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Defined by Spirituality?

Michael W. Higgins

Before we set out on our journey to discover something about the spiritual pilgrimage of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, it is helpful to set the context. In Canada, unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, we do not like to talk about religion and public life. It makes us uncomfortable. A perfect illustration of this unhappy truism can be seen in the recent portrait that appeared in *The Globe and Mail* by Doug Saunders on the life and leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair.¹ In this otherwise informative and insightful piece on Prime Minister Blair, Mr. Saunders manages to avoid any – partial, allusive, or even exotic – reference to the quite considerable role that religious conviction plays in the life of England's current prime minister. In an interesting piece in the June 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair* entitled "Blair's Big Gamble," David Margolick provides an illuminating profile of Blair and his relationship with President George W. Bush that pays considerable attention to the role of religion in the makeup of both these influential politicians.

Canadian skittishness – at least that of the media – on raising issues of faith, spirituality, religious conviction, and philosophical tenets in relation to public leadership stands in sharp contrast to the open season religion provides U.S. and British journalists. Jim Wallis, an American activist and writer, puts the case very well in his "Should Joe Lieberman Keep His Faith to Himself?":

Secular fundamentalists make a fundamental mistake. They believe that the separation of church and state ought to mean the separation of faith from politics. While it is true that some conservative religionists might want to blur the boundaries between

church and state, most advocates of religious values in the public square, like Lieberman, do not. Most of us don't support state- or school-sanctioned prayer in public schools, nor officially backed prayers at high school football games in Texas.

Yet open talk of how a candidate's faith shapes his or her political values should be viewed as a positive thing – it is as relevant and appropriate as many other facts about a politician's background, convictions, and experience for public office. The more talk about values the better in political campaigns and, as Joe Lieberman has pointed out, religion is a primary source of values for many Americans. Clearly, minority religions and non-religious people must always be respected and protected in our nation. But the core commitments of religious liberty need not be compromised by an open discussion of faith in public life. Indeed, the kind of talk about religion and politics Lieberman has sparked in this election campaign represents, according to columnist E. J. Dionne; "not a threat to religious liberty but its triumph."²

What is true for Americans in this regard is also true for Canadians. Talk about religion and politics in the public forum is neither sectarian nor partisan nor a source of intolerance and root cause for persecution. It is a guarantor of liberty for all our citizens. The role, then, of spirituality and faith in the making of Pierre Elliott Trudeau is entirely appropriate for public consideration and digestion. Why should it be otherwise? In my view, Pierre Elliott Trudeau was a man of intense, intelligent, and reflective faith, and this critical dimension of the man needs to be rightly considered when assessing his role and impact on Canadian society.

His funeral liturgy was conducted with great grace by all the principal players and presided over by Jean-Claude Cardinal Turcotte, the cardinal archbishop of Montreal, with sensitivity and dignity. The homilist, Father Jean-Guy Dubuc, carefully composed and delivered his homily with genuine feeling. The readings were judiciously chosen, the choir in fine form, and the artful alternation between post-Second Vatican Council liturgical practice and form with pre-Second Vatican Council hymnody and chant provided an exquisite portrait of Trudeau's aesthetic and spiritual leanings.

Ontario critic and television personality Ian Brown, however, observed that the "service droned on. That's how the Catholic fathers do it; they prevent you from feeling any grief by boring you unconscious." Ouch! This is altogether rather precious when you consider that it emanates from one inclined to sermonize at will.

But more serious still was a column by that otherwise reliably informed and intelligent critic of national and personal quirks and quandaries, Margaret Wente of *The Globe and Mail*. Her "Counterpoint" column about Trudeau the father and lover was insightful and well-crafted, but her subsequent column on the memorial celebrations and funeral mass amounted to a shocking disclosure of ignorance. In one instance she remarked that "in the days after Mr. Trudeau's death, he surprised us all over again with what we hadn't known about him. He surprised us with his bottomless tenderness toward his children and with his religiosity." Religiosity means excessively or sentimentally religious. Pierre Trudeau "sentimentally religious"? The Jesuit child with an intellectual taste for the rigours of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas sentimental?

Wente writes that "it's unnerving, that faith. It came from a tradition of high-church intellectualism that has almost died out and is almost incomprehensible to worldly children of a secular age like us." What, pray tell, is "high-church intellectualism"? Is this a new epiphenomenon to be observed in the Catholic world that has succeeded so far in evading the careful scrutiny of Catholic scholars? Or is it, yet once again, a depressing instance of sloppy writing and imperfect understanding of the subject matter?

The intellectual and spiritual tradition of which Trudeau was a superb part is a tradition that embraces a goodly number of the political leaders of our country, admitting the wide range of variations and permutations due to intellect, character, and level of spiritual maturity. Brian Mulroney, Joe Clark, John Turner, Marc Lalonde, and Jean Chrétien are just a few of the political notables of the tradition Wente terms "incomprehensible to worldly children of a secular age like us."

To be a religious thinker does not mean that one is inclined to religiosity. Quite the contrary. To be a man or woman of faith in a secular age may well be far less the minority experience that dogmatic secularists believe it to be. The faith of Pierre Elliott Trudeau was constitutive of his very self-definition, of his very meaning as a human being, of his vocation as a father and national leader. The faith of Pierre Elliott Trudeau was private in its intensity but public in its expression. The final mass was not a convention for him, not an aesthetic experiment, a churchly tradition required by protocol. It was at the core of the man, and he applied to his faith that same level of passion and logic that so many of us have come to admire in other spheres of his public life.

Trudeau's spirituality was as much a part of the legacy as all his other accomplishments; to miss that simple point is to diminish him and ourselves.

In a recent article by Vancouver reporter Rod Mickleburgh on the recovery of Mike Harcourt, the former B.C. premier whose near-fatal fall at his beach cottage left him potentially paralyzed for life, Mickleburgh writes: "The ordeal, and the flood of prayers that were said on his behalf, have strengthened a part of Mr. Harcourt that he rarely talks about – spirituality. 'I'm not a great supporter of organized religion because, too often, people don't practise what they preach,' he said. 'But I've always been spiritual.'"³

This dichotomy – religion vs. spirituality – is, in my view, a false one. There is no surprise in Mike Harcourt's reflections; they are undoubtedly sincere and speak authentically of his own experience. What is a surprise is that he would use such terms at all, that a national newspaper known during the William Thorsell years as either hostile or indifferent to religion, and that a topic traditionally viewed as *verboden* in journalistic and political circles in the country, has now become, if not commonplace, certainly acceptable.

And so it has become acceptable to have not just an allusion, an utterance, a sound bite, or a talk on Trudeau and spirituality, but indeed a whole conference. Historians, religious studies scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and theologians will have much to chew on as they try and figure out why Canada is doing what has long been acceptable in the U.K., the U.S., and Australia: examine in the media the faith convictions, traditions, and spirituality of public figures.

Trudeau and his contemporaries were "puck shy" when it came to religion and public life. Religion is private property only. Beware! Something of a rationale for that position can be gleaned from Edith Iglauer's 1969 *New Yorker* profile of the new prime minister when she quotes Trudeau's Jesuit mentor Robert Bernier:

Even as a boy, Pierre needed a sense of dedication. To swallow the world takes a long time, and he started by getting an international background – preparing himself for anything and waiting to see where he could best go. I think he really committed himself to Canada with the magazine *Cité Libre*. We had the Duplessis government in Quebec, and the occasion was right. The domination of the clergy over political matters at that time in Quebec was detestable. They had been the most learned men for a couple of hundred years, and everyone had consulted them, but then they became detrimental to liberty and it was time for them to step back into the religious life. Pierre thinks, as a political man should, about the order in this world. Religion is something else; it's what to do to get into the other world.⁴

Not quite the enlightened post–Second Vatican Council thinking that you find in Trudeau’s contemporary, fellow religionist, and occasional political opponent, [the late] Claude Ryan:

Far from being marginal, religious faith can and should play a central role in the conduct of the Christian who is actively engaged in public life. I believe that our politicians should more and more accept to be transparent with the population as regards their religious opinions.... I do not question the sincerity of a politician who prefers to keep his religious opinions to himself. I do not doubt either that some politicians may have excellent personal reasons to do so. But Christian faith is not a faith that must remain exclusively private. I believe, as Newman did, that I owe it to my friends to let them know exactly who I am and what I think.⁵

Ryan’s Catholicism was activist, engaged, Liberationist, and deeply rooted in the social teachings of the Church, whereas Trudeau’s was philosophical, detached, classical, and insular. Trudeau had no stomach for the social initiatives of the Canadian episcopate – particularly as they involved a sharp critique of his own government’s fiscal policies – and when his friend Gerald Emmett Cardinal Carter of Toronto publicly distanced himself from the Canadian bishops’ 1983 “Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis,” Trudeau mused aloud and for the clear benefit of the media: “The fox is now among the chickens.” Trudeau much preferred the company of French Dominican intellectuals to Pedro Arrupe’s Jesuits.

If Trudeau had little taste for applied theology, he had a clear predilection for ecclesiological and epistemological investigations. If he was not fond of chatting with the likes of Dr. Tony Clarke and Bishop Remi De Roo, he was quite taken with the idea of a stimulating colloquy with the likes of Père Yves Congar and Père Marie-Dominique Chenu. In short, Trudeau delighted in the cut and thrust of Catholic intellectual life. After all, the Jesuit child knew the value of first sources, the importance of languages, the Jesuit love of the syllogism, the centrality of *eloquentia perfecta* in the making of a Christian gentleman, and the intellectual allure of the Jesuit motto to do all things, explore all things, for the greater glory of God – *ad majoram Dei gloriam*. In addition, of course, there is that wellspring of French Catholic intellectual life – the Personalist School – with philosophers Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel, and the non-Gallic Lublin School of Philosophy. This is Trudeau the Catholic thinker.

His spirituality, although undoubtedly intellectualist in part, was a genuine spirituality of resistance, grounded in a love both for justice and for the contemplative dimension. He had little time for the easy spiritualities that are so effortlessly marketed in Western culture as the next phase in human self-fulfillment. The *Chicken Soup for the Soul* school of spirituality espouses a strategy of self-enhancement techniques, a feel-good process of self-affirmation, that appeals to those hungry for spiritual fulfillment but disinclined to struggle for spiritual enlightenment.

Trudeau would never have opted for the easy way out in matters of the spirit any more than he would have in matters of the mind or body. His native temperament, Jesuit formation, stoical bearing, and competitive nature would have resisted the insubstantial nutrition proffered by *Chicken Soup* of any persuasion. Scrupulous, skeptical, and subversive, Trudeau's Jesuit or Ignatian spirituality is one of right-knowing and of making things just. It is a spirituality that does not so much proscribe experience as much as it invites one to sift and gauge its true measure. Found in an enchiridion or handbook, it is not a spirituality of the handbook. It is to be lived in its fullness in the present.

What, then, of Trudeau the Jesuit child?

Certainly there are numerous references to Trudeau's Jesuit training, to the Jesuit influences on his life, his Jesuit formation, as a cursory read of Andrew Cohen and J.L. Granatstein's *Trudeau's Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Pierre Elliott Trudeau* (1998) will bear ample witness. Journalists, biographers, political scientists, historians, and international commentators have written, sometimes with tiresome regularity, about the Jesuit-like qualities of temperament, intellect, and style of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. But what, precisely, in the context of the pre-Thirty-second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (pre-1975) era, does this actually mean? For example, the education that Pierre Elliott Trudeau received as a Jesuit child would have been comparable to that which stamped the estimable Richard Gwyn of *The Toronto Star* when he was moulded by the Company of Loyola at Stonyhurst, the great Catholic public school in England. But it clearly would not have been the same kind of Jesuit stamp felt by the media philosopher Mark Kingwell when he received his moulding at St. Paul's College in Winnipeg in the 1970s. Why?

Let me provide you with a very brief history of Jesuit education. Their first university – a *studium generale* – was established in 1547 at Gandia and their first classical college at Messina one year later. By the time of their suppression as an Order in 1773 they had 800 colleges and seminaries and 15,000 teachers to be found chiefly in Europe, the Americas, and India. The Jesuits are responsible for instituting the first

organized system of education in the Western world with its definable time structure and curriculum, and with the progression in an orderly and intelligible form from the lowest class to the highest. In 1599 the *Ratio Atque Institutio Studiorum Iesu* was codified and formulated under the fifth general of the Society of Jesus, the Italian aristocrat Claudio Aquaviva.

Diego Ledesma, one of the greatest of all Jesuit educators, advanced four reasons for a Jesuit education:

- i. the cultivation of languages
- ii. *eloquentia perfecta*
- iii. logic
- iv. the perfecting of Ciceronian and Scholastic splendour and rational refinement (an example of Trudeau's own famed "intellectual pugilism").

The education that Trudeau received at the Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf (the Lower Canadian Province of the Society of Jesus) was a formation secured by centuries. Although the great compendium of Jesuit public education, the *Ratio*, was very differently applied during the post-Suppression period (the Jesuits were reactivated following the formal reinstatement of the Society of Jesus in 1814), there are continuities of influence; style, and emphasis dating back to the sixteenth-century foundation. This was changed in great measure in the mid-1970s, but by that time Mr. Trudeau had long since graduated from Brébeuf.

The influence on Trudeau by individual Jesuits is critical, but it is also rather different from the "shaping strategy" to be found within the institution itself quite independent of any personality. Bob Rae, the former premier of the province of Ontario, in his article "Hedgehog or Fox?"⁶ provides informed commentary, although quite obliquely, on the Jesuit style, highlighting with grudging respect Trudeau's predilection for the subtle manoeuvre, clever repartee, and sophisticated argument. These are undoubtedly Jesuit qualities of mind, although Rae does not identify them as such. Still, they are very different in kind from the jesuitical or sophistical skills that one finds ably exercised by Trudeau's later contemporary President Bill Clinton.

In the end, however, if one is to discover the genuine and enduring influence of the Jesuits in their education formation, it must be found at the source of all Jesuit educational theory: the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola. As law professor and author Robert Drinan observes of his life as a Jesuit,

It is remarkable that they – the *Spiritual Exercises* – have the power to guide you, almost like *The Imitation of Christ*. You pick it up at any point and you find out what you need to know at that very moment. The *Spiritual Exercises* gives you the foundation, but I think that, like St. Ignatius himself, we need to move beyond the basics. He was a mystic for most of his life, his spirituality deepened as he matured, and I think that you can say that for most Jesuits. They deepened their own spiritual lives by going back to the things of Ignatius, to the first 30-day retreat, and then to the second 30-day retreat that we do during our tertianship. The concepts of the *Spiritual Exercises* have a way of getting into your soul in such a manner that you may not be able to articulate them, but they are there – real, pervasive and determinative.⁷

There is little textual or oral evidence that Mr. Trudeau read the *Exercises* or had seen them as a guide in his personal life, but it is safe to conclude that the shaping that his own masters had in the tradition of the *Exercises* helped to cultivate in their charge an intellectual and spiritual disposition that would last for his whole life.

But the Jesuit makeup of Trudeau is only part of the pilgrimage. For most of his life, Trudeau sought-out confessors, confidants, interlocutors, and intellectuals from within the Order of Preachers – the “*domini canes*,” the Dogs of the Lord, the Dominicans. Louis-Marie Régis, Benoît Lacroix, and Gilles-Dominique Mailhot were just a few of the Canadian Dominicans who were close to him. Michel Gourgues, Rector of the Collège Dominicain philosophie et théologie, has observed:

Trudeau's ties with the Order flourished throughout the years. Indeed he considered himself a lay Dominican, having taken philosophy courses in his youth and afterwards staying in contact with one of his teachers, Father Louis-Marie Régis, whom he thought of as his spiritual director and as a friend. In fact, he asked Père Régis, among others, to bless his marriage and he attended his funeral mass in 1998. While he was Prime Minister, he would regularly but at unexpected times visit Père Régis's priory. When Yves Congar came to teach for a term at the Collège Dominicain in Ottawa, Trudeau was anxious to meet him and invited Père Congar to Sussex Drive for a meal. Congar was quite struck by Trudeau's familiarity with his work, including his magisterial and seminal work, *Towards a Lay Theology*.⁸

Very possibly, what Trudeau found compatible in Dominican spirituality is the Order's commitment to truth (their motto is "*veritas*"), a truth that is not simply intellectualist (a "what") but relational (a "who") – an understanding of truth that emerges out of the dynamic of contemplation and action, out of the tensions of the thinker and the lover.

This assiduous pursuit of truth, centered in liturgy and common life, nurtured by friendship and prayer, is the hallmark of all the luminaries of the Order. If the focus has been on the Middle Ages [remember Trudeau's many conversations and seminars on medieval thought and dialectic at Université de Montréal, a point highlighted by Dominican scholar and activist Philippe Leblanc], it is because the renewal of Dominican life in the 20th century has been achieved by returning to its authentic roots, its post-conciliar *ressourcement*. The great Dominicans of the 20th century – Sertillanges, Lagrange, Chenu [Trudeau visited him almost every time he was in Paris], Congar, and Schillebeeckx – have all lived lives of intense activity marked by scholarship and a lively interest in their neighbours' good.⁹

One of the attributes of the Dominican charism appears, according to former Master General Timothy Radcliffe (scion of a venerable Recusant family, Ampleforth-educated, and past Oxford professor), to be freedom: the freedom of the poor itinerant preacher, the freedom to scatter, "the freedom of the compassionate person, who dared to see and to respond." And, in the end, the freedom from a government that involves limiting the freedom of the individual to a government that "enables us to share a common responsibility for our life and mission."¹⁰

The intellectual appeal of the Dominicans and the methodological rigour of the Jesuits needed some counterbalancing, and I believe that could be found in the Benedictine tradition, with its sweet savouring of the word and mystery in *lectio divina* and its plenitude of graces, its natural rhythms of mind, body, and spirit. Dom Laurence Freeman, onetime prior of the Benedictine Priory of Montreal who would have had regular congress with Trudeau during the years that the Christian Meditation Community flourished on Pine, succinctly identifies the features of Benedictine spirituality:

The Benedictine tradition continues to inspire me because of its vision of the possibility of an integration of the different activities and constituents of life. St. Benedict sees the monastic life as a harmony of prayer, work, manual work, creative work, and study, a harmony that is held together centred in a spirit of

charity and a love of God and of neighbour.... I think the essence of the Benedictine approach has always been hospitality, openness and flexibility, and the willingness to allow people to share life and the experience of the community according to their own capacity and according to their own calling.... it strikes me as a being broad-minded, healthy, normal and human way of living the search for God.¹¹

Trudeau frequently chose Saint Benoît-du-Lac – a community of the Solesmes tradition – for his retreats, as well as meditating and attending the Hours and the Eucharist at Montreal's Benedictine Community with some regularity. I saw him there once at the Office of Sext, seated on the floor, meditating, emptying his mind, his personal mantra methodically recited, his visage serene, posture perfect, surrounded by young McGill students and fellow intellectuals such as Charles Taylor. I do not know if he ever met the founder and *eminence grise* of the Christian Meditation Movement, the former professor of international jurisprudence at Trinity College, Dublin, Dom John Main. It is Main's conviction of the centrality of meditation to the fully-lived and examined life that struck a chord with Trudeau. Experience is not eschewed, the inner journey reduced to easy formulae, the intellect disparaged and feared, stillness and silence rendered suspect, rubric and ritual displacing hard and honest inquiry. For Main, as for Trudeau, "we have to make contact with the ground of our being. And unless that process is underway, all our experience will leave us in the shallows.... More and more men and women in our society are beginning to understand that our personal problems and the problems that we face as a society are basically spiritual problems."¹²

In the end, Trudeau was a spiritual hybrid: a disciplinarian (the Jesuit), a philosopher (the Dominican), and a contemplative (the Benedictine). Never overtly or publicly "theological" in the way of a Baroness Thatcher or Tony Blair, or of compatriots Claude Ryan or Gérard Pelletier, never fervent and evangelical in the way of a George W. Bush or Jimmy Carter, ever suspicious of ecclesial and state commingling, yet nonetheless comfortable in the presence of senior Catholic ecclesiastics such as Gerald Emmett Carter, Trudeau's maturing (and occasionally mutating) spirituality suffused, anchored, and directed his inner life. In no small part, it defined him.