

WIHW 2013 Korea

A four-hour long celebratory event (from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.) marking the third World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) was held on Sunday, 3 February 2013, in Seoul, South Korea. The program of activities for the occasion was hatched and orchestrated by the Korea Society for UN Initiative for Peace among Religions (KSUNIPAR), a non-religious and non-governmental organization, with the full support of a local Christian church, i.e., "The Little Church of Zaccheus"¹, Sugyo Dong, , Mapo, Seoul.

The event was held without fanfare; it was just another Sunday service at a familiar church with usual congregation and guests. The only unusual part was a wall notice board at the entrance announcing the World Interfaith Harmony Week and expected appearance of an Imam from the Seoul Central Mosque. The hoped for appearance of the Mayor of Seoul did not materialize.

From all accounts, what went on inside the Church on that day was a groundbreaking affair involving two great Abrahamic religions in Korea since Islam found its way to Korea some sixty years ago. From all accounts available to us, this was indeed the first time an Imam visited a church in Korea and met and talked with the congregation freely and gracefully for over two hours..

A brief description of Islam in Korea would be in order here. Islam was first introduced to Korea during the Korean war in the mid-1950s by the Turkish troops serving under the UN Command to repel North Korean aggression. Today, the strength of the Korean Muslim community stands at 35,000 strong and along with some 100,000 foreign Muslims resident in Korea are served by 10 Mosques in the country. And yet, Islam pretty much remains outside the main religious and cultural purview of the country.

Furthermore, as elsewhere and quite often, there is a large reservoir of misrepresentations about Islam which, aggravated by international security conditions and erroneous information on Islamic way of the recent past, makes Islam overtly unattractive in the perceptions of other religions as well as in the public eyes at large. The questions raised at the end of the Imam's presentation reflect, (greater detail, below) these earnest concerns were very much in evidence, although much of what was raised was intelligently and logically responded to in earnest by the Imam so that truth was quite discernible to the audience.

¹¹ The Honorable Mayor of the City of Seoul, Park Won Soon, personally writing in a blog described the Church as a "a tiny lamp light" denoting the Church's exemplary characteristics of purity, devotion and commitment" among the Korean Christian community.

It may be recalled parenthetically that the observance of the 2012 WIHW was a first pioneering event involving the Imam's presentation to a group of meditation practicing Buddhists which has successfully served as a precursor of the 2013 activities. On the whole, this year's gathering had shown a greater interest in the level and quality of participation. This year's questions tended to show that the audience showed higher level of substantive knowledge on Islam. This gives us the hope for more successful get-togethers for the future with greater enthusiasm consistent with more varied and improved format, etc. which KSUNIPAR should strive to devise.

This year's WIHW contents were in four parts, i.e., (A) Church sermon; (B) Imam's lecture; (C) Luncheon and A vocal recital, and (D) Dialogue with the Imam

Church Sermon

Hon. Professor cum Pastor of the Church, Dr. Jacob (Kyoung-Jae) Kim devoted substantial portion of his sermon to the rationale and significance of the UN General Assembly's resolutions of these past three decades on the critical importance of harmony and dialogue among world religions and called upon all religions to help follow the counsel of the United Nations.

He urged reading of the resolutions, now available in Korean language, thanks to a booklet recently published by KSUNIPAR. He pledged his fullest support to do his utmost to take them to heart. He referred, in particular, to the two giant religions of the world, Christianity and Islam, both of the same Abraham origin.

Special Luncheon

A special luncheon was prepared by the Church for the benefit of some 60 regular members, about 20 special guests and KSUNIPAR staffers. The Church has put up banners indicating the WIHW observance.

Imam's Lecture

Following a brief introductory statement by Representative of KSUNIPAR (Yoon-Yul Kim), Imam Abdul Rahman Lee, (Ju Ha), a Korean national who graduated from the Medina National Theological University of Saudi Arabia in 1994 and successfully met Ph.D requirements from Meiji University of Japan in 2004 spoke to the congregation and public guests. The lecture was appropriately titled "Understanding and Misunderstanding of Islam". The use of Power Point technology for the occasion facilitated full absorption of the lecture. The lecturer was soft spoken and clear; it ran for about 50 minutes.

Questions and Answers

After a brief musical program, Q/A session ensued under the chairmanship of Pastor Dr. Jacob (Kyoung Jae) Kim who ensured smooth execution of the procedures involved. There were some six key issues that were raised in the session.

- They were: (1) Two major factions of Islam, i.e., Shia and Sunni. How and why the split came about? What would be major differences? How will their split affect Islam's future
- (2) Sufism's characteristics? What would be its standing in Islam
- (3) Terrorism under Islam. What does "Jihad" really mean? Are acts of suicide bombs. justified for martyrdom?
- (4) What does Hijab or Chador signify in Islam? Is it a factor in Muslim womanhood?
- (5) How does Qu'ran evaluate tenets of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism (all three Oriental religions)
- (6) How do Islamic leaders reach Imamhood?, Educational contents?

"Condemning Terrorism"

An English publication by the "Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought" was presented by Yoon-Yul Kim, Representative of KSUNIPAR. to Imam Abdul Rahman for his future public discussions. It contains valuable statistical data on terrorism and official statements which Imam Abdul Rahman may find useful in his future public discourses.

Conclusion

This note is in fulfillment of my earlier advice that a full account of Korea's observance of the 2013 WIHW activities would be forthcoming shortly after the planned event is held as hoped. Korea proudly remains as an active participant of all previous WIHW celebrations since its inauguration. As far as the value of the WIHW spirit is concerned, let me say that without it being enshrined in the General Assembly, none of the considerable interfaith advances being made around the world could have taken place, leaving the UN ideologies, by and large, ineffectual.

I am far from claiming that what we have done last year and again now being brought about to be a full measure of success. Not, far from it. Peace among religions everywhere will remain unrealizable for a long time to come. We should, however, be happy with the thought that a beginning, even if it is still soft and warm, is being made however insignificant it may seem.

If in Korea, we can get a ball rolling with active interfaith exchanges and mutual learning processes, involving multiple religions, we have indeed done something no one believes possible. For Korea, we could not possibly have imagined an Imam walking into a Church for a town-hall

like get-together chat with a bunch of Christians without so much as a smile.

Now that we know it is possible, why can't we have more Imams visit churches with Christian pastors reciprocating it?. What happened at the "Little Church of Zaccheus" in Seoul last Sunday was indeed a great practical accomplishment..

I wish to put on records my sincere gratitude to Dr. Jacob (Kyoung-Jae) Kim for his unfailing support and courage to spread the gospel of interfaith harmony whenever and wherever in need.

Our thought now turns to developing a number of new approaches to facilitate interfaith dialogues and additional areas of utilizing interfaith machinery for specific programs aimed at creating collective social engineering mechanisms. More on them later!

If clarifications are required on the above statement, please advise.

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