

**Response to Rt. Rev. Munib
Younan's book
Our Shared Witness at the book
launch at the Swedish Theological
Institute
in Jerusalem on October 22, 2012**

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Let me say this straight away: *Our Shared Witness: A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation* by Rt. Rev. Munib A. Younan is a remarkable book, and I am most grateful for this opportunity to be one of the very first to read and reflect on it.¹ I first met with Bishop Munib Younan in 1990 when I was a student at the Swedish Theological Institute; all the students visited Ramallah in order to take part in the Sunday service in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hope. I vividly remember that after the service we talked about Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land. And now, some twenty-two years later, once again, I have the opportunity to learn from him. (I was happy to see that Beit Tavor, where we now are, is mentioned in the book on p. 28.)

Genre-wise I would like to describe this book as “a theological diary” in the sense that it is a collection of essays, interviews, speeches and sermons published or held in various settings during the last few years. I believe the

¹ Munib A. Younan, *Our Shared Witness: A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012).

oldest text is from May 2009 (pp. 41ff.) and the latest from November 2011 (pp. 218ff.). Hence, the reader of *Our Shared Witness* joins the bishop on a world grand tour. When reading his book, I was reminded of what the Apostle Paul writes in his Epistle to the Romans: "... from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ" (Rom. 15.19; cf. Luk. 24.47). However, whereas the Apostle referred to his travels as far away as modern-day Bosnia, Serbia and Herzegovina, and mentions that one day he planned to go all the way to Spain (Rom. 15.24), bishop Munib Younan takes us to Stuttgart, Chicago, Kuala Lumpur—and, yes, as far away as to Sweden.

I found the essays on "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land" and "Lutheran Interest in the Middle East" particularly helpful and attention-grabbing; I also very much enjoyed reading the essay on "Reforming Luther: Toward a Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue for Life among Christians, Jews, and Muslims", perhaps because these three essays are longer and therefore more comprehensive than the shorter texts that, due to consideration of space, cannot be as extensive. Fifteen minutes will not suffice to address all those issues that I would like to discuss. Without further ado, allow me to mention three of them.

(a) First, when reading the book I was reminded of an aphorism of Catholic scholar Henri de Lubac. He stated that Christianity may not be one of the greatest events in history; rather, it is history that is one of the great events of Christianity.² Incarnational discourse in Christian theology emphasizes the importance of history and motivates Christians to be engaged in this world. Incarnation theology is obviously very important to the bishop. (See, e.g., p. 48: "We believe that the Word has become flesh and dwells among us", see also pp. 96f.) There is something in this sentence that triggered my thoughts: Christians confess that the Word became flesh in

2 Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 108.

Jesus of Nazareth; his person was a blessed divine presence. Had John written his Gospel in Hebrew, he would most certainly have used the word *shekhinah* (“divine presence”) in his first chapter. However, the question now is to what extent Christians can and should say, after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, that the Word *dwells* (i.e., in the present tense) among us, and that this is a uniquely *Christian* perception. If we are using the discourse of similarities and differences between the religious traditions in Jerusalem, should we not affirm that Jews, Christians and Muslims are quite similar in this respect? All three traditions cherish the importance of revelatory moments in history—i.e., the giving of the *Torah*, the Christ event, and the revelation of the *Qur’an*—and all three traditions seek to implement the divine revelation in our contemporary world. Hence, the very particularity—i.e., the divine revelation in times gone by—is what is truly universal and what unites Jews, Christians and Muslims all over the world. In a nutshell, what actually brings us together is our distinctiveness; it is our uniqueness that unites us. All three traditions confess that the Word dwells among us. Jews read the *Torah* in Hebrew, Christians confess Jesus as *Christos*, which is Greek, and Muslims recite the *Qur’an* in Arabic. It is almost as if we could quote Acts 2.11: “... in our own language we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

(b) My second reflection has to do with Charles Kimball and his book *When Religion Becomes Evil*.³ Bishop Munib Younan refers to this book several times. A couple of years ago I gave the course “Terror in the Name of God” at Lund University, and the students were asked to read Kimball’s book on five warning signs of corruption in religion: (i) absolute truth claims; (ii) blind obedience; (iii) establishing the “ideal” time (it is perhaps easier to understand what he means if we describe it as a feverish Messianism);

³ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002).

(iv) the end justifying any means, and (v) declarations of Holy War. I found his five clear signals of danger helpful; and I hope the students did so, too. However, what I found troubling in his book and his understanding of religion was the essentializing of religion. He keeps referring to the origin, the centre, the “authentic sources”, and states that the focus of every religious tradition is irenic: “In fact, at the center of authentic religion one *always* finds the promise of peace, both an inner peace for the adherent and a requirement to seek peaceful coexistence with the rest of creation.”⁴ My question is this: is this not something we are able to see only in the historical rear-mirror as we look back in history? E.g., *before* the Civil War in the United States numerous Christians believed with all their heart that slavery and Christianity not only were possible to combine, but even indispensable, also after having read what they believed were the “authentic sources”; *after* the war fewer and fewer believed this.

Hence, I think that when talking about an irenic essence of every religion, we actually make it more difficult to recognize what is deeply problematic and disturbing in religion, especially in our own religious tradition. I think Kimbell is more beneficial and constructive when he talks about “Healthy religion [sc. speaks not of war but the promise of peace with justice]”.⁵ This gives us a better criterion and a sharper tool when analysing what is problematic in our religious tradition: is it *healthy* or *unhealthy* to say this or to do that? It is difficult to identify the centre and the essence, but we can all have a discussion about whether something is healthy or not.

Another example, of even higher relevance to us in Jerusalem, is the stereotyping of Jews and Judaism in the Christian tradition. In Pamela

4 Kimbell, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 39 and 156.

5 Kimbell, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 183.

Eisenbaum's words, Judaism has been presented as "the ultimate paradigm of bad religion."⁶ A Christian is a person who reads the Bible and believes that Jesus is the Messiah—a Jew is someone who reads the biblical texts and repudiates this. Now a Christian can hardly claim that Christology does not belong to the very heart of the matter from a Christian point of view. Hence, an essentializing approach is not particularly useful here. But it would be helpful to ask the question whether it is *healthy* to keep referring to Judaism only as the dark background to bright Christianity, even if done in a discourse of love: "You have to realize that two thousand years of Christian 'love' is almost more than we Jews can bear."⁷ I am reminded of what Krister Stendahl called "holy envy", i.e., that we find something in another religious tradition that we believe is good and beautiful, and that we often talk about this without appropriating it, but giving credit to the other for this religious insight. That is holy envy.⁸

(c) My third point has to do with the otherness and/or the sameness of other people and other religious traditions. In the book *Our Shared Witness: A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation* I believe one can detect both these perspectives. It is sometimes stated that detecting the *similarities* between the religious traditions is the method of obtaining our goal (e.g., p. 107: "In my view, the way forward is for the three religions to discuss the common values shared between them", see also p. 67), but elsewhere it is stated that

6 Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 244.

7 Quotation from Kimbell, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 138.

8 For the concept "holy envy", see, e.g., Yehezkel Landau, "An Interview with Krister Stendahl", 29-31 in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35:1 (2007), 31.

it is the *distinctiveness* that is the foundation for respect: “We are to see God in the other and to accept the otherness of the other” (p. 70), allowing “each religion [to] speak to its own adherents and [to] seek to define itself, rather than being labelled by the other” (p. 157). I am convinced that we need both these perspectives: the remarkable sameness and the radical otherness. My own conclusion is that we need to remember the word *simul* and not only the word *solus* in our Lutheran tradition. Whereas we often talk about “only” as in *sola scriptura* (which could be translated as “back to the Scriptures”), *sola gratia* (which is another way to say: “thank God for God’s grace”), *sola fide* (which we may decipher as the exhortation: “have confidence in God”), we must not forget that we also have the both-and word *simul*, meaning “at the same time”. When describing a person as *simul iustus et peccator*, Luther states that also a Christian has two inclinations, one good and one bad. We will never understand who we are and what we are if we do not accept this fundamental complexity in us, in life, and in a world of many religions. Hence, to state *was Christum treibet* (p. 190) as a hermeneutical tool (“Jesus is the compass”) has to be said by a Lutheran bishop. However, the continuation opens for several interpretations. “Whatever points to Christ, that is what is important for us. That is what endures and remains.” As my own field is theology of religions, i.e., interreligious relations, I think of the implications of this way of thinking for our relations to Jews and Muslims regarding this interpretation: (i) non-Christological readings of the Bible and non-Christocentric theologies are by definition irrelevant because there is no *was Christum treibet*, or (ii) we export our Christological thinking to other religious traditions, e.g., by calling the religious others “anonymous Christians”, or (iii) we emphasize that we are Christians not because we believe in Jesus, but because we believe in a *Triune* God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), meaning that also a non-Christological reading of the Bible that emphasizes, e.g., God as the Creator of Heaven and earth is compatible with a Christian worldview.

Let me conclude as I commenced, by thanking for this opportunity to share my thought on Bishop Munib Younan's book—and also for your choosing to do so at the Swedish Theological Institute!