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The 2014 Slomoff Symposium:

Bridging Global Religious Divides Conference Report



April 7- 8, 2014

*A unique conversation about new areas of research
and practice in building peace across religious divides.*

DEPARTMENT OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION, HUMAN SECURITY, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE
CENTER FOR PEACE, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT
McCORMACK GRADUATE SCHOOL OF POLICY AND GLOBAL STUDIES

Religion has quickly proven itself the defining conflict issue of the Twenty-First Century. Religion and conflict are frequently linked in popular discourse, yet from the beginning, religions have typically held peacemaking as a central value and obligation to their members. This ancient tension between religion as a vehicle of peace and religion as a source of division has taken on global dimensions in recent decades, particularly across a belt of countries roughly crossed by the Tenth Parallel, where Islam and Christianity meet, but in many other parts of the world as well, including Boston. Increasingly, conflict resolution activities must better understand how to engage religion in a manner that enhances its peacemaking capacities while undermining frictions that may arise across religious divides or among its own members.



Benjamin Slomoff with Chancellor J. Keith Motley

Religious ethics and approaches to peacemaking deeply influenced conflict resolution and peacemaking methodologies as they developed over the last 50 years into a discipline present in academic departments, NGOs, and government agencies worldwide. Moreover, in the last decade conflict resolution practitioners and scholars have begun to work closely with religious actors to incorporate the discipline's best practices and to improve the peacemaking capacity of religious institutions. The result has been the development of innovative mixed methodologies and hybrid models enriching both religious peace practice

and the conflict resolution field, the full impacts of which we are just beginning to appreciate and analyze.

The 2014 Slomoff Symposium “Bridging Global Religious Divides” brought together academics, practitioners, and local and national government representatives to UMass Boston to review these current leading trends in the field, and to explore where new research and practice in interfaith work is needed. The Department for Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance and the Center for Peace, Democracy and Development held the two-day symposium to honor the achievements of Benjamin Slomoff (Conflict Resolution '97) and celebrate his 100th birthday.

Panelists and audience cited several key trends in inter-religious peace building:

- Despite these long traditions of making peace, religious leaders still have an underused potential in the field of peace building.
- The conversation between religious peacemakers and theologians on the one hand, and conflict resolution scholars and practitioners on the other, is not as advanced as it needs to be. Academia can play a special role in bridging these two fields, starting with conflict resolution programs and divinity schools.
- The US government is paying much more attention to religion and its importance in conflicts and disputes, and needs active feedback from the religious, academic, and NGO sectors.
- Interreligious peace building projects need to be evaluated more rigorously.
- Religion can often be hard to distinguish from other factors contributing to conflicts, such as the struggle for political power or the distribution of resources. At the same time, these influences should not be used as a shield to say that religion has no role.

Based on these trends, participants recommended several important research questions in need of new research and programming:

- The problem of scaling up peace initiatives from the local level, where the majority of our efforts take place, to have national impacts remains deeply difficult. How can efforts in local interreligious peace building be transferred to the national level?
- What role can social media play in the field of religious peace building, particularly in regard to the scaling up problem?
- What is the appeal of radical religious groups, where do they get their funding, and how can they be countered?
- What are the best practices in order to deradicalize youth once they have engaged in radical movements?
- Religious institutions worldwide tend to privilege men's roles in their hierarchies. Acknowledging both the pressures for change and to maintain tradition, what new or expanded roles for women in religious peace building are possible? How do men and women differ in their approach to interfaith peace building?
- Religious approaches to peace and conflict resolution methods are not always a perfect fit. To what extent should religious content be involved in interfaith dialogues and interchanges? When does it work as a unifying factor, and when does it divide?
- US government actors face a very specific concern when engaging religion in policy matters: the US Constitution's Establishment Clause mandates the separation of church and state. To what extent can US government actors fund interfaith work at home or abroad without violating the Establishment Clause, and what are the legal parameters within which US funders must work?

Missed the conference?
Watch the entire event [here!](#)

Discussion at the symposium followed several major topical themes, led by our panelists, but with extensive audience participation, in part through a large group discussion utilizing a variant of the Open Space Technology method on the last day.

"The most important religious conflicts of our time are not those between religions, they are those inside of religions. There are struggles between Christians and Christians, Jews and Jews, Muslims and Muslims... over who has the right to speak for God and why."

Eliza Griswold

US Foreign Policy Views on Religion and Conflict Resolution

Former and first-ever Special Representative to Muslim Communities **Farah Pandith** set the tone for the symposium as she dedicated her keynote speech to a call for action to push back against interreligious hate and hate speech. "Hate is hate, no matter who the victim is. No matter whom you love, how you live, no matter your race or ethnicity, or how you engage in your world. Hate is hate." Ms. Pandith pointed to the strength of the US government as being a convener, facilitator, and intellectual partner to build networks of like-minded thinkers in the management of religious conflicts. She noted that the fight against hate speech is a crucial challenge for everyone involved in interreligious peace building.



Farah Pandith

Ms. Pandith also elaborated on three central themes that can serve as a starting point to increase interfaith sensitivity. 1) Lexicon matters: it is crucial to be conscious about how we talk about things and what names we give them. 2) Demographics matter: youths are powerful – 62% of all Muslims are under age 30; let us listen to their ideas. 3) History/narrative matters: we need to learn about who we are and where we come from. In her conclusion, Pandith called on peace practitioners to act, to tell their story, to show people how to connect their voices and, most importantly, to think outside the box.

“Hate is hate, no matter who the victim is. No matter whom you love, how you live, no matter your race or ethnicity, or how you engage in your world. Hate is hate.”

Farah Pandith

Bruce Hemmer of the State Department’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) also delivered a keynote speech about the US government’s approach to addressing religious conflicts. Mr. Hemmer emphasized the importance of two-way-engagement in the regions with US involvement. Local groups and their leaders, who are often religious leaders, are sources of advice, ideas, and creativity from which the US can learn. At the same time, it is crucial to respect these groups’ wish for independence. Mr. Hemmer also stressed the importance of moving away from the notion that sees conflict as entirely negative, and argued that peace efforts should concentrate on moving destructive conflict towards more constructive forms, and to focus on aspects that are already working well within a conflicted society.

Mr. Hemmer, moreover, stressed the fact that religious conflict does not always occur between two different religions, but between different adherents within a single religious group. He also pointed out that even when a conflict is not about religion per se, religious

actors are often involved and mixed in with the political structure by, for example, running for office. In these cases it is harder to work with them in their function as civil society leaders. For Mr. Hemmer, central research questions to be answered in this realm are, amongst others: What are the perceptions of the US government and its role in religion and conflict around the world? How does the US government best deal with differences in conception of the proper relationship between the state and religion? How can we bring people together through the peaceful messages of religious texts?



Bruce Hemmer

Lessons from the Tenth Parallel: Rethinking Religious Differences

Eliza Griswold, the celebrated journalist, poet, and author who has written about the religious divides of the Tenth Parallel countries, a term she coined, called for a shift in emphasis in the field: “The most important religious conflicts of our time are not those between religions, they are those inside of religions. There are struggles between Christians and Christians, Jews and Jews, Muslims and Muslims ... over who has the right to speak for God and why.” Ms. Griswold noted that this relationship is often overlooked, because it does not make the news. She explained that during her seven-year journey along the Tenth Parallel she did not find a single conflict that was only about religion: All conflicts possess a secular driver such as

political power or access to resources, and in failed states, where citizenship means nothing because the state cannot provide any basic rights, people increasingly turn toward religion as their primary source of identity.



Eliza Griswold

Ms. Griswold added that religion provides a feeling of belonging and constitutes a group in which people can negotiate for their basic rights on both the local and the international levels. She also emphasized that because “there are many Christianities and Islams,” given the many subdivisions of these two religions, it is crucial to speak in specifics when discussing them. In her experience, the most successful way of bringing individuals across religious divides together is by letting them work on the solution of a common problem that affects anyone, irrespective of their faith.

Pastor James Wuye and **Imam Mohammed Ashafa** of the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna, Nigeria, search for these solutions in Nigeria and across Africa by mentoring imams and pastors in a culture of inclusiveness. They saw the teaching of hate to the younger generations in the family context and the subsequent development of stereotypes as two crucial challenges to interfaith peace building. De-radicalization and re-integration of youth must, therefore, be a central concern in peace building efforts. In addition, IMC trains religious leaders in peace practices, conducts media dialogues, develops codes of conduct, and is working with UMass

Boston to establish an early warning system in Northern Nigeria. IMC also employs key elements of the reflective structured narrative approach, which was developed by **Dave Joseph** and the Public Conversations Project, who also spoke at the symposium. Mr. Joseph explained how this approach provides a useful tool to engage young Christians and Muslims in dialogue, and fosters re-humanization through personal encounters. The inclusion of traditional and religious leaders at the grassroots level has tremendous potential to break the construction of “walls and foster bridges across the divide.” The central question in countries like Nigeria is how peace education can be fostered in the educational curriculum in order to achieve a paradigm shift, which sees the potential of religion to solve, not create problems. Moreover, Mr. Joseph pointed to the inherent –but creative– tension between traditional religious peacemaking methods, which often involve preaching and conflict resolution approaches like reflective structured dialogues, which try to avoid judgments in order to elicit greater openness.

“We have found 75 areas of scriptural similarities between the Holy Koran and Holy Bible.”

Imam Mohammed Ashafa

General Abdulrahman Dambazau, former head of the Nigerian army, emphasized the importance of a solid education and some system of accreditation and regulation for pastors and imams, balanced by constitutional rights to religious freedom, in order to prevent the development of extremist thinking, which might be passed on to a broader audience. General Dambazau raised concerns over the politicization of religion in the face of the upcoming 2015 elections in Nigeria as a fundamental problem. While politicians of different faiths generally cooperate at the national level, religion is used as a currency for mobilization in the local sphere. He noted that the media is a crucial intermediary that can both reinforce and counter this effect, such that

fact-focused media coverage, free of hate speech is, consequently, an important challenge that needs to be faced.

Madhawa Palihapitiya of the Massachusetts Office of Public Collaborations shed light on the potential for community-based early warning systems in the Tenth Parallel countries. Mr. Palihapitiya, who developed these systems in Sri Lanka and with IMC in Nigeria, argued that this approach gives power back to the local population, which develops its own system of both early warning and early response by collecting, analyzing, and verifying information on the ground. He raised three questions in particular: How can citizen-based early warning be further strengthened in order to address religious tensions effectively in Northern Nigeria and elsewhere? In areas dominated by violent armed actors, what are some strategies to help protect and sustain the coexistence work of religious leaders and their constituencies? What strategies are available to peace-oriented religious leaders and groups in order to address violent religious extremism effectively?



Imam Mohammed Ashafa, General Abdulrahman Dambazau, and Professor Darren Kew

Reaching Across Religious Divides in the US: The BRIDGES Model

Mr. Abdul Rahman Mohammed explained the innovative work of the BRIDGES initiative, a public-private effort to improve dialogue between US law enforcement and Muslim and Sikh communities in several major US cities,

including Boston. He emphasized the project's success in Boston in creating a safe platform that gives participants a voice and engages people from various groups to learn about each other's realities. In this environment, participants can build trust, break down stereotypes, and develop genuine, workable relationships. **Mr. Alope Chakravarty**, speaking from the law enforcement side of BRIDGES, alluded to the importance of reaching and integrating youth in the project. He also stressed the importance of a safe, confidential space for open dialogue, and noted that as a full-time US prosecutor, he has to be careful about what he can say in the BRIDGES context, but that "even if I cannot say something, I can listen, and then I can act." Mr. Chakravarty praised the personal commitment of everyone involved in the BRIDGES project, which is run by volunteers and not financially compensated.

"Even if I cannot say something, I can listen, and then I can act."

Alope Chakravarty

Fatema Esmail, a representative from a Muslim community organization in Boston, elaborated on some challenges to the effectiveness of BRIDGES. She stressed the importance of more regular participation and community attendance at meetings in order to establish a better working foundation and room for dialogue. She, moreover, saw the need for more transparency and better information about the goals of the project to ensure trust building and respect between the communities and the government, a process that needs more time. Ms. Esmail emphasized how crucial it is to give voice back to those who feel that their faith has been hijacked by extremists and yet are also frustrated by the Western media view of Muslim communities.

As a representative of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), **Ehsan Zaffar**

looked at engaging with local faith-based communities to address their concerns as a spectrum ranging from information, consultation, and deliberation, to delegation. Mr. Zaffar called for engaging the most disenfranchised individuals of a community and providing them with alternatives to express their dissatisfaction with government policies. DHS tries to achieve this by holding roundtables and trainings, and by establishing a complaints mechanism. Zaffar presented five rules that can be taken as a general guidance: do no harm, address challenging issues, go local, identify the right people to engage with, and involve government partners.

Fostering Inter-Religious Peace Amid Power Disparities: Israelis and Palestinians

Nava Sonnenschein shared insights from the work of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al Salam's School for Peace, which she directs. Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam is a unique peace village in Israel, where Jews and Arabs have lived together in a single integrated community since the 1970s. The School for Peace has trained more than 65,000 participants through workshops and classes in the village's method, which focuses on intergroup, not interpersonal conflicts by actively addressing the conflict and the asymmetry in power relations. The participating groups are considered a microcosm of society and engage in forums with two facilitators in both Arabic and Hebrew as official languages. In doing this, Neve Shalom/Wahat Al Salam seeks to promote a humane and just society, to raise awareness for the conflict, and to develop critical thinking and activism.

"The Palestinian-Israeli peace 'process' ... has no chance ever of going anywhere as it is structured at the present time."

Padraig O'Malley

Chris Taylor, director of Duke University's Center on Religion, Culture, and Conflict, discussed his center's efforts to encourage and equip emerging religious leaders with the latest tools of conflict transformation. Local partners in Indonesia, Pakistan, Israel, Egypt, and Nigeria help to identify emerging religious leaders, who are then brought to a one-month workshop in the US. The group lives together and learns about each other's religions by, for example, visiting religious spaces. The workshop enables the participants to re-assess their stereotypes and find commonalities. They engage in conversations, establish contact, and continue to collaborate after they return to their home countries.



Charles Sennott and Nava Sonnenschein

Charles Sennott, co-founder and editor-at-large of *GlobalPost*, discussed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by focusing on the unique role of the Christian-Arab minority, which might be a broker for peace and reconciliation, and could also function as an interlocutor with the West. **Padraig O'Malley**, UMass Boston's Moakley Chair of Peace and Reconciliation, cited a number of weaknesses in the structure of the current Israeli-Palestinian peace process, most importantly that it fails to bring all relevant actors, such as Israeli settlers or Hamas, to the negotiation table. Prof. O'Malley argued that the only chance that Israel would ever agree on a two-state solution lay in the highly improbable decommissioning of weapons by all jihadist groups. O'Malley emphasized the importance of having a new

generation of peace negotiators taking over the peace talks to achieve new and creative ideas.

Learning from Interfaith Peace Efforts of NGOs and Academic Centers

Joyce Dubensky, CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, shared her insights about the organization's work with religiously motivated peacemakers at the international level. These peacemakers are selected through five criteria: they must be religiously motivated, work in an armed conflict, be involved at the local level, be relatively unknown, and have their freedom at risk. Their current network of 28 peacemakers underscores the power of religiously motivated actors, yet how under-recognized their work is. Ms. Dubensky considered this lack of recognition a key challenge for people working in the field of interfaith peace building and a reason for the constant absence of resources. Another challenge she cited was the difficulty to measure peace in order to evaluate peacemakers' work.



Andrea Bartoli

Douglas Johnson, president of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, illustrated his center's approach to faith-based diplomacy in North Sudan, Kashmir, and Pakistan. Mr. Johnson pointed to the importance of considering every interfaith

conflict as unique and requiring a different approach, such that a top-down strategy might work in one case, while another might require a middle-out approach. He noted that international interreligious peace work should help build capacity, not dependency. Mr. Johnson also emphasized the potential of religion to be part of a positive solution to the conflict, and that the principles of forgiveness and ownership are crucial. Dean of Seton Hall University's School of Public Service **Andrea Bartoli** expanded on the theme of forgiveness, defining it as a gesture of freedom that liberates collectivities from the burdens of the past. Prof. Bartoli pointed out that all research in the field of interreligious conflict has to focus on power, meaning, and relational structures.

Rodney Petersen, executive director of the Boston Theological Institute, reviewed theological education in the Boston area, and noted that a deep sense of relationship with people of other religious faiths is already a lived reality. He observed a growing movement of respect, supported by a theological education that not only talks, but also listens to other religions, exemplified by such practices as Christian schools hiring faculty persons outside of the Christian tradition. Mr. Petersen added that joint engagement in interfaith study and interfaith peacemaking constitute two additional pillars of this deepening relationship.

Next Steps: An Invitation to Research and Practice

Based on the advice and commentary gathered from the 2014 Slomoff Symposium, the UMass Boston Department for Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance and its Center for Peace, Democracy, and Development (CPDD) will invite the conference participants to engage in a new research initiative to address the key questions raised in this report and, where possible and appropriate, develop new project work.

CPDD will begin this process with a research initiative to address the question raised of “scaling up” local interfaith peace projects to have greater, conflict-wide impacts, including at the national level. We will invite partners to join this effort, and encourage other organizations and centers with different interests and expertise to address other key research and practice needs as suggested in this report. Lastly, we will work to continue this conversation and cooperation among the participants, and invite new partners interested in joining the discussion.

Missed the conference?
Watch the entire event [here](#)!

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