

WATANI International

28 August 2005

Word count: 769

Talking of religion

By: George Riad

As someone stepping outside Egypt for the first time, I looked forward to my upcoming trip to Lebanon and Syria with eagerness. This was not just a tourist visit; as a *Watani* reporter I was to attend a convention held to encourage Islamic-Christian dialogue between young people.

The convention hosted 30 young men and women from all over the world: Egypt, Jordan, the United States, Denmark and Canada, as well as Lebanon and Syria—the two-organising countries. The event included a number of seminars, workshops, lectures and other activities, and lasted two weeks; one week in Lebanon and the other in Syria.

Confusing concepts

In his opening address Riad Jarjour, secretary-general of the Arab team for Islamic-Christian dialogue, said the main problem facing a dialogue was the ignorance and lack of knowledge about and the inability to listen to ‘the other’. Dr George tackled the difference between two confusing concepts: fundamentalism and fanaticism. The first meant depending on the roots of religion and clinging to its principles, while fanaticism was the abuse of religion by certain individuals who act in their own interest and thus set ‘the other’ aside, creating the culture of violence.

The convention—held in Lebanon—focused on studying a text from Wesley Ariarajah’s work "*The Bible and People of Other Faiths*", which conveys a message well understood by those taking part. The message is that God created human beings not to have the same colour, the same belief or the same thought, but with a variety that leads to a respect of the others’ culture and beliefs.

Imperative

Lebanon is a beautiful country, whose capital Beirut is a coastal city, surrounded by green mountains. The political situation in Lebanon is highly inflamed under the shades of extreme sectarianism on the part of Maronites, Shiites, and Sunnis. In Beirut we visited the religious centre set up in the name of the late Imam Mahdi Shamseddin and met his son and the centre's manager, Ibrahim Shamseddin. Mr Shamseddin spoke to us about the importance of the Islamic-Christian joint dialogue which he called an "imperative requirement", although he stressed that it did not mean making 'the other' identical to oneself.

A participant from Denmark, Agente Holm, presented a workshop through which she focused on defining the various kinds of dialogue, such as the dialogue of the head (theoretical academic dialogue), the dialogue of hands (social interactive dialogue), and the dialogue of the heart (spiritual dialogue). She also explained the influence of body language and eye contact.

Exchanging notes

In Syria, we visited Islamic and Christian sites in parallel to the convention's activities. Participants from Lebanon mentioned that their media, social and educational organisations, as well as churches and mosques, played a role in encouraging a joint dialogue of the faithful, while the American participants claimed the East was in need of a real and profound dialogue. The Syrian team said that although there was as yet no strong Islamic-Christian dialogue in Syria, the ties between Muslims and Christians were good and sound. The Egyptian performance highlighted the activities of associations working on Islamic-Christian dialogue, together with the obstacles in the way of this dialogue, such as occasional mistrust between the two sides and legislation that discriminated against people on religious grounds. One of the subjects raised was the apathy of many Copts, which leads them to withdraw from active political or social participation.

Common prayers

In Syria our group of Muslims and Christians visited several religious places. We attended part of Holy Mass at St George's Syrian Orthodox Church in Hassakeh and Friday prayers at the Abul-Nour Mosque, which was founded in Damascus by Sheikh Ahmed Kufaro. We also visited the monastery of Mar Mousa al-Habashi. This monastery stands at a height of 1,320 metres overlooking a wilderness in the Qalamoun mountain range. Inscriptions on the monastery walls show the church was built in 1058.

We also visited the Ummayyad Mosque in Damascus, a unique architectural masterpiece. The outer contours indicate that it was formerly a church; the Greek inscriptions are written on the outer walls, and inside is a baptismal font. The mosque contains the tomb of John the Baptist, known to the Muslims as Yehia the prophet. Inside the courtyard doves fly about in a scene of peace and tranquillity.

We found prices much lower in Syria than in Lebanon or Egypt, yet while the economy and infrastructure are weak salaries are double those in Egypt. The Alawites are the ruling sect, while the majority are Sunnis, Christians, Shiites and Jews. Syria is under a one-party system, and criticising the regime or the president is an offence.