

From The Baptist World Alliance

To the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars who have written or signed
A Common Word Between Us and You

May Grace and Peace be Yours in Abundance

Preface

Dear Friends,

Let our first word be one of our appreciation for the generous initiative you have taken, and of our delight in the eirenic and constructive spirit in which your letter has been written. Many of us have hoped for the kind of dialogue between Muslims and Christians that you offer, and now we have your invitation, opening up the way for conversation and deeper friendship. We believe that this letter is a unique moment in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. There have been similar efforts in the past, but none has been endorsed by so many Muslim scholars and religious leaders, representing such diverse traditions and groups within the Islamic faith. In the same way, the response so far by Christian leaders has been representative of a very broad spectrum of Christians, all expressing a warm reception of your invitation. In adding our voices to theirs, we want to embrace your conviction that it is only the movement of human hearts and minds towards love and worship of the One God, creator of us all, that will begin to resolve the huge needs for peace, justice and love of neighbours in our world today. Your letter, then, is not only creative but timely.

The Baptist World Alliance has already made a brief response through its President, the Revd David Coffey, welcoming your letter. However, we now wish to make a more extensive reply from a wide group of Christian leaders within our Alliance, setting out some of the considerations that lay behind our initial response of appreciation. At the Annual Meeting of the Baptist World Alliance, gathered in Prague July 21-25, 2008, leaders from Baptist Unions and Conventions in 66 countries discussed your letter in an open forum. Many of them came from areas of the world in which they have experienced distressing religious conflicts, but there was a common desire to respond positively to your invitation, and a recognition of the friendly and hospitable intentions that lie behind it. They have therefore commissioned this response, and we who are writing and signing it have listened carefully to their experiences and views. We have also read and learned from written responses sent by leaders of Baptist churches in the regions of Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and North America.

At the very beginning of our reply, we want to affirm that you are right in identifying the double command to love God and neighbour as being at the heart of the message of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. We want to say 'yes' to your invitation to 'come together' with you to live in peace, respect and kindness. We wish to collaborate with you, wherever possible, in local projects for peace, justice and the giving of aid to those who are suffering and in need. And we do agree with you that future dialogue between us can be based on the 'common ground' of our obedience, within our own faiths, to the double love command, together with our fundamental confession of the unity of God.

In saying all this with a full heart, however, we want to clarify what we mean by saying that we have a ‘common ground’ in the commandments to love God and our neighbour. We do not understand it to mean that this double command is the sum total of our two faiths: we do not think that the whole range of our beliefs about the relation between God and the world He creates and redeems can be reduced to this double command. We do not even need to assume at the beginning of our dialogue that we mean exactly the same thing by ‘love of God’ and ‘love of neighbour’. Rather, we understand ‘common ground’ to mean that this double command to love opens up a space or area (‘ground’) in which we can live together, talk with each other, share our experiences, work together to enable the flourishing of human life and explore the eternal truths to which our respective faiths bear witness. We can inhabit this ‘common ground’ together, of course, because we recognize that there is a *sufficient* overlap between the way Christians and Muslims speak about love of God and humanity for us to understand each other and open ourselves to mutual exploration. In this sense the ‘common ground’ is also a ‘common word’. Moreover, this common ground is not just a strategy for dialogue, but a gift of God to us all. In the end, it is God who gives the ground on which we stand, and God who opens up the space in which we can meet. We read your letter as having a similar view of what ‘common ground’ means, because you say:

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions – and whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences – it is clear the *Two Greatest Commandments* are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament.

Part of the character of the common ground is its making of a ‘link’ between the Scriptures of three faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – which acknowledge their roots in the faith of Abraham. On this ground the scriptures intersect in some way. We wish to follow your example of encouraging each other to read and reflect on passages from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur’an. It is by reading each other’s Scriptures that we shall come to understand each other better and learn better how we both speak of God. Moreover, we wish to express our appreciation that you have given such a central place to passages from the Gospels in marking out the borders of the ‘common ground’ between us. It is in the words of Jesus recorded in Mark 12:28-31 (parallel in Matthew 22:34-40, cf. Luke 10:25-28) that the two love commands are brought together concisely into one saying. Here, when asked what is the ‘first commandment’, Jesus integrates two passages from the Hebrew Bible:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The second [commandment] is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:7-8) There is no other commandment greater than these.

The Torah itself does not bring the two commands together in one place, and neither – it appears – is there an *explicit* instance in the Qur’an. There are certainly examples of the double love command in Jewish writings of an early period, and in the Gospel of Luke the saying about ‘the first and second commandments’ is found on the lips of a Jewish scribe, whom Jesus approves; but the only instances of the saying in the sacred

Scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths are in the New Testament. We consider it to be a move of the deepest courtesy on your part, therefore, to define the ‘common ground’ in a way that is so familiar to your Christian audience.

However, your letter amply illustrates that the Qur’an and the Hadith contain commands to love both God and neighbour, and one particular saying of the Prophet Muhammad (on ‘the best that I have said’) seems, as you suggest, to echo Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the *Shema*). You explain that love of the neighbour is always *implied* in love of God, since without love of neighbour there can be no true faith in God. As the Prophet Muhammad said:

None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.¹

This is akin to the verse in the New Testament:

Those who do not love a brother and sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (I John 4:20).

A verse from the Qur’an clearly brings together the worship of God with doing good to the neighbour, which seems to be a close parallel to the double love command:

Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbours near and far, to travellers in need, and to your slaves (Al-Nisa’ 4:36).²

Further, you point out that the summons from the Qur’an (Aal ‘Imran 3:64) to Christians to ‘come to a common word’ implies not only a call to love of God (‘worship none but God’) but also to love of neighbour; you argue that the command ‘that none of us shall take others for lords beside him’ is concerned with the religious freedom of all people in the face of human rulers, and that justice and freedom are a crucial part of love of the neighbour:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).

As Christians in the Baptist tradition, we have from our origin been passionately concerned to defend freedom of religion for all people, not for Christians alone, and so we find it poignant that you associate love for neighbour so directly with this freedom. We wish to say more about this below, but it suffices for now to say that there can be no doubt that the appeal to the double love command places us on ‘common ground’.

In what follows, we wish to start the process of exploration that is facilitated by standing and walking together on the ‘common ground’. We hope that there will be opportunities, on a local or regional level, to continue this conversation face to face. When this happens, we hope that our present response will be used, alongside

your original letter, as a set of guidelines for discussion. Here, then, we would like to suggest what may be fruitful lines of enquiry for such a dialogue among Muslims and Christians together in a variety of settings, to increase mutual understanding, and to lay a foundation for partnerships and shared programmes at the grass-roots of our communities.

God's initiative of love

While the common ground we share with you is a familiar space, we find less familiar the emphasis you lay on love as obedience, devotion and constant praise to God. That these are indeed elements of love has been a welcome reminder to us from an Islamic perspective, and we have been prompted to think through again the words of Jesus and the *Shema*, to which you draw attention, that love is a matter of the 'heart, mind, soul and strength'. We have learned a good deal from the way that you find love to be a matter of acknowledging the uniqueness, sovereignty and praise of God as summed up in the word of the Prophet Muhammad that:

The best that I have said – myself and the prophets that came before me – is: 'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things.'³

As you put it, 'The words "His is the praise" remind Muslims that they must be grateful to God and trust him with their sentiments and emotions'. You remind us that the call to love is not a mere emotion or mood, but is a summons to an intentional devotion in which 'the whole of the soul – with its intelligence, will and feeling' participates, and that this will have an impact on the practice of everyday life. We are reminded here of the way that the New Testament urges us to link our praise of God with practical living according to the will of God:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is ... be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father ... (Eph. 5:15-20).

In the light of this human response of love for God, the question which arises between us, however, is the way in which we understand the love of God Himself as a free gift which gets all human love started. Christians want to emphasize that the very nature of God is love, and this is always prior to *our* love for God. Indeed, we are only able to love God and each other because God has poured out His love towards us, lifting us to a new level of life in which love is possible. For Christians, this love is supremely displayed in the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Through the love of God shown in Christ and in his self-sacrifice, we are enabled to love God and others. The power of the initiating or prevenient love of God, freely given, is expressed in such New Testament texts as this:

Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love* ... Beloved, *since God loved us* so much, we ought also to love one another. No one has ever

seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and *his love* is perfected in us (1 Jn. 4:7-12. Our italics)

On first sight, this stress on the initiating love of God seems to be striking a different note from the text you quote from the Qur'an, where the love of God seems to be a consequence or reward of our love and obedience to God:

Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): if ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful (Aal 'Imran, 3:31).

The impression of this saying is reinforced by your comment that God enjoins Muslims who truly love God to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad, 'in order in turn to be loved by God'. However, we notice that the final emphasis of the saying is on the given fact that God *is* eternally forgiving and merciful, and does not acquire these properties when we are obedient. Moreover, you quote a highly relevant saying from the Prophet Mohammad in a footnote elsewhere:

God has one hundred mercies. He has sent down one of them between genii and human beings and beasts and animals and because of it they feel with each other; and through it they have mercy on each other; and through it, the wild animal feels for its offspring. And God has delayed ninety-nine mercies through which he will have mercy on his servants on the Day of Judgement. (Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Tawbah; 2109/4; no. 2752).

Here, just one of a hundred divine mercies is freely given to the whole creation, but it is enough to enable all the empathetic love ('feeling') and mercy that creatures show towards each other. Perhaps, then, the situation envisaged is one where divine mercy gets human love going, and then the exercise of love for God results in still more love from God (the 'ninety-nine mercies' reserved for the Day of Judgement); it is as if the prevenient mercy of God demands responsible obedience. Christians, while stressing the prevenient love of God, have always recognized that there is a complex and often baffling relation between divine initiative and human response. We should not forget here the words of Jesus in John 14:23, that 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them...' which seems to make God's love conditional on the following of the commands of Christ. Also, in the Lord's Prayer we are taught to say, 'forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive* those who trespass against us'.

A discussion about the respective meanings of the love of God and the mercy and compassion of God in Christianity and Islam may then prove mutually illuminating as we wrestle with the mystery of the relation between grace and obedience. Moreover, as Christians we greatly appreciate the Islamic insight that the mercy of God is distributed throughout the created order and creates mercy not just among human beings but in the whole of the animal kingdom. There is a key ingredient here for a theology of peace and justice in the natural world.

The oneness of God and the love of God

While Christians are familiar with the double love command of Jesus, you give us a salutary reminder that the first and greatest commandment ('You shall love the Lord your God') is quoted by Jesus from the Jewish *Shema*, which begins with a

declaration of the oneness of God: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'. This is made explicit in Mark 12:28-31, while it is implicit in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. You therefore urge that the 'common ground' is not just the two greatest commandments, but the confession of the Unity of God in which they are rooted and out of which they arise. The threefold common ground you propose is the Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him and the necessity of love of the neighbour.

While, as Baptist Christians, we affirm both the Oneness of God and the love of God, the fact that we do not often explicitly link them together gives us pause for thought. By 'Oneness' we understand a range of affirmations about God. These include the fact that there *is* only one God (monotheism) and that this God is sovereign, but 'oneness' also means that God is unique and unclassifiable, unlike all objects in the world. The uniqueness of this One God means that God must be mysterious to human minds, and so human language will finally fail in describing God. As God declares through the Prophet Isaiah 'To whom then will you compare me?' (Isa. 40:25) and 'my thoughts are not your thoughts' (Isa. 55:8). Your letter links love and oneness mainly in terms of praise for the sovereignty of God, but there are also regions of thought to be explored which link love with the depths of the mystery of God.

There is room for exploration here in ways that are illuminating but not contentious. However, when we speak of the love and mystery of God we must open out an area of belief that we know will be troubling to you, but which is absolutely essential for us in confessing the Oneness of God: we mean the doctrine of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are well aware that Muslims believe the Christian idea of the Trinity contradicts the affirmation that God has no other being in association with Him. There are many texts in the Qur'an which affirm that 'we shall ascribe no partner unto him',⁴ and we may add the declarations that 'He fathered no one nor was he fathered'⁵ and the denial that 'God has a child'.⁶

We want to make clear that in holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian church has always denied that there are any other beings alongside the One God. In using the traditional word 'person' (*hypostasis* or 'distinct reality') of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the church has never thought that it is speaking of three personal beings like any persons we know in the world. Nor does it think that God has fathered a child with the same physical process that we see in the world around us. Rather, the church is attempting to express the truth that there are mysterious, unknowable depths to the personal nature of God. It is also aiming to be faithful to the truth of God which has been disclosed in the event of Jesus Christ in history.

The church confesses that the life of God, who exists only from God's self and from no other cause, is composed eternally of loving relationships which have some likeness to the relationships we know between a Father and a Son, or a parent and a child, and which are being opened up continually to new depths of love and hope by a reality that our Scriptures call 'Spirit'. While the 'persons' in God cannot be compared to beings in the world, there is some likeness between relationships of love in God and the world, since 'God is love'. We can know these relations, not by observing them or examining them, but only by participating in them as God calls us to share His life. Christians think that this is made possible for us through Jesus

Christ: this is because the eternal Father-Son relation in God was fully displayed and actualized in the relation of Jesus to the God whom he called Father, and whom Jesus taught his disciples to call 'Father' as well. Christians see this vision of God as hinted at in a prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John, that:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they [who believe in me] also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know what you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-3)

This is not the place for a fuller exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and nor have we said as much as we have in order to try and convince you of its truth. We write in order to make clear that we ourselves cannot think of God as love *except* in terms of an eternal communion or fellowship whose unity is dynamic and relational. While we rejoice to confess with you that there is one God, it is not possible for us to speak of the One God without also speaking of Trinity. It is, for us, because God lives in relations of self-giving and sacrificial love that we can say that God 'is' love as well as that God is 'loving'. It is this love which overflows in astonishing generosity to us and draws us into participation in the divine life: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5), and 'when we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... and joint heirs with Christ.' (Rom. 8:15-16).

We have also written about our belief in God as Trinity to explain why we think that we can inhabit a 'common ground' which is marked out by belief in the Unity of God, and why we can confess with you that 'God has no associate'. It would be good to explore the way in which you and we occupy this ground from our different perspectives. It would be particularly useful to explore the impact that our different confessional stances make upon our actual practice of love and justice, in the everyday life in which – as we have seen – we are called to praise and obey God. We are encouraged to think that this kind of conversation is possible because, in your courtesy to us, you have refrained from interpreting the prohibitions of the Qur'an against ascribing any partner to God as a critique of the doctrine of the Trinity (especially in your comments on the appeal to 'come to a common word', Aal 'Imran 3:64).

The extent of love for neighbour

We have already remarked on your declaration that 'in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God'. But, with the scribe of Luke 10:25-8, we may ask 'who is my neighbour'? This teacher of the law had already asked Jesus 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' and had then answered his own question with the double love command, to love God and neighbour. When Jesus commended his answer, he went on to query the identity of the neighbour. Jesus' own answer was contained in a story which has come to be known as 'The Good Samaritan', and whose point is essentially that our neighbour is anyone who is in need of our help, regardless of any boundaries of race, religion or class.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead [A priest and a temple-servant from the man's own people pass him by] ... A Samaritan, when travelling, came near him; and when he saw him he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He said, 'The one who showed him mercy'.

We wonder whether the orphan, the needy, the 'wayfarer' and the slave in your quotation from the Qur'an (Al-Baqarah 2:177) may be interpreted, like the man in Jesus' story, as anyone from any race or religion. We read in Al-Mumtahinah 60:8 that the Qur'an bids Muslims to 'show kindness and deal justly' with all non-Muslims who do not resort to violence. We have already quoted above a saying from the Qur'an, in Al-Nisa' 4:36:

Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbours near and far off, to travellers in need, and to your slaves.

It would be good to know how you understand the 'neighbour who is far off' in this command. It would also be helpful to know how the universality of the neighbour relates in your understanding to the Islamic ideal of the *umma*, or the world-wide community of Muslims which transcends national boundaries. We should say that Christians hear the story of Jesus as a word of judgement upon them, as they have so often failed to be the Good Samaritan throughout the history of the church.

There is a foundation for the idea of the 'universal neighbour' in the conviction, held within all three Abrahamic religions, that the creation of humankind by God points to the relation of all human beings with the Creator, and to their responsibility and accountability to God for their stewardship in the world. This can also be expressed in the idea of the creation of all humanity in the image of God. As you observe in a footnote, Christianity and Islam have comparable conceptions of human beings being created 'in the best stature' (Al-Tin 95:1-8) and 'from God's own breath' (Sad 38:72). After quoting from Gen. 1:27 and Gen. 2:7, you recall the words of the Prophet Muhammad which occur many times in the Hadith: 'Verily God created Adam in His own image'.⁷ The consequent responsibility of human beings is portrayed in a passage from the Qur'an (Al-Baqarah 2:30-35) where God announces to the angels that He intends to place Adam as a 'viceroy' in the earth, a scene akin to Psalm 8 (and quoted in Heb. 2:7-8):

You have made [human beings] only a little lower than the angels,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hand;
you have put all things under their feet

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In Gen. 2:19-20 Adam names the animals, while in the Qur'an (Al-Baqarah 2:30-35) he is given special knowledge of their names by God. Both texts understand the naming, or knowledge of the names, of the animals as a symbol of the responsibility given to Adam. We are all too aware how this God-given stewardship ('dominion') has become a *domination* and exploitation of the animals and the whole natural world, but human beings retain their dignity and value in God's eyes regardless of their failure.

Should we not then regard creation by God and accountability to God as part of our 'common ground'? All human beings are to be held as of equal worth because of the equal responsibility and privilege given to all by the Creator God. Love for neighbour is thus rooted both in God's love for us and God's purpose in creation. We see here a common commitment to respect all fellow human beings, in face of their diversities of race, culture and religion. In this shared vision we have a common project to work out our responsibility for the world before God in promoting the common good of society, the development of human life and care for the whole creation. It is when we work on such projects together that we feel the sense of being part of one human community, and are able to explore the spiritual concerns that have motivated us and the truths that have inspired us. In our very practice we find our feet on the common ground beneath us.

The costliness of love for neighbour

In the section of your letter on love of neighbour, you affirm that sympathy must be accompanied by something more – by 'self-sacrifice' and by 'giving to the neighbour what we ourselves love'. These words seem to us to penetrate deeply into the meaning of neighbour-love, and we would like to set alongside them some words of Jesus in the Gospels which we think express these qualities. At their best, Christians have followed Jesus in commending a love which is vulnerable, which does not expect a return from the person loved, which persists even in the face of rejection of our love, and which is therefore love of enemies as well as those who do good to us.

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:43-48)

In a passage just before the one above, Jesus speaks some very hard words: 'I say to you, Do not resist an evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.' Jesus is really saying that we ourselves cannot lay down any limits to what love may demand. As the Apostle Paul says later, in the context of relations with the state, 'Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another' (Rom. 13:8). We ourselves are not to draw the line. In some circumstances, love may *even* demand non-resistance (or at least non-violent resistance) to those who want to harm us. The difficulty is knowing when these circumstances are. While some Christians have thus taken up a

completely pacifist position, others have espoused a ‘just war’ theory which includes proportionate means for justifiable self-defence. Such ‘just war’ is not to be confused with a ‘holy war’ to advance the cause of Christianity, which we utterly repudiate.

However, underlying these differences of view there is a common principle that we are to go beyond simply being at peace with those who are at peace with us; we are to be *peace-makers*, and love may demand self-sacrifice in this attempt. We are to break cycles of violence by generous actions. For Christians, this view of the costly nature of love stems from a vision of the triune God, where the ‘persons’ are ceaselessly engaged in self-emptying for the sake of the other, and whose self-giving love overflows into sacrifice in the world. The history of human warfare has, nevertheless, shown the constant failure of Christian people to embody the nature of God in this way, and sadly at times in relation to their Muslim neighbours.

It would be good, then, to discuss with you the implications of your appeal to ‘self-sacrifice’ in love of neighbour. It would be especially valuable to reflect further on the saying from the Qur’an that ‘Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love’ (Aal ‘Imran, 3:92), which you explain as: ‘without giving the neighbour what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God.’ This seems to us to be a profound reflection on the command to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ which is found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It has far-reaching implications if we do not restrict ‘what we ourselves love’ to material goods, but consider all the things we love – including our security, our expectations, our status and our very selves. We look forward to reading these passages from our Scriptures together, as we agree with you that ‘if Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace’.

The imperative of religious freedom

We are impressed by the case you advance for religious freedom, and for the frequency with which you return to the issue in your letter. You refer, for instance, to the saying ‘let there be no compulsion in religion’ (Al-Baqarah 2:256) and the principle that God wills there to be variety in belief (‘Had God willed He could have made you one community’: Al-Ma’idah 5:48). Most helpfully, you connect the need for freedom of religion with the supremacy of the sovereignty of God above all human power. The saying in Aal ‘Imran 3:64 makes an appeal to ‘come to a common word’ that we ‘shall worship none but God’; the linked command to ‘ascribe no partner to God’ is interpreted as meaning that none should be forced to disobey God’s commands at the behest of human rulers who pretend to be lords alongside God, and this is expanded to mean that ‘Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to follow what God has commanded them’. In this way, a link is made between the command to love God and the command to love one’s neighbour, understood as including justice and freedom of religion.

As Baptist Christians, we have always defended the right of religious freedom for all people, regardless of their religion, grounding this theologically in the sovereignty of God.⁸ All people are responsible to God alone for their faith or lack of faith, and not to human powers. Key texts from the New Testament to which we have appealed have been Acts 5:29, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority’, and Romans 14:

Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall ... Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Rom. 14:4, 10-12)

The appeal to the final judgement of God on human belief is reflected, it seems to us, in several sayings from the Qur'an, such as 'God is the Hearer, the Knower' (Al-Baqarah 2:137) and 'Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ' (Al-Ma'idah 5:48):

For each we have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that he might try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

It seems to us that you are directing your argument in the first place to a defence of the right of Christians, Muslims and Jews to practice freely the religion in which they have been born, or which they already hold - 'to follow what God has commanded them'. This is obviously of critical importance, and we can think of many local situations where tensions would be eased if this were more widely understood. It is not altogether clear to us whether you think that this principle can also cover the freedom of people to change their religion, or to move from a community of one faith to another of a different faith. As Baptist Christians, we believe that the same principle of accountability to the sovereign God gives freedom to make such a change, from Christianity to Islam or from Islam to Christianity. Of course, we are concerned here with a person's *own* conviction that God is calling them into a different community of faith ('to follow what God has commanded them'), not with unjust human means of persuasion, inducement or compulsion.

We recognize, therefore, that both Islam and Christianity are 'missionary faiths'. We affirm that there is a legitimate kind of mission in which people can, in appropriate ways, share their beliefs with others, and in which people seeking God should have the freedom to explore the way that God is calling them into faith. We believe that as Christians and Muslims we are faced by an important challenge in this age of globalization: that each tradition should develop further its ethical approach to mission, and that we should do this together wherever possible. We would like to engage in discussion on this matter, looking at specific local examples where tension or conflict has arisen between our two communities, and placing these in the context of our Scriptures.

A way forward

We hope that our comments on your remarkable letter have made clear how much it has caused us to think, and how it has caused us to return with new insight to our own Scriptures. It has also prompted us to seek to become more familiar with the Qur'an than we have been. How, then, shall we build on this exciting and generous initiative?

First, throughout this response we have drawn attention to matters that we have said we would like to discuss further with you. We believe that this is best done, not by a central commission of the Baptist World Alliance, but by encouraging our regional unions and conventions of churches to engage in joint conversations and practical projects for aid and development with their Muslim neighbours, in ways that are appropriate for their own area. We will aim to encourage these local activities to give attention to the 'common ground' that we have both identified, and specifically to use your letter and our response in doing so. Wherever possible, we would like to share ecumenically with other Christian churches in these events. We promise, as an Alliance, to keep ourselves informed of what is happening on a local level in inter-faith dialogue and cooperation, to make sure that already existing projects are known about widely in our churches, and to encourage new initiatives where necessary.

Second, we have a deep concern for education, both of religious teachers and of the members of local congregations and mosques. We hope that both our communities might encourage a study, within our own training institutions, of the principles and the methodology that are contained in your letter, together with a reflection on some of the questions that we have raised in our response. In this way our two documents might well be of use in our own communities of faith, as well as addressed to each other. At the same time, we hope that opportunities can be found for joint study courses in our theological colleges, in which students from both faiths can participate.

It is, however, too easy to keep a dialogue going at the high level of theological conversation alone. Somehow the theological vision which enlivens us must be received at the grassroots and change attitudes and prejudices there. Somehow the members of our communities need to be gripped by the value of respect and honour for all people because of the creation of all by the One God, and because of His love and mercy towards them, however wrong the beliefs of others may seem.

Just one way this may happen is for religious teachers in both faiths to be careful about the rhetoric they use, which may have unintended effects on followers who are less aware of theological nuances, and which may even lead to violence. To be concrete, we have one suggestion for Baptist Christians, that they avoid words to describe evangelism (or telling the Gospel story) which appear threatening to others, such as 'evangelistic crusades'. Nor is it necessary to be critical of another faith in order to commend what we believe to be true in ours; the story of Jesus has power to persuade in its own right. It is easy to slip into a violent rhetoric which arouses unpleasant memories of conflicts in the past. We do not venture to suggest examples of unhelpful rhetoric to you, our Muslim friends, but hope that you might be able to identify some for yourselves. Let our rhetoric be that of love, as you have already shown.

In this way, and in many others, we aim to show obedience to the two great commandments of love for God and for our neighbour. We have found this quality in your letter to us, and we hope that you can discern it in this response to you.

May God's grace and love be always with you.

Signed by

The Revd. David Coffey, *President of the Baptist World Alliance*

The Revd. Neville Callam, *General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance*

The Revd. Prof. Paul S. Fiddes, *Chair of the Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church Cooperation of the Baptist World Alliance*

The Revd. Regina Claas, *Chair of the Commission on Freedom and Justice of the Baptist World Alliance*

NOTES

¹ Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, 67-1, Hadith no. 45.

² Translation from *A New Translation* by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

³ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Da'awat, Bab al-Du'a fi Yawm 'Arafah, Hadith no. 3934.

⁴ More than ninety times in the Qur'an, e.g. 3:64; 4:36; 4:116; 5:72; 6:163.

⁵ Al 'Ikhlas 112:1-4

⁶ Al-Baqara 2:115-17.

⁷ E.g. Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Al-Isti'than, 1; Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Birr 115; Musnad Ibn Hanbal, 2: 244, 251, 315, 323 et al.

⁸ Thomas Helwys, pastor of the first Baptist Church in England, wrote: 'for men's religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure': Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (Amsterdam, 1612), p. 69.