

*Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* by Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald

Julia Rady-Shaw

Volume 110, Number 2, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1053516ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053516ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rady-Shaw, J. (2018). Review of [*Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945* by Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald]. *Ontario History*, 110(2), 235–237. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053516ar>

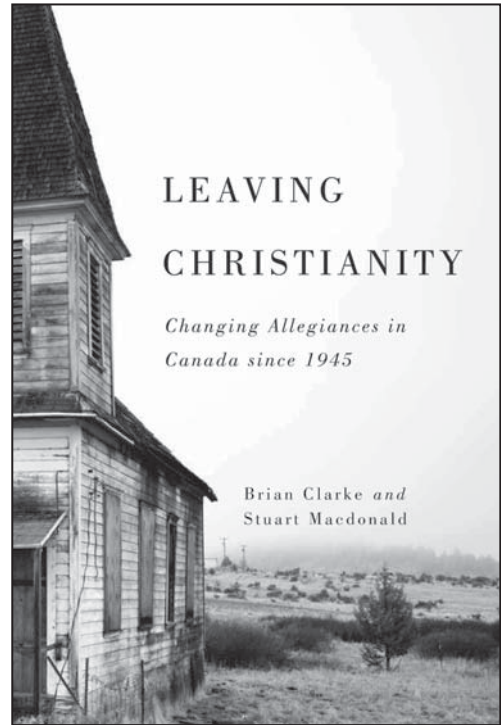
*Leaving Christianity*  
*Changing Allegiances in Canada*  
*since 1945*

By Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 304 pages. \$32.95 paper. ISBN 9780773550865.  
 (www.mqup.ca)

Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald's study of religion in Canada from the mid-twentieth century onwards is an excellent addition to the historical canon. The authors look holistically at the shifting religious landscape in Canada and trace the contours of its change. Not content to accept a simple narrative of religious decline since 1945, the authors use the Canadian census to trace with greater accuracy the robustness of religion until the early 1970s, and how the religious culture in Canada waned, fractured, and even transformed in Canadian society over the ensuing decades.

Over the course of six chapters, Clarke and Macdonald use the routinely generated data of the Canadian census to help illustrate a more complex relationship between Canadians and religion, and how Canada has become a post-Christian society. The authors turn to other demographic data collected by the government as well as denominational records collected by the churches to develop a better comparative study of the religious data collected in the census in order to trace more fully the changes in religious participation in Canada. Clarke and Macdonald declare early in the study that they are "obsessed with numbers," (9) which is very much to the benefit of their readers and their scholarship. Their painstaking attention to numerical data grounds their historical inquiry into patterns of belief within a firm methodology that maps "the nature and



extent of Canadians' disaffiliation from organized religions" (7).

The authors first address the most populace Protestant Christian denominations—the mainstream. The United Church, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Lutherans all maintained steady membership in their polities until the mid-1960s, after which they experienced decline and a precipitous drop in the 1980s. Clarke and Macdonald note that an aging demographic has remained the most active in mainstream memberships, especially after 2001. At one time, participation in the mainstream Protestant churches reflected the age make-up of Canada broadly. In the ensuing decades of the twentieth century, the population of church attendees aged and reflected older demographics with overall numbers shrinking. The Baptist church was the one church that has not de-

clined in absolute numbers since the 1970s.

Clarke and Macdonald further provide nuance to their discussion by introducing other measures of participation in church life: confirmation, marriages, baptisms, faith declarations, and Sunday school attendance. Denominations recorded participation in pastoral involvement, which the authors chart and then use to trace shifts in involvement, especially at an individual level. For example, while baptism was a decision made by a parent for a child, confirmation was a choice made by an individual. Breaking down the data of pastoral involvement sketches a trend towards disassociation amongst baby boomers as they became young adults and the choice of their religious involvement became one they could exercise autonomously from their parents. Within the chapter, the authors treat separately the numbers for the Anglicans, United Church, and Presbyterians from the Baptists and Lutherans. The latter are more challenging to trace in part because both have multiple denominations under their umbrellas. The authors note decline in all five denominations, but looking at their numbers separately points to different time periods for decline and at different rates.

In the second chapter, the authors turn to “Other Protestant Denominations”—neither Roman Catholic nor mainstream, these independent groups, like the Salvation Army or more charismatic sects, tend to privilege more conservative practices. While the authors note that these groups might have fared better statistically than their mainstream Protestant compatriots, and that their decline has been less dramatic, they did decline nevertheless. Growth occurred in terms of their overall makeup of Canada’s religious landscape, and their congregations even if small, were (and are) vibrant. One of the most insightful inferences from this chapter is the need to ad-

judicate participation with some sensitivity. Participation is not an all or nothing game. An individual’s barometer for participation in religious life varies across denominations. A person who attends church once a month might deem him or herself as “active,” just as a person who attends weekly; each person assesses their level of activity differently but arrives at the same conclusion. The metrics of participation and religious fervour remain challenging to unpack—and perhaps offer an avenue of inquiry for other historians to take up and assess.

Chapter three focuses on trends within the Roman Catholic Church. As in the previous two chapters, Clarke and Macdonald’s data reveals a declensionist trend. They also note that Catholic identity has been persistent even if attendance at church has diminished. The authors contextualize their analysis within the broader academic body of work that has speculated on the causes of religious decline within the Catholic Church, notably in Quebec but also within larger shifts in society such as attitudes towards women, sex, and other social identities.

The last three chapters concentrate on broader trends. Chapter four looks at the growth of disaffiliated and unaffiliated Canadians. This category sustained the most pronounced growth since the 1960s as more people identified themselves as having “no religion.” Clarke and Macdonald observe the presence of a large “ambivalent middle”—people who were disinclined to participate in organized religion, and whose choices signaled broader changes for the future as the children of this group were raised in an environment where organized religion was not even considered. Chapter 5 focuses on the extent to which the 1960s mattered in terms of religious change in Canada, and places the study within a broader history of secularization (or better

put, a reordering of religion in society). Finally, chapter 6 confronts the assumption that Canada has long been in a state of religious decline and argues instead that this phenomenon is recent. The formativeness of this process of de-Christianization has contributed and continues to contribute to a reordering of people's participation in civic life. While the authors do not argue for religious revival, they do point to the vacuum of social power created by the decline in religious life, and wonder at the consequences of such a vacuum. It would not be hard to make an argument for the growth of political populism as by-product of this vacuum. But that's a thought for another study.

*Leaving Christianity* demonstrates secularization to be a process of religious re-ordering. Clarke and Macdonald acknowledge that the growth of world religions within Canada's cultural plurality has had an effect on the changes to reli-

gious culture. However, they also conclude that Christianity itself has "undergone an unprecedented development" (200). Canadians have left the church. They have left because they oppose "organized expressions of Christianity;" they have left because they have found meaning outside of the structure and institution of Christian churches; and they have left as a result of generational shifts in religious identity. This book is an important contribution to our understanding of the extent of religious change in the latter twentieth century. Clarke and Macdonald call attention to the importance of the 1960s as a decade of change, and situate their work within broader scholarship on religious and social history that point to the way the monumental cultural changes (or fallout) reverberated across social institutions and especially organized religion.

Julia Rady-Shaw

---

*Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists*  
*The Origins of the Women's Shelter Movement in Canada*

By Margo Goodhand

Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2017. 168 pages. \$20.00 Paperback. ISBN: 9781552669990. \$19.99  
Kindle. ISBN: 9781773630014. ([www.fernwoodpublishing.ca](http://www.fernwoodpublishing.ca))

Margo Goodhand's *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists*, a history of the women's shelter movement in Canada, is engaging, powerful, and touching. Relying heavily on oral testimonies, she puts the spotlight on the creation of five shelters in 1973: Interval House in Toronto; Ishtar Transition House in Aldergrove, B.C.; the Edmonton Women's Shelter (with a detour to the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter); Saskatoon Interval House; and Vancouver Transition House. Much like

the women she profiles, Goodhand's history recognizes the importance of the political and the personal. Her book situates the shelters and transition houses in the politics of the women's movement of the 1970s, but she also gives careful attention to those often invisible and grassroots labours that propelled their creation, including, in the most compelling sections of the book, the emotional support women provided each other during some of the hardest times of their lives.