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As Christians Facing Rising Islamophobia

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The Ecumenical Movement and Islam in Europe. To address the issue of Christians' attitudes toward the growing Islamophobia, I would begin with some ecumenical positions, particularly within Europe. The issue of the relationship between Christians and Muslims has been on the agenda of the ecumenical movement for several decades: the Conference of European Churches (CEC), which brings together the continent's Protestant, Anglican, Old Catholic, and Orthodox churches, began addressing the issue in the 1970s, convening an important consultation in Salzburg in 1978 and then in St. Pölten (also in Austria) in 1983. From 1986 to 2008, work on Islam expanded to include Catholics, with the creation of a joint committee, "Islam in Europe." This committee convened two European Christian-Muslim conferences (in September 2001 in Sarajevo on "Christians and Muslims in Europe: Responsibility and Religious Commitment in a Pluralistic Society" and in 2008 in Mechelen/Brussels on "Being European Citizens and Believers: Christians and Muslims as Active Partners in European Societies") and produced several documents (the two most recent, from 2003, are on common prayer and "Meeting Muslims?"). Unfortunately, the work of the Islam in Europe Committee was suspended in 2008 (at a time of great difficulty in ecumenical relations), although the two bodies continued to work on the issue independently.

The Charta Oecumenica. Ecumenical reflection on relations with Islam, however, is not limited to the Islam in Europe Committee, and if I had to choose an ecumenical document to refer to, I would choose the most authoritative, albeit very concise, Charta Oecumenica – Guidelines for the Growth of Cooperation between the Churches in Europe, signed by CEC and the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) in Strasbourg in 2001. The Charta is a short document with 12 points, the penultimate of which is dedicated precisely to "Cultivating relations with Islam." Here is the text:

"Muslims have lived in Europe for centuries. In some European countries they constitute strong minorities. While there have been plenty of good contacts and neighbourly relations between Muslims and Christians, and this remains the case, there are still strong reservations and prejudices on both sides. These are rooted in painful experiences throughout history and in the recent past. We would like to intensify encounters between Christians and Muslims and enhance Christian-Islamic dialogue at all levels. We recommend, in particular, speaking with one another about our faith in one God, and clarifying ideas on human rights. We commit ourselves:

- to conduct ourselves towards Muslims with respect;
- to work together with Muslims on matters of common concern."

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The tone of this article is essentially positive but also somewhat hesitant, especially when compared to the commitments that the signatories of the Charter itself make regarding dialogue between Christian churches among themselves and with Judaism (paragraph 10). But in 2023, CEC and CCEE finally decided to update the Charter, and in July 2024, a new, still provisional, version was released and sent to the churches for discussion. The new draft has a much more open tone and more solid theological motivations. Here is the text (provisional, I repeat: the final version has not yet been released) of the new Article 8 (which corresponds to Article 11 in the first edition):

“Cultivating relations with Islam. *For Jews, Christians and Muslims, Abraham is a founding figure. Reflections on the relations between Islam and Christianity enable Christians to deeper understand their position within the Abrahamic family. We share with Muslims the belief in one merciful God. However, the Christian belief in the divinity of Christ and in the Triune God also set us apart [editor’s note: the same applies to relations with Jews, but curiously, this is not stated in the previous article]. Both our commonalities and differences can help us to better understand ourselves and each other. Muslims and Christians share both a history and a present in Europe, which has been marked by plenty of good contacts and neighborly relations, but also by wars and painful experiences, strong reservations and prejudices on both sides. To increase our understanding of each other and to improve our living together, we encourage an intensification of encounters between Christians and Muslims and the enhancing of Muslim-Christian dialogue at all levels. We commit ourselves:*

- to discern and pursue matters of common concern with Muslims;
- to oppose Islamophobia in the Church and in society;
- to work together with Muslims in the cause of peace against any form of extremism or misuse of religion.”

As it can be seen, significant steps forward have been made in this new version. The commitment to oppose "Islamophobia in the Church and in society" is very important for our subject matter.

Opposing Islamophobia in the Church. To oppose Islamophobia "in the Church and in society," we must first confront our own "internalized Islamophobia." This is a reflection that, beyond the ecumenical level, individual Christian denominations must make on their own, because each has its own particular history with regard to Islam. Orthodoxy, for example, has a centuries-long history of not always easy coexistence and survival within the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic countries; Catholicism must come to terms with the Crusades, etc. In this sense, the Christian denomination least directly affected by relations with Islam is Protestantism, essentially for historical and geographical reasons. I would like to make a few observations on this, avoiding delving into the problems of Catholics and Orthodox with Islam. To put it very briefly, to borrow the words of Genevan Protestant theologian Jean-Claude Basset (article "Islam" from the *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, Cerf/Labor et Fides, Paris/Geneva 1995, pp. 729ff.), relations between Muslims and Protestants have long been "one of ignorance and rejection." Beginning with the Reformers, Luther listed Muslims (whom he called "Turks") among the principal enemies of Christianity, along with the Pope, the devil, and the Jews! Also Calvin does not seem better informed or any more attentive. Among the few open-minded exceptions are Sebastián Castellion (1515-1563) and Bibliander (Theodor Buchmann, 1504-1564), Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, who advocated the need to take an interest in the Koran, a translation of which he republished in 1543. It is only in recent decades (thanks in particular to theologians such as the Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith, author of *On Understanding Islam* (1981), the French Henry Corbin (1903-1978) and the Anglican bishop Kenneth Cragg) that we begin to acquire an attitude of greater openness, of deeper knowledge, of recognition of some affinities between Protestantism and Islam (from the importance of the "Book" to worship rigorously addressed to God alone, to the simplicity of the liturgy, to the lack of a "clergy"

distinct from the laity (at least as far as Sunni Islam is concerned). In the aforementioned article, Jean-Claude Basset describes four fundamental attitudes of Protestantism towards Islam, attitudes that can significantly be discussed and worked on (art. cit., pp. 737-38). The first option, very pragmatic, is that of conviviality and solidarity. The second, very widespread among "evangelicals", is a missionary attitude ("we try to convert them"): even if not necessarily aggressive, it is still proselytism. The third option, perhaps the most widespread today within the historic Protestant Churches, is that of a dialogue aimed at tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect. The fourth option, still a minority but preferred by Basset, is to "renounce any value judgment or condescension on the religion of the other and to consider the plurality of traditions not only as a given but as a gift from God. It is not a question of renouncing the essence of the faith of either party, but rather of what can be exclusive and imperialistic in its expression... Inspired by the same Calvinist affirmation, *Deus semper major*, God is always greater, and by its equivalent in the tireless Muslim call, *Allahu akbar* [God is the greatest]." Or again, I would add, by the expression found in various writings of Sufi wisdom: "But God knows infinitely more."...

Opposing Islamophobia in Society. Finally, a few words on homophobia in society, a phenomenon particularly evident in our country, where religious freedom is not equal for all and where attempts to promote the integration of Muslims in Italy and the recognition of their organizations have recently been suspended. As is well known, after years of fruitful work (culminating in 2017 with the approval of the Pact for Italian Islam), after observing the inaction of the current government, the members of the Council for Relations with Islam unanimously resigned. The president of this body (which had consultative status with the Ministry of the Interior) has been Protestant Professor Paolo Naso since 2015.

The FCEI's commitment. The president of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), Professor Daniele Garrone, asked me to emphasize the Federation's commitment to countering this trend, starting from a vision of secularism as a guarantee of pluralism in the public sphere. The specific tool used by the FCEI in this field is the "dialogue" section of the Commission for Studies on Dialogue and Integration (COSDI), which in 2018 organized the first study day in Florence on "Protestantism and Islam. Paths of Dialogue". The recent and third FCEI Assembly (Sacrofano, October 2024) reaffirmed the importance of the work of the dialogue section with this document:

"Act 32 (COSDI – Dialogue Section). The Assembly, having considered the strengthening of the commitment to interreligious dialogue a priority, invites the Assembly and the Council of the FCEI to strengthen the work of the COSDI Dialogue Section. It also recommends: 1) promoting knowledge of other faiths, including through the production of informational and educational materials; 2) strengthening opportunities for encounters with the various faith communities present on the territory."

Promoting knowledge of other faiths means, above all, grasping their complexity and avoiding simplifications and stereotypes. It is a special task for us Italian Protestants, who often feel victimized by such simplifications and stereotypes.