

From the Tower of Babel to Parliament Hill: How to be a Christian in Canada today

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CHAPTER 2

WAS CANADA EVER CHRISTIAN?

A rumour has circulated that the United Nations had declared Canada was no longer "Christian." I was unsure of the basis for such a declaration and so I called. After a search of their records, the U.N. spokesperson assured me they never had, nor would they ever, make such an assertion.

The point here is that this appraisal seemed right to so many. Statistics show Canadians to be "very Christian," but we sense the lack of a real Christian presence. And so the U.N. story was accepted because it sounded believable.

While the numbers of Canadians who believe in orthodox Christian faith are significant, the behaviour of the churches makes it seem as if their interests are narrowly focused, on themselves, and not on a grand spiritual vision. This inward focus, along with the increased secularizing of life in general, has left the impression that Canadians no longer regard Christian faith as central or critical to life.

My point is not that, by showing our Christian roots, we somehow have the right to return to what some might think of as those "golden years," but rather that the Kingdom of God invades, shapes, and brings health to a nation. Nations come and go, but the Kingdom of God is the central concern of Christ. Trying to make a nation "Christian" is both threatening to those who are afraid of religion and confusing to those who want the Gospel to make a difference. But by celebrating the reign of Christ's Kingdom, its vitality and rationale will spill over, bringing about civility and spiritual well-being.

Whether it is a matter for national pride or not ... there is no doubt that the history of Canada, as European peoples have made and known it during the past five centuries, is inextricably bound up with the expansion and expression--in politics and society and culture--of the Christian churches.

William Kilbourn

The golden thread of faith is woven throughout the history of Canada from its earliest beginnings up to the present time. Faith was more important than commerce in the minds of the European explorers and settlers.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau

The question "Was Canada ever Christian?" triggers sharp disagreements. Some worry about what they see as a collapse of discipline in schools, about the spread of pornography, and about strident voices attempting to change the definition of marriage; they contend Canada has lost its Christian core.

However, God remains in the national anthem and in the constitution, and many Canadians believe there was a time when our leaders took seriously our national motto, 'A mari usque ad mare,' from "He shall have dominion from sea to sea" (Ps. 72:8).

Others simply dismiss the question as trivial and archaic. They treat the role of Christianity in Canada as a quaint footnote in history.

The question is not irrelevant, however. Christians have played a significant role in shaping Canada--in fact, Christianity is considered by many scholars to be the most formative influence on Canadian society. Furthermore, historians have long known that how we regard the past shapes our view of both the present--who we are--and the future--who we will become. But to answer the question "Was Canada ever Christian?" we must first agree on a definition.

What Is A Christian Nation? Three Definitions

First, "Christian" can be used in a weak sense to mean a country with some connection to the Judaeo-Christian heritage. Though almost every country in the West, from the late Roman Empire until 1800, was "Christian," many political and social realities were as far from New Testament Christianity as you can get.

Second, "Christian" can also refer to a nation in which there are many individuals who claim to be Christian. However, having a lot of Christians does not guarantee that what a culture does is Christian. For example, note the former racial policies of South Africa. Genuine Christians can get caught up in policies which are anything but Christian. So, in the end, the presence of Christians might paint a picture of a country that is religious but not necessarily Christian.

Third, the term "Christian" can refer to a society that reflects the ideals and principles of Scripture. In such a society, the people are not just talking about doing God's will, but are doing it. An American historian comments, "Although we would not expect perfection, we would expect that a 'Christian' society in this sense would generally distinguish itself from most other societies in the commendability of both its ideals and practices. Family, churches, and state would on the whole be properly formed. Justice and charity would normally be shown toward minorities and toward the poor and other unfortunate people. The society would be predominately [sic] peaceful and law-abiding. Proper moral standards would generally prevail. Cultural activities such as learning, business, or the subduing of nature would be pursued basically in accord with God's will. In short, such a society would be a proper model to imitate."

Making these three distinctions helps us avoid equating our own political ideals with what we learn in Scripture. Getting caught up in assuming they are the same leads to idolatry and an irresistible temptation to national self-righteousness. These definitions call us to be careful in using the term "Christian nation." It is a fuzzy term that can make it difficult for Christians to be active, especially if it produces a distorted and overinflated view of any one country as being distinctively or uniquely Christian.

Are any or all of these definitions evident in Canada's history?

Corporate and Individual Christianity: Two Views

Two major ideas have guided Christians in acting on Christ's call to "be in the world but not of it." On one side, there is "corporate" Christianity--the Christendom model--and on the other side, "individual" Christianity.

Corporate Christianity's first expression occurred in the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine made it the state religion. Christianity changed over several centuries, from an obscure sect worshipping a Jewish rebel, to a major world religion that sought to apply Christ's teachings to the political structure of the world's then greatest power. For the next 1,200 years, this approach was used and, even when the church was divided by the Reformation, this Christendom model was included in the Protestant Church through the teachings of the early reformers; Luther in Germany, Zwingli in Zurich, and Calvin in Geneva.

It was also introduced to Canada by the English Anglicans, the Scottish State Church Presbyterians, and, to a lesser extent, the New England Puritans. The Catholic version found its way to Canada via the Roman Catholic Church of France. In the nineteenth century, most Canadian Protestants, while denying the establishing of a state church, recognized dominant Protestantism as a most-favoured religion. This was true even in the United States, where there was purported separation of church and state.

At the heart of the Christendom model is the belief that God deals not only with individuals, but also with nations. Based on the dealings of God with the children of Israel, it sees beyond the salvation of individuals to the formation of a godly society. Salvation is viewed as more than an individual matter; it extends to include families, communities, and ultimately the state. This model holds that nations which, through their rulers, seek to obey God will be blessed in this life, and nations which disobey will be judged.

To accomplish the task of constructing a godly society, the church and civil magistrates worked out various kinds of alliances. Ideally this relationship was to be reciprocal: the rulers had responsibility for ensuring the economic strength of the church, for passing godly legislation, and for restraining evil within society so that the church's teaching would have its intended impact. The church, for its part, was responsible for pointing the way of salvation, instructing people in their duties towards God, and supporting those whom God had placed in authority over them. The result, then, was to be a society that was Christian in its beliefs and godly in its life.

Inwardly, the aim was to bring all its members to the knowledge and worship of God; outwardly, despite the fact that not all its individual members would become good Christians, it was hoped that at least they would display a godly character in the world.

Even with such worthy ideals, such a system needed power to ensure that people conformed. Despite the imperfections of the Christendom model, those who supported it believed that it was based on Scripture and that, in the end, it would ensure Christian patterns for living.

The opposing view to corporate Christianity is "individual" or "Believer Church"

Christianity. In this model it is not assumed that people will be socialized into a church. Church affiliation is a matter of personal choice. While reformers were reworking the old corporate model, the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century was a major force in shaping North American Christianity. Menno Simons, best known for leading the Anabaptists (better known in North America as Mennonites), emphasized that a person needed to be old enough to make a conscious choice to follow Jesus Christ (and thus to be baptized), which eliminated infant baptism as a means of salvation.

At its heart, individual Christianity sees the relationship of the individual to God as being the context in which the most important expressions of Christian experience take place. This relationship is to be sought through Scripture reading, prayer, and living a Christ-like life.

Anabaptists accused Christendom of confusing works--which cannot earn salvation--with God's grace, and of not being serious in living the Christian life. This confusion, they argued, resulted in an emphasis on good citizenship that effectively lifted the requirements the Gospel places upon individuals themselves. Anabaptists argued that society could never become Christian: society can only comprise redeemed individuals.

It should be noted that these two views, though often in opposition, are never completely distinct. The aim of corporate Christianity is the regeneration of society. Individual Christianity does not reject the broader societal implications of the faith. Indeed, Anabaptist groups who attacked the Reformed societies of sixteenth-century Europe built in Russia, for example, alternative Christian communities. These two views within our Canadian experience have had a transforming effect upon each other.

With that background, we turn our attention to the enormous influence the Christian Gospel has had on shaping and defining the Canadian experience.

New France: "None But French Catholics"

On a drive through the villages and towns of Quebec's St. Lawrence Valley, one can see the historical influence of the church. In the middle of each settlement is a tall, dramatic piece of architecture--the local Roman Catholic church. This influence began in Quebec on July 20, 1534, when Jacques Cartier raised a cross on the shore of the Gaspé to explain to the watching Iroquois the message of salvation. Cartier urged Francis I of France to support missionary work to win these "savage peoples living without a knowledge of God" to the Catholic Church.

Almost a century later, Samuel de Champlain--called the "Father of New France"--brought the same sense of mission to the shores of New France with Recollect priests. Two decades later, the larger and more famous Jesuit missions to the Hurons began. Of his efforts to bring missionaries to the New World, Champlain later writes that, "having observed on my previous voyages that in some places there were settled tribes with a taste for tillage of the soil, but without faith or law, living without God and without religion like brute beasts, I thereupon concluded in my private judgment that I should be committing a great sin if I did not make it my business to devise some means of bringing them to the knowledge of God."

These devout French explorers believed that God had a great design for New France. Along with many of their fellow countrymen, they were convinced that their discoveries were part of God's plan to spread salvation around the world and that their new nation was responsible for

both civilizing and Christianizing the inhabitants of this discovered territory.

This missionary drive was powerfully influenced by the Catholic Reformation, a spiritual renewal that pulsed through many countries in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It not only reasserted Catholic doctrine, but nourished a spirit of deep piety and promoted sacrificial missionary enterprise through new orders. Nowhere was this revival felt more strongly than in France. It in turn became a powerful force in developing the North American colony.

The missionary drive was also fuelled by a rather popular interpretation of the time that North American Indians were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel, and, further, that the discovery of the New World announced the arrival of a new age. This rapid conversion of North American Indians, it was thought, would restore the church to its apostolic purity preceding the second coming of Christ.

France, more than any other country, was the prime example of corporate Christianity. As the harsh realities of frontier life and the slow rate of progress gradually tempered the enthusiasm for missions, religious orders gave more attention to the struggling settlements on the banks of the St. Lawrence. New France was seen as a God-given opportunity to create a truly Christian and Catholic society as a light to the world.

At first, the church in New France had great influence without holding political office. In 1647 this changed as the church was given a share in administrative power with the creation of a two-man council made up of the governor of the colony and the superior of the House of the Jesuits. Though the church's political influence rose and fell with the political intrigues of the day, one highlight was the leadership of Francois de Laval as Vicar Apostolic of New France. His arrival in 1659 gave a breadth and intensity to the church's efforts to produce a Christian society. He opened a seminary for Canadian clergy. Then he established a system of parishes intended both to meet the spiritual needs of the habitants and to provide funds for the training of the clergy. The manor house served as the centre for both the religious and the social life of those new communities. Laval was out to build in the New World a garden of the Lord where all would have access to Christian teaching.

Despite the church's failure to fulfil its greater vision for building a Christian society, it did establish an ongoing presence in the religious, social, and administrative life of the colony. Even the conquest by the British in 1759 did not subdue the influence of the church. In fact, the Catholic Church probably benefited from the event. In order to secure Quebecois loyalty in the face of the impending American Revolution, the British, in the Quebec Act of 1774, gave the Roman Catholic Church the right to act as a quasi-state. The church could then take credit for preserving the French language and culture in the face of serious and persistent threats of anglophone assimilation. Until the twentieth century, the Catholic Church helped create a society with control over education, politics, and life-in-the-village, which formed a dam to hold back the cultural tide of the powerful North American civilization. This "Christian" character survived until well into the second half of the twentieth century, when the secularizing influences of the Quiet Revolution broke the bond between Quebecers and the Roman Catholic Church, and when the corporate Christian vision would die.

Eighteenth-Century Nova Scotia:
Religion and Revolution

The French Catholics were not the only ones to use the Christendom, or the corporate Christian model, to create a Christian society in the New World. In 1749 the British in Nova Scotia built a military base at Halifax from which they could attack the French stronghold at Louisbourg. Accompanying these military plans were settlers from a variety of Protestant groups, but at the centre was the Church of England, which assumed that its privileged status in Great Britain would be duplicated in the New World.

In addition to the tough and gruelling problems of settling this demanding land, Nova Scotians were troubled by the noise of revolutionary trouble brewing against the British in the American colonies. Though many sympathized with the aims of the American Revolution, to support it meant jeopardizing their relationship with the local government. They were trapped. Supporting the American Revolution and taking up arms against New England would mean shooting family and friends. And yet refusing to sympathize openly with the American colonies made Nova Scotians vulnerable to American privateers' attacks, as Nova Scotia was the closest British colony. This period of enormous uncertainty and political turmoil coincided with a remarkable series of religious revivals which came to be known as Nova Scotia's Great Awakening.

The revivalist at the centre of this awakening was Henry Alline, a tanner from Falmouth who, in 1775, at age twenty-seven, underwent a dramatic conversion. He spent the next eight years preaching back and forth across what is now Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. He used unconventional methods--open-air preaching, public singing processions, informal sermons, and intense emotionalism. As he was a skilful public debater, his preaching convinced many to turn to Christ. His courage earned him considerable respect among his contemporaries. He was dubbed the George Whitefield of Nova Scotia. (George Whitefield [1714-1770] was the famous Methodist evangelist whose large open-air meetings stirred communities in North America.) After Alline's death in 1784, revival again swept through many of the Yankee settlements, and some of the English ones in Nova Scotia, this time due largely to the tireless efforts of Methodists William Black and Freeborn Garrettson.

These itinerant evangelists transformed entire communities. Although their preaching centred on an individual's relationship to God and focused on the experience of the Holy Spirit in the "new birth," the impact went far beyond an individual's spiritual life. In addition to "leading many people to Christ," Nova Scotia's Great Awakening had social and political implications. Alline challenged the New England colonies for their sinful and illegal activities, such as was, and Britain for general corruptness. Far from being an isolated backwater of the British Empire, Nova Scotia was, as Alline saw it, a central player in God's will for the world.

The message of these itinerant evangelists triggered a mass social movement. The elite no longer held sway. Central religious power was diffused through evangelism. The individual was no longer just a member in the religious community. This new-found individual self-expression challenged and displaced the power and control of the established church.

The objections raised by the Anglicans against Alline's movement, the New Lights, show what was at stake for the Anglican Church. Bishop Charles Inglis describes the view of the new religious movement: "Fanatics are impatient under civil restraint & run into the democratic system. They are for levelling everything both sacred and civil; & this is peculiarly the case of our New lights who are, as far as I can lean, Democrats to a man."

Inglis saw the New Lights as a serious threat to the control of the Anglican Church. The Maritime elite saw the revivalism as a challenge to the social and political status quo. Inglis voiced a common fear when he said the "their [New Lights] political principles are equally dangerous with their religions. It is believed that the conductors of these people are engaged in a general plan of a total revolution in religious and civil government."

Inglis knew that Alline and his followers were not involved in political espionage that might incite a revolt or mob rule. Rather, he feared that the spiritual power of individual converts might produce a generation that would begin to assert democratic ideals. Inglis's vision was that of a corporate Christianity, with his church, of course, at the helm. Alline and his message of individuals freely receiving God's grace apart from the mediating role of the church only upset Inglis's plans for Anglican leadership and control.

Such opposition did little to discourage Alline and his co-workers. If anything, it increased their prestige among the people as God's special messengers. The evangelical emphasis that each individual must take responsibility for his or her own spiritual welfare generated ideas of equality, liberty, and freedom, all of which had enormous political implications. There was a definite link between the freedom of religious expression and political ideas. It can be argued that this evangelical presence made a powerful contribution to the democratizing of Canada.

But even with this revival fervour, the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick did not bring about a Christian colony. In fact, Alline's preaching and community revivals often ended in bitter religious conflict. The emotional excesses led to the real story in Alline's movement--namely, the consolidation into a more orderly, Baptist Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. This consolidation took place because the emotional excesses could not be sustained, and those influenced by the revival needed a more orderly place in which to live out their newly acquired faith. Many Maritimers today who hardly practise Christianity at all still call themselves Baptist. "Radical evangelicalism" (historian George Rawlyk's term) was thus permanently stamped on Maritime culture.

Nineteenth-Century Ontario: Collision of Two Religious Ideas

The American Revolution (1776) had an enormous impact on Canadian history, breaking up Britain's North American colonial empire and forcing the creation of what eventually became known as Canada.

After the Treaty of Paris in 1783, in which the Thirteen Colonies became the United States of America, a large number of United Empire Loyalist left the American colonies and immigrated as settlers to Upper Canada (Ontario). This large group of settlers gave the region its first substantial population and led to the creation of a separate province in 1791. Soon after the first migration, others came, more interested in land than in political or social ideology. These arrivals brought with them a variety of religious beliefs and traditions, which triggered a debate that dominated Canadian Christian life for almost fifty years.

Though no one questioned that Ontario should be a Christian society, what was at stake was which Protestant denomination would receive official recognition and status. On one side were the Anglicans--and, to a lesser extent, the Presbyterians--organized under a strong

corporate tradition with the assumption that they should be accorded the same privileged status in Canada that they had held in Great Britain. Although they did not get all they wanted, in the Constitutional Act of 1791 they came very close to having the Church of England made the official Canadian state church.

On the other side of the debate were the more individualistic Methodists and Baptists. They wanted a deal that would acknowledge the existence of various Christian groups and ensure equal and fair treatment by the state. The outcome of this debate had a direct bearing on church/state relations and public education during the nineteenth century. The most prominent spokesmen for the two sides were John Strachan, Anglican archdeacon of York (later Toronto), and the young Egerton Ryerson, a zealous and articulate Methodist. The clash between the two was set off over a sermon published by Strachan in 1825. Although their quarrels became personal, they were really a clash between the worlds of corporate Christianity and individual Christianity.

The dispute took place on several fronts. In addition to public clashes between Strachan and Ryerson over what they believed made up "proper" Christianity, politicians wrestled with the issue of whether public funds should support church activities and, if so, which churches. This issue came to be known as the Clergy Reserves Controversy. The church's role in both university and public elementary education was also a divisive issue. In each case decisive victories were won by those who wanted a society that embraced many faiths rather than a single denomination.

Strachan's corporate Christian vision came from the long-established traditions of the Church of England. Under this corporate model, Christianity offered salvation as the means to redeem people from sin, to reconcile God and humanity, and to draw earth and heaven together. The redemption of the human race would be slow and gradual. This process would be helped by the church through daily worship, the sacraments, and education by an informed clergy. This regeneration of society could come about only through the careful pooling of the resources of religion and government, seen as the twin pillars of society: the state would teach Christians to live virtuous lives, in turn transforming citizens into useful and productive subjects of the state by ensuring public order and unity of belief.

This vision of the role of an established religion called for the careful collaboration of church and state in building a Christian nation, and thereby an ordered society whose citizens would be faithful subjects and serve that state and its institutions. Without the steadying influence of the Church of England, Strachan wrote, the country was "certain to become a moral waste and a hotbed of sedition and discontent."

What upset Strachan's vision of a corporate Christian culture were a number of Methodist itinerant preachers who attracted Ontarians in high numbers. The Methodists had well-organized circuits and a good supply of tireless, inexpensive preachers and lay exhorters. This system allowed Methodism to grow in sparsely settled frontiers. By 1812 Methodism had become the largest Protestant denomination in Upper Canada. These unruly Methodists represented all the Strachan did not want to see happen in the new colony. Strachan viewed these itinerant ministers as lazy men who left their jobs, setting out, without any preparation or training, "to teach what they do not know, and which from pride, they disdain to learn." But Strachan's view did little to intimidate these out-to-take-the-world Methodists.

They soon found a champion in young Egerton Ryerson, who rose to the challenge, mounting a spirited defence and attack upon the religious-establishment views of Strachan. Ryerson accused Strachan of mistaking his own political and denominational prejudices for the call of Christ to the individual. Writing in the Upper Canada Herald, he asked, "Do you think that the Lord of Hosts assumed our nature, lived in poverty, died as a malefactor, and ascended as a conqueror, to reveal and give efficacy to a code of doctrines and precepts, that should be a stepping-stone to the accomplishments of your selfish system, your highly exceptionable measure, your ... heartless policy?"

These hot-blooded Methodists were not interested in spouting learned phrases with a view to gradually changing society. They worked in the emotional turmoil of camp meetings, where sinners, tormented by guilt and urged to seek God, wrestled with their Creator and found assurance of salvation. For Ryerson and his colleagues, the kind of Christianity advocated by Strachan denied the work of true, heart-felt religion. For them, the church was to persuade by preaching rather than to coerce with political power. For the Christian faith to influence society while staying true to its character, it had to stay away from unholy alliances or compromises with the state. Ryerson's arguments became the focus of opposition against the Church of England's attempts to hold on to its privileged status.

Although there was never a formal separation of church and state, as occurred in the United States, the dissolution of the Clergy Reserves in 1854 and the break-up of Anglican domination meant that all churches became financially dependent on their members, and not on the state. This separation of the church and state--which, ironically, had been achieved not because of the secularization of society, but because of the public fight among Christians--marked the last serious attempt to impose a model of corporate Christianity on Canada.

By the turn of the century, the "individual Christianity" world-view assumed that Christianizing society had to be done outside the political arena; that is, conversion of the population was a necessary first step for affecting public life. They were wrong. In focusing only on the salvation of the individual, to the exclusion of the means whereby society is managed, they lost the opportunity to ensure that Christian principles prevailed.

In the end, there were losses: corporate Christianity could not impose Christian faith on Canada, and individual Christianity gave up the means to influence political life.

An Age of Cooperation

During the nineteenth century, corporate Christianity and individual Christianity found a new synthesis. As Anglicans were stripped of the support of the state, their plans to Christianize society forced them to become more evangelistic. Methodists were fundamentally changed by their rising wealth, education, and social status. After Confederation in 1867, Protestants became more cooperative and developed a vision that led to a collaboration to ensure that this growing country would become "a genuinely Christian nation."

Towards the end of the century, both groups were confronted by the intellectual challenges of Darwinism and biblical Higher Criticism (a more "scientific" means of understanding the Bible). Any differences between Anglicans and Methodists over how best to make Canadian society Christian were overcome in this rising tide of unbelief. As a result, they had to look for ways to address their similar concerns. Out of this came a new spirit of cooperation among the

Protestants. Each group retained their long-held beliefs but became more willing to redefine their relationships by a new spirit of cooperation.

This joining produced a synergy which, in turn, redefined the religious character of Ontario during the late nineteenth century. This character was essentially Protestant in doctrine and moralistic in tone. Although it failed to convert Catholics in Quebec, it had a strong influence in Ontario and the West. The foundation of this collaboration was an "evangelical creed" that was biblical and activist, not metaphysical and speculative. It was based on the single truth that God's will, as revealed in the Bible, could sanctify and transform the human soul, human knowledge, and the community. Though not adopted by every member of society, this evangelical creed represented, as perhaps at no other time in Canada's history, the spiritual, intellectual, and moral tenor of the times.

Another integral part of this Protestant cooperation was a nationalistic vision of Canada as "His Dominion." Its message was to establish the Kingdom of God in Canada. Now that the nation of Canada had been formed, the task was to make its citizens Christian. This optimistic goal of creating a distinctively Christian character was unifying and created a sense of destiny, and it was the force behind a variety of social-reform movements, educational institutions, missionary activities at home and overseas, and voluntary societies.

An Age of Mission

Protestant saw missionary activities as essential to the call of Christ. Increased mission work and the raising of money for missions to reach Canadian aboriginals were emblematic of the growing confidence Canadian Christians had about achieving the goal to Christianize Canada.

For many today, the era of missions to aboriginals is an embarrassment. In part, such a view is justified. To the Europeans who explore and settled in North America, embracing the Christian faith was equivalent to becoming a European citizen. To be civilized was to believe in Jesus Christ, to follow the practices of a particular denomination, and to accept the norms of a European society. To "Christianize" was not only to convert to faith in Jesus Christ, but to accept an Anglo-Saxon/Protestant or French/Roman Catholic way of life. The unhappy link between Christianity and European civilization was strengthened by the churches' connection with the Canadian government, which was seemingly intent on changing the way of life of the aboriginal peoples. And so Christianity at times was a willing partner of political and social forces that interfered in the Native way of life, bringing smallpox, alcoholism, and social dislocation. Confronted with the lasting evidence of the depth of this cultural crime, many Christians now feel a justifiable burden of guilt.

This, however, is not the complete story. While horrific accounts of life in the residential schools dominate the public press and suggest there is only one history to be heard, it would be wrong to assume that aboriginal peoples were only passive recipients of an aggressive and domineering religious assault by overzealous missionaries. Historian John W. Grant says that historians assumed missionaries were always insensitive, while idealizing that state of the aboriginal society. He writes: "The myth of the noble missionary seeking to reclaim degraded barbarians has been replaced, in many quarters, by the myth of the noble savage spoiled by meddling missionaries. A closer examination even of the recent literature of Indian protest, however, turns up a surprising number of exceptions to the general indictment."

Today, while the media give much attention to the upsurge of traditional Native spirituality, the vast majority of Canada's Native peoples continue to claim Christian faith and affiliation. In some cases, these affiliations have been part of Native culture for four centuries. This enduring attraction of Christian belief suggest that more than the forces of cultural imperialism have been at work. While Christian faith has too often been presented in European garb and without sensitivity to the receiving culture, it is my experience that Christian faith translated into existing ways of worship and life profoundly meets a culture's spiritual needs.

During this period of growing influence by an evangelically based Protestantism, many individuals were active in social leadership through the "voluntary societies." These groups were involved with evangelistic, philanthropic, moral, and social issues. Literally thousands of Protestants committed themselves and their resources to these organized activities, believing it would help make Canada more Christian.

William Holmes Howland is a model of this combination of personal faith and social concern. In the late nineteenth century, Howland rose to prominence in the public life of Toronto. His ability to combine a strong faith, untiring activism, social concern, business success, civic responsibility, and political savvy indicates what a thoughtful Christian leader could accomplish.

The son of Ontario's first lieutenant-governor, Howland was well connected in the Ontario establishment. By age twenty-five he was a rising star in the Toronto business community. Converted at age thirty-two, Howland turned his energies to Christian and charitable efforts. Through his business enterprises and Christian endeavours, he became part of a network of Christians, people like himself, concerned with spreading the Gospel and influencing society. Deeply disturbed about declining standards in public morality and the spread of crime, gambling, and prostitution, in 1885 Howland ran as "the people's candidate," and won.

Right from the beginning, Howland made no apologies for his personal faith or his reformist policies. He mounted on his office wall a twelve-foot reproduction of a Bible verse which read: "Except the Lord keep the City, the watchman waketh but in vain" (Ps. 127:11). During his first term he undertook to reform pulic sanitation, suppress pornography, and strengthen Toronto's police forces to deal with an assortment of moral vices: cruelty to women, children, and animals; gambling; houses of prostitution; desecration of the Sabbath; indecent exposure; and unlicensed liquor dens. In addition he prosecuted several city officials caught in acts of dishonesty.

Returned to office for a second term in 1887, Howlan devoted his energies to the clean-up of municipal business affairs, suppression of the liquor trade and prostitution, and getting tough on crime. It was under Howland's administration that the city acquired the nickname "Toronto the Good." He later returned to an assortment of Christian and business enterprises. What is striking about the public career of W.H. Howland is the apparently seamless way in which the aims of a modified corporate and individual Christianity worked together. His concern for individual salvation and for living conditions led him to a broader concern for shaping public policy. Howland's mayoralty represented an attempt to effect many of the reforms proposed by Christians during that time.

Despite attempts by Howland and others, Christian coalitions that tried to persuade society to

live more righteously were frustrated by a sense of powerlessness. Eventually they asked government to help them by enforcing a Christian code of conduct and passing laws. They needed more than moral persuasion; they needed the strong hand of the law.

Church Union:

The Creation Of A "National" Church

As W. H. Howland modelled the linking of individual Christianity to Canada, the movement to create the United Church (church union occurred in 1925) reshaped corporate Christianity. When government made it clear they would not support the idea of an established church, this divisive issue, which had separated protestants, was removed; Protestant denominational tensions relaxed; and merger, or church union, became a possibility.

But other factors also led to merger. Denominations lost financial support from the old country. As clergy were trained in Canada the doctrinal fights in Europe mattered less and less. Presbyterians and Methodists collaborated in interdenominational efforts, in the build-up to a growing consensus that transdenominational union was real possibility. A church historian of the time, C.E. Silcox, wrote, "Canada is our parish. It is the vision of Dominion-wide service that inspires the new Union. ... There will be not a hamlet or a rural community in the whole land where the United Church will not serve." A united church could be a real broker in Canadian political life and could serve as the mechanism to exert a religious and political influence.

This church union in Canada was unique, and did not take place in the United States. Church historian John Webster Grant identifies several reasons. First, because of the country's huge expanse, and relatively sparse and scattered population, Canadians places a premium on cooperation in its confederation, already a model for church union. Second, the nineteenth-century evangelical movement still retained the dual emphasis on individual and social salvation.

"Unlike the United States, which imbibed a tradition of secularism from its founding fathers, Canada grew up under the tutelage of its churches. The pulpit, the school and the press were the leading forces in moulding the Canadian character. Almost all the well-known educators of the period were clergymen, and many leading newspapers were in effect organs of particular religious groups. ... By preaching, editorializing, and founding universities, they sought on the one hand to lay the moral and spiritual foundations of nationhood, and on the other, to act as a conscience to the state."

Underneath this influence was a desire not only to uphold values, but also to correct them and create new ones. Protestants activism was energized by Confederation and its accompanying nationalism and spirit of cooperation. Church union provided a broad mobilization of forces for the spread of the Gospel in a rapidly developing frontier of the country.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Christians were confronted, as were all Canadians, with new realities. One was the opening up of the West and the government's aggressive immigration policy to settle it with farmers, many of whom were non-British and non-Protestant. Churches became more vigorous in trying to meet the immigrants and integrate them into Canadian society. In this changing society, church union appeared to be a practical way of using limited resources to meet social needs. It promised to cut down on the waste of

administration and competition among fellow Christians. As well, those pressing for church union saw it as a means of providing a consolidated front for competing more effectively with the Roman Catholics.

For Canadian Protestants, like their American counterparts, this was a period of great optimism. Before the major conflicts of the twentieth century and the religious upheavals that would shatter communities of faith in the 1920s and 1930s, Canadians saw the possibility of building in their land a Christian world. Historian Grant writes, "Only let the Churches unite, it was often urged, and their influence for reconciliation and righteousness would be irresistible."

Looking back, this optimism seems misplaced. In a century of two world wars and one world economic depression, the movement towards church union was never what its founders hoped it would be. Although the union of all the Methodist churches, almost all of the Congregationalists, and two-thirds of the Presbyterians was eventually achieved (into the United Church), it was tarnished by bitter controversy as one-third of the Presbyterian community chose to retain their identity and churches.

Towards The Secular Society? The Rise Of The Social Gospel

Although the Social Gospel--as it came to be known in North America--has a number of roots, some of which are quite different from the evangelical world-view of the mid-nineteenth century, it is acknowledged that evangelical Protestant faith played an essential role in its beginnings. Methodism, with its concerns for salvation, sanctification, and victorious Christian living, nourished the growth of Social Gospel thought. Methodists were less concerned about theological debates than with the need for forgiveness. Once this had been received through repentance, God's grace would flow, enabling the believers to live sanctified lives. Yet, sanctification could never be a static thing; as sanctified believers responded to God's love in a world that was radically fallen and sinful, they became soldiers in a battle of cosmic proportions. It was thus warfare against the effects of the Fall that led many evangelicals to emphasize social action.

As with evangelical faith throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Social Gospel sprang from the emphasis on claiming the land for "scriptural holiness" this led many into spearheading a number of social-reform movements, including the temperance, Sabbatarian, and anti-slavery movements of England and America. Methodist preachers were sometimes involved in the early trade-union movement, and the slogan "Saved for Service" became important.

The Social Gospel decidedly made a shift from its evangelical roots. It emphasized Christianity as primarily a social religion, concerned with human relations and not so much with the individual's relation to God. Put in more dramatic terms, it was a call for people to seek the Kingdom of God within the very fabric of society, and not in personal conversion. Turning from a focus on God's revelation in Jesus Christ (as recorded in the bible and impressed on sinners saved by the Holy Spirit), it moved to an emphasis on God, who was actively present in all social and cultural forms, helping people of goodwill to make the world more expressive of the spirit of Jesus.

Increasingly influenced by philosophies that emphasized God's work within history rather than transcendence, Social Gospellers came to downplay the concept of individual and personal salvation. Towards the turn of the century, as the social needs of an immigrant population became more obvious, along with the rise of an industrial complex that was often harsh on its workers, church leaders opted for a call to social salvation.

By the end of beginning of the First World War, leading Social Gospel thinkers in Canada such as J.S. Woodsworth and Salem Bland came to equate the cause of social justice, and the political means of achieving it, with the essence of the Christian message. This equation would lead Social Gospel radicals into the causes of Canadian labour, social welfare, democratic socialism, and, occasionally, communism. Although the Social Gospel as a movement would begin to fracture with the development of such radicalism, there was significant agreement among many Canadian Christians that the Gospel of Christ needed to challenge the social structures of the day and condemn the great inequities thrown up by unbridled capitalism. This broad consensus played a significant part in the expansion of Canada's social-welfare mechanism during the twentieth century.

But by the end of the First World War, Canada was rapidly becoming a secular society, and any claims for Canada's being a Christian society were receding. The evangelical consensus of the mid-nineteenth century was breaking down. Causes for this rapid transformation remain the subject of debate, which we return to in chapter 3.

In looking at these individuals and groups who significantly influenced the shape of Canadian culture, the question remains: was Canada ever Christian? The answer depends on the definition. One can say that, at an early point, the country was very much influenced by a corporate Christianity and, from time to time, there have been strong outbreaks of individual Christianity. But to say that Canada was substantially Christian is to deny our history. Those working to bring about either a society that was thoroughly Christian or a society of Christian individuals did so with an awareness of their enormous task. Given the consistency of their calls to righteousness and the urgency with which they went about their tasks, it seems that none would have called Canada "Christian." They all strove for the victory of Christian belief in their society. But his victory, which required the submission to Christ in each heart, seemed beyond their grasp.

Historian John Stackhouse observes that, despite the process of Christianization in Canada (which on some occasions brought substantial numbers of unchurched people into the church), Canadian culture never became thoroughly and exemplarily Christian. This is not to say that Christianity did not have a significant impact on Canadian culture. Even today one can see "contemporary Canadian culture as residually Christian in many respects."

Perhaps then, the better question is "Was Canada once more Christian than it is now?" Although the population of Canada has never been uniformly Christian, the influence of Christianity has always been present, informing society of Jesus Christ. At times this Christian call resonated less effectively with Canadian culture than it did at others. But it is clear that Christian belief, in calling Canadians to be a holy people, has had a significant effect upon Canada and the way in which its people see the world.

The remarkable way in which Christian belief occupied minds and hearts during the early and

mid-nineteenth century, and the resulting impact it has had upon Canada's educational, social-welfare, and political structures, suggest that, while never being "Christian" in its entirety, Canada may have been more nearly Christian during this period than at any other time. It is not without considerable justification that historian Michael Gauvreau, in a book by the same name, calls the nineteenth century Canada's "evangelical century."

However, even the most obvious Canadian Christian success stories have their own ironies and ambivalences. During the "evangelical century," rigorous church discipline virtually disappeared as church culture became less distinguishable from that of the broader society. Church leaders were inclined to leave aside the prophetic call to rigorous discipleship, opting for a cosy relationship with an emerging middle class. And the period was hardly a model of biblical justice in its treatment of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, women, and Native peoples. One could even say that some of Canada's social policies are more biblical today, largely because they have been informed by biblical vision. So we cannot look back to any one time in Canada's history as some kind of Christian golden age. However, we can, and should, look back with careful appreciation for what considerable good was accomplished in these and other contexts, and then turn to face the challenges of our own time, informed by the Christian experiences of our past.

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