

Al Azhar Cairo 2006

The Joint Committee, which is composed of a delegation from the Anglican Communion and from the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar al-Sharif for Dialogue with the Monotheistic Religions, held its fifth annual meeting in Al-Azhar on 2-3 September 2006 which corresponds to 9-10 Sha'aban 1427. This was held in accord with the agreement signed at Lambeth Palace on 30 January 2002 by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. We were very conscious that our meeting was being held in a time of particular political tension in the Middle East in view of the current turmoil involving the people of the region and also the tense situation in many Western countries arising out of a fear of terrorism. This has informed our discussion at this meeting. We were honoured by the participation of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawy.

The theme of our dialogue in 2006 has been 'Freedom of Religion and Respect for Sacred Religious Values'. The subject was chosen in view of the recent controversy about the representation of the Prophet Muhammad in cartoon format and also attacks on sacred Christian symbols. The Joint Committee heard and discussed the following papers:

- The Freedom of Expression and the Respect of the Religious Sites (Sheikh Omar El Deeb)
- Freedom of Expression and the Respect of Holy Beliefs (Sheikh Ibrahim Atta Al-Fayoumy)
- Freedom of Expression and Sacred Religious Values: a Christian (Anglican) perspective (Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali)
- Representing Jesus Christ: A Christian perspective in dialogue with Islam (Mrs Clare Amos)

All members of the Committee affirmed that the teaching of the Qur'an and Islam encourages freedom of expression, with limitation to this freedom in respect of the beliefs and sacred values of all people. Similarly the Bible and Christian tradition also teach that our freedom is restricted due to respect for others. We noted however that the European Convention on Human Rights both promotes the right to freedom of expression but also recognises that it is at times necessarily restricted for the good of the wider community. We also referred to the recent legislation in the United Kingdom which prohibits incitement to religious hatred. We explored together the circumstances in which it might be right for limitations on the freedom of expression to apply, and all accepted that there are issues which affect people where sensitivity is clearly needed, which negatively affect people's feelings and beliefs.

1. We recommend that the United Nations take steps to draw up a convention regarding Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which in a way similar to Article 10.2 of the European Convention, would set out the conditions under which there can be restrictions in certain circumstances on the freedoms mentioned in Article 19, such as matters of public order, the protection of health, and the reputation or the rights of others.

2. The members of the Committee on both sides affirmed the right to comprehensive religious freedom, because there is no compulsion in religion, as our religious traditions teach
3. Members of the Committee reaffirmed the initial agreement between Al-Ahzar and the Anglican Communion which had been signed in January 2002 and the work of the Joint Committee so far.
At this meeting we committed ourselves to ensuring the continuing implementation of the recommendations in our previous communiques, especially on matters such as the need to remove misconceptions about our faiths. We welcomed the publication of the book 'Distorted Images', which seeks to correct misconceptions of both religions, which records the papers presented at our meeting in 2004.
4. The Committee also spent time on affirming the importance of developing the programme of scholarly exchange between Muslim scholars and students from Al-Azhar and Anglican Christian scholars and students from Britain, which had been formally agreed at our previous meeting in September 2005, and which is designed to further understanding by younger Christian and Muslim scholars of the faith of the other community. The Committee committed itself to developing and broadening this process of exchange.
5. Members of the committee expressed their sorrow for the current situation in the Palestinian territories. We appeal to the international community to work towards changing the situation for the better. Recent events in the Middle East have demonstrated the importance of working to resolve the conflict in Israel/Palestine. Members of the Committee affirm the right of all people in the region to live in peace and security.
6. The Committee expressed its deep sorrow at the extensive violence and destruction in the region, especially Lebanon, a country which had rebuilt itself after civil war. As our agreement in 2002 stated we encourage religious leaders to use their influence for the purpose of reconciliation and peace-making.
7. We appeal to the international community to support the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to achieve national unity, total independence and live peacefully without external interference.

We agreed that the Joint Committee should meet again in autumn 2007 in London.

Signed

Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester
Rt Revd Mouneer H Anis, Bishop of Egypt
Dr Yvonne Haddad
Mrs Clare Amos

Sheikh Omar El-Deeb, Chair Al Azhar Dialogue Committee
Sheikh Ibrahim Al Fayoumi
Sheikh Taha Abu Krisha
Mr Abdullah El Nagar