

CASE STUDY OF “RELIGIONS AND MEDIATION IN URBAN AREAS”

Descriptive title of the case:

The alleged assassination of a Muslim leader by her husband causes community and inter-community tensions.

Location (including brief description):

New York City (8.2 million people), which as a result of successive, massive and global waves of immigrants, is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse places in the world: 1/3 of the population is foreign-born; 28% is Afro-American, 27% Hispanic, 10% Asian... Consequently and also due to the USA's traditional religious freedom, New York is, both a very religiously diverse place and, tout court, a very religious place. NYC streets are literally full of places of worship belonging to different traditions and denominations: churches, synagogues, temples, etc. At the same time, every religious community is itself internally very diverse. For example, there are Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhists. Religious communities are used to being very active socially speaking and also in terms of proselytism. Other important aspects of the city are its high density and social inequalities.

Approximate start and end dates (if applicable) of the mediation process:

February – March 2009.

Different actors (religious, interreligious, political, etc.) involved (including their main characteristics and the reasons for the involvement of the mediating actors):

Actors directly involved:

- Aasiya Zubair Hassan and her husband. **A high profile Muslim couple** who co-founded Bridges TV, a channel dedicated to promote a positive public face of Islam.
- More generally: **Muslim women threatened by domestic violence, Muslim men committing domestic violence** and **the whole Muslim local community**.

Mediating actors:

- **The Interfaith Center of New York** (ICNY: www.interfaithcenter.org), whose main goal is to create understanding and respect among the different religious groups of New York as well as to encourage members of all faiths to get involved in civic participation and to help solve social issues. Its programmes and events connect religious communities with one another and also provide grass roots religious leaders with the opportunity to learn more about civic institutions throughout the city and to cooperate with key public figures. In 2009, the ICNY held its biannual retreat on domestic violence, in which eighty religious leaders and secular activists met.

The following mediators were involved through the ICNY:

- Shaykh T.A. Bashir, **an African Muslim leader, responsible for “House of Peace”, a project for educating Imams about the danger of domestic violence.**
- Sally McNicol of **CONNECT** (www.connectnyc.org), **a domestic violence non religious organisation that partners with Shaykh T.A. Bashir and the “House of Peace” project.**

CONNECT contacted Shaykh Bashir years ago through the ICNY, and has worked closely with him ever since. Bashir has attended almost every course at CONNECT’s training institute. He works with men who have abused their intimate partners, something which for many specialists this is an anathema. He also works with Imams, who are often ill equipped to deal with this problem.

Sally MacNicol of CONNECT explains that “a majority of women dealing with abusive partners prefer to seek help from family, friends, and particularly their religious leader. They are not going to seek traditional domestic violence services and they are, for many reasons, never going to go to the police.”

Shaykh Bashir grew up in Brownsville, Brooklyn. After a stint in Vietnam as a sharpshooter, he returned home to study psychology. He explains that from the beginning he knew that violence was the result of systemic social problems. Domestic violence was both a result and cause of much of it. But where were the men who could work with the male components of this vicious cycle? This is the reason why he founded the “House of Peace” project. “He’s a bit of alone ranger out there,” MacNicol says. “But he never lets domestic violence drop off the radar screen. He works with many Imams. He respects and understands them.”

It’s interesting to add that Shaykh Bashir is in many ways conservative and religious by western liberal standards and MacNicol is a feminist liberal theologian. She is unabashedly radical and progressive. “We don’t agree on everything.” She continues. “But he is vital for our work. He does not let the leaders off the hook.”

- **The network of different Muslim local leaders**, representing a diversity of cultural and ethnic groups (African, South Asian, etc.), established through “House of Peace”.
- **Other organisations of Muslim women activists:** Turning Point for Women and Families (www.turningpoint-ny.org) and Peaceful Families Project (<http://peacefulfamilies.org>), both created in order to combat domestic violence into the Muslim community.

Key information related to the background and the context of the case (before the mediation process):

Domestic violence is a crime that afflicts all communities, regardless of their social, ethnic or religious background. Still, the Muslim community in America suffers disproportionately, or so many Muslims in New York believe it (“If a Jew or Christian commits domestic violence, will the media report it as a religious act?”, they wonder). This is one reason why, when domestic violence occurs between Muslims, there is an increasingly strong condemnation by their leadership. This particular case –involving a couple of Muslim leaders very active in publicly promoting a positive image of Islam- needed a particular and urgent response from the community.

Initial objectives of the mediation intervention:

- To fight domestic violence in the Muslim local community and raise awareness about it, particularly among men.
- To fight the predictable negative consequences of the case in the perception (or self perception) of the Muslim local people and in the raising of tensions between Muslim and other communities.

Brief description of the development of the mediation carried out and of the case itself:

The same week Aasiya Zubair Hassan died, Shaykh T.A. Bashir, an Afro-American Muslim and the founder of the “House of Peace” project for educating Imams about the danger of domestic violence, advocated for Imams to dedicate their Friday Sermon (Khutba) to this issue.

Imam Sulaimane Khonate of Masjid Al-Aqsa (an African Mosque), spoke about the importance of treating one’s wife properly. Khonate deals with as many as twenty incidents a week related to domestic violence, and is closely counseled by Shaykh Bashir.

Imam Shamsi Ali, an Indonesian Muslim who represents both the Islamic Cultural Center and the Jamaica Muslim Center, in Queens (a primarily South Asian mosque), argued that domestic violence is a community problem, not a private issue. “It is related to everyone. That is why we have to talk about it.” He also clarified several Hadith, or sayings of the prophet, that are often misinterpreted to hide domestic violence. “There is a saying of the Prophet... where he says to keep family life secret. But he didn’t mean abuses. Abuses must be reported.”

Talib Abdur-Rashid, the senior Imam at the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, had already planned a Khutba on domestic violence when he heard that others were engaged. “We’ve been doing this for years.” He said, about his work since. “Every Friday we speak about social and spiritual issues. Sometimes it’s poverty, sometimes it’s Gaza, sometimes it’s violence in the family.” He is acutely aware of how the domestic violence carried out by Muslims makes Islam look bad, even though it is against Islamic law. “How are we going to spread the word about our community and work, if we let these things happen?” he asked his community. “Domestic violence is a sin.” He says. “The Prophet spoke about this in his last sermon.”

Evaluation of the grade of success in reaching the initial objectives:

Many Imams responded to Shaykh Bashir's call for action. After Imam Talib's Khutba, even several people sought referrals. No consequent interreligious conflicts were reported.

Mediator resources mobilised (human, spiritual, community, etc. resources belonging to the involved actors or resources of the mediating actors):

- Both the religious and civil leadership of Shaykh Bashir.
- The religious sensitivity of CONNECT, who has a branch ("CONNECT Faith") specialised in working with religious communities.
- The moral authority and religious knowledge of the Imams.
- The linking work between religious and civic leaders of the ICNY.