

EIR Conference Report

Khartoum conference seeks solutions in moral realm

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

It is a truth, not yet universally acknowledged, but gaining increasing recognition, that the affairs of our troubled world will be settled in the interests of mankind, only if society and its institutions are brought back under the moral guidance of the universal principles embedded in the world's religious traditions. A significant step in this direction was taken when leaders of the Christian and Islamic world convened in Khartoum, Sudan for the second Inter-Religious Dialogue Conference on Oct. 8-10. The conference, which gathered 500 people from 30 countries and 50 churches or associations, presented a frank estimate of the world's problems, and thrashed out—often in polemical debate—the principles and means through which to shape solutions.

“Despite progress made in science and technology,” as Sudanese National Transitional Council chairman Mohammed Elamin Al-Khalifa noted, “no progress had been made in the moral realm” in today's world. It is this moral vacuum which is threatening the further existence of human society. “Sixty, seventy, perhaps eighty percent of the world's population,” the Sudanese spiritual leader Dr. Hassan Al-Turabi estimated, “is irreligious.” The family, he said, is being destroyed by the prevalence of liberal sexual behavior; morality has disappeared from education, “especially the sciences, where God is never mentioned, although the laws of science are God's laws.” Crime is on the rise everywhere. Politics has been reduced to a “power struggle” where “corruption, even in democratic countries” is pervasive. The reason, according to the Muslim leader, is that “people think that God is not there and does not see their acts of corruption.” In the economic realm, “wealth has been monopolized in the name of capitalism or of socialism,” and the North is being pitted

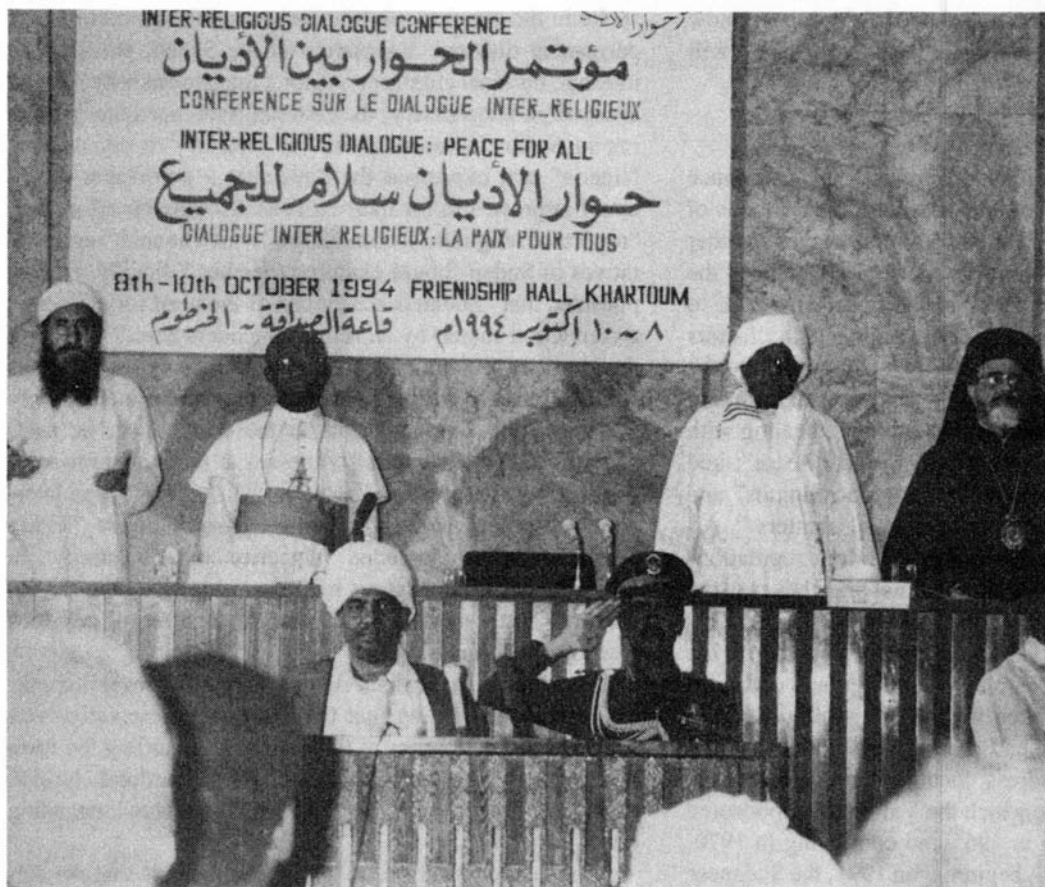
against the South.

The solution can only lie in a revival of moral values in all aspects of social life, emphatically in the realm of politics. Referring to the Sudanese experience, Dr. Turabi explained that various formulas had been tried; “should we have a disciplined military government, a corrupt tribal ordering? Should we be pro-western liberals, or follow the eastern socialist model?” All had been tried, and failed. “Ultimately,” he said, “we turned to God, rather than East or West.”

The Sudanese experience

The special importance of Sudan as the venue for the ecumenical conference lies in the fact that “events in this country are heralding a new transition in the Islamic world,” in the words of national political leader Dr. Ghazi Salahuddin Al-Atabani, the state minister for political affairs, who characterized Sudan as being “in the forefront of a sweeping revivalist movement in the world of Islam.” The key concept of the movement, he said, is that it “attempts to reintroduce morality in our life. It strives to do so in all aspects of life; however, it is because morality is farthest from politics that emphasis is particularly demanded in this area.” Rejecting the misconception that this entails theocratic ambitions, Dr. Atabani said the “revivalist model . . . does not necessarily seek to uproot the existing structures and systems” but “proposes that they be receptive of and congenial to the value system of the society.”

Illustrating the Sudanese experience, Dr. Atabani explained that constitutionally, “all rights and duties are based solely on citizenship” and “neither religion, color nor ethnicity may be used as a basis of discrimination.” Referring to



A view of the podium at the closing session of the Inter-Religious Dialogue Conference in Khartoum, on Oct. 10. At the foreground podium, left, is Sudanese President General Bashir. At the rear table on the far left is Sheikh al-Zindani of Yemen, whose militia retook Aden for the central government forces, and next to him stands Cardinal Francis Arinze, whose interview appears on page 52.

the recent introduction of a federal system of 26 states, he explained that Islamic law (Sharia), though applied to the Muslim majority of the country, is replaced by “custom” or common law, in those non-Muslim states. Furthermore, all matters pertaining to family law (marriage, inheritance, etc.), are subject to the religious precepts of the individuals involved. Referencing by contrast the situation in secular states, to argue that “secularism is no guarantee of religious freedom,” Dr. Atabani criticized the practice of forcing non-Christian pupils to attend Christian religious education classes, and added, “even more serious, they are obliged to attend sex-education classes, which in many instances transcend the objective of educating pupils about sexual physiology to insidiously inculcating new sexual attitudes.” These are attitudes, he stressed, which “contravene basic Islamic and Christian teachings and tend to corrupt human nature itself.”

Dialogue of the religious against paganism

The purpose of the conference was to define common ground between Islam and Christianity, to “mobilize,” in the words of Dr. Turabi, “Christians and Muslims against the irreligious in a common front.” To initiate first a dialogue, then effective cooperation, he continued, “it is necessary to know one another,” and that Christians and Muslims learn

more about the others’ faith. Outlining the fundamental precepts of both religions, Dr. Turabi said, “We all believe in one God . . . we believe that man should devote his life to God, who is omnipresent, and not only in the synagogue, the church or the mosque.” Although doctrine, rituals and prayer may differ in form, “we all believe in the family.” Furthermore, “free will is the basis of religion in Islam and Christianity,” and forced conversion is unacceptable. Commenting ironically on religious rivalries, he criticized those who “reduce their identity to being ‘a Christian’ or ‘a Muslim’ ” and those who “prefer to let someone be irreligious than to see him convert to the other religion.” Rather, he said, Muslims should realize that “it is better for a pagan to become a Christian than to remain a pagan.”

In this context, Dr. Turabi called for the establishment “of a procedure, an instrument, of Christian-Islamic dialogue, then of cooperation.” Through such cooperation, “we should deploy religion for development and progress.” Contrasting this idea of an international religious forum to the United Nations, which is “an instrument of dictatorship,” he asked, “can’t religious people lead the ‘United Nations club’? Can’t we start initiating a worldwide religious order, which is human and just,” governed by “a higher law?” In conclusion, Dr. Turabi warned of the consequences, were such a

dialogue not successful: "It comes late, but let it come now . . . otherwise, others will lead, and we know where it will go."

Institutionalizing the dialogue

As a concrete expression of this proposal, the conference witnessed the inauguration of the Society for the Dialogue of Religions, to be based in Khartoum, with branches in other states of the country. The aims of the society include "the reinstatement of spiritual values in the material world, to salvage it from spiritual emptiness"; dealing with "factors that threaten world peace and security"; safeguarding "the sacredness of religions"; encouraging "dialogue on the future and development of humanity and the world"; dealing with "society's problems of poverty, hunger and disease"; and maintaining "points of convergence between religions" and working toward "surpassing controversial matters." Although the society is based in Sudan, the draft regulations contemplate establishment of international branches, and the thrust of the initiative is international in scope.

Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, secretary general of the Council for International Peoples Friendship, and chairman of the preparatory Committee for the Inter-Religious Dialogue Conference (CIPF), had presented the project of the society in his inaugural address, locating it in the context of the inter-religious dialogue which the Vatican has sponsored in this century, beginning in 1965 and continuing in 1970, 1980, and 1992. In parallel, beginning in 1991, the Sudanese had taken steps to launch a dialogue, which culminated in the first international inter-religious conference in Khartoum in April 1993. "Aware of the importance of dialogue especially between Christianity and Islam," said Dr. Mustafa, "the CIPF directed great attention towards the creation of a permanent instrument for more practical and continued dialogues. This initiative coincided with a similar one from Cardinal Arinze . . . who proposed the establishment of an association for dialogue between Christianity and Islam in the Sudan, similar to the associations already established in Yemen and Jordan." The process leading to the actual establishment of the association included a series of regional conferences in the southern states of the Sudan. Participating in the effort were "the CIPF, the Sudanese Council of Churches, the Sudanese Scholars Society, the Catholic Church, the Coptic Church, and the Sudanese Sufi High Council." It was these institutions, represented in the preparatory committee for the October conference, which issued invitations to other institutions worldwide. Thus an initiative which aimed at institutionalizing the dialogue on a national scale, was simultaneously involved in furthering the exchange on an international level.

It was this feature, not only of the new society founded, but of the conference more broadly, which gave rise to differing interpretations. H.E. Cardinal Francis Arinze, chairman of the Inter-Religious Dialogue for the Vatican, who

spoke in the opening session, welcomed the institution of a permanent dialogue association in the Sudan, stressing its internal, national character. Among the reasons why such an association is necessary, the cardinal referenced the "suffering in Sudan in recent years" as well as "in my country Nigeria" and expressed the hope that a permanent forum could improve life for their citizens. He referenced as well "reports of religious discrimination" which he said "representatives in Sudan should examine together." Finally, he emphasized that "Sudan is convinced of the need for a change, a conviction shared by all religious leaders here." Outlining the steps he recommended for the success of the religious forum, Cardinal Arinze stressed that it should include only Sudanese; the foreign guests at the conference, he said, should be seen as "guests, witnesses at the inauguration of the Sudanese association," which is "different from an international conference on the inter-religious dialogue." Other recommendations included "sincerity and objectivity" in dealing with inter-religious matters, "objective reporting of meetings in the mass media," and "guarantees of religious freedom and human rights."

In response to Cardinal Arinze's remarks, several speakers reacted, intimating that the Vatican representative was seeking to dictate terms to the Sudanese regarding the form the religious dialogue should take. As the cardinal clarified in an interview to *EIR*, this represented a misunderstanding of his remarks.

The deeper point raised by the exchange is that the dialogue among religions must be articulated worldwide. As argued most convincingly by Dr. Turabi, the problems which Sudan faces on a national level are reflected in similar situations in many countries. Religious conflict, as several speakers documented, has been carefully nurtured by outside forces, as a means of preventing national unity, blocking peace and thwarting economic progress.

Dr. al-Tayib Zein al-Abdin of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, presented a paper documenting how the British colonial administration consciously used the religious factor to divide the country. In the south, where it concentrated its missionary efforts, the British divided Christians up among Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians. The British manipulated tribal factors as well, to further complicate the situation. Ruling Sudan as virtually two separate countries, north and south, it limited educational activities to missionaries in the south. The political motivation for this treatment was the British aim to annex southern Sudan to its colonies Kenya and Uganda. In the North, Dr. al-Tayib explained, the British fomented rivalries between the Ansar and Khatmiyya Muslims as well. As Dr. Atabani further detailed in answer to a question during a press conference, the Uganda government (known to be controlled even today by the British) continues to arm and support the rebel forces of John Garang, portrayed as a "Christian" opponent to the Khartoum central government. Dr. Atabani also illustrated British

interest in fomenting conflict, with reference to the visit made to Sudan last year by the archbishop of Canterbury.

The perspectives for success

Despite the apparent differences of approach manifest in the conference, there is no doubt that the Khartoum gathering represents a giant step forward in the fight to defeat the geopolitical statists of "religious conflict" and to mobilize the forces of religion to strive for the Good. The participation of Cardinal Arinze, along with the papal nuncio in Khartoum at this conference, attests to the continuing improvement in relations between the two faiths in Sudan, following the historic visit of Pope John Paul II to Khartoum in February 1993. Also present at the recent conference was His Grace Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir Wako (who had been unable to attend the April 1993 conference). The Khartoum archbishop delivered a major speech to the gathering which began with the revealing statement, "The purpose of this paper is to convince myself that there are good prospects for a lasting inter-religious dialogue in the Sudan and among the Sudanese people." Archbishop Zubeir argued that Christians and Muslims "should cooperate towards finding joint solutions to problems besetting the country . . . precisely by placing God at the center of people's communal and individual lives. All believe that religion ought to be a unifying force in society." Speaking frankly, the archbishop warned against glorifying the Sudanese situation, and spoke of "religious tensions, conflicts, and uncertainties" felt by Christians in the country. Acknowledging the sincerity of the Muslim majority desire for dialogue, he called for a vast educational effort, to lay the groundwork for acceptance of diversity. It is through a "search for what unites Muslims and Christians" that the dialogue may succeed.

In addition to the unprecedented, high-level Vatican representation at the conference, another encouraging sign was the "spirit of Cairo" which pervaded the proceedings. Not only Dr. Turabi and Dr. Atabani, but also Dr. Musa Keilani, on behalf of the World Islamic Council, from Jordan, and Sudanese President General Al-Bashir, referred to the United Nations conference on population, held in Cairo in September, as a turning point in Muslim-Christian relations. As Dr. Adel Husein, from the Egyptian *As Sha'ab* newspaper, said that in the closing session at Cairo, "the believers of this world saw that they are a power and can change the agenda. The Vatican moved," he said, "and the Muslims moved, too." This was "the first time in history that such a battle took place, where the two religions joined hands to oppose the New World Order." Summing up the accomplishment of the Khartoum meeting, Dr. Adel said, "What Dr. Turabi said, in stressing the need to create a common front, one battle against evil, is not a call, but is becoming a reality. In Egypt, people started defending religious values, Al Azhar and the church, now they are following a new path. This conference should become an effective movement."

Interview: Mohammed Masjed Gami

How Iran, Vatican cooperated on Cairo

The Iranian ambassador to the Holy See was interviewed in Khartoum on Oct. 12. EIR asked His Excellency to explain the background to the cooperative effort of the Vatican and Iran at the U.N. Conference on Population in Cairo.

Mohammed Masjed Gami: It goes back to January, when the Secretary Responsible for Relations with States of the State Secretariat of the Vatican called me, regarding the preparatory conference to be held in New York. He asked for the cooperation of my country with the Vatican. Two months later, in March, [Vatican Secretary of State] Cardinal Sodano and the Secretary of the State Secretariat Responsible for Relations with States, Msgr. Jean-Louis Touran, with two cardinals, Cardinal Etchegaray, the head of *Justitia et Pax*, and Cardinal López Trujillo, responsible for the Pontifical Council for the Family, invited all the ambassadors to the Holy See, to explain to them the Vatican's position. Later, the pope became very active. In some speeches, he spoke openly of the Cairo conference and the preparatory conference in New York.

The head of the Vatican delegation for the New York meeting was Monsignor [Diarmuid] Martin, who is an Irishman, a fine gentleman and a close friend with whom I had had contact before. Before his departure from Rome to New York, he came to our embassy at the Holy See, for the fourth time. I told him to make contact with our embassy at the United Nations in New York, responsible for this conference. The New York preparatory conference was for three weeks. During the conference, those responsible from the Vatican, Monsignor Celli (Undersecretary for Relations with States) and Monsignor Carrascosa, asked for full cooperation on the New York conference. The situation was very critical; the problem was that even Muslim and Christian countries did not want to cooperate with the Vatican. The only country with some sensitivity to the issue was Iran. Then I informed them that Malta was active, as I had been told. They asked for the full support of Iran. I was in daily contact with our embassy at the U.N., they did a lot.

After that conference, I met Vatican people who complained about some Islamic countries which were in favor of the U.N. Cairo conference program. The situation in New York was depressed. After the conference, I told Monsignor Martin and others in the Vatican, "Let's see the text [of the