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Ambushed by dialogue in Cairo

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We thought the invitation to dialogue was turning out to be an ambush.

That was the feeling of the 60 of us foreign guests during the first day of the dialogue for which the Muslim University, Al Azhar, had invited us to Cairo, June 28-30.

After almost every paper delivered by the visiting scholars, mostly Christian and some Jewish, from around the world, the line-up of Al Azhar professors sitting in the front row would launch a barrage of sometimes sharp reminders -- that the West had colonized much of the Muslim world, that globalization is controlled by western financial centers, that the unjustified Iraq war has fed Muslim extremists, that Israel, with US support, was brutalizing the Palestinians. So many of their complaints were, we agreed, justified. But enough already!

And then, in casual conversations between formal sessions, some of our English speaking Egyptian co-participants explained to us that for Al Azhar University, the bastion of Islamic Sunni orthodoxy, to invite a flock of foreign scholars to a dialogue titled "Islam and the West" was a bold and highly controversial move. And indeed, prior to the conference and during its first days, the conservative elements of the Egyptian press were sounding caustic comments about Al Azhar selling out to the West.

Ah, it became clear to us ? the professors were most likely speaking more to the abundantly present media at the conference than to their foreign guests. Indeed, with many others of the speakers, I noticed that after adamant public statements that "certain theological issues are simply not on the table," professors and participants would later, in private conversations, pursue those very issues with full abandon. I thought to myself: it would be the same situation if we were having a Christian-Muslim dialogue at the Vatican. Certain things said in private could never be said in public. When dialogue is taking place within institutional frameworks, it has to be conscious of "saving face" (or in Italian: "bella figura.") That may not be ideal. But it's real.

On the third day of the conference, at the very last session, there was an unplanned, unexpected burst of clarity and closeness. During the wrap-up session, I was thoroughly surprised when I received a note from Prof. Ahmad El-Tayyib, President of Al Azhar, inviting me to offer a few closing remarks. Just the day before, Prof. El-Tayyib had served up some severe public criticisms of my paper (which audaciously had dealt with what I called "sibling rivalry" between Christians and Muslims). Now he was asking me to talk more! Perplexed and a bit wary, I immediately sent a message back that I would be honored.

Ten minutes later, I was called upon for some final remarks. Hoping that the text in the Gospels about "the Spirit will give you to speak" would apply on Muslim terrain, I began by referring to a beautiful passage from the Koran where Allah announces: "If it had pleased Allah, He would have made you a single religion (ummah) ? But I have made of you tribes and nations so that you may know one another." (5:48; 49:13) I continued: "I don't know for sure whether this conference has enabled you Muslims to come to know us Christians and Jews better. But I can say that it has definitely helped us to know you much more deeply and accurately. Especially, it has enabled us to know what we often do not really know or understand or feel ? your anger. And your pain. During these days we have seen how deeply you are grieved by the way Islam has so often been misrepresented, even vilified, in the Western media, and how angry you are at the war in Iraq and the policies in Israel that have caused so much suffering to the Iraqi and Palestinian people."

But then I had to add what is so clear from my experience at Union Theological Seminary: "Please know, however, that there are many, many Americans who share your anger and your pain; who are resolute in opposing the imperial policies that our government, especially during the last eight years of the Bush administration, has pursued; who because of our close friendship with Israel can and must be critical of Israel. Please know that with our new President, Barack Hussein Obama, there are genuinely new opportunities for those who are angered and pained in Egypt to join those who are angered and pained in the United States in order to work together for a genuinely different relationship between Islam and the West."

I sat down flushed, and a bit embarrassed. And then was stunned by a sustained applause. After the session, people flocked around my wife Cathy and me and overwhelmed us with expressions, often in broken English, of appreciation, gratitude, even of relief. "It makes all the difference to know that you know what we feel," said a young woman to Cathy. A few went further: "Hearing your anger at your government and politicians, frees us to express the anger we feel at our politicians and leaders who are harming Islam."

But there was one expression of gratitude that brought me to tears. The principle Imam of Syria, Hussam eldin Farfour, shook my hand warmly, offered an open-ended invitation to a meeting of Muslims and Christians he was planning in Damascus, and then added: "Are you coming to the closing dinner this evening at Al Azhar Park?" When I told him that sadly we could not since Cathy and I were leaving very early (4:00AM) the next morning, his eyes closed for a moment as he said "Too bad." When I asked why,

he responded, "Because after your remarks I wrote a poem for you." Our translator, at that moment, stepped out of place and said to the Imam, "Well, sing it for him now." And he did, with the translator attempting to render the beauty of the Arabic into immediate English prose. I really don't remember the stilted translation. But listening to the lilting Arabic, I cried.

The feared ambush turned out to be an unexpected dialogue of deep feelings, shared pain, renewed hopes. Often, we have to open ourselves to being ambushed in order to share feelings and find friendship.

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