

# **THE SIXTH MUSLIM - CHRISTIAN CONSULTATION**

## **on Education for Understanding and Cooperation**

BY

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### **The Sixth Muslim - Christian Consultation**

The Sixth Muslim - Christian Consultation took place in Athens, Greece at the Astir Hotel in Vouliagmeni, September 8-10, 1994. The topic of the consultation was «*Education for Understanding and Cooperation*». The consultation was jointly sponsored by the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Chambésy, Switzerland and the Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research / Al Albait Foundation, Amman, Jordan. The preparations for this interreligious dialogue were due to the initiative of Crown Prince Al - Hassan of Jordan and Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland. The papers were read in the language of the presenter with simultaneous translation into Greek, English and Arabic.

The purpose of the interreligious dialogue is not to attain a syncretistic unity of all religions, but mainly to search for the common ideals of the various traditions in order to avoid extremes of hatred and religious fanaticism. The aim is to make possible the spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation on the common spiritual problems of contemporary humanity.

I was honored to be invited personally by His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and by Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland to participate with the blessing of Archbishop Iakovos of North and South America.

Forty scholars from fourteen countries participated in the Consultation.

The Consultation began on Thursday, September 9th, at 9:00 a.m. inaugurating its deliberations with the reading of the message of His All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. The Patriarchal message was one of peace and conciliation.

The following statement is significant and summarizes the Patriarchal greeting. He says, *«As children of the one and only God, Christians and Muslims, with unity of the human race as fundamental faith, we are called to become better acquainted and draw closer to each other, promoting in every way a dialogue among us, and especially during this time which is the age of dialogue».*

Then, Metropolitan Damaskinos introduced His Excellency, the Minister of Education, Mr. George Papandreou, who pointed out that the history of the Balkan nations paints a black picture. He proposed to view the area of the multi-cultural society in an objective way. The social and cultural differences must not become a force for conflict but a means for dialogue and through education a mutual understanding and extolling of the richness of each religion. The new generations must not be fed with fanaticism and misinformation. As Minister of Education and Religions of Greece, he will make every effort and will bring together all the Ministers of Education of all the Balkan nations to write new common textbooks of the people in the area. These textbooks will avoid offensive language which creates conflicts between people and religions. The remarks by the Minister of Education, Mr. George Papandreou, were well received by all the participants.

Metropolitan Damaskinos then read a message from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, His Excellency, Karolos Papoulias, who was unable to be present due to his duties outside Greece. The statement read: *«Every such meeting between Christians and Muslims is of great importance for our people and our country. We have known each other for a long time through our historical differences, common adventures and through the same or different fears and hopes».*

His Eminence, Damaskinos Papandreou, Metropolitan of Switzerland, began the academic sessions with his presentation. His Eminence in his opening address emphasized how important it is for religions to become vehicles for peace and harmonious coexistence of all human beings. This emphasis is illustrated in the statement where he said, *«Sincere interreligious dialogue is the only way for religions, not only to temper intolerance in the present crisis, but also to re-unite all people through the purely spiritual mission of religion».* To this introductory address by Metropolitan Damaskinos, a response in the same spirit was made by His Excellency, Senator Prof. Dr. Nassir El - Din El - Assad, President of the Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research in Amman, Jordan. He read a message from the Crown Prince Hassan emphasizing the need for peaceful coexistence. He also

gave his own opening address emphasizing religious tolerance and mutual understanding among all people and the rejection of violence.

Following a coffee break, the first session began. Dr. Izzat Jaradat presented his paper on the topic «*Educational Complexity: Understanding and Cooperation through Education*». Dr. Jaradat is the Secretary General of the World Muslim Congress for Jerusalem and Assistant Secretary General of the Ministry of Education. He made an attempt to «*provide a conceptual framework and to develop the process of understanding and cooperation between Muslims and Christians*». He divided his paper into five sections: 1) the Future International Arena; 2) The International Framework: Education for International Understanding; 3) The Dialogue Between Cultures; 4) The Obstacles that face the Dialogue; and 5) The Future Role of Education. He pointed out that in order to be fruitful, the dialogue must take into consideration mutual respect, self-recognition, independence, openness and exchange of ideas and opinions.

Dr. Ulrich Bock from the Evangelical Church of Germany responded stating: «*Education should lead to a state in which we understand ourselves better as human beings, in which we receive what an indispensable contribution to meaningful living religions are able to make*». A vigorous and lengthy discussion followed.

The second session followed in the afternoon with the presentation «*Christian Difficulties in Promoting Understanding and Cooperation through Education*», by Dr. Tarek Mitri. Dr. Mitri is the Executive Secretary, Office of Interreligious Relations, WCC. He expressed enthusiasm for holding colloquiums on Muslim - Christian issues and pointed out how important understanding religious pluralism is to both sides. Islam calls its adherents to the belief in God and his angels, the prophets and the last judgement. The Westerners view Islam through fundamentalism and make the accusations that Islam is a violent religion. Dr. Mitri raised questions such as «*who is going to educate the Christians on Islam?*». He pointed out that Muslims themselves must come together and enter into dialogue and present Islam to the Christians. Scholarly objectivity must be sought, he emphasized, rather than proselytism of others into their own religion. The Churches are not national institutions but trans-national. Dr. Abdullah Madadhah discussed this paper leading a very lively discussion.

In the early evening the third session was devoted to the discussion of the previous papers. Later that evening, all participants attended a reception at the Jordanian Embassy in Athens where a delicious

meal was served and excellent fellowship was experienced by all the participants.

On Friday morning before the fourth session began; Fr. Maurice Bormans from the Pontifical Institute on Arabic Studies in Rome and author of *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims* offered a meditation.

Session four followed with the presentation on «*The Image of Christians in Muslim Textbooks and Mass Media*» by Mr. Husni 'Ayesh, an ex-member of the Jordanian Senate. He surveyed the textbooks used in classes teaching religion and history in all levels of Jordanian schools and other Islamic countries. He also made references to the media portraiture of Christians. He concluded his paper as follows: «*How enjoyable it is to love one's own religion without hating other religions or accusing their adherents of paganism; and how marvelous it will be when the citizens of our country (or of the entire world) who belong to various sources, origins, colors, religions and denominations meet with one another in various departments, playgrounds, clubs, houses of worship and other institutions of civil and global society in love, concord and peace*». Dr. Maria Brun gave a response to Mr. Ayesh emphasizing the «*commitment to better cooperation and deeper mutual understanding*» of the two religions.

The fifth session was dedicated to the presentation on «*The Image of Muslims in Christian Textbooks and Mass Media*» by Dr. Gregorios Ziakas. Professor at the Aristotelean University of Thessalonike, Greece. Prof. Ziakas surveyed the educational material used in all levels of schools in Greece as well as the mass media. He pointed out that Islam is deeply rooted in the Greek civilization and philosophy. He divided his paper into three parts: 1) information provided in Greek primary and secondary schools; 2) textbooks in Universities; and 3) the way Islam is presented in the media. This was a very informative survey and helpful to the participants to understand the nature of the information that Greek students receive and the public media communicates to the Orthodox Christians in Greece. He concluded: «*It would be a mistake to interpret the Qur'an in the spirit of the Bible or the Bible in the spirit of the Qur'an; but to achieve understanding this, divine enlightenment and education are needed, and these can be brought about only through faith and education. Let us hope that Christians will make the necessary progress in the knowledge of Islam and that Muslims will progress in the knowledge of Christianity*». His paper was discussed by Professor Muhammad

Adnan El - Bakhit, member of the Academy's Council and President of Al - Albait University.

During the sixth session, discussion was held on the second topic.

Following coffee break, the seventh session took place. Dr. Abdul Aziz El - Khayat, member of the Academy's Council and member of the Jordanian Senate, presented his paper on «*Muslim Ideals and Past Practices in Promoting Understanding and Cooperation through Education*». In philosophical depth he discussed this topic, dividing it into three parts: 1) educational values and ideals as dictated by the **Qur'an**, the Prophet's **Sunnah**, and the Muslim educators; 2) past practices in promoting the process of understanding through education; and 3) how these values and practices affect understanding and cooperation. He concluded: «*I wanted to show to the honored participants in this Muslim - Christian dialogue the sublimity which is evident in our values and the mutual understanding and cooperation among followers of all creeds through education...*».

Dr. Albert Laham from the Orthodox University of Balamand, Lebanon, gave a long and vigorous response calling Muslims to the ideal of tolerance and mutual respect.

The last paper was presented in the eighth session by the Rev. Archimandrite Dr. Samuel Petrossian from the Armenian Church of Etchmiadzin. He spoke on: «*Christian Ideals and Past Practices in Promoting Understanding and Cooperation through Education*». He spoke of his experience as a Christian under Communism. He discussed «*unity of the human race*», that «*God directs history*», «*collaboration in education*», and «*religious teaching in the Caucasus*». He emphasized that often «*a religious character*» is given to the «*wars*» and «*conflicts between Christians and Moslems*» which most often leaders of both religions reject. The respondent to this paper was His Excellency, Othman Hashem, resident representative in the United Nations Development Program.

A ninth session was held during which a general discussion on the above topic took place.

At the Closing Session, the following conclusions were brought forth:

The main important points emphasized during the Consultation were summarized as follows and distributed to the press.

1. The participants stressed the relevance of Muslim - Christian dialogue in the context of religious plurality that characterizes today's world. They also emphasized the urgent need to address together

problems, conflicts and tensions that threaten harmonious and peaceful co-existence, in an effort to prevent the exploitation of religious sentiments in exacerbating division. The participants are aware of their common responsibilities in dealing with the materialistic culture which prevails in today's world, and offering a contribution by people of faith towards the meaning of existence, life, the world and history.

2. In this context, the participants chose to study the issue of education as a means of better and mutual understanding and cooperation, in view of its crucial role in shaping the consciousness and value systems of the younger generations. As a future-oriented activity, education should be rooted in our respective faith tradition: it should also be concerned with enhancing objective information about each other, and underlining the common fundamental moral and spiritual values. Since education is a continuous process, no efforts should be spared in combating misconceptions, prejudices and the distortion of each other's images.

3. The participants agreed that educational programs within one community should be attentive to the faith and tradition of the other. This should be undertaken with a spirit of objectivity, openness and tolerance, and should ensure that, while we refer to the realities of history and the authentic sources of our religions, we should learn to understand each other in the way we would like to be known and understood.

4. The participants are well aware of the great influence of the mass media, and call for a critical approach to the reductionist, stereotypical, essentialist and sensationalist portrayal of religious communities. They believe in the necessity for active cooperation in correcting our mutual perceptions as conditioned by the media. This cooperation involves revising textbooks and developing new educational materials through the joint efforts of specialists from the two religious communities, as well as encouraging governments to take up inter-religious concerns in new educational curricula.

5. The participants underlined the need to clarify and sharpen the concepts, definitions and analysis as they examine the conflicts of our time in a way that will enable them to elaborate a common strategy for a just peace. Muslims and Christians are called upon to protect their respective communities from the divisive effects of aggressive policies and those which display double standards, through the channels of education, dialogue and mutual cooperation.

After these conclusions were read, the participants expressed their gratitude to the Orthodox Center for the generous hospitality extended to them and the efficient organization of the Consultation. They also expressed their gratitude to the Royal Academy for collaborating with the Center in organizing the Consultation.

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At the end of the Consultation, Dr. Nassir El - Din El - Assad, President of the Royal Academy, extended an invitation on behalf of H.R.H. Crown Prince Al - Hassan to host the next consultation in Amman, Jordan in September 1995 on the theme of:

«*The Educational System in Islam and Christianity*», with the following three sub-topics: 1) Philosophy of Education in Islam and Christianity; 2) Problems of Education in Modern Society from a Muslim and a Christian Point of View; and 3) Features of the Educational System from a Muslim and a Christian Point of View.

The closing of the Consultation was made with an address by Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland. He emphasized the following five points:

**First**, that the teachings of Christianity and Islam contain many common points of creed and spirituality which contribute to mutual understanding even if obscured by extreme interpretations of practices in the course of history.

**Second**, that it is a common duty to use these elements in the field of education in order to restore to the consciousness of people an authentic framework of principles for their interreligious relations which through the dynamism of authentic teachings will rid us of past prejudices.

**Third**, that the promotion of elements of the two religions, through the educational system of people with a different religion, will not threaten, but on the contrary, will reinforce their impact upon society and the reliability of their spiritual message.

**Fourth**, that the fuller knowledge of the authentic content of religions disengages them from any alien secularized causes of division and promotes them into authentic preachers for unity and peaceful coexistence among the people of the world.

**Fifth**, that the self-knowledge of religions regarding their exclusive relationship to absolute truth can be assessed through a serene interreligious dialogue instead of nurturing religious antagonism that will lead us to intolerance and religious tension.

He concluded that: *«It is only when contemporary man is led in the presence of God that he sees more clearly the distinction between good and evil and is liberated from his long or situational servitude to human systems or rather the hypocritical interpretations of the relationships between fellow human beings and the divine creation. This is our common goal. Education is a sacred area that will serve this goal with continuity and consistency».*

In closing, he said: *«I thank all of you and wish you a safe return to your countries. I firmly believe that our humble efforts contribute towards a new perspective for contemporary humanity and will be blessed by God».*

The Consultation ended with a reception and dinner that His Eminence, Metropolitan Damaskinos, gave for the participants at the famous Hotel Astir at Vouliagmeni, Athens.

The excellent arrangements were coordinated by Mrs. Dora Nicolopoulos, representative of the Orthodox Center of Athens, under the direction of Gary Vachicouras, a graduate from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology and a doctoral candidate at the University of Athens.

The Conference was an excellent gathering of prominent representatives from Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The proceedings will be published and distributed by the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Geneva, Switzerland.