

Profile

CLARIS EDWIN SILCOX (1888 -1961): Brave And Resolute Champion Of The City Of God by Alan Davies



I never met Claris Edwin Silcox, nor do I know anyone still alive who can claim his acquaintance. I know him only through his published and unpublished writings, which are plentiful. Certain impressions emerge: erudition; idealism; a high order of intelligence; a crusading spirit; fervent loyalties, both religious and political; a taste for polemics; a constitutional lack of tact; an opinionated frame of mind; a trace — but only a trace — of sanctimoniousness.

A son of a Congregationalist parsonage, the young Silcox absorbed the principles of this form of Canadian Protestantism. He worked hard at school. His high school valedictory address in Paris, Ontario (1903), in praise of the ancient art of oratory, assails the poor English of most politicians and suggests, in adolescent fashion, that such “dumb machines” should be expelled from parliament! Told at the University of Toronto that he possessed the “gift of lucidity”, he excelled in history, classics and English. He served as editor of the student paper, *The Varsity*, and composed the words of his university hymn, “The Blue and The White”, a mark of distinction.

After earning an honours B.A. in 1908, he pursued graduate studies in New England, acquiring an M.A. from Brown University, and an S.T.B. from Andover Theological Seminary. He took ordination to the Congregationalist ministry in that *entrepôt* of the U.S. navy, Newport, Rhode Island., retaining that denominational

affiliation for the rest of his life. All the same, he never changed his citizenship. His American sojourn was long but, as he later said, he was “incurably British”. Canada, with its British institutions, was always his true home, and in his mind “British liberty” and “Christian liberty” were more or less synonymous.

After some time in Congregationalist pastorates, he joined the (Rockefeller) Institute of Social and Religious Research in New York in 1925, and began his travels, first to Geneva in order to study European Christian youth movements, notably the YMCA, playing a part in organizing a world meeting on youth and Christianity that was held in Helsinki in 1926. Three years later, he toured Latin America to investigate the same concerns, as well as social and religious conditions in general. The intervening time was spent in sociological research, collecting the material for one of his two books, *Catholics, Protestants and Jews*, which was published in 1934. His other book, *Church Union In Canada: Its Causes And Consequences*, though researched later, was actually put out first, in 1931. Both works are similar, in that they are long and heavy, with statistics assembled, as someone wrote, with “mole-like drudgery”. They are important nonetheless.

Readers of *Touchstone* will be particularly interested in the character of his book on church union, for that work reinforced the way people in the United Church looked upon the newly-formed institution they were part of. He details the battles between the pro- and anti-union factions in the Canadian churches, especially among the Presbyterians, and the bitterness they often generated. With characteristic aplomb, Silcox assigns a “Scottish superiority complex” to those diehard Presbyterians who resisted the union — Scottish because the Presbyterians were mostly of Scottish and Irish extraction, whereas the Methodists and Congregationalists were largely English. This judgement, if intended seriously, was unfair; a valid case could be made for dissent beyond mere human intransigence. In any case, his account ends in a blaze of idealism: “In shaking off its sectarian shackles, [the United Church] has clothed itself with a real catholicity, which sees... a regenerated ecclesia into whose treasury each denomination of Christendom

may contribute its pearl of great price.” Church union, in other words, was both inevitable and consonant with the mind of God, an article of faith embraced by the pro-union enthusiasts in 1925, and their intellectual heirs in subsequent time. Today, one is not so certain.

Together with his family, Silcox returned to Canada in 1934 as general secretary of the Social Service Council of Canada, an ecumenical organization devoted to social regeneration by promoting Christian solutions to a mass of public problems: crime, temperance, gambling, housing and slum clearance, sexual morality, prison reform, motion picture reform, birth control, etc., — a vast and ever-expanding agenda. Since, to Silcox, all social issues were at root spiritual in nature, there was a double impetus to building a common front among the churches, the transformation of the human heart as well as the social order. It was his hope to unleash this single great moral voice. The crusader — he really was a crusader — was unafraid to tilt his lance at the multiple evils of the age. He assumed a position on everything, usually a strong position. A tireless speaker and writer who addressed countless meetings and wrote countless articles, he made himself a public figure despite the limited resources at his disposal. With his gift of lucidity and love of good oratory, he became something of a Christian gadfly, although his influence usually fell short of its aspiration. Theologically, he was a liberal in the classic Protestant mold. Consider these lines:

Christ still remains the pre-eminent man, the universal man, the peerless man, and the highest revelation ever made to us of that divinity that encircles to an unfathomable depth this stage of human life on which you and I beat out the message of our paltry but consequential days.

In 1938 he became involved with the now-forgotten World Alliance For International Friendship Through The Churches, a body interested in disarmament and peace education, although, unlike many of his contemporaries, he was never a pacifist — the huge loss of lives in the sinking of the *Lusitania* had affected him. However, he was certainly an internationalist, believing in both

the League of Nations and, as an ideal, a “League of Churches”, in other words what later became the Ecumenical Movement. In 1940 he resigned from the Social Service Council to become the director of the Canadian Conference of Christians and Jews, an office that he retained until 1946, after which he became a freelance journalist — a constant contributor to media columns. During this fateful decade, he lost his (first) wife, eldest daughter, and son to death, the last in a terrible motor accident. He died himself quite suddenly in May, 1961, at a meeting in St. Barnabas Anglican Church, Toronto, a workaholic to the end. His funeral oration at Rosedale United Church borrowed the inscription on Oliver Goldsmith’s tomb in Westminster Abbey: “He touched nothing that he did not adorn!”¹

Ideas

Silcox was a man of ideas. His early sermons reveal his intellectual bent. He would preach, for example, on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and it is evident that he had read them, if not in German. During his American years, he became deeply involved in inter-faith and inter-communal relations, and this interest caused him to examine the roots of antisemitism in Western society long before most Christians regarded the matter as important. Influenced by James Parkes, the great British Anglican scholar on Jewish-Christian relations, and the author of several seminal studies,² Silcox acknowledged — again ahead of his time — that Christianity and Judaism are “two parts of one whole”, making the division between the church and the synagogue “the first and most tragic” of the many schisms in Christian history. Like Parkes, and like Reinhold Niebuhr, he praised the Jewish passion for social justice as a priceless gift to the modern world. Like Parkes and Niebuhr also, he was against Christians trying to proselytize Jews. Versed in antisemitic classics such as H.S. Chamberlain’s *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, he grew alarmed at the rise of Jewish

¹Nullum tetigit quod non ornavit.

²Especially *The Conflict of the Church and The Synagogue* (1934).

persecution in Europe (signs of which he probably detected during his earlier European travels) and was increasingly concerned with the plight of the Jews seeking to flee the gathering storm. In 1933 he wrote a rebuttal to a pro-Nazi article that had appeared in *The New Outlook*, written by a young United Church graduate student at Marburg, Harold Hendershot. Hendershot actually approved of the fact that "... every deposed Jew means a job for a good Nordic German."³

Silcox put out a kind of manifesto, published in *Social Welfare* (the journal of the Social Service Council) in March, 1936, in which he decried the harsh treatment "meted out to the Jews, non-Aryan Christians... and various Gentiles deemed 'undesirables' by the present government of Germany." This enabled him to establish a bond with the Canadian Jewish Congress, addressing its third plenary session in Montreal later the same year. He spoke of the need for "new techniques" in the battle against the antisemites. When the Canadian National Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution was formed in 1938 under Senator Cairine Wilson, Silcox was instrumental in securing ecclesiastical support in the nation. In this fashion, he made himself the pre-eminent champion of the Jewish refugee cause in Christian Canada, campaigning courageously for their rescue in the xenophobic ethos of the decade. During his speaking tours he denounced both Quebec nationalism (the St. Jean-Baptiste Society had declared its hostility to Jewish immigration) and Anglo-Canadian nativism. Silcox compared 20th century European Jews to 17th century Huguenots who, cast out of France by Louis XIV, had much enriched the life

³ Silcox, "The German Psychosis", *The New Outlook* (August 16, 1933, p. 598). Hendershot's article, entitled, "The German Point of View" had appeared in the previous issue, August 9. I was able to speak with Hendershot a number of years ago about his early paean to the Third Reich. He expressed regret that "extremists" had taken over what he regarded as a legitimate reform movement in German society. He did not see his own youthful praise for the new order in 1933 as itself tainted with "extremism". Of course, he completely disavowed the subsequent crimes committed by the Nazis, but it's well for us to remember that he was not alone among Canadians in his initial ardour for the German "rebirth" under National Socialism.

of England. Invoking the popular racial assumptions of the time, Silcox exalted the Anglo-Saxon *spirit* — the spirit of freedom and fair play — over Anglo-Saxon *blood*, i.e., crude biological conceptions of race. His forceful speech on these themes delivered in Convocation Hall at the University of Toronto on March 21, 1939, reveals him at his best.⁴ Maurice Eisendrath, of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, described him as the “one indispensable, irreplaceable religious leader” of the day in Canada.

Not everyone, however, shared this opinion. In an interfaith dialogue held in 1928 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, he was attacked as a “narrow bigoted fool” by a furious Jewish participant, who took offense at some “frank” comments Silcox made about Jews (he prided himself on bluntness of speech, believing that Jews as well as Christians require “large doses of medicine”).⁵ Although his critic misunderstood his intent, one forms the impression that Silcox didn’t always perform well. Tact was not his strong point, nor was diplomacy. Once, in discussing bad public taste in movies, he called most people “morons”. Erroneously, in my opinion, he liked to compare Jewish anti-Christian feelings to Christian anti-Jewish feelings, as though they were two sides of the same coin. This failure to recognize the element of ideology in group prejudice caused him to dismiss the notion that the Christ-killer charge lay at the root of mediaeval Jew-hatred, and may quietly lie in its step-child, modern antisemitism.

More serious, in my mind, was his dogmatic view against Zionism, a topic he addressed with increasing frequency in his later years. His 1956 article on the Middle East in *The United Church Observer* was so hostile to Israel that it actually placed him under suspicion as a possible antisemite himself, or at least as a Christian in the grip of residual antisemitism.⁶ This accusation was misplaced, even if, in spite of his scholarly mind, he both simplified and falsified the Zionist idea, ignoring its multi-faceted character. In

⁴“Canadian Post-Mortem on Refugees.”

⁵In his view, “...there is nothing in the wide world to be gained by insisting on giving castor oil to the Christians and soothing syrup to the Jews.”

⁶“The Crisis in the Middle East” (January, 1956).

his eyes, the Balfour Declaration was a mistake and the Zionist state of Israel a misbegotten child of history. If, he declared once, the “ultra-Zionists” achieve their goals, World War III may ensue, a “Jewish war” in a far truer sense than World War II. This was the voice of a liberal of the old school, a man for whom universal ideals reigned supreme, and for whom anything tainted with “tribalism” signified spiritual regression.

Thus the younger Silcox supported the League of Nations, and the older Silcox nursed the dream of world government, including the creation of a “world police force” to enforce international law. He saw World War II in this light, as both a just war and a holy war — “a battle of the Cross against the Swastika”. Yet he was also capable of pragmatic realism, hesitating, for example, to support Canadian participation in military action against Italy when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Were he alive today, would he have supported the American invasion of Iraq, or the NATO military presence in Afghanistan? I suspect not. His idealism, however, sometimes overwhelmed his pragmatism, as illustrated by his belief in the doubtful notion of a “common Christian mind” among the churches, allowing them to forge a united front in society. This was the premise of the Social Service Council and its *raison-d’être*. On this basis, he directed his battles against “all the materialistic forces that refuse to see the wealth of sunlight on the hills of God”. And also on this basis, he plunged into highly contentious debates on, for example, sexual mores (what would he have made of same-sex marriage today?) and civil liberties (he appeared as a witness on behalf of Dorothea Palmer, a nurse charged in 1937 with supplying contraceptives to Catholic women in the Ottawa region). Despite his reformist affinities, he was critical of Christian socialism (e.g., the Fellowship For A Christian Social Order) because its apostles seemed uninterested in “changed lives”. Pietism, on the other hand, especially as exemplified by the Oxford Movement, suffered in his judgement from the opposite fault. When in one of its statements, the 1936 General Council of the United Church attempted to graft on each other the personal and social

aspects of the gospel, Silcox compared the result to the mythic figure of Daedalus whose “wings were attached to his shoulders with wax”.

When he resigned from the Social Service Council in 1940, Silcox did so a somewhat disappointed and disillusioned man. Having failed to organize a Christian common action on social issues, he thought his work “in vain”. Did he expect too much? In this grandiose conception he probably did; no single united Christian conscience on the scale that he sought was ever possible. Moreover, his great crusade to rescue European Jews did not succeed in changing the policies of the Mackenzie King government. In his later years he became a somewhat marginal figure, although he never totally disappeared from the public eye. In my judgment, he dissipated his energies by attempting too much; nothing, not even his work on Jewish-Christian relations, was fully consolidated, although its value remains. But, in spite of his faults and deficiencies,⁷ he was a force to be reckoned with, a brave and resolute champion of the City of God.

⁷In my mind, one deficiency was his entirely negative view of the theology of his contemporary, Karl Barth.