

***Christian Modernism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Protestant Churches of Canada***

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Christianity within Canada during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was characterized by evangelism at home and abroad, family Bible studies, consistent church attendance, and biblical literalism. The Christian faith and the Protestant churches were integral to the lives of the ideal Canadian citizen. Christianity's dominant position in Canadian society was disrupted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the advent of Christian modernism, a fundamental part of the sweeping secularization of the faith that was taking place throughout the Western world. Protestant churches were becoming increasingly interested in engaging with the modern world through an attempt not only to appeal to the general public but also to the clergymen who were tasked with spreading the gospel. The writings of church officials and theologians such as George Coulson Workman, John Campbell, Daniel James Macdonnell, and the contributors to the volume *Essays and Reviews* demonstrated the reluctance of many religious leaders to continue to accept doctrines that they viewed as immoral or inapplicable to progressive Western society. These writings were part of a growing literary genre marked by biblical criticism. Contemporaneously, an intellectual revolution that challenged some of the central tenets of Christianity had begun. Publications such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* presented Christians with scientific evidence that challenged the supernatural and pseudo-scientific elements of their beliefs. The influences of biblical criticism and modern science on the Christian faith marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Canada as a period of substantial theological development with a growing emphasis on social justice rather than traditional religious doctrine.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity had been inextricably linked to all disciplines – particularly the sciences. Natural history, the study of nature through the examination,

description, and classification of flora and fauna, was a field of study that, within the Christian worldview, revealed the exhaustive relationship between the observable world and the Christian Creator. Natural historians were intent on demonstrating God's divine providence by cataloging the 'physical manifestations' of His glory. In December of 1831, the natural historian Charles Darwin was employed on the HMS Beagle to document and collect geological and organic specimens. It was during this voyage that he began to speculate on the mutation of organisms into several new, distinct species. His publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 proposed a comprehensive theory of evolution by natural selection which challenged the established Christian belief of God's providence and the preconceived notion of the harmony of nature. The Canadian historian and journalist Goldwin Smith stated that "natural selection by a struggle for existence, ... with the painful extinction of the weaker members of the race, and even of whole races, is hardly the course which benevolence ... would be expected to take."<sup>1</sup> Some scholars were not compelled by Darwin's theory and criticized his disregard for the Baconian inductive method, and pointed out the significant gaps within his genealogies.<sup>2</sup> However, to most theologians as well as the general public, Darwin's erasure of God from the story of creation posed a significant threat to their belief in the omnipresent and living God of the Old and New Testaments.

During the nineteenth century, Canada had become an "object of attention" within the field of natural history due to its plethora of unexplored territory.<sup>3</sup> Both international scholars such as Philip Henry Gosse and James Hector, as well as Canadian settlers such as Catharine Parr Traill and John Macoun, contributed significantly to the taxonomy of wildlife and plant life throughout

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<sup>1</sup> Goldwin Smith, *Guesses at the Riddle of Existence* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1897), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Henry Gosse, *The Canadian Naturalist: A Series of Conversations on the Natural History of Lower Canada* (London: J. van Voorst, 2018), vii.

Canada. One of the foremost proponents of natural history within Canada was the geologist and principal of McGill University, Sir John William Dawson. Within the posthumously published collection of his work, *Fifty Years of Work in Canada, Scientific and Educational*, he wrote that “in so far as I have had any success as a teacher of Natural Science, it has been due to my reverend regard for every natural object, as the handiwork of the Divine Creator”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is unsurprising that Dawson was a leading critic of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Through a series of publications, Dawson argued that the theory of evolution was “scarcely distinguishable” from materialism and that its pursuit would lead to a “depth of unscientific and unspiritual degeneration”.<sup>5</sup> Other contemporary Canadian scholars were more accepting of Darwin’s theory and attempted to reconcile it with the fundamental aspects of Christian doctrine. Daniel Wilson, a professor of history and English at the University of Toronto, proposed to accept the theory of evolution with the caveat that humans should be differentiated from beasts because of the existence of the immaterial human soul.<sup>6</sup> Despite such endeavors to preserve the Christian beliefs of the Canadian majority in the face of Darwinian evolution, the subsequent rise of biblical criticism would establish the nineteenth century as a period of significant religious crisis.

The application of rational thought to biblical teaching was founded in the rational supernaturalism of the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Proponents of this view purported that the Bible should be read from a rational and non-literal perspective, however, an exception should be made for the miracles and supernatural aspects of doctrine that superseded human understanding. The popularity of this rational approach to the Christian faith was

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<sup>4</sup> John William Dawson, *Fifty Years of Work in Canada, Scientific and Educational*, ed. Rankine Dawson (London: Ballantyne, Hanson and Company, 1901), viii.

<sup>5</sup> John William Dawson, *Modern Ideas of Evolution as Related to Revelation and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10-12.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wilson, *Caliban: The Missing Link* (London: Macmillan and co., 1873), 94.

<sup>7</sup> Terrence Murphy and Roberto Perin, *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122.

contemporaneous with the establishment of the Protestant churches in Canada and thus had a significant impact on their development.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Canada, fundamentally questioning the authority of Christian doctrine or expressing atheistic attitudes was often met with social ostracization. However, by the 1860s, religious skepticism was beginning to be publicly displayed throughout the Western world.<sup>9</sup> This was best evidenced by the publication of the volume *Essays and Reviews*, a compilation of seven works written predominantly by clergymen of the Anglican Church. In their essays, the authors disputed several of the central elements of Christianity such as the creation story, the predictive nature of the Old Testament, and the divine inspiration of the Bible. This publication aimed to summarize the criticisms of German theologians such as David Friedrich Strauss, and in doing so candidly introduced the field of biblical criticism to British North America.

Biblical criticism, a method of interpreting the Bible through the employment of historical and textual analysis, was a popular topic of discussion within Canadian society by the 1870s.<sup>10</sup> Canadian theologians and church officials began to write books, newspaper articles, and journals questioning some of the controversial doctrines of Christianity which appeared unconscionable and inconsistent with modern Canadian society. The growing disbelief in biblical canon such as the existence of eternal damnation, the fallen state of man, and the providence and benevolence of God led to several heresy trials within the Protestant churches of Canada. One such case was the 1875 trial of Daniel James Macdonnell, a Presbyterian minister. During his theological studies, Macdonnell spent three years in Scotland and Germany where he was exposed to the critical

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<sup>8</sup> Murphy, *A Concise History of Christianity in Canada*, 122.

<sup>9</sup> David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 46.

<sup>10</sup> Cook, *The Regenerators*, 17.

approach to biblical study fostered by Christian liberalism.<sup>11</sup> At Glasgow University, professors such as Dr. John Caird and Dr. Robert Lee “compelled [Macdonnell] to review many of the positions which he had been trained to consider fixed.”<sup>12</sup> His experiences abroad prompted him to earnestly pursue biblical truth, and ultimately Macdonnell became uncertain of several key aspects of the Christian faith.

One such uncertainty concerned the standard truths outlined in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Macdonnell asserted that requiring clergymen to uphold such a confession would “do more harm than good” because it would “torment conscientious men.”<sup>13</sup> Despite his apprehension, Macdonnell was ordained in June of 1866 and subsequently moved to Canada to join the Presbytery of Toronto. Macdonnell’s conflict with the confession of faith and his liberal persuasion culminated in a sermon in 1875 on Romans 5:12-21. Within this sermon, he discussed the issue of the “eternity of future punishment” and stated that he had come to no certain conclusion on the subject.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he asserted that he found it difficult to reconcile the issue of eternal punishment as well as other biblical events with “the character of God as revealed in Scripture.”<sup>15</sup> The sermon was published in a number of newspapers, leading to a scandal within the Canadian Presbytery and ultimately an extensive case heard by the General Assembly. Macdonnell’s heresy trial was resolved by his acknowledgment of the authority of the Westminster Confession, and he was allowed to maintain his position within the church. This resolution carried significance as it set a precedent for the Presbyterian church’s willingness to accommodate a measure of liberal thought and theological uncertainty among its clergy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James Frederick McCurdy, *Life and Work of D.J. Macdonnell, Minister of St. Andrew's Church, Toronto* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1897), 23-4.

<sup>12</sup> McCurdy, *Life and Work of D.J. Macdonnell*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> McCurdy, *Life and Work of D.J. Macdonnell*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> McCurdy, *Life and Work of D.J. Macdonnell*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> McCurdy, *Life and Work of D.J. Macdonnell*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 45.

The theological controversy exhibited by the trial of Daniel James Macdonnell was emblematic of a rise in biblical criticism throughout Canada. George Monro Grant, the principal of Queen's University from 1877 to 1902, opposed the biblical literalism of the century prior and appeared "remarkably tolerant" of non-Christian religions in his publication *The Religions of the World*.<sup>17</sup> Another prominent Canadian modernist, the Reverend John Campbell, was charged with heresy in 1893 for asserting that the Bible was not infallible and the Old Testament in particular abounded with errors.<sup>18</sup> The biblical critic George Coulson Workman, a professor at the methodist-founded Victoria College, was dismissed from his position because of a lecture he held in 1890 on 'Messianic prophecy' that argued for a "scientific investigation of Prophetic scriptures".<sup>19</sup> Later, Workman asserted in an address made at the Provincial Sabbath School Convention entitled *How to Study the Bible* that the books of the Bible could only be properly understood through a preliminary analysis of the historical context of the writing and the motivations of its author.<sup>20</sup>

The biblical criticisms espoused by prominent Canadian modernists combined with the scientific developments prompted by Darwin were of major concern to the Canadian Methodist clergyman, E.H. Dewart. As editor of the *Christian Guardian*, Dewart published editorials that divulged his firm convictions regarding the secularization of society and the "relentless criticism of all that has been received from the past".<sup>21</sup> He argued that all Christians should be able to properly defend their faith with a strong knowledge of biblical truth and dogma and that this could be achieved through a less extreme degree of historical and intellectual inquiry than the foremost theologians had been undertaking. Dewart argued that Christian dogmas were not fixed verities

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<sup>17</sup> Cook, *The Regenerators*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Cook, *The Regenerators*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> George Coulson Workman, *How to Study the Bible: An Address for Teachers and Students* (Ottawa: W. Briggs, 1902), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Hartley Dewart, *The Development of Doctrine* (Toronto: Methodist Conference Printing Office, 1879), 6.

uninfluenced by the progression of science and human understanding and that Christian doctrine was progressively developing. In his work *The Development of Doctrine*, Dewart posited that “as the Church grows in knowledge and experience, she may grasp more complete conceptions of the great truths which God has revealed in His Word, and Works, and embody these juster views in her teaching and subordinate standards.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Dewart argued that the Christian faith could be reconciled to modern science through what appeared to be its downfall – Darwin’s theory of evolution. Dewart asserted that the evolution of organisms was a “Divine operation” that was evident within scripture. The developments between the Old and New Testaments demonstrated the existence of a “progressive revelation” which allowed for contemporaries of Christ to better understand the doctrines espoused prior to His coming.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Dewart argued that doctrinal development was intended to continue into the present age through the dispensation of the Holy Spirit among all saved men.<sup>24</sup>

Dewart's proposed theory of theological evolution not only addressed the challenges posed by modern science but also effectively resolved the moral dilemmas faced by Christian modernists. The collective intellectual development of humankind combined with the instructive guidance provided by the Holy Spirit allowed modern man to confidently assess and disregard elements of Christian doctrine that were determined to be inapplicable to contemporary society. By the end of the nineteenth century, the public rejection of dogma was no longer a heretical offense, and the Canadian Christian public had become receptive to the developments of liberal theology. One of the most significant dogmas that was examined and slighted under Dewart’s proposal of theological evolution during this period was the divine and transcendent nature of Christ. Christian

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<sup>22</sup> Dewart, *The Development of Doctrine*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Dewart, *The Development of Doctrine*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Dewart, *The Development of Doctrine*, 17.

modernists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had begun to lean towards a perception of Christ that presented him as a historical figure rather than the Son of God. He was regarded as a pillar of social reform whose disposition and teachings should be imitated by modern Canadians.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Protestant churches of Canada had taken on a radical humanitarian disposition. Emphasis was placed on becoming more Christ-like through the advent of the social gospel, a movement that sought to enact social reform based on Christian moral ideals. The social gospel was predicated on the idea that the necessity for miracles and divine intervention to advance mankind's connection to God had ceased and that the Kingdom of God could be established on earth through philanthropic proselytism. John Watson, the head of the Department of Philosophy at Queen's University, wrote in the *Knox College Monthly* that "Christianity does not conceive of the future world as different from this, but as the present world in its ideal aspect ... Christianity is above all things a religion of this world ... It is nothing if it is not social."<sup>25</sup> Advocates of the social gospel largely disregarded the dogmatic elements of the Christian religion in favor of a progressive application of the teachings of Christ to social issues brought about by the rapid urbanization of Canada such as poverty, disease, and environmental issues.

The intellectual revolution of the mid-nineteenth century was spurred in part by Darwin's publication of his evolutionary theory. Such scientific developments challenged the prevailing literal interpretation of the biblical events of the Old Testament and threatened many of the fundamental tenets of Christian doctrine. Concurrently, the field of biblical criticism that had been developing on the European continent began to be adopted by Canadian church officials and

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<sup>25</sup> Cook, *The Regenerators*, 24.

theologians such as Daniel James Macdonnell, George Coulson Workman, and John Campbell. These figures questioned the morality and relevancy of several aspects of Protestant dogma in their extensive publications. The application of biblical criticism and modern science to Christian theology comprised the Christian modernist movement of the late nineteenth century. Christian modernism was initially rejected by the majority of Canadian religious authorities and a series of heresy trials were held by the Protestant churches of Canada. However, as the modernist movement spread throughout North America and prominent figures began to deliberate it in newspapers, journals, and books, the Canadian public became increasingly receptive to the application of reason and analysis to religious dogma. In particular, the writings of E. H. Dewart helped to reconcile the issues posed by both Christian modernists and modern science with the Christian faith. Dewart's notion of the development of doctrine was essential to the escalation of Christian modernism throughout the remainder of the century and its evolution into the social gospel movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. The social gospel was the ultimate culmination of liberal theology during this period. Its proponents disregarded the theological debates of the earlier century in favor of a "practical application of Christ's teachings" by helping the poor and destitute Canadians who were residing in crowded slums with inadequate living conditions.<sup>26</sup> The social reformism of the early twentieth century and pervasive abandonment of dogmatic theology was a result of the religious crisis prompted by the proliferation of Christian modernism.

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<sup>26</sup> Cook, *The Regenerators*, 24.

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