

Alexios IV used this strategy to fight against his uncle, Isaac III Angelos (1195–1205), who seized power after he had blinded his brother, Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195).

Thus the conflicts led to the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders. History repeated herself and in 1390, John II asked the sultan Beyazid I (1389–1405) to support him against the future emperor Manuel II Paleologos (1391–1425).

From this perspective, the fall of the “Great City” sixty-three years later becomes a logical consequence. The Byzantine corruption created problems after 1453, too. The Church suffered because candidates for the Patriarchate started to offer money to the sultan in order to achieve this important position.

Even though the Orthodox hierarchy had been exonerated from all taxes since the time of Mahomet II, Simeon of Trapezunt (1466–1467 and 1472–1474) paid one thousand ducats for his position.

The Turks exploited this “Byzantine” idea and the amount of money doubled in the middle of the XVIth century, while the patriarchs started to succeed each other quite often. The Church in this way faced great economic problems.

OPENING THE CITY GATE TO THE FUTURE

We should not try to excuse the abuses of the Turkish administration, but we have to acknowledge the mistakes of Christians, too. We should analyze all these events from an objective perspective, avoiding extremism and exaggerations.

Our attempt is not to excuse the crimes committed in 1453 or later, in Constantinople or elsewhere. Crimes

must be always condemned, whether they are committed by Christians, Muslims or people of any other faith.

We would like to stress the idea, however, that we have to overcome the prejudices and pains that come from the past. Historical events must teach us how to prevent future mistakes and should not create greater conflicts.

If we want to avoid suffering, we must understand the context that led to that suffering in the past. As Christians and as citizens of a new united Europe, we have to change our attitudes in many fields.

If we still perceive the Muslim world in a “crusader style,” we will never be able to build up new relationships. The fall of Constantinople must remain a historical event that is understood in its context, and should not be any longer a reason for tensions between us.

The city that unites Europe and Asia should rather play the role of a bridge. It should remain a sacred and holy place for both Muslims and Christians, and to be an Eastern capital of a new Europe.

Suggested Reading
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Editorial Board of Confronti

Examples of Day-to-Day Interreligious Work:

The Confronti Experience

“Confronti” (an Italian word meaning “face to face dialogue” or “comparison,” not “confrontation”) is an interfaith ministry and magazine based in Rome. It started in the 1970s when two grassroots magazines, one Roman Catholic and the other Protestant, joined together to form as one of the first ecumenical magazines in Italy. In 1989 Confronti was founded, following and preserving this heritage while adding an interfaith dimension.

FACE TO FACE DIALOGUE

Following its mission statement “to promote dialogue among the communities of faith in order to produce common actions for peace, justice and the integrity of creation,” Confronti represents a day-to-day dialogue and co-operation between different religions, as it is composed of Christians of different denominations, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and also secular people who are interested in focusing on the role of religion in society.

In a society becoming more and more pluralistic in its cultures and faiths, dialogue can become the catalyst to knock down the walls of fear, mistrust and fundamentalism and to build bridges of true mutual understanding and respect. But what is dialogue? It can take on various forms.



Over the years, Confronti has sponsored a series of initiatives events alongside the publication of its magazine, such as interfaith conventions and forums, international peace education projects and travel study seminars, for both adults and students.

Confronti promotes and supports dialogue and peace projects for the

Middle East, such as an exchange programme between Jewish Israeli and Arab Israeli educators who are invited to Italy (“Seeds of Peace”).

Also, a series of summer camps held in Italy for Israeli and Palestinian children (“Flowers of Peace”); or peace pilgrimages which allow Christians to visit the Holy Land and to meet with the different religious and cultural entities in a spirit of dialogue and service to peace.

THIS YEAR IN JERUSALEM, PEACE

At the beginning of 2004, Confronti promoted a peace delegation to Israel and the Palestinian territories to visit different places like hospitals, settlements, refugee camps, peace centres, schools and kibbutzim; and to meet with politicians, intellectuals, moderates, extremists,

pacifists and religious leaders, representing Israeli and Palestinian civil society.

The delegation signed a document of commitment that was also an appeal to public institutions, religious communities, associations, foundations and cultural centres to support dialogue and peace education programmes.

In spite of a complex, harsh situation, where the tangle of suffering and fear of the two parties is difficult to unravel, the participants of the delegation stressed a positive element in that meaningful experiences continue between Palestinians and Israelis involved with cultural and educational associations oriented towards peace, dialogue and reconciliation.

Even if these people represent a minority (many fewer than those who are convinced to the contrary that violence is inescapable), the surveys confirm that the majority of Palestinians and Israelis are aware that the only possible solution is that of the “two states.” This is an important fact which demonstrates that the majority of the two parties already know the price of a just and long-lasting peace.

The Israeli and Palestinian peace groups (each deeply linked to their own national, cultural and religious traditions) are building a living and important reality: no peace will ever be able to bloom without them planting every day small, fragile seeds in the furrows of that earth.

The delegation left Jerusalem profoundly affected by a difficult and painful situation, but also enriched by the generosity of the land and by the depth of the religious and cultural values of the people who inhabit it. They left with a wish: “This Year in Jerusalem, Peace.”



ing the possibility of encounter and dialogue, while spreading fear and mistrust among different cultures and religions.

This fact, though, makes dialogue more necessary and crucial than ever. The education of young people was mentioned as a basic tool to support dialogue: the promotion of knowledge and respect of diversities shall be achieved by meeting in common spaces rather than living on separate “islands” among culturally and religiously homogeneous groups.

VEIL: YES AND NO

In Italy the debate about the lay state is a burning one, and religion is often abused by political factions as ground for conflict. When in France a recent and highly discussed law prohibited the wearing of veils in public schools, Confronti contributed to the reflection by showing different views within the feminine Muslim world, between the veil's supporters and those who oppose its use.

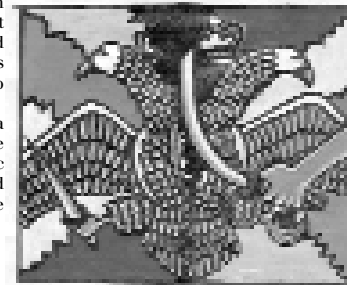
The issue assumes a symbolic value: within the Muslim diaspora in Europe are women who consider the veil as a negative symbol that hinders their emancipation and the affirmation of public secularism; while others think it is important as a symbol of identity and belonging to a specific group in a pluralistic society.

A comparison between two married Muslim women, one veiled and the other not, examines the risk of hiding the real problems that hinder the emancipation of Muslim women: Souad SBAH, president of the Association of Moroccan Women in Italy, and Sumaya AL BARQ, vice president of the Association of Muslim Youth in Italy, are both established residents of Italy.

SBAH says: “France was right to prohibit veils in school. Muslim fundamentalists today want the veil; tomorrow they will ask for separate schools, as they have already done in France. And then, what shall we do?”

Separate everything, so that there is no more communication and dialogue between women and men? The veil is only the tip of the iceberg. This law is salvation for those women and girls who have the veil imposed upon them by their community and family environment.

It is protection for those of us who do not wear it. My fear is that with Muslim fundamentalism spreading,



we are no longer free not to wear it. It is not an obligation or a rule, but a traditional practice and the women who do not wear it are not automatically bad Muslims.”

AL BARQ, on the other hand, is of the opposite opinion: “We are really disappointed with this law. Before this law was approved, we staged a sit-in in front of the French Consulate in Milan, claiming the right of religious freedom.

Every one of us must be free to serenely live-out her own faith within the limits of decency and correctness with respect to her neighbours. The veil has often been erroneously defined as a religious symbol, but it is becoming more political than cultural because of the controversies that it has provoked.

In reality, it is only an act of faith rather than a divine rule. To wear one or not depends on how a woman of faith interprets her religion. However, we are not forced to wear it, but have a free choice. It must be clear that it cannot be either an obligation to remove it or an imposition to put it on.

This is what Islam says: “There is no compulsion in religion.” We as young Muslims must denounce actions like female circumcision, the constriction of women to wear the veil, or any other behaviour that affronts the rights of women.”

Beyond the issue of the veil, freedom of opinion is available today to Muslim women of the West, which allows them to emphasize issues linked to their role inside the family and established community in a non-Muslim context.

Polygamy, the right of succession (which gives men double the inheritance of women), mixed marriages (which, in Muslim tradition, prevent women from marrying non-Muslims, while men are able to); these are all issues that regard the rights of women, veiled or not. Without a decisive contribution from women, veiled or not, these issues will remain unheard.

Confronti is a national interreligious magazine based in Rome. The editor-in-chief is Paolo Naso (Waldensian Reformed), and the assistant editor is Mostafa EL AYOUBI (Muslim). For further information, please visit the website: www.confronti.net.

Martin SMEDJEBACK

Review of Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice by Mohammed ABU-NIMER

Today we live in a multicultural world with many religions existing side by side. But still there are many of us Christians who have never met any Muslims. The only time we hear about Islam is on the news, and most of the time these references are connected with violence.

It is not strange that even peace-loving persons have the idea of Islam as a violent religion. Here is a book that might change our view on that. The book is highly recommended for those who want to get a clearer view on Islam and on peace.

JIHAD AND JUST WAR

Mohammed ABU-NIMER is an associate professor in the International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program at the American University in Washington, DC. He has been conducting workshops in conflict resolution since 1982 in numerous countries.

This book of his, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam* (published in Florida in 2003) provides a theoretical framework as well as a practical one. In the theoretical part ABU-NIMER starts with an overview of the many studies done on just war and Islam. It is clear that there is a school of thought in Islam that justifies acts of war and the use of force under certain, although strict, conditions.

Those who support war often point out and quote the Qur’an verse: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah does not love transgressors.” (2,190).

Jihad was subsequently applied to religious war, but was never used in the Qur’an in such a sense. The Qur’an says: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” Jihad should above all be understood as a struggle for the individual Muslim to become a better Muslim.

A number of passages in the Qur’an seem to provide explicit justification for the use of war or fighting unbelievers, and deciding whether the Qur’an actually condones offensive war for faith or offensive war is really just left to the judgment of the exegete and interpreter, according to ABU-NIMER.

What Mohammed ABU-NIMER mainly objects to is that too little research has been focused on the other side of Islam—namely the traditions and teachings of nonviolence and peace building in Islam.

RAHMAH AND PEACE-MAKING HAND IN HAND

It turns out that both the Qur’an and the traditions of Muslim societies harbour many treasures of nonviolence and techniques for resolving conflicts. The word “Islam” is itself defined as the “making of peace.”

The Prophet says: “Break your bows, sever your strings, beat stones on your swords” (to break the blades). “Peace” (*salaam*) in Islam means not merely an absence of war, but also the elimination of the grounds for conflict and the waste and corruption it creates.

Peace thus understood is indeed God’s true purpose for humanity. The Qur’an also affirms the sacredness of all human life: “And if anyone saved a life, it would be as if one saved the life of the whole people.”

There are countless stories about how the Prophet Muhammed acted as an arbitrator when two parties were in conflict, which shows that third-party intervention (mediation) is an acceptable option to end fighting in Islam.

During the Meccan period of the Prophet’s life (610–622), the Prophet showed no inclination towards the use of force in any form, even for self-defence. He practiced a non-violent resistance that was reflected in all his teachings during that period, when Muslims were a minority and under threat.

