Hutterites and a Changing Perspective

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A religious sect, known as the Hutterites, have called Canada home since roughly 1920, however their existence in Canada has been anything but smooth and seamless. The Hutterites ascribe to living by a coherent theological doctrine that promotes; communalism, non-materialism, and to live like the First Church did in the Holy Bible.[[1]](#footnote-1) These doctrinal beliefs are much different than mainstream society’s lifestyles and in an attempt to stave off assimilation to mainstream ideals Hutterites live out of the public eye in colonies. However, living in isolation has done the opposite, as Canadians and the Canadian government have continually scrutinized the way these people live. Prejudice and discrimination are a large part of Hutterites lives, however this analysis does not tell the whole story. Since their arrival in Canada, mainstream society’s perspectives on the Hutterites and their religious practices have been anything but constant. In this essay I will illuminate how Canadian’s perspectives on Hutterites’ religious and cultural practices were non-linear, as the perspectives were ever changing through the first half of the twentieth century. There was no straightforward acceptance or outright rejection of Hutterites and their practices by Canadians, but rather there was a blend of perspectives differing on the particular time period*.* In order to understand the specific occurrences when perspectives were changing, I will break the essay into three smaller sections; immigration, the Great Depression, and the battle of communal land ownership. Looking at these three occurrences in Hutterite and Canadian history can better illuminate the differences in perspectives on Hutterite lifestyles and practices.

Hutterites are a religious sect who arose out of the 16th century European reformation, often being associated with Anabaptists.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Hutterites’ whole life is based on and revolves around their religious beliefs, where everything in life is based or rooted in biblical doctrine. The basis of the Hutterite doctrine comes from the Anabaptist doctrine. The Hutterite people strive to live exactly like the apostles did in the Book of Acts, as the First Church. All religious and cultural practices flow from their word for word interpretation of the Holy Bible. A few of the major ideals that Hutterites live by are; communalism, pacifism, adult baptism, strict clothing guidelines, working hard, simplistic lifestyle, non-materialism, repentance, man’s sinful nature and isolated living, which are all based on theological doctrine. Even being agricultural and self-sufficient as the means of surviving is a theological belief stemming from Ephesians 4:28 in the Holy Bible.[[3]](#footnote-3) “All aspects of life and the daily round are governed by regulations that are intended to maintain the tenants of faith.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Living by these doctrinal beliefs created clashes with mainstream culture and was at the heart of the resistance felt by the Hutterites.

Immigration

In the years of 1874-1878, the first Hutterites made their way to North America, as most colonies were created in South Dakota and a couple other colonies made their homes in the Western Prairie provinces of Canada. Hutterites had been pushed out of their homes in Russia because they were given a choice; to stay and possibly forced into military action if the Russian government needed, or to leave.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most Hutterites fled, due to their pacifist beliefs, to find a new home that would safely allow them to practice and live their de-attached lives from mainstream society. Canada and the United States gave these people exactly what they wanted; a place that allowed them to live communally and isolated, while having the option to work as contentious objectors instead of being drafted for the military. However, the relationship between the Hutterites and the United States did not last long. During the First World War, Hutterites being an easily identifiable representation of the German enemy because they were German-speaking, lead to the threat of legal dissolution of Hutterite colonies and the conscription of their men. These fears and concerns forced colonies to relocate to Canada.

The Canadian government’s first reactions to Hutterites in the early years of the 20th century was primarily accepting and excitement because they were willing to settle the Western part of Canada, while adding to the growing agricultural economy. “In 1899 the Canadian government labeled Hutterites as the most desirable class of settlers.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Even the government went so far to say that “any inducement possible should be made to secure them [Hutterites].”[[7]](#footnote-7) The government was clearly interested in attaining these communal Hutterites, because Canadian land parcels in the West were divided into individual stakes, where an individual would have to make a claim on a piece of land. However, the Canadian government made separate arrangements for the Hutterites to apply for parcels of land communally, against the system set up.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Canadian government was quite willing through 1917 to let Hutterites immigrate because, when World War II started a large proportion of Western Canadians enlisted to fight and there was a sudden shortage of farm labour, which drove the government to desire and recruit Hutterites even more. The Hutterites were agrarian people who fit the problems and shortages at hand, however this acceptance of Hutterites by the government started to wane.

In a sudden shift the government decided to ban Hutterite immigration to curb any the influx of an ‘undesirable class’, who would not fulfill the regular citizenship obligations.[[9]](#footnote-9) In June of 1919, the Government passed an amendment to the Immigration Act that stated, “such immigrants are deemed undesirable owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of life and methods of holding property, and because of their probable inability to become readily assimilated or to assume the duties and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship within a reasonable time after their entry.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The key words of the amendment are “peculiar…. methods of holding property”, as these few words helped the government target the Hutterites directly due to their communal way of life, while avoiding a direct ban on Hutterites. Even though this amendment was repealed in 1922, the damage and message had been sent that Canadians did not particularly want these communal people coming into their country.

The reaction of common folk in Canada to the large influx of immigration by the Hutterites, was somewhat mixed but mainly negative. A prominent farmer from Winnipeg described his thoughts on the new arrivals in the Maclean’s magazine. “I’ve watched these people closely. They won’t do. They’re different from us as if they came from Mars.” “The heritage they’ve handed down to him [a Hutterite] is a state of mind that couldn’t be changed with a club.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Even though the farmer acknowledged that the Hutterites were “sober, industrious, hard-working people… and are not troublesome in any direct way,”[[12]](#footnote-12) the farmer’s concerns were based on the cultural differences. The farmer’s fear of un-assimilation created a perspective that Hutterites were a stubborn people that would never Canadianize. The Calgary Eye-Opener newspaper from October 5, 1918, took that hard track in clear opposition to the Hutterites, however in a different way than the farmer from Winnipeg. In the comic, a contrast is drawn between the reception and aid given to Hutterites and a war veteran. The Hutterite is given land with beautiful housing and producing land, compared to the war veteran that receives a bare piece of land that only has a gopher and a small bush on it.[[13]](#footnote-13) The comments by the farmer in Winnipeg and the comic in the Calgary Eye-Opener, presented the multifaceted resistance that Canadians had to Hutterites.

Even though there was general discontent towards Hutterite’s immigration into Canada, some Canadians did not see Hutterites as all bad. The writer William Byron from the Maclean’s magazine, in his article *Menace of the Alien*, saw the Hutterites in a different light than the Winnipeg farmer. He had a less cynical view of the Hutterites, seeing them as a people that would easily assimilate over time. He gave credit to women’s groups, churches and the government on splendid programs that would most certainly Canadianize Hutterites. Even though Byron did not outright have a general discontent towards the Hutterites, there was a general acceptance that Hutterite way of life and religious practices could not continue to be accepted, rather an attempt to assimilate these people was needed and would be effective. He wrote, “the work of Canadianizing them [Hutterites] is a task that will stretch ahead for a generation at least.” “They are good farmers thrifty, industrious, and ambitious. In time they [Hutterites] will be good citizens.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Byron had no major objections to their immigration, however the superiority of English speaking Canadians and the need to accept mainstream culture rather than Hutterite doctrine was absolutely essential. “Their [Hutterite] presence is… a serious inconvenience to English speaking settlers.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Within Byron’s piece in the Macleans magazine, a farmer from Saskatchewan had the same sentiments, calling them friendly and courteous people however, their lifestyle was so different that the farmer could not socialize, or interact with them. “They’re not my kind of folks,”[[16]](#footnote-16) and he decided to sell and move. The attitudes and work ethic of Hutterites never upset Canadians but the difference in lifestyle and religious practices concerned Canadians the most.

The clash of lifestyles and the possible failure of assimilation concerned Canadians in the time of Hutterites’ immigration. The perspective of Hutterites during the early years of immigration was a mixed bag; the government saw them as a good class of farmers, however banned them for a short time because of concerns of living practices. The perspective of Hutterites from the common Canadian was similar to the perspective of the Canadian government, as Hutterites were good people with atypical cultural and religious practices that clashed with mainstream Canada and would need to be changed in order to mesh with society.

The Great Depression

Hutterite ridicule and hatred was not always the case, and the great depression added to the many perspectives that Canadians took to Hutterites’ lifestyles and religious practices over the first half of the 20th century. During this time of great turmoil in Canada, the government was on its final legs trying to keep people employed, feed, and happy. The most affected area of Canada was the three Prairie Provinces, where over 90% of the population in the Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan was on some type of relief.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Hutterites who were concentrated almost solely in the Prairie Provinces, were paying their taxes, and essentially costing the government nothing as, “no Hutterites on relief, none drawing old-age pensions, and none receiving mother allowances.” Hutterites kept themselves out of bankruptcy and were able to retire anyone over 60 years old, taking care of themselves.[[18]](#footnote-18) In 1934, the mayor of Raymond, Alberta wrote a letter to the Albertan Premier, who was inquiring about the Hutterites in the Raymond area. The Mayor wrote, “we [mayor and his family] have found them [Hutterites] to be good neighbours. They pay their bills and taxes promptly and are honourable in their business dealings.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Having the Hutterite colonies being amongst the most affected people of the depression and still fully-functioning, impressed Canadians. The criticisms that were heard and felt during their immigration, were fading. Canadians recognized and respected their religious practices because they kept themselves afloat without looking for additional help. Not only was respect given but Canadians saw their practices of sharing and self-sufficiency as a possible solution or a way to curb the problems that lead to great depression.

Edna Kells, from Maclean’s magazine in 1937, looked into this very question of whether Hutterites were a drawback, a menace or a people that Canadian society could learn from. She concluded in the end, that even though these were some of the hardest times in Canadian history, Hutterites were enjoying prosperity and security, needing no help, and having no fear of the future. The Hutterites were buying more land at cheap prices, when many of the other farmers could not afford to continue farming. The prosperity of Hutterites proved to Canadians that their ideals of co-operation, simplistic living and systematic work were concepts that could be adopted into Canadian society to help curb another depression in the future.[[20]](#footnote-20) Even though praise was given in this article, Kells believed that there was a clear superiority that the average Canadian had over a Hutterite. Hutterites were seen as average but not outstanding famers, they tended to be less efficient and not concerned to introduce advanced technology like a first class farmer would. She also perceived Hutterites’ forms of recreation as primitive to mainstream Canadian recreation. “Young Hutterites may rebel and occasionally look with longing eyes to the sports and pastimes of youth on the other side of the line fence… they settle down to make the best of what they have.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Hutterites were still seen as an inferior people that were primitive in their actions, however in a time of economic downturn the Hutterites’ practices were a beacon of prosperity, which gained respect and apathy from those outside the Hutterite colonies.

The changing Canadian perspective of Hutterites had roots in the rise of the CCF. While Canadians, especially in Western Canada, saw Hutterites as a viable people who could handle their affairs, the political party Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), gained power during this very era. During this time the CCF rose to power and popularity, sharing many of the ideals that Hutterites ascribed to. The political party wanted to create a utopia on earth, much like the Hutterites, wanting to become the closest heavenly place on Earth. Hutterites banded together in co-operation to call themselves “the only true Communists in the world”, whereas the CCF took a less extreme stance but saw the lassiez-faire system of economics as a societal problem. Both the Hutterites and the CCF also believed that the strong should bear the burdens of the weak. Some of the most fundamental ideals of both the CCF and the Hutterites were very similar and followed the same strain of thinking.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The CCF had planted its roots during the Great Depression becoming more and more popular, especially in the Prairie Provinces. After officially becoming a party in 1932, in Saskatchewan, the CCF gained a following. Much of the support for the CCF originated and was united in the rural areas, as well as small urban centres, with its roots in the agrarian people.[[23]](#footnote-23) In Saskatchewan, the CCF’s first election in 1938 garnered 18.73%[[24]](#footnote-24) of the vote becoming the official opposition and then in the next election of 1944 the CCF obtained 53.13%,[[25]](#footnote-25) becoming the first socialist government in North America. Across the three Prairie Provinces a shift in thinking occurred, and these changes in political philosophy were in line with the Hutterites. These changes were also another explanation of why Hutterites’ religious practices were more accepted. Tolerance ofcommunal ideals grew amongst many in the Prairie Provinces, which in return helped change the perspective on Hutterites. To recall, a large number of the CCF members were farmers or people from rural areas. These people would also be the ones interacting with Hutterites the most. The similar political philosophy of Western Canadians and Hutterites’ practices helped reduce the difference in lifestyles. Western Canadians were less fearful and concerned of the religious practices and beliefs, which helped add to the new perspective that Canadians took on Hutterites.

After the Canadian perspective on Hutterites had been that of concern and general dislike for their lifestyles and religious practices, the Great Depression brought on a new perspective. Having people connect and agree with co-operative living and bettering society, shown by the similarities of the CCF and the Hutterites, eased the critics. Adding that Hutterites were able to sustain themselves during the Great Depression by not relying on the government gained a renewed respect for Hutterites. Even though feelings of superiority were still true, Canadians gave the Hutterites a new respect. Canadian’s assessment of Hutterite life was less cynical than the period of Hutterite immigration, thus adding a different perspective that Canadians saw Hutterites through.

The Battle over Communal Land Ownership

The days of connection and intertwined values that occurred during the Great Depression did not last long because Canadians perspectives on Hutterites were changing once again. After World War II, the Red Scare had started, as Canadians feared that Communism and their followers were infiltrating Canadian society and would begin a societal upheaval. The background of the post war period was masked by this fear of Communism, which was not so facilitative to Hutterites. The state of fear that Canadians were entrenched in, projected onto the Hutterites because they proclaimed themselves as the “only true Communists in the world.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Having society see the Hutterites synonymous with Communism, caused an outcry in the Prairie Provinces to curb the Hutterites and their ability to spread and multiply. This fear of communism was a starting point into 25 years of hard line discrimination against the Hutterites. From a governmental level down to the ordinary folk of Canada, another perspective of hatred and distaste for the Hutterites appeared.

“The Alberta government, responding to the pressures of public opinion, passed several statutes restricting their right to hold property.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The Albertan Government issued a committee to report on the “Hutterite Problem” in 1947 to calm the fears of the Albertan people. One of the recommendations from that committee was that a new act was to be created to control the expansion of the Hutterites. Through various meetings in 1947, a new act was created and passed, the 1947 Communal Property Act.[[28]](#footnote-28) The Act; limited a colony to owning only 6400 acres, no new colonies could built within 40 miles of an existing colony, and land could not be sold to Hutterites unless it was first offered to the public for sixty days. The act was predicated on many accusations such as; Hutterites outbid regular Canadian farmers with their communal funds, having land by Hutterites lowered those farmland prices because no one wanted to be near them, and they don’t support local businesses because they make everything themselves. All these accusations revolved around the fear that Hutterite colonies had an economic advantage over the average farmer. In the farming world, economic security has always been a problem since weather can destroy hundreds of hours of work in a matter of minutes. The Hutterites through communalism and large holdings could mostly overcome and protect themselves, compared to the average family farm. Canadian farmers felt that family farms were being threatened and self-interest directed their adverse sentiments to Hutterites. The discrimination by the 1960’s had moved from a fear of religious doctrine, to a fear of economic supremacy.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The people backed the policies put in place by the Albertan government, as W.O Mitchell explains in his article in Macleans about a meeting of 300 or so community members in Red Deer in 1965. They all came to voice their opinions to “the like of which I do not believe has been paralleled in Canada in this era” on the Hutterite Problem. “Indignation and pent emotion drew most of them to Red Deer — farmers and ranchers and small - town merchants — from as far as two hundred miles.”[[30]](#footnote-30) In Warner, Alberta in 1960, 300 residents protested against the acceptance of an application for a new colony. One man was quoted saying, “I’d be sorry to set a match to their [Hutterite] buildings and crops, but it’s going to have to be done.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Canadians have a distaste for the Hutterites in the post war period of Canada, as the Hutterite hatred continues through into the early 1970’s, while the justice system continues to uphold these discriminatory policies.

In 1964, after following the 1947 Act for many years the Rock Lake Colony near Lethbridge, Alberta was buying land in an area that was restricted to Hutterites. They were subsequently arrested.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Hutterites took this case all the way up to the Alberta Supreme Court, known as the Walter et. Al. vs. Attorney General of Alberta, however the appeal was dismissed in 1966. The grounds of dismissal was that the Hutterian religious principle of communal land holding is not acceptable to the Albertan Government as it impedes further economic growth in the province. They ruled that this act does not suppress Hutterite religion but rather limits large holding companies. Finally they ruled that even though this legislation only classifies one particular group of people, this is not an attack on the Hutterite people or their religion but rather a suppression of their practices of communal land holdings.[[33]](#footnote-33) The rulings that were upheld in the Albertan Supreme Court continued the discrimination against the Hutterites. The attack on Hutterites was coming from all sides, as the government and the people were coming after the lifestyles of the Hutterite people. Even when this case was taken to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1969, the appeal was once again dismissed, this time on the grounds that ownership of land is under provincial jurisdiction by the British North America Act. They also ruled that the 1947 Communal Property Act was not discriminating against the religious beliefs of Hutterites, even though this Act was put in place solely to curb the advancement of the Hutterites.[[34]](#footnote-34) Going to the court system was the Hutterite’s attempt to plead religious persecution, however the courts did not see it in the same light. The opposition to the Hutterites was reaching its peak, since Canadians wanted Hutterites to integrate, and would face hostility until assimilation was complete.

While the Hutterites were being harassed throughout the post war years into the 1970’s, parts of the Canadian population started to change their perspectives. W.O Mitchell in his Macleans article, illuminated that the accusations against the Hutterites were based on false premises and saw them as a people simply trying to live by God’s laws. Inherently these people were doing what they had always done by resisting integration and living by their theological doctrine. He proposed to leave them be because they were stubborn, peace loving Christians.[[35]](#footnote-35) A woman named, Mrs. J.M. Holt, wrote in the Mailbag section of Macleans Magazine, “how could Albertans, who are prone to become so distressed with the prejudices of the American south, even consider the Communal Property Act?” She continued deploring the Albertans of harassing a hard-working and peaceful people.[[36]](#footnote-36) Even in the newspapers, the Edmonton Journal and the Calgary Herald started calling on the Albertan government and people to grow in their appreciation and understanding of Hutterite lifestyles. Hutterites increased involvement in communities through business dealings and volunteer work, building rinks and community halls, helped bridge the gaps between the Hutterites and the surrounding citizens in the 1970’s. Finally in 1971, the Albertan government had reacted to the changing atmosphere surrounding the Hutterites, as public figures questioned the need for restrictions and prejudices against the Hutterites. The Conservatives gained power in the government from the Social Credit party who had been in power for 35 years and immediately repealed the 1947 Communal Property Act. Though discrimination was not over, Canadians eased their attacks towards the Hutterites heading into the 1970’s.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The roots of hatred began in the fear of communist upheaval but grew into a general hostility. The post war period was a time of constant harassment and hatred by Canadians from the outside who perceived them as an economic threat. W.O. Mitchell put the events in Alberta in relation to Hutterites perfectly, “the Communal Property Act is more than a single arbitrary piece of legislation: it is the crystallization of antipathy and opposition that has been building in Alberta ever since the Hutterites moved into Canada in 1919.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Canadians new perspective of Hutterites was based on fear, as Canadians viewed Hutterites in a much different way than the Great Depression or even their initial immigration. Canadians saw the Hutterites as an infringement on their lives because they could economically take-over, which is projected through the governmental acts and court rulings. Eventually leading into the 1970’s Canadians became more tolerant, however the 25 years of adverse sentiments based on religious and cultural prejudices dominated the post war era.

Conclusion

Throughout these three different time periods, Hutterites have always had some form of discrimination against them, however the intensity and the type of discrimination differed in each era. In addition, not all periods of time were masked by pure discrimination or hatred. During Hutterite immigration, Canadians were in ethnic conflict with Hutterites. Canadians were concerned with Hutterites un-assimilability into mainstream culture and their atypical cultural practices. Nevertheless Hutterites were seen as a necessary people to add to the agricultural economy and were a peaceful people. During the Great Depression, discrimination was based on cultural superiority of Canadians, however Canadians saw them as good citizens that could handle their affairs, staying afloat in Canada’s worst depression. Finally, during the post war period, the fear was mostly based on economic take-over, and this era had was most blatant in the attack on Hutterites’ lifestyles and religious practices. All eras had differing levels of discrimination and tolerance, and the underlying reasons for those tolerances and discrimination were based on different perspectives depending on the context of the time period. The perspectives of Hutterites by Canadians can be seen as constantly changing, where there was no singular perspective that dominated the first 70 years of the 20th century. Rather each time period had its own unique blend of perceptions.

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