Nationalism and Religion: A Personal History

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This article is presented from the perspective of one who, for most of his life, has grappled with the problem of personal identity and its relation to concurrent and often competing claims of national loyalty and religious belief. For me, the strength of these claims goes back to precedents explicitly set by forebears for at least three generations, and implicitly for much longer. This has led to a search for the meaning of these claims to those who went before, and to an examination of their times, particularly of the economic and political conditions to which they responded.

Both nationalism and religion obviously mean different things at different times to different people. Sometimes the nation has been taken to mean the state with the people as servants of the state. Sometimes the nation is seen to be the people, as at present in Quebec. Perhaps this historical expedition will illuminate this difference, so that one can assess the behaviour of the state as oppressor or as servant of the people in the light of religious teaching.

This journey will cover four generations beginning with my great-grandfather Richard Woodsworth, my grandfather James, my father Harold and his brother James, and myself, David. Of these, the most significant person is probably Richard, who was an active participant in the establishment of the Methodist church in Canada at a time when both the church and the state were in a critical period of definition. But his successors have also had to accommodate their ways within the changing relationships among nationalism, religions, and politics.

ARC, XIX, Spring 1991, 59-71

Richard Woodsworth

Richard Woodsworth, the son of a Yorkshire carpenter, emigrated to Upper Canada in 1829, and quickly established himself both as a builder-contractor and as a lay preacher in the Methodist church in York/Toronto. As a contractor, he built the Newgate St. Methodist Episcopal Church in 1833 — the most imposing and permanent church built up to that time. (The name of the street was later changed to Adelaide, and from 1844 the church was known by that name. It was later replaced by the Metropolitan Church [St. John 27].) William and Egerton Ryerson were both ministers of that congregation during the next ten years.

Richard was a lay preacher of the Newgate St. Church but left it, along with many others, in 1840 to join with the British Wesleyans. This was a time of struggle in which the issues of church and state were closely interwoven, and to some people were apparently identical. The issues can only be understood in the context of the efforts to define Canada as a nation.

On the one hand, there was the memory of the American Revolution, which was seen by loyalists as a rebellion rather than a War of Independence. Many of the people in Upper Canada were children of either soldiers or Loyalists. Then there was the vivid and recent memory of the War of 1812, and the current "Fenian" raids on Canada. All of these factors made it essential, for British immigrants like Richard, that loyalty to the British Crown should be often and vigorously asserted.

On the other hand, the Methodist church in Canada had been nurtured and guided by American leaders who followed the episcopal form. There was, however, a strong desire on the part of many Canadian Methodists to be responsible for their own affairs. To this extent they were resistant to what they saw as domination by British Wesleyans, who considered Canada a colonial mission and claimed control of the Canadian movement. These claims

were strongly opposed by Egerton Ryerson, and many others, who vehemently denied charges of being influenced by "democratic" American thought but were none the less insistent on self-direction. There was, therefore, a struggle for power, with strong overtones of political loyalty, between the British Wesleyans and the Episcopal Methodists that confronted Richard along with all Methodist leaders of the time.

This struggle continued for a long time. As early as 1812 the Montreal Methodist society, then under the leadership of American preachers, asserted that

> the American preachers are in general bitter enemies to our good old King and Government . . . Therefore we are often stigmatized as a set of Jacobins when in fact only our spiritual guides are so; but they being our head, we the body are supposed to be defiled and corrupted in the Sorbonian Bog of Democracy. (French 70)

The Nova Scotia District Meeting of 1820 asserted: "To enlarge on the loyalty of our societies would be superfluous. It is an important part of our religion to fear God and while they do so they cannot but honour the King seeing the two are indissolubly united in the Word of God" (French 66). At the same time, "the basic source of disagreement between the [Wesleyan] Committee and the [local] missionaries was the former's insistence on obedience and encouragement of local initiative" (French 65). Obviously it was hard to do both at the same time.

This struggle for control of the Methodists in Canada was part of a broader battle, namely the opposition to the policies and behaviour of the colonial government and of the Family Compact in Upper Canada, which came to a focus there especially around the issue of the "clergy reserves." Bishop Strachan was not only the head of the Anglican Church in Upper Canada, but was also a dominant figure in the Administrative Council. His

strenuous efforts to ensure the profit from a seventh of all crown lands for the support of the Church of England clergy naturally brought resistance not only from the Church of Scotland, but especially from the more numerous Methodists who were under the leadership of Egerton Ryerson. The resistance also brought the ardent support of William Lyon Mackenzie, whose resort to armed insurrection was repudiated by Ryerson in the name of loyalty even though they shared their opposition to the Family Compact. Mackenzie considered this desertion. He wrote, "*The Christian Guardian* [Ryerson's paper] has gone over to the enemy . . . and hoisted the colours of a cruel, vindictive Tory priesthood" (French 144).

Ryerson had to defend himself against severe attacks from Dr. Strachan, who in 1825 preached: "Can it be doubted that it is only through the Church and its institutions that a truly English character and feeling can be given to or preserved among the population of a Foreign [sic] possession?" (French 112). Ryerson, who was himself a strong loyalist, had thus simultaneously to assure the Governor General and the Imperial government in London of the Methodists' loyalty, to clear himself of the taint of democracy, to fend off the control of British Wesleyans, and to challenge Bishop Strachan's aspirations to political and ecclesiastical monopoly.

James Richardson, one of the Methodist leaders, perceptively observed that "civil and religious rights are often so blended together that it is scarcely possible to attend to the one without touching the other" (French 117). Opinion was not united on the separability of church and state. Ryerson himself tried to maintain that he kept them apart by saying, "the discipline of the church does not authorize us to become the judge of another man's political opinions . . . the church is not a political association" (French 161). But the President of the Conference, Harvard, said in a pastoral letter, "under a lawful government good Christians must be good subjects. No man who is not disposed to be a good subject can be admissible to

the sacraments of the church." Within these violent crosscurrents, Richard was a conservative. When the Rebellion was at its crisis, the Newgate Street Church was used to quarter militia men raised to meet the insurgents, and Richard "assisted us to make them comfortable by cooking victuals, making tea, soup, coffee, etc. for them" (St. John 31). He even, at one point, carried a sabre, which was passed down to his grandson James Shaver Woodsworth, who made it the point of a wry comment to the Prime Minister of his day, W.L.M. King. Richard may not have thought much about Canadian nationalism; the issue then, in Upper Canada and the Maritime colonies, was loyalty to the Crown. To him, loyalty and religion were almost inseparable; he might well have subscribed to Bishop Strachan's views on the point.

James Woodsworth

It was into this intense religious atmosphere that James was born in 1843; he no doubt carried with him strong convictions both about his attachment to Britain and to the Canadian Methodist church. Richard lived long enough to see James ordained in 1868, the year after Confederation, at the hand of the formidable evangelist Morley Punshon. Both James and his brother Richard, also a Methodist minister, served the church at the national level. For them, there was now a nation to extend and preserve, and a unified and confident Methodist Church. After serving in several charges in Ontario James went, in 1882, to Portage la Prairie, and in 1885 moved to Brandon as the Superintendent of Methodist Missions: his territory extended from the Great Lakes to Vancouver Island.

For about twenty years, James travelled throughout this vast land by canoe, York boat, ship, buggy, horseback and, when the CPR was completed, by rail. His purpose was to bring Methodism to native people and to reinforce the religion of white settlers by building churches and

appointing local preachers. Seven times he crossed the Atlantic to recruit a total of 280 young Englishmen to the Canadian mission field. There was no doubt that he still regarded England as his home country, but he was also proud to see Canada emerge as a Christian nation.

The year of the move to Brandon was also the year of the second Riel Rebellion. It is significant to note that Indians converted to the church declined to join the rebellion; their allegiance to the church evidently included allegiance to the government of the white men. James himself was zealous in their conversion, preaching, marrying, burying, setting up new congregations and training native preachers.

By the time of James' death in 1917, Canada was a full-fledged country, at war in its own name. The lives of his children show that pacifism based on religious conviction and a powerful commitment to mission service were two of the fundamental values he passed on. The impetus to mission was his version of loyalty to the nation, possibly because there was then no other alternative in his mind to loyalty to Britain's cause, or to the view that the best way to serve Canada was to bring (English) religion to the west.

Harold and James Woodsworth

Harold was the fourth son and fifth child of James' six children, who all reflect the influence of their father by their career choices: three of the sons, James Shaver, Joseph and Harold, became ministers and missionaries; one daughter married a minister who later became a doctor; and the other daughter served for a number of years in a mission school. Harold served as a missionary in Japan for almost thirty years, first for the Methodist Church and then the United Church.

As a boy, Harold was caught up in the nationalist fervour of the Boer War. He wrote, "some of the older boys went to South Africa. We were depressed by the

failure of Buller, and the bells rang when Mafeking and Ladysmith were relieved . . . our exercise books were ultra-patriotic in design . . ." Throughout his life, Harold considered himself attached to England, despite being Canadian. (Throughout his youth he carried a British passport since there was no Canadian passport.)

As a student at Victoria College, Harold was much influenced by the Young People's Forward Movement for Missions. "The question of foreign missions was paramount," he says, "men like John R. Mott, Robert E. Speer and Sherwood Eddy were in their full vigour and made a powerful impression on us." At the time, a great many people volunteered to go to China, others to Japan, Korea and Formosa. The mission field was, in effect, divided up among the various denominations, so that each could have a chance to gain converts.

Harold's main task in Japan was not exciting; he was a teacher, first in a government school under the YMCA, then in a college sponsored by the U.S. Southern Methodists and the Canadian Methodists. This was Kwansei Gakuin, which has since become a major university. The job of the missionary was to convey two messages: first, the gospel; and second, the superiority of western, and especially English, culture and literature. There is no doubt that in the early years, and probably throughout much of his mission life, Harold thought of himself as bringing a higher culture to the Japanese much as his father had thought of his work with the native people of Canada.

There was also the evident power of the British Empire, which even after the First World War was not markedly reduced: British warships frequently paid "friendly" calls to Japanese and Chinese ports. The lesson was taken by the Japanese, who modelled their navy after the British and their army after the German. But as described most eloquently in the novels and in the life and death of Mishima Yukio, many Japanese resented this insulting assumption of superiority by western powers,

and the 1930s saw the growth of nationalist passion that led to the war in China, and of course, to Japan's part in the Second World War.

Harold saw the storm clouds as they blew up; one could not help but see them coming. He watched as Japan invaded China and Manchuria. He was required, as a professor, to share vigils watching over the Emperor's portrait in the college. He was obliged to agree to the conscription of his students, and to military training on the campus; he saw religious practices restricted as secret police searched out "dangerous thoughts" among those influenced by western ideas. Christianity was clearly becoming incompatible with Japanese nationalism. Harold saw too that Shinto, as a state religion, was put to the service of aggressive nationalist expansion, which required the elimination of the very values of freedom and internationalism that were expressed by the missionaries.

The missionary spirit was shared by Harold's brothers and sisters. A letter to him from his brother James Shaver hints at the possibility of going to a foreign mission field by stating, "we in our family can hardly help being missionaries." As it turned out, James' mission was not to the Orient, but to the north end of Winnipeg. He, more than any of his siblings, felt the clash of national and religious interests as he identified with the plight of immigrants and with the cause of the working class; as a result, he became a convinced pacifist. As his sister Mary wrote to Harold,

> the Bureau of Social Research [in Winnipeg] of which he has been head has been closed without warning of more than a few days. The reason given in the paper is the excessive cost of the Bureau, but everyone knows that it is because of James' views on national registration [for the war].

As a result of this, and of the church's warm support of the war, James, a slightly-built clergyman, left the ministry, and moved to Vancouver to earn his living as a stevedore. He later returned to Winnipeg as a leader of the great strike and the founder of the C.C.F.; but he never returned to a church which put nationalism before peace and the unity of all human beings. In 1939, as the sole voice raised in Parliament in opposition to the new war, he was deserted by his own party.

James' removal from the Methodist ministry was not the only such instance during the war years and the early twenties. Because of their support of militant unionism during the Winnipeg Strike and after, others, like William Ivens and A.E. Smith, were also accused of disloyalty, of being communists and of fomenting revolution (Allen). They challenged the church to declare itself on the side of the workers, but found instead that it was already strongly committed to support order and government. Their challenge to the church's support of the State has never since been as sharply raised.

David Woodsworth

One of the consequences for children raised on a foreign mission field is a confusion concerning their own national identity. One acquires knowledge of a "home" country and experiences the occasional preparation for "going home," though usually to an unknown nation. But it is the experienced reality of the "foreign" home that remains most vivid, resulting in an ambivalence that opens a child to the ways and the rights of other cultures. The importance given to ideas, and especially to values, is strengthened by the religious explanation of his parents' presence in a foreign land. "Nationalism," therefore, is something that other people manifest, and is considered a falling away from the Christian standards of universal love for one's fellows; it is not a Christian virtue. What

then takes the place of nationalism? Precisely, a commitment to one's fellows — some form of social-ism, either national or international. The church's teaching and practice are to be measured against the values of service to humanity at home or abroad.

Something like this must have been going through my head on my return to Canada in 1935, a time which found Canada in the depths of the Depression, in the years of the Spanish Civil War and the onset of the Second World War. It was a simple choice, at first, to be a pacifist, especially in the atmosphere of Victoria College where the Student Christian Movement was considered by some to be a "hotbed of communism." But the realities of other nationalisms in Germany, Italy and Japan, made it clear that whatever the errors or duplicity of our own politicians, humanity required active involvement. Pacifism was in danger of becoming passivism. Canadian "nationalism" was not a strong factor in uniting Canadians in the war effort; there was none of the fervent rallying to the flag that had been the spirit of the First War. It was instead a commitment to oppose the inhumanity of Fascism. Echoes of the Winnipeg Strike were still heard, and were revived around such events as the Regina unemployed demonstration and the March on Ottawa. The purposes of the Second War itself were clarified with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, which made the Western forces, for a few years at least, allies of the Soviets. For once, nationalism was undivided.

Since the war, many attempts have been made to define the nationhood of the people of Canada; it has become a kind of pastime for Canadian authors. But the attempts at a new definition have taken a secular form through the economic and political dominance of other nations, especially of the United States, over Canadian purposes in foreign policy, economics and culture. This American urge for dominance has meant a shift towards the right in social consciousness in most of the western world, and towards the acceptance of a doctrine that

selfish consumerism will generate a growing National Product. This doctrine leaps to the assumption that such growth is necessary and (therefore?) moral. Though growth is measured in terms of National Product and the nation's ability to keep up with competitors, the economic base is increasingly seen to be international and corporate, rather than belonging to the nation. Our governments are having increasing difficulty showing that "what's good for General Motors is good for the country," not to mention the attempts to provide moral justification for such economic policies. Further, in Canada, other national government policies (Free Trade, and the provincialization of political and economic power) have also undermined the meaning of Canadian nationalism, while at the same time inducing the rapid growth of Quebec nationalism and that of native peoples. At the same time, government policies have undermined the religious ground of action by legitimating selfishness as the explanation of human behaviour. In short, the option now offered to Canadians is neither nationalist nor religious, but opportunist.

In this conjuncture, Quebec nationalism rises as a clear call to separate. Though no longer clothed in religious vestments, the spirit of Abbe Lionel Groulx remains strong. Quebec nationalism is advanced as an alternative to the dominant political and economic power of English Canada, giving assurance however, that Quebec will fit in well with the American economy. Elsewhere in Canada, other forms of religious and political conservatism that offer "meaning" grow in popularity, while the "mainline churches" are immobilized by their losses. Despite brave statements from the Catholic Bishops on the economy, or the "head office" social policies of other churches, they have on the whole been unable, or perhaps even unwilling, to assume a prophetic role, to challenge the power of those who make economic policy. The mission of the church, along with nationalism, has gone into eclipse.

Lest it be thought that this is a sigh of despair, one might recall that this article began with the comment that concepts of nationalism and religion change from generation to generation. New forms of both nationalism and religious expression are in the making. At the moment, these are expressed most clearly, and ominously, where violence is found in the world: Iraq, Israel, South Africa and the Soviet Union, to name a few. In these places the struggle for human validity takes the form of nationalism spurred on and distorted, in many cases, by religious slogans.

For Canadians, the danger seems to be that we may surrender our nationhood entirely to other more powerful economies, and at the same time define our identity by attacking others. For us to seek it by such means would be to contradict the religious ground of our founding. To inspire hope and faith, nationalism must offer a better goal than economic growth or religious intolerance, and must return to the principles of our commitment to mission. In this regard, Quebec nationalism, expressed as it is by people who subscribe to the economic principles of possessive individualism, cannot hope to remain a shining ideal, though it may well do so long enough to make independence a reality. Canadian nationalism must find itself some other base than language and culture, perhaps a new version of the inspiration of service provided by Lester Pearson, a man of the church.

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