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## **Women's Interfaith Initiatives in the United States Post 9/11**

### ***Introduction***

In the five years since 9/11, women's interfaith initiatives have gained ground in many parts of the United States, providing a new model for inter-religious engagement. These initiatives, although each unique to its own context, have several things in common: they are inspired by a deep-seated commitment to community-building in the aftermath of a crisis; they are often formed at the behest of a personal invitation from one individual to another individual or group; they tend toward common action in the form of group or social projects; and they honor the centrality of storytelling and relationship building for their own sake.

In this post 9/11 era, women's interfaith initiatives offer an exciting alternative to the standard model for interfaith engagement, which often presumes male (clergy) leadership. For one thing, academic and professional authorities on interfaith relations are replaced with real-life experts: women who live and breathe the challenges of religious coexistence in times of crisis. Secondly, formal dialogue is replaced with storytelling. Personal testimonies, reflections, and engagement in difficult dialogues are not limited to theological arenas of overlap and divergence, but instead focus on the day to day experiences where conflicts of identity, more often than ideology, are commonplace.

What follows is a sketch of the multi-religious women's networks of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, as well as a snapshot of women's initiatives that have developed in various parts of the United States over the past five years. The intention is to explore this new model of women's interfaith initiatives, with the idea that it is complementary to traditional models, and as such will be critical to multi-religious societies in the years to come. In the spirit of honoring these efforts, let me begin with a story.

***Beginning to Tell the Story: The Pluralism Project Women's Networks***

In the days after 9/11, a Christian radio station in Ohio put out a call to the community to come and form a human ring of solidarity around the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo. The dome of the mosque had been damaged by rifle fire, as one of many acts of backlash against Muslims in the US. Many of us who keep our fingers on the pulse of religious issues expected this kind of backlash. What we didn't anticipate, however, was the outpouring of acts of solidarity that were used to overpower acts of hatred. In Toledo, the organizers expected three hundred - maybe five hundred at the most - but over 1,000 people turned out for the event.

Cherrefe Kadri, the first woman president of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, told this story to a group of women around a table at the Harvard Club in New York City. It was November 2, and smoke still billowed from ground zero some blocks away. The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, a research organization dedicated to the study and documentation of the changing religious landscape in the United States had convened its Women's Networks in Multi-Religious America at short notice. The one-

day consultation was an attempt to learn about the backlash that Americans of minority religious traditions, primarily Muslims and Sikhs, were experiencing in cities throughout the United States, with a focus on the experiences of women within those communities.<sup>1</sup>

In the days after 9/11, a number of interfaith initiatives were immediately brought to task. Many of them were dominated by male clergy, and women's voices, and in particular the voices of women from minority religious communities, were difficult to hear. In contrast, the Pluralism Project's consultation included representatives from Women of Reform Judaism, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, United Methodist Women, the North American Council for Muslim Women, the Muslim Women's League, Manavi, the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force (now the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund), and others.

What was different about the Pluralism Project's consultation was precisely that it sought to give voice to the critical perspectives of Muslim, Sikh, and other South Asian American women. Participants from these communities articulated their sense of feeling "under siege." Many of the women spoke to the hate crimes that had marred their communities, the misdirected acts of vengeance that seemed to have become socially acceptable in a climate of xenophobia and a culture of war. Stories of detentions, hate crimes, and discriminations - perpetrated by the US government and fellow US citizens - set off new alarms for other participants, namely those from the mainstream Christian denominations. Sikh men and women had been attacked for wearing their turbans;

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<sup>1</sup> More information about this consultation is available on our website, [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org), and in Diana Eck's essay, "Dialogue and the Echo Boom of Terror" in the book *After Terror*.

South Asians were attacked for the color of their skin; Muslim women were harassed for covering their heads; and guilt by association, or at least perceived association, was the order of the days that followed the terrorist attacks.

Like many of the women's interfaith initiatives that have been formed since 9/11, stories were central to the women's networks meeting that day. The stories that were told of personal anxieties, fears, and hopes had been lost to the sensational media coverage of the unfolding "war on terror." As far as the women were concerned, however, the stories they shared with each other were a life raft in a sea of suspicions, assumptions, and ignorance. Of course their stories did not solve the complex religio-political problems of the day, but they did open up doors to unexpected connections and understandings.

The tensions present in the room begged the question: Would the events of September 11 pose an irreversible setback to dialogue and common action? Each woman at the meeting carried her own set of tensions and constraints, as an individual, and as a representative of an organization. In fact, the representative of one of the Jewish women's organizations had been constrained by her board from attending because of voiced concerns about a representative of one of the Muslim women's organizations. Thus the ability to sit at the same table was not taken for granted; nor was the women's courage to tell their stories in a context with its own fears and suspicions.

Yet despite those tensions, the women's commitment to be at the table was palpable. Times of crisis can either increase existing divisions, or make openings for new connections. Face-to-face, the participants sought to share with each other what they had experienced, so that appropriate advocacy and action could take place. Again, the need for relationship building, both formal and informal, was stressed in light of the incredible challenges at hand. One of the participants reflected,

As an American and as a Muslim, I was horrified at what happened on September 11, this tragedy, because I felt like it was pieces of me coming off of...both buildings. It was pieces of all the good work people have done for years and years falling off the building and crumbling...I think that what we need to do is we need to build up long-term relationships. Not interloper kind of relationships, not one-time relationships, but relationships of trust, of caring, and of knowing across religious lines, across socioeconomic lines, and across viewpoint lines, whether within our faiths, or between faiths. If we can do that -- and I mean the type where, don't say, "I'll meet you at the meeting." Invite me to dinner. I'll invite you to my house, too. We need to get to know each other, way beyond the surface.

A few months later, in April 2002, the women's networks was convened again at Harvard University. In the months that followed, participants developed a public statement in time for the one year anniversary of 9/11 called, "A Call for Healing Not Hatred, Reconciliation Not Revenge." It speaks to the religious significance of remembrance, and the necessity for acts of healing and reconciliation. The opening paragraph reads:

We are women from a variety of faith traditions who work together for deeper understanding and cooperation among religious justice-seekers. We call on the people of the United States of America to use words and actions that will lead to healing and reconciliation on the first anniversary of the violent attack on the World Trade Center and related tragedies. We call for a rededication to the values upon which this nation has been founded: equality, political and religious freedom, due process under law, compassion for persons seeking asylum and refuge, and generosity toward persons less fortunate in material blessings.

How true these calls still ring today.

We have had two other formal consultations, including an event at the National Press Club in Washington DC in 2004 to discuss issues of common concern for women of faith leading up to the presidential election. Today, members of our women's networks continue to build relationships with one another, and to take measures of common action and advocacy. Local and regional groupings have also met to address issues of concern and to share resources and strategies.

As an extension of our women's networks consultations, we released the film "Acting on Faith: Women's New Religious Activism in America" in April of 2005. This documentary chronicles the lives of three of our women's networks members – a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Muslim – for whom faith, activism, and identity are deeply intertwined. Filmed in 2003, their stories capture some of the challenges of women living in a post-9/11 era. In combination with our online study guide, this resource has been used by educators, corporate diversity trainers, and local congregations to widen the public conversation. Looking ahead, our focus will remain on local, grassroots expressions of women's networks. Thus the research to which I will now turn forms the basis of our ongoing work in this area.

### ***Acting on Our Stories: Toward a Paradigm of Shared Action and Activism***

The Pluralism Project has long been documenting the interfaith movement in the United States. Over the past five years, we have also been tracking those initiatives that were created or bolstered in response to 9/11. Many of these initiatives were formed by women, or developed women's components in order to serve particular needs. These

women's interfaith initiatives range from small to large, dialogue groups to action groups, social groups to social transformation groups, and day long conferences to lifelong relationships. The personal invitations which formed the basis for many of these initiatives were extended because an individual or group was moved by current events - September 11, the earthquake in Pakistan, the London bombings, or the recent unrest in Israel and Lebanon - to take personal action toward engagement with the religious "other." I will turn now to an exploration of these initiatives.

### *Interfaith Initiatives with a Women's Component*

Several women's interfaith initiatives have grown out of broader, co-ed initiatives. In some cases, there was a deliberate attempt to address the particular concerns of women. In other cases, the women felt a compelling bond with one another, and formed a subgroup to explore this bond.

#### *JAM Women's Group*<sup>2</sup>

In Southern Florida, for example, JAM & ALL, an interfaith group founded by a Jew and a Muslim, was formed in response to September 11. "JAM and ALL is a non-profit organization of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and all peoples dedicated to fostering understanding, social harmony, and peace through dialogue, multicultural interaction and educational projects."<sup>3</sup> As this organization was getting off the ground, the Temple's women's spirituality group invited some Muslim women to one of its meetings.

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<sup>2</sup> JAM and ALL: JAM Women's Group Profile. Online at: <http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=74396> (Accessed 24 August 2006).

<sup>3</sup> JAM & All Website. Mission Statement. Online at <http://jamandall.org/aboutus.asp> (Accessed 23 August 2006).

Subsequently a women's offshoot group was formed in early 2002, with a core group of 30 women ranging in age from 18 to 80 who attend regularly.

JAM Women's Group seeks to "delve deeply into each others' cultures and beliefs for a greater understanding, to create strong friendships and to treat all the world's children with compassion."<sup>4</sup> The group has no formal staff structure, unlike the umbrella organization, but instead relies on volunteerism and the hospitality of its members who open their homes for meetings. The meetings are centered on storytelling and sharing of personal experiences in order to overcome stereotypes and to build strong, resilient relationships. Naheed Khan, JAM member and owner of a local restaurant where the Women's Group often meets remarked, "The end products of our meetings are beautiful relationships. We are all about unity and uniting for peace."<sup>5</sup>

#### *Spiritual and Religious Alliance for Hope<sup>6</sup>*

On the other side of the country in Orange County, California, the Human Relations Commission hosted an interfaith dialogue series among Jews, Christians, and Muslims shortly after 9/11. As the experience was very productive, members decided that they wanted to continue their work with a trip to Mexico to build a house for a low-income family. Sande Hart, one of the Jewish participants, noticed a particular bond among the

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<sup>4</sup> JAM & All Website. Online at [http://jamandall.org/activities\\_post.asp?id=6](http://jamandall.org/activities_post.asp?id=6). (Accessed 20 July 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Reeves, Linda. "Bridging the Gap: Women of all faiths erase mistrust through friendship and understanding. South Florida Sun- Sentinel. (Boca Raton Edition) 27 June 2003. Online at <http://jamforall.org/archives/event072704.asp>. (Accessed 19 July 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Spiritual and Religious Alliance for Hope Profile. Online at: <http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=74406> (Accessed 23 August 2006).

women. She invited them to her home, and the Spiritual and Religious Alliance for Hope (SARAH) was formed.<sup>7</sup>

Today 10-20 women gather at the monthly meetings. Discussion topics include faith, empowerment, and peace. As with JAM Women's Group, participants are encouraged to share their stories, and they have also discussed various lifecycle events and rituals particular to their traditions. Other activities have included site visits to local religious centers, celebration of religious holidays, creation of "peace tapestries," and leadership development for service work in the community.

In recent months, unrest in the Middle East has strained the efforts of SARAH. In the past, the group had prided itself on the relationship between a Jewish woman and a Lebanese woman who worked hard to build common ground. However, in a recent article in *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Hart lamented that the Jewish and Muslim members of the group had both decided not to interact for the time being, saying they needed "space."<sup>8</sup>

#### *Woman to Woman Project of the Interfaith Association of Snohomish County*

A bit further north in Washington State, Therese Quinn and a few acquaintances decided that they wanted to get to know the Iraqis in their community as the war in Iraq raged in the aftermath of 9/11. Under the auspices of the Interfaith Association of Snohomish County, they put up fliers around town. Soon there were 40 Jewish,

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<sup>7</sup> SARAH also refers to the wife of Abraham, given that the project was initially begun as an interfaith venture among the "Abrahamic" traditions.

<sup>8</sup> Ballon.

Christian, and Muslim women gathered at the local YMCA for the first of the group's weekly meetings. Through various activities, such as baking baklava and storytelling, the women gathered get to know one another.

The initial impulse to "get to know their neighbors" has proved fruitful in challenging stereotypes. The formation of friendships has helped many of the women to see the religious "other" as a person like herself. Participant Phyllis Rainey remarked in a *Seattle Times* article that, "You can't judge one person by the foolish way their government is acting. It's things like this, meeting people and seeing them as individuals, that makes us all realize we're more alike than we are different."<sup>9</sup>

### *Women's Interfaith Initiatives*

Other women's interfaith initiatives have simply been formed by and for women. Some have evolved from historically ecumenical women's groups into interfaith groups. New technologies are also providing a venue for dialogue and common action.

### *Women Transcending Boundaries*<sup>10</sup>

Women Transcending Boundaries (WTB) is a women's interfaith group in Syracuse, New York. After an adult forum at her church following September 11, co-founder Betsy Wiggins struggled with the desire to reach out to the Muslim women in her community. Through various connections, she was introduced to Danya Wellmon. The two met for

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<sup>9</sup> Moriarty.

<sup>10</sup> Women Transcending Boundaries Research Report. Online at: <http://pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=74184> (Accessed 23 August 2006).

coffee, and after hours of conversation about their beliefs and experiences, they decided to extend the invitation to other women they thought would be interested. Within a month of 9/11, the first meeting of the group took place in Wiggins' home. Twenty-two women attended, including eleven Muslim women, and eleven others from the Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian faiths.

The group continues to meet monthly on Sunday afternoons in a local private school, with between 40 and 60 participants at each meeting. The organization's three core commitments are: storytelling, service, and socializing. Storytelling has played a prominent role since the early days of the organization when women gathered to share their experiences of 9/11. Later on, a "Life Cycle" series helped women to share the various rites of passage that shape their faith lives. Service projects have ranged from local to international, such as assisting with a literacy project, and raising funds for a girls' school in rural Pakistan. Finally, with an intention to foster lifelong relationships, WTB places a premium on informal socializing. These three commitments are managed by a large leadership council, an advisory board, and six committees.

### *Sacred Circles Conferences at the Washington National Cathedral<sup>11</sup>*

Other women's organizations have expanded their initial ecumenical vision to one that is now interfaith. Since 1996, the Washington National Cathedral in DC has hosted a biannual conference called Sacred Circles. Attended by over 1,000 women, these events were historically ecumenical, drawing women from various Christian

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<sup>11</sup> Sacred Circles Conferences at the Washington National Cathedral Profile. Online at: <http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=74416> (Accessed 23 August 2006).

denominations and diverse spiritual practices. After 9/11, Grace Ogden, Sacred Circles founder, felt the need to explicitly expand the conference into an interfaith initiative.

Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist women were invited to join the planning committee, and the November 2002 meeting was called "Four Faces of Faith."

Silent meditation, labyrinth walking, workshops on numerous topics, keynote speakers, dancing, and singing are all part of the conference. The thematic focus for 2007 will be an exploration of love and fear in women's lives. The mission of the conference says, "In these times, we must choose love over fear. Deep, wise love is the spiritual ground from which we draw strength, vision and courage."<sup>12</sup>

### *Women of Spirit Conference*

Another similar type of conference called Women of Spirit has occurred for the last 21 years in Omaha, Nebraska. Since 9/11, participation has evolved from predominately Christian to multi-faith. This year, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim storytellers will share their faith journeys. Following the first interfaith conference of Women of Spirit, monthly breakfasts were organized to keep the dialogue going. Prayers from the various faith traditions are offered, and different topics are chosen for discussion.

### *Gather the Women*

As e-mail and other communications technologies have become more accessible, relationship building across national and international boundaries has become easier

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<sup>12</sup> Sacred Circles Website. Online at: <http://www.cathedral.org/cathedral/sacredcircles2007/index.shtml> (Accessed 24 August 2006).

and more affordable. As Kathlyn Schaaf watched violent images on her television in California on 9/11 and the days that followed, she felt a clear impetus to do something to connect women. With the help of eleven others, she created Gather the Women, an interactive website and communications hub that is utilized by thousands of women all over the world. The purpose of the website is to provide a space for women to chronicle local events that support world peace. The women who contribute come from a variety of religious traditions, and the site seems to be indicative of a new form of "political activism that's guided and sustained by spirituality."<sup>13</sup>

### *Picking up the Phone and Taking Simple Risks*

The events of 9/11 continue to affect the way in which interfaith initiatives unfold in the United States, but newer global events continue to threaten progress. Perhaps a hopeful example to conclude with is an initiative that is still in its early, informal stages. In July, Ellen Bloomfield, a resident off Blue Ash, Ohio, read a news account of local Muslims' concerns regarding violence in the Middle East. She picked up the phone and called Zenab Schwen, one of the women quoted in the article. She invited her to her home, as Ellen put it, to "sort through issues that threatened to divide the region, the world, and Jewish and Muslim women like themselves."<sup>14</sup>

Schwen immediately accepted the invitation, and the two have continued to meet informally, with no set expectations. Schwen said, "The success of our meeting was that it was just that somebody reached out and wasn't afraid to do it, and somebody

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<sup>13</sup> Peay.

<sup>14</sup> The Enquirer.

accepted willingly. It was the personal connection."<sup>15</sup> It is this connection that they hope to eventually extend to others.

## **Conclusion**

Storytelling and relationship building through a wide variety of activities are the bedrock for many of these women's interfaith initiatives - with the understanding that new insights into who we are, and who we are to each other, are the foundation for building stronger, more connected communities. Yet precisely because of this fact, women's interfaith efforts are rarely covered in the mainstream media, or endorsed by interfaith professionals.

After 9/11, women have made critical innovations in interfaith action: with a focus on one-to-one relationships, experiential dialogue, and an embrace of social activities as a necessary part of their agenda, this new model is complementary to more traditional interfaith initiatives, and is constructive in finding a new way forward when dialogue is stalled by escalating world events. In many ways, laughing and singing, playing and praying together as humans are precisely the activities that make it possible to return to a common table in times of crisis.

At the consultation of our women's networks in 2003, Dr. Diana L. Eck, director of the Pluralism Project, concluded the proceedings with these words:

My fear is that we might, 34 years down the road, look back on a time in America when Christians and Jews and Muslims and Sikhs lived pretty much side by side, and we were fine...we didn't have suicide bombings in our own neighborhoods. And we were

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<sup>15</sup> The Enquirer.

maybe a little less secure than we used to be, but at least we sat around the table and talked to each other. And my fear, actually, is that things could come apart here, too. We have...the opportunity to create a multi-religious society in which we ourselves will not let the experience of the rest of the world so discourage us that we do not try to create this set of bridges and networks, and link ourselves to one another's hopes and futures.

These women's initiatives are a model for linking ourselves in this way. Since 9/11, women in cities across the United States have taught us a powerful lesson about the possibilities for a hopeful future. Through their example, we can see that our courage to connect with one another must overwhelm our fears, in very personal and political terms. Then, and only then, does our shared story begin to emerge.

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