

International Consultation
"Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future"
Keynote lecture by Archbishop Dr Anders Wejryd, Uppsala,
Co-president of Religions for Peace.

Geneva, 1 November 2010

We are able to meet under the auspices of the World Council of Churches – because of catastrophes in past times – and because of daring and, in the eyes of many, totally unrealistic individuals.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Western cultures seemed, to Westerners, and maybe also to some others, thoroughly victorious. Most of, yes nearly all land, was politically in the hands of so called Christian powers. The technology of the colonial powers held promises for the future, hardly ever before dreamt of. The times of wars between the so called Christian powers would hopefully soon belong to the past. Some wars had yet to be carried out in order to stabilise the colonies but in general peaceful times were soon to come. Citizens of European powers travelled normally without passports and visas. Economies were thought to be open.

In protestant theology, ideas of a realized eschatology, ideas of heaven already being here or at least coming close, became more and more common. Perhaps we were approaching the Promised Land already within our own lands and in present times! In the competition between religions, which all were thought to seek the true origin, meaning of and power for life, Christianity seemed to have triumphed, not least the Western form of Christianity, especially Protestantism in its various shapes.

Precisely one hundred years ago Protestant Christian Missions met at Edinburgh, mainly in order not to double-work and to divide the immense task in a fairly balanced way but also to enhance the peace-building responsibilities of Christianity.

But: so many of these hopes died in the trenches of the great European War, the so called World War One. Once again Christians stood against Christians. Fear for loss of influence or fear for loss of room for the inherited cultures triumphed over internationalism, co-existence and optimism.

Christian leaders were saddened to silence or took up the patriotic rhetorics of their lands. Some refused to go along. Some of them became very active both in rethinking the relations between the life to come and immanent realities and also in actual peace activism. One of them was my predecessor at Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom. He was of course greatly criticised both by politicians of all colours and by Christians of many colours, especially more traditionalist ones. Naïve, dangerous, a traitor both to religious traditions and to cultural values was but a few of the negative aspects he was accused of. There were of course a great number of other great or greater persons, though Söderblom, for many reasons, is the one I am closest to. When he finally, together with the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, could invite churches and individuals to the Stockholm meeting in 1925, this became the real start of the Life and Work movement. Actually we know Söderblom wanted to invite Muslim representatives to the Stockholm meeting also, as he meant that Islam should be seen as a part of the same tradition as the Christian. That was his conviction as a historian of religions but it was of course not accepted by others.

Totally unrealistic idealists and enormous catastrophes to people, beliefs and nations then made an organisation like the WCC necessary and possible. In 1948 the Faith and Order movement, with roots in the International Mission Council, together with the Life and Work movement from Stockholm and Uppsala in 1925, formed the organisation that is hosting us today.

Catastrophes and daring pioneers and idealists formed our host organisation. But catastrophes and daring pioneers and idealists are also what mark the Common Word call and so many of the endeavours to dialogue, moderation, understanding and cooperation between the world religions as e.g. Muslim and Christian relations.

I do not to pretend to speak from any other perspective than my Nordic or more true: Swedish. What has already been said and what will be said during the coming days at this conference will bring up many other perspectives.

In the Swedish discourse religion had a period of surprising acceptance in the 1990's. The French enlightenment tradition had been very successful in making religion a very personal thing, an issue of private choice, in the public understanding of what religion is. But suddenly a large number of immigrants, for whom religion was a necessary part of their identity, moved into the public arena. This coincided with a serious economic depression which made it clear to many how limited and reductionist the technocratic and secular projects were. It also coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union and the role played for that by Pope John Paul II. Religion was back on stage – and respected. Sometimes also very strange and primitive new-age forms of religion were lifted up and acknowledged by media. That paves the way for backlashes.

On the international scene the ended game between Communism and Capitalism needed new players, because the need for alternatives is always there. Only too readily people introducing themselves as servants of God in our two religions stepped in.

So the backlash is here. Religion is still back on the stage – but now, as in most parts of Europe – questioned and ridiculed. Religion is looked upon as something that is at the root of conflicts and divides societies. Look at September 11 and many of the fundamentalist so called Christian responses to it! Religion stands in the way of modernisation and makes it impossible to discuss individual ethics and social ethics in a sensible and meaningful way. Religion has only the good of its own people before its eyes, not the common good. Religion is, in short, greetings from yesterday, that may seriously jeopardize peaceful progress.

Are these words just natural fruits of a hostile atheistic surrounding, which we shouldn't care about, or are we to blame for any of it? Shouldn't we care at all or should we care a lot?

We should care a lot. There are so many traits in our two religions that do speak contrary to this. We have to show responsibility to our traditions, to our peoples and to all those who have not yet found their religion. We have to act in concurrence with the deepest values of our traditions!

The tensions between our religious traditions and the consequences we witness is a catastrophe. Catastrophes change lives and priorities. Initiatives have to be taken. Normally they are taken by people looked upon as naïve, dangerous and irresponsible. As always before!

“It would be easier to be a Muslim in Sweden if more people believed in Jesus.” That is how a Swedish imam stated the situation some years ago. Religions are a lot less at the roots of conflict than is ignorance or lack of personal experience of what religion can mean. At the roots of conflicts are normally issues of power over people, resources and territory. It is indeed true that religion can be very successfully used to prolong and deepen and motivate conflicts – but is that done by those for whom religion really is of personal and spiritual importance – or by others?

In my tradition the concept of the Triune God is used far too little to underline the universal side of Christianity. This might surprise as the concept of trinity is one of our oldest points of conflict. But any real reflection over it shows the responsibility and respect that each Christian is called upon to show against everyone and all things created. They are all created and everyone is created by the same God, in God’s side as Father, regardless of their beliefs. All is kept alive and moved by the same God, in God’s side as Holy Spirit. Some acknowledge the side of God who is the Son, the Redeemer, but God is not God only for those who do that.

Already in the Jewish tradition one commandment has precedence over all others, that of loving God more than anything else and your neighbour as yourself. Christian traditions brings that on and often see what is upholding and promoting life as an important criteria for what is to be judged as good. In the Lutheran traditions good deeds are only to be done for the good of the fellow-human, not for God. That is indeed a secularisation of ethics already from the 16th century! Here I must ask to what extent the concepts of *halal* and *haraam* are also linked to what is good for life, and to what extent they therefore could undergo some transformation at certain points in history.

I think all of us here recognise that there is no relevance for our religions without identity – but on the other hand, there is no identity without relevance. It is part of the identity both of the Prophet and of Jesus Christ that they were totally relevant for the people they met. Their task to understand people, to change the course of people’s lives and to reach out to people, their relevance, is to a great extent also their identity.

The theme of this conference, Transforming communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common future, is indeed a challenge. Just affecting communities is a big enough chunk for all of us, transforming them is mostly far beyond realism. And here it is about a common future, a Common future. There are reasons to give up already before we have started.

It is provocative to many to visit a thoroughly Muslim neighbourhood in Europe. It is not only provocative but often also scaring. The old homogeneous land now hosts other cultures with other languages and other codes of conduct. In short: Other most everything. But at the same time nearly always very, very peaceful. But it was my land – and is no more. And those who experience this are often the ones who have more reason than others to fear. Fear of unemployment. Fear of exclusion. Fear of not being part of tomorrow. The well educated and well off dwell somewhere else.

The Christian traditions have grown from Abraham to universalism, but if they are adhered to by the people who are challenged or scared by the new Muslim presence I am afraid some of them usually identify the Christian religion with what things used to be like, strengthening the ethnic identity. That is what so much of the traditional teaching has been saying for ages, when religion was to be the supreme unifying factor of a nation!

I see it as quite a challenge to lift up religion as a cohesive factor for a mixed society, when religions either have been used for exclusive nation-building or have had to find their static places in *millet* systems.

All that was taken for granted was not taken for granted as long as it wasn't challenged. And it was not challenged because it wasn't even noticed. But when some of it was challenged many were shaken as the arguments for what was taken for granted were not there or at least they were not known.

Where are the roots of our ethic and how is the ethic given to us? Are we ready to anchor the ethics in what it does to our fellow human, near or far, in this or coming generations and take the conflicts and different opinions that follow from such a basis? Or do we have to build our ethics on different revelations – or can we find a shared revelation?

To me The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is, of course, a grand achievement and a piece of good theology. It was also developed after catastrophes, when it stood clear to many what selfishness, fear, greed and hatred could lead to. It is more complicated than that for many of you, also for Christians, I know that. But still, what more precisely stops us from supporting this declaration and using it for building a common understanding with religious back-up?

Or maybe we should simply stick to the wisdom of the Common Word and just start from the shared commandment of mutual love. It is revolutionary enough and it challenges us all in a number of areas.

Religions have to be taught – and learned. In today's world not only “my own” traditions have to be taught but also those of others – in a respectful way. What roles can religions play for religious education beyond “their own”? We are all Abraham's children!

As we share the Creator and the respect for life given, how can we use our traditions for the cohesion of our societies, trying to foster open and sustainable societies?

Religious groups often have a credibility that goes beyond every other group in dissolved societies. They can both become those who trigger off violence and those who build for the future. If they can acknowledge that their beliefs differ but that a large part of their ethics can be shared, they will make a tremendous difference. But can they do that? Do they have sufficient backing for that from the respective religious authorities?

Two years ago I had the privilege to invite twenty-nine knowledgeable people committed to issues of environment and climate change to Uppsala. They had a wide variety of religious affiliation, but they were all prominent in their religious traditions. We were to speak out in preparation for the UN climate meeting in Copenhagen. A background material was prepared, both on describing the state of science at that time and of ways of reasoning in different religious traditions when it came to the responsibility for creation. Many of us were struck by the shared values, the shared respect for a sacred creation or environment, but also how much was shared in respect to acknowledging reason and consequences of different ethical choices – and the preferential standing of the poor and weak. There was a shared respect for the holy, a shared respect for natural sciences, a shared respect for the realities of politics and indeed a shared respect for the religious traditions. That gave me hope. Maybe even for this theme: Transforming communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common future.