

"CHRISTIAN SELF UNDERSTANDING IN RELATION TO ISLAM"

**A SUMMARY REPORT OF
THE INTERNATIONAL INTRA-CHRISTIAN CONSULTATION**

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World Council of Churches

Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation

Church and Ecumenical Relations

This document is published by the World Council of Churches following the intra-Christian consultation in Chavannes de Bogis (Geneva), summarizing the various papers presented at that meeting.

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This is a working document - opinions expressed in the presentations and the listeners' report do not necessarily reflect WCC policy.

Report of the Consultation

In October 2008, an intra-Christian consultation organized through the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) between the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Christian World Communions (CWC) explored questions related to Christian self-understanding in relation to religious plurality with special focus on Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam and Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The two-day consultation, held at the Hotel Chavannes de Bogis near Geneva, was attended by fifty experts in Christian-Muslim dialogue and Christian leaders who represented the fellowship of WCC member churches, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and a variety of CWCs, including the Roman Catholic Church.

This consultation was facilitated jointly by the WCC programme on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation and the programme on Church and Ecumenical Relations. The Joint Consultative Commission of the WCC and CWCs appointed a steering group to prepare the consultation. The group included representatives from the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the World Council of Churches.

The ecumenical (theological) reflection on dialogue with Islam

Christian-Muslim relations have been an issue since the historical rise of Islam, more than fourteen centuries ago. Their complex history was in many cases characterized by constructive living together, but sometimes also marked by rivalry or war. Both the practical living together of individuals and communities of the two faiths, and the theological challenges, including the questions of Christian self-identity and self-expression in relation to Islam, have engaged Christians through the centuries. It is observed that the type and level of the relationship between the two communities have been paralleled at the level of their theological thinking.

From the beginning of the life of the WCC there has been an awareness of people of other faiths, and a continuous ecumenical process of reflection on inter-religious relations and their meaning for Christian identity and self-understanding. In 1966 a group of Christian theologians met for the first time in Broumana, Lebanon, to discuss and reflect on relationships with Muslims. A series of Christian-Muslim dialogue encounters began officially in 1969 in Cartigny, Switzerland - two years before a WCC sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies (DFI) was established in 1971. Since then, ecumenical reflection among Christians on dialogue with Islam has continued to raise many theological and pastoral questions for the member churches. Various member churches and ecumenical partners have set up syllabi/curricula, study centres and commissions for Christian-Muslim relationships to encourage theological and practical commitment to dialogue on the basis of sound knowledge and sensitive understanding of Islam.

Reflection on Christian self-understanding and the theological approach to religious plurality has been on the agenda of the WCC many times, reaching a certain consensus in 1989¹ and 1990² but in recent years it has been felt that this difficult and controversial issue needed to be revisited. The Porto Alegre Assembly of WCC in 2006 brought this issue into focus again when member churches agreed to strengthen their common efforts in the area of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, and strengthen their ecumenical theological reflection on what it means to be a Christian in a world of many religions.

The context of the WCC-CWCs consultation

This renewed focus came at the right time when new initiatives for dialogue from the Muslim world offered significant opportunities for the WCC member churches to deepen their ecumenical Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam and to work together in promoting dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. One such initiative took place in October, 2007 when 138 Muslim scholars and leaders authored an open letter entitled “*A Common Word*” on the need for interfaith understanding and respect between Christians and Muslims, calling for renewed theological exploration in Christian-Muslim relations. The letter was addressed to a wide variety of churches and Christian leaders and generated lively and deep discussions between Christians and Muslims around the world about the “Love of God” and “Love of Neighbour”. This was followed in 2008 and 2009 by the Global Initiative for Dialogue, initiated by the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in Madrid, New York and Geneva, which also introduced new opportunities for deepening and strengthening dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

In response to the invitation of *A Common Word*, the World Council of Churches (WCC), instructed by its Central Committee in February 2008, initiated an ecumenical process of response which began by producing a commentary entitled “Learning to Explore Love Together”, whose aim is to assist the churches in their reflection on the letter and in sharing their experience of the love of God and love of neighbour in their respective contexts.

Several responses to the Open Letter from churches, councils of churches, Christian World Communions (CWCs) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) have identified some of the theological issues of common concerns that Christians and Muslims should reflect upon together during the years ahead.

¹ The world mission conference of 1989, cf. F.R. Wilson ed., *The San Antonio Report*, WCC, 1990, in particular pp.31-33.

² Baar Statement: Theological Perspectives on Plurality, available at:
<http://www.oikoumene.org/gr/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/baar-statement-theological-perspectives-on-plurality.html>

The ecumenical process of response was reinforced by the joint initiative of CWCs and the WCC to continue the journey of reflection and dialogue together. The Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) between WCC and CWCs, during its meeting in May 2008, proposed to sponsor a consultation that would further explore questions related to Christian self-understanding and self-expression in relation to Islam within the ecumenical family and its implications for Christian-Muslim Dialogue today, underlining the importance for people in both faith communities to learn more about each other and from each other.

Rather than producing a written response to the letter by the Muslim scholars, the goal of the consultation was to provide a space for churches and communions of churches to share their initiatives and theological resources for engaging with Muslims, and to identify substantial issues for Christian theology in relation to Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The main goals of the consultation - as identified by the steering committee were:

1. To seek mutual enrichment and commitment by providing space for churches and communions to share their initiatives, perspectives and specific theological resources for engaging with Muslims.
2. To identify and discuss substantial issues concerning Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam.
3. To discern how best to respond to a new era in Christian-Muslim dialogue and opportunities for cooperation.

The goals were reflected practically in a number of *expected outcomes* that would be achieved by the end of the consultation:

- a. List theological issues that are pertinent to Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam and that are best approached ecumenically by Christians.
- b. Consider ways for articulating a Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam and relationship with Muslims.
- c. Propose ways and means to work cooperatively as churches, councils and communions in responding to the new opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue.
- d. Popularize resources that help churches to deepen their self- understanding and their self-expression in relation to Islam.

The methodology of the consultation

The methodology used for achieving the objectives of the consultation involved panel presentations and group discussions in order to encourage dialogue between church representatives and experts. The panel presentations offered the possibility of considering and learning from a variety of Christian theological approaches to Islam, as they were developed by

various Christian traditions, while also taking into account different contextual perspectives where Christians and Muslims live together.

A group of listeners accompanied the presentations and the discussions. Their listening is summed up in a reflective report that could serve as a springboard for ongoing ecumenical cooperation. Although the listeners' report was not adopted by the participants as a final statement of the consultation since it needed further development, it is indicative of where the ecumenical family stands today in the process of asking questions and finding answers in relation to the subject matter.

The Programme of the consultation

The two-day programme began on Saturday 18 October, with a keynote address by His Holiness Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia, on "***Living as a Community with Muslims: Concerns, Challenges and Promises***". The keynote lecture followed two welcoming speeches by Rev. Dr Robert Welsh on behalf of CWCs, and Rev. Dr Shanta Premawardhana on behalf of WCC, and introductory remarks by the facilitators of the consultation: Doug Chial and Rima Barsoum.

An ecumenical prayer service on Sunday morning, 19 October, provided a space for a deep spiritual sharing, reflecting on the icon of "***Christ is Our Reconciliation***" and the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. The ecumenical service was prepared and led by Mrs. Clare Amos and Rev. Simone Sinn.

Four panel presentations, on Sunday 19th and Monday 20th, dealt with the theme of the consultation from two perspectives: the confessional and the contextual, and in many cases these two approaches were found to be interwoven.

The first two panels explored "***various Christian approaches to Islam***" including: Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran and Evangelical approaches. A third panel on the "***Contextual approaches to Islam***" offered inputs by Christian theologians living in Islamic contexts. A fourth panel presented the contextual approaches by theologians living in pluralistic contexts. The panels were followed by group discussion and accompanied by a group of listeners who presented their reflective report in a plenary session on Monday afternoon, focusing the discussion on ***substantial issues for Christian theology in relation to Islam*** and their ***implications for Christian-Muslim dialogue in the 21st century*** as they were identified during the consultation.

The programme concluded with a discussion and comments on the listeners' report, an evaluation session, and a closing prayer. The participants agreed on the need for further ecumenical exploration of theological issues pertaining to Muslim-Christian dialogue and invited the organizers to facilitate the process.

Keynote Lecture:

“Living as a Community with Muslims: Concerns, Challenges and Promises”

by His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, head of the Armenian Apostolic Church (See of Cilicia)

In his opening address Catholicos Aram I identified four interrelated trends associated with the present predicament of Christian-Muslim relations, including: the ambiguous perception of religion; the misconception about Islam and Christianity; the collision of values that govern human life and provide the basis for self-understanding; and the narrow self-contained perception of identity that contradicts the proactive self-understanding which is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the Other. His Holiness argued that the prevailing misperceptions, ambiguities, polarizations, tensions and collision, hijacked and sharpened by politico-ideological agendas and geo-political strategies, can be transformed only through a shared life in community. Therefore, “living-in-community must become the real objective of a frank and serious Christian-Muslim dialogue”, which deals not with symptoms but with deeply rooted wounds through a careful diagnosis and in the spirit of mutual respect and trust.

He then explained the urgent necessity for community building with Islam, on the basis of equal rights and obligations, as well as full and active participation in all aspects of the life of society, including decision-making, listing a number of decisive issues and crucial questions that require frank discussion and a comprehensive analysis by Christians and Muslims.

Among issues to be addressed, Catholicos Aram I elaborated on the relationship between faith and reason as a critical area that needs deeper investigation; the response to secularism and how both religions articulate their reactions in different ways; the tension between human rights and Islamic law; and ways in which both religions link mission, witness and conversion, encouraging his audience to think and to “develop a Logos-centred, not church-centred, theology of mission that embraces the Other without jeopardizing the ‘otherness’ of the Other.”³

He continued by re-affirming that “living together in community must take the centre stage of Christian-Muslim dialogue” and that the solid foundation of such a community is laid in a local context where Christians and Muslims can build a shared life that encompasses and transcends differences at the local level. This can be achieved, in his opinion, by: a) moving from isolation to integration, since unconditional love of neighbour and hospitality towards the stranger are essential features of the two faiths; b) moving from exclusion to participation, where values interact and identities are integrated to build a community of reconciled diversities; c) moving

³ Address by Catholicos Aram I, available at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/08-10-18-address-by-catholicos-aram-i-living-as-a-community-with-islam.html>

from reaction to interaction, when the self-understanding of identity is marked by creative openness and dynamic interaction with the Other: creative interaction of perspectives, concerns, values and expectations that enables us to move towards building a common life.

Catholicos Aram I concluded his lecture by making a few suggestions for the future work of the WCC, and affirmed that religious plurality and Christian self-understanding must remain a major item on the agenda of the ecumenical movement, which needs to be tackled with an interdisciplinary approach and a holistic perspective. He also emphasized the urgent need for a critical evaluation of Christian-Muslim dialogue today, and called for a more focused agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue touching issues that pertain to the life of people.

Panel - I & II Various Christian approaches to Islam

Panel one included presentations from Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran approaches to Islam, and was moderated by Rev. Dr Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Panel two included presentations from Reformed, Anglican and Evangelical approaches to Islam, and was moderated by OKR. Dr Martin Affolderbach, Secretary for Interfaith Relations of the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Germany EKD.

The panels tried to respond to the following questions:

- ***What is the theological approach of your church /or communion toward Islam?***
- ***What resources has your church/communion developed about the issue?***
- ***How has this approach been expressed in the church/ or communion's response to A Common Word?***

An Orthodox View

The first panellist, Fr. Dr. Emanuel Clapsis from the Holy Cross Orthodox School of Theology, representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate, presented a paper on Orthodox theology in relation to Islam.

In his paper, Fr. Clapsis observed a shift in focus in recent years for Orthodox churches in their dialogue with Muslims. This has moved from giving primacy to their substantial differences that justify their rejection of one another, to a broad acknowledgement of affinity between them, in search for a common ground that Islam and Christianity share. They have a common framework of principles and values that allows them to peacefully coexist, respecting each other's distinct religious tradition and symbols and contributing to the up-building of a culture of peace and justice based on God's love.

Moreover, he suggested that “Christian-Muslim dialogue today should not be limited only to practical matters and civil virtues but it should have the freedom to explore theological truths that inform and shape civil virtues.” That is to say, the cooperation in the public space must not be simply grounded on political or pragmatic factors but it must also reflect the essential matters of faith and be firmly grounded in theology. A challenging question for the Orthodox churches today remains how to explore their identity as it relates to religious plurality? How to develop a theology of religions that enable the Orthodox churches to recognize in critical and dialogical manner the presence of God in other religious communities without compromising the centrality and the uniqueness of the Christian gospel?

He also suggested that Pneumatology is foundational for the recognition of God’s presence in history and in communities of living faiths and ideologies. This assumption is grounded upon the belief that God’s Spirit is active together with the Logos in the creating, redeeming and sanctifying work of God. Orthodox theologians have extensively reflected on the divinity of the Holy Spirit, its presence in the believers, the Church, and the sacraments. Yet, there is a need to explore theologically the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the world beyond the distinct boundaries of the Church: in the secular order, in programmes of social transformation, in public services, in politics and in other religious or humanistic systems of belief and communities, which remains an undeveloped aspect of Christian theology.

From an Orthodox perspective, Fr. Clapsis understands the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in the world from the perspective of God’s economy, which is intrinsically Trinitarian. He argued that the universal operation of God’s Spirit relates to the economy of His incarnate Logos as two distinct but inseparable economies; the Spirit of God acting in the world beyond the distinctive boundaries of the Church may work prior to an explicit affirmation of Jesus as Lord and Savior. It moves the world in unity with the risen Christ in incomprehensible ways. Here it is important to note that unity with the risen incarnate Word of God can be realized by explicitly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but at the same time also by living His pattern of life loving God and through God’s love to love the neighbor.

This presence and the operation of God’s Spirit in creation are also salvific in nature. Salvation originates in God’s providence and is achieved through the incomprehensible work of the Holy Spirit in the world that brings all into unity with the risen Christ and consequently to the Church in its wider sense. Thus, he concluded, the Church does not reject whatever holy and true exists either in history or in other religious communities because it considers them as rays of the divine truth that enlightens and leads all people to God.

A Catholic View

The second panellist, Fr Prof. Maurice Borrmans, representing the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, presented a detailed reflection on the Roman Catholic Church’s response to the letter of 138, A Common Word

In his elaboration on the Catholic approach to Islam, as it was expressed in a number of founding texts of the Second Vatican Council and Papal encyclicals as well as it was practiced by the church, Fr. Borrmans referred particularly to founding texts such as *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in para 16 "... the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God." And to *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions, that summarizes the Catholic church's approach to Islam and Muslims, in para 3: "The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. 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." The same text urges Christians and Muslims 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."

He also quoted other documents, produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), on "The Church and other Religions: Dialogue and Mission", 1984, and "Dialogue and Proclamation", 1991. He elaborated on the Catholic Church's understanding of the *Theology of Religions* as it was presented and adopted in the report of the International Theological Commission (1996) and in the document *Dominus Jesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2000) on the church and other religions in relation to salvation.

Giving special attention to the letter of 138, Fr. Borrmans highlighted the importance and the significance of the letter, particularly in terms of the consensus that the letter generated among scholars and leaders from different Muslim traditions, its structure and the way it articulated the two commandments of the love of God and love of neighbour. He found the content of the letter combined innovation with traditional Islamic thinking. He also offered a critical analysis of the letter, and discussed the Catholic responses to it, particularly the response of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, and of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) as well as the correspondence and projects that followed, between the Vatican and Al al-Bayt Institute with the signatories of *A Common Word*.

He concluded with few remarks on the theological, ethical and mystical implications of the love of God and Love of neighbour, and on the importance of interreligious dialogue in advancing the work for peace and justice for all humanity.

A Lutheran View

The third input to the panel offered some Lutheran perspectives on relations to Islam, presented by Rev. Simone Sinn, representing the Lutheran World Federation.

Rev. Sinn began by highlighting the importance of faith formation, especially for young people, that consciously and constructively relates to other faiths, affirming that both Christians and Muslims need to uphold the dialogical dimensions of faith, share the valuable insights in *A Common Word* and the responses to it with people at the grassroots level, and encourage them to develop a dialogical space in faith formation.

While examining documents and public statements about Islam and Christian-Muslim relations produced by Lutheran churches, which indicate an intensified hermeneutical process about the understanding of Islam and the self-understanding of Christianity, she observed the need for orientation and discernment in theological and non-theological dimensions of our relationship to Islam.

Rev. Sinn noted the concept of “relationality” at the heart of Lutheran theology. This relationality as it was expressed in the writings of Martin Luther starts first of all with God’s relation to us in God’s free grace. This means interfaith relations challenge us to reconnect with this basic theological insight that “it is the living relationship with God that shapes who we are, not our belonging to a specific group of people.” According to Sinn, in dealing with the question of how we relate to one another as people of different faiths, we are called to also be more conscious about how we relate to God. Therefore, Christian-Muslim encounters have a rich potential not only for deepening our relations to one another, but also in deepening our understanding of God’s relation to us. Important theological and spiritual formation takes place in these encounters.

She then highlighted four relevant themes for Lutheran relations to Islam:

a) *Seeking to acquire adequate knowledge about Islam and Muslims*, as it has been evident in Lutheran theology. Martin Luther in his writing about the Turks (Muslims) regarded adequate knowledge as essential for any judgement, and he strongly supported the Latin translation of the Qur’an in Basel in 1543 with a theological preface in which he sets forth his theological position. Luther also opposed the Crusade against Muslims, as he regarded the difficult political situation should call for repentance before God, not for waging war with people of other faiths. Thus, by applying Luther’s perspectives today, we become more aware of the context. “In a time full of stereotypes and preconceived ideas about the Other, Lutherans strongly advocate for striving to get at as much first-hand information as possible, develop a sound knowledge of Islam in its manifold forms and direct encounter with Muslims.”

b) *Fostering interfaith cooperation*. Reflection on Luther’s explanation of the two kingdoms or reigns and in following his theological model, distinguishing between the worldly and the spiritual realm, gives space to live together with people who have different world views. “As

faithful we might not agree on theological issues, but as citizens we live together, work together and jointly promote the common good of the society.” The emphasis on interfaith cooperation, also called “diapraxis”, enabled LWF to work together with and for Muslim communities through World Service programmes in Muslim countries, and through the Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa (IFAPA).

c) *Engaging in joint theological explorations.* In order to better understand one another’s faith perspectives, joint theological reflection at the grassroots’ as well as academic level has increasingly taken place. This enables to see commonalities as well as differences and shows to what extent Islam and Christianity have always had a dynamic relationship in relating to one another and distinguishing oneself from the other. For Lutherans, joint explorations of holy scriptures and hermeneutical reflections are of special interest. Furthermore, joint Christian-Muslim explorations can contribute to public discourse in the wider society. Reflections on freedom and responsibility, for example, can contribute to public discourse in a world that talks a lot about liberty but constantly creates new dependency. Such discourse may possibly bring to the table a rich conversation on how faith liberates the faithful from human-made bondage to have a trusting relationship with God, and how at the same time this freedom calls the faithful unconditionally to serve their neighbours. Martin Luther’s writing “The Freedom of a Christian” can be one of the contributions to that discourse.

d) *Bringing together faith, hope and love;* by taking up the Pauline triad “faith, hope and love” from 1 Cor 13:13, Rev Sinn argued that the interconnectedness of these three dimensions is a hallmark of good relations between people of different faiths. From a theological point of view, there needs to be an integrated perspective where faith, hope and love mutually enhance the relationship; faith points to the existential dimension at stake in interreligious relationships, hope is the eschatological dimension of religious belief, and love stands for the committed relational dimension between human beings. Thus what constitutes a “good” relationship is a living process that engages existential, eschatological and committed relational dimensions. Christians who participate in such “holistic” relationships with Muslims often emphasise how such relations deepened their own understanding and relationship with God and how it strengthened their commitment to work for the common good.

A Reformed View

The Reformed approach to Islam was presented by Rev. Dr Johnson Mbillah, General Adviser of the Programme on Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), representing the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC).

In his presentation, Rev. Mbillah observed that Reformed theology to which WARC adheres, with its roots in the 16th-century Reformation, has developed from generation to generation in such a way that no one theologian can claim to have all that it takes to form the totality of Reformed thought. There are, however, guiding and non-negotiable principles that form the basis upon which the most of Reformed theology draws its mandate, these are: the authority of

scripture (the Bible), the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the necessity of mission, witnessing to all peoples.

Reformed theology in its variety has been described as a “river into which many sources flow and from which many streams originate”. There are however common characteristics of Reformed theology which one may find in all the branches that exist in the reformed family – that is made up of congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United and Uniting Churches.

In relation to Islam, Rev. Mbillah explained that Reformed theology, through its guiding principles, has laid the foundation for contextual theology; it can transform itself into living theology in a given context – in this case the context of Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, he noted that in the ecumenical age it is difficult to describe any Christian theological approach to Islam as purely Reformed, purely Anglican, Evangelical or even Roman Catholic. There is usually an overlap and there is no absolute theological position that remains the preserve of one and only tradition.

A clear statement of a Reformed theology is the statement of *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*: “the Reformed Church always to be reformed”, this means that the essence and the foundation of reform is to turn back to the early church and its belief in Jesus Christ. This must be revisited from time to time to ascertain that theologies are in consonance with that principle. Reformed theology in the context of relationship with Islam and Muslims should uphold the value of human relations as a family, and at the same time recognise that such relationship involves sharing: a give and take. Such give and take involves a presentation of the gospel in word and in everyday living.

An Anglican View

The Anglican approach to Islam was presented through dialogue between Mrs. Clare Amos and Prof. David Thomas, representing the Anglican Communion office and the Anglican Communion’s Network for Interfaith Concerns.

In the beginning of their presentation the presenters identified three basic sources that Anglicans normally resort to and draw upon while defining self-understanding and their relationship with the Other (in particular Muslims), those are: scripture (the Bible) taken in its entirety, tradition as represented in the ecumenical councils of the church and reason or the conscience of the faithful. These three sources of authority in terms of Anglican engagement with people of other faiths are expressed in a foundational theological document on the Anglican theology of inter faith relations “A Generous Love” that was presented at, and commended by, the Lambeth Conference in 2008.

“Generous Love” begins with a theological statement, about God as both One and Three, and it also ends with a theological statement, about the dynamic of “sending and abiding” which is both God's and ours.

Prof. Thomas explained that the thinking within the Anglican Communion, especially the Church of England, has been very much led by the experience of relating to people of other faiths in different contexts, and taking seriously the reality of the Other in the thinking of the church. This has connected well with the fundamental resource of the Trinitarian thinking. In “Generous Love” the Holy Trinity is the very basis of the understanding of how Christians relate to the Other; their God is characterised as the One who provides and gives new life and as the One who sustains, and that understanding of God as being the One who is and yet the One who sends is the very basis of the document.

Mrs. Amos added that the key sentence, towards the end of the document, on the “pressing need to renew our relationships with people of different faith must be grounded theologically in our understanding of the reality of God who is Trinity” emphasizes the importance of holding together the theological and practical dimensions of the question, to think theologically as well as thinking socially and practically: “we cannot think about Christian-Muslim engagement without thinking theologically about what is there within our tradition that requires us to have that engagement.”

Thus, the Anglican understanding of what it means to be a Christian in relation to the Other, which is an abstract intellectual exploration, is challenged constantly by the engagement with the Other in a very real way. At the same time the engagement with the Other is always challenged by the theological thinking on the basis of the three resources in a Trinitarian manner. Some people would prefer to place doctrine at the fore front of the attitude toward other faiths, others would prefer to place experience before anything else, and then be challenged by that experience to reflect theologically.

The purpose of “Generous Love” is to ground the experience of inter faith encounter firmly in the heartlands of Christian believing. Its approach rests on the conviction that religious diversity poses challenges to the Church not only at the political and social level, but in the area of theology. The document argues that although these challenges have been with the people of God from the beginning and throughout history; what is needed for today is to recover readings of the core texts of our faith which speak into our diverse contexts. For many Anglicans a deep engagement with the Biblical text is the way through which they would like to engage with people of other faiths, as an example there is the Scriptural Reasoning method as practiced in the Building Bridges process initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This method is based on a patient listening and conversation with the person of another faith in order to understand and to witness; a combination of deep understanding and dedication in trying to see the Other as s/he is, at the same time an awareness of what it is to be a Christian.

At the end of their enriching dialogue the two presenters highlighted “Hospitality” as one of the characteristics of the Anglican engagement with people of other faiths. They also commented that they believe that the dialogical method in which they had chosen to make their presentation expressed something that was significant about Anglican theological methodology.

An Evangelical View

An Evangelical approach to Islam was presented by Prof. Dr Thomas Schirrmacher, representing the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)

Prof. Schirrmacher began his presentation by highlighting the importance of the issue of Christian-Muslim relations for the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) today, in particular because of the following reasons: 1) these two religions comprise more than half of the world population; 2) almost 89% of what is said about religion in media today is related to either Christianity or Islam; 3) some violent history behind the two religions which is still remembered although we have to say that Christians and Muslims today are not responsible for what had happened 500 or 1000 years ago; 4) unlike other religions, Islam's holy book includes many statements about Christianity and therefore Muslims know about Christianity from what they read in the Qur'an, which is not exactly how Christians understand their faith; 5) Islam is different from Christianity when dealing with issues concerned with the relationship between religion, society and state; 6) and last but not least, is the question of Islam-West relations which is on the daily agenda of Christian-Muslim dialogue today. More than 80 % of WEA members live in the South and do not see Christianity as a Western religion, yet from an Islamic point of view Christianity is seen as a Western religion, and therefore Christianity is sometimes seen responsible for whatever military or political actions taken by secular western government.

As a sociologist of religion, Prof. Schirrmacher observed that as a result of Globalization the number of people changing their religion is increasing rapidly. In comparison to 30 years ago when the vast majority of the world population never had a real relationship with another religion, today this is totally different. This brings a lot of tension to the world and a lot of tension inside each community, therefore it is very important not only to watch that happening but also to discuss it and try to understand it.

In response to the questions posed to this panel, he presented the WEA approach to Islam as expressed in its letter of response to *A Common Word*, starting the letter with the emphasis on peacemaking based on theological grounds, then moving to the second part "Your call, our call" which represents a typical Evangelical call to seek forgiveness that is only found in Jesus Christ; this call in particular comes in response to the invitation expressed in the Muslim letter which was perceived by WEA as a call to Christians to follow God according to Islam. The third section is on the topic of "love" which emphasizes that "Evangelicals think that theology comes before ethics." Here the WEA's response aims to put love into practice and therefore presents the personal relationship with Muslims as the key to solving many problems that cannot be solved in conferences and meetings, but by how millions of Christians and Muslims live together. Nevertheless, "this love must be deeply grounded in good theology and in Trinitarian theology," which is a unique feature of a Christian theology on love, that "the Christian love is not a command given by God but the very essence of God."

Another point emphasized in the WEA response is the issue of religious freedom, about which it argues that “religious freedom always in history has come before religions have come closer to each other” - giving the example of Catholics and Protestants in Europe, when political freedom came first and both sides stopped using state’s violence, afterward they started to talk with each other – therefore the issue of religious freedom cannot wait until interfaith relations improve rather it should be addressed first.

The last part in of the WEA response is about standing in solidarity with the persecuted church, which is another aspect of the Evangelical tradition. For WEA, in the light of the discussion on religious freedom and of accepting and loving Muslims, it was important to have a clear statement on what they see as persecution of Christians in some Islamic countries.

Regarding theological resources and tools developed by WEA on dialogue with Islam, there have been increasing efforts to collect more information and to try to learn more about Islam in different countries, in order to also understand the diversity within Islam. In this area WEA also tried to include more specialists with Arabic language skill, which is the language of Qur’an, Prof Schirmacher highlighted in particular the WEA initiative to establish a series of institutes for Islamic studies that are producing study materials for the churches trying to answer all kinds of related questions. One such institute is the International Institute for Religious Freedom where they began extensive research and developed contacts to understand the experience of the Orthodox and Oriental churches who have lived together with Islam for centuries.

He then highlighted four key points that should be considered while summarizing the general approach of WEA to Islam:

1. Mission and peace can go together, as it is expressed in 1 Peter 3: 15-17, which has become the rationale for WEA to witness and answer every question, including those asked by Muslims, but in gentleness and respect, without violating the human rights of other peoples, and with respect to their beliefs.
2. Witness is always related to the Biblical notion of martyrdom and persecution, especially that, according to Prof. Schirmacher, almost 50% of WEA members live in areas where they are in danger of persecution. This reality prompts Evangelicals to develop a “theology of persecution” to show that martyrdom and persecution are integral parts of their faith, nevertheless this does not give Evangelical the right to react using violence against their persecutors, but to trust that they are in God’s hand.
3. Personal relationship and hospitality to people of other faiths have been the source of strength of the WEA movement, which, according to Schirmacher, have led to the conversion of almost of 90% of Evangelicals.

In the relationship with Muslims it is very important for WEA to distinguish between the question of witness to the gospel, and the political issues that are handled by governments, especially issues of human rights and religious freedom. For WEA, these are two separate matters. As an example, Prof. Schirmacher thought that persecuted evangelicals should not react

to persecution in any violent way; at the same time they are encouraged to use their legal rights as given in the legal system of their countries to stop this persecution.

He concluded his presentation by offering a clarification on behalf of WEA regarding attempts by some evangelical missionaries to convert members of other churches and expressed readiness to discuss this issue honestly with all churches.

Panel - III Contextual Approaches to Islam: Christians in Islamic Context

Panel three focused on the role of context in articulating theological thinking. Speaking from the experience of Christians living in Muslim majority contexts, it included presentations by Christian theologians from Lebanon, Nigeria and Pakistan, and was moderated by Rev. Dr Herman Shastri, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Malaysia.

An Approach from the Middle East

The first input was given by Fr. Dr George Massouh, representing the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, and the Balamand University in Lebanon.

As an Arab Christian theologian, Fr. Massouh began by acknowledging that Islamic belief in God is a monotheistic belief, since it stands in the tradition of Abraham, affirming that this acknowledgement is rooted in the Christian experience of living together with Muslims in the various countries of the Middle East. An experience built up over decades in Eastern churches with their different linguistic, doctrinal and liturgical traditions. In most cases this acknowledgement is linked, particularly to the national and political situation within which Muslims and Christians relate to each other, and can be seen in their insistence on patriotic unity based on their common belief in one God, Allah, the creator of heaven and earth. Such a call to unity between Muslim and Christian citizens is based on unity in belief in the One God. Doctrinal issues, such as the Trinity, the person of Jesus, the cross, Mohammed's prophetic role, the Qur'an, and others, are left aside.

He therefore illustrated how the coexistence of Muslims and Christians in good times has influenced Christian thinkers in matters of belief and theology. The love of such thinkers for Muslims has greatly influenced the content and form of their theology. In other words, it can be said that such good relations between Christians and Muslims has led Arab theology into making some quite unusual theological statements, such as saying that "Christians and Muslims believe in the same one and only God".

Fr. Massouh argued that such theological statements are based on an apophatic theology in which the main emphasis is on God's almightiness and transcendence, a belief common to Christian theology and to Muslim theology. That is why in an Arab setting Christian witness is best served by an apophatic theology. It should not be forgotten that God remains an

unfathomable and inaccessible mystery, who can only be discovered by worshippers who are humble of heart.

He then examined the thinking of a number of Orthodox theologians such as Mgr George Khodr, the Greek Orthodox metropolitan of Mount Lebanon, as regards the link between theology and relations between people holding different beliefs. Mgr. Khodr has always rejected the idea of *Harat Alnasara* (the Christian ghetto), and has appealed to Christians to move out of *Harat Alnasara* and live alongside Muslims without any inferiority or superiority complex. Khodr has also called on Muslims to regard Christians as citizens having the same rights and the same duties as their Muslim fellow citizens. Furthermore, Khodr said, “The whole of the Church’s missionary task is to awaken the dormant Christ, who is asleep in the night of other religions”, for Christ is to be found outside the historic confines of the Church, and he does this by making no distinction between the activity of the Son and the activity of the Spirit, for “the activity of Christ cannot be understood apart from the activity of the Spirit.” Khodr, quoting in his support the words of Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon (202), “Where the Spirit is, there is the Church,” concludes by saying, “The Spirit operates through the Spirit’s energies according to the Spirit’s own economy, and on that basis one can regard non-Christian religions as places where the Spirit is at work inspiring them.”

Fr. Massouh concluded by affirming that relations between Christians and Muslims come prior to any theological theory. It is possible to go as far as to say that theology has developed, either positively or negatively, out of and reflecting the state of those relations. These relations should, at least on the Christian side, not be determined by the strength or the numbers of the two communities. Christians should regard themselves only as citizens who are equal to their Muslim fellow citizens. While ordinary people, in their daily lives, are not interested in discussing theological or doctrinal questions, relations between them develop quite independently of theological disputes. In other words, their living together is far removed from theology. They do, however, often discuss moral or ethical questions.

Finally, he identified a few challenges which Christians of the Middle East need to take up as they develop their theological thinking, including: 1) the need for a theology of “the Other” to consider the genuineness of their faith and their spiritual inheritance; 2) to respond to the call of Professor Mahmoud Ayoub, an Arab Muslim theologian, that is “to move on beyond mutual tolerance and respect to what he calls as communion of faith between Muslims and Christians”; 3) to sense that the renaissance of their countries will come mainly through the renaissance of all the inhabitants of the region.

An Approach from Africa

The second input was given by Bishop Dr Josiah Atkins Idowu Fearon, representing the Anglican Church in Nigeria and PROCMURA.

At the beginning of his presentation Bishop Josiah drew the attention of his audience to the fact that Nigeria is one of few countries in the world where both Christianity and Islam have an almost equal number of adherents. “This context is often described by ‘Islamicists’ and ‘missiologists’ as a ‘flash point’”. He therefore tried to give a brief historical background about Nigeria, to describe the context in which Christians and Muslims interact.

Linking the creation of the modern state of Nigeria to the British trade and colonial presence in the nineteenth century, he described the formation of a country of different tribal groups in response to the colonial control imposed by the British. He commented especially that the British made no attempt at encouraging unity between these tribal groups by putting in place an arrangement that would allow for the freedom of religion. As a result, at independence Nigeria began with two systems of governance: one for the South and another for the North (where *Shari’a* was practiced) with a modified version for the middle part of the country.

Islam first came to in Nigeria in the tenth century, and from there it spread westward culminating in the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate. Christianity became known in Nigeria during the fifteen and sixteen centuries, then formally in the nineteenth century with the British merchants, through the western part of Nigeria, and from there it advanced northward across the country. The first contact between the two religions within the country was in the 19th century, and then in 1914 they became the two official religions in Nigeria.

Bishop Josiah then analyzed the relationship between the two religions in three different contexts within Nigeria: 1) where Islam is the dominant religion as in Sokoto state in the North; 2) where Christianity is a dominant religion as in the South, and 3) in the middle belt states which used to be a battleground between the two.

Reflecting on these three contexts, he argued that in many ways the current tensions within Nigeria are more complex than we are often made to believe. Religion is often given as the reason for the crises though most are often caused by economic and political reasons. “A difference in religion, by itself did not usually cause any tensions but it was religious differences when combined with ethnic or geographical differences that difficulties arose.” Dividing Nigeria into states in 1967 changed the balance of power between the north and the south. In order to retain the dominance by the northern politicians, religion was brought to the fore and it began to play a major role in the political and social lives of Nigeria. From then on Muslims began to complain about the dominance of the Christians and demand Islamic law leading to the implementation of *hudud*⁴, which had been expunged by the British. Bishop Josiah wanted to make it clear to his audience that Christians in Nigeria are not against the aspects of *shari’ah* that is permitted within the constitution; but it is the *hudud* that has created the opposition by the Christians.

In such a multi-religious context there is no one single approach to Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, however, there are two types of ongoing dialogue methods: 1) the dialogue of life,

⁴ *Hudud* means the class of punishments that are fixed for certain crimes that are considered to be "claims of God."

which takes place through different forms within the country: through daily encounters and organized meetings between the state government and stake holders, as well as through awareness building seminars and workshops about the need for peaceful co-existence and respect for the neighbor. These seminars focus on conflict prevention and resolution, and it addresses religious leaders, students, youth and women; 2) the theological dialogue, which is mainly among Christians and it aims at educating Christians about Islam, the Islamic legal system, the history of Islam and of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria with particular focus on the contemporary situation. Sometimes, Muslims also participate in this exercise which motivates them to educate other Muslims about Christianity and the Christian community of Nigeria.

Bishop Josiah then concluded by listing a number of challenges and prospects for Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, primarily the problem of ignorance within both communities, and even among religious leaders, about their own religion and that of their neighbor. Ignorance cause suspicion and easily leads to religious crises, especially when associated with ethnicity and tribalism. In addition, there is a need to give a new orientation to the members of both communities regarding the importance of equal citizenship and equal opportunities. In this respect it is worth mentioning the support by the government of the Nigerian Interreligious council at the national as well as state and local government levels.

An Approach from Asia

The third input was given by Rev. Prof Charles Amjad-Ali from Luther Seminary, representing the Church of Pakistan. He served for 11 years as the director of the Christian Study Center in Rawalpindi.

Prof. Amjad-Ali began his presentation by introducing the context of Pakistan, as the first country with a multi-ethnic background to be created in the name of Islamic identity. Classifying Pakistan a post-colonial state, he elaborated on the different models of state formation such as the Westphalian nation-states, the immigrant states, and the multi-ethnic nation-states, explaining that Pakistan is a hybrid of all these three patterns but does not belong fully to any. In this uniqueness Islam played a major role in the formation and subsequent developments of Pakistan.

He noted that that most Islamic *ulema* and *mullahs*⁵, at the time of the struggle for independence, were against the formation of Pakistan, because they saw it as a purely political creation, and thought the concept of nation-state was a return to the period of *jahiliyya*⁶ with its tribal identities, and therefore a fundamental violation of the principle of Islamic *ummah*⁷. Nonetheless, once the nation-state of Pakistan was established, the very people who were vehemently opposed theologically to the very concept of Pakistan, demanded a comprehensive Islamic character for it, they sought to superimpose the principles of *shari'a* on the new state.

⁵ The word *ulema* refer to theologians, and *mullahs* to mosque-based leadership. These definitions are good enough for the present purpose, though the meanings of both these titles are more complex than this.

⁶ *Jahiliyya* is an Islamic concept describing the state of ignorance of the guidance from God.

⁷ *Ummah* is an Arabic word meaning "community" or "nation."

Thus issues such as the role of religious minorities became a part of the early debates about the national identity, during the writing of the first constitution. After the 1971 Bangladesh crisis which led to the collapse of the whole infrastructure that had so far held Pakistan together, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto established the most secular government in Pakistan's history but the situation changed dramatically after General Zia-ul-Haq's coup in 1977. Pakistan's Islamic identity was reinforced but was now combined with the military's dictatorial rule, and thus led to a state-based revival of Pakistan's Islamization through a change in the constitution and the introduction of new laws.

Minorities, especially Christians, have responded to these developments in different ways, in private they developed a negative attitude toward the power holders and Muslims in general. Amjad-Ali believed that "the level of [their] obsequious sycophancy and internal negativity towards Islam has been proportionate to the public demand for Islamic law in political and social life." In addition, their missiological and theological vocation was determined by their background and theological formation. For example, inside the protestant traditions Pakistani Christians adopted evangelical theology developed in the context of Western modernity, without asking how to apply this theology in the context of Islam. When such a theology was done at all, it was highly polemical against Islam, following the tradition of Phander's *Mizan ul Haq* (Balance of Truth). On the other hand, in terms of piety Pakistani Christians were deeply affected by Islam, and on issues like fasting, clothing, and anything to do with sexuality, their cultural norms are overlaid by a deep Islamic and/or Hindu veneer. Highlighting this contrast, Prof. Amjad-Ali argued that while Pakistani Christians were being very conservative theologically, they were in fact being much closer to Islam than they realized or acknowledged. He thought that "their theology was predominantly based on Christendom and for a Christian majority, however their experience of piety and religious practice was determined by their minority status under a serious Muslim threat. This theological schizophrenia caused a serious crisis of responsibility and theological formation, mission and witness [... and so] Pakistani Christians largely stayed away from any role in public life and the political arena."

He commented on the blasphemy laws, which under Zia's Islamization expanded to include clauses 295-B and 295-C to the Pakistan Penal Code, thus making blasphemy against the Qur'an heavily punishable and blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammad punishable by death. This has caused incredible dislocation and created victims in every community, but it has become an ever present cudgel against the minorities. Especially since Pakistani Christians are often regarded by Muslims as the agents, allies and symbols of the West, particularly America. So whenever world events transpire to reflect some anti-Islamic feelings, the Christians are held to blame.

At the end of his presentation, reflecting on what is required for evolving a new doctrinal and theological base for a genuine Christian theology in Pakistan, Amjad-Ali proposed the following:

1. To address the sources, by encouraging a more contextual hermeneutics of the Bible.

2. To discuss the nature of law, and whether the law is binding, like *shariah*, or is it a parameter defining guide to human sociality, inter-exchange and inter-subjective activity, inspired by Christian understanding of law based on God's justice and love.
3. To question the status and place of sinners, which will change our understanding of the character of exclusivity and inclusivity. When inclusivity is based on the cruciform model, on God's love on the Cross and salvation for that sinner, this theology will help shift perceptions against Muslims and bring a tradition of love, care, and giving

He concluded with a few critical observations and questions especially on the relationship between religion and politics and church and state, the issues of *lex talionis* and on the situation of Muslim minorities and Islamic sources.

Panel - IV Contextual Approaches to Islam: Christians in Pluralistic Context

Panel four focused on the role of context in articulating theological thinking, speaking from the experience of Christians living in pluralistic contexts—principally Western. It included presentations by Christian theologians from Sweden/Kenya, United States/Australia and Norway, and was moderated by Rev Dr Jørgen S. Sørensen, General Secretary of the Council on International Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

✚ **The first panelist, Dr Anne Kubai, from Uppsala University - originally from Kenya- has worked for many years on the issue of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa with PROCMURA**

In her presentation Dr. Kubai argued that with the end of the Cold War, there was an urgent need to find a new strategic enemy. Though there were no real rivals or enemies, there was a threat that was perceived to be more dangerous: terrorism, which became synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism. The resource for this war was the well-known mental blocks of prejudices and projections erected in the contemporary “western” imagination over Islam and in Muslim imagination over the “west”. The events of 9/11 not only confirmed these mutual mental images, but also legitimised and energised “the fight against terrorism”. She explained how in the context of the “war on terror”, representations and perceptions of events and situations become crucial; the historical myths are revived and the perception of Islam as violent is globalized.

In Africa, she argued, the war on terrorism has adversely impacted on the perception of the Other, and thus on the already fragile Christian-Muslim relations. Christian-Muslim relations have become of much wider interest; they have been taken beyond the narrow religious factor. Divisions which had been hitherto blurred become more defined, as there is a mutual perception

of otherness which is evidently shaped by current global trends. Hence the values of the Other are regarded as threatening or problematic and the end result is mutual distrust, as the communities move on in a troubled relationship.

She commented that in Africa, “Christian scholars have formulated theologies of liberation in response to the struggle of the poor and economically downtrodden; Black theology in response to the experiences of racially oppressed Africans in this continent and the Diaspora; and feminist theology as a resource of the emerging consciousness of women”. Similarly, there are resources that can motivate a theology which can sustain an integrated approach to the issue of interreligious relations. However, in Kubai’s view, this is not without certain challenges: the gamut of emerging trends and discourses in the Christian churches, not only in Africa, but also in the African Diaspora in Europe. The emphasis on individualism and the appropriation of modernity in Europe by immigrant African Christians introduces a new dynamic in the conundrum.

✚ ***The second input was given by Fr. Prof Daniel Madigan SJ, from Georgetown University.***

Fr. Madigan is a Consultant for the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims

In the beginning of his presentation, Fr. Madigan pointed the problem of category mistakes that might arise when we define religions with pre-determined generic categories such as: founder, scripture, symbols, feasts, law and practices, ceremonies, ideals, etc. In terms of Islam and Christianity a fundamental mistake occurs in paralleling the Qur’an and the gospels, Jesus and Muhammad. It is important to understand the correct parallels in order to recognize the specificity of each tradition with regard to the notions of revelation, scripture and prophecy. Therefore, he proposed the notion of the Word (not in the first place scripture) as the common term around which Christians and Muslims can build an understanding of their religions’ specificities.

He also pointed out a comparison mistake in today’s plural contexts, when religions tend to be reduced to varying schemes of rituals and actions to be carried out and of prohibitions to be observed, they tend to be compared on the basis of their ethical standards and ritual observances. In this case the specificity of Christianity, in which it is believed that God takes the initiative in putting us in right relationship, tends to get lost altogether.

In response to the increasing Muslim presence in the West, historically considered a Christian context, Fr. Madigan called attention to the need for Christian theology today to take Islam as an interlocutor in the way Western theology has in recent centuries taken skepticism and unbelief as its interlocutor; in this we are engaging not people who do not believe, but rather who believe differently. This has already been experienced by the Eastern churches and particularly in the Middle East where Christians have a strong awareness of Islam not as an exotic “other religion” but as a post-Christian and quite novel reading of the Judeo-Christian tradition, “as a reform

movement that proposes a substantial re-reading of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Christian tradition that had developed in biblical and post-biblical literature and practice.” For believing Muslims Islam is not simply a human reform movement, but God’s reform. Thus it has a very particular claim on the theological attention of both Christians and Jews. The dialogue is, therefore, qualitatively different from what it tends to be with believers of traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism, even though in the Western pluralist context these dialogues with Eastern traditions seem to dictate the model. Fr. Madigan argued that Christians may have to accommodate themselves to the idea that our theological dialogue is not simply the polite study of the exotic beliefs and customs, but rather a sometimes vigorous disagreement about how to “read” and understand the history of God’s engagement with humanity, and that Islam, as a religion, will remain a lively challenger of our reading of the Jesus event, and will call us to an ever clearer expression of our faith.

Although the figure of Abraham has become an increasingly important a symbol of common faith pluralist situations such as the Western context, Fr. Madigan said it is difficult to see that a focus on our “father in faith” will give us the common framework through which to understand each other. “The most important common belief our traditions share,” he added, “is that the Word of God has been spoken in our world—the eternal divine word that is of the very essence of God.” Speaking about the “word of God” has often led to a competition over the relative value of each other’s prophets and scriptures, but for Madigan this is a category mistake and “we need to avoid being drawn into a discourse of Prophets and Books which ultimately leads us into a theological dead-end.”

Furthermore, he commented that is essential for Christian self-understanding to recover the centrality of the Incarnation and Trinity, but at the same time to find more fruitful ways of expressing them for a Muslim audience. Given what he had already pointed out about the parallel between Jesus and the Qur’an, Fr. Madigan proposed that “a robustly Johannine, high-descending, Logos-Christology is, perhaps contrary to expectation, a more promising point of departure for a theology responsive to Islam, than are the low-ascending Christologies often adopted as being most appropriate to interfaith engagement.” He also explained that a Logos-Christology may give us a first opening into a more accessible theology of the Trinity.

He concluded by emphasizing that the Christian self-understanding can be immeasurably enriched in the encounter with a tradition that bears in its very foundation a critique of our faith. “Just as Christians are able to lose sight of the uniqueness of the Gospel, others are sometimes able to catch sight of it,” and they can alert us to it, even though it may be through criticism.

✚ ***The third input was given by Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik from the University of Oslo - also representing the Church of Norway***

In his presentation, Prof. Leirvik tried to lead the discussion towards exploring a new theological paradigm for Christian-Muslim dialogue and proposed “a relational theology of

religion” in dialogue with Islam. He began by offering some introductory remarks on the notion of pluralism, wherein he distinguished between traditional plurality and modern pluralism; “Traditional plurality refers to a situation in which different cultures and faiths coexist as entities that can be neatly separated, in a relatively stable constellation in which the borders between the communities can only be crossed at great personal cost. In situations of modern pluralism, everything is more fluid. Individuals may identify with more than one culture and may develop plural identities; [...] Modern pluralism implies also that every faith has to recognize a plurality of views within one’s own tradition.” In this context of modern pluralism, he explained, the distinction between ecumenical conversation and interreligious dialogue sometimes become blurred, and disagreement, on some ethical issues for instance, sometimes leads to forming new alliances between conservative Christians and conservative Muslims, or between liberals on both sides.

While addressing the question of how to explain the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in a meaningful way? Leirvik offered some reflections on Trinitarian theology as a form of “Relational theology.” Taking Christian faith in God the Creator, the Incarnate, and the Holy Spirit as a frame of reference, he reflected on three theological questions that might be seen as aspects of Trinitarian theology, but could also be reformulated interreligiously as questions about what he proposed as a “relational theology”:

1) Can we recognize religious plurality as willed by God? 2) Can Christians and Muslims join hands in a humanization of theology? 3) Can we think of the Holy Spirit as “the holy between” Christians and Muslims?

As regards the first question, he commented that when the signatories of *A Common Word* quoted the Qur’an and the Bible side by side, they were treating central aspects of the Bible as reliable revelation. Similarly we find several Qur’anic quotations in the Archbishop of Canterbury’s response to *A Common Word*, treating these parts of the holy book of Islam as a divine source of spiritual guidance. Such mutual respect of each other’s scripture, he argued, can be nurtured through engaging scriptural reasoning methods, which may lead to a double experience: “a sense of joint blessing, but also a recognition that differences in scriptural interpretation do not necessarily coincide with the boundaries between our religions.”

Regarding the second question, Prof. Leirvik tried to bring into focus the issue of humanization of theology, which he considered an aspect of Christology (or of incarnation theology).

While exploring the Biblical notion that the love of God can never be separated from the love of the human other, a similar understanding in the context of Islam is reflected in a *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet) about visiting the sick. Leirvik proposed that the close association of God to the vulnerable Other in this *Hadith* - as it was also expressed in *A Common Word* - could be one possible point of departure for a dialogue on the humanization of theology. In this respect he also referred to Tariq Ramadan’s call for a moratorium on corporeal punishments in Islam, as

expression of a concern to protect the vulnerable human being. He then explained that this concern for the vulnerable Other has gradually become a shared religious commitment for Christians and Muslims in Norway, and has led to several joint actions by the Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council of Norway, on issues related to religious minorities, conversion, domestic violence, and have also opened a dialogue about the highly controversial question of homosexuality. This also illustrates how the public discourses in the Scandinavian context constantly challenge Christians and Muslims alike to reconsider their traditional positions – and to humanize their theologies.

In the last part of his presentation, he briefly touched upon the question of a “relational Pneumatology”, reflecting on Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue which includes a relational way of understanding the work of the Holy Spirit. Buber’s main ethical point is to avoid reducing one another to an object, an “It”; instead, in a truly dialogical relation we treat each other as “I” and “Thou”, and the space between us (between I and Thou) will be filled by Spirit.

Leirvik concluded by asking whether this kind of relational theology, or Pneumatology, can make sense in Christian-Muslim dialogue. He believed that this way of reasoning protects the sanctity of every true encounter, whether it is experienced as a blessing or as a difficult test. It reveals both modes of interreligious encounter as a potential dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

Plenary Discussion

Substantial Issues for Christian Theology in Relation to Islam - Implications for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the 21st Century

Moderated by H.E. Bishop Nareg Amezian, from the Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia, and a co-moderator of JCC

The plenary session included a presentation of the draft of a reflective report produced by a group of listeners who accompanied the meeting. Prof. David Thomas, the convener of the Listeners Group, presented the report. This was followed by a rich discussion, comments and suggestions from the participants, however, the session could not reach an agreement for adopting the listeners report. It was agreed to receive it as a reflective report of the discussion and to add it to the summary report of the consultation.

Although the listeners’ report was not adopted by the participants as a final statement of the consultation since it needed further development, it provided an indication of where the ecumenical family stands today in the process of asking questions and finding answers in relation to the subject matter. It included several recommendations and proposals to be followed up by the organizers.

Several points mentioned in the Listeners Report were included in a joint press release by the WCC and WARC, issued 22 October 2008.

The Listeners Report

20.10.2008

1. A sense of who we (Christians) are in relation to Muslims

- Our self-understanding as Christians is defined by our relationship with God as Trinity as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Our traditions help us to perceive the loving God in creating, incarnational, salvific and pneumatological terms
- We are each drawn closer to God through our own communal life and tradition
- Our traditions inspire us to show love for our neighbour as a representative of the presence of Jesus Christ, regardless of race, religion or gender
- Our Christian self-understandings are challenged and deepened by our relations with Muslims
- As Christians we often find ourselves in a critical relationship with our own traditions, and can also find ourselves growing in commitment to our own traditions
- At various times, Christians have looked on Muslims as Other in different ways: partner, friend, neighbour, stranger, rival, even "enemy", some of these helping dialogue, others hindering it
- Our relationships with Muslims have been mixed, and have been qualified by mutual respect and cooperation, but also mutual oppression and persecution
- Christians are constantly renewed by the process of dialogue; which helps explain why we welcome the invitation of *A Common Word*
- Christians thrive upon the fertile tension between theological reflection and living in diverse contexts with Muslims

2. When Christians interact with Muslims they have drawn upon a variety of resources. In our time when relations between Christians and Muslims are particularly urgent these resources require intentional re-formulation

- We have long recognized the importance of specialists in the study of Islam as Muslims live and present it, and the need to educate leaders and communities in the knowledge of Islam. Learning from the lessons of the past is important for future relations.
- We acknowledge the need for different theological approaches in different contexts
- We recognize the virtue of patient listening, and look on dialogue as an aspect of spirituality. We have learnt the need for sensitivity in dialogue with Muslims

especially in areas of vocabulary, and when referring to key terms such as mission, witness and conversion.

- We recognize the diversity and richness of attitudes among Christians and know the importance of heeding questions raised by people from different places, circumstances and generations, especially the young.
- We recognize the value of resources from outside our own faith (including Islam) in constructing welcoming and diverse communities.

3. Steps for Further Reflection

Through this consultation we have discerned the need to

1) Encourage our communities to

- know Islam better by listening carefully to how Muslims express themselves
- understand better God's invitation to us to be good neighbours to one another, and to extend this neighbourliness to Muslims.
- equip ourselves to bear appropriate witness to “the hope that is in us”

2) work together ecumenically to

- continue our exploration of such important questions as Trinity and Salvation in relation to Islam, and the relationship between witness, mission, dialogue and living together in right relationship
- continue network-building within the resources of this consultation body, and we invite our WCC and CWC colleagues actively to explore ways of facilitating this

3) work with Muslims on issues such as

- Religion and state, human rights
- Relationship of religious identity to land or territory
- Concepts of secularism, pluralism, citizenship
- Further collaboration on such issues as social and economic justice, climate change, peace, healing of memories
- Conversion
- Use of religious symbols for political ideologies, religiously motivated violence, gender justice and human sexuality
- What it means to encounter one another
- How interreligious dialogue contributes to deepening contextual theology
- The common challenge to hand on the legacy of faith to coming generations

-- End of the report --

Joint Press Release by the WCC and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches

Issued 22.10.08

Christian communities should improve their knowledge of Islam, be good neighbours to Muslims and bear witness to their faith in an appropriate manner, according to an international group of church leaders and experts on Christian-Muslim dialogue.

These were some of the recommendations put forward at an 18 to 20 October consultation aimed at developing an ecumenical Christian theological understanding of dialogue with Islam. Convened by the World Council of Churches (WCC), it gathered some fifty church leaders and experts on Christian-Muslim dialogue in Chavannes-de-Bogis, outside Geneva, Switzerland.

Participants acknowledged a history of "mixed" relationships between Christians and Muslims, with both positive and negative dimensions. On their part, Christians have seen Muslims both as friend and rival, neighbour and stranger.

However, participants agreed, Christianity teaches to love the neighbour regardless of race, gender or religion. Even more, Christian self-understanding is challenged and deepened through relationships with Muslims, while Christians themselves are renewed by entering into dialogue with them.

For this dialogue to be fruitful it needs to be sensitive, including a careful use of traditional Christian language like mission, witness and conversion. And both church leaders and communities need to be educated in the knowledge of Islam as Muslims live and present it.

While attitudes among Christians towards Islam are diverse and rich, different contexts and experiences of living together with Muslims inspire different theological approaches.

The consultation identified a number of issues to be addressed in further dialogue with Muslims, among others: human rights, conversion, concepts of secularism, pluralism, and citizenship, as well as the use of religious symbols for political ideologies and religiously motivated violence.

Participants also recommended further Christian-Muslim collaboration on issues such as social and economic justice, climate change, peace and healing of memories.

Organized by the WCC together with a number of Christian World Communions, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Roman Catholic Church, the consultation is a continuation of an ecumenical process launched by the WCC in response to "A Common Word," a letter signed by 138 Muslim scholars and addressed to Christian leaders around the world in October 2007.

Rather than producing a written response to the letter by the Muslim scholars, the goal of the consultation was to provide a space for churches and communions of churches to share their initiatives and theological resources for engaging with Muslims, and to identify substantial issues for Christian theology in relation to Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Participants agreed on the need for further ecumenical exploration of theological issues pertaining to Muslim-Christian dialogue and invited the organizers to facilitate the process. A report on the consultation, including the presentations delivered and an account of the findings will be published by the end of the year.

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