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Notes and Comments

Muslim-Sponsored Moves toward International Understanding and Social Justice

THOMAS J. O'SHAUGHNESSY

News reports for 1976 on the whole paint a dark picture of Muslim-Christian relations. The year, however, also saw two meetings in the interests of joint understanding and brotherly peace between followers of these world faiths. Muslim countries, Libya and Pakistan, were prime movers and lavish hosts of both.

The Tripoli Seminar on Islamic-Christian Dialogue met on 1-6 February 1976 to discuss points of agreement and difference between Islam and Christianity. The seminar was sponsored by the Holy See, as well as by the Libyan Arab Republic, which spent more than a million dollars for the affair. An international group of Muslim religious leaders and statesmen, including Colonel Moammar Khadafy, met 15 Vatican delegates led by Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli. Besides the delegates more than 300 observers from 43 countries and 120 representatives of the press and other media sat in on the meetings.

Two sessions convened each of the five days at the Liberation Theater in Tripoli. The Libyan Government provided full equipment for the simultaneous translation of the proceedings. Despite Vatican efforts to keep the talks on a strictly religious course, the seminar on occasion veered into politics. But on the whole it was a fraternal encounter, the first of its kind since before the Crusades.

Two of the questions discussed had special relevance for the present: (1) Can religion be effective in guiding men's lives in the contemporary world? (2) Must religion concern itself with social justice? The final declaration gave a strongly affirmative answer to both.

Because of the great number of journalists and radio-TV personnel invited, this meeting got wide publicity. But another congress that went almost unnoticed in the world press was perhaps even more meaningful in its thrust and content. This was the International Congress on Seerat, held on 3–15 March 1976, under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Government of Pakistan. Seerat is the biography of Muhammad considered as a way of life held up for imitation by Muslims. The aim of the Congress was to “promote Islamic brotherhood, unity, and solidarity on an international level,” and its theme was the “message of Muhammad for the modern man.” The list of participants included 69 Pakistani and 93 non-Pakistani statesmen, scholars, and intellectual leaders. No Communist countries were represented. Some of the more important delegates were the prime minister of Pakistan, Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; the speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan, Sahibzada Farooq Ali Khan; the Imam of the Mosque of Al-Azhar University, the most important traditional university in Islam; the Imam of the Ka’ba in Mecca, the leading mosque of the Islamic world; and the Secretary-General of the Islamic Secretariat. About 15 Christians, including one Belgian Jesuit, were invited and most read short papers. Two, Professor W. Montgomery Watt of the University of Edinburgh and Professor George Makdisi of the University of Pennsylvania, gave full-length conferences at the opening plenary sessions on 6 March and 10 March.

The International Congress on Seerat was avowedly religious in its aims and content. The program proposed as themes of discussion the beliefs of Islam as a revealed religion, its civilizing role as a transmitter of culture, and its Prophet Muhammad as the ideal man. But in working out the details of these themes the program introduced a number of topics not usually associated with traditional Islam, for example, the contributions claimed for Muhammad to social justice, to the raising of the status of women and the family, to the ideal of accountability of the individual to society, and to the science of comparative religion, of which he was said to be the founder. More important than the claims themselves is the fact that today’s liberal-minded Muslims see them as important goals or pursuits in contemporary society and implicitly affirm their intention of realizing them as far as possible.

The same kind of awareness was evident in the subjects alluded

to in the papers and addresses. In the printed program, 83 of these bore titles. Twenty-three were on purely religious themes, while 4 referred to individual countries or areas like Black Africa, Nigeria or Cyprus. The other 56 dealt with Islam or Muhammad, some in specific regions, but under aspects that were less strictly religious. Sixteen made some reference to science, art, culture or scholarship; 8 mentioned ethical themes like norms of life or moral action, medical ethics, and the like; 7 referred to themes having to do with modernity or progress; and 6 spoke of the social question and the economy under headings like social justice, inflation, distribution, and the economic system. Six also made reference to themes concerned with the brotherhood of mankind, international peace or war. Religious dialogue or tolerance found a place in another 6 titles, law or politics in 5, and education finally in 2.

The heavy stress on scholarship and culture was to be expected, as the civilization made possible by the Islamic conquests was humanistic and literary in tendency and much concerned with the written and spoken word. Legal matters, peace and war, and moral problems are also traditional themes. The great study in Islam as in Judaism has always been the law, dogma being given a relatively minor place.

What was remarkable in this congress, however, was the importance given, in no less than 19 papers, to topics having to do with social justice, the world economy, religious dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, and the needs of contemporary man and society. From the time of Muhammad, the emphasis in Islam has always been on commutative rather than social justice. The Qur-an indeed is full of mercantile expressions that reflect the interests of Muhammad, himself a merchant. Social justice in Islam has been until now a felt need rather than an accomplished reality. The contributions Muhammad's faith has made to the history of economics too are also minor. In the matter of religious tolerance, however, Islam has a better record than most Christian societies until recent times.

But in all these new emphases, it is again not so much the contribution Islam has made in the past that is here noteworthy. What is more significant is the fact that progressive Muslims have come to see how central such subjects are to contemporary life and to the good of international society. In a world where group participation and human solidarity are dominant phenomena, men of every

creed are meeting situations that have been facing Western society for many decades. Muslims, it seems, are now more aware that Christians have been trying to solve these problems and that they may have something worthwhile to offer to men of good will of other beliefs.

Christians too have much to learn from Islam. This was a point forcefully made by Dr. Musa O. A. Abdul of the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. In his address, "Islam on Religious Tolerance," he pleaded for greater mutual comprehension among world religions on the basis of Aristotle's principle — the measure of any class is what is best in it.

Dr. Ahmed D. Alonto, the only Filipino participant in the Congress, also spoke on the subject of religious tolerance. Although his address was strongly partial, he brought out the need for Christians to understand the Muslim position in the Philippines — largely a defensive one based on a centuries-long maintenance of religious principle.

Professor Watt of the University of Edinburgh in his paper on secular historians and Muhammad set forth a more effective form of defense of religious principle by the use of scientific historical methods. Muslims, he suggested, might well apply these methods to some of the problems surrounding the life of Muhammad and the early history of Islam. He also described recent work on the *Hadith* (Islamic Tradition) by a contemporary Turkish Muslim scholar, Faut Sezgin.

Dr. Frank De Graeve, S.J., professor at the University of Louvain, likewise made a significant contribution in his paper on the religious attitude of Emperor Akbar in his contacts with three groups of Jesuits successively invited to his court. New light, he showed, is cast on Akbar's intentions by the publication of the complete Jesuit correspondence in recent volumes of *Documenta Indica* in 1970 and 1972.

There is ground for hope that the good seed sowed in both congresses may bear a full harvest of mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation between the two world religions. Remarkable is the fact that Muslims were the main initiators of the sowing.