INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IJRF.ORG

Is the glass half full or half empty?

Examining current initiatives on "Human Fraternity" and their implications for religious freedom and mission

Carsten Polanz[1]

Abstract

While some observers see the 2019 Catholic-Sunni Document on Human Fraternity as a powerful message against Islamist extremism, others regret the exclusion of central points of conflict. This article outlines the context of the document and compares some of its key points with the positions of the two main Muslim protagonists in the internal Islamic discourse on freedom of religion (and expression), conversion, and apostasy. The consequences for Christian missions could be great should an understanding of dialog prevail that tacitly makes peaceful coexistence dependent on largely ignoring central differences of faith and renouncing mutual missionary witness.

Keywords

Apostasy, Christian-Muslim dialog, Human Fraternity, al-Azhar, United Arab Emirates.

1. Introduction

On 4 February 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, signed a "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together"[2] in Abu Dhabi. With this and other initiatives, the United Arab Emir-

1 Dr. Carsten Polanz is a lecturer in Islamic studies at Giessen School of Theology (Germany), researcher at the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and executive editor of the bilingual journal *Islam und christlicher Glaube / Islam and Christianity*. His research focuses on key theological issues of Christian-Muslim dialog, contemporary Islamic jihad concepts and reform movements, and current discourses on the integration of Muslims in Europe and the future of religious freedom in the public sphere. This article uses American English. Article submitted: 8 Aug 2024; accepted: 13 Feb 2025. Email: polanz@fthgiessen.de. ORCID: 0009-0008-6573-9574. Parts of the article are based on a previous essay published in 2023 in a Catholic German-language journal for Christian-Muslim dialog: Carsten Polanz, "Gleiche Begriffe – gleicher Inhalt? Eine Problemskizze im Dialog mit dem Religions- und Gesellschaftsverständnis von Ahmad al-Tayyeb und Abdullāh Bin Bayyah," *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2023): 58-68, specifically 60-65.

2 The document is available in a total of eleven languages (including Arabic, German, English and French) at https://tinyurl.com/mrk29h7f.

ates (UAE) in particular, under the leadership of Mauritanian jurist Abdullah bin Bayyah and his Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS), have attempted in recent years to present themselves internationally as pioneers of interreligious tolerance, a culture of dialogue, and equal citizenship for religious minorities. In response, the United Nations launched an "International Day of Human Fraternity" in 2020, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the document a "model for interfaith harmony and human solidarity." Apparently, for him and many other political and religious representatives, the glass is half full.

However, these initiatives have also received criticism. The document mentions "freedom of belief" but not freedom to change religion. In addition, individual Catholic voices see the sweeping equation of the diversity of religions with the will of God as a betrayal of the heart of the gospel. Others point to the UAE's poor human rights record and its anti-democratic agenda in the wake of the Arab uprisings. They warn of a "cheap dialogue." Apparently, for these voices the glass is half empty.

This paper reflects on the "human fraternity" project in terms of its implications for religious freedom and Christian mission. After a brief overview of the central contents of the document and selected voices on its reception to date, it examines the context in which the human fraternity initiatives are embedded, the positions of the two Muslim protagonists on the current internal Islamic power struggle and the limits of legitimate freedom of religion (and expression). Finally, I will analyze to what extent their understanding of dialog allows room for mutual missionary witness or tacitly makes peaceful coexistence dependent on ignoring or downplaying fundamental differences of faith.

2. Central statements of the document on human fraternity

The human fraternity document begins by stating that faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. The main part of the document begins in "the name of God who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity." This is followed by a list of groups to whom the document aims to give a voice, always using the same phrase "in the name of"[3]: innocent people whose killing God has forbidden, the poor and marginalized, widows, orphans, victims and refugees of war, the persecuted and tortured.

The two authors call for a "culture of dialogue,"[4] geared toward mutual understanding and cooperation. The document identifies "a desensitized human con-

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.

science,"[5] which alienates the individual from religious values and tempts them to replace transcendent principles with materialistic philosophies, as a main cause of the crises of the modern world. As a result, many isolated and desperate people are driven into self-destructive forms of "atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism."[6] According to the document, the incitement of hatred, extremism, violence and war has nothing to do with the truth of religion, but rather with the "political manipulation of religion" for short-sighted political or economic goals. The name of God must not be misused to justify terrorism. God has "no need to be defended by anyone."[7]

The document proposes an extensive set of actions, including protection of places of worship from violent attacks, ending all forms of support for terrorist groups, a commitment to the concept of full citizenship with equal rights and obligations, and protection of the family and in particular the dignity and rights of children (also in the face of digital threats).

Freedom as a "right of every person" is also explicitly emphasized in this list of demands. Every individual should enjoy the "freedom of belief, thought, expression and action." Pluralism and "the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language" is described as being "willed by God in His wisdom," which for the authors also represents the foundation for the "freedom of belief" and the "freedom to be different." In this respect, people should not be forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture or to follow a certain "cultural way."[8]

The two signatories pledge to promote the document among religious, political, and social leaders and institutions and to support the political implementation and further educational and scientific reflection of the principles set out in the document.

3. Highlights of the reception to date

At a meeting with Charles Michel, president of the Council of Europe, Mohammad Abdulsalam, who as secretary general of the Muslim Council of Elders played a key role in the process, described the document as a "roadmap for peace and stability in world communities."[9] Others not involved in the project have praised the document and the initiatives it has launched. For UN Secretary-General António Guterres, it represents a "model for interfaith harmony and human solidarity"

5 The Arabic version speaks of the "absence of human conscience" (*taghyīb al-ḍamīr al-insānīya*). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/7yc3vkr9.
6 Ibid (English version).
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3stv45ur. He outlines the entire process in Mohammad Abdulsalam, *The Pope and the Grand Imam: A Thorny Path. A Testimony to the Birth of the Human Fraternity Document* (Dubai: Motivate Media Group, 2021).

that should inspire "us all" to stand together as "one human family" and form an "alliance of peace."[10] Ibrahim Salama, director of the Human Rights Treaties Division of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke in Geneva in 2020 of a "landmark document" that "provides a framework, mechanism and inspiration for action to ensure realization of the human right to freedom of religion or belief through dialogue and action."[11]

On the Catholic side, Cardinal Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, among others, promoted the document as a "milestone on the path of interreligious dialogue."[12] As prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Church, he was involved in the drafting of the document. Even before the signing ceremony, Bishop Paul Hinder, then the church's apostolic vicar for South Arabia, had already connected the Pope's visit to the region with hopes of additional parishes for the almost one million Catholic guest workers in the UAE.[13] During a presentation to the German Bishops' Conference in Frankfurt in March 2019, Hinder said that the document was not perfect, but that it made "remarkable statements," including with regard to the paragraph on religious freedom, "which – provided they do not remain a dead letter – have far-reaching consequences."[14] Currently, many are still suffering from the non-observance of these principles.

Lebanese sociologist Rita Faraj of the Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai saw the interfaith meeting in February 2019 as a "new horizon in Muslim-Christian relations" and considered the document historic. But she called on al-Azhar to carry out an "internal revolution that pulls Muslims out of religious isolation." Faraj criticizes the document's "conservative religious mentality" and "negative stance towards non-believers, agnostics, and atheists."[15] She also regretted the absence of clear language regarding followers of other religions such as Judaism,[16] which is not mentioned at all in the document.[17]

10 "Secretary-General's Message on the International Day of Human Fraternity," 4 February 2023. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwukh4jm.

11 Ibrahim Salama, "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together: The Role of Inter-Religious Dialogue Towards the Universal Enjoyment of the Right of Freedom of Religion and Belief," 27 February 2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2ysaftvn.

12 H. Em. Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, "Religious Freedom and the Document on Human Fraternity," 27-28 February 2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3hh4hex3.

13 See Gerhard Arnold, "Die Toleranzoffensive der Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate (UAE) und die Weltkonferenz über menschliche Brüderlichkeit 2019," in Thomas Schirrmacher and Max Klingberg, eds., *Jahrbuch Religionsfreiheit* (Bonn: VKW, 2019), 76.

14 Paul Hinder, "Als Bischof in Arabien: Franziskanische Impulse für den christlich-islamischen Dialog," 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3tpjyrzh, 4f. The translation of these and other German quotations is by the present author.

15 Rita Faraj, "The Document on Human Fraternity: Peace Between Religions in a Troubled World," *Ecumenical Forum* 40 (2019): 282-284. Available at: https://unipub.uni-graz.at/download/pdf/4608131.pdf.

16 In this context, see also the analysis of al-Tayyib's hatred of Israel and his strong tendencies towards anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Polanz, "Gleiche Begriffe – gleicher Inhalt?" 66-68.

17 For further examples of the reception to date, see Esther Schirrmacher, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit als Gesprächsangebot: Inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung oder oberflächliche Toleranzpolitik?" *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2023): 73.

In his reflection on the document, Felix Körner, holder of the Nicolaus Cusanus Chair for Theology of Religions at the Institute for Catholic Theology of Humboldt University in Berlin, addressed its lack of clarity regarding comprehensive religious freedom. According to him, the "freedom of belief, thought, expression and action" and the "freedom to be different" mentioned therein could also have been explicitly named as freedom to change religion, "if one already condemns any compulsion in religious matters."[18] But Körner did not go on to explain specifically why the Pope's Muslim dialog partners were reluctant to adopt this seemingly logical conclusion.

In the following discussion, I will focus on three aspects that have, in my opinion, been underexposed in the analysis so far: the context in which the document is embedded, especially with regard to the role of the UAE; the positioning of the two main Muslim protagonists in the internal Islamic discourse on freedom of religion and apostasy; and the potentially far-reaching implications for Christian mission, should an understanding of human fraternity prevail that tends to suppress fundamental differences of faith in the name of peaceful coexistence.

4. The history and context of the document

Gerhard Arnold speaks of a veritable "tolerance offensive" with which the UAE is trying to present itself as a pioneer of a global religious and social tolerance policy. In 2007, the "Louvre Abu Dhabi" was opened, with the declared aim of promoting intercultural dialog worldwide.[19] In 2014, both the Muslim Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (MFPPMS), under Bin Bayyah's leadership, and the Muslim Council of Elders under the leadership of Sheikh al-Azhar were established in Abu Dhabi to promote the peaceful nature of the Islamic religion and counteract religious tensions in times of increasing extremism by the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. A Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence was founded in 2016, followed by an International Institute for Tolerance in 2017. The first World Tolerance Summit took place in 2018 in Dubai.[20]

Following the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity, the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity was established to ensure implementation of the document's stated goals. In 2020, the UAE, together with 30 other countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, introduced an "International Day of Human Fraternity" at the United Nations.[21]

18 Felix Körner, "A Reflection on the Abu Dhabi Document," *La Civilità Cattolica*, English Edition, vol. 3, no. 7, art. 1 (2019). Available at: https://www.felixkoerner.de/sites/default/files/2-66e.pdf.
19 See, for example, Kanishk Tharoor, "The Louvre Comes to Abu Dhabi," *The Guardian*, 2 December 2015. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2rfwvcvs.
20 See Arnold, "Die Toleranzoffensive," 63-84.
21 See also Esther Schirrmacher, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit als Gesprächsangebot," 69-74.

The UAE's involvement is taking place in the context of intense international disputes over the sovereignty of interpretation within Islam. In his article "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," James Dorsey shows the broad spectrum of Islamic actors currently competing with each other:

> This battle for the soul of Islam pits rival Middle Eastern and Asian powers against one another: Turkey, seat of the Islamic world's last true caliphate; Saudi Arabia, home to the faith's holy cities; the United Arab Emirates (UAE), propagator of a militantly statist interpretation of Islam; Qatar, with its less strict version of Wahhabism and penchant for political Islam; Indonesia, promoting a humanitarian, pluralistic notion of Islam that reaches out to other faiths as well as non-Muslim center-right forces across the globe; Morocco, which uses religion as a way to position itself as the face of moderate Islam; and Shiite Iran, with its derailed revolution.[22]

Hamdullah Baycar and Mehmet Rakipoglu[23] also describe this struggle for regional and global influence, which is being contested by the UAE and others through both military "hard power" (in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen) and religious "soft power." In *Rivals in the Gulf*,[24] David Warren compares the contrasting strategies of Qatar and the UAE to secure the support of powerful allies (especially the USA) in the face of external and internal threats to their rule through various forms of "state branding."

As Warren shows, Bin Bayyah, today the mastermind of the UAE's tolerance initiatives, was closely associated for decades with Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926-2022), the Egyptian Sunni jurist who developed into a global media mufti from his Qatari exile in the 1990s and 2000s.[25] Both were instrumental in the establishment and expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) – international, cross-denominational organizations involving multiple schools of Islamic law that claim to define the balanced and truly Islamic middle way (*wasaṭīya*) between religious extremism and Western secularism.[26]

22 James Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam, Ramat Gan" (Bar-Ilan University, 2021), 4ff. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/muzsha84.

23 Hamdullah Baycar and Mehmet Rakipoglu, "The United Arab Emirates' Religious Soft Power through Ulema and Organizations," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): 646. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/646.

24 David Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021).

25 In this regard, see the comprehensive anthology by Bettina Gräf and Jacob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds., *The Global Mufti. The Phenomenon of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī* (London: Hurst, 2009).

26 Cf. Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 79.

In the course of the Arab Spring uprisings, however, the two parted ways. With strong support from Qatar, al-Qaradawi sided with the insurgents and against the ruling regimes in Syria and Libya as part of his "jurisprudence of revolution" (*fiqh aṭ-ṭaura*) – with the exception of Bahrain.[27] He strongly condemned the UAE-backed military coup by ʿAbdelfattāḥ as-Sīsī, defense minister at the time and currently president, against president Muhammad Mursī, followed by his massacre in a Muslim Brotherhood protest camp in Rabaʿa. Bin Bayyah, on the other hand, remained silent about Mursī's overthrow and at the same time expressed increasingly loud doubts that democracy was "the cure for all ills, particularly terrorism."[28] With his resignation from the pro-Qatari IUMS in 2013 and the founding of the FPPMS in 2014, which was strongly supported by the UAE, the break was complete.

5. Bin Bayyah's understanding of state and society

A fruitful dialogue of cultures and civilizations must of course also address the question of the social and political system that appears best suited to protect religious freedom and other fundamental human rights. In contrast to al-Qaraḍāwī, Bin Bayyah relies on a "jurisprudence of peace" (*fiqh as-silm*) with the state-sponsored programs of the FPPMS, intended to end the "chaos of religious discourse" (*fauḍā al-ḫiṭāb ad-dīnī*), which in his view has been triggered by unqualified muftis.[29] He wants to realize justice through a specifically Islamic concept of consultation (*šūrā*),[30] which he does not want to define clearly as a form of either democracy, theocracy or aristocracy.[31] In an English-language article from 2012 on the relationship between *šūrā* and democracy, Bin Bayyah describes the prevention of unrest and oppression as well as the search for peaceful solutions as unifying concerns, but he warns that democracy could become a "source of constant dispute and disorder" due to "partisan extremity."[32] As he explained at the opening of the FPPMS on 9 March 2014, the "call for democracy" could even amount to a "call for war" in societies that lack the necessary "common ground."[33]

In his contributions, it becomes clear that, with reference to the Egyptian jurist and Muslim Brother Taufīq aš-Šāwī (1918-2009), he perceives the essence of Western democracy in a very abbreviated and distorted way as a struggle for

27 Ibid., 48-51.
28 Thus the English translation of Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 80, with reference to the work by Abdullah bin Bayyah, *al-Irhāb: al-tašḫīṣ wa-l-ḥulūl* (Riyadh, 2007), 56-57, which is not accessible to me.
29 See in particular Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 7, 75, 82 and 103f.
30 He cites Suras 3:159, 42:38 and 2:233 as Qur'anic foundations.
31 Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Shura (Consultation) and Democracy." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4vc2wep5. An Arabic version of this text could not be found.
32 Ibid.
33 Quoted in Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 94.

the "absolute authority" of the social majority.[34] He contrasts this caricature of democracy with his ideal of Islamic consultation, in which individual freedoms, social justice and political equality are derived from Sharia law and its fundamental, timeless objectives and principles. For him, the ruler's right to the people's obedience is balanced by his duty to enforce justice and fairness.

In view of Muhammad's own example, it appears to Bin Bayyah to be a legitimate option for the ruler to select merely a few leading representatives of the individual social groups for consultation.[35] He explicitly distinguishes his concept of consultation from "public criticism" or "open condemnation" of the ruler, because the latter can lead to violent clashes with the regime.[36] As Warren shows, Bin Bayyah expects citizens not to give up their right to justice in the face of an oppressive state, but to postpone it for the sake of peace.[37] Also notably, he compares the relationship between the ruler and the people with the relationship between husband and wife. Just as the man is free to decide (e.g. to take a second wife) despite far-reaching consequences for the whole family, the ruler cannot be restricted in his decisions due to his more extensive knowledge of all relevant facts.[38]

Bin Bayyah's explicit Islamic legitimization of autocratic rule should, of course, be appropriately classified and evaluated in the reception of the peace and tolerance initiatives of the FPPMS that he has led. Where autocratic rule is justified in principle, it seems impossible to actually implement the goal of "full" and equal "citizenship" (*al-muwāṭana al-kāmila*) of Muslims and non-Muslims formulated by over 250 Muslim scholars and heads of state from more than 120 countries, such as the Moroccan King Mohammed VI, in the Marrakesh Declaration[39] of January 2016, which was co-initiated by the FPPMS.

Although the authors of this declaration glorify Muhammad's "Charter of Medina" as a groundbreaking "constitutional contract" for the realization of a multi-religious society,[40] and although some Christian associations such as the World Council of Churches speak of a groundbreaking rethinking of religious freedom for non-Muslim minorities, critics miss "practical initiatives to further the Declaration's lofty

34 Bin Bayyah, "Shura (Consultation) and Democracy." Bin Bayyah does not cite a specific source for the quotations he uses.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 David Warren, "The Modernist Roots of Islamic Autocracy: Shaykh Abdullah Bin Bayyah and the UAE-Israel Peace Deal" (27 August 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2xdwezr6.
38 Ibid. According to Warren, the FPPMS's positive statement on the UAE's peace treaty with Israel should also be seen against this background.
39 See "Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities." The conference took place from 25 to 27 January 2016. The official website with the original Arabic text is currently not available. An executive summary is available at: https://tinyurl.com/27x55nxj. See also the constructive and critical analysis by Friedmann Eissler, "*Erklärung von Marrakesch: Muslime bekräftigen die Charta von Medina*," *Materialdienst der EZW* (2016) 3: 103-106.
40 "Marrakesh Declaration," 2 (executive summary).

goals."[41] The lack of concretization of clear and verifiable criteria may also have to do with the fact that Bin Bayyah sees the concrete forms of expression of citizenship in his writings as dependent on the regional context. He therefore explicitly distinguishes between the "absolutism of principles" and the "relativism of applications."[42]

6. Religious freedom and apostasy for al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah

Whether non-Muslims in Muslim majority societies can actually gain full citizenship depends crucially on the concrete understanding of freedom of religion and belief. In this respect, we should examine the understanding of religious freedom outlined by al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah in various writings and interviews in recent years.

In the "al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence"[43] of 2017, for which al-Tayyeb was largely responsible, equal rights and obligations in the sense of the "Charter of Medina" are fundamentally affirmed. The declaration was published on the occasion of an international conference organized by the Muslim Council of Elders and al-Azhar entitled "Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration." Here, too, the order of society dating back to the reign of Muhammad in Medina is glorified as the "fairest system of governance."[44] Today, it is "the top duty" of a necessarily strong state "to protect the citizens' lives, freedom, properties, as well as their right to citizenship and human dignity."[45] However, this declaration lacks a concrete definition of individual civil liberties.[46]

Particularly in the context of anti-extremism initiatives, al-Tayyeb never tires of defending freedom of belief as a fundamental Islamic value. In doing so, he refers to relevant passages from contemporary discourse such as Sura 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things." He also cites Sura 10:99: "If it had been the Lord's will, they would all have believed – All who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!?" The exploitation of human needs with the aim of winning people to Islam has, therefore, no place

41 Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 107.
42 See e.g. Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Citizenship between the Absolutism of Principles and the Relativism of Applications," 13 March 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mvtf6e8a.
43 See "Al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence Issued by His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar," 28 February 2017, currently not on the al-Azhar website, but available at: https://tinyurl.com/e7nypwjs.
44 Ibid, 1.
45 Ibid, 3.
46 According to Friedmann Eissler, the concept of citizenship is not presented critically "but introduced quasi suggestively and yet unbrokenly linked to a traditional 'Medina model,' which cannot be thought of conclusively without the 'dhimmi status' of minorities (moreover only of the 'heavenly religions' Christianity and Judaism)." For further unresolved questions, see Eissler, "Interreligiöser Dialog. Azhar-Erklärung zum muslimisch-christlichen Zusammenleben," *EZW Materialdienst* (2017): 5. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2eue6bu4.

in Islamic philosophy. Forced conversions would only increase the number of hypocrites.[47] Faith as an "act of the heart"[48] cannot be forced.

Following a speech in the German Bundestag on 15 March 2016, al-Tayyeb was asked directly about the issue of apostasy. In his response, he pointed out that the Qur'an does not impose a specific punishment on converts, but that some traditions speak of punishing those who pose a danger to society. Recently, however, even entire television channels have propagated such conversions without anyone bringing those responsible to justice. No one had been hanged or killed. He therefore expressed his astonishment that anyone could even think that conversion was a punishable offense. In this statement, Sura 18:29 appears as the last word in the debate: "Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject [it]."[49]

A few weeks later, however, al-Tayyeb expressed a significantly different tone in front of a predominantly Arab Muslim television audience. In two interviews on his own al-Azhar program, broadcast on various satellite channels, on 15 and 16 June 2016,[50] he explicitly emphasized the consensus among classical legal scholars regarding the punishment of apostasy from Islam with death. Only a few have deviated from this position. All four schools of law agree that apostasy is a crime and that the persons concerned must be put to death if they do not respond to the call to repent after a specified period of time. This view is based on two sayings of Muhammad that are considered authentic. Only the Hanafis made an exception for women because they were not in a position to fight the community.[51]

Whereas the classical jurists would demand the death penalty regardless of whether the person in question turned against the community after apostasy, contemporary jurists (following the Hanafi exception regarding women) would demand the death penalty only if the apostasy takes the form of transgressions and crimes and the person concerned is guilty of "high treason" (*al-ḫiyāna al-ʿaẓmā*) against the Muslim community and rebels against what is sacred to society. Al-Tayyeb also refers here to contemporary scholars such as Abū Zahra, Maḥmūd Shaltūt, and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Khallāf, who do not classify apostasy as an *ḥadd* offense with a fixed punishment; rather, they leave the level of punishment to the discretion of the respective ruler, who can flexibly orient himself to the given "conditions" *(ẓurūf)* of society.[52]

47 See Ahmad al-Tayyeb, *Mafhūm al-ǧihād fī l-islām*, 2019, 20-22. Available at: https://alimamaltayeb.com/books/22/مفهوم_الجهاد_في_الإسلام.

48 Ibid, 22.

49 The speech by al-Tayyeb and the subsequent question-and-answer session are available at: https://tinyurl.com/y8me7wvz.

50 The two interviews – episodes 10 and 11 (2016) of the program "al-Imām al-Ṭayyib" – are available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjUMHu7JSpw and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EminlQOAncg, respectively. The interviewer also addresses the critical question of the extent to which the punishment of apostates can be reconciled with the principle of citizenship.

51 See "Al-Imām al-Ṭayyib," episode 11 (2016).

52 Note ibid.

What is decisive with regard to a realistic reception of human fraternity is that al-Tayyeb explicitly distinguishes between the "freedom of faith" (*hurrīyat al-ʿiʿtiqād*) and the "freedom of apostasy" (*ḥurrīyat al-ʿirtidād*), because the apostate knew the truth, initially embraced it and then turned his back on it. For al-Tayyib, the apostate can represent a "danger" (*ḫaṭar*) to the community, because turning away from one's former religion can be accompanied by hatred towards Islam. However, the Shaykh also sees the possibility of "intellectual and faith-related crises" (*azmāt fikrīya wa-īmānīya*), in which the person concerned turns to another religion or sect due to material or intellectual temptations. Here he recognizes no danger for Muslims and their society, but he emphasizes once again that all previous jurists would have considered the crime of apostasy in general – i.e., without the differentiation he has made – as a threat to Islamic society.[53]

Certain attempts at moderation and contextualization of tradition are therefore just as clear here as the remaining reservations about comprehensive religious freedom. Al-Tayyeb feels that judging Islamic societies by Western standards is unfair. For him, cultures such as the West, whose context and foundations have given rise to the freedom to engage in "apostasy," "to change religion" (*taġyīr ad-dīn*) and to express "non-religiosity" (*al-lādīn*), differ fundamentally and completely from a culture in which an "Islamic legal judgment" *(ḥukm islāmī*)[54] has emerged for dealing with apostasy.

Bin Bayyah seems to indicate a similar reservation with regard to religious freedom and freedom of opinion. In an English-language article entitled "Freedom as a Human Right" (2012), he begins by stating that Islam does not question the "inner thoughts" that people have in their homes. At the same time, he threatens those who, as the "fifth column or the agents of other civilizations," publicly spread their apostasy and thus, according to his interpretation, turn against the foundations of the Muslim social system, with "due Islamic punishment."[55] Bin Bayyah's long-time colleague al-Qaraḍāwī made a very similar distinction between minor apostasy, which the person concerned keeps to himself, and major apostasy, which must be resolutely combated.[56]

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Daniel Philpott, a political scientist at the private Catholic University of Notre Dame, called for a "mean-

53 See "Al-Imām al-Ṭayyib," episode 10 (2016).
54 Ibid.
55 Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Freedom as a Human Right." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yk5yx9td.
56 See Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, "Apostasy - Major and Minor." Available at: https://islamonline.net/en/apostasy-major-and-minor. See also the detailed analysis of this and numerous other writings by al-Qaradawi on apostasy in Christine Schirrmacher, *"Let there be no Compulsion in Religion" (Surah 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians – Discourses on Apostasy, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock; Bonn: VKW: 2016), esp. 265-286, and Christine Schirrmacher, "Apostasy: What do contemporary Muslim theologians teach about religious freedom?" *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 6, no. 1/2 (2013): 196-197.

ingful, authentic dialogue" instead of a "cheap dialogue"[57] in the run-up to the Pope's visit in 2019. He expressed concern that the dialog could just be part of an image campaign. Although there are much more repressive states, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, and although Christians, Hindus and other religious minorities in the UAE have the freedom to practice their religion in private, restrictions remain. Christians cannot "be public about their faith, they cannot communicate their faith through the media or have a procession down the street. Anything that might remotely smack of evangelization, and which some brush out as proselytism, is out."[58]

While conversions to Islam are encouraged, people who want to leave Islam and turn to another religion continue to face dangers, including the potential death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy.[59] The surprisingly clear statement in the Document on Human Fraternity, "God has no need to be defended by anyone," seems difficult to reconcile with al-Tayyib's and Bin Bayyah's statements on apostasy in the intra-Islamic discourse."[60] The fact that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1990 Cairo Declaration, and the 1994 Arab Charter on Human Rights are not cited by name in the Document on Human Fraternity, in favor of a general reference to "previous International Documents that emphasized the importance of the role of religions in the construction of world peace," is probably because it was not possible to agree on a common point of reference.[61]

7. Implications for Christian mission: Dealing with fundamental differences

One controversial passage of the Document on Human Fraternity for Catholics is the formulation directly following the emphasis on freedom of belief, thought, expression, and action, according to which pluralism and the diversity of people, not only with regard to color, sex, race and language but also with regard to religion, "are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings."[62] At this point, Timo Güzelmansur sees "an imbalance in the document, because it compares characteristics of a person, such as color or gender, with

57 Ines San Martin, "As Pope heads to Gulf States, issues from Islam to immigration loom." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yckh4dx6.

58 Ibid.

59 See Jason Horowitz, "Pope Francis Makes 'Historic' Gulf Tour Amid Yemen Crisis and Christian Repression." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yeszs9wa.

60 Tino Güzelmansur, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit: Anmerkungen zur Papstreise und zum Dokument", *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2019): 54–64, here 57.

61 A detailed analysis of the Muslim and inner-Islamic criticism of these declarations can be found in Christine Schirrmacher, "Islamic human rights declarations and their critics. Muslim and non-Muslim objections to the universal validity of the Sharia," *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 4, no. 1 (2011): 40-60.

62 Ibid.

which he was born and over which he has no influence, with religious affiliation, over which he does have influence." He also points out the serious potential implications for religious freedom should turning away from one religion and converting to another be portrayed as "disregarding the divine will."[63]

Critics such as the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Astana, Athanasius Schneider, interpret the blanket equation of religious diversity with the will of God as a "betrayal of the gospel," because Jesus Christ is no longer witnessed to as "the only Savior of Mankind." Schneider warns against a paralysis of the Catholic "mission *ad gentes*" and emphasizes, with reference to 1 Timothy 2:4 and Acts 4:12, among others, that it is rather the will of God to "lead all men to Jesus Christ and to eternal life."[64] In a discussion with Schneider, Pope Francis acknowledged the potential for misunderstandings and clarified that, unlike the diversity of sex, he attributes the diversity of religions solely to the "permissive will of God."[65]

A look at how al-Tayyeb has defined the relationship between Islam and other religions in the past clearly shows that even for him, the controversial formulation is by no means intended to express the equal validity of the religions and that he quite naturally assumes an Islamic claim to absolute truth and superiority. In a speech given in the USA in 2002, which was published in revised form in 2020 as part of a collection of speeches by al-Tayyeb, Islam appears as a "natural extension" (*ʾimtidād ṭabīʿī*) of previous "heavenly messages" and as the "final form" (*aṣ-ṣīġa an-nihāʾīya*) that corresponds to God's will for humanity "until the end of time" (*ilā nihāyati z-zamān*).[66]

In the "logic of the Qur'an" (*minṭaq al-qurʾān*), for al-Tayyeb there are actually no different religions, but only the one "divine religion" (*ad-dīn al-ʾilāhī*) – which he understands as an "invitation of people to the oneness of Allah." The various "heavenly messages" therefore differ only in the area of "legislation" (*tašrīʿ*), but not with regard to "faith" (*ʾaqīda*) and "morals" (*aḫlāq*).[67] For him, this also explains why the messengers and prophets who preceded Muhammad, such as Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus, are referred to as Muslims in the Qur'an, although he clarifies that they are of course not to be described as followers of

63 Güzelmansur, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit," 61.
64 Interview with Bishop Athanasius Schneider on 26 August 2019, "The Christian Faith is the Only Valid and God-Willed Religion." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3f885vr8.
65 Interview with Bishop Athanasius Schneider, 7 March 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5774uxtr.
66 Ahmad al-Tayyib, "Al-Qaul al-Tayyeb. al-Islām wa-l-adyān," in al-Tayyib, *Min kalimāt al-imām al-akbar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib*, 2020, Vol. 2, 13. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yxha3d8c.
67 Ibid, 13ff. In an interview in March 2019, al-Tayyib explains that although a distinction must be made between the Muslim, Christian and Jewish religions in everyday conversations, there is no distinction in the "language of the Qur'an, in [Islamic?] science and in reality" (*fī luġat al-qurʾān fī l-ʿilm fī-l-ḥaqīqa*); there is no Christian or Jewish religion but only one religion, and Islam is "the final manifestation" (āḫir *maẓhar*) of this religion. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8FLxyRZVag.

Muhammad.[68] In the same way, al-Tayyeb assumes the unity of the "heavenly books" (*al-kutub as-samāyīa*), so that the Gospel confirms the Torah and Muhammad confirms the Torah and the Gospel.[69]

It is certainly helpful and welcome, in view of the anti-Christian incitement and violence of extremist groups such as the Islamic State, that al-Tayyeb emphasizes the special closeness between Muslims and Christians in this speech based on Sura 5:82.[70] However, one misses a genuine interaction with the Christian self-understanding of the Gospel. In another speech that he gave in March 2010 as part of an interreligious dialogue event in Washington, he explicitly emphasizes that the Qur'an "confirms the divinely revealed books in their original form and insofar as they remain faithful to the intention of the divine source."[71] He thus upholds the traditional accusation of a falsification of the Torah and Gospel by Jews and Christians. This also means that the high esteem of these two holy scriptures as guidance and light, which he often refers to in the context of dialog, clearly does not relate to the Holy Scriptures read by Christians to this day and their self-image associated with them.

In this respect, the question arises as to how an open and respectful dialog can succeed despite these far-reaching mutual reservations and questions on both sides. To merely postulate an Islamic understanding of the common essence of all religions as the necessary basis for constructive coexistence, on the other hand, would be tantamount to a theological appropriation of the Christian dialog partner.

Such can be seen in the Muslim dialog initiative "A Common Word between Us and You" by 138 Muslim scholars from 2007. The open letter, also signed by al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah, appeals to Christian leaders worldwide to work together for world peace on the basis of assumed commonalities such as love of God and neighbor. In doing so, the presentation completely disregards key aspects of the faith for Christians (which are not shared by Muslims, and in some cases are sharply rejected) and at the same time talks only about "formal differences" (*ʾiḫtilāfāt šaklīya*)[72] between Christianity and Islam. Gordon Nickel has shown that the central reference text (Sura 3:64) has played a key role in the context of

68 Ibid, 15-18.
69 Ibid., 18-19.
70 The context of the verse, however, makes it clear that the Christians meant here obviously recognized Muhammad as a prophet: "When they hear (during the recitation in worship?) what has come down (as revelation) to the Messenger, you see how their eyes overflow with tears because of the knowledge they (already) have of the truth (through their own revelation). They say: 'Lord! We believe. List us among the group of those who bear witness (to the truth)!'"
71 To my knowledge, only this English translation of his lecture is available: Ahmad Mohamed al-Tayyeb, "Islam and the Other Religions." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3s9485vu.
72 The Arabic text is available at: https://tinyurl.com/564duzrt. Various translations and official responses from Christian churches, organizations and individuals can be found at www.acommonword.com/downloads-and-translations/ and www.acommonword.com/christian-responses/.

Islamic Daʿwa (invitation to Islam) throughout history. In the classical tradition of interpretation, to which the leading Jordanian Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought is also expressly committed, it stands in the context of a polemical dispute between Muhammad and a Christian delegation from Najran. Muhammad wanted to confront them with his call to a "common word" or "common terms" (*kalimatin sawāʾin*) to dissuade them from believing in the divinity of Jesus.[73]

So where peaceful coexistence is made dependent on theological harmonization or the suppression of obviously fundamental differences in matters of faith, at best a short-term and deceptive harmony can be achieved, which has little to do with an authentic culture of dialog and demands a high price. That price is an often rather insidious, tacit renunciation of comprehensive religious freedom, which also includes the right to conversion and mission and the possibility of controversial debate, especially on fundamental questions of faith and life.

8. Conclusions

In times of rampant Islamist extremism and existential threats to Christian and other minorities in Muslim-majority societies, there is a great desire for "climate change" in Christian-Muslim relations. Interfaith initiatives and declarations calling for peaceful, respectful and equal coexistence in the West and the Islamic world are of course to be welcomed. The Document on Human Fraternity could make an important difference if some of the goals expressed in it were actually made the basis of concrete policy and if influential educational institutions were to promote honest and self-critical reflection on the great gap between ideals and reality in current Christian-Muslim relations.

However, many important questions remain unanswered, and some have obviously been deliberately left out. This applies, among other things, to freedom of conversion, which Heiner Bielefeldt, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, rightly described as a "litmus test for religious freedom."[74] Bin Bayyah's "jurisprudence of peace" and his *šūra* concept are much closer to the autocracy of the UAE than to a constitutional democracy. Despite some attempts at moderation and differentiation in the examined statements on apostasy, there is still plenty of room for the arbitrary restriction of freedom of belief and expression. This means that practically anyone who wants to openly express and

73 Gordon Nickel, "The Use of Sūra 3:64 in Interfaith Appeals: Dialogue or Daʿwa?" *Islam und christlicher Glaube / Islam and Christianity* 2 (2015): 37-40.

74 Heiner Bielefeldt, "Schwerpunktthema Apostasie – Die Freiheit zum Glaubenswechsel," in Deutsche Bischofskonferenz und Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, eds., *Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit von Christen weltweit 2017: Das Recht auf Religions- und Weltanschauungsfreiheit: Bedrohungen - Einschränkungen - Verletzungen* [Joint Texts No. 25], (2017): 47. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdfdms9k.

perhaps publicly justify their rejection of Islam or their conversion to Christianity may still be portrayed as a traitor who threatens the inviolable foundations of state and society.

Even where influential opinion leaders such as al-Tayyeb or Bin Bayyah condemn premature and exaggerated accusations of disbelief (*takfīr*) and the vigilante justice of radical Muslims against fellow believers and demand compliance with certain jurisprudential standards, they simultaneously create an ideological breeding ground in which radical groups can continue to grow. State and religion remain closely related, so the Islamic claim to truth can be enforced with violence against apostates or heretics if they are perceived as posing a danger to society.[75]

The rather critical findings of the analysis presented here raise the question of possible alternatives. Indonesia offers much more far-reaching and less ambiguous approaches to relativizing Muslim claims to power vis-à-vis people of other faiths and dissenters. For example, the Indonesian organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Islamic non-governmental organization with 40 million members, calls on Muslims worldwide to unequivocally recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including full religious freedom, in its 2017 "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam."[76]

To overcome the current identity crisis, Muslims must critically question central concepts of Muslim orthodoxy and classical Islamic law, which have been repeatedly used to legitimize violence in recent decades, because they have become obsolete due to the conditions of modern nation-states.[77] In an article entitled "God Needs No Defense,"[78] Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), former Indonesian president (1999-2001) and chairman of NU from 1984 to 1999, regretted that "normative religious constraints" and "internal control mechanisms" had defeated Islamic humanism and paralyzed Muslim societies. Apostasy and blasphemy laws therefore prevent thinking "outside the box" not only in matters of religion, but also in other areas of life such as literature, science and culture.[79]

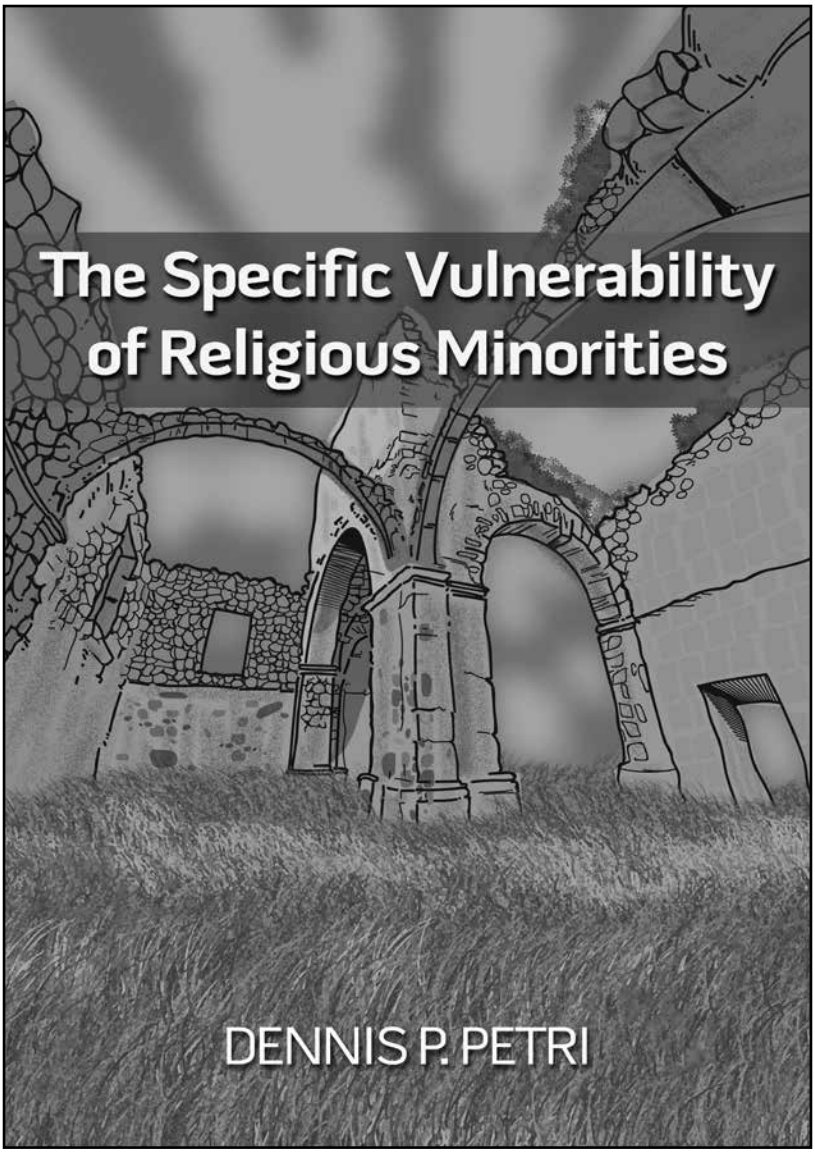
Although NU has welcomed the Document on Human Fraternity in principle and even received, in 2024, the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity together with the Muhammadiya movement, which is also Indonesian,[80] it clearly wants to go much further in its interpretation of central concerns than the Muslim dialog

75 See al-Tayyib, *Mafhūm al-ğihād fī l-islām*, 22.
76 "Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam" (21-22 May 2017). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/cnf92pkb.
77 "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," 7.
78 Abdurrahman Wahid, "God Needs No Defense," in: Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, eds., *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4f72ebm3.
79 Ibid, xix.
80 For details of the award, see https://tinyurl.com/2s3jcf2b.

partners of Pope Francis examined in this article. Thomas K. Johnson, senior theological advisor of the World Evangelical Alliance, therefore advocates "global cooperation" between Evangelicals and representatives of NU's "Humanitarian Islam" in the public sphere.[81] Johnson explicitly states that such cooperation is not about a "peace of shared religious beliefs," but about a "peace of compatible approaches to life in society based on similar approaches to public ethics."[82]

This distinction is essential; neither Christian-Muslim peace nor peace in society as a whole should be made dependent on theological consensus. Christians and Muslims (like Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, and other groups) must be challenged to demonstrate their peacefulness, especially where they encounter people with fundamentally different convictions. In terms of genuine and comprehensive religious freedom, this presupposes a consistent distinction between legitimate religious claims to truth, on one hand, and claims to political power that threaten peace on the other. On this point, the two main Muslim protagonists of the Documents on Human Fraternity lack the clarity and consistency demonstrated by NU in its declarations on Humanitarian Islam.

81 See Thomas K. Johnson, *Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations: A New Partnership for Peace and Religious Freedom* (Bonn: VKW, 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ywzmvxcy.
82 Ibid, 47.



Religious Freedom Series Vol 7, VKW: Bonn, 2023. 403 pp. ISBN: 978-3-862269-267-5.
Download at www.iirf.global