

Interreligious dialogue for sustainable peace: The Library of Alexandria building bridges of tolerance and mutual understanding

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Abstract:

Tolerance has been always the main criteria identifying the Egyptian nature.

We believe that the basis of all religions – with no exceptions – are common. It is an invitation for good conduct, respectable behaviour, loving others and not hurting anyone.

Violence has nothing to do with religion, it's a human act created by narrow-minded people and ignorant mentalities.

Terrorism has been accelerating in Egypt since the 90s and reached its peak during the ruling of the Muslims Brotherhood after the revolution in January 2011.

Believing in the power of culture, literacy and arts as the gate for solidarity, understanding and tolerance among nations, the Library of Alexandria has developed a number of projects to narrow the gap among religions, cultures and civilizations.

In this paper, I will highlight two major projects that the library is working on in this phase.

The first project is an invitation from the library to the young generation, especially those who come from religious schools and rural areas, to come in groups and visit the library, attend enlightening lectures, concerts, go through different activities and visit museums at the library to learn more about their country heritage and give them the sense of inclusion and broaden their minds and fight extreme and intolerant thinking.

The second project is a palace from the royal era that the library has taken after an agreement with the government and decided to transfer this magnificent building to become a museum to all religions known on the Egyptian soil, starting from the Pharaonic, Greek, Roman eras and including the Jewish, Christian and Islamic heritage.

Keywords: literacy, intellectual thinking, trusted information, interfaith dialogue

Introduction

Egypt is the cradle of holy religions and on its soil, different cultures and nations are bonded throughout the history in a unique phenomenon.

You walk through the streets in Egypt; you will find a mosque next to a church and a synagogue, a nun in a mosque and a veiled Muslim woman in a church during certain ceremonies and celebrations.

Tolerance has been always the main criteria identifying the Egyptian nature.

We believe that the basis of all religions – with no exceptions – are common. It is an invitation for good conduct, respectable behavior, loving others and not hurting anyone. If we understand these rules, we will never participate in any religious confrontations.

In Christianity, it is said: “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you.” In Islam, it is said: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction,”

Violence has nothing to do with religion, it’s a human act created by narrow-minded people and ignorant mentalities.

Recently, the Egyptians have been facing unusual fanaticism and terrorism from different religions and sects. This causes, with no doubt, real conflicts and sometimes even disasters that put the whole community in serious suffering and grief.

Terrorism has been accelerating in Egypt since the 90s and reached its peak during the ruling of the Muslims Brotherhood after the revolution in January 2011.

The Egyptian moderate nature that never accepted extremism had therefore rebelled again in 2013 and people went to the streets in the revolution of June 2013 and took off the radical Islamic party and president.

Since 2014, the current President of Egypt has raised a call for action to revive the nature of tolerance and spread peace among people in Egypt.

The Library of Alexandria took its part in this initiative and decided to be an active partner in the government plan.

The Library of Alexandria is not just an extraordinarily beautiful building; it is also a vast complex where the arts, history, philosophy, and science come together. Moreover, the myriad activities it offers have made it a place for open discussion, dialogue, and understanding.

Believing in the power of culture, literacy and arts as the gate for solidarity, understanding and tolerance among nations, the Library of Alexandria has developed a number of projects to narrow the gap among religions, cultures and civilizations. The goal of these projects is to fight the culture of hatred, inferiority and illiteracy with culture, arts and inclusion, which is the way for a sustainable peaceful nation.

There will be no peace among the nations without peace among religions. There will be no peace among religions without dialogue among religions.

Interfaith dialogue should enhance our sensitivity to the feelings of all professing religious people in their relationship with God. Good dialogue should, in addition, result in the deepening of the faith of every participant.

Participants in the dialogue should represent their faith group views trying to avoid subjects that involve fundamental and polarized differences, which can bring on deeply emotional reactions without adding to understanding.

In this paper, I will highlight two major projects that the library is working on in this aspect.

First Project:

The first project is an opened dialogue platform offered by the Library of Alexandria to the young generation from all over Egypt. It is an ongoing program that started in the beginning of 2016. It encompasses a number of activities like for examples: lectures on literature, history, religion and culture, cultural visits, musical concerts, handicraft and arts workshops, visits to museums and historical sites.

The first phase of the project included twelve courses on Islamic culture in Cairo, Alexandria, Assiut, Kafr El Sheikh, Giza and Port Said. The courses targeted young people from the age of 18 to 35 years old. It encompassed a number of lectures given by eminent professors, Sheikhs from Al Azhar, social scientists and some selected high profile figures. Some of the themes covered during this course were: the exegesis of the Quran, prophetic sayings and traditions, Islamic history, Arabic scientific heritage, Islamic law Shari'ah, conditions for delivering formal and advisory opinions in Islam, Islamic arts and architecture, Islamic Jurisprudence, Islamic thinking, manuscripts, and philosophy, Arabic calligraphy and language, Arabic literature and Sufism.

At the end of the courses each participant received a set of books for the value of 500 EGP as a gift from the library.

The second phase of the project started in January 2018 with a new action plan and approach. The program was categorized in three different levels.

The first level is dedicated for school students from all over Egypt specially those who come from Upper Egypt and other rural areas. This level aims at thriving creative thinking, entrenching the value of arts, culture and literature, and developing personal skills and level of literacy. The library intends to have this program implemented in many places in Egypt starting from the Library of Alexandria main building in Alexandria and Beit El Senary, a historical building affiliated to the library, in Cairo then it will be extended to Upper Egypt and Delta.

The second level is designed for university students using the 20 Embassies of Knowledge premises that the library of Alexandria established in universities and research centers across Egypt to expand its services and programs. This level aims at enriching the cultural knowledge for the university students in different domains like the Pharaonic history, Coptic culture, modern Egyptian culture and emphasizing their creativity skills.

The third level targets young people who finished their studies. The library works at this level in collaboration with Misr Public library branches and cultural centers in different governorates in Egypt. This level aims at forming a cultural and scientific dialogue with young people to consolidate their patriotic feelings and principles. The dialogue should answer all inquiries and worries disturbing this category of people using and intellectual and rational way leaving no space for extremism and violence to get to them.

In addition to all these activities, the library often invites distinguished religious figures to give enlightening scientific lectures to minimize the gap in understanding the others' beliefs and culture. As an example, the visit of Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria in February 2018.

This project with all its activities tends to pass on to the new generation real and valuable scientific experiences from trusted figures in the society to fill the gap of empty and illiterate minds from which terrorism, violence and extremism can sneak in. In fact, the discussions and

brainstorming reflect the real needs of the new generation and their craving for knowledge and reliable information.

Second Project:

The second project is a palace from the royal era that the library has taken after an agreement with the government and decided to transfer this magnificent building to become a museum to all religions known on the Egyptian soil, starting from the Pharaonic, Greek, Roman eras and including the Jewish, Christian and Islamic heritage.

The museum is a proof for basic beliefs for openness and tolerance, which are deeply rooted, in the Egyptian society.

The collection in the museum covers the following themes:

- *Religion* and *Faith* are the keys for civilization in Egypt and for the characteristics describing the Egyptian human nature. This section includes temples, Pharaonic tombs, Islamic and Coptic architecture and other items.
- The effect of the Egyptian religion on the world (the first cultural dialogue ever known). Some examples of Egyptian temples and antiquities that were found in Arabian Peninsula and the Levant area will be displayed.
- Egypt has been always great support to religion and prophets like Ibrahim, Joseph, Moses, the holy family, and others. The collection for this theme includes texts from holy books where Egypt is mentioned.
- Tolerance and respecting others' beliefs is the basis for life in Egypt throughout history. Example: The Elephantine antiquities.
- The Septuagint, the oldest translation of the old testimony in the world was done in Alexandria. The museum will display manuscripts proving this fact.
- The effect of the old Pharaonic faith on the old ages. This section will show texts proving this fact from books and lectures by the Evangelical Theological Seminary and texts from a book written by an America priest.
- Egypt manufacturing the Kaaba cover for Saudi Arabia by Copts from the Fatimid era and the last convoy for sending the cover in 1963 was lead by a Coptic Christian soldier.
- The significant role of Copts in shaping the Islamic civilization, for example in the industry, literature, arts, architecture, etc. Some products of this time will be displayed.
- A section at the museum will be dedicated to the meeting between Saint Francis and Sultan Kamel El Ayouby in 1219 during the Crusades. This meeting is considered the first interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims and the East and West.
- The role of Copts in printing the holy Quran. This section shows examples of these printed Qurans.
- The effect of the Quran and the Arabic Culture on the first translations of the bible and the religious terms. Samples of manuscripts will be exhibited.
- A collection showing the similarities in the motifs used in the manuscripts for both the bible and the Quran.
- Similarity between the front side of the Coptic museum and El Akmar mosque in El-Moez street in Cairo. Photos of both buildings will be displayed in this section.
- Also there will be a section dedicated to Dr. Henry Amin Awad, a Copt and a great lover, collector and donor of Islamic heritage. He is called *The Monk of Islamic*

Monuments. This section will present a show on Dr. Henry life journey, his belongings, and his role in saving the Islamic heritage.

- A display of some samples of the Jewish Genizah documents.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to point that these are only some projects at the Library of Alexandria in disseminating knowledge and building bridges of tolerance and mutual understanding as part of the government strategy for facing extremism and terrorism.

Everyone at the library is proud to be part of this enlightening institution and when you look at the design of the Library of Alexandria, you will notice that all windows are in the shape of an eye facing an open space, which is the Mediterranean Sea.

The design is an inspiration for the library vision to become the world's window on Egypt and Egypt's window on the world.

This is exactly what the library does and I would like to quote Dr. El Fekki saying that the government has concentrated after the revolution in June on the society *hardware* (infrastructure, facilities, etc.) and that it is the time now to concentrate on the *software* (people, education, knowledge, literacy, etc.).

This is the time for libraries transforming societies as fighting with guns can kill terrorists, but fighting with knowledge can kill terrorism; so knowledge is the key library weapon and the Library of Alexandria is determined to use it.

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