

## Continuing to Make History:

### From the Ethics of Christian Witness to Global Principles of Religious Proclamation

This is the text of a speech by Thomas K. Johnson given on behalf of the World Evangelical Alliance at the Vatican in Rome on June 21, 2016 at the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct” which was published on 28 June, 2011 as a joint venture of the PCID, the World Council of Churches and the WEA.<sup>1</sup>

Your Eminence, your Excellencies, brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, friends and neighbors of good will:

I am grateful for the opportunity to represent the World Evangelical Alliance and the six hundred million Christians we seek to serve in celebrating the fifth anniversary of the history-making document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview I gave in Geneva on the occasion of its release in 2011, I expressed the hope that this text and the themes it contains might become standard parts of Christian teaching, much as the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the themes they contain have become standard parts of Christian teaching.<sup>3</sup> In the last five years, I believe, this hope has begun to be fulfilled in our world-wide Evangelical movement.<sup>4</sup> Already in 2014 our WEA Theological Commission reported, “Over the past two-and-a-half years the document has been studied and appropriated in many places: Brazil, India, Norway, Thailand, Nigeria, Myanmar and various other places. Different church bodies have used the document to draft their own codes of conduct; mission agencies and international relief organizations have also adapted its content and used it as a study guide for staff working in inter-religious contexts. In some cases the meetings to discuss the document and its contextualization have been the very first truly all-Christian gathering in that country.”<sup>5</sup> And when the contents of the document have been discussed, the most common negative

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson represents the World Evangelical Alliance as Religious Freedom Ambassador to the Vatican.

<sup>2</sup> To read or download the text go to: <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/resources/source.htm?id=288>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO0cDJVWGZ0>.

<sup>4</sup> Much of this story of the document becoming standard Christian teaching is told by Thomas Schirrmacher, “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World – Three Years On”, *Current Dialogue* 56 (Dec) 2014: 67–79, online at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/current-dialogue-magazine/current-dialogue-56>.

<sup>5</sup> “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World”: An Interview with Rosalee Veloso Ewell and John Baxter-Brown”, November 2, 2014, <http://imeslebanon.wordpress.com/2014/02/11/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world-an-interview-with-rosalee-veloso-ewell-and-john-baxter-brown/>.

reaction has been that someone claims, “We already were convinced of this before we read the text.” This process of becoming standard teaching was exhibited in the way Bishop Efraim Tendero, President of the World Evangelical Alliance, quoted “Christian Witness” in his speech on “The Gospel and Religious Extremism” in Bethlehem as an application of our understanding of the entire *pattern* of biblical teaching.<sup>6</sup> This means that the contents of this document are recognized as fitting with and also growing out of everything we believe as Evangelical Christians.

Codes for conduct, or codes of ethics, generally arise in response to a need. This was clearly true of the Ten Commandments. The need to which this 2011 code of ethics for religious persuasion—for propagating and promoting the faith—responded is the extent to which religious faith has been entangled with human conflicts since the dawn of history. The first murder recorded in the Bible was filled with confused and frustrated religious motivations; Cain murdered Abel after Abel’s sacrifice to God was accepted and Cain’s was rejected. Even if you do not accept the Bible as your holy book, please consider this story as a thoughtful commentary on human experience. Religion has long been associated with the mistreatment of people who do not have the same religion or the same religious experience, whether this mistreatment is in the form of violence, manipulation, or deception. In an astonishingly unified manner, the representatives of almost all Christians joined to address this ancient problem which has been amplified in our time by globalization. We could not say that we will not talk about our faith or invite other people to come to our faith, because the message that God is reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ is the most important news we have received; rather, what we have said is that there are recognizably good and evil ways of treating people when we talk about and promote our faith. The new code of ethics responded to the recognition that members of our churches have not always acted appropriately. Though the problem was already described in a cautionary manner by the ancient story of Cain killing Abel, we have now addressed the problem directly in a way we think is suitable for our time and for our Christian communities.

However, the problem of using inappropriate means to promote, proclaim, or propagate a religion, philosophy, or ideology is not unique to Christianity. This was an underlying issue in much of the global violence of the last one hundred years. Even National Socialism would have been much less evil had its advocates used exclusively non-violent means to promote their ideology. So allow me a brief excursion into fundamental moral philosophy.

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<sup>6</sup> “WEA Secretary General Speaks on Gospel and Religious Extremism at Conference in Bethlehem, Calls for Recognition of Evangelicals in the Holy Land,” March 16, 2016, <http://www.worlddea.org/news/4648/wea-secretary-general-speaks-on-gospel-and-religious-extremism-at-conference-in-bethlehem-calls-for-recognition-of-evangelicals-in-the-holy-land>.

Two generations ago the English writer C. S. Lewis made an important observation about the nature of conflict that applies, at least, to those conflicts in which we humans quarrel like people and do not merely fight like animals. When we quarrel with each other, we consistently seek to tell our opponents that they are not following the rules whereas we are following the rules. Our opponents can be expected to reply by stating the reverse—namely, that they are following the rules and we are not. But almost never do we hear the response, “There are no rules.” Frequently we appeal to a short list of generally accepted moral rules even when we are quarrelling with people who do not share our own religion or culture. In a time of quarrel or conflict, most people who are not sociopaths discover, even if they had not previously thought about it, that they have to assume the existence of a few universal moral rules in order to have any meaningful discussion.<sup>7</sup> Within Christian thought we have traditionally called these universal moral rules “God’s natural moral law,” using the word “natural” to mean that these few moral rules are knowable and available to all people regardless of their culture or religion.<sup>8</sup>

When I first read “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” shortly before it was published, I wondered whether this text had been written in such distinctively Christian terminology that people who are not inside the Christian tradition would understand what we were talking about. It seemed to me at first that perhaps our writing teams had been so exclusively interested in moral rules as explained in Christian religious terminology that they had forgotten to speak about the universal moral rules which I just described. But after a second or a third reading of the text, I realized that my first impression was one-sided. Although the text contains much distinctly Christian terminology, it also includes significant references to universal moral rules and assumptions that can, I believe, have a multi-religious application to the age-old problem of the entanglement of religion and violence. I will mention two such references.

In principle 7 we see a reference to universal human dignity, always a foundational assumption for universal moral rules. To quote the document, “Religious freedom, including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one’s religion, flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26).” The explanation of human dignity is in terms of the biblical theme of creation, but the claim that humans have dignity is far more universal than is belief in the religious doctrine of creation. Similarly, in principle 8 we read, “Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common

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<sup>7</sup> See the first chapters of C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, which is available in various editions and in several languages. Available online: [http://samizdat.qc.ca/vc/pdfs/MereChristianity\\_CSL.pdf](http://samizdat.qc.ca/vc/pdfs/MereChristianity_CSL.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> For a longer discussion of God’s natural moral law see Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: VKW, 2005). Available online: <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/resources/view.htm?id=231>.

good." Though clearly addressed to Christians, this principle mentions mutual respect, justice, peace, and the common good, all of which I take to be key elements of the universal moral law. The document thus assumes that most people, regardless of religion or culture, can recognize respect, justice, peace, and the common good.

In our age marked by extreme levels of religious persecution, religious violence, and religious terrorism, it is time to articulate the universal standards by which people of all religions can clearly distinguish the honest practitioners of their faith, such as Abel of old, from the violent practitioners of their faith, such as Cain. Within Christendom we have done our homework and have written a code of ethics for Christian proclamation. All the people represented here today should continue on toward another history-making code of ethics related to the protection, proclamation, promotion, and propagation of all religious, philosophical, or ideological messages.