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Church History: Has it a Future in Canada?

During the past decade the discipline of church history in Canada has begun to manifest two distinct changes in emphasis. Whereas in previous generations church history has been very largely the preserve of seminarians and placed its main stress on institutional history and on biography of a hagiographic hue, it has in recent years received increasing attention from secular historians and social scientists whose interests have broadened the range of investigation to the point where today the field may more properly be described as religious history.

While these developments might appear to augur a richer and more vital future for the discipline, a countervailing force seems to be threatening its very existence, not merely as a distinct, identifiable, and legitimate area of academic study, but perhaps even as a curricular subject. In the currently popular revolt against institutional religion, the church's history and the study of that history are anathematized with that most damning adjective, 'irrelevant.'

To judge from the frequently expressed reminiscences of some seminary graduates (of all generations!) church history was never the high spot of excitement during their college days. Yet among many of the 'working clergy' there appears to be a lingering acceptance of the discipline as something which, if not justificatory of the church's existence and their own calling, at least provides a veneer of respectability to a theological curriculum, much in the manner that Greek and Hebrew are viewed as exotic but inevitable hurdles on the road to a B.D. — disciplines which, once mastered sufficiently to obtain a passing mark, may then be forgotten because they are not 'relevant' to a 'with-it' church in a 'with-it' world. Perhaps church history is dull. Perhaps its professors, like their secular counterparts, have failed to make the subject 'a meaningful experience.' Courses in urban issues, social dynamics, or community counselling, have an admitted glamour that the investiture controversy or the Donatist heresy lack. 'Anything but history,' as Sir Robert Walpole exclaimed. But the present challenge to church history in Canada takes other forms than the eternal complaint about a 'dry-as-dust' discipline.

Church history or religious history, and all such appurtenances as archival programmes, research funds, and publication, rank low in the priorities of church expenditure. Furthermore, despite the increasing involvement of some secular historians in religious history, few if any of them have the requisite background in theology, while the budding 'clerical' historian has too seldom been exposed to the historical discipline in its secular setting. And, if these chasms can be bridged, there remains the simple fact that church history in Canada is not attracting enough recruits to replace its losses on the field of

battle. Few graduating seminarians pursue further studies in the discipline – so few that future Canadian faculty requirements might well have to be met entirely from abroad if scholarship of international standards is to be maintained. In its ten years of life the Canadian Society of Church History has declined in numbers of members, and both the Anglican and Roman Catholic historical societies are encountering similar problems. If church history is to survive in Canada, and if it is to survive as something more than an aberrant scion of sociology or anthropology, it must assume a new militancy and acquire vocal acolytes.

A church that does not study its history is an amnesiac church.

J.S.M.