

Interfaith efforts move from mere tolerance to deeper partnerships

A coalition of Muslim students highlighting the Jewish roots in Moroccan culture, and an evangelical pastor and imam creating a nationwide grassroots network are among those partnering against extremism.

by [Harry Bruinius](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Standing in front of a mostly Jewish audience in New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage, Laziza Dalil, who leads a Moroccan Muslim student group, posed the question she often hears: "Why would a group of Muslims be interested in working on Jewish history?"

Answering her own question, Dalil said the young people in Association Mimouna, who have taken on the task of highlighting the Jewish roots in Moroccan culture, "identify with a pluralistic, inclusive identity that is proud of its Jewish component . . . the most important thing that gathers us as a group are the values we share."

The event in late April was a conference of major American Jewish organizations gathered to honor Muslims who protected Jews during the Holocaust, along with activists like Dalil. The keynote speaker was a major Sunni theologian, Mohammed Al-Issa, the secretary general of the Muslim World League in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. He came to publicly condemn Muslims who deny the Holocaust or use Islam to justify acts of violence and terror.

As anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic violence stalk Europe and the U.S., religious leaders in all three Abrahamic faiths have been trying to get beyond ideas of tolerance to uphold a deeper commitment to civic ideals.

Dalil noted how her perceptions have changed and spurred her to learn how much of ancient Jewish life had been woven into the fabric of Moroccan Berber culture.

“I have thought this coexistence between Jews and Muslims—it was not only living side by side, but sharing crucial parts of their life—was a regular phenomenon,” Dalil said. “I was wrong.”

It was only when she moved to France to pursue graduate studies, in fact, that she really encountered flagrant anti-Semitism.

“I was living in a Jewish neighborhood,” Dalil said. “One day a very mature lady came up to me on the streets and said the most horrific sentence I ever heard in my entire life: ‘Paris was cleaner when the Germans were here.’”

Mehnaz Afridi, head of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Interfaith Education Center at Manhattan College, often gets startled reactions from those who encounter her: a Muslim scholar working at a Catholic institution and leading a center focused on the Holocaust and the Jewish experience.

“In a city so wildly diverse, we’ve put together the most unfamiliar people you can imagine into a room to work on issues of genocide and the Holocaust,” said Afridi, author of *Shoah through Muslim Eyes*, noting how the rise of white nationalism has galvanized interest in her research center recently. “My goal is to eradicate anti-Semitism in the Muslim community.”

While Muslims and Jews in New York have been forging ties with a greater sense of civic earnestness, Christians and Muslims who adhere to traditional teachings often face deeper obstacles, said Bob Roberts, pastor of the 3,000-member NorthWood Church in Keller, Texas.

For the past few years, Roberts has worked closely with Mohamed Magid, imam of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, one of the largest Muslim communities in the Washington, D.C., area. They are creating a nationwide grassroots network called My Neighbor’s Keeper. The goal is to build “neighborhoods and cities that are more interconnected and resilient to hate and violence.” Creating a space of deeper civic trust and understanding, he said, isn’t always easy for faith traditions that emphasize their exclusive claims to truth or a belief that their sacred book alone reveals a singular pathway to God.

“Being exclusivists,” Roberts said, “makes us tribal. And the impact of being tribal is, we see each other as objects to be won rather than people to be in relationship with.”

Roberts and Magid have been trying to push through these obstacles, however—first, by bringing together groups of imams, rabbis, and evangelical pastors for a three-day retreat, to get acquainted in an environment of openness and transparency. Participants make a commitment to have their members work side by side on neighborhood projects or other civic concerns.

Steve Bezner, senior pastor of the Houston Northwest Church, a Southern Baptist megachurch, who has worked with Roberts, [described an encounter to the Washington Post](#): “The first time I met an imam in my neighborhood, we’re five minutes into the conversation, and he said: ‘Do you think I’m going to hell?’ I said, ‘That’s what my tradition teaches, yes.’ He said, ‘Good, I think you’re going to hell, too, so now we can have an honest conversation.’ ”

M. Bruce Lustig, rabbi of the Washington Hebrew Congregation, a 160-year-old Reform synagogue in the nation’s capital, runs a similar interfaith effort called Sarah and Abraham’s Tent, bringing congregations together to socialize and work to address various civic concerns.

“We don’t agree on anything, nor do we intend to,” Lustig said of the evangelicals he has met during collaborations with Roberts. “But the intellectual exchange, the spiritual levels that we’re able to connect to by coming together with ‘the other,’ the things we talk about—How do we serve God? How do we serve humanity?—they’ve been phenomenal.”

Both Lustig and Roberts say that despite the faith traditions’ exclusive claims to truth and revelation, each also maintains a fundamental doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God.

“We don’t have to let our relationship stop if, well, OK, I’m not going to follow your religion, and you’re not going to follow my religion,” Roberts said.

Afridi, the director of the Holocaust center at Manhattan College, has endured anti-Muslim violence, including being spat upon, and noted that when her students think of Islam they think of extremist groups and oppression of women.

“But if there is a place in the world where we can do something different about this, it’s got to be the United States,” she said. “I’ve lived everywhere in the world, and I always just get so much solace here, because so many people are doing such good work, investing so much in each other in so many unexpected ways. It’s important

for people to hear, to reach out and show them what we're doing.”

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