

# A son and his father

“I regret,” Alexandre Trudeau began, “that I must give up my claim to be ‘The Hidden Trudeau.’”

The laughter that erupted from those assembled in the St. Jerome’s Community Centre on November 6 recognized that this most private son of Canada’s most private prime minister was about to do something extraordinary. He was about to talk about Pierre Trudeau’s faith and spirituality from the only vantage point not presented in the book being launched that evening: that of a son reflecting upon the guidance and example of his father.

A year before, in May 2003, friends, colleagues, and scholars gathered at St. Jerome’s and the University of Waterloo to examine Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s faith and its influence on his public life. From those discussions came *The Hidden Trudeau: The Faith Behind the Politics* (Novalis) edited by John English, Richard Gwyn, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer. The book documents the insights of many participants who knew or had studied Trudeau, including John Turner, Allan

MacEachen, Stephen Clarkson, Michael W. Higgins, and Bruce Powe. Speaker after speaker arrived at a conclusion that Alexandre summed up in three words more than a year later: for Pierre Trudeau, religious faith was “a private thing.”

In looking to the prominent, public role that religion has come to play in American political life, Alexandre is proud that his father’s religious conviction was private. But he is also “proud that he shared it with me and my brothers.”

Without breaching that privacy, he offered glimpses into how his father encouraged a sense of faith and social justice within his sons, taking them to Mass and developing their understanding of the proper role and exercise of religious belief by reading to them from literary classics.

In particular, Alexandre remembered how his


father was moved by an episode in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Jean Valjean, arrested for burglarizing a church, is freed when the Bishop tells the gendarmes that he had given the stolen candlesticks to Valjean as a gift. A cleric of less generous disposition featured in another favourite story drawn from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. The parable of Christ’s return to Earth and imprisonment by the Grand Inquisitor demonstrated to Alexandre the perils of an institutionalized belief severed from its humane origins.

“It stays with me,” he said.

Alexandre has chosen to enact his personal sense of social justice as a filmmaker and journalist for *Maclean’s*. His documentary *Embedded in Iraq* chronicles the forty days he spent living with a middle-class Baghdad family before, during and after the American invasion. His latest film, *The Fence*, documents the time he spent living on both sides of the security barrier separating Israel from Palestine—first with an Israeli family, then with a Palestinian man. It is his gift to create a human context for the momentous issues of our time.

In considering the foundation for his own beliefs, Alexandre quoted Pascal’s famous Wager on God’s Existence: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.” And, like his father, he believes that religious belief is something shared with others “as our most sacred, private thing.”

He shared such a moment in his closing remarks, recounting a meeting with an elderly Muslim who acknowledged that “he loved his religion, but he had never met a true Muslim.” And Alexandre concurred: “I said the same: ‘I am a Christian, but I have never met a true Christian.’”

The speech was the highlight of an event which raised money to support the Pierre Trudeau Scholarship. Created by Dr. Ron Schlegel, this scholarship is available through St. Jerome’s to upper-year students throughout the University of Waterloo studying in areas closely associated with Pierre Trudeau: history, philosophy, religious studies, and political science. 

*All royalties from the sale of The Hidden Trudeau will be donated to the Trudeau Scholarship by Novalis.*

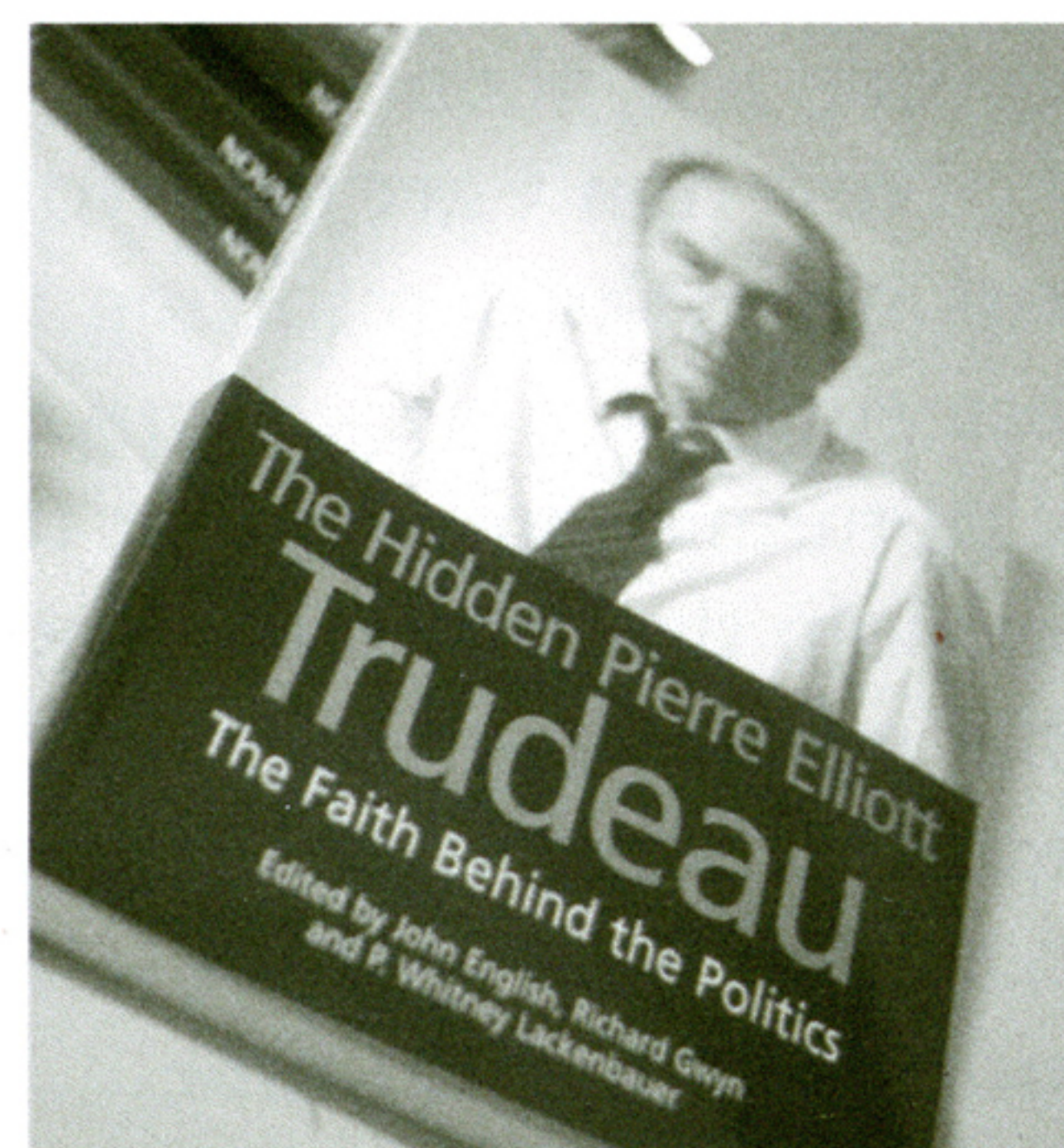


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