

ABRAHAM'S TABLE FORUM SERIES

Freedom of Speech vs. Respect for the Sacred



Reverend Chloe Breyer
Interfaith Center of New York

Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson
T'ruah

Haroon Moghul
Columnist at Al Arabiya

Fight evil speech with better speech.

It is up to the Jews to interpret the Torah since God is no longer present

The issue in the Muslim world today is the nature of how Islamic societies developed



How far dare the boundaries of free speech? How do we combat hate speech?

Abraham's table is a forum series organized by the center for interfaith affairs of Peace Islands Institute. It aims to establish a common ground among Abrahamic traditions.

This month's forum series of Abraham's Table focuses on the balance between freedom of speech and respecting the sacred. Peace Islands Institute was honored to welcome our three guest speakers to the panel all of whom shared their own insight on the issue coming from different religious backgrounds.

BIOGRAPHIES

Reverend Chloe Breyer is the Executive Director of the Interfaith Center of New York and is the episcopal priest in diocese of NY. She is also the associate priest at the St. Philips Episcopal Church in Harlem. Reverend Breyer founded and directed cathedral forums of religion and public life at cathedral of St. John the Divine. Following 9/11, she worked on an Interfaith initiative to rebuild a mosque in Afghanistan that was destroyed by US bombs. Breyer is the author of *The Close*, the story of a young woman's first year at a seminary and has contributed to chapters of *What can one person do to heal a broken world* and *Challenging the Christian rights from the heart of the Gospel*.

Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson is the Director of Education at T'ruah: the Rabbinic call for Human Rights. Formerly known as Rabbis for Human Rights in North American, this organization works to advocate human rights in North America, Israel, and the occupied territories. He was ordained in 2013 from Hebrew college. Before coming to rabbinical school he taught 5th grade in the school of Manhattan for three years and worked for many summers at URJ Eisners camps. He earned his degree in Biology from Brown University and spent his post baccalaureate semester in the Arabia institute for environmental studies.

Haroon Moghul is a columnist at Al Arabiya. He is a fellow in Muslim politics and society at the Center on National Security at Fordham Law. He writes a weekly column and is a doctoral candidate at Columbia University. Previously, he was a national securities studies Fellow at the New America Foundation. Haroon's 2006 novel, *The Order of Light* anticipated the Arab Spring. His work has been published in the *Boston Review*. In 2015, he will publish his journeys from atheism to Islam through Yale University Press entitled *How to be Muslim*.

Peace Islands Institute
Center for Interfaith Affairs

The Center for Interfaith affairs provides a common ground of dialogue for every faith and non-faith tradition to discuss, explore and understand each other, and offer suggestions for the common problems of humanity. Discussion series, panels, visits, trips, conferences, dinners, book clubs and active community services are continuously organized by the Center for Interfaith Affairs. We believe knowing is the first step to harmony and love.

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Reverend Chloe Breyer, Executive Director of the Interfaith Center of New York, offered a Christian standpoint on the tensions between freedom of speech and respecting the sacred. She spoke of how Christian baptismal vows protect freedom of speech by promising to strive for justice and peace and doing what they can for the common good. Reverend Breyer offers a solution to combating hate and offensive speech. She stresses that in the fight between hate and love, chose love. In a society where freedom of speech is protected by law, "Fight evil speech with better speech," a solution that has worked effectively for Reverend Breyer and her fellow colleagues. She brought up the issue of how society can deeply abuse freedom of speech in an effort to protect what is sacred. To promote awareness and overcome misperceptions, Breyer suggests that opening public debative ideas as well as Interfaith dialogue at the local national and international level can be among the best protections against religious tolerance and can play a positive role in strengthening democracy and combating religious hatred.



Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson, Director of Education at T'ruah, offered a tale from his tradition in an attempt to balance out these two values. The ancient tale focused on freedom of expression and how it is challenged in the absence of God. "It's up to the Jews to interpret the Torah since God is no longer present." Jews have found their freedom of expression as long as they don't abuse it. Rabbi Meirowitz believes that when you embarrass

someone in public, terrible things can happen, because when you embarrass someone you embarrass God. The lesson of this story: Restrict what you say in freedom of speech because God is listening.

Haroon Moghul, Columnist at Al Arabiya, talked about the common misperceptions of Islam being incapable of maintaining democracy. He spoke about the recent issues in the Middle East and their struggle to find a common ground in maintaining peace and prosperity. "The issue in the Muslim world today is the nature of how Islamic societies developed, the loss of a social construct and a social contract, and an attempt to figure out what comes next." Mr. Moghul mentions that many Muslim countries are currently trying to forge a durable social contract between people with many different visions of what it means to be a human being. He gives a positive example from Tunisia and the country's attempt to balance two different visions of society. The newly reconstructed Tunisian constitution developed the idea that freedom of speech should be protected as well as respect for religion and the sacred. Haroon acknowledges that every constitution needs some level of tension to forge compromise and that is where freedom of religion and respect for the sacred conflict.

