

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

The First Annual Muslim Peacebuilding, Justice, and Interfaith Dialogue

The First Annual Muslim Peacebuilding, Justice, and Interfaith Dialogue was held on 28-30 April 2006. Sponsored by the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice (SIPJ) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), it was made possible through a Conflict Transformation Grant, in part with the Fuller Theological Seminary, and the generous support provided by the Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace at American University.

The conference was opened by Mohammed Abu-Nimer (SIPJ) and Louay Safi (ISNA). Abu-Nimer explained that this event was being held to “systematically think about the Islamic perspectives of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue, and to attempt to bring it into the American public context.” Safi mentioned that “it is crucial that we learn how to prevent and resolve these inevitable conflicts.” After these opening remarks, the panel sessions began.

Panel 1, “Peace through Development: Experiences from Muslim Communities and the Muslim World,” discussed the effect of development practices in Muslim communities on the peace and sustainability of both these communities themselves and their outside interactions. Kathleen Meilahn spoke about the United States’ inability to create a sustainable peace in Iraq due to its lack of cultural and religious understanding. She was followed by Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, who presented the SIPJ’s study on Muslim Peacebuilders in Africa and the Balkans. Her major findings included the use of and the need to expand the concept of *tawhid* (that all of creation emanates from God) and therefore must understand unity through plurality. Putut Widjanarko’s presentation focused on the Muslim community’s contribution to reducing ethnic differences within Islam.

Panel 2, “Intra-Muslim Dialogue,” focused on the need for intra-faith dialogue among Muslims. The presenters pinpointed the Sunni-Shi’ah split, differences between converted Muslims and born Muslims, and ideological

differences within the American Muslim community. Panel 3, "Islamic Approaches to Mediation and Conflict Resolution," opened with Imam Muhammad Shafiq's survey of the state of conflict resolution and dialogue in the Muslim world. He expanded on the point that Muslim communities are more willing to participate in interfaith dialogue than intra-faith dialogue. Abd al-Hayy Weinman and Mohamed H. Mukhtar then expanded on the Islamic principals that can achieve mediation and conflict resolution. One of these is *jama`ah*, an African Muslim practice of creating a neutral buffer zone in the middle of a conflict zone to serve as a new community for victims.

Panel 4, "Peacebuilding, Democracy, and Human Rights in the Islamic Context," clarified the place of these three themes in Islam by discussing their historical and current applications. The case studies included both the historical and current place of Muslim women in peacebuilding, historical examples of the civil and pacifist strategies used during the Makkan period, and the 2006 Palestinian elections. Panel 5, "Islamic Approaches for Interfaith Dialogue," provided several examples of interfaith dialogue by Muslims, including the creation of a game designed to encourage this activity. Imam Kazerooni spoke on the role of civil society in interfaith dialogue, and Junaid Ahmed dwelt on the need to move beyond just dialogue to interfaith solidarity and justice campaigns.

Panel 6, "Successes, Lessons Learned, and Challenges Facing Muslims and Muslim Organization Working for Peace and Justice," reviewed the importance of Muslim organizations working for peace as well as their challenges. The Interfaith Youth Core (IYC), based out of Chicago, and the American Muslim Voice (AMV) were highlighted. The IYC focuses not just on dialogue, but also on coordinated action (e.g., community service) to create true understanding. AMV representatives discussed their strategies for dealing with insufficient funds and communication with other organizations.

The Special Session, "The Network of Muslim Peacebuilding and Interfaith Dialogue," included representatives of the founding organizations of the Network for Muslim Peacebuilding and Interfaith Dialogue, among them Kadayifci-Orellana, Safi, Imam Mohammed Shafiq (Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue, Nazareth College), Rabia Harris (Muslim Peace Fellowship), Rashied Omar (Kroc Institute, University of Notre Dame), and Imam Taqi-Baker (Free Muslim Association). This discussion included making the network accessible to other practitioners, including young people. There were also warnings about succumbing to a nationalist overtone and a need to reach out to different ethnic groups.

Several themes emerged in the course of this event, among them the following: the relationship between Islam and culture, the need for intra-faith

dialogue between Sunnis and Shi`ahs, the need to understand Islam's internal diversity, recovering Islamic nonviolence from the early tradition, moving toward the *shūra* (consultation) model of community, bringing women's voices into intra-faith dialogue, identifying the main Sunni and Shi`ah leaders for training and dissemination, learning how to "tolerate the intolerant," and the need for the American Muslim community to engage in dialogue with the larger American society.

This event closed with a call to integrate Shi`ahs into American Muslim community organizations and spotlighted the need to establish a dialogue between both groups. It was pointed out that ISNA's first two presidents were Shi`ah. In addition, it was suggested that programs should be designed to initiate this rapprochement and that they could even be used as an outreach mechanism to the entire community. It was also suggested that anthropologists and sociologists continue to be employed to evaluate the movement, as this will help both practitioners and academics remain critical and reflective, both academically and spiritually, while pursuing their work.

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Globalization and Trans-nationalism

On 10 August 2006, The National Advisory Council for South Asian Affairs (NACSAA) met at the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, to answer several questions: Do markets know best? Does the market really know? Are the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer? Does globalization mean Westernization and/or Americanization? Are traditional societies being dissipated? As there were many speakers, I will present only brief summaries.

Shabir Ahmed stated that the West uses its foreign aid to get countries to follow its own standards and perspectives, while many members of the elites have abandoned the traditional lifestyle. On the positive side, globalization solves poverty through the market. Syed Akhtar asked whether globalization was the same as McDonaldization or Nikeification, or just about cultural domination and sweatshops. He sees globalization as a win-win situation, provided that a nation has the necessary "enabling conditions": a highly educated workforce, the rule of law, and democratic institutions.

V. Balachandran reminded the audience that globalization also causes problems. In India, this takes the form of increasing farmer suicides, shanty towns, a lack of investment in the agricultural sector, a decrease in the qual-