From Radical Revival to Gradual Gentrification: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Québec

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Introduction

Telling the story of the growth of the Québec Mennonite Brethren Church comes down to recalling the most eventful and troubled part of Québec's history. The years of change and turmoil that Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church planter Ernest Dyck came to refer to as the "Quiet Revival" form a period called the "Quiet Revolution". The history of the MB Church in Québec is so intertwined with the trajectory of Québec society that no one could understand how this small group of Churches planted in a semi-urban setting on the North shore of the island of Montreal emerged without a general assessment of what it meant for Québecois to live in the post-war era.

Depicting such a trajectory of course depends on how one chooses to interpret what happened in the Post-war Era and the meaning and importance one attributes to the Quiet Revolution in Québec's history. In short, historians of that era have wondered about the degree to which the Quiet Revolution was a dichotomy in relation to the previous era, often referred to as the "Grande Noirceur": an obviously tendentious designation. Assessing the nature and meaning of both eras also reveals a general perspective

of Québécois identity: do Québécois form a distinct collectivity that evolved in a separate sphere, on a different rhythm from that of the rest of the Anglo-American continent?[1] Many Québecois historians of the 1970s and 1980s reacted to the prevailing nationalist and "survivance" mentality that overlaid historical discourse, shifting their perspective by assuming the "normality" and modernity of the Québec society – instead of its backwardness – within the North American area[2].

This paper does not pretend to offer a contribution to that assessment. However, any study that digs in that fertile and controversial epoch must acknowledge the complexity of history and its interpretations. As I wrote this paper, my first (conscious) assumption about the Quiet Revolution was that the 1960 election of Jean Lesage's Liberal Party after a fifteen year monopoly of Maurice Duplessis's Union Nationale represented an important political step towards the modernization and secularization (however not completed until the de-confessionalization of the school commissaries in the 1990s) of the Québec state and society. Yet by no means would I portray an overly sudden Quiet Revolution with no antecedent, no brewing period, no social causes. The fact that I locate the Quiet Revolution (1960) in the Post-war cultural and demographical context on an international scale indicates that I not only see it as related to the consequences of the war, but also as a local variation of a wider global phenomenon.

Another assumption I had was on the two-fold meaning of the Quiet Revolution as a cultural and political rebellion against clerical control as well as against the social domination of the Anglophone minority over the French-speaking majority in Québec. On that matter, it may be difficult to set a *tableau* for all of Québec since reality varied from region to region, depending on the proximity to Montréal, on the closeness of both linguistic groups, on the local economic disparities, as well as on the state of the industry and of labor relations. Without taking into account any general picture of the French-English situation, I chose to limit my study to the particular context of the Sainte-Thérèse region; a choice that will undoubtedly tinge the portrait given here.

Thirdly, as a Québecois trained in U.S. history, my first encounter with a narrative of the Quiet Revolution is rooted in my childhood experience. Hearing my folks tell stories of their youth molded my understanding of the era I am now grappling with. Yet, although distancing myself from their perception of Québec's history is an unavoidable intellectual process, this firsthand – and fatally biased – comprehension of the experience of the Québécois

born during the baby boom somehow allows me to grasp the emotional charge, and thus the ultimate meaning, of these moments.

Fourthly, while grounding my explanation on the social and historical context, my paper should be less considered as a contribution to the history of the Quiet Revolution than a contribution to church history in Québec, and more broadly to Mennonite history. The perspective proposed in this paper is that of the social history of a Church movement's genesis and development. Through interrelated stories of conversions and interactions around a small suburban Mennonite Brethren outpost, the focus will be on the social and generational status of the converts. We will then explore how their newfound faith and role in the Church shifted their perspective on life and society. Lastly, I use the term "gentrification" which usually refers to a neighbourhood's betterment in lifestyle and social status. In this paper, it will be employed as an equivalent of the French term "embourgeoisement", which not only refers to the transformation of a neighbourhood, but primarily to one's departure from a radical, revolutionary standpoint and lifestyle, and the transition towards a more conventional, capitalist and bourgeois way of life.

Different Work in a Different Society

The Québec MB Church is the only provincial conference among the Mennonite Brethren in Canada where Church planting was first and foremost the fruit of a missionary effort instead of that of a settlement movement as it was in Western Canada. Québec was not targeted by the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches as a mission field before the late nineteen fifties, about a hundred years after Mennonite Brethren first settled in Western Canada. Why did they wait so long before considering Québec a potential provincial conference of MB Churches, other MB mission works were at that time already well established in remote countries such as India, China and the Belgian Congo? Why the national neglect?

Undoubtedly, there was a tendency to equate mission with the colonial world, and to use the colonial system to reach the "uncivilized" with schools, hospitals and churches. The language barrier should also be noted as an obstacle to MB Church planting in Québec. From the Anglo-Canadian perspective, Québec, the only French-speaking province of Canada, could almost feel like a foreign and mysterious separate empire within Canada. But the biggest challenge would be the hegemony of the Catholic Church

over Québec society. Since the Conquest of New France by Great Britain in 1763, the Catholic Church had maintained protective control over the French Canadians as guardians of their identity (Catholic and French) against the English and Protestant invaders. The subsequent settlement of Protestant English and Scots in Québec created a clear-cut division between what novelist Hugh MacLennan identified as "two solitudes". Montreal still has that East-West divide, rue Saint-Laurent, with French-speaking neighbourhoods on one side, and English-speaking neighbourhoods on the West side. The "border zones" would sometimes see many conflicts and fights arise between the two groups. Those growing up in such "border zones" would sometimes be instructed by their parents not to go play at the park, because there they could "stumble upon" English people. The more bourgeois and wealthy English were those who could afford practicing sports and who had leisure activities for their children. The typically poorer French Canadian would often have to work two jobs and even require their children to work as well. Street fights and conflict between French and English were not uncommon at that time, an atmosphere that has now completely vanished in a city increasingly cosmopolitan (rather than dualistic). Despite this socio-linguistic cleavage mixed marriages did occur, sometimes leading to some ostracism from the community.

Before 1960, virtually all French Canadians were Catholics, baptised as infants and thus incorporated into the Church. The control of the Church over the French population and over politics was overwhelming. The Church was the cement of civil society, it ran the school system from the elementary to the university level, it ran the hospitals, it had the power to ban from public life books, music, films, drama acts and popular shows. Selling condoms in a store was a crime and the police had a "morality" division devoted to fight depravity. There was a black market for those who would read great French poets such as Baudelaire or Lamartine because these "anti-clerical" works were deemed dangerous by the clergy (they were on the Catholic black list). Distributing Evangelical literature was also forbidden in 1950s Québec.[3]

1961: Selecting the Location and the Missionary

This was the setting where Ernest Dyck was asked to start a Mennonite Brethren mission work in the province of Québec in 1961. Ernest and Lydia Dyck had been evacuated from Congo in 1960 and the Canada Inland Mission (CIM) considered Québec a

temporary station for missionaries who had the ability to speak French while waiting for the reopening of the mission in Congo.

Since the CIM had no previous knowledge of Québec society and geography, Henry Warkentin was sent there to investigate a potential mission field, not for the English and Protestant minority, but one that would focus on the French and Catholic majority. After an initial trip to Québec, Warkentin returned with Ernest Dyck. Together they spotted several suitable locations where no other Evangelical churches existed. The north shore of Montreal was selected with the town of Saint-Jérôme targeted as the first place to start a local church. Another town about fifteen kilometers south, Sainte-Thérèse, was targeted as a second potential location.[4] Both towns, especially Sainte-Thérèse, were cultural, economic, and demographic hotspots populated densely enough for planting more than one church. These were places of higher education, both towns had a regional college where the youth of the nearby towns and villages converged. They were also industrial centers where dozens of factories employed thousands of workers. At the turn of the 1960s, there were six piano factories in Sainte-Thérèse.[5] That means that workers' unions were important, and a distinctive labour mentality emerged there. As the factory bosses were typically English and the workforce was most often French-speaking, struggles and strikes in the labour sector in Québec of course followed the usual division along linguistic lines.[6]

The First Decade

When the Dyck family crossed the Ottawa River after driving across the country from Alberta, Ernest immediately felt he was now in a foreign country. As he stopped to fill the gas tank, he could hear the different music of the French language spoken everywhere:

> We realized from the day of our arrival in St-Jerome that we were in French Canada. This was Québec and we would daily have the opportunity of improving our French. However, most of the people were friendly and we believed that, with the help of the Lord, we would find friends in our new environment. The countryside surrounding our town was beautiful.[7]

Ernest Dyck had been born in the village of Hierschau, the Molochna colony in Russia. He had to flee as a child when his father Peter was shot by robbers. With his mother and siblings, Ernest first settled in Manitoba, then in Alberta, and finally in Abbotsford,

British Columbia. He experienced a personal conversion to Christ as a teenager. As a young adult he started Bible studies and went to the MB college in Tabor. He married Lydia and experiencing a calling to go evangelize in Africa, he and Lydia moved to Québec. After two years in Québec where they were sent to learn French, the Dycks moved on to Belgium where they studied the Belgian colonial system in Africa, and then finally reached the Congo. There Ernest oversaw teachers training. One might characterize Ernest Dyck as a fundamentalist, or at least as an Evangelical traditionalist Mennonite Brethren. Yet, Dyck was also an enterprising missionary who had a long-term vision of his work and a strong capacity to adapt to circumstances.

Aside from subjecting himself to the hard way of doing church planting (door-to-door evangelism), Dyck's entrepreneurial skills were demonstrated as he strove to evade the Catholic clergy's monopoly over the French chaplaincy in prisons and hospitals (another example of the "Two Solitudes"). Not content with serving the Anglophone community, his goal was to reach the Francophones. When he was physically restrained from visiting Francophone patients or prisoners, Dyck refused to abide by a provincial rule that contradicted the Federal law (Canadian Bill of Rights of 1960). He wrote to the Québec Department of Health twice, but to no avail. Then he took his car, drove to Québec City and burst into the minister's secretary office. He reminded the government official that such a restriction based on language was in opposition to Canadian law. After assuring them he did not mean to cause them any embarrassment, Dyck finally demanded a special exemption for him to serve the Francophone population. And permission was granted to him.

Despite his boldness and go-ahead style, the initial impact of Ernest Dyck's evangelism was minimal. Times were difficult; people were suspicious of an Anglophone talking to them about religion.

The following year, in 1962, Dyck welcomed Clyde and Elizabeth Shannon to help start a second Bible study group in Sainte-Thérèse. They were also missionaries who were evacuated from the Congo. In Ste-Thérèse the Shannons were contacted by a family of Portuguese immigrants who were part of a Protestant minority in the Azores. The family had been fleeing conscription during the decolonization war in Angola and were now in search of a Protestant, French-speaking church in Québec. The Franco family consisted of a widow with her four sons as well as an adult daughter and her husband Florimundo Medeiros. The family soon became pillars of the Sainte-Thérèse group, one son becoming a

prolific church planter and pastor. Another became the first Québecois Mennonite Brethren sent oversea as a missionary in Portugal.

Both the Saint-Jerome and the Sainte- Thérèse groups were closely tied and, together, formed a rather conservative group in a society that was undergoing a historic upheaval that saw it becoming less and less conservative.

Quiet Revolution and Quiet Revival

The Québec Specificity within a Western Phenomenon

The Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II created a vacuum in terms of the birth rate in Québec. But the return of the soldiers produced a renewed interest in domesticity and family life. The most significant social phenomenon in the postwar era is undoubtedly the so-called baby-boom.

World War II also shattered many assumptions and illusions people had about authority, science, and knowledge. For many, the extent of the war and the scale of the destruction discredited those who held power. This global rejection of the "old way of life", magnified by a sense that anything was possible, had local variations. In the U.S. in the 1950s, African-Americans struggled for their civil rights and to end almost a hundred years of racial segregation. In the 1960s, young people subjected to a limited conscription massively revolted against the war in Vietnam. In France over the same period, French youth decried Charles De Gaulle's colonial policy and the inhumane war in Algeria. In Québec, French Canadians deeply resented their past. Centuries of Anglo-Protestant economic and social dominance and contempt, as well as centuries of clerical control and abuse had pressured a younger, and numerous, generation into social change. A more radical Québec nationalism emerged during the 1950s and 60s, and a pervasive rejection of clerical authority swept Québec society at the turn of the 1970s. Within a few years, the habit of attending church was abandoned by most of the Francophones. Fewer and fewer young people enlisted in religious orders, contraception became popular with the new sexual freedom, and women had fewer children and entered the workplace en masse.

The year 1960 also marks the beginning of what is known in Québec as the Quiet Revolution. It was a lyrical, social and political movement that was fueled by nationalism and secularism. It started with the election of the Liberal party in 1960 under the

theme of "Masters in our own house". The Lesage government initiated a high-speed modernization of the Québec state, nationalized the formerly U.S. owned hydro-electricity, and secularized the Health and Education boards, removing them from clerical control[8].

On the other hand, the end of the war and the new prosperity, especially in North America, created a new joyful spirit. The generation born during the baby boom anticipated the future with optimism and were eager to change the world their parents had built.[9] A new counter-culture emerged in the 1960s with the specific purpose of reversing the social codes of the dominant culture: wearing long hair and jeans, using drugs, listening to rock music, etcetera.

Baby Boomers enter the MB Church

This counter-cultural way of life was especially pervasive in the town of Sainte-Thérèse. As an educational and industrial crossroads, downtown Sainte-Thérèse was a place where dozens of young hippies converged in a strange Woodstock-style smoky atmosphere. In Québec, Catholic cathedrals were constructed at the center of the town, and everything revolved around them. In Sainte-Thérèse, the old Catholic college was right behind the manse. As the Church's dominance faded, the Catholic college was converted into a secular college in 1967. It soon became a place of dissent and social protest.

In 1970, one of these Theresian young men associated with the non-conformist hippie movement entered the newly established MB chapel in Sainte-Thérèse. It was on a Wednesday evening and Ernest Dyck was there delivering a mid-week Bible study. Guy Lavoie, a local student, had traveled along the American West Coast and had met with people from the "Jesus Freaks" movement. He had come to consider himself a disciple of Jesus, and so he started looking for a church when he got back to Sainte-Thérèse. In his memoirs, Ernest Dyck describes the scene:

> On a Wednesday night when I arrived at the Ste. Thérèse church for the mid-week Bible study and prayer meeting, I met a young man looking at the tracts and Christian literature displayed at the entrance of the church. I introduced myself to him and welcomed him to our evening service. His name was Guy Lavoie. He was of small stature with a beard and long hair, dressed as a hippie […] He told me he loved to read the Bible and that he had become a Christian. His outward appearance did not impress me positively, however, he spoke in such a

> humble way that I decided that I wanted to believe that he had become a Christian.[10]

This fateful encounter offers a glimpse into Dyck's temperament, but it also shows the deep cultural gap between the two men. Guy Lavoie was not just another hippie. He was also a prominent drug dealer in the neighbourhood. A witness among the Portuguese recalled the moment when Guy first stepped into the Church. He was barefoot, he wore a fur coat, he had seashells in his hair, and he walked in with a young woman on each side. [11] Guy Lavoie's conversion and sudden transformation into an Evangelical Christian, under Ernest Dyck's leadership, as well as his uncompromising drive to evangelize in the streets, sparked a chain of conversions among the youth of Sainte-Thérèse. All these young converts entered the Sainte-Thérèse MB Church, thereby drastically changing the composition of the congregation. Among them, there were many college students, factory workers, activists, and artists.

To illustrate the counter-cultural dimension of the growth of the MB Church in Québec, three of them are especially important. First, Jean Théorêt was a college student and a Socialist activist; he became the first dean of the Québee MB Bible Seminary and pastored in two MB congregations. When he was introduced to Jesus by Guy Lavoie, Jean started to read the Bible. He was struck by the gospel's call to peace and justice. He came to believe that no human reform could bring about perfect peace and justice but true faith in Jesus Christ.[12] Second, Pierre Wingender was an activist who worked with the Front de Liberation du Québec, a terrorist separatist group in the 1960's; he became a fiery preacher and a pastor after graduating from the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Bible Seminary. His two younger brothers also converted and became leaders of Québec MB Conference. Third, Richard Toupin was a young professional singer who played with the best musicians of his time; he became a leading evangelist, a church planter, and he formed a worship band that was known not just in Québec but also in French-speaking European countries and in the French Caribbean. He is still considered one of the greatest Evangelical composers in Québec, thanks to Ernest Dyck's intervention. Shortly after his conversion, Toupin thought he had to renounce his artist life and quit doing music. He believed that his past glory as a professional musician and singer was incompatible with God's glory, and that he had to humble himself by finding a new occupation.[13]

Dozens of other stories of converts with a similar sociological profile could be recalled. The impact of their integration in a small, rather old, and conservative congregation created a new dynamic and a different Church culture. With tremendous energy, cohesion, and with great precocity, the young converts soon took charge of the ministries of the Church. They led worship and evangelistic initiatives, and they made disciples. After the two congregations of Sainte-Thérèse and Saint-Jérôme were planted in the early 1960s, between 1967 and 1977 four more congregations soon were established in the same region of the Greater Montréal. By 1980, the MB Churches in Québec had grown from about a 100 to 400 members. Under Ernest Dyck's guidance, emerging young leaders were at the forefront of the new church plants. By the end of the 1970s, three of them had become pastors, all under the age of twenty-five.

This considerable rise in numbers required investing in institutions as well. In 1974, Dyck organized the purchasing of a summer camp from the Anglican Church in the Laurentians. It became Camp Péniel. Attracting so many young people exceeded Dyck's expectations. Now, there was a need to train and educate them. In 1976, Dyck organized the purchase of a building on the island of Laval, north of Montréal. It was a chapel of the United Church with a basement spacious enough to hold Bible classes during the week. And so the Institut Biblique Laval was established, where dozens of young converts would receive training and where young leaders would be taught and eventually teach.

Success and growth seemed natural to the emerging Québécois leadership, because they had not known otherwise. Their ambition was boundless: in 1982 they formulated a vision for having 40 churches by 1992. Facing the impossibility of reaching that goal, Québec leaders then settled for the more reasonable target of counting 2000 members by the new millennium, thrice the number the six MB Churches that had been established by 1987.[14]

Towards Gentrification and Decline

Diversity and Conflicts

Such a young and dynamic movement blooming within so short a stretch of time was inevitably characterized by immaturity. Tensions with the old conservative guard, especially the Portuguese leadership in Sainte-Thérèse, arose as the emerging Québécois leadership, trained in the MB seminaries, took a less fundamental-

ist outlook on faith and Church life. Some, however, were victims of their own "radical" temper, and others ended up attracted to more charismatic approaches to faith. Churches like Sainte-Thérèse and Saint-Jérôme underwent crisis after crisis until the exhaustion and disappointment drove almost half of the congregation to leave.

By the 1980's, Québec society was entering a new age. It was marked by the defeat by a narrow margin of the Yes option at the 1980 referendum. Then a severe economic depression started in 1981, putting an end to an era of considerable prosperity and idealism. Sociologically at the turn of the new decade, the younger cohort of the baby boom generation was now settling into a more conventional professional and domestic life. The restless young converts of the 1970's started to have children, bought a house and consumer goods. In terms of mission, focus shifted from reaching out to friends, family, co-workers, to consolidating ministries *in* and *for* the church: youth ministry, Bible school, disciple making, food banks, etcetera. With great generosity and enthusiasm, the MB Canadian Conference supported the work in Québec and subsidised its early and rapid expansion through the acquisition of buildings and facilities. However, managing and supporting a summer camp, a Bible school and a half-dozen of church buildings became a heavy burden, both in terms of funding and human resources. The Québec MB conference was mostly composed of middle-class churchgoers and most of them had young families. Since Evangelicals tend to have more children than the average, Québec MB Churches could count on a promising youth for a second generation. By the mid-1990s, a pool of about 400 children or teenagers attended a MB Church in Québec. With the rapid secularization of the Québécois culture, education and thought, retaining and enlisting the youth has proven more difficult than anticipated. Only a few of them have taken charge of the MB's future in Québec. Some now attend other Evangelical churches instead of that of their parents. But the majority of those who were raised in a MB congregation do not go to church anymore.

Conclusion: Coping with the Decline and the Quest for an Identity

At the beginning of the Revival in Québec under Dyck's auspices, the work was mostly focused on bringing people to generic Evangelical faith and teaching young converts instead of forming a specifically Anabaptist denomination. Because of Québec's linguistic isolation from other Canadian Anabaptists, the influence of

other Evangelical groups on the Québécois Mennonite Brethren has always been significant. More charismatic or fundamentalist trends often created divisions among MB churches. In other words, as revealed by a brief look at any database of the French books available in the churches' libraries, the Zion prophecy and temperance were more fashionable topics in the 1980's than the Sermon on the Mount. Also, given the complex and loaded history Québécois had with religion, many Mennonite Brethren would not even use that name fearing it would get in the way of their personal testimony. More than fifty years after its birth, many Mennonite Brethren in Québec, lacking any cultural connection to their larger spiritual family, still ask themselves what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian.

Nevertheless, against all odds, and amidst so many challenges, if you step in a Mennonite Brethren Church today, you will see, feel, and hear a congregation that breathes in an Anabaptist way. Without necessarily knowing it, MB Christians in Québec live out the Church as a community, in a congenial and congregational fashion. Contrary to most other Evangelical churches, pastors are not called by their title, but by their surnames as anyone else. MB churches now allow women ministry, an exception within the Evangelical world in Québec. Sermons are now more oriented toward Anabaptist topics than before. Social justice, world peace and compassion are more central than before in the discourse of the Church as well as in the personal testimonies. This, even more since immigrants are pouring into the churches in search of a caring community. This newfound mission may be the long-term effect of having what a former MB leader in Québec, Eric Wingender, once called a "furtive" – perhaps unconscious – Anabaptist mindset. It may also be the unexpected effect of years of lack of success and decline. Ironically, as the Mennonite Brethren in Québec are starting to come to terms with their Anabaptist roots, gradual decline through gentrification may very well lead to their disappearing as a denominational group. The challenge for current MB leaders in Québec might then be to turn historical consciousness into wise and efficient decisions for the future.

Notes

[1] The most recent and outstanding study confronting the many perspectives on the Quiet Revolution is Alain-G. Gagnon, ed., *Québec State and Society*, Guelph, ON, 2008 (3rd ed.). Especially, see Luc Turgeon, "Interpreting Québec's Historical Trajectories: Between La Société Globale and the Rgional Space."

[2] For a criticism of the "revisionist" school, see Ronal Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth Century Québec*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 1997.

[3] Many general works survey the role of the Catholic Church in Québec: the most complete account remains Jean Hamelin & Nicole Gagnon, *Histoire du catholicisme québécois*, Boréal, Montréal, 1984.

[4] Henry Warkentin, "Report to the Board of Evangelism", 1960, *Archives AEFMQ*.

[5] Société historique de Sainte-Thérèse-de-Blainville, *Cahiers historiques : histoire de Sainte-Thérèse*, Joliette, L'Étoile du Nord, 1940. 359 pages.

[6] Pierre Fortin, "La Révolution et l'économie"in Guy Berthiaume & Claude Corbo, *La Révolution Tranquille en héritage*, Boréal, 2011, 94-100.

[7] Ernest H. Dyck, *Called to Witness*, 2003, p. 120.

[8] For a more nuanced analysis of what was the "Grande Noirceur", see Lucia Ferretti, "La "Grande Noirceur": mère de la Révolution Tranquille?" in Guy Berthiaume & Claude Corbo, ed. *La Révolution Tranquille en héritage*, Boréal, 2011, p. 27-46.

[9] An interesting reflection on that optimistic outlook could be found in François Ricard, *La generation lyrique*, Boréal, 1992.

[10] Ernest H. Dyck, *Called to Witness*, 2003, p. 166.

[11] Filmed interview with Florimundo and Natalia Medeiros (Archives of the Société d'histoire mennonite du Québec), Zacharie Leclair, July 2009.

[12] Filmed interview with Jean Raymond Théorêt (Archives of the Société d'histoire mennonite du Québec), Zacharie Leclair, July 2009.

[13] Filmed interview with Richard Toupin (Archives of the Société d'histoire mennonite du Québec), Zacharie Leclair, July 2009.

[14] Archives of the AEFMQ