



Spiritual Reflections

Seeking Justice for all

By Shahid Akhtar

A reflection with a threefold perspective: as a Muslim-Canadian, as an immigrant from Pakistan, and as a practitioner of deep-rooted interfaith conflict resolution co-chairing the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims.

We all know that Canada is one of the most diverse societies in the world. While this is certainly a strength and something to celebrate, our country also has a history of societal hierarchy and discrimination. Complex factors including the effect of colonialization have caused one predominant group to rise to the top in terms of quality of life, power, and influence - mostly at the expense of others.

Firstly, from a Muslim perspective, we are commanded by the Islamic faith to seek social justice for all oppressed people, regardless of religion, race, or nationality.

Our faith helps us relate to prejudice and discrimination against marginalized groups, including Indigenous Peoples, because we belong to one common human body – and when one part of the body hurts, everything hurts.”

The sufferings of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the Palestinian people, the Uighurs in Xinjiang, and the ongoing civil war and refugee crisis in Syria makes many in the Muslim community more acutely aware of what it is like for the Indigenous people to be the victim of racism, prejudice, violence, and hatred.

From my perspective as an immigrant from Pakistan, I must admit that when I had a chance to visit some reservations for the first time, I was shocked to see that in this first world country, many original inhabitants and rightful owners of the richest land and natural resources, lived in worse conditions than what I had seen in the shantytowns back home.

The generational damage that colonizers have done is clearly visible today, including implementing a hierarchy where some groups were made to feel like outsiders or ‘others’. While every immigrant comes to this country with their own unique stories, in my

experience, immigrants are natural allies with Indigenous people in our struggle to overcome the feeling of being the ‘others’ in the Canadian society.

Lastly, I am writing this from my perspective of the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims and an ongoing engagement in the inter-faith and intra-faith conflict resolution. I feel that the Jewish and Muslim communities have a special sensitivity to being the target of prejudice in the forms of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Thus, they can play a unique and hopefully useful role in trying to address discrimination faced by Indigenous people. Like the history of the colonizers and the colonized, Jewish-Muslim conflicts have inflicted untold hardships.

While we still have a long way to go, like-minded people in these communities have learned from each other and built alliances to counter hate.

Canada has one of the most active interfaith alliances in the world working to counter bigotry, hate and violence aimed at minority communities.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide a reflection. To close, I would wish to convey the thought that the 21st century has brought about tremendous changes in human attitudes and behavior and power dynamics. What could be done at one time with only brute military power and huge infrastructures can now be done by individual empowerment due to technological advancement, new alliances, and shift in realization of what is in the true interest of individuals, groups, and nations.

This gives us hope and optimism that we can all live with dignity, self-worth and esteem in this society which takes pride in its remarkable values of social justice for all. I’ve included some “points to ponder” that I’ve found



helpful in my own mediation, interfaith and conflict resolution work.

Points to Ponder for Advancing the Struggle for Social Justice:

- Build maximum alliances for common cause with racial, religious, and immigrant communities.
- Determinedly participate in the political process and use imaginative and creative methods to resolve issues.
- Utilize international forums in alliance with global public opinion builders.
- Launch large-scale awareness campaigns and make best use of the news cycle.
- Engage youth. Seek world exposure in the arts, entertainment, literary and cultural arenas.
- Inculcate pride. Make it cool to be Indigenous. Encourage longing for recognition and sense of belonging.
- Make personal contribution to enrich the land that sustains us.

- Promote a nation-to-nation mindset in individuals while being proud Canadians.
- Avail the (general) willingness of Canadians to be helpful. Don't squander the opportunity.
- Don't forget to enjoy and find fulfillment and purpose in the process.

Shahid Aktar is currently a co-chair of the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims. CAJM is the first bilateral Jewish-Muslim organization dedicated to creating co-operation between Jews and Muslims in combatting anti-Semitism and prejudice against Muslims.

Questions for Reflection

1. *What struck you most?*
2. *How might you work with your community towards a more just Canada? How might you act on Aktar's "points to ponder"?*
3. *Share a quote or insight that sticks with you.*