

A Common Word: Building Global Goodwill

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The Document's Origins and Contents

In the remote Jordanian desert, miles from any landmark or human traces, stands a solitary bhutum (pistachio) tree which has stood there some 1,500 years. There are no other trees for kilometres in any direction. Under that tree, tradition has it, Islam and Christianity first met 1,400 years ago when a Christian monk observed the tree lower its branches to shield a 9-year-old boy from the desert heat. The monk, Bahira, politely questioned the boy, Muhammad bin Abdullah from the clan of Hashem, and identified him as a future Prophet to his people.

Under this same tree in September 2007 was dedicated perhaps the most important harmonious contact between the two great monotheistic faiths in centuries. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan visited the tree and prayed under it before launching *A Common Word Between Us and You* on October 13, 2007. This initiative, coordinated by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought in Jordan, is an invitation signed by 138 Muslim leaders from across the theological and geographical spectrum to the Pope and other Christian leaders to work together for peace, justice and harmony based on two foundational principles of both religions, love of God and of neighbour. The breadth of signatories is unprecedented, including the main branches of Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi Islam, the president of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bosnia, Russia and Istanbul, and even the Jordanian director of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Reflecting on this venture a year later, Prince Ghazi said, "I do not think it is an exaggeration to say it has become the world's leading interfaith dialogue initiative between Christians and Muslims."¹ The 138 signatories had swelled to more than 300 in little more than a year, with a further 460 Islamic organisations endorsing

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¹A Common Word Between Us and You, Theological Motives and Expectations, address by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad to the Eugen Biser Award ceremony, 22 November 2008. <http://www.acommonword.com/en/Ghazi-Biser-Speech.pdf>. Actually, the speech was delivered by

it. In that time, more than 60 Christian leaders have responded warmly, including Pope Benedict XVI, Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, world Lutheran head Bishop Mark Hanson, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II and many American Protestant leaders. There have been important international conferences of Muslims and Christians at Yale University, Cambridge University, Lambeth Palace (home of the Archbishop of Canterbury) and the Vatican, and grassroots community responses across the globe. Importantly, many of these have emerged with concrete plans for the future, particular initiatives to improve understanding and harmony. So though this work is in its infancy, it is developing a momentum that may indeed reduce fear and suspicion among communities of both religions and may promote better understanding and social justice among both. As Prince Ghazi said, “one may fairly say that in its first year *A Common Word* achieved – by the grace of God, Al-HamduLillah – historically unprecedented ‘global traction’, and is hoping in its second year – with the Will of God, in sha Allah – to achieve historically unprecedented ‘global trickledown’.”²

Its immediate genesis was one of the less promising interactions between the two faiths: Pope Benedict’s 2006 address at Regensburg University in which he quoted Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached”.³ It was a peripheral part – almost an aside – of a speech about faith and reason, but it was highly inflammatory, and the Pope later apologised to Muslims, emphasising that it did not reflect his own view. Although most Muslims responded gracefully and proportionately, there were also violent responses, with churches in Asia and the Middle East being firebombed, and a nun murdered in Somalia, enabling critics to highlight the paradox of rebutting accusations of violence by acting violently. A much more irenic response came from a group of 38 Muslim scholars, led by Prince Ghazi, who wrote an open letter to the Pope. The only answer from the Vatican was “a perfunctory courtesy visit to me, a month later, from some Vatican officials” (Ghazi, 2008) the prince said. So a year later, the scholars tried again, adding another 100 signatories to symbolise that they were many and were serious. They also hired a public relations company and worked with Christian friends to create momentum.

The need for such an initiative is obvious, some would say desperate. The “clash of civilisations” thesis propounded by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington seems to many to be developing an inexorable inevitability, fuelled by Muslim political grievances against the West, mounting Western hostility and suspicion (especially after the September 11, 2001, attacks), difficulties in integrating large

the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Mustafa Ceric, after the expected closure of Munich airport due to bad weather forced Prince Ghazi to abandon his travel plans.

²A Common Word Between Us and You, Theological Motives and Expectations, address by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad to the Eugen Biser Award ceremony, 22 November 2008. <http://www.acommonword.com/en/Ghazi-Biser-Speech.pdf>.

³<http://www.zenit.org/article-16955?l=english>.

and often economically disadvantaged Muslim communities into Europe, rising religious fundamentalism (on both sides) and ancient mistrust and misunderstandings. Yet at the same time growing economic, social and cultural interdependence in a globalised world make it clear that former geographical and cultural boundaries can no longer apply. Perhaps a third of Muslims now live in non-Muslim majority countries, especially in India but increasingly in the West.

The Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Mustafa Ceric, put it elegantly and clearly in his address to the Catholic-Muslim Forum at the Vatican in November 2008.⁴

What is the purpose of our age? Is it the clash or alliance of civilisations? Is it violence or reconciliation? What are the fears of our time and what are the hopes? . . . The fears are many. Ours is a time of grave sins, such as wealth without effort, pleasure without conscience, education without morality, business without ethics, politics without principles, science without responsibility, faith without sacrifice and religion without compassion . . . But there is hope and great opportunities.... The need for the Muslim-Catholic dialogue is obvious, not only because of our claim to the common heritage of Abraham, but also because of our heritage of a historical interaction that could not be avoided in the past and a historical responsibility that cannot be ignored in the future. It is precisely in this historical unavoidability of the encounter between Catholicism and Islam that we see the reason for the advancement of A Common Word Between Us and You in many areas of mutual concern such as war and peace, justice and injustice, hunger and poverty, and the trust and prosperity of the world.

The document itself notes that Muslims and Christians make up well over half the world's population, and without peace and justice between these religious communities there can be no meaningful peace. "The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour".⁵

It is a substantial document, 15 pages long (though this was mostly signatures), filled with Qur'anic and Biblical references and discussion establishing these twin principles. There are sections on love of God, love of God within Islam, love of God as the first and greatest commandment in the Bible, love of the neighbour, love of the neighbour in Islam, love of the neighbour in the Bible and an invitation to a common word. The document recognises that some of the formal differences between the two religions cannot be minimised, but suggests that the two greatest commandments are an area of common ground between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament. It concludes that finding common ground is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders.

With the terrible weaponry of the modern world; with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake. And to those who nevertheless relish conflict and destruction for their own sake or reckon that ultimately they stand to gain through them, we say that our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace

⁴<http://acommonword.com/en/conferences/20-rome-november-2008/106-address-by-his-eminence-mustafa-ceric-grand-mufti-of-bosnia.html>.

⁵<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>.

and come together in harmony . . . So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to (one) another, and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.

Jordan's Prince Ghazi, the initiative's chief architect, told the Yale conference in July 2008 it represented "an extended global handshake of religious goodwill, friendship and fellowship and consequently of inter-religious peace".⁶ He further explained the motives and expectations of the Muslim scholars in a speech in Germany in November 2008, saying they had only one motive: peace.

We were aiming to try to spread peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims all over the world, not through governments and treaties but on the all-important popular and mass level, through the world's most influential popular leaders . . . We wanted to stop the drumbeat of what we feared was a growing popular consensus (on both sides) for worldwide (and thus cataclysmic and perhaps apocalyptic) Muslim-Christian jihad/crusade. We were keenly aware, however, that peace efforts required also another element: knowledge. We thus aimed to try (to) spread proper basic knowledge of our religion in order to correct and abate the constant and unjust vilification of Islam, in the West especially (Ghazi, 2008).

Response from Yale

Many of the Christian leaders addressed responded quickly and warmly, including Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist and Churches of Christ leaders, and leading academics from Yale, Princeton, Harvard and Cambridge universities. Indeed, Yale Divinity School published an effusive reply as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on November 18, 2007, written by four Yale theologians – Miroslav Volf, Harold W. Attridge, Joseph Cumming and Emilie M. Townes – and signed by more than 300 leading Christians, including many Evangelicals. The respondents not only were "deeply encouraged and challenged" by the historic Muslim open letter, which they received as "a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide", but also sought forgiveness from the All-Merciful One and the Muslim community around the world for past and present sins against Muslims, such as the crusades and excesses in the war on terror.⁷ They called the Muslim letter courageous, heartening, deeply insightful and a source of hope. They agreed that the common ground of love of God and of neighbour should be the basis of interfaith dialogue, saying "in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree. . . . Given the deep fissures in the relations between Christians and Muslims today, the task before us is daunting. And the stakes are great". The Yale letter said the next step should be for leaders at every level to meet to determine how to fulfil the requirement to love God and one

⁶http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/Yale_Comm_Word_Conf_2008_Open_Stmt_HRH_Prince_Ghazi.pdf.

⁷<http://www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw.htm>.

another. “We commit ourselves to labour together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.”

Indeed they did, hosting a conference in July 2008 for 140 Christian and Muslim scholars. It produced a Final Declaration with four points of agreement.⁸ First is the unity and absoluteness of God, whose merciful love is infinite, eternal and embraces all things. Second is the recognition of rights, including freedom of religion. It notes: “No Muslim or Christian should deny the other these rights, nor should they tolerate the denigration or desecration of one another’s sacred symbols, founding figures or places of worship,” a formula which covers Muslim concerns about denigration of the Prophet Muhammad by critics of Islam and Christian concerns about persecution and lack of freedom to worship for Christians in many Muslim countries. The third point commits both sides to furthering these principles through continuous dialogue, and the fourth deplors threats against those who engage in interfaith dialogue (without indicating where such threats come from).

The Response: Archbishop of Canterbury

The Anglican response was also warm, if a little more measured. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, aided by scholars from many Christian traditions, prepared a 17-page response entitled *A Common Word for the Common Good*⁹ which, like Yale, welcomed the Muslim generosity of intention but expressed more modest expectations while seeing it as a pathway to better mutual understanding. In this response, published in July 2008, Dr Williams writes that some have read the invitation as an insistence that Muslims and Christians should be able immediately to affirm an agreed and shared understanding of God. But such an affirmation would not be honest to either tradition. It would fail to acknowledge the reality of the differences that have been the cause of deep and even violent division.

We read your letter as expressing a more modest but ultimately a more realistically hopeful recognition that the ways in which we as Christians and Muslims speak about God and humanity are not simply mutually unintelligible systems. We interpret your invitation as saying ‘let us find a way of recognising that on some matters we are speaking enough of a common language for us to be able to pursue both exploratory dialogue and peaceful co-operation with integrity and without compromising fundamental beliefs’.

Dr Williams says the invitation should spur further discussion within the Christian family and within the Muslim family as well as between the two faiths, because it invites all to think afresh about the foundations of their convictions.

He suggests five areas which might be fruitfully followed through. First, *A Common Word’s* focus on the love and praise of God underlines a shared commitment – the fixed intention to relate all reality and all behaviour intelligently,

⁸http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/Yale_Common_Word_Conf_2008_Final_Decl.pdf.

⁹www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/media/word/2/j/A_Common_Word_for_the_Common_Good.doc.

faithfully and practically to the God who deals with us in love, compassion, justice and peace. There are differences as well as similarities in the ways the two faiths understand and express the love of God and of neighbour, and these could be explored. Second, the commitment to love of neighbour that is rooted in the love of God suggests both faiths have a passion for the common good of all creation. This has practical implications for future relations with each other and the rest of the world. The third area is both faiths' emphasis on sacred texts. The concern to ground what each says in its Scriptures shows a desire to meet not at the margins of their historical identities but speaking from what is central and authoritative for each. The faiths differ slightly in the role they accord their Scripture, Dr Williams writes, but for each faith Scripture provides the basic tools for speaking of God. Therefore it is in attending to how they use their holy texts that each can learn most truly the nature of each other's faith. The fourth area of promise is the way *A Common Word* encourages the faiths to relate to each other from the heart of their lives of faith. "However much or little 'common ground' we initially sense between us, it is possible to engage with each other without anxiety if we truly begin from the heart of what we believe we have received from God; possible to speak together, respecting and discussing differences rather than imprisoning ourselves in mutual fear and suspicion." The fifth area the archbishop identified is the sense of shared calling and shared responsibility that flows from the focus on love of God and neighbour. "We acknowledge gratefully your recognition that the differences between Christians and Muslims are real and serious and that you do not claim to address all the issues. . . . In our response, it is this search for a common awareness of responsibility before God that we shall seek to hold before us as a vision worthy of our best efforts."

A Common Word for the Common Good then engages in extended analysis of the concept of the one God who is love, suggesting a theological model by which Muslims can understand the Christian concept of a triune God who is nevertheless one, a unity. This model is built around the Christian concept of God as love, and Dr Williams suggests that how much this has in common with the vital Islamic conviction that God is the Compassionate, the Merciful is a significant area for further work. But the Muslim letter and Christian responses make it clear, he says, that the two faiths do have a basis on which they can explore together in a spirit of "truly neighbourly" love. The Anglican response then considers what is involved in responding to God's gift of love, what is involved in loving one's neighbour and how to seek the common good in the way of God. This is important particularly because it tackles the problem of religious violence. In a footnote, Dr Williams extensively quotes Colin Chapman, an Anglican expert on Islam, who says both sides need to recognise several important factors. Over 1,400 years of sometimes difficult relations, both faiths have at different times and in different places been associated with conquest and empire, and conflicts have left their mark on the collective memory of both communities. They should understand that there is a wide variety of reasons for tensions in different situations today. Although there are some common factors where Muslims and Christians live side by side, nevertheless there is also in each situation a unique set of political, economic, cultural or social factors that contribute to the tensions. Furthermore, both faiths have large numbers living as a minority. In

such contexts, both Christians and Muslims face similar dilemmas and may have more in common with each other than with secular neighbours. Chapman also cites Israel–Palestine as a vital issue to both sides, where both have a responsibility to work for a just resolution. He believes the concept of love of the neighbour could help address many of these immediate issues around the world. Both faiths teach the Golden Rule (do to others as you would have them do to you; love for your brother what you love for yourself):

This must mean in practice, for example, that when Western Christians try to put themselves in the shoes of the Christians in Egypt and reflect on how they would like to be treated in that minority situation, this should affect the way that they think about Muslim minorities in the West. The principle of reciprocity seems to many to be a natural expression of love of the neighbour, since it means wanting for our neighbours what we want for ourselves. Its acceptance by both Christians and Muslims would help to resolve many of the tensions experienced by both Christian and Muslim minorities.¹⁰

Dr Williams writes that religious violence suggests an underlying religious insecurity, often expressed as the need to “protect God’s interests”. Expressing it in such terms shows how absurd it is, because the eternal God cannot need “protection” by the tactics of human violence. Trying to compel religious allegiance through violence is really a way of trying to replace divine power with human – that is why the Qur’an insists there can be no compulsion in religion. But religious identity has often been confused with cultural or national integrity, with structures of social control, with class and regional identity and with empire, and it has been imposed in the interest of these and other forms of power. Despite Jesus’ injunction, Christianity has been promoted at the point of the sword and legally supported by extreme sanctions. Despite the Qur’an, Islam has been supported in the same way, with extreme penalties (up to death) for abandoning it and civil disabilities for those outside the faith. “There is no religious tradition whose history is exempt from such temptation and such failure,” Dr Williams notes. “What we need as a vision for our dialogue is to break the current cycles of violence, to show the world that faith and faith alone can truly ground a commitment to peace which definitively abandons the tempting but lethal cycle of retaliation in which we simply imitate each other’s violence.” In another extensive footnote, Dr Williams cites important reflections by Australian Jesuit theologian Daniel Madigan, who notes that it is easy to overestimate the threat of inter-religious violence and that in fact people who shared a faith have historically proved far more lethal than Muslims to Christians or vice versa. “More Muslims are killed daily by other Muslims than by Christians or anyone else. The huge numbers who went to their deaths in the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s were virtually all Muslims.” (To which I add, Muslims are by far the chief victims of Muslim suicide bombers.)

Scarcely any of the tens of millions of Christians who have died in European wars over the centuries were killed by Muslims. The greatest shame of the last century was the killing of millions of Jews by Christians conditioned by their own long tradition of anti-Semitism and

¹⁰A Common Word for the Common Good, footnote 30, p. 12

seduced by a virulently nationalist and racist new ideology. The last 15 years in Africa have seen millions of Christians slaughtered in horrendous civil wars by their fellow believers. So let us not be misled into thinking either that Muslim-Christian conflict is the world's greatest conflict, or even that war is the most serious threat to the human future.¹¹

Dr Williams continues by suggesting that the unconditional and self-sacrificial love of neighbour promotes peace by taking people beyond a bland affirmation that they are at peace with those who are at peace with them, to a new place where their religious convictions can help create peace where there is none. This approach does not require either Christianity or Islam to water down its core convictions.

Far from being a cause for concern, holding fast to our truth claims whilst rejecting violence does two very positive things at once. First it affirms the transcendent source of faith: it says that our views are not just human constructions which we can abandon when they are inconvenient. Second, by insisting that no other values, no secular values, are absolute, it denies to all other systems of values any justification for uncontrolled violence. Transcendent values can be defended through violence only by those who do not fully understand their transcendent character.

Furthermore, religious plurality helps social unity.

Where diverse groups exist together, they have a shared interest in common security. We learn that we best defend ourselves by defending others. In a plural society, Christians secure their religious liberty by advocating the liberty of people of other faiths to have the same right to be heard in the continuing conversation about the direction and ethos of society.

This insight goes yet deeper into the realm of social justice. If we are in the habit of defending each other we should defend other groups and communities too. Together we can speak for those who have no voice or leverage in society, including migrants and minorities, Dr Williams says:

Our voice in the conversation of society will be the stronger for being a joint one. If we are to be true to the dual commandment of love, we need to find ways of being far more effective in influencing our societies to follow the way of God in promoting that which leads to human flourishing – honesty and faithfulness in public and private relationships, in business as in marriage and family life; the recognition that a person's value is not an economic matter; the clear recognition that neither material wealth nor entertainment can secure a true and deep-rooted human fulfilment.

As Muslims and Christians deepen their engagement, they should seek three main outcomes, Dr Williams suggests. Maintain and strengthen the momentum of interfaith encounter; find safe spaces within which the differences, as well as the convergences, between Christians and Muslims can be properly explored; and expand the influence of interfaith encounters into local communities and those engaged in the wider realities of our societies. To keep the encounters focused and effective, they need to establish broad priorities, Dr Williams says. Each faith tradition urgently needs to be educated about the other, to overcome prejudice and

¹¹A Common Word for the Common Good, footnote 33, page 13.

misunderstandings inherited from the past and often perpetuated by media stereotyping. Opportunities for interfaith encounters need to be multiplied, on many different levels and in different settings – especially educational projects, working towards the Millennium Development Goals, and working for reconciliation in situations of conflict and historic enmities. And if these encounters are to be sustainable, all participants need to commit to the process and to each other. “Such a commitment, growing into affection, respect, collegiality and friendship, will be an expression of love of neighbour; it will also be done in love for God and in response to God’s will.”

Dr Williams’ paper was warmly received by Muslims. Professor Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for *A Common Word*, called it the most extensive, profound and comprehensive of the Christian responses:

The Archbishop has reciprocated our call for a serious and sincere dialogue . . . We are deeply appreciative of the fact Dr Williams’ response is extremely thoughtful and engaging, its spirit and tone reflecting a seriousness and erudition which one needs in order to engage in result-oriented and constructive dialogue.¹²

He particularly appreciated the theological contribution that showed the possibility of explaining some of the most difficult theological issues, such as the Trinity, in ways that could build bridges between the two communities rather than alienating them, and also the suggested guidelines for deepening dialogue.

The paper was followed by a Christian–Muslim conference at Cambridge University and Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s official London residence, in October 2008 involving some 40 Muslim and Christian clerics and scholars – according to the communiqué at the end, the most significant gathering of international Muslim leaders ever held in the United Kingdom, with Christian participants of similar stature. That forum was being held at the same time as renewed and strengthened persecution by Islamists of the ancient Christian community in Mosul, Iraq, was receiving media attention, and the communiqué – issued in the names of Dr Williams and Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomma – addressed it directly:

As we were meeting together we were deeply troubled to learn of the situation in Mosul where threats to the Christian community have further added to the tragic Iraqi refugee situation. These threats undermine the centuries-old tradition of local Muslims protecting and nourishing the Christian community and must stop. We are profoundly conscious of the terrible suffering endured by Iraqi people of every creed in recent years and wish to express our solidarity with them. We find no justification in Islam or Christianity for those promoting the insecurity or perpetrating the violence evident in parts of Iraq. We call upon the religious, political and community leaders to do all in their power to promote the return of all persons and communities, including the ancient Christian communities, and ensure a stable environment in which all citizens can flourish. We unequivocally declare that, in Iraq as anywhere else in the world, no person or community should be persecuted or threatened on account of their religious faith. We must all have a particular concern for religious minorities in our midst.¹³

¹²Footnote 33, page 13.

¹³<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=misc&item=ibrahim-kalin>.

The plight of the Assyrians did not noticeably improve, but it was an important development nevertheless. Western critics of Islam have often complained that Muslims are highly sensitive to the suffering of the Ummah (global Muslims) but seem indifferent to the suffering of non-Muslims, especially if caused by Muslims, and have called for just such statements as this. When it came, it could scarcely be more definite or authoritative – a powerful example of interfaith initiatives directed at improving social justice.

The severity of the global financial crisis was also becoming obvious at the time, after a period of limited optimism that coordinated international interventions might minimise the damage, and the communiqué addressed this too, pleading with the international community not to forget the disadvantaged as they battered down the hatches:

We live in an increasingly global world that brings with it increased interdependence. The closer we are drawn together by this globalisation and interdependence, the more urgent is the need to understand and respect one another in order to find a way out of our troubles. Meeting at a time of great turbulence in the world financial system, our hearts go out to the many people throughout the world whose lives and livelihood are affected by the current crisis. When a crisis of this magnitude occurs we are all tempted to think solely of ourselves and our families and ignore the treatment of minorities and the less fortunate. . . . It is out of an understanding of shared values that we urge world leaders and our faithful everywhere to act together to ensure that the burden of this financial crisis and also the global environmental crisis does not fall unevenly on the weak and poor. We must seize the opportunity for implementing a more equitable global economic system that also respects our role as stewards of the earth's resources.

The communiqué noted the generous spirit and collegial processes underlying the Muslim invitation and the Archbishop of Canterbury's reply, saying it had enabled them to begin exploring areas of potential agreement as well as difficulties that have sometimes become the focus for misunderstanding and hostility. They discussed the understanding of scripture, shared moral values, respect for foundational figures, religious freedom and religiously motivated violence. They were also eager to identify specific ways to broaden and deepen the interfaith encounter, and set themselves four tasks for 2009. These were to identify and promote educational materials, for all age groups and in many languages, that both faiths accept as providing a fair reflection; to build a network of academic institutions, linking scholars and resources, and establishing teams to work on shared values; to find money to facilitate exchanges between people training for leadership within the religious communities; and to translate significant texts from each tradition for the use of the other.

The Response from the Vatican

The Vatican was more cautious, and it took more than a month for the Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, to reply to Prince Ghazi of Jordan on November 19, 2007. He conveyed Pope Benedict's gratitude to the signatories and agreed that Christians and Muslims – without downplaying their differences – should look to

what united them, especially belief in the one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge.¹⁴ He said the Pope had emphasised from the start of his pontificate that the life of every human was sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims, and that there was plenty of scope for the two faiths to act together to promote fundamental moral values. Cardinal Bertone said the Pope would be most willing to receive Prince Ghazi and a group of the signatories, and said this delegation could meet the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to set up a further meeting. Prince Ghazi was also comparatively restrained in his reply, on December 12, 2007, accepting in principle the dialogue and arrangements. He reminded Cardinal Bertone of the purpose of dialogue, as expressed by Muslims at an interfaith conference in Naples in October 2007:

Dialogue is by definition between people of different views, not people of the same view. Dialogue is not about imposing one's views on the other side, nor deciding oneself what the other side is and is not capable of, nor even of what the other side believes. Dialogue starts with an open hand and an open heart. . . . Its purpose is to see where there is common ground in order to meet there and thereby make the world better, more peaceful, more harmonious and more loving.¹⁵

Prince Ghazi said the Muslim motive for dialogue with the Vatican was to seek goodwill and justice, and trusted that the Vatican had a similar general attitude to dialogue, quoting the famous words of St Paul on love in 1 Corinthians 13: 1–6. He said: “I mention these last things only in view of some recent pronouncements emerging from the Vatican and from Vatican advisors – which cannot have escaped the notice of Your Eminence – as regards the very principle of theological dialogue with Muslims. Howbeit, although many of us consider these pronouncements as having been superseded by your letter, we nevertheless wish to reiterate to you that we, like you, also consider complete theological agreement between Christians and Muslims inherently not possible by definition, but still wish to seek and promote a common stance and co-operation based upon what we do agree on.”¹⁶ Pope Benedict is regarded as taking a somewhat more astringent line on relations with Islam than his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who was an ardent advocate of interfaith dialogue. Benedict has identified it as an important challenge for the Catholic Church, but emphasises “reciprocity” — the idea that Catholic (and other) minorities should be given the same rights in Muslim countries that Muslims receive in the West. In a speech to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2006, he said:

In a dialogue to be intensified with Islam, we must bear in mind the fact that the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task. This task is very similar to the one that has been imposed upon Christians since the Enlightenment, and to which the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of long and difficult research, found real solutions for the

¹⁴http://www.campchabad.com/roman_curia/secretariat_state/card-bertone/2007/documents/rc_seg-st_20071119_muslim-leaders_en.html.

¹⁵<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/184641?eng=y>.

¹⁶Respected Italian journalist Sandro Magister published the full text of both letters on his online column on January 2, 2008, along with interesting commentary. <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/184641?eng=y>.

Catholic Church. It is a question of the attitude that the community of the faithful must adopt in the face of the convictions and demands that were strengthened in the Enlightenment. On the one hand, one must counter a dictatorship of positivist reason that excludes God from the life of the community and from public organisations, thereby depriving man of his specific criteria of judgment. On the other, one must welcome the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights and especially the freedom of faith and its practice, and recognise these also as being essential elements for the authenticity of religion. . . . The content of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims will be at this time especially one of meeting each other in this commitment to find the right solutions. We Christians feel in solidarity with all those who, precisely on the basis of their religious conviction as Muslims, work to oppose violence and for the synergy between faith and reason, between religion and freedom.¹⁷

The gulf between the Vatican and Islam was clearly wider than that felt by the American signatories to the Yale letter.

Nevertheless, in March 2008 a delegation came to the Vatican and set up the Vatican's first Catholic–Muslim Forum, held from November 4 to 6 that year, with 24 participants from each religion, plus a few advisors. Seyyed Hossein Nasr – an Iranian who is a professor at George Washington University in the United States and is respected in both Western and Islamic circles – gave a key address, repeating that only with peace between the two religions could there be peace between peoples and nations. It is remarkable, he observed, how theological positions in one tradition have their correspondence in the other. Both religions have created major civilisations, both claim universality for their message and both their histories have been intermingled with periods of violence, which has sometimes been legitimated by religious authorities. He made no apology for the discrepancy between religious freedom in countries with a Christian history and Muslim countries, suggesting that Christians in their position would be the same.

You and we, we both believe in religious freedom, but we Muslims do not allow an aggressive proselytising in our midst that would destroy our faith in the name of freedom any more than would Christians if they were in our situation. The encounter of Christianity with modernism, including secular humanism and rationalism associated with the Age of Enlightenment, has also been very different from the experience of that encounter with Islam. Perhaps we can each learn something from the other in this very significant matter. We should join together in the battle against the desacralising and anti-religious forces of the modern world, and joining effort should bring us closer together. Secularism should certainly not be a source for the creation of further distance between us.¹⁸

This plea must have registered, because later that month the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, thanked Muslims for putting God back into European public discourse. In a speech printed in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, Cardinal Tauran said religion was now talked and written about more than ever before. "It's thanks to the Muslims. Muslims, having become a significant minority in Europe, were the ones who

¹⁷http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061222_curia-romana_en.html.

¹⁸http://acommonword.com/en/attachments/107_Nasr-speech-to-Pope.pdf.

demanded space for God in society.”¹⁹ Tariq Ramadan, a leading European Muslim and forum participant, writing in the *Guardian* newspaper on November 3, the day before the forum opened, observed that the West has been shaped by Islam, as Islam has been shaped by the West. Like the Archbishop of Canterbury, he insisted that critical internal reflection must happen within the West and separately within Islam, to reconcile themselves to their respective pasts. And for interfaith dialogue, a constructive conversation on shared values and ultimate goals is “far more vital and imperative than our rivalries over the number of believers, our contradictory claims about proselytism, and sterile competition over exclusive possession of the truth. Those dogma-ridden individuals who, in both religions, claim truth for themselves, are in fact working against their respective beliefs”.²⁰ Whether he regarded Pope Benedict, guardian of the Catholic magisterium, as a dogma-ridden individual is unclear (and probably mischievous speculation by me). In any event, Pope Benedict addressed the forum on its last day, November 6. He said the great interest the forum had sparked was an incentive to ensure that its fruits were not limited to the participants and experts but were passed on as a precious legacy at the service of all, to bear fruit in people’s daily lives.²¹ He was pleased that the forum had adopted a common position on the need to love their fellow men and women disinterestedly, especially those in need, for it was part of the tradition of both faiths. There was a vast field in which both faiths could act together to defend the moral values they shared, starting with the dignity of each human being and fundamental rights to freedom of conscience and of religion:

The discrimination and violence which even today religious people experience throughout the world, and the often violent persecutions to which they are subject, represent unacceptable and unjustifiable acts, all the more grave and deplorable when they are carried out in the name of God. God’s name can only be a name of peace and fraternity, justice and love. We are challenged to demonstrate, by our words and above all by our deeds, that the message of our religions is unfailingly a message of harmony and mutual understanding. It is essential that we do so, lest we weaken the credibility and the effectiveness not only of our dialogue, but also of our religions themselves. . .Dear friends, let us unite our efforts, animated by good will, in order to overcome all misunderstanding and disagreements. Let us resolve to overcome past prejudices and to correct the often distorted images of the other which even today can create difficulties in our relations; let us work with one another to educate all people, especially the young, to build a common future.

The forum produced a final declaration containing 15 points of agreement, including important statements on religious freedom and rejecting terrorism which attracted the media’s attention, but also other points including a joint commitment to ensuring that human dignity and respect are extended equally to both men and women.²² It

¹⁹http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/11/28/worldupdates/2008-11-28T184158Z_01_NOOTR_RTRMDNC_0_-367653-1&sec=Worldupdates.

²⁰<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2008/nov/03/catholicism-islam>.

²¹http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081106_cath-islamic-leaders_en.html.

²²<http://www.zenit.org/article-24175?l=english>.

noted that love of neighbour included the right of individuals and communities to practise their religion in private and public. Point six says: "Religious minorities are entitled to be respected in their own religious convictions and practices. They are also entitled to their own places of worship, and their founding figures and symbols they consider sacred should not be subject to any form of mockery or ridicule." This was an important agreement for both sides covering (as noted with the Yale document) Muslim concerns about slandering the Prophet Muhammad in the West (the issue behind the Danish cartoon crisis of 2006) and rising Islamophobia, plus difficulties for both sides in establishing places of worship. Muslims in the West have sometimes found it harder than other groups to get planning permission for mosques or schools due to local prejudice, while Christians in most Muslim countries face considerably more obstacles. The declaration affirms that no religion or its followers should be excluded from society, and that both faiths have a duty not only to educate their followers in civic, religious and moral values but also to promote accurate information about each other's religion. Point 11 says: "We profess that Catholics and Muslims are called to be instruments of love and harmony among believers, and for humanity as a whole, renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion, and upholding the principle of justice for all." Point 12 calls for an ethical financial system which takes into account the poor both as individuals and as indebted nations.

Muslim participants wanted a joint crisis management plan for when tensions flare up between the religions, arguing that violence in Muslim countries after the Danish cartoon crisis might have been averted if Christians and Muslims had spoken together against both the provocation and the unrest. Reuters quoted Sohail Nakhlooda, editor of the Amman-based *Islamica* magazine which has been an important advocate for *A Common Word*, that a joint group would also speak out against religious persecution, such as the oppression of Iraq's Christians. "We have to look out for each other," he said. Professor Ibrahim Kalin said cooperation between churches and mosques in the Netherlands defused tensions before far-right politician Geert Wilders released his anti-Islam film *Fitna* in 2008. "That was the first fruit of the kind of co-operation we want to have," he said, according to *Reuters*. The final declaration of the Catholic-Muslim forum noted that both sides had agreed to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent Catholic-Muslim committee to coordinate responses to conflicts and other emergencies. It said a second seminar would be convened in 2010 in a Muslim country yet to be determined.

Hostile Responses

In some Christian quarters, the Common Word invitation received a cool and suspicious response. (No doubt some Muslims, especially Islamists, were also hostile, but my language deficiencies and especially lack of Arabic mean I am greatly restricted in investigating that.) But, as I reported in *The Age*, Melbourne, a couple of days after it was released, Hal Lindsey of World Net Daily viewed the overture as an

ultimatum: make peace with us or we'll kill you.²³ In *The Times*, Simon Jenkins said the letter encouraged militarist fantasies of extremists on both sides because it implied Islam had political and military power to match the West, feeding jihadist ambition and Western paranoia. Others doubted the signatories' sincerity, seeing it as a ploy to pretend peace, or dismissed their analysis of Christian theology. Two Muslim converts to Christianity, Sam Solomon and Al-Maqdisi, produced a 107-page booklet, *The Truth About A Common Word*, calling the Muslim letter "nothing more than a 21st century version of the call to unity and peace which Muhammad issued to Byzantium before his death in the 7th century – a call which has resounded again and again since that time throughout history, just before the Islamic forces moved in to make good militarily their claims to the right to rule politically by divine decree."²⁴ Peace in Islam, they say, is possible only with submission to Islam. If Muslims genuinely want peaceful coexistence, they should declare void Qur'anic texts that discriminate against Christians and Jews, describing them as unclean, apostates, polytheists and children of apes and swine. They should discard the apostasy law which makes it illegal to convert away from Islam, make all religions equal under the law, and treat all people as equal regardless of race or religion.

One of the more important analyses came from Dr Patrick Sookhdeo,²⁵ another Muslim convert to Christianity who founded and directs the Barnabas Fund, a UK-based organisation working for persecuted Christian minorities. His response, published on November 28, 2007, suggests that *A Common Word* is a carefully multi-layered document aimed at different audiences. It is addressed to Christian leaders, but is aimed particularly at world public opinion, while certain terminology and the Qur'anic verses selected suggest it has a different message for the global Muslim audience, who are intended to understand it as *da'wa*, or an invitation to convert to Islam. The Qur'anic verses chosen to demonstrate the unity of God are the ones usually interpreted as an attack on the Trinity and the deity of Christ, Sookhdeo says. He denies that Islam has a concept of love of neighbour comparable to Christianity's, saying that love of neighbour is constrained by shari'a law: Christians and Jews are to be humiliated and brought under dominion as second rate citizens, infidels must accept Islam or be killed. Heretical Islamic sects must be annihilated. Thus "neighbour" really means only fellow Muslims of the same tradition. Sookhdeo says "a basic fallacy of the open letter is the view that Western states are basically Christian and that, when pursuing their national interests, religious Christian motivations are foremost in their minds. This is a very common Muslim misconception, and is an indication of how much more important their faith is to an 'average' Muslim than to an average Westerner". He says that although the letter looks like a well-intentioned and urgent plea for better understanding between

²³<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/common-beliefs-key-to-uniting-old-religious-foes/2007/10/18/1192300950563.html>.

²⁴http://www.answering-islam.org/fileadmin/authors/solomon/truth_about_common_word.pdf, page 13.

²⁵http://www.barnabasfund.org/news/archives/article.php?ID_news_items=342.

the faiths, it blames all wars in which Christians and Muslims are involved on the actions of Christians. *A Common Word* states: “As Muslims we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes.” According to Sookhdeo, this implies that the war against Islamist terrorism is a global war of Christianity against Islam and that Christianity is the aggressor against Islam, which is the radical Islamist view:

There is no sense of sorrow or remorse for the wrongs Muslims inflicted on Christians historically, or indeed currently in many Muslim lands. There is no recognition that in many places things may be the opposite, with Muslims oppressing Christians and driving them from their homes (e.g. in Iraq, Sudan, Nigeria, Indonesia and Pakistan). There is no mention of the Christian communities in Muslim lands suffering other kinds of persecution and discrimination. There is no admission that Muslim actions could have played any part in the alienation between Muslims and Christians.

It is this disparity that made the plea for the Muslims’ forgiveness in the initial Yale response infuriating to some Christians. Australian Anglican priest Mark Durie published an analysis in February 2008, saying it adopts a

self-humbling, grateful tone. This is disturbing in the light of the history of Christian-Muslim relations. The classical Islamic understanding of the role of Christians as dhimmis in the Islamic state was that they should show gratitude for the generosity of having had their lives spared, and humility because their condition deserved contempt. . . . For many Christians who live under Islamic conditions, the tone adopted in the Yale Response will come across as capitulation, and it will signal abandonment of the cause of their persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.²⁶

Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (Ghazi, 2008) addressed some of these “strange suspicions and speculations” in his speech in Germany. He insisted that *A Common Word* was not intended to trick Christians or foist Muslim theology on them or convert them to Islam. Nor was it intended to reduce both religions to an artificial union based on the two commandments to love God and neighbour. Rather, it was an attempt to find theologically correct pre-existing common ground to avoid deep-rooted religious mutual suspicion being an impediment to behaving properly towards each other – and attempt to ensure religions are part of the solution rather than part of the problem. It was not intended to exclude or diminish Judaism, but Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in the world and history, with 2.1 billion and 1.5 billion adherents, respectively, compared with 25 million Jews. “*A Common Word* does not signal that Muslims are prepared to deviate from or concede one iota of any (of) their convictions in reaching out to Christians – nor, I expect, the opposite. Let us be crystal-clear: *A Common Word* is about equal peace, NOT about capitulation.”

²⁶<http://acommonword.blogspot.com/2008/02/reflections-upon-loving-god-and.html>.

The Way Forward

Nevertheless, even if the suspicions articulated by Drs Sookhdeo and Durie were justified, *A Common Word* would surely still be a worthwhile project. The speed and scope of the developments in the first year provide a powerful argument. With conversation comes the possibility of understanding, even affection, whereas without it such possibilities are greatly reduced. Australia has quite a long history of deliberate interfaith dialogue, dating back two decades. It is interesting that Melbourne has a longer history and far more harmonious relationships between Christianity and Islam than Sydney, where more conservative views dominate both faiths. The reasons for this are many and varied, but a more open attitude by Melbourne religious leaders and a multitude of determined efforts to build bridges between the three Abrahamic faiths have certainly been a significant factor. Five years ago, many Christians in Melbourne had never met a Muslim, and many Muslims had never met a Jew. Face-to-face conversations over meals or at public events put a human face on the “other” and some notable ongoing friendships have been forged. Muslims, Christians and Jews have gone back into their communities and spoken about their experiences, helping to break down mistrust. Interfaith dialogue is not a universal panacea, but obviously it is far better to be talking – and listening – to each other than ignoring each other. That is true whether it is cardinals and clerics meeting at the Vatican or villagers at the grassroots.

A Common Word is important first in its symbolism, not only to the faithful in each tradition but also to onlookers of other faiths or none. Enabling people of each faith to see the other as neighbour rather than foe is even more important and, given the calibre of the leaders involved, it will surely have some impact. The trickle-down effect to the ordinary faithful, however, will take time, and that is the most important test of all. Can it improve the lives of Muslims and Christians living in difficult circumstances, can it enhance social justice? Can it reduce racism and bigotry, discrimination and violence? Can it challenge long-established patterns of hostility and suspicion? The practical steps that have emerged from the various forums are helpful. The Yale conference, for example, decided to set up a website providing approved resources to guide Christians and Muslims learning about each other’s faith and proposed a week each year during which leaders of each faith emphasise the good in the other. If this were preached in every church and mosque, it must have an impact. Cambridge/Lambeth produced plans for academic networks, educational materials and exchanges, while the Vatican forum may lead to a joint crisis response committee. Prince Ghazi highlighted “a barrage of activity” in 2009, including a documentary film, several books, a joint Christian–Muslim sensitivity manual, a political conference at Georgetown University in Washington and a large religious conference planned in Malaysia, two high-level meetings between Muslim and Orthodox Church leaders, and another between Muslims and the World Council of Churches. He mentioned a major European-based global Christian–Muslim peace institute with *A Common Word* as part of its charter, though no details had emerged at the time of writing, plus an inter-university student initiative in the United States, and even a *Common Word* Muslim–Christian string of prayer beads.

A top-level Muslim ambassador told me privately that he is optimistic about the place of Muslims in the West,

where there is an interesting and welcome revival on stressing Islam as a religion of justice. . . . There are more Muslims in important parts of the West who realise the choice isn't between living in the land of darkness (as pre-Islamic Arabia was called) or under the caliphate. Perhaps a third live in a state where they are not the majority, and a new paradigm of social involvement has to evolve. They are no longer temporary guests in the West, nor are they potential rulers. There will still be areas of friction and tension, but these will have to be negotiated. Increasingly the majority of Muslims in Western countries will find that they and wider society come to an accommodation around a significant set of common values.

The German Minister for the Interior, Dr Wolfgang Schauble, signalled an openness to Islamic views in suggesting in November 2008 that Europeans should reflect on Muslim criticisms that the Western model of society is “excessively marked by economic rationality and the relativism of values.²⁷ We don't have to agree. But we should consider whether the process of secularisation does not also lead to the loss of certain valuable things. This can lead to a new openness towards religion and can help us see what values are intrinsic to Islam, such as a life in accordance with one's ethical convictions or the importance of the family. We will have to learn to accept Islam as part of our societies. And we should make even greater efforts to help with the process of making Muslims feel at home in Germany and Europe. By the same token, Europe's Muslims face the challenge of modernising their interpretation of faith. This process is essential for Muslims to truly become part of modern European society. Islam must become a bit more European if Muslims hope to play a greater role in their communities as European and German Muslims”. It could have been Tariq Ramadan speaking, suggesting an important consensus is evolving.

But the Muslim diplomat is less sanguine about improving social justice for minorities in Muslim countries. Given the state structures and power relationships, it is hard to know what can be done, especially as political leadership sometimes encourages repressive measures by conservative Muslims as a means of distracting them. Minorities generally lack the legal protections they enjoy in the West. A key goal for Muslims mentioned by Prince Ghazi is to end the vilification of Islam in West. This is obviously both commendable and important, but it needs to be matched by a parallel effort to correct and abate vilification of Christianity in Muslim countries, in the Middle East and Pakistan especially, where secular Western foreign policy is often perceived as a Christian war on Islam – with devastating consequences for Christian minorities. It is not well understood in many Muslim countries that Christianity long ago lost a direct influence over government policy in nearly all Western democracies. For example, Pope John Paul II and many Christian leaders argued strongly against invading Iraq in 2003 but had little influence. (The extent to which American policy may be shaped by Evangelicals is beyond the scope of this chapter.) And although the Muslim world has a strong unity, expressed in the concept of the Ummah, it is centuries since Christians had a parallel notion of

²⁷ <http://www.acommonword.com/Bundesinnenminister-Dr-Schauble-Rede-22-11-2008.pdf>.

Christendom. It was rendered irrelevant by Europe's religious wars and the rise of nation states. As *Islamica* editor Sohail Nakhoda told an ambassadors' forum in Jordan in December 2008, "it is time for bold measures and sustained engagement to reclaim the middle ground" for Muslims against the lure of Islamist and puritanical religious groups.²⁸ In his speech, Nakhoda identified precisely why *A Common Word* has been so significant and generates such hope:

Prior to the coming of the Common Word, Christian-Muslim relations, as we know it, in its formal set up, faced an identity crisis. There was scepticism among the Muslim and Christian laity about its effectiveness and relevance. It was an ivory-tower endeavour, an exclusive club, a meeting ground for the same people endlessly discussing the same doctrinal issues. There was no shortage of interfaith initiatives nationally and internationally but it was always a case of lots of motion but no movement. The Common Word initiative did not suffer from the same problems. It was built on consensus . . . and it brought together not marginal or ultra-progressive figures, but the most authoritative and influential Muslim religious leaders who carried enormous influence in the streets of the Muslim world and in their communities. Its significance was that it was a call from the centre and not from the periphery of Muslim discourse and so everyone had to take notice. Its message commanded attention. The Common Word took everyone by surprise. Good ideas always have an element of surprise. It captured the hearts and minds of religious leaders, academics and the wider public, and it became a formidable brand.

After its first year, the *Common Word* initiative certainly achieved remarkable things. Even so, it is only at the very beginning. As the Jesuit Islamic expert Christian Troll – a member of the Catholic delegation to the Vatican forum – told the Cambridge conference, "it needs patience and confidence, staying power and open hearts."²⁹ It requires energy and commitment and formal structures, because important interfaith initiatives in the past have petered out through a lack of such structures to keep them active. It needs to extend downwards into churches and mosques across the globe and upwards to policy-makers and politicians. Given its impetus and achievements, *A Common Word* is well placed to do that. The challenges and tensions between Islam and the West are as serious today as at any time in the life of Prince Ghazi's pistachio tree, but *A Common Word* may well bring the sort of global warming people of both faiths long for and need.

²⁸<http://www.acommonword.com/The-Significance-of-the-Amman-Message-and-the-Common-Word.pdf>.

²⁹<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/208895?eng=y>.