

John W. Grant, editor, A History of the Christian Church in Canada

G. S. French

Volume 2, Number 2, Spring 1973

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad2_2rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

French, G. S. (1973). Review of [John W. Grant, editor, A History of the Christian Church in Canada]. *Acadiensis*, 2(2), 91–98.

Reviews

A HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CANADA. Editor: John W. Grant.

I: *The Church in the French Era.* H. H. Walsh. Toronto, Ryerson, 1966.
II: *The Church in the British Era.* John S. Moir. Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972. III: *The Church in the Canadian Era.* John W. Grant. Toronto, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972

Perceptive visitors have often commented on the seeming religiosity of Canadians; the most casual reading of our history would lead one to conclude that, piety aside, religious issues have been a frequent source of controversy in our society and religious influences have helped to mould our growth and behaviour. Curiously, however, we have been slow to develop the systematic study of this aspect of our history. During the inter-war period, the most noteworthy publication in this area was the first volume of C. B. Sissons' *Egerton Ryerson* (Toronto, 1937), but the appearance of S. D. Clark's *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto, 1948) and of H. H. Walsh's *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto, 1956) really marked the emergence of a growing scholarly interest in the nature and significance of our collective religious experience. In these circumstances the late Dr. Lorne Pierce, editor of the Ryerson Press and an enthusiastic advocate of Canadian studies, laid plans for the publication of a comprehensive history of the Christian church in Canada. The three volumes before us of *A History of the Christian Church in Canada* constitute the realization of Dr. Pierce's hopes. As a whole, they span the long interval between the earliest missions in Acadia and the Christian pavilion at "Expo 1967", and as such are a landmark in the historiography of religion in Canada.

The foreword by John Grant indicates that in preparing this series, the authors "accepted two general assumptions" (I, p. viii). They have sought, first, to write a history "ecumenical in both range and sympathy", that is one in which "the history of each communion is seen as part of the history of all communions"; otherwise, "the story (would lose) any vital link with the common source and common destiny that are integral to the existence of the Christian Church" (I, p. viii). They have agreed as well "that the Canadian locale should be taken seriously", unlike those who have failed to note that "the Canadian environment has affected the churches and in turn been affected by them" (I, p. viii). From this perspective they have examined "the institutional development and the devotional life of the church...its public witness and...its relation to the development of the Canadian character" (I, p. viii).

Unexceptionable as this statement of intent is, its implications for the shape of the narrative in these volumes are of considerable magnitude, a matter that is clarified by Dr. Walsh at the outset. The intention was not to write a history of religion in Canada or of Churches such as the Anglican and

Roman Catholic; rather it was to describe all the Canadian manifestations of the Church as the community of the redeemed. "As a member of the redeemed community the church historian is called upon to record what God has wrought through the witness of the church..." (I, p. 2). His subordinate responsibility is to demonstrate "the importance of Canadian church history in understanding the national development of Canada" (I, p. 8); his "overriding responsibility" is "to communicate and make relevant to his readers the part that the Canadian church has contributed to the universal history of the church" (I, pp. 9, 8). This should not entail the absence of objectivity, for, as Walsh emphasizes, all historians have controlling assumptions; the church historian can and should make as effective use of the tools of history as do other practitioners. Moreover, although the Canadian church historian is writing about a part of the universal church, he must perceive this in its own terms. He ought to utilize themes and insights derived from European and especially American church history, but he must recognize that, in this as in other fields, there are important differences between the Canadian and American scenes.

With these guiding principles in mind, the three authors have produced a broad and succinct narrative in which the foundation, growth and the actions of the various denominations are described in the context of our emerging and rapidly changing social and political order. Of necessity they have eliminated much local or personal detail and have sought to weave certain major themes carefully into the texture of their account. Among these perhaps the most significant are the interplay of external and local influences in the adaptation of the churches to their new roles, the disruptive effects of distance, inadequate communications, and provincial loyalties, on their structures and their sense of identity, the continuing need to find resources for missionary expansion, the lengthy controversy over establishment, their concern for the native peoples, and their persistent efforts to shape the growth of Canadian society. In each volume one or more of these themes assumes greater prominence.

As its title suggests, Dr. Walsh's volume is a thorough study of the origins of the Roman Catholic missions in Acadia and New France, and the emergence from these of a church that would survive foreign conquest and play a crucial part in the history of Quebec and Canada. This is in part a familiar story and one that often seems picayune, enlivened as it is with persistent rows between the religious and civil authorities and between the religious themselves. The contrast between the noble designs, and the precarious situation of the church, and the all-too-human behaviour of its leaders is strikingly ironic.

This is much more, however, than a narrative of ecclesiastical disputes. The author has a sympathetic understanding of the religious atmosphere out of which the missions to New France grew and of the way in which the

mystical yet evangelical piety of seventeenth-century France endured in the controlled environment of the colony. He stresses that, in contrast to New England, the initial missionary thrust was not to found a new province of the church but to bring the gospel to the native people. Although the actual results were small, the missionaries' determined efforts to protect the Indians and to assimilate them without wholly destroying their society and culture prefigure the history of our subsequent relations with them and our inability to devise an effective and humane Indian policy. By 1760, however, the Church had become an intrinsic and vital part of the social fabric of New France. The clergy "had succeeded in laying the foundation of their concept of the *Regnum Dei*, not on an aboriginal basis as they had hoped but in a neglected colony of their own compatriots always pitiably small in number and often forgotten by the Fatherland" (I, p. 85). The parochial system with its unusual measure of lay participation was a crucial constituent of church and society. "It...survived the shock of the British conquest unimpaired, and the French-Canadian parish has remained almost impregnable to the assimilating tendencies of American civilization" (I, p. 169). Through the church French-Canadian society was being kept in touch with "a humanistic tradition that goes back through St. Thomas Aquinas to Aristotle..." and hence loyal to "a way of life distinct from the rest of North America..." (I, p. 203).

After 1760 and especially after 1784, the religious as well as the political condition of British North America was transformed. The church historian's task becomes that of describing not only the life of the Roman church but the growth of several Protestant churches in strident competition with each other, alike only in their antipathy to Catholicism and in their determination to survive in a hostile and baffling environment. These bodies had to provide for the spiritual needs of regional societies separated by great distances, divided internally by the ethnic loyalties of their peoples and evolving rapidly from the pioneer stage to the economic and social maturity of the 1860's. Well before 1867, too, the churches were becoming aware of the immense challenge that would confront them when the tide of settlement reached the western territories.

Dr. Moir has shown that the seemingly chaotic events of this period embodied variations on certain critical themes. All the churches were attempting to adapt or Canadianize their structures, their personnel, and their practices without jeopardizing their transatlantic heritages or severing completely the ties which bound them to parent churches. No denomination succumbed completely to the new conditions; not one came to pride itself on its "historylessness" or on its fidelity to the practices of the primitive church. On the contrary, most churches were characterized by a dynamic tension arising out of the interplay of historic and local influences. But, those in which the balance shifted most quickly from dependence to self-

reliance and autonomy and in which few illusions were cherished about the natural denominational proclivities of the people, grew most rapidly. Nonetheless denominational loyalties were determined to a significant degree by the kind of religion to which settlers were first exposed and by ethnic affinities.

The process of adaptation was accompanied, Dr. Moir emphasizes, by prolonged controversy over the relationship between church and state and efforts to create an establishment. French and English-speaking British North Americans alike believed that a secular state and society were unthinkable; the imperial government and the Anglican clergy were convinced that an Anglican establishment was crucial to the orderly development of the colonies. This latter conviction when translated into legislation and administrative regulation generated tenacious resistance, not only in Quebec where it was seen — correctly — as an aspect of anglicization, but in the other colonies whose heterogeneous peoples and religious backgrounds made the acceptance of pluralism and voluntarism inescapable. In the end the Roman Church in Quebec retained many of its privileges and in the other colonies a working relationship emerged that might be categorized as an informal plural establishment.

The conflict over church-state relations was but one element in a continuing attempt to bring Christian influences to bear on the social development of British North America. In so doing the churches were caught up by what Dr. Moir has described as the rival claims of nationalism and denominationalism. The divisions between and within the churches ensured the partial failure of those who pressed denominational claims at the expense of tolerance, equality, and social unity. In the end some provision was made for confessional primary schools; the role of the churches in higher education was left in confusion; the sabbath was safeguarded; and the prohibitionists began their long march towards their ephemeral victory in the twentieth century. Above all, by 1867 no one doubted that "a prime task of the central government would be 'to maintain...Christianity throughout the land' " (II, p. 194), a belief whose implications would be thoroughly investigated in the ensuing century.

In *The Church in the Canadian Era*, a volume filled with apposite and persuasive generalizations, John Grant has undertaken the formidable task of making sense out of the manifold changes in the churches and in their social functions during the first century of Confederation. Against the background of political consolidation, massive immigration, industrialization, war, urbanization, and profound intellectual renovation, the churches' efforts to adjust their traditions and practices are concisely described. These included far-ranging missionary programs, the assimilation of contemporary Biblical scholarship, church unions, the rise and fall of the social gospel and the remarkable post-1945 attempts to provide meaningful religious

outlets for a new society surprisingly infused by religious interests. Important as these responses were in themselves, they were doubly significant, Dr. Grant suggests, because they embodied some fundamental themes in Canadian church history and some decisive alterations in the place of the churches in our society.

Before 1867 and increasingly thereafter the Canadian churches were influenced by two complementary currents — “one of recall to a past that was in danger of being left behind, the other of adventure into a future that was yet to be shaped” (III, p. 207). The tension generated by the interplay of these forces was of “unusual intensity” (III, p. 208). “Canadians became inescapably aware, as many Americans did not, of being immersed in a continuing stream of Christian history within which the Atlantic crossing constituted a minor incident rather than a revolutionary break” (III, p. 208). They drew on this stream to reinforce their adherence to traditional forms and associations and to limit the impact of innovative concepts or groups. Conversely, they tried “to stake a total claim for Christ on the future” (III, p. 209), an objective that was fully if variously expressed in the efforts of ultramontanes and evangelicals to bring about “the effective christianization of Canada” (III, p. 68). The former, by combining “respect for tradition with an activist and missionary temper, relieved for a time the tension of past and future” (III, p. 210) in Quebec. The latter worked for “a sanctified nation — moral, enlightened and devoted to the principles of the Protestant Reformation” (III, p.76). The “Christian Canada they so often prophesied in glowing terms would be one from which, within the limits of human possibility, sin both public and private had been expelled” (III, p. 79). Limited as it was, this vision inspired Protestant expansion and activism until very recently.

Despite their intense competition with each other and with Catholicism the Protestant churches had as well a “peculiar fascination” (III, p. 211) for church union. They believed that a united national church “would serve as a reminder of the continuity of Christian history” or as a means to “a more thorough occupation of the land” (III, p. 212). Thus unions within churches were effected in the nineteenth century, and the union of 1925 brought together three churches in the expectation of building a Christian nation more quickly. But, Dr. Grant contends, this concept made sense only in the context of the belief that “the institutions and values of Western society rested on a Christian foundation” and that Canada “was destined to become a part” of “Christendom” (III, p.213): “The movements that gave shape to Canadian church history sprang from the womb of Christendom and assumed its continued vitality” (III, p. 215). Union “would demonstrate the Christian consensus on which the nation rested...and would be a significant step toward making the nation more perfectly Christian” (III, p. 215).

Unfortunately, however, the Canadian churches were trying to bring Canada

more fully into Christendom when it was disintegrating, a fact less evident to us because of the slower pace of social and intellectual change in this country, as compared with the United States and Britain. "Realization that Christendom was dead, even in Canada, dawned with surprising suddenness in the 1960's..." (III, p. 216). From this came a new perspective on the religious boom of the post-war period. "The church was no longer the keeper of the nation's conscience" (III, p. 204); church union as hitherto conceived was no longer defensible. The French Canadians "realized that their survival as a people no longer depended on the support of the church"; hence, "the old bonds" between church and community "snapped with a suddenness that startled the entire nation" (III, p. 218).

The churches' subsequent attempts to redefine their role in a secular society have been confused and hesitant, but, Dr. Grant observes, in this situation "the primal tendencies that have shaped Canadian church life have begun to assert themselves in new guises" (III, p. 218). Our lingering traditionalism with its external frame of reference may help to preserve us from provincialism. Denominations are now seen as products of Christendom, "admissible luxuries perhaps in a society that took basic Christian assumptions for granted but serious impediments to effective witness in a world where Christianity (has) become one of many options" (III, p. 220). Church union thus seems more imperative than before. The tension between the conservatives and the innovators persists, but, in a dramatic reversal of the earlier battle-lines, the evangelicals now seek the realization of obsolete objectives or the restoration of older forms; in all the churches their opponents are searching for realistic means of survival. "Canadians of 1967, like visitors to Expo, were offered a choice of Christian responses to the growing secularization of society ... Some day the church might reach a new point of equilibrium, but exploration was its mood in 1967" (III, p. 225).

The words equilibrium and exploration may be fittingly applied to this study in its entirety. Its three component parts constitute a thoughtful exploration of the principal features of Canadian church history based upon and informed by a wide knowledge of the available sources and of similar works on other branches of the church. Within a limited space the authors have described not only the major developments but also have not lost sight of regional differences and of the smaller groups that have in some cases appeared briefly on the stage. They have shown a sympathetic awareness of the distinctive characteristics of church life in the Maritimes, Ontario, and the western provinces, and they have dealt sensitively with the intricate and crucial role of the Catholic Church in the historical evolution of Quebec. Similarly, they have demonstrated that the effort to reach equilibrium between metropolitan and local influences, the forces of tradition and of innovation and the legitimate interests of the sacred and the secular, has been a constant theme in our religious history. In this we are not distinctive; our

uniqueness lies in our having attained a precarious equilibrium without capitulating to one extreme or the other. "The church life of Canada like the nation itself, has always seemed to remain poised on the brink of complete Americanization without actually going over it" (III, p: 210), for "having rejected revolution, Canadians discovered that the past had nevertheless an inexorable tendency to recede into memory" (III, p. 211).

As the great age of the churches in Canada fades rapidly into the past, these volumes should prompt us to ask additional and perhaps different questions about the religious dimension of the past. If in this respect as in others we have come close to Americanization, it would be useful to look searchingly and comparatively at specific aspects of American and Canadian church history. The denomination has been the accepted form of religious organization in each society, but clearly the concept and the function of this entity are not identical in each. Readers of Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963) would probably conclude that the Canadian churches have been less given to emotional and anti-rational excesses than their American counterparts, but this conclusion may well reflect our general belief in our moral superiority. A study of anti-intellectualism in Canadian religious life would clarify this question and incidentally test the validity of Hofstadter's conceptual approach. Similarly, in both countries Christian and national values and aspirations have been intimately associated with each other. The Canadian evangelical dream of the "Christian nation" has had its counterpart in the American concept of the "redeemer nation". Neither has come to fruition; both have led to a significant blurring of the distinction between the religious and the secular realms, but it would be wrong to conclude that the impact of this relationship has been identical in the two countries. If we could define the nature and the genesis of this difference it would add much to our understanding of our respective national assumptions and actions.

Turning to a broader issue — if Canadians are now aware of the demise of Christendom and recognize that they are members of an increasingly secular society, should we not re-examine the assumptions on which works such as this are based? Specifically should we continue to refine the history of the Christian church in Canada or should we begin to write the history of religion in Canada? To raise this question is not to suggest that acceptance of the continuing reality of the church has distorted the narrative in these volumes or that it need do so in others. Likewise one need not accept J.C. Brauer's contention that, because the church historian "ends by writing a history of Christianity that looks no different from that of historians" who do not assume the church's continuing existence as a community of the redeemed, "the day of the church historian...is now past".¹ To understand the beliefs which the

1 J.C. Brauer, ed., *Reinterpretation in American Church History* (Chicago, 1968), p. 21.

churches have shared should add imaginative insights to works about them. Rather, if attention were centred on the history of religion, the whole subject could be examined from a new perspective.

If the history of the Christian religion in Canada were seen as a particular instance of the history of religion in human society, it would be possible to move from the level of overt activities such as the prohibition movement to an analysis of the ways in which Christian beliefs and institutions gave legitimacy to or undermined social values and agencies. In practice, did the nature of the Christian religious experience inhibit or expedite the adaptation of the social and political structure to new circumstances, or did it protect the *status quo*? What were the social effects of revivalism or more generally of evangelical forms of religion as opposed to its otherworldly function as understood by the church and the individual? What are the characteristics and the sources of the secularization of Canadian society? Has the religious impulse which nourished the growth of the churches begun to wane or is it flowing in new channels? If so, what are the implications of this change for our social and political development?

Dr. Grant and his collaborators did not set out to answer these kinds of questions. They have given us instead a well-constructed and often stimulating account which will be an indispensable starting point for those who wish to penetrate more deeply into the history of the Canadian church or to seek different insights into our religious experience. For this we should be very grateful.

G. S. FRENCH

The British-Americans; The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789. Mary Beth Norton. Boston and Toronto, Little, Brown and Company, 1972.

Praise falls superfluously on a prize-winning book. The winner of the Allan Nevins award of the Society of American Historians is a fair and splendidly balanced account of the aging and dejected Tory lions of the American Revolution who found refuge in Britain but were seldom satisfied. Most of the principals of the book and much of their correspondence are familiar to scholars of the Revolution. Those who left no correspondence and are completely forgotten, lost in the lower reaches of British society, have disappeared from history. Miss Norton estimates that altogether there were between seven and eight thousand Loyalists who took up permanent residence in Britain. Considering the many who passed and repassed the Atlantic between 1774 and 1790, a more precise estimate would entail enormous labour and would still be open to suspicion. Future citizens of the Atlantic Provinces such as Hannah Winslow, Ward Chipman and Charles Inglis, appear fleetingly but