

Looking Together to the Future

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In addition to all the documentation reproduced or alluded to in the earlier sections of this publication, a synopsis was produced by Christian Troll for participants to read and thus refresh their memories of the most salient points *en route* to Cadenabbia itself. Were ever conference attendees better prepared? During the plenary sessions themselves, participants could take all these preliminaries for granted and focus on discussions about the realities thus exposed and the practicalities of pointers towards the future. This final section of the Report draws from those discussions and aims to point towards issues for further discussion, clarification, study or practical strategies towards building a more just society.

Justice

The overall title of this publication points at once to the major reaction of the assembled participants: the ACW themes of love of God and love of neighbour are incomplete without the inclusion of the theme of justice, which all would hold to be central and several would see as a more fundamental human value than love. If a just society could be built, then love, neighbourliness, peace and compassion would flow from it. A society that is structurally unjust makes it, at least, a hard place for love of neighbour to flourish. The key aim of Christians and Muslims, thus it was held, is to build a society where all human beings can live together with dignity. Human dignity is something that cannot be compromised, and in a hierarchy of values, basic human values were seen to be paramount, to be followed by values based on religion, with nationality and ethnicity coming further down the scale.

And yet from where are these human values to be drawn? As members of two faith communities, participants argued that basic human values come from God, creator of all, and thus were ultimately universal. Such human values ought to be accessible by reason also; therefore we spoke of basic human values, which are common to all humanity. Such values would include justice, fairness, kindness and human sympathy for those who suffer. From within both Muslim and

Christian systems, it was argued that if we want something for ourselves: freedom, dignity, human rights, then these things should be given to others; this is the fundamental meaning of "love of neighbour".

Several practical messages were heard. We have to accept that a deep distrust, even bordering on hatred, exists between different groups of people in the world, in regions and in local communities without a basis in personal experience or personal history. This requires us to own and work with our shared histories in an informed way, through education. Some causes of injustice in African and Asian societies have their roots in factors that lie outside the regions geographically and beyond the control of local religious or civic leaders, such could range from proxy wars, through struggles for spheres of influence, to the importation of religious traditions and approaches that are quite alien to the indigenous people of these continents. Whilst many causes of injustice can be traced to socio-economic-political sources, some of which take on a religious garb in reality, it cannot be escaped that religion has some responsibility also in communal violence and suchlike unjust situations; there was a call to re-examine underlying theologies and focus on the kind of catechesis that was given within religious communities and to be vigilant about material transmitted in the name of religion on television channels and the Internet.

The existing Universal Declaration of Human Rights was seen to have grown up in a First World context; the question was thus posed: What shape would such a declaration of human rights take if it were written from a Muslim or Christian or religiously plural developing world context? High flying talk of justice as a fundamental universal human value cannot be allowed to obscure the reality that in many countries in Asia and Africa, not hereby excluding other parts of the world, the agencies set in place to enforce justice are endemically corrupt. It was held to be a universal religious duty to make the world a more just place for human beings to flourish, however a specificity of the Cadenabbia gathering was that we were drawn from parts of the world where people had lived in pluralist societies for generations, therefore a particular challenge that we must face in the future is how to apply this experience to create a just common law by consensus in a country with a plurality of religions: could this be a "religious" law or must it by definition be "neutral to religion" or, in this sense, secular?

Shari'a

It is a common experience for all those experienced in Christian-Muslim meetings, conferences and dialogues, that sooner or later the question of the Shari'a is bound to be raised; our gathering was no exception. With the geographical compass represented, there were countries that talked actively of "introducing the Shari'a" and others that were founded on quite other principles, such as the *pancasila* principle in Indonesia and the secular tradition of independent India.

Some important first steps should be recorded. Given that the aim of the Shari'a is to establish a situation in which human beings can flourish in the way that God intended, in justice and peace, then, following on from the foregoing, a discussion of the Shari'a is a necessary part of any Muslim discourse on justice. It also follows, justice being a human value open to all by virtue of their reason, that wherever justice is to be found, there by definition is the Shari'a. Emphasis was laid on the importance of beginning with the *maqasid al-shari'a* (the underlying objectives) instead of approaching the Shari'a piecemeal as though it could be implemented as replacement elements in a system that is not founded on the underlying principles.

A strong note of caution was sounded that people often speak of "implementing the Shari'a" as though it were a clearly defined body of laws worked out in bound volumes and sitting on a shelf ready for implementation; this is not the case. As one member put it, to "implement the Shari'a" in the present situation is to sign a blank cheque as no-one knows its precise contents. Another member noted that if one were to draw up a handbook of women's rights in a range of Muslim countries, the results would show how arbitrary and ambiguous talk of the Shari'a is at the present juncture.

Some participants were opposed to the current talk of "implementing the Shari'a", seeing it as the consequence of poor constitutional law and inadequate civil law enforcement, thus creating a vacuum, often supplemented by corruption, into which calls for the Shari'a were seen as the solution. Others noted that if people wanted to be ruled by the Shari'a then they had a right to it. This led to some discussion about the methodology of implementation; if it were not by consultation and the will of the people, would its imposition not amount to

religious dictatorship? At the same time, no law is accepted by all the people but in a democracy, if the majority vote in a law, this must be done in such a way as to protect the rights of the minorities. African Christians, we were told, are not interested in having Christian religious states or being governed by Christian religious law, rather they look for a common state law that rules everyone. If Muslim personal law were to be introduced into a state, it was asked, would that mean that all Muslims have to be ruled by it and thus lose their rights under the common civil law, as upheld by the Christians? Would that not mean that Muslims were thus deprived of their right to choose according to their consciences? It was noted, on the basis of the Qur'an itself, that all human beings are directly and individually accountable to God; this point is particularly sharpened when one thinks of the situation of Muslim women under a legal system that had no or unequal feminine input in its creation and thus can be best described as "male majority law". What then would be the legal and moral position of these women in conscience?

Some of the realities of the Shari'a debate around Asia and Africa were noted. It often leads to polemical attacks by one group of scholars on another. Shari'a becomes a tool to make mischief in the hands of the oppressed who want to claim it as a means of getting back at their oppressors. In the eyes of many, "implementing the Shari'a" connotes imposing the *hudud* punishments; but our attention was drawn to report from the Prophet to the effect that the *hudud* should be kept away by any suspicion of lack of certainty. This principle of deterrent ameliorated by compassion seems far removed from the reality too often witnessed and reported. If the emphasis was on the *maqasid* rather than the *hudud*, then we might indeed see corruption rooted out from societies, the hungry fed, an emphasis on education and so on. It was noted with concern that opposition to elements of law that people labelled as "being part of the Shari'a" but that lacked fundamental justice was seen as "promoting ungodliness", being anti-Islam or indeed downright blasphemous. Indeed with so much misapplication of "Shari'a" around, there are those who associate the term with "causing injustice".

Two specific questions relating to Shari'a stemming from ACW were discussed. It was asked if "loving your neighbour" does not equate to "equal rights for all" and thus suggests a secular common law for all and not the Shari'a for Muslims and another law for Christians. There

was a call for the advocates of ACW to show how it would operate within a Shari'a-based system and demonstrate that such a philosophy does not demand a secular system.

Living with pluralities

One of the characteristics already noted of the Asian and African situation is an experience of living with pluralities, whether in terms of ethnicities or of religions. Stemming from this background, it was noted that "love of neighbour" affects all humanity; even though some of our neighbours are not always friendly and full of goodwill towards us. Hospitality was seen to be key in neighbourliness and a call was made for a more hospitable theology from both communities. A particular concern was raised about plurality that stretched beyond the Abrahamic religions; maybe if ACW had been generated in Africa and South (-East) Asia instead of the more insular Arab-European world, this issue could not have been avoided: is my family member who follows a Traditional Religion or Hinduism also my neighbour?

The language of exclusivity can often be detected in theological discourse but frequently it extends into identity politics where faith labels become symbols attached to majorities and minorities as a way of claiming group solidarity. The reality is, of course, that such identity politics is also played out within a faith community, which is divided by internal division and tension. Could the spread of a more democratic spirit, both within groups and between them, prompt an ideology of greater power-sharing?

The traditional plurality of our loci of interest cannot be immune from influences from outside in our globalised world society. Tensions, actions, theologies, economic strategies and political hegemonies from the West all have their impact in a way that cannot be controlled locally. At the far end of this spectrum was noted external funding for extremist groups and the exporting of armed conflict. Such external forces were not alien to taking on a religious colouring, be it Christian or Muslim.

Theology

The starting point for the discussion here was that Christians and Muslims are two faith communities under God and therefore our faith prompts reflection, which is theology, which in turn inspires us to

such documents as ACW. From a Christian perspective, an incarnated theology means taking local contexts seriously and being open to the Spirit of God working through people of other faiths. And yet experience prompted participants to formulate the question: Can a religious community bear with outsiders being openly critical of their perceived "divine truths"? Which elicits the further question: Is this "criticism" the same thing as "asking questions in order to understand better"? Indeed throughout the theatre of our concern, and perhaps on a wider canvas also, both faith communities are beset by self-declared "experts" in religious matters who are eager to proclaim with assurance what "God says", which prompted one member to raise the massive hindrance to progress caused by those who teach that "my opinion" is the "only right opinion".

Internal theological tensions within each faith are not unknown and need to be acknowledged and worked through. Attention was drawn to some Pentecostals and some Salafis who actually foment tension, first within their own religious community and then between the faiths. Indeed some of the worrying promoters of extreme positions within both communities are middle class "born again" Muslims or Christians, who draw their inspiration and guidance from the Internet or television, and prove to be much more dangerous than traditionally trained and grounded religious leaders. Such groups tend to be prone to "selective reading" of both scripture and history to bolster their extreme positions.

At the same time participants were keen to remember that there are insurmountable differences in theology and belief between Christians and Muslims; not least about how we understand God, Jesus/Muhammad and Qur'an/Bible. These must not be glossed over but we must feel ourselves inspired to "explore the otherness of the other". Indeed one fundamental weakness in religious educational institutions noted is that they need to be more open to understand the other faith within its own terms and paradigms and not according to their own construction of "the other". One important burden placed on theology is to drive and inspire the practice of the faith in human living.

A COMMON WORD

Much has already been written about ACW: how welcome it is, its potential importance in giving new impetus to the relationship between Muslims and Christians, and its strengths and weakness in terms of content. Several of the papers in this volume comment on this point; particular attention could be drawn to those of Channan and Madigan. A dominant reaction from both Asian and African participants was that the document is hardly known at all amongst religious leaders, local religious communities, theological educators or the media. Occasionally a signatory provoked a little interest, just by being a signatory, but overwhelmingly the reports were that the signatories themselves have not been active in promoting the document in their links, if they have any, with local Christians or in inspiring co-religionists to engage in a new way on the basis of the letter.

It was noted by some informed participants that ACW was drafted and then sent out for signature; it was not the product of a collaborative effort on the part of the signatories. ACW has a whole variety of readers, and thus is open to a variety of meanings being drawn from the text, both amongst Muslims but also amongst Christians and others who receive the text. Similarly others noted that many Christian responses to ACW had been collaborative efforts by theologians and Church leaders. This prompted the reflection and question: there needs to be some intra-Muslim agreement on the authoritative status of ACW; how representative is it? This representative quality is one obvious difference between ACW and *Nostra Aetate* but it was noted that the two documents shared the methodology of affirming those things that can so be and remaining silent on the remainder of issues.

The question was raised, based perhaps on a Muslim understanding of *din al-fitra*, that if ACW was truly *A Common Word* then it ought to be common to all humanity and not just restricted to Christians and Muslims. As such it should lead to common action to promote the common good both locally and internationally. What strategy might it prompt to break the deadlock over Palestine? was one comment. The lack of strategies and an action plan has already been noted as a weakness in ACW; perhaps related to its geographically limited authorship and non-representative status. Could it have brought forward an action plan on which the signatories could deliver?

There were calls for ACW to be translated into regional languages to disseminate the message wider. This prompted some discussion as to whether, if it were to be translated “for the masses”, it ought to be accompanied by a commentary and some reflections. Perhaps such accompanying literature could be a joint Christian-Muslim production?

Practical ways forward

It was generally agreed that this group meeting in Cadenabbia, drawn as it was from such a vast geographical area and with people acting only in their own personal recognisance lacked the capacity or mandate to set in train a range of practical measures. We could only make some practical observations. It was hoped that the signatories of ACW might feel the onus to become loci of future co-operative action; as indeed might the Aal al-Bayt Foundation in Jordan.

The most pressing practical outworking was the recognition of the need to work on all levels of education. To halt the production of ill-informed polemical literature, which all too easily leads to conflict. To revise existing text-books from children’s classes upwards and to introduce material that reflects the other faith within its own paradigms and models of understanding. Only in this way, could the message begin to work down to people in local communities. Coupled with this was the urgent need to address the educational institutions in which future religious leaders in both communities are educated. There needs to be a great interchange of materials and personnel to promote authoritative learning.

The speed and range of worldwide communication mean that local issues have global consequences, as may be evidenced by the episode in the Sudan in which a teacher allowed the children in her class to select the name Muhammad for a Teddy Bear. We need to prepare people to work with such media in productive ways. Similarly, the access to extreme voices on the Internet was noted and the disruptive activities of international speakers on lecture tours; to spare people from some of whom might require that entry visas are not issued, according to some participants.

One of the realities of life is that we do not start from a blank page of history; injustice is rife in the affairs of humankind. Can this be corrected on the basis of justice alone, or, as ACW indicates, do

human beings need to emulate the divine example of tempering justice with mercy and applying creatively the principles of compassion, as understood similarly and differently within Christian and Muslim traditions, to heal the injustices of society.

The overriding practical outcome called for by the conference was to empower both Muslims and Christians locally to work for justice and promote the Common Good, in health provision, education and the eradication of poverty, so that both communities could be known globally for their love of their fellow human beings.