



# A Church in Dialogue

## *Catholics and Muslims in Canada: Believers and Citizens in Society*

*The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops*

The President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a letter explaining that this pamphlet is intended “to help Canadian Catholics better understand their Muslim neighbours. Christianity and Islam are the two most populous religious groups in the world. For our own good and for the good of all humanity, we must learn to live in harmony with each other, and Canada can certainly play an important role in modeling this harmonious relationship. Knowledge of each other is essential for such a task.” The complete text of the letter by Archbishop Paul-André Durocher is found in the “Media Room” on the CCCB website: [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca) under “Statements & Letters”.

### ■ Why do Catholics need to know about Islam?

As noted by Muslim scholars in 2007: “Muslims and Christians together make up over half the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians” (*A Common Word Between Us and You*, 2007).



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Christianity has about 2.3 billion followers, and about half of all Christians are Catholic. Islam is a world religion with an estimated 1.6 billion members.

Muslims are our neighbours and our co-workers. Because the number of Muslim immigrants to Canada is increasing, it is even more important to know Islam better so as to foster better relations and improve mutual understanding.

### ■ What are the origins of Islam?



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Islam began with a man named Muhammad, who was born in 570 AD in the town of Mecca in Arabia (now Saudi Arabia). Muhammad, who was orphaned at a young age, was cared for by relatives, especially an uncle. Like this uncle, Muhammad grew up to be a trader,

travelling throughout Arabia and neighbouring lands. He earned people's respect and trust. Many people at that time went on pilgrimage to the Kaaba, in Mecca. This cube-shaped structure was said to hold more than 360 deities. For Muhammad, however, there was only one God. When praying at the Kaaba, he would have called upon Allah (Arabic for God). In 610, while meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, he received what he believed to be messages from God. He shared these messages with his wife Khadija and other people, and Khadija became the first convert to Islam. But few others converted at this time, as many did not welcome the message that Muhammad was relaying. Besides preaching that all must surrender to Allah alone, he promoted justice and equality. Many, especially the rich and powerful, turned against him.

In 622, when it was no longer safe for Muhammad to remain in Mecca, the people of Yathrib (about 500 km north) offered him a place to settle with his companions. The group migrated to Yathrib and grew in number. The city later came to be known as Medina, "City of the Prophet." This migration is so important for Muslims that the year 622 marks the beginning of their calendar.



In 630, Muhammad entered Mecca with a strong force and the Meccans were defeated. Over time, many tribes of Arabia became Muslims. The core of their religion was belief in the one God and in Muhammad, God's messenger. The Kaaba is still the most important Muslim shrine today, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime is one of the five pillars of Islam. Muhammad remained the undisputed religious, political and military leader of this growing community

until his death in 632. His messages, which had been collected by his companions during his life, were gathered together after his death. Then, his successors ordered the compilation of the words that had been kept from the beginning. The work resulted in what is now called the Qur'an.

## ■ Islamic Teaching

Islam is the name of the religion; this word means submission, allegiance. Muslims submit to God's will. They are called to surrender to God. The word *al-qur'an*, which is of Syrian origin, means "recitation." The Qur'an (Koran is the anglicized version of the name) is four fifths as long as the New Testament and is divided into 114 chapters, or Suras, arranged from longest to shortest.





## Basic Religious Concepts

- ▶ Muslims believe in one God who is merciful and almighty.
- ▶ The human person is called to submit to God's will.
- ▶ God is the creator of heaven and earth.
- ▶ On the Day of Judgment, God will reward the good and punish the wicked.

## The Five Pillars of Islam

1. *Shahadah*: Confession of belief in Islam: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet."
2. Ritual Prayer: Muslims pray five times a day: upon rising, peak sun, mid decline, sunset, and before retiring to bed. A muezzin (crier) calls people to prayer from a minaret (tower of a mosque). The people say, among other things, "*Allahu Akbar*" – God is most great. Muslims pray turned toward Mecca.
3. Acts of Charity: a 2 ½ percent tax is to be paid on a person's wealth to help the less fortunate.
4. Fast of Ramadan: Muslims follow a 12-month lunar calendar. Ramadan is the holy month of Islam when Muslims commemorate the first recitation that Muhammad received and the migration from Mecca to Medina, which happened 10 years later. During this month, Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. The feast of Eid el-Fitr marks the end of the fast.
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca, called the *hajj*: At least once in their lifetime, those who are able are expected to travel to the holy city. The pilgrims wear white clothing – white is the ritual colour of Islam – signifying that all Muslims are equal.

## Subdivisions among Muslims

Although non-Muslims tend to associate Islam with Arab ethnicity, not all Muslims are Arab and not all Arabs are Muslim. Arabic-speaking Christians existed long before the arrival of Islam and are found among our colleagues and neighbours. While there are many subdivisions among Muslims, we find three major branches:

Sunnism	Shiism (Partisans of Ali)	Sufism or Mystical Islam
From the Sunnah tradition meaning "well-travelled way." Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr, a companion of Muhammad, was his rightful successor. 87% of all Muslims are Sunni. Large populations of Sunnis are found in Turkey, Africa, the Middle East and Indonesia, to name a few places.	Ali was Muhammad's son-in-law. Shi'ites believe that Ali was the rightful successor. He became the fourth successor ( <i>khalifa</i> , in Arabic) but was assassinated. 10 to 15 % of the world's Muslims are Shia, but Shias represent 90-95% of Muslims in Iran, 45-55% of Muslims in Iraq, 45-55% of Lebanese Muslims, and approximately 25 % of Indian Muslims.	<i>Sufi</i> is an Arabic word that may come from the word <i>suf</i> (wool). A century or two after Muhammad's death, those who followed the inner way of Islam wore coarse brown wool garments. They emphasized direct contact with God through mystical experiences. (Whirling Dervishes are Sufis.)

“We must never forget that they ‘profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day’”  
(*Lumen Gentium*, 16)

Pope Francis

– *Evangelii Gaudium*, 252

“All of us, Christians and Muslims, live under the sun of the one merciful God. We both believe in one God who is the creator of man. We acclaim God’s sovereignty and we defend man’s dignity as God’s servant. We adore God and profess total submission to him. Thus, in a true sense, we can call one another brothers and sisters in faith in the one God.”

– Saint John Paul II  
(Kaduna, Nigeria,  
14 February 1982)

## ■ Shared beliefs – Catholics and Muslims

- ▶ We worship one God, although we do not relate to God in the same way; we acknowledge God as merciful and almighty.
- ▶ We believe that God created heaven and earth.
- ▶ We believe that God has spoken to humankind, although our understanding of revelation is not the same.
- ▶ We await the Day of Judgment.
- ▶ We believe in the resurrection of the dead.
- ▶ We try to live lives that are morally upright.
- ▶ We pray, give alms and fast.

## ■ Differences between Catholics and Muslims<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ Catholics believe in the Trinity: one God in Three Divine Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Muslims do not accept this doctrine.
- ▶ Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet. Catholics worship Jesus as the Son of God.
- ▶ Catholics believe that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Muslims do not believe that God became incarnate in Jesus.
- ▶ Catholics believe that Jesus redeemed our sins through his death on the cross. Muslims do not share this belief.
- ▶ Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is God’s final revelation to humankind. Muslims believe the Qur’an to be God’s final revelation.
- ▶ Catholics believe that all people are born with the wound of original sin. Muslims believe that Adam and Eve sinned, but were forgiven, and that their descendants did not inherit their sinfulness.
- ▶ Catholics believe that God’s law prohibits divorce; the Qur’an permits but discourages divorce.
- ▶ In Islam, God makes his will known. In Christianity, God not only gives his will, he gives himself.
- ▶ It is important to caution against what dialogue experts refer to as “the word trap”. Christians and Muslims may use the same term or speak of the same person, but their understandings of these terms may differ significantly. For instance, a Qur’anic presentation of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, prayer, almsgiving and pilgrimage has a certain meaning that may not be shared by Christians. Open and clear discussions are required in every dialogue to avoid misunderstandings.

<sup>1</sup> The Qur’an clearly denies three great mysteries of the Christian faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Jesus’ death and resurrection.

## ■ Catholic–Muslim Dialogue



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has a commission dedicated to dialogue with Christians and other religious traditions: the Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue.

The Commission forms relationships with other Churches, ecclesial communities and religious traditions.

It fosters dialogues that promote Christian unity, and with other religious traditions, a better understanding of belief. The commitment of the Canadian Bishops to interreligious dialogue was greatly inspired by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which encouraged deeper understanding of other faith communities. “The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” *Nostra Aetate*, had this to say about Muslims:

The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to all people. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting.

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all... and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. (*Nostra Aetate*, n. 3)



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The Second Vatican Council was called by Saint John XXIII and concluded by Blessed Paul VI. The Council supported dialogue with other Christians and with members of other religious traditions. On Pentecost Sunday in 1964, Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with people of other religious traditions. He called it the Secretariat for Non-Christians.

After the Council, Paul VI encouraged the Secretariat, now the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, to write a message to Muslims on the occasion of the end of Ramadan each year.



“We thank the Almighty for what we have in common, while remaining aware of our differences. We perceive the importance of promoting a fruitful dialogue built upon mutual respect and friendship. Inspired by our shared values and strengthened by our sentiments of genuine fraternity, we are called to work together for justice, peace and respect for the rights and dignity of every person. We feel responsible in a particular way for those most in need: the poor, the sick, orphans, immigrants, victims of human trafficking, and those suffering from any kind of addiction.”

– Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran,  
*Towards a Genuine Fraternity  
between Christians and  
Muslims* (Message for the end  
of Ramadan, 2014)

The Pontifical Council has three goals:

1. To promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and followers of other religious traditions;
2. To encourage the study of religions;
3. To promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

In 1974, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims was formed. The Commission’s mandate is to help build and support religious dialogue with Muslims. Dialogue commissions have also been set up at regional, national and international levels around the world. The Church situates interreligious dialogue within the evangelizing mission of the Church. The dialogue is a dialogue of salvation. “God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind. In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the Church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women.” (*Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 38).

Four forms of dialogue have been encouraged:

1. Dialogue of Life: Christians witness to their own faith and way of life while in dialogue with others;
2. Dialogue of Action: The call to safeguard and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values through dialogue;
3. Theological Exchange or Dialogue of Experts: Enables specialists to deepen their understanding of their own tradition and appreciate the value in other religions;
4. Dialogue of Religious Experience: Delves deeper into personal religious experience and fosters solidarity in prayer and in discussions about religious experience.

Saint John Paul II encouraged this vision when, in 1986, he invited religious leaders to come to Assisi for an interreligious gathering focused on the theme of world peace. A number of Muslims accepted the invitation.

Other agreements between scholars also began to take shape: for example, an academic cooperation agreement between Ankara University in Turkey and the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome has resulted in an exchange of professors and in a number of colloquia being held in both Rome and Ankara.

In a colloquium on holiness in Christianity and Islam, on May 9, 1985, Saint John Paul II said: “We do believe, Christians and Muslims, in the one God, the living God, the God who created the world, and this is a powerful common ground on which to build together true holiness in obedience and worship to God.”

In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI visited a mosque in Turkey, where he said:



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

“Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will ... Freedom of religion, institutionally guaranteed and effectively respected in practice, both for individuals and communities constitutes for all believers the necessary condition for their loyal contribution to the building up of society in an attitude of authentic service, especially toward the most vulnerable and the very poor.”

“As religious leaders, we are obliged to denounce all violations against human dignity and human rights. Human life, a gift of God the Creator, possesses a sacred character. As such, any violence which seeks religious justification warrants the strongest condemnation because the Omnipotent is the God of life and peace. The world expects those who claim to adore God to be men and women of peace who are capable of living as brothers and sisters, regardless of ethnic, religious, cultural or ideological differences.”

– Pope Francis (Ankara, 28 November 2014)

## ■ Challenges to Dialogue

The plight of Christians in the Middle East continues to be a serious concern for the universal Church and therefore a challenge to Catholic–Muslim dialogue.

The lack of protection of fundamental human rights, such as freedom of religion and freedom from fear and want, continues to threaten the very existence of Christians in this region.

It must be noted that in some instances Muslims have tried to protect their Christian neighbours from extremist elements of Islam; yet, despite these honourable acts, Christians in the Middle East continue to suffer greatly. Both Muslims and Christians suffer much at the hands of those who unconscionably choose to use religion as a justification for violence.

## ■ Catholics and Muslims in Canada

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) is represented on the National Muslim Christian Liaison Committee (NMCLC).

Formed over 15 years ago, this Committee has aspired to bring together several Muslim and Christian national organizations to dialogue together as people of faith in Canada.

In the past, the NMCLC has taken on projects such as “Families Meeting Families,” in which Muslim and Christian families were paired and invited to get to know each other and their faiths through social interaction. One of the most successful programs has been the Recognition

Dinner, in which a Muslim and a Christian are recognized for their contribution in furthering understanding between Muslims and Christians. Most recently in March 2015 the NMCLC hosted a public event entitled: “Decisions in End of Life Care- Christian and Muslim Perspectives.”



Iraqi women sing during a Christmas Mass in a Chaldean church in Baghdad (25 December 2004).

Photo: © AP Images



Photo: Courtesy of the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto

Muslim-Catholic Student Dialogue of Toronto



“On behalf of the Bishops, priests, religious and lay Catholics of Canada, I unequivocally state that we are also committed to dialogue with the Muslim communities spread throughout our land.”

– Statement by Archbishop Paul-André Durocher, President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (24 October 2014)

In addition to national efforts, there are many local Catholic and Muslim dialogues happening throughout dioceses across Canada, including the archdioceses of Edmonton, Montreal and Toronto. These local efforts at dialogue and collaboration between neighboring parishes and mosques are proving especially fruitful.

In 2007, 138 prominent Muslim leaders and scholars issued an open letter entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You.” The writers note the common elements of belief in God, love of God, love of neighbour, and the importance of promoting peace in the world, since Muslims and Christians together make up a large percentage of the world’s population.

In November 2008, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and representatives of the 138 Muslim leaders who signed the open letter to Christian leaders established the Catholic–Muslim Forum, which meets every



Photo: L'Osservatore Romano

three years. At its most recent meeting in November 2014, Forum participants deliberated on the theme “Working Together to Serve Others.”

In August 2008, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue issued a response to “A Common Word Between Us and You”:

We acknowledge with great interest and hope the Open Letter entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You.” ... Here in Canada, we are grateful that Muslims and Catholics together with other Christians and members of all faiths, can live in peace and harmony. .... We endorse and promote the dialogue required to maintain and strengthen Christian and Muslim collaboration, at the same time fostering a genuine spirit of mutual understanding. ... We pray it be God’s will that the Open Letter help us all in building relations of respect and cooperation among faith communities.

For more information on ecumenical and interfaith relations, visit the official website of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops: [www.cccb.ca](http://www.cccb.ca)

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