

Beyond the Half-Way House: Evangelicalism and the Shaping of English Canadian Culture

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Review Essays/Notes critiques

Beyond the Half-Way House: Evangelicalism and the Shaping of English Canadian Culture

SINCE 1970, THE HISTORICAL ENTERPRISE IN English Canada has been the scene of a conflict between the defenders of the traditional link between historical writing and the definition of national character and the advocates of "the new social history", who have aggressively asserted the existence and historical value of particular local, class, gender, ethnic, regional and occupational identities.¹ Yet despite their at times sharp polemical differences, the old national history and the new social history were united in marginalizing the religious experience and in failing to recognize its creative role in shaping cultural traditions, social forms, and political ideologies. At best, historians conceded, religion existed as a mere reflection of changes in social structure or political climate, or as a "pre-modern" theological mental framework, inevitably destined to wither away with the emergence of a secular culture, the function of industrialization and urbanization. At worst, religion was a reactionary force which supplied ideological legitimation for the political and economic status quo, misleading and fragmenting movements for social and political change.²

The place of religious history in Canadian historiography stands in sharp contrast to the considerable attention paid to religion in the United States. There, historians have recognized religion as central to the major episodes and

- 1 For a discussion of the interplay of these two emphases of Canadian historical writing, see the survey by Carl Berger, "Tradition and the New History", in *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900* (2nd ed., Toronto, 1986).
- 2 See, for example, Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History*. Few of the older "nationalist" historians showed any particular interest in relating the religious experience to the definition of national character. The belief that religion, in the form of "theology", was doomed to decline in the face of secular modes of thought has proved an attractive metaphor to Canadian intellectual historians. See, for example, A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal, 1979), for a particularly compelling example of this genre. Historians of the working-class, inspired by the Marxist left, have proven particularly blinkered by Marx's notion of religion as a form of "false consciousness". Religion figures not at all in Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, 1979), and functions as a force which divided ethnic communities of workers in Greg Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto, 1980). Recent histories inspired by a feminist perspective have similarly downplayed the role of religion as a factor in shaping the definition of women's roles. See, for example, Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto, 1983), which neglects the essential precondition of women's involvement in suffrage movements, an earlier phase of activity in voluntary movements sponsored by the Protestant churches. Religion also plays little role in Veronica Strong-Boag's *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto, 1988).

processes which shaped the American experience: the formation of colonial societies, particularly in Puritan New England; the cultural changes of the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century, which were inspired by religious revivalism; the American Revolution; and the great age of “reform”, which sought to “perfect” both individual and society by drawing upon a series of religious revivals.³ American historians have shown little reticence in explaining not only how the changing religious experience provided much of the ideological underpinning of the American “middle class” in the early decades of the 19th century, but also how Protestant religion, in both the formal sense and in terms of the cultural values it promoted, contributed to an ongoing process of institutional and state formation. While it may be argued that the neglect of religion on the part of English Canadian historians reflects the lack of exciting “events” and “episodes” associated with the making of national character and traditions, there remains a pervasive sense among historians that Protestant religion represents an anti-modern, reactionary mentality which was doomed to be superseded by the “modern” temper. This effectively removes the religious experience from any meaningful historical interaction with the wider culture and society, and constitutes the principal stumbling-block to the recognition of the central importance of religion in any historical account of English Canadian society and culture.

It is significant that when religion did move from the margin to the mainstream of historical concern, it did so only at its moment of crisis and decline. Under the impact of industrial capitalism, Protestant religious leaders, by stressing the possibility of the achievement of the Kingdom of God on earth, asserted a more activist role for their churches and, in the process, began subtly to replace theological explanations of man and society by secular currents of thought and action. In *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1928* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973), historian Richard Allen identified Protestant religious traditions, in the guise of the “social gospel”, as the principal intellectual underpinning of the great wave of reform which sought to mitigate Canada’s encounter with industrial capitalism between 1890 and 1930. Despite his belief that the movement had secularizing implications, Allen’s account of the influence of the “social gospel” in Canadian society and politics was an optimistic one. The movement failed to achieve the building of the Kingdom of God on earth, but it succeeded in forging “links between proposed reforms and the religious heritage of the nation, in the process endowing reform with an authority it could not otherwise command” (p. 3). Although, in Allen’s estimation, the social gospel encouraged the development of a secular society, Protestant religion, he maintained, played a key role in shaping the language and agenda of

3 This interpretation appears most consistently in William McLoughlin’s synthetic work, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978).

a broad coalition of “progressives”, and was the key element in the creation of an indigenous tradition of democratic socialism (pp. 356, 350).

Intent on drawing links between Canada’s Protestant religious heritage and the reform impulse, *The Social Passion* also provided Canadian historians with a compelling metaphor. With its description of the social gospel as a sort of mid-way point, or “half-way” house between evangelical orthodoxy and secular ideologies deemed “desirable”, “forward-looking” and “progressive”, Allen’s work constructed a powerful teleology which explained the emergence of “modern” Canada by linking ideology and social action. Indeed, according to the thesis advanced by Allen, the English Canadian “mentality” moved through three stages in the years between 1880 and 1930.⁴ In the years before industrialization and urbanization, culture and society in English Canada were heavily influenced by evangelical orthodoxy, which stressed revivalism, personal sin and a strong sense of individual responsibility.

By the 1890s, however, a new emphasis was becoming evident. Many religious leaders and members of the professional middle classes, worried by the abuses of early industrial capitalism, moved the churches to a more activist role in society, and articulated the “social gospel”. Though complex, this outlook drew upon the intense priority placed on redemption by the old evangelism, and allied it with forms of “organic”, collectivist thought encouraged by the rise of new forms of evolutionary thought, and philosophical idealism.⁵ As appropriate to an intermediate stage of development, the “social gospel” emphasized the worldly role of the churches in the improvement of society, and began to question the traditional categories of individual sin and redemption. By 1914, three distinct tendencies had emerged. “Conservatives”, who remained close to the traditional evangelicalism, stressed personal-ethical issues such as temperance, and emphasized legislative reform. A smaller group of “radicals” had almost completely discarded the evangelical heritage, positing that sin was a social phenomenon, and that no individual regeneration could take place until industrial capitalism had been drastically transformed. Between these two groups lay an ill-defined body of

- 4 The metaphor of “Evangelical Orthodoxy” - “Social Gospel” - “Secular Society” has become the standard interpretation of the reform tradition in English Canada. See, for example, the recent survey of the inter-war years by J.H. Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto, 1986); and McKillop’s *A Disciplined Intelligence*, which relies heavily on Allen’s categories. The metaphor appears even in a recent account of the rise of the discipline of sociology in English Canada. See Marlene Shore, *The Science of Social Redemption: McGill, the Chicago School, and the Origins of Social Research in Canada* (Toronto, 1987). One cannot help but be reminded of Auguste Comte’s highly imaginative account of human progress from “Theology” to “Metaphysics” to “Sociology”.
- 5 Nancy J. Christie, “The Cosmology of New Societies: Darwinian Thought and the Writing of History in English Canada and Australia, 1880-1958,” Ph.D. Thesis, Sydney University, 1987, has examined the convergence between forms of evolutionary thought and interpretations of human society.

“progressives”, who sought to mediate the tensions by promoting “a broad ameliorative programme of reform”.⁶ In the final stage, which occurred at some point between 1920 and 1940, “the social gospel” became fractured and diffused, shading into secular reform ideologies, such as democratic socialism, or into forms of social science, which had largely discarded their theological baggage. Thus was the secular society of 20th-century Canada created.

Perhaps the central inadequacy of Allen’s definition of the “social gospel” and its role in English Canadian culture was its “whiggish” bias. *The Social Passion*’s point of departure was not the intellectual antecedents of social Christianity,⁷ but, rather, the mid-20th-century secular culture it had spawned. In Allen’s estimation, the “social gospel” was the key influence in the creation of the most desirable features of modern Canadian life, especially the emergence of an indigenous tradition of democratic socialism in the 1930s, and the commitment of the “secular” social sciences to ameliorative reform of capitalist society. This “reading backwards”, while ostensibly conceding religion a role in the emergence of modern English Canada, in fact reveals less about the impact of religion than it does about the discomfort of the modern academic mind when confronted with cultural traditions at variance with the modern social science outlook. Religious ideas and experiences are ultimately denied integrity and coherence because they are abstracted from their historical context and enlisted in the service of a “progressivist” myth of social and intellectual change.

In studying the relationship between religion and society, it is difficult to avoid the pressure to “read backwards”. Ramsay Cook’s important study, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985), does not fully resist the temptation to view the 19th-century religious experience in relation to the 20th-century mind-set. Cook’s point of departure, like Allen’s, is the great “secularization” of English Canadian thought and culture which occurred between 1890 and 1930 (p. 5), but he is far less optimistic concerning the eventual outcome. Where Allen saw the “social gospel” as affirming the relevance of religion by enshrining the reformist heritage of Protestantism in secular social movements, Cook characterized the efforts of clergymen to come to terms with industrial society as largely futile; Christianity, in his estimation, became “less rather than more relevant” (p. 6). In

6 *The Social Passion*, p. 17. Allen’s typology, it should be noted, is based upon American analyses of the “social gospel”.

7 Indeed, it is curious that Allen devoted so little attention to the emergence of the “social gospel” from its evangelical roots. Although Allen’s introduction certainly acknowledges that these exist, there is no analysis of the pre-1890 evangelical contribution to the discussion of social problems, nor is the reader informed as to how Canadian churchmen saw their society functioning. More significantly, there is a complete lack of discussion of how the churches assimilated the new currents of social thought to their theology in order to formulate the “social gospel”. One gets the sense that, Athena-like, the social gospel simply burst upon the Canadian cultural scene in the 1890s.

contrast to Allen, Cook maintained that the new social activism of the churches which emerged after 1890 flowed not from a sense of optimism, but from a perception of intellectual weakness and inadequacy in the face of the challenge to Christian doctrine posed by evolutionary thought and the higher criticism of the Bible. In an effort to “come to terms” with modern thought, clergymen embarked upon a slippery slope by attempting to salvage Christianity by transforming it into an essentially social religion, a process in which “the orthodox Christian preoccupation with man’s salvation was gradually replaced by a concern for social salvation”. This new union of sacred and secular, in Cook’s estimation, was followed by “the substitution of theology, the science of religion, with sociology, the science of society”, the essential precondition for the emergence of a modern, secular mind-set (p. 4).

It is, however, Cook’s analysis of the intellectual and cultural climate between 1860 and 1890, in which the social gospel was defined, which constitutes the central contribution of *The Regenerators*. During these three decades, Protestant leaders were confronted with “Darwinism”, which, through the mechanism of evolution divorced from divine intervention in nature, posited secular explanations of human origins and the progress of societies at variance with those of “evangelical orthodoxy”, whose theological outlook was derived from the Bible. Out of this encounter there emerged three tendencies in Protestant ranks. First, “conservatives”, like Principal William Dawson of McGill and Rev. William MacLaren of Knox College, Toronto, viewed “Darwinism” as a species of atheism directly subversive of Christianity. Further, these men believed that evolution’s denial of God’s place in the natural order undermined his role in the social order and promised social chaos. Social conservatism, Cook argues, “went hand in hand with scientific conservatism, and both were founded on religious conservatism” (p. 12).

A second, and somewhat larger group of “liberals”, like Principal Grant of Queen’s University, Rev. E.H. Dewart of *The Christian Guardian* and the philosophers George Paxton Young and John Watson, urged accommodation between Christian theology and some form of evolutionary thought. Through what Cook maintains was a flawed understanding of “Darwinism” and its implications, these men redefined religion as “character” rather than “doctrine”, assimilated the tenets of an optimistic, evolutionary philosophical idealism and forged an activist, socially-conscious Christianity. This they did in the belief that attention to “the practical tasks of social regeneration” could become “a substitute for the formidable labour of reformulating theological doctrine” (p. 229). By this means, clergymen hoped to avoid the troubling implications of evolutionary science. This accommodation between Christianity and evolution, which Cook terms “theological liberalism”, provided the intellectual rationale for the “social gospel”, but it rested upon flimsy intellectual premises. By surrendering theology, the other-worldly message of personal redemption characteristic of the old-time

evangelism, Protestant clergymen effectively rendered their own role, and, indeed, religion itself, irrelevant in modern Canadian society.⁸

Like *The Social Passion*, *The Regenerators* rests upon the definition of a three-fold spectrum of theological “parties” within the churches. While “conservatives” bewailed the impact of Darwin, and “liberals” strove to orient the churches towards social action, “radicals”, a colourful, loose coalition of secularists, positivists, single-taxers, spiritualists and feminists pointed out more prophetically the shape of things to come. The common denominator of their efforts was, in fact, a religious quest, for they strove to appropriate and “liberate” the essential element of the Protestant heritage, the ethical message of Christianity, from the theological systems of the mainstream churches. Their critique of the churches, Cook argues, was founded upon their belief that these institutions sanctioned the selfishness characteristic of capitalist political economy (pp. 183, 163, 122). Their common goal was expressed in religious language, and emphasized human perfectibility, the union of the sacred and the secular, and the progressive evolution of mind and society (p. 73). Underneath this rhetoric, however, lurked clearly secularizing implications. Spiritualism, with which many flirted, stressed “instant gratification”, and traditional notions of “regeneration”, once directed to an other-worldly realm, were moved to an “earthly paradise”, a “regenerated” society characterized by a rejection of the “selfishness” of modern capitalism, and the application of Christian ethical principles to human relationships and economic organization.

By exposing the fallacies of “liberal” theology’s attempt to adjust evangelical religion to the imperatives of modern culture, Cook reminds us of the spiritual dimension which has largely been lost in modern society. By the 1980s, when Cook wrote *The Regenerators*, the reformist vision of the welfare state had faded amidst uncertain economic times and a rising chorus of regional discontent. His work thus offers a “neo-conservative”⁹ appropriation of Allen’s three categories of cultural change, with the emphasis on a metaphysic of decline, rather than progress. It must be asked, however, whether a pessimistic reading of the story of secularization actually moves the historian closer to an understanding of the

8 Cook’s discussion of these liberals occurs in somewhat diffuse form in *The Regenerators*, Chapter 2, especially pp. 14-5, 19-20. For the “irrelevance” of religion due to its redefinition in social terms, see Chapter 12, “The Sacred Becomes the Secular”.

9 This “neo-conservative” interpretation of the period 1890-1930 as one of religious loss and decline had its origins in the 1960s. The influential article by Michael Bliss, “The Methodist Church and World War One”, *Canadian Historical Review* XLIX, 3 (September 1968), pp. 213-33, fired the opening salvo, by arguing that the Methodist programme of social action elaborated in 1918 was a species of “socialism”, but the dominance of Allen’s “progressivist” hypothesis in the 1970s forced this tradition underground. “Neo-conservatism” flowered, however, in the 1980s. The appearance of *The Regenerators* in 1985 marked the beginning of the assault on Allen’s position, and was followed by David Marshall’s doctoral dissertation, “The Clerical Response to Secularization, 1860-1940”, Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1987.

place and role of religion in the culture and society of late 19th century English Canada. Indeed, it is the central irony of the “neo-conservative” emphasis on the futility and shallowness of “liberal” theology, that it implicitly encourages the continued marginalization of religious history.¹⁰

The Regenerators rests upon an irrevocable opposition between “evangelical orthodoxy”, defined by Cook as a pre-modern way of relating man and society, based upon the “static” categories of theology, and the emerging modern outlook, anchored on the evolutionary sciences. Recent studies, however, have done much to redefine the nature of this conflict in late Victorian society, and the emerging consensus seems to be away from “military metaphors” of the type employed by Cook. On balance, late Victorian clergymen in Britain, the United States and English Canada usually were able, with a minimum of difficulty, to reconcile the evolutionary outlook with their theological traditions in such a way as to involve little or no modification of what they deemed “essential” doctrines.¹¹

Indeed, the frontier of the historiographical debate concerning the impact of evolutionary and broadly naturalistic thought now turns upon the relationship of science to a wider cultural spectrum beyond religion. What is clear is that by the end of the 19th century, evolutionary thought had permeated Canadian culture. Not only had sociologists and psychologists sought to ground their disciplines in evolutionary thought, but, as Carl Berger was the first to articulate, the naturalistic perspective was even embraced by modern historians such as Harold Innis and Arthur Lower.¹² Although for many religious historians the dichotomy between science and human beliefs has made for a palatable rendering

10 It is no accident that Ramsay Cook, the chief protagonist of the “neo-conservative” interpretation, also coined the term “limited identities”, a view which has underwritten much of the “new social history” which, like the older “national” history, marginalizes religious history by implicitly presenting the view that religion, because it was destined to inevitably decline, is less worthy of the historian’s attention than factors of region, class, gender or ethnicity.

11 See James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 19-122, for a critique of the “military metaphor”. Other studies of the British and American context which stress this aspect include David N. Livingstone, *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, W.B. Eerdmans, 1987). For the response of Canadian Protestant clergymen, see Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), Chapter 4.

12 Carl Berger, *Science, God, and Nature in Victorian Canada: The 1982 Joanne Goodman Lectures* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 78. In “The Cosmology of New Societies”, Nancy Christie has defined the harmonious encounter between human society and nature as the central characteristic of English Canadian historical writing which endured well into the 20th century with the works of W.L. Morton, Arthur Lower and Donald Creighton. Indeed, so convincing has this naturalistic, or environmentalist interpretation become, that even Ramsay Cook, the champion of the “conflict” metaphor, has undergone a recent “conversion

of the past, Darwinian scholarship has demonstrated that a reassessment of this position is in order if we are to understand the way in which, in practice, men and women received and integrated new values into their established world-view.

This emphasis upon the “non-violent” nature of the Victorian encounter between religion and science compels both a re-evaluation of what historians have deemed the “pre-modern” or “anti-modern” character of evangelical Protestantism, and, more importantly, a new awareness of the cultural context in which Victorian religion functioned. But, as one recent historian of the rise of modern unbelief has retorted, in an attempt to salvage the venerable creed of opposition between Christian belief and “modern” society, did not these late-Victorian clergymen concede too much, and, having made God more and more like themselves, make it feasible to abandon belief in God? Seen from this standpoint, it is possible to argue that the “natural parents of modern unbelief turn out to have been the guardians of belief.”¹³

Any resolution of this conflict involves the attempt to recover the delicate interaction between the intentions and historical experience which characterized the mental life of those Protestant clergymen who sought to reconcile their beliefs with what they viewed as the highest products of the human mind: the advance of science and critical thought. Such a recovery cannot take place within the “reading backward” which has dominated the historical discussion of religion in English Canada. The recovery of the relationship between Protestant religion and the culture of English Canada requires a new approach, one less concerned with discerning the pedigree of the 20th century mind than one which takes as its principal task the situation of the religious experience within its historical context. Informed by a “forward reading”, such a historian will treat religion as an integral and dynamic element of any given historical period, at once influenced by the surrounding culture, and creatively shaping the social and ideological matrix.

In recovering the religious history of English Canada, the central difficulty faced by the late 20th century historian lies in defining the precise character and cultural role of 19th-century Protestantism. There is an ever-present temptation to portray 19th-century Protestantism as a repressive, puritanical “dead hand”, a code of theological abstractions which acted as a barrier to the emergence of “modern” forms of scientific and critical thinking.¹⁴ Intellectuals living in a

experience” concerning the happy convergence of nature and culture. See Ramsay Cook, “Cabbages Not Kings: Towards an Ecological Interpretation of Early Canadian History”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 25, 4 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 5-16.

13 See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins 1985), p. 261.

14 This interpretation subtly underlies the portrait of Victorian Protestantism presented in *The Regenerators*. It is also the central theme of McKillop’s *A Disciplined Intelligence*, particularly Chapters 1-3.

post-Christian age have been taught by both literary figures and historians to think of “evangelicalism”, the dominant tendency within 19th-century Protestantism, as a term of opprobrium.¹⁵ For those who lived through the cataclysmic social and cultural changes of the decades between 1800 and 1870, however, “evangelicalism” was expressive of their participation in a transatlantic movement of religious revival, which transformed not only personal piety but also values, institutional life and the relationship of the Christian churches to state and society. Of equal importance, and what decisively anchors religious history within the mainstream of historical discussion, is the fact that “evangelicalism” was one of the key cultural forces which promoted the emergence of the complex of ideas and attitudes we designate as “modern”.

Evangelicalism developed in the great religious revivals which occurred amidst the bewildering series of demographic, political and economic changes of the mid-18th century. As Nancy Christie has recently argued, evangelicalism struck at the root of the ideological defences of the *ancien régime* by transforming popular religion. It placed its emphasis upon the unmediated, individual access to God, and thus it implicitly rejected the balanced notions of hierarchy and social order so forcefully promoted by both Protestant and Catholic established churches. In the context of the late 18th century, evangelicalism must be viewed as a movement of liberation, deriving its impetus from the same complex of cultural and social changes which produced the great revolutionary upheavals in Europe and America and the first great age of reform.¹⁶ Evangelicalism rejected both formalized systems of theology and traditional hierarchies of religious authority in favour of what one historian has termed a “quadrilateral” of priorities: an intense stress on the conversion of individuals; the belief that the religion must be lived in an active life; a particular regard for the Bible as a popular and accessible source of religious truth; and an emphasis on Christ’s atonement for human sin.¹⁷

- 15 It is of more than passing interest that much of the English Canadian novelistic literature written since the 1920s has involved the “liberation” of the protagonist from the “Protestant” heritage. Despite its metaphysic of decline, *The Regenerators* can be viewed as a final echo in the long-drawn out rejection of the Victorians.
- 16 For this interpretation of evangelicalism, I am indebted to the recent study by Nancy J. Christie, “In these times of Democratic Rage and Delusion: Popular Religion and the Challenge to the Established Order, 1760-1815”, in G.A. Rawlyk, ed., *The Protestant Experience in Canada, 1760-1990* (Burlington, Welch Publications, 1991), pp. 9-47. Christie convincingly presents the case that in the Canadian context, the evangelical revival was the medium through which ideas of republicanism and liberal individualism shaped the popular values of English Canada during its formative years.
- 17 See the recent study by David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730’s to the 1980’s* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 3, for this remarkably succinct and precise definition of evangelicalism. Bebbington’s analysis also stresses the fact that “evangelicalism” presented a mode of religious experience very distinct from that even contemplated by the Protestants of the Reformation.

Far from acting as a narrow and inflexible system of theology, evangelicalism was, in the words of Goldwin French, a diffuse, rather protean popular “creed”,¹⁸ which gave meaning to a whole complex of attitudes concerning the nature of the individual and the relationship of people to their society. Evangelicalism, experienced in several “waves” of revival which occurred in the Anglo-American world between 1730 and 1870, touched and transformed the religion of all social classes. Yet it was not only in the sphere of personal religion that its effects were felt. Significantly, the intense upsurge of religious revival coincided exactly with the seven decades in which the society, ideologies and institutions of English Canada took shape. In the process of shaping their own identity, the inhabitants of the British North American colonies were acutely conscious that new forms of religious expression supplied the impetus to throw off older values and institutional arrangements. More positively, evangelical religion sanctioned and, in many cases, supplied the model for the creation of new ones.¹⁹ In contrast to the cultural experience of the two older societies of Great Britain and America, where the “modernizing” tendencies of evangelicalism had to compete with, and were to some extent altered by, deeply rooted *ancien régime* forms of religious practice, notions of community solidarity and relationships of political and social power, this process operated in British North America with minimal resistance. The consequences of this cultural divergence within the Anglo-American world remain to be explored.

Two recent works have sought, from the standpoint of religious history, to analyse the nature and impact of the momentous social and cultural changes which took place between 1800 and 1870. John Webster Grant’s *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988) is organized around the formation, nature and role of the Protestant churches as institutions in English Canadian society. Aggressive evangelism was the hallmark of the 19th-century religious experience, and the Protestant churches, in Grant’s estimation, were largely successful in persuading the people of Upper Canada to “commit themselves to the profession of ... Christian faith, and to involvement in the activities of a religious organization” (p. 222). Such an activist temper led, however, to intense and, at times, bitter competition among rival churches, as Anglicans and Methodists disputed the basic question of

18 Goldwin French, “The Evangelical Creed in Canada”, in W.L. Morton, ed., *The Shield of Achilles: Aspects of Canada in the Victorian Age* (Toronto, 1968). The challenging questions posed in Professor French’s perceptive essay have only recently been taken up again by historians interested in exploring the relationship between religion and the wider society of 19th-century English Canada.

19 For a preliminary exploration of the evangelical reconstruction of society on the lines of the “voluntary” principle, see Michael Gauvreau, “Protestantism Transformed: Personal Piety and the Evangelical Social Vision, 1815-1867”, in Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, pp. 48-97.

whether “one’s position in society should depend upon a vested interest or on the ability to outdo rivals in open competition”.²⁰ With the settlement of this issue in the 1850s, 19th-century Ontario evolved what Grant terms the “Protestant consensus”, in which the contending churches began to look remarkably alike, at least in social function. Although Upper Canada/Ontario, unlike its British parent, lacked a formally established church, it eschewed the intense pluralism which characterized the American religious scene. By 1871, the vast majority of Protestants identified themselves as members of four large churches, each acting as “an unofficial moral and educational establishment”, in which religion legitimated the new capitalist social and economic order by encouraging hard work, sobriety, thrift and enterprise, and by promoting probity, restraint and a “responsibility for the public good” (pp. 223-4).

In keeping with its origins in the late 18th century assault on the values and institutions of the *ancien régime*, evangelicalism was premised upon a dynamic view of God’s activity in the human and natural worlds and was insistent that the religious revival was intimately associated with the progressive advance of human knowledge and social improvement. Evangelicalism, one of the principal intellectual progenitors of a new age and of a culture in the process of thoroughly espousing the private and public values of capitalism, supplied the language and encouraged the construction of institutions designed to promote its attendant ideologies of political and economic liberalism. Indeed, with its insistence upon the personal encounter between God and the individual sinner as the basis of religious experience, “evangelicalism” supplied the essential mind-set by which English Canada entered the modern age. In what are perhaps the most stimulating chapters of this fine book, Grant analyses an aspect of Victorian society which is often too easily forgotten, reminding us that Victorian culture rested upon a host of “voluntary” institutions, ranging from Sunday Schools, temperance societies, benevolent and fraternal societies to missionary groups. All of these, in turn, took their inspiration and their institutional model from the evangelical definition of a church as a free association of equal individuals.²¹

As *A Profusion of Spires* demonstrates, however, the Victorian “Protestant consensus” was not created without a moment of bitter cultural contest between two rival views of the religious experience, human nature and social organization. This is the subject and theme of William Westfall’s *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), which examines, from another perspective, the emergence of the common outlook upon which Protestant Ontario rested.

20 Grant, *A Profusion of Spires*, p. 223. Grant places less emphasis on the *political* differences between Anglicans and Methodists. For a different interpretation, which takes seriously the political rhetoric of early 19th century religious groups, see Christie, “In these times of Democratic Rage and Delusion”.

21 Grant, *A Profusion of Spires*, Chapter 11, “The Activist Temper”.

Westfall advances a significant new focus for religious history by orienting the historical discussion of the religious experience outside the visible institution of the church, and towards the study of mentalities, values and attitudes. Introducing the idea of culture as a “pattern of interpretation”, Westfall affirms the centrality of religious history, arguing that “religions are systems of belief that answer the questions that cultures ask”. Protestantism not only shaped how people in Upper Canada/Ontario experienced God; it also shaped the complex of attitudes through which that society interpreted the world (p. 13).

It is Westfall’s central thesis that the “Protestant consensus” emerged out of a period of tension between two divergent “cultures”, each sponsoring a rival notion of the nature and role of religion, and hence, of human nature and society itself. This was the struggle between the “religion of order”, represented by Archdeacon (later Bishop) John Strachan and the Church of England, and the “religion of experience”, championed most forcefully by Rev. Egerton Ryerson and the Methodists.²² The “religion of order” represented the attempt of colonial elites and administrators to establish the cultural system of the *ancien régime* in Upper Canada. Premised upon the belief that the natural world and the human world rested upon a stable, rationally-ordered hierarchy (pp. 30-1), the religious outlook of men like Strachan stressed that redemption was a slow and gradual process involving the restraint of the passions and appetites. Thus, it was vitally important for the emerging society of Upper Canada that it possess a visible hierarchical church which could teach restraint and obedience. Believing that a loyal and ordered population was the basis for a Christian society, Strachan insisted upon an “alliance” between church and state, which, in his estimation, rested upon reciprocal interests and social utility. The state would protect and financially support the established church, while the church, in turn, would provide the ideological legitimation necessary for the state to accomplish its objectives (p. 23).

By contrast, Strachan’s competitors, the Methodists, advocated the “religion of experience”, founded upon a dynamic (some would say cataclysmic) view of the relationship between God and the sinner. This type of religious expression stressed redemption as occurring in a single, dramatic moment of conversion, often in the context of highly enthusiastic mass religious revivals, and correspondingly diminished the mediating role of the institutional church. Such a culture was founded upon personal experience, and, because it was implicitly egalitarian, it consciously rejected the ideas of natural and social order represented by John Strachan. Methodists promoted the belief that contact between God and the individual occurred in the sphere of the emotions, not the intellect.²³ Such religious views, in the estimation of Anglican leaders such as Strachan, could

22 The characteristics of these patterns are ably analysed in *Two Worlds*, Chapter 2, “Order and Experience: The Religious and Cultural Roots of Protestant Ontario”.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-41. Interestingly, Westfall avoids the term “evangelicalism”.

serve as the ideological groundwork for republican and democratic ideas of government and society at variance with the monarchical and hierarchical values championed by the established church.²⁴

The religious experience, and thus, the cultures it sustained did not remain static. Victorian Protestant Ontario, Westfall claims, emerged between 1850 and 1870 because changes in the social and cultural environment had forced the Anglican “religion of order” and the Methodist “religion of experience” to draw closer together. Because of their success in mass evangelization through enthusiastic camp-meeting revivals, Methodists were compelled to face the fact that they could no longer merely concentrate on converting sinners, but had to sustain and cultivate the saved. Among converts who had begun to place a high value on the pursuit of social and political “respectability”, the old emotional camp-meetings suddenly appeared to sanction a dangerous antinomianism. These cultural pressures dictated a gradual shift to a more formalized and structured institutional apparatus: an educated clergy, Sunday Schools, church colleges and a host of voluntary agencies designed to promote and foster morality and charitable endeavours.²⁵ Revivalism remained, but was transformed into “a more moderate and controlled style of worship” through the careful policing of camp-meetings, the employment of professional revivalists such as James Caughey and the insistence of church authorities that revivalism should be regarded as only one of the means of grace (pp. 71-5). Indeed, Methodism had moved closer to the old Anglicanism’s view that salvation was a gradual process which involved both the emotions and the intellect.

The “religion of order” was, in turn, compelled to moderate its claims to control and direct the cultural life of Upper Canada. Central to the realization of its social vision was the alliance of church and state, symbolized by the Clergy Reserves. With the final secularization of the Reserves in 1854, it had become evident to the Anglican leadership that they had been abandoned by the state. This occurred because, in the 1840s, the state changed its character, and “rejected the old axiom that public religion was essential to public order” (pp. 107-8). It is one of the fundamental ironies of the history of the early Victorian age that the state, which the Church of England had laboured to defend against social disorder and the threat of republicanism, accepted in effect, the evangelical view that society did not rest upon mystical notions of divine right which sanctioned hierarchy, restraint and order, but upon “an essentially materialistic and developmental understanding of politics and the state” (p. 109), which viewed society as a

24 *Ibid.*, p. 21. It is curious that Westfall argues that “Strachan needed enemies in order to promote his own religious goals”. As Nancy Christie has shown in ““In these times of Democratic Rage and Delusion”, the links between popular evangelicalism and political republicanism were sufficiently evident that Strachan was not merely “creating enemies”.

25 The substance of these changes are superbly outlined by Westfall in Chapter 3, “The Tempering of Revivalism”.

voluntary contract between competing individual interests. To this, the Church of England could respond only by taking on the characteristics of its evangelical opponents, and thus becoming a voluntary, self-supporting denomination subject to the “hidden hand” of the religious market-place.

In keeping with its view of culture as a pattern of meaning, *Two Worlds* advances the idea that the emerging “Protestant consensus” also organized the concepts of time and space which lay at the heart of the experience of Victorian Ontario. Westfall argues that this Victorian cosmology comprised two separate, but related worlds — the sacred and the secular (pp. 8-9). Through the conscious promotion of Gothic church architecture, church leaders created a “sacred” space as defined against a “secular” world outside; and through a dynamic, optimistic “millennial” organization of human history, preachers and their congregations sought to relate biblical doctrine to the evidence of social and material progress characteristic of mid-Victorian Ontario.²⁶ Despite its concentration on material progress, this culture also recognized the ever-present reality of the sacred, a tension full of creative possibilities, but one which ultimately destroyed this delicate accommodation.

The categories of space and time, however, do not exhaust the rich potential of Westfall’s insistence upon the linking of religious and cultural history. One of the implicit questions, tantalizingly hinted at in *Two Worlds* concerns the coincidence in time of the emergence of the “Protestant consensus” and the transition of the province to an economic organization modelled on market capitalism. Was there any wider relationship between religion and capitalism, especially if the latter is considered in a non-Marxist way as a system of values? To what extent did evangelicalism, or the “religion of experience”, actually aid in the articulation and promotion of the values, attitudes and social institutions which governed the practice of work and the accumulation of wealth in Protestant English Canada? And, to what extent did the rise of evangelicalism change the understanding of how the economic and social order functioned? Issues which the Victorians faced for the first time, such as the nature of poverty and the relationship between charity and the reform of the individual, were decisively shaped and given their particular “Victorian” cast through an encounter with varieties of “evangelical” religion.²⁷ And what of the neglected question of the relationship of elite and popular religion, which might be studied with reference to the changing character and role of religious revivals? Indeed, as certain historians have noted, early revivalism might represent not merely an antinomian

26 See *ibid.*, Chapters 5 and 6.

27 For a study of the relationship between evangelicalism and early Victorian capitalism in the British context, see Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988). In general, Canadian historians have left studies of the nature of capitalism to those of the Marxist persuasion.

“religion of experience”, but an attempt to forge a rival, ordered community at odds with older notions of custom and hierarchy.²⁸

If evangelicalism involved not only a new form of personal piety but also a new understanding of the nature of the individual and the community, it is evident that this religious transformation also had political implications. In the 18th and 19th centuries the close links between religious adherence and political ideology were readily apparent, and thus, it was not surprising that the emergence of politics within the province of Upper Canada in the 1820s and 1830s should revolve around religious questions and, in particular, the relationship between church and state. This relationship has often been forgotten by contemporary political historians who have neglected both the content and context of political ideology, reading back the mid-20th century concern with the more “pragmatic” questions of patronage and party organization.²⁹ In any understanding of the function of politics in Victorian Canada, religion must emerge as an essential component of the discussion. A concern for the cultural component of politics will encourage a reinterpretation of the emergence and intellectual content of political ideologies such as liberalism and conservatism, and of the practice of politics in early Victorian Canada, which may have owed a good deal to religious divisions. And, moving from the world of politics to that of the Victorian home, historians should direct their attention to interpreting the influence of the dramatic shift in religious experience on patterns of child-rearing, family life, and the self-definitions of personality and gender which lay at the core of English Canadian culture.

A Profusion of Spires and *Two Worlds* offer a much-needed corrective to the dismissal of evangelical religion as “anti-modern”. Indeed, the theology, or value-system, depicted by Westfall and Grant fundamentally challenges the Protestant world portrayed by those historians who have read religious history “backwards” through the lens of secularization. But how is the historian to interpret the history of the relationship of evangelical Protestantism to the social and cultural world of English Canada between 1870 and 1930? Were the churches, in effect, acting as the unconscious agents of secularization by constructing an accommodation between their theology and science? Did they seek this accommodation for the sake of what was, at best, a shallow and evolutionary optimism? And did this “liberal” theology accent social action at the expense of personal regeneration and religious revival?

28 This interpretation of revivalism draws upon Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977), which interprets the Second Great Awakening as an “organizing process”.

29 This neglect is apparent even in a recent work such as that of Gordon Stewart, *The Origins of Canadian Politics: A Comparative Approach* (Vancouver, 1987) which, ironically, seeks to recapture the 18th century influence on the structure of Canadian politics in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Marguerite Van Die's *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) and Brian Fraser's *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988) offer reassessments of the nature, role and concerns of the much-maligned "liberal" theology which grew up in the period after 1870. Neither biblical fundamentalism nor religious scepticism, claims Van Die, was the only alternative available to the Victorians. What of those who tried to reconcile belief to the times, while remaining fully conscious of the power of evangelical religion to make effective use of new thought (p. 195)? Though neither a biography nor an intellectual history, *An Evangelical Mind* relates the career of Nathanael Burwash, the influential chancellor of Victoria College, to the main social, intellectual and cultural changes facing the Protestant churches in the period 1870-1914. Throughout, Van Die's emphasis is upon continuity: while Methodism certainly did change between 1850 and 1900, the transformations took place within the limits imposed by the Wesleyan theology (the Methodist version of the evangelical impulse) (pp. 7-8). With a faith forged in the midst of the redefinition of revivalism, Burwash certainly did take the lead in accommodating the evolutionary outlook and the historical criticism of the Bible to the Methodist theology, but he remained firmly committed to the imperatives of revivalistic religion, holding that faith rested upon an individual, "inner assurance". The new knowledge was integrated selectively, and only in so far as it affirmed the continued cultural and intellectual primacy of the Wesleyan relationship between faith and learning.³⁰ Believing in the ultimate harmony of reason and religion, Burwash maintained that all new knowledge, if rightly understood, would prove supportive of revealed religion.

Van Die's study ultimately accepts Cook's central thesis of the decline and irrelevance of Protestant religion, but does not agree with the conflict model set forth in *The Regenerators*. Although all of Burwash's activities were directed to giving permanent expression to the revival, by anchoring religion firmly at the heart of the Victorian consensus of values, "in seeking to express Methodism in terms meaningful to a changing environment, he [Burwash] was at the same time quite unintentionally undermining the very religion he was trying to preserve" (p. 186). Indeed, between 1884 and 1925, leaders like Burwash presided over the eclipse of the old piety by shifting the emphasis in conversion from a definite crisis experience to one based upon nurture and education (p. 193). Stating the issue differently from Cook, however, Van Die argues that the problem was not secularization, but the enduring problem of the relationship between Christ and culture: Methodists not only had to face the challenge, imposed upon them by the revival, to transform culture through religion, but also had to face the

30 Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, Chapters 4 and 5, p. 182.

apprehension that changes in the culture itself might transform religion and make it ineffective (p. 194).

Similar difficulties in relating Christianity and culture were faced by a group of “progressives” within the Presbyterian Church. Like their Methodist counterpart, Nathanael Burwash, these clergymen shared the confident belief that “the values and culture of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism were the key to moral and social progress in Canada as it entered the twentieth century” (p. x). As Brian Fraser suggests concerning this group, their impulse to social action proceeded not from some defensive reaction or sense of theological inadequacy, but drew upon the cultural resources of Presbyterianism, more explicitly a Scottish atmosphere which combined a “reverent” form of biblical criticism, the social vision of idealist philosophy, which promoted a brand of “collectivist” liberalism, and the urban religious revivalism of Dwight Moody.³¹ Unlike Richard Allen and Ramsay Cook, who have argued that the churches substituted a social definition of religion for the emphasis on individual salvation typical of the older revivalism, Fraser maintains that the Presbyterian version of the “social gospel” remained strongly anchored to an individualist bias. Clergymen like C.W. Gordon, J.G. Shearer and T.B. Kilpatrick argued that God acted in the world through the transformation of character and conscience; the church, therefore, must promote the “Christianization of civilization”, in which individuals were transformed into the likeness of Christ, and Christian ideas gradually permeated society through the agencies of moral and social reform. The basis of any improvement, however, remained centred on evangelism, and would be accomplished through the education of public opinion, not through any radical restructuring of economic or social relations (pp. 32-7).

The association of evangelism and moral and social reform, which held in balance the twin evangelical emphases of individual redemption and social action, was the basis of the “social gospel”. Fraser contends, however, that the “progressive” attempt to create a Christian nation ultimately failed. The explanation for this phenomenon constitutes a still implicit, but nonetheless provocative challenge to the view of theological “liberalism” as a half-way house. The Presbyterian “social gospel” failed, in Fraser’s estimation, not because it had too easily surrendered evangelical tradition to modern thought, but because it was too deeply rooted in the piety of the 19th century. In fact, these Presbyterian leaders identified their vision of a “Christian nation” with the conventions and aspirations of the late Victorian middle-classes, an exclusivism which denied legitimacy to the concerns of the poor and the immigrants (pp. x, 102).

Taken together, the works of Fraser and Van Die on the nature and role of late-Victorian Protestantism present a preliminary critique of the secularization model. Granted that, by the 1920s, the churches were less relevant to English

31 Brian Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, Chapter 1.

Canadian society than they had been in 1870. But was this the ironic outcome of a naively optimistic encounter with evolutionary thought? Or did it result from some deeper, more tragic process which involved the way in which evangelicalism related to Victorian culture? In answering these questions, historians will find it necessary to orient themselves away from a fixation with "Darwinism", and proceed to a consideration of the ambiguous relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. If we accept the argument that evangelicalism played a key role in shaping the values of capitalism and in promoting their acceptance in early Victorian culture, it might be worth asking whether Protestantism was, in turn, rendered irrelevant not because it surrendered its theology, but because it failed to transform that theology sufficiently to respond effectively to changes within the practice and values of capitalism in the early 20th century. More specifically, the American historian Jackson Lears has defined the period between 1880 and 1920 as one in which the ethic of production, founded on self-denial and underwritten by evangelicalism, was transformed into a hedonistic, bureaucratic, professional "culture of consumption", founded upon new therapies promoted by mass advertising and the social sciences.³² Evangelicalism, anchored in a world firmly committed to individualism, and oriented to a social vision premised upon the face-to-face community of the family farm or small town, simply could not effectively comprehend, assimilate, organize or criticize this new, urban, industrial capitalist reality, premised upon the loss of individual autonomy, in such a way as to remain culturally central. While its tenets remained important in the sphere of personal piety and private belief, the new professional middle classes adopted other, non-religious ways of interpreting human nature and social relationships.

Seen in this light, the period of the "social gospel" marks less of a "mid-point" than a paradoxical end-point and a new beginning. The encounter between Protestantism and the corporate-bureaucratic phase of industrial capitalism revealed the inadequacy of the old theology, represented by Burwash and the "Presbyterian progressives", who had believed that it was possible to create a Christian nation founded upon the notion of gradual social improvement through the perfection of the individual. At the same time, the inadequacy of this old equation of evangelicalism and the nation persuaded some within the churches that a more radical critique of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, which would sweep away much of the "old evangelism" was the precondition of a new, and more "realistic" encounter between Protestantism and modern society. Thus, the "social gospel" in the 1920s, as explored by Richard Allen, represents something distinctly "new" within the Canadian

32 See Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1981); and R. W. Fox and Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York, 1983).

Protestant tradition.³³ Darwinism was not the great watershed within Canadian Protestant culture, for it did not create permanent divisions within the churches; rather, the question of the relationship between Protestantism and the capitalist order fragmented the church into theological “parties”, a process which began during the 1890s and was consummated during the Great Depression.³⁴

So far, the new religious history has treated both the rise and decline of “Protestant culture” as an Ontario phenomenon. Many of the conclusions, however, raise important questions for other regions, particularly the Maritimes, whose encounter with Protestant revivalism antedated Upper Canada’s.³⁵ In the Maritimes, the cutting edge of revivalism and evangelicalism was provided by the Baptists, rather than the Methodists, an important consideration underlying the essays in Robert S. Wilson’s edited collection, *An Abiding Conviction: Maritime Baptists and Their World* (Wolfville, Lancelot Press, 1988). The central theme of the essays is continuity: throughout the 19th century, Baptists drew upon the heritage of the revival, creating an institutional structure (in particular a system of public education) to ensure the permeation of evangelical culture into the society at large. More tellingly, educators like Theodore Harding Rand used the revival heritage constructively after the 1850s to accommodate the intellectual and institutional changes which swept Victorian Canada. Rand, the Baptist counterpart to Nathanael Burwash, believed that the spiritual element stood at the crown of education; and the goal of education was to produce “an earthly society redeemed by reformed individuals”. Rand thus pioneered a social gospel very similar to that expressed by Burwash and the Presbyterian “progressives”, one anchored firmly in the revivalistic traditions of the earlier evangelical age.³⁶

33 See the final chapters of Allen, *The Social Passion* for this emphasis. See also Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, Chapter 7, for an analysis of the attempt in the church colleges to elaborate a new theology. For a reconsideration of the “novelty” of the “social gospel”, see William McGuire King, “An enthusiasm for humanity: the social emphasis in religion and its accommodation in Protestant theology”, in Michael J. Lacey, ed., *Religion and Twentieth-Century American Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 49-78. This literature stresses a more careful definition of the “social gospel” in relation to the earlier “national gospel” promoted by the pre-World War One generation of clergymen.

34 For a stimulating analysis of this disagreement over ways of responding to modern capitalism, see Phyllis Airhart, “Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism, 1867-1914”, in Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, pp. 98-138. In assessing the fragmentation between “progressives” and “traditionalists” in the Canadian churches, Airhart advances an important critique of the tripartite division into “conservative”, “progressive” and “radical” advanced by Allen.

35 See, in particular, George Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists, and Henry Alline* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press 1985), for a study of the revivals stimulated by the preaching of Henry Alline during the American Revolution.

36 See, in particular, the fine essay by Margaret Conrad, “An Abiding Conviction of the Paramount

The similarity in the “Protestant cultures” of Ontario and the Maritimes draws our attention to a significant question as to the scope and method of “religious history” in relation to currents within the discipline of Canadian history. Despite the subtle differences which did exist in the religious experience of the two regions, evangelicalism and revivalism created cultures which bore a remarkable resemblance to each other, to the point where the historian can begin to identify elements of a common “Protestant culture” which bound together the disparate regional communities of British North America, divided as they were by geography and the constraints of political economy. Far from seeking admission to the pantheon of “limited identities”, the historian of the religious experience attempts to chart a different course. Because “religious history” is concerned, first and foremost, with interpreting the religious experience within its historical context, it supplies a perspective which can integrate private experience and the public values of a particular historical period. And because religious impulses like evangelicalism operated in more than one society, it is the task of religious history somehow to relate the local experience to its counterparts in the common religious culture of the Anglo-American world. Further, “religious history” supplies a vantage point from which the historian can begin to consider and integrate issues of gender, class, ethnicity and region — all of which involve religious dimensions. “Religious history” will thus act as one — and it must be stressed, not the only one — of the focal points by which the “limited identities” of the “new social history” can be synthesized and organized into a broader pattern of cultural meaning, without, in turn contributing to the further fragmentation of the historical discipline.

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“Outstanding in the Field”: Recent Rural History in Canada*

WHILE STUDIES OF RURAL LIFE HAVE traditionally focused on immigration, settlement policy, the grain trade and agrarian movements, their interpretive framework has rested generally within the context of either the staple thesis, metropolitanism, or political history.¹ A few of these studies have become

Importance of Christian Education: Theodore Harding Rand as Educator, 1860-1900”, in Wilson, ed., *An Abiding Conviction*, pp. 155-95.

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¹ John Herd Thompson, “Writing About Rural Life and Agriculture”, in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada* (Scarborough, Ont., 1990), pp. 99-100.