

Loosening our Bible Belt:

The Changing Faith of Alberta

By Graham Chandler

Each Sunday morning, I look out my window at the church across the street and see faces I never see on Saturdays. Ample black women in hats. Ethiopian couples. Silver-haired pairs inching out of late 1980s Buicks and Cadillacs. The Saturday scene is cool, baggy-panted skateboarders clacking by, young singles trailing their Labradors across the park, and yuppie couples parking Ford Explorers to breakfast at the Galaxie Diner.

Fifty years ago, Sunday morning faces would have been no different from Saturday's. In 1951, 92 per cent of Albertans proudly stated they belonged to one of the Catholic or Protestant faiths. By 1991, that figure had dropped to 74 per cent. In fact, official figures from the last full census in Canada show that 19.7 per cent of Albertans now claim no religious affiliation at all, a fig-



ure fully 58 per cent higher than the 12.5 per cent nationwide. In the land reputed to be the centre of Bible thumping in Canada, what in God's name is going on?

From creation to cremation, Albertans are rethinking their religions.

Ask any Canadian where the Bible belt of Canada is, and the common reply will be "that's easy: Alberta." But the statistics tell us something quite different. In every census since the 1930s in which the question was asked, we've had the second highest percentage of the responses "no religion," "no religious preference" or "no religious affiliation" of any province in Canada, second only to our neighbours to the west. There's no record of Albertans being any more evangelical than anywhere else in the country, especially

in B.C.'s Okanagan and lower mainland—or even in urban Toronto! Arguably, the Bible belt of Canada is to be found in the Atlantic provinces.

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Alberta’s reputation has a series of roots. According to David Marshall, history of religion professor at the University of Calgary and co-author of an upcoming book, *Prophetic Voices: A History of Religion in Alberta*, many of our immigrants in the early 20th century were Americans with evangelical leanings, including the Mormons. Because they couldn’t identify with Canadian religious groups such as the Methodists or Lutherans, they clustered into sectarian religions. Being poor, they attended the rural Bible colleges.

“It was sort of a frontier thing,” says Marshall, “a new setting for newly created churches.” The institutions of Bible colleges and radio evangelism in Alberta, says Marshall, created a foundation stronger than elsewhere in Canada.

But not until premiers Aberhart and Manning hit the political stage was there any special reason why Alberta should have been painted religious. Says Marshall, “It’s our political tradition that fed the Bible belt label.”

William “Bible Bill” Aberhart, founder of the Social Credit party, was Alberta’s premier from 1935 to 1943, and Ernest Manning, his successor, until 1968. Before taking the torch, Manning studied at Aberhart’s Prophetic Bible Institute in Calgary and served as a member of his cabinet.

Aberhart, while an Albertan through and through, broadcast his “Back to the Bible Hour” radio show from coast to coast. “Most Albertans didn’t embrace Aberhart’s religious teachings,” says Marshall. “He was just a good politician. But the rest of Canada saw his religion first.”

Generally, there’s a difference between Canada and the U.S. when it comes to separating religion from politics in

a leader, asserts Marshall. It’s no threat to most Americans that George W. Bush’s attorney general, John Ashcroft, holds daily bible study classes in his office or that Jimmy Carter was a Baptist preacher. “In Alberta we tend to ignore that, as does the U.S.,” says Marshall, “but the rest of Canada doesn’t. [Most] Canadians like to keep them separate.”

In Marshall’s view, the same phenomenon accounted for the polarization of the Alliance party vote in the last federal election. “I don’t think Albertans embrace Stockwell Day’s religiosity. They’ll accept him if he’s deemed competent. The rest of Canada probably only saw his religion, but to Albertans he’s a politician.”

BIBLE BELT STEREOTYPE NOTWITHSTANDING, MOST

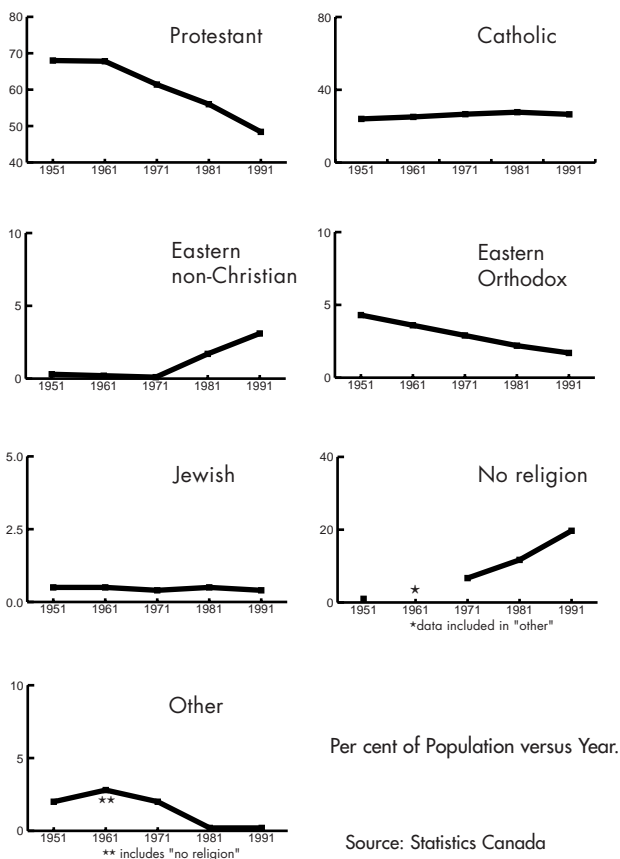
Albertans still profess to belong to a major religious group or church (see graphs page 32). At the last census, 48 per cent belonged to one of the Protestant faiths and 26 per cent called themselves Catholics. Apart from the 20 per cent who reported no religious affiliation, the remainder were attached to Eastern non-Christian (Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Buddhist making up 3.1 per cent), Jewish, Eastern Orthodox and para-religious groups.

These numbers aren’t the same as 50 years ago. In 1951, 68 per cent counted themselves Protestant; 24 per cent, Catholic; 1 per cent, no religion; and 7 per cent, the remainder. Over the intervening years, the percentage of Catholics has remained relatively steady, the Protestants seem to have lost considerable ground to the “no religious affiliation” set, and the percentage of Eastern non-Christians has grown from 0.3 per cent to 3.1 per cent.

Some stick with old-time religions because of family

Actual church attendance figures are not reliable, but it appears we're not losing faith—just interest in going to church.

Changes in Religious affiliation, 1951-1991



tradition or fear. Like my Baptist friend from Texas once told me, "I believe, just in case." But what about the 20 per cent who have drifted? "First of all," says Marshall, "we need to ask, 'What do we mean by "no religion"?' We need to be cautious in interpreting these numbers; it doesn't mean they're all atheist." Indeed, of those in the "no religious affiliation" category of the last census, fewer than 1 per cent claimed to be atheist or agnostic—so they're not non-believers. "They're just saying 'I'm not

adhering to a traditional faith,'" says Marshall. "If you're a child of the sixties, you might embrace Buddhism or nature or whatever."

Patrick Carmichael is a child of the sixties, and grew up attending the Anglican Church. "I drifted away from regular church attendance after I left home," says the historical novelist, who lives in Calgary. "I have nothing against organized religion—belief in a power greater than ourselves is good, while intolerance, divisiveness and hypocrisy happen with or without religion—but it is difficult for me to embrace all the required beliefs of any one denomination."

Like Carmichael, most Albertans appear not to be losing faith—just losing faith in organized religions. University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby has conducted cross-Canada surveys of social trends, including religious beliefs and activities, at five-year intervals since 1975. He hasn't broken down the data by province, but on a national scale, he's found Roman Catholic church attendance at weekly services fell sharply between 1975 and 1995, from 45 per cent to 25 per cent. Most of the drop has been in Quebec; but even outside Quebec attendance has fallen from 41 per cent to 38 per cent. Mainstream Protestant groups have fared even worse: church attendance dropped from 23 per cent to 19 per cent across the country. He noted also that what he calls the conservative Protestant groups (such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Alliance [Church] and Mennonites) increased their attendance from 40 per cent to 64 per cent.

CURIOUS ABOUT THE DECLINE IN THE ATTRACTION OF the churches, especially among the Protestant flocks, I went to visit the Very Reverend Bill Phipps, who was the outspoken moderator of the United Church of Canada from 1997 to 2000. Phipps talks straight up and likes to tackle issues head-on. In one of his first interviews as moderator, he told the *Ottawa Citizen* that hell doesn't exist, Jesus never ascended into heaven, nor is Jesus God.

“The never-ending human quest for meaning ensures religion’s viability.” —Reginald Bibby, sociologist, University of Lethbridge

Phipps’s office is attached to the United Church in the plush and pleasant Calgary neighbourhood of Scarboro, and I begin by asking him about the public’s response to what some considered statements of heresy.

“It was wonderful,” he says. “It got people everywhere talking theology—in bars, gyms, golf courses. It made the headlines. But I also talked about faith in the economy and social justice too. It put another face on Christianity, showed that we weren’t out to convert, but to understand other religious traditions; it was a fresh message.”

I thought it might be more than a fresh message that’s needed to warm the pews again. Why are the churches being abandoned? “The church is no longer the centre of socializing,” replies Phipps. “When I was a teenager, that’s where you went to meet girls, to form a hockey team. That’s no longer the case. The church is not the only game in town. In my lifetime, I’ve seen the church going from the centre of power to the sidelines. It used to be the moderator could phone the prime minister and have lunch.”

Phipps believes the churches face similar problems all across the country, if not much of the world. “The whole world is in a post-Christian state,” he says. “And Alberta is much younger and more secular, so you could say we have less of a religious tradition to hold on to. But like most of the Western world, Albertans live in a society that’s consumer- and wealth-oriented.” He emphasizes his point with raised palms. “Some say the relative wealth of our province can cloud one’s vision. Wealth gives you more choice for your time: golfing, skiing, travelling. We’re bombarded with things, it’s a systemic evil—an old human nature survival response: ‘I’ve got to get all I can because it might run out.’ The more we have, the more we think we need.”

“Part of my understanding is that people know deep down something is dreadfully wrong,” he continues. “There’s a spiritual crisis and they know it. Why is there so much interest in spirituality? It’s because people know there’s a spiritual soul. They know there’s a dis-ease within themselves and society.”

Phipps thinks part of the problem stems from Canadians’ image of Christianity: the right-wing conservatism of a Stockwell Day. “His style is more what the non-church people see as the Christian faith. I say no. The United Church supports gay rights, abortion, we’re not in the pockets of corporations, we care about social justice. The United Church was deeply involved in the beginnings of the labour movement, welfare, medicare, workers’ compensation, even the abolition of slavery. And we welcome scientific knowledge.”

But there are drawbacks to modernizing. It can turn off the traditionalists, the ones who remain with the church precisely because of its old customs and doctrine. “The churches are in a bind,” says Marshall. “In trying to be socially relevant they risk becoming irrelevant, risk losing the timeless traditions. How they square that circle is a major problem. Maybe the dismantling of the welfare system will give them back that role.”

ALL WHO CLAIM TO HAVE TURNED AWAY FROM THE church haven’t done so entirely. Bibby has found that people who carry the “none” label tend to wear it for fairly short periods of time. They’re usually younger people who claim no religious ties until they marry, have children and experience death in the family. “I was married in a church and I’ll be buried in one too,” says Carmichael, “because I have spiritual beliefs and churches are the holders of these traditions.” Bibby says that as most people move through these stages, they reaffiliate, typically identifying with the religion of their parents. Statistics tend to corroborate this argument. According to Statistics Canada, in Alberta, 45 per cent of the “nones” are aged 24 or under and 84 per cent are under 45. Across Canada, 35 per cent of them were unmarried and 46 per cent had no children.

But how do we explain the high “no religious preference” percentages in Alberta?

“Migrations,” answers Marshall. “When you move away from home, [of] what do you divest yourself?”

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Family, church and so on. There's a relation between mobility and a high degree of 'no religion'."

Many feel liberated, others try to look for an alternative, a new atman. Professor Irving Hexham sees many in his religious studies classes at the U of C. "It's not clear from students where they are going," he says. "It's not the Hinduism or Buddhism of the 1960s and '70s any more. Cults and New Age religions aren't making great inroads either. There seems to be a lot of neo-paganism and interest in witchcraft like the Wiccans around. Some of it is connected with the feminist movement. Students are buying into this, even though they don't seem too well-informed about it."

Bibby thinks Canadians are trying to figure life out. Many feel that what they are doing with their lives doesn't seem to have much significance. They still pursue efforts to deal with mystery and meaning. "The quest for spirituality continues," he writes. "But relatively few appear to be turning to traditional religion."

Bibby sees it as a paradox that religion is on the decline just when (he figures) it shouldn't be—judging by people's fascination with the supernatural and their wanting to find out how to make life more meaningful. It's as if, just when Canadians are craving hamburgers, Wendy's, McDonald's and Burger King were all to fold at the same time, he says. To carry the analogy a step further, one might argue that perhaps it's not hamburgers Canadians crave, but something more satisfying and meaningful. Perhaps people today are smarter, better educated, more rational, and realize that belonging to outdated organized religion doesn't connect them with the spirituality some of them need.

THE DOUBLE FRONT-DRIVE GARAGE AND BAY WINDOW OF Sami Elkurdy's spacious bungalow in southwest Calgary is little different from others in the city's fresh new developments. Indeed, the fine Egyptian carpets into which my shoeless feet sink as he invites me into his living room might well adorn other bungalows too. But the social

routine in this home is different: his wife doesn't join us. It's no slight; I am a man from outside her immediate family.

Tall and effusive, Elkurdy is a devout Muslim. He calls himself a layman but has been nominated by Calgary's Sunni Muslim community to give lessons in Islam as a way of life, and he's graciously offered to chat with me about the sorts of challenges Muslims face in Alberta. The first of those challenges reveals the reason he was nominated: religious instruction. "We have only one imam here in the southwest mosque," he explains. "So we have a consultation process as to who would be best to help teach what the Koran says."

Most issues facing Muslims and other minority religions in the province are rooted in their small numbers. And divisions brought from home countries don't help, either. "We're disorganized here," says Elkurdy. "There are four groups: Sunnis, Shi'ites and two other flavours, all split by our interpretation of the Koran. Each has its own community."

And their own communities aren't where most Alberta Muslims work. Elkurdy, a senior geophysicist for a large international oil and gas firm, talks of problems Muslims encounter in the workplace. Their religion calls for prayer five times a day. "The before sunrise and after sunset prayers are no problem," he says. "We can do those at home. But in an office environment, it's difficult. I just find myself a private corner and do it by myself." Elkurdy is quick to point out that no one has ever taken offence at this. "Calgarians have never denigrated us, but many Muslims here skip the prayers due to embarrassment."

There's no doubt Islamic religious teachings clash with western morals and ideas. Koranic laws are seen as more restrictive than Alberta society with regard to homosexuality, extramarital sexuality and feminism. Muslims are not only prohibited from drinking alcohol, but shouldn't even be in a room where it is served. "I have to do business lunches sometimes," says Elkurdy. "After that I have to ask repentance. And for employee farewell lunches, I

“The churches are in a bind. In trying to be socially relevant they risk becoming irrelevant.” —David Marshall, history of religion professor, University of Calgary

sign the card and explain to them I can't attend the lunch.” There are other social issues too, many of them a part of everyday routines. Like shaking hands. “Muslim men aren't permitted to do this with women outside their families,” he explains. “But sometimes, again for business reasons, I must shake a woman's hand.”

The clash extends to Albertans' perception of Muslims' treatment of women. “That's another problem we face here,” says Elkurdy. “We want to live a life where the man is head of the family. Women have a more vital role than going out and making money: raising children. It's women's role [in] society. Mother-care takes precedence over daycare. Some view it as 'locking up my wife'; that's crazy. We're not that absurd.”

To raise those children in Alberta, Muslim wives face even bigger challenges. In high school there's peer pressure to date, and teenagers are exposed to temptations their religion tells them are immoral. How do kids deal with all of this? “That's clearly our biggest problem,” says Elkurdy. “They face so much—for example, other kids saying 'What's this prayer thing?' Kids don't know how to respond—they try to hide their religion.” Elkurdy says the Muslim community asks school principals to allow time and a room for Friday prayers.

Do they fear for their children? “Absolutely,” replies Elkurdy. “Communication with parents is being reduced to mundane things. Bit by bit, our children are losing their Islamic identity. Efforts to counter this by parents and community are sparse. We want to continue with our schools. We have one Islamic school that goes up to Grade 6, in the northeast. But there is only one—therefore, lots of long distance busing. We're not building Islamic schools fast enough; there's been a tenfold growth in our community here over the last five years. So I try to make up with Islamic teachings at home. With my grandchildren, it will be a bigger problem. The younger ones don't speak Arabic (the language of the Koran). The real challenge is with generations coming.”

“We often face discrimination because of our Arabic-

sounding names too, but perhaps this isn't really a religious issue. We're prejudged; the media has to spread the right word for Muslims. Maybe we should be more organized, like other (minority) communities—they hire amongst themselves—but that can hurt Canadian society. But society has been accepting us here. For example, stores have adapted and some now offer things like halal meats.”

ALBERTA SOCIETY'S READY TOLERANCE FOR MINORITY religions such as Islam may in fact prove to be their biggest danger. Marshall says what's facing them is acceptance and intermarriage. “There are big challenges for second and third generations,” he says. “As they intermarry, what happens to their kids? They will face the same dilemma as North American Judaism. Unless they have enough numbers, it'll be hard for them to hold on.”

Bibby concurs as he predicts where faith in Canada might be heading. “The smaller faith groups will find it difficult to sustain their numbers,” he writes. “By the year 2015, we will be looking at a drastically revised Canadian religious landscape. Roman Catholics will remain prominent nationally. Mainliners will be on the sidelines. The formerly marginalized conservative Protestants will form the new mainline.” He feels the decline of organized religion in the last half of the 20th century will be socially tragic if equally effective sources of civility and spirituality fail to appear. “But,” he adds, “the never-ending human quest for meaning ensures religion's viability.”

What then might become of the church on my corner? Whatever it will be, it won't be lacking in spirit. Phipps sums it up, “Albertans always rally to a cause; it's part of that entrepreneurial spirit of ours.”

Calgary writer **Graham Chandler** holds a doctorate from the University of London. His articles have appeared in numerous national and international magazines. His article on the Alberta family, “Father No Longer Knows Best,” appeared in our Nov/Dec 2000 issue.