

Interfaith for Understanding and Peacebuilding program in Washington DC

Tomiko Duggan
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Washington D.C. – A gathering of over 70 people in the Founder’s Room at The Washington Times Sunday April, 24th was full of energy and interest as the seven panelists each gave their passionate insights into peace building in Pakistan. Recent tragic events in Pakistan, including the murder of highly-respected Soran Singh inspired this gathering. Dr. Singh was a Pakistani Sikh doctor, TV anchor, politician and Minister of Minorities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Before joining Pakistan’s political party Tehreek-e-Insaf in 2011 (*Pakistan Movement for Justice is a third way communitarian political party which aims to create a welfare state, where the state is responsible for education, health and employability of citizens. Its ideology is based on promoting complete freedom of thought, abolition of personal income tax and dismantling religious discrimination in Pakistan*), he was a member of Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (*a socially conservative, Islamist political party working toward creating an Islamic state in Pakistan*) for nine years. He joined the JI in an effort to bring peace to Pakistan. Dr. Singh was appointed as an Ambassador for Peace five years ago in Pakistan. A moment of silence was offered by all in his memory.

Mrs. Tomiko Duggan, Executive Director of Public Affairs, UPF USA – Washington, DC introduced the work of UPF through a short video and then brought forward, Dr. Zulfigar Kazmi, Executive Director of The Commongrounds, USA, MC and co-sponsor. He is also the Vice President of the China – American Friendship Foundation which focuses on the relationships between the US, Pakistan and China.



Dr. Kazmi introduced the first speaker, Mr. Victor V. Gill, President, Christian Voice of Pakistan. He has lived in the US for 40 years. He asked, “*Is religion part of the solution or part of the problem? Both.*” Conflicts began at the beginning of time with Cain and Abel, he added. God hoped that Cain would change his mind and not fight with his brother, but he didn’t overcome, he said. He asked, “*Did these brothers have a religion? Yes,*” he said. So do terrorists who kill others without knowing they are brothers, he concluded. He explained that all people have a motivation or chip inside that pushes each of us toward respecting religion and God, yet many feel Schadenfreude happiness when the other side loses more people than we do. In the Holy Koran, *Sura 5:32 “If one person is killed it is too many.”* Killing is not for the people who believe in God, he added. Religion is like a medicine; it can heal us and give us value. But if you take too much of it, like a *holy roller*, it becomes toxic. Medicine bottles say: Keep out

of reach of children. This is true for extreme religion too, it is unhealthy, he concluded.

The next speaker was Mr. Manny Manawar Alam, President of the Pakistani American Congress (PAC). He is the first Christian to become it's president. He began by saying that to bring everyone together under one umbrella for peace is monstrously challenging. He noted that the US was going to sell Pakistan F16 fighters but when 74 Christians were killed in the streets, with 134 injured, the deal was held up due to the lobbying of those who feel it is not safe for minorities in Pakistan. He said that we need a win-win situation for US – Pakistan relations. He added that there are many efforts ongoing to make peace, including interfaith dialogue. He feels that Pakistan needs secular schools like Indonesia and the Philippines; and women and youth need to be involved in tolerance teaching like in Thailand. Many Hindu organizations are influenced by the peace teachings of Ghandi, he added. American Jewish fellowship, the American Friends Committee and others are working toward peace in Pakistan. He concluded with: *“No religion will bring peace; it is you and me who will get the job done!”*

The third speaker was Javad Ali, an Ambassador for Peace in Pakistan. He is a TV reporter and a Muslim. He has been visiting the US for 14 days and is working on his Ph.D. He said that after 1980 a group emerged that is called *Zia's children*, who claim to be the main jihadists. When he studied in school, it was *Dinyat* (all religions) taught respectfully and not as radicalized as it is today. Now the Sunni based Islam has become political, he said. The radical curriculum is funded by the UK AID, and US AID, but they don't know what is being taught or what is written in the textbooks. The West is paying for the radicalization of Pakistan and doesn't know it, he added. The reality is only Muslims can become government leaders. Minorities make up 20% of the population and none can hold positions of influence, he said. His hometown was always integrated and thus peaceful, he said. He stated that all of Pakistan needs a non-radicalized curriculum; he concluded, *“We do not need a religious war but a war of ideology.”*

The fourth speaker was Douglas Burton, a former U.S. State Department official in Iraq. He was also a press member while serving in Kirkuk in May of 2007, while the US and Iraq were gaining ground against Al Qaida. He stated that genocide against minorities in Iraq and Syria is ongoing. *“We need to get out of the mindset of denying the link between Islam and radicalism, the ones who are fighting are Muslims,”* he stated. The 2.5 million Christians have historically been mediators between the Shi'a and the Sunnis, we need them to continue to play that role in Iraq, he added. But there is extreme genocide against the ancient Chaldean Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis, and Assyrians. [August, 2014 ISIS attempted ethnic cleansing against the Yazidis and the Assyrians.] He continued saying that there are two million refugees in the Kurdish area now due to the fighting. There are 360,000 Christians, who are the most educated leaders, are struggling to survive. Many minorities have tried to leave the country, he added. Now there is an effort to create a safe zone in the Nineva plain, near the Tigris River around Mosul. It is 14,000 square miles of space. This is in the Kurdish held area. But the problem, he said, is that this area has oil fields; Iran and ISIS and Syria want this area for its richness, so does Baghdad, he added. He said emphatically, *“Radical Islam needs to be clearly known not denied.”* The governments in the world can do much to help this struggle, in the US Congressmen Fortenberry and Eshoo have been working to help relieve this crisis, he added. The US Defense of Nation Act is arming the militias in the area, they will defend their own area and then the economy can begin to develop, he said. Private organizations can engage with NGOs and other organizations or groups to aid Iraq, even churches can adopt another church in Mesopotamia, he added. *“We need to win the war of ideas and remove a totalitarian regime,”* he concluded. While he was in Kirkuk he used his experience of being a Boy Scout leader, to help the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in the area to connect to the US organizations for exchange of ideas, uniforms and badges and to secure a non political base for these social groups to work, allowing all Iraqis, regardless of religion or sect to work together in a healthy way.

The fifth speaker was the only woman on the panel, Hali Jilani, Director of the Institute of Cultural Intelligence. She is a well-educated Afghan and Muslim, who has served as an aid worker, a military advisor and has educated US soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan about the cultural needs of the people and how to reach the indigenous leadership to bring peace. She said, *“We need to protect the minority rights, the topic today is dear to my heart.”* She reported that the CIA made a mistake when they brought in Saudi advisors who were radicalized and then set up the Taliban foundations that later crushed the natural culture of Afghanistan, which is quite different than the Wahabi-style of Islam. They are not natural allies, they had their own political agenda, she added. The religious traditions of the area are ancient, Cyrus the Great, a Zoroastrian, 500 BCE, stated that ‘no religion is superior to another.’ After he invaded a country he allowed the people to keep their own religions and worship their own gods. Maimonides is another inspiration for the area; he was a uniquely gifted Jewish teacher. He spoke so well about religion that the narrow-minded Christians and Muslims didn't allow him to speak again for fear that he might convince others of his views. “Each religion is valuable,” she said. When bad leadership tries to remove the ideas of another it creates a power vacuum, the greed of some ‘play the God card’ to fill the vacuum and try to address the pain that people have suffered but then dominate them and cause more suffering, she said. Thus the Taliban were accepted at first because they offered help after the Russians were driven out. Interfaith is essential, *“we need to understand and respect the beliefs of others,”* she concluded.

The sixth speaker was a 16 year old student; Abbas Ali is a high school student studying at St. Anselm's Abbey School in Washington, DC. His father is a strong Shi'ite, his mother is a Jew and he was born on Christmas Eve and attends a Catholic school. His parents are now divorced, and he is Jewish, and is working to spread "Intercultural Competency." His grandfather was a famous Islamic teacher, Johiri. He wishes to understand other religions so that he can help bring peace to the world. He speaks Urdu, Arabic, and is studying Latin, French and Hebrew. He also attends UN conferences to learn what the situation in the world is. His father was extreme in his thinking; he disliked all other religions except his own Shi'ite Islam. Abbas believes that there is no productivity in meaningless hatred. His protestant great grandmother helped Jews escape the Nazis during World War II. He now understands Christianity much better and sees how religions can work together, he said. *"It is rare for a religion to solve religious conflicts and acts of violence,"* he added. Many conflicts are the result of economic, political or cultural problems not just religions, he said. All religions do have humanitarian aspects, but the Taliban has not shown theirs yet, he commented. He said "A secular approach is needed now." Ignorance of the other is the real problem. We need to use the 'spiritual approach' first, producing low violence; then the 'secular approach,' but if both fail only then should we use the military approach because a military effort will fuel violence and stir up negative passions, he said. A broad educational system must promote love and respect for all; and peace makers need to be diverse ethnically, age-wise and religiously, he concluded.

Alex Cromwell was the final and seventh speaker. He is an instructor at the School of International Service, at American University in Washington, DC. He is working on his Ph.D. at George Mason University, VA in Conflict Resolution. He works with the youth to create ways for divergent groups to get to know one another and through relationships old biases are replaced by personal experience which engenders understanding and tolerance. He said that *"peace begins within ourselves."* Pakistan is suffering so much conflict due to religious narrowness, "when a religion focuses on being "chosen" problems arise because other religions are "less chosen" than yours, indicating your superiority over others, he said. "My God verses your God," kind of thinking, he added. *"We need to change the lens we are looking through,"* he said. He works to bring youth together to meet the "other," and get to know that the feelings, desires and goals of the "others" are just as valuable as one's own. The new relationships that are made create change and an attitude shift, he said. He read several reflections of students who came to the US and got to know Americans. One Muslim was moved by the tears of a Native American who spoke passionately about his beliefs, whereas before the Muslim was taught that all non-Muslims were going to hell. He was also moved by the mother of the family he was staying with as she prayed sincerely with tears. He decided that such a loving, kind and sincere woman was definitely not going to hell. Another Muslim felt shame because previously he had felt happy at the catastrophe of 9-11 in New York, because he believed that the US was a bully and a terrorist country. But when he heard that those people who lost loved ones during that time had actually forgiven the Muslims he was sorry for his ignorance and stated that *"Now I can appreciate anyone wherever I go in the world."* Mr. Cromwell said that when a young person has exposure to other types of believers it can create good relations and open the mind to more reasonable thinking. He teaches that attitudes change from relationships, beliefs are good and bad everywhere, but we are all human beings. And behaviors shift to practice tolerance and understanding.



Following the program, new Ambassadors for Peace were appointed by Susan Fefferman, the AFP coordinator for the DC area. The seven new appointees are: Mr. Umar Farooq, founder and CEO of NEXT TV, a Lifestyle program that collaborates with The Commongrounds; Ms. Sadaf Shahid who has been instrumental in promoting interfaith dialogue in Virginia. She hosts an Annual Women's Peace Conference; Mr. Mazhar Chughtai, is a leading Pakistani-American businessman and educator who supports educational and health programs in Pakistan. Also appointed were speakers: Abbas Ali, Alex Cromwell, Manny Alma, and Victor Gill.