



Minutes – Meeting of 7/17/2008

Attendance: Marty Melkonian, Chair; Usman Ahmad; Habeeb Ahmed; Irfan Amin; Paul Auerbach; Norma Cohen; Kate Ehlers; Richard Goodman; Joyce Gorycki; Jacqueline Jill Rito; Jean Judd; Faroque Khan; Zubeida Lunat; Alkhateeb Muhammad; Ruth Reeves; Lilyan Strassman; Deborah Swartz; Ruth Swartz; Dolores Tibbets; Richard Tibbets; John Tilton; Latifa Woodhouse; Qamar Zaman.

Marty Melkonian called the meeting to order at 7:45.

Minutes: The members waived reading of the minutes from the 6/19/08 meeting and approved them as written. Norma noted that we are now sending our minutes via email to TIA National office as well as to local TIA leaders around the country.

Treasurer's Report: Dolores reported that we received membership dues totaling \$70 plus a \$25 "tithes" from The Shepherd's Singers, whom we had given a \$250 honorarium following their performance at January's "Stop the Hate" vigil held at Hofstra. We also paid banking fees of \$5 for the month. Therefore, our treasury increased from \$2,295.81 to \$2,385.81 for the period 6/19/08 to 7/17/08. Dolores commented that many members write messages in strong support of TIA's mission on their membership forms.

Announcements: Norma offered a belated thank you to Lilyan Strassman for all her efforts to make May's Clergy/Religious luncheon a success.

We passed around a greeting card for members to sign. The card will be sent to Fr. Henry Benack, who has been unable to attend our meetings lately due to health concerns.

Faith Based Funding: We had an extended discussion about Bush's Faith Based funding initiative and whether TIA-LI should issue a formal statement on the issue. We also reviewed TIA-National's press release which called Obama's plan an improvement, but urged him to include stronger constitutional safeguards. (See the website <http://www.tialliance.org/the-news> for the TIA press release).

Some members felt that government should never fund religiously affiliated organizations, some believed we should do so only if they meet strict regulations regarding non-discrimination in hiring as well as in the provision of services. Concern was expressed as to how to provide services if all religiously affiliated organizations were denied federal funds. Since it appeared that we could not arrive at a consensus, we decided to not issue a statement at this time.

FISA Legislation: Marty noted that the new Foreign Services Intelligence Act (FISA) gives the President more powers than he had under the old FISA law, while also granting

immunity for telecommunications companies which complied with the Bush administration's illegal requests for their records. Marty noted that the new law will hamper the ability of reporters to get information from confidential sources because of the likelihood of reporters' communications being monitored under the new FISA law. He suggested that we read an article by Chris Hedges, whose article ends with:

"The monitoring of suspected terrorists, with proper oversight, is a crucial part of our national security. But this law is not about keeping us safe, which can -- and should -- be done in a constitutional manner and with judicial oversight. It is about using terrorism as a pretext to permit wholesale spying and to silence voices that will allow us to maintain an open society."

You can read the entire article online at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-hedges11-2008jul11,0,1553314.story>

Norma noted that the ACLU has filed a lawsuit against this ominous legislation.

Interreligious Conference in Madrid: Faroque Khan spoke about the global interfaith conference in Madrid July 16th to July 18th. Approximately 300 religious leaders attended this conference, including Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, Christians, Jews and Muslims. It was hosted by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Faroque noted that the conference stressed the importance of dialogue among the world's religious leaders.

At our TIA-LI meeting, it was noted that people still ask "Why don't Muslims speak up for religious tolerance?" In truth, Muslims do speak up, but their statements do not get reported in the Western press. Latifa noted that it is our job as members of the Interfaith Alliance to publicize such statements and try to get the media to report on them.

See the "Special Report" following these minutes for more details about the Madrid Conference.

Iran Blockade: We discussed House Congressional Resolution 362, in which Rep Gary Ackerman of the 5th Congressional District (parts of Nassau & Queens) threatens a blockade of Iran in order to force them to shut down what many suspect is a nuclear weapons program. We are concerned since a blockade is an act of war. We don't need to instigate a war against another Muslim country!

Rep. Ackerman claims that he is not calling for a blockade, but his Resolution contains language calling for:

"...prohibiting the export to Iran of all refined petroleum products; imposing stringent inspection requirements on all persons, vehicles, ships, planes, trains, and cargo entering or departing Iran; and prohibiting the international movement of all Iranian officials not involved in negotiating the suspension of Iran's nuclear program..."

Since a blockade would be needed to impose Ackerman's "stringent inspection requirements," his assertion that this is not a call for a blockade is contradicted by the wording of his Resolution.

We are troubled by the fact that this resolution has 252 cosponsors, almost ½ of the members of the House. Several members have asked to have their names withdrawn as cosponsors, but the Ackerman resolution remains a serious threat. It could easily lead to an expanded war in the Middle East.

Further Iran Blockade Activity Since Our July 17th Meeting:

Several TIA-LI members met with Rep. Ackerman's aide at his Bayside office on July 25th to ask him to withdraw this resolution, or at least reword it to take out the most explosive language. The aide said that he would contact us after reviewing Ackerman's calendar when he returns to the district.

Since July 23rd, several peace groups have been circulating email stating that the anti-war movement is winning this fight to block Res. 362. The emails cite a July 22 article by Mark Weisbrot of AlterNet at <http://www.alternet.org/story/92395/> However, Resolution 362 has not been withdrawn. The list of cosponsors has grown to 259 as of July 31, and a companion Resolution in the Senate has 49 cosponsors (both represent an increase in cosponsors since the July 22 Weisbrot article). Therefore, it is far from dead and remains a serious threat to stability in the Middle East.

TIA-LI urges all members to contact their congress members and ask them to (a) not join as cosponsor; or (2) withdraw their support if they are already listed as cosponsor. You may call the congressional switchboard at 800-828-0498 and ask to be connected to your congress member.

People's Agenda: Marty reported that the People's Agenda now has about 3,000 signatures. The plan is to have a presentation of the petitions on October 15th, when the final presidential debate is held at Hofstra University.

Reports From Other Organizations:

- Dick Goodman reported that the MICAH project, which had been run by Catholic Charities, is now being run by the Long Island Council of Churches, with offices at Touro College in Central Islip.
- Dick also reported that the Central American Refugee Center of Hempstead is holding its 25th Anniversary Dinner on November 19th in Westbury. Following Dick's presentation, we agreed to donate \$50 to the Center.
- Joyce Gorycki reported that New Yorkers Against Gun Violence (NYAGV) will be holding their annual benefit on November 17th in Manhattan. Following a brief discussion, we agreed to make a \$50 donation to NYAGV.

NEXT INTERFAITH ALLIANCE MEETING
The next TIA meeting will be Wednesday, August 27th at 7:30pm at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock 48 Shelter Rock Road, Manhasset. Call (516) 627-6560 for directions, or visit the website www.uucsr.org

Respectfully submitted,
Richard Tibbets

UPCOMING EVENTS

Hiroshima Memorial

On this 63rd Commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima
Wednesday, August 6, 2008, 7:00 to 9:00 PM

For further details about the Hiroshima Memorial, visit the TIA-LI website at
www.interfaithalliance-li.org

SPECIAL REPORT:

Highlights of press coverage for July 16th to July 18th Madrid Conference

On his weekly radio program *State Of Belief*, Interfaith Alliance President Welton Gaddy interviewed Rabbi Brad Hirschfield about this conference, which both Gaddy and Hirschfield attended. Rabbi Brad Hirschfield is author of *You Don't Have To Be Wrong For Me To Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism.*

To begin with, Gaddy rued that this conference received very little press attention. He said that it was unique, maybe even unprecedented, that this conference was convened by Muslims and hosted by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Gaddy called the meeting historic and reported that “...*leaders from many different faiths, Christian, Jewish, Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus agreed that this event was a big step for the future of religious tolerance in this world.*”

Hirschfield called the conference “a remarkably hopeful event.” He was very moved to hear King Abdullah bring together people of different faiths “...and declare before them that diversity is a sacred principal in the tradition he calls his own.” Hirschfield also was very pleased that Saudi TV broadcast images of so many leaders of various faiths engaging in dialogue. He said that this was in stark contrast to the usual depiction of people of other religions as “crusading monsters” and “Zionist devils.”

When Gaddy asked whether he thought that this conference had political motives, Hirschfield replied that none of us have “pure” motives. He also referred to an old rabbinic tradition that says “from impure motives or from less than selfless motives come pure and selfless acts.”

Following this discussion of the Madrid conference, Gaddy & Hirschfield discussed Hirschfield’s new TV program *American Pilgrimage*, in which he engages in interfaith dialogue with leading Imams and Muslim thinkers.

*See below for a link to the **State of Belief** website to listen online to this show or to download a podcast.*

Rabbi Michael Lerner, head of Tikkun and co-founder of the Network of Spiritual Progressives also attended the Madrid conference. He was initially skeptical, even planned to skip the conference due to various grievances he has against Saudi Arabia. He did attend, however, and was surprised “to hear the Saudi King not only affirm the centrality of tolerance and dialogue...” but to express opinions and concerns very similar to Lerner’s own. For instance, Lerner reported that the King affirmed the goal of religious tolerance, stating that “Religions have not caused wars... but rather extremists who have misused religion in a hurtful and harmful way.” Lerner reports the King said people respond to extremists “Because there is a deep spiritual crisis in the world, and it is that crisis which creates the conditions in which exploitation, crime, drugs, family breakdown and extremism flourish.” Lerner also reported the King saying, “... it should be the task of the various religious communities of the world to work together to overcome that spiritual crisis,” and that such action would require religious cooperation, mutual respect and tolerance.

Lerner also said, “It remains to be seen whether the King can impose his new tolerance over a Saudi society which has not done much yet to embrace this new tolerance.

Lerner observed:

“This was obviously a new direction being articulated by the King of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, it was not just being articulated for a Western audience. The King had convened a similar meeting of Islamic scholars and thinkers in Saudi Arabia six weeks before, and there had championed this new approach for Islam as the one most authentically rooted in traditional Islam.”

Links to Press Coverage of the Conference

July 18, 2008: *Christian Science Monitor*

An in-depth two page report on the conference

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0718/p04s07-woeu.html>

July 26-27 episode of TIA’s *State of Belief* radio program

Scroll to bottom of “July 26-27, 2008” section of this webpage, then click on control to listen to program online (or go to *State of Belief* homepage and download podcast). NOTE: the program is about 35 minutes long. The segment in which TIA’s Welton Gaddy discusses the Madrid conference with Rabbi Brad Hirschfield begins at the 19 minute mark and lasts about five minutes.

Following their discussion of the Madrid conference, Gaddy and Hirschfield discuss Hirschfield’s new interfaith program, *American Pilgrimage*, which appears on Bridges TV.

<http://www.stateofbelief.com/show-archive/133-july-26-27-2008->

July 20, 2008 report by **Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun** on his experiences at conference (19 page report)

<http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/article.php?story=20080720154203145>

More Links to Press Coverage of the Conference

July 15, 2008 *New York Times*

Very brief report stating that Madrid conference will be held

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/world/europe/15briefs-ACONFERENCEO_BRF.html?scp=4&sq=saudi%20arabia%20madrid&st=cse

July 28, 2008 *Newsday*:

Newsday did not report on Madrid conference prior to its happening.

However, they did report on a subsequent call by Al-Qaida for the killing of King Abdullah for leading the conference.

<http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/world/sns-ap-al-qaida-tape.0.729416.story>

From the Interfaith Alliance - National Office "Media Roundup"

What Does 'Jihad' Really Mean?

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92552774&ft=1&f=1016>

NPR - 7/17/08

After years of using the word "jihadist" to describe terrorists who carry out attacks against civilians and the U.S. military, the Bush administration has finally realized that doing so actually pays those groups a compliment in the eyes of some Muslims. Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Bush administration has relied on terms like "jihadist" and "Islamic extremists." But jihad has very positive connotations in the Islamic world. It is akin to religious duty: when someone wants to better themselves, they embark on a jihad. Whether it's to quit smoking, pray more, and in some cases, fight off anyone preventing them from practicing their religion. "Just like you wouldn't call Josef Stalin a hero of the revolution, you don't want to call Osama bin Laden a jihadist. He loves it," says Duncan MacInnes, a spokesman for the State Department's Counterterrorism Communication Center. The State Department has issued a memo to all its employees cautioning them against using Islamic references whenever condemning terrorist attacks. The Department of Homeland Security has also advised its employees to avoid those same mistakes.