

AMSS 39<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Cosmopolitan Islam: Globalization, Transnationalism and Muslim Diasporas”

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**ABSTRACT**

“Cross-Cultural Educational Experience”

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Although Islam is not in conflict with the West, and the West is not in conflict with Islam, we find ourselves in a situation where our communities are entangled in a state of fear and often violent conflict. Transformation of this conflict and ultimately its peaceful resolution will depend to a great extent on our ability to recognize one another’s humanity and to hold respectful dialogue among the peoples of these communities. Soliya’s Connect Program is providing a space for almost a thousand university students annually from 25 countries to enter into an indepth dialogue and discussion of the issues that affect the relationship between their communities and Western and predominantly Muslim societies. This dialogue, taking place on the Internet and using the latest in new media technologies, offers a cost-efficient platform for interaction on a scale, not possible before, is held in a respectful, structured and academic setting, allowing first-hand exchange to counter misconceptions spread by mass media. The Connect Program is a nine-week program where students *meet* weekly on-line throughout the course of a semester in small multinational groups with two skilled facilitators via a unique web-based video-conferencing application. Students engage in intensive discussions about the relationship between Western and predominantly Muslim societies, and collaboratively analyze and produce their own media products to develop a deeper understanding of alternate perspectives and build knowledge about relevant issues. This presentation looks at the experience of the Connect Program and some of its challenges, results, and prospects for the future. It demonstrates the potential that this program has for mediating a peaceful exchange of perspectives, while offering its participants a unique chance to humanize one another and begin to put an end to the demonization that plagues the relationship between Muslim and Western communities.