



**ICCJ International Abrahamic Forum
Meeting of the Steering Committee
11-12 December 2011
Heppenheim**

Participants: Debbie Weissman (ICCJ President), Rabbi Ehud Bandel (IAF Chair), Prof Reuven Firestone, Mr Abdessalam Naijar, Rev Canon Hosam Naoum, Mr Mustafa Baig, Ms Debbie Danon, Ms Rebecca Brückner (YLC Chair), Rev Dick Pruiksmā (ICCJ General Secretary), Ms Francesca Frazer (IAF Co-ordinator, minutes)

Apologies: Prof Heidi Hadsell, Prof Mona Siddiqui, Prof Karl-Josef Kuschel, Prof Rashid Omar

Sunday 11 December, 2011

Welcome

Welcome for all participants at the Martin Buber House from Rabbi Ehud Bandel (IAF Chair), Dr Debbie Weissman (ICCJ President) and Rev Dick Pruiksmā (ICCJ General Secretary), followed by a history of the Martin Buber House and Buber's life by Ms Birgit Meurer.

Introductions

All members of the committee introduced themselves and told us about their backgrounds and interest in interfaith, specifically Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Workshop pre-meeting

Pre-meeting with Rabbi Ehud Bandel, Dr Debbie Weissman, Rev Dick Pruiksmā, Rebecca Brückner and Francesca Frazer concerning the IAF and YLC workshops, all of which aim to address the issue of J-C-M dialogue.

Monday 12 December, 2012

Introductions from Dr Debbie Weissman and Rabbi Ehud Bandel

Following on from the previous day's introductions, Debbie and Ehud each spoke about their backgrounds, what led them to participate in interfaith work and their desires for J-C-M dialogue.

Presentations: Why Trialogue?

Three members of the steering committee (one Muslim, one Christian and one Jew) were asked to prepare 20-minute presentations on why each considers trialogue to be important, before discussion of each paper by the rest of the steering committee.

Mr Abdessalam Naijar (Wahat al-Salam/Neve Shalom)

Main points:

- Man has a responsibility to establish peace and tranquility (Sakina) in society.
- We can participate in interfaith dialogue in ways that do not compromise some fundamental beliefs that are at the heart of our own faith and commitments.
- Recognition that the other's role (belief, attitude and behaviour) is relevant and significant to us.
- Trialogue requires trust; it is the backbone of true communication.
- Develop mutual understanding through sharing values and creating a new meaning of life together. Also celebrate the differences between us.
- Must face up to the challenges of the unknown
- We live in a "global village"; no member of the different religions can live in isolation from the other. All communities belonging to different religions, cultures and races must open their doors to all others.
- Interfaith dialogue: people of faith engage in serious and respectful conversations about the diversity of religious belief and practice.
- Goals of Wahat Al Salam/ Neve Shalom (a village in Israel established jointly by Jews and Palestinian Arabs, in which AN is active): to support dialogue between the followers of religions and cultures; to enhance dialogue, respect and cooperation between nations; to encourage peace, justice and reconciliation; and to counter justification for violence and conflicts under any cover.
- Quotes from Rashid Omar and Mona Siddiqui who couldn't attend this meeting:
 - Rashid Omar: "The Qur'an teaches that differences among humankind are not incidental and negative, but rather that human diversity represents a God-willed, social reality."
 - Mona Siddiqui: "Interreligious work has never been about implicit or explicit conversion... Most importantly, it has been to understand that talking about a common humanity demands much generosity in the face of practical difference."

Discussion

Linguistic Relations

- AN explained that the Arabic word "Sakinah" refers to something coming from God and giving a sense of confidence and tranquility. It seems to be related to the Hebrew word "shekinah", the term for God's presence in the world. The root of "sakinah" is "sa-ka-nah" which means "dwelled" or "remained in place", which further supports the association with the Hebrew "Shekhinah" as "indwelling"- the Hebrew and Arabic terms both come from the same root.
- MB commented that in both languages the word translated as "know" means not just to recognize someone, but means engaging with one another.
- DW noted that studies have shown how close linguistically and ethnically Jews and Arabs are, so it is tragic when they are in conflict with one another. She commented that Jews and Christians have an image of Muslims as being violent people- as the saying goes "Not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims" and noted the similarities between this attitude now and the earlier anti-Semitic attitude that Christians had towards Jews, as being behind all the problems in the world.

Vectors

- RF suggested that there are vectors in all three Abrahamic religions: they all say their goal is peace, but then occasionally violence is necessary. They have different views in different eras: so in one era one religion appears violent while the others do not; in another era, the roles are reversed, and so on. He commented that religion is a human response to divine tradition. Therefore each tradition is a human institution which views itself with one set of criteria and all others with another set of criteria. In fact, Judaism used to be a militant religion, but then became quietist due to the need for self-preservation. It is therefore impossible to say one religion is loving or peaceful and the other is not.
- DP suggested that the problem is that it is easy to reach out to the other in a time of conflict, because it's easy to see who the 'enemy' is. We need to learn how to do this in times of peace.
- EB also emphasized the need to not view the West as against Islam, since many now see Judaism and Christianity as being together in a defence against Islam. We need to combat this assumption.

Summary

DD offered a useful summary of Mr Naijar's paper and our discussion:

- We need to be ready to dialogue and to find willing partners in the world.
- We must recognize the "other" as being relevant to us, and we need to consider how to make it relevant to those who don't see it as being so.
- We must consider how to give people the tools for dialogue so they don't think they are under attack, and how to ensure people assume good intentions in a non-confrontational environment. Trust is difficult to believe and easy to topple.
- We need to think about what we are asking people to do when they read a paper on our website. Should they forward it to interested partners?

Should we encourage them to discuss it in the forum?

Rev Canon Hosam Naoum (St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem)

HN prepared a few notes on the topic at very short notice, after we learned that Prof Karl-Josef Kuschel was unable to attend the meeting due to ill health.

Main points:

- The aim of trialogue is to promote peace, justice, reconciliation, equality, shared experience and acceptance of diversity.
- Hospitality -the fourth Christian virtue- is important in all traditions. See the tent of Abraham.
- Religion can be both aggressive and liberating (fundamentalism, radicalism), so bridge-building between the faith traditions is crucial.
- All are created in the image of God, so all have a duty to respect one another.

Discussion

- DW stressed the importance of having a separate trilateral Abrahamic forum and maintaining ICCJ as an organization primarily focused on Jewish-Christian dialogue, rather than simply changing it to International Council of Christians, Jews and Muslims. While there are a number of organisations involved in trialogue, there isn't another organization that focuses only on Jewish-Christian dialogue and so, rather than lose this, we want to gain something by adding an Abrahamic forum.
- MB suggested that we might want to put our personal accounts on the website (how each member of the steering committee became involved in interfaith etc) in order to humanize it.

Prof Reuven Firestone (Hebrew Union College, LA)

Main points:

- Discussion with friend as to reasons for dialogue: "The bottom line is that Jews are involved in dialogue with Christians so that they won't kill us. The core reason Christians are involved in dialogue with Jews is because of the overwhelming guilt that derives from Christian complicity or apathy during the Holocaust." At the most basic level, most people engage in dialogue, not for admirable moral-ethical reasons, but for what should be considered existential motivations
- History has demonstrated that religion does not, by definition, seek peace. Peace is certainly a goal of religion when it is determined to be beneficial to the community, but no religion has shied away from initiating brutal wars when such actions were judged in the long run to be beneficial to the community of believers. Peace occurs when it is considered to be in the best interest of the community of believers to refrain from war and violence.

- In the ancient world, there was little interaction between religions, so each side developed and reinforced narratives of exclusivity and exclusion that became part of its cultural and religious ethos.
- All changed with modernity; religious populations are no longer fortified behind the two great camps.
- Religious dialogue is potentially the most important program to try to bridge the divides between peoples.
- Religion has proven itself throughout history to be the most powerful way to motivate extremely large populations of people to engage in extraordinary and selfless behaviours. Sometimes those behaviours are negative, such as war in which huge numbers of people demonstrate their willingness to die for a religious cause. But other times those behaviours are tremendously positive, such as when people are willing to give very deeply of their time and resources and even their health and their lives in order to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and help their fellows who are in need.
- We need to engage in religious dialogue today in order to: prevent such violence; to learn how to be secure in our own religious truths without feeling threatened by the religious truths of the other; to demonstrate that we respect and honor the dignity of the other's faith, even if we belong to a different faith; and to be role-models, demonstrating how to be firm in our belief while living and interacting with people whose very existence might serve as a kind of existential religious challenge to us.
- This kind of dialogue means engaging with people of other faith traditions in common cause, interacting through work and play, through neighbourhood organizations, social justice actions, and through joint charitable activities.
- Such engagement cannot be exclusive to Jews and Christians, but must include members of all religious communities in our societies, and most certainly our Muslim brothers and sisters with whom we live so closely today and with whom we have so much in common, even if our histories have included periods of terrible conflict and war.
- Today our goal is to break down these narratives and to convince everyone that it is in the best interest of all our faith communities to invest resources and energies in promoting cooperation, understanding and peace.

Discussion

- DW and RF agreed that no one narrative is fully accurate; we should remember that all narratives are partial and inadequate.
- DW noted the commonalities between the traditions; all religions deal with two issues: 1) What does it mean to be a human being? And 2) What does it mean to live in a community?
- RF commented that repentance is a theme common to all three traditions.
- MB also suggested that Islam has traditionally been wary of historical criticism, because it suggests that the book is not true. That is not to say that Muslims do not engage critically with the text - they do- but that there has been some reluctance in the past.
- DW stressed that we should combat the assumption that interfaith

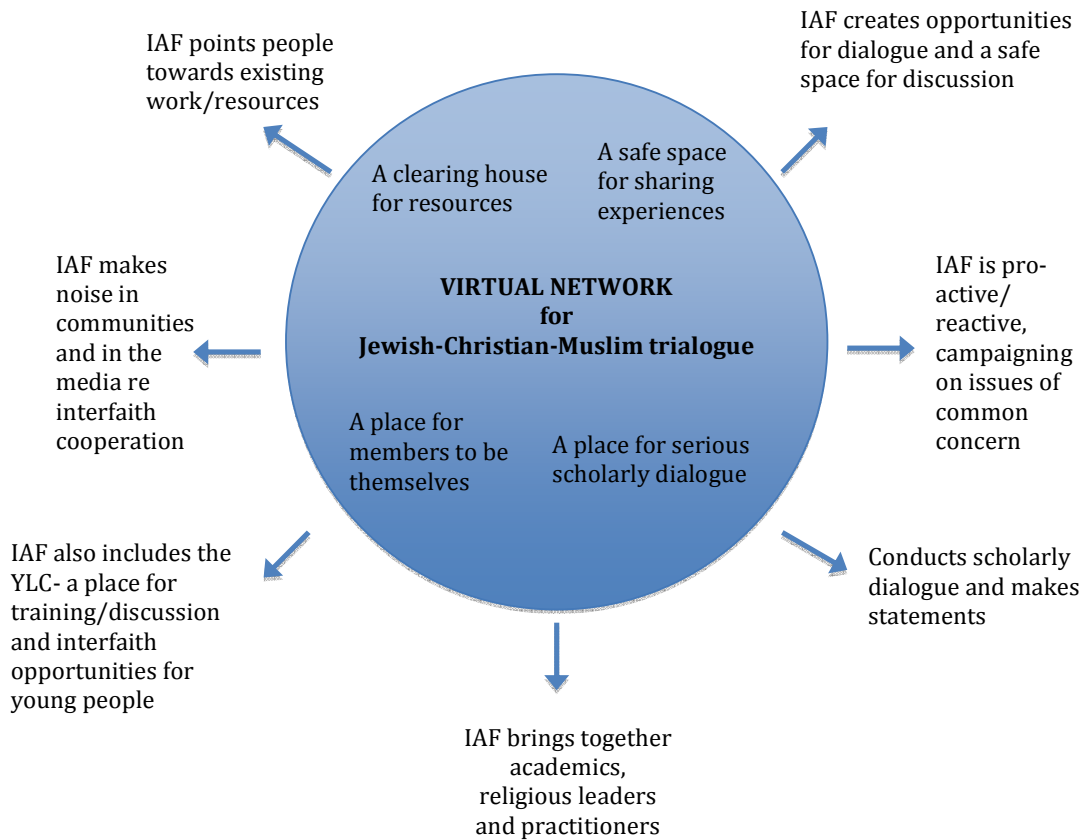
relations entails having a more liberal religious view; e.g. that only liberal Jews would be involved in dialogue with Christians for example. We should also understand that we cannot expect our partners to hold the same views on all issues (abortion rights, for example).

- MB agreed that we should make clear that dialogue/trialogue does not assume one needs to compromise one's own beliefs in order to take part, but rather to be willing to listen to those of others.
- EB noted that we should all be self-critical and that humility is a precondition to dialogue.
- DD reminded us to all be careful not to fall into the trap of using "we" and "they", referring to each other in terms "us" and "them", as that can hinder dialogue/trialogue. She noted that there is a place of comfort, when discussing one's own beliefs, and a point of panic, when encountering the unknown, but stated that education can bridge this gap.

Advanced Interfaith Facilitation Workshop: The Art of Asking Ms Debbie Danon (Three Faiths Forum)

- DD used an extract from 3FF workshop looking at how to ask effective interfaith questions – and how to use those tricky "ouch" questions as opportunities for learning.
- We split into groups of 2/3 and DD gave us questions to examine, such as "Isn't Sikhism just Islam and Hinduism mashed together?" or "Don't you think it's unfair that all Muslim women have to cover their hair?" The questions were all phrased negatively, sounded judgemental, and instigated a defensive feeling in those asked. DD explained how 3FF holds workshops to teach young people how this phrasing could be offensive, and how such questions could be asked differently. They learn to say "oops" whenever they say something they think could be offensive and "ouch" if they feel offended, as a light-hearted way to address the issues without being confrontational.
- In groups, we discussed what the ideal situation (if interfaith work was successful) would look like, in the community, at a local/national level and at a global level. We recognized that all three need to be linked for interfaith relations to truly work. Working together as a community is very different to influencing people on an international scale and so we must aim to deal with both, not just by encouraging community projects but making global statements etc.
- With DD's assistance, we explored the identity and beliefs of the International Abrahamic Forum and what actions would be associated with this. The diagram below represents what the IAF is (circle) and what it intends to do:

What is the International Abrahamic Forum (IAF) and what does it do?



Rules of Engagement: A Framework for Dialogue

DD explained that all participants should set out rules for dialogue, with an understanding of how we should phrase statements. For example, one should always speak using “I” statements and not speak for others. She offered two useful acronyms to explain what the ASKeR should consider when they ask a question and what the ASKEE (the one answering) should consider:

Assumption (what is the asker assuming?)

Statement or Question (is it a question or really a statement of what the one asking is thinking?)

Key Words (what are the main points?)

Rephrase (which words could be judgemental and should be rephrased?)

Assume good intentions (of the one asking)

Spectrum of views (in every tradition)

Keep it short and sweet

Explain jargon

End on a positive note (“I hope this has made it clearer for you”)

Following these rules will encourage non-confrontational discussion.

Preparations for 2012 conference in Manchester

We discussed the current workshop plan and decided that all workshops should be extended to 1.5 hours.

The plan for the 3 IAF and 2 YLC workshops (both of which are trilateral) is now as follows:

02/07/12 Session 1, Workshop 5: IAF: Reuven Firestone, TBA

02/07/12 Session 2, Workshop 10: IAF: Abdessalam Naijar, Wahat al-Salam, Neve Shalom as a test case

03/07/12 Session 3, Workshop 15: YLC: Marty Rotenberg, Social Responsibility Practised

04/07/12 Session 4, Workshop 20: IAF: Mustafa Baig: Muslims living under non-Muslim jurisdiction

04/07/12 Session 5, Workshop 25: YLC: Rebecca Brückner and Debbie Danon: Interfaith 2.0

YLC intend to meet on the Thursday before the ICCJ conference (28/06/12) and encourage as many of the IAF as would like to join them for cultural activities, including visiting places of worship, before the main conference begins. It was agreed that IAF would not hold a separate conference yet (as YLC do), but may do in subsequent years.

AN suggested that we consider how best to advertise the conference using media outlets. We should invite journalists from radio, television and newspapers to the conference to ensure full coverage before, during and after the event.

Closing Statement

IAF Chair Rabbi Ehud Bandel expressed his gratitude to everyone for taking part in this first full meeting of the steering committee of the IAF and IAF co-ordinator Francesca Frazer agreed to circulate a report of the meeting that would then be available on the website.