



LEARNING TO EXPLORE LOVE TOGETHER
Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to “A Common Word”

Preamble

On 13 October 2007 a group of 138 Muslim scholars addressed an open letter to Christian leaders. Among those addressed was the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. Based on initial responses from member churches, the WCC initiated a process of responding to the letter. Since November 2007 the WCC commenced consultation with its member churches and ecumenical partners, a number of whom responded with great enthusiasm. This was followed by a meeting of scholars and church experts engaged in the field of Christian-Muslim relations. Their deliberations produced the following commentary on the letter entitled “Learning to Explore Love Together”. The commentary is intended to assist the churches in reading and responding to the letter “A Common Word”. The document includes suggestions to encourage member churches and ecumenical partners in their reflection on the Letter and in its invitation to explore together with Muslim fellows the love of God and the love of neighbour in their respective contexts. Churches and ecumenical partners are then invited to share their reflections with the WCC as a contribution to a common understanding of and a common response to this initiative. The on going process of reflection and the desire to create a common response to the letter through an initiative of dialogue is described below.

A Letter from 138 Muslim Scholars

The Letter, entitled *A Common Word between Us and You* (drawing upon an invitation to conversation in common between Christians and Muslims that appears in the Qur’an), sets out key dimensions of belief and action that in its authors’ understanding followers of the two faiths hold in common. They sum these up in the two-fold commandments of love expressed in the Bible: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself’. To this end, by citing verses from the Bible, the Qur’an and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), the letter briefly shows how Christians and Muslims share similar teachings about love for God and love for neighbour. On the basis of these shared teachings, the authors then issue an invitation to Christians to join together with them ‘on the common essentials of our two religions’. They also make clear that there are differences between Christianity and Islam, and counsel that ‘there is no minimizing some of our formal differences’. But they recall that since 55% of the world’s population belongs to these two religions, “making the relationship between these two religious communities [is] the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace.”

This invitation marks an encouraging new stage in Muslim thinking about relations between

Muslims and Christians. Throughout their shared history, followers of the two faiths have too often misunderstood one another. In recent times, a new way of thinking about the other took place; the churches have begun to think afresh about the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, including Islam - prominent among the outcomes of this thinking are the Roman Catholic Church's *Declaration on Relations between the Church and non-Christian Religions*, 1965, and the World Council of Churches' *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, 1979. Here, in *A Common Word* is a clear indication that leading Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders are committed to fresh thinking about the relationship between Islam and Christianity. The courage of their action must be applauded – and since then around one hundred more scholars have signed the Letter - and the sincerity of their gesture must be welcomed in the warmest terms.

Ways towards a Response

After consultation with its member churches and ecumenical partners, and with the advice of specialists, the World Council of Churches proposes to initiate a process that, with patient reflection and mutual exploration between the people of the churches and the people of the mosques, can lead to fresh awareness one of the other, abandonment of stubborn prejudices, and new ways forward in respect and cooperation.

The following steps summarize the process:

- The World Council of Churches encourages its member churches and ecumenical partners, to recognize and welcome the serious intent of *A Common Word* and prayerfully consider its invitation to dialogue and cooperation. It also invites them to reflect ecumenically on the content of the Letter in their own unique contexts. While acknowledging that some churches have already begun this journey, the present document is aimed at facilitating and deepening such endeavours.
- The Council will call on its Muslim partners – especially the signatories to the Letter – to create a joint *planning group* to prepare steps towards common action, and seek joint Muslim and Christian initiatives of dialogue and cooperation at both the regional and global levels.
- The Council will propose to this group, the organizing a series of consultations between Muslim and Christian leaders, scholars and practitioners which, based on this new opportunity, will reflect on points of mutual understanding, work on a theological and ethical framework for future joint initiatives and establish new means of exploring further in both matters of faith and life.

These steps are taken on the understanding that the invitation in the Letter is issued by its signatories in full awareness of the difficulties that have accompanied past efforts, and that it signals a new and vigorously energized desire for a fresh start.

Exploring Together the Love for God and Love for Neighbour

The Letter eloquently underlines similarities on the key points of love for God and love for neighbour which both Christians and Muslims respect. However, the differences between the ways in which they each understand these imperatives and put them into practice cannot be ignored.

The testimony of past and present writings by Muslims and Christians about and against the other serves as a clear reminder that misunderstanding can easily arise when followers of each faith try to explore the other's beliefs without proper care and attention. Therefore, it must be stated

unequivocally that Christians should be ready to learn about Islam by listening closely to what Muslims themselves teach, and that Muslims should be ready to learn about Christianity by listening closely to what Christians themselves teach. Presuppositions are to be put aside, and followers of both faiths must be ready to seek the learning and wisdom of the other as the other imparts it according to their own unique insights.

Exploration of love for God together will undoubtedly yield startlingly instructive insights for both Christians and Muslims. In the same way, exploration of love for neighbour together will reveal many points on which Muslims and Christians will recognize commonly held principles and actions. But these signs of similarity must be held in tension with real divergences and hard to reconcile differences.

Thus, for example, while both Christians and Muslims say they perceive God as one, what is actually meant in Islam by the doctrine of *Tawhid* (Unity of God), and what is actually meant in Christianity by the doctrine of the Trinity? Are these contradictory doctrines, as the history of engagement between the two faiths attests, or is there a way in which they can be seen as complementary insights into the mystery of God?

Similarly, while both Muslims and Christians claim to receive revelation from God, what is meant when Muslims claim to perceive the will of God revealed in the Qur'an - what has been called the Word of God become book-, and what is meant when Christians claim to perceive God's self revealed in Jesus Christ - who is called the Word of God become flesh?

In the same way, the love of neighbor is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God in both religions. Both Christians and Muslims obey God by seeking to respond to need in society. In Islam loving one's own neighbor is expressed in acting with responsibility and generosity towards the needy within the community. In Christianity the love of neighbour is seen as a reflection of God's love to humanity through Jesus Christ. This love transcends geographical and religious boundaries and thus embraces humanity in all its components without exception as it is expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The concept of love of God and love of neighbour is but one bridge and point of dialogue for action, at the same time Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation should explore a common ground in the search for justice and peace.

Agreeing and Disagreeing in Respect and Love

While Christians and Muslims may often be surprised to recognize in the utterances and explanations of the other what can appear to be reflections of their own beliefs, they will also see stark divergences in emphasis and some clear differences that resist all resolution by mutual efforts. Not the least of these will be the Christian difficulty of appreciating Muhammad as a prophet, and the Muslim difficulty of appreciating Jesus as God incarnate. These spring from sincerely held views that have been keenly defended for centuries, and as keenly questioned and rejected.

It is therefore a pressing necessity that while Christians and Muslims must find ways of enhancing what they hold in common, they must also find ways of acknowledging and respecting the differences between them, of attempting to understand these, and of not allowing them to fuel hostility. The degeneration into mutual recrimination and condemnation is a pattern that has been repeated in the past to the sorrow of people of good will, who would also acknowledge with regret the ways in which religion has been misused. This may easily continue in the future unless careful steps are taken to prevent it.

With understanding the plurality and complexity of their shared history, both Christians and Muslims must work hard to develop respect where understanding is difficult and trust where differences do not yield to inquiry. In full recognition of the long history they hold in common, while recalling examples of humane mutual respect, they must recognize the need to work actively to heal hurts both local and global, and to change attitudes and stereotypes. Member churches are encouraged to recall and learn from each other's experiences, and examine how these might inform and challenge their future actions.

More than this, even when Christians and Muslims continue to disagree on matters of belief, they should strive to reach the point at which they can recognize and endorse what they hold in common with sufficient integrity to allow them to work together in the world. Thus, they should make it a priority to understand how the precious heritages they each hold can direct and even impel them to work together for justice and peace, recognizing their joint goals and responding to the call of the One they worship and obey to come together not only in a common word but also in common action for the greater glory of God and the wellbeing of all.