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**“A Vital Christianity and A Genuine Democracy are
Inseparable”: Christian Democracy in the Canadian
Protestant Press in the Second World War**

ADAM D. RUDY
McMaster Divinity College

During the Second World War, Christian democracy was a major theme in the Canadian Protestant press. To twenty-first-century eyes this theme may seem something of a novelty, but for those who read the Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, and United Church denominational newspapers, Christian democracy was a familiar theme. It was also an important theme for three reasons. First, it was important because a majority of the newspapers' writers and readers believed democracy was the source of freedom for Canada and all Christian civilizations. Second, it was important because for Canadian Protestants, democracy, especially British democracy, was predicated on Christianity or Christian principles. This meant that anything that threatened democracy also threatened Christianity. In this way, the war was easily justified and construed as a righteous cause. Third, as I will demonstrate in this essay, democracy stood at the center of a web of interrelated assumptions and beliefs that informed the Canadian Protestant worldview and understanding of the war. In the Protestant denominational press, democracy was linked with the British empire, Canada's place in the empire, the Church's role and responsibility in Canada, Christian civilization, freedom, pacifism, the Royal Tour of

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Canada of 1939, the war as a just and righteous cause, and God's providence and action in human history. In addition, there were numerous discussions that located the origins of democracy in the New Testament. In what follows I will show how democracy was connected to these various ideas and beliefs.¹

In his survey of Canadian Church history since Confederation, John Webster Grant has suggested that, while the role of the Churches in the Second World War was similar to that of the First World War, there all resemblance ended. Appeals to aid the Motherland, and the hopes of a millennial victory, he noted, "were replaced by sober determination to finish a messy but necessary job."² It is true that the mainline Protestants did not respond to the Second World War in the enthusiastic and jingoistic manner in which they had to the First. However, Grant's statement and brief discussion of the Second World War leaves out a great deal. If the Great War had been the "war to end all wars," the Second World War was the war to save democracy and preserve Christian civilization against the threat of totalitarianism, Naziism, and Hitler. Grant is unable in his survey to show his readers that Canadian Protestants saw the war as a just cause in defense of Christian democracy and Christian civilization. Every element of their understanding of the war was in some way connected with this fundamental fact. Like Grant, my scope here has limits, so in this article I will survey a representative sample of the Protestant commentary on war and Christian democracy. I argue that the Protestant churches, generally, viewed the war as a just cause. They justified Canada's part in the war on the basis of a web of interrelated assumptions which all centered around, to varying degrees, their notions about Christian democracy.

Before proceeding it is important to clarify that this paper relies solely on the denominational newspapers of the United Church, Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Church of England in Canada, and Canadian Baptists. These were the four largest Protestant denominations with deep historical and cultural roots in Canada. Religious newspapers were a key feature of Protestant life in Canada between Confederation and the 1950s. Within their pages were not only editorials, denominational news, and sermons, but national and international news. As Gordon Heath has pointed out, the Protestant denominations had major influence and power in Canadian culture in the nineteenth century, and the denominational press was one of the tools by which that influence was disseminated.³ This influence had begun to wane by the Second World War, but only

marginally. Numerous historians have noted that there exists between a newspaper and its readership a fundamental two-way relationship: the newspaper reflects the sentiments of its constituency, even if it is the organ of a denomination.⁴ Given the widespread adherence to Protestantism in English-speaking Canada and these churches' cultural authority, the contents of the denominational press act as one window, among others, into the public opinion of a large constituency.

It should also be noted that I frequently refer to the Canadian Protestant "worldview." This term is uncommon in some circles, and even where it is frequently used it often remains vague. The term worldview is typically used to describe the sum of beliefs, assumptions, and ideas that shape how an individual perceives the world around them, regardless of whether the beliefs, assumptions, and ideas logically fit together. Indeed, it is inevitable that worldviews will contain tensions and contradictions. In this paper, though, worldview is used to refer to the broad collective outlook of Canadian Protestants. Specifically, certain ideas, beliefs, and assumptions that were widely held across the Canadian Protestant landscape. The subjects examined in this paper, such as Christian democracy, the British connection, pacifism, God's providence, and the war as a just cause, were all elements of the Canadian Protestant worldview. I realize this remains vague, but a worldview is somewhat nebulous at the best of times, and my purpose here is not to dissect the Canadian Protestant worldview and turn out its contents, but rather to show how important, interrelated components of that worldview shaped the Canadian Protestant view of the Second World War.

The Interwar Years

The years between the two World Wars has been called the "Decades of Discord" by historian John Thompson.⁵ During these years Canadians were recovering from the horrific experience of the First World War, and also experiencing a lot of changes. The events of these two decades are the context in which the Second World War occurred and the setting in which Canadian Protestants understood the war.

It has been suggested, and widely agreed upon by historians of Christianity in Canada, that the English-speaking mainline Protestant denominations were deeply involved in and committed to nation-building. As Robert Wright has noted, the mainline Protestant denominations had preceded the birth of the nation and "identified deeply with Canadians'

emergent sense of nationality and community.”⁶ Phyllis Airhart has argued that the churches after Confederation became intimately involved in the twin challenges of creating His Dominion in Canada and winning the newly-opened western frontier for Christ.⁷

Canadian Protestants’ involvement in shaping the nation was partially rooted by the largely evangelical Protestant culture that had developed in English-speaking Canada, especially Ontario.⁸ Nation-building was also facilitated by this culture as it ensured that the churches had a long reach in shaping public opinion. Historians have also noted how, between the predominantly Christian culture, the churches’ influence, and the churches’ nation-building activity, a consensus arose between the largest of the Protestant denominations.⁹ This consensus consisted in a shared presupposition about Christendom, a sense of destiny regarding Canada’s place in the Christian British empire, a strong belief in the Church’s responsibility for forming the nation through moral reform campaigns, a tendency to de-emphasize the differences of theology and polity between their respective denominations, and a strong optimism about their progress. This consensus provided the basis for interdenominational cooperation in social reform work, as well as the initial necessary groundwork for the church union movement. The Protestant consensus began to exhibit some strain around the turn of the century. Despite enthusiasm and optimism that the twentieth century would be Canada’s century, the Social Gospel, theological differences and, most significantly, the First World War, challenged the consensus.¹⁰ Both Robert Wright and John Webster Grant have claimed that the Protestant consensus began to crumble during the interwar period.¹¹ In the years immediately following 1918 a sense of the deep tragedy and horror of the Great War took hold and deeply held notions about the goodness and inevitable improvement of humankind crumbled. Disillusionment with democracy, capitalism, and Christianity was widespread. Robert Wright has noted that Canadian youth figured highly among the disillusioned, for they had been the ones forced to fight a war caused by the world of their parents. Consequently, Wright points out, the 1920s saw an unprecedented spirit of rebelliousness among Canada’s youth.¹²

The Social Gospel movement, nebulous at the best of times, experienced success in the years immediately following the war as it responded to pressing social issues. However, as Richard Allen has noted, the movement began to decline in the latter half of the 1920s.¹³ While the Social Gospel entered decline, the United Church of Canada was formed

in 1925.¹⁴ During this decade too, Canadian Protestants experienced the collision of modernism and fundamentalism as it ripped apart the Canadian Baptist constituencies of Central and Western Canada.¹⁵ However, though there were and continued to be divisions between conservative evangelicals and liberals, “all agreed that Canada ought to be fashioned into ‘God’s Dominion’ – a Christian, democratic, and preferably British nation from sea to sea.”¹⁶

The vision of Canada as the Lord’s Dominion, which ran deeply in Canadian Protestantism, experienced a serious blow in the 1920s.¹⁷ During the First World War the Protestants had claimed triumph when the Canadian Federal and Provincial governments passed prohibition legislation. The temperance movement, which had been heavily supported by the mainline denominations since before Confederation, was the grand cause of evangelicalism. The passage of prohibition legislation suggested to many Protestants that with this new law Canada had taken a huge step toward national holiness and moral purity, even if it had been passed primarily to aid the war effort. In the 1920s, however, one by one, each province repealed its prohibition laws. A sense of regression likely would have set in among many Canadian Protestants.

Concerns for a firm and lasting peace following the Great War were allayed by the creation of the League of Nations and a strong internationalism. Mission efforts around the world were redoubled in the belief that they were essential to developing and maintaining international harmony. At the same time, concerns hovered in the shadows over the new Soviet state in Russia, the rise of fascism in Italy, Naziism in Germany, the civil war in Spain, and, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Among Canadian Protestants, partially in response to these disconcerting international events and partially in response to the horrific experience of the war, pacifism gained widespread adherence. Tied to this particular brand of pacifism was a critique of capitalism, which, it was believed by many, had ultimately caused the Great War. Pacifism and social concerns seemed to go hand in hand, and socialism, even communism, looked appealing to some Protestants. The dim view of capitalism was furthered by the Great Depression, which hit Canada’s labourers and rural communities harder than most.

In the turmoil of these two decades between the World Wars there were some events that would have been viewed by Canadian Protestants as small victories in a world where religion, particularly Protestant Christianity, appeared to have just entered a period of decline. The

creation of the United Church of Canada was one such cause for celebration, as was the formation of the League of Nations. The creation of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, which distinguished itself from the Student Christian Movement, took place in this time, and both sought to inspire youth with Christian religion. The Oxford Group Movement, later called Moral Re-Armament, arrived in Canada in 1932 with an interest in fostering personal and pietistic religion among college students. There was also a brief resurgence of revival when the UCC brought Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese evangelist, to Canada in the early 1930s.

Despite these small victories, Canadian Protestants in the Interwar period lived in a world that appeared far less certain than it had before 1914. Democracies seemed to be failing, social issues were all too prominent, fascism and communism were on the rise, and a lack of interest in organized religion existed where it had not previously. The death of a strong king, George V, seemed to mark the end of an era, especially once his son Edward VIII abdicated in the midst of controversy, and in so doing seemed to denigrate the virtue of the monarchy. Notions of imperial loyalty and Canada's connection to Britain also suffered in the Interwar period.¹⁸ In the midst of these macro-level changes, Canadian Protestants observed the rise of Hitler and Naziism in Germany and, by the mid-1930s, the idea of another war, though fervently hoped against, became a likely reality.

It is then not surprising that democracy should figure so largely in the denominational press in light of the anti-democratic clamour arising from Germany, Italy, and Spain in the 1930s. Indeed, many of the norms, patterns, and assumptions that had seemed to characterize Canadian life since the late nineteenth century were being challenged. The denominational press indicated a view of western democracy, and British democracy in particular, as embattled. And, as one would expect in denominational newspapers, the relationship of democracy to Christianity was a key theme. In what follows I will begin by showing how Christianity and democracy were conflated in the Protestant denominational press. Then, I will briefly consider how several other important elements of the Canadian Protestant worldview and interpretations of the war overlapped, to varying degrees, with notions of Christian democracy.

Christian Democracy versus Totalitarianism

Before the war even began the denominational press was replete with discussion of international events, the problems facing Jewish refugees, the likelihood of war, and the feasibility of pacifism, to name only a few of the issues facing them.¹⁹ Concerns about totalitarian states like Germany were foremost among their considerations. An article in the *Canadian Churchman* from February 1939 admitted that fascism and communism presented a challenge to decent democracy. The writer went on, however, to state that “*They offer an essential challenge to Christianity.*”²⁰ This article, and others like it, indicate a world view in which freedom and democracy were inextricably intertwined with Christianity. The writer emphasized that a successful and flourishing democracy depended primarily on Christian ideals. He quoted a resolution that he believed expressed the mind of “our Church leaders in this matter.” The resolution recognized “the essential fact that political democracy and freedom can be secured for all, and retained by winning victories for Jesus Christ in better economic and social relationships.”²¹ The resolution itself stated, in part, “that the Council believes that the freedom we desire for all classes of our people can only be realized in the regulation of our economic and social relationships in closer harmony with the principles of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²²

Economic injustice was identified by the writer as the source of communism and fascism’s reactionary forces. He claimed that “the only way to avoid the evils of either Communism or Fascism, or both, is *through Christian fellowship* to affect and direct Industry, Economics, and International Affairs. This Christian Fellowship is not merely a sentiment towards goodwill; it is goodwill, unselfishness and sacrifice in operation.” As for the source of freedom and this seemingly all-important Christian fellowship, it was “a heritage of Christian tradition.”²³ The key concept proclaimed by this author was the assumption that Christianity, freedom, and democracy were intertwined, and that Christian civilization, which included Canada, needed Christianity to strengthen the moral and economic fabric of the nation, in order to successfully face the threat of totalitarianism.

Another article in the *Canadian Churchman* assessed democracy in comparison to dictatorships. The author found that democracy had been seriously hindered by a severance of obligation from democratic citizenship. The writer argued that democracy, in its essence, required its citizens

to serve in times of both peace and war. Secondly, he pointed out, democracy required that such service be both excellent in quality and voluntary. Western democracies, he argued, in order to remain democratic and resist Hitler's Nazis, could only hope to maintain their democracy by changing their whole idea of life and living together. He wrote, "What chance is there of this until we change our whole idea of life; our whole idea of living together; and what's more, until we change it to a full Christian content. For our faith bids us give; it bids us serve; it bids us pull together."²⁴ Like the author of the previous article, this writer assumed a deep interconnection between Christianity and democracy, noting that democracy only worked well when its citizens lived by Christian principles. Again, as in the previous article, there was an idea of a revived Christianity bolstering democracy. Put another way, it was the churches articulating their role. They believed they needed to call their flocks to renew their faith, and in so doing they would strengthen the nation.

The *Maritime Baptist* boldly equated democracy with rationality as it contrasted both with dictatorship, irrationality, and brutality. One article, describing the western democracies' attempts to avoid war, argued, "the democracies were most desirous to sit around a conference table in peace and let reason determine the issue."²⁵ Germany's choice to follow the course of brutality and invade Poland forced Britain either to declare war, or to admit to the world that "her plighted word was worthless, her honour a sham and her democracy meaningless."²⁶ Yet here was no reason to despair. The writer noted that even though nobody knew what the future held, "in this case, as in every other, faith in God and in the justice of our cause is the most powerful ally we can have, nationally and individually."²⁷ The writer further stated that "equally important is that those who take part in upholding and defending a righteous cause shall themselves be worthy of the cause they espouse."²⁸ Prayer, he suggested, was a practical way to aid the war effort: "Prayer taps the resources of the Eternal. It gives light on the dark path of duty and brings a clear and uncertain sense of right to those who seek to do God's will. It keeps patriotism pure and strong."²⁹ He concluded the article by reassuring his readers that "God has not forsaken His world . . . he will not forsake those whom He has entrusted with the establishment of His Kingdom on the earth."³⁰ Though avoiding a direct discussion of the Christian origins of democracy or a special relationship between the two, the article was forthright about the Allied cause being not merely righteous but reason-

able, assuring readers moreover that God was on their side for He had entrusted them, Protestant British Canadians, with the establishment of His kingdom on earth.

Another article in the *Maritime Baptist* claimed that totalitarianism was the greatest threat to the church since the fall of the Roman Empire. The writer stated that, “the claim that the need and the authority of the State must override every other loyalty is one which Christian men can never admit.”³¹ He also noted that the freedom that Americans loved and that Britons cherished was never guaranteed to remain: “less than a generation ago freedom seemed assured in countries in which it has now been swept away.”³² The author then came to his key point: “Are there now mutterings in our own countries from which we should take warning? Has America no people who dabble in Fascism, Nazi-ism, and anti-religious Communism? We shall do well to give heed to the signs of the times. *Wrong ideas can spread like a plague, and the Churches must meet them with the truth.*”³³ Thus framed Christian truth became the only effective response to Naziism.

The unique relationship between Christianity and democracy was further expounded upon in the *Canadian Baptist*, where it was argued that British democracy had its origins in the New Testament. One article, entitled “The Spiritual Foundations of Democracy,” argued that democracy has “two main principles; the principle of freedom and the duty of considering others. The privilege we are all willing to accept but are we so ready to carry out the duty? Can we come to see this duty not as something burdensome, but as a joyous privilege? The privilege of loving our neighbour as much, that we want to help him in every way possible.”³⁴ For this writer democracy’s inherent privilege of freedom was the privilege of loving one’s neighbour.

A writer declared in another article that, “Democracy then is a form of government which can be established and maintained only by those who have learned to govern themselves on a moral and spiritual basis, who have learned to think in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number.”³⁵ This author connected this idea of the common good to the Christian theme of sacrifice, writing, “I like to think that democracy was born in the Garden of Gethsemane in that hour when the Master cried, ‘Father . . .’ In that hour the complete surrender of self-will and self-interest for the good of humanity was achieved.”³⁶

Yet another article, this one written by the influential President of the Baptist World Alliance, John Rushbrooke, proclaimed that “the perfect

democracy demands a fully Christianized society . . . it is a Christian concern to stand for democracy . . . where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”³⁷ Expanding on this theme of liberty another article stated the foundational belief that “a vital Christianity and a genuine Democracy are inseparable. The native air of Christianity is liberty . . . Liberty and the spirit of Jesus are one in the same.”³⁸

Some of these statements may appear extreme, especially in comparison with some of the statements from other newspapers, but it should be noted that the concept of Christian liberty was a key element of Canadian Baptist identity at this time. It was not unusual for Baptists to think of themselves as a fundamentally democratic denomination and to pride themselves on their emphasis on liberty (usually stated as soul liberty or religious liberty). Thus the war, with its strong overtones of anti-democratic power, became an occasion for Baptists to elucidate the Christian foundations of British-style democracy. Of course, this concern was evinced throughout the other Protestant press, and while democracy was of particular interest for Canadian Baptists, I have demonstrated here that it was cherished across the spectrum of Canadian Protestants.

Empire and the King of Canada

The idea of the British Empire was also deeply implicated in the Protestant connection between democracy and Christianity. In the two decades between the World Wars there appeared to be a cooling of imperial sentiment and the strong sense of connection to Britain and the empire that had characterized some of the rhetoric and thinking in the Great War and the Boer War. The Royal Visit in 1939, however, revived a sense of loyalty and imperial pride among many and underscored the relationship between British monarchs and democracy. Though British democracies might stand under a growing threat of totalitarianism, the Royal Visit provided reignited Canadians’ pride not only in the monarchy but also in their longstanding connection with Britain, and, in their view, Canada’s senior position within the British Empire.

A writer for the *Maritime Baptist* argued that the recent Royal Tour of Canada by His Majesty George VI and Queen Elizabeth had breathed new life into Canada and the Empire’s democratic spirit. He suggested that it, “led the citizens of the Dominion to feel that we will join ourselves to no party that does not carry the flag and keep step to the music of the Empire.”³⁹ He likened the Royal pair to the Roman Vestal Virgins who

tended the sacred fires of Rome, and who thereby “refreshed the fires of patriotism, which is the vital condition of national permanence.”⁴⁰ This writer also affirmed the rational nature of democracy and the irrational nature of Nazism when he stated the now dashed hope that the

science of destruction would flee before the arts of peace, and that human wisdom might withstand the assaults of blind prejudice and hate, it has been the fate of the statesmen of democracy to meet a situation in which honor and truth, the noblest values of the race, have been ruthlessly ignored; evil has been crowned as good, mendacity reigns in high places, and liberty for which millions have struggled and suffered has not only been counted as worthless dross, but its possession forbidden, and organized might has sought to drive it from the earth.⁴¹

He went on to praise the British statesmen who had exhausted every avenue of peace noting that they had “explored every avenue which contained the slightest possibility of peace, knowing it to be the masterpiece of reason.” In this way the rationality, and by extension the superiority of British democracy, was affirmed. In this way the reasonableness of democracy reinforced the justice of the cause. He pointed out that British statesmen possessed the “confidence that the cause they champion is righteous and right shall prevail.”⁴² The writer then broadened his scope to embrace the whole empire while noting Canada’s special place in it: “An implicit trust in their leadership and strong pride in it as well, characterizes the entire Empire from Cape Colony to the Antipodes, from New Zealand to the States of the Princes of India, from England, ‘that brilliant star upon the crest of time,’ to Canada the fairest jewel in the Imperial Crown.”⁴³

The *United Church Observer* echoed the *Maritime Baptist* in its view that the Royal visit had reinvigorated the democratic spirit of Canadians. “I feel this visit of our King and Queen will cement not only the ties of Empire and the *bon entente* between the two dominant races on this North American continent,” observed on writer, “but will immeasurably strengthen the aims and ideals of democracy throughout the world.”⁴⁴ The same writer further praised British democracy: “where else but in a democracy could a king and queen mingle so freely among the common people, unmolested and unafraid? It augurs well for the future progress of the democratic ideal of government when distinctions of Royalty and commoners are so lost sight of as to make them one – one desire to serve,

one in their will to achieve lasting good for all mankind, one in their whole-hearted co-operation to build the newer and better world order.”⁴⁵

The matter of royalty and Canadian loyalty were connected in a letter to the editor that claimed to be disgusted by the *Observer's* editorials, filled as they were with pacifist sentiments. The writer noted that pacifists, and apparently the editor, objected to “the association of allegiance to God with allegiance to King and country.”⁴⁶ In response, he argued that pacifism always ended, logically, in disloyalty. He warned that the *United Church Observer* should take notice because “the vast majority of our church members will continue to regard loyalty to King and country as second only to loyalty to God.”⁴⁷

Empire, monarchy, and Canadian patriotism were thus unyieldingly equated by the Canadian Protestant press. Indeed, writers in the denominational press would on occasion move beyond implicit arguments to state outright the importance of Canada's relation to the rest of the empire. This led some to go so far as to assert that only when the claims of the state became one with the claims of religion, that is Protestant Christianity, would the state finally become what it was meant to be: “When the empire of men is in effect the empire of God: when the Kingdom of the spirit places its seal on the physical realm then shall come that free totalitarianism which we need, that free claim on the whole man which joins with a free offering of the whole man, in glad service and surrender.”⁴⁸ Once this had been accomplished, “then the state will be what it was meant to be, the necessary structure through which the life of God finds its fullness in the wider ways of men.”⁴⁹ This concept dovetailed with the nation-building ethos that pervaded many of Canada's largest Protestant churches and aligned with the Protestant belief that Canada was a Christian nation. The same writer stated that “it was [with] something like this in mind that our fathers named this land a Dominion. We hear a lot of ‘Dominion Status.’ True Dominion status will only be found when we read into our national life the words of the Psalmist that we have claimed as our own. ‘His Dominion shall be from sea to sea.’”⁵⁰

At the same time that arguments like this were being advanced, Protestant notions about Canadian identity and patriotism continued to be inextricably linked with a durable cultural connection to Britain. There was a strong sense of pride rooted in the belief that much of what was good in the world came from Christianity and British history. As one article in the *Canadian Baptist* stated:

The best things in our British tradition and our Empire's life are the things that grow out of Christian elements in our past and present. British law and justice, British love of fair-play, British tolerance and liberty, and the strong humanitarian and philanthropic strains in our national life – these are all the products of the Christian faith of Christian Britishers . . . it is the bounden duty of every Christian citizen to do all in his power to strengthen and deepen such Christian elements in the nation's life . . . The nation and the Empire need YOUR contribution to its highest life.⁵¹

Democracy and Pacifism

As Gordon Heath has shown, pacifism found a widespread acceptance among Canadian Protestants in the wake of the First World War.⁵² While the rapid rejection of pacifism among Protestants in the autumn of 1939 is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to point out that pacifism not only endured within the United Church but even caused a controversy in October 1939. While pacifism was not the position of the majority in the United Church, it had sufficient influence to shape the General Council's statement in 1938 that war was contrary to the mind of Christ. For the entire year of 1939 there was an ongoing and heated discussion on the subject in the *United Church Observer* located primarily in the letters-to-the-editor. Pacifism as expressed in the United Church and its newspaper merits an essay, nay a monograph, on its own. What follows here is a brief overview of the way in which pacifism was connected to common Canadian Protestant ideas about Christianity, freedom, and democracy.

One article in the *United Church Observer* argued that freedom, democracy, and social institutions could not be defended by the rejection of Christ seemingly entailed by the pacifist position.⁵³ The need to defend democracy was further underscored in a sermon printed in a double-page feature entitled, "The Pulpit Looks at Church and War: From West to East our Ministers Face the Problem of What the Christian Attitude to War Should Be." This piece opened with the statement, "once more we are called to uphold the sacredness of pledges given, to fight for democracy."⁵⁴ This preacher recognized that some members of the UCC were doing some serious soul-searching over the war and the proper Christian response to it. He stated that "if when we come back from our waiting upon God, we take up arms for righteousness, like the knights of old, it will be with an abiding uncertainty that we are working for Him."⁵⁵ While thus seeming

to endow the nascent war with the religious significance of a crusade, the writer went on to argue that, “we all owe too much to our Empire, and to our nation, to stand aside at this time, and let others carry our burden.”⁵⁶ And yet the same writer also called the church to safeguard freedom of conscience and all democratic liberties in the midst of the war. For this reason, he advocated that the church must not become entirely identified with the purposes of the State, as it had in the First World War. He concluded by stating that “the Church must teach and proclaim that God will defend the right . . . that though right is worsted, wrong cannot conquer.”⁵⁷

The *United Church Observer*, when compared to the other denominational newspapers, evidenced a kind of ambivalence toward the war as it became the only Protestant newspaper to consistently give voice to dissenting views while offering a space to critique the identification of Christianity with democracy. For example, one article that, though it critiqued pacifism, advocated caution “lest we be tempted to identify the cause of God with even such a desired form of government as democracy.”⁵⁸ And yet, he wondered, “what will happen to democracy, what will happen to us, if we do not defend ourselves?” One of his answers was “if democracy be of God, God will” defend it. A brief analysis of the thirty-first chapter of Isaiah led him to conclude by asking “is not democracy also in His hands, or does He no longer rule the world?”⁵⁹ Even in critiquing the close identification of Christianity and democracy, then, this writer assumed God’s intervention in human history to preserve and protect Christian civilization, which was, of course, democratic.

Although there were many pieces published in the *United Church Observer* that supported the war, there were many more that argued for a pacifist position. No doubt encouraged by the pacifist leanings of the editor, the pacifist position grew to occupy a place larger than life in the *United Church Observer*. Its presence was certainly disproportionate to the actual numbers of pacifists in the United Church.⁶⁰ It is not so surprising, then, that the “Witness Against the War Manifesto” printed in the *Observer* in October 1939, sparked such controversy.⁶¹ However, by early 1940, the discussion had largely been laid to rest. Regardless of whether one held to pacifism or saw the war as a just cause, democracy and its deep connection with Christianity informed their views.

Yet support for the war effort could still be found in the *Observer*. One article described the discussion and decision about war reached by the

Oshawa Presbytery of the United Church. The viewpoint agreed upon in this discussion was one of regret “that the Christian ideal does not yet prevail in the world and confess our share in the failure of the Church to make it dominant.”⁶² Surely, had Christian ideas spread more fully and taken root more deeply, this war would not have occurred. Emphasizing God’s fatherhood over all peoples, the statement went on to say that, “We deplore war; and while we recognize the sincerity of the pacifist, yet we must insist that Christian principles, upon which our democracy is based, must be upheld today, even at the risk of life itself.”⁶³

A statement from the National Executive of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order implied a similar understanding of the Christian origins of democracy. The statement outlined five tasks of the church in wartime which both the pacifist and the supporter of war could perform. The first task was “The Task of Interpretation.” It noted that the government’s professed aim was to defend democracy and to oppose fascism. This provided an opportunity for the church to “teach our people the true meaning of the democratic way of life.”⁶⁴

This brief survey of pacifism in the Protestant press has focused solely on the United Church. This is not because other Protestant churches lacked pacifists, but because the presence of pacifism in the denominational press was primarily located in the United Church.⁶⁵ Though the discussions surrounding pacifism in the *Observer* seemed to offer the only critique of identifying Christianity too closely with democracy, Christian democracy still played a foundational role in their view of the war and their discussion about how to respond to war.

Prayer and God’s Providence

Christian democracy was also connected with ideas about God’s Providence – understood here as God’s actions in human history and human affairs. This had a practical outworking in Canadian Protestant spirituality. The church, for example, frequently called for days of prayer. In one such instance, the *Presbyterian Record* printed a call for a week of reconsecration “of the Canadian people to our cause” in October 1941. The proclamation stated “at the beginning of the third year of this war the leaders of democracy have re-affirmed their determination to continue the struggle until the evil of Nazi tyranny has been destroyed.”⁶⁶ The proclamation also stated “and know ye further that we do also hereby ordain and declare this week as one of reconsecration of our lives and

principles which under Divine Providence have been our stay and help in the past, to the end that torment may be lifted from men's hearts and peace and safety come for all nations and peoples."⁶⁷ These denominational statements prized democracy over and against the totalitarian Nazi regime, and more importantly indicated the need for purity of life and principle before God, all while hoping that the war might end.

In early September 1939, the Governor General proclaimed a day of prayer and intercession for October 8, 1939. The statement, printed in the *Canadian Baptist*, noted that it would be a day "of humble prayer and intercession to Almighty God on behalf of the cause undertaken by Canada, by the United Kingdom and other Dominions of the British Commonwealth of Nations."⁶⁸ The belief in God's Providence, and that God was active in human affairs came to the fore following the events at Dunkirk. The *Canadian Baptist* contained an article that not only stated the conviction that God acted at Dunkirk, but that this divine intervention was in response to a National Day of Prayer held in England the week prior to the miraculous event. While the events at Dunkirk were seen as a consequence of divine action, and as proof that God was truly on the side of the Allies, the Allied war situation looked bleak late in the summer of 1940. During this grim time a joint statement was issued that appeared throughout the Canadian Protestant press. It was signed by the leaders of each of the four mainline denominations and it called upon Canadians to hold fast in their confidence in God. It stated their collective belief, "that our cause is the cause of Christian civilization, and that Divine Power and guidance will be given to us to win victory for it," and it called on all who believed in God and righteousness to "give themselves to this sacred cause."⁶⁹

King George VI issued an empire-wide call to a day of prayer and intercession late in the summer of 1940. The *Canadian Churchman* noted the upcoming day in an editorial and encouraged its readers to "respond eagerly because all our Empire will be joining with us. What a power of prayer will go forth that day. If we join with all our brethren in the Commonwealth and really and truly rededicate ourselves to Christ we can expect such a blessing in our national life that will surprise us."⁷⁰ Responding to the same appeal from the King for a Day of Prayer, the *Presbyterian Record* included a statement from the Moderator who expressed his hope that Canadian Presbyterians on that day would "earnestly supplicate God's help for the cause of freedom and civilization."⁷¹ Prayer was one of the major responses to the war undertaken by

Canadian Protestants, and their efforts in this regard really seemed to intensify during 1940, when an Allied victory appeared unlikely. As a writer for the *Canadian Churchman* noted, “the power of prayer that goes to God from the civilized world at this time is truly wonderful.”⁷²

A Just and Righteous Cause

As this essay has already suggested, the close alignment and near conflation of democracy with Christianity, and the connection of these with Canada’s place in the British Empire, necessarily resulted in a view of the war as a just cause. But the war was not merely a just cause. It was a righteous cause. One article that had praised the British leaders who tried so hard to avoid the war claimed a confidence “that the cause they champion is righteous and right shall prevail.”⁷³ In the *Observer*, one United Church minister argued that it was the responsibility of the church to teach “and proclaim that God will defend the right, and though right is worsted, wrong cannot conquer.”⁷⁴ A statement from the president of the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec printed in the *Canadian Baptist* stated that “the time has come when a free enlightened people, patient beyond all precedent, has become grimly, resolutely determined that this unholy thing that has risen in the earth must be resisted and crushed.”⁷⁵ In an editorial on the outbreak of war in the *Canadian Baptist*, the editor justified the war on the basis that “the lives and liberties of nations everywhere were threatened by the ruthless racketeer of the Rhine. So it is War.”⁷⁶

The *Canadian Churchman* didn’t include an official statement outlining the justice of the cause, but it was strongly implied in various sermons and editorials. One printed sermon, which gave an extended outline of how the Church should respond to the outbreak of war, made the point that the war was really a fight to establish the ultimate peace: “In the days and weeks to come, many millions of men will march forth, going to war to fight for an ultimate peace,” and that “through their noble action some contribution to the cause of an ultimate peace may be made.”⁷⁷

Canadian Protestants held a common belief that Christianity (read Christian democracy) was the direct antithesis of fascism and Naziism. Indeed, given the rhetoric surrounding “the cause,” it is difficult to see how they could interpret the war as anything but a religious conflict – a war between good and evil. This led some Canadian Protestants to stray into the belief that the war “dreadful though it is, becomes a holy

crusade.”⁷⁸ A similar sentiment described the Allied forces as being “soldiers of the cross which unites us with our fellow believers in the great fight under Christ’s banner against all forces of paganism and irreligion in the life around us.”⁷⁹ Views such as these inevitably led to the demonization of the enemy. A typical example identified Hitler as the Anti-Christ. One article declared that “to defeat this Anti-Christ we have the unflinching promises of God . . . we will, as Christ’s Crusaders, meet the challenge.”⁸⁰ Canadian Protestants’ view of the war as a just and righteous cause based on Christian democracy had its logical conclusion in both support for the war and the demonization of the enemy.

Conclusion

This brief survey began by demonstrating the concept of Christian democracy in the Canadian Protestant press. From there it showed how various facets of the Canadian Protestant worldview were linked with, or overlapped with, a belief in Christian democracy. John Grant has argued that Canadian Christians held a presupposition of Christendom which shaped their worldview. I submit that this presupposition of Christendom assumed a Christian democracy in Canada and the British Empire. For Canadian Protestants, Christian civilization could scarcely be discerned from Christian democracy.

For many Canadian Protestants the origins of democracy were widely believed to be found in Jesus himself, or more vaguely, in general Christian ideals or principles. They thus believed that God himself would intervene in human history in defence of democracy. Discussions of pacifism, for or against, were frequently linked with democracy and Christianity. Democracy was also attached to ideas of empire, loyalty to the British empire, Canada’s place in the empire, as well as the King and Queen, and especially their Royal visit in the spring of 1939. And, last, but perhaps most importantly, it was at the center of the depiction of the war as a just and righteous cause.

There were other important facets of the Canadian Protestant worldview that the confines of space and time prevent me from exploring here. One of these was the Protestant churches’ ideas about its role in Canadian society as nation-builders and influencers of public opinion. The Protestant press exhibited this concern in its polemics against the “liquor traffic” and their desire to restrict commercial activity on Sundays to protect the sanctity of the Lord’s Day. This and other concerns about

public morality were tied to the war effort. Sometimes it was conceived as a necessity for Allied victory, but more often it was connected to the enduring Protestant interest in establishing a lasting peace after the war in the form of a new world order built upon Christian principles. Indeed, the interest in establishing such a peace was evident in the Protestant press from the moment the war began. These elements of the Canadian Protestant view of the war, which require further research, will be explored in my forthcoming work.

What I have meant to demonstrate in this article is that the overlap of Christianity and democracy at the heart of the Canadian Protestant worldview was, (a) connected at a deep level to many other important ideas, beliefs, and assumptions, which, (b) together formed the framework or lens through which they viewed and interpreted the war. The central notion of Christian democracy and the other various elements of the Canadian Protestant worldview resulted in their interpretation of the war not merely as a just and righteous cause, but as a war between good and evil. The survival of Christian civilization was at stake.

Endnotes

1. The role of the concept of Christian civilization in Canadian Protestant support of the war effort has received limited analysis in Charles Thompson Sinclair Faulkner, "Christian Civilization: The Churches and Canada's War Effort, 1939-1942" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975).
2. John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1988), 151.
3. See Gordon L. Heath, "Forming Sound Public Opinion," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 48, no. 2 (2006): 109-59.
4. See Knudson, "Late to the Feast," §1-2, <https://www.historians.org/publicationsand-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-1993/late-to-the-feast>; Also see Robert Wilkinson, "'To the Front': British Newspaper Advertising and the Boer War," in *The Boer War: Direction, Experience, and Image*, ed. by John Gooch (New York: Routledge, 2013), 203-12.
5. John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).
6. Robert Wright, "Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 151.

7. Phyllis Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 99.
8. Among others, this has been noted and studied by William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); see also, Michael Gauvreau, "Protestantism Transformed: Personal Piety and the Evangelical Social Vision, 1815-1867," in *The Canadian Protestant Experience*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 48-97.
9. Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation," 99.
10. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 96. Grant claims that Canadians had a strong sense of destiny in the larger domain of the British empire.
11. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 113-21. This is Wright's thesis in "Canadian Protestant Tradition."
12. Wright, "Canadian Protestant Tradition," 145.
13. See Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
14. Allen suggests that, even though the church union movement and the social gospel seemed to be complementary causes, once the United Church had been formed, the realities of union, re-organization, and the temperance crisis indefinitely postponed the priority of social gospel goals. See Allen, *The Social Passion*, 263.
15. For an account of the controversy in the BCOQ surrounding T. T. Shield's and McMaster, see Clark Pinnock, "Modernist Impulse at McMaster University, 1887-1927," in *Baptists in Canada: Search for Identity Amidst Diversity*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman (Burlington, ON: Welch Company, 1980), 193-208. The impact of the controversy and resulting schism on the university has been studied by George Rawlyk, *Canadian Baptists and Christian Higher Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 31-62.
16. Wright, "Canadian Protestant Tradition," 151.
17. To see how deeply this vision persisted among Canadian Methodists consult Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).
18. While part of this was because of disillusionment following the Great War, it was also further facilitated by the passage of the Statute of Westminster which changed Canada's legal standing from a semi-autonomous dominion, to a

sovereign and autonomous nation within the commonwealth. Canadian politicians had been instrumental in the passage of this act through British Parliament.

19. The Protestant response to the persecution of the Jews in Germany, while important, is beyond the scope of this essay. See, for example, Haim Genizi, *The Holocaust, Israel, and the Canadian Protestant Churches* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).
20. "Christianity, Communism and Fascism: A Call to Thinking People," *Canadian Churchman*, 2 February 1939 (original emphasis).
21. "Christianity, Communism and Fascism."
22. "Christianity, Communism and Fascism."
23. "Christianity, Communism and Fascism" (original emphasis).
24. "Democracy," *Canadian Churchman*, 9 February 1939.
25. "War Forced Upon Us," *Maritime Baptist*, 13 September 1939.
26. "War Forced Upon Us."
27. "War Forced Upon Us."
28. "War Forced Upon Us."
29. "War Forced Upon Us."
30. "War Forced Upon Us."
31. "Christianity and the Totalitarian State," *Maritime Baptist*, 13 September 1939.
32. "Christianity and the Totalitarian State."
33. "Christianity and the Totalitarian State" (my emphasis). Note that despite the fact that the writer refers to America, it was written by a Briton (he refers to himself as this elsewhere in the article) presenting an address in the United States.
34. "The Spiritual Foundations of Democracy," *Canadian Baptist*, 2 February 1939.
35. "Where Democracy was Born," *Canadian Baptist*, 2 February 1939.
36. "Where Democracy was Born."

37. "Spiritual Freedom from Constraints of Earthly Authority," *Canadian Baptist*, 30 March 1939.
38. "Baptist Democracy in a World of Dictators," *Canadian Baptist*, 13 April 1939.
39. "The Statesmen of Great Britain," *Maritime Baptist*, 20 September 1939.
40. "The Statesmen of Great Britain."
41. "The Statesmen of Great Britain."
42. "The Statesmen of Great Britain."
43. "The Statesmen of Great Britain."
44. "The Royal Visit," *United Church Observer*, 15 June 1939.
45. "The Royal Visit."
46. "Objects to Editorial," *United Church Observer*, 15 June 1939.
47. "Objects to Editorial."
48. "Democracy," *Canadian Churchman*, 9 February 1939.
49. "Democracy."
50. "Democracy."
51. "My Duty to My Church," *Canadian Baptist*, 15 January 1941.
52. Gordon L. Heath, "The Rise and Fall (and Resilience) of the Peace Movement Among Presbyterians and the United Church in the Interwar Years, 1919-1939," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2019) 51-77; Gordon L. Heath, "'We Are Through with War': The Rise and Fall of Pacifism among Canadian Baptists Between the Two World Wars," *Baptistic Theologies* 9, no. 2 (2017), 37-53; and Gordon L. Heath, "Irreconcilable Differences: Wartime Attitudes of George C. Pidgeon and R. Edis Fairbairn, 1939-1945," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers*, 1999.
53. "What Should the Church Do About War," *United Church Observer*, 15 September 1939.
54. "What is the Message of the Church?" *United Church Observer*, 1 October 1939.
55. "What is the Message of the Church?"
56. "What is the Message of the Church?"

57. "What is the Message of the Church?"
58. "Pacifism," *United Church Observer*, 1 July 1939.
59. "Pacifism."
60. Ian McKay Manson, "The United Church and the Second World War," in *The United Church of Canada: A History*, ed. Don Schweitzer (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 61.
61. This document was published and signed by a group of pacifist ministers in the UCC. For an excellent account of this controversy and its origins see David R. Rothwell, "United Church Pacifism, October 1939," *Bulletin XXII* (1973-1975), 36-55.
62. "The Presbyteries Speak Out," *United Church Observer*, 15 October 1939.
63. "The Presbyteries Speak Out."
64. "Christians and the War," *United Church Observer*, 1 November 1939.
65. There was limited discussion of pacifism in the *Canadian Baptist*, but it tended to focus on the shortcomings of pacifism and discussing reasons not to be a pacifist.
66. "Reconsecration Week," *Presbyterian Record*, October 1941.
67. "Reconsecration Week."
68. "Governor-General's Proclamation: Day of Prayer and Intercession," *Canadian Baptist*, 28 September 1939.
69. "The Call of the Hour," *Presbyterian Record*, July 1940.
70. "A Day of Prayer," *Canadian Churchman*, 5 September 1940.
71. "Moderator's Message," *Presbyterian Record*, August 1940.
72. "Around a Common Mercy Seat," *Canadian Churchman*, 27 June 1940.
73. "The Statesmen of Great Britain," *Maritime Baptist*, 20 September 1939.
74. "What is the Message of the Church," *United Church Observer*, 1 October 1939.
75. "War," *Canadian Baptist*, 7 September 1939.
76. "War Again!" *Canadian Baptist*, 7 September 1939.
77. "The Price of Peace," *Canadian Churchman*, 7 September 1939.

78. "Christianity on the Fatal Spot," *Canadian Baptist*, 1 January 1940.
79. "The Church – Its Nature and Function," *Canadian Baptist*, 9 March 1939.
80. "War's Miracles of Past Assure of Divine Help Against New Anti-Christ," *Canadian Baptist*, 1 June 1940.