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Is religious faith the cure for terrorism?

The Globe's monthly panel convenes to discuss faith, terrorism and youth engagement

An Israeli law student assassinates a prime minister on behalf of other Jews. A twentysomething Christian militant plants pipe bombs at the Atlanta Olympics in opposition to abortion and gay rights. A young Norwegian man embarks on a mass shooting to "save" his country from Muslim immigrants. Former Ontario high-school classmates become radicalized and join a plot to attack an Algerian gas plant. Two Muslim brothers, one just 19, bomb the Boston Marathon in supposed defence of Islam.

Extremism transcends age and faith, but young people – and young men – are particularly susceptible. Many of their outbursts are carried out in religion's name, although the dynamics are usually more complex than that. The Globe's Faith Exchange panel has convened to discuss what religious communities can do to engage young people and provide alternatives to extremism.

- **Sheema Khan** writes a monthly column for The Globe and Mail. She has a master's degree in physics and a PhD in chemical physics from Harvard. She is the author of *Of Hockey and Hijab: Reflections of a Canadian Muslim Woman* .
- **Matt Wilkinson** is director of youth ministries for Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec and author of *Youth Ministry: Now and Not Yet* .
- **Sikander Hashmi** is an imam, writer and teacher in Kingston, Ont.
- **Lorna Dueck** has been reporting on Christian practice in Canadian life for the past 20 years. She is an evangelical Christian and host of *Context with Lorna Dueck* , seen Sundays on Global and Vision TV.
- **Howard Voss-Altman** has been serving Temple B'nai Tikvah, Calgary's reform Jewish congregation, for the past 10 years. He is a community leader in the areas of human rights and civil liberties.
- Moderator **Guy Nicholson** is an editor in The Globe's Comment section. He professes no religious beliefs.

Guy Nicholson: Looking at a list of incidents like the one above, some Canadians would conclude that religious teaching is a cause of extremism, rather than a solution. What would you say to that, panelists?

Lorna Dueck: I would say this list of alarming youth activities coming from religious teaching is extremely incomplete. Rather, we should examine why some religion can be hijacked into violence, and why other faith is developed into virtues and character that build lives for the common good.

In all those cases, we also have to ask whether what is at issue is religion, politics or some mix. Ideologies of religion manipulating for political power are not condoned in Christian practice, but I realize our history is full of examples of just that. It's bad faith when it happens. When faith turns violent, it is sick faith.

Authentic Christian faith in the fashion of Jesus subverts violence, it does not condone or perpetuate it.

Howard Voss-Altman: There are so many forces that join together in producing extremist behavior – mental illness, the response to a particular religious teaching, family dynamics, education, employment (or lack thereof) – that it would be highly simplistic to attribute a criminal or terrorist act to a religious teaching or ideology. However, when religious teachings emphasize exclusivity – that is, the one and only truth – then those religions that do not possess "truth" become an easy target or scapegoat. The danger lies in claiming absolute truth, because then, everyone else must surely be wrong.

Lorna Dueck: As well, when believers withdraw into a narrow world of self, or self-interpretation of a perceived divine voice speaking into imagination, faith is distorted. Faith does have evidence and practice from which to be evaluated and thought carefully on; it is a community and history of practice meant to produce beauty, not destruction.

Sikander Hashmi: Extremism, of the religious type, obviously has to do with religion. But to point the finger at religion as the source of the problem is somewhat like pinning the blame for global warming on Earth and saying, "If there was no Earth, there would be no problem." Rather, it is what humans do on Earth that will help reduce global warming or increase it. Similarly, when religious teachings are misunderstood and twisted, we find extremism. The answer to religious extremism lies within religion itself. If someone showing radical extremist tendencies is to be challenged, telling them to leave religion altogether won't cut it.

Matt Wilkinson: Today's young people are looking for a place to belong, for acceptance and to be empowered. It is easy to tie young people to some devastations that have occurred and seek to make direct links to religion. However, young people, many more than those causing destruction, are actively engaged in serving the poor, investing into others, offering hope, seeking to live out love. It is interest that when these stories are shared, they are not tied to these young people's faith but rather just to them as individuals – but when there is a link to radicalism, it is immediately tied solely to religion.

Guy Nicholson: That's a great point, Matt. After many years of intense international focus on terrorism and security issues, have governments, media and societies made progress in this regard? I'm getting at Lorna's reaction here, too.

Lorna Dueck: It is fair and necessary to raise religion as a problem when it causes pain. The press should not fear to connect dots, think "politically correct" or whitewash on religion. Then, as Sikander points out – we need to examine what's within the religion itself causing it. Author Miroslav Volf points out, the answer to religious violence is not less faith, it is more faith – for myself as a Christian, it is a more careful look and practice on the teachings of Christ.

Matt Wilkinson: When it comes to young people, we are seeing in the Christian faith many of those walk away from organized religion for reasons that were highlighted in a recent study called Hemorrhaging Faith[1], reasons that involve hypocrisy, judgment, failure and exclusivity. What was also found was that young people who were given the opportunity to see positive leadership, to have adults actively involved in their life, has a huge impact on decisions that they made and a positive view on faith. As we look to address issues of young people disconnecting from the root of their faith – in my case, the Christian faith, rooted in being selfless service of others, radical love including enemy love, and generous giving – it will likely take the investment of other adults intentionally walking alongside these youth to be that positive influence and wise sage.

Howard Voss-Altman: In such religious discussions, every subject must be on the table, including religious truth. A healthy conversation with young people should be open to their natural skepticism: Does God exist? Who wrote our sacred scriptures? Under what cultural and political circumstances were the scriptures written? How do religious texts influence and shape our behaviour? We must be able to trust our young people to ask (and attempt to answer) questions that challenge their faith. Our job is not to inculcate, but rather to educate and then encourage both their adherence and their dissent.

Matt Wilkinson: I strongly agree with Rabbi Howard. It is absolutely critical that we empower young people to think, to ask questions, to doubt and even to reject religious truths so that when they come to their understanding and their convictions, they are not based solely on a parent's faith or someone else's ideal. I know first-hand what it was to doubt, but it is in the permission to doubt and struggle that I was able to say no enough times that when I was saying yes I knew this was what I really believed. What made the difference was I wasn't on this journey alone – I had a number of other adults in my life that walked this journey with me and we need the same for the next generation.

Sheema Khan: I can't speak for other communities, but within Muslim communities, we have to do a far better job of empowering youth so that they can openly discuss the issues they face, the dreams they have and their concerns about events overseas. Right now, many Muslim institutions (not all) fail to provide such a forum for frank discussions. We need to let them express themselves, and in the process, to educate them and provide avenues in which they can constructively channel their zeal for social justice.

Guy Nicholson: Sheema, you proposed our topic today, suggesting that many young Muslims "start off with a deep dissatisfaction with the prevailing youth culture that is drenched in alcohol, sex and materialism. Surely this dissatisfaction must happen in other communities ... how do they deal with it?"

Sikander Hashmi: Youths must have coping mechanisms to deal with situations that go against their choices and preferences. This, of course, will help them throughout their lives. In the case of young Muslims, I have seen youth getting together, finding fun activities, exploring their faith and getting involved in social justice causes. There is a certain emptiness one feels when one feels excluded. The key is to fill that void with what the individual is desiring (for example, acceptance, excitement, purpose etc.) with positive alternatives.

Lorna Dueck: The best evidence of helping youths cope with dissatisfaction appears to be coming from authenticity from parents. A close second is the input that comes from alternative messages and pressures peers and media provide. For Christian families, that begins in the church. Having experienced and watched church youth groups and Christian education programs for a few decades now, it always comes down to relationships of the teacher to student, of peer to peer, and accuracy to source material, the Bible. Ancient truths, spiritual insights reflected into pressures, temptations and identity issues.

Matt Wilkinson: I would add that for young people, coping with dissatisfaction provides the opportunity to make an impact. Today's youths are much more concerned with issues of justice, collaboration and making this world a better place than they are with climbing a corporate ladder, stepping on whomever in order to get there. Many I've worked with as a youth pastor have pointed to having an adult believe in them, listen to them and give them opportunity – this was one of the most effective ways to navigate challenges the culture was throwing at them.

Guy Nicholson: Lorna has raised the issue of these alternative messages. What are the limits to what religious teaching can do to influence young people? What critical factors are beyond the realm of the church or mosque? I'm talking

about combating extremism, but also the day-to-day battle to guide and assist.

Matt Wilkinson: There clearly are issues surrounding sex, alcohol and materialism in other communities, definitely within the Christian community, and it's simply because we are all broken people, messed up and trying to find our way in this world. However, when I see these issues and some of the negative things that come from such abuses, it becomes so easy to focus on behaviour modification instead of spiritual transformation. This is one of the key reasons young people are abandoning institutionalized religion, because they are not looking "TO DO"; they are looking to "TO BE." If we merely change behaviour, we are merely perpetuating the "good look" of religion, but when we shift our focus to the much longer journey of walking with young people toward spiritual transformation, not through judgment and rejection, but through correction, love, and grace, we see a young person who changes from the inside out.

Lorna Dueck: I think limits of Christian influence seem to be reached when it comes to politics, and some very real issues of international injustice. We've got persecuted Christians in China, the Middle East, children still not going to school in African countries, human trafficking, all these issues live large on youth idealism. As a result, there's been a great upsurge in "mission trips" over the past 10 years of Christian youth ministry, where youths raise their own funds to travel to "the other" – to poverty, to injustice. They head out to a radical act of kindness, led by missionaries or youth pastors. We're documenting this now in Love Is Moving[2], or you can see it in We Day[3] – practical day-to-day battles that youth have a power to engage in positive change.

Matt Wilkinson: I think as faith leaders, one of the important thing is not just teaching and living out the values of our faith to the next generation, but being conscious about some of the messaging that young people are getting about other faiths through acts of extremism and the media portrayal of it. We must walk with our young people in seeing what it is to live at peace with each other, what it is to find points where amid differences we can connect, and help them navigate through their own perception of people in light of extremism and then ultimately offer a different reality – point them to opportunities to serve others, to live out love, to listen to others, to care for the planet – to be positive witnesses of their faith to their world and be an influencer instead of the influenced.

Howard Voss-Altman: I'm afraid that most young people I meet are not deeply dissatisfied or alienated by youth culture. The challenge for religious leaders is to respond to an ethos of isolation (iPods and smartphones) and instant gratification by appealing to our youths' natural idealism and communal orientation. Young people believe in goodness and choice. We have to help them see their lives not in terms of "What's in it for me?" but rather, "What's good for the entire community?"

Sikander Hashmi: Great point, Rabbi Howard. One of the issues I have noticed is too much of a focus on do's and don'ts without a solid foundation in faith. Many times, the don'ts go against what youths (even adults) desire to do. One of the things I'm trying to do is first help our youths discover their spirituality, which I believe all of us have. Once that spirituality is allowed to rise and they build a good understanding of God, then a lot of the other discussions (for example, care for and service to other) become a lot easier.

Matt Wilkinson: I appreciate what Rabbi Howard has shared. Many youths I have mentored and walked with have shared that although they have become disillusioned by the institution of the church, they very much embrace Jesus and his teachings. The idea that Jesus would come not to destroy but rather to serve, that he came not to live among the elite but to spend most of his time among the outcasts, that he would bring the forgiveness of sins instead of the rejection of the person. When young people are able to move away from the self and the desires of the "me generation" and embrace the person and teachings of Jesus,

they seem to look at their world differently – again, it is something not done alone but done in the community around that young person.

Guy Nicholson: And if the choice Howard mentions leads to a full, self-examined life without religion? Someone came knocking on my door the other day promising to help me search for meaning – between family, rewarding work and more interests than I have time to pursue, it felt like an unnecessary offer.

Sikander Hashmi: Well, that's what it is, then. It's a choice, after all.

Howard Voss-Altman: In the end, the goal is the fully realized self-examined life. If that life does not include religious practice, then it's up to the rabbis, imams, ministers and priests to offer the most compelling teachings that affect the lives of our people. But if someone really seems to be making the effort to live a meaningful life without formal religion, that's all we can really hope for.

Sheema Khan: Another issue that all young people face is that of identity, and related to that, the question: "Which group do I belong to?" It is a period of flux, as interests and perceptions of oneself change. For Muslim youths, there are two additional issues they face: Being a minority, and the post-9/11 ethos. Interestingly, the latter has caused many to re-examine who they are and what they believe in, primarily as a response to being defined a certain way by popular media.

Guy Nicholson: Ah, your insight has stolen one of my questions here, Sheema. You should be moderating this one!

Howard Voss-Altman: One of the most difficult aspects of this conversation is the natural inclination of religion to encourage group identification. When I was growing up in the United States in the 1960s, my rabbi used to ask us: Were we American Jews or Jewish Americans? If you answered "American Jews," it was a sign that you placed your identity as an "American" first, and that you were on your way to assimilation and losing your Jewish identity. If you chose "Jewish American," it meant placing your religious identity above your national identity. I've always felt that both identities are critical to our youths, and that religious leaders need to reinforce both religious involvement and responsible citizenship. When we subordinate one to another, we can easily slip down the slope to extremism.

Sikander Hashmi: This is where many young Canadian Muslims are struggling. Some have told me that when they're at school and with their peers, they feel more "Canadian." When they're at home or at the mosque, they feel more "Muslim." That's likely because they're associating cultural practices and expectations (like alcohol, sex, materialism) they face on the outside as being a part of the Canadian identity. My message to them is that those are not a part of a Canadian identity. You can practice your faith fully, express yourself as a Muslim and still be a law-abiding Canadian like anyone else.

Howard Voss–Altman: Thank you, Sikander. Very well said.

Matt Wilkinson: The minority identity issue is something we, even on this panel, need to be cautious of. The worse thing we can do is to paint all young people as one way or paint one religion in one light or lump all of youth culture as one element – the diversity within each of these areas is something we need to realize. When I am in dialogue with a Muslim friend, a Jewish friend or a Christian friend – am I seeing them as human beings, fearfully and wonderfully created, or do I see them through a clouded lens of decisions made by individuals within their faith? I think all faiths have dark elements in our histories, things we are not proud of and would rather not be part of our faith ancestry, but they are. The decision we have now, and young people have today, is: Who are we going to be going forward? How are we going to see one another? In the Christian scriptures, it is said that we will be known by our love; that is the hope that I have for the

generation now – that they be known by their love, not just for like-minded people, but for all humanity.

Guy Nicholson: So much attention has been focused on Islamic teaching since the rise of al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks. How much priority have Muslim faith leaders in the West come to put on addressing this issue? And how widely have these efforts come to be understood by other communities?

Lorna Dueck: In this post 9/11 world, I have seen more efforts for faith communities to understand each other, and to work together on youth pressure points. Youth groups in my tradition do get educated about other faiths, and encouraged in community with them. There is some natural cohesion since, in a youth media world dominated by money, clothes and sex, this minority band of youths with religious parents know they are different. It makes sense when there has been experience. When kids see honest love, acts of kindness and relationship, that rings right with teachings that God is love.

Sikander Hashmi: I think initially, there was some denial and hesitance in confronting the issues. Sure, there were condemnations of the 9/11 attacks but it took time for many leaders to realize that the way Islamic teachings were being interpreted and portrayed was something that needed to be addressed. Part of it was because our faith was being hijacked to commit horrific acts of violence but also because of the Islamophobia and mistrust that was being fuelled as a result. Today, I think it is definitely a priority for many Muslim leaders in the West.

Sheema Khan: With respect to the role of Muslim leaders post-9/11, I would say that there have been four chronological phases, at least in Canada.

Immediately after 9/11, there was a basic issue of defending the community against a backlash. And there was a backlash: vandalism against mosques and Islamic schools and property, physical and verbal assaults, taunting in schools etc.

After that had subsided came the news of the rendition of Maher Arar[4], and the complicity of our government in this sordid affair. This set back relations between the community and the security services/government quite a bit. How do you encourage youths to co-operate with police in light of such an event (and also, complicity in the rendition of three other Canadians)?

The third phase came with the high-profile arrests of the Toronto 18[5], and what really brought this case home was the open trial in which evidence was available for all to see. Perhaps this was the case that served as the catalyst for community leaders to address the issue of extremism head-on, within a Canadian context. Right after 9/11, imams unequivocally condemned the terrorist attacks in their sermons. After the Toronto 18, the issue was addressed again, but with more of an emphasis towards the youths and their roles and responsibilities here in Canada.

The fourth phase has to do with cultural clashes (the *niqab* , honour killings etc.) here, and how to be proud of one's faith while being Canadian. More needs to be done on this front. We need to let youths know that their Canadian identity and experience is part and parcel of who they are, and nothing to be ashamed of. There are wonderful aspects of Canadian culture that are also true to Islamic principles. We must encourage youths to explore this identity and impress upon them that they are not expected to foster an identity from overseas.

Guy Nicholson: That's all the time we have today – thank you, all, for your time and thoughts.

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