



Consultation on “Interreligious Coexistence Initiatives”

01.03.2019 | Pavol Bargár*

As a follow-up to the standard biannual meeting of the ICCJ Executive Board (ExBo) a consultation on "Interreligious Coexistence Initiatives: Dialogue, Education, and Activism" was organized for the members of the ExBo and invited representatives of ICCJ member and partner organizations. The consultation took place on February 5-7, 2019, in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

The program was prepared by Debbie Weissman, ICCJ consultant, and Anette Adelman, ICCJ General Secretary, in close cooperation with Sarah Bernstein, Executive Director of the [Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue](#) – one of the two ICCJ member organizations in Israel –, and Ophir Yarden, Director of the program [ADAShA: The Jerusalem Center for Interreligious Encounter](#) at the Rossing Center.

Very rich and stimulating, the program by and large employed the method of exposure trips to give the participants a hands-on opportunity to get to know and reflect on the topics and issues relevant for interreligious initiatives in Israel and Palestine. As such, it sought to go beyond theoretical knowledge that can be introduced to “students” in a lecture hall. It was, therefore, crucial that the ExBo was given an opportunity to take part in this unique consultation.

The consultation began on the evening of February 5 with a reception sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung – KAS), Country Office Israel. Moderated by Debbie Weissman, the reception gave the consultation participants an opportunity to meet and engage in informal conversations with invited representatives of various coexistence projects and organizations, both Israeli and Palestinian, and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. In addition, all participants were greeted by Bo Sandahl, ICCJ President, Joachim Rother, Deputy Director of the KAS in Israel, and Michael Melchior, founder of Mosaica, a religious peace initiative. In his address, Rabbi Melchior pointed out a danger of religious people forming “(un)holy alliances” (e.g., Judeo-Christian tradition) in order to exclude others (e.g., Muslims, secular humanists).

On the morning of February 6, the program started by Ophir Yarden welcoming the participants and briefly acquainting them with the mission and programs of the Rossing Center, especially ADAShA: The Jerusalem Center for Interreligious Dialogue that Yarden directs. Afterwards, the participants were introduced by Hana Bendcowsky, director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations of the Rossing Center, to the colorful and multilayered reality of Christianity in Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular, followed by a commented visit to the Christian quarter of the Jerusalem Old City and Church of the Holy Sepulcher / Anastasis, also guided by Bendcowsky. This part of the program was invaluable since Bendcowsky as a non-Christian scholar of Christianity was able to offer a unique outsider’s perspective on Christianity as a lived religion and on some of the Christian holiest places.

In the afternoon, Ophir Yarden explored the significance of holy sites for intergroup (especially interreligious) relations, using Mt. Zion as a kind of case study. Taking into consideration archaeological, historical, and theological perspectives, Yarden primarily focused on David's tomb and the place of Jesus' last supper with his disciples (coenaculum) but also commented on cemeteries with a particular regard for a condemnable recent phenomenon of "price tag" vandalism by certain Jewish individuals and groups done at Christian cemeteries. The participants' visit to the Protestant cemetery on "Mt. Zion" was guided by Paul Wright, president of the Jerusalem University College, who also introduced the participants to the work pursued at his institution, aimed at educating (especially) Protestant clergy from North America.

Subsequently, the consultation participants were accepted at a private audience by Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem. In a lively informal conversation, H. E. the archbishop was informed about the work of ICCJ and, in turn, acquainted the participants to the ministry of the Patriarchate in Israel and Palestine. Particular attention was paid to interreligious cooperation and to the situation of Christians in Gaza.

The thought-provoking program of that day was brought to its end by a session held at Ecce Homo. The session was chaired by Sarah Bernstein, the executive director of the Rossing Center, who first introduced the participants to the work of the center (to add to what had already been said by Ophir Yarden earlier that morning) and then welcomed Michal Mushkat-Barkan and Suad Younan, experienced educators and facilitators in the Teachers' Lounge program. Founded by Mushkat-Barkan, the program aims at establishing and facilitating dialogue among Jewish and Arab educators in Israel. The consultation participants could get to know both methodology and some practical outputs of this initiative.

The program on the next day, February 7, resumed the topic dealt with the previous evening, namely, education. On the bus en route to the Hand-in-Hand Bilingual School in Jerusalem, a local bilingual (Hebrew – Arabic) elementary school, Ophir Yarden provided the participants with some insights into the Israeli education systems. One of the key facts regarding education in Israel is that students up till the university level have very little interaction with peers outside their language/ethnic group (i.e., Jews with Arabs, and vice versa). The Hand-in-Hand Bilingual Schools (there are currently six schools in Israel) were, therefore, intentionally established with the aim of bridging this divide. Noa Yammer, from the school's PR office, and Yaffa Shira Grossberg, a teacher at the school, informed the participants about the school's approach and curriculum that emphasizes the need to have classes co-taught by both Jewish and Arab teachers. The participants were also given a guided tour around the school, including one of the classes, and an opportunity to speak with some of the school's students.

Like education, medical care is another area where religion(s) can promote peace and coexistence. A visit to St. Louis French Hospital, one of the local (and more famous) Jerusalem hospitals, therefore followed. The participants were greeted by Sr. Monika Duellmann, the hospital's director, who very engagingly illustrated the daily reality of interreligious spiritual care. The image she portrayed was full of wisdom, humor, understanding, and the shared humanity that goes across the borderlines among religious traditions.

In the afternoon, the consultation participants got on a bus to be transferred to Ramallah since the following part of the program continued at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), Country Office Palestinian Territories. The office's program manager, Johannes Lutz, greeted and accompanied the participants on the bus, giving them a particular perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian relations. The geographical shift also meant a shift in the level and perspective of the conversations. While the initiatives explored until then aimed at promoting interreligious coexistence among various groups within the Israeli society, the focus was now on the level of the Israeli-Palestinian relations, seen through the political lenses with religion being merely one (albeit important) factor. There were three speakers on the afternoon program:

First, Inès Abdel Razek-Faoder, a policy advisor at the office of the prime minister in the Palestinian Authority, discussed the complexities of the situation, with a particular regard to the young generation. Emphasizing the need to secure equal rights for all parties involved in the situation, she acknowledged the right of the Jewish people to self-determination and expressed her preference for a two-state solution.

Second, Imad Haddad, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ramallah, spoke about his view on interreligious dialogue, giving specific examples how he and his church pursues dialogue and coexistence initiatives in their context. Clearly rejecting replacement theology, Haddad advocated a theology based on the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God. As a result, all people are potential dialogue partners for him, regardless of religion, for the sake of promoting peace and reconciliation.

The third part of the afternoon program (which was, at the same time, the final part of the consultation) featured a political debriefing by Marc Frings, the director of the KAS Country Office Palestinian Territories. A political analyst, Frings provided the participants with a thorough analysis, painting a very comprehensive and realistic image of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Somber as it might have been, Frings' interpretation was not without any hope for the future. If such a future is to come true, however, many agents need to be involved, including religious ones. Interreligious work, such as that pursued by ICCJ, is of crucial importance in this respect.

Multilayered and very inspiring in its variety, the consultation generated a number of common themes that surfaced during different presentations.

First, the participants were reminded repeatedly of the importance of the other for shaping one's own identity. In other words, one needs the other in order to know oneself. Indeed, it is one of the tasks of ICCJ to bring people out of their contexts to give them opportunities to experience their religious other(s) in a safe environment.

Second, in most countries, Jewish-Christian (and, generally, interreligious) dialogue today is seen as an academic endeavor. The Israeli situation shows the importance of living dialogue in everyday situations through various educational, social, medical, and cultural projects. "Being neighbors," working within shared space, is the *modus operandi* for working together in this regard.

The two points above also indicate the significance of this consultation taking place precisely in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not only, famously, a holy city for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also a place where a plurality of worlds intersects and intermingles. Moreover, it is a place of "hypertrophied" identities, with various traditions "competing" with each other, both inter- and intra-religiously. Furthermore, Jerusalem is a place that makes one aware of the plurality of one's own religious tradition. This all makes for a fascinating polyphony (at times, admittedly, a cacophony) of sounds, smells, colors, and tastes that can hardly be experienced in any other city in the world.

There is yet another factor that speaks for the importance of Jerusalem as the place for this consultation. As a holy city for some of the major world religions, Jerusalem shows the crucial place of presence in religion: adherents of many traditions come here to be enabled physical contact with the sacred, to get connected to what they regard as the core of their lives.

Broadening the scope, the context of Israel was also of relevance for the consultation's location as the State of Israel is the only country in the world where Jews represent a majority of the population. This creates a new situation with new opportunities and challenges, and anyone

involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue needs to take this fact into consideration.

In conclusion, it can be said that the consultation was a very successful one thanks to its carefully prepared program, format, and location. Two remarks should be made in this respect. First, the consultation showed the importance of getting to know the context and background information for understanding the (religious) other better. This insight gains increased relevance in the today's world strongly driven by instant and unverified messages in the media and social networks. Second, the consultation makes a good case for experiential learning that exposes participants to the various dimensions of the lived reality of a subject under reflection. This approach could be fruitfully explored by ICCJ more extensively in the future.

Once again, many thanks go to all who made this extraordinary learning experience possible.

Read also [here the blog post](#) on the "Jewish News" by Elizabeth Harris-Sawczenko, Director of the Council of Christians and Jews in the UK, who joined us in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

And for a picture gallery [look here](#).

Pavol Bargár is ICCJ Second Vice President.