

Workshop Report (by Susan Palmer)

New Religions in Quebec: Alternative Spiritualities after Vatican II and the ‘Quiet Revolution’

Les Nouvelles Religions au Québec: Spiritualités Alternatives après Vatican II et la Révolution tranquille

April 25, 2014, McGill University (The Chapel, Birks Building, Faculty of Religious Studies)

Organizers: Susan Palmer/ Solange Lefebvre/ J. Gordon Melton/ Arvind Sharma

The Purpose of our April 25 one-day workshop on Quebec’s new religious movements was to bring together scholars and researchers who have studied the phenomenon of alternative religions in Quebec since the “Quiet Revolution”. These movements include the Catholic *integristes*, or conservative schismatic movements within Quebec’s ultramontane type of Catholicism, as well as indigenous, imported and international NRMs or “sects”. Controversial “*sectes*” like the Solar Temple and criminal “cult leaders” like Roche Moses Theriault have been highlighted in the media, but there are to date surprisingly few in-depth ethnographical studies of these groups. The objective of the workshop was to showcase on-going research on Quebecois alternative religions, to share theories and observed patterns on Quebec history and culture, and to focus on Quebec as a favorable “ecological niche” for new spiritual movements and radical social experiments and alternative worldviews.

This Researcher (Susan Palmer) has thought about organizing a conference on this theme for years, but it was at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Boston, 2013, where I had two conversations that suddenly made this plan a possibility. First, I spoke with J. Gordon Melton, the Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at Baylor University, Waco, Texas. He is also the director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. He has been collecting data on alternative religions in Canada for fifty-odd years, and recently he was appointed to Baylor University, where he has the assistance of the university’s excellent staff and facilities to organize conferences or produce volumes and encyclopedias with a Canadian theme. I also had a conversation with Solange Lefebvre, who was a Membre du comité des experts de la commission Bouchard-Taylor, and is very much aware of Quebec’s current social and religious trends. As fellow team members of the Religion and Diversity project we planned this workshop and with our different contacts and Solange’s experience in organizing conferences, it went fairly smoothly. Our organizing committee was composed of myself, Solange Lefebvre, Gordon Melton and Arvind Sharma.

The Venue for the one-day workshop was the beautiful oak panelled, stained glass Birk’s Building chapel at McGill University. Through the influence of Professor Arvind Sharma (who is the Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill) we managed to reserve it on a Friday for our venue. Professor Sharma also helped us with publicity and with borrowing coffee urns. Professor Ellen Aitken, Dean of Religious Studies gave me some practical advice and

recommended hiring a Ph.D. student, Andrew Lairenge, as our technical assistant and Chapel custodian. Andrew proved to be invaluable and helped us through several small crises. McGill also provided the elegant Victorian-style faculty lounge for our tea/coffee breaks.

The Presenters came from Montreal, Quebec, Ottawa, Waterloo, Ontario and Texas. Our presenter from Kentucky had to cancel, unfortunately, because of illness in his family.

The Morning Session featured papers by Martin Geoffroy, Susan Palmer and Paul Gareau on three unique movements that emerged from Quebec's Catholic milieu – the Berets Blancs, the Mission de l'Esprit Saint and the Army of Mary. The questions and discussion that followed these presentations focused on the definition of "intégrisme" versus "fundamentalism" and on their legal status and relationship to the post Vatican II Catholic Church. The second morning session focused on the new 'Anti-Catholic' movements. These included the Atheistic 'Churches' in Quebec and Canada, the Temple of Satan in Quebec and the men-only Temple of Priapus. Gordon Melton presented his history of trends, types and divisions among atheist movements, including the peculiar branch of atheism founded by Dr. Henry Morgentaler, and he made a strong case for characterizing atheist organizations as new "religions" or "churches". Cimminnee Holt analyzed the Satanists' response to Pauline Marois' proposed Charter of Values, based on online sources. Donald Boisvert presented original research in his description of the aims and practices of the Montreal-based (little known) Temple of Priapus, a gay homo-erotic secret society, and analyzed it as at once a replica of - and reaction against - the Catholic Church.

The Afternoon Sessions:

Our first afternoon session explored some of Quebec's controversial "cults" or *sectes*. Guy-Robert St-Arnaud (Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Montreal), explained the aims and procedures of "*CÉINR: de l'information à une écoute*". This organization used to be the *CINR (Centre d'Information sur les nouvelles religions*, and was founded in 1984 by the brilliant scholar and Franciscan priest, Richard Bergeron (who sadly passed away last week). Directed by Bertrand Ouellet et Richard Bergeron, the CINR was a very useful center of information on new religions with a library and collection of files, books, NRM literature and media reports.

It was fascinating to hear from St-Arnaud how the old CINR has morphed into the new CÉINR, whose mission and objectives are radically different. Le CÉINR offers a service ("*d'écoute, d'aide et de références*") by telephone, whereby persons who are "*touchées ou troublées par une expérience de croyance extrême ou par les nouveaux phénomènes spirituels ou religieux*" and can share their experiences with a researcher. The aim is to contribute to scientific research on modes of belief and to offer a "stage clinique à des intervenants psycho-sociaux ou tout autre professionnel intéressé à l'écoute du croire".

Finally Michael Kropveld, who is the Executive Director of Info-Cult/Info-Secte, presented a paper on the controversial Baptist Church of Windsor, whose minister and parents in the congregation were accused of physical abuse of children. Loraine Derocher (Université de Sherbrooke) presented a paper on the socialization of second generation members of apocalyptic groups and their integration into society upon leaving. As she explained in the question period that followed, her Research Ethics Board had restricted her from identifying the specific apocalyptic groups her human subjects had been raised in, in order to protect their anonymity.

Some of the “flashpoints” and challenges posed by these groups – such as their use of alternative medicine, their authority patterns, and unconventional approaches to sexuality, childrearing and gender roles were discussed in the question period.

In the final session, the papers addressed broader sociological/historical themes that contextualize Quebec’s religious minorities. Legal information and sociological insights were contributed by Lorne Dawson (University of Waterloo) and by Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa). Dawson gave examples of the “Legal Privatization of Religion” based on his experience as an expert witness in cases involving NRMs or terrorists. His point was that religion is becoming less understood and more and more marginalized in the courts. Beyer spoke of how alternative religions were stigmatized and deviance labeled as “Cults, Sects, or Fundamentalisms” in Canada through the “Globalization of 'Bad Religion'”. Finally, Arvind Sharma presented his “Proposal for a Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions” explaining how all religions (even Scientology or Satanism) should be awarded these basic rights.

The afternoon discussion addressed the various ways in which Quebec’s new religions movements have been influenced by the province’s unique historical, cultural, linguistic, and social forces. The presentations of Beyer and Dawson stimulated a lively debate on Quebec’s “public management” of religious diversity, and on the ways that immigrant or unconventional religions challenge (or accommodate) Quebec’s legal, political and social structures. Two important notions came out of this workshop. One was a need for more research into the actual groups (there are over 800, according to the CINR’s record). Two was the hope that this workshop will stimulate more contact and networking between scholars and researchers in the area of alternative religion in Quebec.

Sponsorship and Aims of the Conference

This conference was funded by the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council, and is sponsored by the *Religion and Diversity* project at the University of Ottawa (www.religionanddiversity.ca) and part of its mission is to map the contours of religious diversity in Canada. Funds covered the cost of travel and accommodations for three presenters, the fee for technical assistance, ground travel, and coffee, tea and biscuits for the two breaks and lunch at the nearby Lola Rosa vegetarian restaurant on rue Milton.

For a small one-day workshop it was well attended, I counted over thirty people in the chapel in the afternoon session. It was encouraging to watch students engaging with faculty in the discussions, as well as the presence of several members of NRMs who were able to offer feedback. The objective of the workshop was to build scholarly networks across Quebec between French and English universities and their faculty and students. Thanks to the grants from the Religion and Diversity Project this networking was successful.