

The Trail of Pope Francis – Holy Sites in Jerusalem Conference Report

Summary

On May 20th 2014, Search for Common Ground's (SFCG) Jerusalem office held a day conference at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, in partnership with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung office, entitled **The Trail of Pope Francis – Holy Sites in Jerusalem**. The conference took place five days before the visit of Pope Francis to the Holy Land and drew a packed audience of 108 people including top religious leaders from the Abrahamic faiths, senior European diplomats, academics, and members of the local and international press. Reflecting on changes over the past half century, the conference discussed issues relating to Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, opportunities for inter and intra-faith reconciliation, the vision of the Holy See for Jerusalem and its inhabitants, and the status of Israeli/Vatican relations. Time was set aside at the end of each session for interchange with the audience and resulted in lively, often passionate, discussion. Feedback received after the conference was extremely positive. People commented on it being a significant learning experience as well as being highly interesting and practical. An article referencing the conference was published in the New York Times on May 29th: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/world/middleeast/mass-planned-on-mount-zion-stirs-ancient-rivalries.html?_r=1 Other articles in a variety of languages based themselves on information gleaned from the discussions.

This conference followed a successful first conference on Holy Sites organized by the SFCG Jerusalem office at the Israeli Foreign Ministry on October 30th 2013. Both meetings are part of a pilot SFCG is implementing in the Holy Land to gauge the practical effectiveness of a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites it has developed together with three other international non-profit organizations. The Universal Code endeavours to safeguard holy places and promote interreligious reconciliation worldwide by demonstrating that dialogue between relevant bodies leading to common action is a significant tool for building relationships and reducing tensions around holy places.

Funding for the conference was provided by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and included payment for simultaneous translation into Arabic, English and Hebrew. The conference proceedings are available on CD.

(Annex 1 – Invitation to the Conference)

Agenda Report

Welcoming Panel

Sharon Rosen, co-director of Jerusalem's SFCG office and organizer of the conference, opened the meeting with words of welcome and an explanation of the Universal Code of Conduct on



Holy Sites and its purpose – to reduce tensions and better protect holy places by building systematic dialogue and cooperation leading to common action between religious leaders and other relevant bodies. She reflected on the historic conciliatory meeting between Pope Paul 6th and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras exactly 50 years ago that was being commemorated and celebrated the following week at the meeting of Pope Francis and the present

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The event itself could be seen as a symbol of the peace that still needs to be attained in the Holy Land.

Michael Mertes, resident representative of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung office added his words of welcome. He commented on the recent spate of attacks by politically motivated extremists against holy sites in the Holy Land but emphasised that hate crimes are a global phenomenon that attack religion but also the state itself and its rule of law. They are a challenge to the state's ability to protect itself against enemies from within. How the state deals with these challenges is a test of its democratic maturity.



Finally, **Svein Sevje**, Norwegian Ambassador to Israel, self-professed long-time friend of SFCG and representative of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry offered his words of welcome. He said that the generosity of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry that has enabled the creation and activities of the Universal Code, stems from its belief that dialogue between religious leaders is a productive part of the reconciliation process and must be encouraged.

Session One

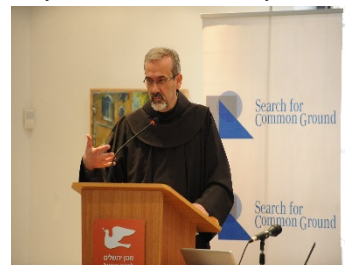


Professor Yitzhak Reiter, the moderator, set the scene by commenting on the timeliness of the conference and provided a contextual frame to the session which focused on two Jerusalem case studies of shared sites, Mount Zion and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He pointed on the one hand to the growing number of hate crimes in Israel against holy sites and on the other hand, to articles 4 and 5 of the Universal Code which offer a way forward to solve conflicts around

shared sites through dialogue and joint decision making by the relevant bodies. He also questioned the ‘sanctity of the status quo’ as a way of maintaining ‘quiet’ and asked whether the time had not arrived to explore this issue further in order to better serve people who want to pray at their holy sites.

a. Mount Zion Case Study

Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who is the Christian custodian of holy sites in the Holy Land pointed out that the Cenacle on Mount Zion is the second most important site for Christians yet adherents are hardly allowed to pray there. He emphatically stated that the Vatican is not claiming sovereignty or ownership, contrary to unsubstantiated rumours flying as a result of Pope Francis’ visit, but it is seeking an agreement with Israel to allow Christians their basic rights to pray there on a regular basis.



Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir, whose Jerusalem Intercultural Center is located on Mt Zion, spoke of the ‘tenants meeting’ that was held on the mountain (the first in 500 years!) to promote dialogue and mutual understanding, with another meeting planned for June. There had been a deterioration of relationships and a growth in violence over the past year but they are searching to find a way, through dialogue, for the mountain to be a place everyone can visit in harmony.

Professor Mohammad Dajani whose family were custodians of the holy sites on Mount Zion for hundreds of years during the Ottoman period gave an historic overview of the changes that have taken place as sovereignty has changed hands. He voiced his belief that all people should have full access to pray at their sites on the mountain and that they should receive full protection.

He also strongly asserted that Islam is a religion that pursues peace and that it must not be judged by its small minority of hardliners.

Both **Hana Bendowsky and Merav Horovitz**, who work in education, spoke of the complexities of teaching about the history of the shared site and of promoting mutual acceptance and respect in light of long standing prejudices, ignorance and attempts to erase historical facts in favour of a particular religion. Despite the difficulties though, they insisted that shared sites are an excellent opportunity to talk about all three Abrahamic religions and that adults and youth must be challenged to understand the complexities through dialogue and site visits.

b. Church of the Holy Sepulchre



The panel, which included Greek Orthodox **Archbishop Aristarchos**, Armenian **Archbishop Aris Shervanian** and **Police Inspector Johnny Kassabri** discussed the Holy Fire Ceremony, its venerable history stretching over one thousand years, and the complexities of accommodating tens of thousands of pilgrims who attend this once a year ceremony. While Archbishop Aristarchos confirmed that cooperation takes place with

the police and that there had been improvement in police conduct, he called for more sensitivity to pilgrims' needs in the future.

Archbishop Shervanian sought acknowledgement of the Armenian role as an equal player in the ceremony and criticised the police for its handling of the ceremony. In response Inspector Kassabri

emphasised the complexity of the ceremony which was prepared for months in advance by the police in multiple discussions with the players and which had to take into consideration both the safety and security of all the people in the Old City of Jerusalem as well as the needs of the pilgrims themselves. The police had made changes in 2014 to give privileged access to local Christians.

Lunch in the garden of the Jerusalem Institute provided opportunities for lively discussion among the participants and interviews by the many journalists of panellists and other significant leaders in the audience.

Session Two

This session provided two rich presentations by senior religious figures of their faiths, the **Auxiliary (Catholic) Bishop of Jerusalem, William Shomali and Rabbi David Rosen** who has been knighted by the Holy See for his work in Catholic/Jewish relations.

Mgsr William Shomali spoke of the Holy See's vision of Jerusalem. Basing himself on many quotations of the present and previous popes, he said that the holiness of Jerusalem for all three monotheistic religions both unites and divides us through its multiple narratives. It is therefore essential that the parties to the negotiations take fair and appropriate account of the sacred and universal character of the city and it requires that any possible solution must have the support of the three religions, both at the local and at the international level. Solutions must be based on international law and cooperation and there is a deep need for a process of reconciliation and forgiveness.



Rabbi Rosen pointed to the transformational changes that have taken place over the past fifty years in Jewish/Catholic, Israel/Vatican relations which are quite revolutionary and demonstrate that with the right leadership, anything is possible. From a stand opposed to Zionism, the Church now has diplomatic relations with Israel and is at the forefront of denouncing anti-Semitism. At the same time there is a need for the transformed Church teachings to be greater absorbed into Catholic grass-roots education and activities in various countries round the world where these influences are less evident.

Sharon Rosen concluded the conference by returning to the message of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites which calls for dialogue by all relevant parties in reducing conflicts around sacred sites. She also differentiated between the sense of belonging to a particular place or land which can be inclusive as opposed to a desire to own a place which is necessarily exclusive in that what is 'mine' is not 'yours'. There was a need to reduce the fear that loss of ownership means loss of access. This can only happen by building trust among peoples through dialogue and respectful engagement.

Conclusion

The conference was an excellent example of how sensitive issues regarding holy sites can be explored by religious leaders of different faiths and other professionals through dialogue and debate, while seeking and suggesting constructive ways forward. The meeting was considered highly successful by the organizers, the panelists and the audience and was described in letters sent to the organizers as 'scintillating', 'excellent', 'practical', 'great learning experience' 'timely', and 'well organized'. As such it advanced the purpose of the Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites and the pilot taking place in the Holy Land.

Annex 1

You are cordially invited to a conference on:

The Trail of Pope Francis: Holy Sites in Jerusalem

20 May 2014

Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies – 20 Radak Street, Jerusalem

RSVP via e-mail: jeru@sfcg.org

On 25 - 26th May 2014, Pope Francis will visit the Holy Land and meet with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Jerusalem. This encounter commemorates the historic meeting of Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras on Mount Zion exactly 50 years ago.

Reflecting on changes over the past half century, this conference will discuss issues relating to Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, opportunities for inter and intra-faith reconciliation, the vision of the Holy See for Jerusalem and its inhabitants, and the status of Israeli/Vatican relations.

The conference is taking place within the framework of a pilot being implemented in the Holy Land to gauge the practical effectiveness of a Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites. The Universal Code endeavors to safeguard holy places and promote interreligious reconciliation worldwide by demonstrating that dialogue between relevant bodies leading to common action is a significant tool for building relationships and reducing tensions around holy places.

The conference will provide simultaneous translation in Arabic, English and Hebrew.

9:45am *Registration*

10:15 – 10:30am *Welcome and Introduction*

- **Sharon Rosen**, Co-director, Jerusalem office, Search for Common Ground
- **Michael Mertes**, Resident Representative, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung office, Israel
- **H.E. Svein Sevje**, Norwegian Ambassador to Israel

10:30am – 12:30pm *Holy Sites Case Studies: Conflicts and Solutions*

a. **Mount Zion**

- **Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, Custos of the Holy Land
- **Dr. Hagai Agmon-Snir**, Director, Jerusalem Intercultural Center
- **Professor Mohammad Dajani**, Founder, Wasatia; Lecturer, Al Quds University
- **Hana Bendcowsky**, Programme Director, Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations
- **Merav Horovitz**, Programme Director, Yad Ben Zvi

b. **Church of the Holy Sepulcher – The Holy Fire Ceremony**

- **Archbishop Aristarchos**, Archbishop of Constantina, Chief Secretary of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem
- **Archbishop Aris Shirvanyan**, Director of Ecumenical and Foreign Relations at the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem
- **Inspector Johnny Kassabri**, Liaison Officer for Christian Communities, Merchav David, Jerusalem

Moderator: Professor Yitzhak Reiter, Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies and Ashkelon College

12:30 – 1:30pm *Lunch*

1:30 – 3:00pm *A Vision for Jerusalem and Israeli-Vatican Relations: 1964 - 2014*

a. The Holy See's Vision for Jerusalem

- **Monsignor William Shomali**, Auxiliary Bishop, Latin Patriarchate

b. Israel-Vatican Relations

- **Rabbi David Rosen**, International Director, Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee

Moderator: Sr. Karmela Farrugia nds, Religious of the Congregation of our Lady of Sion

3:00 – 3:15pm *Concluding Remarks*

- **Sharon Rosen**, Co-director, Jerusalem office, Search for Common Ground