

The Islam in Europe Committee

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In response to recent demographic changes in Europe, the Christian Churches of Europe have come to recognise the importance of guiding their members in their encounter with Muslims living in their midst. The Conference of European Churches in cooperation with the (Roman Catholic) Council of European Bishops' Conferences have created an "Islam in Europe Committee" that published, in 2003, a Study Paper entitled "Meeting Muslims."* The Churches are fully aware that their discourse in regard to outsiders—to non-Christians—has cultural and social consequences. They remember with humility that faith in absolute truth sometimes produces arrogance and goes hand in hand with contempt for and hatred of dissidents. Since the wave of fascist anti-Semitism and the end of World War II, the Churches have struggled to revise their discourse in regard to Jews and Judaism. They now ask themselves the question how Christians should approach the Muslims living in Europe.

Can Christians Respect Religious Pluralism?

Are Christians faithful to their creed able to respect otherness? Can people who believe that Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and humans honour members of non-Christian religions? The religious pluralism of today's society makes this an urgent question—for Christians as well as for followers of other religions. Jonathan Sachs, a Jewish scholar and Orthodox rabbi, argues in his *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002) that respect for religious pluralism is in accord with Jewish teaching, and Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim scholar and religious leader, argues in his *Western Muslims and*

* Information about the "Islam in Europe Committee" can be found on the website, www.ccee.ch, maintained by the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, and on the website, www.cec-kek.org, maintained by the Conference of European Churches.

the Future of Islam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) that respect for otherness is in keeping with Muslim faith. “The Islam in Europe Committee” asks itself whether, on the basis of God’s revelation in Scripture, the Churches are able to persuade their members to honour the faith of their Muslim neighbours. Shall Christians accept today’s religious pluralism as a purely diplomatic gesture to adjust to democratic values? Or are Christians summoned by their biblical faith to honour Islam and the other world religions?

The Study Paper does not give an answer to this question. It recommends that the Churches urge their members to respect their Muslim neighbours and engage in friendly dialogue with them. Their task is not to convert Muslims to the Christian faith, but to acquaint themselves with Islam and acquire a more profound knowledge of their own religion. The Paper expresses the hope that such dialogue will renew the commitment of both partners to the best of their religious tradition. Yet the Paper does not settle the question whether this pastoral policy is a necessary compromise to foster social peace in European society, or whether it is an expression of fidelity to God’s Word in the Scriptures.

The Paper is unable to propose a theological theory to justify its pastoral recommendations. Since the Islam in Europe Committee represents Churches with different confessional traditions, it does not attempt to arrive at a theological consensus. While certain Churches have articulated their attitude towards Islam in theological terms—for instance, the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican Council II and more recently the United Church of Canada—the approach to non-Christian religions continues to be a controversial topic at the World Council of Churches. What the Study Paper wants to do is to create an enlarged theological imagination that will allow believers to think in new ways about Muslims and other non-Christians. For this purpose the Paper offers a list of biblical passages in the hope that reflecting on them the Churches may recognise that God is gracious to sinful humans wherever they are. While this is a useful intellectual strategy in a situation where consensus is impossible, the list of passages offered in the Paper seems inadequate to me. Some of them have nothing to do with respect for non-Christians, while well-known biblical texts that theologians have related to this topic are not mentioned.

Biblical Passages to Enlarge the Imagination

The Study Paper begins by stating that “two convictions should move us, *There is one God and one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus* (1Tim 2:5) and *If you greet only your brothers [and sisters] what is there extraordinary about that? Even the Gentiles do as much* (Mt 5:47).” The second quotation, taken from the Sermon on the Mount, follows upon the commandment that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. If one tries to locate Muslims in this text, they are either our enemies whom we must love or the Gentiles whose virtue does not come up to the Christian standard. This does not offer much help.

The next quotation is from Deuteronomy. According to the Study Paper, “biblical texts are harsh with the false gods of the strangers, but the foreigner himself, either ethnically or by faith, has a privileged place in the heart of the people of Abraham.” God tells the people that when they harvest their crops, they should leave some sheaves on the field *for the alien, the orphan and the widow . . . Remember that you yourselves were slaves in Egypt.* (Deut 4:19–22) We learn from this text that God wants his people to honour and support those who are economically marginalised in their society. If Muslims in Europe are poor, Christians should see to it that society offers them help. But the biblical text says nothing of what attitude Christians should have toward believers in Islam.

Next is the text *There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when . . . famine lay hard over the whole country, yet it was to none of those that Elijah was sent but to a widow of Sarepta in the territory of Sidon.* (Luke 4:25–26) Jesus spoke these words after the people of Nazareth refused to listen to him. He hinted that just as at the time of Elijah God’s favour was granted to a widow among the Gentiles, so his own message may one day be received by those outside of Israel. This is a theme running through the synoptic gospels: seeing the absence of faith in Israel, God may offer the truth of salvation to the Gentiles. What this text (along with many others) tries to justify is the decision of the young Church to carry the Gospel to the wide world. It is possible to read this text as a message to the Church to be humble and recognise that, at certain moments, God’s grace is active among people outside the walls. This has some relevance to the issue at hand.

The Study Paper offers a little-known text from the prophet Micah that envisages the pilgrimage of the nations to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. *All the people may walk, each in the name of his god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever* (Mic 4:5). The literal reading of this text seems to contradict the principal message of the Bible.

Another passage, John 11:51–52, is also of little help. The text proposes that *Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad*. The reference here is surely to the Church's universal mission to unite the nations within its fold.

The Paper suggests that the passages from the gospels reporting the encounter of Jesus with non-Israelites may enlarge our theological imagination regarding God's relation to Muslims. It mentions Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan women, in which he declares that in the future *neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father, . . . for God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth*. (John 4:21, 23) But this is surely a reference to the coming worship in spirit and in truth within the Church, the body of Christ. Then the Paper mentions the encounter with the Roman centurion at Capernaum whose faith greatly impressed Jesus. *Not even in Israel have I found such faith: I tell you, many will come from east and west . . . while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown in the outer darkness*. (Matt 8:10–12) Again, this is surely a reference to the Church's future among the nations and in no way a call to have respect for people from east and west who follow other religions. Then the Paper mentions the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician (Mark 7:26) or Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21–28) and the man from Gerasa healed from the possession of demons (Luke 8:38–39), which reveal Jesus's readiness to heal and bless non-Israelites who have faith in him. Yet these texts, it seems to me, do not encourage an open attitude toward outsiders who do not know Jesus.

The Paper mentions three other texts that together announce the universal relevance of God's revelation in Israel and later in Jesus Christ. Abraham, the Paper reminds us, is regarded as father of the faith by Jews, Christians and Muslims. God promised that *in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Gen 12:3). The Paper also recalls Abraham's respectful exchange with Melchizedech, the priest of unknown lineage (Gen 14:17–20). Then there is the startling passage

from 1 Tim 2:4 that *God desires all men to be saved*. While St. Augustine was troubled by this passage, Karl Rahner assigned it an important place in his theology. Yet is this a powerful passage? The subsequent verse (1 Tim 2:5) tells us that *there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all*. Is there any hope for non-Christians?

I find the Paper's list of biblical passages disappointing. There are other passages in the Scriptures that open the mind more effectively and suggest that God graciously embraces all of humanity.

Other Biblical Passages to Enlarge the Imagination

Ancient Christian authors in Egypt attached great importance to the prologue of John's gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God: he was at beginning with God, all thing were made through him . . . In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it . . . and he enlightens every man who comes into this world* (John 1:1–5, 9)

The ancient Christian authors recognised in these verses an echo of the biblical texts that speak of God's wisdom, Sophia, created by God prior to the world and accompanying God in the creation of heaven and earth. *The Lord formed me as the first of his works, the beginning of his deeds of old; in the earliest ages was I fashioned. . . When he established the heavens I was there, when he traced the vault over the face of the deep I was there. . . I was beside him as a ward of his, and daily was filled with delight, sported before him all the time, sporting in this world of his, and found my delight in the sons of men.* (Prov 8:22–23, 27, 30–31)

According to the author of the Book of Wisdom, this wisdom of God, personified in poetic manner, addresses all human beings in their hearts. *For wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. For there is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear and undefined, distinct, beyond harm, loving the good. . . All-powerful, all-seeing, and interpenetrating all spirits that are intelligent, pure and subtle. For Wisdom is more mobile than any motion, she penetrates and permeates everything, because she is so pure, for she is the breath of the power of God, a pure emanation of his almighty glory, . . . a reflection of the everlasting light* (Wis 7:22, 23–25, 26).

The ancient Christian authors thus came to believe that the Logos, the Word of God, incarnate in Jesus, was addressing people

everywhere in the world, summoning them to search for the truth and live a selfless, holy life. Clement of Alexandria held that the divine Word uttered itself in the wisdom of Plato and Socrates and left an echo in the Hindu tradition.

This ancient Logos-Christology was revived by twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologians such as Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner and influenced the teaching of Vatican Council II on the world religions which, it says, “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all human beings” (*Nostra aetate*, # 2).

Another set of relevant biblical texts, taken from the Pauline epistles, have enlarged the theological imagination of theologians and even influenced the teaching of some Churches. These passages suggest that the redemption brought by Jesus Christ has an effect on the whole of humanity, even on the cosmos. In Christ has been revealed God’s redemptive purpose for sinful humanity, active in a hidden way from the beginning. *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:19) For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:10) For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:19) For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in the place of the two, so making peace. (Eph 2: 14–15)*

The first meaning of these passages is that God’s work of reconciliation is presently taking place in the Church and will be realised in the whole of creation at the end of time, yet these passages also suggest that what happened in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has effectively changed something in human history and now, in the Spirit, touches every human being. These christological passages have persuaded some theologians to think of God as the transcendent mystery of reconciliation, summoning people in all places and all traditions to change their hearts, strive for justice and become peace-makers. I recall that for Thomas Aquinas, Jesus was not only the head of the Church, but also the head of humanity, suggesting that the

gratia capitis summoned all human beings (S.T. 3.8.3). The idea of the cosmic Christ has influenced the encyclicals of John Paul II.

A third set of biblical texts that enlarge the theological imagination are taken from the psalms where God's creative and redemptive activity seem to be fused. Here God's creation is not an event in the past but an ongoing exercise of God's power establishing the universe and offering redemption of the chosen people. The message that seems to echo through many of the psalms is that implicit in divine creation is God's redemptive purpose. *Come, let us cry out with joy to the Lord, acclaim the rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving, acclaim him with music. For the Lord is a great God, a king greater than all the gods. In his power are the depth of the earth, the peaks of the mountains are his; the sea belongs to him, for he made it, and the dry land moulded by his hand (Ps 95:1-5). Blessed be the name of the Lord, now and forever. From the rising of the sun to its setting, praised be the name of the Lord. Supreme over all nations is the Lord, supreme over the heavens of glory. His throne is set on high, but he stoops to look down on heaven and earth. He raises the poor from the dust, he lifts the needy from the dunghill, to give them a place among princes, among princes of his people. He lets the barren woman be seated at home, the happy mother of sons. (Ps 113:2-9)* Because creation and the offer of redemption are co-extensive, we may hold that all people on this earth are summoned by divine grace.

I wish to mention a fourth set of passages that enlarge our theological imagination. There exists a certain tension within the writings of the New Testament between the proclamation of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount and the Pauline message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ. The conversion to which Jesus calls his listeners, it would seem, could take place in people's hearts in any religion. This is certainly true for the call to be poor in spirit, to be meek, merciful and pure of heart, to hunger and thirst for righteousness and to refuse to retaliate after suffering harm. There is no outright contradiction between Paul's emphasis on saving faith in Jesus Christ and Jesus' own call for the conversion of people to a radical ethos of selfless love because such a conversion is not an achievement of the will, but the entry of God's reign into people's hearts. Conversion is always the fruit of divine grace. Still, there is much in the preaching of Jesus (and in certain books of the Old Testament) that addresses thoughtful religious people and is capable of transforming their lives, without giving them the idea they should change their religious adherence.

These people feel that they can follow the summons of Jesus by rereading their own religious tradition and discovering in it previously unsuspected meaning. This certainly happened to Gandhi. It would be a good exercise for stretching one's theological imagination to read the Bible with sensitivity to the passages calling for a change of heart that could inspire people belonging to other religious traditions. In my writings I have called "the irony of the Gospel" our encounter with non-Christians who have more trust, more hope and more love than we have.

I fully appreciate that the Islam in Europe Committee is unable to formulate a biblically-based theological theory to justify its pastoral recommendations. Because it represents different confessional traditions, theological consensus is impossible. In this situation it is a good idea to propose a series of biblical passages that would stretch the theological imagination of readers in all the Churches. What is hard to understand, however, is why the committee chose so few passages, including some that were not related to the issue. It is my impression that there is a minor theme in the Bible that assures us of God's redemptive presence in human history, even if this theme is overshadowed by the major theme announcing God's election of Israel and subsequently of Christ and his Church. Yet the Spirit blows where it will. We are keenly aware that the Spirit has converted the Church from alliance with empire to solidarity with its victims. Some biblical passages encourage us to think that God inspires similar conversions in other religions.