

Above Us and Between Us

An Introduction and Resource on the letter ...

A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU

... signed by 138 Muslim Scholars

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Foreword

The letter 'A Common Word Between Us and You', signed by 138 Muslim scholars, is a huge opportunity for serious dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders. It is also an opportunity for clergy and Church members to consider their own faith and beliefs as we enter into greater dialogue and understanding with Muslims in our own local communities.

This conversation and dialogue needs to be grounded in an understanding of the precious difference and diversity of our own faith. This excellent publication is an important resource for taking our thinking forward.

Love of God and our neighbour is central to many faiths, but in that encounter with our neighbour how do we hear what is really being said? How do we speak in such a way that we are really being heard? These basic questions need to be addressed, and Peter Colwell has produced a resource that takes this forward in a very helpful way.

We live in a society which is multi-cultural and multi-faith. It is important that we enter into our study of sharing and encountering with informed and considered beliefs and opinions. We hope that you will use this resource as the beginning of a deeper exploration of your own faith as together we reach out to people of other faiths. Together we can reach out in love, with faith and a deep appreciation of our neighbour.

Revd Canon Bob Fyffe

General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

1

Introduction

In the autumn of 2007, the letter entitled ‘A Common Word Between Us’, signed by 138 Muslim scholars, was sent to Christian leaders throughout the world, calling for the two faiths to come together around ‘love of God and love of neighbour’. Some have seen this as offering a new and exciting opportunity for the two faiths – opening up a new avenue of engagement between Christians and Muslims, especially within local communities. Others have taken a more cautious, even sceptical, point of view.

This publication is designed to be a resource for local congregations that will:

- Explain the background of the letter ‘A Common Word Between Us’;
- Offer a commentary on the theological issues that underlie the letter;
- Offer study material for local church groups;
- Offer guidelines for using ‘A Common Word Between Us’ for local inter faith relationships.

It can therefore be used both as a resource for local churches to inform them on issues of Christian–Muslim relations, and as a tool to develop relationships locally between Christians and Muslims.

In using this resource it will be helpful to first read the letter, which can be found on the website of ‘A Common Word’ – www.acommonword.com.

At the time of writing, relations between Christians and Muslims are a matter of great importance. Hardly a week goes by when the media does not focus on some aspect or other of this relationship, or the broader issues posed by the presence of significant numbers of Muslims within Western society.

A good deal has been written on what might be common ground between Christianity and Islam. Along with Judaism, they are often referred to as ‘Abrahamic religions’, in that all three faiths give a special place to Abraham (even though the Islamic Abraham story is notably different from the Judeo-Christian story).

Christianity and Islam (like Judaism) are monotheistic and they have a strong sense of scriptural authority, and both are faiths that seek converts – believing that it is the will of God that all humanity be reconciled to Him.

Christians and Muslims have much in common, but there are also important differences. Sometimes the commonalities lead us to areas of difference: the place of Abraham in the three faiths serves to illustrate this. Whilst all three ‘honour’ Abraham, the Islamic version of the story of the sacrifice of his son not only differs from the version in Genesis, but contradicts it – for example, it is Ishmael not Isaac whom God calls Abraham to sacrifice. This serves to highlight the fact that there are significant differences between Christianity and Islam which cannot be avoided in inter faith dialogue.

There are other differences that emerge when Christians and Muslims encounter one another. Muslims, for example, are troubled by the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, believing that it compromises the belief that God ‘is one’. Muslims also deny the divinity, the death on the cross and the resurrection to eternal life of Jesus. Christians do not recognise Muhammad as a prophet, seeing the incarnation of Christ as moving beyond the prophetic tradition. There are also significant differences in the understanding of how God reveals Himself, the nature of scripture, and understandings of the nature of God, sin and forgiveness.

The history of Christian–Muslim relations has not always been an easy one. Whilst there are many examples in history showing how Christians and Muslims have lived together in peace, it is also true to say that interaction between the two faiths has been often marred by invasion and counter-invasion, colonisation, and some cases of forced conversions.

During the early period of Islamic expansion many Christian communities that had been strong in the Near East (e.g. North Africa and Asia Minor) lost their position to Islam. In 1095 the First Crusade began, heralding numerous attempts to recapture Jerusalem from Muslim rule which left deep scars in the collective memory of those living in the areas affected. In later centuries Ottoman Muslim invasion and occupation in South-Eastern Europe proved traumatic to many Christian communities and resulted in fears that Western Europe would fall to Ottoman rule. Western European colonialism also had a number of long run, often negative, consequences. In addition there were adverse consequences following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after its defeat in World War I.

These difficulties continue to the present day. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 is often portrayed in very hostile terms by Muslim commentators as having

been instigated by ‘Crusaders and Zionists’, and, since the events of September 11th 2001, the ‘War on Terror’ is often perceived by Muslims as a war on Islam.

Christian–Muslim dialogue cannot avoid the differences between the two faiths, nor the burdens and scars of history, but for many within both religions there is a sense of urgency to find ways of living together which avoid the tensions of the past and which work for the benefit of the whole world.

Inter-religious dialogue and joint community involvement can play an important part in overcoming the difficulties between Christians and Muslims, and there are now numerous local inter faith initiatives that strive to this end. In 2004 a Christian–Muslim Forum was established in England following the Archbishop of Canterbury’s ‘Listening to Muslims’ initiative. In some universities there are efforts to facilitate meetings between Christian and Muslim scholars, just as there are many local Christian–Muslim dialogues around the country. All this is alongside the many initiatives that seek to bring together a wider range of different religions and faith communities.

2

The Origins of the Letter

The letter had its genesis some time before autumn 2007. Indeed, it was the culmination of a number of factors that need to be briefly recalled.

The Amman Message

The 'Amman Message' appeared in November 2004, signed by 553 Muslim leaders from more than 80 countries. The list includes politicians and heads of states, as well as religious leaders (e.g. Grand Muftis and Ayatollahs) and Muslim scholars.

It was addressed to Muslims throughout the world and aims to describe what Islam is and what it is not. On the Amman Message website (www.ammanmessage.com) the significance of the Message is declared to be:

... a historical, universal and unanimous religious and political consensus of the Ummah [nation] of Islam in our day, and consolidation of traditional, orthodox Islam.

The Amman Message attempts to give an account of the central teachings of Islam and covers matters such as the Oneness of God, a return to the practice of the Pillars of Islam, ethical living, opposition to extremism, the need to participate in modern society, opposition to terrorism and the importance of appropriate training for Muslim leaders.

The Amman Inter Faith Message

The Amman Message, addressed to Muslims worldwide, was followed up a year later with an Inter Faith Message which was addressed to Christians and Jews. Its purpose was:

not merely to defuse tensions between Muslims, Christians and Jews ...
nor simply to promote tolerance between them, but rather to establish full acceptance and goodwill between them. For Muslims, Christians

and Jews together comprise around 60% of the world's population, and establishing acceptance and goodwill between them means, in effect, establishing peace and friendship over most of the world.

The three main themes focused upon are:

- Belief in the unity of God;
- Worship and devotion to God;
- Love and justice towards fellow human beings.

A Open Letter to the Pope

On September 12th 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a lecture at Regensburg University in Bavaria, Germany. Although the subject of the lecture was 'Faith and Reason', it became the subject of controversy due to the mention by the Pope of a negative comment on Islam by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, made during the siege of Constantinople (1394–1402).

The ensuing controversy led to some very strong reactions in the Muslim world, including riots in which people were killed.

A month later, 38 Muslim scholars signed a letter to the Pope which endeavoured to deliver '... an answer to the Pope in the spirit of open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding.'

Foremost in the mind of the Muslim signatories of this letter was the belief that Islam had been misrepresented, and so it addresses particular areas in the Pope's lecture which the signatories wished to respond to, including God's transcendence, the use of reason, Holy War and forced conversion.

A Common Word

In October 2007, on the first anniversary of the letter to the Pope, and to mark the end of the Fasting Month of Ramadan that year, 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from across the Muslim world signed a much longer letter addressed to Pope Benedict XVI, and to the Orthodox Patriarchs of the Eastern and Near-Eastern Churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leaders of the Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed Communion, and the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. This letter makes an appeal for the coming together of Christians and Muslims around mutual acceptance of the centrality of 'love of God and love of neighbour'.¹

¹ The letter can be downloaded from www.acommonword.com.

The letter first emerged at a conference held in Amman, Jordan, entitled ‘Love in the Qur’an’, organized by the *Royal Academy of The Royal Ahl al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, which has the support of the Jordanian Royal Family. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammed bin Talal of Jordan appears to have been a prime mover behind the initiative.¹ It is probably the first significant approach by a prominent group of Muslim scholars to Christian leaders urging greater co-operation between the two faiths. The scholars themselves are drawn from across the Muslim world – not only countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Iran, but also Nigeria, Sudan, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Bosnia, Turkey and from European based Muslims, including those from Britain, France, Germany and Italy. The letter, like the Amman Message, is signed by both Sunni and Shia Muslims. The signatories are drawn from several streams of Islamic thinking – and so we find individuals from the Sufi and Wahabi traditions, from those regarded as more ‘liberal’, and from others associated with conservative and political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The letter speaks out of the Islamic tradition and grounds itself in some of the key Qur’anic passages which the authors claim support Muslims engaging with Christians (and Jews).² However, it is significant that the letter not only quotes from the Qur’an but also directly from the Bible – particularly from the Synoptic Gospels. It also alludes to the Jewish scriptures as lying behind the Christian gospels. Thus, it may be an attempt to speak to Christians by appealing to the Bible and not just to Islamic sources, but this does not necessarily suggest an acceptance of the authority of such texts.

Some have criticised the letter for only addressing Christians. In fact, a different letter was subsequently addressed to Jews. This was an initiative of the Cambridge based Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths.³ It is also important to recognise that the whole letter reflects the concerns of the Qur’an and mirrors Muhammad’s engagement with non-Muslims. As noted, the Qur’an permits Muslim engagement with Christians and Jews (although not ‘idol worshippers’). For example:

Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians
and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does

1 Prince Ghazi bin Muhammed bin Talal serves as the personal envoy and Special Adviser to King Abdullah II of Jordan.

2 The letter is addressed to Christian leaders alone.

3 www.woolfinstitute.cam.ac.uk/cmjr.

righteous good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Q. 2.62)

Other faiths such as Buddhism and Hinduism are not mentioned, probably because it is likely that they were not known to Muhammad. We can therefore see that the framework being set out here for Muslims to engage with Christians is one the signatories believe is authorised by the Qur'an – it is not an invitation to Muslims to embrace a form of global inclusiveness based on Western liberal ideas.

Clearly the importance of the theme of 'love' arises out of the concern that Christians and Muslims should live together in peace and harmony. Bearing in mind that Islam is a religion with a vast diversity, there will be Muslims who will take issue with the views expressed in the letter – some will regard it as not going far enough in reaching out the hand of friendship to Christians, whilst others will feel it goes too far in this respect.

Will this letter gain acceptance within the 'mainstream' of informed Islamic opinion? Time alone will tell.

3

'Love of God and Neighbour' in Islam

The official website for 'A Common Word' not only contains the full text of the letter and the signatories, but also some of the responses to it. On the home page of the website an introduction is given which explains the intention behind the letter:

It is hoped that this document will provide a common constitution for the many worthy organisations and individuals who are carrying out interfaith dialogue all over the world ... (it) can give them a starting point for cooperation and world-wide co-ordination, but it does so on the *most solid theological ground possible*: the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet, and the commandments described by Jesus Christ in the Bible. Thus despite the differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two *greatest commandments*.

The title of the letter is taken from a verse in Qur'an:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Q. 3.64)

It is important to recognise from the outset that for Muslims the Qur'an is the source of direct revealed authority and therefore the letter 'A Common Word' begins with an appeal to the Qur'an and addresses Christian leaders within a framework already set down in the Qur'an.

In the early part of the letter there is a definition of a Muslim – s/he that testifies to the truth of the statement 'there is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God'. It also begins with an important declaration:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and contend with them in the fairest way. Lo! Thy Lord is best aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is best aware of those who go aright. (Q. 16.125)

This passage in the Qur'an is normally understood to be a call to all humankind to embrace Islam and, as Muslims believe that every person is born Muslim, it is the duty of every Muslim to call humanity back to the path that God ordained for humanity. This is what Muslims call *da'wa* and is broadly analogous to a Christian understanding of evangelistic mission. However, within the context of this particular letter it may also be read as a desire to promote a dialogue around the elements of the declaration.

It is sometimes said that inter faith dialogue is the product of a post-modern world where truth is understood in subjective terms. These are not the assumptions that lie behind this letter, which stands on the firm ground of the the authority of the Qur'an. This authority is not something conditioned by the historical context of any particular time or place: it is the unquestionable word of God.¹

The central idea within this letter is an appeal for Muslims and Christians to come together around the 'love of God and love of neighbour'. But before we look at the understanding of 'love' within Islam, it might also be helpful to explain a number of matters that concern the relationship between Muslims and Christians which are mentioned in the letter.

1. People of the Scripture (or sometimes referred to as 'People of the Book') is the description of Christians and Jews given in the Qur'an (it is not, as sometimes stated, the designation of all three faiths). It gives special status to Christians and Jews within Islam, different to that of other religions which have no *legitimate* status within a Muslim state.² This special status (*dhimmi*) enabled Christians and Jews to exist within a Muslim state with a degree of protection on condition of the payment of a tax, called the *jizya*. The payment of the *jizya* indicates an acceptance of Muslim rule. Commentators are divided on whether they regard this as having positive or negative effects.

1 Muslims believe that the Qur'an is only the word of God in the original Arabic. Translations of the Qur'an are regarded as 'interpretations' thereof.

2 Some Muslims jurists have also afforded the status of 'People of the Book' to Zoroastrians.

2. Trinity or Tritheism? ‘Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah.’ This verse also raises an important area of difficulty in Christian–Muslim dialogue. The Muslim interpretation of this verse has consistently made reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Oneness and Unity of God is one of the central theological tenets in Islam. But Muslims also believe, on the basis of a particular passage in the Qur’an, that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity compromises the Oneness of God. The comment about God having ‘no partners’ is often understood to be a reference to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which is seen by Muslims not as a description of the nature of the One God, but of a belief in *Tritheism* (three gods). It is clear that the Qur’an’s view of the Trinity is at variance with Christian theology and addressing this issue is one of the key challenges of Christian–Muslim dialogue.

3. ‘No Compulsion in Religion’. Mention is made in the letter to there being ‘no compulsion in religion’. This Qur’anic verse is cited in Christian–Muslim dialogue in many different contexts and different meanings are suggested from time to time. It refers to the fact that God gave human beings free choice to embrace or reject Islam, and therefore ‘no compulsion in religion’ is recognition of this reality. A similar understanding is found within Christianity (see for example: Matthew 10.5–15). However, this issue was raised in the earlier controversy over the Pope’s Regensburg Lecture. Indeed, it is the first issue raised by the Muslims who signed the open letter to Pope Benedict XVI which states that ‘no compulsion in religion’ was ...

... a reminder to Muslims themselves, once they attained power, that they could not force another’s heart to believe. (It) addresses those in a position of strength, not weakness.¹

4. Love of God and love of neighbour. This is the main theme of the letter. It is noteworthy that the letter not only appeals to the Qur’an in support of its call in respect of love of God and neighbour but also quotes the Bible too. It does this first of all by quoting the ‘Shema’ in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures:

1 ‘Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI’ – www.acommonword.com.

Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6.4–5)¹

The ‘love of God and of neighbour’ theme is not the only aspect of this passage that will attract Muslims, but also the affirmation of the oneness of God.

When the letter moves from the love of God to the love of neighbour, the unity of God is the starting point. The letter’s starting point for a discussion is the Shema (Deuteronomy 6.4–5).

From there the letter moves swiftly to the way in which Jesus refers back to the Shema in speaking about loving one’s neighbour as oneself. But again the stress on the Oneness of God is made clear and makes no concession to Christian trinitarian understanding of the unity of God, nor therefore to the divinity of Christ.

In Islam, loving God is an obligation placed upon all Muslims. There is no mention of God loving humanity (although many Sufi writers talk of God’s intimacy with humankind). It needs to be stressed here that any suggestion of God being ‘vulnerable’ is regarded by Muslims as weakness and therefore alien to the nature of God. Whilst Christians talk of God as ‘love’, Muslims talk of God being ‘merciful’. But God is not obliged in any sense to be merciful, as ‘mercy’ is not part of God’s nature in the way that Christians talk of ‘love’ as defining God’s nature. Islam does, however, talk of God showing compassion, kindness, mercy and pity and in the Hadith we find: ‘I have taken upon myself the law of mercy.’

Closely associated with this human obligation to ‘love God’ is the theme of ‘praise and devotion of/to God’. This is something that Christians will be very comfortable with. Churches with liturgical traditions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) will be familiar with starting an approach to God with praise. Indeed, the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1648 – Presbyterian tradition) begins with the assertion that ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever’.

1 ‘Shema Yisrael’ – ‘Hear O Israel’ are the first words of this passage from Deuteronomy and are used in Jewish prayer service.

4

‘Love of God and Neighbour’ in Christianity

The crucifixion of Jesus set men thinking more than anything else that has ever happened in the life of the human race. And the most remarkable fact in the whole history of religious thought is this: that when the early Christians looked back and pondered on the dreadful thing that had happened, it made them think of the redeeming love of God. Not simply the love of Jesus, but the love of God.¹

In Christianity, ‘love’ is one of the most important themes. Christians are called to love God because He loved us first:

God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4.9–10)

But this love is ‘self-giving’ –

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3.16)

Love is regarded as pre-eminent above all things:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues they will cease; as for knowledge it will come to an end ... And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13.8–13)

Love in Christianity is not a merely relational or a descriptive thing, but a dynamic description of the nature and manner of God’s salvation. The love *of* God

1 D.M. Baillie, *God was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*. London, 1956, p. 184.

for humanity is therefore *self-giving*, in that God *in Christ* gives of Himself for the salvation of the world. This is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To put it into slightly different language, God *of his own choosing*, allows Himself to be made vulnerable in order to redeem a fallen creation. To love God is also to love one's neighbour – and vice versa.

Christian theology has also distinguished between different kinds of love including *philia* (friendship), *eros* (sexual) and *caritas* or *agape*. Agape is the word that has been charged with meaning in Christianity and has come to be understood as the unconditional love towards one's neighbour.

Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church, in his response to the letter, makes the point that in Christianity *neighbour* '... does not mean "proximity" or "kinship"; rather the neighbour is "the other" who is in need of our love, help and fellowship.'¹

A similar point is made by Mor Eustathius Matta Raham, Archbishop of Jezira and the Euphrates (Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch), who also comments that:

The love of neighbour in Islam reflects the geographical sense of the word 'neighbour'. In Christianity, love of neighbour surpasses all geographical and religious boundaries and takes on a whole new dimension encompassing all of humanity. In the New Testament, neighbour even means becoming a brother.

In the Qur'an, neighbour is much more closely associated with 'proximity' and 'kinship'. Furthermore, whilst Jesus talks of love for enemies as being implicit in the command to love one's neighbour, Muslims are not commanded to show love to the enemies of Islam.

As is so often the case in inter faith dialogue, the points of convergence between the religions can also reveal fundamental disjunctions. Whilst 'love of God and of neighbour' are common themes within the two religions, it is also the case that they rest on very different foundations. The Christian understanding of agapaic love is rooted in the sacrificial and self-giving love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. This difference is not just a matter of semantics – it points to a fundamental difference in the way Christians and Muslims understand the relationship between God and humanity. Islam might be seen as placing the emphasis upon human *submission*

1 The responses to 'A Common Word' can be read in full on A Common Word website: www.acommonword.com.

to God (*submission* is one meaning of the word *Islam*), whereas Christianity might be seen as placing the emphasis upon human *participation* in God's saving grace through Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the ways in which the two faiths interpret the meaning of 'Love of God' is illuminating: Islam regards love of God as an obligation placed upon the believer, whereas Christianity sees love of God as the human response to God's love of humanity.

Let us therefore note a piece of mutual criticism between the two faiths. Muslims criticise Christians for teaching that God makes himself vulnerable (they would say that an all-powerful God can save without doing this). Christians, meanwhile, have criticised Islam for not pointing to the immanence – the closeness of God – expressed especially in the incarnation.

Although these are points of contention between the two religions, there are also potential areas for dialogue.

5

The Responses to ‘A Common Word’

It did not take very long for responses to ‘A Common Word’ to materialize. These can be found on the official website of ‘A Common Word’.

From within Christianity the responses have largely come from the Western Churches, and thus far there is a paucity of responses from Churches that exist in majority Muslim countries. This may be redressed with the passage of time.

Early engagements with the initiative fell into four broadly distinguishable categories:

- Official responses from Churches and Communion – often via press releases;
- Academic responses – especially from Theology and Divinity faculties;
- Other Christian responses (e.g. Individual Bishops, Ecumenical Groupings, etc);
- Political responses (e.g. the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair).

Most of the early reactions offered a broad welcome to the initiative. To take an example, here are the words of Professor Iain Torrance, a former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland:

I truly welcome *A Common Word Between Us and You*. I do not perceive this as an attempt to be definitive. I believe it is deliberately written so as to direct us to common ground at the deepest level. It is a common word, a word which is familiar to Jews, Christians and Moslems. I believe it is a beginning. I believe it is a testimony to a generosity of spirit which Christians should acknowledge and receive with humility and much gratitude. With the help of God, we can together build bridges, allay fears and permit an area for calm discussion and hope founded upon our love of God and for our neighbour.

Many Churches and Communion issued immediate welcomes to the letter. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, was one of the first to welcome the initiative:

The theological basis of the letter and its call to ‘vie with each other only in righteousness and good works; to respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill’, are indicative of the kind of relationship for which we yearn in all parts of the world, and especially where Christians and Muslims live together. It is particularly important in underlining the need for respect towards minorities in contexts where either Islam or Christianity is the majority presence ... There is much here to study and to build on. The letter’s understanding of the unity of God provides an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to explore together their distinctive understandings and the ways in which these mould and shape our lives. The call to respect, peace and goodwill should now be taken up by Christians and Muslims at all levels and in all countries and I shall endeavour, in this country and internationally, to do my part in working for the righteousness which this letter proclaims as our common goal.

The Society of Friends in Britain was another to give an early welcome:

We warmly welcome this Muslim initiative, hoping that it will be reciprocated by Christian leaders, and that Christians, Muslims and those of other religious traditions will unite around what we have in common, in order to defuse tensions arising from fear and suspicion, and work together for a more peaceful world.

The Roman Catholic Church’s official response needs to be set within the broader context of the Second Vatican Council and in particular *Nostre Aetate* which stated:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth ... who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as

God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

In his response on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Cardinal Tauran stated:

One aspect that struck me in a particular way is that, perhaps for the first time, the text signed by the Muslims presented Jesus of the Gospel with citations from the New Testament, and not from citations of the Koran [sic].

Whilst welcoming the letter, Cardinal Tauran noted that the task that lies ahead will not be easy:

Muslims do not accept that one can question the Qur'an, because it was written, they say, by dictation from God. With such an absolute interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the contents of faith.

From the evidence of the responses so far, the letter has also provoked some interesting questions for reflection within Christianity on how to respond to people of other faiths.

Daniel Madigan SJ, of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims, whilst noting the danger of a reductionism within the letter, also states:

In fairness to our Muslim colleagues, it should be admitted that many Christians too will propose a shorthand rendition of Jesus' saying about the greatest commandments as the kernel of his teaching and the foundation of Christianity. But are they right? Is that all there is to the Gospel? Does the Word become incarnate simply remind us of a few important verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus ... Is all the rest of his living, dying and rising somehow only ancillary to this?

These Christian perspectives include a full response from His Holiness Aram I of the Armenian Orthodox Church. This clearly articulates Christian belief concerning God's love for the world in sending His Son Jesus Christ, and as we have seen, also draws attention to a subtle difference between the Christian and Muslim understanding of 'neighbour' –

According to the Gospel (Luke 10.24–6) the word 'neighbour' does not mean 'proximity' or 'kinship'; the neighbour is 'the other' who is need of our love, help and fellowship.

This is set in a context of welcoming the letter, a commitment to living together in peace, and a willingness to explore what sort of community Christians and Muslims might build together.

The initial welcome to the letter has been followed by more detailed responses which explore the nature of the Christian response. According to the Bishop of London, Rt Revd Dr Richard Chartres, the letter 'demands a substantial response which approaches the same theme from a Christian perspective.' At the present time, substantial scholarly work has been put in hand amongst Christian scholars around the world.

6

Issues for Christian–Muslim Dialogue

In the present climate, it is not difficult to make the case for Christians and Muslims to talk to one another and to engage in dialogue and shared social action for a better world. But given some of the historical difficulties which have been alluded to, and some of the differences in belief, how Christians should approach their Muslim neighbours can sometimes be the source of some anxiety.

Colin Chapman, in his book *Cross and Crescent*, makes what may seem an obvious point, but one which needs emphasising:

... we approach Muslims as human beings. We meet them as people before we meet them as Muslims. We greet them as individuals with a name before we think of them as representatives of a great world religion. We extend the hand of friendship as neighbours before we self-consciously announce that we are Christians.¹

There is a danger that we see Muslims *as ambassadors* of their religion, rather than as individuals. There is also the risk that we forget that Islam, like Christianity, is an immensely diverse faith, with many different traditions and understandings on key aspects of belief and practice.

In the specific case of the letter ‘A Common Word’, there has been a tendency in some quarters to see it as a definitive account of the ‘Muslim view’ of Christianity, whereas there are very varied views within the Islamic world as to whether this is the right approach, that it doesn’t go far enough or that it yields too much to Christian faith and understanding.

For Christians seeking to engage with their Muslim neighbours, there are a number of issues in the letter which helpfully point to areas of exploration.

¹ Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2003, p. 21.

1. The Authority of Bible and the Qur'an

The word 'fundamentalist' is often used in the Western media with negative connotations of a certain religious mentality, but for many Muslims it is a descriptive and non-pejorative term which simply describes the place of the Qur'an in Islam.

Both Christianity and Islam have single, authoritative scriptures – the Bible and the Qur'an. However, there are substantial differences in the manner of their authority. For Christians, the Bible is authoritative. However, whilst for Muslims the Qur'an is the 'Word of God', in Christianity the Word is incarnate in Jesus Christ (John 1.14), and the Bible 'bears witness' to Christ, the Living Word.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran summarises this distinction thus:

... for a Muslim the Qur'an is a 'supernatural dictation' recorded by the prophet of Islam, while for a Christian, revelation is not a book, but a Person.¹

Points for reflection and discussion:

- How authoritative is the Bible in your Christian tradition?
- What are the resonances with an Islamic approach to the Qur'an?
- How would you explain your understanding of the authority of scripture to a Muslim?

2. God

For Muslims the central belief is the Oneness of God. Anyone who has visited a Muslim country will remember the 'call to prayer' from the minaret of the mosque which calls all the faithful to worship of the One God. Christianity teaches a belief in the One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Points for reflection and discussion:

- Are these merely differences of emphasis or are they foundational differences?
- How might you explain the doctrine of the Trinity to a Muslim?²

3. Jesus

Muslims regard Jesus (in terms of authority) as the first amongst the prophets after Muhammad, but not as the Son of God. In Islam, Jesus is born conceived

1 Stated in a lecture given at Heythrop College, University of London on the 28th May 2008.

2 The Archbishop of Canterbury addressed the Al Azhar University in Cairo on the Trinity – www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

miraculously, does miracles and must return to the world at the end of time; but he does not die on the cross and therefore does not rise to eternal life, and is not the ‘Way’ to salvation. In Christianity, however, as already noted, Jesus is the Word Incarnate and is the Way to salvation (John 14.6f).

Points for reflection and discussion:

- How does the Christian view of Jesus differ from the Muslim view, and where are the commonalities?
- What are the implications of the differences and commonalities?¹

4. Love of God, Love of Neighbour

‘A Common Word’ is focused upon the themes of the ‘love of God and love of neighbour’. It is the hope of the signatories of the letter that Christians and Muslims might come together in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding, around this belief.

Points for reflection and discussion:

- How far do you think this aspiration should receive a positive response?
- What, if anything, are the limitations of this approach?
- How might this approach provide a basis for building positive local relations between Christians and Muslims?

(See also Bible study in the Appendix)

5. Defining Your Religion

As we have seen, a Muslim is defined as someone who can testify to the statement: ‘there is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God’.

Points for reflection and discussion:

- How would you define a Christian?
- Is dialogue with Muslims better served by concentrating on experiences in life or on the teachings of the Faiths? How might your answer to this help or hinder a dialogue with a Muslim?

Other Areas for Exploration

There are, of course, many other fruitful areas of exploration in Christian–Muslim dialogue. In his 2008 London lecture, Cardinal Tauran identified some of these:

¹ The publication *Jesus Through Muslim Eyes* by John Parry, produced by the United Reformed Church, might be a useful resource.

witnessing to a life of prayer; being faithful to spiritual commitments; defending the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the family; the fight against illiteracy and disease; the moral formation of young people and being peacemakers. These notwithstanding, the thornier issues of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and reciprocity with regard to places of worship are also to be considered.

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Exploring Further

Developing Christian–Muslim Relations

There is a great deal of work already underway in the arena of Christian–Muslim relations. A lot of the finest work goes on at a grass-roots level where Christians and Muslims are living and working together for the benefit of their community.

In some places there are special centres and projects set up to further better relations between people of different faiths, and there are also places that offer opportunities for greater engagement and study. Details of some of these places can be found below.

An important resource in this arena is the Christian Muslim Forum for England which was set up in 2006 following a ‘listening exercise’ initiated by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey. The Forum offers a range of resources and opportunities for developing Christian–Muslim relations. Contact details are:

Christian Muslim Forum

1st Floor, Camelford House, 89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TP

Tel: 0207 936 9078

Fax: 0207 936 9100

Email: info@christianmuslimforum.org

For Further Study

There are a number of centres that offer courses on Islam and Christian–Muslim relations. Some offer short courses for those new to this subject, others offer courses leading to Diplomas or Higher Degrees, and some may be able to provide help and advice on specific issues. For further details, contact the Secretary for Inter Faith Relations at Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, or contact the centres direct:

Heythrop College, Centre for Christianity and Interreligious Dialogue

Kensington Square, London W8 5HQ

Tel: 020 7795 6600

<http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/226/298/>

The London Inter Faith Centre

125 Salusbury Road, London NW6 6RG.

Tel: 020 7604 3053

info@londoninterfaith.org.uk

www.londoninterfaith.org.uk

St.Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society

2A Stoughton Drive North, Leicester LE5 5UB

Tel: 0116 273 3459

<http://www.stphilipscentre.co.uk/default.htm>

The Trinity Foundation for Christianity and Culture

Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Street, London SW1X 9BZ

Tel: 020 7730 8830

<http://www.tfccinternational.com>

Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity

63 St.Paul's Road, Manningham, Bradford

Tel: 01274 488144

admin@bcdd.org.uk

<http://www.bcdd.org.uk>

Glasgow University, Centre for Inter Faith Studies

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, No. 4 The Square, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ

Tel: 0141-330 6524

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/theology/research/centreforinter-faithstudies>

There are some Christian specialists in Islam who are available to lead courses on this subject. For further information, contact CTBI:

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7654 7254

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7654 7222

Email: interfaith@ctbi.org.uk

For Further Reading

- Alfred Agius, editor, *Interfaith Dialogue: the teaching of the Catholic Church*, CBCEW 2002.
- Reza Aslan, *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*. Heinemann, 2005.
- Maurice Bormans, *Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims*, Paulist Press, 1991.
- Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam*. InterVarsity Press, revised edition, 2007.
- Michael Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith dialogue: a Catholic view*, in which there are 72 pages on relations with Muslims (SPCK 2006).
- Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian–Muslim Relations*. Cambridge, 2000.
- A. Christian van Gorder, *No God But God: A Path to Muslim-Christian Dialogue on God’s Nature*. Orbis, 2003.
- Michael Ipgrave (ed), *The Road Ahead: A Christian–Muslim Dialogue*. Church House Publishing, 2003.
- Michael Ipgrave (ed), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur’an together*. Church House Publishing, 2004.
- Michael Ipgrave (ed), *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur’anic Perspective*. Church House Publishing, 2005.
- Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity Among British Muslims*. I. B. Tauris, 2002.
- Philip Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim*. Continuum, 2007.
- Christian Troll SJ, (transl. David Marshall) *Muslims Ask, Christians Answer* (available from Westminster Interfaith – see www.answers-to-muslims.com).
- Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*. Oneworld, 1997.

Some Resources Produced by the Churches

‘A Short Introduction to Dialogue with Muslims’ produced by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales: (http://www.catholicchurch.org.uk/index.php/cbc/catholic_church/catholic_bishops_conference_of_england_and_wales/departments/dialogue_and_unity/committee_for_other_faiths_cof_1/a_short_introduction_to_dialogue_with_muslims).

‘May I Call You Friend: Sharing Our Faith With People of Other Faiths’
(Methodist Church, 2006).

‘The Inter-Faith Encounter’ (Scottish Episcopal Church, 2006).

‘Jesus Through Muslim Eyes’ by John Parry (United Reformed Church, 2005).

Generous Love: an Anglican theology of inter faith relations (NIFCON 2008).

Appendix

A Bible Study

The Unconditional Love of God in Christ

Reading: Luke 15.11–15

Along with the parable of the Good Samaritan, the story known as the Prodigal Son is one of the Jesus' best known and best loved parables. Many commentators have stated that Jesus was a master story teller who at an instant could capture and provoke the imagination of his hearers.

The parable of the Prodigal Son neatly summarises the Christian belief in the unconditional, forgiving love of God in Christ. We might regard the errant son as selfish and ungrateful. He appears self-indulgent and only concerned with his own comfort, enjoyment and fulfilment. It is this self-centredness that leads him to demand his share of the inheritance and he leaves for a far-off country for his 'gap year' of indulgence!

But it is the manner of his return that provides the essential message of this parable.

Finding himself alone, cold, hungry and poor, he does not 'repent' of his selfishness – we are not told that he misses the love and affection of his father and his brother – but instead remembers that his father's servants will be better fed than he. Realizing this, he said 'how many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger.'

So he resolves to return and to become one of his father's hired hands. His instinct is self-preservation, not repentance of heart.

As he approaches his home, his father sees him from afar. Why has he returned? Maybe he has returned to ask for more money? Maybe (as is the case) he is returning in the hope of some form of financial salvation?

If these doubts were in his father's mind they are not a part of this parable.

His father, full of pity for his errant son, runs to meet him in an emotional reunion. He welcomes his son:

... for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found ...

The acceptance of the father is unconditional and risks the disappointment that the son returns for anything other than reunion or being 'found' again.

The parable speaks to us of the total acceptance of the God of love, who loves us first, even though we might be unworthy of him.

Points for reflection and discussion

A Muslim reading this parable would be perplexed as to what this is saying about God. Surely the father is weak in his parental authority? Should not the father wait until the son prostrates himself in front of his father, begging for forgiveness? Surely the only right relationship between God and humanity is one of 'submission', where the human embraces God's path? Maybe the other son in this story is more worthy of our sympathy? Are Christians really saying that God is weak?

- What does this parable say to us about a Christian understanding of the love of God?
- What lies behind possible Muslim questions regarding this parable?
- How might Christians explain to Muslims their belief in the self-giving love of God made known in Jesus Christ?