

SPORTS, STORIES, AND SECULARIZATION: CANADIAN PROTESTANTISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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What is secularization? Is Canada a secular society? If so, when did the shift from Christianity to secularization occur? If not, how do we account for the removal of prayer from schools and fluctuating numbers of practicing Christians according to census figures? These questions speak to the contentious issue of secularization in Canadian historiography. In the early part of the twentieth century, new secular activities created ever increasing competition for the time and attention of Canadians. In response, mainstream Protestant religious leaders in English Canada undertook a series of projects to draw the population back into church involvement. Several historians have argued that by aligning the church with sports and adapting their sermon styles religious leaders actually served to promote the increasingly secular society they were trying to prevent.¹ Census data, along with the continuing influence of

¹ David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

mainstream Protestantism in Canadian society until well into the 1930s, however, indicates that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Christian churches skilfully adapted to challenging social and economic times in order to remain relevant in Canadian society.

The secularization debate in Canadian historiography begins with the response of churches and religious leaders to a so-called “period of drift for the Canadian churches.”² A majority of historians studying religion and secularization in Canada have pointed to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the start of a long decline in church relevance. Major proponents of the secularization thesis include David Marshall, who argues that in an effort to make society sacred, religion, in reality, became secularized.³ Along with Marshall, Ramsay Cook argues that socio-economic divisions pushed religious leaders beyond what they were equipped to handle and in responding to these conflicts they effectively made religion irrelevant.⁴ In contrast, Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau in *A Full-Orbed Christianity* argue that despite facing conflict within and criticism from without, mainstream Protestantism remained flexible and adaptable around the turn of the century and was thus able to adopt new techniques – such as social evangelism – in order to retain authority and relevance within Canadian society.⁵ This paper incorporates evidence from census data, the Young Men’s Christian Association

² Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), xi.

³ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*.

⁴ Cook, *The Regenerators*.

⁵ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*.

(YMCA), and scriptural precedent for many of the “new” and “radical” practices adopted by religious leaders to argue that church leaders and religion remained relevant in a time of great social and economic upheaval.

“Secular” is defined by the Oxford Canadian Dictionary of Current English as “not religious or spiritual,” “not concerned with promoting religious belief,” or “not bound by a religious rule.” To “secularize” is defined as to “remove something from the control of religion.” For the purposes of this paper, “secularization” refers to the removal of aspects of Canadian society from the grasp of mainstream Protestant churches. According to Robert Choquette,

[S]ecularization was usually understood as the gradual emancipation of this world from the *other* world, the transcendent world, the world of God. Secularization was a process whereby segments of society and culture were withdrawn from the authority of religious institutions and symbols.⁶

Choquette argues that “according to this common understanding, as secularization increases, religiosity decreases in the same proportion.”⁷ This argument is flawed, however. The removal of something from the control of religion is not directly tied to a decrease in “excessive” or “sentimental” piousness in the people from whom it is removed.

Statistics from the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and No Religion categories of census data from 1871 to 1971 (with a specific focus to 1931) support the argument that Canadians did not

⁶ Robert Choquette, *Canada's Religions* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004), 353.

⁷ Choquette, *Canada's Religions*, 354.

experience a widespread abandonment of mainstream Christianity in the early part of the twentieth century.⁸ In the case of Anglicanism, census data indicates a general increase in popularity, leading to a peak in 1921 and then a gradual decline until 1971. Methodism, on the other hand, reached its peak percentage in 1891 and declined rapidly until 1931, when it no longer was offered as a choice on census forms. Presbyterianism steered a middle ground between Anglicanism and Methodism, remaining fairly stable percentage-wise in the period between 1871 and 1921. Finally, the lack of pattern in the No Religion category emphasized the constantly fluctuating percentage of religious non-adherence, likely due to tumultuous social and economic conditions of the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ While identification with a particular religion on census forms does not necessarily mean strict adherence to that religion, census data does suggest that the theory of a mass exodus from mainstream Christianity and a turn towards secularization at the turn of the twentieth century is an oversimplification of events. For this reason, an examination of the YMCA, along with an analysis of scriptural precedent, can provide a fuller picture of religious participation and non-participation in this era.

⁸ Historical statistics of Canada: Section A: Population and Migration, “Series A164-184. Principal Religious Denominations of the Population, Census Dates, 1871 to 1971,” http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-516-x/sectiona/A164_184-eng.csv.

⁹ The first half of the twentieth century was socially and economically tumultuous for Canadians, as many coped with sending loved ones away to both the First and Second World Wars, while in the interwar years the Great Depression adversely affected the lives of many Canadians. The census data also makes note that this number includes First Nations groups, who were considered to be pagans.

In an effort to bring Canadians back into the folds of the church, mainstream Protestantism incorporated secular activities, such as sports, into its day-to-day fare. Religion and sports became closely tied in Canadian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and although a majority of historians studying religion view this as a dilution of the sacred aspect of Christianity, a stronger argument can be made that this development was a way for churches to remain relevant in a modernizing world. The values of muscular Christianity permeated society and Christ-centered programs such as the YMCA increasingly drew connections between the spiritual and physical realms. At the same time, independent Christian organizations were not alone in making this comparison. Churches themselves underwent modifications, such as the addition of gymnasium facilities, in order to draw in Canadians.

The rise of muscular Christianity, as Robert J. Higgs argues, “transformed the body of Christ into a Hercules or Apollo.”¹⁰ Higgs points out that there was no scriptural foundation for this view of Christ, but the depiction of Christ as particularly masculine was a logical development during an era defined by a “crisis in masculinity,” as has been described by historians like Tina Loo.¹¹ While men were searching for activities that would prove them to be “skilled, self-reliant, self-controlled, chivalrous risk-takers” in a

¹⁰ Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports & Religion in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 201.

¹¹ Higgs, *God in the Stadium*, 201. For example, in Loo’s article “Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia, 1880-1939,” big game hunting is described as “ascribing a racial and sexual identity.” Tina Loo, “Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia, 1880-1939,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 298.

secular context, the church realized the benefits that could be gained by adapting and sponsoring activities promoting the same masculine ideals. In doing so, it made Christianity appealing to men actively seeking opportunities to prove the extent of their masculinity.¹²

The need for a masculinised Christianity was paralleled by the need for a masculine reinterpretation of other events. Sports were particularly important in shaping the contours of masculinity in this era, as Robert Kossuth and Kevin Wamsley have argued. Their study of cycling in London, Ontario reveals that “a variety of competitive and social/recreational events” were organized in the late nineteenth century, and that men were considered the primary participants in competitive and vigorous sports such as cycling races, which required the possession of masculine traits and physical strength.¹³ Depicting Christ as a physical force such as Hercules or Apollo (although biblically unfounded) fit with the fare of the day, thus making Christianity and church attendance a valid male activity at the turn of the twentieth century.

One of the greatest promoters of muscular Christianity, the Young Men’s Christian Association, arrived in Montreal, Quebec in 1851, establishing itself as the first YMCA in North America.¹⁴ From the outset, the goal of the YMCA was “to put religious teachings into practice and to lead by example.”¹⁵ The

¹² Loo, “Of Moose and Men,” 299.

¹³ The “notion of manhood,” they argue, “was particularly apparent in sport and physical recreation activities.” Robert Kossuth and Kevin Wamsley, “Cycles of Manhood: Pedaling Respectability in Ontario’s Forest City,” *Sport History Review* 34, no. 2 (2003): 170.

¹⁴ “Serving 150+ Years,” YMCA Canada, http://www.ymca.ca/eng_150years.htm.

¹⁵ “Highlights of YMCA Milestones,” YMCA Canada, http://www.ymca.ca/eng_milestones.htm.

YMCA soon proved itself popular among Canadians, and the organization hailed its progress as “revolutionary” for its offerings of religious discussion and activities outside of the church.¹⁶ By 1866, the impact of muscular Christianity on the YMCA was reflected as it began to add physical activities to its list of services.¹⁷ Basketball, for example, encouraged vigorous activity and physicality while still emphasizing the importance of sportsmanship and “good” Christian values. We need only to look at the team photo of the 1920 Men’s Basketball team to realize the far-reaching effects of muscular Christianity. In the photo, the men are all



“YMCA Men’s Basketball Team, 1920.” Photos: Celebrating 150 Years of the YMCA, <http://www.ymca.ca/en/who-we-are/history/ymca-photo-gallery.aspx?g=1962>.

muscular, have serious facial expressions, and their hands are placed on the shoulders of the men in front of them. These characteristics point towards the

¹⁶ “Highlights,” YMCA Canada.

¹⁷ “Highlights,” YMCA Canada.

importance of physical and emotional strength, as well as the bonds of Christian brotherhood. Indeed, the very logo of the YMCA – a triangle in which each side contains one of the words, spirit, mind, and body¹⁸ – indicates that “the spirit [was] supported by mind and body.”¹⁹ Despite arguments that the introduction of sports into Christian life diluted the impact of Christian teaching, the YMCA demonstrates that sports actually allowed leaders to bring their religious messages to young men in a way that way relevant to their lives at the turn of the twentieth century.

Independent Christian organizations such as the YMCA were not the only ones embracing the turn towards muscular Christianity and incorporating physical activity and sporting teams into their daily fare. Churches themselves underwent modifications during this time period, including the building of church gyms that provided locations for games, sports, debates, and social activities. David B. Marshall argues that “one way in which the clergy attempted to deal with the increased competition they faced was to harness many of the new leisure activities directly to the church.”²⁰ This “harnessing,” Marshall argues, ensured that “churches were not a place for worship only.”²¹ While Marshall viewed this as evidence of secularization, a re-evaluation of the evidence indicates that although “the clergy were admitting that sports and athletics were of primary importance,” they were not admitting that religious instruction was any

¹⁸ “Spirit, Mind, Body: YMCA 150,” YMCA Historical Booklet, <http://www.ymca.ca/downloads/English-YMCA-Historical-Booklet.pdf>.

¹⁹ Higgs, “Builders of Character,” 201.

²⁰ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 128.

²¹ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 129.

less important.²² By incorporating physical activity into the church itself, religious leaders adapted to the need for a masculinised version of Christianity while still drawing Canadians into the church, providing them with both physical and – perhaps more importantly – spiritual nourishment.

In the early twentieth century, the availability of, and access to, new leisure activities threatened the rates of Sunday church attendance. In order to remain competitive, clergymen “concluded that the only way to survive...was to make Christianity more appealing by making it more secular in both form and content.”²³ In sermons, religious leaders incorporated anecdotal stories and visual aids in order to bring a new excitement and sense of modernization to church services. Much like the incorporation of sports into Christianity, the narrative style of preaching developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped churches stay up-to-date with new developments in society, thus ensuring that the church remained relevant in the eyes of Canadians.

In the nineteenth century, the shift towards telling tales of religious fiction in the pulpit was a departure from the “logically arranged...text, exposition, and proof” style that constantly made reference to the Bible, otherwise known as “expository preaching.”²⁴ Instead, nineteenth century sermons tended to start with a Biblical text and then

²² Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 131. Scriptural precedent, in fact, may have been used to support this belief. 1 Timothy 4:8 explicitly states that “physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” New International Version (NIV), 1 Timothy 4:8.

²³ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 139.

²⁴ David S. Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 5 (1980): 481. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 139.

incorporated not only “secular illustration and personal example” but “also narrative and humor.”²⁵ As Marshall observes, the new style of preaching “took a [Biblical] text, but speedily wandered away from it.”²⁶ Extra-textual additions helped to engage the audience in the sermon and, as David S. Reynolds notes, were not an entirely new concept. According to Reynolds, Scottish clergyman Hugh Blair, who published *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* in 1783, argued that in order to keep sermons engaging and to prevent lessons from becoming over-familiar “doctrine...should always be fleshed out with concrete example.”²⁷ These concrete examples enabled sermons to break away from the “ponderous and uninspiring” type of sermon common in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and instead “capture the imagination” of parishioners, ensuring that Christians would remember lessons they learned on Sunday morning throughout the week.²⁸

The shift in homiletics from an expository to a narrative style initially appeared to be a radical departure from the norms of the time. Telling stories to teach Biblical truths, however, was in fact scripturally based. In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly tells parables (short moral or religious stories) in order to convey implicit truths. In Luke 15, for example, Jesus tells a series of parables about loss to a group of tax collectors and sinners. The first two parables convey explicit messages about repenting of one’s sins, while in the third and most famous, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus makes no

²⁵ Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative,” 481.

²⁶ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 139.

²⁷ Reynolds, “From Doctrine to Narrative,” 484.

²⁸ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 140.

straightforward comment or lesson.²⁹ The combination of these three parables results in a longer, implicit story that requires the listener to think for themselves and draw out a personal meaning from the narrative. In the same way, religious leaders in the nineteenth century incorporated stories, with implicit meanings, into their sermons in order to force their congregations to digest the meaning of the message long after they left the church building on Sunday morning.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have traditionally been viewed as a period of decreasing relevance for the Christian church in Canada. Historians such as Marshall and Cook argue that in an effort to draw Canadians back to the church, religious leaders effectively diluted the sacred nature of the church itself. On the other hand, there is a significant amount of evidence to indicate that

²⁹ In the first parable, Jesus tells of a man who has one hundred sheep and loses one, then goes after the lost sheep and rejoices when he recovers it. At the end of this parable Jesus notes that “in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who did not need to repent.” (NIV, Luke 15:7). In the second of the Luke 15 group of parables, a woman with ten silver coins – each worth about one day’s wage – loses one. Jesus asks the group listening to his parable, “does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?” (NIV, Luke 15:9). Again, Jesus draws the conclusion that there will be much rejoicing in Heaven when one sinner repents. The third is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this tale, two sons have property divided between them and the younger son goes abroad and “squander[s] his wealth in wild living.” (NIV, Luke 15:13). Eventually the son returns home and begs his father to take him on as a hired man because he is no longer worthy to be called his son. Instead, the father welcomes his son home, saying “this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (NIV, Luke 15:24).

although non-traditional practices were adopted by the churches and independent Christian organizations such as the YMCA, in reality these groups were using scriptural precedent in order to remain relevant in a time of social and economic upheaval. By incorporating the values of muscular Christianity through the creation of sports teams and eradicating the traditional style of expository preaching in favour of a more narrative and engaging style, mainstream Protestantism proved to be flexible and adaptable enough to maintain a place of influence and relevance in Canada well into the twentieth century.