Royal Palace

Amman, Jordan

10 July 2011

Dear Archbishops,

It was with much interest that I heard about this timely coming together on 'Christians in the Holy Land', and with much frustration that I discovered I would be unable to attend. My son, Prince Rashid, happens to be getting married very close to the date of the conference.

It was in Amman, in 1999, that I first became the Moderator for the World Conference of *Religions for Peace*. That same year, with eminent representatives of the monotheistic faiths, the Foundation for Interreligious and Intercultural Research and Dialogue was formed. The aim of the Foundation was an attempt at 'the most authentic message that the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam can give to the world of the Twenty First Century."

The Foundation published the three holy texts as a single set of books, which were presented to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Rome on February 2007. The Foundation has also created a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Geneva whereby several fellows, each possessing a PhD in theology, history or another humanity, could research and publish together not so much to create understanding – although that is important – as to create intellectual appreciation and crucially 'good will'.

I should also note that on the 17th of July the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies [RIIFS] in Amman is holding a conference entitled 'Religious Minorities and Mass Media in the Arab World'. The Conference intends to look at how the media narrative towards religious minorities regionally and globally is too often dominated by accounts of sectarianism or dramatic portrayals of 'the other'. I have proposed to institutions such as RIIFS that they do more to share

information, and develop a conversation, with like-minded institutions and individuals in the UK and beyond.

Despite the good things that are being done, however, it cannot be denied that twelve years ago many of us would have hoped that the situation of Christians, in the birth place of Christianity, might have been significantly better than the one we see today.

Christians in Iraq were already leaving en masse before the massacre at the Church of our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad last October. I have long pointed out, in interviews in the UK and closer to home, that in the Eastern Arab world 'Arab' means Christian and Muslim. And yet the sad fact is that sectarianism has not gone away: we all remember the outrageous attack at the Coptic Church in Alexandria on none other than New Year's Day. In Egypt the anti-sectarian Tahrir Square revolution was followed by riots between Copts and Muslims.

In the seat of Christianity – the old Walled City of Jerusalem – there are less than 9000 Christians today. Over the past few decades the proportion of Christians in the Middle East as a whole has dropped from 25% to around 5%. The upheavals currently sweeping the Middle East may well make Christian minorities feel less, not more secure.

So the panic felt is real. It is also one, I should add, that is shared by Muslims – Arab Christians were the custodians of the Arabic language during a long period of decline, and helped pioneer the 'Arab Awakening' of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century. In short Christians are not simply part of the Middle East's rich religious patrimony, but an integral part of its history, its culture, and its civilization.

The many differing shades of Christianity in this region only constitute a 'minority' in the quantitative sense: qualitatively Christian communities have always contributed to virtually every aspect of life, from education, to business, to medicine and the arts. They have always been Stewards – what we call in Arabic 'aqhah' – and not guests.

I do not believe that 'mutual knowledge' solves all: some of the bloodiest and most brutal conflicts are often played out by those who

know each other only too well. Neither do I believe that the doctrinal differences of the three Abrahamic religions can be resolved, even if I personally believe that they have far more in common than divides them.

Instead I find myself reflecting on the long and seemingly forever unwinding tapestry of our shared experience… a tale of conquests, squabbles and great wrongs, but also triumphs, that has brought us closer despite everything. It seems that the destinies and aspirations of the faiths are intimately intertwined.

Christians in this region, entirely understandably, have at times been the first to forget that they have always been here. This is what I meant when I said in a recent Financial Times[1] piece, entitled 'the Middle East: Harder to bear', that 'Christians of the east have to do more to develop their own storyline'.

On the Sinai Peninsula, at the mouth of a gorge at the foot of Mont Sinai, lies a monastery called St. Catherine's. Many of you, I am sure, may have heard of it. The Monastery was built by the Emperor Justinian I in the 6th century. Next to the Vatican, the monastery library preserves the second largest collection of early codices and manuscripts in the world, among them important copies of the *Achtiname*, a document in which the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, is claimed to have bestowed protection upon the monastery.

Cultural and civilizational self-righteousness have no place within any religion, especially Islam – those who preach violence and hatred in its name, or claim a monopoly on the truth, are from a quite different tradition. They are not simply perverting the teaching of the Qur'an: they are defacing an element of their own heritage.

But it's also so easy to forget, amidst the headlines, so many stories of coexistence – intimate stories which play out in the streets of Jordan and Lebanon every single day, although we might not always read of them. It remains my hope – even though I may never see it – that Jerusalem will become a place of peace, a true global city, above politics.

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[1] Middle East: Harder to Bear, Financial Times, David Gardener, http://tiny.cc/gh6rz

In order to do that, perhaps we should start thinking less and doing more. Perhaps instead of speaking of 'understanding' and 'coexistence' we should begin, quite simply, by working together with each other towards common goals in our local communities? In Education and Charity why can we not work together? Who wants to see Jerusalem in the state it is in today? The human face of Christianity, of Islam, or Judaism so often remains hidden – but each in simplicity and silence is in a way undeniable, and greatly needed.

I was once told that the lodestar of Judaism is the law, the lodestar of Islam is Justice, and the lodestar of Christianity is love. I cannot think of a region of the world more desperately crying out for all three. That Christians have been made to feel that there 'is no room in the inn' of the Middle East is appalling. As a Muslim I hope that the Christian community will persevere and forgive, and assure you that our prayers are with you, in a spirit of brotherhood.

My warmest greetings.

Yours sincere friend.

El Hassan binTalal

The Most Rev and Rt Hon The Lord Archbishop of Canterbury

and

The Most Rev and Rt Hon The Lord Archbishop of Westminster