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## **Singing Common Ground: Inshallah Offers an Embodied Response to Polarization to an Interfaith Audience**

**Debbie Lou Ludolph<sup>1</sup> and Héctor A. Acero Ferrer<sup>2</sup>**

On May 7 to May 9, 2023, the Canadian Interfaith Conversation (CIC) hosted the sixth edition of the *Our Whole Society* conference at the Martin Luther University College campus in Waterloo, Ontario. Seeking to generate robust multisector engagement in dialogue about the changing role of religion in a pluralistic Canadian society, CIC partnered with a number of educational institutions and community organizations to present this edition of the conference.<sup>3</sup> Previously held in Montreal (2013), Vancouver (2015), Ottawa (2017), Toronto (2019), and online (2021 & 2022), the *Our Whole Society* series has brought together leaders from all sectors of society to create a space for meaningful dialogue, in which a representative cross-section of Canadian society can shed light on the contribution that religious voices can make to addressing issues of shared social concern.

The 2023 *Our Whole Society* conference, titled “Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization,” sought to foster new contributions to Canadian public discourse that specifically address the recent rise of polarization in North American society.<sup>4</sup> In light of this emphasis on polarization, the conference planning committee added innovative experiential learning elements to the traditional program, hoping to provide practical tools that could help religious leaders and people of faith address the polarization that exists within their faith communities and beyond. One of the main goals of the addition of experiential learning to the conference was to bolster the knowledge mobilization efforts undertaken by the coalition of academic institutions and civic society organizations that CIC brings together. This would therefore ensure the concrete application of the principles put forward by the conference participants, the transference of dialogue skills between communities, and the translation of the theoretical insights nurtured by the conference into practice.

After much consideration, the conference planning committee decided to include an arts-based interfaith workshop as the cornerstone to the event’s experiential learning opportunities. Through this arts-based program, conference participants were immersed in an evening program built around a curated musical experience. Led by Martin Luther University College’s Inshallah Choir, the arts-based interfaith workshop, “Singing Common Ground: An Embodied Response to Polarization,” was designed as a space to hold in

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<sup>3</sup> Some of these organizations include Martin Luther University College, Institute for Christian Studies, Interfaith Grand River, Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Baha’i Community of Canada, Islamic Relief, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Multifaith Summit of BC, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, Muslim Association of Newfoundland & Labrador, Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, Canadian Council of Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, and World Sikh Organization (Canada).

<sup>4</sup> See Maryam Dilmaghani, “Canadian Religious Trends: Secularization, Polarization, or Free-Rider Exclusion?” *Social Compass* 65, no. 5 (2018): 626–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618800415>.

productive tension radically dissenting views. The expectation of the planning committee was to create an opportunity for conference participants to better understand the rich complexity of the human stories that subsist at the heart of the highly polarized North American settings. Consequently, this program was crafted as a space to reflect on the phenomenon of polarization through song and stories, engaging diverse local musicians, artists, and storytellers who hold diverse worldviews in tension through their creative outputs. These musicians, artists, and storytellers would, in turn, have active input in the program offered by the Inshallah choir.

“Singing Common Ground: An Embodied Response to Polarization” was curated by Debbie Lou Ludolph, director of the Kanata Centre for Worship and Global Song at Martin Luther University College, and it confronted participants with a series of musical pieces and stories, interspersed with questions and time for reflection and conversation among the engaged audience. The program was structured as an antiphonal dialogue of stories and musical pieces, with musical sets thematically linked to the stories and artistic output shared by the guests. Guest musicians and speakers were members of different faith traditions, diaspora communities, and the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and their interventions were grounded on personal experiences. These personal experiences were presented through the lens of the question of what it means to be a member of such communities in the pluralistic Canadian context, now fractured by the reality of polarization.

The session sought to involve the engaged audience by enabling them to 1) hear background stories and examples of local engagement with songs that speak of identity and collaboration across difference in polarized settings (focusing on issues relevant to conference attendees such as climate justice, human rights, and religious freedom); 2) experience songs from different cultures and faith traditions, and sing along on short refrains that focus on human flourishing amidst radical difference; 3) integrate outcomes of this experience with key learnings from the first day of the conference; and 4) bring the outcomes of these reflections to the workshops and discussions that took place on the second day of the conference. The significance of placing the program in the middle of the two days of intellectual content was to integrate the experiential learning in the academic learning happening throughout.

At the beginning of the session, the audience was invited to embrace the session as a conversation in which they were an integral part, moving through the evening with a spirit of openness, engagement, and critical response. The reality of polarization which was the focal concern of the conference was therefore re-examined through stories and song. Performers, speakers, and audience were asked to 1) listen attentively to the background stories of the music presented; 2) experience the songs, participate through their own singing, and embody their responses through movement; and 3) use these experiences to question the intellectual content provided in other sessions of the conference.

In order to produce this elaborate workshop, Dr. Ludolph worked with Inshallah in the months prior to the conference. Inshallah is a multicultural, multifaith community choir based at Martin Luther University College’s Kanata Centre, under Dr. Ludolph’s leadership. Emerging out of a trip to Israel and Palestine in 2007, Inshallah celebrates and supports cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue by creating opportunities to develop and participate in song practices that are woven with the richness of diverse cultures and faiths. Inshallah’s projects, performances, and workshops are created, shared, and envisioned

through a combination of story, art, music, culture, and spirituality, while undergirded by critical thinking and community outreach.

Inshallah's practice to welcome and engage difference through the arts is key to the research creation and knowledge mobilization at which this conference aims. For the purpose of the event, Inshallah engaged local community groups and singers from diverse faiths and cultures to offer songs and stories from their traditions, modelling how to engage the audience in participation with these guests. Many of these guests have long-standing relationships with the choir and its members, creating an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. Difference was encountered in numerous ways, including the interplay of familiarity and unfamiliarity with musical elements, language, spiritual themes, lyrics, and invitations to participate. The discomfort that comes with the cultural dissonances was held within the power of shared story and singing together.

The work of Inshallah is supported by a growing body of knowledge that speaks of the capacity of song to create an "in-between space,"<sup>5</sup> disrupting assumptions regarding the "other" and broadening a sense of belonging to the whole.<sup>6</sup> Considering what has been discovered about the musical brain,<sup>7</sup> this relational and embodied way of knowing creates the potential for stories and songs to aid boundary-crossing, especially when accompanied by an intentional orientation to the sacred, hospitality, and acceptance of difference. Furthermore, the singing event as a "process of becoming"<sup>8</sup> has the opportunity to model "redemptive hegemony"<sup>9</sup> and create a vision beyond the everyday reality of the local context.<sup>10</sup> Music's experiential way of knowing through sound, emotion, and body undergirds the in-between space with a bias for relational connectedness. Through performativity, the thickness of the storied songs also invites an integrated intellect/body, wisdom/emotional response to disruption.<sup>11</sup> This experiential aspect of the event provided an excellent counterpoint to the intellectual activity of the conference and path for further knowledge mobilization.

It is important to highlight that, in preparation for the workshop, Inshallah members followed a series of dispositional principles integral to their act of music-making: 1) to listen to, sing with, and engage the teachings of Indigenous peoples; 2) to listen to creation; 3) to celebrate the common humanity and the divine in each human; 4) to contemplate one's inner essence before all the labels; 5) to contemplate the divine as a presence that addresses fear and anxiety and the divine in each of us to offer that presence to others; 6) to celebrate humanity's oneness and pray for harmony; 7) to lament when lives don't reflect a desire for

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<sup>5</sup> See Mary (Joy) Philip, "The Space in Between Spaces: The Church as Prophetic Pest/Parasite," in *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections*, edited by Karen L. Bloomquist, (Geneva: Lutheran University Press, 2007), 96; Debbie Lou Ludolph, "Singing Difference Amid Relational Connectedness: A Narrative Study of How Singing Together Shapes Worldview," in *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/2354/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Helen Phelan, *Singing the Rite to Belong: Music, Ritual, and the New Irish* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Dutton, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 120, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221907>.

<sup>9</sup> See bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performance and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Phelan, *Singing the Rite to Belong*.

all to flourish; 8) to acknowledge one's personal longing for love and to support each other in choosing love and peace and "rising;" and 9) to express one's longing for healing in the world, for peace with justice, and to sing this together as prayer.<sup>12</sup> These principles guided the process of music-making and, by extension, the interaction between the choir as workshop facilitator and workshop participants.

In order to assess more carefully the ways in which Inshallah accomplished the goals set for the arts-based workshop, it also necessary to provide a brief overview of the intellectual journey that the conference charted for all participants. Conference organizers began their work with the premise that, over the past several years, new and deepening divisions have heavily informed communal life across the North American continent—a trend often fueled by media, social media, and other technologies.<sup>13</sup> Such polarization has expressed itself as a hard distinction of people into the categories of "us" and "them," reinforcing prejudices and making genuine conversation and mutual understanding difficult to achieve.<sup>14</sup> In such an environment, the capacity to foster respectful dialogue, find common ground, and create unifying approaches to issues of social injustice becomes increasingly important.<sup>15</sup> Through the *Our Whole Society* conference series, CIC has attempted to create an environment in which diverse groups can collaboratively seek common ground in their responses to some of the most significant social justice crises of our times, such as poverty, climate injustice, marginalization of minorities, and forced displacement.

The member organizations of CIC believe that at the heart of diverse religious traditions is the call to love the "other," particularly in the form of the foreigner or the enemy.<sup>16</sup> This ethical and religious principle speaks directly to the reality of polarization, a reality that is not foreign to faith groups, who regularly need to address divisions within their own ranks—often by affirming the value of different identities.<sup>17</sup> If the principle of loving the "other" does indeed orient Canada's diverse faith traditions, then religion and spirituality can become sources for concepts, principles, and practices centered on love, cooperation,

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<sup>12</sup> These dispositional principles have been taken from preparatory communications between the director and the choir members.

<sup>13</sup> See Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*. (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), chapter 1; Jordan K. Kobellarz, Miloš Bročić, Alexandre R. Graeml, Daniel Silver, and Thiago H. Silva, "Reaching the Bubble May Not Be Enough: News Media Role in Online Political Polarization," *EPJ Data Science* 11 (1) (2022): 1–28; Robin W. Lovin, and Adam Hamilton, *What Do We Do When Nobody Is Listening?: Leading the Church in a Polarized Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> See Cathleen Kaveny, "Bridge Burners," *Commonweal* 146 (17) (219): 9; and "Anger, Lamentation, and Common Ground." *Theological Studies* (Baltimore) 82 (4): 683–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639211053648>.

<sup>15</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011); Miroslav Volf, *Public Faith in Action: How to Think Carefully, Engage Wisely, and Vote with Integrity* (Paperback edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Jo Leddy, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and Gregory Baum, *Faith That Transforms: Essays in Honor of Gregory Baum* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> See John Milloy, *Politics and Faith in a Polarized World: A Challenge for Catholics* (Toronto, ON: Novalis, 2021), 49–50; Jasmin Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools Unravelling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442687509>).

and reciprocity.<sup>18</sup> In light of this premises, “Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization” formulated the following questions<sup>19</sup> to the conference participants:

- What are the concepts, principles, and practices centered on love, cooperation, and reciprocity that can be offered to society by spiritual and faith traditions?
- How have they been successfully put into action in engaging with the wider world and within these traditions themselves?
- What lessons do they have for broader society and how can they be translated into action for Canadians who are concerned about an increasingly divided nation?

Consequently, this conference was an opportunity to explore these questions in a spirit of humility, acknowledging that there are those who use their faith to divide and further polarize society.<sup>20</sup> Conference sessions posited that religious and spiritual leaders, communities, and individuals also have a role to play, in solidarity with their neighbours and colleagues who identify as neither religious nor spiritual, to seek and create common ground in an age of polarization.

It is in the context set up by the entire event, that the arts-based workshop, “Singing Common Ground: An Embodied Response to Polarization,” allowed participants to explore the conference premises experientially. At the heart of the session was the conviction that the kind of solidarity needed in polarized contexts emerges from the complex interaction of diverse stories and cultural expressions of individuals and communities who, in their epistemic and cultural dissonance, come to understand and enact dialogue and cooperation across boundaries of different. Through an invitation to be grounded and connected to the land and the land’s original peoples, the workshop aimed to allow participants to reclaim, restore, retrieve their traditions, their histories. And through the interwovenness of stories and song, the workshop aimed to model a Canada that listens to the alternative traditions and minorities, a Canada that listens in a new way.

This is how the workshop attempted to contribute to a new approach to public discourse, one that seeks to draw on insights from diverse religious and secular traditions of thought in navigating the challenges of constructing a society that is more robust and unified amidst its diversity. Premised on the understanding that community music creates a unique opportunity for engagement, education about unfamiliar perspectives, and integration of learnings into life, the workshop created an interfaith conversation explored and identified strategies to foster greater respect and understanding among the wide range of diverse communities in Canada.

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<sup>18</sup> See Mark Hill, “Living Together in Diversity: Strategies from Law and Religion,” *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 21 (1) (2019): 69–70, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X18000960>; Harry John Huebner, M. Legenhausen, Jeremy M. Bergen, and W. Derek Suderman, “On Being Human: Essays from the Fifth Shi’i Muslim Mennonite Christian Dialogue,” edited by Harry John Huebner and M. Legenhausen (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMU Press, 2013); Barry Mack, “Living Together in Diversity: A Conversation with Charles Taylor,” *The Presbyterian Record* (Montreal) 137 (2): 26.

<sup>19</sup> These questions have been extracted from the *Our Whole Society: Finding Common Ground in a Time of Polarization* conference concept.

<sup>20</sup> See Parker J. Palmer, *Healing at the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

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