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Towards *common ground* between Christians and Muslims?

138 Muslim religious leaders call for reconciliation and cooperation with Christians

Muslim-Christian relations are 1,400 years old but within that long history there has never yet been an initiative like this: on the occasion of this year's Eid, the end of the month of fasting, 138 Muslim religious leaders and scholars signed and published an 'Open Letter and Call'. Despite – or even because of – its provocative contents the Pope's Regensburg lecture appears to be bearing fruit. A year ago 38 Muslim scholars wrote to Pope Benedict but now a more enduring, more widely based dialogue appears to be developing. The new letter is addressed not only to Pope Benedict XVI but also to the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the leaders of the Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and Reformed Churches. The title – 'A Common Word between Us and You' – is drawn from a famous verse of sura 3:64, addressed to Jews and Christians (referred to here as 'People of the Scripture').

The letter compares selected Qur'anic and Biblical texts and comes to the conclusion that both scriptures emphasize 'the primacy of total love and devotion to God' together with love of neighbour. Muslims and Christians, it goes on, make up more than half of the world's population. The relationship between them is therefore "the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world." "As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes"(cf. sura 60:8). The letter adds: "To those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony."

With this initiative, we see the emergence of something like an intra-Islamic ecumenical movement. Amongst the signatories are the Grand Muftis of Bosnia & Herze-

govina, Russia, Croatia, Kosovo and Syria, the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, and the founder of the Ulema Organization in Iraq. However, there are also two Ayatollahs and further senior Shi'ite, Ibadi and Isma'ili dignitaries and scholars. As with the earlier letter to the Pope, this unique initiative was taken by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan. One of the leading intellectuals behind it, Dr Aref Ali Nayed of the Cambridge University Interfaith Programme, describes the letter as 'a consensus [of Muslims around the world]' and 'a milestone'.

Some names are notable for their absence, including those of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and especially Tariq Ramadan, both associated in different ways with the Muslim Brotherhood. Also missing is Muhammad Saiyid Tantawi, the Sheikh of al-Azhar, the influential Sunni institution in Cairo. On the other hand, among the Sunni signatories one is struck by the relatively strong Saudi presence.

This letter from Muslim leaders and scholars undoubtedly deserves careful attention, not least on the part of Christians. For someone such as myself, who has been engaged for decades in religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, it represents a remarkable attempt to reach a broad consensus among leading Muslim figures. This effort certainly has among its aims that Islam should be taken seriously as a distinct and clearly articulated voice at a global level. Reading the impressive list of signatories from all parts of the world and from various socio-religious contexts reminds one that there are no longer separate Islamic and Christian worlds in the sense of geographically distinct areas. Around the world today Christians and Muslims take part in the life of diverse and thoroughly plural societies and states, amongst which must be included societies such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The scholars' letter can be read as a tangible recognition of this fact. The new phase in dialogue of which it is a part can thus be seen as a positive outcome of globalization.

The scholars set forth „all-embracing, constant and active love of God“ as the central command of all three monotheistic religions. It is notable that the document draws not only on texts from the Qur'an, but also from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is therefore strange that in this appeal there is no mention of the community of Jewish believers, whose concise confession of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4-6 is cited by the document as „a centrepiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy“.

It is in itself a highly significant fact that this document includes a number of Biblical passages and comments positively on them. Does this indicate something of a break with Islamic doctrine, according to which the holy scriptures of the Jews and Christians (as they exist in their present form) are regarded as „corrupted“ either by falsification of the text or by distortion of the meaning of the text (tahrif al-nass; tahrif al-ma'na)? As a consequence of this view, the great majority of Muslims have hitherto regarded the text of the Bible (in its present form) as unreliable, have generally taken little interest in its contents (except, in some cases, for polemical purposes) and have

not recognized it as a shared basis for dialogue. For example, the Book of Psalms is not read by Muslims either in public liturgy or in private devotion, despite the fact that the Qur'an repeatedly speaks of the Psalms which were given by God to David (cf. Qur'an 4:163; 17:55). So one naturally asks whether the authors of this document are seeking to understand the biblical texts which they have cited in their own authentically biblical context, which includes both the immediate context of any particular text and also the wider context of the whole Bible. Or could it be that these biblical texts are only accepted and quoted by the Muslim scholars in so far as they correspond with the message of the Qur'an? Be that as it may, the Islamic doctrine of the intentional alteration of the Biblical text by Jews and Christians, which is extremely significant for Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue, is neither mentioned nor explicitly modified in this document.

A crucial point to bear in mind is that for this document and its authors the absolute criterion for the correct understanding of love for God and neighbour lies in Muhammad, his life and his interpretation of the divine commandments found in the Qur'an. In other words, the specific way in which love of God and neighbour were put into practice by Muhammad, first in Mecca and then in Medina, remains absolutely decisive for Muslims today, in so far as they shape their individual and collective life following his example. In this regard, a fuller consideration of Muhammad's approach to Jews and Christians than was offered in this document would have to discuss the increasing tensions of his later years, as reflected in passages of the Qur'an such as sura 9.

We should also mention here the Qur'anic passage which is the source of the document's title – 'A Common Word between Us and You'. This phrase is drawn from a famous verse addressed to Jews and Christians (referred to here as 'People of the Scripture'):

'Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him)' (sura 3:64).

In the context of Muslim-Christian dialogue it is especially important to reflect on the requirement here that 'none of us shall take others for lords beside God'. Much Muslim commentary, classical and modern, has seen in these words criticism of Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. Moreover, this interpretation appears to be in line with a number of other Qur'anic passages insisting that Jesus was a human messenger of God and in no sense divine (3:59, immediately before the text in question; 4:171; 5:75; 9:31; 19:34-5). It is therefore striking that the Open Letter cites a much less polemical approach taken by al-Tabari, an authoritative early commentator on the Qur'an, to the effect that 'Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have „to prostrate before kings and the like“'

(p. 14). One might ask, however, what al-Tabari imagined God had commanded Christians to do – not, presumably, to worship Jesus?

Of course, Muslims and Christians (together with Jews) agree that only God should be worshipped, but we disagree in our views of Jesus Christ, and this disagreement has profound implications for how God is understood and worshipped. For Christians Jesus is both fully human and fully divine; the most basic confession of Christian faith is 'Jesus Christ is Lord'. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is also known by Christians as 'the Lord, the giver of life'; God is thus known and worshipped as Father, Son and Spirit. So it is important for Muslims approaching dialogue with Christians to understand that this trinitarian monotheism is central to Christian belief and worship and is not an aspect of Christianity that can be negotiated away. In this regard there are some slight ambiguities in the Open Letter, moments at which a Christian might feel that it is suggesting that there are no fundamental differences between the theologies of the two faiths, or at least that these differences do not really matter. While the warm, inviting tone of the Open Letter's appeal to Christians is enormously encouraging, it is to be hoped that this can be held together with an approach which takes utterly seriously the points at which Christians and Muslims differ and does not encourage a diplomatic evasion of these points for the sake of a dialogue which would suffer as a result.

Another point to raise here is that even if theologians from the three faiths could agree on the central meaning of the double love-commandment, there would still be enormous practical differences to consider when it comes to putting into effect these commandments in the concrete, here-and-now reality of plural societies. One has only to think of questions such as the imposition of Shari'a, human rights and the relationship between state and religion. Does the double commandment to love God and neighbour on its own truly provide an adequate basis for peaceful and harmonious co-existence in diverse societies?

It so happens that at almost the same time as the Open Letter was published the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (= PCID) released its annual message to Muslims. This year, its theme was *Christians and Muslims: called to promote a culture of peace*. The annual messages of the PCID 'to our dear Muslim friends', which, since 1967, have been published annually on the occasion of Eid, of course belong to a quite different literary form from that of the Open Letter. Nevertheless, we can assume that the author of this year's message, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, named by the Pope a few months ago as the new President of the Council, expresses not only the outlook of the Second Vatican Council but also the particular emphases of Benedict XVI. The Cardinal speaks in the name of the worldwide Catholic Church, a community which roughly corresponds in size to the Muslim community and which is also like the Muslim community in being established in virtually all the nations of the world.

Cardinal Tauran reflects upon the longing for „friendly and constructive relationships“ as such. He does not work from the basis of this or that selection of texts from Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures, perhaps because the scriptures occupy a different place within Christianity and Islam and are also so variously interpreted. Tauran emphasizes the significance of the „the Creator’s plan“, that is the rational laws and structures which can be accepted not only by Christians and Muslims but fundamentally by all people. This plan includes values such as: service of our sisters and brothers and fraternal solidarity „with members of other religions and all men of good will“. The message also points to the challenge set before us all to work for peace „by showing respect for the convictions of individuals and communities everywhere“ and by respecting the right to „religious freedom, which must not be reduced to mere freedom of worship“ but rather is „one of the essential aspects of freedom of conscience, which is the right of every individual and a cornerstone of human rights.“ So although it is to be welcomed when Islamic theologians seeking common ground with Christians quote the Bible in a positive spirit, we must also recall the deteriorating situation and increasingly limited religious freedom of Christians in many Muslim majority countries. And of course in other contexts Muslim and indeed other religious minorities also suffer intolerance. We are thus reminded that the world is now also globalized in religious terms and that there are many challenges to overcome if believers of different traditions are to live together in harmony.

The Cardinal’s appeal points to the necessity of the distinction and separation between the political order and the religious sphere if cultural and religious diversity is to flourish within a just and peaceful society marked by mutual respect. In this sense the PCID sees Christians and Muslims as called to make their respective contributions (inspired by their respective faiths) to the formation and strengthening of the ‘common good’ in plural and democratic societies, societies which are secular (in the sense of being religiously neutral) and which are committed to the human rights of all their members. For however valuable it may be to achieve theological agreement over the question of the double love-commandment, on its own this can hardly guarantee just and peaceful co-existence within diversity.