
RECONCILIATION AND HOPE

IN A MULTI-FAITH WORLD:

EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR MUSLIM NEIGHBOURS

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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USING THIS DISCUSSION PAPER...

Each year, the General Assembly meets to do the business of the church. Most of us are not involved with or even aware of much of the work that is done by the Assembly and by the many committees and agencies that report to it. But this work does have relevance to our lives as Christians and as Presbyterians today.

This discussion paper is a summary of a larger report to General Assembly. It is offered to enable you to explore an important topic of interest and significance to living our faith in today's world. The full report to the 129th General Assembly in 2003 can be found in the Acts and Proceedings (pp.309-320) as part of the work of the International Affairs Committee. It was adopted at that Assembly after revisions suggested by a previous Assembly.

Use this discussion paper with a small group that can reflect and talk together about the issues and ideas that are raised. This document, and the longer paper on which it is based, are not doctrinal or confessional statements. This study is not about judgment but about understanding. It is instead meant to engage Presbyterians in dialogue with each other and to make possible further dialogue with Muslim neighbours.

Throughout the paper there are suggestions for reflection and discussion. Your group should choose one person to lead these discussions. Why not take the time to read the entire report?

OPENING THE DISCUSSION

Begin by sharing any experience the group may have with people of the Muslim faith. What interactions have you had with Muslims?

Now consider this question together: What information does the group have about Islam?

On a piece of newsprint or a blackboard, write down everything that the group can brainstorm about Islam. This can be anything that they know or have heard, any beliefs or characteristics that come to mind. Do not discuss what you hear or evaluate it in any way – just record it as you will come back to it later.

INTRODUCTION

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 brought Islam to the forefront of the world's attention. More than ever before, Christians everywhere are confronted with the need to set aside prejudice and misconception in favour of a genuine understanding of Islam and in favour of working toward reconciliation and hope in a world of many faiths and diverse religious identities. We live in a 'global village' and share a responsibility to collaborate in encouraging productive relationships among adherents of the two faiths. Christians and Muslims have lived and worked together peacefully for centuries, both in the east and in the west. It is imperative that we continue to do so. Today, Muslims constitute the second largest faith community in the world. Many Muslim families name a son Muhammad, a sign of profound respect for the founder of their religion, thus making it the most common masculine name in the world.

MUHAMMAD AND THE QUR'AN

Muhammad was born in Arabia around 570 A.D. Muslims believe that at the age of 40, he received divine revelations which were later written down and collected in the Qur'an. This book is the sacred Scripture for Muslims. Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, is considered a sacred language and only in the last century or so have attempts been made to translate the Qur'an into other languages. Muslims remain divided on the validity of these translations. In public and in private prayers, reciting verses from the Qur'an is done only in Arabic, by Arabic and non-Arabic speaking Muslims the world over. With the spread of Islam into many countries over the centuries, the majority of the world's Muslims today do not speak Arabic. Nevertheless, because of the reverence for Arabic, it is typical for Muslims to use some Arabic terms, notably "Allah", the Arabic word for "God" even when speaking their own language.

MONOTHEISM

While recognizing that there are fundamental theological differences between Christianity and Islam, there is much that they have in common, most notably the faith in the One and only true God. Muslims begin their prayer with the ascription that opens every chapter of the Qur'an: "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." This belief in the One God makes Christianity, Islam and Judaism theological cousins, descendants of the faith of Abraham, a fact which the Qur'an generously and repeatedly acknowledges.

The prophet Muhammad readily credited Christians and Jews with belief in the One True God. He called them, with considerable sympathy, "The People of the Book." His heroes were persons like Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Moses and Jesus. He venerated Mary and her son Jesus, whom he accepted as a prophet of God. However, in time, Muhammad's stark monotheism led him to part company with the Christians. The idolatry in Arabian society, to which he so strenuously objected, involved the worship of deities believed to be the daughters of Allah. He rejected outright the thought that God needed a son. However, as Christian-Muslim interaction increased, some Muslim theologians began to recognize the unique Christian claim of the pre-existence of Jesus as the eternal Word of God who was incarnated in the Virgin Mary. Sympathy with this basic Christian concept, however, was not widespread. For the majority of Muslim theologians, the emphasis remains on Jesus as prophet to the Jewish people. Muslims have as prophet Muhammad, who is considered the recipient of God's final revelation and who is designated by the Qur'an as the 'final' and 'seal' of the prophets.

LIFE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND 'JIHAD'

In Islam, the true believer is an admirable person who leads a righteous life and believes in Allah, the Judge on the Last Day, and in “the Angels, and the scriptures and the prophets”. True believers readily share their wealth with the poor, without neglecting prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. The righteous are engaged in spiritual discipline and ‘striving’, which for most Muslims defines the concept of ‘Jihad’. Despite much of its contemporary use in the media, this word ‘jihad’ does not primarily refer to war, but to the spiritual exercises of prayer, study, fasting and alms-giving as a way of preparation and active engagement in spreading the faith. This propagation of the faith is to take place peacefully by tongue or pen, for “Allah does not love the aggressors.” (2:190).ⁱ Therefore Muslims will not be the first to bear arms. But they are permitted to engage in war to defend themselves and their faith. So, even when used in a military context, ‘Jihad’ then has more the connotation of just war than of all-out aggression. In a famous anecdote, Muhammad told a weary party of soldiers returning from battle:

“You are now returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad”. “O Messenger of God,” they asked, “Who are we going to face now?” “Yourselves,” he replied.

REFLECTION

The concept of ‘right relationship’ is one that is important to Christian faith. As Christians, we learn that how we treat others is central to being in right relationship with each other and with God.

In your study group, discuss examples of Biblical teachings on right relationship. What passages can you remember or find that teach us how to be in right relationship with others. As a group, come to consensus on three common biblical teachings about right relationship.

Return now to the list that you brainstormed at the beginning of the study. Through the lens of right relationship and with what you have learned about Islam in this study, take another look at the ideas, beliefs, and characteristics on this list. Using a green pen, circle everything that you know to be true. With a red pen, circle everything that is false, an exaggeration or a misunderstanding. Then use a blue pen to circle anything that remains a question or that you would like to learn more about.

As a group, discuss the following questions:

- How much did/do you really know about Islam?
- Where do our misconceptions about Islam come from?
- What things can you now add to the list to show what you have learned about Islam?

CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM INTERACTION

Many of the most serious religiously motivated conflicts, tragically, involve Christian and Muslim populations, including conflicts in Bosnia -Herzegovina, Cyprus, Kosovo, Macedonia, the Philippines, Sudan and Turkey. Islamic civilization is the only one with which the territorial, religious, economic and cultural boundaries of western Christianity have fluctuated for the past fourteen centuries. This relationship has been marked heavily by confrontation. But there have been periods of fruitful collaboration and mutual regard, especially under benevolent Muslim leaders, who saw the free exchange of ideas and goods to be beneficial to both communities. A dramatic decline of goodwill on both sides came with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, the establishment of British rule over Mogul India during the 18th and 19th centuries, and later the break up of the Ottoman Empire. The European colonization that followed swallowed virtually all Muslim lands.

Two other factors in more recent years have contributed to complicating Christian-Muslim relations, namely western dependence on Middle East oil, and the establishment of a specifically Jewish state in Palestine. The political maneuvering in the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia, created by the Cold War, together with the need for petroleum to keep the global economic engine going, introduced new sources of dissatisfaction, misunderstanding, and frustration for Muslims. The overwhelming images of western wealth, cultural dominance and swaggering smugness today further intensify these feelings in the Muslim world.

Christians living in Muslim lands also have a similar aversion to many western secular values and have developed the discretion necessary to separate stereotypes from the essential human values they share with Muslims. We have a great deal to learn from Middle Eastern Christians who have found creative ways to engage with their Muslim neighbours in prayer for a world where God's justice, peace and abundance is intended for all.

SHARED VALUES

In the current context, there are both opportunities for fruitful Christian-Muslim dialogue and significant obstacles. Muslims, like Christians, do not all express their faith in a uniform way; there are vast geographical and cultural differences among them. In whatever situation they find themselves, Christians and Muslims can work together in a fruitful way by standing against the excesses of their own culture. In our western culture we are increasingly aware that ours is a 'post-Christian' society whose values, aspirations and self-understanding we live with but do not share and may find quite appalling. In many spheres where Christians find themselves at odds with a consumer-driven materialistic secular society, they will find Muslims who share their concerns. Equally, many Muslims are shocked by the images of intolerance, misogyny and extremism that are directed at them by other Muslims who insist that this is the only true expression of Islam. Christians and Muslims can support each other in calling attention to the need for personal moral integrity in both private and public life, in promoting social attitudes and practices of compassion and justice, and in protesting the exclusion of spirituality and expression of faith from the public square. Despite theological differences, Christians and Muslims can find creative and constructive ways of thinking, learning and working together. Much can be learned from the example of the Arab Working Group on Muslim Christian dialogue, founded in 1995 by the Middle East Council of Churches. In December 2001 this group adopted a statement called "Dialogue and Co-existence: An Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant" in which prominent Arab Muslims and Christians state:

"Muslim-Christian dialogue is...a dialogue among believers. They perceive this endeavour as a practical expression of their religious values, values which give substance to the meaning of pluralism, mutual awareness, and the unqualified dignity of the human being, and of the values of justice, fairness, truth, decency, fellow feeling, affection, mercy and the stewardship of creation." (par 2).

"...dialogue is also a way of resolving the confusion between genuine religiosity and fanaticism which leads to violence and extremism..."(par. 7).ⁱⁱ

Islam and Christianity, along with Judaism, are Abrahamic faiths. In this document we are emphasizing the fact that Muslims and Christians share substantial beliefs and values in their commitment to creating a just, peaceful and secure social order in which the worship of God can be conducted openly and freely. Overcoming a long history of conflict and misunderstanding is not easy, but it is surely worth the effort.

The International Affairs Committee heard of several initiatives taken by congregations and courts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in this vein. A letter was sent to the Canadian Islamic Congress by the Synod of Toronto-Kingston assuring them of prayers of concern and “our determination to help end bigotry and narrow mindedness no matter where it is found.”ⁱⁱⁱ Several congregations invited Muslim speakers to their churches or began studies on Islam.

CLOSING REFLECTION

What next? What do you still want to know about Islam? What can you do to explore right relationship with Muslim neighbours?

For Christians, study is not the end but the beginning. Our faith is an active one. What we believe we must live. In your group, discuss the questions posed above. Look again at your brainstorming lists and the reflections you have done with this paper. Attending especially to the items circled in blue on your list (those things that you need to learn more about) and to the biblical teachings about right relationship, decide together what action you will take based on your learning.

Close with prayer.

Read together Section 9.2.1 “Our Mission and Other Faiths” from Living Faith.

Ask each person to name one thing that they are thankful for.

Ask each person to offer one thing that they want to ask God for help with.

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*Indicates those references included in the original report to General Assembly. The additional references were added to this study document for their value as study resources.

- i Quotations from the Qur'an are from N.J. Dawood *The Koran*, Penguin Books, 1956. Numbers in parentheses refer to Surahs (chapters) and verses of the Qur'an.
- ii The full document is available on request from Justice Ministries.
- iii Correspondence from the Synod of Toronto-Kingston to the Canadian Islamic Congress, November 29, 2001.

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