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Building Interfaith Bridges: Dirce and Nohad Toulan's Contribution to Interfaith Dialogue

Mark Rosenbaum

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Dirce and Nohad Toulan's Contribution to Interfaith Dialogue

A conversation with Rabbi Daniel Isaak, Sister Mollie Reavis, and Imam Mikal Shabazz

Moderated by Mark Rosenbaum

In early January, 2014, the Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies brought together key leaders of Portland's faith community to remember Nohad and Dirce Toulan's contributions to interfaith dialogue. What follows are excerpts from that discussion.

Mark Rosenbaum: *What a pleasure to be here. I think all of us were shocked at the circumstances that took Nohad and Dirce from us. But we are now resolved that their legacy shall be part of what propels us forward in our working with community.*

One of those strong memories, and their strong presence, was in the field of interfaith relations — Nohad, a very devout Muslim, a very learned man, and his wife Dirce, a very devout Catholic and very learned herself. They were married for over fifty years and were able to sustain their individual religious values and perspectives, while at the same time embracing the diversity of the community around them. Their example was and is extraordinary, and one we want to focus on today.

We have a panel here of people who are very familiar with Nohad and Dirce and their work in the community. Allow me to introduce them to you. Rabbi Daniel Isaak is the head Rabbi of Congregation Neveh Shalom. He grew up in San Francisco and taught Hebrew there, and was an undergraduate at the UC Berkeley where he graduated in 1971. He served as the Rabbi in Hackensack, New Jersey before coming to Portland to lead Neveh Shalom.

He has a very distinguished career in Portland and I won't go through all the involvements he's had except to say as it relates to our conversation today. He leads, on an annual basis,

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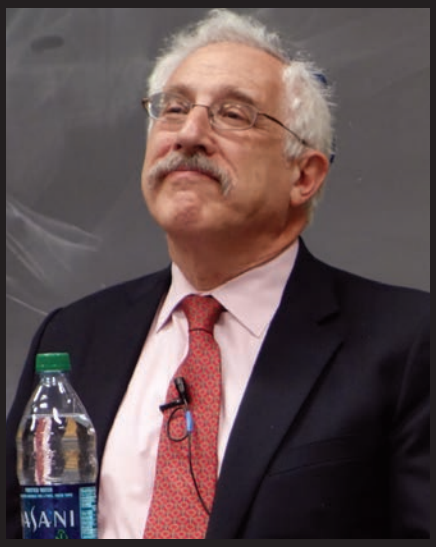
the community Passover Seder, which brings together some 150 clergy, politicians, community leaders, and various religious organizations to share in this most colorful ritual and reenactment of the Jewish, what he calls, Master Story, which is absolutely right.

He, like many people, was inspired after 9-11 to say we need to do something more in terms of our interreligious outreach. And so he was instrumental in organizing a Muslim, Jewish, Arab dialogue group the purpose of which is for participants to learn about each other, come to trust each other, so that they might discuss, with respect, the most difficult issues which divide us. In addition to that, he's very involved with the Ecumenical Ministry of Oregon and the work that they do.

We also have Imam Shabazz whose background is quite impressive. He defines himself as a Muslim thinker, faith leader, father, grandfather, husband and businessman – a great number of mantles to wear. He is the founding member, director, and Imam of the Oregon Islam Chaplains Organization. He's also very involved in prisoner reentry, a key area that is, of course, not normally highlighted, but can have such a profound impact on our state and on individuals. And in that capacity, he serves as Director of the Al-Hijrah Fullway reentry residential facility and a member of Mercy Corps Northwest's ROAR Reentry Alliance. He is a promoter and participant in regional and national interfaith communication and collaboration, with long established working relationships with Jewish, Christian, and nondenominational faith-based organizations. He works to build bridges of understanding and common good to our shared living space. He is, in addition, the former award winning Chair of the City of Portland Bureau of Development Services and Diversity Development Committee, and founding member and Co-Chair of the Diverse Empowered Employees of Portland.

Finally, we have Sister Mollie Reavis, who has been involved with Nohad and Dirce as well. A native Oregonian, born in Portland, and raised in Medford. She graduated from St. Mary's High School in Medford and entered the religious life as a Holy Names novitiate at Marylhurst here in Portland. She earned her BA in Mathematics at Marylhurst and spent forty-four years as a teacher and administrator in Catholic high schools, most recently at St. Mary's Academy in Portland.

During her early years she also earned Master's degrees from the University of Oregon and the University of San Francisco. She has received grants from the National Science Foundation and spent two summers at Princeton as a Woodrow Wilson scholar. In the fall of 2001, Sister Mollie participated in a sabbatical program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and began to study Christian-Muslim relations. She has attended two summer conferences on Christian-Muslim relations at Georgetown University. Since '03, she's been a



Rabbi Daniel Isaak

Imam Mikal Shabazz

Sister Mollie Reavis

member of the Institute for Christian-Muslim Understanding in Portland and she considers it a great blessing to be able to interact with Muslims and Christians of various denominations. After serving at St. Mary's Academy for 32 years, Sister Mollie retired in '08. She continues to live at Holy Redeemer in Portland and engages in interfaith dialogue and leadership.

So, welcome to our panel and thank you for joining us. Could you spend a minute and talk about the state of interfaith relations in Portland at the time you first were involved with one another. How would you characterize that circumstance in Portland at the time? Rabbi Isaak.

Rabbi Isaak: I came from a community that had a very active interreligious community. It was a smaller community than Portland. And I was quite disappointed that a similar interaction didn't exist here. Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon is certainly a wonderful institution that gathers together the evangelical community, and the Archdiocese and mainline churches. And has also reached out to the non-Christian community, even so they are simply an ecumenical group.

When I came here, I didn't know if there were any Muslims in the community. They were very quiet. I mean, I did meet a few leaders through this interreligious committee. But, I would say that many in the community, if they knew Muslims in the community, they didn't know who they were because they didn't have a public presence. In many ways that changed after 9-11.

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Imam Shabazz: Well, the state of interfaith relations at that time was somewhat benign. My community involvement was with, and had been, and continues to be with the ministries of Wallace D. Fard Muhammad because, on a national level, we were engaged and were encouraged to be engaged with interfaith dialogue and understanding across the board. In fact, Chiara Lubich, who was the head of Focolare Movement with the Catholic movement and who was a Catholic nun, was a very close friend of my Imam. So that movement was already happening on a national scale.

Here locally, we were moving in that direction, having those dialogues. And, the first engagements that I'm familiar with, that expanded that work, were with Rabbi Rose and Rabbi Ariyeh Hirschfield. Rabbi Rose and the Jewish Federation of Portland came to the forefront during the Bosnian war. That's when we intersected with the National Conference of Christian and Jews, and, also with the Albina Ministerial Alliance.

There was this work that was going on but as a whole, there was very little work going on that we were aware of. So when I met Dr. Toulan, in that period of time there was a little activity.

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Sister Reavis: At the time I first met the Toulans, I must agree with the Rabbi and the Imam that there were some interfaith relations going on in Portland but certainly, not as much as after 9-l1. I did attend some of the Collins lectures that Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon sponsored. And I know that it started out basically as an ecumenical Christian organization, but I believe they had begun to include some interfaith partners. Not as many as they do today.

My interfaith relations had to do mainly with families of students that we had at St.

Mary's Academy. We had several Jewish and Muslim girls, and I got to know and appreciate their families. But it was informal. Just among people who were willing to reach out and get to know one another. So, when I look back, I think 9-11 was just a milestone. I mean, it really was the event that woke us up to the fact that we really didn't know that much about one another.

Mark Rosenbaum: *One of the things that's interesting though amongst the three of you is that 9-11 became a galvanizing time which you did not use to separate or to inflame circumstances, but rather used as an opportunity to bring people closer together and to learn. And that's terrifically instructive. Imam Shabazz, you have talked about how Dr. Toulan would quietly, as you put it, tutor you from the sidelines in terms of message and impact. But do other panel members here remember times of how the Toulan's involvement assisted you in your interfaith efforts and understanding? Sister Mollie?*

Sister Reavis: Well, in 2013, Mr. Wajdi Said, I think many of you probably know him. He and the Reverend Chuck Cooper started this group called the Institute for Christian Muslim Understanding. And at the present time, Dr. Jan Abushakrah and I are the current Co-Chairs. But I remember back in 2013, September 11th, our very first public event, that Dr. Toulan was one of the main speakers, along with Dr. Dave McCreery from Willamette University.

Dr. Toulan was willing to share his gifts and talents, and was so generous that he spoke twice at some of our events. But at the first one, I always felt that he got us off to a very good start. The topic was the importance of understanding each other.

Later on, I heard him speak at so many different venues, the topics ranging from things like Arabs and Muslims in the media, the then the current and changing situation in Egypt, and also misunderstood passages in the Quran, holy places, Christian and Muslim perspectives and so on. He just...I think as it's been mentioned, he was very learned and very generous in sharing his knowledge with others.

There was a letter written in 2007 by, I believe it was 138 Muslim scholars, "A Common Word between Us and You." This letter focused on the foundational principles of love of God and love of neighbor in all three of the Abrahamic religions. Conferences and workshops have been held about this letter all over the world, including here in Portland where we had dinners and discussions and so on. I just always felt like, you know, Dr. Toulan must have been a very busy person. But, Dirce and Nohad would show up and just be willing to participate in conversations with whoever wanted to speak with them.

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Mark Rosenbaum: *Imam Shabazz, any further comments, thoughts about how he impacted interfaith relations?*

Imam Shabazz: Well, as has been stated, his presence in lending his influence, there was no doubt that Dr. Toulan's influence, politically, economically, and intellectually was greatly respected. And among the Muslim, particularly the Arab students, he was the one person in the community that some disagreed with but very few were willing to challenge. And that went a long way, because what it did was it held at bay the excitement to promote or to push forward an agenda that may have been extreme. Even though some extreme behavior did manifest itself, it was very difficult to come from a cultural point of view, a language point of view, a political or re-

ligious point of view and claim Muslim, and then run up against Dr. Toulan's presence and his influence because he was a stabilizer.

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He was a stabilizer. Because it was very difficult to deal with him, because his reach was global, not regional and local. So he was a very stabilizing entity within our community at a time when stability was definitely needed. And he would do it in such a way that did not put himself center-stage as a dictator or controller. And he never really even identified himself as a community leader. He just identified himself as an intellectual person who knew and understood his religion, the value of the Muslim community integrating into society and addressing societal needs not from a selfish self-image, or selfish position, but from an inclusive position. And that's what he did. And he did it very, very well.

His key was always in education. Utilizing education and engagement to change the circumstances.

Rabbi Isaak: There are two things that I could add. One, was the he really knew the Arab world. I remember when the when the United States was going to war in Iraq, he spoke about how Iraq was really very different from his home in Egypt. And that the Iraqi people, the country, and the diversity, the problems, and the way people react in Iraq was different from Egypt. That somehow we have this amorphous sense that the whole Arab world is the same. And he was able to say, you know, there really are differences from place to place, from Morocco all the way to Iraq.

The other thing that I think was very important: in our dialogue group, the Muslim participants were very reticent to be self-critical. Now I don't know what went on in private conversation, but in our conversations. We Jews are always self-critical. And I think some in the group misunderstood that as being, I wouldn't say disloyal, but not Zionist or supporters of Israel. But Dr. Toulan understood that, because he could also be self-critical. Self-critical about the things that were going in the Muslim world. The lack of leadership that upset him enormously.

I came, in particular, to hear his presentation during the elections in Egypt. And, he was very, very hopeful and very optimistic. And, he discussed Salafi's as different from the Muslim brotherhood as distinguished from ... he was very hopeful.

The last conversation that I had with him, he was very, very discouraged, about the future of Egypt, the future of his homeland. But he could share those kinds of things without feeling that someone was going to use it against him in some way, that he could be honest and forthright in all those kinds of things.

Maybe to summarize what I'm hearing, perhaps from all three of us, there was a kind of respected nobility about him. You know, whether it's holding down the young people...[group chuckling]... or whatever. You know, when he spoke, when he expressed an opinion, it was not simply something off the top of his head. It was something that was really very important.

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There is an article in today's *New York Times* by Thomas Friedman in which he quotes from a new book by, I think, a foreign minister in Jordan, who says that the issue is an internal Arab problem in the Arab world. And it has to do with having a sense of understanding between all the groups. As I read that article this morning, I thought to myself, Nohad could have written that book. He also had the sense of love, but also ability to be critical.

Mark Rosenbaum: *Your comment about self-criticism, Nohad loved many things, the United States, of course, being one of them. He could sit down instantly and tell you what was right about U.S. foreign policy, in his opinion, and what was wrong. And that dialogue you talk about he'd enter into, as it relates to interfaith work is part of an academic exercise that brought the nobility and integrity he had which was, I'm willing to examine any position and discuss it from a position of thoughtful context. And that's what made him, I think, a such a great partner through the years.*

...I once met Nohad and Dirce at an anti-war demonstration ...they were probably the best dressed people there.
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Sister Reavis: I would like to just mention, Mark, that I once met Nohad and Dirce at an anti-war demonstration and also at a protest march. As you can imagine, they were probably the best dressed people there. [Group chuckling] They stood out. I thought about that when you were saying they had sort of a nobility about them. And I thought, it must be a worthy and good cause for them to show up.

Mark Rosenbaum: *So let's conclude. I'll summarize these last two questions in a way. How would each of you characterize the state of interfaith relations today? So here we are many, many years since you first met the Toulan's. And then, what steps do you think need to be taken in the next few years to embrace and move forward the ideals that Toulan's embodied?*

Imam Shabazz: Well, if we look at the dialogue, the conversation, the relationships that have been established, and the level that they started on and where they are, I think there's a lot of collaboration, communication and conversation at the top but it needs to filter down. It needs to filter down and it needs to be seen more among the adherents. It needs to get some traction in that regard. I think right now we seem to be event oriented. And when events come up we galvanize. Then we start talking to each other. But, we need to expand that conversation forward into the general populations. That self-accusing spirit that Dr. Toulan displayed, or that self-reflection, I think most religious groups and communities probably need to do a little bit more of that and recognize where we stand in terms of interfaith and recognizing each other, and the principles that we all share.

The disagreements that we may have, without being disagreeable, that's all well and good but on the fundamental primary level, in our society at least, we're still struggling with the issue of race. As Dr. Martin Luther King pointed out many years ago, eleven o'clock on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America. So we still have some hard things to deal with, in terms of how our positions are translated in terms of social, economic and political justice in our country. That's something yet to be really given some traction. Get the conversation going, at a grassroots level, and deal with the major issues that we have in our country.

We can talk, and I go to many churches and I'm surprised, even at this date in time that some churches—I don't want to say what areas, you know, Oregon City, Lake Oswego, whatever, Northeast Portland—they're still very segregated. And among us, among the Muslims, we too have a level of segregation among ourselves that we have to work through. So, the work is yet to be done. We have a model but the work is still to be done.

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Mark Rosenbaum: *Sister Mollie?*

Sister Reavis: Well, I think that what we could do in the future is to follow the Toulan's example, of being generous

with our time and talents. Going maybe out of our comfort zones to meet people of other faiths and cultures. And, recognize our shared humanity. That we have a lot more in common than we do differences and then have the courage to speak out when we hear, perhaps on the radio or TV, or on the Internet, people spreading fear through, you know, half truths and innuendos.

Any religion that's been around for a long time has chapters that we aren't all proud of. And, I think we need to acknowledge that. And maybe this is what both of you mentioned about being willing to be self-critical of the things that need criticizing but then move ahead on what we have in common.

I also have noticed that if the religion has a scripture, people who tend maybe to be extremists, cherry-pick verses. So I would suggest that we all become familiar with our own scriptures and those of other religions as much as we can, so that if we hear just one verse, and it doesn't quite sound right, at least we can get a broader view and know the true messages of the other groups' scriptures. I'll stop there.

Mark Rosenbaum: *So Rabbi Isaak, how would you characterize the state of interfaith relations today? And how do we build on the Toulans' model to move forward?*

...I agree with Imam Shabaaz that the issue has to do with trust and goodwill and it has to filter down from the clergy to the rest of the people.
—Rabbi Isaak

Rabbi Isaak: I think in some ways our local community is way ahead of what we read about in the newspaper—mosques that can't get permits to build. You know, what happened in the Ground Zero, and the kind of scandalous behavior for a country that really believes in diversity and pluralism. But I think I would agree with Imam Shabazz that the issue has to do with trust and goodwill and it has to filter down from the clergy to the rest of the people. We have to have more opportunities to get to know each other.

I mean, think about what has happened in terms of our understanding and acceptance of homosexuality. It's happened as a result of people getting to know each other. People having experience, sometimes with people in their own families, and, thereby, breaking down certain problems.

But, you know, in all of this, America is this wonderful experiment that doesn't exist anywhere else. My good friend Shakria Ahmed from the Bilal Mosque, told a story—he's from Bangladesh—he told a story of taking his son to visit his parents. It was within two years or three years of 9-11. And he prepared his son and said, now we have Muslim names. We are going to Bangladesh. I want you to know that we undoubtedly will run into trouble. People will ask questions. People will be suspicious. And, his son listened to him. And he told this story and became very emotional.

And he said, so we come home and we land in the United States in San Francisco. And he says, the fellow who's looking at our passport, looking at where we had just been, looking at our name, and said, where are you going? And they said, we're going home to Portland. And the fellow looked to them and said, welcome home. And, you know, and his son hit him in the elbow and said, see Dad, this is America! M

Mark Rosenbaum, a long time friend of Nohad and Dirce Toulan, is the President and CEO of Rosenbaum Financial, Vice Chair of the State of Oregon Welfare Review Commission, Chair of the Multnomah County Commission for Children and Families, and Vice Chair of Oregon Mentors. In addition, he chaired the Board of the Oregon Region of the National Conference of Christians and Jews from 1983 to 1986.