



"One Body, One Voice" John 17:23

We Too Want to Live in Love, Peace, Freedom and Justice

A Response to A Common Word Between Us and You

Peace

We appreciate how you urge in your letter the fact that this world needs peace and that members of the two biggest world religions will play a major role in defining the future of the world. If we promote war and strife in our lives and teaching, violence and bloodshed will follow; if we advocate peace and justice, lives will be saved.

Let there be no doubt that as Christians, we want to live in peace with Muslims and with all men and women in this world. This is intrinsic to our religion from its founding, even though we have not and do not always consistently practice what God and our written revelation commands us. We regret the actions of Christians in the past and in the present whose actions have not or do not match the teachings and examples of Jesus. We determine to act differently.

Jesus commands us in Matthew 5:9-11: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." In Luke 10:5, Jesus commands us: „When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’" And Jesus’ brother, James, rightly echoes his brother’s words when he says: "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness." (James 3:18).

Similarly, Jesus’ apostle, Paul, writes in Romans 12:17-18: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul extends this command to the political world: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

So be assured, that we support any effort that would promote peace in this troubled world. We are eager to discuss those things that promote unrest and to seek means of peacefully living together. Let us consider our differences in person and seek to convince each other with good arguments, without violence or the threat of such, transcending differences in politics or the actions of governments.

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Indeed, we agree with you when you write: "So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us view each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in peace, harmony and mutual goodwill."

We are convinced that every human being bears the image of God and carries the dignity of creation and therefore deserves our respect, no matter whether he knows the truth or not, whether he lives according to God's will or not.

Your Call, Our Call

In your opening summary, you commence with what is obviously a "call to Christians" to become Muslims by worshipping God without ascribing to him a partner.

May we, in return, invite you to put your faith in God, who forgives our opposition to him and sin through what his son Jesus Christ did for us at the cross?

We do this not to stir up strife but because we are as convinced of the truth of our faith as you are. Jesus says in John 17:3 in a prayer directed to God, his Father: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Jesus, Himself, said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

By referring several times to Quranic statements that state God has no partner and associate, you rightly draw attention to the deepest difference between Islam and Christianity. Even though we are convinced that you misunderstand our doctrine of God being Three in One, when you speak about a 'partner' of God, we are convinced of the truth of Trinity and, therefore, we cannot accept your invitation. We know that this is a fundamental difference in our understanding the nature of God; one that will require long and sincere talks, and genuine listening to each other if we are to truly understand each other's position and to move beyond historical caricatures. We urge you to consider joining us in such discussions.

A Christian View of Love

Your letter, of course, marks only a beginning of what could be a long discussion between us. You do not mention many topics that belong to the core of your and of our faith; things that cannot and should not be easily set aside. In your letter, you only quote from Jesus' mouth that which is in accordance with your faith. This is, of course, your good right and whatever you quote from Jesus, we take very seriously. But we deserve the right to follow *everything* that Jesus said, as we read in the four Gospels which form part of our holy book.

We understand that your invitation to us to become Muslims is very similar to the invitation given by Muhammad to Jews and Christians in his lifetime. Muhammad was convinced that Jesus taught the same message as he did and that any word of Jesus in the New Testament that disagreed with his message was, therefore, not Jesus' original message but a distortion.

Just as we respect your right to believe this, we reserve the right to disagree and to explain the message of Jesus Christ ourselves, according to our own faith and tradition. Let us explain this by giving a short Christian understanding of your central topic “love”.

For us it is central that:

1. God is the one who first loved us,
2. eternal love takes place first of all between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,
3. Jesus is the love of God incarnated,
4. Jesus’ death on the cross is the greatest evidence for God’s love for us,
5. the reason for not loving God and our neighbour is our sinfulness and opposition to God,
6. only God’s forgiveness can change us from people who hate God and others, into people who reconciled with God and others, and
7. therefore we only can love if the love of God is poured into our heart first.

Because this kind of love is so central to us, you do not need to fear that we will use our different view of love, either secretly or publicly, as an excuse not to love you and to let peace suffer. We draw attention to our differences only to show that we have a long way to go if we want to make love the centre of our discussions.

Religious Freedom

As you know, Muslims and Christians live together in the same countries throughout the world. If we want to live in peace in these countries, we cannot wait until we have solved all our theological problems. As you say, “justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part” of the peace that we all desire.

No country in the world at any time in history has achieved peace between religions through those religions agreeing on all differences between them and by uniting. Normally, it was and is the other way around. When the religions decide not to use violence, coercion, or political pressure against each other, a platform was built on which the religious groups could coexist despite their differences, each able to fully practice and propagate their faith, freely allowing all members of that society, of all major and minor religious communities, to choose what religion to follow or not to follow.

Even within our religious communities, it is obvious that we cannot agree in detail between the different theological schools. The differences between Sunnite and Shiite Islam, or Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity readily come to mind. Wherever those differing schools are able live peacefully together in one state, it is not because they have agreed on everything but because either the state forces them to live in peace (which is rarely a lasting solution) or because they themselves have decided to leave their differences in the realm of theology and conviction.

Peace in the political realm cannot depend on theological uniformity. Indeed, it is evident that even when government share religious beliefs that even then, they may go to war with each

other. Instead, we must acknowledge that religious freedom is a basic human right for everybody, especially for those that err from our point of view. The true test of religious freedom is not how we treat those who agree with us, but how we treat those with whom we differ. We agree that God does not want people to believe in him because they are threatened, forced or induced through financial gain but who follow him out of deep, heart-felt conviction.

Three Concerns

We have three special concerns that we would submit to you, asking for your opinion and further discussion.

Our first concern is this: it is important to distinguish between the Christian faith and the Western world. Even though many Christians live in the Western world, the majority of Christians do not. Christianity is not a Western religion, having been founded in the Middle East and is today practiced mostly in non-western societies. Indeed, the majority of people who live in the Western world do not even believe in God or do not live according to his will and show a lifestyle that is not in accordance with the Christian faith.

It is important to acknowledge that political peace is not primarily peace between two religions, Islam and Christianity, but also Islam's relationship to Western culture and Western states. We are often grieved by the immorality that we see in the Western world and we do not want this to be a hindrance to peace. We urge you to realize that the problems of the Western world are not because of Christianity but because of the West's increasing rejection of it.

Our second concern is this: You write: "As Muslims we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes ..."

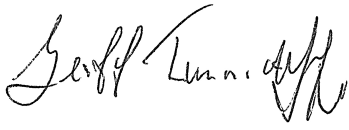
This line puzzles us. We ask ourselves, "Where do Christians wage war against Muslims? Who of the many Christian leaders, you have addressed your letter to, is involved in such a sin as waging war against you or driving Muslims out of their homes? Has any Christian leader publicly urged that such actions be taken against Muslims?" Please inform us of such behaviour, if such can be found, that we may do whatever action is possible to insure that Muslims live in peace.

Our third concern is this: We have evidence of many cases where Christians cannot practice their Christian faith without restriction in Muslim countries. They are often not allowed to build churches, worship together, and even fear loss of their lives and families. Some are imprisoned and others have been killed. If this is against your wish and intention, we would kindly ask your help in establishing the same levels of peace and justice for Christians living in Muslim societies as Muslims, themselves, possess.

We are eager to hear about the next steps of our conversation.

"The God of peace be with you all. Amen." (Paul in Romans 15:33)

On behalf of World Evangelical Alliance,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Geoff Tunnicliffe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'G' and a distinct 'T'.

Dr. Geoff Tunnicliffe

International Director