CHURCH, NATION AND WORLD ORDER: A CHANGING CONTEXT*

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In reaffirming our loyalty as individuals and as a church to our country and to our King, we remind both country and King of our surpassing loyalty to Him who has created all men, and who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To Him we lift up our hearts, and in the unrestricted service of His will alone we do find our perfect freedom.

This quotation from the 1944 United Church Report of the Commission on Church, Nation and World Order reflects a harmoniously ordered set of loyalties. If the keystone of the arch was knowledge of God, the foundation was a clear sense of the role of the United Church and of Anglophone Protestants in Canadian society. That foundation has now crumbled, and for many Canadians whose roots are in one of the mainline Anglo-Saxon Protestant traditions, the keystone has also been dislodged. Theological thinking about church, nation and world order must, therefore, move on two fronts. How has the role of the United Church changed? And, how can we recover an awareness of God’s will which is convincing enough to order our secondary loyalties?

The Report of the Commission on Church, Nation and World Order is a good starting point for asking how an earlier generation of United Church members answered these questions. The Commission was created shortly after the outbreak of the second World War. Its broad mandate was to examine “Basic Religious Principles in the light of which might be considered the responsibility of the Church to the Nation and the World Order.” The 1942 General Council renewed the Commission’s mandate and increased its membership to make it “representative of all sections and interests of the Church.” In addition to the forty-five commissioners and thirteen consultants, eleven regional groups were formed involving another 130 or so persons from across the nation. The resulting report, which went through nine drafts before it was adopted by the 1944 General Council, was thus representative and thorough.

My main purpose in this paper is to bring this report to the attention of United Church members as a resource for reflecting on their own loyalties to region, nation and the wider world community. A secondary aim is to stimulate conversations about how changes since World War II should influence our response both to the Report and to the ‘world of the text’ which has taken for granted by the authors.

The following comments by an American Roman Catholic writer illustrate the relevance of these aims for United Church members. They remind us that Catholics are better than we are at maintaining a lively conversation with the documents of their church. They also display the widely held assumption that official recognition of the transforming stance of the churches was achieved only in the 1960’s.
In the movements of the 1960’s a spirit—nameless, like Yahweh—was alive, unincorporated in the churches but alive in the land and seeking justification in the Scriptures. The theme affirmed made common sense but did not reflect organizational policies—until Mater et Magistra, Pacem in Terris and then Vatican II, the Uppsala Conference (of the World Council of Churches), Popularum Progressio (1968), the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops (1967), the Synod on Justice in the World (1971) and the 80th Year Letter all made official the mandate of the Gospel to transform the world in justice as an act of religious commitment.

The Report of the Commission on Church, Nation and World Order provides United Church members with an early articulate statement of the intention of their church to be a transforming presence in relation to the established social order. The first section asked why the church should speak. The answer was that the church was the custodian of the moral and spiritual teachings which had greatly influenced our civilization; that secular political leaders described the war as a defence of that Christian civilization; that the current crisis was a judgment of God on all nations; and that the church with its nearly three thousand ministers serving five thousand congregations was in a good position to speak to and for the people of Canada. ‘Out of this intimate knowledge of the people of Canada, as well as out of its inherent responsibility as part of the universal Church of Christ, it ventures to set forth the basic principles of a Christian charter.’

The Report’s “Christian Charter for Man [sic] and Society” (paras. 5-16) pictures humans as spiritual, social and physical beings whose “supreme destiny is to receive God’s best gift which is Eternal Life.” This doctrine of human life, the commandment to love God and neighbour, and the conviction that mutuality is the law of life for persons and societies provided the basis for specifying duties and rights and religious principles for the social order. The individual has a duty to co-operate in social living, and “the right to the experience of solidarity with [other people] in various groups and communities.” A major aim of the individual is “to overcome in one’s self and in the social order all obstacles to the life of a true community with God.” The primary object of “the social economy is the satisfaction of basic human needs, physical and cultural. The resources of the earth are provided by God for all [God’s] children, and should not be squandered nor monopolized by any.”

We do not live by bread alone, however, and the Kingdom of God will not come by social engineering alone.

Since human sin spoils the best plans for social betterment, we affirm that only Christ, who takes away the sin of the world, can provide the dynamic for the complete renewal of our society and for the redemption of individuals from self-love and self-indulgence. There can be no good society without good men and women.

Structural changes are also required since the presence of good men and women “within society will not by itself ensure that the social structure also is morally good.”
The Gospel must be brought to bear both on personal lives and on the structure of human relationships as a whole.”

In their attempts to transform the social order Christians will not be motivated and sustained only by their hopes of success.

Since human frailty and sin are always present, and since God has not placed in man’s hands all power and wisdom, and since man often must leave his work unfinished, -- imperfection, disappointment, failure, suffering and tragedy will not be completely banished by the noblest ideals and the most devoted effort. Yet, despite many inequalities of opportunity, health, capacity and strength, we are members of one another, for good and ill. Though the Kingdom of God in its perfection is beyond any attempt to give it formulation in the finite life of man, the Gospel of Christ has, nevertheless, its own resources for this situation. It can sustain men under disappointment; it can raise them above failure; it can transform suffering from tragedy into a means of salvation to God’s glory. *The Kingdom of God is already among us when it thus shows its power and makes known good tidings to the poor, release to the captives and the setting at liberty of them that are bruised.* In our struggle to realize God’s will in the structure of an actual society, the Kingdom is ever “at hand” as the pattern which has been shown us in the mount.\(^vii\)

The *Report’s* rationale for speaking out as a church, and its Christian charter for humans and society, continue, as I said above, to provide an articulate statement of the United Church’s general commitment to a transformationist stance. It is less clear, however, whether the world view and perspective embedded in the balance of the *Report* reflect an appropriate stance for today’s church.

Paragraphs 17-27, “Political Reforms Needed,” emphasize the interdependence of nations, the rationality of national leaders, and the importance of gradual adjustments in the context of the rule of law. The authors urge all nations to recognize that, “if they are to achieve freedom from recurrent wars, each more devastating than the last, and to effect through mutual assistance and collaboration the economic adjustments needed to improve the condition of [people] in every country, they must organize international institutions, based on law, to maintain peace and justice.”

A new world order should both prevent future wars and create a more equitable global society.

When world community interests require economic or other changes, *the organization of nations should arrange for such modifications of international policy as may be consonant with peaceful change,* especially in matters which are beyond the scope of national control and management. It should, of course, be democratic in its constitution and in its spirit, permitting every people to participate in discussion, decisions and action to a degree commensurate with its capacity, experience and willingness to act responsibly.\(^viii\)
From the standpoint of the Third World countries, Native peoples and poor classes, which have been oppressed by existing arrangements, the Report would appear too complacent about the possibility that changes would occur to meet the needs of “world community interests.” The language used to express their concern for underdeveloped areas also reflected the authors’ taken for granted identification with the dominant Anglo-American-European world-creating forces.

The progress of underdeveloped, retarded or oppressed peoples toward political responsibility, economic prosperity, and religious freedom, must be the object of international concern, whatever nation or nations may be given particular authority in the period of tutelage. The welfare of each and the breakdown of any must be the concern of all members of the international body. Retarded peoples should be given every encouragement in attaining a higher standard of economic and cultural life.

Some hint about the nature of the dominant social order within Canada was reflected in a comment about minority rights which was probably directed at French Catholic Quebec.

While minority rights should be respected, it should be pointed out, insofar as our own Dominion is involved, that such rights should not be allowed to continue as an excuse for retarding the constitutional development of Canada, and so preventing legitimate reforms by the great majority of the people.

The Report’s paragraphs on internationalism and nationalism suggest that a “cool”, rational approach provides the best guarantee that the loyalties of persons and nations will be properly ordered. The authors affirm the value of nationality as “a precious gift to men and implicit in the very structure of human society.” Love of country “need never be confused with chauvinism or jingoism. Its finest flower is the spirit of sacrifice which grows out of a wholesome patriotism.” In a typically Canadian fashion the authors maintain that, “Each of the different nationalities can bring into the commonwealth of God rich values which have been forged in its historical development and in its struggle for life against varied conditions of climate and geography.”

The Report goes on to say that,

It would be contrary to the law of nature if we sought world unity by trampling upon these riches of national diversity. Nevertheless national sovereignty must yield to the common needs of mankind, thus permitting a permanent and automatic control of nationalist ambitions in order that nationality may be a means of life, rather than of death and destruction.

It is tempting to suggest that the authors could take a “cool,” rational approach to the question of limiting national sovereignty because their larger sense of identity as members of the British Commonwealth would not be threatened by the kind of nations they had in mind.
No nation can live to itself alone. Canada has multiple responsibilities as a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations, as one of the major countries in the Western Hemisphere and as a potential member of any other association of nations that may be formed. The possible conflicts which may arise because of such diverse relationships are not insuperable. Canada has grown to her present stature and influence within the British tradition and we believe that our larger loyalties will find more effective expression as we contribute to world stability and development from within the Commonwealth.

Paragraphs 28-37 discuss domestic political changes needed. The paragraphs on national unity reflect the kind of emphasis on harmony and goodwill, and on the struggle against climate and geography, that one would expect of a dominant group.

Canada cannot be a united and happy country until its constituent races learn to understand one another and to work with and not against one another. There must be mutual appreciation of the distinctive traditions and needs of all of these ethnic groups. The majorities must be considerate of the minorities, and the minorities must be equally considerate of the majorities. Sectionalism which tends to set the East against the West, the Maritime provinces against the Central provinces, or the urban industrial areas against the rural districts, must be transcended by a common purpose and a higher Canadianism. The difficulties inherent in geography, diversified resources and density of population can be overcome in a spirit of goodwill and a desire for mutual betterment.

The authors’ emphasis on freedom of conscience, spiritual comprehensiveness and the desirability of a national church, combined with their attack on religious exclusiveness, once again reflects the stance of a dominant assimilating group rather than a minority threatened with assimilation.

Religious antagonism is particularly obnoxious and destructive both of national unity and real religion. Bigotry, fanaticism, religious exclusiveness and the demand by particular religious groups for special privileges before the law, should have no place in Canadian life. Freedom of conscience and freedom of worship should be recognized. In such freedom we should aim at the spiritual comprehensiveness and unity which may, in due time, so far as Canada is concerned, take shape in a Church which may fittingly be described as national.

The sections on “Economic Reforms Needed” (paras. 38-101), “Social Emphasis Needed” (paras. 102-134), and “The Responsibility of the Christian Church” (paras. 135-156), continue to stress the need to balance duties and responsibilities. They reflect the standpoint of the dominant ethnic group and social class. Many of the reforms promoted by the Report have been implemented, and others, such as the steps which “should be taken to make medical, dental, hospital and mental hygiene services as accessible as possible to everybody on the basis of their need rather than of their ability to pay,” are still deserving of United Church support. The pressing need for many
persons, however, is to rethink the role of the church from the standpoint of marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Their own experience of marginalization, and their conviction that Christians should be on the side of the poor, have uprooted them from the “world of the text” taken for granted by the authors of the Report. They believe that the church should shift its emphasis from supporting the established social order and the existing economic system in the name of peace and harmony to criticizing them in the name of justice.

This shift in perspective is often referred to as the adoption of a metropolis-hinterland analysis of local, regional, national and international relationships. While dominant metropolitan spokespersons talk about wider loyalties, hinterland groups experience oppression and engage in struggles against colonial and other forms of dominance. Groups which are “oppressed” rather than “retarded” do not worry about limiting their “nationalist ambitions.” They are concerned about how to recover self-respect and a degree of control over their lives. They are no longer prepared to be patient and to wait for those who have power to make “the economic adjustments needed to improve the condition of men in every country.”

English Canadians, especially those living in southern Ontario and in the Anglophone enclave in Montreal, have an ambiguous relationship to this metropolis-hinterland “pecking order.” For Anglo-Ontarians and Montrealers it is “our people” who have dominated the social order which has allowed central Canada to develop at the expense of the other regions, especially the Atlantic provinces and the North. On the other hand, we must now face the fact that Canada’s sovereignty has been eroded by the foreign control of our economy. The authors of the Report could still appeal to George Munro Grant’s vision of Canada’s destiny as a dominant partner in an important Empire. We must respond to this grandson’s lament that Canada is now a satellite of the United States.

English Canadians now experience our own nationalist struggle for survival. We now know what it is like to feel angry and betrayed by the continentalist sell-out of our resources. We have experienced the indignation that comes from being told by liberal, anti-nationalists to be patient and rational. It is, therefore, easier to understand and to identify with other marginalized groups who feel exploited rather than retarded. Thus, our “world” includes Quebec, Native peoples and the poor not only as partners in the struggle for justice but as carriers of the symbols of divine justice for the marginalized.

This identification with the underdog rather than with the civilizing mission of the larger Anglo-American family would seem unfair and an abdication of our high calling to be the authors of the Report.

We reiterate our Christian faith in a God whose compassion extends to all people and while we are properly mindful of the high mission of the English-speaking peoples at this time, we repudiate every suggestion that they are a people “chosen” to rule others. To them much has been given in the infinite providence of God; but from them much is required. It is their duty to assist subject peoples as quickly as possible along the road to independence.
This shift in perspective leads to a different understanding of the responsibility of the church. In the concluding section of the Report, which was devoted to this topic, the authors assessed the strengths and weaknesses in the United Church of the 1940’s. They were pleased that support for the United Church had reached 19.16 per cent of the population. They were concerned, however, about the level of recruitment for the ordained ministry, the decline in zeal for the “great work of Foreign Missions,” and the lack of participation of “laymen of standing and ability” in the courts of the church. They also worried about the “hostility that has arisen within the church towards the pronouncements of the Church Courts in the economic and social fields.” They were confident, though, that “Much misunderstanding and ill will can be avoided if Christian love prevails, supported by more patience, discrimination and careful regard for all the issues involved.”

From the standpoint of a social justice perspective, increased church membership is a mixed blessing. It depends upon which side new members support in the struggle for justice. Recruitment for the ordained ministry, zeal for foreign missions, and the participation of “laymen of standing and ability” are not as important as encouragement and support for persons directly involved in fighting the conditions that “put people down” (Bob Dylan). The ability of the church to contain “wide divergence of opinion and conviction” is less important than the church’s willingness to bear a consistent witness to the Kingdom that is among us when it “makes known good tidings to the poor.”

The Report pointed out that, “There is ground to believe that the Church’s conviction as to the truth of Christianity has been progressively losing its sharpness over a period of years. The way ministers were being trained seemed to “blunt the startling revelations which come to us in the Gospel.” They were encouraged however by the “signs in our church of a re-emphasis by both ministry and laity on the fundamentals of the Christian faith.”

The crucial question, of course, is: what are “the fundamentals of the Christian faith?” The final paragraphs of the Report reflect a return from an earlier emphasis on transforming the social order to a traditional appeal to come to God through Christ. “The basic responsibility of the church now and in the days to come is to lead the world to God through Christ.” No other approach seemed to the authors to promise either ultimate victory or protection against disappointment. “People who have followed false leaders and have dedicated their loyalties to lost causes are weary and disillusioned.”

The Report ended on an almost apocalyptic note:

The Church must open up the way for a new and passionate emphasis on the appeal and proposal of Jesus to the whole world, not only because of the sanctions and blessings which come to the race under the benediction of Christ but in sheer and honest fear of what is bound to happen to our race and to us as individuals if the world cannot be brought within sight of some spiritual ideal which restrains and commands us all.

From the standpoint of a social justice perspective, these contentless pleas to turn to Jesus need to be complemented by the Report’s earlier comments about the Kingdom.
“The Kingdom of God is already among us when it thus shows its power and makes
know good tidings to the poor, release to the captives and the setting at liberty of them
that are bruised.”

This earlier paragraph might have been inserted at the insistence of social
gospellers on the Commission such as R.B.Y. Scott, Harvey Forster and John Line.
They were members of a small but influential Christian socialist movement called the
Fellowship for a Christian Social Order which existed in Canada between 1934 and
1945. Developments since the 1940’s make the stance of that group look very
prophetic. It was clear to the radical wing of the movement at least that the struggle for
justice was the setting in which God’s presence would be experienced and His will
discovered. This point was vividly made by J. Morton Freeman, FCSO national staff
person between 1940 and 1944. In a letter he wrote to me while I was working on my
thesis on the FCSO, he recalled his farewell address to the church-oriented faction of the
Fellowship which had forced his resignation.

I expressed the strong conviction that unless we could see that the spirit bloweth
where it listeth, that wherever men and women stood up against their oppressors,
there was Jesus in the midst of them, that the actual expression of the intention of
Jesus in real life was often very rough whether we liked it or not, and that if, for
example, we could not see the prophets marching with the revolutionary
movements in China, then we could not claim to be expressing the prophetic
voice of Christianity in our time. The audience was very silent at the end.

Thirty years later it became fashionable to see the spirit of Jesus at work in Mao’s China.
Perhaps thirty years from now we will wonder why all persons with “a desire for mutual
betterment” did not see the hand of God in the social justice movements of the 1970’s.
Meanwhile we must converse with one another so that those who listen can help those
who speak to become conscious of the “worlds” behind their thoughts and actions. I
would suggest that the Report of the Commission on Church, Nation and World Order,
and the writings and activities of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, are
important resources for clarifying the “worlds” behind the moderate and radical strands of
United Church social thought. My aim in this paper has been to introduce this Report as
a starting point for thinking about how we determine our priorities and order our loyalties.

END NOTES

i Commission on Church, Nation and World Order, A Report to the Eleventh General Council of the United
Church of Canada (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service, 1944), 32.

ii Report, 3-5. The Executive of the Commission consisted of: Mr. Gershwin W. Mason (Chairman), Rev.
Gordon A. Sisco (Secretary), Rev. G. P. McLeod (Assistant Chairman), Rev. R. B. Y. Scott, Rev. J. R.
assisted the Executive in preparing material.

iii Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophical hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics,” Studies in Religion-Sciences
Religieuses 5, 1 (1975/6), 24-25: “The task of hermeneutics is not to recover a certain contemporaneity with
the act of creation; but neither is it merely to reconstruct the structure of the work. I would say that the task
of hermeneutics is to explicate the ‘world of the text’.