The will to embrace: An analysis of Christian-Muslim relations

Ronald Allen Baatsen
Department of Science of Religion and Missiology
University of Pretoria
South Africa

'Without the will to embrace the other there will be no truth between people, and without truth between people there will be no peace' (Volf 1996:224).

Introduction

Over the last couple of decades there has been an intensified interest in developing a thorough theological framework for how Christians and Muslims can relate to one another. This interest has grown in part due to an uptake in militant extremism in recent years, which has resulted in reactionary responses on a global scale. This has spiked fears and uncertainties, leading to violent outbursts. Furthermore, it has led some to claim that the future of the world depends on whether we will be able to develop a framework on how the two largest religions in the world can coexist.

This research presents an analysis of the history of Christian-Muslim relations in order to understand the nature of the conflict. A theological motivation is developed for

why Christians need to get involved with Muslim interfaith dialogue in order to promote peace and justice, whilst respectfully creating room for one another to coexist. Churches and missions have a duty to remember their calling to service, reconciliation, peace-making, evangelism and dialogue. We have a task to educate our people in relation to Islam, to teach the forgiveness of sins and to reach out in love to Muslims in word and deed as the bearers of the gospel, '[w]e can no longer ignore neither Islam, nor Muslims' (Miller 2006:427).

In approaching the issue of interfaith dialogue, some of the major initiatives which are currently at the forefront of developing models and suggestions as to how we can practically live peaceably together will be discussed. By means of a comparative study I attempt to illustrate that Christianity and Islam are sufficiently similar to one another to be able to engage in an interfaith dialogue by focusing on the central claim of both religions, which is God is a unity, or one. Many will find this to be a difficult task, as the inherent inquiry underlying the comparison asks whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God. The answer to that question will have severe consequences for how our respective faiths are to relate to one another.

However, a recurring problem surfaces when discussing interfaith dialogue, which relates to the unique particularity within each religious tradition, in other words, that which sets one religion apart from another. This also gives rise to the question of whether faithful witness, which I use to refer to mission or *Da'awa* for Muslims, has any place within interfaith dialogue. We need to realise, however, that this central claim of both religions to proclaim the gospel is perhaps also amongst one of the main driving forces for religious conflict. Therefore a careful theological consideration is needed from a Christian perspective with which we can engage in dialogue as a means to promote a common coexistence, whilst being faithful to our call to proclaim the gospel.

■ Research problem and relevance of the study

A publication of The Pew Research Forum (2015) indicated that Christianity and Islam will make up just over 60% of the world population by the year 2050, with near parity in numbers: an estimated 2.8 billion Muslims and 2.9 Christians. Given these projections, the importance of how these religions relate to one another cannot be more adequately emphasised. Although other religions should also be considered as major role players on the world scene, none of the others have the comparative significance that Christianity and Islam have. As the document 'A Common Word Between Us and You' (A Common Word 2007) states in its opening lines:

> Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. (n.p.)

These facts are also of growing importance since religious affiliation is no longer geographically determined. We truly live in a world of religious plurality. No matter where one travels, these shifts within society are physically tangible as different religions become much more visible, a result of various social identity markers, that is, clothing, jewellery and other religious attire. The implication of these changing realities is that engagement with one another becomes increasingly unavoidable. These engagements however, are marked by outright suspicion, uncertainty or even (depending on context) hostility. Volf (2011:1) states that a deep chasm exists between Islam and Christianity, a chasm of misunderstanding, dislike and hatred, that separate these religions. For the most part of our day-to-day lives we seem to be 'okay' with viewing each other on the periphery – but for how long this can be maintained is an increasing uncertainty in most parts of the world. To this uncertainty we can add factors such as rising population, growth, and a progressively interconnected and interdependent world, along with diminishing natural resources. It seems clear that conflict between Christians and Muslims will multiply in the near future due to the assertion of these religions within the political arena, especially where democracy is dominant.

If the history of conflicts between these two religions is anything to go by, there is seemingly no alternative outcome. Yet in recent years there has been a growing sense of urgency amongst religious leaders from both sides for the need to foster common ground and better understanding of each other for the sake of all humanity. The importance of studies like these is their invaluable contribution to global dialogue, given that Christianity and Islam make up the majority of the world's population. These brief observations mark our respective histories of conflict directed towards each other. In short, this study aims to present an analysis of Christian-Muslim relations throughout history and how through dialogue we can promote peace and justice, by valuing what they hold in common whilst allowing and respecting that which is particular to our respective faiths.

For the purposes of this chapter four main areas will be focused on in order to clearly understand the complexity and urgency of the global situation. Once that has been established, we will start to develop from a uniquely Christian perspective a paradigm for interfaith dialogue to take place. This inquiry starts off with an analysis of conflicts between Christianity and Islam throughout history, and how the continuation of these conflicts mars any possibility of future peace. Accordingly it serves to illustrate the need for and complexity of developing new paradigms for us to coexist.

The second phase of the chapter focuses on underscoring the Christian motivation for engaging with Muslims with respect to dialogue. Here I will be relying heavily on the work of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace* (1996). Along with this discussion concepts justice, peace and reconciliation will come to the fore, which we need to critically evaluate to underscore how interfaith dialogue could promote these, and as such actively work against prejudice, suspicion and misunderstanding.

After we have established the basis and motivation for interfaith dialogue, we will critically reflect on the practice and possibilities it can open up for the future. A brief discussion on different models of interfaith dialogue will be offered and evaluated. Our focus will then turn to a comparative study of Christianity and Islam, in particular that which both religions hold in common. This will be done with specific reference to the one true God, as creating common ground for dialogue for people of either faith to build relations with the other.

In the section which follows the biblical theme of hospitality a specific framework for interfaith dialogue will be looked at. Hospitality will be presented as a non-threatening environment whereby the other is invited in as an act of the 'will to embrace', where open and safe dialogue can take place. Within this context dialogue again is understood as a twofold task of facilitating peace whilst at the same time bearing faithful witness. The last section takes this act of 'faithful witness through dialogue' seriously into account. Here it will be argued that during interfaith dialogue we have the clearest opportunity to authentically and faithfully, in a non-threatening manner, communicate our unique Christian particularities.

Over the last couple of years I have had a fascination with and keen interest to get to know and learn as much as possible about Islam. Initially my prime motive was singular in focus – to learn how to proclaim the gospel to Muslims and how to disciple them into the 'maturity' of the Christian faith. Yet my own world has expanded as I have gained various insights through 'on the ground experiences' in observing Christian-Muslim relations in a variety of contexts across Africa and the Middle East. This combined growing urgency within me to work towards social justice has had profound implications for how I view and live in the world. In bringing these two passions of Muslim ministry and a desire for holistic faithful witness together, they have combined to stir an interest in interfaith dialogue, which in a way gave birth to this research.

Limitations

This study has various limitations which need to be kept in mind. Firstly, a Christian perspective is presented on how we as Christians are to make sense of the Muslim community, and accordingly relate to them as people who live with Christians in a global, interdependent society. Muslims need to consider a similar research project from their own point of view, specifically in terms of how they understand the Christian theology of the Trinity, and whether or not a suggested claim such as whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God has any implications for them, especially in terms of *Da'awa*.

The second limitation for this research is the incapability of presenting all the various Christian positions on the matter of how Christians are to relate to Muslims. The reality is that we have a very diverse faith community with diverging points of view on this

matter, and the same would be applicable for the Islamic community. Therefore, my attempt here is to try and speak in broad terms in order to give voice to what has been termed 'normative Christianity'. In other words, the presentation here should be agreeable to the Christian community at large.

The third limitation is that interfaith dialogue takes many forms and has an intricate amount of plausible outcomes. However, this goes beyond the scope of this research and chapter. It is our aim here to develop the urgency for dialogue, along with the corresponding theological framework for dialogue to take place where it creates room for 'faithful witness'.

The last limitation relates to the nature of comparative study, which will be applied here. Comparative study either seeks similarities or points of divergence. For the purpose to promote dialogue and reciprocal embrace, the study is limited to key commonalities shared by Christianity and Islam. This point will be further argued in a way such that it cannot be dissolved or annulled by any other point of disagreement.

Methodology

Having identified the particular focus areas to be researched, the following research methodologies will be applied. Firstly, for the bulk of the research a scientific literature study will be conducted on almost every level of the research enquiry. By reviewing various academic articles and books I hope to develop a thorough understanding of the nature of the religious conflicts related to Christianity and Islam, especially looking for instances where certain events provoked aggressive responses from the other faith. Furthermore, the literature study will aid in developing a thorough theological framework for understanding interfaith dialogue and its uses in terms of promoting justice and peace throughout the world.

In terms of underscoring the possible content for interfaith dialogue, as 'people under the same roof', the comparative study will be reflecting between Christianity and Islam in order to determine which aspects of our respective faiths we hold in common. In particular, special focus will be on the notion of the 'one true God'. The importance of this specific focus will become clear as the study progresses.

Furthermore, by means of the comparative study we will be able to identify the very specific particularities within the Christian tradition which differ from the Islamic faith. These particularities will essentially centre on the person of Jesus and form that basis of our specific Christian mandate to bear faithful witness.

Throughout this research references will be made both to the biblical texts as well as the Qur'an. Where scripture is used, a text-critical, socio-scientific and socio-historic reading of the text will be rendered in order to thoroughly grasp the social context of the text. We will specifically be looking at principles uncovered through a hermeneutic

process which could then be applied to our current context, in particular those which might pertain to interfaith dialogue. The following theological disciplines are presumed to be of importance for the research task at hand: Religious Studies, Missiology, Dogmatic, and to a certain extent Pastoral Care.

■ Historical overview of religious conflict

In the introduction it was noted that relations between Christians and Muslims range from disinterest and uncertainty, to misunderstanding and even hostility. This context serves as enough reason for the development of better understanding of how Christians and Muslims interact, both theologically and practically. However, given the increase in tension between these religions in recent years due to an uptick in extremism since 9/11, as especially portrayed through the media, hostility and fear seem to dominate the attitude towards each other.

History gives us perspective into understanding current tensions. More than that, history serves to prevent us from being ignorant of the current realities whilst promoting new possibilities for the present. The way we understand religious conflict will shape how we understand the purpose and place of interfaith dialogue and inform the attitudes of how we engage in dialogue.

For those of us living in very fast-paced societies, lingering on the past seems like time wasted. Yet in a pastoral sense we know that the past is never truly past – it remains alive within memory. For that reason something like the crusades or the Fall of Constantinople will always inform our current experience.

Miroslav Volf (2011:2) explains that current events take Christians back to relive past ones; in other words, the experience of present danger or threat brings back memories of past injury, and that past injury is seen as likely to repeat itself within the present situation: What happened then will most likely happen again. These relived memories and fear of history repeating itself stir aggressive energies which often result in violent actions, either by individuals or larger groupings of people, and even nations.

Before reflecting on some key historical events we should consider what makes a conflict religious. Since very few conflicts historically are strictly religious in nature, they often involve ulterior motives relating to material goods such as freedom and territory, economic resources, political power, et cetera, in which religion often seems to play a minor role (Volf 2011:4). There are also numerous examples of conflicts which directly concern religious issues, even though other issues may be involved as mentioned. A particular case in point would be conflicts which involve holy sites – like Jerusalem, for example. Jerusalem was captured in 638 CE by the Arabs and has been in an almost continuous state of conflict since then.

Furthermore, the religious practices of evangelism and *Da'awa* have caused immense tension and violent conflicts in various areas of the world. Other specifically religious reasons for conflict often exist where one religion is a minority under the rule of the other; in such cases very specific persecution and hardships can befall the minority group. Social identity theory suggests that the related issue of social identity markers (in this instance, certain religious attire) often make a group of people a target for persecution.

Volf (2011:5) observes that sacred things need not be involved for conflict to take place, but when sacred things are at stake, conflicts become exacerbated. The issue is seemingly not whether the conflict is religious or not, but that when religious people partake in conflicts, these become increasingly intensified. In the words of Hans Küng (Knitter 2013:247) 'there will be no peace among nations unless there is peace and cooperation between religions!' Later I will deal with the theological content around which dialogue can take place to promote peace and cooperation between Christianity and Islam specifically.

For our purpose a selected number of conflicts are chosen for reflection, and brief key responses to these conflicts will be highlighted. However, this task is difficult since, as Robert Wilken (2009:26) points out, Islam has historically always been more than a faith with which Christianity cannot simply relate as one religion to another without reference to social, cultural and political factors.

The focus here will not rest so much on these 'other factors', but more specifically on those conflicts that have an underlying theological motivation, or that crossed the line of the sacred which invoked a theological response from the other faith. Where applicable, the relevant discussions between the religious leaders, along with any other relevant insights which might be useful for the present context of conflict, will be referenced.

Islamic expansion and the crusades

No event in the history of Christianity was more unexpected, more calamitous and more consequential for Christianity than the rise of Islam (Wilken 2009:19). The rapid and vast expansion of the Arabs throughout the 7th century irrevocably and completely transformed society. Within a decade three major cities (Damascus in 635, Jerusalem in 638, and Alexandria in 641) of the Christian Byzantine Empire succumbed to the foreign invaders. These events were so unexpected and happened so fast that the Byzantine Empire could hardly mount a defence. The irony was that the rumours of a growing force in the Arabian Peninsula were of little concern, with other major conflicts taking place across the empire. Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem, overconfident that the Saracens were no real threat, before the conquest of Jerusalem encouraged the faithful with these words: 'We will laugh at the demise of our enemies, the Saracens, and in a short time see their destruction and complete ruin' (Wilken 2009:19). Up until that point

the global centre of Christianity was in the Near East; up until today Muslims are still in Jerusalem and have been in a confrontation with Christianity ever since.

Christians in the 7th century had difficulty grasping the realities of Islamic expansion through the Arab conquest. These were not merely marauding armies conquering their cities; these were heralds of a new religion and architects of a new civilisation. One of the first recorded Christian comments relating to Muhammed appeared shortly after his death; an old man remarked, '[*h*]e [*Muhammed*] is false, for the prophets do not come armed with a sword' (Wilken 2009:20). Then again, Islam is not merely a faith in the same way that Christianity is, but is an all-encompassing social, cultural and political phenomenon.

A caliphate was established in the ancient Christian city of Damascus, whereby new communities were formed in the conquered territories, held together by common beliefs and practices. The invaders initially kept themselves apart from the local societies, maintaining their identity and thus gradually displacing the culture of the occupied region. During the caliphate of Abd-al-Malik and his son Hisham, Arabic became the official language of administration, commerce and learning. New currency was minted inscribed in Arabic, '[*t*]here is no god but God alone. He has no companion'. This was considered a direct reproach to Christians (Wilken 2009:20). Islam asserted itself during this period as an all-encompassing religion, dominating private and public life.

As a dramatic public gesture the Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Judges were appointed to administer the emerging body of law, which over time became known as the *Shari'a*. *Shari'a* is to be understood as an evolving body of social practices more than a fixed code. *Shari'a* has become a defining marker of Muslim identity, adding to the complexity of dealing with it today, as it is not merely legal in nature. By the year 750, 50% of the world's Christian population found themselves governed by Muslim authority. Their rights and privileges were limited by their legal status as *dhimmis*, that is, members of a restricted and inferior minority subject to an arduous tax (Wilken 2009:21). In most of these regions originally conquered by the sword the subject peoples eventually embraced the religion of their conquerors.

Islam continued its relentless military conquest westward, sparking the beginning of the first crusade towards the end of the 11th century. In terms of Christian-Muslim relations, the brutality of the crusades probably marks the darkest period as a specific Christian counteroffensive against the occupation of former Christian lands. In light of the context, the crusades were an understandable attempt on the part of the Christian world to halt the advance of Islam, reclaim lost territory and, importantly, recapture the holy city of Jerusalem. Ultimately, however, the crusades ended in failure since the territories that were gained were reclaimed within two centuries (Wilken 2009:22). However, at that time brutality was not really used to define one religion over and

against another; it was merely understood as a clash of civilisations. It is only within recent history that the crusades have been stirred within memory to serve contemporary agendas as a controversial issue. This has gained a great deal of public attention, more specifically when it comes to interfaith dialogue.

Islamic expansion and the Christian crusades, although not discussed here in detail, form the basic reflection in terms of fear of those memories being relived in the present. We live with the continual fear that our current experience may lead to that kind of experience, thus marking one of the greatest stumbling blocks which we need to get across for true interfaith dialogue to take place. These can quite correctly be understood as such, but in terms of a constructive contribution for our purpose we need to look to the Turkish conquest of Asia Minor, which was of far greater significance. Wilken (2009:22) points out that the arrival of the Turks prepared the way for the eventual fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Turkish conquest

The city of Constantinople was the capital and bastion of Christianity for both the Roman and later the Byzantine Empire situated in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Constantinople stood at the centre of the Eastern Christendom for nearly 1000 years. Following the Islamic expansion by the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople became the Islamic capital of the Empire. This, the conquering of Constantinople had far greater consequences for Christianity than the crusades, especially considering demographics. In the 11th century Asia Minor was almost completely Christian, by the 16th century, Muslims made up almost 92% of the population (Wilken 2009:22). Thus, by the beginning of the 16th century, Islam had a new powerful political centre in Constantinople, and already then they started putting roots down in South-Eastern Europe, where they remain to this day (Volf 2011):

> At sunrise the Turks entered the city near San Romano … They went rushing about the city, and anyone they found they put to the scimitar, woman and men, old and young, of any condition. This butchery lasted from sunrise, when the Turks entered the city, until midday, and anyone whom they found was put to the scimitar in their rage … They were all running furiously like dogs into the city to seek out gold, jewels and other treasure, and to take merchants prisoner. They sought out monasteries, and all the nuns were led to the fleet and ravished and abused by the Turks, and then sold at auction for slaves throughout Turkey, and all the young women also were ravished and then sold for whatever they would fetch … The Turks loaded all their ships with prisoners and with an enormous quantity of booty. (p. 42)

During these conflicts for Asia Minor an encounter took place between Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity

and Islam in the 14th century. Manuel (Volf 2011) made the following comment relating to the violent nature of Islam:

> Show me just what Muhammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith that he preached. (p. 22)

This recorded statement was made by Manuel in 1391, long after what remained of the Byzantine Empire became a client state of the Turks in 1379, just before the eight-year siege of Constantinople (1394–1402). The Turks were engaged with various conflicts around that time, having conquered Thrace, Macedonia and the Serbian Empire.

It was clearly evident during that time that the sword of the Muslim Turks was deployed with the purpose of conquering, subduing and threatening. Manuel's comments on the inhumanity and evil of the conquerors at that time did not mean much. Yet it is interesting to note that these events, recently referenced in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI in the famous speech at the University of Regensburg, caused much fury and protest amongst Muslims (Volf 2011:19). Importantly, it resulted in renewed efforts initially from Muslims but also from Christians to promote peace and understanding amongst all religions. These developments, as a key contribution to interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, are specifically examined in the following section.

The Fall of Constantinople meant that suddenly Rome itself, the centre of Western Christendom, was under threat and in very real danger. Some even feared that the whole of Europe might have followed the same fate. Europeans were left with two very distinct options of how to respond to these worrying developments in the east: the tried, and to a large degree unsuccessful approach of organising a military crusade, or the new and untested option of engaging in dialogue.

Volf (2011:41–59) discusses both of these responses quite extensively in light of the respective advocates for each: Aeneas Silvious Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, as the vigorous and persistent advocate for another crusade, and Nicholas of Cusa representing the call for dialogue. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into detail; I merely summarise the position of Nicholas below, as it pertains to our theme of interfaith dialogue. Even though the context of this situation is vastly different from anything we are currently dealing with, the option of weapons versus words remains open to us. It would be beneficial for us today to grasp why Nicholas opted for dialogue, and how he navigated the theological issues related to such a task.

Shortly after these events Nicholas set his mind to the task of writing a treatise titled *On the Harmonious Peace of Religions*, wherein he effectively argued for a direct alternative to the crusades (Volf 2011:47). Nicholas envisioned a conference, or dialogue as we would refer to it, as a joint venture or search for truth through argument. The basis for such a conference depended on two important yet controversial convictions. Firstly, that all people, whether they knew it or not, worship the one and only true God, whereby he

aligned himself with some of the great Christian fathers such as Augustine. He hoped that a dialogue where different religions expressed their unique way of worshipping the one true God would result in peace. Importantly though, by this he does not see all religions as equal – he understood Christianity as the final and complete revelation of God, and that other religions seek to express the same but are filled with errors and incomplete revelations. The second conviction relates to how he understood the error in different religions: for Nicholas error rests ultimately in ignorance and not the wilful rejection of a manifest truth.

The central question which Nicholas sought to answer regarding Muslim-Christian relations relates to the question of God's unity, his oneness. He builds a lengthy argument, claiming that that which Muslims reject about the Trinity, Christians also indeed need to reject, followed by an argument out of the Qur'an that Muslims ought to accept what Christians believe about the Trinity. He maintained that Christians and Muslims both worship the one true God, albeit with different names and in different ways, whilst insisting that the Christian faith offers the most reliable and complete revelation of that one God (Volf 2011:56). Ultimately, for Nicholas the situation called for a battle of ideas, not a battle of swords. This notion of the one true God will be returned to in a later section.

Siege of Vienna

The conquest of the Turks continued after the fall of Constantinople, with various kingdoms across Asia, Africa and Europe falling under Ottoman control in the first few decades of the 16th century. The Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent steadily started making major inroads into the western territories, capturing large portions of eastern, central and southern Europe. It became evidently clear that the Ottoman Empire was one of the greatest existing political and military powers of the day. Suleiman the Magnificent prepared a force numbering nearly 100 000 to march on Hungary and lay siege to Vienna. By November 1545 Suleiman completed his fifth campaign in Hungary, capturing Hapsburg's forts and annexing nearly all their Hungarian territory (Volf 2011:61). The realm of the Ottoman Empire stretched from Persia in the east to Croatia and Hungary in the west. On 10 November 1545 a truce was negotiated, bringing the extensive expansion of the Turks to an end.

It is during this period that the Protestant reformer Martin Luther reflected substantially on whether Christians and Muslims have a common God. Ironically, that almost never seemed to be the question, but rather whether Muslims and Christians share in the important characteristics of God, such as God's absolutely unconditional love. In 1530 he wrote with no exaggeration, '[w]e now have the Turk and his religion at our doorstep.'

Again, this does not present a complete overview of Luther's dealing with the topic, but merely an overview of his position, as the intricacies will be dealt with later. As has already been stated, for Luther the question does not have anything to do with whether Christianity and Islam have a common God, in terms of substance, he takes this for granted. For Luther as a theologian the question was not about a clash of civilisations, but had more to do with the salvation of the human soul. He maintained that the Muslim convictions about God and their spirituality were utterly inadequate for salvation (Volf 2011:67). He promoted Islam as being good for this life, but not for the life of the world to come. If you wanted a religion centred on morality, Islam would be a good choice.

He dealt with the issue by relating the Islamic view of God to that of the Samaritans, in particular by referring to John 4, where Jesus responds to the Samaritan woman: 'you worship what you do not know' (v. 22). For Luther a major problem centred on the denial of the Trinity and the death of God's son on the cross. This led him to claim that in the hearts and mouths of Muslims, the true God morphs into no God at all. Their worship is directed towards the correct object, the 'One True God', but they distort that object almost beyond recognition (Volf 2011:71). However, it should be noted that for Luther this was not merely the case for Muslims, he even placed most Christians under this criterion. It was not a polarity of 'us' Christians versus 'them' Muslims, it related more to some Christians as those who correctly understood God and knew how to relate God correctly, versus most Christians and all non-Christians who do not (Volf 2011:74). Accordingly, Luther agrees that there is a lot of commonality between Christianity and Islam, especially in how the Christians view God. Yet all commonalities are ultimately unimportant in terms of his primary concern of standing before God.

▉ Recent examples: Denmark, Nigeria and Indonesia

Recently there has been an extremely high escalation of conflict, often designated as conflict between Christians and Muslims. Here I attempt to briefly reflect on three countries where this has been the case, and where the situations were seemingly interrelated. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, religious conflicts are difficult to define, especially in today's world where they are cultivated out of various forms of political transition, socio-economic circumstances, and the cumulative effect of sustained grievances. I develop this primarily as a base discussion for the following section, where we will engage with the motivation for a Christian response, specifically relating to what Rasmusson (2008:215) defines as an 'us versus them' syndrome in Christian-Muslim conflicts. It should be noted that the narratives below do not reflect the entirety of the situation on the ground in the respective countries, since good relations between Christians and Muslims are also being maintained.

Denmark's largest newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad on 30 September 2005, and were again reprinted in 2008 (Rasmusson 2008:216). These images depicted the Prophet in various demeaning ways, such as wearing a turban in the shape of a bomb with a burning fuse, or wielding a cutlass. Another had him saying that paradise was running short of virgins for suicide bombers. These are considered blasphemous within Islam. This incident drew sharp criticism from the global Islamic community, including Indonesia and Nigeria, and in the latter it even resulted in violent riots and killings.

In Nigeria's northern regions within the Plateau State, in the city of Jos, riots were triggered in 2001 due to issues relating to land ownership and access to public offices of the so-called indigenous people. The predominantly Christian Birom, Anaguta and Afizere peoples make up the indigenous grouping, whereas the Muslim Hausa-Fulani peoples are regarded as settlers. The Muslims as a minority group felt discriminated against. Violent conflicts and riots erupted throughout the region, especially in 2002 and 2004. This led to the eventual declaration by the president that the Plateau State was in a State of Emergency (Rasmusson 2008:217).

Indonesia experienced one of its most violent and persistent conflicts between December 1998 and 2001. Muslims and Christians in Poso, Central Sulawesi erupted in violence after a Christian and a Muslim got involved in a street brawl. The arrival of extremist groups such as Laskar Jihad in the region escalated the violence. Initially a private conflict, it soon evolved into a communal conflict which resulted in the death of hundreds of Muslims and Christians, with millions being displaced and destruction of private and public property (Rasmusson 2008:218).

However, in all three cases these conflicts cannot be categorised as solely religious, with the possible exception of the case in Denmark. A multitude of other factors were also clearly involved, such as economic inequalities, public ambition, feelings of neglect and exclusion, as well as ethnic, cultural and social envy (Rasmusson 2008:218). However, these struggles are often framed in religious terms, thus becoming a tool to be used within the struggles, but to state that this is the sole cause would be an oversimplification.

The dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' plays a crucial role in understanding these conflicts. It relates specifically to the socio-economic conditions of one group over and against another, specifically reflecting questions related to social identity as defining symbolic markers, but also the markers which define a group as unique and separate. If these identifying markers are threatened, conflict becomes the expected response in the sense of self-preservation. For example, in the case of Denmark various ministers went as far as stating that Denmark must be defended from those who come from the outside, with reference to the current influx of Muslim immigrants (Rasmusson 2008:222).

For them, reaction to this influx of Muslims is like resistance to invading German soldiers during World War II.

Religion, although not necessarily central to the various conflicts, plays a central role in our social understanding of who we are. Religion further informs our perspective and understanding of the other. It becomes a small jump to view people of another religious tradition, say Islam, from the perspective of Christianity as people worshipping another completely different God; hence they would be viewed as 'the other' or even as an 'enemy'. Rasmusson (2008:222) points out that the 'us' versus 'them' syndrome is commonly associated with images of enemy and fear; even majority populations can feel discriminated against by the 'other' – those they see as a threatening enemy.

These situations are continually exacerbated on a daily basis by the media, which often only portrays one-sided, negative stories of the 'other' or 'enemy', depending on the context. From our predominantly Christian context, it would place the spotlight on negative stories of Islam in particular, stirring fear and general mistrust towards Muslims. These often then lead to violent reactions by some, which are then again in turn exploited within the media and by populist politicians, contributing to the atmosphere of fear and mistrust – thus forming a vicious cycle.

Minority contexts, religious freedom and extremism

One of the major complexities of Christian-Muslim relations relates specifically to how we can coexist together, especially given our multireligious, interdependant and closely connected society, where the dichotomy between specific Christian civilisations and Muslim societies has become increasingly distorted. As indicated earlier the dialogue which needs to take place is not merely religious in nature, but needs to move beyond that to the lived experience of people coexisting together.

This becomes painfully difficult in regions where one religion is in the minority, such as in the case of Denmark. In a brief survey of the *Open Doors World Watch List* (2015), this becomes especially painfully clear from a Christian perspective, seeing that the majority of states where Christians are experiencing various forms of persecution are predominantly Muslim. This is part and parcel due to the Muslim claim that Islam is a totality, a complete system that covers each and every aspect of human life (Naim 1995:11). Research has shown that people from ethnic or religious minorities experience direct and indirect forms of discriminatory treatment in the labour market (Rasmusson 2008:219).

For that very reason, although going beyond the scope of this research, interfaith dialogue needs to wrestle with the issue of religious freedom. We need to underscore how our religious identities can coexist peacefully with one another, whilst creating room for our outward expression, be it in the form of Muslim *Da'awa* or Christian

mission, whilst recognising that it is exactly our differing outward expressions which contribute to the challenges of their coexistence. In the final section I hope to show specifically how religious dialogue can promote authentic Christian witness.

Another aspect to which very little attention is devoted is the issue of religious extremism. In recent times this has become a real metaphorical elephant in the room for interfaith dialogue and any possibility of peaceful coexistence. It is interesting to note that religious extremism is a relatively new phenomenon, and only seriously presented itself as a question for interfaith dialogue after the horrific events of 9/11. Volf (2011:255–262) devotes his final chapter to this thorny issue, advocating a multipronged approach to combat religious extremism, and for specific engagement with the religious communities from which these extremists come. Denying this part of one's religious identity is not helpful, and rather simply lends credence to the claim by extremists that they possess the truth. The reality is that extremism on the one side breeds extremism on the other – negative views and negative actions often elicit corresponding and even augmented negative views and actions in return. For example, Pastor Terry Jones, who burnt copies of the Qur'an on September 11, 2010, sparked protest in many Muslim countries which left two people killed and many wounded in Afghanistan (Independent 2010).

Important for this discussion though, is the fact that religious extremism and, in a very specific way, Muslim terrorism breeds fear and suspicion, and more importantly how these supposed violent propensities can be reconciled to the one God to whom Muslims owe ultimate allegiance. This then becomes one of the central reasons why people doubt and are increasingly hesitant to engage in the 'absurd' possibility that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

It is in light of this dark and at times shameful history on both sides that we need to ask new questions if we are to envision any kind of alternative future. In order to move forward, we will need to become very real and frank about our shared experience of history. Whether we agree that those actions were authentically Christian or Muslim becomes irrelevant.

There is a very apparent danger if we do not acknowledge these events in that we can have a faith without history or, perhaps even worse, a history without faith (Naim 1995:10). The reality is that these historical events help shape our social construct of the other religion, which leads to a kind of 'us' versus 'them' mentality which breeds hostility. Steven Haggmark (2008:38) observes that we use these memories to establish abstract generalities which we accept as fact, and accordingly create an 'enemy' that is based on our own cultural biases and generalisations.

In other words, our understanding and response towards the other faith is socially constructed. We need to continuously ask ourselves to what extent is our picture of Islam

socially constructed and then generalised to the point of being dangerous. These images or memories discussed above merely serve to highlight some of the negative images used in our social construction, whether we have all the facts together or not. It is images like these which make it increasingly difficult for dialogue aimed at peace and justice to take place. Only genuine human encounters can undermine this process.

■ The will to embrace

It is clear from the combined histories of both traditions, Christian and Muslim, that our engagements have been marred by extreme violence, along with recent events. These narratives fuel growing suspicion, fear and hatred towards the other. The problem in almost all of these instances narrated in the previous section relates more to our perceptions of the difference between 'us' and 'them' rather than the diversity itself (Rasmusson 2008:215). Volf (1996:16) argues this point a bit differently, stating that these ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts are part of a much larger problem of identity and otherness. The rhetoric which often follows is that of a protective and positively defined 'we' versus a threatening and negatively defined 'them'.

In this section a possible Christian response to these given realities and perceptions is explored as a possible theological framework for moving forward to a just and peaceful society where dialogue becomes the practical application. In other words, what kind of people are we to become – ought we to become – in order to live in harmony with others? Wolterstorff (in Volf 1996:21) stated that we need to concentrate on fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, shaping a cultural climate in which such agents thrive.

I turn now specifically to the work of Miroslav Volf and his book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (1996). As a leading voice within mainline Christianity on Islam, a professor at Yale and the founding director of the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture, he has extensive personal experience of dealing in dialogue between cultures and religions. In particular, he is serving on the executive board of the Centre for World Dialogue, which believes that dialogue and the exchange of views has a vital role to play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts (Centre for World Dialogue, n.d.). Given the social realities as described above, it demands that we place identity ('Christian') and otherness ('Islam') at the centre of our theological reflection (Volf 1996:17).

An important note for the discussion to follow is that the work of Volf primarily centres on how the Christian faith is to be understood in terms of their racial, ethnic or cultural identities, and from that position, how the one relates to the other. However, this is not our primary concern here, but more so, as in the later part of his work, how our

Christian identity determines how we should relate to others. For our purposes much of his work is interpreted in terms of a religious other, specifically a Muslim other.

The cross and conflict

Any theological reflection on how we are to relate to any other, regardless of whether the other is defined on socio-economic, political, racial, cultural, sexual or religious lines, our departure point should always reflect the life and ministry of Jesus, and in particular a reflection of the cross as both an act of solidarity and of self-giving love.

Since we are dealing with conflicts, an ethical consideration is of some importance. Through the lens of the cross there is a beckoning to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and suffering, whilst at the same time the supplemental theme of atonement for the perpetrator. Moltmann (1992:129–131) argued that in the sufferings of the cross were not only the sufferings of Christ but also those of the poor and weak which Jesus shared in his own body in solidarity with them. Christ accordingly identifies with the victims of violence and identifies the victims with God. In the same way that the victims need to be liberated from suffering caused by oppression, oppressors need to be liberated from injustices committed. Volf (1996:23) observes that the cross is a divine atonement for sin, injustice and violence on the earth: 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: Whilst we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

Where Moltmann (1992) expressed specifically the solidarity of the cross to the victims, we will move more towards the motivation of this solidarity, which is understood as God's self-giving. God gave of himself on the cross for the sinner and the evildoer in order to receive them into divine communion with himself. The question then becomes to what extent are we willing to give of ourselves to our enemies? This theme, which we derive from the cross, is often referred to as self-donation. Important for consideration is that solidarity as expressed by Moltmann cannot be separated from self-donation. All who suffer can find comfort in the solidarity of the crucified, but only those who struggle against evil by following the example of the crucified will discover him at their side. Volf (1996:23) adds that to claim the comfort of the crucified whilst rejecting his way is to advocate not only cheap grace, but a deceitful ideology.

The call of all discipleship centres on the pattern of life and death shown by Jesus. The theme of self-donation, or Christ's self-giving love, stands at the centre of Christian theology. Even our practices as a faith community express this central truth. The two sacraments, that is, baptism and communion, serve to reiterate this point continually in the lives of followers of Christ. Baptism serves as identification with the death of Christ (Rom 6:3), whilst communion calls us to remember Christ as the One who gave his body for us (1 Cor 11:23–24). Moltmann (1992:137) states beautifully that the self-giving love

of Christ is rooted in the self-giving love of the triune God. This is at the very core of the Christian faith – the very fact that Christ modelled self-giving love to all on the cross – and in turn it becomes a demand to be followed by his followers. For our Christian reflection on Muslim-Christian relations, this is our departure point to know Christ, and indeed, him the crucified (1 Cor 2:2).

We should, however, be careful not to overromanticise the act of self-donation, as the act of modelling Christ's example often leads to similar results. We might hope for reciprocal self-donation, as that would inevitably result in perfect love, and thus a perfect world. However, the reality is that this kind of reciprocity is hardly ever achieved or fulfilled. Self-donation is more often than not met with exploitation and brutality. Thus the road we choose to walk is not an easy one nor for the faint of heart, but then again it is for the faintest of hearts. Volf (1996:25–27) speaks of this as the scandal of the cross, stating that in a world of violence the cross – that eminently counter-cultural symbol – lies at the heart of the Christian faith. However, by this we should not think that the scandal refers to the inherent danger and threat of exploitation associated with self-donation, since any suffering experienced can be endured – especially if that suffering bears the desired fruit.

The true scandal is when we engage with the act of self-donation, and it does not bear the desired fruit. Hope deferred makes the heart sick (Pr 13:12). To state it emphatically: You give of yourself to the other, and the hope to end violence is not met – rather, violence continues and destroys you. Volf (1996:26) calls this pain of failure and violence a cry before the dark face of God. The reality is that there is no way around the scandal since it is at the core of the Christian faith. Our only valid responses are either to reject the cross, or take up the cross to follow in the footsteps of the crucified 'and be scandalized ever anew by the challenge' (Volf 1996:26). The beauty and reward, however, lie within the scandal, that in the act of self-donation – whether it bears the desired fruit or not – we will find ourselves in the company of the crucified.

Before moving on to the 'will to embrace', as the heading suggests, a theological framework for why the animosity or tension exists between Christians and Muslims needs to be developed. Only once this has been established can we return to the act of self-donation or, more correctly, the will to give of ourselves to others, and 'welcome' them by reinterpreting our own self-identification as Christians in order to make space for them, 'the other'. This should happen before we place judgements upon whom or what 'the others' are, critically avoiding any broad generalisations, except for identifying them in their humanity. We need to consider the humanity of Christians and Muslims as people occupying the same space, as Volf (2011) refers to all of us as people 'living under the same roof'. This then becomes an important reflection for us, as we cannot really avoid one another, as has been established in the previous section. Perhaps an important disclaimer regarding 'the will to embrace' is that it precedes any 'truth' about others and

any construction of their 'justice'; therefore it is absolutely indiscriminate and strictly immutable, transcending the moral mapping of the social world into 'good' and 'evil'.

Differentiation and exclusion

Without expanding at great length here on what Volf (1996) articulates in this regard, the fact has already thoroughly been established that there exists conflict, whether perceived or real, between Christianity and Islam. These conflicts are multidimensional in nature, drawing on a lot of different socio-economic and political factors, but are often exacerbated as a result of religious connotations. Exclusion has enormous negative connotations within ministry reflection, something which ought to be avoided. It is, however, also extremely helpful in identifying various boundaries which can then be evaluated. If we go about life without underscoring exclusion, we become oblivious to the very fact that boundaries indeed do exist. In a very raw sense, 'us' Christians versus 'them' Muslims are helpful religious designations but also harmful, in that they breed suspicion and malintent towards the other.

Volf (1996:65–68) opts to speak of differentiation as opposed to separation, which he explains in the following way: differentiation consists of 'separating and binding', which expresses something of how identities or objects relate to one another, whereas separation would always result in 'self-enclosed, isolated, and self-identical beings'. Differentiation becomes important for our dialogue, in that Islam and Christianity cannot be seen as separate entities which have nothing to do with one another. As already seen, religions interact with one another in either positive, constructive relations or, more often than not, negative and violent conflict towards the other. Social ('religious') identity is formed through a complex process: We are who we are not because we are separate from others who are next to us, but because we are both separate and connected, both distinct and related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges (Volf 1996:66). In terms of interfaith dialogue one chooses to focus on those aspects of our various religions which define one as distinct, but also on what all might have in common in order to build bridges to engage with the other. Others, however, would point to the selfsame aspects as a means for debate and sowing further division which seeks to prove 'truth', but does nothing to promote peace or justice. As stated earlier, the will to embrace preceded 'truth'.

Our identity results out of our distinction which we discover in relation to the other; in a very real sense we negotiate our identity in interaction with one another. Exclusion then becomes the 'sinful activity of reconfiguring the creation' (Volf 1996:66). It is a twofold action moving against differentiation; firstly by removing oneself out of the pattern of interdependence, which inherently defines the other then as 'enemy' which must be pushed away or driven out for one's own preservation. Secondly, the removal of

separation, in other words not recognising the other as someone belonging to the pattern of interdependence. This leads to viewing the other as an inferior who needs to be assimilated or subjugated by the self. This often becomes expressed in our attitudes towards mission, or as violent conflict.

Volf (1996:72–139) identifies the following forms of exclusion and their remedies: If we do not engage with these remedies of exclusion, then exclusion will always lean towards its extremes, which seek to kill and destroy – that is, exclusion as elimination. Exclusion can also take another subtle form, and that is assimilation, whereby the argument is simply 'we will refrain from killing you or casting you out, if you are willing to become like us.' In other words, you must reject your identity.

☐ Renaming

Renaming involves behaviours or beliefs which have been falsely labelled as 'sinful'. These are often expressed as gross generalisations and ill-informed judgements, for example, 'all Muslims are terrorists'. Often simply by renaming things which were deemed unclean or impure, Jesus offset the binary logic which defines social life. Christians need to reinterpret how they view others, and abolish the system of exclusion that this creates.

☐ Remaking

In addition to removing labels, Jesus made clean things out of truly unclean things, by engaging with the outcast and marginalised of society. This relates to tearing down the barriers created by wrongdoing in the name of God, whose love knows no boundaries. It is the active engagement with those who are guilty, the 'extremists' and the 'terrorists', where they are sought out and brought into the communion.

To move again beyond all of these forms of exclusion we need to return to the cross. This relates to how we understand ourselves as Christians. Galatians 2:

> I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and himself for me. (vv. 19–20)

Here Paul reflects on his own identity, and the way he understood himself. He presumes a centred self, more specifically a wrongly centred self which needs to be decentred by being crucified. In other words, his conception of himself needs to be crucified and laid down. However, one is never truly free from one's identity, as the self is continuously recreated. Volf (1996:71) calls this new crucified centre a decentred centre, which is defined by self-giving love which continually opens the self up, and makes it capable and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself, which was patterned by the suffering Messiah.

◼ Embrace

The previous section developed a thorough understanding of the varieties of conflict which are all, to varying degrees, defined as religious conflict, specifically between Christianity and Islam. I explained these as being understood either as a 'clash of civilisations', or within the most basic polarity of exclusion, as 'us' versus 'them' or perhaps even 'either us or them'. Volf (1996:99) observes that the stronger the conflict, the more the rich texture of the social world disappears and the stark exclusionary polarity emerges, around which all thought and practice aligns itself. This will be all the more true for conflicts of a religious nature, as they are defined by our deepest convictions.

The most common response when conflict emerges is that of simply I 'don't have a choice', which stems directly from the logic within an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, seemingly oblivious to the very fact that to destroy the other or be destroyed is itself a choice. If there is will, courage and imagination, these stark polarities can be overcome, suggests Volf (1996:99). Christians can resist the pull and rediscover their common belonging. For our reflection here we will again turn to the cross as our ultimate expression of God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion, as a model for how we as humans should relate to others.

Before engaging with Volf's model of embrace, a comment reflecting back needs to be made. In attempting to deconstruct the conflicts above, one often falls into the liberation loophole of attempting to identify who is the oppressor and accordingly who is the oppressed, as existing within the 'us' versus 'them' polarity. However, as one has seen, both Christians and Muslims are historically guilty of gross violence towards the other, thus making such distinction improbable. Therefore our point of departure rests not in the value of freedom, of who is right and wrong, but should echo that of Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988) who insisted that love is ultimately:

> [T]he deepest root of all servitude is the breaking of friendship with God and with other human beings, and therefore cannot be eradicated except by the unmerited redemptive love of the Lord whom we receive by faith and in communion with one another. (p. xxxviii)

An interesting motion is raised by Volf (1996:109) where he advocates for placing our understandings of conflict and global events in the world of growing plurality, to be situated within the grand narrative. That would be the grand narrative of the Christian faith, as is the fact that Christ will return and in front of him every knee will bow. Although not expressed in these words, he speaks of the 'final reconciliation' when we all will appear before God. He does this not in a way to defer one from dealing with the conflict at hand, but to illustrate that the final reconciliation is in the hands of God. We cannot push people towards that, or other forms of salvation, specifically universal salvation which would remove differential boundaries, as discussed earlier. Rather, he suggests that we should recognise that along with new understandings and peace

agreements, new conflicts and disagreements are permanently generated. He is almost saying 'let's not get lost in our theology, but be real with what is happening in the world.' Therefore he suggests that we should not wrestle with how to achieve the final reconciliation, but rather focus on what resources are needed to live in peace and struggle against oppression in the absence of the final reconciliation.

With regard to embrace Volf suggests four movements which we need to move through in order to truly embrace the other: repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for the other, and healing of memory.

☐ Repentance

Volf (1996:112) starts off by explaining the ministry of Jesus specifically in a political capacity amongst the poor and marginalised. He focuses more on the fact that Jesus proclaimed a lot more than would be expected of any politician at that time: Kindling hope in the hearts of the oppressed and demanding radical change of the oppressors whilst communicating the message of God's unconditional love and the people's need for repentance. These two centralities, on which Jesus' ministry was based, can be deemed to be the most hopeful aspects of Jesus' message: divine love and repentance addressed to the victims. Repentance is not merely 'to make a radical alteration in one's life', it is to make a turnabout of a profound moral and religious import which inherently implies the recognition that you have made a mistake, but more than that, that you have sinned.

What is striking in this message is to whom the call of repentance is addressed. Not only had those been called to repentance who were oppressors, but also importantly so were the victims of oppression themselves (Volf 1996:114). This is important for us because, as was stated earlier, in conflict we cannot distinguish between oppressor and the oppressed, and neither did Jesus make this distinction. That is exactly what makes the proclamation of Jesus so revolutionary – the connection he makes between the hope that he gives the oppressed and the radical change that he requires of them.

He continues to explain that the reason for the need for repentance on behalf of the oppressed is because not only do these need material and psychological help, but they also have a deeper need to be released from their understandable but nonetheless inhumane hatred towards the oppressor in their hearts. The value of this cannot be overemphasised given that in any conflict, the role of the 'victim' continuously shifts. Therefore the victims need to repent because social change that corresponds to the vision of God's reign cannot take place without a change of their heart and behaviour.

It should be observed here that it is not clear exactly what Jesus called his followers to repent from, or rather that Jesus nowhere clearly defines sin. Gnilka (1993:212) defines sin according to Jesus as a failure to live the life of discipleship as described in the Sermon

on the Mount. Thus accordingly sin could have an extremely broad application, but the apt application for our purposes would be to reflect on the failure of loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, for example (Mt 5:44). Repentance accordingly becomes an extremely powerful force combating suspicion, hatred and the breeding of contempt towards the other. Volf (1996:116) states that to repent, one resists the seductiveness of sinful values and practices, and lets the new order of God's reign be established in one's heart.

It is a radically different response to that of the oppressor. By repentance the victim's response is no longer determined by the terms of the oppressor, such as the circumstances under which the conflict was carried out, the values which dictated the conflict, and importantly the means by which these were fought. Repentance 'humanises' the situation, preventing the victim from either mimicking or dehumanising the oppressor. Victims need to repent of what perpetrators do to the soul – to repent of the fact that all too often they mimic the behaviour of the oppressors, and let themselves be shaped in the mirror image of their enemy (Volf 1996:116). One can take this a step further, and argue that they need to repent of their ungrounded defence of their reactive behaviour by claiming that they are not responsible, or that such actions are needed for liberation. If repentance fails to occur on all of these levels, the full human dignity of victims will not be restored and the desired social change will never occur.

Volf (1996:117) presents a narrative from the conflicts in his home country in Croatia and/or Serbia, and the violence which had occurred there. In the narrative he explains that the violence and disgrace that was suffered created hate. However, he makes the beautiful remark that 'under the onslaught of extreme brutality, an inner realm of freedom to shape one's self must be defended as a sanctuary of a person's humanity.'

The repentance of the oppressor is not discussed here, as such repentance is a given requirement. Perhaps just a note on how the gospel demands more from the oppressor in terms of repentance; for them repentance is more than just the purifying of desire and the mending of ways. It also implies the making of restitution to those they have wronged (Volf 1996:117). Genuine repentance on the side of the oppressor often results in super-abundant restitution, which is an attempt to offset the injustice of the original violation. Derida (in Caputo 2007:69–72) explains this in economic terms: The act of giving, in this case the taking thereof, results in perceived debt within the beneficiary, who then needs to (in a reciprocal way) repay that perceived debt. He argues that these exchanges always result in being reciprocated, and set of a circle of return as each exchange opens up a perceived debt in the other.

Volf (1996:118) emphasises that the need to talk about the victim's repentance has to do with 'the creation of the kind of social agents that are shaped by the values of God's Kingdom and therefore, capable of participating in the project of authentic social

transformation.' Repentance then becomes the point of departure if one is to authentically respond from within a Christian narrative, respond to the social realities of animosity between Christians and Muslims and perhaps move towards an alternative outcome.

Forgiveness

Repentance is always shrouded in the pain and the promise of genuine confession. However, it is a fundamental step which needs to take place as it forms the departure point for forgiveness. Caputo (2007:73) argues that the only thing that can truly be forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under which true forgiveness becomes possible, is when forgiveness is impossible. Forgiveness, especially in cases of extreme violence, is that thing which is beyond understanding, beyond reason, beyond all accounting and all cost. In this sense, forgiveness bears witness to the possibility of the impossible. Therefore it is a gift and in a very true sense of the word, 'grace' (Moltmann 1987):

> A person who thus admits his guilt and complicity renders himself defenceless, assailable and vulnerable. He stands there, muddied and weighed down. Everyone can point at him and despise him. But he becomes free from alienation and the determination of his actions by others; he comes to himself, and steps into the light of a truth which makes him free. (p. 43)

Although being the first step, repentance within the perceived 'us' builds anger within the heart of every victim against whom an injustice has been committed. The words of Christ on the cross become deemed impossible and turned upon themselves: 'Forgive them not, for they know what they do!' (Lk 23:34). Revenge becomes the logical and powerful emotion which often tends to dictate our response, whereby we argue that the oppressor deserves unforgiveness or, put differently, it would be considered unjust to forgive. In terms of forgiveness it would go a long way if the oppressor confessed and repented, yet this is hardly ever the case. When this occurs Volf (1996:120) claims that both the victim and the perpetrator become imprisoned in the autism of mutual exclusion, unable to forgive or repent and are then united in a perverse communion of mutual hate. Revenge is deemed the only option, and an injustice demands to be repaid in kind. A spiral of vengeance is soon to follow, since under the guise of seeking justice the one group acts out in violence or so-called 'just' revenge, which is in turn perceived by the other as an injustice, which again beckons 'just' counter-revenge.

The only way out of the endless cycle, the predicament of irreversibility, is through forgiveness (Volf 1996:121). Volf understands forgiveness as a genuinely free act which does not merely react, but breaks the power of the remembered past and transcends the claims of the affirmed justice, and so makes the spiral of vengeance grind to a halt. It should be self-evident from this description that forgiveness is incredibly powerful and bears immense social import in terms of dealing with conflicts. In being crucified, Jesus

became the ultimate example of his own teaching. When Jesus prayed on the cross to forgive the unjust that placed him there, the power of revenge was overcome. The law of retaliation became null and void. It is in the act of forgiveness that one becomes liberated and truly free, and in a very specific way, free from the obligation to evil deeds.

An immediate objection at this point would be to ask, but what about justice? Volf (1996:122) remarks that the very idea of forgiveness implies an affirmation of justice. The expression in the Lord's Prayer, for example, to forgive our debts as we forgive others (Mt 6:12), expresses an element of debt. One could argue then, if justice is included, why forgiveness? Volf (1996:122–128) establishes a lengthy argument in this regard on the merits and criticism of restorative justice, which is not of importance to us at this moment. Suffice that he concludes that strict restorative justice can never be satisfied.

Bonhoeffer (1995:144) argued that forgiveness provides the framework to properly understand justice in which it can be fruitfully pursued by stating that 'only those who are in a state of truthfulness through confession of their sin to Jesus are not ashamed to tell the truth wherever it must be told.' Once one has forgiven, one can pursue justice without falling into the trap or temptation to pervert justice into an injustice.

The rage and anger expressed earlier, which often swells up in the face of injustices experienced, has its correct place before God. These are often expressed in the language of the Psalms which call for the imminent destruction of enemies. Important to understand is that these are reflective outbursts in the context of prayer, where we voice with outrage from the depths of our souls our deepest emotions. These are never to be understood as emotions to be acted upon. Volf (1996:124) states that in the act of placing unattended rage before God, we place both our unjust enemy and our own vengeful self in front of God who loves and does justice. It is within this place before God that hate seems to regress and a seed for the impossible is planted, to forgive the unforgivable. In front of the cross of Christ our enemy moves from monstrous inhumanity to the sphere of our shared humanity, and the victim from proud innocence to common sinfulness.

Forgiveness is expressed most vividly through the imagery of the cross, as it symbolises both the destructiveness of humanity as being contrasted to the greatness of God's love. The cross is not merely the suffering of an innocent person, but is extended in the passion narrative as a tortured soul which offers its body up as a prayer of forgiveness to the torturers. From the imagery of the passion narrative Bonhoeffer (1995:95) saw that forgiveness itself is a form of suffering. In other words, when we forgive we admit in part that we have suffered a violation, and further suppress our rightful claims of strict restorative justice.

☐ Making space in oneself for the other

We cannot, however, stop at forgiveness and accordingly go our separate ways. Although some would advocate for a position that each, after repentance and forgiveness has

played out, in the sense of justice as well, should go their separate ways – especially in situations of extreme conflict. This possibility as we know has closed itself up to us as we live in a pluralistic and interdependent society where interaction with the other is unavoidable. Correctly understood though, the cross as a symbol of forgiveness serves as the boundary between exclusion and embrace, as it has the power to break down the walls of hostility.

Volf (1996:126) remarks that the passion of Christ aims at restoring communion between former enemies, even those who persistently refuse to be reconciled. The central message of the gospel and that of the cross centres around this understanding, that Christ refuses the other to remain as an enemy whilst creating space within himself for letting the offender in: 'While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son' (Rm 5:10). In God's relentless pursuit to break the power of human enmity without violence and receive humanity into divine communion, 'God gave himself up in Christ', is the fact that he did not have to give us up. 'As an expression of the will to embrace the enemy, the cross is no doubt a scandal in a world suffused with hostility' (Volf 1996:126). The cross becomes the ultimate symbol of offence in a world of violence. We would do well to remember that the call to follow in the fate of the crucified and his demand to walk in his footsteps remains open to us (Mt 16:24; Lk 14:26).

If we follow in the footsteps of Christ, we ought to mimic the two dimensions of the passion narrative in our relations towards others, especially those we deem as our enemies. The two dimensions reflect God's self-giving love which overcomes human enmity, and further creates space within him to receive estranged humanity. Volf (1996:128) uses the imagery of Irenaeus to express that when the Trinity turns towards the world, the Son and the Spirit become the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace. We would do well to always remember that we ourselves were in enmity towards God. Despite this God, who gave himself in love and loves us with the same love with which they (the persons of the Trinity) love each other, drew us into communion with himself.

Therefore, much of the meaning of the cross is surmised by the injunction 'to embrace each other'. As we have been embraced by the outstretched arms of the crucified God, we ought to open up our arms, especially for those one deems enemies, and make space within ourselves for them. We should invite them in, so to speak, so that we might together be able to rejoice in the eternal embrace of the triune God (Volf 1996:131).

This becomes very practical in terms of our motivation to engage with Muslims, to hear and become part of their narrative. To 'invite them in' becomes our motivation to practice Christian hospitality as an act of deeply expressing the will to embrace.

☐ Healing of memory

This last move within the act of embrace or the actual embrace goes to a large extent beyond the scope of this research, as it starts to touch on the practicalities of reconciliation which come as a result of the willingness to embrace. Since the motivation for this section is to illustrate the Christian motivation to engage with interfaith dialogue, I opt to leave the possibilities of dialogue open-ended, as indeed they truly are, and as the final section will also illustrate.

The healing of memory which Volf (1996) speaks of is a kind of forgetting which he develops from the presupposition that matters of:

> [T]ruth and justice have been taken care of, i.e. the perpetrators have been named, judged and hopefully transformed, that victims are safe and wounds are being healed, a forgetting that can therefore ultimately only take place with the creation of all things new. (p. 131)

Forgetting, or rather the healing of memory, has much more to do with remembering correctly. Volf advocates that when victims remember correctly, the memory of inhumanities of the past will shield both them and all of us against future inhumanities. If perpetrators remember rightly, the memory of their sins will help restore their guilty past and transform it into soil within which a more hopeful future can grow. However, we need to go a step further – and hence the wording of 'forgetting'. In order to truly go beyond past grievances we need to be able to let them go, that is, let go of the memory of the past, if we truly want to be reconciled one to the other. It is only in the willingness to forget that we can start to remember rightly. Forgetting here is distinct to other responses which often tend to either deny or reject the past. Holding on to the past in a defensive way from a specific perspective inherently means that the injustices have not yet been confessed, repented or even forgiven. Forgetting in this sense is a means of being free of that troublesome past, in that it does not dictate our current responses towards the other.

Volf (1996:135) explains that no final redemption or reconciliation is possible without the redemption of the past. Since every attempt to redeem the past through reflection must fail because no theodicy can succeed, the final redemption is unthinkable without a certain kind of forgetting. To understand this we need to consider God's 'forgetting' in terms of our sins as a plausible model for our human forgetting. At the centre of God's all-embracing memory there is a paradoxical monument to forgetting that which was done on the cross of Christ (Volf 1996:139). There is a direct link between the way God forgets, and the way God forgives the sins of humanity. He does this by taking sins away from humanity and placing them upon God-self (Jn 1:29; Rv 22:1–4). Thus, understanding memory in light of both Christ's suffering and the glory of God's new world, forgetting ultimately takes on an eschatological character, where forgetting removes the injury of memory as the last obstacle in the process of embrace.

■ The drama of embrace as a metaphor

In what follows I briefly describe the act of embrace as a metaphor for our engagement with others, or more specifically others with whom we share a degree of hostility (Volf 1996:140–148). The drama echoes the four movements that were described above. Throughout we will also then be reflecting on how interfaith dialogue mimics the drama.

□ Opening the arms

Simply put, with the act of opening the arms we express the desire for the other, suggesting the pain of their absence and the joy of the other's anticipated presence. It is the creating of space within ourselves for the other to enter, as an act of self-donation. By the opening of the arms we express the desire for engagement, that we have the adequate space for that desire to be fulfilled, and that the formally perceived boundaries are now crossable. It is the invitation, the initial will to embrace. The hosting of an interfaith dialogue, or just a meal for interaction to take place, could be deemed as this initial action since it communicates a desire for engagement with the other, but remains open as the other has not as yet responded.

□ Waiting

This is the continuation of the movement towards the other. It presses in to fulfil the expressed desire by the opened arms, the created space, the opened up boundary, et cetera. However, it stops just short of engaging the other. The other cannot and will not be coerced or manipulated into an embrace. Therefore the waiting is a proper waiting that has the power to potentially move the other into a movement towards the self, the stirring of desire. These initial two movements are often one-sided in their origin, and can never move towards their desired goal without reciprocity from the other, hence the importance of this discussion as the first step.

□ Closing the arms

The goal of the will to embrace comes to realisation; a reciprocal act takes place in which both have moved through the act of opening up the arms and waiting – each giving of themselves to create room for the other. Hegel (1977a:112) defines this action as two-sided because it is the action of the one as well as of the other. In the act of embrace the identity of each person is maintained; however, at the same time it is altered or transformed and the uniqueness of the other is also affirmed as being different. Importantly though, the act of embrace, regardless of being a neighbour or an enemy, signifies something of commonality. This place can only be achieved by the selfless giving up of oneself for the other – it is 'a necessary via dolorosa in a world of enmity and indifference toward the joy of reciprocal embrace' (Volf 1996:146).

Here it relates to interfaith dialogue in that we do not engage in the dialogue of truths as a matter of debates, of us over and against them, we rather seek commonality at first and from there work towards the common good. This reciprocal nature helps develop values and rhythms through which we can then communicate our unique particularities within interfaith dialogue. These engagements also tend to define the determination of such dialogue, considering that the outcome will always be varied and open-ended, depending on the context, participants, and nature of the dialogue. Therefore we leave the outcome open-ended for the realm of the impossible, embracing a multifinality where various outcomes – some previously inconceivable – become possible.

It is always imperative to remember that the embrace can be refused at any moment and that is okay, but it does hinder the exchange of mutual giving and receiving. Therefore a certain risk lies in embrace as we do not know how the other will respond to our invitation. We most likely will be misunderstood, despised and even violated. Looking back to our imagery of the cross as a symbol of embrace with Christ's arms extended, we can rest assured that many would not return an aligned desire to embrace. Nonetheless, we need to continuously seek opportunities where one can extend one's own arms as a sign of the will to embrace.

From a dense theology of the cross as a universal symbol of embrace, of selfless giving and creating room for the other, it would be unfaithful for us to consider any other response to Islam than to be willing to engage in dialogue. It is within the realm of dialogue that we can come openly to give of ourselves, and become vulnerable. We can share and confess our history of sinfulness towards each other, forgiving one another's transgressions. Perhaps then we can start to create room for the other as we live together under the same roof.

In this process the hope of an undetermined future presents itself. This is where our memories of the past can be restored in order for us to live peaceably amongst one another whilst expressing our unique particularities which make us distinct from one another. Ultimately in the act of embrace we are separate, but for that faintest of moments we become interdependent, holding and leaning on each other, where our defined boundaries become porous. This possibility of mutuality allows for justice and forgiveness to respond to violence in an appropriate way. Embrace then becomes a matter of Christian charity and self-respect, 'if we continue to view ourselves as apart, we do violence to ourselves and to others' (Oppenheimer 2003:21).

◼ A Common Word and interfaith dialogue

Over the course of the last decade a lot of emphasis has been placed on the role of dialogue between Christians and Muslims as a means of developing greater understanding of the other in order to foster peaceful and just living relations. This became especially urgent

after the Danish incident of 2006 with the demeaning caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, which threatened peace and security in many parts of the world. These events forced leaders of various nations and transnational organisations, including the United Nations' Kofi Annan, to speak out (Volf 2011:20).

In this section one of these initiatives for dialogue between Muslims and Christians will be explored, developed from an Islamic perspective and its respective Christian responses. This is an extremely remarkable and unprecedented development, unlike any in the history of Christian-Muslim relations – a defining development for the road forward.

Background

At the end of Ramadan on 13 October 2007 Muslim scholars sent an open letter to all Christians inviting them to engage in dialogue on the basis of world peace and the central call to both Christians and Muslims to love God and love thy neighbour (Speelman 2010:110). This document was supported by various quotations from both the Bible and the Qur'an.

The letter came as a response from the Islamic community to the so-called and now famous Regensburg lecture of Pope Benedict XVI in September 2006 (Volf 2011:19). In the lecture the Pope aligned himself to a large extent with an array of voices from the international community who stated that freedom of expression does not include the right of desecration. The Pope called for mutual and urgent respect of religions and their symbols. He did not leave it at that: He indirectly and gently rebuked the violence within Islam as well, with specific reference to the various riots, killings and burning of property in response to the events which took place in Denmark. Most Muslims would wholeheartedly agree with the Pope up until this point.

However, the Pope went on to reference a medieval theologian, Manuel II Palaeologus, who commented negatively on Islam just before the fall of Constantinople (Volf 2011, cf. Speelman 2010:110):

> Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached. (p. 22)

The Pope seemed to be implying that Islam is a violent religion, and the cause of its violent nature lies in the character of the Muslim God. Soage (2007:138) commented that in this way the Pope put the caricatures of the Danish newspaper into words. This resulted in a call for a 'day of anger', which led to violent protests with effigies of the Pope being burnt in Basra, Iraq, a Catholic nun being shot in Somalia, the Kashmir Valley almost being shut down by protests, and al-Qaeda vowing to conquer Rome, amongst others (Volf 2011:21).

The fact that the Pope referenced Manuel was not the heart of the contention which triggered the corresponding violence; the Pope effectively argued that violence was but a mere symptom of erroneous ideas about the nature of God. He argued further that within Christianity God is reason, *logos* (Jn 1:1), whereas in Islam God is a transcendent and pure will, and that these stand diametrically opposed to one another. This understanding is further expressed in how Christianity's God of reason encourages reasoning, deliberation, and persuasion, whereas the God of pure will of Islam demands obedience and promotes violence (Volf 2011:24). Thus the Pope ultimately understood that at the heart of our religious differences lie completely different understandings of God (Vatican 1999):

A Common Word

The immediate response to the Regensburg address was an 'open letter' a month later signed by 38 Islamic scholars, where they in point-by-point form refuted the Pope's statements with well-reasoned, measured arguments, and further wanted to debate with him about what they saw as erroneous interpretation of their faith tradition (Speelman 2010:110). Apart from dealing with the issues raised by Pope Benedict XVI, the 'open letter' also served to remind the Pope that since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) the Catholic Church has affirmed that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. The letter essentially argues that although Christians and Muslims have different understandings of God, they still worship the same God (Vatican 1999):

> We Christians joyfully recognise the religious values we have in common with Islam. Today I would like to repeat what I said to young Muslims some years ago in Casablanca: 'We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, and the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perspective'. (n.p.)

Volf (2011:28) observes that within this initial 'open letter' lay a hidden but truly revolutionary idea, which the letter refers to as the 'common essence' between Christianity and Islam, and that the two greatest commands as articulated by Jesus are (Mk 12):

> The first is 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and 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'. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. (vv. 29–31)

The authors of the letter communicated, in contrast to the Pope who only saw differences and incompatibilities, that they saw similarities amid the undeniable and ineffaceable differences. They believed that our shared convictions about God can serve as a bridge between two communities, not only as a source for division (Volf 2011:27). Exactly one year after this 'open letter' on 13 October 2007 a longer text was published which expands on this very argument, titled 'A Common Word between Us and You' (A Common Word 2007).

The argument of a Common Word basically follows through with three interrelated movements, starting by expressing our common devotion to the one God, or 'love' of God, although differently expressed in our respective faith traditions. The letter follows with our common expression to seek justice and peace, motivating it by underscoring that it is love of the neighbour which motivates such action. It is on the basis of these foundational values, of love for God and neighbour, that common ground is established for dialogue to start taking place.

The opening lines of the document start with the Islamic confession of faith, '[t]here is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God', and continues to expound on the unity of God, quoting Muhammad (Speelman 2010):

> [T]he 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 the praise and He hath power over all things'. (p. 111)

Muhammad accordingly calls Muslims to be devoted to God with all their heart, all their soul and all their mind, and in this form of devotion it relates to the call to 'love God'. Volf (2011:29) observes that 'love' for God does not appear in the words of Muhammad. He explains that in no way does Muhammad attempt to say anything about how humans should relate to God, rather he is describing God. These descriptions that he uses imply a specific human attitude towards God – that the one God demands exclusive devotion on the part of humans.

Speelman (2010:112) explains how for Jesus the love of the neighbour is but one side of the same coin, with the love of God on the other. This is essential also in Islam, as without it there can be no true faith in God and righteousness (Surah 2):

> [R]ighteousness is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask … Such are they who are sincere. Such are the pious. (p. 177)

The document thus lays, by these two arguments, common ground for dialogue whilst affirming that both religions are distinct from one another. These two greatest commandments are the foundation for common ground, and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah, and the New Testament (Volf 2011:29).

Most Christians will be sceptical as to whether these great commands to love God and love thy neighbour stand central to the Islamic faith; however, this is a question for Muslims to answer. It is positive to note that the 'Common Word' document was originally signed by 138 authoritative voices from across the Islamic world, representative of senior leaders and scholars from around the globe and all streams of Islamic thought. The list has grown immensely since being written and signed by authoritative figures from both Christianity

and Islam (Speelman 2010:110). It is indeed unprecedented to hear a unified voice from a deeply divided Islam, which fans a flame of hope for the future in new ways like never before. According to Sabra (2009:90–91) the 'Common Word' is an important interfaith dialogue initiative, especially as it reverses the trend that dialogue has always been a Christian initiative towards Muslims, and consequently always met with suspicion and reservation.

The 'Common Word' was drafted in part in response to the events of Regensburg, as noted earlier, but perhaps more specifically to respond to the growing deterioration of relations between Muslims and Christians. These religions make up more than half of the world's population and accordingly the document recognises that the world cannot be at peace if our religions are not at peace (Volf 2011):

> [W]ith the terrible weaponry of the modern world, with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. (p. 30)

Given the animosity, suspicion, fear, and continuous conflict which seems to define the Christian-Muslim engagement, the critical question that one needs to engage with is whether it is indeed possible to move away from a clash of civilisations' mentality, or an 'us' versus 'them' syndrome, towards peaceful coexistence of our faith traditions. Does something as feeble as 'love' for God and neighbour inspire enough motivation to bring about the change that we desire?

The 'Common Word' initiative is perhaps the best point of departure in expressing that which is essential to both Christianity and Islam: the love of God and neighbour. More than that, the document serves to show how this love, which is essential and common to both, has the power to bind us together to promote – even demand – that regardless of our faith tradition, we accordingly seek the common good of the other. Coming to this conclusion, Volf (2011:31) states 'a deep faith no longer leads to clashes; it fosters peaceful coexistence.' Deep faith as expressed through love and love understood as active care leads to respect for others and struggle for the rights of others.

However, as we have already alluded to, the presumption of the document is that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. This position sits with difficulty with most Christians today, regardless of the fact that for the most part this has not been disputed within the Christian tradition. On the other hand, for Muslims this issue is settled within the Qur'an, '[w]e believe what was revealed to us and what was revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and to him we submit as Muslims' (*Al 'Ankabut* 29:46). Also (*Al Shura* 42):

> God is our Lord and your Lord; we have our works and you have your works; there is no argument between us and you; God brings us together; and to him is the final destiny. (p. 15)

In the following section this theology will be developed from a Christian perspective.

■ The Christian response

The 'Common Word' document is addressed to prominent Christian leaders across the world, in particular to Catholic, Orthodox and mainline Protestant denominations. It has sparked a variety of responses, both positive and negative, and led to continuous and sustained debate on the issue of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

One of the earliest responses came from the Chief of Rabbis of Israel and the Archbishop of Canterbury on October 31, 2007, where both religious figures expressed deep respect for the spirit of the letter and pledged to 'commit themselves and encourage all religious leaders to ensure that no materials are disseminated by our communities that work against such vision' (Ali 2009:117).

The most publicised responses came from four prominent scholars of Yale Divinity School the very next day, and has become known as the Yale response. They wrote (Yale 2009):

> We receive it [*A Common Word*] as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings, we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and neighbours. (n.p.)

This was followed up by a conference at Yale in July 2008 entitled 'Loving God and Neighbour in Word and Deed: Implications for Muslims and Christians', which was attended by over 120 leading Muslim and Christian scholars and leaders. At the conference, a unanimous commitment was made to 'learn to love each other. Let us learn to love all neighbours and let us do that in the name of our common future and in the name of our one God' (Yale 2009).

Ali (2009:118–119) observes various other very positive responses which all in differing ways echo the voice from Yale, in particular the press release of March 20, 2008 entitled 'Learning to Explore Love Together' by the WCC, stating that the document was an encouraging new stage in Muslim thinking about Christian-Muslim relations (Oikoumene 2008). A few months later a consultation was held in Geneva, which represented a fellowship of WCC member churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, and a variety of Christian Communion Churches, which included the Roman Catholic Church, where they worked on the issue of Christian self-understanding in relation to Islam (Ali 2009:119).

However, as noted, the responses from the Christian community were not all as positive. The Barnabas Fund called it a misrepresentation of the truth, and a 'veiled threat calling for the acceptance of Islamic dominance' (Ali 2009:120). Others argued that the document contains nothing 'new' or 'common', and as such nothing positive to contribute to Muslim-Christian relations. Volf (2011:34–35) makes specific reference to the influential Pastor John Piper of the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota,

who did not respond directly to the document but responded to the underlying assumption that the God of Islam and Christianity is the same. His argument essentially surrounds the person of Jesus, and that for Muslims God is very much unlike Jesus, and that the difference is profound. Accad (2011:181–182) observes that numerous evangelicals accuse Christians engaged in dialogue with Muslims of naivety and ignorance of the true nature of Islam, with some viewing the document as a Muslim deception or a ploy to dismantle the Christian mission enterprise. In May 2009 a book was published by Advancing Native Missions, titled *The Common Word: the Undermining of the Church* (Maqdisi & Solomon (2009)), wherein they specifically appeal to the Christian community to withdraw their endorsement of the 'Common Word'. They argue that the Common Word trivialised the incomparable love of God and of the neighbour through the acceptance of a commonality, which they state the signatories knew all too well to be a well-crafted illusion.

According to Accad (2011:181) most evangelicals are primarily reactionary and experiential in their attitude to Islam and Muslims, stating that most of these negative attitudes expressed above do not stem from a comprehensive historical, theological, and liturgical reflection and analysis of Islam's nature. He goes on to call for a proper Christian theology of Islam to be developed, which will do justice to the multiple dimensions and diverse manifestations of its religious world.

Dialogue

It is without a doubt that initiatives like 'A Common Word' and its corresponding responses from both the Islamic and Christian communities are extremely inspiring, regardless of whether one agrees with it or not. It presents us with a viable theological framework and practical suggestions for successful dialogue. However, one of the major challenges relates to what extent both faith communities will reflect positive effects of such initiatives at a grassroots level.

Ali (2009:121) identifies three issues which he deems of vital importance for these initiatives to succeed. Firstly, understanding that the rules for any sort of dialogue or conversation across religious and cultural lines are not different from those for a successful interpersonal relationship; secondly, that dialogue needs to make a serious attempt to understand the world views of the participants in the dialogue; and lastly, the need to disentangle the issue of salvation from the dialogue. This last point of Ali is, however, debatable since our understanding of salvation is indeed central to our unique particularity within the Christian tradition. How we go about it in dialogue needs to be thoughtfully considered. A detailed discussion on this matter will be presented in the final section.

During June 2015, at the annual 'Middle East Consultation' at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Lebanon, prominent leaders engaged with ministry to Muslims,

gathered to discuss that year's theme of 'Identity and Belonging'. Given the unique context of Lebanon, with a comparatively large population of both Christians and Muslims living in a relatively continuous state of 'fragile' peace, much can be learnt in terms of expressing our particular faith traditions whilst coexisting peacefully as belonging to the same communities. Some of the contents of the Middle East Consultation will be reflected on later, specifically as we move towards the notion of developing liminal spaces and dealing with the issue of evangelism. George Sabra (2009) reflects critically on the Lebanese experience of Christian-Muslim relations, and identifies three levels of dialogue which are applicable to our current considerations:

1. The 'existential dialogue' of everyday life, which is non-reflective and relates to the day to day dialogue as a result of shared, lived spaces where Christians and Muslims live, work, study, et cetera. These engagements are typically a grass-roots experience. Sabra (2009:90) comments specifically on the context of Lebanon, and that it is in an advanced form of a close relationship between the members of the two religions, which is a rare occurrence. However, this is increasingly becoming true in our global society, where the dichotomy of a specifically Christian society or specifically Muslim society is steadily deteriorating.

2. The second form of dialogue he terms the 'dialogue of life', where Christians and Muslims come together to discuss and exchange views on issues that emerge out of living together. These can range from joint citizenship, justice and peace, to moral values and freedoms of expression, and various political, economic and social issues.

3. The last and perhaps most difficult form is a 'dialogue of truth' where religious scholars and theologians discuss and debate matters of faith and doctrine.

The question remains though which type of dialogue 'A Common Word' presents to us. Although these three forms of dialogue are distinct from one another, they are also very interrelated; our faith and understanding of God inform in part our views on socio-political issues, which in turn in part inform our lived actions amongst those we live with. These constructions, as discussed earlier, are obviously a lot more complex. Clearly 'A Common Word' does not fit into the first form of dialogue, since it is a reflective and intellectual undertaking. However, the first form of dialogue is at the forefront of our intended or desired outcome – to come to a place where we can peaceably live in loving relationships with one another. The dialogue accordingly presents itself as both a dialogue about life and about truth. It moves beyond mere understanding and mere tolerance, which Sabra (2009:91) understands as a condescending stance – a position where one who claims to have the truth look down upon those who deny or attack that truth. By arguing that the twofold theme of love of the one God and love for the neighbour is the most essential principle for both faiths, the document creates common ground on the basis of love – which, it argues, enables the goals of peace, harmony and mutual good.

▮ A couple of considerations regarding dialogue

Considering that the document is written by Muslims to a Christian audience and, importantly, presents Christian teaching by Muslims on the basis of Christian Scripture, rather than the Qur'an's understanding of Christianity, is truly unique and remarkable. But 'A Common Word' does raise some questions, especially as it claims that the dual command to love God and neighbour constitutes the essence of what it means to be Muslim. Do Muslims in general adhere to this interpretation of Islam, or is the 'Common Word' perhaps an attempt to restate Islam for Muslims in this way? If the document is to be a fruitful addition to interfaith dialogue, this question needs to be answered by Muslims.

Secondly, it is noteworthy to observe that when the documents states '[t]here is no God but God, He Alone, He hath no associate' and the call to love God alone, it is not interpreted as anti-Trinitarian, or anti-Christological in any manner. This is an exceptionally positive interpretation of the Qur'anic denial of God having an associate, and opens up promising doctrinal dialogue between Christians and Muslims, which will be focused on in the following section. However, it also raises a certain level of suspicion amongst Christians, since the document makes no reference to the Trinitarian theology of Christianity, seemingly in a subtle way serving to correct Christians. However, this remains ambiguous in the text.

Furthermore, the document itself in its treatment of 'love of the neighbour' falls short in comparison to the section on 'love of God'. Sabra (2009:96) maintains that this is very disappointing considering that the whole point of the document is to promote a peaceful and harmonious relationship between Muslims and Christians. What complicates the matter is that when 'love of God' is addressed, a clear identification is made as in a total devotion to the one God; whereas with the 'love of the neighbour' it is left open to interpretation. This becomes highly problematic in that how Christians and Muslims understand who their neighbour is differs greatly. Within Christianity your neighbour could be your enemy, and indeed that is implied. In Islam, however, your neighbour is someone who is worthy of love, and can be anyone except those who 'wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes' (Sabra 2009:97), which essentially boils down to the enemy. This could be viewed as being either positive or negative, but the document remains a fruitful consideration for dialogue.

This historic initiative holds within it the promise or potential to form a good basis for a dialogue of truth to continuously take place with the purpose and hope of peaceful coexistence between the adherents of Christianity and Islam. The document 'A Common Word' in its entirety rests upon a foundational assumption of whether it can be said that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God or not. Within Islam this is presumed,

and thus not addressed in the document. Indeed, Christians and Muslims would agree that they do not hold the same beliefs regarding the one God that they worship. This is, however, not the question being asked. Ironically we dispute these particular beliefs amongst those within our own respective faith traditions – how much more with the beliefs of a different faith? The question really centres on whether the object of our devotion, love and worship is the same or, in the words of Volf (2009:36), 'is the God whose final self-expression is found in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the same God as the God of the Qur'an?'

■ The cross, the crescent and the one true God

Having accordingly established the theological and specifically Christian motivation for dialogue to take place, an attempt will be made to illustrate the dominant theological concepts which form on the one hand the content of interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam, and on the other make that very conversation possible or even necessary. This is especially true if we focus on the very foundational claim found within both Christianity and Islam, the belief in one God. The real question for us in this section will therefore mainly centre on whether this one God that we adhere to is indeed the same God or not. Since both religions make the claim, it ought to have a profound impact on how we understand the other. If the 'one God' claim differs drastically, conflict is sure to follow – but what if they are similar? What possibilities would such a view open up, not only for the sake of dialogue, but for promoting justice and peace?

Having established that for Muslims the question of whether Christians worship the same God as they do has already been settled, we noted how in the Qur'an, in *Al 'Ankabut* 29:46, the very specific claim is made with reference to Christianity, '[o]ur God and your God is One: and to Him we bow.' So the development of our understanding of the unity of God, and whether Muslims and Christians are worshipping the same God, is primarily the responsibility of Christians – since the assertion that they do sits uneasily with most Christians. That would, however, be an oversimplification of the matter, as Volf (2011:79) correctly observes that Muslims make two distinct affirmations which intensify the need for dialogue. Firstly, as mentioned, they claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God; then secondly they maintain that the central beliefs in Christianity seriously compromise the most important characteristic of God, which is his oneness. The Qur'an suggests that in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity the Christians have added partners to God, or 'joined gods' (*Al Baqarah* 2:135) Towards the end of this chapter the issue of the Trinity will be specifically dealt with.

Perhaps an introductory reflection on the matter will be helpful and possibly defuse some of the early objections and hesitancies towards our current discussion. Phil Pharshall (2013:28), who has extensive experience in terms of ministry amongst Muslims, makes

the following observation: When Muslims convert to Christianity, he often poses the question of whether when they became Christian, they started worshipping a different God from what they used to worship as a Muslim. To this the response has been, without exception, a strong 'No'. He continues to state how these Muslim converts are in no way compromising their faith in the biblical God; from childhood they have been taught an ongoing continuity of God's being and acts as presented in the Torah (Law), *Zabur* (Psalms), *Injil* (Gospel) and the Qur'an.

Theological tension arises out of the distinction of Muslims who hold the view that Christians have perverted monotheism, and of Christians who in turn view Muslims as undercutting the central message of God's redemptive work by denying the saving work of Christ. Pharshall (2013:29) maintains that for him Islam presents an inadequate and incomplete, but not totally misguided, view of God. Accordingly, he deems it unfair to suggest that the God of Islam is absolutely distinct from the God of the Bible. Yet he maintains, in similar fashion to Piper, that the crucial point revolves around the person of Christ – and that Islam and Christianity are irreconcilable over this central issue.

Language and comparison

Before we attempt to grapple with the theological discussion which Pharshall alluded to, we need to make sense of the linguistic designation within each faith: Whether to refer to the Being we understand respectively as God or Allah. Volf (2011:80–81) observes that both Christians and Muslims have difficulty with the term 'Allah' as referring to the Christian God, citing various instances where this has led to conflict in communities, as was the case in Malaysia. At this point it is merely a linguistic hurdle that needs to be crossed, especially considering that it is quite common amongst Christian communities in the Arab-speaking world to refer to God as 'Allah'. However, the objection for Christians is the inherent implication of usage of the term 'Allah'. The argument often goes as follows: When Christians refer to God, by definition they imply Jesus as the begotten Son of the Father, but by referring to 'Allah' that designation is not possible, as 'Allah' by definition does not have a Son. Therefore these terms cannot be used to refer to the same Being.

Semantically speaking though, this argument does not make sense as it prescribes a specific definition which is not normatively maintained by either religion. 'Allah' is simply the Arabic word for 'God', in the same way that 'Theos' is Greek for 'God'. Perhaps to clarify we should observe that 'Allah' or 'God' is not a proper name, but a descriptive term which can be translated, unlike proper names. Christians have for millennia referred to God as 'Allah', long even before the emergence of Muhammad, for example the Copts in Egypt who have been around since the 1st century (Volf 2011:82).

Most of the people who object to the usage of 'Allah' as a designation to refer to God object based on the presumption that Christians and Muslims worship different gods. An acknowledgement of that distinction refutes the argument, as a different word does not imply a different God. Inversely, the opposite argument is also true and important to remember, that using the same word for God does not mean that our gods are the same. People can share the same name, for example 'Allen', which is my name, but also the name of my aunt who stays in The Netherlands. Now for argument's sake, suggest that we were visiting each other and another family member entered the room, and asked 'Allen, how is your son doing?' Everyone present would know that the family member was addressing my aunt, as I do not have any children yet. This is a crude example, but serves to illustrate how one can have the same name, yet remain distinguishable in terms of referent, that is, the object or person to which the name points.

This however raises some new questions as to how many attributes or properties have to be shared in order to be the same. When applying this logic to God though it becomes more complex since we believe that God is one, eternal and unchanging. Therefore we cannot rightly compare him with another, as there is no plausible other within our framework as Christians, and indeed for Muslims as well, thus making a comparison between the Christian God and the Muslim God redundant. Nonetheless, that is the essence of the question at hand: Whether the thoughts and utterances of Muslims that are expressed in terms of being about 'God' have the God that Christians worship as their object (Volf 2011:84).

In the following section such an analysis of the dominant thoughts in contemporary theology will be presented to illustrate that the descriptions of the object of Christian and Muslim affection are sufficiently similar so as to refer to the same object.

Before doing that, we should ponder the theological challenges if our conclusion points to the 'different' alternative. Volf (2011:84) points out that from a Christian perspective there are basically three options open to Muslims, if Christians claim that they worship a different God. These would be that the God Muslims refer to (1) is another God, (2) is no real object, or (3) is an idol. The latter two dissolve into one another. Remember how Paul claimed that no true idol god exists (1 Cor 8:4). Thus, from a Christian point of view Muslims are either worshipping a collective projection which does not exist, or the Christian God.

An initial approach to the question at hand would be to compare Islam to the likes of other religions as found in Scripture by way of analogy, for example to the Samaritans. Here the question never seems to be whether they worshipped the same God as Christians or even Jews for that matter, but that they merely did so without true knowledge of God. This sufficiently explains the distinction for a lot of Christians, but when taken to its full length of application, it would place idolaters and atheists all under the same description. For this reason many others find the argument unpersuasive, especially considering the well-established understanding of God that Islam holds.

Volf (2011:87) advocates for an actual comparison between what Christians and Muslims say about God, to see which elements within their respective descriptions they hold in common; that is, if the Christians are to come to an agreement of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God or not. In Romans 1:20 Paul wrote the following, '[e]ver since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.' This is generally understood to mean that all religions contain within themselves some knowledge of the one true God. This then serves as motivation for a comparative study between our religions to determine those elements which we indeed hold in common as descriptions about God.

Another common departure point relates to our shared history, or common Scripture. This follows a comparatively similar argument to how Christians relate to Jews. The question has not really ever arisen, or at least not from a Christian point of view, as to whether Jews worship the same God as Christians do, on the basis that Christians view the Scripture of the Jews as their own. The question then for us becomes whether the Qur'an and the Bible are similar enough in content so that we might assert that we share a common Scripture with Islam.

In terms of content we find numerous parallels and overlaps in sections of the Bible with the Qur'an. In terms of revelation the Qur'an states (*Al Baqara* 2:136, *Al Nisa'* 4:136):

> We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the descendants and that given to Moses and Jesus and that given to all Prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them. (v. 136)

It would appear that for Muslims we share a common revelation through our common ancestry, and therefore they would conclude that we worship the same God. Volf (2011:88) argues that this would settle the argument for Christians on one condition, and that is that Muslims need to agree that the Bible contains the authentic content of God's self-revelation to Abraham, Moses, the Prophets and Jesus. This would then indeed constitute being a sufficient indicator that Christians and Muslims have significant overlaps and therefore a common Scripture.

However, would Muslims agree to such an assertion? This seems to be the general consensus amongst Muslims, that indeed they do believe in the revelation to all of these prophets, just not as it is recorded in the Bible. This follows directly from the Qur'an, where it explicitly states that Christians have gone astray from the original revelation (*Al Ma'idah* 5:14, 66, 68). Thus Muslims would agree only with common Scripture and the revelation recorded in the Bible in as far as it is in agreement with the Qur'an. Therefore, for any sensible comparison, we will need to compare the content of what is said in the Bible and the Qur'an about God, to determine whether the God they worship has the same object in mind.

Volf (2011:89–91) argues that in a comparative study we seek to establish that which is 'sufficiently similar' – noting that our descriptions about God need not be identical, and at the same time they cannot be radically different in order to refer to the same object. The point is that our descriptions regarding God would be different to some extent, which is to be expected. This normally finds expression in our different understanding of God's goodness, or what it means to thank God, et cetera. These variations cannot be diametrically opposed to one another as this would clearly imply the worship of another God, or given the Christian paradigm to state that they worship no god (Volf 2011):

> Are they so radically different that they cannot be referring to the same object? And to what extent and in what regards must they be similar to be referring to the same object? (p. 91)

Therefore we need to concentrate on what is common within our respective faith traditions, whilst at the same time keeping an eye out for that which is decisively different.

Remember that the context here is interfaith dialogue, and for that reason we go about this discussion in a way which might or might not promote those ends. For that reason our approach takes any similarities or commonalities seriously. Volf (2011:92) observes that we could follow a 'differences' approach in a comparative study, but notes that this would, for obvious reasons, produce completely different results which only serve to alienate Christians and Muslims further from one another. Nonetheless, it is important to keep both together since differences will show any incompatibilities, although that should not be our departure point. These different approaches are often born out of a desire to express our unique Christian particularity, as what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. This is a valid point worth considering, but given our particular Christian perspective and reflecting on the words of Jesus to love your enemies (Mt 5:43–48), our Christian motivation as the 'will to embrace', a blended approach seems to be the most appropriate.

A common God

One of the most authoritative statements for Christians on the matter of whether Muslims worship the same God comes from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) called together by Pope John XXIII, where they published a short official document on non-Christian religions titled *Nostra aetate* (1965). In the first lines dedicated to Islam we read, '[t]hey adore the one God, living and subsisting in himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men.' It is important to note that the text does not explicitly state that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, but that it seems to imply such a deduction. Volf (2011:96) observes that the document appeals to a sufficiently similar description of the object of worship, which implies that the object of worship is the same.

Whether Christians and Muslims would completely agree with the assessment of sufficient similarities is not really of consequence, since both religions have strong disagreements amongst themselves regarding the descriptions of God. However, the appeal here is not to every discrepancy, rather it is addressed to what Volf (2011:97) calls normative Christians and Muslims who broadly embrace the traditions of their respective religions. Below a brief presentation is given of Volf's (2011:97–110) examination of the similarities of the descriptions of God and his discussion in terms of similarities in commands within the two faiths, to reinforce the claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Volf (2011:97–98) establishes three foundation beliefs which stand central to the Christian and Muslim understanding of who God is:

1. There is only one God, the one and only divine Being.
   B: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.' (Mk 12:29)
   Q: 'Know, therefore, that there is no god but God.' (*Muhammad* 47:19)
2. God created everything that is not God.
   B: 'In the beginning … God created the heavens and the earth.' (Gen 1:1)
   Q: 'He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth.' (*Al Shura* 42:11)
3. God is different from everything that is not God.
   B: God 'dwells in unapproachable light, which no one has ever seen or can see.' (1 Tim 6:16)
   Q: 'No vision can grasp Him. But His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet He is acquainted with all things.' (*Al An'am* 6:103)

Volf (2011:98) suggests that if these similarities could point to God, both would point to the same object. Especially considering the last point, it seems self-evident that everything else is not God, and thus the only thing remaining is God. The argument, although abrupt, serves to simply illustrate that from specific and overlapping convictions about God found in the Scriptures of both faith traditions, they point to or suggest a common subject when both religions speak of worshipping God.

This presentation is not thorough in terms of all that Christians or Muslims will want to bring to the table when engaging in interfaith dialogue. The importance of these three descriptions regarding God as one, the creator of all, and 'incomparable and incommensurably' different, serves to designate the object of the discussion or comparison and has been identified. Therefore a referent has been established with whom both religions can agree. However, other descriptions can be raised which might perhaps be radically different. In application though, other suggestions would challenge the foundation we have now established. These differences in description will only lead one religion to insist that the God of the other religion is not worthy of being called 'God' or, more specifically, being called the God of the other. These differences Volf (2011:100) maintains are still referring to the same object, but indicate a difference in how each religion assesses the character of that object.

Recognising these discrepancies we need to identify a 'sufficiently similar' characteristic within God whereby all other characteristics can be evaluated. For example, considering how in our first section, where a history of religious conflicts was sketched, we could easily lead a person to think that within either Christianity or Islam their vision of God is ultimately evil. Contrasting this to what Volf (2011:101) identifies as the fourth element of 'sufficient similarity', which is God's goodness (1 Jn 4:16; *Al Buruj* 85:14), the former vision of God as being evil – although in our human experience might be an expression of our view of a God, and thus accordingly has the same 'object' in mind – distorts the God beyond recognition since God cannot be both evil and good at the same time. It is interesting to observe how even within Christianity and Islam it is debated how each faith should correctly understand these four elements. Of some importance for us is that each faith, although agreeing on these four elements that they point to the same object, essentially maintains that the other holds some erroneous view on at least one of these elements. The biggest argument centres on God's oneness, which I aim to resolve below in a discussion regarding the Trinity.

Volf (2011:105–110) continues to illustrate by comparing the commandments found in the Qur'an and the Bible that there is sufficient overlap to emphasise that each religion points to the same object. He starts off with a discussion on the two greatest commands: To love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. These serve, as 'A Common Word' also observed, to indicate that similar commands suggest similarity in understandings of God. These commands are intricately related to one another as an expression of God's character. Consider 1 John 4:7–8, which calls us to love one another, because love is from God, and continues 'God is love'. As Christians we imitate God's command to love in order to align ourselves with God's character. Therefore we might conclude that God's commands are directly related to his character.

Volf continues to illustrate this by doing a command by command comparison of the Ten Commandments, which emphasises the point already made. He illustrates various other commonalities, but also touches on a unique Christian difference not found in the Islamic sacred texts – the command to love one's enemies (Mt 5:43–48). Although Christians struggle to live out this command, it is a central, particular concept of our faithful witness to the world as a message of God's unconditional grace, '[i]t is a clear consequence of the Christian conviction that God is love' (Volf 2011:110).

Another important distinction which he continues to highlight is that although the commands are the same, their corresponding punishments for breaking them are seemingly worlds apart. The Qur'an observes some extremely harsh temporal punishments on transgressors, whilst the God reflected in the New Testament does not impose any temporal punishment, but extends grace and mercy. This extension of grace and mercy is a very unique Christian expression of our faith. However, this distinction in temporal punishments does not suggest that Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God.

If we were to make such a suggestion we would need to wrestle with the Old Testament, which is filled with temporal punishments. If we go this route, we would end up annulling our presupposition that Jews and Christians worship the same God.

Muslims and Christians agree on the following six claims about God (Volf 2011):

1. There is only one God, the one and only divine Being.
2. God created everything that is not God.
3. God is radically different from anything that is not God.
4. God is good.
5. God commands that we love God with our whole being.
6. God commands that we love our neighbours as ourselves. (p. 111)

One God or three

Up until now a process has largely been followed to develop or promote the understanding that there is an exceeding amount of overlap in the religious traditions of both Christianity and Islam, in order to plausibly suggest that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Perhaps to state it differently for those who have not come to this conclusion, Christians and Muslims share fundamental parallels in their understanding of the objects they respectively worship, enough so that one can suggest that this object of worship ought to be one and the same. At the very least their theologies are surprisingly similar, enough so to validate further inquiry and dialogue for better understanding.

One of the biggest hurdles for Muslims to overcome to come to this point is a thorough understanding of the Christian theology of the Trinity. The oneness of God, *Tawhid*, is a principle which stands at the heart of Islam (Volf 2011:129). Christians are very aware of the problematic theology of the Trinity in terms of Muslim engagement. Since most Christians struggle to grapple with the concept themselves, they avoid engagement with Muslims simply on the basis of the fear that it might surface in a discussion, which indeed it will. According to Muslims the doctrine of the Trinity violates their greatest sin of *shirk*, which is unforgivable and blasphemous in that it implies adding a partner to God, or the association of other beings of equal status with God (Ipgrave 2008:21). Therefore in obedience to the Qur'an Muslims reject what Christians appear to affirm, that God had a son and that other gods should be joined to God and that God is but one of three beings. The objection is rather straightforward: Do Christians in any way divide the divine essence in the way they speak of God? A lot of ground has to be cleared to return to a place where Muslims could see that Christians in fact do not divide the divine essence.

McGrath (2007:247) explains how Mohammed most probably encountered unorthodox statements regarding the Trinity which led to Islam's strenuous objection.

He then continues to reaffirm that the doctrine of the Trinity has never been seen – at least within the Christian tradition – to be compromising or contradicting the unity of God. Recall the words of Nicholas of Cusa (Volf 2011:135), '[*i*]n the manner in which Muslims and Jews deny the Trinity, assuredly it ought to be denied by all.'

A helpful development within Christian theology is that of *perichoresis,* which explains how the three divine 'Persons' of the Trinity are tied together in a mutual indwelling. Volf (2011:137) explains how the understanding of God not ever being alone, or that the Persons are always 'in' each other, implies that the being of God remains one, in that one cannot say 'to be one is not to be the other', which results in a shared or undivided activity in the Being of God since the act of one Person is always done by all three Persons, as they are in each other and act through the activity of the one Person. This affirmation resolves problems relating to whether Christians divide the divine essence, since the Persons are always within him and act undividedly.

The first chapter of John affirms this way of thought, by stating that the 'Word became flesh', and the Word as such 'was God', and was 'within God' (Jn 1:1–2, 14). Similar expressions are found throughout the Bible; consider John 1:33–34, 10:38, et cetera. The centrality of the issue centres on the divinity of Christ as the incarnate One. Christians affirm that in Christ all three Persons are present and act in that one Person who became incarnate (Volf 2011:138). Volf continues to explain how all language is inadequate to describe God, such as the usage of 'Persons' which is commonly understood as separate entities in the Trinity, where Christians use the word simply because there is no better word to describe or express what they believe. They use the word knowing that we must mentally adjust its meaning when referring to the Trinity. Volf (2011:142) also grapples with the issue of numbers, arguing that God is unique and categorically different from the world. However numbers remain a bit of a conundrum for the mind to get around, as we exist within the world which can be numerated (Volf 2011):

> To say that there are three 'Persons' in God means only that there are three eternal, inseparable, and interpenetrating agencies; and in each, the other two are present, and in each, the single divine essence is present. (p. 142)

This section is not to persuade Muslims of the validity of the Trinity, to which many would still disagree after these arguments above. The purpose is to illustrate that the objections made by Muslims with regard to Christians dividing the essence of God are unfounded, and that the things to which Muslims object accordingly need to be objected to by Christians also. Furthermore, our shared affirmation of the unity of God should draw us closer to one another, rather than being a dividing rift. In the words of Jesus, 'the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Mk 12:29). It follows then, as Volf (2011:142) argues, that the denial of the Trinity on the part of Muslims is insufficient ground to deny that we worship the same God.

The Trinity cannot be removed from the Christian faith as it stands central to our religious self-understanding and becomes the frame through which we perceive and relate to the world. It is a foundational affirmation of how Christians believe God has made himself known to the world in that God had to become incarnate without dividing himself, and come to humanity as God. Furthermore, the Trinity is an expression of God's love within himself, which in turn explains his love towards us.

The purpose of this section was not to conclusively determine whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God, as Volf suggests. Personally I am not completely convinced, but choose to leave that open-ended. The purpose here was to illustrate the importance and value of the theology of the unity, or oneness of God, for interfaith dialogue with Muslims, as a foundational departure point which will determine much of the possible outcome of such a dialogue. Any plausible affirmation of whether one worships the same God serves as an uncomfortable obstacle to any who wish to engage in religious conflict.

▌Christian hospitality and interfaith dialogue

Earlier it was established that our Christian faith urges within us a will to embrace the other, the one who is wholly other and different from us, which then was applied to our relation with Muslims. In the opening section we established the underlying animosity which exists between Christians and Muslims. As Christians we have a very specific motive to love those whom we deem our enemies, and a call to move towards others to promote justice and peace. In this section it is argued that Christian hospitality is our foundational and creative biblical notion to invite the other into a space which we have created within ourselves. Hospitality is an expression of our willingness to embrace Muslims in a respectful way, and to promote dialogue with the hope of cultivating an alternative future compared to the history we have experienced together.

From the Scriptures we know that hospitality is no small matter for Christians. We continuously throughout the gospel find Jesus generously giving and receiving hospitality. It seems so foundational that it makes its way into the parables of Jesus with such weight that it would seem as if a failure in the practice of hospitality would lead to a fractured society, and if left unattended it would hinder kingdom exploits (Lk 14:15–24).

Within the ancient Mediterranean world view the art and practices of hospitality were considered a fundamental moral virtue. Hospitality as a basic practice often occurs on the borders of society's defined lines of 'us' versus 'them'. Hospitality, standing central to aspects of human activity, informs family and friends to engage with strangers and enemies. Hospitality facilitates the social process whereby someone who is an outsider can cross boundaries from being a stranger to being a guest, from a person we formerly deemed hostile to a friend.

Stages of hospitality

Barton (in Mittelstadt 2014:132) suggests that hospitality moves through three stages, which are used as a reflection on the process of interfaith dialogue. These stages are evaluation, incorporation and departure.

☐ Evaluation

A host evaluates a stranger to determine if incorporation of this guest is possible without undue threat to the security of the group for whom they are responsible. Most of my argument considers this topic of evaluation as discerning the position of Christians and how we view the 'other' (Muslims). In our evaluation thus far we have established both the motive for our engagement and willingness to invite the other to dialogue. We further developed some theological common ground, which indeed creates a neutral environment for dialogue to take place.

☐ Incorporation

Once the stranger has been evaluated, invitations are extended in order to incorporate the stranger as a guest. Here, in accordance with the culture-specific codes of hospitality, and in this case religious culture, the host will extend obligations understood by both parties. Most interfaith dialogue initiatives develop various values or principles which would govern the engagement of interfaith dialogue, for example, a common restriction imposed on interfaith dialogue is evangelism. These guidelines form the common ground, or as was noted earlier in other words, the first phases of the reciprocal embrace which we want to see taking place.

☐ Departure

The state in which the stranger (and I would include the host as well) leaves the engagement of hospitality is incredibly important, since the stranger has now become a guest and perhaps even more – a friend. A healthy parting of ways is when the guest is honoured and sufficiently refreshed, resulting in solidifying future relations between the people from their respective communities. In this sense dialogue as hospitality has open-ended potential to bridge the gaps of hostility and animosity towards the other. This then leaves both the host and the guest transformed.

Often in our reflections on Romans 12 we miss the refrain from Paul to 'extend hospitality to strangers' (v. 13). Exhortations like these are found throughout the Pauline literature, as he extends the obligation to practice hospitality to believers, but also because

he depended on their hospitality. During hardships and trials Paul also keenly observed the frequent absence of hospitality and severe experiences of hospitality from his enemies (1 Cor 4:11–13; 2 Cor 6:4–10, 11:21–33). Mittelstadt (2014:134) argues that Paul understood the church as a metaphor for the household of God. As overseers of God's household, Christians serve as stewards and are as such obligated to exhibit the best qualities of familial and institutional hospitality. However, developing an understanding of hospitality from Scripture is difficult since hospitality is an intricately interwoven value within the narratives of Scripture.

Luke observes this value more keenly than any other of the Gospel authors, for example, in Acts 2 one needs to be aware of the enlarging vision of God's kingdom which takes place as a result of hospitality during Pentecost. Acts 2 narrates the story of how the disciples waited in an upper room to receive the Comforter, or Spirit, which had the profound impact of allowing them to speak in tongues (Ac 2:1–12) recognisable to people from every nation. In this emphatic fashion the ministry of Jesus is extended by the working of the Holy Spirit. This event speaks of the hospitality of God, to call upon all peoples on earth to embrace an open-ended vision which purposefully acts as barrier-breaking inclusivity (Mittelstadt 2014:135).

Not all of the values and movements within hospitality will be expressed, as in many ways it overlaps with those discussed earlier within the 'will to embrace' as an expression of the radical inclusivity we see in Christ. Suffice to say then that the gospel urges us to practice hospitality and extend it radically towards the other, especially those whom we would consider not fit to receive our hospitality. Mittelstadt (2014) expresses that hospitality has the power to overturn marginalisation and combat separation with inclusivity. Hospitality further offers itself as a symbol which is similar to Holy Communion, in that it reflects the very heart of the gospel. In Luke 24:30–31 we encounter the beautiful narrative of how 'he [*Christ*] took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised Him.' Thus, hospitality is in itself a sacramental encounter.

In this way hospitality takes on a missional and eschatological character. Simply by inviting 'others' (Muslims) for a meal, we in a symbolic sense are inviting them to the Lord's table where their eyes might be 'opened'. Eschatologically speaking, hospitality inaugurates the partially realised kingdom and also stirs up imagery from the Gospels (Lk 14:22) of the future banquet, 'on the mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples' (Is 25:6–7).

Hospitality and interfaith dialogue

Fernandez (2013) develops various competencies or qualities of religious leaders who are capable of leading faith communities within a multireligious context. These have been

arrived at as a result of extensive interfaith programmes built on the basis of Christian hospitality. These competencies are as follows:

- Awareness and recognition of our religiously plural setting.
- Appreciative understanding of other religious traditions.
- The need to relate to other religious traditions on their own terms.
- Recognition of the religious stranger as a subject companion, both in terms of meaning-making, that is developing understanding, and world-making, working together towards the common good.
- Considering them as hermeneutic companions and engaging with them in interfaith reading of texts and contexts.
- Being at home in one's own house, that is, we need to develop a depth of understanding of our own religious tradition.
- Reaching out and being open to going deep – in the depth of our religious tradition lies the heart and openness to the other.
- Religious identity must be understood in right relationship to the whole, denouncing supremacy as far as possible.
- Practising the hospitality of receiving, whilst also offering hospitable space and hospitable presence.
- Hospitable relations demand that expressions of one's deep convictions be communicated with honesty, respect, and openness.
- Ability to make normative or ethical decisions in the midst of competing moral and religious claims.
- Developing the ability to integrate multifaith traditions and normative claims in relation to socio-political institutional dynamics.
- Importantly, knowing how to live with unanswered questions.

From the above list of competencies it should be self-evident that hospitality is not merely a simple meal we present, but a deep opening up of ourselves, inviting the other into sharing together out of the depths of our self-understanding. This occurs in order that we may learn and grow together within a non-threatening common ground, where we can respectfully consider the other and work together towards the common good. Just perhaps, within that space, something of the divine might take place, where the eyes of both Christians and Muslims might be 'opened', and where formerly unimaginable possibilities and realities might just start to emerge.

▌Particularity and faithful witness

In this final section the very specific fear and hesitancy amongst many Christians is briefly addressed: That dialogue threatens the place of evangelism. This is strongly disagreed with here, since it is within the context of interfaith dialogue that we get the opportunity

to give authentic expression to the particularities within our Christian faith, and as such bear faithful witness to the gospel.

One of the major concerns for many Christians relates to the fear or concern that dialogue with Islam hinders our call to evangelism. Patrick Sookhdeo (in Accad 2011:181) identifies the approach of dialogue as being birthed within liberal theology, describing it as little more than 'accommodationism', and stating that interfaith dialogue seriously threatens evangelism. Earlier we observed how accusations like these were levelled against Christians in support of the 'Common Word' initiative. However, these accusations find some legitimacy in that various policies of non-proselytism have been adopted by various Christian church entities as a prerequisite of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

It seems that our Christian history forces us to choose between dialogue in search of common ground and evangelism which emphasises a concern for distinctiveness. Unfortunately, the endorsement of one has sadly resulted in the violent rejection of the other. This violent dichotomy verges on a personality disorder, states Accad (2011:184), almost to the extent of a kind of spiritual psychosis. This presents a troubling dualism; on one side is the danger of dialogue without evangelism, which is not evangelical at all, and on the other, and in light of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, dialogue which does not promote peace would not be Christian at all. This dualism in mission is often misrepresented as a choice between kingdom ('dialogue') and church ('evangelism'). The following deconstruction by Caputo (2007) might be helpful:

> The idea behind the church is to give way to the Kingdom, to proclaim and enact and finally disappear into the kingdom that Jesus called for, all the while resisting the temptation of confusing itself with the kingdom. (p. 35)

Nowhere in Scripture are we called to establish a particular (most likely our own subjective) expression of church amongst the nations, the call has always been for the kingdom. The church in this sense is not the establishment or final goal of missions, it rather becomes but the question, an interim provisional plan B, continuously asking how in this specific moment in time to best reflect and proclaim the message of Christ presented to us within Scripture as the kingdom.

During dialogue there is often the request that all forms of missionary activity be stopped, since it often creates conflict between communities and does not reflect tolerance of other faiths, especially if we consider the possible result and implication of conversion (Accad 2011:183). During a panel discussion of the Middle East Consultation 2015, a leading cleric and one of the heads of the judicial system in Lebanon echoed a similar request for both Islamic *Da'awa* and Christian mission to stop. This was not with reference to dialogue specifically, but in general, relating to the lived experience of our faiths in a multipluralistic world. His major argument centred on the complexity, pain and challenges involved in the process of moving from one faith to another.

However, Accad (2011:183) argues that it would not be reasonable or fair towards Christians or Muslims that when presented with the beauty of the others' faith, to deny the possibility for an individual to convert and to become an adherent of another faith. The fears expressed about dialogue as an alternative to evangelism are unfounded, and perhaps motivate us towards a better understanding of evangelism. After surveying various Scriptures, he (Accad 2011:184) comes to the conclusion that there is no concept of interreligious conversion in the New Testament, when it comes to turning from any world view and embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is never suggested that a Jew should reject Judaism and adopt a new religious way in order to accept Jesus' claims about himself. Repentance within the New Testament is not the turning away from a former religious affiliation, but from certain attitudes, behaviours and ways of thinking. At the end of this section a story will be narrated which reflects this more clearly.

The post-Christiandom era forces us to abandon the dichotomy between evangelism and dialogue, and move towards a multipronged and holistic approach to mission. Accad (2011:185) states that the emerging generation of missionaries prefers to think of themselves as developmental workers and peacemakers. These are not seen as mere platforms of pretence with no substantial work to justify it, but rather as real and legitimate platforms, actual jobs, where they can live out the kingdom of God as global Christians. In this way, dialogue becomes by definition missional, where there is no standby of proclamation for the sake of dialogue. Dialogue should thus be seen as a complementary function of the proclamation of the gospel. With regard to the Middle East Consultation that was referenced earlier, Accad (2011:186) explains how Christians and Muslims are brought together during the Consultation to interact in a dialogue forum. He continues to state that the motivation and purpose of the Consultation is decidedly and unapologetically missional, passionately dialogical, and holistically transformational, both for us and for our Muslim partners in dialogue.

Accad (2011:186–189) references various values which they have learnt over the years of interreligious consultation, some of which we will briefly highlight here. Firstly, honesty and transparency through everything that we communicate in our lived lives within the Christian community, the media and within the world at large, are extremely important. He makes this observation especially with reference to living within a predominantly Muslim context in Lebanon, but more so given our interconnected world. Information on what we do elsewhere is easy to come by. Various missions' organisations similarly advise new missionaries to clean their online footprint before engaging with ministry in any context where the gospel is not freely accessible.

Accad (2011:186–189) continues to note how we should learn to speak fairly and avoid generalisations of Islam. Transparency goes further though, as it is not only about the integrity of discourse but also about being candid about the agenda and objectives.

He claims that Muslims appreciate clarity and honesty and would much rather engage in conversation with persons who are serious about their faith, which leads them to passionate evangelism, as opposed to those who are not (Accad 2011:187). Both Christians and Muslims should be excited about the opportunity through dialogue to present the other with a balanced and attractive discourse on central particularities of their respective faiths.

It is within this space of being transparent and honest about our faith convictions, where we open ourselves up through humility and a willingness to listen to the other, that new possibilities present themselves to us, and where personal and communal transformation can take place. Accad (2011:189) concludes that we should embrace a missionary task which is both supra-religious and thoroughly Christ-centred.

The WCC, in their official document on mission titled *Together Towards Life* (Oikoumene 2012:27–26), makes the following assertions with regard to evangelism in interfaith dialogue: Dialogue is a way of affirming our common life and goals which are the affirmation of life and the integrity of creation. Dialogue only becomes possible, according to the document, if our departure point is the expectation of meeting God who already has preceded us, and has been relating with people within their own contexts of culture and convictions. Dialogue accordingly creates room for an honest encounter wherein each member brings to the table all that they are in an open, patient and respectful manner. The document continues to explain how evangelism and dialogue are distinct, but interrelated. It observes that evangelism is not the prime focus of dialogue, but that the clear presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ has a legitimate place within it. Evangelism further involves listening to and being challenged and enriched by others (Ac 10:1–43).

We conclude this section with some practical but important suggestions. Firstly, dialogue is important both in contexts which are multireligious and, perhaps more importantly, where it is necessary to protect the rights of minority groups and religious freedom so that all can contribute to the common good of all the representatives within a community (Gn 1, cf. Oikoumene 2012:26):

> Religious freedom should be upheld, because it flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings, in the image and likeness of God. (v. 26)

The way we treat one another through love is a demonstration of the gospel we proclaim. The 'Common Word' initiative, which uses this very specific Christian language, gives us a clear opportunity to demonstrate the gospel through our lives within a framework established by Muslims. Lastly, we need to emphasise a theology of presence as a means of witness, especially in the way we engage with Muslims, to practice love and justice and accordingly, to represent Christ.

Missional theology of interfaith dialogue

In the following section the work of Terry Muck (2011) is briefly surveyed. He advocates for a missional theology of dialogue to be developed, and identifies four characteristics which are critical for this:

- It should be based on an orthodox recognition of God's revelation to all.
- It should fully embrace Christian humility.
- It must be grounded in a love of one's neighbours.
- Such a theology needs to make known to all involved, the commitment to Christian witness.

In the biblical text of Romans 1 Paul makes it clear that God has created, that God has not left anyone to themselves, and that God has given us all the capacity to know of God's existence. Throughout the history of the church almost every great theologian has built into their systematic representations references to God's ubiquitous presence. Justin Martyr spoke of the *logos spermatikos*, John Calvin of *sensus divinitatis* and Martin Luther of *Deus absconditus,* or in the words of John Wesley simply 'common grace' (Muck 2011:191). The general understanding with regard to these concepts is that God has somehow through various means made himself known to all people. Whether these people recognised it as such, however, is a different matter. These perceptions or experiences bring people to the knowledge that God indeed does exist. Importantly, though, the possible knowledge gained from such religious experiences is incomplete and incapable of leading to salvation. This then becomes the theological basis for us to be willing to listen to the religious narratives of other faiths, and encourages the exchange of interfaith dialogue. Muck (2011:191) argues that we miss the opportunities for mutual learning which take place when those whom God has created, whether Christian or not, share with each other the many evidences of God's glory and how they are affecting our lives. This theology is extremely important for understanding the place of interfaith dialogue, as it runs the risk of falling into one of two extremes: On the one hand of being minimised, so that the dialogue no longer functions as a space for mutual learning and essentially then becomes reduced to a monologue, and on the other hand exaggeration of mutual learning within dialogue, which can lead to pluralism where all voices in dialogue become truth and thus can lead to salvific efficacy.

Dialogue is based on the recognition that we do not know everything and have much to learn, 'for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1 Cor 13:12). Many Christians are hesitant of this way of thinking – that we can actually learn something from other faith traditions – since it seemingly might imply that we are admitting to a weakness within the Christian faith, thus something which can be exploited by other religious traditions. However, the inverse is reflected within Scripture, that true weakness would not be willing to make such an acknowledgement. Hiebert (1999)

advocates for a type of critical realism as an epistemological stance for missionaries, which would help us to avoid the twin dangers of extreme foundationalism, which leads to intellectual arrogance, and postmodern idealism, which in turn leads to relativism. Critical realism is built on two principles, firstly that absolute truth exists, and secondly that humans can only know truth imperfectly, or as the postmodernist would put it, 'all truth is subjective'. For Christians truth is presented through the mechanism of faith, which is a subjective exercise informed by Scripture, and it is by this truth that we measure all truth.

Missional theology for dialogue must be grounded in a love of neighbour (Muck 2011:192). Hostility is not conducive to dialogue. Participants who want to partake in interfaith dialogue have various reasons and motives for engaging with people of different religions, but those motivations need to be saturated in love. Paul noted that any interaction without love is meaningless (1 Cor 13:1). This notion of love also marks the will to pursue the common good of the other. Our desire is always to seek the common good of all people, especially in promoting harmonious coexistence with those of other faiths, and in contending for justice.

Muck's (2011:192) last theological departure point relates to the earlier discussion on transparency, where he states that a missional theology of dialogue makes known to all involved our commitment to Christian witness. It is on this point of witness where we expressly recognise the Christian faith to be universal and exclusive. Indeed dialogue only becomes truly meaningful if people are clear about their strongly held convictions. Muck (2011:192) argues that this should be done amongst people of good will, where an honest atmosphere has been created. The participants in such a dialogue will be free to be who they really are, with confidence that others, to the best of their abilities, are doing the same.

In the engagement of interfaith dialogue one enters the space liminally. In other words, one is treading on ground that is not yet defined, an open conversation that is moving somewhere – we hope towards peaceful coexistence, or perhaps even another, where the other recognises the beauty of the gospel and responds to it. The truth is we just do not know what might possibly occur as a result of dialogue. Interfaith dialogue often opens up formerly unseen possibilities, such as the creation of alternative faith communities, communities which we formerly could not have perceived as being possible. These communities, although existing within either the Christian or Islamic tradition, do not conform to any existing explicit understanding or definition of the respective faith community in which they exist. This often results in them being persecuted by people of their own faith tradition. The following narrative came to light during the Middle East Consultation of 2015 in Lebanon: A woman who became a follower of Christ as a result of interfaith dialogue deeply challenged our preconceived ideas of what should happen as a result of conversion from Islam to Christianity.

The woman will be referred to as Sara, a pseudonym to protect her identity. She comes from a country with a relatively large Christian population, although predominantly Muslim. She grew up as a Muslim, only to 'convert' to Christianity in her early 40s. The word 'convert' here is not defined as becoming a Christian, as she rejects the term completely, but converted in the sense of professing to be a follower of Jesus. It was a struggle to place or understand her faith convictions initially, especially considering how she continuously, throughout our discussions, would say that she is Muslim. However, for Sara to be Muslim was not a profession of her faith, but a profession of her social or cultural identity. We need to remember that Islam is a complete way of life and not everything is necessarily religious in content.

Perhaps the work of Tim Green (2015) would be helpful in order to understand these seemingly irreconcilable identities. Tim would argue that at a core identity level Sara is a follower of Jesus, but this core identity does not necessarily need to define her social or even collective identity. Why this is important though, relates to the perceived threat that might follow a person that turns to Christ out of Islam. Persecution and death threats are well reported to follow a proselyte. Interestingly enough, as was discussed at length at the Middle East Consultation 2015, persecution is not necessarily a result of turning away from or rejecting your faith, more often persecution has to do with the betrayal of rejecting the social or collective identity which the person belongs to.

Thus, in the case of Sara the perceived persecution from her Muslim friends and family is very limited, despite the fact that they know she is a follower of Christ. This has allowed her to remain embedded to some extent within her Islamic community, where she has established an alternative faith community. This community looks and feels very Muslim in terms of its practices and liturgical rhythms, yet it is within this very alternative expression of faith that she gets to share the gospel of Jesus. Sara often expressed that she cannot relate to the Christian communities socially and culturally, as they are so different from her that she does not feel welcome. It is out of those experiences that the need for her to establish her own unique faith community grew, one in between the borders and not strictly defined as being Muslim nor Christian, at least not in the traditional sense of those words. In the words of Volf (2011:198), the name and religious identity is unimportant, the reality of following Christ as Lord is.

Results like these raise questions on the notion of blending religions, which is something not advocated here. Yet, as I argued earlier, the results of interfaith dialogue are varied and unpredictable as they are determined by those involved and the way the dialogue is structured to take place. However, these considerations go beyond the scope of this study, and are occurrences in any religious tradition. Rather, our question relates to our response to these communities, should they occur.

In conclusion, we need to acknowledge our unique differences and how interfaith dialogue creates various opportunities for us to communicate faithfully that which we

believe. Faithful witness within dialogue should not take place in a way that compels someone into a response, but with love we faithfully proclaim with open arms. The missional aspect within interfaith dialogue beckons us to truthfully know ourselves and the unique particularities of our own faith as well as that of Islam, and accordingly to spread our faith respectfully.

■ Conclusion

We live in an ever-growing complex, pluralistic society where tensions between social, cultural, ethnic and religious lines are being pushed to the forefront of our lived lives. Relations between Christians and Muslims are extremely tense and have gained increased momentum and publicity in recent years. We observed early on in this research that there is an amplified sense of animosity, suspicion and even enmity between these two global religions. History has shown that religious conflict in particular is greatly intensified, and these two religions have a brutal history. If something does not change in terms of how we view one another, the future itself seems a frightening place.

Throughout this chapter significant changes in recent history have been pointed out, with growing support amongst religious leaders to promote interfaith dialogue. In as far as possible, we have respectfully looked at some of the Islamic initiatives as a major step in the right direction if we are to promote peace and justice as people living under the same roof. 'A Common Word' has opened up a whole new world of possibilities and willingness from Muslims to learn from and engage with the Christian community.

Before the 'Common Word' initiative most attempts at interfaith dialogue were driven from a Christian point of view, and often bore little fruit. 'A Common Word' has spurred a whole new motivation and energy. From here we developed, almost as a response, the uniquely Christian motivation of why Christians are compelled to engage in dialogue. Here the will to embrace was expounded as a theological metaphor for inclusivity and dialogue. The will to embrace urges us to accept the other unconditionally, as Christ accepted the animosity within us.

The will to embrace is a call to create room within ourselves for the other, to sacrifice our particularities but for a brief moment, so that reciprocal embrace can take place. Only once this reciprocal openness presents itself, can we safely start learning and engaging with the other, perhaps then, as part of the actual embrace, our particularities might also receive room to be presented as faithful witness. This theme was further expanded upon where we related the will to embrace to the theology of hospitality as a uniquely Christian way of creating room for the 'stranger' to be welcomed and relationships to be built, whilst maintaining at the very core a missional and eschatological witness.

'Together towards life' by Oikoumene (2012:25–26) summates our concluding position by bringing these various aspects of interfaith dialogue together in the following way: Interfaith dialogue functions as hospitality and as a theology of presence which authentically communicates something of the gospel by wholeheartedly accepting the other. This leads to the creation of liminal spaces where we can listen and learn from the other, whilst offering an honest encounter where we can proclaim our deepest convictions in a patient and respectful manner.

■ Summary: Chapter 4

The relationship between Christianity and Islam from the perspective of a willingness to embrace them is described in this chapter. Over the last decade, there has been an intensified interest in developing a thorough theological framework for how Christians and Muslims can relate to one another. This interest has grown in part as a result of an upsurge of militant extremism in recent years which has resulted in reactionary responses on a global scale. This has spiked fears, suspicions and uncertainties, leading to violent actions and retaliations. Furthermore, it has led some to claim that the future of the world depends on whether we will be able to develop a framework on how the two largest religions in the world can coexist. This research presents an analysis of the history of Christian-Muslim relations to understand the nature of the conflict. A theological motivation is developed for why Christians need to become involved with Muslim interfaith dialogue to promote peace and justice, whilst respectfully creating room for one another to coexist. Churches and missions have a duty to remember their calling to service, reconciliation, peacemaking, evangelism and dialogue. Christians worldwide have a task to educate people on relations with Islam, to teach the forgiveness of sins and to reach out in love to Muslims in word and deed as the bearers of the gospel. This attitude of reaching out is encapsulated in the expression 'a willingness to embrace'.

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