The Canadian and Australian Church Unions: A Comparison

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ABSTRACT

Based on archival data in the Canadian case and secondary sources for the Australian one, this paper both describes the Canadian church union (1925) and the Australian church union (1977) and places them in their societal and religious institutional contexts. The paper concludes by outlining the similarities and divergences of the two church mergers. In this section, a third church union—the Church of South India (1947) is introduced to highlight the comparison.

Introduction

WITHIN ORGANIZED CHRISTIANITY, as in all social organizations, there are centripetal as well as centrifugal forces, but a glance at any schema of Christian Church history would strongly suggest that schism has been the dominant, if not the only, trend. Nonetheless, in the history of Christianity, re-uniting processes were operative, as well, although the results more frequently terminated in fondly-expressed hopes than in actual unions (Rouse and Neill, 1967; Gill, 1979). During the last several centuries and particularly during this century actual reunions and unions have become more numerous (Kelly, 1971; Till, 1972; Grant, 1973; Moede, 1975; Cressey, 1978 and The Ecumenical Review, 1969-71; 1971-73; 1973-75; 1977-79).

Contemporary sociologists of religion seem to have all but ignored this centripetal development. Perhaps this is so because Western Society has been labelled post-Christian and therefore secularization appears to be more relevant. Whatever the reasons might be, the relatively rich body of sociological literature on both schism and secularization is in contrast to the paucity of works on church unions. Church union is but one of a number of sub-categories of the ecumenical movement. A much larger sub-category is bilateral confessional dialogue. While bilateral confessional dialogue has enjoyed considerable popularity in this century, it was given a renewed impetus by Vatican Council II (1962-64) because the Council encouraged discussion with Protestant and non-Christian bodies. The primary purpose of these dialogues was the promotion of mutual understanding but they have led at least in one instance to the union of two Protestant confessions.

Church unions themselves may be subdivided into four categories: 1) in the broadest sense, there is the union of churches in one or more social mis-
sions; 2) there is a federated union in which each denomination maintains its own autonomy but participates as well in a supra-denominational government; 3) there are reunions within particular denominations; and 4) there is the merger of two or more denominations within a particular nation to produce a new ecclesiastical entity. This last category itself could be subdivided into: 1) bilateral unions; 2) trilateral unions; 3) multilateral unions. Two trilateral unions will be investigated in this essay.

The essay is both descriptive and comparative, one step towards the more comprehensive and analytical study of church unions. First, a brief outline of the Canadian church union will be given followed by a description of the Canadian context in which the union took place. This will be followed by an overview of the Australian church union and its context. During the comparison of these two unions, a third union, the union in South India will be introduced.5 There will be a brief conclusion.

Highlights of the Canadian Church Union Story

Church union had been “in the air” for some time (McNeil and Nichols 1974:240-44) but it took an almost casual and unofficial plea for union by a presbyterian minister while he was conveying the traditional fraternal greetings of his church to the Methodist General Conference of 1902 meeting in Winnipeg to get the machinery moving. Dr. Patrick, the Presbyterian minister, was a relative newcomer to Canada, having come from Scotland two years previously to accept the principalship of a Presbyterian college in Winnipeg. Before leaving his native land he had experienced first hand the turmoil which was associated with the reunion negotiations of the Free Church and the United Church yet he felt that Canada, particularly the Canadian West which he had come to know, required the union of the Protestant denominations. At that very same General Conference the Methodists invited the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to meet with them to determine whether union was possible.6 Both accepted and struck union committees.

During the period from 1904-08, when the Joint Union Committee composed of approximately ten Congregationalists, forty Methodists and forty Presbyterians worked on the "Basis of Union," many of the leaders in the three churches became enthusiastic about the prospect but, when the "Basis of Union" was brought to the church courts, trouble began, at least for the Presbyterians.

The Congregationalists and Methodists rapidly established their positions; by 1910 the Congregationalists were officially committed to union and by 1912 the Methodists were similarly committed. From 1912 to 1925, when the union was consummated, the conflict was almost entirely Presbyterian in origin. Presbyterians voted on the "Basis of Union" in 1911-12 with the result that approximately one-third of those voting were opposed to union and they voted again in 1915, after some attempt at mollifying the anti-union minority had