

"Young People as Agents of Muslim-Christian Inter-cultural and Inter-religious Dialogue"

Naersnes, Norway, 3&ndash9 October 2004)

Five Muslims and 25 Christians from Europe and beyond participated in WSCF's first inter-religious conference held at a rustic retreat place about an hour from Oslo. Although the Muslims were few, they represented a wide geographical range of Islam (Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Kuwait, Palestine, Algeria) and were able to inform us about the differences and similarities of Islamic tradition world-wide. And although heavily weighted toward Lutherans (this being Scandinavia), the Christians also represented all major confessions. The small size of the group and the rainy weather turned out to be an advantage as they contributed to good group cohesion ? we had a lot of time to get to know each other when we were all stuck in the same room together.

The conference got off to an inauspicious start when the first lecturer took sick and failed to appear, but an excellent substitute was found in the person of Rozs-Nagy Szilvia (one of the prepcom) who spoke about parallels between inter- and intra-religious (ecumenical) dialogue. Also the first day, there were two sessions of workshops prepared by the participants on topics such as terrorism, the World Council of Churches, and the true meaning of "jihad." The evening was devoted to intercultural sharing with food and (non-alcoholic) drinks from our native or adopted countries.

The second day began with a lecture from Vusala Guluzade, a Muslim university lecturer from Azerbaijan, who spoke about the culture of her country and its strong heritage of inter-religious harmony. After further workshops, in the afternoon we heard from Trond Bakkevig who spoke on "The Role of Religion in Peace Building and War Mongering." It was an excellent lecture drawing from his experiences in the former Yugoslavia and in Chechnya; he emphasised the necessity of differentiating between true religious conflicts and conflicts justified by using religion. Following his lecture, there was a group discussion and plenary which turned into a question-and-answer session about Islam, proving so popular that it was repeated twice ad hoc later in the week. In the evening, we learnt about Norwegian culture by watching a short video and trying some authentic Norwegian tastes: salmon, flatbread with cinnamon and sugar, and cod-liver oil.

Day 3 was the excursion into the city proper. In the morning we visited the NKS house (home of the Norwegian SCM) and heard an excellent lecture from Notto Thelle on the methodology of religious dialogue, followed by a challenging input from Oddbjorn Leirvik, critiquing religion and Muslim-Christian dialogue according to Enlightenment principles. In the afternoon we split up into three groups to visit the important sites of Oslo: the fortress and Cathedral; the National Gallery and historical cemetery; and the Viglund sculpture park. We met back together then to visit the main mosque in Oslo, where we were able to observe the before-sunset prayer and meet the imam.

Thursday began with more workshops, followed by Anne Hege speaking on spirituality in our traditions. In the afternoon, a Norwegian convert to Islam spoke about love in Islam, relating the love of God for humans with the love of humans

for others. Then three members of the pilgrimage to Palestine organised earlier this year by NKS shared their experiences through pictures and stories. And in the evening we explored inter-religious co-operation, with a slight shift in focus from Muslim-Christian to Muslim-Hindu dialogue, by watching a film on the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

The final day was packed full of interesting and challenging inputs, first from a Hungarian convert to Islam, Henna Szovati, who spoke about the Muslim understanding of gender roles. Followed by a lively group discussion, the program continued in the afternoon with Kristin Kanzari, another Norwegian convert, speaking about Muslim heritage – specifically, the pre-Aristotelian understanding of medicine developed by Muslim physicians which centres around the concept of "vital heat" and has radical implications for the relationship between the sexes. This lecture as well sparked spirited debate and proved to be one of the more controversial contributions to the conference. On a calmer note, we spent our last hours together doing a final evaluation and conversing and playing games.

The presence of non-Christian participants proved an interesting challenge to make the conference acceptable to all faiths. The tradition of joint morning worship was modified into a time for individual prayer and common silence. Evening prayers were separate for Muslims and Christians through the week, but on Friday we held a joint reading of the Koran and Bible for the closing prayer. The ban on alcohol was well-respected, while the discouragement of dancing was lessened slightly during the week with the consent and approval of the Muslim participants. All in all, the group did an excellent job of respecting one another's beliefs and finding common, inoffensive pastimes. Muslims and Christians intermingled well, with no separation into "Muslim" and "Christian" camps.

Despite the great number of challenges the organisers faced in preparing this conference, it was a great success and interest has been expressed in a follow-up conference to explore further and deeper the topics raised here.

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