

Christians and Muslims in the British Commonwealth

In June 2000 the King George VI & Queen Elisabeth Foundation of St Catherine's in Windsor, UK, hosted its 14th conference with a Commonwealth theme: 'Christians and Muslims in the Commonwealth: A Dynamic Role in the Future' (Report No. 74). The conference, which brought together more than 80 participants, was co-sponsored by the Altajir World of Islam Trust.¹ During more than 25 years this trust has generously supported the interest of the *ummah* including its Christian minorities. For example, in June 1993 it had convened a conference on 'Christians in the Holy Land', which was attended by the present author as a representative of the Conference of European Churches. Both conferences took place in Cumberland Lodge in the beautiful setting of the Great Park of Windsor, once a summer resort of the royal couple mentioned above. Twice before St Catherine's Foundation dealt with subjects concerning Muslim minorities. In 1991, they held a conference 'Islam: The British Experience' (Report No. 29) and in 1994, they organized one on 'British Muslims and State Education' (Report No. 46).

In a message to the Commonwealth conference the *Prince of Wales* said: "This conference brings together two particular concerns of mine: to create better understanding between people of different faiths and to use more effectively the Commonwealth's unique position as a hospitable meeting place for different cultures".

By a simple definition, freely adapted from the *Britannica* (s.v. Commonwealth, Vol. 6, 1973), the Commonwealth is a voluntary organization of 44 nations that have mainly political and economic common interests, sentiments, traditions and roots in the history of the British Empire. But the political dominance this implied has, during the course of history, completely disappeared, making place for a moral code including democratic principles that link together its member states and that are made operative when members violate it. Not all countries that were under British dominance for a long period have joined the Commonwealth. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that no other former empire succeeded in forging such an organization. In most of the member nations, the English language and to some extent English laws continue to play an important part. A number of bodies and associations exist to further the interests of the Commonwealth.

At the dose of this first conference on 'faiths', the question was raised but not yet satisfactorily answered, whether a Commonwealth Inter-Faith Council ought to be organized, of course, with proper budgeting, staff publications, etc. Experience tells us that most of the recommendations of international gatherings such as of the one under review remain wishful thinking if they cannot be passed on to existing or newly to be created networks for their implementation. This Commonwealth conference made 20 such recommendations.

The British Inter-Faith Network could be used as a model for other countries where inter-faith activities are still only the concern of open-minded individuals. In the Muslim world an example has been set by the 'Al al-Bait Foundation' in Jordan. It was therefore quite appropriate that His Royal Highness *Prince El-Hassan bin Talal*, whose name has been linked with this active institution for many years, was invited to address the conference in Windsor on 'Faith in the 21st Century'. The Prince pleaded for more than taking a joint stand in areas of conflict. 'Positivists are needed, people who actively seek dialogue and reconciliation', using the word 'positivist' in another than the traditional philosophical way. He said: 'In inter-faith dialogue, between Muslims, Christians and Jews, we have passed through three phases of fear: fear of the other, fear of the folks back home and fear for peace'. In this way he saw a creative role for religion in civil society, without coercion and constraint (*la ikrah fi al din*, Qur'an 2:256). Everybody's security is served by 'promoting cultures which are not clashing, but interacting with, enriching and understanding each other'. Obviously, without explicitly stating, reference is being made to Huntington's much discussed future scenario of the West and the Muslim world as clashing cultures.

Prince El-Hassan was preceded as speaker on the same theme by the bishop of London, *Richard Chartres*, who addressed the controversial issue of globalization. 'There is a crisis in the faith tradition of the West, although not in Christianity worldwide. Our global culture of consumerism continues to inspire the idea of growth without limits.' The religious answer to modern challenges should not be characterized by simplistically 'denying the critical approach which leads to the modern disease of fundamentalism, which pretends that religious truth can be measured, photographed and enumerated objectively, in the same way as scientific truth', stressed bishop Chartres.

Mavis Badawi, a Muslima from London and the only female speaker, dealt with the 'role of religion in society'. She argued that 'women are the mainstay against the threat to religious traditions posed by globalization' and stressed 'that women can contribute to cementing relationships and peace making within and between Commonwealth countries, and the world at large'. Women can, in her view, play this role more effectively when men are more prepared to take their central place in family life. She pleaded for action against the type of racism she suffered herself, on the basis of a common humanity.

Also speaking on the second major theme, the 'role of religion in society', Professor *Michael Taylor*, president of Selly Oak Colleges, described the various attitudes of Christians *vis-à-vis* culture. He concluded that Christians and Muslims as for such values as equality, fairness, cultural diversity,

honesty sustainability and the dignity of work come to occupy common ground but for different reasons. 'In this pluralistic age we have come to respect a diversity of religions.'

Dr *Ismail bin Haji Ibrahim* from Malaysia, speaking on the third major theme, the 'need to recover compassion', stated the fact that: 'Compassion is not lost but concealed by layers of "modern imperatives"'. Did he mean to include in these imperatives resurgent nationalisms, global economic pressures, religious exclusivism?

Dr *Matthew Kukah* from Nigeria blamed both Muslims and Christian forces for destroying the social fibre of African societies. Professor *Anthony Johns* from Australia underlined the need to add the notion of reciprocity in order to make compassion more adequate and less patronizing and condescending.

More than other speakers, Anthony Johns and his colleague from Britain, *Christopher Lamb*, formerly Secretary of Inter-Faith Relations of the British Council of Churches, addressed the issue of how host societies are affected by new Muslim minorities. Dr Lamb interestingly observed that the crisis in the faith tradition of the West, where religion had been edited out of public life and policymaking, might lead to a process of rethinking on this issue 'not least because of the Muslim insistence that faith matters'. Does he mean that the arrival of Muslims is, after all, a blessing in disguise for established religion and that this Muslim insistence might become part of an antidote against a process of ongoing privatization of religion in the West?

Anthony Johns from Australia, a country once described by Prof. *Ali Kettani*² as one where Muslim newcomers are received better than anywhere else, shared the concern of many Christians who find it difficult 'to come to terms with the truth claims of other faith communities when living with them on equal terms in a plural society. The process of adjustment continues to be painful and complex ... Australian scholars have contributed to exploration of the spiritual and intellectual traditions of Islam. Christian thinkers have been driven to a theological explanation for religious diversity which does not down-grade their own faith'. He stressed the urgency 'that theologians from both religions devise ways of justifying mutual respect between religious traditions whose core formulations draw lines that set them apart as mutually exclusive'. In spite of these differences, which are due to the intrinsic and irreducible identities of Islam and Christianity, ordinary people in both religions believe that they worship the God of Abraham ... Anthony Johns' concluding sentence is worth quoting as characteristic for the eirenic sphere which obviously was felt during this conference:

"Without compromising the different understandings each tradition has of the person of Christ and the vocation of Muhammad, there are basic theological principles shared, though the degree to which they are shared is hidden by cultural veils. Both religions proclaim the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the dead, and life everlasting and recognize that the key values for social behaviour shared by both traditions derive their ultimate authority from beyond time".

As mentioned before, 20 recommendations, not all clearly phrased or equally important, conclude the report. The 21st recommendation should have been that such conferences should be held again on different levels in order to elaborate on the growing consensus (perhaps sort of an *'ijma*) between representatives of both religions, which can be derived from this brief report.

Notes / Anmerkungen

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A copy of this report can be ordered from Dr Geoffrey Williams, Foundation of St. Catherine's, Cumberland Lodge, The Great Park, Windsor, Berkshire SL4 2HP, UK.

1. A full report in book format by Altajir World of Islam Trust, 33 Thurloe Place, London SW7 2HQ, UK.
2. M. Ali Kettani, 'Challenges to the Organization of Muslim Communities in Western Europe: The political dimensions', in eds W. A. R. Shadid and P. S. van Koningveld, *Political Participation and identities in Non-Muslim States*, Kampen: Pharos, 1996, pp. 20-23.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

J. Slomp berichtet von einer Konferenz im Juni 2000 in Windsor, in der es um Fragen des Zusammenlebens von Christen und Muslimen im Britischen Commonwealth ging. Erstaunlich war dabei zum einen die Zusammenarbeit zweier Stiftungen, einer königlich-britischen und des 'Altajir World of Islam Trust' und zum anderen die religiöse Thematik, auch die Überlegungen für einen "Interreligiösen Rat des Commonwealth". Als Modell könnte das "British-Inter-Faith Network" dienen. Dabei ist zu berücksichtigen, dass sich religiöse und ethische Probleme mischen und die Minoritätenfrage gerade für die aufnehmenden Gastgesellschaften von entscheidender Bedeutung ist, wie Sprecher aus weiteren Commonwealth-Ländern betonten. Interessanterweise hat das Commonwealth gewissermaßen moralische Qualitäten bekommen, gerade im Blick auf die Herausforderung der Moderne, parallel zu den Religionen. Diese könnten hier noch erhebliche Versöhnungsarbeit in Konfliktfällen leisten.

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