

*A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920-1970* By Catherine Gidney

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## *A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment and the Canadian University, 1920-1970*

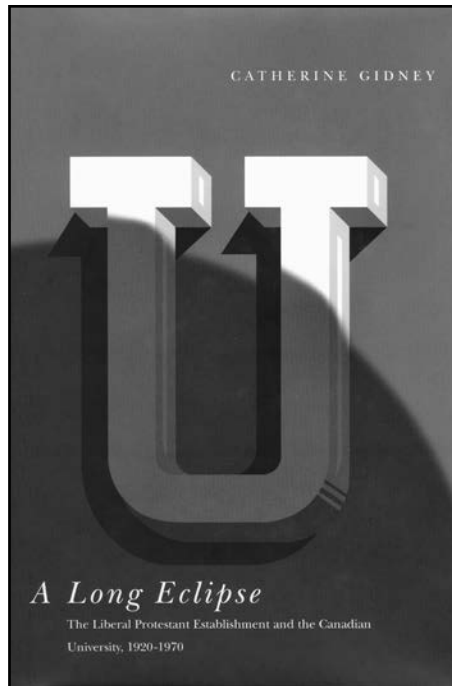
By Catherine Gidney. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.  
xxvi + 240 pp. \$75.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-7735-2805-9. <www.mqup.mcgill.ca>

To what public figure would you attribute these words: "The understanding, as well as the maintenance, of Western culture and its democratic institutions depend upon the transmission of the Judeo-Christian tradition, strengthened by the wisdom of the classical period from both of which we derived the vitality of our civilization." (p. 106) Tony Blair? George W. Bush? The warriors against terrorism putting an academic spin on their actions? Could be Blair, but would he say "Judeo-Christian," an American not a British neologism? Bush? The language doesn't have the requisite Texas twang.

The words belong to Sidney Smith, President of the University of Toronto, 1945-57, and they appeared in his *President's Report for 1949-50*. It is hardly conceivable that a president of the University of Toronto, today, would define its central role as maintaining Western culture and its democratic institutions. Were she or he to do so, eyebrows would be raised among those who fund the university – its provincial masters – for serv-

ice as an instrument of economic progress, a supplier of training and skills that underwrite a post-industrial economy. And given the diverse, multi-cultural body of faculty and students, questions would be raised by them about their place in an institution whose head limits its purpose to transmitting the Judeo-Christian tradition improved by the wisdom of Western antiquity.

So what was Smith saying in the context of his time? According to Gidney, he was expressing the conventional wisdom of English Canadian liberal Protestant Christian culture. Its elites controlled most of the universities in Canada excepting the Roman Catholic foundations. For them, universities existed to provide an education that would equip students to become the leaders of the next generation, a leadership that would understand its role in terms of the fundamental principles of liberal Christianity: tolerance of diverse viewpoints, an emphasis on religious experience rather than religious doctrine, and zeal for a better society on earth, all framed



by behaviour that was morally 'pure.'

These desiderata were underwritten by the primacy of faculties of arts where implicit Christian truth unified knowledge, professorial staff saw themselves as liberal Christians in the classroom and student life was controlled in conformity to the norms of (bourgeois) Christian personal morality anchored in Victorian Canada's celebration of the Christian virtues engendered by "light, soap, and water." And support for and intensification of the university as a Protestant liberal moral community was provided by various organizations that were not formally part of the university but had a presence that was vigorously encouraged by administrators and faculty. The most important of these was the Student Christian Movement (SCM).

So what happened? Working with the archives of Dalhousie University, the University of Toronto, McMaster University, the University of British Columbia and various campus organizations, plus an extensive body of pertinent history and secondary literature, Gidney describes the decline and fall of Protestant liberal campus hegemony from the beginning of the interwar period in the twentieth century to 1970, when the effects of the counter-culture and student political protests of the 1960s were fully evident. The story is neither simple nor unilinear. The control of student behaviour moves from a moral order enforced by deans of women and men who saw themselves as *in loco parentis* agents for the prohibition of alcohol, gambling and sex to unisex dormitories and the legal (as opposed to moral) control of behaviour. University officials dealing with the lives of students become counsellors and enablers of expressive subjectivity rather than authoritative figures enforcing personal morality.

Liberal organizations such as the SCM

oscillate according to the social questions of the day. The Great Depression brings on the challenge of communism and its solution to the problems of unregulated capitalism. The prosperity, consumerism and apprehended conformity of the post-World War II period raise the question of personal authenticity and commitment in the framework of the return to religion in the suburbs of the 1950s. And of no minor importance there is the challenge to the liberal Christian SCM agenda posed by conservative, evangelical student organizations such as the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) that required subscription to 'fundamental' Christian doctrine: the divinity of Jesus Christ, etc.

By the end of the 1960s, SCM was a venue for dialogue and discussion of religion among all who would join, including atheists and followers of any religion. It hardly attracted anyone. Evangelical student organizations had gained the upper hand, slowly but relentlessly growing throughout the twentieth century. They did not subscribe to the notion of the university as a moral community unified by the principles of liberal Christianity.

On the faculty side, the university had become a place where highly specialized knowledge was produced by research and taught by a diverse array of departments and faculties. To pretend that a school of business, a department of physics, and a department of English somehow had transcendent coherence in terms of liberal Christian religious ideology was no longer possible.

Gidney has given us a very readable, and, indeed, for those who may have been involved with the organizations that she writes about, entertaining story. Its scholarly importance lies in the contribution it makes to the understanding of secularization as an organizing concept in historical

and sociological research. 'Long eclipse' is the operative term, for she shows that secularization is not only a 'Quiet Revolution' made patently visible by legal enactments that with the stroke of a pen transfer institutional authority from church to state. Rather, it can come about, too, by erosion caused by trends and hardly visible events that over a long duration eat away at the religious culture of an elite until it disappears from public view, though not without leaving traces.

But that disappearance does not mean that religion itself has disappeared from the scene. Only one form is in eclipse. For as

Paul Bramadat shows in *The Church on the World's Turf*, and Catherine Gidney surely knows and champions, evangelical Christianity has a vigorous though modest (not as modest as SCM's!) presence on English Canadian university campuses today.

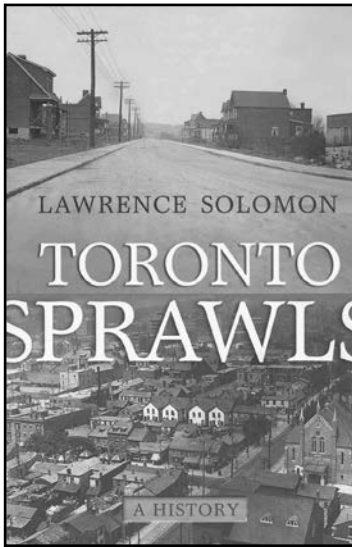
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## *Toronto Sprawls: A History*

By Lawrence Solomon. Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for Public Management Monograph Series, 2007. xix + 120 pp. \$19.95 softcover. ISBN 0-7727-8618-0. <[www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com)>



Neoliberal urban scholars approach the question of 'urban sprawl' – defined as low-density auto-dependent urban development – from one of two mutually incompatible positions. The first, which is well articulated in *The Voluntary City*, endorses low-density

(sub)urban forms, arguing that they result from the preferences for large lots and automobile travel, and disdain for dense living. 'Sprawl' is thus the result of market

demand, of households voting with their feet (or, rather, their cars), rather than of state intervention in the land market. It is the democratic choice of the majority and the state should not try to subvert that will by imposing urban planning policies which aim to contain, intensify, consolidate or otherwise intervene to reduce the urban footprint, even if there may be long term public benefits.

While maintaining criticism of state intervention in the land market, the second neoliberal approach argues, instead, that sprawl is the result of overzealous state involvement in the form of freeway subsidies, zoning and other land-use controls which have aimed to disperse urban populations. This story views the compact city as economically and socially more efficient, yet urban planners or municipal and other public officials promote and subsidize urban dispersion out of both a moral aversion to dense cities and as a paternalistic attempt at social engineering. The villain of the story is still well-intentioned but misguided state *dirigisme*, but in this second approach such action is the cause of the sprawl that the first approach celebrates. Eliminating subsidies that maintain ineffi-