Quebec and Religion

The study of history has fallen on hard times. Informed observers claim that Canadians know little about their own society and history. Our generation is obsessed with the here and now. But knowledge of history is important. Whether we know our past or not, we are shaped by it. The Russian novelist Boris Pasternak wrote that "a man does not die like a dog in a ditch, he lives in history." As we face the possible breakup of our country, a knowledge of the historical roots of the conflict will enhance political discussion. To change the present and pave the way for the future, we must know what has gone on before and recognize the forces that shaped the current situation. Ignoring history is like travelling without a map or sailing without a chart and compass. If we do not know our own history, we will be ill-equipped to understand the complexities of Canadian politics.

Many Quebeckers believe that Canada is constituted as a country of two founding nations. Therefore, a majority vote within either of these two "peoples" is sufficient for separation. Quebec francophones have never accepted the multicultural or "mosaic" view of Canada, either in principle or in practice. They resent its implications of equal status for all minority cultures. They feel vastly overpowered by the surrounding North American population and worry that their unique French culture will either become diluted or disappear all together. They want to survive as a distinct people and fear that Confederation may not be the best means of ensuring this survival. Many separatists, therefore, distinguish Quebecois (citizens of Quebec) from "Canadians" (citizens of the other provinces and territories).

To keep Quebec within the Confederation, federalists hammer on the economic consequences of separation. They are involved with the separatists in a fight to the finish. The stakes are high. But the economic arguments won't persuade separatists who believe that they are at the point of winning.

Historical background

From 1663 onwards, sparsely populated Quebec developed into a French colony dominated by French-style authoritarianism and the Roman Catholic Church. The British conquest, in 1759, changed the course of its history and social development, and continues to impact political thought. More than 200 years later separatists still view their status as the domination of the Quebec nation by a British colonial master. Past and current concessions to Quebec have not changed their conviction that they live in a colonized and underdeveloped country. They think of themselves as victims of Anglo-Saxon oppression. Historian Marcel Rioux, advocate of Quebec independence, complains that in every region of affluent Canada, Quebeckers are "the least prosperous, the most unemployed, and yet they become more anglicized every day! In their own country, they are the lumpenproletariat! Federalists insist that Confederation is the good life, independence the blackest misery, but we wonder if the people of Quebec can sink any lower. They do not have much to lose."

The 1763 Treaty of Paris confirmed the transfer of Canada to the British crown. The stated intention of British colonial policy was the assimilation of French Canadians to English language, culture, laws and the Church of England. However, this policy was quickly abandoned. Francophone Quebecois were determined not to be slowly smoothed out of existence. They fiercely resisted the attempted assimilation. The Quebec Act of 1774 guaranteed to French Canadians the French civil law and the traditional seigneurial system of landholding, as well as bestowing a number of rights and privileges upon the Roman Catholic Church. It was given clear title to its hereditary land.

The Roman Catholic Church

As a whole, the Roman Catholic Church remained faithful to the British crown. In 1775, the rebellious colonies (later to become the United States) launched an attack on Quebec. Most Quebecois, guided by Bishop Briand, supported the British. The war of 1812 was another occasion for the Quebecois to show their loyalty to the British crown. This time it was Joseph-Octave Plessis, Bishop of Quebec, who galvanized his priests and the entire apparatus of the Church to support the British cause. And Plessis cleverly used his newfound influence with the British by expanding the administration of the Catholic Church in all of Canada.

The Catholic Church gave Quebec a uniform religious character. It was extremely traditional. Monseigneur Laval, who dominated religious life in Quebec from 1659 to 1684, had the greatest influence on the development of its religious and national character. He managed to have the Bishop of Quebec directly appointed by, and subordinate to, the Holy See in Rome. Ever since, French Canada remained the stronghold of clericalism. The clergy tended to subordinate the State to the Church.

The parish priest not only became the undisputed head of his parish, but he also played a vital part in every aspect of community life. Not a single transaction took place in the parish without consulting the priest. He drew up wills, drafted deeds of gifts, and looked after documents placed in his care. The parish priest was also the key stone of the educational system. His influence outstripped all others, social and political. French was the language of instruction. Much emphasis was placed on preparing pupils for their first Communion. One later objective was to make rural life attractive to forestall emigration to the cities. The clergy came to see urban life as the erosion of faith. Secondary education prepared for study for the liberal professions in colleges classiques. French language and literature were emphasized. As a result, the educational system strengthened the francophone concept of a distinct society within Canada. It shaped the morals, religious convictions and the cultural outlook of a large part of Quebec's population.

The essence of Quebec's heritage is thus the Catholic faith, large families, the parish, the French language, rural living, and historical development distinct from the rest of Canada.

The history of Quebec's Protestantism

The Calvinists or Huguenots from France had settlers in Quebec at the very beginning of its history. A Huguenot, Sieur de Monts, was closely associated with Samuel de Champlain both at Port Royal and Quebec. Other Huguenots also played a prominent role in early French colonies. Their immigration to Canada was brought to an end by Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642), the chief minister of France during the reign of Louis XIII. He introduced the policy that none but French Roman Catholics were allowed to settle in New France, a policy that became even more rigid under Louis XIV. The Huguenots were banished. Historian H. H. Walsh observed that if the French Calvinists had been allowed to remain, Quebec's cultural development would have been strikingly similar to that of New England.

After the British conquest, Quebec became a mission field for Protestants. They sought to win French Roman Catholics, and with partial success. In the 1830s, Madame Henrietta Feller came to the province from Switzerland. She began a mission work in Grande-Ligne district. By 1848 the mission had 18 missionaries at work and nearly 200 members in mission stations. For years, the Grand-Ligne Mission was the dominant force in evangelical work in Quebec. By 1858, a French-Canadian Reformed Church with ten congregations had been established. It dissolved eighteen years later and its members were absorbed by other Protestant denominations. Presbyterians also had a major home mission work in Quebec. In 1863 they had gained a famous convert in Father Charles Chinique, a former Roman Catholic priest, renowned preacher and temperance worker since 1845. In 1875 he was placed in Craig Street Church, Montreal, where his French services soon attracted overflow crowds of upwards of 800 people.

Protestant and Roman Catholic conflicts

French ultramontanist Roman Catholicism adopted a fiercely defensive attitude towards the influences of Protestantism. It gave Quebec a strong sense of mission and destiny. The Catholic hierarchy led the fight to safeguard Quebec's national consciousness. Protestantism was seen, therefore, not only as a threat to the religious character of Quebec but also to its national identity. It has been said that to be French and Catholic is normal, to be English and Protestant is permissible, but to be French and a Protestant is heresy. Francophone Quebeckers who turned Protestant were branded as traitors and apostates. In the words of one nineteenth century nationalist:

> Every nation must fulfill its own destiny, as set by Providence. It must understand its mission fully and strive constantly towards the goal . . . (The goal) Divine Providence entrusted to French Canadians is basically religious in nature: it is, namely to convert the unfortunate infidel population to Catholicism, and to expand the Kingdom of God by developing a predominantly Catholic nationality.

Until the 1960s, evangelical outreach faced extreme obstacles. For example, in 1939 the Baptists commenced a radio broadcast - one half English and one half French. But Roman Catholic pressure brought a close to the broadcasts in 1942. In 1953, Quebec's

censorship board banned the film *Martin Luther*. And I recall evangelical Baptist missionaries who worked in Quebec, telling in chapel at Central Baptist Seminary, Toronto, about the persecution they had suffered during the Duplessis regime, in office from 1936 to 1939 and from 1944 to 1960. In 1947, Pastor Murray Heron and his associates were jailed several times for preaching the Gospel in French on the streets of Rouyn-Noranda.

Mission Field Quebec

The forces of change came with the Quiet Revolution in 1960. Education was largely removed from the control of the Roman Catholic Church. One no longer had to be a practising Catholic in order to be a loyal Quebecker. And the Vatican II Council introduced a more cordial tone in Protestant-Roman Catholic relations. The Quiet Revolution led to a rapid secularization of Quebec. The stress was now on linguistic and cultural distinction rather than on Quebec's Catholic heritage. Almost overnight the stable synthesis of Catholic, French, rural, conservative and isolationist values had disappeared. Historian Mark Noll notes that

> Earlier weaknesses in the Church's response to modern intellectual and social arrangements as well as the powerful inroads after World War II of market forces help to account for Quebec's rapid change. But fully satisfactory explanations for this extraordinary - and extraordinarily rapid - revolution have yet to be published.

Since the 1970s, francophone evangelical congregations have doubled in number. Mennonites, the Christian Missionary Alliance, and the Associated Gospel have begun ministries in Quebec. The French Baptist congregations are again flourishing. And, although small in number, the Église Réforméé has an effective ministry.

A knowledge of Quebec's religious history is essential for understanding the background of Quebec separatists' aspirations. It also reminds Calvinists of their responsibility towards Quebec. The Huguenots, the French Calvinists, were unable to bring the Gospel to Quebec. With the new openness towards the Gospel since the Quiet Revolution, Calvinists have now a great opportunity, by the grace of God, to be the salt and the light in a vastly secularized province.

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