

State's Hughes Hosts Interfaith Dialogue

Film, panel discussion, explore common roots of Abrahamic faiths

By Michael Jay Friedman
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- U.S. Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes, hosting a screening of excerpts from the new documentary film *Three Faiths, One God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, said religion at times has been "misused as a source of division, even as an instrument of oppression or attempted justification for terrible crimes.

"Today we confront a violent extremist ideology that seeks to misuse religion to divide people."

After the April 26 screening, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Barry F. Lowenkron conducted a panel discussion with the film's producers and a panel of four religious figures.

The film seeks to overcome ideology by illustrating the similarities among the three Abrahamic faiths, and by profiling members of each faith who dedicate their effort to facilitative understanding and respect.

Among the film's observations were the similarity between the Muslim *haj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca, and the biblical Jewish *hag*, connoting a comparable pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Akbar Ahmed, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United Kingdom who currently is a professor of international relations at American University in Washington, urged distribution of the *Three Faiths* film throughout the Muslim world. Ahmed said that recently returned from a tour of Muslim nations where he found both anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism to be real problems. But he suggested these could be overcome by allowing Muslims to hear individuals like fellow panelist Rabbi David Rosen discuss their faith and speak respectfully about Islam.

Rosen, who heads the American Jewish Committee's Department for Interreligious Affairs, said the limits of pluralism are crossed when one denies the dignity of the other. All people of faith must acknowledge extremism among their co-religionists, he said.

Rosen urged a "dialogue of action," where people of different faiths, and especially young people, work together on practical initiatives such as helping the needy. (See [related article](#).)

Imam Yahya Hendi, Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, agreed, citing the New Testament's Gospel of Matthew for the need "to do social justice projects together." Hendi has conducted such projects, including a recent interfaith effort to repaint part of a local church.

“Interfaith dialogue is about partners coming together ... with mutual understanding and respect and willingness to listen to each other's story,” Hendi said.

Ahmed reminded the audience that the three Abrahamic faiths-- Christianity, Islam and Judaism – are practiced by only about one-half of the world’s population.

Three Faiths producers Gerald Krell and Meyer Odze previously created the award winning *Jews and Christians: A Journey of Faith*, a two-hour film televised in the United States over the Public Broadcasting System.

The event was the second in a series of interfaith dialogues at the State Department sponsored by Hughes. Designed to increase the knowledge and understanding by department employees, Hughes' initiative aims also to establish a model for similar efforts by employers and communities throughout the United States.

For more information, see [*The Religious Landscape of the United States*](#) and [*International Religious Freedom*](#).

Created: 26 Apr 2006 Updated: 26 Apr 2006