

***The History of Christianity in the United States and Canada.* By Mark A. Noll. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992. ISBN 0-8028-0651-1. Pp. xvi+576.**

Almost twenty years have passed since Robert T. Handy had the audacity to try compressing the story of Christianity in the United States and Canada into a solitary volume. Now Mark Noll, Professor of Church History at Wheaton College, has devoted his considerable abilities as a scholar to write another one-volume survey that again places the similarities and differences in the development of Christianity in the two countries side by side. The volume presents a sophisticated synthesis of both an impressive range of older and a wealth of more recently published material that Noll has skilfully crafted into highly readable narrative.

Noll has, in recent years, become a strong advocate of the comparative international approach to the historical study of religion. Comparing Christianity in Canada and the United States was a natural choice: the more similar the societies being compared, explains Noll, "the more possible it should be to isolate the factors responsible for differences between them." The general contrasts, parallels and anomalies highlighted by Noll throughout his narrative not only illustrate the rich potential of this approach, but should also provide an incentive for other scholars to do similar but more detailed studies.

Readers should be aware that, despite the comprehensive survey promised by the title, the primary storyline "centres on the rise and decline of evangelical Protestant dominance in the United States." Noll shows how an "evangelical America" emerged from "colonial pluralism and the tumults of the Revolutionary era," and how this "hegemony began to erode with the Civil War, and how it came to an obvious end by the 1920s" (4). The story of Canadian Christianity, and the story of Roman Catholicism in North America, are included for comparative purposes and are clearly subordinate to the main plot. As a result, the coverage of these two aspects of North American Christianity is a little thin in places. For example, the treatment of nineteenth-century Catholicism in the United States, which by the end of that century had become the largest Christian communion in the country, surely deserves more than 22 pages.

Most welcome is the self-conscious effort Noll has made to integrate within the narrative the theologically and ethnically diverse groups which have come to inhabit the religious landscape in the North America. For example, attention has been given to groups that protested against the hegemony of Puritan rule in New England, to the development of different African-American traditions, to the emergence of "outsiders" like the Millerites and the Mormons, to the ethnically diverse Orthodox groups, to the Hispanic communities, and to the manifold ex-

pressions of pentecostalism and the charismatic movement. Incorporated alongside his analysis of major movements, events and denominations are biographical sketches of ordinary people, excerpts from hymns and poems from writers as different as Jean de Brébeuf and Madeleine L'Engle, and a veritable wealth of insightful comparisons and social commentary. Noll's multi-faceted narrative creates a picturesque tapestry that reveals the rich diversity and complexity within North American Christendom.

Approximately 16% of the volume is devoted to Canadian Christianity (this is somewhat less than in Handy's earlier volume). Highlighting the Canadian content is a chapter entitled "His Dominion: 'Christian Canada'" which effectively depicts how the conflicts between a militant ultramontane Roman Catholicism in Quebec and a cluster of evangelical Protestant groups in English Canada left an indelible mark on many of the country's institutions. Canadian readers will, however, be disappointed by the sparse treatment given to twentieth-century changes. Many readers will be surprised by Noll's conclusion that Canada, a country without a national ideology of special divine blessing, may well be considered by historical standards the more "Christian nation."

A surprisingly large proportion of the book (at least 100 pages) is devoted to assessing developments that have affected the public fate of Christianity during the last 50 years. This section concludes with a reflective, and explicitly interpretative, discussion of the impact of modernity. Noll moves beyond the pictures painted by Handy, and more recently by Seymour Martin Lipset, of Canada as the more conservative, group-oriented and traditional society. Modern secularizing forces that stress "technology instead of morality, personal enrichment instead of altruistic service, and the potential for personal development instead of the force of historical traditions" have moved Canadian society away from traditional religious practices but have, in the United States, come to co-exist with traditional religious practices. Also intriguing is Noll's provocative suggestion that looking for stories about "signs of contradiction"—moments when Christian faith offered something unexpected to a person, a problem, a situation, or a region—might be a better way of evaluating Christianity's past than is the balance sheet approach which enumerates gains and losses on the basis of visible public influence.

The volume will undoubtedly become a popular introductory textbook, particularly among those interested in the history of North American Protestantism: it is attractively illustrated with numerous photographs, maps and charts. Moreover, each chapter concludes with a short bibliography, and certainly not the least consideration is its affordable paperback price.