

REPORT OF THE EUROMED CONFERENCE IN ALEXANDRIA

(Nov 20-24th 2006)

Organised by

The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for Dialogue Between Cultures

Teacher Training Course on

“Religious Diversity and Gender in an Intercultural Perspective”

The report below is a very personal one by an enthusiastic participant, Eric Hellicar, from Cyprus, who was asked at the end of the conference to act as Rapporteur – apologies for its many inevitable generalizations and unintentional personal bias.

1. Introduction: The Greek poet Kavafi tells us to visit Egypt to learn from the scholars; the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), with the Council of Europe, invited us to learn both from scholars and from each other – and we did.

They invited 35 participants from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, UK, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Austria, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt, ranging from those in their 60s with a wealth of experience to those in their 20s with a wealth of enthusiasm (and a variety of experiences): the mere act of bringing us together produced two major benefits:

- an exchange of differing views that stretched our minds beyond the tramlines of our own national experiences and broadened our understanding of possible approaches to an issue of great importance;
- the comfort of finding others, of such varied backgrounds, facing the same challenges and sharing the single belief that the field of intercultural and interfaith education is vital to the peace and progress of the world.

2. Organisation and Setting

The inevitable dryness of this official report should not hide the genuine gratitude felt by all the participants – including the speakers and organizers. There are useful suggestions for improvements for future conferences, but these do not diminish our respect for what we were given and the way it was offered. The overall atmosphere was friendly and encouraging, rather than officious and didactic. The city itself created a perfect setting where history, beauty and teeming streams of battered cars and smiling people were interwoven. Ancient Churches and inspiring Mosques coexisted beside the modern “Bibliotheca” and its wonders of technology and wisdom. The hotel accommodation combined comfort with individuality and the food was excellent. Transport arrangements were efficient, if sometimes rather last minute.

3. Preparation and Materials

Information about the conference arrived rather late, and the background book was perhaps too heavy and too lengthy for participants to make use of during the course (or conference) – the lecture on its contents was most useful, mixing the academic with the practical. The material presented by most speakers was well received and accessible, though it often proved a shade theoretical until we had the “best practice” examples on the final day. The greatest benefit came from the many working group sessions. Participants look forward to receiving the promised CD of talks and information about the various projects presented.

4. Outstanding Conclusions (see full list in the appendix).

4.1 There was enthusiastic support for two recommendations:

- i). that **more such teacher training should be organized, involving not only more teachers of religion but also participants from many more disciplines, and**
- ii). that **pupils throughout Europe and the Mediterranean (and the world) should all receive the best possible education about all the world's major faiths and ethical systems without any pressure to follow a particular religion or system.**

4.2 This latter call may be a dream which neither the ALF or the C.of E. can spirit into reality, but it expresses the deeply held belief of all present, namely that such education was urgently required if religion is to play its part in inspiring people to build a peaceful, progressive, prosperous and just society - rather than become a cause of conflict and division. While it was often stated that the forces of fanaticism, greed and politics were at the root of our violent and unjust world, and that the major faiths of the world should and could be forces for harmony and peace, there were still dangerous misunderstandings and institutionalized barriers of dogma and practice that meant that religions were often seen more of a cause for disunity than harmony.

4.3 The participants proved to be remarkably positive in their consultations, sharing varied practical projects and principles which will enhance their own work in the coming years. These led to a third vital recommendation:

- iii). that **the Anna Lindh Foundation establish a website through which teachers throughout Europe and the Mediterranean can access ideas and resources to strengthen their own teaching and social activities, starting with the details of the examples of best practice presented at the conference. The website should, of course, provide links to the many existing sources of material for teaching the positive contributions of religions, including ethics, in a constructive rather than confessional method.**

5. Tribute to the Organisers

The many experts involved both in presenting papers and in organisation should be congratulated on their practical approach and their encouragement which made the participants feel that they were not simply students learning from the experts but the core of the conference. As one teacher put it: "We may not have learnt many completely new ideas, but we have been inspired by learning of how others are seeking to put them into practice – equally from experts and participants." The Swedish Institute in Alexandria and the Goethe Institute both contributed to a smoothly run conference with plenty of time for discussion and some relaxation, if not enough time to visit the many historic religious sites in the city (organized trips to such places could have been included if the conference had started on Monday afternoon instead of Tuesday morning). The problems that arose from some last minute arrangements were eclipsed by the warmth and sincerity of the local officers. The size of the conference also allowed us to become a single group and we benefited by the high number of experts and organisers for so few participants.

6. The presentations:

6.1 The opening session was brilliant. Usually panels of experts launching a conference spend ages describing the work of their various bodies; in this case we had five speakers who presented very solid ideas in a direct and concise way – this created an atmosphere of work rather than words.

6.2 The first plenary session on “The Importance of Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue” stressed the seriousness of the subject we were studying, and immediately placed the emphasis more on education than on Dialogue. Indeed it might be claimed the conference was more directed towards training ourselves for more effective teaching of religions than towards either dialogue or dealing “with religious diversity in classrooms”, as envisaged in the lengthy title. Dr. John Keast provided an outline of the book presented to participants. Although a thorough study it was not referred to during our consultations – a shorter summary, such as a script of Dr Keast’s talk, sent by email some time before the conference, would have been beneficial.

6.3 The second keynote talk at the first session by Dr Hassan Waguih delighted nearly everyone with his erudite presentation. With its scholarly and more spiritual approach, it established a fine balance to the admirably analytical work of the Council of Europe. It opened a constructive contrast which was reflected throughout many of the working groups: a contrast between the more clinical and legalistic approach from our experience in northern Europe, (where the conflicts between students of different religious backgrounds was often very near the surface) and the more emotive and “religious” approach around the Mediterranean, whether from countries dominated by the Catholic Church or from countries where Islam was the dominant force. The wisdom we gained from Al Azhar University made us feel grateful we had come to Alexandria for this conference. There was, sadly, no real time for questions after these two excellent presentations.

6.4 The second plenary session produced two very differing presentations. The first, by Dr. Basma El Shayyal was intensely practical and took us into a field where Islam is at last gaining respect within the educational system of the U.K., and the legal aspects of religious education. This led on to some very useful comparisons with the situations in various countries (at least in some of the Working Groups) and a realization of how different situations were in single faith schools, whether run by faiths or governments, and in multi-cultural school, whether private or state-run.

6.5 The second speech was more politically aligned, with Mr Ziad Ebeid explaining the work and stance of the League of Arab States. Here there was even more frustration that there was not more time for questions and many wished to discuss (or debate) the issues raised. A number of participants, however, seemed to feel that the talk, interesting though it was, was not so directly connected with the main themes of the conference.

6.6 In the Working Groups we followed up some of the topics raised by the Plenary sessions, but groups were left admirably free to follow any line of discussion they felt helpful. In at least two of the three groups we discussed the crucial choice between single faith schools and schools whose classes combined pupils of many faiths – arising from Dr Basma’s talk. The views expressed were mostly in strong favour of the latter, but we did not debate this in a plenary session to discover whether this was universally shared – time did not allow.

6.7 The third Plenary Session introduced the second theme of the course – the Role of Women (and Men...) which produced the expected lively debate, though many felt this was almost a separate subject to the main theme. Dr Fatma Amer provided some fascinating insight into the work of the Islamic University in Markfield (Markfiled?) in UK and an ideal example of the contribution of women in this field of education. What she said sparked off some vigorous discussion in some Working Groups, though it often went down a rather different, and well-worn, path.

6.8 The second lecture did not seem directly connected with the theme of gender, although Professor Loubnaa Youssef of Cairo University left no one in any doubt as to the equality of the sexes in the field of educational proficiency. Her field was that of literature rather than religion but she demonstrated how relevant the question of inter-cultural dialogue was in all disciplines. Some felt this talk was not so relevant to the participants, who were from schools rather than universities, though the Professor's attack on rote learning in schools led to many a knowing smile round the room.

6.9 The final Plenary Session was brilliant, the high point of the conference for many. Sadly the keynote speaker, Gorel Bystrom Janarv was not able to present her project as she was still recovering from a medical emergency which had occurred on the first day. However her magic case (with its contents displaying the cultures of six different religions) and her slides were presented and received with great enthusiasm. The period of silence for prayer and meditation for Gorel that followed was perhaps the highest point of unity of the week – suddenly we were one, whether Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, or of no affiliation. (see note 1 below).

6.10 After the presentation of Ms Janarv's project a number of participants presented a brief outline of their own practical projects. These inspired everyone and deserved much more time for us to ask questions and discuss. I think everyone felt that such a session should have been included in the course, (it only took place due to Gorel's absence) and held earlier so that we had more time to follow up. Some participants spoke movingly but with no materials as they had not expected such an opportunity – the few books and CDs that were brought were in instant demand. One practical project teaches more than a dozen lectures!

7. The Working Groups

7.1 Many felt that these groups were the heart of the conference/course (also see 6.6)

7.2 The leaders of these groups must be congratulated for the way they guided them but still left participants free to discuss issues of their own choice. Opinions varied as to whether we should have had more specific topics or whether it was right that we were left very free. On the whole groups started to discuss the topics from the Plenary sessions and then followed their own paths.

7.3 When the groups worked on their final reports they were more concentrated but still did not have enough time to gain universal approval of recommendations or to include all the matters individuals had raised. Nor were we too sure what kind of recommendations would actually lead to positive results. These points however did not detract from the overall success of the groups. The size of group was just right to allow everyone to participate and nearly everyone was humble in their contributions.

7.4 The full record (see Appendix 1) of the recommendations is more representative of the value and work of the conference than this very individualistic report! That so many themes were repeated in each group was proof of how similar our experiences were – and of how valuable the sharing of our experience was. Perhaps the greatest value of the conference was the discovery of our common concern – we realised that others cared about the issue as much as we did, that others found it as hard to be successful in accomplishing our common aim of guiding pupils (& fellow teachers!) to real, sympathetic understanding of other faiths or systems of belief as we did.

7.5 When we left we carried with us many jewels of understanding, and as we exchanged views about these (at the Chinese restaurant on the final night) most quoted thoughts or ideas from fellow participants expressed within the working groups. The example one quoted was the image of ‘Unity in Diversity’ shared by a teacher from Portugal – “how boring it would be to have a garden full of white roses, how beautiful is a garden filled with flowers of every kind and colour – so let it be in our schools and in our countries”; another quoted the experiments with rats that demonstrated the power of faith or hope); another the flexibility of approach in Cyprus that changed a bi-communal play into a book on the environment; and so on. Only a few of these had been shared with the whole conference.

7.6 The final session when the groups reported was very positive and left us feeling happy that other groups had been as constructive as ours! More time however was needed for the discussion of our various conclusions. One group reported more on the effectiveness of the group consultation than on the recommendations which would be circulated in full later, the others were more efficient with power point presentations.

8. **Other Overall Observations.**

8.1 Why had we come together? Opinions varied. Some had expected a theological discussion of common ground, most had not and most were glad we steered clear of such topics. Some felt we had come because of complaints or experience of tension within our schools (and societies) but we didn’t really deal directly with these. Some had expected workshops on particular kinds of intercultural dialogue and though we had some of these there was insufficient study in depth to learn from them. Most did not worry that we had a variety of motives and expectations – what we gained was good and that was what mattered. All agreed that more such conferences were needed.

8.2 The confrontation some expected between Christian and Islamic values did not occur. The sense of unity was far greater than any sense of difference. Indeed, if there were two differing viewpoints, it was the contrast between northern Europe and the Mediterranean that was most noticeable. To begin with the participants from central and northern Europe included some with no religious faith, or faith unattached to a Church or Mosque – others stressed the need to respect the ethical systems of the non-religious. Moreover they spoke fervently of the difficulty of making religions real to pupils who dismissed religion as an irrelevant hangover from the past. On the other hand those from southern Europe and the Mediterranean often spoke of the control of one Church or Faith over religious education, and how other religions could be taught with sympathy and objectivity in such a situation. State control of curriculum in the north presented very different opportunities and challenges from the control of Church or Mosque in the south – and the atheist background in some countries in central Europe. These differences seemed to increase our common conviction that all children need to be given a decent, fair understanding of all the major Faiths.

8.3 The visit to the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** was awe-inspiring. An impressive successor to the Library of Alexandria that was rightly one of the wonders of the Ancient World. It put our present confusions as the religions of the world meet each other in the melting pot of a shrinking world in context. Examining the one remaining sample of the original library (even if a copy) was a humbling experience – the hall in which it was displayed so discreet and sombre. We were delighted by the latest technology used to reveal the wonders and the wisdom of the past and the present. We were staggered by the beauty of the older texts of Christian and Islamic Holy Books, and the devotion of their scribes. It was humbling, unifying and enriching.

8.4 Few of the participants mentioned **other religions** outside the Abrahamic tradition of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, though Europe now includes a growing number of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. A point worth considering for future courses, for we have much to learn of and from these religions.

Note 1: (from 6.9 above) The absence of any common worship or meditation was felt by some participants and perhaps a room could have been set aside where multi-faith meditation and prayer could be shared by those who wished it. We spoke of the need for deep understanding of each other's faith but did not practise it! Others spoke of how much they would have enjoyed being taken to visit and pray in the El-Abbas Mosque by the Muslim participants, to the Coptic Cathedral by the local Christians etc. They felt this should not have been at the start of the course but after we had got to know one another - and respect each other so much.

Note 2: (from 6.9 above) Visiting Ms. Gorel Bystrom Janarv in her hospital suite brought me great personal joy, especially at the end of the conference to report on everything, including the presentation of her material and our common prayers for her. I was moved by the kindness shown to her by the staff of the hospital, by Amina Abodoma (who showered similar smiling care on all of us), by Mrs. B. Henningsson of the Swedish Institute and other visitors from the course. We were all deeply sorry that she was not able to attend the course and recommend that she be invited to a future course where she could actually set up her exhibition and personally guide us through it.

Note 3: I have not mentioned by name the various organisers and those who chaired various sessions – not because their contributions were not valued but because such a list would perhaps reduce the emphasis I have placed on the fundamental achievements of the course- something I know they would not wish. (see Appendix 5)

Appendices:

- 1a,1b,1c Recommendations from the 3 Working Groups.
- 2 Learning Materials (from Groups)
3. Examples of Good Practices (Notes by Dr Keast)
4. Key-note speeches.
5. List of Individuals and Organisations running or participating in the Course.

Appendix 1. RECOMMENDATIONS from WORKING GROUP ONE

The Anna Lindh Foundation should:

1. stress the importance of representing the individual diversity of religions, religious perceptions, and how religions are lived;
2. promote a curriculum/subject that looks at all religions for all students together;
3. emphasise that teaching of religions should not be confessional but should promote real knowledge and understanding;
4. advocate the provision of additional classes in ethics/values/relationships and brain development for all students;
5. insist that teachers of religion should be qualified and trained in religious sciences and pedagogy;
6. insist teachers should take into account the different levels of understanding and experiences of students in the class, and use pedagogical skills;
7. hold seminars for teachers of all subjects to come together and promote intercultural dialogue with each other (including exchange programmes) but ensure prior preparation, bringing of materials and visits to places of intercultural importance;
8. produce a guide (or curriculum model with recommendations about learning materials – not a manual) for teachers to help students deal with ‘me and the other’, to develop understanding of the other, improve relationships, social skills and cooperation, including practical exercises as well as theory, skills, techniques and methods of questioning;
9. encourage teachers to develop their own skills and professionalism, with access to continued training;
10. help teachers to be confident enough to resist political, social and religious pressure;
11. promote the use of e-communications and exchange programmes among students.

Appendix 2: **LEARNING MATERIALS**

Recommendations from Group 1:

The Anna Lindh Foundation should produce learning materials on:

1. Ethical/life issues that students are interested in;
2. How to use stories and novels to deal with religious diversity;
3. How to use music/arts/drama and movies for this;
4. What religions have in common; (see 10 below)
5. Key concepts such as tolerance and how to promote them;
6. How students can share each others' festivals and occasions, and what they mean;
7. How to bring groups of students together for service activities;
8. How to use ICT to promote intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, including how to recognise misinformation and bias on the internet;
9. Websites that are useful sources of such material eg www.reonline.org.uk and www.retoday.org.uk.

Such materials could come from sharing what already exists or producing new ones, so that each school has a tool kit (some being developed already).

10. Three books which were circulated and participants felt would be helpful:

The Book of Prayer	(Prayers from many religions)	One World, Oxford
Gems of Guidance	Compiled by David Journey	George Ronald, Oxford
	ISBN 0 85398-348-8	
Unity in Diversity	Compiled by O.P.Ghai	Sterling Publishers Pvt Ltd
		Baha'i Publishing Trust of India, New Delhi

Appendix 3

EXAMPLES OF (GOOD) PRACTICES

i) Gorel Bystrom Janarv, Office World Wide Wisdom

How to use religious artefacts – part of a travelling exhibition, which can be used for teachers or students; can be adapted to many different teaching situations; Six parts with one for each religion with things like clothes

“Same, same but different” Multi-faith Europe, Touring 2008-12

Diversity is not the problem – it is the solution

We have a proven project

Pictures/examples of clocks

God has 99 names – large exhibition, set up in sections in a hall

[but much of it is cultural rather than religious eg western food, clothes not religious in themselves]

City tours, training to be a city guide

www.same-same.net

ii) Eric Helicar, Cyprus

Longest distance in the world is the space between mind and the heart

Shortest distance in the world is the space between the heart and the mind

Peace Child project (Cyprus, Berlin, N Ireland, Russia) using drama [heard this on Radio 4] – prepare a play, perform for audience of parents etc, with video; but it failed in Cyprus (not Greek and Turkish youth in same place etc); could not do a film either, but produced a book but only by taking the youth to England to meet – produced a book called *Your Island, My Island*; now found in all schools on the island (intro by Kofi Anan etc). Most productive exchange took place in playgrounds etc; examples of the courage of the young people when they got back; importance of involving the young people themselves.

iii) Emtiaz Haasoona, Egypt

School environment problem, linked to millennium development goals; linked to issues of gender and diversity, nutrition, nature

Use scientific thinking, stories, art, discussion, feedback

Workshops for teachers, activities for pupils, festivals, achievements

Community service campaigns, environmental clubs

Case studies

Also, visit of Danish girl to Egypt during the cartoon crisis

iv) Christina Fischer, Sweden

World wide school network organisation for environment and humanity

– care for yourself, care for yourself and care for nature

v) Eva Maria Bannert, Austria

DVD on girls from different cultures meeting and talking

vi) Rita Tuovinen, Finland

Crossing Borders: Seminars for teachers and students from different cultures, who come together to produce a magazine (see example)

www.crossingborder.org

vii) Margarita Serra, Spain

Thematic approach to teaching religion, eg Death, festivals (calendar and info)
Also magazine for teachers – *Dialogal* (in Catalan) with ideas [bit like RE Today]

viii) Bashaer El Nagi, Palestine

Example of dialogue between Muslims and Christians; involves caring for the streets, beach cleaning, not as ends in themselves but to talk; planning a better future - some involvement of students from UK? Visits to churches and mosques, picnics etc
Also do lectures on Zionism? Also how to use drama in classrooms – must find solutions for our problems – have to believe in that; but cannot talk about dialogue between Jews and Palestinians (I am human as well as teacher trainer - members of family have been killed and imprisoned by Israelis, as well as teachers; too much history and pain)

ix) Ulrike Kohnen Zulzer, Austria

“Sights (Scenes) and sounds of my city” UNESCO project – using expressive and performing arts, videos

x) Neina Zedian, Lebanon

Plea for mutual understanding etc, speak different languages but speak same language

xi) Kamal Ghaddar, Lebanon

Experience of the war in the Lebanon – members of family killed and half village destroyed; meeting and dialogue are the solutions; hope that the apple tree will blossom again; what we really need is truthfulness, integrity, openness
Truthfulness is the main gateway to the solutions. Why are we here? Are we here to solve problems and find solutions? Problem is more crucial in Europe than the Arab world – more diversity in Europe. Lebanon only 4 million with 18 sects, but conflict is not directed by religious issues but political issues. People use the sectarian divisions to increase the temperature of conflict. Be objective; really believe that all humans are equal. Do we really intend to break the barriers between the religious groups or are we trying to do something else? (May Bondak, Christian Lebanese woman, agreed.)