

Jacques Grand'Maison: Religion and Nationalism During Quebec's Quiet Revolution

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I would like to introduce the nationalism and religious thinking of Quebec priest, theologian and nationalist, Jacques Grand'Maison by comparing him to the well-known nationalist cleric, Lionel Groulx.¹ Grand'Maison has been a professor of theology at the University of Montreal for more than three decades. In 1965, he published his first book, *Crise de prophétisme hier et aujourd'hui*, which was acclaimed for being well ahead of its time by calling the liberal optimism of the Second Vatican Council to task (Baum 1991, 97). Since then he has published more than twenty books, four of which are multi-volume works. He has also frequently addressed his audience through his numerous articles in Catholic publications, especially *Maintenant*, and the Jesuit journal *Relations*. In recognition of his distinguished career, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Montreal dedicated a symposium in 1990 celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary to the work of Grand'Maison (see Lapointe 1990).

On top of this extraordinary academic career, Grand'Maison was (and still is) an influential activist with a long history in progressive movements in his diocese of St. Jerome, an industrial city north of

Montreal. In 1979, he was asked by the Parti Québécois to run in a by-election in St. Jerome, an offer he declined after much introspection. It was through his religiously-inspired engagement in issues of social justice that Grand'Maison developed and came to express his definition of social science, and ultimately, his ethical judgment on nationalism.

While both Grand'Maison and Groulx shared a similar commitment to the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec and to the people or nation which that Church did so much to define and serve, the two men differed fundamentally in their conceptualization of the relationship of religion to nationalism. This article surveys how the academic disciplines of history and sociology, and the changes within these disciplines, helped to shape their respective religious nationalisms. More specifically, it focuses on how a particular conception of the social sciences defined Grand'Maison's religious nationalism and social activism.

History and Traditional Religious Nationalism

In his essay, "La Survivance French-Canadian Style," Ramsay Cook describes the didactic story-telling role played by the historians of French Canada:

. . . the historian in French Canada has played a leading part in the definition of the ideology of nationalism. It is from history that the definition of French-Canadian society and values is drawn. The historian speaks of the society's past, in order to define its future, or, to put it another way, to give it that sense of mission which is a necessary part of every nationalism. (1971, 114-115)

This function was hardly unique to French-Canadian historians but was part of a wider phenomena. Anthony Smith, a sociologist who specializes in theories of nationalism, argues that nationalist history, both popular and academic, has served the same purpose of bringing the past to life in order to provide direction for the future. Nationalism, he contends, is the response by an ethnic group to perceived or real decline. It is a salvation ideology that provides a blueprint for the future by pointing to the past. Thus nationalist history is written to be both didactic and dramatic.

Romance, mystery, drama—this is the stuff of any nationalist salvation-drama. It is important, because it helps to teach us “who we are,” to impart the sense of being a link in a chain which stretches back over the generations to bind us to our ancestors and our descendants. It is also important, because it teaches us “where we are” and “who we should be,” if we are to “recover ourselves.” By conveying the atmosphere and drama of past epochs in the life of the community, we “re-live” the lives and times of our forbears and make ourselves part of a “community of fate.” (Smith 1987, 179-180)

Lionel Groulx clearly fits Smith’s description of the nationalist historian. In his speech to the Second French Language Congress in Quebec on 29 June 1937, “History as a Guardian of Living Traditions,” Groulx discussed how history provides both a self-definition and an implicit blueprint for the future. “What is the purpose of History?” he asked rhetorically,

It helps a nation avoid deviations from the proper path, prevents it from building its life, its mores, its education along entirely wrong lines, protects it from hasty, improvised solutions to its economic, social or political problems, saves it from being a mere guinea pig in the hands of politicians, endows these political leaders with consistency of purpose and a capacity for leadership. (Trofimenkoff 1973, 148)

Groulx lamented the fallen condition of the French-Canadian nation: it had become a plagiarist of Anglo-Saxon art, fads, customs and fashions. Having been sold out by its political leadership, it was ignorant of its history and wavering in its faith. The two overt signs of this decay were, according to Groulx, the loss of national feeling and the emigration to the United States of large numbers of French-Canadians in search of employment. He complained that

all around us we witness the miseries which result when nations forget their past and stray away from their guidelines: incoherence, disintegration, acceptance of mediocrity and servitude, the impossibility of a collective life, the triumph of every kind of individualism—all signs of ultimate doom. (Trofimenkoff 1973, 156)

Norman Cornett points out that Groulx's historical perspective was "fundamentally teleological," and that this *telos* was defined in conservative Catholic terms (1989, 410). Groulx's nationalist history, however, went beyond outlining the *telos* of French Canada; through it he hoped to inspire people into action. And so, in his popular work of the 1920s, *Notre maître, le passé*, he wrote,

History does not preserve the past in a state of inert or sterilized material. It preserves and imparts life; it can be a source of strength. Through it, the virtues and strength of the living are increased with each generation by the strengths and virtues of the dead. Without history, we only retain in the mystery of our sinews and souls vague tendencies, the undefined vestiges of the life and heroism of the past. (Groulx 1924, 16-17 [my translation]).

Within the framework of Groulx's religious nationalism, the writing and study of history brought these real but vague forces into consciousness providing French-Canadians with the fortitude to remain true to the political, economic, social, moral and religious definition of the French-Canadian nation which the clerical and lay Catholic elite had created. This vision saw the nation as politically organized in an organic hierarchy led by the clergy, as economically agrarian and corporatist, as socially traditional and patriarchal, and as morally dominated by Catholic values (Trofimenkoff 1983, 182ff). Through its didactic and dramatic functions, nationalist history created solidarity and provided a well-defined, if sometimes vague and unrealistic, program of action.

A New Relationship Between Religion and Nationalism

Much happened in Quebec between the publication of Groulx's celebrated book, *Notre maître, le passé* in 1924, and the appearance of Grand'Maison's two-volume work entitled *Nationalisme et religion* in 1970. After the Second World War, a combination of economic, political and cultural innovations culminated in the radical modernization and secularization of Quebec society in the 1960s, a process now called the Quiet Revolution. Among these important changes was the secularization of the nationalist movement. This meant that the Church no longer controlled the symbols and power of collective self-definition for the

people of Quebec (Baum 1991, 15-47). Concretely, it meant that secular and non-confessional organizations such as political parties became the arena for collective identity and solidarity. A young Québécois, moved by the nationalist spirit, was more likely to join the Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale, or the later Parti Québécois, than a Church-sponsored group like the Association catholique de la jeunesse canadienne. Traditional nationalists were scandalized by this development, and Groulx himself rejected the Quiet Revolution as a regression to an animal past in his *Chemins de l'avenir*.

However, many Catholics alienated by the authoritarian, anti-modern organization and praxis of the Church, and inspired by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, did not see the secularization of society in negative terms. In contrast to Groulx, Grand'Maison saw this as a golden opportunity both for Quebec Catholicism and nationalism. Both would benefit from the clarification of the proper relationship between religion and politics that had too often been obscured in Quebec by the ideological marriage of conservative political power and traditional Catholicism. Grand'Maison criticized this religious nationalism as a compromise of Quebec's political maturity and a counter-testimony to Christianity (1970, I:16, 166; II:85-87).

Grand'Maison's understanding of religion and nationalism is very different from that of Groulx. I will focus on one important difference, that of the change in paradigm from history to social science. The social sciences (sociology, political science, economics and psychology) revealed to Grand'Maison the true nature of oppression in Quebec. This included both the material oppression caused by the foreign ownership of capital and by the unequal class structures which meant the economic and cultural inferiorization of the francophone majority and the justification for such injustices through the creation of elaborate ideologies.

History and Social Science in the New Nationalism

In *Religion et nationalisme. Tome I*, Grand'Maison argued that historians are no longer the key figures who inspire nationalism in Quebec. The nationalism which culminated in the formation of the Parti Québécois was no longer based on an idealization of the past, but on the post-World War II awareness of the far subtler forces of economic and

ideological imperialism which created huge divisions between rich and poor nations. It was the decolonization movements and fights for independence and autonomy around the world that focused the attention of the masses on national exploitation defined in neo-capitalist rather than military terms. Many of the historical symbols and stories, such as the Church and the Conquest, lost their central importance. More important were the new convictions arising out of the urban and industrial context of Quebec in the 1950s and 1960s: «celles de pouvoir créer une société progressive, un mieux-être collectif, une culture majeure et ouverte à des plus larges solidarités» (Grand'Maison 1970, I:160). Social analyses of injustices, not nationalist historical projects, were the major creative forces behind the new secular nationalism.

Grand'Maison, however, did not contend that history as a discipline had been replaced completely, but that the type and role of history had changed. In *Religion et nationalisme. Tome I*, he recapitulated the history of Quebec, relying on the works of Guy Frégault, Maurice Séguin, and to a lesser extent, Michel Brunet. What marked these historians was their repudiation of the traditional nationalist history and their overriding concerns with questions of modernization and economic development. Thus even history as a discipline was transformed and influenced by questions, categories and methods introduced by the social sciences (see Cook 1971, 130-135; Bouchard 1990; and Grand'Maison 1970, II:171-172). For Grand'Maison, history as a discipline was used largely to substantiate his sociological analysis of structures and injustices in modern society. His method, he stated, parallels that of psychoanalysis which seeks to understand personal history, not through a love of the past, but as the means for overcoming a present malaise (1970, I:156).

Grand'Maison's passionate concern for current injustices and his critical attitude towards pre-Vatican II Catholicism did not lead him to ignore history or denigrate the past. In fact he lamented modern Quebec's blindness to its own history, which he called «un sous-sol historique mal assumé» (*Une Foi*, 137). An accurate analysis of the past was essential, he maintained, to locate the scholar and the community «dans le pays réel» (in the real world). Only in dealing fairly with the past could one be open to the options of the present. Without such an anchoring, intellectual and political elites were free to pursue the mythological and self-serving

discourse of ideological systems (*Une Foi*, 139; *La Nouvelle classe*, 12). This led to the danger of «sterilité» and «irréalisme» both of which resulted in the disillusionment and «apoliticisme» that had plagued traditional nationalism. He was concerned that the marginalization of religion in Quebec public life would separate further the “rational,” scientific and technocratic elite from the population which held on to its religious identity. He was particularly critical of those both on the political left and right who wanted to build a new Quebec society *ex nihilo* without reference to the Catholic roots of the Québécois (1970, I:216-217). For Grand’Maison, central to any analysis of Quebec was the way its national identity has been created by Catholicism over the greatest part of its history. History as a discipline was important in Grand’Maison’s nationalism but it became secondary to social analysis.

Social Science and Social Justice

Just as history had functioned in the religious nationalism of Groulx, so too social science was both didactic and dramatic in the work of Grand’Maison. It taught the Québécois about the nature of their oppression and inspired them to action. Two developments provided paradigms for Grand’Maison’s evaluation of Quebec in 1960. These were the post-War class struggles in Europe, and the decolonization movements which changed the political and economic map of the world. In a limited way, he identified the Québécois as a class-nation which was being “colonized” by the forces of foreign economic and cultural imperialism. By these forces he meant the control of the Quebec economy by American capital and the influence this had on politics and culture. It meant that francophone Québécois were twice separated from the important levers of decision-making over their society: first by language and culture because the economic power elite was anglophone and American by culture, and second by class structure.

Even though Grand’Maison believed that social-scientific analysis supported the nationalists’ claims, this did not mean he was a classical nationalist who had simply replaced the discipline of history with that of sociology. It did not mean he simply added the insights of progressive nationalists to an earlier nationalist theory in an uncritical manner. It is important to see how his social analysis transformed the very nature of

his nationalist outlook and relativized nationalist claims. The most notable transformation occurred through the introduction of class consciousness into his nationalist thought.

Groulx's historical perspective and nationalism was organic; he saw French-Canadian society as a unity, even if it was hierarchical. For him, even the divisions between rich and poor, the powerful and powerless, were part of the natural order. Arguments about class consciousness and divisions were, in his view, attempts by atheist leftists to destroy the core of French-Canadian solidarity and identity, namely Roman Catholicism. Grand'Maison expressly rejected this organic view of society and argued that while culture unites the Québécois, social structure divides them. Workers were always wary of Groulx's reactionary nationalism which believed in the abstraction of a society without classes (1970, I:179). He argued that Groulx's nationalism was unrealistic in its presupposition of a democracy (which the elites defied), in its assumptions about a widespread adult political consciousness in Quebec (which never existed), in its sense of collective ownership of property (which, because of the Church's absolute rejection of socialism, was wholly symbolic), and in its monolithic religious culture (which confused people living in a pluralist urban environment) (1970, I:129). The new nationalism saw through Groulx's simplistic and self-serving ideology. He argued that the nationalist conflict was being fought by the working class against both a foreign elite and an indigenous «petite bourgeoisie». Often the nationalist debate simply reflected the conflict between a nationalist bourgeoisie and an assimilated one, a debate which ignored the real issues facing the workers and the poor, e.g., housing, unemployment, inflation, factory closings, regional disparity and urban decay (Grand'Maison 1970, I:106, 132, 175).

Awareness of the divisions *within* the nation, and the self-critical awareness of the ambiguity of nationalism and its potentially ideological character, meant that nationalist claims were relative and conditional. Nationalism, Grand'Maison realized, could be both the rallying call of the oppressed classes and the self-serving discourse of the comfortable middle-class. He also thought it could and should be an exercise in a collective ethical debate on the question of social justice, solidarity and identity.

What then were the criteria by which Grand'Maison judged a nationalist movement? First, the nationalist project had to be judged on an ethical basis as to whether it promoted social justice and solidarity. Did it exhort people to national unity without addressing the issues of unequal class structures, regional disparity and poverty? In the past such a strategy usually hid class conflicts and other differences between the nationalist elite and the people.

Second, it had to reflect the reality of ideological, cultural, ethnic and religious pluralism in an urbanized society. Grand'Maison explicitly rejected the classical nationalist identification of the state with the nation since it inevitably led to the oppression of minorities. The relationship between the two must be dialectical, he argued, the state must not ignore a nation within its borders and deal with its citizens solely on the level of individuals nor can it deny the rights and freedoms of individuals or minority communities (Grand'Maison 1970, I:65). Having rejected the central premise of classical nationalists, Grand'Maison felt that the nation was free to determine its political association in whatever form it chose. This decision also stemmed from his sensitivity to the economic question behind sovereignty. If the central question facing the majority of Québécois was the foreign ownership of capital and control over their economy, then without economic and social reform, political sovereignty, pure and simple, would have been an illusion, not a solution. Nationalism, to be realistic, must address both «le national» and «le social» (Grand'Maison 1970, I:171ff).

Third, the nationalist project had to be democratic. Grand'Maison rejected the dream of an elite-led nationalism that Groulx and some conservative Catholics had kept alive (1970, II:30). Influenced by French existentialism, he believed that real democracy (which goes beyond electoralism in its social, economic, political, cultural, psychological and historical implications) would create healthy, responsible, independent and free adults who were politically mature and culturally creative (*La Nouvelle classe*, 265-266). Democracy demanded that one never accept any ideology completely, not even nationalism. He wrote, "this practice invites us to fight against all forms of centralization of wealth, knowledge or power, against all totalizing claims on behalf of class, party, state, corporation, union, religion, race or gender" (*La Nouvelle classe*, 105 [my translation]).

The Social Sciences and Ideology Critique

In conclusion, I will return to the role of the social sciences. For Grand'Maison, sociology performed two important roles: it analyzed the real forces of oppression and imperialism, and it exposed the ideological systems created to justify and mystify these injustices. This analysis, in turn, inspired people to work for greater solidarity and justice. Applied to Quebec, Grand'Maison's social analysis revealed the "colonial" and oppressed status of the Québécois and it demystified the secular and religious ideologies created to mask that injustice. This understanding of social science was not positivist which seeks to be objective and neutral. Sociology, for Grand'Maison, was meant to be «engagé», an ethically motivated scientific analysis related to the struggle for justice in a particular historical and political context. His nationalism, informed both by his fidelity to Catholicism with its rich history in Quebec, and by this emancipatory social science, was a radical departure from the nationalism of Groulx that sought to make history, especially the written history of a conservative nationalist elite, the master and teacher of Quebec society.

Endnotes

1. The research for this article was completed during the tenure of a Doctoral Fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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