

## Reflections on the Wroxton Gathering

By Khaleel Mohammed

Most meetings on interfaith dialogue, whether they are held under the auspices of academic or confessional discourse, follow a certain format. The presenters are generally selected in a manner that will seek to ensure that they contribute to perceived harmony among the participants. This inevitably means that those who question certain cherished traditions will be ostracized. It also means that differences which are what foster the need for such dialogue will often be overlooked, and instead points of convergence, real or assumed, focused upon. Sometimes, participants may be apologists, in which case the sense of harmony precludes opposing any of their viewpoints; or they may be polemicists against their own religion, which endears them to a certain crowd. In either case, very little is actually accomplished on the level of widespread benefit, although individual friendships may be forged. And perhaps this is the reason why, after more than a decade of interfaith encounters through North America, spurred on by the horrific memory of 9/11, little has been achieved. The latest Pew polls show that relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims are still, while not acrimonious, certainly not indicative of a pluralist outlook. The focus of many states on banning Shariah law—something that no mainstream Muslim organization has ever solicited—indicates the result of negative “othering.”

As a long-time participant in many interfaith meetings, at home and abroad, I have also noted that presenters often are more focused upon their own presentations rather than listening to what is said by others. As such, a common sight is that while a speaker is at the podium, her co-panelists, instead of listening attentively, can often be seen concentrating on tweaking their own notes that they will be presenting shortly. And thus, a meeting that is supposed to promote dialogue instead ends up being an exercise in public relations: everyone smiles, but none has really listened and digested what the other has to say. It is for this reason that when I was asked to contribute to a book on the subject, I titled my chapter, “The Art of Heeding,” pressing my view that one should more focus on listening; the time for tweaking and preparing one’s own presentation is before the meeting, not during its course.<sup>1</sup>

My experience at Wroxton Trialogue, held at the United States Holocaust Museum in October 2007, was to revitalize my efforts and change my negative attitude towards such gatherings. In the first place, the eighteen participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds, based on their education and academic credentials. As with almost all academics, even those from within the same tradition did not share the same viewpoints: indeed there were some who were vehemently opposed to each other’s perspectives on several issues.

The focus on the presentations was decidedly against fostering any sort of apologetic: the title “Encountering the Stranger” forced participants to examine how their respective faiths dealt with the outsider. Given the acrimonious history between the three Abrahamic religions, this certainly was no easy task. And as if that were not enough, the wide variety of interpretations of any scriptural texts deemed relevant required a maximum of effective moderating in all sessions.

As if to ensure that presenters did not just speak, they were told that all of their material would be listened to, read and then their fellow presenters would direct questions that they would have to effectively address. The presentations and responses were published as *Encountering the*

*Stranger* by University of Washington Press in 2012, edited by Professors Leonard Grob and John Roth.

In my own presentation, for example, I reflected upon a “fatwa”—an authoritative opinion—rendered a few years ago in Saudi Arabia by its highest council of scholars that rejected the idea of pluralism. Since Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni, I also discussed the workings of a Shi’ite group that wanted to have one of contemporary Shi’ism’s highest authorities, Ayatollah Sistani, order that the famous American professor, Abdul Aziz Sachedina be banned from the mosque pulpit because of some of his views. The thrust of my presentation was that none of us knows for certain that a particular spiritual path is the singularly correct one, and I used the shared story between the scriptures: of Abraham welcoming guests at Mamre, without checking to see if they shared his worldview. As such, I entitled my presentation “When certainty becomes immaterial”—the idea that harmonious human interaction takes precedence over considerations of religious truth.

After listening to my presentation, and reading my preliminary draft, my fellow presenters questioned me on a variety of topics. Among these was my contention that ethics, rather than theological perspective, should govern interfaith relations. My reference to the story of Lot and its oft-interpreted homophobia was questioned in terms of how it meshed with my views of ethics. And I was also questioned about Lot’s protecting his guests at the possible price of his daughters’ safety: did I see responsibility towards his guests as more important than his duty as a father to protect his children?

These questions, it will be noted, were based on a deep examination of what I actually said, forcing me to examine my views as a world citizen, and asked without any implication of malice. The selection of questioners was strategic: they came from different religions, chosen at random. This meant that any one presenter could be faced with questions that forced a thorough examination of values declared as representative of his/her religion.

The back and forth discussions that went on via email forced us to interact with each other as academics, as upholders of our particular faiths, and even as opponents of the views of our coreligionists in some cases. In the end, what we produced was a volume of what I consider truly enlightening essays. This set the paradigm for several other encounters. At the 40th Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust in 2010, a group of participants presented a summary of what we had learned at this conference.<sup>2</sup> And at the “Responsibility of World Religions in an Age of Genocide,” conference in Aspen, Colorado, in June 2012, I asked that the paradigm of the Holocaust meeting be adopted for future interfaith gatherings.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I took from this conference concerned the idea that we all have to initially agree on anything. We do not have to sweep differences under the table. We have to acknowledge that differences do exist, and we may often have to acknowledge that they may not be solved in the foreseeable future. This acknowledgement is what forces us to draw upon the best of our respective spiritual backgrounds. For, while all the religious traditions have a history of interfaith and intrafaith acrimony, they also have ideals that promote a tolerable *modus vivendi*. In arranging interfaith gatherings, I am careful to ensure that the presenters are chosen to represent a realistic spectrum of their faith, and not only from those whose views agree with mine. Even in terms of being a university professor, I learned from the Wroxton gathering: for if a professor cannot relate to a student without getting angry when the latter expresses a viewpoint that is in opposition to the professor’s, then the whole commitment to interfaith dialogue would seem just a meaningless façade. I am happy to say that in 2015, a group calling itself “The Foundation for Interfaith Understanding” is using the Wroxton gathering, and the book “Encountering the Stranger” as its model for future conferences.

**Khaleel Mohammed** is a professor of religion at San Diego State University and a core faculty member of the university's Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies. Dr. Mohammed is also a speaker with the United Jewish Communities (UJC) and the Brandeis University National Women's Committee. His research interests include Islamic law (classical and modern), comparative religion, Jewish/Christian/Islamic encounter, Qur'anic exegesis, antisemitism in Islamic/Islamist material, and Arab-Israeli relations.

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Art of Heeding" in *Interfaith Dialogue at the Grass Roots*, ed. Rebecca Kratz-Mays. Ecumenical Press, PA., July 2008: 75-86. Initially published as a journal article, "The Art of Heeding," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43 (2), Spring 2008: 75-86.

<sup>2</sup> "Encountering the Stranger," 40th Annual Scholars Conference, St. Joseph's University, PA. March 8, 2010.