

## A View From the Edge of Empire: Prophetic Faith and the Crises of our Time

DOUGLAS J. HALL

When Vernon Visick invited me to participate in this series of lectures, he said that the planners would be interested in my “general theme” of “the stewardship of life in the kingdom of death;” but then added that, since this series is “intentionally international,” the committee would like me to speak as a Canadian, interpreting “some of what is happening in Canadian life in terms of minority relationships, the future of the nation, the Canadian relationship to the United States, etc.”<sup>1</sup> In this address I want to link the two main thrusts of the invitation, that is, I would like to speak to your question, “What is to be done?”—which I take it means what is to be done by those who try to engage in the praxis of prophetic faith in the midst of our present crises—I would, I say, like to speak to this question both as a Christian and a Canadian. They are by no means synonymous terms! So far as my own life and thought are concerned, however, they are obviously interwoven.

### *On Living Next to “Superpower”*

There are two salient features of the Canadian reality that cannot be missed by anyone remotely familiar with our history and our mentality as a people. The first is the tenuousness and the extreme vulnerability of our whole experiment in nationhood. The second is our proximity to one of the great superpowers, the United States of America. These two aspects of the Canadian reality are of course inseparable. Part of our irresoluteness as a federation is directly attributable to our position vis-a-vis the United States. The lines not only of geography but also, to a considerable extent, of history run north and south on this continent. For example, people in

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<sup>1</sup>This is an edited version of an address given during the Persian Gulf War at the University of Wisconsin (Madison). It was part of a series entitled, “Prophetic Faith and the Crises of Our Time.”

Quebec and the Atlantic provinces are far more familiar with Boston and New York than they are with Toronto, Winnipeg or Vancouver. This north/south pattern is true all over my country. But this "natural" preoccupation of Canadians with the United States would not play the havoc that it does with our hesitant bid for nationhood were it not for the fact that the United States is what it is.

And what it is, its own protestations, its own reluctance, and the essential modesty of the American people notwithstanding, is empire. It is certainly not an empire in the classical sense, that is, territorially; but it is an empire all the same, and a far more potent imperial force than any of the classical empires from Rome to Great Britain, because the source of its power is the more subtle and more effective influence of global economics, high technology, and modern mass communications. America is not only the inventor and producer of most of the world's complex technology, but it is also the centre from which the technological mentality and quest flows to all corners of the earth, even the most remote. The United States is also the purveyor of popular culture everywhere: even in ancient societies like Japan, which has in some ways outstripped the technological cleverness of America, the young pattern their lives on the rock and punk and Pepsi generation that they encounter in American music, TV and tourists. The subway trains in sedate old Kyoto, where I lived for four months last academic year, carry advertisements that feature mainly American models.

But you know all of this already! What you may not know is what it is like to live right alongside such a "superpower," to share about 4,000 miles of "undefended border" with this giant. While discussion about the border being "undefended" is growing increasingly rhetorical, in a more subtle sense it really is "undefended;" Canadians in particular are subject to the influences that accrue from this lack of any real defence. Just consider this one datum: according to a fairly recent survey conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the average Canadian watches nine full years of television in his or her lifetime. By the time a child enters primary school in our country, it will have seen 6,000 hours of TV, and if the child eventually reaches university its viewing time will have increased to 26,000 hours. But the most important piece of information coming from this particular survey was that no less than 88% of the television Canadians watch emanates directly from the United States. Increasingly, not only the aspirations and values of Canadians, but even their speech-patterns are being altered by the formative influence of this Great Educator, television.

Living on the edge of empire, in my experience, is evocative of four states of mind: envy, resentment, dependency, and (but this is a category of an altogether different order, and one that I want to develop later)—*potential* wisdom.

Envy. Sir George McLeod of Iona used to say that Canadians have their hearts in Great Britain, their eyes on the United States, and a slap on the back for Soviet Russia. This is now a somewhat dated summation, but the saying remains altogether true with respect to Canadian eyes. Our eyes are fixed steadfastly still on our American cousins. We feel ourselves dull, prosaic, by comparison. We aspire to your seeming breeziness, we covet your surety and lack of self-doubt, we imitate the way you dress. With every new generation we are trying harder to be like you. Envy.

And all the while we also resent you. We resent your power: your often unintentional control of everything. We writhe under your immense lack of awareness of us. We tell jokes about American ignorance of Canadian geography and history. We also resent your real domination of us—economic domination. We feel owned. We sense increasingly your designs on our natural resources. Will you also drain our waterways that you, in part, have polluted through acid rain and industrial wastes? Oh, we resent you—whom we also envy.

And we are dependent. That is, we make ourselves dependent, because, increasingly, we have no stomach left for independence, for self-development, for the amplification of an alternative vision. We know that you too have lost much of the zest of yesteryear. "The American Dream," of which our Canadian Dream was a pale copy, is not the vital thing that it was a century ago. But even this knowledge does not deflect our growing dependency. Perhaps we feel we can shelter ourselves under the wings of your might and your plenitude even in their decline. In the insightful Quebec-made film, "The Decline of the American Empire," the intellectuals who are the decadent protagonists of the tale, assure each other that the benefit of living in Montreal is that even when life in nearby Plattsburg, New York, is falling apart you can still watch from a relatively safe distance and enjoy, still, the benefits of empire without any of its responsibilities.

There is, I suspect, nothing very unique about all this. Have not those who lived on the edge of empire always manifested something like these states of mind?—envy, resentment, and dependency? Were these emotions not for instance the perennial psychic states of ancient Israel? And did not

the prophets of Israel continuously rail against precisely these responses to existence? Against Israel's self-righteous resentment of the great powers by which it was surrounded, invaded, captivated? Against the ease of its ruling classes, who so often gave themselves to pleasures made possible by their unholy alliances with power? For biblical Israel too, throughout its history, was a people living on the edge of empire, some empire, some "super-power."

### *Prophetic Consciousness and Proximity to Power*

But mention of the prophets brings me to the fourth factor which I think may in a tentative way be associated with life on the edge of empire: wisdom, potential wisdom. It is this aspect of the subject that I want chiefly to develop here, because I think it may contain a metaphor that could be useful today for Christians who are seeking to discover the meaning of prophetic faith and witness. I will state the matter first as a question: what I want to ask—what biblical reflection drives me to ask, what my life as a Canadian impels me to ask could be put in this way: does the experience of living in close proximity to great power have anything to do with the development of prophetic consciousness? Might one be able as a Canadian to interpret one's context as evocative of the sort of critical insight that engenders prophecy? And what, in that case, could Canadian Christians bring to the ecumenical Christian dialogue today by way of a contribution to the meaning of obedient discipleship in the post-Christian era? Does life on the edge of empire also, now and then, evoke insight, wisdom, prophetic vigilance?

Now it is undoubtedly presumptuous to ask such a question, and I hasten to add: I by no means wish, in doing so, to imply that wisdom is part of the Canadian reality. My question is rather a theoretical one—and a matter of hope. When I attempt to translate into concrete, political terms the hope that divine grace nurtures in me as a Christian living in Canada, I ask myself: dare I think that our existence in that large space, that wintry landscape that is on the periphery of all that light and warmth and power, could breed in us—were we receptive to it—a certain wisdom?

Recently, a great Canadian scholar died—Northrop Frye. Professor Frye was internationally recognized and respected as a distinguished literary critic. Canadians on the whole knew less about him than other people knew—a typical fate of Canadian scholars! But he himself believed that his

work was profoundly affected by his specifically Canadian context. An important aspect in the “difference” that his Canadian context made to Northrop Frye—and the same could be said about such Canadians as George Grant, Marshall MacLuhan, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Robertson Davies, Pierre Elliot Trudeau and others—has to do with the fact that being a Canadian, and being so intentionally and reflectively and not merely as an accident of birth, means recognizing that one occupies a peculiar position vis-a-vis power. It does not follow from the mere positioning in relation to power that people will come to engage in the kind of intellectual and spiritual struggle that accompanies the getting of wisdom; nevertheless, I suspect that wisdom is usually learned by human beings, if it is learned at all, only as the spirit and mind do battle with the promises and the delusions of power. The prophets of Israel, including that one who “fulfilled” the prophetic office, emerged from the midst of a people that existed in a certain (let us say) provocative relationship vis a vis a whole series of empires. I doubt if that could be considered purely accidental.

What do I mean by being “in a provocative position” vis-a-vis power? What sort of position could become, under some historical circumstances, a context favourable to the development of prophetic wisdom? It would have to be a position enabling familiarity with the advantages of power, while simultaneously opening the eyes of the soul to the destructive and even demonic dimensions of the power impulse when it is most successfully pursued. What I mean is that the edge of empire constitutes a particularly auspicious situation for the evolving of prophetic consciousness, at least theoretically speaking, because it is a vantage-point from which to grasp and be grasped by the paradox of power.

The paradox of power is both the necessity and the nemesis of human communities. It is necessary because, without some exercise of its potentiality for control over its internal and external realities, the human community is at the mercy of disintegrative spiritual forces within and natural, physical threats from without. Humankind perishes if it does not take hold of its potential to foresee, to plan, to build, to defend, to direct and govern. The stewardship of life is dependent upon this realization—this making real—of the power that we have been given to understand, to shape the future in some at least genuine if limited ways, to “change the world” (Marx). We must come to know that we are not pawns, mere helpless things who can only wait for the plague to carry us off, some plague, physical or spiritual.

But the quest for power is also, with great historical regularity, the nemesis of peoples and nations. Experiencing the joys of potency we are tempted to think ourselves omnipotent. The very taste of mastery gained goads us into delusion: feeling our strength as human beings we are enticed to think ourselves veritable controllers of nature, makers of history. The little successes of adolescent power blind us to the reality of our actual limitations. Having against time and tide, wind and weather made for ourselves these sheltering cities, we go on to construct lordly ideological monuments to our ingenuity, our superiority, our impregnability. The honest labourer becomes an heroic prometheus. The steward becomes the owner. The nation becomes empire. The well-known Reformed hymn perfectly summarizes the matter:

Age after age their tragic Empires rise,  
 Built while they dream, and in that dreaming weep:  
 Would [we] but wake from out [our] haunted sleep,  
 Earth might be fair and all [folk] glad and wise.

By living on the edge of empire, it is possible—not inevitable—to discern, existentially, something of the logic of this progression, the rise and decline of Empire through the use and abuse of power. Such discernment is not a virtue; it is simply a consequence of historical positioning—and, of course, if it is actualized, it is also a sheer gift!

To exemplify this out of the specifics of Canadian experience, it has always seemed to me that—with exceptions—Americans tend not to notice with any great consistency the negative aspects of their own international prowess. Inside the fortress, unless one is oneself in some visible sense a victim of its pursuits and values, it is quite possible to believe without hypocrisy that the American Way is the best possible way; that the American spirit is basically good and altruistic; that American economic, cultural, industrial and governmental agencies on the whole reflect the fundamental decency of the American populace; and that therefore also the American military, when it enforces what it interprets as the nation's will in places far and near, is doing so for essentially just and benevolent reasons. If, once again, a high percentage of the population of the United States can within the space of a few weeks learn to consider an obscure leader in a formerly almost friendly nation The Enemy; if, once again, the majority of American citizens are ready to believe that "our cause is right,"

that they are again defending the innocent and bringing bullies to justice, this illustrates how difficult it is within the boundaries of empires to sustain the self-critical stance that belongs to the prophetic tradition. There are always, I believe, minorities within empires who keep alive the more objective pursuit of truth, and America has been richly blessed with such minorities. But the position itself—the position within the imperium—militates against a widespread critical vigilance on the part of the greater public.

In the past the Canadian experience was not productive of this kind of belief-ful-ness. Part of the reason why our federation is so tentative is that, traditionally, we are not believers. From the outset, there has been a high degree of scepticism in our historical character. Perhaps it is our cold climate. It's hard to "believe" when it's so damn cold! This is aided and abetted by our mostly rugged terrain. The theme of Canadian literature, as Margaret Atwood has brilliantly demonstrated, is not success and the conquering of barriers (not the Horatio Alger motif) but survival.

Our lack of "belief" — by which I do not mean only belief in God, or even especially that, but rather a general belief-ful attitude extending all the way from God to Government — is also due to the fact that we have been denied great power, and have had to live alongside a power, a power whose greatness has frequently been felt by us as humiliation (oppression is too strong a word). Canadians have never been the most conspicuous victims of American imperial power, but we have known enough of America's expansiveness to realize, now and then, that America is not to be interpreted forthwith on the basis of its own often generous public account of itself. We learned our scepticism as a people, in part, by listening to American public rhetoric; for we could usually see, what our more credulous American cousins often seemed not to see, the incongruity between the rhetoric of power and its actual behaviour in the world. It was, I repeat, not a virtue of ours that we could see this; it was only the uniqueness of our positioning—close to power, envious of its obvious benefits, dependent upon its self-protective shield, and resentful of its encroachments.

I would like to say that we Canadians have seized the opportunity present in our positioning vis a vis your power. I would like to report that the country as a whole—or at least a portion thereof sufficiently influential had actually achieved some measure of wisdom, had actually learned some of the lessons that are there to be learned by those who live on the edge of

empire, had therefore set themselves to follow a course within the community of nations significantly different from that of the United States of America. I would like to think that Canada had acquired an independent identity, that it is not merely a satellite. I would like to believe that our nation would have retained remnants of the parental civilizations which could enrich our culture and, at the same time, enrich our contributions to other peoples—including the United States. I would like to be able to believe that we had honoured the many new Canadians in our midst by maintaining and acquiring ties with their homelands—that we might have become the first truly “international nation”—not a melting pot, but a patchwork quilt of peoples enriching each other’s lives. I would like also to report to you that we had listened, finally, to our own native peoples, and had learned from them that human mastery over the natural world would only end in disaster. I would like to be able to conclude by saying that Canada has somehow, in some modest way, made good its historical potentiality for prophetic wisdom.

But I cannot report any of this: I stand before you as one who believes—or rather, who fears he must now believe—that Canada may not survive at all, as an identifiable national entity, sufficiently unified to be received in the community of nations as “a country.” This is what I think—what I fear to think!

Why this apprehension? Because the processes of disintegration have already gone too far. There is amongst us too little by way of a vital public will to survive—as Canada. There is no widely-held and credible vision of what Canada is or could be! French Canada—Quebec—can make the claim for such a vision more legitimately than any other region of the country. But while each of the five or six “regions” of our country clamours for special rights and privileges for itself, each desiring to be thought a “distinctive society,” few voices indeed are heard to speak with enthusiasm for Canada.

How this has come to pass is a story that would require not only more time but greater wisdom than I possess. That it has come about is a fact that few thinking Canadians would bother to deny. I think we do not have the public will—let alone the courage—to be. Continentalism, inspired mainly by mass consumerism and the economic manipulations of those who in fact have no country but Gain, has won the day. Our present government, as one of our greatest elder statesmen Eric Kierans put it, follows “like a poodle” the master’s voice emanating from the White House.



Perhaps in a few years the celebrated “undefended border” will have disappeared altogether.

And that, I would like to say, would be a sad thing not only for us—but also for you! Because you could have used an honest friend such as Canada might have been. In a way that was never true in your country, we managed at our best moments to institutionalize and legitimize radical criticism, to honour not only “freedom” but dissent. The socialist party, the former CCF and present NDP, has not only held office in several provinces (now even in Ontario, the bastion of economic capitalism), but it has been the only effective party in our nation with both an alternative vision and a lively critique; and its critique stems precisely from that hermeneutic of suspicion with respect to power that I have been delineating here. Some days I feel that the socialist party can still effect a radical change, can save the ultimate dissolution of our country. In any case, the incipient dissolution of our country is not to be attributed finally to party politics; it is something deep in the contemporary Canadian psyche. We seem unwilling to pay the price to be, on the one hand, different from you, and on the other accepting of the differences within our own society. If Canada is “cancelled,” it will not be because of the failure of any one party or segment of the population; it will be because of an all too general “lack of interest” on the part of the majority—a lack of interest which gives to the financial movers and shakers of the world precisely the opportunity that they need to establish their dominion, unimpeded by national dreams.

### *Recovering Global Responsibility in the Post-Christian Era*

The rise and fall of nations, like the end of individual life, necessarily brings sorrow to those who still care for their existence, who still hope for their good. That is true also of people of faith. Augustine, for all his pessimism about the “earthly city,” the *civitas terrena*, did not rejoice over the fall of Rome! This is because hope, biblically understood, is never just a vague thing, a mere historical optimism, an indeterminate providentialism. The hope that belongs to the tradition of Jerusalem fastens itself on specific things, events, people, movements; it deals in particulars. It looks for the triumph of the good in concrete happenings, in particularly earthly loves and attachments, in spontaneous responses to crises on the parts of counter-cultural minorities, in stirrings of the public conscience, in turnings, transi-

tions, paradigm shifts. Biblical hope is historical hope, and therefore it takes with utter seriousness the exigencies of time and place.

As a Christian, my hope was therefore—in part—attached to my country. I say as a Christian! My love of country was not a matter of mere patriotism, and certainly not of unqualified nationalism. It was a pragmatic thing. I felt that Canada might play a special role in the international community precisely because it was alongside the greatest world power in our planetary community. Alongside, without being part of that empire. Distinct. Canada could be, I hoped, a “middle power”—a mediating people. Acting responsibly within the nation, Christians, together with others of good will, might help the nation to act responsibly globally. Globally—for the hope that belongs to the tradition of Jerusalem is not limited to nations, it aspires to the mending of the world!

But in 1991 we are, apparently, not willing, for the sake of peaceful alternatives, to risk annoying our friend, the U.S.A. During the recent Gulf War we instead leapt immediately into the fray—on your side. Oh yes, on the side of the United Nations, or so it is said! Might it not have been more genuinely in keeping with our allegedly “historical peace-keeping role” had we attempted a more mediatorial posture, also in this war? Had we, for instance, backed the many Americans and others who favoured the continuation of the embargo against the desperate and despotic Saddam Hussein?

In any case, we did not. And to some of us in Canada today, that fact, together with the internal divisions that are coming to a head with the renewed enthusiasm of Quebec for independence from the rest of Canada, is experienced as something like a signal of the imminent end of our experiment in national identity and vocation, at least insofar as an effective international dimension of that vocation is concerned. And what are we, as Christians, to say about this? I have said that if Canada ends it would be necessary for Canadian Christians to lament it. If Canada ends, whether with a bang or a whimper, Christians would have to mourn the loss of a vehicle of historical hope—one that never quite came off, though it had a lot of promise.

Is there, for Christians, any other legitimate response to such an eventuality? Of course! For our hope as Christians is not tied unqualifiedly to the fate of nations, even beloved nations. God will bring, is bringing about God’s reign in the world, God’s Kingdom, with and also without the nations! But that eschatological presupposition of our faith does not cause

us, surely, to despise our experiences with and as members of nations. From our involvement in the life, the aspirations, the struggles and the failures of institutions and nations, people of faith learn—or may learn—important lessons about the character of their greater hope and its historical implementation.

As a Canadian Christian, I feel that I have learned—am still learning—one thing that is important for all Christians everywhere, as we face together the reality of another and much more decisive ending, namely, what I have called elsewhere the demise of Christendom, the end of the Constantinian era. In this new stage of the Christian movement, which may prove to be the most demanding as well as the most significant stage of all, all serious and thinking Christians are living “on the edge of empire!” All of us know that we are already on the periphery, where great power is concerned, and most of us suspect that we shall be pushed still further and further to the outer edges of power by the technological, commercial, industrial, military and still more subtle spiritual forces that are at work in our midst.

For many Christians, especially in the First World societies of the West, this can only be experienced as a shocking turn of events. Unlike our sister faith, Judaism, we Christians are not used to living on the edge of empire. For most of its nearly twenty centuries, the Christian Church has in fact been closely allied with various empires. We have learned—oh, how well we have learned—to adjust our mission to imperial goals, to present our gospel as an undergirding of the pursuits and values of dominant societies, to refrain from offense where the ruling classes are concerned, to comfort the victims of those classes but not to alter greatly the conditions by which they are victimized. The Christian Church has achieved a high degree of expertise, over the centuries, in living with power. It has found out, century after century, in its relations with empire after empire, how to gain power for itself through an uncritical proximity to power. But what it has lost—and lost almost irretrievably on account of this *modus vivendi* with power—is precisely the possibility of prophetic faith and witness. It has forfeited the power of prophetic judgement and love in order to claim its share of influence and status as the chaplaincy to the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them.

Perhaps those Christian communities which have lived on the edge of empire, which have not been at the centre “where the action is,” which have long experience of living with decisions made outside their own

immediate sphere of direct influence—perhaps, as the disciple community of Jesus Christ everywhere is pushed to the periphery of power, such communities may season and encourage the church's faith and hope by drawing upon their own historical experience. They already know the temptations that belong to life on the edge of empire: envy, resentment, dependency. The history of the Christian movement teaches us how easy it is for the church, when it is not permitted a place at the centre, to envy those who are there, to resent them, and to court their protection.

The case of East Germany demonstrates my point about the wisdom that may be gained by those who are not part of the dominant culture, who are precluded from that sort of participation in society. Precisely because the minority church in the German Democratic Republic, prior to the Reunification, was not part of the powers-that-were, it was able to provide leadership to the protesting movement that gave rise to *die Wende*—to the changes that began to occur, visibly, in the Fall of 1989. Without the guidance of the diaspora church in the German Democratic Republic, the protesting movement would either have been split into a thousand factions from within or destroyed by the tanks because it had resorted to an abortive violence.

To live on the edge of empire, the periphery of power, does not mean to have abandoned public responsibility (though that is certainly a danger—the danger of ghettoization!). It could mean the development of a far more honest and far-sighted and responsible vigilance for the *civitas terrena* than ever is manifested by those who are too closely aligned with the dominant powers. What better illustration is there of the social and worldly responsibility that can be borne by those who are denied access to the corridors of power than we have in the history of Judaism within Western Christendom! The prophetic community does not abandon the world because it abandons, or is abandoned by, the rulers of this world; on the contrary, because its position “on the edge” gives it the necessary perspective to perceive—what sheer power never does perceive—the delusions and negations of power, it becomes all the more watchful. And watchful, not only in behalf of the victims of power, but in behalf even of those who, wielding power, fail to realize how it robs them of their essential humanity.

In this series you are asking, “What is to be done?” What is to be done by those who wish in some genuine way to make good the promise of prophetic faith and witness in the face of the manifold crises of our own

historical moment? If we are to “do” anything very significant about the crises of our time; if we are to serve the forces which steward life and resist the kingdom of death, then we Christians must first of all concern ourselves with a new way of being. Our doing will follow from our being. And if our being is the being of a prophetic minority willing to stand with the crucified One outside the gates of those who rule, then, I am confident, our doing will take care of itself.

My thesis has been that it is of the essence of that prophetic being that it must learn the wisdom of living “on the edge of empire,” and of doing so without envy, without resentment, without dependency, opening itself to the global stewardship that becomes, under God, the special mandate and possibility of those who are denied direct access to the power and glory of empires.