



Celebrating the national evangelical mind



A snapshot of contemporary Canadian evangelical writers

Wayne Holst
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For more than a decade, I have been reading Canadian religious material in general and books in particular. I scan many popular and scholarly periodicals and communicate with numerous authors, editors and publishers. I have written for evangelical and mainline Protestant publications, for Roman Catholic as well as secular audiences. My personal archive now contains 500 reviews that have been carried by various Canadian and international media.

There are many who could be included among those Canadian Christian writers who are making their mark in the evangelical world. This is not a definitive or exhaustive list. Rather it is a snapshot—not a panoramic movie—of those who deserve appreciation for their contributions to current Canadian evangelical writing and publishing.

Missing material

About a dozen years ago Mark Noll of Wheaton College, perhaps the most prominent American evangelical historian, authored a book entitled *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994). He wrote it as “an epistle from a wounded lover.” It was a groundbreaking, perception-altering work; a wide-ranging piece of cultural criticism which argued, “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”

Noll complained that evangelical intellectual influence on American politics, science and the arts (to say nothing of religion) had atrophied. He mourned what he saw as a great divorce between intellect and piety in North American evangelical Christianity.

Noll had searched vainly for evangelical material by and for thoughtful people whose faith demanded an intelligent defense, just as their intelligence longed for the comforts of faith. Anti-intellectualism and intellectual-elitism are the dual enemies of a vibrant and vital faith, he wrote. The church and the academy must never lose touch with each other. Giving a reasonable, winsome account of the hope lying within a Christian was essential but missing.

Although Noll is a well-respected scholar, I believe he was too sweeping and at the same time too nationally confined in his judgment. I am convinced, more than a decade after Noll's perceptive indictment, that Canada has never lacked and continues to possess notable evangelical thinkers and spokespersons. Some prominent Canadian evangelicals have been unusually successful as reconcilers of reason and piety. They have penetrated and continue to influence many social, cultural, political and economic spheres. Communicating with both intellectual rigor and passion, they balance the faith-claims of head and heart as well as their personal and professional lives. I detect a surprising array of such persons with national and international influence. Indeed, their numbers and impact have been increasing. This nation, and especially its secularized elite, needs to be awakened from slumber and reminded of this important phenomenon. Canada would be wise to recognize and celebrate its "evangelical mind."

Senior mentorship

Two senior mentors whose ideas have challenged my thinking and helped mature the faith of many within and beyond their own evangelical communities are Clark H. Pinnock and Ian Hunter.

Pinnock is now, after a quarter century of teaching, preaching and writing books, a professor emeritus of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. Throughout his career he has been a pilgrim who followed where the word of God—as he understands it—has led him.

Pinnock fathered a cross-denominational movement popularly known as Open Theism. His most famous book, and the one that first drew much attention to him, is *Most Moved Mover* (Baker, 2001) in which he presents his arguments on the subject.

Open Theism asserts that God is not all-knowing in the classic theological sense and does not possess certain knowledge of all aspects of the future. Pinnock's theology consistently repudiates doctrines of predestination and similar views based on fatalism or determinism.

In November of 2002, Pinnock was formally required to defend his ideas and his membership in the Evangelical Theological Society, an international association of conservative scholars that is centered in the United States. Pinnock defended himself graciously and agreed to make a few nuanced changes to several footnotes in his book.

These actions preserved his membership in the society as well as his reputation in the estimation of many of his colleagues. But the movement he spawned continues to encourage evangelicals to grapple with and refine their theologies concerning the mind and will of God.

Hunter is professor emeritus in the faculty of law at the University of Western Ontario, in London. He was a teacher of jurisprudence for many years but his avocation is popular writing on religious and legal matters in secular and religious periodicals. He authored a biography of Malcolm Muggeridge and edited a collection of his writings. The feisty English communicator became a role model, with whom Hunter shares some obvious traits of character.

Hunter is not one to suffer fools gladly. But even those who take exception to his opinions will often, albeit grudgingly, appreciate his honesty and clarity.

In a recent address to the London Inter-Ministerial Fellowship, Hunter took on both lawyers and clergy. He said solicitors were little more than hired guns and that modern clergy were, by and

large, utterly disregarded. He complained about the current lack of judicial standards. He decried the fact that three pillars of Canadian law—the profession, the law schools and the courts—have each been undermined by a skewed interpretation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

As a lifetime churchgoer Hunter was no easier on preachers. He spoke of the incompatibility between revealed religion and postmodern culture. He chastised clergy for selling out to the latter and warned them about growing governmental hostility to their privileged tax status. Church organizations that try to use the courts in an attempt to protect religious freedom are misled, he continued. The Canadian charter, by its nature, will always favour secular rights over religion. Hunter also lampooned the feminization of Canadian Christianity. This, he ventured, results in churches largely devoid of males. Few men protest these developments, however.

Hunter's opinions may cause some people to wince, but to ignore him without working through the implications of his prickly arguments will leave everyone intellectually impoverished.

Prime examples

Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge in Alberta and John G. Stackhouse Jr. of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, are evangelical writers at the apex of their influence. When the secular media want a cogent, sound bite opinion on a religious issue affecting Canadians in general, they regularly contact Bibby and Stackhouse. When the churches in Canada and beyond seek a better understanding of how they might deal with current challenges and opportunities, these effective intellectual communicators respond with books, articles and on-site presentations. No other interpreters are their equal when it comes to understanding and addressing the Canadian context and religious spectrum.

Bibby has been one of the country's better-known academics for almost three decades. His work continues to be published in virtually all of Canada's major periodicals and he frequently appears on the national media. He has interpreted his findings to a wide range of Protestant, Catholic and other faith groups. In the United States, he is known as Canada's authoritative religious commentator.

A Baptist by background and style, Bibby began studies in theology but gravitated into the sociology of religion. He avoids apologetics, and sees his primary contribution as a cultural and religious trend-spotter. Bibby possesses a rare skill among academics. He is adept as both a researcher and popular presenter of his findings.

Bibby's most recent books (of many over the years) have charted, for the first time, a rise in the spiritual consciousness of contemporary Canadian life. *Restless Gods* (Novalis, 2002) and *Restless Churches* (Novalis, 2004) provide scientific data and a practical resource to help churches respond to new missional opportunities.

After writing about religion for many years, Bibby has more recently begun to shift his focus by making a personal contribution to help the churches respond to the spiritual renewal taking place in Canada today.

John Stackhouse has taught at Wheaton College in the U.S. and at the University of Manitoba. He currently holds the Sangwoo Youtong Chee Chair of Theology and Culture at Regent College in Vancouver, as well as serving as adjunct professor of religious studies at the University of British Columbia.

He has written more than 400 articles and reviews. He is the editor of four and the author of five books including *Canadian Evangelicalism in the 20th Century* (Regent, 1998) and *No Other Gods*

Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions (Baker, 2001). He also serves as a contributing editor for Christianity Today and Books & Culture.

Stackhouse has demonstrated a special ability to interpret modern evangelicalism to evangelicals themselves and to others. He wants to help evangelicals break out of confining, unhelpful thought-patterns of the past and to respond to contemporary challenges of witness and service through more effective political and social engagement.

In a recent article in Faith Today, the official periodical of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Stackhouse writes helpfully that Canadian evangelicals are not just like American evangelicals. They are not threats to Canadian public welfare but positive contributors to it. They do pose a threat to some cherished ideas of the liberal Canadian intelligentsia and this has led to some “evangeliphobia.” He explains why evangelicals seek to be moral realists in a North American cultural ethos of moral relativism.

While Stackhouse is comfortable writing for evangelical readers in general, he is particularly interested in the distinctives of Canadian evangelical culture, theological stance and social/political engagement.

Women to watch

Lorna Dueck and Denyse O’Leary help to bring gender balance and a feminine perspective to a male-dominated group of evangelical writers and communicators.

Dueck is the talented executive producer of her own current affairs program, “Listen Up TV”, with offices located in Burlington, Ontario. In addition to writing faith and public life commentary for the Globe and Mail she is in demand as a popular public speaker on moral values and Canadian society.

Dueck began her media career in radio and by writing for ChristianWeek and Faith Today and then worked for “100 Huntley Street” for eight years. She co-authored the book, In Search of Hidden Heroes with Don Moore (Vision 2000/Faith Today Publications, 1995)—a collection of stories about Canadians who share their faith in daily life. As an investigative reporter, Lorna produced documentaries on subjects ranging from war-torn Sierra Leone to the Innu of Labrador.

As the founder of the National Coalition of Concerned Mothers, Dueck led in the presentation of a brief to a Canadian Senate committee studying euthanasia and has lobbied for tougher child pornography laws.

O’Leary has been a freelance writer for 35 years. She specializes in scientific developments of interest to faith communities. As a regular columnist for ChristianWeek, she focuses on the contemporary interrelationship of science and faith. O’Leary has also written for Christianity Today, Globe & Mail, the Toronto Star and Canadian Living.

O’Leary’s book, By Design or by Chance? The Growing Controversy on the Origins of Life in the Universe (Castle Quay Books Canada, 2004) helps to clarify for a confused Christian readership the current debate between Darwinian, Intelligent Design and Creation Science perspectives. She presents a range of views from leading scientific writers and organizes her presentation in a simple but comprehensive way.

In addition to their current intellectual contributions, Dueck and O’Leary are exemplary models for media-minded female evangelical figures of the future.

An inordinate number of Canadian evangelical personalities serve as visible and respected communicators on our contemporary cultural scene. Presented here are but a few of them. Mark Noll notwithstanding, it’s time to celebrate the Canadian evangelical mind!

Wayne A. Holst is an adult educator at St. David's United Church, in Calgary, Alberta. He teaches religion and culture at the University of Calgary and is the former book reviews coordinator for ChristianWeek.