

# **Ideological Containment: Islamic Extremism and the Option of Theological Dialogue**

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## Abstract

Islamic extremism is founded on a dualist worldview: the realm of truth and the sacred (*dar al Islam*) set in opposition to the realm of falsehood, chaos and war (*dar al harb*). An ideology of contestation underpins Islamist radicalisation. And Islamic political thought is inherently theological; any response to the political ideology that arises from the dualist worldview must necessarily address allied theological perspectives and presuppositions.

In October 2007 an ‘Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders’ emanating from Jordan, entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, was issued to the Christian Church worldwide. What is at the heart of this ‘call’? What does it suggest with regard to an Islamic theological counter to dualism? What might it portend for the future of relations with Islam? Does it signal a new era for theological dialogue with Islam and co-operative conjoining in the wider struggle against radicalisation and extremism?

This paper will introduce the letter, review some representative responses to it thus far, note some issues and challenges that are raised and, by way of conclusion, offer a perspective on containing ideological extremism through interfaith theological dialogue. Can the dialogue option enable the addressing of theological factors inherent in the ideological underpinnings of Islamic extremism, thereby acting to contain it?

## **Introduction**

The ‘Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders’ (A Common Word, 2007CE/1428AH) was signed by some 138 Muslim clerics and academics and addressed to Pope Benedict XVI; some 20 named heads of Eastern (Orthodox) Churches; the Archbishop of Canterbury and four heads of Western Churches, including the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and, finally, to “Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere” (p. 1). This letter, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, is a significant document in terms of the context and pressing issues of Christian–Muslim relations and, indeed, of the wider arena of interfaith engagement with Islam and Muslim peoples. The document is in two sections: a short Summary and Abridgement, then the substantive epistle of some thirteen pages divided into three parts – (I) Love of God, (II) Love of the Neighbour, and (III) Come to a Common Word Between Us and You – followed by over four pages of Notes and the list of 138 signatories, given in alphabetical order. Following a flurry of initial reactions and responses, more measured considerations are also underway. Colloquia and conferences have or are being convened in Europe, America and elsewhere. The task of reception of this epoch-making Muslim text is steadily progressing.

## **The Muslim Letter of 2007**

The opening paragraph of the letter's Summary gives the pressing context: the pursuit of the peace of the world. Specifically it asserts "The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians" (p. 2). Comprising, together, over half of the world's current population, the letter is premised on the moral and theological responsibility of these two global faith communities to live up to their own precepts, especially in the context of the critical need for peaceful resolution to contemporary mutually divisive and destructive situations. And the basis for such resolution is to hand in "the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour" (ibid). These principles, which thread throughout their respective scriptural texts – two examples of which are given from the Holy Qur'an (*Al-Ikhlās*, 112:1-2; *Al-Muzzammil* 73:8) and one from the New Testament (*Mark* 12:29-31) – form the basis of "the common ground between Islam and Christianity" (ibid). Furthermore, the Summary of the letter makes pivotal reference to the Quranic injunction to Muslims to engage dialogically with Christians – as well as with Jews – by virtue of all three being "Peoples of Scripture" (or Peoples of the Book), in order to arrive at "a common word between us and you..." in matters of fundamental theological values (*Aal 'Imran* 3:64). This dialogical call and its justification are interlinked to the view, as proffered in the letter, that the two commandments of love expressed by Jesus in his citation of Torah – love of (or for) God; love of (or for) neighbour – are also embedded within Islamic scriptural text and theological sensibility. Hence the summary concludes: "in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is essential to our faith and practice". Love – of God and neighbour – is the basis for dialogue and the foundation of peaceful coexistence. The substantive letter then spells this out. It is not particularly long; it is really an invitation – a foretaste, an announcement of being open for the business of dialogue. As such it is an event that has occasioned much interest and reaction – the overwhelming majority of which is fully positive. And so a trajectory of the phenomenon of reception of this text is now emerging in its own right.

## **Responses to the Muslim Letter**

The official website of A Common Word ([www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)) is an interactive repository of response documents and related material. As at the beginning of November, 2008, some 60 formal Christian responses from leaders, organisations, and individuals may be accessed on the site together with some Jewish responses and nearly 500 recorded news items; a dozen audio-visual items and some 180 personal comments recorded. The site announced that as of November 1 2008 over 460 Islamic organizations and associations had declared their support for the letter. And around 20 ‘new fruits’ of interfaith developments are listed as having been initiated as a direct result of the letter. This is an impressive amount of activity to have taken place in a little over a year since it was released. Furthermore, the original 138 signatories have now more than doubled – and this is likely to increase (e.g., 277 as at November 4, 2008; 280 as at November 6; 299 as at December 3, 2008). Clearly the letter and its reception has become already a land-mark event in terms of Christian–Muslim relations. It is also a signal event in terms of the interaction of Islam with the wider world more generally. In order to review and comment upon the mainly Christian responses, I have grouped them into four categories: (1) the Vatican and other Catholic responses (the letter arose out of the earlier reaction to the now infamous ‘Regensburg’ address given by Benedict XVI, and he is the figure to whom it is initially and primarily addressed); (2) Orthodox Church responses; (3) Other Christian Churches, institutions and councils, including the formal response by the Archbishop of Canterbury; (4) sundry responses from various organisations, groups and individuals.

### ***Catholic Responses***

A number of responses are listed from Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. They include his immediate reaction of welcoming the letter as a “very encouraging sign” and “an eloquent example of dialogue among spiritualities” among other comments and press releases.<sup>1</sup> *Inter alia*, he is on record as portraying something of a cautious attitude in respect to noting very real hermeneutical difficulties and the limits to dialogue that exist. But I suggest this is a mark of interfaith realism; dialogical engagement is a process not a panacea, and the Vatican has clearly welcomed this new Muslim initiative for the process. Indeed, the gratitude of Pope Benedict for the letter was formally given by the Secretary of State,

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=6>, last viewed 13 October 2009.

Cardinal Bertone, on November 19, 2007 in which the Pope's appreciation for the "positive spirit which inspired the text" is conveyed.<sup>2</sup> Belief in the one God – though differing understood – is at the core of the quest for the common 'word' between Christians and Muslims. The principle that "without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should look to what unites us" was clearly expressed. Pope Benedict's remarks to Muslim representatives, given at Cologne on August 20, 2005, were also included: "I am profoundly convinced that we ... must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values".

By March 2008 an agreement had been reached to establish 'The Catholic-Muslim Forum', with the first seminar held in Rome in November 2008 attended by some 24 religious leaders and scholars, together with five advisors, from each side. The overall seminar theme was "Love of God, Love of Neighbour" with the sub-themes 'Theological and Spiritual Foundations' and 'Human Dignity and Mutual Respect' being specifically addressed. The Common Word Website has posted the full text of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's speech – "We and You: Let us meet in God's love" – and that of the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, His Eminence Mustafa Ceric, together with the welcoming address and substantive speech of the Pope, His Holiness Benedict XVI. The final statement entitled "Called to be instruments of Love and Harmony" was issued on November 6. In it a number of points were made, including acknowledgement of the different reference points for affirming love of God and neighbour (for Christians via the example and teaching of Christ; for Muslims via the example of Muhammad and the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah); affirmations of the sanctity and dignity of human life; assertions of the need for respect and mutual tolerance of variety and difference; the need for proactive engagement in the quest for justice and peace. Clearly, although the sentiments of the declaration would echo many such dialogical encounters that have gone before, a new impetus and a renewed vigour of engagement in dialogue is evidenced. A new beginning has been made, at least in respect to the ongoing relation of the Muslim world with the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican.

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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/letter-from-the-vatican.pdf>, last viewed 13 October 2009.

The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), a leading Catholic institution in respect to relations with Islam and Muslims, has recorded its appreciation of the Muslim leaders' letter.<sup>3</sup> This response states that the "long and diligent association with the cultural and religious patrimony of Islam, as well as our regular contacts with members of the Muslim community enables us to take note of the originality of this gesture and entitles us to draw attention of non-Muslims to its qualities". Among a number of salient positive observations made in respect to the text of the letter, the PISAI response comments in particular on "the special treatment (given) to the supreme point of reference that undergirds 'the other' as Jew or Christian, namely, the dual commandment of love of God and neighbour ... The willingness to acknowledge another person in the deepest desire of what he or she wants to be seems to us one of the key points of this document". A number of Catholic scholars have also made individual responses, among them Professor Daniel Madigan SJ of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. He sets the Muslim letter, and its Catholic response, in the context of Vatican II and its pivotal document, *Nostra Aetate*, which marks, for the Roman Catholic Church, the commencement of the search for 'a common word'. Furthermore, the Muslim letter clearly regards "the reactionary and intransigent ideologies that drive terrorism and puritanical repression are not drawing on the whole of the Islamic tradition, but rather a truncated and impoverished reading of it". An internal Islamic critique that is here signalled within and by the letter bodes well for a dialogical process that seeks to address issues of peace and social harmony.

### ***Orthodox Responses***

A number of responses to the Muslim letter have been forthcoming from various senior figures within the family of Orthodox Churches. They include, for example, letters from the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, from the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, and a statement of endorsement supported by a number of Arab Orthodox Christian leaders – Coptic, Maronite, Melkite, Armenian and Syriac.<sup>4</sup> There is a moving acknowledgement of the very long-standing relation between Armenian Christians and Muslims – positive with respect to Arab Muslims; but rather negative with respect to

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=27> , last viewed 13 October 2009.

<sup>4</sup> This statement – the Final Communiqué of the Third International Conference, "Coexistence and Peace Making" held in Jordan in January, 2008 (<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=newcontent&item=1>, last viewed 13 October 2009) – also bears the signatures of Roman, Syriac, Coptic and Melkite Catholic Patriarchs.

Turkish Muslims of the Ottoman Empire – given in a letter on behalf of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. This response also asserts:

We therefore deem it imperative to begin a true dialogue among the monotheistic religions, the aim of which should be the strengthening of eternal and common human values, the reinforcement of relationships between different faiths, and the protection of all that God has created. We also remain hopeful that this would contribute to better understanding each other, including strengthening mutual respect for one another’s spiritual, national and cultural traditions and heritage.<sup>5</sup>

His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia in the Armenian Orthodox Church, and a former Moderator of the World Council of Churches, gives voice to a widely-felt positive response to the Muslim letter. He affirms the prospect of Christians and Muslims dialogically engaged for the greater good and so stresses the theme of common humanity and community: “We belong to one humanity and one world under one sovereign God”.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Other Christian Church Responses***

There is a raft of responses now recorded from leaders, councils, and institutions, both denominational and ecumenical. Among the more substantial is a carefully considered response by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. After an initial positive message of response in a Press Release<sup>7</sup> in which he “welcomed the letter as a clear reaffirmation of the potential for further development of existing dialogue and common action between Christians and Muslims and other faith communities”, Williams undertook a wide-ranging ecumenical consultation before composing his formal reply. The Archbishop’s document is entitled ‘A Common Word for the Common Good’.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this Anglican response has been endorsed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.<sup>9</sup> Williams’ missive notes the Muslim letter’s spirit of “a helpful

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=57> last accessed 4 November, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Aram-I-Armenian-Orthodox-Catholicos.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Press Release from Lambeth Palace, Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2007.

(<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=11> last accessed 6 November, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Common-Good-Canterbury-FINAL-as-sent-14-7-08-1.pdf> , last accessed 13 October 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/documents/World-Alliance-of-Reformed-Churches.pdf>, last accessed 13 October 2009.

generosity of intention” (p. 1) and interprets the Muslim invitation to Christians as not seeking a facile quick accord but the more modest quest to “find a way of recognising that on some matters we are speaking enough of a common language for us to be able to pursue both exploratory dialogue and peaceful co-operation with integrity and without compromising fundamental beliefs” (p. 2). Indeed, the Muslim invitation is “a powerful call to dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims” for which the “very wide geographical (43 countries) and theological diversity represented among the signatories ... provides a unique impetus to deepen and extend the encounters” (p. 15). Williams identifies five areas for further exploration: i) understanding “the love of God”; ii) practical implications of “love of neighbour”; iii) the nature, interpretation and use made of respective scriptural texts; iv) the need to relate to each other from the basis of humble piety – “from the heart of our lives of faith before God” (p. 3); and v) the common awareness that, despite real differences, there is a shared “responsibility before God that we shall seek to hold before us as a vision worthy of our best efforts” (ibid). Williams argues that

Religious violence suggests an underlying religious insecurity. When different communities have the same sort of conviction of the absolute truth of their perspective, there is certainly an intellectual and spiritual challenge to be met; but the logic of this belief ought to make it plain that there can be no justification for the sort of violent contest in which any means, however inhuman, can be justified by appeal to the need to “protect God’s interests” (p.12).

He goes on to observe that

the more we as people of genuine faith are serious about the truth of our convictions, the more likely we will be to turn away from violence in the name of faith; to trust that God, the truly real, will remain true, divine and unchanging, whatever the failures and successes of human society and history. And we will be aware that to try and compel religious allegiance through violence is really a way of seeking to replace divine power with human; hence the Qur’anic insistence that there can be no compulsion in matters of religious faith (*al-Baqarah*, 2:256)... What we need as a vision for our dialogue is to break the current cycles of violence, to show the world that faith and faith alone can truly ground a commitment to peace which definitively abandons the tempting but lethal cycle of retaliation in which we simply imitate each other’s violence (p. 13).

With reference to the four-fold typology of interfaith dialogues – life, action, theological exchange, religious experience – Williams enunciates three imperatives for dialogical

engagement between Christians and Muslims: to strengthen practical programmes; intensify intellectual endeavours by way of research and colloquia; to foster deeper mutual appreciation to the life of faith of each other. He goes on to identify three possible outcomes: 1) maintaining and strengthening momentum for engagement; 2) the creation of safe dialogical discursive space to enable the problematic deep divergences to be explored; 3) that such engagements need to have a wide impact of relevance – they are not just the edification of participants. The applied focus with which Williams draws his paper to an end affirms mutual education, the continued engagement in living practical issues, and the commitment to a long-haul process as being of the essence of the practical response to the Muslim letter. Already a follow-through in terms of the intentions signalled by William’s response can be seen in the communiqué to emerge from a conference on ‘A Common Word’ held in October 2008 at Cambridge University, England, and of which he was a host.<sup>10</sup>

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA provides an ecumenical response that welcomes the intent of the Muslim letter “to engage seriously with Christians in dialogue ... grounded in the authentic religious convictions of our respective communities”.<sup>11</sup> This response highlights themes of hospitality and peacemaking as expressions of neighbourly love. The experience of Christian ecumenical dialogue opens out to interfaith dialogue and the quest for building upon common theological ground: “we can walk forward together with mutual appreciation in acceptance of the commandment to love God with our whole being, and in belief that love for God leads to and is demonstrated in love for one another”. Practical expressions of Christian-Muslim engagement and mutual education are noted and encouraged. Most significantly and challengingly is the recognition that the Muslim letter affirms that Muslims are not necessarily against Christians; indeed, Christians may consider Muslims as “*with us*, and that this togetherness bears upon the state of the world... we similarly affirm that Christianity is not against Islam”.

The highly influential publication, *The Christian Century*, proclaimed in a lead article on November 13, 2007: “The most impressive thing about (the Muslim letter) is that it

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<sup>10</sup> See: <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/16-conferences/16-communique-from-a-common-word-conference.html> , last accessed 13 October 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See: <http://acommonword.com/en/christian-responses/11-an-ecumenical-response-to-a-common-word-between-us-and-you.html> , last accessed 13 October 2009.

exists. The second most impressive thing is the economy of its argument. The scholars resist the innate desire to touch on everything pertinent to Christian-Muslim dialogue and instead invite Christians to remember Jesus' words about loving God and neighbour".<sup>12</sup> And in a letter of March 2008 the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev Samuel Kobia, expressed his positive response to the Muslim letter. He stated that he read the letter "as a representative expression of the Muslim will to engage with the Christian community in dialogue for the sake of justice and world peace" and he indicates he has "asked our Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation programme staff to make a response to your initiative a top priority".

### *Sundry Responses*

Finally, notice needs to be taken of a range of sundry organisations, groups and individuals. For example, John Esposito, the renowned American scholar of Islam, in his letter of endorsement states of the Muslim document that it "is a crystal-clear message of peace and tolerance". David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, England, who has the honour of being the first to be listed on the Christian Responses section of the official web-site, affirms the supreme importance of the Muslim initiative. He states of the Muslim letter that its

significance is not that it offers anything novel but that it selects so wisely from the riches of both scriptures and opens them up in a way that is highly relevant to the present situation. I found myself deeply moved by its vision of what it calls 'the all-embracing, constant and active love of God' and 'the necessity and paramount importance of love for – and mercy towards – the neighbour', and by its concern not only for that half of the world's population who are Muslim or Christian but also for every single other person and the whole of creation.<sup>13</sup>

Among the many other individuals who have responded to the Muslim letter, I would note that of the widely-respected author, Karen Armstrong. She wrote in October 2007:

The initiative of the Common Word is sorely needed by the entire world. All too often, religion is associated with violence and intolerance, and the compassionate ethos, which lies at the heart of every major faith, gets pushed to the sidelines. The assertion of the principle of love, which is so central to both the Muslim and the Christian traditions, should be paradigmatic of

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<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3808>, last accessed 13 October 2009.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://acommonword.com/lib/media/Regius-Professor-of-Divinity.pdf>, last accessed 13 October 2009.

the religious response to the fearful realities of our time. We must reclaim our traditions from the extremists. Unless the major faiths emphasize those teachings which insist upon the absolute holiness of the “other”, they will fail the test of the 21st century. The coming together of Muslims and Christians, who have such an unhappy history of hostility, is a beacon of hope and an example to the whole of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

And mention must be made of the joint response issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbis of Israel in the context of their second meeting, which took place in Israel on October 31, 2007.<sup>15</sup> In their comment they noted the Muslim letter signals “very positive developments which are a clear sign of determination to create structures that can advance principled cooperation and moral solidarity among the Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other religious communities” and they stated:

The ‘Common Word’, though addressed to Christian Churches, also makes clear its respect for Hebrew scripture in citing directly from the Book of Deuteronomy and in acknowledging the inspiration that this provided for their understanding of the Quranic teachings on the unity and love of God and of neighbour. In promoting these values we commit ourselves and encourage all religious leaders to ensure that no materials are disseminated by our communities that work against this vision. We have agreed that in responding to the Common Word, it will be important to consider carefully together how the perspectives of Christians and Jews are properly held together.

## **Issues and Challenges**

Among the issues and challenges raised by the letter, the chief thing I notice, and that seems to me to signal cause for a hopeful future of dialogue between Christians and Muslims – and also a wider dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims – is the fact that it does not start from the premise of Abrahamic commonality, but rather it highlights indisputable theological principles and values as the bedrock of interreligious connectedness and so the basis of dialogical engagement: love of God and love of neighbour. The clear implication is that extremism may be combated by addressing that which appears to directly deny the love of God and the love of neighbour.

On this basis the call to “come to a common word between us” – which is not a call to surrender distinctive understanding and identity, nor an invitation to reductive

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<sup>14</sup> See: <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=35>, last accessed 13 October 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=37>, last accessed 13 October 2009.

unanimity – is certainly well-grounded and invites, by way of response, careful and respectful consideration and reply. *Inter alia*, it is inescapably the case that the preface and qualification of ‘Unity’, with which Islamic discourse imbues its theological articulation, requires some unpacking and consideration for, *prima facie*, it could be taken as a hegemonic hermeneutic embedded within the terms of an irresistible invitation. Teasing out a response to the stress upon the unity of God as representing a key reference point for the presumption of commonality needs to occur both as part of a Christian response to the letter, and as a signal to further work as part of the theological agenda that could be pursued within the context of any dialogical ‘coming to a common word’.

Christians and Muslims believe, worship, and submit to the one and the same God, yet that One God is differently revealed and responded to. Theological differences must be addressed in dialogue alongside, and in mutual deepening of, the common understanding and affirmations that Christians and Muslims otherwise assert. Thus the singularity of God can issue in an affirmation of ontological integrity upon which both may agree – God does not exist as a member of a divine community (polytheism) nor in some sort of federated association (there are no partners and associates as such; no subordinate ranks in partnership) – but it also may issue in an existential and theological integrity (the agentic expression of divine compassion, mercy and love that signals the relational initiative which properly lies with God reaching out to, and connecting with, the lived history of the peoples of God) that allows us to speak, conceive, and know God in manifold ways. And here the words of the Qur’an, as with the words of the Bible, need to be carefully weighed and interpreted such that the essential integrities are seen to be maintained and enhanced, not undermined and devalued.

### **Containing Ideological Extremism**

Having introduced the letter, reviewed some representative responses to it, and noted some issues and challenges that are raised we come now to the question of containing ideological extremism through interfaith theological dialogue. Can the dialogue option enable the addressing of theological factors inherent in the ideological underpinnings of Islamic extremism? Certainly the Muslim letter is to be warmly welcomed and responded to on many fronts and for many reasons, not the least of which is in respect

to the issue of resisting extremism by way of ameliorating the influence of radical ideologies – or, to put it another way, by virtue of strategies that seek to restrain extremism by constraining ideologies of extremism. The roots of ideological extremism may be reckoned as involving, among others, the attitudinal ideology of condescension and contempt: that which negatively valorises ‘the other’ and tends towards legitimating (in the eyes of an extremist) extreme or violent behaviours directed toward the other (cf. Pratt, 2007). The Muslim letter poses the challenge of dialogue as a mode of addressing the conditions from which extremism, as a distortion of the dominant traditions, may arise. In this regard, theological dialogue offers the prospect of achieving what might be called ‘ideological containment’. But can dialogue deliver?

There have been many attempts at articulating models of dialogue (Jeanrond and Lande, 2005; Robinson 2004). Mark Hensman (1999), for example, has usefully noted several taxonomies. The often utilised Life-Action-Experience-Discourse pattern, as previously noted, is well-known. Dialogue is, of course, primarily a mode of interpersonal relationship: it is people, face-to-face, who engage in a dialogical encounter. Dialogue is a modality of relational engagement; it is a way of ‘loving one’s neighbour’. Furthermore, the experience of dialogue can precipitate change: “Things look different when one meets at the boundaries, or when one is invited into the spiritual realm of the other” (Thelle, p. 13). The substantive focus of interreligious dialogue is not simply the fomenting of good interpersonal relations across religious traditions, vital though that may be. The opening up of the Christian Church – that is, the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, both independently and correlatively – to interreligious dialogue has had a chequered history, but its trajectory has been relentless nonetheless. Dialogue, or perhaps more appropriately today, ‘interfaith engagement’ more broadly, which denotes a dialogical phenomenon that is inclusive of, yet broader than, discursive dialogue, is here to stay. But the dialogical enterprise is not static; relational breadth requires also spiritual and intellectual depth.

I wish to argue that, arising out of the dialogical trajectory thus far, a specific dimension or model of dialogue is logically suggested as the ‘next step’ in the extending and deepening of interfaith engagement. It is to that model that I now turn; it is what I call *transcendental dialogue*, or the dialogue of *intentional cognitive (i.e., theological/ideological) engagement*. It may also be thought of as an exercise in

*dialogical triangulation*, for it involves paying careful attention to the interlinking of the three dimensions of values, narrative, and underlying metaphysics – all of them components of any religious worldview; indeed of any worldview as such. Very often it is the quest for common values upon which to base conjoint action that drives dialogical engagement. The default premise is something along the line that there can be unanimity of moral and ethical perspective that relativises the clear differences of belief and worldview. Religious interlocutors can agree to disagree about beliefs provided they can talk a common language of applied values. But arguably all religious values, and so religious-based ethics, derive from religious narratives – the fund of story, example, teaching and exhortation whereby religions provide guidance and inspiration – which in turn are underpinned by the metaphysics – the relevant epistemology, ontology, etc. – of the religion’s worldview.

Furthermore, very often the metaphysical dimension is treated as a static realm of concept and ideational construct when it may be better understood in terms of dynamic principle. The ‘truth’ of a matter is found perhaps less in the substantive datum of belief or dogma that governs the reading of the religious narrative, and so the articulation of value; than in the dynamic inherent in the metaphysical substratum, thus allowing for a re-reading of narrative and so re-thinking of belief structures and allied systems of value. Thus by engaging in a deep – transcendental – dialogue that triangulates the three dimensions of metaphysic, narrative and value inherent in all religious belief systems, the prospect emerges of genuinely working through difference to find not the lowest-common denominator of banal sameness but a valid new perception of complementarity and co-existence. In and through such dialogue the structures and content of ideologies can be subject to critique and radical reassessment.

This model of dialogue represents the ideal of theological dialogue at its best; the open-ended quest for truth and understanding which, by way of insight gained in and through the dialogical encounter, takes interlocutors deeper into, as well as extending beyond, their own tradition. The key is that such intentional cognitively-oriented dialogue involves careful and mutual exploration of critical issues and questions of ideological and theological differentiation, and sharing in the development of mutually efficacious interpretation and cross-conceptualization. The aim is not to provide an intellectual panacea, or to presume cognitive engagement is the superior dialogical modality. Rather

I would contend the proper function would be to roll back the barriers that inhibit efficacious diaconal and cooperative modalities of engagement.

Transcendental dialogue requires that each partner to the dialogue is secure and comfortable in their grounding identity, but is not thereby closed to having that identity critiqued, extended, even challenged – and thereby also enriched. It presupposes the addressing of the deep and thorny matters of theology and religious ideologies and worldviews as a priority for interfaith engagement rather than, as has so often been the case, leaving such issues aside in favour of a more homogenous, often praxis-focussed, agenda. The caveat that dialogue should not effect change to Christian identity, teaching and self-understanding, for example, recurs in varying ways throughout much of the material and work of the Vatican (and others) with respect to interreligious dialogue. Dialogue as the discursive component to cordial relations is one thing; dialogue that necessarily requires a challenging rethink of one's own position and presuppositions seems effectively curtailed. Nevertheless, transcendental dialogue may well be approximated in situations such as the monastic exchanges between members of Zen Buddhist and Catholic Benedictine orders, for instance. However, the fact remains that, for example, whilst the Vatican understanding of dialogue involves recognition of the 'risky search' for truth at the same time it seeks to minimise any risk of fundamental change to its apprehension of truth (Swidler, 1990).

If the pressing issues facing global humanity today are to be successfully addressed, and their impacts appropriately ameliorated, it will require a considerable deepening of interreligious dialogue in order to resolve impasses. The goal of mutual understanding is not the only legitimate aim of dialogue: mutual critique with respect to "judgement and criticism of religious beliefs or practices" with a view to probing to the depths the challenging issues of the day is inherent to good and needful dialogical engagement (Griffiths, 1991, p. xi). Deeper dialogue cannot be shunned. In truth,

Christian resources for interfaith encounter must encompass a spectrum of elements, some more directly relevant to one kind of encounter than another ... If the whole Christian church is to meet the challenges of religious diversity faithfully, it will have to draw deeply upon both its catholicity and its ecumenicity (Heim, 1998, p. 9).

Dialogue is always a ‘risky’ business, of course; it carries with it the possibility that, in consequence to genuine openness, the outcome may well be radical yet needful change.

## **Conclusion**

There is much in the Muslim letter in terms of both its underlying intention and substantive content, which comes to us framed as a dialogue between textual sources, and which is cause of great encouragement. Noting that the two faiths between them comprise some 55% of the global population, a stark truth is enunciated in the letter: if the people of these two faiths are not at peace with each other, “the world cannot be at peace” (p. 15). The intertwining of Christians and Muslims in terms of global social realities and international relations means the arena of Christian–Muslim dialogue is not simply a matter of interreligious nicety: “our common future is at stake” (p. 16). As well as pressing practical realities and issues of inter-communal, even global, peace, the suggestion – reinforced by Quranic and biblical reference – is that the future and integrity of both Christians and Muslims is at stake, lest “we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony” (ibid). The letter concludes on a hortatory note – let differences not be the cause of strife; let the pursuit of “righteousness and good works” be the only just basis of rivalry and comparison; let mutual respect, fairness, justice and kindness rule in the quest for peace, harmony and reciprocal goodwill. And this is summed and capped by the quoting of *Sura Al-Ma’idah*, 5:48 – religious plurality is a consequence of God the Creator who could have chosen to make everyone the same, but did not; yet all difference and variety is, in the end, resolved by virtue that God is both the common beginning and the encompassing ending.

The letter is an invitation for renewed and deepened dialogue; the call to ‘come to a common word between us’ cannot be discharged by one side. It is only within the context of genuine theological dialogical encounter that the Quranic call can be truly honoured. And it is only as Christians and Muslims together search their respective scriptures and related traditions of interpretation and appropriation that the essential dynamic of deity – the Will of God – can be apprehended in and through the differing details of textual record and interpretative tradition.

If the indications thus far as to the range and depth of responses and engagements around the letter and its concerns are anything to go by, then this letter undoubtedly signals a new era for theological dialogue – even my proposed transcendental dialogue – with Islam and so a co-operative conjoining with respect to ideological containment in the wider struggle against radicalisation and extremism.

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