

Jihadists in Brooklyn?

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 31, 2007 All Things Catholic

In the iconic 1980s film "The Big Chill," Jeff Goldblum's character at one point argues that rationalization is more important even than sex. His clincher was a rhetorical question: "Ever gone a week without a rationalization?"

In the same spirit, I would submit that complex news stories rarely go very long without an irony, and one such story this week features a towering irony indeed. It's set in Brooklyn, where heated debate is swirling around a new public school offering instruction in Arabic and Arab culture. Proponents style it as a way of fostering diversity, while critics insist that it will indoctrinate youth in Islamic radicalism and terrorism. (I've posted stories on the controversy at <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1281> [1] and <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1285> [2], and more coverage is appear in the Sept. 7 issue of *NCR*, which is at the printers now.)

Here's the irony: this alleged beachhead for jihad is named for a non-Muslim, an early 20th century Lebanese poet whose writing is about as close to religious fundamentalism as, say, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

The school is called the "Khalil Gibran International Academy," deemed a fitting choice since Gibran (1883-1931) wrote in both Arabic and English, and lived most of his life in the United States. Born a Maronite Catholic, Gibran later adopted a universalist spirituality that doesn't exactly make him the author of choice for Islamic militants. His outlook was captured in a 1914 poem called "A Tear and a Smile": "I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your church, and pray in your synagogue, for you and I are sons of one religion, the Spirit." In his day, Gibran was reviled by both Catholic clergy and the Ottoman Empire because of his acerbic criticism of authority. He was also an admirer of the founder of the Bahai faith, regarded by Muslim traditionalists as a pernicious heresy.

Of course, the fact that the new school bears Gibran's name doesn't necessarily mean it reflects his outlook; Sara Springer, a local middle school teacher and a leader of the opposition to the new academy, describes the name as "a feel-good front to anesthetize the public to [the school's] actual agenda."

Be that as it may, Gibran's memory nonetheless recalls an era not so long ago in which conflict between Islam and Christianity did not seem written in the stars. It begs the question of whether his past could be prologue to some future détente -- whether it takes shape in Brooklyn or not.

For much of the 20th century, Khalil Gibran's poetry and stories were among the most read literature in the world, winning vast audiences through his blend of Eastern and Western thought. He was born in 1883 in Bsharri, a Maronite Catholic village in the mountains of Lebanon, at the time ruled by the Ottoman Empire. His maternal grandfather was a Maronite priest. (Maronites follow the Eastern custom of married clergy.) The young Gibran didn't have any formal schooling, but his village priest taught him to read and write by studying the Bible.

Gibran's family immigrated to Boston in 1895. He began moving in artistic circles, whereupon he announced that he no longer considered himself a Catholic but rather a pagan. Gibran later returned to Lebanon for college, then went to Paris to study with the French sculptor Auguste Rodin.

Throughout his career, Gibran seemed fascinated by religion, but appalled by religious authorities and institutions. This became abundantly clear with a 1908 collection of short stories under the title of *Spirits Rebellious*, the last entry in which was called "Khalil the Heretic." The 15,000-word tale amounts to a bitter polemic against Catholic clergy and the authorities of the Ottoman state, both of whom Gibran regarded as parasites feeding off the toil and misery of the poor.

To say that Gibran regarded priests as jerks would be, as the saying goes, unkind to jerks. Here's how his eponymous hero describes the typical priest: "He is a traitor who uses the Gospel as a threat to ransom your money ? a hypocrite wearing a cross and using it as a sword to cut your veins ? a glutton who respects the tables more than the altars ?he makes the sign of the Cross with his right hand, and clutches your throat with the left."

His venom for the Islamic Sultan and his agents is equally strong, thundering that Ottoman nobles "live like Nero" while the people "live in wretched huts and suffer the pangs of poverty."

Perhaps the most interesting element of the narrative, as seen through post-9/11 eyes, is how it assumes basic harmony between Christian and Muslim authorities. In fact, that's exactly how reaction to *Spirits Rebellious* played out, with Muslim and Catholic officials jointly burning the Arabic edition in Beirut's central market.

(According to Gibran's biography, his lone reaction was to quip that this probably meant there would be a second edition of the book -- a writer's response if ever there was one.)

Then as now, Lebanon was a small but fiercely proud country. After Gibran became its most famous native son, Muslims and Christians once again came together, this time to embrace him rather than to drum him out.

When Gibran died in 1931, his body was returned to Lebanon and carried in a solemn procession to Bsharri. Newspapers reported that mourners included Maronite Catholics, Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Druze Muslims, Greek Orthodox, Jews, and Protestants. The funeral Mass was celebrated by the Maronite Catholic archbishop, and Gibran's body is buried in the grotto of the monastery of the Monastery of Mar Sarkis, his childhood church. Prayers were said over the grave by Muslim clergy.

None of this is to suggest that Gibran's world was innocent of Muslim/Christian tension. In "Khalil the Heretic," the hero asks, "Until when shall the Cross be kept apart from the Crescent before the eyes of God?" Gibran knew that Maronites and Druze Muslims had engaged in bloody conflict from 1840 to 1860. Yet there's little sense in the social universe he describes of inevitable tension between the two faiths.

For himself, Gibran's working assumption seemed to be that the official leadership of all faiths is equally distant from divine ideals. In 1912's "Broken Wings," he wrote: "The Christian bishop and the Moslem imam and the Brahman priest become like sea reptiles who clutch their prey with many tentacles, and suck their blood with numerous mouths."

That's a depressing diagnosis, perhaps, but one that hardly augurs an inexorable clash of civilizations. Reading Gibran today calls to mind a period in which Muslims and Christians didn't axiomatically regard themselves as rivals, suggesting at least the possibility that the stars could align that way again.

Based on these reflections, I would propose a simple test for assessing the dangers allegedly posed by the new Khalil Gibran International Academy in Brooklyn: Will students actually be reading the works of their school's namesake? If so, the academy may be a lot of things, but a crucible of religious radicalism it's probably not.

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Aside from obvious church/state issues, debate about the school boils down to how the West ought to respond to its growing Islamic presence. Should initiatives that allow Muslims to express their cultures be encouraged, on the grounds that it's the best way to promote reconciliation with pluralism and democracy? Or, given the danger of such initiatives being co-opted by jihadists, is this playing with fire?

The launch of the Khalil Gibran International Academy, projected as a grades 6-12 school with an eventual enrollment of 500-600, was announced by New York education officials in February, with support from a broad swath of religious and civic leaders.

New York already has public schools that focus on particular languages and cultures, such as Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, and Haitian-Creole. The concept for the Gibran Academy is to teach Arabic and Arab cultures alongside a normal public school curriculum. Organizers vow the school will not promote Islam, though to critics those claims strain credibility.

Opposition has mobilized into a grassroots coalition called "Stop the Madrassa." Though the word in Arabic literally just means "school," colloquially a madrassa is understood as a forum for jihadist indoctrination. The coalition is supported by leading critics of radical Islam such as Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forum, and Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy.

Supporters deny the academy is dangerous.

"This is a normal public school, using Arabic as the medium," said Imam Shamsi Ali of the Islamic Cultural Center on 96th street, who has acted as an informal advisor to the school. "Just studying Arabic doesn't radicalize anybody."

That's an argument that comes off as a smokescreen to Springer, an 8th grade teacher in Brooklyn and a leader in the "Stop the Madrassa" coalition.

"We have Islamic fanatics in this country who are trying to take over our Constitution, our way of life, and to impose shariah law," she said in an Aug. 29 interview. Based on what she described as links between the school's organizers and various fundamentalist Islamic causes and organizations, Springer insisted that "this school is an incubator for a fanatical Islamic agenda."

Catholic reaction appears divided as well.

Richard Thompson of the Thomas More Law Center, founded by Domino's Pizza magnate Tom Monaghan, shares Springer's alarm. The center is acting as co-counsel for the Stop the Madrassa group.

"We must understand that the political goal of radical Islam is to destroy our Judeo-Christian culture," Thompson said. "[The academy] is a Trojan horse that New York City is building for radical Islam with taxpayer money. That the Quran calls for Muslims to subjugate the world, especially Christians and Jews, is a fact anyone can look up."

Another Catholic litigator, however, is more favorable. Kevin Seamus Hasson of the Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty says that since the academy does not establish Islam as the state religion, it does not pose a constitutional problem. Further, Hasson argues, there are compelling reasons to foster experiments that could encourage Muslims to embrace pluralism and democracy.

"Even taking a low-end estimate for the number of Muslims in America, we're talking about maybe 3 million people," he said. "The prospect of surrendering that many people to an ideology that wants to destroy us is stupid."

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