

Reviews

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CHRISTIAN CANADA?

**by Mark Noll Vancouver:
Regent College Publishing,
2007.**

In this little book, noted American church historian Mark Noll asks how did Canada, which was more religious than the United States before World War II, end up significantly less so 50 years later? Noll addressed the question in an article for *Church History*, journal of the American Society of Church History (75 [June 2006]: 245-273) and Regent College Publishing has reissued the article as a 57-page book.

Noll meant the *Church History* piece to serve as a brief introduction for American scholars to the differences between the religious development of Canada and the United States. He admits that he himself is an outsider, but a sympathetic one, and relies heavily on “the splendid array of marvelous historical studies” produced by Canadian historians. Consequently, he presents the evolution of Canadian Christianity against the backdrop of its U.S. counterpart. He notes the major differences,

including the greater diversity of Christian denominations alongside greater religious individualism in the U.S., the lower participation and membership rates in Canada, the dramatically different nature of Canadian conservative evangelicals and their more muted public voice, as well as the different roles that Christianity has played in public life in both countries. He ties these differences to the different historical evolutions of each society. While there is nothing new in Noll’s historical account, he offers a readable, and enjoyable, introduction to the religious development of Canada that both ministers and scholars working in the US and Canada will appreciate.

There are two types of shortcomings in Noll’s “book” (really an extended essay). The first type has to do with his history of Canadian Christianity. It is a presentation that is both pithy and useful, but Noll focusses too heavily on developments from Ontario and Quebec. While the Atlantic provinces and the West are mentioned, most examples come from Central Canada. Moreover, almost nothing is said about the impact of Christianity on Canada’s aboriginal peoples, most of whom are Christian. The same critique might be leveled at Noll for almost ignoring the participation of women in the development of a Christian

Canada. I can sympathize with Noll on these types of lapses; as I found in my own work, a brief introduction of this nature constrains the author in what can and cannot be covered.

The other shortcoming comes from Noll's own approach to the history of Christianity, an approach that takes religion seriously and locates the cause for religious change inside of religious institutions and communities. After examining some of the social forces that shaped the changing religious and social landscape of Canada, Noll writes: "But for dramatic changes within religious life it is most important to examine changes with religious life itself" (p. 37). I doubt this is always true. External factors, such as war, conquest, plague, and other social changes have often had a greater impact on the evolution of Christian communities than internal developments. And so it is true with modernization; the churches could not control nor contend with the processes of modernity (industrialization, urbanization, individualization, and the growth of state power, to name a few).

Perhaps it is because I am a sociologist of religion who has a deep respect for the power of "power" (especially the power of social institutions such as the state and corporations) that I do not find Noll's explanation compelling. As

early as World War I, government and business had greater influence on the values and beliefs of Canadians than the churches — as Canadian religious leaders often lamented. Explanations of the secularization of Canadian society should be tied first to these external forces and then considered in terms of internal developments — although as Noll points out, this is a chicken-or-the-egg type judgment where either/or answers are bound to fall short.

Despite my disagreements with a number of Noll's judgements, I think that ministers, students and scholars will find this introduction to Canadian Christianity useful. It is engaging and well-argued. Noll understands the complexities of his topic and has worked through an impressive number of the most important studies in this field. It would have been useful to include these in a bibliography so that scholars unfamiliar with this body of literature on Canadian Christianity could use it as a resource. If this book did nothing more than to serve as a guide to that impressive body of literature, one could conclude that Noll has produced a worthwhile little volume that deserves to be read by those engaged in Christian ministry, as well as by students of religion in universities, theological colleges, and seminaries.

— David Seljak