

Al Azhar Cairo 2004

The Anglican - al-Azhar al-Sharif Joint Committee for dialogue met in Cairo 8-9 September 2004 and issued the following communique. On the Anglican side the dialogue was administered on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury's office by the Network for Inter faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion (NIFCON).

Communique for the Anglican/Al azhar Dialogue Committee

The Joint Committee, which is composed of a delegation from the Anglican Communion and the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar al-Sharif for Dialogue with the Monotheistic Religions, held its third annual meeting in Al-Azhar in Cairo on 23 and 24 Rajab 1425, which corresponds to 8 and 9 September 2004. This was held in accord with the agreement signed at Lambeth Palace on 30 January 2002 by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar.

The theme of our dialogue in 2004 has been 'misconceptions'. The Joint Committee heard and discussed during these two days the following papers presented by Christian members of the Committee:

- Christianity and the West (Dr Yvonne Haddad)
- Christianity, the Crusades and western imperialism (Rt Revd Dr Mouneer H.Anis)
- Christianity and power (Canon Dr Christopher Lamb)
- The Joint Committee also heard and discussed the following papers presented by Muslim members of the Committee:
 - Jihad in Islam (Dr Mustafa al-Shakaa)
 - Human rights in Islam (Ambassador Nabil Badr)
 - The position of women in Islam (Shaykh Fawzy el Zefzaf)

Listening to these papers reminded us that Christians and Muslims frequently hold misconceptions about each other's beliefs and practice. Acknowledging the particular danger of generalizing about each other's faith, we commit ourselves to work seriously at counteracting inaccurate presentations of Christianity and Islam, according to the terms of the agreement signed in January 2002 which referred to the need to work towards 'the restoration of the image of each in the eyes of the other'.

It is important that religious leaders in our respective faiths have an informed understanding of the religion of 'the other'. With this in mind we were glad to hear about the time spent by Shaykh Fawzy el Zefzaf at Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge. We look forward to developing a series of study exchanges between students at al-Azhar al-Sharif and those in training for the Anglican ministry, as being of significant value for our future relationships.

We were encouraged to hear reports of cooperative ventures between Christians and Muslims in both England and Egypt. We noted the decision by the Archbishop of Canterbury to help establish a national Forum in England to enable Christians and Muslims to discuss matters of common concern. We were also glad to learn about the

sequence of 'Building Bridges' seminars chaired by the Archbishop which have brought together an international group of Christian and Muslim scholars.

Additionally, we appreciated the efforts by al-Azhar and the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, to give practical expression to our dialogue at the grass roots level, in a variety of ways.

Inevitably current political crises in some parts of our world received the attention of the Committee.

As regards the Holy Land, a place of particular significance to both Muslims and Christians, we expressed our regret that since we last met in September 2002 the deterioration in the situation there has increased the injustice, violence and hardship experienced by many.

In relation to Iraq, we expressed our regret for the continuing great suffering of its people and we affirmed the importance of respecting the right of the people of Iraq, with all their religious and ethnic diversity, to determine their own future.

We are aware of the enormity of the current suffering in Sudan. We call upon political and religious leaders to continue to encourage the government of Sudan and other concerned parties to ensure the security and welfare of all its citizens with impartiality.

We are conscious of meeting in the week after the dreadful events in Beslan, in southern Russia, which have been widely condemned by our religious leaders, and are deeply concerned about their potential repercussions.

We discussed several other parts of the world where the situation of vulnerable minorities, both Christian and Muslim, is of particular concern. We commend the efforts of both Muslims and Christians to work towards a greater awareness of the importance of human rights and of religious freedom. In this respect we particularly welcome the National Council on Human Rights which has been established in Egypt.

In the light of these and other such situations the importance of our continuing engagement with each other, as Christians and Muslims, is reinforced. We therefore look forward to deepening our dialogue at a further meeting in autumn 2005. We also anticipate with enthusiasm the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Cairo later this week, during which he will give a lecture at al-Azhar al-Sharif and lay the foundation stone at a new health centre in Sadat City, a project which expresses cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

In summary

We...

- Commit ourselves to use our influence in our respective religious communities to counteract misconceptions about Christianity or Islam, being aware particularly of the danger of generalization about either faith based on the actions or views of a minority.

- Commit ourselves to developing our joint study-exchange programme for students and religious leaders in training.
- Commend the initiatives undertaken by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the area of Christian-Muslim relations, especially plans for the establishment of a national Christian-Muslim Forum in England.
- Commend the cooperation of al-Azhar al-Sharif under the leadership of the Grand Imam and the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt.
- Welcome the setting up of the National Council for Human Rights in Egypt.
- Commend all international efforts to bring about security and a just peace for all in the Holy Land, particularly appreciating the role of the Egyptian government in this respect.
- Agree that the Joint Committee of Dialogue should meet again for a further dialogue in autumn 2005.

Anglican signatories

Canon Dr Christopher Lamb
Most Revd Alexander Malik
Rt Revd Dr Mouneer H Anis
Dr Yvonne Haddad

Muslim signatories

Shaykh Fawzy el Zefzaf
Dr Ali Simaan
Ambassador Nabil Badr