

## THE SAVOUR OF THE SOIL

Welcome to Canada, the spacious place I have called home for well over half a century. What kind of place is it, and how does this affect human thinking and activities within it, politically, socially, culturally and religiously? In particular, how has being in Canada affected the past and present of the Unitarian movement here, and, reciprocally, how has having such a movement here affected the life of the country? These are questions that can be explored meaningfully only in relation to a wider context, and I want to begin with a brief look at the whole concept of place, which has moved to the focus of attention in many quarters during the past few years.

The English theologian Philip Sheldrake says in his book *Spaces for the Sacred*: “Place has become a significant theme in a wide range of writing, including philosophy, cultural history, anthropology, human geography, architectural theory and contemporary literature. This partly reflects what a number of commentators refer to as a crisis of place in Western societies – a sense of rootlessness, dislocation or displacement.” He adds, “place has three essential characteristics – it engages with our identity, with our relationships and with our history.”<sup>1</sup>

I call your attention particularly to those three words: identity, relationships and history. To a very significant extent these three are one. None of them can be considered adequately in isolation. And the rootlessness theme is never far away. I live in a city where 40% of the inhabitants are, like myself, first-generation immigrants, and though the rate for the country as a whole is lower than that, it is still higher than for any other country except Australia. The First Nations who have been here from time immemorial have honoured a few of us by ceremonially adopting us into their tribes. Canadian novelist Margaret Laurence, who during her residence in Vancouver was part of my congregation, said that though we have in many ways not yet earned the right to call them ancestors, for her part she would do so, because they have the “ability to tell and teach the things needed to be known.” In particular, we can absorb their relationship to the land itself as a part of our identity.<sup>2</sup>

A Unitarian of an earlier generation who expressed this relationship to the land memorably was Arthur Lismer, also an immigrant and a member of the distinguished Group of Seven who transformed Canadian art from an imitation of European models to an authentic expression of the Canadian scene. He expressed himself not only by way of his canvases, but also in his writing. In one passage of which his biographer said it ‘might well fit in words some of the music of Sibelius’, he wrote: “We have a background of epic grandeur. It is a land where romance and rugged charm lie, not in resemblance to another country, but in their own significant forms of beauty and colour ... This design or form of our country is its character, the elemental nature which we recognize as one recognizes a familiar shape. It partakes of our own character; its vitality and emphatic form is reflected in the appearance, speech, action and thought of our people. It is the setting for our development, firing our imaginations, establishing our boundaries. It is home land, stirring the soul to aspiration and creation.”<sup>3</sup>

Here was an echo of what was said back in 1860 by another Unitarian, John Corder, the first settled minister in Montreal: “Undoubtedly a nation is growing up here in Canada, which promises to hold no mean place in the future annals of civilization. ... Our nationality as it grows must savour of the soil on which it grows.”<sup>4</sup>

A savouring of the soil on which we stand is an inescapable feature of an authentic sense of place. But ‘place’ also has a wider meaning, as when we speak of our place in society or in the whole scheme of things. Here too the themes of identity, relationships and history are interwoven, and as a guide in this exploration I am going to follow Charles Davis, who thirty years ago delivered a paper at Carleton

University here in Ottawa entitled “Our New Religious Identity.”<sup>5</sup> Davis had been one of the leading Catholic theologians in England when in 1966 he caused a sensation by announcing that he was leaving the church. He subsequently moved to Canada and became professor of religious studies at Concordia University in Montreal.

In his paper Davis used himself as an example of the crisis of identity through which he said religious adherents were now passing. He had publicly broken with the church because of disagreement with some of its teachings, and yet his views were no more unorthodox than those of many who stayed within it. “If someone now asks me whether I am a Catholic,” he said, “I do not know how to answer.” Politically, the same quandary had to be confronted: “I am from England, but that is not now my home. Does Canada, the country of my citizenship, claim my final loyalty? But Canada rests upon a constitutional arrangement and has not the unity of a people or *Volk*.... To call oneself a citizen of the world is unreal, because there is as yet no world order.”

He then moved to the crux of his argument, citing “an unresolved tension between a growing and desirable universalism and the need for a particular social identity and tradition.” He is, of course, using the word ‘universalism’ in the way sociologists of religion do, to refer to a synthetic view of religion-in-general, as opposed to the particularism of its various organized forms. The problem of identity is that, in his words, “Universalism is destroying the particularity needed to nourish it; particularity, especially in the political order, is threatening the universalism needed for human survival”. How is this dilemma to be resolved? Drawing upon the work of Kohlberg and Habermas, he distinguished stages in the growth of the individual, the collective, and religious traditions, all of which may move from the conventional level focused upon the immediately particular to a post-conventional, universalist identity beneath and beyond all specific traditions.

But this does not mean that one floats free of all traditions or draws indiscriminately from all. I am reminded here, perhaps irreverently, of what Thoreau wrote in another context: “Why should I be lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?”<sup>6</sup> But I find the way Davis saw the universal in relation to the particular enormously helpful in considering what it means to be in a place in every sense of that term. Here are his words:

“Those who have reached a post-conventional religious identity by grounding themselves upon universal religious principles are capable of positively accepting the plurality of religious traditions and substantial changes in their own tradition. Their basic religious identity is not threatened, because it is not tied to the formulated content of the tradition to which they belong.

“But they will belong to a tradition – unless their universalism is of a crude and inadequate kind. The religious counterpart of bourgeois liberalism, though some professedly radical students do not realize it, is the attempt to construct one's own individual religion with elements from a diversity of cultures. A mature universalism is a degree of self-reflection sufficient to allow one to discern the distinction between the universal and the particular in the tradition which is one's own. It does not mean distancing oneself from any organic relation to any tradition. Not to belong to any tradition is to fall into and abstract and empty universalism – abstract, because it is limited to formal and thus repeatable features of culture; empty, because it lacks the unique concrete substance of cultural reality. The eclecticism of do-it-yourself religion is an attempt to fill that emptiness.”

At this point the attitude of the individual to the tradition is not one of conformity but of critical appropriation. This, he said, is not to be effectively achieved by the individual in isolation -- what he called a monologue -- but through engagement with others in “an ongoing process of communication.”

“A post-conventional or universalistic religious identity is therefore realized”, he concluded, “ when people, belonging to a religious tradition, but not tied to its fixed contents or norms, engage as free, autonomous persons in a process of unrestricted and unconstrained communication with others of the same tradition, of other traditions, or of no tradition on matters concerning religion with the aim of achieving agreement, not conformity.”

Where does the individual Unitarian in Canada find her or his place in this whole picture? What is included within the various circles of identity? I use the image of the circle because it is so deeply rooted in this place that is Canada, being very significant in the oldest traditions here. In her 1999 inaugural address as Governor General (the Queen's representative as head of state) Adrienne Clarkson quoted the words of Grand Chief John Kelly: “As the years go by, the circle of the Ojibway gets bigger and bigger. Canadians of all colours and religions are entering that circle. You might feel that you have roots somewhere else, but in reality you are right here with us.” She added that “ the aboriginal circle enlarges to include all of us – native and immigrant – arriving by boat and plane to a vast and beautiful land....”

The first of such circles is that drawn around our own individuality, locating each one of us in a specific time and place. We are what we are as the outcome of a personal history which, however varied it may have been, is held together in the continuity of memory, and expresses the relationships into which we have entered with the persons and places that have been part of our lives. I find it exactly expressed in the words of Tennyson:

I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.<sup>7</sup>

The latter part of that quotation conveys beautifully that one's identity is not a finished product but a work in process, an ideal that one is seeking to embody. That is an important feature of the other circles of identity we will be considering too.

The second of these is that of the country itself, compounded of geography and history. W.L. Morton wrote in his book, *The Canadian Identity*: “The Canadian or Precambrian Shield is as central in Canadian history as it is to Canadian geography, and to all understanding of Canada. It is almost one half of all Canadian territory. The heartland of the United States is one of earth's most fertile regions, that of Canada one of earth's most ancient wildernesses and one of nature's grimmest challenges...” True, and it is also true, as he added, that the “alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life...”<sup>8</sup> 'Civilization', as he identified it, stands for that part of the country in which the overwhelming majority of its citizens live, and this in turn is so varied that perhaps it would have been more appropriate for Corder to have spoken of the savour of the soils in the plural, anticipating the current CUC ritual of adding a pinch of local soil to an urn which travels across the country with each annual meeting.

If the country's physical form is thus varied and intractable to an extent seldom paralleled elsewhere, the same could be said of its human component. In a world where political borders are continually changing, Canada's have remained the same since 1846, apart from the addition of Newfoundland a century later. Within those borders is an area roughly defined by ancient east-west communications along the waterways, which were in turn followed by the French explorers and traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and their British successors.

Political, military and social forces dictated the human form the country subsequently took. The early French alliance with the aboriginal people, reinforced not only by treaties but by a fair degree of intermarriage, gave place to British rule after 1743. Though tempted to impose the English language and religion, a course of action commended by the American colonists, successive British governors came to realize that this would be impossible without repression on a scale that would have been both inhuman and expensive. Their acceptance of the francophone and Catholic identity of the population ensured that the French felt no inclination to join in the revolution that soon erupted to the south of them. The advent of the many refugees from that revolution who eventually came north as Loyalists meant that henceforward the country would be bilingual and bicultural, and it became customary to speak of two founding peoples, with the aboriginal population pushed further and further to the margin.

So pluralism became an established fact, to be deplored or to be celebrated. Large-scale immigration broadened its compass. The 1920s saw the emergence of the metaphor of the mosaic, proposed in conscious opposition to the American metaphor of the melting-pot. Each tile in the mosaic, it was claimed, would maintain its own pre-existing identity, and contribute to the overall pattern that would constitute the Canadian identity. Back in 1962, Pierre Trudeau articulated its program. "We must", he said, "separate once and for all the concepts of state and nation, and make Canada a truly pluralistic and polyethnic society... it could become a brilliant prototype for the moulding of tomorrow's civilization."<sup>9</sup> This vision was echoed and amplified in the challenge issued by visiting British economist Barbara Ward six years later. "Canada", she wrote, "has a particular aptitude for experiment. This is partly a question of her internal stresses.... She would have detached nationalism creatively from the 'nation state' and shown a way forward to the scores of states – many of them new – who harbour a number of 'nations'.... A Canada prepared to pioneer with lucidity and daring the role of the first 'international nation' in history would not only have an immense impact on its fellow states. It might also transform its own political life."<sup>10</sup>

But this separation between the two concepts of state and nation is not easy to maintain. It is easy enough to point to nations such as the Kurds or the Basques who have no state of their own, but general parlance refers to nation-states simply as nations, as in the accepted name for what is called an 'international' body, the United Nations. The ambiguity here has been exploited by Quebec separatists. Their provincial legislature has long been called the National Assembly, and they have looked for separate representation on international bodies. The parliament of Canada attempted in 2006 to clarify the situation when it voted by an overwhelming majority that "the Québécois form a nation within a united Canada", but a large minority within that province has voted in referenda to separate from Canada and form their own nation-state. Meanwhile, there has been no such controversy over the designation of the aboriginal groups as First Nations.

The other term that has been used in this discussion is 'multiculturalism'. Controversy over nationalism, multiculturalism, and the mosaic has, with varying terminology, constituted the debate on Canadian identity that has existed for many decades, and to some extent ever since the country came into being in its present form. No end is in sight, with significant contributions to the debate appearing successively in the past three years: in 2007, Andrew Cohen's *The Unfinished Canadian*; in 2008, John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country*, sub-titled *Telling Truths about Canada*; in 2009, Rudyard Griffiths's *Who we Are*. On the one hand, there are those who stress the diversity, seeing Canada as a 'community of communities', as Joe Clark, Trudeau's opponent in Parliament, put it. On the other hand, there are those who see this emphasis (if we use Charles Davis's analysis in this connection) as a premature leap into universality by-passing a needed acceptance of particularity if we are to find any glue that will bind all the features together. In terms of the more usual metaphor, it is argued that a mosaic is not just a random collection of tiles; they have to form an identifiable pattern. Twenty years ago Reginald Bibby,

one of Canada's leading sociologists of religion, wrote in his book *Mosaic Madness*: “On the surface, for a country like ours to opt for a pluralistic model and declare itself to be a nation of nations sounds workable. And as the idea of the cultural mosaic spills over into other areas, such as relationships and family life, education and the media, the idea of being able to choose freely from many options sounds inviting... However, the mere presence of diverse parts does not for a moment ensure an integrated piece of art – let alone an integrated and prosperous society...:if what we have in common is our diversity, do we really have anything in common at all?”<sup>11</sup>

Griffiths, in the book I have just mentioned, and Saul, more particularly in his earlier book *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, claim that the path out of this dilemma was marked out by individual citizens who at key points in our history collaborated in pursuit of common ideals transcending the diversity of their cultures. The heroes of their story (in defiance of the commonly held view that Canadian history has had no heroes) are those who struggled together for reform and responsible government in the pre-Confederation period – William Lyon Mackenzie together with Louis-Joseph Papineau, and Robert Baldwin together with Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine. The latter couple, called by Saul 'the original Siamese twins', shared the highest elective office in what then constituted Canada and were able to put into effect many of the reforms to which they were both dedicated.. Griffiths went on to enumerate other more recent cross-cultural collaborators who followed the same path.<sup>12</sup>

None the less, the moves in this direction have always had to contend with others moving in the direction of a polarization of cultures, and the tension continues. But as that astute commentator Northrop Frye observed over forty years ago, “the uncreated identity of Canada may be after all not so bad a heritage to take with us.”<sup>13</sup>

If we move now to the third circle, that of religion in Canada, many of the same features re-emerge. Here too it is a matter of being a part of all that one has met and at the same time bringing these disparate elements into some form of unity. All forms of religion in Canada, apart from that of the aboriginal peoples, have been imported from elsewhere, and often there has been resistance to any attempt to modify them from the form they took in their original home. The 'colonial mentality' long accepted that the best models both for thinking and for practical organization were to be found there.

During the French era the Roman Catholic Church was inextricably bound up with the state and was given responsibility for directing the life of the *habitant* settlers, as well as for efforts to convert the aboriginals. After the British took over the country there were attempts to set up the Church of England as the established church, tempered by the realization on the part of successive governors that French Canadian acceptance of this was a hopeless proposition and that a more pragmatic approach to effective government meant reaching some sort of accommodation with the Catholic Church. With the arrival of the Loyalists came a number of other Protestant denominations, and religious pluralism became an established fact, accompanied for many years by rivalries and conflicts. These have subsided considerably in more recent times; by the middle of the twentieth century a fairly simple picture of church affiliation had emerged. The Roman Catholic Church remained by far the largest, counting nearly half the entire population in its membership. In the Protestant half, the United Church of Canada and the Anglicans had the largest membership, followed at a considerable distance by the Presbyterians, Lutherans and Baptists. No other denomination had more than an insignificant proportion of the total.

From the mid-1960s onward organized religion has seen massive decline. The period has been one during which there have been a great many careful surveys, which together with the figures from the decennial censuses make it possible to measure this fairly accurately. A report presented to the Anglican

Church in 2005 showed that membership had fallen by 53% in the previous 40 years and was continuing to drop by 2% per annum. The United Church went down by 39% between 1961 and 2001, the Presbyterians by 35% in the same period. The Catholic Church slightly increased its membership by receiving large numbers of immigrants from countries such as the Philippines, though it did not keep pace with overall population growth. But its stronghold in Quebec registered the most spectacular change in weekly church attendance. In the mid-fifties 88% of the population attended; by 1990 this had dropped to 28% and was still falling. Still, there are some individual congregations in the mainline churches that are thriving, and the evangelical churches, though representing only a small portion of the population, have registered significant growth. The same is true of non-Christian faiths such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Islam, which have also benefited from recent immigration.

In the last census, second only to the Catholics in total numbers were those who entered themselves as having "No Religion": 4.8 million people, or 16% of the total. In my home province of British Columbia that figure was 35% and in the city of Vancouver 41%. As I look at those figures, my mind goes back to something that occurred while I was a student at Oxford. The college chaplain, concerned about low attendance at his services, posted a list on which he asked us to indicate our religion. One student wrote in "Personal", and a number of others then followed suit. I suspect that if such an option had been offered in the census a great many of those who indicated 'no religion' would have chosen it, for despite the decline in organized religion, recent surveys indicate a great interest in and personal practice of some form of what is called spirituality.

Another component of the changing religious scene has been the rise of interest in contextual theologies. One of its foremost exponents in Canada has been Douglas Hall, former professor of theology at McGill University. "Something new has been added in contemporary contextual theology", he wrote. "The simplest way of designating that new element is to call it the *sense of place*. ... What we have by way of a tradition as Christians, once the centre of it all moved beyond the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, is largely a European phenomenon... Contextuality means in a special sense the discovery of the place-dimension of the human condition ... bound up with the dramatic spread of Christianity into parts of the world which could never be europeanized in the manner which befell North America."<sup>14</sup> With direct reference to Canada, he wrote, "Our theological communities have always been heavily laced with non-Canadian teachers, and thus Canadian ministers and laity have been indoctrinated in British, European and American theological traditions with very little attempt to relate all this to the specifics of the Canadian situation.... we repeat nearly verbatim the ideas which come out of other people's political, cultural and theological struggles."<sup>15</sup>

Hall's identification of themes for a Canadian contextual theology is instructive, particularly since it was prefaced by the comment: "The very idea of a theology 'Made in Canada' seems to many a contradiction in terms" He continued: "Had we any imaginative awareness of our own 'place', we might realize that it contains dimensions which are highly evocative for theology. To exist on the edge of empire (as ancient Israel nearly always did) is for instance an intensely suggestive situation for bearers of our particular religious tradition. To be the inhabitants of a 'space' where extremes of cold and heat dominate, where nature is writ large and is not always 'user friendly'; where a sparse population has never been able enthusiastically to imbibe even the pale Canadian version of the American Dream that it nonetheless clearly envies; to be therefore a people whose literature and *mythos* abounds in the theme of 'survival' (Atwood) rather than 'success' -- what could be more provocative...? To be founded upon two European cultures, which were never easily compatible; to have in our midst the peoples of many nations, and so to enjoy the prospect of being perhaps 'the first international nation' (Barbara Ward) in a world of deadly conflict -- what could be more beckoning to the spirit of a theological tradition based on the Good News of reconciliation and peace? One could go

on.”<sup>16</sup> One could. For my part I would add the growing dialogue with the people of the First Nations who could be counted as ancestors, as Margaret Laurence put it.

Many of these themes will emerge once more as we turn to the fourth and last circle – that of the Unitarian movement in Canada. Unlike such movements in other parts of the world with the exception of Australia and New Zealand, it did not evolve on its own soil out of another form of religion, but was brought in by immigrants who were already Unitarians when they came. In the early days, the period following the War of 1812, these Unitarian immigrants came from Ireland, England and New England. Later in the century, a very substantial number came from Iceland; they were liberal Lutherans who rapidly identified themselves as Unitarians after their arrival. In the 1921 census, one-third of all Unitarians in Canada were from that background.

As with the other religions transplanted from elsewhere, there was for a long time an attempt to make it replicate as far as possible the form it took in its place of origin. Literature and ministers were imported; the latter often stayed only for a limited period. The 'colonial mentality' characteristic of other forms of religion was dominant among the Unitarians too – all significant thinking and practice was supposed to come from the centre of things, of which they were only distant outposts. This was accentuated by the smallness of numbers in the case of the Unitarians. It long persisted, and there is still heavy dependence on imported materials produced for another context, either in their original form or with some attempt to Canadianize them. Too often they have also brought with them involvement in controversies and conflicts with little or no relevance to Canada.

One aspect of this irrelevance appears in what Douglas Hall said about being 'on the edge of empire', which is a very different situation from being at the centre of empire. The consciousness of belonging to a major world power, whether Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or America in more recent times, inevitably affects religious thinking, and Canada, though not as marginal in the world as Ireland or Iceland, is no more than a middle power, and the contribution it makes to the life of the world will be of another order. Reflection on what that will be becomes an important consideration for Canadian religions generally and for Unitarians in particular.

Historically, the movement grew slowly. After an abortive attempt in the troubled days of the early '30s, a congregation came into being in Montreal in 1842, under the energetic but temporary leadership of an Irish minister, Henry Giles; he was succeeded by John Cordner, also from Ireland, who stayed for 35 years. The congregation for a time constituted the Presbytery of Canada of the Irish Unitarian movement, but then discarded its presbyterian form of government in favour of the congregationalism of England and the United States. The Toronto congregation was formed three years later and called a Scotsman as its first minister. For most of the century these were the only two congregations in Canada, though their members contributed substantially to Canadian society at all levels. The movement grew slowly in the early twentieth century, then went into decline until after the Second World War, when it expanded rapidly. Ties with Britain, Ireland and Iceland weakened as those with the American movement became stronger. The Canadian Unitarian Council was formed in 1961, and went through a struggling first decade of trying to establish itself as an effective body despite the handicap of severely limited resources.

The close ties that had developed with the American movement brought many benefits but also problems. During the '70s and early '80s American UUs were conscious of having lost their way, and were almost in despair of finding a way to articulate their new identity. They had merged two historic traditions organizationally, but unlike the Canadians who worked on the merger producing the United Church of Canada some years earlier, they had given little thought to what this implied for the personal

identity of individuals. The feeling of being lost seeped over the border through the widespread use of American materials and the largely American composition of the ministry, though there was not the same basis for it, since the Universalist component of the American merger was virtually extinct in Canada by the time the CUC was formed, having fallen to less than one percent of its one-time strength. The three surviving congregations, two of them in villages, reported a combined membership of 68, and it was acknowledged that some of these were in fact Unitarians who had moved to the areas served by those congregations. But if in Canada there was not the same problem of creating a new religious tradition and identity, there was a problem in that there was little general awareness, particularly among the newer members, of the longer tradition either of the Unitarian movement as a whole or of specifically Canadian Unitarian history. When seven principles for the UUA were eventually proposed and eagerly accepted almost as though Moses had come down from the mountain with tablets of stone, the CUC jumped joyfully on to the bandwagon, modifying those principles only to the extent of Canadianizing the spelling. If there was any awareness at that point of the danger of the empty and abstract universalism described by Davis it got lost in the enthusiastic relief that at last here was something to be seen as providing an identity.

But it did deflect interest away from the attempt during the same period to undertake a deeper exploration of the Canadian contextual themes enunciated by Douglas Hall. In 1985 Mark DeWolfe picked up the challenge in a paper entitled "Our Corner of the Mosaic" presented to the annual meeting of his ministerial colleagues, which reverberated more widely and resulted in a decision to devote the 1988 CUC annual meetings to an exploration of Canadian contextual theology. A booklet was produced for congregational discussions prior to that meeting, entitled *Listening to the Language of the Land*. The CUC meeting itself featured presentations by two academics from other denominations who were working in this field. But we always seem to be more adept at launching new projects than at following up on them, and this one sank below the horizon again. An attempt to bring it back up four years ago did not draw enough support to proceed. More recently, the CUC set up a process to involve individuals, congregations and workshops at its annual meetings to see if it might be possible to promote a national identity, but it would be premature at this point to guess how far this will go.

There are many other parallels that appear when one begins to probe more deeply into how Canada has been affected by having Unitarians in it and how Unitarians have been affected by being in Canada. There has been the same internal diversity, producing a debate over whether to embrace pluralism itself as an identity or to look for some more determinate convergence. In the Unitarian picture, the pluralism has been in religious beliefs rather than in language, culture or ethnic origins; in fact Unitarian congregations are very homogeneous ethnically, in spite of concern over failure to attract persons of other than European ancestry, and the frequent use of worship materials from Eastern religions. Again, there has been the same cavalier attitude among so many members towards traditions and a history going back beyond yesterday. The frequently heard complaint that Canadian history is boring is echoed in the reluctance of many Unitarians to look at the centuries-old road the movement has travelled. In the denomination as in the country there has been the same influx of newcomers, balanced by large numbers leaving; the total membership of the CUC today is almost the same today as when it was first formed, though the population of the country is much larger.

Concern has been expressed in recent years over the shallowness of knowledge about the country and its traditions that has been required of persons seeking Canadian citizenship (by contrast with the reluctance to accept high standards of education and professional training gained in another part of the world). The same could be said about the almost casual ease with which one can become a member of a Unitarian congregation. In both contexts, again, appears the negative identity. In view of their history, it is not surprising that so many Canadians begin their self-definition by making it clear that

they are not Americans, nor that so many Unitarians insist at the outset that theirs is not a church with creeds and dogmas.

Such parallels aside, Unitarians in Canada, like all other Canadians, have to deal with their physical setting. Canadian song-writer Gilles Vigneault summed up the climatic aspect of this in one phrase: "Mon pays, c'est l'hiver." Mark DeWolfe picked up on what Douglas Hall had already said about 'winter light' in these words: "If we are as a people truly to belong to the land and country of Canada, then we must learn spiritually how to be at home in winter. And it might be possible to develop a stance for living creatively in Canadian winters which applies to the winters of the soul, which arrive in any season, which might be the gift of Canadian spirituality, a Canadian theology, to the larger world."<sup>17</sup> Such a gift could be especially meaningful for Unitarians, who have been accused before now of having a 'fair-weather' religion. But no less than other Canadians who can afford to do so, they flock to sunnier and warmer climes during at least part of the winter.

One respect in which Canadian Unitarians, like American UUs, differ substantially from other religious bodies is in the greater degree of consensus over basic values as distinct from doctrines. A systematic survey conducted in 1979 by Robert I.H. Miller established that here there was practically no variation that could be attributed to class, education or frequency of church participation, nor were there more than minimal differences between Canadians and Americans. Since that survey the tendency to make adherence to the Seven Principles (capitalized as in the Ten Commandments) a widely accepted way of identifying Unitarians may have given additional corroboration to these findings.

There is also a high degree of homogeneity in political affiliations. Of the three parties competing country-wide, a great majority of Unitarians support the New Democratic Party, with a smaller number supporting the Liberals and almost none supporting the Conservatives. The association with the political left goes back to the days of the Social Gospel, prominently supported by a number of Unitarians. A listing of those who have made significant contributions to political and economic life, as also to education, social change and the arts and sciences takes up 45 pages in my book *Unitarians in Canada*,<sup>18</sup> and is out of all proportion to Unitarian numbers. Impressive though this is, some caution is called for in claiming this as a Unitarian contribution, for some of these individuals were only peripherally involved in church life, or may have subsequently moved away from it altogether.

One notable example of political action by a Unitarian goes back to the days of what John Ralston Saul called the original Siamese twins. The person who acted as intermediary in bringing Baldwin and LaFontaine together, and who succeeded Baldwin as co-premier after his retirement, was Francis Hincks, an Irish Unitarian who had thrown himself into supporting the cause of reform ever since his arrival in Canada, and became the only Unitarian ever to have served in the highest elective office in the country, though a number of others have held cabinet positions, both federally and provincially .

Since the CUC came into being, it is possible to speak with greater confidence of Unitarian declarations and actions in relation to public affairs, as these have been democratically endorsed. Resolutions at annual assemblies have emerged from considerable research, and recommendations both from individual congregations and from the CUC have been made to Royal Commissions or other public bodies charged with investigating social, educational and environmental issues. On one occasion the CUC co-sponsored with McGill University an academic symposium on toleration.

One particular area may serve as an illustration of social change in which Unitarians have been heavily involved from the outset – that of sex and marriage. Less than fifty years ago, in the early days of the CUC, a person could serve a prison sentence for advocating contraception, a law that was not changed

until 1969. Abortion was outlawed until 1988. Divorce was very difficult to obtain until the Divorce Act of 1985; in fact some provinces had no divorce courts at all and divorce was obtainable only by an Act of Parliament in each instance. Until 1969 homosexuality was punishable by up to 14 years in prison. The present century saw the gradual legalization of same-sex marriage, beginning with court judgements in some provinces that prohibitions here were inconsistent with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and culminating in an Act of Parliament in 2005 legalizing same-sex marriages in the whole country. Canada became the fourth country in the world to adopt such a reform. Unitarians were prominently active in promoting all these changes, both as individuals and through political lobbying by the CUC.

Let me say a word in conclusion about what is often misleadingly referred to as 'the separation of the CUC from the UUA' – misleadingly because as with Siamese twins, one can only separate what is already joined, and the CUC was never joined to the UUA by anything more than affiliation, as also with the British General Assembly and the IARF. What actually happened is that for the first forty years of the two bodies nearly all of the Unitarian congregations in Canada were members of both, supporting both financially and receiving services from both. This was more and more felt to be an unwieldy burden, particularly since many of the services from the UUA had little or no relevance to Canada. So after much discussion there was indeed a separation, but it was a separation of the individual Canadian congregations from the UUA, making the CUC the recipient of their financial support and the provider of services, except for ministry, which was still organized on a continent-wide basis. A few congregations chose to continue their membership in the UUA as well, making token financial contributions.

So where do Canadian Unitarians stand today? We are as perhaps never before inescapably a part of the overall religious scene, with a degree of acceptance that we seldom received in the past. We are active in interfaith activities. Perhaps more than any other form of religion we have internalized the mosaic, which has resulted in the same identity problems as in the country at large. We too have an unfinished identity, as we peer through the arch to the untravelled road that beckons. A recent book was sub-titled *The Elusive Utopia*, and perhaps that is as good an image as any, given Sir Thomas More's playful use of the Greek when he coined that word: *eu topos*, the good place; *ou topos*: no place at all.

## NOTES

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John A.B. McLeish: *September Gale*, Toronto (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) 1973, p. 75.
4. John Corder: *Twenty-five Sermons*, Montreal 1868, pp. 173, 176-177.
5. Charles Davis: "Our New Religious Identity", *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 9,#1 (1980), pp. 25-39.
6. H.D. Thoreau: *Walden*, chapter on "Solitude".
7. Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "Ulysses".
8. W.L. Morton: *The Canadian Identity*, Toronto (2<sup>nd</sup> edn) 1972, p. 4.
9. Pierre Trudeau: "Canada and French Canadian Nationalism" in William Kilbourn (ed) *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom*, Toronto, 1970, pp. 15, 16.
10. Barbara Ward: "The First International Nation" in Kilbourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-48.

11. Reginald W. Bibby: *Mosaic Madness*, Toronto, 1990, pp. 91-92
12. Rudyard Griffiths: *Who We Are*, Vancouver, 2009  
John Ralston Saul: *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, Toronto, 1997.
13. Northrop Frye: *The Modern Century*, Toronto, 1967, p. 123.
14. Douglas John Hall: "On Contextuality in Christian Theology"  
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15. Douglas Hall: *The Canada Crisis*, Toronto, 1980, pp. 37-38.
16. "On Contextuality", p. 15.
17. Mark DeWolfe: "Living in the Dark", sermon delivered on February 2, 1986  
to the Unitarian Congregation of South Peel.
18. Phillip Hewett: *Unitarians in Canada* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn), Toronto, 1995, pp. 330-375.

-- Phillip Hewett, Collegium 2009