

A Response to *A Common Word* from an African Perspective

Al-Tayib Zain Al-Abdin

The letter of "*A Common Word Between Us and You*" sent by 138 Muslim scholars, religious leaders and intellectuals to top Christian leaders in the Vatican, Canterbury, Moscow, Jerusalem and other religious centres in the world (25 senior Christian leaders of different denominations) represents a breakthrough in the stalemated dialogue between Muslims and Christians. It is the only initiative in our times, taken by distinguished Muslim scholars from different parts of the Muslim world, to start a serious dialogue with Christian leaders. It originated from the Royal Institute of Religious Studies in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The theme of the letter around the 'love of God and love of neighbour', as a shared value between Muslims and Christians, is innovative and appropriate for our difficult times of conflict and extremism. The authors proved their point by quoting copiously not only from the Qur'an but also from the Bible, which is not a common practice among Muslims. Dialogue with the 'People of the Scripture' is an Islamic duty, the Qur'an says: "And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it be in the best way, except with those who do wrong. And say to them: we believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is one, and to Him we have submitted" (Q. 29:46). However Muslims, especially government bodies, were not sufficiently earnest to respond positively to the calls for dialogue initiated by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Interfaith Dialogue Unit of the World Council of Churches since the late sixties and early seventies. They were suspicious of the motives and purposes of dialogue; the early dialogues were called, financed and organised by western churches. As organisers, the churches fixed the time, venue, agenda and the participants who, in most cases, did not represent the main trend among Muslims. Later on, the Muslim participants became more representative. In fact, even Christians in Asia and Africa were not enthusiastic about these dialogues; they were afraid that the sensitive issues discussed might harm their relationship with their Muslim co-citizens, especially in Muslim-majority countries.

Gradually Muslim leaders accepted the challenges of dialogue but they rarely took the initiative of sponsoring them. This is partly due to religious conservatism, lack of vision for the purpose of dialogue, weakness of voluntary Islamic institutions and shortage of finance. Some Muslim governments, like Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan and Sudan, managed to organise some religious dialogues, but it was mostly as a political show rather than a long-standing policy. This background gives more significance to *A Common Word*, as a new approach from independent Muslim leaders towards religious dialogue. It is a step to be welcomed and encouraged.

The theme of the letter focused on the love of the One God and love of the neighbour, as foundational principles in both Islam and Christianity. It is true that both words (God and neighbour) occur many times in the Qur'an and Bible, but the concepts are different. The use of the word 'love' in an abstract form subscribed to God occurs rarely in the Qur'an; the emphasis is on the merciful and beneficent nature of God who forgives human sins and showers them with all kinds of blessings and graces. On the other hand, the Qur'an mentions the many types of people whom God loves: the God-fearing, those who do good, the benevolent, the just, the patient, etc.. It also mentions those who are not loved by God: the infidels, the aggressors, the wrong-doers, the arrogant, the treacherous, the extravagant, etc.. However, there are other shared values between Islam and Christianity which should be given prominence in the dialogue because they are more relevant to peaceful coexistence in the turbulent and violent world of today. They are the values of peace, justice, equality, human dignity and freedom. These are clear values with concrete implications and responsibilities for any modern community or society. The letter mentions the values of justice and freedom of religion as a by-product of the love of neighbour; I believe they are intrinsic human values in their own right. They are higher and more basic than the concept of love of neighbour, because they are closely related to human dignity, which distinguishes man from the other creatures of God. In Islam the establishment of justice is the whole purpose of sending Messengers by God to human societies. The Qur'an says: "Indeed We have sent Our Messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance that mankind may keep up justice." (Q. 57:25). On the other hand freedom of religion is granted by God Himself, nobody has the right to deny it. The Qur'an says: "And say: the truth is from your Lord. Then

whosoever wills, let him believe; and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve." (Q. 18:29). The main purpose of dialogue should be peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation among communities, societies and nations irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, colour or nationality. However, the religious people who believe in the oneness of God and the Day of Judgement should lead the way to show the troubled world of today the right path. It would be a grave failure and betrayal on behalf of their faiths, if the secularists and non-believers are to take that responsibility while the people of faith, who claim the truth, are left behind arguing their complex theological differences! It happened several times in the history of the world, we should not allow it to happen again. The letter went on to say that good relationships between Muslims and Christians, being more than half of the world population, will contribute significantly to meaningful peace around the world. It is the ethical values of the two religions and the example of good behaviour set by their leaders, which will lead the world towards peace rather than the sheer size of the two communities. The main weakness of the letter is that it did not set practical objectives for the dialogue between Muslims and Christians, and did not suggest any road map to promote dialogue in order to achieve the desired goals.

The Christian responses to *A Common Word*, which came from distinguished centres like: Lambeth Palace, Yale University, Cambridge University, the Vatican, Munich and India, were positive and serious. It is worthy to discuss here in some detail, the response of Fr Christian Troll (*The Asia Pacific Times*, Hamburg, December 2007) because he is the initiator of the present dialogue, an active religious leader who is associated with the largest Christian church in the world and an specialist in Islamic studies. I believe he also represents the major conservative trend in the Catholic Church, which makes his response more significant. Moreover, he is a straight forward person who does not couch his convictions behind trivial niceties. I am encouraged to be equally frank. Fr Troll commented on the letter that it represents a remarkable attempt to reach a broad consensus among leading Muslim figures; it aims partly to take Islam seriously as a distinct articulated voice at a global level. He did not mention the subject of the 'broad consensus', which I presume to be dialogue with Christians and Jews in order to achieve world peace. I do not think Islam needs this letter or dialogue with other religions to be taken seriously at the global level. It has earned that position by its

noble teachings, long historical traditions and civilisation, the diverse cultures and nations which adhere to it, its huge presence and impact as a living faith in the different continents of the world and the commitment of the majority of Muslims to their faith. It is the religion which is most studied, discussed and written about all over the world by non-adherents. Fr Troll asks if the Biblical quotations used in the letter indicate a break with the classical Islamic doctrine which considers those scriptures as 'corruptions' of those originally revealed by God. My answer is that it does not. The Muslim view is taken from the Qur'an, which we consider the literal Word of God: "Do you covet that they will believe in your religion in spite of the fact that a party of them used to hear the word of God, then they changed it knowingly after they understood it?" (Q. 2:75). Nevertheless, the Qur'an calls these scriptures 'holy books' which should be implemented, "Say (Muhammad) O People of the Scripture, you have nothing till you act according to the Torah, the Gospel (*Injil*) and what has been sent down to you from your Lord" (Q. 5:68). This means that these books are still substantially authentic. But is it only the Muslims who question the complete authenticity of the Torah and the Gospel? There is a long tradition of controversy among biblical scholars about the authenticity and history of various parts of these scriptures. One of the latest critical studies by the distinguished British classical scholar, Enoch Powell, is *The Evolution of the Gospel*, published by Yale University Press (1994), in which he translated from a late Greek manuscript the Gospel of Matthew. He said: "Matthew discloses that an underlying text was severely re-edited, with theological and polemical intent, and that the resulting edition was afterwards recombined with the underlying text to produce the gospel as it exists. That underlying text was itself the product of earlier processes which involved more than one series of major additions." However, if the Muslims deny the complete authenticity of the Biblical scriptures, the Jews and the Christians deny the whole Qur'an as the Word of God and deny Muhammad as a genuine Prophet of God. Thus, we have nothing for which to apologise!

Fr Troll indulged himself in mentioning other differences between Muslims and Christians like the nature of Jesus Christ, which according to him "has profound implications for how God is understood and worshipped", the concepts of the Holy Spirit and the Father as central to Christian belief that cannot be negotiated away. He also pointed to some practical differences with Muslims like the implementation of

Shari'a, human rights and the relation between state and religion. The latter points are not theological differences from the Christian point of view, but political principles adopted by the west due to social and political developments across centuries, which were not always supported at the time by the church. Fr Troll also pointed to the increasing tensions of Muhammad's approach to Jews and Christians during his later years as reflected in *sura* 9 of the Qur'an. The verses referred to in the said *sura* (Q. 9:30-35) do not speak about violent tensions but about theological differences and characteristics of religious leaders. However, the Qur'an is a book which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over 23 years, it constituted the whole period of his mission. That period witnessed ups and downs in the Prophet's relationship with other groups and communities; the Qur'an, being a book of guidance in different circumstances, reflected that changeable relationship. It is in the human nature not to establish a permanent relationship among individuals, groups or communities even among people of the same faith. The Qur'an speaks about the situation of enmity among Muslims themselves and shows how to solve it. The proper answer for how to deal with our religious differences in the modern world is appropriately summarised by Cardinal Bertone, in his letter to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, the master mind behind *A Common Word*, on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote: "Without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should look to what unites us, namely, belief in the one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge who at the end of time will deal with each person according to his or her actions. We are all called to commit ourselves totally to him and to obey his sacred will". Dr Troll touched upon the important practical issue of religious freedom; he rightly noted the limited religious freedom of Christians in some Muslim-majority countries. The degree of freedom in any society reflects the cultural, social and political development of that society irrespective of its majority religion. At one time the Catholic Church was one of the most repressive institutions in Europe. The degree of freedom in the Muslim world, which emerged from European colonialism only 60 years ago, cannot match the level reached in Europe and America which have had more than 200 years of constitutional democratic governments. The limitation on religious freedom has no basis in Islamic teachings because it is granted in the Qur'an itself, "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q. 2:256). This is why the history of Islam did not experience religious genocide as it happened to the

Muslims of Palestine during the Christian Crusades, the Muslims of Spain at the time of Ferdinand and Isabella at the end of the 15th century and recently the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina after the break down of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1990s. The Muslim world did not suffer from religious wars as took place during the Reformation in Europe in the 16th century. Nevertheless, the degree of independence and freedom enjoyed by Christian institutions in many Muslim-majority countries, though it is limited, is far more than what Islamic institutions and organisations could get in their own countries. Muslim governments, which are mostly secular or semi-secular, firmly control Islamic institutions like mosques, *madrasas* (schools) and *awqaf* (endowments). It is not a question of religion but a question of political environment. What is not justifiable is the sudden Islamophobia which spread in Europe after the unfortunate events of September 11th 2001 in New York; it led to many anti-terrorist acts directed mainly against Muslims. It reached the extent of preventing the wearing of headscarves for Muslim girl students and the paying of *zakat* to charitable societies; the step was racially and politically motivated against migrant Muslims in order to win the support of the extreme right. These incidents show that religious freedom is still fragile even in long-established democracies, which require strong commitment and more co-operation among people of faith to protect and ensure freedom of religion under all circumstances.

The Situation in Africa

Muslims suffered a great deal of prejudice and discrimination at the hands of European colonial powers and European missionaries. Christianity spread in most African countries since the Catholic Portuguese sailed with their gunships around the coasts of Africa in the late 15th century, to be followed by the Germans, British and French during the 19th century. The colonial powers considered the spread of Christianity in the colonised countries as a civilising mission to the polytheist Africans; it was also meant as a moral facilitator to subdue them to European domination. Some churches went all the way to support unchristian systems, such as the apartheid regimes in South Africa or the slave trade, which forcefully seized African youth to work in Europe and America. The colonial administrations put the services of general education and medical care completely in the hands of Christian missions, which they used to evan-

gelise the local inhabitants of the country. The newly established schools became the major conduit for new mission converts. The Muslims who were conscious of their religion refused to join the missionary schools; the result of which was that they found themselves outside the whole modern system of education, civil service, economy and armed forces. As a result of this situation, Muslims were degraded to the bottom level of society even when they were the biggest group in the country. The consequences of that disadvantageous legacy still continue several decades after those countries gained their independence.

On the other hand, Africa is one of the most tolerant regions in the world in religious matters; it has experienced religious pluralism since antiquity. Almost every ethnic group has its own religion, god and rituals cited in its local language. The individual person hardly practises his rituals outside his locality. When Islam and Christianity were introduced into the continent, people coexisted with them without much problem. Those scriptural religions were quite often adapted to accommodate traditional beliefs and practices, to the dismay of their original preachers. For example, the circumcision of girls in the case of Muslims and polygamy in the case of Christians; both habits were not authorised by religious teachings. It was not uncommon to find members of one family adhering to different religions. The traditional animists are usually more tolerant than Muslims or Christians. However religion was sometimes used to mobilise certain sections of the population against others for political purposes, especially at times of conflict. It happened in the cases of Sudan, Nigeria, Uganda, Liberia, Tanzania and others.

Religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians was not much practised in Africa. Of the many major dialogues organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Interfaith Dialogue Unit (WCC) during the last three decades of the last century, almost none of them were held in Sub-Saharan Africa. However at the beginning of the 21st century African countries became not only involved in dialogue but active in establishing interfaith organisations, which include Muslims, Christians, Jews, Baha'is and followers of traditional religions. During the last five or six years, more than 40 interfaith societies have been established which are affiliated to the continental association 'Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa' (IFAPA) founded by the Lutheran World Federation in 2002, and the interna-

tional 'World Conference of Religions for Peace' (WCRP) established in Japan in 1970. Those societies have been active in peace-making, humanitarian aid, human rights and combating HIV disease. This shows that African religious communities are more concerned in working together to solve practical problems of their societies rather than indulging themselves in discussing theological differences. A recent publication (*Striving in Faith*, Life & Peace Institute, Uppsala, 2008) discussed Muslim-Christian relations in Sudan, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Nigeria; it found out that community relationships are usually at peace but political and ethnic tensions can easily be given religious overtones. The editor summarised the situation in John Voll's words: "There is a strong sense of competition and potential open conflict among both activist Muslims and activist Christians in Africa. Conflicts that may have different causal elements sometimes become defined and articulated in religious terms."

The Sudan, like many African countries, experienced religious diversity and coexistence since ancient times. The Pharaonic Kushite civilisation spread in Nubia since the 8th century B.C., the coming of Orthodox Christianity in the middle of the 6th century A.D. led to the establishment of three Christian kingdoms in Nubia with different theological traditions, while Islam entered Sudan in the middle of the 7th century from three different places (Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa) and had different characteristics according to its place of origin. After seven centuries, the gradual spread of Islam, led to the establishment of some Islamic kingdoms in Darfur, Kordofan and Sennar. Despite their different denominational traditions, two of the Christian kingdoms merged with each other without any tension or conflict. The various Islamic traditions in the northern part of the country coexisted for centuries without any serious discord. The *sufi* trend was the most dominant in Sudan; it influenced the Sudanese people with its spirituality and tolerance. The conversion from paganism to the Pharaonic deity and from Christianity to Islam took more than twenty-four centuries without instigating a religious conflict. The outcome of that long process was a peaceful coexistence among the adherents of the different religions and traditions; the strong blood kinship and tribal solidarity mitigated any extreme religious feelings. Trimmingham, explaining the wide spread of Islam at the expense of Christianity, said that the far more important factor "was the attraction of the seductive power which Islam exercises upon any African people rendered spiritually homeless, especially through its power of

assimilation of indigenous practices." (*Islam in the Sudan*, London, 1949). Fundamentalism is a recent phenomenon which has not taken root in society.

The Anglo-Egyptian rule (1898-1955), which marked the era before independence, was dominated by British administrators who were accountable to their own government. The new administration was biased to curtail Islam and spread Christianity. It gave the churches full freedom to engage in missionary activities among the animist believers in southern Sudan and in the Nuba mountains but not in the Muslim north, for security reasons. After some years, the government allowed the missions to start modern education in the big northern cities, giving them big plots of land in central places. They are the best schools in the country to date; the majority of their students have always been Muslims, which reflects tolerance on both sides. To disrupt the spread of Islam and the Arabic language in the south, the colonial administration introduced in the 1920s the Closed District Act, which prevented northerners and southerners from visiting each other's region. At one time it wanted to annex the south to East African countries. That policy of separation between the two parts of the country, coupled with the churches' activities to foment hate against Muslims of the north, created a gulf of suspicion and mistrust amongst the southerners against the north. The British policy was changed only a few years before independence, it was too late to change attitudes and preconceived ideas. No wonder the first mutiny of southern soldiers against the central government in Khartoum took place in August 1955, even before the British Governor General left his office. Since that time, several southern rebel movements took arms against the central government demanding cession from the north. A protracted civil war continued now and then until a comprehensive agreement was signed in January 2005 between the SPLMandA and the government of Sudan. The military regimes of Aboud (1958-64), Numairi (1969-85) and al-Bashir (1989-2005) tried to solve the southern problem by pushing a policy of Arabisation and Islamisation in the south, which was counterproductive. Ironically the two first regimes were overthrown by northern trade unions, civil society groups and angry crowds; the immediate cause was the civil war in the south. Although religious propaganda was used by both parties to the conflict, the conflict has nothing to do with religion. In the last two decades, about two million southerners fled the operation zones in the south to live among Muslims in the

north, which confirms the fact that the confrontation was not between two peoples or two religions. The real cause of the war is around the distribution of power and wealth. The religious map of Sudan may be estimated as: Muslims 75% (5% of them in the south), animists 13% and Christians 12%. The latter two are mostly in the south and the Nuba Mountains.

During the peace negotiations, the two parties (Government of Sudan and SPLM) differed sharply on the sensitive issue of the role of religion in public life. The SPLM called for a secular state because of the religious diversity in the country, while the government defended the right of the Muslims in the north to implement Shari'a laws in their part of the country. After more than two years of tough negotiations, they reached a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) which was signed in Nairobi on 9 January 2005, in the presence of the regional and major powers of the world and the United Nations. The agreement included a detailed plan to share power and wealth between the north and the south, security arrangements to ensure the implementation of the plan and the role of religion in public life. The main points in the last subject contain the following: that Shari'a may be implemented in the north but the south will be exempted from any religious laws, the recognition of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Sudan, the freedom of belief, worship and conscience, that nobody shall be discriminated against on such grounds, and that eligibility for any public office, including the presidency, shall be based on citizenship and not on religion, beliefs or customs. All personal and family matters including marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession and affiliation may be governed by the personal laws of those concerned. The national capital had a special arrangement: to exempt non-Muslims from Shari'a laws, that they should have their own courts and prosecution offices, and that they will be represented in the law enforcement agencies of the capital. A special commission was established by the presidency to ensure that the rights of non-Muslims are protected in accordance with the terms of the agreement. All the points mentioned above were included in the Sudan Transitional Constitution, which was approved by both parties in July 2005. The CPA opened a new era in the history of Sudan; it attempted successfully to find solutions to all the problems which marred the relationship between the Muslim north and the Christian and animist south since independence. The agreement on religion was welcomed by most religious leaders, both Muslims and

Christians. The CPA needs to be implemented seriously and honestly, and to be followed by similar agreements to share power and wealth with other marginalised regions like Darfur and eastern Sudan. As a consequence of the positive environment created after the CPA, a successful Muslim-Christian dialogue took place in the first week of July 2007 organised by the ministry for guidance and endowments. The major churches took an active role in organising and drafting the recommendations of the conference. The two communities pledged: to deepen the understanding of the coexistence between Muslims and Christians, to enhance the role of mosques and churches to encourage the spirit of coexistence and communication, to reject violence and religious extremism, to strengthen ethical values and combat moral corruption, and to achieve mutual understanding for national unity based on equal rights and responsibilities. The conference called for common institutions to promote dialogue among the followers of Godly religions, for cooperation among the believers to strengthen peace and unity, and to combat all kinds of terrorism. Muslim and Christian leaders succeeded since 2003 (before the CPA) to establish a shared independent organisation called the Sudan Inter-Religious Council (SIRC), which included equal numbers of leaders from the two communities in its general assembly and executive bureau. The Council aimed to strengthen the values of tolerance and coexistence in society, undertake dialogue and extend ties between religious leaders, protect religious freedom and places of worship, consolidate the values of peace and national unity and solve conflicts between religious sects. SIRC managed, in a short period, to solve a number of problems for the Christian community in Khartoum, such as: compensating the Catholic Church for its sports club which was seized by the government because its lease had expired, preventing the building of shops around the Christian cemetery, compensating the Episcopal Church for its school which was destroyed by building a major highway in the area, cancelling a government order to suspend the Armenian Church after an internal controversy over the election of its executive committee, obtaining three plots of land, free of charge, to build new churches for the Catholic, Episcopal and Sudan Church of Christ churches. The Council organised a number of workshops on conflict resolution, religious freedom, the Darfur problem and dialogues on peace-building. All the activities of SIRC were shared by members from both religious communities. The organisation gained mutual confidence and built international relations with similar organisations, especially in Africa.

What Lessons May Be Gained for Africa from the Call of Religious Dialogue?

My answer is that religious communities in Africa, especially Muslims and Christians, should work together to make life in their respective societies more peaceful, free and just. They should do their best to make life easy and tolerable for the weak members in society by providing humanitarian aid, medical care, education and combating poverty. They should stand firm in protecting the noble values of religious freedom, justice and human rights. They should combat dictatorship, injustice, corruption and moral decadence. In other words, what is required is to have dialogue on practical matters which will improve the standard of life in society for everybody. It is not useful for poor, weak and backward societies to squander their energies in debating theological differences, which have remained with us for many centuries and are not likely to disappear for a long time to come; however knowing these differences and the logic behind them for each religion, may lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the other's point of view. That matter may be left to the elite of both communities.