

French-Canadian Catholicism: Bulwark Against or Purveyor of Modernity?

GAUVREAU, Michael — *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931–1970*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.

RARELY does a reviewer get the opportunity to evaluate a study that challenges in such a forceful and direct manner the very foundations of the orthodox historiography on any given subject. Michael Gauvreau's *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931–1970* is just such a study. This exhaustively researched, superbly organized, and lucidly written monograph shouts loudly for much closer critical attention than most monographs that come across our desks. Very sensitive to the enormous challenge involved in "Recasting Catholicism's Place in Modern Quebec" (p. 3), Gauvreau contests what he considers are the excessively ideological and political interpretations of the "Quiet Revolution". He begins with an overly succinct introduction which, as his critics will charge, is a somewhat biased evaluation of the existing historiography. Like all true believers, Gauvreau proceeds on the assumption that his cultural/religious interpretation of Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" must displace rather than complement the prevailing interpretations. This is unfortunate since some of the prevailing interpretations are, in varying degrees, reinforced by his otherwise illuminating study of the role of a small but significant group of progressive Catholics in advancing important aspects of modernity, especially those dimensions involving the private sphere of lay individuals, families, and communities.

What is the historiographical paradigm that Gauvreau sets out to debunk? Prior to the 1960s the unchallenged understanding shared by the vast majority of Quebecers and Canadians, Catholic and non-Catholic, was that the role played by the institutional Catholic Church in the lives of French Canadians had been far more crucial than that of any other institution, including the state. Yet, as Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" progressed through its ideological phases beginning in the 1930s to its implementation phases in the 1960s and 1970s, this consensus began to evaporate. Politicians, academics, and journalists debated whether or not the Catholic Church's role in ensuring the sur-

vival and expansion of the French-Canadian communities in Quebec and throughout Canada had been and continued to be largely positive. By the 1960s a majority concluded that the institutional Catholic Church and its hierarchy had become a liability. They needed to be replaced by a modern bureaucratic state controlled by francophone Quebecers.

French-Canadian traditional nationalists, led by the historians and ideologues Canon Lionel Groulx and Robert Rumilly, were adamant that the Catholic Church remain the dominant institution in the lives of all French Canadians if they wished to retain their language and culture while attaining greater autonomy over the private and public sectors affecting their lives. Displacement of the Catholic Church by a powerful, secular Quebec state would destroy the distinct nature of the Catholic, French-Canadian nationality and thwart its proselytizing mission in North America. French-Canadian liberal-minded politicians, intellectuals, and historians, with roots in the Rouge movement of the mid-nineteenth century and in the developmental liberalism of the early twentieth century, regularly blamed French-Canadian Catholic Church leaders for the backwardness of their educational, social service, and health institutions and programmes. The lack of modern educational facilities, liberal-minded French Canadians contended, ensured the continued economic inferiority of French Canadians on both the individual and collective levels.¹

Challenges to the traditional nationalists grew out of the groundbreaking Faculties of Social Sciences in the French-Canadian Catholic universities of Montreal and Laval in the 1940s and 1950s, havens for liberal Catholics, lay and clerical, most of whom had embraced French Personalism. These faculties produced a new middle class of specialists, increasingly secular and urban, who were determined to modernize fully their beleaguered French-Canadian society. Neo-nationalists at *Le Devoir* and *L'Action Nationale* and neo-liberals at *Cité libre* and in the labour movement agreed that, while the institutional Catholic Church had been instrumental in the survival of a pan-Canadian French Canada since the mid-nineteenth century, its continued dominance of French Canada posed a serious threat to its continued survival and expansion. Both neo-nationalists and neo-liberals called for an end to all forms and practices of clericalism, which, they maintained, undermined French Canadians' appreciation of, and commitment to, a liberal-democratic political culture and institutions. Neo-liberals insisted on a complete and rapid separation of church and state in areas crucial to their liberal modernizing goals: education, social service, and health institutions. The neo-nationalist movement was divided between its anti-clerical supporters, including the radical Montreal School of historians who supported the neo-liberals, and its more cautious, pragmatic members who feared that a wholesale separation

1 Ronald Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth Century Quebec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 13–92; Jean Hamelin and Nicole Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois : le XX^e siècle* (Montreal: Boréal Express, 1984), vol. 1.

would completely undermine the viability of the Church and destabilize French-Canadian society. The early historiography on these ideological movements reflected the range of neo-liberal and neo-nationalist positions *vis-à-vis* the Catholic Church's past and future roles in Quebec society.²

The ideological children of the Quiet Revolution took the debate one step farther. Characterizing themselves as the first generation of truly professional historians, the revisionists — Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, and Jean-Claude Robert in their *Histoire du Québec contemporain* (1979) and *Le Québec depuis 1930* (1986), and John Dickinson and Brian Young's *A Short History of Quebec* (3rd ed., 2003) — applied an economic and class analysis to Quebec's past in order to debunk the accepted interpretation concerning the dominant role played by the Catholic Church in the survival and development of French Canada. Demographic, economic, social, and class forces — which they maintained greatly overshadowed the role of the clerical and political elites — were responsible for determining the nature and scope of the modernizing processes of industrialization and urbanization that got underway soon after Confederation. These revisionist historians portrayed the French-Canadian Catholic Church as an unflinching defender of the traditional values, norms, and institutions of a declining agricultural economy and a rural, Catholic way of life. Despite its valiant efforts, the Catholic Church proved incapable of stopping or even modifying the powerful impact of North American capitalism, which engendered ongoing industrialization, urbanization, rural depopulation, and ultimately the wholesale secularization of Catholic French-Canadian society. Consequently, the French-Canadian Catholic Church was not in a position to play a constructive role in the process of adapting French-Canadian society to modernity after Confederation. For the revisionists, the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s was merely the culmination of a long process of the French-Canadian community's embracing of all forms of modernity.

Only in the past couple of decades have the neo-liberal, neo-nationalist, and revisionist interpretations been contested by a new generation of cultural/religious historians in Canada. Cultural/ideological historian Nicole Neatby, in her study, *Carabins ou activistes? L'idéalisme et la radicalisation de la pensée étudiante à l'Université de Montréal au temps du Duplessisme*, demonstrates that French-Canadian Catholic students developed a social conscience that focused on matters concerning international peace and global cooperation as well as on the urgent need for social and political reforms in Quebec. Pushing their own self-interests, Université de Montréal students argued that these reforms should begin with the democratization and secularization of Quebec's Catholic universities. The transformation of student *mentalité* and their pursuit of a more activist role in society, Neatby argues, was

2 Michael D. Behiels, *Prelude to Quebec's Quiet Revolution: Liberalism versus Neo-nationalism, 1945–1960* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985; Hamelin and Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois*, vol. 2.

fuelled by their Catholicism, more specifically the debate that emerged between traditionalist and progressively minded Catholics, both of whom began to question traditional Church doctrine and practice. Conservative Catholics stressed that societal reform would only come from personal spiritual regeneration. Modernist Catholics argued that spiritual regeneration was a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition to attain the genuine reform of the Catholic Church and society at large. Only a reasoned, non-conformist, truly authentic Catholicism, as espoused by French writer André Gide, would help bring about the range of reforms being proposed by the neo-nationalists of *Le Devoir* and the neo-liberals associated with *Cité libre*.

Nonetheless, Gauvreau is the first cultural/religious historian to dismiss completely the ideological-political interpretation of the “Quiet Revolution”. What is Gauvreau’s agenda? He sets out to accomplish two interrelated missions. First, he is determined to revitalize and improve the research and writing of religious history by applying revisionist cultural and modernist theories and methodologies, approaches that focus exclusively on lay people rather than on the hierarchy and the institutional church. His is a religious history from the pew rather than the pulpit. Having done this for the Canadian Protestant communities, Gauvreau applies the same approach to his research on, and interpretation of, a small segment of Quebec’s French-Canadian Catholic community’s ongoing confrontations with modernity in mid-twentieth-century Canada.

Secondly, Gauvreau is hell-bent on completely shattering what he considers is the prevailing and quite misleading elitist and sexist ideological and political interpretations of the origins, intent, and outcome of Quebec’s “Quiet Revolution”. He spares no opportunity to discredit and disparage the “orthodox” liberal, neo-nationalist, revisionist, Marxist, and post-revisionist interpretations of this monumental event with the intent of making these interpretations secondary if not completely irrelevant. The first authentic, progressive, and even radical “quiet revolution”, he stridently maintains, occurred within the myriad of French-Canadian working- and middle-class lay Catholic Youth Movements set up by Catholic Church leaders in the 1930s. Their intent was to rechristianize French-Canadian society and the Catholic faithful who were being drawn to secular ideologies and social and political movements. In what was an unintended development, these Catholic Youth Movements evolved into a progressive vanguard pushing for a progressive, liberal Catholicism. A significant percentage of the Catholic youth movement’s members, especially women, embraced a “populist” regenerative spiritualism, pushed for the reconstruction of the French-Canadian family, and challenged patriarchy with a radical Personalist feminism.

Gauvreau’s approach enables him to argue that the original and most profound “quiet revolution” was essentially cultural and religious. He delineates clearly, and with considerable context and nuance, the remarkable role played by the marginal French-Canadian Catholic Youth organizations — whose members and families embraced conservative, moderate, and radical strains

of the regenerative French Personalist Catholic ideology — in articulating and proselytizing the need for a progressive Catholicism that embraced the contemporary needs and aspirations of the faithful rather than those of the institutional Church. This rising generation's profoundly transforming and modernizing Catholicism, Gauvreau argues with considerable conviction, began in the late 1930s, gained momentum throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and reached maturity in the early 1960s. Its apogee was reached during the struggle between Church and State over the nature, scope, and goal of educational reform, which entailed the re-establishment of a Ministry of Education, full public funding for primary and secondary schools, and state control over college and university education.

Gauvreau contends that the Education Concordat, a bargain worked out between senior Church and State officials during the very first stage of Quebec's political/state "Quiet Revolution" in 1960–1964, represented progressive Catholicism functioning at its very best. This "new consensus" in Church-State relations, he argues somewhat less coherently and convincingly, was undermined in a very dramatic fashion during the late 1960s by a conjuncture of radicalizing social, ideological, and political developments that produced the independence movement, which was eventually taken over by René Lévesque's Parti Québécois. Indeed, according to Gauvreau, the primary culprits were the radical Personalist Catholics of *Cité libre* — led by the sociologist and lay theologian Fernand Dumont — who opted to put their neo-Gallican, elitist, and sexist Catholicism in the service of a pseudo-Personalist, social-democratic, independent Québécois state. Beleaguered Catholic Church leaders strove valiantly, with the help of their conservative and moderate Catholic Personalist regenerators, to control the far more seductive and powerful political/state "Quiet Revolution". Their laudable goal was to maintain a vibrant and empowered institutional Catholic Church at the centre of an emerging Québécois civil society.

The Catholic Church and its progressive lay men and women lost their gambit. Why? One of the unintended consequences of the cultural/religious "quiet revolution" was the creation of a radical wing whose members quickly embraced the far more subversive dual ideological forces of social democracy and secessionism fuelling the political/state "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s. One can easily argue that the wholesale dechristianization process pursued by the radical Personalists was merely the logical outcome of the doctrine of Personalist Catholicism, which had as its long-term goal the creation of the "City of God on Earth". Francophone Catholic Church leaders came to this realization much too late to reverse the damage. Indeed, one can easily argue that the Catholic Church contributed, both consciously and inadvertently, to its own demise by not throwing out the "secularizing" utopian Personalist Catholics, the Trojan horse in the house, much earlier.

The problem with Gauvreau's overly narrow approach and rather limited interpretation is that it gives too much responsibility and credit to Dumont and his radical Personalist colleagues for a phenomenon that was driven by

far greater forces — class, gender, state, corporate, technology, the rights revolution, and competing nationalist ideologies — than this small coterie of academics *cum* radical lay theologians. This coterie of radicals added fuel to the fire, but did not really set the match to the institutional Church. The myriad factors contributing to the de-institutionalization of the Catholic Church were already well underway at all levels of society by the 1950s. One might be convinced that Fernand Dumont and his coterie administered the *coup de grace* with their Commission. But it was of little use trying to close the barn door; the horses had all escaped. Indeed, Dumont and his friends sensed this reality. While lamenting the loss of their grand dream — a modern, communitarian, Personalist-inspired Québécois Catholic society — they simply moved on to their new dream of an independent, socialist, Québécois nationalist-state. They naively believed, for a short time, that a regenerated, Personalist-inspired, and fully Gallicanized Catholic Church could and should support their new dream. This was not to be, since their new dream necessitated that the institutional Catholic Church be completely discredited to prevent it from functioning as an effective counterweight to the expanded Quebec state, henceforth the central institution in the Québécois struggle for survival and equality.

David Seljak, a historian of religion, offers a different interpretation of the Catholic Church's serene "silent surrender" to the Quiet Revolutionaries' displacement of the *Église-nation* by the *État-nation*.³ While agreeing with Gauvreau that most "Quiet Revolutionary" modernizers did not intend to carry out a massive rejection of Catholicism nor relegate the Catholic Church to the dustbin of history, he offers a very different explanation. Seljak argues that the demise of the *Église-nation* was brought about by the convergence of three events: the Second Vatican Council, which rejected any vision of an established state religion; the emergence of the faith and justice movement driven by liberation theology in the Third World; and the Catholic Church's rapid and uncritical acceptance of the reconceptualization of French-Canadian nationalism into a Québécois secular neo-nationalism in the 1960s. After flirting momentarily with Personalist Catholic communitarian doctrine as a way of salvaging a public role for the Catholic Church in the new Québécois nation-state, progressive Dominican editors of *Maintenant* and Jesuit editors of *Relations* married their Catholic liberation theology with democratic socialism and the independence of Quebec. By the 1980 referendum, the Assembly of Bishops of Quebec affirmed the right of the Quebec people to decide democratically their constitutional future as long as the concept of

3 David Seljak, "Why the Quiet Revolution was 'Quiet': The Catholic Church's Reaction to the Secularization of Nationalism in Quebec after 1960", *Historical Studies: Canadian Catholic Historical Association*, vol. 62 (1996), pp. 109–124, and "Catholicism's 'Quiet Revolution': *Maintenant* and the New Public Catholicism in Quebec after 1960", in Marguerite Van Die, ed., *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 257–274.

the “Quebec people” included all individuals and communities regardless of race or religion.

Gauvreau’s innovative and provocative study of the Catholic origins of modernity in Quebec adds a much-needed dimension to the historiography of modern Quebec. No doubt, his monograph will spur on other historians to provide even greater nuance and scope to our understanding of the interplay among all the various public and private “quiet revolutions” which, each in its own unique and significant manner, transformed the French-Canadian Catholic society into the Québécois society and Catholic French Canada into *la francophonie canadienne*.

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