

BOOK REVIEW/LIVRE RENDU

Paul Bramadat and **David Seljak**, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 448 pp. \$49.95 paper (978-0-8020-9584-8), \$100.00 hardcover (978-0-8020-9875-7)

The interface between Christianity and ethnicity is an ever-changing series of relationships embedded in identity (self and ascribed), but rooted in cultural forms, geography, gender, and social class. How religious and ethnic self-understandings co-mingle, creating a multidimensional character permeating individuals and groups, lies at the heart of the edited collection that historian Paul Bramadat and religious studies scholar David Seljak have assembled. As an anthology, it is extremely uniform in presentation style and content coherence. Interwoven through each of the nine chapters on specific groups — ranging from Canadian Anglicanism (Wendy Fletcher), to Francophone Roman Catholics (Solangé Lefebvre), Evangelicals (Bruce Guenther) and Eastern Christians (Myroslaw Tataryn) — there are both autobiographical memories and stories of individual congregations that create pictures of the changing religious landscape in Canadian society.

The metanarrative of the book is the profound impact of the *discourse of loss* facing most Christian denominations and the churches which serve under their leadership or banner. Bramadat and Seljak believe that the current trajectory of the secularization of Canadian society — and its accompanying formal disentanglement of Christianity from important state institutions — may be unfolding unevenly, but that it is undeniable. As a result, the Canada that those of European descent believed would last forever is fading away. In its wake, many believers feel a sense of “betrayal of the arrangement upon which Canada has been founded” (p. 13) — the Christian project, in the words of the editors (p. 422).

In laying a theoretical groundwork for the chapters to follow, the editors highlight the influence of those Canadians who believed that religion was “inherently socially divisive” and a barrier to a “mature democratic, liberal and multicultural society” (p. 14). As well, *believing without belonging*, a phrase coined by British sociologist Grace Davie, accounted in part for the great exodus from the churches on Sunday morning and their dwindling coffers. Yet, the discourse of loss reflected more

than these declines. No longer could Christian co-religionists assume that the values and objectives of their faith and tradition were one and the same as the values and objectives of the broader society. Basically, things were not as they once were — old ways of doing things were not so slowly passing away.

While there is no weak link in this collection, I was particularly drawn to the discussion of the United Church of Canada (Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng) and a chapter aptly entitled “The Poetics of Peoplehood” (Royden Loewen) on Canada’s Mennonites. Ng traces the “imagined community” that the founders of the United Church had in mind as they established what they believed was a national church — white Protestant descendants of immigrants from Great Britain and Ireland — and their recent efforts to be inclusive of ethnic and racial diversity (pp. 204–5). The challenges presented by a national church in a bilingual Canada and the factors surrounding transnational identities in the United Church are particularly insightful. Loewen commences his discussion of the evolution of Mennonite identity in Canada by stating that the question of religion and ethnicity is “deeply vexing for many Mennonites in Canada” (p. 330). He argues that ethnicity for Canadian Mennonites is a cultural construction “established by time, tempered by space, and conditioned by social interaction. It intersects dialectically with religious teachings that are themselves in flux” (p. 332). The interface between religion and ethnicity Loewen considers a “poetic act.” Their historical narrative becomes an ethnic marker — a migrant people with a particular cultural script — including notions of peoplehood and community cohesiveness, fermented in social borders, historical imagination, and religious faithfulness (p. 335).

This edited collection is successful at a number of levels, and herein lies its usefulness. First, there are several chapters that would be excellent reading for undergraduate students taking their first course in religious studies, or the sociology of religion. Second, the nuanced accounts of various traditions within Christianity offer the more advanced undergraduate a window into the multidisciplinary study of religion. Third, the text as a whole would be beneficial reading for graduate students and scholars attracted to the study of religion, culture, ethnicity, gender, and class. Since various authors understand this web of connections in part from their own discipline, and personal narrative, there are contextually rich offerings throughout the collection. While a generation ago, one would have been tempted to see Lutherans identified with Germans (Bryan Hillis), or Presbyterians with Scots (Stuart MacDonald), the clean and clear assumptions of religion and ethnic stories were always more complicated than they seemed at first blush. This complexity held

too for Roman Catholics who were Anglophone and Allophone (Mark McGowan). Tensions between ethnic churches and the parent body, and intergenerational dilemmas facing all ethnic (and religious) groups are highlighted in most chapters, adding again to the sense of cohesion throughout the volume.

Book-ending the various chapters are two essays by Bramadat and Seljak — short, concise overviews of what they see as the interface between Christianity and ethnicity and where they see the future of Christianity in Canada heading. The book is neither overly pessimistic, nor overly optimistic. There are reasons to both mourn and celebrate what has been and what *is*. Interwoven through the discourse (and I might add politics) of loss, there are many strands of renewal, of adaptation and dramatic change. They argue that Canada must find new pillars on which to rest its institutions and values, surely a massive endeavour and one perhaps which their next edited collection will help to uncover and document!

In sum, Bramadat and Seljak have provided a careful blend of theoretical insights, empirical observations, and personal accounts of the changing religious landscape from a productive group of Canadian scholars of religion. The analysis neither blurs the real differences between the religious traditions that are highlighted nor does it exaggerate the influence of the vexing questions and dilemmas facing many Christian churches within contemporary Canada. Its strength lies in its breadth, its nuanced discussion, and its elegant prose.

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