

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

THE PRESENT POSITION AND THE FUTURE PROSPECTS OF CANADIAN THEOLOGY

GERALD R. CRAGG

THE launching of this new Journal invites us to reassess the present position and the immediate prospects of Canadian theology.

Some people, of course, would deny that such a phenomenon exists. It can be argued, no doubt, that the word "theology" is properly qualified only by the adjective "Christian" and that the more truly it rises to its proper stature the less susceptible it will be of more parochial designations. But setting that question to one side, one may contend that there is nothing that can properly be classified as "Canadian theology". Distinctive schools and traditions exist elsewhere; we cannot claim to have added to their number. "Continental theology" may include many emphases, but it suggests a characteristic approach to the problems of religious thought. "Scottish theology" has established its own idiom; in England, both Anglican and Free Church Schools have had their distinguishing marks. In the United States certain trends have appeared which the rest of the world chooses to regard as distinctively American. Many of these terms, of course, are inexact, and sometimes they are misleading, but they are undoubtedly serviceable. It is an inescapable fact that in Canada we have done nothing to add to their number; hitherto we have contributed nothing that is specifically Canadian. In other areas of endeavour, the increasing awareness of national unity has produced appreciable results. We have characteristic schools of painting; we have a growing literature which is marked at least by self-consciousness. Has theology lagged behind?

Beyond any question our present position is strongly influenced by our past. It is impossible to understand the existing situation without reference to the forces that have shaped our history. Prominent among these has been a kind of theological "colonialism"—a dependent spirit which has persistently looked elsewhere for leadership. Ideas and those who inculcated them could carry little weight unless they clearly bore the imprimatur of some foreign origin. It was tacitly assumed that no good thing could come out of a Nazareth as remote as ours from the fountain-heads of truth. Clear evidence of this was supplied by the character of the teaching given in our theological colleges. Till very recently our most influential centres have imported their professors from abroad. It is fortunate for us that they did; no one can calculate the benefits we have reaped from the stream of British (and perhaps especially Scottish) theologians who have come to Canada to teach. Many have remained, and in a land where most

people are immigrants at but one or two removes, they have become an integral part of the life of the country. Some, of course, have remained only till they established a reputation, and then have returned to occupy distinguished positions in the lands from which they came. At this point, two comments must suffice. This has been a Canadian, not a theological, pattern: Lord Rutherford, A. E. Taylor, Harold Laski (to take three examples from various disciplines but from one of our universities) all began their careers in Canada. It therefore indicates the basic fact that we have lacked the resources to be otherwise than dependent on other centres of thought and learning; we have had neither the men nor the intangible resources to be self-sufficient, and our debt to those who have come to our aid is incalculably great.

Our dependent status has been the consequence of the pattern of our life. At every point the frontier situation has governed the merging social forms of an expanding country. In a pioneering community there are few encouragements to academic speculation. "Winning the frontier" has been the major responsibility of all the churches, and other matters have been remorselessly thrust aside. We malign the pioneers if we think that they were indifferent to the need for study. In the days of the saddle-bag itinerants, Egerton Ryerson laid down the stern maxim that a minister who found it hard to study four hours a day had better ask himself whether he had not mistaken his calling. The practical difficulties, however, were almost insuperable, and when, at a later period, James Denney remarked on the poverty of ministers' libraries in Canada, he was pointing to the consequence of problems from which there was little prospect of escape.

Canada has had few nurseries in which potential theologians could cultivate their gifts. We have had no "country parishes" of the kind which elsewhere have provided support but have also offered leisure. Our colleges have had few junior positions in which a promising man could serve a theological apprenticeship. Over large areas, our library facilities have been remote from those who might have used them and in any case they have been deplorably weak. Opportunities to buy theological books have been negligible; we have had few book stores, fewer still that stocked serious theological works, and none in which the great religious classics could be purchased second-hand.

Lack of adequate resources, combined with the pragmatic approach natural in churches that were fighting to win the frontier regions, has kept all our colleges small and most of them weak. Some have lived a precarious life under a kind of suspended sentence. The staff has often not been equal to the task of providing a full theological curriculum, but in addition its members have been expected to assume a great variety of miscellaneous duties, administrative, ecclesiastical and evangelistic. Some gains, of course, have accrued, but theologically the losses have been obvious and severe. There has been little "learned leisure", and under such conditions an indigenous theology does not readily develop.

Nor can we overlook the background of theological thought. Fifty years ago, the Canadian churches were involved in the struggle to win freedom from the fetters of a narrow literalism. When that battle was won there was no strong theological tradition ready to assert itself. In certain of its manifestations, "liberalism" was unduly negative in spirit and largely indifferent to the heritage of historical theological development. In a country where practical demands were clamant, the attractions of the "social gospel" were obvious, and it was easy to accept them as a substitute for resolute grappling with great theological questions. Little heed was paid to the warning, "This ought ye to have done and not to have left the other undone".

It is a great deal easier to analyse the past than it is to describe the present situation or to chart the course of future development. Certain important facts, however, offer ground both for immediate encouragement and for future hope.

There is no doubt that the last few years have witnessed something approaching a theological renaissance. This has been world-wide in scope, but it has not left us unaffected. There has been a new awareness of the importance of theological issues and a new enthusiasm for theological studies. Most contemporary schools of thought can claim disciples among us and all have awakened interest in varying degrees. We may not have been originators, but we have been participants rather than mere spectators.

Moreover the foundations for further advance are obviously being laid. Recent years have brought a new awareness of the central position which Biblical studies must occupy in all theological endeavour. The exact study of the Old and New Testaments has claimed a greater measure of attention. So have the claims of the distinctive view of human life which emerges from a careful examination of the Bible. Biblical theology has its enthusiasts and they are on the increase. There has also been a keener recognition of the importance of historical studies. There have always been those who were interested in the past; the important recent development has been the growing awareness that the examination of the unfolding pattern of Christian thought can contribute immeasurably both to the understanding of the faith and to the clarifying of contemporary perplexities. A distinguished American theologian recently remarked that each passing year made him more deeply conscious of the immense importance of studying the development of Christian theology. In this realization it is obvious that many Canadians share. Nor is the philosophy of religion neglected. The evidence for this many-sided interest can be found not only in particular projects of which only our colleges are aware but in the books which Canadian authors have published in recent years. At every point examples could be cited, but where so much has been done, a catalogue would be tedious and selection would be unfair.

Certain aspects of the present situation give ground for genuine en-

couragement. In the prosperity of the country the churches have had their modest share, and this has been reflected in the much more secure position of our colleges. A new confidence has been created; in many instances staffs have been increased; progress can be reported in the slow but vital task of augmenting library resources. Canadian theology should not reside exclusively in our colleges, but for some time to come they are likely to be its most hospitable homes. As the country expands, as new districts call for new congregations and our churches face the urgent task of claiming the newest frontier (that developing around every major city), there is little prospect of securing increased leisure for the "working minister". We can at least be grateful that our colleges are in a stronger position to cultivate the quickened theological interest which has appeared.

The development of centres for post-graduate theological study is also an important feature of our present situation. Until comparatively recently a Canadian student anxious to pursue advanced studies was compelled to go abroad, simply because no facilities were available at home. Now, in two important centres, there are opportunities for academic research in the major theological disciplines. This does not mean that many of our ablest students will not continue to go abroad. Indeed, it would be disastrous if they did not do so; Canadian theology cannot risk the perils of parochialism, and the benefit of contact with other centres of theological thought is too precious to be forfeited or even reduced. But the existence of post-graduate schools does greatly increase the likelihood that many men will have some experience of post-graduate study to whom otherwise it would be denied. It should considerably extend the circle of those who have been introduced to the discipline of research. Many will not pursue the matter further, but some unquestionably will. A wider interest will create a new climate, and in it Canadian theology will have an opportunity to expand.

The future of Canadian theology will depend on the extent to which we improve the opportunities now available. We must realize, however, that the present situation is unsatisfactory in many ways, and we must alter it in the days ahead. Though our colleges have been manifestly strengthened, their resources (with few exceptions) are insufficient for the task they face. Since the development of Canadian theology is in large measure the responsibility of our professors, it is unfortunate that so few have adequate opportunities for writing and research. We have no tradition of sabbatical leave; we lack the resources which make it possible to grant periodical absence or to encourage travel. Where post-graduate facilities have been established, there has been no compensating increase in the size of the faculties, and busy men have been further overburdened. We have been deficient in benefactors, and our churches, torn between competing claims on their generosity, have not been sufficiently imaginative in their attitude to theological education. It must be borne in mind, of course, that great centres of theological learning have been established elsewhere without resources greater than those which we now command; the

facts are there, and it is impossible to dispute them. It may be that we require to cultivate a new tradition; possibly we need a clearer understanding of the simple truth that a man can produce creative work even when he lacks ideal conditions. Perhaps our theologians need to remind themselves that those who have something to say can make the time to read and write even in the face of exacting demands on their resources.

We unquestionably need to develop a new tradition among the rank and file of our ministers. Though Canadian theology may be cultivated most industriously in our colleges, it requires as wide a foundation as possible. Most ministers are very busy, but all ministers must read. We are too likely to forget that serious theology ought to have a place in the daily reading of every working minister. Years ago F. W. Faber remarked that sound theology provides the best devotional reading a man can find: when kindled, it burns long. And it is as useful in the pulpit as in the inner room. As Richard Baxter pointed out, a man can preach well on short notice only if he has a sound system of theology in his head; he might have added (and he would have added, had it been relevant) that a man can preach well at any time only if he has the same resources. We have been too apt to assume that a minister who wishes to do exact theological study must resign his charge and return to college "to take a course". Fortunately there have been exceptions, even in our overcrowded Canadian church life; but their number should be considerably increased.

Meanwhile certain practical problems which remain unsolved constitute an obstacle to our development. Both the production and the distribution of theological literature present grave difficulties. There are few Canadian publishers who are ready to accept the risks inseparable from the production of theological works. Those who will even consider producing religious books look for as wide a general market as quickly as possible, and sometimes, because they are not satisfied with a slow sale over a period of years, promptly "remainder" all surplus stock. At present the Canadian theologian is almost compelled to seek a publisher abroad, and if his work is specialized in character he has no alternative but to do so. The publishing problem is closely related to the kindred one of the sale of theological works. If Canadians had developed the habit of buying books, there might be more book stores; if there were more book stores, the facilities for the purchase of theological books might be better. As it is, a deplorable situation is further aggravated by the "book club" habit and the supine mentality which it develops. Few aspects of our national cultural life are more disconcerting than our deplorable lack of facilities for the examination and the choice of books. Our poverty is underlined by the simple fact that a small city like Oslo can boast a score of book stores all better stocked than anything that any of our major Canadian centres can boast. Our churches and our colleges have taken certain steps to rectify this situation, but a much more courageous policy is necessary if Canadian theology is to be delivered from the blighting effects of this problem.

It would appear that we have grounds for guarded optimism. Something has been accomplished; much remains to be done. One final question demands consideration. When we achieve a mature theology, what rôle can we expect it to play? An indigenous theology will not, of course, be independent. The character of Christian thought is such that we ought to bear one another's burdens and to learn from one another's discoveries. Moreover the existence of the ecumenical movement will inevitably increase our awareness of other traditions of thought and our interdependence one upon another. And it is perhaps true that we can draw from Canadian experience in other fields certain inferences which combine to suggest the direction in which we might profitably move. Recent years have seen a notable increase in Canada's status in the world of nations. We have not become one of the great powers; we are what Mr. Pearson has described as a "middle power", and contemporary events suggest that there is an important and distinctive function which can be discharged by nations in this category. They can occupy a mediating and a reconciling position. It may be possible, in God's providence, that we can play a similar rôle in the development of an ecumenical theology. It may be that our outlook and our gifts, as well as our background and our history, qualify us to undertake such a task. No worthier future could be envisaged than one in which we could contribute, according to our measure, to the work of effecting a creative reconciliation between the significant influences either now at work or perceptibly emerging in the great field of Christian theology.