

Sudan hosts major interfaith meeting

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

That the Sudanese capital Khartoum should be the site for an international, inter-religious dialogue, charting the way for fruitful cooperation among Christians and Muslims not only in Africa but throughout the Third World, would seem most unlikely, according to the image the country has been branded with. Yet, as the Conference on Religions in the Sudan, held April 26-30, demonstrated to about 100 participants from all over the world, the reality is more promising for world peace than the grotesque fictions spun out by the mass media.

Sudan, Africa's largest country, has been painted as the terror of the continent, in terms reserved heretofore only for Saddam Hussein. It has been dubbed the Trojan Horse used by Iran to infiltrate "Islamic fundamentalists" into North Africa, who, it is alleged, are plotting to overthrow Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, before expanding southward to take over the entire continent. The military government which came to power in 1989 under Lt. Gen. Omar Hassan Ahmed al Bashir, and has introduced a unique form of Islamic rule, inspired by world-renowned Muslim leader Dr. Hassan al Turabi, has been depicted in the world press as a criminal joint venture of religious lunatics and bloodthirsty soldiers. The German daily scandal sheet *Bild Zeitung* blared out on May 4, "Sudan has Christians nailed to the cross," alleging that "Junta chief general Omar Hassan el-Bashir, Islamic fanatic, has Christians hunted down and often nailed to the cross." On April 22, the London *Guardian* accused the Sudanese government of machiavellian hypocrisy because it pledged peace negotiations to end civil war in the south.

The *Guardian* and *Bild* pieces appeared at the beginning and end of the unique conference, sponsored by the Peace and Development Foundation, on religions in Sudan. Neither European paper found the conference newsworthy, although the five-day meeting drew Christians and Muslims, scholars and clergymen, from 31 countries, covering Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, to discuss dialogue, rather than confrontation.

As Bishop Filo Theou explained to participants, the idea arose from the need to propagate the truth. Last February, Pope John Paul II's visit to Khartoum had punched a hole in the diplomatic *cordon sanitaire* that had been tightened

around the country. In that same month, the Coptic church leadership proposed an international conference, which the government subsequently welcomed. The idea was to show the world that tolerance, not sectarian persecution, was the law of the land, and that the war which has raged on and off for decades, was tribal, ethnic, and political—not religious.

General Bashir, in his opening statements, briefed the participants on the process leading from a cease-fire to negotiations between the government and the insurrectionist Sudanese Popular Liberation Army (SPLA), negotiations which were beginning in the Nigerian capital of Abuja on the same day. He emphasized that Khartoum was bent on reaching a peace agreement, regardless of machinations by outside forces to perpetuate strife, to the detriment of the economy. In an address to throngs of Sudanese—Christians, Muslims, and animists—who demonstrated in support of the peace talks with the SPLA slated to open in Abuja, Nigeria the next day, Bashir blasted those in Washington or London who think they can determine the fate of his nation. He declared an amnesty for all those who have raised arms against the central state, in keeping with stated government policy to reintegrate the rebels in normal economic and social life.

Field trip organized

On April 28, a field trip was organized to the towns of Juba, Malakaal, and Wau. Delegates returning from the day-trip issued an unsolicited statement regarding their findings. One declaration said: "During our stay we visited various churches (Roman Catholic, Protestant, and African inland church) and one mosque. Children and adults of the Christian and Islamic communities received us with songs and prayers inside and outside their places of worship, showing their respective symbols, flags, and banners. Enquiring about the problems in the areas, the people spoke mainly about food and job shortages and the consequences of the past war. All agreed, despite the problems still on the floor, in wishing peace and brotherly relationships between the religious communities.

We observed that the people of Malakaal and Jouiba, both Christians and Muslims, are determined to develop the conditions for mutual cooperation in the country, without any external intervention or manipulation." Another statement, issued by those visiting Wau, said: "We were well received by the officials and religious leaders of Wau, among them the governor, the mayor, the Roman Catholic administrator, the Episcopal archdeacon, the Imam of the main mosque, and many others. . . . We were informed by those [people associated with Christian and Muslim places of worship] whom we met that the most urgent problem among all those that need immediate attention from the responsible authorities, is the great shortage of food in the area, and that religion is not a cause for conflict and strife among the people of Wau."

Further, casual conversation with representatives of the southern Christian churches during the breaks in the conference proceedings confirmed to those who inquired, that there is no forced conversion policy on the part of the central Muslim authorities. Pastors and sisters who were asked may have expressed concern about the spread of Islam, particularly among the animists who account for 64% of the southern population, but when asked whether such conversion were forced, or whether Christians were pressured in any way to abandon their faith, the answer was negative. Some southern Christian representatives complained that their churches, "sudanized" (i.e., led by Sudanese members of the particular denomination), were being encouraged to use Arabic, rather than any of the 100 local dialects, in their services. This, however, they agreed, was an expression in the religious realm of an Arabization policy undertaken by the government in an attempt to establish a national language. Masses in the Catholic church in Khartoum, for example, are celebrated in Arabic or in English.

Further light was shed on this aspect of the situation by Prof. Awan al Sharif Gasim who, lecturing on the history of religions in Sudan, declared that none of the religious systems introduced, whether Christianity or Islam, was brought through force. Christianity came in the sixth century, in two forms, that of the Emperor Justinian and that of Empress Theodora, which differed regarding the dual or monophysite nature of Christ. Islam entered later, from Egypt, not by military force, but through Muslims who settled and intermarried with the local population. It was only with the arrival of the European colonialists much later that religion was used as a political weapon, he said, to carve out spheres of influence through activities often disguised as missionary ventures. Thus, in the present century, following independence in 1956, the government sought to "sudanize" the churches, as a way of protecting the nation from unwanted foreign infiltration, the professor said.

Since introduction of the law of 1973, all Sudanese, regardless of religious confession, have been granted freedom of movement, whereas foreigners continued to be subject to laws pertaining to aliens, he said. In 1983, Islamic law (Sharia) was introduced, but does not apply to non-Muslims. These principles are explicitly defined in the central government's platform for peace talks with the SPLA. They are also embodied in the final documents voted up by the conference, a "Charter of the Religious Dialogue in the Sudan" and a final declaration. In the specific case of Sudan, the charter included a pledge to "service of mosques and churches and maintenance of the buildings and sacredness," "freedom of religious education," "introduction of comparative theological studies," "joint voluntary charitable organizations," and so forth. The declaration included reference to the need to strive for a new just economic order, reflecting the moral principles of religion.

As Bishop Filo Theou quipped, "What we said does not

mean that we are angels, nor that we are a society without problems. . . . We are human beings, after all. The perfect society exists only in the minds of Plato and Farabi. The city of God exists in the mind of St. Augustine. But still, we are not devils, nor terrorists, neither extremists."

The basis for an ecumenical alliance

The question posed at the conference was: how to strive toward such a perfect society of religious coexistence? Though attended and addressed by scholars and religious leaders, ranging from the Vatican spokesman Michel Lelong, responsible for the Christian-Muslim dialogue, to the Sudanese Coptic Rev. Filo Theos Faraj, to the Russian Orthodox Church Venerable Rev. Archimandrit, to official representatives of Islam in Iran, Syria, Chad, Lebanon, and many other countries, including those of Europe, as well as Dr. Turabi of Sudan, the conference did not descend to academic disputations on the fine theological distinctions between the main faiths represented; rather, it focused on seeking solutions to concrete problems assailing Sudan and mankind today, from the standpoint of the common principles uniting those of otherwise differing religious traditions.

General al Bashir made this clear in his inaugural statements. He called for "a dialogue between the different religions to establish a healthy society based on the religious principle." The same point was made by Sudanese Bishop Gabriel Roric and by Helga Zepp-LaRouche. Reverend Roric identified the common principles uniting all by saying, "In the society of all believers in God, it is governed by the concepts of morality, which has basic beliefs and principles. That is, God is the Creator and source of all goodness, truth and beauty. Man is a responsible, dignified, and honorable agent of his creator and God has put everything in the universe and on earth in the service of mankind."

Helga Zepp-LaRouche, president of the Schiller Institute, who had been invited to present her views on the foundations of an ecumenical dialogue, explored this notion of man made in the image of God, common to the Abrahamic religions, as the starting point for world peace. (See article, p. 41).

Her introduction of the question of economic method and morality added an important dimension to the deliberations, particularly considering Sudan's struggle to achieve economic self-sufficiency, free of the shackles of International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities and usury. It also sparked debate. Although one Swedish Muslim objected to Zepp-LaRouche's denunciation of malthusian think-tanks, her approach was roundly applauded by the majority of the conference. One member of the Islamic Party of Britain stressed that "we are living in a real world with real problems which we have to face, whether Muslims or Christians." He added, "if we want to bring people together, we cannot ignore political economy, especially the monetary dimension," as it is the banks, not religious conflict, which are destroying people. A

Sudanese interjected that the colonialists not only divided Sudan through religions, but they did not develop the economy of the country at all.

The secretary general of the Uganda Muslim Assembly said he feared that those forces mentioned by Zepp-LaRouche, who use terms like “sustainable development” or “appropriate technologies” for maintaining underdevelopment, would not respond to a profoundly religious message, such as the one she had delivered, to introduce morality into economic policy. Another British participant backed up Zepp-LaRouche’s thesis regarding malthusian population control, citing the widely circulated hypothesis that the species-threatening epidemic AIDS had been deliberately spread through Africa.

Religion as a way of life

The answer to the question, whether evil economic and social policies could be overcome by religion, came in two forms: an evening lecture by Dr. Hassan al Turabi and an encounter with the way of life of the Sudanese.

Dr. Turabi, touted in the world press as an “Islamic fundamentalist,” the “brain behind the Sudanese dictatorship,” and the “evil genius coordinating the international Muslim conspiracy,” appeared in his lecture “On Religion, Life, and Justice,” as an urbane, sophisticated, witty personality, on whom years of education in France and Britain have left a distinctive mark, without erasing his profoundly Muslim identity. In his reflections on the unity of religions, of humanity, and of wealth, he drove home one point: that to the extent that man is ruled by the moral principles embedded in the Abrahamic religions, then his deliberations in the form of economic, social, or juridical policy will be morally shaped. To the extent that his thinking is not so shaped, so will his politics be immoral. He charged that it was the colonizers from the West who introduced borders into Africa, delineating spheres of influence along imperialist lines. “God is universal,” he said, and did not “invent nations.” Thus, “it is only people with a religious sense who can conceive of mankind as one family.” He ridiculed those monarchs throughout history who “without realizing that God is sovereign, arrogated to themselves ‘sovereignty’ and in so doing annihilated entire peoples.” Those who sought absolute power, he said, even fought the church. Europe, he said, “after having lost its religion, entered into a process of wars. Now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seeks a new enemy and thinks it has found one in Islam. ‘I’m the hero, I need an enemy’ is the cry of the West.”

The main point, he emphasized, is that without religion there can be no morality, no justice, regardless of what “laws” or “norms” might be devised. An example is the United Nations: “After Germany was defeated in World War II, the U.N. was set up, but it has no parliament, no democratic body to regulate it. If it goes against international law, there is no court to appeal to. Its highest organ is convened,

but how? According to the majority of the world’s population? No. Great Britain, the U.S., France are there, but poor India, with a population greater than that of the three combined, has no seat. The U.N. is based on absolute power, not morality.”

As for economic justice, without religion, he reiterated, there can be none. “Take the case of malaria in the Third World. What do they say? ‘Let them die, if they live and marry and propagate, they may immigrate to our countries.’” He added, “In Europe, people are so occupied with their pets, their dogs, cats, reptiles, and birds, which are extremely well fed, they talk to them and coddle them. But for them, if Africans and Asians are starving, no matter. It is not important. If Europe paid out as much for Sudan as it did for its pets, the country would be industrialized today.” He added, “This does not mean we should not be kind to animals; on the contrary, as Muslims, we respect all God’s creatures. But man is superior.”

Dr. Turabi pleaded for a revival of the spirit of religion as a way of “uniting mankind into one body, dedicated to one God.” If this is not done, he said, then man will continue to create wars more disastrous than in the past.” Echoing ideas introduced earlier in the conference, he said, “I don’t want to look to the wars of the 21st century, it would mean the end of humanity.”

Not all Sudanese may endorse Dr. Turabi’s political vision of an Islamic state in which religion defines the parameters of law; but the spirit he embodies is shared by many Sudanese people. The country is not ruled by a formalistic application of “Islamic law”; those delegates to the conference who came with preconceived notions of Iranian-style dress, with women shrouded in floor-length black chadors, were shocked to see women clad in simple or elegant, brightly colored dresses, most wearing the sari-style “tobe” national dress. There is no law prescribing wearing a veil; women are being integrated as a matter of conscious social policy into positions of responsibility and economic equality. Nor does the Sudanese give the impression of being “oppressed.” Though poor, suffering an economic poverty imposed by decades of colonialist and post-colonialist looting, the country is struggling to achieve self-sufficiency, an effort which lends an air of dignity and optimism even to the least advantaged. The intelligentsia, which represents a broad stratum, articulates a grasp of the workings of international politics which one would rarely find in any governmental institution in Europe. This is not only because the Sudanese have been subjected to decades, nay centuries, of colonial exploitation, through which they have learned the ropes. Most countries of Africa have been given the same ugly treatment. But in Sudan, the special combination of a history of (at times victorious) resistance against colonial exploitation and a profound religious faith—whether Muslim or Christian—has forged a national identity, both Arab and African, of formidable dignity, which has allowed them to buck the IMF.