

Religions for peace | april 2009

The famous American political scientist Samuel P Huntington in 1992 published his article Clashing values, where he claimed that cultural and religious identities would be the primary source of conflicts after the cold war. He developed his theories in a book in 1996 and even wrote a very controversial article later where he claimed that Islam has bloody borders.

Huntington got of course lots of opposers, one of which was the Iranian scholar Mohammad Khatami, who pleaded for Dialogue among the civilisations. In the same spirit 138 leading Muslim intellectuals at Eid al-Fitr in October 2007 wrote a letter to Christian leaders of the world inviting to dialogue on the basis of what is common to us, and even to the Jewish religion, the two Commandments of love.

Personally I think that one of Huntingston´s presuppositions is correct, namely that the situation after the cold war has ended is new. The western world needs new enemies and for too many Islam serves this purpose. The Orient is unknown to many and it is easy to create an atmosphere of fear when many lack knowledge. This has caused antisemitism and even suspicions against the Oriental Christianity.

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One of the subscribers of the important document from the 138 Muslim leaders was the professor of philosophy at the university of Cairo, Dr Hassan Hanafi. We are very pleased to greet him welcome to-day.

The letter in October 2007 from the 138 Muslim leaders inspired us to invite to this seminar. We think that this letter lays the base for dialogue in confidence between us. We, therefore, will take the invitation seriously and answer: Let us meet on the basis of the two Commandments of Love.

Within the Centre for studies of Contemporaneity we celebrate this year our 10th seminar of dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims. When I speak of “we” I think of Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson and myself. We are leading the Centre for studies of Contemporaneity. We started in the year 2000 with a seminar on the theme Global ethics and had that time the famous German theologian Hans Küng as leading guest.

After this start we went on with an internal Swedish dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims, all the time dealing with existential questions in an effort to meet and share the good fruits of our various traditions. We have had the common intention to seek God and to develop spirituality with themes as Good and evil, Human values and human dignity, Death, Religion and politics, Holiness and even one year God.

Now we want to celebrate the ten years of dialogue by once more trying to open the Swedish cultural context for impulses from abroad, and this time with representatives from the region of the three great religions of the book, the Orient.

East is east and west is west and never they will meet once Rudyard Kipling said. His perspective was without doubt more far away in the east than what we call the Near Orient but nevertheless there is a big difference in cultural history, religious devotion and life style between Sweden and the Near Orient, near from our point of view, not your.

In spite of different religions peoples in the Orient have a fellowship that in the days of the crusades lead Christians and Muslims of the Orient to fight side by side against the western invaders, and when the Arabs came to Egypt they were greeted as liberators by many of the Christians who were oppressed by the Roman Empire.

Our western history in relationship to the Orient is not always flattering, if ever, and it reveals that it is important for us to learn more about the way in which you look, who live in the Orient. It is important that we meet on the basis of the two commandments of love.

We share with the 138 Muslim leaders the conviction that east and west need to meet in dialogue. As one of the fundamentals for our work since we started we have had the theses from Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1992. There will be no peace among the nations if there is not peace among the religions and there will be no peace between the religions if we don't study each other's fundamental religious documents. Furthermore. We can add, if we don't become friends and look upon each other with respect.

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Now we greet you welcome, distinguished guests from the Orient. I have already mentioned Professor Hassan Hanafi. We are also happy to welcome director Daniel Rossing from the Jerusalem institute for Jewish-Christian Relations which you yourself has founded. Daniel Rossing has a past as advisor in the Department for Religion in the Government in Jerusalem. You have undertaken this trip with personal sacrifice and we are very grateful for your presence.

We are also happy to greet His excellence Métropolitte Isidore Battikha from Homs in Syria, leading representative of one of the orthodox churches of the East. For us Swedes it is a little complicated to think of twelve different Churches in Syria. You represent the Orthodox-Catholic tradition, which means that you theologically stand in the Orthodox tradition but recognize the pope in Rome as your religious leader. In spite of twelve different Churches in Syria I would say that you are a spiritual leader of great importance in all Christianity in Syria and a spokesman for all Syrian Christians. Metropolitte Isidore was for 15 years bishop of Damascus and is since 1994 Metropolitte of Homs in the centre of Syria.

I would also like to say a word of gratefulness to Morton Narowe, former Overrabbi of Stockholm and a good friend. You have supported this dialogue from the beginning and without you it had not been possible. You have opened these localities in the Jewish congregation where all so well take care of us. Professor Göran Larsson has rendered unvaluable service in preparing this seminar. Göran Larsson has a profound knowledge of Jewish faith in the same respect as Professor Jan Hjärpe has a profound knowledge in the Islamic faith. The presence of you both is a guarantee of high level on the different contributions.

In the prehistory of the seminar former prime minister Ingvar Carlsson plays an important role. Former minister of finance Allan Larsson is not present but has also played an active role. The seminar could not have reality without support from The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia foundation. Unfortunately it was impossible for Barbro Osher to be present but the fact that we can meet is due to her generosity.

Especially invited are The Sikh Guru Dharam, born in London with a Jewish mother and now living in Sweden. Within the Centre for studies of contemporaneity we have started dialogue with Guru Dharam. We also greet Awad Olwan, imam of Fisksåtra and a true friend of our dialogue. It is also a pleasure to see a substantial part of young Muslim students from the University of Stockholm.

We are happy for our guests and for the presence of all the partakers and hope that these days will give deeper knowledge and even deeper love between our civilisations, our cultures and our religions. I hope that we together will give a strong testimony that Religion is not given to the world to cause conflicts. Religion is given for peace. ///

Bengt Wadensjö, april 2009