



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
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Personal Reflections

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Middle East Study Tour

Part 5

I awoke Thursday after a restless night with a degree of nervous anticipation. The source of my unrest was the knowledge that in the afternoon I would be addressing a predominantly Muslim audience on the topic of "Religious Liberty in the US Political Experience." My remarks would then have two formal responses by scholars, followed by questions from the floor.

In my remarks, I spoke of the guarantees of religious liberty in our Constitution and the roots in the Baptist experience. Since I was speaking as a Baptist religious leader and not as a professor of political science, I wanted my audience to understand the importance of religious liberty to Baptists because of scripture, our understanding of the nature of faith, and our early experience as a persecuted people.

The program was hosted by the Makassed Foundation under the auspices of the Arab Group for Christian-Muslim Dialogue headed by Dr. Riad Jarjour, former general secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches. The Makassed Foundation is a Muslim educational non-profit organization that has long been concerned for literacy and education in Lebanon.

We had heard of the lavish hospitality of the Middle East, and, indeed, our study group had already experienced it with our Baptist hosts here in Lebanon. We were greeted as a team with great warmth by everyone present. Those present were leading business men, politicians, academics and clerics—all committed to a future of peaceful relationships between Muslims and Christians.

The responders to my presentation presented some important points. They first emphasized that when derogatory or inflammatory statements about Islam are voiced by Christian leaders in the West, it is the churches in the East that suffer because the statements are used by radicals to inflame others. The second responder challenged us about the quality of relationships between the Muslim and Christian communities in Lebanon and the need to be honest in dialogue.

Following the discussion, the members of the Makassed Foundation treated the team to a delicious meal. The French influence in Lebanon can still be seen in the cuisine, especially in the pastries.

As we finished dinner, I noticed that Dr. Daouk seated next to me was preparing to sip a cup of tea. Earlier he had referred to an old story that, when the British first encountered coffee (the beans were called Turkish berries), they refused to drink it because it was rumored that if you drank it you would become a Muslim. That is why, the story goes, the British drink tea. As he picked up his cup of British tea I asked him, "Aren't you afraid drinking British tea will make you a Christian?" Laughing, he pointed back and forth between his cup of tea and my cup of Turkish coffee and said, "Interfaith dialogue."

Earlier in the day we had met with the Lebanese Minister of Information. One of the things he had mentioned in our meeting was the tension between those in Lebanon who stressed the importance of justice in dealing with the past conflicts by holding perpetrators accountable and those who for the sake of peace felt it was best to not revisit the past. In passing he mentioned some had thought a "Truth and Reconciliation process" similar to that in South Africa should be instituted. In that process, those who came forward and admitted their involvement in atrocities and told the story of what happened to the victims were granted amnesty as a sign of forgiveness and as a step toward a future together. Some of you may recall Bishop Tutu's famous remark, "Without forgiveness there is no future." But the effort never got off the ground in Lebanon.

This raised for me a theological issue I wish to explore with my Muslim friends. In the New Testament there is the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation which runs throughout as the work of God in Christ and as the ministry of the church in the power of the Spirit! Is there a similar motif in the Koran? If not, what is the basis for the work of reconciliation in Islam?

Lord God, you who gave yourself in Christ to reconcile the world to you and to one another, bless those this day who labor in the ministry of reconciliation that as leaven folded into the dough they might transform discord into harmony through the power of your Spirit. Amen.

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