

Letter to 138 Muslims from a group of pastors in Haderslev Diocese, Denmark

Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In a time characterised by despondency and distrust in relations between Christians and Muslims at both the global and local level, we are pleased to see your letter, "A Common Word". Thank you for your invitation to a conversation about faith, for your endeavour to uncover common insights between us, and for a description of the Christian faith in which we recognise ourselves.

We will contribute to a continuation of our conversation here with our own reflections.

1. The One God

You begin your letter with the words: "There is no God except God". This confession to the one God - the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has supremacy (as in Al-Mulk, Koran) / who has the kingdom and the power and the glory for all eternity (as in The Lord's Prayer, New Testament) - is fundamental to Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. We understand your letter to mean that you recognise Christians' belief in the one God, and we are pleased to note this. In the worship of the Danish Lutheran Church this belief in the unity of God is expressed repeatedly. Prayers are concluded with "one true God, from eternity to eternity" while the sermon ends with praise to "one true triune God".

We think that this mutual acknowledgement that Christians and Muslims believe in one God is important. Just as Muslims dislike being addressed as 'Mohammedans', since Mohammed is regarded as a prophet and not divine, so do Christians dislike the accusation of polytheism. Let us therefore mutually acknowledge that Christians and Muslims believe in one God.

We confess of this one God that he is the Creator of all things. From this we derive our view of life and man, which holds that life is a sacrosanct, God-given gift that we must surround with dignity and respect. We are created into a relation with both God and our fellow-beings. In your letter you explore these common features of our religions under the perspective that, as the two greatest commandments, love of God and love of our neighbour are the foundation that links the Koran, the Torah and the New Testament. We recognise this common word and we invite discussions in greater detail as to how we interpret this love commandment.

Belief in the one God expresses not only God's unity but also his exclusivity. Belief in many gods or nature-gods is idolatry. The belief that Muslims have one God, Christians another and Jews a third is idolatry: God is only one, but our understanding of him and his salvation is different. In a world marked by idolatry, materialism and secularism Christians and Muslims share a wish to guide people to the one God and to maintain and promote the meaning of faith in the one God. Between us we reject atheism's termination of the mystery of existence and denial of everything that lies outside mankind's cognitive limits.

Muslims and Christians are a related family in believing in the one and same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No one can fully comprehend God's greatness and divine mystery. We speak of God in earthly categories, but God will always be greater than such categories. Statements about him are to be believed and held true.

2. Christ and the Trinity

We are glad to see that you describe Jesus through his own words in the Bible and not just through the words of the Koran. You emphasise the words from the Bible that accord with those of the Koran. As Christians, however, we include the whole word of the Bible in order to understand God's nature.

We wish to describe God's nature as it is seen through Jesus' words and life, and this means that Christians and Muslims have divergent views. As Christians we speak of the one God as the triune God. It is in this inseparable unity consisting of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we see God revealing himself to the world.

The Bible witnesses to God as triune. Jesus says of himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14: 6). And Paul writes: "for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:6). The message in Jesus' life and the Christian faith is that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God is thus the one who loves first; and in order to reveal his unconditional love, he enters into the sinful world through Jesus Christ. His ultimate act of love is death on the cross in place of mankind as an expression of God's mercy and forgiveness - without mankind having to do anything to deserve these. God the Holy Spirit grants mankind the justifying faith in Jesus Christ and helps us to live as he has taught us: "The spirit of truth will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

This belief is not shared by Muslims, and here we do not have a common word.

3. A common word and the same God?

Thus Christians and Muslims share a common word in some respects, but in other respects we do not speak the same word. We invite further discussions, also on the areas of our religions where we do not share a common word, so that we advance our insight and understanding of one another's concerns.

Perhaps we can also challenge and inspire one another's faith? With questions like this one, for example: Islam has 99 designations for God. The last name is not named because God is already greater than mankind's imagination. Jesus has taught us to look upon God as a loving father whom we can trust. God is a father so loving that in the New Testament it says that God is love (1 John. 4:6). Can Muslims speak of God as father and as love - or can this be thought of as being included in the 100th name?

God is God independent of mankind. God does not die, not even if hymn-singing and prayers should fall silent among people. As we sing in the Danish Lutheran Church: "God is God, though every land should vanish/God is God, though every man should perish." As imperfect people we find it difficult to believe, tolerate and accept that we as Christians, Muslims or Jews serve one and the same God; but is it not the sum of our joint faiths that there is only one God? We believe in different ways and praise God in different ways. But the belief that love from one and the same God lights our path should allow us room for Christians and Muslims, believers and atheists, proselytes and converts in every society to be esteemed and respected, because we are all created by the one God.

4. Ethics and love of our neighbour

All ethical considerations take as the starting-point the good that God has created and his love and care for all his creation. Every ethical demand is regarded as an expression of God's desire to be good to us. Christians' wish to live their lives by rules that we find justified in the biblical writings, based on the belief that these rules are an expression of the good that God wants for us. In this way God's love is the starting-point for our ethical thoughts.

Specifically, there is a major difference between the way in which we interpret God's wish for good actions. Christian churches such as the Danish Lutheran Church do not have any unequivocal ethical demands for the believer. Though sharing the same faith, members of the same church can relate quite differently to specific ethical questions. The fact that we can differ over what we specifically regard as the will of God does not prevent us from being united in our love of God and in our wish to reflect his love in our mutual human relations.

We see it as a major step on the path to a constructive dialogue between Christians and Muslims that on the Muslim side there is recognition that despite much disagreement over specific, ethical questions we are united in emphasising a love of God and a love of our neighbour.

At the same time we must note that there is a significant difference between the Christian motivation to love God and the content of your letter, which states "Thus in the Holy Qur'an God enjoins Muslims who truly love God to follow this example, in order in turn to be loved by God". As Christians we refer to, and live in the faith of, God's prior and unreserved love for us: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). God's love does not presuppose our good actions, but encourages them. For us, all ethical action takes place on the basis of a love that is given beforehand.

Love of our fellow-beings as a central commandment in both Christian and Muslim ethics casts a light on what we agree on: belief in the God who wants the good for us and the world He has created.

Jesus extends the love commandment to include also our enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). This radical interpretation of the commandment to love our neighbour is a constant challenge to Christians and one which we acknowledge that we do not always live up to. Are Muslims faced with a similar demand? And can we together include this demand where Christians and Muslims experience themselves as in opposition to one another?

5. Mission and co-existence

Both Muslims and Christians maintain that their faith is the one true path to salvation, and for both religions mission is important. Christians cannot preach anything else but that Jesus Christ is the saviour of the world - at the same time believing that we cannot set limits on the activity of the triune God.

We call on Christians and Muslims to give each other the freedom for mission across the globe, including freedom to argue against each other's faith. Freedom of religion means the fundamental respect for all our fellow-beings to think, speak and believe freely.

We further call on Christians and Muslims to continue the conversation as to how far we share a common word, as we uncover fractures and common insights in our faith, life attitudes and view of mankind. In so doing we can promote knowledge of each other and mutual respect.

Finally, we call for discussion on how our religions can be a resource in a modern world with democracy, pluralism and human rights.

There is a lot of mutual anger and frustration over how Christians and Muslims treat one another in the countries where Christianity or Islam sets the tone, and there is reciprocal condemnation and too little roominess between Christians and Muslims. It is our wish that the joint agreement on the value of loving our neighbour may promote peace between people and states. Our endeavours for co-existence should not be dependent on theological or ethical agreement.

May the one God meet us in love and mercy and teach us to show these to one another.

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