Church History of Canada: Where From Here?

by

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In a recent review article, I stated that A History of the Christian Church in Canada by Grant, Moir and Walsh is the apex of a particular development in the historical study of religion in Canada, that it is firmly rooted in a coherent perspective of Protestant neo-orthodox assumptions about the nature of the Christian church, and that it has given shape and clarity to a major part of our Canadian religious heritage. (1) But because the Protestant neo-orthodox perspective has lost much of its controlling power, it will in the future be challenged in three distinct ways: first, its definition of religion will be broadened; second, there will be a much greater openness to the social sciences; and third, there will be more emphasis on comparative studies. In this paper I want to indicate why I think the historical study of religion will move in this direction and then I want to look at some of the difficulties I foresee if, in fact, it does.

I

In A History of the Christian Church in Canada John Grant indicated it would be a history of the "Christian church" rather than the "churches" because he thought it should be "ecumenical in both range and sympathy". (2) To move from the "churches" to the "church" was an important step in conceptualization for it led to a higher level of synthesis than had been previously possible. But today even the "Christian church" seems to be too narrow a frame of reference. One reason for this is that it leaves Judaism

out of the picture. Although this community represents only 1.3% of the Canadian population, both its internal development and its interaction with other groups in Canadian society is too important to be entirely ignored in any future synthesis of the religious history of Canada. Moreover, because the study of religion in Canada is no longer confined exclusively to the theological colleges some of us who teach this subject in departments of religion find ourselves being forced in this direction especially when Jewish students turn up in our classes. So I think it is inevitable that our definition of religion is going to be broadened in this direction.

Furthermore, it will be broadened to include not only normative religious groups like Judaism but also other non-normative forms of religious expression. The possibilities here are endless but I will give only one illustration. C. P. Stacy's A Very Double Life (1976) was a very entertaining book but I'm sure some of you came away from it, as I did, not only with an uneasy feeling that Stacy had failed to put Mackenzie King's encounter with Spiritualizm in context, but also with a feeling of regret that no one in our field had ever assisted him by exploring this aspect of non-normative religious expression in Canada. (3) Part of the reason for this is that up until recently there have not been many models for dealing with this sort of material in a way that would be considered either intellectually or historically respectable. Today, however, that is no longer the case. In 1977 Oxford University Press published R. Laurence Moore's In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture which is an outstanding model of how this material can be handled

with great sensitivity and intelligence. Moreover, through such studies as Alan Gauld's The Founders of Psychical Research (1968); Katherine H. Porter's Through a Glass Darkly: Spiritualism in the Browning Circle (1958); and Arthur H. Nethercot's The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (U. of Chicago Press 1960) and The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant (U. of Chicago Press 1963), it is possible to see how an interest in Spiritualism was an important aspect of what Paul Carter has called the "Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age". (4) In the near future therefore I suspect that our definition of religion will be broadened to take into account various non-normative forms of religious expression like this one which have played a part in the religious awareness of Canadians.

There are two reasons why I believe there will be a greater openness to the social sciences in the future historical study of religion in Canada. First, the shift in context from the Protestant theological colleges to departments of religious studies has made this inevitable. Today it is almost impossible for anyone in a department of religious studies to be unaware of the work of Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, Robert Bellah, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. Besides the influence of these social scientists has affected not only the definition of religion which is being used but also the type of problems which are being investigated.

Second, I think that a greater openness to the social sciences is going to be forced upon us simply in order to understand what is currently happening in the historical study of religion in French Canada, Britain and the United States. If I have correctly understood Serge Gagnon's recent article on "The Historiography of New France, 1960-1974; Jean Hamelin to Louise Dechene", the reason Walsh's work appears so dated today is that

it does not reflect the most recent French Canadian scholarship which has been deeply influenced by the Annales School of French historical scholarship. (5). I do not profess to understand the methodology of this school but it seems clear that its commitment to "scientific" history cannot be understood without some effort to appreciate the contribution to the social sciences which French scholars have been making for the past fifty years. (6)

The same is true in Britain where, for example, the series Studies in Church History ed. by Derek Baker, reveals that increasingly even the themes of the English Ecclesiastical History Society meetings are being influenced by the social sciences. (7) The same influence is also apparent in the work of Alan D. Gilbert, Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740-1914 (1976) and Hugh McLeod's Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City (1974) to mention only a few. Similar trends can also be seen in the United States: the first title that comes to mind is Carroll Smith Rosenberg's Religion and the Rise of the American City (1971) but there are many others that range from Timothy L. Smith's new work on religion and ethnicity to Martin E. Marty's A Nation of Behavers, which reveal the impact of the social sciences on our discipline. (8) Therefore, I think it is reasonable to assume that the influence of this work will soon make itself felt in English-speaking Canada.

There are also two reasons why I think there will be more emphasis on comparative studies in the future. First, because a broader definition of religion and a greater openness to the social sciences will lead to less emphasis on national distinctiveness especially when this is defined solely in contrast to the United States and more interest in the way Canadians have

responded to much larger cultural and religious transformations. Second, I think we are going to be driven in this direction by the frustration of discovering that good scholars who follow their subjects across the border or the Atlantic continually reveal all sorts of fascinating things that we as Canadians have ignored. For example, Ernest Sandeen in his study of Fundamentalism has named a dozen Canadians who were extremely important in the development of this movement yet in our own Canadian materials we are often not aware of their existence. The same is true with Peter d'A. Jones on Christan Socialism where he traces several of his people across the Atlantic to the U.S. and Canada but when we look at our Canadian materials there is never any mention of these people. Recently William R. Hutchison and Ernest Sandeen have argued that it is impossible to know what is distinctively American about the Social Gospel or Denominationalism unless these are placed in comparative context. (9) I suspect this is also true for Canada and until we begin to view Revivalism, Fundamentalism and Ecumenicity in comparative context we are not going to know what is truly distinctive about the Canadian experience for all of these movements were shared in the Anglo-American-Canadian community and it is clear that there has been a great deal of mutual borrowing of ideas, techniques, and on occasion even personnel.

There are many more things which could be said on this subject but I must now turn to some of the possible pitfalls which we may expect if the historical study of religion in Canada does move in this direction.

II

There are at least three dangers which I foresee: fadism, jargon and an acute identity crisis. Lawrence Stone has recently pointed out that the French historian Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie was confident a decade ago that "narrative history, the history of events, political history and biography were dead" and "the methodology of history must now be strictly quantative, preferably with uniform sets of data covering time spans of several centuries; it must concern itself with long term shifts in the material bases of life; and it must focus on computerized work". The basic problem with this programme, as Stone points out, was that it resulted in almost unreadable monographs whose findings were often banal. More recently, Stone continues, Ladourie has exchanged his over-enthusiastic acceptance of computerized "scientific" history for an equally over-enthusiastic acceptance of folklore and semiotics. But, as Stone concludes, "recourse to the theories of the most up-to-date folklorists, semiologists or symbolic anthropologists will not compensate for the lack of detailed data about precisely what was said and done by whom, and how they were interpreted at the time." (10)

I mention these comments because I think that in a period when the neo-orthodox paradigm has lost its controlling power and the new paradigm is not yet apparent, some of us stand in danger of becoming fadists because we are afraid of being "old hat" and conventional historians of an institution that appears to be irrelevant to the central concerns of our secularized society and of little interest to most up-to-date social scientists and social historians.

Closely related to the problem of fadism is the problem of jargon. In broadening our definition of religion and opening ourselves to the social sciences there is the danger of getting lost in its language. I was reminded of this recently when I ran across the following title of a review essay by John Lankford in the Anglican Theological Review:

> "An End and a Beginning: Reflections on Sydney Ahlstrom's 'Religious History of the American People' and the Future of Sociologically-Informed Inquiry into Religion in American Life" (11)

Actually the article was not as bad as its title suggests, but the "barbarism" which the social sciences have fostered in the use of the English language is frightening. And when I read the material of those who already seem to be launched on a more sociologically-informed inquiry into Religion in Canadian life, I begin to wonder whether there are not some potential pitfalls here of which we need to be aware.

The most serious problem, however, is the problem of identity.

Church history is a theological discipline and a servant of the church. But who would be served by the historical study of religion in Canada? I've mentioned Departments of Religious Studies. But are such departments a flash in the pan? Do they have real stability? May we not be serving a constituency which may pass away as quickly as it has arisen especially with dropping enrollments in the 1980's and demands for bread and butter courses? And besides how high on the list of priorities is Religion in Canada in a department which is trying to field courses in the five major world religions? Or how high on the list of priorities is Religion in Canada for a Canadian Studies programme? So we may well ask,

is this the time for Canadian church historians to be hankering after new Gods or to be trying to ingratiate themselves with new institutional or cultural patrons? In short, if we move out in these new directions, will it not further complicate our already existing identity problems?

Perhaps you will not agree, but for some time now I think our Canadian Church History Society has been suffering from an acute identity crisis. We began as a Society clearly related to the other theological disciplines but when the C.S.S.R. was formed we started to have problems. Part of this was related to the establishment of departments of religious studies but perhaps even more important was the Canada Council's decision to define, for purposes of funding, History as a social science and Religion as a Humanity. It was this externally imposed definition that raised both a loyalty and an identity issue for this society. Are we historians first or religionists first? If we are primarily historians then we want to meet with the Canadian Historical Association so we will know what is happening there and if the religionists meet at another time and have another set of interests which often appear irrelevant if not ridiculous, then so be it. Why not cut our relations there and forget about the C.S.S.R.? That's one problem but if we add to it a sense that the church as an institution is too narrow a base for our historical refelction, then we have added a significant new dimension to that identity problem. But this is not the end of it for a further complication in all of this is the rise of a number of denominational historical societies as well as the Catholic and Jewish Historical Societies. From

the Catholic and Jewish perspective I think we have been seen as the old Protestant theological society but from the Protestant perspective we are seen as a new society for the Historical Study of Religion in which their denominational interests are often ignored or not given the attention they deserve. So what I'm suggesting is that we already have serious identity problems but if we start to move in the direction I've suggested then we are going to have a lot more problems.

Well I have many more questions but unfortunately no answers. I suspect, however, that our worthy chairman realized that by the time I was finished a great cloud of confusion would have descended on our discussion and therefore he has wisely left the best for last aware that any confusion I may have caused will be cleared up by my worthy colleagues on this panel. Therefore, with great hope and anticipation I gladly yield the floor to these two wise men from the East.

Footnotes

(1) N.K. Clifford, "History of Religion in Canada", The Ecumenist 18(July-August, 1980), 65 - 69.

(2) John Grant, "Foreward by the General Editor", A History of the Christian Church in Canada, viii.

(3) See Robert S. Ellwood, "The Study of New Religious Movements in America", The Council on the Study of Religion Bulletin 10 (June 1979), 69, 71-72 and Catherine L. Albanese, "Research Needs in American Religious History", C.S.R. Bulletin 10 (October 1979), 101, 103-105.

(4) Paul Carter, The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age (De Kalb, Ill., Northern Illinois U. Press, 1971).

(5) Serge Gagon, "The Historiography of New France, 1960 - 1974: Jean Hamelin to Louise Dechene", Journal of Canadian Studies 13 (1978), 80-99.

(6) Traian Stoianovich, French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell U. Press, 1976).

(7) See especially Popular Belief and Practice, Vol. 8. Studies in Church History, ed. by G.J. Cuming and Derek Baker (Cambridge U. Press, 1972).

(8) Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Religion and the Rise of the American City (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell U. Press 1971); Martin E. Marty, A Nation of Behavers (Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1976) and Timothy L. Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity", American Historical Review 83 (1978), 1155 - 1185.

(9) Ernest R. Sandeen, "The distinctiveness of American Denominationalism: A Case Study of the 1846 Evangelical Alliance", Church History 45(1976), 222-234; William R. Hutchison, "The Americanness of the Social Gospel: An Inquiry in Comparative History", Church History 44(1975), 367-381.

(10) Laurence Stone, "In the Alleys of Mentalite", The New York Review of Books 26(Nov. 8, 1979), 20-24.

(11) John Lankford, "An End and a Beginning: Reflections on Sydney Ahlstrom's 'Religious History of the American People' and the Future of Sociologically-Informed Inquiry into Religion in American Life", Anglican Theological Review 56(1974), 463-481.