



Religious leadership in the 21st century

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HAIFA - On May 17th, 2023, His Beatitude Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, participated in a conference organized by the Haifa Laboratory for Religious Studies' public committee, of which he is a member, and which was centered on religious leadership and the challenges it faces today.

What is the role that religious leaders should play today? What voice should they embody in our rapidly changing, too rapidly perhaps, world, be it on a political, geographical, ethical, social or technological level? These were the questions that various religious leaders and lay scholars from across the country – whether Druze, Muslim, Jewish, Christian or of the Bahá'í faith – attempted to answer during the conference held yesterday on the campus of the University of Haifa. During the various speeches, many subjects were covered, including the fundamental importance of dialogue, communion, acceptance and tolerance (and, in certain cases, the lack thereof among religious communities or leaders), as well as the role played by faith in the great historical events that have shaped today's world.

This initiative came from the Haifa Laboratory for Religious studies, who came to light a few years ago to further highlight Haifa as a model for religious co-existence and to study religions, most especially interfaith dialogue and interdisciplinary collaborations.

Among those who came only to listen to the various speakers – which notably included, in addition to Mgr Pizzaballa, Rabbi David Rosen, Karim Asad Ahmad Khan KC, Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Dr. Einat Kalish Rotem, mayor of Haifa, Dr. Mansur Abbas, leader of the United Arab List, and Amir Muhammad Sharif Odah, head of the Islamic Ahmadiyya Community in the Holy Land – many emphasized that the importance of this type of event was not so much related to the discussions as to the opportunity for encounter it creates. "It's kind of the only way for people from different faiths to get to know each other and to form bonds," said one of the guests attending the conference, who is herself a peace activist promoting interfaith initiatives in Israel. "The visual is also important; it's important for people to see Jews, Muslims and Christians sitting next to each other and debating peacefully topics related to faith or even politics."

One cannot deny that, in the Holy Land, to do this is already to be making a point. Moreover, some of the participants did not hesitate to discuss rather hot topics in an honest and straightforward way, thus rekindling the sometimes faint – but always present – light of hope regarding the future not only of the Holy Land, but also of the rest of the world. In the end, while acknowledging (and reminding what should be) the limits of religious leaders, all agreed to say that they had a "strong responsibility" to their faithful and their fellow lay peers, and were supposed to always incarnate, as opposed to politics, the voice of "welcome", of "openness to the other", of "kindness", of "justice", and of all the human and moral values defended by most of the world religions.

After the debates, the conference concluded with a tribute to the Muslim Ahmadiyya community, a messianic current of Islam founded in the late 19th century, which was succinctly summed up during the presentation by the following words: "Love for all, hate for none" – words that many, whether in the Holy Land or elsewhere, could benefit from.

Source: [Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem](#).