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Mosque opening highlights schism

By BILL KAUFMANN

The big mosque on the prairie was showing its stuff.

Just outside the simple elegance of a cavernous assembly hall, Sustainable Resources Minister Ted Morton tugged on his cowboy boots after a walkabout.

Turbaned Sikhs were ushered in warmly by their Ahmadiyya Muslim hosts with bottles of spring water.

It might have been their sabbath, but a member of Calgary's Jewish community had made it down.

Departing from beneath the sprawling canopy of a symbolically inclusive tent, Roman Catholic Bishop Fred Henry allowed that, yes, this was a huge occasion.

And of course, politicians of all stripes were there to be seen and heard by the politically-active crowd.

One group that wasn't present were members of the more mainstream Islamic Supreme Council of Canada. They weren't invited, said that Sunni Muslim group's president, Calgarian Syed Soharwardy.

It's hardly a surprise, given the council's and other Muslims' views of the Ahmadis

"We don't consider the Ahmadis to be Muslims ... I don't call it a mosque, it's a place of worship," says Soharwardy, explaining the other sect doesn't consider Muhammad the last word in prophets.

The erection of the massive structure "is all about showing off their wealth," he says, adding dotting politicians are attracted to that affluence. It begins to sound much like schisms familiar to Christendom.

Calgary Ahmadi community leader Dr. Safer Kahn has heard it all before and seems more disappointed than angered. "Islam does not give the right to look into the heart of the other person -- if we're good people that's more important," says Kahn who, like Soharwardy, is a native of Pakistan.

Even so, Kahn -- whose faith disavows terrorism and hatred -- says Soharwardy's never come out strongly enough against the Taliban or suicide bombing.

But as he spoke, Soharwardy was trudging through northern Ontario on a cross-country trek dubbed the Multi-Faith Walk Against Violence.

If anything, he's been diligent in condemning Muslim extremism though cynics would say --

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unfairly, I believe -- that it's just for show. His words echo those delivered on Saturday by Ahmadiyya spiritual leader Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad.

For both groups, it's an enduring burden borne by good people who, sadly, feel compelled to assure their fellow Canadians. As their guests looked on in the shadow of the new mosque, Ahmadis boisterously chanted "long live Canada."

Says Kahn: "Canada and its people are in our prayers, always. We are obliged to."

It's suggested to Soharwardy that Muslims face a double standard, that Christian clerics and politicians aren't called on to denounce state terrorism of western militaries, often practised with a divine blessing of their own. Since when has a Christian here ever been compelled to insist "those detestable acts aren't representative of our faith?"

Soharwardy says there are, indeed, many notable Christians who don't denounce western aggression and that extremist Christians exist just as surely as their Islamic counterparts.

But he prefers to speak of the good Christians he knows and gracious Canadians he's met on his walk since leaving Halifax. Soharwardy insists he's had not one negative encounter. "This has changed me quite a bit and given me a highly positive appreciation of Canadian society," he says.

He sounds a lot like the ever-hospitable Safeer Kahn. The new Baitun Nur mosque, says Kahn, is more than a place of worship, it's a bridge to other faiths.

For two sects with more in common than less, it could serve as an example to burnish the image of organized religion that's too often spelt rancorous division.