

Thirty people from seven countries and two religions came together for two weeks, to engage in and discuss Christian-Muslim dialogue and the ways in which dialogue can be carried out. They came from the Middle East, Europe and North America, and

Although the participants were young, this was not a "youth conference" in which tough issues were sidestepped and left to the elders. Serious questions were asked and answered on the fears and tensions between Muslims and Christians, between East and West and between the different nationalities of the region.

The overriding theme of the discussions of dialogue was of "mutual respect" - of the importance of each person recognizing the legitimacy of the other's beliefs, of listening with attention, and of explaining one's own beliefs in a way that comes from the heart.

The group began their two weeks with a visit to the Near East School of Theology in downtown Beirut. There they met with Dr. John Hoover, professor of Islam at the seminary. He outlined a series of common points between Christianity and Islam, drawing on their respective scriptures; pointed out some areas of contention which arise in Muslim-Christian discussions; and presented a series of principles around which dialogue should be conducted. The group then practiced this dialogue by looking at two similar passages from holy scriptures: Exodus 20:1-17, "the Ten Commandments", and Surat al-Isra' 23-39.

Wednesday's visit to the Muhammad Mehdi Shemseddine Institute was highlighted by a lecture from Ibrahim Shemseddine, the Institute's director. Giving a Shi'ite perspective on dialogue and the need for mutual respect, he asserted that the imposition of Islamic law as a governing principle was not even a theoretical obligation for Muslims - the only requirement was to do what was best for the *umma*, and any form of government that would achieve this is for the good.

Agnete Holm, attending the conference from Denmark and a coordinator for interfaith dialogue for DanMission, led a workshop that identified three dialogues: the dialogue of the hand, the head, and the heart.

Dialogue of the head is academic and theoretical, focused on elucidating points of doctrine and historical positions. It has progressed considerably through the years, but only rarely has it been useful outside the circles of academic dialogue.

Dialogue of the hand is the dialogue of people working together side by side to achieve a common goal. It is a good thing in and of itself, and can often be used to achieve useful ends. It also can build trust among people who are not ready to engage in other forms of dialogue.

Dialogue of the heart is a scary, intense, personal and highly rewarding form of dialogue. In it, people share with each other the way that their faith affects them, the way they personally feel their faith. It is scary because, fully engaged in, it implies a willingness to be changed. It is impossible to determine in advance how you will emerge from a true dialogue of the heart.

There followed a practical workshop, wherein small groups were given a series of questions and asked to pick between 4 answers. They were asked to each stand in the corner of a square that corresponded to the answer they chose. The questions were

on matters of faith: would you participate in a worship if invited by a friend of another faith, and if so, how? What if that friend was from a non-monotheistic religion, such as Buddhism? And who, ultimately, will go to hell, and who to heaven?

The physical element made visible the differences of opinion held by the members of the groups. Some, hearing the arguments from the other corners, decided to shift from one to the other. Others remained in their opinions. In considering the question of heaven and hell, many people, unsatisfied with the available choices, chose to stand in a fifth place, arguing that they did not and could not know the answer to this question, because the final judgment had to be left up to God.

The following day was primarily taken up with presentations by the groups from different countries about dialogue in their particular contexts. The Syrian group spoke first, reporting on a dialogue conference held in Damascus earlier in the year and relating two personal experiences - one a negative one of a Christian who had to face an accusation from a Muslim interlocutor that modern Christianity is a "false Christianity" and thus not covered by the Qur'an's discussions of Christianity; the other of close friendship between Muslims and Christians in Aleppo.

The Jordanian group discussed the situation in Jordan, where interreligious life is good - people live together with mutual respect, although they don't discuss much about their respective beliefs. Discriminatory attitudes reside mostly among a small group. The government is careful to limit its interventions in the religious arena - in the recent case of the dethronement of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Irinaios, the government only intervened after the church had made its decision.

The Danish group said that their country has had recently to come to terms with the fact that it has failed to integrate the immigrant groups that have come in over the past 30-40 years. They discussed the work of different organizations in their country in encouraging dialogue, and also related the story of a killing in a largely-Muslim area in Copenhagen which had attracted a lot of attention locally.

The Lebanese group focused on how politics and the recent political changes had raised tensions and done damage to interreligious relations in their country. They related a story about a Muslim woman and her child who were harassed by Christians as she tried to go to a hospital; there have been many such incidents from multiple perspectives in the recent period.

The American group offered a bleak picture of dialogue in "the Divides States of America" at the moment, where the prevailing discourse is one that sees attempts to understand the other as weakness, and where there are deep divisions among Christians over the understanding of the role of their faith, and over what it is saying about modern life.

The Egyptian group used a metaphor based on statistical analysis to say what they see as the basic need for dialogue: in any randomly-distributed population, the largest group is clustered around the center, with relatively fewer towards either extreme - in the case of religion, extremist religion on the one hand and atheism on the other. The key on a social level for dialogue is to help the middle 80% of Muslims get in touch with the middle 80% of Christians, and to minimize the effects of the outlying groups on this

central dialogue.

That evening, the group relaxed with a cultural evening, presenting traditional songs, dances, and games. Memorable items included a remarkable fish-based liquorice shared by the Danish group (strangely, no one asked for seconds), a humorous pantomime performed by the Syrian group, and quick lesson in salsa dancing from the American group. In a show of cross-border solidarity, the Syrians and Lebanese together showed off the regional dance, the *debke*.

A walk through a cedar forest in the Shuf region in Southern Lebanon, a visit to the Jeita cave system, and a ride up the telefrique to the statue of Mary at Harissa comprised the tourist element of the group's stay in Lebanon. During the day, they stopped for lunch at the House of Hope in Kahala, where they spoke for a while with the foundation's director, Jean Iter, about his work providing shelter, guidance and education to children off the streets of Beirut. Almost all of these children have been abused or abandoned by their parents. Some are Lebanese, but many have parents from other Arab countries. Some members of the group interviewed some of the children, hearing first-hand of the hardships on the streets of Beirut.

The next day was a travel day, as the group went from central Lebanon to Hassakeh in the northeastern corner of Syria. After a three-hour delay crossing the border, the group finally arrived at 1 AM, some 19 hours after they had started.

Some 7 hours after collapsing in their beds at the St. Mary Monastery, the group roused themselves to go to a Syrian Orthodox worship service at the Church of Mar Touma in Hassakeh. It was the first time for both of the Muslim participants to attend such a service, as well as the first Syrian Orthodox worship for many of the Christians. As it was St. Thomas' day, the sermon focused on the pioneering role played by that saint in establishing the church in India.

After the service, the group was received by the bishop of Hassakeh, and then had a discussion with Father Afram al-Hanno. Unfortunately, and possibly because the visit was being filmed by Syrian television, the dialogue was constrained, and the Syrian members of the group in particular felt disappointed by the fact that the speaker started his presentation with a series of political quotations, and then denied that there were any problems or difficulties whatsoever between Muslims and Christians. "We knew that he was just saying what he felt he had to say, and not being open," said one.

That afternoon the Egyptian and Lebanese groups gave their reflections on dialogue in general, and on what they had experienced in the first week of the conference in particular.

God owns us, said one Egyptian participant, we don't own God. He created us and not vice versa, and we cannot set limits on God's forgiveness and mercy. The kingdom of God is without borders or limits.

One of the Egyptian presenters, reflecting on the situation of dialogue in his own country, blamed the lack of development in dialogue there on a national mindset, shared by both Muslims and Christians, that sees only one correct answer to any given question. He also noted that the Egyptian security services tend to discourage

dialogue lest disagreements arising out of these dialogues escalate and disrupt the superficial social peace.

The Lebanese group saw relations in their own country as distorted by the political system. Although seats in the government are assigned according to religious sects, they expressed skepticism that these deputies actually represent their people's desires in finding common ground.

They recommended that over the long term, Lebanon's educational system needed to be reformed. A good religious education system could help bring children up to respect others. A possible basis for this would be a book that contains texts from both the Qur'an and the Bible, encouraging students to study the differences and similarities between the two texts.

The following day, after a failed excursion to find a place where they could go for a swim, the group sat down to consider the ways in which religion can go wrong. They generally agreed that religion is not the source of conflict and tension, but that misused, it can be a powerful tool in the hands of people seeking to aggravate conflicts and motivate people against the "other".

The only way to avoid the misuse of religion is to avoid using it for power, to avoid making claims to know or own the ultimate truth - in fact, to remain humble before the truth. It is excessive surety of one's own truth that leads to religion being carried to a fanatical level.

The afternoon's sessions continued with a discussion led by the American group. Rather than present again on the situation in America, they elected to moderate a discussion "with the gloves off", asking every person there to write down a question that they were perhaps too shy to ask personally or in an open session - whether to nationals of another country or region, or to members of another religion, or to members of another sect within the same religion.

The discussion was at times tense. Sometimes the answers served to dissolve a false image held in the minds of some participants; in all cases the willingness to confront these questions and walk away friends affirmed the value of bringing people together.

"Do you Americans and Westerners really think your relations are better than ours?"

"A question for the Orthodox and Catholics: How does it make you feel to know that your fellow Christians can't take communion with you?"

One that came up during the session was that of the hadith that states, "You should stand with your fellow Muslim, whether he is right or wrong". This, explained Laila Khalifeh, a Muslim woman attending from Jordan, does not mean that a Muslim should support a fellow Muslim in the commission of wrong acts. It is clearly agreed upon in a number of commentaries that if one's fellow Muslim is doing wrong, it is incumbent on the believer to stand with him in order to help him correct that wrong.

After clearing the air, the participants then engaged in a much more personal dialogue facilitated by the Danish group. They were divided into small groups, all comfortable in

one language (either Arabic or English) to make translation unnecessary. Then each member of each group spoke to the others for at least three minutes, uninterrupted, about his or her personal experience of and relationship to God. The sessions were very intense, and people reported feeling moved by the experience.

The following day, the Syrian contingent reported their experiences and noted their comments on the event. Among the comments:

As a group, we were not very good listeners. How can we have a dialogue in this region if 30 people can't really listen to each other?

We need to keep this group together somehow. Maybe we could meet again next year? In the meantime, we should hold country-specific get-togethers and put together a web site for the conference.

When I started (said a Christian), I thought I knew about Muslims, since I had read the Qur'an. I now understand that I need to talk to Muslims and learn how they interpret and live their own faith.

One Syrian Christian found the most interesting people to get to know were the non-Syrian Arab Christians.

The Jordanian group took the next session. Reflecting on their time with the group, they noted that they especially saw the work at the House of Hope in Lebanon as a true expression of faith, translated into action.

They then opened the floor to questions from the other nations. Responding to a question about her faith's, and her, feelings about nonviolent resistance, Leila Khalifeh noted that it was absolutely imperative that before resort could be made to violence to combat oppression all methods of mediation and nonviolent opposition be exhausted. Furthermore, even in a final resort to violence, it is imperative that the innocent and the uninvolved not be hurt.

The next day, the group bid Hassake farewell in another marathon bus trip across the desert. They stopped half-way across to visit the ruins of Palmyra, rolling in to St. Christophoros Monastery in Sidnaya, north of Damascus, at about ten.

The following day was taken up with a visit to Mar Mousa monastery, also north of Syria. To reach the monastery, visitors must climb nearly 400 stairs. This was complicated in this case by the fact that one of the group was a woman with a paralyzed leg. The male participants shared the task of carrying her on a stretcher up the stairs to the monastery.

The monastery itself is a building that has been renovated considerably over the past two decades, since it was reopened after having been abandoned for nearly a century. The monastery is now a center dedicated to a theological appreciation by Christians of Islam. After lunch, and a quick tour of the old chapel, the group talked with Father Paulo, head of Mar Musa.

Father Paulo said that rather than "dialogue", he preferred to say that he was working

on "building harmony among religions". He saw the willingness to appreciate Islam from a theological basis, to see the truths that it contains, as a necessary and logical progression from the ecumenical willingness of Christians to see that each different church holds a part of the truth.

He is currently under investigation by the Vatican, charged with relativism and syncretism. Asked what his response to these charges had been, he discussed the two meanings that "syncretism" could have: there is the bad, banal, superficial syncretism achieved by taking different ideas from different religions, throwing them into a blender, and pushing "go" - this results in a drink that no one from any religion finds drinkable. On the other hand, it is only natural that people from one religion can find, after having deep dialogue with persons from another religion, elements of that religion that change how they approach their own faith. This has gone on from time immemorial, and is a process that has fundamentally shaped Christianity throughout its history. Denying this is to deny the human elements in faith altogether.

The next day, Friday, the participants attended what was for many of them their first Friday service in a mosque. They were guests of the Abu Noor Foundation, founded by the late Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kufaro, and now headed by his son, Salah. Before attending the worship service, the group talked with Salah Kufaro, discussing his opinions on dialogue and how moderates can make themselves heard in a world where extremists seem to have the loudest voice.

He noted that it was hard to make oneself heard when the media, especially the Western media, is often biased and free with the "terrorist" label. He does not hold all Christians responsible for Bush's acts, nor all Jews responsible for Sharon's. Why, then, should all 1.3 billion Muslims be held responsible for the acts of Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi?

He also noted that he had just returned from a meeting in Amman, gathering hundreds of top Muslim clergy from all confessions and all areas of the world, which had agreed that it was illegitimate for one Muslim to pronounce another Muslim as *takfir*, or outside the faith - a rhetorical tactic often engaged in by extremist religious leaders.

The group was then shown into the mosque itself, where they listened to Mr. Kufaro's sermon. Responding to the bombings in London the day before, he concentrated on the sura from the Qur'an that proclaims, "whoever kills for no reason, it is as if he killed the whole of mankind."

With that, and following a quick tour and shopping trip in downtown Damascus, a late-night evaluation session, and many farewells, the group of thirty new friends dispersed to their own countries, determined to keep in touch and to build towards better coexistence and dialogue in each of their countries.