

The Road Ahead for Renewal

By Paul Miller

The Study of the Past

Everybody knows that history is the study of the past. But why do we study the past? It is more than mere curiosity or antiquarianism. The reason we investigate what happened yesterday (or a thousand years ago) is because we hope that it will yield up lessons and patterns that can shed light on the predicaments and possibilities of today and tomorrow. Through history we can gain perspective on where we have come from so we can better figure out where we are going.

Historical awareness is retrospective. History's lessons only become visible as we look back from the vantage point of the passage of time. We need the perspective of distance in order to appreciate the significance of the past. But that significance is never completely beyond dispute or controversy. People disagree widely on the meaning of history, which is why there are so many conflicting interpretations of historical events.

People say history repeats itself but that's only partly true. It's true in the sense that we can see patterns that allow us to draw analogies between what happened in the past and what's happening now. We know that every ten or fifteen years, the stock market falls suddenly after a period of sustained growth. That means we shouldn't be surprised when it happens (although we almost always are). But if it really were true that history repeats itself, we should be a lot better at predicting accurately what is going to happen. Mark Twain wrote that history may not repeat itself – "but it does rhyme." Events are unique, but they have similarities that instruct us. As we reflect on the path we have taken, it can help to illuminate the path ahead – not perfectly, because we still have to journey by faith, but enough to be helpful.

We are often puzzled and perplexed by what is happening around us because we do not grasp what it means to think historically. Either we expect too little of the past and ignore its lessons; or too much, and are surprised when things do not happen the way they happened before. I would like to reflect on these thoughts as they apply to Canadian Christianity, especially to the United Church of Canada. Canadian churches have been shaken to their foundations in what seems like a very short time and church people are bewildered. How did things change so fast? And what, if anything, can we do about it?

Atheism and Theism: A Case Study in Historical Dialectic

Recently, I read a book that shed some light for me on these questions. At the *Origins of Modern Atheism*, by the Jesuit scholar Michael J. Buckley,¹ explains the remarkable rise of modern atheism. Religious people today tend to be puzzled by the aggressiveness and fanaticism of contemporary atheists. Every new book on the evils of religion seems to be more strident and mean-spirited than the last. The atheist triumvirate of Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris, and their imitators, argue that religion in all its forms "poisons everything." It is one huge nasty mistake, the source of everything wrong with the world, the pestilential relic from a superstitious past. Taking their cue from Freud, they judge religion to be a form of mental delusion. The world will be a much better place when religion has finally been banished. Public opinion polls show that the atheists may be gaining ground. The only "religious" group that is really growing in our culture are those who have "no religion."

This is an historical anomaly. The vast majority of human beings who have ever lived have been religious. So, where did atheism come from? The usual answer is "modern science" – especially Darwin. Science teaches that what is real is what is measurable. And you can't measure God. Science is about

what can be falsified, and you can't falsify God. If you could, you would destroy religion anyway; so "faith," they say, is nothing more than refusal to accept the evidence. How many young people have gone away to university only to find their faith damaged beyond repair by first year biology and psychology courses that "prove" there is no room for God anymore. A young woman from my church recently e-mailed me: "I can say that university has really taken a hit on my faith, not to say I don't believe, but Christianity gets a bad rap in many university settings." Modern culture is all about trying to explain things and successive scientific breakthroughs have undermined God as an explanatory hypothesis. Revolutionary advances in science, like Darwin's theory of natural selection, have seemingly removed any need of God to account for the way the world works. The result? Religion in the west has been in defensive retreat for four hundred years. In 1867, Matthew Arnold published "Dover Beach," a poem that seems at first to be about watching the waves of the sea wash up on the shore, but turns out to be about the demise of religious faith.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Faith once covered the earth like the ocean. Now, because of science, all that is left is a "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar." Not that we're any better for it. We find ourselves, Arnold writes, "on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/Where ignorant armies clash by night." But what can we do? As they say on CSI, you can't argue with science.

But atheism is not new Buckley points out. People have long accused one another of "atheism," but that did not mean a denial of God per se, but a denial of *my* God. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* records that St. Polycarp, the 86 year old bishop of Smyrna in the second century, was commanded on pain of death to recant his Christian faith, to "swear by the fortune of Caesar and cry 'Away with the atheists'" – meaning to recant his faith and denounce fellow Christians who would not bow down to the Roman gods. Polycarp is said to have turned to his accusers and bellowed at them, "Away with the atheists!", a thrilling act of courage that sealed his fate. Atheism is an old, old word, but modernity has put a new spin on it. It is based on the philosophical denial of the existence of God, which only became possible in modernity. So, how did this happen?

Buckley argues that modern atheism is not the result of the conflict between science and religion, as is often believed, but the exact opposite. Atheism, he says, emerged out of the enthusiastic embracing of science by religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Religion and science became almost fused in such a way that early modern belief in God actually created the conditions for the eventual denial of that God.

History, Buckley argues, tends to be dialectical in nature.² In other words, what drives it is the working-out of inner conflicts and contradictions. Theism and atheism are two poles that exist in dialectical tension.

An essential unity in intelligibility lies between atheism and theism, and if only the negative moment of this dipolarity receives attention, the problematic situation remains

undetermined. ...Atheism does not simply replace theism. The conflict between them is mortal because of their more general unity of meaning.³

Atheism is dependent on theism, is “parasitic on theism,” Buckley argues. Without theism, atheism would not have arisen.

At the Origins of Modern Atheism is a long and extremely complex book but Buckley’s argument can be grasped through his treatment of the work of Isaac Newton. Newton was a deeply religious man, but he posited a universe that works like a vast machine, according to laws of force and motion that are the same everywhere. God functions as the ultimate force and prime mover.⁴ “The [Newtonian] universe is a system, a unity composed of the sun, planets, and comets whose masses and motions are proportioned so carefully that they ‘could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.’”⁵

Newton believed that the complexity and harmony of the cosmos testified to the grandeur of God. However, Newton inadvertently made it possible to deny the existence of this God by reducing God to a force that could be inferred from the structure of the world. Newton’s God was eventually a “god of the gaps” and knowledge of this God was ironically dependent on the way the universe operates, not the other way around. Newton was never able to resolve certain irregularities in nature and he appealed to divine intervention to account for them. Newton believed, for example, that the planets and stars did not collapse in on themselves because a wise and providential God kept them all in place. But future advances in understanding came up with natural explanations for what Newton was not able to explain with the methods of the time, rendering God superfluous. For example, a century after Newton, the French mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon Laplace “established the dynamic stability of the Newtonian universe...a dynamic stability that needed no intervention from god to correct its mechanical errors.”⁶ Laplace’s conclusions were simply one episode in the much larger story of the steady incursion of scientific research into areas that were formerly thought to be God’s domain. Maybe the high point in this process (or low point, depending on your viewpoint) was Darwin’s claim that the emergence and evolution of life itself, attributed by Christians to the creative power of God, can be accounted for through purely natural processes without recourse to divine intervention.

The United Church: Growth and Decline

Buckley isn’t talking only about atheism but about the dialectical structure of historical events. And I think that his work provides an interesting lens through (which) to examine the history of the United Church of Canada. Just as theism and atheism appear to be diametrically opposed phenomena that are actually inextricably linked, so the burgeoning and self-assured United church of 1960 seems to have little in common with the beleaguered and bewildered church of 2010. But if Buckley’s analysis is sound, then maybe the explanation for the condition of the church today is to be found in the state of the church at an earlier time. Maybe the origins of the church’s present “failure” can be found in its past success.

One narrative of the United Church’s history goes something like this. The church was strong, healthy and growing, but somewhere along the way something “happened” and it became sick and declining. Some say it started in the early 1960’s with the New Curriculum. Some say it was the church’s preoccupation with human sexuality in the 1980’s, culminating in the decision of the General Council in 1988 to declare that sexual orientation would not be a barrier to ordination. All of these suggestions assume that the United Church got into trouble because it abandoned its core identity. But what if the problem is that core identity itself?

Let’s take 1965 as a symbolic year. The United Church was forty years old and seemed poised to go from strength to strength. New churches were opening across the country every month. Sunday schools were

bursting at the seams. Life was good. But, this very expansion and the values it expressed made the church vulnerable, because the United Church, like many mainline Protestant denominations, was based on the belief that its essential purpose was to attract as many people as possible, build as many churches as possible, and spread its influence as widely as possible through the mainstream of society. Church expression expressed the essence of the church's missional life during the postwar boom years.

It was easy to get on board with this vision because it was true. The United Church did have a wide influence. People did listen to its leaders. More and more people did join. It reflected the mainstream of Canadian culture. "Mainstream" was embedded in its DNA. According to John Webster Grant, the United church expressed "the evangelical liberal drive to sanctify Canadian society."⁷ Sometimes the United Church is portrayed as a radical and prophetic vanguard, but in my experience, this is not the church dominant characteristic. From its inception the mission of the United Church has been to exercise as broad a presence and influence within Canadian society as possible.

The Church union movement was born out of the idealistic conviction that denominational divisions were a scandal, an affront to Jesus' High Priestly prayer "that all may be one." But there was a practical, strategic side as well. A united church would be better positioned to evangelize a growing nation of immigrants. It was all part of the larger goal of "Christianizing" Canadian society – an almost universally accepted value in the first four decades of the United Church's existence, embraced by both traditionalists and progressives, evangelicals and social gospellers alike. This value propelled the powerful anti-gambling and temperance movements, as well as the church's ill-fated involvement in the Native residential schools. And it explains the success of the United Church in its first fifty years. *The goals of the church were congruent with the goals of society.* That is why the United Church grew. United Churches encouraged respectable family values and hard work. They promoted social reforms that have become iconic expressions of Canadian identity, such as universal health care and pensions. United Church members were good citizens of their community and country. Because the church essentially mirrored the core values of the society, the church was respected, visible and listened to.

There was a downside, however. Breadth always comes as the cost of depth. As number went higher, expectations of church membership went lower. If you are going to "draw the circle wide" enough to encompass anyone who wants to belong, you cannot make belonging too difficult. The 1960's may have been the time when churches were filling up, but they were filling up with people who had an increasingly tenuous knowledge of and loose commitment to Christian identity. We succeeded in growing the church, but forgot how to make disciples.

This may account for the related phenomenon of the ongoing relative strength of more conservative denominations. During the time when the United Church seemed to dominate the Protestant religious landscape, these churches were considerably more marginal and sectarian. But their expectations of doctrinal correctness and a counter-cultural lifestyle were higher. That means that their appeal was narrower, and, while they didn't expand as rapidly, but they haven't declined either. Sociologist Reg Bibby has pointed out that the so-called "evangelical" churches have not grown as a percentage of the population in almost a century and a half. In 1871, they represented 8 per cent of Canadians – the same percentage as today.⁸ Their apparent growth is the result of maintaining that percentage of a growing population, while the proportion of mainline Protestants has plummeted. The essential question is: How have they held onto that 8 per cent? Does it have something to do with a commitment to discipleship?

What has really characterized the United Church of Canada is its desire to occupy the cultural centre, which accounts for both its earlier success and its current decline. It is the constant that explains much of our history. The church did not change in this respect so much as the culture in which the church was situated changed. The United Church never gave up trying to appeal to the cultural mainstream, increasingly at odds with the church's inherited identity. The 1960's were famously a time of major

cultural upheaval. We became more cynical, more materialistic, more individualistic, morally more relativistic. Pierre Trudeau's oracular pronouncement that "The government has no business in the bedrooms of the nation" captured the spirit of the times; and the United Church marched in step with this spirit, believing that the way to appeal to the people was to show how closely the church's values mirrored their own. What the church did not bank on was that religion itself would become a casualty of consumer culture. In the vast smorgasbord of deinstitutionalized spiritual options that emerged in the 60s, fewer people had any appetite for what the church was serving up. The church that downplayed any serious conflict between its expectations and prevailing cultural norms ended up being the victim of its own success. The main problem that has plagued the United Church of Canada is the combination of a desire to be mainstream but an inability to find ways of speaking effectively to the mainstream of today.

The travail of the United Church of Canada is one brief moment in the much larger story of the decline of Christendom, in which the church occupied, or even defined, the cultural mainstream. For those who grew up in Christendom, the demise of the church as we know it seems like a catastrophe. But theologically, it may be what saves us. The church may have been in danger of gaining the whole world, but losing its soul. It was never intended that the church reflect the mainstream values of its culture. As John Howard Yoder has commented, "that the church is a minority is a theological, not a statistical, statement." Churches today are caught in the transitional moment in the dialectic of mission and discipleship. Mission and discipleship are not contradictory values, but they are often in tension. As the church exercises its mission to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, it often finds that the demands of discipleship are compromised. Is the Gospel about free grace lavished on the whole world, available to everyone without cost? Or is the Gospel about costly discipleship, the straight road and the narrow gate through which only a few may enter? The answer is that it is about both; but we don't like living in tension, so our instinct is to try to resolve it by emphasizing one over the other. But it is a tension that is not meant to be resolved but to be lived. When mission starts to overshadow discipleship, or discipleship mission, the church has to be renewed so that the balance can be restored. That's what the principle that the church is *semper reformanda* – "always in need of reform" – is about. The cultural success of a thousand years of Christian mission has brought us to the point where a renewed emphasis on discipleship is required. That is the challenge and the possibility of the present time.

Whither "Renewal?"

Which brings us to the "renewal" movement in the United Church. This movement exists through four organizations... The renewal movement's mission is to call the church back to its true theological and moral identity. I have long supported the renewal movement because it seemed to me to stand against the United Church's willingness to simply kowtow to contemporary mores, even at the cost of eviscerating the Gospel. However, it has become clear that the pathos of the church and the renewal groups are one and the same. The renewal movement finds itself in a steep decline that mirrors the decline of the church as a whole.

It is usually assumed that the renewal movement is at odds with the establishment of the church over matters of theology and doctrine. This is certainly true; but it is not the whole story. I have argued that the church's very "success" in its early decades – its ability to appeal to the broad mainstream – has become its Achilles heel today. Analogously, the fundamental problem of the renewal movement is not its opposition to the church's agenda but the extent to which it has allowed itself to be defined and controlled by that agenda. The main thrust of the renewal movement has always been the reform of denominational structures... But what if God's plan for the church is not that these structures be reformed by swept away? The form which the United Church has taken since 1925 is proving less and less capable of sustaining the church's life. By fixating primarily on the decisions of entrenched structure like General Council, the renewal groups have become sidetracked from strategies that might genuinely renew the church. Again,

the reason for this is not to be found in differences between the fundamental values of the church and the renewal movement but in their co-dependent similarity. Both are concerned to be culturally mainstream, but differ on how that goal should be accomplished. Is it by getting in step with evolving social values, or by defending the church's historic creeds and constituency?

Recently someone drew my attention to an article from the February, 1968 issue of the *United Church Observer* about the (then) fledgling United Church Renewal Fellowship. This article describes the UCRF as a conservative movement launched in protest over the New Curriculum, the United Church's cradle to grave Christian education program, which incorporated insights from historical biblical criticism into its lessons.⁹ The article characterizes the UCRF as a "rebellion against what the protesters call a drift to humanism and liberal theology" which "demand[ed] a return to 'sound biblical theology.'" But what is really fascinating is the fear expressed by the UCRF that the church would lose its share of the religious marketplace as people departed for more theologically conservative denominations. I don't say this critically or cynically. Important theological and religious principles were at stake. But the UCRF was a child of the United Church, and it shared with the establishment of the church the basic concern to shore up the church's historic place in society.

Later renewal groups followed the lead of the UCRF. Church Alive began in 1974 to be a voice for orthodox theology within the United Church. The Community of Concern famously emerged in the late 1980s in anger over the General Council's apparent indifference to the deluge of resolutions from congregations and Presbyteries opposing the proposal to ordain "self-declared" homosexuals. The National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations was established to provide encouragement and support to individual churches that saw themselves at odds with the decisions of the church. All the groups have portrayed themselves as the defenders of the "true" United Church and the path to the restoration of the church that once existed.

I want to be clear. I believe that the renewal movement has played a vital role in the United Church for four decades, not sufficiently appreciated by its critics. For one thing, these groups have provided a place and a voice for those dismayed with the direction the United Church has taken. According to the 1968 *Observer* article, the Evangelical United Brethren may never have entered into the church union in 1968 were it not for the existence of the UCRF. And, while scores of members, clergy and congregations broke away after 1988, the renewal groups were the only thing that kept many in the church. The renewal movement has been an alternative voice in a denomination whose commitment to diversity and "inclusivity" is often little more than lip service and from which conservative evangelicals have been systematically excluded. However, the renewal movement's obsession with reforming the church structurally has limited its effectiveness.

I have been part of many conversations in which it is alleged that something "happened" to a church that was once strong and proud, but has been hijacked by fools and blackguards. The renewal groups have seen it as their mandate to "hold the church's feet to the fire," and to demand accountability from the powers that be. But, accountable to what? The mantra of the renewal movement has been "the Twenty Articles of Faith of the Basis of Union." These conversations suggest that if the church would just adhere to its theological heritage, it would get back on track. But this analysis is too simplistic. As church historian John Webster Grant has argued, however, the doctrinal section of the Basis of Union was not particularly well thought out. The Articles of Faith were basically a unimaginative committee effort, cobbled together for reasons of expedience, and never intended to be the church's final word on theology. Furthermore, Grant wrote, the "failure to think [more] in terms of the whole Christian tradition has encouraged the United Church to look inward" and "there has been a tendency to regard the formularies of the United Church as self-contained."¹¹ I'm afraid that the renewal movement's constant appeal to "the Twenty Articles of Faith" has contributed to the same inward-looking attitude that is expressed in the

establishment's almost mystical reverence for a so-called "United Church ethos." The Twenty Articles of Faith have not generated any more missional growth than the establishment ethos has been able to achieve. In other words, the same blind spots and obsessions that have weakened the denomination as a whole have inhibited the renewal movement from sustaining long-term renewal.

Hindsight is 20/20 and it's always easy to say what might have been if we had done things differently. The renewal movement can recognize and honour the important role it has played in the church; but the time has come to own up to its decreasing relevance, because *the church that it seeks to renew no longer exists*. The United Church's ambition to encompass the mainstream of Canadian society has ironically pushed it from the centre to the margins, and perhaps institutional oblivion is not very far off. It has continued to try to move with the culture, but lacked the courage to fully relinquish its former status. The result has been that the culture no longer knows nor cares what the church does. Heroic resuscitation measures are past the point of effectiveness.

The renewal movement has striven to restore both the character and the image of the United Church. But it is doubtful that that church can be restored. In my opinion, the renewal movement should turn its attention to the more modest, but more fruitful task of encouraging communities of Christian disciples who can be a sign, witness and foretaste of God's kingdom in a post-Christian culture. This is happening, for example, in the UK, where evangelicals in the Church of England and the Methodist Church have been at the forefront of the "Fresh Expressions" movement, which has been initiating new and creative examples of Christian community in contexts where the established church has all but disappeared.^[12] This mission of Fresh Expressions is not to shore up the inherited church, but to direct the church's energies outward in mission to those not currently being reached. The kind of disciples required by the Kingdom today are not those who will occupy influential pulpits or to administer a coast-to-coast denomination. They are not those who stake out a particular position on the theological spectrum, whose categories themselves are largely the creation of modern consciousness. Instead, they will simply learn what it means to follow Jesus among a people who no longer recognize him. In a sense, it's more like living in New Testament times. Not exactly, because history only "rhymes"; but close.

I share the sorrow of many that much of the church that formed me as a Christian seems to have disappeared. The current state of the United Church, of which I have been a member my entire life, saddens me. But God's people have always been pushed to the margins. What they have discovered is that the margin and not the centre is where God is most often to be found. The renewal movement will have a future if it is able to speak into that situation and discern where God is active in a post-Christendom world. In the rhyming cadences of Christian history, the demise of inherited forms of church have been times of greatest spiritual reawakening and renewed vitality for mission. The challenge of the renewal movement is to see where this is happening and catch up to what God is doing, for the benefit of the whole church.

¹ Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

² Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 25.

³ Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 14.

⁴ Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

⁶ *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 324.

⁷ John Webster Grant, *The church in the Canadian Era*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 109.

⁸ Reginald Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada's Churches can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*, (Toronto: Novalis, 2004), 39.

⁹ In retrospect, the New Curriculum was a remarkable achievement in concentrating the church's resources in a single, national project, the like of which has not been seen since. In terms of denominational accomplishment, the New Curriculum probably marks the high point of the United Church of Canada.

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¹⁰ J. Berkeley Reynolds, "The hot new fight for the good old faith," *The Observer*, February 15, 1968, 12.

¹¹ John Webster Grant, "Blending Traditions: The United Church of Canada" in John Webster Grant, ed., *The Churches and the Canadian Experience (A Faith and Order Study of the Christian Tradition)* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), 138

¹² www.freshexpressions.uk.org. The website for Fresh Expressions Canada is www.freshexpressions.ca.