



HUMAN FRATERNITY
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BISHOPS' COMMITTEE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Christianity and Islam: No More Walls Divide Us

A Zoom Conference organised by the Scottish Bishops' Committee on Inter-religious Dialogue and the (Shia) Ahl Al-Bait Society Scotland to celebrate the anniversary of 'Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together' signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al Azhar, in February 2019.

Duncan MacLaren

The one advantage of holding a conference on Zoom in the middle of a lockdown is that you are, almost always, guaranteed a large audience. If this conference to celebrate the first anniversary of the document, 'Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together', signed by Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, on 4th February 2019 in Abu Dhabi had been held in the Banqueting Suite of Glasgow City Chambers as planned, then it is doubtful that there would have been over two hundred people attending.

The Conference began with live or videoed messages from Aileen Campbell MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government in the Scottish Government, and Judge Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam, the Secretary General of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity which is charged with putting the ideas in the document into practice.

The two main speakers were Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald M.Afr., a former President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and one of the Catholic Church's leading experts in Christian-Islamic relations, and Sheikh Mohammad Ali Shomali, a founding director of the International Institute of Islamic Studies in Qom, Iran and an activist in Islamic-Catholic dialogue between Shiite scholars and Catholic theologians.

Cardinal Fitzgerald framed his thoughts on the document by describing it as "courageous, wide-ranging and realistic" but emphasising that it was still a "work in progress". It was 'courageous' as it engaged in some detail with a leader of another religion. It was 'wide-ranging' because, in the first place, it was based on a shared theological understanding of Creation, one which "sees the creative act of God as the foundation for the fraternity that it desires to promote". It concentrates on basic human rights, especially those of women, children, refugees and the elderly. With rights come duties to ensure equality so that everyone can enjoy justice. The document calls for a culture of tolerance and makes clear that "religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood". Such

attitudes have nothing to do with the truth of religion but are only a skewed manipulation of religion.

It is 'realistic' because it takes into account change and progress in the world of today as well as its manifold injustices. The positive steps taken by modern civilisation in science live side by side with "a moral deterioration that influences international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility".

The document is 'a work in progress' as it seeks to make the principles in the document better known so that they can be translated into policies, decisions and legislative texts. They hope that the document "may constitute an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of good will".

Sheikh Shomali mentioned the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, as a document which expressed "the same message, the same concerns and the same wisdom" and insisted that "We no longer have walls that divide us and the problems are no longer on only one side of the world. The great challenges are common to all of humanity".

He then names the challenges cited in the document - from poverty to corruption, from the arms race to terrorism, from discrimination to atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism. He hails the document as one of the most important inter-religious documents in the last twenty years. The Pope and the Grand Imam were lauded for listening to God's will for humanity today, saying that "the document is no longer limited to the sphere of the Church or the Mosque. Rather. It is a universal perspective that can truly be a meeting point between Islam and Christianity and other faith traditions and to a large extent people with no faith".

After a brief pause, a dialogue between these two giants of Christian-Islamic dialogue expanded on what they had said in their speeches. They agreed that over the years they both had become much more accepting of the differences between their faiths because their attitude became more God-oriented rather than religion-oriented. The question of truth was put into the chat box. Sheikh Shomali said that truth belonged only to God so we humans cannot find it completely. We all have a share in truth which, of course, echoes *Nostra Aetate*. Cardinal Fitzgerald added that, through inter-religious dialogue, we walk

together towards truth. Sheikh Shomali said that more important than truth was truthfulness – a dedication to truth.

The Cardinal said how he did not like phrases such as ‘I as a Christian am called to make my Muslim brother or sister a better Muslim’ (and vice versa). He wanted his friend, Dr Shomali, to be better oriented towards God (as he wanted for everyone, including himself) so that we become better human beings. Dr Shomali agreed. To a question about the theological issues in the document, the Cardinal pointed out that it was essentially a practical document which is why we must find ways of putting it into practice. He quoted the French writer, Antoine Saint-Exupéry, “Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward in the same direction”.¹ Dr Shomali said we must build on tradition and that the document shows the result of trusting one another.

¹ Aimer, ce n’est pas se regarder l’un l’autre, c’est regarder ensemble dans la même direction.

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME : BISHOP BRIAN MCGEE

1. Welcome and thank you for coming to what should have been a full day conference on Human Fraternity but is now a virtual gathering.
2. You are all very welcome especially our two main speakers Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald and Dr Shamila. So too we are honoured to have with us Ms Aileen Campbell, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Archbishop Mario Conti, my predecessor on the Committee for Interreligious Dialogue and Archbishop MacDonald and Fr Jan Nowotnik who are responsible for interreligious dialogue within the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.
3. Today's conference is celebrating the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam from Al-Azhar University, Ahmed el-Tayeb on 4th February 2019. It was signed in the name of God and suffering humanity. While in Abu Dhabi the Pope said *"There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future."*
4. We have come together this evening in friendship and in a spirit of service to help the human family deepen its vision of hope and to commit ourselves as people of faith to work for a more just, equitable and peaceful society. We hope that we might celebrate this document each year, hopefully on 4th February which has now been designated by the United Nations as International Day of Human Fraternity and will be celebrated as such for the first time this year. It can be a bridge between Holocaust Memorial Day at the end of January and Interfaith Harmony Week in this first week of February.
5. The document on Human Fraternity has caught the imagination of many people around the world. It has also led to the setting up of the Higher Committee on Human Fraternity which desires a more peaceful

existence for all. It is composed of Christians, Muslims and Jews and Judge Abdelsalam who is the Chair of the Committee has very graciously sent us this message of support

Video clip

6. We will of course send our thanks to the Judge Abdelsalam for his gracious and kind words. We are also honoured to have with us this evening Ms Aileen Campbell, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government. She has a very wide remit but many of us here this evening know her through her commitment to interfaith relations and her support for faith communities and interfaith initiatives. We are Delighted that she has agreed to address us this evening.

Conference on Human Fraternity

+ Michael Cardinal Fitzgerald, M.Afr

The document on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed by Pope Francis and Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, in Abu Dhabi on 3 February 2019, is a courageous document, it is wide-ranging, it is realistic, it can be considered to be a work-in-progress.

Let me take up each one of these points.

It is a courageous document.

The two leaders have had the courage to engage with one another. Dr Ahmad al-Tayyeb was the first Imam of al-Azhar to travel to the Vatican to meet with a Pope.

Pope John Paul II had visited al-Azhar on 24 February, 2000, and had been warmly welcomed. He was applauded by the assembled '*ulama*' (scholars), a rare occurrence. Sheikh M. Sayed Tantawi had wanted to visit the Pope in Rome, but was not able to do so. This was achieved by al-Tayyeb.

For his part, Pope Francis accepted to go to Cairo to take part in a meeting for Peace organized by al-Azhar, and he was the first Pope to set foot on the Arabian Peninsula.

These two religious leaders have shown that they were ready to engage the members of their respective religions, though they would not be surprised at meeting with some opposition.

The document is very wide-ranging.

.It underlines the importance of reinforcing "the bond of fundamental human rights".

It emphasizes certain rights: the rights of women, of children, of the elderly and the weak.

But it also call for attention to duties, speaking of "the equality of rights and duties under which all enjoy justice."

It upholds freedom, including the freedom of "belief, thought, expression and action" (the term *mumârisa* used in the Arabic text suggests that common participation in living out one's faith is intended here).

It tackles the problem of extremism, and evokes the need for the protection of places of worship.

It calls for a culture of tolerance which, one could say, almost by definition goes beyond mere tolerance, certainly beyond a laissez-faire attitude, since it stigmatizes individualism. It thus demands moral regeneration.

The document is geared more to cooperation in practical matters than to a deepening of theological understanding. It is nevertheless based on a theological understanding of creation, and sees the creative act of God as the foundation for the fraternity that it desires to promote.

This ample nature of the document leads to a certain vagueness. For example: It speaks of the “authentic teachings of religions” without presenting any criteria for discerning this authenticity.

It urges the establishment of “full citizenship” without explaining the meaning of the adjective “full”.

In advocating the rights of children it calls on the family and on society, without examining the relationship between these two realities.

The importance of dialogue is emphasized, but also of “avoiding unproductive discussions” without any indication as to what might render the discussions unproductive.

It is a realistic document, taking into account change and progress in the world today, but also recognizing the presence of constant conflict and the injustice of inequality that exists in our world.

It is clear in its condemnation of terrorism and of extremism in all its forms and of the use of religion to incite to violence and war.

Pope Francis is a “dreamer”, dreaming of a better world (his book, produced with Austin Ivereigh, is entitled *Let Us Dream*), yet Francis is not living in a dream world. In their analysis of the world we live in, the Imam and the Pope do not hold their punches. While acknowledging progress, particularly “in the fields of science, technology, medicine, industry and welfare, especially in developed countries”, they point to “moral deterioration that influences international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility”.

These points only go to show that the document does not pretend to have said the last word. The authors recognize that their document is not a definitive statement, but rather an invitation to engage in a work-in-progress. This is why I tend to classify it as “a proposal and a project”. The authors pledge “to make known the principles contained in this Declaration” so that they can be “translated into policies, decisions, legislative texts”. They express the hope that

the document may become an “object of research and reflection” in schools, universities and institutes of formation. (This conference falls certainly in line with that hope). Their aspiration is that it “may constitute an invitation to reconciliation and fraternity among all believers, indeed among believers and non-believers, and among all people of good will.”

An “Application Committee” has been set up. This is encouraging since it underlines that the document is considered to be a step in a process. The fact that a representative of the Jewish faith has been included in this committee is a sign that the dialogue and cooperation is to be pursued not only by Christians and Muslims, but by and with others too, whether believers or not. The committee, one hopes, will help to clarify some of the points in the document which remain rather vague, such as the “authentic teachings of religions” or the idea of “full citizenship”, already mentioned. The committee was already active in promoting a day of prayer and fasting for the end of the pandemic. This shows that its aim is to fulfil the programme formulated as a kind of slogan:

the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.

(the Arabic text has *ṭarîq* which suggests “way” rather than “standard”).

Reflections on the
“Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”

Mohammad Ali Shomali

Arrival of the second anniversary of signing the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” by His Holiness Pope Francis and His Eminence the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad el-Tayeb, in Abu Dhabi on the 4th Feb 2019 has not reduced the significance of this initiative and has not turned it into an old news. Instead, as expected, we witness increasing and widening appreciation and acknowledgment of this historical document. Both parties have tried to build upon it. For example, **the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity** comprising some religious leaders, educational scholars and cultural leaders has been established in order to follow up the ideas outlined in the Document on Human Fraternity and in order to inform and encourage religious leaders, and heads of international organizations to support and promote the values of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. For example, last year the HCHF launched an international day for prayer on the 14th of May which was welcomed by Pope Francis and Christian and Muslim leaders across the world. Al-Azhar has introduced a new course on this document to its students. On the 3rd October 2020, Pope Francis issues the encyclical letter **FRATELLI TUTTI** on Fraternity and Social Friendship. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar rightly considered this letter of the Pope whom he defines as 'my brother Pope Francis' as an extension of the Document on Human Fraternity. As I said in an interview with the *Città Nuova*, I believe that the two documents express the same message, the same concerns and the same wisdom. They show how the true faith is truly universal and so are the challenges we face. We no longer have walls that divide

us and the problems are no longer only on one side of the world. The great challenges are common to all of humanity. What made me very happy with this encyclical letter was that it showed how the work between Christians and Muslims and the fundamental mission of the Church are not separate in Pope Francis' understanding of the mission of the Church today.

Last year we had a round table on the first anniversary of this document in Glasgow. We also had online joint prayer on the 14th of May. This year the Catholic Bishops Conference of Scotland and the Ahlul Bayt Society of Glasgow had planned some events, but due to continuity of pandemic, it is now limited to this online programme. Of course, this has the advantage of allowing more people to participate. I take this opportunity to thank all the organisers. I hope that many programmes and courses are held and continue to be held locally, nationally and internationally to discuss ways for implementing recommendations of this document and to work towards creating a culture of dialogue and respectful and peaceful coexistence all over the world.

Our biggest threat and concern in today's world is not the question of which religion will dominate the other or whether we should all become Muslims or Christians. Dwelling on these questions often deflects our attention away from the elephant in the room: faith in God itself, along with our common religious values, is constantly being questioned. Divine traditions, moral values and human rights—especially one's right to their dignity and the right to one's autonomy over their destiny—are in large scale disregarded or compromised.

The document on human fraternity shows how the Pope and the Grand Imam and their institutions were able to go beyond ethnic, cultural and even doctrinal differences and boundaries and turn to face of God and try to listen to His will

for humanity today. What they grasped and presented in this document is no longer limited to the sphere of the Church or the Mosque. Rather, it is a universal perspective that can truly be a meeting point between Islam and Christianity and other faith traditions and to a large extent people with no faith,

The document on human fraternity facilitates dialogue because it presents issues on which we can all discuss and collaborate. In addition to highlighting the fundamental and urgent issues for today's world, it shows that, if we go deeper, we realize that we are first of all human beings called to face the same challenges. If we stay tuned to the true nature of the human being, we realize that we have a responsibility to work together to solve the painful problems that afflict us.

The document on human fraternity insightfully identifies some of the most pressing issues of our age, such as:

1. poverty
2. social injustice
3. discrimination
4. inequality
5. the arms race
6. corruption
7. moral decline and desensitised human consciousness
8. distance from religious values and relating supreme and transcendent values with worldly and material ones
9. terrorism
10. individualism
11. weakening of family

12. atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism.

The document, in a bid to work together for a brighter future, invites us to reflect over and implement the following points:

1. Establish fraternal ties and, consequently, love and collaborate with all human beings—especially between Christians and Muslims.
2. Promote a culture of dialogue, mutual recognition and respect.
3. Spread a culture of tolerance and co-existence.
4. Rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness and human fraternity.
5. Revive the human conscience and remain grounded in religious values.
6. Observe moral values, especially in international encounters, to avoid despair, isolation and religious or atheistic extremism.
7. Attend to the world's injustices.
8. Safeguard family life.
9. Do not misuse religion by legitimising violence in the pursuit of one's political agenda.
10. Respect the freedom that God has granted to mankind.
11. Respect the rights and dignity of women.
12. Preserve the rights of children, the elderly and people with special needs.
13. Secure equal citizenship for all members of one's society.
14. Protect places of worship.
15. End all terrorist activity in the world.
16. Form good relations between the east and the west.

Regardless of what reservations one might have about some of the delicate theological issues in the document—such as the relation between divine will,

pluralism, and the diversity of religions—the general approach and ideas presented in the document appeal to Muslims across denominations.

It is my firm belief that certainly this document is one of the most important interreligious documents of the last twenty years. I think it was only sincerity, fraternal respect and love along with hard work of scholars on both sides which made issuing such document possible. The Qur'an says:

He sends water from the sky that fills riverbeds to overflowing, each according to its measure. The stream carries on its surface a growing layer of froth, like the froth that appears when people melt metals in the fire to make ornaments and tools: in this way God illustrates truth and falsehood- the froth disappears, but **what is of benefit to man remains**- this is how God makes illustrations.

(13:17)

VOTE OF THANKS : SHEIKH MOHAMMED PAKDIN

In the Name of God, the Compassionate the Merciful

Salam Alaykum,

Peace be with you.

Rumi the famous Iranian Poet says:

چشمی دارم همه پر از صورت دوست

با دیده مرا خوشست چون دوست در اوست

I have two eyes which are filled with the image of my brother.

I love my eyes for they perceive my Beloved.

A big thank you to everyone for attending. Cardinal Fitzgerald and Shaykh Mohammad Ali Shomali, a special thanks to you both for the enriching and insightful talks. You both made some very important points.

Cardinal Fitzgerald, the point you made about this document to be “object of research and reflection” in schools, universities and institutes of formation is especially important and inspiring. I certainly hope that our community here in Scotland and other communities move in this direction.

I'd like to also add that these kinds of fertile discussions can and should extend beyond the scholarly or academic sphere and into our own circle of community, friends, and family. Through genuine dialogue we can go beyond religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence and reach higher levels of fraternity and unity.

It seems that until these debates become a public discourse, one cannot hope for its fruitfulness at the level of social relations in the society. and that has been one of the most important goals of this conference to bring such discussions to the attention and concern of individuals in societies.

The Document on Human Fraternity is a significant contribution that provides the grounds for more dialogue.

Sheikh Shomali, I was particularly fascinated by what you mentioned that

"What they grasped and presented in this document is no longer limited to the sphere of the Church or the Mosque. Rather, it is a universal perspective that can truly be a meeting point between Islam and Christianity and other faith traditions and to a large extent people with no faith"

I believe that Muslims should help their Christian brothers and sisters to become better Christians, and Christians should help Muslims to become better Muslims. We also need to pass this message of fraternity and unity to next generations and teach our children through our words and actions that a fellow human being is either a brother/sister in faith or our equal in humanity, who deserves our respect, care and love.

We hope and pray that the seeds of fraternity and love are planted in our hearts and that they blossom into something beautiful that bears fruits for all to enjoy.

I'd like to end with a tradition from Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) in which he says:

"A believer is a mirror for his believing brothers/sisters. In their absence, he wishes them well, and in their presence, he tries his best to remove their pains and problems as well as pave the way for their progress."

Thank you and God bless you!