

Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies: The Protestant Ethic and the Quest for Social Justice in Canada, By Richard Allen (2018) Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 388 pages. ISBN: 978-0-77355-504-4

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Anderson addresses her thesis almost entirely to a U.S. audience but it is, with some modification, also applicable to Canada. We do not have employment-at-will and there are more legal constraints on employers. Nevertheless, most elements of “private government” exist here to some extent and are equally objectionable. The discussion that Anderson wants to stimulate needs to take place in Canada, as well as in the U.S.

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Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies: The Protestant Ethic and the Quest for Social Justice in Canada

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When I decided to review this book, I was looking for something in English to parallel, and perhaps balance, the extensive amount of literature on French Roman Catholic writing on Church's and clergy's involvement in social and labour action. At the same time, I was looking for material that could provide potential links between developments in English and French Canada in the area of socially directed action inspired by the Churches, themselves to deal with the impact of industrialization in the workforce and on the community.

What I found was a fascinating book which certainly sets the stage to respond to this sort of need, but which, in my opinion, could go much further. At the same time, what is particularly striking is that the reading of this study gives one the impression of embarking on virtually two books in one. At the outset, the author explained as much:

The first impetus for the present collection arose from complaints of students that some of my published articles were

difficult to locate ... [there was also] a thin red line of autobiography that might be of historiographical interest ... [Thus] ... the collection could, at least potentially, be read at two levels at once ... (Preface, p. xvii).

My appreciation of these two levels is generally in line with this observation of the author. As I would put it, the first level deals with the subject I expected through the presentation of a series of articles, many of which, but not all, had already appeared elsewhere and were combined here doubtless both to facilitate access and, in addition, to provide some continuity to what is a fascinating story full of implications for the study of English Canada. The second, found in the italicized introduction to each article, takes the form of an explanation of the context and circumstances of the article that follows immediately. Nevertheless, it is also biographical, providing insight into the gradual development of the thought and action of the author himself.

For someone interested in examining the subject of the Social Gospel in the English-speaking context, certain of the articles appear to be more central to an understanding of this theme. These include: Chapter 6: “The Background of the Social Gospel in Canada” (p. 82-101); Chapter 7: “The Social Gospel and the Reform Tradition in Canada”, 1890-1928 (p. 102-118); Chapter 11: “The Social Gospel as the Religion of the Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada” (p. 166-178). These chapters situate the movement at various times and give a very good idea of its periodic transformation, as well as its strengths and weaknesses.

There are several points at which the author offers explanations about the basic nature of the “Social Gospel”, likely because several of these articles initially appeared separately and needed some explanation to properly situate the reader. The following passages provide a few examples, the first two appearing in the same article:

The social gospel that arose in the latter years of the nineteenth century ... developed under influences that encouraged a social concept of humankind and underlined the social dimensions of the gospel, so that the solutions that appeared to be most useful were those that had an essentially social character. (p. 84)

A few pages later, we find: "The social gospel in Canada, like the variants of social Christianity elsewhere, was undoubtedly a response to the challenge of the social and economic conditions precipitated by an emerging industrial / urban order." (p. 86)

In another article, it is argued that: "The social gospel rested on the premise that Christianity was a social religion, concerned, when the misunderstanding of the ages was stripped away, with the quality of human relations on this earth." (p. 104)

It appears, from the author's writings, that there were various currents, which came together around this concept as it emerged and continued to grow. Some articles appear, for example, to be primarily theological, or socio-economic, or political, but usually finish by integrating the other related themes. At one point, for example, it is explained how social gospel fed into the emergence of the Progressive Party, which emerged during the first part of the inter-war period and virtually eliminated both Liberal and Conservative Parties from the prairie provinces for a time. It goes on to elaborate on the rise and ultimately the fall of the Progressives and the broader movement behind them. Other articles explain how the concept and action of social gospel reinvented itself like the chameleon, inspired by events and courants, which appeared in the various churches of the reform tradition and within their lay communities. There are also cross-border references linking developments in Canada and the U.S.A.

At the end of the book, in a section called *Postscript*, the author makes an effort to bring his subject up to date and engages with current debates, as he argues:

Over the past generation neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideologies have insidiously and shamelessly embellished traditional free enterprise mythology with beguiling stories of "trickle-down economics" and "rising tides that lift all boats". These "mini-myths" of supply-side economics have not infrequently been accompanied by an exotic mythological concoction of Ayn Rand heroic individualism and crypto-anarchistic views of the evils of government. In reality, over the past few decades, the net result of these "applied mythologies" has been a reversal of several decades of progressive income redistribution and the creation of an obscene, socially disintegrative level of income disparity where top corporate executives make as much on the first day of the year as the average wage worker will earn in an entire year. (p. 321) [from "Postscript: Myth, Religion and the Politics of Sacred and Secular", p. 310-326].

In conclusion, this is a fascinating read, on a subject that is often unfortunately glossed over today or simply ignored, but of essential interest and importance to anyone preoccupied with the roots and fundamental debates of our society, both past and present. It clearly indicates the links between the various social forces and groups that have composed and continue to compose the nation over time. In doing this, it allows us to go much beyond superficial analysis of social questions and the development of ideas. It can also help readers like myself who are attempting to bridge the gap between thought and developments in each of Canada's linguistic communities to favour better mutual understanding.

The dual track composed of series of vignettes on the one side and personal reflections on the state of the art at the beginning of each chapter, however, can be challenging, and at times a bit confusing. In a sense, the author warned us about this at the outset. As he wrote, "... if some readers find the book rather idiosyncratic, I shall not be surprized." (Preface, p. xvii).

It would be useful to have a full-blown account of the author's own development on the one hand, and a redrafting and linking of these interesting articles on the other, to provide a fully integrated version of the subject. Perhaps, that will be the next step in the process.

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