

The Rise of Liberalism in Canadian Protestant Churches

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This paper is concerned with the rise of Christian liberalism, a process which may be regarded as covering the period from about 1860 to 1940 in Canada. I shall interpret the latter part of my title "in the Protestant Churches" rather broadly; because the Protestant Churches, while in large measure the source of Christian liberalism, in the end failed to contain it. Many of the liberals like J. S. Woodsworth, Stanley Knowles and others, who began in the Protestant ministry, spent most of their active careers in other areas of Canadian society. Therefore I shall describe Protestant liberalism within, but also beyond the Protestant churches. It may be well to point out that, throughout this paper, I shall use the term liberalism in its religious and not in its political connotation.

Christian liberalism represented a departure from the older, orthodox Christian position which largely prevailed in the Anglo-Saxon world prior to 1860. There were few exceptions to the prevailing orthodoxy in Canada in this pre-1860 period.¹ Despite grave differences, the Christian churches in Canada shared a common body of belief. All believed that man was a sinner, bound for hell, unable to rescue himself, in need of a redeemer, but capable of salvation if he would avail himself of the divine sacrifice on his behalf. All accepted the authority of the Bible, which all believed to be divinely inspired. All regarded the achievement of eternal life as the dominant aim of the Christian. His own material, earthly comfort, while pleasant, was of secondary importance.

To be sure, each church had special ideas which tended to divide it from other churches. The Roman Catholics and High Anglicans had special ideas about the historic role of the Church and the Clergy; they stressed the importance of membership in the corporate church and participation in its sacraments. They differed in their attitude toward Biblical interpretation and toward the Papacy. The adherents of the Reformed Faith (Presbyterians, Low

¹ One of the few early liberals was the Rev. Edwin Hatch, a professor of Trinity College, Toronto. Hatch belonged to the "broad or critical school" and was one of the reasons for opposition to Trinity on the part of Benjamin Cronyn, the Bishop of Huron. See Philip Carrington, *The Anglican Church in Canada* (Toronto, 1963), p. 133.

Church Anglicans and others) emphasized the distinction between the visible and invisible churches, the role of justification by faith in the process of salvation. The Methodists and Quakers agreed with the Reformed Church in regard to the invisible church and justification by faith, but stressed the role of free will in the process of salvation. Their distinctive feature was emphasis upon the "Inner Light," as distinct from any external agency in the Christian's achievement of salvation. The differences between the churches were often more apparent than the central body of belief which all shared.

The orthodox position, as I have described it, came to be challenged in England (as well as in other countries) by the scientists and the biblical critics. Two volumes, Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Essays and Reviews* (1860) were of especial significance. In *Essays and Reviews*, a group of English scholars undertook to introduce the British public to the German critical approach to the scriptures. Neither volume was a bolt from the blue. Darwin's volume was the culmination of work by himself and his predecessors in the fields of biology and geology. *Essays and Reviews* interpreted a century of European critical biblical scholarship. But these two volumes had an especial impact on British and later upon Canadian thought.

Both Darwin and the authors of *Essays and Reviews* tended to foster a humanist and evolutionary conception of man. Both the scientists and the biblical critics tended to destroy the orthodox conception of the Bible as an inspired and authoritative volume. The net result was a growing skepticism in regard to the supernatural aspects of Christianity.

Christian liberalism was an attempt to defend the Christian position against this challenge. Like many new movements in thought, it developed first in the urban parts of Canada and spread only slowly to the country districts.² The Christian liberals imitated the method employed by Bishop Butler in the Eighteenth Century. Butler had sought to defend Christianity against the deists by accepting a large part of their position at the outset. In the late Nineteenth Century, the Christian liberals sought to preserve the Christian ethic by capitulating to the attack against its supernatural basis.

In its origins, Christian liberalism reflected certain long-run influences. Among these, orthodox Christianity should first be mentioned, although many Christian liberals travelled a long way from their Christian origins. They reflected a humanism and an optimism which was simply part of the Nineteenth Century intellectual tradition. It was a world which many forerunners had helped to shape. Among them were Jefferson, Tom Paine; the romantics, such as Byron and Shelley; Bentham and the Utilitarians; the New England transcendentalists; positivists like Comte. The ethical idealism of the early Christian liberals owed much to Kant and Hegel; but the immediate background of Christian liberalism in Britain and in Canada was the challenge

² See Stewart Crysedale, *The Changing Church in Canada* (Toronto, 1965).

of the scientists, the higher critics and their friends.

In its early phases Canadian Christian liberalism, like its British counterpart, was rooted in theology and late Nineteenth Century philosophy. The early Christian liberals were comparatively close to their orthodox Christian origins. They were followed by others who got much further from orthodox Christianity and to whom one may give the term post-Christian liberals. The hey-day of the Christian and post-Christian liberals was the decade of the 1920's. At that time they held the field in the universities and, to a lesser extent, in the churches. Their viewpoint became the new norm, but it has already receded far enough into the past, at least in its uncomplicated form, to be capable of description and objective analysis.

II

The late Nineteenth Century liberals were primarily concerned with the problem of how far Christian doctrine could be reconciled with the findings of science and higher criticism. Of first-rate importance was G. M. Grant, 1835-1902, a Presbyterian minister and, from 1877 until his death, the Principal of Queen's University. Grant prided himself on his moderation. He accepted the findings of the scientists and biblical critics, but thought that people should be critical about them. On the occasion of his installation as Principal of Queen's on December 5, 1877, he discussed the scientists and the biblical critics, pleading with Christians to consider their findings with an open mind and in a spirit of moderation. He urged his audience,

Cultivate then a cordial spirit towards criticism and science. Accept thankfully the undoubted results of the one, the facts of the other. Bear with their theories, for even unproved theories may be useful to them as working theories.³

J. F. Stevenson, Principal of the Congregational College in Montreal, and Chairman of the Congregational Union of Ontario and Quebec in 1879-80, expounded ideas which were similar to Grant's. In an address at the annual meeting of the Union at Montreal in June, 1880, Stevenson questioned the authority of the creeds while accepting the theories of Darwin and the biblical critics; but he also retained much of the orthodox Christian position, affirming his belief in the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection and the ascension.⁴ George C. Workman, the Professor of Old Testament Exegesis at Victoria College, was a less fortunate advocate of Christian liberalism.

³ *Queen's College Journal*, December 15, 1877.

⁴ *The Canadian Congregational Year Book*, 1880-81 (Toronto, 1880), pp. 65-82.

Workman's ideas on Messianic prophecy led to a controversy in 1890 which ended in his resignation.

While Grant and Stevenson spoke within the arena of formal theology, other liberals were expounding much the same position as professors of philosophy. In 1871-72, there were three significant appointments to chairs of philosophy in Canada: George Paxton Young at Toronto, John Watson at Queen's, and John Clark Murray at McGill.

George Paxton Young (1819-1889), a Presbyterian minister and Professor at Knox College, Toronto, reached a point by 1864 in which he could no longer give to the Westminster Confession "the sort of assent expected by the Presbyterian Church." He resigned from the Presbyterian ministry and Knox College and, for the last eighteen years of his life, occupied the Chair of Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics at University College, Toronto.

A volume based on the lectures of Young entitled *The Ethics of Freedom* is an illuminating case study in the thought of the Canadian Idealists.⁵ Young's lectures indicated his ideas in regard to the ethical standard. He flatly contradicted the position of the English Utilitarians "in setting up as a standard of right the tendency of action to produce pleasure." He declared that man's chief good was not the pursuit of pleasure, but "the realization of the moral ideal." Man's knowledge of the moral ideal, argued Young, would always be imperfect; but the ideal could be known "in so far as the moral nature has unfolded itself and thus exhibited the capabilities that are in it." It was the function of conscience to preserve the Moral Law, despite the onslaughts of the Utilitarians. Moreover, Young attributed to conscience an authority which orthodox Christians had accorded to the Scriptures or to the Church. The distinguishing characteristic of the moral faculty, argued Young, was its authority. He insisted that the moral faculty "merely pronounces that the highest of the ends that may be before the mind, should be sought; and this declaration is *ipso facto* one of absolute authority."

John Watson, appointed Professor of Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics at Queen's University, was an even more distinguished example of Ethical Idealism. An example of his thought was provided by an article which he wrote in 1909, on the occasion of the death of his mentor, Edward Caird.⁶ Watson insisted that German Idealism, as interpreted by Caird (and also by Watson), enabled his generation "to preserve the essence of religion while giving it a more rational form" (p. 306). Watson insisted that the whole of life was a unified and perfect system. He did not regard the Infinite as merely beyond, but as something related to the finite. In short, Watson believed in

⁵ George Paxton Young, *The Ethics of Freedom*, notes selected, translated and arranged by his pupil, James Gibson Hume (Toronto, 1911), pp. 55-63.

⁶ John Watson, "Edward Caird as Teacher and Thinker," *Queen's Quarterly*, April, May, June, 1909.

the concept of Truth, and in man's ability to come progressively nearer to a complete knowledge of the Truth. Thus he contrived to preserve the Christian ethic even though he had lost faith in "traditional theology."

Through the universities, Grant, Workman, Watson, and Young, influenced a whole generation of young Canadians. Particularly they influenced the Protestant clergy: Presbyterians and Methodists, and those Anglicans who attended Young's lectures at University College.

The early Christian liberals were largely concerned with the problem of reconciling Christianity and science; but even in the 1890's there began to emerge an aspect of Christian liberalism to which greater stress was to be devoted in the future. The Christian liberal became concerned with schemes of social amelioration. Thus the annual meetings of the Queen's Theological Alumni Conference, instituted by Grant in 1893, discussed papers not only on biblical criticism, but also on the problem of poverty, the single tax, social evolution and the like.⁷ The Methodist General Conference of 1894 appointed a Committee on "Sociological Questions" for the first time in the history of Canadian Methodism. The report of the Committee sounded the authentic note of modern post-Christian liberalism in its assertion,

When Society has become impregnated with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, trusts, monopolies, heartless combinations and oppressed economic conditions shall have been superseded by a universal brotherhood.⁸

An early Christian liberal in Montreal, the Reverend J. B. Silcox, stressed the social implications of Christianity, while preserving some elements of doctrinal orthodoxy. On Easter Day, 1895, Silcox preached a revealing sermon on "Social Resurrection," his principal interest.⁹

III

Christian liberalism went from strength to strength in the years after 1900, and reached the peak of its influence in Canada in the decade of the 1920's. Its advocates were vocal in the universities and in the Protestant churches. They still had all the confidence of an *avant-garde*, not yet made to appear old fashioned and uncomplicated by the emergence of neo-orthodoxy and existentialism. Church union of the Methodist, Presbyterian and

⁷ Richard Allen, "The Social Gospel and the Reform Tradition in Canada, 1890-1928," *Canadian Historical Review*, December 1968, p. 385.

⁸ J. S. Riddell, *Methodism in the Middle West* (Toronto, 1940), pp. 211-212.

⁹ J. B. Silcox, *Social Resurrection, A Sermon preached on Easter Sunday, April 14, 1895, in Emmanuel Congregational Church* (Montreal, 1895).

Congregational churches in 1925 was gratifying to Christian liberals, and its spokesmen, like Rev. Richard Roberts, were prominent in early United Church preaching.¹⁰

A consideration of religious periodicals in the period after 1920, indicates the continuance of a liberal attitude toward the Scriptures and a growing concern for the social implications of Christianity. These attitudes were widely proclaimed in such church papers of the period as the *Presbyterian Witness*, the Methodist *Christian Guardian* and the Canadian Journal of Religious Thought.

The *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought*, an ably written periodical, was published in Toronto between 1924 and 1932. The *Journal* was an interdenominational periodical, but the United Church was particularly prominent in its Editorial Board.¹¹ The *Journal* was closely connected with the church colleges. Among its contributors were Richard Roberts; H. A. Kent, principal of Queen's Theological College; James Smith, principal of United Theological College, Montreal; L. H. Marshall, the Professor of Homiletics in McMaster University.

The Student Christian Movement (SCM), an international organization which entered Canada in 1920, provided an important mouthpiece among university students for the opinions of Christian liberalism. The SCM was organized at a nationwide conference at Guelph, Ontario, on December 31, 1920. From 1921 it functioned in almost every English-speaking university and college. The SCM emphasized the relevance of the Christian faith to social and personal problems. It has been described by the *Encyclopedia Canadiana* as having been theologically liberal in the twenties and socially liberal in the thirties, and later emphasizing a recovered orthodoxy.

IV

Some time after 1900, Christian liberalism was followed by a type further from Christian orthodoxy. To this more recent type one may give the term post-Christian liberal. The Christian liberal, despite his emphasis on the social Gospel, still had some rudiments of Christian theology. He liked to talk about the Fatherhood of God as well as the Brotherhood of Man. The post-Christian liberal, like his forerunner, the Christian liberal, believed in the

¹⁰ Richard Roberts (1874-1945) was the pastor of Sherbourne St. United Church in Toronto (1928-1938), and from 1934-1936 was Moderator of the United Church of Canada. He was an eloquent preacher.

¹¹ The Board of Directors, eighteen in number, included eleven members of the United Church and four Anglicans. The Educational Committee, twenty-two in number, included twelve members of the United Church, two Anglicans and two Presbyterians.

goodness of man and the importance of obtaining social justice for everybody, regardless of race, creed and colour. He had the ethics of Christianity, but he had moved beyond the orbit of orthodox Christian theology and had abandoned the idea of a personal God. J. S. Woodsworth and William Ivens, both of them clergymen, got much further from their Christian origins than did early liberals like Grant and Young.¹² Post-Christian liberalism was characterized by the emergence of a humanism which had been inherent, but not so obvious, in the thinking of the early Christian liberals like Grant and Young. The post-Christian liberals were less concerned with the reconciliation of Christianity with science and more concerned with the process of improving the living conditions of mankind.

I do not mean to suggest that the older type of Christian liberalism completely disappeared with the advent of post-Christian liberalism. After the emergence of the latter in the early twentieth century, the two positions continued to be maintained side by side.

Goldwin Smith should be mentioned in connection with Post-Christian liberalism. Smith is chiefly remembered for his political ideas, but his ideas on philosophy and religion were also of significance. Smith represents a sort of half-way stage between Christian, and post-Christian liberalism. Like the Christian liberals, he addressed himself to the problem of how much of Christianity could be salvaged in the face of the challenge of the scientists and the Biblical critics; but his theology was so extreme as to put him in the camp of the post-Christian liberals. One of the clearest expositions of Smith's religious position was his address to the Unitarian Club of Toronto in 1904.¹³ Rejoicing in the discoveries of science, Smith discarded belief in miracles, including the resurrection: "Of positive proofs such as would be afforded by the return of one from the dead we have none," he asserted.¹⁴ He had no very sure ideas about God, although he appeared to believe in a God of justice. He envisaged a universe in which "good struggles with evil, and so far as the inhabitants of our planet are concerned seems on the whole gradually to prevail."¹⁵ He believed also in the goodness of human nature. He contended that man has the quality of aspiring to the good and has also a capacity for love of the brighter, purer kind. Like other Christian, and post-Christian liberals, Smith regarded Christianity as of importance because of its moral values. "If we still follow Jesus of Nazareth," asserted Smith, "it

¹² J.S. Woodsworth repudiated the idea that God was "separate and above the world," and regarded God as simply "the Absolute." See Grace MacLinnis, *J. S. Woodsworth, A Man to Remember* (Toronto, 1953), p. 327.

¹³ Goldwin Smith, *Lines of Religious Enquiry, an address delivered to the Unitarian Club, of Toronto* (Toronto, 1904).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

is because His words are true, and being true are bread of moral life.”¹⁶ Smith was certainly not without social concern; but he did not have the passion for root and branch social reform which characterized the later post-Christian liberals.

The most distinguished of the post-Christian liberals was J. S. Woodsworth. He graduated in arts from Wesley College, Winnipeg, in 1896, and studied theology at Victoria College, Toronto. Woodsworth entered the Methodist Church but soon became dissatisfied with the failure of the church to fulfil its social responsibilities. In 1902, when the minister of Keewatin, Ontario, he wrote to his cousin, Charles Sissons,

Again what is the church doing? Let a stranger study the social and religious problems here in Canada. What real part does the church play in the lives of the people—Analyze your congregations—Take out your few Christians—How much real life is there even among them? We struggle to keep up congregations to please cranky people—and all for what?¹⁷

After a long process of increasing discontent, Woodsworth finally left the church in 1918 and began a career of active politics. Having supported the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, he was elected as an Independent Labour Party member to the Canadian House of Commons in 1921. His career as one of the principal organizers of the CCF in 1932 and as its leader until 1940 and Honorary President (1940-1942) is well known.

Woodsworth was best remembered for his long advocacy in the House of Commons of socially desirable causes. He advocated the type of evolutionary socialism which is usually associated with the British Labour Party. Like other post-Christian liberals, Woodsworth was essentially a humanist. Man, he regarded, as intrinsically good. If Man was corrupt, it was the result of a bad environment. He could be improved if his environment were made better. Woodsworth wrote in 1915:

At least in this world, souls are always incorporated in bodies, and to save a man, you must save him body, soul, and spirit. To really save one man you must transform the community in which he lives.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Public Archives of Canada, *Sissons Papers*, J. S. Woodsworth to Charles Sissons, January 16, 1902.

¹⁸ Grain Growers Guide, June 30, 1915, quoted in K. W. McNaught, “J. S. Woodsworth and a Political Party for Labour, 1896 to 1921,” *Canadian Historical Review*, June 1949.

Not only was man good, but the human mind must always be the final court of appeal. Woodsworth was impatient with “the type of mind that always looks for some extreme authority ... and if it can cite such authority seems willing to accept any statement, however unreasonable or far from the facts.”¹⁹

Woodsworth was not only a humanist but also a humanitarian. “The very heart of the teaching of Jesus was the setting up of the Kingdom of God on earth,” he wrote in an article entitled “My religion.”²⁰ His idea of revival was to produce an increased passion for social justice. “People had been praying for a great revival of religion,” he said in 1919, and continued:

The revival was here – a passion for justice -a sense of brotherhood – a yearning for a better order – a willingness to serve and sacrifice.²¹

Other post-Christian liberals were William Ivens, Arthur L. Phelps and Stanley Knowles. They all followed the same course as Woodsworth, out of the ministry and into the secular promotion of the social gospel. Ivens and Knowles, both had distinguished careers in the CCF. Phelps, a Methodist minister, lost his faith in orthodox Christianity and had a long career in the Departments of English at United College, Winnipeg, and McGill. Among his colleagues he stressed causes of social amelioration. There was also a strong post-Christian liberal element in the thinking of the Progressive Party in Canada. Richard Allen points out that Henry Wise Wood counselled his farmers to look to the church for a social saviour, Jesus of Nazareth.²²

During the period of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, Woodsworth and Ivens co-operated with another group, who could not be termed “Christian” at all, the free-thinking radicals like Fred Dixon, Bob Russell and John Queen. The free-thinking radicals were mostly Old Countrymen, recent arrivals from Great Britain. Russell and Queen were Scots, Russell, a Clydesider. Dick Johns and Dixon were Englishmen. They were much further from their Christian origins than the post-Christian liberals, who for the most part were Canadians. The social objectives of the post-Christian liberals and the free thinking radicals were similar. They had arrived at the same destination by different routes.

The case of the Endicott family provides a striking example of the transition from Christian liberalism to post-Christian liberalism and political radicalism. Dr. James Endicott graduated from Wesley College, Winnipeg, in 1893, just at the time when Higher Criticism was destroying the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, B. C. Federationist, October 4, 1918.

²⁰ Grace MacInnis, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²² Richard Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

foundations of early Methodism and driving it toward concentration on the social Gospel. He had a long and distinguished career as a Christian liberal within the Methodist, and, after 1925, within the United Church. His son, James Gareth Endicott (born 1898) began where the father left off as an exponent of the social Gospel. After World War I, Endicott Junior entered the Methodist ministry, and in 1925 he went to China where he worked as a teacher and missionary until 1946. He taught for a year at Shanghai University and returned to Canada in 1947. He left the United Church ministry and entered a career of extreme radicalism. Endicott became chairman of the Canadian Peace Congress and published a *Far Eastern Newsletter* that, in the main, followed the communist line.²³

The connection between Christian and post-Christian liberalism on the one hand, and political radicalism on the other, was well illustrated by the publication in 1936 of a composite volume, entitled *Towards the Christian Revolution*.²⁴ The volume was edited by Gregory Vlastos, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University and R. B. Y. Scott, Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at United Theological College, Montreal. The group of writers was dominantly United Church and, in addition to the editors, included four university professors and two United Church ministers. All had the basic ideas of Christian and post-Christian liberalism: a critical view of the Bible, an optimistic concept of human nature, and tremendous emphasis on the social Gospel. The general argument of the volume was that the Protestant churches had laid insufficient stress on social reform in the past and must do better in the future. Some of the writers proposed that the programme of social reform should be ushered in by a socialist state. J. King Gordon thought that the Church must play an active role in the remedying of economic distress and in the campaign against war. He favoured,

a socialized and co-operative economy directed towards the adequate provision of economic security.²⁵

²³ *Encyclopedia Canadiana* (Ottawa, 1958), vol. IV, p. 5.

²⁴ Published in Chicago and New York, 1936. The list of writers included John Line (Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, Victoria College, Toronto); J. King Gordon (former Professor, Christian Ethics, of United Theological College, Montreal); J. W. A. Nicholson and R. Edis Fairbairn, United Church ministers; Eugene Forsey (Lecturer in Economics and Political Science at McGill University); Eric Havelock (Professor of Classics at Victoria College).

²⁵ Vlastos and Scott, p. 156. Two of the contributors to *Towards the Christian Revolution*, Eugene Forsey and King Gordon, were also associated with the League for Social Reconstruction, which was formed by a group of Montreal and Toronto professors in 1931. The League's volume, *Social Planning for Canada*, published in 1935, expounded much the same social programme as the volume,

V

Not all of the Christian and post-Christian liberals were radicals in politics. Some were political Liberals like L. B. Pearson. As a Christian or post-Christian liberal, Mr. Pearson believed that man is essentially good. Man is the centre of the universe and the source of moral principle.²⁶ Men, he said, should never be “forgetful of their true nature and unaware of their full possibilities.”²⁷

Mr. Pearson grew up in a period which was perhaps the hey-day of nineteenth century optimism and it was not surprising that he was a firm believer in human progress. While aware that some men are bad, he nevertheless maintained that there were more men of good will in his day than there used to be.²⁸ As a believer in progress, Mr. Pearson thought of politics in evolutionary terms. “It is one of the characteristics of life,” he wrote,

for societies as well as for individuals, that the consequence of success in grappling with problems is often the obligation to meet and master greater ones. We are forever climbing the ever mounting slope.²⁹

Mr. Pearson’s religious ideas were the alter ego of his political philosophy. He conceived of Christianity chiefly in social and political terms. He stressed the brotherhood of man. The function of Christianity was to promote charity and tolerance, and therefore to make a world order more possible.³⁰ Mr. Pearson stressed the function of Christian theology as a social and political unifier, as well as the place it gave to the idea of the worth and dignity of man. He deplored the lack of unity in Christendom, and insisted upon the desirability of the greatest possible unity consistent with free choice in the world of religion.

VI

After 1930, Christian and post-Christian liberalism ceased to dominate Canadian schools of theology to the extent which had been the case in the

Towards a Christian Revolution, but without its religious overtones.

²⁶ Lester B. Pearson, *Democracy in World Politics* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 4-5.

²⁷ Christian Foundations for World Order, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa, *Statements and Speeches*, No. 54/56.

²⁸ *Democracy in World Politics*, pp. 4 and 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Statements and Speeches*, No. 55/27, pp. 3-5.

twenties. Professor John Line, of Victoria College, marked the transition from the liberalism of the twenties to the more sophisticated theology of the thirties and beyond. In an article published in 1936, he praised the social programme of Christian liberalism, but expressed profound dissatisfaction with its ideology.³¹ Like other Canadian theologians, Line was attracted by the Barthian ideas of a sovereign God and the need of sinful man. In the forties and fifties the so-called existentialist theologians, notably Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich and Bonhoeffer, began to exercise a considerable influence on the *avant-garde* in the Canadian churches. The files of the *Canadian Journal of Theology*, which commenced publication in 1955, indicate the preoccupation of many Canadian university theologians with the thought of neo-orthodoxy and with the new twist to which the more unorthodox existentialists, Bultmann and Tillich, gave to a new generation of liberalism; nevertheless old fashioned liberalism continued to be expounded, particularly by those who had been in college before 1930.

R. C. Wallace, writing in 1955, sounded the authentic note of Christian and post-Christian liberalism when he asserted:

The doctrine of the essential wickedness of human nature has no place either in my philosophy or in my experience ... Since life began on this planet there have been successive steps forward, and since the early days of man these steps have led to a more adequate functioning of the human body and the human mind. The process continues so slowly as not to be perceptible within the compass of a human lifetime. But it continues, and will increasingly, aided by the conscious efforts of men and women of goodwill who strive for a better life.³²

Some appraisal of the role played by Christian and post-Christian liberals must be attempted. Their influence in many areas of Canadian life was momentous. They converted the larger part of the old-line Protestant churches in Canada to the tenets of liberal theology. They exerted a powerful impact on movements toward union of Protestant churches. To a large extent the strong unionists in the 1920's and again in the 1960's, were liberals. Negatively the reaction against liberalism drove many Protestants out of the old-line churches and into conservative churches like the Pentacostals and Evangelical Baptists. The liberals helped to produce in the Protestant churches and in Canadian life generally, a much increased emphasis upon social justice and upon schemes of social amelioration. Christian liberals like L. B. Pearson provided much of the leadership in movements making for

³¹ Published in Vlastos and Scott, pp. 26-50.

³² R. C. Wallace, "As I Look Back," *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. XLI, No. 4, Winter, 1955, pp. 493, 494-495.

world collective security in the League of Nations, the United Nations, and NATO.

The philosophy of the Christian liberals was of course anathema to orthodox Christians. They were horrified by a process which came out of orthodox Christianity, which became progressively more humanist and which often ended in atheism. Even in the arena of purely secular discussion, liberalism was open to criticism. In the universities the liberals helped to produce a generation of academics, particularly in the social sciences, who were largely unaware of the Christian traditions of Western Civilization. The view of all liberals in regard to human nature was demonstrably naive. The tradition of optimism in regard to human nature has been long and includes the French *philosophes* in the Eighteenth Century, the American transcendentalists (Emerson, Whittier *et al.*) in the early Nineteenth, and the liberals with whom this paper has been concerned in the late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries; but human nature always let the optimists down, e.g. the excesses of the French Revolution and the atrocities in two world wars in the Twentieth Century.

In the long run, too, the ethical idealism of the Christian and post-Christian liberals had no abiding defence against the inroads of pragmatism. The earlier orthodox Christian position had the sanction of belief in a God of Mercy and Justice revealing his ideas to man through Christ, the prophets and the Holy Scriptures. The early Christian liberals began the abandonment of this defence by scrapping the authority of the Scriptures and the supernatural basis of Christianity, and by retaining only the Christian ethic. Later liberals of the Richard Roberts type continued the tradition of ethical idealism and a weakened theology. Post-Christian liberals abandoned the idea of a personal God completely. Neither type of liberalism had much intellectual defence against pragmatism; but of the two types the liberalism of the post-Christians was the more vulnerable. In reality, the post-Christian liberals were the end result of a process which the early Christian liberals had begun. G. P. Young had tried to substitute the authority of the moral law for the authority of Scripture; but in the end the conflict between the advocates of the moral law and the advocates of the principle that whatever works is right seemed to become a mere difference of opinion between two schools of philosophy. In this conflict Pragmatism was frequently the victor.