

Translated by the World Scout Bureau from "La Croix" newspaper, published in Paris 4 December 2003. Original article in French is available on scout.org.

GATHERING: "Learning to live together": 1st World Scout Inter-religious Symposium held in Valencia

Scouts want to help transcend religious conflicts

VALENCIA From our special correspondent

The participants who attended the 1st World Scout Inter-religious Symposium held in Valencia from 29 November to 2 December went home full of hope. They had been faced with an important and topical challenge: "Learning to live together: Tolerance and Solidarity", which was the theme of this four-day symposium.

The appeal had met with a great response, and from far away (Sri Lanka, Polynesia). In total, there were more than 150 participants, representing some 35 national Scout organisations and a dozen Scout religious alliances.

"A symposium like this is the result of many years of reflection," explains Marie-Louise Correa, who chairs the World Scout Committee. "At every Jamboree, we realised that young people were praying in their separate corners. So we encouraged a change by introducing common prayer sites. Between the Jamboree in Chile and the next one in Thailand, the difference was spectacular. And that's how this symposium came about!"

Different religious celebrations, open to all, were shared intensely. Thus, Shabbat prayers brought together Polynesian Adventists, Christians, Buddhists and even Muslims. With almost all of them wearing the kippa, they spent an hour together following these prayers, with explanations given by three Jews.

"We need to know one another and to interrelate, but I realise that I would never have participated in a Shabbat ten years ago," declares Mohamed H. Al-Humaidi, Chairman of the Kuwait Scout Association. Imad Twal, Chaplain of the Catholic Scouts and Guides of Jordan, goes further, saying "I expect Scouting to be a step towards peace. Is that possible? Here, fear and political urgency make people open up. Scouting needs to be more visible in the Arab world."

And that was certainly the key question raised at this international gathering, i.e. how can Scouting, through its religious references, work as a mediator? "Our great fear at the moment is that of the infiltration of our association by fundamentalism," states Mohamed Rouabhi, Chief Chaplain of the Muslim Scouts of France.

For many, this symposium came at the right moment. "It allows us to return to the basics, to go out of our parish and to then tell young people what we have experienced here, because we don't have enough experience with other religions yet," believes Christian Larcher, Director of External and International Relations with the Scouts de France.

Frédéric Charbite, Chief Commissioner with the Eclaireuses et Eclaireurs Israélites de France, is encouraged by the joint presence of Muslim Arab countries and Israel. "Scouting has allowed us to interrelate. That's more than necessary at a time when, in France, interaction between communities is difficult and tensions are being felt in our association."

In this respect, the experience of the Israeli Scout Association, an all-religion association, has been extremely useful. "Our co-existence scheme between young Jews, Arabs and Druzes, who get together every two months for the weekend, has surprised more than a few," explains an amused Amos Ilani, International Commissioner of the Israeli Scout Association. Visibly moved from having "rediscovered the Assisi spirit", Jean-Marie Mallet-Guy, Chief Chaplain of the Scouts de France, concludes that this inter-religious dimension should be part of all training courses, to show that "through Scouting, religions are not sources of confrontation but of communion".

In any case, the symposium has met one of its objectives and the participants want a second symposium to be held in two years' time. A decision in this respect will be taken at the World Conference.

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