

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE
AT THE ISLAMIC-CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTRE
OF COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Aminah Tønnsen

El centre d'estudis islàmics-cristians de Copenhaguen és únic en el sentit que va ser establert conjuntament per musulmans i cristians. El Consell Directiu està format per un nombre igual de musulmans i de cristians, que coope- ren en un ambient d'amistat i de respecte mutu. El centre és completament independent de qualsevol institució polí- tica o religiosa.

El diàleg interreligiós és un testimoniatge recíproc de la fe que implica les dues parts; és una qüestió d'escoltar l'altre per tal de conèixer i d'entendre la seva fe amb tot el respecte, i fracassarà si hi ha assumptes amagats. Aquest diàleg interreligiós sovint farà que el creient més aferrissat accepti la diversitat, fins i tot dins de la pròpia fe.

Però, a més, el diàleg interreligiós deixa ben clar que compartim molts valors i que estem preocupats de la mateixa manera pel futur, independentment de la fe que proclamem com a nostra.

333

Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim

In the name of God, the most compassionate, the most merciful

Assalamu 'alaikum

Peace be upon you

I would like to give you some background information before starting my lecture:

- Denmark has about 5.4 million inhabitants. About 1 million of them live in the area of Copenhagen.

- 86% of the population are members of the National Lutheran Church.
- The population includes about 200,000 Muslims.
- The first Muslims came as working labour in the 60s mainly from Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. Since then, there have been "waves" of refugees from Iran/Irak, Palestine, Eastern Europe and Somalia.
- It is estimated that only 10-15% of the Christian and Muslim population actually practice their faith by praying and going to church and mosque regularly.
- It is a fact that the presence of Muslims has made the average Dane more aware of her or his background and Christian roots.
- Since November 2001 we have had a conservative/liberal government that depends on an ultra-right-wing party.
- 8-9 out of 10 media reports on Islam and Muslims are negative.
- Rightwing politicians, clerics and journalists often say things about Islam and the Muslims that they would never, ever dare say about Jews or Judaism. Even people in the other Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden, are shocked over the situation and atmosphere in Denmark.

The Islamic-Christian Study Centre was established in May 1996. It is situated at the very heart of Copenhagen (which is the capital of the Kingdom of Denmark) - in a quarter, where people of different cultural, ethnic, linguistic backgrounds and religious faith live and work together. The centre has become a meetingplace for people seeking information and advice, attending training courses, debating and making friends.

The Islamic-Christian Study Centre is unique in the sense that it was established by Muslims and Christians jointly, that the board is composed of an equal number of Muslims and Christians who cooperate in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual respect - and that it is totally independent of religious and political institutions.

Our goal is to provide sober-minded and prejudice-free information about Islam and Christianity and to promote dialogue and peaceful co-existence between people of different religious faiths.

God is great - greater than anything else in this universe. He could surely have created mankind as a uniform entity, but He gave us intellect, free will and the right to make our own choices. Our differences are a trial - and a challenge to prove that we are able to create unity in total respect of diversity - that we are able to communicate

and to interact to defend common values. The Koran says:

"O Mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God is full of knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)." (49:13)

"To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute." (5:51)

According to the Koran my duty as a Muslim is to bear witness to my faith and to **"invite to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching. And to argue with those who listen in ways that are best and most gracious."** (16:125)

That's where my duty in this respect ends. It is up to **"the other"** to reach out for God and find his own way and make his own choice. **"Let him who will, believe – and let him who will, reject it!" (18:29) "Let there be no compulsion in religion." (2:256)** Despite of this, Islam has the reputation of being spread by the sword.

Thus interfaith dialogue is a reciprocal testimony of faith involving equal parties. It is not a matter of trying to convince the other, but of listening to one another in order to know and understand each other in total respect of religious diversity. Dialogue is a goal in itself - not a means of conversion.

Real dialogue requires equality and mutual respect. Dialogue will fail if there is any hidden agenda. We have been in a situation, where we had to remind people of this, as they had clearly come to convert people. They did not accept **"the other"** as an equal partner and spoke down to them.

COURSES at the centre are given by Muslims, when the subject is Islam - and by Christians, when the subject is Christianity. Introductory courses have been given to Islam, to Christianity, to the new tendencies in Koranic interpretation, to the life of Prophet Muhammad, to Muslim-Christian relations in history, etc.

Our next course aims at making Muslims qualified to be part of a **VISITING TEAM** that hospitals in the area of Copenhagen can call upon in case Muslim patients or their families feel the need to talk to a fellow Muslim of the same origin as themselves to overcome

tragedy and suffering, sorrow or loss – and give them hope for the future.

OPEN DEBATES about current social and ethical issues, where Muslims and Christians contribute on an equal footing, take place once a month on issues such as human rights, bioethics, religion and identity, individual and state, teaching of Islam in public schools in Denmark, religious liberty, etc.

VISITS are received, both by groups and individuals – even from abroad: England, Germany, Indonesia, Norway, Sweden, Palestine, Zambia, Pakistan, Iran and the United States. All are eager to learn about our dialogue-experiences and about Muslim-Christian relations in Denmark. Students of all levels seek guidance to prepare papers and theses, and professionals of every kind contact us for lectures - especially about Islam, integration and interfaith dialogue – or simply how to interact with Muslims and their “strange” traditions!

RESEARCH on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations is done in cooperation with the Faculty of Theology of the University of Copenhagen, and the centre is increasingly involved in international interreligious dialogue work.

A **NEWSLETTER** is published 4 times a year with articles in Danish and English, book reviews, reports on the current events, etc.

An **ANTHOLOGY** was published in 2001: “Muslims and Christians face to face.” Members and friends of the centre contributed with articles about interfaith dialogue, experiences of Muslims in Denmark, ethics of liberation, etc.

A **LIBRARY** has been built up containing relevant books and journals - mainly in Danish and English, but also in such languages as Arabic, Swedish, Norwegian, Urdu, and French, with articles being registered in our own IKS database.

COUNSELLING and personal advice is provided in hospitals and prisons – or for mixed marriages in crisis.

The **DIALOGUE GROUPS** are the Alpha and Omega of the Islamic-Christian Study Centre. The dialogue group that was the origin of the establishment of the centre has been active for nearly ten years now. Besides this, we have a women’s group, a students’ group, 4 ‘ordinary’ groups - and a multifaith group uniting Muslims, Christians, Jews and Buddhists.

Each group consists of 10-15 members and decides its own ways and topics. It might be a video followed by a discussion, or an exchange of views on the basis of extracts from the Bible and the Koran.

A theological question will almost automatically lead to a discus-

sion of its actual social application - and vice versa.

We meet once a month, and so we get to know each other very well and will after some time be able to trust "the other".

INTERfaith dialogue in an atmosphere of complete trust will automatically lead to **INTRAFaith** dialogue.

I can assure you that it is extremely interesting for Muslims - especially for converts - to listen to a Lutheran, a Quaker and a Catholic's discussion of the "trinity" or "baptism and salvation".

And a Shia, a Sufi, a European reformist and a hardcore Sunni will have different views upon how to read and understand the scriptures or even upon terms like "sacrifice", "destiny" or "salvation".

The hard-core Sunni may start to say "you are wrong" to his fellow-Muslims - but in time he may change and say "in my opinion..." instead, and thus accept diversity even inside Islam, which is an extremely important achievement.

ISLAM is ONE, but the texts allow different interpretations on certain issues.

The main question is: Shall we read the Koran and the traditional Islamic Law literally and imitate the Prophet as to every minor detail - or shall we interpret the verses of the Koran and follow the Prophet by finding the aims and objectives of the teachings and apply them to the actual circumstances by (ijtihad or) deduction?

This discussion has always been going on - amongst Muslims as well as amongst Christians. We actually had the same discussion in Denmark some 150 years ago, when the famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard insisted upon the fact that following Jesus is not the same as imitating Jesus.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE is a process, something to be experienced. In some cases even the fact that a Christian can talk about the trinity without being met by outbursts telling her or him that trinity is polytheism, can be a step forward.

I still remember the day a young Muslim, born and raised in Denmark by Turkish parents, publicly declared that it was at the Islamic-Christian Study Centre he had felt respected by - and even made friends with - believing Christians for the first time in his life.

DIALOGUE is a process - religious education in primary and secondary schools is an important **FIRST STEP**. The teachers have an important role to play and must be well educated and have appropri-

ate textbooks. My latest book "Islam – Faith and Conduct in Life" is an important step in this respect – not least because it is the first time that an important publisher of school text books in Denmark has asked a Muslim to write a book on Islam which is now used in both public and private schools.

"**PROPHET ABRAHAM**" is the turning point in study material elaborated by the Islamic-Christian Study Centre in collaboration with clerics of the Danish National Church, including themes like:

What is the Koran? / What is the Bible?

What is the function of an imam? / What is the function of a priest?

Abraham in the Islamic tradition. / Abraham in the Christian tradition.

The pupils are then taken to the local church, where a priest tells them about the function of the church and about the Passion.

At a visit to a mosque, a Muslim tells the pupils about the function of a mosque and about the pilgrimage and Abraham's sacrifice.

Not only Abraham, but also great prophets like Moses, Josef and Jesus can be subject for comparative studies at all educational levels.

VISITING TEACHER TEAMS consisting of a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim have been created in order to give pupils of different levels in primary school a picture of similarities and differences between the three monotheistic religions. Just the fact to see a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim sitting at the same table and talking together in a friendly and harmonious atmosphere can make the pupils respect the faith and traditions of "the other".

Some of us have taken part in the elaboration of **VIDEO TAPES** for adults, where a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim explain their view on major themes like: The conception of God, the holy Scriptures, belief and salvation, baptism and circumcision, belief and belonging, women and gender, jihad, war and peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, etc.

DIALOGUE opens our minds and develops our faith. The questions that "the other" asks us make us reflect upon our own faith. Talking about **SIMILARITIES** makes trust grow so that it becomes much easier to talk about **DIFFERENCES** and to accept and respect **DIVERSITY** and **PLURALITY**.

INTERFAITH dialogue makes us realize that belief in God binds people together despite religious, social, cultural, ethnic, national and political differences - and that the bonds of faith can make us interact to create a harmonious and prosperous society.

Interfaith dialogue makes it clear to us that we share numerous

values with people of other faiths: We are all concerned about the future - about how to keep our children away from alcohol, drugs, violence and crime.

As citizens, we are all equally concerned about poverty, human rights, ecology, war and peace.

PRACTICAL DIALOGUE is another dimension of **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE**: people meet as neighbours, at schools, at university, on the playground, at work, at sports grounds, in networks, etc., working together for a common goal.

In real life, theology is not the starting point, but culture and religion are often closely linked so that it can be an advantage to know each other's religion and traditions in order to find solutions to common problems.

The meeting face to face in dialogue teaches us how to live and work together in harmony to enable us to "**strive as in a race**" for the **COMMON GOOD** as the Koran urges us to do – not only in our own society but in the world as a whole.

DIALOGUE transforms people from being "hard" and "exclusive" to becoming "soft" and "inclusive" – without compromising their own faith and their own traditions.

 339

The Islamic-Christian Study Centre of Copenhagen is a unique combination of a training, teaching, documentation and dialogue-centre and has thus become the social network for many of its members.

It is my firm belief that this could not have been achieved if the centre had not been established by Muslims and Christians jointly, who feel equally responsible for the centre's achievements and image, and if it had not been totally independent of religious and political institutions. These points are essential, especially for Muslims living with an often hostile majority.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST: It is indeed a great challenge to be a believer – Muslim, Christian or Jew - in a secularised European society. We are all bound to respect the laws of the state; but the possibilities and rights that these laws grant the citizens often go far beyond the limits set by our religion. Thus, it is up to the individual to set up limits and act in a responsible manner according to his or her belief.

It is my personal experience and belief that the fact that the individual has to set up limits for himself in a society where almost everything is acceptable, makes the individual grow in faith, aware-

ness and responsibility. People of sincere faith are far better prepared to work and strive for the common good in the long run.

We should “**strive as in a race in all virtues**”, but unfortunately, it is only a minority amongst Muslims, Christians and the Danish society as such, that acknowledge that we indeed have common values and goals – and that we are equally responsible for the future of our society.

Lastly, it has become quite common to talk about *tolerance*; but literally speaking, tolerance is negative - meaning to *tolerate* or to *bear with someone or something considered inferior*: The powerful tolerates the weak, the clever tolerates the less gifted - and the majority tolerates the minorities.

But this is not enough for me: Although I’m a Muslim, Denmark is still my native country, and I want to be respected as a citizen with full rights and duties.

The Muslim community’s struggle to have a **Muslim graveyard** is a good example of our situation:

340

In the past years, deceased Muslims have either been transported to their country of origin or been buried in special areas of Christian graveyards. For about 10 years Muslims in Copenhagen have been struggling to find a suitable area that could be transformed into a Muslim graveyard. Local councils have in haste changed the local map and priorities in order to prevent the Muslim community from buying a certain piece of land. Or they have raised the price to an astronomic level.

Recently however, a court decision has come to our rescue: The court has decided that the price of a certain lot in the area of Copenhagen is 2 mio. Danish Crowns instead of 22 mio. Danish Crowns that the local authorities had demanded in the first place.

The day after the announcement of the court decision a representative of the ultra-rightwing-party declared that his party would not stop to fight any Muslim graveyard even after it has been taken into use.

Definitely there is still a lot that needs to be done with respect to the situation of the Muslims in Denmark. May God help us and guide us in our efforts.

Abstract

The Islamic-Christian study centre of Copenhagen is unique in the sense that it was established jointly by Muslims and Christians. The board is composed of an equal number of Muslims and Christians who cooperate in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual respect- and that it is totally independent of religious and political institutions.

Interfaith dialogue is a reciprocal testimony of faith involving equal parties. Interfaith dialogue is a matter of listening to the other in order to know and understand her or his faith in total respect and will eventually fail if there is any hidden agenda.

Interfaith dialogue will often make even the most hardcore believer accept diversity even inside her or his own faith.

Interfaith dialogue makes it clear that we share numerous values and that we are equally concerned about the future whichever faith we claim to be ours.