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Mark Noll, *What Happened to Christian Canada?*

A response from an Evangelical perspective

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Noll's *What Happened to Christian Canada?* makes an outstanding contribution towards understanding the declining role of Christianity in twentieth-century Canada. He identifies himself as a "sympathetic American," but one should add that it would be difficult to find any Canadian with a grasp as firm as Noll's of the literature on Christianity in Canada.

To that impressive historical understanding, Noll brings his own comparative insights, gained from decades of study of Christianity in North America and beyond. He also makes good use of other theorists. In particular, he uses insights from Seymour Martin Lipset and David Martin to explain how the more ordered, communal, "top-down" nature of Canadian Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, compared to the more populist, egalitarian, and entrepreneurial nature of U.S. denominationalism, contributed to Canada's more rapid secularization.

He draws a convincing picture of how the structure of Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, which had done so much to ensure an orderly, Christianized Canada for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contributed to the secularization process in the latter half of the twentieth century. Not only did a number of modern, inherently secularizing ideas work downward through the elites of the hierarchical systems with less resistance from the public in Canada than in the United States; the less flexible and entrepreneurial Canadian religious "system" was also far less able to adapt to the rapid changes of the late twentieth century than were its U.S. counterparts.

Although his main focus is on Roman Catholicism and the Protestant mainline denominations, Noll also addresses the role of "Canada's sectarian and evangelical churches." He rightly attributes Canadian Evangelicals' relative lack of impact on the broader society to "ethnicity, language, a passivity-inducing Holiness theology, or a stultifying fixation on biblical prophecy" (49). All of those certainly were important factors, but further elaboration of the reasons for Canadian Evangelicals' isolation might be helpful.

Canadian Evangelicalism, from the 1920s onward, was characterized by a high level of relatively recent immigration, which magnified the influence of the already much higher proportion of immigrants in Canada compared with the United States in that period. Consequently, according to Noll's account, in the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s, some of the larger evangelical groups (in most of western Canada, much of Ontario, and smaller pockets elsewhere) were still, in a number of ways, cultural outsiders—perhaps more than Noll's study recognizes.

For example, the bulk of one of western Canada's major evangelical groups, the Mennonite Brethren, migrated in both the late 1920s and in the era after the Second World War. In addition to the usual language and cultural barriers and the consuming task of becoming established, additional factors contributed to isolation for a longer period than might otherwise be expected. The enforced isolation in Mennonite colonies in Russia had established patterns of low engagement with the surrounding culture, which often took these Mennonites several generations

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to overcome once in Canada. Certain Anabaptist characteristics reinforced isolation during the war, most notably pacifism, but their German heritage and continued use of the German language did the same. From the 1970s onward, when some Canadian Evangelicals began to become more politically active, the Anabaptist influence contributed to wariness on the part of a number of Mennonites towards political activity, especially if it could appear to connect church and state or to resemble political activity of the U.S. political right.

The Calvinist Dutch immigrants, in contrast, were not only eager to assimilate to Canadian society but were strongly disposed to engage society in the social, economic, educational, and political arenas. However, the vast bulk of that immigration came in the 1950s and 1960s, several generations later than that of most of the Dutch Calvinists to the United States. Thus, this group was more focused on becoming established than on engagement until the 1970s and 1980s or even later. Further, with their Kuyperian Calvinist background, it took many of these immigrants a number of decades to overcome sufficiently their suspicions of the pietistic, holiness, and/or Anabaptist traits of most Canadian Evangelicals to allow them to cooperate with these groups in social endeavours.

Additionally, several other important factors have contributed to Evangelicals' remaining in what Noll describes as "self-contained social, intellectual, and cultural ghettoes."

Until quite recently, Canada suffered a virtual lack of evangelical liberal arts colleges and universities in which evangelical minds could engage with a broad spectrum of the social, intellectual, and political issues of the culture, and students be trained to make an impact on the broader society. Instead, throughout much of the twentieth century, Canada was home to one of the strongest concentrations of Bible colleges in the world. As late as the mid-1990s, three times as many students were registered in Bible colleges in Canada as in its few evangelical liberal arts colleges and universities.

The focus on Bible colleges not only reflected the strong pietistic and missionary thrust of most Canadian Evangelicals but also highlighted several important differences between Canadian and U.S. society and education. Until the 1960s, most Canadians viewed university education as the preserve of a relatively small elite. Indeed, not until the early 1960s did one-half of Canadian students even graduate from high school. Compared with the United States, very few moved on to university-level education until the 1980s, and even then, participation rates remained lower north of the border. Certainly, throughout most of the twentieth century, few Canadian Evangelicals belonged to a social elite which expected its children to go to university.[1]

The Canadian system of post-secondary education also militated against a distinctly evangelical involvement. When Canadian Evangelicals eventually did attempt to establish degree-granting liberal arts institutions, they ran into significant political and legal roadblocks. Because of the near monopoly on higher education by public institutions in Canada, it proved very difficult for autonomous, distinctly Christian liberal arts institutions to emerge.[2] Despite the role of the major denominations in founding its universities in the nineteenth century, the province of Ontario did not even allow private institutions to grant arts and science degrees until 1998. British

[1]For elaboration of comparative views of higher education, see Robert Burkinshaw, "The Funding of Evangelical Higher Education in the United States and Canada," in *More Money, More Ministry*, ed. L. Eskridge and Mark Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 274–298
[2]John G. Stackhouse, "Respectfully Submitted for American Consideration: Canadian Options in Christian Higher Education," *Faculty Dialogue* 17 (Spring 1992): 52–71, describes several older Canadian models that are not strictly secular but, at the same time, do not provide for autonomous, distinctly Christian institutions. Stackhouse also describes influential groups of Evangelicals at Canadian universities in Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship groups from the 1920s onwards in his *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). It should be noted, however, that these groups were relatively small and were located only in several larger Canadian cities.

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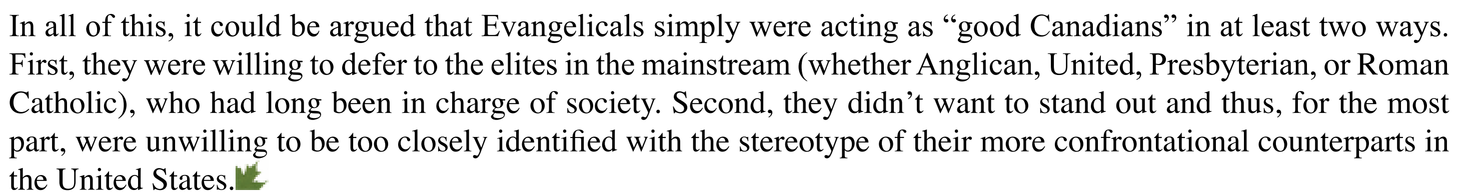
Columbia's Trinity Western University, the oldest and largest of the nation's twentieth-century evangelical liberal arts institutions, was forced to overcome major political and legal hurdles in both the 1980s and 1990s as it moved towards degree-granting status and the right to train professional educators. Thus, in the critical decades of secularization, Canadian Evangelicalism was hindered by the limitations of its educational institutions.

In addition, by remaining on the sidelines and allowing those in the religious mainstream to provide leadership in Canadian society, Evangelicals were doing more than simply reacting to the excesses of the social gospel by retreating into pietistic isolation.[3] There is no question they did both of those things. But, as Noll at least implies, they were also implicitly recognizing that they belonged to "sectarian" denominations, which were tolerated but not fully legitimized in the same way as were their U.S. counterparts. Many Canadians were simply used to any societal leadership coming from the major denominations.

Evangelicals were also acting as a numerically small minority in Canadian society, somewhere between one-third and one-half the strength of U.S. Evangelicals as a proportion of the population.[4] They also lacked the wealth of Evangelicals south of the border: the greatest concentration of Baptists resided in the poorer provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and the growing Pentecostal movement generally lacked significant wealth until later in the twentieth century.

Finally, given the proportions of Roman Catholic, Church of England, and Church of Scotland adherents in most provinces in the nineteenth century, Evangelicals had not comprised a majority across the whole of Canadian society in the same way as had their counterparts in the United States. Thus, they did not sense the same urgency to attempt to reclaim a legacy of societal leadership.[5]



In all of this, it could be argued that Evangelicals simply were acting as "good Canadians" in at least two ways. First, they were willing to defer to the elites in the mainstream (whether Anglican, United, Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic), who had long been in charge of society. Second, they didn't want to stand out and thus, for the most part, were unwilling to be too closely identified with the stereotype of their more confrontational counterparts in the United States.

[3]E.g., see Brian Stiller, "A Personal Coda" in *Church and Canadian Culture*, ed. Robert VanderVennen, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 193-202.
[4]Mark A. Noll, "Religion in Canada and the United States," *Crux* 34 (December 1998):13–25, utilizing data from a 1996 cross-border poll by the Angus Reid Group.
[5]George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 204.