

CONFRONTING ISLAMOPHOBIA

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Conference Report

At the interfaith service concluding the Confronting Islamophobia conference (May 6-7, 2011) at Saint Mark's Cathedral, Rabbi James Mirel opened his remarks saying "...let it be well noted, a Jew called Muslims to prayer in a Christian church. That one sentence says it all!"

The "all" was all that we hoped for, an event where Christians and Jews could lean more about and from Muslims; and where Muslims could experience the interest and openness of neighbors who care about their well being in our community.

The conference I Am My Brother's Keeper, Confronting Islamophobia was already being described as a watershed event in Seattle for the mutual understanding and shared work undertaken by a broad range of Muslims, Christians and Jews. About 600 people had gathered the evening before to hear Imam Feizal Abdul Rauf from the Cordoba Center in New York City give a compelling talk and to lead Muslim evening prayer that began with an incredibly beautiful call to prayer. Moderator Phil Ginsberg enabled discussions that were both honest and respectful.

The 35 protesters across the street, of whom the media hoped to make much, declined the invitation to join us and learn more. By the time the Imam arrived, their group had dwindled to 6 cold, wet people.

For a day and a half, Muslims, Christians and Jews gathered to learn, to discuss issues, to consider strategies for combating Islamophobia and to worship together. The energy in the rooms was so warm, so positive and hopeful that we all had a glimpses of what could be. The sincere interest to know more about the other, to celebrate the dignity of difference, and to grow in one's own faith was remarkable.

The Mideast Focus Ministry of Saint Mark's sponsored the event that grew out of my concern about the increase in Islamophobia and Muslim's loss of civil rights. There is much that reminded me of 1930's Germany and the question "Where were the churches?" It is time to ask where we will all be on this question. To focus us on the question, we began and ended with the scriptures in all three faiths that command us to love our God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves.

The morning focused on learning more about Islam as a faith and Islam and the West. Imam Jamal Rahman and Dr. Yovvne Haddad gave talks that challenged us to go deeper in our understanding both spiritually and intellectually. The afternoon focused on how to create strategies to combat Islamophobia. But it was perhaps modeling what could be done that was most effective. Jeff Siddiqui had asked for a few minutes to talk about the two imams who had been put off a plane because of their dress that morning. Our own Sentaor Cantwell chairs the transportation committee. So during the day we drafted a petition to her that people signed and handed in during the worship service. A concrete commitment to action.

There were thirteen workshops, from which participants could choose three. There was standing room only when Kathleen Christian talked about The Role of Islamophobia on US foreign policy. Efforts to understand different ways of evaluating the issues pushed some to engage fiercely on the tough questions. An equally large crowd sat and stood to lean more about "Sharia, Canon Law and the Constitution" an effort to understand the roles of civil law and religious law allowed by a constitution that supports the rights of all. Yvonne Haddad wove together information as varied as new insights about the Crusades and the role of Muslim women since 9/11 that shared both complexity and space for engaging. Jamal Rahman and Rabbi Ted falcon lead group discussions that one participant said "melted" her prejudices.

Not every workshop was outstanding. But the bar at the top was very high! And we didn't answer questions about militant fringe Islam that were in many participants minds. The speaker on Sharia was talking about the US, not about remote and primitive villages that

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we hear about on the news. Questions about violence asked in other workshops weren't always answered well. We have more to learn about how to deal with the ideas promoted by the media. The focus here was on mainstream Islam. That part was outstanding. It was just a beginning.

We used almost 400 lunches provided by two different chefs, about 150 of which were for youth and those working on the conference. There were halal and vegan options. We spread a wide net in the community for participation by each faith and by all ages. Muslims, Christians and Jews worked, with equal numbers of each faith involved in the effort. (Fewer Jews attended because it was Shabbat.) That includes 9 steering committee members, 52 volunteers, 43 co-sponsors, 22 workshop leaders and panelists, 5 clerics, 4 speakers, 6 musicians, 4 videographers and a technical crew of 4. These numbers don't include the 5 mosques that provided hospitality, with dinner and programs Saturday evening.

The closing service with Bishop Greg Rickel, Imam Fazal Hassan and Rabbi Jim Mirel was a celebration of our shared experiences and a commitment to action. The music by Abráce, as warm and honest as the conference, pulled it all together. Bringing us in with The Storm is Passing Over, they provided the rhythms and music of Egyptian Copts, of a Hebrew/Arabic song of peace, a Jewish/Ladino song about the birth of Abraham, and more. It was a wonderful experience of the ways our differences can bring us together.

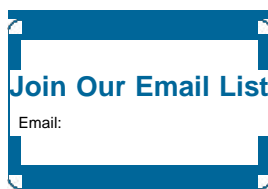
By evening many people had engaged so fully that they went home, missing a very important part of the experience. (Perhaps we had one too many workshops.)

It was dinner at the different mosques that cemented the feeling that one had reached past the veil of "Otherness" to real connection for those who did go on to dinner. One mosque had a quiz on Islam for its guests and the guests got all the answers right! I took that as a good measure of what was learned during the day. But more important were those who talked about the warmth, the hospitality, the power of just sharing a meal and relaxing together.

We are only beginning to answer the question "Where will the churches be?" In convening the conference, I learned a great deal about how vulnerable Muslims are here in Puget Sound, about a loss of civil rights that is hard for the rest of us to comprehend because it is for the most part hidden. But I have no doubt that almost everyone who attended the conference left caring about the rights of someone they met; that they will read the news differently and some will answer the call to action.

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