



Religious Identity and Open Dialog

Reasons for Giving the Eugen Biser Award to H. R. H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal

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A question probably in the minds of many shall be answered right at the beginning of this explanation of the reasons for giving the Eugen Biser Award:

What does Eugen Biser, Catholic theologian and philosopher of religion, have in common with the three leading scholars and representatives of Muslim faith who are going to receive the Eugen Biser Award in this ceremony? What is the connection of the Eugen Biser Foundation, whose purpose it is to extend the new approach of Eugen Biser's theology into the future, to the world religion of Islam?

In view of the intercultural and interreligious tensions as well as the fragile political situation in the world, questions like these are asked not only for information but mostly in skeptical, even accusatory and warning undertones. Well-founded, serious objections to a dialog with Islam had to be raised from the Christian as well as the political side and the side of society, it is said. This not only cast doubt upon the religious claim of Christianity but also endangered peace in society and even the entire system of government.

Such reservations and fears are not unfounded; they can be corroborated by facts and therefore should neither be belittled nor suppressed. On the contrary: Objections like these, which frequently have a strong emotional base, must be treated on a rational level and in a reasoned way. First and fore-

most, this must include warnings of generalization, simplification, and prejudice in assessments of interreligious and intercultural problems, and thus pave the way for the differentiated analysis urgently needed.

In matters of religion, i.e. the relationship between God and man and vice versa, one aspect to be considered as a matter of principle must be that the "pure essence" of religion is an ideal unattainable in any concrete realization by man in this world. Man is, and always will be, a finite and, therefore, fallible creature. Religion as practiced in history always runs the risk of moving from the center of its message to things peripheral, random, thus slipping into unimportance. In extreme cases, this may even lead to a religion turning into its opposite, only pretending to be a relation with God while, in reality, perverting its very ideals. The disastrous aspect of this situation is that this perverted religion will continue to claim God's authority for itself and its actions. The spokespersons of a religion turned into its opposite, in their fundamentalist basic attitude, will not tolerate closer examination of the intentions associated with their position. As a rule, they know quite well that they abuse religion as an instrument and that their objectives differ from the ideals of their religion. The reality of practiced religion encompasses all possible shades and blends between the extremes of ideal and perversion.

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Dialog from Christian Origins



For centuries, relations of Christianity and Islam were characterized by that “perverted nature” of the two religions because a constitutive element of true religion was missing, i.e. love of the neighbor.

For these reasons, a critical return to the fundamental message of both Christianity and Islam is the precondition for a positive and promising dialog between the two world religions.

The subtitle of the Eugen Biser Foundation, “Dialog from Christian Origins”, expresses the leading principle of Eugen Biser’s theology and the objectives of his Foundation. Eugen Biser designed his life’s work by recurring to the original texts of Christianity in a critical exchange with its tradition and under the impression and the demands of the intellectual situation of our time characterized by secularism and atheism. His theology focuses on the message of Jesus who experienced and preached God as unconditioned love. Love of God, as expressed tangibly in the love of the neighbor, marks the essence of Christianity in its personal structure; it is the indispensable base of Christian existence. Interreligious dialog, without relinquishing its own identity, therefore is the inalienable duty of being a Christian responsible for himself not least because peace among the religions is the irreplaceable prerequisite of peace among men.

More than fifteen years ago, Eugen Biser keenly diagnosed the situation in the world like this: “In a period of rampant individual and group egoism and its devastating consequences, escalating conflicts between nations, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that we are living in an hour of dialog and will survive only if growing confrontations

can be overcome by a culture of understanding.”¹

In October 2007, 138 religious leaders of Islam addressed an open letter to the religious leaders of Christianity titled *A Common Word Between Us and You*.

Comparing the basic ideas of this epochal declaration with the intention of the theology of Eugen Biser and that of his Foundation immediately reveals why the three representatives of Islam who signed this pioneering, courageous document quite rightly receive the Prize. Not only formally, because of the high regard for dialog, but also in terms of content, a surprising level of agreement can be found about the preconditions and possibilities of peaceful coexistence.

That there are questions to be addressed to this text under aspects of Christian theology does not detract from the importance and weight of the common features and the agreement it expresses.

Reading the *Common Word* creates the impression of Islam and Christianity approaching each other, while preserving their identities, in an effort to shed potential for conflict in the light of major common features. The uniting links outlined in this document from the Torah, the New Testament, and the Koran, are not marginal but in the center of the three Abrahamic religions: It is the faith in God and the highest Commandments associated with it, the love of God, and the love of the neighbor. These fundamental religious principles constitute an excellent foundation and precondition of an interreligious dialog all the more so as love

1 Eugen Biser, *Brennpunkte des Dialogs. Zur Wiederbegegnung von Christentum, Judentum und Islam*, in: *Meditation* 19 (1993), p. 26.

Eugen Biser Foundation

Dialog from Christian Origins



of the neighbor, as the text reads, must be considered a criterion of a genuine religion, with human rights implicitly and directly associated with it. That there must be no coercion in religion, also according to the Koran, is expressly emphasized.

However, these objective preconditions of a dialog remain speechless and ineffective if dialog is just a topic of discussion without becoming reality. There must be specific subjective dispositions in order for this to happen. First of all, the partner in a dialog must be accepted as a human being. Mere toleration would be despising him or her. Tolerance is about world views and opinions where discussions are possible and different opinions may be held. Dialog must be an open talk based on mutual respect among equal partners. This openness implies the readiness to truly want to know the other party, not indoctrinate, let alone convert him or her. Sometimes it is even necessary to overstep the boundaries of one's religion and tradition in order to perceive a different religion not as a danger but a potential broadening of one's horizon. One needs to open oneself to experiencing God in a way members of other religions have to this day, which has been reflected, again to this day, in traditions unfamiliar to us.

To many a believer, this request may seem like giving up one's religion. However, it should be borne in mind that the history of God's relationship with man, i.e. the history of salvation, does not begin with this or that religion to be traced back in history, nor does it begin with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It begins with the creation by God of the world and of man. God thus originally chose man as such, and the original self-revelation of God does not occur in a specific religion but

in human experience and thought. The question about the origin and determination of human existence ultimately includes the question of God.

Religions are later concretions of such experience of God under conditions of a specific historical situation. This does not mean that all religions are equivalent. However, they all fall under the claim of God, that absolute reality beyond which nothing greater can even be thought², and which, in principle, is beyond human understanding.³

Any dialog of religions must be conceived from this absolute yardstick which precedes all religions. It opens up a perspective which puts into a relative framework many a problem within each religion as well as within the different religions, unmasking them as man-made.

Any theology should carefully strive not to become provincial under this claim of God's absoluteness and thus, acting with an allegedly comprehended God, advance the perverted type of religion.

As the history of religions shows, this turned out to be the undoing of many religions. The thesis of monotheism being the real cause of wars belongs to that category.

Another insight is extremely important in interreligious dialog. The question of truth and that of salvation must be uncoupled. Man's salvation is based on God only. It is not a matter of some religion or religious institution. The absolute sovereignty of God and the unavailability of God's salvation are inalienable and must never be put up for disposal.

2 Anselm of Canterbury, 1033/34-1109.

3 Thomas Aquinas, 1224/25-1274.

Eugen Biser Foundation

Dialog from Christian Origins



This does not suspend the question of truth, but rather refers it to the realm of doctrines and theories seeking to explain religious reality without, however, being identical to that reality. It is not by believing in doctrines, but by faith in God that man is guided to his or her destination. Even religions reflecting millennia of experience of God are not the determination, but have merely signpost functions indicating the determination.

If religion is seen in the perspective of its essence, there can be no reason, basically, why religions, under the aspect of their function in human society, turn out to be opposed to, or even use violence against one another. The *Common Word* has made a contribution to this insight which cannot possibly be overestimated. It has shown the common basis of Jews, Christians, and Muslims which, despite existing theological differences, is sufficient to guarantee a peaceful coexistence. Christians with an average level of information in religious matters are not likely to have a more than fleeting idea of this fact. The same thing is probably true of Jews and Muslims.

The open letter ends with this request: “So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect one another, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.”

Raising to a level of consciousness the common basis of the love of God and the love of the neighbor thus would be a way of correcting a grave misunderstanding and thus advancing dialog on a broad basis.

The *Common Word* about reconciliation of Christians and Muslims has an external dimension as well. It may be read as a common word of Muslims and Christians ad-

ressed to the world. Also non-believers, atheists, and agnostics must be included in the peace efforts. Christians and Muslims are obliged to do so also because, in certain phases of their history, they themselves abused religion, thus fundamentally doubting belief in God and bringing discredit upon it.

All efforts in interreligious dialog must be made in the interest of one cause: Peace among men, not for some egoistic interest but out of common responsibility for the world before God. To quote Eugen Biser again, it has to be realized that “there is no alternative to peace.”

Royal Highness, Prince Ghazi, we are particularly grateful to you as the leading author of the *Common Word*. Upon your initiative, this pioneering document is addressed to all Christian churches. Its intention is obvious. The dialog offered in this way is to contribute to mutual understanding of the two world religions.

However, the *Common Word* is not a consensus paper written to ensure mutual agreement in specific questions, an agreement which could be revoked at any time. On the contrary, you compiled this text from the normative sources of the three religions, thus rendering the result independent of historical chance constellations. You painstakingly traced and developed those common features which are an indispensable foundation for the dialog of religions and, in addition, represent a firm basis for intercultural coexistence.

The religious horizon expressed in your text also is a symbol of your openness to all human concerns in this world and your penetrating analysis of the present situation.

The various functions you, Royal Highness, are holding in your country, the King-

Eugen Biser Foundation

Dialog from Christian Origins



dom of Jordan, especially deputizing for the King in his absence, bear witness to this fact. When a small delegation of the Eugen Biser Foundation had the privilege of being your guests in Amman, we experienced your spontaneous willingness to discuss even critical issues. The same openness characterized the discussions with colleagues at the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies.

The Eugen Biser Foundation has been actively engaged in the Christian-Muslim dialog for three years. In addition to regularly organizing scientific symposia with the Islamic Theological Faculty of the University

of Ankara, it is also the compilation of a Christian-Muslim Lexicon which is to create the preconditions for an understanding between Muslims and Christians and, in this way, serve the common objective of peaceful coexistence.

As chairman of the Board of the Foundation, I would like to thank you, Royal Highness, most sincerely on behalf of the Eugen Biser Foundation for having accepted the Award, thereby indicating that we have found a partner in our endeavor to find a “fair and equitable” solution to the not inconsiderable problems confronting us in this world.

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