

The 8th Annual UMAA Convention: *Changing the Perception of Islam*

By Salman Jaffri

This year Muslims both young and old attended the 8th Annual UMAA Convention (Universal Muslim Association of America) as they do every Memorial Day Weekend, and was held this year at the Sheraton Premiere in Vienna, Virginia. Each year the convention picks a different theme trying to address the problems facing the Muslims of today, and this year's theme couldn't have come at a better time: *"Changing the Perception of Islam in the West"*.

So before we get into the events that took place this weekend, the first question that should be asked is: "What is UMAA and where did this organization come from?" UMAA came into existence at a meeting held on the night of September 28th, 2002. Founding members unanimously agreed that although the American Shia Muslim Community had successfully established Islamic Centers all across the United States, it was now time to build a bridge and fill in an existing gap with other Muslims and Muslim organizations across the country to address the socio-economic and political issues that face ALL Muslims in the United States and around the world. Its purpose was to establish an open dialogue with the American government in an effort to increase understanding, and to try to erase the misperceptions that Islam faces today.

UMAA has not just served the interest of Muslims in this country, but it has also provided its services in different parts of the world as well. From supplying aid in the relief efforts in the devastating earthquakes that hit Pakistan in 2008 and just recently in Haiti back in February of 2010, to taking on the responsibility of providing financial assistance in the building of schools in Pakistan to cater to the need of education for children, UMAA is a gradually rising force that has been organized to provide assistance in times of need as well.

The underlying theme this year came at a time when there is a huge need to foster a better understanding of Islam and Muslims in the West. To rid of any stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam and to remove any distortions being promoted by the "Islamophobics" and the media, a task that this year's convention president, Dr. Ethisham Abidi says "is not an easy task at all, but we must stay vigilant".

So what was it about UMAA this year that showed its vigilance? This year I had the opportunity to get up close and personal with the different programs as well as the people attending the convention, so telling you first hand that indeed there were many aspects of this weekend which showed an attempt to combat the problems that Muslims of all ages face, whether it be from external forces that hinder Islam as well as internal.

It also highlighted on another interesting point; the cultural differences between the older versus the younger generation; a problem and misunderstanding that needs to be addressed, especially in these turbulent and changing times. One of the workshops addressed exactly this point. Youth members were divided into different groups and brainstormed ideas on how to bridge the gap between the older generation and themselves to reach a better understanding of each other. They addressed the problems that the youth faced in today's day and age and the confusions surrounding the topics of drugs, violence, sex and dating. In an attempt to bridge the gap between older and younger people within the community, youth members presented their ideas to each other and engaged in an open discussion amongst themselves along with elder members of the community.

Other workshops and presentations at UMAA this year ranged from how the Muslim Community can gain exposure in the Western media, the influence of politics on the Western media, and addressing perspectives for political action in the American Landscape. The convention also catered to the needs of our

youngsters as well, providing a child day-care center with a magic show that lasted two days for the enjoyment of the children attending this year.

The Young Professional Networking Session Dinner allowed youth members of different professions to sit down with one another and establish a networking that would be beneficial for the upcoming generation and a matrimonial service that allowed young men and women to meet with one another while still maintaining Islamic etiquette. UMAA president Dr. Ethisham Abidi who has successfully established his own pharmaceutical company in Hunt Valley, Maryland stated that, "it is my hope that as in the past, that this year's convention will help all *momineen* both young and old to network with one another, form unions, facilitate marriages and reunite friends who only meet once a year".

The highlight of the convention though, was on Sunday May 30th. Every year UMAA invites a keynote speaker to the Annual UMAA Grand Banquet which takes place in the afternoon. This year two keynote speakers were invited that shed some light on a few matters. Farah Pandith, a Muslim immigrant, who is the head of the United States Special Representative to Muslim Communities, and Syed Haider Abbas Rizvi who is a prominent member of the National Assembly of Pakistan. In a very friendly manner while at the same time an eloquent speech, Farah addressed the topic on the difficulties of Muslim immigrants to the United States who have a difficult time integrating themselves into American society. Her position as a special representative to the Muslim Community was created for the first time in American History to build an understanding between Muslims and the U.S. She was appointed at this position by Secretary Hilary Clinton in June of 2009

Syed Rizvi spoke in regards to the condition in Pakistan and the terrorist attacks that have taken place over the past few months, also commenting on the bomb blasts that took place in Karachi during the month of Moharram during a procession on the day of Ashura commemorating the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH), Imam Husain. In his speech, he stated that these attacks are not just attacks on a specific sect of Islam, rather it is an attack on ALL Muslims and goes against everything that Islam stands for. He emphasized that a dialogue between all members of the Islamic faith would strengthen the bond between all Muslims and we would be better able to combat the external attacks that Islam faces today from the world, while also alleviating the internal quarrels as well. Other speakers included Molana Syed Mahdi Modaresi and Dr. Sayed Hossein Nasr, both of which emphasized the time for change within the Islamic *umma*. The convention also made special condemnation against the attempted terrorist attack that took place in Times Square back in early May and stressed that these acts of violence go against the teachings of Islam.

Whether it was an UMAA banner or a brochure, or even a program that I saw at the convention, one thing that caught my eye was an Ayat from the Holy Quran which was displayed over and over again: "*Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves*" (Surah13, Verse11). As I walked from work one workshop to another, and one ballroom to the next listening to what people had to say, I realized that no matter what, there was indeed an effort being generated in those three days to positively try to bring some sense as to what is happening to our *mazhab*, our Islam and hopefully to bring some change. I can only hope that what was said to the people did not fall on deaf ears. All in all, I met new and interesting people and was greeted by smiles and hugs.

Let us all pray that Inshallah we find the necessary tools within ourselves to help our *umma* find the way to exemplify what our Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) stood for; a love, respect and adoration for each other that is long overdue. I am reminded of an Ayat in the Quran that I often think of yet for some reason we choose to just ignore it: "*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full Knowledge and*

is well-acquainted (with all things)." (Surah 49, Verse 13). This wonderful principle of Islam makes it clear that there is no single people, race, or nation that is better than others. God created us all equal. In God's eyes, the best of us are the most righteous and most kind. And to that I sincerely say "Ameen".