

Conflict and Coexistence 2015

*The Breaking and
Making of Interfaith
Relations*



St Andrews Coexistence Initiative





ST ANDREWS COEXISTENCE INITIATIVE

For a number of years, interfaith in St Andrews had been low-key, at best. There had been a general lack of initiatives which built bridges between different groups and most societies and groups kept to themselves. We recognised that this had to end.

St Andrews prides itself on being a forum for learning and the interaction of ideas, therefore the absence of any meaningful religious debate was tarnishing this well-earned reputation. But more importantly we recognised that the lack of nuanced understanding of the other creates a vacuum where bigotry and prejudice can form and gain momentum, even amongst the very brightest. With this in mind, we sought to fill the vacuum with something more positive and engaging, and our flagship event is our annual conference.

Who are we?

We are a group of undergraduate students from the University of St Andrews committed to dialogue and greater understanding between peoples. We currently represent the three Abrahamic faiths and are active in our university societies, which include the Jewish Society, the Islamic Society and the Christian Union. Many of us have held positions of responsibility in these organisations, indeed our committee has included a number of Presidents. We come from a variety of religious, geographical and social backgrounds and study diverse subjects including International Relations, English, Medicine, Divinity and Economics.



Our Ethos, Purpose and Vision

Fundamentally, we believe that religion should not be forced down anyone's throat, but it does need to be better engaged with and understood. This is to the benefit of those with or without faith. We don't want to just sit around having an awkward cup of tea, but to deepen each person's understanding of the trials, complexities and uniqueness of religions. Whether we like it or not, religion has an enormous impact on our everyday lives and on the lives of all humanity. Consequently we shouldn't shy away from it but tackle it head-on.

*To provide **meaningful content** which challenges and engrosses participants.*

*To deliver the means which encourage meaningful debate and **exchange of ideas**.*

To build the foundations for a positive interfaith infrastructure in St Andrews and beyond



This Year

This year our theme is ‘Conflict and Coexistence: the Breaking and Making of Interfaith Relations’. We retain the format of last year in having a series of lectures, followed by a concluding panel discussion and dinner.

The aim of the conference is to highlight the underlying reasons for the global fragmentation of interfaith relations, including looking at case studies and theories, as well as cases where relations are positive. We will then be using these discussions to explore general and specific strategies to overcome conflict. We would like to employ an inter-disciplinary approach, with various levels of analysis, in order to explore these questions thoroughly.

We hope that the combination of inspiring and challenging content, as well as the interaction between participants, will enable us to fully explore and experience interfaith in action. It’s going to be an exciting ride, and we would love for you to join us.



Last Year's Event

At last year's inaugural conference for the St Andrews Coexistence Initiative, titled 'Coexistence Conference: Tolerance and Plurality in the Middle East,' several different academics and clerics presented on the topic of coexistence in the Middle East. Each approached the topic based on his or her particular theological, disciplinary, and historical background to bring a diversity of views to St Andrews' hallowed and historic Parliament Hall. The conference was structured as an ongoing conversation that was not limited to the conference speakers. Several tea and coffee breaks throughout the day allowed the conference speakers and attendees to informally engage with each other and the material that had been presented.

The conference drew heavily upon the ample resources of St Andrews to feature five representatives of the University including Professor Mario Aguilar, the Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics, and Reverend Donald MacEwan, the University's Chaplain. Professor Aguilar discussed Pope Francis' perspective on interfaith dialogue within the context of Jerusalem as well as the Middle East more generally. Reverend MacEwan presented photographs he has taken around the world of significant religious sites and practices. Reaching beyond St Andrews, Dr. Mia Spiro, a lecturer in Jewish Studies at the University of Glasgow, and Imam Hamza ibn Abdurrahman, the Mosque Leader at the Dundee Central Mosque, also presented at the conference. Dr. Spiro discussed interfaith relations in reference to Jewish history and culture while Sheikh Hamza discussed coexistence from an Islamic perspective. The conference also featured lectures that focused on the ways Jews, Muslims, and Christians approach and interpret the Quran; the crossover between Jewish and Muslim medieval philosophy; and the significance of Jerusalem to interfaith relations.

Bringing together the views presented during the day, the conference included a panel discussion featuring the guest speakers. The discussion allowed the speakers to move beyond their particular lecture topics to more broadly consider coexistence in the Middle East, the role that religion plays in escalating and alleviating conflict, and the opportunities for reconciliation and improved relations between different faith groups. Bringing the discussion to the conference attendees, the event concluded with a dinner catered by Le Rendezvous which gave the conference speakers and attendees an opportunity to continue the conversation well after the microphones were turned off.

'Although I personally was not born and raised in the Middle East and thus was not familiar with much interfaith coexistence issues that existed there, I still found the Coexistence in the Middle East conference very enlightening. This was down to the fact that many speakers from various faith backgrounds gathered and shared their opinions which engendered different perspectives on the topic. As a result, not only did I gain new information and facts but my mentality also altered in a good light. I viewed interfaith issues differently and considered other views & perspectives on them, something which I had not often done prior to the conference.

'With regard to the way the conference was conducted, it was obvious that meticulous planning was carried out beforehand as the venue, food served, and itinerary were all praiseworthy. Having said all this, I am very much looking forward to next year's much anticipated Coexistence Conference and all that it has to offer'.

— Amsyar Jaafar, President of the Islamic Society at the University of St Andrews



'Attending last year's Coexistence Conference was a fantastic experience that really opened my eyes to some of the complex issues facing the Middle East from a more academic perspective, as studying Medicine means that opportunities to hear such renowned lecturers in this field are few and far between. However I think the most outstanding thing about the conference was not merely its intellectual value, but perhaps the sheer act of bringing together students from different faiths or none to discuss difficult issues in a safe environment, free from the hate and prejudice that we must surely leave behind in the hope of a more peaceful future'.

— Sarah Levy, University of St Andrews 2015

'It was a pleasure to be involved with the first Coexistence in the Middle East Conference. Not only was I impressed with the quality of the contributions, but the very idea of Islamic, Jewish and Christian students sitting down together to devise, plan and organise such an event is a profound statement of hope. Despite voices which say that religion can only exacerbate social and political tensions in the Middle East, the conference struck me as a model for the contribution which faith can, and perhaps has to play in thinking about life together'.

— Reverend Doctor Donald McEwan, University Chaplain



Our Committee



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