

**Lynne Marks, *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), 336 pp., ISBN: 978-0774833448.**

British Columbia is notable for its secularism. Nearly half its population reports having “no religion,” a proportion almost double that of Canada as a whole. In *Infidels and the Damn Churches: Irreligion and Religion in Settler British Columbia*, Lynne Marks (University of Victoria) explores the province’s early years, and demonstrates that, although more pronounced today, British Columbia’s “secular exceptionalism” is not new. Covering the 1880s to 1914, this engaging and meticulously researched monograph explores the foundational period for the province’s “openness to irreligion” (4). Marks taps a rich variety of quantitative and qualitative sources to explain the combination of factors that limited the hegemony of mainstream churches while creating openings for alternatives.

Central is Marks’s argument about the role of the province’s gender, class, and racial characteristics in shaping its irreligious profile. First, a resource-driven economy and limited farming sector led to a significant overrepresentation of men, many of them transient, among the non-indigenous adult population. The same economic profile fostered class polarization and labour radicalism that often included anti-religious ideologies. A final critical factor was racial diversity, particularly the presence of a significant Asian population that was both overwhelmingly male and largely non-Christian. The intersecting gender, class, and racial identities fed anti-religious rhetoric, such as when church efforts to curb rough male culture were branded as effeminate, or when expressions of ministerial concern about Asian immigrants’ souls provoked hostility from anti-immigrant Euro-Canadian workers.

Marks begins by drawing on manuscript census records from 1901 and 1911, which recorded individuals’ self-described religious orientation or lack thereof. She cross-references these with church census counts of communicants to demonstrate not only the clear overrepresentation of the “irreligious” among the inhabitants of British Columbia, but also the failure of many of those who did claim a denomination to actually affiliate with or attend a church. The numbers make clear why churchmen in B.C. wrung their hands in frustration and lamented the tendency of men to “leave God behind when they crossed the Rocky Mountains.” Marks’s quantitative analysis of the shape of irreligion is followed by an examination of the content of non-belief, in the form of a careful analysis of anti-religious discourse by local journalists, radical unionists, and others.

Having laid this groundwork, Marks uses a variety of approaches in the next several chapters to explore how irreligion played out in the province. First, she examines

individuals of “fuzzy fidelity,” meaning those who filled the vast middle ground between proclaimed atheists and regular churchgoers. To do so she carefully teases out complex and conflicted religious and irreligious identities that shifted with age, marital status, residence, and other life changes. Along the way, Marks provides intriguing examples of self-proclaimed believers who avoided church, radicals who maintained “vestiges” of Christian practice, and many other variations. Next, she turns to a comparative case study of the religious landscapes of eight small towns – four in B.C., two in Ontario, and two in Nova Scotia – to provide a textured sense of why, as one migrant put it, “Sundays are so different here.” A chapter titled “Could Sodom Be Worse?” turns to the province’s urban centers, Victoria and Vancouver, exploring both the significant role of these cities’ mainstream churches and their acute awareness of the challenges they faced. No wonder churchmen turned to white women as they tried to assert Christian hegemony; women – particularly when extended the right to vote – could be key allies in efforts to tame rough culture.

The final chapters focus on an array of challenges that vexed the Christian establishment. These ranged from “rough” male culture, fraternal organizations and radical unions that appealed to many Euro-Canadian men, to the non-Christian, often racialized communities that were more visible and numerous in B.C. than elsewhere in Canada. Far more so than in eastern provinces, Asian immigrants resisted conversion efforts, and, although most Indigenous peoples had accepted Christianity, many churchmen doubted the thoroughness of these conversions. In addition, Marks argues that mainstream denominations’ relative weakness opened space for metaphysical alternatives such as spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science, all of which were vastly overrepresented in B.C. While noting that there is debate about the causal direction (does more irreligion strengthen alternatives, or vice versa?), Marks states, “certainly the popularity of both unbelief and alternative religions reinforces the legitimacy of a broader range of religious and irreligious choices than may be possible in more dominantly Christian regions” (187).

It is within the context of her discussion of these alternatives to mainstream Christianity that Marks examines British Columbia’s Jewish population. Unlike Asian immigrants who were othered, feared, and reviled, and were the objects of both missionary outreach and immigrant restriction efforts, Jews in the province were an accepted part of the white population. They faced little antisemitism and were less frequently targeted by missionaries than were Jews in eastern Canada. Marks argues that the perceived threat to white hegemony by racialized others helped to whiten both Catholics and Jews, making them more accepted in B.C. than they were in the central and eastern provinces. Jews, and especially single Jewish men, were, like their Christian neighbours, relatively irreligious; far more turned out for secular gatherings than for religious services, while others were drawn to synagogue for ethnic rather than religious reasons.

*Infidels and the Damn Churches* is a major contribution to the field, bringing religion into conversation with race and class to understand the interconnections of the three in shaping British Columbia, and in “establish[ing] irreligion as a normalized option... in a way that did not occur elsewhere in Canada” (19). Marks’s careful attention to local context, thoughtful deployment of sources, and attention to nuance, inconsistency, and variation in identities sets the standard for this type of historical study. Although Marks limits her treatment of British Columbia’s Jewish population to a short section, this monograph contains both a clear understanding of the context shaping Jewish experience in the province and a model study of religious identity and its relationship to class, race, and place.

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