

"Human Rights Need Religion to Flourish"

the

## 3rd Annual Hill Lecture

The annual Hill Lectures were established by the Centre in 2001 as a means of furthering public discussion of the connections among morals, faith (both religious and non-religious) and the foundations of culture. The Lecture series is named in honour of Frederick Walter Hill, D.F.C. (U.S.), C.M., S.O.M., B.A., M.B.A., the distinguished businessman and philanthropist, Member of the Order of Canada and tireless advocate of serious cultural analysis and engagement in Canada.

**May 13, 2003  
Ottawa**

*By Deborah Gyapong*

"Religion must be given a much larger role to play in the current human rights revolution," said Prof. John Witte, Program Director of the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion at Emory Law School in Atlanta, Ga., author of several books, and an internationally recognized expert on law and human rights. Prof. Witte presented the Centre's third annual Hill Lecture under the title, "Religion, Secularism and Human Rights."

"Without religion, many rights are cut off at their roots," he said. Religious groups must remain engaged in the debate, and must challenge the way elements of the human rights movement have become a non- and even anti-religious creed.

"Without religion, the state is given an exaggerated role as a guarantor and defender of human rights." The result, Witte believes, is that religious communities look askance at the way the modern human rights revolution frequently works against religious freedom. Many religious groups perceive modern human rights as a Trojan horse undermining orthodoxy, hierarchy, authority and submission through equality, diversity and freedom of speech.

"Leaders of the rights revolution have consigned religious groups to a lower and lower priority," he said.

Pointing out that religion is undergoing a renaissance all over the world with both positive and negative effects, he added: "Human rights norms need a human rights culture to be effective. ... A human rights culture needs religion to be enduring."

Witte believes that the contemporary human rights culture can be anti-religious, but that such an anti-religious stance cuts human rights off from its origins. He said that human rights are nurtured by religion and that such nurturing must continue.

He also stated that all of the major religions have violated human rights at various times in their histories and must dig into their revelation and theological jurisprudence to make their voices heard in fresh ways, so that human rights remain grounded in transcendent truths.

Competing religious groups need a human rights framework to guide them so that people can learn to respect the rights and the dignity of those who believe differently, he said.

The basis of the respect for the human person is the religious insight into the divine creation that undergirds the dignity of each human being.

An audience of over 150 included academics, Senators, MPs, representatives of major Christian, Jewish and other faith groups in the Ottawa area, and public policy experts.

John McKay, MP (Scarborough East, Lib.) introduced the speaker, praising the Centre's "leadership" in the area of religion and public life in Canada.



*Professor John Witte  
Photo Credit: Anita Thiessen*

The question and answer session went for over an hour and the general sense was that the yearly event is providing an opportunity to raise questions about faith and culture to a new level at the very heart of political decision-making in Canada.