News



Panel discussion at the Alliance of Virtue conference in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 7, 2018. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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As hundreds of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith leaders from the United States and abroad descended on Washington for a conference on religious tolerance this week, attendees were quick to note an unexpectedly large delegation from one particular religious group: evangelical Christians.

Speakers at the "Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good" repeatedly highlighted their surprise and delight over the noticeable contingent of evangelicals among the more than 400 attendees at the glitzy, three-day series of discussions and speeches.

The presence of so many evangelicals, a group often associated with a negative view of Islam, provided a welcome backdrop for an event aimed at championing tolerance, many said.

Hamza Yusuf, president of Zaytuna College, America's first accredited Muslim college, said the evangelical presence was especially notable given recent polling: According to a 2017 poll from Pew Research, nearly three-quarters of white evangelicals say there is a natural conflict between Islam and democracy, compared with roughly half or fewer of those in other major religious groups who express the same view.

White evangelicals were also the major religious group most supportive of President Trump's 2017 travel ban — sometimes called a "Muslim ban" — barring immigrants and refugees from several Muslim-majority countries, according to a 2017 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute.

"The evangelicals coming took great courage, because of a lot of the attitudes within that community," Yusuf told Religion News Service on Feb. 7, the conference's last day.

"The evangelicals coming took great courage, because of a lot of the attitudes within that community." — Hamza YusufAt one point, Bob Roberts, an evangelical pastor at

Northwood Church in Keller, Texas, asked evangelicals in the crowd to clap if they were excited about the conference and its message.

"This is new for us — it shouldn't be new for us," he said over the applause. "I'm not a Muslim, but I just really care about religious freedom. … The tribal way we are doing religion today is going to destroy us."

In a separate interview with RNS, Roberts said the "older, higher levels" of evangelicalism are unlikely to embrace the message of the conference, because they "have an old worldview." But he argued that younger evangelicals have "realized the world has shifted" and that the conference is a model for future efforts to protect religious liberty.

"Here's something that's really problematic about how we think about religious freedom: We get Christians together and say, 'Here's how we're going to do it.' That day is over," he said. "If we don't have conversations on religious freedom with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews — they're wasted conversations."

Deborah Fikes, a Texas-based Southern Baptist and former permanent representative from the World Evangelical Alliance to the United Nations, also discussed the challenges of interfaith work among conservative Christian groups.

"Growing up, Catholics were criticized, Muslims were criticized … the Methodists were criticized. … It was always such a focus on our differences," she said during a Wednesday panel. "Yes, there are definitely obstacles [to tolerance] for evangelicals because of that culture."

Fikes said that in her U.N. work, she observed that American military actions abroad can foster negative perceptions, especially when conflated with the belief that the U.S. is a "Christian nation." She expressed concern that the "conservative political party's policies" in the U.S. are "really hurting the most vulnerable," pointing to evangelical support for the Trump administration's recent decision to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel — despite widespread objection among Middle Eastern Christians.

"I know that conservative Christians … are so passionate about protecting Christian minorities in the Middle East, but that one decision has greatly harmed and compromised the Christian minorities we want to protect," she said.

The conference also touted its declaration, released Thursday, at the end of the gathering.

"Recognizing that our shared values are more important than our differences, and that we are strongest when we act together, we pledge to combine our best efforts to foster unity where there is discord, aid the impoverished, tend the vulnerable, heal the poor in spirit, and support measures that will ensure respect for the dignity of every human being," the declaration reads in part.

It later adds: "There is no room for compulsion in religion, just as there are no legitimate grounds for excluding the followers of any religion from full and fair participation in society."

"This is new for us — it shouldn't be new for us." — Bob RobertsIn addition, the statement, referred to as the "Washington Declaration," called for concrete steps: serving a billion meals to victims of violence and conflict and proposing the creation of a "multireligious body" that would "support mediation and reconciliation that will act in accordance with our shared values to build peace in the world."

"I recommend we create an alliance from our religious traditions ... to be a mediating team for reconciliation between conflicting groups," Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, president of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies and a driving force behind the gathering, said to the crowd while speaking through a translator.

During the same panel, Rabbi David Rosen, international director for the American Jewish Committee's Department of Interreligious Affairs, described the event as "an incredibly historic gathering that sets the stage for a new era."

Other participants included Bishop Efraim Tendero, secretary-general of the World Evangelical Alliance; Timo Soini, minister for foreign affairs of Finland; and Rabbi David Saperstein, director emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and former U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

The declaration did not mention Trump's travel ban, and it was not clear how many attendees — if any — hailed from the Muslim-majority countries listed in the most recent iteration of the ban: Syria, Iran, Chad, Libya, Yemen and Somalia.

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The conference also included the first public address by newly appointed U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback. The former Kansas governor — who was confirmed by the Senate last month after Vice President Mike Pence cast a tie-breaking vote — described the conference as a model and spoke of religious freedom as the "most important foreign relations topic today."

"This is the big one," said Brownback, who grew up Methodist, converted to Catholicism and reportedly also attends an evangelical church. He said later: "The administration has made clear this is a foreign policy and national security objective."

Brownback's presence was not without controversy. Conservative outlet PJ Media published an article Tuesday criticizing the ambassador for associating with Bin Bayyah, who its authors described as a "hardline Islamic cleric" who endorsed "killing of Americans in Iraq."

Roberts, who later said he has experience enduring pushback from fellow conservatives who disapprove of his interactions with Muslim leaders, appeared to reference the piece on Wednesday morning during a panel discussion, referring to "articles that come out from crazy people."

"I love you, Sheikh," he said, pointing to Bin Bayyah in the audience. "[Even] if you were a really bad person, then I've got a chance to reach people worse than you … why do we think making peace is with good people?"

The conference concluded a day before the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, an annual gathering of largely conservative Christians that often includes an address by the president of the United States. Both Roberts and Yusuf said they planned to attend the breakfast.