

In the name of God the merciful ,most kind

Developing mutual understanding and friendship between Muslims and Christians

Musharraf Hussain

A talk given at a meeting of three bishops in Morley Retreat and Conference Centre, Ilkeston.

In this paper I will be exploring the following three aspects of Christian – Muslim relations:

- a) **What is the nature of Christian-Muslim relations: Theological arguments.**
- b) **A brief survey of activities and programmes promoting Christian Muslim relations.**
- c) **What more can be done.**

In Islam rights are of two kinds the Divine rights and the Human rights. Divine rights include strong faith in the Lord and worshipping Him. Human rights are about respecting others, caring for them and valuing diversity. Humanity is described as “Allah’s

family” and thereby Human rights are sacred. The Qur’an repeatedly tells believers to worship the Lord and equally emphasis the respect for Human rights. In order to promote

these rights and good relations The Qur’an teaches four principles:

1. Equality and not discrimination
2. Mutual understanding not disengagement
3. Co-operation not conflict
4. Friendship not Hatred

(for full discussion on this plz see my paper “quranic motivation for interfaith work)

This clearly shows that a Muslim who is aware of his religious teachings will naturally engage in Christian-Muslim dialogue. I believe that our Christian friends would have a parallel set of teachings which encourages them to engage with the other.

Therefore for pious Muslims and Christian’s interfaith dialogue is not merely a diplomatic exercise about exchanging smiles and courtesies. Neither is it just for promoting peace and security, in fact it is based on genuine desire to know the other and to be good to the other.

Professor Hugh Goddard has rightly pointed out the real problem with Christian – Muslim relations is ‘The level of mutual understanding between these two communities, however, is often very low; indeed it could be said that mutual ignorance is far more widespread than mutual understanding’(Christians & Muslim: From double standards to Mutual understanding, Curzon Press, P1).

And yet there are many similarities which Dr Zaki Badawi boldly expressed in these words: ‘Christianity and Islam spring from same Abrahamic roots and both adopted Hellenistic philosophical heritage, share moral values, past and present conflicts between them originate in territorial ambitions or the acquisitions of resources’ (September 2001, Writing in Evening Standard London).

The Archbishop Rowan Williams expressed similar sentiments perhaps more guardedly when he said, ‘Christians are Christians and Muslims are Muslims because they care about the truth, and because they believe that truth alone gives life. About the nature of that absolute and life giving truth, Christians and Muslims are not fully in agreement. Yet they are able to find words in which to explain and to explore that disagreement because they also share histories and practices that make parts of their systems of belief mutually recognizable, a story reaching back to God’s creation of the world and God’s call to Abraham’ (In: Scriptures in Dialogue, Churchill House Publishing).

This common base between the two religions is further elaborated by Professor Ismail Faruqi. ‘Islam and Christianity hold that God is transcendent and eternal; that He created the universe; that He created man and placed him on earth to fulfil His will; that the content of divine will for man is faith and moral law. Both religions hold mans fulfilment of the divine will, or obedience to the moral law, to be universal in essence and application. Finally both religions hold that mans fulfilment of this destiny is salvation, felicity and happiness in this world and the next’ (Ismail Faruqi: Islam and other faiths By A. Siddiqui). For such open minded and friendly people, there is no reason why the call to prayer from mosque cannot blend with the chimes of the bells from the nearby church. However, let us be realistic and accept the fact that there will always be Muslims and Christians who have no interest in interfaith dialogue or in bringing people together. The challenge for those engaged in interfaith work is to invite such people with wisdom.

We have seen that there are many parallels, commonalities and similarities between the two traditions that justify our coming together for dialogue. The differences are there too, which make us distinct and unique, Christians and Muslims. For example the Christian belief of trinity and original sin are unacceptable to Muslims just as accepting the Quran as the final divine revelation and the Prophet Muhammed are unacceptable to Christians. For building friendship we must avoid the polemics and focus on commonalities. The Muslims are told to do just this in the Quran, ‘O People of the book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God’ (Ale Imran:64).

Apart from sharing so much spiritual values, Christians and Muslims share moral teachings. In fact it would be correct to say that the moral teachings of both traditions are very similar if not the same. Take for example the famous Christian seven virtues: faith, hope, love, prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. Both the Quran and the Prophetic Sunnah are replete with reference to all these virtues and many more. Similarly now look at the seven

deadly sins; Anger, envy, greed, arrogance, sloth, gluttony and lust. Again Islamic texts emphatically teach Muslims to avoid these seven deadly sins.

A Brief survey of programmes and activities promoting Interfaith

In this brief survey I will look at three initiatives in which i am involved at local, national and international level.

Faiths in Action

In 1997 the vicar of the local church near my mosque came to visit me. Rev. Graham Burton is a gently spoken, thoroughly English and someone committed to social justice. A member of his congregation was having problems with a Muslim neighbour, can the Imam do anything? This was my first interfaith encounter. There after we began to meet regularly, I must admit the initiative came from Graham, although I was willing to work side by side with him.

Since 2000, Christian and Muslims have come together on Good Friday to pray for the suffering in the world, this is what happens, Local Christians walk in procession carrying the cross, they stop outside the mosque, since it is Friday Muslim worshippers are gathered in the mosque. I ask them to come out and greet the Christians. Then Graham and I take turns to read an agreed prayer. This lasts about ten minutes, then the Christians carry on with their procession and the Muslims return back to the Mosque. This has helped to create positive feelings on both sides.

Graham and I continued to meet regularly in 2003 we decided to set up a formal organisation, Faiths in Action. We attracted the local Catholic and URC to work with us, as well as some other voluntary and statutory agencies. Some of our events have included: Seminars on asylum seekers, two public events condemning 7/7 bombings, seminars on spirituality, environment etc.

The Christian Muslim Forum

Representatives of Christian and Muslim communities in England have worked together to establish this national forum. From 2002-4 a series of consultations were held in several cities with significant Muslim populations. The forum was officially launched in January 2006 by the Prime minister in Lambeth Palace. The archbishop of Canterbury is the patron. The objectives of the forum are:

- To weave a web of open, honest and committed personal relationships between leading Christians and Muslims.
- To encourage shared reflections on the spiritual, ethical and practical values of the two traditions in order to offer resources for citizenship in our society.
- To develop channels of communication to help Christians and Muslims together to respond to events which test our relationship.
- Let me explain to you the strategic priorities of the forum. As this will give you insight how this forum of twenty committed Christians and Muslims is working together.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The following five strategic priorities are outlined in the Christian Muslim Forum's 2008-11 Strategy:

Creating Safe Spaces

1. Lead, influence and encourage open and honest engagement to improve community relations;

Living Creatively With Our Differences

2. Build our capacity to engage with each other effectively;
3. Improve women's, young people's and children's involvement in our engagements;

Healing And Creating Relationships

4. Identify and lead discussions on issues of concern that relate to Christian Muslim relations and effect wider society;
5. Be a role model for dialogue and engagement locally, regionally, nationally and internationally;

2. PRIORITY PLANNING

CREATING SAFE SPACES

- 1. Lead, influence and encourage open and honest engagement to improve community relations.**

Why is this a Priority?

- Christian Muslim relations have experienced a significant number of negative encounters historically and more recently. As with all such experiences there is a risk that they become self perpetuating. Whilst recognising differences and disagreements the Forum is committed to building positive relationships between Christians and Muslims, a duty that is at the core of both faiths;
- Christianity and Islam are the two largest faiths in England and will remain so for the foreseeable future. As the Muslim community continues to grow across England there is a need to ensure good relations with Christians, for the sake of these two faith communities and wider society;

- In this context, the Forum knows that it needs to influence Christian and Muslim communities, policy makers, Government and funders about the importance and methods of building positive Christian Muslim relations.

What the Forum wants to achieve with this priority:

- Christians and Muslims increasing their understanding and appreciation of each other.
- Opportunities to meet, discuss and enjoy each others company and celebrate each others faith and communities together.
- Influence society and policy makers to recognise the importance of positive Christian Muslim engagement and to building cohesive communities.

Project Examples:

- *Imams and Ministers Conferences*
- *Christian and Muslim Women Retreats*
- *Preachers Conference*
- *Youth Dialogue*
- *Christian and Muslim Youth Worker Training*
- *Family Issues conferences*

LIVING CREATIVELY WITH OUR DIFFERENCES

2. Build Christians' and Muslims' capacity to engage with each other effectively

Why is this a priority?

- The majority of Christians and Muslims don't know the best methods to start and sustain effective dialogue or other activities with each other;
- Christians and Muslims need to be convinced that dialogue with each other is religiously appropriate, works and is to be encouraged; and
- Emerging Christian and Muslim engagement at local levels needs support, resources and skill development.

What the Forum wants to achieve with this priority:

- An increase in the number of Christians and Muslims engaging positively with each other across society (age groups, genders and class); and
- An increase in resources and effective engagement methodologies available to Christians and Muslims engaging locally, regionally and nationally.

3. Improve the numbers of women, young people and children involved in Christian Muslim engagement

Why is this a priority?

- All three groups are significantly under represented in most Christian Muslim engagement activities, which are less effective as a result.

What the Forum wants to achieve with this priority:

- Engagement initiatives that are designed by, led by and are attractive to these groups;
- Empower and include these groups so that future Christian Muslim engagement activities are as inclusive and therefore effective as possible

Project Examples:

- *Christian and Muslim Women Retreats*
- *Teacher Conferences*
- *Media Training for Faith Leaders*
- *Good Practice Guides for Young People's Christian Muslim Activity Weekends*

HEALING, CREATING AND CELEBRATING RELATIONSHIPS

4. Identify and lead public debate on issues that effect Christian Muslim relations and wider society

Why is this a priority?

- Both faiths require their followers to resolve disagreements with their neighbours and unite on issues of common concern; and
- If issues of common concern are not jointly addressed they have the potential for adversely affecting Christian Muslim relationships and those in wider society

What the forum wants to achieve with this priority:

- Clarifying commonalities and differences on issues of common concern;
- Christians and Muslims supporting each other when fear and ignorance distort people's understanding of the two faiths and their followers; and
- Educating and challenging individuals and institutions misperceptions of either faith.

Project Examples

- Joint statements on issues of public concern relating to the two faiths (e.g. 'Christmas For All' in 2006 – a statement showing Muslim support for the celebration of Christmas and 'No Go Areas of the Mind' – a statement challenging the Bishop of Rochester's assertion that some Muslim communities are no go areas for Christians);
- Public and scholarly seminars; and
- Religious Literacy Awareness for Journalists

5. Being a role model for dialogue and engagement locally, regionally, nationally and internationally;

Why is this a priority?

- There is a need for increased Christian Muslim dialogue at each of these four levels; and
- Positive (as with negative) engagement at any of these four levels can have a positive impact on any of the the other three.

What does the Forum want to achieve with this priority:

- A portfolio of successful projects that demonstrate the positive benefits of Christian Muslim engagement across all four levels; and
- An increase in good practice Christian Muslim engagement across these four levels.

Project Examples:

- *Young People's local Christian Muslim groups*
- *Local and Regional Imams and Ministers Conferences*
- *Young People's Christian Muslim Activity Weekends*
- *International Exchange Projects (e.g. Indonesia)*

A Common Word Between us and you

I am one of the 270 signatories of this wonderful international Muslim initiative that calls upon the followers of Christianity and Islam to live together in peace. It invites Muslims and Christians to adopt two foundational principles of their faiths love of the one God, and love of the neighbour. As there are the two most often repeated principles in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity.

'Now, exactly one year after that letter, Muslims have expanded their message. In *A Common Word Between Us and You*, 270 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals have unanimously come together for the first time since the days of the Prophet r to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam. Like the *Open Letter*, the signatories to this message come from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Every major Islamic country or region in the world is represented in this message, which is addressed to the leaders of all the world's churches, and indeed to all Christians everywhere.

The final form of the letter was presented at a conference in September 2007 held under the theme of "Love in the Quran," by the *Royal Academy of The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, under the Patronage of H.M. King Abdullah II. Indeed, the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, and the best basis for future dialogue and understanding, is the love of God and the love of the neighbor.

Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.

It is hoped that this document will provide a common constitution for the many worthy organizations and individuals who are carrying out interfaith dialogue all over the world. Often these groups are unaware of each other, and duplicate each other's efforts. Not only can *A Common Word Between Us* give them a starting point for cooperation and worldwide co-ordination, but it does so on the *most solid theological ground possible*: the teachings of the Qu'ran and the Prophet r, and the commandments described by Jesus Christ u in the Bible. Thus despite their differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two *greatest commandments*.
(www.acommonword.com)

The Archbishop in response has said, ‘

We recognise that your letter brings together Muslim leaders from many traditions of Islam to address Christian leaders representative of the diverse traditions within Christianity. We find in it a hospitable and friendly spirit, expressed in its focus on love of God and love of neighbour - a focus which draws together the languages of Christianity and Islam, and of Judaism also. Your letter could hardly be more timely, given the growing awareness that peace throughout the world is deeply entwined with the ability of all people of faith everywhere to live in peace, justice, mutual respect and love. Our belief is that 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.

Hopes for *A Common Word*

We know that during his captivity in Asia Minor in the fourteenth century, the Orthodox archbishop Saint Gregory Palamas, greatly impressed by the tolerance and kindness of the Muslims he met, became close friends with the son of the Turkish Emir, with whom he had many conversations. In one of the letters he wrote at that time, the saint expressed his hope that “a day will soon come when we shall be able to understand each other”. Now, nearly seven hundred years later, one prays all the more for such a day. But what exactly is the understanding we seek, and what kind of dialogue are we called to engage in?...These and other such historical contacts and openings suggest the possibility for a deeper and more inward dialogue between Christians and Muslims than is customary in our day. It is my personal hope that *A Common Word Between Us and You* could serve as

the occasion for precisely such a dialogue, one in which spiritual travelers from both

religions, while insisting as they must on the dogmatic truths of their respective revelations, might come to realize what the great Sufi teacher Ibn Arabi meant in saying,

“My heart has opened unto every form: it is ... a cloister for Christian monks ... and the *Ka'ba* of the pilgrim.”

Dr James S. Cutsinger (Ph. D., Harvard)
Professor of Theology and Religious Thought
University of South Carolina

The Danish response is also full of praise for this initiative; The contents of the letter are remarkable and positive to us for several reasons: It is unique for a Muslim text to portray Jesus through his own words in the Bible and not merely by references drawn from the Qur'an. And it is positive that learned Muslims so clearly recognize that Christians believe in the one God (and not in three); even though significant differences exist regarding how Islam and Christianity view the one God. The letter invites a common understanding of what unites Christians and Muslims in theological and ethical terms. Christians and Muslims agree that there is no God except God; that God is one, and that His is the glory and the power in all eternity. Our common foundation is the belief in the one God as Lord and Creator and in the common view of life and man, that follows from this; that life is sacred, God-given, and that all mankind is created by God in His image (or as Muslims articulate this: created by God as his deputy, who mirrors God's qualities) and is infinitely worthy and inviolable; that people are, therefore, equal and should be treated with respect. But according to the authors of the letter, the common basis also lies in what is essential for the faith, namely *love for God and love for one's neighbor*. This is an unusually direct way of saying that this love is not only absolutely central in Christianity but also in Islam. As Christians, we believe that the one God has shown the world His true nature, which is love, in Jesus of Nazareth, and we regard God's love as *unconditional and rich in mercy*; which means that forgiveness and love is given to man independently of any notion of merit or returns. The love of one's neighbor follows from this as a natural result of the belief in God's forgiving love in Christ – as God loves us, so we shall love our neighbor.

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

Yours sincerely
Vr. Rev. Anders Gadegaard
Dean of The Copenhagen Cathedral

Do you not think that the Muslim and Christians with their distinct spirituality, moral values, God given energy and creativity can bring about positive social change in Britain?

However, this requires introspection we religious people find often find difficult, constant dialogue, mutual respect and understanding and willingness to share our space and time.

This is the way forward for cohesive, integrated and spiritual awakened society. That we all Christians' and Muslims wish to see, this will happen once we start trusting one another.