

# Confederation as an intra-Christian pact

## NASCENT PLURALISM

From the vantage point of 2016, the Confederation debates in the Province of Canada show remarkable clarity about and commitment to the ideal of religious accommodation and liberty. At the same time, the debaters' vision of pluralism and their policy for enshrining it was tightly narrow, and all but blind to the lengths and measures that would eventually ensure the religious pluralism Canadians now take for granted.

The debaters certainly shared a genuine interest in protecting the rights of the two dominant religious minorities, the Protestant minority in Catholic Lower Canada, and the Roman Catholic minority in Protestant Upper Canada. The debaters safeguarded these minorities constitutionally, setting the stage, in a limited fashion, for the myriad religious groupings to come. Though some statesmen voiced suspicion about how their traditions might be harmed by the pact, it was a relatively effortless achievement. Overall, the debaters viewed the compromise with a pride they felt was well earned, for they had overcome long-standing intra-Christian rivalries and achieved the mutually assured survival of Christianities. The efforts to preserve two spheres of religious autonomy unfolded with mutuality, with only a trace of acrimony. The Roman Catholic Church and a handful of Protestant churches (Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist) would continue to receive some support from the new state. Practical and enlightened politics had triumphed over old differences.

The religious rapprochement between rival sects of Christians that emerged from the debates would profoundly impact policy and cultural life in the subsequent 150 years. Insofar as religion is concerned, the political and economic compact that made Canada was thus, on the one hand, a minorities protection scheme. It laid the groundwork for pluralism, a tradition of accommoda-

BY DAVID KOFFMAN

David Koffman teaches history at York University and is the co-editor of *Canadian Jewish Studies*.

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tion, and sowed the seeds that would later contribute to the weakening of Christian institutions and leadership in national public life altogether. The protection scheme served, imperfectly, as an expandable avenue for other religious minorities.

## A NARROW WORLD

On the other hand, the debates show consideration for neither Indigenous religiosity nor the great explosion of non-Christian religious immigrant imports, which would begin to transform—even in the lifetimes of the Fathers themselves—the religious landscape we now know in Canada. The Fathers protected just two of the three groups we now consider to be the “founding peoples” of this country, Protestants and Roman Catholics, each in the others' domain. Indigenous religious actors, commitments, and interests—however internally diverse they were and however uncomfortably the category of “religion” fit into anyone's world view or lexicon—were entirely elided. The debates betrayed just how narrow a world the Fathers lived in, in terms of religious diversity. There was virtually no mention, no provision, no acknowledgment of any religion other

than the major Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics (the single largest religious demographic). The *only* named religious minority in the Waite edition of the debates were Irish Catholics, whom Christopher Dunkin insisted had distinct political interests. No mention was made of Buddhists, Confucians, or Muslims, some of whom had already settled in what was about to become Canada, or Jews, already a fairly prominent group in the country.<sup>1</sup> Smaller Christian minorities like Huguenots, Mennonites, Adventists, Mormons, Pentecostals, and Eastern, Russian, Ukrainian, and Greek Orthodox Christians went unmentioned too.

Still, Christianity was of central concern. The Confederation project, wrote George Brown, was meant to “establish a government that will ... strive to develop its great natural resources—and that will endeavor to maintain liberty, and justice, and Christianity throughout the land” (37). The part Christianity played in this semi-established government would be an axiom of coherency, both an afterthought and a natural, a given. Confederation, first and foremost, implied command over natural resources for trade. Second to resources were liberty and justice. “Christianity throughout the land,” though included as an essential element of the new national project, was listed last. The new state would be Christian, with partial and plural establishment, making it different from Britain, with its established Anglican Church, and from the United States, which had erected an explicit wall separating church and state.

In reading the debates 150 years later, one cannot help but sense how inadequately they reflect the profound ways that Christianity dominated and shaped 19th-century Canadian life, its customs, its culture, and its expectations for the future. Political elites—secular, deist, or Christian—spoke little of Christianity, despite the general commit-

ment of the vast majority of Canadians to it. Religion itself seems to have been far from central to the debaters, even those who considered themselves churched. The religious differences between Catholics and Protestants were generally subsumed under *national* and *linguistic* identities. John A. Macdonald, John Rose, A.A. Dorion, and Christopher Dunkin all shared the sense that religion was but one element of regional identities. George Brown, who fought against separate schools, celebrated the pact as compensation for all the strife of the previous years, making religious difference but a small part of the harmonious and peaceful union, composed, as he put it, of two distinct “races,” speaking different languages, with unique social, municipal, educational, and religious institutions.

### EVANGELICAL CONSENSUS

The debates themselves were largely silent about their deep-seated assumptions, but Christianity was clearly an intimate partner of opportunity, expansion, and national self-possession. The central concern for fostering the autonomy of Britain’s remaining North American colonies included preserving their respective religious and legal differences, but the Fathers lived in a world of “evangelical consensus,” in John Webster Grant’s terms, one that crossed the Catholic–Protestant divide.<sup>2</sup> It was so obvious it didn’t need to be debated. Canadian Christians built temperance organizations, missionary associations, Bible and tract societies, and established the Lord’s Day Alliance and YMCA/YWCAs, all with both nationalistic and millennial overtones. Churches ran hospitals, orphanages, social agencies, and schools—Indian residential schools among them. The federal government consulted these semi-established churches about the levels and mix of immigrants who would be allowed to enter Canada. The Christianizing impulse profoundly impacted Indigenous–European relations, to put it mildly, just as it would impact later newcomers as well. But this consensus

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Christianity is notably absent from the debates themselves.

Yet another notable absence—reflecting the general absence in the subsequent course of Canadian religion—is the absence of *civic religion* at the genesis of the nation. Neither the Fathers of Confederation nor leaders in the young state used the tools of religion to develop federalism. Though some debaters discerned the hand of God in uniting political enemies, or sprinkled a reference to Psalm 72’s “God’s Dominion” in their speeches, as P.B. Waite’s introduction to the edited debates noted, the new national ideology, such as it was, did not evoke divine blessing. One reads an impressive lack of religious enthusiasm for the project in the debates. Politicians likely cared a great deal about what clergymen, who had significant public clout in the 1860s, said in support of or against Confederation, particularly in Quebec. Though many consulted religious leaders, not one uttered a word about it in Parliament.<sup>3</sup> No one suggested the creation of new rituals or holidays. They cast no new symbols or anthems. The debaters did not even deploy religious tropes in their debate rhetoric to heighten the importance of the work or vest spiritual meaning in new statehood. They did not use the language of faith, salvation, or grace, so common in the “New Jerusalem” of the United States. Canadians imbued their new state with *less* religious meaning than Americans did, though para-

doxically, they were also far less radical in separating religion and statecraft. (The *British North America Act, 1867* included no disestablishment clause.)

### THE SECULARIZING ROAD

As much as Christianity was a given and civic religion absent, the debates also provide some evidence of the diminishment of Christianity in the overtly political sphere, perhaps hinting at the secularizing road to multiculturalism ahead. Confederation itself devolved educational decisions to the provinces. With the exception of Quebec, which abolished its Ministry of Public Education in 1875 to turn over educational decisions to the Catholic Church and the “Protestants,” it was inside those provinces’ *secular* ministries of education—and not among Church leaders per se—that so many religious tensions would later play out. The courts, the state, and its provinces slowly but surely assured neutrality in matters of religion. The most obvious vestiges of Christian privilege—oaths, clergy salaries, state-funded theology schools, and prayer in civic ceremonies—were removed. (Since the 1960s, for instance, colleges and universities were forced to sever confessional ties in order to be eligible for provincial funding.) The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, much later, would consistently support the rights of individuals over and against the rights of

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particular religious communities whenever the two came into conflict. Scholar Lois Sweet has shrewdly observed that pluralism and the accommodation of religious minorities were achieved largely by ignoring religion altogether (except in Quebec).<sup>4</sup> That de-Christianization would pave the path to pluralism might have shocked or disturbed the debaters of Confederation.


Finally, and most obviously, from today's perspective the debates show a glaring absence of representation of religious communities that are now at home in Canada. Of course, the religious pluralism of today was unforeseeable in 1865. Canada was visibly Christian until the end of the Second World War, despite large communities of Jews in the major cities. African, Asian, and Latin American immigrations brought religious traditions and variations of Christianity, as well as Baha'ism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and many other traditional religions or modern derivations thereof. New religious movements and spiritual groups have exploded. These religions and movements did not even appear as available categories in the 1941 or 1971 censuses. (The 1991 census had, for the first time, on the other hand, but one category for all Protestants.) That Christianity would have been woven into the social fabric of the nation in 1865 seemed a natural given in the debates; the short version of them made no mention of Jews, Africans, or Asians, despite having religious (as well as racialized) bodies on the ground.

## "FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND RELIGION"

Lest I paint a picture of a natural evolution of Protestant–Catholic coordination toward a broader religious pluralism, I should add by way of conclusion that religious groups (often as ethnic groups who minimized their own religious ideologies and the extent of their religious commitments in order to make their cases more palatable) fought and con-

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tinue to fight for inclusion and redress of the many sins committed against them. Federal and provincial exclusions and race-based policies not only impacted the obvious realms of public education, immigration, and naturalization, but also drove policy limiting voting rights and public office limitations, as well as policy with regard to religious accommodations in gender, health, housing, and labour. These were all battles that had to be fought largely by religious minorities themselves. Religious minorities would have, in all likelihood, supported a fuller disestablishment from the very beginning. One of the main motivations for migrants to come to Canada was, after all, freedom from religious persecution. Many religious communities have wished for the same constitutionally guaranteed privileges that Roman Catholics have enjoyed (enshrined in the *British North America Act*) extended to their own groups. Chinese leaders, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs led the charge for their own language and culture schools, for vouchers to remit school tax to pay for separate religious schools, and for charter schools. It was religious communities who successfully lobbied to have "freedom of conscience and religion" included in the Charter. Since 1982 this key phrase has provided the legal basis for court challenges to legislation about religious rights.

Over the last 150 years, the religious liberty clearly visible in the debates evolved in new directions and to further extremes than the debaters themselves could have known. 

## NOTES

1. In the larger debates, over 1,000 pages, "religion/religious" comes up over 200 times: Catholics are referred to 110 times, "Papists" twice, Protestants 80 times, Church 41 times, God 17 times, and Presbyterian 6 times. Narcisse Belleau referred to Jewish emancipation in Lower Canada (183). Étienne-Paschal Taché echoed him (236), as did Alexander Mackenzie (432), and Charles Alleyne (672). Lotbinière Harwood referred to Jews (and religious diversity in Germany and England) (830, 833).
2. John Webster Grant, *A Profusion of Spires: Religion in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); see also "the shadow establishment" in Martin David, "Canada in Comparative Perspective," in David Lyon and Marguerite van Die, eds., *Rethinking Church, State and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
3. Marcel Bellavance argued that the Catholic Church swung the argument (unfairly) in favour of Confederation in Quebec: Marcel Bellavance, *Le Québec et la Confédération: Un choix libre?* (Québec: Septentrion, 1992).
4. Lois Sweet, *God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada's High Schools* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997).

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