



By Don Hill

# What happens when you mix religion and politics?

**I** have a story to tell you, a modern day parable.

In the grim days following 9/11, media intelligence about the extremists responsible for the terror was pretty spotty. At the time, I was national host of *CBC Radio One's* religion show. The very thought that there might be a radical branch of Islam was news to my network colleagues in Toronto.

In the scramble to get a grip on **President Bush's** question, "Why do they hate us?" I interviewed an acknowledged expert on Islam, **Bernard Lewis**. He was in New York.

As our conversation unfolded, a profile emerged about the hijackers and their objectives. Dr. Lewis' depiction of the fanatics' intentions sounded oddly familiar.

"Are we fighting with the bikers of Islam?" I asked.

Dead silence.

"That's one way of putting it," he said, after a raspy chuckle. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

What I learned right then and there is *belief* matters. And to not understand what others believe – what other cultures hold to be true and proper – creates the conditions for confusion at best, and in the extreme, catastrophe.

Religion matters, too. It matters a great deal. The Latin root of the word says as much: religion means 'to bind community'.

Religion and politics have always been in close collaboration, especially here in western Canada. Prairie political movements—both the CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation), the parent of today's NDP, and Social Credit, the political dynasty that lasted for over 30 years in Alberta—were built with religious principles and, in particular, the workings of the 'social gospel'.

There were two distinctive streams that flowed out of the *social gospel* movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The course charted by **Tommy Douglas**, a Baptist minister, the CCF premier of Saskatchewan and the father of universal healthcare in Canada is well-known to this day. Reverend Douglas' government embodied the *social gospel* principle of "I am my brother's keeper."

Reverend **William Aberhart**, the Social Credit premier of Alberta during the Depression years of the 1930s marked the second tributary of the *social gospel*. "Bible Bill" Aberhart and his successor Premier **Ernest C. Manning**, the father of **Preston Manning**, regarded themselves as stewards of the people. They believed the primary role of government was to uphold social and community values through prudent management of the province's finances and resources.

So what has the *social gospel* got to do with our present-day politics? Lots.

There is evidence that a third stream of the *social gospel* is now in play.

A couple of years back, I had Preston Manning on my province-wide radio phone-in show. I was intrigued by his response to a question about the environment, following an otherwise unremarkable speech he made in Red Deer.

"I don't think Albertans are getting the governance that they deserve," he said. And, when I prompted him to further explain (because he did leave things hanging a bit),



Tommy Douglas

Manning volunteered that, given the history of rapid-fire political movements in the West, the 'environment' might well be the rallying point for a new style of leadership and a new political party "that has yet to reveal its name," he said.

Manning also hinted that whatever the party might call itself, there was a very good probability 'it' would be the next political dynasty in the province.

I sense the environment may well be the third tributary, the newest stream of the *social gospel*, alongside social and community concerns long-associated with the movement.

## BELIEF AND CULTURE

Religion—as a way of knowing—is very often the basis for how people govern themselves around the world. To ignore religion, to push it to the margins of society does not make it go away. Like a river that goes underground, religion tends to resurface no matter what you do to block its progress.

I strongly disagree with **Richard Dawkins**, the scientist and avowed atheist who recently declared in his best-selling book *The God Delusion* that religion is akin to a mental virus, a malignant disease that ought to be eradicated.

Several years ago, Dr. Dawkins visited the *Behavioural Neuroscience Laboratory* at Laurentian University, where I am an adjunct researcher. After exchanging pleasantries, I enquired if Dr. Dawkins had investigated meditation, for instance, the type associated with major religions such as Buddhism which, to my way of thinking, is more a 'science of mind' than religion.

He frowned.

There is a lot to be learned from contemplative practices—especially if you are in a leadership role.

The expression "damned if you do and damned if you don't," is the basis for a Zen Buddhist *koan*, a riddle, which must be solved before moving on to another challenge.

"If you answer my question incorrectly," a Zen master instructs, "I will hit you with a stick." And "if you answer it correctly, I will hit you with a stick."

What's the answer?

Hint #1: the *koan* is really a question about your leadership.

You can't dodge it.

Remaining silent—"dynamic inaction," as one clever fellow put it—is promptly rewarded with a sharp and instructive thump. Think of this puzzle as you might when business shifts ground and the future of your enterprise demands an immediate, yet purposeful response; do nothing and you get whacked.

Hint #2: Zen

*koans* are counterintuitive to conventional ways of thinking.

When I hosted the religion show on *CBC Radio One*, my perspective was constantly upended by extraordinary ideas. I was challenged to set aside my personal worldview as the baseline of all things good and proper. To understand wisdom traditions, I learned to empathize with the ontology I was investigating, even if it meant surrendering to it for the moment; I had to suspend my beliefs about how things ought to be.

Hint #3: Imagine I am now holding the stick. And I'm telling you—yes, *you*—if you answer my question incorrectly or correctly, you will get hit with it.

The answer is right in front of you... right now.

Take the stick. ✓

Don Hill is a 'thought leader' at the Leadership Lab and Leadership Development at the Banff Centre. He is also an award-winning writer and broadcaster with a large footprint on the Internet. Listen to his radio series *Inspiring Leadership*, a 20-part documentary on contemporary leadership and the challenge of leading in the 21st Century every Saturday morning at 8 AM on the CKUA Radio Network.

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Preston Manning



Richard Dawkins

## Edmontonian IN EXILE

By Janet Edmondson in Calgary



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**O**ur family is familiar with the tragedies of heart disease. My father-in-law had his last heart attack at 52, leaving his wife to finish raising four teenaged sons. One of those sons had his first heart attack in his twenties, and died at the age of 47. Another son recently had angioplasty. An infant nephew died during heart surgery; a niece had three cardiac surgeries before she was two. One of our own children was misdiagnosed by a young GP with a major, four-site heart defect, leading to a week of anguish, until the pediatric cardiologist reassured us that it was an innocent murmur.

So I was happy to be seated next to the Right Honourable **Don Mazankowski** at a dinner last month to learn firsthand a bit about the Mazankowski Alberta Heart Institute, which will open in Edmonton in October. The former deputy prime minister was a delightful dinner companion... enthusiastic about this world class facility which will focus on all services from disease prevention to the most complex patient

care... and humble about his part in its creation. He told me he tried for two years to convince the "powers that be" to name it after someone "more worthy of the honour". They correctly ignored him.

I told Mr. Mazankowski a bit of our family history. He was confident that each of those people would have lived longer and healthier lives had such a facility existed. Not only will the institute provide acute care for children and adults, but it will also allow research and technology advances to be immediately applied to those who would benefit. There will be a congenital heart disease program providing lifelong care to children born with heart disease. The institute will also house the Alberta Cardiovascular and Stroke Research Centre—ABACUS. There will be major focus on prevention of heart disease through education.

Whether we live in Edmonton or Calgary, it is reassuring to know that we will have this outstanding institution available to make the lives of our family, and yours, better. ✓