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Akbar Ahmed & Judea Pearl Stress Need for Dialogue

By Rebecca Byerly

Pittsburgh: In an unprecedented event, Professor Judea Pearl, father of Daniel Pearl the journalist who was killed in Pakistan, engaged in a dialogue with Muslim scholar Dr. Akbar Ahmed at the University of Pittsburgh, Bellefield Auditorium on October 23.

It was Pearl's first dialogue and some members of the Jewish and Muslim community in Pittsburgh had expressed apprehension about such an effort. The two men were uncertain of who would show up for the event and what would unfold in the dialogue but Ahmed and Pearl were received by more than 400 audience members, including President of the Islamic Council of Pittsburgh, Umar Slator, and President of the American Jewish Association in Pittsburgh, Mark Frank, curious to know and learn what the speakers would share with one another.

"In Pearl I saw great compassion, here is a man whose son has been killed, in the most brutal of ways and through this tragedy he saw a need for the bridges of dialogue," Ahmed said, who is a former high commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain and chair of Islamic Studies at American University.

Pearl is president of the Daniel Pearl Foundation, established in 2002, to "continue Danny's mission of dialogue and friendship, and to address the root causes of his murder." Pearl is also a professor of computer science and director of the Cognitive Systems Laboratory at the University of California, Los Angeles.

"Hatred took the life of my son and hatred I will fight till the end of my life," said Pearl acknowledging his son's death as a reason for dialogue. He also revealed one of the key reasons he agreed to come to Pittsburgh and talk with Dr. Akbar Ahmed. "Ahmed was the only Muslim author I read who has expressed empathy for the sense of siege Israelis feel," Pearl said. "Empathy is the essence of understanding and prerequisite to dialogue."

Ahmed connects the statement in his book 'Islam Under Siege' with the two most frequently repeated of God's 99 names, Rahman and Rahim, (Beneficent and Merciful) to express the compassionate nature of Islam.

Members of the audience spoke out against religious hatred.

Faizan Haq, offered his apologies for not being there as a Pakistani and a human being to speak out against Pearl's murder. Haq is the Secretary General of the Pakistani American Congress. Haq also pointed to the violence perpetuated toward Muslims in the United States.

"On behalf of the people of Pakistan I beg for forgiveness for the murder of your son Danny Pearl," said Umar Ghuman, a member of the National Parliament of Pakistan.

Ghuman and Haq encouraged Pakistanis and Americans to move forward in dialogue towards a greater understanding of each other.

According to Dr Akbar Ahmed, the apologies, an unprecedented effort on such a momentous occasion, speaks of the true nature of Islam, compassion and justice.

In a personal interview Pearl shared his thoughts about the apologies of Ghuman and Haq.

Pearl appreciated Ghuman and Haq's apologies. He said, "I am grateful to these brave officials for making public statements which to me represent sincere commitment to educate the people toward tolerance and acceptance." However, he wanted the clerics to speak out against the murder of his son.

Ahmed said, the murder of innocent people like Danny Pearl is never acceptable in Islam. The Qur'an states that "Killing a single innocent person is like killing all of humanity,(Surah:Verse 32).

"You have the freedom to interpret your religion any way you want but you have an obligation to interpret it in a way that would benefit mankind," said Pearl.

"People had a chance to speak but also listen, people heard each other through Akbar and Judea in a way they normally are unable to hear one another," said David Shtulman, Executive Director of The American Jewish Committee and organizer of the event.

Eleanor Loftis, an audience member, apologized on behalf of the Catholic Church stating that the slaughter of Jews and Muslims in the name of God and religion throughout history was wrong.

Ahmed and Pearl had a follow-up discussion on at the Pittsburgh Press Club the following morning. Though Pearl and Ahmed are advocates for a two-state solution in Israel they do not believe it will significantly decrease the violence in the Muslim World. Ahmed asked the audience to consider the situation in Israel and how it will affect the Muslim world.

"Though peace in Israel is important, let's say today both societies are at peace, do you think that will make any difference in the violence and murders in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and other Muslim nations?"

According to Ahmed the answer is obviously no, the violence will continue and the only way to quell it is through dialogue and the growing need for all people to seek compassion and provide justice to the dispossessed.

Interest in this type of dialogue has been shown from cities across the United States such as, Washington D.C., Detroit and San Francisco. There has been talk of continuing this dialogue in countries such as Pakistan and Egypt.

In response to the question, why dialogue now, Shtulman responded, "Some things take a long time to accomplish but just because they will not be completed in your lifetime does not mean that you don't start the effort."

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