



So, What Did Really Happen to “Christian Canada”?

by Mark Noll, University of Notre Dame

These responses to my effort at asking “what happened to Christian Canada” are as wise as they are charitable. As such, they indicate that, whatever else one concludes about the society-wide place of Christianity in contemporary Canada, real virtue remains very much alive among Canadian Christian intellectuals. As an outsider and an amateur on the subject of Canadian history, I am much gratified that my “preliminary probe” has been taken up by insiders and true experts in such a helpful fashion. By calling this attempt a preliminary probe, I am referring self-consciously to the late George Rawlyk, from whom I and so many others received so much encouragement to study the history of Christianity in Canada, and who often used that designation for his own thought pieces of interpretation. Robert Burkinshaw, Bruce Guenther, Mark McGowan, and Marguerite Van Die are all proficient scholars whose own works have shown how valuable serious study of Canada’s religious past can be for both historical and Christian understanding. I am gratified to have received insight from each of them in the past and now am delighted to have received even more.

A first point that each of the four makes in some way is to beware of distorting over-simplifications. This is an important reminder when trying to describe a whole nation’s religious character, since it is surely a mistake to allow prominent features of one group or region to exclude contradictory evidence from elsewhere. In different ways, they all stress that for the various sectors and traditions of Canadian religious life it is necessary to peer beneath the surface, to take account of regional variation, to understand the importance of chronology, and to recognize the complexities of change.

Thus, Marguerite Van Die offers the reminder that the United Church has always harboured a variety of not always harmonious impulses. Robert Burkinshaw and Bruce Guenther remind us that the more sectarian, evangelical denominations were never uniform. In their case, they make the compelling observation that *when* a denomination migrated to Canada explains a lot about *how* the denomination saw itself in relationship to Canadian Christianity as a whole. For some evangelical groups, such as the Mennonite Brethren and the Dutch Reformed, movement out of isolated status to full participation in public life took place largely after the dramatic changes of the 1960s; this chronology, therefore, demands a different accounting than for others, like some of the Baptists, who had been participating in public life since the nineteenth century.

Burkinshaw’s further observation is also telling: the absence until recently of evangelical colleges and universities has had important consequences for how Canadian evangelicals are able to act in the public sphere. Guenther’s point is equally well-made, that groups that deliberately turned away from efforts to influence the nation at large—for example, the Salvation Army along with many Pentecostals and Anabaptists—require an analysis that takes their own stance toward the nation into account.

Church & Faith Trends



October 2008 / Volume 2 / Issue 1

A Publication of The Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
// An Initiative of The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

Mark McGowan's reminder that non-French Catholics deserve separate consideration is even more to the point, since there have long been a large number of Catholics outside of Quebec. The history of these non-francophone Catholics certainly does require separate attention. My only response is to ask the factual question whether a similar, if less precipitous, fall-off of attendance and adherence occurred among these Catholics as among French-speaking Catholics in Quebec. If so, the further query is whether the factors affecting Catholics outside of Quebec may have been closer to factors influencing mainstream Protestants, such as in the United Church, than those that affected Catholic fellow-religionists in Quebec.

A final issue related to the real variety in Canadian Christian life is the excellent point about church renewal stimulated by new immigrant communities. Since Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and other recent immigrant streams are responsible for many new sites of congregational vigor—and among both Catholics and Protestants—then perhaps the general situation needs to be described not as the decline of Christian Canada but as the de-Europeanization of Christian Canada. (This observation may be just as true for the United States, since rising tides of immigration are doing even more to pluralize the character of American Christianity than to seed the landscape with non-Christian faiths.)

In general, however, the necessary reminder to keep the diversity of Canadian Christian movements in view does not so much obviate the question about the rise and fall of “Christian Canada” as enliven and enrich the question. Yet to answer that question properly obviously requires something more akin to a big Russian novel than the American TV drama I attempted.

A second important point, which is made in different ways by Mark McGowan and Marguerite Van Die, is to consider more directly the forces of “modernity” in Canada's recent history. My essay stressed changes in the churches and in national political affairs, which clearly have been important. But it is also doubtless true that broad cultural, social, and economic shifts have been responsible for much that affects religion. McGowan's reference to court rulings under the Charter is especially germane. Court decisions defending individual rights and preferences over against the traditional privileges of collective entities, including churches, can be read as judicial activism that transformed structures of daily life. But they can also be read as decisions trying to catch up with structural changes that have already taken place in daily life. To the extent that such changes involve family formation, habitual religious practice (or non-practice), personal morality, economic self-sufficiency, or attitudes toward rights—and to the extent that the ever-more-encompassing popular electronic media have featured these changes—modern lifestyles certainly affected the part played by the churches in Canadian life as a whole. Van Die also has a discerning point, that mainline Protestants mostly approved the expansion of government authority over a broad range of social duties that had once been widely regarded as the churches' preserve. In general, such sound historical observations underscore the fact that the place of religion in any society depends on many things occurring outside the churches, as well as on what the faithful do while in church and in the privacy of their homes.

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A third common theme in the responses is most important of all. It is the difficult issue of ascertaining the essential Christian character of any society. Here the question cuts two ways, although in typically Canadian fashion the commentary is gentle instead of barbed. Implicit in my essay was the assertion that, because church attendance is now considerably higher in the United States than in Canada, because morally traditional Christians in the States are now more visibly active against abortion-on-demand and in support of traditional marriage between one man and one woman, and because politically conservative Christians have been more obviously influential in political elections and in many state contests, therefore, the United States was now a more Christian country than Canada. Conversely, I stated explicitly that I thought Canada's past record with respect to violence, human rights, missionary service, and other measurable qualities had once made it a more Christian nation than the United States. But several of the comments ask whether Canada's supposedly Christian character in earlier periods was more than skin deep; they ask, in effect, whether earlier Canadian society was Christian in the terms of the New Testament or only by comparison with what was happening in other parts of the world. Marguerite Van Die also observes that while the United States has often manifested a strong national civil religion, Canada has not. She stops at that point, but could have gone on to assert that a national civil religion, even if it employs the biblical language of Christian revelation, may quite directly contradict Christian ideals, such as those defined by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Guenther adds the relevant observation that, for some Anabaptist and radically sectarian Protestants, any effort to define an earthly government as Christian is ipso facto idolatrous.

All these excellent questions demand deeper investigation and sharper conceptual thinking. My effort began with what, as an outsider, still strikes me as a notable series of contrasts. More Canadians, proportionately considered, were in church on Sundays in 1950 than their counterparts in the United States; that situation is now reversed. Publicly funded Canadian education at all levels into the 1950s included explicit Christian teaching that had largely vanished from American public schools by the 1930s. In various Canadian regions, the Catholic Church, the United Church, the Canadian Anglican Church, the Presbyterians, or the Baptists were not so long ago respectfully recognized as foundational to the social order. Yet in these same regions today the churches seem to have faded as powerful public influences. Without ever staying in Canada for long enough to measure such a variable accurately, I am guessing that the stations of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) program much less religious content today than fifty years ago. Whatever legitimate questions should be raised about the quality of Canadian religious life in the past, that life did seem to display the outward signs of Christian presence and to support the cultivation of personal and domestic piety.

Comparisons with the United States may be significant, but not nearly as important as between Canada *then* and Canada *now*. With various American colleagues I have often raised questions about the true Christian character of a supposedly Christian America. But those evaluative questions do not seem as complex to me as cause-and-effect questions about the manifold religious changes in Canada's public life. The four commentators have added welcome nuance to my admittedly sketchy account; they have shown well how truly complex a full-blown analysis of "Christian Canada over time" must be. But nothing they have said shakes my conviction that the seismic



changes in Canada—in the various churches, in relations between churches and the social order, in the legal standing and political influence of Christian institutions—define a historical problem of greatest significance.

The changed status of the churches also deserves the most searching theological analysis, for, as Marguerite Van Die has suggested, the positive work of Christian ministry requires at least some measure of self-awareness about the social and cultural contexts within which these ministries are attempted. For both older Christian traditions such as the Catholic Church and the United Church, and newer Christian traditions such as many evangelical movements, the effectiveness of Christian ministry as well as its integrity will depend in large part on understanding the Canadian cultures in which ministry now takes place.

But, Bruce Guenther asks, where to go with further historical research? My response, again as an outsider, is to encourage work on two fronts. The archivally based monographs that have recently proliferated for different Christian groups in Canada construct one essential stepping stone to better historical understanding. Research of the sort that Guenther has carried out on Bible schools, Burkinshaw on western Canadian evangelical movements, McGowan on Irish Catholics, and Van Die on Christian families in the Victorian era—such work is indispensable for understanding the actual dynamics of historical change. Yet in addition, broader, more synthetic accounts for Canada as a whole, or for Canadian regions taken individually, are a great desideratum. The late John Webster Grant was a master of both levels of synthesis, as illustrated by his national survey, *The Church in the Canadian Era*,¹ and his model study of one region, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-century Ontario*.² Before his untimely death, George Rawlyk had also worked to promote broad-based syntheses, either as editor (*The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760 to 1990*;³ *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*⁴) or by himself (*Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicals in the 1990s*).⁵

Leading scholars such as Grant and Rawlyk have demonstrated how essential careful monographs are for reliable historical vision, but they have also shown how stimulating large-scale synthetic projects can be for promoting answers to genuinely Big Questions. In the end, a combination of fine-grained particular research and bolder, more encompassing syntheses should make it possible to find out “what happened to Christian Canada,” or even to know if that question makes any sense at all. 🌱

¹John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1988).

²John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

³George Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760 to 1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

⁴George Rawlyk, ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

⁵George Rawlyk, *Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicals in the 1990s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University, 1996).