
Christian Churches and Their Peoples, 1840-1965: A Social History of Religion in Canada is the ninth volume in the Themes in Canadian History series. The purpose of the series is to bring key themes in Canadian social history to a non-specialist audience in a short volume. The addition of religion to this series is quite welcome, and historians Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau are certainly two of the most appropriate scholars to produce such a book.

With Christian Churches and Their Peoples, Christie and Gauvreau present “the religious understanding and experience of ordinary people,”(3) while acknowledging that “much of the way […] people experienced religion occurred outside the institutional church”(4). The authors position themselves in opposition to the common argument that secularization and modernization happened simultaneously and conclude that the 125 years covered by this study was not a period of significant religious decline, but rather “one in which the fit between church and its clergy and religion and the people was always uneasy, ambiguous, and fraught with tension” (200). The themes of tension between the clergy and the laity, the public and private influence of the church, and continuity and change, are highlighted throughout the book as it progresses chronologically unraveling both key historical points and relevant historiographical discussions.

Christian Churches and Their Peoples is organized in a generally chronological fashion, beginning with early colonial society and ending in the mid-1960s. A chapter on missions in Western Canada throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appears in the middle. The major transitions in theological discourse in each period are explored. The important shift from evangelical revivalism in the mid-nineteenth century to a social Christianity by the turn of the century is highlighted primarily through an overview of
Methodism in Canada leading up to the formation of the United Church of Canada. The relationship between the church and the state is also a key theme, and parallels are made between the Roman Catholic leadership in Quebec and Protestant clergy in English-Canada, both of whom led the way for the Canadian welfare state. The book concludes by discussing the role of the United Church in the post-war period, exploring the increasing gap between conservatives within that denomination and its more progressive members.

The most insightful section of _Christian Churches and Their Peoples_ is Chapter Three, a discussion of missions in Western Canada from the mid-nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. Christie and Gauvreau delve into the important issues of colonization without minimizing the experiences and agency of either the Christian missionaries or Indigenous people. They also soundly present the various scholarly approaches that exist on the Canadian colonization process and highlight the oppressive consequences of the relationship between the state and the churches in many colonial, and missionary, projects.

This book is successful in unraveling many of the complex issues of spirituality, theology, and colonization in a concise and coherent way. Christie and Gauvreau also demonstrate the significance of Sunday schools, youth groups, voluntary organizations, and non-bureaucratic sects (such as the Salvation Army), as well as reveal how religious understandings intersected with discourses of masculinity, immigration, ethnicity, youth, and class. These connections raise a number of original questions surrounding religion in Canada that will likely raise interest in young scholars, many of whom will appreciate the extensive bibliography included in this volume.

The greatest disappointment of this important study is the absence of any African-Canadian churches. Denominations such as the British Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church have particular significance in the religious development of Ontario and the Maritimes. Furthermore, the extent to which African-Canadians were integrated, and often segregated, within mainline Protestant and Roman
Catholic churches is also missing entirely from the discussion. While the authors admit that they give less space to “sectarian Protestant immigrant religious traditions” (7), a brief look at how the less mainstream sects, including Mormons, Quakers, and Mennonites, interacted with more prominent church influences would also have been insightful. At times the group of “ordinary people” whose experiences make up this study seems quite narrow.

With Christian Churches and Their Peoples, Christie and Gauvreau deliver a readable, concise social history of religion in Canada, a study that is long overdue. This book will be of great value to scholars in related fields of Canadian social history as well as in religious studies more generally.

Patricia Kmiec
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
p.kmiec@utoronto.ca