

Discussing the Undiscussable

In *HP* 194 (Autumn 2015), we met a young man who calls himself John Calvin, a gay, Palestinian-born Christian convert living in Edmonton, Alberta, while awaiting deportation back to Palestine. John equated being sent back to Nablus with certain death since there was good reason to believe that he would be murdered by his own “*Hamas* royalty” family.

I had the pleasure of meeting with John twice over the past year. I don’t think I’ll ever meet another twenty-something who has experienced the kind of hardships that John has – and with such complete lack of bitterness.

Some of our readers have written asking about John. In March of this year, I received an update: John managed to get himself into the US, and, after seven months of incarceration, is now living in New York City. In May, 2016, John wrote that:

[O]n the 25th of April the appeal period passed without any appeals or cross appeals, which means my status for the first time ever holds permanency. That actually is exciting to me, I don’t have to fear death imminently for the very first time since I was 19.

Very good news!

But one question troubles me: how could it be that Canada provided John with the promise of deportation but the US was able to provide him with asylum? As a Canadian, this stings.

In my conversations with John, I realized that he has some very interesting stories to tell about growing up in Nablus in a *Hamas*-family household. I hope he’ll share them with us now that his more pressing concerns about life and death have been settled for the better.

In this issue of our magazine, you’ll see an article by Barbara Smoker, “*Educated for Murder*,” where she discusses her experiences debating imams at Oxford. She also discusses the late Mohammed Em-

wazi, better known as Jihadi John, the ISIS go-to guy for London-accented decapitation videos. Ms. Smoker reminds us that Emwazi was raised in the UK and attended the University of Westminster.

One can’t help but wonder what turned Emwazi, a young Brit, into an Islamic terrorist and what turned John Calvin, a young Palestinian (and the grandson of one of the founders of *Hamas*) into a peace-loving, good-humoured

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Christian. Did one of them fall down the wrong YouTube rabbit-hole while the other fell down the right one? Is it nature or nurture, dumb luck or free will?

It could be that some minds are born more susceptible to supernaturalism or sadism or skepticism or altruism. We can't do much about the genetic hands we are dealt at conception. What we *can* do in our free and democratic societies is to ensure that the marketplace of ideas remains free and open. No subject matter can be placed on a pedestal so high that reasoned discussion can't reach it.

All of us, at some point or another, have been (or *are*, or *will be*) wrong in a belief. (I confess that I believed that the word *bruin* meant *baby bear* up until my early 40s. How many other embarrassments will I endure?!) Sometimes the correction is quick and painless, but sometimes – often in cases where the belief has become a pillar of personal identity – it is neither. Sometimes these beliefs are considered sacred and not up for discussion.

So how do we discuss the undiscussable?

Guilherme Brambatti Guzzo and Gabriel Dall'Alba tackle this question in their article "The Role of Educators in Desacralizing Ideas," on page 8. (Sneak preview: Do it gently!)

Elsewhere in this issue, you will get a description from humanist officiant Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson of the meaning and the performance of humanist weddings in northern Saskatchewan; Gary Bauslaugh shares his thoughts on the recent tectonic shifts in the landscape of Canada's assisted dying laws and also recollects his conversations with right-to-die activist John Hofsess; Tom Campbell tries to dig up the origins of human altruism; John Nixon scratches his head wondering where that persistent beeping sound is coming from at 3 a.m.

We had to do some catching up in the *Book Reviews* department, so you'll find three in this issue. Among them, a review of a book by Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz called *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. Harris (an atheist) and Nawaz (a Muslim) make discussing the undiscussable¹ in a mutually respectable

and productive way look easy. We should all be so lucky.

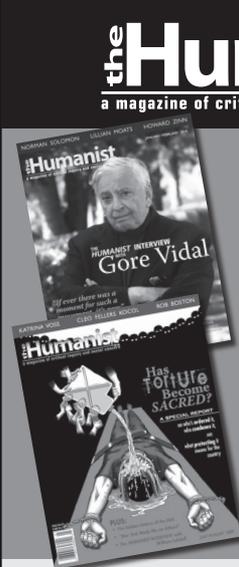
– Richard Young

¹ All this talk about *discussing the undiscussable* is making it impossible for me to resist recounting this goofy but true story. One day, in the early-1990s, I had some time on my hands and, so, I found myself thinking about the limits of human thought and getting frustrated as a result. I thought, "How does one think the unthinkable?"

Then, out of the blue, this answer came to me: "With an itheberg." (Say it out loud.)

I wasn't trying to come up with a silly joke, but that's all I got out of my earnest attempt to answer that unanswerable question.

It wasn't very satisfying, but at least it temporarily distracted me from facing my limitations. And, if I can't live forever, then it is a micro-consolation that maybe that dumb joke will outlive me.



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