

Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding

UN, 12/7/2004, second seminar in a series on Unlearning Intolerance organized by the UN Department of Public Information.

Report by **Sharmin Ahmad**
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Executive summary

Shashi Tharoor: Racism and hatred are learned and can be unlearned.

Koffi Annan: Islam is not opposed to the West, but contributed to the Western heritage and helped advance European civilization through commerce, cooperation, art and science. The hostility between the Muslims and the West is rooted in specific Western policies. That such policies are responsible for fueling resentment among Muslims must be acknowledged. Strategies beyond legal protections that would bolster unlearning Islamophobia include education, a media watch, leadership by public authorities, integration, and interfaith dialogue. Through “ijtihad” Muslims must make it clear through their words and actions that the few Muslims who deliberately kill civilians are acting against Islamic principles.

Syed Hossein Nasr: Islamophobia has a historical past when the church doctrine of anti-Christ was associated with Islam. Originally a policy or bias against the Arabs, Jews and Muslims in Spain, anti-Semitism is now limited only to policy or bias against the Jews. Islamic ambitions to regain identity and revive its civilization have caused a tremor among those who don't understand Islam. Islam did not occupy the Gulf of Mexico, but the West has occupied and exploited the Persian Gulf. The attempt to project Islam as the new enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union has proliferated Islamophobia, but so have the acts of some Muslims. The unjust and inhumane treatment of the Palestinians have given rise to conflict and extremism. Fanaticism feeds fanaticism. Most Muslims would love to study in the USA or Britain. In Iran, Jews and Christians sit in the parliament and Islamic Turkey Inquisition sheltered Jews following the Spanish. Islam opposes certain aspects of the modern condition such as the breakdown of the family rather than modernity itself. It stands firmly on the principle of Divine (there is no god but God) and blossoms through diversity of ideas and interpretations.

Ahmed Kamal Aboulmagd: The term “anti-Islamism” is preferable to “Islamophobia” in that it conveys to the public a clearer message of bigotry and racism. Our goal should exceed mere tolerance.”

Haney el-Banna: Many become UN-phobic, because of its veto system.

John L. Esposito: Rooted in European history, Islamophobia is manifested again by Reagan's terming Iran as the “New Evil Empire,” and is “fueled by the militant Zionist

Christian Rightists and the Neo-Conservatives.” Religious extremism, rather than Islam, is the enemy.

Asma Gul Hasan: Muslims “don’t reach out and support each other.” Mosques make Islam a religion of Do’s and Don’ts, and to “young Muslims the mosque is a source of discord,” often “racist and sexist.”

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf: An inner transformation of the heart must precede positive change in society.

Calvin O. Butts: He is “not afraid of any one who loves God.” Aware of Christian extremism, he credits Malcolm X for bringing true message of equality in Islam.

Azizah Al-Hibri: The Quran exhorts the faithful to be inclusive. The seed of democracy in Islam is planted through the system of “Bay`a.” The downfall of Islamic civilization was due to lack of ‘ijtihad’, colonization which appropriated ‘waqf’ and charitable academic institutions, and the politicization of mosques which encouraged the Head of a Muslim State in publicly choosing and promoting a formal religious school of thought.

R. Scott Appleby: Call for a “hard tolerance” that will promote honest self-criticism, understanding, and reject demonization of the Other. Islamophobia has permeated all fields including the academia. The key elements in all religions such as forgiveness, reconciliation and hospitality must be promoted through honest actions.

Noah Feldman: We may not agree, but have to learn to tolerate each other’s views. He encourages a more direct experience of Islam and Muslim culture.

Panchapakesa Jayaraman: The Qur’an does not distinguish among prophets. Comparative Religious Studies in school could educate students to respect world religions.

Mons.Gyorgy Fodor: Al-Ghazzali’s honesty and love for God would have a positive impact on a Christian theologian to become a better Christian. Make an alliance on commonalities. The assumption that all Christians are polytheists or all Muslims will go to Hell must be challenged. Muslims must take responsibilities for their actions.

Amaney Jamal: 2003 marked the highest civil rights abuses against Muslims. 49% of the U.S population support surveillance of Arabs and Muslims and 23% support an increase in police power.

Rabbi David Saperstein: Jewish and Muslim history are intertwined by history and as victims of hate crimes. Direct interactions with different faith groups and coalition building on common issues of concern can help build greater level of mutual trust. Meet with media editors and inform them on issues of concern to Muslims. “In order to have a friend, be a friend.”

Giandomenico Picco: He asked his kidnapper in Beirut, “Do you have children?” establishing a common ground in a critical situation.

The session was concluded by a Q&A period touching on discrimination, Iraq, Americans’ reluctance to acknowledge their racism, the need to condemn attacks on civilians and Muslim apologetics, media bias, the need for young Muslims to enter journalism, strife among Muslims, and “terrorist” as a code word for dark-skinned person.]

Full Report

Human Rights activists have yet another word, “Islamophobia,” to include in their list of agendas for misinformed people to unlearn, undo, and unravel. Islamophobia, a new kid on the block, has not yet become an idiom like its brother “anti-Semitism” in the West. Since the 9/11, the fast paced life of U.S.A has experienced the speedy rise of Islamophobia at an alarming rate, and hence a seminar titled Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding was held at the United Nations, on December 7, 2004. The seminar was the second in a series on Unlearning Intolerance organized by the Department of Public Information at the UN.

Undersecretary-General for Communications and Public Information Shashi Tharoor said in his welcoming speech that no one is born with racism or hatred. They are learned and so they can be unlearned as well. In his opening statement, Secretary-General Kofi Annan stressed the “need to unlearn the stereotypes that have become so entrenched in so many minds and so much of the media.” Islam, contrary to the stereotype, is not opposed to the West, but contributed to the Western heritage and helped advance European civilization through commerce, cooperation, art and science, he stressed. The hostility between the Muslims and the West is rooted in specific policies adopted by the West, which includes colonization and domination of the Muslim world. That such policies are responsible for fueling resentment among Muslims must be acknowledged to combat Islamophobia with an understanding that the Muslims have reacted against these specific policies and not the West in general. Secretary-General Annan recommended a few strategies beyond legal protections that would bolster in unlearning Islamophobia. Among these are the following:

1. **Education** to empower people to separate facts from lies and myths.
2. **Media Watch** to prevent the spread of hatred.
3. **Leadership** of public authorities to condemn Islamophobia and ensure the enforcement of non-discrimination.
4. **Integration** to enable immigrants and hosts to “understand each other’s expectations and responsibilities,” and to work together “against common threat such as extremism.”
5. **Interfaith dialogue** and activities based on practical direction which will draw “examples of those communities in which different people come together regularly in professional associations.... Or in other social settings.” These informal interactions are “useful in demystifying the ‘Other.’”

Kofi Annan pointed out the importance of “ijtihad” or interpretation which must ensue from the Islamic tradition itself in combating Islamophobia and that Muslims must make it clear through their words and actions that the few Muslims who deliberately kill civilians are acting against Islamic principles. He said, emphatically, that Islamophobia is as much a personal issue for Muslims as it is for others who respect universal values of peace, harmony and co-existence. He concluded with a cautionary note to the world community “not underestimate the resentment felt by members of one of the world’s great religions, cultures and civilizations,” and stressed the need to rebuild trust among diverse people for “peace, security and development” in the one world in which we live in.

The keynote speaker and the university professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Syeed Hossein Nasr wore light grey jacket, black pants, maroon scarf loosely hung over his shoulders, while his spectacles, wide forehead, and slightly long grey hair complemented his age and wisdom, appearing in a style befitting a celebrated scholar. In his eloquent speech and thoughtful analysis, he pointed out that Islamophobia is a new and as well as an old phenomenon enmeshed in the historical past when the church doctrine of anti-Christ was associated with Islam. Anti-Semitism originally meant a policy or bias against the Arabs, Jews and Muslims in Spain, but is now limited only to policy or bias against the Jews. Aside from church propaganda against Islam which has given rise to anti-Islamic feelings, Islam is a religion which wants to “regain its identity” and it wants to “revive its civilization”, which has caused a tremor among those who don’t understand Islam.

Contrary to propaganda, “Islam did not occupy the Gulf of Mexico” but the West has certainly occupied and exploited the Persian Gulf to advance its economic gain, Prof. Nasr noted. He also attributed the attempt to project Islam as the new enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union to Islamophobia. Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington have proliferated the phobia with their ideas. Islamophobia also exists because of the acts of some Muslims “who forgot the elements like beauty and education which made Islam a civilization.” Muslims, he said “are also to be blamed for not understanding and using the media to dispel anti-Islamic propaganda. The issue of Palestine is like a wound in the heart” and the unjust and inhumane treatment of the Palestinians has given rise to conflict and extremism. The fanaticism of the West feeds fanaticism of the East and vice versa. Islam is blamed for the extreme acts of some Muslims, whereas Buddhism or Shintoism was not associated with the actions of those Japanese who attacked Pearl Harbor. The distorted perception about Islam has given rise to many rumors and Dr. Nasr cited a few:

Rumor: Islam hates the West.

Answer: False. Most Muslims would love to study in the U.S.A or Britain.

Rumor: Islam hates Jews and Christians.

Answer: False. In Iran Jews and Christians sit in the parliament. The Islamic Turkey sheltered Jews following the Spanish Inquisition.

Rumor: Islam is against modernity.

Answer: False. Islam is only as anti-modern as T.S Elliot. If modernism means break down of environment and family, then of course Islam is opposed to such false notion of modernism.

Islam stands firmly on the principle of Unity which is La ilaha illallah (there is no god but God) and blossoms through diversity among people, ideas and interpretations. He quoted prophet Muhammad (PBUH) saying that diversity is a blessing from God.

The panel discussions that followed the keynote presentation were divided into three segments. They were 1 Perspectives on Islamophobia Today; 2 Education for Tolerance and Understanding; 3 Confronting Islamophobia.

Ahmed Kamal Aboulmagd, professor of Public Law at Cairo University was the first panelist to address the session. He preferred the term anti-Islamism to Islamophobia. Anti-Islamism, like anti-Semitism conveys to public a clearer message of bigotry and racism. The use of the word tolerance “represents a minimalist” approach, while “our goal is much more than tolerance,” he noted.

Haney el-Banna, president of Islamic relief, at London Seminary and the recipient of the Ibn Khaldun award, delivered his message in poetic pathos mixed with humor. Many, he said, have become UN-phobic, because of its veto system by which only a few secure their interest against fairness.

John L. Esposito, university professor and founding director, Georgetown University Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding and author of Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World was introduced as Dr. Nasr’s old friend. Esposito joked, “I’m not Nasr’s old friend. The word ‘old’ makes me phobic. Words have power.” He traced the root of Islamophobia in European history, carried over to the present time and manifested itself through Reagan’s rhetoric when, following the Iranian revolution, he labeled Iran as the “New Evil Empire”. Islamophobia is also “fueled by the militant Zionist Christian Rightists and the Neo-Conservatives,” he noted. “Islam is not the enemy; religious extremism is,” he concluded.

Asma Gul Hasan, author of Why I Am a Muslim and American Muslims: The New Generation criticized Muslims for their negative words and actions. There are “Muslims who don’t see beauty and spirituality in Islam.” Muslims, she observed, “don’t reach out and support each other” and “that’s why books written by Muslims “are not selling well.” Some Muslim groups will not invite her because she does not wear a headscarf. Mosques make Islam a religion of Do’s and Don’ts. To young Muslims the mosque is a source of discord.” Many mosques, she lamented, “are racist and sexist.” She urged Muslims to take control of their religion. Under-Secretary-General Shashi Tharoor, moderator for the session, in a reference to his earlier reminder to Ms.Hasan, joked, “Sorry the UN has asked a Muslim woman to ‘wrap up.’” The audience broke in to a hearty laughter.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, president of American Sufi Muslim Association, and the author of *What's Right with Islam* emphasized an inner transformation of the heart before one can see positive change in society.

Calvin O. Butts, president of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in the city of New York delivered a heartfelt speech in the second panel. He greeted the audience “in the name of Allah and testify that prophet Muhammad is His messenger.” He said that he could utter the Muslim article of faith because he knows who he is and his Christian identity, adding, “I am not afraid of any one who loves God. Muslims and Christians are united in God.” Referring to his African heritage, he said “I am very aware of Christian extremism,” and credited El-Hajj Malik (Malcolm X) for bringing true message of equality in Islam. He urged the people of faith to confront materialism and the “pornographic view of the world”. Memory is short-lived, he said, when people forget how the colonists subjugated the Africans by using religion, or that the Oklahoma City bombing, carried out by the Christian Rightists, was not the act of Muslims. He concluded with *as salamualaikum*.

Azizah Al-Hibri, professor of Law at T.C Williams School of Law at University of Richmond and president of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, was the first among the panelists to begin with *As salamualaikum*. A few began with *Bis millahir Rahmanir Rahim*. She, like her predecessor panelist, Dr. Aboulmagd, felt that the “lukewarm term tolerance is not enough.” The Quran exhorts the faithful to be inclusive. She quoted a few verses from the Quran as examples. According the Qur’an, “God has conferred dignity upon the children of Adam,” not only Muslims, she reminded. The seed of democracy in Islam is planted through the system of “*Bay`a*” which allows Muslims to choose leaders.

The downfall of Islamic civilization was due to lack of ‘*ijtihad*’, colonization which appropriated ‘*waqf*’ and charitable academic institutions, and the politicization of mosques which encouraged the Head of a Muslim State in publicly choosing and promoting a formal religious school of thought. Re-education and pragmatic policy making are key components in restoring trust, and peace across the religious and cultural borders, she noted.

R. Scott Appleby, Director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute at University of Notre Dame called for a ‘hard tolerance’ which will promote honest self criticism, understanding, and reject demonization of the other. Islamophobia has permeated all fields including the academia. “Teaching students to sympathize with the enemy” was the accusation when the Peace Studies Department at a university in Chicago wanted to teach its students about Islam. In order to prevent such phobia, the key elements in all religions such as forgiveness, reconciliation and hospitality must be promoted through honest actions.

Noah Feldman, Associate Professor of Law at New York University with a Masters degree in Islamic Studies from Harvard University, began his lecture with the Islamic greeting *As salamu alaikum* in proper Arabic accent. He said that tolerance is positive. We may not agree, but have to learn to tolerate each other’s views. He teaches subjects

connected to Islam to Muslim and non-Muslim students and encourages a more direct experience of Islam and Muslim culture.

Panchapakesa Jayaraman, Executive Director of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, (Institute of Indian Culture) USA, which is based on Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence referred to the Qur'an, which does not distinguish between prophets. He quoted from a Hindu philosophy similar to the Qur'anic precept that speaks about unity of humankind through its diversity. "The rain water," he quoted, "comes from the same source and then take different courses." Islam, he said, in its origin is a beautiful religion. The great sages and poets like Rabia Basri or Rumi represented Islam in a noble manner different from the Islam preached by the extremists. He suggested comparative Religious Studies in school to educate students to respect world religions.

In the third panel discussions Mons. Gyorgy Fodor, Rector of Peter Pazmany Catholic University at Budapest stressed the exchange of religious studies at religious institutions. In Hungary, scholars have translated Ghazzali, Ibn Rushd, Al Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Tufayl that have had a positive impact on students and scholars in understanding Islam. Al-Ghazzali's honesty and love for God would have a positive impact on a Christian theologian to become a better Christian. The Muslims and Catholics should make an alliance on commonalities, such as their support for marriage between a man and a woman. He said the assumption that all Christians are polytheists or all Muslims will go to hell must be challenged. Muslims, he said, must take responsibilities for their actions. Pope John Paul apologized to Muslims for atrocities done by Catholics, yet no such apologies have come from the Muslims.

Amaney Jamal, assistant professor of Politics at Princeton University, gave a long list of human rights abuses against the Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11. 2003 marked the highest civil rights abuses against Muslims, according to the survey conducted by CAIR. The FBI at a university in Texas demanded to see the roster of students attending a conference on Islamic Law. 49% of the U.S population support surveillance of Arabs and Muslims and 23% support an increase in police power. She asked, "When did it become a norm of radicals to dominate the media and represent the mainstream?"

The Representative from Senegal gave a dreary scenario of the world in which half of the world's population lives on less than a dollar a day. Referring to Crane Brinton, who put his observation in *The Anatomy of Revolution*, he said that revolution happens not because the poor people rise but because elites lose hope and don't act. He acknowledged people's grievances against the US, whose image is damaged by the war in Iraq, in not doing enough to resolve the Palestinian conflict, and in becoming a partner of the oppressive Muslim rulers and a select few.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, in his extemporaneous speech gave his reason for attending the seminar, which is to affirm that Jewish and Muslim history are intertwined. He cited the Jews living under the Muslim rule. Referring to the recent hate crimes against Muslims, he said, that there have been three times more hate crimes against Jews than Muslims. This experience also binds the

Jews and Muslims together. According to the Jewish scripture every one is created in the image of God and every one is equal as brothers and sisters. Islamophobia can be confronted by teaching about Islam in academic settings. Direct interactions with different faith groups and coalition building on common issues of concern can help build greater level of mutual trust. He urged those present to look for allies and not to work alone. Media is another area where Muslims can work to change the negative image of Islam by meeting with the editors and informing them on issues of concern to Muslims. Finally, he said, "In order to have a friend, be a friend."

Giandomenico Picco, CEO, GDP Associates, special advisor and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the UN Dialogue among Civilizations gave a telling personal example of how to build a common identity. He was blindfolded by the kidnapper in Beirut. When the blindfold was removed, he could see a masked man, whom he asked, "Do you have children?" At that point the kidnapper saw in him not an enemy but a father like he was, thus a common ground was established in a critical situation.

During the Question and Answer period Aisha Adawiyah, an African-American sister asked the reason for no representation on the panel from the African-American Muslim Community. Dr. Azizah Hibri acknowledged her grievance and deemed it to be a racial discrimination.

A Muslim representative from the audience asked Dr. Noah Feldman as to why he chose Islamic Studies for his M.A degree at Harvard and what was his experience in writing the preamble for the New Iraqi constitution? Dr. Feldman answered that not only did he earn an M.A degree in Islamic Studies, he also did his doctorate in Islamic Studies at Oxford University for the reason of close historic relationship between the Jews and Muslims, and he wanted to apply his degrees in the context of bridge building among the Jews and Muslims. He made a correction to the second segment of the question. He said that he did not write the preamble but worked as an advisor in writing the Iraqi constitution. The Iraqis' were not bound to accept his advice. They could take it or leave it. He believes that the Iraqis' should take charge of their own affairs.

Reverend Calvin O. Butts commented that most Americans will not acknowledge their own racism. The Muslims, like the African-Americans have to be aggressive in a non-violent way in their demands for equal and fair representations and build a coalition. Rabbi David Saperstein called upon Muslims to condemn the acts of Muslim terrorists who kill Israeli civilians and attack their synagogues and schools to gain trust. Muslims must resist their oppressive governments.

Dr. Jamal Amaney received many questions from the audience, among which was how the Muslims can address their plight effectively when the U.S government or the attorney general will not address Muslim grievances. Dr. Amaney referred to Rabbi Saperstein suggested coalition building. She also advised Muslims to do self-monitoring. "Not all clerics are extremists or selling products" but the reality is that the corrupt and authoritarian rulers in the Arab world have made links with some Islamic organizations that refrain from criticizing these governments and support their positions.

The CAIR representative of the New York chapter asked why none of the activist organization such as CAIR, ISNA, ICNA or ADC were invited to present on the panel. The support of these organizations is needed to formulate a plan of action. Shashi Tharoor answered that his points were well taken and the session was indeed meant to be a dialogue so that in future peoples' concern could be addressed and plans formulated to resolve their plight.

Moushumi Khan, an attorney of Bangladeshi origin, called on the Muslims who have contributed greatly to this society to stop being apologetic. Several panelists recommended targeting the youth population and training them in conflict resolutions and peace buildings. Shashi Tharoor referred to the United Nations Educational Resources which is involved in educating the youth in peace building and co-existence. www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/3plusu, www.unu.edu, www.un.org/chronicle are among the selected UN cyber sites to receive more information on youth education. It was noted among the panelists and the audience that the media is a major player in promoting Islamophobia and the question was how to make the media act fairly.

Dr. John Esposito said that Fox television is adept at rejecting people who would not side with their positions. They once dropped off an interviewee after the channel learned his position on the issue he was going to discuss on T.V. This scenario is common among the media which “wants you to say what they want, not fact or [some other] position.”

Asma Gul Hasan who introduced herself as a lawyer and her sister as a physician, encouraged Muslims to go into journalism, art and film-making and be pro-active in sending responses to T.V. shows to create a positive impact.

Dr. Noah Feldman, referring to Asma Gul Hasan, said that she and the young generation like her can offer a lot more through fiction and nonfiction stories. He called upon the Muslims to be honest in their identities as Muslims and not to shy away from defending their policies. “I would not want the media to ask me, a Jewish American, to speak on Islam, but a Muslim.”

Dr. Azizah Hibri responded that the media more likely will ask Feldman or Esposito because they are like them (meaning their Judeo-Christian European Heritage). If on rare occasion Muslim scholars are called and they speak out their minds then “we'll not be called next time, because we're not like them”.

Syed Mohsin Naqvi from Jamaica, New York, asked Dr. Nasr and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf how to resolve internal hatred. Dr. Nasr responded that every religion has its internal conflict, and Islam is no exception. He advised not to wait to overcome the internal strife before focusing on Islamophobia. Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf stressed educating Muslim Youth about their heritage and making sociology and the understanding of jurisprudence according to current time as well as learning from other groups about how they minimized strife.

A question was asked as to why there is Islamophobia when World Religions is taught in the U.S high schools? Dr. Scott Appleby answered that textbooks alone will not dispel Islamophobia; direct interaction will. Reverend Butts in answering a similar question said that Islamophobia exists because most Muslims are people of color. "They cannot call them Nigger, but terrorists." Dr. al-Hibri pointed out that the U.S constitution protects people's faith but not terrorists, "so it's eas[ier] to call [one a] terrorist than Muslim" Dr. Feldman disagreed saying that not all Americans view Muslims as terrorists. America is a great nation, which espouses diversity.

Imam Naqvi from Maryland asked the Under-Secretary-General about the UN's role to carry out the message of this session to public. Shashi Tharoor referred to various approaches the UN has taken to publicize the event and make such events more successful in the future. He referred to the Islam Exhibit in conjunction with the event, procuring written survey of the audience and coverage of the session in the UN cyber space. He also urged to e-mail comments and suggestions to Unchronicle@un.org

Shashi Tharoor, in a humorous style typical of him, said, "We are like the Egyptian mummies pressed for time." In his concluding remarks he reminded the West of the Muslims' contribution to the world heritage of learning. It was the Arabs and Muslims who collected and translated the Latin and Greek philosophers, later translated into English. "Can we separate religion from identity?" he asked. "One can be all at once, an Arab, a Muslim, a Jordanian, and a doctor, all (identities) can live in harmony." In order to combat Islamophobia one needs to go beyond it and attack ignorance to dispel fear and strive to understand one another as brothers and sisters in faith.

Shashi Tharoor who hails from South India, concluded quoting a two thousand year old Purana (one of the sacred books of Hindu religion) story in which a sage asked his disciples when night ends and dawn begins? One from the South said that when the sun touches the tip of palm leaves. The sage answered "No". The other disciple who lived in the North of India said that when the first ray of the sunlight touches the peak of the Himalayas. The sage said, "No. When two travelers walking from different directions meet and embrace each other, and standing under the same sky, gaze upon the stars, then night ends and dawn begins."

"Hope you will have a new dawn in the century that began."