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The Challenge of Canadian Church History to its Historians

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SINCE Canadian Christianity is part of the missionary outreach of the European churches, its history in the main has been regarded as a codicil to European church history.¹ Such a status has hardly added to the prestige of Canadian church historiography, nor attracted many students into this field of historical research. It is a status, however, that Canadian church history shares with the history of all the younger churches both on this continent and in Asia and Africa,² and it is only very recently that the story of non-European Christianity has begun to be told on its own merits. One reason for the long delay has been the difficulty of adapting the history of the younger churches to the normative canons of European church history—a difficulty that has sometimes led to the conclusion that genuine church history of these younger churches cannot be written.³ Because of this reproach, several American church historians have made a frontal attack upon the so-called normative canons of church history and are insisting that “changes must come not only in definitions, approaches and methods, but also in the attitude toward the content and subject matter of church history.”⁴ This is an attack in which Canadian historians may well join and strive for a church history discipline which is comprehensive enough to deal with the whole body of Christ’s church throughout the world.

I

There are, however, certain basic assumptions, which distinguish church history as a discipline from other historical disciplines with which it will be difficult to dispense, even in the interest of comprehensiveness.

The first of these is the conception of the church as a people related to

1. *Vide* Philip Carrington, *A Church History for Canadians to 1900 A.D.* (Toronto, n.d.): A history for Canadians that deals mainly with the history of the Church of England. Three chapters out of forty-six are allotted to Canada and the organization of the Anglican church in Canada. There is a brief paragraph dealing with “other Protestants.” In fairness to the author it must be said that the “book is written for the young people of the Church of England in Canada,” nevertheless, it is a striking example of the codicil treatment of “overseas” churches.

2. An extended discussion of this subject is to be found in an article by L. J. Trinterud, “The Task of the American Church Historian,” *Church History*, XXV (Mar., 1956).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

God through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.⁵ 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; he must at all times help the members of the church to "look backward in time—backward on the path along which they have come,"⁶ so that they may understand the true cause and hope of their status as a people of God.

A second assumption of no less importance, is that church history is universal in its outlook. In point of fact, church historians have always acted on the principle that they were engaged in a universal study; it is extremely doubtful if any historian today whether writing in Europe or America would take exception to Eusebius' dictum that "he who would commit to writing the history that contains the Church's narrative, must needs begin from the first with the beginning of the dispensation of Christ Himself . . . a dispensation more divine than most men imagine." By this after-thought Eusebius meant that "Christianity is as old as creation" and church history actually should begin with Adam and Eve and include such worthies as Abraham, Moses and all "those friends of God in days of old."⁷ Many an earlier church historian has tried to do just that, but in modern days it is customary to follow Eusebius' example and simply salute the distant ages before getting down to more recent events.

These then are the controlling assumptions of the church historian, and they do pose a problem when one is dealing with the variety and exclusiveness of sectarian Christianity of the American continent. It is possible, no doubt, to write about the churches apart from these two assumptions; a great deal of study has been given to the sects in Canada, with particular emphasis upon their cultural influence in Canadian life,⁸ but such research belongs to the field of sociology rather than church history. Because of the fissiparous nature of both American and Canadian Christianity, even church historians have been tempted to write Christian sociology rather than church history; but if the church historian abandons his controlling assumptions and becomes a mere chronicler of religion he is depriving himself of the unique interpretative insight which distinguishes him from the secular historian. As it has been said of the historian generally: only he "who is excited by his participation in history . . . will be able to understand history,"⁹ so it can be said specifically of the church historian: only he who is excited by his participation in the church is able to understand church history.

5. Such a definition of the church in relation to history is to be found in Karl Barth, *The Church and the Political Problem of Our Day* (London, 1939) pp. 5 *et seq.*

6. Quoted from Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

7. Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History, etc.* (trans. by Lawlor & Oulton, London, 1927, 2 vols.), vol. 1, pp. 4 and 14.

8. S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto, 1948); C. A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* (Toronto, 1936) and W. E. Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta* (Toronto, 1955) are the most important studies in this field.

9. R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 122.

It may be contended that such participation detracts from the objectivity of the historian, but his involvement in the church need imply no more bias than is common to all historians who must necessarily belong to a human culture and are dependent upon some common orientation towards experience if they are to communicate with their readers. And once it is conceded that all history must necessarily be subjective—Professor Bultmann goes so far as to say that “. . . the most subjective interpretation of history is at the same time the most objective”¹⁰ then the church historian is on an equality with his secular colleagues who also have their controlling assumptions; and along with these assumptions, which may well include “the central events of the faith,”¹¹ he can also make use of all the techniques and tools of secular history; he can be just as “critical and discriminating in his judgments” and just as conscientious in this “choice and sorting”¹² as the most scientific historian. Nor will he, since Collingwood, indulge in mere “scissors and paste” history or depend “altogether upon the testimony of authorities;”¹³ nor will he forget Collingwood’s warning that if the events of the past are to live in the present “they should vibrate in the historian’s mind.”¹⁴ But in order that the Canadian historian may do this very thing and take cognizance of all the many vital aspects of Canadian Christianity, it is necessary that he free himself from much of the methodology and presuppositions of European church historians.

II

At least two of these presuppositions must be summarily dismissed as of no value in the New World. The first is what has been described as the “patching on” view of the continuity of church history; the second is a concentration on national church history to the depreciation of dissenting or so-called heretical churches. The “patching on” view no doubt arose out of the concept of the church universal in which the historian would take “a comprehensive backward look to the Garden of Eden,”¹⁵ a view that was further strengthened by the historiography of the post-Renaissance period when classical interests began to dominate Western thinking. Under this influence all true history was regarded as beginning with Greece and Rome and national histories were conceived as something to be added on to the history of the Greco-Roman world. Church historians under the same influence thought of church history in terms of the church fathers who were either Greek or Roman; consequently the history of the various national churches of Europe appeared as sequels to the regular church histories of the

10. *Ibid.*

11. J. McIntyre, *The Christian Doctrine of History* (Edinburgh & London, 1957), p. 3.

12. Quoted from Jacques Maritain on the *Philosophy of History*, ed. by J. W. Evans (New York, 1957), p. 3.

13. *Vide* R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), p. 257.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

15. Quoted from L. G. Trinterud, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

fathers.¹⁶ Although this "patched on" type of history does retain the continuity of the church from apostolic days to the present time, it hardly does justice to the autonomous development of European churches, particularly to the history of dissent; and it becomes almost unmanageable when applied to the American continent, where "patching on" becomes twice removed from the original church.

This disservice is even exceeded when Europeans, preoccupied with a national or established church, regard it as the true church and retain, as it were, only a Catholic covering for the separated churches under the titles of dissent or non-conformity. Such terms with their derogatory implication will not do in the New World where very frequently an Old World dissenting religion may well have become the dominant cultural influence in large areas of the American continent.

III

While New World church historians continued to adhere to the Old World canons it remained almost impossible to write a comprehensive history of either American or Canadian religious development. The first church historian to challenge the European concept and pioneer in new methods and techniques was Professor W. W. Sweet, who is now generally recognized as the dean of American church historians. With the appearance of his *The Story of Religion in America* in 1930, a new era in the field of church history began, but even as late as 1950 Professor Sweet complains that "Religion has been the most neglected phase of American history," and he underlines his complaint by saying, "The average college student could pass a better examination in Greek mythology than in American church history and is better informed on the Medieval popes than he is on the religious leaders of America."¹⁷

In seeking a new method of making American church history more than a mere "appendage to general church history on the one hand or denominational monographs on the other"¹⁸ Professor Sweet, perhaps, relied too much on the discipline of secular American history;¹⁹ nevertheless, he did infuse a new spirit into the study of American Christianity and has succeeded, as he intended, in reminding "secular historians of the religious factors that have helped to shape America" as well "as impressing denominational and other historians of religion of the significance of other religious groups and the secular forces in shaping their particular groups."²⁰

Since Professor Sweet's pioneer effort there has been a growing accumulation of publications on American church history (Professor Sweet himself

16. This theory is more fully discussed by Trinterud, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

17. W. W. Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1951), p. vii.

18. Quoted from an article by S. E. Mead, "Professor Sweet's Religion and Culture in America," *Church History*, XXII (Mar., 1953), p. 45.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

20. Quoted by Mead *op. cit.*, p. 33, from "Every Dog Has His Day," *The University of Chicago Magazine*, XXXIX (Feb., 1947), p. 11.

is godfather to more than thirty Ph.D. theses on some aspect or other of American church history), and an intense discussion by students of the subject on the best interpretative approach to what is still an almost untilled field of research. In all this discussion an interpretative method is being sought which will avoid the temptation of becoming mere Christian sociology, but will at the same time provide themes sufficiently comprehensive to do justice to the complex history of Christianity on the American continents.²¹ A careful study of this literature²² can materially help to smooth the path of the Canadian church historian as he tries to wend his way through as complex a religious development as that of the United States.

IV

One conclusion that has become quite generally accepted by American historians is that the term *Catholic* can no longer be identified, as it often is by European historians, with an institutional expression of Christianity. As Professor L. J. Trinterud has rightly observed, ". . . seldom do these institutional expressions allow of easy harmonization;" consequently, "Church history becomes largely the history of the warfare within and between these various ecclesiastical institutions which we know as 'churches'."²³ Because of this lack of harmony in defining the church and also because all ecclesiastical institutions have had an historical development it is now pretty well agreed among American church historians that they have no firm standard whereby they can exclude any church or sect from the history of the church universal. Therefore, it follows that the concept of the Catholic church must be broad enough and inclusive enough to embody all those who at any time past and present have claimed or do claim redemption through Jesus Christ. It must be admitted that this larger concept of the Catholic church imposes a particularly onerous burden upon both American and Canadian church historians because of the fissiparous nature of the material they have to deal with; nevertheless, the church historian must consider sympathetically and with understanding all religious groups, however fanatical or bizarre, if he is to do complete justice to church development on this continent.

This does not mean that he abandons his critical faculties or that he does not have his own perception of the Gospel; in point of fact he does permit himself the same freedom of judgment in treating the claims of a sect as he permits himself in judging his own particular branch of the church Catholic; but he must always remain aware that he himself, unless he claims infallibility, cannot be the final judge in these high matters of spiritual discernment.

21. *Vide* E. H. Harbinson, "The 'Meaning of History' and the Writing of History," *Church History*, XXI (June, 1952); an interesting discussion of the Christian understanding of history and the influence of modern secular historians on this understanding.

22. *Vide* R. T. Handy, "Survey of Recent Literature: American Church History," *Church History*, XXVII (June, 1958), pp. 161-167; an exhaustive survey of the more recent literature.

23. L. J. Trinterud *op. cit.*, p. 10.

V

In thus providing sectarianism with a more respectable status than has been customary in European church histories, it becomes necessary to look more closely at its theological origins and its European development. Such an investigation soon reveals the inadequacy of the older church histories in which the sects are very often portrayed from a negative point of view, as threatening the norms and structures of the national church, or as culturally divisive forces. Because of this older approach to a religious phenomenon that has in America created the typically free and popular churches of the frontier, it becomes almost a necessity to rewrite the religious background of New World Christianity. This to some extent has been done by Professor J. H. Nichols who in the opening pages of his *History of Christianity 1650-1950*, states quite frankly that he is going to treat the many separated church traditions "as if they were all part of the Christian society, the church, or as if the church were to be found in significant measure with them."²⁴

Such a treatment brings into prominence many themes that are only lightly touched upon by older church historians. One is revivalism which opens up a whole series of allied issues, the most significant being voluntaryism, namely, that religious institutions should depend upon the free-will contributions of the membership. To the European historian the American interest in these themes may seem excessive since revivalism has perhaps played only a minor rôle in European cultural development; but the interest is by no means excessive when it is realized that revivalism and many of the principles it fostered, such as voluntaryism, lay-participation in religion, and democracy itself, have brought about a revolution in church organizations on this continent. As a matter of fact, the theme of organization always occupies a prominent place in both American and Canadian church histories. How this has come about has been very succinctly explained by Professor Sydney E. Mead in an illuminating article in *Church History*, in which he points out that during the upheavals of the Great Awakenings the patterns of sectarian religion began to infiltrate the conventional churches and thus "through confusion and compromise" there began an "historical merging of the traditional patterns of 'church' and 'sect', 'right' and 'left' wings, as known in Europe, into a new kind of organization combining features of both plus features growing out of the immediate situation."²⁵ To this resulting organizational form Mead has applied the term "denominationalism" which he considers a peculiarly American phenomenon and "unlike anything that had preceded it in Christendom."²⁶ Such being the case there is good and sufficient reason for American church historians to make a fresh review of the European religious scene, so that they may be-

24. J. H. Nichols, *History of Christianity 1650-1950* (New York, 1956), p. iii.

25. S. E. Mead, "From Coercion to Persuasion," *Church History*, XXV (Dec., 1956), p. 22.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

come better acquainted with the origins of a very self-conscious religious ideal which is frequently reiterated in the oft-repeated slogan, "Go to the church of your choice."

VI

Since denominationalism is also a Canadian phenomenon, this contemplated revision of European church history may well help the Canadian church historian to set forth Canadian church development more clearly and significantly. And yet he must use this material with caution, for there are variations in the Canadian and American developments which prevent as radical a break with European concepts and methods for the Canadian historian as for the American. For one thing, church history in Canada begins with New France in which the union of church and state continued for almost a century and a half and was so firmly established that the alliance has partially prevailed in French Canada down to the present day. Under these circumstances it seems quite possible to keep the first half of Canadian church history firmly within the concepts of European historiography; except for the fact that the French Canadian church did not remain immune to the democratic spirit of the frontier. Outstanding evidence of this is the prominence of lay participation in the councils of the church, which in the words of Archbishop Roy of Quebec has led to the formation "of a type of religious grouping to be found nowhere else perhaps but in French Canada."²⁷

To this may be added an additional factor, namely, that the Roman Catholic Church in Canada joined with dissenting groups to oppose the British government's attempt to establish the Church of England in Canada. Thus, unwittingly perhaps, the Roman Catholic Church in Canada made its contribution to the ideal of denominationalism, and can in some sense fit into the canons of American church historiography. On the other hand, its strongly rooted seventeenth century concepts, its semi-established position in the province of Quebec and its consistent emphasis upon loyalty to the ruling authorities both in church and state, has made its impact upon the Protestant churches in Canada and gives the latter a religious outlook that is not always in accord with Protestant development in the United States. Thus there has been in Canada a religious mood that questions the ultimate desirability of denominationalism and does hanker for greater uniformity of religious expression in the interest of cultural unity. The long series of church unions in Canada, culminating in the United Church of Canada, is the historical expression of an ideal that looks beyond American denominationalism as the final "destiny which awaits the whole of the Church Catholic in the future."²⁸

27. M. Roy, *The Parish and Democracy in French Canada* (Toronto, 1950), p. 15.

28. *Vide*, L. J. Trinterud, *op. cit.*, p. 9. The larger content from which the quotation is taken sees a different future for the Church Catholic: "Whatever 'the fissiporous American religiosity' may in fact be, it seems indeed to be that destiny which awaits the whole of the Church Catholic in the future."

VII

It seems, then, that the Canadian church historian is challenged to combine the techniques of both the European and American church historians; but his supreme challenge, as it is of any church historian, is to communicate and make relevant to his readers the part that the Canadian church has contributed to the redemption history of Jesus Christ. That does not mean, however, that he overlooks the importance of Canadian church history in understanding the national development of Canada. For it is evident that many of our secular historians miss not a few of the static factors of our cultural development, to say nothing of the poetry and intangibles which are inseparably bound up with our religious expression. But these are the subordinate responsibilities of the church historian; though without discharging them he would not be doing full justice to his larger task of making the history of the Canadian church relevant to the history of the Catholic church of God. In other words, the historian of the church of Canada has an overriding responsibility of contributing to the writing of a truly universal history of the church.

It is in meeting these two demands, the national and the supra-national, that the problem of communication becomes most acute; for his larger audience he must be more or less informative as he sets forth the claim to universal significance of the great variety and novelty of church life in Canada; for his smaller audience he must, in a subdued sense, be hortatory as he sets forth its involvement in the larger life of the church universal.

Above all, the church historian, within whatever geographical area he writes, must be sensitively aware of what has been described by Karl Jaspers as an "axial period," lying somewhere between 800 and 200 B.C., when man became "conscious of Being as a whole of himself and his limitations."²⁹ It is also with a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the meaningful occurrences of the past—the breathless history of the last six thousand years, with its significant landmarks of revelation—that the Canadian church historian tries to throw some light upon the church history of his own little cranny of here and now.

29. On the "Axial Period" *vide* K. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London, 1953), p. 2.

"An axis of world history, if such a thing exists, would have to be discovered *empirically*, as a fact capable of being accepted as such by all men, Christians included. . . . It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the 'Axial Period' " (p. 1).