

## Students of diverse faiths seek understanding at Bossey WCC, 14 July 2011



*Mohammed Azhari, Australia: "In coming to know one another as persons, we will learn to respect each other."*

*by Theodore Gill (\*)*

**"Religions as instruments of peace" is the subtitle of a 2011 summer course on "Building an interfaith community". Twenty-three students from more than a dozen nations have assembled at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland for the course which runs from 4 to 29 July.**

One of the early lecturers admitted that many observers today see religions not as instruments of peace but as reasons for conflict. "Our hands as religious leaders are not clean," said Rabbi Richard Marker of the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations.

The experience of too many nations and their governments, he added, "is that religion is a cause of divisiveness that works against shared values."

Now in its fifth year, the institute's summer course on interfaith relations brings together students of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions for a time of study, shared experience of one another's sacred spaces and reflection on their own cultures, spiritualities and worldviews.

The student body is made up of nine men and fourteen women. Ten are Christian, seven are Muslim and six are Jewish.

They have come from Latin America, western and eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australia. Three are sisters from religious orders in Colombia, Guatemala and Romania. Three students have come from Israel, and three are Palestinians.

Danielle Antebi of Israel, whose academic background is in criminology and international politics, was eager to join the course after her brother's positive experience as a student last summer. "He is an archaeologist who gives presentations on Israel in various places," she says, "and he wanted an opportunity to meet people from different countries and hear their opinions of Israel and of the relationships between people of differing religions."

She concluded that a month at Bossey, overlooking Lake Geneva, would provide her "a great opportunity to meet and interact with people representing a number of cultures."

Charlotte Lindhé heard of the course from her pastor in the Church of Sweden. Following her graduation from secondary school, she began an ambitious programme of travel and backpacking that has taken her to China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Future destinations include Greece, India and North America.

"I hope to learn more about my own religion in relation to the beliefs of others," she explains, "and I hope to be able to share what I learn with my own parish and others when I return to Sweden."

She says that her interest in inter-religious activity was awakened while visiting Israel and Palestine where she saw "religions existing side by side, yet not really living together."

### **Move beyond tolerance of differences to appreciation**

Mohammed Azhari of Australia, who pursued studies in Islamic teaching and inter-religious dialogue during his graduate work in Damascus, sees the course at Bossey as "a brilliant opportunity to come and encounter people of other faiths. Here, we will begin by building community among ourselves, hoping that this will be a first step toward some greater achievement."

Azhari sees the students asking themselves, "How do people attain peace through prayer, through their beliefs? In coming to know one another as persons, we will learn to respect each other. In this way we can move beyond mere tolerance to appreciation, to acceptance even of what makes us different. And this is for the best, since it is ignorance that leads to conflict."

During the first week of classes, Rabbi Marker was joined in discussing Judaism by Grand Rabbi Marc Raphaël Guedj, president of the *Fondation Racines et Sources* (Roots and Sources Foundation).

Professor Fawzia Al-Ahmawi of the University of Geneva and Hafid Ouardiri, president of the Ta'aruf (Interknowing) Foundation, are offering their expertise on

Islam, and Christianity is to be interpreted by several staff members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as by Professor S. Wesley Ariarajah of Drew University in the United States of America.

Professor Odair Pedroso Mateus of the Ecumenical Institute, academic coordinator for the 2011 summer course, champions this opportunity for “promoting encounter, not provoking conflict”, for asking hard questions and exploring the possibility of “dialogue as a means of peaceful change” in the world, for “encouraging community among civilizations, rather than a clash.”

The Ecumenical Institute administration is sensitive to the variety of dietary practices among the students, and spaces for worship have been arranged appropriate to each of the religious traditions represented.

Founded in 1946, the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey is the international centre for encounter, dialogue and formation of the WCC. It is related to the University of Geneva through a covenant agreement with the university’s autonomous faculty of Protestant theology.

The summer course has been jointly organized by the Ecumenical Institute, the WCC programme on Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation, the Ta'aruf Foundation and the *Fondation Racines et Sources*.

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