

## **Return to Christianity: Herbert Norman's Letter to his Brother Before his Suicide**

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### ***Return to Christianity or Remain in Christianity***

Herbert Norman committed suicide on 4 April 1957. Just one night before, he saw a Japanese movie about how deposed Shogun Minamoto Yoriie was killed in Shuzenji Hot Spring.<sup>1</sup> He was greatly shocked by the movie and under the pressure of McCarthyism he felt that he could never again see Japan, his beloved birthplace. He decided to commit suicide the next day and spent his last night writing three letters to family members.

One of the letters was sent to his older brother Howard and his wife Gwen, who were missionaries to Japan and resided in Kobe. In it Norman confessed his faith in Christianity. This confession is still a controversial issue in Canadian politics. Some view the letter as evidence of Norman's return to Christianity. Others, however, contend that Norman was still an agent of the Soviet Union and a strong believer in Communism and, accordingly, was merely pretending to return to Christianity in order to avoid damaging the reputation of his supervisor, Lester Pearson.<sup>2</sup>

Norman's suicide denied us the opportunity to procure direct evidence to resolve this controversy. Accordingly, we must consider indirect evidence, both psychological and historical. My personal circumstances allow me some insight into Norman's state of mind. Like Norman, I am a member of the United Church. I too have suffered from depression and considered committing suicide. Moreover, Norman may have been gay<sup>3</sup> and I am a transsexual. Finally, we have both moved

regularly between cultures.<sup>4</sup> I can imagine the difficulties he faced in the 1950s.

The United Church especially in Canada has traditionally been more tolerant of the beliefs of its members than have other denominations. There is no strict doctrine in the "United" tradition. This is especially true of the United Church of Canada due to the influence of the Canadian Methodist tradition, which emphasizes social concern and local charity rather than belief in strict doctrine.<sup>5</sup> When Norman, who was born in rural Japan and met many poor people there in early twentieth century, encountered the Great Depression and the bad behaviour of Canadian Government during his younger days in early 1930s, it is understandable that his social concern led him to study Marxism. And his decision to enter the Communist Party in Great Britain during his study abroad at Cambridge was not so curious in view his family's belief in the Social Gospel. Accordingly, I believe that, even in the 1930s, Norman embraced what might be called "loose Christian beliefs" and retained these beliefs until his death.

Okubo Genji, a famous translator and introducer of Norman's works to Japan, discussed Norman's letter to his brother<sup>6</sup> in his explanatory notes for the complete works of Herbert Norman. Okubo wrote that Norman's "Christianity saved him from false ideas." By this he meant that Christianity allowed Norman to continue to receive the love and care of his family. However, Okubo did not view Norman's return to Christianity as total or complete. Okubo also noted that Norman prayed several days before his commit suicide, so Christianity did not save his life. Yet, it connected him to his family and their beliefs. I define this attitude toward Christianity as "loose beliefs."

There are precedents for such "loose beliefs" in the United Church tradition. Lester Pearson, the son of a famous family of Canadian Methodist (and United Church) ministers, was on the verge of quitting the Church when he entered Victoria College in the University of Toronto. However, he had strong ties with the United Church executives and occasionally attended worship services.<sup>7</sup> Though he never became a Marxist or a Social Gospeller himself, social concerns inherited from his ancestors led to his "Middle Diplomatic Policy" after the World War II. John Endicott also espoused "loose beliefs." Endicott was a second-generation missionary to China with connections to Canada and the Chinese Communist Party. He became a secret agent of the OSS and Canada's Ministry of the State during the 1940s, and was involved in the peace movement led by Stalin's Soviet Union in the 1950s. Certainly,

many assumed that he and his wife Mary had renounced Christianity and become Marxists. Though it is true that, at the time, John and Mary believed communist countries had better conditions for peace and human rights, they never thought of themselves as having left Christianity. They merely thought the road to “pure Christianity” lay in Marxism.<sup>8</sup>

We should consider Herbert Norman’s thought regarding his reliance on Communism in 1930s in the same way. Before he entered communist movements, he had been strongly influenced by the Social Gospel movement through his brother Howard and his colleagues at Victoria College. During the Great Depression he pondered the nature of “pure Christianity” and sought an answer in communism. Also we should remember that many United Church members, including their families, expected him to become a second-generation missionary to Japan like his older sister and brother; his father, Daniel Norman, was very famous missionary. Moreover, Norman may have felt some peer pressure because many young people in the church, under the influence of their parents and others, wanted to become missionaries. Accordingly, he may have needed a “clear cut” reason not to become a missionary. “Leaving Christianity, and embracing communism” became Norman’s “clear cut” message to his family.<sup>9</sup>

I cannot determine when Norman finally abandoned his belief in communism and returned to his “loose beliefs” in Christianity. He was hired as a translator for the Canadian Legation in Tokyo in 1939 and then taken prisoner by the Japanese authorities after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He may not have abandoned his faith in communism at this point because, following his returning to North America as the result of an exchange of prisoners in 1942, he visited Tsuru Shigeto’s former apartment at Cambridge, Massachusetts in search of Marxism-related books, unaware that the apartment was under FBI surveillance. This resulted in the FBI listing Norman as a “suspicious person, a Marxist.” This is a very controversial event and one about which there have been many rumours. I heard from one source several years ago that when Tsuru Shigeto died, his oral history, based on interviews conducted by Kato Norihiro, would be published and that it would include recollections related to Herbert Norman issues. Tsuru died in February of 2006. Accordingly, we may find more evidence when this book is published. At this writing, we cannot determine whether Norman was a Marxist or not in 1942, but he may still have sympathized with Marxism at that time.

***Norman's Reaction to the Brutal Massacres by Stalin***

However, when he returned to Ottawa and was doing intelligence work related to Japan and East Asia for the Secretary of State, he may have had access to intelligence information on the situation in the Soviet Union. This may have included information regarding huge massacres and brutal events ordered by Stalin in the Soviet Union, because many western secret agents had already entered or resided in the Soviet Union and sent many reports at that time. If this were the case, it would have been a great shock to Norman. Thus, I suppose he returned from Marxism to loose Christianity sometime in the early 1940s.

When he returned to Japan in 1945, before the beginning of the Cold War, most people said they didn't sense the influence of communism in Norman's activities or thinking.<sup>10</sup> After he became a head of the Canadian Delegation in Tokyo, he relied heavily on Lester Pearson's leadership and, in addition to official letters, sent him many of personal letters<sup>11</sup> about private matters. Almost all of these personal letters that are contained in the National Archives of Canada are still closed to the public. However, there is some public evidence for Norman's reliance on Pearson. When Pearson attended the Commonwealth Foreign Minister's Conference held at Colombo, Ceylon at February 1950, he stopped over in Tokyo for several days on his return journey. He ordered Norman to make preparations for this stop over. At that time, Norman sent a very long, very sensitive letter, in the form of an official letter, in which he asked Pearson to become a kind of counsellor to him.<sup>12</sup> Pearson's reply was brief and businesslike. But we don't know what kind of conversation occurred between them in Tokyo. At the same time, the Secretary of State asked Norman to go to Moscow. Norman declined this offer because he wanted to work at the East Asian Section at Ottawa.<sup>13</sup> Norman might have been afraid to become a chief of the intelligence department in Moscow. It was surely dangerous job at that time.

The investigation by the RCMP of Norman, who was under suspicion as a Marxist, was part of a conspiracy against the group who cooperated with Pearson's diplomacy and an effort to undermine the "Middle Diplomacy Policy" led by Canada, Sweden and Australia. Norman was one of the weakest but most important people in the Pearson's group. Accordingly, he was targeted by "Cold War" supporters and ultimately committed suicide. It was surely a tragedy.

### ***The United Church's Position in the 1950s***

The Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec and other small Protestant denominations merged to form the United Church of Canada in 1925. Accordingly, in comparison to other denominations in North America in the 1950s, the Church did not have strict doctrines. It tolerated a "loose Christian attitude" among its members more than other churches did. However, in the 1950s, Canada was still dominated by European descendants and Canadians themselves regarded their country as a "Christian nation." There was no concept of "multiculturalism" or "cultural diversity" in Canada. Victorian style Christian ethics and British manners were still dominant among upper and middle class Canadians.<sup>14</sup> Most of the United Church members still honoured this style even though their actual beliefs were closer to "loose Christianity."

Many United Church members still believed in the superiority of the modern Euro-American living style and that it was their duty to promote it as a Christian mission in developing countries. The living style was described in Max Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*: Protestant people should study hard, become good workers, marry early and not divorce, and produce good citizens for the next generation. Also many people were concerned about Marx's pronouncement that "religion is the opiate of the masses" and feared that if communists occupied the world, religions might be banned and Christian churches would be oppressed by communists. In the context of the Cold War, this idea was justified.

Under these circumstances, many people who once "officially left" the church because they were fascinated with communism, a very different lifestyle from the Victorian lifestyle and ethics, felt it difficult to return to the Church officially, even the United Church of Canada which accepted "loose beliefs."

### ***The Difficulty of Returning to the United Church in the 1950s***

Norman might have wanted to return to the Church in order to avoid his suicide. He was born and grew up in a manse in rural Japan. Even though his belief in God was not firm, he still had some loose relationship with Christianity. After he left communism in the early 1940s, he might have needed another "reliable truth" to sustain him. Lester Pearson was a good advisor to him and he might have provided "reliable truths" to

Norman. However, Pearson was a very busy person and he could not be a psychologist to Norman. So he wanted another “reliable truth” to guard him in 1950s. The United Church of Canada should have provided the “reliable truth” for him at that time. But, under the circumstances, the United Church could not do so, and Norman never returned to it.

Norman committed a lonely suicide but stated his “return to Christianity” in his last letter to his brother. Reflecting from my feelings of a strong desire to commit suicide and other difficulties in my life, I think that people who are born and raised in any religious tradition would tend to want to revitalize his or her strong reliance on their religion in a time of crisis. Norman wanted to pray for God at the Church instead of committing suicide. What prevented Norman from returning to the Church in 1950s? It was the attitude of the Church. The United Church expected a “Christian-like” attitude from their members at that time. According to that attitude, Christians should wed a person of another gender, love that person monogamously forever, and raise some children and to become good citizens. For Christians, rejecting communism was also an important issue in the 1950s. So John Endicott suspended his ministership of the United Church<sup>15</sup> in 1956 as it was rumoured that he believed in communism, shortly following the death of the influential John Endicott, Sr.

In those circumstances, Norman felt many difficulties in returning to Christianity. He had no children, which caused many people to rumour that he was gay or that he had a girlfriend other than his wife. His life history of entering the British Communist Party in 1930s still made many United Church people think that he might be a communist. The United Church was not so “inclusive” for such people at that time.

Also the influence of McCarthyism was very strong even in Canada at that time. Under McCarthyism, one either believed in the superiority of western culture and Christianity, or he or she was a communist. There was no middle stance regarding the plurality of the cultures, middle diplomacy policy, and so on. From the point of view of McCarthyism, such people were a front for others who wanted to promote communism for the common people. At that time, many North American professionals who worked for mutual understanding among cultures, especially in communist countries and areas, were shunned by the common people. Norman was one of them.

Under these tough circumstances, Norman could not return to the Church even though he wanted to do so. From the point of view of salvation of Christ, the people of the Church showed bad judgement and

a superficial attitude. Even today, elements of this attitude remain and must be changed.

### ***Changes Since the 1950s***

After the transformation of Canada from an “Anglophone Superior Society” to the “Multicultural Society” in the 1960s,<sup>16</sup> Canadian churches gradually changed their attitude toward the people living in Canada. The United Church had once decided to merge with Anglican Church of Canada, but that effort failed in 1975. Afterwards, many older executives of the United Church lost their power and new, more liberal people took the reins.

Under their leadership, the United Church made many reforms. It apologized to the First Nations, allowed the ordination of gay ministers, provided stronger support for ethnic churches, and so on. With these reforms, many older members who loved Victorian manners and values left the church, and the younger members with more evangelistic ideas went to evangelical or fundamentalist churches. However, the people who still had “loose Christianity,” but hated strict-minded Victorian ethics and enthusiastic, charismatic Christianity returned to the church. These numbers are small compared to the number of people who left. However, if the church can become more inclusive and encourage more to return, it can play a great role in stabilizing society as a “dominant religion” in Canada.

So we should not judge people’s beliefs in a superficial atmosphere affected by secular culture. As Robert Bellah explained, some people express religious feelings as “Civil Religions.”<sup>17</sup> The task of the mainline churches is to take care of the souls of the religious-minded who lose their way in the secular world. I feel that mainline Protestant churches in North America are making efforts to do so, especially the United Church of Canada which has officially announced itself as an “Inclusive Church.” I recognize these efforts. However, many people still cannot return to the church today because they remember the “exclusiveness” of the church attitude.

If Herbert Norman were alive today, he might be welcomed back into the church. And he would probably live comfortably in a “loose Christianity” lifestyle, without huge mental or other problems. He might use his profound historical knowledge of North America and Asia to improve mutual understanding. So his situation in 1950s was tragic and we

should not repeat such a situation. How may we show our inclusiveness right now? I think we should reconsider Norman's beliefs and officially recognize his honour as a "sincere United Church member." Such efforts help churches regain the trust of ordinary people and may lead to the return of some people to the Church. Even though it is smaller than evangelical and charismatic churches, the United Church of Canada is a very important church that plays a significant role in the stabilization of society in North America.

### **Endnotes**

1. The showing of this movie was hosted by the Japanese Embassy in Cairo. The name of the movie was "Shuzenji Monogatari (Mask of Destiny)." It is generally thought that Norman's decision to commit suicide was precipitated by this film. This movie was a last time for him to recollect of his birthplace, Japan (Roger Bowen, *Innocence is not enough: The Life and Death of Herbert Norman* [Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986], 316).
2. Most supporters of the former interpretation were supporters of the Liberal Party or the New Democratic Party, and were mainline Christians or Catholics. Conversely, most who espoused the latter view were supporters of Progressive Conservative Party and were fundamentalist Christians. So the dispute was more political and religious than it was an investigation of the facts. And this dispute still continues. See, for instance, Bowen *Innocence is not Enough* and James Barros, *No Sense of Evil: Espionage, the case of Herbert Norman* (New York: Ivy Books, 1986).
3. At that time, Canadian law punished gay activity. So we cannot find any evidence to conclude whether Norman was gay or not. But rumours about Norman had strong influence in the society so we should consider such issues in this context (Miyoko Kudo, *Higeki no Gaikokan-Herbert Norman no Shogai* [Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989], 254).
4. Japanese feelings regarding suicide are totally different from those in western cultures. Japan has a "hara-kiri" suicide, which was conducted by samurai during the Middle Ages until early modern Japan (around 1870s). Hara-kiri was the "honourable death" for samurai. Norman's suicide was not a kind hara-kiri. However, he was strongly influenced by Japanese culture. He might have harboured some sympathy for "honour death" in his mind.
5. See, for example, Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).



6. Okubo Genji, ed., *Herbert Norman Zenshu: The Complete Works of Herbert Norman*, Vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978-79), 454.
7. John English, *Shadow of Heaven* (Toronto: Lester & Orphan Dennys, 1989), 16-17.
8. Please see my article, "Missionary, Reality for Diplomats," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2001): 65-80.
9. Letter from Norman to his family, Daniel Norman Papers, 16 January 1933, United Church Archives, Toronto, ON.
10. Bowen, *Innocence Is Not Enough*, 116-120.
11. Personal Letters from Herbert Norman to Lester Pearson are not yet open to the public. However, Norman mentioned that he wrote personal letters to Pearson in his official letter to Ottawa. We could assume many letters, maybe one per week, were sent to Pearson at that time.
12. Letter from Herbert Norman to Lester Pearson, 19 February 19, 1950, Lester Pearson Papers, National Archives of Canada (NAC), Ottawa, ON.
13. Letters between Herbert Norman and Secretary of State in early 1950. Papers of the Department of the Secretary of State, NAC.
14. At that time Canada was still a "Christian Country" with official hours of Christian radio shows during the 1950s. Many sincere church members flourished in the 1950s.
15. It was decided by the General Assembly of the United Church of Canada in 1956.
16. Lester Pearson's "Biculturalism" in 1964, and Pierre Trudeau's "Multiculturalism" declared in 1968 changed Canadian Society very clearly.
17. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

