CHURCH HISTORY OF CANADA: WHERE FROM HERE?

by

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The Ganda of East Africa have a saying which goes as follows: "When the leopard comes to you, the club at your neighbours won't drive him off". This proverb should be a warning against the attempt of neighbours to club the leopards in our closet of Canadian church historians. I confess at the outset, therefore, that I spent twenty-eight of my years in the United States. What is worse, I trained as an Africanist and have brought to the study of Christianity in Canada concerns which have recently dominated the study of Christianity in Africa. These include myth-ritual-symbol systems, new religious movements; the relationship between African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity; the question of contextualization; the impact of Christianity on society generally; and the worships, ethical practices and processes of schism and renewal of African Christians - in short, Christianity as expressed in thought, action and corporate life.

In saying this, I make explicit a methodological bias in the direction of the history of religions approach summarized by Joachim Wach in The Comparative Study of Religions.[1] Wach stressed that religion tends to concrete expression in thought, action and fellowship. He broadened the study of religion to include not only the scaffolding, that is, religious institutions, leadership and major events, but also the inner happenings, for example, the devotions, world views and values of ordinary members of respective traditions; the language and actions of people as they live out their understanding of their faith, and so on. As I consider the first question concerning the paradigm which presently undergirds Canadian church history, I am impressed by the high quality of the former, outer story. This has been summarized in two excellent works of synthesis, the three-volume History of the Christian Church in Canada by H.H. Walsh, John S. Moir and John Webster Grant; and Robert T. Handy's A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada. The first work is noteworthy

in moving beyond a region-by-region and denomination-by-denomination approach to consider the total impact of Christianity upon Canadian life, while the latter is the first to attempt to delineate the major unities, differences and interrelations of the Canadian and American stories without treating the Canadian material as a mere appendage. Much less adequate has been treatment, in these or other works, of the inner story.

There are several reasons for this. In the first place, the academic study of Christian history in Canada is relatively recent. While we have an abundance of biographies of church leaders, accounts of local congregations and regional or national denominational histories, only three major works of synthesis have followed the publication, fifty years ago, of Edmond O. Oliver's The Winning of the Frontier. To my knowledge, no such work has yet appeared in our second official language. Only since 1964 has an annual current bibliography appeared. A cursory glance through the calendar of our seminaries and universities reveals an absence of serious attention to the field, and students do not flock to my one course on the subject. In the second place, as Keith Clifford and John Grant have described elsewhere,[2] Canadian church historians tend to utilize imported themes such as the frontier thesis and church-sect typology, although indigenous issues such as the existence of two cultures within one nation and the Canadian mosaic are now used. To the extent that a paradigm exists, it posits the thesis that Canadian Christianity has been less "enthusiastic", more churchly, more conservative and closer to European patterns than those in the United States. But this thesis, which I question, derives largely from an elitist perspective and has stiffled examination of the inner happenings. A third reason for the lack of attention to inner history has been the lack of confidence that our story is relevant, distinctive or exciting.[3] I am certain that I am not alone in struggling regularly with the question of Canadian content in my teaching. As an example, let me cite a current project, a course on modern shapers of the Christian

faith for our Hamilton Lay School of Theology. While such names as Schweitzer, Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil and Thomas Merton are naturals, I have had much greater difficulty including Canadians of equal stature. This is not simply a matter of depricating our past. Gerald Cragg once observed that we have not had leisure time for great creativity.[4] The scale of our society, and our preoccupation with what Margaret Atwood calls "hanging on, staying alive," have seemingly prevented us from assuming a central role in Christian history despite our significant contributions in such areas as theological education and church union. Atwood writes:

> . . . Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all. Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds out, not the smugness and/or sense of security of everything in its place, which The Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. 5

Atwood's generalization is surely too sweeping, but she does bring focus to the sort of problem awaiting anybody who undertakes the study of Christian history in Canada. While the recent publication of excellent works of synthesis and monographs on such themes as the social gospel movement and language nationalism should lay to rest any anxieties we might have about the relevance, distinctiveness and excitement of our past, as well about the maturity of our craft, much needs to be done. I want to suggest that we move in two different, but complementary directions in the 1980's. The first is in the area of what I have called the inner happenings to elucidate what is specifically Christian about Christian history in Canada. This will require the use of insights from other disciplines, including anthropology, history or religions, literary criticism, psychology and sociology. The second is in the area of comparative study to elucidate just how Canadian is Christianity in Canada. This will require much more nuanced examination of patterns of religious life in Canada which have previously appeared unCanadian.

On the first, I take my lead from Peter Brown's studies of religion and society in late antiquity. Brown calls attention to "the abiding paradox of

the relations between the inner and outer world."[6] Brown writes:

> I have had to go to the intimate realities of men's lives - to their patterns of deportment, to their relations with women and children, to their methods of education, their tastes, their use (and abundants misuse) of leisure, to the heavy lumber of ideas at the back of their minds, and to the intimate, but no less real, disasters and excitements involved in their attempts to live at peace with themselves, their families and their near neighbours. In so doing, I am well aware that I have wandered off some of the royal roads of ancient history. In asking myself why the Roman aristocracy became Christian, I found myself more concerned with their wives and their poetry, than with the edicts of their Emperors; just as, in discussing the supposed prevalence of sorcery in Late Antiquity, I have attempted to point away from the somewhat prurient interest in the 'Decline of Rationalism', . . . to the more intimate, if prosaic, facts about how Late Roman men grappled with suffering and misfortune in their lives, by what means they maintained their image of themselves, and what they expected in their relations with others. The historian of religion, precisely because he is a historian of religion, must keep his eyes firmly on the ground. He cannot look closely enough at the abundant Late Roman evidence for the ways in which men related themselves to each other and to their own experience. 7

I have cited Brown at length because I believe that he helps to set the agenda for church history in general, and Canadian church history specifically, in the 1980's. In numerous writings, he establishes high standards, not only for inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural work, but also for sympathy, trained insight and common cunning. In his studies of Augustine, holy men and the iconoclastic controversy, he compells us to reconsider what is specifically Christian and religious about the Christian religion.

As an example of how we might apply his approach to our work, let me cite the case of Charles Chiniquy, during the nineteenth century "successively the best-known Roman Catholic priest in the province of Quebec and the best-known Protestant minister in all of Canada."[8] Chiniquy usually merits some note in surveys of Canadian church history, but we read little concerning the world view and values which generated his crusading fervour. Why did temperance and anti-Catholicism stir such tremendous passions? Why was there an apparent dichotomy between the effectiveness of elite leadership and popular religion? The same sorts of questions must be raised about Henry Alline, Louis Riel or some of our twentieth-century crusaders - William Aberhart, Brother Andre, Thomas Todhunter Shields - whose names often evoke embarrassment. Still their relative neglect

attests to the relative neglect of inner happenings, what is happening in the pews, at the camp meetings and bible conferences, in the minds and hearts of holiness and charismatic revivalists, at the bible colleges, what is taught and thought in the established seminaries and denominational offices, and so on. The inner story must take into account the actions of believers, not only as they worship, sing, pray, meditate and study, but also as they move into broad social movements, for example, for women's rights, or against Canadian involvement in arms sales and against nuclear proliferation. Some of this work is already under way, and it may result in a very different perspective than that of our governing paradigm which posits Canadian Christianity as conservative, churchly and closer to European religious patterns than those in the United States.

On the second direction, comparative studies, I take my cue from Herbert E. Bolton's 1932 Presidential address to the American Historical Association, delivered, appropriately, in Toronto and entitled "The Epic of Greater America", as well as Robert Handy's History of the Churches in the United States and Canada.[9] The many attempts to identify which is especially Canadian about Christianity in Canada have often claimed too much for our distinctiveness and uniqueness, while at the same time they have missed opportunities to illumine what is distinctive or unique by careful attention to patterns of religious experience elsewhere. Several examples come to mind - church-state relations, spirituality, missionary outreach - but let me explore two themes which invite comparative study, revivalism and civil religion.

First, revivalism. Standard Canadian church historiography acknowledges the existence in Canada during the 18th and 19th centuries of a tradition of revivalism, but it tends to concentrate on such issues as church-state relations and Canadianization. One reads of growth and conflict but one would scarcely realize that, in both the Maritimes and the Canadas before Confederation, religion and the revival thereof were serious matters.

Unlike the tendency today to distinguish sharply between things sacred and

things secular, Christianity was evident in the ebb and flow of every day life. At least i n Protestant circles, people read their Bibles daily and organized to build churches, to combat demon rum and to ensure that Bible and prayers formed part of school curricula. People met frequently to renew church covenants. Baptists, for example, met regularly to admonish and discipline church members on such matters as non-attendance at church, drinking, brawling, dancing, sexual misconduct, hypocrisy, slander or behaving at camp meetings in an unseemly manner. Revivals, adapted to Canadian frontier conditions from the United States often despite intense histility to that country's alleged anarchy and republicanism run awry were prominent in free church circles, especially Methodist and Baptist. The revivals tended to be emotional and to emphasize individual self-examination, but they met other needs as well. People experienced welcome respite from harsh frontier conditions. "God was in the camp," they could affirm in the warm atmosphere of Christian community. "The sound of the trumpet was heard." They may even have had a good time for, as one contemporary critic put it, "More persons go for a frolic than to obtain any spiritual benefit."[10]

To the extent that revivalism has received at least grudging recognition for the period before Confederation, it has been almost totally ignored subsequently. Nonetheless, holiness and dispensational groups have waxed and waned, the Niagara Bible Conferences attracted wide representation from Canadian churches, and the so-called third-force denominations have moved securely into the mainstream. While some work on our inner happenings is under way, much more attention is required in this area. A continental approach surely is necessary for such reasons as the impact leading Canadian figures (T.T. Shields, A.B. Simpson, Father Coughlin, Aimee Semple McPherson) have had in the United States and the strong base of fundamentalist institutions in the United States.[11]

The problem of neglect is much the same with respect to civil religion. By the beginning of what Prime Minister Laurier proclaimed to be "Canada's century" two distinct identities had emerged. These were not quite as uniform as is

suggested by the pairings French-Catholic and English-Protestant, and much greater attention must be given to other ethnic groups. Still, France and England constituted the two founding nations of Canada. From earliest times, the existence of a French-Catholic sense of mission has been acknowledged. Much less well-known is the existence in English Canada of a powerful cult of loyalty and devotion to the monarchy. This loyalty and devotion had religious as well as political content.[12] By developing such Biblical archetypes as covenant, exodus, chosen people, promised land and the New Jerusalem, English Canadians transformed the idea that God is an Englishman, to read, "In the beginning God created Canada."[13] The theme of election - God's chosen people - which has had a potent history in both England and the United States, appears again and again in English Canadian religious history. The following excerpt from a sermon preached by the future Bishop Strachan of Toronto picks up the theme:

> Now, although Great Britian has many sins to deplore; yet, on a comparison with other nations, it will be found that she possesses more true liberty, more solid morality, and more true religion, than they. Where is there a nation equal to the British in the number and extent of its charitable institutions? or possessing such a spirit of independence, such intrepid virtue; such a rational piety; these are the distinctions which have enabled her to continue successful against the world in arms . . . She has stood . . . with the Bible in her hands, abiding firmly by the doctrines it reveals. 14

Strachan went on to identify the Upper Canadian as a remnant, a seed or a little flock which would stand as witness in North America to God's goodness in church and state.

Strachan's dream of a Christian Canada did not, of course, materialize. The clergy reserves were secularized and a national church never came to be. But his dream did not really die. The notion of English providential election has persisted, and is adopted by many non-English-speaking immigrants as well as by Canadians of English descent. For some, "believing that the Anglo-Saxon race had an important place in the economy of the Kingdom of God," this has meant not only the Christianization of Canada, but also the anglicanization of the French Canadian.[15] For others, claiming no quarrel with French Canadian people, this had meant simply a consciousness of a mission, "as truly as ancient Israel had"

to forge a dominion, from sea to sea, which would be, the home of freedom, of justice, and of peace."[16] George M. Grant of Queen's University wrote in 1873, "A great future beckons us as a people onward. To reach it, God grant us purity and faith, deliverance from the lust of personal aggrandizement, unity and invincible steadfastness of purpose."[17]

Whether as an alternative to democracy and denominationalism run amok in the United States, or in collaboration with it, Canada as a distinct kind of America developed as a potent symbol for many Canadians. Those of you who witnessed the funeral train of John Diefenbaker last summer will recognize that the symbol has not lost its power, and it might be noted that the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship still popularizes the motto, "His Dominion shall be from Sea to Sea."[18]

Canadians have been as vulnerable as citizens of the United States to the confusion of religion and nationalism. Does it really matter that we know this? I think the comparative study of Christian history in both countries does matter, because the narrow range of much that is called scholarship is stiffling, even if it does provide the bed rock studies upon which comprehensive works must build. And it matters because the tendency towards parochialism which I observe to be characteristic of scholarship - and life more generally - in both the United States and Canada is unacceptibile in our world. However powerful or self-sustaining the local may be, we need a larger perspective. Scholars often protest that the phrase "ivory tower" does not adequately describe their activity. If scholars are to shape positively the issues which affect our social existence, we must counter the tendency towards intellectual isolation, pedantry and reductionism. We may even come to know ourselves more adequately.

[1]Joachim Wach, The Comparative Study of Religions, ed. with an intro. by Joseph M. Kitagawa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

[2]N.K. Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: an Historiographical Analysis," Church History 38 (December 1969):506-23; John Webster Grant, "'At Least You Knew Where You Stood with Them':Reflections on Religious Pluralism in Canada and the United States," Studies in Religion 2 (Spring 1973): 340-51; id., "Christianity in Canada," in L'homme, les religions et la liberté, ed. Robert Choquette (Ottawa: Les Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1974).

[3]John W. Grant, "Asking Questions of the Canadian Past," Canadian Journal of Theology 1 (July 1955):98-104.

[4]Gerald R. Cragg, "The Present Position and the Future Prospects of Canadian Theology," Canadian Journal of Theology 1(April 1955):6.

[5]Margaret Atwood, Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 33.

[6]Peter Brown, Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), p. 10.

[7]Ibid., p. 17.

[8]Pierre Berton, My Country (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), p. 138.

[9]Herbert E. Bolton, "The Epic of Greater America," American Historical Review 38 (April 1933):448-74; Robert T. Handy, A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[10]Susanna Moodie, Life in the Clearings versus the Bush, intro. Robert L. McDougall (London, 1853; Toronto:Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1959) p. 110. See also, M.A. Garland, "Some Phases of Pioneer Religious Life in Upper Canada before 1850," Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records 25 (1929):231-47; David J. Green, "An Investigation into the Role of the Baptist Church as a Moral Court on the Niagara Frontier," (term paper, McMaster University, n.d., Canadian Baptist Archives, Hamilton, Ontario); Arthur W. Kewley, "The Beginning of the Camp Meeting Movement in Upper Canada," Canadian Journal of Theology 10 (1964): 192-202; John S. Moir, "The Canadianization of the Protestant Churches," Canadian Historical Association Report (1966):56-59 and "The Upper Canadian Religious Tradition," in Profiles of a Province. Studies in the History of Ontario, ed., Edith G. Firth (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1967).

[11]Harry H. Hiller, "Continentalism and the Third Force in Religion," Canadian Journal of Sociology 3 (1978):183-207; Joel A. Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism 1929-42," Church History 49 (1980):62-75.

[12]H.H. Walsh, The Christian Church in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956), p. 103.

[13]William T. Gunn, His Dominion ([n.p.]: Canadian Council of the Missionary Education Movement, Press of the Hunter-Rose Co., Limited, 1917). p. 1

[14]S.F. Wise, "God's Peculiar Peoples," in The Shield of Achilles. Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age, ed., W.L. Morton (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1968), p. 53.

[15]Burkhard Kiesekamp, "Presbyterian and Methodist Divines: Their Case for a National Church in Canada, 1875-1900," Studies in Religion 2 (Spring, 1973):296.

[16]George M. Grant quoted by Carl Berger, The Sense of Power. Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867-1914 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 218.

[17]George M. Grant, Ocean to Ocean. Sanford Fleming's Expedition through Canada in 1872 (Toronto: James Campbell and Son, 1873), p. 358.

[18]Terence Dempsey, "The Role of the Church in English Canadian Nationalism. God's Dominion of Canada (Senior Seminar, McMaster Divinity College, 1979, Canadian Baptist Archives):42-43.