

The open letter of October 13, 2007, that 138 scholars and other prominent representatives of Islam sent to a number of church leaders represents an important step in the essential dialogue between adherents of the world's two largest religions. The letter, that has generated many positive reactions, bears testimony to a strong desire for international solidarity and an awareness of our common future.

The letter is a comprehensive, brave, and learned document that incorporates an opening in relation to Christianity that is unique in the history of the world. At the same time, it is unusually accommodating towards Christianity and seeks to make its point not merely from its own standpoint, but also by using terminology and figures of speech inspired by the Bible.

We greatly appreciate that such a broad spectrum, geographically and theologically, of Muslim groups around the world – so many respected Muslim leaders and scholars – together have addressed themselves to Christian leaders and expressed not only a common understanding of the necessity of dialogue and cooperation, but also have presented their own view of the common element of faith in God in otherwise different religions.

Similarly, we also believe that inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue and cooperation cannot be viewed as being optional, but must be seen as a necessity if one wants to promote true respect and avoid violent conflicts.

The contents of the letter are remarkable and positive to us for several reasons:

It is unique for a Muslim text to portray Jesus through his own words in the Bible and not merely by references drawn from the Qur'an. And it is positive that learned Muslims so clearly recognize that Christians believe in the one God (and not in three); even though significant differences exist regarding how Islam and Christianity view the one God.

The letter invites a common understanding of what unites Christians and Muslims in theological and ethical terms. Christians and Muslims agree that there is no God except God; that God is one, and that His is the glory and the power in all eternity. Our common foundation is the belief in the one God as Lord and Creator and in the common view of life and man, that follows from this; that life is sacred, God-given, and that all mankind is created by God in His image (or as Muslims articulate this: created by God as his deputy, who mirrors God's qualities) and is infinitely worthy and inviolable; that people are, therefore, equal and should be treated with respect.

But according to the authors of the letter, the common basis also lies in what is essential for the faith, namely *love for God and love for one's neighbor*. This is an unusually direct way of saying that this love is not only absolutely central in Christianity but also in Islam. As Christians, we believe that the one God has shown the world His true nature, which is love, in Jesus of Nazareth, and we regard God's love as *unconditional and rich in mercy*; which means that forgiveness and love is given to man independently of any notion of merit or returns. The love of one's neighbor follows from this as a natural result of the belief in God's forgiving love in Christ – as God loves us, so we shall love our neighbor.

We recognize that through the letter's description of the twin commands of love (love of God and love of one's neighbor) a promising starting point for continued theological dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians has been established.

The letter contains a fine concluding message on which everyone should be able to agree: "So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us," it says. "Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill."

Still, as we all know, the truth lies in the action, not primarily in declarations. What is really exciting is therefore the continuation – this means the operational consequences that the letter is meant to have. We should not just declare our agreement theologically and ethically but also work practically to make the mutual respect and kindness real locally, nationally, and internationally.

In that context we have noted the following statement in the letter: "As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes." As we see it, nobody, neither Muslims nor Christians, should *wage war* against others because of their religion, *oppress them or drive them out of their homes*. On the contrary, Muslims and Christians should stand together to safeguard religious freedom, peace, and respect for religious minorities in countries where they constitute the majority themselves.

We are convinced that religion is not the main cause of the various conflicts that involve Christians and Muslims. But in many places religion becomes part of the conflict or the factor that triggers it off, while the real causes are often of a political, social or economic nature. Religion and religious feelings are sometimes used by politicians for their own purposes or by populations to spread prejudice and cast others as the enemy.

At the same time, we have experienced that religion can play a positive role in the area of conflict resolution. A religious appeal to people's conscience and hearts can be strongly motivating in ethical terms. It is our hope that the letter will lead to more than just polite conversation between selected religious leaders but that it will also play a motivating role ethically that can lead to concrete action for peace and more harmonic coexistence.

On the basis of the letter and our answer we will take the initiative to meet with Muslim religious leaders in Denmark to continue this exchange. In addition we intend to send a copy of our answer to the Vatican and to the World Council of Churches, of which the National Council of Churches in Denmark is an associate member, as we hope to be part of the ongoing process of discussion and cooperation that is expected to be established between the 138 letter writers, their religious communities and organizations, and the member churches of the World Council of Churches as well as the Catholic Church.

Copenhagen, March 29th, 2008

Yours sincerely



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