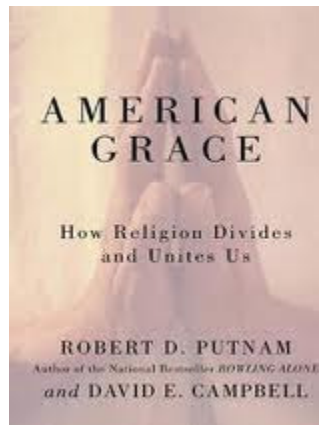


Love of God and Neighbour
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The title of this talk is “Love of God and Neighbour”, but you Americans might note that in Canada “Neighbour” is spelt with a “u”, as in my neighbour includes “You and You and You”. No exceptions. The famous words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13, 34-35), link explicitly love of God and love of neighbour. The two great commandments, found in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Torah, are one. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God.

So close to Easter, I must note that the empty tomb is good news everywhere. As Vicar Trevor Fisher in Vancouver wrote the other day, the message of Easter is that we are “not a fluke organism somewhere out in space, left to our own limited devices. Our Lord in being raised from the dead proclaims that a greater purpose is at work in our small world”.

American Grace



Recently, I read the excellent *American Grace — How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2010) by Robert Putnam of Harvard and David Campbell. How do the two great commandments line up with our practices and what can we learn?

Americans are highly religious by any standard, with 83 percent reporting to a large opinion survey to belonging to a religion. Forty percent attend religious services nearly weekly or more (compared to about 25 percent in Canada, according to the 2005-07 survey cited for both countries); 59 percent of Americans pray at least weekly. The authors also found that Americans believe in a God “who is loving and not very judgmental”. Sixty-two percent said they ‘very often’ feel God’s love in their life.”

The book’s conclusion examines how religion affects American society, including such matters as whether religious people are good citizens (they are), disagreements between religious and secular Americans and among members of different faith traditions. The last chapter stresses

how U.S. religious diversity and commitment facilitates religious harmony. America's grace is its myriad webs of "interlocking personal relationships among people of many different faiths."

We Canadians would benefit from a similar study on our own country, presumably by Prof. Reginald Bibby, research chair of sociology at the University of Lethbridge. One of the points he made in an op-ed piece in the Globe and Mail (April 25) recently was this:

"Actually, that active core of 20 per cent to 25 per cent (weekly service attendees in Canada) has not changed very much. The participation losses of mainline Protestants and Quebec Catholics have been offset by the gains of Catholics elsewhere, evangelical Protestants, and other groups, led by Muslims."

I'd like to talk now about some remarkable people of varied backgrounds, who live out their faith, combining love of God and love of neighbour often in the face of major adversity.

Shahbaz Bhatti



Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Minister for Minorities, was assassinated early last month. He was well aware of the dangers he faced; indeed, he decided not to marry to avoid exposing others to what ultimately befell him. A few years ago, I'm told he led a group of Christian aid workers after an earthquake struck his country. They found a house where the roof had fallen and a man was trapped underneath. Bhatti helped him get out and then noticed slogans on the walls against Christians,

such as "Kill the infidels." Bhatti asked the man what sort of facility it was. The answer was in effect that it was a training location for Al-Qaeda. The man added, "And you came here to save my life?" "Yes," Shahbaz replied, "Christianity is all about saving lives." For Bhatti, it was also about speaking up for all of Pakistan's religious minorities until the day of his death.

Laszlo Tokes

Laszlo Tokes was a Hungarian minister in Transylvania, Romania in the 1980s, when he was sent to a church in the city of Timisoara. In mid-December, 1989, thousands – Romanians and Hungarians alike-- joined his congregation gathered around the church to protect his pregnant wife and him when police came to arrest them. The continuing and growing street protests in Timisoara—so similar to what we have seen so often during the Arab Spring—led directly to the fall of the Ceausescu dictatorship in Bucharest within days.



Not long ago, I learned from broadcaster Arpad Szoczi (www.euronair.eu) why the authorities went to arrest Tokes. Szoczi and his father had raised the funds to send two Canadians --a journalist and a former Quebec Cabinet minister-- to interview Tokes secretly in Timisoara in the spring of 1989. Tokes spoke out fearlessly about the treatment of the Hungarian minority and many other victims of the regime. When a Hungarian television station later broadcast the interview, Ceausescu - as well as many residents of western Romania - saw it.

Ceausescu sent his dreaded Securitate police to arrest him; what Tokes judged “the turning point” in the Romanian Revolution was then reached. Tokes is now an elected member of the European Parliament and one of its Vice-presidents.

Gao Zhisheng



Gao Zhisheng, aged 47, often called "the conscience of China", received a second nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008. He had become a Christian after attending a Beijing house church in 2005, concluding, "In addition to physical needs, man also has his equally important spiritual needs..." He later gained international acclaim for donating his lawyers's skills to defend evicted farmers, miners, underground Christians, dissidents and disabled persons.

His public criticism of the persecution of the large Falun Gong community, a traditional exercise group with a spiritual component (organharvestinvestigation.net), triggered seven weeks of torture for himself. It stopped only when he agreed to "confess" in an article saying that the party-state treated his family well and that Falun Gong had tricked him into writing a letter to the U.S. Congress. Shortly after his release for a brief period, Gao wrote a letter detailing his ordeal and authorized its release to the public in February, 2009, even though he had been threatened with death if he spoke publicly about his torture.

His wife, Geng He, and two children, aged 16 and 7, had in the meantime escaped to America. She continues to fight for the release of her husband and others, but his whereabouts has been unknown for the past year and she doesn't know whether he is alive or dead as a result of ongoing physical and mental torture/brainwashing. "My husband's wish was that his children have freedom and human rights too, so now that we've arrived in the U.S., he can let out a sigh of relief". On Mar. 28 of this year, The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called on the party-state of China to release Gao, terming his detention a violation of international law.

National Prayer Breakfasts in Ottawa

A word now about Canada's National Prayer Breakfast in Ottawa, which has been going almost as long as the one in Washington, and about three speakers, among many, who have addressed either the breakfast or seminars afterwards and struck me as being especially strong on love of neighbours.

Romeo Dallaire

Retired General Romeo Dallaire is Canada's national hero for his work as commander of the U.N. peacekeeping mission during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. He was one of few officials who acquitted himself well throughout the entire ordeal, although he still insists on blaming himself. His personal courage and that of his tiny band of U.N. peacekeepers, while so many other foreigners were 'turning tail', seemed based on the Great Commandments. Dallaire says, "There must be God because I have shaken



hands with the devil." He recently published a new book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, about the plight of the estimated 250,000 child soldiers used by military and paramilitary organizations today across the world.

Kim Phuc



Another of our speakers was Kim Phuc, whose photograph as a young Vietnamese girl running from napalm (which touched about 40 percent of her body) was judged in Japan to have been the most important photo of the entire 20th century. She now lives in Canada and her biography, *The Girl in the Picture*, was written by Denise Chong. Phuc spoke on reconciliation and how after she became a Christian she was able to forgive all who had caused her such grief, including the American who authorized bombing near her home. I believe she also met with the pilot who dropped the bomb which hit her-and forgave him.

Diane Morrison



Diane Morrison has been Executive Director of the Ottawa Mission for homeless men for 20 years, since she first brought skills as an innovative school teacher and committed Christian to an organization run by men since its founding in 1906. The Mission serves 1200 meals daily and provides a place for 233 men to sleep each night. Funding is provided by donations (60%) and government (40%). Yearly donations of about



\$5 million help to support a school, drug and alcohol treatment, chaplaincy, job training, housing and health services for homeless men, women and children and a hospice. The staff and volunteers provide an atmosphere of encouragement, hope and acceptance to the most vulnerable people in the city. She, the staff and volunteers see many lives changed.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus today? People with whom we rub shoulders ought to see in us God's message of kindness and unconditional love for the human family with all persons of equal value. Here are vignettes about three more persons who practice devotion to God and the social gospel:

Jim Wallis



Most of you will know Jim Wallis of the D.C region as the founding editor of Sojourners magazine or have read *The Soul of Politics*. Wallis combats poverty and despair on the streets of a number of inner cities in urban America. He finds the approaches of both liberals and conservatives inadequate to the challenges the world faces and judges that a new political consensus that fuses social justice with personal responsibility is called for in both our countries and elsewhere.

What Wallis found in the Bible made him sensitive to injustice, whether male supremacy, growing economic inequality, homophobia, or the growing ecological catastrophe. He thinks America's traditional virtues of civility, justice and citizenship are being replaced by divisions along lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, culture, resource scarcity and division into a world of perpetual conflict. Wallis often reminds people that "the priority of the poor in the Bible has been one of the best kept secrets in the churches."

"Mayu" Brizuela de Avila

"Mayu" Brizuela de Avila was the highly-respected Foreign Minister in the government of El Salvador from 1999-2004. "God", she feels, "gives talents to everyone; the more one has the greater the responsibility to be a 'beacon' for Him". At every meeting we both attended in the hemisphere, her contribution was profound and unique, including the signing of the Democratic Charter by Organization of American States (OAS) foreign ministers on 9/11/01 in Lima about an hour after the second plane hit the World Trade tower in Manhattan.



As an example, she was invited to speak at an OAS student forum in Edmonton, later flying for more than 12 hours from San Salvador to L.A. and from there to Vancouver and on to Edmonton. Her message to the students transmitted her faith and positive attitude on life, encouraging them to excel in their daily lives. While there, she wanted to meet the Salvadorian community and a meeting was arranged at a church. She insisted on arriving early so that she could greet each person as they arrived. She saw God in every one of the political refugees that had fled her war torn country at the time. After public office, she continues working at a regional level, as she serves the Lord in Latin America through corporate social responsibility projects. In short, she sees her work as a path to sanctity, a path to serve her country, her region, her fellow citizens and God.

Tommy Douglas

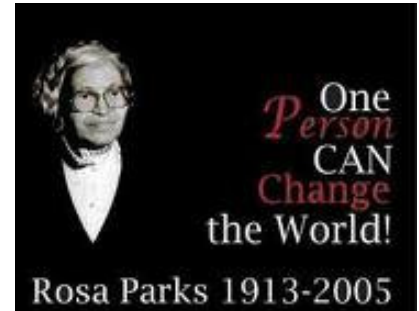


The Prairie Canada Baptist minister Tommy Douglas believed that building the Kingdom of God on Earth required introducing radical measures. During the Great Depression, he transformed himself from a preacher into a social democratic legislator. As premier of Saskatchewan for 17 years, he worked to protect farm families from banks in Central Canada. He then turned his efforts to building the first universal health care system in North

America, battling the provincial and later the Canadian and U.S. medical establishments. By getting Medicare with a single government insurer to work in sparsely-populated Saskatchewan, he proved that a health system ultimately based on the premise that all lives are of equal value for Medicare purposes could work nationally and beyond.

Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks of Alabama changed American history when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in December 1955 and was arrested. In her book *Quiet Strength*, written long afterwards, she noted, "I felt the Lord would give me the strength to endure whatever I had to face. God did away with all my fear." The book explains how religion shaped her life and has been a central part of the American civil rights movement since the '50s.



Things don't always turn out as well for two billion or so Christians today as they did for Rosa Parks. The hostility towards us in various parts of the world today is tragically creating many victims of all ages, probably more than at any time since Jesus was among us. Yet don't all of us still have an obligation to show solidarity with victims of religious persecution whatever their faith or absence of one? If our, say, Muslim neighbours know that we Christians denounce the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia or anywhere by name-only Christians, they might consider being more supportive when we raise our voices together against the persecution of Christians around the world.

Living our Faith



Having observed Christians around the world over many years, I'm constantly struck by how essentially similar are their answers to the question of how we can live our faith today. Many Christian women, men and youth attempt in their daily lives to be points of light wherever they are.

Grace – God's love for all humanity– merits the final word. It is the one thing that only churches can provide in a world which craves it the most. Grace can bring transformation and hope. As Philip Yancey expressed in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, it is hunger for grace that brings people to any church. "I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there," he writes. "I returned because I found grace nowhere else." In a world filled with 'ungrace,' we believers should seek to dispense grace wherever we find ourselves.

Thank you all; God bless your vitally important work.