

# CRT Blogs

## Laura's Blog - 2012



My name is Laura and I am currently a second-year student at New College of Florida, located in Sarasota, FL. My area of concentration is Political Science with a minor in International Studies, specifically focused on South Asia. I am interning with the Center for Religious Tolerance (CRT) during January Interterm 2012, and will be attending a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) conference on women, religion and peacebuilding with CRT Director Andy Blanch January 4-6. My undergraduate liberal arts education is allowing me to explore a wide variety of topics, and I have recently begun to study different avenues of peacebuilding. I stumbled upon CRT when I was researching peacebuilding initiatives in Florida, and realized its values meshed well with my own. I will be traveling to India next fall for a semester abroad, and as part of my program I will intern with a grassroots development program that helps Indian women with small-scale business ventures. I hope my internship with

CRT will allow me to explore religious peacebuilding, an area that I feel is particularly relevant to my studies in South Asia.

*January 8, 2012*

The conference, “Women, Religion, Conflict and Peace: Exploring the Invisible,” is an outcome of an earlier USIP symposium on women, religion, and peacebuilding, and will result in a book published by USIP. Research on religion and peacebuilding has not thoroughly covered women’s role in the process, specifically grassroots peacebuilding that many unrecognized women are involved in. This conference will address the gap and provide a more holistic picture of religious peacebuilding. I will be experiencing the peer review process alongside Andy Blanch who has submitted the paper co-authored by Esther Hertzog and Ibtisam Mahameed, “Women Reborn: A Case Study of the Intersection of Women, Religion and Peace Building in a Palestinian Village in Israel.” The paper presents a case study of Women Reborn, a women’s empowerment group that supports Muslim Palestinian women living in Northern Israel through grassroots development. Approximately ten papers will be reviewed during the conference, ranging from Catholic women's peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao, Philippines, to bridging ethnoreligious cleavages in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



*January 10, 2012*

The “double invisibility” of women in religion, and women in the formal peacebuilding process had caused a “Bermuda triangle” at the intersection of research on women, religion and peacebuilding. Addressing this gap, USIP’s conference, “Women, Religion, Conflict and Peace: Exploring the Invisible” was an amazing experience, exploring nuances of detailed case studies as well as attempting to create themes between them.

Eleven authors attended the conference to present their papers and generate innovative dialogue with peers in the field. On the first day the authors were split into small groups that allowed for in-depth discussion of their case study and suggestions for revision. The small group discussion, which only lasted for two hours, was the highlight of the conference for me. The women in the group I sat with were Andrea Blanch (presenting a case study of Women Reborn, Palestinian women in Israel), Monica Maher (case study of Catholic women peacebuilders in Honduras), Anjana Dayal Prewitt (trauma healing in India), and Zilka Spahic-Siljak (case study



of Muslim and Christian peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The diversity of the group led to rich discussion that brought the nuances of each case study to light. The resulting discussion was so fascinating and insightful I regret being unable to simultaneously attend the other small groups. After a half day focused on the authors' papers, the conference was opened to a larger audience of individuals from the Washington D.C. area. The dialogue that ensued from the presentations of case studies continued into the second day, which culminated in highlights of what was learned.

After attending the conference several areas of interest stood out to me, such as the complexity of each case study and its resistance to generalization, the power of interfaith movements, the invisibility of grassroots peaceworkers, and perceived tension between women's religious and secular groups. The authors discussed that the invisibility of grassroots peaceworkers can be a strategy for social change, and consequently some women may not want to gain institutional leadership. The issue that arises from the "invisibility" of faith-based women peacebuilders is their agency to be recognized in formal peacebuilding, whether they have the choice to be "invisible" or not. Another issue discussed was generalized tension between women's religious groups and secular groups, which was rebuked by certain case studies, such as in Zilka Spahic-Siljak's study in Bosnia/Herzegovina where women's faith based organizations cooperated with secular NGOs to expand their influence, which still retaining their political views. An interesting trend is that many of the women's religious groups that were studied by the authors turned to interfaith peacemaking (Honduras, the Philippines, Israel/Palestine) as their individual efforts grew more successful.

The most significant thing I took away from the conference was the diversity of religious peacebuilding being done by unrecognized women who are making a difference in their communities, in turn fostering peace in their societies. From manning an all-women's peacekeeping contingent in Mindanao to protesting in the streets of Honduras and Arab countries, it is important to document what these women have done (if they choose not to remain invisible), and celebrate their achievements. They are truly building peace from the ground up.



*January 18, 2012*

I just recently attended the Ocean Interfaith Community of Sarasota program in honor of "World Religion Day" which posed the question: Can religion be a positive force for world peace? I personally believe the answer is YES. A variety of speakers on behalf of a multitude of religions presented their thoughts on the answer. Reverend Denise Oyler of Unity Church of Sarasota, where the program was located, spoke of the "thread of commonality" that runs through most organized religions. Her anecdotes of Hindus praying on the banks of the Ganges, Muslims bowing five times toward Mecca, Jews reading the Torah, and Buddhists walking the Eightfold Path of Buddha, all had one thing in common: a form of spoken and internal prayer. Her introductory speech began a theme which many of the other speakers addressed, referencing the linkages between religions, and how those connections might be used to promote peace. Guided meditation and interfaith music offered welcome pauses between the speeches, enriching the program with vivacity.

Andrea Blanch spoke of the "challenge for peacemakers to take this sense of peace we just experienced [guided meditation] and transform it into action." She also mentioned the need for "taking back" the speech of peacemaking, which has been repurposed for use by the military, such as "peacekeeping" missions which involve guns and the threat of violence as mechanisms for stability. Arlene Pearlman, co-chair of the Women's Interfaith Network, explained her view that religion can't create peace, humanity can. Many of the other speakers opposed this, presenting religious texts and movements emerging within organized religion as positives forces for peace. Tony Ballard offered passages from Baha'i writings that spoke of peace, and emphasized the need for "true religions" that followed the examples of peace that their prophets provided. He also sang a beautiful song accompanied by guitar, which he composed, about world peace, invoking images of tranquil

oceans and the peaceful embrace of mankind.

Gopi Chari, founder of the Hindu Mitreya Center, spoke of the fascinating exploration his small organization was conducting of various religious texts, suggesting that all scriptures teach the same basic things and that it is only human interpretation that changes them. A representative of the Buddhist Kadampa Meditation Center, joked that since he was representing the Buddhist Temple for World Peace, his answer to the question of religion as a positive was already answered. His narrative of the Buddha's teaching to treat everyone as if they were your own mother, part of the main practice of "cherishing others," recommended one option towards world peace by labeling according to love, rather than our delusions of anger and hate. His speech was so engaging, and enthusiastic that I definitely will be visiting the Buddhist meditation center, which is located in Sarasota. Zaid Smith, of the Rising Tide International Sufi Centered, offered the most controversial response to the question of whether religion can promote peace, by asking instead whether we should even have world peace. Referencing World War I and the conflict in Kosovo/Bosnia, he implied that the answer for world peace is not always an easy one, by acting peacefully you may allow greater violence, for example ethnic "cleansing." This question is a troubling one that I struggle with, because immediate peace is not a realistic expectation. It will be a time-consuming process, filled with hard work that will be tested by opportunities to prevent great violence with lesser violence.

Dr. Deri Ronis wrapped up the discussion by promoting a viewpoint very much in line with the United Religions Initiative, which she works with, that everything is sacred. Her own exploration of religion ranging from Christianity to Baha'I to Buddhism allowed her to see the value in every religion, an understanding that I think if more people followed would contribute greatly to efforts for world peace. The diversity of speakers and their answers to the question of religion and world peace created an excellent event. I highly recommend attending the next Ocean Interfaith Community of Sarasota event, likely in a few months, on religion and world peace. I found it very rewarding and thought provoking. At the very least, it reminded me of the diversity of religious organizations and the many options for religious peacebuilding that have yet to be explored.