**The Loyalists and Religious Diversity**

It is helpful to recall that the majority of those who fled the 13 colonies for Canada had been born in the New World themselves. My ancestor was born in New York State or Pennsylvania in 1766. It is estimated that the anti-revolutionary proportion of the population was about 20-30%, about 500,000 people, but only 100,000 voted with their feet and moved elsewhere. More than half of these abandoned North America altogether and went back to England, or Bermuda or the West Indies. About 40,000 Loyalists came to Canada. Foreign visitors to Upper Canada remarked that “the typical English Canadian was really a ‘Yankee’, just one that happened not to support the war with Britain.” American travellers to Canada often stated that the Canadians were much like themselves, with a spirit of independence and even insubordination. An eminent historian has stated that all Englishmen in the 18th century, including those in England, but certainly those in America, “were known throughout the Western world for their insubordination, their insolence, their stubborn unwillingness to be governed.”

One source, perhaps the most important source for this spirit of independence is the fact that most Americans and also most Loyalists were from “Dissenting Churches.” This spirit of dissent, which was a “counter-culture world view, was rooted in the Puritan Awakening of 1610 to 1640. The Puritans favoured the authority of the Bible over against tradition, and they favoured the separation of church and state as well as the right to follow one’s conscience. The Puritans uprooted themselves, and tens of thousands embarked on cramped, frail ships for the new World. As Calvinist Protestants they wanted to establish a new covenant with God on a special errand into the wilderness of North America. But they brought with them the church divisions and sects which were present in England. The list of Dissenting Churches and groups in England is quite amazing. I list them alphabetically: **Adamites** (restoring Eden and nudity), **Anabaptists**, **Barrowists** (founded by Henry Barrow, a prominent Elizabethan separatist who thought the Church of England was corrupt), **Behemists** (the followers of Jacob Boehme), **Brownists** (after Robert Browne, early congregationalism), **Diggers** (a Protestant agrarian sect-Gerard Winstanley), **Enthusiasts** (a British pejorative term for anyone talking about religion or politics in public), **Familists** (followers of a Dutch mystic who had achieved perfection), **Fifth Monarchists** (who thought that 1666 would be the end of earthly rule), **Grindletonians** (a Calvinist sect-Roger Brereley), **Muggletonians** (two London tailors announced that they were the last two prophets), **Philadelphians** (formed by an Anglican priest, John Portage who was ejected from his parish in 1655, and who was also a follower of the German mystic Jacob Boehme), **Sabbatarians** (Protestants who practice Jewish laws, including observance of the Jewish Sabbath), **Seekers** (forerunners of the Quakers were a non-conformist group which rejected formal religion), **Socinians** (forerunner of the Unitarians, rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity) and **Ranters**. Ranters were a pantheistic sect, believing that God was in everyone. They rejected the authority of both the Bible and the Church, arguing that sin is a product of the imagination, and arguing in favour of nudity. John Bunyan had encounters with them, and George Fox claimed that most Ranters were converted to Quakerism. The term “Ranters” probably referred to their very noisy preaching.

This is an important point because most of the dissenting churches in America flourished during what is called the **First Great Awakening**, 1730s-1760s. Revivalism hit America in 1734 with the revival begun in New England by Jonathan Edwards—emphasizing conversion experiences, new light from God, and the possibility of new churches and sects. After 1739 the whole of British North America, from Georgia to Nova Scotia seemed to explode like a string of firecrackers. And it was travelling, itinerant preachers like George Whitefield that kept it going. This is important because it was the same kind of preaching which came to Upper Canada with the Loyalists. George Whitefield was only 23 when he began preaching in America (he had been already a sensational preacher in England), and his style of preaching was riveting. He would sing hymns, wave his arms, tell stories in colloquial language, employ vivid imagery, weep profusely over his own melodramatic appeals, and pray extemporaneously and directly to God, as though he were actually speaking to him. The effect on Americans was electric. The First Great Awakening led to the formation of new denominations such as the Separates (or Strict Congregationalism) and the Separate Baptists, and to many perfectionistic sects like the Shakers. Ann Lee came from England in the 1770’s to the Albany area, and she attracted attention because she worshipped by ecstatic dancing or “shaking”, and she considered herself to be Christ’s female partner, so she frowned on sexual relations and marriage—with the consequence that the Shakers went out of existence, but they left us great furniture.

The Loyalists came to Canada out of the First Great Awakening. Most of the Loyalists were members of Dissenting Churches. Of course there were some Englishmen who were Anglicans, and many in the British army favoured the state church, the Church of England, but most of the Loyalists were from the frontier regions of New York and Pennsylvania where the Dissenting churches were strong, where they had very little enthusiasm for any state, or established church. There were Quakers and Mennonites who were escaping persecution, religious intolerance and the violence of war. There were Scottish Presbyterians and Dutch Calvinists, **and** since 40% of the Loyalists were Palatine Germans, there were Lutherans, Moravians and Tunkers (from the German word *tunken*, meaning “to dip”) or Dunkers or Dippers. **And there were Methodists**.

It is important to recall that the Palatine Germans also came from a “dissenting” religious background. In the Palatine area of Germany they were strong Protestants, constantly under siege by the Catholic king of France, Louis XIV. The Palatine was a haven for other dissenting groups which fled from France, such as the Waldensians in the 12th century and the Huguenots in the 17th century—and of course in the 16th century under the influence of Martin Luther, most Palatines became Lutherans. In the early 1700’s Louis, afraid that the Palatines would ally themselves with the Protestant king of England, William III (William of Orange), attacked the Palatine, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. The Palatines fled down the Rhine River to Rotterdam, where they were rescued by Queen Anne’s ships and brought to England. Many went on to America. And another group went on to Ireland and settled in the area around Limerick. At first these settlers had only a couple of ministers, including a Mr. Miller, a Lutheran minister who cared faithfully for his German flock. He is significant not only because he is the beginning of the story of “the Romance of the Palatine Millers” but also because in 1750 he hosted John Wesley who had arrived in Ireland to preach. There is a humorous anecdote that when Wesley went to the home of a William Miller in Cork to preach, the house was so crowded that the little son Adam had to sit under the table. Wesley announced his text for the evening as “Adam, where art thou?” Promptly the boy answered, “Here I am, under the table.” This story made its way across the Atlantic including the boy, Adam Miller, whose descendents live in New Brunswick. Many of the Irish Palatines became Methodist, and the emigration from Ireland to America during the years 1760 to 1765 included Rev. Philip Embury, who was converted by Wesley’s preaching in 1753 and who built the first Methodist Church in America, in New York in 1766. In the same emigration was Barbara Heck, a prominent Methodist, who became a Loyalist and fled with her family to Upper Canada, settling in the town of Augusta, close to the St. Lawrence River.

The Loyalists brought Methodism to Canada, and the same kind of preaching which characterized the First Great Awakening in America. During the 1780’s and 1790’s when the first settlers were building their homes, there were very few preachers and no church buildings. The first Methodist preachers were itinerant circuit riders, riding on horse-back from place to place, preaching in homes and in the fields, just as John Wesley and George Whitefield had done decades before. One of the first Methodist preachers was **William Losee**, a Loyalist and an energetic traveller and preacher—with fervent sermons, marked by frequent injunctions to the Lord to smite the sinners. He organized the first Methodist circuit in Canada in the Bay of Quinte area and the first Methodist Church in Canada in 1792 at Hay Bay. **Calvin Wooster** was remembered as “a man of mighty prayer and faith,” whose voice could be heard at night “earnestly praying for the salvation of souls.” His appeals were so bold and pointed that few could stand before him without either fleeing from his presence or smitten with conviction, fall down on their knees and cry for mercy. **Nathan Bangs** was an Anglican from England and became a Methodist convert while working as a surveyor in the Niagara area, when a Methodist preacher spoke to him and (quote) “his words came like a dagger to his heart**.” Harry Ryan** was a professional boxer before his conversion. He was a rough and energetic man and his favourite exhortation was “Drive on, brother! Drive on! Drive the devil out of the country! Drive him into the lake and drown him!”

One of the ways the Methodist preachers sparked the fire of revivals was through the **camp meeting**. The first camp meeting in Upper Canada was held at Hay Bay in 1805. 250 people gathered in September for an event which began with singing, prayer and sermons. After a whole day of sermons there was a prayer meeting during which it was reported that (quote) “the power of God descended on the assembly and songs of victory and praise resounded through the forest.” Nathan Bangs said, “I felt an unusual sense of the divine presence and I thought I could see a cloud of divine glory resting upon the congregation.” Then after the Lord’s Supper, “the people wept, prayed, sang, shouted aloud and had at last to break away from one another as by force. As the hosts marched off in different directions the songs of victory rolled along the highways.”

The eminent Canadian sociologist, S.D. Clark concludes, “The Great Revival in Canada followed upon the Great Revival in the American West. The growth of Methodist influence in the country after 1795, in particular, was phenomenal.” The British governors Haldimand and Simcoe complained frequently that the Loyalists were ungovernable—as I said at the beginning, they displayed a spirit of independence and even insubordination, which was no doubt because they were members of Dissenting churches. Their experience of revivalism made them wary of authority, and doggedly stubborn in pursuit of their own self-interest. To really understand the Loyalists we must learn more about their religious impulse and their religious diversity.