

HAPPY IS THE LAND THAT ROBS FROM GOD:
SECULARIZING CANADA IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY

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“Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other, unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about . . . And take its side.”¹

Introduction

Statistics Canada’s 2021 census findings caused concern for many churches across the nation. Trends seem to indicate that Canadians, more than ever before, possess “no religious affiliation.”² While such statements lack nuance and do not communicate the full story of Canadian religion, leaders are searching for tools to navigate the “shifting landscape of Canadian religion.”³ The contribution of this article is to offer an example from Canadian history that states simply: Canada has been here before.

In 1850, the Anglican Archdeacon of York, Andrew Bethune, stated ruefully, “When this spoliation shall be rendered complete, there may Sir, be a class who will pronounce this a really free and happy country!”⁴ For him, the spoliation of Canada was not a shifting landscape of religious opinion but the issue of Clergy Re-

1. Snyder, *On Tyranny*, 22.
2. Thompson, “More Canadians,” n.p. Another useful article is Cornelissen, “Religiosity in Canada,” n.p.
3. See the Cardus study authored by Pennings and Los, “The Shifting Landscape of Faith in Canada,” n.p. In it, the authors note their paper comes from a Spring 2022 panel with nine groups of religious leaders desiring to “start an ongoing dialogue about how to navigate a rapidly shifting spiritual landscape in Canada.”
4. Bethune, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 16.

serves. The Reserves comprised roughly one-seventh of colonial lands set apart by the Imperial Government to build churches and, through sales or rental revenue, financially support Church of England and Church of Scotland clergy for the spiritual edification of colonists.⁵ Popular opinion held that revenues generated should be used for the betterment of all Canadians rather than the advancement of a couple of denominations.⁶ For Bethune and others like him, those who supported such a stance were not simply undermining a historic British institution but were in open rebellion against God. Though the whims of the age leaned towards removing the Reserves from their clerical role, Bethune reminded Canadians that “in sober afterthoughts,” they would come to recognize no “country is to be congratulated where the Church of God has been robbed.”⁷

5. Church of Scotland claims to the Reserves was a long and drawn-out battle between them and Church of England leadership; the latter believing they were to be the sole beneficiaries. There is not sufficient space in this article to delve into that. Suffice it to say that, by 1824, the Church of Scotland qualified as a Protestant established church and was, therefore, granted access to Reserves funds. This formed a legal precedent utilized by the other denominations to finally convince the Government to dismantle the Reserves in order to honor the religiously diverse landscape of Upper and Lower Canada.

6. As is seen in one line from this Petition to the King (Various Authors, “Petition to the Provincial Parliament,” 1), the Reserves were viewed as oppressive to “a very large majority of the people of this Province are now suffering, and for a long series of years have, suffered, positive although indirect persecution on account of their religious opinions.”

7. “There will not, surely, be many who, in sober afterthoughts, will heartily respond to that sentiment,—that a country is to be congratulated where the Church of God has been robbed.” Bethune, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 12. He would go on to note that, given the largely agrarian nature of the economy, colonists were flirting with ruin if they continued to entertain the notion of disbanding the Reserves. Bethune wrote: “Can we, in such a condition of rebellion against the Most High, hope for bountiful harvests and commercial success,—credit abroad, or trustfulness amongst ourselves? With such dishonour to Almighty God, sanctioned by the public voice . . . can the country prosper? Not, if we are to believe in the immutability of the plans and purposes of the Divine Providence. ‘Ye are cursed with a curse; for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.’” Bethune, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 16.

Whether we are talking about declining religious allegiances in the twenty-first century or the Clergy Reserves question of the nineteenth, the true concern seems to be the damage wrought upon society when trusted religious institutions are abandoned. Without such institutions, will the citizenry take their faith seriously? What would religion even look like if people could choose whatever belief system strikes their fancy? What will happen to social conscience? What will happen to social order? If faith has no discipline, how long until the entire nation descends into vice? This reflection explores the nineteenth-century issue of secularizing the Clergy Reserves as analogous to the issues around declining institutional Christianity today.⁸

Societal Need for Clergy Reserves

Institutions, be they religious or non, offer community and safeguard people from their selfish desires. In the words of George Chalmers: “the spontaneous demand of human beings for religion is far short of the actual interest which they have in it . . . the less we have of it, the less we desire it.”⁹ As beneficiaries of funds from the Reserves, it is easy to dismiss the chastisements of men like Bethune and Chalmers as unduly influenced by personal interest. However, we are better served if we take seriously concerns

8. This was also a time when many of the so-called norms of Canadian faith were established as it pertained to denominational loyalty. Returning to the Cardus article: “Canada’s religious landscape remained largely unchanged from the mid-nineteenth century until the end of World War II, when the majority of Canadians identified as Roman Catholic or Protestant.”

9. Quoting George Chalmers: “the spontaneous demand of human beings for religion is far short of the actual interest which they have in it. This is not so with their demand for food or raiment, or any article which ministers to the necessities of our physical nature. The more destitute we are of these articles the greater is our desire after them. But the case is widely different when the appetite for any good is short of that degree in which that good is useful or necessary; and above all, when just in proportion to our want of it, is the decay of our appetite towards it. Now this is, generally speaking, the case with religious instruction, the less we have of it, the less we desire it.” Bethune, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 15.

from clergy that the demise of the Reserves could also signal the demise of Canadian Christianity.

Throughout the 1820s, Reverend John Strachan of York composed several narratives, complete with dubious statistics, to support the claim that most Canadians were disposed to become Anglican if only the church could secure greater funds to support staff.¹⁰ For Strachan, the Anglican Church was necessary to inculcate loyalty to the disparate collection of colonists who comprised the Canadas and the Maritimes. More than the government or the sparse social organizations present in the colony, the church stood above them all as the institution best suited to “infuse into the inhabitants a tone and feeling entirely English.”¹¹

For Bethune, “Britain has grown great under [this] present system,” especially in comparison to America. Britain’s constitution proved the Empire was “pre-eminently a religious nation, she has become so . . . through the influence of her Established Church.”¹² The perpetual threat of America’s anti-establishment ideologies creeping north had been undergirding Anglican concerns since the conclusion of the Revolutionary War in the eighteenth century.

In 1786, the Rev. John Stuart feared his inability to routinely contact Loyalist settlements around his base at Cataraqui opened space for rival churches. His letter to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) could offer only generalities about the religious proclivities of the outer settlements. He felt confident to

10. There is insufficient space in this article to offer a comprehensive overview of the Clergy Reserves question. For the sake of this reflection, it will suffice to state that from 1820–1850 colonial officials in the metropolis of London were vexed by managing these lands. The Clergy Reserves were part of the larger British belief that an established church was essential for a society to maintain Christian character. For more on this see Moir, *Church and the State*.

11. “Two or three hundred Clergymen living in Upper Canada, in the midst of their Congregations, and receiving the greater portion of their income from funds deposited in the Mother Country, must attach still more intimately the population of the Colony to the Parent State. Their influence would gradually spread, and they would infuse into the inhabitants a tone and feeling entirely English; so that the very first sentiments and opinions of the youth must become British.” Strachan, *A Speech*, 7.

12. Bethune, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 5.

write only, “they seem well disposed to attend divine Service, and show no aversion to the discipline and principles of the Church of England”¹³ Stuart’s report also addressed concerns that republicanism could infect even ardent Loyalists and saw any balking of Anglican discipline as indicative of American stubbornness within the people.

Combatting Rival Ideologies

Returning to Rev. John Strachan, the insidious and ubiquitous presence of Episcopal (American) Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and other more “enthusiastic” versions of the faith were the greatest threats to the soul of the colony. The crux of his concerns was their ongoing connection to American missionary agencies that had “shewn themselves the enemies of the Established Church.”¹⁴ The Federalist arguments for the separation of church and state could not be tolerated in a Canada desirous of maintaining the connection to God’s chosen empire of Great Britain. Like Stuart before him, Strachan noted that discipline was required if Canadian society hoped to emulate Britain’s God-honoring legacy.¹⁵ Whatever rhetoric the anti-Reserves camps used, Strachan argued Christianity was “a continual lesson of obedience to the laws and submission to constituted authorities”—not a characteristic he believed American-based faith possessed. Their Revolution had proven them “enemies to regular Government,” seek-

13. Stuart, “Letter,” 118.

14. Strachan, *Speech*, 28. Strachan granted one of the more evangelical denominations tacit support: “Of the Wesleyan Methodists I have spoken with approbation, as well as of their Teachers and Preachers, because they appear, in as far as I have seen, exceedingly respectable, and the friends of piety and good order; but I cannot approve of those Methodists who get their Teachers and Preachers from the United States.” Strachan, *Speech*, 27.

15. “Even in those remote parts of the country, where the Methodist Itinerants are the most active, so soon as the population is sufficiently compact to admit and require the ministrations of a regular Clergyman, he finds his congregation increasing by the gradual accession of their more respectable adherents” Excerpt from Jacob Mountain’s Memorial to King George IV as found in Ryerson, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 12.

ing rather to “destroy the influence of religious principles, and to pull down religious establishments”¹⁶

In his 1825 eulogy for the Anglican Bishop of Quebec, Jacob Mountain, Strachan sounded a clarion call: “if the Imperial Government does not immediately step forward with efficient help, the mass of the population will be nurtured and instructed in hostility to our Parent Church, nor will it be long till they imbibe opinions anything but favourable to the political Institutions of England.”¹⁷ Thus, one of the preeminent issues behind the Clergy Reserves was fear that a weakened Anglican Church could not protect colonists from being seduced by individualistic Christianity. A version of the faith too attached to the trends of the age and foreign politics, rather than the ancient faith spread by a godly Empire. A citizenry lacking proper religious instruction could not make educated choices in matters of faith. Society would decline, and before long, even the ardently faithful would be beyond hope because all their choices would be conducive to, and influenced by, the environments in which they were raised.

Therefore, we return to Bethune’s warning that unless “restitution is made, or penitence at least is expressed by a God-fearing people,” the future of the colony was bleak. Without the discipline and oversight of a well-funded British and Protestant church,

16. Strachan, *Speech*, 28.

17. “Even when churches are erected, the Minister’s influence is frequently broken or injured by numbers of uneducated itinerant Preachers, who leaving their steady employment, betake themselves to preach the Gospel from idleness, or a zeal without knowledge, by which they are induced without any preparation, to teach what they do not know, and which, from their pride, they disdain to learn. When it is considered that the religious teachers of the other denominations of Christians, a very few respectable Ministers of the Church of Scotland excepted, come almost universally from the Republican States of America, where they gather their knowledge and form their sentiments, it is quite evident, that if the Imperial Government does not immediately step forward with efficient help, the mass of the population will be nurtured and instructed in hostility to our Parent Church, nor will it be long till they imbibe opinions anything but favourable to the political Institutions of England. It is only through the Church and its Institutions, that a truly English character and feeling can be given to or preserved in any Foreign possession” Strachan’s Eulogy of Bishop Mountain as found in Ryerson, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 14.

“public disquiet will be the heritage of coming generations.” Even if funds were used to support non-sectarian education throughout the colony (the stated desire of most anti-Reserves groups), such education “without the life and light of religion” would create only further enmity.¹⁸ The legacy of non-religious (read non-Anglican) education would be “a bitter testimony to the dangers of a little learning,” and the colonial world of British North America “shall have scepticism and infidelity rampant in the land.”¹⁹ For those invested in Anglican supremacy, the issue was aligning colonial faith with the proven godly character of the British constitution so that other dangerous ideas did not overwhelm the soul of society.

Secularizing the Reserves & Religious Freedom

The irony is that the concerns of those opposed to the Reserves were quite similar. For them, the inclusion of denominations like the Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Free Presbyterians, and United Presbyterians safeguarded genuine faith against narrow party interests. Bethune, Strachan, Chalmers, and Stuart were concerned that the lack of Reserves meant that the individual would be raised in a land of weak faith. Thus, whatever choice each colonist made in regard to his or her religion would be the result of negligent Christian education. Those in the anti-Reserves camps argued it was the Clergy Reserves that were really to blame. This misguided policy actually weakened colonial faith by monopolizing one version of Christianity over other legitimate expressions, thereby disadvantaging numerous other loyal Christian

18. “Caleb Hopkins . . . spoke in favour of outright repeal of the Clergy Reserves and their devotion to education.” Moir, *Church and the State*, 53.

19. Bethune, *Clergy Reserves*, 13. Strachan (*Speech*, 41) agrees: “Do we ever find any upright trustworthy, or giving Religion a thought, unless they have been educated in it from their childhood? . . . But it is unnecessary to argue upon this subject, or to say more than to recall to Christians the positive commands of Scripture—to teach Children the fear of God—to bring them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord: While therefore King’s College will be open to all denominations of Christians, it will nevertheless possess a religious character.”

voices dedicated to supporting Imperial interests.²⁰ These Christians saw the Reserves as an outdated and ill-fitting Imperial policy at best, and tyrannical abuse of clerical power at worst. Their arguments proposed that greater inclusion of differing religious views posed no threat to Imperial interests and strengthened the burgeoning nation's desire for progress. However, they agreed with their opponents' concerns about individualism harming true faith. Whereas Bethune, Chalmers, and Strachan worried over the common person's attention to matters of faith, those in favour of disbanding the Reserves worried about one specific man's attention to faith.

The strength of the pro-Reserves party was that Clergy Reserves were instituted by the late King George III (d. 1820). Thus, to call them into question was akin to challenging the ruling of the respected monarch. However, Reformers argued the actual origin of the ruling came from an 1819 charter, posthumously applied to George III and obtained under dubious circumstances by Lord

20. "And we humbly beg leave further to represent to your majesty, that, apart from the objections entertained by the great majority of your majesty subjects in Canada, to religious endowments, by which certain favoured denominations of Christians, are kept in connection with the state, and thereby placed in a position of superiority over others, the present disposition of the revenue derived from the clergy reserves investments is manifestly unjust. That the entire revenue derived from the investments made before the passing of the imperial act three and four, Victoria, chapter 78, has been there by assigned to the churches of England and Scotland, to the exclusion of the Wesleyan Episcopal and New Connexion Methodist, the free Presbyterian Church of Canada, the United, Presbyterian Church, the Baptist, Congregationalists, and other religious bodies, whose pastors have an equal claim to the designation of a protestant clergy, with those of the clergy of the churches of England and Scotland." Earl of Elgin & Kincardine, *Despatch*, 4. On the loyalty of the Episcopal Methodists specifically: "They are not Republicans; neither are they infected with republican principles; nor have they come 'almost universally from the Republican States of America.' *Seven eighths* of the religious teachers among the dissenters, are British born subjects. And out of the whole body of the Methodist itinerant preachers, who seem to be the principal butt of the Doctor's hatred, there are only eight who have not been *born and educated* in the British dominions. And of those eight *all except two* have become naturalized British subjects according to the statute of the Province." Ryerson, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 18. Italics part of the original quote.

Bathurst. In his appeal to Imperial officials, Egerton Ryerson noted the Anglicans “acquired the superintendence and control of the Clergy Reserves, not by the Statute 31st George the Third, [as believed by most] but by a Charter obtained Under the auspices and by the recommendation of Lord Bathurst—notorious as well as odious for his high church exclusion and bigotry.”²¹

This has two very important elements to consider. First, the exclusive rights of the Anglican (and later Presbyterian) Church to the funds were not a wish of the late King but were the political machinations of a man whose desires for Anglican supremacy were well documented. Second, the character of the charter, written as it was in London, did not correspond to the reality of colonial life. Rather, the charter was shown to shape colonial life in confining ways that desired to consciously advantage one church over the others; with no attention paid to the wants or religious desires of the people. Those opposing the Reserves argued they “did not originate with any disappointed party either in Canada or elsewhere,” crying out for a sturdier Anglican presence. In fact, the desire for Reserves did not originate in Canada at all! Nor did it “originate with even a liberal whig” but originated “with no less personages than that high Churchman, Earl Bathurst himself.”²²

The Clergy Reserves were thus argued to be an external policy enacted by a powerful person from outside of Canada clearly doing so to advantage his own religious beliefs. Therefore, if the argument for institutions was that they safeguarded citizens from their baser inclinations, the Reformers were able to show that the institutions of colonial religion were really the result of one man’s “bigoted” desires. That, in the words of Ryerson and others, was religious tyranny.²³ It forced a singular ideology upon masses who possessed little financial or practical recourse to oppose the

21. Ryerson, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 5.

22. Ryerson, *The Clergy Reserve Question*, 7.

23. “That this violent infraction of the rights of your petitioners, and of the Canadian people generally, was accompanied by circumstances of the deepest treachery, so derogatory to the character of a civilized government, and so calculated to alienate the minds of the people and annihilate all confidence in their rulers, that the parties implicated therein deserve yet to be impeached.” Various Authors, “Petition to the Provincial Parliament,” 1.

choice. It was less tyrannical and more civilized, fraught with perils as this may be, for individual freedom of conscience to reign rather than living in a world where one man's desires could hold so much sway.

Conclusion

The issues discussed in this reflection are far removed from the issues of our present age. However, in this story, we can draw parallels between the nineteenth-century Clergy Reserve issues and the twenty-first-century church adherence issues. For those invested in the religious institutions of our age, the abandoning of institutional faith is characterized as "secularization." This story teaches there are always those on the outside of even the most celebrated religious structures who have been neglected and oppressed by those very same institutions. For those who have experienced disenfranchisement, the ability to secularize religious institutions feels like freedom and empowerment.

When the Clergy Reserves were eventually secularized, faith in Canada did not disappear. Neither did morality, social cohesion, or material blessings. If anything, genuine religion deepened as Imperial authorities recognized the landscape of Canadian religion was a decision best made by Canadians, not for Canadians. Today, as back then, it is incumbent upon Christians to understand the ways institutional structures fail to protect or benefit all Canadian lives. After all, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the waning of institutional structures like the Reserves meant the waxing of others dedicated to genuine faith, education, and beneficial social reforms. Their successes were based less on the institutional demands of a few and more on the religious freedom of the many. Despite Bethune's condemnations, Canadians of the nineteenth century were not "robbing from God." They were simply removing an institution deemed unfit and problematic. Perhaps the non-religious of today are, likewise, not abandoning God but finding their spiritual happiness in a shifting landscape that no longer requires the old structures.

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