

Chester Ronning Centre Newsletter

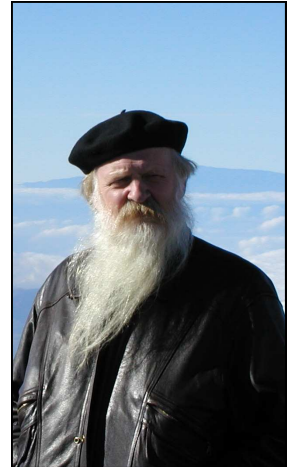
Fall 2006—Vol. 1, Iss. 1

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Director's Note

The Chester Ronning Centre cultivates a deep understanding of issues and themes at the intersection of religion, faith, and public life. We deal with the difficult questions asked by those who are religious and those who are secular, questions that heighten our sense of the fragility of public life in liberal democratic societies and elsewhere. Breaking the stalemate between the dialectical thinking of right and left, religious and secular, and exploring the capacities obscured by this “comfortable divide” is central to our aim.



We are working in three spheres: the academy, the public square, and religious communities across the spectrum of human cultures. The Ronning Centre brings forward the finest thinking of women and men who anchor their considerations in religious worldviews as well as public intellectuals rooted in the theoretical frameworks that emerged from the Enlightenment and modern ideologies. Our initial task is to animate a new conversation that takes the depth and texture of these worldviews seriously, if not literally, and to explore what each of them may offer to the local, national, and international discussions that surface when religion and public life intersect in the pluralistic context in which most of us now live.

David J. Goa,
Director

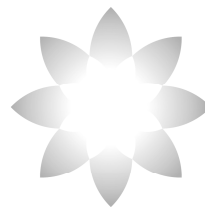
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Chester Ronning Centre
for the Study of Religion and Public Life

www.augustana.ca/ronning

THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF THE CHESTER
RONNING CENTRE
Philip Merklinger

The official launch of the Chester Ronning Centre was on 25 March, 2006. The Centre will be a place of hospitality for the difficult questions we face when religion and public life intersect.

“There is an old saying that a prophet has no honour in his own home,” remarked Audrey Topping, daughter of Chester Ronning. “That certainly is not true of Camrose.” The 200 people who attended would certainly agree that Ronning exemplified the mission of the Centre. He spent a good part of his life in Camrose as principal of Camrose Lutheran College (1927–1942). Ronning ran for the United Farmers of Alberta in a by-election in 1932 and was elected as a member of Alberta’s Legislative Assembly. He also ran for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in the federal election of 1945 but lost. Ronning served as a diplomat in Norway, India, China, Korea, and at the UN, and as mediator in secret peace talks during the Vietnam War.

Audrey Topping (an accomplished photojournalist), her husband Seymour Topping (former *New York Times* correspondent, editor, and Columbia University professor), Brian Evans (China scholar and professor emeritus at the University of Alberta), Berdie Fowler (Ronning’s secretary at Camrose Lutheran and publisher of the *Camrose Booster*), Bill Blaikie (MP and deputy leader of the federal New Democrats), and Ray Schultz (Lutheran bishop) all spoke about Ronning’s life. The Augustana Choir performed.

Bill Blaikie emphasized the “timeliness” of the launch of the Centre: “I was saying we needed a centre for religious studies and I was thinking of the University of Winnipeg. I didn’t know about Augustana and Camrose. We need peace between religions and this Centre is a great thing.”

Audrey Topping next told a selection of stories about Ronning and showed slides. Both words and pictures outlined a life that was grounded in the Christian faith and the fundamental care he believed it demanded of him.



Audrey Topping at Public Launch

This care informed everything Ronning did when he was principal of Camrose Lutheran, according to Berdie Fowler. It was also very much in evidence when Ronning strove to negotiate peace between the United States and North Vietnam. Significantly, his faith-based care was exercised in his desire and ability to communicate *on a personal level* with all people, no matter who they were, what they believed, or where they were from.

Seymour Topping and Brian Evans gave us an even deeper sense of who Ronning was and what he was able to accomplish. Topping noted that Ronning retained his “profound hope for a better world.” Perhaps, Topping suggested, “students would find unending inspiration” in Ronning’s life. This point was underscored by Ray Schultz who noted, “Post-modernism isn’t going to be able to help us. We need something more. It is a transmodern world and we must share across historical and ideological boundaries.”

Afterward one audience member commented: “Just imagine, a person from Camrose did all that.” Over the course of the afternoon it became clear that Ronning demonstrated that a human life is an open horizon of possibility and can make an impact on public life. Indeed, Ronning was able to see potential in even the mundane biographical details of his own life — ethnicity, religious background, place of origin, and religious faith. These were his entry points into public life. Religion instructed Ronning in the ways of hope. By extension, he teaches us that religion can also instruct public life in the ways of hope. All in all, the official launch was a successful and auspicious start for the Centre.

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Ronning Centre Roundtables

*Many don't see any
real connection be-
tween their faith
and their farming
practises...*

*Brian
Rozmahel*

Interesting issues emerged from two roundtable discussions held in November 2005 in Camrose and Edmonton. We at the Ronning Centre want to consider them in our programming and research.

In Camrose the first issue to emerge was the role religion could play, but isn't, in helping farmers find a voice for their struggles. Some feel shamed. Others feel impotent because they think they have no power to change the pattern of the unsettling of rural communities. The values or ethics that people in rural church communities display are often not shaped by the tradition and texts of their own faith, but by an external, individualistic, consumer-oriented culture. Many don't see any real connection between their faith and their farming practises or with their own economic and relational struggles or those of their neighbours.

Related to this disconnect between faith and economic and community life is the disengagement from community involvement in both smaller cities like Camrose and in the suburbanization of Edmonton. A culture of individualism flourishes especially well in built environments that have no communal centre or heart. Within suburbia, religious groups sometimes only nurture the suburban, disengaged soul. Other religious groups become the only "centre" which provides the social life, entertainment, and meeting point for the otherwise anonymous community. What happens to celebrating diversity, to dialogue amongst differences, and to political engagement, all of which are crucial for a democracy?

*Post-modernism
isn't going to be
able to help us. We
need something
more...*

*Bishop Ray
Schultz*

(cont'd on next page...)



Panellists at the First Chester Ronning Public Forum

Chester Ronning Centre
for the study of religion and public life

Visit our website at
www.augustana.ca/ronning

- **Mission Statement**
- **Calendar of Events**
- **Work of the Centre**
- **Senior Staff and Associates**
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The Chester Ronning Centre Newsletter
is a bi-annual publication of
The Chester Ronning Centre
Editor: Dittmar Mündel
Photography: Reiner Loewan

Roundtables, Cont'd from page 3

As for celebrating difference, the question was asked: How can the Ronning Centre create opportunities and spaces of hospitality so people can feel free to express their divergent religious or secular views without having to be dogmatically or politically correct? People feel censored or they now censor themselves to fit into their religious and secular fraternity, and genuine dialogue with the other, in all its complexity and texture, is lost. This narrowing of conversation is also detectable in the media with the prevalence of sound bites. The absence of genuine dialogue around the same-sex marriage act, but the presence of “taking a stand” and rallying the troops is a good example of this avoidance of engaging the other. It also was cited as an example of how we can bleed off intellectual and emotional energy that is needed for so many justice issues that we dissociate from, such as AIDS in Africa.

In religious communities it seems very hard to deal with the structural aspects of injustices. Some argue that churches' preoccupation with charity siphons off the energy needed to expose and battle unjust struc-

tures, but maybe the alternatives are framed incorrectly. The issue is not genuine charity, which responds to the needs of strangers as opposed to changing structures, but rather an institutionalized charity on the one hand and people who want to change the big systems, but ignore concrete people and their immediate needs on the other. Those currently dominant options would have to be transcended.

One pervasive preoccupation was how, with their very different views of the relation of state and religion, people find appropriate ways for religion to intersect with public life. The covert imposition of religious agendas — Stockwell Day and George Bush were given as examples — is as problematic as the overt imposition of a theocratic model some claim is God's will directly on society. In the last decades in Canada, political leaders have frequently ignored the positions of religious leaders with the valid claim that many or most of the members of their religious communities do not share the views of these leaders on social, cultural, or economic issues.

Maybe we at the Centre can contribute to rewaving the tapestry of life-in-community through such rich conversations as we began at these roundtables.

Dean's Notes...

*Roger Epp, Dean
Augustana Campus*

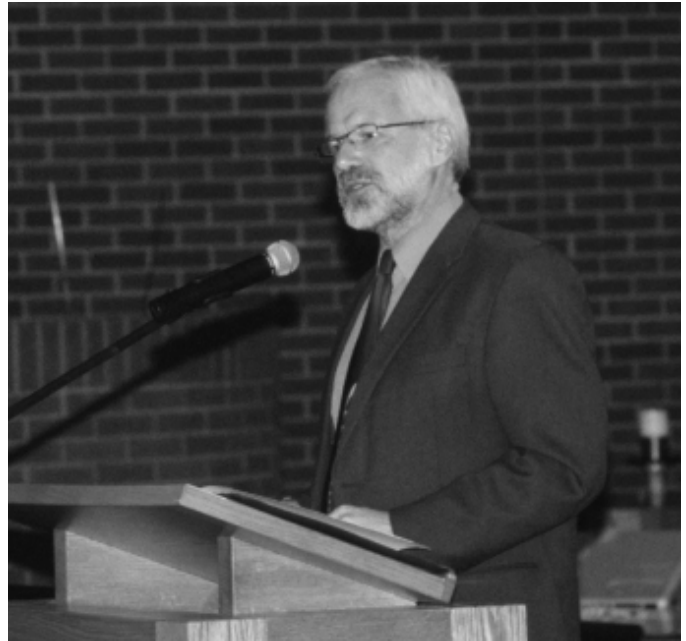
As I write, one student publication in Canada has reprinted the Danish cartoon of the prophet Muhammad that prompted incendiary protest around the world.

Other publications may follow, not out of disrespect to Muslims, their editors say, but to make a statement about free speech. Meanwhile, a professor has become a national media personality for posting the same cartoon on his door. Religion, he said, was “one of the greatest evils visited on humankind”; at best, he felt, it should be strictly a private matter.

As the cartoon controversy reminds us, it is possible to affirm constitutional and academic freedoms and yet lament the unsatisfying, monologic character of the public speech that is exercised under those freedoms — especially on the subject of religion. Whether in the media, in public, or on campus, religion is too often a realm mediated by caricatures. It is dominated by minds made up, thoughts hurled, and civilizations clashing. In the university it is approached with awkwardness, suspicion, even hostility — and without differentiation. Among students it becomes a silent dividing line.

Last summer a diverse group of scholars, mostly from the United States, issued a draft declaration, *Religion and Public Life: Engaging Higher Education*. Their declaration noted the challenge posed by “a citizenry inexperienced in engaging others on issues of religious and moral differences.” They encouraged universities, public as well as private, to serve as models for the difficult but important conversations required in a pluralistic society, and to engage religious communities directly in an enlarged circle of public reason.

Their declaration confirmed the timeliness of what we have started at Augustana with the Ronning Centre. David Goa, Dittmar Mündel, and the advisory committee have given ambitious shape to the initial vision for the Centre with a series of consultations on subjects, including Muslims and the media. Their care for the character of public speech and the inclusion of diverse voices has been exemplary.



Roger Epp at the Public Launch

Hendrickson Memorial Endowment Fund

The Augustana Faculty of the University of Alberta is grateful for the support provided by the family of George and Magda Hendrickson. Six generations of the Hendrickson family have both nurtured Augustana and studied with its various teachers and professors over more than ninety years. The Hendrickson Memorial Endowment Fund provides the funding for the Augustana Distinguished Lectures, given by an outstanding scholar and public intellectual whose thought and action, informed by faith, has engaged the demanding issues facing our world. This endowment enables the Ronning Centre to bring fine theological and religious thinking into the larger university conversation on public life and into the public square in Camrose and Edmonton, and through publication into vigorous international conversation.

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Point and Counterpoint

Point

The importance of engaging in public life from a religious perspective.

Dittmar Mündel

Noble thinking leads to noble action in all areas of life.

Virindar
Lamba

Voter turnout is low, especially in certain age groups. People are “bowling alone” rather than in leagues. Many in suburbia are not involved in maintaining or enhancing the life of “their city.” All of these phenomena point to civic disengagement. This abandoning of public life is not only a threat to our common life together, to our concrete communities and cities, it also undermines the credibility of religions, the integrity of religious groups, and the health of individuals.

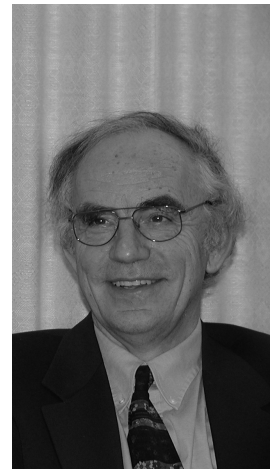
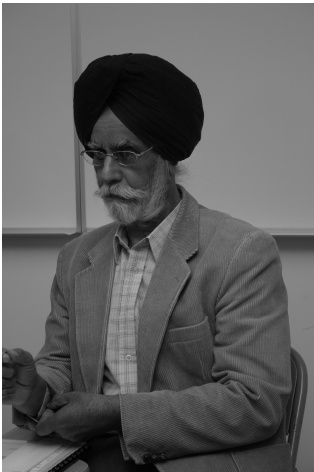
While as a Christian theologian I can only speak with some competence about the threat lack of public engagement poses for the Christian faith, it seems that many other faith traditions are also diminished by it. For example in a Ronning Centre consultation on religion and public life, Virindar Lamba, a Sikh spiritual leader in Edmonton, stated that we should not speak of the intersection of religion and public life, as if religion only touches public life now and again. Rather, he argued, noble thinking leads to noble action in all areas of life. His comments highlight the false divisions between private and public or between values and objective facts that still dominate our supposedly post-modern minds. To use but one example of the need to overcome the artificial distinction between private and public in religious thinking, the Sikh spiritual task of overcoming greed, the Buddhist focus on overcoming selfish desire, and the Christian death of selfishness so that a new self in service to others can be born, have this in common:

they are weakened if believers in these faith communities preserve these central tasks of their faith for their private lives while out in public they immerse themselves in a consumer culture and an economics based on animating our selfish desires to ensure “economic progress.” Linda McQuaig, in *All You Can Eat: Greed, Lust and the New Capitalism*, shows forcefully how the religious and moral restraints that used to curb greed in society have not only been eroded, but replaced by elevating wealth and conspicuous consumption to a high North American value. In North America many of the inordinately wealthy identify themselves as Christian. Does this not undermine belief that the way of Jesus or of any other religion is an alternative to “the ways of the world,” rather than another method of seeking power in the world? Can we be privately virtuous and publicly swim with the sharks, or do we become like the sharks?

(Cont'd on page 7)

So when Christians cocoon themselves within their congregations, they are cutting off crucial sources of spiritual energizing and growth.

Dittmar
Mündel



Within Christianity two central concepts — creation and incarnation — seek to overcome the dangerous split between the private, as the sphere of religion and values, and the public, as the sphere of autonomous economic, political, cultural, social, and environmental forces. Nature and society are viewed as “God’s creation.” Often it is a hurt, abused, and exploited creation, but it is a real presence of God nevertheless. So in all my interactions, all my relationships with the world in work, family, leisure, education, and politics, I am being addressed by “the God clothed in creation,” as Martin Luther put it.

My responses in all these realms are both moral and religious. They are “moral” since this is the realm of responsibility: I am called to respond to my employees or employer, my spouse and/or children, nature, my students or the material I am learning, my co-citizens in my community or country, for example. The responses are also “religious,” since whatever I put my trust in (for example, the hidden Creator or an ideology such as progress) or am unable to trust expresses itself in my responses. My responses are despairingly “religious,” or should one say “irreligious,” if my sense is that ultimately I am impotent and that the forces that are playing themselves out create a world of inevitabilities. If those who claim to trust the Creator block God out of their economic relationships or political relationships or relationship to the environment, they are cutting themselves off from being able to listen to, and respond to, God. A private religion participates in the irreligion of the culture of impotence.

“Incarnation” is the other central Christian concept that seeks to prevent faith from cocooning itself into a private realm divorced from our public lives among other humans. At Christmas — and in all worship ideally — Christians celebrate that “the Word was made flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.” This means that the divine can be encountered in, and that the divine has taken on, a human life and all of humanity in the life of Jesus. Jesus, in a parable of the human encounter with the ultimate, says, “what you have done to the least of these, you have done to me.” So while Jesus communicates that the hidden God is gracious, he refers his followers back to their public lives among people, especially the most vulnerable, the poor, as the realm of their response to this gracious God.

The concepts of creation and incarnation thus show that within the tradition of Christianity disengaging from the real, messy, public world of diverse people is not an option, since it would be withdrawing from where the divine addresses us and asks for our responses. So when Christians cocoon themselves within their congregations, they are cutting off crucial sources of spiritual energizing and growth. This statement does not mean that contemplation or even a contemplative life is bad and activism is good. Contemplation is a way of engaging the world, since it seeks to see more clearly things that make for peace. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh are clear examples of publicly engaged contemplative lives.

Finally, it is important to note that disconnecting one’s private life of values and religion from one’s public life has potential for very detrimental effects on one’s personhood. In her work on “sustainable lives, sustainable livelihoods,” Dr Elizabeth Lang of Concordia University College discovered that what is frequently called a “mid-life crisis” is in fact a crisis generated by people not having lived according to their values or religious beliefs. To make it in the world of work or to adapt to the dominant culture, they often seriously compromised what they valued deeply. As a result a physical, psychological, and spiritual crisis suddenly overwhelmed them. The way out of the crisis is to uncover what you truly believe and value and then align your living, your working, and your interactions in the public realm with your inner compass.

*...disconnecting one’s private
life of values and religion
from one’s public life has
potential for very
detrimental effects on one’s
personhood...*

Counterpoint

When religion is banished, public life is diminished
David J. Goa

One of the reasons it has been difficult for the last half century to think with any clarity about religion and public life is that the codependent twins, secular and religious fundamentalists, have captured the public conversation on a number of key ethical issues. They were born together.

The secular twin insists on sweeping the public square clean of any and all religious perspectives, arguing that they are always irrational and unprogressive and that they will hijack public life for the confessional interest of a narrow and particular group. The religious twin argues that faith perspectives have important things to say when it comes to many of the grave issues of our day. On the virulent side of the debate this twin also claims a position coterminous with the will of the divine. Public is pitted against private, belief against knowledge and reason, or so the spokespersons on each side of this divide would like us to believe. These two twins have consciously or otherwise figured out how to capture almost all of the airtime when it comes to many important local, national, and international issues. My sense is that these two twins have had their day and it has become clear to all, except possibly the twins, that the gravity and complexity of the issues require us to move beyond their feeding frenzy, their diet of dialectical rhetoric.

There are gifts that come with the end of the colonization of public discourse by these twins and we need to see them clearly. A climate of hospitality will return to public discussion. Hospitality is required to bring forward the depth and texture of ideas from various quarters. No longer will it be good enough simply to declare unilaterally that one's position expresses fully and adequately the sources of all religious thought within one's own particular religious tradition or denomination. So, too, it will be on the secular side of the bar. Complexity is its own reward. The ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment that joined with religious values in the creation of liberal democratic societies

were surely not exhausted by our particular experiment with them since the French Revolution. They may also be rich enough to welcome pluralism and tough enough to hold genuine difference together in a civil space. We need to find out if we want to shape a civil life capable of moving beyond the twentieth-century experiment in banishing some of the deepest and most profound values known to the human family. How else will we learn to shape a public square that is richly furnished and capable of fielding the particular differences reflected in our citizens with their many religious and secular worldviews?

Recent Events

Consultations

Roman Catholic Church on Public Life
Julian Hammond & Brian Rozmahel

Faith, War, Taxes & Canadian Responsibilities
Dave Hubert

Actualizing the Social Conscience of Islam in Public Life
Karim Jiwani

Seminars

Teaching and Learning on the India Study Tour
Varghese Manaloor & Jack Waschenfelder

A Scholar at Home in the Rural: Readings
Roger Epp

Augustana Distinguished Lecture
The Root of War is Fear
Love Your Enemies as Yourself
Jim Forest
(More on this event in next edition of the Newsletter)

THE FIRST RONNING FORUM

The first Ronning Forum was held on 24 March at Camrose United Church. The keynote speaker was Bill Blaikie, MP for Winnipeg-Transcona, Deputy Leader of the Federal New Democrats, and United Church minister. The respondent to his “Preaching the Social Gospel in the 21st Century: Challenging



*Bill Blaikie, MP
Winnipeg-Transcona*

Secular, Religious and Market Fundamentalists” was the Hon. Walter McLean, former MP for Waterloo, Mulroney government cabinet minister, and Presbyterian minister. A panel discussion followed. The panel consisted of Shayda Nanji (member of the Edmonton Ismaili community), Bishop Victoria Matthews (Anglican Diocese, Edmonton), Dr John Hiemstra (professor of Political Science at King's University College, Edmonton), and Walter McLean.

Speaking to approximately 300 people, Blaikie's guiding question was, “How do those of us who see ourselves in the social gospel tradition speak of ourselves and what we believe in a twenty-first century Canadian context that is characterized by secularism, pluralism, a touchiness on the part of many about anything Christian, and a touchiness in general about the role of religion?” Blaikie responded that those who are in the social gospel tradition should “speak out of their prophetic traditions, challenging the rulers of their day to do justice, to love kindness and mercy, and to measure their political choices not in terms of how they help the rich and already powerful, but how they help the hungry, the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized and the environment that future generations will have to live in.” For him, as for J.S. Wordsworth, M.J. Coldwell, Tommy Douglas, and many others in the history of Canada's social gospel movement, faith should not be separated from public life. He quoted from an event he attended: “Some people say it's up to governments to get the poor out of the slums. But we in the prayer breakfast know that if we get Jesus into the hearts of the poor, they will get

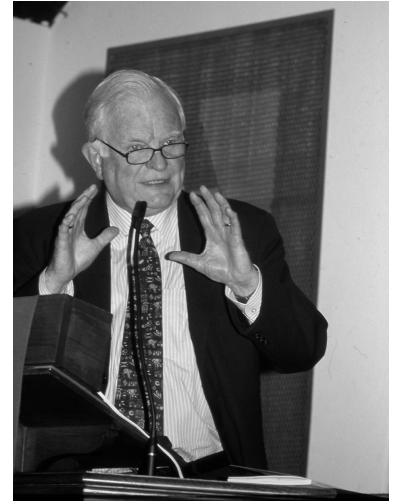
themselves out of the slums.” On the contrary, Blaikie said that “The economy is a moral issue. That is really what the social gospel was all about, and will be all about no matter what new form it may take.”

Blaikie said the voice of the Christian Left has, in the last twenty years or so, regressed so that the only political voice now identified as Christian

by the general public is that of the Christian Right. “There is a need to re-establish in the public mind that there are faith-informed progressive perspectives on those issues.” Indeed, Blaikie noted that God, religion, and idolatry are certainly not dead. He warned, though, that this “postmodern” context means that “discerning idols will be a demanding, and perhaps dangerous task.” He observed: “The challenge of the social gospel in the twenty-first century is three-fold: religious fundamentalism, market fundamentalism, and secular fundamentalism.”

With eloquence, wit, and insight Blaikie explicated the biblical roots of the Christian Left in juxtaposition with current political attitudes, such as the “false gods” of the marketplace, public opinion poll, fear, “the arrogance of religious exclusivity,” and “the false and manipulative humility of liberal inclusivity.” Blaikie said the Bible calls us to a politics of care, not just about ourselves and the quality of our lives, but about others and the quality of their lives, and about what it means to live with others in community.

Panel members took up a number of the issues Blaikie addressed. Afterwards, many spoke of Blaikie's lecture as an important reminder of the need to re-establish open discussion and debate within the political sphere. Many also commented how good it was to hear a point of view which has been excluded from contemporary Canadian political discourse.



*Hon. Walter McLean
Former MP, Waterloo*

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Recent Activities of the Centre

Public Launch and Forum—March 24-25, 2006

A public forum and launch of the Chester Ronning Centre with Audrey Ronning Topping, Seymour Topping, eminent scholar Brian Evans, Reverend Ray Schultz, Bill Blaikie, MP, the Honourable Walter McLean and the Augustana Choir.

Next Issue

The Augustana
Distinguished
Lecture

Climate of Fear/
Commitment to
Peace
Conference

Point and
Counterpoint

Upcoming
Events

Publication
Releases

Seminars 2005-2006

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 14 September | "Religion: A Strength and a Weakness for Political Parties,"
<i>Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, Civil Liaison Officer, Orthodox Church in America, Canadian Diocese</i> |
| 16 October | "Science, Faith and the Uses of Scripture," <i>Dittmar Mündel</i> |
| 30 January | "Science, Faith and Conservation Research," <i>Glen Hvenegaard</i> |
| 27 February | "In the Shadow of Byzantium: Memory, Ideology and Religious
Resurgence after Ceauescu," <i>David J. Goa</i> |
| 20 March | "Alfred North Whitehead on 'The Public,' 'The Private,' and
the Prehension of Religion," <i>Adam Scarfe</i> |
| 27 March | "Science and Scientism: Limits to Both?" <i>Tim Parker</i> |

Consultations 2005-2006

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 15 September | "A Christian Orthodox Understanding of Religion and Public
Life," <i>Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, Civil Liaison Officer, Orthodox
Church in America, Canadian Diocese (University of Alberta,
Edmonton)</i> |
| 30 November | "Church of God and the Encounter with Public Life,"
<i>John Howard</i> |
| 1 December | "Sikh Tradition and the Encounter with Public Life,"
<i>Virindar Lamba</i> |
| 16 January | "A Christian Science Understanding of Religion and Public
Life," <i>Nicholas Wickenden</i> |
| 23 January | "A Hindu Understanding of Religion and Public Life,"
<i>Sushil Kalia</i> |

Round Tables 2005-2006

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 7 November | Camrose Round Table, Augustana Campus |
| 14 November | Edmonton Round Table, University of Alberta Campus |

Resources

The Ronning Centre provides a variety of resources for scholars, journalists, public officials, and professionals and interest groups who wish to deepen their understanding of religion and public life. We strive to enhance the understanding of the place of religion, its gifts and challenges, and the nature and challenges of civil life.



Friends of the Chester Ronning Centre ...

The *Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life* focuses its work on a set of issues and themes that demand our attention whether or not we are religious.

And the *Friends of the Chester Ronning Centre* provides an opportunity for interested and concerned men and women to join us in a legacy project of the Augustana Faculty—to meet at the heart of compelling contemporary issues and themes and make it possible for many to learn and contribute to the understanding of religious perspectives on public life and public understanding of religious perspectives.

We invite you to become a *Friend of the Centre* and join the table of hospitality that seeks to bring depth and texture to many of the compelling issues of our time where religion, faith and public life intersect.

Friends of the Chester Ronning Centre will receive:

- Invitations to our conferences, seminars, lectures, forums, cafés, study circles and symposiums;
- Our regular newsletter;
- Notification of our publications, research and public forums;
- Invitations to conversations with public intellectuals and scholars that go beyond the news stories of the day;
- Opportunities to influence and support fruitful research and religious and public conversation on many of the most compelling issues of our day.

I would like to become a Friend of the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life

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