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Jewish and Muslim groups work together for inclusive Europe

By staff writers
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European Jewish and Muslim organisations have come together to create a dialogue over global concerns, opposition to racism, and their common future in a diverse Europe.

Among the questions tackled at a conference on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue held in Brussels last week were: What is the role of the Middle East conflict in Jewish-Muslim conversation? Is the media a positive force for change in inter-religious relations? How can local communities be successfully engaged together?

Addressed by speakers including Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid (chair of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony, UK), Rabbi Michel Serfaty (Founder & President of Amitié Judéo-Musulmane de France) and European Commission Culture Director Vladimir Sucha, participants were reminded of their shared religious and cultural heritage and were encouraged to join forces rather than working against each other.

A key outcome of the Conference was the establishment of a European Platform for Jewish-Muslim Co-operation to both encourage and to raise the profile of local, national and Europe-wide dialogue and co-operation initiatives.

In providing a forum for the sharing of experiences, ideas and good practices, the Conference also witnessed the initiation of new partnerships between organisations and the development of project ideas in the arts, media coverage of Jewish and Muslim issues, religious diversity training, grassroots involvement, academic co-operation and joint lobbying efforts.

Awards for best practice in Jewish-Muslim co-operative initiatives were also proposed.

The Conference also saw the release of 'mapping reports' compiling information on partnerships, initiatives and best practice in the field of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, the UK and France.

Presented by Dr Richard Stone, Founding Director of Alif-Alef UK, the reports show that although there are real challenges facing dialogue initiatives – including not only the Middle East conflict and gender issues but also structural differences between communities and the need for time and effort to sustain dialogue – there is nevertheless a great deal of positive contact between Jewish and Muslim communities in the countries studied, and this is growing.

Organised by Brussels-based Jewish anti-racism organisation CEJI with guidance from a Jewish-Muslim Steering Group, the European Conference on Jewish-Muslim Dialogue was conceived with a view to promoting dialogue, exchange of best practice, co-operation and partnership

between Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe.

It welcomed seventy Jews and Muslims from Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, the UK and France who are involved in or interested in dialogue at a community level. Organisations represented included the European Muslim Network, the International Council of Jewish Women (ICJW) and Islamic Relief.

Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid, Chairman of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony UK and the National Association of British Pakistanis and Conference Steering Group member said of the initiative: "The European Conference comes at a crucial time in Jewish-Muslim relations. In bringing together people working to increase religious harmony and tolerance within their own communities, it provides a much-needed focus on their achievements and is an important step towards tackling animosity and misunderstanding between Jews and Muslims."

As CEJI Director Robin Sclafani explained, Jewish-Muslim dialogue initiatives are valuable not only for creating respect and understanding between communities but also as "a source of inspiration for intercultural relations as a whole and a demonstration of solidarity in the fight against all forms of racism".

Participant Shereen Williams of Radio Salaam Shalom, the UK's first Muslim and Jewish radio station, added: "There is an increasing understanding that Jews and Muslims in the UK and worldwide have a common history that dates back thousands of years. Now, more than ever, it is time to draw on and learn from our positive cultural experiences."

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