

Bism Illah Al-Rahman Al-Raheem

'A Common Word in Deed'

November 1st, 2010

Your Reverence Dr Olav Fykse Tveit,

Your Excellency Dr Mohammad Ahmad Al-Sharif,

Dear Friends,

Al-Salaamu 'Aleikum; Pax Vobiscum,

I am honored to be with you today and to be asked to address you. This conference — *Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims building A Common Future* — promises to be an important milestone in developing harmonious relations and better understanding between Christians and Muslims, and we pray that it will be successful *in sha Allah*. The idea for this conference originates from the *A Common Word* Initiative of October 13th 2007, and the response of the previous General Secretary of the World Council of Churches — Reverend Dr Samuel Kobia. I had the pleasure of discussing it with him when he visited Jordan in 2008. However, it is only now that this conference has come to fruition, so I must thank both Dr Kobia and Dr Fykse Tveit — as well as Dr Mohammad Al-Sharif, the Director of the World Islamic Call Society, on the Muslim side.

As can be seen on www.acommonword.com, the *A Common Word* initiative focuses on 'Love of God' and 'Love of the Neighbour' as a joint platform for peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians, and after three years and various historical conferences it has emerged that, theologically speaking, Muslims and Christians do indeed share 'Love of God' and 'Love of the Neighbour' at the heart of their religions, even though these may be understood or interpreted differently. Indeed, on May 9th 2009,

at the King Hussein Mosque in Amman, Jordan, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI noted that:

‘the more recent *A Common Word* letter echoed a theme consonant with my first encyclical: the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor, and the fundamental contradiction of resorting to violence or exclusion in the name of God (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 16)’.

Some Protestants in particular have questioned how Muslims and Christians can have ‘Love of God’ in common since we do not have the same conception of God, and since Muslims do not accept Trinitarian Theology. However, the Holy Qur’an clearly says: ... *our God and your God is One ... (Al-‘Ankabut, 29: 46)* and the *Nostra Aetate* (‘*In Our Time*’) Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council of October 28th 1965 admits:

‘[Muslims] ... worship God, who is One, Living and Subsistent, Merciful and Almighty’.

Moreover, we hardly need say that the *Common Word* of Love of God and the Neighbour lies *in the subject* not the object. Thus if we say that ‘we as Muslims and Christians have Love of God and the Neighbour in common’ this does *not* presuppose, logically speaking, that Muslims have exactly the same theology as Christians, any more than if we said ‘we all have love of country in common’ presupposes that we all come from the same country. Howbeit, the object of the initiative was not at all to reduce our religions to a common theological core but rather to find a common essence — not denying all our many and irreducible differences — that would allow us to more easily be at peace and harmony with one another, and indeed practice love (*caritas*) towards one another.

This we should seek to do altruistically — not for a hidden ulterior motive such as building bridges so that we can more easily proselytize and convert one other; nor as a favour that we are condescendingly doing for each other; nor even as an act of alliance between us such that we expect the other side to reciprocate to other followers of our own religion; nor, finally, because we are all in the same boat and if we continue fighting we might destroy the whole world (ourselves included) — but rather because practicing *caritas* is the right thing to do, and because it is what God wants us to do. Moreover, human love, when the motive is noble, always benefits the lover more than the beloved, who may or may not benefit from it and may not even be aware of it. As you all know better than I, love liberates us from our own egos and changes our own souls. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

Whoso doeth right it is for his soul, and whoso doeth wrong it is against it.... (Fussilat, 41:46)

And Jesus Christ ☐ said:

And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. / But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great... (Luke 6: 35-36)

Howbeit, 'Love of the Neighbour', is not only a sentiment — however altruistic — it implies and requires certain concrete actions. There are many courses of action which we cannot and will never agree upon — even when we all sincerely act out of *caritas* — but I think we will all readily agree that the best starting point for enacting our '*Common Word*' is to defend the

other against followers of our own religion when the other is weak and oppressed, especially in a social minority context.

God says in the Holy Qur'an:

Worship God, and ascribe not partners unto Him. And do good towards parents and kinsfolk, towards orphans and those in need, towards the neighbor who is near and the neighbor who is a stranger.... (Al-Nisa, 4:36)

Now according to the Classical Qur'anic Commentary of Ibn Kathir, '*the neighbour who is a stranger*' refers to the People of the Book — Christians and Jews; however, the Commentaries of Qurtubi and Jalalein say that '*the neighbour who is a stranger*' also includes everyone on earth. In any case, we as Muslims are required to defend all those who are oppressed in our midst.

In a similar vein, in the Bible Jesus Christ □ quotes God saying to the wicked on the Day of Judgment:

'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' (Matthew, 25:45)

Thus for both our religions harming religious minorities among us is evil; is absolutely forbidden and is ultimately a rejection of God's love and a crime against God Himself. Consequently, we are bound by our own religions to defend each other in such a context.

Allow me here to relate the apposite example of the Emir Abd Al-Qadir Al-Jaza'iri, the great Nineteenth-century descendant of the Prophet Muhammad □ and the hero of the Algerian struggle against French Colonialism, who though exiled in Damascus by the French nevertheless came to the rescue of the city's Christians:

‘On the morning of the 10th of July 1860 an angry crowd gathered outside the emir’s house, demanding that he hand over the Christians who had taken refuge with him. ‘O my brothers’, he addressed the mob, ‘your conduct is impious... How low have you fallen, for I see Muslims covering themselves with the blood of women and children. Has God not said: “*He who kills a single soul ... it is as if he hath killed the whole of humanity*”? (5:32). Has He not also said: “*There is no compulsion in religion...*” (2:256) ?’

This only enraged the mob further. The leaders of the crowd replied to him: ‘O holy warrior! We do not need your advice... Why are you interfering in our affairs? You, who used to fight the Christians, how can you oppose our avenging their insults?’ The emir retorted that: ‘I did not fight “Christians”, I fought the aggressors who called themselves “Christians” ’.

The anger of the mob increased and at this point the tone of the emir changed. He addressed his own guards (saying): ‘And you, my Maghrebis, may your hearts rejoice, for I call God to witness: we are going to fight for a cause *as holy as that for which we fought before!*’ At this the mob dispersed and fled in fear and fifteen thousand Christians—including all the European diplomatic staff and their families—were saved by the emir.

(Reza Shah Kazemi, ‘*Emir Abd Al-Qadir Al-Jaza’iri*’, 2007; See also: Bessaïeh, Boualem ‘*Abdelkader à Damas et le sauvetage de douze mille chrétiens*’ p.90; Spencer-Churchill, Charles-Henry, 5th Duke of Malborough, *The Life of Abd el-Kader: Ex-Sultan of the Arabs of Algeria*, pp.314–318).

Defending each other today, however, is more complicated. Before considering what to do and how to do it, we are faced with a series of complex social, political and religious puzzles which we must fully understand in order not to make things worse. For whilst there are places where Christians are clearly severely oppressed by Muslims (such as Pakistan, Iraq and Sudan), and places where Muslims are clearly severely oppressed by Christians (such as the Philippines); there are a lot of other

places where it is not clear who is oppressing who (such as along the Muslim-Christian ‘fault line’ in Sub-Saharan Africa); places where we know both Christians and Muslims routinely wrong and kill each other (such as Nigeria); places where Christians and Muslims are both oppressed by others (such as Palestine, Burma, Thailand and India on occasion); places where our knowledge of the religious oppression there is limited (such as China); places where foreign missionary activity is exacerbating local relationships and causing communal violence (such as Indonesia) albeit that this does not justify the oppression there; places where the cause of violence is not religion but irredentism (such as Chechnya, Kashmir and Sudan) although again this does not justify the oppression there; places where there is no violent oppression as such but legal or social discrimination (such as in parts of the Arab world and Europe, and right here in Switzerland — where Muslims can no longer build minarets); places where Christians are oppressed by Muslims but Muslims oppress other Muslims even more violently (such as Pakistan and Iraq) due to sectarian violence (though the governments do their best to stop this); places where we as Christians and Muslims are not likely to agree on who is wronging who; places where Muslims and / or Christians will never agree among themselves — let alone with each other — on who is doing what to who and whose fault it is; and, finally, places where individuals regularly exaggerate their religious plight to their co-religionists abroad due to their own individual myopia, or simply to exploit them for personal financial benefit. This in turn is then seized upon by the international proselytism ‘industry’ to solicit more and more donations from their own popular bases which then fund more and more attempts at foreign proselytism and this makes the situation yet worse.

To make matters more complex, religious leaders in different places have various and varying degrees of political power or social influence, and therefore — morally speaking — they have different degrees of responsibility ranging from merely denouncing oppression to mobilizing social awareness and action against it; and this is to say nothing of the different levels of access to objective information as to what is really going on and how best to help.

In addition to all of this one cannot fail to make mention of the mixed blessing presented by the world media, first as a medium and second as a network of social, cultural, political and above all *financial* institutions. We cannot go into this in detail here but it suffices to say that the very medium of today's media predisposes it to want to *entertain* more than to *inform* such that it always looks for drama and therefore for conflict, shock or reversal (which are the main building blocks of drama, as per Aristotle's *Poetics*). Consequently, most of what the public receives about Muslims as such is news of terrorism, violence and demonstrations (however statistically insignificant these may be relative to other activities Muslims engage in), and most of the news about Christians as such — with the exception of the high media profile of the Pope — involves controversy, schism and scandal.

Institutionally speaking, we will just briefly mention that whilst Muslims finally control one truly global news agency (Al-Jazeera), not many non-Arabs or non-Muslims view it, and whilst various churches have many news agencies only the most committed Christians follow them. Thus if Christians or Muslims want to defend each other or say or do something positive it is difficult to disseminate this into the popular news as it is considered 'not newsworthy' — this being a media codeword for 'too boring' and 'not commercially profitable'. I am particularly galled by this

when the same global media agencies inflict upon the world an hourly update of meaningless sports statistics; a daily dose of the latest misdemeanors of some actor or actress, model, singer or sportsperson; and a weekly wedge of distorted scientific theories molded into fantastical popular science stories. Consequently, 99.9% of mainstream Muslims in particular are constantly ‘challenged’ by the media to ‘condemn terrorism’ although they have done so repeatedly and *ad nauseam* (as can be seen, for example, at www.theamericanmuslim.org) but when mainstream Muslim leaders actually do try to respond to this ‘challenge’ the media never reports it. In short, to today’s media, the fact that billions of people of faith are striving daily and with every conscious breath to do the right thing with God in mind is apparently not as important as the substance-abuse foible of some American starlet who people like me have never heard of or never wanted to hear of. I exaggerate only slightly....

Now these things together present real obstacles and problems for us all, but since the most complex and apparently irresolvable problems consist essentially only of many smaller, entangled problems, we believe that with God’s Grace and the right intentions it is — or should be — possible to come to some reasonable understandings and solutions. It should be possible in most of these cases to know and agree on what and who is wrong, and what must be said and done. This, God willing, will be the substance of the deliberations taking place here over the next three days.

This brings me to Jordan’s latest — and potentially — greatest idea for improving global interfaith relations — an idea which epitomizes the best of what this conference is striving to do. On September 23rd 2010, His Majesty King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein proposed before the United Nations General Assembly the establishment of a *World Interfaith Harmony*

Week. Less than two weeks ago, on October 20th, 2010, at Jordan' behest, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously approved a resolution establishing *The World Interfaith Harmony Week*. I will not read the preamble — it can be found at www.worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com — but the short operative text of the resolution reads as follows:

World Interfaith Harmony Week

The General Assembly,

1. *Reaffirms* that mutual understanding and inter-religious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace;
2. *Proclaims* the first week of February of every year the World Interfaith Harmony Week between all religions, faiths and beliefs;
3. *Encourages* all States to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Temples and other places of Worship during that week based on Love of God and Love of the Neighbor, or based on Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbor, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions;
4. *Requests* the Secretary-General to keep the General Assembly informed of the implementation of the present resolution.

You will all no doubt notice how remarkable and blessed it is that a United Nations General Assembly resolution should speak of 'Love of God and Love of the Neighbor' or 'Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbor'. I myself had the honour to introduce and explain the resolution, so allow me to repeat some of the explanation.

The *objective* behind the resolution is to turn the tide against the world's inter-religious tension, mistrust, dislike and hatred by:

- 1) Co-coordinating and uniting the efforts of all the interfaith groups doing positive work with one focused theme at one specific time annually,

thereby increasing their collective momentum and eliminating redundancy.

- 2) Harnessing and utilizing the collective might of the world's second-largest infrastructure (that of places of worship — the largest being that of education) specifically for peace and harmony in the world: inserting, as it were, the right 'software' into the world's religious 'hardware'.
- 3) Permanently and regularly encouraging the silent majority of preachers to declare themselves for peace and harmony and providing a ready-made vehicle for them to do so. Moreover, if preachers and teachers commit themselves on the record once a year to peace and harmony, this means that when the next inter-religious crisis or provocation occurs, they cannot then relapse into parochial fear and mistrust, and will be more likely to resist the winds of popular demagoguery.

It will be noted, moreover, that the language of the resolution excludes no one, of any religion or of no faith at all: every person of good will, with or without faith can and should commit to 'Love of the God and Love of Neighbour' *or* 'Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour'. Loving the Good and the neighbour is, after all, the essence of good will. And referring to 'the Good' obviously does not necessarily imply belief in God or in a particular religion, even though for many believers 'the Good' is God precisely: Jesus Christ \square said: '*No one is Good but God Alone*' [Mark, 10:18; Luke 18:19, and Matthew 19:17], and 'the Good' ('*Al-Barr*') is one of God's Names in the Holy Qur'an [*Al-Tur*, 52:28]. Thus speaking of loving 'the Good' is a theologically-correct but inclusive formula — *in so far as it goes* — that unites all humanity and excludes no one, compromises

no one, commits no one, forces no one, harms no one, costs nothing, and — on the contrary — includes everyone, celebrates everyone, benefits everyone, unites everyone and has the potential to bring much needed Peace and Harmony to the entire world *in sha Allah*.

Now clearly this a deliberate broadening — but not abandoning — of the *A Common Word* principle, so I ask this conference and everyone here to lend it their full support as it represents a comprehensive effort to alleviate interfaith problems before they descend into the oppression of minorities (our primary concern here today). After all, ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’. More concretely and specifically, we ask you all to help by:

- (1) Writing a personal email or letter of support for this initiative and posting it on the support section on the www.worldinterfaithharmony.com website.
- (2) Writing emails to all those on your email lists who you think might be interested and asking them to show their support on the same website.
- (3) Posting any resources you think would be important to themes of the World Interfaith Harmony Week on the website.
- (4) Organizing an event yourselves or simply giving sermon or a lecture on the first week of next February on the theme of Interfaith Harmony.
- (5) Recording your event on the website according to your own countries.

Finally, allow me to say that it will take time for people of different religions to love their neighbours as such but with God’s grace, earnest prayers, patience, intelligent and deliberate planning, hard work and good will, this can be done, *in sha Allah*. God says in the Holy Qur’an:

Surely those who believe and perform righteous deeds — for them the Compassionate One shall appoint love. (Maryam, 19:96)

Thank-you.

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