

International Consultation
"Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future"
Lecture by Clare Amos, Director of Theological Studies, Anglican Communion

Education, education and education

Geneva, 3 November 2010

I spent last week in Egypt, participating in and helping to administer the annual meeting of the dialogue between the Anglican Communion and Al Azhar Al Sharif. In our communiqué which will be published later this week is included the following paragraph.

‘ Dr El Gindi (from Al Azhar) and Bishop Mouneer Anis (the Anglican bishop in Egypt) spoke of the special importance of ensuring that Christian and Muslim young people were educated in ways which encourage them to treat other religions, and their followers, with respect. The need for mutual respect in relation to the doctrines and sacred texts of each other’s religion was highlighted.’ⁱ

So it feels very appropriate to come from Cairo to Geneva, to give this short paper on Education in relation to inter faith dialogue. I have been asked to look at ‘Education’ as a sort of transversal – engaging with the other two themes of this consultation. I was also asked to be aware of the conclusions of a previous international consultation facilitated by the WCC in 2002 which brought together Christians and Muslims to explore the subject of *Christians and Muslims in dialogue and beyond*.

I have been requested to speak out of the Christian perspective, and will be doing that, and will be bearing in mind the ecumenical nature of our gathering. Given the breadth of the subject inevitably I will be focusing especially on illustrations drawn from my own context – which is that of a British woman, who has lived also for a number of years in the Middle East, and who works professionally in the field of interfaith dialogue for the international Anglican Communion, a Christian tradition which is present in many parts of our world. I will be seeking to raise questions as much as to provide answers. And that leads me into the first point I want to address. To what extent is our philosophy and understanding of the nature of education itself influenced by our religious beliefs or theology of revelation – and how far do we need to take account of this in our discussions? For example I find it intriguing to study the Gospels as an example of Jesus as educator. I think it telling that (certainly in the synoptic gospels) the Jesus we encounter seeks to educate people by provoking questions rather than providing easy answers, and by using a parabolic method of teaching which confronts people sharply and force them to draw their own conclusions rather than offering them ready made. And I have an instinct that this educational methodology of Jesus has, admittedly alongside other factors, been a significant impact on the Christian understanding of education, certainly in the Western world. It has I believe been influential in encouraging us to view education as not merely about the imparting of knowledge, but rather a dialectic process, and one which offers some challenges to an understanding of the nature of revelation in purely propositional terms. My perception – rightly or wrongly – is that in some other parts of the world and in other religious cultures the philosophy of education is considerably more didactic. I am thinking both about education in general, but more particularly religious education.

I think that this issue needs to be named and identified at the start, because if we are seeing education as a tool to promote interreligious dialogue then it is surely important to acknowledge that Christian and Muslim educational philosophies may be different, and may affect and be affected by our theologies of revelation. In fact I find it intriguing that the dialogue between Jesus and the scribe about the greatest commandment in the law which is the key Christian text used within *A Common Word* should be related rather differently in each of the three synoptic Gospels in which it appears. In Matthew it is a case of Jesus informing the scribe, in Mark there is much more of a discussion between Jesus and the scribe, and in Luke it is the actually the scribe himself who answers the question. Is it characteristic of a Christian understanding that I should rejoice, both spiritually and educationally, in the fact that there are these three different descriptions of the encounter between Jesus and his dialogue partner, and that these include a description of the scribe as his own teacher? Is it also significant that *A Common Word* should choose to focus on the descriptions given in Matthew and Mark of Jesus instructing the scribe, but omit the Lukan and Markan portrayals of the scribe coming to discover this for himself through his encounter with Jesus? As I say – I offer the questions rather than provide the answers!

But this discussion does, it seems to me, impact fairly directly upon one of the questions that was raised in the 2002 WCC consultation, namely the topic of textbooks. The report of that consultation commented:

‘In our religious formation, in our schools and colleges, in mosque and church, we affirm our determination no longer to speak or write about or for the other without the full participation of the other. We affirm the need to work collaboratively on producing joint textbooks on Christian-Muslim relations, as well as to examine religious and history textbooks in an effort to identify and remove prejudicial and stereotypical characterisations.’ⁱⁱ

It is I believe a helpful exercise to consider to what extent this aspiration has been carried through and made a difference in the eight years since? Not perhaps as much as we might have hoped. I think I can honestly say that in Britain there has been very considerable effort in the last decade to ensure that school textbooks portray non-Christian faiths with both accuracy and empathy. A 2007 national Ofsted report on Religious Education in Britain *Making sense of Religion* has a section headed ‘Educating for diversity: is religious education responding effectively to the changing social reality of religion post-9/11?’ⁱⁱⁱ And clearly 9/11 and to a lesser extent the 2005 event known as 7/7 has made a substantial impact on the teaching – and the perception of the importance – of religious education in British schools. Over the last couple of years I have contributed to a national project coordinated by the University of Warwick^{iv} entitled, *Materials used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England*^v, which analysed the main textbooks currently in use in English primary and secondary schools, as well as a number of websites designed for educational use. I was a Christian educational consultant and specialist for the project: there were also specialist consultants from all the other faiths referred to in these textbooks. I have brought with me a few examples of these textbooks – but I want to make clear that well over 30 different textbooks were surveyed.

There were a number of critiques made – the key one is that the needs of an exam syllabus sometimes militated against the internal logic of religions – but that was a critique that applied across the board relating to several religions. However the report explicitly concluded in relation to the presentation of Islam as follows:

‘The content and quality of the presentation of Islam was seen to be helpful in conveying a rich and attractive picture of Islam as a living religion that has a place in British society as well as in the wider world. However, accounts of the religion were sometimes rather simplistic.’ In spite of the comment ‘simplistic’, which probably partly relates to the need to emphasise further the diversity within Islam, it is intriguing that the presentation of Islam in the textbooks was possibly better than that of Christianity. The summary conclusion on the presentation of Christianity in the textbooks was that ‘In several resources Christianity came across as the default religion, a fact that gave Christianity both too much assumed presence and too little actual attention. There were implicit assumptions in some of the resources, that they were addressing students with a Christian background. Non-Christian religions were often presented through a Christian lens. At the same time reviewers noted a reluctance to engage with the real core of the Christian faith such as Christian belief in Jesus as God incarnate.’

So although the presentation of all religions in school textbooks at times suffers from the slightly uneasy engagement between religions and the United Kingdom’s increasingly secularised educational establishment, I genuinely believe that in England we have taken seriously the need for religious education to support constructive engagement between Christians and Muslims, and certainly the importance of people of the relevant faith being involved in the preparation of relevant school textbooks.

I am not sure that that is necessarily the case in all other parts of the world. Here I am drawing on work done in a research project that is entitled, *Christianity in textbooks of countries with an islamic tradition* which is directed by Dr Johannes Lähnemann and which has developed out of a collaboration between German and Turkish scholars supported by their respective governments. The project is still ongoing but has published an interim report which makes salutary reading. I quote briefly from this report. The report states:

‘There are common features in the way Christianity is regarded in the various countries with an Islamic tradition. Christians are regarded - in accordance with the Qur’an - as “people of the book”, and therefore Christianity, in principle, as a recognized religion. So the overall view of Christianity is never entirely negative. On the other hand, Christianity is held to be an imperfect “precursor” religion of Islam – with problematic falsifications in its holy scriptures and with doctrines which are apparently at variance with the belief in one God (Jesus as the Son of God...). It is also burdened with its own history, above all the Crusades and colonialism. In general Christianity is dealt with in a highly selective way, and then mainly in the form of supposedly objective facts. Apart from some first signs in Turkey, insights gained by recent teaching about world religions have not yet found their way into textbooks.’^{vi}

The conclusions are based on work done largely in four countries: Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Palestine, and has clearly looked at history textbooks as well as ones focusing specifically on religious education. I cannot go in detail into all that the report states – but I note a few examples of what researchers discovered (direct quotes from the summary report are given in inverted commas):

In Turkey there is a real effort to introduce a syllabus which seeks to give objective information on religions other than Islam and to education for tolerance
‘In Iran, as an Islamic republic, religion plays a central role in school education. Overall, it is Islam that is the measure of all things (in history textbooks, too) – it is quite simply presented as the superior religion.’

In Egypt although there is a reasonable presentation of Christianity in the first few Christian centuries ‘the problem lies in the fact that after 640 the indigenous Christianity virtually disappears. Anyone reading the school textbooks would think that, just like the Pharaonic or Roman eras, the Coptic era, too, belonged to a bygone age, from which only scattered ruins are still to be seen. Christians appear as stereotypes, as objects of the Arab rulers’ tolerance ... as subjects from whom taxes were to be raised and whose ancient churches and monasteries serve today as tourist sights. Western Christianity is viewed primarily as a military and economic rival a) in the depiction of the campaigns of conquest during the early Islamic period b) in the depiction of the crusades, which are dealt with in great detail, contrasting the bloody capture of Jerusalem with its recapture by Muslim forces without bloodshed c) in the depiction of the colonial period and the struggle for independence’ In Palestine the current situation has meant that earlier efforts in the Oslo Process to achieve a new mutual Muslim-Christian-Jewish awareness in school textbooks has been much reduced.

These comments are based on research which I have not myself done – so I am relying on the accuracy of the research of Dr Lähnemann. But this research has been widely and well received, and if it is painting a fair picture it is salutary. I would say that my own experience last week in Egypt when our efforts to raise the topic of school textbooks clearly made some of our dialogue partners from Al Azhar defensive and uncomfortable and led to an intra-Muslim discussion suggest that Lähnemann’s comments on the situation in Egypt may well be realistic. I realise of course that the countries that Lähnemann surveys only offer a snapshot rather than a complete picture of the situation in the Islamic world, and Lähnemann explicitly also comments that the book *Christianity in the Arab world* by Prince Hassan of Jordan provides a model of writing about the religion of the ‘other’. But if we are hoping for concrete results from this consultation are there ways in which we can actively take forward work to improve the presentation of each other’s faith in school textbooks? Given Prince Ghazi’s throwaway remark on Monday about places of education being the world’s largest infrastructure it seems to me that to attempt this task would be a significant contribution to helping a move in the direction of compassionate justice for minority religious communities. It could really make a difference.

Of course education is not simply for children – and another essential area that I believe we should be focusing on is the education of religious leaders in both the Muslim and the Christian faiths, those training to be imams or ministers. It is imperative that those training for such roles are equipped to be leaders in a world of many faiths, and this requires both that they have an adequate understanding about other religions and have reflected on the importance of inter faith engagement. I also believe that the learning about ‘other faiths’ must include followers of those other faiths as teachers. A recent important publication sponsored by the World Council of Churches *The Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*^{vii} makes it clear that for Christians, education relating to inter faith dialogue is now considered an imperative for future Christian religious leaders. The examples of good practice I now give come either from this book – or my own personal experience. They include:

- Centres that have been set up in Britain in Leicester and Bradford, both multi-cultural cities, by the Christian churches, working together. These centres offer a variety of courses to equip Christian leaders of various kinds to minister in Britain’s increasingly multi-faith context. As a matter of principle courses offered in relation to Islam or Hinduism would always involve Muslim or Hindu teachers. Often the course will also include a stay in a Muslim or Hindu home. The Leicester centre in particular has now gained an international reputation and its courses are attended by Christians

from other countries. For example, after the Danish cartoons saga, the Church of Denmark sent all its bishops on a course organised by the Centre in Leicester so that they were better equipped for the future.

- Training offered by the Markfield Institute of Higher Education also based in Leicester. This Islamic college offers courses to enable young Muslims to function as religious leaders in key British institutions, such as hospitals, universities and prisons. Markfield works closely with the Christian centre in Leicester referred to above – and teaching about Christianity at Markfield includes a significant input from the Director of this centre.
- The transformation of Hartford Seminary in the United States to become a centre both for serious learning about faiths other than Christianity and the methodology of dialogue.
- A series of what are called ‘learning pathways’ which have been developed in the Church of England that offer a checklist to bishops, priests and lay ministers to encourage them to take seriously the need to equip themselves for ministry in multi-faith contexts in Britain.
- The excellent work in a number of spheres of the national Christian-Muslim Forum of England which seeks to offer means to enable Christians and Muslims to learn from each other in a number of spheres. For example there are regular short residential courses for Christian and Muslim youth. There are also courses for ministers and imams – one of which has involved listening to and learning from each others’ preaching. This Christian and Muslim Forum set up with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury itself offers a model that I think other countries could emulate.^{viii}
- A short video, which if time had allowed I would have liked to show you, produced by Churches Together in England to encourage English Christians to take seriously national inter faith week – which in England currently takes place in late November.^{ix}
- A quarterly electronic newsletter published by my office in the Anglican Communion called the ‘NIFCON Christian-Muslim Digest’ which seeks to share and analyse news about international Christian Muslim relations in a considered and non polemical way. Please let me know if you would like to receive this regularly.^x
- A study exchange which I myself organised linked to the Anglican Communion’s ongoing dialogue with Al Azhar. This has enabled a small number of younger Muslim scholars, both men and women, to spend some weeks studying at Christian theological colleges in England, and has also enabled young Christian scholars and trainee ministers to spend some weeks studying at Al Azhar university in Egypt. The exchange has not just impacted on those who took part in it, but has made a significance difference to other students in the receiving colleges as well.
- A study guide to *A Common Word* to enable Christians to engage with it more readily. The study guide was written by Peter Colwell of the ecumenical body Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.
- The really significant contribution made by PROCMURA – the Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa. PROCMURA is an ecumenical Christian organisation that works both to assist with conflict resolution and with the education of African Christian religious leaders. In my own work I have supported PROCMURA as it was involved in a training event for Anglican clergy in Sudan to enable them to facilitate Muslim-Christian dialogue in that country. PROCMURA has also supported the development of a masters degree in Christian Muslim relations which can be studied at St Paul’s University in Kenya.^{xi}

These examples are a few snapshots of good practice around the world. Once again, thinking about the importance of gaining concrete results from this consultation – how can we make such existing initiatives better known and facilitate the development of other similar educational pieces of work? Given the particular context of our meeting here at the WCC it is interesting to note that for many Christians our appreciation of the importance of the inter faith dimension in theological education owes quite a lot to the discoveries many Christians have made through ecumenical theological education – in particular the fact that ‘learning from and about the other can offer a sharpened sense... of one’s own religious identity and faith tradition’.

Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Britain, was once asked about his three key priorities. His reply was ‘Education, education and education’. I think we could say the same in relation to taking forward our concerns here at this consultation. I note that the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his response to *A Common Word*, includes the comment, ‘there is an urgent need in both our traditions for education about one another. We are all influenced by prejudices and misunderstandings inherited from the past – and often renewed in the present through the power of media stereotyping. Teaching and learning about the reality and diversity of Islam as Muslims practise their faith should be a priority as important to Christians as understanding of actual Christianity should be to Muslims. In concrete terms, such educational programmes might be initially be focused on those preparing clergy and imams respectively for public inter-faith roles and on those providing religious education to young people.’^{xii}

What I have been doing above is giving some practical examples of what I believe the Archbishop was talking about.

I began this presentation by referring to *A Common Word* – and I want to end by touching on it again. I have to confess that I have got increasingly tired of dialogue gatherings where somebody says, ‘We are not going to discuss theology, we are only interested in dialogue about social and practical concerns’. I sometimes wonder what I am doing there. Social and practical dimensions are important, but for me as a Christian – and I believe for Muslims too – my social ethics spring out of and are related to my theological beliefs. So to discuss the one without taking account of the other feels a very shallow and ultimately unsatisfactory exercise. It also skates over the real differences between our faiths, which I believe are as important as the similarities. To quote the Archbishop of Canterbury again, ‘We have to see how very other our universes are; and only then do we find dialogue a surprise and a joy as we discover where and how we can still talk about what really matters most – holiness, being at peace, and what truly is.’^{xiii} This for me includes a call for both religious traditions to be willing to be genuinely self-critical for that is part of the educational process. One of the important features of *A Common Word* which in my view makes it stand out from other initiatives is its determination to hold together theology and practice, and to offer a theological undergirding for its call for the concrete expression of ‘Love of neighbour’, acknowledging that love of neighbour depends ultimately on deepening our love of and understanding of God. To respond to *A Common Word* requires us to do theology – which is surely at heart discovering more about God. So I want to end by offering thanks for *A Common Word* and to plead that as we move forward at this consultation we take seriously the need to develop and publicise educational tools that equip both Christians and Muslims to engage with the faith of each other, in our differences as well as similarities, but in common acknowledgement of our mutual love of God.

-
- ⁱ Web address for this communiqué will be given shortly.
- ⁱⁱ <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=6370>
- ⁱⁱⁱ The report can be accessed via the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk
- ^{iv} I am grateful to Dr Julia Ipgrave for pointing me in the direction of various religious education resources and reports.
- ^v *Materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England*, Robert Jackson, Julia Ipgrave, Mary Hayward, Paul Hopkins, Nigel Fancourt, Mary Robbins, Leslie Francis, Ursula Mckenna, Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, University of Warwick, 2010
<http://www.education.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR197.pdf>
- ^{vi} 'Christianity in textbooks of countries with an islamic tradition'. *Panorama* 16, 2004/2005, p. 105-119.
- ^{vii} *A Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, edited by Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja, Regnum Books International, 2010
- ^{viii} <http://www.christianmuslimforum.org.uk/>
- ^{ix} http://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/144998/Churches_Together_in/Working_Together/Inter_faith/Inter_Faith_Week/Inter_Faith_Week.aspx
- ^x <http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/digest/index.cfm>
- ^{xi} <http://www.procmura-prica.org>
- ^{xii} <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1893> and follow link to download
- ^{xiii} *Christian Theology and Other Faiths* <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2196>