Church History of Canada: Where from Here?

by

John Webster Grant

Back in the late 1950's, when Dr. Lorne Pierce instigated the formation of what became the Canadian Society of Church History, his chief purpose was to promote the formation of a reservoir of scholars and ideas that would make possible what he envisaged as a centennial three-volume history of the church in Canada. When I arrived at the Ryerson Press in 1959 as his designated successor, he asked me to assume the general editorship of what he described as a "definitive" history of the church in Canada. I smiled somewhat indulgently, for I have never had much faith in definitive studies. This is 1980, however, and the resulting series looks rather more definitive now than when it was first projected. There has been a good deal of nibbling around the edges, but nothing like the wave of revisionism that all of the contributors anticipated. Despite some perceptible yellowing of the pages over the years, therefore, these volumes probably represent as good a terminus a quo as any from which to assess current trends in the writing of Canadian church history.

Identifying the presuppositions inherent in a book, let alone a series, is a task probably best undertaken by just about anyone other than the authors; one does not normally begin by listing one's presuppositions. In reflecting after the event on the process of planning and writing, I am aware that we were doubtless affected by personal biases and by the theological Zeitgeist but more obviously by the availability of existing research and, perhaps even more strikingly, by the nature of the assignment. Since one was writing on a national scale, one had to look for common features; in the

preface to my volume I wrote, "At least one criterion of selection has been consciously adopted ... that of relating the history of the church to the development of Canada as a nation." Since a mere assembling of denominational histories would be no more national than an assembling of regional histories, the volumes would also have to be ecumenical. Since the forging of bonds among regions was largely the responsibility of national headquarters, there would have to be considerable attention to institutions. And despite a preponderantly metropolitan thrust in Canadian church histories from the start (after all, a "winning" of the frontier from metropolitan bases was as paramount to E. H. Oliver as to Innis or Creighton), there was a natural interest in identifying any distinctively Canadian elements in the development of church life.

The approach I have outlined seems to me not only defensible but even inevitable in any book or series with a title like "The History of the Church in Canada". It also has some built-in biases of which those who have tried to write national church history are probably more acutely aware than anyone else. In dealing with the period before Confederation one looks for a common story when in fact there wasn't one. In dealing with the later period one inevitably emphasizes the interaction between Ontario Protestantism and Quebec Catholicism, with some attention to its overflow into the prairies. The Atlantic provinces and British Columbia tend to float towards the margins, as does anglophone Roman Catholicism, and the origins and preferences of the author seem to make little difference to the outcome. On the other hand, while influences from outside Canada are certainly noted, limitations of length and the need to tell a connected story tend to make the treatment self-contained, leaving no opportunity

for tracing many intriguing lines of connection with the outside world. These biases - homogenizing, centralist, institutional, and somewhat introverted - are increasingly less acceptable as affection shifts to the local and particular on the one hand and the universally human on the other.

The natural expression of this dissatisfaction is not the writing of a different kind of national church history but rather an attempt to pick up themes with which national history cannot adequately deal: on the one hand, regions, groupings, and issues that receive no more than passing treatment in national church history, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mennonites, the native peoples, the separate school issue, perhaps next white Anglo-Saxon Protestants as a distinct minority; on the other, the tracing of impulses that overflow national boundaries. Works of the former type have dominated the 1970's and are likely to continue into the 1980's. Less attention has been paid to the task of setting Canadian church history in a broader context, but such studies as Tom Sinclair-Faulkner's article on the theological and philosophical roots of the Workman-Jackson controversies and John Moir's forthcoming history of Canadian biblical scholarship may prove to be indicators of an awakening interest. Given the present particularist mood, however, I am inclined to see Robert Handy's History of the Churches in the United States and Canada as the culmination of an earlier trend to generalization rather than as the harbinger of a new flowering of synthetic history.

To note the current eschewing of global studies is not to predict their permanent demise. Every so often it is necessary to try to measure the woods, even at the cost of overlooking particular trees or

interesting pathways. So long as Canada continues to be a country, its religious history will occasionally need to be surveyed. If it ceases to be one, or if its shape or external relations are seriously altered, the need for a new reckoning will be all the more urgent.

In view of limitations of time, I will content myself with dealing as briefly as possible with one further issue. It is now a commonplace, especially in departments of Religion, that church history is destined soon to vanish in favour of something broader and academically more respectable called religious history. Without doubt such a genre is emerging and will become more important. I have already used the term in this talk when it seemed to fit, and it best describes at least one of my own current projects. I am not convinced, however, that church history is a thing of the past or at best the present. History is essentially about communities, and both the denominations and ecumenical groupings are significant communities. They deserve and will receive attention as legitimately as the Liberal party or the Canadian Congress of Labour.

In at least two respects, however, I think that church history will change significantly. One of these is obvious: the history of the church (or churches) in Canada can no longer be offered as the equivalent of a religious history of Canada, as with some empirical justification we have tended to offer it in the past. The other is less easy to describe with any precision, but I will at least try. We have become so accustomed to describing the church in terms of a battery of institutions from local youth or women's organizations to national committees that we tend to forget that this pattern has been normative for a mere century. This kind of church may well be disappearing before our eyes, although it is difficult

to foresee what will replace it. Something more loosely organized, more resistant to direction from the centre, although perhaps in its discrete expressions often more rigid in outlook and expectation, may be in the offing. Church history, I predict, will go on. In writing it we may have to deal with a more diffuse and elusive entity than we have known.

Suggestions by those who preceded me seem, at least on the surface, to point in two opposite directions. On the one hand, Keith Clifford foresees increased drawing on sociology, with church history becoming something like a religious department of social history. On the other, Paul Dekar urges more attention to the inner springs of spirituality that have commonly been missed in institutional church history. I am nervous about either development unless it is corrected by the other. There is a tendency nowadays to assume that the significance of religion or of faith has been fully explored when one has analyzed its social causes and effects, and greater dependence on sociology might only aggravate this tendency. There is also a tendency on the part of psychologists, and sometimes of members of departments of Religion, to assume that only the inner life matters in religion and that religious institutions are no more than containers for it. To follow this line too far is to fall into a sort of intellectual docetism that can give no account of the tremendous loyalty some people have for the religious communities to which they belong.

I do not think that either speaker intended the consequences of which I have spoken. Indeed, I suspect that despite our different approaches all three of us are fairly close together. We all agree that the nuts and bolts of ecclesiastical gadgetry, and perhaps also open controversies over specific issues, have loomed too large in Canadian church history, and that what we now need is a historiography that will give more attention to what the churches have meant to those associated with them. I am still prepared to think of this as "church history".