

A Concise History of Christianity in Canada, Terrence Murphy, ed.

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A Concise History of Christianity in Canada, Terrence Murphy, ed.,
Roberto Perin, assoc. ed., Toronto: Oxford University Press xii,
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ONE WONDERS WHY, almost four years after its appearance, this book has not been more wisely reviewed and debated. Perhaps, in an age of political correctness and historiographical fragmentation, it does not pay to write “nationally” — witness all the recent multi-authored histories of Canada, before which John Michael Bumsted’s *A History of the Canadian Peoples* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998) and its 1992 predecessor stand as the only notable exceptions. Yet *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* is, by far, the best book on the subject to be published — and it is not “concise,” as the title misleadingly suggests. Of the five articles it contains, Terrence Murphy’s “The English-Speaking Colonies to 1854” (108-88) and Roberto Perin’s “French-Speaking Canada from 1840” (190-259) are highly original and innovative and challenge commonplace interpretations; Brian Clarke’s “English-Speaking Canada from 1854” (261-369) is a book in itself; and Terry A. Crowley’s “The French Regime to 1760” (1-55) and Gilles Chaussé’s “French Canada from the Conquest to 1840” (56-106) draw upon their authors’ previous works to give the reader a clear overview of facts and problems.

The book was initially meant to replace *A History of the Christian Church in Canada* edited by John Webster Grant (Toronto: The Ryerson Press and McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1966-72). The series consisted of three volumes, one by H.H. Walsh, *The Church in the French Era. From Colonization to the British Conquest* (1966); a second volume by John Sargent Moir, *The Church in the British Era. From the*

British Conquest to Confederation (1972); and a third one by Grant himself *The Church in the Canadian Era. The First Century of Confederation* (1972, rev. ed. 1988). The series strongly leaned towards the ecumenism of the times, emphasizing similarities among Christian churches. Furthermore, since its appearance new worldwide research on the part of a new generation of scholars had enriched our knowledge of the history of Christianity in North America, far beyond the framework of institutional development. The Grant series was followed by two syntheses that touched upon the whole of English — and French — speaking North America, Robert T. Handy's *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) and Mark A. Noll's *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992). They devoted most of their attention to the United States and, in spite of the fact that the two authors belong to different generations of scholars, they did little to change the historiographical perspective on Canada.

As far as French Canada is concerned, the rather traditional synthesis by Hermann Plante, *L'Église Catholique au Canada, 1604-1886* (Trois-Rivières: Éditions du Bien Public, 1970) was followed by the innovative series, edited by Nive Voisine, which goes under the overall title *Histoire du catholicisme québécois* (Montréal: Boréal, 1984-9). The series consists of three volumes in five tomes, of which all but one have been published so far: Lucien Lemieux, *Les années difficiles, 1760-1839* (1989); Philippe Sylvain and Voisine, *Réveil et consolidation, 1840-1898* (1991); Jean Hamelin, *Le XXe siècle. De 1940 à nos jours* (1984); and Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Le XXe siècle. 1898-1940* (1984). A shorter collective synthesis, edited by Hamelin, *Les Catholiques d'expression française en Amérique du Nord* (Turnhout: Éditions Brepols, 1995), was not of the same quality as the multi-volume *Histoire*.

The authors of *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* draw on new scholarship to show their awareness of fields of investigation that became fashionable in the past twenty years, such as popular beliefs and practices or gender and aboriginal issues. Furthermore, they are also quite keen in showing denominational and regional differences. In doing so, the authors well show their deep knowledge and clear understanding of their period. For example, Murphy's pages dealing with religious tolerance, interdenominational co-operation, social utility of religion and evangelicalism (122-37) are among the best in the whole volume, and so are Perin's pages on the centrality of religion in the survival of the French-Canadian culture (223-8) — although the latter's defense of Msgr. Ignace Bourget "from the left" is likely to remain controversial for some time.

To what extent is Newfoundland covered in *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*? Given the fact that chapters are subdivided mostly by linguistic areas, the province goes almost unmentioned in three of the five essays — Crowley's, Chaussés and Perin's. Conversely, Murphy's article follows the history of Newfoundland step by step. This allows the general reader to place Newfoundland

matters in the context of British North America and makes it possible to follow the island's development by piecing together the several paragraphs dealing with it. One goes from Lord Baltimore's earliest Catholic priests, to the occasional missionaries between 1630 and 1750, the denominational establishments of the 1780s, and the end of all restrictions to Catholics in 1830. Of special interest is Murphy's discussion of lay initiatives, both in recruiting new clergy and in providing spiritual and formal services to their communities (114-16). Murphy's chapter ends with the end of the ascendancy of the Church of England, the class structure of the island's denominations, the origins of Newfoundland sectarianism, the creations of church societies, and the establishment of the island's special educational system — which a referendum only very recently (1995) reformed. Clarke's essay picks up the history of Newfoundland in 1854. The basic statistical evidence on Newfoundland's denominations is given in a general overview (261-6). A specialist of 19th century Toronto, he is, however, much less consistent in following the island's developments. Except for a paragraph on Newfoundland's educational system, the island is barely mentioned.

In conclusion, specialists in the history of post-1854 Newfoundland would still need to rely on *Concise History's* logical predecessor, *Creed and Culture. The Place of English-Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society, 1750-1930*, edited by Murphy and Gerald John Stortz (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), a book that anticipated many of this volume's original and innovative features. Yet *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* should be in the office and the home of anyone who is interested in the history of Christianity in North America.