

Reflections in the Light of *A Common Word* – An Introduction

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The Regensburg Lecture of Benedict XVI (12 September 2006) has in spite – or even because – of its provocative content contributed decisively to the conviction: two religious communities with a universal truth claim, who confess the One God and together make up more than half of the world's population – at a time marked by globalisation – are challenged as never before to talk and act with one another in reasonable ways, on the basis of the central doctrines and values of their respective faiths. The 'Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders' to Christian leaders, the so-called 'Letter of the 138' (ACW), published in Amman by the 'Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought' on 13 October 2007, a little more than one year after the Regensburg Lecture, surely constitutes a most significant Muslim initiative in the field of Christian-Muslim relations. The Letter designates the dual love commandment as the central commandment not only of the Bible but of the Qur'an as well, and it calls for a renewal and intensification of Muslim-Christian dialogue and collaboration. It has evoked written responses from a great number of individual Christian leaders, churches and groups of theologians. It has also generated a number of international conferences at eminent academic institutions in Europe and the United States, as well as countless local and regional initiatives. Worthy of special mention among the various dialogue meetings initiated by the core group of ACW are the dialogue with the Theological Faculty of Yale University (24-31 July 2008), the conversations with the Archbishop of Canterbury organised together with the Inter-Faith Programme at the University of Cambridge (12-15 October 2008) and the First Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome (4-6 November 2008). This Forum had been established on 6 March 2008.

All these initiatives and meetings – a full list of which can be found on www.acw.com – have been dominated on the Muslim as well as on the Christian side by European and North American voices.

However, as the Report of the 'Pew Research Center: Forum on Religion and Public Life', contemporary with our Conference in Cadenabbia, tells us, proportionately more than three-quarters of the world-wide Muslim population now lives in the Asia-Pacific (62%) and the Sub-Saharan Africa (15.3%) regions. On the Christian side Asian Christians in our days account for roughly 18 % and African Christians for roughly 16 % of the Christian World population. Thus, during the past century the weight within the Muslim as well as the Christian communities – numerically and otherwise – has been gradually shifting towards South and South-East Asia as well as to Sub-Saharan Africa. Asian and African Muslims and Christians significantly influence and even modify the outlook of each of the communities as a whole.

Dr Johnston Mbillah in his keynote paper eloquently makes the same point:

Arguably, the largest meeting of Christians and Muslims takes place in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and not the West and the Arab world. It is well known that it is in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia that one can notice Christians and Muslims living as members of the same family sharing in the joys of birth and the sadness of death and celebrating religious festivals together as if there were no stark differences between Christianity and Islam.

Having said that, it is also in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia that the competitive characters of Christianity and Islam as rival missionary religions is felt more than anywhere else. It is in this light [...] one must look beyond the Euro-Arab axis of the Mediterranean to the largest meeting of Christians and Muslims that take place in Africa and Asia to make more sense of Christian and Muslim relations.

It therefore seemed relevant and urgent to learn how personalities with a long record of dialogue practice and reflection – hailing from Asia east of Iran and from Sub-Saharan African countries – view and evaluate the initiative taken by the authors of ACW and the process of dialogue set in motion by this letter. What importance do Christian and Muslim leaders hailing from these regions attribute to this document, and how do they evaluate the ideas and resolutions of the international conferences at Yale, Cambridge and Rome dedicated to it? What do Asian and African Muslims and Christians, who in their respective countries have been engaged for years in promoting better

Christian-Muslim relations, think about ACW and the resolutions of the subsequent conferences? How in their view should and could the noble principles and ideas put forward on paper be translated into reality in their respective countries and regions?

In cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Berlin, Muslim and Christian personalities from Pakistan, India, Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as from Nigeria, Sudan and Kenya, were invited. All of them had been engaged effectively for years in their respective countries in promoting Christian-Muslim dialogical encounter, with great courage and perseverance, often in the context of communal disinterest, fear of the other and distrust. In addition a handful of similarly qualified persons from Britain, the United States, Italy and Germany were invited. The small number of participants, about twenty altogether, was meant to favour personal encounter and in-depth exploration of issues after a prolonged period of preparation ahead of the actual meeting between 1st and 4th October 2009 in seclusion in the quiet Villa la Collina at Cadenabbia on the bank of Lake Como in Northern Italy.

The objective of this exchange and reflection was not another evaluation and exploration of the theological and ideological bases and claims of ACW and of the ensuing process of discussion but rather, *first*, to reflect critically from their specific vantage point about the results so far of the 'Open Letter Process' and to discuss the practical significance of the ideas, proposals and resolutions that had been coming up during that process with regard to the challenges that Muslims and Christians together face in their respective regions and countries and, *second*, to make out areas and problems of cultural, social and political life in the respective countries and regions which would seem to demand deepened Muslim-Christian dialogue and *last but not least*, to propose strategies for translating the resolutions of the conferences into practice, including the possible setting up of Christian-Muslim groups/bodies that would make a sustained effort towards shared critical reflection, mutual criticism and common action. In particular, we wanted to ask: What are the political meanings, implications and consequences for human rights and human dignity; for freedom of belief and of religion; for the Common Good (*bonum commune*); and for living together in a pluralistic, secular and democratic society?

We envisaged that all the participants in the Cadenabbia workshop during the months previous to our meeting would have made themselves familiar with the texts, themes, discussions and results of the above-mentioned chain of international conversations that had taken place in the wake of the publication of ACW. The website www.acommonword.com and an electronic dossier containing the relevant materials which was sent to each participant in March 2009 turned out to be helpful in complementing the participants' knowledge in this matter.

Eight participants (two from Asia and two from Africa for each section) were asked to prepare position papers on the following two topics:

- The 'Open Letter and Call' of 13 October 2007 and the subsequent international dialogue meetings so far: A critical evaluation of the significance of the ideas, proposals and resolutions that have come up during that process, with regard to the challenges that Muslims and Christians together face in their respective country and region.
- Which problems of cultural, social and political life and thought of each country and region demand a renewed effort of Muslim-Christian dialogue and cooperation? Ideas and initiatives needed on the normative, practical, political and structural level.

The texts of these papers were completed by July 2009. They were sent to all participants, each of whom was asked to write a comment of approx. 800 words on the two main groups of papers. Especially with regard to the second group of papers the participants were asked to give special regard to the quest for political meanings, implications and consequences. Most of these comments reached us in time so that it was possible to send them to every participant before the beginning of the workshop on 1st October. Thus we all arrived at Cadenabbia having had the opportunity to read the above-mentioned written contributions beforehand.

We trust that the engaged Christian and Muslim voices from Asia and Africa assembled in this volume will help in understanding and supporting their common struggle for genuine justice and democratic values in their regions and beyond.