

The current situation of Christian-Muslim relations: emerging challenges, signs of hope¹

Jørgen S. Nielsen



International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, Foto: Österreichisches Bundesheer

There was a time during the 1970s and 80s that it was possible to have peaceful, relaxed and mutually confirming and generally optimistic meetings of Christians and Muslims in various parts of Europe and even across the Mediterranean. The events of 11 September 2001 tend to be cited as the moment when reality caught up with us. The scenario quickly both absorbed existing political processes, such as the Palestine question and tensions in the Caucasus, and fed into the by now well-known new ones: the so-called 'war on terror' and the US-led actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. But if our view is restricted to perspectives imposed by crisis management in the context of such events, I would argue that the long-term possibilities of creating constructive relations internationally risk being held hostage for short-term gain, gain which may not even be realized.

Economics and politics usually function with short-term goals: a profitable contract, an improvement in GDP, a favourable treaty with a friendly government. Politicians often find themselves forced to react to events and

¹ This is based on a lecture given in December 2008 at the University of Utrecht, Netherlands, on the award of the Belle van Zuylen Visiting Chair.

public pressures; they have to keep an eye on how the media will report and interpret their actions. But if we want to create some space for longer-term views, the horizon must be expanded. This is where a cultural, and with it the religious, dimension comes in. It helps to provide depth: there is a long heritage which colours present perspectives. It helps to provide breadth: there is life beyond economics and politics.

In this short discussion I want to look especially at the depth, at the cultural relationship between Europe and the Muslim, and in particular the Arab Muslim world over time, and how this has interacted with political relationships. I then want to try and break through the sense of crisis and point to more promising and constructive dimensions, especially of the religious relationships.

Very immediately, any discussion of relations between Christians and Muslims is caught up in what one might call the 'Crusades syndrome'. Historically, that series of conflicts across the Mediterranean was a multi-faceted affair – and they were not called Crusades until some time after the events. In western Europe it was an integral part of the process of establishing Catholic Christendom, and crusading, although primarily targeted at Islam, struck out at anything non-Catholic. Constantinople, the centre and symbol of Orthodox Christian faith and power, was sacked in 1204; Scandinavians ravished the heathen regions of the eastern Baltic and retain their Crusader banners till today as national flags; the Jews of the Rhineland and elsewhere were made to suffer as were various heterodox Christian sects in parts of France and Spain.²

But my use of the term is not restricted to these historical events of the 12th-14th centuries. Rather, I am using it to cover the whole range of conscious memory of a history of conflict on both sides of the Mediterranean, a memory which to a great extent is mythology. This starts with the earliest capture of the Byzantine provinces of the Middle East and North Africa by Arab Muslim expansion, the Muslim conquest and the Christian re-conquest of Spain and southern Italy, the Crusades themselves, and the growth of the Ottoman empire in the ruins of Byzantium. The Crusades were revived as part of the imperial discourse of the European powers in the 19th century, and both French and British generals referred to their victories over the Ottoman armies towards the end of the First World War in Palestine and Syria in crusading terms. Modern parallels grew with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and comparisons between Israel and the Frankish states of the Levant

² See particularly Christopher Tyerman, *The invention of the Crusades*, London: Routledge, 1998.

in the 12th-13th centuries became popular in the history departments of Arab universities as well as in public debate. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and statements of Al-Qa'ida continue to keep the image alive.

The syndrome has lodged itself in our collective subconscious in such a way that it is easily brought to the surface when circumstances are right. Examples are easy to find. In the media and daily conversation in many parts of the Muslims world it finds expression in a lively trade in conspiracy theories. Any prominent media personality or politician who is perceived consistently to be against Arabs or Muslims is often assumed to be a Jew and definitely islamophobic, regardless of facts. Any move by a western government or institution or statement by a significant personality which is explicitly favourable to an Arab perspective is, in some quarters, dismissed as yet another cynical move to retain control.

In Europe, in a similar fashion, the 'Turks at the gates of Vienna' clearly coloured Luther's attitude and thus added to an older medieval Christian fear of Islam. In Germany the novels of Karl May have consolidated a fear of things 'oriental' which makes the racist tones of the novels of Sir Walter Scott seem positively gentle. The heroics of imperial adventure became part of everyday reading in France and Britain, with the savage and primitive character of the opponent being exposed to the civilizing mission of the enlightened, usually Christian, European. And we are seeing these images being revived and exploited in the present by extremist groups in both regions.

Most remarkable has been the way in which this historical mythology of a Mediterranean 'frontier' has been adopted in other regions of the world. In parts of South and South-East Asia, and especially in areas of sub-Saharan West Africa, there are regions where Muslims and Christians have lived together peacefully for centuries. Villages have inhabitants of both communities, and extended families have Christian and Muslim members. In some cases, the same family will include both a Muslim imam and a Christian priest. In such areas, the collective memory was often one of a common history and shared collective identity and interests. Over the last half century or so, that memory has gradually been replaced by that of the frontier.

The mechanisms are varied but are in one way or another part of the general process of globalization. Christian mission and Muslim da'wa have been driven by particular trends within the respective religions, primarily those characterized by aggressive and impatient attitudes to those who are different, be they of their own religious family or of another. So resource-rich

North American conservative evangelical Christianity meets oil-funded forms of Arab Islam and set the tone and the agendas. Both the alien parties bring with them perceptions of relations between Islam and Christianity at the core of which are an innate enmity and distrust symbolized by the Crusades and the myths of the Mediterranean frontier. Gradually these perspectives have been infiltrating the 'client' communities. Someone else's history has taken the place of their own.

The trouble with these perceptions and attitudes is that they are based at best on a one-sided view of our history. The relationships across the Mediterranean were never only those of conflict and confrontation. During the Crusades themselves trade between Egypt, North Africa and the Italian city states continued unabated; commercial treaties were regularly signed and renewed. The long periods of flourishing cultural and intellectual progress in Islamic Spain and Sicily have fortunately not been forgotten. Less attention has been given to periods of lively Ottoman cultural interaction with its neighbours, not to mention the tolerance of internal pluralism which for long periods characterized that empire. Neither can one ignore the significance of the much earlier absorption of elements of Hellenistic culture into the high Arabic-Islamic culture of the 'Abbasid period, nor the much later and reverse fascination of 18th and 19th century European writers and artists with Ottoman and Arab motifs.

So why is it that the conflict is remembered and restated, while the positive interaction and interdependence is so easily forgotten? Apart from the obvious response that the former is more exciting, I suggest that there is a much deeper reason. This has to do with religion, but not primarily in the sense of religion as differences of belief, dogma and ritual, rather in the sense of religion as a marker of communal identity.

At a key phase in the early development of medieval Europe, Christianity became one of the most significant factors in establishing a new polity, with all the social, cultural, institutional and political elements which that implies. The term 'European' first appears to have been applied to the region as a political-geographical entity in a contemporary account, written by a Cordoban Christian, to describe the army of Charles Martel at the battle of Poitiers in 732. By the end of the century Martel's Kingdom of the Franks (*Regnum Francorum*) had become Charlemagne's Christian Empire (*Imperium Christianum*). Christianity was the glue which was to hold together the nascent state structures of European Catholic Christendom. The Crusades were an essential dimension in this project. They were the means by which the Christianization of Europe itself was confirmed as well as providing the ideology

which moved the crusading armies against Baltic paganism, central European Jewry, eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the Muslim Arab world.

However, this process was taking place at the same time as Europe was emerging from a period of deep intellectual introversion. This was the era when the foundations were laid for medieval humanism and Catholic scholasticism, ultimately leading to the Renaissance and the turmoil of the Reformation. As is increasingly well-known, many of the intellectual resources for this process came from across the Mediterranean, through Spain and Sicily. Prof. George Makdisi has convincingly shown that the scholastic traditions of universities established in places like Bologna, Paris and Oxford can be traced directly back to Arabic-Islamic models.³ But precisely because these resources were Islamic their origins had to be subjected to collective amnesia: the building of high medieval Christendom could not be admitted to rest in part on Islamic foundations, and Arabic could not be admitted to its rightful place as a European classical language next to Greek and Latin.

Let me at once suggest, on the other side of the equation, that something similar is going on around us today, but in reverse. The developments of the Arab world over the last century or two have undeniably been profoundly influenced by Europe, and not only in the sense of political and economic power or technology. It extends to key conceptual components of educational, political, cultural and social discourse. Much of European thought has been indigenized in the Arab and Muslim worlds. French and German political philosophy became an integral part of the concepts of Arab nationalism as it rooted itself through the Hashemite Arab revolt, Kemalism, the Arab National Movement, the movement for a Pakistan separate from India, the Baath party, the Algerian FLN, and Nasserism. Indeed, Islamic thinkers have also adapted and absorbed European ideas over this period.

Again, it is characteristic that those who most strongly deny such a relationship of intellectual interdependence are those who insist on the complete and absolute otherness of the opponent against which they are trying to define themselves. It used to be true of some extreme Arab nationalists; it is now true of some extreme Islamists. The 'otherness' of the origin of the adopted ideas, be it western or Christian, has to be suppressed, just as Christendom did it to Islam those centuries ago.

³ George Makdisi, *The rise of humanism in classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990.

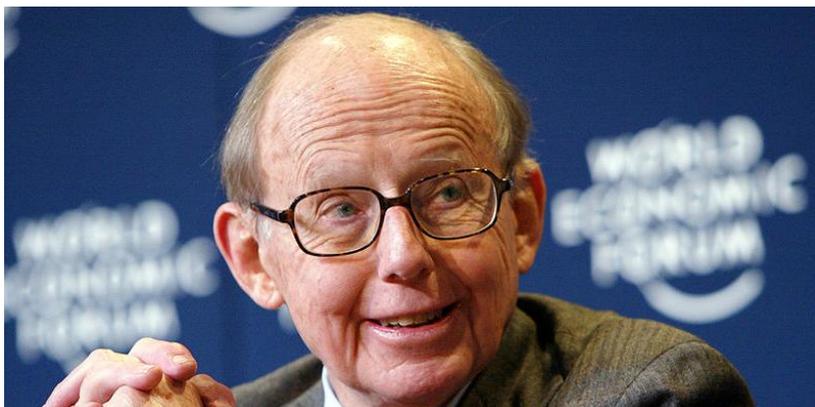
It has become common to see the events of 11 September 2001 as marking some form of turning point in Christian-Muslim relations. They had their obvious political and military consequences, most immediately in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the increase in spectacular terrorist operations. In many western countries, discussions about Islam and policies towards Muslims became much more security-driven. The western responses to 9/11 led also to a growing mistrust towards Christians in Muslim majority regions of the world. Networks of promising Muslim-Christian cooperation came under external pressures which some were unable to survive, while in other places new networks were created to resist the pressures towards conflict. I would, however, argue that in this field the major turning point within the last decades has actually been the end of the cold war two decades ago. It had a number of consequences, not least of which was the end of the bi-polar world which had kept regional and other rivalries subdued on a secondary level of priority compared to the pressures imposed by the global contest between the Soviet bloc and the West.

While some analysts found optimism in the new situation, most triumphantly expressed in Fukayama's *The end of history*, others were apprehensive at the complications which could rise to the surface now that the disciplines imposed by the cold war had disappeared. More directly, the talk of a 'peace dividend' to come from the opportunity to cut defence budgets was a threat to certain economic interests, including those of the 'military-industrial complex' which President Eisenhower had warned against. The new environment was probably also one which so challenged set and institutionalized ways of thinking that inertia was easier and more comfortable than exploring new visions.

Within less than two years after the collapse of the Soviet system, a new range of issues, encouraged by political and commercial interests, began to surface coalescing around the idea of 'Islam, the new enemy'. By this time the public debate had become heated. Although the phrase 'clash of civilizations' can be traced some years further back, it became common currency in the wake of the publication of Samuel Huntington's article of that title in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1993. The then secretary-general of NATO, Willi Claes, inadvertently revealed how far this perspective had penetrated into the corridors of power when he in 1995 publicly warned against the threats from Islam.

The consequent debates and the attention devoted to the 'clash' in the media and by politicians contributed to strengthening an already existing tendency to interpret certain political crises in religious terms. This first became common as a way of simplifying the complexities of the Lebanese civil war

which had started in 1975. It appeared in the frequent explanation of the war between Iraq and Iran during the 1980s as in essence a conflict between Sunni and Shi'i, where previously a favoured explanation had tended to found in a more secular reference to primordial tensions between Semitic and Indo-European, or even Aryan, races and cultures. The civil war in Sudan was often similarly portrayed. But such an analysis, simplistic and lazy, was particularly dangerous when the conflicts sparked by the collapse of the Soviet bloc especially lent themselves to be located on this matrix – I refer to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in particular, but also to tensions in Central Asia, especially for a time in Tajikistan, violence in the Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya and the neighbouring regions.



Samuel P. Huntington 2004; Foto: World Economic Forum/ Peter Lauth

The result was that assumptions arising from ways of thinking focused on a clash of civilizations defined by religion, above all by Islam and Christianity, became so deeply embedded in the frameworks of analysis in political and media networks that the events of 9/11 could easily and immediately be assimilated. The opportunities of starting on a radically constructive reorientation offered to the United States by the global outbreak of sympathy, best expressed in the French newspaper headline 'Nous sommes tous américains',⁴ were squandered.

Through these marked changes in the context and the content of the public debate, the character of Christian-Muslim dialogue has also radically changed. It was in the 1950s that the earliest international dialogue meetings took place, in Bhamdoun, Lebanon in 1954 and 1956 and in Alexandria, Egypt in

⁴ Editorial by Jean-Marie Colombani, *Le Monde*, 13 September 2001.

1955,⁵ although some of its Christian theological foundations can be traced a good deal further back. Such meetings and the work of individual theologians led to new openings towards Islam in the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and in the establishment of a sub-unit on interfaith dialogue by the World Council of Churches in 1971. In this early phase the dialogue was usually “asymmetrical”. It was a question of Christian initiatives, to which friendly individual Muslims were invited. The participants were specialists and enthusiasts and, it is clear, were dealing with issues which were only marginal to the priorities of the various churches. When such dialogues were initiated by an official church body, the common complaint was that while the Christian partners could in some way be seen as ‘representative’, the Muslims were not and could not be. This was theoretically because there was no Muslim ‘church’ which they could represent, although a frequent suspicion was that the complaint really was about the churches’ unwillingness to talk to less amenable ‘representative’ Muslim organizations. It seems that a meeting in 1973 between the Vatican and a Libyan Muslim institution was an attempt to move beyond this weakness, but it was trapped by the political interests of the Libyan government. Also during the 1970s the World Council of Churches sought more official Muslim participation by cooperating with the Pakistan-based World Muslim Congress. The problem here was that the Congress was in practice an arm of the Saudi-dominated Muslim World League.

These developments in Muslim-Christian relations were matched in western Europe, here especially driven by the realization that Muslim communities had settled in our industrial cities through major immigration during the period since 1945. Local and national initiatives were taken with varying degrees of enthusiasm and institutional support. On both the Protestant and the Catholic sides Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands were pioneers, although in Britain the character of the process was multi-faith oriented rather than specifically Christian-Muslim, simply due to the more varied character of the immigration. At the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s these various national activities began to network across the European borders and to reach out to eastern Europe. It was informal at first in the network around the so-called Journées d’Arras, which continues to meet till today, but it was soon formalized into a committee on Islam in Europe run by the Conference of European Churches and shortly after as a joint programme with the Council of European (Catholic) Bishops’ Conferences.

⁵ Juliette N. Haddad (ed.), *Déclarations communes islamo-chrétiennes*, Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1997; and Jutta Sperber, *Christians and Muslims: the dialogue activities of the World Council of Churches and their theological foundation*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000.

Within a few months of the publication of Samuel Huntington's article on 'The clash of civilizations' there was a global explosion of dialogue meetings and conferences. Many of them, if not a majority, were Muslim initiatives, many by government-sponsored Islamic agencies or Islamic studies department at government universities and sometimes directly by government ministries. Occasionally the official theme was relations between Islam and Christianity, but much the most common title in one way or another involved relations between Islam and the West. Of course, this reflects the agenda set by Huntington but it also reflects the general broadening of the dialogue agenda, from working within the confines of a narrow concept of religion to one which paid much more attention to the political, social and economic dimensions. Ironically, while these meetings and conferences were organized to combat Huntington's vision of a clash, they unquestioningly accepted his rather simplistic concept of distinct, clearly identifiable civilizations!

It is apparent that the comfortable little niche of Christian-Muslim dialogue, which had been carefully nurtured in the decades after 1945, was being forced to face new realities. The asymmetry, of which participants and observers had complained, had ceased, but its cessation had been accompanied by a sharp expansion of the field being covered and of the identities of the participants. The issues have become too urgent to be left to theologians and too large to be left in the hands of local and national community projects. In becoming politicized at an intercontinental level, relations between Muslims and Christians drew in politicians across the board. In the Barcelona agreement of November 1995, the European Union and the Mediterranean coastal states explicitly included dialogue between the religions as part of the third, cultural 'basket' to provide some depth to the baskets of political and economic cooperation. Under the heading 'Partnership in social, cultural and human affairs' the signatories started by stating 'that dialogue and respect between cultures and religions are a necessary precondition for bringing the peoples closer.'

Governments and politicians began to develop an interest in Muslim-Christian relations, usually under the guise of relations between the West and the Arab and/or the Muslim world:

- The Swedish foreign ministry in 1994 opened a section entitled Euro-Islam led by an official of ambassador status. In the summer of 1995 it staged an international conference on this theme in Stockholm to be followed a year later by one in Amman and two years after that in Cairo, all leading to the establishment of a Swedish institute in Alexandria in 1998.

- In March 1996, the annual cultural festival of the Saudi National Guard for the first time included a conference on 'Islam and the West' at which Samuel Huntington was among the invited speakers.
- the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office's conference centre at Wilton Park has held several conferences in this field through the 1990s and into the new century.
- The foreign ministries of countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom appointed officials or even established departments with a focus on relations with Islam.

These are just a few examples, and the events of 9/11 very quickly led governments in Europe and elsewhere to involve themselves ever more deeply in what they saw as interreligious dialogue:

- Already in January 2002, an international Muslim-Christian conference took place at Lambeth Palace at the joint initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the British Prime Minister's office.. This has since led to a regular series of meetings of Christian and Muslim theologians organized jointly by Lambeth Palace and Qatar.
- The political perspectives were a core dimension at the Muslim-Christian consultation called by the World Council of Churches in October 2002.
- During 2003 the religious affairs ministries of Algeria and Tunisia and the Libyan Islamic Call Society all held large international conferences on relations between Islam, Christianity and the West.
- In Germany the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, associated with the Social Democratic Party, built on previous activities to take part in organizing a conference in early 2004 on Islam and the West in Beirut together with a local organization close to Hizbullah and subsequently started an annual series of seminars in Berlin intended to support the development of what it called 'progressive' Islam.
- Part of the Saudi response to external pressures after 9/11 was the invitation to a number of western academics to take part in a conference on Islam and terrorism at the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, in April 2004.

And so I could go. It is clear that there has been a major infiltration, if not actually an attempt at a take-over of Christian-Muslim dialogue by political interests. This brings with it its own dangers particularly that short-term considerations of strategic and material interests will manipulate and corrupt the religious dimensions. From being restricted to religious circles, where it was marginal and comparatively simple, Christian-Muslim dialogue has become central and complicated, explicitly involving social and political dimensions.

But we have also seen more recently that political and social considerations can drive forward the religious dialogue. The last fifteen months have seen two major initiatives from significant Muslim sources, initiatives which have put Christians under pressure to respond positively and substantially in a field which they had hitherto played the major role in defining and motivating. I am referring to the open letter initially signed by 138 Muslim scholars and published on 13 October 2007 and the initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia the following spring which led to international conferences first in Mecca and then in Madrid.

The first of these two initiatives arose directly out of the angry Muslim reaction to the speech by Pope Benedict a year previously at Regensburg in which he had quoted a Byzantine emperor for some critical views of Islam. A group of Muslim scholars had at that time addressed a letter to the pope pointing out where they thought he had gone wrong. The longer letter a year later was headed 'A common word between us and you', a quotation from the Qur'an 3:64. A website includes the text of the letter, signatories, and the texts of, by end October 2008, sixty responses from Christian theologians and churches.⁶ The gist of the letter was a call to join together in common action based on a shared belief in the one God and the commandment to love God and the neighbour. It is probably the first time in history that a letter of this nature, showing such repeated evidence of careful thought, organization and formulation and signed by such a wide range of Muslim scholars has ever been sent to Christian leaders. It is one of those rare cases where the attribute 'historical' is truly justified. The authors have been assiduous in their research, making sure that their presentation of Christian teachings is one which Christians can assent to. They have carefully identified their addressees and recognized the five church families into which the Middle East Council of Churches places its members. The signatories represent the full range of Islamic tendencies and schools: Sunni and Shi'i; Sufis; Salafis and reformists; government and private. There are people together in the list of signatories who would not normally want to be seen on the same platform. By the end of April 2009, the number of signatories had reached 300 from all over the world. This is a truly ecumenical letter: an Islamic *oikumene* addressing a Christian *oikumene*.

The significance of the letter has been reinforced by the nature of the response. During the first few weeks after publication a number of individual and groups of Christian theologians sent welcoming letters. Some church

⁶ www.acommonword.org.

leaders responded by way of a positive acknowledgement. Then gradually over the spring and summer of 2008 more considered responses started coming in, some quite lengthy such as the seventeen pages from the Archbishop of Canterbury dated 14 July 2008. The open letter has clearly challenged the main churches nationally and internationally to strengthen their focus on the dialogue with Islam. It has provoked a sharpening of internal debates in some countries, where tendencies which have built up their profiles as critically against Islam have been active in opposing the more constructive responses of the mainstream church bodies. At the same time, the letter has challenged the churches also to think internally about their attitudes to other religions in a world which has become radically more integrated over the last couple of decades. Although some political dimensions in the open letter initiative can be discerned, the later Saudi initiative seems to have been much more overtly political in its context. The background here was also implicitly Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech of September 2006. The threatening responses, coming as they did after widespread violence in the Muslim world earlier in the year in response to the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in Denmark, had given new urgency to an ongoing low-key dialogue between the Vatican and Saudi Arabia. This led in November 2007 to an official visit by the king to the Vatican and an upgrading of the talks between the two sides, including, according to some press sources, talks about the opening of churches in Saudi Arabia. The following March the king gave a widely publicized speech in which he called for dialogue among Muslims, Christians and Jews. That this was no empty talk was shown when the Muslim World League at the beginning of June hosted a conference in Mecca in which Muslim scholars from around the world considered Muslim approaches to relations with other religions. Six weeks later, King Abdullah and King Juan Carlos jointly opened an international dialogue conference in Madrid to which representatives of all the major religions as well as interested political figures had been invited.

Many observers initially placed this Saudi move in the context of King Abdullah's 2002 Middle East peace initiative which was subsequently adopted by the Arab League, an interpretation which was denied by Saudi sources. A more interesting comment was attributed to Muhammad al-Zulfa, member of the Saudi Consultative Council, the Shura. He was reported by Associated Press to have said that the king's March speech was 'a message to all extremists: Stop using religion.' This is, of course, a point which has regularly been made by Muslim religious and political leaders, that the violent extremism, of which the terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, Madrid and London were but the most potent expressions, was to be condemned by all Muslims.

As such attacks increasingly threatened stability in Muslim societies themselves, it had gradually become necessary to take counter-action. Locally, this meant heightened security measures in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia itself. Internationally, it meant in the final analysis having to attract the attention of the media and politicians with some seriously high-profile initiatives. Both the open letter and the Saudi move served this aim.

But these initiatives cannot be dismissed as merely cynical political manipulation. There is a substance in them which involves a recognition that the circumstances the world finds itself in today requires not only that the potentials for conflict mobilized under the banners of Islam and Christianity be neutralized, but also that these two religions in particular need to find ways of working together. First of all, bridging the frontier between them is necessary to defuse the pressures coming from their respective extremists. And, secondly, the problems of globalization, threatening shortages of food and energy, and of climate change mean that mankind cannot afford the wastage and distractions of backward looking religious rivalries.

The fact that interreligious dialogue, particularly the Muslim-Christian variety, has become a dimension of national and international politics is a challenge and an opportunity. As the dialogue has become politicized it becomes a dimension of *Realpolitik* and with that it will be subjected to the manipulation, negotiation and compromise, clean and less clean, which are an inevitable part of the political processes. The challenge is how to prevent the political processes from executing a complete take-over. On the other hand, the translation of interreligious dialogue onto centre stage offers the opportunity that religions and religious identities can become a positive force and no longer only sit there waiting again to be used as ammunition in yet another conflict.