

BRIAN CLARKE AND STUART MACDONALD. *LEAVING CHRISTIANITY: CHANGING ALLEGIANCES IN CANADA SINCE 1945*. MONTREAL, QC: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017. (ISBN : 9780773550865)

The drastic decline in church adherence and rise in people stating they have “No Religion” in Canada has been a major topic of discussion amongst scholars of religion, including historians of religion. But while there is general agreement that this is symptomatic of a drastic social change through the second-half of the twentieth century that has persisted into the twenty-first, what exactly this means has resulted in at-times heated debate, precisely because of its significant implications for Canadian society. Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, in *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*, take an interdisciplinary approach to this development, using a thorough examination of quantitative data to ground their historical and sociological analysis. The sheer drama of the numbers themselves is significant, but the extensive, complex, and nuanced analysis of what the numbers mean is the book's most valuable aspect, particularly because the theories of other scholars are tested against the numbers and analysis the authors provide.

The book's first four chapters are organized around particular groups of Canadians – the statistical data being derived primarily from the Canadian census, the National Household Survey, a variety of church records, among other sources – with the book's final two chapters commenting on more general social and historical trends in the time-period from 1945 to 2011. The first three chapters analyze some of the most numerically substantial groups of Christians – various Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics – while its fourth chapter focuses on Canadians stating that they have “No Religion.” It is this chapter that is one of the book's most substantial contributions to the scholarly discussion on Canadian religious history, particularly as Clarke and Macdonald argue for recognizing the significance of people who are “non-churched,” as opposed to

“de-churched” – that is, the generational trend that relates to those members of de-churched (or non-churched) families whose children have never been socialized into church life, and thus, have no familiarity whatsoever with churches and their various institutional functions. The numbers of non-churched are expected to increase over time, particularly with the substantial increase in the “No Religion” population of Canada since the 1960s.

The book’s last two chapters reflect on more general historical trends, placing the quantitative analysis in a broader socio-historical context. The fifth chapter foregrounds a discussion of how we can evaluate the lasting impact of the 1960s on Christianity’s place in post-war Canada. The rich analysis here certainly deserves mention, as the authors take bolder sides in some of the debates about what these declines in Christian adherence say about Canadian society; it is argued that the dominance of Christianity in Canadian public life has passed its peak, and that the cultural changes in the 1960s caused a social shift that made churches an increasingly marginal factor in Canadian life where it was once a crucial center. Most importantly, Clarke and Macdonald note that this shift has shown no signs of reversing; in fact, it has been gradually accelerating into the twenty-first century. The final chapter of the book is likely its most controversial, given its claim that these historical processes have led to a “post-Christian Canada.” While I would question the finality this assertion imputes given the continuation of publicly-funded separate school systems, the recent election of the Coalition Avenir Québec (who, despite their legislation regarding religious symbols, insisted on a crucifix being kept in the Québec National Assembly), a Christian-normative secularism, and so on, the authors have offered much throughout the book on which to premise a debate over this idea.

Given its focus on statistical information, analysis of what the numbers actually *mean* is the book’s most valuable aspect, particularly as the claims of sociologists and other scholars of religion are tested against the authors’ thorough study. For example, the notion that

some evangelical or Pentecostal churches, whose memberships are growing, even somewhat account for the defection from mainstream Protestant churches is shown to be an impossible hypothesis – as the authors note, “the gains of other Protestant denominations come nowhere close to offsetting the losses among the former mainstream Protestant denominations.”¹ Moreover, the perspective some sociologists have advanced that there is a large group of Canadians waiting to be recruited by churches or other religious institutions is found to be wanting, as the authors’ emphasis on the character of Canada’s “No Religion” population illustrates. Again, the distinction made in the book between de-churched and non-churched Canadians draws our attention to the fact that more and more Canadians have never been introduced to church life, and therefore, have little idea about what churches as institutions contribute to Canadian society. Further reflective of the change in Christianity’s place in Canada, a group of Canadians that has been underrepresented in the scholarship are those stating that they are simply “Christian,” without specifying a denomination – as the authors note, this group is now larger than several major Protestant denominations, and through the book’s sophisticated analysis of census data from 1981 (when these simply “Christian” respondents first appeared on the census) to 2011, the authors demonstrate that they are demographically similar to the “No Religion” population.

It would have been beneficial to enliven some of the quantitative data in other chapters as the authors did in their analysis of Québec’s Roman Catholics, where their use of the interview research done by Jacques Grand-Maison and Solange Lefebvre gave a much clearer picture of how a “cultural Catholicism” lingers in the province.² In their strict focus on quantitative data, some such examples that clarified their interpretations are absent in other parts

¹ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 85. Clarke and Macdonald are primarily responding, in this example, to the work of sociologist Reginald Bibby.

² *Ibid*, 154.

of the book – for example, an engagement with theories on consumerism’s relationship to the growth in people stating they have “No Religion” are reserved for the book’s conclusion, where the authors note, disappointingly tersely, that “[t]he Canadian cultural ethos of consumerism favors No Religion, and so it is no surprise that No Religion remains a growing and robust trend.”³ But such concerns are rather peripheral in comparison to the book’s achievements: for the historian of twentieth- and twenty-first century Canada, the data and analysis available in *Leaving Christianity* is indispensable.

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³ Ibid, 233.