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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Asking Questions of the Canadian Past

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ANYONE who has attempted to teach the history of the Church in Canada is painfully aware of the limitations of Canadian historiography. The student of English or Scottish Church history has at hand an extensive bibliography, whereas the literature dealing with the Canadian past is scanty and leaves out of its range many important aspects of the subject. Few of the Canadian books are equal in quality to standard histories of European Churches. Most serious of all, the student who comes to Canadian Church history from the investigation of older regions senses at once what can only be called a diminution of scale. He seems to be moving from significant history to a less significant story.

The problem is not limited to ecclesiastical history but affects the writing of secular Canadian history as well. Most books of Canadian history, especially textbooks of Canadian history, fail somehow to engage the mind or to grip the imagination. Fortunately the achievements of writers like Dr. A. R. M. Lower and Dr. Donald G. Creighton give hope for the future.

Most of the defects of Canadian historical writing can be traced to the lack of two important qualities. One of these is a sense of magnitude. We seem to be reading not about world-shaking movements or controversies but about back fence gossip or line fence quarrels. The other is a sense of relevance. We can appreciate much more readily our debt to Magna Carta than our involvement in the affairs of colonial governors or the politics of the Double Shuffle.

But why do we feel this lack of magnitude and relevance? Is it because the incidents of Canadian history are not large enough or important enough to us? To some extent, no doubt, our story leaves us at a disadvantage. None of the great moments of history—with the possible exception of Church union—has occurred in Canada. Likewise the events and movements that have been most influential in shaping our secular and our ecclesiastical history have taken place elsewhere. We should be left with more clues about our heritage if we knew only the history of Europe than if we knew only the history of Canada. Nevertheless, the magnitude and relevance of our story justify better history than we have so far written. Our past has qualities of the heroic that we have not fully exploited. We have been shaped by that past, too, in greater measure than our historians have yet indicated.

Is the problem, then, the immaturity of our scholarship? To some extent, yes. In the field of history, secular as well as religious, we are only beginning to find ourselves. The major problem is not, however, lack of

ability. One senses that competent men are attempting to deal with a mass of material that continues to elude them. Some of our own scholars have done much better work when they have left Canadian history for research in other fields.

Neither refractory material nor incompetent investigators are primarily responsible for the present unsatisfactory state of Canadian historiography. Our real trouble is that we have not made up our minds what to look for. R. G. Collingwood insisted that scientific history is written by putting questions to the past.

Every step in the argument depends on asking a question. The question is the charge of gas, exploded in the cylinder-head, which is the motive force of every piston-stroke.¹

In writing the story of the Canadian Church we have not yet reached maturity because we are still casting about for the right questions to ask. The questions that we have asked hitherto have not, except in rare cases, been of sufficient magnitude and relevance. Inevitably, our history has appeared dull and of only secondary importance.

Greater attention to historical technique will help us towards maturity. Collingwood pointed out that the methods of the historian bear a closer resemblance to those of the detective, seeking to draw inferences from clues, than to those of the compiler of a scrapbook, assembling a bulk of material in a more or less orderly fashion. The compiler serves a valuable purpose, bringing together much of the raw material of history. The concern of the real historian, however, is with the solution of problems of human behaviour rather than with the arrangement of archival material. Much that has passed for history in Canada consists of what Collingwood called "scissors and paste" work, work valuable and necessary but still pre-historical. We are at a stage now when we ought to be asking historical questions and solving historical problems.

But what questions shall we ask? The historian is unlimited in the range of the questions that he can put to the past, provided that he asks human questions. Nevertheless, the application of certain criteria to Canadian Church history may lead us to problems that are likely to be productive of interesting and significant solutions.

First, we must seek out problems that are of real weight. A great deal of the history that we have written to date has dealt with such questions as, "Who was the first minister of *x* congregation, and when did he arrive?" Gregg's monumental *History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* consists largely of such items of ecclesiastical genealogy. We owe a great debt to Gregg and to others like him. Most of the writers of his era dealt honestly with the personalities about whom they wrote and furnished us with information that we could ill afford to be without. Until we ask questions larger than theirs, however, we cannot hope that Canadian Church history will escape the dullness of which it has so often been accused.

Similarly, we must approach problems with serious intent. We are all familiar with the "filial piety" type of book about the past, often authorized by a Church board, rich in inspirational value but without pretensions to historical judgment. It would be idle to condemn these books as history, for their purpose is not historical. There is a danger, however, that in drawing inspiration from the deeds of our ancestors we may fail to do justice to the complexity of their personalities. One has only to compare Mrs. Stephenson's *One Hundred Years of Methodist Missions* with Alexander Sutherland's *Methodism in Canada*, from which much of her information is drawn, to see how the portraits of the pioneers can be retouched and an unreal perfection read into the story. We cannot hope that the past will come alive until we treat our forefathers with the honesty of purpose that we instinctively feel to be due to a Luther or a Calvin.

Secondly, we should be on the look-out for problems that are relevant to the life of the twentieth century Canadian Church. There is, indeed, a danger in using the past to explain the present. The true historian studies past human actions for their own inherent interest, and not only because they throw light on our own situation. In examining historical material with a view to discovering how we have come to be as we are, we are apt to treat our ancestors as if they were important merely because they were our ancestors. This is poor theology, and poor historiography. Nevertheless, the past takes on a new dimension when it is seen to be our past. It becomes excitingly new and contemporary.

Much of Canadian Church history, unfortunately, has not been shown to stand in close relation to us in our situation. Much has been written about the heroism, the piety and even the foolishness of our fathers in the faith, but when we seek out the roots of our traditions we find ourselves confronted with strange gaps in the record. What difficulties we meet, for example, when we seek to learn how our ancestors reacted to situations that still confront us today! We know what rivers they crossed and how many services they held on a Sunday, but what order of service did they use and what did they do when they entered a Sabbath School class? With a few honourable exceptions, our historians have not troubled to tell us about such matters. But what life would be breathed into Canadian Church history by a little elementary information about activities of universal concern!

Thirdly, we should do well to look for problems that can only be solved from Canadian sources or that can best be solved from Canadian sources. The Canadian historian is under no obligation to devote himself to Canadian themes. Anyone who does wish to write Canadian Church history, however, must develop an awareness of the Canadian tradition, especially as it differs from other traditions.

Chief among the pitfalls that await the would-be author of Canadian history is the difficulty of differentiating the fields in which there is a distinctively Canadian approach from those in which we have accepted

our traditions almost ready made. Some studies have proved disappointing because they have only set in a Canadian frame a picture already familiar to us in a British or American setting. Studies of the development of theological or social thought or of changes in practical Church methods generally fall into this class. The fact is that in these fields we have very largely accepted the answers that others have given and that there is in them, therefore, no separate Canadian story. No doubt some such studies must be made, if only to reach negative conclusions, but they are unlikely to unearth results excitingly new.

Another form of this difficulty is the subtle temptation to write into Canadian Church history assumptions derived from the study of other countries. We read a statement about the American Church in a certain period, and assume that it must also be true of the Canadian Church in the corresponding epoch. We are the more easily deceived because the two situations are so alike that we are bound to discover *some* evidence to support our assumptions. Unfortunately we may easily be led to overlook differences that are as striking as the similarities and sometimes even more significant. Few serious writers of Canadian Church history have not at some time succumbed to this danger.

The analogy of the American frontier has been particularly misleading to Canadian writers. American historians have discovered that study of the unique conditions of life on the rural frontier sheds light on many aspects of American Church history. Why not, Canadian historians have rightly reasoned, look for similar influences on Canadian Church life? It is temptingly easy to take another step, and to assume that deductions about American churchmanship made from studies of the American frontier can be applied quite simply to Canada. Some writers have surprised us by succumbing to this fallacy. S. D. Clark's excellent work, *Church and Sect in Canada*, is deprived of some of its value by the author's apparent determination to read out of Canadian evidence conclusions suggested by studies elsewhere. The evidence is there, all right, for the Canadian scene has always exhibited close parallels to the United States, but absorption with piety of the American frontier type seems to have blinded Mr. Clark to specifically Canadian aspects of churchmanship. How else explain the unreliability on broader issues betrayed in this "whopper": "Union of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches in 1925 was a reflection of the growing dominance of secular values associated with Politics and Big Business"²?

Even Dr. Lower, who usually succeeds in writing the Canadian story from within, has succumbed at times to the tempting American analogy. Of the frontier period he writes: "The only denomination that had sprung up on the spot, in answer to the needs of the people, was the Methodist."³ He cannot mean that Methodism spontaneously appeared on the Canadian frontier, which would be a palpable absurdity. He must mean that it took on a new form on the American frontier, which is something quite differ-

ent. The fact is that, during the period in which Methodism appeared in force, Upper Canada was little more than an extension of upper New York. The countryside was wide open to American influence, and the itinerant preachers who took advantage of the opportunity thought of themselves simply as Americans. Only when Canada began to take shape did a typically Canadian denominational pattern begin to emerge, and that was not the pattern of the American frontier. Over the long years of Canadian history the denominations that gained most consistently in numbers were the Roman Catholic, the Anglican and the Presbyterian. Despite Dr. Lower, these denominations were all as Canadian as the Methodists.

Despite suggestive analogies with other countries, the Canadian Church has its own story and its own heritage. Recognition of this uniqueness need be inspired by no sentiments of Canadian nationalism. It is, rather, required by historical realism. No one can hope to write good Canadian Church history who has not succeeded in getting inside the Canadian situation and writing about it from within.

The suggested criteria of magnitude, relevance, and relation to what Malcolm Ross has described as "our sense of identity" as Canadians, are not intended to limit the Canadian historian in his search for problems to solve. Their purpose is to suggest to Canadian historical writers certain problems whose solution would furnish worthy themes. Several such problems come readily to mind.

1. *The influence of religious issues on the whole Canadian political tradition.* In a small Nova Scotian town almost all the members of one Presbyterian Church vote Liberal, whereas the majority of the members of the other vote Conservative. To those who know anything of the story of the quarrels of the Antiburghers and the Kirk this correlation of religion and politics will not be surprising, and most politicians could tell you a good deal about it too. From few books on Canadian history, however, would one gather to what extent our political parties have crystallized upon lines of cleavage originally ecclesiastical. No one wishes to reopen old sectarian quarrels, but a dispassionate study of the influence of the Churches upon political life would tell us much about ourselves and would, at the very least, show how impossible it is to understand Canada without knowing something of the religion of her people. Many textbooks of Canadian history have been written in apparent ignorance of this connection.

2. *The closely allied problem of Church and state in Canada.* Since our religion and our politics have so frequently affected each other we Canadians have obviously had to make certain decisions, conscious or unconscious, about the manner in which the two ought to be related. The precise balance has varied so much from province to province that no single answer could possibly be given to the question, "What is the Canadian tradition concerning the relations of Church and state?" Nevertheless, we have a pattern that is not quite like anyone else's. We have no established Church like those found in England or Scotland. On the other hand, our tradition

is not aptly described by the phrase, "the separation of Church and state," so widely used in the United States. After all, what minister (at least outside British Columbia) has not preached regularly in country schoolhouses as a matter not of courtesy but of course? Whatever the opinions of most of us about the relations of Church and state, we regularly assume an intimacy of connection that belies a strict theory of separation.⁴ There is a wide field for someone who will sort out our traditions in this area and ask how we came to get them. Such a study will have obvious relevance to the current issue of religion in the public schools.

3. *The development of a Canadian attitude to denominations.* In this field, too, we are not quite like others. We have not inherited the English tradition that there is one Church and all others are dissenters; indeed, Canadians rejected this tradition with some heat. We have not, however, accepted all denominations as equal, sovereign and self-sufficient Churches with the readiness that was formerly normal in the United States. It is difficult to define the difference between Canadian and American attitudes to denominationalism, but one senses it whenever one crosses the border. The difference is well exemplified in the university setting, where Americans naturally gravitate to denominational groups and Canadians to inter-denominational fellowships. Canadian impatience with denominational cleavages goes back a long time. Students of Canadian Church history are all aware that unions of related groups in Canada have commonly preceded unions of the same groups elsewhere. But why? This subject suggests questions that might fruitfully be put to the Canadian past.

4. *Distinctive Canadian features in church life.* A keen observer will have no difficulty in detecting in many aspects of our Church life elements that are distinctively Canadian or have a distinctively Canadian flavour. In non-liturgical Churches this is certainly true of worship. The atmosphere of Canadian worship is somehow not that of English or Scottish or American worship. Several students are interested in this line of research now. Other areas offer similar possibilities. The other day, for example, a friend suggested an investigation of the place of theological education in the Canadian Churches. When Thomas McCulloch modelled his seminar on the Log Colleges of American Presbyterianism and on the University of Edinburgh he began an equivocal tradition that is distinctly Canadian, and so familiar that we tend to take it for granted. An analysis of our Canadian churchmanship should suggest many other subjects for research.

The student of Canadian Church history should have no difficulty in finding a subject. We are only beginning to formulate the questions that will enable us to read the secrets of our past. A student who attempts one of the problems suggested here or a similar problem will, however, be confronted immediately with one formidable obstacle. He will find that many of the documents he needs are unavailable, or have been lost, or have been destroyed. To some extent this deficiency is due to carelessness about preserving archival material. To an even greater extent, however, it stems

from a limited view of what archival material includes. We have been moderately good about preserving official Church records and some biographical material. But who has kept sample orders of service, or Sunday School lessons? A broader conception of Church history implies a broader view of Canadian archives.

As we ask the proper questions and carefully seek out the documents that will supply the answers, we may expect the gradual growth of Canadian Church history to maturity. The process will be slow, for only as one question is asked will the next be revealed. Already, however, there are promising signs of an approach to the past that will furnish us not only information about our ancestors but answers that are considerable enough, relevant enough and distinctive enough to make mature and exciting history.

NOTES

1. *The Idea of History*, p. 273.
2. P. 431. Capitalization his.
3. *Colony to Nation*, p. 194.
4. "In the United States the Protestant approach is nearly always from the point of view of the separation of church and state. In Canada it is almost always from the point of view of the cooperation of the church and state." *Religious Instruction in the Schools of Canada*, Information Service of National Council of Churches, Oct. 20, 1951.