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A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

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# The Church and Canada's Self-Awareness

JOHN WEBSTER GRANT

THE PROBING OF OUR SENSE of identity has been a persistent and even obsessive theme of Canadian writing. When one seeks to analyse this national self-awareness, however, one discovers that it can refer to several rather different phenomena. At the most elementary level one becomes aware that there is something distinctive about being Canadian. A Canadian is different from an Englishman or a Scot or a Frenchman or a landed immigrant, or at least has certain qualities in addition to whatever other national identity he claims. At a somewhat more advanced level, Canadian awareness expresses itself over against more particular forms of identification. The word "Canadian" has a content that is not exhausted when we have said "Ontarian" or "Nova Scotian" or even "French-Canadian." Beyond this again, it is possible to be aware of Canada, not in competition with rival sources of identity but rather in terms of national achievements and possibilities. Canadians have tended to neglect these positive elements of self-awareness, if only because they have had so much difficulty in establishing even the more negative ones. Englishmen and Frenchmen are able to take the distinctiveness and unity of their countries for granted, concentrating instead on memories of national glory.

As the church has shared in the Canadian experience it has related itself to all three aspects of Canadian self-awareness. There has naturally been some tendency to progress from simpler to more complex forms, although with a great deal of overlapping in time.

## I

The church has often been a hindrance to the development of distinctively Canadian ways, and particularly to the development of self-consciously Canadian ways. Ecclesiastical institutions have been notoriously resistant to change, and in a new land this conservatism has been reinforced by the desire of nostalgic immigrants to preserve religious practices associated with the homeland. Thus, in a country dominated by North American building styles, Anglican churches are rivalled in their unrepentant Englishness only by china shops. More than a century ago William Proudfoot complained of his Presbyterian associates, "We are too Scotch,"<sup>1</sup> and some would say that the situation has changed little in the meantime. The religious quarrels of Ireland seemed almost to be magnified in crossing the Atlantic, although

<sup>1</sup>Unpublished letter of William Proudfoot to David Anderson, 1846.

time has largely dissipated them now. The Roman Catholic Church in Quebec has traditionally encouraged the retention of the French language as a barrier against the infiltration of Protestantism and materialism.

From a general charge of perpetuating irrelevant old-world ways A. R. M. Lower exempted the Methodists, whom he described as "the only denomination that had sprung up on the spot, in answer to the needs of the people."<sup>2</sup> In fact, however, Methodism had been imported to Canada ready-made from the United States, and Neil Gregor Smith has reminded us that from the beginning self-conscious Canadianism has asserted itself as often against American as against British influence.<sup>3</sup> Lower's claim could most plausibly be made on behalf of the Maritime Baptists, who originated from a local mutation of Congregationalism.

From the time of the earliest settlements, however, churches of all backgrounds have been compelled to seek Canadian solutions to Canadian problems. Marcel de Grandpré has called attention to the importance for French-Canadian piety of *Le Catéchisme du Diocèse de Québec*, issued by Bishop Saint-Vallier in 1702 as a compendium of doctrinal and practical instruction for a pioneer population.<sup>4</sup> James Evans' Cree syllabics are another example of a habit of improvisation that has typified every branch of the church in Canada. The necessity of adaptation has sometimes led branches of the church to take up positions at variance with their normal inclinations. American Methodists and Scottish Seceders, driven by colonial circumstances to sponsor institutions of learning but unable to finance them out of their own givings, bent their voluntarist principles to lobby for government grants to their "non-sectarian" schools. When it became obvious that the clergy reserves were doomed, on the other hand, the Anglican bishops suddenly became enthusiasts for voluntary giving. It was John Strachan, that doughty foe of republican subversion, who to encourage such popular support instituted an American-style diocesan synod with lay representation. Similarly in Quebec, despite the presence of a strong ultramontane element on the episcopal bench, Archbishop E.-A. Taschereau was able to persuade an emissary of Pius IX in 1877 that the realities of the Canadian political situation required the exemption of the Liberal party from the papal condemnation of "liberalism."

The provision of a clergy raised and trained in Canada was early recognized as a necessary condition of effective adaptation to local circumstances. Immigrant priests and ministers rendered heroic service, but so long as the church depended on them it could never become deeply rooted in the soil. In 1663 Bishop Laval laid the foundation of an indigenous

<sup>2</sup>A. R. M. Lower, *Colony to Nation* (Toronto: Longmans, 1957), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. N. G. Smith, "Nationalism in the Canadian Churches," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 9 (1963), 114-25. This article deals with the "distinctive" aspect of Canadian self-awareness in greater detail than can be attempted here.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Marcel de Grandpré, "Traditions of the Catholic Church in French Canada," in John Webster Grant (ed.), *The Churches and the Canadian Experience* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), pp. 4ff.

Catholicism by endowing the Grand Séminaire at Quebec with his own money. He meant it to be a diocesan centre rather than merely a training school, but his choice of a seminary for this role was surely significant. The Presbyterian Thomas McCulloch, discouraged by the biblical illiteracy of his congregation, asked himself in 1804: "could nothing be done among the young men of the Province, inured to the climate, and prepared for Christ's sake to brave the difficulties incident to Colonial ministerial life?"<sup>5</sup> and the provision of such a "native ministry" was henceforth the dominant interest in his life. Strachan's funeral sermon for Bishop Mountain, usually cited in another connection, was mainly devoted to this theme. Complaining that "gentlemen of education and zeal refused to forsake their homes and the endearing association of early years, to come to so distant and inhospitable a colony,"<sup>6</sup> he looked to income from the clergy reserves to make clerical training possible in Canada. Even the Methodists could not ignore this problem. Hugh Johnston observed that "when at the close of the unhappy strife in 1815, the Genesee Conference resolved to go on with the work in Canada, it was renewed at serious disadvantage, and not until an able corps of native-born preachers had been raised up could the work be fully and efficiently carried on."<sup>7</sup>

The manner in which Canada was settled prevented a uniform and orderly process of indigenization. By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century such groups as the Methodists of Upper Canada and the Baptists and Presbyterians of the Maritimes had learned a fair measure of self-reliance. Successive waves of immigration thereafter resulted in the renewal of aid from without. Local organizations lacked the resources to meet expanding needs, and despite McCulloch and Strachan native-born ministers were not always the most willing to endure pioneer conditions. Even the services the local groups were able to offer were not always satisfactory to immigrants or acceptable to British ecclesiastical authorities. In French Canada the natural increase of population was such that Bishop Ignace Bourget of Montreal called in the aid of many French orders, although most of these recruited Canadian members and speedily became naturalized. By 1867 Canadian churches were undoubtedly receiving much more help from abroad both in men and money than they had been receiving forty years earlier.

Whatever regrets we may have about this crablike progress towards self-sufficiency, we should not wish to be without the enrichment which Canadian church life has derived from outside sources. Left to their own devices, Canadian-based communions tended to adapt well to their environment but

<sup>5</sup>William McCulloch, *The Life of Thomas McCulloch, D.D.* (no publisher or date stated), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>*Claims of the Churchmen and Dissenters of Upper Canada Brought to the Test: in a controversy between several members of the Church of England and a Methodist Preacher* (Kingston: printed at the Herald Office, 1828), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>"Historical Sketch of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Upper and Lower Canada," in *Centennial of Canadian Methodism* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1891), p. 62.

also to become ingrown and provincial. Indigenization and renewed fertilization from abroad have been complementary processes in the maturing of the Canadian church—the one modifying its form, the other enriching its content.

## II

The church made little direct contribution to the achievement of confederation in 1867, unless one counts the part played by its internal quarrels in suggesting confederation as a way out of constitutional deadlock. The church showed little interest then in national unity as such. It did not even contribute greatly to feelings of fraternity among the colonies, for there were few ecclesiastical links between the upper and lower provinces. An exception must be made for the Roman Catholic authorities of Quebec, who accepted responsibility for the propagation of the faith throughout British North America.<sup>8</sup> The entire hierarchy spoke out strongly for confederation, fearing annexation to the United States as a likely alternative, and its attitude may well have prevented strong negative reactions in French Canada. Otherwise opinion varied with circumstances. Acadian Catholics and Maritime Kirkmen, both for different reasons highly conscious of their minority status, saw in confederation the possibility of drawing brotherly support from Canadian colleagues. Leaders of the Presbyterian Church of the Lower Provinces, who had attained a secure position in Nova Scotian society, contributed to the anti-confederate stand of the Liberal party there. The *Christian Guardian* took a cautious stand in favour of confederation, seeing in it interesting possibilities for a consolidation of voluntary forces, while expressing concern for the fate of the Protestant minority in a French-dominated Quebec.<sup>9</sup>

Religious motives may have played a somewhat larger part in the purchase of the Hudson's Bay territory in 1870, an act that was universally recognized as an integral part of the project for federating the colonies. French-Canadians had a natural sense of kinship with the Métis of the west, and both Bishop Alexandre Taché of St. Boniface and Louis Riel had influential friends in Quebec. Such Ontario Protestants as George Brown, on the other hand, looked to the settlement of the west as a means of nullifying Roman Catholic influence by weight of numbers.

To Catholics and Protestants alike, too, the west offered a missionary challenge. Roman Catholic work was in the hands of the Oblate order, French-based but well represented in Quebec. Of the other Canadian communions the Methodists were the most deeply involved. Their work in the northwest had originally been sponsored by the British Wesleyan Conference, but the missionaries had been recruited in Canada. Then in 1854 John Ryerson had surveyed the area for the Canadian Conference, and in

<sup>8</sup>See J. A. Raftis, "Changing Characteristics of the Catholic Church," in *The Churches and the Canadian Experience*, pp. 82f.

<sup>9</sup>*Christian Guardian*, July 4, 1866, p. 106.

1868 George McDougall led a group of Canadian missionaries across the Assiniboine. Another party of Canadian Methodists had entered British Columbia in 1859. Anglicans had long been at work in the northwest in close association with the Hudson's Bay Company, but the initiative was almost entirely English. Despite the Scottish origin of the Red River settlers and of many Hudson's Bay factors the Presbyterians had neglected the west completely until the Canadian Free Church sent John Black to Kildonan in 1851. By 1870, however, church growth and general optimism in the east were making the west attractive to all communions as an area for future expansion. During the previous year the first Canadian Baptist minister had appeared on the plains.

If churchmen had taken little part in the discussions that led to confederation, they responded with vigour to the new situation it brought about. Confederation, it should be remembered, had among its results not only a change in political arrangements but a revolution in communications. Canada would have been impossible without the invention of the railway. Railway speculators were the great entrepreneurs of political novelty, the dreamers of continent-spanning dreams. The Maritimes were induced to enter confederation only by the promise of a line from Montreal to Halifax and Saint John. Prince Edward Island demanded, and received, a railway-cum-ferry. British Columbia exacted the highest price of all, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was the existence of a line of steel across the continent, even more than political union, that compelled church leaders to raise their sights.

The northwest quickly became the great Canadian mission field as eastern settlers overcame their prejudices against its climate and discovered the fertility of its soil. In 1881 the Presbyterian Church took the unprecedented step of naming James Robertson as superintendent of missions for the region. In 1883 the Anglican Province of Canada set up a Board of Missions for British North America. James Woodsworth, appointed Methodist superintendent for the west in 1886, emphasized work among the settlers. Yet the response in eastern Canada was uneven and often disappointing. Support for Anglican work continued to come primarily from British societies. Robertson complained that theological graduates seldom felt called to difficult places, and he and Woodsworth had to turn increasingly to Britain for recruits.

Consolidation of provincial and sectarian fragments into national denominations was a marked feature of the decades after confederation. Four groups, two in the upper provinces and two in the lower, united in 1875 to form the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Unions in 1874 and 1884 reduced six Methodist groups to one. In 1874 the Anglican dioceses of eastern Canada were brought together in the Provincial Synod of Canada. The General Synod of the Church of England in Canada was formed in 1893, the result of strong pressure from the west.

The influence of confederation on this process of consolidation was great,

although largely indirect. It was occasionally said that the existence of Canada demanded the formation of churches commensurate with it,<sup>10</sup> and the success of confederation undoubtedly lent prestige to other projects of union. "The tendencies of the time point to union," declared a pamphlet circulated by the Primitive Methodist Union Association in 1873. For the most part, however, it was practical considerations that weighed with the planners. The *Presbyterian Witness* of Halifax observed that the holding of general assemblies depended on "good cheap communication with Canada."<sup>11</sup> Competition within the newly-enlarged national unit figured largely in the arguments urged upon Primitive Methodists in the pamphlet already cited: "One Methodist body could take a strong position in the social and educational work of Canada. . . . If we waste our resources we must take a second place." ". . . The growth, wealth, and power of Popery need a united Methodism to confront it." Another argument came even closer to the heart of the matter: "Four ministers and four churches were to support in many places where one could do the whole." Settlement in the west and the depopulation of rural areas in the east demanded regrouping for the more effective deployment of resources.

In assessing the results of confederation we must bear in mind that the unity it created was compounded with diversity. The act that federated the colonies also divided the largest of them to form the new provinces of Ontario and Quebec. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of this development for Canadian church history. The assurance to Quebec of cultural and educational autonomy secured the support of the hierarchy for confederation. It also made possible the domination of Quebec politics by the *programmistes* who took their cue from the ultramontane Bishop Bourget of Montreal; Bourget's assumption of "la subordination de l'État à l'Église"<sup>12</sup> would have been unthinkable in the old united province of Canada. Confederation similarly confirmed the role of Protestant Ontario as a counterweight to Catholic Quebec. Another result of the bargaining that preceded confederation was the entrenchment of the rights of religious minorities to their own schools in Ontario and Quebec, and failure to maintain those rights in New Brunswick and Manitoba was a major source of French-Canadian disillusionment with confederation. For religious denominations, as for ethnic groups, confederation was thus not so much an invitation to closer relations as an aid to non-violent co-existence. It was followed, not by universal good feeling, but by readjustments designed to establish a new balance of forces. Only recently, under the inspiration of the ecumenical movement, has the church begun to move to more positive conceptions of Christian and Canadian unity.

<sup>10</sup>In *The New Dominion*, a periodical founded in 1867, John Dougall of Montreal compared church union with political federation.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in J. T. McNeill, *The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1875-1925* (Toronto: General Board of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1925), p. 19.

<sup>12</sup>Robert Rumilly, *Histoire de la Province de Québec* (Montreal: Éditions Bernard Valiquette, n.d.), Vol. I, p. 229.

## III

Canadians have at various times become excited about the possibilities of national greatness, but they have seldom been able to maintain the mood very long. Confederation touched off a flurry of optimistic speculation about the future. Ernest Duvergier, a French journalist, noted in 1864 that English-speaking Canadians were already calculating that the total area of a united British North America would surpass that of the United States.<sup>13</sup> George Monro Grant crossed the continent in 1872 as private secretary to Sir Sandford Fleming and then called Canadians to a vision of national greatness in a book entitled *Ocean to Ocean*. The boom in railways could not fail to generate some excitement, and the missionary challenge of the west helped the church to share it. On the whole, however, Canadians held their enthusiasm well in check. Their restraint can be explained in part by a slow rate of national growth. Early settlement in the west represented a redistribution rather than a rapid increase of population, and periodic depressions weakened confidence in the new nation. Even more disturbing to churchmen was the persistence of corruption in national and provincial politics. Evangelicals and ultramontanes alike took a tough line on public morality, and secular idealists like the Canada First group sought unsuccessfully to rescue politics from preoccupation with trivial concerns of patronage and party loyalty. Canadians remained optimistic about their future, but for several decades they were not inclined to boast of their achievements as a nation.

While English-speaking churchmen could find compensation for national shortcomings in the occupation of the northwest, the Roman Catholics of Quebec received only disappointment from that quarter. Bishop Taché had dreamt of a French-speaking, Catholic west, and in the early 1870s his dream had seemed by no means unrealistic. Some rural areas of Quebec were overpopulated, and for a generation French-Canadians had shown their willingness to emigrate by flocking to the factory towns of New England. In the northwest there was plenty of room, French-speaking inhabitants promised a ready welcome, and French-speaking priests were available for religious services. It was only necessary to divert the stream of immigration in that direction, and Taché zealously propagated his cause in Quebec. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to overcome an early impression, to which Taché himself had contributed, that Manitoba was a bleak and infertile region. Protestant Ontario colonized the plains, the Quebec hierarchy had to content itself with schemes of northern colonization, and French-Canadians continued to move to New England. The result of this western failure was to concentrate the efforts of the church in Quebec upon the building of a Catholic civilization at home and to leave expansive dreams to others.

Repressed by circumstances for several decades, Canadian self-confidence

<sup>13</sup>*Revue des Deux Mondes*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 31.



surged forward about the turn of the present century. The wheat boom brought an increasing stream of immigrants to the prairies, the resulting prosperity created industrial cities in the east, and the Yukon gold rush served as a dramatic symbol of potential wealth. The newly consolidated communions girded themselves to meet the demands of a society that suddenly showed signs of sophistication and complexity. They introduced new methods of evangelism and education, became interested in the moral (and more cautiously in the social) problems of the new cities, and began to sprout bureaucracies.

Although these new emphases and techniques were often carbon copies of American models, churchmen in tune with rising national sentiments applied them to the building of a distinctive Canadian character. They conceived it to be their duty to help the newcomers to become good Canadians, and in working with them they began to evolve a rudimentary philosophy of Canadianism. Essentially this consisted of the moral principles they had been seeking to inculcate all along, but in line with the Canadian tradition of unity in diversity it was extended to include the preservation of varied old-world cultural elements in the new setting. About the time of the First World War, too, the enthusiasm for Canadian topography that inspired Tom Thomson and later the Group of Seven began to find a place in Christian programmes for youth. Taylor Statten, who devised some of these programmes, linked growth in Christian character very closely with wholesome outdoor activity.<sup>14</sup> Inspiration to clean living in summer camps beside quiet northern lakes made Christianity and Canadianism seem very close kin.

No communions were more deeply affected by these varied strands of Canadian self-awareness than the Methodist and Presbyterian. Their strong tincture of voluntarism trained them in habits of self-support and encouraged them to recruit local leaders. Their consolidation in the post-confederation era enabled them to mobilize their resources in every part of the nation. Their keen interest in public righteousness made them peculiarly sensitive to possibilities of national fulfilment. The Congregationalists, although much fewer in number, shared the same puritan and voluntarist tradition. Without underestimating other motives, one inevitably suspects a close relation between the peak of national self-awareness that was reached in the early years of this century and the movement for the union of these denominations that culminated in the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. One must seek the link, not in any desire for national self-aggrandisement but rather in a sense of responsibility for mission to the nation. The United Church was to give the Christian faith a distinctively Canadian expression. It was to make room within itself for the various strands of Canadian culture. It was to make Canada great by imbuing it with a Christian character. All these things it has in fact tried to do, with varying degrees of success.

<sup>14</sup>See C. A. M. Edwards, *Taylor Statten* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1960).

The process of developing self-awareness that has marked Canadian history as a whole has been repeated in the experience of each group of newcomers to Canada. The great hurdle has been that of learning to be at home in the new land. Immigrants often try out long-established Canadian churches, which in theory at least are anxious to welcome them. The experiment seldom works, any more than it worked in the early nineteenth century when English Methodists and Scottish Presbyterians sampled the services of their naturalized brethren. The tendency then is to set up groups that will preserve the languages and the memories of home. Thus many Dutch Reformed immigrants, recommended to a United or Presbyterian church, have found Christian Reformed services more congenial to them despite theological differences. When some adjustment to Canadian ways has been made, the possibility of greater inclusiveness is bound to arise. Lutherans, who organized themselves at first along lines of European nationality, are now successfully overcoming these increasingly irrelevant divisions. The Orthodox are likely to go through the same process in the future. Their tradition is one of autonomous or "autocephalous" churches coterminous with national boundaries and using the local languages in their worship. In Canada this precedent suggests a single Canadian Orthodox Church using English in its worship. Hitherto European languages and loyalties have determined ecclesiastical allegiance, however, and there is little prospect of any change in the near future.<sup>15</sup> Slowest of all to develop, as in the past, is a sense of the possibilities inherent in the Canadian situation. The immigrant group tends to be preoccupied at first with its own concerns and internal tensions, only gradually relating itself to issues of nation-building. Some groups that have appeared in Canada since the beginning of the twentieth century may reach this stage before its end.

#### IV

Among the various aspects of self-awareness the most important, but in many ways the most difficult to evaluate, is that of ideological content. The question here is not simply how Canadians see themselves as different, what characteristics strike them as national rather than provincial or regional, or even what importance they attach to their existence as Canadians, but rather what they conceive Canada to stand for.

Throughout Canada's history the various branches of the church have sought to shape the beliefs and social attitudes of its people, and they have had ample opportunity to do so. They have been founders of newspapers, of community organizations, of universities and colleges. Almost every Canadian, at least until very recently, has attended their Sunday Schools, listened to their sermons, and been subject to the discipline of their courts. A general account of the influence of the church on the quality of Canadian

<sup>15</sup>For a discussion of the problem see Milos Mladenovic, "Canadian Orthodoxy and the Union of Churches," in *The Churches and the Canadian Experience*, pp. 115-18.

life would be beyond the scope of this article, but a study of Canadian self-awareness demands some estimate of the part of the church in forming the image that Canada projects. From many Canadian historians one would scarcely infer that it had played any part at all, but the French observer André Siegfried was keenly aware of the formative role of religion in Canada. He wrote:

According to the ethics of French Canadian Catholicism, the individual is obliged to live within a social framework, encompassed by a series of rites which punctuate the passage of the days and years. He submits to the effective direction of a spiritual hierarchy, which extols to the faithful the beauty of sacrifice, the value of discipline, and the virtue of the family. English Canadian Protestantism, on the other hand, puts the accent on man's moral responsibility to his own conscience, with no need for intervention on the part of a sacramental priesthood. In their eyes, the development of a material civilization is, in fact if not in doctrine, a form of moral dignity.<sup>16</sup>

Although one wants to object that this is a very broad caricature, it is probably a fairly accurate reflection of how Canadians have looked to themselves. It bears a close relation, moreover, to what the churches have attempted to achieve. French-Canadian Catholicism has sought to give shape to society, while the dominant Protestant emphasis has been on the shaping of character. Not so clearly stressed on either side has been the formulation of national purpose, and it is in precisely this area that we have been weakest.

The image of Christian Canada—churchgoing, moral, and devotedly partisan—strikes both believers and unbelievers today as somewhat archaic. Whether we like this image or not, it is unlikely that the church will have sufficient authority in our time to replace it with another. By making Canada aware of its faithful presence, however, it can have an effective influence on national life. It can shape a distinctive Canadianism where this has always been shaped, on the ever-shifting frontier. It can foster an inclusive Canadianism by engaging in creative dialogue both within its own ranks and with those outside. It can contribute to Canada's stature in the area where Canada has already come closest to greatness, that of concern for the peace and welfare of all men. As for the ideological content of Canadian life, it will do best to seek first the Kingdom of God and let ideology fend for itself.

<sup>16</sup>André Siegfried, *Canada* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), pp. 96f.