

# Breaking the Chain of Hate

Since the attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, there have been reactions both of hostility towards Muslims and of awakened interest in the Muslim world. In some quarters the 'clash of civilisations' world-view has gained ground. In the Muslim world there is apprehension about the consequences of the 'war on terrorism'.

Lebanon experienced 15 years of brutal civil war, ending in 1990. During those years and since, individuals and groups kept alive the idea of national reconciliation and worked to build relationships with people of other communities.

One such group felt that their experiences had taken on a wider significance in the light of the crisis between the West and the Muslim world. Initiatives of Change (formerly Moral Re-Armament) invited four of them to visit Britain for six days in April 2002 to share their perspectives.

## The Lebanese group

- **Assaad Shaftari**, an engineer who was a senior officer in a Christian militia. He has since made a public apology to those who were his victims during the war;
- **Muheiddine Shihab**, Mokhtar (Notary Public) of Ras Beirut, who has acknowledged the evil acts he committed as a commander of a Muslim militia;
- **Hisham Shihab**, a journalist who enlisted in a Muslim militia, then rebelled against orders to shoot civilians;
- **Ramez Salamé**, a lawyer who left a Christian militia and risked his life to cross Beirut's 'Green Line' of control to re-establish links with Muslims during the war.



*London: Assaad Shaftari, Hisham Shihab, Muhieddine Shihab, law student Ronnie Graham and Ramez Salamé*

## **Their programme**

### **In London**

- They spoke to three hundred people at a public meeting 'Breaking the Chain of Hate' in Westminster Cathedral Hall.
- In Parliament they briefed John Battle MP, the Prime Minister's adviser on faith issues, and later spoke at a meeting chaired by Sir Patrick Cormack MP.
- They met personalities from the Afro-Caribbean community in Brixton.

**In Liverpool**, they spoke at a reception attended by 35 community representatives from Merseyside and beyond. Two women, active in HOPE (Healing Our Past Experiences), came specially from Northern Ireland. One Catholic, the other Protestant, they had each lost a son in the conflict. Also present were representatives of the Warrington Ireland Reconciliation Enterprise (WIRE) set up after an IRA bomb killed two children in Warrington.

**Bradford** is the city with the highest proportion of Muslims in the UK. Here they were hosted jointly by the Council of Mosques and the Inner Ring Group of clergy of different denominations, chaired by Dr Philip Lewis, advisor to the Bishop of Bradford on inter-faith issues.



*Liverpool: the Lebanese group with women from Northern Ireland working together for reconciliation*

- Sher Azam, Chairman of the Bradford Council of Mosques, and other leaders of the Muslim community welcomed them at the Pakistani Community Centre.
- Dr Karen Abi-Ezzi, lecturer at the university's Department of Peace Studies, chaired a seminar attended by 40 post-graduate students.
- Archdeacon Guy Wilkinson, chairman of the Board of Governors of the Immanuel Church of England Community College, welcomed them to the school where they spoke to a class of students.



*Bradford: with lecturer Dr Karen Abi-Ezzi after addressing post-graduate students of Conflict Resolution at the university's Department of Peace Studies*

# Statements made by the Lebanese at a public meeting at Westminster Cathedral Hall

ASSAAD SHAFTARI

I was brought up in a Christian environment and my school and university were Christian institutions. Although the Christians were less than 50 percent of the Lebanese population, we had a lot more privileges, power and wealth than we ought to have had. Being Christians we had to consider the Muslims as brothers — but I thought of them as inferior brothers.



I was living in a sterilised virtual reality. I knew my version of the political situation: Lebanon was ours; the Muslims were there because they happened to be there — that was their problem, not mine. They were traitors for looking towards a united Muslim world. Aligning ourselves with the West seemed very natural for me. Then the Palestinians arrived with their military power and the Muslims relied on them to correct the injustice.

When the war started I was ready to fight for my Christianity, my Lebanon and 'the free world' — I was fighting a Holy War. I was rapidly promoted and became a senior officer in the United Christian militias called the Lebanese Forces. Although I considered myself to be a very modern urban dweller, my behaviour was tribal. Any Muslim, Palestinian or leftist became my enemy. I put their soldiers, their civilians, their children and their elders in the same basket. Retaliating by shelling civilian quarters was then very normal. Kidnapping, arresting, bombing, murdering were normal means for me to fulfil my 'holy' mission. I became the policeman, the judge and the executioner.

In 1985 I represented the Lebanese Forces in the negotiations for a 'pragmatic' peace agreement with the Muslims. Meeting the enemies around the negotiating table did not open any new perspectives: we only discussed legal and constitutional matters. My group was a victim of a 'coup' because the Christians rejected the results, and I had to flee the heartland of the Christians and seek refuge in a Christian town in the Muslim area.

The Christians in the town where we sought asylum rejected us, considering us traitors to the Christian cause. However one group received us. They were part of what I discovered to be Moral Re-Armament (MRA) in Lebanon.

Through them I discovered two things: firstly, it was no use trying to change the world if I did not start changing my life, and what was in my heart; and secondly: if one listens, God speaks, and if one obeys, God acts. Unsatisfied with my whole world, I decided to start with inner personal change on more than one level. It is a long process that will never end. I discovered that my behaviour, what I thought to be perfect Christian behaviour, was very far from God. I let God enter into my life and everything started to change. I had to reconcile with God and myself before reconciling with others. I also had to forgive before asking for forgiveness.

The multi-faith dialogue meetings, which the MRA team was organising, helped me to encounter Muslims and discover, to my surprise, that they had their families, dreams, expectations — and grudges against me and my people. I discovered the human being in them that I had forgotten throughout the civil war. We did not have to become similar or agree on everything, but to know, respect and love each other.

I realised I had gone wrong, and if God had given me the chance to survive many attempts on my life there should be a reason. I needed to do something about my past. After a long and painful fight with myself, I decided to address a letter of apology in the press to my war victims — asking for forgiveness and promising, with God's help, to do any reparation I could, and let Him do the rest. I decided to get rid of my prejudices, jokes and my contemptuous attitude towards the Muslims. Having my son and his future and the future of the next generations in my mind, I vowed to help them not to repeat my mistakes. I joined these good friends in our long reconciliation path. I also decided to get to know the Muslims more. Praying in a mosque brought down my last taboo! We had the same God and the same human nature. As a Christian, my culture had to follow me, not the opposite!

## MUHIEDDINE SHIHAB

I cannot talk about how I arrived at reconciliation with myself and others without mentioning how hatred starts to infiltrate our hearts and minds, to take control of our lives and actions. There is no doubt that hatred towards the 'other' exists in our lives. It exists in mosques, churches, the family, the community and the educational system that depicts the world as rotating around a particular community and strives to reshape the world in its own image.

When we were teenagers, we Muslims were told that the Christians intended to slaughter us, throw us into the sea, and found a Christian state similar to Israel and allied with her, to spearhead the war against the Arabs and Muslims. Those ideas mobilised us to fight against the Christians. But I discovered later that the Christian youth were told that the Muslims wanted to establish a Muslim state, oust all the Christians, and join the Arab countries in their fight against Israel. Hence, neither of the two versions of the 'conspiracy' was true.



During the war, I was known as a staunch fighter who led his foot soldiers with cunning through the fiercest of battles. But, once in a while, I had touching human experiences that forced me to ask existential questions. I remember that we once drove the Christian militias from a neighbourhood after a bloody battle, and we found a dead, old man, tied to a chair and riddled with bullets. Obviously, the Christian militias had eliminated him before they pulled out. I stood in front of the dead body that seemed to be gazing at me with glassy eyes. I felt that he was talking to me. I wondered about the purpose of life, God, and death. It was the first time that I cared for a dead body. I untied it and called a military ambulance to take it decently to a morgue. Such experiences stuck in my conscience, but I could not change myself. I was afraid that my comrades would consider it cowardice and mock me. In addition, the events were going too fast for us to stop and think seriously about what was happening to us.

After the war, peace and tranquillity made those psychological problems come to the surface. I decided to meet the Christians whom I had only seen as enemies, dead enemies, captives, or hostages. My friend Hisham and I

started going to areas with a Christian majority in Lebanon to see for ourselves. I found out that the Christians were human beings like us. Some were rich, others were poor, and some had the same stereotypes about us as we had about them. They were only different in being Christians.

Right then, my reconciliation walk started. We wanted to do something to help people like us overcome their alienation and hatred, and to promote dialogue instead of violence as a way to solve problems. So we founded a social committee that serves as a vehicle to spread these ideas, through organising mutual visits, lectures, and conferences. We started our activities in 1992. We went against the tide and had many failures because tolerance, openness, and dialogue were not popular. We were harshly criticised and sometimes harmed physically, especially by extremist groups, but this only increased our determination. We knew that we were doing the right thing for our children. And we knew that God, our God and their God, the One God, was watching over us. Later we had municipal elections, and we decided to do what is good for both the Christians and the Muslims in our district. We took a Christian candidate on our ticket, even though no Muslim would vote for a Christian. We wanted our ticket to be a model of co-existence for all Lebanon, and to show that our country is like a bird that cannot fly without both wings: the Christians and the Muslims. We won the elections. It showed that our efforts to spread tolerance had started to bear fruit.

Two years ago we were introduced to Moral Re-Armament in Lebanon. It was one of the most important junctures in the history of our committee. We felt that we were not working alone in Lebanon. My visit to Caux\* in Switzerland last summer, and the ambience of openness and forgiveness there immensely helped the healing process in my heart. We need to bridge the gap between different peoples and cultures in this global village. We need to work on ourselves, love our enemy, and extend our hand in friendship to our neighbour.

It is mentioned in Muslim literature that human beings are all children of God, and that the closest to Him among them are those who are most beneficial to his children.

\*Conference centre for Initiatives of Change (formerly Moral Re-Armament)

## HISHAM SHIHAB

I was only a teenager when an extremist group recruited me, two years before the Lebanese war broke out. I was taught that the world is divided into two realms: the realm of Islam and the realm of unbelief. In that group, we did not recognize international borders. We were told that we had to work for the foundation of a Muslim state. My mentors told me that the Christians were unclean infidels, Crusaders, and an appendage of the morally corrupt West in the Middle East; that they were spies among us, and their hostile presence should be taken care of.



I was taken to military training camps and told: 'If you want to shoot straight, imagine there is a Christian in your sights'. Later I was given a long-range rifle with a powerful telescope and ordered to snipe at people in the Christian part of Beirut. It was a moment of truth when, through my telescope, I saw three people running for cover: an old woman and two boys. One of them looked like a cousin of mine. The old woman with her wrinkled face reminded me of my grandmother. My conscience told me that they

were people like us. I refused to follow orders and decided to quit. No causes are worth the bloodshed.

Later I joined a Muslim clerical school to study Islam properly. I discovered that I had been taught ideological Islam in the extremist group, not Islam as a religion. I discovered a Muslim cannot be an observing Muslim if he does not believe in Jesus and his message, and respect the Christians.

Later I started reading the New Testament and discovered that my countrymen who were fighting us were not good Christians. And we, the Lebanese Muslims, were not good Muslims in our attitude towards them. I found a verse in the Qur'an that is almost parallel to that famous verse from the Sermon on the Mount ['Love your enemies']:

'Good and evil deeds are not alike. Requite evil with good, and he, between whom and you is enmity, will become your dearest friend.'



Let me confess that we, the Muslims and the Christians in Lebanon, in our double-talk and stereotypes of each other, encouraged a culture of hate, not a culture of tolerance; and that culture of hate led to the civil war that destroyed our country. It may even have had an influence on the global situation after September 11, the cataclysmic events in Palestine, and other events in other parts of the world.

In this respect, I believe that education, equal opportunities, and justice have become matters not only of national security but also of international security. I call upon all educators to look for common ground among the races and faiths, and urge them to avoid the elements of conflict, especially those that are part of the past, and that blow our problems out of proportion and out of reality.

I would like to recite a verse from the Glorious Qur'an that a great Muslim scholar believes that we Muslims should heed:

'Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans\* — whoever believes in the Last Day and does what is right — shall be rewarded by the Lord. They have nothing to fear or regret.'

And another famous verse that incorporates the whole of humanity:

'Men, we have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most righteous.'

I believe that if we, the peoples of the Middle East, continue on the present path of violence, our actions may become a model to be copied by the whole world. Then there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression, culminating sooner or later in areas of anarchy that will make the whole world pay a heavy price. But if we can abandon grievance and victimhood, settle our differences, and join our talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavour, we can once again make the Middle East, as it was in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, a major centre of civilization. The choice is ours.

\*Followers of John the Baptist

## RAMEZ SALAMÉ

When the war started in Lebanon, I joined a local Christian militia. Unlike my three compatriots I was not a good fighter, but I thought I should set an example for other young Christians.

One day, in a moment of prayer, I perceived that God had a more important battle than the one I was fighting. I asked Him what to do to join that higher battle. And the thought came to me that I should give away my military gun, which I did. Later I had a thought to go across the dividing line in Beirut and meet Muslim friends whom I hadn't met for a long time because of the war. It was a dangerous move, but I obeyed.



Much later, a thought came — again during a time of quiet and prayer in the morning — to call for a meeting of dialogue between Lebanese from different communities. This was the beginning of a series of meetings that took place year after year and which gathered together an increasing number of Lebanese from all factions.

This dialogue process was a great blessing. When I am asked what we achieved, two simple answers come to my mind: firstly, we grew in love towards each other, and, secondly, we grew in the knowledge of what is right — knowing that only what is right can unite.

Trying to reconcile with my countrymen has also helped me to reconcile with some close members of my family. Sometimes, if not often, mending relations with those who are closest to us is more difficult than with those who are at a certain distance. I have learnt that love is doing and working for the good of the other. What is the good of my brother? This is what I am called to do and accomplish.

This journey I have spoken of would not have been possible without the care and help of many people of this great country, Britain, some of whom are sitting in this audience, others having now passed away. They demonstrated what it means to care and lay down one's life for others. To them, again, I wish to express my unceasing gratitude.

Towards the end of the war in Lebanon, the Christians got divided among themselves and fought each other fiercely. I wondered why this happened? I came to the conclusion that this took place because of our failure as Christians to relate to the people of goodwill on the other side and to build an alliance with them.

It seems that, again and again, we are called to repeat our father Abraham's journey: daring to leave the land of security to the promised land of peace. Assaad, Hisham, Muhieddine and myself, together with other friends in Lebanon, have pledged to help each other on this journey.

# A British Response

PETER EVERINGTON

*A trustee of Initiatives of Change, who has worked in several Middle East countries. He spoke at the conclusion of the public meeting in London.*

For all of us, whether we know the Middle East or not, it is hard to take in the brokenness of those 15 years of war in Lebanon.

Our Lebanese visitors have recalled us to a personal dimension of this, which echoes one of the Psalms of King David (No. 51): 'A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.'

From this base of repentance and forgiveness, David rebuilt the moral and spiritual authority of his country.

That is what you are doing for your country, and what we are challenged to do for ours: to break the chain of hate, perhaps the chain of pride and self-centredness too, and follow the initiatives that come from this kind of change.

There are many ideas competing for the soul of Britain and Europe today, as there are for the Middle East. The idea we can hold on to together is that God has a plan for His world, and each of us has a part.

Thank you for coming and for illustrating that for us so well.