

Al Azhar - Study Exchange Programme

Egypt and England – a significant study exchange: Christians and Muslims learning about each other's faith

A significant development and strengthening of the relationship between the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar Al Sharif, the centre of Islamic learning in Cairo, Egypt, has taken place during November through two significant study visits. The first is that of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, His Eminence Dr Ali Gomaa, who delivered a talk at the University of Cambridge during the first week of November. A longer stay for study, of a month's duration, was made by three younger Muslim scholars (El Sayed Mohamed Abdalla Amin, Farouk Reza Bekhit Sayyid, Sameh Mustafa Muhammad Asal, graduate teaching assistants at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Department of Islamic Studies in English, Al Azhar University) to Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge, England, November 1-29. Ridley Hall is well-known as a training centre for future Anglican clergy.

Study exchange linked to Anglican Communion Al Azhar dialogue

This double visit, of both Dr Gomaa, an eminent international Muslim scholar, and of three future Muslim religious leaders, is linked to the study exchange agreement signed by the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar Al Sharif in September 2005 at Lambeth Palace and ratified in the presence of Sheikh Al Azhar, Dr Mohamed Tantawy, at a meeting held at Al Azhar in September 2006. This process of study exchange has been developed to further the aims of the initial agreement between the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar, signed by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey and Dr Mohamed Tantawy in January 2002, which provided for not only an annual meeting for dialogue by representatives of both parties, but also spoke of the need 'To encourage Anglicans to understand Islam and to encourage Muslims to understand the Christian faith.'

Earlier this year, in March-April 2006, a young British clergyman, Revd Nigel Dawkins, spent six weeks in Cairo at Al Azhar, and further visits to Al Azhar by Anglican Christians are already being planned.

Dr Gomaa speaking in Cambridge

In his talk given in the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge Dr Gomaa affirmed that 'Islam has nothing whatsoever to do with the extremism that has come to be associated with it, to the extent that you can safely say to any terrorist, "you are not from amongst the Muslims".' He also spoke of his fear that such 'extremists will convince the world that the entire Muslim world is the enemy, that a war on terror is a war on the entire Muslim world and anyone who supports the Muslim world against the prevailing view.' He reminded his audience that 'the source of...much of the extremism and political violence across the Muslim world and beyond is the tragedy of Palestine, which has not been resolved for the last 60 years... Egypt was quick to answer the call to peace nearly 30 years ago, but to this day we have not arrived at true peace as a result of the intransigence of all parties.' Dr Gomaa also noted that he had 'visited London two

years ago and encouraged the British government to facilitate Muslim participation in the mainstream and support existing and ongoing efforts in the Muslim community to that end. Islam needs to be presented in a deeper and more complete way and to be presented with more sensitivity and objectivity in both the media and the educational curriculum in order to reflect Britain's true multicultural character. The issue of British Muslim disenfranchisement needs to be seriously addressed, as well as the establishment of a British based authority for Muslims in Britain to turn to along the lines of Al Azhar. There is no more powerful a weapon against extremism than correct education and the recognition on all sides that British Muslims and Non-Muslims belong to this country [Britain] just as Muslims and Non-Muslims belong to the world.'

Regius Professor of Divinity and Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, Professor David Ford, commented, 'The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme welcomed the opportunity to invite Dr Ali Gomaa to the University of Cambridge. This was an invaluable opportunity to explore ways in which our respective institutions might engage with one of the most topical issues of our time: how to contribute to better understanding and relations between the world's great faiths. Hosting such a highly respected scholar as the Grand Mufti of Egypt was an encouraging start towards continued and sustained engagement between Al Azhar and Cambridge'.

During his stay in England Dr Gomaa also met the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, and Dr Kim Howells, Minister of State at the Foreign Office.

A busy and creative programme for younger scholars

The busy programme of the younger scholars organised for them by Ridley Hall included opportunities to learn about Christian doctrine in classes and seminars, to share insights about the Muslim faith with others, participation in 'scriptural reasoning' sessions, visits to significant centres of Christian-Muslim engagement in England such as Leicester and Birmingham, meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Inter Faith Adviser, and opportunities to be involved in Friday prayers at a number of different mosques in England.

Sameh Asal commented: 'It is an amazing experience for me as a Muslim theologian to be in Ridley Hall to learn about Christianity from well-versed Christians in an environment of love and mutual understanding. I wish that Muslims and Christians work together to spread love and peace throughout the whole world in order to have a better tomorrow. We have few differences but so much in common; we both believe in one God, the Prophets, the angels and the Hereafter. Moreover, we Muslims and Christians share many ethics and moral values, and all that is sufficient for building strong bridges between the followers of the two heavenly religions.'

His words were echoed by El-Sayed Amin, who referred to the crucial importance of such exchanges: 'In this era of globalization, we really need to recharge our spiritual batteries as Muslims and Christians by conducting such interfaith gatherings on regular basis. We need to feel, as theologians from both sides that we are living in a real community of grace.'

In a talk at Ridley Hall Farouk Sayyid had spoken about the place of Mary in Islam, noting that it was one of the significant points of contact between Islam and Christianity. He added, 'In fact, no Muslim can be a Muslim unless he or she believes in Jesus, peace be upon him.'

Equipping for the future

Dr Christopher Cocksworth, Principal of Ridley Hall, who had hosted the younger scholars during their visit underlined the significance of the event, for both Christians and Muslims, saying, 'Christian ministry in our generation will be dominated by global and local issues surrounding Islam. It is vital that future Church leaders are equipped to face these issues responsibly. The visit of Dr Ali Gomaa to Ridley Hall, and the month's visit of the three young scholars, has been a unique opportunity to develop relationships, build understanding, and search for the right language to discuss differences. Our guests have shown a deep respect for the Christian faith and it has been a privilege for us to learn about Islam directly from Muslims.'

Clare Amos, of the Anglican Communion's Inter Faith Network who had assisted with setting up the exchange reflected, 'These visits, both of Dr Gomaa and this pioneer group of younger Muslim scholars, has been very a creative development within the framework of the ongoing commitment to mutual dialogue of the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar Al Sharif. As someone who is myself an educationalist I am well aware of the importance of providing such opportunities for younger people, the religious leadership of the future, so that we widen and strengthen the base of the dialogue between our two communities. I am grateful to the British Foreign Office for their willingness to support this innovative development, and to colleagues in Cambridge, Cairo and London who worked with me to make it possible.

Both the visit of Dr Gomaa and the stay of the younger scholars were facilitated by the current presence on sabbatical in Cambridge of Rt Revd Mouneer Anis, Anglican Bishop of Egypt and North Africa, and were sponsored by the British Foreign office as part of their 'Engaging with the Islamic World' programme of the Global Opportunities Fund.