

CSCH President's Address 2020

**Of Piety and Pandemics: The Canadian
Society of Church History Enters its Sixties**

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I'd like to begin by acknowledging that I am speaking to you from the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the Sto:lo people. The majority of you will probably be listening from a different Indigenous ancestral territorial location. Take a moment to acknowledge your location. As you take that moment – and especially if you are a Canadian – ask yourself what actions you are taking to move towards reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians. Patricia Victor, our University Siya:m (a Sto:lo word for respected elder) at Trinity Western University reminds us often that Indigenous protocols and land acknowledgements are not hoops to jump through; they are one aspect of learning to walk well together. In a time of tremendous global upheaval, Congress 2020's theme, "Bridging Divides: Confronting Colonialism and Anti-Black Racism," has given us an opportunity to confront our own colonialism and anti-black racism. May we learn and act in ways that promote justice.

Friends, if you are listening to this virtual presidential address "live" (as opposed to reading it after printing), I want to pause at the outset and give us a few minutes to congratulate ourselves on making it to the end of the Virtual CSCH 2020 Annual General Meeting. The Canadian Society of Church History's sixtieth birthday is one for the record books. Let us consider, momentarily, that our little society did it! Granted, we would never have been able to accomplish this significant feat were it not for the

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incredible support of the Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences and the work of our program chair, Bruce Douville. Back in March, which feels like years ago, when I attended the Federation meeting where the announcement was made that Congress 2020 would be virtual, I assumed that we, like most other scholarly associations, would cancel our conference this year. I believe I said as much when I called a meeting of our executive. Bruce, however, encouraged us to consider the possibility of moving our annual general meeting online. With the extensive support of the Federation, we have done something remarkable, something worth a rousing three cheers and a stirring huzzah.

I think it is important for us all to acknowledge the current historical moment. In the past few months each of us has undergone a tsunami of emotions and experiences as we “pivoted” from life as we knew it to our present state. We could fill a dictionary with words like pivot – or unprecedented – that we did not think would ever get as much use as they have in the past three months. Many, though not all, of us have undertaken the mammoth task of moving our classes from face-to-face to online delivery (I should add that I am very aware that I speak from the incredibly privileged position of being a tenured professor). In our haste to act quickly without upsetting the semester too much for our students, we raced to figure out Zoom, our campuses’ Learning Management Systems, HyFlex learning, multi-access learning, and how to un-mute ourselves when it is our turn to speak on Zoom. Suddenly we were spending more time in front of our screens than ever before.

Overnight it seems, our lives became virtual as our daily commute became much shorter, moving us from one room in our home to another, or perhaps only from one end of a room to the other. We learned to wash our hands; we learned that we touch our faces far more than we thought we had; we learned that two metres is the wingspan of an eagle, the length of a moose, a caribou, a snowmobile, a hockey stick, the space occupied by four ravens, one mountain lion, three Canada geese, or two arm-lengths (although that is an ageist and ableist measurement if you’re a child, a little person, or physically disabled). Across the country we could tune in daily at 1100 Eastern to monitor the growth of Justin Trudeau’s hair. We can probably all name our own chief provincial health officer. How many of us could have done that at the end of 2019?

And the cancellations. We can all itemize multiple cancellations. One after the other, we watched conferences get cancelled. Graduations, too, were cancelled or postponed until such time as it will be safe for us to

gather in large groups again. Research trips have been cancelled. Family gatherings and face-to-face coffees, dinners, and drinks with friends have been cancelled. And I have not even touched on sports, theatre, concerts, and major summer fairs and festivals. Some of us have lost loved ones during this pandemic. Whether those deaths were due to COVID-19 itself or another reason, our capacity to say goodbye in person, or to gather and mourn our loss, has been hampered by necessary public health limitations brought on by this pandemic. So many of the rituals with which we mark the passage of time each year have been cancelled or changed in ways that make them almost unrecognizable. As much as possible we have moved everything we can online, including this conference. I would like to thank each and every one of you who has given a paper, attended a session, or participated in any way in this conference. Your commitment – your faithfulness – to this society and its annual gathering is evidence of the strength of our community. Those of us who have been around the Canadian Society of Church History for a number of years will attest to the warm sense of community that draws us back together year after year.

Here we are celebrating the sixtieth birthday of the society. We are not gathered physically in London, Ontario where we might even have been able to share a candle-less birthday cake (“in these times of COVID” as my eight-year-old granddaughter says, we cannot have people blowing on anything someone else might consume). Instead, we are spread across the country trying our best to recreate the sense of community that replenishes us each year at our annual conference. We are tired. It turns out that Zoom calls and staring at screens day in and day out is exhausting. We do not even need a study to give us evidence for this truth, although these studies exist.¹ We know this truth; we feel it in the deepest part of our being. If you are like me, you have not really paused since the beginning of March when our lives changed so drastically. We moved our courses online. We met contracted deadlines for publications, or we did not meet them but worked hard to get there anyway. We stumbled over the finish line for the semester. But it did not stop there. In addition to our regularly programmed summer research and writing, we now face the certainty that the academic year ahead will also be virtual. Any suggestion otherwise is unrealistic.² If a COVID-19 vaccine is successfully tested and deployed, it is possible that we *may* be back in the physical classroom in late 2021/early 2022.

We will never be back to “normal.” As historians we know that. We know that the worlds before and after watershed events are different. They

may be similar, but they are not the same. And, for all the blustery talk of back to normal, or back to normal but better, that we are hearing from some politicians today, we as historians know that the normal of December 2019 is not going to re-materialize. We are not going back in time. The economic and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be with us for some time.

For my presidential address, then, I hope you will indulge me as we do something a bit different. Like CSCH presidents before me, I have read previous presidential addresses. It was both pleasant and enlightening remembering past conferences along with their presidents' addresses and learning from those that pre-dated me. Alas, I have no insider memories of our founders to offer, nor after this past semester do I feel equal to the task of recounting our society's history. While I do think I have a unique perspective about historical actors on the margins, I have no unique methodology to offer. I have neither the wisdom nor gravitas of presidents who have preceded me, although like Sandra Beardsall, I do not intend to be a disappearing past president. I have nothing catchy to add: no Methodist circuit riders with books or guns, no three-headed calves, and no post-colon-ist witticisms (a la Jaime Robertson). If ever there was a time that we have been forced to "adjust the sails," using Marilyn Färdig Whiteley's term, this year has been it.

Given the age of our society and the format of our conference as well as of this address, I thought it would be a good time to slow down for a moment, to pause and reflect on our society at sixty. What can we say about our sixty-year-old society, other than that, by virtue of age alone, CSCH is entering a period in which it is at higher risk for complications from COVID-19? What we can learn from this moment as we look forward to post-pandemic CSCH conferences?

I would like to begin with an interactive exercise, just to make sure you're still out there. On your computer or handheld device, please go to www.menti.com and enter the code on the screen. I have two menti interactive exercises and we will take a few minutes to work through these.

Menti.com – what are you grieving? These are things unrelated to CSCH directly.

Menti.com – what are you missing, or did you miss, most about CSCH this year?

What losses are you grieving?

Mentimeter



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We are feeling our losses. They hurt. As we have identified the things we have missed most about this year's conference format, we have identified what we value most about our scholarly association. As we move into the future, we need to keep these values in mind as we consider things we *must* change and things we *might* change.

We know from multiple studies by higher education strategists that universities are going to be changed by the current health and economic crisis. In a recent op-ed in *University Affairs*, Ken Steele, who runs education.ca, suggested a number of consequences of the pandemic on planning for delivery of course material in this upcoming academic year.³ They are: 1) equity and inclusion will be major challenges; 2) pedagogical innovation will accelerate; 3) university finances will be in crisis; and 4) the university will endure. Let us consider Steele's final point first – "the university will endure." Steele contends:

Pandemics have disrupted higher education in centuries past, driving scholars from campus and depressing enrolments, but the academy ultimately survived, and emerged transformed by the experience. Academic communities remain essential to our society and economy, advancing knowledge through the interplay of intellect and ideas. This crisis may have stripped away many rituals and traditional trappings of campus life, but it has also cleared our calendars and our minds, reinvigorated our pedagogy and relaxed unnecessary policies, giving us an unprecedented opportunity to rethink our work and reinvent our institutions.

History and the humanities in general (including theology and religious studies) have been under serious pressure since the economic crisis of 2008. History departments across North America have watched enrollments dwindle. According to an American Historical Association study, “of all the major disciplines, history has seen the steepest declines in the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded.”⁴ While we have no clear statistical study for Canadian universities, the attrition is similar.⁵ At large public universities as well as at small private liberal arts universities, where history should be at the heart of the curriculum, we find ourselves under increasing pressure to justify our existence. Most recently, in a shocking example of short-sightedness, a private Christian university in Virginia, Liberty University, eliminated its philosophy program. Not that Liberty University is an example that the majority of reasoned scholars would want to emulate, but for those of us who teach at faith-based institutions, we cannot help but wonder if the outright cancellation of humanities programs is the canary in the coal mine in a landscape of incredible economic uncertainty.

But this pandemic has shown the world what we historians already know: history matters, historians matter, the history of religion matters. Historians around the world have offered blog posts about past pandemics to provide context for the current one.⁶ Church historians like us have used those fora to reflect on Christian responses to the current and past pandemics. As John Fea, our International Keynote Speaker two years ago has commented in his book *Why Study History: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*, historians might “alert us to potential present-day behavior by reminding us of what happened in an earlier era.”⁷ Much of this behaviour has been inspiring. Today, as in the past, individuals and groups have stepped forward in service to one another, to our communities, and to our country. Those who have been unable to donate their services have often donated money. All of these acts of service have reminded us that “we are all in this together.”

Even so, historians remind us that citizens and governments have not always responded sympathetically to horrendous public health crises. Jim Downs recalls for us the lack of intervention in the smallpox epidemic of the 1860s that killed more than 49,000 Americans in southern states. He also points to the lack of political intervention in the 1980s AIDS epidemic, arguing that some political leaders “barely acknowledge[d] its existence.” When these epidemics ravaged minority groups – African Americans and gay men, respectively – “racial discrimination, homopho-

bia, stigma, and apathy” determined the public response.⁸

As church historians we know that Christians have not always responded charitably in times of pandemic. The bubonic plague, that endemic pestilence that became pandemic seventeen times between its first appearance in 1347-50 and its last in 1664-67,⁹ was often interpreted as God’s wrath poured out on both the righteous and unrighteous. Quaker leader George Whitehead’s memoirs described the situation in 1665 plague-ridden London during a time of extreme religious persecution against dissenters, especially Quakers:

God was pleased even then, in the year 1665, to hasten his heavy judgment and sad calamity of the great plague, or raging pestilence upon the said city, and some other places in the land, whereby many thousands of the inhabitants died . . . Though the calamity was common to all classes, yet were the righteous taken away from the evil to come, and it went ill with the wicked; but for all this they would not return to the Lord; neither would the cruel persecutors repent of their abominable cruelties, but persisted therein as far as they could; disturbing our meetings and imprisoning, until they were frightened with the plague . . . As the contagion and sickness increased, many of our persecutors were so terrified, that their hands were for some time weakened; yet still many of them were so hardened that they were resolved to proceed against us unto banishment: as when Pharaoh saw there was respite, he hardened his heart, so did our persecutors.¹⁰

London city records tabulate 68,596 deaths from the epidemic. Scholars suggest that deaths exceeded 100,000 out of a total population estimated at 460,000.¹¹ While a 22% death rate in the final pandemic of bubonic plague was less than half that of the 1347-50 pandemic, which killed 50% of the population of Europe, 22% is a considerable number. Those confined to jails, or living in mean conditions, would have experienced considerably higher mortality. It is little wonder that Whitehead titled his 1665 epistle to Friends, *This is an Epistle for the Remnant of Friends and Chosen of God, Whom He Hath yet Preserved to Bear Testimony in and about the City of London*.¹² In his epistle, Whitehead assured “the remnant” of Quakers (or perhaps he was trying to convince himself) that, “God who hath given us strength and courage to stand in an evil day over Hell and Death and the Devil with all his fiery assaults against the Righteous, and that the Lord hath yet spared, and will

spare a Remnant to bear his mark and name upon Earth, and to hold forth a living testimony for his glory and praise amongst the Sons of men.”¹³

Historians know that the historical actors who live through pandemics often interpret them differently than the historians who come afterward with the benefit of hindsight, distance, and more than a single perspective. As a dissenter who had experienced tortuous persecution at the hands of the Church of England, Whitehead situated the pandemic within a particular set of religious beliefs. Non-dissenters approached the plague in the same way with a different set of religious beliefs.¹⁴ We see similar religious responses to today’s COVID-19 pandemic. John Piper, council member of the Gospel Coalition, “a group of pastors and churches in the Reformed tradition that put the gospel of Jesus Christ at the center of all activities,”¹⁵ runs a blog called *Desiring God*. Recently Piper invited Rosaria Butterfield to write a guest post on his blog. Butterfield is a former English professor at Syracuse University; she is an ex-lesbian who converted to conservative evangelicalism, married a man, and became a parent. In her guest post, Butterfield suggested that the current pandemic is a “surprising answer to prayer.” She reasons thus: churches have rallied to support the elderly and immunocompromised with meal preparation and delivery or shopping for essentials, God has destroyed “idols . . . both national and personal,” and for the first time in years there will be no gay pride parades in June.¹⁶ Butterfield concludes that God has answered the prayers of faithful cis-gender, straight Christians against queer people – Christian or not – by depriving them of an “affirming audience who can sway others to its side,” and “denying them the oxygen that this particular fire [of sexual identity] needs.”¹⁷ As someone who actively and consistently advocates for LGBTQ+ students at a private Christian university that staked its reputation on a “traditional” definition of marriage, I disagree with this particular interpretation. Just as I do not think God brought plague to London to kill off religious enemies on both sides of the dissenting divide, I do not think God caused the current pandemic to cancel Pride.¹⁸ As historians, we seek more complex explanations for such catastrophic events.

History – the practice of studying and analyzing the past, not the past itself – saves us from myopia. Historical inquiry forces us to confront our own limited perspective and abilities as we wrestle with the complexity of the past. As John Fea writes, history requires humility, not pronouncements; “perhaps more than any other discipline, [history] teaches this sense of limits.”¹⁹ We also require empathy in order to understand, but

not excuse, the people of the past. History can help us respond to the present crisis more thoughtfully. A longer view of events whose causes are complicated but knowable, and whose consequences are serious, but difficult to predict, can help us to determine our way forward in the difficult months ahead. Moreover, as Fea has contended, historians can help cultivate the habits and traits of citizenship, “necessary for a thriving democracy.” Habits and virtues like “empathy, humility, and selflessness” are badly needed in our present world.

History requires that we think critically about the world around us. Done properly, we evaluate information and its sources, whether the source of that information is from scientists, journalists, political leaders, or social media connections. As Samuel S. Wineburg has argued in *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*, proper lateral reading is not part of being a digital native. Gen Z and all those who come after them may be completely at home in a digital environment; that does not mean they can navigate its pitfalls without properly learning the importance of lateral reading and critical thinking.²⁰ As Wineburg says, “historians have a crucial role in helping young people navigate the shoals of unreliable, solid, false, true, dependable, and rickety information that confront us. The connections between the historical thinking that we’ve developed in print sources, and the kind of historical thinking that we need to engage in digital sources, those connections are inchoate but are begging to be developed.” Importantly, “[t]he future of the past may be on our screens. But its fate rests in our hands.”²¹

We cannot go back, but how do we go forward? Let’s consider again the three areas Ken Steele identified as certain challenges for universities and those who populate them in the academic year ahead: 1) equity and inclusion; 2) the necessity of pedagogical innovation; and 3) the crisis of university finances. As a scholarly society that is dependent on those who populate universities, the Canadian Society of Church History will certainly feel the impact of these challenges. What does this mean for our small sixty-year old society? Undoubtedly, our small size may have worked in our favour this year as we moved our conference online. As a small association, we had the capacity for nimbleness to move into a virtual platform not afforded to the larger societies for whom the logistics would have been overwhelming. Moreover, as a small society dependent on the labour of volunteers, we have not had to face the financial impact of maintaining an administrative office in straitened circumstances. On the one hand, in addition to Congress itself, I am sure many of us have

born witness to the casualties of large conferences being cancelled. In this way, then, our small size has provided us with the capacity to be flexible.

On the other hand, without the support of the Federation we would never have been able to pull this off. From Swoogo to Zoom to streaming to YouTube to IT support from AV-Canada, the technical and technological infrastructure support for this conference has been immense. With the benefit of all this support, we have been able to innovate. It has been a steep learning curve, but we have done it. Are we prepared to carry this innovation forward into future conferences and between conferences? Once we are permitted to gather in large groups again, are we prepared to commit to including digital conferencing mechanisms as a central part of our annual general meeting in order to expand attendance to those who are unable to travel whether that is because of age or financial resources? I know we have had Skype presentations or papers read in absentia in the past, but this was always a reactive not proactive approach. If equity and inclusion matter to us, how will we act to make CSCH more equitable and more inclusive beyond the face-to-face conferences? Integrating more accessible digital platforms for our conference and ensuring accessible e-commerce functionality on our website will require some changes. It will be a lot of work and some – perhaps even many, if not all – of us are uncomfortable with change.

The Canadian Society of Church History has stood the test of time. At sixty years of age, we have a few aches and pains, but this conference has shown us that we are not too old that we are unable to change. We must confront colonialism and anti-black racism. We must readjust our lives to account for COVID-19. We may need to change some things, but it is going to be okay. We've got this.

Endnotes

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