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BOOK REVIEW

Gordon Heath and Paul R. Wilson, eds. *Baptists and Public Life in Canada*. Canadian Baptist Historical Society Study Series 1. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012. x + 400 pp. Pbk. ISBN 13: 978-1-60899-681-0.

In his 2012 Kuyper Lecture, “A Public Faith: A Christian Alternative to Secular and Religious Political Exclusivism,” Yale theologian Miroslav Volf draws attention to the religious exclusivism of Roger Williams, founder of the first Baptist church in North America, and strong critic of the efforts of early Puritans to erect a “city upon a hill” where the state enforced God’s law and where punishment of heresy was death. Volf notes that though religious exclusivists often prevented those with different beliefs from participating in the public sphere, other exclusivists such as Rogers actually came up with the idea of pluralism as a political project. His comment underscores the importance of examining the historical legacy of Baptists within the public sphere. In *Baptists and Public Life in Canada*, editors Gordon Heath and Paul R. Wilson offer an important and ground-breaking collection of ten essays devoted to aspects of the Canadian experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely in central Canada.

As is apparent in this collection, there is no lack of evidence that Baptists were indeed active in Canadian public life. What is even more interesting to this reviewer is that, despite their comparatively small numbers, the roles they assumed seem to fall unselfconsciously in step with the efforts of the larger mainline Protestant denominations. Unlike Roger Williams, most Baptists appear to have had little hesitation in contributing to a Protestant Dominion of Canada, this country’s nineteenth-century “city upon a hill,” and its later version “the kingdom of God,” or as

Tommy Douglas phrased the project, “to transform our city into the Holy City—to make this land in reality ‘God’s own country’” (p. 161).

Most of the Baptist presence in public life, like that of the other mainline Protestant denominations, can be classified as efforts at reform. In her examination of Grimsby school superintendent Jonathan Woolverton, Sharon M. Bowler describes a well-educated Baptist whose efforts to shape mid-nineteenth-century education in Upper Canada/Canada West in the face of Anglican claims to exclusivity were based on the same ideal of non-sectarian Christianity as that of Egerton Ryerson, with whom he frequently corresponded. Readers may further note that UNB professor Wilfred Currier Kierstead’s positive approach to modernity informed by personalist philosophy, carefully and persuasively described by Daniel Goodwin, was not unlike that of earlier liberal evangelical educators such as Methodist Nathanael Burwash and Presbyterian George Grant, or his own Presbyterian contemporary, Robert Falconer. And while no one would dispute the uniqueness of Tommy Douglas, Sandra Beard-sall offers a compelling analysis of an “evangelizing politician” who saw a real connection between his Baptist formation and his commitment to working for a more just Canadian society. Nor did Baptists fall outside the Protestant mainstream in their nationalistic attitude to war, as is evident in James Robertson’s examination of the Baptist press response to the Fenian raids of 1866, and in Gordon Heath’s analysis of the 1885 Riel rebellion. Not only did the Baptist press align itself with its fellow Protestant newspapers, but more surprisingly, in the Maritimes, Heath observes, it was actually more jingoistic than its central Canadian counterpart. Paul Wilson’s excellent article on poor relief by Toronto middle class Baptists in the years 1834–1918 describes a shift familiar to students of Canadian religious and social history from moral reform to social service in which Baptists often co-operated with mainline Protestants in various enterprises. A final example of shared concerns with the mainstream is Robert Smale’s account of Baptist nativist attitudes to eastern European immigrants.

There are, however exceptions to Baptists reflecting main-

stream cultural values, and as one would expect, among these is T. T. Shields. While much is known of Shields the pugnacious defender of Baptist fundamentals, Doug Adams opens new ground by examining Shields's vitriolic battles with Ontario Liberal Premier Mitch Hepburn about the latter's accommodation of the alcohol industry and separate school funding, and with Prime Minister Mackenzie King on his hesitancy in bringing in conscription. In his balanced assessment, Adams concludes that though the anti-Roman Catholicism motivating Shields in these battles was not unique, his excessive paranoia and blindness to political and social realities undermined his influence in public life. In a different account of Baptists resisting the dominant culture, Mark Steinacher analyzes the significant non-Baptist enrollment of McMaster University in the years 1890–1929, arguing that the institution was seen as a Christian alternative to the secularization of mainline Protestant universities. However in his at times speculative search for explanation, he fails to take into account the considerable scholarship attesting to the Christian character of these universities during the period under examination. Finally, and in arguably one of the most solid essays, Donald Goertz examines the contribution of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec in 1919–1920 to the Forward Movement, whose intent was to develop the larger Canadian church's mission to reform public life. While initially Baptists embraced the Movement's emphasis on both individual spiritual renewal and a social evangelism that engaged public life, they quietly dropped the latter in favor of the much more popular accompanying project of fundraising for foreign missions. Here, in eschewing a social for an individual gospel, Baptists did appear to be out of step with mainline Protestants.

This brings up a major problem with the collection. There are other more minor criticisms, such as the need for a stronger editorial hand in refining the structure and the length of a few of the essays, but of greater concern is the absence of an informative introduction to what constituted Baptist beliefs and practices in the periods under examination. In today's secular environment one cannot assume that readers know what differentiates a Baptist from other Protestants. This omission undermines

the potential impact of a collection dedicated entirely to the role of one denomination in Canadian public life. The decision whether or not to make a link between distinctive Baptist belief and public action seems to have been left to the discretion of the individual writers, and it is only on p. 355 that one of the authors (Robert Smale) gives the reader a comprehensive survey of Baptist distinctives (though surprisingly omitting believer's baptism). Unfortunately he does not proceed to clarify to what extent if any these distinguished the denomination's attitudes to immigrants from those of other evangelicals, nor for that matter, if there was a Baptist influence on the thought of his final subject, Watson Kirkconnell, "the prophet of Canadian multiculturalism."

In conclusion, this collection leaves no doubt that there were indeed Baptists who were active in public life in Canada, but it is less helpful in informing us to what extent their contribution was distinctive. The editors do note in their introduction that the collection "makes no claim to be the definitive study of its subject. But it is a beginning . . ." (p. 7). It is indeed a promising beginning, but one hopes that the conversation will continue.

Marguerite Van Die, Professor Emerita of History and Religion
Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario