

Challenges of Islam in America forum organized by Essi Zahedi and Abdou Gaye

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Congregation Emanuel Temple in Kingston, NY

Kingston, NY - Religion in itself is hard to understand and often harder to explain, even for those of the same belief. Now imagine the challenge of trying to explain a religion to people whose most intense experience with that faith has been an almost daily diet of images centered on murder, destruction and the madness associated with suicide bombings.

That was the setting on Sunday, April 17 at Congregation Emanuel Temple in Kingston, NY for three Muslim speakers and a Jewish moderator before a crowd of approximately 125 avid listeners and participants. Add to that a

two-hour time limit and the fact each speaker came from a different country, with different backgrounds and entirely different religious experiences.

The Forum, entitled “The Challenges of Islam in America,” was the latest in a series of talks organized by two of the speakers, Essi Zahedi and Abdou Gaye. The third speaker, Mirza Iqbal Ashraf, a well-known author and Islamic scholar, was invited to join the forum when Iskandar Atajanow, the Imam from Bard College, was unable to attend because of a military commitment.

The moderator, Paul Golomb, Rabbi Emeritus of the Vassar Temple, did a deft job of challenging his audience with thought-provoking questions which were introspective as well as insightful.

Previous talks of the Forum were held at the Kingston library for the past two years. With the library currently under renovation, a new location was needed. In stepped Bob Cohen, coordinator of the event and Chair of the Ulster County Religious Council, who offered the temple as an alternative venue.

Rabbi Golomb began with a few opening remarks, and immediately set the tone for the afternoon when he asked the audience, most of whom were older, how many came to America as adults; few had. With that insight, the audience was put in the position of having to understand the situation of older Muslims, many of whom came to America as adults with the barriers of language, culture and tradition to overcome, while at the same time striving to assimilate.

During the question and answer session Rabbi Golomb also challenged the audience to think about the meaning of “democracy” from its earliest incarnation dating back to Socrates and Plato, and also in a more modern, focused understanding of how it relates to the present day, and to an American understanding in particular.

The other major question, this one directed to the speakers, was simple, yet complex in nature: “What is the meaning of jihad.” The complexity, and contradiction, arose when the term itself was defined from a Koranic as well as modern-day interpretation, from which two very different meanings are derived.

In the meaning derived from a Koranic perspective, the idea of “struggle,” or, more precisely, “the struggle to do God’s will,” each of the speakers were in agreement in that “the biggest jihad is that which people must fight within themselves.”

“I and Abdou,” explained Zahedi, “are struggling to do God’s will in trying to bring religions together. In that sense we are “jihadists.”

Prof. Ashraf went on to say, “jihad means any type of struggle, for knowledge, learning, any work you do; doctors treating patients is also a jihad.” He then explained that “jihad means war, but jihad is political war, not religious war.” In this context he referenced recent wars to explain from where the modern-day version of ‘jihad’ came and why it is so prevalent.

“The modern jihad started against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Jihad is only a war for the sake of Islam, but war as jihad against your own self is the greater jihad.”

Each speaker’s experience with Islam has been as varied and unique as is each one’s belief in and understanding of the Koran. Once again, Rabbi Golomb exhorted the audience to see each of the speakers as “a face of Islam,” not “the face of Islam;” each one an individual expression of a particular religion, no

different from Judaism, Christianity, or any other religion.

Zahedi is married to an American and the father of four, he was born and raised in Iran as a practicing Shia during the time when it was ruled by the Shah and his family. In 1977 he was exposed to the concept of a “unity of religions,” a concept he decided to pursue further.

Following the revolution in 1979 he published a book on ecumenism, was arrested shortly after that and imprisoned as “a CIA agent” by the new government and, in an ironic twist, was identified by communists in the new state as a “counter-revolutionary.”

Several months later, after no evidence could be found to corroborate the charges he worked for the CIA, he was released from prison. Shortly after, he escaped to Pakistan and eventually made his way to the U.S.

“The reason we have this kind of forum,” said Zahedi, “is because, as you know, Islamic extremism is in the news all the time. They say this group of extremists are a minority, maybe only two or three per cent, but the majority of Muslims are silent; they are not doing anything.

“That’s why we thought, based on our background and study, we would just try to explain what is true in all religions, and what is accepted by all people.”

The Islam Forum’s other founder, Abdou Gaye, is from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, a country located in western Africa bordering the Atlantic Ocean. An extremely poor country, its population is nearly 100% Muslim, predominantly from the Sunni sect of Islam with a smattering of Sufis; atheism is punishable by death and no other religion, except for a small community of Christians, is practiced there.

“In Mauritania it is a simple, nomadic lifestyle,” explained Gaye. “It is an Islamic country and you have no choice but to be a Muslim in that country.”

This did not prevent a missionary - disguised as a journalist - from the Unification Church from witnessing to Gaye and helping him get to the United States and to enroll at the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS), from where he graduated in 1997. He is married and the father of two children, both of whom are currently attending university. An interfaith minister, Gaye believes Muslims must read the Koran “with a new light” in order to change their situation.

“Islam will not respond to the 21st century until Muslims can recognize it is time for reform,” explained Gaye.

The third speaker, Miraz Iqbal Ashraf, a retired professor and lecturer, is a native of Pakistan. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Persian Literature and Islamic Philosophy, and a master’s degree in English Language and Literature. He is also the author of several books on Islam and philosophy, and has taught at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Although Pakistan is predominantly a Muslim nation, his father chose to home-school Miraz, acquainting him with the philosophers of the West as well as many Muslim thinkers and, as Ashraf put it, “brought us up on purely moral values, not Islam. Islam is my chosen religion.”

Over the past two years the Islam Forum has focused on important questions of faith and beliefs as seen from each religion’s point of view, such as: “Who is Jesus,” “What About God, Love and Marriage,” and, most recently, “Mysticism in Islam and Christianity.”

Now that the Forum is expanding and becoming more established in the area, Zahedi has set his sights on reaching as many people as possible.

“We are hoping that through this type of presentation we will be invited to go to different places that already have an audience,” said Zahedi, “to colleges, churches, synagogues, mosques and cultural centers.”