

Anti-Americanism and Canadian Identity

by Theodore Plantinga

Another federal election is upon us, providing us with renewed occasion for soul-searching as we contemplate strategies to avoid the break-up of Canada. Politicians and parties will bend over backward to prove that they are not anti-French or anti-Quebec. Canadian identity will be reaffirmed. Our Prime Minister will tell us again and again that Canada is the greatest country in the world -- just ask the UN! And some will mutter that our relationship to the USA is the root of many of our current woes. Note that I said "some" -- not many.

Canadians who are historically aware know that something along the lines of anti-Americanism (henceforth AA) has long been part of the mix of elements in the conception of Canada that is held by many of us. Much of our country's original population consisted of folks who had literally turned their backs on the American experiment in government, folks who pulled up stakes and moved to territories where they would be able to live under the British flag (the United Empire Loyalists). Thus Canadians have a long history of being *against* something, namely, the USA.

Many people have the feeling that it is not a worthy sentiment to be *against* or to define oneself by *opposition* or *contrast*. Christians, in particular, are inclined to argue that we must be affirmative and positive.

A well-known Canadian historian has just entered the fray, warning us against AA. Jack L. Granatstein, in *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996), has sought to prick our conscience. He wants us to stop being so small. Granatstein warns: "... anti-Americanism was once the Canadian way of being different. Now it has faded away, and good riddance to it. Anti-Americanism never was and never could become the basis for any rational national identity." [p. 286] AA, for Granatstein, is a "glib, mindless prejudice" (p. 287).

I do not intend this essay to be read as a book review. Hence a couple of comments on the book will follow -- then I will return to the main theme, which is AA itself.

First of all, it is my impression that Granatstein's book is somewhat soft in that it does not address the really difficult questions or seriously contemplate some of the uglier scenarios that might present themselves as possible futures for Canada. Tough-minded the book is not. Secondly, much of the book consists of historical survey: in such-and-such a period there was some anti-American sentiment, and here is how the business played out Granatstein does not work seriously with the provocative theme in his title; his subtitle is a better indication of the content of the book. Nevertheless, his book is well worth reading, for the subject is indeed a serious one.

How about it, then? Are we allowed to be "against" some ideology or group? Well, let's remember that many of us are *Protestant* Christians. A Protestant, presumably, is one who protests, who rejects something. What do we reject? The answer is: the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Christian faith, especially as it could be found in the period we call the Reformation Era. (There have been many changes in the Catholic world since then; it might be worth asking to what extent Protestants today should be "anti-Catholic.") In a real sense, Protestantism is parasitic on Catholicism; it draws its definition in part from Catholicism.

My reaction to Granatstein's noble sentiments is that Canada is also somewhat parasitic in relation to the USA when it comes to defining national identity. We need honesty here: much of the content of cultural teaching in Canadian schools (including Christian schools) is muted AA intended to keep some distance between ourselves and our American neighbors. During my upbringing in Winnipeg's public schools, this keeping of distance was accomplished via a substantial orientation to British culture and identity. Today the pro-British orientation is much less, and as a result the AA content is more likely to be spotted for what it is.

My purpose in this essay is not to lend sanction to negativity or to unworthy, unchristian sentiments. But I do want to be politically and culturally realistic. Therefore I will conclude with a small proposal for reform in relation to our lingering AA orientation.

When I think about why it is important to keep certain "bad" American influences out of Ontario, which has been my home, off and on, for more than three decades, my thoughts quickly drift across the border to Michigan, where I

have spent six years of my life and where two of my brothers are now living on a permanent basis. If certain influences are "bad" for Ontario, might they not also be "bad" for Michigan? Deep down, I believe they are. Now, this point is hard to spell out in any detail, but I'd like to challenge my readers -- including American friends and acquaintances -- to try.

One way to pose the question is to ask whether Americans also need a dose of AA. At first the suggestion seems absurd, but on further reflection (and perhaps after some change of terminology) it no longer seems strange. I know such Americans living right here in Canada. By and large, they are better at explaining what makes Canada unique and special than most Canadians are. And they are no more interested in having the USA take over this country than I am.

But are there also such people living in the USA itself, that is, people who are worried about large-corporation influences in the world of culture, entertainment and education, people who are worried about multinational outfits that seem to be beyond the reach of anyone's legislation? Yes, I think there are. And I believe they would understand and appreciate my concerns about the possible Americanization of Canadian culture and education.

What is needed, now, is a discussion of these issues, a discussion that is not intended to exclude American citizens, whether living in Canada or in the USA. If a mass-produced culture is not good for the folks here in Ontario, it is probably not so good for our friends in Michigan either.

What I am talking about here is a serious effort to opt out, as it were. Christians already need to do this in relation to various developments in our society. Being a dedicated Canadian is good practice for being a Christian, for the same spirit of independence and willingness to be a bit different is needed for both these identities. In my classes I sometimes speak of minoritarianism as a way to explain the mentality that is needed. Canadians also need to be minoritarian in their cultural relationship to the USA.

On the purely political front there is also a difficulty when it comes to integrating Canada with the USA, namely, the disparity in size, which makes it difficult to bargain as equals. When the economic integration of the North American nations is discussed (Mexico is in the picture now as well), the example of Europe is often mentioned. Is this a fair parallel? A few observations are in order.

First of all, there are plenty of difficulties within the European economic community. A major issue in British politics is the degree of control over its own affairs which a nation relinquishes by becoming part of such a trading arrangement. The Conservative regimes of John Major and of Margaret Thatcher before him were well known for their caution on this score. From the British example, we see that some tension and hard feeling are well nigh inevitable when deep-level economic integration is attempted.

Secondly, the Europeans have been working on their new arrangements for decades. It was not all that long after the second world war when plans for integration began to be discussed seriously. Many timetables have been published (by year X, such-and-such will be the case ...), but what has happened, typically, is that events have unfolded more slowly than their planners had hoped. The passage of time is a clear indicator that difficulties and conflicts can generally be resolved but that it is it wise to allow the preponderant economic muscle or political preponderance of one party to the negotiations to override the interests of smaller partners. As I contemplate North American economic integration, I wonder whether the USA has the patience and the political resources to engage in lengthy deliberations about issues that might seem minor to many people.

Third, the European economic community has established a series of permanent institutions for coordination and dispute settlement. There is a parliament of some sort, which generally meets in Strasbourg, and sometimes elsewhere. There are permanent offices and officials stationed in Brussels, a city in one of the smaller countries in the economic community.

In relation to the North American economic community, I am inclined to ask: where is Brussels? It is also worth asking whether US political leaders have shown much willingness to recognize the authority of international agencies. Many leaders and commentators even articulate what might be called a "benevolent dominance" theory of US behavior on the international stage. Not long ago, when President Clinton's administration decided some bombing of Iraq was in order, there was public discussion of the legality -- or lack thereof -- of such conduct. One answer that was offer was what some commentators called the "800-pound gorilla theory." In other words, was anyone in a position to do anything about it? As long as the purpose of the international action was generally regarded as good or benevolent, such as holding a malevolent dictator in check, it was thought that the US has free rein. There is currently no countervailing superpower on the world stage with which it must reckon.

In short, I question whether there is enough wholehearted willingness in the US leadership (both government authorities and commentators) to enter into international arrangements in which smaller, less influential countries might sometimes be able to counter US aspirations by appealing to international regulatory agencies which might hand down a judgment now and then which Americans regard as contrary to their economic interest. If the US were an 800-pound gentleman, I would not be overly worried. But when its own commentators use the term "gorilla" instead, I get a bit worried.

Does my worry make me a proponent of AA? Perhaps the term needs to be toned down a bit at this point. Perhaps a physical metaphor can help at this point. It sometimes seems to me that our two countries are on opposite sides of a platform which is tilted in such a way that the USA is at the low end and we are at the high end. Unless we take specific measures to keep our position, we will gradually slide into their arms. Those efforts might strike some folks as a mite unfriendly; hence talk of AA comes naturally to mind. And so I support the continuing inclusion of something akin to AA in Canadian school -- both Christian and public -- in the awareness that some of it comes across as small-minded. But small we are in terms of population and international influence. I like it that way. And I hope to continue to avoid the warm embrace of the 800-pound gorilla. *[END]*