In a Space Outside the Norm

It’s 1 pm on a Friday afternoon. The sounds for the call to prayer can be heard echoing through the packed room, while people from all walks of life enter the Masjid (Mosque). You find yourself sitting next to a friendly Muslim you’ve seen a few times, while on the other side of you is a child getting ready to pray. Once the prayer is over, everyone gets back to their respective lives. Some people stay, some leave, yet the Masjid is still standing to serve its role not only as a place for worship, but as the centre and source of unity for the Muslim community. This scenario represents the vital role that religious institutions, such as Masjids and schools, play in the lives of the hundreds of thousands of Muslims presently living in Montreal.

Islam is not only a religion, it is a way of life. It places a lot of stress on individual morality and self-improvement, although the needs of society override those of the individual. Religious institutions in Islam are not only important, they are vital to improving the morality associated with religion in society. Thus, when Muslims, who are required to perform daily prayers and to refrain from the use of alcohol and drugs, are placed in a society where these acts defy the norm, they desperately need a way...
In today’s world, one may come to question what role and duty the Church has in a liberal democratic society, and if there is room for the Church in modern day politics at all. Since the Church and political society share the same mission of serving the common good of the people, the Church has a definite right and duty to contribute her social teachings to the political life of society. Throughout history there has been considerable debate about the Church’s role in politics, because of indecisiveness about where the boundaries of religion should lie and “...whether religion is primarily private, public or some uneasy combination of the two.” However, as a result of the “diminishing divide” between religion and politics, the question is not whether religion should influence politics, but “how and when should religion influence politics?” Consequently, I feel that the role of the Church, and of individual Catholics alike, is to take the initiative to form or support human associations that contribute to, and foster, the development of the common good.

However, from the very fact that “the political community and the Church are mutually independent and self-governing” the role that the Church plays in political society should remain indirect, and be excluded from the activities of the political process. If the Church becomes involved in the politics of the state, we face the danger of subordinating the Church’s objectives to political goals. This becomes more evident as religion and politics are coupled too closely in the public realm, which does not result in the “sacralization of politics, but the politicization of religion.” Also, when the Church directly participates in politics, she risks the possibility of obscuring her central message with “the siren song of temporal political power.” Therefore, the Church should concern herself mainly with issues of social justice, not partisan politics. When the Church uses her power to support other human associations, such as faith-based organizations, she can inspire social action to achieve “…the common goals of helping the poor and strengthening the fabric of life.”

Thus, the principal responsibility of the Church in a liberal democratic society is to “identify, clarify, and enhance the deeper structures of justice” in the society by first promoting human development. As John Paul II acknowledged in one of his encyclicals, the Church’s role in the political life of a society is to contribute to its “ethical and social aspect” while remaining within her respective field of discipline. The Church’s objective should not be to seek the “reformations of nations, but the transformation of individuals,” because progress of any kind must commence by “inward moral transformation.”

Moreover, the Church does not influence politics by “arousing moral indignation, but by awakening the individual conscience.” The distinction between the two is a subtle but significant one, because “moral indignation” urges people to criticize others while individual conscience incites people to question themselves. Transforming the hearts of individual Catholics and increasing their participation in community life leads them to take greater responsibility for their actions and for their faith. With an increasing number of individual Catholics questioning their role in political society, many will become instruments of social transformation, demanding more responsibility from themselves and from their organizations in order to serve the common good of society.

—Nina Kim
Nina is a student of political science and international development studies. Her favourite colour is blue.

In relation to the idea of “Religious Institutions”, this drawing of an intergenerational game illustrates how people both make the church, and are the church.

Marcie Gibson
Marcie is a graduate of McGill, still active with the St. Martha’s ecumenical group

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to maintain their identity. This is accomplished primarily through religious institutions, the most important one being the Masjid.

Although today the Montreal Muslim community seems fairly well established with over 25 Masjids in the region, as well as schools and daycares, this was not always the case. In 1965, as a result of petitioning for the recognition of Muslims as a religious community in Quebec, the “Act to incorporate Islamic Center of Quebec – El-Markaz Islami” (Bill 194) was passed. This bill not only recognized the presence of Islam and Muslims in Quebec society, but gave the ICQ (a prominent Masjid in Quebec) “all the rights and powers of belonging to ecclesiastical corporations”. This ensured a solid foundation for the Muslim community to build from, and depicts the importance of organized religion in society. Since then, Muslims in Montreal have had an easier time getting things accomplished, such as establishing prayer spaces on campus, planning large scale events, getting Islamic marriage licenses, and uniting the community as a whole.

Presently in Montreal there are weekly Islamic schools as well as a few full-time Muslim schools. The goal of these institutions is similar: to increase unity among Muslims of all ages and races, to increase their ability to interact with each other despite individual differences, and to ease their learning experience by reducing the temptations around them. The same holds for youth groups, learning circles, Muslim sports leagues, and Muslim student associations within schools. Without these institutions, it becomes difficult for a religion to strengthen its individual members, as well as the bonds between them. This strength leads to a society that will inevitably flourish.

—Aisha Khan
Aisha is in her second year of microbiology and immunology
In 1959 our prime minister in Sri Lanka was a man named Bandaranaike, the father of our current PM. He was bowing to pay his respects to a monk, like we do, when the monk pulled out a revolver and shot him in the stomach. Bandaranaike died, slowly.

Politics. Monks have power in Sri Lanka and they use it partly to defend the majority Buddhist Sinhalese race (me). My dad says Bandaranaike was killed because he was giving too much to the minority Hindu Tamils, but he was still a fairly radical Sinhalese nationalist. I dunno. He messed with the power structure and he got killed. Fairly normal, especially in Sri Lanka, except that the killer was a monk. The funny thing is, that’s almost normal too.

Oh yeah, and it’s not a Buddhist-Hindu thing. In almost every Buddhist temple there’s a Hindu shrine, inside. It’s politics. Religion is one thing. Religious institutions are another. The institution of Buddhism can be corrupted by war and hatred, but Buddhism’s got nothing to do with that.

One more thing, everything I’m saying is just a perspective, and biased and ignorant at that. I don’t recommend judging anyone based on what I say. Personally, I don’t blame the British or anybody. Kingdoms rise and fall and people have to deal with it. The only thing I’m trying to get across is that organized Buddhism in Sri Lanka isn’t Buddhist in the sense that people here use the term. It’s not nice. Because it’s intertwined with our culture you can see all the problems we’ve been having reflected in our religion. It’s like we haven’t slept in 20 years. If religion is our eyes, then they’re bloodshot.

I’m in the car with my parents, driving through Colombo at night. There’s dogs and cows and cyclists on this two lane road. Big trucks bail past us and we almost die every two minutes. Or I feel that way. I can never get used to driving in what’s basically a driveway full of animals. I’m asking my dad if there’s anything good about religious institutions and he says no. We pass the prison on the way home. There’s a statue of the Buddha out front.

It’s tomorrow and I’m walking through the temple near my aunt’s house. I call her Chuti Amma, little mother. It’s beautiful here—so green and alive. A tree has grown, strangely, so that it’s roots curve and wind up to form a gnarly arch. We walk under it to a little stupa where monks are ordained. It’s quiet and nice. We bow to them.

Sri Lanka has preserved one version of the Buddha’s teachings, the Thervada, derived from the oldest known record available. I likes. It’s simple and helps me live my life and be nice to people. I have access to these teachings because the religious institution of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has preserved them for over two thousand years. My Chuti
Amma has a temple to go to. Monks have food to eat and support for their efforts to awaken. I’ve met some monks who’ve come out of this system that are absolutely radiant. These things are good. These things come from the religious institution.

The institution here is a loosely organized group of monks. There’s no Dalai Lama or nothing, just a few powerful sects that can ordain monks. Monks are ordained young, eleven or twelve. It’s horoscope based, not like these kids decide. Lots of kids whose horoscopes indicate that they’ll bring misfortune to the family are sent to the monastery. That horoscope stuff is real here. Monks also control temple property, and some try to ordain their illegitimate kids. The monk ‘round my Grandma’s house was like that—keeping up with a woman and not ordaining any new monks, ensuring that the land would be passed down to his son. In the airport, seats are reserved for clergy. In stores monks always go to the front of the line. Which is cool, and respectful. It just begs the question: what are monks doing in stores?

You see, in Sri Lanka you find monks in all sorts of places one wouldn’t expect them. A monk serves as a member of parliament, for example. There was a monk in this psycho truck in front of us, cutting people off and driving like an insane Sri Lankan, which is the rough equivalent of a drunk, blind, epileptic Canadian. He had a driver, like the upper middle class does here, but where was he going in such a hurry? Probably going to some formal function, like a funeral or alms-giving, though it was most likely a cabinet meeting. Monks officiate lots of cultural things. Some are in the monastic life, but most are not.

Buddhism is part of a larger Sinhalese culture. Sinhalese culture involves way more than just Buddhist thought. Our culture involves rice, and fresh fish, and lots of chili pepper. Our culture also involves getting in mad fights with people that got off the boat a little later than 500 BC. Seeing Sri Lankan Buddhism as a part of this culture explains why it acts so, um, un-Buddhist. Some of the most racist Sinhalese are monks, and monks are some of the most vocal opponents of ending the war. Also, if you ask anyone on the street they’ll probably say they’re Buddhist, but in 1983 we rioted and killed hundreds of Tamils in the streets. Furthermore, our Buddhist government leaked voter rolls to the rioters so that they could find Tamil households and kill the right people. I’m no expert, but I don’t think that qualifies as accepting behavior.

The Buddhism I know and try to practice is in many ways so removed from the practice in Sri Lanka that I get confused when people talk about how Buddhists don’t mess with anybody. We’re not any closer to enlightenment than anybody else. We happen to preserve some knowledge, but that doesn’t mean that we use the knowledge. In reality, we’re a crazy, murderous, and cruel people. We’re also friendly and we smile a lot. Buddhism in Sri Lanka reflects all of these contradictions.

—Indi Samarajiva

Indi was born in Vancouver, moved to Sri Lanka ’til he was 5, grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and lives in Montreal. His family moved back to Sri Lanka in August 2002.

Sarah Rich

Power of the Dance

Two men of distinction within their tribes meet on the literally lacklustre dance floor of an establishment in a land far far from their home. They are defending an individual pride, but in the same army, on the same team. Consider it a pre-season scrimmage, a practice, war games, part of training. They have had difficulty finding a worthy adversary on their own territory, and they both live for one thing—they rarely acknowledge it even to themselves—the power of the dance, the power it has over them. The way that they feel that the only time they ever accomplish anything, the only time they are ever worth anything, is on that splintery dance floor with the attention of that beautiful man on him and his attention on himself and only him as well. These men have adorned themselves for war, but they adorn themselves on all levels for war every day. And as removed as this place might seem from the enemy at the gates, this is the most substantial training they will get for the struggle. And somewhere they know it. This is all one life. Everything is everything else. Learn this and know this and no moment of your life will ever be wasted. Two breakdancers.

—Sarah Rich
Confessions of a Bi-spiritual

Our society is obsessed with boundaries, with demarcating the boundaries of identity. Anyone with a dual or multiple identity can testify to this—those who are mixed-race, for example. Society has a difficult time dealing with people who don’t fit into its categories, people who don’t, or refuse to, conform to our dual gender system of male and female are particularly penalized.

What about people who are bi-spiritual, those who feel equally at home in two or more spiritual communities? Most, if not all, of the contributions to *Radix* contain only one religious symbol at the end of each article. As someone who identifies as both Quaker and Bahá’í, I often find it difficult to answer the question “What religion are you?” It is difficult enough to explain Quakerism or the Bahá’í faith on its own, let alone to attempt an explanation of how my heart embraces both! There are many aspects of my identity that embrace dualism—I am Eurasian, bi-national, and bi-cultural—but to be bi-spiritual has to enter into popular discourse.

Most religions expect complete, exclusive devotion. The notion that your heart and soul may be ‘divided’, would likely horrify many religious leaders. But instead of being ‘divided’, I see being bi-spiritual as deriving spiritual nourishment from multiple sources. For me, Quakerism (within the Christian tradition) and the Bahá’í faith (originating in Iran), both respond to my spiritual needs. Both have opened doors for me, and both promise continued spiritual growth. I am also drawn to, and instinctively practise, concepts from Buddhism and Hinduism.

While I pride myself on my openness, I have also struggled with the issue of identification. How can I consider myself both Bahá’í and Quaker? I have felt guilty, as if participating in both somehow diluted my commitment to each one on its own. I realized that my internal struggle was being fed by a society that, above all, wants us to choose, to know. To transcend or straddle boundaries makes people feel uncomfortable, for then we become difficult to categorize.

All my life I have yearned to belong, to truly belong to a community. Everywhere I’ve gone, I’ve always felt somewhat on the margins, never a full or complete member of any group. I am only now beginning to embrace duality and multiplicity as a source of strength, despite the lingering pain of being mixed and feeling ‘incomplete’ wherever I’ve gone.

Being mixed means I can travel with ease between different ethnic communities; being bi-cultural means I am equally familiar with European and North American culture. Being bi-spiritual means I am open to all faiths—I can converse with God, connect with Her, regardless of the institutional religious environment. I have felt a ‘spiritual high’ after Durga Puga in a Hindu temple, after Quaker Meeting for Worship, and after the Bahá’í nineteen-day feast.

It angers and frustrates me that religions like to know they ‘own’ our spirits—that our spirits belong to them exclusively. I say “no” to being spiritually boxed and labelled! My soul wants to be free to explore, and feed from, multiple sources. Thus, I wear a necklace with the Goddess Tara on it, leading many people to ask me if I am Buddhist or Hindu. It was a gift from the woman at the Japanese Buddhist centre where I meditated in London, U.K. In my room, one can see the influence of diverse faiths and cultures. I derive strength from the writings of multiple faiths—from Sufi poetry to Biblical quotes. Many of you likely do the same. The key difference, I suspect, is that you still clearly identify with one religion in particular.

I feel society needs to take into account, and accommodate, its growing population of people who don’t fit into one box—whether that is the box of religion or the box of ethnicity. I am tired of ticking ‘other’ on questionnaires and census forms. I feel this dehumanizes me and renders my uniqueness invisible. I am not ‘other’, I am me!

When it comes to religion, the overwhelming assumption that one will identify only with one religion leaves me feeling like I lack certainty, and devalues my form of spirituality. I find it ironic that despite the profusion of inter-faith activity and growing inter-faith cooperation, the boundaries of the faiths themselves remain clear-cut. Inter-faith does not mean multi-faith. The recognition of the essential commonality of most religion has yet to have practical implications in terms of worship. I find it difficult combining my Quaker and Bahá’í worship—and constantly feel the two in tension.

I have realized that to embrace a dual identity is not easy in our culture. It requires great resiliency and strength, and the ability to stand both within and outside the circle. Fortunately, when my heart turns to God, it does not matter how I identify. I can simply be me.

—Kathryn Lum, Honours Anthropology
*Kathryn considers herself to be a spiritual gypsy, and in travel finds herself face to face with her deepest fears and challenges*
Religion and a Liberal Society
Religious Pluralism and Public Policy Conference—Beatty Lectures, Oct 9th and 10th 2002

Our present society is the first of its kind, its population embodies widespread skepticism regarding the concept of religion. Every other civilization studied has had some kind of common belief. But what religion was able to provide in the past has proven to be no longer relevant for many.

How then, does a society function without a common behavioral code—without a common religion? Thinkers all over the world have tried to answer this with the idea of a global ethic. What would a global ethic look like if it were to emerge?

William Galston, the guest of honour on the night of the ninth, tackled this subject with grace. His argument rests on the foundation that a common good does exist, but a comprehensive good does not. He believes that all religions should be recognized by the state, but the state’s participation in issues of faith should end there. The gnome-like Galston began by stating that morality in public policy does not necessitate that the public have a belief in a god-figure. Indeed, he reports that half of the American population does not think of morality in a holy sense.

Instead, Galston suggests that the role of the state is to create an all-inclusive basis of legitimization, and let the faith groups deal with their own practices and membership. Religion is not just human flourishing and salvation, but also action and authority. The focus of the governing body should be on the fundamental liberty that must be accorded to all in a liberal democracy: a free conscience.

The state’s job would be to make room for many traditions, rather than forbidding anything other than Christianity; a general recognition instead of more structuring. Democracies in a liberal society should assume the religious/moral nature of its participants, and make a place for this, in all its diversity, instead of making restrictions. The state’s role should be affirmative, and legitimate authority should always be multiple.

A democratic system also needs outside reference points to function, to rely on something other than itself. Taking religious texts completely out of democracies would leave it with no other reference points. While politics are valuable instrumentally, they are less valuable meaningfully; therefore, the state should accept all religions, but let ultimate acceptance fall to the people themselves. This results in a ‘legitimized freedom’, which is liberalism at its core.

On the evening of the tenth, Father Richard Neuhaus took a different angle at a similar problem. In his opinion, we are currently in a struggle between spirituality and secularization (as opposed to a struggle between Christianity and Islam). The processes of modernization and secularization, or more specifically, capitalism and secularization, are connected. Capitalism upholds a liberalism of individuality. Each is entitled to one’s own view, and consequently, the system leaves no room for recognizing a “higher law”. Therefore, widespread liberalism is not conducive to keeping a religious ethic (“acts of faith”) alive.

Neuhaus makes a critical distinction between an ‘individual’, which is a term used without reference to the culture around the individual, while a ‘person’ is a small part of a larger entity. A society should be seen as a collection of persons, rather than of individuals. The idea that we are inherently dependent on each other will facilitate the recognition of different moral structures. If this last is achieved, the state will be able to act as a prism, reflecting all, but absorbing none.

In most areas of our lives we would like to have some continuity, and at best, complete continuity. Should the area of behavioral ethics be intertwined with religious doctrines? What about those who don’t believe in a religion, but who do live a moral life according to their own estimations? Perhaps this is not a question of should or should not, but can or cannot. What’s your opinion? Send your response to radix@yours.com

—Sheila McKnight

Book Review: Sexual Secrets

It’s the book that your esoteric, once-hippie parents have been hiding under their bed for years, whose pictures satisfied your curious mind, but whose text may have seemed a bit... boorring.

Sexual Secrets is a book that explores sexuality through a medium of spirituality, as opposed to the many sex books out there that can only offer technique. In fact, when flipping through the text, I began to think, "um, so... where’s the sex?" Aside from the 600+ kama sutra flavored illustrations, the book itself doesn’t indulge in physical pleasure nearly as much as it explores the other overlooked side of sex: the soul.

Relying heavily on Eastern philosophies and religions Sexual Secrets explains, in thorough detail, the significance of every organ, chakra, and neurotransmitter of the human body, how it works, why it’s there, and how it relates to passion.

From delving into old Eastern myths, to diagramming the nerve endings that can be found in the sole of the foot, to explaining the many different types of "lingam" and "yoni," Sexual Secrets tells all. But don’t expect to find a tiny little book thoroughly diagramming the male and female genitalia with arrows pointing to where to touch and what to do with what. The title itself is a bit of a misnomer, because this isn’t so much a book about sex as it is about the spirituality of people and how their energies intermingle when they come together in the act of lovemaking.

Although the 334-page book occasionally refers to straightforward, concrete technique, its real wisdom lies in its guide to controlling and channeling intangible spiritual energy in a way that is optimal for lovers. The foreword of the 20th Anniversary edition proudly proclaims: "Sexual Secrets has been the spiritual person’s guide to celestial copulation. Flesh meets faith inside this book and each is the better for it." Sexual Secrets isn’t just about increasing sexual consciousness, but about celebrating the incredible, spiritual powerhouse that is the temple of the human body.

—Erykah Zelfand

Erykah is a Zen garden enthusiast who drinks too much yogi tea. It’s unclear whether she’s in Arts U0 or UI

Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy
By Nik Douglas and Penny Slinger
Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1979