HARNESSING CANADA'S INTERFAITH RESERVOIR: POOLING INTERRELIGIOUS RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL WELL-BEING

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Canada has an extensive network of interfaith, ecumenical, and multifaith organizations that promote community resilience and social well-being. Identifying the actors and processes of this interreligious nexus are crucial for understanding the movement's potential to foster social cohesion. Harnessing Canada's interfaith reservoir is a prudent strategy to mitigate religious radicalization and extremism in Canada's multicultural landscape.

Canada holds a substantial reservoir of the world's renewable freshwater resources making the country a beacon of hope in a fragile future of global warming where Canada seems destined to become a leader in the distribution of clean water resources for a thirsty planet. The Canadian fresh water reservoir is vast and deep. It can sustain diverse populations, nourish them, and promote human growth and potentiality; conversely, clean water might become a source of unsavory conflict between haves and have-nots, leading to unpalatable social and global unrest. Journalist Gwen Dywer predicts that water could become a source of conflict in a toxic future; therefore, its management must be taken seriously[1]. With careful protection, proper policies, and sound maintenance, the Canadian clean water supply will continue to nourish communities as well as ensure their safety and resilience against potential threats such as droughts and population migrations resulting from global warming.

We Canadians often take our vast reservoir of clean water for granted without recognizing that we are, in reality, all responsible for protecting and caretaking Canada's extensive freshwater reserves through sound planning, consumption, and prudent policies. In a congruent manner, Canadian society encompasses another vast reservoir that is often taken for granted though it is also critically important for ongoing social well-being, community health and resilience. Here, I am referring to Canada's extensive reservoir of multifaith and interfaith groups and networks of resources, which are actively cooperating together to promote respect, goodwill, and understanding across religious and non-religious lines. I call this pool of interreligious goodwill, Canada's interfaith and multifaith reservoir, which facilitates communal harmony that deeply enriches Canadian society, nourishing it with interreligious understanding and social cohesion. I contend that Canada's vast interfaith and multifaith reservoir needs to be carefully understood, protected, and strengthened to promote social well-being and to build safer and more resilient[2] Canadian communities.

Respected internationally for successfully facilitating religious accommodation in a multicultural framework, Canada's interfaith experience offers a useful model to observe how religious diversity can strengthen community connections, foster religious harmony, and promote community well-being. It is worthwhile and instructive to contemplate interfaith relations from a birds-eye level to grasp the lar-

ger Canadian landscape of interfaith activities. Accordingly, the purpose of this short article is threefold: first, to outline promising research that maps Canada's interfaith landscape; second, to showcase Canadian interfaith success stories to raise awareness of the correlation between interfaith activity and resilience; and, finally, to facilitate interfaith literacy to help Canadians learn about the advantages and benefits of positive interfaith relations.

Since 2013, research has been conducted across Canada involving visits to interfaith centres to learn about their best practices for interfaith harmony. The aim of this research has been to better understand the benefits of interfaith relations to build a more resilient society. Interfaith 'success stories' have been collected from these centres because, for the most part, interfaith successes are usually not reported by the media—with a few notable exceptions[3]. Unfortunately, Canadian interfaith activities are poorly known to the general public, which is exacerbated by the fact that the interfaith organizations, themselves, are usually too humble to publicize their own interfaith accomplishments. Therefore, the average Canadian is unlikely aware of the levels of religious cooperation going on in their local neighbourhoods and communities. In contrast, many Canadians are saturated with media images of religious violence on television and social media, which shape public perceptions of religion in unflattering ways. Voices of the Canadian interfaith movement challenge the ubiquitous and disturbing religious media headlines by telling different stories. Interfaith practitioners tell positive and resilient stories of religious harmony, community compassion, fellowship, friendship, social service and social justice initiatives. It is these positive stories —these hopeful counter-narratives against religious extremism and radicalization— that need to be told in the public eye to foster more balance in the overall public's perception of Canadian interfaith relations. This essay serves this larger educational purpose by disseminating some of the research findings concerning the Canadian interfaith landscape.

TAPPING INTO CANADA'S INTERFAITH RESERVOIR

Canadians have cultivated an extensive network of interfaith, ecumenical, and multifaith groups and organizations that are partners in promoting religious diversity, harmony, and social well-being in society. I call this Canada's Interfaith and Multifaith Reservoir and I consider it to be the most promising metaphor for the future of interfaith relations in Canada. I use this metaphor deliberately for several reasons: first, the image of an interfaith reservoir makes sense to Canadians because it is associated with the positive connotations of sanctuary, protection, well-being and nourishment; second, a reservoir suggests a pool of resources that can be accessed to promote individual and community well-being and growth. In the same way, Canada's multifaith/interfaith movement provides a vast pool of resources, knowledge and goodwill that could be harnessed for the benefit of Canadians to build social cohesion through fostering more diverse, open, respectful, and inclusive communities. Third, the metaphor of an interfaith reservoir is profoundly instructive for a healthy interfaith future because it reminds us never to take the waters of spiritual understanding for granted. We must remember that actual reservoirs of fresh water are not self-contained. They exist in a larger environment and interact with that environment. Reservoirs must be protected from pollution and contamination that can damage their nourishing qualities. In the same way, Canada's own interfaith reservoir of goodwill and understanding needs to be protected because it is not fail-proof or guaranteed. Outside factors such as world events or negative media reporting can adversely damage interfaith relations in Canada. Therefore, protecting the reservoir is a prudent act in ensuring its longevity, sustainability, and resilience.

Reservoirs belong to a larger eco-system that helps to sustain them; indeed, reservoirs require nourishment with new waters from diverse sources such as streams, underground aquifers, or rainwater to stay clean and healthy. Likewise, religious communities need to be open to new waters of spiritual understanding to avoid stagnation. After all, pools of water will start to smell unless they are open to new flows. The fluid practice and processes of interfaith dialogue encourage open-mindedness and flexibility because dialogue welcomes learning from others in a spirit of mutual understanding and growth.

Thus, the metaphor of an 'interfaith reservoir' has a double meaning: it refers to both the immense resources for interfaith harmony to be tapped for nourishing social well-being; yet it reminds us that reservoirs need to be safe-guarded because they can become harmful to a society if mismanaged. Religious communities and other community stakeholders need to become active caretakers in ensuring the responsible sustainability of the interfaith and multifaith reservoir. Otherwise this reservoir could become polluted with anger, hate, alienation, and other negative conditions, which could undermine healthy communal relations. Like the effects of pesticides entering into the groundwater, Canadians must be careful that religion is not polluted with the toxins of hate and extremism, which are cancerous to a larger healthy society. Therefore, harnessing Canada's interfaith reservoir is a prudent strategy to mitigate religious radicalization and extremism in Canada's multicultural landscape.

MAPPING CANADA'S INTERFAITH LANDSCAPE

Given the need to protect Canada's Interfaith and Multifaith Reservoir, it is necessary to identify the extensive network of groups who are actively involved in fostering interreligious

understanding across Canada. With this wisdom in mind, the Canadian Government, through its Kanishka Program, has supported a new research project entitled, "Strengthen Canada's Interfaith Organizations and Networks to foster resilience, public safety and counter-terrorism" (2013) lead by Dr. Scott Daniel Dunbar, the principal investigator. This project maps the contours of the Canadian interfaith movement in the hope that its reservoir of resources continues to nourish social well-being rather than becoming polluted with radicalization[4]. Research for the project commenced in 2013 under the auspices of the Canadian Interfaith Research Centre[5], which undertook the identification of Canada's interfaith landscape in concentric circles building outward from municipalities, provinces, national and international networks, and online environments. This multidimensional approach allows for a broad exploration of the many levels of interfaith activity to probe the depths of Canada's interfaith and multifaith reservoir.

Significantly, this mapping project seeks to identify the key organizations and groups who are either directly involved in, or indirectly facilitating, interfaith and multifaith understanding, cooperation, and partnerships. It aims to provide an open-access, user-friendly, and educational resource to strengthen interfaith relations in Canada through an interactive website that includes a large map of Canada which documents the existence of interfaith centres around the country. With this map, it will now become easier for interfaith organizations to find and locate like-minded allied organizations in their own cities, provinces, regions, and nationally for mutual collaboration, support, and partnerships. Best of all, these various organizations have the opportunity to share with each other their successful interfaith practices to help strengthen social resilience through the swapping of Canadian experiences and success stories. It will become possible for visitors to click on an interfaith centre found on the map and to read a short profile about it including its 'best practices' and success stories.

Promisingly, mapping Canada's interfaith landscape allows for the prospect of identifying both current and potential future Centres of Excellence in Canadian interfaith relations, which could have long-lasting social benefits. These centres could be identified by their sustained contributions to improving the quality of spiritual and mental health and well-being in Canadian communities through interfaith programs, training, and educational initiatives. Continued investment into these Centres of Excellence could yield improved social dividends in interreligious relations and significantly enhance community well-being. As a step in this direction, the aforementioned mapping project seeks to develop a database of 'best practices' to raise public awareness of the benefits of interfaith activities in Canada. The end result will be the creation of a common resource centre for Canada's interfaith groups that will facilitate intergroup networking and communication for ongoing education and learning. It will help the diverse interfaith and multifaith communities to learn from each other by sharing their best practices. In these ways, the mapping project can harness the potential of the interfaith and multifaith reservoir as a defense against religious radicalization and extremism in Canadian society.

Finally, this mapping project aims to build interfaith literacy, which promotes healthy knowledge of religious diversity. As Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), asserts, interfaith literacy is vital today to overcome ignorance and stereotypes about one's religious neighbours[6]. The development of interfaith literacy is an important step in building trust and respect in the public's perception of religious groups in society. In this way, Canadians can come to understand and appreciate the vast reservoir of interfaith organizations that exist in Canada to strengthen community well-being, build resilience, and make a safer society. This mapping project, therefore, considers what we as Canadians are doing right to prevent religious radicalization by harnessing interfaith resources and strengthening its multifaceted architecture.

DIMENSIONS OF CANADA'S INTERFAITH ARCHITECTURE

Interfaith activities take place at many levels in Canadian society with various goals and agendas. It is this plurality of voices in open dialectical communication between identity and difference that enriches the Canadian mosaic. If we employ the metaphor of interfaith dialogue as bridge building across religious backgrounds then Canada's interfaith reservoir contains many bridges of complex architecture and distinctive styles.

Previous efforts in interfaith relations focused primarily on high-level theological exchanges between religious leaders, scholars, and public authorities, but this was just one dimension of interfaith relations. Another level involves interfaith exchanges at the grassroots among everyday Canadians. Consequently, one can speak of different overlapping spheres of interfaith activity in Canada including, but not limited to, the theological level, the educational level, the social-justice level, online levels, and so on. And these levels may, or may not, be interconnected, overlapping, and harmonizing.

An emerging frontier of interfaith relations is social media, which allows new opportunities for interfaith understanding but also provides new dangers. This new frontier is especially popular with youth who are producing their own interfaith/multifaith websites, Facebook pages, chat rooms, blogs, etc. offering commentary about current events, with new networks of friends, followers, and critics. These emerging Internet vehicles have great potential to advance interfaith understanding but they can also be dangerous and damaging if they are used to promote stereotypes, propaganda, anti-Sem-

itism or hate. Unfortunately, the Internet has become a place for trolling and flaming[7] where nasty things are said about others under the alleged cloak of anonymity. This invective can poison the minds of religious and non-religious people so it is necessary to ensure that the Internet does not sour interfaith relations, promote hatred, or fan stereotypes. As the world becomes more digitally integrated, such online interfaith networks will become more important requiring the urgent development of an accepted interfaith 'Netiquette'. Those involved in interfaith dialogue will need to be vigilant of managing online activities with a healthy web-presence. Studies have shown that terrorist organizations have utilized the World Wide Web and social media to mobilize recruits[8] so an awareness of the influence of online religious activities is also important in the realm of interfaith relations[9]. Certainly, social media is becoming an increasingly important frontier for interfaith networks and this development requires the allocation of appropriate resources and experts to manage this aspect of the Interfaith Reservoir. Researchers must also be attentive to online religious networks fostered by social media to understand how they are used[10].

CANADIAN INTERFAITH ACTIVITIES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety officials, scholars, and other community stakeholders are increasingly recognizing the role of interfaith dialogue in fostering security and preventing or reducing religious violence and terrorism[11]. Suffice it to say, we live in a post 9/11 world in which understanding our religious neighbour is a necessity. Interfaith dialogue is desirable to overcome ignorance, to build trust, to foster respect, and to promote open communication among religious communities and non-religious citizens. The effectiveness of the Canadian interfaith reservoir to promote community resilience can be illustrated by several Canadian examples.

In many Canadian cities, interfaith partnerships have been formed among public safety stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, community health boards, aviation authorities, public policy planners, as well as security and intelligence communities, which recognize and respect the value of open religious diversity to make Canada a safer place to live. For example, the Halifax Regional Municipality has set up a "Partners in Policing Cultural Diversity Committee" to foster positive interfaith relations with law enforcement organizations including the RCMP and the Halifax Regional Police force[12]. These efforts have been fruitful in dealing with incidents of gang behaviour, anti-Semitism, and racism in the community. Other cities in Atlantic Canada are implementing proactive measures for harnessing the well of interfaith understanding. As a case in point, the police academy in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, regularly invites religious speakers, especially members of the Islamic community, to their police graduation ceremonies to talk about the importance of interfaith relations for social cohesion and well-being. Such community dialogue between interfaith practitioners and law enforcement organizations offers a mechanism for working together to solve common problems. In this way, dialogue fosters resilience in communities by facilitating respect for a plurality of voices in a multicultural society, and building trust for mutual recognition and appreciation.

An effective illustration of the direct correlation between interfaith cooperation and resilience in Atlantic Canada arises from the Swissair Flight 111 tragedy in 1998 that claimed the lives of 229 people. Those who passed away in this horrific plane crash came from multiple faith backgrounds. In order to ensure that the plane's victims, many of whom were unrecognizable, would be given a proper and respectful funeral according to their unique religious traditions, an interfaith organization was established in Halifax in the aftermath of this tragedy to deal with this unforeseen situation of adversity. This noble effort resulted in the emergence of the Interfaith Council of Halifax (ICH), which continues to play a cathartic role in reducing religious tensions in Nova Scotia. Even today, the IHC honours the victims of Swissair Flight 111 in a multifaith ceremony on the anniversary of the tragedy. The site of the crash near St. Margaret's Bay, Nova Scotia, is considered to be sacred ground by the families who make a pilgrimage to this site to honour their deceased loved ones. These families greatly appreciate the efforts of the IHC to honour and respect the lives and religious sensitivities surrounding the Swissair Flight 111 victims.

Since its inception, the ICH has fostered interfaith resilience by bringing different religious communities together to resolve social tensions. It responds in times of crisis to adverse social situations to ensure that the situations are resolved quickly with multifaith respect and cooperation. As a case in point, the ICH responded decisively and proactively to the issue of the Prophet Muhammad cartoon controversy in 2006-2007 by penning a letter of support for the Muslim community signed by the representatives of Halifax faith communities. This letter showed solidarity with the Muslim community while respecting the right to free speech in a democratic society. By drafting this letter, the ICH mitigated a potentially explosive issue in society and helped to diffuse tensions within the Halifax Muslim community over the cartoon controversy. In this manner, the actions of the ICH illustrate an effective interfaith response to adversity where an interfaith centre born in adversity becomes, itself, a foil for mitigating adversity and championing resilience.

Other interfaith and multifaith centres in Nova Scotia have worked with the ICH to improve interfaith literacy in Atlantic Canada. For example, the Dalhousie Multifaith Centre and the Tatamagouche Centre have high-caliber policies, programs, and services to strengthen multifaith cooperation.

Furthermore, these organizations have forged international interfaith connections by participating with non-Canadian partners such as the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland to study interfaith understanding and conflict resolution on the ground level. Such expanding networks show the ripple effects of Canada's interfaith reservoir on the larger world.

As can be seen, interfaith cooperation builds resilience in two ways: first, it functions as a type of preventative medicine to inoculate religious communities against radicalization and extremism; and, second, it can be harnessed as a reactive measure, or anaphylactic, to mitigate religious tensions in times of stress. Interfaith dialogue strengthens trust, facilitates frank dialogue among different religious groups, and allows for the expression of grievances while simultaneously enabling a common united front in the face of—and in response to—incidents of religious crisis, fear, frustration, alienation, hatred and/or violence. Interfaith dialogue does this mainly by providing counter-narratives and competing voices that challenge extremist narratives in pluralistic societies. Therefore, interfaith dialogue provides a mechanism to withstand the challenge of violent interpretations of religion through the positive regular occurrence of open communication, which helps to build community cohesion and resilience.

CONCLUSION

Religion's potential to incite fanaticism, extremism, radicalization and violence must be taken seriously. However, religion can be, and often has been, a source of communal harmony, social stability, and human well-being. Often unrecognized by the media, Canada's religious landscape includes a vast reservoir of activists who are mutually engaged in pooling interfaith resources to create social harmony, respect and community well-being. Identifying the centres, organizations and processes in this interreligious nexus is a crucial step for understanding their potential to foster community resilience and social cohesion.

The research project outlined in this article seeks to identify and map the different interfaith organizations actively engaged in Canada's interfaith movement to ascertain both the level and type of activity as well as the connections between the groups and regions. Canadian interfaith groups are invited to share their success stories in order to build a database of interfaith resources and 'best practices' to strengthen resilience in Canadian contexts. By identifying the nexus of interfaith centres and celebrating their successes, the public can become more aware of Canada's vast interfaith reservoir, plus the interfaith community itself can build on their mutual successes. In this way, Canada can contribute to being a model of interfaith harmony and cooperation to the world.

I am convinced that the way of the future for interfaith relations in Canada is through recognizing, protecting, and strengthening Canada's multifaith and interfaith reservoir and mapping its contours to build stronger connections and networks. In this way, the diverse religions of Canada can share their waters of spiritual understanding to nourish a safer and more vibrant society. And in this way, the Canadian interfaith movement can have a ripple effect that extends outwards to other communities around the world.

NOTE

[1] Dyer, Gwyn, 2010. Climate Wars. Oneworld Publications, p. 11-151. Another view of future 'water security' is found in: Wolf, A. "Water and Human Security." AVISO: An Information Bulletin on Global Environmental Change and Human Security. Bulletin #3, June 1999.

[2] Resilience is broadly defined as "an individual or community's adaptive capacities following a disturbance or adversity". See Rebecca L. Carter (2007: 1) "Understanding Resilience through Ritual and Religious Practice: An Expanded Theoretical and Ethnographic Framework" Megacities: Social Vulnerability and Resilience Building. Electronic document, www.vie.unu.edu/file/get/3852.pdf In the Canadian context, Dr. Michael Ungar, Co-Director of the Resilience Research Centre in Halifax, Canada, explains resilience as the capacity of individuals or communities "to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways." www.resilienceproject.org/

[3] Notable Canadian journalists who cover religious stories (both positive and negative) are Douglas Todd, Vancouver Sun, Robert Sibley, Ottawa Citizen, and Mary Hynes of CBC Tapestry. All of these journalists are award winning. To promote journalistic balance, quality and excellence in the news media, several organizations such as the Religion Newswriters Association (RNA) and American Academy of Religion (AAR) offer annual awards for the best journalist articles about religion.

[4] It should be noted that Canadian researchers are in good company with this interfaith mapping initiative because Harvard University has launched a similar mapping project in the United States to document and showcase America's own interfaith architecture. Harvard's Pluralism Project includes an initiative entitled, "America's Interfaith Infrastructure: A Pilot Study," which similarly seeks to identify and document active interfaith centres using Google Maps for easy locating and networking.

[5] The Canadian Interfaith Research Centre /Le centre canadien de recherches pour le dialogue interreligieux was established in 2013 to promote Canadian research excellence in interfaith, multifaith, and ecumenical relations. Its motto is: "Fostering excellence in the analysis and understanding about interfaith relations in Canada and the world." Available online at: www.interfaithresearch.com

[6] Interfaith Youth Core website. Available online at: www.ifyc.org/

[7] Zoë Cassandra (2008) defines "Trolling" as "the act of deliberately posting inflammatory or confusing messages on the Internet in order to provoke a vehement response from a group of users" (pp. ix-x). Conversely, "Flaming" is "the act of deliberately posting hostile messages on the Internet often directed to a specific individual" (pp. ix-x). See Zoë Cassandra, Managing Conflict in Virtual Environments. Masters of Science Thesis. New York University, 2008. Available online at: https://files.nyu.edu/zc279/public/Managing_Conflict_Zoe_Cassandra.pdf

[8] Wright, Marie. (2014.) "Technology and Terrorism: How the Internet Facilitates Radicalization." The Forensic Examiner. See www.theforensicexaminer.com/archive/winter08/7/

[9] Crystal Hoganson, (2013.) "Adapting to New Realities in Emergency Management: Resilience Through Social Media" The Conference Board of Canada, 12 pages.

[10] See Campbell, H. (2012). "Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society." Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 80 (1): 64-93; cf. Helland, C. (2005). "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet." Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 1(1).

[11] For example, on Nov. 8 2012, at the Kanishka Project conference in Ottawa, Xiaoyi Yan, the Director of Research and Evaluation in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, emphasized the importance of strengthening interfaith dialogue in preventing radicalization and facilitating resilient communities.

[12] Halifax HRM Policing: "Partners in Policing Cultural Diversity Committee." Available online at: www.halifax.ca/HRMPolicing/PPCDC.php Accessed 15 June, 2014.