

# Future Christian-Muslim Engagement

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Allow me, first of all, to express my gratitude to God for having inspired a small group of Muslim believers to author 'The Open letter and Call from Muslim religious Leaders' (=ACW) of October 13th 2007 and many other eminent Muslim leaders and scholars to sign it. Let me equally thank God for inspiring the Archbishop of Canterbury to write his response: 'A Common Word for the Common Good' (ACWCG) -- after having called together earlier this year a good number of fellow Christians belonging to various denominations and having listened carefully to their responses to ACW. These two initiatives have contributed significantly to moving forward religious conversation between Muslims and Christians. May I state here my full agreement with what the Archbishop has written at the beginning of his searching and inspiring Response ACWCG: '...only through a commitment to that transcendent perspective to which your letter points, and to which we also look, shall we find the resources for radical, transforming, non-violent engagement with the deepest needs of our world and our common humanity.' (p. 1)

The two documents do not waste time with non-committal compliments nor do they avoid contradiction and critique, yet throughout they maintain an attitude of listening, fairness, respect -- in the awareness of a shared responsibility before God, humankind and all creation. In fact, they open up the opportunity for a new stage in the ongoing process of Christian-Muslim encounter.

I have been invited within this session on the theme 'Future Christian-Muslim Engagement', in the light of the two documents just mentioned and of various other responses and discussions in the wake of 'A Common Word', to make a few remarks on 'Best Practice for Muslim-Christian Engagement'.

The authors of ACW have quite rightly called to mind the political and societal responsibility which Christians and Muslims carry, if only because they make up something like half of the world population. We can only do justice to this responsibility, and we can only pursue the aspirations expressed in the two documents with any credibility, if we have the courage and confidence to talk with one another about what moves us in our innermost hearts and minds as we reflect on the reality of Christian-Muslim encounter on the ground. Are we prepared for honest self-critique, eager to listen to -- and possibly to accept -- any well-informed critique from our partners in dialogue, indeed from partners in our wider societies?

This contribution starts from the common affirmation of the absolutely central place held within each faith by love of God and love of neighbour, or the dual love commandment. Without going into the weighty theological questions which ACW and ACWCG raise, may I here briefly point to five selected areas of questions that would seem to demand consideration and possibly action, on the part of Christians and Muslims, always keeping in mind the appropriate type of encounter in question.

## **1. The dual love commandment and persistent human self-centeredness.**

ACW, surprisingly in the light of the Koran's portrayal of the human predicament, says little about such abiding realities that mark individual and corporate human life as, for instance, forgetfulness of God and rebellion against him, of oppression in the sense of exceeding the appropriate limits of behaviour in dealing with others, while violating their essential human rights (especially that of the weak and marginalised). Does ACW possibly believe that human beings, if only sufficiently and intensively enough instructed about the dual love commandment, can and will overcome this problematic situation? ACW does not discuss the ways in which God's love is able to come and remedy "the plight of man". The response of the Archbishop, in contrast, states that 'when God acts towards us in compassion to liberate us from evil, to deal with the consequences of our rebellion against him and to make us able to call upon him with confidence, it is a natural (but not automatic) flowing outwards of his own everlasting action.' (p.

5) Do we both, Christians and Muslims, share an awareness of our need to be liberated by God into the freedom of His gift of love? In this case our loving response to God's action would seem to require repentance, prayer for inner purification as well as for purification by acts of compassion, the practice of self-criticism individually and corporately and prayer that we might be healed, redeemed and recreated by the power of God's self-giving love.

Such awareness will bring about in us a determined effort towards honest self-criticism as well as an eager willingness to learn and to be cleansed and transformed by listening to what God may want to tell us through our partners in dialogue, be they declared followers of a religious faith or not. Do we consider our dialogue sufficiently informed by these convictions and the attitudes shaped by them?

## **2. The dual love commandment as key to the interpretation of Holy Scriptures**

The Archbishop has pointed towards the substantial difference between how Christians and Muslims understand what Holy Scripture is, and also the different places held by their respective scriptures within their wider theologies. I agree wholeheartedly with him that, in spite of this difference, 'studying our scriptures together might continue to provide a fruitful element of our engagements with each other in the "process of building a home together"'. (p. 3) In fact, I consider that determined and effective efforts to promote the thorough study of the religious tradition of the Muslim or of the Christian partner in dialogue are essential, especially among Muslim and Christian students of religion. Such study should be marked simultaneously by empathy and critical rigour, and should endeavour to understand single doctrines within the whole of the faith-universe of the partner in dialogue. Do we have enough thoroughly-trained Christian students of Islam and Muslim students of Christianity? Critical and at the same time empathetic study of the partner in dialogue would imply that ever more Christians study Islam as Muslims ideally see it and also as it has been and is lived in reality; equally, it would imply that ever more Muslims study the normative teachings as well the empirical reality of the Christian faith tradition of Christianity, in the same attitude of critical openness. In this way such doctrines as for instance those of 'the altering of the biblical scriptures by Jews and Christians' (tahrīf), 'the incarnation of God in Jesus the Messiah', 'the Holy Trinity of God', 'the uncreatedness of the Koran', of 'Muhammad as the seal of the prophets' (khātam an-nabiyyin) may be better appreciated by those who cannot accept them in faith. I am pleading here for a critical Christian-Muslim scholarship marked by the will to understand out of love. Must one not formulate the golden rule also this way: Try to understand the other's faith as you would like your own faith to be understood?

Christians and Muslims engaged in the study of the other faith walk the difficult path of applying the approaches of the modern human sciences intelligently to the great, age-old disciplines of the other faith tradition, but doing so in a spirit of charitable and empathetic understanding. Where that spirit is lacking in our study of each other's traditions, we betray fundamental imperatives common to both our faiths about love and respect for our neighbour.

## **3. The dual love commandment and Human Rights**

Only relatively recently the Christian churches and a few Muslim individuals and even bodies (at least to some extent) have revised their teaching on human rights in principle. They have turned and become supporters and defenders of Human Rights. God himself, so they argue, has planted them, as it were, into the nature of man. This is the decisive reason, why these rights claim unconditional respect both from the state as well as from the Church. Human rights and divine rights cannot be played off one against the other. Human rights give expression to the minimal conditions which protect the human dignity which is due to the human person as Creature of God. In this sense, to recognize and respect human rights is nothing but obedience to the will of God; indeed, there are many believers for whom the promotion of HR is an aspect of obedience to the dual love commandment. Am I right to assume that those who have signed ACW would unqualifiedly recognise Human Rights or am I mistaken in this? The word "Islam" means "submission to the Will of God". Hence, if human rights correspond to the divine Will, does Islam by its nature carry the obligation to recognize them together with all human beings of good will?

#### **4. The dual love commandment and the organisation of the state in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies.**

In Christian-Muslim dialogue the question of the correct relation between religion and state plays an important role. The high regard for the separation of religion and state among most Christians and many Muslims does not seem primarily due to philosophical or ideological reasons. Most important and absolutely necessary for understanding it are the historical experiences that led to it: in the West these were especially the confessional wars after the protestant Reformation and, later, the communist and fascist dictatorships of the 20th century. Limits are imposed on – and accepted by – both religion and state. This arises from the conviction that this mutual demarcation is of use to both sides and follows from the love of neighbour that insists on respecting the religious and confessional identity of the other, even if the teaching associated with this identity may be rejected as inadequate or false. It rejects the objective of imposing an Islamic or Christian state order. It is convinced that the separation of state and religions serves the peaceful co-existence of all peoples. The neutral role which it prescribes to the state prevents the state developing an exaggerated pseudo-religious self-understanding and also prevents particular religions from misusing power and violence in their own interests. The attempt to establish Christian states has failed and with great costs on all sides. Nothing suggests that Islamic states will and can fare better. The crucial question here once again is the understanding of human rights. I think we should intensify dialogue on this matter.

The modern state has to preserve its religious neutrality. Can we together resist all attempts, from whatever side they may emerge, to create in gradual ways spaces for the rule of a Law directly derived from texts held to be divinely revealed and eventually a state ruled by such a body of laws?

#### **5. The dual love commandment and violence in the name of religion**

No religion can declare itself free from the fact that in its name violence has been or is being perpetrated. The burden inherited in this way does not disappear by itself. For the past and its memory to be healed more is needed than to agree about the facts, though merely to achieve this can be very difficult. All religions must face the task of clarifying their relationship to violence, in the past and in the present, for the sake of the future. This reaches far beyond the problem of Holy War. How does a religion deal with human beings, who turn away from it, and how with those who falsify or vilify or ridicule the faith? In the Christian West for centuries those deemed guilty of apostasy, heresy and blasphemy were threatened or punished with death. That is past, hopefully for ever. The important principle, that nobody may be forced to believe (cf. Q 2:256) only comes fully to fruition, if it guarantees the freedom also to abandon the faith, to understand it differently, or even to despise it. Am I right to think that it is solely God's affair to judge the weight of such matters. Only He is able to look right into the inner hearts of women and men. Hence we should beware of wanting to anticipate HIS judgement.

Before concluding let me make a practical proposal: Could not the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, in the spirit of ACW, constitute a permanent Christian-Muslim working committee (I do not wish to name it a watchdog committee) that would consider and evaluate complaints from Muslims and from Christians about ways of acting and speaking on the part of Christian and Muslim individual and bodies that seem to contradict blatantly the spirit and principles of dialogue which those very individuals and bodies have committed themselves to?

#### **Conclusion**

The dialogue between Christians and Muslims has probably reached only its initial stages. It needs patience and confidence, staying power and open hearts. It is our own faith, first and foremost, which obliges us to speak with one another in spite of all the depressing experiences in our relations, past and present. In other words, God expects dialogue of us, the God whom we Christians invoke together with you Muslims as the merciful, the just, the loving and the long-suffering. We owe gratitude to God and also to the authors of 'The Open Letter and Call' as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, for effectively having

focussed our aspirations and prayers on the ongoing pilgrimage of encounter with one another towards HIM.

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Public lecture given at the Cambridge (UK) University  
A Common Word Conference, held on October 12th, 2008