

THE EVANGELICAL OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Michael Wagner's Review

Under Siege: Religious Freedom and the Church in Canada at 150

By: Don Hutchinson, Word Alive Press, 2017

Don Hutchinson is a Christian lawyer with considerable experience litigating religious freedom cases in Canada. He has worked in a legal capacity for the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada as well as other organizations. He also has experience as an evangelical pastor. This book reflects decades of intimate familiarity with legal issues involving religion and how they affect Christians in this country.



There are two main themes to this book. One is to give a thorough but popularly-written account of the current legal status of religious freedom in Canada. The other is to encourage Christians to be involved in the public affairs of the nation.

In order to address the first theme, a number of chapters provide overviews of key court decisions affecting religious freedom. Examining a large number of cases provides a good sense of balance. On the one

hand, Christians have legitimate reasons to be concerned about religious freedom. For example, in the 2005 case *Kempling v. British Columbia College of Teachers*, the BC Court of Appeal agreed that a public school teacher could be disciplined for writing newspaper submissions defending the Christian position on homosexuality. However, on the other hand, some court decisions have turned out reasonably well. An example of this would be the 2015 Supreme Court of Canada decision *Loyola High School v. Quebec* recognizing the religious freedom of a Roman Catholic private school.

Despite current cultural and political trends, Hutchinson warns against developing “a siege mentality” and giving in “to a sense of inevitable cultural defeat” (p. 8). Those who fall prey to such fears risk becoming unfruitful in the cultural and societal tasks that are necessary for Christians to undertake.

Secularist opposition to Christianity

This does not mean that Hutchinson paints a rosy picture about the current state of the country. He acknowledges that there is a sense in which Christianity is under attack, especially from those who hold to a secularist perspective: “Increasingly, government and social pressures reveal the creeping approach of non-inclusive secularism that regards religious beliefs and practices as inconvenient, or offensive” (p. 44).

Later, he makes the same point more sharply: “There are significant players in the state and its citizenry who prefer that Christians ‘*speak no more to anyone in this name*’ (Acts 14:17), i.e. not have influence” (p. 80).

Ultimately, the secularists want to exclude Christianity from all aspects of public life in Canada. According to Hutchinson, their agenda “would include the prohibition of expressions of faith in the public sphere of life, including the Church’s separation from involvement in the public square, exclusion from providing faith-based non-discriminatory public

service, and ineligibility to receive public funding for providing services that benefit the general public” (pp. 127-128).

Christians need to be willing to take legal action in defense of their rights. There have been successful instances of such legal action. Home education provides one such example. “The Home School Legal Defence Association of Canada has become the champion of home-schooling and parents’ right to determine the education of their children. The constitution provides protection for parents’ rights, but it can be a long, hard, expensive court battle to enforce them against the inexhaustible financial resources of a determined and taxpayer-funded provincial government” (p. 142).

Was Canada a Christian nation?

I would quibble with one point that Hutchinson makes repeatedly in the book. He writes: “Canada was never a Christian nation, but historically it was influenced by Christianity and the various expressions of the Church, for both good and ill” (p. 158).

It’s not entirely clear what he means by the term “Christian nation,” so perhaps this is just a semantic issue. However, a good case can be made that Canada was at one time a Christian nation in some sense. For example, our first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, once referred to Canada as “a Christian country” in the House of Commons. In 1912 the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada wrote that “Christianity is part of the common law of the realm.” Furthermore, Canada’s Head of State (Queen Elizabeth) took a coronation oath to maintain “the Laws of God” and “the Protestant Reformed Religion.” These brief tidbits could be easily supplemented with additional evidence.

Nevertheless, Hutchinson recognizes that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has had a significant impact in diminishing Christianity’s public presence in Canada. Referring to the adoption of the Charter he

writes, “Since April 17, 1982, Canadians have experienced a nation where Christian influence in the governance of the nation, as well as many other aspects of common life in the public sphere, is increasingly contested” (p. 158). Pierre Trudeau’s Charter of Rights has done much to reduce the role and influence of Christianity in Canada.

Hutchinson emphasizes the need for Christians to get involved in public affairs for the benefit of the country: “Now is a time for us to be salt in an otherwise decaying society, a preservative in a dominion that is increasingly unsavoury, adding the savour of life” (p. 166). Towards the end of the book he makes this point even more emphatically: “It’s time for us—together—to get off the bench, through the gate, and in the game, even while we’re growing in our capacity to be in the game. Canada needs us!” (p. 252).

Conclusion

Overall, this is a very helpful book. Anyone interested in political and social issues in Canada would benefit from it. Hutchinson writes, “One of the reasons I wrote this book is to help inform and encourage pastors, other leaders, and the person in the pew with an awareness of where we as Christians stand in Canada” (p. 188). He has largely accomplished this goal.

