

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NORTH AMERICAN THEOLOGY: THE CANADIAN STORY

My contribution to this evening's session will be more in the nature of a supplement than a response to Professor O'Brien's paper. I have been asked to say something about the Canadian story, and to say it briefly. It is not an easy task perhaps most of all because there is no single Canadian story to tell.

The basic fact about Canadian political, cultural and indeed religious life is that Canada is a bilingual and in some sense binational country. People, of course, have come to Canada from all over the world, but there they have encountered not one but two great cultural traditions, the English and the French. This has had a decisive impact on the Canadian Church. There is a French Canadian Catholicism that reaches back in an unbroken line to the beginnings of New France in the early seventeenth century. It is quite distinct from the Catholicism that Scots and Irish brought to Canada in the nineteenth century and which itself has been transformed by the contributions of immigrants from central and eastern Europe and from the Mediterranean.

I would like to say a word about each of these Catholicisms, about their relationship, and about aspects of the theology to which they have given birth.

The experience of French Canadian Catholics is in many ways unique. The extent and the intensity of the changes that the Quebec Church underwent in the 1960s are probably without parallel. They offer a fascinating object of study for anyone interested in the many-sided and complex theme of Catholicism and modernity.

The French Canadian Church has a relatively long and rich history. It began with a period of intense religious vitality and missionary zeal. The great French school of spirituality was at its zenith. Women like Marie de l'Incarnation and Marie de saint Ignace came to the fledgling colony to open schools and hospitals. The Jesuits embarked on the noble dream of Huronia where many of them met martyrdom. The first bishop of New France, François de Laval arrived in 1659 and founded among other institutions the famous *Séminaire de Québec* upon which he left the imprint of his own austere and rigorous spirituality.

The first great crisis for the Church came with what is known as *la conquête*, the defeat of the French and the handing over of the colony to the British in 1763. The adjustments were not easy for either side, but fear of unrest in the American colonies led the authorities to seek a compromise. The Catholic Church was recognized, and its bishop came to be the spokesman for the Canadian people. He for his part made every effort to ensure their loyalty to the British crown.

It was in the course of the nineteenth century that the power and the influence of the Church in Quebec became considerable. The failure of a small liberal bourgeoisie to effect a successful revolution in the name of democratic and other values in the late thirties led to the final triumph of the institutional church. From 1850 to the end of World War II Quebec came more and more to take on the appearance of a kind of latter-day Christendom.

The organic and mutually reinforcing relationship between church and state that marked the French period continued under British governors and then in the parliamentary system of the nineteenth century. The Church provided almost all the schools, hospitals and social welfare programs that existed in the province. This was only possible because of the dramatic growth in religious vocations. The lay-clerical struggles in France at the turn of the century only added to the number of religious communities active in Quebec. In 1931 there was one religious (priest, brother or sister) for every 96 people.¹

This control by the Church of so many of the institutions of society was accompanied by the development of an ideology to justify it, the ideology of ultramontanist. Influenced by Louis Veuillot as well as by developments in Rome, Quebec bishops and a substantial group of politicians embraced an extreme and rigid political and religious ultramontanist. This came to be allied to nationalism and to a theory about the special dignity of an agricultural way of life. Afraid of being overwhelmed by the anglo-saxon and increasingly urbanized and industrialized society of North America, the Quebec elite embraced a religious-national myth that focused on rural values. The history and destiny of French Canada came to be interpreted in messianic terms. Over against Protestantism and the creeping materialism of the United States, Quebec in its struggle to survive was called to witness to the superiority of its cultural and spiritual values. The two were inseparable. As one writer put it in 1847: "We shall be Catholics above all, but Catholics not only by conviction but also by nationality."² Among the nationalists of the early twentieth century, there was a widespread theory that "language is the guardian of faith." In some cases, the values were reversed and faith was seen as "the guardian of culture."³

The processes of industrialization and urbanization were difficult ones for the Church of Quebec. *Rerum novarum* seemed to provide a tool. Probably more than anyone else, the Quebec Church attempted to translate into reality the confessional, corporative and somewhat backward-looking theories of the social encyclicals. It supported the *caisses populaires*, cooperatives of every kind and confessional unions. It took enthusiastically to the various forms of Catholic Action that were being developed in Belgium, a country to which it looked for a good deal of its social inspiration.

In spite of the many *Grands Séminaires* and the faculties of theology at Quebec, Montreal and Ottawa, historians agree that from the beginning and through-

¹Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois* vol. 3 *Le XXe siècle*, tome 1 (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1984) 152.

²Quoted in Fernand Dumont, Jean-Paul Montminy and Jean Hamelin, eds., *Idéologies au Canada Français 1850-1900* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971) 11.

³Cf. Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Le XXe siècle*, tome 1, 293ff.

out the nineteenth century the theology that existed was extremely weak. The Quebec Church was not interested in scholarship or speculative thought. *Aeterni patris* marked a decided upswing in the study of Aquinas. Before very long Thomism became the accepted ideology of the province. It provided the philosophical and theological frame for the clerical and nationalist social theories that were propagated by the Jesuit *Ecole sociale populaire* in Montreal and by the extensive network of newspapers and periodicals that had grown up under episcopal supervision.

The French Canadian Church has always had a somewhat ambivalent relationship to France. Laval was in some sense both Gallican and ultramontane. The bishops at the period of the French revolution tried to protect Canada from its ideals. In the nineteenth century it was the conservative voice of France to which ecclesial authorities listened. In the twentieth century as communication became easier theologians tended to identify with French neo-Thomists like Garrigou-Lagrange. In the 1950s some Dominicans and above all educated lay people found inspiration of a different kind in periodicals like *Témoignage chrétien* and *Esprit*.

The Dominicans played an important rôle in opening up the Quebec Church to other ways of thinking. Perhaps the best known name here is that of Georges-Henri Lévesque the founder in 1938 of the *École des sciences sociales* at Laval. Amid controversy and recrimination the school grew into a full faculty and offered a liberal and deconfessionalized view of Quebec society.⁴

By the 1950s it was clear that Quebec and its Church were in for a period of profound change. With the death of the long-reigning conservative premier Maurice Duplessis in 1959 change became inevitable. With the accession to power of Jean Lesage and his Liberals in 1960 the quiet revolution was underway. What followed was a dramatic crisis for the Church.

Within a matter of years most of the institutional bonds that had tied the Church to Quebec society were dismantled. Religious practice, already on the decline in urban areas, dropped precipitately. Large numbers left the clergy and above all religious life. The traditional clerico-nationalist ideology that had for so long provided the common discourse of society was rejected out of hand. The rate of change was if anything intensified by the renewal called for by Vatican II. After a period of enthusiastically attempting to implement the conciliar decrees, a silence and sense of dislocation fell upon a good deal of the Quebec Church. A page had been turned. A new chapter was beginning, and church people were far from certain about the direction it was going to take and above all about their role in it.

In 1984 John Paul II in Quebec City, using what the bishops of the province had told him a year earlier, recognized that "*la culture traditionnelle a éclaté.*" The Church had been pushed to the margin; it seemed to have entered a period of exile. For all that, he insisted, Christians cannot withdraw from society. They must not acquiesce to a divorce between religion and culture. Inspired by the heroic witness of the past, church people, he said, must find new ways to be present in and to speak to the new situation.

⁴Cf. Michael Behiels, "Le père Georges-Henri Lévesque et l'établissement des sciences sociales à Laval, 1938-1955," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 52 (1982) 355-76.

In 1977 an important sociological analysis of Catholic theologians active in Quebec between 1940 and 1973 was published. It underscores the dominant role of Thomism in the province up to 1960. It also documents the reinforcement that traditional Quebec society received from its contacts with Rome and with the Dominican thomistic tradition in France. The collapse of the influence of Aquinas in the 60s was rapid and decisive. It was to some degree compensated for by a decade-long German and Dutch influence. In regard to individual authors, the study notes that "from 1964 to 1970 Quebec theologians rank Rahner as the theologian who influenced them more than any other."⁵

A striking feature of the period under review was the almost total absence of significant influence from the anglo-saxon world, whether British or American. Nor was there much reciprocal influencing within the province itself. "The history of contemporary Quebec theology," the study concludes, reflects "a situation of dependence on foreign sources more than a system of national theology."⁶

It was in areas like catechetics and social doctrine that the Quebec Church came closest to the Canadian reality, but even there, more often than not, the principles and the theories used had been developed elsewhere.

The study covers the period down to 1973. Since then there has been a considerable interest in Latin American theology and a noticeable concern with the Quebec situation. As in the rest of North America, theology has moved closer to the university world and to a dialogue with new methodologies and disciplines. In the process it has become much less clerical. The growth in the quantity and quality of studies of Quebec religious history is indicative of the new scholarly interests.

In 1840 a British governor described the English and French presence in Canada as that of "two solitudes." A Protestant historian has suggested that English-speaking Catholics in the nineteenth century might well be described as a "third solitude."⁷ Theirs was the fate of being a double minority, a minority within a French dominated Catholic Church and a minority within the Protestant English world. Although their experience varied across the country, they tended to maintain a minority mentality into the recent past.

The first English-speaking Canadian diocesan seminary was founded in 1910 in Toronto. Its emphasis from the beginning was missionary. Massive immigration from eastern Europe was opening up western Canada in a new way, and the Catholics of central Canada saw it as their responsibility to provide clergy for this new field for expansion. The seminary began with and continued to be marked by a triumphalist anti-modernist strain. *Pascendi* and *Lamentabili* were hailed in Toronto as signs of the vitality and effectiveness of the Roman magisterium. The Ca-

⁵P. Partikian and L. Rousseau, *La Théologie québécoise contemporaine (1940-1973): genèse de ses producteurs et transformations de son discours* (Québec: Université Laval, 1977) 145.

⁶*Ibid.*, 152.

⁷John S. Moir, "The Problem of a Double Minority: Some Reflections on the Development of the English-Speaking Catholic Church in Canada in the Nineteenth Century," *Social History* 7 (1971) 53-67.

nadian Church was thought to be free from the heresies that were condemned. If they existed in Canada at all, they were to be found among Protestants.⁸

The church-state cooperation that was so much a part of Quebec history has had its impact in English-speaking Canada as well. In spite of occasional conflict and animosity, Catholic institutions were able to enter into varying relations with public universities. The Basilian Fathers at St. Michael's in Toronto and elsewhere were deeply involved in such typically Canadian arrangements. In the long run they were to have a considerable effect on the development of theology.

Although its concern was more philosophical than theological, an important step in the development of Canadian Catholic scholarship was the founding in 1929 under the inspiration of Etienne Gilson of an Institute of Medieval Studies at St. Michael's College.⁹ Soon recognized as a world-class institution for the study of medieval thought and society, it helped the English Canadian Church to achieve a sense of the importance of critical historical studies. The founding of a similar institute in Ottawa in 1930 had a comparable effect in French-speaking areas. The presence there during the first five years of Marie-Dominique Chenu was an important factor in influencing the course subsequently followed by French Canadian Dominicans.

In the 1960s St. Michael's, to take an example with which I am particularly familiar, expanded what was in fact the Basilian scholasticate into a faculty of theology offering in addition to its seminary program a M.A. and Ph.D. It was an important step in the development of lay theology in Canada. The program took on its own institutional identity for a decade or more under the name of the Institute of Christian Thought. In its focus on interdisciplinary studies it created a considerable interest and promised to produce a distinctively Toronto approach to the theological enterprise. Health problems, changing interests, lack of funds and a general shift in North American cultural patterns in the 70s brought the experiment to an end, but not before a new and far-reaching development had already begun, the Toronto School of Theology.

The TST is a quintessentially Canadian phenomenon. A federation of seven theological colleges representing four different denominations, it began in 1969 in an atmosphere of remarkable trust and openness. It has existed long enough to have passed through difficulties of various kinds, and to have grown in size and quality. As the founding generation withdraws from the scene the school is left with the challenge of renewing itself and deepening the extraordinary possibilities that it continues to offer to the Canadian Church for serious theology and that within an ecumenical context. Many of the theological degrees are now conjointly awarded by the member colleges and the University of Toronto. The programs are funded in part by government subsidies.

⁸Cf. Katherine Murtha, "Modernism and English Speaking Canadian Catholics: A Study in the Catholic Press in the Toronto Area at the Turn of the Century" (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 1985).

⁹Cf. Laurence K. Shook, *Catholic Post-Secondary Education in English-Speaking Canada: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 210-28.

The last twenty-five years have been traumatic ones for the Church in Quebec. It has, we saw, moved from a situation of Christendom to one marked by pluralism, secularization and all the liberal and consumer values taken for granted in the North American way of life. In English-speaking Canada the experience has been a different one. If Vatican II ushered in a period of change and in some cases of conflict, the massive immigration from Catholic countries in the postwar years has transformed the demographic and cultural map of English Canada. Although much present talk of multiculturalism is unrealistic in the long run, the old ideal of a WASP Canada has collapsed. A new Canadian identity is slowly being formed and a major element in it will be a variety of Catholic cultural experiences. English-speaking Catholics are no longer a minority; the challenge for them is to recognize it and to accept the social and cultural responsibility that goes with it.

Catholics in Canada have shared the experience of the two solitudes. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history records bitter squabbles between French and Irish Catholics over French-language schools outside of Quebec and over the linguistic nature of various dioceses. After a number of abortive attempts to establish some kind of common episcopal structure the Canadian Catholic Conference was formally set up in 1948. It blossomed after Vatican II and became an important instrument for conciliar renewal. The theological interests and European connections of the French allied to the more pragmatic and organizational approach of the English brought catechetical and liturgical reforms to Canadians more rapidly and more smoothly than in many other countries. Since 1971 and the preparations that took place for that year's Synod on social justice, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, as it is now known, has spoken out forcefully and concretely on a range of social issues. In the process it has done a great deal to further the development of a distinctively Canadian theology.

English-speaking Canadian Catholics have, on the whole, been remiss in the scholarly understanding of their own history and of their present situation. Gregory Baum, a German-born theologian who has made such a contribution to theology throughout North America, has been among the few Catholics in English-speaking Canada to do something in this area. Even his efforts, however, have been stimulated in part by the activity of the bishops' conference.¹⁰

There are reasons why English Canadian Catholicism has failed to such an extent to develop a consciously Canadian theological perspective. One of these is related to our traditional minority and colonial mentality. Another flows from the neo-scholastic tradition with its sense that theology transcends national boundaries. A third has to do with the fact that a number of religious orders in English-speaking Canada have been international in composition. Their members have crossed back and forth across the American-Canadian border and have not felt the need to refer in a systematic way to the Canadian context.

Institutionally, a center like the TST offers the English-speaking Canadian Church an important resource. It is one, however, that cannot be taken for granted.

¹⁰Cf. Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties and Forties* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1980) and Gregory Baum and Duncan Cameron, *Ethics and Economics: Canada's Catholic Bishops and the Economic Crisis* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1984).

Ecumenical relationships have to be worked at constantly. So does the attempt to do theology in a way that is responsible to both church and university. Over and above these general values, what is required at the moment is a greater sensitivity to the Canadian scene and to the need for an indigenous theology. Given our proximity to the United States and the issues that we share with it, as well as our traditional openness to Europe, such an emphasis will certainly not lead to provincialism. It will, however, help us to root our theology in our own culture and thus be of assistance to our Church in its daunting task of trying to proclaim the gospel message concretely and decisively in our world.

A particular effort should be made to break out of the two solitudes. English-speaking Canadians have a great deal to learn from the history, the thought and the struggles of the Quebec Church. Both linguistic groups cannot but be helped by a knowledge of and dialogue with the other as they attempt to speak to their respective cultures. Together these cultures and their interrelationship constitute a good part of what might be called the Canadian experiment.

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