

THE EVANGELICAL OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

George Grant: Canada's Greatest Political Philosopher— and a Christian Conservative

By: Michael Wagner, Ph.D., 03-17-2017



Every Canadian should know about George Parkin Grant (1918-1988), Canada's greatest political philosopher. Although in some respects his political views are hard to categorize, for much of his life he described himself as a Christian and a conservative. These characteristics were especially pronounced in the last few years of his life as he focused on using his intellect and prestige to oppose abortion and euthanasia.

The most comprehensive biography of George Grant is *George Grant: A Biography* written by political scientist William Christian (University of Toronto Press, 1996) and it is the basis for much of this article. William Christian knew Grant personally.

Early life

George Grant was born in Toronto in 1918 into a very distinguished family. His uncle, Vincent Massey, would become Governor General of Canada from 1952-1959, and his nephew, Michael Ignatieff, would later be leader of the Liberal Party of Canada from 2008-2011. Listing all of his notable relatives would take up considerable space.

Anyway, it was clear from early in his life that he was intellectually gifted and it was natural that he would pursue an academic career. He was at Oxford University when World War Two broke out. As a young man in a prestigious Canadian family, it was expected that he would serve as an officer in the military.

However, he was a pacifist, and instead of a military role he chose to help with civil defence in London during the German bombing. His refusal to serve in the military during the war was an embarrassment to his family and hurt his career prospects in the first few years after the war.

It was during the war (December, 1941) when he had a kind of mystical experience that made him into a self-conscious and dedicated Christian. William Christian writes that “George usually spoke of the experience as a conversion” (p. 92).

At Oxford in 1945, Grant attended some meetings held by the famous literary critic and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis. Grant thought very highly of Lewis, and it was at these meetings that he met the young woman (Sheila Allen) who would become his wife.

University professor

After returning to Canada, Grant got a job as a professor of philosophy at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. He held that position during the

years 1947-1960. When he took up the post at Dalhousie he had not yet completed his doctorate from Oxford. He finally completed it in 1950, arguing in his thesis (as William Christian notes) that it “is the fundamental equality of all souls before God that made it possible to understand the moral appeal of democracy” (p. 156).

After considering various alternatives, Grant joined the Anglican Church of Canada in 1956. He wanted to make sure that his children would be raised within a Christian context. He and his wife had six children. “As the children grew up, George attended services regularly and was active in the church, sitting on committees and helping in parish organization” (p. 180). By the 1970s, however, he was grieved by the Anglican Church’s liberal direction on abortion and euthanasia.

In 1961 Grant became a professor in the Religion department of McMaster University in Hamilton where he stayed until 1980. McMaster, incidentally, was originally founded as a Baptist college. When Grant first wrote to an official at McMaster expressing interest in a position there, he had stated that his chief concern was that “the truth of Christianity should be given a fair and intellectual hearing in the universities of Canada” (p. 209).

During the 1970s, Grant began to receive a large number of academic honors. Many Canadian universities offered him positions, and he was also given many honorary degrees. Basically, by this time he had become Canada’s most prominent and respected scholar.

According to William Christian, Grant “was the media’s favourite Conservative intellectual” (p. 291). Indeed, before the end of the 1970s many Canadians considered Grant’s work to be “the best political philosophy ever written in this country” (p. 325).

Grant later returned to Dalhousie in 1980 where he retired in 1984. William Christian writes that in “retirement he thought he was free to

make clear just how central Christianity had been to his life and thought” (p. 355).

George Grant died in Nova Scotia in 1988.

Canadian nationalism

Grant is most famous as a proponent of Canadian nationalism. His book, *Lament for a Nation* which appeared in 1965, is considered to be the most significant literary expression of English Canadian nationalism ever written.

Grant was upset when the government of Conservative John Diefenbaker was defeated by Liberal Lester Pearson in 1963. Diefenbaker was a staunch, old-fashioned Canadian who believed strongly in maintaining Canada's British heritage and British connection. Pearson was more of a continentalist, who instead wanted stronger ties to the United States. *Lament for a Nation* was written to explain how Canada's historic identity was gradually being replaced by American ideals and that Canada would effectively lose its distinct character and independence.

Lament for a Nation helped to make Grant a hero of the New Left because it opposed American influence in Canada. Grant was also strongly and publicly opposed to the American military intervention in Vietnam.

During the early 1960s, he flirted with socialists and the NDP because he saw them as allies in opposing American influence in Canada. He even hoped that the student rebellion of the 1960s “might prove a harbinger of spiritual renewal” (p. 256). Of course, as subsequent events showed, this was certainly not the case.

Despite these associations, Grant described himself as a Christian and a conservative. These labels made his left-wing friends uncomfortable

with him. As well, he strongly opposed the civil disobedience tactics of some student activists, leading to further friction with them.

His association with left-wingers dissipated as he continued to argue for a distinctly Christian approach to philosophy. When abortion became a big issue in the early 1970s, Grant's Christian perspective became especially pronounced since he saw abortion as the greatest issue of the time.

Because the focus of his interest changed, so did the basis of his support. Whereas he had been quite popular among the New Left in the 1960s, by the late 1970s “he was being lionized by different groups, theologically conservative Catholics and Protestants and people who might be described as the New Right” (p. 314).

Technology

Besides nationalism, a major theme of Grant's thinking concerned the issue of technological society. Modern Western societies are constantly pursuing new technology, which is to say, mastery over nature. We see nature as something that needs to be dominated and compelled to serve human needs.

While this has led to many positive developments, e.g. medical advances, it has also led to such things as weapons of mass destruction. Even worse, the determination to dominate and control nature has led some into attempts to dominate and control human nature as well. Thus the technological impulse can sometimes justify seeing human beings as things to be utilized rather than as special creatures.

Grant saw the United States as the central driving force behind technological society. He feared that the impetus for continual technical mastery of nature would envelop the whole world, leading to “the universal and homogenous state.” In short, the distinctive characteristics of various cultures and countries (e.g., Canada) would be dissolved by

the expansion and widespread acceptance of a technology-centered way of life.

Pro-life

From a conservative Christian standpoint, however, Grant's greatest work deals with abortion and euthanasia. His most noteworthy writings in this regard are his books *English-Speaking Justice* (House of Anansi Press, 1985) and *Technology and Justice* (House of Anansi Press, 1986), as well as his 1988 article, "The Triumph of the Will."

English-Speaking Justice consists of a series of lectures originally delivered at New Brunswick's Mount Allison University in 1974. Abortion is discussed in the context of criticizing the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision of the United States Supreme Court which legalized abortion throughout that country. In short, the Court ruled that fetuses of less than six months were not persons and therefore do not have rights. Grant famously said that this decision "raises a cup of poison to the lips of liberalism" (p. 71). "Liberalism," in this context, refers to the idea that all people have individual rights.

Grant noted that the mother and the fetus are both human beings. By saying that fetuses are not "persons," the US Supreme Court had determined that some human beings do not have rights: "In negating the right to existence for foetuses of less than six months, the judge has to say what such foetuses are not. They are not persons. But whatever else may be said of mothers and foetuses, it cannot be denied that they are of the same species. Pregnant women do not give birth to cats" (p. 71).

Denying some human beings the right to life raises the question as to why any human being has rights. This line of reasoning leads to what Grant calls the fundamental questions: "What is it, if anything, about human beings that makes the rights of equal justice their due? What is it about human beings that makes it good that they should have such

rights? What is it about any of us that makes our just due fuller than that of stones or flies or chickens or bears?” (p. 72).

Thus the abortion issue, in this sense, is really about what it means to be a human being or a person. If we define “person” to exclude fetuses, the same definition will likely exclude other human beings as well. Furthermore, a definition of “person” that excludes fetuses inevitably involves arbitrary distinctions between human beings, and one set of arbitrary distinctions can easily be replaced by another set of arbitrary distinctions, endangering even more “non-person” human beings. In sum, by allowing abortion, our society has been opened up to all kinds of evil possibilities.

Even non-Christians should be able to see that by allowing the execution of one particular group of innocent human beings, there is no principled basis for opposing the execution of any other group of innocent human beings. The determination of which innocent people are to be executed is subjective. The “solution” for unwanted pregnancies today becomes the “solution” to unwanted grandparents tomorrow, and the “solution” to other inconvenient people the following day. This seems clear enough. If we don’t stop abortion, and the rationale that justifies abortion, the killing of innocent people will only increase.

Euthanasia

Technology and Justice continues much of the same kind of argumentation. Grant points out that “[t]hose who advocate easy abortion in the name of rights are at the same time unwittingly undermining the very basis of rights. Their complete disregard for the rights of the unborn weakens the very idea of rights itself” (p. 119).

This book also contains a powerful section arguing against euthanasia. It focuses especially on the euphemisms commonly employed to promote euthanasia. For example, there is a powerful irony when the advocates of euthanasia emphasize the phrase “quality of life.” Here’s the irony: the

term “quality of life” is used to justify killing—death! Emphasizing “quality of life” legitimizes putting people to death. Furthermore, “[d]ecisions for euthanasia based on ‘quality of life’ assume that we are in a position to judge when someone else’s life is not worth living. There is absolutely no evidence that the handicapped or the retarded would prefer to be dead” (p. 115).

Grant wrote his article “The Triumph of the Will” (in a collection of articles by various pro-lifers called *The Issue Is Life: A Christian Response to Abortion in Canada*) as a response to the 1988 *Morgentaler* Supreme Court decision which struck down Canada’s abortion law.

As with his previous writings on abortion, Grant pointed to the larger issues involved: “After the Supreme Court decision, the victorious advocates of abortion on demand paraded with signs, on some of which was the slogan ‘Abort God.’ They were right to do so. What they meant was ‘abort the idea of God because it has held human beings back from liberation’” (p. 164). Christianity places limits on human behavior that many modern people see as inhibiting their freedom.

Conclusion

Canadian conservatives really should know about George Grant because of his role as a major Canadian thinker. For Canadian conservative post-secondary students in the social sciences and humanities, familiarity with the work of George Grant (especially his later material) can be especially helpful. George Grant is a pivotal Canadian intellectual figure, and his perspective cannot be simply brushed off in any reputable college or university in this country.

There are aspects of Grant’s thinking that fall short by strict conservative Christian standards. Some of his views are not entirely orthodox. Nevertheless, Grant considered Christianity to be true, and he believed it was relevant for modern intellectual life. He tried to incorporate it into his critique of society. This became especially pronounced in the later

years of his life, and he was deeply grieved by the legalization of abortion.

Canada is a country where the government and media elites try to suppress discussion of abortion. Yet the nation's greatest political philosopher saw abortion as one of the most significant tragedies of the modern age, and he had no qualms about voicing his views on this issue. The whole country would benefit if George Grant's writings were more widely known, but they are especially pertinent for Canadian conservatives.

