

Egyptian Dialogue with the “Other”

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In November 2007, I participated in three dialogues with non-Egyptians, specifically with members of three Western societies. The first one, the Norwegian-Egyptian Dialogue, was held in Luxor, a beautiful city which is becoming even lovelier and better organized and gradually turning into the largest open air museum for the world's oldest civilizations. The second dialogue was an Egyptian-German dialogue in Alexandria, and the third dialogue was the Egyptian-American Dialogue, held in Washington, DC.

The overarching objective of all of these dialogues is to help each “side” learn different issues about the other dialogue partner, including economic, social and cultural themes, with the aim of paving the way towards mutual cooperation based on knowledge of the other and on mutual respect. The three dialogues I participated in shared common features of openness, transparency and freedom of expression, all of which are essential to knowing the “other” before cooperating with him.

One of the main differences between these dialogues was in who organized them. The first dialogue, held in Luxor, was sponsored by Farouk Hosni, Minister of Culture. That program mainly discussed multi-cultural matters as the first step to developing sustainable Egyptian Norwegian cultural cooperation. Because of this focus, the dialogue was entitled "Opportunities and Challenges."

This event, which was supported by the ministry of culture in both countries, provided space for discussion between various cultural institutions in Egypt and Norway. We dealt with culture, regarding the impact of globalization on the cultural identity of both people. Then we tackled the nature of cultural dialogue from the perspective of each side. Also discussed was the matter of maximizing the role of women and youth in cultural growth and development. In addition, we addressed formal cooperation between the two countries and the new cultural policies in this changing world. Thinkers, writers, playwrights, publishers, journalists, directors, musicians and other opinions-makers all participated in this dialogue

The other two dialogues were organized by the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS). Because it is a non-governmental organization, it engages in more specific topics which seem relevant from the point of view of a civil society organization working in social and cultural development.

In the Egyptian-German Dialogue, both sides discussed the topic of citizenship and its political and social meanings from the two cultures' perspectives and the role of religious institutions and civil society organizations in supporting citizenship as a national and social value. In the third event, the Egyptian-American Dialogue, both sides discussed the role of civil society organizations in building bridges of cooperation between the two peoples.

Islamic religious scholars from Egypt and Arab-American imams participated in the dialogue. Christian clerics from both countries were also involved as well as journalists, members of the media, and civil society leaders interested in development, women and general social dialogue.

Through participation in these three dialogues, one of which was organized by the Ministry of Culture and the other two of which were led by a civil society organization, I noted that people need greater cultural and social connections, in this world which we now call a global village. Nowadays, countries' economies and political tensions are interconnected, and people travel overseas and cross borders for so many reasons. In these meetings, participants sought to find commonalities based on the struggles of each society.

In general, every society is facing similar pressures derived from the rapid rise of capitalist development accompanied by a technical and information revolution. Impacts of this development only differ from one society to another according to each country's stage of social and economic development. While the pressures are the same everywhere, the response of each society to those pressures is different. That knowledge is a step towards building understanding and interaction among people of the two countries.

The delegations reflected how social mobility involves both a society's historical evolution and also its current changes and developments. The Norwegian delegation to Luxor included in a young Norwegian director with Kurdish roots. He left Iraq, escaping from Saddam Hussein's regime, and fled to Norway. There he completed his education, studied cinema direction, and become part of the Norwegian Film Institute. He found himself in Luxor as a citizen and member of the Norwegian delegation but with strong Kurdish sensitivities. In the United States of America, there are imams teaching courses on Islamic thought in the most famous American universities. Americans now are active in promoting dialogue between religions and between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. They are trying to embrace common values and avoid tensions that might stem from differences between these groups. In Alexandria, a German Muslim lawyer discussed citizenship from his perspective as both a German and a Muslim

The diversity of opinions within the non-Egyptian delegations that we met were not biased by their governments, but were a reflection of their people's politically independent outlook.

In Washington, our Egyptian delegation met with an American lady who leads a civil society organization called "Partners in Peace". Ms. Jerry Bird organizes tours for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women from Israel and Palestine to different American states to demonstrate that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a political conflict, not a religious one.

Jerry Bird stands firm against the trends that threaten her activities, insisting on continuing her activities and maintaining her independence. She has organized eighteen tours for women in the last three years. During those tours, women visited dozens of universities, schools, associations, churches, Islamic centers and synagogues.

Jerry Bird has financed the cost of each of these tours by donations from Americans who support peaceful activities and oppose George Bush's policies related to military interventions in the Middle East.

This social mobilization which is happening on the other side of the dialogue table does not represent the main stream, but it can be considered an intellectual uprising among the people due to all the developments in areas of capitalist growth, the communications revolution and the free movement of people between communities. It comes also as a result of current political tensions and people feeling that they are being pushed into pointless wars. Therefore dialogue among partners has become very important because it helps people on each side to identify what is going on with the "other" and then to better understand the social realities of each society.

At the end of our visit with Jerry Bird, we asked her, "What do you want us to do?" She responded without hesitation, "I ask you to explain to your people that not all of us are George Bush." Yes, the West is not a single bloc.