

Secularizing the Faith: A Comment

BRIAN CLARKE

The title of David Marshall's book, *Secularizing the Faith* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), aptly captures its main thesis. English-Canadian society ended up becoming more secular because Protestantism was secularized from within by the clergy. In accommodating their faith to the social, cultural and intellectual temper of their times, Marshall claims, the clergy stripped the churches of their gospel message and in so doing robbed Christianity of its sense of mystery and its apprehension of the supernatural.

As Marshall puts it in his typically evocative prose: "religion became an empty shell; the church's mission became secularized." The call to personal salvation was overtaken by the call to social service and reform, and faith by sentimental moralism. In sum, the various strategies that the clergy adopted to address the needs of their age – Liberal theology, the Social Gospel, the development of professional revivalism, the drive for foreign missions and the movement for church union – all missed their mark. Instead of inaugurating the Kingdom of God in Canada and "stemming the tide of secularization," as they had hoped, the clergy had made their faith irrelevant to a generation facing the hard realities of World War I and the Great Depression. Lacking a distinctive message and mission, they sentenced themselves and the institutions they represented to the margins of Canadian society. And what was worse, in the process they also cut themselves off from the well-springs of religious renewal, and so were unable to embrace the insights of neo-orthodoxy.

This interpretation of Canadian Protestantism builds on the work of

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Brian McKillop and Ramsay Cook, and many will recognize their influence. But make no mistake about it: Marshall's book is the most important study to date to tackle the theme of today's panel – secularization from within the churches.

Methodists and Presbyterians typically saw themselves as embodying the mainstream of Canadian Protestantism, and it is the Methodist and Presbyterian clergy who occupy centre stage in this account, at least until 1925, after which clergy from the United Church enter into the spotlight. The focus here is primarily upon the upper echelons of the clerical profession – church administrators, educational leaders and other luminaries, such as editor E.H. Dewart and novelist C.W. Gordon, better known as Ralph Connor. As these men were in their time important religious leaders and thinkers, no historian can afford to ignore them. The question, then, is how can historians best study these clergymen in order to throw light upon the church that they lead and the times in which they lived?

In *Secularizing the Faith*, Marshall rightly insists that, if we are to understand what has happened to religious life, we must attend to the relationship between the clergy and the people sitting in the pews. I couldn't agree more. In order to that, however, it seems to me that one must also examine the rank and file of the ministerial profession, that is those who worked in congregations across the country. To take just one example, one gets little sense in this study what kind of training and formation these ordinary ministers would have had, and how this training and formation would have influenced their preaching and, in general, their approach to pastoral care.

What the clergy were up to, or at least thought they were up to, is one thing; what the laity made of all this quite another. Unfortunately, the laity occupy a remarkably low profile in *Secularizing the Faith*. As a result, one gets little sense of what congregational life meant to them. Marshall criticizes those who would limit the study of Christianity to the sacred precincts of church, and I think many would agree with him on this point. Nevertheless, it was in the local congregation that the clergys' struggles for the hearts and minds of the people were won or lost. Moreover, I am still unclear as to what effects the larger trends in society that are highlighted in *Secularizing the Faith* had upon congregational life. We learn, for example, that consumerism represented a radical change in people's outlook, one that was antithetical to traditional Protestant values. But how the emergence of a consumer culture interacted with other in-

fluences on belief and practice such as gender, life cycle and class remains an open question.

For one thing, women rarely make an appearance in these pages, even though recent community studies by Doris O'Dell and Lynne Marks have shown that middle-class women were the churches' mainstay. Middle-class women may have been in the forefront of the consumer revolution, but by and large they remained staunch supporters of the churches. In some respects, their commitment to the church increased substantially during this period as women's missionary societies and church auxiliaries sprung up in congregations across the country. The major social and intellectual currents of the times, it would seem, affected middle-class women differently than men. At the same time, this "feminization" of congregational life also raises the question as to exactly what role the clergy played in forging new religious sensibilities. How did the clergy respond to women's growing visibility in church life, one wonders, and how did this development influence their reformulation of the faith?

At any rate, *Secularizing the Faith* does at times leave me uncertain as to what role is being claimed for the clergy in the secularization of Canadian society. On the one hand, the clergy are a critical force in the secularization of Canadian society. What they did fatally undermined religion of its vitality. On the other hand, it appears that the clergy played a limited role in the process of secularization. "Religious decline," Marshall remarks, "may also be halted, briefly, or temporarily reversed in an age of secularization" (18). Viewed in this light, the struggles of the clergy are but rear-guard actions that in the end could only affect the pace of secularization, not its overall direction.

"The secular," Marshall cautions us, "should not be simply regarded as the opposite of religion" (18). Yet, despite this dictum, the religious is often sharply distinguished from and set in opposition to the secular, as is the supernatural from the natural and the transcendent from the immanent. Such stark polarities obscure how the demarcation between the sacred and the secular is itself a function of religious belief and practice, as is – I might add – the interrelationship between these two categories, including the ways the former imbues the latter with meaning and significance. Moreover, such a polarity also obscures the many ways in which Protestant Christianity had become inculturated in Canadian society, which has a direct bearing on the issue of religious decline, a prominent theme in *Secularizing the Faith*.

Finally, the disjunction between the religious and the secular leads Marshall to claim that the Protestant clergy faced but two options. They could accommodate their message to the times or they could hold fast to traditional doctrines. In choosing the former, the clergy opted for social influence, or so they had hoped, at the expense of preserving the integrity of their religion. It comes as no surprise, then, that this message of accommodation is unfavourably contrasted with historic Christianity, the evangelical creed, Christian orthodoxy, and the essentials of Christianity.

These terms are not, of course, synonymous but, in any event, they are used to highlight the religious inadequacy of the clergys' attempt to modernize the faith. That one can make such a normative judgement solely on historical grounds strikes me as problematic, given the historical diversity of Christianity, not to mention the many competing claims to orthodoxy. On what grounds does one decide that one particular form of historic Christianity should have a normative purchase, particularly now that Liberal Protestantism – which also made claims of its own to orthodoxy – is part of the Protestant heritage?

Secularizing the Faith is a provocative study that is certain to generate much debate. And it will do so because, not least among its virtues, it is exhaustively researched, elegantly written and magisterial in its scope.