

An African Reflection on *A Common Word*

Johnson A. Mbillah

In the history of Christian-Muslim encounters, relations and dialogue, it is always understood that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, in his young life encountered the Christian monk Bahira who other sources refer to as Nesto or George, and that during the early days of his prophethood he also encountered the Christian, Waraqa ibn Naufal, who was a cousin to his wife Khadija.

Apart from the above brief encounters, the most important dialogue session between Muhammad and Christians took place when a delegation of Christians from Najran visited him in Madina in the 9th year of the Hijra (631 CE). The Christian delegation, which is said to have been made up of a bishop, his 45 scholars and 15 men, embarked on what is often referred to as an investigatory dialogue aimed at knowing more about the Islamic faith which Muhammad invited people to accept and to listen to issues that he wished to raise on the Christian faith. In this encounter there was cordiality and understanding; there was also disagreement on theological issues touching on the person of Jesus the Christ, as well as misunderstandings on the question of truth. This led to the invitation of Muhammad to the delegation that they invoke the curse of God on one another (*Mubahala*) to determine which religion is true.¹ In spite of these contrasting fortunes in the first dialogue between Muhammad and Christians, the discussions to all intent and purposes ended harmoniously. To put it in another way, they agreed to disagree in a good manner and the Christians were even permitted to carry out Christian prayers in the Prophet's Mosque (*Masjid al-Nabawi*).²

This foundational dialogue that Muhammad had with the Christians from Najran did not continue in like manner through the history of Christian-Muslim encounters. Encounters marked by confrontations, rivalry and even violent conflicts in the name of *jihads* and crusades,

political domination and counter-domination accompanied by irate polemics, poisoned any form of meaningful dialogue that could have been re-initiated.

Modern dialogue between Christians and Muslims, which in essence began in the 20th century, is generally speaking a Christian initiative. This is true when one looks at the Protestant Churches, as represented by the World Council of Churches initiatives, and the Roman Catholic Church's initiatives since Vatican II.³ These dialogue initiatives with Muslims have over the years involved Christian and Muslim leaders, scholars, educators, and even activists. In the different dialogue sessions, critical issues based on religion, law and society, human rights, religious freedom, community rights, Christian mission and Muslim *da'wa*, peace and communal tensions (among others) form the subject matter for the interchanges.⁴ In Sub-Saharan Africa, the initiative of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), formerly known as the Islam in Africa Project (IAP), is worth mentioning. Since 1959, when the programme was initiated, one of its main objectives has been Christian constructive engagement with Muslims for peace and peaceful co-existence with a stated vision of "A continent where faith communities live with their differences in peace".⁵

With the above background information it can be said with some amount of certainty that the initiators of "*A Common Word (ACW)*", apart from appealing to the Qur'anic call for dialogue with Christians, are simply following the tradition and example (*Sunna*) of Muhammad, and by so doing, also responding to modern dialogue which, as we indicated, has generally been a Christian initiative. In whatever way one looks at ACW, the truth of the matter is that it is most opportune. For it sets the tone for mutual discussions from both the Christian and Muslim sides of the religious divide. From now on, dialogue for whatever purpose will be seen as Christians and Muslims moving towards each other and not just an invitation from one group to the other.

In this paper, we will look at ACW in the light of the above and for the value it adds to Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue. We will do so by commenting on salient issues that have been raised in the document, provide a reflection on the Sub-Saharan African context of Christian and Muslim encounters, and raise issues on the relevance of ACW in that context. All this we will do taking into consideration previous reflections on ACW, not least the Cambridge and Yale consultations.

We cannot leave this introductory part of our presentation without saying how grateful we are to the organisers of the Cadenabbia conference for providing the platform for this engagement to take place. To those who dreamed about this and those who implemented it, we say in *Kusaal*, my native language and spoken by a section of the peoples of northern Ghana, *Te pusiya pamm* (we thank you all very much).

Salient Issues Raised by A Common Word

ACW, which was made public on 13 October 2007, signed by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars, and addressed to 27 Christian leaders and churches everywhere, sets out the oneness of God as the foundation of the relationship between Islam and Christianity and the love of God and love of neighbour as the guiding principle by which Christians and Muslims can talk peace and live in peace. In short, ACW unequivocally makes it clear that the unity of God and the necessity of love for God and neighbour are the common ground.

The Oneness of God

The doctrine of the oneness of God in Islam, as in Christianity and Judaism, is that which provides a common ground for the three religions to be referred to as 'the three monotheistic religions'; that the oneness of God is a core belief and prime doctrine in Islam, as it is in Christianity, cannot be contested. What is and can be contested is the question of what oneness means in the two religions. For as Islam talks about God being one and only, alone and lonely (*tawhid*), Christianity believes that God is one and only, alone but not lonely, he is triune (Trinity). We are all aware that the Muslim confession of faith (*shahada*), for example, takes *tawhid* as the essence of faith when new converts to the faith have to recite: "there is no god but Allah". It is even understood that the *shahada* can be and is recited in the ears of babies. In a similar vein, Christianity takes the Trinity seriously when ushering in new converts to the Christian faith through baptism by asking the following question or its variant: "Do you believe in the one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?" and the new convert has to answer: "Yes I do". The new convert is then baptised "In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁶ The same formula of the Trinity is used for infant baptism.

These variant understandings of the oneness of God in Christianity and Islam are humanly speaking irresolvable since they constitute

the essence of the two faiths. The situation as explained means that for ACW to take root within the Muslim communities and for Christians to buy into it, there must be mutual respect of our different understanding of the One God. In doing so, we will be acknowledging the diversity of our understanding of what each religious tradition means when it talks about the oneness of God. To acknowledge this will enable us to maintain the integrity of our respective faiths and ensure that Christians and Muslims do not compromise the essence, or should we rather say the fundamentals, of their beliefs.

It is worth emphasising that to take this into account will not be a contradiction, for as ACW states, "God understands better our misunderstandings" or to use a Qur'anic quotation, "Unto God ye will return and he will then inform you of that wherein ye differ" (Q. 5:48). In fact it is understood that the Christian delegation from Najran (referred to earlier) in their dialogue with Muhammad recognised the irreconcilable theological differences between Christianity and Islam and therefore said to the Prophet of Islam "O, Abu al-Qasim, we decided to leave you as you are and you leave us as we are. But send with us a man who can adjudicate things on our properties, because we accept you." The request was honoured and Muhammad thereby dispatched a delegation to go with the Christians to assist them. Noteworthy in this discourse is that the inability to agree on theological differences did not jeopardise the willingness of the Christians of Najran to request Muhammad for assistance, as it also did not jeopardise the willingness of Muhammad to offer such assistance.

Love God and Love Your Neighbour

The love of God and the love of neighbour, which the signatories of ACW see as the common ground for Christians and Muslims working together for peace in the world and peace in their communities, is a welcome statement. What needs to be carefully looked at though is the Christian understanding of the love of God and the love of neighbour. These need to be carefully looked at from the Christian perspective, not because ACW did not take cognisance of what Christian theology and the Bible says about love of God and love of neighbour but precisely because what it says about it is so minimal that the essence of love of God and love of neighbour in Christian thinking is not captured. Perhaps a few elaborations here will deepen the conversation.

Love of God

The Christian understanding of the love of God is that the initiator of that love is God himself. He loves human beings as a result of his very nature which is love. The evidence that one has accepted God's initiative of love is for the person to exhibit love. Thus, the Bible says of human beings: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 Jn 4:8). To know God therefore is to respond to his love by loving him and recognising always that: "We love because He first loved us." (1 Jn 4:19). This love of God, which depicts the vertical relationship between human beings and God, is, in Christian thinking, incomplete without its horizontal aspect which is love of neighbour. It is this love of neighbour to which we now turn our attention.

Love of Neighbour

On the question of love of neighbour, it is clear that the signatories of ACW have come to an understanding that Christians are neighbours with Muslims and that if these neighbours (Christians and Muslims) are not at peace then the world cannot be at peace. It argues strongly that since Christians and Muslims together form 55% of the world's population, there can be no peace in the world if the two communities are not at peace with one another. In the light of the above, it contends that Christians and Muslims can together achieve peace in the world. For ACW therefore, peace between Christians and Muslims is a prerequisite for peace in the world. It is worth emphasising that what ACW says is also true of Sub-Saharan Africa where Christians and Muslims currently form the majority in the African religious landscape.

Giving ACW the benefit of the doubt that it was addressed to Christians worldwide and therefore constitutes an exclusive document meant for the purpose to which it was written, we nevertheless find it important and worth asking a question about the non-Christians that ACW does not address. Will they also be regarded as neighbours with whom we can together work towards peace in the world? The truth of the matter is that if the 55% of Christians and Muslims in the world, which ACW recognise as neighbours without whose cooperation there would be no peace, are unable or unwilling to extend the same or similar understanding of neighbourliness to the 45% who are neither Christian nor Muslim there will also be no peace in

the world. With this, shall we therefore understand that the signatories of ACW see Christian and Muslim neighbourliness as a stepping stone for working towards good neighbourliness with all others, or is their understanding of neighbourliness exclusive to that of Christians and Muslims? This brings us to a comment we would wish to put forward on the Christian understanding of neighbourliness.

The Christian understanding of love for neighbour goes beyond love of those with whom you share a religion, a friend or one with whom you agree. A lawyer in a brief dialogue with Jesus the Christ sought to know how one can obtain eternal life. He was asked to narrate what the Law says and he brilliantly narrated what ACW stands for when he said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." (Lk 10:27). The lawyer appeared to understand who God is and how and why he has to love God, but wished to know who the neighbour is by asking Jesus: "Who is my neighbour?"

The attitude of the lawyer is typical of religious people (and let me dare say Christians and Muslims included) when it comes to the issue of who is the neighbour. Jesus in response to the lawyer's question set up an imaginary scene which nevertheless was true to life. The Jews in Jesus' day acknowledged none as their neighbour except their own. In the scene, a Samaritan who was an outsider and therefore not regarded as a neighbour assisted a Jew, who was beaten by robbers and was in serious difficulty. Jesus said to the lawyer "go and do the same" i.e. go and take for neighbours those who are not Jews. In other words, those who do not share the same faith or ethnicity with you (Lk 10:25ff).

The above scene, which is popularly known as the Story of the Good Samaritan, illustrates the Christian understanding of who the neighbour can be and what love of neighbour means – love those who may not love you in return. In fact Jesus emphasises this when he says "...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 6:27-28). This radical departure from what is usually thought to be the norm is re-emphasised by Jesus in a rhetorical question in which he says: "If you love those who love you what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them" (Lk 6:32).

With these biblical views of love of neighbour, it is important to re-emphasise that ACW, in collaborating with Christians in the love of God and love of neighbour needs to accompany Christians in their understanding of what it means to love God and to love your neighbour. Having said that, it is worth clarifying that what we have elaborated is not intended to create a dichotomy between what Muslims and Christians mean when they talk about the love of God and love of neighbour but rather to call for an understanding of the very essence of love in Christianity so that together we enter into dialogue for peace knowing what each faith tradition says on the subject.

Sub-Saharan Africa and A Common Word

The history of the Christian faith and Islam cannot be written with Africa left in the margins. Africa is known to have served as a safe haven for Christianity⁸ and Islam in their formative periods. In Christianity, the biblical writers make it clear that a threat to kill the baby Jesus was averted by the directive of an angel that Jesus should be taken to Egypt (Matt 2:13-15) to prevent him from being killed in infancy. In Islam, on the other hand, when Muhammad the Prophet of Islam and his followers faced severe persecution in Mecca during the early days of his preaching he asked his followers to migrate to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) where they would be treated well.⁹ They did so and were well treated.¹⁰ Jesus and the followers of Muhammad were forced by political-religious violence to seek refuge, in modern terms 'to become refugees', in Africa.

In the context of ACW therefore, a discussion of what it stands for in relation to Christian-Muslim relations in Africa, as the Cadenabbia conference suggests in part, is not only relevant but a re-visitation of centuries of interaction between Christianity and Islam amongst African peoples, and what that has done and continues to do with African converts to Christianity and Islam in terms of relating to one another across the religious divide. In this paper we will concentrate on Sub-Saharan Africa, which along with Asia, is the focus of the conference.

Arguably the largest meeting place of Christians and Muslims is in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and not the West and the Arab world. It is well known that it is in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia that one can notice Christians and Muslims living as members of the same

family, sharing in the joys of birth and the sadness of death and celebrating religious festivals together; as if there were no stark differences between Christianity and Islam.

Having said that, it is also in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia that the competitive characters of Christianity and Islam as rival missionary religions are felt more than anywhere else. It is in this light that we hope that ACW is not merely thinking of Islam and the West, which generally come to mind when people begin to talk about Christian-Muslim relations, but that it recognises that in practical everyday life, one must look beyond the Euro-Arab axis of the Mediterranean, to the largest meeting place of Christians and Muslims in Africa and Asia, to make more sense of Christian-Muslim relations. We say so as a result of a careful look at the geographical representation of the signatories of ACW and those to whom it is addressed.

As regards the countries represented by the signatories to ACW, it is worth mentioning that the signatories come from 43 countries, out of which nine countries are from the entire continent of Africa. Of these nine countries, five are geographically from Sub-Saharan Africa. As regards the individual signatories themselves, it has to be noted that out of the 138, 30 are from the entire continent of Africa, with 12 of these 30 from Sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria records the highest number of six signatories, with Sudan and Mauritania registering two signatories each, while Chad and The Gambia have one signatory each. A careful look at the signatories from Sub-Saharan Africa show that Mauritania and the Sudan are members of the Arab League thus leaving Nigeria, The Gambia and Chad as the only signatories from Sub-Saharan Africa, which do not have dual affiliation in the context of the signatories of ACW.

The limited number of original signatories of ACW in Sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with the lack of a mechanism by which its contents are to be disseminated among the Muslim communities (at least in Africa), means that very few if any, outside the original signatories and the countries from which they come, know about the initiative.

Of those to whom ACW is addressed, it is worth noting that even though it is addressed to 'the leaders of all Christian Churches everywhere', those singled out for mention are the world bodies of Christianity such as the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the

Anglican Communion, amongst others. The Regional Christian bodies of Africa, such as the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the Symposium of Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) and the Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), were not addressed and therefore hardly know anything about ACW. The situation as described is similar for Asian Christian religious bodies. As a result of this, most responses to ACW come from churches and academies in the West where most of the world bodies of Christianity are based.

The Value of A Common Word for Sub-Saharan Africa

Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, one of the architects of the ACW initiative, in his speech at the Yale University conference, is reported to have said: "The intention in sending out the *A Common Word* missive was simply to try to make peace between Muslims and Christians globally....It was and is an extended global handshake of religious goodwill friendship and fellowship and consequently of inter-religious peace."¹¹

This statement, which explains what was in the minds of the originators of ACW and what their dreams are, is helpful since it clarifies the reasoning behind the document. In the Sub-Saharan African context, inter-religious peace or more correctly multi-religious peace, finds its roots in the African environment, in which Christianity and Islam found a home. In this region, the presence and success of Christianity and Islam and their continuous growth can largely be attributed to the African view of religious plurality, which is 'live and let live' with our religious differences in peace. This philosophy, to which we have on many occasions made reference as one that thrives in African spirituality, serves as the bedrock for Christian-Muslim peaceful coexistence in many parts of Africa. In other words, the two religions (Christianity and Islam), which for ages sought to displace each other, eventually found themselves in an environment where religious plurality and tolerance formed the core of the religious life of the people. Arguably therefore, it can be said without any hesitation that before the advent of Christianity and Islam in Africa, for example, Africans went to war against each other for all sorts of reasons – except for the sake of religious differences.

When a research student asked the landlord of a Kusasi¹² household, made up of Christians, Muslims, and adherents of African Traditional Religions, how it was possible for members of the three faith communities to live together in peace when Christians and Muslims are known to be less tolerant of each other, he responded proverbially: "Before the white man brought us sugar, we already had honey, and before the Arabs informed us of Allah, we already knew Wina'am".¹³ This analogy seeks to indicate that the Kusasi, and in the wider sense the African, had religion before the advent of Christianity and knew of God before the advent of Islam. This view, far from portraying any lack of commitment of the family members to their various religious affiliations, rather reiterates the innate belief of the African traditional religious environment that people need not quarrel over religious differences or fight over God, who has different names among the different ethnic groups in the continent.¹⁴

The above philosophy, which talks about human relations with God as the foundation for human relations with fellow human beings, finds grounds in many African primal philosophies, of which *Ubuntu*¹⁵ comes to my mind. *Ubuntu*, a word that depicts African philosophy that provides an understanding of human beings relations with fellow human beings, makes it clear that we only discover our own humanity by relating with others. We are told that the Zulus in South Africa, for example, will say "*Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*", which means that a person is a person through other persons. Among other things, the word carries with it harmony, common humanity, and reciprocity, with the view of building and maintaining community.

In essence, *Ubuntu* in many ways does not subtract any value from what Christians and Muslims mean when they talk about the love of neighbour. In this sense, Christians and Muslims in the African environment need not throw away values of what it means to be African when such values are not at variance with their adopted faith traditions but on the contrary strengthens them. To do so under the inherited Christian thinking that all that is African is pagan, and the Muslim thinking that all that is 'pre-Islamic' falls within the period of ignorance (*jahiliyya*), would be tantamount to throwing away a philosophy which provided a tolerant religious environment that facilitated the growth of Christianity and Islam in the continent. For *Ubuntu*, as in other African philosophies "address our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from that connection."¹⁶

The Challenge for Christians and Muslims as Neighbours for Peace

Earlier in this paper we have indicated that ACW's contention, that if Christians and Muslims are not at peace with one another the world cannot have peace, is as true for Africa as it is for the world. We have also alluded to the fact that Christians and Muslims working together for peace amongst and between themselves as neighbours should lead to a broader understanding of neighbourliness that includes all others, so that peace in God's world may become the norm for all peoples and not just between and among Christians and Muslims. For as Christians believe that they are God's stewards, commissioned to take care of his creation and all that is in it, so we also understand that Islam regards human beings (Adam) as God's *khalifa* (viceroy) with functions of caring for God's world.¹⁷

If being stewards and viceroys of God also means ensuring that there is peace in God's world, ACW can make an impact in Sub-Saharan Africa and wherever Christians and Muslims live side by side, if adherents of the two religions practise the ideals for which they stand in terms of the love of God and love of neighbour for peace. This can only be done if all who affirm what ACW stands for, and I believe there will be many, work hard to transform this foundational statement, not seen before in Muslim history, into practical living, since peace is only meaningful when it is practised and seen to be practised by those who preach it.

A clear example of what we mean comes in two conference proceedings which the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) organised and which were attended by over one hundred Christian and Muslim leaders from Sub-Saharan Africa. The conferences, which took place in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Accra, Ghana, looked at issues of Conflict Prevention, Peace-building and Reconciliation in the region.¹⁸ In the said conferences, participants declined to make any extensive analysis of what Christianity and Islam say about peace and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims and wider society. They argued that the scriptural and theological foundations for peace in Christianity and Islam are well known and there was no need to recycle them but rather to act upon them. I shall give a brief résumé on peace in Christianity and Islam later.

In the deliberations, Christian and Muslim leaders were asked to get out of their comfort zone of always referring to their respective religions as religions of peace and show it by example i.e. living in peace and ensuring that the continent has peace. Attempts to explain away violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the northern part of Nigeria as being social, economic, political, ethnic etc. were not readily accepted. Participants raised questions of how conflicts outside the parameters of religion could lead to Christians and Muslims targeting one another and burning down churches and mosques. It was also mooted that the best possible way for Christians and Muslims to talk peace and live peace was to ensure that issues that militate against peace between members of the two communities are confronted and dealt with. It was argued that situations where Christian and Muslim leaders played the proverbial ostrich of the African continent, which buries its head in the sand to avoid seeing the dangers that pursue it, or the proverbial African monitor lizard, which always closes one eye in the midst of danger with the understanding that 'the eye that sees trouble should have it', were unacceptable.

It is the issues that militate against Christians and Muslims living in peace, which I have the mandate to outline before the conference participants, to which I now turn, to put forward for comment by the participants at Cadenabbia.

Unethical Christian and Muslim Expansionist Policies as Threats to Peace Between Christians and Muslims

We have said earlier in this paper that Sub-Saharan Africa is the area where Islam and Christianity are growing faster than anywhere else in the world. Arguably it is the place where religious freedom in the true sense of the word has always been practised. This tolerant religious environment has for some time now been invaded by itinerant preachers from both Christianity and Islam. The methods employed by these itinerant preachers to make converts have no guiding ethic and therefore give room for some preachers from both sides of the religious divide to use inconsiderate and in some cases offensive language to propagate their religion. Negative perceptions by Christians and Muslims of each other's religions, drawn from medieval polemics between Christians and Muslims, for example, are deployed by these provocative preachers. These methods are known to breed conflict, which in many cases degenerate into violent confrontations. In East-

ern Africa, for example, Christian and Muslim polemics against one another in the form of debates, known in Kiswahili as *Mihadhara*, have created such animosity in some parts of the region that they sometimes have led to violent conflicts.

Importation and Exportation of Religious Conflicts into Sub-Saharan Africa

The universality of Christianity can ordinarily be seen by the fact that Christians are spread throughout the globe. Christian solidarity in a spiritual sense, the universality of Christianity, is seen by the Christian understanding that all Christians belong to the Body of Christ – the Church. This concept means that all Christians everywhere belong together in a mystical union that transcends political borders, colour or race. In Christ there is no east, no west, no north, no south, no white, no black etc. The universality of Islam is also seen in the fact that Muslims are spread throughout the globe. The unity of Muslims is seen in terms of the Islamic concept of the universal *umma* (community) to which Muslims everywhere belong. This form of unity is understood to be both temporal and spiritual and thus transcends established borders of nation-states or countries. In the *umma* there is no east, no west, no north, no south, no white, no black etc. The model of the *umma* provides a form of Muslim citizenship which is difficult to define but which shows itself more and more in times of crises. It is well known, for example, that Muslims not directly involved more often than not go to demonstrate solidarity with fellow Muslims who are facing any form of persecution and injustice from other people.

An upsurge of religious particularism, influenced by the concept of Christians belonging to the Body of Christ and Muslims belonging to the universal *umma*, has militated against the unity of nations and the quest for common citizenship, that would enable Christians and Muslims as neighbours to live together in peace. The perception that the European and North American West is Christian, and the Arab East is Muslim has created a situation where conflict between the West and the Arab East is perceived to be conflict between members of the Body of Christ (Christians) and members of the *umma* (Muslims). This was more pronounced and almost became the norm in some parts of Africa, during the Gulf War of 1991, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the Danish cartoon saga in 2006. In Nigeria (the

northern part), for example, Christians and Muslims literally slaughtered each other and burnt down places of worship.¹⁹ In a situation as described above, Christians and Muslims exercise negative solidarity. They import conflicts from outside Africa into the continent. If this negative solidarity was to become the norm, conflicts anywhere could be exported or otherwise imported to countries that in terms of physical proximity are far away from the conflict zone. The fallacy of this emerging negative solidarity is that members of the Body of Christ have even fought other members of the Body of Christ in the two great European wars; also known as World Wars I and II. In the same vein, members of the *umma* are known to have fought against other members of the *umma* in the Iraq-Iran war. For members of universal Christianity and Islam to succeed in setting Africans against their own kind is very unfortunate indeed. For in such a situation it blatantly violates the African understanding of religion, which as we have said earlier is 'live and let live with our religious differences in peace and not in pieces'.

If the ideals of ACW are to become the norm, then Christian and Muslim leaders need to discuss openly the universal nature of their religions and what that means for local and regional contexts, so as to ensure that things alien to Africa are not imported into the continent, to the extent even of importing conflicts in the name of religion (Christianity and Islam) and thereby fighting proxy wars.

The Problem of Translating Good Precepts into Good Practice

We have in our appreciation of ACW's contention that if Christians and Muslims are not at peace with one another, the world cannot have peace, indicated that this is as true for Africa as it is for the world, since Christianity and Islam possess the largest numbers of religious adherents in Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Christians and Muslims are always at pains to convince all others that their religions have peace as an essential value. Christians, for example, argue that the advent of Christ was announced with the angels' song 'Peace and goodwill among humankind' (Lk 2:14), thus indicating that the Christ who was born brought peace to human beings. In fact Jesus is referred to as the 'Prince of Peace' (Isa 9:6).

Muslims, on the other hand, have always passionately explained that the word Islam, which translates as submission, also has in it *salam*,

which means peace. In fact they always explain that the normal routine greeting of Muslims, *salam alaykum* (peace be with you), with the respondent saying *wa alaykum salam* (and peace be with you), shows the essence of peace in Islam.

The comment is often made; if the two religions which have the largest following in Africa are religions of peace, then one would expect the continent to be experiencing peace. This is by no means wholly the case, as conflicts shoot up in some parts of Africa, including those that have a religious bearing. What this means is that the ideal precepts of peace embedded in Islam and Christianity have failed to influence people's lives. In other words, the leadership of Church and Mosque, and by extension Christians and Muslims, are not doing enough to ensure that the ideals of their respective religions are not mere theoretical concepts. This is a challenge that cannot be brushed aside, for the essence of peace, which ACW advocates, is far from being theoretical: it is very much an existential issue. It is an issue that in every circumstance should go beyond talking about it, to living it.

Gatherers and Scatterers and the Need for Intra-Christian and Intra-Muslim Discussions on A Common Word

In the Christian-Muslim encounters in Sub-Saharan Africa, like elsewhere, there are those who gather and those who scatter. By this we mean: there are those who work hard to ensure that Christians and Muslims live side by side in peace and those who consciously or unconsciously work to poison relations. The signatories of ACW, which aims at building relations, are therefore among those who gather and have to engage the Muslim community consciously to spread the ideals of ACW, just as Christians need to engage consciously their own to spread the message of the intentions of ACW. It is only in doing so together that Christians and Muslims will come to appreciate the importance of ACW.

As far we are aware, the World Council of Churches and the Anglican Communion under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, among others, have been able to bring together Christians of all traditions carefully to reflect on the message of ACW and to encourage them to respond positively and spread the message, so as to inform the Christian communities. It can only be hoped that conscious

efforts are being put in place to encourage intra-Muslim discussion on ACW in Sub-Saharan Africa, as in other places, so as to ensure that it does not fall with other laudable initiatives, which sometimes remain in the annals of history but with no impact.

Conclusion

As a contribution to what ACW stands for and to demonstrate what Christians and Muslims in Sub-Saharan Africa, under the auspices of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), are doing to promote peace between Christians and Muslims, and by extension the wider society, we hereby reproduce two communiqués issued during the Christian and Muslim peace conferences, to which reference was made earlier.

The Dar es Salaam Communiqué

We, Muslim and Christian religious leaders from Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Uganda, meeting in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania from September 1 – 5, 2008 under the auspices of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), on the theme: Religion, Conflict Prevention/Management, Peace Building and Reconciliation in Eastern Africa:

- having deliberated on the causes of misunderstandings that lead to violent conflicts in the region;
- aware of the fact that religion and religious differences have been misused and manipulated to poison relations and lead to the loss of human lives and properties;
- concerned about the sufferings that have resulted from violent confrontations perpetrated by some of our followers;
- recognising that there are some positive steps that have been and are still being undertaken to bring about peace and reconciliation where violent conflicts have occurred;
- having recognised our common mission to build, uphold and sustain peace in the society at all times;

Do hereby rededicate ourselves to remain in solidarity with each other in pursuit of peace, justice and reconciliation in the region in particular, and Africa in general, and reaffirm that:

- Religious leaders have the utmost responsibility to ensure that justice and peace prevail in the region;
- Religious communities in the region should be mobilised to promote understanding and trust for peace and peaceful coexistence;
- Religious leaders and communities must ensure that there is mutual respect, understanding and appreciation of each other's religious values, beliefs and practices;

Interfaith engagement is a strong tool that can be used to identify and harness potentials for the realisation of peace and peaceful coexistence. On account of the above, we call upon:

- Religious leaders to recognise anew the value of remaining politically impartial and desist from partisan politics in order to play effective roles as peace-builders and reconcilers;
- Governments and political leaders to observe and practice principles of good and responsible governance;
- Governments and policy-makers to develop and implement policies that respect and uphold religious and cultural pluralism;
- Religious leaders to constructively engage with policy-makers to re-examine education curriculum and policy with the view of inculcating the spirit of mutual understanding and trust among communities;
- Governments and those in positions of authority to desist from the tendency to manipulate state resources to favour specific communities or one's own community as this is not only immoral but also a recipe for conflict;
- All stakeholders in interfaith work to collaborate and complement each other's efforts rather than be in competition in addressing human needs in society;
- Governments, political leaders, and economic planners to regularly and deliberately involve religious leaders in matters of policy development, and conflict management;

We adopt the above as our resolve to remain in unity and work with each other as partners in addressing our regional religious, social, economic and political challenges.

Signed by all participants at the conference on September 4, 2008 in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

The Accra Communiqué

We, 60 Christian and Muslim religious leaders from ten (10) West African States that include Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Togo met in Accra, Ghana under the auspices of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) on the theme: "*Religion and Prevention of Conflict, Peace Building and Reconciliation*" at the M-Plaza Hotel, from July 20-24, 2009.

HAVING deliberated on such issues as: Religious Leaders as Agents of Peace, peace between the religions as a prerequisite for religious leaders to promote peace within the wider society, negative religious expansionist policies, the politicisation of religion, globalisation/internationalisation of conflicts, negative solidarity, the challenge of translating good precepts in religion into good practice in everyday life, causes of conflicts, and advocacy for peace by example;

HAVING received Case Studies on Christians and Muslims Collaboration for Peace from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire, and Nigeria;

AWARE that religion and religious differences have always been exploited for political, economic, communal and personal interest which have caused the deaths of thousands of our brothers and sisters and the destruction of properties;

VERY CONCERNED at the violent confrontations in our individual countries carried out by some of our followers;

RECOGNISING that there are some positive improvements in Christian and Muslim Collaboration for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation;

UNDERSTANDING and ACCEPTING that as Religious Leaders we must at all times be Agents of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation and must live by example;

DO HEREBY RESOLVE and reaffirm our willingness and determination to continue to remain in solidarity with each other in the furtherance and sustainability of Peace, Justice, Healing and Reconciliation in the West African region in Particular and Africa in general;

ACCORDINGLY, as Religious Leaders coming from the two major Religions in the West African region, and representing millions of persons of faith,

RESOLVE as follows:

- That we would lead by example and take responsibility to Promote Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in our region;
- That we would embark on a campaign to create awareness and sensitisation within the religious communities to promote positive religious tolerance for peace and peaceful co-existence;
- That we would respect and appreciate each other's religious values, beliefs and practices;
- That we would collectively engage national governments, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and along with our counterparts in the various regions of Africa, the African Union (AU) to urge for responsible governance and democracy

Call on Religious Leaders

- We call on all Religious Leaders to continue to be Prophetic and proactive at all times without fear or favour;
- We call on religious leaders to be politically impartial and refrain from partisan politics so as to ensure that we play effective roles as Agents of Peace Justice and Reconciliation;
- We call on the followers of our respective religions to complement each others efforts for peace in society and peaceful co-existence among themselves and avoid negative tendencies which has the propensity for conflicts;
- As both Holy Books (the Bible and Qur'an) place emphasis on Peace, that as religious leaders we practice Peace in fulfilment of the tenets of our respective religions.

Call on Government

- We call on Governments and Political leaders in the Sub-Region to practice good and responsible governance and guarantee peaceful transitions from one duly elected government to the other;
- We appreciate and thank those governments that have created an enabling environment for dialogue with religious leaders, and call on others to create the same;

- We call on Governments to ensure that Child and Drug trafficking be eradicated within the Sub-Region;
- We as Religious Leaders have adopted the above and have resolved to continue to work together to promote positive religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, addressing Peace, Justice, Healing and Reconciliation.

Done in ACCRA, Ghana this 24th Day of July 2009.

Signed by all Participants from:

BURKINA FASO, COTE D'IVOIRE, GHANA, LIBERIA, NIGERIA, SENEGAL, SIERRA LEONE, THE GAMBIA, The Republic of BENIN, AND TOGO

Attested by:

Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Fellowship of Councils and Churches in West Africa (FECCIWA), World Council of Churches (WCC)

The above communiqués, as may be seen, broaden the call for peace to include governments whose actions sometimes do not augur well for peace. In many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa people still listen to their religious leaders and take them seriously. It is in this light that ACW's call on Christians to inculcate a spirit of good neighbourliness with Muslims based on their respective scriptural injunctions holds value.

As we analysed extensively, there are stark theological differences between Christianity and Islam, to the extent that words and phrases may look the same but not mean the same. But as we have said all along, we do not need to come to an agreement on theological and doctrinal issues to work together to promote peace and mutual respect. Our common humanity, as the World Council of Churches has always upheld, and our recognition that there are good values in Christianity as in Islam, as Vatican II holds, should bind us together to seek peace, even as we exercise mutual respect for our differences. As love appears to be the central focus of ACW's invitation to Christians, let us remind ourselves that "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7).

- 1| *We understand that the mutual cursing did not take place after the Christians objected to it by citing the biblical injunction which reads: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" Deut 6:16 cf Matt 4:7).*
- 2| *For details on Muhammad's encounters with Christians see Ibn Hisham, Abd al-Malik, al-Sirat al Nabawiyya,, Egypt 1955, 1, p. 180-577.*
- 3| *Vatican II (1962-65) is well known for its declaration on the "Relationship of the Church with Non-Christian Religions" in the document Nostra Aetate.*
- 4| *See the World Council of Churches document "Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action". This document is a result of the Christian-Muslim meeting held in Amersfoort, Netherlands in November 2000.*
- 5| *The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) focuses on relations and uses the word 'dialogue' only in situations of conflict and misunderstanding, through which Christians and Muslims need to work together with the aim of resolving the conflict or at least understanding its dynamics so that they may live with it in peace.*
- 6| *It has to be noted that the formula is not God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit but rather God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
- 7| *http://www.dehai.org/archives/dehai_news_archive/oct02/0640.html (12/11/2004).*
- 8| *We use 'Christianity' here loosely being aware that in essence there was no Christianity before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which formed the foundation of the Christian faith.*
- 9| *A. Guillaume, The Life of Muhammad, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 (Eighth impression), p. 146.*
- 10| *ibid; pp. 270-277.*
- 11| *World Council of Churches News Release, 11-08-2008.*
- 12| *The Kusasi are a group of people who inhabit the north-eastern corner of Ghana sharing borders with northern Togo and Southern Burkina Faso.*
- 13| *Wina'am is the name of God among the Kusasi.*
- 14| *In Kusaal, God is Wina'am, in Swahili, Mungu, in Akan onyame etc.*
- 15| *For a detailed analysis of Ubuntu see David Suze Mande, Ubuntu philosophy as an African philosophy for peace. www.africafiles.org Subject no. 20359.*
- 16| *ibid. Also see Nussbaum, Barbara (2003) "Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity", in Reflections, the Society for Organisational Learning and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Vol. 4, no.4 pp 21-26.*
- 17| *I recognise that I have trodden in unfamiliar territory and will be pleased to know what the Muslims, who will be commenting on my script, say about the whole issue of khalifa in terms of whether it applies to Adam alone or to all human beings in the creative order of God.*
- 18| *The Dar es Salaam Conference took place in September 2008, while the Accra Conference took place in July 2009. For details of the proceedings of the two conferences see the PROCMURA website: www.procmura-prica.org.*
- 19| *We recognise that the situation in the northern part of Nigeria is more complicated than meets the eye.*