

Teaching Canadian Religion: Some Questions of Approach

JOHN WEBSTER GRANT

Just before the meetings in Charlottetown last year, after a glass or two of wine in a roadhouse near the campus, I made some very incisive comments about the ethical responsibilities involved in teaching religious history and especially Canadian religious history. I must have done so, for otherwise why would Maureen Korp have asked me to share some of them with you this morning? Unfortunately I cannot recall a word I said on that occasion, but rather than leave a gap in the program I will at least suggest a few tensions, ambiguities and perhaps even ethical questions of which I have become aware in the course of my teaching career.

Over a number of years of teaching history, and especially Canadian religious history, I gradually became aware that I was trying to do two things at once. On the one hand, and with the greater gusto, I wanted students to have the experience of doing history, which is essentially research. To that end I assigned essay topics and directed students to archival collections. On the other hand, I was forced to recognize that most students have no ambition to be historians and treated the assignments I handed out as so much busy work. What they wanted – or were pressed by advisors to seek – from my courses was some understanding of how we got from there to here. I have no regrets about my sometimes fanatical efforts to push students toward primary sources which in some cases resulted in very fruitful encounters with a lived past, but I have also come to recognize the legitimacy of the demand for guidance about meaning.

In fact, like all of us, I have devoted most of my efforts throughout

Historical Papers 1993: Canadian Society of Church History

my teaching career to relaying history and thus introducing students to it at second hand. But perhaps my greater love for the investigative aspect has led me – again, I suspect, like most of us – to think it my duty to shake up students by breaking down their entrenched preconceptions. How better to start students thinking for themselves, after all, than by casting doubt on what they had always taken for granted? After a while – too long, I am sure – I began to realize that most students do not have ingrained preconceptions about history, or even about the basics of Canadian folklore. I discovered this most dramatically when I passed on what Hereward Senior assured me as a true story. After William of Orange defeated James II at the Battle of the Boyne, the news was relayed as quickly as possible to Rome. When the Pope received it, he ordered the bells of the city pealed in celebration of a glorious victory. In terms of the politics of the time this made sense. James II was a protege of Louis XIV, who was busy whittling away papal prerogatives in France, while William was co-ordinating an opposing coalition of which the papacy was a part. What reversal of Protestant expectations, I thought, but when I told the story to a class of United Church theologs it was received without a flicker of surprise.

Gradually it penetrated my thick skull that what I told my classes, for me often revisionism, was for them the received view of history. William and the Pope were allies – why not? – and down this went in their notes. Having written far too much Canadian religious history, I have had the same experience from my writings. Again and again I have wondered where younger writers could have picked up such ridiculous ideas, and when I checked the footnote there it was – John Webster Grant. In such cases, of course, some future historian will set the record straight, but my words will still be in cold print to mislead hapless students into repeating them. Probably nothing has troubled my historical conscience so much. If there is a lesson, it is probably that we need to be especially careful to point out to students that historical events can be approached from more than one angle. I do not mean by this to suggest acceptance of historical relativism, as if each historian could bend events to his or her taste. I am still convinced that every historical question has a single answer, though we may not be able to discover it. What I have in mind is that each generation, each group, and each person will approach history with different questions, and different questions will naturally call forth different answers.

Looking back over my teaching career, I think that the major

challenge has been in responding to widening ripples of plurality. From the beginning I have always tried to be fair to other traditions, sometimes to the point of scandalizing denominationally conditioned students. In retrospect, however, I have come to realize that unconsciously I assumed a pattern of Christian history in which the central thread ran from the apostolic church to the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925. My first acute awareness of other possible patterns came during a year in India when in preparing a lecture on the Council of Chalcedon I suddenly realized that my class contained both Monophysite and Nestorian students. This was a good preparation for moving into an ecumenical consortium where I was answerable to students of various traditions. Others have faced a similar challenge as the focus of religious studies has moved from the seminary into the secular university. For me, however, this shift was comparatively painless compared with the mental adjustments required – though perhaps not always successfully carried out – by the increasing enrolment of women, Koreans and older students of various backgrounds, as well as by increased awareness of other world religions, native spirituality, newer religious movements, popular religiosity and secular equivalents of religion. Here the problem was one not merely of coping with the unfamiliar but of keeping up with perceptions and demands that seemed to change almost from day to day.

I cannot claim ever to have dealt adequately with such concerns, which were raised with great urgency only in the later years of my teaching career. I am not happy with a response typical of too much Canadian multiculturalism: “All have won, and all must have prizes.” All must be seen to win, at any rate, except MWASPs (male white Anglo-Saxon Protestants), although in recent years male white Irish Catholics (we might call them MICs) have also become fair game. Honesty in critical judgement, after all, is of the essence of history. Neither can I accept the suggestion that in order to avoid cultural appropriation we must leave the study of other groups to their own members. For one thing, limitations of personnel make it impractical; I claim no great expertise on native religion, but I was aware that unless I said something about it the topic was likely to be neglected. Again, many of the most valuable historical insights are accessible only through comparisons, indeed the whole of history consists of the study of interactions. In any case, sticking to my own tribe would have been contrary to the whole philosophy of the historical department of Toronto School of Theology, which deliberately trusts its members to deal

fairly with one another's history.

But perhaps that last remark gets at the nub of the problem. Christian denominations now generally trust one another to estimate them fairly, but increasingly we are finding out that other groups have reason not to trust us in this way. I do not pretend to have a global solution. Certainly part of it must be to provide a broader mix of teachers, but this does not relieve individual teachers of responsibility for fair play. All I can offer is the importance of trying to enter as imaginatively as possible into the perspectives of others, so that the negative judgements we must sometimes offer do not come across simply as criticisms from the outside. Of course this empathy is possible only within limits. Still, I recall with some satisfaction an occasion when a Roman Catholic student told me after a lecture that this was the first time in his theological course that he had heard someone put in a good word for the Pope. In fact this had been a lecture on the Renaissance popes, and I had not tried to defend them. What I had done was to try to put myself in the place of a pope of the period who had some desire for reform and to indicate some of the difficulties he would face and some of the compromises he would be likely to make in seeking to overcome them.

Finally, there is the basic question, How can I justify having spent most of my adult years teaching history and especially Canadian religious history? On this question I spent most of my career in a tug-of-war with students – generally, you must remember, theological students. With my Collingwoodian principles I wanted to help them see how everyone from the Renaissance popes to John Strachan made sense of their actions to themselves. For the most part they wanted to pass moral judgements on historical actors and events: to argue about who was right or how things ought to have come out. Nor was I greatly cheered when with unabashed whiggery a kind colleague would insist that church history really is useful because it teaches many practical lessons, for almost invariably the lessons we draw from history are shaped by the values we bring to it.

So what is the real justification for teaching history? I still think that there is real value for students in acquiring something of a historical sense, and despite myself I must admit that there is some practical wisdom to be gained from history. Increasingly over the years, however, I have found myself most comfortable in justifying my way of earning a living simply by insisting that communities as much as individuals live in large measure out of memory. No individual would willingly face the prospect of suf-

fering from amnesia, although there are some things we might wish to forget, and by the same token an amnesiac community or institution is seriously depersonalized. Similarly, ignoring the history of other communities is equivalent to expunging their heritage from our consciousness. Perhaps in coming to this position I have unconsciously been absorbing the post-modern spirit with its emphasis on story. In any case, I offer it not as the whole truth but at least as a significant part of the truth.

