

Dialogue and the Echo Boom of Terror
Women's Religious Voices After 9/11
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“As an American and as a Muslim, I was horrified to watch the television that morning. I felt as if pieces of myself were tumbling off of those buildings. All the work we had been doing for years and years to build up positive relations between Muslims and other faiths seemed to be falling and crumbling.” Sharifa Alkhateeb of the North American Council for Muslim Women opened our day of intensive discussion in New York, just six weeks after September 11. Sharifa’s fear that the positive work of interfaith relations would suffer a cataclysmic setback was a working hypothesis. The preceding six weeks had been filled with the backlash of terror for Muslims and Sikhs, South Asians and Arabs in the United States.

The leaders of American women’s religious networks had met once before, gathered together by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. We had met in Cambridge for two sunny days in April of 2001 to get to know each other's organizations and to connect our circles of work. It was a process of mutual learning, exploring the boundaries, and recognizing women’s leadership in a world of interfaith relations too often dominated by the publicly visible leadership of men. We represented another reality, determined to be more visible and vocal: United Methodist Women, Women of Reform Judaism, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, the North American Council for Muslim Women, the Muslim Women’s League, Manavi, and many others. Our April meeting in Cambridge had begun to build relationships, but as we met in the wake of September 11, all of us wondered if they would be strong enough to hold the weight they now bore. Even as we gathered that November morning, we acknowledged that one of our members, a representative of Hadassah, one of the largest Jewish women’s organizations, was constrained from attending by her board because of the presence of the founder and president of the Muslim Women’s League. The inability to sit together at the same table, with all of the imputed views and suspicions it represented, signaled the fraying of relationships. Honest interfaith discussion of American policy in the Middle East was almost at a standstill.

By November, the term 9/11 had become its own locution, with a powerful penumbra of meanings: the blue September morning, the crumbling of the towers and the eerie images of the Ground Zero, the helmeted firemen and the trucks filled with rubble, the chain-link fences covered with flowers and messages, the impromptu shrines and candles, the grief and recrimination, the faces and portraits of those who had died, printed day after day in the newspaper. Included in the penumbra of meaning conveyed by 9/11 was, by now, the reality of war in Afghanistan. The official American backlash against an evasive and unseen enemy was paralleled by an unofficial domestic backlash against neighbors in our very midst. The age-old strategy of punishment, retribution, and revenge was being enacted and tested on the domestic and international scene. Gambling on their effectiveness was the government’s working hypothesis. Would the blunt instruments of war, even with their precision, root out terrorists or create the conditions for them to flourish?

Now gathered around the table in New York, each of us described, carefully and personally, what had happened to us and to the women in our communities in the weeks following September 11. We began putting together our own composite picture, assessing as best we could the “collateral damage” of September 11, both for women and for the interfaith movement more broadly. All of us had seen both the worst and the best, from our own particular vantage point of vision. All of us were aware that we were entering new terrain in interreligious relations.

Emira Habiby Browne of the Arab-American Family Support Center in New York recalled the fear that welled up as she heard the news. “I was driving downtown when I turned on the news and heard what had happened. They were already comparing it to Pearl Harbor, and my first thought was ‘Oh my God, we’re going to be rounded up and put in camps now.’” She described the strain of the following weeks as the Arab-American center experienced soaring demand and unprecedented siege at the same time. The fraying of the fabric of trust was also the experience of Blu Greenberg of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and Carolyn Kunin of Women of Reform Judaism who described how painful it was to see the celebratory Arab street scenes broadcast of television, a searing reminder of the reality of anti-American and anti-Israel sentiment. Sister Helen Marie Burns of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, a nationwide Catholic organization, described feelings many of us shared. “From the moment I watched the second plane hit the tower, I felt such a deep sadness. Not anger, but a deep sadness. That sadness has not left me since that day. I have been sobered at a level of my being that hasn’t been touched before.”

Muslim, Arab-American, and South Asian women around the table had all experienced the fear of being marked with suspicion. Laila Al-Marayati from Los Angeles spoke of the threats both her mosque and its Islamic school had received, along with an enormous and exhausting volume of requests for information, explanation, and interpretation. Shamita Das Dasgupta of Manavi, an organization focused on violence against South Asian women in the U.S., described new strains in program that serves Muslim and Hindu women alike. They felt besieged from the outside and they experienced new tensions within. “We were already struggling,” said Shamita, “because domestic violence within our communities challenges our perceptions of who we are. But 9/11 has almost brought to a breaking point the relations we had built up for seventeen years between the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities, between Indians and Pakistanis. Now we hear people say, ‘Muslim women should not be going there.’ Yet our shelter is full of Muslim women. Hindus say, ‘We should not wear *selwar kamiz*, or now we should wear a *bindi* mark on our foreheads so people don’t think we’re Muslim.’ In one sense we are now struggling against our own communities.”

Navjot Kaur, a Sikh woman, recounted the growing roster of incidents that had been reported in the previous six weeks to the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (SMART). Sikhs were targeted for their turbans, revealing the ignorance and insecurity of a country unfamiliar with its own newest citizens. There were incidents of harassment, beatings, and arson. In Mesa, Arizona, Balbir Singh Sodhi had been shot and killed,

mistaken for a turbaned follower of Osama Bin Laden. As Navjot put it, “While September 11 has unified the nation in many ways, it has also opened up an outlet for acceptable hate crimes against minorities. Though the violence and harassment against Sikhs is often described as a problem affecting Sikh men, it has also affected Sikh women. Some Sikh women wear turbans. Others dress in traditional *selwar kamiz*, and they are targeted for that reason. Or they are targeted just because of the color of their skin.”

Beyond the unraveling of trust and the eruptions of violence, there was another important fact that emerged in sharing our experience: that incidents of brutality and violence here at home had also elicited a wave of sympathetic support in response. If there was a violent backlash to 9/11 that targeted minorities in the United States, there was also a backlash to the backlash that resoundingly rejected these acts. There was a sustained countervailing outreach, hands stretched across each chasm that opened, connecting people in spite of and perhaps because of the inchoate fear, anger, and sadness that spread in the aftermath of 9/11.

Emira Habiby Browne described an Arab-American security initiative in New York, developed in response to the fear of being randomly victimized. “We thought we would establish an escort system, because we heard immediately after September 11 that children were not going to school,” she said. “Arab children were scared to go out, and their mothers didn’t want to go out either. So we put out a notice that we wanted to start an escort system, and we had hundreds of people calling to say they wanted to participate. Eventually, we had over a thousand volunteers.”

Rifle fire hit the stained glass dome of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo on September 11, but Cherrefe Kadri told the story of the response. “A Christian radio station in the Toledo area, contacted me, wanting to do something. They called out on the airwaves for people to come together at our mosque to ring our building, and to pray for our protection.” Cherrefe described how moved she was by this initiative from complete strangers. “We were hoping for 300 or 500 people and we thought that number might be able to get around the mosque. But two thousand people showed up.”

Sharifa Alkhateeb, summarized what for many of us had been a climate change. Her own worst fears of the collapse of initiatives for dialogue were, in fact, surprisingly undermined by the events of the subsequent weeks. “From my experience after September 11,” she said, “for every one negative thing that has happened, there have been, without exaggeration, at least a hundred positive things, not the least of which is people’s willingness to want to know something more about each other, something deeper, something beyond the sound bite.” The hypothesis of the cataclysmic setback for interfaith relations could be sustained only if we did not try to understand those “hundred positive things.” There was an echo boom from even the most violent acts: the wide community support for the family of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona, bringing thousands of people together who previously had no knowledge at all of the Sikh neighbors in their midst. The response to Hazim Barakat, an Islamic bookstore owner in Alexandria, Virginia whose store window was shattered by bricks wrapped with

messages of hate. Hundreds of people stopped by; messages and flowers flooded into his shop from neighbors he did not know, but who now reached out to him.

As the months have passed, it is clear that 9/11, far from being a setback for interfaith relations in the United States, has become a stimulus to far more serious dialogue. In November of 2001, we were just beginning to see the emergence of a new wave of interfaith initiatives across the United States. According to the research of the Pluralism Project, this has grown in significance in the months since then. Countless cities and towns –from Memphis, Tennessee to Urbana, Illinois to Bozeman, Montana now have interfaith associations, councils, and initiatives that have been started since 9/11.

Admittedly, this has not been an easy time for inter-religious dialogue. Conservative Christian leaders have been emboldened to reckless statements about Islam. Jewish-Muslim dialogue initiatives have foundered with the further deterioration of peace-prospects in Israel and Palestine. Islamophobia has become a staple of AM talk-radio. Basic civil rights have been undermined. And yet through all of this, dialogue initiatives have moved to a new depth of relationship. They are not only about understanding neighbors half-way around the world, but building relationships with people who live across town or across the street.

How is it, then, that a shattered window produces a new set of relationships? How is it that an act of hatred can produce a positive echo boom of compassion? What can we all learn from these kinds of experience repeated time after time in cities and towns across America? Far from causing us to tighten our defenses and clench our fists, tragedy more often opens our hearts and creates the space for new beginnings. On one level, it seems natural, even intuitive that this should be the case. But how can the positive echo-boom of tragedy be leveraged into the creation of policy? Lessons learned at a local level were never even remotely apprehended at a national policy level. The space opened for new and powerful alliances across the world was, instead, occupied by a strategy of violent retribution, articulated in the language of war within hours of the September 11 attacks.

Womens Religious Networks has continued to meet and has involved new women in the three years since 9/11. By the time we gathered in April of 2002, the crisis of civil rights for all Americans was on the agenda. The Patriot Act had generated a new climate of fear-mongering and suspicion. The policy of reprisal was in full swing, alienating the very communities we needed as allies. Sharifa reported that people were afraid to come to the mosques, afraid to donate to Muslim charities, afraid to protest. Muslim homes and offices had been raided. Shamita Das Dasgupta told us “September 11 became a pretext for doing what they wanted to do anyway: crack down on immigrants. Detentions, raids, targeting brown people were the order of the day. Now everyone is afraid of punitive measures.”

By the time we met in May of 2003, the war in Iraq had begun, and we expanded our number to include women from other parts of the world. The war seemed predictably

to be sowing dragon's teeth with each victory. Beverly Harrison, a major voice in Christian ethics, set a somber tone, now a year and a half after 9/11. "What I love most about America," she said, "is the passion for democracy, and it is that we are losing. There is a kind of facism among us that we do not even recognize." Bold words, but words that struck a chord. Sheila Decter of the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action said, "It is not just the laws that have been changed, but a kind of complacency and apathy has set in. Let someone else decide. I am concerned not only about free speech, but more broadly, about civil discourse: We Americans have lost the ability to talk." Sharifa Alkhateeb observed, "There is a new demonization afoot, and the country is slipping back from basic civil liberties, from freedom of thought."

Terry Rockefeller of the September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows brought us back to September 11 and to the hope and vision that led us to keep on talking, building bridges of words, even as we recognized the profound discouragement many of us felt. "My sister was killed in the World Trade Center," said Terry, "and I experienced, for many weeks, a tremendous collective compassion surrounding me. When I stood in line to file a victim's report, people brought coffee and hugs. When I took a taxi to the station where victims families gathered, the taxi driver said, 'No charge.' Something happened in the world following that tragedy, and not only in America. There was a profound opening, reaching out toward America in sympathy and solidarity. And then we lost it. We need to get back to that ground of connection."

Peaceful Tomorrows is comprised of people convinced that the response to the death of their loved one should not be more violence. A few weeks earlier, they had traveled by bus from town to town all along the route between the Pentagon and Ground Zero. They had marched together through one town after another with the message "No More Victims," carrying signs "No War in Our Name". As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had put it during the Vietnam war, "The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows."

Dialogue is the process of connection. There is no dialogue among religions as such. Dialogue is always among people, like the women of six religious traditions who have been part of Women's Religious Networks. Dialogue is not premised on unanimity, but on difference. Dialogue does not aim at consensus, but understanding. Dialogue does not create agreements, but it creates relationships. As Sharifa put it, "We need to build up long term relationships –not just meetings, not just one-time encounters, but relationships of trust and knowing across religious lines."

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