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Extreme beliefs *Writer examines radical groups*

By Julie McGalliard
staff reporter

Laird Wilcox says he always has been more interested in why people believe than in what they believe.

Wilcox examined the "why" of extreme beliefs during his lecture on the "Psychology of Extremism" at Western last Thursday.

His conclusions were based on more than 20 years of studying political organizations on the far left and far right.

Wilcox said he spends half his time as a carpenter and half as a researcher.

His research led him, in 1965, to establish the Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements, one of the largest of its kind, at the University of Kansas. The collection contains about 5,000 books and pamphlets covering about 7,000 extremist groups.

He also publishes "Guide to the American Right," "Guide to the American Left," "Guide to the American Occult" and "The Wilcox Report," a newsletter on the American left and right.

Wilcox has investigated these groups from the inside, by attending their meetings and speaking with their members. He has come to know, he said, about 400 members of extremist groups, having dinner with them, and in some cases forming 20-year friendships with them.

"They were all united — every one of them — in their desire, in their own way, to do the right thing as they saw it," he said.

Extremists can be identified more accurately by the way they behave than by what they believe, he said.

"Extremism has much more to do with a manner of relating, a kind of shrillness, an anger, a tendency to call names, a tendency to be unfair and arbitrary," he said.

"I've met people who were Marxists, which one would think of as being very extreme, who were very rational and even-handed; interested in what I had to say; were always glad when somebody contradicted them because it helped them think things out."

A characteristic of a fanatic or extremist is an inability to see another point of view.

"Their emotional investment in their beliefs is so strong that it's almost painful for them to consider a counterview," he said.

Extremist groups tend to have a strong desire to censor or silence their critics.

"When they want to silence the opposition, this is a dead giveaway these people are up to no good," he said.

"The desire to censor or silence comes from the fear of ideas."

To avoid being lured into an extremist group, "Whenever you find yourself inordinantly convinced by a particular argument, it's a good idea to expose yourself to counter propaganda."

"Examine your beliefs," Wilcox said. "Develop an appreciation for clear, logical thinking."

"Any time someone says 'trust me,' or like the Rev. Moon says, 'You don't need a mind. I'll do your thinking for you' — the minute you hear that, get out."

"Don't ever lose your capacity for skepticism. It's the most valuable thing you've got," he said.

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