



*Michael Kessler is associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University and a visiting assistant professor of government and an adjunct professor of law at the Georgetown University Law Center. Kessler works in theology, ethics (theological, philosophical, and political approaches), and the nexus of law, politics, and religion. He received his PhD focusing on religion and moral and political theory from the University of Chicago, where he was a William Rainey Harper Fellow and held a Henry Luce Dissertation Fellowship. Kessler received a JD from Georgetown University Law Center and he graduated from Valparaiso University with a BA (honors) in theology.*

At this year's annual meeting, the AAR's Public Understanding of Religion Committee hosted a Special Topic Forum on "Scholars and the Public Representations of Islam in the United States." Our panelists were Jocelyne Cesari, Harvard University; John Esposito, Georgetown University and incoming AAR President; Ebrahim Moosa, Duke University; and Najeeba Syeed-Miller, Claremont School of Theology. All are esteemed scholars who work in various ways to broaden understanding of religion among diverse publics. The lively conversation focused on the role of scholars — such as those consulted by reporters and government agencies — in shaping conversations about the public representations of Islam in the United States. We discussed the public issues involved in two major controversies: The proposed Park 51 Community Center near Ground Zero in Manhattan and the recent hearing by Representative Peter King, head of the House Committee on Homeland Security, on "The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community and that Community's Response." But the larger focus was to help members of our guild develop ways to bring the expertise of scholars to bear upon public discussion of religion. We inquired about the challenges faced by religion scholars in trying to shape public conversations about religion, in a climate that is often significantly overrun by competing voices and in media formats that constrain nuanced analysis. We learned from the panelists' experiences as they offered strategies for how members of the academy can fruitfully engage in broader public dialogue about the complexities of religion in public life, especially during critical moments in our communal lives.

Cesari offered two points that define much media-based discussion of religion: "ideology trumps facts" and "emotion trumps reason." A lingering assumption permeates this discourse to the effect that the more religious one is in public, the less civic one can be. While the work of Robert Putnam and others seriously deflates this assumption, in the case of religious Muslims, this perception is widely upheld. The result is a too-common suspicion of Muslims and their

allegiance to the civic and political order. Cesari suggested religion scholars can help reshape these misperceptions by recrafting the narrative of “America” to include Muslim Americans as a core group belonging to the nation.

Esposito offered insights into his experiences on media programs during the King hearings and the Park 51 controversy. He suggested the phenomena revealed the wide extent of Islamophobia and general attitudes against immigrants prevalent in our society and yet the media expressed a general surprise at the extent of the suspicion and fear when these issues emerged. The academy was ill-prepared and ill-equipped to speak out in ways that would help build understanding and mitigate the harm. The media opportunities are often the “battle of the experts” that generally privilege extreme positions. The challenge for religion scholars — and the AAR — is to marshal the immense resources of the 10,000+ members of the Academy to promote the public understanding of religion. We need to develop ways to become *the* place to which the media and the public turn to for facts and level-headed analysis. And scholars must learn to adjust approaches and rhetorical delivery to build connections to often vastly different audiences, having ready facts and arguments geared toward different audience levels.

Moosa urged that in the context of these events, scholars must write more often for the general public and creatively utilize multiple channels, including fiction, blogs, and film among more traditional media outlets. He implored fellow scholars to “be bold” in their presentations and to balance the fear spread by others with patient instruction. Moosa suggested that in the United States we have tremendous resources for positioning scholars in public discourse, including premiere and respected universities, but that we collectively must unlock the resources at our command and engage in the conversation more strategically. We must pursue excellence in our scholarship, but this does not preclude public outreach and broader, sustained conversations.

Syeed-Miller offered a theoretical assessment of engagement with persons from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, urging different levels of dialogue directed to promoting justice and peace. Syeed-Miller relayed stories of working in areas of the country with groups some might think would be predisposed to think of her in negative terms. On the contrary, she found a predominant openness and receptivity to her presence. She urged scholars to not anticipate hostility in a way that paralyzes their involvement and instead strive to create engagement spaces that allow for pluralism and difference in which these predispositions can be broken down.

All were in agreement that the AAR needs to help equip members to engage in public dialogue, even in light of sometimes hostile situations. Oftentimes, though, scholars will find the audiences and fellow participants to be thoughtful and oriented to constructive dialogue. The more we as scholars, and as a guild, can encourage and facilitate such discussions, the more we can break down misunderstanding and the difficulties that arise therein. Expect to hear more in the coming months about how the AAR will work to provide resources for members to effectively participate in public discussions — whether in national media channels or your local community forum.