

LOSING OUR RELIGION

By Stephen Gauer

Social change can shake the ground like thunder, but it can also arrive as silently as a sunrise. In 2001 almost five million Canadians told Statistics Canada that they have no religion. That's a record number—16 percent of the population, up from 12 percent in 1991 and just one percent in 1971.

Pollsters call us “Nones.” Our numbers vary enormously across the country, lower in the east, much higher in the west. In Greater Vancouver, we outnumber all the other religious denominations. In the city itself, we're almost half the population. This is unprecedented.

We're a growing force but we don't get much attention. We're not organized. We have no leaders. We don't shout, march, protest, or commit acts of violence. When religion saturates a major issue of the day like Islamist terrorism or gay marriage, we scratch our heads and question not just the arguments at play but the very premises of the debate.

We have no Bible or Koran to guide us, so we don't think alike. Some Nones rarely think about religion at all. Some are atheists; some are agnostics. Some are strongly spiritual and believe that there is a form of life or life energy beyond the physical. I was raised a Lutheran but believe that we come into the world, live our lives as best we can, and then die and dissolve into dust.

Carol is a sixty-two year old retired social worker. Like many people who reject organized religion, she had plenty of first-hand experience when she was young. "I went to the United Church when I was small," she says. "My mother was the one involved with the church; my father never went. I attended and then I taught Sunday school. I had perfect attendance until I went away to university to study social work when I was seventeen.

"But after I went away, I stopped going to church. Part of it was my father. He was a doctor, and always kind of cynical about religion. He felt it was hypocritical to attend church on Sunday and then do 'bad' things on Monday. Because of him we were allowed to question things like religion."

Religion is powerful, Carol says, because people need to belong, need to feel part of a group, need simple answers to unanswerable questions. "But those of us who don't believe in organized religion define ourselves in other ways. To me, religion is like a cocktail party: lots of talk, lots of words without any understandable meaning, repeated over and over. It's very superficial. There's no real intimacy, only 'faux' intimacy."

At 28, Kim is two generations younger than Carol. She's a software developer with two university degrees and a strong family religious background. Her grandparents were Christian missionaries in Africa. Her parents live in Portugal, and travel to and from Mozambique where they work for Christian aid agencies.

Like Carol, Kim fell away from religion when she was a teenager. “I went to Sunday school, religious camp, did the Bible club and the kids club. But when I was fifteen I started to question religion. I met some quality people who were living different lives than what my parents preached. I didn’t see anything wrong with not being religious. My parents’ rules didn’t make sense anymore.”

“I’m an agnostic now,” she says. “I don’t believe in any religion. I neither believe nor disbelieve. To me it’s not an interesting question because I can’t verify the answer. I’m not interested in lying to myself to feel better.”

Some Nones had little or no exposure to religion when they were young. Cindy, 40, is operations manager for a software company. “I was never christened, never baptised,” she says. “When I was eight, a woman down the street offered to take me to church. My mother said it was OK. I remember going every Sunday for about a year. Then one night I went to bed, and I was distraught and sobbing. My sister ran downstairs and got my mother. She asked me why I was crying, and I said, ‘Because I’m going to heaven and you’re not!’ My parents stopped the churchgoing.”

“I only think about religion in the context of my son Henry, who’s ten. He’s being raised a Catholic at his father’s request. When he was attending religious classes for first communion I went one night where parents were supposed to talk about how to support their children in their learning about God and the church. I

hated it! I was stuck in a room with people who made it feel like a club I didn't belong to.

“That's what I hate most about religion, the exclusionary nature of it, the idea that 'if you're not part of our club, you're not good enough to get into heaven.' ”

How do Nones live a moral life without religion? Carol, the retired social worker, sees morality as a form of problem solving. “In a way, that's what morality is about,” she says. “Perhaps we're better at it. We know there are no quick fix answers. We don't have the arrogance that we're right. We approach every moral question with a sense of personal confidence. We look at it and weigh it and then proceed. These are skills you develop when you cut yourself loose from religion.

“Part of these skills come from my career as a social worker. Abortion, for example. Some people believe it's wrong and wrong for everyone—they impose their beliefs on others. But when you're working with a woman who's wrestling with that decision, you help her make that decision freely by seeing the options, seeing what's in the best interest of everyone involved in that decision, and help her explore what will happen depending on the decision she makes.”

Other Nones use the golden rule, or some variation of it, as a basic guide to telling right from wrong. “My parents taught me to treat people the way I want them to treat me,” says Cindy. “I

believe in the golden rule, that we should be kind, be polite, try to get along.”

Kim, the daughter of missionaries, admits that her moral sense has been shaped by her religious upbringing. “Yes, there is a lot left over from religion, including the ethical part. But I’d say karma guides my decisions; I believe I get back from the world what I give out.”

Time magazine raised a furor in 1966 when it published a cover story titled “Is God Dead?” The story quoted respected theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer (“we are proceeding toward a time of no religion at all ...”) and academics like Harvey Cox, author of *The Secular City*, as it tried to come to terms with the apparent decline of religion in mid-1960s America. The doubts about religion expressed by noisy 19th-century critics like Nietzsche (“God is dead! And we have killed him!”) appeared to have finally seeped into mass culture.

But the *Secular City* did not triumph. Forty years later, organized religion is still with us, and more prominent than ever. Although mainstream church attendance is still down, fundamentalist and evangelical attendance is rising. And newer arrivals like Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism now claim a place in an expanded Canadian religious mosaic.

The None argument has always been with the need for holy texts, rules, churches, exclusion and structure, not spirituality itself. “My own mind is my own church,” Thomas Paine wrote more

than 200 years ago. Paine was a Deist who rejected the idea of revealed truth and the organized religions of his time.

Paine's ideas about religion eventually damaged his writing career. The bleed of religion into politics is an old story. As Carol points out, the stakes are very high right now. "It's a very dangerous time in the world," she says. "I think Bush has started what amounts to a religious war. In the US you have to wear your religion on your sleeve. People are emphasizing differences in religion, rather than the humanness we all share. We should be looking at what makes us the same."

(1357 words)

SIDEBAR: Further reading

Thomas Paine: *Collected Writings* (Library of America, 1995) contains Paine's famous essay, *Age of Reason*, written in 1794-95, which lucidly presents the Deist arguments against theism, the Bible, and revealed religion in general. Favourite quote: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."

The End of Faith, by Sam Harris (Norton, 2004), is a tour-de-force polemic against organized religion by an outspoken American neuroscientist. Favourite quote: "Criticizing a person's faith is currently taboo in every corner of our culture. On this subject, liberals and conservatives have reached a rare consensus: religious beliefs are simply beyond the scope of rational discourse."

Other titles:

Why I Am Not a Christian, by Bertrand Russell (Touchstone, 1967): "I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue."

The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective, by Harvey Cox (Collier Books, 1990): "The forces of secularization have no serious interest in persecuting religion."

Secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things.”

Living Without Religion, by Paul Kurtz (Prometheus Books, 1994):

“It is possible for individuals to lead lives of excellence and to respect the rights of others without theistic pretensions or sanctions.”

Web sites:

Humanist Association of Canada: <http://hac.humanists.net/>

Council for Secular Humanism: <http://www.secularhumanism.org/>

American Humanist Association:

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/index.html>

American Atheists: <http://www.atheists.org/>

Atheist Alliance: <http://www.atheistalliance.org/>

Agnostics: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/agnostic.htm>

Sidebar: 245 words