

Let Us Meet in Faith beyond the Confessions – The Two Commandments of Love | april 2009

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In preparing my opening comments for this session on “Let Us Meet in Faith beyond the Confessions – The Two Commandments of Love,” I worked with the assumption that the choice of the topic was at least in part connected with the admirable open letter entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You” issued in October 2007 by over 138 prominent Muslim personalities from a large number of countries from several continents, including academics, intellectuals, scholars, government ministers, political advisors, authors, muftis and media chiefs, and addressed to some 27 Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christian leaders around the world, and the subsequent response entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You,” which was published as a full-page ad in the New York Times on 18 November with nearly 300 signatures of leading Christian personalities.

Through Professor Hassan Hanafi I wish to thank those who composed and signed this conciliatory document which is an inspiration and encouragement to all who labor for reconciliation and harmonious relations between different religious communities and most especially between Christianity and Islam, which, as the document and the response note, together comprise more than half of the global population. The Muslim document is praiseworthy not only for its conciliatory content and tone, but especially in light of the fact that in the background of the document was a growing tendency in many western Christian countries to demonize Islam and view it as a hostile force in the world, as well as a specific unfortunate incident in which many Muslims worldwide felt insulted by a reference to a Byzantine emperor’s strong criticism of Muhammad’s teachings in a speech delivered by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006. Rather than responding revengefully as so often happened in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, the leading Islamic figures, in signing the document, extended to Christians worldwide a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation.

My only regret concerning “A Common Word between Us and You” is that it was not also formally addressed to Jewish leaders worldwide. Nonetheless, as the Chief Rabbis of Israel noted in their positive response to the document contained in a joint communiqué with the Archbishop of Canterbury from 31 October 2007, the Muslim document in fact makes numerous positive references to Judaism and quotes freely from the Hebrew Bible, as well as from the Koran and New Testament.

The core message of “A Common Word between Us and You” is that the Abrahamic faiths share some core common ground that is at the heart of all three faiths, namely the two com-

mandments of love – love of God and love of neighbor. As noted in the Christian response:

“Surprisingly for many Christians, your letter considers the dual command of love to be the foundational principle not just of the Christian faith, but of Islam as well. That so much common ground exists – common ground in some of the fundamentals of faith – gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us cannot overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together. That this common ground consists in love of God and of neighbor gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities.”

Jews of course would equally affirm that love of God and love of neighbor is the heart and core of their faith and a basis for common cause and cooperation between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Indeed the Muslim document itself notes that “The Shema in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5), a centerpiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy, says ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’” In discussing love of neighbor, the document also makes reference to Leviticus 19:18: “...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...”

What we must honestly and practically ask ourselves, individually and collectively, is the following: If the common core of our respective faiths is love of God and love of neighbor, why have we found it so hard to love one another and why have our relations so often been marred by strife and enmity, and to some extent still are? I would like to point to a number of factors that seem to adversely affect our relations and sometimes blind us to the universal vision of love of God and love of neighbor which is the shared heart of our three particular faith traditions.

The first is the arrogance and/or indifference to others and especially to those who are weak in society which tends to characterize majorities, including groups that were once oppressed minorities and then obtained power. Indeed, all three of our faith communities trace our origins to lowly beginnings in which our founders and forefathers were a persecuted minority. In a few days the Jewish people will once again celebrate the Passover seder in which we retell in detail the story of our beginnings in bondage in Egypt, our passage from slavery to freedom through the saving hand of God, our sojourn in the dessert to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, and our eventually entry into the promised land. One of the most repeated phrases used in the Torah to remind us of our fundamental obligation to be mindful of and merciful to those who are weak in society is: “remember what it was like when you were strangers and oppressed in Egypt.” Our sages ask why it is necessary for God to repeat this phrase so many times in the Torah and the answer of course is that the fact that one was once lowly and persecuted is no sure guarantee that one will not someday become an oppressor and aggressor.

That all three of our faiths have at one point or another succumbed to the corrupting influence of power is all too obvious. The *Kuzari*, one of the most famous works of the medieval Jewish philosopher and poet, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, written originally in Arabic in the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, is composed in the form of a dialogue between the king of the

Khazars and a Jew. The Jew, in making his argument for the supremacy of Judaism over philosophy, Christianity and Islam, has a good answer for all the questions that the king presents, which is not surprising since Halevi is composing both the questions and the answers. Only in one instance does the Jew honestly confess that he doesn't have a clear and convincing answer and this is when the king asks whether the Jewish people, if they one day obtain power, will use it any differently than others have. Today, in the era of an empowered Jewish state this of course is no longer a purely rhetorical question.

The second factor or circumstance which often causes us to forget our obligation to love our neighbor is the sense of defeatism and hopelessness that often characterizes an oppressed and wounded minority. Humiliation, offense or fear, whether real or imagined, whether current or remembered, easily lead those who are wounded or offended to demonizing the enemy and justifying savage acts of revenge that quickly generate a cycle of violence from which it is hard to extract ourselves. Some scholars would argue that the ravages against the Christian minorities and the holy places in the Holy Land by the "Mad Caliph" Hakim at the turn of the previous millennium was a factor that enhanced the pejorative view of Muslims as infidels and fuelled the ruthless onslaught of the Crusades, from which the relations of Jews, Christians and Muslims have not fully recovered to this day. Some would argue, as does Avraham Burg in his book *The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes*, that the persecutions which the Jewish people suffered during nearly two millennia, culminating in the Holocaust, have produced among us a politics of memory which makes it difficult for us to see the humanity and suffering of the other and to believe that peace is possible. Some would argue that elements in the Islamic world are still responding to both the ravages of the Crusades and the humiliations of the colonial era.

That suffering and humiliation do not have to lead to demonization of the other and loss of the ability to love the neighbor is perhaps best illustrated in the Middle East by the case of the Christian minorities which are the focus of the concerns of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR). Francis B. Sayre, in his preface to Robert Betts' book *Christians in the Arab East*, writes the following:

"A minority, sometimes welcome, sometimes not, is often wounded. It is drawn to its own community, where corporate strength is a precious resource. Survival requires special skill, special faith; the community is constantly winnowed by the loss of those without courage and those too selfish to persevere. So the little band is purged and matured, until it has a unique and precious contribution to make to the very society which is at the same time its scourge and its nourishment....How often it happens that special destiny is given, not to the great and complacent majorities of the world, but to the little bands of people who never succeed so well as to be able to forget the Source of their strength and life. Such has been the role of the Christians in the Moslem lands of the Middle East."

The third factor that can adversely affect our ability to love the neighbor is the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam have such profound similarities, as "A Common Word between Us and You" and the positive Christian and Jewish responses to the open letter emphasize. Common ground and deep similarities can indeed be the foundation for convivial and cooperative relations between different groups. But they can also be a source of an-

tagonism and enmity between them. Psychologically, the other who is neither fully brother nor fully other can be a threat to my identity and integrity, because the striking similarities between me and the other can leave me feeling that I am redundant and my life is insignificant and meaningless. Indeed those who are most like one another – and this would seem to be the case of Jews, Christians and Muslims – often have the hardest time getting along with one another and loving one another. The other who is clearly very different from me is far less threatening than the other who is very similar to me and who I often end up demonizing in my mind in order to protect the uniqueness which individual and collective egos seem to require for survival. These psychological mechanisms can be related to my observations in the morning session concerning the relationship of universality and particularity and the need not only to find universal common ground but also to make sufficient space for difference, particularity and otherness. There is a beautiful rabbinic midrash that notes that when an earthly king mints coins, each one is exactly the same, but when God, the King of Kings, mints coins, each one is uniquely different. What they share in common is that they are all minted by God, created in the image of God. Or in the words of Krister Stendahl, from the perspective of God we are all minorities and therefore unique and particular.

The final factor that seems to curtail our ability to love the neighbor concerns a neighbor who has been wounded by us, and this too would seem to be especially applicable to the relations of Jews, Christians and Muslims who in the course of history have clearly wounded and offended one another. It would appear to be far more difficult to love the neighbor whom I have wounded and sinned against, because to truly love such a neighbor requires the same confession of sins that is an integral part of our love of God. A vital ingredient that has contributed tremendously to a revolutionary change for the better in the relations of Jews and Christians in the west has been a clear confession on the part of most major Churches of their sins against Jews.

Likewise, the Christian response to “A Common Word between Us and You” contains the following statement in the preamble: “we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g. in the Crusades) and in the present (e.g. in excesses of the ‘war on terror’) many Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors. Before we ‘shake your hand’ in responding to your letter, we ask forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.” One of the criticisms of “A Common Word between Us and You” is that it paints an ideal picture of Islam and fails to include a confession of the sins of Muslims against others.

Jews also, as a tiny and often wounded minority, find it difficult to acknowledge and confess the ways in which we have, and especially are, wounding Muslims and Christians in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have often argued that there will be no resolution of our conflict, and that our ability to love the neighbor in our situation will be severely limited, as long as we fail to recognize the trauma and suffering of the other, and most especially the pain which we cause the other. Love of neighbor, like the love of God, must begin with a contrite confession of sins against the neighbor and a plea for forgiveness whose sincerity is verified by the true change of heart, mind and deed that can lead to reconciliation and true peace. ///