

Commonalities Found Between Islam, Buddhism

By JENIFER MILLER

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Eight visiting Islamic academic and government leaders met with several SGI-USA members at the Seattle Culture Center on July 22 to talk about religion, politics, war, the sexes and, most important, happiness in this world.

“The exciting part was how open and relaxed everyone here was,” member Dave Harris said. “The Islamic visitors were as anxious to dialogue as we were. Differences in language and religion were not a barrier.”

The eight guests, representing six Islamic countries (Gaza, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, the West Bank and Yemen), were traveling to different U.S. cities under the auspices of the World Affairs Council of Seattle.

The WAC International Visitor Program selected the SGI-USA to play host for this exchange because SGI-USA members practice a “non-traditional” religion in America, and because they were looking for an organization that could organize such a meeting quickly and make the Middle East visitors feel welcome.

With the short notice, an elaborate reception was still put together. A children’s exhibit on diversity filled one end of the lobby. Flower arrangements adorned walkways. A photo exhibit of SGI President Ikeda’s travels for peace was set up.

When the visitors arrived, people from all backgrounds were waiting with big smiles to greet them. And John MacFarland, city administrator of Tukwila, where the culture center is located, was on hand to offer welcoming words.

After a formal opening, the reception moved to a conference room for free-flowing talk on many subjects. What is the status of women in Buddhism? What is happiness? How can one overcome suffering? How do SGI-USA members propagate their faith?

“It was just like the scene in *The New Human Revolution*,” said Dave Harris. “Shin’ichi Yamamoto imagines a conference taking place among Nichiren, Jesus, Shakyamuni and Mohammed, religious leaders who fought for the people’s happiness throughout their lives. Shin’ichi says that a common understanding among people could be quickly reached based on such a conference. However, because such a conference is not actually possible, Shin’ichi says that it is up to the different groups’ believers today to return to the spirit of these religious teachers and talk with one another from that standpoint,” Mr. Harris said.

“As I saw from today, this is absolutely true,” agreed Waheed Ali Ahmed Rasheed, deputy governor from Yemen. He added that “people should continue to talk about commonalities to discover universal principles that in turn lead to fundamental solutions to world problems.”

Art Hoover, head of the joint territory’s Culture Department, said: “This conference was a real answer to my prayers. It was an affirmation that we can live out our faith on the world stage.”

Before leaving the United States a few days later, the eight visitors reported impressions of their trip to WAC, saying that their visit to the SGI-USA was the highlight of their stay and how they looked forward to similar get-togethers.

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