Christians on the Left: The Importance of the Social Gospel in the Canadian Social Democratic Tradition

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Résumé
Cet article s’intéresse à l’histoire du mouvement social-démocrate canadien et met en évidence le rôle prépondérant qu’ils ont joué les chrétiens de gauche. Trouvant leur inspiration dans une interprétation sociale du message du Christ, ces chrétiens se sont fortement impliqués dans le processus de création d’un nouveau parti politique, situé clairement à gauche de l’échiquier politique, et ont contribué à modeler son discours.
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Scholars have been focusing in recent years on the question of the political influence of the religious right, inspired undoubtedly by the links that became openly apparent between the George W. Bush administration and the evangelical churches. This recent emphasis on the Christian right has obscured the close relationship that has also existed between church members and left-wing political parties. The history of the social democratic movement in Canada is a case in point and reveals the importance of the Social Gospel on the political thought and the political discourse of the Canadian left. Christians on the left of the political spectrum were the driving force behind the creation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the first viable social democratic party in Canada. In its early years, the theme of Christian brotherhood was front and centre in the party’s political discourse. The Social Gospel tradition has also had a major influence on Canadian political culture generally, allowing a Canadian social democratic party to become electorally viable and develop into a well-established element of the contemporary political landscape.

The Social Gospel movement in Canada found its inspiration in the same group of social theologians as in the USA and in Europe, although the country also produced some writers who can be considered as Social Gospel theologians in their own right.¹ Historically, this theological

¹ The most notable Canadian social gospel theologian was undoubtedly Salem Bland, author of The New Christianity (1920). As a faculty member at Wesley College in Brandon, Manitoba, Bland had great influence on a new generation of church ministers, inspiring young clergy to take their theological training into the social and political realms. The Canadian philosopher John Watson (Christianity and Idealism, 1896; The Interpretation of Religious Experience, 2 vol. 1912) was another Canadian who made a notable contribution.
current can be traced back to Christian responses to the social crisis of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Then, writers were intent on linking their implication in social reform to biblical studies and to an historic reflection of what they saw as the real motivation of Jesus and its translation in the first-century Church. The term Social Gospel refers to a Protestant movement, but the Catholic Church developed an analogous doctrine during this same period referred to as Social Catholicism. The Social Gospel established as its objective renewing with what was seen as the original purpose of Christianity, that is the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth. To quote the leading figure of the Social Gospel tradition, Walter Rauschenbusch, in his seminal work Christianity and the Social Crisis: “Christianity as an historic movement was launched with all the purpose and hope, all the impetus and power, of a great revolutionary movement, pledged to change the world-as-it-is into the world-as-it-ought-to-be.”

Rauschenbusch here presents a portrait of the early Christians as revolutionaries who, beyond their personal quest for salvation, were also committed to a collective struggle to transform the existing social order.

For Rauschenbusch, the Church had a role to play in the fight for social justice and this was revealed not only in the historic origins of Christianity, but also in scripture. He made this explicit in his choice to preface his book with two lines taken from the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth!” Provocatively, he ended his quote there, letting the reader fill in for himself what follows, namely “as it is in heaven” and thereby emphasized the Christian requirement of working towards change in this lifetime rather than waiting for God’s mercy in the afterlife. Another central element of the Social Gospel was that it focused on the community of Christians, rather than concentrating exclusively on the personal salvation of the individual sinner as in the evangelical tradition. In the words of the Canadian historian Richard Allen, the Social Gospel can be summarised by this new focus: “The demand ‘save this man, now’ became ‘save this society, now’.”

The Social Gospel and the creation of the CCF

In the Canadian case, the two central elements of the Social Gospel theology, namely the Christian requirement to work for social justice in the name of God, and the focus on the needs of the wider community of Christians rather than on individual salvation, made it natural for representatives of the new current to become linked to the political

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2 Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, New York: Macmillan, 1912, 123.
3 Ibid., preface.
movements that were trying to resolve the social problems of the early 20th century. It was in the Canadian West that the fervour of the Social Gospel was the most intense, and it was also in this region that political discontent was the most profound. Western farmers were vulnerable to fluctuating prices on the grain markets and felt exploited by the political and economic policies forged in Central Canada. While the National Policy, which held sway under both Liberal and Conservative governments during the period, certainly helped to create a sense of nationhood, it was seen in the West as a model in which the industrialised centre exploited the Western resource-based periphery. The export of Western crops was the real motor of the burgeoning economy. The farmers in turn created new markets for manufactured goods produced in Central Canada. But while the industrialists were favoured by the federal government’s policy of protective tariffs, from a Western point of view the high tariffs simply meant that farmers had to pay inflated costs for the tools and machines they needed. Moreover, they recognised that it was their labour that indirectly financed the cost of building and maintaining the national railways. And yet, Ottawa claimed nothing could be done to help them when farmers began to suffer from falling prices on the international grain markets. A feeling of discontent began to rise, but due to the demographic realities of the country, and to the bipartisan nature of the political landscape at the time, the concerns of Western farmers went unheard. Government policy was formulated to meet the needs of the more populous industrialised regions and the Western MPs carried little weight inside the Liberal and Conservative party caucuses to voice their opposition. This political reality led radical farmers to add appeals for democratic reform to their list of grievances.

It was in this environment that farmers began to organise into grain growers associations to defend their interests and these groups, formed in the midst of the Social Gospel fervour of the day, would later form the nucleus of the future Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the first successful Canadian social democratic party. Left-leaning farmers came together politically at the provincial level under the banner of The United Farmers of Ontario, or The United Farmers of Alberta, movements which were to unite under the name the Progressives5 at the federal level

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5 It is important to avoid establishing a strict parallel between the American Progressives and the Canadian political party of the same name. The two movements certainly share some common features, notably of which the most important are that both were middle-class and reformist rather than revolutionary. However, their political and social environments were notably different (distinctive political traditions on the two sides of the border, and important differences in their religious make-up). Chronologically the two movements were also slightly out of synch: the Canadian term designates a short-lived political party formed in 1920, while the American usage typically refers not only to a party, but to an era of reform running from the 1890s into the 1920s.
of politics. These political formations advocated the creation and expansion of co-operatives as an alternative to the model of competition in the capitalist market economy. Meanwhile, younger, more radical Protestant ministers, just ordained and in touch with the newer social theology, had been sent out to the West and had started talking about creating the Christian kingdom on earth, based on working hand in hand and sharing wealth. This discourse tied in directly with the Fabian socialist utopia of the period, which consisted in building what was called the Co-operative Commonwealth, a new society in which the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system would be replaced by the ideal of Christian brotherhood. The theme of co-operation allowed those in the political movement to work hand in hand with church leaders. For the former, integrating the proponents of the Social Gospel allowed them to attenuate the radicalism of their anti-capitalist discourse; for the latter, contributing to active social change was a component of their faith and a way to spread the Good Word.

The terminology in use at the time allowed the Canadian farmers to openly espouse the term “socialist” while rejecting the Canadian Communist Party for whom the same word evoked a model of society in which the workers would control the means of production. Certainly, the Christianity at the heart of the Canadian farmers’ convictions was not compatible with the atheism of the Communist leadership, and this would lead to irreconcilable differences of opinion on a number of issues. Another source of tension between the farmers and the Communists was in their differing objectives. Canadian left-leaning farmers were fundamentally middle-class in their background and reformist in their outlook. They hoped to work towards a more just society, but from within the framework of the Western liberal democratic tradition, a tradition founded on property rights that the farmers accepted in principle, at least when they were applied at the level of the small-scale independent farmer.

While the grass roots Christianity of the Western farmers predisposed them towards the Social Gospel, and created a fairly homogeneous group, those trying to organise the industrial working class into a political movement faced a very different situation. Here the political landscape at the beginning of the 20th century was characterised by a lack of unity, with a variety of competing currents all trying to mobilise a growing electorate. The two strongest left-wing parties were the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the former adhering to a strict Marxist ideology and the latter finding its inspiration largely in the British Fabian Society. However, the two major parties at the time – the Liberals and the Conservatives – both produced
leaflets intended to “catch the labour vote”\(^6\), as they said, and thereby limit the appeal of the left-wing parties. The Liberals were even ready to negotiate alliances allowing prominent members of the ILP to present themselves as Liberal-Labour candidates in certain constituencies. If elected, they would typically then be integrated into the Liberal party machine, with the result of limiting the potential of the ILP to grow and to challenge the Liberals directly.\(^7\)

This situation began to change in the early 1920s. In 1920, a group of disgruntled Liberals allied with leaders from the provincial wings of the United Farmers created the Progressive Party. The party burst onto the scene in 1921, sending fifty-eight MPs to the federal parliament in Ottawa and thereby disrupting the traditional bipartisan functioning. The Canadian Progressives disintegrated quite quickly as a party: some members reintegrated the Liberal Party, others became associated with the right-wing populist Social Credit Party\(^8\). However, an informal parliamentary coalition composed of the two Labour MPs and the most radical of the Progressives was formed and came to be known as the Ginger Group.\(^9\) Out of this experiment, a project was born to create a new political party based on a farmer-labour alliance: the result was the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, or CCF, in 1932.

**The importance of religion in the early CCF**

From the very beginning, this new party was largely influenced by the Social Gospel tradition. Its first leader, the charismatic J.S. Woodsworth, was one of the two Labour MPs elected to the federal parliament in 1921, and had chosen to enter politics in direct response to his experiences during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. However, he was also a former Methodist minister who had trained for ordination under the influence of the prominent Social Gospel theologians of the time. Woodsworth spent a year in England in 1899-1900 as a theology student at Oxford University, but it was his contact with the London

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\(^6\) André Siegfried, who wrote about Canada from a European perspective at the beginning of the century, found this quote amusing and commented on it in *Le Canada: les Deux Races*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1906, 277.

\(^7\) Take for example the case of Ralph Smith, who presented himself as the Liberal-Labour candidate in Vancouver in 1900, won election and immediately joined the Liberal caucus.

\(^8\) Social Credit came to power in the province of Alberta in the depression era. The party was led by William Aberhardt between 1935 and 1943 and then by Ernest Manning until 1968; both were fundamentalist Christians. The best analysis of Social Credit can be found in C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953.

\(^9\) The Ginger Group was an influential voice in parliamentary politics in the 1920s. The name, which refers to a group that stimulates or enlivens the main body, illustrates the philosophy at work.
slums that made the most impression on him, an experience that forged his Social Gospel calling more than any of his lectures. Back in Canada, he was ordained as a Methodist minister, but again it was through his social work with the poor that he found the greatest satisfaction. Woodworth spent years running a mission for the poor in one of Winnipeg’s working-class neighbourhoods, and later became active in the Labour Church in Winnipeg. A good example of how the future CCF leader linked his Christian beliefs to his political convictions is found in his customary short prayer before meals:

[w]e are thankful for these and all the good things of life. We recognize that they are part of our common heritage and come to us through the efforts of our brothers and sisters the world over. What we desire for ourselves we wish for all. To this end may we take our share in the world’s work and the world’s struggles.

Saying grace in this way illustrates what lies at the core of the Social Gospel theology, namely that being faithful to the message of Christ requires the Christian not only to give thanks for his daily bread, but also to work actively towards the transformation of society in the name of the Lord.

The other Labour MP elected in 1921, William Irvine, was another person in the inner circle at the founding of the CCF in 1932. Irvine was also motivated by his Christian beliefs. He had studied at Brandon College under the prominent Social Gospel theologian Salem Bland, and had gone on to work as a Presbyterian and Unitarian Minister, first in Emo, Ontario, and then in Calgary. Another prominent CCF parliamentarian and future party leader, Tommy Douglas, shared a similar background: he trained under Salem Bland, and then worked as a Baptist minister in Saskatchewan before joining the CCF.

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12 Irvine’s commitment to the Social Gospel would twice lead to problems with church hierarchy. In 1915, due to his political radicalism and his unorthodox positions on church doctrine, he found himself accused of heresy by a church elder in his first congregation in Ontario. Although the Presbyterian hierarchy had supported him officially, he resigned his commission in 1916, and agreed to take charge of a Unitarian parish in Calgary. Even the more free-thinking Unitarians could not accept his opposition to the war effort and relieved him of his duties in 1917.

13 Tommy Douglas would later become the first CCF provincial Premier, when he led the party to victory in Saskatchewan in 1944. This was the first socialist government in North America, inspiring the seminal work by Seymour Lipset *Agrarian Socialism: the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan: a Study in Political Sociology*, Berkeley: University of
The Christian credentials of the CCF leadership reassured farmers who far outnumbered the industrial working class in the early 20th century. 40% of the population was employed in the primary sector, mainly in farming, in the years before the First World War, and there were only 155,000 unionised workers for a population of about 7 million. In the 1920s and 1930s the industrial working class was growing, but not as quickly as those employed in the tertiary sector, and there were still only 300,000 unionised workers in the 1930s. 14 In this demographic context, an unabashed Marxist discourse which included an open rejection of the Church, such as was presented by the Communists, was not viable in electoral terms. The Social Gospel allowed candidates to openly defend their variety of democratic socialism from within a set of widely-held Christian moral values. The very name they chose, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, accentuated the ideals of Christian brotherhood and charity, rather than focusing on international revolution as the Communists were doing with limited success.

The importance of the religious question can be seen clearly in some of the election material produced at the time. In a French language tract produced by the CCF and distributed in Quebec during the 1935 election campaign entitled “the CCF and Religion” the party attempted to diffuse some of the negative publicity being spread against it. To counter those who were trying to assimilate the CCF and the Communists, the CCF took refuge behind its Christian credentials, noting in its tract that the Council of Canadian Bishops had not condemned the CCF, while it had taxed the Communists with being “extremist, revolutionary and atheistic.” 15

The CCF could hardly be taken for atheist – after all the Party leader had been ordained as a Methodist minister – but the danger was being seen as anti-Catholic. In its literature, the CCF took pains to present its policy as being founded on the same Christian morality that had inspired the pontifical encyclicals. One tract begins by asking the question “Can a Catholic vote CCF?” and then provides the answer:

yes, because the pontifical encyclicals are asking for reforms that will relieve the suffering of the people; yes, because the Canadian Bishops are in favour of the economic reforms put forward in the encyclicals; yes, because only the CCF

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can bring to Canada the reforms which have been asked for by the Pope and the Bishops.16

The focus on support for social reform within the Catholic hierarchy was meant to reassure the Catholic faithful and make them feel comfortable in casting a vote for the CCF. The tract went on to specify that “the CCF doctrine does not come into conflict with any dogma of the Roman Catholic religion”, and concludes with the forceful statement: “the CCF is the social expression of Christianity!”17

This attempt to link into the current of Social Catholicism, for the Catholic Church was subject to similar influences as those at work in the Protestant churches during this period, met with little success. In French Canada, the CCF had to deal not only with a highly conservative clergy, but also with the reticence of French Canada generally in face of a political party that was considered as both Protestant and English-speaking. French Canadians were concerned with the fight against assimilation – la politique de la survivance – and this defensive strategy was hardly compatible with the development of an open partnership whether it be based on politics or on ecumenism. The CCF recognised this weakness, of course, and strove to combat it. In a French-language tract entitled “Healthy Nationalism versus Unhealthy Nationalism”, the CCF adopted a more traditionally socialist argument, trying to develop a sense of solidarity between workers whatever their origins:

English and French workers are brothers in misery. What difference is there for the worker to be badly paid by Dupuis or Eaton, Raymonde or Clarke, the Provincial Bank or the Royal, la Sauvegarde or Sun Life? It’s still the same exploitation!18

However this strategy proved ineffective in Quebec, and the Catholic clergy’s local opposition to the CCF played a leading role in this rejection.19

The difficulty was not only one of language and culture. Even in English Canada, the CCF was unable to obtain endorsement from the

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17 Ibid.


19 The Catholic Church had maintained a close working relationship with the two traditional parties that could be traced back to the promises contained in the Quebec Act of 1774. It already had influence in government circles without developing ties with the CCF. Even on questions of union membership Quebec lagged behind English Canada due to the influence of the Catholic Church. The first strongly-representative union in Quebec, the CTTC (Confédération des Travailleurs Catholiques du Canada) was not established until 1921 and maintained a close relationship with the Catholic Church.
Catholic Church, most probably because of clerical wariness towards the radicalism of the Protestant CCF leadership. However hard proponents of the Social Gospel within the CCF tried to combat the label of extremism, by insisting on their Christian credentials and focusing on areas of common ground between the social concerns in the encyclicals and their own tradition, the Catholic clergy of English Canada based its analysis on the works of Pope Leo XIII which had strongly condemned collective ownership. CCF members could hardly deny that the nationalisation of banks and key industries was one of the central planks in their platform. Moreover, the Catholic clergy in English already had privileged access to Canadian political leaders from the two traditional parties, and preferred to talk about social reform from within olitical structure which had always served them well in the past.

Among the English Canadian Protestants, however, the close working relationship between the representatives of the different Christian denominations and the CCF was used as an electoral argument. A pamphlet was even created in the early 1950s entitled: “We are not ashamed of the Gospel”. In this lengthy document, we see the CCF openly assuming the title “Socialist” – a term which in the North-American context was often assimilated to “Communist” and used in a derogatory manner – and explaining their philosophy with a series of explicit references to the first Christians. To quote directly from this document:

People are confused as to what a Socialist is, as to what he stands for and as to what he hopes to achieve. [...] There is, of course nothing new about such misunderstanding. Throughout the ages it has often been the fate of those who have sought to replace the evil-that-is with the good-that-ought-to-be to be misunderstood. [...] The ending of chattel slavery, the introduction of Old Age Pension payments and the founding of Christianity itself all came to pass as the result of efforts put forth by those who had to overcome the misunderstanding of their fellow citizens. [...] And when, like St Paul, they were challenged by the unbelievers around them they too, like him, declared with confident pride that they were not afraid of their gospel.

What then is the Socialists’ gospel? The only gospel worthy of the attention of whole of humanity has been summed up for us by its greatest Exponent. It was simply this, “I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” Abundant life physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually, this is the Socialists’ gospel. Why should we be ashamed?20

This document was produced in Saskatchewan and is typical of the openly Christian style of the Western farmer-based wing of the CCF. We see the party espousing the same convictions made popular by the Social

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Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. Like Rauschenbusch, the CCF document presents the early Christians as social activists working to transform the world. Like Rauschenbusch, the party presents the idea that working for social justice is a moral obligation for the true Christian. The document also reveals the strategic choice to proudly take on the designation of “Socialist”. However, in the examples provided of the introduction of Old Age Pensions or of the abolition of slavery, we are clearly in the domain of social reform conducted from within the existing system. The CCF may well insist that they are not ashamed to be called socialists, but for them a true socialist works in the name of brotherly love, and refuses the radicalism of the Communists who not only rejected Christianity, but who also called into question the middle-class attachment to small-scale property rights.

Although the CCF was created through an alliance of left-leaning farmers on one hand and labour unions on the other, the Central and Eastern wings of the party, dominated by the industrial trade unions, chose not to distribute the type of tract quoted above, preferring material which employed more secular economic arguments. But even in the secular, intellectual circles of Central Canada, there had been a strong Social Gospel tradition among influential party officials. The discourse presented by the influential League for Social Reconstruction in the 1930s is a case in point. This was a group that had no official religious ties, but whose leadership included several United Church ministers\(^\text{21}\), and whose most famous spokesman and writer, Frank Scott, was the son of a clergyman.\(^\text{22}\) In a famous document entitled Social Planning for Canada, the League noted that, although their movement was non-religious, Christians were welcome and that “*radical Christian thought and action may play an important part in the coming period of social reconstruction.*”\(^\text{23}\) David Laycock in his book *Populism and Democratic Thought in the Canadian Prairies* refers to the importance of Protestant reformism in the Eastern wing of the party when he notes the importance of what he calls “secularised Protestant reformism” in the CCF’s political philosophy.\(^\text{24}\) In

\(^{21}\) The United Church is an indigenous Canadian denomination founded in 1925 as an amalgamation of the Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian Churches. It was founded at a time when the Social Gospel theology was dominant and has since remained faithful to this tradition, considered today as resolutely liberal in its outlook. It is noteworthy that some of the most conservative Presbyterian churches (784 of the 4512) chose to remain independent in 1925. Largely due to the continuing immigration of Presbyterians from Scotland, the independent Presbyterian Church has maintained its presence in Canada.


\(^{23}\) *Ibid.*

other words, he suggests that the Social Gospel provided the moral foundation for the central ideas in the CCF program, namely co-operation, rejuvenated democracy and a reasoned criticism of the capitalist system. The program was presented as secular, but when it insisted on sharing wealth, it did so in a manner which opened the door to left-leaning Christians. The CCF hoped to put an end to class exploitation, but from within a framework that accepted private ownership, especially that of the individual family farm. This type of policy was chosen, not only for the strategic reasons of building widespread support and maintaining the farmer-labour coalition but also because the Christian concept of a brotherhood of man permeated thinking and convinced members of the possibility of reforming the capitalist system without abandoning their faith, unlike their Communist counterparts.

The Social Gospel’s influence on the CCF leadership was openly acknowledged: church ministers played a key role in creating the farmer-labour alliance, and subsequently often served as electoral candidates both at the provincial and federal levels. Not surprisingly, the marked presence of left-leaning Christians in the party leadership was translated into a political programme inspired by the Social Gospel tradition.

**The Social Gospel and Canadian political culture**

The CCF changed its name in 1961 to become the New Democratic Party (NDP). The change in name was of symbolic importance at a time when the CCF leadership was attempting to strengthen its ties with the Canadian Labour Congress. The new party was to be seen as a true alliance between organised labour and the CCF, rather than simply a left-wing party that shared some of the objectives of the union movement. However, even in 1961, the party took care not to abandon references to its Social Gospel heritage. Notably, delegates at the inaugural convention chose to elect a Baptist minister, Tommy Douglas, as the new party’s first leader. This decision to maintain a visible link to the Christian brotherhood message that had been so important to the previous generation of party faithful has proved to be electorally viable. In fact, the NDP has continued to find fertile ground in Canada for its left-wing reformist discourse compatible with Christian social theology, and, contrary to the short-lived Progressive Party or to the marginalised Communist Party, it has become a permanent feature of the Canadian political landscape. The CCF/NDP has been present in every Federal Parliament since its first foray into the political arena in 1935. Provincial wings of the party have governed in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. CCF/NDP candidates have been elected in federal constituencies in every province except Prince Edward
Island. These results reveal that a form of social democracy compatible with Christian values has been electorally viable in Canada.

Certainly, the Social Gospel played a central role in the creation and early success of a Canadian social democratic party. But, this theological current has also had a wide impact on Canadian political culture generally. Studies reveal that Canadians are schematically less individualistic than Americans and more inclined to show confidence in government to find collective solutions to societal concerns.25 This key difference can be traced in part to the differing religious traditions. While Canadian religious history is marked by the domination of a few hierarchically organised national churches that have reinforced a collectivist vision of society, the American congregationalist tradition has accentuated a more individualist political discourse. Canada developed respecting established churches: Anglican, Catholic and more recently, the United Church which was founded with the specific objective of creating a national church for Canada along the lines of those in Europe. Traditionally the great majority of Canadian Christians have belonged to one of these three hierarchically organised churches which conceive of the community of the faithful at the national, or even international level, distinguishing themselves clearly from the small Protestant sect tradition south of the border for whom the community of Christians represents primarily the small group of faithful belonging to a local church. This difference has been crucial to the development of more collectivist attitudes in Canada in contrast to the American model of rugged individualism. The collectivist approach to Christianity has made Canadians traditionally responsive to left-of-centre political appeals which echo social messages from the pulpit.

The Social Gospel tradition in the midst of which the United Church of Canada, still the major Protestant denomination in terms of membership, was founded has led it to become resolutely liberal. From strongly supporting state initiatives in health care and the fight against poverty, to early acceptance of ordaining homosexuals for ministry, to a pragmatic acceptance of a woman’s right to safe access to publicly-funded abortions, the United Church has helped to foster liberal public opinion on these issues. Indeed, the debate on how the country should deal with the thorny issue of abortion is particularly revealing. While in the United States it has been manipulated by the Republican Party to maximize support, in Canada the situation is the reverse. In fact, in recent elections, the Liberal Party has chosen to produce television advertising that explicitly reaffirms the pro-choice position suggesting that the

Conservative Party threatens a woman’s free access to a termination. On the northern side of the continental border, therefore, the abortion issue has been deliberately used to discourage pro-choice citizens from voting Conservative.

Conclusion

The importance of the Social Gospel in the creation and continued viability of a Canadian social democratic party clearly reveal that Christianity as a political influence is not necessarily an ally of the New Right. However, in contemporary Canada, as elsewhere, the Social Gospel influence is on the wane. Recent demographic studies reveal a nation that has been moving away from the more liberal mainline Protestant churches, thereby making it more difficult for the collectivist Christian tradition to provide a counter-balance to rising individualism in the country’s political culture. Two trends are at work: rising levels of secularisation and a conservative Evangelical wave coming up from the South. The former seems to represent the most serious threat to the political influence of the Social Gospel tradition. While left-leaning Christians used to constitute the core of the CCF’s supporters, the contemporary NDP finds strong support among the relatively large group of contemporary Canadians (16% and rising) who declared themselves to have “no religion” in the most recent national census. The high degree of secularisation is certainly of particular importance in the contemporary study of religion and politics in Canada. The 2001 official Census Report published by Statistics Canada reported that only about one third of Canadians engage in regular religious activities, with “regular” being relatively loosely defined as attending services “once a month or more”. The General Social Survey conducted also by Statistics Canada in 2001 found only 20% of the over age 15 population attended religious services on a weekly basis. In this type of environment progressive messages from the pulpit can no longer exercise great influence on left-wing political parties specifically, or on political culture generally. While it cannot be denied that today’s NDP still includes a relatively high percentage of leaders inspired by their Christian calling, the party’s official discourse has become strictly secular in response to the

26 2001 Canadian Census, Statistics Canada. All statistics cited here are available through the website <www.statcan.ca>.

27 For example, the former NDP Premier in Saskatchewan, Lorne Calvert, had previously served as a United Church minister, the Ontario NDP is led by Howard Hampton whose father was a United Church Minister, and in Newfoundland, the NDP leader, Lorraine Michael, is a former nun.
changing attitudes and religious practices. Support in Central Canada is now structured around sections of the population who would not likely respond favourably to the openly Christian rhetoric which was so effective for the CCF. For one thing, adopting an overtly Christian discourse would not mesh well with the contemporary policy of multiculturalism which is particularly popular with the younger, highly urbanised, secular voters who support the NDP today. As for the rise of more conservative evangelical forms of Christianity, the jury is still out as to the extent of their influence in contemporary Canada. Reginald Bibby suggests that Canada is in the early stages of a religious revival, but the lack of sufficient historical distance makes his thesis appear at this stage to be more of an intuition than a documented reality. 28 In any case, whatever the extent of rising religious activity in Canada, one thing is certain: the trend is moving in favour of evangelical and charismatic churches, and has not allowed Canada’s mainline Protestant churches to slow down their decline. The rise in religious activity is therefore not likely to allow Canadian political culture to renew with its Social Gospel tradition. Instead, the growing evangelical and charismatic focus on individual salvation will tend to reinforce right-wing political parties proposing a less pervasive role for the state and more conservative positions on social issues, thereby bringing Canada a little closer to its southern neighbour.

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