

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Allen, Richard. *Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies: The Protestant Ethic and the Quest for Social Justice in Canada.* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018, pp. 388, \$100.00 hardcover, (9780773555044).

Throughout his academic career, Richard Allen explored the role of religion in the social and intellectual history of English Canada. In particular, Allen drew attention to the social gospel movement and its influence on both religion and politics during Canada's early twentieth century. His research demonstrated that progressive and radical left strains of Christian thought provided a powerful impetus for secular social action. Allen's scholarly pursuits aligned with his own political engagement as a member of the Ontario legislature in the 1980s and a cabinet minister in Ontario's first social democratic government in the 1990s.

How fitting that Allen's final published work, released a month before his ninetieth birthday and two months before his passing, should be a collection of essays that he wrote over the span of nearly seven decades, reflecting his lifelong interest in the linkages between sacred and secular, and between thought and action. Allen's stated purpose is to furnish readers with a broader context to his earlier work on religion and social reform. While his ground-breaking monograph *The Social Passion* centered on the social gospel in Canada between 1914 and 1928, *Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies* includes pieces on the antecedents of the movement, as well as its evolution subsequent to the 1920s. Beyond the historical content, Allen's secondary purpose is autobiographical and historiographical, and he deliberately chooses to "call attention to the threads of autobiography that a reader might ferret out of the text of this collection of essays" (xx). *Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies*, then, functions on two levels: as a window into the social and intellectual world of early-twentieth century social Christianity, and as a window into the personal and social world of the author.

To call attention to the autobiographical dimension of this collection, Allen opens with "Growing Up Religious, Political, and

Historical,” a substantial memoir of his childhood and youth as a son of the manse. His father, Harold Allen, was a United Church minister, and a committed socialist, active in the CCF. “Growing up Christian and democratic socialist,” Allen writes, “certainly informed my decision to become a historian, as well as my choice of field in which to exercise my professional training” (xxi). There is significant autobiographical content throughout the remainder of the book, and much of this is inherent in the structure of the collection itself. The essays are ordered more or less chronologically, from his undergraduate years to the near-present, and each essay is prefaced with a brief “backgrounder” in which Allen explains the context of its creation, and often reflects critically on its content.

The bulk of the essays reflect Allen’s abiding interest in the interplay between the sacred and the secular, especially the religious roots of ostensibly secular progressive social and political movements. The essays are grouped into four main sections. The first part, “The World We Have Known,” opens with the aforementioned memoir and follows with his student essays. Part two, “From Providence to Progress,” explores the antecedents and intellectual origins of social Christianity in English Canada prior to the twentieth century. Among these, there was the nineteenth-century idea of social progress, which Allen shows was an extension and modification of the theological concept of divine providence. While European progressive ideas had more explicitly secular roots, Allen argues that this was not the case in English Canada, where evangelical Protestants believed that God was immanent in the processes of social change. Other roots of the social gospel included: a sense of national mission among Canadian Protestants, a new appreciation for the state as a vehicle for social betterment; and new theological developments among liberal Protestants which emphasized “the prophetic tradition that God required not burnt offerings but justice” (100).

The essays in part three, “Consciousness, Crisis, and Consequences,” reflect the heart of Allen’s research, and focus on how these ideas were proclaimed and embodied in the social movements and individuals associated with the social gospel in Canada, particularly in the prairie west. Much of Allen’s work here centres on turn-of-the-century Winnipeg, which was home to influential Methodist advocates of the social gospel such as J.S. Woodsworth and Salem Bland. The latter taught at Wesley College (a seedbed for the social gospel), where students were exposed to his Christian socialist views, later summarized in *The New Christianity*. A chapter also

deals with the agrarian revolt of the early twentieth century, which achieved political successes throughout Canada in the early 1920s. Allen contends that the revolt “could not be full understood unless it were seen as a religious phenomenon seeking to embed ultimate hopes for humanity in the temporal order” (166). The social gospel was the “new social faith” that the movement needed (170), and even though the social gospel was predominantly urban in its origins, it proved adaptable to a largely rural movement. The thrust of the essays in this section is that secular social reform in English Canada was underpinned by a new social orientation in Protestant Christianity. As a student in the Winnipeg YMCA wrote in 1898 (cited by Allen in more than one essay), there “is no such thing as purely individual righteousness” (127).

The final section, “Religion and Political Transformation,” ventures past the 1920s to focus on the influence of social Christianity on the left of the 1930s and beyond, and, more broadly, on debates over the social impact of Christianity in the modern world. The strongest piece in this section, “Towards a Materialist Christianity,” centres on radical left Christian intellectuals in the 1930s associated with the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order. The weakest piece is “Max Weber and the ‘Iron Cage of Capitalism,’” a lengthy review of four books that address Max Weber’s arguments in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Given the book’s title, it is undeniable that Weber’s arguments about Protestantism and capitalism are centrally important for Allen. Throughout, Allen’s key question would appear to be: what is the relationship between Protestantism and social change in Canada? In an earlier chapter concerning Max Weber, Allen observes that a “Protestantism that contributed to the advance of capitalism, or let itself be captivated by it, was not my parents’ Protestantism” (38). Nevertheless, he recognized that Weber’s thesis was “fundamental to an understanding of the convulsions of the world I had inherited and whose history I was devoted to studying” (38). Allen does not deny Weber’s hypothesis, but drawing on Thelma McCormack’s “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Socialism,” Allen makes a convincing case for “an alternative Protestant ethic” (137) which underpinned movements that challenged capitalist hegemony.

In sum, *Beyond the Noise of Solemn Assemblies* is a wide-ranging, thought-provoking, and engaging collection. Given the circumstances of its publication, it is also a testament to a life well lived. Allen’s book will be of interest to scholars of social reform movements, and

the complicated role of religion in such movements. Additionally, it will interest those fascinated by the relationship between the world of the author and their academic work.

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