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Fuad Giacaman

## Palestine: Hope doesn't disappoint

Fuad Giacaman wählt bewusst das Paulus-Wort „Hoffnung lässt nicht zu Schanden werden“ (Römer 5,5), um ein Bildungsprogramm zu charakterisieren, das auch angesichts einer äußerlich verzweifelten Situation langfristig zu Frieden und Versöhnung beitragen kann und soll.

Ausgehend von der Tatsache, dass es im Israel-Palästina-Konflikt immer wieder religiöse und politische Führer gibt, die religiöse Argumente für ihre einseitigen Ziele ausnutzen, und dass deshalb bei vielen, die sich um Frieden bemühen, die religiöse Perspektive bewusst vermieden (und dadurch Extremisten und Fundamentalisten überlassen) wird, bemüht sich das Projekt „Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences“ darum, authentisches Kennen und Verstehen der Religionen Judentum, Christentum und Islam in Schulen Israels wie Palästinas zu fördern. Dabei geht es sowohl darum, das Differentielle zwischen den Religionen nicht zu übergehen, ihm aber in Respekt gerecht zu werden, als auch darum, aus den reichen Quellen der Religionen Beiträge für die Ziele Befreiung, Gerechtigkeit, Versöhnung und Frieden zu gewinnen.

Ein Schlüsselbegriff der gemeinsamen Arbeit von Israelis und Palästinensern, die unter der Regie des holländischen Theologen Dr. Jacobus Schonefeld seit 1999 durchgeführt wird, ist der Begriff „sumud“, der Standhaftigkeit, Ausdauer und Gegenseitigkeit einschließt, durch den palästinensischen Autor und Juristen Raja Shehadeh Anfang der 80er Jahre des 20. Jahrhunderts aber bewusst auf Theorie und Praxis der Gewaltlosigkeit bezogen wurde: sich auch angesichts militärischer Bedrückung und gewaltsamer Gegenwehr diesem Diktat nicht zu beugen, nicht zu fliehen und auszuweichen, sondern auch unter inhumanen Umständen Würde, Hoffnung und Grundbedingungen der Humanität zu bewahren.

Das Curriculum von „Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences“ liefert hierzu Material und Unterrichtshilfen in den drei Sektionen: 1) Charakteristika von Judentum, Christentum und Islam, 2) Eine Gemeinschaft der Gerechtigkeit und der „compassion“ (Teilhabe, Mit-Leid, wechselseitiges Eintreten füreinander) in den drei Religionen und 3) die religiöse Bedeutung des Landes (bzw. der Landverheißungen).

Dabei wird ein vierfacher hermeneutischer Weg beschrrieben: 1) Lesen in den heiligen Schriften und in Zeugnissen von Persönlichkeiten, die „sumud“ praktiziert und Befreiung von Unterdrückung erkämpft haben – wie Gandhi und Martin Luther King, 2) Nachdenken über die Schriftpassagen und entdecken gemeinsamer Überzeugungen/Glaubensgrundsätze sowie verbindender Spiritualität, 3) Austausch und Diskussion über die Erkenntnisse, 4) Reflexion in Bezug auf das eigene Leben und die Möglichkeiten, im Sinne der beispielgebenden Persönlichkeiten und Projekte aktiv zu werden. Über die Weitergabe des Projekt-Materials hinaus gibt es Seminare, Trainings-Einheiten und Direktbegegnung für Schülerinnen und Schüler, Studierende und Lehrkräfte –

unter den gegenwärtigen Umständen allerdings nicht in gemeinsamen israelisch-palästinensischen, sondern nur in parallelen Veranstaltungen auf beiden Seiten, aber in ständigem Austausch miteinander – und zwar in 14 Schulen je auf israelischer wie auf palästinensischer Seite, mit der Option weiterer Entwicklung und Verbreitung des Programms.

## I. Introduction:

It is a sad situation we are presently living in the Holy Land: Palestine and Israel. But nevertheless I have chosen as title “Hope doesn't disappoint” from the letter of Paul to the Christians of Rome (chapter 5, verse 5). Why? Because at the AEI we have faith in peace building and this belief is accompanied by hope and work in spite of the almost catastrophic circumstances in front of us. The inter-religious peace project which I will introduce in this paper is called “Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences.”

## II. Background

### *a. The Rationale: Religion as a Strategy for Peace Education*

Peace educators usually tend not to concentrate on religion, since religion seems to exacerbate and complicate conflicts rather than to contribute to their solution. Nevertheless, I make a plea for concentrating on religion as a strategy in peace education, for the following reasons:

1. It is an important aim of peace education to humanize conflicts by viewing the other not as an abstraction but as a living human being affected by similar fears, flaws, hopes and ideals as oneself. Religion cannot be left out, since it represents a dimension of depth in human identity, also in that of the Other.
2. Irrespective of the ideas and beliefs of an individual, a community is strongly influenced, even constituted, by a set of values, beliefs and fundamental stories which help it to find orientation in the world. Since religion is one of the major sources of orientation for a community, it is important not only to get to know the other as an individual but also to acquire insight into the religion of the community to which the other belongs.
3. Even for those who call themselves "secular", religion is often a key factor in defining their collective or national identities.
4. Although religion is not the cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, religious differences play an increasingly significant part in it.
5. One should not try to minimize or harmonize religious differences but consider them as challenges for peaceful coexistence demanding creative solutions. Concentrating on the religion of the other creates awareness of the differences between the religions involved in the conflict, dealing respectfully with these differences and thus showing respect for the other being different – a fundamental trait of any peace education.

6. Since religious leaders on both sides of the conflict manipulate tenets of their faith to justify positions and claims, moderates striving for peace tend to run away from religion in disgust, leaving it in the hands of the extremists. Religion is too valuable for that.

7. Leaving religion in the hands of extremists and “fundamentalists” also prevents the moderates from capitalizing on the many rich sources within Judaism, Christianity and Islam in support of the goals of liberation, justice, reconciliation and peace.

**b. Source of inspiration: Sumud**

Before elaborating on the role of religion in peace education, it should be clear that peace education does not come out of a void. As a Palestinian Christian living in Bethlehem my understanding of peace education is closely connected to the situation of occupation which we are living as well as the message of new life that remains eternally associated with Bethlehem. The present occupation, the longest in modern history, is characterized by Israeli domination and Palestinian dependence in many different fields. It closes off young Palestinians' horizons, practically and metaphorically. They don't know what life will give to them. They see a Wall in front of them. How is it possible in such an asymmetrical situation to conduct peace education, and to keep high the flame of new life and new hope?

AEI's answer can be illustrated by discussing a culturally sensitive Arabic concept we cherish, *sumud*. Literally it means steadfastness, endurance, or - to use a term which has recently become much in vogue in psychology and education - resilience. It basically means that one's spirit cannot be broken. The concept also relates to our Palestinian attachment to the land, the will not to leave it as a result of pressures or temptations (such as a better life abroad). In the beginning of the 1980s the Palestinian author and lawyer Raja Shehadeh gave *sumud* various shades of meaning which connect the concept to the theory and practice of non-violence. Being *sumud* is a choice of staying steadfast by neither fighting the adversary militarily nor becoming subdued or subjugated to his dictates, nor fleeing or departing. In Shehadeh's understanding, *sumud* means keeping up the dignity and hope of rooted daily life, of maintaining and asserting humanity and community under often inhuman circumstances.

For our present subject, the role of religious values in peace education, *sumud* basically means restoring the human spirit to become a responsible human actor again, rather than to become hostage of anonymous forces, unguided emotions and uncontrolled cycles of violence. In our present situation, this being or becoming human has two sides. On the one hand, *sumud* requires a vision of a different reality than the present inhuman one. In that sense, the concept stands in the prophetic tradition of the religions, and requires a standing up, a saying no against injustice and oppressive power which makes constructive daily life difficult or impossible - in the footsteps of for example the Bishops Oscar Romero and Desmond Tutu and other leading religious figures striving for a better society based on fundamental human rights and dignity.

On the other hand, sumud means preventing the dehumanization of Israelis (and by doing so, the dehumanization of oneself) to which the situation of occupation and all the present mobility restrictions so easily gives rise. To accomplish this, it is among other things necessary to know the Other's and one's own religions better, to dispel stereotypes, to respect differences and to see the many deep similarities. Religion shows that we are fundamentally shaped in God's image, and therefore are all dignified and equal.

At AEI we try to give educational shape in our work to this double spirit of sumud, by building the communication skills of our youth and women from a value-oriented perspective. How to communicate with the Other in a dignified manner which gives him or her space as a human person? But at the same time: how to challenge the Other to work on common values of justice and human standards of living, against oppression and occupation, and to speak truth to power?

These are the two traditions from which our work flows, and which, while carrying a measure of tension between them, have both a strong religious and value-oriented background.

On the practical level, sumud requires peace building from the inside out. Sumud indeed teaches us that "hope doesn't disappoint" and life can be renewed as long as the human spirit is developed against the odds. To take an example: One of our peace activities is called RRCA or: Read, Reflect, Communicate and Act. It has been designed to help building inner-peace through practices of non-violence and communication, as a step towards helping to create, on a modest scale, some conditions for external peace. It consists of four steps and is part of the project Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences:

1. Reading passages from the Holy Books and from persons inspired by those Books who have developed a courageous practice of sumud and liberation from oppression and occupation while maintaining human dignity and respect, such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Reading here implies an active learning and listening attitude.
2. Reflecting upon the passages and detecting commonalities among the different Holy Books in an act of common faith and spirituality.
3. Communicating one's readings and reflections within the group and opening the floor for discussion.
4. Understanding the relevance of the readings and reflections for one's practical life, and looking for options how to act out and communicate the wisdom of the books in the footsteps of those who have created such exemplary models by practising those words.

By strengthening better understanding of the other's religion and of the common history and values they all share, our project helps the current generation of young people to overcome some of the misunderstandings and stereotypes that contribute to the region's conflict and problems. Paying attention to differences between religions and

trying to understand them, contributes to overcoming fear of the Other. Such fear, we know, leads to avoiding the Other; becoming subdued to him, or allowing oneself to become dominated by rage and feelings of revenge against him. Fear of the other does not create hope and a horizon of new life, and does not contribute to sumud.

**c. Summary of the Project:**

"Living in the Holy Land: Respecting Differences" is an educational project that started in 1999 and was jointly carried out by the Center for Educational Technology (CET) in Tel Aviv and AEI – Open Windows in Bethlehem for upper and high school students. It has been designed to promote understanding between Israelis and Palestinians by exposing pupils to each other's religions, viz. Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

**General Objectives:**

The aims of the project are:

- To provide an opportunity for participants to develop an informed awareness of the similarities and differences between the three religions' traditions that impact people's living in the Middle East
- To introduce participants to the concepts of human diversity and variety
- To break the cycle of stereotypical thinking and religious prejudice
- To encourage participants to find their own cultural and religious voices so that they can begin to empathize with the Other
- To explore and enhance participants' understanding of the different religious concepts and universal values of peace, tolerance, love, justice and compassion
- To contribute to better relations among Jews, Christians and Moslems, by fostering respectful and accepting attitudes toward adherents of other religions and world-views.

**Operational Objectives:**

The practical goals of the project are:

- Expanding the scope of implementation of the program so it will come to encompass a growing number of classes
- Training teachers to implement the program during the school year
- Training moderators to provide effective teacher training workshops
- Enabling educational and cultural encounters between all participants in the project, including pupils, teachers, principals and project staff
- Publishing professional materials on an internet site and as text book.

**Design of the Project**

The project textbook was written in English and then translated into Arabic and Hebrew.

The text book consists of three sections:

1. Characteristics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam
2. A society of justice and compassion in the three religions
3. Religious meanings of the land

The materials were prepared with the cooperation of a group of Jewish, Christian and Moslem scholars and teachers. The overall project consultant has been Rev. Jacobus (Coos) Schoneveld – a Protestant Dutch theologian and scholar who was distinguished with a Dutch medal for working towards rapprochement among the followers of the three religions.

The materials deal with the following challenges in inter-religious peace education.

#### ***A. Three Different Narratives***

Studying the Jewish, Christian and Moslem traditions we came across three different narratives explaining why the land is holy to these three religious communities. According to their deepest convictions these narratives are not human inventions but based on revelations that the prophets and messages received from God. They must not be doubted, as they are considered absolutely truthful. For a believing Jew, Christian and Moslem no compromise is possible about the veracity of each one's narrative.

The big challenge is how can we deal with these differences and at the same time respect and honour the views of the others without trying to rob them from what is holy and dear to them.

#### ***B. Conflicting Claims***

Jews, Christians and Moslems agree at least on one point, namely that the purpose of their living together in the Holy Land is to obey the will of God. But in reality they do not conform to the will of God. They try to satisfy their own desires and ambitions through the use of power and authority in influencing the others. These things do not conform to the prayer of Jesus Christ when he was addressing God the Lord: “yet not what I will but what thou wilt” (the gospel of Saint Marc: chapter 14, verse 36).

#### ***C. Triumphal Dreams and Compromise***

Each religion has the expectation that its claim of truth will triumph, also in relation to the Holy Land. On the other hand, each religion has developed strategies to cope with the gap between its dreams of triumph and the reality in which it lives, and each religion has worked out arrangements of compromise or accommodation. For example; according to Islamic traditions, the world is divided in two realms:

1. Dar Al Islam - the Abode of Islam: that part of the world where the ordinances of Islam are established and which is under of a Moslem ruler.
2. Dar Al Harb – the Abode of War, where Islam does not rule and therefore must be conquered by Islam.

Theoretically, this implies a constant state of war with the non-Moslem world. Yet, as this was proved an impossible option, the Islamic jurists found in Islam a tradition that made peaceful relations with the non-Moslem world possible; a third abode was conceived, named Dar Al Sulh – the Abode of reconciliation.

In Christian Europe, the long series of religious wars, in the late Middle Ages and early modernity, led to the gradual separation between church and state, between religion and politics. This separation was eventually, after a long resistance, accepted by the Christian churches.

It thus turns out that in actual historical reality the religions can arrive at arrangements of peace and mutual accommodation, because the alternative – everlasting war between the religions – would be too negative to contemplate.

### **III. Project Implementation**

The program implementation went through two stages; the first between 1997 and 2001 and the second between 2001 and the present.

In the first stage, the program was implemented jointly by Israelis and Palestinians.

The second stage showed the deterioration of the political and security conditions on both the Palestinian and Israeli sides.

We asked ourselves the question: is it possible under the present circumstances to continue the project or should we stop waiting for a change of conditions? The institute was of the opinion that it would be wrong to stop after all the work and effort made in the preparatory stage and that we had to continue the implementation because of its important educational and national value for the Palestinian nation. We believe that we are destined to live together as two peoples, we reject the use of force, violence, domination and keep on searching outlets that would help ending the occupation and oppression, and by doing so, will eventually lead to a human and full recognition of the other and a peacefully living next to him. Since the joint Palestinian/ Israeli implementation was unthinkable under Intifada conditions, it was decided to implement the project on two separate tracks. Dr. Jacobus Schoneveld continued his work as a coordinator between the two sides.

#### ***Implementation Structure:***

##### **1. Project Administration**

The administration has consisted of the AEI director general and two coordinators (Moslem and Christian) one in Bethlehem and the other in Ramallah in the West Bank, and an assistant director responsible for youth affairs. Their responsibility has been to make contact with the participating schools, prepare curricula and other different courses and activities and coordinate among schools.

##### **2. Participating Schools:**

There are fourteen participating schools; seven in Bethlehem and seven in Ramallah. 50% of the teachers involved in the project are Moslem and 50% Christian. The ma-

jority of the schools are private, where Christian and Moslem students learn together. The majority of the teachers participate since the project's first year. This gives the program consistency, progress and follow-up through the cumulative experience of the teachers. The numbers of the participating male and female students are each year about 500. They are from grades 9th, 10th or 11th. The AEI youth group which participates in the project involves around 30 male and female students who come from various Bethlehem schools.

#### **IV. Curricular and Extra-curricular Activities**

##### ***a. Teacher/ Student Training Sessions***

Teacher and student training sessions by educators and specialists are being held upon the request of the participating schools in coordination and planning with the teachers and students. The choice of the inter-religious topics, which are related to the themes in the project curriculum, are left to the students so as to encourage their involvement and participation. The presentations aim at deepening the understanding of the concepts and values of the educational units among the participants.

##### ***b. Educational Fieldtrips***

Fieldtrips are an essential and vital educational tool in AEI's "do" methodology and come back especially in this project. Fieldtrips allow the students to get a feeling of context and roots, but also give our youths a chance to breathe and escape a suffocating environment and the frustrations associated with life here. Fieldtrips allow for student-centered discussions and a break from our rote-learning school practices. Finally, they help our youths to connect themselves to the land and the community in an open and direct way. By combining knowledge with fun we strengthen active learning and also discover new methods of learning, including folkloric and heritage activities.

##### ***c. Joint Celebrations of Religious Feasts and Holidays***

Christian and Islamic holidays are usually jointly celebrated by school communities at Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Al Adha Feast (Abraham's sacrifice of his son), and other occasions. The importance and meanings of these feasts are usually discussed by Christian and Islamic religious panelists. Sharing food is part of such celebrations. The eating together and conviviality help in strengthening national unity and bring people to better understanding and looking into their cultural and social traditions of faith.

##### ***d. Bethlehem Summer School of Communication:***

AEI's summer schools have been held in Bethlehem for the past four consecutive years. They come at the end of the school year during the summer school vacation in order to enable our university, school students and teachers to participate. Each year a different value is chosen that fosters better understanding and helps to achieve the aims and



principles of the project. For example, during the summer school 2006 we chose the value of "history," and looked for examples of Christian-Moslem living together over time.

#### **e. Curriculum Development**

After five years of implementing the Living in the Holy Land project, a special evaluation seminar was held in which teachers, educators and experts in curriculum designing, and representatives of UNRWA and the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian National Authority participated in April/May 2004 in Jericho. The aim of this training and evaluation seminar was to review the curriculum materials developed as for both their contents and form.

### **V. Conclusion**

To conclude, let us go back to the quotation of the letter to the Romans that I chose as an inspiration of my personal witness. Hope doesn't put to shame; new life will prevail, on condition that we are purified by the test of suffering and discouragement. "Suffering produces endurance; endurance (or sumud) produces character; character produces hope" it is said. We are not hoping only for ourselves but for all the women and men and children in the midst of whom we live. In Romans 15, verse 30, Paul writes: "I urge you, brothers and sisters by our Lord and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle in prayers."

Prayers become a struggle with and for others. Prayers help to envision a different reality, without discrimination and oppression. Prayers help to humanize others. This modest project aims at contributing to such a vision by creating better inter-religious relations based on mutual recognition and a better understanding of each other's presence, history, identity and dignity by learning to know about the other's religion in a real life context. After all, the environment and creation in the Holy Land are suffering from the present lack of peace and are "waiting to be set free" (Rom 8:21)