

They Build New Bridges Between Muslims, Jews and Christians

By Christy Goodman

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Jews, Muslims and Christians had the opportunity to learn about each other recently during an afternoon of interfaith study.

The Dialogue Project, an organization that hosts monthly conversations between people of various faiths for a better understanding between communities, hosted their second annual study and culture program at the YWCA of Brooklyn, located at 30 Third and Atlantic avenues.

After being entertained by Palestinian folk dancing, Hebrew and Arabic poetry and traditional music, the audience listened to Rabbi Niles Goldstein, author and founding rabbi of the New Shul in Greenwich Village, and Dr. Mohammad Fadel, an attorney and religious advisor to Muslims Against Terror.

“In terms of what comes out in our regular dialogues, they reflect the mega-rumors and untruths that exist in each community about ‘the other,’” said the president and founder of the Dialogue Project, Marcia L. Kannry, of the six monthly circles that meet in Park Slope.

The six monthly circles constitute 65 percent of Brooklyn’s Dialogue Project while the interfaith study makes up 25 percent and the remaining 10 percent are geared toward specific educational events.

The Dialogue Project’s Eddy Erhlich said, “We want to go beyond the Dialogue Project and make more bridges between communities.”

A bizarre turn of events that Sunday helped to enforce the basic theme of the Dialogue Project, making the study session an even greater success.

An area gospel church was holding a stirring meeting below the project, utilizing the majority of the power for the stereo system.

According to Kannry, when the group was made aware of another meeting upstairs, they informed members of the Dialogue Project they were paying for their space and raised the volume a touch more.

“That was the framework for the afternoon because people had to sit close together to hear the two speakers,” said Kannry. “The contact was made just in people sitting together listening to speakers and physical contact because of that loud music from below.”

Nearly 70 people were huddled together in the YWCA and listening intently to the presenters speak of the differences and similarities between the two religions.

“There was a child care there for 10 kids,” began Erhlich. “It was a beautiful thing. My daughter and two Palestinian children were playing together while their parents were trying to do what the kids do naturally – trying to coexist.”

Author of “Lost Souls: Finding Hope in the Herd of Darkness,” Goldstein said he had spoken at similar events, but this afternoon the audience very consciously avoided political issues, and focused on spirituality.

“People were more focused on the issue at hand – comparing and contrasting our two ancient but related traditions,” Goldstein said.

Goldstein used the Jewish liturgy and Fadel used the Koran as a springboard to speak on the issues.

Focusing on themes of creation, revelation and redemption, the group learned about basic principles of Jewish and Islamic theology, the relationships each religion has with God and with each other.

Reading selected verses from the Koran, Fadel began speaking of the divine relationships between humanity and God in a universal sense, including their responsibilities before God and being the object of special divine favor.

“I read a few verses that were more familiar to people with a Jewish or Christian background with reference to the story of Adam and Eve and the devil and the story of Abraham,” said Fadel.

He then spoke about God’s covenant with the children of Israel and what it means to be faithful of God’s covenant.

The participants had many opportunities to flesh out both Fadel and Goldstein’s speeches and ask questions that challenged themselves and the speakers.

“It created an openness in a way people may not normally be opened – which is why this is a Dialogue Project event,” said Kannry.

The group did basic comparisons of the books used in Judaism and Islam.

“I thought that it was interesting to see the notion of the Jewish prayer book in the sense that this prayer book is made up of relatively recent vintage text,” said Fadel, whose doctorate is in Middle Eastern languages. “It is very old for an American, but for an old religion like Judaism, 17th century is very new and very interesting.”

The discussion ensued about how modern Jewish behavior and laws have been continually reformed and discussed, while there is no real comparison to Islam, since the Koran is considered a divine revelation and therefore does not need to be updated in any fashion.

One observer, Ayman Masoud, found the conversation over the use of the Sidder, the Jewish prayer book, in addition to the Torah, to be interesting.

“Islam just has the Koran,” said Masoud. “When you pray you say the first chapter. If you want to add to it you can.”

Masoud was also very pleased with how people were “anxious” to learn more about Islam and Judaism to battle the stereotypes and negative information.

“This was a powerful model that needs to be replicated, said Goldstein. “By avoiding politics and building up trust, we can learn more about each other and each other’s faiths.

Fadel, a published author, said the event spurred “genuine interchange” and that there was a real seriousness and interest.

Goldstein said, "There are many similarities between our sister religions. I think there was a palpable sense of hunger to learn about each other's faiths and that was very heartening to me."

Masoud also commented that he, as well as many of the participants, thought this event could have lasted longer and there should be more in the future.

Already Erlich is in the process of planning another study session featuring a small collection of teachers from different faiths.

The Dialogue Project exists solely on contributions. Currently, there is a waiting list of 500 people to get into smaller dialogue circles, but there is no funding.

For more information, go online to www.thedialogueproject.org or snail mail the Dialogue Project, 172 fifth Avenue, #254, Brooklyn, NY 11217.

Kannry stated, "If we keep doing it and modeling it, everyone will start learning from each other."