

Poisoning the Student Mind?: The Student Christian Movement at the University of Toronto, 1920-1965

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Article abstract

Historians have documented the interlocking nature of student culture and religious life in nineteenth-century higher education; in contrast, after World War I religion has generally been ignored, or portrayed as disappearing from the academy and broader life. An investigation of the Student Christian Movement, however, suggests that by combining liberal theology with left-wing politics it became an influential religious force on campus well into the twentieth century. Reflecting a fairly homogeneous student population, supported by faculty and the administration, and articulating the temper of the times, the SCM served as the public voice of religion on campus. Only in the 1950s, as new social phenomena emerged, such as divisions among Protestants, the rise of agnosticism, and the creation of secular political organisations, did the SCM begin to lose its cultural authority on campus.

Poisoning the Student Mind?: The Student Christian Movement at the University of Toronto, 1920-1965

CATHERINE GIDNEY

STUDENT CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS LIFE CONSTITUTED INTERLOCKING FEATURES of nineteenth-century higher education. Historians have documented the influence of denominational colleges where Christian presidents and professors interwove intellectual inquiry with Christian character formation, and they have demonstrated that students regularly attended chapel service and participated in religious clubs.¹ But beyond that, religion has been either ignored or portrayed as disappearing from the academy and broader society after World War I.² Two issues in particular have been identified as ushering in our own secular century: the development of a vitiated liberal faith, which emphasised social action at

I would like to thank Marguerite Van Die, Mike Dawson, Lara Campbell and the paper's anonymous readers for their helpful comments and encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge the funding received from Queen's University's School of Graduate Studies and Research.

- 1 Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991); A.B. McKillop, *Matters of Mind: The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (Toronto, 1994); Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1919* (Montreal and Kingston, 1989).
- 2 The exceptions are Paul Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada During the Thirties* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990), and Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1941* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996), who build on the pre-1914 work of historians such as Van Die in *An Evangelical Mind* and Phyllis D. Airhart in *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, 1992) to suggest that religion remained a strong societal influence until the Second World War.
- 3 David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto, 1992); McKillop, *Matters of Mind*. Doug Owsram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto, 1996), argues on the one hand that there was an intellectual secularization after 1920 and on the other that Christian character formation remained a role of the university until the 1950s; see esp. 177-78. George M. Marsden has recently argued that in the United States religion became increasingly peripheral to student culture in the twentieth century; see *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York, 1994).

the expense of doctrine, and the growth of the university as a research institution, embodying objective, scientific ideals.³

An investigation of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) at the University of Toronto, however, suggests that with its combination of liberal theology and left-wing politics the SCM became an influential religious force on the university campus well into the twentieth century.⁴ Indeed, after World War I, the SCM developed into a strong and vital movement among students in the Faculty of Arts and Science. Drawing on a tradition of worship and prayer within university circles, as well as on the evangelical heritage of both social service and political activism, students in the SCM set their sights on both the Christianization and democratization of society. Thus by fusing faith and reform, they created a Christian student movement capable of addressing twentieth-century concerns.

How is it, then, that we generally consider the university today to be a secular space? Much of the answer lies with the changing role of Protestantism in public culture. As J.W. Grant contends, after the First World War “the churches retained their customary place in the center of Canadian community life.”⁵ The fairly homogeneous student population on the University of Toronto campus, which was similar to that within the mainline churches, provided the SCM with a sense that it spoke for the campus community.⁶ Support from university administrators and senior faculty encouraged the movement in this belief. Although more radical than the mainline churches, on campus the SCM reflected Protestants’ sense of themselves as setting the “social and moral norms” of society.⁷ While maintaining into the post-World War II period this sense of being a leading Protestant voice, the SCM also began to face a number of challenges to its position. I will argue that the process of secularization has less to do with theological changes to mainstream Protestantism at the turn

4 There is no comprehensive study of the SCM in Canada or at the University of Toronto. For various aspects of the movement see Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto, 1971); Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*; Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto, 1987); Donald L. Kirkey, “‘Building the City of God’: The Founding of the Student Christian Movement of Canada,” MA thesis, McMaster University, 1983. Two monographs offer useful but brief accounts of the national movement: Margaret Beattie, *A Brief History of the Student Christian Movement, 1921-1974* (Toronto, 1975); Ernest A. Dale, *Twenty-One Years A-Building: A Short Account of the Student Christian Movement of Canada, 1920-1941* (Toronto, n.d.).

5 J.W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, 1988), 131.

6 Axelrod, *Making of a Middle Class*, 24, 31, argues that nearly 75 per cent of all students at the University of Toronto were Protestant: 65.9 per cent belonged to the three mainline denominations – Anglican, United Church, and Presbyterian – and 9.5 per cent were other types of Protestants. Most students were also middle class.

7 Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 176. Robert Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (New Jersey, 1994), 37-38, argues that mainline Protestant churches in the United States shaped American values into the 1950s.

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of the century than with Protestantism's loss of cultural authority, as a variety of new social conditions emerged in the 1950s.

Founded in 1920, the SCM was the outcome of student discontent over several issues. The YMCA and YWCA had been the focus of Christian student activity before the establishment of the SCM. But during the war, tension between students and the Associations began to develop; the Y's were criticized for being too evangelical, uninterested in modern economic and social problems, and unconcerned with student issues.⁸ This tension was exacerbated by student veterans' disillusionment with the churches' support of the war and the lack of democracy at home.⁹ Students wanted a co-educational, democratic, independent national youth movement.¹⁰ Discontent with traditional religious institutions, then, converged with currents of the social gospel movement and broader post-war desires for the reconstruction of society.¹¹

The SCM at the University of Toronto had its main headquarters in Hart House, where the general-secretary, an ordained minister, had his office. Barred from entering that male bastion, female students had their own woman's secretary, whose office was located in the Household Science building. There were also separate organisations for students in arts and professional faculties. These locals met in a unified University of Toronto council, the executive of which came most consistently, from the mid-1930s on, from Victoria, University, and Trinity Colleges, Engineering, Medicine, and Theology. Local units across Canada, including the University of Toronto SCM, were united in a National Council. The Canadian movement had ties to the British SCM, which had evolved in the late nineteenth century as an umbrella organisation for the Student Volunteer Missionary Union and the British Colleges Christian Union, as well as to the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva.¹² The Canadian, British,

8 Editorial, "Why a 'National' SCM," *Varsity*, 9 November 1923, p.2; R.B. Ferris, "The Student Christian Association," *University of Toronto Monthly* 24 (November 1923): 72-73; University of Toronto Archives [hereafter UTA], Hart House Records, A73-0050, B68, File SCM, letter to Dick from J. Burgon Bickersteth, 4 March 1957; Diana Pederson, "'The Call to Service': The YMCA and the Canadian College Woman, 1886-1920," in *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education*. Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds. (Kingston and Montreal, 1989), 188, 203, 205-206.

9 United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives [hereafter UCA/VUA], SCM, B84-11, File 21st Anniversary Committee, J.D. Ketchum, "After Twenty Years," c. 1941; Dale, *Twenty-One Years A-Building*, 5; Pederson, "'The Call to Service,'" 206.

10 Ferris, "The Student Christian Association", 72-73; Beattie, *Brief History of the SCM*, 7; Kirkey, "'Building the City of God,'" 77, 82, 86, 91-92.

11 Allan, *The Social Passion*, 213-18, illustrates the links between the SCM, the social gospel, and progressive politics, especially the politics of the agrarian party in the post-war period.

12 Steve Bruce, *Firm in the Faith* (Aldershot, 1984), 68. As is the situation for Canada, there is no comprehensive study of the SCM in Britain. For the origins of the movement see Tissington Tatlow, *The Story of the Student Christian Movement of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1933). For a useful insider's perspective see David L. Edwards, *Movements into Tomorrow: A Sketch of the British SCM* (London, 1960).

and world organisations sent out a veritable procession of speakers and visiting secretaries, thus connecting isolated locals into a national, and ultimately, world movement.¹³

From the time of its founding, the SCM faced disapproval from evangelical students, as well as Y and business leaders. In the 1920s, as Protestantism became fragmented by fundamentalist attempts to affirm a traditional faith, and by modernist attempts to accommodate the current culture, the SCM faced attacks for being “modernistic” and for de-emphasizing doctrine.¹⁴ In the 1930s the movement was criticised by the same groups but this time for being radical, and accused of potential communist ties, a fear reinforced by continued RCMP surveillance of the movement.¹⁵ Such critics charged that the SCM was “poisoning the student mind,” a notion the SCM gleefully developed into a satirical theme song.¹⁶ Yet at the University of Toronto the SCM, as at other universities across Canada, was strongly supported by students, faculty, and the administration.¹⁷ Campus newspapers regularly reported and discussed SCM events until the mid-1950s. SCMs themselves were a presence on campus, participating in athletics, student councils, and left-wing politics.¹⁸ Faculty and members of the administration formed an Advisory Board early in the SCM’s existence in order to aid with finances and provide advice, thus conferring on it the necessary respectability and backing to sustain a long-term national movement. Members during the period 1920 to 1965 included Presidents Falconer, Cody, and Smith, and in 1960, Claude Bissell became an honorary member. Other members included the various wardens of Hart House, for example J.B. Bickersteth, Nicholas Ignatieff, and Joseph McCulley, along with Deans of Women such as Jessie Macpherson of Victoria College and Mary Innis of University College.

13 Beattie, *Brief History of the SCM*, 10-11.

14 UTA, Office of the Registrar, 73-0051, Series V, Clippings, B240, File Intercollegiate Christian Union 1929-39, “New Movement is Fundamentalist Says Organizer,” *Varsity*, 18 January 1929.

15 “SCM Meetings Attract Reds,” *Varsity* (18 January 1932): 1; UCA/VUA, President’s Office, 89.130v, B53-4, Clipping, “Cody Denies Charge of Communism,” *Varsity*, 5 October 1938; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B16, File Communism, Reverend G. MacGregor Grant to Marjorie Peck, U of T SCM, 27 January 1949. The SCM was one of many left-wing groups under police surveillance on Canadian campuses in the interwar years. See S.R. Hewitt, “Spying 101: The RCMP’s Secret Activities at the University of Saskatchewan, 1920-1971,” *Saskatchewan History* (Fall 1995): 24.

16 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-10, File 13, Murray Brooks, “The Student Christian Movement of Canada, 1927-1938,” 17 January 1953; Beattie, *Brief History of the SCM*, 134.

17 Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 130.

18 For example, see “Marion Hilliard Awarded Moss Scholarship,” *University of Toronto Monthly* 25 (Nov 1924): 55; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B75, File SCM, SCM, U of T, Spring-Term Newsletter (April 1959); Sheila MacLeod, “SCM on Campus and in the World,” *The Strand* 21 (November 1963).

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Participation in the SCM or SCM events hovered at around four to eight per cent of the student body from 1920 to 1965.¹⁹ Lest the reader consider this a somewhat trivial figure, it is worth pointing out that in the 1930s student involvement in reform-oriented activities on Canadian campuses was around five per cent. Similarly, in the late 1960s, at the height of the student movement, activists on American campuses were considered to constitute less than five per cent of the student population while those more moderately involved constituted only 20 per cent.²⁰ The fairly substantial rate of participation in the SCM arose from the movement's ability to address student concerns. The SCM held, for example, frosh receptions, teas, supper parties, chapel services, addresses and open forums, retreats and small missions, national and international speakers, and local, national and world conferences.²¹ But what drew students particularly was the connection between faith and social reform, a relationship that may best be examined through the movement's many study groups, lectures, service activities, and social action programmes.

During the inter-war years, the SCM reflected the more radical elements of the social gospel movement. Its concern to build a new Christian order through following the teachings of Jesus was evident in conference themes such as "Building the City of God," and in lectures such as that by Salem Bland in 1923 which called for the elimination of capitalism and the ethic of self-interest.²² Discussion groups in the 1920s on industrial unrest and internationalism, and in the 1930s on war and peace, or the threat of fascism, illustrate the continuing strength of this perceived need to re-order society.²³ This desire for reform was reinforced by the Sharman method of Bible study which, unlike the more cautious investigations supervised by Y leaders, let students explore and inter-

19 Report of the Warden of Hart House, *Annual Report of the President of the University of Toronto* [hereafter *President's Report*], 1929-30, p.85; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin*, May 1940; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B15, File 1963-4, SCM President's Report, U of T, 1963-64.

20 For the 1930s see Paul Axelrod, "The Student Movement of the 1930s," in *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, 222. For the 1960s see Kenneth Keniston, *Young Radicals: Notes on Committed Youth* (New York, 1968), 298; Leonard L. Baird, "Who Protests: A Study of Student Activists," in *Protest! Student Activism in America*. Julian Foster and Durward Long, eds. (New York, 1970), 124.

21 See for example "Frosh Reception in Hart House," *Varsity*, 9 October 1923, p.1; "UC," *Varsity*, 22 October 1923, p.4; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B42, File SCM Printed Material, UC Women's SCA, U of T, Programme 1931-32; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B42, File SCM, Printed Material, SCM, U of T, 1932-33; UTA, SCM, B79-0050, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin* (November 1939); Report of Acting Warden, *President's Report*, 1941-42, p.61.

22 Beattie, *Brief History of the SCM*, 74; "Dr. Bland Addresses SCM," *Varsity*, 10 December 1923, p.4.

23 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-35, SCM Handbook, "Our History," c. 1963; Ferris, "The Student Christian Association," 73-4; Editorial, "Internationalism," *Varsity*, 17 October 1923, p.2; "SCA Corner," *Varsity*, 15 October 1931; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin*, November 1939; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin*, May 1940.

pret the Bible for themselves. In particular, the method concentrated on the life of Jesus and applications of His teachings, thus encouraging young Christians to investigate the social conditions of their own society and determine whether it was fulfilling its potential.²⁴

The late 1920s and early 1930s represent a more conservative period for the SCM, as the student veterans graduated and the social gospel movement began to fragment.²⁵ For instance, study groups in the late 1920s and early 1930s emphasised aspects of the life of Christ or mission study. Yet during the 1930s students came not only to re-emphasise the founding vision of the SCM – the need to re-order society – but also to engage increasingly in social activism. In the 1920s, students learned about social conditions through service – by working in the university settlement, for example, or the downtown boy’s club.²⁶ This service component continued in the 1930s with events such as canvasses for used clothing to aid the unemployed.²⁷ But students also became more activist.²⁸ As one contemporary contended, “the challenge of the left to the Church became focused through the SCM” in the 1930s.²⁹ The SCM often acted as a student branch for the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, a left-wing Christian think-tank whose members contributed to the League for Social Reconstruction and the CCF. Concerned with the increasingly appalling social conditions caused by the Depression, such organisations sought a more ethical and democratic society based on co-operation.³⁰ Often their meetings attracted “some of Toronto’s ‘Reds,’” fuelling perceptions of communist links to the SCM.³¹

24 Beattie, *Brief History of the SCM*, 75-77; Judith Fingard, “College, Career, and Community: Dalhousie Coeds, 1911-1921,” in *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, notes a similar dominance of the social gospel, the SCM, and the Sharman method among Protestant students at Dalhousie.

25 See Allan, *The Social Passion*, 17; Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 122, 130; UCA/VUA, Dean of Women, Dean’s Reports, 90.064v, B3, File 9, Report to Committee of Management, 13 January 1927; Dale, *Twenty-One Years A-Building*, 23-24; James M. Pitsula, “Student Life at Regina College in the 1920s,” in *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, 127, notes a similar emphasis on personal development in the mid-1920s at Regina College.

26 “Varsity Y Still Does Good Work,” *University of Toronto Monthly* 20, 7 (April 1920): 261-62.

27 “Bulletin Board,” *Varsity*, 15 October 1931, p.4; “Students Asked to Aid Destitute,” *Varsity*, 3 November 1931, p.1; Letter to editor, *Varsity*, 29 January 1937, p.2.

28 For the purposes of this paper social reform includes both service activities and political activism. The former consisted mainly of charity work whereas, as activists, students united to address political or moral issues in a variety of ways, ranging from demonstrations to expressions of concern. See Keniston, *Young Radicals*, 300.

29 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-35, SCM Handbook, “Our History,” c.1963.

30 Michiel Horn, *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada, 1930-1942* (Toronto, 1980), 202-3.

31 “SCM Meetings Attract Reds,” *Varsity*, 18 January 1932, p.1; Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 133. Such perceptions had some validity. Joan Sangster, in *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto, 1989), 152, a study of socialist and communist women, relates that one young woman first learned about communism by meeting communists in the McGill SCM.

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By the early 1930s, the SCM was particularly involved in social action centred around disarmament, and in introducing university students to the peace movement. For example, the Student Christian Movement of Canada (SCMC) presented a petition, signed by 10,000 students, to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett asking the Canadian government to work for a reduction of armaments at the upcoming Geneva disarmament conference in 1932.³² Three years later, the SCMC established its position on war and peace, recommending the renunciation of war and encouraging social action through co-operation with League of Nation Societies, protests against militarism, and Armistice Day services emphasizing peace instead of war. The Toronto branch quickly inaugurated a peace service that attracted a large crowd of 700, much to the consternation of the Alumni Association, which had always sponsored the traditional Armistice Day service.³³

Historians of religion have tended to view the late 1920s to the Second World War as a period of religious conservatism, when piety and personal evangelism were emphasized within the churches.³⁴ While this argument appears to hold true for the SCM for a short period in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it usually spoke with a radical voice during the inter-war period. Indeed throughout these years the SCM generally represented an oppositional force to the conventional church position. While following the general social pattern toward personal religion in the late 1920s, it was more progressive than the churches in the early 1920s and again in the 1930s when it formed part of the radical wing of the social gospel movement. But whether the movement was more theologically conservative and service oriented or more liberal and activist, the two central components within the movement – faith and reform – were always entwined. It is this union which made the SCM at the University of Toronto not so much an oppositional force as an influential voice on campus.

During the inter-war years, in sum, the SCM served as the public voice of religion in campus life. To the extent that Christian practice and belief was a vital force within the walls of the university, it was the SCM, supported by the administration and faculty, which provided the leadership that both crystalized consensus about the form and content of Christianity and that gave unity to religious expression on campus. In part, this outcome was because of the religious composition of the student body itself. Nearly 75 per cent were Protestant, and

32 UTA, Office of the President, A67-0007, B130, File Brooks, Murray Brooks, General-Secretary SCMC, to Falconer, 14 October 1931; Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 156.

33 Editorial, *Varsity*, 10 November 1936, p.2; Letter to editor, *Varsity*, 10 November 1936, p.2; Beattie, *A Brief History of the SCM*, 21; Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 156-57.

34 N.K. Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties: Some Aspects of the Canadian Experience," in *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada*. D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort, eds. (Vancouver, 1980), 125-40; Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 249.

66 per cent belonged to the three mainline Protestant denominations – Anglican, United Church and Presbyterian – denominations which substantially shared in a common social outlook.³⁵ Yet this was not the only reason for SCM leadership: the SCM also reflected the particular temper of the times and the concerns of students that reached beyond the bounds of personal piety into the larger world of student activism.

During World War II, tensions increasingly developed within the movement over a perceived emphasis on the role of social reform at the expense of personal piety. In the 1941 commemorative history of the movement, the author, a University of Toronto professor, wondered whether there was not an element of “flabbiness on the side of personal devotion and self discipline” in the SCM.³⁶ Such concerns about the lack of worship were part of a general theological rethinking of liberal Protestantism that had begun during the inter-war years. World War I, the Depression, and then the Second World War all called into question ideas such as God’s immanence, the goodness of man, and progress. Many theologians attempted to balance traditional faith with more modern tenets. Notions of progress and optimism were displaced with concepts such as God’s other-worldliness, Jesus’ divinity, and a renewed emphasis on the role of sin.³⁷ As a result the SCM developed a strong focus on faith and religion in study group and lecture topics. Social issues did not disappear: topics on peace or democracy, for example, could still be found. But SCM Bulletins reveal that in discussion groups an interest in Bible study, church doctrine, and aspects of the life of Jesus predominated.³⁸

Similarly, student action followed the trend toward personal religion, with the political activism of the 1930s replaced by more service-oriented activities. The SCM did engage in some limited political activism: for example, it protested the repatriation of Japanese-Canadians during World War II and petitioned the Ontario Government to adopt the Dominion Provincial Youth Training Plan so as to provide more scholarships for Ontario youth.³⁹ New forms of activism were also developed. The SCM summer work camps fell somewhere

35 See note 6.

36 Dale, *Twenty-One Years A-Building*, 32.

37 This rethinking of theology was influenced by theologians such as Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr who attacked liberal Protestantism. However, theological liberalism remained central to the new theology. See John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through its Development* (United States, 1954), 259, 268-69, 275; Catherine Gidney, “Richard Roberts: A Case Study in Liberal Protestantism in Canada During the Interwar Years,” *1995 Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History*: 81-100.

38 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin*, May 1941; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B42, File SCM Printed Material, Pamphlet, SCM in U of T, April 1943; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File Archives 1944-45, *News of the SCM*, U of T, June 1945.

39 Beattie, *A Brief History of the SCM*, 45-48; “SCM Petitions Province to Combine with Dominion in Granting Scholarship,” *Varsity*, 11 February 1942, p.1.

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between the pre-war settlement house and the 1960s Peace Corps. Living cooperatively, students worked at such divergent jobs as heavy industry or mental institutions to learn first hand about the problems and the social conditions of the less privileged.⁴⁰ But as in the late 1920s, students generally learned about and sought to ameliorate social conditions through service. They raised money for the International Student Service, put on clothes drives for war-torn France, and held weekend community projects such as renovating rooms at Fred Victor Mission in Toronto.⁴¹

This emphasis on service and personal religion continued in the immediate post-war period. The SCM sold Christmas cards for India University Relief, helped with local Church clean-ups, and engaged in weekend work camps where students combined worship with a charitable activity. Similarly, study groups focused on Bible study and continued to use the Sharman method to explore the life of Jesus.⁴² Yet if social issues did not have a prominent place within the movement, glimpses of the 1930s radicalism could be seen. The President of the University of Toronto SCM, for example, attended the World Youth Festival in Prague in 1947, a cultural festival attended by 20,000 youth from around the world, a substantial number of whom were from communist countries. The festival was organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, of which the British SCM was a member, and which the British and American governments considered to be a communist front organisation.⁴³ Not only did the President make his experiences with communists known but at the fall camp that year students from other organisations, such as the United Jewish People's Order, were invited to describe their experiences at the Prague Youth Festival and on the Yugoslav Youth Railway.⁴⁴ The SCM, then, provided a forum for more radical student interests. Similarly, when other student groups were refused space on campus, the SCM provided a platform for the "Red Dean" – the Right Reverend Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury. Johnson sparked a national controversy during a cross-country tour of Canada in 1948 by speaking about his support for the USSR. Such activities led critics to fear

40 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File Archives 1944-45, *News of the SCM*, U of T, June 1945.

41 "Student Christian Movement has Busy Year," *University of Toronto Monthly* 63 (June 1943): 264; "Clothes Drive by SCM Planned for France," *Varsity*, 10 December 1946, p.1; "Work Week-end Planned by SCM," *Varsity*, 14 November 1946, p.1.

42 "SCM Undertakes Work Camp Idea," *Varsity*, 21 January 1947, p.3; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, October 1947; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1949-50, Report of the Toronto Unit of SCM of Canada, 1949-50; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1950-51, SCM, U of T, *Undergrad News*, November 1950; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File Archives 1953-54, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 10 November 1953.

43 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, October 1947; Joel Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, translated by Ralph Blumenau (London, 1996), 112-22.

44 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, October 1947.

the movement's influence in turning Christians into communists.⁴⁵ And yet the student most exposed to these eastern influences, the President of the University of Toronto SCM, reaffirmed his faith, contending that "only by confession of our sins and submission to His will, [do] we find peace for ourselves and for our world."⁴⁶

Such criticisms of the SCM, though, along with the desire of some members for greater religious expression within the movement, reinforced tensions over the role of social action and worship that had begun during the war. Religious expression remained prominent on campus in the post-war period, not only at Toronto but at the national and international level as well.⁴⁷ Yet within the movement there were growing complaints in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The issues were lack of worship and that attendance at chapel was low and needed revitalisation.⁴⁸

Part of the sense of lack of worship within the movement may have been the result of the development of "doubter's clubs" and "agnostic weekends."⁴⁹ From its founding the SCM had an open movement policy without any formal membership, rejecting the religious tests required by the Y's. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, the movement was willing to accept both seekers and doubters.⁵⁰ In fact, the presence of agnostics was considered important in order to broaden both discussions on faith and the network of social concern. These annual weekends were serious attempts to address a new social phenomenon. While atheism had a long history in intellectual circles, it appeared as a more widespread and legitimate belief system among students only in the 1950s. The SCM, then, was attempting to provide a forum where agnostics could join in to learn about, and help apply, the Christian message to society. While such weekends were a successful, if temporary, means of maintaining expressions of doubt within a Protestant framework, they tended to increase antagonisms between liberal and more conservative members.⁵¹

45 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B16, File Communism, Reverend G. MacGregor Grant to Marjorie Peck, U of T SCM, 27 January 1949; Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957* (Toronto, 1994), 277, 366.

46 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, October 1947.

47 Edwards, *Movements into Tomorrow*, 36. For examples see Report of the Warden of Hart House, *President's Report, 1945-46*, p.72; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1949-50, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, December 1949.

48 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1950-51, Report, SCM U of T, 1950-51; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File Archives 1953-54, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 10 November 1953; UTA, SCM, B70-0059, B7, File FROS post-1959, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, March-April 1958.

49 "Year's Activities Planned By Vic SCM," *Varsity*, 23 October 1941, p.1.

50 Kirkey, "Building the City of God," 111; Beattie, *A Brief History of the SCM*, 11.

51 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, November-December, p.2; UCA/VUA, SCM, B48-10, File 14, "The Student Christian Movement of Canada," c. 1953, p.1; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B15, File 1963-64, SCM, U of T, President's Report, 1963-64, p.3; Beattie, *A Brief History of the SCM*, 97.

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At the same time, the SCM was losing its privileged place and becoming merely one of a number of religious groups. Historians have remarked on the growing prosperity of the post-war period and the social trend towards raising families and moving to the suburbs. Connected to this phenomenon was the growth of mainline Protestant denominations as families looked to the traditional values of the churches to guide them.⁵² This renewed interest in religion in the post-war period created competition among the various Protestant denominations to win new members for themselves. Such competition occurred not only in the new subdivisions, but also in the universities. While the resurgence of religious life across North America provided the impetus for the appointment of a variety of denominational chaplains, its effect was also to fragment religious efforts. In particular, such fragmentation was caused by increasing political and theological divisions among Protestants. Evangelical student Christian groups such as the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship began to grow in membership and in confidence, challenging the SCM's self-proclaimed position of representing the public voice of Protestantism on campus.⁵³ Some SCMerS felt that their movement represented the most ecumenical and open religious voice on campus and spoke to the concerns of students and broader society. As a result, they argued that denominational work should be performed under SCM auspices.⁵⁴ This sense of rightful space marks the tensions between its identity as a protest movement and its increasing establishment as an institutional vehicle of student Christianity. But if SCMerS saw themselves as the prevailing religious voice at the University of Toronto, they were also disquieted by the national organisation's affiliation in 1944 to the newly created Canadian Council of Churches.⁵⁵ While the SCMC's link to the Council could be taken as a recognition of the influence of the SCM on campus across Canada, it not only brought into question the SCM's identity as a protest movement but increasingly separated radical students focused on social change from the attempts by the leadership within the movement, both at the local and national level, to secure respectability and, more importantly, financial stability.⁵⁶

52 Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 161-62, 173; Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, 7-12.

53 Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 164; Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 250; John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "The Protestant Experience in Canada Since 1945," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990*. George A. Rawlyk, ed. (Burlington, 1990), 204-5. For the United States see Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 394-95. The British SCM faced a similar phenomenon: see Edwards, *Movements into Tomorrow*, 39.

54 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B40, File Staff Newsletter, SCMC, December 1952; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B68, File SCM, SCM, U of T, Advisory Board Minutes, 18 April 1956.

55 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1947-48, *Undergrad News*, SCM, U of T, November-December 1947.

56 UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B75, File SCM, Allan McLachlin, General-Secretary, "The Future of Toronto SCM," 16 November 1959; UTA, SCM, Advisory Board, B79-0059, B30, File Minutes 1959-62, Minutes Advisory Board, 23 November 1959.

As in the immediate post-war period, study groups from the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s remained predominantly focused on faith and religion.⁵⁷ Yet despite this continuity, there were significant changes in the emphases placed within the movement. Compared to the 1940s or early 1950s, discussion groups, and more particularly, lectures devoted increasingly more attention to the relationship between Christianity and society. Study groups discussed traditional topics such as “communism” and “labour relations,” but also issues such as “non-violent resistance,” “leadership for Social Action,” and by the late 1960s “cybernation,” “interpretive dance,” and “Quebec.”⁵⁸ Lectures provided for a mixture of interests, with topics on comparative religion and the relationship between social science and Christianity, as well as on world issues. Speakers not only discussed the traditional geographic areas of Europe and Asia but also placed a new emphasis on Latin America. Lecture topics such as Controversial Ethics, which covered race discrimination, and youth and nationalism in south-east Asia and Latin America, in conjunction with discussions on colonialism, suggest that students in the SCM were beginning to examine the implications of nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialism in the face of the increasing independence of European colonies.⁵⁹ Moreover, lectures with titles such as “Gods in Conflict,” which explored a variety of world faiths, indicate the growing desire to understand Protestantism as one religious explanation of human society among many.⁶⁰

One of the most significant shifts in emphasis in the late 1950s and 1960s was the increasing focus on the examination and study of a range of ideas that were beginning to influence student intellectuals. The writings of theologians and philosophers such as Karl Barth, Dieter Bonhoeffer, and Soren Kierkegard, along with literary figures ranging from Albert Camus to Jack Kerouac, helped radically reshape beliefs and desires.⁶¹ Students were introduced to alternative

57 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1956-57, SCM, U of T Fall Programme; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B71, File SCM 1957-58, SCM, U of T, Newsletter, January 1958; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1958-59, SCM, U of T, SCM pamphlet, January-February 1959; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1959-60, SCM, U of T, Newsletter, April-May 1960; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B61, File B13, SCM pamphlet, 1960-61; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, “Seminars,” 1964.

58 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, “Seminars,” 1964; Victoria College in the U of T, *Bulletin*, 1967-68, p.55; UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-127, File U of T 1960s, *Newsletter*, 1969.

59 UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B83, File SCM Advisory Board, SCM Spring Program 1957; UTA, SCM, U of T, B79-0059, B7, F1958-59, SCM, U of T, Mid-Term *Newsletter*, January-February 1959.

60 UTA, A74-0009, B11, File Dean of Men 1957-58, SCM Spring Term Lecture Series; John Robert Colombo, “A Missionary Views Hinduism,” *Gargoyle*, 6 November 1957, p.4.

61 UTA, B79-0059, B7, File 1956-57, SCM, U of T Fall Programme; UCA/VUA, Union Council, Fonds 2004, 93.001v, B2, File Reports 1962-68, Report of Victoria College SCM 1962-63; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1959-60, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, April-May 1960; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B61, File B13, SCM pamphlet, 1960-61; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, “Seminars,” 1964; Victoria College in the University of Toronto, *Bulletin*, 1967-68, p.55.

belief systems, though within a Christian framework of understanding. Liberal Protestants had always attempted to integrate modern thought with traditional Christian beliefs, and in the 1950s they were continuing to do so. Yet for some students, eastern religions, atheism, and the nonconformity of existentialism would provide powerful alternatives to the increasingly traditional beliefs of liberal Protestantism.

In the late 1950s, however, the SCM was still a vital movement. If existentialism expressed the alienation and disorientation of 1950s youth,⁶² its emphasis on experience and feeling may also have helped refuel social Christianity's emphasis on action. As Doug Owrarn has recently noted, "The first stop on the road to campus activism was often in organisations like the Student Christian Movement."⁶³ Particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, social activism centred around the Combined University Committee on Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND), a movement that had gained much of its impetus from the SCM.⁶⁴ The early New Left, centred in the CUCND in Canada, was marked, according to Cyril Levitt, by an emphasis on personal responsibility as well as by "Beat" concerns for "authenticity, alienation, and individual freedom."⁶⁵ The beliefs of the SCM, with their emphasis on moral commitment and social action, thus converged with those of the CUCND. Not surprisingly, the SCM at University of Toronto supported the Toronto CUCND and had representatives on its committee. In the late 1950s, the SCM passed a motion to ban nuclear weapons for three years. It sponsored, along with a number of other campus groups, a Peace and Disarmament Conference in February 1958 attended by some 400 students and featuring a panel on religion and disarmament. And in 1963, the SCM participated in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament observance at Toronto and co-hosted with CUCND a lecture series on peace.⁶⁶

By the mid-1960s, the SCM had become involved in organisations specifically influenced by the American New Left. Thus it participated in the formation of the University of Toronto Non-Violence Committee, a social action coalition influenced by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, more

62 Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston, 1992), 6.

63 Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time*, 219.

64 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B47, File SUPA, SUPA *Newsletter*, 21 December 1965.

65 Cyril Levitt, *Children of Privilege: Student Revolt in the Sixties: A Study of Student Movements in Canada, the United States, and West Germany* (Toronto, 1984), 6-8, 98.

66 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B61, File CUCND, letter to President, U of T, SCM from Edward Johnston, Corresponding Secretary, Toronto CUCND, 6 March 1961; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B71, File SCM 1957-58, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 1957-58; UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-65, File U of T 1950s, Program of the Student Conference on Problems of Disarmament and Peace, U of T, February 1958; UTA, B79-0059, B7, File FROS post-1959, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, March-April 1958; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B15, File Executive Cabinet Meeting 1963-64, Minutes SCM Cabinet Meeting, 17 September 1963; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 1 October 1963.

commonly known as SNCC, whose purpose was to improve civil rights in Canada. In addition, the SCM played a key part in establishing the Friends of SNCC.⁶⁷ Other SCM initiatives were similarly influenced by American concerns. In 1966, for example, the SCM participated in a demonstration in Ottawa organised by the Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA) against Canadian involvement in Vietnam. And, with CUCND and the Toronto Students' Administrative Council, the SCM co-sponsored a talk by American student Tom Morgan. Morgan was attempting to raise money for his defence trial against an indictment for attending an address by a black socialist leader supporting the right of southern blacks to physical self-defence.⁶⁸

Evidence of continuing acceptance of the SCM in New Left organisations appears in the 1965 SUPA *Newsletter*, which not only contained information about the upcoming SCM conference, but which featured an old-west-style "wanted" picture of Jesus Christ, the "professional agitator," on the front cover.⁶⁹ While the SCM's long-term influence on campus and its favoured treatment by the administration may on the surface make it seem an unlikely midwife to the early New Left, both student groups had the same ideals: a general interest in social issues, a sense of democracy unfulfilled, and the desire for an improved society.⁷⁰ Paradoxically, in contributing to the "poisoning of the student mind" the SCM had also helped spawn secular alternatives through which students could express their political activism.

While the SCM influenced secular politics from the late 1950s on, however, it was also losing its influential position on campus. If in the early 1950s complaints were being heard about the lack of worship, by the early 1960s the President of the University of Toronto SCM was arguing that "few if any SCMers know how to lead in corporate prayer" or "really know how to pray."⁷¹ Attendance at SCM events remained stable at around five per cent of the student body, but study groups, although attracting between 150 and 300 people annually throughout the 1920 to 1965 period, declined in proportion to the

67 In the American setting Ellwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*, 72-76, has illustrated how religious people aided the civil rights movement and emerging New Left, in organizations like SNCC.

68 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, December 1963; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 25 February 1966; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 11 February 1964; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, November 1963; UTA, SCM, B79-0050, B14, File Church and University Committee, SCMC, "A Brief to be Submitted to a Consultation of Christian Churches and Agencies Regarding University Work in Canada," May 1965; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B103, File SAC, Leaflet, "Toronto Committee to Aid the Bloomington Students," 14 February 1964.

69 UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B47, File SUPA, SUPA *Newsletter*, 21 December 1965.

70 Levitt, *Children of Privilege*, 8; Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time*, 220.

71 UTA, B79-0059, B15, File 1963-64, the SCM in the U of T, President's Report, 1963-64. See also UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B68, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, 1 October 1963.

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expansion of the university.⁷² The attraction of intense theological or social study under Protestant auspices seemed to be lessening. The development of agnosticism and the rise of denominational groups in the 1950s converged with an increased number of secular political organisations to challenge the SCM's sense of speaking from a position of theological and political authority.⁷³ This was not simply a problem at Toronto. As one commentator noted, faced "on the one side by the flood of denominational chaplains, on the other by the new action groups on campus," the SCMC witnessed "a loss of purpose and direction, a decline in morale" originating at the "grassroots" level.⁷⁴ Moreover, while the agnostics of the 1950s were involved in questioning or even rebelling against Christianity, by the 1960s students were coming to see Christianity as increasingly irrelevant.⁷⁵ While references to the SCM continued to appear in the Victoria College newspaper *The Strand*, they did so less frequently. By the late 1950s, references to the SCM in the *Varsity*, the *University of Toronto Monthly*, and the reports by the Warden of Hart House to the President were all but gone.

More conservative contemporaries often pointed to the liberal theology and left-wing political views of the SCM as an attenuation of Protestantism, and as the mark of a social movement devoid of Christ. And there is no doubt that for some, as a result of the open discussions within the movement, the SCM led to a secular outlook.⁷⁶ Yet it would appear that social issues and personal faith were tightly interwoven in the SCM. It is useful here to draw on the work of scholars who are rethinking traditional categories and binary opposites.⁷⁷ While such work has been applied mainly to categories of gender, it is particularly useful in the history of religion for rethinking the traditionally opposed concepts of the sacred and the secular. In the SCM, social action and faith expanded and contracted according to the period at hand. At certain times, such as in the 1930s and again from the late 1950s onward, social issues and political activism became more important. At other times such as in the 1940s and

72 UTA, B79-0050, B42, File SCM Printed Material, SCM in the U of T, 1932-33; UTA, B79-0059, B51, SCM, U of T, *News Bulletin*, January 1937; UTA, SCM, B79-0059, B7, File 1949-50, Report of the Toronto Unit of the SCMC, 1949-50; UTA, Hart House Records, A73-0050, B68, File SCM, SCM, U of T, *Newsletter*, April 1956.

73 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-65, File U of T 1950s, U of T SCM, SCM to L.G. Pineo, 17 January 1958.

74 Canadian Council of Churches, 16th Meeting, 22-25 November 1966, Record of Proceedings, "Student Christian Movement of Canada," 131-32.

75 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-35, Peter Paris, "An Interim Report of the Student Christian Movement of Canada," April 1965, p.4.

76 UCA/VUA, SCM, B84-11, File 21st Anniversary Committee, J.D. Ketchum, "After Twenty Years," c. 1941.

77 For example, see the work of Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto, 1990), 8-9.

early 1950s, personal faith and social service had greater influence. Yet despite changing emphases, worship and action were always considered to complement each other.

Grounding social action in faith, the SCM provided the cornerstone for campus activism until the mid-1960s. As Paul Axelrod has argued for the 1930s, and this continued to be true after World War II, the SCM provided a legitimate arena for student radicalism.⁷⁸ Its emergence had been part of a growing revolt against traditional religious institutions and much of its history is rooted in critiques of contemporary society. Theologically liberal and politically left-wing, the SCM was a vehicle created by students in order to understand, incorporate, and develop new intellectual, religious and political ideas. The SCM maintained an active and influential presence on campus well into the post-war period because of this sense of having a public role, of being engaged in a public dialogue over the nature of Canadian society.

But while the SCM remained strong in the 1950s and early 1960s, fractures in the religious structure were becoming more evident. The post-war period has generally been stereotyped as conformist and complacent.⁷⁹ One historian has recently argued, for example, that the period before 1960 to after 1970 marked a change from "orthodoxy to heterodoxy."⁸⁰ An investigation of the SCM, however, reveals the existence of heterodoxy in the 1950s on two levels. First, the 1950s marks a period of increasing political activism in the SCM. Second, it is during this period, rather than during the ferment of the 1960s, that challenges to the SCM's public influence took place. Indeed, Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau have recently pointed to the importance of the post-war period for Canadian religious history. They argue that the increasing spiritual diversity of the 1940s and 1950s contained the origins of secularisation, "when Protestantism seemingly lost its identification with the cultural mainstream."⁸¹ Certainly, concerns about the lack of worship within the movement and competition from other denominations began to corrode the SCM's position on campus. But other issues, such as the increasingly widespread legitimacy of agnosticism and atheism, and the development of secular political organisations, also played a role. More significantly, the SCM did not lose its identification

78 Axelrod, *Making a Middle Class*, 130.

79 Breines, *Young, White and Miserable*; Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, 1994). These authors do not contest the idea of the 1950s as complacent but they do probe the dissent beneath the conformism. In Canada, Levitt, *Children of Privilege*, 14, holds to the stereotype even while situating the early New Left in the late 1950s. Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, has recently stressed not only the stability and orthodoxy of the 1950s but also its influence in shaping the democratic ideals of the 1960s generation and their questioning of authority. However, he concentrates on the baby boomers, generally ignoring the young adults of the 1950s.

80 Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, 314.

81 Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 250

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with the student culture. Rather, it acted as one key seed-bed for the political activism of the mid-1950s on. The secular university, then, was developing not because the SCM no longer had a relevant message but because a host of competing voices had emerged. While the SCM shaped a pervasive religious culture at the University of Toronto until the mid-1950s, in this new milieu it gradually lost its public influence and dominant religious position within the university.