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# An Astonishing and Completely Normal Book from Turkey

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A year ago, in late 2018, a book appeared that was simultaneously most astonishing while also completely normal. As a student I read some astonishing books, texts that changed the course of history, whether Plato's *Republic*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, or Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. In such books, it is the usually the content of the book which is astonishing; but in the recent astonishing book, the content is a routine presentation of basic Christian teaching.

What is astonishing is the authorship of the book: official representatives of all four branches of Christianity, each of which has highly competent senior spokespeople in Turkey. I am speaking of the book *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, written by Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox leaders, published by the Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey, now readily available in Kindle. In response to the century of pressure on Christians in the Middle East, at times reaching genocidal levels, all branches of Christianity have joined forces to confess and explain their shared faith, first in Turkish, now in English for the international community.

The churches in Turkey have once again taken global leadership, this

time by so publicly and dramatically displaying the new paradigm in intra-Christian relations; this is suitable follow-up on the decisive role of the churches of Asia Minor, today's Turkey, in the formulation of the classical Christian creeds in the fourth and fifth centuries. As in any paradigm shift that potentially influences the lives of hundreds of millions, it is wise to assess the nature of the shift. I will do so by placing this book in the unfolding recent history of documents regarding intrafaith relations.

## I. The Previous Pattern of Intrafaith Relations

Looking at intra-Christian relations since the 1970s, one sees a pattern of getting to know each other by means of talking about each other, with a strong emphasis on getting to know the truth claims of the other branches of Christianity. For example, in the preamble to the joint Vatican/WEA statement on meetings from 1993 to 2002, 'Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia', one reads, 'The purpose of these consultations has been to overcome misunderstandings, to seek better mutual understanding of each other's Christian life and heritage, and to promote better relations between Evangelicals

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and Catholics.' The writers of the text labored to understand each other's understanding of the Christian message and life. This required comparing truth claims in great detail.

While this was only the explicitly stated purpose of that decade of interaction, one sees a similar character in the other two primary documents of that era. These documents are 'The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977–1984', published in 1985, and "'Scripture and Tradition" and "The Church in Salvation": Catholics and Evangelicals Explore Challenges and Opportunities', published thirty-two years later in 2017, the result of intensive discussion from 2009 to 2016. A review of these texts, or even perusing the tables of contents of these texts, reveals an extraordinarily precise examination of what Catholics and Evangelicals believe about themes such as the Bible and its interpretation, spiritual authority, tradition, Christ, the gospel, salvation and the church. A study of the three documents provides a distinct introduction to Evangelical and Roman Catholic theology and ethics. To repeat, the focus of the interaction was on the truth claims of the respective branches of Christianity, which were examined in precise detail.

This focus was also seen in other intra-Christian discussions, not only in Evangelical-Catholic interactions. For example, the North American Orthodox-Catholic Consultation of 2003 invested tremendous energy into the 'Filioque' question. Does the Holy Spirit proceed 'from the Father' or 'from the Father and the Son' (Filioque), as the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, respectively, had confessed in slightly differing versions of the Christian creeds? In their official

statement, they very carefully recommended that 'Orthodox and Catholic theologians distinguish more clearly between the divinity and hypostatic identity of the Holy Spirit, which is a received dogma of our Churches, and the manner of the Spirit's origin.'<sup>1</sup> The manner of the discussion again illustrates the focus on respective truth claims within intrafaith interactions.

## II. The New Pattern of Intrafaith Relations

Beginning around 2010, one sees a new type of interaction among the multiple branches of Christianity, while the older type of interaction also continued. This is a transition from dialogue to cooperation, a transition from talking with each other towards jointly addressing common problems. The document that signalled the new pattern was 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World', jointly issued in 2011 by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the text and background, see Thomas K. Johnson, *The Trinity in the Bible and Selected Creeds of the Church* (Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminary, 2013), 19–20, available at [https://www.academia.edu/36948453/The\\_Trinity\\_in\\_the\\_Bible\\_and\\_Selected\\_Creeds\\_of\\_the\\_Church\\_Resources\\_for\\_Study](https://www.academia.edu/36948453/The_Trinity_in_the_Bible_and_Selected_Creeds_of_the_Church_Resources_for_Study).

<sup>2</sup> See the WEA press release 'A New Page of History Is Written', Bonner Querschnitte, 29 June 2011, <https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-182011-ausgabe-172-eng.html>. For commentary on the need for this text, see Thomas K. Johnson, 'In Context: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World', World Reformed Fellowship, 2011, available at [https://www.academia.edu/40718713/In\\_Context\\_Christian\\_Witness\\_in\\_a\\_Multi-Religious\\_World](https://www.academia.edu/40718713/In_Context_Christian_Witness_in_a_Multi-Religious_World).

This code of ethics was a response to opposition to Christian proclamation in several countries, sometimes in the form of anti-conversion or so-called anti-proselytism laws, sometimes in the form of prejudicial claims that Christians had used inappropriate means to entice people to become Christians. We were accused of using humanitarian aid, medical care or education as a bribe to manipulate people into pseudo-conversions to Christianity. And therefore, opponents of Christianity thought, Christian proclamation should be forced to a halt.

One must admire the holy boldness displayed in the opening line of this response by representatives of some 95 percent of all people who are called Christians: 'Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian.'<sup>3</sup> Then comes the complementary principle: 'At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.'

To be noted is the way in which proclamation of the gospel is set within ethical principles arising from the creation of all people in the image of God. Rather than being limited by complaints coming from the world, Christian proclamation is to be

guided by ethical principles built into creation, which might even be shared by people who do not yet believe in Jesus. Without denying that some Christians may have sinned, the solution was to establish a public code of ethics by which religious proclamation (by Christians or by adherents of any belief system) may be evaluated. For our purposes of the present message, namely perceiving the generational patterns within intrafaith relations, one must notice the transition from discussing our respective understandings of Christian truth claims towards also jointly solving problems arising for all Christians.

This same paradigm development was displayed in the Tirana consultation 'Discrimination, Persecution, and Martyrdom: Following Christ Together' of 2015. Organized by the Global Christian Forum on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican), the World Council of Churches, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and the World Evangelical Alliance, the consultation brought 150 church leaders together. 'Seventy-five Christian church leaders from churches and countries that know "Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom" were listened to by seventy-five top global Christian church leaders from other countries.'<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the meetings, those gathered issued a surprising statement. Among other things they said, 'We repent of having at times perse-

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See also Thomas Schirrmacher and Thomas K. Johnson, 'Why Evangelicals Need a Code of Ethics for Mission', *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 3, no. 1 (2010), available at [https://www.academia.edu/37017831/Why\\_Evangelicals\\_need\\_a\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics\\_for\\_Mission](https://www.academia.edu/37017831/Why_Evangelicals_need_a_Code_of_Ethics_for_Mission).

<sup>3</sup> The whole text is available at [https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/zu\\_BQ100-199/zuBQ172/ChristianWitness\\_recommendations.pdf](https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/zu_BQ100-199/zuBQ172/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf).

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<sup>4</sup> See the WEA press release 'Historic Gathering of Global Christian Leaders to Discuss a Common Reaction to "Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom"', Bonner Querschnitte, 17 November 2015, <https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-492015-ausgabe-385-eng.html>.

cuted each other and other religious communities in history, and ask forgiveness from each other and pray for new ways of following Christ together', a clear reference to intra-Christian persecution. Then the delegates issued a tremendously serious 'to do' list related to supporting and protecting Christians from all churches facing discrimination, persecution and martyrdom.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with the documents on intra-Christian relations from the previous generation, the Tirana consensus message contained no comparative truth claims. The text is openly Trinitarian and gospel-centred, yet there was no mention of the differences among Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox views. Shoulder to shoulder, senior representatives of almost all Christians gathered to respond to the oppression of Christians.

### III. The Initiative from Turkey

Christians in Turkey are heirs to a most distinguished history. Much of the mission work described in the New Testament was in Asia Minor; followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch, today's Antakya in southern Turkey; and the great international councils of the ancient church were held in the regions we now call western Turkey.

Though the Christians in Turkey repeatedly suffered devastating wars and persecutions in the medieval and early modern eras, they represented 20 to 25 percent of the population as

recently as 1914. Starting in 1915, some three million Christians died in a series of genocides, followed by a century of repression and discrimination, initiating a long-term exodus of believers. Christians are now less than half of one percent of the population in Turkey. Recent prominent martyrs add to the severe pressure felt by Christians in Turkey.

Rather than splinter or retreat, Christians of the most diverse heritages and ethnicities are clearly resurgent, amidst reports of spiritual renewal in the churches. Prompted partly by requests from the Turkish government and schools for a definition of what Christianity is, Christians in Turkey are confessing their faith together. One is reminded of the way in which the church of the first centuries confessed 'Jesus is Lord' to counter the confession of the Roman imperial religion that 'Caesar is Lord'. Going beyond the great Christian creeds, their efforts to author a book together must have taken countless hours in committee, so their official representatives could evaluate every word to be sure it was consistent with the best convictions of each of the churches. We should receive this book as a gift to the entire body of Christ.

Under the old paradigm, Christian groups met to get to know each other better and clarify their similarities and differences. Building on that previous work, within the new paradigm, Christians are jointly affirming their shared faith and proclaiming that faith to the world in unified fashion. That is a significant development deserving close examination.

The book begins with a brief introduction which discusses monotheism, the Bible, Jesus Christ (including his death and resurrection),

<sup>5</sup> The full consultation message is available at [https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/BQ300ff/BQ385/DPM\\_Message\\_English\\_.pdf](https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/BQ300ff/BQ385/DPM_Message_English_.pdf).

and salvation by faith (quoting John 3:1–16), with a few paragraphs about the churches and their practices, including worship, rituals and holidays. There follows a chapter on the ‘Existence and Oneness of God’, which explains the four ways in which humans get to know God: through reason, through revelation, through Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. These four ways are not separate from each other; they are components of the holistic way we know God and his salvation.

The desire for a holistic presentation continues into the description of God as Trinity. Starting with the unity and complexity seen in creation, they describe the unity and complexity of God: ‘Just as creation’s oneness derives from the oneness of God, so also creation’s multiplicity has its source in the principle of God’s plurality.’<sup>6</sup> But knowing God as Trinity is not the result of reason; this theme prompts an explanation of revelation. ‘God has communicated to humankind the most correct knowledge concerning Himself in His own written Word, the Bible, and in His incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The knowledge communicated to us through this divine self-disclosure that we call Revelation is certain to contain propositions, especially concerning the identity of the Creator, that are beyond the mind and understanding of man.’<sup>7</sup> What follows is a brief explanation of Christian teaching about the Trinity, such as one would expect from any competent pastor, entirely

normal but astonishing because it is in unity from the pens of official representatives of all four branches of Christianity.

The explanation of salvation places the work of Christ into God’s eternal plan from before the creation of the world to have a people among whom he would dwell. Humanity was created as the pinnacle of creation, in the very image of God, to care for God’s world. The human race was given freedom but used this freedom to revolt against God. God did not give up on mankind; he began a plan of redemption to be implemented over many centuries, starting some 4,000 years ago with Abraham, while the world was buried in idolatry. Through the sacrificial system taught by Moses to the people of Israel, God showed that sin and guilt must be paid by a sacrifice. John the Baptist declared that Jesus is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!’ (Jn 1:29). The death of Jesus on the cross was the true sacrifice that paid for sins, bringing an end to the era of physical sacrifices. ‘By faith, we Christians participate and share in this unique Sacrifice, offered once in all of history.’<sup>8</sup>

We could summarize the entire book, but that is not necessary. Some might look for a strongly worded statement on *sola scriptura*, fearing such a book could betray an excessive dependence on the authority of one church. We will not find such intra-Christian debate here. Rather one finds statements such as this: ‘Outside of the Holy Bible there is no book presenting a historical project estab-

<sup>6</sup> The Joint Commission of Churches in Turkey, *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings* (Kindle edition), Location 153.

<sup>7</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 160.

<sup>8</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 421.

lished by God to save humankind.<sup>9</sup> 'Which book has influenced societies to develop, practice and defend human rights and values, gender equality and democracy, freedom of thought and expression?'<sup>10</sup> 'The message of the Holy Bible has reached us without change or corruption. Even in translation, its light is so powerful that the literature and intellectual life of every Christian nation has experienced revolutionary, sweeping change after acquiring a translation of the Holy Bible.'<sup>11</sup> Even the discussion of reason as a way to know God is designed to support biblical beliefs, a normal apologetic method.

Some will look for a paragraph on justification by faith alone. This could disappoint a careless reader. That exact terminology may be lacking. One finds such statements as these: 'According to the Christian faith, human salvation from sin is a free gift of grace. A person cannot bring about his own salvation.'<sup>12</sup> This is joined with a careful presentation of the forgiveness of sins. We may wish to add a sentence when we are teaching on this subject, but that will be an explanation of what is written, not a denial of what is in this book.

The discussion of the Bible and faith leads to ethics. Our Turkish brothers and sisters do not disappoint. As is common for Christians, they connect love and law. 'Many of the religious laws given in the Bible,

especially the Ten Commandments, can be used to determine ethical measurements, standards and values of human behaviour. According to Christian tradition, the common starting point of all of these laws is love.'<sup>13</sup> They continue, 'Christians have attempted to implement their faith by building schools, hospitals and soup kitchens in addition to houses of worship. Every church has an active aid program that tries to help its local poor. Various foundations contribute to the education of poor students through scholarships.'<sup>14</sup> In relation to civil law, they write, 'Everything prohibited by secular law may not be a sin, while not every sin may be prohibited by secular law. If this situation forces us to make a choice, Christians should listen to God's Law and their conscience.'<sup>15</sup> Continuing their emphasis on God-given human dignity they add, 'Abortion is the greatest assault on human life and, therefore, also to Almighty God. Our Holy Bible clearly shows that God's great love and care for a person begins from the moment of conception.'<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Our brothers and sisters in Turkey have written an astonishing book; though normal in Christian teaching, it is overwhelming as a unified proclamation of basic Christianity to the whole world. Even if it is hard for us,

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<sup>9</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 682.

<sup>10</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 693.

<sup>11</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 694.

<sup>12</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 589.

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<sup>13</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 740.

<sup>14</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 770.

<sup>15</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 778.

<sup>16</sup> *Christianity: Fundamental Teachings*, Location 781.

the rest of the body of Christ should, once again, accept the leadership of the churches in Asia Minor. Not all our fathers and mothers in the faith immediately accepted the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople in the fourth century, but history shows it would have been better for our churches if we had accepted their leadership more quickly. The same is true today. We should humbly accept the leadership coming from Turkey. Not only individuals but official representatives of all the churches in Turkey have implemented 1 Peter 3:15, 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.' We should go and do likewise, in public cooperation with the other branches of Christianity.

Our context today is not exactly the Gnosticism or Arianism faced by

the early church and addressed in the creeds, though those problems constantly recur. The Turkish context is a history of violence, genocide and oppression, now facing a Muslim-majority culture mixed with global secularism. There are serious analogies to the situations faced (or soon to be faced) by Christians around the world.

The method used in this book cannot be imagined without the recent history of intra-Christian relations, both the process of getting to know each other by talking about each other's truth claims and also the process of joint responses to opposition. The churches from the four branches of Christianity in Turkey have presented a unified proclamation, *apologia*, and ethics in response to opposition and persecution. The global body of Christ needs to find courage to follow.