

A Letter of Recommendation For Drs. Cornelis Hulsman

With feedback on AWR networking

To Whom It May Concern

Dear Drs. Cornelis Hulsman,

Congratulations with the new website!

It gives me pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for Drs. Cornelis Hulsman and to provide in it the inseparable feedback concerning my positive networking experience with AWR.

I had two very enriching major communicative events with Drs. Hulsman, the editor-in-chief of AWR: 1) when we both participated in the German organization Missio's Christian-Muslim dialogue program and 2) when he involved Dr. Jeff Adams, a US Independent Baptist minister, in a discussion about the need for one standard in dealing with different religions.

When His Excellency, the Egyptian Minister of Awqaf, Dr. Hamdy Zaqzouq, recommended my name for Missio's program focused on opposing stereotyping and polarization, resulting in fruitful meetings with academics, media, religious leaders and politicians in Berlin, Germany in October 2004. In that big event, I had the opportunity to be in the company of Drs. Hulsman where we had the chance to conduct together extensive sessions and talks in churches, mosques, schools, academic centers, universities, the German Parliament and German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We also had the opportunity to participate in an academic international media conference organized by Prix Europa & RBB Berlin, held from 15th to 17th October 2004. Participating in such a conference was a very unique experience, because the interactions of world media performance were under scientific scrutiny. For me it was a great moment to see and experience a positive network of many fair-minded intellectuals and researchers representing many countries, convening to discuss their findings for feedback. I presented a paper titled "Western Media as seen through the eyes of a Muslim scholar: The discourse patterns that need to be clarified and negotiated [A study from a Linguistics of Negotiation and Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective]".

In that paper, I tried to dissect the gross and subtle distortions practiced by some western media that provided very negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam through very lop-sided and unfair coverage of events that are characterized by decontextualization and hasty framing. The examples were from major world media sources such as Newsweek and Time magazines.

Drs. Hulsman provided a presentation on AWR coverage regarding Muslim-Christian interactions in Egypt. He demonstrated the elements of unprofessional coverage of some events and cases that received a bad press in the west.

At the end of this conference we jointly issued a press release warning against the misinformation traps that characterize many media coverages, and called for

a collective world action to promote fair, unbiased and scientific standards to improve the quality and ethics of media coverage.

Such a joint effort was an excellent move and proved to be a step in the right direction which needs to be encouraged and developed through the sincere and humane efforts of all fair-minded people in our world. In sum, that program was a wonderful opportunity and represents an excellent example of effective acts of positive networking on the part of both AWR and Missio.

The rector of the Azhar University Dr. Ahmad Al-Tayyab was very quick to allow me a long leave from 12 to 26th of October 2004 in the middle of the academic semester. He welcomed the idea of such a program as it is very compatible with the Azhar University's mission to support such dialogues that would definitely enhance positive understanding between the Arab/Islamic World and the West.

During such a very rich communication experience, I can state here my impressions of Drs. Hulsman as an affable, sympathetic and knowledgeable colleague and I include my feedback on his work as the editor-in-chief of AWR in the following three points:

1- Sensitive Objective Coverage:

Drs. Hulsman first came to Egypt almost thirty years ago. He is one of those experts who developed a very good experience-based sense about the unique role of Egypt as a leading Arab/Islamic country, and he is definitely one of those who know well about the good and unique interwoven and deep relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. Such a realistic stance which is culturally shared and experienced by the overwhelming majority of Egyptians, made him very alert and sensitive in dealing with the so many cases of actual misinformation/disinformation-oriented coverage. For example, Hulsman was the first to visit Al-Kosheh village in August 1998 and displayed the extensively used and ill-founded claims regarding the so-called "persecution of Christians in Egypt" –as claimed in some Western media. He showed through his objective reports from Al Kosheh that the trouble relates to social issues rather than a Christian-Muslim problem in the country.

2- Open- Mindedness and Accepting Constructive Criticism:

Through my several professional interactions with Drs. Hulsman, I found him to be very open-minded, an excellent listener who is willing to accept any constructive criticism. When I once told him that: "AWR is an excellent idea for enhancing and improving cross-cultural communication between the Arab-Islamic World and the West but the term "AWR" is somehow a misnomer from my own point of view. This is because its very focus lies almost solely on what I call the Muslim-Christian unfavorable square. After having read many editions of the electronic journal from the perspective of an Egyptian, I felt somehow depressed because the intense coverage of AWR may unconsciously and eventually cultivate in the western or foreigner's mentality the view that our daily communications in Egypt take the bizarre form of a Christian versus a Muslim which is, of course, a totally untrue picture. For when it comes to the unique cultural context of Egypt the Muslim vs. Christian communication square is very rejected by almost all Egyptians. And if there are some

few or misinformed speakers or writers (Muslims or Christians) who put themselves on that square consciously or unconsciously they do not represent the overwhelming majority of Egyptians or the true nature of the daily spontaneous interactions in Egypt.

Such a spontaneity was reflected in a fascinating book by the late intellectual Edward Said; a professor of Columbia University and a Christian Palestinian-American who spent many years of his life in Egypt. The title of the book is "Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the rest of the world". In that book Edward Said defended Islam and displayed the unfair coverage. He showed the truth about Islam and Muslims. In that book [released in 1997], we can easily get a sense of the spontaneity of the deep relationship between Muslims and Christians in Egypt and in the Arab world in general. Having lived among us as a very dear Christian brother, Said responded in a very spontaneous way to the unfairness of misjudging Islam and Muslims in the U.S.A. media.

Famous director Youssef Shahin reflected in his internationally recognized films the very spontaneous and harmonious relationship among Muslims and Christians who compose together the socially cohesive fabric of the Egyptian society.

Dr. Botrous Ghali, the former general secretary of the U.N., said in his first speech in the U.N. that he is "The son of the Arabic Islamic civilization".

Makram Ebeid, a very famous Egyptian lawyer once said: "I am a Christian in terms of religion but I am a Muslim citizen too" (the meaning of the word Muslim is that person who is submissive to the all mighty God). So from a cross-cultural communication perspective westerners should recognize that the overwhelming majority of Egyptians feel very sensitive when it comes to outsiders discussing Muslim-Christian relations because such type of discussions have been associated with attempts to exert political pressures, creating fake dissections, and maybe seditions in certain cases. Unfortunately, such sensitivity has increased immensely by the current high wave of unfair attacks on Muslims and Islam in the west.

Dr. Jeff Adams, member of the AWR Board of Advisors, agreed with Hulsman's views when Hulsman wrote: "Remarkably enough many anti-Muslim comments in the West have come from major Christian leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Jerry Fines, Rev. Pat Robinson and Rev. Franklin Graham"[E-mail dated 25th of May 2004]. Dr. Adams added by saying that such antagonistic comments have been opposed by other Christian leaders [AWR, 2004, week 15, art. 2 and 3]. The like of Dr. Jeff Adams views must be respected and welcomed in the Arab media in the context of improving the quality of interfaith dialogue or what I may call 'The external Christian-Muslim dialogue. By that term I mean here that dialogue which may take place between the Arab-Islamic world and the west. The very sensitive issue for us here in Egypt and in the Arab-Islamic world at large is that we do not like at all and totally disagree to classify any internal dialogue among Egyptian citizens under the label of the external Muslim-Christian dialogue which has its different set of communicative patterns.

When I clearly communicated the above stated very frank and critical messages to Dr. Hulsman, I found him to be a very sympathetic interactant who has an excellent capacity to listen and respect other views and to be an open-minded and a positive

revisionist. He responded to my views by talking with enthusiasm about his ambitions and interests to have a wider scope of AWR in the future to address the other diversified meanings of healthy and effective cultural interactions that must be dealt with to contain many of the unconscious cases of miscommunication that may happen in the complicated process of cross-cultural communication as well as intra-cultural dialogues.

3- The need for a new Media working Assumptions and the case of Mediation through networking:

In investigating and analyzing the ill-founded media communication patterns embedded in absolutist terms such as "Persecution of Christians in Egypt" or a dogmatically used term such as "Islamic Terrorism" or Islamophobia related terms, we can easily find that such terms are enhanced and nourished mainly, through hearsay stories, rumors, single misguided individual acts, or inaccurate information by biased media that spread only negative stereotypes. Such media adopt a predominant working assumption like: "**Bad News Makes the News**". The very dangerous stance, in such a context is that some media circles may venture to mix the cards and work hard on creating the "bad news" which could be done in a very subtle way. Given that situation I always ask my media students in my courses of Linguistics of Media Negotiation in Akhbar Al-Yom Academy to address the following mirror question: "Can you provide us with good examples of news making from any interaction file based on a new working assumption like "Good News should also make the news"?"

The motivation behind nourishing the embedded orientation in the above question is to get our future journalists closer to the issue of fair and balanced coverage and not to be influenced by only the "Bad News" assumption that many of the western and actually world media circles adopt. This "Bad News" assumption has negatively impacted the process of news coverage worldwide and made management of many world issues and conflicts a far more difficult task for fair-minded conflict managers. In trying to provide my students with an illustrative example of the "Good News Assumption" which is also coupled with an excellent mediation through effective networking, I refer them to "The second" major communication event with Drs. Hulsman. That event included also Dr. Jeff Adams, who is a prominent Christian leader. [for the detailed version of such a triologue see AWR, 2004, week 15, art. 2 and 3, week 51, art. 9 and 10]. That triologue proved to be an excellent mediation effort through effective networking on the part of AWR. By mediation here, I mean a mediation of interfaith meanings between the Arab-Islamic World and the West and a mediation to lessen the negative impact and intensity of on-going misinformation, lack of information and wrong perceptions that increase conflicts rather than focusing on solving them.

Finally, I do congratulate Drs. Hulsman for AWR's new website and I wish him the best of luck.

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