Richard Roberts: A Case Study in Liberal Protestantism in Canada During the Interwar Years[1]

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During the nineteenth century powerful intellectual currents and changing material conditions resulted in a mounting challenge to the theological underpinnings of mainstream Protestantism in Canada. Ideas such as Darwin's theory of evolution, the higher criticism and the rise of social science, on the one hand, and the debilitating social effects of industrialization, on the other, encouraged clergymen to explore new ways of combining faith and reason, and to re-conceptualize the relationship between Christianity and the social order. While historians generally agree that together these two broad forces transformed mainstream Protestantism, the nature and effect of this transformation is greatly contested.[2] Two interrelated questions have polarized the debate. First, did clergymen subvert the message of mainstream Protestantism by embracing liberal theology, or did liberal Protestantism maintain a continuity between traditional tenets and new developments within modern society? Second, did liberal theology promote a shift from religious activism to secular social action, or did it embrace the notion of service as an integral part of one's religious commitment?

In this article I want to explore these issues through a case study of Richard Roberts, an influential clergyman and religious leader in the United Church of Canada during much of the interwar period.[3] Born in Wales in 1874, Roberts was trained as a minister in the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church and went on to preach in several Methodist and later Presbyterian churches in London, England, and then at the Church of the

Pilgrims in New York.[4] By the time he was called in 1921 to the American Presbyterian Church in Montreal, he was already an internationally renowned preacher, religious activist and pacifist.[5] But from 1927 to 1938, the main period under consideration in this article, Roberts preached at Sherbourne St. United Church, one of the most prestigious and wealthy churches in Toronto, counting among its congregation such men as Sir Joseph Flavelle, Sir Edward Kemp and H.H. Fudger of the Robert Simpson Company.[6] Having read broadly in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, philosophy and scientific thought, moreover, he not only attracted university and theological students in both Montreal and Toronto by the quality of his sermons but was also frequently asked to speak to local branches of the Student Christian Movement.[7] He helped train ministerial candidates, lecturing at Emmanuel College in 1927 and again in 1933. Between 1925 and 1937 Roberts wrote a weekly devotional column in the United Church's official organ, the *New Outlook*. During the interwar years he also wrote over a dozen articles, pamphlets and books, on subjects ranging from pacifism and social reform to the reformulation of liberal Protestant theology. Finally, Roberts was also a prominent and highly respected figure in the United Church's Toronto conference as well as on such national committees as the Commission on Evangelism and the Commission on Christianizing the Social Order; indeed, from 1934 to 1936 he served as Moderator of the United Church.[8]

Case studies, of course, have their limitations, above all in focusing on an individual rather than the larger context. In the first half of the twentieth century, mainstream theologians and preachers were involved in a transatlantic debate over how to rearticulate theology in the face of modern thought. As a result, by the 1920s evangelical Protestantism had been transformed into three broad varieties of faith: fundamentalism and its opposite, modernism, both of which have received attention, and in the middle a liberal Protestantism of which currently little is known.[9] While a comprehensive study of the United Church and its leaders does not as yet exist, historians have suggested that it was formed in 1925 within this middle strand of faith. Indeed, they argue, leaders of the United Church such as John Baillie and George Pidgeon followed thinkers like Nathanael Burwash and George Munro Grant, who consistently worked to reconcile evangelical beliefs with the demands and concerns of a new social order.[10] Roberts' thought, then, must be understood within the broad context of theological reformulation of the times and within the particular tradition

of rearticulation inherited by the United Church.

In the absence of a larger synthesis, however, a case study is not without its advantages. First, such an approach can provide a detailed portrait of one prominent clergyman's attempt to rethink liberal Protestantism in light of his understanding of the relationship between religion and scientific thought, and between society and Christianity. Secondly, it provides an opportunity to explore, admittedly on a limited scale, developments in a period that have either been neglected by historians primarily interested in mainstream Protestantism around the turn of the century, or which have been treated as a mere epilogue to the pre-war years.[11] In the pages that follow I will pursue both of these issues by examining Roberts' theological ideas, his views on religious and social reform, and his understanding of evangelization, a central notion in his conception of the ministry.

During the early 1920s, as Roberts was settling in to minister to his Canadian congregation, he began to realize the extent to which late nineteenth-century intellectual and social changes within western society had not only called various tenets of classical Protestantism into question, but had also resulted in their alteration. In Roberts' view it was especially Darwin's theory of evolution that had fundamentally challenged Protestants' conception of God. Traditionally, God had been thought of as the focal point of the universe, a supernatural being transcending human history who had not only created the human species but also intervened in the human sphere of existence. Evolutionary theory, however, suggested an entire universe in the process of development and thus an immanent God not only present and involved in the improvement of humanity within the natural world, but as such, also limited by its processes. The widespread acceptance of the theory of evolution, Roberts argued, had led to the dominance, among late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century mainstream Protestants, of a liberal theology emphasizing God's immanence at the expense of the evangelical understanding of God's transcendence.[12]

By the late 1920s, Roberts had become critical of this pre-war theology primarily on the grounds that it did not provide a basis for understanding central concepts of traditional Protestant belief. The thought of liberal Protestants was fundamentally inconsistent: they believed in traditional doctrines, such as the Incarnation or Resurrection, and practised religious exercises such as prayer, all of which suggested a transcendent God, while at the same time fundamentally changing these doctrines by

interpreting God's nature as immanent. Thus, the Incarnation had come to be understood as Jesus "coming up from the ranks," while God was understood to work within or through individuals and society.[13]

Roberts' critique was no vague yearning for a return to traditional Protestantism or for a shift to fundamentalism, for neither of these, he claimed, could incorporate new scientific discoveries. Nor was it a repudiation of the immanent God conceived by liberal Protestants to incorporate evolutionary theory. Rather, he believed that neither the concept of a transcendent God nor that of an immanent God could, on its own, provide a sound theological base for modern Protestantism.[14] What was needed, he argued, was a synthesis of these two theological notions.

In his concern during the 1920s and 1930s to reconcile a God completely within the process with one also reaching down towards humankind, Roberts drew selectively on the thought of A.N. Whitehead.[15] This eminent philosopher and mathematician conceived of God as having two poles, the physical and the mental. He described all existence, from God to the smallest organism, as "actual entities" and contended that the "world process consists in the becoming of these actual entities."[16] While God's physical pole was limited and in the process of becoming such an entity, God's mental pole was "unchanging, complete, the source of all ideas and possibilities."[17] These actual entities formed part of "eternal objects" and thus possessed a universal quality that on the one hand was present in God, waiting to be realized through the development and coalescence of actual entities, and on the other hand flowed from God and thus aided the process of realization.[18] Whitehead's thought thus articulated for Roberts a philosophical justification for understanding God as both absolute and evolving.

Roberts' theology during the interwar years illustrates his attempt to combine liberal and evangelical thought by means of Whitehead's notion of a God who was both supernatural and who worked within the evolutionary process. For example, Roberts believed that Jesus was "the ultra-human `emergent' in the course of biological development,"[19] and Christians therefore ought to shape their lives by following the example of Jesus as exemplified by His life and teachings.[20] But how could a perfect human appear so early in the evolutionary process? Was not Jesus a "contradiction of a theory of gradual development?"[21] As early as 1912, Roberts argued that Jesus Christ was an example of God's intervention in human affairs and thus while Christ was of this world, it was as one from the other world that He was worshipped by Christians.[22]

For Roberts it was not Jesus' birth or life but rather his crucifixion, symbolized by the cross, which was the most significant event in recorded history.[23] He argued that theology had lost the elements of reproach and shame that the cross had traditionally represented and that it was imperative these elements be restored.[24] Where early nineteenth-century evangelicals had viewed individuals as inherently sinful, turn-of-the-century liberal Protestants stressed the inherent goodness of humans and the need for social rather than individual salvation.[25] Consequently, the importance placed by evangelicals on the cross as a symbol of human sin and the need for repentance had become de-emphasized in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with the notion of personal salvation achieved "through losing oneself in the social task"[26] becoming dominant.

Roberts both decried the loss by liberal Protestants of the emphasis placed on the cross, and at the same time, saw a need to rearticulate the evangelical doctrine of original sin. The cross, he believed, represented the constant conflict within humans of having to choose between good and evil, and as such forced a choice upon individuals as to the path they would follow.[27] Yet, while emphasizing the notion of individual sin, Roberts interpreted this traditional concept within the framework of evolutionary theory. Repudiating the notion of inevitable progress that prevailed in the pre-war strain of liberal Protestantism, Roberts argued that evolution implied the need for continuous struggle without which degeneracy would occur. Consequently, he defined sin as anything that hindered individual or societal evolution, and he considered part of the nature of sin to be a relapse by individuals and society to a standard of morality inferior to that previously attained, or to any point at which humans no longer strove to achieve the highest possible moral and spiritual level.[28]

Utilizing such basic Christian concepts as Jesus, the cross and sin, Roberts synthesized key elements of liberal and evangelical thought. He affirmed central concepts of evangelicalism, such as a transcendent God, the cross as a symbol of human sin and as a reminder of the need for repentance and forgiveness, and Jesus as evidence of God's intervention in earthly affairs. Yet he combined these with the more recent emphasis by liberal Protestants on an immanent God by stressing the ideas of the indwelling Christ and of Jesus as the perfect human.

Roberts recognized the inconsistencies in his synthesis; as he stated, "logically, transcendence and immanence are irreconcilable notions."[29] Yet

he argued that "the best thought of our time leads us to the idea of a transcendent immanent eternally self-perfecting Absolute."[30] Until a more comprehensive theology emerged, he was willing to live with a theological system that, while paradoxical, was more complete he believed than anything else proposed. But he did not hold this position to be final.[31] He considered the rearticulation of theology to be a constant process and warned that "we shall probably have to build and to discard many a system of theology" before achieving the one which would be absolute.[32]

Roberts was not presenting simply a personal religion but rather a faith which emphasized the relationship between Christian men and women and their society. However, just as he had become critical of pre-war liberal Protestants' stress on God's immanence, so he decried their exclusive focus on the idea of social transformation. While he acknowledged that the social gospel movement had been important in awakening the conscience of Christians to their social responsibilities, he claimed this more modern understanding of Christianity was insufficient. Reform movements or the equal distribution of the world's goods would not necessarily result in the Kingdom of God.[33] Rather, a lasting social transformation would only occur as a result of a spiritual and moral change, as people's lives became redirected by God's principles. Consequently, he believed humans had two inseparable tasks: to achieve personality and to create community.[34] Personality, which he defined not as individuality but as the essence within humanity that all held in common could only be realized through community life.[35] Yet at the same time the community had to provide the opportunity for the fulfilment of personality. Thus it was imperative that Christians be involved in social reform so that they improve temporal conditions in order to allow for the growth of the human personality and thereby ensure the true transformation of the social order.

Roberts' thought on the social order was influenced by his own youth spent in witnessing the hardships faced by the men and women of his Welsh quarrying community, by ministries among working people, by his support for the emerging Independent Labour Party and later the Labour Party of Britain, by the destruction caused by war, and during the 1930s by the suffering caused by the Great Depression. All these experiences shaped and reinforced his view of the need for fundamental changes within society. To this end he advocated the establishment of a real living wage and unemployment insurance so that all would be

provided with economic security and sufficiency, housing and leisure time. Moreover, he called for the elimination of the profit motive in the economic system and its replacement by a society based on co-operation. Profits, he contended, provoked and perpetuated conflict between individuals, classes and nations. For an equitable and just society, commerce needed to be conceived as a social service.[36] In a co-operative society, where owner and worker were reconciled through Jesus Christ, "Capital and Labour might work out something deeper than industrial peace—a living creative fellowship in the interests of the community."[37]

Roberts' criticism of the existing system did not, however, translate into unqualified support for the Christian left. Christian radicalism, which according to Richard Allen emerged out of the disintegrating social gospel movement, gained a stronghold within the United Church in the early 1930s.[38] Such radicalism resulted in the creation in 1934 of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO) – an inter-denominational organization for those interested in social reconstruction which was primarily led by and composed of men and women in the United Church.[39] Concerned about the suffering caused by massive unemployment, and looking for co-operative and social democratic solutions to the economic problems of the 1930s, many leading members of the United Church's left wing also became involved in secular social reform movements such as the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR) and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.[40]

Distressed by the effects of the Depression, Christian socialists within Roberts' denomination put forward a report at the 1933 Toronto Conference of the United Church that aimed at transforming society. The report, drawn up by the Conference's Committee on Evangelism and Social Service, declared capitalism to be against Christian principles and called for a system based on co-operation.[41] It also called for the development of welfare programs, such as social insurance and a minimum wage, to aid Canadian workers hit by the Depression, and for the "socialization of banks, natural resources, transportation and other service industries which under private ownership gave too much power over the subsistence of the people to special interests."[42] While the report was adopted, immediately after the vote fifty-five clergymen, Roberts among them, registered their dissent.

There is little evidence to explain why Roberts adopted this position. Examining the incident, John Webster Grant has claimed that Roberts was

in fact sympathetic to many of the aims of the report,[43] a claim that is substantiated by Roberts' writings on the social order. David Marshall has suggested that Roberts' dissent was occasioned by his opposition to the church sanctioning a specific political or economic program. Marshall contends that Roberts was in effect charging the Conference with adopting the program of the LSR.[44] There is some plausibility to this suggestion. Roberts did not believe that party politics belonged in the pulpit. The church, he argued, contained members of different political persuasions; not until a consensus developed as to the type of action that should be taken to change the social order should a particular vision of society be officially adopted.[45] Possibly a stronger reason for his position, however, was that the 1933 report had not addressed the spiritual concerns central to his thought. While putting forward a program to transform the existing social system, it had not addressed ways in which to effect an inner transformation of people's lives.

This concern comes more clearly into relief if one examines Roberts' position towards the FCSO. This group adhered to the liberal Protestant position of God's justice and Jesus as the purveyor of an ethic of love. Reaffirming social gospel thought, they also emphasized the need to focus on the community and relieve those suffering from unfair economic conditions.[46] The FCSO argued that, while Jesus had worked for victims, the United Church was becoming too supportive and too closely linked to the dominant interests within society. What was needed was for church members to follow the life and teachings of Jesus to create a just society.[47] However, as Christian socialists, they were also convinced that the creation of such a society entailed the destruction of the capitalist system, which transgressed Christian principles in its exploitation of human beings, its failure to provide material benefits for all, its encouragement of an acquisitive spirit perverting human morality and its tendency to induce war. Social justice, they claimed, would only prevail when industry had been socialized and thus production made to benefit the interests of the entire Christian community.[48]

Roberts' thinking was similar enough to that of the FCSO that he agreed to write the Foreword to their main political tract, *Towards the Christian Revolution*. He recommended the book as an "important contribution to the current discussion of the ends and values of a Christian society, and the ways and means of achieving it."[49] However, it may be surmised that his support for the work, which presented the same ideas as

the 1933 report adopted at the Toronto Conference, was grounded in the belief that it contributed to a "discussion" within the church. While it presented a particular vision of society and proposed a program of social reform that could be implemented unlike the 1933 report it was not being put forward at a church Conference to be adopted as official policy. Rather, it was part of the process of enabling the church to develop a position on social issues.

Roberts' involvement in the Commission on Christianizing the Social Order, which at the 1932 General Council of the United Church he had called for in order that the church address some of the problems caused by the Depression, further clarifies how his approach differed from those of Christian socialists within the United Church. Between 1932 and 1934 Roberts aided the chair, Sir Robert Falconer, in drafting the Commission's report.[50] The purpose of the Commission was to articulate Christian standards and principles for the social order, to determine to what extent these principles prevailed, and to establish measures for their implementation, in order to enable the Spirit of Christ to transform all those institutions alien to this Spirit as well as to pervade society, thereby ensuring that all might enjoy a full Christian life.[51]

The Commission identified the main problem in the social order as that of economic insecurity, which it claimed led to conflict between classes and dulled workers' creative powers by reducing their available time and energy for higher pursuits. Such insecurity, it stated, was the result of the dominant "unsocial" spirit of acquisition, which emphasized the accumulation of profits through competition and allowed for individual prestige and domination based on wealth.[52] For social justice, the Commission argued, basic material needs first had to be met, and equal opportunity and equitable prices for the consumer had to be introduced.[53] Moreover, the conscientious worker and efficient manager needed to be united in "a new spirit in Industry which will place co-operation for the general good above competition for private advantage."[54] To achieve such a society, Christians first had to be careful to practise their faith both in their personal and public lives.[55] Second, Christians were to study the existing social order in groups in order to arouse their consciences against injustices within the system and seek measures which might prevent or eliminate such injustices. Third, when there appeared to be a consensus among members of the church as to the type of action to be taken, the General Council would bring this to the attention of the public and political

leaders "in the hope that they may devise methods of reform which seem to promise improvement."[56]

Members of the FCSO welcomed the report as being a sound analysis of the injustices of capitalism and as affirming the United Church's position on transforming society, but at the same time they felt that the report had not gone far enough.[57] They agreed with an appended anonymous minority report, by several members of the Commission, that questioned whether any change to the social order was possible while the existing system survived. In other words, could the Christian ethic be realized, the common good be conceived as the social goal, the desire for profit and adherence to the acquisitive spirit be eliminated, without first establishing a social order based on communal ownership and control?[58]

The FCSO's support for the minority report illustrates once again the difference between the position Roberts adopted and that of the FCSO. Roberts considered the report on Christianizing the Social Order, like the FCSO publication, *Towards the Christian Revolution*, to be a working document for discussion among church members concerning the problems within the existing social order and possible measures by which to create a Christian society. He believed, as the Report of the Commission on Christianizing the Social Order sets out, that this process of discussion was a necessary step in reaching a consensus within the church as to the direction it should take regarding the reform of the social system. The Commission's report, like the 1933 Toronto Conference report, did put forward a particular vision of society; unlike the 1933 report, however, it would not become official church policy, but rather was to be used as a foundation upon which a church position could be built. In addition, while it bore all the hallmarks of Roberts' social reform thought, namely a vision of a co-operative society where through Jesus Christ workers and managers worked towards the social good to eliminate economic insecurity, it also addressed his spiritual concerns. It directly expressed the purpose of social reform as being to enable individuals to live a Christian life. It argued that reform was needed to enliven workers' creative powers. And finally, it endorsed both a personal and social understanding of Christianity by encouraging adherents to practise their faith in their personal and public lives, to study social issues in communal groups and to develop a social position that, by providing the potential for the development of personality, would lead to the opportunity of creating a more Christian society.

For Roberts, individuals' beliefs and their temporal lives were in-

tricately connected. The development of the human personality, or in other words, the growth of the human spirit, could only be achieved in a social setting. The purpose of the community was to provide the opportunity for human creativity and thus enable the elevation of humanity. When creative growth was being restricted, it was imperative that the conditions of that restriction, whether economic, political or social, be reformed. Reform of the social order on a vast scale, however, could not be successfully achieved overnight but had to occur gradually and through consensus. At the same time Roberts emphatically insisted that in order for reform to lead to a lasting social transformation, society had to be based upon Christian principles.

Yet if reform was to create the potential for the development of the human personality, how, in fact, did Roberts believe individuals would learn to accept and to become guided by Christian principles? How, indeed, was "a new principle of life" to be established? During the nineteenth century, evangelicals believed that such a change could only be brought about through individual salvation, a process involving "repentance and conversion and the acceptance of a disciplined life that reflected a spiritual transformation."[59] Often this was achieved through revivalism, a form of evangelization whereby a preacher exhorted a large gathering to repent of their sins, receive the Word of God and be immediately converted.[60] Yet recently historians have argued that by the early-twentieth century this traditional understanding of evangelization was no longer a part of most mainstream Protestants' religious beliefs. David Marshall, for example, contends that with the widespread acceptance of liberal Protestantism, the central features of evangelization disappeared. In fact, he claims, they were to be forgotten until the spiritual depression of the 1930s led clergymen to proclaim the need for a traditional religious revival.[61] While Phyllis Airhart thinks the traditional concept of evangelization did not disappear but, rather, was transformed, she does argue that the revivalism central to Methodism in the nineteenth century had, by 1925, been replaced by a non-revivalist approach to piety.[62]

During the interwar years Roberts not only concurred with evangelicals' notion of spiritual change through evangelization, but he placed this notion at the centre of his conception of the ministry. At the same time, however, he radically changed the evangelical understanding of the process of evangelization. For example, revivals, he contended, could occur at any time and place and disappear as quickly as they had appeared.

Consequently, the preacher, he claimed, ought to be prepared to harness the spirit of revivalism and keep it alive. This he would do primarily through his sermon. To this end, preaching needed, through both rational and emotional appeal, to provoke a commitment from the congregation to Jesus, to move them to lead a disciplined and devotional life,[63] and to encourage fellowship with God and other individuals through individual and corporate prayer.[64] However, he cautioned, evangelization was not to be a popular affair that would cheapen public worship. Roberts disliked the sensationalized preaching and the stunts that often accompanied mass evangelization. Evangelistic efforts, he believed, ought to occur within individual churches, led by the preacher, emphasizing religious growth through Christian nurture rather than sudden conversion, and drawing on both emotion and reason.[65]

Roberts' activities as Moderator of the United Church were based on this view of evangelization. In 1934 Roberts was appointed Moderator for two years. Within a few months of his appointment, he set out in the *New Outlook* his impression of the particular direction that the United Church membership seemed to indicate the denomination ought to take, as well as the type of leadership he would attempt to provide. Church members, Roberts believed, desired a spiritual renewal:

> There is today a rising tide of earnest and persistent desire for definite and sustained concentration upon the spiritual offices of the church, evangelism, the culture of the inner life, the revivification of public worship, the study of the Scriptures and the quickening of fellowship in the deep things of God. These are the things that give the church its meaning; when these fail, or cease, then the Church's life falls into routine and dullness and its impact upon the unregenerate world is compromised and may even cease altogether.[66]

Essentially, Roberts believed his task as Moderator was to provide the necessary leadership to help initiate the process of spiritual quickening within the United Church. To this end, he planned to travel to strategic centres across the country. He wanted to remain in one location for five days, from Sunday to Thursday. While his agenda would be organized by local committees, he would address as many congregations of the area as possible as well as hold a day of spiritual retreat for ministers.[67]

Roberts did not, however, see renewal as a task for the ministry

alone. Only if church members participated in the process would his mission succeed. He not only believed that the laity should be involved in church life, organizing and leading church activities, for example, but that they had a direct role to play in the process of evangelization and spiritual renewal. Consequently he asked every church member to undertake preparation through personal prayer to receive the visitation of the Spirit.[68] At the same time, the spiritual renewal which Roberts hoped his mission would accomplish was not solely for the spiritual betterment of United Church members. He believed that such renewal would lead to "a new passion for social righteousness" and to a Christianity which would "find its proper corporate expression in the creation of a Christian social and world order."[69]

While Robert's concept of evangelization was not a return to the position held by nineteenth-century evangelicals, it does mark a greater continuity with traditional Protestantism than some historians have allowed for. Roberts did affirm traditional forms of piety such as daily prayer, spiritual renewal through belief in Jesus Christ and commitment to a disciplined life. Yet he also in important ways transformed this piety. For example, conversion did not necessarily need to be a direct and immediate religious experience, but rather could occur gradually through the influence of the sermon and regular religious education. Evangelization was to occur in the form of small revivals among individual congregations with the preacher sustaining a long-term religious fervour. Moreover, Roberts' understanding of evangelization corresponded to his religious and social reform thought: it was only if individuals accepted God's Word that human personality would flourish, that society would become based on Christian principles, and that, therefore, true and lasting social transformation would occur.

In his religious thought, in his understanding of the relationship between Christianity and society, and in his conception of evangelization, Roberts neither wholeheartedly embraced liberal theology nor compromised the supernatural elements of his faith. Rather, he combined elements of the old evangelical creed with liberal thought. In his theology, he emphasized central concepts of evangelicalism such as a transcendent God and the cross as a symbol of human sin and a reminder of the need for repentance. Yet he combined these with more liberal notions such as divine immanence and Jesus as the perfect human. Similarly, in his religious and social reform thought he blended the social gospel idea of the need for

a social transformation with the traditional evangelical belief in individual spiritual growth. Neither individual nor social regeneration was sufficient in and of itself, for social transformation, he argued, could only occur as individuals accepted God's Word. Indeed, Roberts' stress on the concept of evangelization was primarily aimed at achieving this spiritual renewal. To this end he rearticulated it for modern society by emphasizing the notion of revivals in small groups within individual churches, led by a preacher who drew on both emotion and reason to aid the gradual acceptance and commitment to God's principles.

This attempt at a synthesis of traditional and more modern beliefs was a result partly of Roberts' concern that the older forms of faith could not incorporate new scientific discoveries or address modern socio-economic conditions. Yet it was also necessary, he argued, because of the inability of the pre-war expression of liberal Protestantism to provide a theological base for understanding central concepts of traditional belief, or to provide the strong spiritual motive to ensure lasting social transformation. This case study suggests that the liberal theology that gained widespread acceptance at the turn of the century was not the final solution that clergymen offered to modern intellectual and socio-economic conditions, but rather that theological reformulation was a constant and on-going process.[70] During the interwar years, therefore, Roberts was involved in a major reinterpretation of the liberal Protestantism that had arisen prior to the First World War.

Any conclusions based primarily on the thought of one person, no matter how prominent and influential, must necessarily be tentative. What has been demonstrated, however, is that while there may have been those whose acceptance of liberal theology led them away from their churches as they sought the means to achieve immediate social reform, Roberts represents a more temperate response. Indeed, in his attempt to posit a synthesis of the logically opposed concepts arising out of evangelical and liberal Protestantism, Roberts was in fact reconciling an abiding Christian faith and piety with the intellectual, social and economic changes occurring within modern Christian society.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Dr. Marguerite Van Die for her support and encouragement, and acknowledge the funding received from Queen's University's School of Graduate Studies and Research.

2. The literature on Canadian religious history can be roughly divided into the work of those historians who argue that the changes in mainstream Protestantism helped create a more secular society, and of those who believe that such changes were part of the on-going process of theological reformulation. For the former position see Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1985); David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992); and A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1979). For the latter position see Phyllis D. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1992); Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1989); and Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterians, Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1988).

3. Several historians have commented in brief and opposing ways on Roberts' religious thought and activities. See Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1991), 265-68; John Webster Grant, *George Pidgeon: A Biography* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962), 124; Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 196-201, 245-47; and Thomas Socknat *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1987), 100-105.

4. Richard Roberts, Autobiographical Manuscript, n.d., Box 1, 20, Richard Roberts Papers, United Church of Canada Archives (UCCA); Gwen R.P. Norman, "Richard Roberts," 1, 26-59, unpublished manuscript, UCCA.

5. Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 100-101.

6. Michael Bliss, *A Canadian Millionaire: The Life and Times of Sir Joseph Flavelle, Bart., 1858-1939* (Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1978), 62, 88.

7. Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 104; Gwen R.P. Norman, interview by author, 10 August 1993, Toronto.

8. Roberts died in 1945 in the United States, where he had been preaching and leading ministerial retreats (Norman, "Richard Roberts," 131-38, 146).

9. Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 373-76; George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 182-84; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 117; and William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), 2.

10. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 136; Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 257-58, 265-271; Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 194.

11. For examples of the former treatment see Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*; Cook, *The Regenerators*; Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*; Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*. For the latter see Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971), and Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*. Gauvreau's *The Evangelical Century* is the only study that begins to examine theology in the 1920s on its own merits.

12. Richard Roberts, "The Theological Dilemma in America," *The Hibbert Journal* XXV (October 1926-July 1927): 140-41; Richard Roberts, "The Scope of Theology," unpublished lecture, 1927, 15-17, Box 4, 112, Richard Roberts Papers, UCCA.

13. Roberts, "The Theological Dilemma in America," 142.

14. Robert, "The Scope of Theology," 4.

15. Robert, "The Scope of Theology," 14.

16. John Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1963), 264.

17. Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, 264.

18. Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought*, 264-266.

19. Roberts, "The Scope of Theology," 18.

20. Richard Roberts, *The Christian God* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1929), 69.

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