

Islamic Forum: UTS Alumni set the stage for interfaith dialogue

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In the evening on the first Wednesday of each month, the Islamic Forum has been held in the Kingston Library. This forum has been ongoing for over one year, and I have attended on several occasions. This last forum on August 5th was special.



Fifteen of us gathered in the upstairs meeting room at the library. Some were attending for the first time, others were long time attendees. People have come in the past to understand more about Islam.... What makes Islam tick? Why is there so much violence? That night was no exception. People want to know about "the other." What could they learn and take away to help them better understand Islam; indeed, to improve their own understanding of God, religion and spirituality?

New World Encyclopedia - Islam

A comprehensive 2009 demographic study of 232 countries and territories reported that 23 percent of the global population, or 1.57 billion people, are Muslims. Of those, it's estimated over 75–90 percent are Sunni and 10–20 percent are Shi'a. Islam is growing faster numerically than any of the other major world religions. This is attributed either to the higher birth rates in many Islamic countries (six out of the top-ten countries in the world with the highest birth rates have a Muslim majority) and/or high rates of conversion to Islam.

Only 18 percent of Muslims live in the Arab world; 20 percent are found in Sub-Saharan Africa; about 30 percent in the Indian subcontinental region of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh; and the world's largest single Muslim community (within the bounds of one nation) is in Indonesia. There are also significant Muslim populations in China, Europe, central Asia, and Russia.

The Islamic Forum is the idea of Essi Zahedi, Abdou Gaye and Ebrahim Hussien. All have a Muslim background: Iran, Mauritania and Egypt respectively.

That Wednesday evening's program was an adventure into the sphere of mystics and mysticism. The topic for the evening was: Mysticism in Islam and Abrahamic religions

After a short introduction from each of us gathered around the table, guest speaker, Dr. Andrew Wilson, Professor of Scriptural Studies at UTS introduced the history, relevance and impact of mysticism in the Judaic tradition. He highlighted his presentation with several graphics.

In the Judaic tradition, mysticism explored the question of how close one could come to know God. But then, as in other religions, mysticism has often been considered dangerous and people have been warned not to study mysticism until they were 40 years old.

Dr. Wilson's insightful presentation also provided a bridge to the other Abrahamic faiths of Christianity and Islam, and set the stage for Zahedi and Gaye. Essi Zahedi introduced the Sufi history and traditions, covering early Sufi mystics, reciting poetry and referencing the surge in popularity in the West of Rumi, a mystical thirteenth century Persian Sufi poet, jurist, and theologian.

The evening's final speaker, Abdou Gaye explained that the Abrahamic religions are often seen to have huge, almost insurmountable, differences in their expression of faith: their creeds, dogmas and rituals. However, when the mystical dimension of the three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are explored we can mostly find commonalities; mysticism as a bridge between the religious divides.

Mysticism guides us to explore the internal, to experience the heart and soul of God's beauty and love; mysticism reveals to us the oneness of humankind. Gaye explained that he himself had experienced personal transformation and growth through such an awakening. His roots in Mauritania gave him the structure of Islamic faith and life, but his wider immersion in the embrace of other paths in spirituality had opened up new possibilities for interfaith unity and the peace of God. As-Salaam Alaykum.