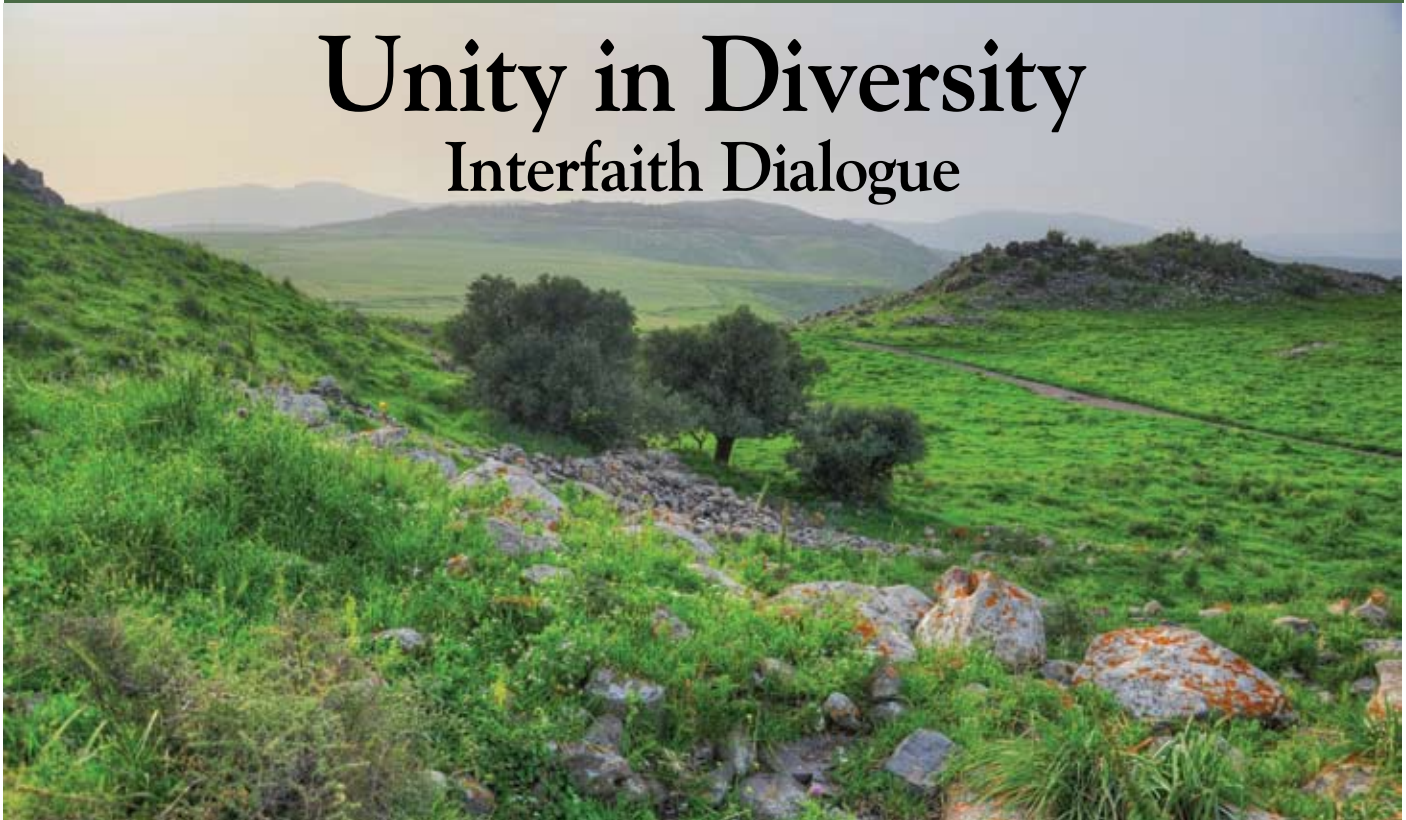


CORNERSTONE

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Unity in Diversity Interfaith Dialogue



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Ten Essential Foundations of Interfaith Relations

by Naim Ateek

Since its inception, Sabeel has recognized that its work and ministry can never be complete unless we reach out to people of other faiths. In fact, we have always emphasized that Sabeel is committed to a three pronged ministry, namely, ecumenical, interfaith, and justice and peace, and our ongoing programs on the ground have always reflected this emphasis.

There was a time in which I used to refer to the dialogue among people of different religions as interreligious dialogue. It was clear to me that when people of various religious traditions meet and dialogue with one another, the result is an interreligious dialogue. Nowadays we call it "interfaith" dialogue. The name "interreligious" is not wrong, and there is nothing wrong in continuing to call it "interreligious dialogue."





A “Living Together” program in Beit Sahur, West-Bank

The Arabic expression that we use for our interfaith work is “Al’aysh Almushtarak” which literally means “Life Together” or “Living Together.” Before 1948, Christians, Muslims, and Jews used to live together in the same communities. They were all Palestinians. Since the establishment of the state of Israel, Christians and Muslims have continued to live together but, to a large extent, and with the exception of a few mixed cities in Israel, the Jewish people live separately. With the growing religious and political extremism in our country it has been important for Sabeel to have as one of its foci the interfaith work. If we are not vigilant in promoting friendships across religious divides, enhancing greater understanding among people, and strengthening the inner fabric of our society, then we are allowing the extremists to win. Although Sabeel’s financial resources are limited, we are thankful that we have been able to build a solid foundation for our life together,

i.e. our interfaith relations, especially with Muslims.

It is important to emphasize that Sabeel’s interfaith work for the last several years has been done in partnership with Al-Liqa Center in Bethlehem. God has blessed our efforts together and we are thankful for our partnership. When I assess our interfaith work, I can see ten important foundations to genuine interfaith relations with Muslims:

First: We see the other as a person of faith and not only as a person who adheres to another religion.

Second: Interfaith terminology is more respectful of the other, of their faith as well as their religion. We accept people as they are.

Third: Interreligious dialogue reflects an intellectual exercise among people of different religions; but an interfaith dialogue reflects a deeper interaction and encounter among people who have a faith commitment.

Fourth: When dialogue takes place

among people of faith, they are sharing more than information and facts about their religion; they are talking about their way of life.

Fifth: Through interfaith dialogue both sides are witnessing to their own faith in the best sense of the word. It does not mean evangelism with an objective to change the other and make him/her become like me. It has to do with how one’s faith in God is lived out in the world and how that affects our relationship with our neighbor.

Sixth: Interfaith relations deepen and enrich each person’s own faith commitment.

Seventh: Interfaith relations open the door to work together in the building of a better society where hostility is replaced by love, contempt is changed to respect, and intolerance is substituted by acceptance and tolerance.

Eighth: Interfaith relations compel us to cooperate in the work of justice and truth and seek peace and reconciliation for all the people of our community.

Ninth: Interfaith dialogue matures us to become friends and to open ourselves to the other; it makes us introspective about our own human weakness and vulnerability and makes us realize the importance of communal unity and solidarity.

Tenth: The ultimate end of all interfaith relations is the glory and praise of the One Creator Loving and Merciful God.

What about interfaith dialogue with Jews?

Ideally, the ten foundations above should equally apply, but due to the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and the continued oppression of the Palestinians by the Israeli government, Sabeel chose to include relations with Jews under the justice and peace ministry.

The oppressive occupation must end before any meaningful dialogue can

take place. Experience has shown that in some places in the West, Jewish partners have imposed certain parameters on dialogue. They have not been willing to discuss or delve into the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. In other words, the whole issue of justice for the Palestinians has been left out of the agenda. In such situations, interfaith lacks integrity and honesty, and it turns into a “deal” because justice is excluded and the whole discourse is dominated and deceptively guided.

At Sabeel, with our Jewish partners – secular Jews, Jewish Voice for Peace, Re-constructionist Jews, and other Jews of conscience – justice is at the heart of our relationship and it is addressed in every conference that we hold. Because if we, as people of faith who believe that God is a God of justice and truth, cannot address an issue of justice

where millions of our brothers and sisters, both Christians and Muslims, are oppressed and are crying out for justice, then something is drastically wrong with our faith and we need to examine our underlying religious, theological, moral, and ethical motives and objectives.

I hope the time will come soon when our interfaith relations will be complete in a tripartite relationship – Muslims, Jews, and Christians – and the climax of all interfaith relations will be realized in the praise and adoration of the One God, uttered and practiced daily through faithful service to all our fellow human beings.

The Rev. Ateek is the Director of Sabeel



Photo by Tina Whitehead

Nabi Musa- Muslim Shrine in the Jordan Valley



“Verily in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest,” the Koran teaches. And we say, “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and your heart shall find rest.”



Christian-Muslim Arab Dialog in the Holy Land

by *Geris S. Khoury*

Why do I call it an Arab Christian-Muslim dialog and not a Christian-Muslim dialog?

I think that the Christian-Muslim dialog in its general sense is almost impossible, due to social differences among believers, the multiplicity of their languages and their distribution over a large area of land, east, west, south and north. Besides, they have different traditions, cultures, social behavior, daily chores and future dreams. I say this in spite of my knowledge of official meetings between Christians and Muslims in which many theoretical issues are lightly and impractically discussed.

On the other hand, the Arab Christian-

Muslim dialog in the Holy Land in particular and the Arab world in general is possible for several reasons:

1. The Arab quality is original in us and in our history, before even the rise of Christianity and Islam.
2. A common language and common history unites us; there are no social, behavioral or ethical differences between Arab Christians and their brothers Arab Muslims.
3. A dialog is imposed on us in our daily life in which we share bread, home and nation. Our dialog is a dialog of life and not a dialog about theories. Our children study in the same schools and study the same curriculum. They play together and face their dilemmas and dreams together. The factors of dialog

create constant dialog between us because our dialog starts during our childhood and goes on until our death.

4. Our Arab dialog is not new. Whatever we do is basically nourishment to a tree whose roots go deep in history. There had been dialog between Arab Christians and Muslims during the time of the Prophet (May the peace of God be upon Him) and also during the period of the Caliphate and after. There are thousands of manuscripts in Arabic, some of which have been published and many others have been kept in several libraries in the East and West waiting for those who would collect, study and publish them that they may become a wealth for the Arab library and the international community. They would encourage dialog in the Arab world and in the world in general because they will provide evidence to all that Christianity and Islam have always been a factor of unity based on love. Both religions call for brotherhood and build bridges of love and coexistence between believers on condition that they listen to the voice of God in their hearts ⁽¹⁾.
5. Cultural cooperation and cooperation to build the Arab civilization did not take place only in the Middle Ages. It also went on powerfully and determinedly when Christians and Muslims faced the Turks and Turkish powers. Christians and Muslims planted the seeds of Arab nationalism and together founded the Arab renaissance. This matter has greatly affected and is still influencing the creation of an atmosphere of dialog and shared existence.
6. Many political positions have contributed to the creation of dialog, communication, and the building strong relations between Arab

Christians and Muslims. For example, I would like to mention the position of the Orthodox Church in Syria, which opened its doors before the large number of Muslim worshippers on Friday in 1937 when Turkey ordered the closure of mosques in the Alexandrian region when an international committee visited the location to reach a resolution whether the region was part of Syria or Turkey. For fear that Muslims might demonstrate after Friday noon prayer and negatively affect the resolution of the committee; the Turkish government ordered the closure of all mosques to prevent Muslims from gathering in mosques for prayer. At once, the Patriarch took a decision to open the doors of the churches to Muslim worshippers. After prayer, Muslims and Christians went out in a demonstration expressing their unity and their position and demanding the annexation of Alexandria to Syria. Says Riyadh Najeeb El-Rayes in this respect, "Orthodox Christians opened, one hour after the Turkish edict to close the mosques, their Byzantine and Roman Churches and transformed them into mosques where the Muslim population held the Friday noon prayer. That was indeed a national parade. For the first time in their lives, Muslims held Friday noon prayer in churches together with Christians. The Muslim imam stood in Christ's temple reading from the Holy Qur'an and the muezzin climbed up the pulpit to call people for prayer. This spontaneous Christian attitude was the greatest national incident in the history of the Syrian struggle for the Arab nationality of Alexandria. It strengthened in the hearts of the Syrian people the Arab national sentiment in light of Christianity and Islam after rumors had spread that religions destroy nationalities"⁽²⁾.



Our dialog is a dialog of life and not a dialog about theories. Our children study in the same schools and study the same curriculum. They play together and face their dilemmas and dreams together.

The Eastern Catholic Patriarchs have expressed the concept and conditions of dialog in clear words, deep meanings, and rich spirituality. It is necessary that dialog begin on the basis of those principles and concepts. They write, "Dialog is a spiritual attitude before anything else in which the individual stands before God and talks to Him, thus his self is sublimated and heart and emotions purged. This is reflected in the individual's dialog with himself and with others -- individuals and groups. Dialog is a spiritual state that carries us from isolation to absorption, from rejection to acceptance, from labeling to understanding, from distortion to respect, from vindictiveness to mercy, from enmity to friendship, from competition to completeness, from repulsion to interaction, and from conflict to brotherhood. Dialog with the other means to know and acknowledge him, to know him as he sees himself and in his full personality, and to acknowledge him as our complement and not as an enemy or competitor, away from presuppositions and presumptions, interests and selfishness. In such circumstances, dialog is transformed into mutual richness without any of the parties conceding themselves, their heritage,

their personalities or identities. No doubt that bigotry in all its kinds in the name of God, nationality, sect, land, race, language, or cultural or social affiliation, is the arch enemy of dialog. The difference between the believer and the bigot is very wide: the believer is used by God, while the bigot uses God; the believer worships God, while the bigot worships himself, claiming he is worshipping God; the believer listens to the word of God, while the bigot distorts His word; the believer elevates himself to the level of God and His Love, while the bigot constantly threatens other people; the believer pays homage to God, while the bigot undermines God's majesty and power; the believer does God's will, while the bigot puts his will before God's will. Indeed, the believer is a grace to mankind, while the bigot is a curse. Bigotry is a form of the denial of God and man at the same time. In the bigot, the power of love and faith is turned into a power of hatred and enmity and aggression. He thinks that he is doing God's will if he attacks whoever differs from him in religion, race, color or heritage. In the believer, it turns into a power for coming together, cooperation and construction⁽³⁾.

¹Graf, Georg, *Geschichte Der Christlichen Arabischen Literatur*, in: *Studi e Testi*, no. 118, 133, 146, 147, 137, Citta Del Vaticano, 1977

²Al-Rayes, Riyadh Najeeb, *Christianity and Arabicism*, Riyadh Al-Rayes for Publication, London, 2nd ed. 1991, p. 88

³Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, *The Meaning of Christian Presence in the East*, p. 92, para. 47
Courtesy of Dr. Geris Khoury, from his book "Arab Christians and Muslims: past present and future."

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Christian-Jewish Relations in the Context of Israel-Palestine

by Fr. David Neuhaus

Perspectives on Christian-Jewish relations in Israel/Palestine in particular and in the Middle East in general are clearly distinguishable from perspectives that are current in Europe and North America. From the European and North American perspective, Jews and Christians have been in a fruitful and passionate dialogue for the past six decades, following a fundamental rethinking of the relationship with Jews and Judaism in the Western Churches. In fact, a deep dialogue has developed between Western Christians and their Jewish neighbors. This dialogue has been powered by two strong motors. One is the awakened sense of contrition among Christians with regard to the tragic fate of the Jews during periods when anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism dominated, culminating in the catastrophe of the Shoah (Holocaust). The other is the embrace of the Biblical and, by extension, the Jewish heritage of the Church and at its center the fact that Jesus, his disciples and the early Church are part of a Jewish world that has bequeathed to us a rich shared heritage, most importantly the Old Testament.

Clearly, the context, and thus the perspectives in Israel/Palestine and in the Middle East are quite different.

In the Middle East today, Jews are not generally perceived as victims of marginalization and persecution but rather as the face of a problematic political reality in the Middle East in the form of the State of Israel and its occupation of Palestinian lands. Arab Christians, and Palestinian Christians in particular, challenge those engaged in the European and North American Jewish-Christian dialogue, asking whether a sense of guilt for the iniquity of anti-Semitism has not promoted an unhealthy dialogue where some Christians seek to assuage this sense of guilt by naively approving anything Jews say or do. This is particularly dramatic when Christians side with the political claims of the State of Israel and ignore Palestinians, their suffering and their legitimate demands for justice. Furthermore, the Old Testament, rather than being held up as “a shared heritage”, provokes concern, particularly with regard to texts about election, promise and land. Many Middle East Christians fear fundamentalist exploitation of these texts in the conflict between Arabs and Jews over Israel/Palestine.

I would like to underline five characteristics of the particular context for Christian-Jewish relations in Israel/Palestine and by extension in the Middle East in contrast to the European context:

Not part of the Christian world

Contemporary dialogue between Jews and Christians has focused almost exclusively on historical relations between Jews and Christians in the lands where Christians are the majority and where they have defined culture, society and power relations. In relation to these lands, Christians have realized that certain modalities of thought, action and political practice marginalized and even excluded Jews, often accused of being outsiders because of their refusal of the Christian faith and their adherence to religious practice other than Christianity. Middle Eastern society and politics are not derived from this same Christian tradition. On the contrary, the modern Middle East is formed in the shadow of the creation of a Jewish state with a Jewish majority in 1948, perceived by many Middle Easterners and by Palestinians in particular as the last remnant of a colonial domination that ignores the aspirations of the indigenous population.

The presence of Islam

Islam is the dominant religion in historical Palestine and the Middle East and Muslims are the majority in all of the countries in the Middle East today (except for Israel). The Christian Arab and the Muslim Arab, whatever



A “Living Together” Conference in Bethlehem

their religious differences might be, live in one society, speak one language, share one culture and experience one socio-political reality. Thus, dialogue with Muslims is a priority for Middle East Christians in a way that is not self-evident in interreligious dialogue in Europe. Dialogue with Jews, in fact, almost always becomes a dialogue within the Middle East context because Muslims cannot be ignored.

The reversal of power relations

The teaching of many Western Churches, profoundly cognizant of the European and North American context, is extremely sensitive to the marginalized and vulnerable status of the Jews in the history of the West. However, Middle East Christians reflect on Christian-Jewish relations from the experience of the sovereignty of a powerful Jewish polity - Israel. Never before in history have Christians experienced Jewish sovereignty (this having been established in 1948 with the creation

of the State of Israel). For many Middle East Christians, the Jew is often, first and foremost, a soldier, a policeman or a settler. Whereas Western Christians engage with Jews as a minority, marginalized and often traumatized, Palestinian Christians are in a situation where power relations are reversed. They do not feel responsible for the fate of Jews in Europe; on the contrary they often sense that they themselves are the victims of that very same history, having lost their homeland when the State of Israel was established.

The Israel-Palestine conflict as definitive

Whereas from the European and North American perspective, the watershed in Christian-Jewish relations was the Shoah, which provoked an awakening to a certain teaching of contempt for Jews in Christian circles, from the Middle East perspective, the question of Palestine is at the center of relations with Jews. Whereas dialogue from the Western perspective often includes

a focus on the struggle against anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, the focus on justice and peace is an essential element of any prospective dialogue between Christians and Jews within the Middle East context.

The place of the Bible

The shared Biblical heritage is a fundamental principle in the decades of Christian-Jewish dialogue that has flourished over the past century. However, the experience of the shared Biblical heritage within the context of Israel/Palestine is not without its ambiguities. The Bible has been used as a foundational text when it comes to establishing a contemporary Jewish claim to the land that Palestinians see as theirs. Zionism, the ideology of Jewish nationalism, often reads the Bible as a legal, historical or even divinely revealed title deed to the land. For many Middle East Christians, a major problem is the use of the Bible to dispossess Palestinians and legitimate injustice. This is particularly evident in certain forms of Christian Zionism that offer Biblical justifications for the dispossession of the Palestinians and hostility towards Muslims.

Conclusion

Whereas Christians and Jews frequent one another in Europe and North America, Jews are no longer present in the majority of the Middle East countries, where they had once constituted vibrant communities before 1948. Only in Israel/Palestine are there substantial communities

of both Christians and Jews today. Here we might suggest some practical initiatives to promote dialogue between Jews and Christians within the context of Israel/Palestine:

1. Encourage a dialogue of daily life focused on the concrete conditions of life in this land called holy. Jews and Christians together with Muslims are called to develop a shared commitment to justice and peace for all inhabitants of the Holy Land. They do come together in the NGOs that promote shared values but often the religious and spiritual elements of the relationships established are ignored. Justice, peace, freedom, reconciliation, pardon, respect for human life and human rights are all concepts that can and must be rooted in the spiritual traditions that are rooted in the Holy Land. Religious discourse should not be left to fanatics and fundamentalists.

2. Jews and Christians must begin to study their shared textual heritage, the literature of the Old Testament, together. Joint study can throw light on the meaning of the religious text and its consequences in the here and now. Challenging violent, exclusivist and discriminatory interpretations of sacred texts is an important part of educating for justice and peace.

3. Jews, Christians and Muslims are invited to recover a memory of a time when Jews lived integrated in the Middle East. In fact, before 1948, Jewish Arabs were as significant a part of the Middle East as Christian Arabs. Traces of this Jewish presence include the contributions of prominent Jewish figures within Arab culture whether in the medieval period (eg. Saad bin Yusuf al-Fayoumi known as Saadia Gaon, great biblical commentator and

translator of the Bible into Arabic) or the philosopher Moussa bin Maymoun (Maimonides) or in modern times (eg. musicians like Leyla Mourad, Daoud Housni and Feirouz al-Halabiyyah). Sadly, the once illustrious Jewish communities of Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon have all but disappeared whereas those of Iran, Turkey and Yemen have been dramatically reduced, yet another victim of the conflict that has plagued the Middle East since 1948.

4. Religious people are called to lives of faith and hope. What more hopeful sign can there be than religious people – Jews, Christians and Muslims – who listen to one another and grow

in understanding and acceptance, speaking a language of mutual respect and esteem rather than the language of contempt that dominates much of the political discourse in Israel/Palestine today. Prophetic discourse must be appropriated afresh so that “God-talk” reminds all human creatures of their fundamental duty to honor one another as created in the image and likeness of God. This prophetic discourse must point out the iniquity of human sinfulness in the dispossession, repression, discrimination and violence that surrounds us and open up the human imagination to the possibility of a society where men and women recognize one another as belonging to one family.

Rev. Dr. David Mark Neuhaus SJ, a Roman Catholic priest, is Latin Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel and coordinator of the pastoral among migrants. He is a member of the Society of Jesus and teaches Scripture at the Seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and at Bethlehem University.

CHRISTMAS GREETINGS FROM SABELL

On behalf of all of us in Jerusalem and Nazareth,
we wish you a Merry Christmas and a blessed 2013!

We wish to express our heartfelt thanks
for all of your hard work and everything
that each of you does for justice
and peace around the world.

With deep appreciation,
The Sabeel Staff and Board



The Imam and His Christian Friends

by Sheikh Zuheir Daba'i

On June 1, 2012, while I was busy preparing for the Friday sermon as I have done for more than 42 years, the sad news came to me through a phone call: it said that my friend Jamal Khoury died a short while ago in Ramallah.

Sadness overtook me. After a few minutes, my daughter Ta'yeed came in and said good morning. When she came closer to me, she asked: What is wrong?

I said: Bad news.

She said: What?

I said: A dear friend passed away a short while ago.

She asked: Who?

I answered: Abu Nicola

She said: Ammo (Uncle) Abu Nicola! and she started crying.

My daughter Ta'yeed and all my kids use the term Ammo when they address Abu Nicola. Ammo means uncle (the brother of the father).

I contacted several friends and told them the sad news and invited them to come to the Church of the Annunciation for the Greek Orthodox community in Nablus. It is a beautiful church which was built three years ago. There is another ancient Orthodox Church inside the Old City of Nablus which was renovated after suffering damage and destruction caused by the Israeli occupation army against the homes, institutions and mosques of the Old City in April 2002. The church was renovated upon orders and with funding from the Palestinian government.

I went to church with my daughter, Ta'yeed, and my two sons, Islam and Jubran. We stood with those who received the coffin and the funeral

started. Father George Awwad then said: "Now, let us listen to the word of the friends of the deceased, Jamal Khoury, to be delivered by Sheikh Zuheir Daba'i".

I told the story above because our friendship grew stronger as I felt in him and other pastors of churches the principles and values that I deem necessary for coexistence between Muslim and Christian Palestinian citizens. They are:

1- We differ in doctrine but we have no desire or need to engage in a debate about whose doctrine is the correct one.

2- There is a more urgent need for religion at the beginning of the 21st Century than at the time of God's messengers and prophets because the oppressors have exploited knowledge and technology for purposes that contradict the essence of religion, thus making their oppression more cruel and painful.

3- There are common spiritual and ethical values within Christianity and Islam and also within other religions. Therefore, we have to work together for our common interest, and there are so many things in common among all human beings.

4- The greatest accomplishment of Muslims is the civilization which resulted from the interaction of the efforts and experiences of a large number of people from all races and religions, mainly the Christian Arabs who have had a major presence in the Arab Peninsula, Greater Syria, Egypt and Iraq. The Holy Qur'an denounced

in an entire Sura those who oppressed and tortured the first believers in the message of Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) which is al-Bourouj Sura. Besides, the only Sura out of the 114 Suras of the Holy Quran which carries the name of a woman is the Sura of the Virgin Mary (Peace Be Upon Her). Thus, the churches, convents and priests in Jerusalem and in all of Palestine are not only sanctuaries but are also an authentic and beautiful component of our homeland and its flavor.

5- The Israeli occupation and its crimes of ethnic cleansing led to the eviction of the Palestinian citizens from the coastal area and Galilee in Palestine in 1948 and then in 1967. This has constituted the first and foremost factor of targeting the Christian presence in Jerusalem and Palestine. We have no choice but to resist and defend our existence. Our non-violent resistance depends on the weapons of faith, patience, information, awareness, collective efforts and capacity to work within a team spirit, and on our friends in the world who reject racism, occupation, hatred and violence. This is why I worked with my friend, Pastor Naim Ateek, in order to disseminate those values and convictions through meetings that discussed non-violence, common spiritual and moral values and other themes. Imams, mosque preachers and public opinion leaders participated in those meetings. The results of the meetings and dialogues were good and promising. We are still looking forward to organizing more meetings and dialogues in the future.

Imam Zuheir Daba'i is the Imam of several mosques in Ramallah and Nablus. He has written extensively about Muslim thought, believes in non violence and calls for a reformed reading of Islam.



Interfaith workshop in Nablus, West-Bank

Living Together

The experience of Muslim-Christian Relations
in the Arab World in General and in Palestine in Particular

by Father Rafiq Khoury

Living together is the big issue of today during a phase of our human history in which our world has become a “small village” where it is no longer possible for any people to live apart, separate from the other peoples. In that context, we are called today to reflect on Christian-Muslim relations in the Arab world in general and in Palestine in particular.

This issue is actually of particular importance now because Islam and the Muslims have unfortunately become a sort of obsession in the West, especially after September 11th, 2001. Such an obsession does not offer a sane atmosphere in which to develop positive relations among religions, peoples and cultures.

For us Christians in this part of the world, the Muslim is not an abstract

or imaginary “thing,” but a real and concrete person. Muslims are our next-door neighbors, the merchants where we shop, our colleagues at work, at school or in the university; we meet them routinely in political or economic or cultural or social life. They are for us concrete human beings, with their good qualities and defects, and we stand before them also with our good qualities and defects.

I would like to have a look at these relations in the past and in the present, before presenting some perspectives for the future.

Experience of the Past

When I was a child, there was always a Muslim in our home working with my father, sleeping, eating and praying in our house. We shared “bread and salt,” as we say in Arabic, expressing the living together, the co-existence, of persons or communities. I am from a small village located to the north-east of Jerusalem, entirely Christian, a village surrounded by several Muslim villages; we shared the same language, the same social traditions, the same culture, the same way of life, working together in our fields, collecting our olives together, drinking the same water, smelling the same soil of the land and learning together. (In our parish school, a third of the students were from the Muslim village next door.)

Now, this personal and local experience is also a collective and historic one since it goes back thirteen centuries, with its ups and downs, as is the case with every human and collective experience.

On this occasion, I would like to focus on four elements of the past, which were definitive for both Arab Christianity and for Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world:

- **The contribution of the Christians to the administration of the new state:** When Muslims arrived in our region, they appealed to the local Christians to help in the administration of the new state. Some of them reached very high and sensitive positions. The example of the Christian Mansour family of Damascus is well-known, since this family was called upon to organize the finances of the state in addition to serving in many other

public fields. We can say that the Eastern Christians took the wise step of integrating themselves into the public life of the new society instead of remaining apart, isolated and living in the past.

- **The adoption of the Arabic language:** Several languages were used by the Christians of these areas, including Aramaic, Syriac, Chaldean, Coptic and Greek. But relatively soon, they all adopted the Arabic language in their daily life, in their liturgies, in their administration and in their religious literature. The Arabic language allowed these Christians to communicate among each other as well as with the surrounding new world which was arising.
- **The contribution to cultural life:** Eastern Christians translated major parts of the Hellenistic culture, especially philosophy, medicine, and the sciences, into Arabic. In that way they enabled the interaction between Arab-Muslim culture and the Hellenistic one and thereby contributed to the development of the formation of the Arab-Muslim culture, which became the most important one at that time. In addition to translation, they also produced results in these cultural fields. It was very common, in that period, for a Muslim philosopher to be the disciple of a Christian one and vice versa (the case of Al-Farabi is well known).¹
- **The formation of the Arab-Christian heritage:** Eastern Christians not only contributed to the formation of the Arab-Muslim culture but developed original Christian thought in Arabic in several religious fields. This heritage is actually being published

in a collection entitled the Arab Christian Heritage.

All these factors were decisive in the formation of Arab Christianity as we know it today. This experience was summarized by the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs in these words: “We [Christians and Muslims] draw on a single heritage of civilization. Each of us has contributed to its formation according to his own genius... Christians of the East are an inseparable part of the cultural identity of Muslims. In the same way, Muslims of the East are an inseparable part of the cultural identity of Christians.”²

Palestine was a part of that process. However, the peculiarity of the Palestinian experience was determined by further factors such as the geographical position of Palestine at the crossroads of three continents and the unique religious position of Palestine for the three monotheistic religions. In modern times, the nature of Muslim-Christian relations in Palestine has been profoundly determined by the tragic Palestinian experience, since Christian and Muslim Palestinians suffered together, were exiled together, fought together and share the same aspirations for the future. All these factors make Muslim-Christian relations in Palestine deeper than in any other part of the Arab world. That experience was summarized in the *Palestinian Declaration of Independence*, which mentions Palestine as “the land of the three monotheistic faiths,” adding:

Nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations and cultures, inspired by a heritage rich in variety and kind, the Palestinian Arab people added to its stature by consolidating a union between itself and its patrimonial Land. The call went out from Temple, Church and Mosque that to praise the Creator,

to celebrate compassion and peace was indeed the message of Palestine... Thus shall these principles allow no departure from Palestine's age-old spiritual and civilizational heritage of tolerance and religious co-existence.

When Christian-Muslim relations are studied, it must be within that framework. Ups and downs have to be seen and considered in that context. Otherwise, we misunderstand and deform reality.

The Situation of the Present

First and foremost, it has to be said that what happened in the past has happened again in modern times. In the second part of the 19th century, a movement called "The Arab Awakening" took place and constitutes the re-entry of the Arabs into modern history. What has to be said here is that the Christians of the Arab world not only took part in that renewal but were also the pioneers of its cultural, economic and political life. This reality, which is still ongoing, shows that the Arab Christians are an integral part of their societies.

However, at the same time, it also has to be said that in the past two decades a number of events have occurred on the local, regional and international levels which have deeply affected Muslim-Christian relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many politicians and strategists, in search of a new enemy, started to develop the idea of the "clash of civilizations" by looking at Islam as the number one enemy of the West. After September 11th 2001, this trend was deepened and transformed into action (the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and recently in Lebanon). Additionally, we must mention the ethnic and religious "cleansing" in the Balkan areas and in other parts of the world; the Islamic fundamentalist movements with their parallels in the West, especially in the USA; the religious revival which often takes a fundamentalist

orientation in Islam, Christianity and Judaism; globalization in its Western and American forms; and the chronic instability of the Arab world with its huge political, economic, cultural and social problems, terrorism and violence. Above all, we have to mention the ongoing international inability to resolve in a fair way the Palestinian problem and its consequences such as the intolerable oppression of the Palestinian people.

All these factors have created an atmosphere of tension, which affects Muslim-Christian relations locally, regionally and internationally. In that atmosphere of tension, we have witnessed some attacks on Christian institutions here and there in the Holy Land. One example is the attacks against some churches after the declarations of the Pope of Rome on Islam. I purposely raise such an example not to minimize these attacks but at the same time not to exaggerate them or to generalize about them. In these cases, we have to take into account the popular and the official reactions to these acts. The Muslim passersby in Qabatia prevented the burning of the church and forced the perpetrators to flee. In the other towns where such acts occurred, they caused a general outcry from the entire population with its parties, civil organizations, popular movements, religious organizations and establishments as well as individuals, showing that these were the acts of isolated persons who did not represent the whole community and that these acts were viewed, indeed, as harming Muslim-Christian relations and creating a sense of fear in the Christian community.

Perspectives of the Future

An experience-personal or collective is never static. And if it were to be so, it becomes a mummified experience

without life and unable to give life. An experience is always a dynamic reality which develops when it is confronted with challenges, new appeals and new needs. The Christian-Muslim experience in our region and in our land has to be permanently developing and deepening in order to ensure its future.

This sort of reflection has already been taking place in Palestine and in the Arab world, a reflection on the experience of the past in order to adapt it to the new challenges of the present. This work is done through several channels. Here in Palestine, this reflection is conducted by a number of organizations, such as Sabeel Center and Al-Liqa Center, which since 1982 have organized annual conferences and different initiatives which aim to develop Muslim-Christian relations in Palestine, including the International Forum in Bethlehem, Passia (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs) in Jerusalem and other forums and organizations.

Within this perspective, I would like to mention two texts which deal with Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world. The first one is a common pastoral letter published by the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs entitled *Together before God for Human Beings and Society: the Living Together between Christians and Muslims in the Arab World* (Christmas 1994). The Assembly of the Catholic Patriarchs was created in 1990. In one of its annual meetings (1994), the Patriarchs discussed Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world and consequently published a common pastoral letter dealing with these relations in the past and the present as well as offering many perspectives for the future.

The second document is the work of the Arab Working Group on Muslim-



Wadi Qelt Monastery in the Jordan Valley

Christian Dialogue, which is comprised of prominent independent personalities from the different Arab countries, Muslim and Christian alike, and which has taken several initiatives to develop Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world. In the year 2002, the group published an important document on the issue entitled *Dialogue and Coexistence: An Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant*, which is, in my opinion, one of the most important texts on this issue and which deserves to be better known and studied. It is presented as a reflection of religious believers, not only as a political perspective, and it has the courage to confront the real problems facing Muslim-Christian relations today in the Arab World.

To open the door to the future, Muslim-Christian relations in the Arab world have to face a variety of issues, such as

mutual knowledge, visceral prejudices existing on both sides against the other, public discourse and its repercussions on the common people, politics and religion, the challenge of otherness, the challenge of sectarianism, the culture of dialogue, and spirituality and dialogue. This reflection aims to develop a culture of dialogue through education in the family, in the schools and in the different educational forums, such as churches and mosques.

Conclusion

Coexistence involves not only looking

at one another, but also looking together at the poor and marginalized. Religious dialogue can be strongly developed though a common effort on issues such as development, human rights, and social problems. In that case, coexistence becomes witnessing together. As Christians and Muslims in Palestine and in the Arab world, we are called to witness to the possibility of living together before God and humanity, a coexistence which the entire world aspires to. Living together is possible; it is decisive. This is our witness, our hope and our commitment.

1 the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, founded by Prince Hassan of Jordan, has started to edit a dictionary of all the Christian figures who contributed to the cultural life in that period, with a short biography of each of them. The first volume is already published, covering the first three letters of the alphabet, comprising 304 pages.

2 Common Pastoral Letter: The Christian Presence in the Middle East, Witness and Mission, 1992, n.48.

Monsignor Rafiq Khoury, Ph.D. in theology, priest of the Latin Patriarchate, a member of the Board of Trustees meeting center for religious studies and heritage in the Holy Land, a lecturer at Bethlehem University and the Faculty of Theology / Ableen. Has a large number of articles and books in the field of specialization.



Younger Voices

Side by Side

by Nanor Arakelian

From around the world, regardless of one's nation, race or ethnicity, people join in to worship and pray, becoming one with the religion that God has blessed them with by birth. Jerusalem has always been known as holy ground, where the three heavenly religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, come together. Three religions, one God, might be confusing, a melting pot where one might expect a fight for God's acceptance or for his satisfaction, as when children argue about who gets to be the favorite in the eyes of the parents!

The walls of Jerusalem wrap these religions together united in one place. This small piece of land that all nations have fought for and still fight over, that defenders have died for, where the feeling is so strong and so deep that it cannot be explained by words, but only by action.

Jerusalem has been conquered by different people and nations and has

been ruled under the specific religion of its conqueror, whether during the time of Salah ad-din, the Crusaders, the Ottoman Empire, the British mandate, or to this day, the Israeli government. The people of Jerusalem, to their credit, have lived together peacefully with their neighbors. Whether Christians or Muslims, they have lived in peace, agreeing that no matter what, they are one. People from different religions have always been together, hand in hand defending each other, walking together in good times and bad.

In history it is mentioned that they have lived side by side; they showed love by taking in anyone who needed sheltering. Jerusalem opened its doors to people no matter where they came from or their religion. For example in 1915 during the Armenian Genocide, many middle-eastern countries - Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Palestine - opened their homes and welcomed Armenians into their families. Many of those families were Muslim, and till this day relationships

have been kept and the bonds which were formed back in those days are still in effect.

Time flies by quickly, however, and circumstances throughout the years have played a crucial role; different aspects mingle with our daily lives, affecting us and our political, economic and social decisions. With globalization and technology the world is becoming smaller and smaller, and people are competing more with each other to see who can come out on top. Sometimes we let our greed for fame or money make us forget about the love that we should have for one another, the importance of humanity and the peace of mind that no amount of money can buy. Politics has played the biggest role until this day, influencing our daily life circumstances, especially in Palestine. Even though it is a small country it is still diverse with different ideologies (political or other) and backgrounds (religion and race) including minorities. Nevertheless, religion has never come between any of these categories. Until

this day, a Muslim family keeps the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the consent of all Christian churches.

Unfortunately, nowadays religion is having a huge impact through politics as well as an effect on the cultural aspects of society, where the influence of out-sources has put pressure on Jerusalem from three ways: the Islamic world, "Israel, being representative of the Jewish world", and the Christian countries. This international pressure tends to cause a negative energy amongst Jerusalemites which is the result of the tension and stress accumulated from the society within, the collision of the

interests in-country with the extremists around the world, leading to tension amongst the people. For example, many professions have employees from different religions; they work together, they talk together and even joke and have a laugh together. Forgetting the stressful atmosphere of reality, the unity of interfaith is observed. However, after work hours we also notice the reality check we go back to, and the pressure from our social groups and their expectations that makes us a little bit further from one another. However,

we are thankful that although with all the international pressure that is upon Jerusalem, we are still able to see the ray of hope and keep intact with one another under one nation; Christian clergy still attend to "Iftar" in Ramadan with Muslim Sheikhs, and their clerics share holiday greetings with Christians and their churches. This itself is interfaith unity.

After all, religion is a relationship with God, but the country is a relationship with its people.

Nanor Arakelian is an Armenian Palestinian, raised in Ramallah, and living in Jerusalem. Recently graduated from Bethlehem University with a degree in Sociology, she works at Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation.

A Christian or a Muslim?

by Nedal Zahran

I was walking around Birzeit one summer afternoon when I met this young boy of five whom I often saw and chatted with. I was glad to see him again and so I started speaking to him. I cannot remember how our conversation started, but I clearly remember how it ended. "Are you a Christian or a Muslim?" he asked. I was so shocked at this question that I stood there for a minute not knowing how to respond. Should I tell him about the third group to which I belong that he might not comprehend? Or should I discredit this question diplomatically? Choosing the second option, I asked "Why should it matter if you enjoy talking to me?"

In the Ramallah of the late 80's and early 90's where I grew up, I do not remember religious identity being so strongly emphasised in our conversations. I even recall a funny incident about my first religion class when they asked us to go and separate into two groups, and I ended up going to the 'wrong' class.

Today, you can still hear the standard discourse about interfaith relations in Palestine coming from religious leaders, politicians and the intelligentsia, holding our community as a symbol for tolerance, coexistence and mutual respect. The word on the street, however, echoes a different discourse: one of independent identities and mutually exclusive communities separated along religious lines. If one looks deeply into the dynamics of the Palestinian community today, one can clearly feel walls standing out to separate communities in a manner that was never there before.

The root causes of this phenomenon are understandable. The sectarian 'polarisation' in the region, coupled with the rise of religious groups as political actors can profoundly impact the development of new forms of identity and blur the common national identity we have shared for generations. My intention is not to paint a dark picture

of the situation, but to raise an alarm on a crisis in the making. It is the duty of everyone concerned with good interfaith relations and maintaining civil peace to face this fact and admit that action is necessary.

When I was asked to write for Sabeel's newsletter, I thought that I should write about how I am integrated into a diverse community like that of Ramallah. My direct community is a liberal one where faith (or lack of it) is never a factor that determines relations between individuals. It does, in fact, symbolise the most noble forms of interfaith relationships. Yet I am concerned that communities like mine are becoming more and more difficult to find. I am worried that my children will not have the chance to live in such a community. That is why I am using this platform to raise my concerns and hoping that some action might follow.

Nedal Zahran, is a specialist in international development and private sector development. He graduated from Li Po Chun UWC in 1999. He then went on to obtain a BA in Economics from Birzeit University, Palestine and MA in International Development from the University of Manchester, UK.

“I have breathed into humans My spirit,” the Koran says, “let us always consider ourselves as if the Holy One dwells within,” the Talmud teaches, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” Christianity says. But if we are all vessels of the divine, how can we use religion to justify destruction of other human beings?

Taken with permission from *Becoming Fully Human*.
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.,
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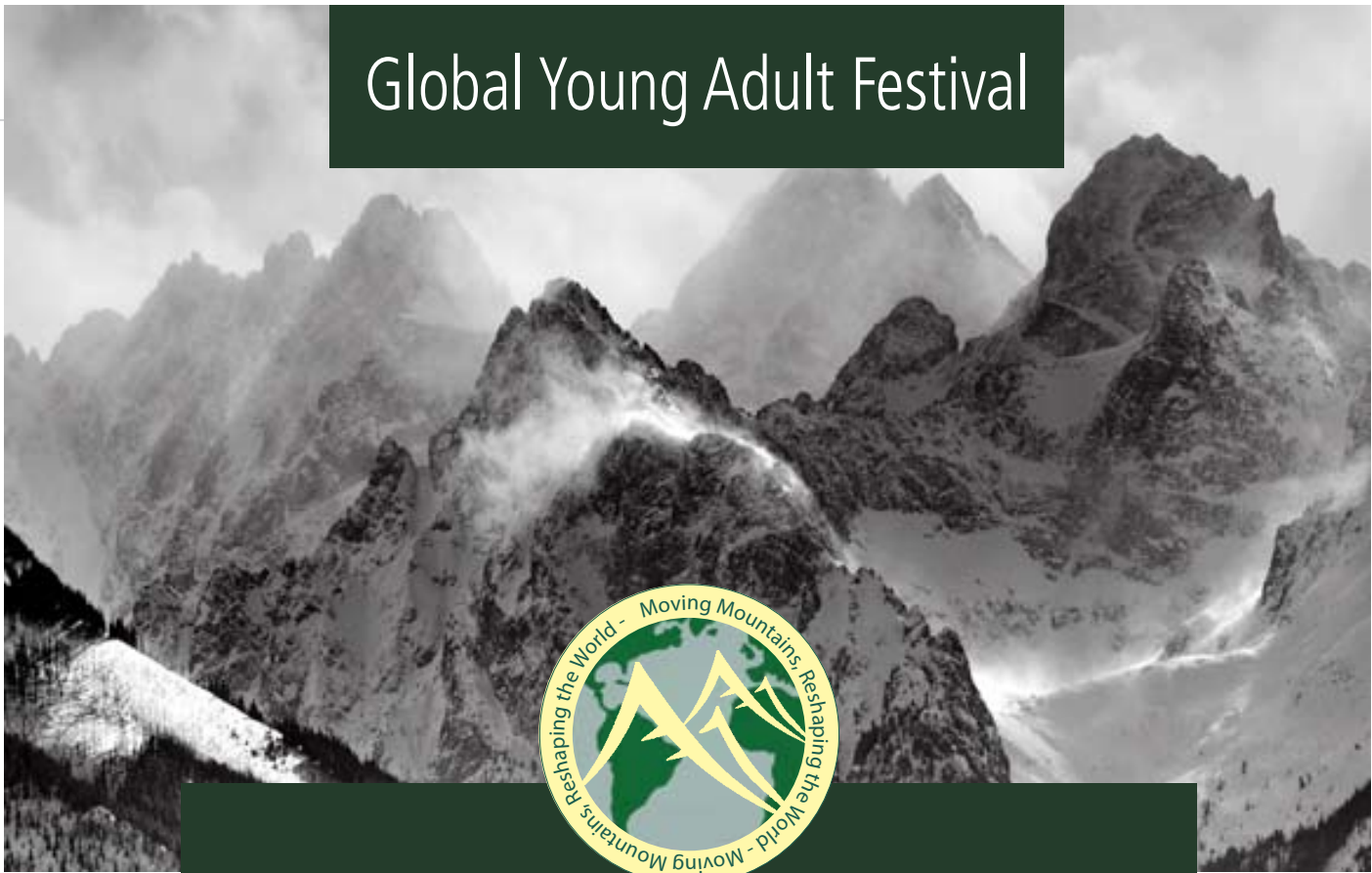


Pray for interfaith dialogue;
for people of other faiths and ideologies;
for situations and places in the world
where there is war and conflict.

May people of different faiths and beliefs
find understanding
in their common search for meaning.

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Praying together for Palestinian detainees in the Dominican Church, Jerusalem.

Ongoing Islamophobia

by Mustafa Abu Sway

On Oct. 12, 2012, I received an email with the subject being “Our Damnable Arabs! 1450!” The name of the sender, “Curtis,” shows that he did not live up to the original meaning of his name; there is nothing “courteous” about his message which includes the following quotation:

With permission from the Author, Cornerstone edited out the quotation because of its disgustingly abusive language.

Such narrative is very offensive, and not only to Muslims.

The sender of the email invites people to read a certain Islamophobic novel in defense of the First Amendment and American freedom. How does such a narrative help protect the freedom

of expression? People who are in the business of generating xenophobic hate speech do not restrict themselves to hurting Muslims; they often discriminate against other minorities as well.

Islamophobia includes irrational fear of Muslims, hatred, discrimination in economic and social institutions, the dissemination of misinformation or stereotyped images about Islam or Muslims, and verbal or physical abuse towards Muslims or Islamic institutions. Some of the worst forms of Islamophobia include burning the Holy Qur’an and ridiculing Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) under the banner of the freedom of speech.

While the coined term “Islamophobia” is relatively very new, the phenomenon

exists from the very early days of Islam. No prophet was ever accepted with open arms by his people. All of them were ridiculed, shunned and, when they undermined existing power structures, their people plotted against them to kill them, and sometimes the plot succeeded. The nascent community of believers faced persecution at the hands of the larger community and many were martyred. This was the case with Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them.

Islamophobic narratives try to portray Muslims as totally other; there is nothing common between them and westerners. But if those westerners are Jews and Christians, then definitely there are many commonalities. I subscribe to the larger human family picture where all of us share first and

foremost being human. In addition, regarding the People of the Book, I advocate a theology of “soft-otherness.” If we deconstruct the post-revelational work of theologians amongst the followers of these three religions, we will be very close to each other, if not identical! Nevertheless, in the light of current differences, one can highlight a process of inclusion translating the love of God into a love of one’s neighbor, where the neighbor is absolutely free to practice her religion and preserve cultural identity in a true multicultural modern society. A true convivencia does not require one to conform to a prevailing way of life, because the latter is ever changing. This is not about indifferent tolerance. It is about acceptance of the right of the other to be different. This is something to be celebrated and not tolerated only. One can only think about how we have treated (are treating!) our own religious minorities within the same tradition, the constant “need” to distinguish us from them. Internal intolerance could lead to an external one, against other religions, and “to distinguish” could be translated in practice “to purify,” leading to ethnic cleansing. Many Islamophobes sell themselves as experts on Islam and Muslims. They typically claim that they have no problem with Islam or moderate Muslims, but they decide who is moderate or not. If one questions and opposes unjust foreign policies, foreign occupation and all the trimmings of neo-colonialism, then s/he could be presented as an extremist. While one can inform the discussion to have a more representative and just coverage of a specific issue related to Islam and Muslims, the root of the problem is to



At the heart of the problem is the lack of true knowledge about Islam. The major media outlets might contribute... to a stereotyped image of Islam and Muslims.

make sure that we live in a just world. Colonialism has to come to an end, and former colonial powers have to invest in the south to offset poverty, famine, illiteracy and disease.

When I was interviewed by the Palestinian National TV regarding “The Innocence of Muslims,” which depicted the Prophet in the worst possible scenarios, I was asked about what should be the reaction of Muslims. I explained that while it was expected that Muslims would be deeply offended and angry, there was no justification for violence against foreign nationals or damage to public property. I also said that to be proactive, we Muslims should make a movie about Jesus Christ, only to say how much we love him and his mother Mary, peace be upon them. In Islamic theology, an insult to one prophet is an insult to all of them.

In more than fourteen centuries, the age of Islam, there were never any negative writings about Jesus Christ or his mother. Her integrity was never questioned by Muslim scholars. The only major difference is that there was no divinization. Moses himself is mentioned most in the Qur’an, and no other prophet comes even close to him quantitatively, though belief in all

of them on the same level is an article of faith (The Holy Qur’an, Sura Al-Baqara, 2: 285).

I did say also that the United States Government itself is not involved in the making of such a horrible movie, and that Americans themselves are not responsible for the action of the few. I stressed, based on my personal knowledge, that many Jews and Christians did condemn such an Islamophobic movie. This does not mean that abuse of the freedom of expression is acceptable. Cannot we agree that offending religions should be excluded from the freedom of expression?

I do believe that at the heart of the problem is the lack of true knowledge about Islam. The major media outlets might contribute, without delving into intentions, to a stereotyped image of Islam and Muslims that is difficult to change easily. It is the sort of coverage that reduces 1.6 billion Muslims to a monolithic negative picture because of the behavior of the few.

Unfortunately, Islamophobia might not disappear soon. Fortunately, people of goodwill can make this world a better place, God willing.

Professor Mustafa Abu Sway is Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, Palestine, since 1996. He has recently been appointed as the first holder of the Integral Chair for the Study of Imam Ghazali’s Work at Al-Masjid-al-Aqsa and Al-Quds University.

Glimpses of Our Activities

Nazareth



Community program- Prayer Service for the Feast of the Holy Cross



Family Retreat -Taybeh



Women's meeting in memory of Huda Jarjoura-Ateek



Youth meeting on Racism

A God of Justice and Mercy

Dr Salah suddenly asked me one day, 'Do you believe in God?' I replied, 'Yes, I could never have done what I have been able to do if I had not had a firm faith in God, and it is my faith that keeps me going even though things do look bleak.' He said that he, too, had only been able to survive throughout the years of the civil war in Lebanon and to participate in the struggles of his people because he believed in God. He is a Muslim, I am a Christian, we both have our different beliefs and ways of worshipping God, but we both believe in a God of Justice and Mercy.

by R. Mackay

Taken with permission from, *This is the Day*, edited by Neil Paynter, Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow.

Jerusalem



Muslim Christian Conference in Bethlehem:
Together Against Racism



Bishop William Shomali speaking on the “Year of Faith”



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to Shared living



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25

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PURPOSE STATEMENT *f* SABEL

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

For more information on Friends of Sabeel groups in your area please contact our international representatives or the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem.