

The Canon of the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of Religion in Canada

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Ever since Peter Gzowski found out that I know how many angels can dance on the head of a pin – and more importantly, why it is a significant question – I have found myself from time to time on CBC’s *Morningside* answering some fairly loaded questions. But perhaps none are more loaded – if you will pardon my putting it that way – than the question of the canon of the classroom. When the study of religion in Canada is introduced to students for the first time, what is it that one simply *must* teach?

Incidentally, when we speak of “what we are not at liberty to omit” it is worth remembering that this constitutes Mark Van Doren’s classic definition of liberal education itself.¹ The question of what we really *must* teach is unavoidable when we introduce a subject for the very first time.

On one of those *Morningside* moments I was brought in to help pick up the pieces following some comments that a colleague at University of Toronto’s Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies had left behind in a discussion of the saints and martyrs whose feast day happens to coincide with that of blessed Saint Patrick. It seems that my mediaevalist friend decided to focus his remarks on the Jesuit martyrs in Huronia during the seventeenth century, thinking that the radio audience would be stirred and gratified to hear the details of their bravery under torture at the hands of the savage Iroquois.

As it happens his radio audience included Iroquois and Hurons who were stirred but not at all gratified by his account of the events at Ste-Marie in 1649. One of them – an instructor in Native Studies at Trent

University – wrote to the President of the CBC to ask,

Why would we want to consider these missionaries, who were so determined to destroy the Huron culture and way of life and so instrumental in the almost complete elimination of the Hurons as a people, as martyrs? The Jesuits then are martyrs only to those who believe that attempting to destroy the culture and spirituality of the Hurons because of their own misguided self-righteousness was the right thing to do. At the very best, to Aboriginal people, they can be regarded as well-intentioned, insensitive and harmful intruders . . . [His] tirade against the Iroquois was clearly racist in intent and incredibly insensitive at a time when Canadian people and Canadian churches . . . are attempting to correct some of the injustices suffered by Aboriginal people.²

Those are strong words – and, I think, quite unfair on the score of racist intent. But fair or not they underscore the need to ask what *must* be taught in an introductory class on religion in Canada. What is in the canon? Let's examine the historical meaning of this concept of "canon" for a moment.

About the middle of the eleventh century the leadership of the Catholic Church began to strive for greater autonomy for the Church from the political order of the day. In self-defence kings and princes were driven to define their own powers as distinct from those of ecclesiastical authorities. Providentially, Justinian's magisterial collection of laws was rediscovered at about the same time and the first European university was founded at Bologna in order to make systematic sense of it. In the twelfth century, therefore, we see the publication of John Gratian's *Concordia discordantium canonum* (*Concordance of Discordant Canons*) and the first important scholarly works on secular law, counterpointed by legislative measures from both ecclesiastical and secular authorities.

In short, the notion of "canon" was given currency in an effort to establish authority in the face of competing aspirations. I therefore find it curious that today's debate over what certain people have cleverly described as "political correctness" – a phrase that I remember using in the 1960s, but only with a Russian accent – is generally couched in terms of whether or not there shall be a single canon of approved learning that "must be taught."

If we were to return to the meaning originally given to "canon" we would recognize that it does not imply that there is only one possible

authority; instead it suggests that there may be more than one coherent body of knowledge, each having a focus that is more or less distinct from that of others, however much these bodies may overlap, support or strive against one another. We would also recognize that canons are developed because human beings simultaneously yearn for the stability that authority gives and chafe at its inhibitions when they seek to live in new ways. The tension between these two inclinations is particularly pronounced in times of stress caused by uncertainty – for example, in times like ours when old symbol systems seem less and less adequate to more and more people.

In times like these we need more canons, not fewer canons. And I think that an introductory class on religion in Canada ought to be structured in light of this need.

Consider, for example, Comparative Religion 3003R offered in 1993-94 at Dalhousie University with a description in the *Calendar* that reads as follows:

When Canadians have built cities, gone to war, founded economic empires, fallen in love, designed school systems and elected governments, religion has often been a decisive factor. Sometimes religion has been the most decisive factor. What is “religion” in Canada? In the course of this extensive historical study of life in Canada from the sixteenth century to the present, a variety of answers will be explored.

Like most departments in the humanities we view our first-year classes as thresholds, not foundations. In first year the student is making the transition from secondary school to university and therefore it does not matter what we teach so much as how we teach it. The truly foundational classes are found at the second-year level, and at Dalhousie we require students to take a number of second-year classes that provide a broad introduction to the world’s great religious traditions before we permit them to enrol in third-year classes. Comparative Religion 3003R “Religion in Canada” is a full-credit class at the third-year level which students can take only after they have demonstrated some mastery of Canadian history and of the world’s great religious traditions.

Comparative Religion 3003R begins with an “Overview” in which I remind the students of some basic definitions of religion and their various uses in the study of religion in Canada. Then I have them read two fairly elementary and brief accounts of religion in Canada, both taken from *The*

Canadian Encyclopedia. The article on “Christianity” appeared in the first edition of the encyclopedia³ and provides a road-map of religious patterns in Canadian history while serving as a scratching point for those who itch over the unexamined proposition that the history of religion in Canada is essentially the history of Christianity. The article on “Protestantism” appeared in the second edition of the encyclopedia⁴ because someone with the wit to read the first edition carefully noticed that the articles on “Catholics” and “Jews” referred to the “Protestant” character of Canada but there was no entry on “Protestantism” to clarify what this encapsulation might mean. Both the content of the entry on “Protestantism” and the manner of its appearance serve to stimulate questions in the students’ minds about what religion in Canada is.

That sets the stage for the first major section of the class, “Encounters with First Nations,” described in the syllabus as including the following topics and assignments:

- Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions*
- Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents*
- John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime*
- Brian Moore, *Black Robe*
- Shamanism
- *Mission of Fear*
- S.R. Mealing, ed., *The Jesuit Relations* (RR)
- The Witch Hunts in Seventeenth-Century France
- Metlakatla, a Victorian Utopia
- Native Spirituality Today: Appropriation or Expropriation?

Although this section of the year-long class begins in September and is completed in October it includes half of the book-length assignments of required reading. This is deliberate. Concentrating the required reading assignments in the early fall eases the burden of exam preparation in December and March while freeing students to concentrate on wider reading of their own in the second term when they prepare a term essay on a topic of their own choosing. And it makes it easier for the instructor to make the point that there are many different ways to understand the encounter between the First Nations and others.

We start by plugging a major gap in the Dalhousie curriculum, focussing as it does on the so-called “great religious traditions” in survey

classes at the second-year level. I teach, for example, “Judaism,” “Christianity” and “Islam” as axial religions⁵ in which the notion of “scripture” is central. Yet the people of the First Nations did not use alphabetic writing at all when they first encountered Europeans, and there are therefore features of their religious traditions that can only be grasped by university scholars through a deliberate and difficult act of the imagination. Sam Gill makes this point in his brief text, *Native American Religions: An Introduction*, particularly in the chapter on “Nonliteracy and Native American Religions.”⁶

Then we read a recent history that has excited a great deal of interest: Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The “New World” Through Indian Eyes*.⁷ This text is not about religion but it does bring the debate over “point of view” into the classroom in a stimulating and eloquent fashion. And in any case, by the time students have mastered Gill’s work, they have come to understand fairly well that religion was not found in a discrete “segment” of the lives of the so-called “Indians”; it was something that permeated every aspect of their existence.

Wright’s book is followed by John Webster Grant’s *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534*,⁸ an outstanding work of scholarship that models for the students what really good historical writing can be.

Having required them to come to grips with a first-rate example of scholarly history I then feel free to ask the students to consider and discuss a work of fiction: Brian Moore’s *Black Robe*,⁹ the account of a Jesuit father’s first venture into the seventeenth-century mission to the Hurons. Although this novel was written in a beach house in Malibu it represents a serious literary attempt to recreate aesthetically the experience of religious doubt and to be faithful to the seventeenth-century context. Moore was deliberate and careful in his effort to be guided by such scholarly studies as Bruce Trigger’s *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*,¹⁰ but the scatological character of the language that he places in the mouths of his Huron and Iroquoian characters is generally a bit startling to students who find Nellie McClung’s notions of dialogue more in line with what they expect to find in a “religious” novel. Nevertheless nothing is wasted: the obscenities scattered so abundantly through the pages of *Black Robe* provide an interesting stimulus to consideration of how reflection on patterns of swearing can give us a better understanding of religious life.¹¹

The study of *Black Robe* serves two other purposes here. First, as the well-crafted product of a gifted literary imagination this novel entices students to do what R.G. Collingwood tells us that all historians must do: they must enter imaginatively into the experience of the people whose lives they are studying, not remain aloof from those experiences.¹² But second, it gives the class a chance to ask whether Moore has truly succeeded in evoking the seventeenth-century mind – and therefore to ask whether we ourselves are capable of doing so. In fact I have my doubts that Moore is presenting the dilemma of a seventeenth-century mind when he portrays a crisis of faith precipitated by the silence of God which is to be resolved by a profoundly humane joining of Jesuit and Huron. I think that this is a characteristically twentieth-century dilemma echoed in another fine novel about Jesuits in seventeenth-century Japan,¹³ but it is not a characteristically seventeenth-century dilemma. On the other hand the story of Father Noel Chabanel's life and death as described in Francis Parkman's work¹⁴ – which Moore refers to as the inspiration for *Black Robe* – is an authentically seventeenth-century life, entangled as it is in the demands of God rather than the silence of God. The problem that the students have to confront is this: how do our twentieth-century presuppositions about what is at the heart of religious life impair our ability to grasp what is going on in the lives of religious people of another era?

I give the students a chance to catch their breath for awhile by pausing to lecture on shamanism – a presentation that draws upon Mircea Eliade's account of the shaman as someone who practices “archaic techniques of ecstasy”¹⁵ and that argues that if the prophets with their scriptures represent the third and latest development in the religious life of humanity, then the shamans represent the first development.

They are then introduced to a collection of primary documents – S.R. Mealings' excerpts from Reuben Thwaites' edited translation of *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*¹⁶ – by means of a full-length feature movie originally produced in French under the title *Le festin des morts*, a dramatization based upon Father Jean de Brébeuf's 1636 account of the Feast of the Dead.¹⁷ The English-language version of this black-and-white production from the National Film Board of Canada is entitled *Mission of Fear*; the set for the film is the reconstruction of Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons in Midland, Ontario.

The excerpts from *The Jesuit Relations* cover three basic periods in the Jesuit penetration of North America and the students are asked to

reflect upon particular questions pertaining to each period:

The Encounters Before 1640 (pp. 13-56)

How did the Jesuits see *les sauvages*?

Consider the relationship between their view of the noble savage and Rousseau's theories of education and penal reform.

The Period of Martyrdom (pp. 57-88)

What place does martyrdom play in the self-understanding of the Jesuits?

Westward Expansion (pp. 89-114)

After Louis XIV came to power, royal control was asserted over New France. How did this alter the relationship between church and state, patriotism and religion?

The study of original written documents in translation is supplemented by references to a three-dimensional model of the reconstruction of the Jesuit's settlement, Sainte-Marie Among the Hurons, maintained by the Province of Ontario at Midland. To be specific, the students are invited to consider what the architecture of this religious community and stronghold tells us about Jesuits and Hurons in the seventeenth-century.

The study finishes with three lecture presentations. One explores the witch hunts of seventeenth-century France in order to make the point that the behavior of the Hurons and Iroquois towards their prisoners which we find so appalling had its counterpart in the behavior of Catholics towards those suspected of Satanism or demonic possession in France. The primary sources for this presentation are the letters of Marie de l'Incarnation,¹⁸ Norman Cohn's study of the witch hunts of Europe¹⁹ and Aldous Huxley's account of *The Witches of Loudun*.²⁰ This is more than a matter of being even-handed in presenting course materials about Jesuits and Hurons; it also provides an opportunity to ask what was the religious meaning of such sustained and inhumane torture during this era of our history.

Another lecture is based upon Jean Usher's study of Metlakatla,²¹ a nineteenth-century Victorian effort to reform Tsimshian society which illustrates colorfully the power and perils of later efforts in English Canada to benefit from what Rudyard Kipling called "lesser breeds without the

law.”²²

The last lecture is an effort to bring the story up to our day by looking at the controversy over residential schools and the recent efforts of the United Church of Canada to make room within its precincts for peoples of the First Nations.

No account of an undergraduate class is complete without reference to its means of evaluation. Like all of our classes in Comparative Religion at Dalhousie, this class is evaluated by a combination of term essays and examinations composed of essay questions. At the conclusion of the segment on “Encounters with First Nations” in Comparative Religion 3003R the students are asked to write a term essay on one of two topics presented to them. That assignment reads as follows:

The primary purpose of this paper is to acquaint students with the style and standards of historical writing expected in this class. The assignment is comparable in difficulty and scope to any of the one-hour questions found on the examinations in December and April. The paper is to be about five typewritten, doublespaced pages long (approximately 1200 words). Handwritten papers will be accepted if they are neatly written in ink and doublespaced. The paper will be graded and returned with extensive typewritten comments. It should respond to one of the following two questions:

(1) Both friends and enemies of the Jesuits have criticized them for being too “worldly,” too disposed to abandon that which is, in the critics’ eyes, truly “spiritual.” In a disenchanted letter to Ignatius of Loyola one young Jesuit described such worldliness as “bowing the knee to Baal.” Writing as an historian, assess the Jesuit mission in Canada during the era of New France. Did the Jesuits bow the knee to Baal?

OR

(2) Discuss the problem of suffering in the encounter of Jesuit missionaries and peoples of the First Nations in Canada in the seventeenth century.

The danger, of course, of emphasizing the many different possible points of view in the study of history is that the emphasis on diversity may inadvertently breed an uncritical relativism. But when Collingwood urged

us to step into the sandals of a Roman legionary whenever we study Roman legions, he never meant us to stay laced into those sandals or to wander barefoot through a moral wasteland where no one – least of all ourselves – is called to account for what they do. The purpose of assigning essay topics as provocative and demanding as those given above is to remind the students – and the instructor – that it is essential for an historian to be both fair and disciplined in reconstructing what has happened in the past, but equally essential to reflect upon the right and the wrong of those past lives as they are resurrected in our imagination. It would be inhumane not to undertake such reflection, and history is surely the most humane of all the academic disciplines.

Endnotes

1. Mark Van Doren, *Liberal Education* (New York: Henry Holt, 1943).
2. Letter from Tom Jewiss (Department of Native Studies, Trent University) to the President of the CBC (22 March 1993).
3. James H. Marsh, ed., *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1985), s.v., “Christianity,” by Tom Sinclair-Faulkner.
4. James H. Marsh, ed., *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), s.v., “Protestantism,” by Tom Sinclair-Faulkner.
5. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953).
6. Sam D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982), 39-58.
7. Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The “New World” Through Indian Eyes* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993).
8. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

9. Brian Moore, *Black Robe* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985; reprint, Toronto: Penguin Books, 1987).
10. Bruce Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Kingston and Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).
11. On the meaning of obscenity and blasphemy, see Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (New York: Collier Books, 1967).
12. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Galaxy Book; Oxford University Press, 1956), 282-302.
13. Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1979).
14. See chapter XXX, Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1910).
15. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Series LXXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 4.
16. S.R. Mealings, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963).
17. See Trigger, 442, n. 52.
18. Dom Guy Oury (rédacteur), *Marie de l'Incarnation, Ursuline (1599-1672). Correspondance* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1971).
19. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-hunt* (Bungay, Suffolk: Chatto-Heinemann, 1975).
20. Aldous Huxley, *The Witches of Loudun* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971).
21. Jean Usher, "Duncan of Metlakatla: The Victorian Origins of a Model Indian Community," in *The Shield of Achilles. Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age*, ed. W.L. Morton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), 286-310.

22. "God of our Fathers, Known of Old," #516, *The Hymnary of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1930).

