

A USINDO Open Forum

**Interfaith Dialogue: Lessons Learned from
Muslims in America**



Imam Shamsi Ali

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On March 28, USINDO in cooperation with AIFIS, Dompot Dhuafa and Sampoerna School of Education held an Open Forum discussion in Jakarta, Indonesia. Speaker Shamsi Ali, the Indonesian Imam of the Islamic Cultural Center in New York, talked about how he tries to spread Islam's peaceful message and strengthen the Islamic community's ties with other religious groups.

Opening Remarks from Ambassador Scot Marciel

Despite their different histories, the U.S. and Indonesia share a special responsibility. Both countries have diverse populations, and their democratic systems incorporate—and must continue to do so—their peoples' varied interests and concerns.

For centuries, immigrants have flocked to the U.S. Upon arriving, they often face difficulties. My grandparents, who came from Italy and Portugal, had trouble assimilating into American society. Other groups face similar challenges, including Muslims who have recently immigrated to the U.S.

To help them, the U.S. must remain tolerant and welcoming—so too must Indonesia. Both countries can show how diverse populations can live in harmony and peace.

Summary of Imam Ali's Key Remarks

As Imam of the Islamic Center, the biggest mosque in New York, Imam Ali explained how he tries to promote inter-religious tolerance. After 9/11, he established a good relationship with NYC's local government, so it would continue to protect Muslims' rights. Such efforts were important, Imam Ali said. Many Muslims did not feel like New Yorkers. They felt isolated and exclusive.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg was cooperative, Imam Ali told the audience. Mayor Bloomberg worked with NYC's Muslim community. He met with Muslim leaders, so he could understand their concerns. He also supported the construction of the so-called "Ground Zero" mosque, even though 70% of New Yorkers were against it. Mayor Bloomberg was committed to the U.S. constitution. He believed that every U.S. citizen had a right to worship and that that right could not be compromised.

Many Muslims, who were harassed, according to Imam Ali, did not have a good relationship with the wider community. They were exclusive and did not engage with non-Muslims. To foster a better relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, Imam Ali encouraged his followers to engage with their surrounding non-Muslim communities.

The Muslim-Jewish relationship, Imam Ali noted, still is fragile. Both communities mistrust each other. Nevertheless, promoting Muslim-Jewish dialogue is important. Imam Ali explained how he spoke at several NYC synagogues. At first, the congregations did not trust him or his message of peaceful co-existence. But later on, they began to accept him and his message.

To further mutual understanding, Imam Ali and Rabbi Mark Schneier established the first Imam-Rabbi summit in the U.S. At the summit, Jewish and Muslim delegations created the "exchange-visit" program, whereby Muslims and Jews would visit one another's places of worship. The program, Imam Ali said, was an important step. It promoted mutual respect and understanding between the two religious groups.

Imam Ali and Rabbi Shneier led other programs, meant to further inter-religious tolerance. They started the Interfaith Dialogue Conference. Attended by religious leaders from the around the world, the Conference promotes peace initiatives between religious groups. In March 2011, Rabbi Mark Schneier, as the President of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, organized a demonstration in Times Square. Participants, using the motto “Today I am a Muslim too,” protested Rep. Peter King’s hearings in Congress about the radicalization of the Muslim community in the U.S.

To address inter-faith tensions, the Muslim community needs to be more involved in America’s civil society, Imam Ali concluded. Muslims must reach out to other communities. They cannot be exclusive. The media, Imam Ali added, shapes perceptions about the U.S. Muslim community. It should focus on the positives—Muslim-Jewish cooperation, for example—as well as the negatives, such as Islamic terrorism. The government, too, needs to ensure that Muslims’ rights are protected. Lastly, Muslims need to study the Koran, so they understand that the Koran does not sanction ignorance and mistrust towards other religions.

Question and Answer Session

Q: After 9/11, you led a prayer in Yankee Stadium. Why did you also read from the Koran? What restrictions prevent Muslims from communicating with other religious groups?

I read from the Koran because I wanted to deliver the Koran’s peaceful message. The reading had nothing to do with prayer. For me, prayer is solely about my relationship with God. I participated in the Yankee Stadium Prayers, not because of religious reasons, but because of my deep sadness over the loss of human life on 9/11.

Some argue that inter-faith dialogue compromises one’s faith. I do not agree with that. We do not mix religions. Muslims pray one way—Christians and Jews another. Inter-faith dialogue simply identifies common interests and concerns, so different religious groups can work and live together.

Q: What challenges do Islamic Centers face in America? How do you feel about the U.S. government’s plan to construct an Islamic Center near Ground Zero?

Some Americans, unfortunately, oppose the construction of new mosques in the U.S. But the U.S. government and constitution ensure our right to build our places of worship. When a community board discusses the construction of a new mosque, local citizens are allowed to voice their concerns. Sometimes, the board rejects the construction plans. But that usually occurs only when the Muslim community has not reached out to its non-Muslim neighbors.

I must clarify: the mosque is not located on Ground Zero. It is two blocks away. In 2010, Nick Lazio, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, said a terrorist syndicate was funding the mosque and that it would be victory symbol for the Al Qaeda. Soon after, people began protesting the mosque’s construction. I believe the mosque issue is being politicized.

Q: As an Indonesian who lives in the U.S., how do you see the Israel-Palestine conflict? Also, how do people in the U.S. celebrate their religious holidays?

I believe that the main problem is mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians. Talking to both sides, it seems that they want the conflict to end. It is, indeed, a complicated issue. Many efforts, both political and non-political, have failed to solve it.

In the U.S., religious holidays are both social and religious. People are not excluded. Everyone is welcome.

Q: How do you respond to people who say that you are not a real Muslims?

It took a long time to get used to those comments. But now I take them as a challenge. Sometimes, I respond to them, explaining my stance and my work. Other times, I just ignore them.