

BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH SCRIPTURES IN DIALOGUE

CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM SEMINAR IN QATAR

(7-9 APRIL 2003)

From 7-9 April 2003, 25 Muslim and Christian scholars gathered in Doha, Qatar, for a seminar convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury and hosted by the Amir of the State of Qatar. Their purpose was to explore the contribution which a joint reading of their scriptures, the Qur'an and the Bible, could make to Christian-Muslim dialogue. The seminar was the second in a series entitled 'Building Bridges'. The first had been held at Lambeth Palace, London in January 2002 - a record of which was published as *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (ed. Michael Ipgrave; London: Church House Publishing, 2002). Like that earlier event, the Doha seminar involved Muslim and Christian contributions on a basis of equality and mutuality. It broke new ground in carrying out most of its work in small group discussions which focused on the reading side-by-side of biblical and Qur'an passages. In addition, the programme included public lectures on paired themes by Muslim and Christian speakers, as well as plenary discussions.

The Amir of the State of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani inaugurated the Seminar by the following remarks.

“There is no doubt that the convening of this seminar takes place under extremely difficult circumstances — namely the war now going on in our region. We have done our best to avert this war, and to limit its complications as much as possible. This grievous situation adds deep dimensions and noble meanings to this seminar since it is a meeting for the sake of peace and reviving the sublime values and ideals of both Islam and Christianity, which religions together believe in the oneness of the Almighty God, and call for fraternity, equality, tolerance, moderation, the rejection of violence, respect for human rights, and the maintenance of man's dignity, life and property. These sublime principles have for centuries formed the original common denominators between the two religions and cultures.

Perhaps it is useful to recall that the Holy Qur'an ordered us not to argue with Jews and Christians except in the best and most gracious ways, and to preach the right path with wisdom and good advice. Therefore, we beseech God to bestow success on your work so that dialogue between civilizations overcomes the challenges and obstacles. We are quite sure that your high status and enlightened thoughts will address in this seminar the obstructions that hinder the course of civilized cooperation between the followers of the two faiths.

Perhaps among the most evident obstructions are two major problems: first, the diversion of the course of the heavenly religions from the essence of their message and manipulation of their tenets to serve political purposes; and secondly, passing judgement on a whole nation because of the behaviour of a minority of extremists or ignorant people, and so distorting its civilization, threatening its interests and offending its established principles. In our view, these are the two original causes of the distorted and false stereotypes of Islam and Christianity, which we see here and there, as portrayed by the media and propagated by racist writers, and which only serve to widen the gap between the followers of the two religions, and make discord replace harmony and clash replace dialogue.

In face of the turbulent events of recent times, we should not forget to point out that our Arab region is honoured by God the Almighty with the revelation of the messages of Moses and Jesus Christ, peace be upon them, and the daybreak of the Muhammadan message. The Arab Muslims, Jews and Christians have lived together in peace, security and fraternity of faith, striving to excel in beneficence and common good. But the land of prophets has for half a century been suffering, and continues to suffer, from the lack of security, peace and stability, as a result of persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict without a just settlement due to the absence of international legality. We look for much from this seminar, hoping that its discussions and papers would go deep into the roots of those obstructions, and find the effective mechanism to activate dialogue. I would like to take this opportunity to propose the formation of a permanent body for dialogue between Islam and Christianity, to be based in Qatar. We believe in the significance of such dialogue between civilizations and in the principles of affection, tolerance and consultation among societies and nations, and will be honoured to

contribute to the efforts aimed at deepening understanding and promoting rapprochement and cooperation among Muslim and non Muslim countries. Peace, mercy, and the blessings of God.”

Introducing the Seminar, the Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Revd and Rt Hon. Dr Rowan Williams said:

“My first duty, which I discharge with the most sincere pleasure, is to thank His Highness the Amir of Qatar for welcoming us to his country and doing so much to facilitate this meeting. From earlier days when my predecessor was welcomed here, His Highness has shown exemplary commitment to this dialogue and has pursued it with an energy and vision characteristic of all he has done as ruler of this small but rapidly evolving country. He has shown precisely the kind of enthusiasm for honest exchange and deepened understanding which meetings such as this are designed to assist, and we are all profoundly grateful. It is a kind of openness that is also making possible significant gestures towards the Christian community here, and for that too let me express my gratitude. I have mentioned my predecessor, and I cannot let the opportunity go past of paying tribute to the courage and imagination with which he addressed these issues of mutual understanding across the frontiers of our communities of faith. I hope to continue such work, conscious all the time of doing no more than building on foundations which he laid through much labour, much thought and prayer, and much tireless fostering of relationships in many lands.

For many, a real dialogue about what we specifically believe and the thoughts we have about our faith ought to take second place to discussions concerning the practical tasks we can share, whatever our faith - and this is thought to be especially true at a time of tension. But this dialogue has been conceived rather differently. Christians are Christians and Muslims are Muslims because they care about truth, and because they believe that truth alone gives life. About the nature of that absolute and life-giving truth, Christians and Muslims are not fully in agreement. Yet they are able to find words in which to explain and explore that disagreement because they also share histories and practices that make parts of their systems of belief mutually recognizable - a story reaching back to God’s creation of the world and God’s call to Abraham; a practice of reading and absorbing scriptures and of shaping a life in response to the Word God speaks to creation. We are here to discover

more about how each community believes it must listen to God, conscious of how very differently we identify and speak of God's revelation. It is a significant meeting not primarily because it coincides with a time of such conflict and anxiety but because it highlights again a deeper and abiding need—a need which the run-up to this present conflict has made all the more urgent.

Listening to God and listening to one another as nations, cultures and faiths have not always had the priority they so desperately need. So this space for reflection is all the more important; it is both a symbol and an example of this kind of engagement.

In this dialogue, we are not seeking an empty formula of convergence or trying to deny our otherness; indeed, as we reflect on the holy texts we read, we shall be seeking to make better sense of how we relate to the other, the stranger with whom we can still speak in trust and love. As we do this—experience shows us—we learn more of the depths of what nourishes us in our own faith; and we hope to go from this dialogue better equipped to witness in a deeply troubled world, to witness to what faith and humble obedience to God and patient attention to each other might have to offer to struggling and suffering nations throughout the globe.”

Michael Ipgrave reported on the Seminar:

“The Doha Christian-Muslim seminar was held from 7-9 April 2003. On the three working days of the programme, the following general themes were addressed in turn: ‘Listening to God, learning from scripture’; ‘Legacies of the past, challenges of the present’; and ‘Scripture and the other’. Each day’s programme included two public lectures, the texts of which are included in Chapters 2-4 of this book. These chapters also aim to provide some record of the major part of the seminar’s work, which was carried out in four parallel small groups, each composed of Christian and Muslim scholars. These groups met on a total of six occasions for intensive reading of paired passages from the Qur’an and the Bible. Participants were greatly assisted in this study process by notes on the scriptural passages prepared by Kenneth Bailey, Vincent Cornell, Ellen Davis, Salwa el-Awa, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Esther Mombo and Tom Wright.”

“The Qatar seminar was distinctive in building its dialogue around the joint reading by Christians and Muslims of passages from the Bible and the Qur’an. Held at a time when dramatic events in the region were impinging on Muslim-Christian relations globally— coalition troops were entering Baghdad at the time of the meeting in Doha— this way of dialogue through engagement with scripture made deep sense. For Muslims and for Christians, the scriptures are central to identity, beliefs, ethics, worship and ways of living. As great changes affect our world and our communities, there is an urgent need continually to remember, study and interpret these formative texts in order to be faithful to God in new circumstances. Christianity and Islam both have long traditions of scriptural understanding, and many ways of developing these traditions further to meet new situations and questions. But there are almost no places and occasions where Christians and Muslims can learn from each other and engage in dialogue around the scriptures together. It is also sadly true that many of the most disturbing things that happen in the name of Islam and Christianity are justified by reference to the Qur’an and the Bible. Any progress towards deeper understanding and peacemaking between the two faiths must, therefore, take these scriptures seriously, because they are linked to the best and the worst in history and in the current situation.

The textually based method shaped the pattern and the character of the dialogue in Qatar. With scripture at the centre of reflection, discussion and deliberation, it was the scriptural narrative that identified the parameters within which particular issues and concerns were discussed. In contrast to some other modes of inter faith discussion, where scripture may be almost incidental to the discussion, or be brought in only sporadically and haphazardly, one participant observed that here it felt that it was the living breath of the revealed Word that was the moving spirit behind the discussion, rather than abstract conceptual constructs of academic or theological discourse. Once the scriptures were opened and read, he said, an air of familiarity seemed to pervade the room; a peaceful and trustful atmosphere emerged, seemingly out of nowhere. It was this sense of shared intellectual and spiritual striving in response to the Word which made it possible for Christians and Scriptures in dialogue Muslims together to address some pointed and difficult issues in forceful yet positive discussions.

As our scriptures permeate our lives, so listening to each other grappling with texts offered us all a glimpse of each other's hearts as well as minds.

It was notable that a dialogue based around scripture led as much into the exploration of differences as into the identification of common ground. This was even true of passages which at first appeared to share a common focus—those relating to Abraham, for example. More generally, in both scriptures we found passages which are 'inclusive', in the sense that they show God's universal purposes, but in both also we met more demanding passages, which emphasize the need for response to a specific revelation and the threat of judgment to those who proved faithless.

Differences are also apparent at a methodological level, in the ways in which Christians and Muslims approach their respective scriptures, and at a theological level, in the ways in which they receive them as conveying the divine Word. It is clear that, by and large, Muslims and Christians view the inspiration of scripture in very different ways. For the one, it is possible to take account of the history of a text's transmission (including its background in oral tradition) as well as its later redaction, and at the same time to hold to the text's inspired status. For the other, divine inspiration is understood more directly and precludes literary and historical considerations regarding the text of scripture, even if other elements in the tradition are not exempt from such study.

Reading scripture in the company of the Other underlines the importance of a certain humility in exegesis. It reminds the reader that there are many things in his or her 'own' scripture which he or she will never fully or definitively comprehend. The Bible and the Qur'an speak to Christians and Muslims as texts which are full of meaning at many different levels, and as texts whose meaning will elude them at many levels also. The Qur'an affirms of itself that it includes 'ambiguous' verses whose import is known only to God. Augustine describes the Bible as a great and high room, but with a door so low that one must stoop in humility to enter into it. In an age when many in both faiths brush aside the very possibility of any uncertainty in their interpretation of scriptural truth, this lesson of exegetical humility is a valuable one for us to learn from one another. None of us has, and none of us ever will have, explored all the riches of our scriptures.

There is clearly ample scope for further engagement of Christians and Muslims together in a dialogue grounded in their reading of the scriptures together. One long and pressing agenda for such a dialogue is set for us by the massive transformations of recent centuries. This is especially obvious in relation to gender issues, but in other ways too dialogue cannot be only with one another (and with people of other religions); it must also engage with the secular understandings and forces in our religious and secular world. Guided by their engagement with the scriptures, Muslims and Christians face the challenge of discerning together what in these tendencies is to be affirmed, what rejected, and what reformed. Nevertheless, the greatest ‘issue’ which draws us into dialogue must be the reality of God and the seeking of his will for our world. Unclear as the way ahead may be, it does seem to be God’s purpose that Muslims and Christians should continue to follow through a dialogue of truth-seeking and peace-making. It is for the sake of God, and in line with God’s will and wisdom, that we come together to engage in study of scriptures together. Each of us loves our scriptures above all as writings through which God is revealed. As one participant at the Qatar seminar said, ‘Long-term devotion to God is the best context for understanding our scriptures.’

The beginning of the twenty-first century is a time when there is an urgent need for Christians and Muslims to engage with each other more deeply for the sake of understanding, peace-making, the blessing of the world, and the glorifying of God, and also a time when there are unprecedented conditions and opportunities for such engagement. We have found in the Qur’an and the Bible texts that can sustain us in a deep and searching dialogue with one another. The challenge facing us now is to develop ways of continuing this in the future so that each of our traditions and all of our societies can be shaped by the wisdom to be gained from our scriptures.

A record of the Seminar has been published in Michael Ipgrave, *Scriptures in Dialogue— Christian and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur’an Together*, Church House Publishing, London, 2004.

Participants

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PROGRAM

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MONDAY 7 APRIL

Day One of Seminar: *Listening to God – Learning from Scripture*

08.00 Breakfast

09.00-10.30 Meeting with participants to introduce themselves

and be briefed on practicalities

His Highness the Amir of the State of Qatar arrives and meets participants.

- 11.15 Official opening ceremony.**
- 12.00-13.00 Lunch reception with the Amir**
- 13.00-14.30 Break**
- 14.30-15.45 Lectures (open to wider audience)**

**Canon Tom Wright to give the lecture from a Christian perspective.
Prof Mansoor Vincent Cornell to give the lecture from a Muslim perspective.**

15.45-16.15 Responses in Plenary to the lectures

16.15-16.30 Break

16.30-18.00 Session One in study groups (see details for all sessions below)

18.00-19.00 Break for dinner

19.00-20.30 Session Two in study groups

20.30-21.30 Feedback from groups and plenary discussion.

TUESDAY 8 APRIL

DAY TWO OF SEMINAR: *INTERPRETING THE SCRIPTURES: LEGACIES OF THE PAST AND CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT*

Breakfast

09.00-10.15 Lectures (open to wider audience)

Dr Mona Siddiqui to give the lecture from a Muslim perspective.

Dr Esther Mombo to give the lecture from a Christian perspective.

10.15-10.45 Break for refreshments (wider audience leaves)

10.45-11.15 Response in Plenary to the lectures

11.15-13.00 Session Three in study-groups

13.00-16.00 Lunch and Rest

16.00-17.45 **Session Four in study groups**
17.45-18.00 **Short Break**
18.00-19.00 **Feedback from groups and Plenary discussion**
Evening Reception/Dinner

WEDNESDAY 9 APRIL

Day Three of Seminar: *Scripture and the ‘Other’*

08.00 **Breakfast**
09.00-10.15 **Lectures** (open to wider audience)
Prof Frances Young to give the lecture from a Christian perspective.
Dr Basit Koshul to give the lecture from a Muslim perspective
10.15-10.45 **Break for refreshments** (wider audience leaves)
10.45-11.15 **Response in Plenary to the lectures**
11.15-13.00 **Session Five in study groups**
13.00-16.00 **Lunch and Rest**
16.00-17.30 **Session Six in study groups**
17.30-17.45 **Short Break**
17.45-19.15 **Feedback from groups and Plenary discussion – and
also final session for reflecting on the seminar as a whole
and considering the next seminar**

Evening: **Dinner/Reception**