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The Vancouver Sun

1st Place
2006
Supple Award
The passion of Paul:

Braving hunger, shipwreck, serpents and soldiers, the complex, fallible, extraordinarily inspired prophet wandered to all corners of the Roman empire to spread the word. The originator of Easter is reviled by some and worshipped by others, but he can't be ignored.

Saturday, March 26, 2005

The itinerant Jewish rabbi Saul of Tarsus, who later became more famously known as Saint Paul, loved to argue. He provoked trouble as naturally as a hungry lion rumbling into a crowded city.

The man whose Hebrew name was Saul and Greek name was Paul seemed to revel in religious combat. He not only argued with close friends such as James, the brother of Jesus, he made many enemies, who described him as ugly, slouched and bad-tempered and mocked him for his squeaky voice.

As a man on a mission to spread the word of Jesus Christ, Paul endured every hardship imaginable; walking 16,000 kilometres to spread his passion-filled message. He lived as if he was drunk with God's spirit, possessed by a force much larger than himself: divine love.

Paul's rock-ribbed convictions kept him going as he endured frequent arrest, hunger, shipwreck, storms, poisonous snakes, lethal soldiers, narrow escapes and more. All this occurred while he trudged through regions that are now prime Mediterranean tourist hot-spots, but which then comprised the rugged, not-so-holy Roman Empire.

Paul -- whose letters to the world's first Christian communities make up the heart of the New Testament -- was convinced he was one with the sacred, eternal power embodied in Jesus Christ.

Some scholars now go so far as to claim Paul was the "inventor" of the Christian church -- as well as the originator of Easter, which two-billion global citizens are celebrating this weekend.

Paul has been the subject of re-energized study in the past decade, as scholars such as Canada's Donald Harmon Akenson, author of Saint Saul, join together to strip away Paul's often-sanitized Sunday-school persona to paint a more full-blooded portrait.

The figure who has been emerging is as complicated and fallible as the heroic King David of the Hebrew Bible, an extraordinarily inspired man who has changed history by writing down arguably the first recorded theology of Jesus, as well as the first accounts of the disparate movement that grew up around him.
Love him or hate him, Paul cannot be ignored.

The flesh-and-blood historical Paul is not necessarily turning out to be the piously consistent authority some conservative Christians have held up in their churches.

Nor, according to the new wave of Pauline scholars, should he be stereotyped as the greatest disaster ever to befall Western civilization, the man who critics say helped turn Jesus's gentle teachings into guilt-ridden moralisms.

Many scholars challenge Paul's liberal Christian and secular detractors, who have labelled him as anti-Jewish, anti-women and anti-homosexual. They suggest such caricatures may not only be historically inaccurate but that is unfair to judge Paul in terms of modern social mores.

Historians such as Akenson say Paul was both a creature of his ancient culture and someone who wanted to radically change it -- who was determined to forever challenge the dominance of the Roman Empire or, for that matter, any overwhelming military-economic force.

Through history, mainstream Pauline scholars such as Barnabas Lindars of the University of Manchester have noted that Paul has been best known for teaching that God's grace, not adherence to strict religious rules, was the key to both human freedom and divine salvation.

This doctrine has inspired countless people through the centuries, including gutsy protesters such as Martin Luther in his fight against 16th-century Catholic corruption, and German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for helping plot the assassination of Adolf Hitler.

"The freedom in Christ that Paul preached about is a freedom from all authority structures," says Daniel Bogert-O'Brien, a post-doctoral researcher at Ottawa's Catholic-based St. Paul's University. "Freedom for him meant freedom from all religious and cultural customs -- to membership in a community founded upon 'faith working through love.'"

As well, as every Sunday school student would be aware, Paul was the man most responsible for arguing that God's promise to the ancient Hebrews was now being offered through Jesus Christ to Gentiles. In other words, Paul was the first to argue that humans didn't have to first convert to Judaism, including by being circumcised, to become bona fide followers of Jesus.

Overarching everything Paul taught and did, scholars now believe, was his desire to reach out to his society's many outcasts: the poor, the sick, the enslaved, the demon-possessed (mentally ill) and the religiously unclean, such as tax collectors and men who ran cemeteries.

Bible specialists have also been debating in recent years whether Paul may have promoted other beliefs that many today would find surprising, including those concerning the resurrection, the miraculous act that forms the heart of Easter.

COSMIC BELIEFS AND CHRISTIANITY

A.N. Wilson, who was once a key figure in the Anglican establishment in Britain,
helped ignite the renewed fascination with Paul in 1997, when he wrote a provocative book that called Paul the inventor of Christianity.

In Paul: The Mind of the Apostle, Wilson maintained that Jesus, the man typically considered the founder of Christianity, was a wandering Jewish sage "who had no intention of starting a religion."

If it wasn't for Paul hammering the story of Jesus's life and death into an elaborate structure of cosmic beliefs, Wilson maintained, "there would never have been a Christianity."

Igniting a huge fuss in parts of the Christian church, Wilson highlighted how Paul's writings in the New Testament largely ignore Jesus's teachings to focus on what Paul believed was the central Christian message: that Jesus was divine -- and was sent to Earth, as Wilson says, to reveal that "the human race was an immortal race."

Wrote Wilson: "Paul was a romantic poet who, in making the crucified Jesus his inner light, used the images of Jesus as savior of the world to capture the imagination of succeeding generations."

Apostle Paul, Wilson says, took up the story of Jesus's death and later appearances to disciples and built them into the beginnings of a wondrous theological framework.

Although both conservative and liberal scholars have challenged some of Wilson's interpretations, most agree at a minimum that Paul was a pivotal figure in establishing the early church's core beliefs and rituals -- particularly those surrounding Easter.

Contrary to commonly held belief, many Bible specialists maintain that Paul did not promote the idea that Jesus's body physically resurrected.

In his recent book, Rabbi Paul, New York professor Bruce Chilton maintains Paul was "contemptuous" of those who believed Jesus was resuscitated from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 5:36, Paul calls such people "fools."

Instead, Chilton argues, Paul was trying to teach that Jesus' resurrection was a cosmic event in which God was signalling that all people, not only Jews, could have eternal life after death.

Paul, Chilton says, was teaching that humans would achieve immortality by being transformed into a "spiritual body," a kind of spirit-filled soul.

Paul also expanded the meaning of the eucharist, the ritual at the heart of Easter, beyond how it had previously been conceived.

It was Paul's idea, Chilton says, that those Christians who gathered together to eat bread and drink wine in Jesus's name actually become one with Christ's spiritual body.

Even more, Paul taught that whoever took part in the eucharistic ritual was linked with Christ in a cosmic whole. This radical concept -- that slaves and free men, prostitutes and the wealthy became equal in Jesus -- upset the status quo in
ancient Rome's viciously hierarchical society.

It can still do so today.

THE EARLY YEARS

He was named Saul when he was born in 10 AD into a Jewish family in what is now southern Turkey, near the Syrian border. Like his father, he became a tent-maker.

Paul grew up in a cosmopolitan environment living alongside Greeks and others. He studied Judaism and eventually became a member of the strict Pharisees.

Later, some scholars now believe, Paul, for reasons unknown, probably joined the more hard-line Shammanites, who approved of violence against non-Jews.

But as Dominican author Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and others write, Paul's angry, strident beliefs led him to persecute, beat up and even perhaps help murder some of the often-poor Jews who became the earliest followers of Jesus.

In his formative years, Paul was what we would now call a bigot who supported ethnic cleansing. He conjures up images of violent Catholics and Protestants or militantly fundamentalist Muslims; people who are utterly convinced that only they possess God's ultimate truth.

Then came the moment in Paul's life that changed history.

It's commonly accepted that Paul never met Jesus in person. Nevertheless, he had his famous conversion experience while travelling to Damascus, a moment that has been visually interpreted by many of the world's great artists.

On the road to Damascus, says Lindars of the University of Manchester, Paul had a vision of a crucified Jesus, risen from the dead and exalted in heaven. It temporarily blinded him.

Suddenly converted, Paul soon switched from being the chief tormentor of the followers of Jesus to becoming their movement's first evangelist, a fierce promoter of the neophyte faith.

Still, despite becoming what we now would call a "Christian missionary," many scholars believe Paul considered himself a Jew to the day his intrepid journeys ended and he was executed in Rome, about 64 AD.

In Paul's time, most of the early followers of Jesus were Jewish.

It was only many decades later that they became known as "Christians," based on the word Christ, which is the Greek name for "messiah."

In Paul's time, there were many competing schools and movements within Judaism. In his efforts to reform Judaism, Paul became the first to proclaim Jesus was the Jews' long-awaited messiah.

"This is a very big deal," says Akenson, one of Canada's leading Pauline scholars, who is also a history professor at Queen's University, Kingston.
Paul was among the first, if not the first, followers of Jesus, says Akenson, to preach that Jesus was a suffering, divine messiah -- not the powerful king-like messiah for whom many Jews had been waiting.

Paul felt it was his duty to straighten out the many communities of mostly Jews that were forming around the crucified-but-divine Jesus.

These communities were all over the map -- literally and figuratively, suggests Bogert-O'Brien, of St. Paul's University.

"Sexual practices in the early communities, for example, varied widely -- from communities that practised something like 'free love' to others that practised polygamy or monogamy," he says.

Paul's fiery, hastily dictated letters to these far-flung Christian outposts, which later became part of the New Testament canon, were his attempt to impose some orthodoxy on a dramatically diverse group of Jesus followers.

In this way, Paul was trying to accomplish two competing things at once, Bogert-O'Brien says.

He was striving to provide religious coherence to the new Christian communities, but he was also trying to overthrow the dominant religious rules of his culture. He preached: "For freedom Christ has set us free," and "Christ redeemed us from the slavery of the law."

Modern scholars are constantly trying to understand what the world of Jesus and Paul was actually like. As they do so, it's becoming more widely accepted that both Jesus and Paul were challenging what Bible experts now call the "honour-and-shame society" they lived in.

In this rigid culture, there were harsh divisions between those considered elite and honourable and religiously acceptable, and those judged shameful and religiously unclean, something like 20th-century India's "untouchables."

In fighting this honour-and-shame society, Paul may have even been defending his own worth.

Bible specialist Herman Waetjen, a professor at Presbyterian Seminary in California, says that since Paul was a tentmaker who worked with animal skins, he could well have been ranked "unclean" by strict Jews.

By emphasizing that all people are saved through Jesus, that God's love is ultimate, Waetjen says, Paul may have been redeeming his own self-image at the same time he countered the religious strictures of the honour-and-shame society.

In his letters, Paul constantly seems torn, says Bogert-O'Brien. Often he seems embedded in his culture -- and appears, at least on the surface, to uphold his era's cultural customs, which kept women and slaves in their place.

But at other times, Bogert-O'Brien joins many scholars in saying Paul's over-riding theology was an affront to the powers that be. Paul's message was shockingly egalitarian and universalistic.
Why else, scholars ask, would Paul write one of the western world's most famous sentences:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

It is this foundational principle that echoes today as Christians and non-Christians step up their probe of Paul's teachings.

Here is a brief look at the continuing debates over what Paul may or may not have said about a number of controversial cultural issues:

Christians and Jews: American Bible scholar Pamela Eisenbaum, who is Jewish, says most Jews see Paul as an apostate, a shameless manipulator and a self-hating Jew.

Many Jews, she says, "hold Paul single-handedly responsible for 2,000 years of anti-Semitism and Christian brutality towards Jews."

But, following detailed studies of the New Testament, Eisenbaum has concluded Paul is much more complex than that, and his criticism of rival Jewish sects far less odious.

Building on Paul's teaching that people are "no longer Jew or Greek . . .," Eisenbaum has become convinced Paul remained a committed, well-intentioned Jew to the end.

Going further, Eisenbaum maintains Paul was one of the world's first champions of multiculturalism -- which she says is the idea that people who are different can be meaningfully related.

Women: For at least 30 years, feminists have railed against how Paul's utterances were used for centuries by church patriarchs to keep women in their place, subservient to men.

Writing to his friend Timothy, Paul appears to declare that a woman may not "teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" in the church. In another infamous passage in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul appears to tell women "to submit yourselves unto your own husbands."

While Jesus had been remarkable in his day for forming unprecedented friendships with women and giving them leadership roles in his movement, Paul, as they say today, just didn't seem to get it.

Still, some Christian feminists, such as the Vancouver School of Theology's Sharon Betcher, are among those seeing Paul in a new light, as archeologists and anthropologists continue to piece together just what kind of culture Paul lived in.

Many scholars are now questioning whether it was actually Paul who wrote the lines that have been most vociferously employed to keep a lid on the rise of women in the global church.

His anti-women comments just don't jibe, some Christian feminists say, with the
high regard Paul often displayed for women in his epistles.

As well, scholars such as Waetjen now say, Paul -- by arguing everyone is free and equal in Christ's love -- was actually fighting the top-down power wielded by the patriarchy. As Waetjen says: "Paul is smashing all that."

Homosexuality: Paul's words are frequently cited by conservative Christians as their divinely ordained authority for opposing homosexual relationships and gay and lesbian clergy.

Even many liberal scholars, such as Akenson, acknowledge that Paul -- although he preached cosmic love and may not have been as harsh about slaves, Jews and women as previously believed -- was, nevertheless, clearly "homophobic."

Retired U.S. Episcopal Bishop John Spong, a blunt-speaking liberal, went so far a few years ago as to suggest that Paul's disgust with homosexuality may have burst out of his own repressed sexual attraction to men. Spong wondered if homosexuality might have been Paul's own mysterious "thorn in the flesh," which had previously been thought to be an affliction such as epilepsy or an anxiety-provoking condition related to shingles.

Yet another camp of New Testament academics speculate that the sections of the Pauline letters that contain the most ferocious denunciations of homosexuals, of "men with men working that which is unseemly," could have been added long after Paul by early church fathers.

The men who created the Biblical canon in the fourth century may have wanted to make Paul's teaching seem more appealing by fitting into the dominant Roman culture.

Another large cohort of scholars, such as Daryl Schmidt of Texas Christian University, believe Paul may have been targeting married men who sought out male prostitutes working out of pagan temples. Similarly, Schmidt says, Paul could have been appalled at the "unbridled passion" displayed in Greco-Roman bathhouses between men who would otherwise be considered straight.

While conservative Christians believe Paul remains undeniably correct in denouncing homosexual acts, some progressive Christians are taking a different approach.

They admire Paul for his teachings about the centrality of love and the liberating power of the cosmic Christ and they suggest that maybe, if Paul actually wrote the anti-homosexual passages, he was in this regard simply a product of his time.

In other words, they think he was wrong.

Such Christian thinkers say human reason, inspired by God, leads to certain viewpoints evolving. They claim, no matter what Paul may have said, it is acceptable for the church to change its mind over time, on everything from women to homosexuality.

LIVING UNDER EMPIRE

Like most Christian feminists, Betcher, of VST, initially considered Paul a stain on the formation of the church, a harsh man who denounced women and homosexu-
als and lacked Jesus's radical inclusiveness.

But the more that Betcher, who was raised in the U.S., probed modern Bible scholarship, the more she recognized "that we can learn from Paul what it was like to live under Empire."

Paul, as a Jew, was steeped in the Hebrew book of Exodus, says the Christian theology professor. He probably knew by heart the triumphant account of the Jews being liberated from slavery under the ancient Egyptian empire.

Today, Betcher believes, Paul continues to "teach us to resist the brute power of 'Empires,' " including those that oppress people and abuse the planet today.

"Paul essentially taught that "divine power is not coercive," Betcher says. "It's humble. It serves others, although it also stands up for itself. Divine power is definitely not the power of Empire, which is the power of humiliation and arrogance."

Betcher and Bogert-O'Brien are among those who believe Paul opposed the ruthless use of economic and military might. He was adamant he would not bow down before any principalities or powers.

The only authority Paul would serve was the spiritual, risen Christ, whom he saw as the ultimate manifestation of love.

Given Paul's wide range of challenging teachings, his frequent self-contradictions, and the wildly different ways he's been interpreted through the decades, Betcher and Bogert-O'Brien wonder if the time has come to celebrate the feisty Paul's knack for provoking debate.

It's been dangerous in the past, Betcher says, when Christians have blindly bowed before Paul as someone who can't be questioned.

So, instead of seeing Paul as a patriarch who handed down unchanging decrees about what Christians must believe and how they should behave, Betcher suggests engaging Paul like the provocative rabbi he was.

Perhaps it's healthier, she says, to see him as one of many contributors to the often-combative and ongoing Jewish tradition known as midrash, or Biblical interpretation.

"We don't have to see Paul as an authority," Betcher says. "We can see him as someone to be in argument with."

There seems a good chance -- even as we approach a very modern Easter, almost two millennia after his death -- that in-your-face Paul would not have expected it any other way.

(see sidebar: Reckless, tough and abrasive)
Sidebar to 'The Passion of Paul'

Reckless, tough and abrasive:

Paul meets the idolators of Ephesus

Saturday, March 26, 2005

I walked in the footsteps of Paul three years ago -- and was struck by an overwhelming sense of the apostle's passionate recklessness and unbelievable toughness.

My wife and I were walking through the ruins of the city of Ephesus, one of the world's most elaborate archaeological sites, in the beautiful arid hills of what is now northwest Turkey, not far from the glistening Aegean Sea.

I found myself imagining how Paul, a poor Jew spreading the word about a divine, risen Jesus, had sweated and strained through the mountains to trek to this place. He wanted to be there because it was then arguably the most cosmopolitan and advanced city in the Roman Empire.

As an evangelist, Paul thought that if he could get his message of cosmic resurrection across in this major port city, where Greek pagans lived alongside Jews, the message of salvation through Christ would then spread to all points of the map.

My wife and I explored the streets and plazas where Paul openly preached for almost three years before he was arrested. We saw the remains of the palaces, theatre, library and the famous statue of the fertility goddess, Artemis, whose temple was ranked one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

The New Testament passages that describe how Paul, around 53 AD, denounced this immensely popular goddess, who appears to sport multiple breasts (or, as scholars now suggest, multiple bull's testicles) came alive. Paul had his followers burn books about Artemis and condemned the craftsmen who profited handsomely by making her silver devotional idols. By doing so, Paul caused a near-riot.

Despite Ephesus being a reputedly tolerant city with a population of several hundred thousand, Paul, as he did elsewhere, had a knack for pushing its citizens' buttons. Crowds wanted to get rid of this aggressive troublemaker.

As the Book of Acts says, some of the city's pagans took to the streets and chanted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Paul and his Jewish followers were soon thrown in jail, not for the first time. We sat in the giant stone amphitheatre where Bible scholars say the apostle's followers, and maybe Paul himself, were thrown, perhaps to fight for their lives against wild animals. He was soon run out of the wonder-filled city.

I had to admire this amazing, difficult man. Fearless. Totally confident. Abrasive. Intoxicated by his God. Carried along by what he firmly believed was the energy of
love, which he was convinced was the force behind the universe. Not caring if he lived -- or was whipped, tortured or executed.

Paul was assured he had found the cosmic answer to suffering, and that everyone needed desperately to hear what he was calling "The Good News."

-- 30 --
Beware the 'boredom boom':

A long-ignored contemporary disease grows more severe among young and old

Friday, May 6, 2005

In the shopping mall -- despite its sparkling light, Muzak and invitations to buy everything from jewelry to sportswear -- there are many kinds of boredom.

There is the boredom of seniors like Zen Gregory, who is 76 and has a cold. The retired millwright has walked over to the Oakridge mall food court for a cup of tea and muffin because he's weary of being trapped alone in his apartment.

"To tell you the truth," Gregory says, "I'm bored with Vancouver. There's nothing to do here." He's tired not only of his jigsaw puzzles and TV shows, but with feeling he has to pay money to do anything in Vancouver. He's thinking of moving back to Ontario; at least he'll be near his daughters.

In the mall, there's also the boredom of teenagers, the cohort most people think about when they reflect on this contemporary disease -- which, paradoxically, is growing more severe as the level of stimulation escalates.

Five Grade 11 friends from Eric Hamber secondary sit at a table next to Gregory. Elliot Lo says his group doesn't find the mall "that special." But at least it's a place to hang out. In school, it becomes clear, the teenagers suffer from the kind of boredom that prisoners experience -- the kind you can't escape.

The famous Danish existential philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once called boredom "the root of all evil." The English poet, Wordsworth, referred to it as "savage torpor." A thousand years ago, Christian monks called it "acedia," a form of inner sloth judged a sin.

But in our increasingly plugged-in, hyped-up, 24-7 society, chronic boredom is becoming a crisis. We feel we have a right not to be bored. We fear boredom as much as we fear death (and more than a few scholars say there's a connection.)

Boredom is not a subject to be treated tongue-in-cheek. Boredom matters. The rise of boredom raises many complex questions about the human condition.

Boredom is the all-encompassing name we now give our discontent. As Patricia Spacks says in the groundbreaking book, Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind, it is a modern-day "menace," the ghost that haunts our every moment.

Boredom is also something we deny. How can we admit to being bored when others seem so busy and, especially on TV, fabulously excited? Confessing to being
bored is like admitting to being a loser.

Drinking Starbucks coffee or juice from Orange Julius, the teens in the Oakridge mall say math and physics are the most enervating subjects.

"'What is the square root of 14?' It's like time is moving in slow motion when the teacher asks stuff like that. I watch the clock all the time," says JoJo Smith.

Most of the group also admit to having watched a lot of TV and having played a few too many thousand video games. Decent students, they're beginning to find electronic media repetitive.

Yet what are you going to do, Smith asks, when you're so bored in school you can't wait to get out, but you're also bored during summer vacation?

Smith feels bad about her boredom; because one of her favourite actors, Viggo Mortenson, the hunk swordsman in The Lord of the Rings, recently declared there's no excuse for it.

That's the kind of moralizing that's long pushed boredom underground, making it hard to discuss or research. Yet the scholars and psychologists who are now probing boredom believe it's one of the major diseases of our era.

We're in a "Boredom Boom," says the U.S.-based Yankelovich Monitor, a consumer survey.

Almost three out of four North Americans say they crave more novelty in their lives, says the Monitor. Sixty-nine per cent agree with the statement: "Even though I have so much to do, I'm always looking for something new and exciting to do." More than four out of five said they were bored with TV and the Internet.

California psycho-physiologist Augustin de la Pena, who has studied boredom for 30 years, says the subject intimidates most researchers because it's hard to measure, funding agencies aren't interested and most people think humans are motivated by more noble purposes than sheer boredom.

However, de la Pena maintains boredom is key to understanding humans. Survey results like those from the Yankelovich Monitor reveal the human mind is always upping the ante for stimulation, just as a drug addict needs larger doses to get high.

It's not only seniors and high-school students who are bored. Clock-watching employees and managers are causing executives to fret because uninterested staff cost companies billions of dollars.

The father of modern capitalism, Adam Smith, worried in the 1700s that mind-numbing industrial jobs would make humans dull and ignoble. Now, some economists worry the fastest-growing category of new jobs is in the low-paying service sector, where hundreds of thousands of cashiers, clerks, security guards, fast-food staff and others endure deadly dull repetition.

Business is so afraid of boredom that high-tech shopping carts are now being designed with DVD players so kids don't get bored while their parents strive to buy things.
As well, the entertainment industry is becoming boring to many -- witness declining ratings for everything from the Grammys to professional sports.

Meanwhile, in our relationships, divorce rates are rising because spouses are bored with each other. Many people are over-eating because they're bored. And surveys show many are bored with sex. TV's Desperate Housewives are, by definition, desperately bored; so they're on the sexual warpath.

Here's what various health specialists say are signs of boredom:

- Lack of interest.
- Vague discontent.
- Frequent drowsiness.
- Listlessness and fatigue.
- The slow passage of time.
- Wishful thinking.
- Preoccupation with romantic or heroic fantasies.
- Vanity and self-absorption.
- Moderate to severe depression.

What causes boredom?

Humans and other animals seem to have an innate curiosity.

"The eyes want to see and the ears want to hear," said early American psychologist Robert Woodworth. When our curiosity is stifled, when our inner energy cannot be expressed, we grow frustrated.

Human beings have a need for stimulation. In a room without windows, decorations, telephones or other outlets, we grow unbearably bored. Even rats will actively explore parts of a maze that have stripes, and avoid walled areas without patterns.

Some may be glad to hear that boredom could be more prevalent among intelligent people. Psychologist Eric Fromm was among the first to propose the theory when he noted higher-functioning animals, such as apes and bears, often get bored in zoos. But snakes and crocodiles don't appear to have the same problem.

The evils of boredom enter our lives in two distinct ways.

The first is called situational boredom.

It's what teenagers experience in a math class or patients feel waiting in a doctor's office. More seriously, it's what prisoners endure in jail, and what millions of seniors experience in badly run residences. It's involuntary boredom; it arises out
of monotonous situations we can't control.

The more troubling type of boredom is chronic.

It's the kind that Madame Bovary experienced in the 1856 literary classic by Gustave Flaubert. Madame Bovary, restricted by social convention, was bored with her husband, bored with her community and bored with her life.

In her endless tedium, she created idealistic fantasies and entered into two love affairs, both of which turned disastrous. She took her life through arsenic.

Like Madame Bovary, it's common to blame something else for our boredom.

We complain we're bored with our spouses, our teachers, with meetings, with surfing the Web, with our "no-fun" city.

Given all the finger-pointing, theologian Paul Tillich said, "Boredom is rage spread thin."

It is deadened anger, or resentment.

Yet while it's often expressed as irritation with others, it's really anger at ourselves.

Vancouver's Bonnelle Strickling sees them every morning: The bored college students. At home they're plugged into exploding electronic media, but in the classroom they can't seem to concentrate.

Later in the day, in her private counselling office, Strickling sees the bored adults, who feel empty. They're stressed because they feel glued to the work treadmill; they've lost their zest because they're too damn busy.

Since Strickling wears dual hats -- as a Langara College philosophy instructor and as a psychotherapist in private practice -- she finds herself fighting on two fronts to counteract the deadening effects of hyperactivity.

She's not the only one concerned about today's paradoxical problem: That our over-stimulated society is breeding widespread, insidious boredom.

Although a good portion of Strickling's second-year students continue to be engrossed in her philosophy classes, after three decades at Langara College, she notes a sudden a decline in many first-year students' ability to comprehend the basics.

"A lot of my students seem to have the attention span of a gnat," she says. "They act in class like they're watching TV. They talk to each other while I'm teaching. There seems to be this kind of constant need for stimulation."

Plugged in at home and on the street to TV, the Internet, laptops, DVDs, cell-phones and MP3s, many young people are becoming merely reactive, Strickling says.

Prof. Michael Raposa, a specialist in boredom based at Lehigh University in the U.S., says we live in an attention-deficit-disorder culture, and the effects are becoming crippling.
"Students today are very good at retrieving information," Raposa says. "They can scan the Web quickly and find what they need. But to get them to read just a paragraph in a text, to really mull it over and make sense of it, is increasingly difficult. As a result, some of their cognitive skills atrophy."

As a therapist, Strickling sees a related kind of inattention, or flatness, in adults. She often listens to the pain-filled stories of baby boomers who feel so pressured and over-scheduled that "all the colour seems to have gone out of everything."

They might ingest the North American drug of choice, caffeine, and they might race from meeting to meeting, but they don't display much energy, much elan vital.

"They seem cut off," Strickling says -- uninterested in work, relationships or spending time with their families. "They don't care about the things they used to care about. It's very disconcerting. I think boredom is the neutral name we give to our lack of meaning."

The Archbishop of Canterbury is among those worried that today's fast-paced world is creating chronic boredom; by making people impatient with questions that don't offer immediate answers.

"Why do we want to escape from the glories and difficulties of everyday life?" the Welsh theologian asks. "Why do we want to escape into gambling or drugs or any other kind of fantasy?"

Picking up on how boredom can lead to addiction, Simon Fraser University philosopher Mark Wexler says that when things that were once satisfying become unsatisfying, we often end up wanting to do more of them. Compulsively. He defines addiction as "the tendency to try to relieve anxiety by repeating things."


It's one of the many ways that our fear of being bored can become destructive.

It's not hard to see how, in this endless pursuit of stimulation to escape feeling empty, boredom can become a special curse on the affluent.

It was impossible to be bored in hard-scrabble primitive days because the fight for survival kept you forever on your toes.

But boredom can be a critical issue for spoiled children; little princesses and princes who have been given everything and not had to struggle for any of it.

Although we generally associate boredom with being underchallenged, Wexler says there's no doubt boredom also comes from being overchallenged.

We just don't get the math class. We find it too nerve-racking to face another tense business meeting. We know we should be realizing more out of the situation. To protect ourselves from feeling inadequate in the face of such frustration and threat, Wexler says we often become jaded. Cynical.
What's going on in the minds of sullen 14-year-old boys or girls who come home from school in a daze, then settle into endless TV-watching or video games until bed? Wexler believes the sad young teens are often reacting to the often-overwhelming academic and social demands of high school, which they find threatening and which make them feel like losers.

Such teens are retreating into a safer, private world of TV and electronic games -- filled with guns, cars, gladiators and wizards; at least it's a world they feel they can control.

They enter an artificial cyberspace that may symbolize the paradox of our time -- because, as Wexler suggests, it's a place where teens are both stimulated and bored at the same time.

See attached Sidebar: The Zen of Boredom
Sidebar to The Boredom Boom

The zen of boredom:

Disengagement key to artistic, scientific and intellectual inventiveness

Friday, May 6, 2005

Can boredom go beyond boredom, and turn into a kind of blessing?

Michael Ayotte has taught variations of the same introductory yoga class more than a thousand times.

But the Vancouver yoga teacher says he doesn't get bored. Instead, he stays "present" in the here and now. He transforms the potential tedium of repetition into a moving meditation that centres both him and his students.

Mark Leiren-Young, a playwright and screenwriter who divides his work between Toronto and Vancouver, converts boredom in a different way: He has learned how to seize on moments of dullness to spark his creativity.

The concept for Leiren-Young's most recent play lit up when he was watching another theatrical performance; halfway through, he realized he knew how it was going to end. That kicked his mind into a creative whirl that led him to write The Night They Kidnapped Barrymore, which just opened in Florida.

More than a few scholars now believe metamorphosing boredom can be the key to artistic, scientific and intellectual inventiveness. Recognition of boredom, they say, can also lead to spiritual insight, whether you're a Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or eclectic seeker.

Boredom has an especially positive role to play in our hyper-stimulated society, say psychologists, artists and spiritual teachers. We can search out boredom as a route to serenity; through a beach vacation, meditative reflection or by washing dishes with a new attitude, perhaps by really noticing the bubbles.

Boredom, it turns out, is in the heart and mind of the beholder.

"The fear today is: 'If I'm not doing something, I'm not alive,' " says Ayotte, noting that the mind always wants to be stimulated. "It's hard to not do something. It takes patience," he says. "Boredom is wishing you were somewhere else. On the other hand, yoga and meditation are about appreciating the present."

Leiren-Young readily admits he's not as centred a person as Ayotte. "I'm a terribly fidgety kind of person." But he knows how to make use of boredom. In a movie lineup or traffic jam, he's always prepared with books or audio tapes, to translate his frustration with sameness into imaginative inspiration.
New York State's poet laureate, Billy Collins, has been having fun of late being a champion of boredom. On the TV show 60 Minutes, he called boredom "paradise," his "muse" and "the mother of creativity."

Boredom is the blessed absence, Collins says mischievously, of what the entertainment world pushes as "interesting," including fashion, the mass media and celebrities.

Vancouver poet Susan McCaslin is also not afraid of what we normally call "doing nothing."

McCaslin, a Douglas College literature instructor, makes a distinction between negative boredom, which cuts a person off from the natural world, and "the fertile, often-solitary state conducive to creativity." Artists, McCaslin says, must constantly find ways to make room for "daydream" and "inner silence."

For those who make a living out of thinking, recognizing when one is bored can serve as a reminder it may be time to change your mind, says Bonnelle Strickling, a Langara College philosophy instructor.

"When I start to feel mechanical when I explain something, when I feel my explanation no longer has that much energy behind it, I begin to ask myself, 'Do I really believe that any longer?' It helps me come up with new ideas."

People who consciously seek out boredom are often trying to give their lives balance.

We all need to find a haven in North America's hurly-burly, says Simon Fraser University philosopher Mark Wexler. It's not only the spiritual seeker, artist or scientific inventor who need time to just sit there, rather than do something. So do clothing-store clerks, doctors and accountants.

The idea of the Sabbath, the ancient Judeo-Christian notion that we should take at least one day out of seven to rest, be grateful and enjoy the world's bounty, comes out of a positive view of boredom, says Wexler.

"We want to live with challenge in our lives. Yet we also need to fall back into boredom for a rest now and then -- before we go back to being challenged again," Wexler says.

And it's good to have people in your life you can be bored with, Wexler says.

"Boredom is something we'll share with intimates. We won't share it with strangers."

Wexler celebrates spouses or close friends who can just sit together and not talk, perhaps be content just "staring at a piece of dust floating in a ray of light."

Wexler can't count how many couples he's known who want to break up because one partner finds the relationship boring.

"And I always say: 'But that's the beauty of marriage,' he says.
"One has the ability to share the slower part of oneself, this boring part of oneself."

In a November, 2004, essay in Harper's Magazine on The Virtue of Idleness, novelist Mark Slouka suggests welcoming boredom into our lives can be a subversive act.

Twiddling one's thumbs is an assault on "The Church of Work," Slouka maintains; the slavish devotion so many North Americans have to being productive, doing business, keeping the economy expanding.

"There's something un-American about singing the virtues of idleness. It is a form of blasphemy, a secular sin," Slouka says.

Linking our compulsion to be constantly busy to a kind of fascism, Slouka suggests boredom opens the door to inner contemplation, which can bring forth free-floating ideas that might upset the establishment.

People who are afraid of boredom are afraid of death, says Ayotte, the yoga teacher. But if we confront the inevitability of death, Ayotte says boredom can be turned into something else entirely.

Contentment can come when we let go of our anxiety about our unhappy past and nervousness about our uncertain future and live in the moment, says Ayotte, citing Eckhart Tolle, Vancouver author of the bestselling book, The Power of Now.

The psychological link between feeling torpor and mortality can sound like a strange one, but Michael Raposa, author of Boredom and the Religious Imagination, says it's crucial.

Feeling bored and empty, Raposa says, is like feeling dead. "So we simply fill up what seems like empty psychic space, or empty spiritual space, with noise -- or what Pascal calls 'diversion' -- because we can't face the emptiness of boredom."

Instead of distracting ourselves through TV, spectator sports, gambling or workaholism, Raposa recommends delving more intensely into boredom in hopes it will lead to the ultimate source of meaning.

The medieval Christian monks who took the time to confront their own acedia, or indifference to divinity, he says, often experienced something like a "dark night of the soul," a terrifying but critical step in their spiritual journey.

In the 1800s, Martin Heidigger, the German existentialist philosopher, taught that those who honestly face up to the intimate relationship between boredom and death can develop a healthy detachment.

Such benign disinterest has also been advanced by Hindu yogis; Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard; the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola; and the Buddha.

In slightly different ways, all these spiritual masters taught this paradoxical truth: That developing an attitude of refined boredom, or disinterest, enables us to be more fully engaged, more connected with the world and others.
Openness will pose a continuing challenge for Ismailis

Saturday, June 11, 2005

It’s like having a nice girlfriend, but she’s afraid to take you home for dinner with her elegant parents.

That’s what it has felt like as a religion reporter trying to cover Canada’s Ismaili Muslim community.

Everything seems to be going fine with the mutual media courtship, until I try to get serious about exploring the Ismaili community. Then an invisible wall goes up, and, like non-Ismalis elsewhere, I’m politely rebuffed.

Invariably, the Ismailis I’ve met have been appealing: Well-spoken, stylishly dressed, educated and successful. Without exception, they have been gracious.

Their spiritual and temporal leader, the Aga Khan IV, is also attractive, as the late Canadian prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a friend, would attest. So would dozens of other global heads of state, dignitaries, architects and intellectuals.

The Harvard-educated Aga Khan, a billionaire philanthropist and spiritual leader, is the opposite of an extremist Muslim. He passionately champions values most Canadians admire: Tolerance, pluralism, civil society and learning from people of diverse world views.

Ismailis are happy to highlight the Aga Khan’s many valuable charity projects. But try to dig below the polished surface of their tight-knit community, which has more than 50,000 members in Canada and 11,000 in Greater Vancouver, and the door is invariably shut -- with a smile, and an assumption that you'll understand.

I’m not sure I do.

Every organization tries to manage the media through public relations techniques. But I’ve never experienced a major religious group so adept at keeping information away from outsiders.

It’s all the more frustrating because the Ismailis I’ve met seem like people I’d like to get to know, not only for the reasons above.

Ismailis are a small Shia subsect of the world’s one billion Muslims. Their interpretation of Islam, as far as I understand it, seems potentially alluring to many westerners, since it’s based on philosophy and mysticism and is apparently not exclu-
sivist.

Yet, while I've been invited to countless religious groups' worship events, Canadian Ismaili organizations remain among the precious few who don't welcome outsiders into their services.

I spoke off the record this week with a Vancouver Ismaili woman about the visit of the Aga Khan, said to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. The woman, highly successful in her field, grew anxious after we spoke, contacting me later to say local leaders had told Ismailis not to speak to the media.

An admirer of the Aga Khan, the professional woman was troubled that the Ismaili hierarchy so consistently shuns outsiders. The secrecy, she thought, made it look as if Ismailis have something to hide, when she believes they don’t.

There have been many other silencing acts.

A Canadian Ismaili university professor, who wrote her PhD thesis on Ismailis in B.C., repeatedly declines media requests to explain her religion.

An Ismaili fellow running a popular unofficial website, which has been giving out-of-town Ismailis advice on how to attend Friday's meeting with the Aga Khan, was recently told by officials to shut it down for "security" reasons.

In a rare bit of recent controversy associated with the Ismailis, the Aga Khan in the mid-1990s gave up his claim to about $2 million in cash, apparently to avoid his community's practices being investigated in Canada.

The money, said to be Ismaili donations, had been apprehended at the U.S.-B.C. border. Ismaili officials said the money was forfeited because they did not want the Ismaili system of anonymous donations to be probed and threatened.

Over the years, when I've asked the always pleasant members of the B.C. Ismaili Council why so much about the community's practices and religion is kept behind closed doors, they have little to say.

However, in talking privately to Ismailis and scholars, the closest I've come to comprehending the penchant for self-protection is a suggestion it emerges from two things: An esoteric religious tradition and a history of persecution.

The Ismailis' religious scriptures and rituals have been hidden from strangers for much of history, in part because of the belief the tradition's inner truths are available only to those who are carefully initiated into the faith.

As well, since the world's far-flung Ismailis in Asia and Africa have never had a country to call their home, they've long been vulnerable to discrimination and oppression -- including by rival Muslims who reject their leader's claim of authority.

Still, despite appreciating this valuable historical background, I'm left with a niggling feeling.

Do certain Ismaili leaders severely restrict the flow of information about their community because, like politicians and corporate leaders, they simply want to maintain control -- of their images and their people?
There is no law that says Ismaili officials, or people of any religion or group, have to tell outsiders about their beliefs and practices (barring criminal investigation.)

But I expect the issue of openness will pose a continuing challenge for the world's Ismailis -- and the Aga Khan -- as they continue to solidify their place in the West and the developing world.

In the past few months alone, the Aga Khan has called on Africans to create a more penetrating and accurate media; urged people in the West to overcome their ignorance about Islam, and promised to build a centre for dialogue in Ottawa that will be designed with symbolically significant "transparent" glass.

The Aga Khan, clearly, is keen to be seen as a public champion of the advancement of mutual understanding between different races, religions, ideologies and nations.

But real engagement requires self-disclosure.

If Ismailis want to become truly effective in advancing their leader's ideals, they'll have to come more fully out of their closet.

- 30 -
Enter the evangelicals:

U.S. religious groups have a foot in Canada's political door, and they're pushing it open

Saturday, July 30, 2005

American evangelist Stephen Bennett declares he's willing to endure "persecution" in Canada to preach his message that homosexual acts are a mortal sin that should be illegal.

The famous U.S. preacher -- a married family man who considers himself "ex-gay" after renouncing his earlier promiscuous homosexual lifestyle -- was the keynote speaker before more than 250 Canadians this summer at a $100-a-ticket fundraiser.

Even though Bennett's Canadian evangelical allies warned him against bringing most of his anti-homosexuality tracts to Canada because they might earn him a jail sentence under the country's hate-speech laws, it didn't stop Bennett from joining a widespread U.S.-based campaign against Canada's proposed same-sex marriage legislation.

"I spoke [in Canada] for nearly an hour, openly and freely as an American," Bennett wrote in his recent weekly column, headlined O Canada, which was distributed to millions of people through popular Canadian and U.S. evangelical websites.

"I will not be silenced," said Bennett, who believes homosexuality is a moral choice, not a genetic predisposition. "The truth is not hate speech. Let them come in here now and arrest me."

The cross-border distribution of Bennett's fiery speech is just one small illustration of the way dozens of powerful conservative Christian networks in the U.S. are helping shape Canada's cultural and political landscape.

Many U.S. evangelicals have been galvanized by recent developments in Canada -- particularly Parliament's July vote in favour of same-sex marriage, but also by Canadian political efforts to legalize marijuana and maintain wide access to abortion, as well as Ottawa's refusal to join the U.S.-led war against Iraq.

Scholars and pollsters who track the links between conservatives in the two countries say the American religious right has gained more clout in Canada in recent years, particularly by bolstering right-wing elements in the Conservative party.

Big-name American Christian conservatives are warning the faithful that what is happening in Canada could soon infect the United States.

"The U.S. religious right certainly sees Canada as a place where liberalism runs
"amok," says Bruce Foster, head of the political science department at Calgary's Mount Royal College.

"And they're saying if Canada is going to hell in a moral handbasket, it will happen in the U.S. It's the slippery-slope argument," says Foster, whose PhD explored the link between U.S. and Canadian religious groups.

Roger Robins, a political scientist at Marymount College in California, says the numerous American evangelicals trying to sway the Canadian scene want to remain below the public's radar.

"There's so much interaction between religious conservatives in the two countries. There are so many cross-border networks. So many groups," says Robins, a former Mennonite pastor who has worked in Canada and specializes in North American religious politics.

"The Americans are smart enough to know not to be seen as too pushy. And Canadians also don't want to be viewed as clones of American evangelicals,"

Some of the more important Christian organizations that have direct or indirect cross-border links, say the scholars, include Focus on the Family, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Real Women, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, various Mennonite and charismatic denominations, and dozens of Canadian evangelical colleges that are well populated with American students and faculty.

Professor Ron Dart, an active Anglican who teaches political science in the heart of B.C.'s Lower Fraser Valley Bible Belt, says there's no doubt the values of the powerful U.S. religious right "have infiltrated the Canadian soul and psyche" -- especially in Alberta.

Although the emphasis of conservative Americans on Canada is now more intense, Dart says they have been effectively shifting the Canadian political and religious scene for more than 20 years.

"U.S. evangelicals have helped create a Republican Christianity in Canada," says Dart, who teaches at the University College of the Fraser Valley, a campus that he says is frequently visited by U.S. conservative Christian groups.

Giant global evangelical organizations such as Focus on the Family, Dart says, draw in millions of people by offering advice on how to raise children and warning about the dangers of homosexuality. "Then, before you know it," Dart says, "you're into Republicanism and U.S. nationalism and imperialism." To be fair, Dart and other scholars emphasize that Canadian liberals and homosexual-rights activists also work with allies in the U.S., who can also show signs of their own ideology.

But the religion scholars say the size, wealth and sophistication of the U.S. Christian right gives it unprecedented influence north of the border (not to mention around the world, particularly in Africa and Latin America).

U.S.-style evangelicalism and its Republican values have been entering Canada at three levels, Dart says: Through the "crude" methods of vociferous pundits such as
Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter; through "populist" organizations such as Focus on the Family, and through "intellectual" figures such as Michael Novak (who is connected with Canada's Centre for Cultural Renewal).

More than one in three Americans consider themselves "evangelicals," and most are Republican, according to polls.

Tories and evangelicals

In the 2004 U.S. election, a growing percentage of evangelicals -- 78 per cent -- voted to send George W. Bush, himself an evangelical, back into the president's office.

In contrast, less than 10 per cent of the Canadian population attends an evangelical Protestant denomination, such as a Baptist, Alliance or Pentecostal church.

Yet Ipsos-Reid pollsters say 51 per cent of these core Canadian evangelicals voted for the Conservative party in 2004, a rate almost twice as high as the general Canadian population.

(To round out the 2004 Canadian evangelical vote: 32 per cent cast a ballot for the Liberals, eight per cent voted NDP, two per cent went for the Bloc Quebecois and seven per cent for all others, including the Christian Heritage Party.)

However, evangelical strength in Canada may be gradually growing and be larger than it first appears. Broadly speaking, Grenville says, 19 per cent of the Canadian population could be counted as "evangelical."

If you define "evangelicals" as those who are highly active in their churches, believe Christ is the only route to salvation, the Bible is the inspired word of God and it is crucial to have a conversion experience, Grenville said, you could add a portion of mainline Protestants (four per cent of the Canadian population) and Catholics (another seven per cent) to the country's evangelical total.

Grenville, who says he personally fits the definition of an "evangelical" in a mainline Protestant denomination, says debate over Bush's global agenda and the same-sex issue has "become a kind of potent combination to bring about the politicization of the evangelical population in Canada."

It's a mixed blessing, Grenville says.

On the positive side, he says Canadian evangelicals are starting to realize they represent a significant chunk of the Canadian electorate "and they should have a voice. They're trying it on for size."

On the negative side, Grenville regrets what he calls evangelicals' "narrow" emphasis on same-sex marriage.

"It ignores the rest of the gospel, which is about loving God and your neighbour and speaking up for the vulnerable. The focus on homosexuality is eating away at evangelicals' political capital in Canada. They're being perceived as a bunch of haters."

Even though scholars say evangelical Protestants form the heart of the religious
right in both countries, most maintain there are subtle differences.

But that clearly hasn't stopped religious conservatives on both sides of the border from joining forces.

Canada's shift to the right

The U.S. religious right, financed in part by billionaire philanthropists such as Howard Ahmanson and others, champions a "laundry list" of issues in the U.S. and around the world --but particularly in Canada, Dart says.

Although its front-line causes are opposition to homosexuality and abortion, Dart says the religious right in both countries also tends to be pro-death-penalty, strong on law and order, big on free trade, anti-euthanasia, advocates of private schooling, soft on the environment, hawkish on the military and leery of social spending.

"American evangelicals are a powerful force. They've helped create a big shift to the right in Canada in the past two decades," Dart says.

Most notably, Dart argues, the influence of U.S. evangelicals has slowly transformed the once-centrist Progressive Conservative party into what is now called the Conservative Party, which Dart maintains should be more aptly called "The Republican Party of Canada."

The Progressive Conservatives of the past, Dart said, made up a diverse and centrist party, which included many Canadian nationalists wary of the power of the American military-industrial complex.

The former PC party started the CBC, firmly supported public education and believed sexuality was largely a private matter, says Dart, author of The Canadian High Tory Tradition.

Canada's current Conservative party, led by Albertan evangelical Stephen Harper, mirrors the U.S. Republican Party, Dart said -- including in the way it not only opposes same-sex marriage, but supports the Iraq war and urges closer economic and security ties with the U.S.

In his new book, Evangelicals and the Continental Divide (McGill-Queen's Press), Atlantic Baptist University professor Sam Reimer says Canadian evangelicals are more like American evangelicals than the Canadians want to believe.

Reimer's extensive surveys also show Canadian core evangelicals have become more conservative, like their American allies, since 1975 -- particularly in wanting restrictions against abortion, divorce, pre-marital sex and pornography.

There is also tight agreement among evangelicals in Canada and the U.S. on key conservative Protestant convictions -- such as that the only way to gain eternal life is through belief in Christ (virtually unanimous in both countries), the Bible should be read literally (four out of five in both countries agree) and the world will end in the battle of Armageddon (two of three in both countries agree).

Despite the converging theological beliefs among North American evangelicals, scholars who have devoted their careers to the subject say there are some subtle religion-based political differences between the U.S. and Canada.
Evangelicals and the Continental Divide, for instance, shows that core Canadian evangelicals are somewhat more likely than American evangelicals to want to protect the environment, more likely to believe the national government has a role to play in combating poverty, more inclined to question free trade and somewhat less likely to be opposed to voting for an atheist politician.

What's the overarching religious difference between Americans and Canadians?

Most Canadians, including evangelicals, don't feel comfortable thinking of themselves, as many Americans do, as blessed citizens of God's chosen nation.

Professor Mark Noll, a celebrated historian of North American religion at Wheaton College in Illinois, says Canadians never developed the idea they were God's chosen people because the country was co-founded by anglophone Protestants and francophone Catholics.

You can't claim your country is chosen by God if you suspect the Christians who populate the rest of the land may not be bona fide, says Noll, whom Time Magazine recently named one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

The Chosen People theme gives American Christians more reason than Canadians, Noll says, to believe it's their unique role in history to culturally colonize the planet, since many equate the American political way of life with the Christian life.

Noll also argues that subtle differences have emerged between Canadian and American politics because Catholicism makes up the largest and strongest Christian denomination in Canada, while Protestant evangelicalism is dominant in the U.S.

Noll argues that most Canadians developed a Catholic-rooted concern for the "common good," while Americans have picked up an evangelical emphasis on individual liberty, personal salvation and suspicion about the power of government.

An Ipsos-Reid poll, for instance, found only 16 per cent of Canadian Catholics voted for the Conservative Party (which stresses individualistic values) compared to 55 per cent of Canadians voting Liberal, eight per cent NDP and 15 per cent Bloc (parties that put a little more emphasis on cooperative ventures).

Given the American Christian emphasis on the importance of religion, Foster says it's no accident most top-flight politicians in the U.S., Republicans and Democrats, for the past several decades have been evangelical Christians who pepper their speeches with "God bless America."

But that's not the case in Canada, where every prime minister since Lester Pearson has been at least nominally Catholic and most other politicians keep their religion, or lack thereof, mainly to themselves.

Although there are exceptions, Foster says, Canadian evangelicals also tend to be less politically aggressive than their U.S. counterparts. "They do their politics differently down there."

In addition to being less ideologically devoted to capitalism and U.S. expansion-
ism, Foster says Canada's conservative Protestants don't generally try to target individual candidates for moral demonization and character assassination. Many Canadians, he says, find such attack-tactics extremely distasteful.

The red flag of homosexuality

In his column O Canada, American evangelist Stephen Bennett's fury about what he labels Canadian mistreatment of conservative Christians is typical of much of the cross-border traffic in religious politics.

For one thing, the evangelist's staunch defence of his right to condemn homosexuality was highlighted as a feature essay on linked popular websites in Canada and the U.S.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, which represents almost all the country's evangelical denominations, distributed the O Canada piece, cross-referencing it with the United States' American Family Association, which claims 2.3 million members.

The O Canada opinion piece is also representative since it fixated on the red flag of homosexuality, Robins says. Since Canada's endorsement of homosexual marriage marks a break from past cultural norms, Robins says it shouldn't be underestimated as a potent "common cause" rallying issue.

"The same-sex legislation represents a historic departure for Canada," Robins says.

Bennett's O Canada column specifically championed the case of conservative B.C. Christian Chris Kempling, a public-school teacher-counsellor from Quesnel who was temporarily suspended after writing letters to the local paper saying homosexuality was a dangerous condition that could be cured.

Although B.C. courts upheld school board arguments that Kempling's views were discriminatory toward homosexual students, Bennett argued the decisions displayed how the Canadian "establishment" was out to ruin Kempling.

The 'persecution motif'

Bennett said his appreciative audience (brought together by noted Ontario Rev. Tristan Emmanuel, who has been busily making sure many evangelicals have been nominated to key Conservative Party ridings) gave him a standing ovation for shaking up "extremely reserved" Canadian Christians.

Rogers, the California-based political scientist, says Bennett's speech, which cited how evangelicals are being made into victims in Canada and the U.S., fits perfectly into the "persecution motif" frequently adopted by militant North American evangelicals.

Promoting a "siege mentality" can serve to mobilize otherwise passive supporters, says Rogers, adding that it's a technique that can also be used by liberals and pro-homosexuality activists.

Like the O Canada column, a similar foray by American evangelicals into Canadian life came earlier in a widely distributed opinion piece titled, Pray for
Canada, Pray for America.

Written by prominent U.S. evangelist Alan Sears, the column attacked Canada's hate-speech laws, saying their acceptance north of the border means they could soon become a reality in U.S. courts, which often cite international law as precedents.

The piece by Sears, head of the influential Arizona-based Alliance Defence Fund, also linked to the website of the B.C. arm of Real Women Canada. Sears praised Real Women Canada for being "very American" in the way it forthrightly opposed Canada's new hate-speech laws, which he suggested could lead to the acceptance of not only homosexuality, but pedophilia and sadism.

Such international connections, Foster says, suggest Canada's evangelical political activists don't always need to belong to the same organization or accept formal political help from Americans to challenge the Canadian political scene.

"Real Women Canada is doing the job for American evangelical activists," Foster says. "They're being an early warning-system for the religious right."

Although the strength of U.S.-style religious conservatism is growing in Canada, both Rogers and Dart want to clarify that cultural-political pressure does not completely flow one way.

Since most Canadian religious conservatives generally don't display the hard-edged militancy of those in the U.S., Rogers says, "American evangelicals are often a little suspicious of those in Canada."

Dart cites how American students who study at evangelical schools such as B.C.'s Trinity Western University and Regent College are often shocked when they realize many Canadians evangelicals "don't accept the American agenda -- that God and the flag are one."

After the conservative American Protestants get over their initial upset, Dart says, some end up appreciating Canada's skepticism about whether it's wise to make "kissing cousins" out of Jesus and Bush.

"Canada plays a very significant role in moderating American extremism -- which brooks no opposition -- on a political, religious and practical level," Dart says.

Although Canadians, including conservative Christians, often find themselves defending themselves against American cultural domination, Dart assures Canadians they sometimes get in their own counter-punches.

"The beaver," he says, "is also capable of fighting back."

-- 30 --

See information graphic (attached):
Enter the Evangelicals: Information Graphic

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICANS AND CANADIANS ON RELIGION, POLITICS AND MORALITY

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<th>American view</th>
<th>Canadian view</th>
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<td>Percentage of countries' population who claim 'my religious faith is very important to me':</td>
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<td>Percentage of countries' evangelicals who believe homosexuality is 'always wrong':</td>
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Ethics at Work pays dividends:

Movement toward more spiritual workplace may be here to stay, as some employers begin to recognize its value to the bottom line

Saturday, September 17, 2005

The burgeoning spirituality-in-the-workplace movement was meant to be about mutual respect and higher purposes.

But for Ann Coombs, one of the early leaders in this North American-wide attempt to bring ethics and dignity to the workplace, it led to utter frustration and disappointment.

The author of the best-selling book, The Living Workplace: Soul, Spirit and Success in the 21st Century, was brought in as a $100,000-a-year consultant to a major company to help the CEO heal what he realized was a toxic, unproductive work environment.

Coombs, based in Vancouver, studied the corporation, encouraged staff to honestly assess their colleagues and leaders and wrote a detailed report -- which happened to cite one senior executive as an abusive tyrant.

Trouble was, the executive in question was a friend of the CEO. The CEO took it upon himself to chop out of Coombs' report all negative remarks about his troublesome pal.

Coombs was shocked. She protested to the CEO. She hasn't worked for the company since.

After more than five years of passionately promoting more spirit-filled, balanced workplaces, Coombs had to take off almost a year to weigh what she was doing.

"I couldn't stand it. I had to leave the corporate world to reflect on what was really important in my work. The message I was getting was I had to compromise myself to keep my contracts. But I won't work in the corporate world under those conditions, at any price."

Despite her rude awakening to what she considers the dark state of much of North American corporate existence, Coombs still has hope for the spirit-at-work movement, which in the past decade has spawned roughly 500 books and countless seminars, retreats and consultations.

Along with a number of other Canadian specialists in spirit-oriented workplaces, Coombs believes the expanding movement needs to be re-assessed.

The spirituality-at-work movement can be defined as an attempt to bring holistic attitudes to offices, job sites and boardrooms.
It means fostering ethical values in the workplace -- such as respect, integrity, openness, diversity, caring and fairness.

This loose spiritual movement has not been about bringing explicit religious expression to the workplace (although that's in part what it has meant in the U.S., where office prayer and meditation groups are more common than in Canada.)

For most of North America, the ultimate goal of the spirituality-in-the-workplace movement is to help people recognize they can achieve a higher purpose in their careers, whether they see it as serving a Supreme Being, other people or the planet.

For companies, the spin-off benefits of the movement are happier staff who are less likely to threaten the bottom line by either slacking off or taking off.

Canadians, however, appear to have a long way to go to make their workplaces more holistic and satisfying.

A University of Western Ontario study found four out of five Canadians don't look forward to work on Monday.

As well, 76 per cent of Canadians feel disengaged from their workplaces, with many actively opposing what their company does.

Where has the spirit-at-work movement failed?

The specialists' over-riding observation is that many executives -- whether in government, non-profits or private enterprise -- pay lip service to the idea of respectful workplaces, but don't give up their autocratic habits.

The spirit-at-work experts also find too many corporate leaders are looking for quick fixes; dreaming they can magically turn their staff into tireless worker-bees through a brief spiritual seminar.

Another problem is corporate culture's demand for ever-higher profits; it's fomenting unprecedented workplace stress, leading to burned-out staff and managers.

There is nothing wrong with corporate North America being led by the profit motive, says Coombs. But when it descends to greed and ruthless behaviour, it becomes counter-productive.

Beyond the bad news, however, what's been successful in the spirit-at-work movement?

The specialists say any attempt to help staff, especially managers, learn about themselves has proved effective in creating healthier workplaces, where staff feel like they serve something more than money.

It is also now more difficult for managers to ignore or disguise a toxic workplace. Bullying leaders are less likely to go unchallenged.

And even though most workplaces remain far from perfect, some staff and managers are making strides as individuals, learning how to integrate their whole being
into even challenging workplaces.

Finally, a few companies and non-profits have really grasped what it means to foster spirituality at work. They've discovered profitability improves when companies implement work/life/spirituality programs.

They've enjoyed a rise in staff loyalty and drastic declines in turnover, leading to cost savings. And, as studies show, some have seen productivity increase by 20 per cent.

Firms mouth the words

It's been difficult for many businesses to get to that promised land, however. The seeds of a more spiritual workplace often fall on fallow ground.

Coombs can't count how many times she's heard executives say: "People are our most important asset," yet too often, when feeling under siege, the managers end up, in effect, conceding, "... that is, until we don't need them."

Edmonton-based Val Kinjerski, who completed her PhD in the field of what she calls "spirit at work," says she often runs across companies that have developed truly inspiring mission statements.

Which they ignore.

"Some managers aren't really serious about their intention to bring the spirit into the workplace," says Kinjerski.

"They may come up with a wonderful vision statement. Then they revert to their autocratic ways. They don't involve staff in decision-making or hold them in regard."

Not surprisingly, the spirituality in the workplace movement has also run smack into the corporate push to maximize production and profit.

Statistics Canada recently reported the average Canadian now works 49 hours a week, compared to 41 hours a week in the early 1980s. Wages for many people remain low.

John Izzo, one of the first teachers to emerge in the spirit-work movement, says two paradoxical trends are happening in the North American workplace.

One is the deep need he says people have felt to find meaning, or spirituality, in their workplace.

The other, says Izzo, is an unquenchable corporate hunger for larger profits, brought on in part by globalized competition.

Izzo, who lives in Vancouver but gives more than 60 workshops a year around the continent, says there's no doubt the drive for higher returns is putting greater stress on workers and managers, contributing to depression, addiction and family breakdown.
He cites a study showing the typical two-income couple now spend an average of only 20 minutes together a day.

"There's this feeling we're all spending more time in the workplace and the sacrifices of making a living might not be worth it," he says.

"There's a backlash. It's on peoples' minds -- and that's going to make a difference in the future, because conversation always precedes action."

The spirituality-at-work movement, Izzo says, doesn't directly promote family-friendly policies -- including flex time, on-site daycare, paid volunteering, tele-commuting and elder-care programs.

But Izzo sees the emergence of such work-life programs as signs a company is sincerely trying to create what he now likes to call, to be provocative, a "loving" workplace.

Movement is here to stay

Despite setbacks, there are solid indications the spirit-at-work movement is paying dividends in some quarters.

No matter how trivial a workshop might seem to some cynics, Kinjerski says it will always be valuable for a company if its managers and staff learn more about who they are.

Harvey McKinnon, who heads a Vancouver-based company that helps charities do fundraising, says research shows staff members act out in the workplace the old emotional conflicts they have with their own families of origin.

The spirit-at-work specialists believe there's no better way to calm down a toxic workplace than to help staff understand, on one hand, their neuroses -- and on the other how they could connect their jobs to their deepest ideals.

Coombs, Kinjerski, McKinnon, Izzo and their ilk are masters at telling stories that can inspire both bosses and staff to inject their whole being -- mind, body, emotions, spirit and soul -- into their work.

Izzo describes the electronic-banking clerk who helped stop a customer from committing suicide. Kinjerski talks about the parking-lot attendant who gave out candies to children who had to go into hospital. She can become enthusiastic about the importance of the work performed by bus drivers.

What do you do with chronically jaded employees? Kinjerski says you ask them to recall a moment when their work actually served a higher purpose. You assist them in coming up with their own inner answer to the question: "What gets you up in the morning?"

In addition to personally trying to follow the advice given in his own books, including The Power of Giving: Creating Abundance in Your Home, At Work, and In Your Community, McKinnon says each year he asks his dozen or so staff to decide how to devote five per cent of the fundraising company's profits to philanthropy.
"It's the most highly anticipated time of the year. It gives staff a really good feeling. They get to give away money to something they really believe in. It certainly doesn't hurt their overall creativity," he says.

But some bosses don't know how to inspire. As Coombs says, "There will always be crummy leaders." Harvey also acknowledges it may be easier to inject spirit into a smaller office than a giant corporate ship stuck in stormy financial seas.

So some spirit-at-work specialists are starting to concentrate less on wholesale corporate makeovers and more on helping individuals bring their hearts, intuition and spirit to work, so they don't necessarily have to wait for their bosses to humanize soul-crushing environments.

At the same time, another positive offshoot of the spirituality in-the-workplace movement, says Coombs, is that it has made it more difficult to ignore or disguise systemic toxicity.

"You still have your autocratic leaders, but now they're more likely to be challenged on it," says Coombs. Employees' expectations are growing. It's harder for a boss to get away with prodding staff with fear, rather than luring them forward with inspiration.

Finally, some companies, to put it simply, are just getting it.

They understand what it means to bring spiritual values into a workplace.

"The VanCity Credit Union model is being held up time and time again," says Coombs, referring to the large B.C. non-profit that keeps winning best-company awards. "It's honouring people."

Coombs and others also cite the spirit-supporting practices of Happy Planet, the medium-sized fruit-juice company run by recently elected high-profile B.C. NDP MLA Gregor Robertson. For more signs of the movement's success they suggest looking at the companies and non-profit organizations that have received B.C.'s Ethics in Action Awards.

With early corporate resistance declining to words such as "spirit" and "soul" being in the workplace, the specialists say the movement is maturing.

"I think it's only going to grow," says McKinnon, "because people are realizing they spend half their lives in their workplace, and they want more meaning out of it."

Despite being forced to temper her early idealism, Coombs has returned, on her own terms, to a vibrant career: Another book, individual life-work coaching, consulting on the future of workplaces and preparing to chair the 2006 International World Futurist Conference.

As Coombs puts it, despite the many roadblocks that have been thrown up against the creation of holistic and respectful workplaces, the movement is here to stay.

"The spirit-at-work movement is for real," she says. "It's that desire people have to work while serving something larger."
Religious rules challenged:
Spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on the West Coast

Saturday, November 12, 2005

Kim Pechet is Jewish, but she doesn't attend a synagogue. Instead, the 49-year-old Vancouver mother teaches yoga and an array of Asian-rooted disciplines to young and old -- including wealthy matrons, office workers, Chinese immigrants, doctors and lawyers, Catholics, aboriginals, neo-pagans and whomever shows up for her classes at the Jewish Community Centre.

Pechet refers to almost every Eastern-based discipline she teaches as "movement meditation."

She won't push the spiritual aspects of yoga, meditation and tai chi on her students, many of whom come for stress relief. "But I do see what I teach as a form of prayer," Pechet says, after elegantly stretching out her arms to illustrate several yoga poses, or asana.

The co-manager of The Sanctuary, a spacious hardwood-floor studio located in a former church on the west side of Vancouver, doesn't define prayer as asking a Supreme Being to fulfill her hopes for herself and others.

More in line with some Eastern traditions, she views prayer as the process of becoming "more intentional -- making one's life more virtuous, including by letting go of anger and fear."

Don't look now, but spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on Canada's West Coast.

Through benign stealth, scholars suggest many Canadians who live on the Pacific Rim are being Hinduized. And Budapestized.

The embracing of ancient Eastern traditions can be explained in part through immigration, with census data now showing more than one out of five British Columbians has Asian roots (mostly Chinese and East Indian).

But the rise of visible minorities in Canada doesn't tell the whole story. Disciplines generally associated with the East are attracting Canadians from across the spectrum, with people from all ethnicities looking to them to foster well-being.

Pechet is hardly alone. The number of British Columbians, particularly women, who have adopted aspects of Eastern disciplines tops 2.2 million, according to a Mustel Group poll done for The Vancouver Sun. It may be the only poll on the continent that has surveyed people about a wide range of alternative spiritual practices.
According to the Mustel poll of 502 randomly chosen adults, more than 56 per cent of British Columbians are either actively practising yoga and meditation, have tried the two disciplines or want to try them.

Yoga comes directly from Hinduism, and meditation is linked firmly with both Hinduism and Buddhism. However, there has long been a minor movement among some Christians, Jews and Muslims to practise meditation.

The Mustel poll reveals the number of people engaging in meditation and yoga in B.C. is growing almost as substantial as those who have a regular prayer practice, the exercise linked most strongly to Western religions.

Could British Columbians' enthusiasm for yoga, meditation and, to a lesser extent, tai chi be superficial? It depends on whom you talk to.

Scholars say B.C. citizens' excitement about Eastern spiritual practices reflects a variety of trendlines -- including that British Columbians' loyalty to Western institutional religions is weakening.

The fastest-growing group in Canada and the U.S. is people who say they have no religion, surveys show. Nowhere is that trajectory stronger than in B.C.

Still, polls show most people who say they aren't religious believe in God and think they have spiritual needs. These people are being dubbed the new "secular-but-spiritual" cohort, and scholars believe they're looking far and wide for something transcendent in which to put their trust.

"With so many British Columbians having no religion, it creates a kind of open space, some would say a void, that people want to fill," says Donald Grayston, professor emeritus of religion at Simon Fraser University, who is also an Anglican priest.

Pechet believes many outdoorsy West Coast Canadians are drawn in unusually strong numbers to yoga, meditation and tai chi because they prefer "natural" forms of spirituality, which challenge both mind and body.

Even the names of many yoga poses come from nature, she says -- including Cobra, Tree, Downward Dog and Mountain.

Langara College's Larry Devries, who specializes in Eastern religions, says the Mustel poll points to how the influence of Eastern spirituality on British Columbians goes far beyond the rapid rise of organized Buddhism and Hinduism.

There are now 135 Buddhist and 35 Hindu centres in B.C., says Devries. And the census shows 2.2 per cent of the population is Buddhist, with one per cent being formally Hindu.

But Devries says such statistics don't fully capture how pervasively Eastern spiritual practices are penetrating the West Coast psyche.

"The diversity of British Columbians is astounding," Devries says, noting that he sees it each week in his classrooms. "The globalization phenomenon is not only globalizing capital, it's doing the same to spirituality."
Canadians are far more well-travelled than Americans, says Devries. And being on the Pacific Rim, he says, British Columbians are constantly travelling to all corners of Asia, where many become familiar with spiritual disciplines once considered exotic.

North Americans who are not overtly religious are trying yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer to try to "align themselves with the forces of the universe," says Patricia Killen, head of the religion department at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Instead of joining institutionalized religions, Killen says many are opting for private disciplines. "They're moving to personal practices like meditation and tai chi," she says, "to keep their religion real."

One major North American study recently revealed, Killen says, that many people are seeing spirituality less as a way to foster the virtue of forgiveness, a traditionally Western ideal, "and more as a source of healing, energy and health."

There is nervousness, however, among at least some Asian British Columbians about the reasons many Canadians are setting up in-home meditation rooms and flocking to the hundreds of yoga, tai chi and meditation centres peppered through the province.

Some South-Asian-rooted Hindus, such as East Vancouver's Rukmini Chaitanya, have a gentle warning, for instance, for the hordes of British Columbians who are trying out India's millennia-old art of yoga mainly to become more flexible.

"Yoga is not only for physical fitness," Chaitanya says. "It's food for body, mind and soul. If not done in the proper method, it's not beneficial. It can actually be harmful."

WHAT A TRANSFORMATION

In B.C., it's clearly no longer the 1950s.

Back then, more than three of four Canadians, the vast majority of them with ties to Britain, France and other part of Europe, attended a Catholic or Protestant church.

You would have searched far and wide to find only a few hundred British Columbians practising yoga, meditation or tai chi a half-century ago, when B.C. seemed largely a place for rugged European-rooted loggers, fishers, miners and their families.

What a transformation. Now only one in five British Columbians regularly attends a religious institution, typically a church. That still represents a lot of dedicated people of faith, but not nearly as many as in the old days.

In contrast, the Mustel poll shows in 2005 that almost one in three British Columbians have tried yoga, with almost half keeping it up as a regular habit.

Another 29 per cent of B.C. residents have tried some form of meditation, according to the Mustel poll, with most sticking with it once they start.
The percentage of British Columbians who have tried prayer as a discipline is slightly higher, at 29 per cent, with almost all maintaining their commitment.

Prayer tends to be linked most strongly with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but it also runs through Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese folk religion and even some forms of Buddhism.

British Columbians' passion for diverse spiritual disciplines, the Mustel poll shows, is consistent throughout all the province's regions and across all age groups (the only exception being that people over 55 are not likely to do yoga).

Another sign of the eclectic nature of religion and culture in B.C. is that many British Columbians have no trouble mixing and matching all four disciplines -- yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer.

For instance, roughly one in two of those who practice the slow, graceful Chinese martial arts poses of tai chi also pray or meditate.

These diverse disciplines are quietly moving in to fill the vacuum left by Pacific Coast Canadians' relative lack of loyalty to religious institutions.

The census shows B.C. has the highest percentage of people in North America who say they have no religion: 35 per cent (compared to the Canadian average of 16 per cent).

The B.C. rate is higher even than the most secular states in the U.S.: Washington (with 25 per cent saying they have no religion) and Oregon (21 per cent).

Religion scholars such as Grayston and Killen say British Columbians are at the North American vanguard of those embracing Eastern spiritual practices, blending them with those from the West.

This is a frontierland, a place where old rules are challenged, they say. That's in part because B.C.'s spiritual searchers, Killen adds, don't feel stigmatized. They don't normally have to battle against the protests of fervent Christians or other religious traditionalists.

In many regions of the world, including parts of the U.S., Killen says, arch-conservative religious people are hostile to meditation, yoga and even deep-breathing relaxation exercises -- denouncing such practices as portals through which demonic spirits can penetrate the human soul.

IT'S BIG BUSINESS

Yoga, with its emphasis on attuning mind with body, is becoming big business all across North America, but especially in B.C.

Yoga Magazine says North Americans now spend more than $3 billion a year on yoga and related products -- from yoga mats to yoga clothing, yoga vacations to yoga videos. Yoga has become popular among Hollywood stars and mass-market women's magazines.

It's hard to come by hard comparative data on how many North Americans actually
practice yoga or other Eastern practices, since most polling on religion has tended to focus on Western traditions such as prayer.

But a rare poll done by Harris Interactive for U.S.-based Yoga Magazine found this year that roughly seven per cent of Americans practice yoga.

Meanwhile, the Mustel poll showed 14 per cent of British Columbians -- or twice the number of Americans -- are currently spending part of their week bending into yoga poses.

Another 16 per cent of B.C. residents have tried yoga's often-demanding body-and-mind stretches, but no longer do so regularly. A further 13 per cent say they want to try yoga, says the Mustel poll (which is considered accurate to 4.4 per cent-
age points, nineteen times out of 20).

All in all, that adds up to 1.7 million British Columbians who have been directly drawn to yoga.

More than two out of three of these practitioners are women.

Those who do yoga also tend to be more educated and well-off than the average B.C. resident.

"The yoga community is definitely thriving in British Columbia," says Louise Quinn, publisher of Ascent yoga magazine, which is based in Montreal but has higher circulation in Greater Vancouver.

When the Mustel Group asked practitioners about the benefits they've received from yoga or meditation, however, many did not put explicit spirituality at the top of their list.

Seventy-two per cent of B.C.'s meditators say they do so to become calmer. And though 22 per cent say they find meditation "mentally inspiring," only eight per cent cited "spiritual growth" as a benefit.

As for yoga, most West Coast practitioners say they find it's made them more relaxed, flexible and healthier. But just six per cent actually used the word "spiritual" to describe their experience.

The Ascent Magazine publisher says the results reflect her observation that British Columbia's yoga community is "much more health conscious" and "focussed on physical power yoga" than in other regions of Canada.

People who practise yoga in Quebec and Ontario, said Quinn, 50, who has lived in all three provinces, don't care as much about physical fitness. They tend to put more emphasis on the spiritual and philosophical teachings of yoga.

Pechet, the Vancouver yoga-meditation teacher, believes people may be receiving broadly defined spiritual benefits from yoga and meditation -- whether they think of it in those terms or not.

To Pechet, any discipline that makes a person less emotionally reactive, more attuned to themselves and sensitive to others is spiritual.
Killen, co-editor of the book, Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest, believes the move that many are making toward yoga and meditation may reflect how many North Americans want to avoid the complexities of religion.

"They're avoiding institutional politics and shifting from doctrine to practise," says Killen. "They simply have a sense they need some sort of practice to organize their inner lives and help them get through their day better."

A large number of such searchers are less sophisticated than some who attend a religious community, she says, where they learn about their faith's history and doctrines. "Many who have a religious hunger," Killen says, "don't have a vocabulary for spiritual discourse."

Hindu-based yoga philosophy is intellectually challenging, says the noted U.S. religion professor. "I can't speak authoritatively about Canadians," she says, "but most Americans are not into a complex religious vision like that in Hinduism."

Chaitanya, whose husband is the Hindu priest at Vancouver's Mahalakshami Temple on East 11th Avenue, regrets seeing her faith simplified. Yoga and meditation should be used to foster more than good physical health, she says. They should bring humans closer to the divine.

Hinduism, Chaitanya says, has a multi-faceted and elaborate cosmology, which is most thoroughly ingested by growing up in a Hindu culture and studying classic scriptures, as well as practising meditation and yoga.

"The true goals of these practices," she says, "are to cleanse the mind, visualize the divine and see yourself within -- to reach the stages far beyond."

**PRAYER A SIMPLE EXERCISE**

Prayer isn't dying out in Canada, but it's changing. Prayer remains among the simplest, least expensive and most adaptable spiritual exercise.

The Mustel Group poll showed roughly one out of three British Columbians practise prayer as a regular discipline.

This figure is lower than those published in earlier surveys of Canadians' religious habits, which typically find that almost two out of three of British Columbians say they pray.

But the Mustel Group's Jami Koehl says the discrepancy can be explained by the way her pollsters asked people if they prayed in the context of a regular spiritual discipline. If the Mustel poll had also probed whether British Columbians occasionally engaged in spontaneous prayer, it may have raised the prayer totals.

Whatever the case, the Mustel poll showed that even many British Columbians who pray, and would be more likely to adhere to a Western tradition, flow easily among spiritual practices.

For instance, 56 per cent of B.C. residents who pray also say they meditate, and 22 per cent stretch their limbs in yoga.

As an Anglican priest and a professor, Grayston has no trouble with British
Cubmaids fluidly blending yoga, meditation and prayer.

That's what he does.

"I pray every morning and evening," says Grayston, who is an admirer of the late Catholic-Buddhist mystic, Thomas Merton.

Grayston accompanies his 20-minute prayer practice with a candle, and scriptural readings, including of the psalms. His prayer room includes a painting of Elijah riding a chariot, which is a traditional Judeo-Christian symbol denoting how prayer elevates one into heaven.

Grayston has also done yoga and is drawn to meditation, particularly centuries-old forms of Christian meditation being revived by American monks such as Thomas Keating.

One of them is called "centring prayer," and can include Christian versions of Hindu-like mantras, which are words repeated during meditation to focus the mind.

Grayston is surprised the Mustel poll shows many British Columbians don't highlight the spiritual benefits of meditation, given that he believes it does more than provide good health.

Meditation helps a person become in touch with their "innermost self," Grayston says. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, he says, the inner self is traditionally considered "a reflection of God" -- and discovering it reminds us we are made in the image of the divine.

In a different vein, Grayston finds it disturbing that men are much less likely to practise any spiritual discipline, including prayer, than women.

Only one B.C. man for every two B.C. women does yoga, the Mustel poll shows. When it comes to meditation or prayer, two men engage in them for every three women.

"I think men are in big trouble in our culture," says Grayston, who helped found Vancouver School of Theology's spiritual direction program.

"Men are drifting. Men are floundering -- vocationally, relationally and spiritually," Grayston says.

"They're not doing spiritual disciplines because they're not disciplined in their personal lives. Men have to be disciplined for their professions, so they value the goof-off time. But I think it takes an adult to follow a spiritual discipline."

MORE THAN JUST RELAXATION

Even though life is becoming higher stress for most British Columbians, Pechet firmly believes yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer add up to more than clever techniques to relax.

There is something spiritual about a practice that helps us slow down, says the veteran teacher. It's an attempt to create a different culture, she says, in which people can quiet their mind, connect to their body and "live more in the moment."
Pechet believes Eastern disciplines are bringing profound changes to hyper-active North America. That's why she believes when some people make physical fitness the only focus of their yoga, "there's a huge aspect being missed -- at least for me."

Pechet adds that final caveat because she wants to be open-minded, in true West Coast fashion. The best spiritual practices, she suggests, teach people to avoid being doctrinaire, to be respectful of other ways of being and acting.

Pechet doesn't feel it's the role of a teacher to condemn the way certain people might engage in yoga, or any other spiritual discipline.

"After all," she says with a laugh, "I don't want to be a yoga Nazi."

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A multicultural Christmas:
Sir Richard McBride students balance ethnicity with new traditions

Saturday, December 24, 2005

'Tis the season of Christmas trees and Santa Claus expectations inside the old, red brick walls of Sir Richard McBride elementary on East 29th Avenue in Vancouver.

'Tis also the season of Silent Night and sparing a thought for the hungry; of children growing excited about big family dinners, multicoloured lights and piles of gifts.

Just as when I was a kid at Richard McBride in the early 1960s.

Or not.

There are a few differences.

One is that, when I was at McBride, nearly every student was white -- with the exception of two Chinese children (one of whom I had a crush on in Grade 2. Vice versa, I like to think.)

Now, the stately three-storey heritage school, built in 1911 and named in honour of a B.C. premier from the early 1900s, is attended by students who speak at least 22 languages in their homes -- most of them Asian.

McBride is on the untidy front lines of Canada's immigration, language and multicultural policies. Even though four out of five of McBride's 440 students were born in Canada, the vast majority enter kindergarten as English-as-a-second-language students.

Their most common first language is some form of Chinese, spoken in the homes of 172 McBride children.

That's followed by Tagalog, from the Philippines, which is the language used in 66 McBride students' homes. Then comes English (60 homes) Vietnamese (58 homes) Punjabi (33 homes) and Tamil (10 homes).

There are also children whose home languages are Urdu, Japanese, Thai, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, German, Cambodian, or something else.

McBride -- located in the middle of a pleasantly jumbled middle-class neighbourhood between Fraser and Knight streets, where small, well-kept heritage homes frequently butt against blocky new houses and unkempt ones -- has become one of those urban Canadian public schools that have turned into social laboratories.
McBride has become a living test case, where all the theorizing about multiculturalism by Canadian and international policy makers, cultural scholars, economists, religious leaders, immigration critics and the politically correct actually comes to a head.

Is it working?

I went to find out how Christmas is marked at McBride compared with when I was a student, thinking it would be a way to check if Canadian-style multiculturalism is proving effective on the ground, or deteriorating into a grand failure.

Could a public school that mixes large cohorts of Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, ancestor-revering and atheist kids pull off living and learning together, without many people somehow ending up irritated or offended?

Christmas is one of those times that can get up people's noses as too commercial, too sentimental, too emotionally demanding, too invasive or too Christian.

But I found a lot of Christmas energy flowing at McBride.

My first discovery was that neither I nor the teachers could uncover a single student who didn't have a Christmas tree at home.

And, despite their mostly Asian ethnic origins, almost every student I interviewed said they would receive at least some gifts, and have some sort of extended family dinner on Christmas Day. When turkey is on the table, they said, it will likely be served with rice, steamed vegetables or curry dishes.

The widespread embracing of elements of Canadian-style Christmas at McBride suggested to me that it's becoming a secular-spiritual festival appreciated by far more than European-rooted Christians.

Most of the predominantly Asian-Canadian students at McBride seemed as intoxicated as I remember most white kids were in my days at the school; giddy at all the good, Christmassy things suddenly flowing their way.

"There's just a different atmosphere at Christmas," said Benjamin Pan, 12, whose non-religious parents immigrated from China.

"There's the Christmas trees and the lights and the food and the gifts, which all make you feel happier."

Standing near one of the two decorated Christmas trees in McBride's hallways, under which were piled hundreds of cans for the Vancouver Food Bank, Pan said he liked at Christmas how "there's all the kindness and giving to less fortunate people, which should be part of any religion."

I don't really have bad memories of my early years at McBride (I left after Grade 3 for North Vancouver), nor do I recall anyone expressing racist beliefs, but the rows of desks were, of course, perfectly straight in my day. The wall colours were more dour.

And I do remember on days that poured rain we were forced to stay for recess inside McBride's high-ceilinged basement. Some teacher with a British accent would stop our noisiness by forcing us to line up against the basement wall for the entire 15 minutes. If we dared moved, he'd rifle a volleyball at us. That was Grade 1.
Nor are the maps of the world at Sir Richard McBride any longer dominated by the colour pink, marking the British Empire, as they were for my generation -- and especially when my mother, aunt and uncle attended the school during the Second World War.

God Save the King and then God Save the Queen were also sung at McBride in those days, and the British-based Canadian Red Ensign was honoured as the nation's flag.

Since then, of course, in the name of secularism and multiculturalism the singing of God Save the Queen has disappeared from McBride, Bible readings are gone -- and the Lord's Prayer is no longer recited each morning.

I can remember earnestly repeating the Christian prayer sitting at our desks. Even though I was from a non-religious family, I took it seriously, and certainly didn't protest it. But I also had little notion of what it was about.

Yet, despite the understandable removal of explicit British and religious ritual from Canadian public schools, vestiges of traditional Christmas, with its sacred underpinnings, are still allowed in 2005 to have their moment at Sir Richard McBride.

When I asked Codie Schultheis, 11, one of the few dozen white students at McBride, what he thought of some secularists' argument that neither Christmas nor Christian symbols should be allowed in any way in public schools, he looked perplexed.

"I don't get offended when the school celebrates Divali [the Hindu-Sikh festival]," retorted the Grade 6 student, who added his family is not particularly religious.

"I love Christmas. I just try to be happy when it's around. I don't know, people who say we shouldn't have Christmas in the school here should go to a school in China. I bet they wouldn't stop celebrating Chinese New Year there because some Canadians were in the school."

Even though I was raised an atheist, I could relate to the way many of McBride's current students, including those who aren't religious, were exuberant about the approach of Christmas.

As my friends and I did in the early 1960s, most of the McBride pupils talked about trying to believe in the magic of Santa Claus and his present-giving as long as they could.

And like my fun-loving mom, who seemed to like all the Christmas fuss as much as my brother and I did, many have parents who get a kick out of the holiday. Twelve-year-old Nathan Dong said his extended family always buys joke gifts, like "a pair of pink shoes for my uncle, who's the biggest, buffest guy in our family."

Then again, one thing that's new at McBride, compared with my era, is that when the season comes, the multiracial school also pulls out the stops to celebrate at least two other major cultural festivals -- Chinese New Year and Divali.

Chinese New Year, with its emphasis on cosmic good fortune, arrives at McBride in January with gusto. Dragon dancers, Chinese lanterns and Chinese games are brought in. And parents, some of whom run restaurants, serve a Chinese lunch, says
principal Sandra Phillips, who has been at McBride for five years.

For Diwali, which is a celebration of spiritual light, many girls come to school in October dressed in saris and perform Indian dances at a special assembly. The school's Sikh and Hindu parents also bring sweets and prepare a feast of Indian food, says Phillips, the most multiculturally enthusiastic and least uptight principal I've ever met.

In contrast to many school trustees across North America, Grade 7 student Benjamin Pan didn't think Christmas, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Chinese folk traditions or any other faith should be barred from public schools.

"We should recognize all religions, and not just smear them together," Pan said.

To further help bring an awareness of diversity into the schools, Phillips says Remembrance Day assemblies at McBride are often devoted to appreciating families' historical roots.

As well as following a wide variety of religions, some parents of McBride students are refugees who have escaped war. Many parents, struggling with English, work two jobs, which makes it hard for them to become involved in school life -- where the majority of teachers are white, although there are a number with Indo-Canadian, Chinese and Japanese roots.

At Remembrance Day ceremonies, children often wear traditional ethnic costumes, pepper a map of the world with pins showing their own or their parents' country of origin, and talk about why their parents chose to move to Canada.

To round out the multicultural approach at McBride, Phillips has strived to keep the school's eclectic ethnic and religious mix of kids held together by some shared values.

Wall posters, for instance, extol the global virtues of "optimism," "curiosity," "perseverance" and "honesty."

Another hall sign champions tolerance by forbidding homosexual slurs, including "You're so gay." The poster says such bullying is as bad as racism.

More ecumenical ethics are captured in the lyrics of a song by B.C.'s Holly Arntzen, Soar Like an Eagle, which Arntzen and the principal recently adapted to become McBride's anthem.

The words to Soar Like an Eagle, which are posted in the school gymnasium, call on McBride students to celebrate their differences at the same time they reach for a common goal -- to respect and care for one another.

NO MORE SCROOGE

At McBride, in line with these pluralistic times, what we used to call the annual Christmas concert now goes by the more open-ended title, Winter Concert."

There is no longer a theatrical production about the birth of Jesus Christ, like the one at McBride in the late 1950s in which my older brother played one of the bearded wise men. Nor did the students perform Charles Dickens' British classic, A
Christmas Carol, in which my uncle played Scrooge in the 1940s.

But McBride's kaleidoscopic concert would have been a tough event to sit through for a secular purist; someone who wants to erase all aspects of spirituality from the public square.

Multiculturalism manifested itself at the annual McBride concert in ways that make the head swim -- as cultures bumped up against each other on stage in confusing, endearing, often amusing ways.

Here are some scenes from McBride's Winter Concert:

A dark-skinned boy from the ESL kindergarten class, with his black hair tied in a Sikh head-knot, joined his class in holding a green paper Christmas tree in front of his body. He and his classmates then formed the shape of an evergreen and recited, in palpitating English, The Straight Green Tree.

A tall, ethnic-Asian boy dressed up as a roly-poly Santa Claus to help perform songs like Must Be Santa and I'm Getting Nothin' for Christmas, sometimes accompanied by Asian children wearing green elf hats and gigantic beige elf ears.

A Chinese boy sang a sweet solo rendition of It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.

Two lively Jewish songs were performed, The Dreidl and Hanukkah Tonight (whose lyrics, projected overhead, referred to a "miracle divine") -- even though McBride's teachers don't think there's a Jewish child at the school.

Despite the directions of the Vancouver school board and many others across the continent, the Sikh, Hindu and non-religious kids sang some sacred Christmas carols, including Noel, Noel and Ding Dong Merrily on High (which mentions heaven, angels and steeple bells).

As in my day at McBride, Silent Night was sung.

With its reference to the "holy night" in which Jesus Christ was wondrously born to a virgin mother, the classic carol sounded tender coming from the lips of the diverse singers. One of them, Mahdia Merzed, a Muslim, later said she found Silent Night "sad" but she liked it.

Finally, children from scores of different backgrounds crammed together on stage to sing a rousing rendition of Shine a Light for Peace. For a moment it sounded like a concert from Live 8, the concert series in the G-8 countries and South Africa this year in advance of the G-8 conference in Scotland.

The starry eyed kids were having a ball, enjoying the limelight, their parents' chaotic camera work and their own often-impressive performances -- as well as the sense that Christmas freedom was in the air.

Many of the parents, grandparents and relatives who watched the afternoon concert had taken precious hours away from their jobs. With toddlers in tow, many flowed in and out of the gymnasium with casual, sometimes distracted, abandon.

But many also looked proud and said later they were pleased.
"The children did a beautiful job," said Selva Kanbiah, a Hindu cabinetmaker from Sri Lanka, who said he had no trouble with the sacred songs tinged with Christian and Jewish themes.

"I think about my children and enjoy what they enjoy. My children like it, so I have to celebrate it. We live here now."

Bill Dong, a Chinese-Canadian, welcomed the traditional Christmas elements in McBride's Winter Concert.

"We adhere to the North American tolerant way," he said. "We respect every culture and religion, but also take everything with a grain of salt."

When the Winter Concert was over, McBride's music teacher, Lisa Reimer, who almost single-handedly directed the children through the 90-minute event, looked tired but satisfied.

The number-one reason Reimer says she's determined to include sacred choral music in the Winter Concert is her conviction such carols are of far higher quality than most of the "cheesy" secular tunes usually trotted out at Christmas.

"I use Silent Night because vocally it's a really great teaching piece. It seems to be quite magical for kids. They take it really seriously."

Reimer, 30, says the other reasons she includes a few Christian-rooted carols are that a large proportion of the students seem to be Christian -- and, for those who are not, it's a good thing to learn aspects of the Christian story.

"You don't have to believe it."

The Jewish songs are added to the Winter Concert mix, added Reimer, because they have a strong beat, creative melodies and tell some Jewish history.

"It's a way of honouring Jewish people. The students will meet Jewish people in their lives, so it's a way of celebrating diversity."

Reimer, who doesn't attend any religious institution, says in her five years of teaching music she's slowly learned to be more "tolerant" of bringing religion-rooted songs into public schools.

Even though the Vancouver school board "technically" disallows sacred music in the classroom, Reimer says, she would go to the Supreme Court of Canada to fight for the right to teach sacred music. So would a lot of other teachers.

There is a lot of crummy winter-oriented music currently being written in the U.S. for public schools that want to avoid bringing religious songs into the classroom, says Reimer, who leads her own acclaimed children's choir, called Zing!

"Unfortunately some music teachers are choosing the U.S. material because it's safe and it's secular and it's about snow. It's really scary," she said.

"It's a lot better to honour good quality music that happens to be sacred. That teaches us a lot more about diversity than trying to ignore religion."
SOME TAX THINGY

Sakshi Bali, 8, is Sikh. Her parents are from the Kashmir region of India. With a huge smile, she says she loves Christmas, but her favourite religious holiday is the five days of Divall.

Still, Bali can capably recite the basic elements of the Christian Christmas story about Jesus's birth in a stable -- far better than I could at her age.

"Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem because there was some sort of tax thingy," Bali said, noting she'd learned some of the story in class, but also elsewhere.

"The wise men visited the stable and people say Jesus had a halo around his head. I sort of like the story of Jesus -- except for the end, when he dies."

It's almost impossible to keep track of the dizzying variety of cultural-spiritual beliefs held by students at McBride.

But the dozen or so children I met at Sir Richard McBride seemed comfortable with celebrating what have become the near-universal aspects of Christian-rooted Christmas, like Santa Claus and Christmas trees.

All four Grade 3s that I interviewed, including Shawn Thai, 8, whose non-religious parents are from Vietnam, said they receive gifts at Christmas and have family dinners -- some modest, some huge, with up to 40 people attending.

At the same time, the students seemed genuinely interested in each others' faiths and beliefs, including when world religions are taught in class.

"It's cool. It's interesting," said Sakshi Bali.

"When someone's against religion, I get bothered," added her chipper Grade 3 friend, Kayashai Jenkins, 8, whose mom is from the Philippines and dad is from New Jersey.

Jenkins sometimes attends Catholic mass. While many of the Chinese and Vietnamese students at McBride don't explicitly practise any faith, except perhaps Asian folk religion and ancestor reverence, most of the Filipino children are Catholic.

Thaddeus Salvo and Justine Felizarta, both 11, are Canadian-Filipino Catholics for whom Christmas is a big deal. They firmly believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, that he came to Earth so they could be saved and that Christmas is a time when angels are especially active in the world.

"There are angels in this neighbourhood," said Felizarta. "Sometimes I feel them following me, as my guardians."

Salvo's family follows many Christmas traditions, including midnight mass. They also write the names of family members on Christmas tree ornaments and recite prayers for the loved ones. As well, the family often stays up late on Christmas Eve playing the Filipino card game Tongix.

A couple of the non-religious ethnic Chinese children I met at McBride were more
lukewarm about Christmas, saying that, even though they may have a Christmas tree and family meal, the holiday wasn't that big a deal in their home.

But none of the children wanted to get rid of Christmas, arguing that no one in their right mind wants to turn down its presents.

"I mean, what kid doesn't like getting clothes or chocolates?" said Wendy Chan, 12, whose parents are from China.

Neha Vershaya, a Grade 7 student who is Hindu, said her family becomes quite involved in this festive season.

Her family marks Christmas by decorating a tree, putting a singing Santa Claus figurine in their window and having a big Indian food feast.

The Hindu family also trades Christmas gifts with their next-door neighbours -- who are Chinese.

The funny thing was almost every student I talked to, including those who could be classified as atheists, like me in my youth, had struggled in one way or another with whether to remain convinced by Santa's magic.

Many, like Nathan Dong, 12, described the day they caught their parents in the act of playing Santa. Or they joked that at least they acted like they believed in Santa because they didn't want to pass on his presents.

The Grade 3s were most cautious about answering whether they still believed in Santa Claus, knowing the subject can be controversial at their age -- except, that is for Mahdia Merzed, 8, who was born in Afghanistan.

When Merzed, whose family is Muslim, boldly declared -- several times -- she has never believed in Santa Claus, it caused eight-year-old Sakshi Bali, a Sikh, to laugh.

Bali then urged Merzed not to declare her lack of belief in Santa around really young and more impressionable children.

You've got to be tolerant of other people's beliefs, the Grade 3s eventually agreed -- whether it's a conviction Santa can fly through the sky with reindeer, or something much more adult.

OLD STRICTNESS HAS GONE

If such a thing can be measured across time, the students I met and watched at Sir Richard McBride almost seemed happier, more relaxed, than we did when we attended McBride 40 years ago. The school's atmosphere seems more fluid.

That old British-style strictness is gone.

As my relatives remember, despite the ferocity of battle during the Second World War in Europe and East Asia, there wasn't really much fervent jingoism expressed at the school during those days. But there may have been an unspoken belief among some of the teachers through much of the 1900s that one of the purposes of McBride was to advance British civilization.
It could have been worse. The British heritage did bring Canada, and especially B.C., a lot of good things, like parliamentary democracy and a commitment to individual freedom, basic equality and justice.

But, like a lot of nationalistic cultures of the 20th century, the British ethos may have also given the old McBride a severity and uniformity.

This experimental multicultural era at McBride seems more unpredictable, and more exciting.

And the beauty of the kind of multiculturalism that seems to be happening at Sir Richard McBride at Christmas and throughout the year is that it's not just about acceptance of differences. At its worst, that could lead to a sense of anything goes, to a kind of cultural chaos and fragmentation.

I expect the approach the principal, teachers and most students at McBride are now taking would gladden the hearts and minds of some of the world's more notable multicultural theorists, including Princeton University's Jeffrey Stout, University of B.C.'s Philip Resnick and McGill University's Charles Taylor.

These philosophers, in their own way, say that multiculturalism, including religious pluralism, can't truly be successful if people of different backgrounds aren't willing to agree on at least some common ethics.

That doesn't mean everyone in Canada, old timer or newcomer, has to celebrate Christmas, which extols universal moral values such as kindness, fellowship and concern for the poor. But it may not hurt.

Without some overarching values, the philosophers say we'll end up with nations divided into self-ghettoized, ethno-religious enclaves. We won't have multiculturalism, but something much more vapid -- serial monoculturalism.

What are some moral principles to which we can all adhere, despite our different ethnicities and religions?

Scholars name some of those values as tolerance, responsible citizenship, individual freedom and democracy.

McBride's principal, Sandra Phillips, wonders if all those terms can't be summed up in the phrase, "mutual respect."

This cluster of ethical principles sound much like the ideals highlighted in the school's theme song, Soar Like an Eagle.

Every student is expected to memorize the lyrics of the rousing anthem, which are posted in giant letters -- alongside the words of O Canada -- above the gym stage, where the annual Winter Concert took place.

The words of Soar Like an Eagle are there to be seen by all the students, teachers and parents who've somehow managed to arrive at McBride elementary from all corners of the planet:

The school's anthem begins:
"We all have our freedom,
share a common aim
We're all different; still we're all the same
Come into our schoolyard, what can you see?
Children who respect each other, caring, sharing, all together."

Then comes the chorus:

"Tell me . . . How do we get there?
Most of us can't fly.
Soar like an eagle, have an open mind.
Rising on the updraft, sun on your wings,
You can see so many things."

-30-
The passion of Paul:

Braving hunger, shipwreck, serpents and soldiers, the complex, fallible, extraordinarily inspired prophet wandered to all corners of the Roman empire to spread the word. The originator of Easter is reviled by some and worshipped by others, but he can't be ignored.

Saturday, March 26, 2005

The itinerant Jewish rabbi Saul of Tarsus, who later became more famously known as Saint Paul, loved to argue. He provoked trouble as naturally as a hungry lion rumbling into a crowded city.

The man whose Hebrew name was Saul and Greek name was Paul seemed to revel in religious combat. He not only argued with close friends such as James, the brother of Jesus, he made many enemies, who described him as ugly, slouched and bad-tempered and mocked him for his squeaky voice.

As a man on a mission to spread the word of Jesus Christ, Paul endured every hardship imaginable; walking 16,000 kilometres to spread his passion-filled message. He lived as if he was drunk with God's spirit, possessed by a force much larger than himself: divine love.

Paul's rock-ribbed convictions kept him going as he endured frequent arrest, hunger, shipwreck, storms, poisonous snakes, lethal soldiers, narrow escapes and more. All this occurred while he trudged through regions that are now prime Mediterranean tourist hot-spots, but which then comprised the rugged, not-so-holy Roman Empire.

Paul -- whose letters to the world's first Christian communities make up the heart of the New Testament -- was convinced he was one with the sacred, eternal power embodied in Jesus Christ.

Some scholars now go so far as to claim Paul was the "inventor" of the Christian church -- as well as the originator of Easter, which two-billion global citizens are celebrating this weekend.

Paul has been the subject of re-energized study in the past decade, as scholars such as Canada's Donald Harmon Akenson, author of Saint Saul, join together to strip away Paul's often-sanitized Sunday-school persona to paint a more full-blooded portrait.

The figure who has been emerging is as complicated and fallible as the heroic King David of the Hebrew Bible, an extraordinarily inspired man who has changed history by writing down arguably the first recorded theology of Jesus, as well as the first accounts of the disparate movement that grew up around him.
Love him or hate him, Paul cannot be ignored.

The flesh-and-blood historical Paul is not necessarily turning out to be the piously consistent authority some conservative Christians have held up in their churches.

Nor, according to the new wave of Pauline scholars, should he be stereotyped as the greatest disaster ever to befall Western civilization, the man who critics say helped turn Jesus's gentle teachings into guilt-ridden moralisms.

Many scholars challenge Paul's liberal Christian and secular detractors, who have labelled him as anti-Jewish, anti-women and anti-homosexual. They suggest such caricatures may not only be historically inaccurate but that is unfair to judge Paul in terms of modern social mores.

Historians such as Akenson say Paul was both a creature of his ancient culture and someone who wanted to radically change it -- who was determined to forever challenge the dominance of the Roman Empire or, for that matter, any overwhelming military-economic force.

Through history, mainstream Pauline scholars such as Barnabas Lindars of the University of Manchester have noted that Paul has been best known for teaching that God's grace, not adherence to strict religious rules, was the key to both human freedom and divine salvation.

This doctrine has inspired countless people through the centuries, including gutsy protesters such as Martin Luther in his fight against 16th-century Catholic corruption, and German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for helping plot the assassination of Adolf Hitler.

"The freedom in Christ that Paul preached about is a freedom from all authority structures," says Daniel Bogert-O'Brien, a post-doctoral researcher at Ottawa's Catholic-based St. Paul's University. "Freedom for him meant freedom from all religious and cultural customs -- to membership in a community founded upon "faith working through love."

As well, as every Sunday school student would be aware, Paul was the man most responsible for arguing that God's promise to the ancient Hebrews was now being offered through Jesus Christ to Gentiles. In other words, Paul was the first to argue that humans didn't have to first convert to Judaism, including by being circumcised, to become bona fide followers of Jesus.

Overarching everything Paul taught and did, scholars now believe, was his desire to reach out to his society's many outcasts: the poor, the sick, the enslaved, the demon-possessed (mentally ill) and the religiously unclean, such as tax collectors and men who ran cemeteries.

Bible specialists have also been debating in recent years whether Paul may have promoted other beliefs that many today would find surprising, including those concerning the resurrection, the miraculous act that forms the heart of Easter.

COSMIC BELIEFS AND CHRISTIANITY

A.N. Wilson, who was once a key figure in the Anglican establishment in Britain,
helped ignite the renewed fascination with Paul in 1997, when he wrote a provocative book that called Paul the inventor of Christianity.

In Paul: The Mind of the Apostle, Wilson maintained that Jesus, the man typically considered the founder of Christianity, was a wandering Jewish sage "who had no intention of starting a religion."

If it wasn't for Paul hammering the story of Jesus's life and death into an elaborate structure of cosmic beliefs, Wilson maintained, "there would never have been a Christianity."

Ignoring a huge fuss in parts of the Christian church, Wilson highlighted how Paul's writings in the New Testament largely ignore Jesus's teachings to focus on what Paul believed was the central Christian message: that Jesus was divine -- and was sent to Earth, as Wilson says, to reveal that "the human race was an immortal race."

Wrote Wilson: "Paul was a romantic poet who, in making the crucified Jesus his inner light, used the images of Jesus as savior of the world to capture the imagination of succeeding generations."

Apostle Paul, Wilson says, took up the story of Jesus's death and later appearances to disciples and built them into the beginnings of a wondrous theological framework.

Although both conservative and liberal scholars have challenged some of Wilson's interpretations, most agree at a minimum that Paul was a pivotal figure in establishing the early church's core beliefs and rituals -- particularly those surrounding Easter.

Contrary to commonly held belief, many Bible specialists maintain that Paul did not promote the idea that Jesus's body physically resurrected.

In his recent book, Rabbi Paul, New York professor Bruce Chilton maintains Paul was "contemptuous" of those who believed Jesus was resuscitated from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 5:36, Paul calls such people "fools."

Instead, Chilton argues, Paul was trying to teach that Jesus' resurrection was a cosmic event in which God was signalling that all people, not only Jews, could have eternal life after death.

Paul, Chilton says, was teaching that humans would achieve immortality by being transformed into a "spiritual body," a kind of spirit-filled soul.

Paul also expanded the meaning of the eucharist, the ritual at the heart of Easter, beyond how it had previously been conceived.

It was Paul's idea, Chilton says, that those Christians who gathered together to eat bread and drink wine in Jesus's name actually become one with Christ's spiritual body.

Even more, Paul taught that whoever took part in the eucharistic ritual was linked with Christ in a cosmic whole. This radical concept -- that slaves and free men, prostitutes and the wealthy became equal in Jesus -- upset the status quo in
ancient Rome's viciously hierarchical society.

It can still do so today.

THE EARLY YEARS

He was named Saul when he was born in 10 AD into a Jewish family in what is now southern Turkey, near the Syrian border. Like his father, he became a tentmaker.

Paul grew up in a cosmopolitan environment living alongside Greeks and others. He studied Judaism and eventually became a member of the strict Pharisees.

Later, some scholars now believe, Paul, for reasons unknown, probably joined the more hard-line Shammanites, who approved of violence against non-Jews.

But as Dominican author Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and others write, Paul's angry, strident beliefs led him to persecute, beat up and even perhaps help murder some of the often-poor Jews who became the earliest followers of Jesus.

In his formative years, Paul was what we would now call a bigot who supported ethnic cleansing. He conjures up images of violent Catholics and Protestants or militantly fundamentalist Muslims; people who are utterly convinced that only they possess God's ultimate truth.

Then came the moment in Paul's life that changed history.

It's commonly accepted that Paul never met Jesus in person. Nevertheless, he had his famous conversion experience while travelling to Damascus, a moment that has been visually interpreted by many of the world's great artists.

On the road to Damascus, says Lindars of the University of Manchester, Paul had a vision of a crucified Jesus, risen from the dead and exalted in heaven. It temporarily blinded him.

Suddenly converted, Paul soon switched from being the chief tormentor of the followers of Jesus to becoming their movement's first evangelist, a fierce promoter of the neophyte faith.

Still, despite becoming what we now would call a "Christian missionary," many scholars believe Paul considered himself a Jew to the day his intrepid journeys ended and he was executed in Rome, about 64 AD.

In Paul's time, most of the early followers of Jesus were Jewish.

It was only many decades later that they became known as "Christians," based on the word Christ, which is the Greek name for "messiah."

In Paul's time, there were many competing schools and movements within Judaism. In his efforts to reform Judaism, Paul became the first to proclaim Jesus was the Jews' long-awaited messiah.

"This is a very big deal," says Akenson, one of Canada's leading Pauline scholars, who is also a history professor at Queen's University, Kingston.
Paul was among the first, if not the first, followers of Jesus, says Akenson, to preach that Jesus was a suffering, divine messiah -- not the powerful king-like messiah for whom many Jews had been waiting.

Paul felt it was his duty to straighten out the many communities of mostly Jews that were forming around the crucified-but-divine Jesus.

These communities were all over the map -- literally and figuratively, suggests Bogert-O'Brien, of St. Paul's University.

"Sexual practices in the early communities, for example, varied widely -- from communities that practised something like 'free love' to others that practised polygamy or monogamy," he says.

Paul's fiery, hastily dictated letters to these far-flung Christian outposts, which later became part of the New Testament canon, were his attempt to impose some orthodoxy on a dramatically diverse group of Jesus followers.

In this way, Paul was trying to accomplish two competing things at once, Bogert-O'Brien says.

He was striving to provide religious coherence to the new Christian communities, but he was also trying to overthrow the dominant religious rules of his culture. He preached: "For freedom Christ has set us free," and "Christ redeemed us from the slavery of the law."

Modern scholars are constantly trying to understand what the world of Jesus and Paul was actually like. As they do so, it's becoming more widely accepted that both Jesus and Paul were challenging what Bible experts now call the "honour-and-shame society" they lived in.

In this rigid culture, there were harsh divisions between those considered elite and honourable and religiously acceptable, and those judged shameful and religiously unclean, something like 20th-century India's "untouchables."

In fighting this honour-and-shame society, Paul may have even been defending his own worth.

Bible specialist Herman Waetjen, a professor at Presbyterian Seminary in California, says that since Paul was a tentmaker who worked with animal skins, he could well have been ranked "unclean" by strict Jews.

By emphasizing that all people are saved through Jesus, that God's love is ultimate, Waetjen says, Paul may have been redeeming his own self-image at the same time he countered the religious strictures of the honour-and-shame society.

In his letters, Paul constantly seems torn, says Bogert-O'Brien. Often he seems embedded in his culture -- and appears, at least on the surface, to uphold his era's cultural customs, which kept women and slaves in their place.

But at other times, Bogert-O'Brien joins many scholars in saying Paul's over-riding theology was an affront to the powers that be. Paul's message was shockingly egalitarian and universalistic.
Why else, scholars ask, would Paul write one of the western world's most famous sentences:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

It is this foundational principle that echoes today as Christians and non-Christians step up their probe of Paul's teachings.

Here is a brief look at the continuing debates over what Paul may or may not have said about a number of controversial cultural issues:

Christians and Jews: American Bible scholar Pamela Eisenbaum, who is Jewish, says most Jews see Paul as an apostate, a shameless manipulator and a self-hating Jew.

Many Jews, she says, "hold Paul single-handedly responsible for 2,000 years of anti-Semitism and Christian brutality towards Jews."

But, following detailed studies of the New Testament, Eisenbaum has concluded Paul is much more complex than that, and his criticism of rival Jewish sects far less odious.

Building on Paul's teaching that people are "no longer Jew or Greek . . . ," Eisenbaum has become convinced Paul remained a committed, well-intentioned Jew to the end.

Going further, Eisenbaum maintains Paul was one of the world's first champions of multiculturalism -- which she says is the idea that people who are different can be meaningfully related.

Women: For at least 30 years, feminists have railed against how Paul's utterances were used for centuries by church patriarchs to keep women in their place, subservient to men.

Writing to his friend Timothy, Paul appears to declare that a woman may not "teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" in the church. In another infamous passage in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul appears to tell women "to submit yourselves unto your own husbands."

While Jesus had been remarkable in his day for forming unprecedented friendships with women and giving them leadership roles in his movement, Paul, as they say today, just didn't seem to get it.

Still, some Christian feminists, such as the Vancouver School of Theology's Sharon Betcher, are among those seeing Paul in a new light, as archeologists and anthropologists continue to piece together just what kind of culture Paul lived in.

Many scholars are now questioning whether it was actually Paul who wrote the lines that have been most vociferously employed to keep a lid on the rise of women in the global church.

His anti-women comments just don't jibe, some Christian feminists say, with the
high regard Paul often displayed for women in his epistles.

As well, scholars such as Waetjen now say, Paul -- by arguing everyone is free and equal in Christ's love -- was actually fighting the top-down power wielded by the patriarchy. As Waetjen says: "Paul is smashing all that."

Homosexuality: Paul's words are frequently cited by conservative Christians as their divinely ordained authority for opposing homosexual relationships and gay and lesbian clergy.

Even many liberal scholars, such as Akenson, acknowledge that Paul -- although he preached cosmic love and may not have been as harsh about slaves, Jews and women as previously believed -- was, nevertheless, clearly "homophobic."

Retired U.S. Episcopal Bishop John Spong, a blunt-speaking liberal, went so far a few years ago as to suggest that Paul's disgust with homosexuality may have burst out of his own repressed sexual attraction to men. Spong wondered if homosexuality might have been Paul's own mysterious "thorn in the flesh," which had previously been thought to be an affliction such as epilepsy or an anxiety-provoking condition related to shingles.

Yet another camp of New Testament academics speculate that the sections of the Pauline letters that contain the most ferocious denunciations of homosexuals, of "men with men working that which is unseemly," could have been added long after Paul by early church fathers.

The men who created the Biblical canon in the fourth century may have wanted to make Paul's teaching seem more appealing by fitting into the dominant Roman culture.

Another large cohort of scholars, such as Daryl Schmidt of Texas Christian University, believe Paul may have been targeting married men who sought out male prostitutes working out of pagan temples. Similarly, Schmidt says, Paul could have been appalled at the "unbridled passion" displayed in Greco-Roman bathhouses between men who would otherwise be considered straight.

While conservative Christians believe Paul remains undeniably correct in denouncing homosexual acts, some progressive Christians are taking a different approach.

They admire Paul for his teachings about the centrality of love and the liberating power of the cosmic Christ and they suggest that maybe, if Paul actually wrote the anti-homosexual passages, he was in this regard simply a product of his time.

In other words, they think he was wrong.

Such Christian thinkers say human reason, inspired by God, leads to certain viewpoints evolving. They claim, no matter what Paul may have said, it is acceptable for the church to change its mind over time, on everything from women to homosexuality.

LIVING UNDER EMPIRE

Like most Christian feminists, Betcher, of VST, initially considered Paul a stain on the formation of the church, a harsh man who denounced women and homosexu-
als and lacked Jesus's radical inclusiveness.

But the more that Betcher, who was raised in the U.S., probed modern Bible scholarship, the more she recognized "that we can learn from Paul what it was like to live under Empire."

Paul, as a Jew, was steeped in the Hebrew book of Exodus, says the Christian theology professor. He probably knew by heart the triumphant account of the Jews being liberated from slavery under the ancient Egyptian empire.

Today, Betcher believes, Paul continues to "teach us to resist the brute power of 'Empires,'" including those that oppress people and abuse the planet today.

"Paul essentially taught that "divine power is not coercive," Betcher says. "It's humble. It serves others, although it also stands up for itself. Divine power is definitely not the power of Empire, which is the power of humiliation and arrogance."

Betcher and Bogert-O'Brien are among those who believe Paul opposed the ruthless use of economic and military might. He was adamant he would not bow down before any principalities or powers.

The only authority Paul would serve was the spiritual, risen Christ, whom he saw as the ultimate manifestation of love.

Given Paul's wide range of challenging teachings, his frequent self-contradictions, and the wildly different ways he's been interpreted through the decades, Betcher and Bogert-O'Brien wonder if the time has come to celebrate the feisty Paul's knack for provoking debate.

It's been dangerous in the past, Betcher says, when Christians have blindly bowed before Paul as someone who can't be questioned.

So, instead of seeing Paul as a patriarch who handed down unchanging decrees about what Christians must believe and how they should behave, Betcher suggests engaging Paul like the provocative rabbi he was.

Perhaps it's healthier, she says, to see him as one of many contributors to the often-combative and on-going Jewish tradition known as midrash, or Biblical interpretation.

"We don't have to see Paul as an authority," Betcher says. "We can see him as someone to be in argument with."

There seems a good chance -- even as we approach a very modern Easter, almost two millennia after his death -- that in-your-face Paul would not have expected it any other way.

(see sidebar: Reckless, tough and abrasive)
Reckless, tough and abrasive:
Paul meets the idolators of Ephesus

Saturday, March 26, 2005

I walked in the footsteps of Paul three years ago -- and was struck by an overwhelming sense of the apostle's passionate recklessness and unbelievable toughness.

My wife and I were walking through the ruins of the city of Ephesus, one of the world's most elaborate archeological sites, in the beautiful arid hills of what is now northwest Turkey, not far from the glistening Aegean Sea.

I found myself imagining how Paul, a poor Jew spreading the word about a divine, risen Jesus, had sweated and strained through the mountains to trek to this place. He wanted to be there because it was then arguably the most cosmopolitan and advanced city in the Roman Empire.

As an evangelist, Paul thought that if he could get his message of cosmic resurrection across in this major port city, where Greek pagans lived alongside Jews, the message of salvation through Christ would then spread to all points of the map.

My wife and I explored the streets and plazas where Paul openly preached for almost three years before he was arrested. We saw the remains of the palaces, theatre, library and the famous statue of the fertility goddess, Artemis, whose temple was ranked one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

The New Testament passages that describe how Paul, around 53 AD, denounced this immensely popular goddess, who appears to sport multiple breasts (or, as scholars now suggest, multiple bull's testicles) came alive. Paul had his followers burn books about Artemis and condemned the craftsmen who profited handsomely by making her silver devotional idols. By doing so, Paul caused a near-riot.

Despite Ephesus being a reputedly tolerant city with a population of several hundred thousand, Paul, as he did elsewhere, had a knack for pushing its citizens' buttons. Crowds wanted to get rid of this aggressive troublemaker.

As the Book of Acts says, some of the city's pagans took to the streets and chanted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Paul and his Jewish followers were soon thrown in jail, not for the first time. We sat in the giant stone amphitheatre where Bible scholars say the apostle's followers, and maybe Paul himself, were thrown, perhaps to fight for their lives against wild animals. He was soon run out of the wonder-filled city.

I had to admire this amazing, difficult man. Fearless. Totally confident. Abrasive. Intoxicated by his God. Carried along by what he firmly believed was the energy of
love, which he was convinced was the force behind the universe. Not caring if he lived -- or was whipped, tortured or executed.

Paul was assured he had found the cosmic answer to suffering, and that everyone needed desperately to hear what he was calling "The Good News."

-- 30 --
Beware the 'boredom boom':

A long-ignored contemporary disease grows more severe among young and old

Friday, May 6, 2005

In the shopping mall -- despite its sparkling light, Muzak and invitations to buy everything from jewelry to sportswear -- there are many kinds of boredom.

There is the boredom of seniors like Zen Gregory, who is 76 and has a cold. The retired millwright has walked over to the Oakridge mall food court for a cup of tea and muffin because he's weary of being trapped alone in his apartment.

"To tell you the truth," Gregory says, "I'm bored with Vancouver. There's nothing to do here." He's tired not only of his jigsaw puzzles and TV shows, but with feeling he has to pay money to do anything in Vancouver. He's thinking of moving back to Ontario; at least he'll be near his daughters.

In the mall, there's also the boredom of teenagers, the cohort most people think about when they reflect on this contemporary disease -- which, paradoxically, is growing more severe as the level of stimulation escalates.

Five Grade 11 friends from Eric Hamber secondary sit at a table next to Gregory. Elliot Lo says his group doesn't find the mall "that special." But at least it's a place to hang out. In school, it becomes clear, the teenagers suffer from the kind of boredom that prisoners experience -- the kind you can't escape.

The famous Danish existential philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once called boredom "the root of all evil." The English poet, Wordsworth, referred to it as "savage torpor." A thousand years ago, Christian monks called it "acedia," a form of inner sloth judged a sin.

But in our increasingly plugged-in, hyped-up, 24-7 society, chronic boredom is becoming a crisis. We feel we have a right not to be bored. We fear boredom as much as we fear death (and more than a few scholars say there's a connection.)

Boredom is not a subject to be treated tongue-in-cheek. Boredom matters. The rise of boredom raises many complex questions about the human condition.

Boredom is the all-encompassing name we now give our discontent. As Patricia Spacks says in the groundbreaking book, Boredom: A Literary History of a State of Mind, it is a modern-day "menace," the ghost that haunts our every moment.

Boredom is also something we deny. How can we admit to being bored when others seem so busy and, especially on TV, fabulously excited? Confessing to being
bored is like admitting to being a loser.

Drinking Starbucks coffee or juice from Orange Julius, the teens in the Oakridge mall say math and physics are the most enervating subjects.

"What is the square root of 14?" It's like time is moving in slow motion when the teacher asks stuff like that. I watch the clock all the time," says JoJo Smith.

Most of the group also admit to having watched a lot of TV and having played a few too many thousand video games. Decent students, they're beginning to find electronic media repetitive.

Yet what are you going to do, Smith asks, when you're so bored in school you can't wait to get out, but you're also bored during summer vacation?

Smith feels bad about her boredom; because one of her favourite actors, Viggo Mortenson, the hunk swordsman in The Lord of the Rings, recently declared there's no excuse for it.

That's the kind of moralizing that's long pushed boredom underground, making it hard to discuss or research. Yet the scholars and psychologists who are now probing boredom believe it's one of the major diseases of our era.

We're in a "Boredom Boom," says the U.S.-based Yankelovich Monitor, a consumer survey.

Almost three out of four North Americans say they crave more novelty in their lives, says the Monitor. Sixty-nine per cent agree with the statement: "Even though I have so much to do, I'm always looking for something new and exciting to do."

More than four out of five said they were bored with TV and the Internet.

California psycho-physiologist Augustin de la Pena, who has studied boredom for 30 years, says the subject intimidates most researchers because it's hard to measure, funding agencies aren't interested and most people think humans are motivated by more noble purposes than sheer boredom.

However, de la Pena maintains boredom is key to understanding humans. Survey results like those from the Yankelovich Monitor reveal the human mind is always upping the ante for stimulation, just as a drug addict needs larger doses to get high.

It's not only seniors and high-school students who are bored. Clock-watching employees and managers are causing executives to fret because uninterested staff cost companies billions of dollars.

The father of modern capitalism, Adam Smith, worried in the 1700s that mind-numbing industrial jobs would make humans dull and ignoble. Now, some economists worry the fastest-growing category of new jobs is in the low-paying service sector, where hundreds of thousands of cashiers, clerks, security guards, fast-food staff and others endure deadly dull repetition.

Business is so afraid of boredom that high-tech shopping carts are now being designed with DVD players so kids don't get bored while their parents strive to buy things.
As well, the entertainment industry is becoming boring to many -- witness declining ratings for everything from the Grammys to professional sports.

Meanwhile, in our relationships, divorce rates are rising because spouses are bored with each other. Many people are over-eating because they're bored. And surveys show many are bored with sex. TV's Desperate Housewives are, by definition, desperately bored; so they're on the sexual warpath.

Here's what various health specialists say are signs of boredom:

- Lack of interest.
- Vague discontent.
- Frequent drowsiness.
- Listlessness and fatigue.
- The slow passage of time.
- Wishful thinking.
- Preoccupation with romantic or heroic fantasies.
- Vanity and self-absorption.
- Moderate to severe depression.

What causes boredom?

Humans and other animals seem to have an innate curiosity.

"The eyes want to see and the ears want to hear," said early American psychologist Robert Woodworth. When our curiosity is stifled, when our inner energy cannot be expressed, we grow frustrated.

Human beings have a need for stimulation. In a room without windows, decorations, telephones or other outlets, we grow unbearably bored. Even rats will actively explore parts of a maze that have stripes, and avoid walled areas without patterns.

Some may be glad to hear that boredom could be more prevalent among intelligent people. Psychologist Eric Fromm was among the first to propose the theory when he noted higher-functioning animals, such as apes and bears, often get bored in zoos. But snakes and crocodiles don't appear to have the same problem.

The evils of boredom enter our lives in two distinct ways.

The first is called situational boredom.

It's what teenagers experience in a math class or patients feel waiting in a doctor's office. More seriously, it's what prisoners endure in jail, and what millions of seniors experience in badly run residences. It's involuntary boredom; it arises out
of monotonous situations we can't control.

The more troubling type of boredom is chronic.

It's the kind that Madame Bovary experienced in the 1856 literary classic by Gustave Flaubert. Madame Bovary, restricted by social convention, was bored with her husband, bored with her community and bored with her life.

In her endless tedium, she created idealistic fantasies and entered into two love affairs, both of which turned disastrous. She took her life through arsenic.

Like Madame Bovary, it's common to blame something else for our boredom.

We complain we're bored with our spouses, our teachers, with meetings, with surfing the Web, with our "no-fun" city.

Given all the finger-pointing, theologist Paul Tillich said, "Boredom is rage spread thin."

It is deadened anger, or resentment.

Yet while it's often expressed as irritation with others, it's really anger at ourselves.

Vancouver's Bonnelle Strickling sees them every morning: The bored college students. At home they're plugged into exploding electronic media, but in the classroom they can't seem to concentrate.

Later in the day, in her private counselling office, Strickling sees the bored adults, who feel empty. They're stressed because they feel glued to the work treadmill; they've lost their zest because they're too damn busy.

Since Strickling wears dual hats -- as a Langara College philosophy instructor and as a psychotherapist in private practice -- she finds herself fighting on two fronts to counteract the deadening effects of hyperactivity.

She's not the only one concerned about today's paradoxical problem: That our over-stimulated society is breeding widespread, insidious boredom.

Although a good portion of Strickling's second-year students continue to be engrossed in her philosophy classes, after three decades at Langara College, she notes a sudden a decline in many first-year students' ability to comprehend the basics.

"A lot of my students seem to have the attention span of a gnat," she says. "They act in class like they're watching TV. They talk to each other while I'm teaching. There seems to be this kind of constant need for stimulation."

Plugged in at home and on the street to TV, the Internet, laptops, DVDs, cell-phones and MP3s, many young people are becoming merely reactive, Strickling says.

Prof. Michael Raposa, a specialist in boredom based at Lehigh University in the U.S., says we live in an attention-deficit-disorder culture, and the effects are becoming crippling.
"Students today are very good at retrieving information," Raposa says. "They can scan the Web quickly and find what they need. But to get them to read just a paragraph in a text, to really mull it over and make sense of it, is increasingly difficult. As a result, some of their cognitive skills atrophy."

As a therapist, Strickling sees a related kind of inattention, or flatness, in adults. She often listens to the pain-filled stories of baby boomers who feel so pressured and over-scheduled that "all the colour seems to have gone out of everything."

They might ingest the North American drug of choice, caffeine, and they might race from meeting to meeting, but they don't display much energy, much elan vital.

"They seem cut off," Strickling says -- uninterested in work, relationships or spending time with their families. "They don't care about the things they used to care about. It's very disconcerting. I think boredom is the neutral name we give to our lack of meaning."

The Archbishop of Canterbury is among those worried that today's fast-paced world is creating chronic boredom; by making people impatient with questions that don't offer immediate answers.

"Why do we want to escape from the glories and difficulties of everyday life?" the Welsh theologian asks. "Why do we want to escape into gambling or drugs or any other kind of fantasy?"

Picking up on how boredom can lead to addiction, Simon Fraser University philosopher Mark Wexler says that when things that were once satisfying become unsatisfying, we often end up wanting to do more of them. Compulsively. He defines addiction as "the tendency to try to relieve anxiety by repeating things."


It's one of the many ways that our fear of being bored can become destructive.

It's not hard to see how, in this endless pursuit of stimulation to escape feeling empty, boredom can become a special curse on the affluent.

It was impossible to be bored in hard-scrabble primitive days because the fight for survival kept you forever on your toes.

But boredom can be a critical issue for spoiled children; little princesses and princes who have been given everything and not had to struggle for any of it.

Although we generally associate boredom with being underchallenged, Wexler says there's no doubt boredom also comes from being overchallenged.

We just don't get the math class. We find it too nerve-racking to face another tense business meeting. We know we should be realizing more out of the situation. To protect ourselves from feeling inadequate in the face of such frustration and threat, Wexler says we often become jaded. Cynical. 
What's going on in the minds of sullen 14-year-old boys or girls who come home from school in a daze, then settle into endless TV-watching or video games until bed? Wexler believes the sad young teens are often reacting to the often-overwhelming academic and social demands of high school, which they find threatening and which make them feel like losers.

Such teens are retreating into a safer, private world of TV and electronic games -- filled with guns, cars, gladiators and wizards; at least it's a world they feel they can control.

They enter an artificial cyberspace that may symbolize the paradox of our time -- because, as Wexler suggests, it's a place where teens are both stimulated and bored at the same time.

See attached Sidebar: The Zen of Boredom
Sidebar to The Boredom Boom

The zen of boredom:

Disengagement key to artistic, scientific and intellectual inventiveness

Friday, May 6, 2005

Can boredom go beyond boredom, and turn into a kind of blessing?

Michael Ayotte has taught variations of the same introductory yoga class more than a thousand times.

But the Vancouver yoga teacher says he doesn't get bored. Instead, he stays "present" in the here and now. He transforms the potential tedium of repetition into a moving meditation that centres both him and his students.

Mark Leiren-Young, a playwright and screenwriter who divides his work between Toronto and Vancouver, converts boredom in a different way: He has learned how to seize on moments of dullness to spark his creativity.

The concept for Leiren-Young's most recent play lit up when he was watching another theatrical performance; halfway through, he realized he knew how it was going to end. That kicked his mind into a creative whirl that led him to write The Night They Kidnapped Barrymore, which just opened in Florida.

More than a few scholars now believe metamorphosing boredom can be the key to artistic, scientific and intellectual inventiveness. Recognition of boredom, they say, can also lead to spiritual insight, whether you're a Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or eclectic seeker.

Boredom has an especially positive role to play in our hyper-stimulated society, say psychologists, artists and spiritual teachers. We can search out boredom as a route to serenity; through a beach vacation, meditative reflection or by washing dishes with a new attitude, perhaps by really noticing the bubbles.

Boredom, it turns out, is in the heart and mind of the beholder.

"The fear today is: 'If I'm not doing something, I'm not alive,' " says Ayotte, noting that the mind always wants to be stimulated. "It's hard to not do something. It takes patience," he says. "Boredom is wishing you were somewhere else. On the other hand, yoga and meditation are about appreciating the present."

Leiren-Young readily admits he's not as centred a person as Ayotte. "I'm a terribly fidgety kind of person." But he knows how to make use of boredom. In a movie lineup or traffic jam, he's always prepared with books or audio tapes, to translate his frustration with sameness into imaginative inspiration.
New York State's poet laureate, Billy Collins, has been having fun of late being a champion of boredom. On the TV show 60 Minutes, he called boredom "paradise," his "muse" and "the mother of creativity."

Boredom is the blessed absence, Collins says mischievously, of what the entertainment world pushes as "interesting," including fashion, the mass media and celebrities.

Vancouver poet Susan McCaslin is also not afraid of what we normally call "doing nothing."

McCaslin, a Douglas College literature instructor, makes a distinction between negative boredom, which cuts a person off from the natural world, and "the fertile, often-solitary state conducive to creativity." Artists, McCaslin says, must constantly find ways to make room for "daydream" and "inner silence."

For those who make a living out of thinking, recognizing when one is bored can serve as a reminder it may be time to change your mind, says Bonnelle Strickling, a Langara College philosophy instructor.

"When I start to feel mechanical when I explain something, when I feel my explanation no longer has that much energy behind it, I begin to ask myself, 'Do I really believe that any longer?' It helps me come up with new ideas."

People who consciously seek out boredom are often trying to give their lives balance.

We all need to find a haven in North America's hurly-burly, says Simon Fraser University philosopher Mark Wexler. It's not only the spiritual seeker, artist or scientific inventor who need time to just sit there, rather than do something. So do clothing-store clerks, doctors and accountants.

The idea of the Sabbath, the ancient Judeo-Christian notion that we should take at least one day out of seven to rest, be grateful and enjoy the world's bounty, comes out of a positive view of boredom, says Wexler.

"We want to live with challenge in our lives. Yet we also need to fall back into boredom for a rest now and then -- before we go back to being challenged again," Wexler says.

And it's good to have people in your life you can be bored with, Wexler says.

"Boredom is something we'll share with intimates. We won't share it with strangers."

Wexler celebrates spouses or close friends who can just sit together and not talk, perhaps be content just "staring at a piece of dust floating in a ray of light."

Wexler can't count how many couples he's known who want to break up because one partner finds the relationship boring.

"And I always say: 'But that's the beauty of marriage,' he says.
"One has the ability to share the slower part of oneself, this boring part of oneself."

In a November, 2004, essay in Harper's Magazine on The Virtue of Idleness, novelist Mark Slouka suggests welcoming boredom into our lives can be a subversive act.

Twiddling one's thumbs is an assault on "The Church of Work," Slouka maintains; the slavish devotion so many North Americans have to being productive, doing business, keeping the economy expanding.

"There's something un-American about singing the virtues of idleness. It is a form of blasphemy, a secular sin," Slouka says.

Linking our compulsion to be constantly busy to a kind of fascism, Slouka suggests boredom opens the door to inner contemplation, which can bring forth free-floating ideas that might upset the establishment.

People who are afraid of boredom are afraid of death, says Ayotte, the yoga teacher. But if we confront the inevitability of death, Ayotte says boredom can be turned into something else entirely.

Contentment can come when we let go of our anxiety about our unhappy past and nervousness about our uncertain future and live in the moment, says Ayotte, citing Eckhart Tolle, Vancouver author of the bestselling book, The Power of Now.

The psychological link between feeling torpor and mortality can sound like a strange one, but Michael Raposa, author of Boredom and the Religious Imagination, says it's crucial.

Feeling bored and empty, Raposa says, is like feeling dead. "So we simply fill up what seems like empty psychic space, or empty spiritual space, with noise -- or what Pascal calls 'diversion' -- because we can't face the emptiness of boredom."

Instead of distracting ourselves through TV, spectator sports, gambling or workaholism, Raposa recommends delving more intensely into boredom in hopes it will lead to the ultimate source of meaning.

The medieval Christian monks who took the time to confront their own acedia, or indifference to divinity, he says, often experienced something like a "dark night of the soul," a terrifying but critical step in their spiritual journey.

In the 1800s, Martin Heidgger, the German existentialist philosopher, taught that those who honestly face up to the intimate relationship between boredom and death can develop a healthy detachment.

Such benign disinterest has also been advanced by Hindu yogis; Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard; the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola; and the Buddha.

In slightly different ways, all these spiritual masters taught this paradoxical truth: That developing an attitude of refined boredom, or disinterest, enables us to be more fully engaged, more connected with the world and others.
(Note to judges: This analysis was written days after I broke the story that the Aga Khan was privately meeting with his followers in Toronto and Vancouver - events that the Aga Khan and his officials tried to keep out of the news media. As a result of my coverage, the Aga Khan told his adherents in Canada to stop being so guarded with the public.)

Openness will pose a continuing challenge for Ismailis

Saturday, June 11, 2005

It's like having a nice girlfriend, but she's afraid to take you home for dinner with her elegant parents.

That's what it has felt like as a religion reporter trying to cover Canada's Ismaili Muslim community.

Everything seems to be going fine with the mutual media courtship, until I try to get serious about exploring the Ismaili community. Then an invisible wall goes up, and, like non-Ismailis elsewhere, I'm politely rebuffed.

Invariably, the Ismailis I've met have been appealing: Well-spoken, stylishly dressed, educated and successful. Without exception, they have been gracious.

Their spiritual and temporal leader, the Aga Khan IV, is also attractive, as the late Canadian prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, a friend, would attest. So would dozens of other global heads of state, dignitaries, architects and intellectuals.

The Harvard-educated Aga Khan, a billionaire philanthropist and spiritual leader, is the opposite of an extremist Muslim. He passionately champions values most Canadians admire: Tolerance, pluralism, civil society and learning from people of diverse world views.

Ismailis are happy to highlight the Aga Khan's many valuable charity projects. But try to dig below the polished surface of their tight-knit community, which has more than 50,000 members in Canada and 11,000 in Greater Vancouver, and the door is invariably shut -- with a smile, and an assumption that you'll understand.

I'm not sure I do.

Every organization tries to manage the media through public relations techniques. But I've never experienced a major religious group so adept at keeping information away from outsiders.

It's all the more frustrating because the Ismailis I've met seem like people I'd like to get to know, not only for the reasons above.

Ismailis are a small Shia subsect of the world's one billion Muslims. Their interpretation of Islam, as far as I understand it, seems potentially alluring to many westerners, since it's based on philosophy and mysticism and is apparently not exclu-
sivist.

Yet, while I've been invited to countless religious groups' worship events, Canadian Ismaili organizations remain among the precious few who don't welcome outsiders into their services.

I spoke off the record this week with a Vancouver Ismaili woman about the visit of the Aga Khan, said to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. The woman, highly successful in her field, grew anxious after we spoke, contacting me later to say local leaders had told Ismailis not to speak to the media.

An admirer of the Aga Khan, the professional woman was troubled that the Ismaili hierarchy so consistently shuns outsiders. The secrecy, she thought, made it look as if Ismailis have something to hide, when she believes they don't.

There have been many other silencing acts.

A Canadian Ismaili university professor, who wrote her PhD thesis on Ismailis in B.C., repeatedly declines media requests to explain her religion.

An Ismaili fellow running a popular unofficial website, which has been giving out-of-town Ismailis advice on how to attend Friday's meeting with the Aga Khan, was recently told by officials to shut it down for "security" reasons.

In a rare bit of recent controversy associated with the Ismailis, the Aga Khan in the mid-1990s gave up his claim to about $2 million in cash, apparently to avoid his community's practices being investigated in Canada.

The money, said to be Ismaili donations, had been apprehended at the U.S.-B.C. border. Ismaili officials said the money was forfeited because they did not want the Ismaili system of anonymous donations to be probed and threatened.

Over the years, when I've asked the always pleasant members of the B.C. Ismaili Council why so much about the community's practices and religion is kept behind closed doors, they have little to say.

However, in talking privately to Ismailis and scholars, the closest I've come to comprehending the penchant for self-protection is a suggestion it emerges from two things: An esoteric religious tradition and a history of persecution.

The Ismailis' religious scriptures and rituals have been hidden from strangers for much of history, in part because of the belief the tradition's inner truths are available only to those who are carefully initiated into the faith.

As well, since the world's far-flung Ismailis in Asia and Africa have never had a country to call their home, they've long been vulnerable to discrimination and oppression -- including by rival Muslims who reject their leader's claim of authority.

Still, despite appreciating this valuable historical background, I'm left with a niggling feeling.

Do certain Ismaili leaders severely restrict the flow of information about their community because, like politicians and corporate leaders, they simply want to maintain control -- of their images and their people?
There is no law that says Ismaili officials, or people of any religion or group, have to tell outsiders about their beliefs and practices (barring criminal investigation.)

But I expect the issue of openness will pose a continuing challenge for the world's Ismailis -- and the Aga Khan -- as they continue to solidify their place in the West and the developing world.

In the past few months alone, the Aga Khan has called on Africans to create a more penetrating and accurate media; urged people in the West to overcome their ignorance about Islam, and promised to build a centre for dialogue in Ottawa that will be designed with symbolically significant "transparent" glass.

The Aga Khan, clearly, is keen to be seen as a public champion of the advancement of mutual understanding between different races, religions, ideologies and nations.

But real engagement requires self-disclosure.

If Ismailis want to become truly effective in advancing their leader's ideals, they'll have to come more fully out of their closet.

- 30 -
Enter the evangelicals:

U.S. religious groups have a foot in Canada's political door, and they're pushing it open

Saturday, July 30, 2005

American evangelist Stephen Bennett declares he's willing to endure "persecution" in Canada to preach his message that homosexual acts are a mortal sin that should be illegal.

The famous U.S. preacher -- a married family man who considers himself "ex-gay" after renouncing his earlier promiscuous homosexual lifestyle -- was the keynote speaker before more than 250 Canadians this summer at a $100-a-ticket fundraiser.

Even though Bennett's Canadian evangelical allies warned him against bringing most of his anti-homosexuality tracts to Canada because they might earn him a jail sentence under the country's hate-speech laws, it didn't stop Bennett from joining a widespread U.S.-based campaign against Canada's proposed same-sex marriage legislation.

"I spoke [in Canada] for nearly an hour, openly and freely as an American," Bennett wrote in his recent weekly column, headlined O Canada, which was distributed to millions of people through popular Canadian and U.S. evangelical websites.

"I will not be silenced," said Bennett, who believes homosexuality is a moral choice, not a genetic predisposition. "The truth is not hate speech. Let them come in here now and arrest me."

The cross-border distribution of Bennett's fiery speech is just one small illustration of the way dozens of powerful conservative Christian networks in the U.S. are helping shape Canada's cultural and political landscape.

Many U.S. evangelicals have been galvanized by recent developments in Canada -- particularly Parliament's July vote in favour of same-sex marriage, but also by Canadian political efforts to legalize marijuana and maintain wide access to abortion, as well as Ottawa's refusal to join the U.S.-led war against Iraq.

Scholars and pollsters who track the links between conservatives in the two countries say the American religious right has gained more clout in Canada in recent years, particularly by bolstering right-wing elements in the Conservative party.

Big-name American Christian conservatives are warning the faithful that what is happening in Canada could soon infect the United States.

"The U.S. religious right certainly sees Canada as a place where liberalism runs
amok," says Bruce Foster, head of the political science department at Calgary's Mount Royal College.

"And they're saying if Canada is going to hell in a moral handbasket, it will happen in the U.S. It's the slippery-slope argument," says Foster, whose PhD explored the link between U.S. and Canadian religious groups.

Roger Robins, a political scientist at Marymount College in California, says the numerous American evangelicals trying to sway the Canadian scene want to remain below the public's radar.

"There's so much interaction between religious conservatives in the two countries. There are so many cross-border networks. So many groups," says Robins, a former Mennonite pastor who has worked in Canada and specializes in North American religious politics.

"The Americans are smart enough to know not to be seen as too pushy. And Canadians also don't want to be viewed as clones of American evangelicals,"

Some of the more important Christian organizations that have direct or indirect cross-border links, say the scholars, include Focus on the Family, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Real Women, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, various Mennonite and charismatic denominations, and dozens of Canadian evangelical colleges that are well populated with American students and faculty.

Professor Ron Dart, an active Anglican who teaches political science in the heart of B.C.'s Lower Fraser Valley Bible Belt, says there's no doubt the values of the powerful U.S. religious right "have infiltrated the Canadian soul and psyche" -- especially in Alberta.

Although the emphasis of conservative Americans on Canada is now more intense, Dart says they have been effectively shifting the Canadian political and religious scene for more than 20 years.

"U.S. evangelicals have helped create a Republican Christianity in Canada," says Dart, who teaches at the University College of the Fraser Valley, a campus that he says is frequently visited by U.S. conservative Christian groups.

Giant global evangelical organizations such as Focus on the Family, Dart says, draw in millions of people by offering advice on how to raise children and warning about the dangers of homosexuality. "Then, before you know it," Dart says, "you're into Republicanism and U.S. nationalism and imperialism."

To be fair, Dart and other scholars emphasize that Canadian liberals and homosexual-rights activists also work with allies in the U.S., who can also show signs of their own ideology.

But the religion scholars say the size, wealth and sophistication of the U.S. Christian right gives it unprecedented influence north of the border (not to mention around the world, particularly in Africa and Latin America).

U.S.-style evangelicalism and its Republican values have been entering Canada at three levels, Dart says: Through the "crude" methods of vociferous pundits such as
Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter; through "populist" organizations such as Focus on the Family, and through "intellectual" figures such as Michael Novak (who is connected with Canada's Centre for Cultural Renewal).

More than one in three Americans consider themselves "evangelicals," and most are Republican, according to polls.

Tories and evangelicals

In the 2004 U.S. election, a growing percentage of evangelicals -- 78 per cent -- voted to send George W. Bush, himself an evangelical, back into the president's office.

In contrast, less than 10 per cent of the Canadian population attends an evangelical Protestant denomination, such as a Baptist, Alliance or Pentecostal church.

Yet Ipsos-Reid pollsters say 51 per cent of these core Canadian evangelicals voted for the Conservative party in 2004, a rate almost twice as high as the general Canadian population.

(To round out the 2004 Canadian evangelical vote: 32 per cent cast a ballot for the Liberals, eight per cent voted NDP, two per cent went for the Bloc Quebecois and seven per cent for all others, including the Christian Heritage Party.)

However, evangelical strength in Canada may be gradually growing and be larger than it first appears. Broadly speaking, Grenville says, 19 per cent of the Canadian population could be counted as "evangelical."

If you define "evangelicals" as those who are highly active in their churches, believe Christ is the only route to salvation, the Bible is the inspired word of God and it is crucial to have a conversion experience, Grenville said, you could add a portion of mainline Protestants (four per cent of the Canadian population) and Catholics (another seven per cent) to the country's evangelical total.

Grenville, who says he personally fits the definition of an "evangelical" in a mainline Protestant denomination, says debate over Bush's global agenda and the same-sex issue has "become a kind of potent combination to bring about the politicization of the evangelical population in Canada."

It's a mixed blessing, Grenville says.

On the positive side, he says Canadian evangelicals are starting to realize they represent a significant chunk of the Canadian electorate "and they should have a voice. They're trying it on for size."

On the negative side, Grenville regrets what he calls evangelicals' "narrow" emphasis on same-sex marriage.

"It ignores the rest of the gospel, which is about loving God and your neighbour and speaking up for the vulnerable. The focus on homosexuality is eating away at evangelicals' political capital in Canada. They're being perceived as a bunch of haters."

Even though scholars say evangelical Protestants form the heart of the religious
right in both countries, most maintain there are subtle differences.

But that clearly hasn't stopped religious conservatives on both sides of the border from joining forces.

Canada's shift to the right

The U.S. religious right, financed in part by billionaire philanthropists such as Howard Ahmanson and others, champions a "laundry list" of issues in the U.S. and around the world -- but particularly in Canada, Dart says.

Although its front-line causes are opposition to homosexuality and abortion, Dart says the religious right in both countries also tends to be pro-death-penalty, strong on law and order, big on free trade, anti-euthanasia, advocates of private schooling, soft on the environment, hawkish on the military and leery of social spending.

"American evangelicals are a powerful force. They've helped create a big shift to the right in Canada in the past two decades," Dart says.

Most notably, Dart argues, the influence of U.S. evangelicals has slowly transformed the once-centrist Progressive Conservative party into what is now called the Conservative Party, which Dart maintains should be more aptly called "The Republican Party of Canada."

The Progressive Conservatives of the past, Dart said, made up a diverse and centrist party, which included many Canadian nationalists wary of the power of the American military-industrial complex.

The former PC party started the CBC, firmly supported public education and believed sexuality was largely a private matter, says Dart, author of The Canadian High Tory Tradition.

Canada's current Conservative party, led by Albertan evangelical Stephen Harper, mirrors the U.S. Republican Party, Dart said -- including in the way it not only opposes same-sex marriage, but supports the Iraq war and urges closer economic and security ties with the U.S.

In his new book, Evangelicals and the Continental Divide (McGill-Queen's Press), Atlantic Baptist University professor Sam Reimer says Canadian evangelicals are more like American evangelicals than the Canadians want to believe.

Reimer's extensive surveys also show Canadian core evangelicals have become more conservative, like their American allies, since 1975 -- particularly in wanting restrictions against abortion, divorce, pre-marital sex and pornography.

There is also tight agreement among evangelicals in Canada and the U.S. on key conservative Protestant convictions -- such as that the only way to gain eternal life is through belief in Christ (virtually unanimous in both countries), the Bible should be read literally (four out of five in both countries agree) and the world will end in the battle of Armageddon (two of three in both countries agree).

Despite the converging theological beliefs among North American evangelicals, scholars who have devoted their careers to the subject say there are some subtle religion-based political differences between the U.S. and Canada.
Evangelicals and the Continental Divide, for instance, shows that core Canadian evangelicals are somewhat more likely than American evangelicals to want to protect the environment, more likely to believe the national government has a role to play in combating poverty, more inclined to question free trade and somewhat less likely to be opposed to voting for an atheist politician.

What's the overarching religious difference between Americans and Canadians?

Most Canadians, including evangelicals, don't feel comfortable thinking of themselves, as many Americans do, as blessed citizens of God's chosen nation.

Professor Mark Noll, a celebrated historian of North American religion at Wheaton College in Illinois, says Canadians never developed the idea they were God's chosen people because the country was co-founded by anglophone Protestants and francophone Catholics.

You can't claim your country is chosen by God if you suspect the Christians who populate the rest of the land may not be bona fide, says Noll, whom Time Magazine recently named one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America.

The Chosen People theme gives American Christians more reason than Canadians, Noll says, to believe it's their unique role in history to culturally colonize the planet, since many equate the American political way of life with the Christian life.

Noll also argues that subtle differences have emerged between Canadian and American politics because Catholicism makes up the largest and strongest Christian denomination in Canada, while Protestant evangelicalism is dominant in the U.S.

Noll argues that most Canadians developed a Catholic-rooted concern for the "common good," while Americans have picked up an evangelical emphasis on individual liberty, personal salvation and suspicion about the power of government.

An Ipsos-Reid poll, for instance, found only 16 per cent of Canadian Catholics voted for the Conservative Party (which stresses individualistic values) compared to 55 per cent of Canadians voting Liberal, eight per cent NDP and 15 per cent Bloc (parties that put a little more emphasis on cooperative ventures).

Given the American Christian emphasis on the importance of religion, Foster say it's no accident most top-flight politicians in the U.S., Republicans and Democrats, for the past several decades have been evangelical Christians who pepper their speeches with "God bless America."

But that's not the case in Canada, where every prime minister since Lester Pearson has been at least nominally Catholic and most other politicians keep their religion, or lack thereof, mainly to themselves.

Although there are exceptions, Foster says, Canadian evangelicals also tend to be less politically aggressive than their U.S. counterparts. "They do their politics differently down there."

In addition to being less ideologically devoted to capitalism and U.S. expansion-
ism, Foster says Canada's conservative Protestants don't generally try to target individual candidates for moral demonization and character assassination. Many Canadians, he says, find such attack-tactics extremely distasteful.

The red flag of homosexuality

In his column O Canada, American evangelist Stephen Bennett's fury about what he labels Canadian mistreatment of conservative Christians is typical of much of the cross-border traffic in religious politics.

For one thing, the evangelist's staunch defence of his right to condemn homosexuality was highlighted as a feature essay on linked popular websites in Canada and the U.S.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, which represents almost all the country's evangelical denominations, distributed the O Canada piece, cross-referencing it with the United States' American Family Association, which claims 2.3 million members.

The O Canada opinion piece is also representative since it fixated on the red flag of homosexuality, Robins says. Since Canada's endorsement of homosexual marriage marks a break from past cultural norms, Robins says it shouldn't be underestimated as a potent "common cause" rallying issue.

"The same-sex legislation represents a historic departure for Canada," Robins says.

Bennett's O Canada column specifically championed the case of conservative B.C. Christian Chris Kempling, a public-school teacher-counsellor from Quesnel who was temporarily suspended after writing letters to the local paper saying homosexuality was a dangerous condition that could be cured.

Although B.C. courts upheld school board arguments that Kempling's views were discriminatory toward homosexual students, Bennett argued the decisions displayed how the Canadian "establishment" was out to ruin Kempling.

The 'persecution motif'

Bennett said his appreciative audience (brought together by noted Ontario Rev. Tristan Emmanuel, who has been busily making sure many evangelicals have been nominated to key Conservative Party ridings) gave him a standing ovation for shaking up "extremely reserved" Canadian Christians.

Rogers, the California-based political scientist, says Bennett's speech, which cited how evangelicals are being made into victims in Canada and the U.S., fits perfectly into the "persecution motif" frequently adopted by militant North American evangelicals.

Promoting a "siege mentality" can serve to mobilize otherwise passive supporters, says Rogers, adding that it's a technique that can also be used by liberals and pro-homosexuality activists.

Like the O Canada column, a similar foray by American evangelicals into Canadian life came earlier in a widely distributed opinion piece titled, Pray for
Canada, Pray for America.

Written by prominent U.S. evangelist Alan Sears, the column attacked Canada's hate-speech laws, saying their acceptance north of the border means they could soon become a reality in U.S. courts, which often cite international law as precedents.

The piece by Sears, head of the influential Arizona-based Alliance Defence Fund, also linked to the website of the B.C. arm of Real Women Canada. Sears praised Real Women Canada for being "very American" in the way it forthrightly opposed Canada's new hate-speech laws, which he suggested could lead to the acceptance of not only homosexuality, but pedophilia and sadism.

Such international connections, Foster says, suggest Canada's evangelical political activists don't always need to belong to the same organization or accept formal political help from Americans to challenge the Canadian political scene.

"Real Women Canada is doing the job for American evangelical activists," Foster says. "They're being an early warning-system for the religious right."

Although the strength of U.S.-style religious conservatism is growing in Canada, both Rogers and Dart want to clarify that cultural-political pressure does not completely flow one way.

Since most Canadian religious conservatives generally don't display the hard-edged militancy of those in the U.S., Rogers says, "American evangelicals are often a little suspicious of those in Canada."

Dart cites how American students who study at evangelical schools such as B.C.'s Trinity Western University and Regent College are often shocked when they realize many Canadians evangelicals "don't accept the American agenda -- that God and the flag are one."

After the conservative American Protestants get over their initial upset, Dart says, some end up appreciating Canada's skepticism about whether it's wise to make "kissing cousins" out of Jesus and Bush.

"Canada plays a very significant role in moderating American extremism -- which brooks no opposition -- on a political, religious and practical level," Dart says.

Although Canadians, including conservative Christians, often find themselves defending themselves against American cultural domination, Dart assures Canadians they sometimes get in their own counter-punches.

"The beaver," he says, "is also capable of fighting back."

-- 30 --

See information graphic (attached):
Enter the Evangelicals: Information Graphic

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICANS AND CANADIANS ON RELIGION, POLITICS AND MORALITY

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<th>American view</th>
<th>Canadian view</th>
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<td>Percentage of countries' population who claim 'my religious faith is very important to me':</td>
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<td>Percentage who believe in the 'Rapture,' that Jesus will return to Earth and eventually usher in the apocalypse:</td>
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<td>Percentage who believe same-sex marriage is 'wrong and should never be lawful':</td>
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<td>Percentage of countries' evangelicals who believe homosexuality is 'always wrong':</td>
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<td>Percentage who think 'decriminalizing marijuana is a sound idea':</td>
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<td>Percentage who believe there is no fundamental difference between Canadians and Americans:</td>
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Ethics at Work pays dividends:

Movement toward more spiritual workplace may be here to stay, as some employers begin to recognize its value to the bottom line

Saturday, September 17, 2005

The burgeoning spirituality-in-the-workplace movement was meant to be about mutual respect and higher purposes.

But for Ann Coombs, one of the early leaders in this North American-wide attempt to bring ethics and dignity to the workplace, it led to utter frustration and disappointment.

The author of the best-selling book, The Living Workplace: Soul, Spirit and Success in the 21st Century, was brought in as a $100,000-a-year consultant to a major company to help the CEO heal what he realized was a toxic, unproductive work environment.

Coombs, based in Vancouver, studied the corporation, encouraged staff to honestly assess their colleagues and leaders and wrote a detailed report -- which happened to cite one senior executive as an abusive tyrant.

Trouble was, the executive in question was a friend of the CEO. The CEO took it upon himself to chop out of Coombs' report all negative remarks about his troublesome pal.

Coombs was shocked. She protested to the CEO. She hasn't worked for the company since.

After more than five years of passionately promoting more spirit-filled, balanced workplaces, Coombs had to take off almost a year to weigh what she was doing.

"I couldn't stand it. I had to leave the corporate world to reflect on what was really important in my work. The message I was getting was I had to compromise myself to keep my contracts. But I won't work in the corporate world under those conditions, at any price."

Despite her rude awakening to what she considers the dark state of much of North American corporate existence, Coombs still has hope for the spirit-at-work movement, which in the past decade has spawned roughly 500 books and countless seminars, retreats and consultations.

Along with a number of other Canadian specialists in spirit-oriented workplaces, Coombs believes the expanding movement needs to be re-assessed.

The spirituality-at-work movement can be defined as an attempt to bring holistic attitudes to offices, job sites and boardrooms.
It means fostering ethical values in the workplace -- such as respect, integrity, openness, diversity, caring and fairness.

This loose spiritual movement has not been about bringing explicit religious expression to the workplace (although that's in part what it has meant in the U.S., where office prayer and meditation groups are more common than in Canada.)

For most of North America, the ultimate goal of the spirituality-in-the-workplace movement is to help people recognize they can achieve a higher purpose in their careers, whether they see it as serving a Supreme Being, other people or the planet.

For companies, the spin-off benefits of the movement are happier staff who are less likely to threaten the bottom line by either slacking off or taking off.

Canadians, however, appear to have a long way to go to make their workplaces more holistic and satisfying.

A University of Western Ontario study found four out of five Canadians don't look forward to work on Monday.

As well, 76 per cent of Canadians feel disengaged from their workplaces, with many actively opposing what their company does.

Where has the spirit-at-work movement failed?

The specialists' over-riding observation is that many executives -- whether in government, non-profits or private enterprise -- pay lip service to the idea of respectful workplaces, but don't give up their autocratic habits.

The spirit-at-work experts also find too many corporate leaders are looking for quick fixes; dreaming they can magically turn their staff into tireless worker-bees through a brief spiritual seminar.

Another problem is corporate culture's demand for ever-higher profits; it's fomenting unprecedented workplace stress, leading to burned-out staff and managers.

There is nothing wrong with corporate North America being led by the profit motive, says Coombs. But when it descends to greed and ruthless behaviour, it becomes counter-productive.

Beyond the bad news, however, what's been successful in the spirit-at-work movement?

The specialists say any attempt to help staff, especially managers, learn about themselves has proved effective in creating healthier workplaces, where staff feel like they serve something more than money.

It is also now more difficult for managers to ignore or disguise a toxic workplace. Bullying leaders are less likely to go unchallenged.

And even though most workplaces remain far from perfect, some staff and managers are making strides as individuals, learning how to integrate their whole being...
into even challenging workplaces.

Finally, a few companies and non-profits have really grasped what it means to foster spirituality at work. They've discovered profitability improves when companies implement work/life/spirituality programs.

They've enjoyed a rise in staff loyalty and drastic declines in turnover, leading to cost savings. And, as studies show, some have seen productivity increase by 20 per cent.

Firms mouth the words

It's been difficult for many businesses to get to that promised land, however. The seeds of a more spiritual workplace often fall on fallow ground.

Coombs can't count how many times she's heard executives say: "People are our most important asset," yet too often, when feeling under siege, the managers end up, in effect, conceding, ". . . that is, until we don't need them."

Edmonton-based Val Kinjerski, who completed her PhD in the field of what she calls "spirit at work," says she often runs across companies that have developed truly inspiring mission statements.

Which they ignore.

"Some managers aren't really serious about their intention to bring the spirit into the workplace," says Kinjerski.

"They may come up with a wonderful vision statement. Then they revert to their autocratic ways. They don't involve staff in decision-making or hold them in regard."

Not surprisingly, the spirituality in the workplace movement has also run smack into the corporate push to maximize production and profit.

Statistics Canada recently reported the average Canadian now works 49 hours a week, compared to 41 hours a week in the early 1980s. Wages for many people remain low.

John Izzo, one of the first teachers to emerge in the spirit-work movement, says two paradoxical trends are happening in the North American workplace.

One is the deep need he says people have felt to find meaning, or spirituality, in their workplace.

The other, says Izzo, is an unquenchable corporate hunger for larger profits, brought on in part by globalized competition.

Izzo, who lives in Vancouver but gives more than 60 workshops a year around the continent, says there's no doubt the drive for higher returns is putting greater stress on workers and managers, contributing to depression, addiction and family breakdown.
He cites a study showing the typical two-income couple now spend an average of only 20 minutes together a day.

"There's this feeling we're all spending more time in the workplace and the sacrifices of making a living might not be worth it," he says

"There's a backlash. It's on peoples' minds -- and that's going to make a difference in the future, because conversation always precedes action."

The spirituality-at-work movement, Izzo says, doesn't directly promote family-friendly policies -- including flex time, on-site daycare, paid volunteering, tele-commuting and elder-care programs.

But Izzo sees the emergence of such work-life programs as signs a company is sincerely trying to create what he now likes to call, to be provocative, a "loving" workplace.

Movement is here to stay

Despite setbacks, there are solid indications the spirit-at-work movement is paying dividends in some quarters.

No matter how trivial a workshop might seem to some cynics, Kinjerski says it will always be valuable for a company if its managers and staff learn more about who they are.

Harvey McKinnon, who heads a Vancouver-based company that helps charities do fundraising, says research shows staff members act out in the workplace the old emotional conflicts they have with their own families of origin.

The spirit-at-work specialists believe there's no better way to calm down a toxic workplace than to help staff understand, on one hand, their neuroses -- and on the other how they could connect their jobs to their deepest ideals.

Coombs, Kinjerski, McKinnon, Izzo and their ilk are masters at telling stories that can inspire both bosses and staff to inject their whole being -- mind, body, emotions, spirit and soul -- into their work.

Izzo describes the electronic-banking clerk who helped stop a customer from committing suicide. Kinjerski talks about the parking-lot attendant who gave out candies to children who had to go into hospital. She can become enthusiastic about the importance of the work performed by bus drivers.

What do you do with chronically jaded employees? Kinjerski says you ask them to recall a moment when their work actually served a higher purpose. You assist them in coming up with their own inner answer to the question: "What gets you up in the morning?"

In addition to personally trying to follow the advice given in his own books, including The Power of Giving: Creating Abundance in Your Home, At Work, and In Your Community, McKinnon says each year he asks his dozen or so staff to decide how to devote five per cent of the fundraising company's profits to philanthropy.
"It's the most highly anticipated time of the year. It gives staff a really good feeling. They get to give away money to something they really believe in. It certainly doesn't hurt their overall creativity," he says.

But some bosses don't know how to inspire. As Coombs says, "There will always be crummy leaders." Harvey also acknowledges it may be easier to inject spirit into a smaller office than a giant corporate ship stuck in stormy financial seas.

So some spirit-at-work specialists are starting to concentrate less on wholesale corporate makeovers and more on helping individuals bring their hearts, intuition and spirit to work, so they don't necessarily have to wait for their bosses to humanize soul-crushing environments.

At the same time, another positive offshoot of the spirituality in-the-workplace movement, says Coombs, is that it has made it more difficult to ignore or disguise systemic toxicity.

"You still have your autocratic leaders, but now they're more likely to be challenged on it," says Coombs. Employees' expectations are growing. It's harder for a boss to get away with prodding staff with fear, rather than luring them forward with inspiration.

Finally, some companies, to put it simply, are just getting it.

They understand what it means to bring spiritual values into a workplace.

"The VanCity Credit Union model is being held up time and time again," says Coombs, referring to the large B.C. non-profit that keeps winning best-company awards. "It's honouring people."

Coombs and others also cite the spirit-supporting practices of Happy Planet, the medium-sized fruit-juice company run by recently elected high-profile B.C. NDP MLA Gregor Robertson. For more signs of the movement's success they suggest looking at the companies and non-profit organizations that have received B.C.'s Ethics in Action Awards.

With early corporate resistance declining to words such as "spirit" and "soul" being in the workplace, the specialists say the movement is maturing.

"I think it's only going to grow," says McKinnon, "because people are realizing they spend half their lives in their workplace, and they want more meaning out of it."

Despite being forced to temper her early idealism, Coombs has returned, on her own terms, to a vibrant career: Another book, individual life-work coaching, consulting on the future of workplaces and preparing to chair the 2006 International World Futurist Conference.

As Coombs puts it, despite the many roadblocks that have been thrown up against the creation of holistic and respectful workplaces, the movement is here to stay.

"The spirit-at-work movement is for real," she says. "It's that desire people have to work while serving something larger."
Religious rules challenged:
Spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on the West Coast

Saturday, November 12, 2005

Kim Pechet is Jewish, but she doesn't attend a synagogue. Instead, the 49-year-old Vancouver mother teaches yoga and an array of Asian-rooted disciplines to young and old -- including wealthy matrons, office workers, Chinese immigrants, doctors and lawyers, Catholics, aboriginals, neo-pagans and whomever shows up for her classes at the Jewish Community Centre.

Pechet refers to almost every Eastern-based discipline she teaches as "movement meditation."

She won't push the spiritual aspects of yoga, meditation and tai chi on her students, many of whom come for stress relief. "But I do see what I teach as a form of prayer," Pechet says, after elegantly stretching out her arms to illustrate several yoga poses, or asana.

The co-manager of The Sanctuary, a spacious hardwood-floor studio located in a former church on the west side of Vancouver, doesn't define prayer as asking a Supreme Being to fulfill her hopes for herself and others.

More in line with some Eastern traditions, she views prayer as the process of becoming "more intentional -- making one's life more virtuous, including by letting go of anger and fear."

Don't look now, but spiritual practices are undergoing a dramatic shift on Canada's West Coast.

Through benign stealth, scholars suggest many Canadians who live on the Pacific Rim are being Hinduized. And Buddhistized.

The embracing of ancient Eastern traditions can be explained in part through immigration, with census data now showing more than one out of five British Columbians has Asian roots (mostly Chinese and East Indian).

But the rise of visible minorities in Canada doesn't tell the whole story. Disciplines generally associated with the East are attracting Canadians from across the spectrum, with people from all ethnicities looking to them to foster well-being.

Pechet is hardly alone. The number of British Columbians, particularly women, who have adopted aspects of Eastern disciplines tops 2.2 million, according to a Mustel Group poll done for The Vancouver Sun. It may be the only poll on the continent that has surveyed people about a wide range of alternative spiritual practices.
According to the Mustel poll of 502 randomly chosen adults, more than 56 per cent of British Columbians are either actively practising yoga and meditation, have tried the two disciplines or want to try them.

Yoga comes directly from Hinduism, and meditation is linked firmly with both Hinduism and Buddhism. However, there has long been a minor movement among some Christians, Jews and Muslims to practise meditation.

The Mustel poll reveals the number of people engaging in meditation and yoga in B.C. is growing almost as substantial as those who have a regular prayer practice, the exercise linked most strongly to Western religions.

Could British Columbians' enthusiasm for yoga, meditation and, to a lesser extent, tai chi be superficial? It depends on whom you talk to.

Scholars say B.C. citizens' excitement about Eastern spiritual practices reflects a variety of trendlines -- including that British Columbians' loyalty to Western institutional religions is weakening.

The fastest-growing group in Canada and the U.S. is people who say they have no religion, surveys show. Nowhere is that trajectory stronger than in B.C.

Still, polls show most people who say they aren't religious believe in God and think they have spiritual needs. These people are being dubbed the new "secular-but-spiritual" cohort, and scholars believe they're looking far and wide for something transcendent in which to put their trust.

"With so many British Columbians having no religion, it creates a kind of open space, some would say a void, that people want to fill," says Donald Grayston, professor emeritus of religion at Simon Fraser University, who is also an Anglican priest.

Pechet believes many outdoorsy West Coast Canadians are drawn in unusually strong numbers to yoga, meditation and tai chi because they prefer "natural" forms of spirituality, which challenge both mind and body.

Even the names of many yoga poses come from nature, she says -- including Cobra, Tree, Downward Dog and Mountain.

Langara College's Larry Devries, who specializes in Eastern religions, says the Mustel poll points to how the influence of Eastern spirituality on British Columbians goes far beyond the rapid rise of organized Buddhism and Hinduism.

There are now 135 Buddhist and 35 Hindu centres in B.C., says Devries. And the census shows 2.2 per cent of the population is Buddhist, with one per cent being formally Hindu.

But Devries says such statistics don't fully capture how pervasively Eastern spiritual practices are penetrating the West Coast psyche.

"The diversity of British Columbians is astounding," Devries says, noting that he sees it each week in his classrooms. "The globalization phenomenon is not only globalizing capital, it's doing the same to spirituality."
Canadians are far more well-travelled than Americans, says Devries. And being on the Pacific Rim, he says, British Columbians are constantly travelling to all corners of Asia, where many become familiar with spiritual disciplines once considered exotic.

North Americans who are not overtly religious are trying yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer to try to "align themselves with the forces of the universe," says Patricia Killen, head of the religion department at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.

Instead of joining institutionalized religions, Killen says many are opting for private disciplines. "They're moving to personal practices like meditation and tai chi," she says, "to keep their religion real."

One major North American study recently revealed, Killen says, that many people are seeing spirituality less as a way to foster the virtue of forgiveness, a traditionally Western ideal, "and more as a source of healing, energy and health."

There is nervousness, however, among at least some Asian British Columbians about the reasons many Canadians are setting up in-home meditation rooms and flocking to the hundreds of yoga, tai chi and meditation centres peppered through the province.

Some South-Asian-rooted Hindus, such as East Vancouver's Rukmini Chaitanya, have a gentle warning, for instance, for the hordes of British Columbians who are trying out India's millennia-old art of yoga mainly to become more flexible.

"Yoga is not only for physical fitness," Chaitanya says. "It's food for body, mind and soul. If not done in the proper method, it's not beneficial. It can actually be harmful."

WHAT A TRANSFORMATION

In B.C., it's clearly no longer the 1950s.

Back then, more than three of four Canadians, the vast majority of them with ties to Britain, France and other part of Europe, attended a Catholic or Protestant church.

You would have searched far and wide to find only a few hundred British Columbians practising yoga, meditation or tai chi a half-century ago, when B.C. seemed largely a place for rugged European-rooted loggers, fishers, miners and their families.

What a transformation. Now only one in five British Columbians regularly attends a religious institution, typically a church. That still represents a lot of dedicated people of faith, but not nearly as many as in the old days.

In contrast, the Mustel poll shows in 2005 that almost one in three British Columbians have tried yoga, with almost half keeping it up as a regular habit.

Another 29 per cent of B.C. residents have tried some form of meditation, according to the Mustel poll, with most sticking with it once they start.
The percentage of British Columbians who have tried prayer as a discipline is slightly higher, at 29 per cent, with almost all maintaining their commitment.

Prayer tends to be linked most strongly with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but it also runs through Hinduism, Sikhism, Chinese folk religion and even some forms of Buddhism.

British Columbians' passion for diverse spiritual disciplines, the Mustel poll shows, is consistent throughout all the province's regions and across all age groups (the only exception being that people over 55 are not likely to do yoga).

Another sign of the eclectic nature of religion and culture in B.C. is that many British Columbians have no trouble mixing and matching all four disciplines -- yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer.

For instance, roughly one in two of those who practice the slow, graceful Chinese martial arts poses of tai chi also pray or meditate.

These diverse disciplines are quietly moving in to fill the vacuum left by Pacific Coast Canadians' relative lack of loyalty to religious institutions.

The census shows B.C. has the highest percentage of people in North America who say they have no religion: 35 per cent (compared to the Canadian average of 16 per cent).

The B.C. rate is higher even than the most secular states in the U.S.: Washington (with 25 per cent saying they have no religion) and Oregon (21 per cent).

Religion scholars such as Grayston and Killen say British Columbians are at the North American vanguard of those embracing Eastern spiritual practices, blending them with those from the West.

This is a frontierland, a place where old rules are challenged, they say. That's in part because B.C.'s spiritual searchers, Killen adds, don't feel stigmatized. They don't normally have to battle against the protests of fervent Christians or other religious traditionalists.

In many regions of the world, including parts of the U.S., Killen says, arch-conservative religious people are hostile to meditation, yoga and even deep-breathing relaxation exercises -- denouncing such practices as portals through which demonic spirits can penetrate the human soul.

IT'S BIG BUSINESS

Yoga, with its emphasis on attuning mind with body, is becoming big business all across North America, but especially in B.C.

Yoga Magazine says North Americans now spend more than $3 billion a year on yoga and related products -- from yoga mats to yoga clothing, yoga vacations to yoga videos. Yoga has become popular among Hollywood stars and mass-market women's magazines.

It's hard to come by hard comparative data on how many North Americans actually
practice yoga or other Eastern practices, since most polling on religion has tended to focus on Western traditions such as prayer.

But a rare poll done by Harris Interactive for U.S.-based Yoga Magazine found this year that roughly seven per cent of Americans practice yoga.

Meanwhile, the Mustel poll showed 14 per cent of British Columbians -- or twice the number of Americans -- are currently spending part of their week bending into yoga poses.

Another 16 per cent of B.C. residents have tried yoga's often-demanding body-and-mind stretches, but no longer do so regularly. A further 13 per cent say they want to try yoga, says the Mustel poll (which is considered accurate to 4.4 percentage points, nineteen times out of 20).

All in all, that adds up to 1.7 million British Columbians who have been directly drawn to yoga.

More than two out of three of these practitioners are women.

Those who do yoga also tend to be more educated and well-off than the average B.C. resident.

"The yoga community is definitely thriving in British Columbia," says Louise Quinn, publisher of Ascent yoga magazine, which is based in Montreal but has higher circulation in Greater Vancouver.

When the Mustel Group asked practitioners about the benefits they've received from yoga or meditation, however, many did not put explicit spirituality at the top of their list.

Seventy-two per cent of B.C.'s meditators say they do so to become calmer. And though 22 per cent say they find meditation "mentally inspiring," only eight per cent cited "spiritual growth" as a benefit.

As for yoga, most West Coast practitioners say they find it's made them more relaxed, flexible and healthier. But just six per cent actually used the word "spiritual" to describe their experience.

The Ascent Magazine publisher says the results reflect her observation that British Columbia's yoga community is "much more health conscious" and "focussed on physical power yoga" than in other regions of Canada.

People who practise yoga in Quebec and Ontario, said Quinn, 50, who has lived in all three provinces, don't care as much about physical fitness. They tend to put more emphasis on the spiritual and philosophical teachings of yoga.

Pechet, the Vancouver yoga-meditation teacher, believes people may be receiving broadly defined spiritual benefits from yoga and meditation -- whether they think of it in those terms or not.

To Pechet, any discipline that makes a person less emotionally reactive, more attuned to themselves and sensitive to others is spiritual.
Killen, co-editor of the book, Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest, believes the move that many are making toward yoga and meditation may reflect how many North Americans want to avoid the complexities of religion.

"They're avoiding institutional politics and shifting from doctrine to practice," says Killen. "They simply have a sense they need some sort of practice to organize their inner lives and help them get through their day better."

A large number of such searchers are less sophisticated than some who attend a religious community, she says, where they learn about their faith's history and doctrines. "Many who have a religious hunger," Killen says, "don't have a vocabulary for spiritual discourse."

Hindu-based yoga philosophy is intellectually challenging, says the noted U.S. religion professor. "I can't speak authoritatively about Canadians," she says, "but most Americans are not into a complex religious vision like that in Hinduism."

Chaitanya, whose husband is the Hindu priest at Vancouver's Mahalakshami Temple on East 11th Avenue, regrets seeing her faith simplified. Yoga and meditation should be used to foster more than good physical health, she says. They should bring humans closer to the divine.

Hinduism, Chaitanya says, has a multi-faceted and elaborate cosmology, which is most thoroughly ingested by growing up in a Hindu culture and studying classic scriptures, as well as practising meditation and yoga.

"The true goals of these practices," she says, "are to cleanse the mind, visualize the divine and see yourself within -- to reach the stages far beyond."

PRAYER A SIMPLE EXERCISE

Prayer isn't dying out in Canada, but it's changing. Prayer remains among the simplest, least expensive and most adaptable spiritual exercise.

The Mustel Group poll showed roughly one out of three British Columbians practise prayer as a regular discipline.

This figure is lower than those published in earlier surveys of Canadians' religious habits, which typically find that almost two out of three of British Columbians say they pray.

But the Mustel Group's Jami Koehl says the discrepancy can be explained by the way her pollsters asked people if they prayed in the context of a regular spiritual discipline. If the Mustel poll had also probed whether British Columbians occasionally engaged in spontaneous prayer, it may have raised the prayer totals.

Whatever the case, the Mustel poll showed that even many British Columbians who pray, and would be more likely to adhere to a Western tradition, flow easily among spiritual practices.

For instance, 56 per cent of B.C. residents who pray also say they meditate, and 22 per cent stretch their limbs in yoga.

As an Anglican priest and a professor, Grayston has no trouble with British
Columbians fluidly blending yoga, meditation and prayer.

That's what he does.

"I pray every morning and evening," says Grayston, who is an admirer of the late Catholic-Buddhist mystic, Thomas Merton.

Grayston accompanies his 20-minute prayer practice with a candle, and scriptural readings, including of the psalms. His prayer room includes a painting of Elijah riding a chariot, which is a traditional Judeo-Christian symbol denoting how prayer elevates one into heaven.

Grayston has also done yoga and is drawn to meditation, particularly centuries-old forms of Christian meditation being revived by American monks such as Thomas Keating.

One of them is called "centring prayer," and can include Christian versions of Hindu-like mantras, which are words repeated during meditation to focus the mind.

Grayston is surprised the Mustel poll shows many British Columbians don't highlight the spiritual benefits of meditation, given that he believes it does more than provide good health.

Meditation helps a person become in touch with their "innermost self," Grayston says. In Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, he says, the inner self is traditionally considered "a reflection of God" -- and discovering it reminds us we are made in the image of the divine.

In a different vein, Grayston finds it disturbing that men are much less likely to practise any spiritual discipline, including prayer, than women.

Only one B.C. man for every two B.C. women does yoga, the Mustel poll shows. When it comes to meditation or prayer, two men engage in them for every three women.

"I think men are in big trouble in our culture," says Grayston, who helped found Vancouver School of Theology's spiritual direction program.

"Men are drifting. Men are floundering -- vocationally, relationally and spiritually," Grayston says.

"They're not doing spiritual disciplines because they're not disciplined in their personal lives. Men have to be disciplined for their professions, so they value the goof-off time. But I think it takes an adult to follow a spiritual discipline."

MORE THAN JUST RELAXATION

Even though life is becoming higher stress for most British Columbians, Pechet firmly believes yoga, meditation, tai chi and prayer add up to more than clever techniques to relax.

There is something spiritual about a practice that helps us slow down, says the veteran teacher. It's an attempt to create a different culture, she says, in which people can quiet their mind, connect to their body and "live more in the moment."
Pechet believes Eastern disciplines are bringing profound changes to hyper-active North America. That's why she believes when some people make physical fitness the only focus of their yoga, "there's a huge aspect being missed -- at least for me."

Pechet adds that final caveat because she wants to be open-minded, in true West Coast fashion. The best spiritual practices, she suggests, teach people to avoid being doctrinaire, to be respectful of other ways of being and acting.

Pechet doesn't feel it's the role of a teacher to condemn the way certain people might engage in yoga, or any other spiritual discipline.

"After all," she says with a laugh, "I don't want to be a yoga Nazi."

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A multicultural Christmas:
Sir Richard McBride students balance ethnicity with new traditions

Saturday, December 24, 2005

'Tis the season of Christmas trees and Santa Claus expectations inside the old, red brick walls of Sir Richard McBride elementary on East 29th Avenue in Vancouver.

'Tis also the season of Silent Night and sparing a thought for the hungry; of children growing excited about big family dinners, multicoloured lights and piles of gifts.

Just as when I was a kid at Richard McBride in the early 1960s.

Or not.

There are a few differences.

One is that, when I was at McBride, nearly every student was white -- with the exception of two Chinese children (one of whom I had a crush on in Grade 2. Vice versa, I like to think.)

Now, the stately three-storey heritage school, built in 1911 and named in honour of a B.C. premier from the early 1900s, is attended by students who speak at least 22 languages in their homes -- most of them Asian.

McBride is on the untidy front lines of Canada's immigration, language and multicultural policies. Even though four out of five of McBride's 440 students were born in Canada, the vast majority enter kindergarten as English-as-a-second-language students.

Their most common first language is some form of Chinese, spoken in the homes of 172 McBride children.

That's followed by Tagalog, from the Philippines, which is the language used in 66 McBride students' homes. Then comes English (60 homes) Vietnamese (58 homes) Punjabi (33 homes) and Tamil (10 homes).

There are also children whose home languages are Urdu, Japanese, Thai, Persian, Portuguese, Spanish, German, Cambodian, or something else.

McBride -- located in the middle of a pleasantly jumbled middle-class neighbourhood between Fraser and Knight streets, where small, well-kept heritage homes frequently butt against blocky new houses and unkempt ones -- has become one of those urban Canadian public schools that have turned into social laboratories.
McBride has become a living test case, where all the theorizing about multicultural-ism by Canadian and international policy makers, cultural scholars, economists, religious leaders, immigration critics and the politically correct actually comes to a head.

Is it working?

I went to find out how Christmas is marked at McBride compared with when I was a student, thinking it would be a way to check if Canadian-style multiculturalism is proving effective on the ground, or deteriorating into a grand failure.

Could a public school that mixes large cohorts of Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, ancestor-revering and atheist kids pull off living and learning together, without many people somehow ending up irritated or offended?

Christmas is one of those times that can get up people's noses as too commercial, too sentimental, too emotionally demanding, too invasive or too Christian.

But I found a lot of Christmas energy flowing at McBride.

My first discovery was that neither I nor the teachers could uncover a single student who didn't have a Christmas tree at home.

And, despite their mostly Asian ethnic origins, almost every student I interviewed said they would receive at least some gifts, and have some sort of extended family dinner on Christmas Day. When turkey is on the table, they said, it will likely be served with rice, steamed vegetables or curry dishes.

The widespread embracing of elements of Canadian-style Christmas at McBride suggested to me that it's becoming a secular-spiritual festival appreciated by far more than European-rooted Christians.

Most of the predominantly Asian-Canadian students at McBride seemed as intoxicated as I remember most white kids were in my days at the school; giddy at all the good, Christmassy things suddenly flowing their way.

"There's just a different atmosphere at Christmas," said Benjamin Pan, 12, whose non-religious parents immigrated from China.

"There's the Christmas trees and the lights and the food and the gifts, which all make you feel happier."

Standing near one of the two decorated Christmas trees in McBride's hallways, under which were piled hundreds of cans for the Vancouver Food Bank, Pan said he liked at Christmas how "there's all the kindness and giving to less fortunate people, which should be part of any religion."

I don't really have bad memories of my early years at McBride (I left after Grade 3 for North Vancouver), nor do I recall anyone expressing racist beliefs, but the rows of desks were, of course, perfectly straight in my day. The wall colours were more dour.

And I do remember on days that poured rain we were forced to stay for recess inside McBride's high-ceilinged basement. Some teacher with a British accent would stop our noisiness by forcing us to line up against the basement wall for the entire 15 minutes. If we dared moved, he'd rifle a volleyball at us. That was Grade 1.
Nor are the maps of the world at Sir Richard McBride any longer dominated by the colour pink, marking the British Empire, as they were for my generation -- and especially when my mother, aunt and uncle attended the school during the Second World War.

God Save the King and then God Save the Queen were also sung at McBride in those days, and the British-based Canadian Red Ensign was honoured as the nation's flag.

Since then, of course, in the name of secularism and multiculturalism the singing of God Save the Queen has disappeared from McBride, Bible readings are gone -- and the Lord's Prayer is no longer recited each morning.

I can remember earnestly repeating the Christian prayer sitting at our desks. Even though I was from a non-religious family, I took it seriously, and certainly didn't protest it. But I also had little notion of what it was about.

Yet, despite the understandable removal of explicit British and religious ritual from Canadian public schools, vestiges of traditional Christmas, with its sacred underpinnings, are still allowed in 2005 to have their moment at Sir Richard McBride.

When I asked Codie Schultheis, 11, one of the few dozen white students at McBride, what he thought of some secularists' argument that neither Christmas nor Christian symbols should be allowed in any way in public schools, he looked perplexed.

"I don't get offended when the school celebrates Divali [the Hindu-Sikh festival]," retorted the Grade 6 student, who added his family is not particularly religious.

"I love Christmas. I just try to be happy when it's around. I don't know, people who say we shouldn't have Christmas in the school here should go to a school in China. I bet they wouldn't stop celebrating Chinese New Year there because some Canadians were in the school."

Even though I was raised an atheist, I could relate to the way many of McBride's current students, including those who aren't religious, were exuberant about the approach of Christmas.

As my friends and I did in the early 1960s, most of the McBride pupils talked about trying to believe in the magic of Santa Claus and his present-giving as long as they could.

And like my fun-loving mom, who seemed to like all the Christmas fuss as much as my brother and I did, many have parents who get a kick out of the holiday. Twelve-year-old Nathan Dong said his extended family always buys joke gifts, like "a pair of pink shoes for my uncle, who's the biggest, buffest guy in our family."

Then again, one thing that's new at McBride, compared with my era, is that when the season comes, the multiracial school also pulls out the stops to celebrate at least two other major cultural festivals -- Chinese New Year and Divali.

Chinese New Year, with its emphasis on cosmic good fortune, arrives at McBride in January with gusto. Dragon dancers, Chinese lanterns and Chinese games are brought in. And parents, some of whom run restaurants, serve a Chinese lunch, says
principal Sandra Phillips, who has been at McBride for five years.

For Divali, which is a celebration of spiritual light, many girls come to school in October dressed in saris and perform Indian dances at a special assembly. The school's Sikh and Hindu parents also bring sweets and prepare a feast of Indian food, says Phillips, the most multicultural and enthusiastic and least uptight principal I've ever met.

In contrast to many school trustees across North America, Grade 7 student Benjamin Pan didn't think Christmas, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Chinese folk traditions or any other faith should be barred from public schools.

"We should recognize all religions, and not just smear them together," Pan said.

To further help bring an awareness of diversity into the schools, Phillips says Remembrance Day assemblies at McBride are often devoted to appreciating families' historical roots.

As well as following a wide variety of religions, some parents of McBride students are refugees who have escaped war. Many parents, struggling with English, work two jobs, which makes it hard for them to become involved in school life -- where the majority of teachers are white, although there are a number with Indo-Canadian, Chinese and Japanese roots.

At Remembrance Day ceremonies, children often wear traditional ethnic costumes, pepper a map of the world with pins showing their own or their parents' country of origin, and talk about why their parents chose to move to Canada.

To round out the multicultural approach at McBride, Phillips has strived to keep the school's eclectic ethnic and religious mix of kids held together by some shared values.

Wall posters, for instance, extol the global virtues of "optimism," "curiosity," "perseverance" and "honesty."

Another hall sign champions tolerance by forbidding homosexual slurs, including "You're so gay." The poster says such bullying is as bad as racism.

More ecumenical ethics are captured in the lyrics of a song by B.C.'s Holly Arntzen, Soar Like an Eagle, which Arntzen and the principal recently adapted to become McBride's anthem.

The words to Soar Like an Eagle, which are posted in the school gymnasium, call on McBride students to celebrate their differences at the same time they reach for a common goal -- to respect and care for one another.

NO MORE SCROOGE

At McBride, in line with these pluralistic times, what we used to call the annual Christmas concert now goes by the more open-ended title, Winter Concert."

There is no longer a theatrical production about the birth of Jesus Christ, like the one at McBride in the late 1950s in which my older brother played one of the bearded wise men. Nor did the students perform Charles Dickens' British classic, A
Christmas Carol, in which my uncle played Scrooge in the 1940s.

But McBride's kaleidoscopic concert would have been a tough event to sit through for a secular purist; someone who wants to erase all aspects of spirituality from the public square.

Multiculturalism manifested itself at the annual McBride concert in ways that make the head swim -- as cultures bumped up against each other on stage in confusing, endearing, often amusing ways.

Here are some scenes from McBride's Winter Concert:

A dark-skinned boy from the ESL kindergarten class, with his black hair tied in a Sikh head-knot, joined his class in holding a green paper Christmas tree in front of his body. He and his classmates then formed the shape of an evergreen and recited, in palpitating English, The Straight Green Tree.

A tall, ethnic-Asian boy dressed up as a roly-poly Santa Claus to help perform songs like Must Be Santa and I'm Getting Nothin' for Christmas, sometimes accompanied by Asian children wearing green elf hats and gigantic beige elf ears.

A Chinese boy sang a sweet solo rendition of It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.

Two lively Jewish songs were performed, The Dreidl and Hanukkah Tonight (whose lyrics, projected overhead, referred to a "miracle divine") -- even though McBride's teachers don't think there's a Jewish child at the school.

Despite the directions of the Vancouver school board and many others across the continent, the Sikh, Hindu and non-religious kids sang some sacred Christmas carols, including Noel, Noel and Ding Dong Merrily on High (which mentions heaven, angels and steeple bells).

As in my day at McBride, Silent Night was sung.

With its reference to the "holy night" in which Jesus Christ was wondrously born to a virgin mother, the classic carol sounded tender coming from the lips of the diverse singers. One of them, Mahdia Merzed, a Muslim, later said she found Silent Night "sad" but she liked it.

Finally, children from scores of different backgrounds crammed together on stage to sing a rousing rendition of Shine a Light for Peace. For a moment it sounded like a concert from Live 8, the concert series in the G-8 countries and South Africa this year in advance of the G-8 conference in Scotland.

The starry eyed kids were having a ball, enjoying the limelight, their parents' chaotic camera work and their own often-impressive performances -- as well as the sense that Christmas freedom was in the air.

Many of the parents, grandparents and relatives who watched the afternoon concert had taken precious hours away from their jobs. With toddlers in tow, many flowed in and out of the gymnasium with casual, sometimes distracted, abandon.

But many also looked proud and said later they were pleased.
"The children did a beautiful job," said Selva Kanibiah, a Hindu cabinetmaker from Sri Lanka, who said he had no trouble with the sacred songs tinged with Christian and Jewish themes.

"I think about my children and enjoy what they enjoy. My children like it, so I have to celebrate it. We live here now."

Bill Dong, a Chinese-Canadian, welcomed the traditional Christmas elements in McBride's Winter Concert.

"We adhere to the North American tolerant way," he said. "We respect every culture and religion, but also take everything with a grain of salt."

When the Winter Concert was over, McBride's music teacher, Lisa Reimer, who almost single-handedly directed the children through the 90-minute event, looked tired but satisfied.

The number-one reason Reimer says she's determined to include sacred choral music in the Winter Concert is her conviction such carols are of far higher quality than most of the "cheesy" secular tunes usually trotted out at Christmas.

"I use Silent Night because vocally it's a really great teaching piece. It seems to be quite magical for kids. They take it really seriously."

Reimer, 30, says the other reasons she includes a few Christian-rooted carols are that a large proportion of the students seem to be Christian -- and, for those who are not, it's a good thing to learn aspects of the Christian story.

"You don't have to believe it."

The Jewish songs are added to the Winter Concert mix, added Reimer, because they have a strong beat, creative melodies and tell some Jewish history.

"It's a way of honouring Jewish people. The students will meet Jewish people in their lives, so it's a way of celebrating diversity."

Reimer, who doesn't attend any religious institution, says in her five years of teaching music she's slowly learned to be more "tolerant" of bringing religion-rooted songs into public schools.

Even though the Vancouver school board "technically" disallows sacred music in the classroom, Reimer says, she would go to the Supreme Court of Canada to fight for the right to teach sacred music. So would a lot of other teachers.

There is a lot of crummy winter-oriented music currently being written in the U.S. for public schools that want to avoid bringing religious songs into the classroom, says Reimer, who leads her own acclaimed children's choir, called Zing!

"Unfortunately some music teachers are choosing the U.S. material because it's safe and it's secular and it's about snow. It's really scary," she said.

"It's a lot better to honour good quality music that happens to be sacred. That teaches us a lot more about diversity than trying to ignore religion."
SOME TAX THINGY

Sakshi Bali, 8, is Sikh. Her parents are from the Kashmir region of India. With a huge smile, she says she loves Christmas, but her favourite religious holiday is the five days of Diwali.

Still, Bali can capably recite the basic elements of the Christian Christmas story about Jesus's birth in a stable -- far better than I could at her age.

"Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem because there was some sort of tax thingy," Bali said, noting she'd learned some of the story in class, but also elsewhere.

"The wise men visited the stable and people say Jesus had a halo around his head. I sort of like the story of Jesus -- except for the end, when he dies."

It's almost impossible to keep track of the dizzying variety of cultural-spiritual beliefs held by students at McBride.

But the dozen or so children I met at Sir Richard McBride seemed comfortable with celebrating what have become the near-universal aspects of Christian-rooted Christmas, like Santa Claus and Christmas trees.

All four Grade 3s that I interviewed, including Shawn Thai, 8, whose non-religious parents are from Vietnam, said they receive gifts at Christmas and have family dinners -- some modest, some huge, with up to 40 people attending.

At the same time, the students seemed genuinely interested in each others' faiths and beliefs, including when world religions are taught in class.

"It's cool. It's interesting," said Sakshi Bali.

"When someone's against religion, I get bothered," added her chipper Grade 3 friend, Kayashai Jenkins, 8, whose mom is from the Philippines and dad is from New Jersey.

Jenkins sometimes attends Catholic mass. While many of the Chinese and Vietnamese students at McBride don't explicitly practise any faith, except perhaps Asian folk religion and ancestor reverence, most of the Filipino children are Catholic.

Thaddeus Salvo and Justine Felizarta, both 11, are Canadian-Filipino Catholics for whom Christmas is a big deal. They firmly believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, that he came to Earth so they could be saved and that Christmas is a time when angels are especially active in the world.

"There are angels in this neighbourhood," said Felizarta. "Sometimes I feel them following me, as my guardians."

Salvo's family follows many Christmas traditions, including midnight mass. They also write the names of family members on Christmas tree ornaments and recite prayers for the loved ones. As well, the family often stays up late on Christmas Eve playing the Filipino card game Tongix.

A couple of the non-religious ethnic Chinese children I met at McBride were more
lukewarm about Christmas, saying that, even though they may have a Christmas tree and family meal, the holiday wasn't that big a deal in their home.

But none of the children wanted to get rid of Christmas, arguing that no one in their right mind wants to turn down its presents.

"I mean, what kid doesn't like getting clothes or chocolates?" said Wendy Chan, 12, whose parents are from China.

Neha Vershaya, a Grade 7 student who is Hindu, said her family becomes quite involved in this festive season.

Her family marks Christmas by decorating a tree, putting a singing Santa Claus figure in their window and having a big Indian food feast.

The Hindu family also trades Christmas gifts with their next-door neighbours -- who are Chinese.

The funny thing was almost every student I talked to, including those who could be classified as atheists, like me in my youth, had struggled in one way or another with whether to remain convinced by Santa's magic.

Many, like Nathan Dong, 12, described the day they caught their parents in the act of playing Santa. Or they joked that at least they acted like they believed in Santa because they didn't want to pass on his presents.

The Grade 3s were most cautious about answering whether they still believed in Santa Claus, knowing the subject can be controversial at their age -- except, that is for Mahdia Merzed, 8, who was born in Afghanistan.

When Merzed, whose family is Muslim, boldly declared -- several times -- she has never believed in Santa Claus, it caused eight-year-old Sakshi Bali, a Sikh, to laugh.

Bali then urged Merzed not to declare her lack of belief in Santa around really young and more impressionable children.

You've got to be tolerant of other people's beliefs, the Grade 3s eventually agreed -- whether it's a conviction Santa can fly through the sky with reindeer, or something much more adult.

OLD STRICTNESS HAS GONE

If such a thing can be measured across time, the students I met and watched at Sir Richard McBride almost seemed happier, more relaxed, than we did when we attended McBride 40 years ago. The school's atmosphere seems more fluid.

That old British-style strictness is gone.

As my relatives remember, despite the ferocity of battle during the Second World War in Europe and East Asia, there wasn't really much fervent jingoism expressed at the school during those days. But there may have been an unspoken belief among some of the teachers through much of the 1900s that one of the purposes of McBride was to advance British civilization.
It could have been worse. The British heritage did bring Canada, and especially B.C., a lot of good things, like parliamentary democracy and a commitment to individual freedom, basic equality and justice.

But, like a lot of nationalistic cultures of the 20th century, the British ethos may have also given the old McBride a severity and uniformity.

This experimental multicultural era at McBride seems more unpredictable, and more exciting.

And the beauty of the kind of multiculturalism that seems to be happening at Sir Richard McBride at Christmas and throughout the year is that it's not just about acceptance of differences. At its worst, that could lead to a sense of anything goes, to a kind of cultural chaos and fragmentation.

I expect the approach the principal, teachers and most students at McBride are now taking would gladden the hearts and minds of some of the world's more notable multicultural theorists, including Princeton University's Jeffrey Stout, University of B.C.'s Phillip Resnick and McGill University's Charles Taylor.

These philosophers, in their own way, say that multiculturalism, including religious pluralism, can't truly be successful if people of different backgrounds aren't willing to agree on at least some common ethics.

That doesn't mean everyone in Canada, old timer or newcomer, has to celebrate Christmas, which extols universal moral values such as kindness, fellowship and concern for the poor. But it may not hurt.

Without some overarching values, the philosophers say we'll end up with nations divided into self-ghettoized, ethno-religious enclaves. We won't have multiculturalism, but something much more vapid -- serial monoculturalism.

What are some moral principles to which we can all adhere, despite our different ethnicities and religions?

Scholars name some of those values as tolerance, responsible citizenship, individual freedom and democracy.

McBride's principal, Sandra Phillips, wonders if all those terms can't be summed up in the phrase, "mutual respect."

This cluster of ethical principles sound much like the ideals highlighted in the school's theme song, Soar Like an Eagle.

Every student is expected to memorize the lyrics of the rousing anthem, which are posted in giant letters -- alongside the words of O Canada -- above the gym stage, where the annual Winter Concert took place.

The words of Soar Like an Eagle are there to be seen by all the students, teachers and parents who've somehow managed to arrive at McBride elementary from all corners of the planet:

The school's anthem begins:
"We all have our freedom,
share a common aim
We're all different; still we're all the same
Come into our schoolyard, what can you see?
Children who respect each other, caring, sharing, all together."
Then comes the chorus:
"Tell me . . . How do we get there?
Most of us can't fly.
Soar like an eagle, have an open mind.
Rising on the updraft, sun on your wings,
You can see so many things."

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