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## **OttawaWatch 179: Harper's Muslim Mormons**

**By Lloyd Mackey**

*In this piece, I purposely took a while to get to the point (Saturday Evening Post used to call these kinds of meanderings "the long slow curve and the fast break.") So much for the mish-mashing of legitimate baseball parlance.*

One of the sidelights of the prime minister's visit to a big new mosque in Calgary was the comment from prominent imam Syed Soharwardy, that the mosque was the spiritual home of what he described as a Muslim "Mormon" movement.

Soharwardy is the president of the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada and head of Muslims Against Terrorism.

He received a fair amount of ink a few months ago by trying to take *Western Standard* (WS) publisher Ezra Levant to the Alberta Human Rights Commission. His action was aimed at WS, for publishing the controversial Danish cartoons irreverently depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

Almost as quickly as he launched the action, Soharwardy withdrew it, suggesting that he had determined belatedly that the AHRC was an inappropriate body to deal with free speech and free press issues.

One can give the imam the benefit of the doubt, perhaps. In trying to be cutting-edge controversial, while at the same time, giving leadership to moderate, yet devout, Muslims, he might occasionally stray into modes of leadership and communication that might fly better back in the homeland, than in free-wheeling Alberta.

In re-positioning himself to be both more moderate and more relevant, he runs the risk of a believability gap. In that sense, he is like many religious and political leaders who, as they mature, begin to mellow. They recognize the benefit of giving off more light than heat.

Be that as it may, Soharwardy's "they are our Mormons" comment was most striking, given that Alberta, as it happens, is traditionally both Bible Belt and Mormon country, especially in its southernmost regions. Evangelical Christians are quick to point out that "Mormons are not real Christians". All the while such Christians allow that the Latter Day Saints (as the Mormon church is more formally identified) are generally good, moral, fine-living and upright people who would make very fine Christians, indeed, if only they would reinterpret the Bible properly and forget this Book of Mormon stuff.

In writing colloquially about differing belief systems, there is a point to be made, with respect to understanding and tolerance.

Like the Mormons, the Ahmadiyya group – whose mosque Stephen Harper was visiting – have a “latter day” prophet who takes its followers in a different and, arguably, more contemporary direction than the original founders. The Mormons had Joseph Smith. The name of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ahmadiyya prophet is Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.

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That the prime minister would visit the new \$15 million mosque is not surprising. It is in Calgary, and its membership would include many residents of Calgary-Southwest riding, which Harper represents in the House of Commons.

Here is what the PM had to say when he toured the mosque and addressed its people:

This community knows first-hand what it is to experience persecution and discrimination based on your religious beliefs.

So you understand at a profound level that promoting religious freedom is an essential building block for peace and stability here and throughout the world.

All this takes on some additionally interesting significance when the Calgary mosque visit is juxtapositioned with Harper’s address to the Jewish human rights advocacy group, B’nai B’rith, which took place a few days earlier, in Ottawa.

The occasion was B’nai B’rith International’s awarding of its highest honour, the Gold Medallion.

Harper is the first Canadian to receive the award. He joins company with past American presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and Israeli prime ministers David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir.

Bearing in mind what the prime minister said to the “Muslim Mormons” just days later, it is worth noting his comments to the B’nai B’rith crowd.

He quoted the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which intones that Canada “is founded upon the principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law”.

And he said the charter “is rooted in our common theistic tradition and the covenant at Sinai.”

Harper used that groundwork to note, later that:

We see Israel as a friend and ally in the democratic family of nations.

Our support for her right to exist is unshakeable.

Our support for her right to self-defence, (is) unequivocal.

Then, a quick move to a point that might be contentious in such an audience—

Just as we support a two-state solution in the Middle East.

In this we stand with Israeli leaders who have long desired peace, security and democracy for both their own people and the Palestinians.

And a move back to reinforce the original point:

And the sweep of history tells us that those groups and regimes who seek the destruction of Israel have not and never will bring victory, peace or justice to the Palestinians. They can only prolong their suffering.

Harper has learned quickly, during his short tenure, that a leader in a country as pluralistic as Canada must understand the nuances which bring people together and drive them apart.

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