

# *The Church in Canada*

Harold A. Innis

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# The Church in Canada

The Time of Healing.  
Twenty-Second Annual Report  
of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service.  
United Church of Canada. Pp. 47-54

By HAROLD A. INNIS

Modern civilization, characterized by an enormous increase in the output of mechanized knowledge with the newspaper, the book, the radio and the cinema, has produced a state of numbness, pleasure, and self-complacency perhaps only equalled by laughing-gas. In the words of Oscar Wilde we have sold our birthright for a mess of facts. The demands of the machine are insatiable. The danger of shaking men out of the soporific results of mechanized knowledge is similar to that of attempting to arouse a drunken man or one who has taken an overdose of sleeping tablets. The necessary violent measures will be disliked. We have had university professors threatened with the loss of their positions for less than this. But I have little hope of making any impression with what I have to say.

I have made a slight study through unhappy experiences with meetings of this sort and I have always been impressed by the success which attends meetings addressed by Americans or Englishmen. Speakers of both groups are quickly made aware of our sensitiveness and spend much of their time commenting on how much better things are done in Canada than in Great Britain or the United States. Such speakers are very courteous, and are generally equipped with a great fund of stories carefully interspersed throughout the speech, and a peroration which emphasizes the absence of political boundaries between Anglo-Saxon people. The demand for this type of speech implies a lack of interest in a Canadian speaker who might say something distasteful about domestic affairs.

## *The Canadian Church Problem*

The problem of the Church is the problem of western civilization and for that reason is all the more dangerous to discuss. Our position in Canada is perhaps more serious because of our counter revolutionary tradition. In Quebec the French population largely escaped the influence of the French

Revolution and in the older English-speaking provinces immigrants arrived from the United States because of their definite hostility to the revolutionary tradition. The position of the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec is paralleled by the concern of Protestants and of Roman Catholics in English-speaking provinces with control over the activities of the State. Gibbon wrote that “the various methods of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false and by the magistrate as equally useful,” and this might be paraphrased by saying that “the various political groups which prevailed in Canada were all considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false and by the Church as equally useful.” Students of cultural development in Canada have failed to realize the extent to which religion in English-speaking Canada has been influenced indirectly by the traditions of the Galilean Church in Quebec. Nor do we appreciate the significance of the political background of the France of Colbert and Louis XIV. State and Church under an absolute monarchy in France was State and Church under an absolute monarchy in New France. Great Britain failed in the first Empire because Englishmen are alike, but succeeded in the second Empire to a greater extent than is generally realized because French bureaucracy had become solidly entrenched in New France. It was this bureaucracy which enabled the British to govern New France and which enabled Canadians through governmental activity to develop their natural resources by construction of canals, railways, hydro electric power facilities and other undertakings. It was this bureaucracy in Church and State which was reflected in the place of Quebec in Confederation and in turn of English-speaking provinces. Clemenceau once remarked that England was a French colony gone wrong. He might have felt that in Canada the French colony had followed expected traditions.

The absence of a revolutionary tradition in Canada assumes relative stability and continuous repression with the result, as Professor J. B. Brebner<sup>[1]</sup> has shown, that we have been largely concerned with the training of our best students for export to countries with a revolutionary tradition. The Erastian character of religion assumes that the Church has been largely concerned with the development of organization and in turn with ecclesiasticism and links with other interests notably in business. I am told that church union was to a very important extent a response to economic demands. Separate churches could not maintain activity in a large number of communities in the West, and it seemed wiser to follow the example of the banks, the railroads and the elevators and to emphasize the branch system and avoidance of duplication. The results were evident in fact in the

breaking away of radical elements to cite only the case of the late J. S. Woodsworth and the rise of separate parties in the West. It is significant that the late William Aberhart seized on the relations between the Church and the money-changers in his speeches to his Bible Institute. It was a disturbing sight to see the United Church among the creditors who could lose through its position as a holder of Alberta's bonds.

The lack of a revolutionary tradition continually implies the dangers of compromise which have become conspicuous in Canadian life. In spite of the work of my friend, Professor C. B. Sissons, on the life of Egerton Ryerson it is difficult to evade the impression that his connection with education brought the school system of Ontario and of other provinces which followed its lead too close to the Prussian bureaucratic system. The results have been evident in an emphasis on the formalities of religious instruction in the schools and a neglect of the basic problem of character. We have been much concerned in academic circles with the decline of Greek, but I am afraid we do not realize that this is a symptom of an unwillingness to face the exacting demands implied in a study of Greek civilization. We have neglected the philosophical problems of the West and have not realized that the Greeks were fundamentally concerned with the training of character.

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[1] *Scholarship for Canada* (Ottawa, 1945)

### *The Hand of Puritanism*

A counter revolutionary tradition implies an emphasis on ecclesiasticism and the *ipsissima verba* of the Scriptures, particularly of the Old Testament with all the dangers of bibliolatry and of Puritanism. The hand of Puritanism is evident in our literature, in our art and in our cultural life. This implies neglect of the inter-relation between reason and emotion. Religion is a good servant but a bad master, or to cite Pattison further: "Those periods when morals have been represented as the proper study of man and his only business have been periods of spiritual abasement and poverty."<sup>[2]</sup> Puritanical smugness has had a sterilizing influence on the cleansing effects of art and other expressions of cultural life.

The cause of this is, says Shelley, that statesmen and manufacturers have not learnt from the poets the art of recognizing and retaining the significance of that which they see: "The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle,

the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal law of human nature. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines labour, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want. They have exemplified the saying, ‘To him that hath, more shall be given, and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away. . . .’”

As one reads the last pages of the *Defence of Poetry* (Shelley) one begins to see light on that dark saying of Aristotle, “Poetry, therefore, is more philosophic and a higher thing than history, for poetry tends to express the universal and history the particular.”<sup>[3]</sup>

The implications of ecclesiasticism to political life have been evident on every hand. We have had political leaders who have been notorious for breaking records for longevity in political life. When Oliver Mowat was introduced to a prominent statesman in England with a comment on the length of time he had been Premier of Ontario he was greeted with the comment, “Have you no public opinion in that province?” The late J. W. Dafoe is said to have stated that all great public questions in Canada were settled on the basis of personal prejudices, and that political leaders on the whole have lacked the virtue of magnanimity. Lord Acton’s comment that “no public character has ever stood the revelation of private utterances and correspondence”<sup>[4]</sup> has particular significance for the fundamental corruption of Canadian public life.

### *The Vicissitudes of an Economist*

Oscar Wilde wrote an essay on the decay of lying but I am not sure that it would bear reading in this country. We are all too much concerned with the arts of *suppressio veri, suggestio falsi*. “The inexorable isolation of the individual is a bitter fact for the human animal, instinctively so social, and much of his verbalizing reflects his obstinate refusal to face squarely so unwelcome a realization. The great maxims and social inventions are so drawn as to minimize this realization, and are often framed in terms which taken at their face value are operationally footless.”<sup>[5]</sup> I am reluctant to make speeches in public for various reasons, and one reason for accepting your generous invitation was the feeling that this was an eminently suitable body to which I might present a personal dilemma. The department of political economy, if I may judge from personal experience, is under constant surveillance by a wide range of individuals. If in the course of an article I

make a reference to a large government department or a large business organization, I will receive in an incredibly short time after the article has been published a personal letter possibly directly from the public relations officer of the organization concerned or indirectly from the president or head of the organization explaining that my remarks are liable to misinterpretation and inferring that the head of such an influential department in a large university should be very careful about the way in which his views are expressed. I plan to leave in my estate a valuable collection of autographs of prominent men in this country. For these reasons I am largely compelled to avoid making speeches in public and to resort to the careful preparation of material to be made available in print. In most cases this involves writing in such guarded fashion that no one can understand what is written or using quotations from the writings of authors who stand in great repute. I have often envied the freedom of my colleagues in other subjects. On the rare occasions on which I read the reports of their speeches I am always impressed by the ease with which they make statements largely because no one will pay much attention to what they have to say, or because they speak about subjects which do not affect people's direct interests. I am unhappily too aware of the fact that I am the first Canadian to be appointed to the position which I have the honour to hold and that such an appointment coming at so late a date reflects the very great fear of pronouncements made by the holder of my chair. My predecessors have been regarded as safe since as non-Canadians they could not make statements on Canadian affairs which would be taken seriously. But even they, partly because they were not Canadians, were subjected from time to time to the most bitter attacks in the press. Members of the department have been harassed inside and outside the University by protests from representatives of various interests, including political parties.

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[2] *Essays by the late Mark Pattison* (Oxford, 1889) II, p. 82.

[3] Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (London, 1926), pp. 130-31.

[4] Lord Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies* (London, 1919), p. 506.

[5] P. W. Bridgman, *The Intelligent Individual and Society* (New York. 1938), pp. 142-3.

### *Church Weaknesses*

The Church has been rather too intent on losing its life and having it too. It has not been sufficiently philosophical, nor raised sufficient questions as to its limitations. The following quotations are to the point:

“This absence of a professional public, and not the restraints of our formularies, seems to me the true reason why a real theology cannot exist in England. Every clerical writer feels himself bound to decide every question of criticism or interpretation in favour of the orthodox view. It is demanded of him by public opinion that he shall be an advocate and not a critic. Science or knowledge cannot exist under such a system; it requires for its growth the air of free discussion and contradiction . . .”<sup>[6]</sup>

“As poetry is not for the critics, so religion is not for the theologians. When it is stiffened into phrases, and these phrases are declared to be objects of reverence but not of intelligence, it is on the way to become a useless encumbrance, the rubbish of the past, blocking the road.

“Theology then retires into the position it occupies in the Church of Rome at present, an unmeaning frostwork of dogmas, out of all relation to the actual history of man. In that system, theological virtue is an artificial life quite distinct from the moral virtues of real life.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The heresy trials which have littered the annals of the history of Canadian churches point in the same direction. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church and the Church has apparently always demanded its share of blood. Over the doorway of one of your large colleges there are the words “the truth will make you free,” but the heresy trials suggest that the search for truth may mean the loss of your job. The Church is always in danger of overstepping the bounds of moderation. Following Dean Inge, “In religion nothing fails like success.”

The social sciences in which I happen to have an interest may be used as an illustration of the limitations of the Church. So, too, modern business has not been educated in terms of its limitations and responsibilities. The Church has been too apt in its acceptance of the claims of other interests because it has not been sufficiently critical of its own position. Instead of checking the pretensions of the social sciences it has accepted them and used them and

even exaggerated them. Or it has regarded such subjects as sociology as dangerous and to be avoided, which in turn makes for over-emphasis on such subjects as economics and politics. The Church is in part responsible for a tendency in the social sciences to neglect the importance of training and character. With great pretentiousness they pronounce on questions of exceeding complexity in the social sciences and belittle the necessity of a long period of intense training and the development of character essential to an appreciation of the danger of interfering in other people's lives. They are very *apt to assume an active role in the direction of education and in political* and even military activity because of what appears to be their overwhelmingly Erastian character. While there is evidence of improvement in the attitude of the Church, for example toward conscription in World War I and World War II, it has been all too supine in accepting the pretensions of bureaucracy in Ottawa to solve all problems and in its acceptance with little protest of the encroachments which have been made on civil liberties. Has the Church taken any active stand on the position of Jehovah's Witnesses? Has it given attention to the incipient totalitarian dangers of adult education programmes in this country? Does it appreciate the significance of the interest of the totalitarian state in science and its abhorrence of philosophy?

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[6] Mark Pattison, *Memoirs* (London, 1885), p. 317.

[7] *Essays by the late Mark Pattison* (Oxford, 1889), II, pp. 86-7.

### *Some Points for Discussion*

I would like to present to the members of this body the problem not of telling the truth, because I am aware that I do not know what the truth is, but of presenting considerations which will lead to discussion and to a closer approximation to the truth without leading to bitter public controversy. The discussion of questions which affect people's lives must be carried on with great circumspection. I have had occasion recently to come in contact with two professions, the nursing and the medical profession, and to be impressed again with the assumption that a long period of intensive training is essential to the preparation of individuals who are to be concerned throughout their careers with the handling of problems affecting people's lives. I have been appalled on the other hand and by comparison with the cavalier fashion in which great numbers of people discuss the problems of managing people's

lives with almost no intensive training. Dale Carnegie's *How to Make Friends and Influence People* is a symptom of a widespread interest in the technique of pushing people around. In universities the rise of the social sciences and in particular the emphasis on business subjects, personnel management, industrial relations, social work, applied anthropology and so on point to the danger of forgetting that no one can undertake the task of pushing people around without a long period of intensive discipline and training, though in fairness it should be said that there is a widespread appreciation of this danger. But we would do well to follow the example of the medical profession based on centuries of experience and tradition in emphasizing the importance of respect for the individual, evident as early as the oath of Hippocrates, and to realize that decisions affecting the lives of individuals should be made only on the basis of a long and intensive training and on character such as comes from a combination of work with the hands as well as the brain. The social sciences in the main suffer from the lack of physical training which is so important in medicine and are apt to become a part of that system of exploitation by which so-called brain workers exploit those who work with their hands. Socrates and Greek philosophers in general were profoundly impressed with the example of the medical profession and with the need for comparable selection and training in the social sciences.

I have sometimes wondered whether ecclesiastical Christianity has not tended to suppress the Greek point of view of the New Testament and to over-emphasize the Hebrew point of view of the Old Testament and to neglect an emphasis on training and character. In swinging from one point of view to the other and in allowing fanaticism to thrive Christianity has tended to foster an anarchistic society. This view was expressed some years ago by Santayana, from whom I quote:

“Nothing is accordingly more patent than that Christianity was paganized by the early Church; indeed, the creation of the Church was itself what to a Hebraizing mind must seem a corruption, namely, a mixing of pagan philosophy and ritual with the Gospel. . . . By this corruption it was completed and immensely improved, like Anglo-Saxon by its corruption through French and Latin; for it is always an improvement in religion, whose business is to express and inspire spiritual sentiment, that it should learn to express and inspire that sentiment more generously. Paganism was nearer than Hebraism to the life of Reason because its myths were more transparent and its temper less fanatical; and so a paganized Christianity approached more closely that ideality which constitutes religious truth than a

bare and intense Hebraism, in its hostility to human genius, could ever have done it isolated and unqualified.”<sup>[8]</sup>

“What was condemnable in the Jews was not that they asserted the divinity of their law, for that they did with substantial sincerity and truth. Their crime is to have denied the equal prerogative of other nations’ laws and deities, for this they did, not from critical insight or intellectual scruples, but out of pure bigotry, conceit, and stupidity. They did not want other nations also to have a god. . . . What the moral government of things meant when it was first asserted was that Jehovah expressly directed the destinies of heathen nations and the course of nature itself for the final glorification of the Jews.”

“No civilized people had ever had such pretensions before. They all recognized one another’s religions, if not as literally true (for some familiarity is needed to foster that illusion), certainly as more or less sacred and significant. Had the Jews not rendered themselves odious to mankind by this arrogance, and taught Christians and Moslems the same fanaticism, the nature of religion would not have been falsified among us and we should not now have so much to apologize for and to retract.”<sup>[9]</sup>

“Yet what makes the difference is not the teaching of Jesus—which is pure Hebraism reduced to its spiritual essence—but the worship of Christ—something perfectly Greek. Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect had it not been made at once speculative, universal, and ideal by the infusion of Greek thought, and at the same time plastic and devotional by the adoption of pagan habits. The incarnation of God in man, and the divinization of man in God are pagan conceptions, expressions of pagan religious sentiment and philosophy. Yet what would Christianity be without them? It would have lost not only its theology, which might be spared, but its spiritual aspiration, its artistic affinities, and the secret of its metaphysical charity and joy.”<sup>[10]</sup>

### *Religion and Fanaticism*

Denominationalism does not help to avoid this tendency toward fanaticism. It would be difficult to make any statement on the subject of religion which would not give rise to protests from a particular group. Newspaper editors are constantly aware of the increasing vigilance of various denominations and carefully avoid the subject and it would not be wise for me to rush in where newspaper editors fear to tread. The churches

must be regarded with other groups as always on the alert for an unguarded comment.

In universities one finds a reflection of this fanaticism in that individuals advance in all seriousness the proposition that civilization can be saved by having everyone take their specific subject. That such fanatical points of view can find expression in such an institution as a university points to very grave weaknesses in western society, as Frederick Harrison in the following quotations makes plain:

“This mania for special research in place of philosophic principle, for tabulated facts in lieu of demonstrable theorems and creative generalizations, attenuates the intelligence and installs pedantic information about details, where what man wants are working principles for social life. The grand conceptions of Darwin and of Spencer are too often used by their followers and successors as a text on which to dilate on microscopic or local trivialities which mean nothing. And even Spencer’s Synthesis, the only one yet attempted by any English thinker, proves, on being closely pressed, to rest on a substructure of hypotheses, and to ignore two-thirds of the entire scale of the sciences viewed as an interdependent whole. The enormous accumulation of recorded facts in the last century goes on as blindly in this, quite indifferent to the truth that infinite myriads of facts are as worthless as infinite grains of sand on the sea-shore, until we have found out how to apply them to the amelioration of human life.”

“It was obvious that the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century greatly surpassed that of the second half. And it is sadly evident that literature in the twentieth century is far inferior even to that of the second half century.”<sup>[11]</sup>

“Historical study today is far more scientific, and is grouped and classified into elaborate sections, periods, and nations. But like almost every other study, it is overwhelmed with its infinite details, and its unity is lost in interminable special subdivisions, ‘periods,’ and subsidiary ‘ologies.’ Girls and lads in their teens are so deep in ‘diplomats,’ numismatics, and the Manor system, that they are too learned to know anything of common things like the Punic Wars or the French Revolution. Science, too, suffers from the incoherent specialization which is bound up with modern research. The study of science, of course, must be said to be far more widely popularized today, and to be of a much higher order of thought. But biography, the typical literature of our age, feels the reaction of the ceaseless multiplication of lives to record, until the best and the greatest lives are too often overwhelmed in the flow of the obscure and the commonplace.”<sup>[12]</sup>

It is not only dangerous in this country to be a social scientist with an interest in truth but it is exhausting. You will remember the remarks of the Persian at a banquet in Thebes noted by Herodotus. “This is the most cruel pang that man can bear—to have much insight and power over nothing.” On a wider plane it is a source of constant frustration to attempt to be a Canadian. Both Great Britain and the United States encourage us in assuming the false position that we are a great power and in urging that we have great national and imperial possibilities. From both groups we are increasingly subjected to pressure and in turn to bureaucratic tendencies dictated by external forces. We have no sense of our limitations. On the question of Russia we are constantly pushed into a position in which it is assumed that we take sides. We have little chance to raise questions as to the dominance of military authorities in the United States or as to the political needs of the Labour party in Great Britain. We seem destined to occupy in North America the place of Czechoslovakia as a show window in relation to Russia in Europe, first as to the British Empire and second as to the American Empire. But I am in danger of assuming that I may make an impression in what I have to say. I would conclude with an additional word about the Church.

I have attempted to underline certain facts. In common with many observers, I believe that the Church has ceased to have an intellectual interest for people because the Church has lost its curiosity for ideas. Failing to have an interest in ideas the Church has of necessity found an outlet for its energies in social action. This has led to a vast congeries of good works and a vast amount of planning for others and pushing others around. We have developed an amazing aptitude for knowing what the other fellow ought to be doing. If the Church can not return to an interest in ideas, and must therefore express itself exclusively in social action, we ought to insist upon a higher quality of discipline. I have indicated the physician and the nurse as types of special disciplines that are necessary, people who respect the individual and know when to leave him alone, but first of all they know their subject thoroughly. But skill and discipline are of little value unless the practitioners of good works are selected for their integrity and the high quality of their characters.

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[8] George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, III “Reason in Religion” (London, 1906), pp. 106-7.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5.

[11] Frederic Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs* (London, 1911) II, pp. 322-3.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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