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Aspects of Canadian Evangelical Historiography

ROBERT K. BURKINSHAW

This presentation examines the study of the history of evangelicalism in Canada by describing and explaining the changes which have occurred during the last several decades as historians have turned from virtual neglect of evangelical history to placing a significant, and growing, emphasis upon it. The essay also outlines some of the directions in that historiography as indicated at a major conference held at Queen’s University in May 1995.

Two incidents, separated by about seventeen years, illustrate from a personal vantage point some of the dramatic changes which have occurred recently in the historical study of Canadian evangelicalism. The first occurred at the University of British Columbia (UBC) during the late 1970s. As an undergraduate considering future studies, I told a member of the history department of my growing interest in studying the history of Canadian evangelicalism. He was sympathetic but responded, “I don’t believe you can do that at any university in Canada.”

The second occurred at Queen’s University in May 1995. The occasion was a conference of historians entitled, “Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience.” I understand that it was the largest, best-funded conference dealing with any aspect of the history of religion ever held in Canada. Approximately 100 people registered for the four days of meetings with larger crowds attending the public evening sessions. Most of the
participants were Canadians, but the conference also drew some prominent historians from Britain, the USA and Australia. Furthermore, several display tables were filled with recent scholarly books on various aspects of Canadian evangelical history.

I propose to look at some of the reasons for the major shift from such scant historical interest in Canadian evangelical history to significant attention and suggest some of the current directions in research and writing. I am aware that evangelicalism is just one of several areas of study undertaken by members of this society but hope that all members will gain some insights from this survey.

The Shift

Many in this audience will no doubt remember a time when there appeared to be a nearly all-pervasive aversion to religion in general as a category of historical enquiry. All but the younger members, perhaps, will recall a period in which many historians, particularly in English Canada, engaged in a process of “reading backwards” from a quite secular modern era, and thus missed much of the importance of religion in Canadian history. Or they will recall when large numbers of historians were, for ideological reasons, uninterested or opposed to focusing on religion.

Further, some members of CSCH will remember the particular aversion to evangelical history which, in addition to the above mentioned difficulties, suffered from other handicaps. Michael Gauvreau summarizes some of the impressions common among Canadian academics regarding evangelicalism:

. . . the mental universe of nineteenth-century evangelicals emerges . . . (from literary works) as something of a caricature of Calvinism, a closed, inflexible system of “orthodox” theological doctrines, a brittle mind-set destined inevitably to shatter after 1860 under the hammerblows of “Darwinism” and the higher criticism. And, to further confirm the literary and historical revolt against “Victorianism,” Canadians in the 1970s and 1980s have witnessed the scorn directed towards the resurgence in North America of a politically active, conservative “fundamentalist” Protestantism which has appropriated the designation “evangelical.” The word “evangelicalism” thus incarnates not only the opprobrium against “Victorianism” by a self-proclaimed literary and cultural “avant-garde,” but raises the spectre of a militant
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anti-modernism engaged in a successful undermining of scientism, pluralism and tolerance, the supposed hallmarks of a liberal society. For most English Canadians, “evangelicalism” is thus viewed as a Victorian skeleton best hidden in the closet. Yet, by the late 1980s and early 1990s increasing numbers of Canadian scholars were paying attention to the significant role of evangelicals in the history of English Canada. Graduate students are currently researching aspects of the topic at numerous Canadian universities including McGill, Toronto, Queen’s, British Columbia, Carleton, McMaster and Memorial. Numbers of scholarly books are being written and published by several university presses. In 1994 one of the officials at McGill-Queen’s University Press noted that their series, “Studies in the History of Religion,” in which volumes dealing with Canadian evangelicalism play a significant part, was selling better than almost all of their other academic series.

Why has the change occurred? Why has Canadian evangelical historical study metamorphosed from a scholarly “wasteland” to one of our new “growth industries?”

Firstly, we have to note the role of American studies. I am one of those who argue that Canadian evangelicalism is far more than being simply an import from the United States, but in this case American scholars such as Timothy L. Smith, Ernest Sandeen, George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll and Joel Carpenter have provided models for Canadians to follow. Their sophisticated and respected studies have shown it is possible for academic historians to take evangelicalism seriously as a subject without sacrificing their own scholarly integrity. George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture* for example, helped pave the way for certain members of the history department at UBC to look more favourably upon my 1982 proposal to study twentieth-century evangelicals in British Columbia.

Secondly, we must note the role of Canadian scholars. Mention of the 1995 conference at Queen’s brings to mind the name of George Rawlyk, professor of History at Queen’s and organizer of the conference. Rawlyk’s own work on revivalism, especially in the Maritimes, has been trailblazing in its own right. Further, he has frequently included a strong apologetic element in his writing, calling for a recognition by historians of the major, culture-shaping role of the revivalist tradition in much of
English Canada. His McGill-Queen’s series, “Studies in the History of Religion,” while including volumes dealing with a broad range of Christian traditions, has provided an important forum for a number of historians studying various aspects of Canadian evangelicalism. Finally, the large group of graduate students under his supervision at Queen’s provides evidence of both his influence and of the ongoing and future vitality in this area of research.

Other Canadian scholars have also played an important role in this change. The works of William Westfall, Marguerite Van Die, Michael Gauvreau, Phyllis Airhart, John G. Stackhouse and David R. Elliot, among others, have gained growing recognition and respect. While it should be noted that these scholars have received a great deal of encouragement and help from older Canadian historians such as John W. Grant, John S. Moir, Ian Rennie and George Rawlyk and from Americans such as Martin Marty and Mark Noll, it should also be pointed out that this society has provided an important forum for the work of most of them. The members of the CSCH, most of whose primary research interests lay in forms of Christianity other than evangelicalism, have expressed interest in, and provided encouragement for, work on evangelical topics and have thus played an important role in the development of a Canadian evangelical historiography.

These scholars have been aided by, and have contributed to, the movement of religion in general in English-speaking Canada into the “mainstream” of historical enquiry. Michael Owen refers to the work of historians of religion such as John W. Grant in raising awareness that “. . . religion has been an integral element of the way in which Canadians have confronted the broader society.” Marguerite Van Die, in her 1992 CSCH Presidential Address, points out that the recognition of religion as a valid subject for research is largely due to refinements in social history which have led to religion being “. . . recognized as a significant force in the modernization of western society.” Because evangelicalism has often taken the form of a populist religious movement in Canada and elsewhere, and has attracted large numbers of workers and women among others, it has become increasingly difficult for social historians to ignore it.

Ironically, a new type of “backward reading,” a reversal of the earlier form which saw evangelicalism as a fading remnant of the Victorian era, has come to the fore in recent decades. By the late 1970s it began to become clear that Canadian evangelicalism would not disappear but was
indeed showing increased signs of vitality. Whether or not evangelicalism has actually grown in proportion to the national population since the mid-twentieth century has been the subject of some discussion, but it clearly has survived better than its more liberal, mainline Protestant counterpart. This relative growth in the modern era has forced scholars to take evangelicalism in Canada more seriously as an historical reality. A member of the UBC department of history, in discussing the department’s approval of my dissertation proposal on twentieth-century BC evangelicalism, observed that they felt it important someone did such a study because “we need an historical understanding of what’s happening out there.” Academics have become curious enough about the origins of, and developments within, churches that are building modern edifices seating thousands, establishing significant schools and exerting increasing political influence, to encourage historical enquiry.

Evangelical growth in the latter half of the twentieth century has influenced evangelical historiography in some practical ways. Many of the scholars of evangelicalism would not consider themselves to be evangelicals but the numerical growth of many evangelical denominations, coupled with increasing interest in scholarship in some evangelical quarters, has resulted in increasing numbers of young scholars who are themselves evangelicals and have a strong interest in examining aspects of their own tradition. In addition, a growing number of evangelical colleges and seminaries began supporting such scholarship by the 1980s.

Themes and Directions in Canadian Evangelical Historiography

The 1995 “Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience” conference held at Queen’s illustrated some of the current major themes and directions in Canadian Evangelical historiography and pointed towards some directions it might take in the future.

1. “Forward reading”

In 1991 Michael Gauvreau called historians of religion to a “forward reading” of history, as opposed to the “backwards reading” which so commonly takes place.

The recovery of the relationship between Protestant religion and the culture of English Canada requires a new approach, one less con-
cerned with discerning the pedigree of the twentieth century mind than one which takes as its principal task the situation of the religious experience within its historical context. Informed by a “forward reading,” such a historian will treat religion as an integral and dynamic element of any given historical period, at once influenced by the surrounding culture, and creatively shaping the social and ideological matrix.¹¹

Several presenters at Queen’s likewise prodded historians to take religion more seriously in its own context. Marguerite Van Die, in dealing with Canadian Methodism from 1800 to 1884, warned against seeing this as simply a period of declension within Methodism.¹² It was more than a falling away from the enthusiasm of the Hay Bay camp meetings to a middle-class gentility, and to the reputed secularism of the Grimsby Park camp meeting grounds in 1875.¹³ The religious expressions of the latter half of the nineteenth century must be taken seriously on their own terms. Their different experiences, expressions and concerns arose from the very different settings in which they found themselves as middle-class Methodists in an emerging capitalist society.

Similarly, Sharon Cook warned of the danger of a “whiggish” approach in the study of the hundreds of thousands of Canadian women who were evangelicals. While noting the lack of focus on women in evangelical historiography, she decried the lack of attention in feminist history on the evangelical beliefs of so many women; rarely are the religious ideas of women studied.¹⁴ Her observations, of course, are not entirely new. They echo the theme of Ruth Compton Brouwer’s paper presented to this society in 1991.¹⁵

Cook’s study of “Christian nurture” ideas of the members of the WCTU demonstrates the validity of her concerns by illustrating how these women do not fit some modern stereotypes. Although modern scholars often view the WCTU as uninterested in challenging the structures of society, Cook shows that “Christian nurture” ideas of training the next generation of men did constitute a challenge. Implicit in these evangelical women’s desire to raise their boys into very different types of men was indeed a rejection of contemporary views of masculinity.
2. Informal twentieth-century evangelical networks compared to denominational ties

Most of the papers at the Queen’s conference followed the common pattern of being categorized according to denomination (e.g., evangelicals in the Presbyterian Church). Because of the importance of evangelicalism in all the major Protestant denominations and because of the emergence of significant new denominations since the late-nineteenth century, much can be learned from such an approach. Several papers, however, pointed out the tendency within twentieth-century evangelicalism to create informal but very real networks regardless of the denominational affiliation of participants. John Stackhouse’s recent book, *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character*, pioneered this direction as he focused on “transdenominational” institutions and the networks supporting them and linking them.

Several additional important evangelical networks were revealed at Queen’s. Bruce Hindmarsh explored an important but largely unknown network based in Winnipeg and comprised of closely related and mutually supportive institutions that influenced much of the prairies. The independent Elim Chapel, the Canadian Sunday School Mission (CSSM) and the Winnipeg Bible Institute, all based in Winnipeg, shared board members and constituencies for several decades after the 1920s. The Bible school, for example, supplied workers for the CSSM which, in turn, provided converts as students for the school. Elim Chapel members played vital role in both organizations.

Hindmarsh’s work challenges the Alberta prism through which most of Canadian prairie evangelicalism is viewed. He shows how the beginnings of the Winnipeg network antedated the founding of Prairie Bible Institute by about a decade and spread westward beyond Manitoba to include much of Saskatchewan. The CSSM was very active in Saskatchewan, winning converts and forming new churches over a wide area. Under the direct influence of the Winnipeg school, several Bible institutes, such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance’s school in Regina and the currently very large Briercrest Bible Institute, sprang up in Saskatchewan.

Alvyn Austin showed how Toronto functioned at the centre of another large and important evangelical network, one that spread throughout much of North America. The city functioned for many years as the North American headquarters of the giant, non-denominational China Inland Mission. The Toronto Bible College and city missions in
Toronto served as training grounds for potential missionaries from the eastern sections of the continent.

Denominations will no doubt remain as useful categories of analysis for historians but both Hindmarsh and Austin do well to point out that much of the dynamic activity of twentieth-century evangelicalism will be missed if the focus remains exclusively on denominations. In an ironic twist, evangelicals, who have usually eschewed official ecumenism throughout most of this century, have nonetheless practised a pragmatic kind of ecumenism that often renders denominations almost irrelevant.

3. Class

Very little attention has been paid to the question of class and Canadian evangelicalism. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau presented a striking paper at Queen’s that suggests how important a line of enquiry the question is. They challenge some common assumptions about evangelicalism and workers. The study of labour and religion in Winnipeg in this period almost always focuses upon the Labour churches which, at least in some cases, disregarded their evangelical heritage. Christie and Gauvreau argue, however, that larger numbers of workers in Winnipeg were attracted to revivalism, particularly after the war. Workers flocked to a great variety of independent and denominational missions, Pentecostal services, and lectures by fundamentalist leaders brought to the city by Elim Chapel. In contrast, it was many in the “strike-jolted” middle-classes who were far more inclined than were most workers to experiment with social gospel solutions. It is noteworthy that William Ivens was ousted from his Methodist pulpit not by middle-class members uncomfortable with his radicalism but by conservative working-class members who were uncomfortable with his lack of tradition and his doctrinal experimentation.

Christie’s and Gauvreau’s picture, although more noteworthy because of the context provided by the General Strike, is generally comparable with the situation my research uncovered in Vancouver. In that city, while conservative evangelicals could be found in every socio-economic level, most of the numerical strength of the more radically revivalistic or militantly conservative lay in the working-class districts. Further, Barry Mack’s paper at Queen’s revealed the middle-class oriented Presbyterian denominational leadership in the early twentieth century moving towards a more centralized, bureaucratic and social-service, as opposed to evangelistic, style. Such a shift of focus within the leadership
of a major denomination might help explain the growing attraction which the more revivalistic alternatives held for many common people who continued to crave immediate, personal spiritual experiences.

Much more research needs to be done in this area. For example, Canadian Pentecostalism experienced explosive growth in the two decades after World War I, especially in contexts such as that described in Winnipeg by Christie and Gauvreau, so that it numbered nearly half a million adherents in the 1991 census. Very little, however, is known about this development.22

4. Immigrant churches

Immigration and Canadian evangelicalism is also a relatively little explored phenomenon despite the fact that by the mid-twentieth century, at least in western Canada, people of non-British origins had become better represented in evangelicalism than they were in the general population. Europeans of Dutch, Scandinavian and German origins and, by the 1980s, Asians, all became very strongly represented in numerous evangelical groups.

Bruce Guenther’s paper at Queen’s focused on one of the largest and most important of such groups: the Mennonites.23 A growing literature exists on Canadian Mennonites who have played a major, shaping role on evangelicalism in much of western Canada and Ontario.24 Guenther highlighted the ambivalent view towards evangelicalism held by many Mennonites. Most Mennonites hold to the historic, defining characteristics of evangelicalism and large numbers, especially the Mennonite Brethren, have a history of cooperation and identification with evangelicals. However, many Mennonites are repelled by enough cultural and political features of mainstream North American evangelicalism to avoid a close identification with it.

Virtually no scholarly historical work has been done on other significant evangelical groups with their roots in relatively recent immigration. The Reformed churches of Dutch heritage, most notably the Christian Reformed Church, have existed in Canada since the turn of the century but renewed immigration after World War II and high birth rates caused them to grow significantly into the hundreds of thousands of members and adherents by the 1990s.25 Of equal importance to numbers, the Christian Reformed have strongly challenged many Canadian evangelicals to re-evaluate their views of education, politics and social engagement. The
Reformed view of Christ’s lordship over all areas of society has led to a significant re-adjustment in the thinking of many pietistically inclined evangelicals who previously practised a more privatistic faith.26

More recently, the immigration of many evangelical Chinese, Filipinos and Koreans and the very dynamic growth in their numbers in Canada through evangelism has led to strong concentrations of Asian evangelical churches in urban centres like Toronto and Vancouver. In BC, for example, a much higher percentage of Chinese identify themselves as Baptist and Christian and Missionary Alliance than does the general population and high proportions likewise are identified as Pentecostal and Mennonite. However, virtually nothing is known of the origins of these evangelicals and their experiences and influences within the Asian immigrant and Canadian-born communities.

5. Native Canadians and evangelicalism

Research into the frequently positive response of natives in Canada to revivalist preaching has become one of the more fascinating, and important, directions in evangelical historiography. The work of Susan Neylan, graduate student at UBC, is of particular importance.27 Rather than focusing on the missionaries, she focuses instead on the “context of encounters,” especially the role of the native catechists. Her interest lies in examining the native views of revivalism and their use of it as a strategy for survival; as a way of making sense of changes brought by Europeans. Her work is somewhat reminiscent of that of Clarence Bolt’s, *Thomas Crosby and the Tsimshian*28 but represents an important endeavour to shift the focus more to the complex responses of the native themselves rather than on the activity of the missionaries.

6. Comparative history

Over the past several years considerable comparative work has been done between Canadian and, especially, American evangelicalism. Indeed this was a primary focus of a major historical conference in Wheaton, Illinois, entitled “Evangelicalism in Transatlantic Perspective” in 1992 and of the two volumes of papers resulting from that conference. Canadian evangelical scholars appear quite eager to highlight the very real differences between Canadian evangelicalism and its more notorious American counterpart while American scholars of evangelicalism appear quite intrigued with the different characteristics they observe across the border to
the North.\textsuperscript{29}

The non-Canadian historians at Queen’s continued the focus on comparative history. With more than a twinge of wistful longing, American historian Mark Noll explored at some length the “kinder, gentler” version of evangelicalism found to the north of his own country.\textsuperscript{30} British evangelical historian David Bebbington rightly warned, however, of overly simple generalizations which attribute the calm, sober and respectable elements of Canadian evangelicalism to British influences and the fanatical and militant elements to American influences.\textsuperscript{31} He showed how quite frequently British immigrants to Canada have brought with them a brand of religious radicalism and populism which has sometimes to led to turmoil and division in the new country.

\textit{Conclusion}

Many significant developments have occurred in recent years in the historiography of Canadian religion in general. I have been addressing just one of those changes. As with the other developments, this society has played an important role in nurturing it. This, I believe, has been a significant contribution. Given that most of the areas of enquiry into this area of Canadian history are barely underway, I would suggest that future program chairs of the CSCH should expect, perhaps, to receive more proposals from historians wishing to present the results of their research into aspects of Canadian evangelical history.

\textit{Endnotes}


5. The series is supported by the Jackman Foundation of Toronto.


9. Using census data for conservative Protestant denominations, Reginald Bibby, argues that while evangelicals are growing in absolute numbers they are just holding their own as a proportion of the general population, at about 7 or 8% (Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada [Toronto: Irwin, 1987]). By using a broad definition of evangelical developed by David Bebbington and commonly used by historians (i.e., evangelicals are people who, regardless of denominational affiliation, are characterized by a quadrilateral of beliefs and priorities – “conversionist, biblicist, crucicentrist and activist”), Andrew Grenville places the proportion of evangelicals in Canada much higher at 16%, or 3.4 million Canadian adults (“The Awakened and the Spirit-Moved: The Religious Experience of Canadian Evangelicals in the 1990s,” forthcoming in Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience).

10. E.g., Regent College, Trinity Western University, Ontario Theological Seminary and Acadia Divinity College.


13. David B. Marshall makes the point that the Grimsby Park camp-meeting grounds came to resemble more a recreational resort for the middle-class than a site devoted wholly to the saving of souls (Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940 [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992], 130-31).


27. Her report at Queen’s updated the paper read a year earlier at the CSCH meeting: “Shamans, Missionaries and Prophets: Comparative Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Religious Encounters in British Columbia,” *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1994): 43-64.


