

Canadian Society, Past and Present

To commemorate its 50th anniversary, the editors of the conservative magazine Commentary invited a group of American intellectuals to address the following statement and questions:

In the eyes of many observers, the United States, which in 1945 entered upon the postwar era confident in its democratic purposes and serene in the possession of a common culture, is now, fifty years later, moving toward balkanization or even breakdown. Pointing to different sorts of evidence - multiculturalism and/or racial polarization; the effects of unchecked immigration; increased economic and stratification; distrust of authority; the dissolution of shared moral and religious values - such observers conclude in their various ways that our national project is unravelling.

Do you agree with this conclusion, in whole or in part? Has your own thinking changed in recent years on the basis stability of American institutions?

We are now in the midst of a conservative resurgence, social and cultural as much as political, which arguably arose in response to the trends described above. In your view, is it making any headway toward arresting or reversing them? How would you assess its promise, in both the near and the longer term?

A total of 72 politically incorrect people responded. I believe that a similar stocktaking exercise is also worthwhile for Canadians.

As I see it, there is no question that Canada is unravelling. We witness the collapse of the family, the demand for same-sex benefits for homosexuals and lesbians, the high abortion rate, and the increasing demand to legitimize euthanasia. There is a loss of a moral consensus, the weakening of the community, a clamour for group rights, and a passion for equality identified with affirmative action and egalitarianism. Canada has become a nation of consumers, slavishly worshipping all that is comfortable, pleasant, and entertaining. The Bible is considered as irrelevant by today's policy makers and educators. Even in public ethical discourse, the Bible no longer functions as a norm.

The Canadian churches have lost their hold on the population. Church attendance has rapidly declined in recent years. Many who reject the Christian faith think that they do understand its teachings, or at least enough of it to justify its dismissal. But reality is different. Studies confirm that most Canadians know scarcely anything substantial about the Christian faith. It is certainly doubtful that most people are able to explain the foundational Biblical truths of justification by faith, the atonement or the Trinity.

The Canadian Council of Churches enjoys little credibility and is seen by the government as just another lobby group. Membership in liberal churches continues its uninterrupted free-fall. Conservative churches are slowly growing, but their growth is mainly derived from mainline churches and not from the secular unchurched.

What I have described is not a sudden trend. Canada's roots and heritage were Christian. But already in the 19th century it began to drift from its Christian moorings. Liberal higher criticism of Scripture made its impact upon theological schools. The last three decades of the 19th century may well be termed the critical period that led to Protestantism's demise as the dominant influence in Canada. By the end of the 1920s the churches had already lost the battle for the heart and soul of Canada. The historian W.L. Morton notes:

The Canadian churches, as fragmented as the country they served, were bankrupted intellectually and spiritually, not in the decade as such (the 1920s), but more definitely during the decade than before or after.

By the 1950s, Canada had become a thoroughly secular nation. Even Christians began to use secular language as they realized that Christian arguments had ceased to be self-evident to their contemporaries. During the 1960s, Canadian Christendom started to come apart. By act of Parliament, Canada became merely a country "founded upon principles that acknowledged the supremacy of God." But in the public square, God was no longer experienced as a reality. In practice Canadian society no longer had anything to do with the "fear" or "knowledge" of the God revealed in the Bible. Its institutions became largely shaped by "autonomous" reason, science, and technology. Public schools, whose charters called for the formation of "Christian citizens," dropped religious instruction and replaced it with teaching "about" religions, with "values education" or with nothing at all. The death of God in public life led to spiritual emptiness, irrationalism, and boredom. It set in motion the never ending rise of popular culture and cheap entertainment.

In 1968, the flamboyant new prime minister, Pierre E. Trudeau, introduced a major change in political philosophy and style. In 1970 he tabled in the House of Commons the Report of The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (RCSW). *Toronto Star* journalist Anthony Westill called the report

a bomb... packed with more explosive potential than any device manufactured by terrorists.... The history of the problem it describes and seeks to solve is not 100 years of Confederation but the story of mankind.

The RCSW report played a key role in making the situation and status of women a key part of Canada's political agenda. It gave a powerful boost to feminism.

Feminism

The explosion of feminist activity in Canada began in the 1960s. What modern feminists have in mind is the restructuring of society, turning upside down attitudes about the role of men and women. They view social structures as deeply racist, sexist and classist. Many scholars see the contemporary women's movement as one of "the new social movements" which emerged after the Second World War. Radical feminists argue that sex oppression was first and primary and that all other oppressions sprang from it.

Feminism altered the landscape of academic studies by rewriting course curriculum and teaching methodologies from a feminist perspective. Universities began to offer women's studies. Academic and political activity became intertwined. One feminist said: "I was a feminist and then went back to university, for just that reason." The news media became very supportive of feminism, amplifying what was said by feminists for the general public.

Many denominations suffered enormous battles over the ordination of women and the use of inclusive language. Feminist scholar Sara M. Evans, Professor and Chair, Department of History, University of Minnesota, called it

an issue of power, position, and equal opportunity ... a concern about consciousness and cultural change more typical of radical feminism.

Radical feminists advocated "the complete breakdown of the present nuclear family." In her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, published in 1970, Shalumith Firestone called for the elimination of childbirth by natural means, arguing that pregnancy remained an insoluble barrier to women's equality. Feminism contributed to the undermining of the family, the foundational building block of the nation.

Postmodernism

Canadian society is fundamentally changing. It has made a radical break with its Christian past. Richard Gwyn, author of *Nationalism Without Walls*, calls Canada "the world's first postmodern state." For the postmodernists no truth exists; we create it. They celebrate relativism. There are no absolutes. There is no universal truth. Postmodernists don't hold to a common morality or to shared civic virtues. They are deeply concerned about "the structures of oppression," especially as these concern women, lesbians, gays, ethnic and racial groups. According to them, people who claim to know truth and believe in moral absolutes have an ugly history. The latter belief fuels the negative attitude of the media towards the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical/Reformed Christianity. Dr. Stanley J. Grenz, author of *A Primer on Postmodernism*, observes that

The postmodern ethos is especially influential within the emerging generation - among younger adults who take for granted the information age, endless channels of cable programming, and MTV.

Conservative resurgence

Is the conservative resurgence in Canada, as witnessed by the rise of the Reform Party and the 1995 election of a Conservative government in Ontario, arresting or reversing the negative moral trends? I don't believe that they are able to stem the tide. They are fiscal conservatives, driven by the competition motive, unbridled freedom, and other slogans of individualism. They appear to have the idea that because everyone ought to mind his own business, moral and religious judgements should be avoided. The

individual is the focus of authority and the source of truth. Not the sovereignty of God, but the sovereignty of the individual is the standard. The current discussion on "reproductive rights" illustrates the results of this unchecked individualism. Christine Overall, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University, testified to her faith in postmodern individualism when she stated that

in my view, entitlement to choose how many fetuses to gestate, and of what sort, should be seen as a part of the right not to reproduce.

Calvinism

Neither conservatism nor liberalism can rejuvenate our nation. Our nation is divided into two camps - the unbelievers and believers. It seems that the belief systems of the unbelievers has gained complete hold of the public square and will continue to exclude Christian values and norms, regardless how ably and explicitly expressed. But this is not a time for despair.

The root cause of Canada's troubles is not political but spiritual. Because our nation has abandoned God, the breakdown of our society is a logical consequence. Our nation needs to return to God. We need a divine intervention. As the late Dr. Cornelius Van Til wrote: "Unless God sends forth His Spirit, there will be no return, and fearfully rapid will be the descent of the waters." National prosperity and well-being depend on God's action. Yet we do have a responsibility toward our nation. We must work toward a clearly stated Christian response to our times. And I believe that Calvinism is still the best expression of the Christian faith. It teaches us more than justification alone, it exalts the sovereignty of the Triune God over all of the whole cosmos and in all its spheres. I believe that the best hope we can offer our nation is the longstanding Reformed emphasis on obedient service beyond the church community, and the revitalization of the kingdom vision, incorporating Christian education, Christian political action and witness. The church must once again proclaim the gospel in all its fulness, without compromise, call individuals to repentance and strive for the reformation of society according to God's revealed norms in Scripture. And the woeful state of our nation also calls for God's covenant people to nurture compassion for the weak and helpless, concern for the destitute and the needy, and shelter for the strangers and the outcasts.

The Bible plainly teaches that "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is disgrace to any people"(Proverbs 14:34).

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