Editor’s Message
Eric Bolo, Co-Editor

A memorable scene of South Park, episode 17, takes place in a drug education class. Intent on informing his students on the dangers of drug use, elementary school principal Mackay passes marijuana around the classroom, but never gets it back. The kids, of course, know all about marijuana—this high-inducing, munchies-giving drug. And they have decided to keep it for themselves.

Why is it so difficult to discuss drugs without falling into extremes? To some like Principal Mackay, drugs are a ticket to depravation. Horrified by the prospect of kids “getting high”, he tells them to “Just Say No.” Drugs are bad...mmkay? Eric Cartman and his classmates, on the other side, know a lot more about drugs than their moralizing principal suspects. They see in drugs an easy way to transgress the rules, so the principal’s propaganda hardly dissuades them.

Not that the pro-drug movement is free of propaganda, either. Think of Timothy Leary, anthropologist turned LSD guru, who in the 1960s encouraged students to “turn on, tune in, drop out”... and take lots of drugs. To Leary, LSD was no less than a tool of religious enlightenment, a spiritual aide allowing the individual to shed pre-conceived ideas about reality. Indeed, LSD users often report a burst of creativity, enhanced sensory perception, and the feeling of “seeing the world with new eyes”.

But Leary ignored the drug’s potential to trigger latent mental problems like schizophrenia. As reports of LSD-induced suicides and mental breakdowns spread across the U.S., his promise that LSD would bring heaven on earth met with growing skepticism. In retrospect, Leary’s radicalism only reinforced mainstream society’s fear of mind-bending substances. By the 1980s, the naive pro-drug campaigns of the sixties had all but vanished. Replacing them was Nancy Reagan’s no less naive anti-drug slogan - “Just Say No”.

Perhaps the drug debate is so polarized because it touches upon our core beliefs. For example, some may refuse to take drugs because we think that using chemicals that transform the mind is “unnatural”. Others will claim, however, that taking drugs must therefore be embedded in human nature.

How does our world-view orient our attitude towards drugs? This question is the theme of the present issue. Enjoy!

RADIX ONLINE

Check it out on our uber-cool blog:
mcgillradix.blogspot.com
Drugs and Other Mind-Altering Things
Katie Chowdbury

I grew up in Utah, and though I was never a Latter Day Saint, the values of the Mormon Church shaped my view of drugs. The society there encouraged me to “say no” not just to marijuana and cocaine or even tobacco, but to alcohol and caffeine as well.

When my family made the move to Ohio by car, and billboards advertising cigarettes and beer rose up to greet us, I thought we were entering the gates of hell. Even in university, I rarely drank alcohol, and I have never tried smoking. Now, as a Muslim who does not drink alcohol, I still feel guilty sipping coffee.

In his 1981 book, The Marriage of the Sun and Moon, Dr. Andrew Weil explores drugs and their effects first-hand. He finds that, surprisingly, the effect a drug has on a person can depend less on its chemical composition and more on the expectations of the user and his or her social and psychological state. Plants used occasionally by indigenous South Americans to boost energy and mood become dangerous and addictive substances in an isolated and depressed city-dweller.

Coffee makes my friends more alert but it makes my heart thump painfully and my arms feel like they are separating from and floating in front of my body. I expect caffeine to be a dangerous drug, and it is.

As a Muslim who can’t even take Aleve pain reliever without feeling like I’m floating, I’m not interested in the implications of Dr. Weil’s findings for the future of the recreational and spiritual use of illicit substances. I find his work interesting for a quite different reason: if psychological state and expectations can have such a drastic effect on one’s experience, then why use drugs at all?

It was my fourth year of university, and for a class, I had been studying the way Hindu Vedantic philosophy relates to the teachings of Jesus. I was at my desk, contemplating and testing out these ideas of unity and love for the world for a little while, when I looked up and out the window. A pigeon was flying there, and suddenly, I was flying, too. I was the pigeon and the pigeon was me. I had always wanted the experience of flying, and now I was doing it!

The experience lasted only a few seconds, but was fulfilling and spiritually uplifting. On another occasion, I was lying in a sleeping bag on the floor while visiting my aunt and uncle. It was a hot Maine night, and I had to choose between unzipping the down bag and being eaten by mosquitoes all night, or covering myself and overheating. I chose the heat. As I lay awake, I began to notice shapes moving in my vision. They were there whether my eyes were open or closed. Simple shapes, but what struck me was their tangible quality; I felt I could feel and touch their three-dimensional nature, even though I was only seeing them. Soon, I began to analyze them, trying to figure out what was making me see and feel these things. As soon as my thoughts took over, the shapes faded and disappeared, and I couldn’t get them back.

I have seen people enter states of deep stillness through meditation, of ecstatic joy through Sufi dhikr chanting; I have seen healing through energy transfer and the laying on of hands; I have seen calm and hope and love descend in troubled times because of unwavering faith.

There is more mystery in the universe and in our own selves than we could unravel in a lifetime. I choose not to use drugs, but I am liberally experimenting with the very real substances of hope and positive thinking and prayer. Results are not instantaneous, and rituals such as fasting and chanting and praying sometimes take time to establish themselves in my world and in my psyche. I am paving a road that I hope will lead to an experience of love and peace and God. Sometimes the road dead ends, and sometimes I fall through a trap door into the wonder of the moment. I can’t control the outcome, but I must make an effort. What magic to water the seeds of experience! It sometimes takes patience, sometimes luck, but even we non-drug-users can enter the realms of altered consciousness.
Chaplain’s Corner: Manjit Singh

Eric Bolo

Manjit Singh is a volunteer Sikh chaplain at McGill and Director of the McGill chaplaincy. Born in India, Mr. Singh traveled to Canada in 1961 to earn a degree from the Western Ontario Business School. In 1963 he moved to Montreal, where he currently resides. Mr. Singh has been involved in interfaith dialogue for twenty five years, and is now President of the Interfaith Council of Montreal. He teaches a three credit elective course on Sikhism at the McGill Faculty of Religious Studies.

Radix-How did you become a chaplain?
Manjit Singh- That is an interesting story. In 1998, at an interfaith meeting, I have been involved in interfaith work for twenty five years, I met with the then Roman Catholic chaplain at McGill, who was also the director of the Newman Catholic Center. He came to me and asked if we could have a private conversation. I said “sure”. Then, he told me about a McGill student, a Sikh girl whose friend had recently died in a car accident. She had been coming to the catholic chaplain for guidance to cope with her loss of a dear friend. The priest had tried in vain to look for a Sikh spiritual leader in the McGill community to help the girl. “Are there no Sikh priests?” he asked. “There is no ordained priesthood in Sikhism,” I answered. I assured him that I would be happy to speak to the girl as a community elder. The priest gave me her name and phone number after seeking her consent, and I called her. Soon after this, I called the director of the Newman Center to express my desire to serve as a Sikh community elder at McGill. I went through all the formalities for becoming a chaplain - contacting the administration, meeting with chaplains, sending qualifications letters. I was appointed Sikh chaplain by the Dean of Student Services in 1999. Three years ago, I was nominated director of the Chaplaincy.

R.- Was your experience helping that Sikh student what made you decide to become a chaplain?
Manjit Singh- At the time, many of my friends had kids at McGill. Whenever I visited their homes, I tried to converse with them. I realized that they were not up-to-date on their heritage, their culture, their religion. I had been trying to get these young people motivated in learning more about their heritage. When I became a chaplain, they suddenly got interested. I started organizing regular meetings to get them back in touch with their spiritual roots.

R.- You said there was no ordained priesthood in Sikhism...
Manjit Singh- That is correct. In fact, when Sikhism was founded five hundred years ago, it was very much “anti-establishment.” At that time, something very similar to what happened to Christianity with Martin Luther occurred in India. Spiritual leaders began to question religious authority, realizing that nobody has a monopoly over spiritual Truth.

R.- And yet, as a McGill chaplain, you do embody some sort of spiritual authority. Does that ever conflict with your anti-clerical views?
Manjit Singh- Not at all. I follow the Sikh beliefs, and I am very much at ease with those beliefs. I don’t try to impose my views on anybody. I don’t interfere with other religious paths. As director of the chaplaincy, my role is mostly administrative. I don’t tell other chaplains what to do or how to do it.

R.- You said you don’t interfere with other religions represented in the chaplaincy. But do you ever have discussions about the commonalities and differences between your respective religions?
Manjit Singh- No. I mean, that is not our role in the chaplaincy; we are not here to debate among chaplains. Our role is to provide a service to students. Sure, we may have informal one-on-one discussions about this, but that’s all.

R.- What about the promotion of interfaith dialogue among students?
Manjit Singh- Not so long ago I started a program called “My neighbor’s faith”. Every month, we bring students from various backgrounds to visit a place of worship. The goal is to give students a direct experience of religious practices in other communities. Two weeks ago, we went to a mosque - 45 students came, it was very successful. The next event will be at the Chabad House; we will spend the evening with the Rabbi, then we will eat together which is usually how we conclude these events.

The idea is to give you a direct experience of other faith’s practices. I could talk a lot about what Sikhism is, but if you really want to know what we’re about, you should come to the Gurdwara -that is our place of worship- and see with your own eyes. That would be a much more effective way to help you understand.

R.- Tell me a little bit about Sikhism...
Manjit Singh- Ten gurus. The founding guru, Guru Nanak, had his revelation
had his revelation in 1499. Nine human gurus followed him, one at a time. But when the disciples of the tenth guru, who was dying, asked him who would be his successor, he replied “there will be no more human Guru. From now on your Scripture will be your Guru.” So now, in Sikhism, the Scripture itself enjoys the status of Guru. This dates back to 1708.  

Before I say more about the Scripture, you should know that it is all poetry. There are no stories of any kind in the Scripture, only poems. These poems ask the fundamental questions “Who is God?”, “How do you get connected with God?”, “How should we as human beings conduct our lives?”  

The bulk of the Scripture was compiled by fifth Guru in 1604. As it is now, the Scripture comprises the writings of the first five and the ninth Guru, plus the writings of Muslim, Hindu and Sufi thinkers and mystics. In fact, about 15% of the Scripture contains writings by non-Sikhs! This illustrates the Sikh belief that no one has a monopoly over spiritual truth. The non-Sikh writings were included in the Scripture because they took a converging approach to leading a moral and ethical life. People of other religious traditions have valuable things to say. Sikhism does not say “the Sikh way of life is the best way of life.”

R.- The truth is the Truth, no matter where it comes from. Is that, in a nutshell, the Sikh approach to the spiritual Search?

Manjit Singh- Let me give you an example. When our founder, Guru Nanak, had his revelation in 1499, he waded into a river and disappeared for three days. Some people thought he had drowned. When he finally reappeared, he declared: “there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, whose religion shall I follow? I shall follow God’s path, because God has no religion.” You can go up the mountain whichever way you want, north, south, east, or west. It doesn’t matter. Sikh teaching emphasizes that what matters is to abide by the Truth and “walk the talk”, not only “talk the talk.” Guru Nanak said “the Truth is high, but higher still is Truthful Living”.

R.- What did Guru Nanak mean by “there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim”?

Manjit Singh- He meant that “Hindu” and “Muslim” are just name tags. Deep down, we are all part of His/Her creation. Therefore, no one should claim a preferred linkage with the creator. Hence, there is complete equality for all in the eyes of the creator.

R.- The previous issue of Radix was “all about food”. This time it’s “all about drugs”. What is the position of Sikhism on consumption?

Manjit Singh- As far as food is concerned, there are no specific dietary restrictions in Sikhism. The Sikh view is that you should look on your body as God’s gift. Don’t eat or drink anything that is harmful to you. There is no fasting in Sikhism, either. If you think that pain or hunger will make you more holy, you’re wrong. What makes you holy is how you act in this world.

R.- What about drugs?

Manit Singh- The tenth Guru ordained that the Sikh shall not smoke. The observation was that tobacco was addictive, and addiction makes you lose self-control. One should refrain from consuming anything that makes you lose self-control and common sense.

R.- Was there tobacco in late seventeenth-century India?

Manjit Singh- Yes. The East India Company was founded in 1625 by the British. Europeans introduced tobacco to India.

R.- Did the Guru’s ordinance also target marijuana consumption? I have read that some Indian yogis or “sadhus” smoke marijuana as a part of their ascetic spiritual practices?

Manjit Singh- Yes, that certainly played a role. Sikhism prohibits any kind of substance abuse. In real life, of course, we all take liberties—more so in contemporary society where everyone believes in unlimited freedom. Some Sikhs drink, for instance. Tobacco smoking is still shunned, though. There’s a funny anecdote about this, actually. When Allan Rock was the federal Health Minister [1997-2002], he ordered a survey on tobacco use across Canada. The preliminary report showed that B.C. had by far the lowest rate of cigarette smoking in the country. Intrigued, Allan Rock asked his cabinet colleague from Vancouver why he thought B.C. had such a good record. He answered, “A good 10 to 15% of the B.C. population are Sikhs who don’t smoke.”

R.- From what you said, it seems that the golden rule in Sikhism is to avoid consuming what is harmful to oneself. But what about our duties towards other living beings? For example, some people abstain from eating meat not because they think it is harmful for them, but because they think that eating meat violates animal rights, or because livestock production contributes to global warming...

Manjit Singh- Many Sikh are vegetarians, but not all. Meat eating is not a taboo in Sikhism. The important thing is to strive to be responsible and follow common sense. Sikh gurus, especially the first Guru, are known for emphasizing logic and common sense in all matters. To give you an example, when Guru Nanak was asked whether male circumcision was advisable, he said: “Do you believe that God is your creator? Now, if God wanted you to be circumcised, you would have been born so.” It makes sense!
A Visit to the Mosque
Celeste Pang

Celeste Pang visited the Assunah Mosque of Montreal in December, 2009. The visit was organized by the chaplaincy office as part of “My Neighbor’s faith”, a program to promote inter-faith understanding by bringing people to various places of worship. Next event: visit to the Chabad House, March 2 at 5:30. Don’t hesitate!

Last month the McGill chaplaincy office organized a trip to the Assunah mosque. Upon arrival, we were asked to take off our shoes and were shown into the main part of the building. We entered a large room (usually reserved for women) with white walls and carpeted floor. The director of the mosque, also a lecturer at the University of Montreal, had prepared a brief introduction to Islam - its history, the beliefs associated with it, and what it represents to its followers. Upon the call to prayer we entered another room in which men were standing while the imam was reciting the prayers.

I’m supposed to take my shoes off? Am I supposed to cover my head? How ignorant will I sound if I ask this question? Learning about another faith is a challenge in more than one way. There is, of course, “deep” learning, learning about an entire worldview - a slow process which one can hardly go through in an hour and a half. But there is also mundane learning that comes with observing other people’s every day life - how people choose to display and live their beliefs, their ideals, and their faith.

Did you know there is a multiple step formula for figuring out how to apply old rules to new ethical questions? That the carpet is arranged so people are aligned facing Mecca? Perhaps this is not new knowledge to everyone, but there are so many things to know, to understand, that ignorance can only be slowly overcome.

That being said, one has to start somewhere, and this visit was a good starting point. It gave us the opportunity to catch an inside glimpse of another community. As interesting as it may be to sit on a couch at home reading about another faith, the experience of visiting a place of worship is incomparable. I would encourage everyone to explore different communities, cultures and faiths through real-life, physical exploration. Get out there on a dark and freezing cold night and hop on a bus! Walk in and ask questions. It’s worth it.

WRITE FOR RADIX!
Radix is McGill’s Spirituality Magazine. Every two months or so, we publish student-written articles on religious, spiritual and philosophical matters. Each issue also features the chaplain’s corner, a piece of wisdom from a McGill chaplain. Regardless of your religious background or spiritual inclinations, Radix is made for you, by you. Here, you can discuss anything from God to Nietzsche to the spiritually elevating properties of peanuts. So take a deep breath, and let pen and paper, or keyboard and fingers, meet.

NEXT THEME: THY NEIGHBOR’S FAITH
Is religion the wellspring of peace and brotherhood, or the source of all conflicts? How to live one’s own faith, or lack thereof, while respecting other faiths? In the face of religious fundamentalism, intolerant secularism and the “culture wars”, these are compelling questions.
Share your wisdom and experience. Write for Radix.
Deadline: March 4th. Send your submissions to radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca
Visit to Chabad House

Part of the Year-Long
“My Neighbour’s Faith” Series

Chabad House
3429 Peet Street, Montreal
(between Shebrooke & Dr Penfield)
Monday, March 02, 2009
5:30-7:30 p.m.

Please meet at the Chabad House at 5:30pm. Q&A and a discussion session will proceed until 6:30. The evening will close with a traditional Jewish dinner. All are welcome!

Join us to learn about your neighbours’ religion, ask questions and make new friends while we share a free dinner (vegetarian and Kosher) together!

Montreal Zen Poetry Festival
FORGET THE WORDS!

When: March 6-8
Where: downtown + plateau

Featured: David Hinton on Chinese Poetry Culture at the faculty club, Zen monk and Mcgill prof Victor Sogen Hori on Poetry: Memory and Dharma, and many others...

More information @ montrealzenpoetryfestival.ca

Radix is produced by McGill students for McGill students, with support from McGill Chaplaincy Services. The views expressed are those of our contributors and are not necessarily shared by Chaplaincy.

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Email us if you would like to be added to our mailing list. Also, we’d love your ideas and feedback. Email address: radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca
St. Martha’s in the Basement
McGill Ecumenical Chaplaincy’s St. Martha’s shares a weekly informal worship and discussion, followed by a vegetarian supper. It is a welcoming place to form meaningful friendships, explore faith in an inclusive way, and bring sacredness to our lives. Friends of Christians very welcome.
Thursdays from 5-7pm in the basement of the United Theological College, 3521 University.
For details call: 398-4104.

Share a HOT VEGAN LUNCH at the RABBIT HOLE CAFÉ, a Collective Vegetarian Kitchen
3625 Aylmer, downstairs Fridays, 1-4 pm
Donations of $1 or a non-perishable food item are appreciated.

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Sikh Chaplaincy Open Meeting
Social get-togethers
Newman Centre, 3484 Peel
Contact Manjit Singh, Chaplain
manjit.singh@mcgill.ca

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Hillel House
Attention, Jewish students and friends! Discussions on Jewish topics, Jewish feminist movement, social events, “ask a rabbi,” “Ghetto Shul,” Torah study, dating services, message boards, and much more!!!
3460 Stanley Street
(Hillel library)
845-9171
rabbihillel@hillel.ca
www.hillel.ca

Montreal Diocesan Theological College
3473 University Ave.
Daily Christian worship—all are welcome!
Morning Prayer, Mon.-Thurs.: 8:00 am
Evening Prayer, Mon.-Thurs.: 4:30 pm
Eucharist Wed., Fri. 7:30 am (followed by lunch), Fri., 7:30 am
All are welcome!

Volunteers needed!
The Yellow Door Elderly Project is seeking volunteers to work with seniors living in and around the McGill Ghetto. No major time commitment required—flexible hours, just a couple of hours per month! Great opportunity to contribute to community spirit.
If you would like to become a Yellow Door volunteer call 398-6243 or email: elderlyproject@hotmail.com

The Montreal Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) welcomes all for silent worship at 11 am every Sunday at the Greene Centre in Westmount (1090 Greene). Directions are on our website. http://montreal.quaker.ca

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Note: Services marked are only available during the school year.