

Bishop Dr. Johannes Friedrich:

Learning to Explore Love Together

Tribute on the Occasion of the
Conferment of the Eugen Biser Award on Shaykh al-Habib Ali Zain al-Abidin al-Jifri
November 22, 2008

Salutation

Today we are honoring three Muslim scholars, who have achieved something important – and this in more than one respect.

They are among those who, in the autumn of 2006, when the Muslim world was confronted with the Pope's Regensburg speech, argued in favor of constructive dialogue. The Letter of 38 Scholars, which they initiated, was a signal saying that relations between Islam and Christianity should not turn into that notorious "clash of civilizations." Amidst the agitated mood of those weeks, sober-mindedness and steadfastness were needed to reach out not only to the Pope, but to Christianity itself.

As if that were not enough, a year later the 38 scholars had added another 100 to their number, and these 138 had agreed on some momentous theological statements. Among the 138, there were Sunnis and Shiites, thinkers from different schools of Islamic law and different traditions, coming from very different contexts around the world – from countries shaped exclusively by Islam and from countries where Muslims are a minority and coexist with adherents of various religions; from very rich countries and from regions of utter poverty.

Anyone who has ever tried to achieve a consensus within Christianity on a theological text – across boundaries of denomination, schools of theology and nationality – knows what a Herculean task that is. And those Jewish scholars from the United States, who, some years ago, were trying to get support for *Dabru Emet* (Speak Truth), the wonderful document on Christian-Jewish relations, could tell us a thing or two about what efforts it takes to achieve consensus amongst those of one's own faith.

The core achievement of these three scholars – beyond holding fast to dialogue and working on a consensus within Islam – is to be found in the document's subject matter, however. It is an exposition of the love for God and love for one's neighbor, based on the careful interpretation of biblical and qur'anic texts as well as Islamic traditions. Rarely, if ever, has there been an official Islamic document, which quoted the Bible with so much sensitivity and respect. In allusion to a passage in Qur'an, which refers to the relationship of Islam with Christianity, the document is entitled *A Common Word*.

Now there are many Christians, including those in positions of responsibility within the churches, who say: "I will not have Muslims explain to me the essence of Christian faith." However, in this case we should put aside that argument. What we are dealing with here is something else – namely with the fact that Muslims are making an effort to be sensitive to the essence of the Christian faith. This is indeed worthy of the fullest recognition.

The thesis that Islam and Christianity have something in common – indeed, a Jewish-Muslim dialogue has in the meantime been initiated on the same theme – and that this common ground centers around the imperative of loving God and one's neighbor, this thesis *is*, not

only in a religious and theological sense, but also at the level of global politics, of utmost importance. For good reason, therefore, does the Letter of the 138 itself point out that Muslims and Christians together account for about 55% of humankind and that there cannot be peace on earth while there is no peace between the adherents of Islam and Christianity.

The reception by Christians of *A Common Word* has only just begun. Many Christian congregations have so far not discussed the text. And I am sure there are a fair number of mosques around the world where *A Common Word* has not been mentioned. Yet, on the global level, the debate around *A Common Word* has by now achieved considerable significance, which, in the years to come, will, without doubt, also have an impact at the congregational level.

This past summer, the World Council of Churches published “Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to ‘A Common Word’” entitled *Learning to Explore Love Together*.

One rule for interreligious dialogue, which the WCC’s document proposes should, I believe, be emphasized in particular. The WCC says: “...it must be stated unequivocally that Christians should be ready to learn about Islam by listening closely to what Muslims themselves teach, and that Muslims should be ready to learn about Christianity by listening closely to what Christians themselves teach.” This would seem to be self-evident, but those involved in the field know that this rule is by no means generally adhered to, neither is it everywhere here in Germany. And, as a matter of fact, it cannot even be taken for granted in the context of dialogue between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians – unless, maybe, if we are talking about dialogue initiated by the Eugen Biser Foundation.

If we take Christian-Islamic dialogue, one example we could cite would be the question of the oneness and uniqueness of God. What do Muslims really mean by *Tawhid*, the oneness of God? And what do Christians really mean when they speak of God as Trinity? Another example: What do Muslims and Christians really mean by “revelation”? And finally: „In Islam loving one’s own neighbor is expressed in acting with responsibility and generosity towards the needy within the community. In Christianity the love of neighbor is seen as a reflection of God’s love to humanity through Jesus Christ. This love transcends geographical and religious boundaries and thus embraces humanity in all its components without exception as it is expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan.”

Thus, it becomes quite clear: A dialogue of the kind the WCC proposes – and conducts – does not turn a blind eye to differences, but neither does it use them as arguments to deny that which our faiths share in common, or to discredit joint Christian-Muslim action. Let me again quote from the WCC’s paper: “It is therefore a pressing necessity that while Christians and Muslims must find ways of enhancing what they hold in common, they must also find ways of acknowledging and respecting the differences between them, of attempting to understand these, and of not allowing them to fuel hostility.”

There is a long, but – I believe – promising journey of Christian-Islamic dialogue ahead of us. Today, we pause along the way and look back on the distance we have traveled, and we express our heartfelt gratitude to three men who have contributed a great deal to bringing us further along this road.

May I make you more closely acquainted with one of these three scholars? Shaykh al-Habib Ali Zain al-Abidin al-Jifri was born on April 20, 1971 in Jeddah, where he also grew up. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia’s largest seaport, is the gateway to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

In his curriculum vitae, however, Shaykh al-Jifri points out that it was not only the intellectual environment of the Hedjaz, which shaped his thinking, but also the tradition connected with the Hadhramaut Valley and the town of Tarim in Yemen. There, an unbroken line of scholars reaching back all the way to the Prophet, have been teaching the holy lore of Islam and pointing the way along the path of spirituality. After the communists came into power in southern Yemen and the People's Republic was established in 1967, these scholars took refuge in the Hedjaz. It was "at their feet" – and this old-fashioned expression seems to be particularly appropriate – that Shaykh al-Jifri received his education.

After the demise of the People's Republic and Yemen's reunification, he was able to go to Sana'a at the age of 20 to continue his studies, and later moved on to Tarim. His teachers were famous Yemenite scholars like Habib Muhammad al-Hadaar and Habib Omar Bin Mohammed Bin Hafiz. In 2002, Shaykh al-Jifri was made Deputy Dean of Dar al-Mustafa, an institute for Islamic studies in Tarim. As early as 1991, he started to teach in Yemenite towns and villages. From 1993, his teaching activities have been taking him abroad, first to neighboring Arab countries, later to many more countries in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas.

On numerous television stations in the Arabic-speaking world, he teaches the general public about Islamic spirituality; he also creates TV series, for example, a series on the life of the Prophet.

In recent years, Shaykh al-Jifri has increasingly been turning to the traditions of Sufism. A visit to Bosnia has shown that he is responding positively to the specifically Bosnian traditions of so-called "Popular Islam." That is unusual for a scholar born in Saudi Arabia, but it has won him many hearts in Bosnia and, it seems, in the United Arab Emirates as well. Not least, this openness has enabled him to work with Dr Cerić and thus opened the doors for *A Common Word*.

In 2005, Shaykh al-Habib Ali al-Jifri founded the Tabah Foundation in Abu Dhabi, UAE, which he has been directing since then. The Tabah Foundation is committed to the renewal of Islamic thought. In 2007, he was appointed a member of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Foundation in Amman, Jordan. Ever since his involvement in the October 2006 Letter of 38 Muslim Scholars, if not earlier, he has been working continuously for the cause of Christian-Muslim understanding.

Shaykh al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, permit me to express my heartfelt gratitude for the service that you have been rendering and will continue to render to all of us.