

The Need for Evangelical Discernment in “Intra- and Inter-Faith” Initiatives

In recent weeks there have been, and in future weeks there will be some global initiatives in the “intra- and inter-faith” connections of evangelical global bodies that deserve attention and reflection. In past years a number of National Evangelical Alliances have already signaled the danger for evangelical bodies, e.g. WEA, to embrace ecumenical projects that blur the historic evangelical understanding of the gospel and the historic position of the Evangelical Alliance on Christian unity. In 2017 a group of National EAs pointed out the ecumenical strategy of the [“greater oneness”](#) promoted by the Global Christian Forum. It was only the most recent in a series of encouragements dating back to the 1980s that call for evangelical bodies not to fall into “ecumenical agendas” that do not correspond to the biblical teaching and the traditional evangelical posture with regards to other religious bodies and institutions.

The purpose of this letter is to offer three remarks on recent or upcoming events that require evangelical discernment.

1. Season of Creation 2020: the new ecological-ecumenical agenda?

[“Season of Creation”](#) is the latest ecumenical initiative sponsored by the mainline ecumenical bodies. This initiative has a focus on creation care issues. It includes an [“Ecological rosary”](#) (prayers to Mary) and joint [“Ecumenical prayers”](#) which communicate the idea that all who pray them are brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing the same faith, and therefore being different only on secondary, non-divisive issues. While we fully endorse what the Lausanne-WEA taskforce on creation care has produced over the years, we recognize the “Season of Creation” as an instance of “spiritual ecumenism”, i.e. praying together, experiencing unity at the grass-root level, accepting the idea that we are all “one”. The ecumenical agenda is advanced within evangelical circles even if the issue is not formally ecumenism. Creation care does not require “spiritual ecumenism” to be pursued. For this reason, we fully agree with the statement recently issued by the Italian Evangelical Alliance.

"In caring for creation, one must exercise discernment"

A [statement](#) from the Federal Executive Council of the Italian Evangelical Alliance

Rome (AEI), September 1st 2020 - Having read the program of the initiative, "Season of creation", the Federal Executive Council of the Italian Evangelical Alliance encourages the whole church to pray, meditate, and exercise spiritual discernment in order to respond adequately, based upon the revealed Word of God. The Italian Evangelical Alliance:

- supports every initiative of the evangelical people aimed at understanding God's plan for His creation, at the confession of their sin and their responsibilities, at the development of educational, social, political and entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at living a relationship with creation according to the requirements of the Gospel, in view of the hope of Christ who said: "I will make everything new"!
- is grateful for the evangelical documents already firmly established as being part of contemporary evangelical thought on the theme of creation and creation care, , such as: the WEA-related ["Statement on the Care of Creation"](#) (2008) and the Lausanne-related [“Jamaica Call to Action”](#) (2012).

- supports co-belligerent initiatives for a common and shared purpose (by religious and / or secular bodies) aimed at the care and development of creation, even where the faith and worldview of the subjects involved are different.
- distances itself from the ecumenical initiative of the Lausanne /WEA network and does not consider itself represented as it believes that it is neither possible nor biblical to unite in prayer to God with men and women representing religious institutions and bodies who profess a flawed gospel that is different from the gospel proclaimed by the evangelical faith.
- encourages the evangelical bodies involved to exercise discernment so as not to gradually slip into an ecumenical project that goes well beyond the care of creation and invites them not to confuse the right attention for creation with an ecumenical initiative.

2. “All Brothers”, the new Papal encyclical extending fraternity to all humanity

A [new encyclical by Pope Francis](#) will be signed on October 3rd 2020. It will be entitled “All Brothers” and follows the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019. The encyclical marks one more example of Pope Francis’ dedication to promoting “fraternity”.

The aforementioned Higher Committee for Human Fraternity was established in 2019, a few months after the meeting in Abu Dhabi between Pope Francis and Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, the Muslim University in Cairo (Egypt). That meeting was centered on the signing of the controversial “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”. In spite of the praise gathered in inter-faith circles, it is a controversial document for a simple reason: it joins the commendable attempt to build a peaceful society (especially in areas where the relationship between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority is tense) with the idea that Muslims and Christians are “brothers and sisters” who pray to the same God. In so doing, the document wrongly exchanges proximity with fraternity, i.e. our being neighbors with all men and women, with our being brothers and sisters with those who belong to the family of God in Jesus Christ. While proximity connects people of different faiths and backgrounds and calls them to live in peace, fraternity is a spiritual bond that unites believers in Jesus Christ as brothers and sisters in Him.

The “Document on Human Fraternity” blurs this distinction and changes the meaning of fraternity, extending it to the relationships between peoples of different religions, as if Muslims and Christians are “brothers and sisters” praying to the same God.

We fear that the new encyclical “All Brothers” will confirm and even solidify this unbiblical position. In the ecumenical language, fraternity will be stretched to non-Christians and to the whole of humanity, thus making it even more urgent to clarify what is the biblical teaching on unity. We urge evangelical bodies to distance themselves from this unbiblical teaching. Again, as it is the case with creation care, peace and civility among peoples of different faiths and cultures does not demand “unity as brothers and sisters” to be promoted. We are fully committed to maintaining peace and respect, but in order to do that we do not need to buy into this new ecumenical theology of “universal fraternity”.

3. Wake-up call for China

Over the last two years, between 2018 and 2020, China has intensified the persecution against religious minorities and especially against evangelical Christians, who are in absolute terms more numerous than European evangelicals or North-American evangelicals. Open Doors-USA president – Davi Curry – [being interviewed](#) few months ago on the scaling up of China from the 43th to the 23th position of the WWList stated: “The Chinese government is nearly single-handedly responsible for the steep increase in churches and Christian buildings attacked in 2019. The newest policies are penalizing minority Christians in unprecedented ways. If they continue down this path, they will be the single largest violator of human rights worldwide.”

Persecution is not against Christians only. Russell D. Moore – head of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) – has [recently urged Christians to care about the plight of Uighur Muslims](#) in China. China’s persecution strategy is part of an organic plan for the entire society, i.e. sinicization.

In this context a significant role was played by the deal between China and the Vatican (22nd September 2018) that is going to be renewed after the initial two year trial. This agreement included a shared procedure with China to choose the recognized Roman Catholic bishops.

As Giacomo Ciccone, chairman of the Italian EA, [noticed few months ago](#), the deal between Cardinal Parolin and President Xi Jinping, “besides being a betrayal of those Catholics belonging to the underground church who are persecuted, has a negative and objective bearing on the persecution of the whole of the Christian population, 80% of which is Protestant”.

What can we do as evangelicals? We can and we must do something. Of course we can pray and act through the evangelical agencies whose calling focusses on this crucial task. Moreover, National Evangelical Alliances and their regional representatives can organize peaceful prayer rallies in front of China’s Embassies around the world or can send specific letters to the International authorities urging them to defend religious freedom.

The Italian Evangelical Alliance wishes to stimulate prayerful and active interest, taking a posture that is not indifferent nor accustomed to the Vatican wrong and unhelpful position.