Church & Faith Trends

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Douglas Todd on Canadian Evangelicalism

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Douglas Todd, of the *Vancouver Sun*, is one of the most decorated spirituality and ethics writers in North America. He has received more than 60 journalism honours for his features, analyses, news stories and commentaries. He is a two-time winner of the Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year Award, which goes to the top religion writer at any secular newspaper in North America. He has also won Canada's National Newspaper Award and the leading commentary award from the American Academy of Religion. *Vancouver Magazine* recently referred to him as "arguably Vancouver's most thoughtful journalist." He is the author of two books, *Brave Souls: Writers and Artists Wrestle With God, Love, Death and Things That Matter* (Stoddart) and *The Soul-Searcher's Guide to the Galaxy* (International Self-Counsel Press), and has been awarded with several major fellowships. He is currently editing a book titled *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia—Exploring the Spirit of the Pacific Northwest.*[1]

Church and Faith Trends interviewed Douglas Todd on Canadian Evangelicalism because of his reputation as a thoughtful and fair observer of religion in Canada.

Church & Faith Trends (C&FT): How did you come to cover religion in a profession where it isn't common outside of journals for religious communities?

Douglas Todd (DT): I tell anyone who will listen that I was brought up in an atheist family, kind of a strict one, where all religious people were characterized as kooks. And then of course I got older, into my late teens, and started bumping into people who were Christians, were evangelical, were religious. I realized, well, some of them are kooks, but many aren't. As a matter of fact many of them had something going for them that my family didn't. Part of my attraction was to religious people's sense of hope. I think I wanted that and needed it. You know how everyone of my generation rebelled against the church, I rebelled against atheism. I'm glad I have.

C&FT: How did you come to be a reporter who writes on religion for a major Canadian daily?

DT: I studied world religions—that was my bachelor's degree—just because I was so fascinated by it all. And then I went to postgraduate studies of religion and I realized I wasn't really a philosopher type, although now I wonder if I could have been, and I didn't want to be a minister, because the church still felt kind of unfamiliar for me to make that kind of commitment. So I went into journalism because I enjoyed writing for the UBC student newspaper, and I've always been really interested in how the world works.

[1] Biographical information adapted from http://www.canada.com/vancouversun/columnists/douglastodd.html (Accessed June 19, 2008).

And then after about 6 to 10 years of doing everything possible in journalism, from politics to crime to entertainment writing, I realized that I really am interested in spirituality and religion, so why don't I offer to do that? And I did. I thought at the time I was basically offering to take a self-demotion. This was probably around 1990. Religion writing had a low status at that time. But I didn't care. Anyway, it's turned out to be the opposite; my profile has really expanded, and, more importantly, I love it and think it's valuable for readers. I find it intellectually exciting and interesting to follow religious trends and ideas. I also write about ethical issues and philosophy from a non-religious perspective. Sometimes I call what I do the "meaning beat." Philosophy departments at universities have kind of abandoned meaning, so I try to explore it in the newspaper.

C&FT: Has there been an editorial change in receptivity to stories on religion that you've seen over the years?

DT: Yes, it has changed. About the mid-nineties or late nineties the word "spirituality" became kind of trendy. And that opened it up, so that even hard-bitten journalists could think maybe there's something here that's interesting, which is more than just writing about popes and religious leaders and televangelists. Also, colleagues in my own newsroom saw that the way I write about religion wasn't just about people who are overly pious. They saw that the religion beat was about ideas and issues that are really fascinating, even (I hope) to a non-religious person.

My first encounter with an Evangelical was a high-school counsellor-teacher named Ernestine Young, who was from Utah in the United States. She was kind of square-looking, but she was really dynamic and she took about a dozen of us Argyle high school students under her wing. I think she saw us as young people who were intelligent and had a lot of potential but were maybe struggling a bit. She was fantastic. She was totally hopeful and into rattling the cages of the school. She was also into psychology at the same time. Basically, she wanted to change society for the better. She was an unusual mix of Christian Evangelicalism and kind of Sixties radicalism. I had a huge admiration for her. She was probably my first mentor, and she might have saved me, a little bit, from my own upbringing.

C&FT: Thinking of Canada as a big extended family with all its characters, good and bad, that has gathered for a big family reunion, who would the evangelical Christians be and why?

DT: They'd be the earnest types, the family-oriented types, the wholesome types, friendly, occasionally a bit too nice. They'd work in the social services, maybe business too. They might be a little too focused on how they appear.

C&FT: Can you expand on that a bit?

DT: They might be a little public relations–oriented, trying to make a good impression. They might not quite be allowing themselves to be their complete, imperfect human selves. They might be the generally successful and well-off part of the extended family. I think they might not be an overly intellectual part of the family. They'd be the salt-of-the-earth soccer coaches, hockey coaches, and business people. But they would not be that interested in ideas for the sake of ideas. They'd be caring people; they'd go the extra mile for neighbours. And they may be a bit sacrificial, possibly even to a fault.

C&FT: How would they get along with the rest of the family?

DT: [Laughing] They'd get along pretty well. Occasionally, the other part of the family might think, "Oh. They [the Evangelicals] think they've got the answer, and maybe they don't. Or maybe they do. Whatever the case, it makes us a bit uncomfortable." But, you know, the rest of the family would appreciate them for how much good they do in the world, and that they've generally got nice kids who are engaged and going off and doing good things in the world, and are polite.

The rest of the family might think that while we admire them, we can't be like them, even though they'd like us to be. I think the other members of the extended family might wonder, "Is this the real person I'm getting?" They would see the Evangelicals as polite and really friendly and helpful, but there might be a concern about a hidden agenda.

C&FT: If you had to very succinctly define evangelical Christians for your readers in a column how would you do that?

DT: I'd just say they represent 8%–12% of the Canadian population, and they're similar to but more moderate than their American counterparts.

C&FT: What are the two most common reoccurring storylines involving Canadian evangelical Christians, and have these changed over the course of your career as a journalist?

DT: Obviously the homosexuality storyline has been there strongly for a long time. And it continues, especially now that it's manifesting itself in the Anglican church. It's been a long-term storyline that doesn't seem to go away.

I think there are actually three storylines. The second would be evangelical involvement in politics. The third storyline revolves around the claim that Evangelicals are being persecuted by the wider culture.

C&FT: Is that a storyline that Evangelicals are putting out there?

DT: Yes, definitely. And you know there's even some truth to it, in terms of Evangelicals being somewhat stigmatized. But sometimes I think it's a bit overdone. In some instances, Evangelicals' vague sense of feeling persecuted can be manipulated to strengthen support for the cause—and even in its worst manifestations, used as a way to raise money. I wonder that when I hear certain evangelical leaders claim, "Here's the bad liberal culture attacking us again." Andrew Grenville, a pollster who looks at Canadian Evangelicals, has reflected on this problem as well.

At the same time I think it's true that there is some stigmatization of Christians in Canada, including both mainline and evangelical Christians. Non-evangelical Canadians do not at all understand the complexities of the evangelical movement. For that matter, a lot of Evangelicals don't understand the subtleties and diversity of their own religious community. Too many have simplistic beliefs about what it means to be an Evangelical. Fortunately, evangelical groupthink is not nearly as strong in Canada as in the U.S.

C&FT: Could you comment more on the storyline of Evangelicals and political partisanship?

DT: I think this storyline is really interesting and may be the most important one. Just what is the role of Evangelicals in Canadian politics? There is Stephen Harper's Evangelicalism, which he tries to keep a non-story. Preston Manning's Evangelicalism obviously was big. Stockwell Day, while he's not as important a figure, was open about his faith until he learned his lesson—that his religious beliefs are a hard sell in multicultural Canada.

Then there's the related story of the very loose coalition between Evangelicals and what some people might call evangelical Catholics and their support for the federal Conservative Party. That's changed the political face of the country, but in subtle ways compared to the overt ways conservative Evangelicals have been the backbone of the Republican Party in the U.S.

C&FT: Is the partisan storyline the biggest evangelical story that sticks out in your mind?

DT: It is. It's harder to grasp than the homosexuality story, which is so [pause] simple. It seems the homosexual debate never goes anywhere in terms of changing people's minds. It's a bit like the abortion debate. On both issues, people on different sides tell you what they think and feel at a very personal level and that's about the end of it. There's no real dialogue or listening, it seems. The only real changes caused by the homosexual debate show up in institutional machinations, like those associated with the Anglican Church of Canada and the worldwide Anglican Communion. That's where the same-sex blessing storyline intersects with the complexities of human rights and Biblical authority. And it's causing a possible restructuring of the Anglican Communion.

C&FT: Who would you say are the three most influential evangelical Christians in Canada today and why?

DT: I'd actually identify four. Preston Manning is one, because he continues to be an activist and public intellectual. He has his Manning Centre in Ottawa, and he's committed to be an organizer of Evangelicals on a cultural and political level. He started a big movement through the Reform Party that still has legs.

I'd also put David Mainse up there. I'm not sure I should, but he's probably the most popular personality in evangelical circles in Canada because of his show *100 Huntley Street*.

Then there's Brian Stiller, President of Tyndale University College and Seminary. He tried to be a public figure, and he was somewhat successful. I haven't heard too much from him lately, though. He had more of a profile when he was leading The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Actually I'd have to put John Stackhouse of Regent College up there too. He's a public figure who is on the intellectual edge of Evangelicalism. He's dynamic. He's often quoted in the wider media. He writes in *Christianity Today*. Stackhouse is influential, but he's not a typical Evangelical.

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C&FT: How is he atypical?

DT: He's such a brainy guy, and he's pretty courageous and public about his views. You know when I said my impression of Canadian Evangelicals is that they aren't overly intellectual? He goes against that type.

C&FT: If you could offer a piece of advice to Canadian Evangelicals on how to participate constructively in the public square, what would it be?

DT: Two pieces of advice. The first would be to emphasize new topics; get away from sex-related topics. Don't ignore them, but don't emphasize them so much. That is, don't emphasize them unless you want to create a wedge issue that divides conservative Christians from the rest of the public, which unfortunately is how I think some religious leaders use sex-related issues. I would suggest toning down issues of abortion, homosexuality, and even debates over age of consent. I'm getting a bit theological and biblical here, but I think John Stackhouse would confirm Jesus had ten times more to say about the economy and money than he did about sexuality. So the emphasis on sexual issues seems a bit out of whack with what was going on in early Christianity.

The other bit of advice to Evangelicals would be to try to find some common cause with other faith groups and even non-faith groups. That's starting to happen on the environment and other things. There are people out there doing it. I wrote a column a couple of years ago about the "crunchy conservatives," the conservative-but-ethical-and-ecological types who don't want to shop at Wal-Mart and want to protect Creation. Why not work with Buddhist groups on certain common issues? I think it would be really creative for Evangelicals, and the public would definitely take notice. They would see that Evangelicals aren't just pitting their camp against all the others, and that Evangelicals do care about far more than just sex. I know they do because of my work writing about different religious groups, but Evangelicals are not too good at getting that message out to the wider public.