

Belief, Bias, Barriers? RADIX
McGill's Spirituality Magazine



Editor's Message

Joy Ding Co-Editor

We all grow up influenced by our environments and surroundings. Our families, friends and local communities condition our thought patterns and shape our worldviews. These worldviews, in turn, can be largely influenced by religion and traditional morality.

As individuals coming from different communities, with different mentalities and worldviews, we gather here at McGill University and meet on common ground: academia. But we need more than just academia, we need to find meaning in what we're doing, feel inspired, engaged and gain a deeper understanding of the world around us. Part of what we need is dialogue, which can take the form of discussions and debates about issues that are important to us and may be deeply tied to our identities. Sometimes these issues could be controversial or taboo. Take the deep rooted history of the conflicts in the Middle East. During the recent conflict between Israel and Gaza, I found no good place to openly talk to others about what I was feeling, to share my feelings, thoughts and confusions and to hear from others who have different perspectives. I yearned for a venue where people with different worldviews and opinions could share their thoughts with the intention of understanding each other and focusing our energies in finding a solution.

Part of me understands there are deeply rooted issues that remain buried under the weight of bias and prejudice. But another part of me hopes that this weight could be lifted over time, if everyone aspires to understanding the other perspective, rather than to follow the long-trodden path of denying other views. Without this aspiration, I am not sure we will ever come to a desirable solution that will be embraced by everyone.

My hope is that Radix can contribute to creating the space for understanding, both on paper and through Radix events, where everyone is welcome to share their views, beliefs and opinions in a spirit of respect and mutual understanding. I believe that fresh perspectives will sprout only from the rich soil of dialogue.

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RADIX ONLINE

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mcgillradix.blogspot.com

Standing at Cultural Crossroads: the Catholic Church in China

Simca Simpson, Co-Editor

南堂

Yang Tingyun, known as one of the three pillars of Chinese Catholicism once wrote in his work, *Light Emitted by Heaven*: "A spiritual nature is God's gift to man, and it is the greatest gift

of all, ... benevolence, righteousness, social etiquette, and wisdom (the four Confucianist virtues) are all indeed of this nature. These things that God has given us are what we've had all along. The Bible calls it morality and Confucius calls it conscience."

As I approach the entrance of Beijing's 南堂 South Cathedral, known officially as the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, I cannot help but ponder the long and complicated history of the Catholicism or天主教 (Lord of Heaven Religion) that played out on its very site. The Cathedral's walled courtyard is a layer of tranquility between the devotion of the Holy Mass and the outside world. This refuge, whose famed entryway once read "Respect the Teachings of the Way of Heaven" is most easily recognizable as a symbol of European religious imperialism. Its architecture unabashedly declares its European origins, as do the statues of the country's famed Jesuit evangelist St. Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci. But, within this sacred space it is neither the grandeur of the Baroque architecture, nor the simple beauty of its gardens that strike me; but rather its symbolism of the mutual dilemmas of the Catholic Church, the People's Republic and most of all, the individuals caught in between. Both entities have struggled to define themselves during the past century of rapid social and economic change worldwide. The Cathedral itself is no stranger to political upheaval, having been razed in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion, only to be rebuilt in 1904 and later violently opposed during the Cultural Revolution. Both have employed tactics to try to soften the blow of this rapid change on the lives of those in their care, despite conflicting opinions about how to do it. The initiative of the Church was to declare human life absolutely sacred and to controversially discourage the use of artificial birth control; the People's Republic implemented the One Child Policy. Both are criticized for their policies and perceived authoritarianism. Both seek progress while standing on millennia of tradition. But as these two institutions

strive to come to terms with who their identity and what it means in the new world order, thousands of people young and old, Chinese and foreign-born, both papist and patriotic, continue to walk through this very sanctuary to attend Mass.

I have this image imprinted in my mind of the courtyard's grotto to the Virgin Mary set to the background of a smoggy Beijing summer sky and a suspended crane framing the scene. Such scenes are more than familiar in this city, where remnants of the past cede to the open market, and embraces economic progress.

It is within this context that Chinese Catholics continue walking a tightrope between their government and the Holy See, a struggle recently recognized by the Holy Father in his letter to Chinese Catholics as a faithfulness that they have manifested "sometimes at the price of grave sufferings". As Pope John Paul II once said in regards to China's recent socio-economic development, "The Catholic Church for her part regards with respect this impressive thrust and far-sighted planning, and with discretion offers her own contribution in the promotion and defence of the human person, and of the person's values, spirituality and transcendent vocation. The Church has very much at heart the values and objectives which are of primary importance also to modern China: solidarity, peace, social justice, the wise management of the phenomenon of globalization". If, as Yang Tingyun believed, Confucian virtues could be held in common with Christians, could these modern objectives not be shared between the Chinese Government and the Holy See?



Photo by Simca Simpson

Science, Faith and the Creation/Evolution Debate: Bridging Reason and Faith

Eric Bolo

When it comes to the subject of God, the world seems divided along one neat line. On one side of this line stand believers who profess their faith in a transcendent creator going by the name of God. On the other side stand atheists, agnostics, skeptics and others, all united by their lack of positive faith in God.

The divide between belief and non-belief is apparently so great that conflict seems inevitable. Both sides seem so adamant about their faith, or non-faith, as to completely ignore whatever truth may lie on the other side.

Creation VS. Evolution: a sad misunderstanding?

Perhaps nothing illustrates better the ideological conflict between believers and non-believers as the Creation/ Evolution debate. This debate started more than a century ago in Victorian England, when Darwin published his works on the evolution of life by natural selection, and has continued ever since.

Now as then, some Christians feel threatened in their faith by the theory of evolution because this theory contradicts the Bible over a few points. According to the theory of evolution, humans are cousins to chimps and gorillas; they descend from ape-like organisms that progressively acquired properly human characteristics like conceptual language, funeral rituals, and art. The Bible, on the other hand,

says that the first human, Adam, was created directly from clay, in the image and likeness of god -not in the image and likeness of apes.

In response to the perceived threat posed by evolutionary science, some Christian groups have successfully lobbied against teaching evolution at school in some states of the U.S.

Several Christian academics have even proposed an alternative “theory” of Life called Creationism. According to Creationism, all life forms, including humans, are the direct products of divine creation, not of spontaneous evolution. Some creationists have erected museums dedicated to supporting the Biblical story of the creation of the world by God. In one such museum, visitors are shown models of dinosaurs and humans coexisting- an aberration considering that dinosaurs went extinct about 60 million years *before* the beginning of human evolution.

Evolutionary scientists have voiced their opposition to this kind of religious obscurantism, and rightly so. Religious beliefs should be questioned when they directly conflict with empirical evidence, misinform people and obstruct scientific research.

However, I also think that some scientists are going too far when they condemn religion *in general* on the assumption that religious faith always contradicts reason. Such is the approach of Richard Dawkins, scientist and author of the

bestselling book *The God Delusion*. According to Dawkins, religion is nothing more than a failed scientific explanation of the world:

A universe with a God would look quite different from a universe without one. A physics, a biology where there is a God is bound to look different. So the most basic claims of religion are scientific. Religion is a scientific theory (Dawkins, On Debating Religion).

Viewed this way, most religions are failed explanations of the universe; science, on the other hand, excels at explaining things. Whereas religion is founded on human imagination, science is based on facts. Whereas religion is culturally bounded, science produces universal statements that (theoretically) anyone can test. Whereas religion insists on belief and faith, science discards these things in favor of impartial Reason. As Dawkins notes, there is no proof for the existence of God but the testimony of some mystics and prophets. Therefore religion - understood as a scientific theory- is based on shaky evidence. Therefore, Dawkins concludes, we can forget about the whole ‘God’ thing and get back to playing with guinea pigs in search of Truth.

Though enticing, Dawkin’s argument is simplistic and incomplete. Dawkins assaults only the most obvious aspect of religion -its literal content-, but refuses to acknowledge the moral, metaphorical

and experiential side of faith. Religion is not all about explaining the universe. It is a way, not a concept. The literal content of religious stories, therefore, doesn't matter all that much. As the theologian Marcus J. Borg explains,

Of course, the Bible and other sacred scriptures are not fairy tales – but we make a mistake when we think that stories must be factually true in order to be true and truthful.

In short, I disagree with Dawkins' assumption that religion is primarily a scientific theory and that, therefore, religions should be judged by scientific standards. Like Dawkins, I find literal interpretations of the Bible -of which creationism is only one example- as incredible as fairy tales. But unlike Dawkins, I do not think that dismissing all religious people as deluded fanatics is a good strategy to sensitize these same people to scientific reasoning.

Searching for Common Ground

Science has been accused of disenchanting the human worldview by replacing subjective creation stories with a cold objective picture of the universe in which humans play little role. Before Galileo, the earth was the center of the universe. Now we know that the earth is but a speck of dust in a gigantic, spinning galaxy -itself a speck of dust at the scale of the universe. Before Darwin, humans were at the top of the chain of beings- half-celestial, half earthy creatures wrought in the image of God. Now

we know that humans are just a branch in the tree of life condemned to extinction.

It is natural for religious people to feel threatened by science, because science seemingly gives no place to God in the world. Ultimately, however, such fear is unjustified, because science will



never disprove the truth of religious experience. Science explains the "how" of things- it elucidates the mechanisms underlying observable phenomena. Science cannot say why things exist, nor does it give ethical guidelines for the good human life -that is the domain of metaphysics, moral philosophy and of course, spirituality.

Science and religion are "non-overlapping" magisteria, to use a phrase by the scientist Stephen J. Gould. They respond to distinct but complementary human needs; science responds to the need to for objective knowledge, while religion responds to the subjective yearning for meaning and knowledge of self. If we ignore the objective findings of science, we may fall prey to superstition and close-mindedness.

But we must not fall into the other extreme of worshiping science at the expense of religious narratives and spiritual insights, for these have valuable things to say about ourselves and our relation to the world. If we do fall into this trap, we won't know what to do with all we know. Indeed this seems to be the case for many people in the modern world, where scientific knowledge and technological progress coexist with a feeling that the world is absurd, meaningless.

In fact, one could use the findings of science to deepen one's understanding of religious texts. By accepting the scientific picture of the material universe, one can let go of literal interpretations of religious texts, and begin to investigate their metaphorical meaning. From a spiritual standpoint, it does not matter whether you think humans descend from apes or not -what matters is how you relate to the all permeating mystery of Life.

The Other in Anthropology

Lori Abrams

Anthropology's primary focus is to 'get into the mindset' of the other. Typically, this involves learning the 'other's' language and customs, whether it be a remote culture unknown to academic Western society or a technical language such as technicians and doctors would use working in a hospital. Then the anthropologist would attempt to identify systems of government, social networks, the 'other's' ideology and how it organizes the 'other'. It is when the anthropologist becomes 'one of them' that he or she can say with authenticity that this is how the 'other' thinks. In this way, barriers are broken down because understanding is achieved. Understanding is achieved because the anthropologist took the time to study meaning, how meaning is assigned to what, to whom, the reasons for it and the practices that accompany it. Thus, cultural practices or symbols might have appeared revolting to the newcomer at the beginning can be appreciated for their symbolic value.

However, how do we attack the existent barriers within our own culture, when language and practice need not be learned? First, we can consider our western society as what sociologist Émile Durkheim labelled as organic solidarity: individuals function within our larger social whole as interdependent and complementary elements resulting from division of labour. Individuals can hold a variety of value systems and the meanings that are attached to them become the objects of these barriers, so we cannot assume we know the practices and customs of the social whole-because unlike smaller social groups, which Durkheim labels as mechanical solidarity, in which all members buy into the same ideology. In a divided society, if we could acknowledge that individuals within this type of society are likely to hold varied systems of meaning, we could then attempt to drag down these communication barriers. Often what happens when individuals in our society come together, for example, at the workplace, is that one person's intentions are misunderstood by another. By acknowledging that other people have systems of belief and value different from ours, when we interact with other people, we can interpret their actions not by our own set of values, but by theirs or at least by an

unknown undetermined set of values. This would prevent us from reacting strongly according to our own sets of beliefs and allow us to understand more the other person's meaning.

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: *ME, MYSELF AND I*

The theme of the next issue is ego and individualism. How does individualism affect our personal, social and spiritual life? How to reconcile individual desires with collective responsibility? What is the place of the ego in spiritual/religious life?

Any answers? Any questions? Write (or draw, or paint, or take photos) for Radix!

Deadline: September 20th. Send your submissions to radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca

This Issue's contributors:

Cover Art: Joy Diing

Articles: Simca Simpson, Eric Bolo, Lori Abrams, Anna Chigo

For more information about Radix, email us at radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca

Community Feature: Art of Living's YES+ program

Anna Chigo

As the new school year approaches, many of us set goals for the upcoming semester. These can range from the familiar vows to get better grades, exercise regularly, and decrease time spent Facebook-stalking your ex(es), to more ambitious pursuits such as preventing the swine flu pandemic and eradicating poverty. Despite these well-intentioned aspirations, many of us struggle to reach the milestones that we set for ourselves. Have you ever wondered why? If you're reading this, there's a high likelihood that you may have.

"The enemy lurks in your own ranks." Those were the words of a famous dead poet who shall remain nameless here. In fact, the very tool that drives progress in society can prove to be the biggest hurdle in our evolution. Enough pre-amble. We're talking about the mind here.

How often have you asked: "Do you love me? Really? Am I really gonna do well at this interview?" Wondering whether someone really, truly hates you or whether you're really angry doesn't happen as much. With this tendency to doubt the positive and cling to the negative, the mind can trick us into believing that we're good for nothing consumers who are silly to dream beyond the numbing glow of our trusty TV set. Yet deep in the recesses of our being, we know that our capacity as human beings is far beyond what we have explored. This is where YES!+ comes in.

In a nutshell, YES!+ is an innovative and dynamic life skills program for students and young professionals that empowers them with tools to eliminate stress, develop strong social and leadership skills, and increase mental focus. It's as fun as it is challenging, and includes practical sessions on entrepreneurial skills, conflict resolution, and increasing physical, mental and emotional health. For those of us who fall prey to unproductive habits and patterns, it whips us into shape. For the A-Types out there, it calms their mind and makes them chill enough to want hang out with.

Using ancient breathing techniques to harmonize mind and body, YES!+ offers us the opportunity to bring out that dormant inner potential that we've been hearing about since high-school and to become effective catalysts for social change. It makes us aware of our patterns and allows us to observe the tendencies of the mind. That's what YES!+ is in a nutshell. Admittedly, it would have to be one enormous nutshell to fit an accurate description of what the program really entails, but this little taste will have to do for now (until the upcoming YES!+ course on Sept 1 begins).

Recognizing the urgent need to reintegrate human values in society, the internationally renown YES!+ program was designed by the Art Of Living Foundation in 2005. With his mandate of creating a stress-free, violence-free society, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (the founder of the Art Of Living Foundation) brought forth a practical way for young people to rid their system of accumulated stress and to increase their energy level, so they may maximize their capacity both in their careers and personal lives. After all, empowering the individual is the first step towards transforming the quality of life in society.

As participants of YES!+, students and young professionals connect with a network of like-minded people who are ready to take a commitment towards global transformation by first making sure that they are in the best shape possible as individuals. It's kind of like sitting in an airplane in the midst of heavy turbulence, and suddenly realizing that the plane is about to crash. When the oxygen masks pop out, no matter how much you want to help the people around you, unless you put on your own oxygen mask first, you will be unable to help others. YES!+ strengthens and purifies the individual, empowering him/her to effect positive change in their world.

*For more information, contact Anna Chigo,
email: annachigo@gmail.com, telephone: 514 554 6797*

Newman Centre
 3484 Peel St, 398-4106
 newmancentre@mail.mcgill.ca
 www.newmancentre.org

Did you know that Roman Catholic Mass is held conveniently on campus several times per week?



Contact the Newman Centre for details.

The Muslim Students Association of McGill

We offer: weekly study circles, free Islamic educational materials, Ramadan services, lectures/conferences, library (Shatner building, room 430)

3460 McTavish Street, Rm. 14
 ssmu.mcgill.ca/msa

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>

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.

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 McGill Chaplaincy
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 Wednesday 1-2 pm
 (Discussion, Instruction, and Q&A at 12:45)



MCGILL STUDENT PARENTS' NETWORK

The MSPN provides support to McGill students who are parents.

Regularly we offer free of charge to McGill students: in-home babysitting, support group meetings, study sessions for parents with babysitting for children.

Interested families should contact the MSPN coordinator at mcgillspn@gmail.com or at (514) 398-4104

Sikh Chaplaincy Open Meeting



Social get-togethers
 Newman Centre, 3484 Peel
 Contact Manjot Singh,
 Chaplain
manjit.singh@mcgill.ca

Share a HOT VEGAN LUNCH at the

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3460 Stanley Street

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845-9171

rabbi@hillel.ca

www.hillel.ca



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YD The Yellow Door
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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

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. 11:30 am (followed by lunch),

Fri. 7:30 am

All are welcome!

Want fair-traded/fair-priced coffee, or warm, fresh-of-the-day muffins and pastries? Support the

architecture cafe

from becoming yet another overpriced campus cafeteria. Located on the lower level of the Macdonald-Harrington Building in Room G6. Join "Save Architecture Cafe" on Facebook.

Radix publishes ads for groups and events with a spiritual or social-justice theme--for FREE! Email: radix.chaplaincy@mail.mcgill.ca