

Building bridges through interfaith dialogue

A conversation with Mohammad Sammak

Mohammad Sammak is Secretary General of the Committee for Islamic-Christian Dialogue. He has academic training in Political Science and Islamic Thought. He is also counsellor to the Mufti of Lebanon. Highly involved in inter-confessional dialogue, he has authored several books on the subject, including *Islam and the Conflict of Civilizations*, *Introduction to Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, and *Living together in Christianity and Islam*.



Why did you become involved in interfaith dialogue?

In the early 1990s the civil war had left a deep impact on society, as one can imagine. Civilians had been forcibly displaced based on their religious backgrounds,

which meant new generations were born not knowing each other, mistrusting each other, and considering each other as enemies. So those who were born during the war were growing up very prejudiced against people of other religions, and there was no cultural or religious bridge between them.

This was a very worrisome problem but nobody seemed to care. In any case, it did not appear to affect the peace process – political parties reconciled, but the people were left out of the process, and nothing was being done to bring unity and promote a culture of reconciliation. That is why I decided to get involved in promoting tolerance and dialogue. Today's generations will be tomorrow's leaders, so it is important to focus on the problems of stereotyping and mistrust in order to prevent more violence. We need to build new bonds of respect and understanding, and all sectors of society have a role to play: NGOs, members of the government and citizens.

What kind of activities does the Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee organise?

We work with leaders of all religions in order to promote dialogue and peace, and to build bridges between the different faiths. It is composed of seven members, each one a representative of a different community.

One of our main areas of concern is education. As a counsellor to former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, I talked to him about the way in which religion is taught in public schools. Educational establishments provide children with religious education specific to the community they belong to. Christian children leave the classroom when the course is about Islam, and Muslims leave when it comes to Christianity! As a result, they remain ignorant of other faiths.

Al-Hariri was shocked to learn this and at one point decided to stop religious teaching in public schools. I advised this was not a good solution: if public schools renounced religious teaching, it would just go underground, and extremists and intolerant people could impose their own reading of religious dogma and drive the wedge between communities deeper still.

My colleagues and I decided to propose an educational book which could be provided to all children, regardless of faith, and inform all of them about the basis of Christianity and Islam. In order to achieve this we solicited leaders from all communities. But it is no easy task. For example, Christians are divided into around 14 different churches, all of whom must be involved. For Islamic representatives, it seems to be even more difficult. Four groups are involved – Alawites, Druze, Sunnis, and Shia – and despite working for several years it seems that they cannot get it done! In truth, I am quite pessimistic about it.

Attempts to develop a single history book for schools in Lebanon have failed. What can we learn from this?

The inability to agree on a cultural identity and a history transcending religious particularities for our society is very telling. It indicates deep divisions in our society. One man's hero is another's traitor. That is why it is so urgent to build bridges between people.

Why is it so difficult for communities in Lebanon to work together?

This failure has to do with dogma but much more with politics. Before, the Christian-Muslim issue was very serious, but that is not the case now. By contrast, the gap between Shia and Sunnis seems to be more serious nowadays and I am afraid that it could get worse. Understanding among leaders of the main communities is the first step as it relates to mutual respect within society. Broad consensus among these leaders is necessary to fight sectarianism. But the mixture of religion and politics makes the situation very difficult, and the leaders seek to get the best they can for their own interests and don't think about the future of our country.

Is interfaith dialogue becoming more difficult now?

It is becoming harder but at the same time more pressing. The situation is complicated by interactions at a global level. For example, Sunni-Shia relations have been worsening for some time. A few years ago, clashes erupted in Pakistan and bombs exploded in Sunni and Shia mosques. Lebanese religious Islamic leaders decided to make contact with religious representatives in Pakistan in order to help them calm the situation and initiate an interfaith dialogue.

Violence spreads from country to country and can easily destabilise other parts of the world. In 2006, inter-communal tensions were very high in Iraq. We decided to bring religious leaders from Iraq to Beirut for a conference to promote dialogue and reconciliation between them. But on the day in July that we had scheduled our announcement, Israel attacked us!

Can you point to any interfaith dialogue activities that have been a success?

For the last four years we have been involved in an exchange programme for students in several parts of the country. Muslims spend time at Christian schools and are welcomed in a Christian community; Christian youths are likewise welcomed in Muslim schools in Beirut. These youths meet new friends of the other faith, they lunch together, visit their family friends. This experience is very encouraging.

In truth, I was at first quite astounded when I heard some of these young Lebanese saying that it was the first time they had had a friend from another faith! They all belong to the same generation – 15 to 25 years old – but have been artificially separated for so long. The initiative is very successful and has exceeded expectations. People maintain regular contact. The youths introduce their new friends to their relatives so that families become friends. This shows that it is possible to transcend religious differences and build bridges between communities.

Is there a gap between interfaith activities at the grassroots – for example among youth – and engagement with political leaders? How might this be overcome?

It is wise to avoid generalisation. It is true that there is a gap between youth involved in interfaith activities and leaders, but this can be bridged thanks to some political leaders who believe in the positive outcome of interfaith activities. President Michel Suleiman for example turned to us to arrange a spiritual summit meeting at the President's palace. Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri also adopted our initiative to make the annunciation day of Mary on 25 March a national holiday. But other leaders refuse to take these activities seriously. Some consider them folkloric. But whenever there is a confessional tension, all of them look positively at these activities and call for them.

Will things get better, and how?

It is not easy to imagine a future Lebanon without sectarianism. It is a 'mini-Middle East': a place where so much blood has been shed, so many tears wept, and prayers raised. At the same time, all civilisations and religions started here. Someone once said: "a problem well stated is a problem half solved". People need to define the problem first, before trying to solve it, and that means understanding the complex story of this land. My aim is to make people aware that we can all help build bridges and improve interfaith understanding, and that it is in our common interest to do so.

Interview by Fatiha Kaoues