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The Uncommonality of “A Common Word”

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Introduction

NOVEMBER 4, 2008, WAS A HISTORIC DAY. Not only did it mark a new chapter in the long and complicated history of race relations in the United States; it also marked a historic event in the long and multifaceted relationship between Islam and Christianity. For the first time in the history of Muslim-Christian relations, a delegation of 29 Catholic cardinals, bishops, and scholars met with an equal number of leading Muslim authorities and scholars representing some of the most established figures in the Sunni and Shiite worlds. After two days of meetings that it is hoped will mark the first in a series of biannual seminars held by the newly established Catholic-Muslim Forum, they issued a fifteen-point final declaration that included an appeal for the defense of religious minorities and a call for Muslims and Christians to work together in promoting peace the world over: “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.”¹ In his comments at the final session, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that Muslims and Christians share moral values and should defend them together:

We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways. There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage.²

Time alone will tell if this is indeed a watershed event in the history of interfaith understanding between Christians and Muslims. Nonetheless, the fact that this and other meetings among the world's religious leaders are taking place at all is historic. We have no previous record of leading Muslim authorities representing all branches of Islam engaging the Vatican as a single voice. That it is now happening should be cause for hope—for when two civilizations come to a greater appreciation of the humanity and the concerns of the other, there is much less probability for misunderstandings and mistrust and the violence that can arise therefrom. At the very least, dialogue is better than indifference. But beyond that, the collective moral voice of the world's two largest religious communities may help to prevent another Bosnia, another Iraq, or another Sudan. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr said in his closing comments to the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum:

Whether we are Christians or Muslims, we are beckoned by our religions to seek peace. As people of religion meeting here at the center of Catholicism, let us then dedicate ourselves to mutual understanding, not as diplomats, but as sincere religious scholars and authorities standing before God and responsible to Him beyond all worldly authority.³

The Beginnings of “A Common Word”

This historic Muslim-Christian exchange began in earnest on October 13, 2007, when 138 Muslim scholars from all corners of the world, representing every branch of Islam—including such figures as the grand muftis of Bosnia, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bahrain, and even Russia—delivered a twenty-nine page document entitled “A Common Word between Us and You” to the leaders of Christian churches and denominations throughout the world. Originally composed by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan under the auspices of King Abdullah II of Jordan and in consultation with traditional Islamic scholars, this letter was met with responses from Christian leaders the world over, including the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the patriarch of Russia as well as independent scholars.⁴ The most public response was a letter initially endorsed by over 300 Christian leaders and scholars entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*,” which originated at the Yale Divinity School's Center for Faith & Culture and was published in the *New York Times* on November 17, 2007. The most substantial theological response was penned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, after prolonged consultation with Christian church leaders from several

Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic church, and a range of Protestant and Evangelical churches. The archbishop's response displays a subtle understanding of both the limitations inherent in Muslim-Christian dialogue and the possibilities which it opens up. Since its initial launch, the number of Muslim scholars who have signed "A Common Word" has grown to over 300, with over 400 Islamic organizations and associations now endorsing it; and there are now over 500 signatories to "Loving God and Neighbor Together," along with dozens of other Christian responses.

The initial letter and the many responses to it have given rise to a series of conferences between Muslim and Christian leaders. The first, "Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims," focused upon theological issues and was held at Yale University between July 24 and July 31, 2008. The second, "A Common Word and Future Christian-Muslim Engagement," focused upon scripture and was convened by the Anglican archbishop and hosted by Cambridge University's Inter-Faith Programme at Cambridge University on October 12 through 14, 2008, with a final meeting held at Lambeth Palace on October 15. And the third was the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum hosted by the Vatican from November 4 to 6, 2008. Other conferences are now in various stages of planning: one, which will focus on the geopolitical implications of the "Common Word" initiative, is scheduled for Georgetown University in October 2009, and a second is to take place in Malaysia, with a third possible conference to be held in the Philippines. A high-level meeting between Muslim scholars and leaders of the Orthodox churches is also being planned, as well as a meeting between Muslim leaders and the World Council of Churches.

A proposal is currently in place for a United Nations Resolution declaring a worldwide interfaith acceptance week, whereby once a year every member country would ask its churches and mosques to speak of that which is positive in the other religion. In addition, "A Common Word between Us and You" was the impetus for the Wamp-Ellison Resolution adopted in the United States House of Representatives on September 23, 2008. The official summary explains that the resolution

Expresses the sense of Congress that the United States: (1) supports the spirit of peace and desire for unity displayed in interfaith dialogue among leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths; (2) encourages the many people of faith around the world who reject terrorism and extremism to join these and similar efforts to build a common bond based on peace, reconciliation, and tolerance; and (3) appreciates those voices around the world who

condemn terrorism, intolerance, genocide, and ethnic and religious hatred, and instead commit themselves to a global peace anchored in respect and understanding among adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths.⁵

The “Common Word” initiative has also had a significant trickle-down effect in many religious communities: It has given rise to grassroots and community-level initiatives as far apart as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Canada as well as the United States. Development has begun on a joint website supported by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Yale University, and Lambeth Palace that will recommend books in several languages that will enable members of each faith to read about the other faith as presented by its adherents rather than its opponents. And discussions are underway for the development of a multi-university student-driven “Common Word” initiative in the United States.

In addition, a major European-based international Christian-Muslim peace institute that will continue the work of “A Common Word” on a larger scale is now being organized. The C-1 World Dialogue, as it is currently called, aims to continue the work of the C-100 West-Islamic World Dialogue and become the foremost organization for the orchestration of dialogue between Islam and the West and the advancement of peaceful and harmonious relations. Co-chaired by Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, and Dr. Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, the C-1 World Dialogue will bring together high-level representatives from key communities on both sides and seek to act as an umbrella organization with the aim of providing a solid foundation for practical initiatives that promote intercultural and interreligious understanding.

In many instances, these projects are a direct continuation of the practical accomplishments that have grown out of the conferences at Yale University, Cambridge University, and the Vatican. Other initiatives have arisen as a spontaneous response from international organizations and local religious communities. Together, they indicate that “A Common Word” has become a global movement that continues to gain traction. As such, it has also become a subject of scholarly investigation, with several academic conferences being planned to explore the implications of “A Common Word” and expand upon its major themes.⁶

The Evolution of “A Common Word”

When discussing the development of the “Common Word” initiative, many look to the polemical comments in “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” a lecture delivered by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg on September 12, 2007, to mark its inception.⁷ Others look to the initial Muslim response, entitled “An Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,” issued one month later; while others look to the letter (“A Common Word between Us and You”) itself. It must be emphasized, however, that the Catholic-Muslim Forum is only one aspect of contemporary Christian-Muslim dialogue. In addition, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the pope’s Regensburg address, wherein Islam was presented as a religion of violence and irrationality, was an invitation to dialogue.⁸ In fact, the Vatican made no initial response to the “Open Letter” other than a perfunctory courtesy visit from a representative of the Apostolic Nunciature of the Holy See in Amman, Jordan (the Vatican Embassy) to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, who had initiated that response to the pope’s address.

The Vatican’s initial response to “A Common Word” seems incongruous. In contrast to the positive responses that will be examined in greater detail below, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, went so far as to say that theological dialogue with Muslims would be difficult because “Muslims do not accept that one can question the Quran, because it was written, they say, by dictation from God. With such an absolute interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the contents of faith.”⁹ It is remarkable that the president of any council for interreligious dialogue would be so dismissive of Islam’s rich and diverse hermeneutical tradition, wherein every word of the Quran is seen as having multiple layers of meaning. Cardinal Tauran’s statement is akin to Muslims saying that they cannot have dialogue with Christians so long as they maintain that Jesus is the Son of God. Cardinal Tauran also cast doubt upon the sincerity of the document as well as the efficacy of dialogue, remarking that “some questions remain. When we speak of the love of God, are we speaking about the same love?”¹⁰

The Vatican’s opposition to open dialogue with Muslims appears to have changed after the publication of the response orchestrated by the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*.” Only two days after the appearance of this letter, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio

Bertone, sent a reply to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad on behalf of the pope. Soon thereafter, arrangements were underway for the formation of the Catholic-Muslim Forum. It seems that the positive response of so many other churches and Christian leaders may have forced the Vatican's hand.

While the Regensburg address may have served as an unintended impetus for the establishment of the Forum, it was not its ultimate source. The origins of this movement lie, rather, in the mechanisms for dialogue that Muslim scholars have been developing over the past five years. Many who have followed the process from before its inception would thus set the starting point at the July 2005 Amman conference entitled "The International Islamic Conference: True Islam and Its Role in Modern Society," organized by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan under the patronage of King Abdullah II. This groundbreaking conference marked the beginning of a process whereby Muslim scholars representing all schools of Islamic law and theology sought to address the challenges facing the whole of the Islamic world. In this way, an intra-Islamic initiative laid the groundwork for an *interfaith* initiative.

To understand the genesis of "A Common Word," it is important to take into account the accomplishments of the Amman conference. On the one hand, the lead-up to the Amman conference established the mechanisms by which consensus could be reached among Muslim scholars from all branches of Islam. At the same time, the final declaration of the conference answered one of the main objections that many subsequently raised with respect to "A Common Word": specifically, the assertion that Muslims need to denounce extremism before there can be true dialogue. Michael Gonyea expressed such concerns in *American Thinker*, where he wrote of the Catholic-Muslim Forum: "If in the upcoming forum a broad cross section of Muslim leaders can be self-critical, if they can condemn the extremists, . . . Christians will embrace them."¹¹ Such self-critical condemnation had in fact been achieved several years earlier, in what Fareed Zakaria has referred to as "a frontal attack on Al Qaeda's theological methods."¹²

This frontal attack had three basic dimensions. Supported by seventeen fatwas from leading Sunni and Shi'ite authorities, it first established broad support for the eight schools of traditional Islamic law. This in itself was historic, as both Shi'ites and Sunnis came together to publicly affirm the validity of one another's schools of law. They also emphasized that the various schools of law are not regressive, but in fact moderate the religion by providing essential checks and balances. The second prong in this attack was to deny the legitimacy of *takfir*, or apostasizing others. And the third was a reiteration of the traditional qualifications for issuing a fatwa. To outside observers this last may seem to

amount to a mere academic exercise, but it is in fact essential, for every act of terrorism committed in the name of Islam is preceded by an attempt at justification in Islamic terms. And within traditional Islam such justification is usually provided through fatwas.¹³ Demonstrating the illegitimacy of fatwas that call for wanton violence thus strikes at the very root of extremist interpretations of Islam.

The problem of extremist interpretations of Islam is in essence a textual, methodological problem requiring a textual, methodological solution. For no one commits terrorist acts without being convinced that terrorism is justified. Such justification requires a fatwa—and the fatwa must be issued by one who is willing to distort the text. Only by eradicating this pattern can one eradicate extremist interpretations of Islam together with their attendant violence. The final declaration of the Amman conference and the collection of fatwas invoked to support it was thus a crucial step in a true “war on terrorism” in which Muslims and non-Muslims could work hand in hand.¹⁴ For rather than striking at the branches of radical Islamism, it struck a blow to its ideological roots. The Amman conference was thus noteworthy for its innovative approach to building consensus across a broad spectrum of Muslim scholars, and for its repudiation of the extremist interpretations of Islam. This laid the necessary foundations for a broad-based interreligious exchange in which influential ulama from across the Islamic spectrum would be willing to participate and which they would be willing to endorse.

The Message of “A Common Word”

“A Common Word between Us and You” bears many similarities to the final declaration of the Amman conference of 2005 (beyond the fact that the initial “A Common Word” letter was also ratified at a conference in Jordan). Like the declaration, “A Common Word” appeals to consensus, addresses matters of crucial concern to the global Muslim community, and is grounded in and builds on classical Islamic teachings. The final form of the letter was presented at a conference in September 2007 entitled “Love in the Quran,” held by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan under the patronage of King Abdullah II. As the website for “A Common Word” declares: “Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.”¹⁵

To effectively analyze this initial letter and the dialogue to which it has given rise, we must first allow the document to speak for itself. The Summary and Abridgement of the letter begins:

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of 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.

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. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.¹⁶

It continues by citing verses from both the Bible and the Quran to demonstrate the manner in which these principles are underscored in scripture:

Of God's Unity, God says in the Holy Quran: *Say: He is God, the One! / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all! (Al-Ikhlās, 112:1-2)*. Of the necessity of love for God, God says in the Holy Quran: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (Al-Muzzammil, 73:8)*. Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad said: *"None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."*

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. / And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* (Mark 12:29-31)¹⁷

"A Common Word between Us and You" then calls for dialogue and cooperation based upon these two preeminent principles: love of the One God and love of the neighbor:

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimising some of their formal

differences—it is clear that the *Two Greatest Commandments* are an area of common ground and a link between the Quran, the Torah and the New Testament.¹⁸

The letter concludes, before a final quote from the Quran: “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 another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual good will.”¹⁹

The title of the letter derives from a Quranic verse that commands Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and to Jews—the “People of Scripture,” as they are known in the Quran): “Say: ‘O People of Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God’” (Quran 3:64). A similar verse is cited at the beginning of the letter: “*Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and contend with them in the fairest manner. Truly thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is Best Aware of those who go aright* (The Holy Quran, *Al-Nahl*, 16:125).”²⁰ Drawing upon these and other verses, “A Common Word Between Us and You” proposes that dialogue and even contention in the fairest manner are incumbent upon Muslims, and that the principles of devotion to the One God and love of the neighbor are the strongest possible basis for mutual understanding, efficacious dialogue, and cooperation between Christianity and Islam, because they stem from the theological core of both religions. But unlike many other interfaith efforts, “A Common Word” does not seek to syncretize or to proselytize. Participants in this initiative have even taken pains to emphasize the need for recognizing the fundamental differences between the two traditions. Rather than watering down theological positions in the name of cooperation and thus bringing Christian and Muslim communities together at their margins, it asks both communities to speak from what is central and authoritative to each.

One of the letter’s chief aims, according to the press release that accompanied it, is to provide a “common constitution” and a definitive theological common ground for the work of myriad groups and associations around the world who are carrying out interfaith dialogue. The release points out that many of these groups are unaware of each other’s efforts and often duplicate each other’s work. By providing an authoritative “Christian-Muslim Constitution” grounded in Scripture, says the release, the letter aims to unify and unite the forces working toward interfaith peace and harmony in the world. The final section of the letter proposes that this is a matter not of choice but of responsibility:

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. 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.²¹

Some have ascribed ulterior motives to "A Common Word," suggesting that its signatories and proponents intended to foist Muslim theology upon Christians, to reduce Islam and Christianity to an artificial unity, to form a Muslim-Christian alliance against Judaism, or even to lull Christians into a false sense of complacency. But there has thus far been nothing in the movement that would support such charges. As Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad suggests:

We had honestly . . . 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 . . . —that is to say through the leaders of the two religions. We wanted to stop the drumbeat of what we feared was a growing popular consensus (on both sides) for world-wide (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.²²

Christian Responses to “A Common Word”

The majority of Christian responses to “A Common Word” have been very positive, with a only a few cynical or dismissive responses. As there have been over sixty separate responses from bishops, priests, church and ecumenical councils, and individual scholars, and as several of these responses have led to dialogue on many levels, each cannot be analyzed here. I will instead focus on the aforementioned responses from the Center for Faith & Culture at the Yale Divinity School, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Vatican, for each of these has already borne fruit and each has the institutional imprimatur to enable it to reverberate into the future. I will also draw attention to the response of the World Council of Churches (WCC), as it represents the widest and most diverse body of Christian denominations and will most likely influence some aspects of the C-1 World Dialogue.

Yale University Divinity School

The first broad-based Christian response to “A Common Word” was organized by Miroslav Volf and Joseph Cumming of the Center for Faith & Culture at the Yale Divinity School. Signed by over 300 Christian leaders and scholars, “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*” endorses the fundamental thrust behind “A Common Word,” proclaiming that “[p]eaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century,” and that it is incumbent upon all who truly claim to uphold the values of these traditions to work together to meet this challenge.²³ It then reaffirms the centrality of the two commandments (love of God and love of neighbor) and, quoting frequently from “A Common Word,” concludes:

“Let this common ground”—the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbor—“be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us,” your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree. Abandoning all “hatred and strife,” we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other’s good, for the one God unceasingly seeks our good. Indeed, together with you we believe that we need to move beyond “a polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders” and work diligently together to reshape relations between our communities and our nations so that they genuinely reflect our common love for God and for one another.²⁴

Even before this response was released, talks were underway for a conference and workshop that would seek to bring Muslim and Christian theologians (Evangelicals in particular) into greater dialogue. The resulting conference and workshop, entitled “Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims,” took place at Yale University from July 24 to 31, 2008. Several of the papers delivered there are scheduled for publication in a volume to be jointly edited by Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad and Miroslav Volf, director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture.²⁵ The workshop, which was held first (July 24-28), involved approximately 60 Christian and Muslim scholars altogether, along with 3 Jewish scholars. The discussions, which were conducted through the presentation of scholarly papers, on panels, and in informal conversations, focused on five major areas: “Love of God,” “Love of Neighbor,” “Love and Speech about the Other,” “Love and World Poverty,” and “God is Loving.” The larger conference, which followed on July 28-31, began with an address from Senator John Kerry and included approximately 80 Muslim participants, 80 Christian participants, and 7 Jewish participants, thus extending the conversation to a larger group of scholars and leaders.

While some of the participants, such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, David Burrell, a leader in Christian interfaith work for over two decades, the grand mufti of Bosnia, and members of the Center for Faith & Culture, were veterans of interreligious dialogue, many participants were new to such gatherings. Even the veterans, however, remarked that the theological depth of discussion in the workshops was beyond that at any interreligious dialogue in which they had previously engaged.²⁶ That depth helped move the dialogue beyond the platitudes that often plague such encounters. And the participation of many figures that were new to interreligious exchanges demonstrated the *breadth* of this movement, as did the inclusion of important religious figures—such as Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America—and the opening address from Senator Kerry.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the conference was that it brought together Evangelical Christians and traditional Muslims, two communities that have had little exposure to one another and often view each other with suspicion. In one unprecedented keynote session, a leading Muslim scholar and “televangelist” (for lack of a better word) from the Arab world, Habib Ali Jifri, and a leading televangelist from America, Rev. Dr. Robert Schuller, the founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral who is known for his internationally broadcast “Hour of Power”—two preachers who have the ability to move millions within their respective traditional religious communities—shared a stage.

The Final Declaration of the conference, which was agreed upon by all participants, reiterated the content of the previous letters, recognizing that Islam and Christianity share “an essential common ground” and “a common Abrahamic heritage.” Reaffirming a commitment to promote peace, the final statement declared that “ours is an effort to ensure that religions heal rather than wound, nourish the human soul rather than poison human relations. These Two Commandments [love of God and love of neighbor] teach us both what we must demand of ourselves and what we should expect from the other in what we *do*, what we *say*, and what we *are*.”²⁷

The Final Declaration also recognized that both religions affirm Divine unity and that Divine love is central to the whole of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. In addition, it insisted that Christians and Muslims alike must not deny one another basic rights, nor tolerate the denigration or desecration of that which is central to either religion. These assertions help address, for example, the claims of fringe Islamic groups that Christians worship multiple gods and hence should be considered unbelievers, or the misunderstandings that arose in the wake of the Danish cartoon controversy. They lay the foundations for Muslim and Christian leaders to confront insults against either community with one voice and thus avoid the violence that has sometimes ensued in the wake of such incidents.

The participants in the Yale conference also discussed practical issues such as “world poverty, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation in Palestine and Israel, the dangers of further wars, and the freedom of religion.”²⁸ In addition, the conference organizers committed themselves to establishing mechanisms whereby the principles agreed upon at the conference could be conveyed to participants’ respective religious communities. These eventually included the creation of a website with recommended reading lists, the publication of study materials addressed to the various religious communities, and the setting aside of a week every year wherein each community would seek to emphasize the good in the other community. The last served as the catalyst for the aforementioned proposal to the United Nations to declare an annual worldwide interfaith acceptance week.

Although both “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*” and the Yale Common Word conference received wide acclaim, some responses have also revealed the tensions to which dialogue between Muslims and Christians can give rise. This was most evident in the response of John Piper, a prominent Evangelical pastor and author, who released a video criticizing “Loving God and Neighbor Together” for failing to accentuate the unique nature of Jesus as the savior sent for “the propitiation

of our sins.”²⁹ Piper goes so far as to say that the Islamic rejection of Christian teaching regarding Jesus indicates that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God and that Muslims shall thus be “cast out into utter darkness.” Such criticisms have led some prominent Evangelicals who signed “Loving God and Neighbor Together” and who attended the Yale conference to explain their responses and modify their endorsements. Citing the difficulties of creating a document with which everyone could agree, Leith Anderson writes, “While I am listed as the President of the National Association of Evangelicals I added my name as an individual and not as an institution.”³⁰ This would appear to allude to tensions within the Evangelical community itself, as some within the Evangelical movement are hesitant to embrace any dialogue that would acknowledge a common ground between Muslims and Christians, while others think that engaging Muslims in such dialogue is the best approach toward gaining access to the Muslim world and evangelizing within it. This intra-Evangelical debate will be prominent at the sixty-first annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2009, at which Joseph Cumming, the main impetus behind “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” will participate in a panel along with John Piper and Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a prominent Evangelical pastor and radio host, and two Muslim signatories to “A Common Word,” Professor Joseph Lumbard and Professor Caner Dagli.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and Lambeth Palace

While the response organized by the Yale Divinity School was a strong affirmation of “A Common Word” and was made all the more effective as a result of its endorsement by over 300 Christian scholars, the response from the Archbishop of Canterbury, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” has been the most trenchant and perspicacious response to date. Though written as a letter from the archbishop himself to the signatories of “A Common Word” (“and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere”), the response was generated through extensive discussion between the archbishop and leaders of the Eastern, Greek, and Russian Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and other Protestant denominations. The archbishop first met with academics and church leaders in advance of a larger meeting in June 2008 to discuss drafting a response to “A Common Word.” There was unanimous support among the academics and church leaders present for the archbishop to send a letter to Muslim leaders; he then wrote the final letter after further consultation at the meeting itself.

“A Common Word for the Common Good” begins by reaffirming the open spirit of “A Common Word” and acknowledging that though their ways of understanding the Divine are different, Christianity and Islam are not

mutually unintelligible—and that they speak enough of a common language to address the concerns of humanity together. The archbishop notes that “A Common Word” “invites all of us to think afresh about the foundations of our convictions,”³¹ and then identifies five areas with respect to which he believes continued dialogue and cooperation can bear fruit: love and praise of God; love of neighbor that is rooted in love of God; the grounding of dialogue in the scriptures of the two traditions, so that both traditions speak from that which is central and authoritative to each and not what is marginal; respecting and discussing differences, so as to avoid “imprisoning ourselves in mutual fear and suspicion”; and honoring awareness of a “shared calling and shared responsibility” toward humanity and creation.

The subtle explanations of the Christian understanding of love offered by the archbishop deserve extensive theological discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that he takes the opportunity to explain the manner in which Trinitarian theology leads many Christians to a deeper appreciation of the workings of love within the Divine Itself and that this is the foundation for love of the neighbor and of the stranger as the proper response to the gift of love from God. This discussion lays the foundation for an explanation of the deleterious nature of religious violence that exposes the theological hypocrisy which lies at the heart of extremist religious violence of any stripe:

The idea that any action, however extreme or disruptive or even murderous, is justified if it averts failure or defeat for a particular belief or a particular religious group is not really consistent with the conviction that our failure does not mean God’s failure. Indeed, it reveals a fundamental lack of conviction in the eternity and sufficiency of the object of faith.³²

Based upon this observation, the archbishop argues, “Religious violence suggests an underlying religious insecurity.”³³ Bearing in mind that the Divine has no need of human protection can then lead to the awareness “that to try and compel religious allegiance through violence is really a way of seeking to replace divine power with human.”³⁴ This serves as the foundation for a vision of what can be accomplished through an extended dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders:

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.³⁵

On this basis he offers the hope that “our religious convictions can be a vehicle for creating peace where it is absent.”³⁶ This does not oblige Muslims or Christians to reject their own truth claims or to come to some neutral agreement in areas of theological dispute. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate the manner in which transcendent truth claims can serve to expose the self-serving nature of all attempts to justify violence in the name of one ideology or another. This subtle analysis of the ideological basis for human violence and the ability of religion to counter it demonstrates the potential influence that the “Common Word” initiative can have. As the archbishop observes:

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.³⁷

An essential component of the archbishop's letter that is not as fully addressed in other responses to “A Common Word” is the need to understand and respect the different nature of scripture within each tradition. Notwithstanding that, he writes that

for us as for you, reading the Scriptures is a constant source of inspiration, nurture and correction, and this makes it very appropriate for Christians and Muslims to listen to one another, and question one another, in the course of reading and interpreting the texts from which we have learned of God's will and purposes.³⁸

It is fitting that the archbishop should have brought these observations to light, as the conference hosted at Cambridge University, with a final meeting at Lambeth Palace, on October 12–15, 2008, concentrated on scripture and interpretation. While the Yale University conference hosted hundreds of scholars from around the world and addressed most facets of the “Common Word” initiative, the conference convened by the archbishop was limited to fifteen representatives from each faith tradition. Among these were some of

the most prominent signatories of “A Common Word”—including Allamah Shaykh Abd Allah bin Bayyah, whom many regard as the most knowledgeable living scholar of Sunni Islam, and Allamah Shaykh Mohammad Said Ramadan Al-Buti, the most respected Sunni Muslim scholar in Syria today, neither of whom have attended any other events associated with the “Common Word” initiative³⁹.

As with the Yale conference, the conference at Lambeth Palace produced a final declaration that reaffirmed the core principles of “A Common Word”: love of God and love of neighbor. The document was, however, signed only by Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, and by the archbishop. While reaffirming the central tenets of “A Common Word” and the Yale Conference, this communiqué also offered a joint condemnation of the persecution of religious groups in Iraq, with a specific focus on the recent persecution of Christian minorities. In the spirit of the conference, it also spoke in glowing terms of the experience of reading scripture together in a spirit of openness and cooperation:

One of the most moving elements of our encounter has been the opportunity to study together passages from our scriptures. We have felt ourselves to have been together before God and this has given us each a greater appreciation for the richness of the other’s heritage as well as an awareness of the potential value in being joined by Jewish believers in a journey of mutual discovery and attentiveness to the texts we hold sacred. We wish to repeat the experience of a shared study of scriptural texts as one of the ways in which we can come, concretely, to develop our understanding of how the other understands and lives their own faith. We commend this experience to others.

For those who have been involved with interfaith dialogue or with movements such as the scriptural reasoning project, this is not such a remarkable observation.⁴⁰ But it adds credibility and influence to the scriptural reasoning movement when the grand mufti of Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury join with imams and priests in encouraging their followers to read the Bible and the Quran together. Such shared study of scripture and acquired understanding of how other communities understand their own texts could bear unimagined fruits for future generations, especially when both Muslims and Christians are encouraged to do so by the religious authorities whom they most respect. This emphasis upon the possibilities inherent in the process of scriptural reasoning indicates one of the important ways in which academics have played an important role in working together with religious leaders to

shape the “Common Word” initiative. One hopes that this encouragement will help a broader audience apply the tools of comparative scriptural inquiry that the scriptural reasoning movement has developed over the past fifteen years.⁴¹

The Vatican

While the response coordinated by the Yale Divinity School and the letter written by the Archbishop of Canterbury were overwhelmingly positive, the responses from the Vatican have been mixed. Recent statements by Cardinal Tauran have indicated that the Vatican would prefer to focus upon the development of the Catholic-Muslim Forum in conjunction with the “Common Word” initiative, rather than have its energy and attention dispersed among other international interfaith initiatives, such as that initiated by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. Nonetheless, as noted above, the Vatican response to “A Common Word” was not at first positive, and the Vatican did not appear receptive to official dialogue with Muslims until it became apparent that other churches had engaged with “A Common Word.”

Given the multiple declarations regarding interreligious dialogue and interfaith relations that have been issued by the Vatican, beginning with “Nostra Aetate” in 1965, the Muslim-Catholic exchange must first be viewed in this broader context. Recognizing the tensions to which religious misunderstandings can give rise, “Nostra Aetate” sought to outline that which is common to all religions, especially the Abrahamic traditions, declaring that

[t]he Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself, merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will give their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. . . .

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.⁴²

“Nostra Aetate” marked a momentous step forward in the official Catholic approach to people of other faith traditions and, thereby, the reconciliation of traditional Church orthodoxy with modern pluralism. Nonetheless, although the Vatican has afforded greater recognition to Judaism and Islam, it continues to maintain that one can be saved only through a relationship with Jesus Christ that is mediated through the Church. Regarding the prayers and rituals of other faiths, the Vatican has gone so far as to declare, in “Dominus Iesus” (2000):

Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors . . . , constitute an obstacle to salvation.⁴³

In other words, other religions can be tolerated, but only insofar as they are a step toward attaining full salvation through Jesus Christ. Viewed in relation to one another, “Nostra Aetate” and “Dominus Iesus” appear to be saying that error cannot be tolerated in and of itself, but that people who are *in* error still have rights that must be respected—especially those who are well-meaning and seek God, even if in a manner that the Church considers imperfect. Following upon “Nostra Aetate,” the late Pope John Paul II made unprecedented overtures toward other Christian denominations and toward people of other faiths, especially Jews and Muslims. Regarding Muslims, he declared, “We Christians joyfully recognize the religious values we have in common with Islam. Today I would like to repeat what I said to young Muslims some years ago in Casablanca: ‘We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.’”⁴⁴

In contrast to Pope John Paul II’s positive embrace of Muslims, many have sensed a different tone in the statements of Pope Benedict XVI, especially in his assertions that Europe is a Christian continent and in the unfortunate comments in his Regensburg lecture. In this context, many Muslims felt it necessary to engage the Catholic Church in the hopes of restoring relations to a level closer to those that had been enjoyed during the tenure of John Paul II. It is with this goal in mind that “An Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,” delivered one month after the Regensburg lecture, was written. After

correcting the factual errors in the Regensburg lecture, the letter states, in its final section:

Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. As the leader of over a billion Catholics and moral example for many others around the globe, yours is arguably the single most influential voice in continuing to move this relationship forward in the direction of mutual understanding. We share your desire for frank and sincere dialogue, and recognize its importance in an increasingly interconnected world. Upon this sincere and frank dialogue we hope to continue to build peaceful and friendly relationships based upon mutual respect, justice, and what is common in essence in our shared Abrahamic tradition, particularly 'the two greatest commandments' in Mark 12:29-31 (and, in varying form, in Matthew 22:37-40), that, the Lord our God is One Lord; / And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. / And the second commandment is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.⁴⁵

The lack of response to this letter and the lack of media coverage it received, while at the same time many unproductive and counterproductive reactions *were* reported, frustrated many Muslims. The desire to alleviate this frustration and to proactively prevent another Regensburg lecture by the Pope or by other Christian leaders gave rise to the "Common Word" initiative, intended "to move this relationship forward in the direction of mutual understanding." The first impression is that this objective has been achieved, for in his remarks on the final day of the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, Pope Benedict XVI sounded more like John Paul II:

I am well aware that Muslims and Christians have different approaches in matters regarding God. Yet we can and must be worshippers of the one God who created us and is concerned about each person in every corner of the world. Together we must show, by our mutual respect and solidarity, that we consider

ourselves members of one family: the family that God has loved and gathered together from the creation of the world to the end of human history.⁴⁶

While acknowledging that Muslims and Christians conceive of God in different ways and have different understandings of the precise nature of the relationship between the Divine and the human, he affirmed that they can nonetheless work together for the good of all humanity:

There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage. Only by starting with the recognition of the centrality of the person and the dignity of each human being, respecting and defending life which is the gift of God, and is thus sacred for Christians and for Muslims alike—only on the basis of this recognition, can we find a common ground for building a more fraternal world, a world in which confrontations and differences are peacefully settled, and the devastating power of ideologies is neutralized.⁴⁷

Though he did not apologize for his remarks at the Regensburg lecture, Pope Benedict XVI did embrace the call for understanding that had been issued in the initial open letter addressed to him:

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.⁴⁸

None of these remarks are groundbreaking in and of themselves; but they are nonetheless significant because they indicate that “A Common Word between Us and You” has succeeded in countering the deleterious effects of the Regensburg lecture and in bringing Muslims and Christians into the type of dialogue which “Nostra Aetate” in a sense began and which Pope John Paul II embraced. The cycle of recriminations to which the Regensburg lecture initially gave rise has thus been arrested, and for the time being Catholics and Muslims are engaged in real dialogue rather than juxtaposed monologues. The next seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, to be held in a Muslim-majority country yet to be determined two years after the first seminar, should be able to

develop upon the issues addressed by the first seminar and the developments of subsequent conferences, such as that being held at Georgetown University in October 2009, and on the work of the C-1 World Dialogue. Whatever direction it may take, it is significant that Muslim and Catholics have committed themselves to a forum wherein they will be able to express their differences and work toward establishing better understanding between the two groups. This will provide an open channel whereby unfortunate misunderstandings, such as those created by the Regensburg lecture, can be avoided or, if they do arise, be addressed before any negative consequences come to pass.

World Council of Churches

The responses from the Yale Divinity School, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Vatican have given rise to more interaction between Muslims and Christians than have any others. But one should also take note of the response issued by the World Council of Churches (WCC), “Learning to Explore Love Together: Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to ‘A Common Word.’” Acknowledging their commitment to “fresh thinking about the relationship between Islam and Christianity,” the WCC encourages member churches to recognize the “serious intent” of “A Common Word” and “prayerfully consider its invitation to dialogue and cooperation.” The Council then proposes that it will “create a joint *planning group* to prepare steps towards common action, and seek joint Muslim and Christian initiatives of dialogue and cooperation at both the regional and global levels.”⁴⁹

The remainder of “Learning to Explore Love Together” provides a thoughtful outline of the issues and difficulties that confront Muslim-Christian dialogue, noting that “signs of similarity must be held in tension with real divergences and hard to reconcile differences.” It then touches upon two central issues in Muslim-Christian dialogue: the relationship between *tawhid*, or the unity of God, and the Trinity; and the understanding of God’s will as revealed in the Quran and in the person of Jesus. Regarding the first question, it asks, “Are these contradictory doctrines, as the history of engagement between the two faiths attests, or is there a way in which they can be seen as complementary insights into the mystery of God?” Regarding the second, it asks,

[W]hile both Muslims and Christians claim to receive revelation from God, what is meant when Muslims claim to perceive the will of God revealed in the Qur’an—what has been called the Word of God become book—, and what is meant when Christians claim to perceive God’s self revealed in Jesus Christ—who is called the Word of God become flesh?⁵⁰

Although the response from the World Council of Churches has not yet led to the same type of high-level interaction that the responses of the Vatican, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Yale Divinity School have occasioned, it is significant that this broadest and most inclusive international Christian organization has encouraged its 349 member churches in over 100 countries to participate in this movement. This may prove to be an important step in helping Muslims and Christians to “strive to reach the point at which they can recognize and endorse what they hold in common with sufficient integrity to allow them to work together in the world.”⁵¹

The Importance of “A Common Word”

Although the “Common Word” initiative has received some criticism, the response has for the most part been overwhelmingly positive. Though few outside the movement initially grasped its potential significance—what the grand mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa, has referred to as “something of a small miracle”⁵²—some are beginning to recognize the power that Muslims and Christians coming together for the common good could have. In the English-speaking press one can now find over 600 articles addressing various aspects of the initiative—and while this may seem substantial, it is but a drop in the bucket when compared with the attention given to the Regensburg lecture and the Danish cartoon fiasco, about which tens of thousands of articles have been written. Given the inclinations of the mainstream media, it is not surprising that the vast majority of reporters are unable to distinguish the “Common Word” movement from other interfaith initiatives, or to see what promise it might hold. The establishment of the C-1 World Dialogue and other measures may help, in time, to overcome this ignorance.

Three central features make “A Common Word between Us and You” and the subsequent ongoing exchange a crucial, promising, and historic step in Muslim-Christian dialogue: the grounding in scripture; the acceptance of theological differences; and the participation of religious leaders of the highest rank. To take the first point first: As seen in the passages of “A Common Word” cited above, this dialogue has been grounded in scripture from its inception, and it has even sought to expand the manner in which some Quranic verses are interpreted.

Thus, the title of the letter is drawn from the famous Quranic verse, “Say: ‘O People of Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God’” (3:64). Several

scholars have noted that this verse is usually interpreted in a polemical context and employed to support polemical objectives. The interpretive history of verse 3:64 is indeed polemical: Muhammad b. Jarīr Al-Tabarī, the dean of Quranic exegesis, and other influential exegetes, such as, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, and al-Baghawī, have tended to view this verse as a challenge to Christians.⁵³ Nonetheless, as with most verses of the Quran, there are many ways of understanding it. Other exegetes have seen 3:64 as an allusion to fundamental principles that all Abrahamic faiths are believed to share, saying of the phrase “a common word”: “[T]hat is, the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran do not differ regarding it, or there is no differentiation regarding it among the revealed religions (*sharā’i*).”⁵⁴ Or as the eighteenth-century Moroccan scholar Ahmad ibn ‘Ajibah says in his commentary on this verse: “The paths are many and the goal is one, and it is pure unity (*tawhid*).”⁵⁵ Thus, although the polemical strand of interpreting 3:64 may predominate in Islamic history, it is certainly not the *only* interpretive strand.

It is significant that many of the world’s leading Islamic scholars have chosen to emphasize the more universal implications of 3:64 rather than the polemical interpretation. For that the universalist implications of many Quranic verses represent an integral component of this dialogue. Each community has taken it upon themselves to tell the other how they understand the sources and tenets of their religious tradition, while listening to the other community’s explanation of how *they* understand the sources and tenets of their own tradition. As the Final Declaration of the Yale Conference states, “A *Common Word* is rooted in our sacred texts, arising from within, not imposed from without.”⁵⁶ And as Archbishop Rowan Williams has written in his response to “A Common Word”: “[F]or both faiths, scripture provides the basic tools for speaking of God and it is in attending to how we use our holy texts that we often discover most truly the nature of each other’s faith.”⁵⁷ This is an essential observation, for Christians and Muslims often find it difficult to relate to the theological subtleties of other faiths and are rarely swayed by references to great theologians whom proponents of other religions esteem. But given the centrality of scripture in their own tradition, they are able to relate to the centrality of scripture in another tradition. In this way, scripture provides one of the best platforms for Muslim-Christian dialogue. And comparative scriptural inquiry also has the potential of revealing unfamiliar dimensions of one’s own scripture by showing them in another light.

Unfortunately, members of each tradition all too often refuse to afford another scripture the same leniency and interpretive flexibility that they have learned to allow their own. They are less patient with a scripture other than their own; less willing to let the apparent naiveties, inconsistencies, and

contradictions of another scripture yield the profundities that they have come to expect of their own. If, however, Muslims and Christians are able to read their scriptures together, they may come to see that in reading the scriptures of another tradition in a way that casts a negative light on that tradition, they are perpetrating the very same error that they accuse the other tradition of committing when it cites their own scripture against them.

The second feature that distinguishes the “Common Word” movement is that the dialogue has sought not to ignore or deny theological differences, but rather to acknowledge and even embrace them. That is, to quote Archbishop Rowan Williams, the dialogue seeks to bring Christian and Muslim communities together “not ‘at the margins’ of [their] historic identities, but by speaking from what is central and authoritative [to each].”⁵⁸ In this way, the “Common Word” initiative avoids a major pitfall of much interfaith dialogue, wherein well-meaning believers barter away central tenets of their communities’ creeds in the hope of finding common ground—as if one were to say, “I’ll give up the uncreated Quran, if you drop the Trinity.” In the name of violating neither religion, this form of dialogue *undermines* religion, by accepting two unspoken premises: 1) that religions cannot reach common ground on religious terms; and (2) that in the modern period, all people of religion must yield to the principles of secular humanism. This form of dialogue dilutes religion—and it thereby leads many to reject interreligious dialogue as antithetical to the teachings of their faith, or as a Trojan horse by which its central tenets will be undermined. And this can in turn lead to greater misunderstanding and mistrust. For this reason, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad has said of the initiative: “I would like to say also that *A Common Word* does not signal that Muslims are prepared to deviate from or concede one iota of any 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.”⁵⁹

The third feature that sets “A Common Word” apart from other interfaith initiatives is that it has the backing of many of the highest-ranking religious authorities in both the Christian and Islamic worlds. On the Muslim side, this includes figures such as Ahmad El-Tayyeb, the president of al-Azhar University; Allamah Shaykh Abd Allah bin Bayyah; Allamah Shaykh Mohammad Said Ramadan Al-Buti; Ayatollah Muhaqqiq-i Damad, regarded by many as one of the leading Shiite theologians of his generation; and the grand muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Bosnia, Oman, and Russia, among many other countries. On the Christian side, this includes the pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and the heads of most international churches. The history of Christian-Muslim relations has never witnessed collaboration among authorities of this stature.

In the extended version of his final address at the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, Seyyed Hossein Nasr underlines the importance of their participation when he writes:

In this effort to reorient ourselves toward each other, all of us, Christian and Muslim alike, can play a role. But there is no doubt that the main responsibility lies on the shoulders of religious leaders, thinkers and scholars, those whom we call “*ulamā*” in Islam. Those who are guides and trailblazers in religious matters must come forward and seek to bring about understanding to those in their own communities who hearken to their call. They should bring about further knowledge about the other whom they should present as friend, not enemy, to be loved and not vilified.⁶⁰

The involvement of leaders of such eminence has many ramifications. One of these has already begun to be realized in the formation of the C-1 World Dialogue. It is also likely that the “Common Word” initiative served as a catalyst for the interfaith initiative launched by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. But most importantly, these leaders are the people who influence what is said in mosques and churches on Fridays and Sundays, what is taught in schools, and what is heard on television. If they are committed to this exchange, the message of “A Common Word” has the potential to change the way that Christians and Muslims understand and approach one another throughout the world.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite these significant features, it should be stressed that the crucial theological issues dividing Christians and Muslims have not yet been fully discussed in these exchanges—and they may never be fully addressed in the context of the “Common Word” initiative. For this is not at its heart a theological exchange. Rather, “A Common Word between Us and You” is an initiative that seeks to promote peace by alleviating misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims through an emphasis on the love of God, devotion to the One God, and love of neighbor. In this way it allows the participants to maintain their theological differences in creative tension while asserting what they hold in common and working for the greater good. As the World Council of Churches has expressed it:

“Christians and Muslims. . . . should make it a priority to understand how the precious heritages they each hold can direct and even impel them to work together for justice and peace,

recognizing their joint goals and responding to the call of the One they worship and obey to come together not only in a common word but also in common action for the greater glory of God and the wellbeing of all.”⁶¹

Theological discussions may develop in the future, and there may be a role that the academy can play in this dialogue; for those who do not represent large constituencies risk less when venturing new approaches to the faith. Perhaps in this way academics and theologians together can help others to imagine what might be gained if Muslims and Christians sought to define themselves in relation to one another rather than in opposition.

One can hope that the spirit of this exchange will continue to be one of “ying in good works” in accordance with the Quranic verse: “Perhaps God will create friendship between you and those you consider your enemies” (60:8). For as Daniel Madigan, SJ, observes in his response to “A Common Word,” “Where love replaces enmity, it is surely God at work, not just us.”⁶² Let us hope that this can come to pass. For this interfaith endeavor is not only important for relations between Islam and Christianity; it can also help shape the response of religion to the forces of bigotry, terrorism, and extremism. Some have argued that to avoid violent clashes between nations and peoples, religion must be abandoned altogether. But in the twentieth century—the bloodiest of human history—ideological conflicts and their attendant wars have demonstrated that it is humanity, not religion, that is responsible for the atrocities of the past and the present. Many invoke religion to justify reckless ideologies and wanton violence—but in so doing they betray the very teachings of the religions they purport to represent. Perhaps by reaffirming the ethical teachings of their traditions together, Christians and Muslims can employ their collective moral voice to address injustices committed against peoples of all faiths.

The exchange initiated by “A Common Word” will not resolve all of the conflicts that arise out of religious diversity, nor will it ameliorate all of the tensions that grow out of theological disputes. It can be hoped, however, that the positive effects of Christian-Muslim dialogue will spill over from the pens and lips of theologians to the *minbar* and the pulpit, from where they can also reach into the schools and streets. Agreement may not always be reached; but by continuing to approach each other in good faith, Muslims and Christians can take important steps toward eradicating the extremism that corrodes from within and divides from without. Perhaps in this way, “A Common Word” can be one small step toward realizing the vision of the prophet Isaiah (2:4): “[The nations] will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore.”

Endnotes

- 1 [“First Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum,” Rome, November 4-6, 2008: “Final Declaration,” pp. 3-4.*](#)
- 2 [“Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Seminar Organized by the Catholic-Muslim Forum,” Vatican City, Clementine Hall, November 6, 2008.*](#)
- 3 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “We and You—Let Us Meet in God’s Love” (expanded version), *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Winter 2008/9).
- 4 The nature of these responses merits a study in and of itself. The text of “A Common Word” can be found at <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/CW-Total-Final-v-12g-Eng-9-10-07.pdf>; to see the sixty-six Christian responses to date, go to <http://acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=responses>.
- 5 See [H.Con.Res. 374](#) for an outline of the history of the resolution.*
- 6 Several panels on “A Common Word” have been held at academic conferences. The University of South Carolina and Zayed University co-hosted an international symposium entitled “Theory and Application of A Common Word” on March 26-27, 2009. The proceeds of this conference are scheduled for publication in *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of A Common Word*, ed. Waleed El-Ansary and David Linman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Forthcoming, 2010).
- 7 That the Regensburg Address marked its inception is the analysis proffered by Samir Khalil Samir, SJ, in “Pope Benedict XVI and Dialogue with Muslims,” *Annals Australasia* (January/February 2008), pp. 20–25.
- 8 The entire Regensburg lecture can be found on the Vatican’s website.* The polemical passage is as follows:

I was reminded of all this recently, when I read the edition by Professor Theodore Khoury (Münster) of part of the dialogue carried on—perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara—by the erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both. It was probably the emperor himself who set down this dialogue, during the siege of Constantinople between 1394 and 1402; and this would explain why his arguments are given in greater detail than those of his Persian interlocutor. The dialogue ranges widely over the structures of faith contained in the Bible and in the Qur’an, and deals especially with the image of God and of man, while necessarily returning repeatedly to the relationship between . . . three “Laws” or “rules of life”: the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Qur’an. . . . I would like to discuss only one point—itsself rather marginal to the dialogue as a whole—which, in the context of the issue of “faith and reason,” I found interesting and which can serve as the starting-point for my reflections on this issue.

In the seventh conversation edited by Professor Khoury, the emperor touches on the theme of the holy war (jihad). The emperor must have known that surah 2, 256 reads: “There is no compulsion in religion.” According to some of the experts, this is probably one of the suras of the early period, when Mohammed was still powerless and under threat. But naturally the emperor also knew the instructions, developed later and recorded in the Qur’an, concerning holy war. Without descending to details, such as the difference in treatment accorded to those who have the “Book” and the “infidels,” he addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness . . . on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: “Show me just what Mohammed 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. The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. “God,” he says, “is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably is contrary to God’s nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats . . . To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death. . . .”

The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature. The editor, Theodore Khoury, observes: For the emperor, as a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, this statement is self-evident. But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. Here Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God’s will, we would even have to practise idolatry.

- 9 [As quoted in “Cardinal Praises Muslims for ‘Eloquent’ Letter.” *Zenit* \(October 19, 2007\).](#)*
- 10 [Tom Heneghan, “Vatican Says Pope Cannot Sign Collective Response to Muslims,” *Reuters Blogs* \(October 23, 2007\).](#)*
- 11 [Michael Gonyea, “Islam’s Transcendent Challenge.” *American Thinker* \(October 12, 2008\).](#)*
- 12 [Fareed Zakaria, “New Hope: Defeating Terror Requires Muslim Help—and Much More than Force of Arms.” *Newsweek* \(July 18, 2005\).](#)*

Zakaria writes: “Now things are changing. The day before the London bombs, a conference of 180 top Muslim sheiks and imams, brought together under the auspices of Jordan’s King Abdullah, issued a statement forbidding that any Muslim be declared takfir—an apostate [sic] This is a frontal attack

on Al Qaeda's theological methods. Declaring someone takfir—and thus sanctioning his or her death—is a favorite tactic of bin Laden and his ally in Iraq, Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. The conference's statement was endorsed by 10 fatwas from such big conservative scholars as Tantawi; Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani; Egypt's mufti, Ali Jumaa, and the influential Al-Jazeera TV-sheik, Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Signed by adherents of all schools of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), it also allows only qualified Muslim scholars to issue edicts. The Islamic Conference's statement, the first of its kind, is a rare show of unity among the religious establishment against terrorists and their scholarly allies."

- 13 For examples of the pseudo-fatwas issued by extremist elements, see *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence; transl. James Howarth (New York: Verso, 2005). One is most struck by the lack of questions—for a traditional fatwa is always an answer to a question. But in the case of Bin Laden, proclamations are presented as fatwas.
- 14 "The Statement issued by the International Islamic Conference," "True Islam and Its Role in Modern Society" (4-6 July 2005, Amman, Jordan).
- 15 Homepage of A Common Word, <http://acommonword.com>.
- 16 "[A Common Word Between Us and You \(Summary and Abridgement\)](#)," p. 2.*
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 "A Common Word Between Us and You," p. 13.
- 19 Ibid., p. 16.
- 20 "A Common Word Between Us and You," p. 4.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
- 22 [Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, "A Common Word Between Us and You": Theological Motives and Expectations" Acceptance speech for the Eugen Biser Award ceremony, \(November 22, 2008\), pp. 5–6.*](#)
- 23 "[Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You](#)". *New York Times*, November 11, 2007.*
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 *A Common Word: Christians and Muslims on Loving God and Neighbor*, ed. Mirsolav Volf and Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Forthcoming, 2009).

- 26 Personal discussion with Reza Shah-Kazemi and Ibrahim Kalin, spokesperson for “A Common Word,” July 26, 2008.
- 27 [“Final Declaration of the Yale Common Word Conference,” July 2008.*](#)
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 For a video of John Piper’s response to “A Common Word,” [*Desiring God: God-centered resources from the ministry of John Piper*, January 23, 2008.*](#)
- 30 [Leith Anderson, “Signing the Letter to Islam,” *National Association of Evangelicals*, November 20, 2007.*](#)
- 31 [Archbishop Rowan Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” *A Common Word*, July 7, 2008, p. 2.*](#)
- 32 Ibid., p. 12.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., p. 13.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 14.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., p. 16.
- 39 Based on eye witness account.
- 40 [The Most Reverend & Right Honorable Dr. Rowan Williams and H. E. Shaykh Prof. Dr. Ali Gomaa Mohamed Abdel Wahab, “Communiqué from A Common Word conference,” October 15, 2008.*](#)
- 41 For an introduction to scriptural reasoning, see, available at [*Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 1 \(May 2002\).*](#)
- 42 [“Nostra Aetate,” §3.*](#)
- 43 [“Dominus Iesus,” §21.*](#)
- 44 [*Insegnamenti*, VIII/2, \(1985\), p. 497, quoted by Pope John Paul II in “General Audience: The Dialogue with Muslims,” May 5, 1999.*](#)

- 45 [“Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI”, October 12, 2006.*](#)
- 46 [“Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Seminar Organized by the ‘Catholic-Muslim Forum.’” Clementine Hall, November 6, 2008.*](#)
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 [World Council of Churches, “Learning to Explore Love Together,” p. 2.*](#)
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 As quoted in an interview with Stryker McGuire, “A Small Miracle,” *Newsweek*, October 21, 2008.
- 53 Several scholars have raised this point, but the only thorough study is Gordon Nickel’s “‘A Common Word’ in Context and Commentary” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, November 3, 2008).
- 54 Mahmūd b. ‘Abdallah al-Alāsī, *Rūh al-má‘ānī fī tafsīr al-qur’ān al-karīm wa-l-sabā‘ al-mathānī* (Beirut: Dar Elhia al-Tourath al-Arabi, 1420/1999), vol. 3, p. 193.
- 55 Ahmad ibn ‘Ajība, *al-Bahr al-madīd fī tafsīr al-qur’ān al-majīd* (Beirut: Dar al-Kotoob al-Ilmiyyah, 1426/2005), vol. 1, p. 330.
- 56 “Final Declaration of the Yale Common Word Conference,” July 2008.
- 57 Williams, “A Common Word for the Common Good,” p. 3.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ghazi bin Muhammad, “A Common Word Between Us and You,” pp. 8–9.
- 60 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “We and You—Let us Meet in God’s Love.”
- 61 World Council of Churches, “Learning to Explore Love Together,” p. 4.
- 62 [Daniel Madigan, SJ, “A Common Word Between Us and You: Some Initial Reflections,” p. 7.*](#)

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