

Mark Noll, *What Happened to Christian Canada?*

A response from an Anabaptist perspective

by Bruce Guenther, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary / Trinity Western University

Mark Noll's persistent emphasis on the significance of comparative studies between the story of Christianity in Canada and the United States has done much to familiarize U.S. scholars with the unique contours of religion north of the 49th parallel. Canadian scholars too have benefitted considerably from having a scholar of Noll's stature—he was named recently by *Time Magazine* as one of the 25 most influential Evangelicals in the United States—draw attention to the value of comparative studies in general, and to their work in particular.

The central question in this article-length work, which began as the presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 2006, explores the reasons for the dramatic “de-Christianization” of Canada, a process that Noll claims became visible almost overnight after the 1960s (18). The fact that such a “dramatic reversal” took place almost simultaneously in both English-speaking and French-speaking regions elevates its mystique. The pace, and the extent, of this de-Christianization—or secularization as it has been named by other scholars—and the impact of the “web of contingency” that facilitated it, are amplified by a comparison to the experience of Christians in the United States.

The point in this response is not to rehearse Noll's argument, or to summarize the various markers he identifies of de-Christianization in Canada. Suffice it to say that the broad strokes used to paint his picture of decline would be recognized as generally accurate by most Canadian scholars, although Canadian scholars are not unanimous in their reasons for the phenomenon. His impressive command of the literature on religion in Canada is exceeded only by his capacity to situate the story of Canadian Christianity within larger social, economic, and political contexts, and to construct a succinct, thought-provoking synthesis in response to a very complex question. As in every attempt at offering a synthesis, Noll's work raises as many questions as it sets out to answer.

The limitation of an article-length address leaves considerable room for others to add finer nuances and to suggest additional lines of inquiry. The following are only a few examples. The starting assumption of a “Christian Canada” begs for a fuller discussion of the broader question of what it actually means for a country or a civilization to be considered “Christian.” Are public visibility and the capacity to exercise influence within a society the only, or even the best, ways to measure “Christianization”? Noll observes the significant relationship between religion and nationalism in the story of the “Christianization” of Canada, and notes that the overall effect of this intimate relationship has been ambiguous. Is nationalism an essential feature of “Christianization”? Is it merely coincidental that the denominational stories that do not follow the narrative of decline that is highlighted in Noll's book also tend to have less interest in nationalistic causes and identities (e.g., Salvation Army, Mennonites, Pentecostals)? Noll highlights some of the major political shifts that ostensibly contributed towards de-Christianization, but one wonders to what extent the underlying ideological assumptions of political liberalism might have been responsible for the cultural shifts that took place in Canada during the twentieth century?

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Despite the fact that the United Church of Canada alone built 1,500 churches between 1945 and 1965, Noll attributes the “apparent vigor” on the part of Canadian churches during these decades not so much to an internal dynamism, but to nationalism and a post-war “search for normalcy” (27). He uses Pierre Berton’s famous indictment, *The Comfortable Pew*,¹ to point towards an invisible “placidity” created by an insufficient level of tension between the church and the surrounding society that left the larger Protestant denominations increasingly irrelevant. Noll also references Nancy Christie’s work *Households of Faith*,² which highlights the sense of marginalization among church leaders as early as the 1940s that resulted in (or at least coincided with) a theological turn towards neo-orthodoxy. The variegated dynamics within this particular denomination still need considerably more analysis. One hopes that the volume on the history of the United Church in Canada that is presently underway by scholars from within the denomination will shed more light on this period.

Not all denominational histories fit into the “discourse of loss” that characterizes recent studies of Roman Catholicism, the United Church of Canada, and the Anglican Church of Canada. Noll notes the “considerable strength” of a host of new evangelical Protestant denominations that manifested itself concurrently with the decline of the more established denominations.³ The net effect was that, by the 1980s, the cumulative attendance of these evangelical denominations surpassed the cumulative attendance of the more established denominations.⁴ In addition to their numerical growth, these denominations began to work together with each other to form a more public, collective evangelical identity—most notable in facilitating a public evangelical identity has been The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

More research is necessary for understanding fully the reasons why these evangelical denominations flourished during a time when other denominations experienced rapid decline, why these groups have, since the 1980s, taken a much deeper interest in exercising influence within Canadian culture, and why they have become more visible and assertive within the political arena. Their current influence within the political arena, and their disproportionate contribution to what Paul Reed of the Centre for Applied Social Research (CASR) and Statistics Canada refer to as the “civic core,”⁵ would seem to contradict the assertion that “no form of sectarianism or voluntarism has ever exerted a major public influence in Canada” (51).

I believe Noll is right in observing the general lack of interest on the part of these new evangelical denominations in influencing the direction of Canadian society during the first half of the twentieth century. And I agree with Noll that it is important to differentiate between evangelical Protestants in Canada and the United States. But I remain puzzled by his ambiguous explanation of how “Canadian sectarians, evangelicals, pentecostals, and ethnic denominationalists” flourished by following an “American pattern of self-protecting atomism—attending to local situations and avoiding the national Big Picture” (50). The denomination to which I belong, the Conference of

¹Pierre Berton, *The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment in the New Age* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965).

²Nancy Christie, ed., *Households of Faith: Family, Gender, and Community in Canada, 1760–1969* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

³Not all evangelical Protestant denominations experienced the same growth patterns: particularly notable were the dramatic twentieth-century growth patterns of denominations such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada and the Christian and Missionary Alliance.

⁴The first persons to quantify this trend were Dennis M. Oliver, “The New Canadian Religious Pluralism,” *Canadian Society of Church History, Papers* (1979); and Arnell Motz, ed., *Reclaiming a Nation: The Challenge of Re-evangelizing Canada by the Year 2000* (Richmond: Church Leadership Library, 1990).

⁵Evangelical Protestant attendance and membership statistics for the year 2001 can be found in Bruce L. Guenther, “Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada,” in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 411–414.

⁶Paul Reed, with Kevin Selbee, “The Civic Core in Canada: Disproportionality in Charitable Giving, Volunteering, and Civic Participation. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30, No. 4 (2001):761–780; and Paul Reed, “Active Citizens: Who are they, how do they get that way, and why does it matter?” (paper presented at Conference on Citizenship and the Common Good: Secularism or the Inclusive Society? Simon Fraser University, May 19–20, 2005).

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Mennonite Brethren Churches, now the largest Mennonite denomination in Canada, experienced its most dramatic growth only *after* its members became more actively involved participants within Canadian society in the 1960s, and *after* it took steps to welcome new immigrants, thereby becoming more multicultural.⁶

Central to Noll's synthesis is the transition in Canadian culture away from public policies anchored in the Christian tradition towards the "alternative compass of ideological multi-culturalism" (54) and public religious neutrality. The new vision of a pluralistic, multicultural nation created new patterns of immigration, which, ironically perhaps, have slowed the rate of certain forms of secularization: research from Statistics Canada shows that immigrants to Canada are much more likely to attend religious services than their Canadian-born counterparts.⁷ All denominations in Canada, particularly evangelical Protestant denominations, have benefitted from an influx of Christian immigrants.⁸ It is still too early to speculate on whether recent patterns of immigration, which helped to "de-Europeanize" Christianity in Canada (and in the United States),⁹ will challenge the process of de-Christianization described in Noll's article. The work of José Casanova serves as a good reminder that trajectories of decline are not irreversible.¹⁰

Finally, I think it would be of interest to Canadian scholars and church leaders to hear Noll draw from his extensive knowledge of U. S. religion and historiography—a discipline that always seems to be a decade or more ahead of Canada—to offer his recommendations concerning lines of inquiry that would most benefit our understanding of Christianity in Canada. 🌱

⁶Membership in the denomination has doubled during the past 40 years. A significant proportion of this growth came from both an influx of Canadians who did not share the Dutch-German-Russian ethnic heritage of the first Mennonite Brethren immigrants, and recently arrived immigrants for whom English was a second language. (See Ted Regehr, "The Economic Transformation of Canadian Mennonite Brethren," in *Bridging Troubled Waters: Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 101).

⁷Warren Clark, "Pockets of Belief: Religious Attendance Patterns in Canada," *Canadian Social Trends* (Spring 2003): 5.

⁸Bramadat and Seljak, eds. *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, 440.

⁹R. Stephen Warner, "Coming to America: Immigrants and the Faith they Bring," *Christian Century* (February 10, 2004): 20–24.

¹⁰See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).