

On December 8 I had the opportunity to speak at this very important gathering. I was honored to have been invited and I am pleased to give a presentation about the role of the progressive Jewish movement in liberation theology. The remarkable list of speakers included Rabbi Marc Ellis, who spoke via teleconference from the United States, Asghar ali Engineer, of the Institute of Islamic Studies in Bombay, India, Juan José Tamayo, from "Ignacio Ellacuria," the Center of Theology and Religious Science and Adnane Mokrani, teologo islamico, ad Guseppe Barbaglio, author of *Dio violento Lettura dell Scrittura ebraiche e cristiane*, from Rome, as well as many others who shared their vision and hope.

My presentation was a part of a seminar titled, "La condizione della donna," and I was honored to share the panel with Letizia Tomassone, pastora valdese from La Spezia and with Asra Nomani, a journalist and author of a new book about the role of women in Islam, titled "Standing alone in Mecca o "La lotta di una donna americana per l'anima dell'islam."

We three women spoke about our experiences as women in the clergy of our respective religions. Pastore Tomassone spoke about the 40-year tradition of having women ministers within the valedesian Protestant movement. She used biblical references to substantiate her vision.

Ms. Nomai talked about her great friendship with the murdered journalist, Danny Pearl, and how he taught her that any religion that excludes the equal participation of women has damaged the fundamentals of spiritual truth. This spiritual truth, Danny Pearl said, embraces full inclusion for women and stands against oppression of any kind.

With this information in mind, Ms. Nomai, whose childhood experiences included life in a religious Muslim home and who prayed five times daily, began to study the Koran and to learn about the fundamentals of the Islamic faith. From her studies she concluded that the prophet Mohammed never spoke against women or excluded them in any way. For this reason Ms. Nomai began organizing Islamic prayer services led by women.

When it became my turn to speak, I explained my desire to become a rabbi and talked about my experiences as the first woman and first progressive rabbi in Italy. My presentation centered on the changes that have occurred in the Jewish religion for centuries and the responsibility rabbis have to include the findings of modern science in adaptations of halakah (Jewish law). I cited the work of the great rabbi and sage of the 15th century, Rabbi Isserles, who stated that "new knowledge" demands halachic changes. I concluded my remarks with the words of my father, a wise Jewish man who said that "we can make laws and regulations that make great changes in society, but we cannot legislate attitude change. In other words, said my father, "There is always a time lag (chronological distance) between the head (the intellectual changes) and the heart (the emotional acceptance of these changes)."

rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

The conference concluded with Mr. Tonio Dell'Olio asking each speaker to give one word, and one word only, of encouragement to the participants.

These are the words that we shared:

Determination, inclusion, diversity, hope, faith, realistic perspective, and my word, "courage."

I am grateful that part of my rabbinic duties at sinagoga Lev Chadash includes participation in interfaith conferences and meetings. As the Dalai Lama taught, "the only way to bring peace to the world is for the believers of the major religions to sing each others' songs, pray in each other's holy places and make each other's pilgrimages." I believe that this conference furthered the hope of peace.

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