

**INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPERS FROM THE RELIGIONS,
SOCIAL CONFLICT, AND PEACE GROUP OF THE AMERICAN
ACADEMY OF RELIGION: PEACE-MAKING FROM LOS COMPAS
TO A SULTAN OF INDONESIA, AND FAITH IN MONSTER GODS**

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“Abdul Ghaffar Khan: An Islamic Gandhi” by James L. Rowell, Flagler College, argues for the peaceful side of Islam by targeting a Muslim peace activist who worked with Gandhi.¹ After listening to this paper and reading it once again, I was challenged to think about how little so many of us know about the history and people of countries like Pakistan. In general, our (Western) view of the outside world is myopic. Our history texts place us at the center of the universe. We have very little interest in acquiring knowledge about the great people, cultures, and religio-political movements of other countries. For instance, the most boring moments of the semester for my students are when we study Confucianism and Taoism in China. Most of them dislike Asia even more when I discuss the very high literacy rates and the respect many Asian countries have for education and the educated. I use music, visuals, readings, and objects of art but they can’t wrap their minds around a country so far away. Even when I tell them that Taoist medicine and other technologies used by the West were invented in China they have very little, if any, appreciation or interest in the topic.

1. This introduction is a response to the papers given in two sections of the Religions, Social Conflict, and Peace Group at the national Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, California during November 2007. The themes of the sections were, “Revolutionary Approaches to International Peace Making” and “Economic Justice, Ecological Degradation, and Militarization in the Global Economy: Moral and Theological Responses.”

Rowell makes a point that Abdul's legacy is fading because there are few, if any, books in print on his life and no videos. Life stories of people such as Abdul should be included in our textbooks on world religions. Most of the textbooks focus upon a standardized history of Muhammad and the sectarianism within Islam that results in a somewhat stereotypical and flat image of Islam. It takes a lot of effort to help students to step away from the violence that is constantly portrayed in the media to the actual faith of people who practice Islam every day of their lives.

The second paper by Mita Cut, Florida International University, "Mixing Religious Rituals and Mystical Experience with Modern Democracy: Indonesia's Sultan Hamengku Buwono IX" portrays Sultan Buwono as a peacemaker because of his involvement with rituals that united faiths. Religion can often unite a people but history teaches us that religion can produce both benevolent and violent theocracies. Most recently we have experienced Sunni Muslims in Afghanistan who led their people towards a rigid-literalist interpretation of the Quran. That interpretation produced a violent reaction to anything progressive or different. In Indonesia Sultan Buwono, also a Muslim, took his people in a different direction. According to Dr. Cut he combined the faiths of indigenous religions with Islam in a way that did not offend. He understood and appreciated many faiths and perhaps, while not stated in this paper, understood the Sufi traditions. We are so grateful for this contribution from Mita Cut because it provides yet another opportunity to learn about a part of the world about which we know so little.

Sometimes internationals live right next door to us and we never take the time to get to know them. In another paper, "Sanctuary Revisited: Central American Refugee Assistance in the History of Church-based Immigrant Advocacy," by Lane Van Ham from the University of Arizona, we learn of Christian religious groups in the United States who are harboring illegal immigrants. They have created a new underground railroad "Humane Borders" for people who cross our borders to better their lives. While reading Lane's paper, I kept thinking of the Statue of Liberty and the poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus" (1883).

From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome... Give me your tired,
your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched
refuge of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to
me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Van Ham introduces us to "theologies of hospitality," national quotas, preferential treatment of people from certain countries, and the heroic activities of people like Jim Corbett who read their Bible and believe that they have a responsibility to help "aliens." I think the strongest point of the paper is his argument against the accepted "principle of national sov-

creignty.” Should political borders drawn on a map divide people who live on the ground? This fiery topic of illegal immigration permeates discussions at coffee shops on a regular basis in the United States. While millions of illegal immigrants take over jobs that most Americans have abandoned, the majority opinion is against legalizing their presence in our country. Arguments abound and rarely does the web present a positive spin on the topic.

According to the Urban Institute, in 2002 there were 9.3% undocumented immigrants or 26% of the total foreign born population in the United States. Fifty-seven percent were from Mexico, 23% from Latin America, and 10% from Asia.² Many of these illegal immigrants receive welfare and use emergency health-care services. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—International Migration Policy Project—approximately 1.4 million illegal immigrants receive government assistance from welfare or social security totaling \$4.5 billion annually.³ MGT of America, Inc. a public consulting firm, estimates that uncompensated care or non-collectable costs along the border states of the USA reached \$200 million in 2000.⁴

Those dollar figures don't compute in the mind of a professor who earns less than six figures. What I do know is that it seems that immigrants are everywhere. They were hired as sub-contractors to finish my basement. They serve hamburgers and tacos at the local McDonalds and Taco Bell, and our favorite restaurant, Los Compas, employs only people who speak Spanish. *Dos Mundos* is a local newspaper that is gaining popularity. I travel to Lowe's Home Improvement Store and find that all of the signs are in two languages. No matter who I call I am asked if I speak Spanish to push the *numero dos* button on the phone. Even my bank has a Spanish language option at the money machine. No matter what appliance I buy at a local establishment, I have to look very hard to find the English instructions amidst the other languages. That new underground railroad seems to be working.

2. See Jeffrey S. Passel, Randolph Capps, and Michael E. Fix, “Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures,” *Urban Institute*, January 12, 2004. <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=1000587>

3. “Research Perspectives on Migration,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Urban Institute* 1, no. 1 (September/October 1996): 1–14.

4. Executive Summary prepared by MGT of America, Inc. United States/Mexico Border Counties Coalition and MGT of America, “Medical Emergency: Costs of Uncompensated Care in Southwest Border Counties.” Washington, DC and Austin, TX, 2002. <http://www.bordercounties.org/vertical/Sites/{B4A0F1FF-7823-4C95-8D7A-F5E400063C73}/uploads/{FAC57FA3-B310-4418-B2E7-B68A89976DC1}.PDF>

Ann Herpel of Brooklyn, New York, takes on the American belief in the military in “The Ecology of Command: U.S. Pacific Command and the Environment of the Pacific Rim.” She begins her case against the American military by recounting the pathetic story of how noise pollution in various forms and toxic chemicals produced by the American military is killing whales, destroying their habitat, and in the end, killing our oceans. Her paper addresses the poisoning of islands, coral reefs, and peoples in the Pacific Rim. She challenges us to think about the “voracious appetite of the American military” and the natural resources that are consumed in the support of war activities. Herpel traces the effects of Agent Orange during the Vietnam era and the radiation pollution of the atomic and hydrogen bombs in the early twentieth century.

Dr. Herpel questions the “ideology of American militarism,” its obvious power to dominate the world, and the impact of military activities on the environment and economic systems. Her vocabulary is striking and jars us into hard thinking about the devastating long-term effects of military expansionism. In her view America worships a “god of death” that feeds on a “plunder-consumption-economy” and for her this belief-system is pathological. She terms the expansion of the military—“sprawl.” Their need to support the “House of War” demands land, labor, training, manufacturing, disposal, mining, and chemicals. It is a power-hungry giant that is never satisfied.

While listening to Dr. Herpel deliver this paper I was struck by the image of a small woman shaking her fist at the American military. How dare a woman take on the greatest army on earth? Herpel has courage and her words strike at the heart of the belief system used by politicians in our country in many types of conflicts. They turn our heads away from the long-term effects of the military machine toward a present-day fear of the other. They use us and feed upon our fears. Ann lists the human costs of war and I see those costs every day in the classroom. Mothers and fathers leave their children behind while they are dragged off to Iraq. Military students are so frightened that they have to sit with their backs to the wall in the classroom. Male students weep as they are extracted from a class they love in the middle of the semester. Many of the students never return. Some of them try to maintain contact with home by taking classes online. One of my female students who was stationed in Iraq would be called to duty in the middle of the night by her commander. She passed her class on “Exploring Religions”—barely. Students tell of their sacrifices and dedication to their country. They are proud to have served and so we must delineate between the machine and those who are used by the machine. To punish the soldiers for their sacrifices would be an even greater “evil.”

The American military machine consumes our children, our land, our natural resources, our health, our oceans, our minds, and our future. I am reminded of the song written and sung by Holly Near, “Kentucky Woman.”

I have dreamed on this mountain
 Since first I was my mother’s daughter
 And you can’t just take my dreams away—not with me watching.
 You may drive a big machine
 But I was born a great big woman
 And you can’t just take my dreams away—not without me fighting.

And so stands Ann Herpel shaking her fist at the military.

Heather Eaton, St. Paul University, Canada, also takes on the military in “The Ethics of Gender and Globalization: Military Madness and Ecological Stress.” She begins her argument by laying the foundation for the inequality and exploitation of females. “The relationship between gender, poverty, and environmental degradation has been well-established...”. Probably the most startling comment she makes involves the sexual exploitation and trafficking in women in the Pacific Rim. Citing Thailand as an example, she explains that trafficking equals \$124 million equal to 60 per cent of the government’s budget.

She criticizes capitalist economies and ideologies that unite with the military to create an attitude of acceptance of violence against women. There is little room for the female in the new global alliances of the future. One area that she could also have explored is world religions. Every single major world religion advocates and teaches the subordination of women thereby building a foundation of inequality for business, government, and the military. This exploitation of females can be quantified. According to the Women’s Learning Partnership only 1 percent of the world’s assets are in the names of women. Seventy percent of people in abject poverty are women.⁵ These studies are just the tip of the iceberg.

Narrow, or what I would like to term blind thinking, also pervades the academy. As co-chair of a committee creating a new International Studies major at my university, I raised the issue of gender as a category that was foundational to any discussion of the nation-state, economics, or cultural issues. It was a shock to me that the entire committee wanted to sideline the gender discussion including a person who is chair of the Commission on the Status of Women. Yes, they argued that they could include a reading in their courses but it was not to be included in a core of courses that all students would be required to take. One faculty member even argued that females do not experience discrimination any more than males do.

5. <http://www.learningpartnership.org/en/resources/facts/humanrights>

And so this committee of academics has bought into the same ideology that Heather Eaton addresses. Their actions indirectly support the continuation of the belief that females and their issues are secondary to the really important issues that are dictated by traditions, the establishment, and oh yes, male supremacy.

The next paper entitled “Free Trade Agreements and the Neo-liberal Economic Paradigm: Economic, Ecological, and Moral Consequences,” by Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Seattle University, and Daniel T. Spencer, University of Montana, argues that the current global marketplace has become a world religion. People have bought into the belief of unbridled consumption and growth. Moe-Lobeda and Spencer rehearse opinions for and against a neo-liberal point of view that supports integrated markets that have resulted from international trade agreements and the World Trade Organization. Their arguments remind me of the rhetoric often used by monotheistic traditions hoping for a “New World Order” where their form of religion will reign.

Moe-Lobeda and Spencer summarize the age-old arguments against unchecked capitalism such as the exploitation of natural resources and the populace for personal gain. Another underlying fear in this paper is that big business may eventually control governments and when they control governments they will have the power to subjugate the peoples of the earth. It could be argued that this stranglehold on nations is a threat to the security and well-being of the nation-state. Our authors believe that the world has been duped into blindly following big business/multinational companies because they claim to offer a better economic status to some. Behind the advancement of these capitalist economies is a trail of empty pockets, ecological destruction, and destroyed community life.

Finally, John B. Cobb, Jr., Claremont School of Theology, had the job of responding to the papers of Herpel, Eaton, and Moe-Lobeda and Spencer. The most compelling argument in his article, “Economic Globalization and its problems,” is that economists create their theories looking down from the top of the pyramid. For him “growth” is the god of the theorists and the practitioners of globalization. They pay no attention to the “person in community.” In a typical Christian prophetic tradition he labels the economists “idolaters” because he believes their view of unlimited economic growth is inhumane.

The editors have asked me to end this introduction with words about my article, “Religion, Greed, and the Insanity of War.” This piece was not presented at the conference, but the foundation for it stems from the chairing of the “Religions, Social Conflict, and Peace Group.” During the past four years of chairing this dynamic group, the people, the papers, and

the points of view have brought me to the place where I wanted to do research on my own on “war.”

It is not easy on the heart and mind to spend an entire year reading, writing, and thinking about war. To read the accounts of sexual exploitation, mutilation, and to consider the wasted or disfigured bodies and minds within wars is to create an ominous, unforgettable landscape in your mind. To think about those who enjoy, plan, and execute war is like discovering aliens from another planet for me. I cannot recognize them as human beings nor speak their language.

Only recently, I shared some of my research on war with my cousin who is a Vietnam veteran. He is still working through his post-traumatic-stress-disorder every day of his life. “I can’t forget what I did,” he said to me. He met his commander the other day who has ascended to the top of the ranks in the army. His commander remembered him. And my cousin said, “Yes, his stars and stripes are there because of us and what we did.” My cousin understood, all too well, how he had been used in the game of war.

Every step of the way, I was enlightened, challenged, and mystified by my research. In a very small way it helped me to understand my cousin and the pain he has been experiencing for thirty years or more. This is as close as I want to get to war. I don’t want to experience the horrors and aftermath of a world gone mad as it pursues its thirst for power and money and control over everything living or dead.

And finally, with great appreciation for many in the military, I know that my peaceful life is due in part to the vigilance of others who seek to protect us and to those we must humbly say, “Thank you!”

Once again, I must thank Dr. Julie Clague, Department of Theology & Religious Studies at Glasgow University, for her confidence and encouragement in the collection of these papers. We are so happy that we can share our research and thoughts with a greater audience. And we hope that you will find the analyses within these papers provocative enough to launch your own inquiry into the topics, if you have not already taken the leap!