

## NO VIOLENCE IN GOD'S NAME

Germany has produced a lot of news headlines in recent months when, at first, the country welcomed large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly from Syria, and later on suffered from acts of arson against refugee hostels and protest marches by groups like PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans opposed to the Islamisation of Europe) and the electoral success of new right-wing political parties like AfD (Alternative for Germany). In the wake of these highly visible manifestations there is a widespread (political) debate way beyond Germany about the correct and useful treatment of refugees in Europe, with Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel both highly acclaimed and intensely questioned. Among the arguments often repeated and apparently generally accepted, there is the fear of growing political and social influence of Muslims and Islam in German society, and of more violence to come due to the growing role of religions in Germany's modern society. Islam and Muslims, in this kind of arguments, are generally held responsible for acts of terrorism and violent behaviour, particularly against women.

In this context, the *Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK)*<sup>1</sup> has issued a joint declaration of Muslims and Catholics under the title "No Violence in God's Name. Christians and Muslims as Advocates for Peace"<sup>2</sup> (on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016), shortly before the latest "Katholikentag"—a Catholic festival with a long history in Germany.<sup>3</sup> The Declaration was prepared by a *Gesprächskreis* (forum, discussion group or round table) of Christians and Muslims<sup>4</sup>, a ZdK working group dedicated to Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue. It is about 4800 words long, published in a small booklet of 30 pages.<sup>5</sup> Though it may not be ground-breaking or open entirely new perspectives for Christian-Muslim relations, the simple fact of arriving at a joint declaration

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.zdk.de> (in German) (23 June 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken (ed.), *Keine Gewalt im Namen Gottes! Christen und Muslime als Anwälte für den Frieden*. Erklärung des Gesprächskreises „Christen und Muslime“ beim Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken, Bonn: Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For additional information see: [https://www.katholikentag.de/english/about\\_katholikentag.html](https://www.katholikentag.de/english/about_katholikentag.html) (in English; 23 June 2016): This sort of festival, congress, celebration and religious gathering has a history of around 160 years in Germany. The latest, which was the 100<sup>th</sup> *Katholikentag*, took place in Leipzig, Germany, from May 25<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and reported around 40.000 participants/visitors.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.christenundmuslime.de> (in German) (23 June 2016).

<sup>5</sup> The Declaration is available only in German, but there is a short presentation of the central theses in German, Turkish and Arabic (at the end of the German text of the Declaration): <http://www.zdk.de/veroeffentlichungen/erklaerungen/detail/Keine-Gewalt-im-Namen-Gottes-234e/> (23 June 2016).

against violence, in favour of peace building and advocating a creative role of religions in modern society is quite remarkable.

In this report I shall present some of the central ideas and the context of the Declaration. For the history and process of the document's elaboration as well as the reactions to it—in the second section—I refer to Dr Anja Middelbeck-Varwick, a professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Berlin, Department for Catholic Theology, who belongs to the *Gesprächskreis* and the drafting committee for the Declaration and who granted me an interview on the Declaration.

## **1. No Violence in God's Name**

### *1.1 Justice, Gentleness and Mercy*

The Declaration sets out with a very general statement:

As Christians and Muslims we believe in God's justice, gentleness and mercy. We face and experience all over the world acts and structures of violence. We believe in God's promise and guidance. Therefore, we are committed to a peaceful and merciful living together of all humans. We see ourselves challenged to work against any form of violence, oppression, injustice, strife, hardship, and anxiety.

We are united in the hope that God's peace may define our thinking, feeling and acting and that therefore we can collaborate for a peaceful world and positive human relationships. [...] Together, we declare:

- It is a blasphemy to use God as justification for killings and acts of violence.
- There are no holy wars. God aims at peace in justice. From there human action takes its perspective.
- As Christians and Muslims we condemn any fundamentalism, radicalism, fanaticism, and terrorism.
- The Bible and the Quran want to guide humans towards justice and peace. We must oppose the abuse of the Holy Scriptures time and again. [...]
- Extending the faith must never be done under coercion and violence. [...]
- Together we stand for the respect of the human right of religious freedom. [...]
- It is paramount to identify and overcome concepts of enemies. [...]

- To prevent acts of violence is the task of all religious persons and therefore also an interreligious task. [...]<sup>6</sup>

The Declaration stands on these principles and develops from these shared convictions.

The *first section* describes “starting points”: The religious communities and individual believers stand in a history which is not exempt from errors, abuse of power, repressive mechanisms and unjust structures. History shows a long record of wars, struggle for power and abuse. “However, we know that this is a perversion of the commission to peace” (1; p. 6).<sup>7</sup> Both the Christian and the Muslim faiths are being abused by fundamentalist individuals and groups who use theological arguments for legitimising violence as “God’s will.” “This can be done particularly where religious communities develop a strictly hierarchical authoritarian system, where the level of education is low, leaders of all sorts keep followers in bondage, and adult and critical reflexion is suppressed or never developed in the first place.” There is an awareness that Christians are being oppressed in many countries with Muslim majorities.

Altogether, there is nowadays a perception of growing violence apparently due to religious reasons. As a consequence, all three monotheistic religions are confronted today with increased prejudice and hostility. Particularly Muslims are exposed to growing suspicion of violence. Religious convictions are seen rather as a reason for violence than as a force motivating peace (1; p. 7).

The reflection group, therefore, is committed to joint advocacy for peace.

### *1.2 Holy Scriptures—Meanders and Orientation*

The *second section* (pp. 8-21) deals with the Sacred Scriptures and their interpretation. For Christians as well as for Muslims, the Sacred Scriptures are fundamental in guiding their social action towards peace.

The Bible gives testimony of a liberating God. Its stories and history tell of promise, but also know of violence and war. Right from the outset, the Bible reflects on the reason for violence (Gen 4:1-16). The New Testament gives witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through whom God has revealed himself to all humans.

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<sup>6</sup> All literal quotes of the Declaration are my own translation from German and do not necessarily convey nuances in meaning the authors may have had in mind.

<sup>7</sup> I indicate the section of the Declaration and the page number of the leaflet.

Similarly, God's command in the Quran is the engagement for justice and for the good. It is human responsibility to build society according to these principles. Therefore the faithful form a community.

Bible and Quran are Scriptures which talk through humans. It is humans who explain them and use them according to their way of reading for their own action. As it is unavoidable to interpret the Scriptures and to understand them, there are chances and dangers closely related:

In the Bible as well as in the Quran there are expressions with tremendous potential for violence, particularly when read literally or without their wider context. Critics and adversaries of religion take these expressions as proof that religions as such glorify violence and instigate to violence. [...] As religious communities, we must and we will reject instrumentalising the Sacred Scriptures, we will correct erroneous interpretations and offer adequate understandings (2; p. 10f.).

The Declaration then takes some space to show examples of reading the Bible and the Quran regarding violence and peace. For the Christian reading, it draws on the II Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 11-13, and its view of the Bible as the word of God in human words. There is a long process of composing the Bible. There are long-standing misinterpretations, e.g. when the New Testament perspective of the loving God father of Jesus is placed against the Old Testament view of a vengeful God. "In principle, individual sentences of the Bible must not be contemplated out of their context. A 'stone quarry exegesis,' which isolates individual sentences from their context and makes them absolute, is not adequate for the biblical texts" (2.1; p. 12f.).

As an example, the biblical indication of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Ex 21:24): This is no call for vengeance but a rule for restitution, which is taken up in Mt 5:38f and moves ahead towards overcoming evil through practicing good. "Living together free of violence will become feasible only when one of the parties starts abstaining from violence. Even more success will attain whoever approaches the opponent and shows care" (2.1; p. 14).

Similarly, the Quran developed in the course of around 23 years. There is the distinction between Meccan and Medinan suras, according to the places of revelation. Starting in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, this distinction led to a chronological classification of verses and suras. "The parts revealed in Mecca deal particularly with the foundations of faith and faith itself, while in the Medinan sections predominantly topics of community organisation, legal indications and ways of conflict resolution are presented" (2.1; p. 15). Different methods of interpretation suggest there is a certain purpose and sense in the composition of verses in the Quran. Therefore it is important to read the verses in

their context. The exemplary life of the prophet Muhammad as well as the tradition of his procedures and of his sayings (*hadith*) help this interpretation.

As an example, Sura 2 verse 191 is analysed: “Kill them wherever you find them.” It is often used as a “justification” for Muslim violence against believers of other faiths. However, the context indicates the conflictive situation of the Muslims under Mekkan persecution, which led to severe conflicts. There are also limitations to violence in the same Sura. “Muslim commentators concur that defence is legitimate when certain ethical values and principles are upheld, that the Quran and the Sunna clearly indicate” (2.1; p. 17).

Both Scriptures urge the faithful to overcome violence and to take seriously mutual responsibility and thus to arrive at a peaceful living together (2.2: “Orientations to Overcome Violence”: pp. 18-21). Christians understand Jesus to be the promised prince of peace. Peace, however, is not a human achievement but most of all God’s gift. Therefore, peace goes beyond human dimensions (cf. John 14:27). Similarly, “the ideal of peace is profoundly related with Islam: Faith should enable the human being to live in this world as ‘God’s representative’ (see Q 2:30)” (2.2; p. 19). Thus, taking care of creation implies also the engagement for justice and peace. The Quran takes into account the context of conflict of its time, but tries to overcome violence and revenge through the practice of the good.

### 1.3 Violence “in the Name of” Religion Today

The *third section* in the Declaration addresses the topic of religiously justified violence.

Violence “in the name of” religion has many faces today. Above all, religious communities are questioned more frequently as terrorism, fundamentalism and unholy alliances implying mutual exploiting of religion and politics have increased. An understanding of religion is particularly problematic when someone affirms to know “the essence” of their own religion or to preserve and defend it (3; p. 21).

Worldwide, extremists have abused God’s name for their acts of violence. Therefore, the religious communities are called to stand together for peace and justice. “Thus, fundamentalist tendencies within Christianity like for example biblical fundamentalist groups, Christian militias (e.g. Uganda) or murderous opponents of abortion must be confronted. [...] Specially the radicalness of Islamist extremists (Taliban, IS, Boko Haram) has in recent years fostered a negative image of Islam and of Muslims” (3; p. 21f.).

So, extremist positions of religiously motivated believers have put religious communities under suspicion. This leads to strongly demand a shared

engagement for the peaceful living out of religious convictions. This is the topic of the last section in the Declaration.

#### *1.4 Regarding the Debate around Islam and Enmity against Islam*

In Germany, there is a growing distrust in giving credit to the discourse about a “majority of peace-loving Muslims.” Generally, it is suggested that violence actually belongs to Islam’s essence. “Therefore, we see it as our task to explain time and again that violent extremism is profoundly at odds with Islam and that we must spell out the real reasons for violence and conflicts and fight these reasons” (4; p. 22). This leads to some demands and principles:

- “The majority of Muslims is peace-loving.” This is an obvious fact. Out of around five million Muslims in Germany, the State authorities consider less than one percent as radicals, and of these, again a very small percentage is open to using violence.
- “The peace-loving majority is aware of their damaged public image and is taking on critical questioning.”
- “The peace-loving majority take their distance from violence.” The Muslim organisations and communities require effective support by Christians in this task.
- “It is extremely dangerous to let enmity against Islam become an everyday affair.” This enmity is as unchristian as enmity against Jews. For Catholics, the II Vatican Council has laid down principles of esteem and appreciation (*Lumen Gentium* 16; *Nostra Aetate* 3). In the Quran, there are expressions of recognition and esteem for Christians and Jews. “In general it can be said that the Quran does not abrogate or nullify the religions previous to Islam (see Q 5:44-48)” (4; p. 22f.).

There is much collaboration and mutual understanding and help under way. This has become evident particularly in the hospitality towards refugees recently. Peace will benefit from fostering a culture of welcoming others.

## **2. On the Background of the Declaration<sup>8</sup>**

Die Declaration has been drafted in German and there is no intention to translate it into other languages, since it engages particularly the German political situation and social discourse on Christian-Muslim relations.

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<sup>8</sup> This sections draws particularly on comments by Dr Anja Middelbeck-Varwick.

The *Gesprächskreis* is an established institution of the *Central Committee of German Catholics* (ZdK), a sort of think tank. In 2008, the group already issued a joint declaration about Muslim religious instruction in schools. Several years later, in 2012, the group discussed the involvement of Christians and Muslims as partners in building up a pluralist society in Germany, as the believers of either religion want to contribute to social action. Dialogue, therefore, does not limit itself to internal religious questions but tries to articulate the common participation in society and builds on these concerns.

### 2.1 Laying Out Principles

For this Declaration, the *Gesprächskreis* took up the observation that in public discourse over the last couple of years, the debates have been getting harsher and accentuate the differences rather than the common ground. Religions, in general, are seen less in their potential to articulate sense for life or to contribute to social peace. Rather, they are seen as an important root for generalised violence. As a matter of fact, there are acts of violence perpetrated by people who claim religious motivations for them. It is because of this situation that the Christian-Muslim *Gesprächskreis* offers its arguments to the public debate and tries to foster collaboration between the faithful. Muslims often feel ostracised because of their religion.

The actual drafting of the Declaration was accomplished over the last working year. The group and ZdK wanted to issue the Declaration before the *Katholikentag*, a festival which makes the public aware of the church and its issues and therefore was seen as an appropriate moment for the document to be presented. Since there has been a long process of collaboration in the group, the actual drafting of the text went rather smoothly, since there is wide agreement on many topics. Nevertheless, the Declaration is also an achievement: The majority of Muslims signed the Declaration either as representatives of their organisations or at least in their own personal name. There are many Muslims and Muslim communities in Germany who do not participate in organisations; so the organisations are not considered as totally legitimate representatives of all Muslims. However, the group considers that many Muslims could go along with the Declaration and hold to the perspectives of peace.

It is sad to realise that the public often sticks to their preconceived fixed ideas—which, alas, tend to be confirmed when acts of violence happen and are related to religious motivations.

The group opted for a rather short document. The authors are quite aware that the conflict situations in many countries are very complex. Trying to explain them and the underlying cultural and religious worlds would be a difficult undertaking. So in issuing this short document, they also opted for

placing strong indications and setting out principles, even at the cost of having to simplify matters.

### *2.2 On Hermeneutics*

There is a lot of discussion about the possibility and options for an Islamic hermeneutics. The widespread idea is that the Quran and consequently Islam is not open to hermeneutical treatment and therefore has a tendency towards fundamentalism. However, this perception is owed to a large extent to a Western superiority complex. There is, as a matter of fact, a long history of learned interpretation and historical contextualisation of the Quran. This is not the exception, as Westerners often suspect. There are many widely different schools of interpretation worldwide.

However, there are also fields for mutual learning and progress. In Germany, Islamic theology is getting integrated into universities and this step offers a lot of improvement for a mutually enriching discourse.

In the Declaration, the Sacred Scriptures had to be taken seriously as they are the basis for both religions. However, both Scriptures offer perspectives for peace. Hermeneutics come into play when the interpretation of texts is required. The Declaration tries to show that the texts are still open to a new understanding. There are different ways of reading. This is valid also for Christians when considering the relation of the Old and New Testaments. Therefore, the group chose the example of the axiom of “an eye for an eye” which requires contextualisation if it is to be understood. Similarly, also the Quran requires interpretation and contextualisation.

In the group, there was a feeling that maybe some of the expressions and suggestions for contextualisation were too daring. But in the end, everybody managed to accept the proposals. Of course, for Islam, also the *hadith* needs such hermeneutical treatment, but this could not be provided by the Declaration at this stage.

### *2.3 Critical Voices*

Some of the first reactions accused the group of taking too irenic and naive a stance, as “everybody knows” that Islam—and any monotheistic religion, for that matter—tends intrinsically to violence etc. There was also the argument that the Declaration pretended to euphemise or sugar-coat the violent nature of Islam. The *Gesprächskreis* explicitly intends to contradict such perspectives, because in the actual communities, there is a different way of reading the Quran and following Islam, but this does not appear spectacularly in public. There is, of course, a lot of anguish in many groups because of Islam in German society.

While there were some critical comments from the outset at the *Katholikentag* itself and in church-related media—up to the threat to leave the church if such ideas should be allowed to progress—there was also widespread positive acceptance and evaluation of the Declaration, starting immediately at the *Katholikentag*.

The participants of the *Gesprächskreis* are now busy participating in discussions and meetings in order to promote a civilisation of peace and harmony where everyone may contribute on the basis of their (religious) convictions.

As the Declaration states in its final paragraphs:

As Christians and Muslims we want also to state publicly that our confession does precisely not lead to violence, terror and conflict but to reconciliation, understanding, equilibrium and peaceful living together. We want to contribute to making our religious convictions more positively visible in society. We want to expose the force and values, which make sense for our lives, beyond our own communities in order to succeed in life and living together. There are a number of organisations, projects, associations and initiatives which collaborate in Christian, Muslim or interreligious engagements for peace (5; p. 24).

In this quest for peace and the construction of today's society, Christians also are certainly called to collaborate.

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