

Profile

SALEM GOLDWORTH BLAND, PART 2: 1903 – 1950 THE NEW CHRISTIANITY IN A NEW, DISTRESSFUL CANADA

by Richard Allen

In his first twenty-three years of ministry, Salem Bland had made an enviable name for himself as a preacher and platform figure with a scholarly bent and outspoken, liberating views. Destined now for a teaching post at Wesley College in Winnipeg, his reputation had gone before him. Despite the pressures of finding suitable living quarters and preparing lectures in Church History and New Testament, his first month found him giving three notable, wide-ranging, highly acclaimed public lectures that framed his vision and agenda for a prairie west now, at last, in the full flood of development. The year 1903 was one of those rare times of openness and possibility.

He predicted that prairie society would become one of catholicity and reconciliation, congenial to the new social ideas now advancing in the churches. The older parts of Canada had grown up in an age of individualism and the palms had gone to the strong and powerful, but this new emerging region should lead the nation into a time when the common people should come into their own. The fellowship of prairie churches would lead to church union, but the spirit of reconciliation could not stop there and leave untouched an economy that divided society on the basis of wealth and property. He did not mince words: We should be “great fools if we place human nature any longer under the dictates of private enterprise.” The three addresses clearly had some potential for provocation, especially for the Protestant commercial elite in the audience.

Bland was not long in meeting Methodists of wealth and

property among Winnipeg's professional and commercial elite. They were powerfully placed and dominated Wesley College's Board: J.A.M. Aikins, his host on arrival, was head of the city's most prestigious law firm; J.H. Ashdown was the "hardware king" of western Canada; R.T. Riley was President of the Board of Trade; and R.P. Roblin was the Conservative Premier of Manitoba and active in the grain trade. They and their colleagues were busy capturing the prairie "commons" for the international marketplace of industrial capitalism while Salem Bland was committed to an alternative vision based on the new spirituality of the social gospel. How long would they be comfortable with Principal Sparling's new catch?

Salem Bland's principal forum, of course, was Wesley College and its students. There is little record of his teaching, but he was thoroughly up-to-date and wide-ranging in his reading. The later testimony of his students was that "his classes were never dull—some others were." They were ready to be inspired by one whose master conviction about learning was that "culture is an enlargement of experience. It is the power gained to enter into other lives and modes of thought foreign to our own." His social gospel was clearly a subset of that conviction as were his many sermons on prayer. Prayer, he said, opened the soul to the soul of life itself, but the devotional life was necessarily one of fellowship because God's truth comes to us in fragments and we need to share those fragments with each other.

Bland's crippled leg precluded joining the students on the playing field or the hockey rink, but his Sunday morning YMCA meetings were immensely popular. He was a favourite at church young people's organizations, and he was a regular at the college Literary Society. In the latter role, he dared to observe that the arts—painting, novels, drama—were intended to enlarge human sympathies, and every mood of nature, the body, and social life

could be a means of grace. As for the social gospel, some, at least, had already been initiated. “Social solidarity,” one student wrote in the student paper, “is a maxim of sociologists. There is no such thing as purely individual righteousness.” Salem would press the point further: social institutions that were inimical to this spiritual quest called either for transformation or repudiation. Christianity, in a broad sense, was as inescapably political as it was spiritual.

Holding such views, Bland was soon active outside the College, a forceful influence in the Methodist and the General Ministerial Associations. As he had at the Montreal Conference, he convinced the Manitoba and Saskatchewan Conferences to engage in critical Bible study, although the Church at large had yet to authorize the practice. In 1904 he was one of the prime movers in creating a western Methodist weekly paper to monitor western developments and articulate the challenge of advanced Protestant thought and reform.

In 1905, Salem stepped up the pace of his public activity, accepting calls to speak in places like Moose Jaw, Carman, Emerson, and Portage la Prairie. A Christian Endeavour Youth Rally in Winnipeg called on him. He made his first contact with Winnipeg Labor, delivering his talk on evolutionary socialism to the Trades and Labor Council. When the Union of Canadian Municipalities met mid-year in Winnipeg, he launched a series of sermons on urban issues at prestigious Grace Methodist Church. When a church-based Municipal League was formed that year to tackle the issue of prostitution, he supported it, but was quick to castigate the middle class for its “out of sight, out of mind” posture and reminded one and all that, after all, the central issue facing the city was its great disparity of wealth.

Salem had for some time been a disciple of the great American anti-poverty prophet, Henry George, whose land

reform and taxation ideas had an international following. Salem joined local enthusiasts in the Single Tax and Direct Legislation League, and soon became its president. Given his views on women's rights and domestic relations, the Women's Political Equality League was quick to seek his public support and assistance, in the course of which he developed a close relationship with Nellie McClung, Mrs. A.V. Thomas, and their colleagues.

Social reform forces were gathering steam in Winnipeg and the West in these very years, partly as a result of problems inherent in the frenetic pace of western development and its economic ethics (or lack thereof), and partly a reflection of the advancing tide of progressive politics at large. In 1905, Protestant and secular reformers alike, campaigning for moral and sanitary reform, industrial conciliation, public power, land reform, women's suffrage, temperance and civic reform, laid siege to Roblin's Conservative government that had shown some partiality to liquor interests. Salem Bland was prominent among them, attacking Roblin in an open letter that was emblazoned in newspaper headlines. Aikins, a prominent Conservative, was furious and made an abortive move to have Bland removed from his teaching post. It was a sign of things to come!

By this time, however, Bland's reputation was spreading across the region—and, indeed, across the country. He was now accepting about fifty invitations a year to speak and preach. By 1907, his students were fanning out across the prairies. They claimed him as the single greatest influence of their college years and were dedicated to duplicating his message. Shortly there would be invitations from Toronto and Vancouver. He was much sought after by conferences of the Church for ordination sermons and lectures. Sherbourne Street Church in Toronto, whose leaders would soon be battling with the General Superintendent, Albert

Carman, over the higher criticism of the Bible, wanted Bland to fill in during a protracted mid-year absence of their preacher, George Jackson. And, at the request of President Robert Falconer, he delivered a sermon on religion and science at the University of Toronto.

In 1906, Bland's theological reflections took a major shift in direction. Just as the Pauline epistles had earlier given way to the Gospel of John, whose incarnational theology and naturalistic images seemed more congenial to new social evolutionary insights, now the encounter with the works of Adolph Harnack turned him back to the Synoptic gospels and the historical Jesus. In a series of major addresses, Bland spoke with great passion on "The Kingdom of God in the Preaching of Today." He was excited by the connection of a political analogy with the heartland of Jesus' teaching: it was a "doctrine of social Christianity summing up all schemes of social reform, all municipal and national action, gathering them into one organic whole, rooting them in Christ."

However, reaction to progressive religious thinking had been growing since the late century. Conservative evangelicals in the prairie conferences of the Church, picking up the hue and cry, were now becoming alarmed over Bland's influence. A.W. Henry of Winnipeg put it succinctly—"the young men of the church are full of Bland"—and wrote to Carman suggesting that some way be found to rein him in. Whatever Carman thought, Salem had powerful friends in court. Samuel Dwight Chown, a boyhood friend, was now Methodists' leading figure in moral and social reform and soon would become General Superintendent himself. Despite the critics, at the 1910 General Conference of the Church, Bland was named Chair of the Education Committee, whose report after a stirring debate legitimated the teaching of the higher criticism in the Church's colleges.

In that same year, the attack came from another quarter. It was again an election year. When the handsome, articulate Fred Dixon announced his candidacy as an Independent Progressive candidate, Salem publicly endorsed him. Dixon, like Bland, was a leading member of the Single Tax and Direct Legislation League. J.H. Ashdown, a prominent Liberal, “hardware king of western Canada,” and Chair of Wesley’s Board, was not amused, and publicly rebuked Bland for involving himself in a political contest.

Salem was hardly prepared to defer to the Ashdowns of Winnipeg, however. One of his cardinal beliefs was that the Christ, as the incarnating power of God, was at work “outside the camp” as he put it. It was a conviction that underlay his support of secular movements of reform, his reading of and preaching on contemporary literature, and his outspokenness on the political culture of the time. In 1912 and 1913, he readily accepted invitations to address the conventions of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan Grain Growers’ Associations. These “farmers’ parliaments” were powerful bodies. They had overseen the creation of vast systems of cooperative grain marketing and were moving on to a more comprehensive agenda. It was yet another sign of Bland’s rhetorical powers that in Saskatchewan he provoked a movement among delegates for a new political party that was barely contained by leaders not yet ready for that step.

When later that year he learned that prominent churchmen were among the gouging landlords of the area, he used the occasion of an invitation from Grace Methodist Church to preach a hard hitting sermon based on a novel, *The Inside of the Cup*, by the American author Winston Churchill. The message was that such members of the church warranted Jesus’ charge against the Pharisees -- religiously white on the outside, but filthy dregs on the inside. Not only was Bland never invited to preach at Grace

again, but its minister, Rev. Dr. Hughson, tried to get the ministerial association to call Bland to account, claiming he was hurting the church. Eventually the association asked Bland to “explain his position,” which he did at length, to the satisfaction of the assembled ministers.

The end of the western boom in 1912-1913 led prairie reformers of all kinds into increasingly outspoken and radical positions. Bland was no exception. In his view, his vision for the prairies was being compromised by fellow Protestants who subscribed to a malignant economic ethic. His readings in British and American progressive social criticism and his association with Winnipeg Labour, left-leaning liberals, and socialists were pressing him leftward.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Bland did not follow J.S. Woodsworth and others into pacifism, but after researching the background of pre-war international politics, he decided to support the war effort. He was outspoken in using the slogans of the war—a war for the defence of democracy against “Kaiserism”—to assault the very same phenomena in Canadian economic and political life. He readily joined the campaign to conscript wealth before manpower, and when there was evidence of profiteering in the production of food for troops and British consumers, his public criticism led to his being called before the bar of the House of Commons to defend his charges.

Meantime, military recruitment had heavily depleted enrolment at Wesley College, drastically reducing revenues and forcing the Board into remedial action. When in June of 1917 it was announced that Salem Bland was one of the two faculty members to be retired, his dismissal became a *cause celebre* across the West. There was widespread agreement in the prairie press that the College was “sacrificing the strongest man west of the Great Lakes” and that the corporate elite of Winnipeg was

using the crisis in college finances to be rid of someone who for years had pushed forward “every movement for the common weal.” The Manitoba and Saskatchewan Methodist Conferences were in an uproar, and the latter commissioned the Chief Justice of Saskatchewan to chair a public inquiry into the case. No evidence of a conspiracy against Bland could be found, but there was no convincing reason as to why he had been selected. Salem, with widespread agreement, continued to believe that the real reasons had never been given.

Ironically, the dismissal served only to heighten Bland’s popularity and influence. *The Grain Growers’ Guide* offered him a prairie-wide pulpit writing a column, “The Deeper Life.” The Chautauqua organization paired him up with Henry Wise Wood, the Alberta Farm leader, also a fervent believer in a social gospel, and toured them around the prairies in the summer of 1918. Through 1916 – 17 he campaigned for a national non-partisan government to prosecute the war and, with his colleague, William Osborne, launched a New Canada Movement, only to have it swallowed up in the drive for Union Government in late 1917. At an independent, non-partisan convention in mid 1917 he was nominated as the candidate for Winnipeg Centre, but when a second convention organized by the Unionist parties nominated a returned soldier, Salem withdrew his name, in deference, from a contest he could well have won.

Two further events, in 1918 and 1919, testify to the height of his influence. When the Methodist General Conference of 1918 passed social and economic proposals that were farther left than any party manifesto prior to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1933, Bland was credited with the wording, declaring that the “ethics of Jesus demand nothing less than the transference of the whole economic life from a basis of competition and profits to one of cooperation and service.” Not

surprisingly, the resolution soon came under attack by businessmen in the church, with S.R. Parsons, Past-President of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, wondering if the church was "economically worthwhile."

In February of 1919, Salem was called upon again to give the keynote speech at the Saskatchewan Grain Growers' convention. Once again the challenge was to propel the farmers into political action in the form of a new Progressive party, this time with the full support of the organizers. His support for the Union government had weakened as it fell back into old political ways, and he had high hopes that agrarian idealism and practical business sense would bring a renewing spirit to Canadian politics.

1919 was also the year of the Winnipeg General Strike. When the strike broke out in May, there were those who claimed that Bland was one of the perpetrators, but his recorded statements indicate otherwise and, in any case, he had already, in February, said his farewells to the prairies and was now located in Toronto as minister of Broadway Methodist Tabernacle adjacent to the University of Toronto.

In one of his last articles in *The Grain Growers' Guide*, "The Greatness of Times of Change," Bland observed that "a new, unquiet, distressful, incalculable Canada is upon us." And he would shortly observe in one of his memorable metaphors that, in the aftermath of the war the countries of the western world were like "storm-tossed sailors who arrive ashore only to find the land heaving with earthquakes."

The Winnipeg strike had its echoes across the nation, including Toronto. Known to be close to some of the Winnipeg strike leaders, Salem was asked to address the Toronto Labor Forum. Big contributors at his new congregation, Broadway, like the hardware merchant Mike Vokes, were alarmed and called a sparsely attended mid-summer Board meeting and called for his

dismissal, charging that he preached labour sermons. Chown, now General Superintendent of the Canadian church, was quick to tell the Board that it was not their role to dictate what their minister should preach. The same group, six months later, charged that Salem's prayers were not patriotic enough. Eventually cooler heads prevailed and, at the end of his four year term, the congregation asked that he be appointed for a further year – only to have Conference deny the request.

It was a rude initiation to Toronto, but it was followed by further controversy when Bland published his small book, *The New Christianity, or The Religion of the New Age* (1920). The book might well have confirmed Bland's Broadway critics, for he argued that the labour movement was being used by God to bring a new sense of solidarity and social purpose to the world. With what he called the "overflow of brotherhood" from the wartime experience and the long term rise of democracy, a new world was in the making. As for Protestantism, it had become captive to an ambitious burgher class, focused on individual characters and industrial values. The end of the Protestant era was at hand, but the church at large would be renewed in the rich mixing of American, African, Oriental, and Latin American cultures. There were numerous good reviews of the book, though churchmen of various denominations were divided on its merits. Bland himself was especially disappointed that Canadian Methodist publications had "not a good word for it." What he did not know was that a Royal Canadian North-West Mounted Police agent had persuaded ranking Methodist officers that the book would contribute to the unrest of the times and should be downplayed.

Disappointed though he may have been over the controversies that played around him and his analysis of the times, he remained convinced of the rightness of his course. In the 1921 election he campaigned across central and eastern

Ontario, speaking on behalf of Labor and Progressive party candidates, and especially for James Simpson, the Toronto Socialist councillor who had been a big name in the Methodist Epworth League.

Left without a “station” from 1923 to 1925, Bland gave his full time, with official church support, to bi-weekly stands in cities across the nation promoting a new social evangelism and “The Message of the Real Jesus.” Again there were critics, like *The Montreal Gazette*, that charged in a headline, “Bland Denies Divinity of Our Lord,” but the ministers at the Lakehead, among whom Bland spent a month in 1924, were full of praise. Bland’s answer to *The Gazette* was that, if incarnation did not involve limitation, how could we know God at all in Jesus.

In the meantime, the on-again off-again church union negotiations were now on a productive course. Ironically, without a pastoral charge from 1923-25 and despite his long and ardent advocacy of the church union cause, Bland seems to have been ineligible to be a delegate to the grand event in June, 1925. Shortly he would be stationed at the former Western Congregational church in Toronto where an earlier pastor, W.E.S. James, had inaugurated a “Church of the Social Revolution.” Salem continued to read widely, preach new sermons (now numbering into the 500s), and accept diverse speaking and preaching invitations. In 1926, Salem and his cousin and long-time housekeeper, Emma Lavell, were married in New York by his friend, Harry Emerson Fosdick, famous for his defence of liberal Christianity in its encounter with the rampant fundamentalism of the decade. It was in these years that he met Lawren Harris who was so impressed by Bland’s reputation, and perhaps more by his appearance, that he wanted to do his portrait—one of the few he would do. A marvelous study of force of character and self-discipline, it hangs at the Art Gallery of

Ontario. Harris was a Theosophist, and Mrs. Bland was sure they spent more time talking religion than in posing and painting! After three years at Western, at age sixty-nine, Bland took superannuation.

In the latter twenties, the social gospel, which Salem Bland had done so much to pioneer, went into decline in the face of returning prosperity, the administrative tasks of launching a new national church, the growing secularization of social work, and the collapse of Progressive party politics in 1926. Bland, however, had already begun a new career of twenty years writing for *The Toronto Star*. At the opening of the decade, *The Star* had seen Bland “looming as one of the most unique and interesting figures in Canadian Methodism.” Now, with more time at his disposal, he was given *carte blanche*, in regular ‘op ed’ pieces under the byline of *The Observer*, to interpret the world of thought and action to readers of *The Toronto Star* and *Star Weekly* (circulated nationally).

In September of 1929, with the stock market collapsing, the Toronto Board of Control, fearing demonstrations in the streets, proposed putting such demonstrations under the control of the Chief of Police. Bland hastened to appear before the Board to oppose what would obviously become a straitjacket on legitimate protest. Not long after, when a street corner socialist evangelist was arrested, Salem took his place for several days, defying the police.

It was the beginning of ten years of depression that called for radical changes in the social, political, and economic order of things. Despite his age, Salem Bland did not let “his sword sleep in his hand.” During that decade he gave close to a hundred sermons and addresses calling for a renewal of the church and a reconstructed social order. He spoke and wrote for the young, addressed student conferences, and publicized the beginning

movements for a new politics. The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, proposing a radical Christianity that began where the social gospel left off, considered him their patron saint. It was his speech at the landmark Toronto United Church Conference of 1934 that turned the tide in favour of a resolution condemning capitalism as inherently unChristian. And when the CCF was organized in Ontario, it was headlined in one Toronto paper as the “Woodsworth, Irvine, McPhail, Bland Party.”

Mid-decade, when the clouds of war on the international horizon were ominous, Salem Bland (with Tommy Douglas and others) threw in his lot with the popular front organizations, the League against War and Fascism, and the Committee in Defence of Spanish Democracy, of which he became Honorary Chairman. A children’s home in Spain was named after him—and there are those who credit him with sending Norman Bethune, of Spanish Civil War fame, to China. As war approached, he once again rejected the pacifist option and strongly supported the Allied cause.

Domestic and international politics, however, do not fully sum up Bland’s last truly active decade. A cogent voice in the Toronto Ministerial Association, he promoted closer relations between Christians and Jews, and anticipated United Church policy by some sixty years, arguing that Judaism had not been superseded by Christianity, but had still its ongoing historic role and destiny. He continued to have a hopeful view of the future—humanity’s best days were still before it. Jesus remained the great revelation of what human nature was all about and would not fail to come into his own.

In a career of seventy years, he had become one of the truly liberating Canadian minds of his time. He was a major tap root of progressive religion in his early embrace of Darwin, his popularizing of the higher criticism, his promotion of a social

gospel and Christian socialism, his advocacy of progressive revelation, his focus on the historical Jesus, and his early intimations of process theology. It is reasonable to conclude that, in his own life and in the lives and works of those who carried his social and religious vision forward, he exercised a significant influence in the way Canadians thought of themselves, both as persons and collectively as a society. A resolute will inhabited his disabled body. He lived long enough into the post-second world war period to see the beginnings of the Cold War and took his last stand speaking in 1949 at a large rally in Maple Leaf Gardens on behalf of James Endicott's Peace Congress. He died on Feb. 6, 1950 in his ninety-first year.

necessity of the institutional? Or, to rephrase Milbank's question, how according to the Illich-Taylor model, does one comport oneself in an enfolded way *vis-a-vis* institutions or codified rules? If institutions and rules are inescapable for earthly politics and ethics, how does Incarnation reshape them agapeically? Or, alternatively, what does an "embodied" institution or law look like?

I think these are important questions to ask of the Taylor-Illich perspective, not simply to point out the shortcomings of the view, but rather to identify possible points of departure for further political, moral or theological engagements. Of course, we should not be surprised that Taylor offers no easy answers here given his recognition that the eschatological character of Christianity implies that humans live in the "not yet," in a time when the extent of God's reconciliation in the world remains not fully disclosed.

Though it may be a shortcoming of *A Secular Age* that it does not provide any straightforward answers on this issue, the book does present an interesting point of departure for those interested in the various intersections of religion and politics. At the very least, one major achievement of Taylor's book is that it highlights the ways that Christianity itself is implicated in the sidelining of the body, characteristic of secular modernity, and equally importantly that it directs its readers to valuable religious resources that can remedy the movement to excarnation. In all of this, he departs radically from those who conceive of secularity in terms of the mere subtraction of religion, a view which *A Secular Age* demonstrates to be far too narrow.

— Carlos Colorado