

Archbishop to sign Anglican-Muslim agreement

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, is to sign an historic agreement with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar al-Sharif, Dr Mohamed Sayed Tantawy, putting into place arrangements for a programme of dialogue between Anglicans and Sunni Muslims. The signing will take place during a ceremony at Lambeth Palace on January 30th.

The agreement, which is the fruit of talks and negotiations between Anglican and Sunni Muslim scholars over several years, sets out the structures for a formal process of discussion, debate and agreement and details the principles and expectations on which such talks can be based.

Dr Carey said the move was deeply encouraging:

"I'm delighted that we have found so much common ground and that we are now able to move ahead in our understanding of one another. We have convictions we can share and it is in understanding what it is that unites us as well as what divides us which makes this such a challenging and rewarding endeavour. Deepening dialogue between people of different faiths has never come at so crucial a time for the world."

Text of the dialogue agreement between al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Anglican Communion:

A PROPOSAL FOR THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION AND AL-AZHAR AL-SHARIF

We affirm the importance of building on the excellent relations between the Anglican Communion and al-Azhar al-Sharif.

We acknowledge the brotherly relations between the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Dr Mohamed Sayed Tantawy and Dr George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the Anglican Communion.

We believe that friendship which overcomes religious, ethnic and national differences is a gift of the Creator in whom we all believe.

We recognise that both sides need to accept each other in a straightforward way so as to be able to convey the message of peace to the world.

We believe that direct dialogue results in restoration of the image of each in the eyes of the other.

Continuing from the visit of Dr Carey to al-Azhar al-Sharif in October 1995 and the visit of Dr Tantawy, the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar al-Sharif to Lambeth Palace in 1997 and the return visit of Dr Carey to al-

Azhar al-Sharif in November 1999,

and because of our common faith in God and our responsibility to witness against indifference to religion on the one hand and religious fanaticism on the other,

we hope that we may contribute to international efforts to achieve justice, peace and the welfare of all humanity,

resourced by the positive experiences in our long history as Christians and Muslims living together both in Egypt and the United Kingdom and many other parts of the world.

In consequence of this, Dr George Carey, the President of the Anglican Communion, has appointed the following members to the Interfaith Commission:

1. The Revd Canon Dr Christopher Lamb
2. The Rt Revd Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis, Bishop in Egypt with North Africa
3. The Rt Revd David Smith, Bishop of Bradford, UK

The members of the Permanent Committee of al-Azhar al-Sharif for Dialogue on Monotheistic Religions are:

1. Sheikh Fawzy El Zefzaf, President
2. Dr Ali El Samman, Vice President
3. Ambassador Dr Ahmed Maray
4. Dr Mustaffa Al Shakfah
5. Sheikh Abu Agour
6. Ambassador Nabil Badre

Representatives of both sides met in al-Azhar on 10 and 11 September 2001 and discussed the proposal for the dialogue between the Anglican Communion and al-Azhar al-Sharif with the hope of achieving the following goals:

1. To encourage Anglicans to understand Islam and to encourage Muslims to understand the Christian faith.
2. To share together in solving problems and conflicts that happen sometimes between Muslims and Christians in different parts of the world, and to encourage religious leaders to use their influence for the purpose of reconciliation and peace making.
3. To work together against injustice and the abuse of human rights among different nationalities and spreading the good teaching of both Islam and Christianity.
4. To encourage institutions on both sides to play a positive role in development.

To achieve these goals the following decisions were taken:

- A Joint Committee will be established from both sides composed of a Chairman and two members from each side already appointed. It may be possible in the future to add new members but each side will inform the other about its membership.
- This Joint Committee will meet at least once a year in Egypt and the United Kingdom alternately. Each delegation will cover its expenses for travel and accommodation and could meet more than once a year if necessary.

At the end of each meeting a Press Release will be issued. The text of the communiqué must be agreed by

the Joint Committee before publication. No information about papers presented to the Joint Committee will be released outside it without the agreement of both sides.

Notes for editors:

The University of al-Azhar al-Sharif in Cairo is over a thousand years old and is an international centre for Sunni Muslim scholars. Usually known in Arabic as 'the honoured Azhar', its Grand Imam, Dr Tantawy, is acknowledged as Egypt's senior Islamic figure and holder of one of the most respected positions in Sunni Islam worldwide.

Dr Carey's time as Archbishop of Canterbury has been marked by a growing respect between Muslim and Anglican leaders. Dr Carey has twice lectured at al-Azhar, in 1995 and 1999 and Dr Tantawy visited Lambeth Palace in 1997. Also this month, in a separate development, Dr Carey is hosting a major seminar at Lambeth Palace involving Christian and Islamic scholars.