

Book launch:

Munib A. Younan: Our Shared Witness A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation

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by Rev. Sven Oppegaard**

Introduction: The importance of this book

The importance of a book can be measured by several of its aspects. I would like to consider the book by one main aspect, which is that of the author.

The publisher has certainly shown the importance of the author by the portrait on the front page. The author's eyes look straight at you, with a convincing smile. He holds the Jerusalem Bible, which indicates where he comes from – even if it is the English version of the Bible he is holding, and not his dear Arabic version, in which he finds his way most easily. The author is clearly identifiable as a bishop with his shirt of purple color. With his cross clearly visible, the author is identifiable as a spiritual leader, someone who represents an established religion, namely Christianity.

In this perspective I would like to be specific regarding three characteristics:

1. The author's childhood
2. The author's ministry
3. The author's understanding of religion

1. The author's childhood

The biographical sketch at the very beginning of the book may at first hand seem to be just for information, just for the record. But for those who know something of the history of this region, the biographical notes are laden with content. Let me quote the first lines of this sketch:

Munib Andria Younan was born in the old city of Jerusalem after his parents sought refuge in the Monastery of John the Baptist in the Muristan section, during the war of 1948, what Israelis refer to as the War of Independence and Palestinians call *al-Nakba*, the Catastrophe. His parents lost everything and were never allowed to return to their homes. Still today he holds a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) refugee card, identifying with the millions of Palestinian refugees, mostly ignored and mischaracterized by the world for over six decades. (P. 5)

As things developed, bishop Munib was able to look back not only with sorrow, but also with gratitude:

My house was just a stone's throw from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, just three minutes walk from the *Haram al-Sharif*, just five minutes from the Western Wall. Just around the corner was the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer.... (P. 5)

As the editor writes:

His location meant that he grew up playing in the streets with Muslim children and in a context of religious pluralism – the background that makes him a leading participant in ecumenical discussions and in interfaith dialogue. (P. 5)

As we read this book, we sense that the full impact of his words come from the fact that everything changed in 1948. Nevertheless, we must always hear the voice of someone who has been told, and who can himself remember, another reality in this land – a reality where the different nationalities and faiths actually did live together peacefully.

This knowledge of a previous past gives the author his deep seated vision for the future. Because he knows it has been a reality he cannot – in spite of innumerable disappointments – give up the hope that the peaceful coexistence will be a reality once again. That hope permeates every line he speaks and writes. And that is the hope we ourselves must listen for intently, whether we are from this region ourselves, or we have come here from the outside.

2. The author's ministry

It is not a news item for any of us who are here today that the author is a bishop! He does very little to conceal it – in his ministry and his attire. It is with great pride and strong commitment that he carries not only his purple shirt and his pectoral cross, but – in worship – also his staff and his miter.

If we want an indication of how Lutherans understand the ministry of bishop, we can turn to the statement adopted by the Lutheran World Federation Council in Lund, Sweden, in 2007. The statement affirms (§ 15) the perspectives from the Early Church, where the bishops were seen as representing

- a) bonds of unity between the local churches through the maintenance of eucharistic communion,
- b) continuity in apostolic teaching, and
- c) cooperative supervision of the churches.

The statement makes clear (§45) that episcopal ministry is understood by Lutherans as a distinct form of the one pastoral office, the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*, and not a separate office. Bishops (and ministers of episkopé with other titles) are themselves pastoral ministers of word and sacrament. However, the statement says also (§46):

Episcopal ministers provide leadership to the church in its mission, and an accountable voice of the church in the public sphere. [...] (T)heir particular responsibility is to care for the apostolic faithfulness and the unity of the church at large.

As we see, Lutherans have quite a substantial understanding of the ministry of bishops. They are “an accountable voice of the church in the public sphere”. Anyone interested in the official teaching and practices of the church, or who is offended by the church in some way, must know where to turn: He or she can turn to the bishop. The bishop is the church’s responsible voice.

Obviously, at the local level the pastor is also accountable. But at the churchwide level, it is the bishop who is accountable. That is why the episcopal ministry can be very burdensome: We expect that our bishops represent their churches appropriately, and with a genuine pastoral attitude.

One of the important ways in which bishops carry out their ministry is to be clear, and make themselves understood and accountable, in matters of teaching. Therefore, bishops should write – articles, and, whenever possible, books; alone, or assisted by qualified editors. Bishop Munib deserves honor and praise for having spelled out his teaching in the present volume. With this book, he not only makes speeches, lectures and sermons available. *He makes himself available – and accountable.* Those who want to know where he stands on important issues can turn to these pages and find out.

This is all the more important as he is currently the president of the Lutheran World Federation. The bishop of the ELCJHL is – together with the general secretary – a chief spokesperson of a global communion of 143 member churches in 79 countries, representing 70.5 million Christians. The person holding this office is the one who grew up playing with children of other faiths in the Muristan, and who is forever marked positively by this past.

There are those who mistrust him, who criticize his stance on contemporary issues. Much of that comes from a lack of information or deliberate misinformation. By providing this book, along with other writings, Bishop Munib does his part for the purpose of understanding and dialogue. In this way, he properly exercises his ministry as bishop of his church and president of the LWF. May the rest of us do our part by

reading this book, and by contributing to clarifying dialogues wherever this is called for.

3. The author's understanding of religion

Religion is undoubtedly one of the most complex phenomena in human history. It can be a vital source of hope and inspiration, as well as a dangerous instigation to hatred and violence. It is easy, therefore, on the topic of religion to step back and avoid general statements about it. There are those, also, who would avoid speaking of Christianity as being a religion at all.

The author of the volume before us has another approach. In a short speech to the graduating class of Dar al-Kalima College last year, he makes some bold statements about religion, describing what he simply calls “right religion”. It takes courage to speak in such terms. But then, we cannot accuse this author, this bishop, of lacking courage. His language about religion reminds me of Archimedes, the Greek scientist and philosopher (c. 287 BC – c. 212 BC), who said, “give me a fixed point, and I will move the world.”

On the topic of religion, the author – addressing that class of college graduates – speaks on religion from what is for him definitely a fixed point, which is nothing else than the commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10:27 et al., cf. Deut. 6:4-5, Lev. 18:18). Here, Jesus explicitly restates core teaching in the Hebrew religious tradition, which is also upheld in Islam, cf. “A Common Word between Us and You” (2007). Based on this Archimedean fixed point, he speaks freely on the nature of “right religion”. He says,

Right religion is religion that combats any phenomena of instigation against the other and any incorrect generalizations that misrepresents those with whom we are thought to differ. The essence of religion is not hatred and fear of the other. Rather, the essence of religion is love of God and love of neighbor. ... [Right religion] is completely separate from that which is used to justify hatred, killing, and oppression of the other. ... [Right religion] combats any instigation to violence that is taught – whether taught at home, from the pulpit, in mass media, or in the public places. ... We cannot stand idle while others work to instigate hatred, attempt to undermine and undercut, work to defame, or create prejudice against any other. ... The core values of all religion are love of God and love of neighbor. (P. 47f.)

What is obviously implied here is that not only is there something called right religion. There is also something called wrong religion, from which the bishop takes a clear

distance. Wrong religion is religion misused for wrong purposes. The task of interfaith dialogue, therefore, is the collaborative search for those elements in all religions which point us to, and unite us with, the love of God and love for each other.

This perspective has direct consequences for religious leaders. In a major speech in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, last year, bishop Munib deals extensively with the role of religious leaders in the area of religion and interfaith dialogue. He says, among other things:

- Religious leaders are to model respect for other religions. ... We dialogue ... to erase our ignorance of one another. We dialogue in order to learn how the other seeks to be understood. (P. 155)
- Throughout history, religion has often been used to legitimize the political power of the day. (R)eligious leaders must use the power of religion to speak truth to power and to promote justice in their societies and the world. (P. 163)
- If religious leaders only raise their voices in a concerted way, they will become a beautiful, effective symphony of justice that will disrupt injustice and end violations of human rights. (P. 164)

In my view, this emphasis on the significance of religions and the responsibility of religious leaders today calls attention to a an area of crucial importance and urgency in today's world – not least in the Holy Land, in the wider Middle East and North Africa.

Concluding remark:

This book conveys a message worthy of a bishop, and worthy of the president of a world communion. It identifies him with the witness to which he is called, and it encourages all of us to witness to the right religion, grounded in the divine message of justice, reconciliation and peace, looking toward the common future of the human family.

In 2003 the bishop published a book with the title “Witnessing for Peace – In Jerusalem and the World.” This year, he has published “Our Shared Witness – A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation”. These are no small titles. But then, he is not concerned with any small matter. The titles of both books have “witness” at their core. This is appropriate for a president, a bishop, a pastor and a person, for whom witnessing to the Word that has become flesh is nothing less than the meaning of life.
