

The Gospel and Islam: theological clarity without human hostility

In the last few years the will to smooth the areas of theological conflict between Islam and biblical Christianity has made way. A fitting example is the “Common Word” (2007) document, certainly made for noble purposes, but which runs the risk of compromising a healthy biblical definition of the Gospel, of evangelism, and of the mission. On the other hand, just by recalling the word “Islam”, an emotional reaction of diffidence, or even actual hostility, arises in most evangelical believers. Both compromise as well as hostility are wrong. The evangelical faith can maintain its own convictions without fomenting negative prejudices.

“The Gospel and Islam” is a document of Italian evangelicalism dedicated to encourage the mission without nurturing resentment. This document, a result of the collaboration between the Italian Evangelical Alliance and META Onlus, has been approved by some important Italian evangelical missionary agencies operating among Muslims. It contains both affirmations as well as negations regarding Christian testimony requirements, based on important documents of contemporary evangelicalism (*The Lausanne Covenant*, 1974; *The Manila Manifesto*, 1989; *The Cape Town Commitment*, 2010).

The document can be a subject for further analysis in churches or for specific seminars. It also is a contribution to worldwide evangelicalism so that the evangelical mission may continue to combine allegiance to the Gospel together with the love for our neighbor.

The Gospel and Islam: evangelical affirmations and negations regarding Christian testimony requirements

Islam has returned completely in the scope of attention and interest of the Christian churches. The relationship between Christians and Muslims has a millennial *history* with painful experiences on both sides, and also today’s relations are somewhat influenced by history. Some have wanted to portray this relationship as a “clash of civilizations” and have fanned the flames which encourage conflict. Today, also the opposite attitude exists, in which history is viewed “sentimentally”, and Christianity is ascribed with all the responsibilities of the acrimony of the past. The more one is aware of this historical heirloom, and less one risks making generalisations and caricatures on one side or the other.

At a *social* level, our western societies are multicultural and confront themselves with a growing presence of people who follow Islam. We are learning to combine the needs of reception and citizenship by measuring them with the integration challenges of various cultures.

At a *missionary* level, the testimony of the Gospel is very present in countries with an Islamic majority, often marked by the lack of religious freedom and by a hostile attitude towards Christians, especially the native ones. Furthermore, in the last few decades, a missiology is spreading for the Islamic world which encourages the presence of Christians in various manners: integrated in the Islamic communities (“Insiders”), as well as outside the churches. At times, this new way of understanding the mission presents itself in deliberately inconspicuous ways, even if there are negative doctrinal consequences. For this reason, it is necessary to be on guard.

At a *theological* level, the strong pressure to smooth the edges of Christian beliefs in an interreligious confrontation encourages some to suggest that it is necessary to overcome the traditional distance between the Islamic and the Christian faiths. After all, it is said that the Allah of the Koran and the God of the Bible are the same God seen by different religious traditions. Some have gone so far as to speak of a “Crislam”, a sort of Islam that is friendly towards Jesus, but without any breaches of the Koranic faith. If this assumption was true, it would have important consequences for the current and future relations between Christians and Muslims.

In *religious terms*, the use of the brotherhood and sisterhood expression is more and more common when one is speaking to Muslim people. One hears more and more the phrase “Muslim brothers” indicating the existence of a spiritual family relation. If this was true, many motives of separation would fall apart, and be replaced by an ecumenical recognition in the name of a religion of the pluralist humanity.

The following affirmations and negations are hence born from the awareness that Islam has been, is, and will be a test bed for the faith of believers in Jesus Christ, and that speaking of Islam means entering in a complex universe marked by manifold factors. These measure themselves with the challenges that present themselves to the contemporary evangelical church in the desire to remain faithful to the Word of God.

I. We joyously affirm faith in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as He reveals Himself in the Bible, as the only one God. The Father is the only Creator and provider of the world; the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world, the Holy Spirit is the only Spirit of truth for the whole world (*The Lausanne Covenant* [1974] par. 1-3). *We reject* that the God of the Bible and Allah of Koran are the same God seen by different viewpoints. This equation is a misrepresentation of the biblical teaching on the One and Triune God, on Jesus as a true man and true God, and on the Holy Spirit as the divine Person in fellowship with the Father and the Son.

II. We affirm that in light of the substantial and radical differences between the Islamic and Christian faiths, it is not biblically legitimate to have forms of theological syncretism, religious alliance, or spiritual fraternity. *We reject* the idea that the differences must nourish feelings of diffidence, arrogance, enmity, or caricature by Christians towards Islam and its followers.

III. *We affirm* that all human creatures of God have the same dignity which must be recognized, defended and promoted without reservations and without any type of distinction (*The Cape Town Commitment* [2010] par. I.7). The Muslims around us are our neighbors which Jesus teaches us to love as ourselves, showing them the solid difference which the faith in Jesus Christ achieves in the life of his disciples.

We reject all forms of racism, discrimination, cultural and religious prejudice towards the people of Islamic faith or tradition. The substantial diversity of our faiths does not legitimize in any way any type of human hostility.

IV. *We affirm* that all men and women, without any distinction, are sinners, rebels towards God, lost, spiritually dead, under the righteous judgment of God, and that the only possibility of salvation is only in the person and work of Jesus Christ (*The Manila Manifesto* [1989] par. I.3). Salvation is by divine grace only through faith in Jesus Christ.

We reject the idea that observant Muslims, belonging, as such, to an Abrahamic religion, and to some extent, collateral to Judaism and to Christianity, are in a different position in respect of the necessity of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Moreover, we reject the idea of a possible syncretism between Christ and Islam ("Crislam") as a peculiar path for the Christians coming from the Islamic world. Conversion to Christ always involves for all a radical breach in respect of the previous religious arrangement.

V. *We affirm* the need of the Christian mission in the whole world, including the Islamic nations and populations, as an answer to the biblical mandate to bless the nations and to disciple them in the name of Jesus Christ (*The Cape Town Commitment* [2010] par. I.10). It must be done with sensitivity, humility, and spirit of dialogue and adaptability, but without losing the distinctive traits of biblical faith, foreseeing the proclamation of the Good News, the anticipation of conversions to Jesus Christ, and the beginning of a path of discipleship in the church.

We reject the idea that the Christian mission must be replaced by a mere inter-religious dialogue and by the need of being "politically correct" towards other religions. Moreover, we reject the idea that the Christian mission towards Muslims can be labelled as fruit of a "islamophobic" intolerant culture devoted to religious conflict. On the contrary, even though there is the possibility to commit errors, the Christian mission nourishes itself of the love of God for the whole world.

VI. *We affirm* that the Christian faith entails a walk of discipleship which grafts itself in the life of the Christian church as a community of believers in Jesus Christ, who listens to the Word, obeys his commandments and witnesses of the faith in words and in deeds (*The Lausanne Covenant* [1974] par. 8).

We reject the idea that in certain Islamic contexts the path of discipleship can prescind from the Christian church, and can express itself within the traditional Islamic communities. Even though we understand the necessity of contextualisation, the movement of the "Insiders" must be confronted with the fact that the Christian faith is ecclesial, in other words, it manifests itself through the community life of believers in Jesus Christ according to the teachings of the Word of God.

VII. *We affirm* that the Christian mission takes on the responsibility to promote and demand the respect of the fundamental human rights, specifically those relative to religious freedom (*The Lausanne Covenant* [1974] par. 13). We must demand that Muslims have full religious freedom in Western countries and we must also be concerned that Christians have full religious freedom in Islamic countries.

We reject the idea that in secular Western societies Muslims should have fewer rights than ones of other faith communities, because of their dissimilarity. We are also scandalised by the fact that Christian minorities are often subject to severe discrimination, or even violent persecution in Islamic countries.

VIII. *We affirm* the possibility and opportunity to have a sort of open and respectful dialogue as well as a sort of a social co-belligerence regarding matters defined by common interest among Christians and Muslims. In a pluralist society, it is possible and desirable that Christians and Muslims share certain battles for the common good, without this being a doctrinal compromise and a denial of the Christian faith.

We reject the spreading of fear of Islam ("Islamophobia"), often generated by geo-political interests and calibrated by ideological and manipulative readings of the Christian identity. Bluntly identifying the Islamic community with terrorism is false and incorrect, besides representing a deep injustice towards the majority of Muslims.

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Alleanza Evangelica Italiana and META Onlus
ufficio.stampa@alleanzaevangelica.org

This document is also signed by:

- ☐ Open Doors Italy
- ☐ Società Missionaria Evangelica Italiana (SMEI)
- ☐ GiM-Italia
- ☐ Operation Mobilization Italy
- ☐ WEC Italy
- ☐ Missione per la Chiesa Perseguitata (EUN)
- ☐ Italian Ministries
- ☐ New Tribes Mission Italy

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