

NANCY CHRISTIE and MICHAËL GAUVREAU

CHRISTIAN  
CHURCHES  
AND THEIR  
PEOPLES,  
1840-1965

A Social History of  
Religion in Canada

NANCY CHRISTIE AND  
MICHAEL GAUVREAU

Christian Churches and  
Their Peoples, 1840–1965:  
A Social History of  
Religion in Canada

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS  
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2010  
Toronto Buffalo London  
www.utppublishing.com  
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-0-8020-8949-6 (cloth)

ISBN 978-0-8020-8632-7 (paper)



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper with  
vegetable-based inks

---

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Christie, Nancy, 1958–

Christian churches and their peoples, 1840–1965 : a social  
history of religion in Canada / Nancy Christie and  
Michael Gauvreau.

(Themes in Canadian history)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8020-8949-6 (bound) ISBN 978-0-8020-8632-7 (pbk.)

1. Canada – Church history. 2. Canada – Religious life and  
customs. 3. Canada – Religion. I. Gauvreau, Michael, 1956–  
II. Title. III. Series: Themes in Canadian history

BR570.C57 2010 277.1 C2010-903924-6

---

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial  
assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council  
for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial  
support for its publishing activities of the Government of  
Canada through the Canada Book Fund for its publishing  
activities.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND THEIR PEOPLES,  
1840–1965: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF RELIGION  
IN CANADA

Religious institutions, values, and identities are fundamental to understanding the lived experiences of Canadians in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Christian Churches and Their Peoples*, an interdenominational study, considers how churches influenced the social and cultural development of Canadian society across regional and linguistic lines.

By shifting their focus beyond the internal dynamics of institutions, Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau address broad social issues such as the interaction between religion and changing mores, the key role of laypeople in shaping churches, and the ways in which First Nations peoples both appropriated and resisted missionary teachings. With an important analysis of popular religious ideas and practices, *Christian Churches and Their Peoples* demonstrates that the cultural authority and regulatory practices of religious institutions both affirmed and opposed the personal religious values of Canadians, ultimately facilitating their elaboration of personal, ethnic, gender, and national identities.

(Themes in Canadian History)

NANCY CHRISTIE is the Eakin Fellow in the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada at McGill University.

MICHAEL GAUVREAU is a professor in the Department of History at McMaster University.

# **THEMES IN CANADIAN HISTORY**

**Editors: Craig Heron and Colin Coates**

*To Archdeacon Paul Jackson*  
*1938–2006*

# Acknowledgments

A work of historical synthesis builds upon the intellectual labours of others, and this one is no exception. Without the sustained energies of a creative group of historians of religion in both English Canada and Quebec, whose work has immeasurably enriched the field over the past two decades, writing this volume would have proved an impossible task. We have relied immensely upon their researches and insights, for which we are profoundly grateful. We also thank our research assistants, David Dowe and Cam Malcolm, who supplied key material on Protestantism. A conversation with Mark Noll was influential in shaping our approach to a historical synthesis of so vast a topic as religion. Ollivier Hubert generously offered his stimulating comments on a number of chapters, while our colleague Kevin Flatt also provided sage advice. Our most immediate debt of thanks is to Craig Heron, series editor for Themes in Canadian Social History, who asked us to undertake the task of writing a resolutely social history of religion. We have been immensely sustained throughout by his enthusiasm, cheerfulness, excellent advice, and sharp eye for a well-turned phrase. Our thanks to Len Husband of University of Toronto Press, who effectively piloted the manuscript through the assessment procedure and ensured that the publication process was a painless one. We are grateful to Kevin Anderson for proofreading the text and preparing the in-

## x Acknowledgments

dex. We owe a great debt to our dachshunds, Darwin (now sadly departed), Fanny, and Scarlett, who gave us a respite from our work and a more enjoyable venue for discussing Canadian religion on the Bruce Trail. We dedicate this book to the late Paul Jackson, whose constant encouragement and levity during a rather bleak summer were absolutely critical to recovering our momentum.



# Contents

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ix

## Introduction 3

- 1 The Religious Cultures of Discipline and Dissidence in Colonial Society 9
- 2 Machinery of Salvation: The Making of a Civic Christianity 60
- 3 'Their Advance in Christian Civilization': Missionaries and Colonialism at Home 107
- 4 'Canada Is Our Parish': Social Christianity and Its Discontents, 1910–1940 142
- 5 'The In-Group and the Rest': The Churches and the Construction of a New Urban Lifestyle, 1940–1965 179

## NOTES 201

## BIBLIOGRAPHY 209

## INDEX 227

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND THEIR PEOPLES,  
1840–1965: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF RELIGION  
IN CANADA



# Introduction

Until the 1980s, the writing of religious history in Canada was narrow. It concentrated upon the histories of specific denominations, and 'religion' amounted to the pronouncements of the clergy, intellectual developments in theology, and the shaping of organizational structures. In the past two decades there has been an increasing interest in exploring the social dimensions of the Canadian religious environment. This new writing has focused upon the popular response to and participation in churches and their religious associations, the differences in the way various socioeconomic and ethnic groups understood and appropriated religion, and the variables of locality, gender, and age. Generally ignored, however, was the important question of how religion was understood by ordinary people within a particular historical context. Under the influence of the sociology of religion, the new scholarship tended to view religion and the church as largely unchanging and traditional social entities that were either disembodied from or retarded the great dynamic movements of social and cultural change.

This volume begins from the premise that the church as an institutional form was not synonymous with religion as a broader cultural expression. The religious understanding and experience of ordinary people did not necessarily coincide with the prescriptions of the clergy who at various historical junctures defined piety in terms of either attend-

#### 4 Christian Churches and Their Peoples

ing weekly church services, taking the sacraments, giving systematically to support the church, or regularly attending at communion. Not only did the normative concepts of Christian piety, and the relationship between church and the world, fluctuate vastly over time; but more importantly, much of the way in which a majority of people experienced religion also occurred outside the institutional church. It is this constant tension between the clergy and the laity that forms the central axis of this book. From this perspective, our use of the term 'popular religion' does not mean religious radicalism, but more broadly invites readers to consider it as the beliefs and practices of laypeople, which sometimes stood in opposition to the authority of the clergy and the forms of religion they prescribed, but in other historical contexts more closely adhered to clerical models and the cultural leadership of the various churches. While the institutional churches might alter the way in which they constructed public identities over time, religion itself – that is, the belief in supernatural powers or beings – remained relatively constant between 1840 and the 1970s.

In contrast to notions of 'secularization,' which posit religious institutions and values as expressions of 'tradition' and therefore antithetical to the modern world, we argue that the churches were fundamental to the very process of modernity and that they functioned as one of the most important vehicles by which liberal values were infused into both the public institutions and private lives of ordinary Canadians. Where theories of secularization propose a gradual, ongoing decline of religion over several centuries in the face of processes of industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization, this volume argues that there was no linear decline in religious life in Canada over two centuries, much less a consensus over how religion was defined. What did change was that the way in which the institutional churches intermeshed with the wider society, and this involved a conscious decision on their part to oscillate between more other-worldly and worldly notions of church

polity and idealizations of Christian life and living. This was caused not only by the impact of external social forces such as industrialization, urbanization, or modern thought, but also by an inner dynamic in which church leaders sought to alter the role that the churches would play on the terrain of the social. All of this is to argue against the secularization thesis, which has contended that modernization was a linear process in which belief in the supernatural got weaker, the churches were marginalized, and the social authority of religion in the society as a whole was diminished. More recently historians of religion have begun to understand secularization not as social description but as a master narrative, a story that was often used to explain phenomena for which historians did not have sufficient evidence or analytical tools. For example, lacking first-person accounts of what religion meant on a day-to-day basis, historians have taken the clergy's pessimism at face value. Yet clerical discourse itself was shaped by specific historical contexts. In Upper Canada (Ontario), for example, clergy who talked about popular irreligion were in many cases more concerned to recruit more church members in order to found and sustain new congregations. It is true that not everyone attended church, and the census of 1842 shows that not everyone consistently identified with a particular religious tradition, but these sources did not take into account those people who practised their religion privately in the home. Moreover, both Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy at that time often denounced as 'irreligion' forms of popular religious beliefs or practices that diverged from clerical norms. In this case church-going was not related to religious faith but represented one's proclivity for associational life. Regular attendance at church may have been a measure of one's faith, but it might likewise have represented one's sense of public identity and sense of civic involvement, a simple desire for sociability and, in the nineteenth century in particular, a way to display that a person was in good health.

This preoccupation among both the Protestant and Cath-

## 6 Christian Churches and Their Peoples

olic clergy with irreligion reflected a new sensibility among church leaders to connect the wider cultural authority of the church with mass evangelization. In short, the vitality of the church was no longer seen to derive from the support of social elites alone, but, in the era of democratic revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic, it now depended upon making religion accessible to all social classes and cultural groups. The Christian churches constructed a new self-identity as voluntaristic and socially inclusive that dictated the direction of most of the religious projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also stimulated pervasive criticism both within and outside particular denominations that the churches were failing to serve all people from the cradle to the grave. Indeed, the idea that the churches must speak to all people and wholly inform the values of the entire community – an ideal elaborated by the clergy themselves – has been adopted by modern scholars of religion as the authentic standard by which to measure religious decline, without realizing that it was, in fact, a religious paradigm that had been newly articulated by early nineteenth-century clergy.

Major shifts in the social formation of the churches did take place over two centuries, but they occurred in a wave pattern. Some churches sometimes viewed their principal role as fashioning the private identities of their members, but at other times, most notably in the period between 1880 and 1940, the mainstream Protestant and Roman Catholic churches reinvented themselves to erase the distinction between the churches and the world, and they equated their brand of Christianity with the Canadian nation as a whole. Their notion of Christian citizenship was not shared by all religious groups, and even in that period of intense public activity, sectarian forms of religion flourished because they were still attached to an older view of religion as other-worldly in which the world was seen as secular and hostile to the church. If we were to view this process merely from the perspective of the clergy, it might appear that the mainline

churches achieved a hegemonic or dominant control over the religious mores of Canadian society. However, once the religious values of ordinary people are also taken into account, a more complex picture emerges which belies any easy or reductionist conclusions regarding either the rise or decline in the influence of religion in the broader society. In fact, there has been a much longer history to the contradiction identified by sociologist Reginald Bibby between what he terms 'exodus' from the churches since 1960 on the one hand, and the 'persistence' of religion on the other. Indeed, this has been the fundamental axis of popular religion in Canada since the 1840s.

We emphasize the substantial resemblances between the various Protestant churches and Roman Catholicism. They experienced remarkably similar permutations in regulatory practices, definitions of Christian piety, relations with aboriginal peoples, and constructions of what constituted formal religion and the way this must ideally interface with broader social identities of age, gender, and class. We concentrate upon the historical experience of the mainstream Protestant and Catholic traditions and give much less space to Judaism and other sectarian Protestant immigrant religious traditions. We are discussing an era in which the experience of the vast majority of Canadians was encompassed by a limited range of dominant Christian groups: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and, after 1925, the United Church of Canada, and various small Protestant sects, such as Pentecostalism and the Salvation Army. We present the striking religious pluralism that was so characteristic of the New World social environment and show the contrasts and similarities between the various denominational groups without relinquishing regional and local specificity. We hope the book also provides a benchmark for comparative discussion between the religious historiography of English Canada and Quebec, and that between Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. Canada – both English and French – stands apart



## 8 Christian Churches and Their Peoples

from the dominant religious models of both the United States and of Europe, insofar as its religious life was not shaped by either revivalism or by the rise of secularist ideologies; rather, well into the twentieth century, Christianity, both in terms of private and public identities, retained and exercised a social and cultural authority that was unparalleled among industrialized nations.