

The Third Command: To Do Justice

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Let me begin by associating myself with all others who have pointed out the fact that this is a unique initiative, to invite Christians to a common cause of love of God and love of neighbour. Although such an invitation has existed in the Qur'an for many centuries, what is significant is that the manner in which it has been introduced is certainly unprecedented. Furthermore it is an intra-Muslim denominational document presented to the Christian leadership at a time when relations between the two communities are at a very low ebb.

But this letter is also unique in the sense that, perhaps for the first time, Churches of all denominations have responded to the Muslims directly on the issue of common concern. After World War II, the efforts of all Churches were diverted to Jewish-Christian relations, where Muslims and Islam featured as an incidental issue; in other words, Muslims were an afterthought.

The letter is unique from another point of view, that it is an 'Islamocentric' document which has used Biblical quotations as part of its religious traditions. There is a clear departure from many other Muslim publications where the Biblical quotations were used for polemical or apologetic purposes.

Understanding the 'Common Word' – a Common Witness?

The document highlights in its third part that the 'unity of God, love of Him and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.' I believe this is an important claim as far as it goes, but to claim that this dual commandment is the foundation of the two faiths seems to be moving too far. The document has, in my view, overlooked one significant aspect of the two faiths: that is the issue of justice. It may not be convenient to raise it as an additional part within the document but this central issue should not have been ignored. 'What does the Lord require of you', the prophet Micah asks, 'but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?'

(Micah 6:8). And I see a similar request in Islamic traditions, demanding the same love and humility from its followers. The Qur'an states that '...let not the hatred of others turn you away from justice, be just, that is nearer to piety.' (Q. 5:8). The demand that our faiths put upon us, in a simple and straightforward manner, are the demands of not only the love of God and love of neighbour, but these two inter-related vertical and horizontal relationships indicate that God and human beings have a higher purpose: to do justice.

I am sure, like me, many others have signed the document to support a significant Muslim process of dialogue with Christians. By signing the document one is not expected to say that these are agendas set in stone for discussion in future. There are layers of issues within these two, and if one adds the third – justice – all create distinctly different yet inter-related issues. The question of 'Love of God' raises a number of points. Love of God is shared in Islam through continuous obedience and worship. For many Muslims that expression is shown through the Shari'a, largely seen as that imposing un-yielding law. Shari'a for Muslims is also about their prayers and spirituality. A close connection with God and living a life in accordance with the teaching of the Prophet, for many Muslims, sums up the meaning of the Shari'a. It is the way to God, and it is the way to beauty and the sign of God leading to the promise of God. It promotes moral values; laws are there at the service of those values and not the other way round. Today the Shari'a is at the mercy of dictators and failed generals, and in the hands of the protestors.

The issue of Shari'a has been raised by the several contributors to this gathering. Professor Troll himself highlighted a perceived conflict between 'the implementation of Shari'a, human rights and the relation between state and religion.' Fundamental to all these is the basic principle that one cannot impose a law on an unwilling people. Such laws, by nature, become coercive and have no legitimacy with God either. The aspects of accountability, consultation and dissent, freedom of expression and human rights, as well as the inclusion of women and those who are citizens but not Muslims; all these areas are in my view open for debate. The use of Shari'a and its implementation is largely motivated by the sense of injustice and oppression that people feel. The way the issue of Shari'a and its 'implementation' (as if rules and methods were discussed, set in articles and clauses, bound

in several volumes and lying on shelves waiting to be implemented) has been raised in some Muslim countries and regions terrifies me as a Muslim, let alone others.

When I look at the concept of love of God, I find divergence in our beliefs which encourages a good number of members of our faith to reach out to others. Al-Jazeera TV in May this year reported that the military chaplains stationed in the US air base at Bagram were filmed discussing how to distribute copies of the Bible printed in the country's main languages: Pashto and Dari. In one recorded sermon, Lieutenant-Colonel Gary Hensley, the chief of the US military chaplains in Afghanistan, tells soldiers that, as followers of Jesus Christ, they all have a responsibility 'to be witnesses for him'. 'The special forces guys – they hunt men basically. We do the same things as Christians, we hunt people for Jesus. We do, we hunt them down,' he says. 'Get the hound of heaven after them, so we get them into the kingdom. That's what we do, that's our business.' This deep urge, even in a militarily and culturally sensitive zone, in which a soldier is deeply motivated to share the message of Jesus, so that he can bring those who are not Christians to the kingdom, is an expression of his love of God and, from the point of view of those on the receiving end of the message, is equally offensive to God. The perception of God, his love, his care for humanity through Jesus (as the saviour of the whole of humanity vis-à-vis Prophet Muhammad as the messenger and the central figure of blessing for all worlds), how these conflicting positions stand in front of God and his love, needs deeper theological reflection. But until then, we have to accept that the differences of religion will remain forever and that it is the plan of God. Human beings need 'hospitable theologies'.

In all this I have my own concern: what responsibility do the two faiths have in relation to humanity? In our relationship, what place, if any, have those who do not belong to the 'People of the Book' or those who do not have faith in God or religion as we understand it? Is there room for a 'common witness'?

Living in a 'Neighbourhood' – A Common Destiny?

As this conference wishes to focus on Asia and Africa, I believe that there are a few common factors in history at the receiving end of which stand both Christians and Muslims. First, that both communi-

ties are facing a common legacy of colonialism. Both Islam and Christianity have entered into Africa at different stages, but during colonisation in some regions both religions were in a rush to convert the locals. The official policies in some countries, such as Nigeria, meant that the Christians and Muslims did not have direct meaningful engagements. The mediators in some respects were the African traditional religions that had the capacity to absorb both Christianity and Islam into their fold, but also to change their own attitude to faith and living; within a span of time they became distinctly Muslim and Christian but their religious accent was notably African. This is also true, to some extent, with Muslims and Christians in Asia, particularly in India and Indonesia. Secondly, these regions suffered from corruption, maladministration and the exploitation of their resources, both from within the countries and by powerful 'friends' from outside these continents. These by nature set communities in confrontation along ethnic and religious divides and generated their deep suspicion of each other. Thirdly, I believe there is a huge deficit of trust under the respectful veneer of the relationship between the two communities. Inter-faith inter-cultural living is certainly a blessing, providing necessary care within families and the neighbourhood; but what is so bewildering is that overall, communities trust enough *of* each other in their existential relationship but do not trust *about* each other's beliefs and practices. This in my view may lead to some serious consequences. I will illustrate this point a little later.

Against this backdrop one needs to examine the existential realities of *neighbourhood*. One factor that I believe has been a stumbling block between the two communities is the perception of Christians in shared neighbourhoods: although ethnically, linguistically and culturally they belong to the same people, somehow when it comes to religion the perception seems to change. Faith-wise their roots lie somewhere else. Christianity is still been perceived as the white man's religion. This strong subconscious association with their neighbours is detrimental to any meaningful relationship. Such perceptions are also rooted, as Professor al-Tayib has pointed out, in the assigning of medical and educational care by the colonial administrations to Christian missionaries. But it is also fair to say that in some Asian countries, and perhaps also in Africa, Muslims intentionally opted out of such services. They feared a contamination of their faith from such activities and as a result they lag behind in all the areas highlighted by the Professor.

The other crucial issue which has been raised in several dialogue meetings between the two faiths is the issue of education. The problem as I see it is not one of intention but of implementation. There were calls for fair representation of each other's faiths in text books. Ajaltoun in Lebanon (March 1970), the Colombo Dialogue (April 1974), Lagon, Ghana (July 1974), as well as in Hong Kong (January 1975), Porto Novo, Benin (March 1986) and several other subsequent Christian-Muslim dialogues organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the Aal al-Bait Foundation and the World Islamic Call Society, all raised the issue of education and teaching involving textbooks. None of these resolutions, as far as we are aware, have ever produced a single textbook that has been introduced in a Christian or Muslim school. Issues such as these suggest that there is a big gap between our pious hopes and our practical realities, something which we do not perhaps wish to face. But I would like to raise an even more serious issue: what kind of teaching are we offering to our future *ulama* and priests? Let me take the training of *ulama* in *Dar al-Uloom*, *Jamia* or *Pondok Pesantren* (the educational establishments where they are trained). After their training some of them acquire a position and a reputation for being a good *khatib*; they create a place for themselves in Muslim society and wield a great deal of influence in the community. This powerful group are practically unaware of Christian faith and practices and perhaps a large number of them have never visited a church. They have probably never been taught Christianity as Christians understand it and may even have been exposed to some polemical writings on Christianity. I recall a recent conversation with one of these dynamic young scholars, who holds a responsible position in one of the famous *Dar al-Uloom* in India; he proudly asserted that his institution has now introduced the study of other faiths as part of their curriculum. I became curious and asked if that included Christianity. He said 'Yes', and I said 'That means in your syllabus you have also included *Izhar al-Haq* of Rahmatullah Kairanawi?' He replied 'Yes', and I felt sad.

Another issue that will have a considerable impact is the influence of Pentecostal and Fundamentalist Christians with Christian Zionist tendencies in those two continents. Mbillah alluded to this problem in his paper. The retrieving of a true and faithful neighbourly relationship requires a vigilant eye on affairs introduced from abroad. The theology of 'Dispensationalism', and Christian Zionism in particular,

cannot be considered, by any standard, hospitable to other faiths and to Islam in particular. Today's Christian Zionism needs not a muted response, but a bold and forthright rejection of such ideas from the established Churches.

I agree with Professor Wasey about the Saudi initiative of inter-religious dialogue. I believe that a change of heart for a good reason is always welcome at any stage. However, the problem is not one of *intention* but of human resources. Such a commitment to dialogue at an international level needs meticulous planning and competent people to manage the whole dialogue process with understanding and knowledge. The people who led some of these initiatives in the past through Rabitah were more attuned to the people who were polemicist. I hope this may change.

Living in a 'neighbourhood' demands that we explore our shared past with an eye on the ground-realities of our co-existence and common destiny.