

# Editorial

## THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE IN CANADA, 1967: A CRITICAL GLANCE AT THE CANADIAN SCENE

THIS NEW VOLUME of the *Canadian Journal of Theology* opens with two articles which, in different ways, pose crucial questions about the nature of the Christian message and its destiny in the Western world. They are inescapable questions for every Christian inhabitant of "technopolis," and since Canada is already at least a suburb of "technopolis," Canadian Christians cannot hope to evade them. Our Canadian churches must not allow memories of past achievement or remnants of past prestige to blind them to the fact that the "secular city" is already here. Their real and urgent problem can be baldly stated: How are they to respond to the secular challenge? Humanly speaking, it is no exaggeration to say that the future of Canadian Christianity depends on their answer to this question.

This editorial proposes no comprehensive solution. It simply notes and comments on certain signs of the times—all of them observed in the course of a single autumn weekend. Yet perhaps these signs of the times are both representative enough and significant enough to provide substantial food for thought on the church's mission and message.

1. "*The Great God Gadget.*" One Friday afternoon last November an eminent French philosopher, who for many years has made Canada his second home, gave a public lecture at the University of Toronto. Among other things, he spoke of our civilization's idolatry of "the Great God Gadget." More and more, he said, personal values are being neglected because of our obsession with devices and techniques. We are so busy getting things done that we rarely ask whether any particular thing is worth doing. Even our scientists—long rightly respected for their love of truth—are being corrupted by the managerial and popular demand for instant results.

That same evening a leading English-Canadian newspaper unwittingly illustrated this indictment of technological culture. Commenting on a bishop's complaint that young Canadians would not face the rigours of missionary work in the Arctic, an editorial writer remarked:

If young Canadians aren't flocking to northern mission outposts, perhaps it's because they no longer regard spiritual ministrations to Eskimos as a vital and urgent need.

The new challenge lies in the physical development of the north, and in the need to help Eskimos acquire the technical skills required in the years ahead (*Toronto Daily Star*, November 18, 1966, p. 6).

The recognition of our human and Christian responsibility for the material welfare of others is of course as old as our faith itself. The conclusion, however, has not commonly been drawn that a crude utilitarianism is either Christian or humane. Consequently, the blatant materialism of the *Star's* editorial, symptomatic as it is of our society's condition, poses a radical question to Christian readers.

2. "*The World's Agenda.*" As things now stand, it is not at all clear that our Canadian churches are ready to present a full-blooded Christian answer. A recent C.B.C. broadcast nicely illustrates the theological anaemia which currently afflicts us. On November 20, 1966, an Anglican university chaplain spoke on "Church of the Air." His main point, clearly and forcefully made, was that Christians should stop wasting time on "the Church's Agenda" and devote their energies to carrying out "the World's Agenda." The world, he said, is God's world; therefore, the world's agenda is God's agenda. A weekly celebration of God's action in the world is all the churchly activity that Christians need or can justify; the rest of their time should be given to the work of the world. To speak pejoratively of that work as "secular" is to forget that the world is God's world.

Christians can hardly deny that the world is God's world and that man must serve God by responsible action in his world. Nor can any honest churchman deny that too much "church work" has been and still is introverted—devoted to institutional upkeep with little or no regard for mission. But our broadcaster went far beyond these truisms. In fairness to him, it must be said that he did not, with the *Star*, preach technological materialism. But he did seem to be making two more subtly dangerous assumptions: that the chosen goals of a given society can be uncritically identified with God's agenda for his world, and that God's agenda for his world is purely "worldly" in its scope. Neither assumption, however, is obviously consistent with biblical and Christian faith.

That the world is God's world is no guarantee that men, in the exercise of their freedom, will inevitably carry out God's agenda for his world. In fact, the same Christian faith which uncompromisingly confesses God as the Creator of all things also affirms the corruption of the world by human sin. There can hardly be another Christian affirmation which is so abundantly supported by common human experience. The conflicts of human history are an infallible proof that all is not well with man. In the light of those conflicts, can we seriously maintain that the world has an unambiguous agenda? For social idealists, secularist or Christian, the world's agenda in our time indisputably includes economic justice, racial integration, international reconciliation, and nuclear disarmament. (More power to them!) But profiteers, racists, rabid nationalists, and suicidal bomb-rattlers read the world's agenda very differently—and skilfully commend their reading by appeals to self-interest. Given the ambiguities of human history, perhaps it would be just as well for us to work at strengthening the church—neither as introverted institution nor as mere adjunct to the "secular city,"

but as witness to God's law, by which alone the evils of the world's agenda can be purged.

But a further point must be made. That the world is God's world does not mean that his purpose for it is exhausted in politics and economics, science, technology, and the arts. In fact, it is a fundamental Christian conviction that man's true fulfilment is to be found in nothing less than friendship with God, in whose image he was made. Surely, then, the church's agenda cannot be reduced to the liturgical celebration of the world's agenda, however thoroughly purified. On the contrary, the church exists to form man in the knowledge and love of God—a purpose which most certainly includes concern for man, but which no less certainly looks to his fulfilment beyond politics and every other "worldly" activity. It would be sheer disaster for man if the church's witness to his transcendent destiny were to be silenced in favour of a "Coxian" secularism.

3. "*The Ministry—a Vanishing Vocation.*" For a further display of theological anaemia we may turn our attention to the report of an interview with another Anglican university chaplain (*Evening Telegram*, Toronto, November 19, 1966, p. 74). This young priest was unconcerned (to say the least) about the current decline of vocations to the full-time Christian ministry. It was, he argued, a serious error to identify the priesthood with a ministerial "profession." Moreover, the local parish, presided over by a full-time "expert," was on the way out. The church should ordain priests who would continue in their secular occupations, giving their spare time to the task of administering the sacraments and performing other pastoral duties for groups of people in factories, apartment blocks, offices, and other places of assembly. A few "professionals" could then act as supervisors, helping local "worker priests" organize "realistic religious programs" for their little congregations.

No doubt it is wrong to suppose that the ordained minister must invariably be a trained professional, dedicated to a full-time priestly ministry. In practice, many whose professional training has been deficient or even non-existent have been good pastors to the people of God, and in principle, the ministry of word and sacrament is compatible with any honest calling. Moreover, it is evident that a church organized simply as a congeries of local congregations cannot meet the needs of our complex society. In a primarily urban society, where home and job belong, for the most part, to separate worlds, and where effective power is increasingly centralized, it is essential that the church should create new and diverse instruments of witness and service.

Nonetheless, it may be argued that any depreciation of a full-time, professional priesthood and of the parochial system is a grave disservice to the church and to the world. In an age of universal literacy and rapidly advancing educational standards, it would be disastrous for the church to entrust the task of Christian formation entirely to "amateurs," supervised by a few bureaucrats. Certainly, the whole church has a ministry of witness and

service. But the substance of Christian witness and the criterion of Christian service are to be found in the teaching of Scripture and of the church—a teaching which demands the most rigorous training and complete dedication in its exponents. Indeed, it would hardly be excessive to suggest that the church needs, not fewer bachelors of divinity, but more doctors of theology, to confront sophisticated man with the promise and demand of the gospel. Moreover, the obituaries repeatedly spoken over the parish and the traditional pastoral ministry may conceivably be premature. It is at least arguable that the local congregation, if its resources are fully mobilized, is still an effective—perhaps even the most effective—setting for education in Christian faith and practice. Is it altogether irrelevant to note that, even in the most highly developed Western nations, both politics and primary and secondary education are still (so to speak) “parochially” organized? Perhaps this example set by the “secular city” should not be ignored.

Of course, if the essential function of the church is a celebration of the liberties and an invitation to the discipline of the “secular city,” Christian education in the conventional sense must be called irrelevant and professional Christian teachers and their parochial classrooms must be declared unnecessary. It is tempting to suggest that an at least implicit reduction of Christianity to the role of a mere reinforcement of secular aims underlies a further observation of our second university chaplain. “Nothing,” he is reported to have said, “is more incongruous than a minister with an M.A. or PH.D. set in the midst of a community of fruit farmers or factory workers.” But why does he call such a situation incongruous? Would he find it incongruous for a doctor of medicine to provide medical care for fruit farmers or for a master of arts to educate the children of factory workers? Can it be that he grants real substance to medicine and history, biology and geography, but not to Christian theology? On what other grounds could the abolition of a professional ministry and the dismantling of existing agencies of Christian nurture be justified?

If the Canadian churches mean to be more than handmaids of the “secular city,” it is clear that they must prepare themselves for the battle. It is hardly less clear that some of their young and vigorous trumpeters hesitate to sound the call to arms. To say the least, a clarification of strategy and tactics seems overdue.

It is tempting to rush into an orgy of tactical planning before strategic goals have been determined—but therein lies confusion. As a “quarterly of Christian *thought*,” this *Journal* is dedicated above all to the identification of *strategic* goals; as a “quarterly of *Christian* thought,” it is committed to the task of delineating an authentically *Christian* strategy. That task is a complex one, and a wide range of resources—biblical, historical, and philosophical—must be exploited in its performance. It is our great ambition to provide grist for this theological mill.

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