, I acknowledge that those interviewed are predominantly middle class, Anglo, second or third generation Canadians of European descent, and that their stories represent a select demographic with particular privilege. As such, their memories and ideals have been shaped by this privilege. This may also play a role in why they felt safe to both rebel against their parents in the long sixties and to come forward with a dissenting view of religion now.

Block states in her work of oral history, oral narratives should be approached "not as unmediated reconstructions of the past, but as cultural constructions filtered through the

⁷⁵ Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion."

⁷⁶ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 7.

present.”⁷⁷ However, in “Telling our Stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history,” feminist historian Joan Sangster quotes a Personal Narratives Group in stating that while people can lie and exaggerate in oral interviews, “the guiding principle for life histories could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose.”⁷⁸

While there are limitations to using memory as evidence, there are similar limitations to documented evidence; as historian Valerie Yow notes, “Slanting the story to make it acceptable to the receiver occurs even with the diary writer: Even here the individual who writes only for him or herself tries to protect the ego. And letter writers always have in mind their correspondents’ interests.”⁷⁹ The story of an individual, both documented and recorded, is by nature subjective and left to interpretation by the researcher. It can be argued that oral evidence can offer the historian more information. As historian and sociologist Trevor Lummis writes in *Listening to History*, “one precise advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance; the ‘source’ can reflect upon the content and offer interpretation as well as facts.”⁸⁰

The interviews that I conducted lasted one to two hours. They were preceded by and followed-up with brief email correspondence, but all primary source materials are gleaned from the interviews themselves. The interviews took place in coffee shops, over the phone, or in the interview participants’ homes. I did my best as an interviewer to dissolve a perception of my

⁷⁷ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 16.

⁷⁸ Personal Narratives Group ‘Truth’s and Luisa Passerini, *Interpreting Women’s Lives: feminist theory and personal narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), as cited in, Joan Sangster, “Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no.1 (1994): 5.

⁷⁹ Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 18.

⁸⁰ Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral evidence* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), 43.

privilege as researcher, and to make them comfortable to share their stories. My questions followed a script, but the interview participants' stories often strayed far from that script. My interpretation was that they were excited to have someone listen to their stories, and to have someone who cared about their memories. Both their enthusiasm, and their preconceived knowledge of my research interests in gender and secularity may have led to their exaggerating, but these stories represent their identity, the framework of their life, and are their truth. Their stories tell how cultural change over time impacted their lives, and how they interpreted those changes. I am researching how their subjective perception of, and interaction with, culture made real change in society, and oral history provides this evidence.

Chapter 1: Lived Feminism with the Sisters of St Ann: “*A powerful female environment*”

In this chapter, I analyze the role that Brown’s concepts of ‘the discursive death of pious femininity’ and ‘lived feminism’ played in the interview participants’ education, and consequential departure from the Catholic church. These women engaged with the opportunities for women that became increasingly available in this postwar era, and they certainly rejected adopting the traditional pious identities of their mothers. What is unique in this context, however, is the internal discourse of women’s liberation that these women apparently adopted within their Catholicism – having been educated by the Sisters of St Ann at the all-girls St Ann’s Academy and co-ed St Patrick’s Catholic School during a transitional time of Catholic church reforms and a revolutionary time for women’s autonomy. I had originally approached this project of young women leaving the Catholic Church in the long sixties as Brown’s work would suggest: an ideal example of the tension felt by individuals between the discourse of women’s liberation and the teachings of the church. Instead, I found that the interview participants who were graduating in the 1960s and 1970s recall not feeling a need for organized feminism in their lives, and that although they recognized the patriarchal hierarchy in the Catholic church, their own gendered oppression was rarely cited as an initial reason for leaving. Comparatively, the one interview participant who graduated in the 1950s experienced substantial trauma from the patriarchal constraints of the Catholic church, which demonstrates the generational shift in discourse that occurred between the 1950s and 1960s.

Although the interview participants broke from traditional roles for women at the time, most reflect on their adolescence and speak of their equality then as an expectation, rather than a struggle. They story their liberation from Catholicism as a journey towards their personal

autonomy – that is, their moral independence as individuals outside of the dogma of the Catholic church – but not always, as Brown’s work suggests, in the face of patriarchal oppression. The interview participants held a general indifference to the prescriptive concept of feminism, as was stated by Maria, “I saw men telling women what to do and I don’t like being told what to do, no matter who it is, but particularly not when it’s a boys club, which is what Catholicism ended up being to me [...] So I guess you could call it feminism, but basically me as a person, not as a woman.”⁸¹ In their schooling, the Sisters they were taught by upheld them as equal to boys and expected them to engage with higher education and attain good careers before thinking about domestic relationships. At the same time, many of the Sisters were leaving their religious order to live out their own independent lives. I argue that having this internal women’s liberation discourse of independence and equality in their Catholic schooling established the interview participants’ indifference towards the subject of feminism and leveraged their independence. At the same time, this empowerment was taking place within a massive generational shift in gender dynamics.

Limited Cultural Influence

All eleven women grew up in Victoria within the relatively small Catholic community there.⁸² In Victoria in the 1950s, Catholics made up only 8.85% of the population.⁸³ Comparatively, followers of the Protestant denominational Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches made up 77.5% of the population – or, 43, 24.5, and 10%, respectively.⁸⁴ (See Figure 3) The interview participants report feeling culturally isolated within their Catholic communities,

⁸¹ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020, Skype Interview.

⁸² For further history of the Catholic Diocese of Vancouver Island, see: Patrick Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo: 150 Years of Catholic History on Vancouver Island* (Victoria: ICN Publishing, 1997).

⁸³ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Table 41, 1951, 90.

⁸⁴ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Table 41, 1951, 90.

and they also report feeling relatively isolated by being on an island off the coast of mainland Canada. These girls growing up within Catholicism in Victoria in the 1950s report that religion was just a part of everyday life, from their education, to their community, to their friends. In describing growing up in Victoria, Ellen recalls, “This was the world.”⁸⁵ When asked about cultural influences from within and outside of the church, Norma explains, “Both those things were together in my world because my cultural world was Catholic.”⁸⁶ They felt they were less affected by the revolutionary discourse of the 1960s than someone growing up within the secular school system or in a bigger city, like Vancouver. However, they still shifted with the tides of female empowerment and lived out a narrative very similar to other adolescent girls in the 1960s and 1970s. The influences were coming from somewhere.

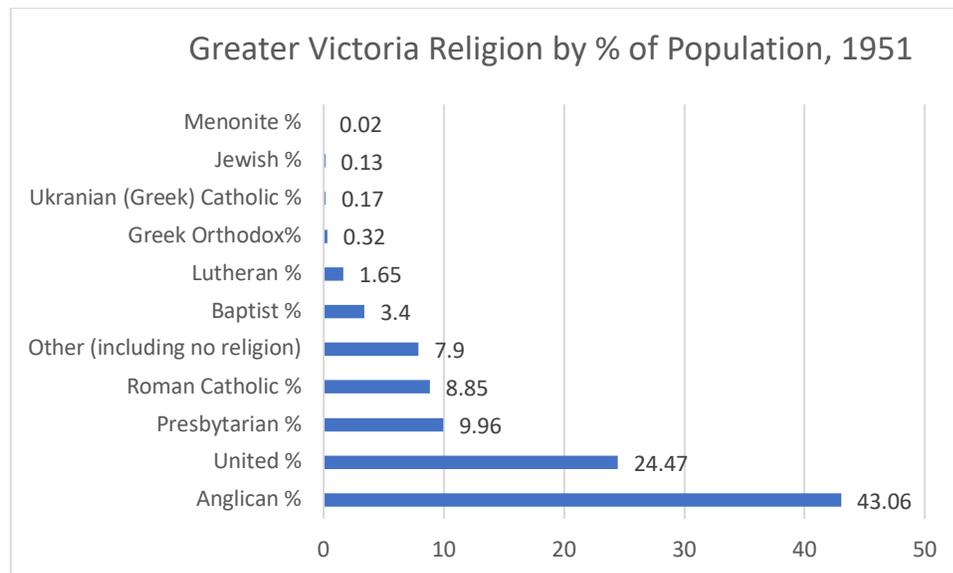


Fig. 3⁸⁷

Gender Equality with the Sisters of St Ann

⁸⁵ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019, Skype Interview.

⁸⁶ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019. In person, Victoria.

⁸⁷ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Table 41, 1951, 90. Note: No religion was not calculated on a regional basis in this Census year, so it is conflated with “other”. “No Religion” for British Columbia in 1951 was reported as 4.5% of the population: *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Table 38, 1951.

It was not uncommon for people to be leaving the Catholic church on moral principles in this era. As Clarke and Macdonald state, “the [Catholic] church attempted to confront the cultural revolution unleashed in the 1960s, and it lost out by forcing people to choose between the personal autonomy the times made possible and conformity to the church and its traditions.”⁸⁸ For the interview participants, their autonomy was not always a question of choice. Despite their awareness of gendered church reforms, such as the Birth Control Encyclical, they did not report feeling personally oppressed.⁸⁹ They recall an expectation for personal autonomy. Many believed that this was instilled in them by the Sisters of St Ann. As stated by Maria, “I always felt that we were just as good, and sometimes, if not better than, decision makers than were, were boys. So that, I think that the nuns in a way incubated what we now call feminism in us for being human beings that have worth and value.”⁹⁰ Ellen reiterates this sentiment of equality, noting that while she was aware of the patriarchal hierarchy, she did not feel its effects:

I think this could be totally wrong, but I think maybe oddly the St Ann's girls were stronger in their confidence. Like it wasn't like they felt unequal to the men. It's odd because, that's all it was, was a female world. And like I say, the nuns were kind of subservient to the priests. And yet I never really felt like there was barriers, or I wasn't really aware of them.⁹²

With similar sentiment, Kim Campbell, Canada’s first and only female Prime Minister and St Ann’s Academy alumnae, spoke highly of the Sisters in their role of supporting women. At a special event in 2008 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Sisters of St. Ann’s arrival in Victoria, Campbell expressed,

⁸⁸ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 161.

⁸⁹ Pope Paul VI, “Humane Vitae,” Vatican, July 25 1968, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

⁹⁰ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

⁹¹ The interview participants refer to the Sisters of St Ann colloquially as nuns. While the terms are often used interchangeably, nuns historically denote women religious who live cloistered in a convent, while sisters live an active life in areas such as education and healthcare. The Sisters of St Ann refer to themselves as sisters.

⁹² Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

The Sisters of St Ann reinforced my deep belief in the power of women to make the world a better place and the importance of getting rid of barriers to women reaching their full potential [...] From personal experience, I can tell you that they left their mark on the mind and souls of girls who were in their care.⁹³

The independence of these Sisters has historical roots. Historian Jaqueline Gresko argues that the Sisters of St Ann have acted as autonomous women since they first came west in the 19th century. In her article “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” Gresko notes that the “assumption that the Oblates set policy and the sisters slaved to carry it out stands unquestioned by most historians.”⁹⁴ However, she argues that the Sisters actually had more power in directing the institutionalization of Catholicism in British Columbia than the men of the Oblate, even “in the face of Oblate leaders’ attempts to subordinate them to masculine direction.”⁹⁵ Two systems of institutionalization came out of this: “the Sisters of Saint Ann’s educational and caring institutions for the peoples of the province and the French Oblates’ Durieu system of reductions for Aboriginal peoples.”⁹⁶ She notes that their school teaching in residential schools “linked the two systems,” but that the Sisters took full charge in developing health and educational policy.⁹⁷ In the 20th century, the bishops of the Vancouver Island Diocese came to “depend on the Sisters of Saint Ann to run institutions.”⁹⁸ Gresko argues that these early

⁹³ Kim Campbell, Speaking in Victoria BC, June 7, 2008 in Theresa, Vogel, *Apolitical SSA's*, Created for the 200th anniversary of Mother Mary Ann, 2009.

⁹⁴ Jaqueline Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia” in *Changing Habits: Women’s Religious Orders in Canada*, ed. Elizabeth M Smyth (Ottawa: Novalis Publishing, 2007), 274.

⁹⁵ Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” 281.

⁹⁶ Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” 275; “One of the most well-known surveillance systems, the oft-vilified Durieu system, was conceived and installed in the second half of the nineteenth century in British Columbia by the Roman Catholic Bishop of New Westminster, Paul Durieu (OMI). The Durieu system formally borrows from the Jesuit reducciones, 16th-century settlements built in South America, for the purpose of assimilating Indigenous cultures through Christianization”: Geoffrey Paul Carr, “‘House of No Spirit’: An Architectural History of the Indian Residential School in British Columbia,” PhD diss., (University of British Columbia, 2011), 112.

⁹⁷ Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” 275.

⁹⁸ Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” 284-5.

Sisters established that the Sisters of St Ann “had a separate culture and were not entirely integrated into that male system,” despite the gendered hierarchy of the church.⁹⁹

In this early colonial era, the Sisters of St Ann setting up the convent and school were some of the first women to own land in a world that was dominantly run by men. One interview participant, Mickey, explains that the early Sisters of St Ann were “wheeling and dealing in a man’s world.”¹⁰⁰ One of the first Sisters to arrive in Victoria in 1859, Mother Mary Providence, who was to take over the role of Superior of the newly built school and convent, is quoted in stating, “A woman’s life is not limited; life will be mostly what women truly wish it to be.”¹⁰¹ Likely, this expectation for women’s autonomy was preserved within the Sisters of St Ann during the long sixties. The Sisters were no doubt impacted by changing gender dynamics in the broader culture; however, the sense of gender equality that the interview participants gained from the Sisters in their youth is contingent upon the Sisters’ autonomous history.

Lived Feminism with the Sisters of St Ann

It can be argued that the dogma of the Catholic church stood and stands in direct opposition to the guiding principles of feminism, namely in opposing women’s autonomy in terms of reproductive rights and the right to move beyond the domestic sphere.¹⁰² While the interview participants recognized this pressure within the church at large, they did not feel

⁹⁹ Gresko, “Gender and Mission: The Sisters of Saint Ann in British Columbia,” 288.

¹⁰⁰ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019, In person, Victoria.

¹⁰¹ Theresa Vogel, *Apolitical SSA’s*, Created for the 200th anniversary of Mother Mary Ann, 2009.

¹⁰² Though not the focus of my research, many women who stayed in the church incorporated feminism into their theology. For more on Catholic feminist theology, see: Denise Lardner Carmody, *The Double Cross: Ordination, Abortion, and Catholic Feminism* (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1986); Elizabeth A Johnson, ed., *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2002); Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Women, Reproductive Rights and the Catholic Church,” *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 2 (January 2008): 184–93; Sara Bentley Doely, ed., *Women’s Liberation and the Church: The New Demand for Freedom in the Life of the Christian Church* (NY: New York Association Press, 1970); Sandra M Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church, revised edition* (NJ: Paulist Press, 1990).

personally held back by it. As Janet explains, “I didn't feel like I was going to be limited. I mean, in my schooling I was always – well, I did really well in school and so, I expected that I would go to university and that I wouldn't get married right away and that I would, you know, have some kind of career or something.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Ellen states that she “never felt compelled to marry and have children,” and if anything she “felt a bit torn about the obligation to go to university,” because she didn't know what she wanted to study.¹⁰⁴ To be sure, while the Sisters wanted the girls to lead independent lives, they were never intentionally downplaying the importance of religion. The Sisters preferred that their students attended Catholic universities. Ellen recalls worrying, “What if I grow up and lose my faith,” stating that “This is what the nuns used to worry about and say, you must never go to UBC. You will lose your faith, you must go to Spokane, whatever it is, Gonzaga.”¹⁰⁵ (Gonzaga University is a private, Catholic university in Spokane, Washington.)

As students of the Sisters of St Ann, the interview participants were always encouraged to succeed in academics and enter into universities before starting families. Janet explained that at one point in her education, they removed the home economics courses and transitioned to an entirely academic stream school. She recalls, “You weren't expected to take home ec classes and cooking classes. They just did away with that stuff. So, there was an expectation that we would do well academically and several of the teachers had degrees and even advanced degrees.”¹⁰⁶ Mickey recalls, “They got rid of ‘the womanly arts’. The industrial age got rid of all of that. You didn't have to learn to do it because the machines were making it – women could go out and

¹⁰³ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020, Phone Interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

have a career.”¹⁰⁷ Maria also discussed the quality of her education with the Sisters of St Ann, stating, “I found the education amazing, and you know, those nuns, I will never forget them. And they were really influential because they were strong women. I felt very, very lucky to have the kind of education I got, which was almost completely academic.”¹⁰⁸

They saw the Sisters as strong female role models, as Lizzie states, “I was grateful for the models of adult women in a profession that I got from the nuns [...] They were kind and they paid attention and they gave extra time.”¹⁰⁹ She continues that, “they were powerful. They didn’t shrink around Father MacNamara, they carried on being who they were.”¹¹⁰ As further iterated by Ellen,

When you're involved in a convent, like where the nuns were, that is a very powerful female environment, and the nuns were super powerful [...] Like the priests were the boss, but the nuns, even at school, the nuns maintained the power [...] The priest had that job to do, but within the context of the convent, those nuns, you know, like they were, they were the boss.¹¹¹

The concept of lived feminism could be apt in describing the feminism of the interview participants. The cultural influences of feminism were coming from the internal structures of the interview participants’ education, rather than through their own struggle with patriarchal oppression. They certainly recognized gendered hierarchies but were surrounded daily by powerful women. However, I found that the interview participants did not report a need to affirm their autonomy as women against patriarchy as Brown suggests. Although some of the interview participants did report patriarchal barriers throughout their lives, they entered their adult lives with the conviction that they were equals. As the feminist influences were coming from the

¹⁰⁷ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020, In person, Victoria.

¹¹⁰ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

¹¹¹ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

Catholic Sisters who were even more removed from the world and from feminist activism than were their students, the concept of lived feminism is appropriate in this case in describing the Sisters.

Mickey was a novice (sister in training) and educator at St Ann's Academy from 1964 to 1969, and she left the order thereafter. She describes the world around her at the convent as blowing open in that era. Importantly, however, she recalls not knowing where the influence was coming from, but that "the atmosphere was charged with it".¹¹² She argues she wasn't influenced by external popular culture, stating, "we missed the whole, all the Beatles. We missed the Rolling Stones, that whole block. We didn't see newspapers for a couple of years. No TV."¹¹³ Mickey recalls that the Sisters of St Ann readily embraced the liberalizing currents of the Second Vatican Council ecumenical church reforms in the 1960s – in particular, calls for social justice, equality for all people, and equality of women.¹¹⁴ As they embraced the world and its changing culture, many Sisters left in their disappointment that the Council did not address issues surrounding the limited role of women in the church, as many had expected would be addressed. After the Council, ordination for women was denied, and the Vatican's birth control encyclical was announced, and many women religious became more conscious of the patriarchal hierarchy in the church.¹¹⁵ At this time, despite insisting that she did not even know what birth control was, Mickey recalls thinking that "there's no way a man's going to tell me if I can or cannot use birth control."¹¹⁶ She relates her change in perception to having an "informed conscience"—a Catholic

¹¹² Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹¹³ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹¹⁵ The Second Vatican Council will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. For further readings on Vatican II, see: Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents* (Liturgical Press, 2014); Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution* (California: University of California Press, 2004); John W O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹¹⁶ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

belief reiterated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1992 that there are times when your own moral conscience must override church teachings.¹¹⁷ It can't be denied that her moral conscience, and those of many other Sisters, came as a reaction to continued gender hierarchies in the church paralleled with a world of new opportunities for women. Further, their informed conscience was undeniably impacted by the changing cultural discourse surrounding piety and femininity. As Mickey conveys, "You gotta remember, back in those days, you're raised that you're going to be a nurse, or you can be a teacher. Your expectations were not very high for a woman – a young woman – in those eras, so one way to get an advance was to be a nun."¹¹⁸ As Mickey further explains, increasing job opportunities for women afforded women religious another option:

These women thought this was their station in life for the rest of their life, but this is based on old theology where the priest would say, 'Your mother is lovely, but being a nun is lovelier.' They say when you are a nun, you are in a higher station, you are higher to God. These women all of a sudden realize that they don't have to be a Sister to 'save their soul.' There were opportunities for women outside the convent, universities were bursting at the seams, so a lot of us left.

It follows that while not actively engaging with the activism of the women's movement, these Sisters were engaging with the discourse and growing opportunities in a determination to affirm their autonomy. Mickey recalls that a noticeable number of the Sisters of St Ann left their religious lives during the long sixties, while onboarding no new recruits.¹¹⁹ The decline and aging out of the Sisters of St Ann played a significant role in the closing of St Ann's Academy in 1973.¹²⁰ In her book, *The Sisters of Saint Anne: A century of History*, Louise Roy notes, in speaking of the numbers of Sisters of St Ann as a whole across North America, "After 1950,

¹¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 3, Section 1, Chapter 1: Article 6. Moral Conscience, 1993.

¹¹⁸ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

¹²⁰ Angela Oh, *St. Ann's Academy*.

entries diminished, deaths and departures increased; the number of sisters grew slowly until 1960 when the Congregation reached its maximum number.”¹²¹ She attributes this to the fact that “the values of our society and living conditions underwent a profound and rapid change, so that from 1950 on, the number of vocations plummeted.”¹²²

Vatican II for Sisters of St Ann

It has been argued that the decline of women religious occurred at the fault of the Second Vatican Council alone. For example, in the edited collection, *Changing Habits*, a history of women’s religious orders in Canada, one Catholic sister Ellen Leonard writes, “In response to Vatican II’s directives, we changed our relationship with the world from one that renounced the world to one that embraced the world...One of the unexpected aspects of renewal was the departure of many religious who no longer felt called to a life that had been transformed.”¹²³ However, as Mickey explained, the influences on women leaving religious orders were much more complex. In *Vatican II and Beyond: The Changing Mission and Identity of Canadian Women Religious*, Rose Bruno-Jofre, Heidi MacDonald, and Elizabeth M Smyth state that, “The reforms of Vatican II were set against the backdrop of a world that moved through the upheavals of the “long 1960s” into the “age of fracture,” in which “unstable configurations translated into a social imaginary where contingency and choice were the dominant values.”¹²⁴

It is important to note that the call for autonomy in the long sixties was not always understood in a positive revolutionary light. In invoking the age of fracture, the authors point to a

¹²¹ Louise Roy, *The Sisters of Saint Anne: A century of History 1990-1950, Volume II* (QB: Les Éditions Saint-Anne, 1994), 493.

¹²² Roy, *The Sisters of Saint Anne*, 75.

¹²³ Ellen Leonard, “The Process of Transformation: Women Religion and the Study of Theology, 1955-1980” in *Changing Habits: Women’s Religious Orders in Canada*, ed. Elizabeth M Smyth (Ottawa: Novalis Publishing, 2007), 236-237.

¹²⁴ Rose Bruno-Jofre, Heidi MacDonald, and Elizabeth M Smyth, *Vatican II and Beyond: The Changing Mission and Identity of Canadian Women Religious* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 3.

more ambiguous interpretation of these changing dominant values. In his book, *The Age of Fracture*, historian Daniel Rodgers discusses how emerging neoliberalism through the long sixties – or the rise of economic liberalism and free-market capitalism – brought about “a multitude of almost instantaneously accessible possibilities,” where “identities became fluid and elective,” and “ideas of power thinned out and receded.”¹²⁵ He further argues that while the 1930s, 40s, and 50s had been “an era of consolidation,” the last quarter of the century was a turn “toward disaggregation.”¹²⁶ The turn toward individualism as a dominant ideology sometimes came at the loss of community structures and a fracturing of social cohesion, as is demonstrated in the dismantling of these religious communities.

Many women religious did answer society’s call for autonomy. In her book on faith and feminism in the Catholic Church, Catholic sister and feminist theologian Sandra Schneiders argues that within this changing culture for women’s autonomy during the long sixties, “women religious realized that they could not exercise even minimal self-determination within their own congregations.”¹²⁷ In relation to Mickey’s commentary that the atmosphere in the convent was charged with change, Bruno-Jofre, MacDonald and Smyth describe convents in the long sixties as developing their own “idiosyncratic understandings of feminism...because of the unique convent environment and broader issues of governance within the patriarchal setting of the Church.”¹²⁸ To reaffirm my argument that the Sisters of St Ann embodied a lived feminism, the authors go on to argue that “as members of closed, self-governing, women-only organizations,

¹²⁵ Daniel T Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 5.

¹²⁶ Daniel T Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.

¹²⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church revised edition* (NJ, USA: Paulist Press, 2004), 32.

¹²⁸ Bruno-Jofre, et al., *Vatican II and Beyond*, 7.

congregations of women religious embraced some feminist principles (such as rights to higher education and job opportunities) independently of secular feminist movements.”¹²⁹

In analyzing the St Ann’s Academy yearbooks within the St Ann’s archives at the Royal British Columbia Museum, the influences of changing discourses of femininity were visually apparent in the physical presentation of the teaching staff. One of the documents issued by the Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae Caritatis*, which focused specifically on the renewal of religious life, stated that the religious habit was to “be suited to the circumstances of time and place and to the needs of the ministry involved.”¹³⁰ This statement rendered the traditional modest habit and veil that had been worn for centuries optional, and Ellen Leonard notes that this transition was “the most evident reflection of the change in attitude toward the world.”¹³¹ The Sisters of St Ann were quick to make the transition to dress as contemporary women. In the 1960 St Ann’s Academy faculty photo, all Sisters wear the full habit with linen tightly wrapped around their face. By 1970, all faculty are wearing common lay clothing and are indistinguishable from the lay staff.¹³² One interview participant, Ellen, recalls this visual transition having an impact on her, and that she saw this as the beginning of the decline of new Sisters. She hypothesises, “Nuns became more secularized in some kind of an effort to attract more recruits, but it didn’t work. I think it was already dying the death. These are all just little ways of tweaking what was already a thing. It’s just, it’s just the way the world is going, or was going at the time, and still is”.¹³³

¹²⁹ Bruno-Jofre et al., *Vatican II and Beyond*, 7.

¹³⁰ Pope Paul VI, “Perfectae Caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life,” Vatican, October 28, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html.

¹³¹ Leonard, “The Process of Transformation: Women Religion and the Study of Theology, 1955-1980,” 236.

¹³² Yearbooks from St Ann’s Academy, 1960 and 1970, Accessed February 2020, Sisters of St. Ann’s Archives, Victoria, BC, Canada.

¹³³ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

The interview participants recall that they began to notice that the Sisters teaching them were leaving their positions in the convent to join the laity. This transition had an impact on the students, as Maria recalls,

I noticed that many of the nuns just suddenly became lay teachers instead of nuns [...] They kept their religion, but they didn't want to be nuns anymore. They were teaching and you know, they were even part of the Catholic church, but they were not going to be nuns anymore. That lack of faith in them just reinforced my feeling that it's an outmoded form of emotional, mental slavery for women.¹³⁴

Janet also recalls Sisters eventually leaving their order, and recollects one in particular who left, "being limited herself in what she could do," and that "she was probably somewhat of an influence" on her.¹³⁵

With these internal influences of autonomous women central to their experience, the interview participants recall feeling empowerment and independence as young women. They would argue that their feminism was fixed in them from the internal structures of their upbringing, rather than from societal discourse. Arguably, this instilled autonomy led them to reject a religion that they saw as hypocritical and oppressive for all. Although the Sisters were in no manner attempting to instill in them an aversion to religion, they were certainly challenging the traditional Catholic discourse of female subservience.

Pious Femininity

While the interview participants cited the Sisters as a source of their female empowerment, it is also important to recognize the impact of generational changes in gender and sexual discourse. In line with Brown's discussion of traditional discourses of pious femininity, it was almost unanimously the case that these women saw their mothers as the pious members of

¹³⁴ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

¹³⁵ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

their family. As Ellen attests, “Piety in men always seemed a bit weird to me.”¹³⁶ Moreover, it was often the case that their fathers only became Catholic in order to marry their mothers, and that religion was never very important to their fathers. In their fathers’ mandatory training with the priest, they made a vow to raise their children Catholic, or as the mother see fit. Lizzie recalls,

It was very important to my mother, and in order to marry my mother with the blessing of the church, my father had to receive initial training in Catholicism. At the end of that, when he declined to join the church and become a Catholic, he had to agree not to get in my mother’s way. He had to agree to facilitate us being raised as Catholics as my mother wished.¹³⁷

Carol G similarly states, “In order to marry my mother, he had to sign a promise. He would raise his kids Catholic. And that’s what he did. He filled his promise. It certainly was not because the Catholic religion was the end all be all.”¹³⁸ Janet corroborates this sentiment, stating, “In order for my mom to be allowed to marry him, he did actually have to do some classes with the priest, but he never intended to become a Catholic.”¹³⁹

In *Thank You, St Jude*, Robert Orsi discusses this role of feminine piety particularly in the Catholic context in the United States from the 1930s to 1950s, which would certainly have influenced neighbouring Canadian Catholic discourse. Orsi argues that women raising families in this era were victim to the effects of their gendered oppression in the face of the Great Depression and the World Wars. In his interviews with Catholic women who were devotees of St Jude, a saint of hopeless causes, the stories of their devotion “exemplify in a stark way the themes of women’s self-abnegation, denial, and submission.”¹⁴⁰ In this way, women engaged

¹³⁶ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹³⁷ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

¹³⁸ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020, Phone Interview.

¹³⁹ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Robert A Orsi, *Thank you, St Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (USA: Yale University, 1996), 192.

with the expectations of feminine piety in contrast to their impious husbands. He argues that “men acknowledged and relied on women’s distinct devotional capacities – or, depending on how one interprets Catholic popular piety, exploited their culturally mandated devotional responsibilities.”¹⁴¹ Norma reflects on the lack of agency she saw in her very devotional mother, stating, “She didn't even know who the hell she was if there was somebody else in the room [...] If somebody came in and said we need a turkey for the rummage sale, she would cook 12 turkeys. But what I saw as a child was a woman who didn't know who she was if there was someone else in the room.”¹⁴²

In her study of irreligion in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1960s, Block found that among her forty-four interviewees, they shared the same idea about gendered religious practice, concluding that churchgoing was primarily “a women’s thing.”¹⁴³ Clarke and MacDonald also discuss this piety in the context of Canada, stating that, until the 1960s, “women’s identity as a respectable wife, mother, or young girl was wrapped up tightly with religion and sexual propriety...in ways that were not so for men.”¹⁴⁴ Agreeing with Brown’s ‘death of pious femininity’, they continue that, “the sexual revolution of the 1960s thus marked a clear expression of women’s rejection of religious conformity.”¹⁴⁵ Some of the women I interviewed recall their mothers transitioning away from traditional gender roles in their youth. Mickey reflects, “I was raised in that, in the traditional sense, that the mother stays home with the children and all that because that’s the way it was in our family. Then, in 1960, my mother went to work.”¹⁴⁶ However, while they embraced some tenets of modernity, none of these mothers

¹⁴¹ Orsi, *Thank you, St Jude*, xi.

¹⁴² Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

¹⁴³ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 86.

¹⁴⁴ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 221.

¹⁴⁵ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 221.

¹⁴⁶ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

abandoned Catholicism. Although they upheld piety as an expectation for their daughters, shifting conceptions of gender in the broader culture meant that piety and femininity were no longer tied as they were for the previous generation.

Generational Change

Comparatively, Marie was born in 1936, graduating from high school and coming of child-bearing age in the 1950s. Before she married, she was in the St. Joseph's School of Nursing in Victoria, run by the Sisters of St Ann. Importantly, the Sisters of St Ann at that time also expected that she would finish her schooling before getting married, and she recalls "a lot of lectures, wailing, and reprimands" when she quit training after the first year.¹⁴⁷ She had begun dating a man during her training and they made plans to get married. In her personal memoir recounting her life in the Catholic church, Marie recalls,

I was a good Catholic girl who wanted to be a virgin when I married. This is what my religious teachings had instilled in my soul [...] Virginity was alluded to. Sex was never mentioned, a topic that was not openly discussed. So, at nineteen going on twenty, a time of passage, I quietly made my choices, quit training, got married and got on with my life.¹⁴⁸

She recounts an early life of perpetual childbirth within the context of the Catholic church, with little room for personal agency. She also recalls watching everything change in the 1960s. Marie reflects,

Today, western teenagers have access to much information, perhaps to the point of overload. In the early 50s, my crowd knew about purity, chastity, venial and mortal sins, and we confidently stepped into our futures. During that time, there was something that was not discussed. It was that unmentionable topic, that three letter word that starts with 's' and ends with 'x'. Therefore, one baby, two babies, three babies, four, five babies, six babies, seven babies...no more! The transition from silent obedience to a loud shout of 'no more' took several years. All this occurred in a time of great change, new popes, bishops, priests; new discoveries, 'the pill' and a new culture with its own beat and gyrating hips.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Personal memoir from Marie, *Sporadic Thoughts on the Evolution of a Soul*, 2010, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Marie, *Sporadic Thoughts on the Evolution of a Soul*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Marie, *Sporadic Thoughts on the Evolution of a Soul*, 7-8.

As Marie strived to maintain a “good Catholic family,” she recalls that “the church did not help with the months of pregnancies and false labours, varicose veins, birthing, nursing, sleepless nights, financial pressures, crowded bedrooms, that needed new pair of shoes, dental bills, groceries.”¹⁵⁰

Marie describes the expectation to have children as a way to hold control over women, which she recounts through a common phrase at the time: ‘Keep them barefoot and pregnant.’ She states, “That was a common thing, we'd go to dance and they say, ‘keep them barefoot and pregnant is key.’ It was a control thing.”¹⁵¹ Her relationship with her husband was troubled, and he had a close connection to the church and a very conservative approach to Catholicism. After her seventh child, Marie experienced varying illnesses and eventually discovered she had a prolapsed uterus. She needed a hysterectomy, which she thought was great news, but her husband was not pleased. Thus ended her life of childbearing. As Vatican II discussions proceeded in the mid-1960s, “while the bishops and pope quietly discussed the sexual lives of their flock,” Marie recounts, “I had passed the time when I needed to worry about birth control. I had had my hysterectomy and thus was saved from having to confront [my husband] with my awakening liberal views.”¹⁵² But with these experiences behind her, her hopes were high for a liberalizing of the church’s teaching on birth control for the next generation.

Instead, the 1968 encyclical from Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, reiterated the church’s stance on contraceptives. Sex was to be between a married man and women, for the purposes of procreation, and contraceptives were condemned. This is still the Catholic church’s stance today, though the interview participants recount that the children in the pews became fewer and fewer

¹⁵⁰ Marie, *Sporadic Thoughts on the Evolution of a Soul*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019, In person, Victoria.

¹⁵² Marie, *Sporadic Thoughts on the Evolution of a Soul*, 21.

as birth control was legalized in Canada in 1969, and as the broader culture's views changed towards sex. Clarke and Macdonald discuss this as a time where "increasingly, women were insisting on their autonomy in deciding how they lived and how they expressed their sexuality. And with increasing education and participation in the workforce, they had the means to do so."¹⁵³ They argue that, for many, what the church had to say on sexual relations was "simply irrelevant."¹⁵⁴ This was a time where women were embracing their bodily autonomy, turning away from the gender expectations of their mothers, and the church's input on the matter was "all sound and fury, and signifying nothing."¹⁵⁵ As one interview participant, Carol D, asserts, "Well I was signed right up for birth control, I had no problem I was right down there at the health clinic saying 'gimme!' I had no qualms about it, I was not gonna have babies."¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

It is fascinating to note that although the interview participants were themselves engaging with the changing discourse of femininity by rejecting the pious path of their mothers, they don't describe their choice to leave as being subversive to traditional structures of gender at the time. Rather than reporting on their oppression as women in their high school years, they recalled an expectation for independent personhood which came from the internal discourse within their Catholic education. They describe their experiences with the Sisters of St Ann as empowering and instilling a sense of equality, if not superiority, rather than instilling in them a need for "female rebellion," which Brown describes as the transition out of the traditional discursive world of feminine piety through the "female rebellion of body, sexuality and above all the decay

¹⁵³ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 160-161.

¹⁵⁴ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 160-161.

¹⁵⁵ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 160-161.

¹⁵⁶ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019, In person, Victoria.

of religious marriage.”¹⁵⁷ Most of the interview participants married in a church, though they recount this action as a societal convention, intended to appease to their parents. Their bodily autonomy was not questioned by the church. This is a stark generational transition from the Catholic girls and women a decade before them who were strongly compelled to abstain from sex until marriage, and without readily available women’s health clinics and birth control, were thereafter pressured by the church to have many Catholic babies.

In this regional and denominational context, the seeds of their independence as individuals were established through an internal discourse of equality prior to any need to rebel against an external societal discourse of patriarchal oppression. Most of the women I interviewed did not recall an awareness of personal oppression from patriarchal Catholic constraints. Rather, they embraced autonomy as modeled by the Catholic sisters that they were taught by, who, arguably, embodied ‘lived feminism’ as termed by Brown. They had always seen the Sisters as powerful and independent, and especially after the Second Vatican Council, they saw the Sisters autonomously directing their own lives outside of the convent. Further, contrary to facing expectations of domesticity, they recall an expectation from the Sisters that they would acquire university degrees and careers before they settled down to marriage and children. As described by Gresko, the Sisters of St Ann of British Columbia have a long history of female independence, which may play a role in the education that the interview participants received. These Sisters were also undoubtedly impacted by society’s shift to dominant ideologies of individualism and autonomy.

Although, certainly the growing opportunities for the interview participants after graduation came as direct result of the labour of the women’s liberation movement, they are very

¹⁵⁷ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 179.

careful not to credit their leaving the church to feminism, or to ever having called themselves feminists. The Sisters of St Ann instilled in them their notion of themselves as equals and they securely entered the world with no need for feminist activism. As Maria states,

I did not feel that men or women were – that any one is better than or stronger, better than or more authoritative than the other. It depends on your brains, not on your muscles or your Y chromosomes [...] I wouldn't say that I ever had the feeling that men should always have the leadership role just by default. I just never considered myself a feminist. Still don't. It wasn't called feminism when I was young, I believe that it wasn't called anything, it is just common sense to me.¹⁵⁸

Even if an aversion to patriarchal control was not the initial reason for why they left religion, the impact of the feminist, gender, and sexual revolution opened up a world for them where they had the freedom to make their own choices, to question religious narratives, to go against the will of their mothers, and to explore other religious and spiritual paths.

¹⁵⁸ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

Chapter 2: Leaving Catholicism in the ‘Long Sixties’: “*Is this God’s rule or is this a man’s rule?*”

The interview participants were graduating from high school on the precipice of a momentous cultural shift during the long sixties. They were leaving the church in a generation where many young people were making choices independently and against the interests of their parents. That these young women left organized religion during the long sixties was not a unique phenomenon in and of itself, as Block notes, “During the long sixties many young British Columbians rejected churches they saw as hypocritical, patriarchal, and irrelevant, and some intently questioned, and eventually abandoned, religious belief.”¹⁵⁹ However, within this local Catholic context, the interview participants report that the insularity of the region and insularity of the religious community meant they were less directly impacted by changing cultural discourse in their early youth than young people in larger urban centres. Despite the mass movements in the long sixties of youth away from organized religion and of women away from piety, they each credit their decision to leave the Catholic church as their personal decision. They don’t recall being a part of, or influenced by, any larger movement. As Norma aptly states, “I don’t think we influenced each other to leave the church, I think it was all individual decisions.”¹⁶⁰ Each woman’s story is a narrative of personal liberation – a liberation of self from old traditions, rules, and collective identity towards self-determination, choice, and individualism. While this was presented as a matter of individual choice by the interview participants, at the same time, as we will see, these individual decisions were very much grounded in the culture of both time and place.

¹⁵⁹ Tina Block, “Most of Today’s Teen-agers Laugh About God”: Youth, Secularization, and the Sixties in British Columbia,” *BC Studies* 203 (October 2019): 52.

¹⁶⁰ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

While most of these women report that they stopped attending mass either in high school or upon leaving their parents' household, their transition from distancing to outright rejection of the Catholic church took place slowly over the following decades. Their stories reveal that, in their youth, the Sisters of St Ann instilled in them an expectation for their independence and gender equality, as argued in the previous chapter. As was noted, these Sisters had no intention of turning them away from religion; however, the interview participants' clear perception of patriarchal hierarchies in the church and their instilled autonomy played a role in their eventual departure. As will be discussed, the interview participants also report that they began to feel doubt and see hypocrisy in the church in their youth. These feelings were confirmed by changes within the Catholic church in the 1960s, such as the Second Vatican Council and *Humanae Vitae* – changes which were intended to make the church more relevant and congruent with the modern world, but actually revealed the hypocrisy and lack of legitimacy of many of the beliefs and practices they had been raised with. Ultimately, upon leaving high school for university, travel, and marriage, they were impacted by the secularity of regional and national culture, finalizing their separation from Catholicism. In this chapter, I discuss how their impulse toward a liberation from religion was attached to their personal determination to affirm their autonomy against an institution that they saw as dogmatic and hypocritical within the context of a changing society. Further, their testimonies reveal an acute individualism, both in their actions and in their recollections, which is consistent with the era of the long sixties, and in particular consistent with the secular and individualistic nature of the Pacific Northwest region.

Doubt in Early Days

At a young age, these women recall that they began to have feelings of doubt about the Catholic religion.¹⁶¹ Despite their doubt, they felt bound by a sense of guilt attributed to the Catholic concept of personal sin. As young girls, they were taught of mortal and venial sins, and of the consequences attributed to sin, including incurring both guilt and potential eternal damnation.¹⁶² At such a young age, their thoughts on the nature of reality were very dependent on the external input of their parents and other authoritative figures, such as those in the church and in school. Therefore, despite most of these women not recalling a strong personal connection to their faith, they strongly remember the fear of retribution and the guilt attributed to their actions. As Ellen recalls,

When I was younger, I thought that the only reason I was a good person was because of the fear of hell [...] I would lie awake nights weeping that even though I thought I was as good as I could be at the moment, what about if I grew up and became really bad, and God already knows whether that's going to happen, but that in itself was a sin because that's predestination and you're not allowed to believe in that either. Horrible. I had some horrible, horrible moments through my Catholic faith. Like there were months I would go through a little black cloud. I'd wake up in the morning on a beautiful day and you know, I was young and healthy, and it would kind of be like nice, and now all of a sudden, 'Oh no, maybe I'm going to hell.' And it would all descend upon me. It was awful.¹⁶³

She also notes that having doubt was itself a sin, so these thoughts were kept internalized. Ellen continues,

I remember feeling like there's something deficient in me because I had a very hard time with doubt. And I don't know if you know this about the Catholic church, but it's a sin to

¹⁶¹ The era of their childhoods ranged from the tail end of the World War II into the early long sixties. Mid 1940s to mid 1960s.

¹⁶² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 3, Section 1, Chapter 1, Article 8: Sin, 1993:

“[1855] Mortal Sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God... by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, though it offends and wounds it. [1861] Mortal sin... results in... the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell... [1862] One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave matter, but without full knowledge or complete consent. [1863] Venial sin weakens charity... and... merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However, venial sin does not break the covenant with God. With God’s grace, it is humanly reparable. “Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently, eternal happiness.”

¹⁶³ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

doubt, so that's the big catch 22, right? Like not only are you struggling with trying to believe it, but it's a sin that you're not believing it, and it goes around in a loop.¹⁶⁴

They expressed that being religious was not something that they ever chose to do, but rather, that it was their parents' religion and their religious socialization. As Maria recollects, "You go, and you do what your parents do [...] and really there wasn't any knowledge then that there was any other way. It was just the way we lived".¹⁶⁵ And as corroborated by Carol D, "It was just a way of life. It's just what you did because that's how you were led through your childhood, how you were raised. You know, you had a big family, and you would all do it."¹⁶⁶ In discussing the decline of religious adherence today, Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau point to the "critical importance of changes in the religious socialization of children and youth."¹⁶⁷ They state that, "historically there has been a very close interdependence between the church and the family," and that "this symbiosis of church and family persisted more or less intact until the end of the Second World War."¹⁶⁸ While the parents of these women expected that the religious socialization they had been raised with and were raising their children with would encourage their daughters to remain Catholic, larger cultural changes through the 1960s would begin to dismantle this symbiotic relationship between church and family.

While these women recall feelings of doubt at this young age, their first memories of a change in their position towards religion began as they developed their subjective conscience and

¹⁶⁴ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹⁶⁵ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ 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: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe: 1945-2000*, eds. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 4.

¹⁶⁸ Christie and Gauvreau, "Even the Hippies Were Only Very Slowly Going Secular," 4; In discussing secularization today, Clarke and MacDonald similarly state that we are "witnessing an unprecedented cultural shift" as youth today are predominantly "non-churched." Their parents being the "de-churched," who left religion in the 1960s to 1980s, and who never socialized their children into religion: Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 171.

started to question the nature of sin.¹⁶⁹ As they began to question the tenets of their upbringing, they also began to see inequalities and a lack of autonomy in their religion and a growing divide between what the church practiced, and what it preached. They saw ostensibly bad people being absolved of their sins, while good people suffered. For some, the hypocrisy they saw at an early age sowed the seed of doubt that eventually led to their leaving the church. As Lauren recalls, “When I got to be about 12 or 13, I started looking about me and the church and seeing people that weren't really good people, but they went to church every day, and that seemed to absolve them and seemed to give them status in the society.”¹⁷⁰ She continues with a story of a time her mother fell sick after delivering her ninth baby in eleven years, and recalls that after her mother’s lifelong dedication to the Catholic church, no one from the church came to the family’s side when they were needed (much like Marie’s memory, as told in the previous chapter):

When she got sick, not one person from that church came to our door and there were six of us still left at home and the priest didn't come to our door. Nobody came to our door to say, ‘how are you doing?’ Not one. And that was it. That was it. I said, ‘I'm done.’ Like the church has indoctrinated my parents to believe that this is the way to go, but they're not here to support you when it doesn't go right. And I just was really mad, really, really mad.¹⁷¹

Lauren recalls that she refused to return to church shortly thereafter. This was her departure from religion to the dismay of her father. She continues,

I just put my foot down. I said, ‘I'm not going to church.’ He says, ‘what do you mean?’ I says, ‘well I don't want to go to church anymore. I don't believe it.’ [He says,] ‘you can't make that decision.’ I said, ‘yes I can. I just did, goodbye.’ And I turned around, told the room. Nobody's ever done that to my father, ever. I'm number five. Nobody's ever done that. The kids who leave the house don't go to church, but they wait. They wait till they don't go home anymore. And if they came home on a Sunday, they'd have to go to church. I'm just saying, I'm not going, period, anymore. And that was me, just, I'm done. I'm done with it all. So that was how I left the Catholic church. It was just like, didn't feel

¹⁶⁹ That is, a subjective character of conscience where the motivational force comes from the individual, as opposed to the sanctions from an external authority.

¹⁷⁰ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019, In person, Victoria.

¹⁷¹ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

the support, didn't feel loved, didn't feel anything.¹⁷²

The interview participants also recall feeling dismayed at being taught as young girls that only Catholics would be saved. Living in Victoria, they would often befriend other neighbourhood children who were not Catholic, and they recognized the disparity between what they were being told and the goodness they could see in other children. This sentiment alone was enough to turn one interviewee, Maria, away from the church at a young age. She states,

I heard from the teachers and from all of the people that are in authority, how we are 'chosen' when we're Catholics. It was first said to me then that anyone else who is not part of the religion will not be saved. And I had made this lovely friend that I wanted to go to watch Saturday morning cartoons with and I thought to myself, 'okay, there is a disconnect here.' There's this moment where I realized that what they were telling me was that this lovely girl who I enjoy being with was not going to be saved, and I could not reconcile that. It took me a couple of months, I guess, but by about the end of grade three, I decided that any religion that excludes people on the basis of their belief system had something wrong with [it]. So that developed over the years – well, I still went to church and I still did some of the stuff, but gradually, gradually I just decided no, not for me.¹⁷³

Retrospectively, the interview participants recognize that it is very easy to control a child's worldview, and in reflecting on the question of why they left Catholicism, they often pointed to the first moment in their childhood when they began to question the Catholic narrative. Of course, the development from a curious childhood doubt to an assertive 'no, it's not for me' often took many years. It is normal for a child to ask questions, though undoubtedly the secularizing culture of both time and place in their teenage years would afford these women an opportunity to choose their own religious and spiritual path. Reflecting on this era, Lauren

¹⁷² Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

¹⁷³ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020; Maria's early critique of Catholicism and desire for autonomy was visible in the Sisters of St Ann archives. In looking through the St Ann's student yearbooks, I came across Maria's graduation photo from 1967. Alongside each photo, the graduating students chose a quote. Beside Maria's was a quote from Voltaire, a prominent critic of the Catholic Church in the 18th century. It said: "Liberty of thought is the life of the soul."

comments on the decline of religious socialization and children developing their own opinions as a reason for youth leaving religion:

If you don't keep cracking the whip, people'll start thinking for themselves. And that's how I look at it. It's really easy to cloister a bunch of little five, six, seven, eight, nine-year olds, but when they start thinking for themselves and they've got questions, and all you say is, 'that's the way it is', 'oh, that's not the right answer,' you know, 'oh, we're not having a discussion'. Well, you're just telling me that's the way it is and that didn't sit well with me. That's where you lose people, I think.¹⁷⁴

These women also recall that there came a point where a disconnect began to grow between their own personal morality, and that imposed by the church. As Janet recalls, "It just seemed like the church seemed to have a lot of wrong ideas and we were taught to believe that the church knows everything and that – as the development of this idea that, 'well maybe that's not true,' more and more stuff seemed to make less sense to me."¹⁷⁵ As they got older, and the world around them was changing, their doubt often turned to disbelief, or in the least, religious indifference. Block discusses the gradual turn to unbelief in BC during the long sixties, stating, "Often finding little support for their nascent unbelief, young people who doubted religious belief in that era were, at least in the short term, apt to become religiously indifferent rather than openly nonbelieving."¹⁷⁶

These women claim they began to inwardly question church authority at a young age which in most cases preceded the secularizing currents of the long sixties, and it is difficult to know with oral history if this is a reflection of their current understanding of themselves and the modern world that they narrate into their youth. They valued their autonomy at a young age, and Norma describes this as a cultural feeling. She states,

It was generally a cultural feeling that if you were a sensitive, deep-thinking, young girl or boy, that this just didn't make sense. This didn't make any common sense that some

¹⁷⁴ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Block, "Most of Today's Teen-agers Laugh About God," 22.

people weren't equal, this didn't make any common sense that people were forced to do spirituality, or that the church could tell me how to run my life and my body [...] I was uniquely me and there was absolutely no respect for that.¹⁷⁷

Come the long sixties, these sentiments of Norma's would be widely shared, as Block notes, "among BC youth, the rejection of organized religion, and especially the churches, fulfilled rather than defied cultural expectations and was part of the broader revolt against authority and established tradition that resonated at that time."¹⁷⁸ Whether they are imputing a current knowledge of historical events onto their younger selves, and/or an acknowledgement that outside culture affected their perceptions in early youth, these early sentiments are a part of their liberation narrative. For many, their early questioning was followed by a confirmation of doubt through changes that took place within the Catholic church during the long sixties.

Second Vatican Council Changes

Two major changes that took place in the Catholic church in the 1960s confirmed their doubts about the authority of the Church: The Second Vatican Council and the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical letter on birth control. Confronted with the forces of global modernity, Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council, which took place from 1962 to 1965, for the purposes of "Catholic renewal, unity of Christians, and dialogue with the modern world."¹⁷⁹ Though the changes were meant to bring a renewal of the spirit of the Church, the interview participants were often more concerned with the physical changes that were taking place. The most commonly recognizable change in each church were the translation of the liturgy, sacraments, responses, and hymns from Latin to the vernacular, the turning of the altar so the

¹⁷⁷ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Block, "Most of Today's Teen-agers Laugh About God" 22.

¹⁷⁹ Terence J Fay, *A History of Canadian Catholics* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University, 2002), 278.

priest faced the congregation, and as discussed in the last chapter, the relaxing of the uniforms of women religious.¹⁸⁰

The interview participants saw new developments in the church as hypocritical, given what they had been previously taught. Although the Vatican insisted that the Council was not meant to be a rewriting of church dogma, but rather a modernizing of the teachings, this was questioned by some of these young women. Having been raised to believe that everything they were told was from the authority of God, Lizzie recalls that she couldn't help but thinking, "is this God's rule or is this a man's rule?"¹⁸¹ The women recall that the intentions of the Second Vatican Council were too complex for a school-aged girl to comprehend or, rather, to care about. As they saw the Catholic church as largely their parents' religion, discussions going on at the institutional level were of little concern to them. However, there were a number of changes that they recall having an impact on their attachment to their faith, though they had little to do with the Vatican's intended spiritual renewal.

¹⁸⁰ It should be mentioned that the Bishop of the Vancouver Island Catholic Diocese from 1962 to 1999, Remi De Roo, was one of the few Canadian bishops present at the Vatican council proceedings. Further, he was well known for his progressive approach to Catholicism. The interview participants, Marie aside, were too young, and soon after disengaged, from the church at this time to have thoughts about De Roo's role in larger ecumenical changes. Nevertheless, as he is now 97 years old, I interviewed him when given the opportunity at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria.

When asked about why he thinks young people were leaving the church in the 1970s, his reply echoed that of the women I interviewed in that those who left were socialized into their parents' religion, and they left swiftly when the culture changed, and church attendance was no longer expected. He says: "Many of the people whose faith was basically a social phenomenon, I mean, they're Christian because they were baptized, but it's not as if they have made a personal decision for Christ, not personally identified themselves as children of God and members of the body of Christ, so yeah, they will readily fall away when the culture changes. When it's no longer popular." Remi De Roo, Oral history interview, October 23, 2019, In person, Victoria.

For further readings on Remi De Roo, see: Patrick Jamieson, *In the Avant Garde: The Prophetic Catholicism of Remi De Roo and Politics Within the Catholic Church* (Victoria: Samarhan Press, 2002); Patrick Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo: 150 Years of Catholic History on Vancouver Island* (Victoria: ICN Publishing, 1997); Pearl Gervais and Grant Maxwell, eds., *Forward in the Spirit: Challenge of the People's Synod* (Victoria: Catholic Diocese of Victoria, 1991); Remi De Roo, *Remi De Roo: Chronicles of a Vatical II Bishop* (Toronto: Novalis, 2012).

¹⁸¹Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

Over the course of Canada's long sixties, there was growing hysteria around youth becoming uninterested in religion, and the churches began to make a conscious effort to attract young people. In her article on youth secularization in BC through the long sixties, Block notes, "To stop young people from opting out of churches, church leaders and members in Vancouver and beyond regularly experimented with new forms of gathering and worship designed to appeal to youth."¹⁸² Some of the women interviewed recall that with the demystifying of the mass through the changes of Vatican II, the church radically changed direction, resulting in what they can only recall felt like a "hootenanny".¹⁸³ As Norma remembers that she was left "absolutely empty once they turned that altar around."¹⁸⁴ Norma continues,

They took the ritual out and they took the Latin away. Cause then it was just, it was like a United service, you know, it was a hootenanny now. Truly. That's how I remember – walking in there and someone's at the altar playing a guitar. What is going on here? Like what is this?¹⁸⁵

And as Maria recalls, "This whole thing of, you know, demystifying the mass and making everyone, you know, sing songs with guitars and all that, was just a pathetic to me attempt at trying to modernize the Catholic church. It didn't do anything."¹⁸⁶

Along with feeling apathetic towards these new changes, they also recall feeling that it was hypocritical to make these changes. It helped to confirm the doubts that they had felt throughout their childhood. In one example, they were raised with the law that they could not eat meat on Fridays, the day that Christ was crucified and the fifth day of creation when God made the animals. When this law was relaxed after the Second Vatican Council, Ellen remembers thinking, "If you had meat on a Friday, you could go to hell for that. And then they took away

¹⁸² Block, "Most of Today's Teen-agers Laugh About God," 31.

¹⁸³ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

¹⁸⁴ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

¹⁸⁵ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

¹⁸⁶ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

that rule and it was no longer a hell offense. You wonder, what about all those poor souls that are already there? It's just, this is not fair."¹⁸⁷

After the Second Vatican Council, with the Catholic church's new insistence on Christian unity, the fate of non-Catholics was no longer characterized as eternal damnation. Ellen remembers growing up warning other non-Catholic kids in her neighbourhood that they would go to hell – or at the very least, purgatory – if they were not baptized in the Catholic church. When this changed, she was suddenly made aware of the deep hypocrisy of the church and recalls a sudden disruption of her moral compass – as she recalls, “I got to the point where I no longer had those black thoughts about going to hell. And I was okay with the fact that if there was one, I was no worse than anybody else, whether or not I practice my Catholic faith. And that was, that was a relief to me, but there was still the social pressure to go [to church].”¹⁸⁸

With the Vatican Council's focus on the acceptance and understanding of other faiths, the interview participants recall not only the acceptance of other faiths through the gates of heaven, but also that they began to learn about other religions from the Sisters at school. Janet vividly remembers the change from her anger at not being able to go with a neighbourhood friend to the United Church on Sunday, to later attending Seder dinners with the Jewish community with her class.¹⁸⁹ Lizzie recalls being taught comparative religion at St Ann's Academy in Grade 11, and the influence it had on her awareness of other religious options for herself. She states,

Up to that point, what we were taught was there's no point in making friends with non-Catholics cause they're all gonna go to hell and we'll just miss them in heaven, so we might as well just stick with the Catholics. So, it was like a lightning bolt to have a nun in habit stand at the front of the room, and we talked about Islam and Buddhism and the whole bunch and the roots of all of them, and to some degree, why people turn to religion. So, I think up to that point, the nun's job was just to keep us Catholics, and this

¹⁸⁷ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹⁸⁸ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

was a real door opening, that there may be other options that might be acceptable. I don't know if that was what she intended, but I figured, she's teaching it, so.¹⁹⁰

Pope John XXIII, popularly known amongst progressive Catholics as “good Pope John,” certainly had great intentions with modernizing the church.¹⁹¹ Progressive Catholic feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that he “wanted the Catholic Church to have a credible position,” within the United Nations.¹⁹² However, when he died in June 1963, before the completion of the Second Vatican Council, his successor, Pope Paul VI, brought old traditions back to the church, including a reiteration of the church's stance on the mortal sin of contraceptive use.

Humanae Vitae

In 1968, around the time that most of the interview participants were graduating from high school and strongly convinced of their own disinterest in Catholicism, the Vatican released the *Humane Vitae* Encyclical letter. The encyclical reaffirmed the traditional teachings of the Catholic church that sex is for procreation alone. While the interview participants do not recall feeling the pressure of this impacting them, as they felt the decision was their own, it reaffirmed their opinion of the church as hypocritical. This was an incredibly divisive move for the Catholic church, and as noted in the previous chapter, most lay people did not comply. Writing on the role of contraception in the sixties religious crisis, McLeod contends, “Both the tensions between religious rules and individual practice and the diminishing power of the church to control sexual behaviours can be seen in the case of Catholics and contraception.”¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Fay, *A History of Canadian Catholics*, 278.

¹⁹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican: A Vision for Progressive Catholicism* (NY: The New Press, 2008).

¹⁹³ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis*, 166.

It was not just lay people who did not agree with the encyclical. In her book, *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, “The tacit consensus in favor of this traditional teaching had been broken...More theologians and priests, even bishops, openly dissented from it and the Catholic laity mostly ignored it.”¹⁹⁴ She continues, “for the first time in modern Catholic history, an official teaching of the Pope was explicitly ‘not received’ by the majority of Catholics”.¹⁹⁵ In his book on the Catholic history of Vancouver Island, local author Patrick Jamieson writes that Pope Paul VI’s encyclical even went against the recommendations of his own special-appointed commission on the issue of birth control.¹⁹⁶ Jamieson notes that the final decision was “not what people had hoped for or expected in wake of the liberalization of the [Vatican] Council.”¹⁹⁷ Jamieson explains that the birth control encyclical put the Bishops of the Canadian Catholic church in a particularly difficult situation, as they decided how they would respond to this issue which they saw as “*fait accompli*” – a thing already done.¹⁹⁸ The Canadian Bishops were greatly aware of the widespread dissent on the issue, as one public opinion poll at the time measured that 85% of North American Catholics were against the decision. The Canadian Bishops decided to release a collective pastoral statement which expressed their belief that the authority of the encyclical can be pastorally decided in the Canadian context of the Catholic church.¹⁹⁹

The women that I interviewed felt from a young age that they did not want the pious and solely domestic life of their mothers for themselves, and though they wanted to have children and families, they felt it important that they do it of their own accord. Some report feeling

¹⁹⁴ Radford Ruether *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, 28.

¹⁹⁵ Radford Ruether *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican*, 28.

¹⁹⁶ Patrick Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo: 150 Years of Catholic History on Vancouver Island* (Victoria: ICN Publishing, 1997), 345.

¹⁹⁷ Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo*, 345.

¹⁹⁸ Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo*, 345.

¹⁹⁹ Jamieson, *Victoria: Demers to De Roo*, 346.

unsupported and guilt ridden as they entered puberty in the Catholic world, as Janet recalls, “I think that I was really depressed because I couldn’t talk to anybody about it, but you know, had to reconcile these things I was feeling as a person going through puberty with the teachings of the church, and they didn’t add up and I couldn’t talk to anybody.”²⁰⁰ In the context of changing secular discourse around piety and domesticity for women, they also did not feel that this life was expected of them. Importantly, the use of contraceptives became legal across Canada in 1969, and women’s health clinics became increasingly common. In this changing cultural context, the interview participants note that they saw the *Humanae Vitae* announcement as deeply regressive and hypocritical. For Janet, this Vatican decision led her down a path of further questioning. She recalls,

It was the late sixties, so there was, you know, a cultural change happening. But I think what kind of tipped me over into, like, suddenly being able to question – you know, like when you grow up Catholic, it’s like the Pope is infallible, that’s the whole thing, and whatever he says is the way it is, the truth. So, I think that thing that finally got me to question that was about birth control.²⁰¹

Similarly, Norma questioned the intent of the *Humanae Vitae* following the Second Vatican Council. She reflects, “Well, it’s interesting that that was all done in, sort of, the name of bringing people in, but then to go and hit down on top of the birth control issue during the feminist movement. It was a very strange decision to me. I don’t know. Well, I think it’s still a strange decision, the planning process there.”²⁰²

The interview participants also recognized a declining birthrate in the families they saw around them even preceding the announcement of the *Humanae Vitae*. As Marie recalls,

The church never ever talked about sexuality. They never talked about intercourse, they never talked about birth control. And in the forties, you go to a Catholic church, you’d see rows and rows of kids. ‘Oh, there is the so-and-so’s,’ ‘oh the number nine,’ ‘oh number

²⁰⁰ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²⁰¹ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²⁰² Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

ten is on the way.’ Well, you get to 1950. Between forties, fifties. Oh, there's only four. Oh, there's only two. OBVIOUSLY, the whole congregation except for a couple of families is practicing birth control! But Rome is not noticing that we're doing it.²⁰³

On the agency of lay people in the church, McLeod argues that at this time, “individual conscience played an increasingly large role in Catholic thinking, while the authority of the pope and bishops was eroded. Many Catholics felt free to decide for themselves on a range of issues where once the church had given them authoritative guidance.”²⁰⁴ Similarly, Clarke and Macdonald argue that “the [Catholic] church attempted to confront the cultural revolution unleashed in the 1960s, and it lost out by forcing people to choose between the personal autonomy the times made possible and conforming to the church and its traditions.”²⁰⁵ The women I spoke with had undoubtedly already chosen their personal autonomy.

On Mothers and Leaving the Church

While the interview participants’ personal beliefs changed over the course of their youth, these ideas were rarely expressed outwardly to family or authority figures. As Block notes, even within the “comparatively secular, rebellious context” of British Columbia during the long sixties, “unbelievers continued to face social disapproval.”²⁰⁶ She continues, “while they were in some ways expected to challenge established religion, young people were subtly and overtly discouraged by their families and the wider culture from eschewing religious belief entirely.”²⁰⁷ This was certainly the case in the context of these women’s lives, where their mothers were deeply upset by the announcement of their departure from religion.

²⁰³ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁰⁴ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis*, 169.

²⁰⁵ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 161.

²⁰⁶ Tina Block, “Most of Today’s Teen-agers Laugh About God,” 22.

²⁰⁷ Tina Block, “Most of Today’s Teen-agers Laugh About God,” 22.

Many of the interview participants recall that their fathers and brothers did not face the same social or familial pressure to attend church as they did. They also recall that their fathers were often less concerned with their decision to leave the church. Janet remembers that her mother “wasn’t happy about it,” but as for her father, she states, “Oh, I don’t think he cared, he just didn’t want me to upset my mother.”²⁰⁸ Lizzie told a similar memory of her father’s opinion on her leaving the church, stating, “He didn’t care. He wanted just for peace at home. He wanted my mom to not be aware of it as much as possible.”²⁰⁹ Lizzie further recalls that, despite her older brother drifting away from the church at the same time as her, as the eldest daughter, her mother blamed her for all of her other siblings leaving the church:

So, my mom was really religious, and I was drifting away, and my older brother was drifting away. My younger sister was drifting away, and my mother would reproach me before – she thought I was the first one to leave Catholicism, and she blamed me for all the other kids. She blamed me for all of the other kids leaving the church.²¹⁰

These sentiments reflect the gendered expectation of women as the embodiment of piety. This made it far more difficult and transgressive for these women to leave religion at this time. As Clarke and Macdonald aptly state,

Negotiating the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the call for individual autonomy was always a more complex matter for women – not only in the area of sexual autonomy, but also economically and socially – and the decision whether or not to leave the church was similarly complex for Roman Catholic women, even as they sought to forge social identities for themselves, ones that broke away from traditional conventions for female roles and expectations regarding femininity and that their church didn’t accommodate or recognize.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²⁰⁹ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²¹⁰ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²¹¹ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 161.

The interview participants recalled stories of telling their mothers they were going to mass at a different church, and then heading to the beach with a friend instead. Lizzie remembers that her biggest worry at that point was “will I get caught?”²¹² She recalls,

Once I graduated from high school, I had to sneak around and pretend I was, you know, rather than going with my mother, I’d sort of – I had my own car – I’d say, ‘Oh, well, I’m going to go to that church instead this afternoon because that’s where my friends are,’ or something. And you know, I’d basically not go.²¹³

She notes that she doesn’t remember “feeling terribly guilty about not going to church” at that point, and that when she moved out from her parents’ house, she “could do what [she] wanted.”²¹⁴

As they went through high school, many of the interview participants increasingly felt that they had no commitment to the Catholic church. As Carol G asserts, “I had no faith, I had no choice [...] I wore a black tie the last year of high school cause I was in mourning, and then I came home the last day of grade 12 and burnt my uniform”.²¹⁵ Upon graduation and leaving their childhood homes, they were released from under their parents’ watchful eye, and their worlds became expansive. When they left home, their seeds of doubt were further confirmed by the increasingly secular and individualistic cultural landscape of British Columbia. They were introduced to many new ideas in university and in the workforce, and found themselves in a world where their religious backgrounds no longer held great importance.

Broader Culture in the Long Sixties

The era of the long sixties was prominently marked by civil rights movements for gender, racial, and sexual equality and the Vietnam war and anti-war protests. These events were

²¹² Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²¹³ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²¹⁴ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²¹⁵ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020.

certainly not missed by the high school aged girls at St Ann's academy in the 1970s. In looking through the St Ann's academy yearbooks from the 1950s to the 1970s, the graduating students' works section transitioned from poetry and art about faith, to poetry about race, war, and religious doubt in the Academy's final years. Only one of the interview participants, Carol D, was still at St Ann's in the 1970s. The rest had graduated and left St Ann's or St Patrick's before this cultural rupture had fully infiltrated the student body, although they were certainly on the precipice of change. This accounts for their recollection that they did not fully engage with the broader culture until they had left school, though it is apparent that in the years leading up to the Academy closing its doors, the student body was beginning to outwardly question the church and engage with outside culture.

The students' poems show that by the 1970s, broader secularizing currents – namely, youth outwardly questioning authority – were resonating with the girls at St Ann's Academy. For one example, this student's poem from 1970, *Black vs White*, questions the Catholic church's moral approach to racism:

Black...or white.
Is it indecision or hatred which makes them fight?
Peace marches, rallies, what good will they do?
When the major choice is up to you.
"Peace in Vietnam" the marches cry,
while they butcher a Negro as he walks by.
Help the needy in foreign lands,
a Negro child dies, while we wash our hands.
Isn't the Negro's soul the same as our's?
Or will God in heaven who is just and right,
Have a gate marked "black" and a gate marked "white"?²¹⁶

Another poem from 1973, *Idealism*, similarly questions the idealism, exclusivity and racism of the Catholic church:

²¹⁶ Yearbook from St Ann's Academy, 1970, Accessed February 2020, Sisters of St. Ann's Archives, Victoria, BC, Canada.

Want ads:

We are building a new and perfect world. It shall be one with no wars, racial prejudices, religious barriers, communication gaps, or starvation. Wanted are persons to fulfill the position of population. Applicants must be neat, clean, no long hair. Must have enough money to support themselves for at least forty years. The person applying for this position should preferably be between the ages of twenty-three and forty and have had at least twenty-three years experience fighting for peace. Sorry: applications from red, yellow, black, or brown people and all non-Catholics not accepted.²¹⁷

In another poem from 1973, the student openly discusses the insularity of her upbringing in the church and her forthcoming liberation into the outside world:

Trying to fit into a box, labeled, numbered, secure like the people around her.
There was no knowledge of a wider world where most people don't fit into their box.
She was secure in her own sheltered world.
No great decision, no great sorrow, but no great happiness.
She was wrapped up in a world of fantasies, of being in a group; being accepted.
She has changed, has found her place with misfits, a freak show like herself, and all other people in the world.²¹⁸

These poems display the cultural rupture that occurred in the long sixties. Where the student works of the 1950s and early 1960s spoke of faith, and the surrounding art showed crosses and flowers, the works of the late 1960s to 1970s engaged with the events of the outside world, with drawings of bombs and war.

The interview participants were coming of age in the long sixties, an era where, as Clarke and Macdonald explain, “Catholic traditionalism ran counter to the norms of Anglo-Canadian society,” with “the rise in their place of the values of personal freedom, individualism, and self-fulfilment.”²¹⁹ McLeod points to the growing distinction between the public and private spheres for the revolutionary uprising of the 1960s. He argues that in the 1950s, “concepts of decency and discretion ensured that much that was normal in private was excluded from the public

²¹⁷ Yearbook from St Ann's Academy, 1973, Accessed February 2020, Sisters of St. Ann's Archives, Victoria, BC, Canada.

²¹⁸ Yearbook from St Ann's Academy, 1973, Accessed February 2020, Sisters of St. Ann's Archives, Victoria, BC, Canada.

²¹⁹ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 217.

sphere”; “then, from the mid-1960s, members of the counterculture were flouting conventions of decency in a way that shocked many respectable citizens, but also accustomed them to new ways of thinking.”²²⁰ Within this context, values of individual autonomy and rhetoric of anti-establishment and anti-authoritarianism were central.

At this time, Canada was renegotiating its identity, making institutional steps to move from a predominantly Christian country towards a more liberal and pluralistic vision of nationhood.²²¹ In his study of public expressions of religion in Canada in the 1960s, historian Gary Miedema analyzes the Centennial Celebrations at the Canadian Expo of 1967 to show how “a federal corporation sought to present an image of Canada that erased a British-French and Christian past and that highlighted an inclusive and pluralistic present and future.”²²² In the same year, then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau famously said that “the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation.”²²³ Nancy Christie argues that Trudeau’s statement evoked Canada’s transition to an individualistic and liberal society where “private values enshrined in individual selfhood are more authoritative than public ideologies and institutions in founding social relations and political rights.”²²⁴ Trudeau’s statement and this transition to individual values is starkly contradicted in the case of the Catholic church’s stance on contraceptives.

²²⁰ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 67.

²²¹ For further reading on Canada’s cultural development in the 1960s, see: Bryan D Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford, eds., *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945-75* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008); Gary Miedema, *For Canada’s Sake: Public Religion, Centennial Celebrations, and the Re-making of Canada in the 1960s* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005); Lara Campbell, Dominique Clément and Gregory Kealey, eds., *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

²²² Gary Miedema, *For Canada’s Sake*, xx.

²²³ Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau said this in defence of the *Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1968-1969*, which decriminalized homosexuality and allowed abortion under certain conditions: Pierre Elliot Trudeau, *Trudeau’s Ominous Bill: Challenging Canadian Taboos* (Canada: CBC, December 21, 1967), TV clip.

²²⁴ Nancy Christie, “From Interdependence to ‘Modern’ Individualism: Families and the Emergence of Liberal Society in Canada,” *History Compass* 10, no. 1 (Jan 2012), 82.

While individualism in the long sixties came to be valued on an international and national scale, Block argues that these values were central in British Columbia. She explains, “Certain countercultural ideals of the 1960s, such as individualism and anti-authoritarianism, underscored and facilitated the secularizing currents of that decade.”²²⁵ However, Block notes that “introduced during the 1960s elsewhere, such ideals were longstanding elements of the Northwest’s identity, and were central to its secular culture.”²²⁶ Lynne Marks and Tina Block have defined British Columbia as a region where, historically, institutional religion has been less important to identity and belonging than elsewhere in Canada.²²⁷ These scholars have focused on the Northwest’s adherence to the rugged and individualistic identity of its pioneering settlers. Block explains, “The values associated with the lifestyle of a particular segment of the working classes – ruggedness, individualism, and irreligion – seemed to resonate in Northwest culture more than in other regions.”²²⁸ She continues, “Seen as central to Northwest identity, such values worked to lessen the pull and prevalence of middle-class religious ideals in this region.”²²⁹ Within this more secular landscape, religious communities remained close knit, as was the case for these young women growing up within the Catholic community in Victoria. However, once they left that cultural world, they found themselves in a space where “middle-class ideals of religiosity held comparatively little influence.”²³⁰

It is also important to consider the role of the second wave feminist movement in these women’s gradual departure from religion. Christie and Gauvreau point to the role of women’s

²²⁵ Tina Block, *Secular Northwest*, 8.

²²⁶ Tina Block, *Secular Northwest*, 8.

²²⁷ 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).

²²⁸ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 85.

²²⁹ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 85.

²³⁰ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 85.

greater participation in the workforce and increased access to higher education in the era as not only “expand[ing] female horizons,” but “[taking] them away from home and introduc[ing] them to new non-religious intellectual milieus.”²³¹ While this is true of women’s liberation across much of the Western world, it was especially powerful within the context of secular British Columbia. For example, Lizzie explains that after her graduation from St. Ann’s Academy, she was offered a position in a youth treatment centre in Victoria which brought in psychology PhD students from Stanford who were being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War. She recalls that this was “a crowd of people I’d never been exposed to before,” where “organized religion was part of nobody’s life.”²³² At the time, she thought, “this is what it is being a grown up.”²³³ Likewise, Norma recalls that she felt immense pressure to attend church from her family growing up, but that as she got older most of her friends weren’t Catholic.²³⁴ She further recalls that once she enrolled at the University of Victoria, her new friends “thought it was weird that [she] was Catholic.”²³⁵ She continues, “I didn’t meet any Catholics, or I met some recovering Catholics, but I never met anybody that was going to church.”²³⁶

The cultural influences of the long sixties align with the interview participants’ liberation from the Catholic church, and the individualism evident in their stories reflects the rugged ideals of the Pacific Northwest, as highlighted by Block. These women express that their choice to no longer follow the religion of their parents was prompted by their own questioning. As Carol G recalls, once she left high school, she began reading books considered banned by the church, which led her to “question things and become more aware.”²³⁷ She continues, “so once I got out

²³¹ Christie and Gauvreau, “Even the Hippies Were Only Very Slowly Going Secular,” 20.

²³² Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²³³ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²³⁴ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²³⁵ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²³⁶ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²³⁷ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020.

in the real world and looked around, then I questioned, and so that was my liberation.”²³⁸ They narrate their decision to leave the church as an individual decision, often to the dismay of their mothers as their siblings followed in their footsteps.

The interview participants envisioned an independent journey of transgression from the religion of their parents towards a life that was autonomously theirs, and they recollect the story of their youth as such. But, of course, there were hurdles on their path of life. Many of the interview participants told stories of depression and sexual, spiritual, and physical shame that came up for them after their departure from the church. Through this depression, some faced addiction, mental health struggles, and troubled marriages. Lizzie reflects that many of the struggles she faced through her life came from her heavy dependence on detachment as a coping mechanism, which she feels she gained from the church. It took her years of counselling and 12 step groups in her later life to develop the skills of depending on her internal resources. She explains,

I didn't have the skills and self-understanding to know how to work through it and I relied very heavily on detachment, which is the way I got through most of my life, at home as a child as well, detaching myself from the chaos that was going around and just making a break and doing a fresh start [...] I probably saw counselors for about 10 years off and on, and learned a whole bunch more about how life works, how I work, how I can work in life, and ways that work for me that work in life. And like, I never got any of that from the church. The only solution within the church was pray, pray and ask for help, and it didn't help when I was in my family as a child, it didn't help when I was praying for faith. I never – there was never any ‘eureka.’ The solution [in Catholicism] always came externally and sometimes I might have attributed it to ‘oh thank God for bringing me to solution at this time.’ But through the process of counseling and 12 step groups, I started to see that the resources were within me, and they could be expanded and educated and I became very interested in the development of my internal resources.²³⁹

It took these women many decades to reconcile with their difficult feelings and to have the confidence today to speak to me about their lives. They also spoke of their disgust with the

²³⁸ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020.

²³⁹ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

Catholic Church as stories about residential schools and sexual abuse came out in the 1990s and 2000s. They report that these were things they were not aware of in their youth, and that these later announcements further confirmed their rejection of Catholicism.²⁴⁰

Despite their separation from the institution of the Catholic church, some of the interview participants state that the religion continues to add value to their lives.²⁴¹ As Janet explains, “I mean, I went to Catholic school and lived in that environment for like 18 years and so obviously, it’s a big part of my life, you know? So, it informs who I am and, you know, how I treat people, hopefully. But the dogma and the kind of beliefs are just not relevant to me anymore.”²⁴² Clarke and Macdonald state that “these baby boomers valued their autonomy. They wanted to discover their own moral codes and choose what to believe and what not to believe. But much as they resented the church’s attempts to curtail their autonomy, much as they would not attend Mass and receive the sacraments, the church was still part of their patrimony.”²⁴³ Despite these women’s rejection of Catholic dogma in their early years during the long sixties, their separation from Catholicism took place over many decades and took many different paths, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Conclusion

²⁴⁰ The Sisters of St Ann ran a number of residential schools, namely Kuper Island School on now Penelakut Island off the coast of Vancouver Island. The interviewees recall going to Kuper Island on retreat but were unaware of the abuse occurring to Indigenous children in residential schools. For further reading on the residential school system, see: Carling Beninger, “Accountability for the Roman Catholic Church’s Role in the Residential School System: Urgent Actions Needed Immediately,” *Active History* (June 2021): <http://activehistory.ca/2021/06/accountability-for-the-roman-catholic-churchs-role-in-the-residential-school-system-urgent-actions-needed-immediately/>; Phil Fontaine, Aimée Craft and The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2015).

²⁴¹ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²⁴² Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

²⁴³ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 154.

Whether they lost interest in the church because of doubt, the church's hypocrisy, or disillusionment with Catholicism, these women ultimately valued their personal autonomy over their bodies, their choices, and their beliefs over religious dogma. It can be discerned that their desire, or even expectation of, autonomy was instilled in them through the strong female role models that they saw in the Catholic sisters. Ultimately, the Catholic church would not be the space that afforded them that freedom. Additionally, their desire for autonomy coincides with the growing importance of autonomy and individualism in both Canadian and local Victoria culture in the long sixties.

As was expressed in the previous chapter, for the women that I interviewed, Catholicism was their entire cultural world in their youth. For most, their religious identity was very important to them in their childhood – whether they really believed what they were being told or not. Although a discourse of individual autonomy had already had some impact on them while in Catholic school, as young adults, they entered into a world where secularism was prevalent, and individualism was central. If they still had any doubts about leaving the church, the secular discourse of the university and work world in British Columbia confirmed their departure. But as will be shown in the next chapter, the process of leaving was not so simple. It took many painful years to fully remove themselves from their childhood church, risking social stigma and cutting of family ties. When they did finally leave, the quest for spiritual purpose continued through their lives.

Chapter 3: Seeking Meaning Past Catholicism: “*The freedom to define my own God*”

For many women, the process of leaving Catholicism during the long sixties was not always a definitive departure from religious practices. The women that I interviewed have pointed to the era of the long sixties as the time that they felt they had transitioned away from an unwavering faith in the Catholic church. However, the process of their full separation from Catholic practices often lingered on for decades. While all of the interview participants stopped attending Catholic mass during the long sixties, many continued with the sacramental practices of baptism of their children and marriage within the church. They report that this was both an expectation of society at the time, and a duty owed to their parents – in particular, to their pious mothers. Often, once these formalities were fulfilled, they felt the freedom to separate from the church.

Further, leaving Catholicism behind did not always mean leaving behind their Christian beliefs. Brown argues that “the reconstruction of women’s conception of their own gender in the long 1960s initiated swelling female alienation from Christian belief, the church, and religion in general in the period between 1975 and 2010.”²⁴⁴ While the interview participants alienated themselves from the church and from the Catholic religion, many of them have nuanced this argument of alienation from Christian belief. To clarify what is meant by Christian belief, they have turned away from church dogma that limits individual agency, but do not always reject a belief in the presence of God or in the importance of Christian moral teachings.

Intergenerationally speaking, Brown is correct in that their leaving the Catholic church did eventually bring an end to religion and church attendance, as all professed that their children do not attend any church or adhere to any religion today. However, many of the interview

²⁴⁴ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 259-260.

participants argue that their Christian moral values were transferred to their children without the need of a church space for that exchange. In this context, they argue that their religious/moral values from their youth are still lived, even when Catholic religion is not overtly practiced.

As their departure from the Catholic church did not always mean leaving behind God, it did not stop their exploring in the realms of religion and spirituality. Many of these women went on to search for religious meaning outside of the confines of a church. Moreover, Norma storied her journey of searching for deeper meaning in other religious and spiritual practices as a natural evolution of her departure from Catholicism. In her youth, she felt that many of the congregants of the Catholic church lacked real spiritual intention. This perception led her to search for a belief system that was truly devoted to a spiritual practice, one without external pressures of condemnation and sin. She discussed her spiritual journey as a search for a philosophy that reflected the values of Christianity, without the dogma of the Catholic church. If necessary to attach labels to their beliefs today, two claim no religion, two are agnostic, three are spiritual but not religious, three are spiritual Buddhists, and one is a not otherwise specified Christian.²⁴⁵ However, as will be shown, their own understanding of their spirituality/religiosity is far more open and less concrete than these labels would suggest.

A further focus of Brown's research is that, for many women during the long sixties, "a freedom from patriarchy led to a freedom from religion".²⁴⁶ While it is true that the interview participants left the Catholic church, their lives continued to revolve around searching for religious meaning, albeit outside of traditional structures. What is collectively true amongst them

²⁴⁵"Christian Not Otherwise Specified": "Since the 1980s there has been a huge jump among those who identify themselves in generic terms, as simply 'Protestant' or as 'Christian.'"..."Beginning with the 1981 Census, these generic responses were recorded separately under two overall categories, as Protestant not otherwise specified and as Christian not otherwise specified."..."It would appear, then, that in calling themselves Christians they are eschewing denominational affiliation": Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 173-190.

²⁴⁶ Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

is that all rejected organized religion, while none completely left behind a belief in a higher power. I argue that their liberation from the Catholic church was expressed as a freedom to define their own God, rather than a freedom from God.

Continued Catholic Practices

These women's decision to stop attending mass during the long sixties aligned with the beginning of a downward trend in Canada's active religious culture. However, while they all express that they developed a disinterest and distrust in the institution of the Catholic church during this time, they often continued engaging with some Catholic practices, at least into the 1980s. This points to the importance of studying the lived religious experience of ordinary individuals, as Block notes, "Scholars of lived and popular religion have shown that answers to the big questions in religious history are to be found not in the theological rafters, but in the practices of everyday life."²⁴⁷ The interview participants continuation of Catholic practices was dependent on the social pressure they felt from society and from their parents, or as a lingering duty they felt to the Sisters and their religious community. In reflecting on this time in their lives, they question why they ever engaged in these practices, and some feel a sense of regret, as it went against their sense of themselves as autonomous in their family decisions. All of the interview participants reflected on their desire for autonomy in their personal lives and in their spiritual and religious practices at the time of their departure from the Catholic church. It is important to reiterate that their departure from religion was a transgression from what was expected of them in their adolescence as young women in religious households. As is nicely stated by Callum Brown,

The vast bulk of no religionists attained that status not through commitment but through various degrees of apathy, producing a practical agnosticism rather than a 'speculative atheism'. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that a person's drift from a religion within a

²⁴⁷ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 7.

religious society, however explained as apathy, was also an act or journey of adventurous rejection...For women, this journey was especially difficult, given the expectations from which religion burdened the formerly 'respectable' woman.²⁴⁸

One liberation narrative that stood out from other interviews was Mickey's, who maintained her autonomous lack of interest in Catholicism, despite her family's full participation in Catholic practices. She remarked that she never felt she had faith in the Catholic sense, though she later baptised her children, married in the Catholic Church, and sent her children to all twelve years of Catholic school, even after she felt she had fundamentally left Catholicism. She had been in the novitiate program at St Ann's Academy in the mid 1960s. When she returned home in 1969, she stopped going to church. She states, "I remember the first Sunday came up and I didn't even think about going to church. Didn't even dawn on me that that was something I should be doing. It was like I just slid right out. That was no longer important to me. It only seemed to be important to me in terms of a community, not a sense of faith."²⁴⁹ At the time that she sent her four children to Catholic school, she had moved to Ontario, (where Catholic school is publicly funded), where her husband was the head of the Catholic school board. She explains, "I just felt the duty to the children that they should, and my husband in the position he was in, he certainly felt that they should be raised Catholic."²⁵⁰ Despite her family's participation in the church, she recalls staying independent in her beliefs, stating, "Certainly by 1980, I was not doing anything with the church whatsoever. The kids are going to school and Catholic education and that was my husband's work, but I didn't participate in anything."²⁵¹ She recalls that after her children had fulfilled their Catholic sacraments, she and her children disengaged from organized religion:

²⁴⁸ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 266.

²⁴⁹ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁵⁰ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁵¹ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

So, they were all baptized in the church, and all went through Catholic school. All four of them through the twelve grades. And at which point, none of them are practicing Catholics now. And the ones that have children, they're not baptized. They don't go to church; they don't have anything to do with church. And it seems as if the minute we got all of these sort of pseudo formalities over with in terms of their initiation into the church, we just, nobody bothered going anymore. We sorta did our duty.²⁵²

She continues, "it was a practicality. It was my duty."²⁵³ As a non-religious, though spiritually open-minded, person today, she reflects that while it may seem hypocritical, it was important to her at the time to give them a religious perspective as a choice. She admits, "It sounds really, really, really hypocritical and I suppose it is, but you do anything for them and if that meant they could progress, perhaps, why would I deprive them of the opportunity to have a faith or make a choice?"²⁵⁴ She reports that her decision to follow through with Catholicism for her family for those years was dependent on a sense of familial and societal duty, though it is interesting that she grounds the decision in the children having personal choice – something that she strongly valued.

For others, the duty that they felt was often owed to their parents, and in particular, to their mothers. Many of the interview participants recall their mothers in tears over their decision to leave the church, and a strong expectation that they would marry in the church and baptize their children. In discussing her decision to baptize her first child, Norma recalls excessive pressure from her mother. When she decided to baptize the child, she recalls her listless response of, "Oh shit, throw some water on him, make all these people happy."²⁵⁵ This could be very difficult in a time when these women were trying to assert their own agency in their personal lives as adults. In her reflection back on that event, Norma says, "I always felt a bit like I

²⁵² Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁵³ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁵⁴ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁵⁵ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

betrayed myself. In that, by not saying, ‘no, absolutely not. This is one of my boundary lines, don’t be talking to me about this again.’”²⁵⁶ Brown states that when the ideology of no religionism breached the cultural discourse in the 1960s, “the passive female no religionist could have found that the family and community pressure made her transit from religion personally very difficult.”²⁵⁷ For women leaving the Catholic church in Victoria, it often was very difficult. Though British Columbia was distinctly irreligious, and a greater acceptance of no religion was slowly spreading throughout the West, it was not generally adopted by the parents of these women.

Most of the women were married in a church, despite no longer feeling a personal attachment to Catholicism. Their decision to marry in the church can also be observed as lived religion, whereby they preserve some of the cultural practices of Catholicism, despite the relative lack of religious meaning. This, too, was a duty they felt was owed to their mothers. Ellen states, in speaking about herself and her siblings, “We all married in the Catholic church actually, just to please my mom, and Father Mac at the time said, ‘Oh, it’s a foot in the door.’ Well, it didn’t work.”²⁵⁸ Carol D was married in the United Church, which she explains “was how it was done back then.”²⁵⁹ She continues that ultimately, “it was for my mother, for my family, and that was it, and honestly to this day, I don’t know why I would even get married in a church. I would never get married in a church again. It was more about her. It seemed better that it was in the United Church than no church at all.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²⁵⁷ Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 266.

²⁵⁸ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

²⁵⁹ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁶⁰ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

While these women continued to engage with the Catholic church despite personally rejecting church dogma, they did eventually feel released from their duties. Understanding how and why they gradually felt released from religious obligations to their mothers and society can be explained in three ways: their transition from childhood to adulthood, the changing discourse surrounding women's agency, and the declining role of organized religion in societal discourse, along with a growing critique.

Continued Christian Beliefs/Values

While British Columbia has been less religious than the rest of Canada since the province's establishment, the very notion of being non-religious was a gendered phenomenon up until the 1960s. As argued by Lynne Marks, British Columbia was settled in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries by white settler men who were either not interested in church, or who proudly rejected God. She further states that "this freedom was much less available to, or less sought out by, the white settler women [of British Columbia]."²⁶¹ This gendered division held true until the discursive changes of the 1960s. Brown argues that the development of an ideology of no religion, in a time of women's increasing agency, "broached the possibility of it being a respectable position for women."²⁶² As is further argued by Block, by the postwar era, "both men and women were responsible for the distinct secularity of British Columbia," and both men and women "shared in criticizing organized religion."²⁶³ While the interview participants did not move directly to 'no religion' in the long sixties, they were critiquing Catholicism and engaging with Canada's secularizing culture – one in which women and youth were increasingly turning away from organized religion. As has been stated, there has been a growing scholarly interest in

²⁶¹ Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*, 4.

²⁶² Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution*, 266.

²⁶³ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 90-91.

the unique secularity of the Pacific Northwest region – also delineated as the Cascadia bioregion.²⁶⁴ British Columbia has consistently had the highest number of ‘religious nones’ in Canada by Census statistics, and that number has been steadily increasing since the 1960s.²⁶⁵ However, claiming no religion does not necessarily equate to atheism. In Block’s research on irreligion in the Pacific Northwest from the 1950s to 1970s, she aptly notes that “residents of the Pacific Northwest were not always religious in expected ways, and non-institutional forms of spirituality were prevalent in the region.”²⁶⁶ In her research on irreligion in settler British Columbia, Marks found that alternative religions were more prominent than in the rest of Canada since the late 19th century. She states, “Unbelievers and non-Christians were not alone in contesting Christian hegemony in British Columbia. Various alternative religions, most with at least tenuous ties to Christianity, were more popular in the province than elsewhere in the country.”²⁶⁷ Further, although irreligious men outnumbered irreligious women in this period, the reverse was true among alternative spiritual groups.²⁶⁸ She continues,

In this period, some secularists decided that, though orthodox Christianity was no longer meaningful or credible, a godless universe did not answer their spiritual yearnings, leading them to embrace a range of metaphysical alternatives...Among those who remained committed to irreligion, men greatly outnumbered women, and many of the women who abandoned the mainstream churches for metaphysical religions never ventured to a fully secular world.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ The Cascadia region includes British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. For further reading on secularity in Cascadia, see: Douglas Todd, ed., *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008); Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (California: AltaMira Press, 2004); Paul Bramadat, Patricia Killen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021).

²⁶⁵ *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Table 45, 1961, 17; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 1, Part 3, Table 13, 1971, 19; *Census of Canada*, Vol. 2, British Columbia Provincial Series: Population; Language, Ethnic Origin, Religion, Place of Birth, Schooling., Table 5, 1981, 5; Statistics Canada, *Religion in Canada 91’ Census*, Table 2, 1993, 95-97; Statistics Canada, *2001 Census of Population*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 95F0450XCB2001004; Statistics Canada, *2011 National Household Survey*, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011032.

²⁶⁶ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 3-4.

²⁶⁷ Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*, 186.

²⁶⁸ Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*, 193.

²⁶⁹ Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches*, 211.

As my interviews show, this is a pattern that continues in British Columbia today.²⁷⁰

Block explores the ways in which residents of the region were “more likely to reject, avoid, or ignore organized religion than were their counterparts in other regions,” during the 1960s.²⁷¹ However, rejecting organized religion did not always mean rejecting belief. Block further focuses on the region’s unique approach to popular religion, in how, “despite the efforts of church leaders to define for the people what it meant to be truly religious, ordinary Northwesterners continued to make up their own minds about how, or indeed whether, to be religious.”²⁷² Similarly, Christie and Gauvreau state,

It is certainly true that women who wished to break with the sexual conventions as laid down by both their parents and the churches may well have been forced to leave an institution because they could no longer abide by the rules. This, however, does not imply that these women lacked a continuing belief in Christian tenets, but simply that they could no longer conform to the moral requirements of the institution.²⁷³

Despite the interview participants’ rejection of the institutional Catholic church, some felt they now had the freedom to engage with how they wanted to be religious. Of all those interviewed, Marie, Janet and Lauren best align with this narrative of maintaining their Christian moral values, and in some cases, Christian belief, while critiquing organized religion. For Marie, leaving the institutional Catholic church meant that her conception of God became expansive, although she still feels connected to her Catholicism. As she states, “I have evolved and I’m dragging the church along with me.”²⁷⁴ She still feels deeply connected to the spiritual aspects of her faith, but no longer feels that the organized structures of religion are important. She explains, “So the church, we don’t need the church to tell us. We know that the world is our neighborhood.

²⁷⁰ It is important to note that while the interview participants moved and travelled throughout their lives, they were all raised on Vancouver Island, they all went to Catholic school in Victoria, and they all reside on Vancouver Island today.

²⁷¹ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 55.

²⁷² Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 63.

²⁷³ Christie and Gauvreau, “Even the Hippies Were Only Very Slowly Going Secular,” 19.

²⁷⁴ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

We don't need to know that, that we we're a Catholic and that they're an Anglican. Yeah. Those boxes. And that's why I see my God is no longer in this little box."²⁷⁵ She continues with her appreciation for the good deeds of Christianity but feels that her spirituality is bigger than a religious label: "It has good concepts. Feed the hungry. You know, all of those things are important, but all of the major religions have that. It's like caring for the universe. It's cosmic. It's cosmic. It's looking after our planet, our little planet."²⁷⁶

With similar sentiment, Lauren expresses that while she rejects the institutional church, she never lost her belief in God:

Yeah, the institutional church, I definitely lost. I will not go back to an institution again. I will not. I don't want anybody pushing their doctrine on me or telling me what to believe or not believe. And the 'you must think this and that.' It just won't happen ever again. Just wouldn't do that anymore. I kind of lost the Jesus thing, but I never really lost the God thing, but I didn't know what it was. I just figured there had to be something out there.²⁷⁷

While all the interview participants claim to have lost a belief in Jesus as the son of God, they sometimes expressed that their understanding of Jesus became secularized. There was an overarching sentiment that Jesus was the perfect person from a historical perspective. Janet explains that while she has an aversion to organized religion, she has not turned from the moral values of Christianity which she sees as embodied by the story of Jesus. She states, "The dogma about, you know, the Holy Trinity, it seemed like magic. I mean, I'm a very pragmatic person. It's kind of like, no, that stuff's all magic. But the teachings of whoever this person was are very valid, you know?"²⁷⁸ Norma corroborates this sentiment:

I never saw Jesus in heaven. I saw Jesus on earth. That's very practical minded maybe, but I just never bought heaven or hell. And when people started telling me I was going to hell, that was so ridiculous to me. Because I knew how kind I was. I knew my heart. So,

²⁷⁵ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁷⁶ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁷⁷ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

²⁷⁸ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

when someone would say, ‘well, you'd be going to hell for that,’ I'd be going, ‘wow, I don't think I will be, because I'm a really good person.’²⁷⁹

Leaving behind organized religion in its traditional form didn't always mean leaving behind the moral values of the Christianity for their children either. While most of the interview participants did not socialize their children into the church, some do believe that they instilled in them their basic Christian values without it. Janet, who was the only interview participant to call herself a Christian, feels that going to a church on Sunday was not essential to sharing her Christian values:

I didn't have them baptized or anything like that [...] And I guess I still consider myself a Christian because that's what my upbringing was. That's where my values come from. You know, I can't change that, and I'm not. But I don't think that, you know, going to church on Sundays is the only way you can teach those, but unfortunately, there's all the other baggage that goes along with the basic Christian values of love one another and do unto others and that kind of stuff.²⁸⁰

Intergenerational Secularization

Despite passing on religious values, all of the interview participants' children became part of the growing numbers of ‘religious nones’ in Canada. Their journey to no religion was either through a lack of socialization into religion, or that they were given the option to disaffiliate that was not immediately available to their parents. While some of these women as mothers felt that the values they passed on were Christian in nature, this did not have an effect on the religiosity of their children after they had chosen to disaffiliate from the church themselves in their youth. In their book, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada*, Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-LaFlamme discuss this intergenerational trend towards no religion, stating, “We see a logical connection from disaffiliation due to choice during one's teen years to

²⁷⁹ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

²⁸⁰ Janet, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

weak religious socialization and irreligious socialization.”²⁸¹ Even for Mickey, who raised her children within the Catholic church and school system, her four children today have no relationship to the church, never attended church after high school, and never baptized their children. Clarke and MacDonald state that in Canada today, “a growing number of Catholic youth no longer see the parish and what it has to offer as a part of their turning points in life.”²⁸² They continue that, “the practices of the church and the religious world to which they provide entry are less and less relevant.”²⁸³ Clarke and MacDonald further state that there are two major trends contributing to the growth of no religion today: 1) children are “unchurched,” meaning that they “have no parental religion to reject,” and 2) children who grew up with religion are becoming “dechurched,” meaning that those “who once identified as having a religious affiliation are choosing not to have one at all.”²⁸⁴ The interview participants’ children have been brought up in a society in which having no religion is both commonplace and acceptable. However, despite a rejection of organized religion, these women would not describe themselves or their children as atheists. In most cases, they state that they believe their children inherited the open mindedness, moral values, and appreciation for humanity and the natural world that they equate with a personal spirituality. When asked if her kids are spiritual or religious today, Carol G did not say no, but rather she replied, “Well it depends what you call it, they all respect nature”.²⁸⁵ Of her children, Marie expresses, “They’re spiritual. They’re all good spiritual, all caring.”²⁸⁶

No Religion/SBNR/Secular but Spiritual

²⁸¹ Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 32.

²⁸² Clarke and MacDonald, *Leaving Religion*, 158.

²⁸³ Clarke and MacDonald, *Leaving Religion*, 158.

²⁸⁴ Clarke and MacDonald, *Leaving Religion*, 171.

²⁸⁵ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020.

²⁸⁶ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

In their current lives, most of the interview participants could be classified as religious nones, as they say they do not belong to any organized religion. Aside from Janet who calls herself a Christian, and Norma who calls herself a Buddhist, the rest did not declare a clearly labeled religious category. Even for Janet and Norma, their personal spirituality is far less structured than a religious label implies. Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme explain that the classification of the religious none is a new social construct for this time and place that we are living in today, and that it is “a way of imbuing meaning to a reality that has become taken for granted by many in our society, a product of this time (the last half of the century or so) and the place (notably European and North American societies) because of a series of historical, cultural, and physical factors shaping the social environments in which we live.”²⁸⁷ However, having not declared an adherence to an organized religion does not necessarily mean that an individual lacks a spiritual practice or belief. As Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme further argue, “This form of decline does not imply the disappearance of all things religious and spiritual, as a diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices along with nonbelief and secular attitudes coexist and are constantly evolving.”²⁸⁸

Today, the prominent disinterest in institutional religion in this region, and the absence of a dominant religion, has created a space where, as stated by sociologist Mark A Shibley, “alternative spirituality is more center-culture than counter-culture.”²⁸⁹ The interview participants could be defined by the popular term “spiritual but not religious.”²⁹⁰ Religious

²⁸⁷ Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 2.

²⁸⁸ Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 5.

²⁸⁹ Mark A Shibley, “The Promise and Limits of Secular Spirituality in Cascadia,” in *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia: Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest*, ed. Douglas Todd (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2009), 35.

²⁹⁰ For further reading on SBNR or spiritual but not religious, see: Sven Erlandson, *Spiritual but Not Religious: A Call to Religious Revolution in America* (Iuniverse Inc, 2000); William B Parsons, ed., *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*, (London: Routledge Press, 2018).

studies scholars Robert Fuller and William Parsons explain that the SBNR category is “difficult to define, let alone distinguish [spirituality and religiosity] from one another,” and is more broadly used to identify “complex attitudes towards religion.”²⁹¹ Shibley has coined the term ‘secular but spiritual’ to represent the specific religious nature of many in the Pacific Northwest region, meaning, “they encounter the sacred and cultivate spiritual lives outside mainstream religious institutions.”²⁹² Accordingly, the interview participants represent a variety of ways in which spirituality and secularity can be co-expressed in this region.

Undefined/Agnostic

Many of the interview participants claim no well-defined religious or spiritual identity but still do not reject the possibilities of a higher power. When asked about how they would define themselves in relation to religion or spirituality today, Carol D, Mickey, and Kate maintained a stance of openness. Carol D says that she has no religion in her life today, which has been “a gradual process of just letting it go and it becomes less and less important.”²⁹³ Today, she says that she feels spiritual “once in a while, generally not.”²⁹⁴ Mickey states that she has an aversion to labels in general. She does not believe in religion as an institution. Yet, on the question of how she would define herself in relation to religion or spirituality today she expressed, “I’m open.”²⁹⁵ She continues, “I’m not particularly spiritual – and I don’t know how to define why I’m not or why I am – I just don’t feel a pull either way.”²⁹⁶ On a similarly open front, Kate explains that when it comes to spirituality, she is “lazy about it,” but that her friends

²⁹¹ Robert C Fuller and William B Parsons, “Spiritual but Not Religion: A brief introduction,” in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*, ed. William B Parsons (London: Routledge Press, 2018), 1.

²⁹² Mark A Shibley, “Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest,” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk (California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 141.

²⁹³ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁹⁴ Carol D, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

²⁹⁵ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

²⁹⁶ Mickey, Oral history interview, August 21, 2019.

would say she is the most spiritual person they know because she is exploring and open to it all.²⁹⁷

Ellen and Lizzie labelled their openness as agnosticism. This is not a rejection of a higher power, but a belief rooted in reason that the nature of God cannot be known to us. Ellen relates her agnosticism to her freedom from Catholicism, stating,

I think there is room for doubt everywhere, and now that I no longer think it's a cause for guilt, I'm free to doubt everything. And while I want my children, my grandchildren, to study and believe in evolution, I don't necessarily think that the story is complete. I don't think we can know everything definitively about anything [...] I don't think there's any rational stance other than we can't know. We just can't know until we all have to go through that door at the end of our life and find out, or not find out.²⁹⁸

Lizzie, who also calls herself agnostic, states that her approach to religion and spirituality is “a more of a detached intellectual way of looking at things”.²⁹⁹ She still calls herself a “seeker”, but says that she does not “believe in external salvation.”³⁰⁰ She explains, “I believe it's up to me to find my way through and I can use the resources of other people, but I wouldn't turn to a deity for assistance.”³⁰¹

Their separation from the Catholic church was often discussed as their personal freedom. Upon leaving Catholicism, they felt that they had acquired the agency to think freely for themselves in terms of religion and spirituality. As Norma expresses, “Catholicism, we'd left that behind. We were never going back there, cause that didn't allow us any freedom at all. There was no freedom there and we were looking for freedom in those days.”³⁰² They were looking for freedom then and continue to engage with their spirituality autonomously today. Their liberation

²⁹⁷ Kate, Oral history interview, January 17, 2020, Skype Interview.

²⁹⁸ Ellen, Oral history interview, November 27, 2019.

²⁹⁹ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

³⁰⁰ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

³⁰¹ Lizzie, Oral history interview, January 16, 2020.

³⁰² Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

from the Catholic church was not a yearning for a freedom from God, but a freedom to discover a personal religious and spiritual expression. As Lauren states, “I always just knew that there was something else missing. I didn't know what that was until I was given the freedom to define my own God.”³⁰³

Buddhism

For some of the interview participants, when they left behind organized religion, they began to look for other spiritual outlets that reflected their desire for individual autonomy. In this context, three of these women became interested in Buddhism – Carol G, Norma, and Maria. They report having retained their belief in the possibilities of a higher power, but with their disdain for dogmatic religion, they turned towards Buddhism which they did perceive as an organized religion. Norma is the only one to confidently call herself a Buddhist today, while Carol G and Maria have, at least, a vested interest in Buddhism. They carried their interest in Buddhism with them through life. Today, as when they encountered Buddhism in the long sixties, their conception of Buddhism is personal rather than communal, and is centered around meditation and morality.

In his discussion of religions in the Pacific Northwest, medical anthropologist Lance D Laird argues that “Western adherents of Asian religions tend to emphasize the philosophical and meditative elements, to the exclusion of devotional ritual and elaborate festivals.”³⁰⁴ He further states that, in his own interviews, he found that “freedom from doctrinal conformity played a major role in attracting them to the practice.”³⁰⁵ This was true of these women, who had freed themselves from the constraints they felt in Catholicism. As Carol G states,

³⁰³ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

³⁰⁴ Lance D Laird, “Religions of the Pacific Rim in the Pacific Northwest,” in *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, ed. Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk (California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 129.

³⁰⁵ Laird, “Religions of the Pacific Rim in the Pacific Northwest,” 130.

I don't believe in organized religion for myself, and I can see that it fulfills roles for other people. I also can see that it is a manipulative tool – a manipulative, controlling tool that doesn't allow for people to think for themselves, which I think is dangerous. Today, I have a faith in a universal being, and I guess the closest thing is Zen Buddhism [...] The meditation concept, I started, been on and off. I'm not very good at it. I can't sit for very long and meditate, but I can do a walking meditation to go into the woods and just stop and appreciate all as one.³⁰⁶

As is further reiterated by Maria,

Buddhists see the most truth. And they seem the most open to new ideas, to science. They seem, at least in many respects, that the teachers aren't trying to convince anyone. The true teachers in any religion or spiritual place, if they start saying, 'well, you should be doing this or you should be this,' then I'm away, I'm gone.³⁰⁷

The phenomenon of young people turning towards Eastern religions in the long sixties was widespread throughout the Western world. In their book, *None of the Above*, Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme discuss the vast overall appreciation of Buddhism amongst those claiming no religion in the West. They argue this shift was partially contingent on the long sixties discourse surrounding individual autonomy. They state,

More positive attitudes toward Buddhism among many nones may be at least in part a reflection of its distinct recent history in Western societies and pop culture: especially in the 1960s and 1970s when Eastern religions, notably Buddhism, were adopted and adapted by hippie and spiritual subcultures in white, middle-class North America as vectors for individual autonomy, quests for well-being and environmental protection.³⁰⁸

These women were no doubt inspired by the discourse of the popular culture at the time. McLeod discusses how, in the 1960s, "Zen Buddhism was emerging as the religion in fashion in San Francisco."³⁰⁹ Most of the women interviewed recall being deeply impacted by the discourse of counterculture youth coming out of San Francisco. Eastern religions were being represented in popular culture through music and art. Discourses of personal liberation, alternative spirituality,

³⁰⁶ Carol G, Oral history interview, January 21, 2020.

³⁰⁷ Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

³⁰⁸ Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above*, 158-9.

³⁰⁹ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 79.

and drug experimentation were packaged and presented as an alternative to traditional discourses of piety and traditional femininity. Norma says that in her youth, she experimented with LSD on the Victoria beaches, left behind her Catholic faith, and hitchhiked to San Francisco for the “Summer of Love” in 1966.³¹⁰ Norma remembers, “As soon as I found Zen in San Francisco, that was it.”³¹¹ Maria recalls that she did her “obligatory trip to India to find some spiritual meaning and truth” around this same time, after being “released from the duties of being a Catholic.”³¹² Both discovered Buddhism and their personal freedom on these excursions.

In addition to Buddhism being prevalent in popular culture, historian Mauro Peressini discusses the role that the diversification of Canada’s religious landscape in the 1960s played in the turn to Buddhism, stating,

The phenomenal diversification of Canada’s religious landscape introduced an unprecedented degree of choice and relativism with regard to beliefs, values, religious practices, and ways of behaving and acting. Ideas and beliefs that had until then been taken for granted were becoming less and less accepted by all, and were thus subject to questioning by other individuals or groups. Many Canadians became open to other religious universes, such as Buddhism, and questioned the world view specific to the traditional positions of the religion they had grown up with, a religion that no longer seemed to be the only possible truth, or necessarily the truest.³¹³

This observation is certainly accurate and relevant for the women that I interviewed. In further support of my argument that these women were seeking individual autonomy in their spiritual and religious choices, Peressini explains that, “in the eyes of many Westerners, Buddhism appeared to be an individual quest for happiness through an interior journey.”³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

³¹¹ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

³¹² Maria, Oral history interview, January 2, 2020.

³¹³ Peressini, Mauro and Canadian Museum of History, *Choosing Buddhism: The Life Stories of Eight Canadians* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of History and University of Ottawa Press, 2016), 59.

³¹⁴ Peressini, *Choosing Buddhism*, 60.

Norma describes her transition to Buddhism as a natural progression from her Catholicism. Further, for her, Buddhism is “a way of life, a philosophy.”³¹⁵ For the other women, although some maintained there was continuity in their moral values, they emphasized the contrast between leaving religious dogma for spiritual freedom and leaving the collective for the individual. Norma recalls a deep appreciation for the ritual and contemplative practices of the Catholic church, but that it was not her “sangha.”³¹⁶ She states that the Catholic church was rigid: “It’s just rigid rules to be there. It was just rigid rules. There was no flexibility at all.”³¹⁷ Being a deeply spiritual person from a young age, she perceived that there was no presence in the Catholic church:

Well, I remember at some point, looking around during the mass, a Sunday mass, and noticing there was no one present, everyone was nodding off, reciting. There was no presence. No one had any presence. The adults around me were going through the motions, but they weren't engaged. And I'm sure that I started seeing that at about 13, 14. By the time I was 16, I'm going, yeah, like they're all there all right. I guess they don't want to go to hell or something. Like what's the deal here? Like, you know, there was no devotion.³¹⁸

Norma began to look into other religions at 16 and, as stated, stopped at Zen Buddhism in San Francisco and has stuck with it ever since. She reports that this transition related to her spiritual self in Catholicism, but from a new internal perspective: “I was always a very spiritual person, and I credit my childhood in the Catholic church with that. Buddhism had the ritual I liked, it had the contemplation and the presence that I like. But it wasn’t really a religion. It wasn’t talking about a God outside yourself. I knew as soon as I walked into the Zen meditation center, this was me.”³¹⁹

³¹⁵ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

³¹⁶ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019; ‘Sangha’ meaning religious community. Specifically, it refers to monastic communities of monks and nuns across the Buddhist world. She is comparing her Catholic religious community with her Buddhist one.

³¹⁷ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

³¹⁸ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

³¹⁹ Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

Conclusion

These women expressed that they saw a lack of personal autonomy in Catholicism which led them to seek spiritual autonomy when they left. The common thread among all those interviewed was a desire for individual autonomy upon leaving the institution of the Catholic church. Though this took many paths, they ultimately were all looking for spiritual freedom and individual expression. As has been discussed, this desire for individualism in religious and spiritual expression has been a long-standing part of religious culture in the Pacific Northwest. These women's spiritual journeys away from the Catholic church align them with Shibley and Block's description of the Pacific Northwest as a "secular but spiritual" region.³²⁰ It is further described by Block as "a place where most people hold some religious beliefs, or define themselves as spiritual, but are relatively indifferent to formal religious involvement."³²¹ What is unique is how they arrived at that destination – not through being raised without religion or with religious indifference, but in a religious context that they did not align with. For these women, growing up within the Catholic church left them open to the possibilities of a higher power, but free from the limitations they felt within the Catholic church. As is summarized nicely by Norma,

I'm just a believer in the universe, you know, on my place, my very small place in the universe, itsy bitsy little blaze in the universe, that's not with the Catholic church. That's a very important, self-important, righteous kind of place, you know. I mean, it couldn't be anything but righteous when men tell you how to live your life and who to have sex with and what you're going to do for a living, you know, how righteous is that?³²²

To return to Brown's argument that for many women during the long sixties, "a freedom from patriarchy led to a freedom from religion," the interview participants have shown that their

³²⁰ Shibley, "Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest," 141; Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 102.

³²¹ Block, *The Secular Northwest*, 102.

³²² Norma, Oral history interview, December 18, 2019.

agency led them to reject institutional faith, but that a desire for individual autonomy in expressing their spiritual and religious lives was central.³²³ What was collectively expressed in the interviews was an aversion to organized religion – likened to their hostility to the dogma of the Catholic church – but not a rejection of the concept of a higher power. They often spoke of the confines of organized religion in their youth as a box to which their ideas were restricted. This was the box that they had freed themselves from upon leaving the church. However, as previously stated, leaving this “box” did not always mean leaving behind God. As Mark Shibley argues, “to understand religious life in the Pacific Northwest requires thinking outside institutional boxes.”³²⁴ Lauren reflects, “The structure of a church, of somebody telling you, ‘this is what we all believe and you have to fit in that box,’ I don’t care what church it is, I’m not going to go to it.”³²⁵ She continues that she “wasn’t ready to let go of the God thing,” although she “wasn’t going to pray anymore.”³²⁶ In a similar statement, Marie describes that upon leaving Catholicism, her conception of God became expansive.³²⁷ She states, “my God’s just gotten huge. Yeah. He’s not in a box anymore. He’s not male or female. He’s cosmic.”³²⁸

Despite rejecting organized religion, many of these women continued to engage with Catholic sacramental practices in their early adult lives. Their departure was not immediate but occurred slowly over time. The gradual nature of their departures can be explained by the power of societal standards, particularly as enforced by their mothers. Once they had fulfilled the conventions of Catholic marriages and baptisms of their children, they did not return to regular church attendance or identify with the Catholic faith. However, their lack of interest in the

³²³ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

³²⁴ Mark A Shibley, “Secular but Spiritual in the Pacific Northwest,” 164.

³²⁵ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

³²⁶ Lauren, Oral history interview, December 17, 2019.

³²⁷ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

³²⁸ Marie, Oral history interview, October 7, 2019.

Catholic institution did not always imply a disintegration of their Christian belief or rejection of Christian moral teachings.

These women's stories represent the transition away from Christianity as the dominant religion in Canada both personally, and intergenerationally. As aptly stated by Clarke and Macdonald, "Not very long ago, Canada was a Christian country, or at the very least a country wherein the majority of individuals identified, in some way, with a Christian tradition."³²⁹ As has been conveyed, today, the dominant religion in British Columbia is 'no religion,' an ideological term that entered the discursive landscape in the 1960s. This was the discursive space that these women found themselves in when they left the Catholic church in the long sixties. While their stories fit into the broader narrative of religion and spirituality in British Columbia, their position in a relatively small Catholic community on Vancouver Island in their adolescence entailed a unique religious journey.

³²⁹ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 9.

Conclusion

Through a discursive analysis of the oral testimonies of eleven women who left the Catholic Church in Victoria during the long sixties, this thesis investigates how cultural and societal discourse since the 1960s impacted their departure from Catholicism. In this local Catholic context, the interview participants report that due to the insularity of their religion and of the region, they felt less directly impacted by the broader culture in their youth. With this in mind, the central focus of this analysis investigates how Callum Brown's research, and in particular the terms 'the discursive death of pious femininity' and 'lived feminism,' stand in this region. Further, this thesis tests Brown's hypothesis that postwar secularization in the Western world has been universally largely attributable to women, who by leaving behind religion no longer socialize their children into the church. Spatially, this research is situated within the region of the Pacific Northwest and draws on scholarship discussing the unique secularity of the region outside of the local Catholic church. Collectively, this thesis engages with the shifting discourse of time, place, and space to discuss how secularization since the 1960s unfolds on a denominationally and regionally specific scale.

Though the initial intent of this study was to discover how Brown's concept of 'lived feminism' represented the interview participants in the long sixties, the interview participants stories reveal how this concept may be best suited for the Sisters of St Ann who reportedly instilled an expectation of equality and autonomy in the women in their early youth. Brown introduces this term to discuss how women engaged with the second wave women's movement, not through active engagement, but in a "determination to affirm their autonomy from prescribed conventional norms."³³⁰ Many Sisters across the Western world were leaving their orders

³³⁰ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

through the long sixties, and that movement was not missed by the Sisters of St Ann. The Sisters in their schools were reportedly strong-headed and independent, and they were quick to embrace a modernizing of their dress and to engage in opportunities for further employment and higher education. Scholars of the declining rate of women religious have looked to this period to discuss how congregations of women religious embraced tenets of feminism as closed, self-governing, women-only organizations within a broader patriarchal governance. Their actions represent a determination to affirm their autonomy, as defined by Brown. In addition, the Sisters of St Ann have a long standing history in the region as autonomous women. Gender equality and the empowerment of women has been a central tenant of the Sisters of St Ann since the 19th century. Today, the Society of Friends of St Ann's Academy, a group of alumnae, Sisters and archivists, are dedicated to gender justice. They host events such as the Women and Power Leadership Conference, and a conversation series on feminism.³³¹

The complete definition of Brown's 'lived feminism' states that it is within this context that "a freedom from patriarchy [leads] to a freedom from religion."³³² While a notable number of the Sisters of St Ann did leave their religious order, I cannot make the argument that this means they always left their faith, as their leaving often meant that they joined the laity. With that said, the sense of independence that they instilled in the women that I interviewed was never intended to remove their faith. However, arguably the interview participants' notion of their equality as women and the encouragement they received to go out and lead independent lives did turn them away from a religion that they perceived as patriarchal and hypocritical. In regard to lived feminism then, the interview participants' freedom from patriarchy entailed a freedom from

³³¹ Society of Friends of St Ann's Academy, "Gender Justice," accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.sfsaa.org/gender-justice>.

³³² Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, 96.

the Catholic church. Notably, however, their own gendered oppression was rarely cited in the interviews as a reason for leaving Catholicism, as they had been raised by these Sisters to expect that they were equal members of society and that they could fulfill their lives autonomously. Further, the interview participants reported an aversion to feminism as a label, in general. This thesis emphasizes in particular how many of the ideals of the Catholic church stood in direct opposition to those of feminism. For the women that I interviewed, while they recognized these patriarchal constraints, they did not feel themselves restricted. This is certainly still an engagement with lived feminism, though reportedly more of an *expectation of autonomy* from prescribed conventional norms, than a *determination to affirm their autonomy* against the patriarchy. Consequently, it was important in this thesis to clearly discuss how lived feminism represents the Sisters of St Ann to understand the seeds of the interviewees' expectation of equality in their later life.

Their freedom from patriarchy can also be understood as attributable to the discursive death of pious femininity, as defined by Brown, whereby the reconstruction of women's identity in the broader discourse of the 1960s put "female identity in collision with the Christian construction of femininity."³³³ By leaving their religious positions and imposing values of freedom of choice on their young female students, the Sisters certainly aided in this 'discursive death'. The reconstruction of women's identity, however, was universal across the West during this era as feminists fought for equality, and new opportunities for jobs and education for women became available. Marie's life story, and those reported by the interview participants of their mothers, show the generational transition of women's identity from one wrapped up in Christian domestic ideals of marriage, motherhood, and duty, towards the modern independent woman.

³³³ Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 179.

Within the Catholic world, the question of women's autonomy came to the forefront during the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, and the introduction of the *Humane Vitae* thereafter in 1968. These discussions led to an exodus of both religious women and lay women from the church, as women's ordination and contraceptive use was again denied. The interview participants felt that these Vatican decisions highlighted the patriarchal hierarchy of the church and a denial of women's autonomy, which only further acted to confirm their doubt and the hypocrisy they saw in the Catholic church.

The dominant culture of the long sixties was fueled with rhetoric of anti-establishment, anti-authority, and anti-patriarchy. Within this context, churches were losing their institutional power in the nation, as many young people were leaving the religion of their parents. As Victoria is situated within the Pacific Northwest region, religious identity outside of the church was less centrally valued than in the rest of Canada. Despite this exodus of youth from religion, and the dominant secularity of Victoria at the time, the interview participants, generally, told narratives of an individual liberation from Catholicism – one not heavily influenced by external pressures. They report that they saw the church as hypocritical and patriarchal, and that as they grew up, religious dogma began to make less sense to them. Often at the dismay of their mothers, they left a church that they had become disillusioned with, to embrace a life of personal choice. The changing culture of the long sixties certainly afforded them the opportunity to break a family lineage of Catholicism, but in discussing their decision to leave on their own terms, both their actions and retelling are laden with the value of individualism. Notably, this individualism is specifically prominent in the regional discourse. As Tina Block has argued, individualism was not only a dominant countercultural ideal of the 1960s, but a “longstanding element of the

Northwest's identity and central to its secular culture."³³⁴ By analyzing their narratives of personal liberation within the context of changing cultural discourse, this thesis shows how these women engaged with the dominant cultural ideals of the long sixties in their determination to affirm their autonomy against the Catholic church and its dogma.

As has been shown, although these women stopped attending mass in the long sixties and felt as though they had fundamentally left the church, their full separation from Catholic practices and their lingering guilt carried on for decades. Brown's research focuses on how the reconstruction of femininity and freedom from patriarchy meant that many women left behind God. The interview participants nuanced this definition in that none turned to atheism, but that the institutional church was no longer of any relevance or authority to them. Some of these women report that they are still influenced by Christian values, but have completely left behind the institutional church. Most report that they maintain a stance of openness to the possibilities of things beyond our perceived realm, but that they no longer hold a clear definition of God. Three of the interview participants report that they are greatly influenced by Buddhist philosophy as they perceive it as a de-institutionalized, non-religion with moral values similar to those of Christianity. Notably, Norma sees her transition to Buddhism as a natural evolution from the Catholic church. She sees Buddhism as a practice where spirit is central, but one where she has autonomy over herself. This focus on spiritual autonomy aligns with the secular but spiritual nature of most people in the Pacific Northwest region, where levels of 'no religion' are highest, but alternative spirituality and passive engagement with the sacred is reportedly high. As has been expressed, it was the freedom to define their own God that was of central importance to these women.

³³⁴ Block, *Secular Northwest*, 8.

Despite their continued spirituality, this history of women leaving Catholicism in Victoria can be seen, as Brown has argued, as an example of intergenerational secularization as attributable to women. They broke free from the domestic and pious roles of their mothers to engage in a life on their own terms. Although they often baptized their first child and married in a church under family and societal pressures, they embraced women's health clinics and contraceptive use to start a family on their own terms – one not bound by the expectations of the church. They fully embraced the opportunities of the long sixties before they settled down as mothers, travelling to San Francisco, going on a soul-searching backpacking trip through India, and going off to university. As women have traditionally been the holders of piety within the family structure, their lack of interest in the religious socialization of their children meant that their children did not carry on any religious identity. While most women report that their children had some introduction to church at a very young age, at least in the form of their baptism, they all report that none of their grandchildren have been baptized or attend church. By liberating themselves from the Catholic church in their youth, these women initiated an intergenerational trend of secularization towards the growing number of 'religious nones'.

These are ordinary women, certainly not activists, who felt the calling of personal liberation, and engaged with that opportunity in a culture that was just beginning to allow for it. They report feeling an aversion to being told how to live their lives, in any context. They express their liberation from religion in terms of an independent development of their conscience that led them to reject oppressive church dogma. In their decision to leave, they often caused tension within their families and lost community and family support networks. Nonetheless, they held steadfast to their call for spiritual and bodily autonomy. They may have been isolated from the broader culture in their youth, and they may not have been feminist activists themselves, but I

argue that in their transgressive actions, they made a contribution towards personal freedoms in regard to gender equality and freedom of religious expression. They were using their personal agency to play a role in changing the cultural discourse surrounding femininity and religiosity here in British Columbia.

If this research were to be further developed, it would benefit from a larger research pool. It was difficult to find women who were born between 1935 and 1955, who were raised Catholic in Victoria, and who consciously left the Catholic Church on Vancouver Island in the 1960s or 1970s. I know that there are more potential participants, as one interviewee Kate said, “At the St Ann’s reunion for the grad class of 1966, about half of the girls didn’t go to mass and just stayed upstairs because they didn’t belong to it.”³³⁵ If I had more time and resources, I would love to track down the graduating classes from 1960 to 1973. It would also be valuable to interview not only those who left, but those who stayed, for a comparative study of how feminism was either incorporated into women’s Catholicism or disregarded altogether in their commitment to the structures of the church. Lastly, it would of course be valuable to interview the Sisters of St Ann to hear first-hand how they experienced the changes of the long sixties, and what they saw their responsibility to be to their students. These calls for further interviews reflect the central importance of incorporating personal narratives, and the value of investigating how culture is both engaged with and shaped by ordinary individuals in the making of history.

³³⁵ Kate, Oral history interview, January 17, 2020.

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