

Panel 3 IFD 2004

Joyce Davis

First of all, thank you for staying with us, even though it's cold, for the last session, (and) I promise you, we'll get into some really provocative topics and it'll be worth the wait. The title of this conversation - and we're hoping that we will make this a conversation - will be Islam and the West. We can begin by stating something that I think we will all agree on: that there is clearly a problem. What is the nature of the problem, whether it is really a religious problem or a political problem or a cultural problem, we can discuss. We start from the point that there are some differences, or a divide that needs to be bridged, between the West and Islam. And some of the questions that have been laid out for our conversation during this last session get to the heart about what this divide is. What are the concepts of tolerance on both sides? Is there a problem there? Are there mutual prejudices between Islam and Western civilizations? Is the relationship between Islam and the West a religious or a cultural problem? What or who could serve as the bridge, the credible partners, in a dialogue between Islam and the West? On what common principles can we begin that dialogue? What is the commonality between the principles of Islam and those that we perceive to be the principles of the West? What are clearly the differences that need to be at least tolerated?

This is the groundwork for what will be the discussion today. We have all introduced ourselves at one point on the previous panel, so I'm not sure we really need to go through that again. I think what I will do is simply tell you who I am. Joyce Davis. I'm the Associate Director of Broadcasting for Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, based here in Prague. In my job we supervise services that are predominantly for the Muslim world. We are serving Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the countries of Central Asia. We are actively engaged in trying to bridge the divide that exists between the Western world and the Islamic world. With that being said, I will also tell you that this is a topic that I have focused on for at least the past fifteen years in my work as a journalist in the United States. The latest book I have out, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East*, addresses many of these principles, so I am delighted to be the moderator of the panel today. So why don't we get started with one of the first topics, the key topic: the relationship between Islam and the West. We know there's a problem. What is the nature of the problem? Religion, culture, politics, and I'm going to say, let's just start with Doctor Ramadan. Tell us, what is the nature of the problem?

Tariq Ramadan

Thank you for starting with me. I think that this is a simple question with a complex answer. We are dealing with different levels here. First, there is a wrong mutual perception. The "West and Islam," as a monolithic reality, doesn't mean anything, because in the West as well, there is a great deal of Islamic teaching. The way the West was built and perceived, even though the West sometimes perceives itself as being without Islam, Islamic teaching, or Islamic legacy, indeed has (roots in) Islam. At the same time, in Islam, and in the Muslim minds, there are so many things coming from Western traditions: philosophical, religious, Jewish, Christian, and Greek traditions. I think that we have to fight against this kind of monolithic perception, binary Manichean vision of reality. This is the first problem. The first problem is our perception, the way we perceive each other. At the philosophical and religious level, there should be a question about why we think this way. We do have differences, but if we stop thinking about them through this prism of a binary vision of reality, we can find common ground, common values, common teachings, and common legacy. I think that Muslims should try to understand, what the West is now, (they should try) to understand its history, and that they're part of the process. At the same time, I think that we have to stop, in our mainstream school system and philosophical teaching, speaking about Western philosophy without speaking about Muslim and Islamic philosophy. As a Muslim, I'm closer to Aristotle than so many Christian philosophers. I really think that we have to abandon this binary vision - it's a question of education.

There is a second level - the historical level - dealing with political inputs, political reality and geo-strategic reality. When we deal with politics, it's really important to understand that we are dealing with domination, either perceived domination or real domination. We are dealing with geo-strategic interests. We are facing the perception that there is a struggle between two or many civilizations - mainly the West against the Islamic civilization. We look at local political problems or political reality in the way that it's the West against Islam, for example in Iraq or in Afghanistan. This is totally wrong. We are so obsessed with denying the fact that there is a clash of civilizations, but it stays in our minds; the way we are denying it means that it is rooted now in our thinking and the way we are dealing with it. I think that we have to get rid of this concept of political conflicts. We have to think about interests, policies, not a civilization against another.

The last point is concerning Muslims in the West. There is a problem here in the confusing terminology. Now we have millions of Muslims in America, in Canada, in Europe, in Australia, and they are Western Muslims, but the perception remains that Islam is an alien religion, a non-European religion. And this is wrong. It's an American religion, it's a European religion, it's a Western religion. We have to look at it this way.

Once again, there is one really important point - a wrong perception (of each other), as well as confusion. When we have social problems, they have nothing to do with Islam; it's not because the majority of the people, who are suffering from being marginalized in France, are Muslims, or come from a Muslim background. The problem is not religious. It has nothing to do with religion; it's a social problem. It's urban policy that we have to question. It's political and social policy that we have to question. This is a misconception that Islam is intrinsically violent, and the fact that these people in the suburbs are violent proves that what we thought before (about it) was true... (The misconception persists) that it's because of the Islamic teaching that they are violent, which is not rational, but misleading; it puts into our minds that there is a problem between Muslims and Western societies, whilst the real problem is: how do we deal with social problems, with social policies? How do we get rid of these intellectual and social ghettos we have created? Now we don't want them, because they fracture our society.

Joyce Davis

It sounds like you were clearly addressing the status of Muslims in Western societies, and within these societies. Again, you have cautioned us throughout this conference not to be naive, but the fact is, we know that many Muslims around the world believe that the West, particularly the United States, is at war with Islam. Mr. Abbas, why do they believe that? Is it true? Do you believe that? Is the United States, is the West at war with Islam, and what would lead people to believe that?

Mohamed Abbas

I guess – at the beginning –

Joyce Davis

Yes or no?

Mohamed Abbas

I guess, yes, there are many people, who believe it. But it's not just Muslims. I remember a German politician, I think it was Gerhard Schroeder, said that now, after the war in Iraq, the idea that Muslims have that the West is against Muslims will become more real.

I agree with people here. I said to my Czech friends, you forget that Moses was Egyptian, Jesus was Syrian, Abraham was Iraqi, they are from there. Even Christianity and Judaism are not Western. We forget that. We forget that Islam is coming from the same area, where Christianity and Judaism came from, and sometimes we have this vision that the West is Christian/Judaist, and East is Islamic, which is a historical error. It is also a geographical error. The problem is in policy and in the need for domination, which is not Christian or Islamic. Czech friends told me that the Turks were very aggressive here in Europe. But I came from Sudan, and I know that Arab and African leaders fought with Turks as well. And in the area of Syria and Iraq they have big problems between the Turks and some Muslims. Thus it is not a fight between Islam as such and Christianity as such. It is not a religious fight but a fight for political domination. I think that the problem between the East and the West now is a political problem. Christianity and Islam are not the main reasons, but some people like to label themselves with such labels in the time of clash, and we then acquire such feeling as well.

Joyce Davis

So, ultimately, it is a political divide - not necessarily a religious divide - is what I'm hearing, because the religion is actually a part of Western civilization as well. And yet, do Westerners perceive that Islam is a part of Western civilization? Can I get you to comment on that, Father?

Józef Zyciński

In my diocese, there is only a group of Arab students and one hundred seventy refugees from Chechnya. The attitude of the people towards the immigrants from Chechnya is so friendly that any form of conflict is eliminated. In Poland in the past, settled Tartars and inhabitants of the area close to Mongolia practiced Islam, and they were both well-accepted by the population. They were good citizens, and there were no conflicts on the ethnic ground. Thus, theoretically, we could find positive counter-examples to this catastrophic vision of the clash of civilizations. I would be skeptical from the methodological point of view towards such catastrophic predictions.

I remember after the World War II certain publications and several authors in Europe argued that Japan should be crushed, because the so-called Japanese imperialism is a perpetuating phenomenon, and without crushing it, it would return in a short time. Now we don't see any form of Japanese imperialism threatening the Western civilization. One should not exaggerate with such obsessions.

Another example of such approach, and it has already been practically mentioned, is Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilization. For me, the arguments provided by Huntington are analogous to the former Communist arguments dealing with the class struggle. A good Communist, whatever he saw, observed always class struggle, and the class struggle was getting stronger and stronger. Now, former Communists

transformed into businessmen, or engaged in different kinds of activity, and nobody continues the theoretical explanation of the world in the terms of class struggle. I would say that if catastrophic interpretation of Muslim/Christian or Muslim/Occidental cultural relationship is continued, the psychological reason for it could be found within the crises of contemporary Western societies. When one watches demographic statistics reflecting the role of Muslim minority in Germany or in France, the statistics are really convincing that in twenty-five years, the structure of French social life will be quite different. But there is nothing to blame the Muslims for.

On the other hand, the question is: should the future of Europe be so catastrophic? Some authors argued that Europe would follow the drama of ancient Greece. There was a time when Greece was so influential in culture - metaphysics was born there, geometry, poetry, architecture - and now Greece attracts mainly tourists. Maybe the European future will follow the same road. In my opinion, this is again a catastrophic concept, as I don't believe in a historical necessity. In Europe, there were many critical situations in the past and there were also the Europeans, who counter-acted the threats and replied to the challenges. It may be the expression of my Episcopal optimism, but I argue that in the present situation, we should not exaggerate the necessity of clash between the Muslim and Christian world. We should look for new means of positive cooperation.

Joyce Davis

Reverend Fletcher? In the country that you call home, Great Britain, there is a virulent debate going on now as to the divide between the Muslims, who are in your midst, especially some, who are quite radical...

Colin Fletcher

I don't believe that for every complex question, there's an easy, simple, definitive answer. That's wrong. And anyone trying to speak about what's happening in Britain at the moment between the faith communities will probably end up doing something like that. As far as Muslims in Britain are concerned, they are two or three percent of the population - there are well over a million in Great Britain now, so not a huge number, but certainly a significant number, and a number on a scale that we've never dealt with in the past. The Jewish community on the whole kept its identity, but also assimilated in a way that many young Muslims would not wish to do at the moment. So we are facing that challenge. We're dealing with situation where the Christians are still in the majority, but of course, if we look at the Anglican Communion worldwide, we think of Palestinian Christians, we think of Indian Christians, Pakistani Christians. We are well-used to handling situations, where we're in very small minorities. And we're in that kind of dialogue. What we're convinced about is that simply to write these questions down as political or power struggles or social problems, and to think that that's the whole dialogue, is to miss the point. All those things are terribly important, but we've got to be honest with each other in our dialogues. We've got to say there are points of difference, and we've got to come clean with each other about them. Certainly that's something the Archbishop has been trying to get involved in. These are not new questions, they're questions such as, what happens when one member of a faith community wishes to convert and to become a member of the other faith community? What do we do about the fact that Christians, but it's not solely Christians, have deep within their psyche the desire to enable others to share their faith? We've got to be open to each other about that. How are we going to handle our holy texts? We are people of the Book, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and our scriptures are terribly important to us. How do we handle those together? What the Archbishop has been trying to do, looking both nationally and internationally, are four things: the Alexandrian Declaration, which brought together Christians, Muslims and Jewish religious leaders, particularly focusing on the Middle East, and say, what can we do to help each other bring peace in the Middle East? Huntington is actually right in one sense, if we don't get peace between the religions, we're not going to get peace. We've got to work at that together. At the same time, there's a dialogue that's just in its infancy between the Anglican Communion and the Al Azhar University and mosque in Cairo trying to foster greater understanding.

A third one is - I brought along a copy - Christian/Muslim dialogues. These are regular meetings now; the fourth one is just about to be held in Sarajevo, where Christian and Muslim scholars are meeting together. Unless you get a common community of learning, then it's unlikely to come down to the rest of the people. And our hope is that by that common community of learning ordinary believers can be influenced. And then right at the grass roots in England, there is the listening initiative in Christian/Muslim relations. We've just got this report out; it was published in June 2004. And that is a group led by one of my colleagues, the Bishop of Aston, a joint group of Christians and Muslims, who've gone round in England to places like Bradford and Blackburn and Leicester and East London, all places where there are very significant Muslim populations. They have brought together Christians and Muslims in each place, and have just got them talking to each other. Fear characterizes and damages so many relationships. We do get this kind of ghettoization even within mixed communities, where we're not listening properly to each other. And the hope is that what we'll now form is some kind of Christian/Muslim forum that the Archbishop will convene within Britain, and carry this forward further. We're always going to have our madcap fringe, both Christian and Muslim, that needn't take us away from really good dialogue that brings the us closer to understanding,

even when we're having to handle issues that could possibly divide us, and in which we disagree.

Joyce Davis

I think the concern, though, is that the madcap fringe, as you called it, is widening or growing. In some perceptions particularly, our concern has been (related to) what has been going on in the Netherlands, and whether that is a sign of what some fear is a violent Christian backlash. I will turn to Professor Gerl-Falkovitz to comment on that phenomenon. Do you see this as a harbinger of more terrible times ahead for us in Europe in the Islamic/Western relations, or do you see that as an isolated incident that is peculiar only to that country?

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

I'm not a prophet. What I would like to stress is that in everyday life, of course, we have differences, and not only differences, but we have real problems. And this murder of Van Gogh shows an interpretation of religion that has to be commented on also by Muslims. For the first time now we had now a demonstration in Cologne with twenty thousand Turks, plus at least as many people from Cologne, protesting against that. However, such protest of the Islamic world against the crimes that are done in the name of Islam is still a thing to be wanted. I mean that it should be more expressed, more clear, more evident, not only when one pushes them to do something... I cannot say how it will develop now.

And there is a second problem, if I may stress it. In my view, it is the relation between men and women. It seems fashionable that I, as a female participant, stress it, but indeed, I think it is a crucial point. And it is a crucial point which is not yet dealt with. We have statistics in Berlin that (tell us that) every fourth Turkish woman is living in a forced marriage. She had never seen her husband before, and just met him, when family arranged it. Every third woman knew her husband before, but the marriage was arranged by the relatives. This is a foreign concept of marriage to ours. Maybe they keep better together than ours, that can be, but there is a problem. Marriage in the nineteenth century among Bavarian peasants was not so much different, I know that. Maybe in Jewish marriage it is also the same. Anyhow, we live now in the twenty-first century, and the question is: how is our conscience in this matter developed now? Can one tolerate it or not? There is a law now prepared that these forced marriages will be prohibited. But this is a Western law again. How will the Muslim community react to that? There is a house in Berlin, where Muslim women can run away, when they don't want to marry, and already there they have to change names and the house has a hidden address. There was a report about it. These are the questions, which are loaded with a lot of question marks...

Joyce Davis

Yeah, we'll let the others comment on that. But again, what I'm hearing, seems to be confusion between culture and religion. Perhaps, what is going on with these arranged marriages is not so much based on Islamic teachings, but on cultural –

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

No, no, no. That's always the understanding. No, if you read the Koran, the Surah two through four, it actually starts immediately with that. It starts, how a woman belongs to a certain family, and how her marriage is to be arranged, how the heritage is to be done, and how the divorce is to be done. I know that my fellow speakers are against it, but I want to stress it. The Koran in the Middle Ages was called the Book of Law. It is the book of law - from its very structure, it is a book compiling legal rules. As we call it in German: Legales Gesetzbuch, a book of law. In this law, there are very distinct rules on how to deal with women and how not to deal with them, how to deal with daughters, etc. I think it's only a cultural phenomenon, as long as the Koran is being treated as the immediate word of God, as verbal inspiration. It is not easy to escape this narrow interpretation and reach for a broader vision or a broader interpretation. I think this is the problem, not culture itself. It's a problem between culture and religion.

Joyce Davis

Well, I will let our Muslim scholars respond to that later. I will say that in my first book, I went around the world basically speaking to leaders of Islamic movements and scholars about these very issues, and found that the interpretation of those religious texts depends on the person you're talking to. As in any religion, some will interpret things much more liberally and some much more hard-line or strident, and it really depends... Some may interpret it that way, that it is forced (upon someone) and others see it completely different - even issues such as polygamy and divorce, and those kinds of things. Again, it's the stereotypes about what a religion is that sometimes get in the way of the dialogue and real understanding. I want to move on, because I want to talk also about the Jewish issue, and the Jewish/Islamic issue. Many Muslim scholars have said that they see their religion as a culmination, or a refinement and perfection of both Christianity and Judaism. How do Jews see that? Could we start with Professor Ehrlich?

Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich

I think we have to speak first about the interpretation of the scriptures, and we will have a very interesting example here. It was only in 1942 or so that Catholics were allowed to have critical exegesis of the Bible. Today, the Catholics are in the leading position in this interpretation. And we have the same problem we had with the Jews in the nineteenth century and the same problem we have today with Islam. Critical exegesis of Islam is for Muslims very difficult, because nothing could be changed; everything is transmitted as the word of God. Our dialogue is then difficult, because there is a different understanding of the sources in principle. It was the same with the Catholics before the council in the nineteenth century. A professor did not get his imprimatur, or got into difficulties for critical approach to the texts. Today, there's a wonderful cooperation between the Christians and the Jews regarding exegesis of the Bible. We are on totally the same level today, and this could be, perhaps, one day with the Muslims as well in their own way. Thus, I see a possibility for real dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims as to reading their own sources, which we have not had yet until today.

I think knowledge can help in this. Knowledge is important. And Jews and Christians do know less about Muslims and Islam; and if they will be studying the sources together, this could really help the understanding and their relationship too. I think we should not only put everything in the framework of politics, we should also try to understand each other and respect each other; therefore, we need the same level of reading the texts, even the same methods of reading. In order to speak with each other, we shall not speak another language, when we are speaking about our sources. I'm sure that one day, we shall find the way to have a triologue including the sources as well.

Joyce Davis

It sounds like you're speaking of the Abrahamic concept as being a basis of dialogue, could you comment on that, Rabbi Hoffberg?

Ron Hoffberg

I think Professor Ehrlich has really made the point that's crucial. I have an experience that I would like to share with you. I was talking about it a little earlier – I was a student in Jerusalem shortly after the Six-Day War, when there began to be a lot of contacts. It was still before the '73 War, when there was a lot of contact, in a positive sense, between Jews and Muslims, between Eastern and Western Jerusalem; they were building the city together. I had an opportunity to study there at that point, and we had classes and teachers and students, who came from Muslim institutions, even rabbinical students. This happened in the liberal movements, not in the orthodox world, of course – and this is one difficulty. From that experience, my sense is that there's much to build on our commonality, and that the political problems, which get in the way of dialogue, are unfortunate, but they'll be resolved more easily with dialogue. Easily isn't a good word. They'll be resolved. They have to be resolved. But they have to be resolved politically. "Political" means some kind of adjustment: not everyone wins everything, not everyone loses everything. Concerning this attitude of a war between the East and the West, or between Islam and the West... I never thought of Judaism as a Western religion. Much of rabbinic writing was done in Babylonia, which was Iraq at the time, and Jewish philosophical context in the early years was based on Moslem philosophical context, long before there was Christian dialogue in Judaism. And we struggled with Judaism coming into contact with other ideas. We struggled with some of the same questions, which you alluded to in terms of the situation with women. Up until nearly the year 1000, Jews were polygamous. Not polygamous, they could have up to four wives. Lots of rules, it wasn't so easy, but they could have up to four wives. After the European experience, the rabbinic community came to a decision that one wife is better. Even if it's negotiated by the family. And that still exists in some circles in Judaism today... and those marriages are often longer lasting. People learn to love each other if they...

Joyce Davis

They have to learn to tolerate each other anyway.

Ron Hoffberg

Yeah. That's the key to everything we're saying.

Joyce Davis

But let's dive into the one difficult topic in this divide between Islam and the West: the issue of Israel. The issue of U.S. support for Israel. The issue of the Palestinians. I'll go back to my Muslim colleagues and ask them to comment on whether this issue of Israel is one of the core issues dividing the West from Islam.

Tariq Ramadan

First, I have two points to what we heard, because it is really important. Yes, there is a cultural reading of the Islamic sources, and this is obvious everywhere. And this is the job of the Muslim scholars to say: be careful, the way you are reading the sources gives you a cultural input, and it comes from certain cultural ways. Forced marriages have nothing to do with Islam - even the literalists cannot support that; but it

doesn't mean that everything in the sources is cultural (input). We have to deal with literalist readings sometimes; for example, people can say through a literal reading, it is possible for a man to beat his own wife. And you have to say in response, this is the literal reading of one part of the verse forgetting the global message, and the global message is that domestic violence has nothing to do with Islam. We have two problems: cultural reading and literalist reading. However, in some cases we cannot say, yes, it's coming from a specific reading. Even the literalists are not promoting forced marriages; you will not find among literalists someone saying that forced marriages are Islamic. But it doesn't mean that we don't have problem with literalist reading...

The second point: Muslim thought that something comes from God, does not pose a problem. It's part of the Islamic credo to think that. If you put it like you put it shortly before, you will be dismissed, because ninety-nine percent of Muslims believe it and for them it's the very word of God. The problem is not the origin of these sayings; the problem is the readers. If you say: oh, it's because it's the word of God for the Muslims that it is unquestionable, then the problem is not the book and the origin, it's the way we are interpreting it. You can read, for example, Karl Marx in a dogmatic way. I think that if you want to be heard by Muslims, you have to say it differently. To put it the way you put it means that you don't want to be heard at all, because it means that you are not accepting one of the credos. This is the book revealed by God for Muslims.

As to the problem of Israel - I think that we have to be self-critical. Many Muslims confuse criticism towards the Israeli policy with anti-Semitism. Thus they adopt some kind of anti-Semitism, because the Israeli state is oppressing the Palestinians. We have to say clearly that anti-Semitism has nothing to do with Islam; it's against all Islamic teaching. This is not in our religion - the Jews are people of the Book, they have the same tradition. On the other side, it doesn't mean that to be critical towards the policy of Israel, or the Israeli government, is wrong. It's not anti-Semitism. And it doesn't also mean that you want to destroy the country. When I am criticizing Saudi Arabia, I am not Islamophobic, neither do I want to destroy Saudi Arabia. It's a critical political approach to say that this Israeli policy is wrong. I think that we have a shared responsibility to say it with the Jewish communities.

It's important to distinguish and to be clear that you are criticizing the Israeli policy, or American support, or unilateral support to the Israeli policy. As long as you are explicit that you are criticizing a policy, it cannot be used to promote any kind of anti-Semitic statements. This should be clear. But we also need people on our side from the Jewish community. I have many, and there are many Jewish friends saying: I am a Jew, and I'm criticizing the state of Israel, because I think that this is oppression. Or this is not the right answer to the (question of) how to treat the Palestinians.

Altogether, Muslims should be critical towards other Muslims using this conflict to promote anti-Semitism. This is not acceptable. On the other side, we need an explicit position, which is: yes, you are right and it's legitimate to criticize a specific policy without being labeled as anti-Semitic. The only way to solve the problem with Israel is to work together. Don't wait for the Palestinians and the Israelis to start. If you are not able to do it in the States, if you are not able to do it in France, where is it possible? Where is it going to be possible if you are not able to promote this kind of dialogue in a democratic system, where there is non-violence? I really think that we are greatly responsible for things happening due to our silence. And I will even put it this way. Our silence sometimes is pushing them towards violence, and I really think that we have to be more vocal to help them to be less violent there.

Joyce Davis

Well, we can go into a lot on the issue of silence, but I want to see right now, if there are any questions from the audience. I'd like to open floor ... Yes. You may stand up and they'll bring you the microphone. I see there were two questions - was there a third? We'll take three quick questions and this will get us further, give more fuel for our fire.

Question from audience

My question is: what would you say is the approach or opinion of ordinary Muslims, or people, who perhaps don't care that much about politics, of the West? How do they perceive the West, or the Western civilization, or their religions? Is it this tolerant and understanding way that religion promotes or is it what we see in the media - that there is a backlash, violence, and the feeling of oppression? What do you think is the tendency now? Are we really going towards this understanding and interfaith dialogue, or are we going toward conflict?

Joyce Davis

Well, those were two questions. What does the ordinary Muslim think regarding the violence and the attitudes toward the West, and are we really moving more toward dialogue amongst religions? Was there a second question? This gentleman here.

Another comment and a question from audience

I would first like to react to Mr. Ramadan's comment and then put forward the question to the whole panel. As an intellectual, I would agree with everything Mr. Ramadan said on the problem of mutual perception. As a citizen of the same country as Mr. Ramadan, I agree with everything that you said about the ethics of citizenship, and having lived myself for several years in an Islamic country, I have lots of respect and admiration for Islamic civilization. But as an observer of what's going on in today's society, I am very much concerned by the polarization at the grass-roots level. This is a real problem; the polarization is there. It has much to do with perception and lack of mutual understanding. It gets polarized on the issue of the headscarf for example.

Now, everything that's been said here about the necessity of a dialogue, and I'm sure that everybody in this room would agree with it, poses the question, and this is now my question to the whole panel: is there any relevance for what's going on the ground and at the grass-root level? This type of dialogue is at the level that it can be understood by us in this room and by intellectuals, but cannot be understood by those that fight each other in the streets. What can be done (to ensure) that the bridge is actually being built? We heard some examples from the U.K., but this is certainly only a beginning; there must be much more done. What is needed so that faith community leaders really do stand up and take the responsibility to make sure that something is changing on the ground? What is the potential there, and what are the chances?

Joyce Davis

Well, those two questions were related. First, ordinary Muslims, what do they think? Can I start with you, Mr. Abbas?

Mohamed Abbas

I guess that due to political results, there's anger. Frankly the difference is between how far the media can go in reflecting on what is happening in Iraq or in Israel. From personal experience, I have a friend, a Christian, and we were watching the Arabic news together. He said to me, you know, you always must feel that you are in a problem, because if you look at this news, almost in all of it, there is a problem. People (have been) dying every day for years... So this accommodates some sort of anger, or, sometimes, the feeling of being helpless. Sometimes it flavors the way people think; and it can even help the people who are trying to exaggerate this confrontation to pretend that it is confrontation between one part and another part.

The view on Christianity and Judaism is not a matter of a sudden idea, but it is written in the Book. It is always good to return to the Book. For a Muslim, if he goes to pray, then he might pray using the story of prophet Moses or prophet Jesus. For us, the relation between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, it is a part of our belief. It gives me the possibility to differentiate between Christianity of Jesus and what some Christians do, or Judaism of Moses and what some Jews do. We should even, and I hope that also some Christians and Jews will think this as well, perceive the difference between what Mohammed brought and what some Muslims do. This is one of the very important things in interfaith dialogue.

The second important thing is that some Muslims feel that people in the West have disrespect for Islam. If I return to the story of this Dutch director, it is a return to the situation, which was here before with Salman Rushdie. I was speaking with a Sudanese friend, and he was trying to say things that he was reading in Czech newspapers. 'Look at some Muslims, what they are doing.' And I replied to him, 'Have you noticed that some Christians in Italy, and in other places, they burned the cinemas because of the film on Messiah Temptation?' I think that one of the very important things is to show the necessary respect for religion. A provocation is a very dangerous thing. Sometimes it looks as if it is planned provocation for Muslims, Christians, Jews, or religion in general. There is a pattern of disrespect towards religious people. Maybe it is part of the process of secularization, I don't know what it is. We must also take care of this. As an individual, if somebody says something bad about me in a newspaper, I can go to court and I can sue him. But for a religion, it is a bit different. Maybe, this is one of the things which gives the Muslims feeling that there are some people in the West...that the West is trying to –

Joyce Davis

So, ordinary Muslims really feel, first of all, the anger, and second, that the West is out to vilify Islam.

Mohamed Abbas

When they generalize, yes.

Joyce Davis

Okay. Yes?

Tariq Ramadan

I really think that it's really important at this point that you make a difference between frustration or the feeling that we are under attack and promoting violence. This is not the same thing. The people who are

promoting violence within the Muslim communities are very small minority groups. They are not the mainstream of the Muslim communities in the West. These people who follow this agenda to promote violence are not from within the community, and it's not the reality of the community. But very often you can find passionate discourse about the West in the community, because of and coming from this frustration that we are under attack, that we are not respected. There is a kind of victimization, which is a reality of the Muslim psyche today throughout the world, not only in the West. I was in Morocco recently, and the perception of the West is really very caricatural: it's the West, they don't like us, they don't like Islam. The point is that we have to be careful not to confuse between passionate reactions and promotion of violence. You can have a kind of violent emotional reaction, which is not a promotion of violence. It is something in psychology, which should be studied, and it's coming from a personal experience. I think that two main points here are necessary. The first, I didn't want to dismiss the points you made. I think that theologically speaking, they are very important points we have to discuss. But at that level, for example, on what it happened in Holland... The great majority of Muslims, if not all the large Muslim organizations in Europe, condemned the murder. This is good, and this should be done. Muslims should not wait to be pushed to speak up - you are right in that way - and I don't think that they waited. They spoke straight after it happened. We also have to educate people to be able to say, okay, we are living in a very passionate time, and this is a very sensitive issue. Criticism of religion is legitimate, but don't confuse legitimate criticism with insults. We have to be careful in the way we deal with these issues.

What he (Mr. Abbas) said before is not meant to justify it. It should be condemned. But van Gogh was speaking about Muslims in a way, which is... please, what do you want – do you want the Muslim to debate passionately or do you want the Muslims to improve their understanding? I think that things are said today very easily in Europe about Muslims, and religion in general. We have to be very cautious. It's not the way we are going to build our common future.

To the question from the audience: I think that these kind of gatherings are important. But what is also important is not to gather only specialists, but to work at the grass root level. For the last fifteen years, part of the job we are doing within the Muslim communities is to help them to understand that they are Muslim and at the same time European. We tell them they can build partnerships and they have to be involved in interfaith dialogue, common citizenship and that they have to work with others. This is the only way to build mutual trust, which is necessary now. What is lacking today is to know about Islam and to know Muslims and fellow citizens; not to know only about Islam. We need to work with them, and I think that without daily experiences with the others, all these theories are not going to help us, and to change our societies. So the clash, if you want, will not be on the borders in Pakistan or Afghanistan, it already is within our democratic societies. If we are not able to achieve mutual trust here, how could you expect that this will happen there?

Joyce Davis

Very good. Our panelists want to comment on that. Why don't we start with Professor Gerl-Falkovitz, and then we will go to Reverend Fletcher, and then to Professor Ehrlich.

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

I beg your pardon, because I have to leave now. I would like to agree with Mr. Ramadan, if I had not so many doubts about that what he was saying. I give you two arguments about so-called cultural reading of Koran. I would be very glad if the critical reading of Koran would happen. However, people who do that are either in prison or in Berlin. Abu Zaid from Al-Azhar university, who tried and began to read it in the historical, critical way, as we read The Bible, is just now sitting in Berlin, expelled from Al-Azhar, you know...

Tariq Ramadan

Not expelled from Al-Azhar, just from Egypt ... He was not an Islamic scholar, he's just...

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

He was divorced even by force from his wife, because they said... One can give a lot of examples. Another Islamic scholar is sitting in Iran - the same case. The cultural reading of Koran is at its very beginning, not fully developed. You can say that I am just telling you all the examples and don't come to the point. But I think as long as these exist...

The second thing: I would agree with you and I'm happy with what was said in this panel. For me the crucial point of change comes, though, in the moment when it is allowed to convert from Islam to another religion and not to get under death penalty. Then, I think, we are on the right way, but, as far as I know, it is not possible.

Joyce Davis

Even that is being debated in Islamic societies. There are a variety of opinions as to the verdict for apostasy. Some are even arguing that if death is the penalty for apostasy, it is not to be executed on earth, but by God. That's actually debated among Islamic scholars. So again, the point is that there are a variety

of interpretations...

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

I know. I agree that there are a lot of varieties of interpretations. But I want to stress that the mainstream of interpretation is exactly like I said. And I want to discuss the mainstream. I would like to believe you, but personally I know someone who is hiding in Augsburg taking a new name, hiding his family, because he converted to Christianity, and this is not acceptable even in Central Europe.

Tariq Ramadan

Mutual trust is important. If we are saying that this is happening in the Muslim communities, trust us, because it is happening. I wrote in a book that it is possible to convert from the very beginning. It was said in the eighth century that someone who changed his religion should not be put to death...

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

Okay - how do you explain these examples then? I don't want to be against you, but...

Tariq Ramadan

Don't take a few examples as the rules. You have to understand that things are moving...

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

There are many examples. That's the problem - how to generalize here? I see your line; I agree with your line. I would be glad if you would be right, but I see too many opposing facts. I hope that your line will be the future one, but my trust will develop when it becomes more real.

Joyce Davis

Well, we see the divide right here...

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

I put some acid into the wine, I apologize for that, but the wine is a bit too sweet, I think...

Joyce Davis

Thank you very much, Professor.

Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz

I wish you the very best, including the reading of Koran. Really so.

Colin Fletcher

Let me go into two areas. One was the state of Israel, another is something from Britain today. If my colleague Bishop Rhea was here today, he would say that the behavior of the state of Israel is not just a problem for Muslims, it's a problem for Christians as well. He is a Palestinian Christian living in the state of Israel. What we're seeing at the moment is the exodus of many Palestinian Christian families from the state of Israel, and that's something very serious. And sadly, that's compounded by an over-literalist reading by some Christian groups that leads them to think that the state of Israel is beyond any sort of normal human judgment concerning the road of justice, and that this debate cannot even be had, because the state of Israel is ordained by God - end of discussion. And that's clearly a very sad position to be in, something we need to be addressing, and something, which I guess all of us can actually unite around. I think that's important.

Just going back to what the Muslims think of this or that. I think there's a grave danger, certainly from a British perspective, of lumping all Muslims together. Certainly in Britain, you've got to be much more subtle than that... We have various groups of Muslims in Britain with very different cultural backgrounds, and all are experiencing Britain in different ways. One of the things we've got to tackle at the moment is that, for instance, our Muslims of Bangladeshi origin may be two, three, or four generations back, and are still not as well educated; their levels of unemployment are higher, their levels of poverty are higher within Britain than would be true of Muslims from a Saudi Arabian background. Or probably an East African one as well. Now, those are serious problems, and one of the problems with a secular state is the tendency to use the label "Muslim" and think, well, that deals with everybody. I think Christians have a role to play in helping the state to understand our fellow faith believers. It's no accident that one of the standard books on the Muslims in Britain is written by an Anglican priest, not a Muslim, but a Christian, who believes that this kind of communication is very important. We come across it time and again when people want to set up interfaith dialogue and think that other faith communities will have roughly the same structures of governance as churches do, which is quite clearly wrong, because most of the imams in Britain would not have English as their first language; many of them would not speak English at all. We've got to find ways of helping governments to actually promote this kind of dialogue. I think that's an important role for the

majority faith community, wherever that majority is, to help in that kind of faith dialogue, and that's something we can always do to help each other.

Joyce Davis

Okay. Professor Ehrlich, and then Father Zyciński.

Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich

I think we all agree that we should have much more knowledge about Islam. Therefore, I have a question to you now. You said that the people who are committing violence everywhere are a very small group of people, who have, in fact, nothing to do with mainstream Islam. But what I'm really missing is a protest of leading Muslims, who would protest against violence, which a small group is doing for a couple of years. This is very important, not only for the world, but also for Islam itself that they show that they disagree with the violence. I disagree with the politics of the state of Israel, but I am able to write this in every journal I could read, Jewish journals as well, that I fully disagree with the politics of Israel of today, and that I wish that the Palestinians get their own state, and the Israelis live in full security. But I miss leading Muslims and leading Palestinians protesting against violence, against killing children and killing civilians. I think this gives the world a wrong picture of Islam, and Muslims should have the interest to protest against such a behavior.

Joyce Davis

I thank you very much, but I sometimes wonder if that's less the fault of the Muslim scholars than it is of the Western press, which does not carry these things. The fact is the head of Al Azhar, the Sheikh Tantawi, the chief mullah in Saudi Arabia, they all have issued quite clear statements condemning violence, condemning suicide bombers, but these stories do not get covered in the mainstream Western press. I know, because I've written it. If you go to www.globalist.org, you'll have all the statements right there, showing you exactly what you've just said. The leading Muslim scholars are denouncing violence. In a recent conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, they stood up on the record and said, Islam must separate itself from extremists. Extremism has nothing to do with Islam. However, we persistently realize that that message, those words, are not reaching the West.

Józef Zyciński

Professor Falkovitz indicated the problems dealing with asymmetry in relationship between Muslims and Christians, at least in the case of conversion. The same problem of asymmetry bothers Catholic bishops, who, during the synod dealing with Europe, expressed their openness in a spirit of dialogue and mutual love on the basis of Abrahamic tradition. The bishops requested the need to insist that reciprocity and mutual contacts should be followed, because it is noticed that many Christians are frustrated, because the relationship is very often unilateral. The Muslim brothers are welcomed, they are permitted to build new temples in Europe, while the Christians in Muslim countries are not permitted. And in this context, the bishops required reciprocity. Once I quoted the document in public discussion, and the bishops were criticized by one of the participants that Christian love should have been unconditional and the bishops should not expect reciprocity. My reply is, certainly, love should be unconditional, and it is, but love itself is not enough. To build a mutual dialogue, to build a just society, we must refer to social justice, and reciprocity in this mutual context, in my opinion, is a necessity.

Joyce Davis

We know that there are clear problems in places like Saudi Arabia, for example, with reciprocity that would be important for any kind of bridging of religious gaps or gaps between Islam and the West. We have five more minutes. Now, we will take a question from the audience, and then have summary and concluding remarks? Yes, sir?

Question from audience

Thank you. My question is primarily directed at Professor Ramadan. You spoke before about the problem not being the text of the Koran and perhaps other books, but the interpretations of them, how men interpret them. I think you also mentioned the Koran not prohibiting the killing of women, children, non-combatants, innocent bystanders. But isn't there also a line in there that says something like, "If there's one bad person in a group, that group should be destroyed or eliminated?" Is there a line that says something to that effect? And then could you step back to the broader question of the interpretation? Well, I might prefer your interpretation, but what makes your interpretation right and how do you argue your interpretation is right, and more fundamentalist interpretation is wrong?

Joyce Davis

Let's start with Mr. Ramadan.

Tariq Ramadan

When you deal with texts, it's really important--after studying the Islamic sciences-- to make your point rooted in the Islamic tradition and Islamic sciences, and to work from within the tradition. It doesn't mean that your point is going to be more legitimate than others' but at least... When you are speaking with the literalists, your job is very tough, because they only quote the verse, and the very moment they quote the verse, the meaning they get is the literal one. And you have to explain that this should be put into context and explained, and that there are many interpretations. The point is to be rooted in the Islamic tradition, in the Islamic history, and to try to educate the people to understand the global message. It's a very long process, an educational process, to try to challenge the interpretation of the literalists.

The majority trend is not the literalist trend. It's really this understanding that with the literalist trend you are not going to solve the contemporary problems. We cannot find solutions. We just isolate ourselves from the surrounding societies and the contemporary issues. Effectiveness gives you a chance here, though. When I am dealing with Muslims at the grass roots level, and I come with new answers, they say, okay, it's good, because this is the answer we need. Effectiveness and a tradition rooted in the classical teachings are very important. This is what we have to do.

As to your question, if it is possible to kill people around one guilty man, it's not. This is not Islamic, and this is not the teaching. It's really important when we deal with new political situations to come back to the roots and the scriptural sources, and to denounce it when it is a wrong reading.

But there is one problem. You said that we have to speak up, and you took a very good example, but let me tell you something. I wrote more than twenty books. You can find in three-quarters of these books denunciation and condemnation of violence and of this, what happened, of the terrorist groups and all that. Up to now, journalists are coming and saying, 'you are too much silent, please say something about it.' Okay - if the perception is that you have to repeat, and to repeat, and right, you are repeating, but sometimes you can say it once, two, three, four times, and it's as if it's not heard. And you are put in the situation where you are always on the defensive, and have to justify yourself as a Muslim by speaking about that. (Many times, I) just don't know. Just after September the eleventh, I was invited to New York to speak, and I was very harsh against what happened. I condemned that, and had to listen to people three years later saying, 'you were not so clear on that.' People are saying, 'you double talk,' and my point is, you have a double hearing. The point is that you have a selective hearing, and you don't want to listen.

I think that it's now the job of Muslims, you are right. But people like you, like others, have to say that there are Muslim voices. If you say that you heard Muslim voices saying that, you will help the Muslims to be heard. But if we are alone in it, isolated, repeating on and on, what will then be the perception of Muslims? "You want to please the West." We are losing the connection with Muslim communities due to the fact that we are always repeating. We condemn and we condemn, and the people are looking at us saying, 'Okay, what do you want, exactly?' Do you want to please "them"? Because of the frustration, if you repeat constantly that you condemn, your own community has the feeling that you are playing "their" game.

Understand, it's a psychological position, which is very difficult. We want to be connected to the community, and it's really important to have people understanding that. To keep on and on justifying and repeating is not helping the people to listen, it's not helping the people to hear, is not helping our own fellow Muslims understand what we are doing.

Last point, about reciprocity. I think that this is the job of Muslims living in democratic societies to condemn what is going on, and whenever there is discrimination against Jews or against minorities. This is our job, and I agree that we have to be more vocal on that. Having said that, and stressing that this is something needed, be careful not to compare it to the level of Muslims living here. The Muslims living in the West are coming from economic exile or political exile. The problem in the countries of their origin is dictatorship with no freedom for all the people, not only the Christians. In the great majority of the Arab world, for example, in Saudi Arabia, it's not democracy. Even the Pakistanis are suffering there, because they are considered slaves. The problem is that we don't have to put this in balance. We are giving you rights and will give you rights the very moment you are giving us rights there. This does not work, what you (archbishop Zyciński) say.

I think reciprocity should be understood by Muslims, who should speak up about discrimination from where they are. And at the same time, they should speak up about dictatorships, about the lack of freedom for all the people there, and ask for equal citizenships for Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the major Islamic countries. I think that we have to do this in common, and not wait for Muslims from the West to speak against what is going on there, because it's not going to work. I really think that reciprocity could be understood in that way, and this is the way we can work together to be more heard in the Islamic world.

Joyce Davis

I'm afraid we're going to have to end it there. I do thank the panelists very much for a scintillating dialogue. I thank the audience for the questions that they presented. I also want to answer this final question that we didn't get to - who can serve as credible partners in the dialogue between both parties. I think we have heard some of them today. And for that, we are most grateful. A reminder, at 5 p.m., there will be a reading

of the Koran, of the Bible, and of the Torah, for about three-quarters of an hour in this room, and there will also be interfaith meditation. You are invited to participate in that. Thank you very much, and I look forward to seeing you at 5 o'clock.