



Common Ground News Service - Partners in Humanity

Not just another interfaith parley

by Rabbi David Rosen

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Jerusalem - Last week, an amazingly colourful array of Arab princes and Muslim clerics came together with representatives of the world's major faiths in the Spanish Royal El Prado Palace in Madrid. While the Western media generally failed to appreciate the magnitude of the event, the Arab media understood how important it really was. Not only was this the first international multi-faith conference ever initiated by an Arab Muslim leader, it was inaugurated by the king of the Muslim world's heartland, Saudi Arabia, where the most conservative Muslim outlook prevails.

At the opening event, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud emphasised his conviction that authentic religion is expressed in a spirit of moderation and tolerance, that concord must be elevated above conflict. In order to address the global challenges of our time, he called for cooperation and collaboration between the different religions.

This green light for interfaith dialogue and collaboration opened the gates for the curious but cautious. As a member of the Jewish delegation – composed of some 15 rabbis and scholars – we seemed most affected by his "permission".

The Arab media interviewed us incessantly, and prominent Arab figures approached us, many of whom had never before met a Jew – let alone a rabbi. The encounter ignited a humanising flame that began to burn away the demonised image of the other. For this alone it was worthwhile.

As is often the case at conferences, conversations outside the formal proceedings offered far greater opportunity for meaningful exchange – especially at meal times. (I should point out that the Muslim organisers had specially ordered kosher food for the Jewish participants, a testament to the consideration and respect shown by our hosts).

At one meal, our Saudi interlocutors were at pains to emphasise the 85-year-old king's courage. King Abdullah's desire, said one of them, was not only for Saudi Arabia to play a more engaged role in the world and with the world's religions, but also to open Saudi Arabia itself to the world.

The World Muslim League (WML), which reflects a very conservative religious ideology, was given responsibility for organising the conference so that the initiative had significant religious "cover". At the same time, it was patently clear that for the WML, these were uncharted waters. The preparations, list of invitees, invitations, the programme itself – all betrayed a lack of familiarity with the interfaith territory, and with specific religious communities in particular. But that too highlighted the remarkable novelty, and thus significance, of King Abdullah's decision to sponsor this event.

While I had been invited not as an Israeli, but as a Jewish leader in the inter-religious field, the fact that I am an Israeli citizen had been excitedly reported in the media. In the highly choreographed proceedings, there was a moment of some passion and heat. It came in the wake of an almost inevitable mantra expressed by a panellist in the penultimate session: while dialogue with Jews was permissible (and perhaps even desirable), he said, dialogue with Israel was not. The panellist called on me to respond to his comment.

I replied that an authentic dialogue is not one in which one side defines the character of the other, but rather seeks genuinely to understand others as they see themselves. Judaism has always been inextricably connected to the land of Israel. While this must not be used to justify actions or policies that conflict with Judaism's ethical foundation, to deny or try to separate this bond is to fail to acknowledge, let alone respect, the way most Jews define themselves. Moreover, because of the

centrality of the land of Israel to Jewish life, without Israeli religious representation, no claim to full and genuine dialogue can ever be credible.

While a few reacted negatively, alleging that the irenic discussion had now been politicised, there were also constructive Muslim responses emphasising that by extension of this principle, Jews need to appreciate what Jerusalem means for Muslims, as well as Muslim solidarity with their Palestinian brothers and sisters.

Perhaps most notable of all was the respectful spirit in which the discussion took place. Many noted that it had actually served as something of a release. The absence of any mention of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had created the feeling that there was an elephant in the room. The opportunity to refer to it in the context of respectful debate actually helped clear the air.

While the concluding statement was an anticipated pious declaration of all things good, it does reflect the expressed Saudi intention to continue this newly embarked upon process. This should not be underestimated: the highest authority in the very heartland of Islam has taken a lead in interfaith outreach with the declared intention of addressing contemporary challenges and resolving conflict. I believe we will look back on the gathering convened on 16 July 2008 in Madrid as a very significant development, both for the Middle East and for the world at large.

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