

**Dialogue and Coexistence:
A Seminar on Muslim-Christian and Arab-Western Relations**

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Parochialism has become untenable.... The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences and ideas that come to life outside the boundaries of a particular religion or all religions continue to challenge and to affect every religion. Horizons are wider, dangers are greater... *No religion is an Island*. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth.²

Everyday the news bears witness to this truth. The consequences of a religiously motivated act spread beyond religious and cultural borders. Globalization has intertwined our destinies so that the only future we have is a shared one. The question remains: How will the religions of the world respond to the interreligious demands of being religious? Ignoring this challenge carries as dire consequences as responding negatively. Therefore, all share in the responsibility for the course of our future.

The media has highlighted the negative side of this challenge, tending to display religion as a source of conflict rather than a resource for peace. The potential of religious contribution to public life must not be assessed through media sound bytes that cater to myopic and militant strands of religious expression. One must look to the broader representation of religious traditions that are working together for the common good, because the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue is essential to any prospect for a peaceful future. Hans Kung's dictum comes to mind, There will be "no peace between the nations without peace between religions; no peace between religions without religious dialogue."

Muslim-Christian relations hold a prominent place in interfaith dialogue, not only because of current events and political agendas, but also because of sheer numbers. With one-half of the world's population comprised of Muslims and Christians, the relations between the people of these religions has a significant influence on the global community; and because the current crucible for Muslim-Christian relations is the Middle East, positive initiatives here have a global effect and provide a path of dialogue and coexistence that others may follow.

The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue (AWG) is an initiative that seeks to respond to this need. It was founded in 1995 by a number of Arab Christian and Muslim intellectuals, religious leaders, and civic leaders from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, the Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates who are committed to working together towards a shared future. In 2001, they

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²Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion is an Island: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, Harold Kasimow & Byron L. Sherwin, eds. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 5, 6.

adopted a covenant that acknowledged: “Religious Differences do not cancel out the fact of belonging all together to an Arab Islamic culture, in whose making Christians and Muslims participate side by side.”³

However, the *raison d’etre* for dialogue is understood as more than a situational response to present-day demands. The act of dialogue is an act of religious expression.

In the group’s view, Muslim-Christian dialogue is not simply a dialogue between compatriots who belong to the same national group. It is also a dialogue among believers who perceive in this effort of theirs an applied expression of their religious principles, principles that give substance to the meaning of pluralism, mutual recognition, the unqualified dignity of the human being, and the values of justice, fairness, truth, decency, fellow feeling, affection, mercy and the stewardship of creation.⁴

In this we see the platform they are developing upon which theological meaning is given to dialogue and difference. The importance of this cannot be overstated. The way religions attach meaning to past events and current realities determine positions toward the “other.” Herein lies the significance and responsibility of religious leadership as meaning givers to history, text and tradition in shaping people’s dispositions and acts towards the world around them.

The AWG sets the aim of dialogue not as the resolution of doctrinal differences, but on the exigencies of life that religions share. The focus centers upon how people from different religious orientations encounter each other around issues of mutual concern. This is termed the “dialogue of life.” The need for such dialogue has been a challenge before humanity that is only growing in importance. “It is also a spiritual, moral and cultural requirement for promoting the virtue of believers getting to know each other.”⁵

The question of difference and variety among people and within creation is also given theological meaning. “Difference and variety are facts of human life. Indeed, they are signs from God manifested in human beings and in creation.”⁶ This is a critical affirmation, for without it diversity becomes an obstacle that must be overcome rather than a reality whose presence offers mutual enrichment.⁷

Though the work of the AWG focuses on co-citizenship of Arab Christians and Muslims, they believed it important to expand their dialogue and address the issues that are influencing religious and political decisions between East and West. Over forty leaders from fourteen countries, all active in the public life of Arab and Western countries, met in October 2003 in London to discern and strategize a way forward that builds upon the shared values of Muslims and Christians, Arabs and

³ "الحوار والعيش الواحد" ميثاق عربي اسلامي – مسيحي، جانب 5

⁴ Ibid., 2 جانب.

⁵ Ibid., 8 جانب.

⁶ Ibid., 8 جانب.

⁷ This point touches upon a theology of religious pluralism, but any treatment of this topic will eventually have to address the plurality of missions (ultimate aims) engendered within religions because of its impact on how co-citizenship is envisioned among religions.

Westerners. In an opening address, Dr. Mohammad Al Sammak of the AWG, underscored that “it is our duty, both Christians and Muslims to liberate our future from the prison of the past, and to work together in building a common future based on our common values of human rights and of human integrity, respect, and freedom.”⁸ To accomplish this, the sessions began by focusing upon the present state and future possibilities of Muslim-Christian relations. The topic was then broadened to Arab-Western relations, with a particular emphasis on how the conflicts in Iraq and Palestine affect these relations.

Reflections & Conclusions

There was a sense of urgency around the seminar. Because of the media’s focus on personalities and attraction to dissonant voices, fanatical religious perspectives and extremist political visions have access to the world stage, and this has escalated the spiral of suspicion between cultures and religions. Unless alternative voices speak up, the voices heard are assumed to speak for all. The AWG sees the importance of working to provide mediums through which moderating and irenic voices of Muslims and Christians can be heard. Too much attention has been given to those who juxtapose Christianity and Islam over-against each other, while too little attention has been given to those who are working together through their respective faiths for a shared future.

Throughout the spirited dialogue, there was also a growing edge of frustration. This is not so much a critical statement as an observation that points to the maturation of Muslim-Christian relations. It is no longer enough for the symbolism of a gathering, i.e., the fact that we meet across religious and cultural boundaries, to justify one’s participation. It is also no longer sufficient to meet solely to make declarative statements about the common affirmations we hold. These are but first steps in the meeting of religions, not the end goal. (Having said this, I recognize that these elements cannot be downplayed in the initial forays of interfaith relationships.) The urgency of world events moves us to the central question for the future of interfaith and intercultural relations: How can the relationships we have fostered and the shared commitments we hold effect change in places that are mired in fear and hostility?

The challenge this represents is daunting. We are working against societal impulses that are quick to create divisions between us. As William Scott Green has identified: "A society does not simply discover its others, it fabricates them, by selecting, isolating, and emphasizing an aspect of another people's life, and making it symbolize their difference."⁹ A presentation by Dr Tarek Mitri raised the problem of an essentialist view, which allows people to see the world in generalizations, stereotypes, and simplified ways of dividing religions and cultures, often making enemies of those about whom we know little. There was a clear resolve among the participants to counter this by informing people of the diversity of religious, political, and cultural realities that exist and how they intertwine to fashion the whole. Without this, people are lacking the knowledge to bridge the gap of information and understanding that is necessary for a hopeful future. Differentiation in

⁸ From Dr. Sammak’s opening address.

⁹ “Otherness Within: Towards a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism”, in Nuesner & Frerichs, eds., *To See Ourselves As Others See Us*, 46-69, cited in Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), xix.

communication is fundamental in preventing high aspirations from being tainted by narrow self-righteousness.

Not only is essentialism a problem, but also those who make false extensions of local conflict to the global level. “They picture the local situation to be an extension of a supposed worldwide struggle between Christianity and Islam. This serves to deepen doubts and fears between Muslims and Christians in our Arab countries.”¹⁰ The seminar served as a counterbalance to those who would use localized sectarian strife to engender fear of a worldwide conspiracy. A stated intent of the AWG’s efforts is to prevent the exploitation of local strife to instill fear and doubt at a global level. A hopeful future is not based upon religious or national interests finding a common enemy, but through a commitment to work towards a common good.

It is clear that there is not only a challenge in relationships between faiths, but also within them. As the participants found encouragement in their ability as Muslims and Christians to engage each other, they also found themselves asking how well they engage their own religious constituencies. It must be acknowledged that fanaticism and divisiveness arise from those who speak and act in the name of the same religions they represent. Therefore, an agenda of *intrafaith* dialogue must be pursued that leads religious communities to more just and irenic approaches. History is replete with examples of religion’s ability to create conflict or offer peace, demand retribution or grant forgiveness, to see God at work in others or to view others as the enemy. A fundamental element in securing a lasting impact is helping religious leadership address sources of conflict and draw upon resources for peace from within our faith traditions. Through this, it is hoped that a broader representation of religious leadership will cooperate in bringing about just and peaceful approaches to common concerns.

The issues of the AWG are critical to the global community, but it is important to acknowledge that the issues before the global community extend beyond the scope of the AWG. Islam and Christianity are global phenomena and the shifting demographics of religious affiliation have given rise to polycentric religious influence. The majority of Muslims are not Arab and the nexus of Christian growth is in the Southern Hemisphere. This does not mean that every organization can or should hold a worldwide focus, but globalization demands that the changing demographics of religious affiliation be factored into any initiative towards religious dialogue.

In the end, the participants hoped that the AWG represents a way to expand participation and develop resources to meet the challenges before us. The case studies served as a reminder that the consequences of whether one responds and how one responds affect the day-to-day existence of countless people. There is a religious responsibility to encourage dialogue that leads to peaceful coexistence.

¹⁰Op cit , جانب 14