

Mark Noll, *What Happened to Christian Canada?*

A response from the perspective of the Canadian Protestant mainline denominations

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We are fortunate as historians of religion in Canada to have Mark Noll as a colleague, for not only does he thoughtfully inform his fellow Americans about the past and present of religion in Canada, but he challenges Canadians to explore our recent, pervasive, and relatively swift de-Christianization. I've been asked to engage Mark's analysis by looking specifically at the Protestant mainline denominations (Anglican, United Church, Presbyterian, Baptist) who, as he correctly notes, bore the burden of the earlier Christianization, and who now seem to have abandoned "the magisterial guidance" they once provided for a large part of Canadian society. Hopefully my thoughts will find points of contact with the other contributions to this discussion, especially with the perspective of Canada's largest mainline denomination, the Roman Catholic Church.

First a word of caution. I agree totally with Margaret Ogilvie's conclusion in her valuable synthesis *Religious Institutions and the Law in Canada*, that historical perspective can offer only limited insight at this time.¹ The causes of de-Christianization of Canada described by Mark Noll will at some point need to be reassessed as we become more aware of such as-yet imperfectly understood influences as urbanization, industrialization and de-industrialization, secularism, state intervention, and changing global immigration patterns. As a historian who is also a Christian, I must underscore John Webster Grant's concluding thought in his insightful *The Church in the Canadian Era*, "the noise of the things that are dying still drowns out the voice of the things that are coming to birth."²

Keeping in mind the ambiguity and provisional nature of my task, I will select two issues which strike me as worthy of brief comment. Each can be simply framed as a question. First, "How Christian was 'Christian Canada'?" or more accurately, "What was the nature of Canada's Christianity?" Second, notwithstanding the historic divergence between the Canadian and U.S. religious experience that Mark has so well laid out, what might the old Canadian mainline denominations learn today from the religious pattern in the United States?

Based on my own research into evangelical Protestantism in nineteenth-century Canada, I would suggest that "Christian Canada" owed much of its vitality to a remarkable fit between the personal moral teachings and practices of mainline members and the social, political, and economic structures of the time. This was a period when the socio-political context favoured evangelical denominations and provided a remarkable opportunity to tap into the energies and wealth of the same laypeople who were busy developing the civil society of a young nation. There appeared to be a congruence between the sacred and the secular that led people to assume that Canada was indeed a Christian country and an example to the world.

The extent to which this fit between the mainline Protestant denominations and the wider culture continued and was readapted in the first six decades of the twentieth century is still imperfectly understood. For this task, we need an analysis that goes beyond the study of religious thought and institutions to focus also on the nature and impact

¹M. H. Ogilvie, *Religious Institutions and the Law in Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Carswell, 2003), 56-7.

²John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 245.

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of economic restructuring—a study comparable to Roberto Perin’s chapter on Roman Catholicism in Quebec in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*.³ Without such work we will not fully understand the remarkable longevity of “Christian Canada” nor the reasons for its rapid collapse in the 1960s. Key to such an analysis, in my view, is a greater attention to the importance, as well as the contradictions and tensions, of the particular nature of the “Christian Canada” ideal that motivated mainline denominations through much of the twentieth century. Since the days of the social gospel, as Canada’s informal Protestant establishment the mainline denominations saw it to be their task to build God’s kingdom. At a time when community life was strong, government was relatively weak, and churches with a national presence had great influence, this was a credible conviction. It held out the promise that, as in the nineteenth century, Christ and culture would remain integrated, but in new ways that addressed the needs of ordinary Canadians. One has only to look at the record of the United Church’s Board of Evangelism and Social Service from 1925 to the mid-1960s to see how, at the local and national level, clergy and lay people were mobilized to bring about a just society where all had equal access to such essentials as old age security, medical care, and employment.

Many of these goals had been achieved by the 1960s. The decade was indeed a turning point, but we need to look at more than theological and moral issues. As Perin has done for Quebec and Roman Catholicism, and Robert Wuthnow for the post-1945 United States,⁴ attention needs to be given to the impact of large-scale capitalism in moving the state to take a regulatory role in society. Research by John Grant and others has shown not that mainline churches such as the United Church were concerned that they were being marginalized—here I disagree with Noll (45)—but rather that they applauded that finally the state was assuming tasks formerly left to churches with limited resources.⁵ But if the goal of a more just society that had long sustained Protestant self-understanding in Canada appeared to have been reached, it was accompanied with ambiguities and tensions, all of which need more historical attention. Thanks to a host of factors—new immigration laws, new sexual mores, and postmodern perspectives—meta-narratives shattered, and even the term “Christian” came to be contested in the 1960s as a new group of Evangelicals made their voices heard. And, unlike the United States, which experienced a similar upheaval, there was no binding civil religion to replace the old values and narratives.

Therefore, how and why the mainline denominations reacted to these tumultuous changes calls for further study. Thanks to the work of sociologist David Martin, we now better understand that de-Christianization occurs very quickly in countries such as Canada with a tradition of informal religious establishment, since secularization is seen to move through, rather than around, institutional structures.⁶ This theory may help explain why leaders within the institutions seemed oblivious to the extent of secularization and carried on much as before, focusing now on “justice issues” that were often uncoupled from the personal moral codes of the earlier “Christian Canada.”

That brings me to my second and final point. If Christ and culture must indeed be interrelated, then at some point it becomes clear that old ways cannot be simply updated. Such seems evident when study after study points out

³Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, eds., *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁵Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 160-206; Gary Miedema, *For Canada’s Sake: Public Religion, the Centennial Celebrations, and the Remaking of Canada in the 1960s*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

⁶David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

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that the percentage of Canadians aged 15 and over attending religious services continues to decline (a 9% drop between 1985 and 2005), and that of those who never attend services continues to increase (from 22% to 33%)⁷.

It takes time for long-established institutions (who also lack the flexibility of independent evangelical churches) to change and come to grips with a new context. Nevertheless, there are signs that this is happening in the old mainline. Under such catchy phrases as “emerging church,” renewal and church growth are no longer the preserve only of conservative Protestants, but are also beginning slowly to change the face of some mainline congregations.

I attest to this trend from the vantage point of someone who in 2004, under the title “Evangelism Now: Christian mission and ‘mainline’ churches in a changing North American culture,” launched a course on the unfashionable topic of evangelism at a United Church theological college. From the start, I was impressed by the number of clergy, working quietly on their own, who were willing, even eager, to come to the class to share their experience in building faithful, enthusiastic Christian congregations. While initially I relied primarily on the writings of Evangelicals familiar for their work in church growth, more recently I have increasingly made use of new books that address specifically the context and tradition of mainline churches. With few exceptions, the literature is from the United States and focuses on congregations rather than denominational initiatives.⁸

Keeping in mind David Martin’s conclusion that the fragmented populist structures of U.S. churches have better withstood the erosion of secularization than have institutional top-down structures, church renewal in Canada now seems to be following the U.S. pattern. Also in tune with the U.S. model is the growth of the non-governmental organization sector, as mainline churches increasingly evolve from denominational institutions to para-church organizations in order to increase their impact on social and global concerns.

With a history of Roman Catholic and Protestant animosity, and having officially adopted multiculturalism, Canada has no tradition of civil religion, and there is little chance that we will ever see here the confessional rhetoric that many U.S. citizens seem to expect in public life. At the same time, after 40 years of iconoclasm in reaction to the perceived tensions and contradictions of an unusually lengthy era of “Christian Canada,” people of faith and people of no faith should finally be able to follow the U.S. example and engage in a robust and informed discussion about the redemptive roles Christianity can play with other religions in the public sphere of a complex, pluralistic society in 2008. I am grateful to Mark Noll, and to this conversation’s organizers at The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, for pointing us in that direction. 🍁

⁷Colin Lindsay, “Canadians Attend Weekly Religious Services Less than 20 Years Ago,” *General Social Survey: Matter of Fact*, No. 3, Statistics Canada, 2008. Catalogue no. 89-630-X. <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-630-XIE/2008001/article/10650-en.pdf> (accessed October 8, 2008).

⁸See for example, Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us : How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins Canada, 2007).