

Religion is on his agenda

One Sunday last year, Richard Gwyn had just settled into his pew in the Newman Chapel in Toronto when he noticed Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and his wife Aline arriving. "Until then, I hadn't thought of Chrétien as a Catholic," he wrote in his column in the *Toronto Star* a few months later. The prime minister's religious practice had never been of particular interest to the media.

"Canada is an extraordinarily secular country, compared to the United States," says Gwyn, who has been covering the political scene as a journalist for more than 40 years. For at least that long, or longer, religion has been off the radar of most mainstream Canadian journalists.

Gwyn was one of the first to mention in print the surprising fact that every prime minister for the last thirty-odd years has been Catholic, with the exception of Kim Campbell. "I made a point of this," he says, "only to make the point that nobody was making the point."

But even in Canada the climate has changed. In the last few years, religion has come out of the closet and re-entered the mainstream of public discourse. This was Gwyn's theme when he delivered the inaugural Somerville Lecture in Christianity and Communications at St. Jerome's on October 12. The lecture, part of the St. Jerome's Centre for Catholic Experience 2001-02 season, was sponsored by the *Catholic Register*.

Gwyn was the natural choice for inaugural speaker. A veteran journalist (his first major assignment was the Springhill mine disaster in 1958), best-selling author (*Smallwood; The Shape of Scandal; The Northern Magus; The 49th Paradox; Nationalism Without Walls*), he's been honoured by the national newspaper and magazine associations and named by his peers in the press gallery as the columnist they all felt they had to read.

For most of his career, religion was off his radar, too. Raised in an English Catholic family with a tradition of military service, he was educated at Stonyhurst, a Jesuit school in Lancashire, and at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. "As a boy I had been a fairly serious Catholic; I'd thought about the priesthood." But it seems he wasn't meant to be either a priest or a Gurkha, his other choice. He dropped out of Sandhurst and emigrated to Canada, where he started work for British United Press in 1957 at \$43.50 a week. He married Sandra Fraser the following year.

Gwyn lapsed from Catholicism in his mid-twenties, but his upbringing continued to influence his attitudes to moral issues, and about five years ago he was drawn back to the Church. "One factor was simply age. As you get older, you're like an elephant: you go back to where you were born. The second was that Sandra was seriously ill. I suppose I was looking for consolation. She died a year ago of breast cancer." But of his return to Catholicism he adds, "I believe it would have happened anyway."

Thinking about religion, he also thought about the alternative, and found it both bleak and absurd. "It seemed to me that it's more sensible to believe in religion than not, since the alternative is to

believe in nothingness, and randomness, and accident. Once I had made that transition, I could say, 'I believe in the basic tenets of Catholicism, and that's where I take my stand.'"


His faith began to influence his commentary. On a foreign affairs panel discussing George Bush's

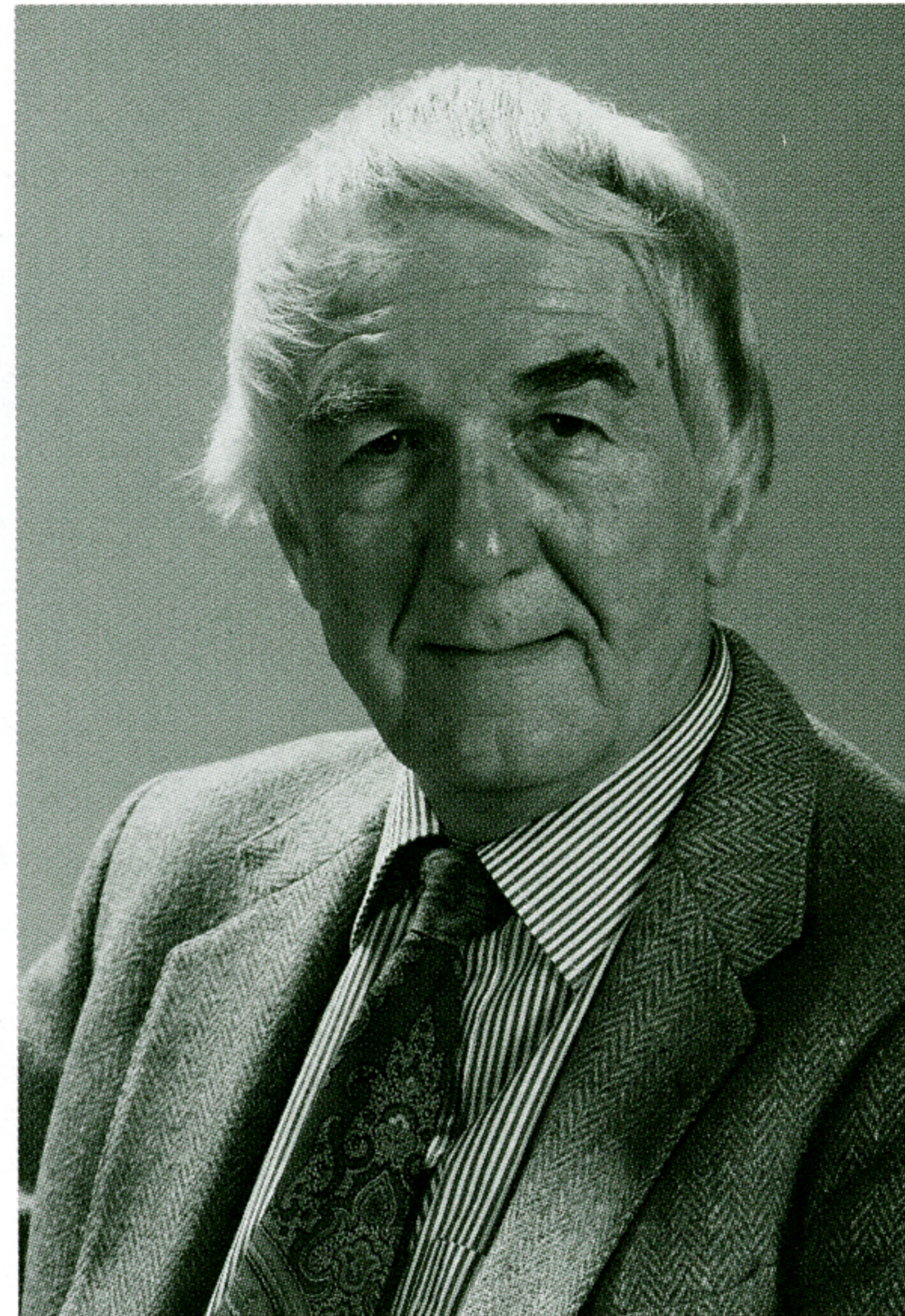
initiative for financing faith-based charities, "I somewhat surprised my fellow panelists by defending this proposition, because the alternative, excluding faith-based charities from federal funding, surely was not defensible. While making that argument, I was aware that two or three years earlier I would not have done so."

The Northern Magus: Pierre Trudeau and Canadians enchanted readers in 1980. If he were writing the book today, Gwyn says, he would have probed more deeply at some points. "In terms of the way Trudeau behaved, his value system, I believe his Catholicism was important to him. But I didn't examine that very much at the time, because it wasn't as significant to me then as it would be now."

He expects to have plenty to write about in future. There's a growing sense among Canadians that something has gone wrong with our values, he says, and this unease has pushed moral and ethical issues higher on the agenda. Another factor is the growing strength of immigrant religions such as Islam and Sikhism, that are raising the energy level of the debate. Finally, the advances of science and technology are forcing us to face ethical questions that would have read like science fiction 20 years ago.

"I think that our Church has something to say about fundamental moral issues," Gwyn says. "And those that catch my attention are the ones that touch that most sacred of all issues: what is a human being? The claim is being made that the first human being will be cloned in a few years' time. All the polls show that the vast majority of people—something like 80 per cent—don't want human cloning. And the same polls show that the vast majority of people assume this is going to happen, that whatever science can do, it should do, and anyway it's going to do."

But not without a debate. Richard Gwyn, for one, will be warming up his keyboard. "My writ is to write about politics," he says. "But it's a broad writ, and issues of meaning will come up more in my writing than they have in the past." 



Journalist Richard Gwyn spoke at St. Jerome's on October 12.

All things human—all things new

Events still ahead in the St. Jerome's Centre for Catholic Experience 2001-2002 season

November 9

Kathleen Keating
Women and the Church

December 3

Jean Vanier
Becoming Human: Living for Others

(We regret that all available spaces have been reserved.)

December 14

The 9:30 Choir
Song: A Celebration of Community

January 25

Lucinda Vardey
Beyond Words: The Language of the Feminine Spirit

February 8

Lee Cormie
Reading the Bible: Hope and History

March 1

Douglas Letson
Power and Peril: The Perils of Writing About the Power of the Church

April 5

Reginald Bibby
Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada

For details visit website www.sju.ca/services/stju_centre

Or call (519) 884-8111, ext. 259 to request a brochure.