

European Conference on the Judeo-Muslim Dialogue

Brussels – April 16, 2007 Morning - Workshop B – Didier Bourg

Good morning, I have been asked to briefly introduce the sharing that will take place within our workshop. I, myself, am the director of a very young association – it is only two months old – the *Fraternité musulmane contre l'antisémitisme* (the “Muslim Brotherhood against Anti-Semitism”). The primary goal of this association is to denounce and combat all forms of anti-Semitism, for example, that which develops amongst Muslims themselves, by declaring that anti-Semitism and Islam are incompatible. Aware that anti-Semitism in Muslim environments is fed particularly by the conflict in the Middle East, we have made a choice, as Muslims, to unilaterally take a strong position on the Israeli-Palestinian question by declaring that we fully recognize the State of Israel as well as its right to defend its population.

Others, such as Rabbi Michel Serfaty, have made another choice, not to address the question of this conflict but first to build a fraternal Judeo-Muslim dialogue. We completely support this choice as it is wise and Rabbi Serfaty's association, the *Amitié judéo-musulmane de France* (the “French Judeo-Muslim Friendship”), is doing remarkable work, especially with young people in the housing projects. His action also allows us to go beyond the confusion between the Middle East and the relationship between believers of sister religions. So, why has the *Fraternité musulmane contre l'antisémitisme* made a completely opposite choice? Because these two approaches are complementary and are, as such, exemplary of the theme of our workshop.

Different levels of understanding, of encounter and of action come into play when one evokes the question of the Judeo-Muslim dialogue.

There is, for example, the image that one has of the group to which one belongs, of where one places oneself within this group, and the same considerations for the other member of the Judeo-Muslim couple as well. To this is added the image that one has of the conflict in the Middle East and the manner in which one imagines the position of the other in relationship to this conflict.

This means that, in reality, we are in a dynamic process with a great deal of diversity. Where often we represent things to ourselves as them and me, their camp and my camp their side and my side, we are now, in reality, in a very wide range of human diversity.

The realisation that the confrontation is not between uniform groups but that individuals come into play allows a “decompartmentalization,” allows new perspectives, allows new ways of seeing and understanding things differently.

This is one of the keys to reconciling different points of view or to instilling respect for different points of view. This is exactly the work that the Peace Movement does.

For this to happen, within the dialogue process, it has to be accepted that one can be a Muslim or a European Arab critical of Israel’s policies without being considered anti-Semitic. Similarly, it must be accepted that one can be a European Jew defending very hard-line positions expounded by certain Israeli politicians without being accused of racism or colonialism. One even has to be capable of defending the right of the other person to express their point of view even when it is different from one’s own.

But most of all one has to be able to go further. To be truly capable of listening to the other’s point of view by considering, on principle, this point of view as valid. By considering that within Israel as within Palestine, there are human beings with identical or very similar values peopling these territories, with needs and aspirations similar to those of the other human beings peopling the planet. To accept that everyone has the right to security, well being and development. And that a human life has no price. Everyday the media and internet provide us with information that feeds our fear, our contempt and our hate. But we can only contribute to peace by driving away these feelings and allowing in the greatest of all feelings, that of human fraternity, whether one is a believer or an atheist.

Then everything becomes possible. The association that I preside is a witness to this. We are Muslim and we do not ascribe to the expected point of view but rather to a point of view that can be surprising but which is nevertheless completely within the religious, ethical or humanistic values that we espouse, both Jews and Muslims.

It is not the interests of one’s particular community that must be put forward but rather the general interest and truth; all violence must be forbidden and condemned. And to have the courage to show oneself as both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian. To present oneself as a Muslim Zionist, defending the existence of the State of Israel and security for its population. Or as a Jew, defending the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

One can go even further. European Muslims could request Israeli nationality in addition to their own nationality as a means of demonstrating their solidarity with the Israelis. I personally and solemnly am making this request. And European Jews could do the same by requesting Palestinian nationality. This symbolic cross-over would not imply the rejection of the group with which one identifies but rather would put into action the fundamental values of one’s

existence: truth, justice and peace. To say out loud that these values are common to us all and that we wish to live them fully, to put them into action and not just to be content to affirm them while acting to the contrary.

When a Palestinian dies in this conflict, it is my blood that spills from his veins and when an Israeli dies in this conflict, it is also my blood that spills from his veins.

As in the Peace Movement, the European Jews and Muslims can gather, without suspicion, without misgiving, acknowledging one another, affirming themselves as brothers and sisters of the same family, united for peace between themselves and Europe, in the service of all Europeans whoever they are, and in the service of peace in the Middle East. And they can gather against their true enemies: hate which can insidiously build up in the heart of each one of us and violent individuals or groups, both Jewish and Muslim which block peace in the Middle East and universal brotherhood.

It is possible here and now. The organiser of this conference, the *CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe*, as well as all the experts which have given them help in this task, have given us the best conditions to realise this hope. Now it is for us, together, to speak truthfully, concretely and in all fellowship with affection and respect. We must go beyond the polished discourse of nice Jews and nice Muslims to reach an authentic fraternal bond. Having become inseparable, we will meet the everyday so that the reality of life will allow us to go beyond our disembodied, inhuman and false images never to be tempted to one day betray our ideals by betraying our brothers and sisters. By rendering solid and alive this fellowship, we do not deny our values, we do not dissemble them but on the contrary we give them life, as citizens and as believers of our respective religions. This is a system where we are all winners, together.

The word is out....