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Addressing the Scars on the Face of Christendom:

World Mission and Global Persecution in an Age of Changing Intra-Church Relations

Thomas K. Johnson

WE HAVE AT LEAST two ugly bleeding scars across the face of Christendom that we need to address urgently if we wish to see a renaissance of evangelical Christianity in our time. Both have to do with perceptions that may be at odds with the best research of our historians. However, these perceptions, whether or not fully based on careful history, make us appear to some people as if we are monstrous Frankensteins, not representatives of the Suffering Servant, Good Shepherd, and Prince of Peace.

I Scars

1. Intra-Christian civil war

The first of these perceived scars is that Protestants and Catholics have been involved in a 600-year intra-Christian civil war, even if this civil war is sub-violent right now.¹ Of course

there have been conflicts; blood flowed, although some of the European wars I heard described in school decades ago as Protestant-Catholic wars of religion were more religious in result than religious in cause. Protestants and Catholics fought on both sides of many of the terrible battles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which suggests that religion was only one of many motivations for the wars.

Nevertheless, the perception of an endless intra-Christian conflict was a significant part of the roots of western secularism that still leaves many resistant to the biblical message. During the decades when I was teaching in secular universities in Europe and North America, students seemed to take 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland as typical of what would happen if Protestants and Catholics were not

the Czech Republic for twenty years, I may be excused for counting the beginning of Protestantism with John Hus.

¹ Because I have been living as a guest in

effectively restrained by completely secular governments. Whether or not we deserve it, this scar is on our collective face.

2. Anti-Muslim crusades

The second perceived scar is that since the Middle Ages, Christendom has been engaged in centuries of military crusades against Islam in its entirety, even if most Muslims would prefer to see the likes of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram defeated in the current wars which are partly with the western, formerly Christian powers. In 2007, I assisted in reporting about the three Christian martyrs in Malatya, Turkey because one of the young men killed had registered to take a theology class I was scheduled to teach in that country.

Shortly thereafter I exchanged emails with a Muslim journalist living in Istanbul. This Muslim journalist is not an extremist. He even maintains good relationships with relatives who are active Christians. Nevertheless, I was surprised to learn that he thought most Christians secretly want to reactivate the Crusades to destroy Islam militarily; he thought the reasons why all Christians are not united in a military war against Islam were a lack of courage, a lack of military force or the restraint of western governments that are controlled by secularism.

This perception makes him, and probably many millions of Muslims, resistant to the biblical message. I think that his perception of the intentions of Christians is mostly wrong, yet this is how we are perceived.

I long for an evangelical renaissance in our time, because every individual

needs to know Jesus and because all our cultures need the input of biblical wisdom to address terrible problems of fundamental injustice. For this renewal to happen, I believe, we need not only to look in the mirror ourselves; we also need to see the scars that others perceive to be on our faces.

That perception, I believe, is that Catholics and Protestants are just waiting for the right opportunity to begin persecuting each other again, while we Protestants and Catholics together are just waiting for the right opportunity to wipe Islam off the map, whether with military, political, educational or economic weapons. Both of these scars involve fears that we will be the ones persecuting, not allowing true freedom of religion for others.

II Promoting Freedom of Religion with Roman Catholics

Of course, one of the reasons why we evangelicals need to develop large-scale cooperation with our Roman Catholic counterparts in the realm of religious freedom is that 2015 was perhaps the worst year ever in Christian history with regard to persecution. Some of the Christians most vulnerable to persecution are neither Protestant nor Catholic, but the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches in the Middle East (although the people persecuting Christians may not care what variety of Christians they are persecuting). We need a joint Protestant-Catholic response that demonstrates visible love for Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Christians.

But to emphasize what might be obvious, we need public and clearly

seen cooperation between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics in the area of promoting religious freedom for all religions in order to remove these two scars from our faces. We need to demonstrate both to Muslims and to our secularized neighbours that we are not about to turn into Frankensteins who are almost ready to start new waves of persecution, whether against other Christians or against Muslims.

If we do this, then some of these people may be more open to hearing the biblical message from us. Our joint Evangelical–Roman Catholic response to persecution should be seen as more than a response to the current genocides; it should also be an attempt to heal the scars that others perceive on our faces so that they are not so afraid to listen when we proclaim Jesus.

This is why it was right for a group of evangelicals to invest time, money and energy into two recent documents, and this is why it is important for evangelical spokespeople to learn about those two documents. Both documents are organic parts of the changes happening in intra-church relations. Both documents are responses to the persecution of Christians. Both documents are set in the context of missions and also address the scars on the face of Christendom.

The two documents are ‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’ (2011) and the ‘Message of the Tirana Consultation’ (2015). I am glad to have participated in the efforts related to both documents, though I was not an author of either text.

1. Christian witness in a multi-religious world

‘Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World’, which we sometimes describe as simply the ‘Code of Ethics in Mission’, was published jointly by the Vatican (specifically the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, in June 2011. In principle, over 90 percent of the people in the world who are called Christians were represented, perhaps the highest percentage of Christians represented in an event since the Council of Nicaea in 325, though not everyone is fully informed about what we did.

a) Biblical themes: anti-conversion, anti-proselytism

Contrary to what some expected, the document is filled with neither the distinctives of Roman Catholic doctrine nor the themes that typically emanate from the World Council of Churches. Instead, it contains selected themes from the Bible applied to the situation of Christians who are under certain types of opposition because of their mission activities. Several countries have laws, the so-called anti-conversion laws, or enforced social expectations that prohibit people from changing religions. Other countries have laws that prohibit people from advertising for or publicly proclaiming their beliefs, the so-called anti-proselytism laws.

Behind such anti-conversion and anti-proselytism laws we frequently find the claim that Christians have used or are using inappropriate means to promote the Christian faith. The claim might be that we are using bribery, coercion, force or manipulation to

bring people into the churches, or that we are making education or humanitarian aid contingent on people accepting Christ.

The response, which took five years of preparation, was a big step in intra-church cooperation. It directly addresses the scar of public fears that we Christians might use violence to annihilate Muslims, force their conversion to Christianity, or try to restrict their freedom of religion.

The code begins with a carefully balanced preamble:

Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.

Notice the two complementary principles. On the one hand, we have the true Word of God that we must proclaim to all people; this is a bold assertion of the truth of the gospel and the urgency of proclaiming that gospel to all people. On the other hand, we have to proclaim God's word with 'full respect and love for all human beings'.

This second principle addresses the perceived ethical scars on our collective Christian face. Ethics is not only about doing what is right when we stand before God; ethics is also about earning the trust of our neighbours. And for us to earn trust from our neighbours, they have to both hear our principles and also know that we will keep to them. Christendom has united to renounce the use of force, violence and manipulation to promote Christ or hinder another religion.

I have presented these two principles as complementary, and most evangelicals will think, 'Of course'. But outside the Christian world, these two principles are often separated. On one hand, much of late modern secularism assumes that strongly held religious truth claims are incompatible with tolerance and promoting freedom for people who hold different beliefs; if we want tolerance and peace in society, many think, we have to stop proclaiming strongly held truth claims.

On the other hand, many of our neighbours who are not part of late modern secularism find it entirely natural to impose their strongly held religious truth claims upon their neighbours by force. ISIS may be the most extreme version of religious extremism, but it is not the only one. And even non-violent forms of religious nationalism in some countries will say that one cannot be a good citizen of that country without following the majority religion, whether one says India is for Hindus or Saudi Arabia is for Muslims. This leads to powerful social coercion to accept the claims of the majority religion.

Strangely, multiple religions, including extremist forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, agree with secularism in finding a conflict between proclaiming strongly held religious truth claims and practising love, respect and tolerance for others. But in our Christian code of ethics for missions, we have joined together proclamation of truth claims with full respect and love for all, because one of the truths we proclaim is that all people are created in the image of God.

Both individual Christians and Christian movements can become one-sided, distorting the full counsel of God

one way or the other, so that they over-emphasize either the proclamation of truth claims or respect for those who think differently. By the power of God's Word and Spirit we have to embody and hold together two principles that are pulled apart by all sorts of unbelief. We must boldly proclaim the truth of the Word of God while we truly love and respect people who may initially reject and ridicule everything we say and believe.

b) Missions

These complementary themes are expanded in the several paragraphs of the code for missions. On the one hand, paragraph two says,

Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (cf. John 18:37). Christian witness is always a sharing in his witness, which takes the form of proclamation of the kingdom, service to neighbour and the total gift of self even if that act of giving leads to the cross. Just as the Father sent the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, so believers are sent in mission to witness in word and action to the love of the triune God.

This is a bold assertion that we can and must participate in the very mission of God; as the Father sent the Son, and as the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, so also the Triune God has sent us into the world. On the other hand, paragraph six of the code notes,

If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others. Such departures call for repentance and remind us of our need for God's

continuing grace (cf. Romans 3:23).

Whether or not I personally have used deception or coercion to lead people to Christ, whether or not my church has used force or manipulation to promote Christianity, some Christians have used inappropriate means to promote the faith. But now Christendom collectively, as part of the new intra-church relations of this century, has publicly repented of this past.

We have to let the world know that this repentance is real. The Crusades are a matter of old history, not to be repeated; even our Muslim neighbours should see that this scar is healing. A careful study of the document, 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World', with issues such as these in mind will be a valuable exercise.

2. Tirana 2015

We now turn to the 'Message of the Tirana Consultation' from November 2015, which, I believe, is an important step in changing intra-church relations in the context of our common need to respond to persecution. This consultation addressed also one of the ethical scars on the face of Christendom. To introduce the context and purpose of our consultation, let me quote the opening lines of the message.

For the first time in the modern history of Christianity high level leaders and representatives of the various Church traditions gathered together to listen to, learn from, and stand with discriminated and persecuted Churches and Christians in the world today.

This global gathering of 145 people took place from 2–4 November 2015, in Tirana, Albania, a country

that was declared by its constitution to be an atheist state in 1967, and now has flourishing churches in a framework of religious freedom even though some discrimination may remain.

The Consultation, entitled *Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom: Following Christ Together*, was convened by the Global Christian Forum together with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Roman Catholic Church), the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the World Council of Churches... .

We have come together because discrimination, persecution and martyrdom among Christians and people of other faiths in the contemporary world are growing due to a complex variety of factors in different realities and contexts.

a) Religious persecution 'to do' lists

About half of the delegates came from persecuted churches, and half came from the free world. It was an extremely diverse group of people who are called 'Christians'. There were Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, Greek Orthodox and North African charismatics, Armenian Orthodox and Presbyterians, European Lutherans, and Pentecostals from several countries. The delegates represented significant differences in style of worship and about some themes in theology, though I believe almost every person there strongly affirmed the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, along with the Incarnation and the Resurrection, so that we had much in common.

We were driven to talk with each

other because of globally growing levels of discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom of Christians. We met in secret, choosing a place rich in symbolic value, and one where we thought religious terrorists would not find us. And just as the procedure of carrying out the meeting was very practical, intended to avoid the martyrdom of the participants, so also the goal of the meeting was very practical, to find new and better 'to do' lists that may reduce the persecution and discrimination of Christians in the long-term.

It seems to me that the Holy Spirit gave wisdom to the participants, such that if the 'to do' lists are implemented, Christians can take steps that will lead to a reduction in religious persecution globally. For example, in just two of the several items in the 'to do' lists, representatives of almost all Christians called on

All media to report in an appropriate and unbiased way on violations of religious freedom, including the discrimination and persecution of Christians as well as of other faith communities.

And they then called on

All educational institutions to develop opportunities and tools to teach young people in particular about human rights, religious tolerance, healing of memories and hostilities of the past, and peaceful means of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

In addition to addressing the media and educational institutions, the representatives of almost all Christians issued several other such calls or public appeals.

b) Intra-Christian persecution

Seemingly along the way, in a manner that did not seem to me to be planned far in advance, a theme that directly addressed one of the scars on the face of Christendom, viz, intra-Christian persecution, surfaced. This theme was addressed in the consultation message prior to the practical lists, as an acknowledgment that, before asking others to turn firmly away from persecution based on religion, we should do it ourselves. The consultation said, 'We repent of having at times persecuted each other and other religious communities in history, and ask forgiveness from each other and pray for new ways of following Christ together.'

My inner response when I heard this statement at the consultation was simply, 'Wow!' In the discussion of this statement, it seemed clear that the leadership of the Catholic Church strongly wanted this public repentance proclaimed. And in the meetings, repentance was immediately shared among representatives of almost all branches of Christendom in light of the history of intra-Christian persecution.

I thought I saw visible love. This does not mean that our theological differences are finished; for example, I am still a Protestant who disagrees strongly with some parts of Roman Catholic doctrine. But it does mean that we should view intra-church relationships in a new light, as friends, not as enemies.

Careful study of the 'to do' lists contained in the Tirana message is needed. If we implement them wisely, with the enablement of the Holy Spirit, I think it is possible for the body of Christ to take effective steps to reduce the persecution of Christians on a global

level. Love for persecuted Christians requires that we try to do so.

Also, please notice the extent to which the other great bleeding scar still perceived to be on the face of Christendom, the fear that Christians will unite to attack Islam, is being treated in the context of our more unified response to persecution. Peace has been declared among the different branches of Christianity while all those branches of Christianity also went on record as promoting freedom of religion for all peaceful religions, even if that message has not yet penetrated to every tribe and village. Now we have to let the watching world know.

III Demonstrating Visible Love

I started by saying that there are two bleeding scars on the face of Christendom, the scar represented by the Crusades and the scar represented by the intra-Christian wars of religion; these scars seem to frighten people away from our message. These two scars have now been addressed, so that healing is occurring in the changing intra-church relations of this century as parts of our more unified response to the persecution of Christians.

One of the books that heavily influenced me as a young man was Francis Schaeffer's *The Mark of the Christian*.² As Schaeffer applied John 13:34–35, he said that Jesus has given our unbelieving neighbours the astonishing right to evaluate our claim to be disciples of Jesus. They may make this evaluation on the basis of our visible love. This has

² Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (L'Abri Fellowship, 1970), now available from InterVarsity Press.

influenced how and why I have participated in the process of addressing the scars on our collective Christian face. Even if we think we have practised love, some of our neighbours think they have seen something else. We, as evangelical spokespeople, should talk openly about visible love replacing our old scars.

I would encourage you to read in their entirety the two primary sources cited here. They can be easily found through an Internet search for 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' and the Tirana Consultation, 'Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom'.

When Faith Turns Ugly

Brian Harris

Following the huge success of *The Tortoise Usually Wins*, 2012, and *The Big Picture*, 2015, in *When Faith Turns Ugly* Brian Harris explores why the Christian faith sometimes wears two masks – usually life-serving and transforming, but occasionally escapist, illusionary and even poisonous. What are the warning signs that faith is at risk of turning toxic? What do we mean by the conviction that the gospel liberates? Brian Harris's take on what constitutes life-serving faith is refreshing and will be appreciated by all who would like to be sure that their obedience to Jesus the Christ will help to build a world with a better name.

Toxic faith is such a blight on Christianity. It unravels our unity, muzzles our message and ruins our reputation. In When Faith Turns Ugly, Brian Harris fearlessly opens the wound of poisonous faith, digs around to find the causes, and offers both insightful healing and powerful hope. You will find the book provocative, challenging, and deeply satisfying. I loved it. Here is just a taste: 'The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty.' Mull over that and read the book for much more.

Steve Brady, Principal, Moorlands College, Christchurch

Brian Harris, who is the Principal of Vose Seminary and Pastor at Large for the Carey Movement in Perth, Australia, is also the author of *The Tortoise Usually Wins* (Paternoster, 2012) and *The Big Picture* (Paternoster, 2015)

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