

TALKING POINTS

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

USER'S GUIDE

"Talking Points" is a set of leaflets issued by the office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to set forth opportunities for discussion and engagement around issues in Christian-Muslim Relations. These Talking Points are intended to stimulate reflection, response, and activity on key issues as part of ongoing inter-religious engagement today.

Each leaflet addresses a particular topic and concludes with several questions for further discussion. These Talking Points have been formulated in such a way as to draw out inquiries and reflections that might otherwise go unattended in our relations with Christians and Muslims. These Talking Points address real questions raised by Christians in varying communities.

For the most part, the Talking Points are intended for discussion among all Christians, as part of our ongoing inquiry and attention to interfaith activity and encounter. And yet, inviting Muslim guests and contributors for discussion on these topics will add depth, interest, and insight.

These Talking Points have a historical background, both in Christian-Muslim relations generally and more specifically in the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America today. The past twenty years have seen a transformation in the stance of many Christians and many ecclesial organizations toward Muslims and Islam. Various factors have influenced this development. These include:

- the witness of ELCA missionaries who have served in Islamic contexts around the world;
- the history of immigration of Muslims to the United States;

- the consequences to Muslim-Christian relations after September 11, 2001;
- the continued experience of living together peacefully and productively in a pluralistic American society;
- the rise of Muslim organizations and a public Muslim voice in collaboration with Christian voices in this country;
- and finally, the increased engagement between Muslims and Christians worldwide.

In recent years, Christians are experiencing a substantial re-evaluation of their attitudes, assumptions, and perspectives toward Muslims and Islam. Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, from the international to national and local contexts, we are experiencing a new era of missional self-understanding, mutual awareness-building, and international advocacy efforts that have the potential for making significant contributions to Christians and Muslims alike in the years to come.

These Talking Points do not constitute an official Christian or ELCA statement about Islam or Christian-Muslim relations. Instead, the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Muslim Relations and staff of the office for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations commend these Talking Points to all persons of good will for the advancement of Christian-Muslim relations specifically, and the improvement of inter-religious relations generally.

We greatly appreciate your feedback from your use of these Talking Points, which will assist in constructing more refined Talking Points in the future. The last leaflet in this folder includes an evaluation; please fill this out and send it to us at your earliest convenience.

Further information on Muslim-Lutheran relationships, including a downloadable form of these Talking Points, may be found on the website: www.elca.org/ecumenical.

Prepared by the Consultative Panel
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TALKING POINTS

#1

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

THE BIBLE AND THE QUR'AN

Around the year 610 of the Common Era, a pious, 40-year-old merchant from the town of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula experienced a call to be a Prophet and Apostle of the one Creator God, charged with delivering the divine revelations that he received to humankind; this was the core of Muhammad's vocation until his death in the year 632. These revelations were collected, memorized, and written down by Muhammad's companions in the nascent community of "Muslims" (those who "submitted" or committed themselves to God); the book known as the holy Qur'an (or "Recitation") was the result. Muslims believe that these verses, contained in 114 chapters or *surahs*, are direct communications of the divine Speech in clear Arabic.

A story is told about a small village in Lebanon in which half the town's population was Muslim, and the other half Orthodox Christian. A celebration was being planned that would involve the entire village. The town council proposed a grand procession through the city streets. The Muslims on the council eagerly announced that they would carry a copy of their sacred book, the holy Qur'an, and that their Orthodox brothers and sisters should do likewise and carry a copy of the Bible. "No," replied the Orthodox priest, "we will carry an icon of Jesus Christ."

This story represents a subtle difference in the way in which Christians and Muslims regard their sacred texts. For Muslims, the Qur'an occupies a status similar to that occupied by Jesus for Christians: the most decisive intersection between the Word of God and human history. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh; the Bible is then a *witness* to this word, pointing to Christ and revealing Christ. Muslims do not believe in an incarnation ("becoming flesh") of the Word, but do believe that the Qur'an is more than a witness to the Word; it *is*

that Word. An early theological controversy within the Muslim community resulted in the wide consensus that the Qur'an is the Speech of God, "uncreated."

Muslims regard Jews and Christians as close relatives in the faith, as "People of the Book" who have historically received revelations from God: the *Tawrat* or Torah, sent down to Moses; the *Zabur* or Psalms, delivered to David; and the *Injil* or Evangel/Gospel, sent down to Jesus. However, Muslims do not generally identify the Scriptures presently in the hands of Jews and Christians with the "original" Torah and Gospel; the extent to which these original revelations have been preserved and/or corrupted over time has been debated throughout Islamic history. The Qur'an, however, is believed to exist as the pure and undefiled transmission of the revelation that God intended. Muslim scholarship points to its collection and memorization already during the life of the Prophet, and its official "canonization" around the year 650, just eighteen years after Muhammad's death, under the rule of the third "rightly guided" caliph, Uthman. Since then, the text of the Qur'an has been very stable (in comparison to the Bible with its variant readings and text families), and modern publishers of the Qur'an go to great pains to ensure the integrity of the text.

The Qur'an is different from the Bible in a variety of ways. While the Bible has a narrative framework (from the Creation to the New Jerusalem), the Qur'an is a compilation of revelations vouchsafed to Muhammad at various times in his life; many surahs read like sermons, each addressed to specific circumstances confronting the Prophet or the Muslim *ummah* ("community"). Contents include narratives about God's prophets and apostles, the praise of God, warnings of God's judgment to come, legal material, and guidance for living.

The Qur'an is exalted Arabic speech, often marked by rhyme or assonance. Indeed, a "translation" of the text into a language besides Arabic is no longer the Qur'an, but rather an interpretation of the Qur'an's meaning. While the majority of Muslims in the world are *not* native speakers of Arabic, throughout the world Muslims rejoice to hear the Arabic Qur'an beautifully recited, learn to take the divine speech upon their tongues, and memorize long passages. Many Muslims memorize the whole of the Book, which is about two-thirds the length of the New Testament.

Muslims read the Qur'an for hope and guidance, but also experience in it—in a way that Christians may think of as "sacramental"—the intimate closeness of God's very Word, which the believer receives into himself/herself and takes to (and by) heart. The beauty of the Qur'an is lifted up for rapt audiences in the work of celebrated Qur'an reciters, and Qur'anic calligraphy is among the highest and purest forms of Islamic visual art.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Recall the story about the Lebanese village. Does the comparison of Christ to the Qur'an make sense to you? What difference does it make to claim that God's ultimate revelation to humankind is found in a person, rather than a book?
2. For Muslims, the Qur'an *is* Arabic. Christians, on the other hand, have many *translations* of the original Hebrew and Greek texts of their scriptures, and are happy to call each of them "the Bible." What implications might this difference have for the way that Scripture is taught and learned, and for the relationship between Scripture on the one hand, and art and culture on the other?
3. Where do *you* experience God's nearness most intensely?

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#2

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

JESUS AND MUHAMMAD IN THE QUR'AN

The angels said to Mary, "Mary, God has chosen you and made you pure. He has truly chosen you above all women." Q 3:42

The angels said: "Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, who will be held in honor in this world and the next, who will be one of those brought near to God. He will speak to people in his infancy and in his adulthood. He will be one of the righteous." Q 3:45-46

Jesus and Mary both play a prominent role in the Qur'an; chapter 19 even bears Mary's name. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus is God's Messenger, sent to reveal the Gospel and call His people back from their erring ways. Jesus performed miracles, healed the sick, and raised the dead (by God's permission). Muslims believe that Jesus was miraculously conceived and born of the Virgin Mary, that he was taken bodily into heaven at the end of his (first) earthly ministry, and that he will come again at the end of time.

Like Muhammad (who is regarded as the final Messenger and "seal of the Prophets"), Jesus receives the highest honor among Muslims as a Prophet and Messenger. According to the Qur'an, there have been many prophets and messengers throughout history, beginning with Adam and continuing through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and others. In fact, the Qur'an asserts that God has sent a messenger to "every nation;" some of these messengers are known, but others unknown to history. Whenever the name of a known Messenger or Prophet is pronounced, Muslims invoke the blessings and peace of God upon him.

God and His angels bless the prophet—so you who believe, bless him too and give him greetings of peace. Q 33: 56

The Qur'an emphasizes the high calling of Muhammad as a Messenger and Prophet and admonishes his followers to pay him their respects. He is described essentially as a warner and giver of good news, and as a prophet and messenger of God like the ones sent before him. The Qur'an encourages Muhammad not to give up in the face of adversity, reminding him that messengers before him faced similar problems.

Muslims hold a deep love for their prophet Muhammad. They consider him an exemplary human being and are confident that living in imitation of his faith, practice, and compassion brings the believer closer to God and the God-willed life on earth. On the Day of Judgment, many Muslims believe, the Prophet Muhammad will plead on their behalf before God. He is closer to them than their own kin, and many are prepared to suffer in defense of his good name and honor. Parents often name their male children Muhammad to elicit his blessing; the celebration of his birthday is in many places one of the most joyous events in the Islamic calendar. Love for the Prophet Muhammad has been expressed in poetry and songs throughout the Islamic world.

So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a "Trinity"—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son.... Q 4:171b

When God says, "Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, "Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God"?" he will say, "May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say...." Q 5:116a

The Qur'an teaches that Jesus, while an extraordinary messenger and prophet of God, is not the Son of God. In Islam, anyone who makes a human being equal to God is guilty of *shirk* (the sin of associating anything in the honor that belongs to God alone). Therefore, according to the Qur'an, God is One (whereas Trinitarian language gives the impression that Christians believe in more than one God). Furthermore, the Qur'an does not mention divine redemption through the atoning passion and death of the Son of God. In fact, the Qur'an appears to deny that Christ was crucified at all (see Q 4:155-159; many Muslims believe that someone else, perhaps Judas or one of the disciples, died on the cross in Jesus' place). Instead, the Qur'an places the

responsibility for one's sin on the individual human who will be judged by God on the basis of his or her works. In judgment, however, God is merciful and forgives the sins of those who are truly repentant.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Many Muslims around the world were dismayed when, some years ago, a Danish newspaper published derogatory cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Can you understand this dismay? Can you think of treatments of Jesus or Mary that have made *you* very upset?
2. Is belief in the Trinity belief in three gods? As a Christian, how do you explain your belief in *one* God who is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"?
3. Many Muslims have believed that Jesus was too honored by God to suffer the terrible shame of crucifixion, and that it is fitting that God rescue Jesus from such a fate. As a Christian, how do you explain that God the Father abandons the beloved Son to such an ignominious death?

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#3

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LAW IN ISLAM

*Guide us in the straight path: the path of those You have blessed.
Q 1:6-7*

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Psalm 119:1

Not too far from the ELCA churchwide office in Chicago, in the spring of 2010, one could see a billboard advertising “*Sharia*-compliant” financing for Muslim homebuyers; the couple pictured on the billboard look pleased that such an important aspect of their economic lives was being conducted in accordance with the *Shari’ah* (the way or law of God; note that the English spelling varies). Over the centuries, this “Way”—based in the Qur’an and the teachings and practice of the prophet Muhammad—has been explored and elaborated in a lively tradition that has aimed to provide guidance for all matters of life: worship and religious duties, the family, economy, social and political life, and so on.

Muslim scholars today arbitrate in family disputes and weigh the most subtle matters of economic policy or bioethics, while Muslim believers turn to trusted authorities to seek counsel and legal rulings (*fatwas*) on matters of concern to them. Their desire is to honor God and fulfill God’s will in all areas of life.

This desire is reflected in a fourteen-century long tradition of legal thought, in which Muslim scholars developed the tools and resources of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) in order to seek the explication of God’s Way (*Shari’ah*). It may be helpful to note that Christians, pondering the mystery of the revelation of God’s very *self* in Jesus of Nazareth, have typically and centrally pursued the study of *theology*; in some contrast to this, Muslims, pondering the revelation of God’s *will* in the Qur’an and the example of the

Prophet Muhammad, have typically and centrally pursued the study of *law*. The Islamic intellectual tradition has tended to be focused more on practical questions of “How shall we live?” than on questions such as “How shall we talk about God?”

Historically, the Islamic legal tradition has played a huge role in unifying “the Muslim world”: even in times of political fragmentation, a framework of law was largely common to Islamic societies, enabling international commerce and providing widely shared discourse and norms. The tradition has been marked by several characteristics: gratitude to God for providing the blessing of guidance to weak and forgetful human beings; the earnest desire to honor God in all things; intellectual rigor; diversity (as many opinions were allowed and debated on any particular issue); and humility, so that the greatest of scholars would qualify carefully derived opinions with the words *wa-llahu a’lam*, “and God is the greater knower” [of the correct solution].

The modern world has brought many complications to Muslims’ quest to honor God in matters of law. In many Westernized societies, adherence to the traditions of the *Shari’ah* has been limited to or focused on the areas of worship and family. In places where political and economic systems are breaking down, calls for the “implementation of the Islamic *Shari’ah*” can represent a cry for justice, an end to corruption, and hope for a better life. In some places, political movements and leaders have tried to claim their loyalty to the *Shari’ah* as a mark of legitimacy—but have sometimes been more concerned with attention-grabbing symbolism (e.g., implementing, without attention to context or legal safeguards, ancient punishments such as the cutting off of a hand for theft or stoning for adultery) than with the struggle for social and economic justice.

Christians will want to listen closely to the debate within the Muslim community—standing up with and for Muslims in the defense of human rights in places where these are threatened, and with respect for those who seek—with intellectual rigor and humility—to do God honor.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. “Muslims seek to honor God and to fulfill God’s will in all areas of life.” Is this an area of commonality with Christians? (Think of the Lord’s Prayer!)
2. A criticism that Muslims sometimes make of Western Christians is that they tend to restrict the honoring of God to a particular “religious” area of life—leaving God out of social and political life. What do you think of this?
3. The above presentation made a parallel/contrast between the central place of *theology* in Christian tradition, and the place of *law* in Islamic tradition. How does this centrality reflect the core teachings of each faith?
4. What do you think of when you hear the word *Shari’ah*? For many non-Muslims, the word has strong negative connotations because of oppression and cruel punishments meted out by the Taliban and others in the name of *Shari’ah*. Is it possible to imagine how, for many Muslims, *Shari’ah* as “the Way” of God represents a blessing and a hopeful ideal—no matter how miserably some human beings have interpreted it?
5. Lutheran-Christians have sometimes tended to denigrate the Law, seeing it as a burden or in opposition to the Gospel. Can our interfaith dialogues—with Jews, and now with Muslims—help us to read (say) Psalm 19:7-10 with conviction?
6. What place does the Bible have in the law of the United States? What place do you *think* it should have?

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TALKING POINTS

#4

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

WOMEN IN ISLAM

People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of severing the ties of kinship [lit. "the womb relationships"]: God is always watching over you. Q 4:1

The role and position of women in Islam has become one of the most debated and least understood topics among Muslims and non-Muslims. It has given rise to deep prejudices about the treatment of women in Islam and conjures up images of honor killings, stoning, and women's bodies clad in black robes and veils (chadors or burqa's). Women, their dress, and position have become prime symbols in the struggle for Muslim identity, in part because of global media attention to women's issues in Islam.

While the Qur'an provides the basic rules, rights, and expectations concerning women, in reality many rules are influenced by local culture and law. The Qur'an itself presents conflicting views about equality and inequality between men and women.

The Qur'an insists that there is no difference in how God considers the religious and spiritual efforts of men and women (Q 33:35). The fourth surah testifies to men and women's equality in substance: they are created from a single soul (Q 4:1). Yet, the same chapter refers to men as the "maintainers" of women (Q 4:34). The Qur'an exhorts men and women to decide on family matters by mutual consent, and to love, support and protect each other (Q 2:233, 30:21, 9:71, and 2:187). At the same time, men are allowed to marry up to four women, provided that they practice equal justice to all wives (Q 4:3). Non-Muslims need to be aware that there is great diversity among Muslims today about whether and how such scriptural provisions are to be applied in the current context. In addition, the Qur'an does not allow a woman to be married against her will (Q 4:19), and she is

allowed to retain her own possessions (Q 4:21). Finally, the Qur'an deeply respects a mother's duty to take care of her children, encouraging her to breastfeed them for two years, and admonishing the husband to provide for his wife (Q 2:233).

During the early centuries of Islam, the texts of the Hadith (a collection of the sayings, advice, and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, also known as the Tradition) began to overrule the Qur'an, which teaches that women have rights equal to men. Instead, interpretations developed that assigned duties to women and rights to men. For example, in many cultures it was taken for granted that a woman could never be in a position of authority. But the Hadith also contain numerous observations of the Prophet's respect and appreciation for women, and in fact some Muslim women have had prominent roles of authority, even as heads of government.

The three components of Qur'an, Hadith, and local culture all play roles in the formulations of the Islamic *Shari'ah* law. Especially the personal status law affects the lives of women through its rules concerning marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. As it was traditionally applied, the position of women in Islamic law is on the same level as a child: she always needs the protection of a guardian—her father, uncle, brother, husband, or son—who accompanies her and gives permission to move outside the domestic domain. Many Muslims today find that these laws do not reflect their self-understanding as faithful Muslims in the contemporary world.

The law furthermore regulates matters pertaining to purity and impurity, as is the case in some Jewish and Christian circles. Due to menstrual and other bleeding, a woman is impure several times in her life. During those periods she is not allowed to perform the ritual prayer, fast during the month of Ramadan, or touch the Qur'an, since all these acts of worship require a state of ritual purity. These rules, in combination with expectations concerning a woman's work, traditionally led to the exclusion of women from theological studies. As a result, few women knew the text of the Qur'an, which became the domain of men.

Today the ranks of women who become scholars of Islam are growing rapidly. Just as was the case in the Christian tradition, women scholars of religion have profound influence on the hermeneutics and interpretations of the holy texts. All over the Muslim world, including North America, Muslim women scholars have

started to re-interpret the Qur'an in order to recapture its underlying message of mercy and justice. One famous scholar, Amina Wadud, has even challenged the ritual worship rules: although Islamic tradition has insisted that men preach the Friday sermon (*khutbah*) and lead the public ritual prayers, in March 2005 she led a gender-mixed congregation in New York in their Friday prayer and delivered the sermon.

While religious conventions hold a strong grip on a woman's circumstances, they are often intertwined with social and economic conditions. Many Muslim women live in war-ridden countries, or in poor areas where birthrates are high and people struggle to feed their children. Services such as clean water, a minimum of health care, and education, are often lacking. These conditions influence a woman's status and well-being as much as religious rules and conventions. This reality is shared by many women, Muslim or non-Muslim. Women in dire circumstances do not have much time to attend to Qur'anic reinterpretation, although it is one of the avenues to true empowerment and liberation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the status of women in your community. Are women and men afforded the same rights, respect, and opportunities? In what way are they equal or not equal in your context?
2. What do you think of the idea that men and women are equal before God, but they have different roles and responsibilities assigned to them by virtue of their gender? Do you see this differently?
3. When you see a woman in a hijab or burqa, what assumptions have you made about her? Have you had other experiences that challenged your initial assumptions? Please reflect upon other signs of religion that people wear, such as a necklace with a cross. How are these signs similar or different from one another?
4. As stated above, Muslim women today are seeking out the Qur'an's "underlying message of mercy and justice." In many important Qur'anic passages they find affirmations of the full co-humanity of men and women under God; at the same time they are challenged by other Qur'anic passages that appear to assert male privileges and prerogatives. Can similar things be said about Christian women and their relationships to the Bible? How do *you* read the Scripture's witness to these matters?

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#5

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FORGIVENESS AND SALVATION

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Matthew 7:21

On that Day, people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done an atom's-weight of good will see it, but whoever has done an atom's-weight of evil will see that. Q 99:6-8

A question often heard by Christians is the following: "Christians live in the assurance that they will go to heaven. Do Muslims share a similar assurance?" A simple answer or easy response to this question masks the complexity in the teachings about forgiveness and salvation in both Christian and Muslim traditions.

U.S. soldiers from a Christian background, when suffering violent attacks in Iraq or Afghanistan, have reported their mixed experiences of fear, prayer, and trust; they speak of a trust that they will be with God should they die. Do Muslims speak of trust in this way?

In February of 1991, the U.S. ground invasion sent tanks over Iraqi minefields, bunkers, and trenches and dumped earth and sand—knowing that they would bury alive the estimated 80 to 250 Iraqi soldiers in the trenches (see Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Army Buried Iraqi Soldiers Alive in Gulf War," *New York Times*, 15 Sept 1991). A few days later, a Minnesota university class of undergraduates discussed the religious implications of this event and wondered what the predominately Muslim Iraqi soldiers were thinking, knowing they were about to be buried alive. One student, a Muslim from Egypt, stated, "I think they were praying and feeling the closeness of heaven." As painful as these experiences were

for Christian and Muslim soldiers alike, the responses of trust sound similar.

In both Christian and Muslim traditions, God is seen as just and forgiving—suggesting that human beings are to be held accountable for their actions, but that the knowledge of God's forgiveness keeps alive the hope of heaven. As the introductory scripture passages show, Christians facing death may indeed feel guilt about their past trespasses against God and other people. But they also trust that God's saving action through Jesus Christ has restored them to a right relationship with God and prepared a place for them in the afterlife.

The Islamic tradition has generally rejected the notion that someone else can and should intercede to save sinful humans. The Qur'an asserts that humans individually are responsible for their own deeds. At the same time, there is a long debate in the tradition about whether the Prophet Muhammad and the Saints will intercede on behalf of Muslims. The 99 Most Beautiful Names of God (mostly found in the Qur'an) reveal something of the expectation of God in Muslims' experience; God is merciful, most forgiving, loving, and compassionate. The Qur'an reassures its readers of God's mercy, forgiveness, and guidance, which are sufficient to enable Muslims to follow God's will and stay on the "straight path" that leads ultimately to Paradise. One authentic Hadith even states that "Whoever professes 'There is no god but God' enters Paradise" (Bukhari).

Islam does not have a doctrine of original sin; the Qur'anic view of the plight of humanity, or the very nature of being human in the world, is distinct from the Christian interpretation of the fallen human being. For Muslims, the human being requires significant guidance insofar as humans are forgetful, slothful, weak, hasty, proud, prone to go astray, self-deceptive, and idolatrous. Christians would agree that the above characteristics are a part of being human in the world. And yet, for Christians, given the reality of sin, guidance alone is insufficient for human salvation; a radical divine intervention in human life is necessary.

Neither the Christian nor Muslim traditions can be reduced to a simple formula on sin, salvation, or any other theological point. Those Muslims who believe that their eternal destiny comes down

to a close weighing of accumulated good deeds versus bad deeds, ignore the centuries-long debate in Islam about how God's judgment and forgiveness will be exercised. Those Christians who believe that the Gospel frees us for our own self-indulgence and self-glorification both distort the Gospel and ignore the biblical texts that stress the importance of love of the neighbor and good works in the world. Muslims and Christians in relationship have an opportunity to discuss and learn from one another about both the mercy of God and the motivation for and importance of good deeds. As Paul recounts in Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. List what you know about particular aspects of the Christian view of human sin and God's saving action toward humans. How does this Christian perspective compare with other types of Christianity with which you are familiar? How do your reflections compare with what you know of the Islamic tradition?
2. At the top of this Talking Point, please read Matthew 7:21 and Surah 99:6-8 aloud. Compare the criteria for God's judgment of humans in the Bible and Qur'an. What have you learned from this comparison? About what remaining issues would you like to learn more?
3. Read the stories of human disobedience in Genesis 3 and the Qur'an, Q 7:10-27 and 2:30-39. Compare the versions for these aspects: the role of the tempter figure, the behavior of the humans (both male and female), and God's response to human disobedience. What did you find most surprising in both the Bible and Qur'anic stories? What are the similarities and differences?

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TALKING POINTS

#6

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

CARING FOR CREATION

[D]o you not see that all those who are in the heavens and earth praise God, as do the birds with wings outstretched? Each knows its [own way] of prayer and glorification: God has full knowledge of what they do. Q 24:41

The heavens are telling the glory of God; And the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Psalm 19:1

The environmental crisis is pushing members of all religious faiths to search their traditions for the resources that will help humanity confront it. Christians and Muslims, who together account for about half of the world's population, have a special responsibility in this regard—and rich resources.

The Qur'an is full of wonder at the natural world. The heavens and the earth, the diversity of animal life, the mystery of their procreation, various kinds of food plants and vegetation, the rain that renews the seemingly dead earth, the mysterious winds that allow for seafaring, even the colors and languages of human beings, are all *signs* of the power and mercy of God. In a sense, the creation is a kind of revelation in signs, alongside God's revelation in words. It has a message to which human beings are called to respond in faith and gratitude.

The Qur'anic word for Paradise or Heaven is *al-Jannah*, "The Garden." Humanity's final hope, then, is presented in terms of a shaded, fruitful, and well-watered place. This hope has been represented in a variety of ways throughout the history of Islamic art: in the glorious gardens around palaces and tombs, such as the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, or the Taj Mahal in Agra, India; in the intricately-woven vegetative patterns in the artistic form of

arabesque; or in the patterns in beautiful Turkish or Iranian carpets.

The human vocation is not to “subdue” the earth (Genesis 1:28), but to be God’s vicegerent or deputy (*khalifah*, Q 2:30) in the earth. For contemporary Muslims, this vicegerency is conceived of as a stewardship. The creation, so full of signs of the power and mercy of God, is not something to be exploited, but to be cared for.

The task before Christians and Muslims is urgent. Many poor Muslims in the world are among the first to suffer from global climate change and its consequences, as may be seen in flooding in Bangladesh or Pakistan, or desertification in the Sahel in Africa.

At the local level in North America, both Christian and Muslim communities are thinking of ways of “greening” their own worship and assembly spaces and their wider communities. May these communities find one another and collaborate in projects from which the entire community will benefit. Here is an issue in which a “dialogue of life” is not only reasonable and possible, but urgent for today’s world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read in the Qur’an, Q 30:17-27, 46, 48-50. What signs are spoken of here? What are the implications of such discourse for (a) the care of the earth; (b) human communities?
2. See Q 27:15-26 (and following), a story about King Solomon, who is regarded as a Prophet in the Qur’an. Solomon’s ability to understand the languages of the animals (here, the ants and the hoopoe bird) is also known from Jewish lore. What might be the ecological implications of such a view of the ants, or the hoopoe?
3. Above, we concentrated on *Islamic* resources that commend attention to and care for the creation. What do you see as the chief *Christian* resources for this?
4. What environmental challenges do you find in your worship and assembly space, or in your neighborhood?

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TALKING POINTS

#7

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

PRACTICING HOSPITALITY, FINDING FRIENDS

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:1-2

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. Q 49:13

Why should Christians be interested in encounter and conversation with Muslims?

A variety of answers are possible, including some exceedingly practical ones. For many North American Christians, encounter and conversation with Muslims is simply a reality of everyday life; Muslims are neighbors, colleagues, professionals in the community, even relatives by marriage. Since Muslims and Christians together make up about half the population of the world, the very future of the planet may depend on the quality of relations between them.

Beyond such practical reasons, however, Christians hearken to the words of Jesus. There we discover that constructive co-existence between people, including those from differing backgrounds and faith traditions, is commanded and expected. Jesus challenges his followers to *love* their neighbors, and even their enemies (Matthew 5: 43-44). Jesus excluded no one.

Jesus' command to love the Other is always a tall order, and at times may have seemed especially so in the context of the burdened history of Christian-Muslim relations. Many Christians and Muslims have grown up with prejudices about and suspicions of one another; they have had difficulty in recognizing the

goodness of God in one another. The Other is often described as someone to be feared, whose religion is deficient, whose culture is flawed.

It is precisely in such a context that Christians will want to turn again to the Bible for guidance in encountering the religious Other. They will find a rich trove of stories in which mysterious and religiously suspect *strangers*—from Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and Abimelech in Genesis 20, to the Magi in Matthew 2 or the various Samaritans of the Gospels—bring blessing, speak and enact truth, or model the godly life. Christians will again discover the Bible's teaching about *hospitality* (Deut. 10:17-19, Romans 12:13-14, Hebrews 13:2), which is a participation in the hospitality of God, shown forth in Jesus who came among us as both host and guest, and enacted at every Eucharistic service. Of course, we must not think that hospitality is a specifically Christian virtue; in fact, Christians who have lived among Muslims regularly bear witness to the sacrificial hospitality that they received among them.

One way in which North American Christians have practiced hospitality is by helping *immigrants*, especially those who have come as refugees. For instance, North American Lutherans have sponsored refugees since the 1950s when, after World War II, one out of every six Lutherans in the world was a refugee or without a home. Since the mid-1960s, many immigrants to the United States have been Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia; in addition, many Muslims have arrived as refugees from war-torn parts of the world.

For any immigrant, leaving all that is familiar and starting over is not easy. It involves learning new customs and habits, oftentimes even a new language. Maintaining one's religious practices is not always a straightforward matter. Muslims in the United States have been challenged in the practice of their faith: How and where can one perform the required prayers? How can one successfully observe the fast during the month of Ramadan, in a society that makes little accommodation for it? North American Christians are challenged to help in "making room" for Muslims' religious practice.

Christians, pressed in the first decade of the 21st century by the challenges of Christian-Muslim relations and intense debates about immigration policy, have searched the Bible and focused renewed attention on the ancient Christian practice of *hospitality*. Muslims, too, have had to search *their* tradition for guidance in dealing with the encounter with the religious Other. One key idea is found in texts such as Q 5:48 and 49:13: that God *could* have created all of humankind to be a single community but did not. That is, human religious diversity is God-willed, and for a purpose: that human beings might come to know one another (Q 49:13), and that communities might compete in goodness (5:48).

Christians are exhorted to love the neighbor, and even the enemy. As many will bear witness, however, as we give and receive hospitality, again and again we will find not enemies, but friends.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When you were growing up, what attitudes or convictions did you receive from pastors, parents, or teachers regarding people of other faith traditions? What do you remember being told, for example, about Catholics, Mormons, Jews, or Muslims?
2. How did you feel when you met, for the first time, someone of another faith tradition? If you had a chance to get to know that person more intimately, what did you learn about that person? How did you find yourself evaluating your presuppositions?
3. Share about a time when *you* were a stranger. What was that like? What challenges did you face (i.e., understanding the language or culture, or eating strange food)? Did anyone help you to feel "at home"?

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TALKING POINTS

#8

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

BELIEVING IN GOD

I believe in one God, an all-embracing God, a God who is neither male nor female, nor human, a merciful and compassionate God. In submitting to God's will and living a Muslim life, I am asked to apply the discipline and judgment that will allow me to make the correct choices. To serve God, I am asked to be fair and just, charitable, and humble.

The quotation above is from Ranya, a Muslim woman from New York City, trying to explain her understanding of God.¹

A question that regularly comes up when Muslims and Christians meet is: Do Christians and Muslims worship the *same* God? Any response requires some nuance. Certainly, there are differences in Christian and Islamic convictions about God. Christians worship God the Holy Trinity; for them, God is the life shared by Jesus, the one he called Abba, Father, and their Spirit, poured out on the Church and active in the world. This concept is not easy to understand: it took the Church years to explain how to understand the concept of the Trinity. However, all Christians agree that there is only one God, not three.

Muslims stress God's unicity or one-ness; for them, God is the one revealed through the messengers and prophets. The Qur'an proclaims the one-ness of God; for example, the very brief chapter 112 states: "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.'" It addresses the Christian belief in the Trinity: "Those people who

¹ Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver, and Priscilla Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, a Christian, a Jew – Three Women Search for Understanding* (New York: The Free Press, 2006), 171.

say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only one God” (Q 5:73; see also Q 4:171).

Despite the differences, there is much that Christians and Muslims can say together about God: Ranya’s words above point to some of these things. From their first encounters to the present day, Christians and Muslims have been able to speak intelligibly and profitably *together* about human life in the light of the reality of God, our creator, our Lord, and our goal; the One to whom we hearken and to whom we turn in prayer and praise.

People of faith find that there are strong reasons, specifically religious reasons, to take God’s reality and our human condition seriously. In response to “A Common Word between Us and You,” a letter signed (at its release in 2007) by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars and addressed to heads of Christian churches, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson stated that “Jews, Muslims, and Christians are called to one another as to a holy site, where God’s living revelation in the world is received in reverence among the faithful and not in fear of our neighbors.”²

Exploring our commonalities and differences is important. But surely the best context for exploring them is that of genuine relationships, as Christians and Muslims come to know one another as neighbors and friends, and can risk sharing their witness about God’s presence and activity in our world today.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What reasons can you find for coming to know people of other faiths, Muslims in particular? Are there biblical passages that come to mind as you think about the encounter with people from outside the immediate circle of faith?
2. What experiences have you had with people of other faiths? Have you learned anything—also about yourself, or your own Christian faith—from the experience?
3. Do you think that it is possible (or appropriate) for Christians to pray with people of other faiths? If so, what kinds of prayer might you offer?
4. How would you as a Christian bear witness to your experience of God *the Holy Trinity* in a conversation with a Muslim?

² “A Common Word Between Us and You,” <http://www.acommonword.com>, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson’s statement may be found at <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=2>

WALKING POINTS

FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION PROPOSALS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

LISTENING: FROM IGNORANCE TO UNDERSTANDING

1. Learn through more study and discussion. "Windows for Understanding: Jewish-Muslim-Lutheran Relations," an online resource from the ELCA at www.elca.org/ecumenical/interreligious, is a resource designed with you in mind and includes a glossary of terms used in Talking Points.
2. Another fruitful path for study and discussion is the open letter sent by Muslim scholars and religious leaders to Christian leaders throughout the world on Oct. 13, 2007, focusing on the commandments to love God and neighbors as common ground for dialogue among Christians and Muslims. Those addressed in this letter included ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson. The letter and responses since its release can be accessed at www.acommonword.com.
3. Organize a movie or a book discussion night. One good film is "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet" (2002, aired on PBS). Interesting novels include Mohja Kahf, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, or Camilla Gibb, *Sweetness in the Belly*. Or pick up a work of non-fiction such as Greg Mortenson, *Three Cups of Tea*. Discuss how the film or book challenged or confirmed your understanding of Islam and Muslims.
4. Many other resources for study are available. Recommendations from members of the Consultative Panel include: Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction*; Amir Hussein, *Oil & Water: Two Faiths, One God*; Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad*; Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*; Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an*; Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*; Joan Chittister et al., *The Tent of Abraham*. The list can go on and on!

CARING: FROM HOSTILITY TO HOSPITALITY

Many Christians have Muslim friends at school, work, or in the communities where they live. An effort to learn about each other's faith, with a sense of openness and curiosity, will result in amazing discoveries. We are all strangers to each other. Learning about each other's faith and background may lead to an appreciation of similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity, as well as a greater understanding and respect for other backgrounds and cultures. More importantly, however, it may lead to an appreciation of other people as fellow human beings who love God and want to honor God's will in their lives.

1. Set up exchange visits with a nearby mosque or Islamic Center. Eventually a smaller group of individuals might schedule informal dialogue meetings. You can begin with a few people from each religious tradition sharing their earliest memories of God. When there is sufficient trust and friendship, move on to such topics as how to know God's will and how to have confidence in an afterlife in the presence of God. Perhaps small groups of "faith clubs" might form out of such relationships.
2. Invite a Muslim to speak with your study group. Perhaps a mother who is Muslim might speak about the challenges she faces in raising children in America, or a coworker might speak about practicing faith in their workplace. Or someone who has immigrated as a refugee might tell about experiences in coming to America.
3. Review together the 1998 ELCA Message on Immigration. Observe "World Refugee Day" together on June 20th. Learn about the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and become involved in the discussion of our nation's policy (www.lirs.org). LIRS partners with churches, the federal government, and local resettlement agencies to resettle refugees. In addition, LIRS provides legal consultation assistance. LIRS is a strong advocate for enacting fair and generous immigration policies and for encouraging the U.S. to go beyond our borders to assist displaced persons worldwide.

LIRS partners with social service agencies to provide assistance to asylum seekers and unaccompanied children. LIRS materials available for your study include: *Responding to The Call: A Manual for Congregations Reaching Out to Immigrants through Ministries of Service and Justice*; *Welcoming the Immigrant: Information and Resources for Lutheran Congregations*; and *A Faithful Response: a Study for Churches on Welcoming the Stranger*.

SERVING: FROM STRANGERS TO COMPANIONS

Listening to each other and caring for one another will lead to a commitment to support and defend one another in times of trouble. Working together for the common good as well as for justice and peace will be a natural byproduct of living out our faith in daily life. What is God calling you to do?

1. Does a forum for interfaith dialogue exist in your community? If not, encourage ecumenical Christian groups to find Muslim counterparts in your community and begin to study "A Common Word between Us and You" together. Together, consider questions of history, prayer, and other practices of faith in your immediate context.
2. Hold a multicultural and interfaith event. See www.trifaith.org for examples of what you might do together.
3. Work together with a local resettlement agency to co-sponsor a refugee family or mentor New Americans (teach ESL, Citizenship, or employment readiness classes). Gather household items and other material donations to give to newly arrived refugees. Involve children in creating "welcome boxes" or "back to school backpacks" for newly arrived refugees.
4. Consider another mutual service project in your community. Perhaps you could build a Habitat for Humanity house together, or sponsor a clean-up effort in a local park.

RESPONSE AND EVALUATION FORM

TALKING POINTS

TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

This form is provided as part of the "Talking Points" packet so that you may submit your thoughts and comments, either for yourself as an individual or as the report of a group discussion. The "Talking Points" are part of an ongoing process of reflection on these issues within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and your input is very much desired.

Please use the form on the reverse side to send your comments by mail or fax, or email them to erinfo@elca.org.

Mailing address

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TALKING POINTS: TOPICS IN CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Response and Evaluation Form

1. Please indicate whether you are offering these comments as an individual _____ or as a report on a group discussion _____. If it is a group report, please describe briefly the nature of the group and the length of the discussion.

2. Which "Talking Points" have you studied? (*circle all that apply*): All 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
3. What thoughts and comments do you have about the issues dealt with in "Talking Points"? (*use additional pages as needed*)

4. Has your study of the "Talking Points" changed your view or increased your understanding? If so, please explain.

5. What suggestions do you have for the ongoing process of study and reflection on these issues within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

6. Would you like for the ELCA to contact you about other available resources for study of interfaith issues? (*optional*)

Name _____ Congregation _____

Email _____ Phone _____ City & State _____