

**International Consultation
Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future
Geneva, Switzerland**

FINAL STATEMENT

Preamble

At the joint invitation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), the Royal *Aal al Bayt* Institute and the Consortium of A Common Word, 64 Muslim and Christian leaders, scholars, and activists from around the world gathered in Geneva, from 1 to 4 November 2010, to develop concrete ways of building a common future, in order to achieve more compassionate and just societies, based on equality, co-citizenship, and mutual respect.

Nature and objectives

Very few meetings have like this one been organized as a jointly prepared and jointly sponsored consultation. It has been made possible because of the shared experience over recent decades of international Christian and Muslim consultations:

Motivated by our commitment to interfaith dialogue, the consultation aimed to help Muslims and Christians move beyond the discourse of minority and majority towards upholding the principle of shared citizenship. We desired to stress the role of religion in reconciliation, instead of allowing it to be identified with conflict, and to emphasize the importance of education in eliminating mistrust among religious communities.

With this in mind the consultation focused on three main areas:

- Beyond Majority and Minority.
- From Conflict to Compassionate Justice.
- Education for Understanding and Shared Citizenship.

In the opening session representatives of the organizers presented their perspectives on the theme of the consultation. Short lectures by invited experts on each of the topics were presented to the full consultation. Parallel working groups then listened to local experiences from around the world presented by participants. On this basis they then considered the themes in ways which combined theoretical and practical perspectives.

Opening session

Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, opened the proceedings by welcoming the participants and thanking the Muslim partners for their commitment to this project. The consultation builds on the long experience of such meetings in which the WCC has been an active and committed partner. From its origins the WCC has been committed not only to the *oikoumene* of the Christian churches but that of all humanity. The General Secretary spoke of his experience as chair of the church's dialogue with the Islamic Council of Norway. He posed three central questions to the consultation: How can communities be transformed to express an inclusive "we"? How can Muslim and Christian leaders build relationships which can face challenges together? And how can our spiritual and religious resources be used to transform our communities?

Dr Ibrahim Rabu presented greetings from Dr Muhammad Ahmad Sharif, General Secretary of the World Islamic Call Society (WICS). Based on Islamic principles, the World Islamic Call Society strongly believes that inter-religious dialogue and cultural cooperation are the best ways of dealing with global challenges, whether religious, educational or social. This gathering brings under one roof a significant number of leaders from Muslim and Christian communities at a time when all of us are anxious about the growing phenomenon of violence coupled with extremism. It is our duty, dictated by the moral need to be open towards each other, to express our deep anxiety, on behalf of Muslims and non-Muslims, especially Christians, alike, as a result of the Swiss referendum that led to the banning of mosque minarets. Such an outcome contradicts the image we all hold of this country. We cannot conceal our worries that the ban may impact world relations negatively at various levels. We believe that the opportunity still exists to deal wisely with such a delicate situation. We are certain that this country will continue protecting the rights of every one of its citizens to freely practice his/her religion.

Revd Dr Thomas Wipf, on behalf of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and the Swiss Council of Religions in Switzerland, and *HE Sheikh Yousef Ibram*, Imam of the Geneva Mosque, extended the welcome of the local and national religious communities to the consultation. Both emphasized their deep regret at the referendum of December 2009 which prohibited the building of minarets. The churches and the Muslim organizations had, both together and separately, campaigned against the ban and continue to work together to ameliorate the negative impacts of that event. This consultation, they said, will have a significant effect also on the local situation and help with looking forward to a more positive future.

Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, President of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), presented greetings on behalf of CEC and of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and stated that the consultation will contribute to the development of a set of values that could strengthen the exercise of religious freedom and human rights.

In the first of two keynote lectures, *HRH Prince Ghazi b. Muhammad b. Talal* of Jordan, referring to the October 2007 statement ‘A Common Word’ signed by 138 senior Muslim scholars, focused on the shared Muslim and Christian principle of defending the oppressed regardless of religion. He quoted the example of ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri who, exiled in Damascus after having resisted the French invasion of Algeria in the 1830s, saved many thousands of Christians during sectarian clashes. Political powers and media frequently keep the public in ignorance of realities which do not suit their interests. In relation to this consultation it is therefore particularly welcome that the UN General Assembly in October 2010 agreed to establish the World Interfaith Harmony Week to take place annually in the first week of February.

The Rt Revd Anders Wejrud, Archbishop of Uppsala, Sweden, in the second keynote address, recalled the enormous changes over the last century moving from Christian and western triumphalism through a number of disasters to work of visionary activists whose dreams led to the international and interreligious initiatives which lie behind the current event. But elements of our religious communities have become politicized, and others have suffered by association, while a backlash against religion threatens to marginalize them all. Religion and identity are closely interdependent and both are unavoidably relevant to everyday life. So when marginalized communities fear change, religion too often becomes a tool for conflict instead of a force for justice and reconciliation which are inherent in love of God and love of neighbour.

Working on the themes

1. Beyond majority and minority

HE Dr Tarek Mitri, Minister of Information, Lebanon, pointed out that modern nation state models have revived ancient hatreds, and the contemporary focus on legal minority rights encourages the development of distinct identities. Concerns for collective survival encourage a turning inwards and open the door for external interference – the example of Christian communities in the Ottoman state illustrates the process. The new nation states often lacked a shared sense of history, resting on a theoretical shared citizenship which in only some cases was able to construct a new shared history. In such situations of uncertainty, when crises destabilize, anger and frustration find release in targeting scapegoats, often religious minorities. Tensions between nation state formations and ethnic, religious and linguistic realities, when they increase, throw minorities back on their own resources and external partners. State governments make things worse by seeking to manipulate such internal differences to maintain power. This disguises the fact that social and economic problems are shared across all such communal divisions.

Prof. Dr Mahmoud Ayoub, Hartford Seminary, USA, started with the reflection that there are non-Muslim countries whose Muslim populations far exceed those of countries regarded as guardians of Islam – which needs no guardians. What are minorities? Some are oppressed, others oppress. In the west a Muslim presence has been continuous since

the early 8th century, often as rulers, more recently as colonial migrants. Relationships have often been disrupted by the appearance of fanatical revival movements. Currently, Muslims in North America and Europe live in a generally favourable situation, but they need to indigenize. For that they need to develop an Islamic scholarship which is relevant to, and grows out of, the western Muslim experience. The resource for such a course can be found in Qur'anic and Prophetic models: Sura 29 verse 46, 'And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best, except for those of them who act unjustly;' and 5:48, '...for everyone of you did We appoint a law and a way, and if God had pleased He would have made you a single people...'. The Qur'an wanted all the people of the book to be one ecumenical community, but none of them accepted this role, yet this goal remains a sign of hope. So we need not a *fiqh* of minorities but one of citizenship and pluralism which learns also from secular humanism.

2. From conflict to compassionate justice

Dr. Aref Ali Nayed, Director of the Kalam Research and Media center in Dubai, focused his presentation on growing ecologies of peace and forgiveness, citing teachings in both faith traditions which require compassion towards our neighbors. He remarked that there is an urgent need to repair, rehabilitate and maintain the scholarly and spiritual institutions that preserve and grow compassion in the hearts of young people. Furthermore, he said we are called upon to retrieve, rehabilitate and re-articulate the true compassionate teachings of our traditions regarding the divinely ordained value of human personhood and its rights, duties and freedoms.

Revd Kjell Magne Bondevik, President of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, Moderator of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs and former Prime Minister of Norway, began his presentation by saying that it is more difficult to win peace than it is to win war. He named the three ethical values of compassion which arise from his faith - the commandment of Jesus to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves, the understanding that we are all created in the image of God and the principle of sound stewardship of God's creation.

Dr. Farid Esack, Professor in the Study of Islam at the University of Johannesburg, suggested that we can never attain compassionate justice, but that we can attempt to move towards this justice. He added that justice is an imperative value and that compassion is a value which stands on its own. He added that justice without compassion is a betrayal of justice, and that we must recognize that each of us has the capacity to become what we hate in the other.

3. Education: The path to understanding, cooperation and active citizenship

Dr Ja'far Abdusalam, Secretary-General of the League of Islamic Universities in Egypt and professor emeritus, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, drew attention to the many verses in the Quran that stress human diversity as something important and natural. "Islam establishes equality between all human beings. The Prophet spent a lot of time fighting

discrimination and showing that we humans are all equal," he said. Educating and teaching are key means of affirming equality and non-discrimination among human beings. In relation to this Muslims and Christians should take advantage of scientific progress and learning and in respect for law. Education and science should be in the service of the community and should be open and shared. An important dimension of this is to correct the mutual images of Islam and Christianity, especially in school textbooks.

Clare Amos, speaking as a British Christian woman with many years of experience in the Middle East, asked to what extent our philosophy and understanding of the nature of education itself are influenced by our religious beliefs or theology of revelation. 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. We need to look at a range of experiences and research accumulated in recent years in a wide variety of international settings, and she referred in detail to some of these. In conclusion she again stressed the importance of remaining alive to the theological foundations of our shared educational reflection and experience.

Recommendations

Preamble

- We have mutual concerns about the issues affecting our world and our communities; we share the consequences of these issues in our lives and therefore we need to address them together.
- The basis of our faiths, as expressed in the call to get to know each other and the two commandments to love God and to love the neighbour provide a solid ground for our common responsibility to act and address common concerns.
- We regard the deepening of our mutual religious and theological understanding as a necessary dimension of our continuing dialogue, exploring both the points where we share common ground and where we differ.

1. Beyond minority and majority

- We commit jointly to work to counter discrimination, abuse of laws and unjust legal restrictions on matters related to religious identity.
- We commit jointly to undo the effects of historical injustices and stereotypes which continue to discriminate against particular religious communities.

- We commit jointly to commend the principles adopted by like-minded international and non-governmental organizations, refusing to allow religious or spiritual authority to justify discrimination and exclusion.

2. *From conflict to compassionate justice*

- We call for the formation of a joint working group which can be mobilized whenever a crisis threatens to arise in which Christians and Muslims find themselves in conflict.

- Religion is often invoked in conflict creation, even when other factors, such as unfair resource allocation, oppression, occupation and injustice, are the real roots of conflict. We must find ways to ‘disengage’ religion from such roles and ‘reengage’ it towards conflict resolution and compassionate justice.

3. *Education: the path to understanding, cooperation and active citizenship*

- We commend and commit ourselves to the implementation of the World Interfaith Harmony Week as adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 October 2010.

- We recommend that the organizers of this consultation consider establishing a joint project to:

- a) encourage the sharing of experiences of living together constructively in plural societies and urban settings;
- b) collect and disseminate best practices in activities and projects that build a culture of dialogue and interreligious cooperation;
- c) focus on the social and economic problems affecting more than one billion people living in poverty, which are among the most acute causes of racial, ethnic and religious conflicts;
- d) focus on environmental issues and climate change and the challenges they represent to human security.

- We affirm the importance of relevant and balanced education about the religion of ‘the other’ at all levels and in appropriate formats, in curricula and text books and the training of religious and community leaders, teachers, lecturers and researchers, ideally provided by an adherent of that religion.

- We encourage the production of an interfaith resource book and of joint teaching tools on Islam and Christianity for the use of religious teachers, imams and clergy, and their translation and dissemination worldwide.

- We call on those who fund and manage universities and colleges of religious training to support the establishment of teaching and research programmes in the major religions with a view to encouraging positive interreligious relations.
- We encourage the development of programmes designed to strengthen young people's abilities to play a constructive role in a plural world, to reflect on the values of compassionate justice and mutual respect, and to prepare them for future leadership roles.
- We call on the media to assume their responsibility to provide balanced coverage of the issues which concern us.

On matters of current concern

- The consultation notes with regret and pain the suffering of religious groups in various locations around the world today, where minorities are scapegoated for deeper and more complex problems.
- The consultation coincided with an escalation of tragic and violent events in Iraq, and a statement was issued.
- The participants expressed their concern about the tensions surrounding the forthcoming referendum in the Sudan. It is important that these tensions not be seen as being between Muslims and Christians.
- The participants expressed their concern at the Swiss vote to ban the construction of minarets and noted with appreciation the broad campaign against this vote.
- The consultation reaffirms the value of Christians and Muslims engaging in dialogue as a way of moving forward together.

4 November 2010