

Al Azhar London 2007

A Communiqué from the Anglican/Al-Azhar Dialogue Committee

The Joint Committee, which is composed of a delegation from the Anglican Communion and from the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar al-Sharif for Dialogue with the Monotheistic Religions, held its sixth annual meeting in London on 2-3 September 2007 which corresponds to 21-22 Sha'aban 1428. 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.

On our first day we were glad to meet at the St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, Bishopsgate, City of London, where we were welcomed by the Director of the Centre, Mr Simon Keyes. This Centre, based in a church demolished by a IRA bomb in 1993, has been restored to be a place where peoples of different faiths and cultures can engage constructively with each other to promote better mutual understanding and to facilitate the resolution of conflicts. Towards the close of this day we visited the exhibition 'Sacred', which is currently on display at the British Library. This exhibition shows clearly how the Abrahamic religions have a love for, and an honouring of, the sacred texts which are fundamental for each of our faiths. On our second day we met at Lambeth Palace and appreciated the welcome we received there, and the hospitality offered by Canon Guy Wilkinson, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Secretary for inter faith affairs.

The Joint Committee heard and discussed the following papers:

- The role of religious leaders in promoting the right of citizenship (Bishop Mouneer Anis)
- Muslim minorities in the west (Sheikh Umar El Deeb)
- Religion and violence (Bishop Alexander Malik)
- The relationship of religion to Law, Shari'a, Jihad, Just War and Fundamental Freedoms. (Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali)
- The authority of fatwas (Sheikh Umar El Deeb)

Our discussions this year based on these papers were wide-ranging and stimulating. A central theme in our conversations has been the importance of citizenship, and the need for people to be enabled to be full citizens of their country whatever their faith tradition. Governments and religious leadership need to work together to assist Muslims in the West to be more integrated within the structures and life of Western society, enabling them to be both members of the Muslim religious community as well as fully citizens of their country. Similarly in parts of the Muslim world Christian communities can perceive themselves as marginalised from the social and political lives of their countries, for example due to laws and customs relating to electoral practice, and we believe that the religious and political leadership in such countries needs to engage constructively to assist in overcoming such perceptions of marginalisation.

We have been very concerned to note that there have been attacks on religious leaders, Muslim and Christian, in several parts of the world, and call upon the appropriate authorities to take steps to prevent such attacks. We explored the way that on some issues, for example the legitimacy of force in certain circumstances, there is a variety of views held within each of our faith traditions. Both Christianity and Islam are aware of the importance of establishing a framework from within their respective religious tradition, to enable moral decisions about issues of war and peace to be made. Both traditions also expressed their conviction that in situations of conflict there can be no proper peace which does not also take into account the demands of justice.

In the light of all that we have discussed, while acknowledging the authority of our respective sacred texts, the Bible and the Qur'an, we wish to stress that it is essential that both faiths learn to interpret their sacred texts and traditions in a responsible way. Because of the number of fatwas issued in the Islamic context we have noted that for a fatwa to be credible it should be defined and issued by a recognised authority such as Al Azhar.

During our time together we met with Revd Nigel Dawkins and El Sayed Amin, who had both participated in the study exchange programme which enables younger Christian and Muslim scholars to spend a period of time in an institution which trains future religious leaders of the other faith. Under the scope of this programme Nigel Dawkins had spent six weeks at Al Azhar in Cairo, Egypt, and El Sayed Amin (and two other younger Muslim scholars) had spent a month at Ridley Hall in Cambridge, England. They shared their experiences and suggestions. We committed ourselves to work to further develop and extend this programme. Throughout our entire meeting we were very aware of the importance of engaging with younger people, and particularly future religious leaders. Such engagement with younger people is crucial to ensure the development of better mutual understanding between our two faith communities.

It is now five years since the initial agreement was signed by the Sheikh Al Azhar and the Archbishop of Canterbury. We reminded ourselves of the terms and goals of the original agreement, and in particular the aim expressed there that our dialogue might assist us, 'To share together in solving problems and conflicts that happen sometimes between Muslims and Christians in different parts of the world, and to encourage religious leaders to use their influence for the purpose of reconciliation and peace-making'. We committed ourselves to developing a structure and process to enable us to fulfil this aim more adequately in a practical way.

We agreed that the Joint Committee should meet again in autumn 2008 in Cairo.

Signed

Sheikh Omar El-Deeb - Chair Al Azhar Dialogue Committee

Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali - Bishop of Rochester

Sheikh Muhammed Sharkawy

Most Revd Mouneer H Anis - Bishop of Egypt, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East.

Dr Yvonne Haddad

Most Revd Alexander Malik, Bishop of Lahore, and Moderator of the Church of Pakistan