

THE REACTION OF WASP CHURCHES
TO NON-WASP IMMIGRANTS

by

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Dr. Ian Mackinnon, under whose teaching at Pine Hill Divinity Hall I was introduced to church history, has written, "Population matters are basic to the understanding of the social fabric of a nation."¹ The interaction of ethnic and cultural traditions may seem to many students a much less exciting field of study than the progress of spiritual and intellectual movements, and I daresay they are right. In the development of our own country, however, adjustments and often compromises among diverse groups have been much more conspicuous than original movements, and I have found that the easiest way to give some shape to Canadian church history is to tell the story in terms of the effects of successive waves of immigration - French, American, British and in this century cosmopolitan.

The period I have selected for comment extends from about 1900 to 1914, when the first world war brought immigration to a temporary halt. For decades prior to 1900 Canada had been losing more people to the United States than it had been gaining from the old world, the early settlement of the west having been almost entirely the result of a redistribution of the existing Canadian population. By 1896 the number of immigrants was down to 17,000 the lowest since Confederation. Then, thanks to a rise in the price of wheat and other primary products, a lowering of ocean freight rates, the filling of the American west, and energetic recruitment by the Laurier government and the Canadian Pacific Railway, people began to come in great numbers. More than 50,000 immigrants entered Canada in 1901, more than 200,000 in 1906. In the decade from 1901 to 1911 a million people settled in the three prairie provinces, and the total population of the country increased by 34%.

Although more than half of the settlers spoke English when they arrived, the most conspicuous feature of this immigration was its ethnic variety. During the nineteenth century it had been possible to classify Canadians as either British or French, the notable exceptions - apart from the long-assimilated German and Dutch population of eastern Canada - being Mennonites and Icelanders in Manitoba. Those who began to arrive about 1900, by contrast included people from every corner of Europe as well as the Far East and their presence was made more conspicuous by a policy of allocating compact blocks of land for group settlement. A large proportion were drawn from the varied peoples of Austria-Hungary, above all Ukrainians from the old province of Galicia. Clifford Sifton, Laurier's Minister of the Interior, described these "men in sheepskin coats" as ideal immigrants. They were at any rate sufficiently numerous and obvious to be tagged as typical, descriptions of foreigners in this period tended to be descriptions of Ukrainians.

It would be unfair to suggest that historians have neglected the great immigration of the Laurier era, but most of them have treated it as a colourful incident rather than as part of the main thrust of Canadian history. Church historians, in particular, have set a pattern of subsuming immigration under the general heading of home missions, thus branding it as a specialized area of interest. Yet, as has happened again before our eyes since the second world war, immigration drastically altered the society in which the churches were set. It transformed Canada from a static nation sadly lacking in self-confidence into a dynamic one staking an assured claim on the new century. It gave the country its first taste of metropolitan or near-metropolitan life. It introduced new folkways and made some old ones no longer viable.

In this paper I will not attempt to describe in detail the work of the churches among the newcomers, nor will I even touch the important subject of the rise of such predominantly immigrant churches as the Lutheran and Orthodox. My concern is rather with

attitudes within the long-established churches of Canada - attitudes to immigrants, attitudes to the new situation created by immigration ultimately changed attitudes to their own task. I had originally hoped to include all major churches and all major immigrant groups in my review. The material grew beyond all reasonable bounds however, so I have fallen back on a title that lends itself to more compact treatment, "The Reaction of WASP Churches to Non-WASP Immigrants".

The best point of departure, perhaps, is a brief look at the state of Canadian Protestantism just prior to the great immigration. At that time the churches were probably at the height of their power and influence. As a result of earlier evangelistic efforts they were reaping the harvest of a church-going, sabbath-keeping population. They had succeeded, despite an early head-start for French Catholicism, in making the west an outpost of Ontario Protestantism. They were able to mount formidable moral campaigns that fell short of desired results in legislation but succeeded in making drinking and most public amusements socially unacceptable. They had a dream of national greatness that included adherence to their own moral standards, and the dream seemed to have every possibility of realization. Methodists and Presbyterians in particular, had solid reasons for thinking of themselves as authentic representatives of Canada's future.

To churches so situated the immigrant tide represented a significant new factor they could not ignore. As self-appointed custodians of the national conscience they could regard the introduction of divergent mores only as a threat to their elaborate programme of moral reformation. As missionary enthusiasts, on the other hand, they were bound to see in the arrival of the newcomers a Macedonian call to service and witness. As nation-builders, too, they had to take account of them as contributors for better or worse to Canada's future. To these three aspects - threat, call and challenge - the rest of the paper will be devoted.

Prominent in the response to immigration throughout the period under study was dismay at its unsettling effects. The first official notice taken by the Methodist Manitoba Conference in 1898 was an expression of bewilderment,² and as late as 1921 the British Columbia Synod of the Presbyterian Church was striving to prevent the immigrants from becoming a menace to our civilization.³ The Methodist chaplain Wellington Bridgman was out on an extreme limb of his own when he wrote of central Europeans, "These people seem to carry an innate morbid passion to shed blood",⁴ but a respected Presbyterian official could soberly comment, "It may be taken for granted that a considerable percentage of the new arrivals are, morally, socially and intellectually, of a decidedly lower type than the average Anglo-Saxon".⁵ Most churchmen shared the sense of crisis expressed by John Stark in an address to the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, "All that is choicest and best in our national life is trembling in the balance."⁶

Dr. C.W. Gordon (Ralph Connor to his readers) published in 1909 a novel entitled The Foreigner in which he sought to call the attention of the public to the Ukrainian problem. The book has no great literary merit, but it reveals a good deal about the attitude of a well-intentioned, socially minded Protestant of the period. Its portrayal of immigrants is distinctly unflattering. They are described as living in physical squalor and moral degradation, fighting with knives instead of manly fists, and ending their wedding feasts "in sordid drunken dance and song and in sanguinary fighting."⁷ The contrast between their ways and those of the British comes out strongly in a confrontation between the Ukrainian Paulina and her Irish benefactress Mrs. Fitzpatrick. It was the East meeting the West, the Slav facing the Anglo-Saxon. Between their points of view stretched generations of moral development. It was not a question of absolute moral character so much as a question of moral standards.⁸ The conclusion naturally followed: "They must be taught our ways of thinking and living, or it will be a mighty bad thing for us in western Canada."⁹

J.S. Woodsworth is justly known for his early interest in the immigrants and his dedicated work on their behalf. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, to discover that his estimate of their ways was remarkably similar to Gordon's. He cited their tendency to lower the standard of living, the burden they imposed on public charity, their high rate of sickness and insanity, their illiteracy, their propensity to crime, their affinity with despotism and their tendency to congregate in slums.¹⁰ He referred to Orientals in terms that would raise eyebrows today: "the expression, 'This is a white man's country', has deeper significance than we sometimes imagine".¹¹ One gets the impression that Woodsworth regarded the admission of aliens as an almost unrelieved misfortune.

It would be a mistake to attribute these unfavourable judgments to mere narrow-minded nativism. Norman Macdonald has documented the unseemly haste of governments and transportation magnates to populate the prairies by any available means,¹² W.C. Smith the lack of adequate procedures for selection that resulted from this haste.¹³ The churches were not alone in decrying indiscriminate immigration, and the Protestant churches had some special reasons of their own for alarm. They were naturally disconcerted, just when they seemed to be successfully implanting ideals of temperance and personal discipline, to see the country inundated with people who had never heard of the virtues of total abstinence and threatened the rigid Canadian Sunday in the bargain. They were also disturbed to find that many of the newcomers, through their natural helplessness in a strange land, became ready victims and sometimes tools of the bootleggers and vice traffickers whom they had come to regard as their natural enemies. Moreover, having opposed separate schools on the issue of national unity for many years, they were less than pleased by the advent of so many potential supporters of these schools.

Although it would be an exaggeration to isolate immigration as the primary factor behind the causes espoused by Canadian Protestants during the 1900s, its effects certainly contributed to the intensity with which these causes were pressed. The demand for prohibition took on a new urgency, while the protection of the Lord's day became for the first time a really critical issue. The future of the immigrants was also an important factor in the controversy over provisions for separate schools in the acts setting up the new provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta in 1905, on which the Methodist Church at least expressed itself even more forcibly than it had on the Manitoba school question of the previous decade.¹⁴

If his presence constituted a problem, the immigrant was also a fellow-human in need, a brother for whom Christ had died. Almost without exception, churchmen argued that everything possible should be done to ease the way of the newcomer and to improve the conditions under which he lived. Gordon's intention in writing The Foreigner was undoubtedly to call attention to his plight, and he complained bitterly of general neglect: "Many and generous were the philanthropies of Winnipeg, but as yet there was none that had to do with the disease and degradation that were too often found in the environment of the foreign people. There were many churches in the city rich in good work, with committees that met to confer and report, but there was not yet one [he excepts a Methodist mission] whose special duty it was to confer and report upon the unhappy, struggling and unsavoury foreigner within the city gate."¹⁵ J.S. Woodsworth, whose Methodist mission may have been the one to which Gordon referred, saw the situation of the immigrants in intensely human terms. His writings are full of such expressions as "Poor people!"¹⁶ "If we only knew one life!"¹⁷ In this spirit churches of all denominations rushed to provide welcoming agents at the ports, hospitals, schools and community centres on the prairies, Catholic Friendship Houses and All Peoples' Missions in the cities, and church services where there was some hope of a response.

Protestant work among foreign immigrants had three main purposes, which I list in order of apparent urgency rather than of ultimate importance to the churches involved. First came the purely humanitarian task of introducing the immigrants to the country, providing them with essential services and protecting them from swindlers. Then came the slower but equally important enterprise of "Canadianization" - an omnibus concept that included the inculcation of loyalty to Britain and to British institutions as well as the cultivation of nonconformist moral standards. A third aim was evangelism, which seemed desirable in the case of all non-Protestants and especially inviting in the case of groups like the Ukrainians who at first had little access to priests of their own.

To those responsible for service to immigrants these three types of activity seemed not only compatible but complementary. What greater favour could one do the immigrants than to introduce them to the benefits of Canadian civilization, and where could one exhibit that civilization better than in the fellowship of, say, a Presbyterian or a Methodist church? In this spirit Brown, Connor's ideal pastor in The Foreigner, set out to make his Ukrainian charges "good Christians and good Canadians, which is the same thing."¹⁸ In practice, however, it was not easy to prevent one purpose from getting in the way of the fulfilment of another. It was sometimes necessary, as even Brown came to realize, to abjure proselytism in order to make Canadianization palatable. Even humanitarian services might be unacceptable if there was a suspicion of ulterior motive behind them. Those who worked on the premise, "if we do not get these people upon our hearts and consciences today, tomorrow we will have them upon our backs,"¹⁹ were unlikely to convince the immigrants that they were merely disinterested friends.

Some of the tensions inherent in this situation came out clearly in an unusual experiment attempted by the Presbyterian Church in Canada.²⁰ Although most Ukrainians were Greek Catholics, using an eastern liturgy but obedient to the Pope, some had been

influenced in their homeland by evangelical preachers. In the first years of this century a few young men including one Ivan Bodrug were persuaded by the Presbyterian superintendent James Robertson to take a short course in divinity at Manitoba College. Bodrug was urged to accept ordination, but he demurred on the ground that as a Protestant he would lose all influence among his people. The bishop of an American breakaway group known as the Independent Greek Church then came to Winnipeg,²¹ and Bodrug accepted ordination from him. The upshot was that upon the initiative of Robertson's successor J.A. Carmichael the Presbyterians sponsored an Independent Greek Church in Canada. This organization was something of a hybrid. In its worship it used the Orthodox liturgy purged of Mariology and other elements regarded as superstitious. It was organized in a consistory after the Presbyterian style, and eventually provided with an executive council. Its catechism was a translation of one widely used among the English free churches.²² At one time it had fifty-one missionaries,²³ and Presbyterians looked for a mass movement among the Ukrainian settlers.

Unfortunately for such high hopes, the enterprise contained two built-in weaknesses that would ultimately destroy it. One of these was an unresolved uncertainty about the real nature of the Independent Greek Church. Some of its priests hoped that it might become a national church for Ukrainians, purified of unevangelical practices but treasuring its liturgy and maintaining episcopal ordination. Others regarded it as merely a half-way house to Protestantism, and a number of them were fanatical in their hatred of Rome. Strife between the two factions split the church in 1900. Bodrug temporarily accepted a post in the United States, and some who left with him never returned. The Presbyterian Church was equally ambiguous in its approach. Its authorities stressed the indigenous nature of the movement but assured their own constituency that the consistory never took an important step "without the knowledge and approval of the Synodical Home Mission Committee in Winnipeg."²⁴ The unstable equilibrium was only

maintained through Carmichael's active support. Shortly after his death the church took the Ukrainian work directly into its own hands, arguing that the Board of Home Missions should not spend money on property not vested in the Presbyterian Church or pay salaries "to workers not our own, and consequently not under the control of the Board."²⁵

Equally serious was a wide gap in understanding of the significance of the project between its sponsors and the leaders of the community to which it was designed to appeal. Sponsors saw it as service to the needy, indeed as an example of service so disinterested that it did not even win converts to Presbyterianism. Leaders of the Ukrainian community on the other hand, regarded it as a transparent fraud. Not only the Independent Greek Church but Protestant hospitals and schools were in their estimation merely lures to attract the unwary away from the solid ways of their fathers, and they warned their people to have nothing to do with them. Both points of view had some justification in the facts.

Protestant effort among non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants can by no means be dismissed as a record of failure. The churches performed many services that no one else was able or willing to perform, despite their own prejudices they helped many immigrants to find acceptance in Canadian society, and they attracted an appreciable number into their own churches. Increasingly, however, they found it necessary to separate proselytism and service. Projects of the 1920's, such as that among Ukrainians at Insinger, Saskatchewan, were characterized by promises that the churches would not even seek to make converts.²⁷

At once a menace and an unwitting candidate for missionary outreach, the immigrant was also a potential fellow-Canadian who would help to determine the future of the nation. As their active programmes of Canadianization attested, churchmen recognized from the beginning that ultimately they would have to come to terms with the immigrants. Those with strongly developed nationalistic sentiments, notably Methodists and Presbyterians,

were especially active in cultivating potential leaders among the immigrants

At first it was supposed that the influence would all be in one direction. The nation was to be welded together on the basis of British institutions and Protestant morality, and the task of the churches was to help the immigrant to appreciate the heritage that was his by adoption. The possibilities open to the degraded foreigner were described by Ralph Connor in unctuously patronizing terms. Kalman, the Slavic protagonist in The Foreigner, demonstrated his successful adaptation to Canada by becoming a Presbyterian and a successful capitalist and - all too typically of Connor - by marrying the daughter of a Scottish peer. "To those he met in the world of labour and of business he seemed hard. To his old friends on the ranch or at the mission, up through all the hardness there welled those springs that come from a heart kind, loyal and true. ²⁸

Behind the frequently vulgar manifestations was a philosophy of nationhood that suggests rather sinister overtones today but carried considerable conviction then. As William Magney has written, in words that could be applied to churchmen of several denominations, "To Methodists, the English language was simply one of the essential elements to any scheme for building a unified nation. Loyalty to national tradition, or provincial peculiarity was not the point; rather, it was loyalty to the high calling which God had given the English-speaking Anglo-Saxon race in Canada to build a new nation out of diverse materials which would be a model of Christian, albeit British, virtue and morality in all its institutions. ²⁹

Because national tradition was not the point, there was a possible opening to a vision of Canada to which immigrants might make their own distinctive contributions. The first signs of change appeared about 1912, when the terms "newcomer" and "stranger" began to replace "foreigner" and "immigrant" in Home Mission reports. ³⁰ By 1915 a report contained the heading, "The New Canadian," ³¹ a phrase that first appeared to my knowledge in

the title of a book published in 1907.³² Gradually there emerged a pattern in church literature of noting in series the peculiar contributions that might be expected of each group. A home mission superintendent who boasted of his Scottish forebears before an Armenian audience and then urged his hearers to take the same pride in their own ancestors was symptomatic of an emerging vision of a multicultural Canada.³³

By 1917, when the Congregationalist Dr. W.T. Gunn wrote His Dominion for an interdenominational committee, belief in racial equality and in the possibility of mutual enrichment was becoming a commonplace of official Protestantism. His suggestion that various ethnic groups "have something to contribute to our country"³⁴ was no longer original. Canadian WASP's had taken a long step in humility, however, when one of their number could write, "We must lift them up or they will pull us down", had often made a striking close to an address on 'The Problem of the Immigrant', but what about the 'problem' of the speaker? What delicious and unconscious conceit of ourselves - we are all 'up'! What hasty lump condemnation - they are all 'down'! What Pharasaism there is in the mental picture.³⁵ Future books published under church auspices, such as W.G. Smith's Building the Nation in 1922, would continue the tradition established by Gunn. The concept of Canada as a mosaic (the word was first used by Victoria Hayward in 1922 in a travel book entitled Romantic Canada) would henceforth be the official line of the leading Protestant churches.

The cosmopolitan immigration of the early years of this century was an important factor in changing the image of Canada current among Canadian Protestants. Previously churchmen had made little distinction between Canadian greatness and British greatness, and they had thought of the normal Canadian as a church-going WASP of Victorian habits. Now Canada began to emerge as a new entity of varied colours. True, many attitudes remained essentially unchanged until after the second world war. The old standards remained normative, the distinctive contributions

expected of new Canadians consisting of little more than peripheral elements like colourful national costumes and folk dances with little bodily contact. Nevertheless, a frame of reference had been set within which a new Canada could take shape.

It was not merely the fact of immigration, however, that produced the ideal of Canada as a multicultural mosaic. By their presence the newcomers compelled the adoption of some new attitude, but the actual categories in terms of which the new situation could be rationalized had to be imported or drawn from previous experience. In part they were imported. An international vogue for the rights of small nationalities probably had some effect, although Canadian churchmen were outgrowing their earlier patronizing tone to non-Anglo-Saxons several years before Woodrow Wilson's famous statement of war aims. The publication of the books of Gunn and Smith by the Canadian Council of Missionary Education suggests the possibility that thinking about overseas missionary policy may have had some influence on attitudes to members of other ethnic groups at home. But there was also a Canadian background. The recitals of contributions of various nationalities recall similar recitals of English, Scottish, Irish and French contributions in pro-confederate oratory³⁶ and subsequently in First of July speeches. Canadian multiculturalism is an extension of biculturalism.

Finally, how did immigration and the response to it affect the life of the churches themselves? In at least three areas its influence may have been significant.

1st. It almost certainly helped to crystallize vague suggestions of church union into a definite proposal for action. Although the flood of continental immigration was in its early stages in 1902, when union discussion formally began, it had already evoked some panic among church leaders. The Protestant programme of nation-building was faced with a crisis, and only a united, genuinely Canadian church seemed capable of meeting it. The hope expressed in the Basis of Union for the eventual emergence

of "a church truly national" had nothing to do with any hankering for establishment, a good deal to do with the hope of welding the varied peoples of Canada into a Christian nation.

2nd. Awareness of conditions under which immigrants lived gave a sharper edge to the church's social involvement. The social gospel would have been imported from the United States even if the immigrants had never come, but probably in more genteel form. It was in the immigrant quarters of the rising cities that Canadian Protestants had their eyes opened to the underside of capitalism, and it was among those who worked in these quarters that a more radical breed of social gospellers arose.

3rd. The effects of concentration on Canadianization as a central task of the church upon the theological outlook of Canadian Protestants deserve further study. This concentration was not the beginning of the trend that would make liberalism by the 1920's the dominant mood of Canadian Protestantism. It was rather one manifestation of a long process of involvement in nation-building by way of temperance campaigns, attacks on corruption in public life, and a long-continued resistance to allegedly divisive institutions such as separate schools. It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the effects of the crisis of identity that led Ralph Connor to equate good Christians with good Canadians. Despite all they have learned since, Canadian Protestants have still not completely outgrown a propensity to equate evangelism with propagation of the folkways of an earlier generation of WASPs.

FOOTNOTES

1. Canada and the Minority Churches of Eastern Europe (Halifax: The Book Room, 1959), 7.
2. J.H. Riddell, Methodism in the Middle West (Toronto: Ryerson, 1946), 250.
3. Minutes of the 30th Synod of British Columbia, 1921, 19.
4. Wellington Bridgman, Breaking Prairie Sod (Toronto: Musson, 1920), 163.
5. E.D. McLaren, in Acts and Proceedings of the 36th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1910, appendix, 14.
6. Baptist Year Book, 1900, 47.
7. The Foreigner (Toronto: Westminster, 1909), 87.
8. Ibid., 24f.
9. Ibid., 255.
10. J.S. Woodsworth, Strangers Within Our Gates (Toronto: The Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, Canada, 1909), ch. 19.
11. Ibid., 276.
12. Norman Macdonald, Canada Immigration and Colonization, 1841-1903 (Aberdeen University Press, 1966).
13. W.G. Smith, A Study in Canadian Immigration (Toronto: Ryerson, 1920).
14. Margaret E. Prang, "The Political Career of Newton Wesley Rowell," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1959, 95-102. I am indebted for this reference to William Magney, "The Methodist Church and the National Gospel", a class essay at the University of Toronto, 1968.
15. The Foreigner, 160.
16. Strangers Within Our Gates, 33.
17. Ibid. 19.
18. The Foreigner, 253.
19. Editorial in the Christian Guardian, April 22, 1908, 5.

20. Except where noted, I follow the account of this experiment in Michael Zuk, "The Ukrainian Protestant Missions in Canada", unpublished thesis in the Library of McGill University, 1957.
21. Strangers Within Our Gates, 307.
22. J.A. Carmichael, in Acts and Proceedings of the 34th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1908, appendix, 12.
23. Zuk thesis, 37.
24. Report of Home Mission Committee, Western Section, 1906-07, in Acts and Proceedings of the 33rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1907, appendix, 7.
25. Acts and Proceedings of the 39th General Assembly, 1913, appendix, 7.
26. Zuk thesis, 62.
27. Ibid., 67.
28. The Foreigner, 373.
29. Magney essay, 114.
30. Acts and Proceedings of the 38th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1912, appendix, 11, 12.
31. Colin G. Young, superintendent of missions for northern Saskatchewan, in Acts and Proceedings of the 41st General Assembly, 1915, appendix, 34.
32. Howard A. Kennedy, New Canada and the New Canadian (London and Toronto: Musson, 1907).
33. The incident is described by W.T. Gunn in His Dominion (Toronto: Canadian Council of the Missionary Education Movement, 1917), 205.
34. Ibid., 215.
35. Ibid., 202.
36. See, e.g., the speech of the Hon. Georges-Etienne Cartier before the Legislative Assembly of Canada on February 7, 1865. P.B. Waite, ed., The Confederation Debates in the Province of Canada, 1865 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), 50f.