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## Revivalists: Marketing the Gospel in English Canada, 1884–1957

*By Kevin B. Kee, McGill-Queen's University Press, 269 pp, $29.95.*

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The relationship of means to message has been a discussion fraught with conflict since Jesus challenged our conception of what it means to life a live totally focused on God. There has been a general consensus that the means does affect the message but little agreement on which means support the message, and which damage it. In *Revivalists: Marketing the gospel in English Canada, 1884–1957*, Kevin Kee explores how five evangelists tried to walk this line. In all cases their objective was to capture the attention of a particular demographic long enough to communicate the message of the gospel. Kee argues that their adjustment of methods to contemporary styles "contribute[d] to the vitality of Canadian Protestantism" (4). Despite their different denominational affiliations, they shared a common goal of bringing people into relationship with Jesus Christ and worked in cooperation with local churches and denominations. However, they focused on different demographics and operated in different eras, which led them to different means. It is these means of marketing their message that most interest Kee.

Hugh Crossley and John Hunter operated during the late nineteenth century at a time of evangelical consensus and relative societal stability. They aimed to provide a substitute for secular entertainment and were willing to accommodate their methods to the needs of the community. For example, while criticizing the corrupting influence of the theatre, Crossley and Hunter filled their services with humour, drama, singing sermons, and emotionally charged music. Other "secular" market strategies used included selling souvenirs, featuring famous people in advertising, and creating a spectacle for the sake of newspaper coverage.

In contrast to the social and political support enjoyed by Crossley and Hunter, Oswald J. Smith operated on the fringes of society with his Peoples Church drawn from a less-influential demographic. His message was traditional, but his methods were just as entrepreneurial as Crossley and Hunter's. Smith's emphases on a cosmic battle between good and evil, a separation between church and world, the end times, healing, and overseas missions distanced him from mainline Christianity. Yet these emphases were not accidental—they responded to specific cultural trends and interests. For the same reason he was happy to use contemporary advertising methods: parades, popular music, film, and radio. Selling religion as a commodity was not a problem because of the eternal value of the product (85). Kee concludes that what best typifies Smith was his pragmatism (94).

For pragmatism of a different kind, Kee discusses Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group's efforts to convert the elite of Canadian society. The Oxford Group used, rather than the more entertainment-oriented spectacle of other revivalists, an intellectual discussion format that appealed to a middle and upper-class demographic. The group also chose an appropriate setting with appropriate amenities—in this case, expensive hotels with tennis and fine dining. This accommodation also applied to the parts of the message emphasized. While Smith stressed the end times, Buchman tended not to mention the afterlife (113), preferring to mould "the Christian message into a form that resonated in a quasi-scientific intellectual culture" (114).

For an example of someone who could change with the times, Kee explores the ministry of Charles Templeton. Over his career as a revivalist Templeton was both a populist evangelical preacher and a mainline intellectual revivalist. In both cases

he was responding to a particular demographic in an effort to communicate his message. In Templeton's first revivalist career he was an evangelist for Youth for Christ. Templeton was sensitive to the patriotism of the war years, social issues of concern in the 1940s, and the language of young people. In return he was adored like the celebrity he was (157). However, Templeton's dissatisfaction with the "shallowness" of this ministry led him to seek education at Princeton Theological Seminary. When he returned to Canada it was as an evangelist for the United Church of Canada. His style shifted to better match the more respectable methods of his new employers. While there were themes in common with his earlier ministry (the problem of sin), he now had a greater confidence in humanity's ability to do something about the world's problems (168–170). Ultimately, Templeton's doubts about his faith led him to leave the ministry altogether.

Occasionally Kee makes claims that would benefit from a stronger defence. The inability of Crossley and Hunter to keep the theatres closed may point to failure or just changing cultural norms. Kee contrasts Oswald J. Smith with other evangelists in that he did not attract a prime minister to his services or bring about a nationwide revival. These examples as measures of success do not reflect Smith's own goals nor his influence in Toronto and overseas. Kee ascribes the Canadian turn to do-it-yourself religion to the values created when religion constantly accommodates its methods to the culture. While this undoubtedly played a part, there were many other significant cultural factors that played a stronger role in this change (e.g., multiculturalism, globalization). Finally, Kee's conclusions about the results of marketing religion in Canada are decidedly ambiguous. While this results in an unsatisfying conclusion, it likely reflects the complexity and constant change in Canadian religion.

I also have a number of minor quibbles with the editing of the book. For example, miscellaneous information, while sometimes interesting for placing these figures in their historical context, did not always clearly relate to the central thesis of the book (91–94).

None of these concerns detract from the value of the book. *Revivalists* is a fine introduction to a particular era in Canadian religion. It illustrates diverse relationships with social and cultural powers—while focusing on the role of marketing in communicating these revivalists' messages. Kee does a good job of showing how national and international events and ideas (e.g., world wars, Darwin, the founding of the state of Israel) influenced the marketing of Canadian Christianity. Kee is clear and readable, and he helpfully provides a basic history of Christianity in Canada for those not already familiar with this area of study.

The question of how to engage Canadian culture with the gospel will be of interest to many readers of this book. While Kee offers no definitive conclusions, two of the many relevant topics that this book explores include the relationship of the message to the medium and the balance between cultural accommodation and cultural conflict.

The Bible does not provide a specific means by which the message must be presented. In the biblical text we have examples of diverse means: dramatic prophecy, silent meditation, and public arguments. The evangelists described here adopted contemporary methods to communicate traditional messages to their different audiences. However, it is also clear that their methods included some people and excluded others. The Oxford Group's use of expensive hotels for their meetings intentionally excluded the common person. Smith's use of film and music intentionally catered to common tastes in popular entertainment and tended to attract the lower middle class. The lesson is not just that the medium shapes the message but that evangelists need to be conscious of how the medium shapes who will hear the message. Some means are more appropriate in some settings than others. These examples also demonstrate that a single approach to presenting the gospel is unlikely to be effective with all Canadian demographics. In addition, the message clearly matters. The content of Smith's messages

was part of his appeal, and when the Oxford Group shifted from a more individual to a more socially focused message, this choice affected the group's ability to attract people (138).

Canadians are often described as irenic, peace loving, or conciliatory. This predisposes us to favour accommodation over conflict. It is common in the sociology of religion to argue that religious groups exist because they offer something to people that they cannot get elsewhere. However, if there's too much distinctiveness in religious practice, the costs of involvement soon outweigh the benefits. These evangelists were effective at navigating the competing forces of accommodation and conflict. They were happy to use the names of famous people to advertise their meetings but were not afraid to challenge social and moral norms. Finding the middle ground in that tension was one of the keys to their success.

Students of Canadian Christian history will find much that is familiar here (the general story of religious change in Canada) and much that is novel (the specific marketing activities of these evangelists). Kee's book is an enjoyable read. Setting aside minor quibbles with arguments and editing, this book could serve as an excellent mirror for Canadians to evaluate their own approach to marketing their services. At very least this book is an important reminder that each new generation has to reinvent its methods in order to faithfully communicate the unchanging message.