**Minutes of
Arab-Western and Muslim-Christian Relations
London , 23-25 October 2003**

***Introduction***

1. The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Relations invited a number of Christian and Muslim partners in Europe , North America and Australia to a meeting held in London 24-25 October 2003. On the evening of 23 October the Trinity Institute for Christianity and Culture hosted the participants at its centre in South Kensington in a programme hosted by the Bishop of London, the Rt. Hon and Rt. Revd Dr Richard Chartres.
2. The meeting took place on the background of the occupation of Iraq and the uncertainty and deteriorating security situation there, and in the context of the increasing physical and mental suffering and escalating violence affecting the everyday lives of everyone in Palestine . The Arab Working Group was concerned that this should be an occasion for it to impress on its partners the severity of these issues and to explore ways of getting this message to a wider audience outside the Middle East region.
3. A number of short prepared papers were presented:

**:: Arab-Western mutual perceptions, attitudes, and challenges: Introductory Paper**

**:: Christian-Muslim relations as they reflect or influence political disagreement**

**:: Jerusalem and Palestine the question of Palestine and its centrality to mutual understanding.**

***Discussion***

**3.**The background to much of today's discussion about and images of conflicts in the Arab world is located in historical memories and imaginations which differ, often radically, according to the parties. It was suggested the role of religion in defining communities in this context contributes to the complexity, since religion functions primarily as community ( *ta'ifa*) rather than as faith and so people who have no faith help to define communities in which people do have faith. In a situation such as that in Palestine/Israel historical memories therefore open communities defined by religion to political manipulation and exploitation

**4.**Such historical memories, and the stereotypes which follow, are regularly reproduced in media reporting of events in the region. They in turn reinforce the stereotypes and so the whole process is repeated and its hold on the public imagination deepened. This is overlaps with those more ‘scientific' analyses which prefer to describe particular groups in essentialist terms. The ‘orientalism' defined by the late Edward Said and others, as applying to a certain European and American academic tradition, is paralleled by, for example, the ignorance of western public opinion and some Arab leaders of the internal varieties of Christianity both within the region and among those western Christian groups which have or seek a presence in the region, as well as of much Arab portrayal of Israeli or western society. Some Arab participants expressed the fear that Arab public opinion has been provoked by US policies to move towards a view that Americans *en bloc*are the ‘enemy'. This would effectively deprive the US of the ability to influence opinion in the region in any constructive direction.

The media themselves, especially those of the West, are often dismissed in similarly essentialist terms. This fails to acknowledge that there are reporters and media outlets which do not necessarily fit the anti-Arab and islamophobic stereotypes. It was noted that public opinion in Europe particularly has become much more sympathetic to Arab perspectives on Palestine in recent years, and that popular opposition to Coalition activity in Iraq has been widespread. It has to be recorded that the reporting and analyses of the much-maligned media have contributed significantly to this change.

**5.**Participants expressed their strong dissatisfaction at the way in which easy generalisations and stereotypes are often allowed to take the place of analysis of the complexity of the local situations, their interrelationship with regional factors and to treat them in isolation from global contexts, as well as ignoring the potential global impacts of events in the region. There has thus often been a tendency to explain conflicts in religious terms: Palestine/Israel as a Jewish-Muslim conflict, Lebanon and Sudan in terms of Islam and Christianity. More recently, the ‘clash of civilisations' idea has been imposed, and the so-called Christian-Muslim conflict threatens to become global, so that events in Iraq spark riots in Nigeria or Pakistan and increase he insecurity of Muslim communities in Europe. Participants were agreed that all of these issues are political in nature and can only be explained and solved by political analyses of the interplay of the processes of power, communal (nation, ethnicity, religion) interests and self-perceptions, violence and political institutions such as the state. In this context it was noted with interest that the positions taken by many European states and popular movements in opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 has undermined the strength of the Christian-Muslim conflict scenario, popular during the previous war in 1991, and exposed the US play for regional power.

The group was solidly critical of the use of violence as a means to achieve political ends, firstly because of the abhorrence of violence expressed in both Muslim and Christian teachings and secondly because it more often than not worsened the political situation and imposed widespread suffering on innocent people. But the group was equally critical of the self-interested manipulation and double standards hiding behind the use of the concepts of ‘terror' and ‘terrorism'. All agreed that, so long as this remains the case, these terms serve only to confuse public opinion and to prevent the serious analysis which is so urgently necessary. The group was deeply impatient with the simultaneous application of discussions of values (such as democracy, human rights, justice, peaceful protest, and the rule of law) to symptoms of a conflict and of the refusal to apply such values to the underlying causes.

**6.**Much attention has been devoted to the growth of ‘islamophobia' in many parts of the world after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks in New York and Washington DC . However, participants spoke of many positive responses and ultimately significant improvements in Muslim-Christian relations in many parts of the world. The active opposition of church leaders in all continents against the recent war in Iraq as well as the growing support for justice in Palestine has broken the widely-held consensus, which had grown especially during the 1990s, that there was a ‘civilisational clash' between Christianity and Islam. Immediately after 9/11 many churches opened their doors as a refuge to local Muslims, and church leaders condemned attacks on Muslims and Islamic institutions. Many mosques and Islamic centres, as well as colleges and university departments, have seen a major growth in positive interest in learning about Islam and in establishing relations with Muslims. In some countries, such as the UK , a longer-term growth in interfaith activities has accompanied a growing realisation of the importance of the participation of all religious communities in the public sphere. Ideas of civic society, common citizenship and shared neighbourly responsibility have gained ground.

On the other hand, many participants were deeply worried about the activities of intolerant and radical trends within Christianity and Islam propagating exclusive claims for their versions of the faith, often associated with manipulation of political and economic means of power and in some cases resorting to violence. After 9/11, of course, phenomena like Al-Qaeda inspire fear in the West but are actually more of a threat to the Muslim world itself, both in themselves and through the justification they offer to those who wish to act against the interests of Muslim communities and countries. But as much, if not more, cause for concern are those aggressively proselytising Christian organisations who have been using the current situation to target the Muslim world. Particular mention was made of the US projects associated with the Revd Franklin Graham and others who have seen Iraq as ‘ripe for conversion'. While the security situation has discouraged their activities, this is likely to be only a temporary pause. Such activity is provocative to Muslims and destabilises civil society. Worse, it is a direct threat to the position of the existing Middle Eastern churches and to the security of their congregations.

**7.**The various conflicts and tensions in the region have often mobilised religious identities as parties against none another and appealed to religious community loyalties against the other. There was broad agreement that such misuse of religion is damaging both to the communities and to the real role which Islam and Christianity should be playing. The teachings of both religions share a concern for justice for everyone, regardless of religious identity. Participants agreed that followers of both faiths had a wide responsibility to help transform society through the struggle for justice and respect for human dignity, even when this could be uncomfortable to one's own community. Here is an agenda where the mainstream of Christian and Muslim believers and institutions could come together as both a moral and political force against the extremists in the two religions.

***Recommendations***

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| 8.1.   | The Arab Working Group is encouraged to work with its international partners to establish some form of network or alliance aimed at concerting activities and exchange of information. Such a structure could exist primarily as an electronic network with a website (including links to other useful sites), mailing lists etc.  |
| 8.2.   | Symbolic and practical actions of solidarity should be identified and participation in them be encouraged through the spread of information and networking.  |
| 8.3.   | The Arab Working Group should send small delegations to meet with local and regional churches in North America , Europe and Australia to explain Middle East perspectives on current issues, in cooperation with partners in the localities concerned.  |
| 8.4.    | Together with UK partners, the Arab Working Group is encouraged to send a team to meet with the London-based media to engage them in discussion and briefing about current events of concern. Similar events could be held in other major media centres in other countries.  |
| 8.5.   | The Arab Working Group and its partners, perhaps within the framework of the network suggested in 8.1, should consider developing appropriate education materials and programmes. |