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CANADIAN CULTURE

AND THE GOSPEL

What is the relationship of the Gospel and Canadian culture? A prior consideration might be why we should even raise such a question? In the minds of many people it is presupposed that, by its nature, the Gospel is universal and hence both theology and the work of the Church is universal. This means that the aim of theology (the language of the Church) is to speak truths that are universally true. Theology must hence ignore the individual idiosyncrasies of peoples or groups and concentrate upon what is true of humanity in general.

Greek Philosophical Presuppositions

But the presupposition that theology ought to think in universal terms comes from the influence of Greek and Germanic philosophical traditions. As Christianity moved into the Graeco-Roman world, it adopted the philosophical presuppositions of that world and Christian theologians attempted to think in universal, ontological and metaphysical terms. Germanic philosophy and theology continue this way of thinking. This form of thought meant that human nature is more real than individual men or women. To be really true, a truth had to be equally evident to all persons everywhere regardless of their individuality, their uniqueness or their particular history.

A theology constructed after the model of Graeco-Germanic philosophy had to seek to construct universal systems of thought. It sought doctrinal formulations and ways of speaking that would be seen as equally true regardless of where or when spoken. Its ethics were constructed upon the basis of "natural law" which meant the law of human nature. Given human nature, certain actions are always right and others are always wrong regardless of circumstances because human nature is the same everywhere. We must quickly pass beyond individual differences of times and places, or of cultural heritages and penetrate to the basic nature of human beings.

In recent years there has been a strong reaction against this Graeco-Germanic way of doing theology. Thus we find theologians, like James Cone, developing a black theology, built upon the unique experience of the black people in America.

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1. Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, (editors), *New Theology No. 9: The New Particularisms*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), pp. 7-23.
 2. See James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969); also James Cone, *Liberation: A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970).

We find attempts at writing a theology of women, a theology of youth, a theology of America and so on. In such a context, it is inevitable that some will ask for a Canadian theology.

Return to Hebraic Thought Processes

Is the request for a particular theology justified or is the break with traditional universalism a last gasp of a dying discipline? The defenders of theological particularism argue that what they are doing is to turn from Graeco-Germanic ways of thinking to Hebraic and Biblical ways of thinking. When we look at the Bible we do not find a set of universal truths that drop down from heaven and are addressed "To Whom It May Concern." On the contrary, we find a God who speaks and reveals Himself in the concrete life and experiences of a people. God did not first address all of humanity, He chose a particular people and in the vicissitudes of their history, the rise and fall of their kings, their slavery and deliverance from it, in their captivity and their return from it God made His will and person known. In the New Testament God's Word became incarnate in a particular Man and in His life, death and resurrection there was the ultimate revelation of God. It is no accident that Graeco-Germanic ways of thinking have had difficulty with the Incarnation. How can the shifting sands of historical events bear an eternal truth?

Greek philosophy set the ideal of a static, eternally unchanging truth which means that its thought had to move to abstraction. But the Hebrew thought in dynamic and concrete terms. When Jesus said, "I am the truth", He made a statement that was incomprehensible to Greek philosophy. How could a concrete existing person be truth? The Greeks knew that there was a God because the universal reason of man, working from the fact that there is motion in the world, is forced to see that there must be a first mover. Anyone anywhere can reason to this inevitable conclusion. But the Jews knew that there was a God because He had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and Christians knew that there was a God because He had raised His Christ from the dead.

Of course the Bible does move to a universalism. The Old Testament looks forward to the time when all nations shall come to worship the Lord and in the New Testament the Risen Christ sends His disciples to preach the Gospel to all the nations. But this universalism is quite different from the Graeco-Germanic metaphysical truth. When all nations come to Jerusalem to worship they are not to worship the God that is known by all rational men, they are to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, to be converted to the Gospel in the New Testament means that we become part of the "new Israel", grafted on to the particular people through whom God has made Himself known. As Christians we find that Hebrew history becomes our history; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob become our fathers in the faith.

If we take the Hebraic way of thinking, with its dynamic and concrete expressions, we must see that the Gospel has to be directed to the experience of the hearers. It does not fall from heaven as a universal truth, but it becomes

incarnate in the life and experience of those to whom it is addressed. Luther profoundly understood this when he emphasized the importance of preaching. The Church, he said, is not a “pen house”, built on a written word, but a “mouth house”. The word of Scripture comes to life when it is preached, that is, spoken in and to the experience of a particular people. The Word of God is not a matter of dead marks on a page but a living relationship that occurs when the Word is preached and heard in a concrete situation.

If we take seriously the Biblical way of thinking we must be concerned about the question of the Gospel and Canadian culture. We have to ask how we can preach and witness so that God’s Word becomes a living word in the context within which we are called to speak. We must strive to understand the uniqueness of the situation that is Canada. This is not something that we have done too well in the past. Our theological thinking has been imported at first from Europe and more recently from the United States. Without pretending that we have nothing to learn from what others have said, the fact still remains that we need to examine what their insights must mean within the context of Canadian life and culture.

Within the limits of this paper I cannot hope to develop a Canadian theology. At best I can only draw attention to a few of the unique features of the Canadian situation vis-a-vis the United States. I see my contribution not in terms of making a definitive statement on Canadianism but to stimulate many others to continue the task of attempting to understand the situation to which Canadian churches are called to proclaim the Gospel.

Canadian Beginnings

The understanding of Canada must begin with the fact that, as a nation, we had a very undramatic beginning. The American Revolution is still very much alive in the life of the American people. In fact, it holds for them a place comparable to the Exodus in the life of the Jewish people.

Canada had no revolution and we cannot point to any dramatic point at which we came into being as a nation. Like Topsy, Canada just grew. In our beginnings there was a war, but Canada did not fight it; it was an imperialistic conflict in which England and France fought for the spoils on our soil. So long as a third of our population is French Canadian, we cannot make Wolfe into the kind of hero that George Washington is to our Southern neighbors.

Canada can date its Confederation and the signing of the British North America Act but that does not signify any sharp break or development. Canadian independence had been growing for many years before that and it had to continue to grow for many years after that. And in some very significant ways Canada never has known independence.

Americans also find their identity in the conquering of their frontier which is appropriately called the “Wild West”. Although the Wild West may be a mixture

of fact and myth, it nonetheless affords a powerful basis for contemporary American identity. Canada, too, had a frontier but somehow it failed to be productive of helpful myths.

A few years ago Canadian television tried to build a series around Canadian frontiersmen like Radisson and Groseilliers. But it was a dismal flop. After audiences had thrilled to the exploits of Davy Crockett, Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Geronimo, Sitting Bull and General Custer, what Canadian chapter of history could make a successful television series? The National Dream did prove to be a fascinating series but it was hardly the material to fill Canadians with a sense of their identity.

This lack of a dramatic beginning to the nation with which Canadians can identify has had both good and bad results. Canadians do not need to apologize for their relatively peaceful beginnings. Precisely because of its undramatic beginnings, Canada has a valuable heritage. Our history does not lead us to glorify violence or to see it as a basic solution to problems that beset us. Furthermore, Canadians are not as prone as most nations to a nationalistic chauvinism. Canadians do not take naturally to methods of confrontation. Our way is to find a compromise that will get us around problems. Canadians are thus ideally suited to the role of peacekeepers in which we have been cast in recent years. These qualities give us good reason for hoping that we may build one Lutheran Church in Canada before it is achieved in the United States.

The bad side is that Canadians lack a national identity. We are never quite sure just who or what we are. In such a situation, Canadians often can find self-identity only in being against someone else. In the past a spirit of anti-British feeling was often all that Canadians had in common. More recently, anti-Americanism has offered itself as the most direct route to a Canadian identity.

Closely allied with this lack of national identity is a deep sense of inferiority on the part of Canadians. We are apologetic about our weather, about our economy, our politics, our arts and culture. When I and my family decided to come back to Canada after some twenty years in the United States, we were appalled to be asked time and time again, "Why would you ever come back here?" Regardless of their anti-Americanism, Canadians tend to see America as the promised land and they cannot quite understand why someone who had established himself in the promised land should want to return to Canada's frozen shores.

A Nation of Minorities

There is still another reason for Canada's lack of national identity. It arises from a feature of which, as Canadians, we are justly proud. The United States and Canada are both nations of immigrants and in both cases the immigrants have come in significant numbers from scores of countries. But the philosophies of immigration have been radically different in the two countries. The United States has aimed to be a "melting pot" in which all immigrants were encouraged to become fully assimilated into the American way of life as quickly as possible.

Ethnic groups that have not assimilated have often met with serious discrimination. In Canada, however, we have taken pride in keeping our inherited traditions. We have not felt that there is any contradiction between being a good Canadian and remaining loyal to the country from which we have originated.

The rejection of the “melting pot” theme in Canada is no doubt rooted in the fact that our founding fathers were two nations and Canada has been officially bi-lingual from the beginning. However, as history has developed, there has arisen a tension between the official bi-lingualism of Canada and the emphasis upon retaining the ethnic traditions. In Western Canada there are only small pockets of French-Canadian settlements but there are large settlements of Ukrainians, Germans and other nationalities. Western ethnic groups, keenly aware of the value and importance of their language and culture, resent the preferential treatment received by the little groups of French Canadians. In Western Canada we are enthusiastic about being bi-lingual but it does not make much sense to us that French should be *the* second language that is recognized by governmental agencies, etc.

Church-State Relationships

Canada also is lacking in a sense of national identity because it does not have a dominant religion. In the United States the flame of Protestantism may, at times, flicker low. Protestant churches are easily taken over to serve the demands of civil religion. But the fact remains that the United States is a Protestant country. Canada is close to being divided equally between the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations.

This religious division in Canada is, to a great extent, the cause of an interesting relationship between Church and state. American churchmen never cease to marvel at what seems to them to be a serious loss of the separation of church and state in Canada. Parochial schools here can be supported by public taxation, an ultimate horror to Americans. It never ceases to amaze Americans when they learn that even a theological seminary in Canada can and does receive state funds.

Paradoxically, despite the blurring of church-state separation in Canada, there seems to be less danger in Canada of the church being taken over as the expression of civil religion. Canadian politicians are not nearly as likely to end political speeches with a pious note of religious terminology. Canadian churches are a little less prone than American churches to bless the national way of life.

The other side of the different church-state relationship in Canada is that clergymen have made a considerable contribution as politicians in this country. Canada's socialist movement, beginning in the old C.C.F., was never without a considerable sprinkling of clergymen among its leaders. The social gospel theology was an American product but in the United States the social gospel remained very much an academic exercise. It was in Canada that the social gospel movement really became a political power.

The social gossellers were not the only religious spokesmen to get into the political arena. In Alberta “Bible Bill” Aberhardt, a fundamentalist radio evangelist, founded the Social Credit Party and took over the Province of Alberta. Later his mantle, both as radio preacher and premier, fell upon Manning. Social Credit reigned supreme in Alberta from the thirties to the seventies. Throughout its three decades of rule, Social Credit was a fascinating mixture of fundamentalist piety and reactionary politics.

In the United States the separation of church and state has made it difficult, if not impossible, for religion to bear any decisive influence in the political sphere. But in Canada there is not the same suspicion of the clergyman or religious groups that would try to bring religious ideals into politics.

Pragmatic Socialism

Partly because of the religious influences described above and partly for a host of other reasons, Canada has been much more open to social welfare legislation than the United States has been. In the United States there is a basic fear of government. Anytime that the government does more than support the armed forces and deliver the mail, someone is sure to raise the cry of “creeping socialism”. “Socialism” or “communism” are words that send a thrill of fear down the spine of any red-blooded American. Canadians have always been more pragmatic. Partly through necessity, the government in Canada has always been knee deep in the ownership of various organizations that would be sacred to free enterprise in the United States. The Canadian National Railway has long been operated by the government. Saskatchewan has had a government telephone system from its beginning. The socialist movement has played an important role in Canadian politics and it forms the government in three of our provinces.

But there are a host of paradoxes in the Canadian scene. Despite the respectability of socialist ideas and the advanced welfare state, Canada only put a tax on capital gains two years ago. There are far less controls on monopoly industry in Canada than in the United States. Many an American capitalist would look with envy upon the privileges of “free enterprise” still allowed in Canada.

Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination in Canada is a widely prevalent reality from which we manage to hide our eyes most of the time. In fact, Canadians take great pride in being superior to the United States with its racial problems. In the U.S. racial discrimination has tended to be open, often taking a legal form. In Canada the discrimination is kept unofficial and relatively hidden from view. When it does surface it is quickly forgotten.

The Canadian self-satisfaction about race relations is nourished by a comparison of the frontier history in Canada with that of the United States. We

read a book like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*³ and thank God that we are not like our violent neighbors to the south who have been racist from their beginnings.

Certainly it is a fact that, while the U.S. had a long history of Indian wars with a great deal of bloodshed, the Canadian frontier was tamed with an amazingly small amount of violence. The reasons for this were many, however, and not all of the reasons indicate moral superiority upon the part of Canadians. For example, the NWMP, which patrolled the West, were very small in numbers and could not afford the luxuries of provocation as could the U.S. Cavalry. Also the western settlement in Canada was slow and for a long time the settlers were so sparsely scattered that they had to bend over backwards to keep on friendly terms with the Indians. But when all is said and we have paid Canada every possible compliment for its handling of the Indian situation, one fact stands out clearly. The end result in Canada was almost identical to that in the U.S. The native people were robbed of their land, their way of life was destroyed, they were forced onto reservations that inevitably consisted of lands that were of lesser interest to the white race. They were forced into degradation and denied an opportunity to build self-respect or a viable way of life. Insofar as a pickpocket is ethically somewhat more desirable than a mugger, Canada's winning of the West is ethically superior to that of the U.S. But that is about all that we can say for it.

Pride of Righteousness

This leads me to one final comment about Canadian culture. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his brilliant analysis of sin as pride⁴, found that there are three forms of pride. First there is pride of power in which a person exalts himself over others by having power over them. This has been the particular temptation of the U.S. in recent decades, as it has been one of the world's most powerful countries. If power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely then Canadians are pretty safe. As we saw earlier, Canadians have never really had control of their own affairs. Much less have they been able to control the lives of others. Secondly there is pride of knowledge and here neither the U.S. nor Canada faces any particular temptations. There is a problem most evident in European settings. But the third form of pride (and in Niebuhr's opinion the worst) is pride of righteousness or religious pride. And this is prevalent in Canada. It is the form of pride that goes into the temple to thank God that it is not as other men.

Canadians have, as a nation, an innocence. We are innocent primarily because we are impotent. And thus we have turned our impotence into the basis for a claim to virtue. Similarly, we are not as wealthy as the United States and again we turn this into an excuse for a feeling of superiority over the "materialistic" American.

3. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), I, Chapter 7.

Communicating the Gospel in Canada

I began by saying that I did not expect to do more than to stimulate others to continue the task of exploring the Canadian situation. Hopefully we have done enough to achieve this. But, having done it, we must ask what it means for the communication of the Gospel.

For one thing, it means that we have to take seriously the uniqueness of the Canadian situation and not suppose that theologies or programs developed elsewhere can be neatly applied to the Canadian scene. Let me use a simple illustration. Our Canadian seminaries are members of the American Association of Theological Schools. Each year we have to fill in copious reports for them. Last fall I rebelled at one of the questionnaires. It asked us to list the number of our students who were American blacks (that is, our black student from Africa did not count), Cubans or Puerto Ricans. Instead of filling in the zeros, I wrote a protest that such a question was meaningless in Canada. Why did they not ask how many Indians or Metis we had, or how many Ukrainians? (Our seminary could have claimed some in these categories.) These questions would have had some meaning for us. This is very minor, of course, and yet, do we not need to be continually alert that our situation is not that of the United States and if we are to communicate the Gospel in Canada, we cannot be content to import American programs or theologies.

In Canada the Gospel must address itself to the problem of a people in search of an identity. The church must help Canadians to find a basis of who they are that does not depend upon being anti-American or anti-anything else. We need to speak in a culture that prides itself upon not being a melting pot. As Lutherans, we do not need to apologize for the fact that we have not phased out our two-language congregations as rapidly as they have in the United States. We need to explore the possibilities opened up for us by the unique church-state relations in this country. We need to create in Canadians the appreciation of the dignity of the person that is inherent in the Gospel. We need to give a warning that Canada has no well-developed belief in the rights of persons. We need to bring the Gospel to bear upon the form that pride takes in the Canadian situation.

What all of this means for Canadian Lutheranism is something with which we have just begun to wrestle. This paper will be of value only if it is followed up with an extensive attempt to understand ourselves as a people and the relationship of the Gospel to our condition.

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This article is a condensed form of a paper presented to the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in Canada, May 27, 1974, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Single copies of the unabridged version are available free upon request as long as present supply lasts.