

EXTENDED WEBSITE EDITION

Inroads roundtable: The view from Waterloo

A multifaith conversation about diversity,
Enlightenment and brownification

The six participants in this roundtable discuss the experience of cultural and religious diversity in one particular corner of English Canada, Waterloo Region in southwestern Ontario. Originally settled by Mennonites from Pennsylvania, and long a point of attraction for German immigrants to Canada, Waterloo Region has seen its complexion change rapidly in the last few decades. Its economic base has shifted with the growth of its three postsecondary educational institutions and the advent of high-tech companies such as Research in Motion, maker of the BlackBerry. Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism are establishing themselves as significant elements in its religious scene.

One forum in which these changes are reflected is Interfaith Grand River (IGR), whose first meeting – coincidentally – took place two days after September 11, 2001. In the past year or so, the intensity of the issues faced by IGR (of which



GILIGONE/FLICKR PHOTO

I am a member) has escalated. A school board decision to allow the distribution of Gideon Bibles in schools and the desecration of a local mosque demanded responses from the organization. Quebec’s Bill 94, which would ban face coverings in certain circumstances, was the subject of passionate interest and debate.

To convey a sense of these discussions, I invited nine women of a variety of religious backgrounds to participate in this roundtable – I limited it to women not for any reason of principle but because it had to be limited somehow, and some of the issues are of particular interest to women, and there are some very articulate women in IGR.

Six of the nine – Karis Burkowski (Neopagan), Carol McMullen (Jewish), Elizabeth McNair (Mennonite), Sandy Milne (Catholic), Idrisa Pandit (Muslim) and Jessica Rodela (Unitarian) – were available on September 16, the date chosen for the conversation. Ginny Freeman MacOwan and Craig MacOwan provided invaluable technical assistance. The September 11 anniversary had just passed, and with it the threat by a pastor in Florida to burn copies of the Qur’an. In the style of the old CBC television program Fighting Words, the participants were presented with a series of quotations and asked to respond to each one in turn. Some of the highlights are presented here.

— Bob Chodos

“I think I’ll keep my mixed up, multicultural (this is not a bad word), bastardized, poly-religious, integrated and even miscegenated American identity, thank you anyway.”

— Palestinian-American writer Suheir Hammad

CAROL MCMULLEN: As far as my own identity is concerned, with a last name of McMullen, and coming from Irish immigrants, and then deciding to convert to Judaism, as far as who I am and where I sit in different parts of society, a white woman, from an “educated” background, but wanting to relate to many different parts of society, I see many of those pieces as being helpful in relating to certain parts of society and I see many of those pieces as being obstacles in relating to other parts of society.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: I really liked that quote. I thought it was a powerful way of saying, “I

am more than any one piece of me.” I like to think of myself as a human being first, a female second, Neopagan, Canadian, Franco-Germanic – there are so many levels. And yet none of them is a definition. So I love the fact that she sees herself as a composite of many things. It’s like seeing herself as part of a cultural mosaic just within herself. And I think that’s a healthy way to look at one another, at all times.

JESSICA RODELA: It is the story of Hispanics in the United States that we are definitely of mixed identity as part of our identity, so for myself, I was born of Anglo parents, raised

My husband used to say, “Mennonites are so groupy,” in a negative way, and I said, “Yes, I love it, it’s important to me.” I like having my own identity in my own community, but I like being part of a broader community that is very multicultural.

— Elizabeth McNair

in Central America, born in South America, spent much of my time in the United States in Spanish-speaking areas, although I do not speak Spanish – also common among Hispanics. Hispanics within a North American context are identified by that big label *Hispanic* whereas within ourselves we differentiate many many areas. And now I’ve moved to Canada. So mixed identity for me is something that is part of who I am and it’s not confusing. I’m not any one thing.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: I really liked this as well, and I feel really comfortable that that’s what we are. I really feel good about being part of a Mennonite community, and Mennonites *have* community. My husband used to say, “Mennonites are so groupy,” in a negative way, and I said, “Yes, I love it, it’s important to me.” But I was also reading yesterday in one of our church papers about Emmanuel

Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, whose pastor’s name is April Yamasaki, and they have intentionally developed a multicultural church. And I thought “Yes, if I move there, I would like to be part of that.” So I like having my own identity in my own community, but I like being part of a broader community that is very multicultural. I don’t like the melting pot idea that everybody has to be the same. I think the richness of our community in Canada is that people express who they are.

SANDY MILNE: So far everybody has talked about the quote with respect to the individual. I’m interested in how it says something about our community, as opposed to me personally. Our community is mixed up, multicultural, bastardized, poly-religious, miscegenated – *bastardized* and *miscegenated* have negative connotations for the most part; I’m not sure what she meant by them and I’m not claiming them for anything in particular. But like Elizabeth I value diversity, and I think that value of diversity has grown in me from when I was little. I remember going into high school and discovering that not everybody was Roman Catholic like me, and then discovering that not everybody had two parents living together at home like me. And then going to university and discovering that many people didn’t speak English first like me was again revelation. And coming to this awareness has been for me a source of growth and a good thing.

But I also see many people who are afraid of growing. So I appreciate the quote and I think it’s important that those of us who value difference say so. And that’s where I find the hard part for me still.

IDRISA PANDIT: I don’t know how to define my personal identity. That really is something that I never had to think much about. My life has been multiple experiences, growing up in Kashmir, a community that was very homogeneous in some ways and heterogeneous in other ways. We never felt the tensions of the differences that you typically feel in a community of people having different faiths. Culturally all were the same, faith-based you had many different communities living together, and where we lived there were many different languages spoken. The place where I lived attracted people from all over the world. I grew up with Germans, Austrians, Americans, Canadians all living in my neighbourhood, and I went to a school that was run by the Church of England, and so I had English

teachers, and I studied Christianity as one of my subjects. It was all part of who I was as an individual growing up and of course it shaped my outlook.

The word *integrated* really strikes me in this quote. I think most of the problems emerge when people are not able to make the distinction between integration and assimilation. Elizabeth, I heard you say, “I don’t want the melting pot.” The melting pot, for me, means you want everyone to look like you, speak like you, behave like you, dress like you, believe like you. Integration is important for any society to function, because if you choose to live in Canada you have to adapt to the Canadian way of life to the degree that you are not imposing your way of life on anybody else. Assimilation? No thank you.

“Here is something I have learned the hard way, but which a lot of well-meaning people in the West have a hard time accepting: All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not. A culture that celebrates femininity and considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls’ genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or flogs and stones them for falling in love ... The culture of the Western Enlightenment is better.”

— Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad*, 2010

SANDY MILNE: I take some exception to the notion that you can say “better” or “worse” about the whole thing. I think there are some aspects of Western culture which are better than some aspects of another culture, but I would hesitate to take the whole thing in one gulp. And I would certainly question whether any culture in the world celebrates femininity holistically. I think there are pieces of Western culture that do, but there’s lots which puts

women down in many ways. I think that women as masters of their own lives is in itself a questionable way of phrasing things.

Culture is not fixed. Culture is always in transition, and that’s one of the struggles that I continue to have. I have to keep telling myself that all the time. Culture is not a given. It is not something that is handed down from on high as normative. Culture is always, from a Christian point of view, in need of redemption, in

need of improvement. I think Enlightenment, unfortunately, is the damndest, wrongest word to describe Western culture, because it has a connotation of good, and I'm not at all sure that the Enlightenment was a good thing – from the perspective of now. Certainly not all good.

JESSICA RODELA: As a woman I'm both amused and incredibly offended by this statement on pretty much every possible level. I don't recognize this rosy version of the Western Enlightenment that somehow has prevented me from being oppressed as a woman. What news after 47 years! And this statement calls down the most extreme parts of one subset of people who oppress women in a particular way. There are also equal and just as heinous subcultures in the Western world that oppress women in a different way. So I have a hard time dealing with the quote seriously because

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I find it a fairly racist statement and not very useful.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: I also think it's a bit simplistic. It doesn't take into account the whole spectrum, and she's taking little bits of both sides. Within my lifetime, here in Canada, you could beat your wife – it was in the law that a man had the legal right to discipline his wife. Also within my lifetime, women didn't get a fair share of anything. There have been so many changes just within my lifetime that to say that this culture is that much farther along the spectrum of equality and respect for women – yes, we've made huge gains, but we still have a very long way to go. And the fact that some parts of some cultures haven't even started on that road yet – that may be true, but that's not all of that culture. That's pieces of that culture. We have extremes here too. We have people out in British Columbia who are marrying girls who are young enough to be their granddaughters, and multiple of them, and somehow we let that go by. That's not showing respect for these people. And even if they say they are willing, how willing are they if they're uneducated and have no knowledge of their alternatives? I hear where she wants to be coming from, but it's too simplistic to take really seriously.

CAROL MCMULLEN: Old Order Mennonites and Amish shun people. Maybe they're not flogging or stoning people, but people who don't fit into the norms and values are shunned. And certainly within strains of Judaism, if you marry the wrong person, the parents are told to mourn as if the person is dead. These kinds of things are psychological levels of shunning.

Am I deeply concerned about some of the issues that are raised here? Absolutely. The question I struggle with is: should I support people who go into countries trying to change the values of cultures that do these things that I find so offensive? Is that our role, to go into these cultures and send, certainly not missionaries, but any kind of emissaries trying to educate and change this? Part of me emotionally feels for the victims that this is something we should do, but another part of me says that this is imperialist, this is taking our values and saying that we are better and that we somehow have a right to go in and criticize when there are major problems with how we treat our own Aboriginal people.

When I was asked to participate in the forum on wearing hijab and niqab, I looked up some things on the Internet, and it struck me that where we are saying that some Muslim women may be oppressed because they need to cover, the sites were asking, "Who's oppressed? Are we the ones in fact whose young women go out scantily dressed and the attention that they are attracting is of a physical kind, when Muslim women cover up and say, 'Don't look at my body when you are judging me, you judge me for my mind, for my thoughts, for what I have to say, not for how I look.'" That was very moving to me.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: Could I comment on one of the things you said? You talked about going into other countries and educating them. I think, instead, that we need to be really careful about the immigrants coming into our country. They need to be educated about our laws and their rights as part of coming in to the country.

I have a friend who's a head nurse at a hospital, and she has had to do the surgeries where they cut open these young girls who have been stitched up, because they get married and then they're bruised and battered because nothing works, and they have to go to the hospital and get this awful thing sliced open. She said that had appalled her, but what appalled her more was hearing that it's still happening, that families are saying, "Oh you're going to go back to Somalia to visit Grandma," and they come back and it's been done to them, but they're Canadian girls. We may dislike what happens in other countries, but there is not a lot we can do to control that. However, if it happens here or happens to our citizens, especially when it breaks our laws, we have a duty to put a stop to it, protect the victims and punish the perpetrators. The fact that they say it's their "custom" should have no bearing.

CAROL MCMULLEN: But are you saying that you feel it is our mandate to go in and try to change that because we disagree with it?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: We have laws against this stuff. If they send them over there and bring them back here again, they should be tried.

CAROL MCMULLEN: I struggle.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: I read some of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book, and I felt really uncomfortable with this idea, partially because I know there's much in our society that we're not thrilled with, much abuse that happens in our society. I think it's going to be really interesting to see how Canada treats what we call honour killings, having read the information about that young

girl in Mississauga. It's really kind of scary, but I don't think that happens just in her particular family. I think it can happen in different ways among ordinary families, and when you go into a mental health institution, almost every person who's in there has a history of abuse, especially in the addiction programs. So we have lots of things that we don't do well. But I guess again it's the whole thing about individuals or small groups versus the whole culture, identifying problems in a whole culture based on what some people do. We can say the exact same thing about our culture – we're not very civilized at all if we look at all the things that some people do.

CAROL MCMULLEN: So what is the difference between honour killing where the person is killed on the spot and someone who commits suicide because of the shunning?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: I actually find it rather refreshing that the papers have stopped referring to it as honour killing. They just describe who got killed and what happened to them. And they've taken that word *honour* out of it, because what is honourable about that? And I rather like that. I thought, good, that takes less of a stand in blaming a culture, focuses it on the extremists who did that. And it's also a

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little refreshing to see that crazy guy who was going to burn the Qur'an, because we get to see that we have crazies over here too. And you can't judge a whole culture by the crazies. So it was kind of refreshing for people to say, "You know what, let's stop looking at just the crazies on the other side."

JESSICA RODELA: Well, let's call on the media to stop giving it that much attention. The guy in Florida with 50 members out of his trailer, a church that he himself named with no denominational affiliation gets front-page news. Let's not judge the Western Enlightenment based on the actions of Terry Jones in Florida.

IDRISA PANDIT: I could say many harsh things about Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but speaking to her work, I think you have to recognize her personal story and know a little bit about that and where she's coming from when she is writing this in an Islamophobic world where she is promoted and presented as a spokesperson for Islam. People know what her agenda is, who is promoting her, why she is writing what she is writing.

Having said that, honour killings, female genital mutilation, all of the other things that might be cultural practices in cultures that have Christianity, Islam, many different faiths in that geographic region, why do they get attributed to a certain faith and not to that particular region? Now, as you said, we have to be careful about immigrants. When you move to a country, the basic thing you do is that you choose to abide by the laws of that country. Female genital mutilation is illegal in Canada. Period. There is no discussion there. Now if it is a cultural practice in certain

When you move to a country, the basic thing you do is that you choose to abide by the laws of that country. Female genital mutilation is illegal in Canada. Period. There is no discussion there. Now if it is a cultural practice in certain communities – which by the way have zero to do with any faith or at least with the Islamic faith – then it needs to be stated that way. – Idrisa Pandit

communities – which by the way have zero to do with any faith or at least with the Islamic faith – then it needs to be stated that way.

So if the Western Enlightenment means Orientalism, where this is all coming from, if it means imperialism, if it means oppression, absolute no-no. I don't want that kind of enlightenment. If Western Enlightenment means better education, equal access and opportunity for men and women, if it means living with dignity with one another and being an example for the rest of the world, to show that in Canada people from many different cultures and faiths can live together in harmony, yes to that kind of enlightenment.

Muslims immigrated to Canada for economic reasons. They are highly skilled professional people seeking a better life for themselves. Give them time to integrate, and let them learn to develop their interaction with others in Canada. But in the process you have to change, I have to change, Sandy has to change, everybody has to change, because my child is going to go to school with a child whose face is completely unknown to him. That level of interaction takes time. That's multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not a

policy that you draft and you put it on paper and you impose it on people. Multiculturalism means you learn to change, adapt, accept, inform, be aware and live with the other so that we can live in harmony. If it's an imposition one way or the other, it's all going to be a farce. If I come here and I impose, this is my way, it's not going to work.

SANDY MILNE: What you just said about culture, about multiculturalism, about needing to learn to live together – I don't know for sure, but most of the people around this table are married, and if you're not married you know people who are married. Isn't that exactly what you have to do in order to *be* married, and to *stay* married – to become multicultural?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: That requires education. There have to be ways that we can get to learn about one another. It's happened in Interfaith Grand River. We've all had a chance to get to learn about one another and understand one another's faiths and cultures and realities, but if you keep to yourself, if you ghettoize or are ghettoized, and you keep in a little bloc of

people who are likeminded, then you never get there.

CAROL MCMULLEN: And yet while we're being exposed and exposing ourselves and our children to other influences, there is a value in not becoming assimilated, and that isn't what the goal is: it isn't that people become so understanding and so open that they lose who they are, or in some way devalue the specialness of who they are. And I think that balance is one that many of us struggle with.

JESSICA RODELA: It's that very shaping of culture and cultures that is fuelling, for example, the Hispanic migration and now the paranoia in the border towns in the United States. The proposal is to actually build some magical wall across –

CAROL MCMULLEN: Where have we heard that before?

JESSICA RODELA: – the boundary to prevent the hordes of Hispanics from coming in. In the border towns Anglos are no longer the majority. Hispanics are still considered a “minority,” but in many many areas and school districts, actually, they are the dominant culture, and that is terrifying to the status quo. And because Hispanics in the last two generations have been so successful at both maintaining parts of their culture and integrating through politics, school systems, every possible walk of life, and intermarriage, now all of a sudden it's what my husband and I used to call, joyfully, the “brownification of America.” Soon everyone will look like us.

IDRISA PANDIT: It is very important to know where these debates are emerging from. I came across a report by the RAND Corporation, supported by the Smith Richardson Foundation, called *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources and Strategies*. This was done in 2003. You know why we are having debates about niqab and hijab? It's there. It tells the media which stories to cover – no wonder I have no success getting Kashmir in the news – which stories not to cover, and how to cover them. That is really the key. How do you cover them? Get people like Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, all of the others, and give people like this space to speak. Develop them into specialists on Islam. Put them up there as the spokespeople for Islam. Discredit anyone else who might be truly speaking from their faith. With these kinds of guidelines that our wonderful media follow, where do we go? So I think it is important for us not to stay at the superficial level but really to look at where this is coming from.

CAROL MCMULLEN: Can I just hark back to this topic here that has still been on my mind about the female genital mutilation issue, and the other thing that the media in our enlightened society do is pick topics that are the flavour of the week, month or whatever. What about male circumcision?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: That doesn't stop functionality.

CAROL MCMULLEN: No, but for some people it is an issue, and lately it is not even discussed as an issue. And coming from a religion that practises it, I just find it fascinating that when this is being talked about, that part is not talked about. I just find it fascinating that we

pick and choose the things that we become all inflamed about depending on what the agenda is. At least that's how I see it.

SANDY MILNE: It's no longer part of the package when you have a baby boy. It used to be part of the package, it was just automatic, you had to reject it, but now it's a choice.

CAROL MCMULLEN: I know, that's a move, and of course I agree with you that it is different, but some of the questions it raises have some

similarities, and it's not as openly discussed, and I just find that fascinating that we pick the things that are the most inflammatory or relevant to whoever makes it relevant at the time.

JESSICA RODELA: Look at the not so subtle message that female genital mutilation and veils are put in the same sentence – and stoning. And the assumption is that a woman in these cultures has no say, and a woman being veiled is equal to having no say.

“Where our “multicultural” society works, it works because people from different ethnic groups live, work and socialise together, and because they fall in love, marry and produce brown Britons. Where it doesn't work is where individual cultures cut themselves off from their neighbours, and insist on interacting only with their own. It's in these cultures that people learn to be suspicious of everything that's different. And it isn't a long journey from suspicion to hate to attack.”

— Christina Patterson, *The Independent*, London, August 4, 2010

CAROL MCMULLEN: Not among Old Order Mennonites and Amish. Not physical attack. Elizabeth, can you speak to that? They certainly don't go out and arm themselves and are noted as a peaceable society and, boy, there's nothing more reclusive than those groups, as I see it. What do you think about that?

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: Within the faith, there is an indication of nonviolence. But that doesn't mean there's not violence within the community – nonviolence has a specific meaning. I'm not sure that it's necessarily one or the other – that you either totally integrate or assimilate, or if you're separate then you cut yourself from everybody.

SANDY MILNE: I don't think she is suggesting that we all become brown. Because then it's all homogeneous again, and certainly from my point of view, it's not our goal as human beings to become cookie cutters. Everybody the same colour? That's not it! The notion is that people are valued as individuals in community and these communities are a set of intersecting circles, and some of them overlap and some of them are quite independent. My background being Roman Catholic, we have monasteries, we have women and men who cut themselves off entirely from the rest of the world – except that's not true at all. Those people are very, very, very connected to what's

going on in the world. They live out their lives in a different way. Should they all come out and have three kids like I did? No! Should I go into the monastery? No!

KARIS BURKOWSKI: I don't see that the Mennonites keep themselves that far out either. We have tree cutters who come that are Old Order Mennonites. If you want something built there are Mennonites that you can go to. You see them in the market – they integrate, they talk to you, they're very friendly, you can talk to them, down the road they have little stands where they're selling things. It's not that they cut themselves off from having anything to do with us. It's just that they want to live their lives their own way. That's a little different from a ghettoized culture, whether it's ghettoized from the inside or ghettoized from the outside, where they really are cut off, and you're not allowed to mix with them.

CAROL MCMULLEN: But they don't socialize. This is business you're talking about, not socializing.

SANDY MILNE: But they do live in the same neighbourhoods, and they do work together. Two out of three isn't bad in that list.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: They're a very small group among Mennonites. In the worldwide community, the largest Mennonite churches are in Africa. More than 50 per cent of Mennonites live below the Equator. So we're talking about a very small group within a much larger group. So we have that same problem. There are small groups of people who keep themselves together, and that can be family culture too.

Just in reading the information about that young girl in Mississauga, it seemed to me that that particular father was so concerned and so fearful that he limited the activities of his children – all of them. The married boys were all living at home. And so it's an example of a family culture, not necessarily reflective of all the people who come from Pakistan.

SANDY MILNE: That's what happens when you're cut off from your neighbours, and that's another piece of this quote – cutting yourself off from your neighbours. Geography has something to do with it. The folks who live next door share the same street with you. You have a responsibility to your neighbours. The closer they are physically, the more responsibility you have.

IDRISA PANDIT: I think ghettoization is a two-way street. You can participate and be nice to your neighbours if you find some reciprocity there. Many people withdraw and stay in their little family or community ghetto because they don't encounter that reciprocal involvement. And I do take responsibility to a large degree. In the Muslim community, where there are many many different cultures, they all feel comfortable with people who speak their language or who do things their way, so they form their little clubs. This is a very unhealthy thing that I have fought against in my own community.

When I moved here I found it extremely awkward going to the Waterloo Mosque. I would say hello to everybody, because that's the way I've been when I meet anybody in a place of worship. And someone came up to me and said, "You know that person? You've only been here so many months." And I said,

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"I don't really know them, but I said hello to them." "Well, we've lived here twenty-some years and we don't know these people who sit in the front row." These were the people who sit in the corner, and I couldn't believe how they had built walls.

Another time, I had eight people from eight different countries in my house. And one woman was going on and on, insulting a certain culture, to which I had some affiliation. And this was a person who was all about assimilation. I always wear different kinds of clothes. "In Canada you're not allowed to wear something like this. You should wear what everybody else wears." I was in absolute shock. And my daughter said, "What is wrong with this person?" Then finally when she left she said, "I was better off with my own people." That says it all.

So people want to stay with their own people because they can continue the garbage within that little ghetto. That is self-imposed ghettoization. But look at the other side. There are ghettos, for example the ghettos of France, that are a whole different story. They don't choose to live in the ghettos. They are put in the ghettos. There is a certain section of the society where the Muslim community can live,

nowhere else. There is no interaction. They are kept where they are.

I don't like what the person was saying, because I don't want anyone telling me that all our kids should be brown. If my daughter falls in love with a jet-black person, I'm more than happy for her. That's what she has chosen. But should I enforce it: you really need to go and meet somebody who's from this colour or this community or this culture? No. If Mennonites want to stay Mennonite and live in their communities, as long as they're not harming any non-Mennonites, there's nothing wrong with that. Forced adaptation and acculturation – it just doesn't work.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: I hate to tell you, Idrisa, but when it comes to your kids, you don't get to choose.

IDRISA PANDIT: I'll remember that.

JESSICA RODELA: There is the human comfort level of being among our own kind. When I was in Chicago, for the first time I was living and working only among Anglos, and I was so relieved when I found the Hispanic side of town, and I understood the cultural cues, and all of a sudden I could just mingle around these families and hear accents that were familiar to

me. It reminded me, “Oh yes, this is a piece of me that I don’t necessarily actively miss, but these are the sounds of my childhood.” This is part of who I am, and I start missing it without realizing that there’s a vacuum, so I actively seek out that balance. And just a little

comment: in two years of my immigration process, so far no one has sent me the Canadian dress code, so I eagerly await it.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: For some people it includes tattoos and piercing.

“Interculturalism as defined by the [Bouchard-Taylor] commission favours a common culture, which is actually Quebec culture, in which there is no place for other cultures. Given this, how can interculturalism be a working model for harmonious relations between cultures when, by its very nature, it establishes a hierarchy of cultures? How can harmony among cultures come to be when there is a relationship of domination in which other cultures are subordinated to the culture of the Québécois de souche? How can a vivre-ensemble [a way of living together] that takes different cultures into account be constructed when the references are those of Quebec culture? The Bouchard-Taylor Commission missed the opportunity to discuss a common culture to be built with – not outside of – new Quebecers, taking into account their cultures, and not just a single culture, that of the established majority.”

— A Muslim woman in Quebec interviewed for a study by Meena Sharify-Funk of reactions to the Bouchard-Taylor Report, 2009

SANDY MILNE: This is assuming that Quebec culture or English Canadian culture is monolithic, and that it’s static and a given. We who are here are absolutely affected by the folks who are coming. Once the folks who have just come have been here a while, they in turn will be affected by the folks who next come. And we’re also affected by the folks who leave. I think it’s artificial to believe it can be static. That said, there is a point to saying, there is a Canadian culture. There is an English Canadian culture, which is less well defined. But we have a set of laws, we have a set of practices. They are absolutely not perfect, one acknowledges that,

but you’ve got to start somewhere. You can’t start on zero every time a new person arrives.

CAROL MCMULLEN: To make it specific, an example is the resistance of many parents to changing the annual Christmas concert at schools, and calling it a holiday gathering or a holiday concert or whatever. There are many many people, as we know, who are deeply upset, and for many people the fact that Christmas concerts are no longer politically correct seems to epitomize the changes happening around them. I have certainly heard that from people in the school system,

teachers, saying that people in their classrooms are deeply upset about this.

SANDY MILNE: And speaking as a Christian who practises, I find the whole notion of a Christmas concert offensive, because it’s all about Santa Claus and snowmen. It’s secular to start with, so why call it Christmas? My Christian celebration has been absconded with by the Canadian culture. And my holier day has been treated even worse.

CAROL MCMULLEN: By Easter bunnies.

SANDY MILNE: It’s absolutely offensive. That said, Canadian culture requires holidays sometimes. So, shall we start over again and put them all in the summertime when it’s decent weather? Let’s put New Year’s in July. I really think that’s a good idea. It makes sense. However, we in Canada are part of a whole world. So unfortunately, the Western piece has said that New Year’s is on January 1 – what a stupid time of the year to have a New Year. We have to deal with the history we’ve been given. And I think there’s a really good point about naming things what they are. Heck, it’s a Christmas tree. You can call it your kind of tree, but it’s not a holiday tree, it’s not a Chanukah tree.

CAROL MCMULLEN: Jews don’t want it to be a Chanukah tree.

SANDY MILNE: Exactly. So if you want to talk about a Yule log or whatever you want to talk about, that’s great, but the one that I’m decorating is a Christmas tree.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: That’s right. And they could get around all of that by having the holiday

In two years of my immigration process, so far no one has sent me the Canadian dress code, so I eagerly await it. – Jessica Rodela

named for something that’s not a religion but something that’s observable. There’s no denying that there’s solstice, there’s equinox, there are different agricultural points in the year. Have a harvest festival. Have a solstice. And then if you want to celebrate Christmas at that time, celebrate Christmas. If somebody else wants to celebrate Chanukah, celebrate that. Everybody gets a holiday, the holiday is based on something undeniable that anybody with two eyes can see, and celebrate it your own way.

CAROL MCMULLEN: So when do we get our two weeks off? Is it around the dominant-culture, “Christmas” holiday?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: It’s the one that you can’t deny. It’s around when the year changes. When the light starts to come back. When you have the change from days getting shorter to days getting longer. You can’t deny that. You call it Chanukah and you get your two weeks then, I call it Yule and I get my two weeks, you call it Christmas and you get your two weeks. Everybody gets the same amount of time.

CAROL MCMULLEN: I’m really pushing this. When do the teachers get off? For two months?

I think there's a really good point about naming things what they are. Heck, it's a Christmas tree. If you want to talk about a Yule log or whatever you want to talk about, that's great, but the one that I'm decorating is a Christmas tree. – Sandy Milne

From the time Chanukah starts in November until all the different Epiphanies and whatever are over in January is two months. So what's happened is that the dominant culture, up to now, has had the holiday time at the time of its holiday. But God help you, at the university, if you have an exam on one of your special days, they're not going to change the exam date.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: But if they had the significant holidays at the times that are undeniable.

CAROL MCMULLEN: And you're going to convince them how?

KARIS BURKOWSKI: We're talking about an optimum solution here. And then you had eight or ten other holidays, or however many you need to make up the number. You can have those whenever you want. Those are like personal sick days.

CAROL MCMULLEN: You get a certain number of personal days.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: Personal days of absence. You have personal days, and then you have the cultural times when everybody's off.

CAROL MCMULLEN: It comes down to the practical issues. We can sit here and say we want all this, but how do you set it up?

JESSICA RODELA: It speaks directly to me as a Unitarian minister. We actually celebrate all of these days, because within the Unitarian Universalist faith are representatives from all of these people. So I have my Buddhist UUs and my Jewish UUs and my beloved Pagans and Christian refugees of all stripes and people who intermarried so we're their compromise solution.

CAROL MCMULLEN: So in your faith group you can do that, but if we're talking about society, and how we get our court system and our schools and our holidays and our calendars to reflect this, that's where I think we're in the biggest trouble.

SANDY MILNE: The biggest problem in schools would be allowing teachers to have their holidays as faithful people, as opposed to what's currently become the case, which is a sense of entitlement to two weeks off now, one week off now, two months off now, thank you.

JESSICA RODELA: The Unitarian solution, inasmuch as that's been, is that we do cater to the dominant culture of whatever city and whatever school system we're in. The Unitarian church ends up following whatever the school system dictates, because that will actually dictate the pattern of attendance,

and I would be a fool to decide to run against that tide. I'd just be spitting in the wind. So it became controversial two years ago when I said, "Okay, so December 25 happens to be a holiday called Christmas, and I'm going to call it that. And I'm going to call Solstice Solstice, and we're going to call Chanukah Chanukah, and we're not going to pretend there's some one-size-fits-all word that encompasses all of that." So we have a Christmas service, and we do Christmas eve. And to my humanists who say, "Don't put God or Jesus in my church," I say, "Stay home on Easter and Christmas, because I will be saying the J-word."

CAROL MCMULLEN: You're still not dealing with society. That's your little enclave, which is enlightened.

JESSICA RODELA: They would probably object to that word. We haven't got a perfect solution, but I am dealing with 200 people coming and going who argue about every single word.

CAROL MCMULLEN: So it's a model of what society could be doing.

JESSICA RODELA: We're not creedal, but we agree to a certain set of principles. It's not that everyone agrees on everything, but we've agreed to disagree, and we've agreed to a decent dissent. Part of what we are together is learning at the edges of our difference. I've stopped singing a hymn we have called "We are all one." No we're not! We're all 100 people who will argue with whatever I'm going to say on a Sunday morning. That's okay. Part of who we are is that we're going to grapple with the differences instead of pretending that we all are one, because in my congregation we can't.

IDRISA PANDIT: We've been talking a lot about religious holidays and observances, but my question is: Is there a bigger meaning to the dominant culture? What about a consumerist culture? What about an individualistic culture? All these are part of the Western Enlightenment. So how do you fit an Eastern mind with the Western consumerist capitalist individualist culture? What do you do when you're coming from a society where people live together, where it's very normal that some still live with their fathers, where aging parents don't go to nursing homes?

And you're going to have that now in Canada. There are still families that belong to that mindset, that kind of culture, where parents age with their children. Are we going to look down on them and say, "That is wrong. Now you're in Canada, you have to put your father or mother in the nursing home." Is somebody going to tell me that now that my daughter is 18 she should be leaving home because that is the way we do it in Canada? These are the kinds of tensions we will have to resolve as we move along, and figure out a way of living in harmony among different cultures by accepting that Elizabeth's way of doing things in her family is going to be different from my way of doing things.

Interestingly enough, when they passed the niqab bill yesterday in France, they had to make it constitutional. It's most unconstitutional, so what did they do? They drafted the bill – which speaks to the hypocrisy of the whole thing – in such a way that the word *Muslim* or *women* was never mentioned, so that it would not be questioned on its illegality. So the intent is one thing, but the cover

is something else, and I think that's what happens a lot. We try to cover things up. We sugar-coat things and present them as if it's for all, it's not just for those people, but the intent is directed precisely at those people.

SANDY MILNE: As someone said, "It is just as illegal for the president of the University of Waterloo to sleep under a bridge as it is for a poor person."

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: I wonder whether the dominant culture is determined by the size of the

group. The Mennonites were the very first settlers in this community – my family was here in 1800. Then when more and more German people came, English people came, other people came, things changed. You would never say the Mennonites are the dominant culture in this community any more. But they were when they arrived. The same in Quebec. French Canadian Roman Catholics are what our perception was of the dominant culture in Quebec. But as people come in it will change.

"After September 11, rightly or wrongly, I felt the calculus of risk had changed. And I feel it's still changed. I still think there is the most enormous threat from the combination of this radical extreme movement [radical Islam] and the fact that, if they could, they would use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. I think they would if they could. And you can't take a risk with that happening."

— Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in an interview with the BBC, September 3, 2010

"Terrorism, by radical Islamists or anybody else, is a real threat but a modest one. It cannot be "defeated," but it can be contained by good police work and wise policy choices. It might make it into the top ten global threats, but it certainly wouldn't make it into the top three. Anybody who says it does has something to sell or something to hide."

— Journalist Gwynne Dyer, in his syndicated column, September 11, 2010

IDRISA PANDIT: Tony Blair's wrong. We know he was. After a million people were massacred and he beat the drums of war, we found out there were no weapons of mass destruction – all that nuclear, chemical and biological stuff that he drumbeat to have innocent soldiers and innocent Iraqis killed wasn't found. So he obviously was wrong, and he won't admit it, because he was the leader of the nation, and he led a nation to war, along with the

international community. "You can't take a risk with that happening." So what kind of risk are you willing to take? And who is going to be victimized by your attempt at occupying and oppressing others? I'll leave it at that.

JESSICA RODELA: The leaders are invested in justifying the choices that they made when we were on the verge of what could have been an unprecedented peace, and they forgot that this

is gang warfare, and if you retaliate there's no end to it. There was that moment when you thought maybe they'll come together, and then George Bush basically declared war with an Israeli flag behind him, and that was the U.S.'s first response.

SANDY MILNE: But to come back to another point, fear is so destructive.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: And they work so hard at building an atmosphere of fear, because they get more power that way.

SANDY MILNE: If we only look at here, fear has power. If we look at the future, fear is not the end. As a person of faith, I'm not It. I don't have to be God. I don't have to be right. I can afford to make a mistake. That's what he said: "I can't take a risk." I *can* take a risk. Because I'm not It. I personally am not It.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: The words that are used are so inflammatory. It was the Americans who dropped the first bomb in Japan, and that's called heroism. Many more people died than died at the World Trade Center, and it's not called a terrible disaster. The World Trade Center was horrible, but there weren't very many people who died there in comparison to Baghdad, so it's the words that we're using so much to inflame this whole thing about terrorism.

And I think if this guy had burned the Qur'an last week, it probably would have inflamed an awful lot more, all over the world. I saw some hope in the fact that the American government is saying, "Don't do this," rather than, "Do it, and then that's another country

If this guy had burned the Qur'an last week, it probably would have inflamed an awful lot more, all over the world. Isn't this guy in Florida a terrorist too, for the kinds of things he's saying and doing? He's considered ignorant, but you don't use the terror term with him. – Elizabeth McNair

we can move into." Isn't this guy in Florida a terrorist too, for the kinds of things he's saying and doing? He's considered ignorant, but you don't use the terror term with him.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: The United States is never "the terrorist." They're the "defenders of freedom."

JESSICA RODELA: Three of my stepchildren in the United States signed up for the military at a high school recruitment activity. So I had three children and a son-in-law serve in Iraq, one of whom was there for four years, three tours back to back, one with the army and two with the Marine Corps.

And the one who was there for four years saw the devolution of the war in terms of being sent right after "major operations were over" – remember that, it happened early on in 2003, when it was "over"? So she was sent



early on and was first told, “You’re here as an ambassador,” and she was mostly armed with candy and sticks of gum: “We’re really here to rebuild.” Within six weeks, she was told, “Shoot anything that moves.” This war turned me into a total pacifist. I was at the time part of a military family. My stepchildren joined because both their father and mother were in the Marine Corps. They knew what their stepmother thought of this, which is why they joined and then told me last. But I wasn’t a true pacifist. I was not in favour of this war: it was an absolute travesty and a tragedy. When they sent my daughter over and I realized, so, three months before she arrived in Iraq and was handed a rifle and told to shoot people, she was a prom queen. My prom queen with a rifle and a few weeks of training does not make the world safer for democracy.

And what terrified me the most wasn’t as much that my children were in physical danger,

Three months before my daughter arrived in Iraq and was handed a rifle and told to shoot people, she was a prom queen. My prom queen with a rifle and a few weeks of training does not make the world safer for democracy. — Jessica Rodela

which they were, but knowing what was going to happen to them, what they would have to do, and then coming back, how were they going to translate that in a society that then was going to say, “Well, suck it up. You were just doing your duty.”

“Nine years later, the main fact of our lives is the overwhelming force of unreason. Evidence, knowledge, argument, proportionality, nuance, complexity, and the other indispensable tools of the liberal mind don’t stand a chance these days against the actual image of a mob burning an effigy, or the imagined image of a man burning a mound of books. Reason tries in its patient, level-headed way to explain, to question, to weigh competing claims, but it can hardly make itself heard and soon gives up.”

— George Packer, in his blog on the New Yorker website, September 10, 2010

JESSICA RODELA: The political and media climate here is still so much more measured and tame than in the southern United States, where I spent some time this summer. It really is a cultural difference, to raise that word again. I can still feel the difference all around me. It does terrify me that being this far along in my immigration process, a decade from now I’ll find that I’ve left for just more of the same, because I can also feel the slip and I want to say, “Don’t do that!” I really do blame the media for heightening this atmosphere. These images are the ones that get published. The images of people sitting around demanding tolerance, if it doesn’t offend anyone, don’t make great visuals. The visuals aren’t nearly as compelling as the ones of the Tea Party craziness that’s going on in the United States.

CAROL MCMULLEN: And the “honour killing” in Toronto.

ELIZABETH MCNAIR: There were some real concerns too around the treatment of the protesters at the G-20. There are these two people from Waterloo, one fellow just got out of jail recently and his sister got out a little while ago, but they’re under house arrest. He can’t go anywhere out of his house, and she can go with her mother.

KARIS BURKOWSKI: The media made a big big fuss about people being arrested, but never once mentioned what they were protesting against.

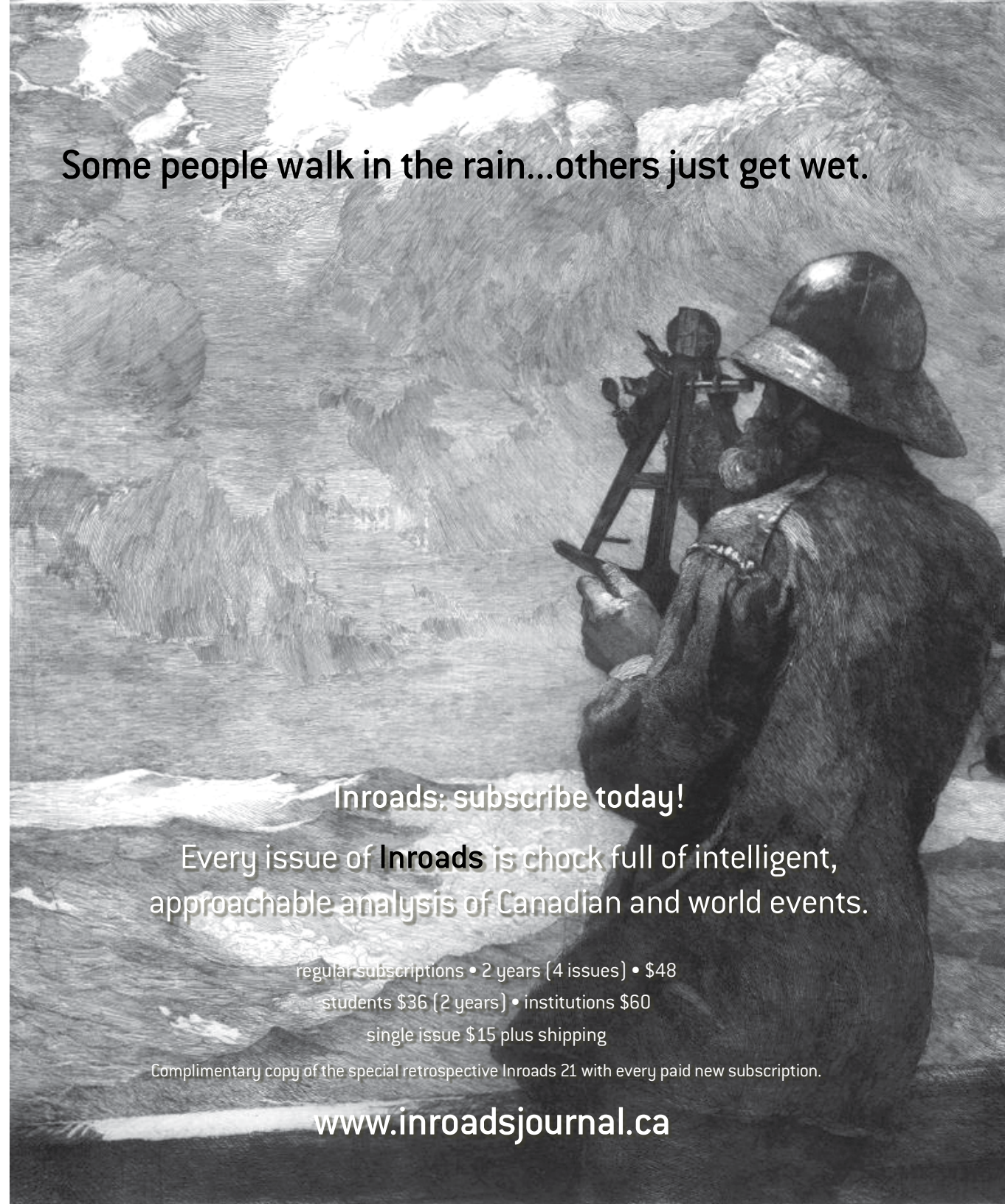
ELIZABETH MCNAIR: These people weren’t even protesting – they were just walking down Queen Street. And they’re considered subversive.

CAROL MCMULLEN: And they will have a police record. If you go to volunteer and they do a police record check, that police contact will be on there.

JESSICA RODELA: The worst thing we can do is throw up our hands and decide, “Oh well, all of these people are idiots who believe this stuff and we’re going to stand in our own righteous Western Enlightenment mode and feel superior.” I think that’s what Western intellectuals have done, saying, “Oh those people are stupid.” No they’re not! They’re in charge. They got something right. Rather than respond to it with some sort of sense of moral and intellectual superiority, we have to be there in the trenches and grapple and figure out, what is our message as reasoning people? Why is that being considered irrelevant, both in the media and in the wider culture?

SANDY MILNE: There's a limit to how far you can expand your horizon at a time. You can only go from here to the next step; you can't make the jump, because you don't have the support to hold you there. Our job as individuals is to push our own boundaries of comfort and to invite our families, our spouses, our kids, our church folk to come along.

JESSICA RODELA: It occurs to me that what we have, as people of faith, of different faiths, is that we are the symbol-bearers. We may not have an image that is as compelling as an effigy being burned, but we do each bear the symbols of our faith, and those are powerful symbols that have endured for millennia. So those are the ways in which we can use an image to combat what the media are promoting.



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