CSCH President's Address 2010

"We who speak . . . and write books": Writing and Teaching the History of Christianity In a Secular Canada, 1960-2010

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Despite your executive's remission in issuing press releases and giving interviews to the media you are probably all aware that 2010 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Canadian Society of Church History (CSCH). This is an event which, given the transitory nature of life and the fragility of academic disciplines, calls for deep gratitude, not to mention amazement, that we are still here, and to all appearances, thriving. Anniversaries are occasions to ponder one's changing identity. Those whose memory goes back to our previous milestone, the Society's fortieth anniversary, may recall the witty foray into that subject offered by Sandra Beardsall in her presidential address. Sandra made the unforgettable comparison of our society to a three-headed calf, the kind one might run across at a county fair, a freak of nature (or is it design?), whose one head stares intently at theology, its second at history, and its third at religious studies. Her provocative question, "[As a three-headed calf] Do we play any meaningful role in the Canadian academic barnvard, or are we really intended for a tattered tent in a tawdry sideshow – a slightly shocking lesson in the pitfalls of inter-disciplinarity?" is still with us.¹ Ten years later, I'd like to address the matter of identity in a rather different way. Regrettably I cannot replicate the creativity and wit of my predecessor, but instead must

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ask you to plod along with me to reflect on a few critical moments in our collective history this past half century.

As a Society we owe our existence to the decision by Lorne Pierce, editor-in-chief of the Ryerson Press, in collaboration with H. H. Walsh, author of the 1956 publication, *The Christian Church in Canada*, to prepare the production of a definitive three volume work to mark Canada's centenary. With this in mind, and eager to know who was doing what in the field of Canadian Church history, they contacted others and organized this society in 1959. In May 1960 the newly formed Canadian Society of Church History launched its first annual meeting, to coincide with those of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies and the Canadian Journal of Theology. Membership was open to "all who are seriously interested in Church History," an interest, which according to the recollection of John Moir, found alleviation on the humid days of annual meetings by recourse to the beer tents.

With the reassurance that fifty years later, conviviality continues to enliven and for some, lubricate, the Society's annual meetings, I want to look a little more intently at the decade of our founding, and explore a few facets of the title of my address: "We who speak and write books': writing and teaching the history of Christianity in a secular Canada, 1960-2010." The first part of the title comes from a line in a recently discovered sermon of Augustine "We who preach [in our case 'speak'] and write books . . . speak as we are still knocking for understanding."² I sympathize with that sentiment, which was also captured so effectively in the title of Richard Allen's presentation on Salem Bland earlier this afternoon, "God's Truth Comes to Us in Fragments." My thoughts (which certainly have no pretension to divine truth), also come to you in fragments. Aware of the time of day you would be listening to my remarks and of my limited grasp of the topic under review, and totally against my Calvinist upbringing to shun the personal, I have decided to intersperse my comments with a few autobiographical fragments. In the unlikely event that conviviality languishes at our impending celebratory dinner, I'm hoping that my recourse to the autobiographical will be a catalyst to similar disclosures on your part, and in that way that we continue to enrich our collective history.

As a child nurtured on religious patriotic literature extolling Dutch resistance during the sixteenth-century Spanish occupation, and later to the Nazis, I thrilled to the words of hymns such as "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," and "Faith of Our Fathers Living Still in Spite of Dungeon, Fire and Sword. "The words might be in English, belted out in a Christian Reformed basement church in Canada in the 1950s, but in my mind they placed me in touch with a heroic religious tradition, as spellbinding in the past as it remained alive in the present. Later, when I enrolled at Victoria College, University of Toronto, where unlike in my immigrant community, life did not revolve around faith and church, I saw no need to abandon my fascination with Christianity. University life in the mid 1960s did test old boundaries, but for those so inclined, there was comfort in the Protestant ethos still evident in Victoria's residence life, and more widely in Toronto the Good and its thriving churches. History courses, though challenging my earlier bent towards the heroic and patriotic, became opportunities to examine the teachings and practice of the institutional church in settings as varied as medieval Germany and early twentieth - century French Canada. These were not considered marginal, but key topics in the history of the period under consideration.

No doubt insulated by the religious values of an immigrant society, and by those vestiges of a Christian past still evident in university life, I remained blind to the dramatic seismic shift the church in Canada was at the time undergoing.³ Much more prescient was the observation in 1967 by John Webster Grant, one of the Society's founding members: "The image of a Christian Canada – churchgoing, moral, and devotedly partisan – strikes both believers and unbelievers today as somewhat archaic. Whether we like this image or not, it is unlikely that the church will have sufficient authority in our time to replace it with another."⁴

And yet, despite his observation, when reading the presentation titles and the minutes of the annual meetings of the CSCH in the 1960s I was struck by the absence of any evidence that those writing church history realized its implication for their own discipline. Like Augustine, it would seem they were still knocking for understanding. What you do notice is a shared emphasis on the importance of heritage, on the need to record the past. We remain greatly indebted to the results of those efforts, especially to the Centenary Series by Walsh, Moir and Grant.⁵ Helpful in understanding the mindset of that generation of church historians, through the lens of one of their own, is the historical survey John Moir gave at the twentyfifth anniversary of the CSCH in 1979.⁶ His description of the CSCH during the 1960s and early 1970s testifies to a culture that retained the strong influence of the church. Not surprisingly, the Society's founding members were all male, most had clerical training and were attached to churches and seminaries. As was the custom, they were accompanied on their summer academic outings by their "ladies," whose accommodation

had to be arranged elsewhere than in the university residences that housed conference participants. Presentations, in Moir's succinct wording, were "largely by Protestants, for Protestants and about Protestants."

It was not until the 1980s and early 1990s that the loss of church authority previously noted by John Grant became a matter of scholarly interest.⁷ A younger generation of historians, no longer "church historians" like the "founding fathers," but historians interested in religion as a force of intellectual and institutional change, entered into a lively debate that drew in various ways on "modernization as secularization" theory. Their focus was not, however, on the 1960s. Interested in the origins of the decline of Protestant mainline belief and practice so evident in their own time, they concentrated on what they saw to be the corrosive impact of scientific and theological thought of the late-nineteenth and earlytwentieth centuries. Their argument, that there had been an "inner secularization" or accommodation of Protestant thought to a secularizing Canadian society, did not go uncontested. Others maintained that instead of religious decline, late Victorian Canada was distinguished by a remarkable vitality of evangelical Protestant religion. This is not the place to recapitulate the "secularization debate" so familiar to many of you.⁸ It found a forum in several panel discussions at the CSCH, the first in 1986 examining Ramsay Cook's award-winning book, The Regenerators: Social Criticism in late Victorian Canada (1985), and the second in 1994, focussing on David Marshall's Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief (1992). The debate gave Canadian religious history a brief popularity, and more enduringly, a series of publications that built on, and took in new directions the earlier work on nineteenth-century Canadian religion by the founders of the CSCH. However, partly because of a lack of clarity about what was meant by secularization, and also because of the exclusive focus on churches, clergy, and social reformers, I would have to agree with the view of Ian Mackay, that to an outsider the debate seemed "somewhat strained and inconclusive." 9

In retrospect I believe that even in the 1980s and early 1990s, in our approach to secularization as historians, we were still implicitly being influenced by an earlier church culture. We took Christian identity so for granted that we did not clearly define it nor confront the intricate ways that it was part of a wider social, political and economic structuring of daily life. What was notably absent from our debate was a sophisticated understanding of the complex ways Christian identity had been formed in past ages not only by "internal" factors such as theology and church socialization, but also by "external factors" such as gender, social class, economic structuring and law. Since then, sociologists such as David Martin and Jose Casanova have contested and thoroughly refined the classical theory of "modernization as secularization" that had informed the Canadian secularization debate.¹⁰

As a result of their work, and of other recent historical studies into religious change in western societies, I now see the concepts of Christendom and de-Christianization to be more helpful than the term "secularization" as a historical framework for understanding the loss of Christian authority. As defined by British historian Hugh McLeod, Christendom is

a society where there are close ties between leaders of the church and secular elites; where the laws purport to be based on Christian principles; where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, everyone is assumed to be Christian; and where Christianity provides a common language, shared alike by the devout and the by the religiously lukewarm.¹¹

By being more precise, this concept avoids the pitfalls of subjectivity and lack of clarity that were evident in the inconclusive debate on secularization of the 1980s. Rather than assuming that there was once a single "Christian Canada" that at some point in time declined (we are reminded of the desire of the CSCH's forefathers to "preserve our heritage") we can instead examine the different forms that Christendom has undergone as part of the restructuring of society. Given Canada's colonial origins, its struggle with inadequate resources before and after Confederation, and such ongoing concerns as minority religious rights and Indian policy, the state has played an unusually strong part in shaping the various forms Christendom has assumed from the sixteenth century to the 1960s. This strikes me as an especially fruitful theme when writing an overview of Canadian religious history that distinguishes itself from earlier syntheses such as those authored by the CSCH's founders. Christendom took on distinctive forms because of the close relationship between religion and the state first in New France, then in the efforts at Anglican religious establishment, followed by evangelical Protestant voluntarism upon disestablishment and by Roman Catholic ultramontanism within and outside Quebec; in the constitutional arrangement of 1867, and in the shift to economic capitalism at the turn of the century, and more recently in the transition to the welfare state in the 1960s. In such a framework, religious

change is not a steady downward slide into "secularization," but an intricate and ongoing process of readjustment in which leaders of the church and secular elites interact in new ways; where religion and law are dynamic in the way they interrelate to shape a changing Christian moral order; and where Christian identity and discourse "shared alike by the devout and the by the religiously lukewarm" take on different forms over time.¹² In examining these various forms of Christendom, attention has to be given also to the tensions and contradictions that in turn led to change. Among these tensions and contradictions was the situation of religious and ethnic outsiders. How was their identity constructed? How did they themselves construct it? What was their part in the various forms assumed by Christendom?

Here we come again to our Society's founding decade, and to Augustine's experience of "still knocking for understanding." Fifty years later as historians we are in a position to raise questions about Christian identity overlooked by the founders of the CSCH, and even by those who more recently concentrated on "inner secularization" at the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s, colleagues such as Roberto Perin, David Seljak, Gregory Baum and Michael Gauvreau have done impressive work. For English-speaking Canada, important foundations have been laid by such CSCH members as Catherine Gidney, Gary Miedema, Bruce Douville, and Ruth Compton Brouwer. Either anticipating or working within, the new historiography on the 1960s, they have moved away from the earlier concentration on church and clergy in their analysis of religious change to focus on previously unexamined public sites: the university campus, the state's place in defining the religious celebrations of Canada's Centennial, youth participation in overseas development, and the formation of new spiritualities.¹⁵ By including forces external to religion, their work connects with European, British and American historiography on the dismantling of Christendom in the 1960s, and at the same time adds to the growing body of comparative trans-Atlantic studies.

There are three additional reasons why I find the concept of Christendom a more fruitful approach to the writing and teaching of the history of Christianity in a secular Canada. First, "Christianity" (again citing McLeod), "is not equivalent to or dependent on the maintenance of Christendom."¹⁶ Despite its loss of cultural authority, religion, as we are reminded regularly in the media, continues today to flourish in many sites. Again, let me give a personal observation. As those who teach in seminaries and evangelical colleges, and as all familiar with the statistical work of Stuart MacDonald, Reginald Bibby and others, are aware, a good number of Canadians today continue to experience organized religion as part of their identity.

I am one of those. Many years ago I changed my denominational allegiance, but each time that I worship with family members in the Christian Reformed congregation that helped to shape my youthful enthusiasm of a Christian past, I am made aware of how much of that past remains. Scores of blond-haired, blue-eved children flock to the front of the pulpit each Sunday for the minister's childrens story as their parents and grandparents settle in for a half-hour of theological and biblical sermon reflection, followed by a lengthy congregational prayer. Laving out the needs and joys of the community, the prayer is followed by a different form of public witness: well-funded collections for local and church causes, ranging from the needs of a city mission or the local Christian school to famine relief in drought-stricken Africa. Fifty years after its founding by Dutch immigrants, this church, and so many like it, continues to reflect many of the facets of the image of a Christian Canada which historians and other observers, including most of the media, have long since considered vanished.¹⁷ Exploring the reconfiguration of "Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada" (to cite the title of a recent collection) continues to be one of our tasks as historians in today's pluralistic, post-Christendom context.¹⁸

Second, those who reject Christianity do not necessarily replace it

with a purely secular worldview. Referring to today's fascination with spirituality, American historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has pointed out that "the invention of 'spirituality' originated in large measure in the search by nineteenth-century Americans "for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance." That religious world has continued to expand. Where at the time of the founding of the CSCH, a "serious interest in Church History" was sufficiently comprehensive to describe the society's mandate, fifty years later, as Bruce Douville's work on radical forms of religion in the 1960s reminds us, it is impossible to make a clear distinction between those who fit within "church" history, and those who do not. Alternative forms of religion are part of the broader context of changing religious identity, and have to be examined on their own terms, and not only as evidence of loss of Christian authority.

That brings me to the third and final reason why I see the concept of Christendom so important for the writing and teaching of Canadian religious history today. In 1985 when I was first appointed to Queen's, I could expect that most of the undergraduates who chose to take my history course in religion and North American society had some personal connection to organized Christianity and understood its basic terminology. Twenty-five years later this is no longer the case.¹⁹ For students (and for readers of our work), who have had little or no such socialization, the intricacies of nineteenth-century denominational differences are often mystifying and confusing. The concept of Christendom, however, makes the complexity of religious identity more accessible. It allows religion to be approached not in the first place through the byzantine maze of doctrine and church polity, but as a way of organizing society and shaping personal and communal identity in different times and places.²⁰ Thus it takes into account such more familiar forms of social structuring as gender, the economy and government, which together helped shape the various forms of Christendom. It also calls attention to the tensions and contradictions these structures brought to religious belief and practice, and to the ways whereby people addressed these.

Here I need to mention, at the risk of repeating what is becoming a refrain in my own writing, the importance of the methodology of "lived religion" in helping students understand religious practice and identity. Pioneered by American historians such as Robert Orsi, David Hall, Colleen McDannell and Leigh Schmidt, and shaped by the insights of post-structuralism, this approach emphasizes religion's constant dialectical relationship with the social.²¹ Like anthropologists seeking to understand

an unfamiliar society, these scholars of religious history in a secular age take as their guide ethnography rather than institutional or intellectual history, as was once the case. Institutions, denominations, theologies and doctrinal teachings are part of the context from which lived religion is extrapolated, but the primary focus is not on these but on what people actually make of them. This calls for an awareness of the idiomatic possibilities and limitations within the culture under investigation: of what people were able to desire, express, fantasize. Why, for example, did the rich imagery of a heaven figure so prominently in nineteenth-century accounts of death, to disappear almost entirely in our own time? How in each instance did Christendom and its replacement help define the experience? Related to this is the importance of the prevailing knowledges of the body: what was it that people in a certain period of time and place tasted, felt, smelled, heard? Asking such questions, historian Robert Orsi has been able convincingly to reconstruct for readers with no religious background, the lush rituals and feasts of Italian Roman Catholic immigrants in early twentieth-century Harlem, while CSCH past-president James Opp has offered a layered analysis of the faith healing in early twentieth-century Canada.²² Excavated with care, skill, and observation, practices that could easily be derided or criticized instead become the subject of informed understanding. In such a method, students are encouraged to recognize that religious idioms, symbols and institutions do not simply reflect a world (as was the assumption in the older approach to history), but that they also *make* a world, a world with all its tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities.

The emphasis on religion as dynamic experience in dialogue with its context also has implications for students' own self-awareness. As researchers and writers, they begin to recognize their personal implication in the study and writing of human history, and hence to realize the importance of their own "spirituality," of their own religious formation or lack thereof. Thus, rather than seeing the religious past as "dead" and its actors as "other," they are encouraged to explore to what extent their own circumstances as thinking, feeling people, caught in the complexities of daily life can provide at least an entry into the religious experience of, for example, Pentecostals in the early-twentieth century. In short, along with and as part of, the usual reading and analysis of texts, students become more aware of the kinds of religious worlds people have made, and of the scholars, including themselves, who study these worlds.

This approach does not call for a confessional position. Historian

Robert Orsi, for example has been clear that for him there can be no return to the Roman Catholic piety of his youth, nor to any confessional faith. At the same time, in an insightful essay on the way the personal and the historiographical have been linked in his work, he has acknowledged how his insight into the lived experience of devout Roman Catholics has sharpened his own self-insight as a human being.²³

Such an approach would not have been possible if the moral authority of the old Christian Canada were still in place. Rather than being forced to take a creative, multifaceted approach to excavating the religious experience of an earlier time, students (and their instructors) would have simply assumed that a knowledge of institutions and theology alone was needed. Moreover, it has been my experience that prior Christian socialization, though in some ways a benefit, can also limit, even to the point of distortion, a person's openness to the rich layers of meaning within historical texts. Overlooked then is the messiness, the contradictions, and the tensions that were (and are) part of lived religion, as of life more generally.

Instead, "lived religion" as a methodology that sharpens student perception of religion within the warp and woof of existence, raises awareness of the many ways in which the quest for the sacred has shaped, and continues to shape people's negotiation of daily life. Belief and practice are then seen as never static, but sensitive to the context of its practitioners. Yes, at age fifty we are still a "three-headed calf," but some may see us as an academic freak, we are so by necessity and design.

And that strikes me as an appropriate way to bring these meandering reflections to a conclusion on this occasion of our fiftieth anniversary. Because of the dynamic nature of religious practice, the identity of the CSCH in 2010 cannot be a continuation of "the faith of our fathers" about which I, and others, once sung so lustily or spoke of with such conviction. The massive de-Christianization of the intervening period has permanently displaced such an option. What it has done, however, is opened a space in the academy for a more perceptive approach to religion, one that recognizes the ambiguity of life, the tensions and contradictions that are part of living within the given structures of place and time. Where once in my youth (and in our country's youth), the history of Christianity was seen as a heroic enterprise, today its study is more complex. Yet as I grow older, I see it as more rewarding, as demanding a deeper self-knowledge and a keener awareness of the fragility and ambiguity of every day life not only in the past, but also in the present.

Endnotes

- 1. Sandra Beardsall, "The Three-Headed Calf: Triple Vision and the Canadian Society of Church History," President's Address, *Historical Papers:* Canadian Society of Church History (1999): 197-211.
- Cited in "Augustine Through the Ages," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 4, 2000.
- 3. For the prevalence of a Protestant ethos in Canadian university life until well into the 1960s see Catherine Gidney, *A Long Eclipse: the Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University*, *1920-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).
- 4. John Webster Grant,"The Church and Canada's Self-Awareness," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 (1967): 164.
- The last two were not published until 1972, when the American purchasers of the Ryerson Press issued them "as a part of their policy to Canadianize their image" (John Moir, "The Canadian Society of Church History – A Twenty Year Retrospect," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* [1979]: 89).
- 6. As summarized by Moir, the Society's minutes also carried references to such congregational practices as purging the roll of non-paying members, sporadic membership drives directed to an ill-defined constituency, recurring and inconclusive debates on the same issues, and financial vicissitudes which varied according to the skills of the volunteer treasurers (*Canadian Society of Church History Papers* [1979]: 76-98).
- 7. There exists no comparable survey to Moir's to offer insight into the culture of the CSCH in the 1980s and 1990s, but panel discussions such as "Church History of Canada: Where from Here?" (1980), "Recovering Women's Experience in Church History" (1990), and "How Ought Church Historians to do Church History?" (1992) point to a growing self-consciousness concerning church history as a discipline.
- 8. An informed recent analysis of the debate on secularization among Canadian historians can be found in Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower:* Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xv-xxvii.
- Ian Mckay, "CHR Forum: the Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *The Canadian Historical Review* 81 no. 4 (December 2000): 925, note 16.

- David Martin, A General Theory of Secularization (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1978); and José Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 11. Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.
- 12. I have elaborated this argument in "From Sea to Sea': Protestant Forms of a Christian Canada, 1812-1960," paper presented to the American Society of Church History Annual Spring Meeting, Montreal, April 17, 2009.
- Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustof, eds., *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe*, 1750-2000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.
- John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, ON: Welch 1988), 216; cited by Mark Noll in a more wide-ranging analysis, "What Happened to Christian Canada?" *Church History* 75, no.2 (June 2006): 252.
- 15. The reader is directed to the Cumulative Index of CSCH Papers (1960-2009), prepared for the Society's fiftieth anniversary and available on its website.
- 16. McLeod, Religious Crisis of the 1960s, 265.
- 17. Nor is it entirely absent in the United Church congregations where I have mainly worshipped since. The image may have experienced something of a time warp but the contours remain. They are evident in the aging congregation's intense concern with "faith and justice" issues, but also in its reenactment of a social and communal identity at variance with today's fragmented, busy and individualistic urban lifestyle. In 2004 I launched for theology students a course on church renewal with the provocative title (for the United Church) "Evangelism for Non-Evangelicals," in which presentations offered by guest ministers gave evidence of many contemporary vital and vibrant congregations within the old "mainline" denominations.
- Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
- Hence to focus on the "inner secularization" of, for example, Methodists and Presbyterians, or even the imprecise term "Protestants" becomes a mystifying experience.
- 20. The term also draws attention to commonalities, as well to the more recent interest in placing the Canadian experience within a larger trans-Atlantic context. See for example, Richard Todd Webb, "How the Canadian Methodists Became British: Unity, Schism, and Transatlantic Identity," in *Transatlantic Subjects*, ed. Nancy Christie (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 159-198, and Richard Vaudry, *Anglicans and the*

Atlantic World: High Churchmen, Evangelicals, and the Quebec Connection (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

- Robert N. Hall, ed., Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; Leigh Eric Schmidt, Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
- Robert Orsi, The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and James Opp, The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine, and Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880-1930 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
- Robert Orsi, "Have You Ever Prayed to Saint Jude?' Reflections Fieldwork in Catholic Chicago," in *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 146-176.