



ICCJ Bonn Conference 2017

Reforming, Rereading, Renewing:

Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

Reformieren, interpretieren, revidieren:

Martin Luther und 500 Jahre Tradition und Reform in Judentum und Christentum

## OPENING EVENT

SUNDAY, JULY 2, 2017 - AT THE "KAMMERSPIELE BAD GODESBERG"

### Greeting

**By Bishop Dr Munib Younan**

Your Excellencies,  
Dear friends,

It is a joy and honor for me as an Arab Palestinian Christian evangelical Lutheran bishop to be invited to address the conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews here in Bonn. I bring you the greetings of Jerusalem, a city that is in need of your prayers. We are gathered here for an important series of conversations around topics vital to today's world. Exploring the possibility of good relations between Christians and Jews—as a component of strong relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims—is a central concern for the world today. I hope that this conference would address issues related to justice, peace, reconciliation and living together in our divided and broken world. It is our joint responsibility, as people of faith, to advance the humanity of human beings in our world.

We gather in the year commemorating 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation. We celebrate this globally, ecumenically and in a spirit of repentance. Even with this spirit of repentance, we are not shy to emphasize the positive points of the Reformation. Through the efforts of Martin Luther and countless other reformers, the Reformation brought both the freshness of the Gospel and a message of liberation and freedom for all people. The phrase, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, was first coined by theologian Karl Barth in the mid-1940s. Lutherans have of course taken the insight of this Reformed theologian and read them back into the core of Martin Luther's Reformation spirit, even back to his theses on indulgences in 1517 and his theses for the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. These sparks of brilliance in Luther's early career as a Reformer point to his courageous drive to reform, to rebuild, to remake the church in a spirit of repentance and faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In its deepest meaning, the continuing, ongoing Reformation has inspired commitment to the freedom of every human being, respecting human rights, gender justice, freedom of conscience, as an integral part of our freedom, by God's grace. This is why the Lutheran World Federation decided to take the theme "Liberated by God's Grace" as the theme of the 500 years commemoration. The freshness of the Gospel helps us grasp human freedom and dignity more deeply than we can imagine. Through our ongoing dialogues with other churches and religious traditions, we now understand that these are not our values alone; every established religion respects the inherent dignity of human beings.

This 500th anniversary year also provides an important opportunity for Lutherans—along with all Christians who identify with western traditions—to strengthen engagement with Jews and Muslims

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alongside efforts to improve ecumenical relationships. Germany provides an important context for each of these conversations.

The churches in Germany, including the Lutheran churches, have been, after the Holocaust, very active in combatting antisemitism. I deeply appreciate their work to establish and expand meaningful, respectful Jewish-Christian dialogue. Following these pioneering efforts, the 1984 Lutheran World Federation assembly in Budapest repudiated Martin Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes. This was an act of repentance, but also liberation, indicating that Lutherans have a critical relationship with our founder and namesake. This is good process, not only for church institutions, but the conscience of our people and the possibility of relationship with all our neighbors. This has caused a constructive shift in Lutheran Jewish relations.

Now, in the midst of conflict throughout the Middle East and the ongoing refugee crisis, it is time that the churches follow the lessons of the Jewish-Christian dialogue and do the same with Muslims and Islam. As Lutherans, we must now begin the process of repudiating what Luther wrote about Islam, most often in his attacks against "the Turk." We must remove from our tradition any influence that promotes hatred of the Other as its highest goal. This is where I believe that as Arab Christians we are able to contribute in building bridges with Muslims from our 1400 years' experience of peaceful coexistence.

It is now time for us to consider joint efforts to combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Neither of these commitments necessarily reduces our zeal for justice on behalf of oppressed and marginalized people. Saying no to anti-Semitism does not mean that people or churches stay silent in relation to peace based on justice in the Palestinian-Israeli issue. In fact, I believe that the Christian Jewish dialogue cannot be separated from the Israeli-Palestinian situation, which in turn is central to any consideration of regional and global peace.

In the same way, calling for democracy and equal citizenship in the Muslim world does not make a person anti-Islamic. In both cases, of course, some people will use calls for justice to mask their anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. But a strong, robust dialogue seeking the best for all communities will stand in contrast to those bad-faith efforts.

Coming from the Middle East, I am a witness to the fact that there are many extreme voices that are harming our region; and we are all aware of the growing extremism that is using religious texts to justify violence and death, and to promote their political agenda. However, the Middle East has also positive developments towards a constructive understanding of diversity and plurality, and must support these initiatives. I will give some examples. First, there is the Common Word document issued in 2007, signed by 138 Islamic scholars from throughout the world. The document declared that the core message of the Holy Scriptures, including the Qur'an, is summed up in the commitments to love God and love the neighbor.

More recently, I have participated in meetings in Marrakesh and Cairo. As Muslim scholars debate the standing of minorities living under Islamic rule, my presentations in these conferences have emphasized the message of equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibility while embracing diversity. At *Al-Azhar* University, the consultation of February 2017 issued a statement saying that there are no minorities (*dhimmi*s) but only equal citizens.

It is important for leaders in the North Atlantic region to understand that the Muslim world is addressing the same questions being asked in Europe and North America. The main political challenge throughout the world today is to insist on the principle of equal citizenship. Throughout the world, certain politicians and groups are insisting that belonging to one religious community or another makes a

person less equal. We see these tendencies both in populism and in extreme nationalism. In Europe, we need to be aware that deep European attitudes on Islam and Muslims—some of them shaped by Martin Luther himself—have shaped responses to the refugee crisis. It is high time that the message of equality and inherent dignity for all human beings—a message shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is reasserted against these destructive political trends. As a refugee myself, I believe it is a high time that we follow the document of United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees that was signed by all religious traditions, “Welcoming the Stranger Among Us”, and to accept those refugees and displaced in Europe and other places, for it is our call to see the image of God in the refugee, displaced, oppressed, and whose human rights are violated.

I hope that this dialogue and many others like it that address the common challenges we face in the world today will contribute to the energy generated through this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. In October 31, 2016, His Holiness Pope Francis, myself as the President of LWF, and the General Secretary of LWF Rev. Martin Junge, co-hosted a joint commemoration of the Reformation event in Lund, Sweden. The event was the culmination of 50 years of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, a series of efforts that have reformed and renewed our relationships with one another. The event has created a new energy of openness and possibility. His Holiness and myself signed a historical statement in which we declared that what unites is greater than what divides us, committing as Lutherans and Catholics to move from conflict to communion, work together for peace based on justice in the whole world, and to a joint prophetic *diakonia*.

I offer this same energy to our interreligious dialogues, both Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim. Our dialogues should not be determined by old patterns and old agendas. They should be instead informed by the common challenges we face together in today’s world. We must commit ourselves not just to dialogue, but to relationships built on trust and friendship.

For the last three days, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, and the Evangelical Church in Rhineland, have had the fifth workshop of Christian Jewish dialogue under the theme “Fighting Against Extremism in a ‘post-truth’ Era”. Today I call on all religious leaders in the world not to be complicit but have prophetic voices in combating all kinds of hatred and extremism. Let us remember that there is no monopoly of one religion when it comes to religious extremism. Today it is the call of religious leaders to be prophetic in combating extremists by exposing their political agendas. We must use education and inter-faith dialogue to promote acceptance of the other. Today more than ever, it is our call to see the image of God in the otherness of the other.

As the Psalmist said: “Do good; seek peace, and pursue it.” And as James writes, “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

May God bless each of you, and my God bless this gathering.



الكنيسة الإنجيلية اللوثرية في الأردن والأراضي المقدسة

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan & the Holy Land

Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

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