

## Faith Communities and Home-Grown Extremism

Donald Beecher, Carleton University

Ottawa's Intercultural Dialogue Institute hosted its annual Interfaith Dialogue Supper and Colloquium on March 26, 2015 at the Turkish Cultural Centre in Kanata. In seeing over one hundred participants from so many different faith communities was inspirational in itself, among them the eight members of the hosting committee: Mark Adler, MP, the Venerable David Selzer, Archdeacon of the Anglican diocese, Father Jacques Kabangu, Interfaith Officer of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, Mohammed Azhar Ali Khan, President of the MCCNCR, Scott Goldstein, Director of Hillel, Ottawa, Dr. Harpal Buttar, Ottawa Sikh Society, Prof. Catherine Clifford, Saint Paul University, and Roman Mukherjee, Interfaith activist. Conversation during these events is always rich and rewarding, and who you may find yourself with is often a surprise. Across from me was a high-ranking member of the Ottawa Fire Department who brought insights into recent procedures for dealing with new impediments such as rooftop solar panels, and to my left was a student volunteer in the IDI who is passionate about the jungle areas of her native Peru. The evening's master of ceremonies was Mrs. Theresa Qadri, accompanied by her husband, City Councillor Shad Qadri, Chair of Crime Prevention Ottawa, who kept events moving along and bravely confronted a daunting roster of international names. After an orientation and preliminaries, she introduced to us Catherine Clifford, Professor of Systematic & Historical Theology, who was our moderator for the evening's panel.

The chosen topic that brought us all together is one which is on all of our minds, despite its perplexing challenges: "Deterring Home-grown Extremism: Can Faith Communities Help?" Colonel Guy Chapdelaine from the Office of the Chaplain General, National Defence Headquarters, led off with carefully considered thoughts on the nature of extremism itself. There is an explicit mental process at work in shaping the radicalized mind, which is in need of better understanding. There must be a critical magnitude of grievance and alienation that leads to an ideology of violence. There must be an indoctrination which plays variously upon historical destiny, escape, adventure, promise of community and brotherhood, a path to rewards, rebellion, or duty to a supreme being. How do these promises appeal especially to adolescents? Radicalization is one of the "alchemies" of the human mind, a complex and mysterious process of transformation, much of a kind with the cult crazes of America beginning in the 1960s. As Colonel Chapdelaine spelled out, not all extremism leads to violence; it always comes down to individuals, their personal sense of alienation, anger, poverty, ideological commitment, or craving for rebellion against the society that fostered and failed them. So how do we intervene and who do we blame? And here, as with the two succeeding panelists, the inclination is to veer back upon the cultural and social health of our own society—whether our modernity is sterility, and whether our own religious traditions have been ignored. Why would any of our youth be incited to actualize themselves in total rejection of their own culture? Some feelings ran high during the question period to follow that the fault lies with our own weakened religious practices. Speakers were inclined to veer yet again to address the collateral damage done to the Muslim communities within Canada through projections of fear and blame. ISIS is, alas, inspired by a perversion of Islamic creeds. Through irresponsible generalization, specific abuses of a common

religious heritage are easily visited upon all practitioners and Islamophobia follows, darkening imaginations on both sides. Many of the evening's reflections were devoted to distancing faith groups from such phobias by underscoring their mutual desires to oppose radicalization and to maintain a spirit of ecumenicist dialogue. Colonel Chapdelaine stressed that our religions must be practiced in the open, through exchange, respect, and understanding. For him, education is vital, not only concerning the beliefs of others, but concerning one's own religious and cultural heritage.

Prof. Karim Karim, Director of Carleton University's Centre for the Study of Islam, concentrated on the perceptions of Islam, the media, the generation of information about terrorism in general, and the shaping of public opinion. No topic is more germane to our times. Central to his thoughts were two leading concepts, our historical amnesia concerning past terrorism, and the way in which we construct self and other as a default mode of human reasoning. What did he mean? First, that terrorism is nothing new. He gave a quick and effective power-point presentation to remind us of the Fenian raids, the FLQ, the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, the Air India bombing, and other acts of terrorism or inimical violence. But by reminding us of forgotten terrorism, how do we deal differently with the terrorism which confronts us today? Are we to relax into the present as part of a continuum merely shaped by the media, or simply recall that not all terrorists are Islamic? I think a bit of both, which leads to Prof. Karim's second point. If I may paraphrase him as follows: it is quite true that the human brain creates associations with cooperators and vilifies outsiders as threats. There is only one self, and all else is otherness until exterior agents earn their reputations as cooperators and benefactors, beginning with mother, at which point we extend the community of trust—one which, in ancestral times, rarely reached beyond the family or tribal nation. Prof. Karim invokes this binary as an instinct too menacing for our times regarding the part which self/other psychology plays in the formation of prejudice and blame. His concern is once again with the misplaced expressions of Islamophobia, often fostered by sensationalized media coverage. The self/other dyad, however, is a two-handed analytical sword because, as a phylogenetic trait, it cuts in all directions. Even so, heads are severed or they are not, on the grounds of an identity rejecting other identities deemed unworthy of life. That is radical and it is terrifying. It is fascinating to see just how mutable and slippery these arguments can become. The crux of the matter regarding home-grown radicalism is curiously paradoxical when it comes to the self/other of radicalization. What happened to John Maguire of Kemptville and University of Ottawa business school student who converted to Islam? How did he come to believe in the eschatological destiny of Jihadism, follow a path paralleling his own father's ideological defection, and head for Syria? That is the topic under investigation, and I urge, editorially here, the reading of "From JMag to Jihad John: the radicalization of John Maguire" from the *Ottawa Citizen*, Feb. 7, 2015 (on line). In radicalizing himself he made his Canadian birth identity the "other"—which is all of us, of whatever faith. Where now is the self and the other when conversion hi-jacks identity? He gives us much to think about, for we are never certain that such casualties of our culture are not the fault of that culture, as Prof. Karim pointed out and as the third panelist preaches in unison. Thus, the dialogic crisis of conscience against Islamophobia also comes with postures of guilt and breast-beating over the defections of our youth, redounding as it does upon Western culture in general. Yet pursuit of this argument is contagiously destructive in its own right. Quo vadis?

The third panelist was René Tenasco, Sacred Fire Keeper, Kitigan Zibi Algonquin, who spoke extemporaneously about Canada's arrival at this dark moment in its history, thereby creating through random association a comprehensive lament for a nation in need of its own

basic or radicalized overhauling of values. Given the terrorism practiced by Canadians upon aboriginal populations it is time for a new social contract with our native peoples. Tenasco returned to a burden of responsibility for the “other” inherited by all post-colonial nations which must tender ever greater respect in order to be forgiven. Terrorism was on his mind as he thought back to an episode in his younger life in which their cattle was confiscated by the RCMP. That was what a boy experienced according to his culture, and in such things were the making of the man. Memories are formed by their own alchemies of the mind. By degrees the conversation came full circle to the collective phobias by which otherness and exclusion are felt, whether by Indians (or Muslims by implication?), alluding then to those corporations who treat natives as “pagans, the uncivilized, and ignorant.” Many such stories flowed together to the quickening of our conscience, providing an important window into the interface with aboriginal concerns, prophecies, and spiritual visions. Yet, there is talk enough at City Hall, as he confessed, but for him, more theorizing is a bane, “it is killing us.” We need a movement of spirit and a meeting of minds. Perhaps that can be the circle back to those alienated by ISIS propaganda and the lure to radicalization. We have come a long way around.

There were questions to follow, forthright and diverse, which gave substance to thoughtful responses from all of the panelists. It was a most rewarding evening of intellectual exploration and reflection. There was a very real sense of unity in our diversity in our mutual respect for dialogue and an underlying hope that faith communities, upon further reflection, really can make a difference in deterring the radicalization of our youth. Plans are already being laid to extend the conversation into our schools and families in hopes of reaching those who are most vulnerable to the allurements of social media. Time, by then, was late, but it had passed rapidly, and feelings were general that this is no easy phenomenon to understand and control.

Nevertheless, there are tentative proposals to be made. Radicalization is a rhetorical process, an art of persuasion seeking those inclined to its message. The deterrent to subversive rhetoric is counter-rhetoric representing a better option for self-actualization—not the sermon but the inclusive dare. Social orders predicated on the values of individualism, liberty, respect for law, civil rights, multicultural interface, even deep religious experience ad lib, are the more positive options. But for the alienated in spirit, nothing could seem more bland, mundane, and anti-subversive. The Canadian experience needs to be kept exciting and a personal odyssey for everyone. How this is done is not a matter of front-of-the-class lecturing on civil culture. Minds must somehow be reached by an enculturation, by rites of passage, by making dangerous the Canadian experience, by surrounding it with a pro patria passion, by indoctrinating our youth with a culture of hope, participation, and meaningful processes. We may fall back on the fact that only those who have direct affiliations with the candidates for radicalization can attempt to intercept the process: teachers, parents, siblings, friends, and religious leaders, whether of the faith abandoned or of the faith adopted. But very often their discoveries of minds in transition come at times beyond dissuasion. Young minds need so much for mental health which can be provided only through the bestowal of value and community by others, and it is easy to point fingers at those too overwhelmed to provide it. Faith communities, in particular, may seek to do what they can to revitalize the religious experiences of the most positive kind for the most vulnerable youth, both outside and within the Muslim community. Educators may seek to engage individuals through their imaginations in the ways in which history and moral challenges are taught. More adventurously, cultures must think of the rites which pertain to the passage from adolescence to adulthood, those practices which determine membership in the sub-communities of the culture. In the nearly total absence of such rites in western society, the adventurous make

their own, as a last ditch assertion of their autonomy as individuals, only to end up exploited by some of the most faceless and depersonalized collectivities imaginable, unified only by politicized violence. That truth needs to be carefully exposed. We must hold on to our children with our hearts through a culture which processes their advancement through the ranks of adolescence with attention and direction. Technology has made a nation of latch-key kids even with their parents upstairs, one in a thousand milk-toasted into desperate dreams. There are, as yet, no final answers, but if the threat frightens us enough, our provisional thinking will take us to an inventive overhauling of adolescent experience and the construction of a society of activated and participatory inclusion.