

PROCEEDINGS

Conference on

Interfaith Peace Building: Global and Local Perspectives

With

Interfaith Peace Building: An Iranian-American Perspective



Co-Sponsored by:

Indiana University School of Social Work

International Interfaith Initiative

DĀNESH Institute, Inc.

November 5, 2010

Indianapolis, Indiana

DĀNESH Institute, Inc.

Purpose:

Established in 1994, DĀNESH is a nonpolitical, not-for-profit, independent, educational organization. As such, the Institute has a 501(c)(3) status. The primary purpose of DĀNESH is to support scholarly studies and project related to communities of Iranian heritage abroad, particularly the United States.

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For further information, please contact:

DĀNESH Institute, Inc.

c/o Indiana University School of Social Work

902 West New York Street

Indianapolis, IN 46202-5156

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Interfaith Peace Building: Global and Local Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

On November 5, 2010, the DĀNESH Institute held its 2010 annual conference in partnership with the Indiana University School of Social Work and the International Interfaith Initiative entitled *Interfaith Peace Building: Global and Local Perspectives*. The conference featured speakers from the USA and abroad and included *Interfaith Peace Building: An Iranian-American Perspective*, which will follow the summary of the other presentations.

The conference began with a welcome by Charlie Wiles, Director, and International Interfaith Initiative. He also introduced Douglas Hairston, Mayor Ballard's interfaith coordinator, who brought greetings from the Mayor. Mr. Hairston made a visual presentation of the various projects undertaken by the city to bring people of different faiths, nationalities and ethnic groups together.

Dr. Irene Queiro-Tajalli, professor, IU School of Social Work, and President of the DĀNESH Institute, welcomed the audience on behalf of DĀNESH and introduced Dr. Michael A. Patchner, Dean of the School of Social Work.

Dr. Patchner welcomed the audience and briefly mentioned that the School would celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2011. In his remarks, Dean Patchner stated that "...by holding this conference, we are modeling a healthy interfaith dialogue leading to restoring tolerance and cooperation among people of different spiritual and religious backgrounds." He introduced philanthropist Herr Klaus Martin Finzel of Cologne, Germany and presented him with an award recognizing his commitment to interfaith dialogue and global peace.

This conference was supported by a generous donation from Mr. Finzel. Mr. Finzel has a vision of establishing a *World Interfaith Peace Center* in Indianapolis

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902 W. New York Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202-5154
Please send your comments about the Newsletter to Cyrus S. Behroozi at CSBehroozi@aol.com.

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Youth Dialogues

Before the keynote speech by Eboo Patel, participants from youth Dialogues, sponsored by International Interfaith Initiative and Christian Theological Seminary, provided individual accounts about the value of meeting and learning about students from different faith traditions. The students participating in the dialogues were from the Immaculate of Mary School, Madrasa Tul-Ilm, and Congregation Beth-El Zedeck. Following that, students from the Coexist program of Brebeuf High School spoke about interfaith programs that are happening at their school, including the Kenya Carnival which is a youth lead project providing a school lunch to over 2,000 students in Kenya every day. Finally, Mark Wolfe a student at University of Indianapolis, who is an Interfaith Youth Core Fellow, gave a very passionate speech about the need to establish viable interfaith programs on college campuses around the country. Interfaith Youth Core has partnered with AmeriCorps to help launch interfaith programs in five universities in Central Indiana including IUPUI, Butler, Marian, University of Indianapolis, and Franklin.

Interfaith Cooperation in the 21st Century

Eboo Patel

Mr. Patel is the Executive director of the Interfaith youth Core and a member of the White Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. He is the author of Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation. Mr. Patel is a Muslim- American who travels the world talking about the urgent need for all faiths to work together toward the goal of world peace. He believes that “the way people with different religions get along is going to be the difference between peace and war, harmony versus stability, basically life and death”. Mr. Patel spoke of four ways that individuals, communities, and nations react to another religion. The first three responses, ‘bubbles of isolation’, ‘barriers of religion’ and ‘bombs of destruction’ are hindrances to people of different religions working together. The fourth way that people can approach a different religion he termed “bridges of cooperation”, which was the method he encouraged listeners to use. He emphasized that each individual needs to understand “why I am the way I am”, but also be open to coming together and achieving compromises with people of differing faiths. He spoke about how religion has the power to either divide people or bring them together, and sees religion as a conduit to bring people together. He also talked about his own realization that the more positive interactions a person has with someone of another religion, the more openness and respect he/she will show towards that religion.

Engaging the Other: Examples of Arab-Jewish Peace-Building in Israel

Amy Kronish

Ms. Kronish is an author and film critic, internationally known for her work on peace-building between Jews and Muslims. She is the author of two books: *World Cinema: Israel* and *Israeli Film: A Reference Guide*.

Ms. Kronish showed several film clips highlighting interactions between Jews and Muslims, and then led a group discussion around the significance of the films. She spoke about the influence that films similar to these are having in opening up dialogue between the Jewish and Muslim communities. She also spoke of her belief that all people of all languages have the same basic needs and desires, and that they are depicted on film. She pointed out that to really build peace and understanding between people of different faiths, it is not enough to merely coexist. There must also be open and honest interaction between the different groups, and people of all faiths must have the opportunity to speak from a platform where they will be heard without bias. Ms. Kronish also spoke of the need for individuals to have confidence within themselves in regards to their own religion in order to build strong, open relations with people of other faiths.

Peace Be With You: The Coming Rapprochement of Christianity and Islam

Dr. David Carlson

Dr. Carlson is a professor of philosophy and religion at Franklin college in Franklin, Indiana, and author of *Peace Be with You: Monastic Reflections in a Terror-Filled World*. He participated in a question and answer session facilitated by Dr. Khadija Khaja, professor of social work at Indiana University Purdue University in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Dr. Carlson spoke of the time he spent traveling to monasteries all over the country, speaking with monks about their experiences in a post 9/11 world. He decided to interview monks because he viewed them as being separated from the mainstream culture and not affected by the media. He discovered that many felt like the United States should have used the experiences of September 11th to build a bridge with Muslim countries rather than further isolating itself. For Dr. Carlson, the primary barrier preventing the United State from building bridges is that the US acts as if it was the only nation to ever be attacked by terrorists. He thinks that the country missed a prime opportunity to connect with and forgive those who had wronged them. The United States chose to focus on the pain of the attack rather than how it could be used for transformation and restoration. Dr. Carlson also made the point that the United States was not the only nation affected by the attacks of 9/11; the effects of the attack were felt across the world. He went on to speak about the need to discover the "humanness" in everyone, including one's enemies, in order to move towards peace. He believes that it is "mankind's divine destiny" to live in peace with each other. He also spoke to the barrier of not forgiving one's enemies. Many people see forgiveness as compromising or condoning a wrong doing, but Dr. Carlson finished with the thought that every war is actually a civil war because we are all God's children.

On Interfaith Peace Building with Emphasis on Faith and Gender Issues

Maimoona Imroz Shah

Ms. Shah, an Indian Muslim, of the Global Youth Leadership Institute, shared her personal experiences working to create interfaith connections. She spoke about her work with *Play for Peace*, an international organization that encouraged interaction between people of different faiths in a fun, non-threatening environment. In India, this group has worked to improve strained relationship between Muslims and Hindus. She presented several accounts of horrific communal riots, clashes between police and youth, and other acts of group violence. She highlighted the role of women in conflict resolution and pointed out the importance of educating women with different cultures, decreasing competition, and eliminating oppression to move toward peace and understanding.

Panel on Interfaith Peace Building

Reverend David Berry, Associate Pastor for Mission, Second Presbyterian Church

Imam Michale Mikal Saahir, Imam (Islamic Minister) of the Nur-Allah Islamic Center

Reverend Callie Smith, Director for Life Learning and coordinator of the Faith Learning Initiative at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis

Rabbi Lew Weiss, Board Certified Chaplain, licensed Social Worker and Staff Chaplain at Methodist/Clarian

Reverend Berry talked about the House of Abraham and his work with the *Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis* to build Unity Park with 10 houses in the Martindale/Brightwood neighborhood, and a Peace House with the help of all faith traditions. He also expressed a desire to build a house in Israel and Palestine.

Imam Mikal Saahir talked about his extensive work with the *Focolare* organization which promotes dialogue between Muslims and Catholics and develops interfaith programs. He also mentioned the building of the House of Abraham with the assistance of Habitat for Humanity.

Reverend Smith talked about her work at *Christian Theological Seminary* and how they were hosting “Interfaith 101” workshops for congregations to learn about opportunities to reach out to diverse faith traditions. She highlighted the youth dialogue project that they partnered with the International Interfaith Initiative in the fall with the participation of middle school students from Muslim, Jewish and Christian congregations.

Rabbi Weiss talked about the *Indianapolis Interfaith Alliance*, and a Middle East trip where he helped to create “living room” dialogues where members of diverse faith traditions can take turns hosting groups in their homes.

Closing Ceremony

Chief Arvol Looking Horse, Assisted by Paula Horne-Mullen

Chief Looking Horse is the 19th Generation Keeper of the original Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe of the Lakota, and he leads World Peace and Prayer Day through the Wolakota Foundation. He is the author of White Buffalo Teaching and known around the world for his interfaith peace building efforts.

The final speaker of the day was accompanied by his wife Paula Horne-Mullen. They spoke of experiences they have had around the world in trying to bring peace between people of different faiths. They felt that it was time for the world to be mended and that religion could be a point of healing, rather than a point of division. They closed the conference with a magnificent prayer for peace.

Interfaith Peace Building: An Iranian-American Perspective

By Dr. Yahya R. Kamalipour

Introduction:

One of the oldest civilizations in the world, Iran,¹ is a vast multilingual, multicultural, and multi-faith nation which has produced many internationally acclaimed scholars and philosophers such as Rumi, Sa'adi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, Avicenna, Razi, and has made numerous contributions to the world, according to the *National Geographic Magazine*.

Iran is part Persian, part Islamic, and part Western, and the paradoxes all exist together. (August 2008)

Although the majority of the population speak in Farsi (Persian), other languages and dialects such as Persian and Persian dialects (58%), Turkic and Turkic dialects(26%), Kurdish (9%), Luri (2%), Balochi (1%), Arabic (1%), Turkish (1%), and other (2%) are spoken in various parts of the country (Wikipedia, 2010).

With over seven and a half million citizens and a mostly young population (see Figure 1), coupled with a rich history of tolerance and hospitality, Iran has the third largest oil reserve in the world; hence economically and culturally, it is capable of contributing to the well-being of the Iranians and to their aspirations for a unified and prosperous nation in which all ethnic/cultural groups and religious minorities (see Figure 2) could co-exist with one another based on mutual respect,

Figure 1: A Few Facts about Iran



- Capital city: Tehran
- Currency: Rial
- Government: Islamic Republic
- Population: Greater than 74 million
- Median Age (2008 est.)
 - Total Population: 26.4 years
 - Male: 26.2 years
 - Female: 26.7 years
- The majority of Iranian citizens are of Muslim faith (Shi'a sect)
- The national language is Persian
- Iran has the third largest oil reserves in the world

Source: CIA Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> and Iran Online, www.iranonline.com (2010)

¹ Prior to 1935 known as Persia

Figure 2: Major Cultural Groups and Religions



- About 89% to 90% Shi'a
- About 8% Sunni
- About 2% are Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and others.
- Only three minority religions are officially recognized.
- The Bahá'í Faith is not officially recognized
- Iran has the largest Jewish community in the Muslim World.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Iran and Los Angeles Times: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/middleeast/images/map.html> (2010)

Discrimination and Ignorance:

It should be noted that in Iran and elsewhere, ignorance is a formidable obstacle against establishing a harmonious interfaith and intercultural society. In fact, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education² most people, including college students, know very little about Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and other religions. For instance, in the post-September 11, 2002 era, anti-Islamic hate crimes in the United States, commonly known as “Islamophobia,” have been on the rise, including:

1. Debates surrounding the proposed Islamic cultural center (mosque) near Ground Zero in New York City, and
2. A Florida Pastor’s plan to host a “Burn the Quran Day”.

Furthermore, according to EEOC data (2010), Muslims make up less than two percent (2%) of the US population, but account for about one-quarter of the 3,386 cases of religious discrimination. According to a commentary by Grace Nasri (2010), “While discrimination in the workplace has risen sharply in recent years, hate crimes targeted at local mosques have also surged in states from New York, California, and Tennessee to Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.”

The largely prosperous and educated Iranian community in the United States, which is unofficially estimated to be about one-million³ and scattered throughout the country, is not only affected by the existing discriminatory mind-set but faces many challenges, including the acceptance of diverse ethnic, political, and religious expatriates who have migrated to the US and elsewhere after the 1979 Iranian

² Worshipping in Ignorance, 2007

³ Mostly in California

Revolution--a popular revolution that toppled the earlier monarchical Pahlavi regime and replaced it with an Islamic Republic.

In view of the above introduction, I would like to first provide a brief historical context, second, a personal context, and third a global context vis-à-vis the topic at hand.

A Brief Historical Context:

Prior to the Muslim/Arab conquest of the Persian Empire⁴ in the 7th century, the main religion of the country was Zoroastrian or Mazdaism⁵ and there were also large and thriving Christian, Jewish, and other communities. Zoroastrians believe that there is one universal and transcendent God, Ahura Mazda, and that active participation in life through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep chaos at bay⁶. After the Islamization of Persia by the Safavid dynasty, Zoroastrians were marginalized and hence many of them migrated to India and settled there where they are known as "Parsi" or Persian. A small number of them still remain in Iran, mainly in Yazd and Kerman cities. Furthermore, a small Christian and Jewish community exists in present day Iran and because Islam considers them as members of the Ibrahamic family and holders of the holy books⁷ they are constitutionally allowed to practice their faith; hence there are churches and synagogues in the major Iranian cities. On the other hand, other minority religions, such as Baha'is, are marginalized and considered unacceptable. Interestingly enough, for the past decade, the growing Baha'i community in the United States has organized an annual international conference, Association of the Friends of Persian Culture, in Chicago, which draws thousands of participants—including non-Baha'is—from throughout the US and other countries. To my knowledge, no other Iranian religious minority in the US has been able to match such a successful cultural event annually open to all interested individuals.

Additionally, sizeable Iranian Christian⁸ and Iranian Jewish communities, reside in the US. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, many Jews also migrated to Israel.

The current situation in Iran, notwithstanding recent history, demonstrates that Iranians have been quite tolerant toward other peoples and religions. One of the notable Persian Kings, Darius The Great (516 BC), is known for promoting tolerance toward other religions and cultures during his reign. Another Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great, reportedly after his conquest of Babylon (539 BC), permitted the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and practice their faith freely. As one of the oldest religions in Iran, thousands of Jews were also allowed to remain in the Empire⁹.

A Brief Personal Context:

⁴ Now Iran

⁵ The worship of Ahura Mazda

⁶ I. P. Petrushevsky, 1985, & Zoroasterian

⁷ The Bible and the Torah

⁸ Mainly Armenian Orthodox

⁹ Iran Chambers, 2010

Born in the Province of Kerman, in the southeast of Iran, I completed my high school education there and, shortly after graduation, came to the US to pursue my college education. Kerman, the center of the province, was and still is a culturally diverse city. During my high school years, I had the opportunity to meet people from such minorities as Christians, Jews, Baha'is, Sufis, Zoroastrians, and so on. In fact, on my daily bike rides to my high school, I vividly remember going by the Jewish neighborhood and occasionally stopping by a sizeable Orthodox church on the main city street. The church itself was located in the middle of a mansion-like setting, surrounded by tall trees, and tall walls. The entrance was adorned by a huge wooden door (palace-like gate) through which one could see the Church, and next to it a library in which many books, mostly of a religious nature translated into Farsi, were available for purchase and perusal.

The Jewish neighborhood was quite sizable and many Jews were involved in lucrative businesses such as the Persian rugs, jewelry, electronics, pistachios, and so on. Due to the fact that my late father was in the rug making and farming (pistachio) businesses, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with many of the Jewish merchants. And I remember quite vividly that very little business took place during the Jewish holidays.

The Zoroastrian community was in the southern part of the city. They operated a high school (Iranshahr which still exists) with an excellent academic reputation; hence I spent one year of my high school days there, but, due to its long distance from home, I transferred to another high school. Nonetheless, that year gave me a valuable insight about the Zoroastrian beliefs, culture, and festivities.

Having lived in the US for most of my adult life (over 40 years), I am also blessed to reside in a very diverse neighborhood in which immigrants from numerous (around 50) countries live in harmony side-by-side. In fact, the neighbor across the street is from the Philippines; to the right from India (Sikh religion); to the left from India (Hindu religion); around the corner a Mexican family (Christian), further down from an Eastern European country; and so on.

My personal experiences, in Iran and the US, illustrate that it is indeed possible for people of diverse cultures, religions, and backgrounds to live harmoniously side-by-side. On one hand, I view my neighborhood as a microcosm of the world and firmly believe that people—regardless of their skin tone, religion, culture, and nationality—can live and work together. On the other hand, I often wonder “why we cannot create the same kind of harmonious situation across the globe?” and “how can we reduce the mounting tensions and bridge the increasing gaps?”

Concluding Comments:

It appears that religions and nations have monopolized “God”. Consequently, this has resulted in many Gods: My God, your God, his God, and her God. Across the globe we see examples of a determination to cling to “our beliefs” as if there were no others, and as if there must be no others. Furthermore, each of the world’s religious traditions seems to include one or more extremist sub-

groups, and it is the sub-groups that are blamed for most of the violence. Hence, the actions of a small minority tarnish the image of a large majority.

Fortunately, the mainstream elements of the world's religions seem to be generally unanimous in advocating inter-faith cooperation. Such gatherings and numerous other seminars and conferences throughout the world, attest to a movement that will hopefully result in a more cohesive and less divisive global climate vis-à-vis various religions.

For the past 10 years, I have been fortunate to work with a sizable global network, consisting of concerned scholars, journalists, activists, clerics, and writers/researchers, to hold an annual conference, Globalization for the Common Good (GCG), around the world. The conference brings together representatives of diverse intercultural and interfaith groups to discuss and recommend strategies for bridging the existing divide among religions and cultures. Furthermore, in cooperation with the founder of GCG, Dr. Kamran Mofid, we publish an open-access online publication, *Journal of Globalization for the Common Good*, which is devoted to the promotion of the common good, interfaith cooperation, intercultural communication, and dialogue based on mutual respect and cooperation.

It goes without saying that the Iranian community, whether in the US or elsewhere, faces the same challenges and opportunities as any other cultural community vis-à-vis interfaith peace building. Clearly, a concerted, collective, sustained, and carefully orchestrated effort is needed to reverse the existing local, regional, national, and international problems. We should keep in mind that one of the continuing obstacles toward establishing interfaith harmony is the "US vs. Them" and "Them vs. US" mindset. The reality is that in this age of globalization and interconnectedness, we all share similar issues and problems.

Finally, the global media, coupled with increasing penetration and accessibility of the Internet, can help to bridge the ideological, cultural, racial, and geographical gaps, and contribute to a safer world for all of its inhabitants. Of course, a crucial element in any successful and sustained campaign is the "individual" and his/her knowledge, understanding, and commitment toward building a more peaceful and promising future. In other words, individuals are the key components of a given society, organization, corporation, government, and media; hence individual responsibility lies at the center of all that we accomplish and experience personally or collectively.

*Didn't I say, don't sit with sad companions.
Don't sit with anyone but those whose hearts are glad.
Since you are in the garden, don't go to thorns.
Sit amidst the roses, jonquils, and jasmine.*
Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi (Persian Poet)

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