

## **LA Interfaith Event Brings Muslim, Christian and Jewish Groups Together**

By Nazim Karim

Los Angeles: With the provocative title of “God and Allah Need to Talk,” 440 people gathered on Sunday September 14, at the Laemmle Fairfax Theater, Los Angeles, for an inspiring three hours of audiovisual delights, with film, music and inspiring words. This may have been a first anywhere as over 200 people had to be turned away as the tickets were sold out a week before the event, in itself a phenomenon for an interfaith cultural event.

A new book, “The New Revelations: A Conversation with God,” by Neale Donald Walsch asks, “How in the world can one person take on the task of changing the world? If all it takes is one person to instigate self-destruction, can it not also be one person who inspires self-renewal?”

There may just be such a person. The brainchild of Ruth Broyde-Sharone, a journalist and documentary and educational film producer and director, who received the Fete d’Excellence award for her work in promoting interfaith dialogue, the title alone was enough to attract a second look from those aware of the event. Driving in Hollywood about a year and a half ago, she noticed a billboard that stopped her and inspired the film. “God and Allah Need to Talk,” it said. “How can this make sense?” she asked herself, as “that would be like God talking to Himself.” She then understood the message, that by framing the statement in this manner, the author (Rush Riddle) was using God and Allah as metaphors for the Christians, Jews and Muslim communities that had become alienated from each other, almost as if they were praying to different Deities, without the recognition of their common theological foundations.

Inspired by this realization, she then arranged to film a session at the Islamic Center of Southern California, on the occasion of Ashura, commemorating the flight of the Israelites from Egypt during the Exodus, an event commented on in both, the Old Testament and the Qur’an. She interviewed Dr Maher Hathout and Dr Mahmoud Abdul-Baset of the Islamic Center, as well as some Jewish visitors who were surprised at the common understanding and exposition of the Exodus theme, and appreciated Dr. Hathout’s explanation of justice. “I am from Egypt but I don’t relate to Pharaoh. I relate to Moses,” he said. “What counts is where we are, vis-a vis justice, particularly now, when there is heated politics and conflict between Muslims and Jews. We should never

lose perspective. The issue is not that those people are Muslims and those people are Jews. The moment we do that, we are violating this text. The issue should be, "Where is justice?" Let's stand by it; where is injustice let's stand against it. If injustice is committed by a Muslim, it should be as fiercely fought."

The film then moved to the Temple Kol Tikvah, where a Passover celebration was an opportunity for its Rabbi, Steven Jacobs, together with Dr. Nazir Khaja of the Islamic Information Service and Rev Ed Bacon, to invite representatives of all three communities to share the event together.

At the Laemmle Theater gathering, representatives spoke on behalf of their communities. Xandra Hayden, a senior Fellow at the School of Public Policy and Social Research at UCLA, showed her support for the event, recalling the tolerant "Golden Age" of Spain, prior to 1492, when Jews, Muslim and Christian lived together in relative harmony, with their scholars engaging one another in dialogue and debate.

Joe Hicks, Vice President of Community Advocates Inc., stated that, "Just as God and Allah are, in fact, the same life force, so are we all one race of beings, in fact, one human family. If we are truly serious about unity and interfaith collaboration, today should be a giant step forward of how we can make that a reality."

Amir Hussein, Professor in the Dept. of Religious Studies at California State University, Northridge, talked of the Qur'anic understanding of diversity. "The key to interfaith dialogue is not that we seek to convert each other but we help each other find what is meaningful in each other's traditions," he said. He continued, "The hadith of the Holy Prophet teaches us that not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. In the Qur'an (Sura 49, verse 13) --- which is a remarkable verse on our origins --- there are four key points: God addresses all of humanity, not just specifically Muslims. Second, it mentions the creation of humanity into distinct groupings comes from God, and it is a positive value; third, it encourages people to transcend their differences and learn from each other and, finally, the passage does not say that Muslims are better than other people, but that the best people are those who are most aware of God."

The cultural congregation at the Laemmle Theater featured speeches from several other personalities; Ms. Diane Watson, Congresswoman for the 33rd District, said, "On this very special occasion, let me commend you for bringing cultures together; it is about love, about understanding, it is all about your brother and your sister." Los Angeles' Sheriff Lee Baca said, "I ask all the faith communities to do things together and get to know each other as this is more than just about tolerance, its about connectivity. And this world will be on the right course if we understand each others cultures." Father Alexei Smith of the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles extended an invitation to all, saying, "We invite all the various faiths here to come to the cathedral and to pray together, because if we pray together, we will certainly work together."

Finally, Mr. Ahmed Ali, President of the Council of Pakistani American Affairs (COPAA), observed that “we need to replace the walls of ignorance with bridges of understanding --- not only in America but the entire world....we believe that only by reaching out to our fellow citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity, can we remove fear and stereotypical images by others.”

Artists who donated their time and talent at the event included Mitra, a singer from Iran, Alula, an Ethiopian singer, Stephen Longfellow Fiske, a peace activist and folk singer, Naser Musa, a Palestinian from Jordan, Yuval Ron, a composer and musician who performed with the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, Jamie Papish, a percussionist, Stefani Valadez, singer and guitarist and the Ismaili Muslim Dance Troupe, which performed a traditional Iranian dance.

Following the reception, guests were able to partake of culinary delights from the three communities, donated by well wishers, with the whole event being organized and coordinated by Dr. Julie Heifetz, a lecturer at Pepperdine University and at Cal State Northridge, and Dr Nur Amersi, a Santa Monica veterinarian, with volunteers from the Ismaili Muslim community assisting the organizers.

The event was appreciated by the guests, who vowed to do what they could to make a difference in bridging the gap between the communities. As Ms Broyde-Sharone commented on the sellout event, “What do you think it could mean? I think it means that we’re hungry for dialogue, hungry for reconciliation, hungry to find out about one another And on some level we’re all asking the question: where do we go from here?” A good question that needs thoughtful Muslims to see what each individual can do in his/her professional capacity, to explain the essential messages of Islam and do whatever they can to foster greater understanding between communities, irrespective of political or ideological differences.

Perhaps the final word on the event was best expressed by Rev. Leonard Jackson, President of the Los Angeles Council of Churches: “God/Allah are talking. But the question is, are we listening? Let us leave here today knowing that we are all talking to each other.”