

Al Azhar - Study Exchange Programme

Al-Azhar Exchange Programme March-April 2006

Exchange Report by : Nigel Dawkins

Introduction

In Spring 2006, a British Christian student spent six weeks on exchange at Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Nigel Dawkins is training for ordination in the Church of England at Westcott House, Cambridge. From 9th March until 19th April he lived in Cairo and participated in the life of Al-Azhar University for the purpose of improving understanding between Muslims and Christians, both in Egypt and in Britain.

The exchange programme was funded by the Global Opportunities Fund (Engaging the Islamic World Group) of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. It was coordinated by the Anglican Communion Office with assistance from the Anglican Diocese of Egypt and the British Embassy in Cairo.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to describe the student exchange and to consider what lessons might be learned for future students visiting Al-Azhar on the exchange programme.

Audience

This document has been written for the staff of the Anglican Church and the FCO who have been involved in funding and organising the exchange:

- Clare Amos Exchange Coordinator Anglican Communion Office (London)
- Mouneer Anis Diocesan Bishop Anglican Diocese of Egypt (Cairo)
- Claire Halperin Political Officer FCO (Cairo)
- Rasha Mehyar Projects Officer FCO (Cairo)
- Ian Felton Programme Manager FCO (London)
- Jonathan Bamber Communications Officer FCO (London)

In addition, it has been written for British students who may in the future be invited to participate in the exchange programme.

Background

What is Al-Azhar?

Al-Azhar is a Sunni Muslim religious institution centred at Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. The mosque is an internationally-respected centre of Sunni theology and

jurisprudence. However, Al-Azhar is also an education system which, consisting of primary schools, secondary schools and universities throughout Egypt, exists as an Islamic alternative to the education provided by state institutions. Al-Azhar University was founded in the 10th century, a few years after the mosque, and claims to be the oldest university in the world. Its earliest buildings are located next to the mosque in Old Cairo, but its main Cairo campus is in the suburb of Nasr City. The university has campuses throughout Egypt, one of which is in Tfhanna Al-Ashraf near Benha. Education is segregated at Al-Azhar University.

What is the ACO?

The Church of England is one of a large number of national churches which together constitute the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Communion Office (ACO) represents certain mutual concerns of the Anglican Communion. The Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON) team, based at the ACO's London office, is responsible for developing relationships with other faiths on behalf of the Anglican Communion.

What relationship exists between the ACO and Al-Azhar?

For a number of years the ACO has been developing relations with Al-Azhar. This relationship now consists of an annual interfaith dialogue conference and other visits between the Anglican Church and Al-Azhar institutions. The student exchange programme between Anglican theological colleges and Al-Azhar University is the most recent element of this relationship.

What is the GOF?

The Global Opportunities Fund (GOF) is an initiative of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) to provide funding for overseas projects conceived and implemented by other organisations. GOF's Engaging the Islamic World Group (EIWG) is the team which has provided funding for the Al-Azhar Student Exchange Programme to send Anglican ordinands to Cairo and to invite Muslim students to Cambridge.

What is the Anglican presence in Egypt?

The Anglican Church is represented in Egypt by the Anglican Diocese of Egypt & North Africa. The diocese is based in Cairo, and both the cathedral and the diocesan offices are found in Zamalek. The diocesan bishop, Mouneer Anis, has a strong interest in interfaith dialogue.

The Exchange

Preparation

In the weeks before travelling to Egypt I was invited to the ACO to discuss arrangements for the exchange with Clare Amos, the exchange co-ordinator. I was also invited to the FCO to meet members of the EIWG, Ian Felton and Jonathan Bamber, to

discuss the group's work and their expectations of the exchange. In addition I had been given the opportunity to meet Bishop Mouneer, some months earlier.

Arrival

During the first few days in Cairo I met Bishop Mouneer and his staff, and moved into a flat which the diocese had rented for me, which was a five-minute walk from the cathedral. I also met Claire Halperin and Rasha Mehyar from the British Embassy, who took me out to the Nasr City campus to meet the vice-president of the university, Dr Abdul Daim Nusair. Within a few days I had permission to attend classes at the Faculty of Languages, and soon befriended a lecturer in English language, Dr Rida Bedeir, who was enthusiastic to have me join him in his classes.

Classes

Dr Bedeir teaches a number of classes in different faculties:

- Islamic Studies in English at the men.s Faculty of Languages (Nasr City)
- English for Islamic Studies at the men.s Faculty of Da.wa [\[1\]](#) (Nasr City)
- Hadith in English at the men.s Faculty of Sharia (Old Cairo)
- English Language at the women.s Faculty of Humanities (Tfahanna)
- English Language at the men.s Faculty of Education (Tfahanna)

For the purpose of maximising contact with students, I decided to attach myself to Dr Bedeir and accompany him to most of his classes. This allowed me to be seen by many classes, each of which contained 200-300 students, and to communicate primarily in English. I sat with him at the front of the class and took part in language exercises such as role-plays and simultaneous translations. Dr Bedeir saw me as a valuable asset as a native speaker of English, and was keen for the students to hear me speak. He allowed me to address classes on topics of my own choice, and this gave me continual opportunities to discuss life in Britain, the invasion of Iraq, the nature of Western values, the reaction to the Danish cartoons, etc. He also allowed me time in each class to answer questions posed by the students and therefore engage directly with them.

The visits to the Tfahanna campus involved an early start: getting up at 5.30am, to be at Nasr City for 7am, to take a minibus to Tfahanna for 9am. However, the students at the women's faculty in Tfahanna proved to be brighter, better motivated and more engaging than the students at the men's faculties. For this reason I decided to split my time between the women and the men, spending two days per week at the Tfahanna campus and two days at the Cairo campuses. My usual weekly routine therefore was to spend four days in classes, one day studying alone and one day with Christians, such as at the Alexandria Bible College. This routine satisfied my hopes for the exchange, with a primary emphasis on interacting with students and a secondary emphasis on studying Islam.

Prince Charles

On 21st March, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall visited Al-Azhar to tour the mosque and address the university. The speech was to be the second the prince had given on the subject of interfaith relations, the first having been at Oxford in 1993. The embassy invited me to meet the royal visitors and attend the speech. During his tour of the mosque I was given an opportunity to speak to the prince for a few minutes, describing the exchange programme and mentioning that, having been present at his first speech, I was looking forward to the follow-up. The prince's visit was very well received by students at the university, many of whom were given the chance to meet him.

Cultural Day

On 28th March, I took part in a Cultural Day at the women's Faculty of Humanities in Tfahanna. This consisted of Dr Bedeir and myself presenting talks and hosting debates on issues such as Western misconceptions of the Prophet Muhammad, and the position of women in Islam and Christianity. This day allowed me to explore in more detail ideas ranging from the history of political liberalism to changing notions of modesty in the West. Again, the students were given opportunities to ask questions so that I could engage directly with their concerns. The undergraduates expressed their enthusiastic appreciation to us both for having organised the day, mentioning how seldom such events occurred and how interesting it had been.

Muslim Brotherhood

On 16th April, I was invited with Dr Bedeir to a party in honour of the fourth year students at the Faculty of Education, to be held at the men's halls of residence in Nasr City. We arrived at 9pm to find a large stage set up outside with seating and standing room hundreds of students. As we were directed to the front row of seats, I noticed that the students acting as crowd control, holding back those standing with arms locked, wore green sashes with an emblem of crossed swords with a book, and two logos: *Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimiin*[\[2\]](#) and *Islam Huwa Al-Hal*[\[3\]](#). At the back of the stage was a vast banner with crossed swords and the Quran, with the same logos. Unknown to us, we had been invited to a revue organised by the Muslim Brotherhood . a banned organisation in Egypt. If he had known, Dr Bedeir said that he would not have brought me. However, we settled down, and after a few humorous sketches, I was invited to get up on stage and introduce myself. As I conveyed greetings from .Cambridge University and the Church of England. there were hisses in the audience, quickly followed by applause . a fascinating insight into the diversity of feeling in the audience. After completing my introduction, I sat down again, and after enjoying the revue for half-an-hour, Dr Bedeir informed me that some of the students were asking if I would address them on the subject of the Danish cartoons. Having agreed, I was given a couple of minutes to gather my thoughts before being ushered onto the stage, into the gaze once again of five hundred Muslim men. I talked about the relationship between freedom and responsibility in the West, the way that Christians have developed a thick skin. to parodies of religion, and the possibility that the Danes did not understand the depth of offence that would be caused by the cartoons. As I finished I was given a round of applause. As we left the event, we were detained by the security police and invited to

drink tea with four senior officers. We were interrogated for an hour about why we had been at the event.

Leaving Party

On 18th April, the last day of the exchange, I organised a party for some of the students at the women's Faculty of Humanities. The time I had spent in front of classes had been valuable for allowing me to talk to the students and answer their questions, but I had had less opportunity to put questions to them. So I invited ten undergraduates, two from each year, to join me for lunch. I asked them about politics, education and marriage, and how they saw their life after university. It was fascinating to hear them talk so freely about the political system, the education system and their hopes about finding a good man to marry. At the end of lunch I gave them some small gifts from Britain before saying goodbye.

Live Dialogue

After the exchange was complete I was invited, as a representative of a European church, to conduct a Live Dialogue on the subject of Europe and Islam. IslamOnline.net is a Qatar-based website which promotes better understanding of Islam. One feature of the website is hosting Live Dialogues, in which experts in various fields are invited to answer questions submitted in real time over the internet. For two hours I sat at a computer in the Cairo office of Islam Online, receiving questions from Lebanon, Canada, Iran and Australia, and writing paragraph responses which were immediately posted on the site. This experience gave me the opportunity to speak to Muslims in many countries. The editor of the European Muslims section of IslamOnline was pleased with both the questions and answers in the dialogue. The Live Dialogues are archived online at <http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/select.asp>.

Lessons Learned

Anglican Communion Office

The ACO maintained good communication via email with me in the months prior to the visit, and invited me to visit their office twice to discuss the exchange and to meet the bishop. I felt well prepared for the visit. The ACO was efficient in purchasing airline tickets, and agreed a weekly stipend which was sufficient for me to live comfortably and to fund occasional events such as the party at the Faculty of Humanities. I would recommend that future students confirm accommodation rent with the diocese at the beginning of the visit, and that they secure a tourist visa from the consulate in London (valid for three months) rather than at Cairo airport (valid for one month).

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

The FCO invited me to King Charles St to discuss the exchange a few weeks prior to leaving. This was a good opportunity for me to learn about the GOF and the work of the EIWG, and to ask about the FCO's expectations of the exchange. I would

encourage the FCO to invite future students to such a meeting so that they are aware of the wider context in which the exchange is taking place, and also because the privilege of being invited to the Foreign Office engenders a sense of personal confidence.

Diocese of Egypt

The diocese provided much-appreciated assistance in preparing for the exchange, renting a flat for me, writing letters to the university on my behalf and establishing other contacts during my stay. I benefited greatly from the existence of the cathedral community, and I would recommend that future students are accommodated in a guesthouse flat to maximise the sense of being part of that community.

British Embassy

The embassy set up the critical first meeting at the university, having established good relations with the university authorities. I was very grateful for their initial efforts at getting me into the university, and their ongoing efforts at including me in such events as the visit of the Prince of Wales. I was grateful to be invited to the embassy to discuss progress and would encourage similar invitations be offered to future students.

Al-Azhar University

No programme had been prepared at Al-Azhar University for me as an exchange student. The vice-president gave me permission to visit the Faculty of Languages, but it took three weeks for me to receive permission to attend classes at all faculties. Faculty deans were sometimes nervous about allowing me to take part in classes. I consider myself to have been very fortunate in meeting Dr Bedeir who was both generous with his assistance and proactive in helping me make the most of my time there. I would strongly recommend that future students find one or two lecturers to shadow during their time at Al-Azhar as a means of getting exposure to students, and that Dr Bedeir be approached in that capacity if possible. There is a risk of the programme being hampered by university bureaucracy.

Conclusion

The most rewarding parts of the exchange were the times spent talking face-to-face with Egyptians: travelling on the minibus to Tfahanna with the lecturers gave me opportunity to have long conversations about culture and religion. Special events, such as the Cultural Day and the Brotherhood party, gave me unusual opportunities to address large groups of students on various issues in a spirit of generosity and mutual understanding. Almost all the students and staff I met at Al-Azhar were very friendly and hospitable, welcoming me into their classes and being enthusiastic to speak to me.

The effect of the exchange is difficult to measure: it was only towards the end of the exchange that I became aware of how appreciative the students were that I had come to spend time with them. However, I am sure that this exchange has had a significant positive effect on the perception of Christianity and the West for many students at Al-

Azhar, and that an on-going exchange programme will strengthen the foundation of mutual understanding on which the relationship between Al-Azhar and the Anglican Church is built. I hope that presentations I make and articles I write about the exchange will also improve understanding of Islam in Britain.

I am most grateful to staff at the FCO and embassy in Cairo for funding and facilitating the exchange; to the ACO for inviting me to participate in and for coordinating the exchange; and to the Diocese of Egypt for its help in making the exchange a success.

Notes

[1.](#) An Arabic word which literally means call, but might be translated as mission, preaching or evangelism. The Faculty of Da.wa is the university faculty where postgraduate students are trained to be imams.

[2.](#) The Muslim Brotherhood

[3.](#) Islam Is The Solution