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Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization

John Milloy¹

There is no question that Canada is a polarized nation. It's not simply that we have disagreements. As a country we have long engaged in lively debates over a variety of issues, but something seems to have changed. While in the past, discussion was often respectful and focused on the question at hand, our current dialogue is increasingly becoming more and more personal. We have begun to divide the world into "us" and "them", vilifying those that don't agree with our way of thinking and often even refusing to engage with them. At the extremes, this trend has moved beyond politics and expressed itself in an alarming increase in religious intolerance and racism.

The implications of these divisions for our society are profound. Canada faces some momentous challenges. How can we address issues like the climate crisis, economic inequality, or systemic injustice when we refuse to work together and see anyone with different views or approaches as "an enemy"? How do we address one of our most pressing issues, advancing reconciliation and right relationships with Indigenous Peoples, within the current context? We need to create a society where everyone gets a chance to contribute, feels heard and respected. Our future depends on it.

But how? Is there a role for Canada's religious communities in tackling this pressing task? Although religion has admittedly been a source of division in our society, it can also be a source of unity and healing. Central to most religions is the idea of unconditional love of your fellow human being, even the stranger and those we dislike. The call of most traditions is to create a world where no one is marginalized, and all can flourish. Moreover, many traditions themselves have faced profound divisions within their own ranks and found creative ways to foster healing and renewed unity. Do these traditions have lessons that they can share?

To answer that question, a conference entitled "Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization" was convened at Martin Luther University College, May 7-9 2023. The gathering was the sixth "Our Whole Society" conference sponsored by the Canadian Interfaith Conversation. This biennial conference brings together religious voices, academics, representatives of civil society and others to discuss the positive contribution that Canada's religious communities and people of faith can make to our society.

Martin Luther University College was delighted to partner with the Canadian Interfaith Conversation along with a variety of other sponsors, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and a number of religious denominations and faith-based organizations to host the conference. Over the course of two days, we heard from over 40 speakers from across Canada, the United States and even the United Kingdom, talk about the role that religion might play in addressing polarization.

This edition of *Consensus* is devoted to capturing some of the important work presented at the conference as well as inviting other voices to offer their insights into the

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question of polarization and religious faith. As the Chair of the conference, I was invited to be the guest editor and, in turn, invited conference presenters to transform their work into more academic articles or allow us to publish edited versions of their presentations to share their thoughts more widely. We also sent out a general call for other voices to contribute their views on this important matter.

We were delighted with the response and readers of this edition will not only get a flavour of the conference but will also be given the opportunity to consider the question of polarization and religion at a deeper level through expanded articles and outside contributions.

This issue begins with a series of five articles based on conference presentations. Jack Jedwab, the President of the Association of Canadian Studies, and a noted public opinion researcher, sets the stage by sharing research into the current state of polarization in our country, looking at the period before and after the pandemic. Rick Hiemstra, from the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada explores the increasing divisions between those who identify as Evangelical Christians and more mainstream society, examining the increasing importance of “authenticity” in Canadian culture and its potential incompatibility with some religious traditions. Bruce Clemenger, also with the Evangelical Fellowship, adds to the discussion by examining the relationship between our attempts as a nation to maintain an inclusive political creed in the face of competing social ontologies. Sabrina Di Matteo, a doctoral student at the University of Laval, takes the discussion to Quebec, painting a picture of polarization in that province, particularly in relation to Bill 21. The article section is rounded out by Carmen Celestini of the University of Waterloo who examines the disturbing link between conspiracy theories and some religious voices and their ties to Christian nationalism.

This issue’s second section contains conference proceedings including edited speeches given by two of our keynotes. We were honoured that Elizabeth May, the leader of the Green Party of Canada, opened the conference with her thoughts on polarization from the vantage of elected life. We were equally delighted that Canada’s new Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia, Amira Elghawaby, gave one of her first public addresses to the conference, sharing her thoughts on the grave threat of religious intolerance against Canada’s Muslim community.

The challenge of making progress on Indigenous Reconciliation was addressed by Charlene Bearhead, former National Coordinator for the National Day for Healing and Reconciliation with a very thoughtful response from Kim Uyede-Kai, from the United Church of Canada.

One of the highlights of the conference was an evening arts-based interfaith workshop presented by Martin Luther University College’s Inshallah Interfaith Choir. The workshop, entitled “Singing Common Ground: An Embodied Response to Polarization” helped participants understand how to find productive tension when confronting radically dissenting views. Workshop organizers, Debbie Lou Ludolph and Héctor Acero Ferrer from Martin Luther University College, give an overview of the workshop and its contribution to the conference discussion.

Moving beyond the conference, our Studies and Observations section examines other aspects of polarization. Jeffrey Dudiak from Kings University in Edmonton, Alberta, shares an excerpt from a larger project that he is working on that looks at the role of Christian wisdom in addressing polarization. Logan Liut, meanwhile, a student at the University of

Toronto's Victoria College, looks at polarization within the Catholic faith during the pontificate of Pope Francis. Finally, David Pfrimmer of Martin Luther University College, draws upon a recent edited collection by Liisa North on the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile, *Canada-Chile Solidarity, 1973-1990: Testimonies of Civil Action*, to find lessons for contemporary faith based public action.

Caitlin Taylor and Nicole Walker, meanwhile, challenge us through their poems as do a series of sermons that we have reproduced from a variety of settings. For those wanting to read further, we have our usual book review section. As always, we express our deep appreciation to all the contributors.

No one is surprised to learn of Canada's religious communities addressing social justice issues. Although we have no shortage of such issues facing our nation, our inability to engage those holding different views and perspectives has ironically itself become an "issue" which demands attention by Canada's religious communities and their members. As delegates gathered at Martin Luther University College last May there was no shortage of discussion. To no one's surprise, delegates left with as many questions as answers. But as we listened to speakers and panel presentations and participated in workshops, it became clear that Canada's religious communities and their members have an important role to play in addressing the polarization gripping our society.