

We offer the following guidance in the hope that it may ease some of the obstacles in the path to forming sincere relationships between Christians and Muslims. This document is therefore offered as a guide to sensitive areas which may arise when Christians and Muslims meet each other. Each faith has values, customs and practices which need to be understood by members of the other faith tradition if one wants to build sincere and sustainable relationships. This is particularly so with regard to Christians and Muslims who, although they share much in terms of faith, have very different ways of giving expression to this faith.

The Christian Muslim Forum offers the following only as general guidance as we realize that there will be many exceptions to what is suggested below. We therefore urge all individuals or groups to acquaint themselves of their particular local needs and imperatives. We hope that mutual compromise and tolerance will underpin all relationships which, we anticipate, will overcome any offence given inadvertently.

### **1. How should we treat each other when we meet?**

Muslims should let good manners, mutual respect and sincerity be their guide for their social interactions with Christians in light of the fact that Islam looks at the whole of humanity as *banī Aadam: We [God] has bestowed dignity (karramnā) on the progeny of Adam (banī Aadam)*, (Quran 17:70). Muslims should avoid polemical conversation and proselytization.

Christians should recognize the respect that people of other faiths, and especially Muslims, give to Jesus Christ (even though our beliefs differ) and respect them as believers. Dialogue is an opportunity for witness and for talking about Jesus. It is advised that polemic, propaganda and proselytization are avoided.

### **2. How do we greet each other?**

Most Muslims shake hands on meeting or departing. However, it should be noted that some Muslims may be reluctant to shake hands with persons of the opposite sex: this is not intended as a personal slight and should not be taken as a barrier to normal social discourse. Therefore, it may be best that the first time one encounters Muslims, they are allowed to set the norm for how they wish to be greeted.

Most Christians will wish to show friendship/express common faith through shaking hands, (or embracing or kissing) others of both genders, including sisters and brothers of other faiths - '*Greet one another with a holy kiss*' (Romans 16.16). The use of a handshake has become, for most Christians, a fundamental way of greeting and showing appreciation of the other. Demonstrating equality by how we greet one another has become for many Christians today a fundamental way of witnessing to the core New Testament understanding of the equality of male and female before God, and not to shake hands with both male and female can be seen as offensive.

### **3. What do we tell each other about our faith tradition when we first meet?**

Muslim ethics and practices derive principally from the Quran and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (generally referred to as ‘the *sunna*’ by most Muslims). Muslims consider themselves as part of the same Abrahamic tradition as Christianity and Judaism and therefore much of Muslim ethics and practices are common to Christianity and / or Judaism. [Muslims can be broadly divided into two principal groups: *sunnī* and *shīa*, each of which in turn have adherents who further separate themselves into sub-groups based on particular practices and beliefs.]

Christian ethics and etiquette derive ultimately from the Jewish scriptures – but radically reinterpreted by Jesus’ teaching and the Christian scriptures. Over the centuries there have been various groups of Christians who have held more to practices from the Jewish scriptures – e.g. strict sabbatarianism, but in general the answers to the next question govern Christian ethics and therefore Christian etiquette.

### **4. Where are you coming from?**

For Muslims, belief in the text of the Quran as God’s final revelation revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and belief in the Prophet Muhammad being the last of a long lineage of Prophets, starting with Adam and including Abraham and Moses, unites all Muslims. Further, Muslims give the highest priority to the practice (‘the *sunna*’) of the Prophet Muhammad and believe it to be the model for emulation – in terms of daily practice as well as spiritual life.

For Christians, internal intention and motivation matters more than the outward appearance and observance. For instance, Christ touched the ‘untouchable’, and kept company with ‘sinners’. Peter’s dream in Acts 10 is the means through which God helped him to overcome his scruples about associating with what the Jewish scriptures considered unclean (‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane’). Saint Paul outlines the fundamental Christian principle of the freedom of the believer before God. He criticizes Christians who fall back into seeing religion as obeying a set of rules – he calls this being enslaved to the old ways from which Christ has freed us. Conversely, Paul warns strongly against using our freedom in Christ as an excuse for license and declares the very highest goals of righteousness for a Christian.

Consequently in the area of etiquette it is to be expected that Christians in different ages, cultures and traditions will develop different approaches. Christian scripture encourages Christians to be aware of their fellows and the impact of each person’s freedom on the other – if an action which is right for us causes offence to others then we should refrain from exercising our freedom.

### **5. How do you approach the use of Scripture?**

The importance of the Quran (in Arabic) in the personal and public life of Muslims cannot be emphasized enough: the text of the Quran is the source of personal and public prayer as well as the main source of ethics and morality. Muslims believe it to have been preserved in history to the present in the same form as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early part of the seventh century (CE). This preservation of the Arabic text of the Quran, for Muslims, is guaranteed through the unbroken oral tradition since the time of the Prophet Muhammad to the present rather than via the written tradition: the oral tradition referring to the recitation of the whole of the Arabic text of the Quran solely from memory. Persons who commit the Quran to memory are thus deemed worthy of the highest honour and respect in Muslim communities everywhere.

Christians look to the Bible as God's Word because it bears witness to God's revelation in history, culminating in Jesus Christ, God's living Word. Christians have different ways of showing their respect. Most churches have some form of daily lectionary which encourages private and corporate reading of the Bible. For some, particularly Protestant evangelicals, they might use a Bible which is well thumbed or has even had passages underlined or comments written in the margins.

## **6. Why do you dress like that?**

Muslims, particularly in the UK, belong to a diverse range of ethnic, geographical and cultural traditions and this diversity is reflected in how many of them dress. However, what is common to most Muslims, men and women, is the emphasis placed on modesty. Examples of dress types that have religious connotations include the headscarf (usually referred to as the *hijāb*), the coat (the *jilbāb*), the face veil (the *niqāb*) and prayer caps. It should be noted that some Muslims prefer to organize their social activities based on separate facilities for men and women.

Western Christians generally dress in the same way as non-Christians, this may include clothing which reveals, rather than conceals. There is a tradition of modest dress in Christianity but changes in society have led to changes in attitudes and to the way in which people dress. The dress style of Western women (Christians and non-Christians) may not reflect the expectations of people of other cultures and religions.

People who hold religious offices - priests, ministers, monks, nuns, bishops - have specific religious dress, and symbols, which they wear to indicate their role. Some Christians wear religious symbols, particularly the cross or crucifix (a crucifix is a cross with the figure of Jesus being crucified upon it). However, these may also be worn by people who are not practicing Christians.

## **7. What are the important times of the day, week and year for you? Why?**

Muslims are required to pray five times a day: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and at night. These five daily prayers constitute the most important ritual for Muslims and most Muslims observe these prayers scrupulously, both individually as well as in congregation if present as a group. It is suggested that if Muslim prayer times fall within the duration of an inter-faith event, time (approx. 10-15 mins.) is allocated for the ritual prayer (usually referred to as either *salāt* or *namāz*) and washing facilities as well as a clean area for the performance of the prayer are provided.

The most important religious day in the week for Muslims is Friday when men, as well as many women, go for the noon prayer to the mosque. Although Friday is religiously the most important day in the week for Muslims, it does not constitute 'the sabbath' in the Christian sense; in fact, for most Muslims, it is a 'normal' working day.

The three most important events for Muslims during the year are the month of fasting (the month of *Ramadān*), the celebratory festival following the month of fasting, *eid al-fitr* and the celebratory Abrahamic festival, *eid al-adha*. The dates for all Muslim religious festivals are calculated according to the lunar calendar and therefore change every year. Along with these three main events, many Muslims celebrate additional events with religious significance.

Prayer is a very important part of Christian life and faith. Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray, teaching them the 'Lord's Prayer', which begins by addressing God as 'Father' (see Luke 11). The apostle Paul encouraged the early Christians to '*pray without ceasing*' (1 Thessalonians 5.17). Christians generally do not have set prayer times, although the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican churches have traditions of morning, midday and evening prayers, and this is a discipline required of

clergy in the different traditions. The monastic traditions have a tradition or 'rule' of seven prayer times throughout the day and night. At a dialogue event it would be appropriate to make provision for Christians to pray together when Muslims are praying.

For some Christians an authentic prayer has to be explicitly prayed in the name of Jesus Christ and/or the Trinity. Muslims will need to be aware of this if Christians are praying when Muslims are present and we ask that they recognize that this is not done to cause offence or highlight theological disagreement but is a natural part of Christian prayer. Christians appreciate feeling comfortable enough to say *Amen* at the end of a Muslim prayer, though some Christians will not choose to participate in this way, due to their theological convictions.

Sunday, for Christians is the weekly celebration of the resurrection of Jesus and for many has long been associated with the Jewish Sabbath, or day of rest. The two major festivals each year are Christmas (the birth of Jesus) and Easter (the Crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus): both are preceded by penitential seasons (Advent, 4 weeks and Lent, 6 weeks) which many Christians observe with some limited form of fasting as a time of spiritual preparation.

### [Calendar of Muslim and Christian festivals](#)

## **8. How do you view bad and blasphemous language?**

Muslims regard bad language as well as blasphemy as contrary to the dictates of the Quran and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Insulting others even if one may feel slighted cannot be justified in the Islamic tradition. Muslims take blasphemy very seriously and regard any insult or offence against God, any of the Prophets – in particular, Muhammad – and the Quran as blasphemy.

The Bible regards speech as a powerful tool – for good or ill - and requires Christians to speak in ways that are truthful and upbuilding for our fellow human beings. Blasphemy is seen as using the name of God or Jesus in a way that brings dishonour to God. Such usage has become more commonplace in secular conversation and media usage in Britain over the last few decades. While Christians find this offensive they have different approaches about how to deal with it. Although there is an ancient law in Britain about blasphemy, it has long been the general view within most churches that this is an area of community life which cannot helpfully be dealt with by recourse to legal action.

## **9. Why do you not eat or drink this?**

Most Muslims do not drink alcohol and some may not wish to be present at meetings where alcohol is served. As to consumption of meat, Muslims follow very similar rules as orthodox Jews insofar as they do not eat pig meat and have strict requirements for the killing of animals before they can be eaten (the equivalent term for *kosher* for Muslims is *halāl*). Like orthodox Jews, Muslims also have restrictions on the kinds of seafood they can eat. The safest advice that can be given regarding drink and food for Muslims is to provide non-alcoholic drink(s) and vegetarian food.

In the Gospels Jesus drank wine as an expression of the general biblical approach that wine is part of God's gracious gift to humanity and is linked in with celebration – and is central to Christian worship in Holy Communion. Jesus himself turned water into wine at a wedding feast as a sign of his presence as the Messiah. However, some Christians throughout history have adopted a teetotal discipline, sometimes as a particular sign of commitment or as a witness within a society which has a problem with the abuse of alcohol.

There are no particular food requirements for Christians. Some Christians may have concerns about food that has been sacrificed or offered in another religious context and would have qualms about eating it, for some this includes Halal meat. There is discussion about food sacrificed to idols in the Christian scriptures which culminates with a verse advising caution for those who may be unconcerned about the scruples of some - *'Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.'* (1 Corinthians 8.9)

Some Christians may be vegetarian for personal reasons. Catholics traditionally avoided meat on Fridays and eat fish instead. For an inter faith/inter-cultural context see also the Jerusalem council's declaration on *kosher* food in Acts 15.29. At a dialogue event, where the decision has been taken to include meat, it would be appropriate to make sure there were some dishes available that didn't include *halal* meat for the reasons described above. In this case all dishes should be labelled.

## **10. What is the significance of fasting?**

The minimum time for fasting for Muslims during one calendar year is the month of *Ramadān*. During this time, Muslims abstain from all food, drink (including water and cigarettes) and any sexual relations between sunrise and sunset. Many Muslims congregate and eat communally at sunset to break the fast together (this meal is generally referred to as the *'iftār'* meal). Many Muslims also fast on various days during the remainder of the year following the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. The month of *Ramadān* is a time for prolonged prayer and reflection as well as fasting for Muslims and mosques hold extra congregational prayers every night during this month. As Muslims are fasting during *Ramadān* this is not a preferred time for Muslims to travel or for evening meetings (except to participate in the *iftār* meal).

The spiritual significance of fasting for Christians lies in increased time being spent in prayer, and time to focus on the needs of others rather than on one's own personal desires and needs. There have been two main types of prescribed fasting in Christianity - Wednesdays/Fridays and Lent. Wednesday/Friday fasting is still observed in the Orthodox church, many Catholics still avoid meat on Fridays as part of the Friday fast, although this is no longer required. Fasting generally is now less prevalent in the Western, particularly Protestant, churches. Individuals may fast occasionally or regularly as part of their own spiritual practice.

*Lent* – this is a 40 day period, not including Sundays, when Christians have traditionally avoided certain foods, particularly meat, in recognition of Jesus' fast and time of temptation in the wilderness (Matthew Ch. 4; Luke Ch. 4) and the period leading up to his death and Resurrection (the Orthodox church has different timings). The last day before Lent is Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday (with the placing of ashes, from a burnt palm leaf cross, in the sign of the cross on the forehead) or Clean Monday in the Orthodox church.

## **11. Sources for further information**

It is difficult to find reliable reading about Islam and Muslims in the UK. The main university publishing houses in the UK (for example, Cambridge University Press) and the USA (Chicago University Press) along with mainstream publishers (for example, I. B. Tauris) are the best sources. There are many pamphlets and booklets produced by niche publishers whose reliability and aims are suspect and these are best avoided. The one publishing house outside the mainstream that can be recommended is the Cambridge based Islamic Texts Society ([www.its.org.uk](http://www.its.org.uk)). The following are a good place to start:

1. Du Pasquier, Roger, *Unveiling Islam* trans. T. Winter, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992, ISBN: 0946621322. (Available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).
2. Waines, David, *Introduction to Islam* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, ISBN: 0521539064. (Available from [www.cup.com](http://www.cup.com)).
3. *The Quran*: a new translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, ISBN: 0192831933. (Available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)).
4. Lings, Martin, *Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources* Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995, ISBN: 0946621330. (Available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

As is the case for reading about Muslims and Islam, as well as books there are many pamphlets and booklets in circulation about Christianity and Christians and the quality and suitability of these for people seeking to understand the religion varies. Mainstream and university publishing houses are a good source as well as the following recommendations:

1. [www.answers-to-muslims.com](http://www.answers-to-muslims.com)
2. Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007, ISBN: 9781853118036. (Available from [www.scm-canterburypress.co.uk](http://www.scm-canterburypress.co.uk)).

Further information on the accommodation of the practical needs of Christians and Muslims can be found at: [www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/f/l/religion\\_1.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/f/l/religion_1.pdf) (Appendix 2, pp. 39-50).