

Writing the History of Canadian Christianity: A Retrospect and Prospect of the Anglophone Scene

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In order to understand where we are collectively as a discipline, we must first look at where we have been. Only after we have figured where we have been and how we got from there to where we are now will we be in position to appreciate what our discipline is currently up to. Over the past generation, the history of Canadian Christianity in anglophone circles has gone through a number of significant phases, which taken together form the trajectory that has led us to where we are as field today. I would like to trace this trajectory by examining the four major works of synthesis that have appeared during the past thirty years, beginning with the trilogy, *A History of the Christian Church in Canada* by H.H. Walsh, John Moir, and John Webster Grant that appeared between 1966 and 1972, followed by Robert T. Handy's *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, published in 1977, and wrapping up with the 1990 survey edited by the late George Rawlyk, *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, and Mark Noll's *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, which came out in 1992.¹

One way to identify historians' basic assumptions is to closely examine what topics they choose to concentrate on, along with the reasons they offer in favour of that choice. In the case of Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy two topics stand out. The first of these topics is announced in three key words in the

¹ Volumes 1 through 3 of *A History of the Christian Church in Canada* are H.H. Walsh, *The Church in the French Era: From Colonization to British Conquest* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1966), John S. Moir, *The Church in the British Era: From the British Conquest to Confederation* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era: The First Century of Confederation* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972); Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); George A. Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990* (Burlington: Welch Publishing, 1990); Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

trilogy's general title, *The Christian Church*.² The authors' chosen subject was the Church, with a capital "C," not as some historians would have it churches, denominations, or Christianity *per se*. In many respects, using the term "Church" as a central organizing concept marked a distinct advance: it was inclusive in scope and ecumenical in spirit. Moreover, the term served to capture a salient characteristic of Canadian church history. As Walsh argued, the Canadian churches, unlike their American counterparts, looked "beyond denominationalism as the final destiny of the church" to that of ecumenism.³ From this perspective, then, the primary feature of denominationalism is that it foments division and conflict both religious and social.

This brings me to the second central topic in the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy: the churches' place in and their contribution to the country's national development.⁴ Three questions loomed especially large in this regard: what was distinctively Canadian about Christianity in this country? how did the churches' campaigns to Christianize Canadian society contribute to the country's cultural dualism? and, how can the study of the churches' role in Canadian society unlock that enigma known as the Canadian identity?

There is no question that *A History of the Christian Church in Canada* represents historical scholarship at its best. Supplementing the rather limited secondary literature that was then available, the authors extensively mined archival resources to produce the most comprehensive historical survey of Christianity in Canada to date, and it will remain so for the foreseeable future. Yet despite its high standard of scholarship, the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy made little impression upon the Canadian historical profession as a whole. By and large, the profession ignored religion at the time and has continued to do so. Nor has the trilogy's perspective had as much influence as one would expect upon the many specialized studies that have appeared since its release in 1972, the volumes in the McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Religion being a case in point. The authors of these studies have no doubt frequently consulted the volumes by Walsh, Moir, and Grant, but it is nevertheless the case that, for reasons that I will explore later on in this essay, the vast majority of these studies are concerned with very different themes and issues.

² N. Keith Clifford, "History of Religion in Canada," *The Ecumenist* 18 (July-August 1980): p. 67; Grant, "Foreword by the General Editor," in Walsh, *Church in the French Era*, p. viii.

³ Walsh, *Church in the French Era*, p. 8.

⁴ Grant, "Foreword by the General Editor" in Walsh, *Church in the French Era*, p. viii; David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 15; William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), p. 216, n. 37.

The Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy has not received the critical acclaim it deserves in this country. But, in a curious twist of fortune, American historians of Christianity have given it a warm reception. In that country, the appearance of the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy paved the way for the comparative study of Christianity in the North American context.⁵ The trilogy's influence upon these comparative studies has been so great that for Americans its perspective has become in effect the received or standard version of Canadian Christianity's history.

The title of Robert T. Handy's survey refers to churches in the plural, but his primary focus is in fact the rise and fall of the quest to create a Christian society in the United States and Canada. An examination of the various ways in which this quest were unique to Canada thus forms the basis for his comparison between Christianity in this country and in the United States. The institutional development of the churches is part of this picture because it helps to explain the most distinctive characteristics of Canadian Christianity, in particular the churches' special role as bearers of Canadian national consciousness and the country's unique set of arrangements between church and state.

As many reviewers at the time observed, Handy captured many of the distinctive qualities of Canada's Christian institutions (their emphasis on tradition and continuity, for example) and of Canada's social landscape, where the overlap of language and religion gave rise to distinctive – and often conflicting – collective identities and conceptions of public order (though Handy was careful not to overlook the heterogeneity internal to Catholicism or Protestantism). Nevertheless, Handy took an unabashedly conventional approach to his subject, focusing upon the institutional and organizational concerns traditional to church history. To be sure, churches are important to the history of Christianity, just as banks are to economic history, unions to labour history, and political parties are to political history. Nonetheless, these examples suggest that church history leaves a lot out that is germane to the history of Christianity. As the essays in *The Canadian Protestant Experience* illustrate, most historians of Christianity would today agree that church history's frame of reference is far too narrow.

One indication of the change in perspective and approach taken by the authors of the *Canadian Protestant Experience* can be found in George Rawlyk's preface to the collection. Here Rawlyk used such terms as "religious life," "religiosity," and, of course, "experience" to describe his contributors' main subject matter. In keeping with this perspective, these

⁵ Handy, *History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, p. viii.

essays concentrate upon culture rather than institutions.⁶ This shift in emphasis is accompanied by another, equally significant development, that in method. To cite just a couple of examples, the authors examine revivalism as a cultural form and piety as a way of life. Whereas Walsh, Moir, and Grant traced the churches' impact upon Canadian culture, in this volume Protestantism itself is taken to be a complex cultural phenomenon, one that can be investigated as a cultural system.

In addition to the marked shift in focus and method I have noted, many of the themes central to the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy play out in a very different fashion in *The Canadian Protestant Experience*. Take for instance, how the authors treat the Protestant contribution to the development of the country's national identity. While recognizing the importance of the Protestant vision of making Canada God's dominion as an ideological framework for evangelical activism and outreach, these authors also explore the contested nature of this national vision. First, the authors lift up the internal fissures of Protestantism, for example those between supporters of church establishment and evangelicals, and later on, within evangelical ranks between progressives and traditionalists. Second, the authors emphasize the disjunction between Protestant national dreams and the realities of Canada's cultural and religious diversity. On both counts, the accent falls on Protestant disappointments and failures, an interpretation that hardly fits into the classic mold of the nation-building school of history.

By contrast, Mark Noll's *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, which plots the rise and fall of Protestant hegemony in North America, adopts a comparative perspective very similar to that of Robert Handy. In fact, Noll takes Handy's argument one step further when he argues that "Canada has an even better objective argument for being considered a 'Christian nation' than does the United States. ... if believers want to find a more convincing history of 'Christian America,' they should look to Canada."⁷ Canada may have lacked generally accepted overarching national myths, but Noll argues, this situation enabled Canadian Protestantism to gain a even greater public presence than its American counterpart, as Protestants vested their national hopes in their churches, and at the same time made it less ideological and more open to compromise.

Noll presents a most provocative thesis, but it is nonetheless the case that his interpretation, like that of Robert Handy, continues along the thematic vein first opened up by Walsh, Moir, and Grant. Their trilogy's influence on subsequent comparative work by American historians raises an

⁶ See Elwood Jones, review of Rawlyk, ed. *The Canadian Protestant Experience* in *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 35 (1993): p. 52.

⁷ Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, pp. 546-7.

interesting question: why has the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy not fared as well here as in the United States? To answer this question, one can start by looking at some of the recent trends in the writing of Canadian history. The Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy was initially conceived at a time when the reigning paradigm among English-speaking historians was that of nation building. The trilogy had the misfortune, however, to appear just as new trends associated with the emergence of social history were beginning to take hold in the historical profession at large.

As Noll notes in his introduction, social history has fundamentally transformed how historians presently conceive their subject to include ordinary people and popular culture.⁸ This change was accompanied by another shift in focus as many historians now turned their attention to the formation of those identities based upon region, class, and ethnicity – to which a new generation of scholars would soon add gender. The early proponents in Canada of this shift in perspective argued that, instead of getting “hung up” on the issues of national development and identity, historians should explore these more limited identities, which they suggested were of far greater importance to most Canadians.⁹

The consequences of this change in outlook for Canadian history were profound. Those identities that an earlier generation of scholars took to be peripheral to the national story now appeared to many to have value in and of their own right. The conventional and the mainstream were out, and diversity and difference were now in, something to be appreciated and, indeed, celebrated. Thus by the time the trilogy was completed in 1972 many historians were losing interest in the issue of nation building and had begun to focus their attentions elsewhere.¹⁰

The situation in the United States couldn't be more different. For one thing, American historians have long recognized religion's formative role in shaping their nation's culture. For another, the advent of social history has done little to diminish American historians' long-standing preoccupation with – call it what you will – American exceptionalism, the American national character, or the building of the American nation. In fact, American social historians have tapped into their country's enduring progressivist

⁸ Noll, *History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, p. 1.

⁹ J.M.S. Careless, “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 50 (1969), pp. 1, 3, 6, 9.

¹⁰ Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 259.

tradition to revise that project, not to disown it as many Canadian social historians have done.¹¹ As result, the Walsh/Moir/Grant trilogy addressed a set of issues revolving around nation building and national character that were and still are of central concern to American historians.

As I indicated earlier, the emergence of social history has changed how historians of Christianity conceive their subject. Now that ordinary people and “limited identities” are in, historians are not only studying specific groups of people but also examining these groups in particular social contexts and locales. Consider for a moment some of the main developments on the American scene. Denominational history, long held in disrepute by professional historians, is now enjoying a new vogue.¹² Moreover, Jay Dolan’s 1975 study of Catholic New York marked the beginning of what has become a veritable flood of community studies. Indeed, one now finds established academic historians turning their attention to microcommunities, the parish or local church congregation.¹³

How some of these approaches are being adopted in Canadian circles can be seen in the collection of essays edited by Terrence Murphy and Gerald Stortz, *Creed and Culture: The Place of English-Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society*.¹⁴ Though not a survey history, this volume offers the broadest treatment to date of anglophone Catholicism. *Creed and Culture* covers a wide range of topics, including immigration and settlement, relations between anglophone and francophone Catholics, Protestant attitudes to Catholics, and the development of Catholic institutions, all of which serve to locate anglophone Catholics culturally. In tracing this group’s journey from a sectarian minority to an integrated (not to say assimilated) part of the anglophone mainstream, these essays further our understanding of how anglophone Catholics contributed to the emergence of English-speaking Canadian identity. In doing so, they go a long way in reinterpreting the Canadian national experience by emphasizing the degree to which this country’s pan-anglophone identity was itself the product of ethnic and cultural diversity.¹⁵

¹¹ Herbert G. Gutman, “The Missing Synthesis: Whatever happened to History?” *The Nation* 233 (21 November 1981): pp. 521, 553-4.

¹² Robert Bruce Mullin and Russell E. Richey, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Retrospective Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹³ Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975); James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, *American Congregations*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Terrence Murphy and Gerald Stortz, eds., *Creed and Culture: The Place of English-Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society, 1750-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Donald Harman Akenson, “The Historiography of English-Speaking Canada and the Concept of Diaspora: A Sceptical Appreciation,” *Canadian Historical Review* 76 (1995): p. 392.

There is, however, yet another strand that runs through some of these essays, albeit a minority, that of limited identities. In these essays what stands out is the multiplicity of anglophone Catholic identities (Scottish and Irish), their geographical specificity (Scottish Catholic Prince Edward Islanders), and their plasticity (Irish Catholics become ardent British Canadian nationalists). Furthermore, a number of the contributors devote their attention to ordinary people, attending to their religious and cultural practices (as in the case of their devotional piety), modes of collective action (trusteeism), and forms of community (congregation, voluntary association, and ethnicity), perspectives which suggest the influence of recent trends in social and cultural history.

Though hardly new, another trend that is shaping our field as well as the historical discipline as a whole is the move towards specialization. To take one example, social history has become a collection of sub-fields, such as ethnic history, urban history, women's history, family history, and labour history. Some would say this signifies fragmentation and overspecialization; others that it signifies growth and diversity.¹⁶ But whatever one thinks of this development, note what is usually not on the list in this country: the study of religion. Specialization need not result in marginalizing the study of religion. Again the American scene offers an instructive contrast to developments in Canada. In the U.S. historians of American Christianity are doing some of the most innovative work in ethnic history, black history, and women's history; all of which has raised the profile of that field in the general historical profession.¹⁷

What does all this mean to us as a field here in Canada? Well, for one thing, the American example suggests that if we want to get the attention of other historians we are going to have to do work in some of those areas that interest them. For quite some time now, historians of Christianity have recognized the saliency of religion for identities based upon region, class, race, ethnicity, gender or some combination thereof.¹⁸ Contemporary interest in the question of identity would suggest that opportunities do exist for historians of religion to contribute to those debates taking place in the

¹⁶ Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 318; on the former position see Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26 (1991): pp. 5-17 and on the latter position see Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 76 (1995): pp. 354-76.

¹⁷ See for example the studies by Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), Paula M. Kane, *Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See Thomas Kselman, ed., *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991) and Thomas A. Tweed, ed., *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

historical profession as a whole and in the academy at large.¹⁹ Some would argue, however, that to do so will only reinforce the current trend towards hyper-specialization and the fragmentation of historical knowledge. Indeed, fragmentation has become something of an obsession these days, and many historians are calling for new syntheses to counter this drift towards fragmentation.²⁰

But is it the case, as the title for this session – “Canadian Church History: Fragmentation or Synthesis” – seems to imply, that we must choose between one of two options, fragmentation or synthesis? Here, I think, one needs to be clear exactly what a synthesis is. The point that needs to be stressed is that a synthesis is a particular kind of narrative overview, one that is strung along a thematic thread or two in order to make sense of social diversity and cultural multiplicity. On this score, I am reminded of the word that John Moir invoked when he described his contribution to the trilogy as a “patchwork.” I find that word to be a most apt one because for me it is a salutary reminder that in order to make sense of the past one need not write histories that hang by a thread, or two.

¹⁹ For current historiographical discussions on the question of identity see the essays commissioned to mark the CHR’s seventy-fifth anniversary in *Canadian Historical Review’s* 76 (1995). For an interdisciplinary discussion see Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Identities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

²⁰ See Bliss, “Privatizing the Mind,” and Thomas Bender, “Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History,” *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): pp. 120-36.