

EDITORIAL

Convention Breaking

Welcome to a series of articles whose central theme is the challenge of conventions. In their own ways, all our writers are going over ground that has been ploughed many times, only to come away seeing new things there, defying the conventional.

The complexities of religion, culture and state are no more obvious than that explored by Catherine Caufield in her “Oblates and Nation-building in Alberta.” The general perception most Canadians have of Aboriginal peoples, at least in the recent past, is that the church undertook to train Indigenous children to be assimilated into Canadian society. They were unsuccessful in that enterprise. Canada now has to develop another way to integrate Indigenous peoples into the body politic. Simplistic, but it is the norm in any discussion around the Canadian dining room table. That it is based entirely on colonialist assumptions is scarcely raised, and if so, is likely to be lost in discussions associated with post-colonial rhetoric. Yet the narrative informs so much of the way that Euro-Canadian society deals with the legacies of the past; existentially Canadians never seem to negotiate alternatives. Like a broken record, it plays out over and over in public life, law, scholarship and all manner of cultural interactions. Caufield shifts the frame completely. What if the treatment accorded to Indigenous peoples was at least in part dictated by notions of nationhood buried in the conflicts? What if the Oblates had been shock troops for a particular vision of nation, one that lingers on? This raises issues about how First Nations see themselves, as well as how Canada structures relationships to Indigenous peoples. This is a thought-provoking analysis calling many aspects of Canadian culture into question.

Anyone who has ever tried to translate a major work from one language to another comprehends the context of Waseem El-Rayes’ article: Are titles a mere appendage to a magnum opus or are they critical in the interpretive lens used by the author? El-Rayes argues that one cannot just translate a title by looking at the dictionary meanings...one has to plumb the way in which language is used in the book; indeed one must explore the style of writing itself before arriving at a conclusive translation. The tome in question is one from the hand of the great scholars of Islamic political/historical analysis,

Ibn Khaldun. His *Kitāb al-'Ibar* has normally been interpreted as a thoroughly historical work, intending to set out the main structures of Islamic development from the time of the Prophet to his day. El-Rayes takes another perspective. He suggests that Ibn Khaldun's intent is **not** to write a history of Islamic society as is often claimed. Rather the Moroccan wanted to challenge what had become accepted in his time—that Islamic society was shaped by an inevitable historical structure, a structure that was the legacy from a time pre-existing the Prophet. El-Rayes suggests we should look again, for he sees the scholar's intent to point towards strategies of political power that were not fixed in any kind of structural succession. It was rather how political power has an amorphous shape that uses language as a tool in framing society. A challenging piece: "The *Book of Allusions: A New Translation of the Title to Ibn Khaldun's Kitāb al-'Ibar*."

We have lived with William James so long that he has taken on a kind of gospel among those looking for some ultimate validation of religion. John Shook urges us to be a little more cautious. His "William James on Religious Saints and Verifying the God Hypothesis" suggests that James is not all that "scientific" in his argument that the many saints about us and in history really "proves" the existence of a higher power; that while it is true that the moral pronouncements coming from a wonderfully pious grandmother seem to have the ring of the beyond in them, the saints, the veritable standard for God-relatedness, can't be relied on to guarantee that. Much of what they pronounce is re-stating the moral tradition. So while we no longer worship gods like Aten or Apollo, the assumption that the evolution of deity is manifested in the moral statements of these historical holy figures just does not jibe with the facts on the ground. William James' hope that he could validate belief in God by connecting it to the distinguished holy people about us in history and experience falls short. Is Shook's argument convincing enough to call in question the iconic *Varieties of Religious Experience*?

Speaking of convention-breaking, consider Walter Vanast's "Le Martyr Imaginaire: Illness and Theatre in the Career of Gabriel Breynat, Bishop of the Mackenzie, 1901–1926." The prevalence of illness as a trope in mission life has long intrigued historians and Canada has had its share of appropriators. Many of the heroes and heroines of Canadian Christianity found illness a creative part of serving. It is fitting, then, that Vanast should use the metaphor of "illness as theatre" to explore the life and work of the greatly-lauded Oblate, Gabriel Breynat, Bishop of the Mackenzie for twenty-five years beginning in 1901. How he was able to keep his little band of workers loyal and committed seems to be almost a minor miracle, especially when his illnesses seemed to take him to such benevolent environments as Arizona while they weathered the bitter storms in northern Canada. All this apparently without mutiny!

In Vanast's reading, Breynat manipulated illness and through it the drama of martyrdom as the means to maintain discipline among his helpers, to the extent they appeared willing to accept his illness as a necessary ingredient in their collective dedication to God and the mission. Notions of conquest, even if the enemy was no other than a different missionary church, similarly played a role in defining the mission. Breynat was lauded widely by Rome for his prowess in maintaining and furthering northern missions. Rome needed victories at the "ends of the earth" to confirm its role in Canada's north, while the struggling staff in the Mackenzie needed Breynat's illness to undergird their own sense of Christian ardor and self-less dedication. Theatre indeed!

One currently popular discourse is that suicide bombers are driven by religion. Reams of paper and barrels of ink have convinced the world that today's Muslims are exceedingly religious to the point that they willingly commit suicide for Hamas or al-Qaeda. It matters not that in Muslim scripture and law, suicide is forbidden. Absolutely forbidden. Robert James walks us through the material and systematically undermines the confidence generated by this paper and ink. His "Religiously Inspired Terrorism Ideology and Narrative" unpacks the discourses and certainly finds religion there as a kind of glue that holds radical groups together. But when he examines the suicide file, the data points another direction...to a very political issue...a hatred of oppression. Not a motivation rooted in a deep religious sensibility at all. A worthy correction to all that unfounded writer-ly labor.

Earle Waugh

