

# Missionaries shun modern societal myths, comforts

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ues, in addition to a single-minded focus on God's wisdom, is at the heart of missionary work.

Missionaries say their adherence to holy books such as the Bible or Koran enables them to counter societal myths, such as beauty being merely physical or self-gratification being valued above all else.

Echoing maxims they maintain come from God, missionaries believe appearances are irrelevant when placed next to character and action. It is character and action that reinforce the duty to carry out God's will as outlined in the holy books, which teach indulging in earthly pleasures often prevents humans focusing on the most righteous task of serving others.

Mr. Mirza revealed a plethora of parallels between Christian and Muslim missionary doctrine. He talked about Harzat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the spiritual originator of Islam's Ahmadiyya movement, with the reverence a teenager reserves for the latest pop star.

"People found him so pious and dedicated to Islam. In his lifetime, he asked followers to come forward and devote their lives completely to Islam," Mr. Mirza said, seated in the mosque's library next to a giant map of dozens of cities in which Ahmadiyya Muslims have set up missionary outposts. Locales include Rome, Moscow and Beijing.

Between 1889 and 1908, it is estimated Ahmad converted to Islam more than 500,000 inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent and other areas. On two missions in Chicago

and San Francisco between 1981 and 1998, Mr. Mirza converted 30 people to the faith, but said that number is irrelevant next to the importance of its aim.

*'Jesus was obedient, so I am obedient.'*

"It is (about) the struggle," he said. "You always try your best to convince people the message you have is really good for them. Anything which really takes your attention away from your spirituality, damages your soul. It doesn't matter if it's rock 'n' roll or (the TV show) Survivor. If these activities take away from your religious responsibilities, that is not good for your spiritual health. That's where

my struggle comes in."

Father Fedele Bisceglia, a Franciscan brother from Italy who has worked with lepers in Africa and several other areas of the world, knows the struggle all too well.

He has carried out dozens of projects over the past two decades, including overseeing a centre for handicapped children in Central Africa and establishing a soup kitchen in southern Italy.

The lengths to which he went to help one person were so great, one family member noted, it inspired awe from an Anglican priest who called him a true man of God.

Speaking through a translator inside Maple's Divine Mercy Catholic School, where students have helped him raise \$1,750 for an abandoned child for whom he's caring, Father Bisceglia said he has no

problem forsaking life's comforts.

Media messages that push happiness through self-gratification or consumerism, he added, are false.

"Come and do the work that I do because I'm the happiest man in the world," he said.

Family members from Woodbridge noted Father Bisceglia, who often leads mass at St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church, became "quite rebellious" at age six. Upset over the death of his mother, he went to live in a Christian orphanage and eventually became devoted to causes espoused by St. Francis of Assisi.

Father Bisceglia said he takes part in missions simply because he loves.

"Jesus was obedient, so I am obedient," he said.

## Seeking personal God

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ality is a term whose vagueness is one of the reasons for its popularity.

Boomers, writes Emberley, a Carleton University professor who spoke to more than 350 Canadians across the country, seek a personal, not an institutional, God, one who is inclusive, not discriminating.

But because boomers also seek a "raw hunger for spiritual wholeness, a hunger for what is real, what is in the fullest sense", they are at the cutting edge of today's spiritual searches.

It may be easy to lampoon, but Emberley separates the snake-oil from a sincere quest for enlightenment, a quest that is not the result of aging or ennui, "but

a quickening way of thinking and being, which has lain dormant for three decades".

And it's one, he argues, that policy-makers, both temporal and ecclesiastical, ignore at their peril.

I don't mean to give the next book on the subject short shrift, but I haven't read it yet: Reg Bibby, Canada's premier chronicler of religious trends, has just released *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*, whose advance notices tell an optimistic story: There's a significant rejuvenation of religion in Canada, both inside and outside the churches. Either way, blame the boomers.

Ron Csillag, a Thornhill resident, is a regular contributor to the Faith section. He may be reached at [csillag@rogers.com](mailto:csillag@rogers.com)



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