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History of the Churches in the United States and Canada (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by John M. Zinkand

A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada, by Robert T. Handy. Oxford University Press, New York, New York, 1977. 471 pages, \$19.95. Reviewed by James A. De Jong, Associate Professor of Theology.

As the first of twenty projected volumes in a new series entitled "Oxford History of the Christian Church," Professor Handy's historical survey of the churches in Canada and the United

States is masterful. It considers its subject from a combination of carefully chosen angles: institutional life of the churches, mutual influences of church and society on one another, intellectual history, the phenomena of popular religion and the connections between churches and culture. In so doing, the study not only meets the objectives of the series in general, but it also presents a balanced and absorbing review of North-American church history.

The book is skillfully done in every way.

Its style is polished, direct, and nuanced; the author never intrudes into the content. The text is seasoned only with essential notes that invite further reading, rather than intimidate the non-specialist. Yet, the bibliographical essay is both current and selective of only the best literature available for all periods covered. The index appears to be thorough and accurate, and the maps complement the text. The binding, boards, and paper are quality material. The dust-jacket is dignified, but attractive. And, most importantly, Mr. Handy's account is superb.

He naturally begins with the European colonization efforts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the account progresses, he moves back and forth across the border with ease, highlighting the men, events, theological issues and ecclesiastical developments that constitute North-American church history. The book is marked by balance, insight, clarity, and objectivity. Yet, when he is called upon to choose sides in issues of interpretation, Dr. Handy distinguishes himself as a historian who prefers a substantive assessment that reflects deep understanding of the moods and spirits of his subjects, rather than the spectacular and speculative theories that some have adduced.

Two examples of his approach serve as good illustrations. The first explains first- and second-generation Puritan relationships with New England Indians. While some anthropologists and cultural historians have denounced the Puritans for their treatment of the Indians, Handy not only presents a more balanced picture (in which he depicts the lamentable as well as the laudable moments of this relationship), but he is also appreciative of the godly concern and compassionate spirit with which some of the Puritans tirelessly evangelized Indian tribes, achieving dramatic results and earning the genuine gratitude of many native Americans. Secondly, he discards bizarre theories that attempt to explain the Great Awakening, for a more historically insightful interpretation:

Concern for the authority of the Bible and for the personal appropriation of religious truth had been part of Protestant life in America since the early seventeenth century, and the Awakeners who dramatized these themes often found ready response. The great attention paid by Puritan preachers to such themes as conversion, the new birth, and sanctification was echoed in the exhortations of the preachers of the revival. (page 77)

The volume also manifests evenness. Twentieth-century events are handled with as much depth and perception as those of the colonial

period. Handy has saturated himself in Canadian as well as in U.S. church-history literature. Whether he is focusing on such social forces as immigration, the Civil War, or French-Canadian cultural identity, or on denominational histories and theological controversies, he does so with equal skill. The result is a general survey that should prove extremely durable.

This book offers a bonus for the readers of *Pro Rege*. As members of a constituency living in both Canada and the United States, we have for the first time a historical interpretation that displays the common influences on churches in both countries. Immigration, denominational and ecumenical developments, wars from King William's War to Viet-Nam, civil rights issues, the evolution of religious pluralism—to mention only a few—have shaped the churches of both nations. Often this has occurred simultaneously and similarly in both places. At other times, it has happened with marked differences, for example, in the area of higher education, with respect to nineteenth-century Canadian longings for something of a national religious establishment, and regarding French versus English traditions in Canada, as opposed to the "melting-pot" ideal in the U.S.

What emerges from juxtaposing Canadian and U.S. church history, as Handy has done, however, is an enriched understanding of both. Serious Christian Reformed believers who value both their national identity and their confessional-ecclesiastical affiliation, and who are attempting to develop a tempered understanding of both in the North-American situation will especially appreciate this book.

As far as Dordt College is concerned, the curriculum could well be reviewed in the light of implications raised by Handy's study. With a student population that is one-fourth Canadian, and with a religious faith motivating and directing the campus community towards what H. Richard Niebuhr has termed the authentic Calvinistic stance of "cultural transformation," Dordt College has a unique opportunity—perhaps even a God-given calling—to engage in transnational academics for the sake of our Lord. Robert Handy has given that educational option a new dimension of historical credibility. And for that we thank him deeply.

Basic English Revisited: A Student Handbook, by Pat Sebranek and Verne Meyer; illustrated by Chris Krenzke; published by Basic English Revisited, Burlington, Wisconsin, 53105, 1977, 116 pp., paperback, price: \$2.45. Re-