

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

كَلِمَةٌ شَرَعِيَّةٌ

A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU

THE ROYAL AAL AL-BAYT INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC THOUGHT

2009 • JORDAN



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INTRODUCTION

“A COMMON WORD” ACCOMPLISHMENTS 2007–2008

In the Name of God

Over the last year since its launch the *A Common Word* initiative (*see* www.acommonword.com) has become the world’s leading interfaith dialogue initiative between Christians and Muslims specifically, and has achieved historically unprecedented global acceptance and “traction” as an interfaith theological document.

A Common Word was launched on October 13th 2007 as an open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars and intellectuals (including such figures as the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bosnia, Russia, Chad and Istanbul) to the leaders of the Christian Churches and denominations all over the world, including H.H. Pope Benedict XVI. In essence, it proposes—based on verses from the Holy Qur’an and the Holy Bible—that Islam and Christianity share at their core,

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the twin “golden” commandments of the paramount importance of loving God and loving the neighbor. Based on this joint common ground, it called for peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims worldwide.

Since the launch of *A Common Word* in October 2007, over 60 leading Christian figures have responded to it in one form or another, including H.H. Pope Benedict XVI, H.B. Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II of Russia, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams, and the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Mark Hanson (see “Christian Responses” at www.acommonword.com). On November 2007, over 300 leading U.S. Evangelical leaders also responded in an open letter in the *New York Times*. In the meantime, the Muslim Scholars signing the initiative increased to around 300, with over 460 Islamic organizations and associations endorsing it.

A Common Word has led to a number of spontaneous local grass-roots and community-level initiatives in places as far apart as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Canada, South Africa, the USA, and Great Britain (see “New Fruits” at www.acommonword.com):

- Over 600 articles—carried by thousands of press outlets—have been written about *A Common Word* in

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English alone.

- Around 200,000 people have visited the Official Website of *A Common Word* for further details.
- *A Common Word* has already been the subject of a number of M.A. and M. Phil. dissertations in Western universities in various countries (including at Harvard University, the Theological Seminary at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and the Center for Studies of Islam in the UK).
- *A Common Word* has been the subject of major international conferences at Yale University, USA, and at Cambridge University (UK) and Lambeth Palace, and was studied at the World Economic Forum in Spring 2008 and the Mediterranean dialogue of Cultures in November 2008.
- *A Common Word* was also the basis for the First Annual Catholic-Muslim forum held at the Vatican in November 2008.
- *A Common Word* was the central impetus behind the Wamp-Ellison Resolution in the US House of Representatives which passed in 2008, and it was commended in this Resolution.
- *A Common Word* received the UK's Association of Muslim Social Scientists 2008 *Building Bridges Award*, and Germany's *Eugen Biser Award* of 2008.

A COMMON WORD
BETWEEN US AND YOU

I. A COMMON WORD

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

On the Occasion of *Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak* 1428 AH/
October 13th 2007 AH, and on the One Year Anniversary
of the Open Letter of 38 Muslim Scholars to H.H.
Pope Benedict XVI,

*An Open Letter and Call from Muslim
Religious Leaders to:*

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,

His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, Patriarch of
Constantinople, New Rome,

His Beatitude Theodoros II, Pope and Patriarch
of Alexandria and All Africa,

His Beatitude Ignatius IV, Patriarch of Antioch
and All the East,

His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of the Holy
City of Jerusalem,

His Beatitude Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and
All Russia,

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His Beatitude Pavle, Patriarch of Belgrade and Serbia,
His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of Romania,
His Beatitude Maxim, Patriarch of Bulgaria,
His Beatitude Ilia II, Archbishop of Mtskheta-Tbilisi,
Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia,
His Beatitude Chrisostomos, Archbishop of Cyprus,
His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and
All Greece,
His Beatitude Sawa, Metropolitan of Warsaw and
All Poland,
His Beatitude Anastasios, Archbishop of Tirana,
Duerres and All Albania,
His Beatitude Christoforos, Metropolitan of the Czech
and Slovak Republics,
His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria
and Patriarch of All Africa on the Apostolic Throne
of St. Mark,
His Beatitude Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and
Catholicos of All Armenians,
His Beatitude Ignatius Zakka I, Patriarch of Antioch
and All the East, Supreme Head of the Universal
Syrian Orthodox Church,
His Holiness Mar Thoma Didymos I, Catholicos of the
East on the Apostolic Throne of St. Thomas and the
Malankara Metropolitan,

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His Holiness Abune Paulos, Fifth Patriarch and
Catholicos of Ethiopia, Echege of the See of St.
Tekle Haymanot, Archbishop of Axium,

His Beatitude Mar Dinkha IV, Patriarch of the Holy
Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East,

The Most Rev. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of
Canterbury,

Rev. Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and
President of the Lutheran World Federation,

Rev. George H. Freeman, General Secretary, World
Methodist Council,

Rev. David Coffey, President of the Baptist World
Alliance,

Rev. Setri Nyomi, General Secretary of the World
Alliance of Reformed Churches,

Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary, World
Council of Churches,

And Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere ...

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In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU (*Summary and Abridgement*)

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. The following are only a few examples:

Of God's Unity, God says in the Holy Qur'an: *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 Qur'an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete*

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devotion (Al-Muzzammil 73:8). Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.”

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ ﷺ 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)



In the Holy Qur’an, God Most High enjoins Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews—the People of the Scripture):

Say: O People of the 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. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal ‘Imran 3:64)

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The words: *we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* relate to the Unity of God, and the words: *worship none but God*, relate to being totally devoted to God. Hence they all relate to the *First and Greatest Commandment*. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries on the Holy Qur'an the words: *that none of us shall take others for lords beside God*, mean 'that none of us should obey the other in disobedience to what God has commanded'. This relates to the Second Commandment because justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour.

Thus in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the *Two Commandments* of love.



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
And may peace and blessings be upon the Prophet
Muhammad*

A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair
exhortation, and contend with them in the fairest way. Lo!
thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way,
and He is Best Aware of those who go aright.*

(The Holy Qur'an, Al-Nahl, 16:125)

(I) LOVE OF GOD

LOVE OF GOD IN ISLAM

The Testimonies of Faith

The central creed of Islam consists of the two testimonies of faith or *Shahadahs*,¹ which state that: *There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.* These Two Testimonies are the *sine qua non* of Islam. He

or she who testifies to them is a Muslim; he or she who denies them is not a Muslim. Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: *The best remembrance is: ‘There is no god but God’ . . .*²

The Best that All the Prophets have Said

Expanding on *the best remembrance*, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also said: *The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’.*³ The phrases which follow the First Testimony of faith are all from the Holy Qur’an; each describes a mode of love of God, and devotion to Him.

The words: *He Alone*, remind Muslims that their hearts⁴ must be devoted to God Alone, since God says in the Holy Qur’an: *God hath not assigned unto any man two hearts within his body (Al-Ahzab, 33:4)*. God is Absolute and therefore devotion to Him must be totally sincere.

The words: *He hath no associate*, remind Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls, since God says in the Holy Qur’an: *Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God . . . (Al-Baqarah, 2:165)*. Indeed, [T]heir

flesh and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God ... (Al-Zumar, 39:23).

The words: *His is the sovereignty*, remind Muslims that their minds or their understandings must be totally devoted to God, for *the sovereignty* is precisely everything in creation or existence and everything that the mind can know. And all is in God's Hand, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Blessed is He in Whose Hand is the sovereignty, and, He is Able to do all things (Al-Mulk, 67:1).*

The words: *His is the praise* remind Muslims that they must be grateful to God and trust Him with all their sentiments and emotions. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

And if thou wert to ask them: Who created the heavens and the earth, and constrained the sun and the moon (to their appointed work)? they would say: God. How then are they turned away? / God maketh the provision wide for whom He will of His servants, and straiteneth it for whom (He will). Lo! God is Aware of all things. / And if thou wert to ask them: Who causeth water to come down from the sky, and therewith reviveth the earth after its death? they verily would say: God. Say: Praise be to God!

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But most of them have no sense. (Al-'Ankabut, 29: 61-63)⁵

For all these bounties and more, human beings must always be truly grateful:

God is He Who created the heavens and the earth, and causeth water to descend from the sky, thereby producing fruits as food for you, and maketh the ships to be of service unto you, that they may run upon the sea at His command, and hath made of service unto you the rivers; / And maketh the sun and the moon, constant in their courses, to be of service unto you, and hath made of service unto you the night and the day. / And He giveth you of all ye ask of Him, and if ye would count the graces of God ye cannot reckon them. Lo! man is verily a wrongdoer, an ingrate. (Ibrahim, 14:32-34)⁶

Indeed, the *Fatihah*—which is the *greatest chapter in the Holy Qur'an*⁷—starts with praise to God:

*In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful. /
Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds. /*

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*The Infinitely Good, the All-Merciful. /
Owner of the Day of Judgement. /
Thee we worship, and Thee we ask for help. /
Guide us upon the straight path. /
The path of those on whom is Thy Grace, not those
who deserve anger nor those who are astray.
(Al-Fatihah, 1:1-7)*

The *Fatihah*, recited at least seventeen times daily by Muslims in the canonical prayers, reminds us of the praise and gratitude due to God for His Attributes of Infinite Goodness and All-Mercifulness, not merely for His Goodness and Mercy to us in this life but ultimately, on the Day of Judgement⁸ when it matters the most and when we hope to be forgiven for our sins. It thus ends with prayers for grace and guidance, so that we might attain—through what begins with praise and gratitude—salvation and *love*, for God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Lo! those who believe and do good works, the Infinitely Good will appoint for them love.* (*Maryam*, 19:96)

The words: *and He hath power over all things*, remind Muslims that they must be mindful of God's Omnipotence and thus fear God.⁹ God says in the Holy Qur'an:

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... [A]nd fear God, and know that God is with the God-fearing. / Spend your wealth for the cause of God, and be not cast by your own hands to ruin; and do good. Lo! God loveth the virtuous. /

(Al-Baqarah, 2:194-5) ...

[A]nd fear God, and know that God is severe in punishment. (Al-Baqarah, 2:196)

Through fear of God, the actions, might and strength of Muslims should be totally devoted to God. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

... [A]nd know that God is with those who fear Him.

(Al-Tambah, 9:36)

O ye who believe! What aileth you that when it is said unto you: Go forth in the way of God, ye are bowed down to the ground with heaviness. Take ye pleasure in the life of the world rather than in the Hereafter? The comfort of the life of the world is but little in the Hereafter. / If ye go not forth He will afflict you with a painful doom, and will choose instead of you a folk other than you. Ye cannot harm Him at all. God is Able to do all things. (Al-Tambah, 9:38-39)



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The words: *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, when taken all together, remind Muslims that just as everything in creation glorifies God, everything that is in their souls must be devoted to God:

All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifieth God; His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things. (Al-Taghabun, 64:1)

For indeed, all that is in people's souls is known, and accountable, to God:

He knoweth all that is in the heavens and the earth, and He knoweth what ye conceal and what ye publish. And God is Aware of what is in the breasts (of men). (Al-Taghabun, 64:4)

As we can see from all the passages quoted above, souls are depicted in the Holy Qur'an as having three main faculties: the mind or the intelligence, which is made for comprehending the truth; the will which is made for freedom of choice, and sentiment which is made for loving the good and the beautiful.¹⁰ Put in

another way, we could say that man's soul knows through *understanding* the truth, through *willing* the good, and through virtuous emotions and *feeling* love for God. Continuing in the same chapter of the Holy Qur'an (as that quoted above), God orders people to fear Him as much as possible, and to listen (and thus to understand the truth); to obey (and thus to will the good), and to spend (and thus to exercise love and virtue), which, He says, is better for our souls. By engaging *everything* in our souls—the faculties of knowledge, will, and love—we may come to be purified and attain ultimate success:

So fear God as best ye can, and listen, and obey, and spend; that is better for your souls. And those who are saved from the pettiness of their own souls, such are the successful. (Al-Taghabun, 64:16)



In summary then, when the entire phrase *He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things* is added to the testimony of faith—*There is no god but God*—it reminds Muslims that their hearts, their individual souls and all the faculties and powers of their souls (or simply

their *entire* hearts and souls) must be totally devoted and attached to God. Thus God says to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the Holy Qur'an:

Say: Lo! my worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds. / He hath no partner. This am I commanded, and I am first of those who surrender (unto Him). / Say: Shall I seek another than God for Lord, when He is Lord of all things? Each soul earneth only on its own account, nor doth any laden bear another's load... (Al-An'am, 6:162-164)

These verses epitomize the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ complete and utter devotion to God. Thus in the Holy Qur'an God enjoins Muslims who truly love God to follow this example,¹¹ in order, in turn, to be loved¹² by God:

Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): If ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful. (Aal 'Imran, 3:31)

Love of God in Islam is thus part of complete and total devotion to God; it is not a mere fleeting, partial

emotion. As seen above, God commands in the Holy Qur'an: *Say: Lo! my worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds. / He hath no partner.* The call to be totally devoted and attached to God, heart and soul, far from being a call for a mere emotion or for a mood, is in fact an injunction requiring all-embracing, constant and active love of God. It demands a love in which the innermost spiritual heart and the whole of the soul—with its intelligence, will and feeling—participate through devotion.



None Comes with Anything Better

We have seen how the blessed phrase: *There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*—which is the best that all the prophets have said—makes explicit what is implicit in *the best remembrance (There is no god but God)* by showing what it requires and entails, by way of devotion. It remains to be said that this blessed formula is also in itself a sacred invocation—a kind of extension of the First Testimony of faith (*There is no god but God*)—the ritual repetition of which can bring about, through God's grace, some of the devotional

attitudes it demands, namely, loving and being devoted to God with all one's heart, all one's soul, all one's mind, all one's will or strength, and all one's sentiment. Hence the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ commended this remembrance by saying:

*He who says: 'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things' one hundred times in a day, it is for them equal to setting ten slaves free, and one hundred good deeds are written for them and one hundred bad deeds are effaced, and it is for them a protection from the devil for that day until the evening. And none offers anything better than that, save one who does more than that.*¹³

In other words, the blessed remembrance, *There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, not only requires and implies that Muslims must be totally devoted to God and love Him with their whole hearts and their whole souls and all that is in them, but provides a way, like its beginning (the testimony of faith)—through its frequent repetition¹⁴—for them to realize this love with everything they are.

God says in one of the very first revelations in the Holy Qur'an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (Al-Muzzammil, 73:8).*

LOVE OF GOD AS THE *FIRST AND
GREATEST COMMANDMENT*
IN THE BIBLE

The *Shema* in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5), a centrepiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy, says: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*¹⁵

Likewise, in the New Testament, when Jesus Christ, the Messiah ✠, is asked about the Greatest Commandment, he answers ✠:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. / Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, / "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" / Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." / This is the first and

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greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."(Matthew 22:34-40)

And also:

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" / Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: '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 12:28-31)

The commandment to love God fully is thus the *First and Greatest Commandment* of the Bible. Indeed, it is to be found in a number of other places throughout the Bible including: Deuteronomy 4:29, 10:12, 11:13 (also part of the *Shema*), 13:3, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6, 30:10; Joshua 22:5; Mark 12:32-33 and Luke 10:27-28.

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However, in various places throughout the Bible, it occurs in slightly different forms and versions. For instance, in Matthew 22:37 (*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*), the Greek word for “heart” is *kardia*, the word for “soul” is *psyche*, and the word for “mind” is *dianoia*. In the version from Mark 12:30 (*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*) the word “strength” is added to the aforementioned three, translating the Greek word *ischus*.


The words of the lawyer in Luke 10:27 (which are confirmed by Jesus Christ ☩ in Luke 10:28) contain the same four terms as Mark 12:30. The words of the scribe in Mark 12:32 (which are approved of by Jesus Christ ☩ in Mark 12:34) contain the three terms *kardia* (“heart”), *dianoia* (“mind”), and *ischus* (“strength”).

In the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength*). In Hebrew the word for “heart” is *lev*, the word for “soul” is *nefesh*, and the word for “strength” is *me’od*.

In Joshua 22:5, the Israelites are commanded by Joshua ☩ to love God and be devoted to Him as follows:

“But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Joshua 22:5)

What all these versions thus have in common—despite the language differences between the Hebrew Old Testament, the original words of Jesus Christ  in Aramaic, and the actual transmitted Greek of the New Testament—is the command to love God fully with one’s heart and soul and to be fully devoted to Him. This is the First and Greatest Commandment for human beings.

In the light of what we have seen to be necessarily implied and evoked by the Prophet Muhammad’s  blessed saying: *‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’,¹⁶* we can now perhaps understand the words *‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me’* as equating the blessed formula *‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and*

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His is the praise and He hath power over all things' precisely with the 'First and Greatest Commandment' to love God, with all one's heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible. That is to say, in other words, that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible's First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning. Moreover, we also do know (as can be seen in the endnotes), that both formulas have another remarkable parallel: the way they arise in a number of slightly differing versions and forms in different contexts, all of which, nevertheless, emphasize the primacy of total love and devotion to God.¹⁷



(II) LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR

LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR IN ISLAM

There are numerous injunctions in Islam about the necessity and paramount importance of love for—and mercy towards—the neighbour. Love of the neighbour is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God because in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God and no righteousness. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.”¹⁸ And: “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.”¹⁹

However, empathy and sympathy for the neighbour—and even formal prayers—are not enough. They must be accompanied by generosity and self-sacrifice. God says in the Holy Qur’an:

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces²⁰ to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free;

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and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the pious. (Al-Baqarah, 2:177)

And also:

Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love. And whatsoever ye expend, God is Aware thereof. (Aal 'Imran, 3:92)

Without giving the neighbour what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God or the neighbour.

LOVE OF THE NEIGHBOUR IN THE BIBLE

We have already cited the words of the Messiah, Jesus Christ ﷺ, about the paramount importance, second only to the love of God, of the love of the neighbour:

This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:38-40)

And:

And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:31)

It remains only to be noted that this commandment is also to be found in the Old Testament:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. / You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:17-18)

Thus the Second Commandment, like the First Commandment, demands generosity and self-sacrifice, and *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*

(III) *COME TO A COMMON WORD
BETWEEN US AND YOU*

A Common Word

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 Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament. What prefaces the Two Commandments in the Torah and the New Testament, and what they arise out of, is the Unity of God—that there is only one God. For the *Shema* in the Torah, starts: (Deuteronomy 6:4) *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!* Likewise, Jesus ﷺ said: (Mark 12:29) “*The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one’*”. Likewise, God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Say: He, God, is One. / God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all.* (*Al-Ikhlās*, 112:1-2). Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.

This could not be otherwise since Jesus ﷺ said: (Matthew 22:40) “*On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*” Moreover, God confirms

in the Holy Qur'an that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new: *Naught is said to thee (Muhammad) but what already was said to the messengers before thee (Fussilat, 41:43)*. And: *Say (Muhammad): I am no new thing among the messengers (of God), nor know I what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow that which is Revealed to me, and I am but a plain warner (Al-Ahqaf, 46:9)*. Thus also God in the Holy Qur'an confirms that the same eternal truths of the Unity of God, of the necessity for total love and devotion to God (and thus shunning false gods), and of the necessity for love of fellow human beings (and thus justice), underlie all true religion:

And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming): Worship God and shun false gods. Then some of them (there were) whom God guided, and some of them (there were) upon whom error had just hold. Do but travel in the land and see the nature of the consequence for the deniers! (Al-Nahl, 16:36)

We verily sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance, that mankind may stand forth in justice... (Al-Hadid, 57:25)



Come to a Common Word!

In the Holy Qur'an, God Most High tells Muslims to issue the following call to Christians (and Jews—the *People of the Scripture*):

Say: O People of the 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. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). (Aal 'Imran, 3:64)

Clearly, the blessed words: *we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* relate to the Unity of God. Clearly also, worshipping *none but God*, relates to being totally devoted to God and hence to the *First and Greatest Commandment*. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries (*tafsir*) on the Holy Qur'an—the *Jami' Al-Bayan fi Ta'wil Al-Qur'an* of Abu Ja'far Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari (d. 310 AH / 923 CE)—*that none of us shall take others for lords beside God*, means 'that none of us should obey in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God'. In other words, that

Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have 'to prostrate before kings and the like';²¹ for God says elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an: *Let there be no compulsion in religion...* (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:256). This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbour of which justice²² and freedom of religion are a crucial part. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

God forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers.
(*Al-Mumtahinah*, 60:8)



We thus as Muslims invite Christians to remember Jesus's  words in the Gospel (Mark 12:29-31):

... 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.

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, (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an [*Al-Mumtahinah*, 60:8] quoted above). Moreover, God says in the Holy Qur'an:

They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of God in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). / They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. These are of the righteous. / And whatever good they do, nothing will be rejected of them. God is Aware of those who ward off (evil). (Aal-'Imran, 3:113-115)

Is Christianity necessarily against Muslims? In the Gospel Jesus Christ ☩ says:

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:30)

*For he who is not against us is on our side.
(Mark 9:40)*

... *for he who is not against us is on our side.*

(Luke 9:50)

According to the *Blessed Theophylact's*²³ *Explanation of the New Testament*, these statements are not contradictions because the first statement (in the actual Greek text of the New Testament) refers to demons, whereas the second and third statements refer to people who recognised Jesus, but were not Christians. Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do (but Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ's nature), but in the following way: ... *the Messiah Jesus son of Mary is a Messenger of God and His Word which he cast unto Mary and a Spirit from Him ... (Al-Nisa' 4:171)*. We therefore invite Christians to consider Muslims *not against* and thus *with them*, in accordance with Jesus Christ's words here.

Finally, as Muslims, and in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we ask Christians to come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions ... *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 ... (Aal 'Imran 3:64)*.

Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us, for our common ground


is that on which hangs *all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:40). God says in the Holy Qur'an:

Say (O Muslims): We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. / And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then are they rightly guided. But if they turn away, then are they in schism, and God will suffice thee against them. He is the Hearer, the Knower. (Al-Baqarah 2:136-137)

Between Us and You

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.

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 and come together in harmony. God says in the Holy Qur'an: *Lo! God enjoineth justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbiddeth lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorteth you in order that ye may take heed (Al Nahl, 16:90).* Jesus Christ  said: *Blessed are the peacemakers ... (Matthew 5:9), and also: For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? (Matthew 16:26).*

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. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a watcher over it. So judge between them by that which God hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee. For each We have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ. (Al-Ma'idah, 5:48)

*Wal-Salaamu 'Alaykum,
Pax Vobiscum.*

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The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought,
Jordan

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NOTES

¹ In Arabic: *La illaha illa Allah Muhammad rasul Allah*. The two *Shahadahs* actually both occur (albeit separately) as phrases in the Holy Qur'an (in *Muhammad*, 47:19, and *Al-Fath*, 48:29, respectively).

² *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Da'awat*, 462/5, no.3383; *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 1249/2.

³ *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Da'awat, Bab al-Du'a fi Yawm 'Arafah, Hadith no.3934*.

It is important to note that the additional phrases, *He Alone*, *He hath no associate*, *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, all come from the Holy Qur'an, in exactly those forms, albeit in different passages. *He Alone*—referring to God—is found at least six times in the Holy Qur'an (7:70; 14:40; 39:45; 40:12; 40:84 and 60:4). *He hath no associate*, is found in exactly that form at least once (*Al-An'am*, 6:173). *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, is found in exactly this form once in the Holy Qur'an (*Al-Taghabun*, 64:1), and parts of it are found a number of other times (for instance, the words, *He hath power over all things*, are found at least five times: 5:120; 11:4; 30:50; 42:9 and 57:2).

⁴ The Heart

In Islam the (spiritual, not physical) heart is the organ of perception of spiritual and metaphysical knowledge. Of one of the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ greatest visions God says in the Holy Qur'an: *The inner heart lied not (in seeing) what it saw. (al-Najm, 53:11)* Indeed, elsewhere in the Holy Qur'an, God says: *[F]or indeed it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts, which are within the bosoms, that grow blind.*

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(*Al-Hajj* 22:46; see whole verse and also: 2:9-10; 2:74; 8:24; 26:88-89; 48:4; 83:14 et al.. There are in fact over a hundred mentions of the heart and its synonyms in the Holy Qur'an.)

Now there are different understandings amongst Muslims as regards the direct Vision of God (as opposed to spiritual realities as such) God, be it in this life or the next—God says in the Holy Qur'an (of the Day of Judgement):

That day will faces be resplendent, / Looking toward their Lord;
(*Al-Qiyamah*, 75:22-23)

Yet God also says in the Holy Qur'an:

Such is God, your Lord. There is no God save Him, the Creator of all things, so worship Him. And He taketh care of all things. / Vision comprehendeth Him not, but He comprehendeth (all) vision. He is the Subtile, the Aware. / Proofs have come unto you from your Lord, so whoso seeth, it is for his own good, and whoso is blind is blind to his own hurt. And I am not a keeper over you. (Al-An'am, 6:102-104)

Howbeit, it is evident that the Muslim conception of the (spiritual) heart is not very different from the Christian conception of the (spiritual) heart, as seen in Jesus's ✠ words in the New Testament: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* (Matthew 5:8); and Paul's words: *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I am known.* (1 Corinthians 13:12)

⁵ See also: *Luqman*, 31:25.

⁶ See also: *Al-Nahl*, 16:3-18.

⁷ *Sahih Bukhari, Kitab Tafsir Al-Qur'an, Bab ma Ja'a fi Fatihat Al-*

Kitab (Hadith no.1); also: *Sahih Bukhari, Kitab Fada'il Al-Qur'an, Bab Fadl Fatihat Al-Kitab*, (Hadith no.9), no.5006.

⁸ The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

God has one hundred mercies. He has sent down one of them between genii and human beings and beasts and animals and because of it they feel with each other; and through it they have mercy on each other; and through it, the wild animal feels for its offspring. And God has delayed ninety-nine mercies through which he will have mercy on his servants on the Day of Judgement. (Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Tawbah; 2109/4; no.2752; see also Sahih Bukhari, Kitab Al-Riqaq, no.6469).

⁹ Fear of God is the Beginning of Wisdom

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is reported to have said: *The chief part of wisdom is fear of God—be He exalted (Musnad al-Shahab, 100/1; Al-Dulaymi, Musnad Al-Firdaws, 270/2; Al-Tirmidhi, Nawadir Al-Usul; 84/3; Al-Bayhaqi, Al-Dala'il and Al-Bayhaqi, Al-Shu'ab; Ibn Lal, Al-Makarim; Al-Ash'ari, Al-Amthal, et al.)* This evidently is similar to the Prophet Solomon ﷺ words in the Bible: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom ... (Proverbs 9:10); and: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge. (Proverbs 1:7)*

¹⁰ The Intelligence, the Will and Sentiment in the Holy Qur'an

Thus God in the Holy Qur'an tells human beings to believe in Him and call on Him (thereby using the intelligence) with fear (which motivates the will) and with hope (and thus with sentiment):

Only those believe in Our revelations who, when they are reminded of them, fall down prostrate and hymn the praise of their Lord, and

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they are not scornful, / Who forsake their beds to cry unto their Lord in fear and hope, and spend of that We have bestowed on them. / No soul knoweth what is kept hid for them of joy, as a reward for what they used to do. (Al-Sajdah, 32:15-17)

(O mankind!) Call upon your Lord humbly and in secret. Lo! He loveth not aggressors. / Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering (thereof), and call on Him in fear and hope. Lo! the mercy of God is near unto the virtuous. (Al-A'raf, 7:55-56)

Likewise, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself is described in terms which manifest knowledge (and hence the intelligence), eliciting hope (and hence sentiment) and instilling fear (and hence motivating the will):

O Prophet! Lo! We have sent thee as a witness and a bringer of good tidings and a warner. (Al-Ahzab, 33:45)

Lo! We have sent thee (O Muhammad) as a witness and a bearer of good tidings and a warner, (Al-Fath, 48:8)

¹¹ *A Goodly Example*

The love and total devotion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to God is for Muslims the model that they seek to imitate. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

Verily in the messenger of God ye have a goodly example for him who hopeth for God and the Last Day, and remembereth God much. (Al-Ahzab, 33:21)

The totality of this love excludes worldliness and egotism, and is itself beautiful and loveable to Muslims. Love of God is itself loveable to Muslims. God says in the Holy Qur'an:

And know that the messenger of God is among you. If he were to obey you in many matters, ye would surely fall into misfortune; but God hath made the faith loveable to you and hath beautified it in your hearts, and hath made disbelief and lewdness and rebellion hateful unto you. Such are they who are the rightly guided. (Al-Hujurat, 49:7)

¹²This ‘particular love’ is in addition to God’s universal Mercy *which embraceth all things* (*Al-A’raf*, 7:156); but God knows best.

¹³*Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Bad’ al-Khalq, Bab Sifat Iblis wa Junudihi; Hadith no. 3329.*

Other Versions of the Blessed Saying

This blessed saying of the Prophet Muhammad’s ﷺ, is found in dozens of *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) in differing contexts in slightly varying versions.

The one we have quoted throughout in the text (*There is no god but God, He alone. He hath no associate. His is the sovereignty, and His is the praise, and He hath power over all things*) is in fact the shortest version. It is to be found in *Sahih al-Bukhari: Kitab al-Adhan* (no.852); *Kitab al-Tahajjud* (no.1163); *Kitab al-Umrah* (no.1825); *Kitab Bad’ al-Khalq* (no.3329); *Kitab al-Da’awat* (nos.6404, 6458, 6477); *Kitab al-Riqaq* (no.6551); *Kitab al-I’tisambil-Kitab* (no.7378); in *Sahih Muslim: Kitab al-Masajid* (nos.1366, 1368, 1370, 1371, 1380); *Kitab al-Hajj* (nos. 3009, 3343); *Kitab al-Dhikr wa’l-Du’a’* (nos.7018, 7020, 7082, 7084); in *Sunan Abu Dawud: Kitab al-Witr* (nos.1506, 1507, 1508); *Kitab al-Fihad* (no.2772); *Kitab al-Kharaj* (no.2989); *Kitab al-Adab* (nos.5062, 5073, 5079); in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi: Kitab al-Hajj* (no.965); *Kitab al-Da’awat* (nos.3718, 3743, 3984); in *Sunan al-Nasa’i: Kitab al-Sahw* (nos.1347, 1348, 1349, 1350, 1351); *Kitab Manasik al-Hajj* (nos.2985, 2997); *Kitab al-Iman wa’l-Nudhur* (no.3793); in *Sunan Ibn Majah:*

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Kitab al-Adab (no.3930); *Kitab al-Du'a'* (nos.4000, 4011); and in *Mumatta' Malik: Kitab al-Qur'an* (nos.492, 494); *Kitab al-Hajj* (no. 831).

A longer version including the words *yuhyi wa yumit*—(There is no god but God, He alone. He hath no associate. His is the sovereignty, and His is the praise. He giveth life, and He giveth death, and He hath power over all things.)—is to be found in *Sunan Abu Dawud: Kitab al-Manasik* (no.1907); in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi: Kitab al-Salah* (no.300); *Kitab al-Da'awat* (nos.3804, 3811, 3877, 3901); and in *Sunan al-Nasa'i: Kitab Manasik al-Hajj* (nos.2974, 2987, 2998); *Sunan Ibn Majah: Kitab al-Manasik* (no.3190).

Another longer version including the words *bi yadihi al-khayr*—(There is no god but God, He alone. He hath no associate. His is the sovereignty, and His is the praise. In His Hand is the good, and He hath power over all things.)—is to be found in *Sunan Ibn Majah: Kitab al-Adab* (no.3931); *Kitab al-Du'a'* (no. 3994).

The longest version, which includes the words *yuhyi wa yumit wa Huwa Hayyun la yamut bi yadihi al-khayr*—(There is no god but God, He alone. He hath no associate. His is the sovereignty, and His is the praise. He giveth life, and He giveth death. He is the Living, who dieth not. In His Hand is the good, and He hath power over all things.)—is to be found in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi: Kitab al-Da'awat* (no.3756) and in *Sunan Ibn Majah: Kitab al-Tijarat* (no.2320), with the difference that this latter *Hadith* reads: *bi yadihi al-khayr kuluhu* (in His Hand is *all* good).

It is important to note, however, that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, only described the first (shortest) version as: *the best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me*, and only of that version did the Prophet ﷺ say: *And none comes with anything better than that, save one who does more than that.*

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(These citations refer to the numbering system of *The Sunna Project's Encyclopaedia of Hadith (Jam 'Jawami' al-Ahadith wa'l-Asanid)*, prepared in cooperation with the scholars of al-Azhar, which includes *Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abu Dawud, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Nasa'i, Sunan Ibn Majah, and Mumatta' Malik.*)

¹⁴ Frequent Remembrance of God in the Holy Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an is full of injunctions to invoke or remember God frequently:

Remember the name of thy Lord at morn and evening. (Al-Insan, 76:25)

So remember God, standing, sitting and [lying] down on your sides (Al-Nisa, 4:103).

And do thou (O Muhammad) remember thy Lord within thyself humbly and with awe, below thy breath, at morn and evening. And be not thou of the neglectful (Al-'Araf, 7:205).

... Remember thy Lord much, and praise (Him) in the early hours of night and morning (Aal 'Imran, 3:41).

O ye who believe! Remember God with much remembrance. / And glorify Him early and late (Al-Ahzab, 33:41-42).

(See also: 2:198-200; 2:203; 2:238-239; 3:190-191; 6:91; 7:55; 7:180; 8:45; 17:110; 22:27-41; 24:35-38; 26:227; 62:9-10; 87:1-17, et al.)

Similarly, the Holy Qur'an is full of verses that emphasize the paramount importance of the Remembrance of God (see 2:151-7; 5:4; 6:118; 7:201; 8:2-4; 13:26-28; 14:24-27; 20:14; 20:33-34; 24:1; 29:45; 33:35; 35:10; 39:9; 50:37; 51:55-58; and 33:2; 39:22-23 and 73:8-9 as

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already quoted, et al.), and the dire consequences of not practising it (see 2:114; 4:142; 7:179-180; 18:28; 18:100-101; 20:99-101; 20:124-127; 25:18; 25:29; 43:36; 53:29; 58:19; 63:9; 72:17 et al.; see also 107:4-6). Hence God ultimately says in the Holy Qur'an:

Has not the time arrived for the believers that their hearts in all humility should engage in the remembrance of God ... ?

(Al-Hadid, 57:16);

... [S]lacken not in remembrance of Me (Taha 20:42),

and: Remember your Lord whenever you forget (Al-Kahf 18:24).

¹⁵ Herein all Biblical Scripture is taken from the New King James Version [Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved].

¹⁶ *Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Da'wat, Bab al-Du'a fi Yawm 'Arafah, Hadith no. 3934. Op. cit.*

¹⁷ *In the Best Stature*

Christianity and Islam have comparable conceptions of man being created in the best stature and from God's own breath. The Book of Genesis says:

(Genesis 1:27) So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

And:

(Genesis 2:7) And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

And the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: *Verily God created Adam in His own image. (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Al-Isti'than, 1; Sahih Muslim,*

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Kitab Al-Birr 115; *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, 2: 244, 251, 315, 323 etc. et al.)

And We created you, then fashioned you, then told the angels: Fall ye prostrate before Adam! And they fell prostrate, all save Iblis, who was not of those who make prostration. (Al-A'raf, 7:11)

By the fig and the olive / By Mount Sinai, / And by this land made safe / Surely We created man of the best stature / Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low, / Save those who believe and do good works, and theirs is a reward unfailing. / So who henceforth will give the lie to thee about the judgment? / Is not God the wisest of all judges?(Al-Tin, 95:1-8)

God it is Who appointed for you the earth for a dwelling-place and the sky for a canopy, and fashioned you and perfected your shapes, and hath provided you with good things. Such is God, your Lord. Then blessed be God, the Lord of the Worlds! (Al-Ghafir, 40:64)

Nay, but those who do wrong follow their own lusts without knowledge. Who is able to guide him whom God hath sent astray? For such there are no helpers. / So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright—the nature (framed) of God, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) God's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not—/ (Al-Rum, 30:29-30)

And when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My Spirit, then fall down before him prostrate, (Sad, 38:72)

And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: Wilt thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not.

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/ And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying: Inform Me of the names of these, if ye are truthful. / They said: Be glorified! We have no knowledge saving that which Thou hast taught us. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower, the Wise. / He said: O Adam! Inform them of their names, and when he had informed them of their names, He said: Did I not tell you that I know the secret of the heavens and the earth? And I know that which ye disclose and which ye hide. / And when We said unto the angels: Prostrate yourselves before Adam, they fell prostrate, all save Iblis. He demurred through pride, and so became a disbeliever... / And We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will; but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrong-doers. (Al-Baqarah, 2:30-35)

¹⁸ *Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Iman, Hadith no.13.*

¹⁹ *Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, 67-1, Hadith no.45.*

²⁰ The classical commentators on the Holy Qur'an (see: *Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*) generally agree that this is a reference to (the last movements of) the Muslim prayer.

²¹ Abu Ja'far Muhammad Bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an*, (*Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed, 1992/1412), *tafsir of Aal- 'Imran*, 3:64; Volume 3, pp.299-302.

²² According to grammarians cited by Tabari (op cit.) the word 'common' (*sawa'*) in 'a common word between us' also means 'just', 'fair' (*adl*).

²³ The Blessed Theophylact (1055-1108 CE) was the Orthodox Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria (1090-1108 CE). His native language was

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the Greek of the New Testament. His *Commentary* is currently available in English from Chrysostom Press.

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II. LIST OF SIGNATORIES

The following is list of the original 138 signatories to the Common Word document.

1. **His Royal Eminence Sultan Muhammadu Sa'ad Ababakar**
The 20th Sultan of Sokoto; Leader of the Muslims of Nigeria
2. **H.E. Shaykh Dr. Hussein Hasan Abakar**
Imam of the Muslims, Chad; President, Higher Council for Islamic Affairs, Chad
3. **H.E. Prof. Dr. Abdul-Salam Al-Abadi**
President of Aal Al-Bayt University; Former Minister of Religious Affairs, Jordan
4. **Prof. Dr. Taha Abd Al-Rahman**
President of the Wisdom Circle for Thinkers and Researchers, Morocco; Director of Al-Umma Al-Wasat Magazine, International Union of Muslim Scholars
5. **Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf**
Co-founder and Chairman of the Board of the Cordoba Initiative; Founder of the ASMA Society (American Society for Muslim Advancement); Imam of Masjid Al-Farah, NY, NY, USA
6. **Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah**
Vice President of the Fiqh Council of North America, USA
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III. RESPONSES & DOCUMENTS

RESPONSE BY PROFESSOR DAVID FORD
Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme

10th October 2007

This historic statement gives the right keynote for relations between Muslims and Christians in the 21st century. It is what we have been missing since 9/11/2001. The most impressive list of signatories from all the main Muslim traditions and countries have made a clear and powerful proclamation of love for God and for all neighbours. The message is rich and deep, and it goes to the heart of Muslim faith as expressed in the Qur'an. It also goes to the heart of the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament.

There are three main reasons why this is so important.

First, it is unprecedented in bringing together so many of the leading religious authorities and scholars of Islam and uniting them in a positive, substantial affirmation. This is an astonishing achievement of solidarity, one that can be built on in the future.

Second, it is addressed to Christians in the form of a friendly word, it engages respectfully and carefully with

the Christian scriptures, and it finds common ground in what Jesus himself said is central: love of God and love of neighbour. I like its modesty—it does not claim to be the final word but to be ‘a common word’, one that Muslims and Christians (and, I would also add, Jews and many others) can share with integrity. This is shared ground, mutual ground, where there is the possibility of working further on issues that unite and divide us. This common word does not pretend that there are no differences between Muslims and Christians (for example, on the Christian teaching *about* Jesus rather than the teaching *of* Jesus). It takes a vital step forward, and wisely does this by concentrating mainly on each tradition’s scriptures, those core texts that are so often misused but which, in my experience, also have the resources for enabling deeper mutual understanding and trust.

Third, it opens a way forward that is more hopeful for the world than most others at present in the public sphere. Its combination of Islamic solidarity around core teaching together with friendly address to Christians should be seen as setting a direction for the twenty-first century. It challenges Muslims and Christians to live up to their own teachings and seek political and educational as well as personal ways to do this for the sake of the common good. It invites them to go deeper into their own

faith at the same time as going deeper into each other's. It cries out to be followed through by many initiatives in the same spirit. These should be among Muslims, among Christians, between Muslims and Christians, and between them and those of other faiths and no faith. They should be in many spheres of life and at all levels—local, regional and global. It is deeply encouraging that the Royal Academy of Jordan has had the courage, imagination and practical capacity to achieve this. Now the Royal Academy needs to be joined by many others in following this through.

An obvious question is: but will this have any impact on the violent extremism that afflicts the world? I do not think that problem has a simple one-off solution. But any long-term solution will have to include four elements:

- Muslim solidarity around an understanding of their faith that clearly excludes violent, uncompassionate acts, programmes and language;
- better Christian understanding of Islam;
- deeper engagement between Muslims and Christians that makes use of the resources at the heart of their faith, such as their scriptures;
- a concern for the flourishing of the whole human family and the whole planet.

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I find all four in 'A Common Word'. If sufficient people and groups heed this statement and act on it then the atmosphere will be changed into one in which violent extremists cannot flourish.

I think that many people have longed for a statement like this. Its significance is not that it offers anything novel but that it selects so wisely from the riches of both scriptures and opens them up in a way that is highly relevant to the present situation. I found myself deeply moved by its vision of what it calls 'the all-embracing, constant and active love of God' and 'the necessity and paramount importance of love for—and mercy towards—the neighbour', and by its concern not only for that half of the world's population who are Muslim or Christian but also for every single other person and the whole of creation.

DAVID F. FORD

Regius Professor of Divinity

Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme

University of Cambridge

9th October 2007

THE YALE RESPONSE

*Response of over 300 leading Christian Scholars
to A Common Word published as a full page
advertisement in the New York Times*

*In the name of the Infinitely Good God
whom we should love with all our being*

**Loving God and Neighbor Together:
A Christian Response to
*A Common Word Between Us and You***

[On October 13, 2007, on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, 138 Muslim scholars and clerics sent an open letter “to leaders of Christian churches, everywhere.” The signatories to that letter, titled A Common Word Between Us and You, include top leaders from around the world representing every major school of Islamic thought .

The following response was drafted by scholars at Yale Divinity School’s Center for Faith and Culture. It was issued by the first four signatories below and endorsed by almost 300 other Christian theologians and leaders, including those listed here. To promote constructive engagement between these major religious communities, planning is underway for*

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a series of major conferences and workshops involving many of the signatories to A Common Word and to the Yale response, as well as other international Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders.]

Preamble

As members of the worldwide Christian community, we were deeply encouraged and challenged by the recent historic open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals from around the world. *A Common Word Between Us and You* identifies some core common ground between Christianity and Islam which lies at the heart of our respective faiths as well as at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism. Jesus Christ's call to love God and neighbor was rooted in the divine revelation to the people of Israel embodied in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). We receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.

Muslims and Christians have not always shaken

hands in friendship; their relations have sometimes been tense, even characterized by outright hostility. Since Jesus Christ says, “First take the log out your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:5), we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g. in the Crusades) and in the present (e.g. in excesses of the “war on terror”) many Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors. Before we “shake your hand” in responding to your letter, we ask forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.

Religious Peace—World Peace

“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.” We share the sentiment of the Muslim signatories expressed in these opening lines of their open letter. Peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century, and perhaps of the whole present epoch. Though tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Christians and Muslims stand against each other are not primarily religious in character, they possess an

undeniable religious dimension. If we can achieve religious peace between these two religious communities, peace in the world will clearly be easier to attain. It is therefore no exaggeration to say, as you have in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, that “the future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Common Ground

What is so extraordinary about *A Common Word Between Us and You* is not that its signatories recognize the critical character of the present moment in relations between Muslims and Christians. It is rather a deep insight and courage with which they have identified the common ground between the Muslim and Christian religious communities. What is common between us lies not in something marginal nor in something merely important to each. It lies, rather, in something absolutely central to both: love of God and love of neighbor. Surprisingly for many Christians, your letter considers the dual command of love to be the foundational principle not just of the Christian faith, but of Islam as well. That *so much* common ground exists—common ground in some of the fundamentals of faith—gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that

bear down upon us can not overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together. That this common ground consists in *love* of God and of neighbor gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities.

Love of God

We applaud that *A Common Word Between Us and You* stresses so insistently the unique devotion to one God, indeed the love of God, as the primary duty of every believer. God alone rightly commands our ultimate allegiance. When anyone or anything besides God commands our ultimate allegiance—a ruler, a nation, economic progress, or anything else—we end up serving idols and inevitably get mired in deep and deadly conflicts.

We find it equally heartening that the God whom we should love above all things is described as being Love. In the Muslim tradition, God, “the Lord of the worlds,” is “The Infinitely Good and All-Merciful.” And the New Testament states clearly that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Since God’s goodness is infinite and not bound by anything, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” according to the words of Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospel (Matthew 5:45).

For Christians, humanity's love of God and God's love of humanity are intimately linked. As we read in the New Testament: "We love because he [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Our love of God springs from and is nourished by God's love for us. It cannot be otherwise, since the Creator who has power over all things is infinitely good.

Love of Neighbor

We find deep affinities with our own Christian faith when *A Common Word Between Us and You* insists that love is the pinnacle of our duties toward our neighbors. "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself," the Prophet Muhammad said. In the New Testament we similarly read, "whoever does not love [the neighbor] does not know God" (1 John 4:8) and "whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). God is love, and our highest calling as human beings is to imitate the One whom we worship.

We applaud when you state that "justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part" of the love of neighbor. When justice is lacking, neither love of God nor love of the neighbor can be present. When freedom to worship God according to one's conscience is curtailed, God is

dishonored, the neighbor oppressed, and neither God nor neighbor is loved.

Since Muslims seek to love their Christian neighbors, they are not against them, the document encouragingly states. Instead, Muslims are *with* them. As Christians we resonate deeply with this sentiment. Our faith teaches that we must be with our neighbors—indeed, that we must act in their favor—even when our neighbors turn out to be our enemies. “But I say unto you,” says Jesus Christ, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:44-45). Our love, Jesus Christ says, must imitate the love of the infinitely good Creator; our love must be as unconditional as is God’s—extending to brothers, sisters, neighbors, and even enemies. At the end of his life, Jesus Christ himself prayed for his enemies: “Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

The Prophet Muhammad did similarly when he was violently rejected and stoned by the people of Ta’if. He is known to have said, “The most virtuous behavior is to engage those who sever relations, to give to those who withhold from you, and to forgive those who wrong you.” (It is perhaps significant that after the Prophet

Muhammad was driven out of Ta'if, it was the Christian slave 'Addas who went out to Muhammad, brought him food, kissed him, and embraced him.)

The Task Before Us

“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.

Given the deep fissures in the relations between Christians and Muslims today, the task before us is daunting. And the stakes are great. The future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace. If we fail to make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony you correctly

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remind us that “our eternal souls” are at stake as well.

We are persuaded that our next step should be for our leaders at every level to meet together and begin the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another. It is with humility and hope that we receive your generous letter, and we commit ourselves to labor together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.

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* **Joseph Cumming**, *Director of the Reconciliation Program, Yale Center for Faith and Culture*

* **Emilie M. Townes**, *Andrew Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology and president-elect of the American Academy of Religion*

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RESPONSE BY THE ARCHBISHOP
OF CANTERBURY, DR. ROWAN WILLIAMS

A Common Word for the Common Good
to
the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars
who have signed
A Common Word Between Us and You
and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere

Grace, Mercy and Peace be with you

Preface

Dear Friends:

We are deeply appreciative of the initiative you have taken and welcome *A Common Word Between Us and You* as a significant development in relations between Christians and Muslims. In your letter you have addressed 27 Christian leaders and “leaders of Christian Churches everywhere” and many of those addressed have already responded or set in motion processes through which responses will in due course be made. Having listened carefully to Christian colleagues from

the widest possible range of backgrounds, most significantly at a Consultation of Church representatives and Christian scholars in June 2008, I am pleased to offer this response to your letter, with their support and encouragement.

We recognise that your letter brings together Muslim leaders from many traditions of Islam to address Christian leaders representative of the diverse traditions within Christianity. We find in it a hospitable and friendly spirit, expressed in its focus on love of God and love of neighbour—a focus which draws together the languages of Christianity and Islam, and of Judaism also. Your letter could hardly be more timely, given the growing awareness that peace throughout the world is deeply entwined with the ability of all people of faith everywhere to live in peace, justice, mutual respect and love. Our belief is that only through a commitment to that transcendent perspective to which your letter points, and to which we also look, shall we find the resources for radical, transforming, non-violent engagement with the deepest needs of our world and our common humanity.

In your invitation to “come to a common word” we find a helpful generosity of intention. Some have read the invitation as an insistence that we should be able immediately to affirm an agreed and shared understand-

ing of God. But such an affirmation would not be honest to either of our traditions. It would fail to acknowledge the reality of the differences that exist and that have been the cause of deep and—at times in the past—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.’

We find this recognition in what is, for us, one of the key paragraphs of your letter:

“In the light of what we have seen to be necessarily implied and evoked by the Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) blessed saying: *‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me—is: “there is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things”*”, we can now perhaps understand the words *‘The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me’* as equa-

ting the blessed formula *‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things’* precisely with the ‘First and Greatest Command-ment’ to love God, with all one’s heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible. That is to say, in other words, that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible’s First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning. Moreover, we also do know (as can be seen in the endnotes), that both formulas have another remarkable parallel: the way they arise in a number of slightly differing versions and forms in different contexts, all of which, nevertheless, emphasize the primacy of total love and devotion to God.”

The double use of ‘perhaps’ in that passage allows for openness, exploration and debate—made possible because certain aspects of the ways in which we structure our talk about God in our respective traditions are intelligible one to the other. We read it as an invitation to further discussion within the Christian family and within the Muslim family as well as between Muslims and Christians, since it invites all of us to think afresh about

the foundations of our convictions. There are many things between us that offer the promise of deeper insight through future discussion. Thus for us your letter makes a highly significant contribution to the divinely initiated journey into which we are called, the journey in which Christians and Muslims alike are taken further into mutual understanding and appreciation. The confession that “God knows best” reminds us of the limits of our understanding and knowledge.

In the light of this letter, what are the next steps for us? We draw from *A Common Word Between Us and You* five areas which might be fruitfully followed through.

First, its focus on the love and praise of God, stressing how we must trust absolutely in God and give him the devotion of our whole being—heart, mind and will—underlines a shared commitment: the fixed intention to relate all reality and all behaviour intelligently, faithfully and practically to the God who deals with us in love, compassion, justice and peace. One of the areas we can usefully discuss together is the diverse ways in which we understand the love of God as an absolutely free gift to his creation. There are bound to be differences as well as similarities in the ways we understand and express God’s love for us and how we seek to practise love for God and neighbour in return, and in what follows we consider

how these might be explored in a spirit of honest and co-operative attention.

Second, its commitment to a love of neighbour that is rooted in the love of God (and which, for Christians, is part of our response to the love of God for us) suggests that we share a clear passion for the common good of all humanity and all creation. In what follows we shall seek to identify some practical implications for our future relations both with each other and with the rest of the world.

Third, the concern to ground what we say in the Scriptures of our traditions shows a desire to meet each other not 'at the margins' of our historic identities but speaking from what is central and authoritative for us. Here, however, it is especially important to acknowledge that the Qur'an's role in Islam is not the same as that of the Bible in Christianity; Christians understand the primary location of God's revealing Word to be the history of God's people and above all the history of Jesus Christ, whom we acknowledge as the Word made flesh, to which the Bible is the authoritative and irreplaceable witness. For the Muslim, as we understand it, the Word is supremely communicated in what Mohammed is commanded to recite. But for 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.¹ In what follows we shall suggest how studying our scriptures together might continue to provide a fruitful element of our engagements with each other in the process of "building a home together", to pick up an image popularised by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in a recent book.²

Fourth, and growing out of this last point, the letter encourages us to relate to each other from the heart of our lives of faith before God. 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.

Finally, 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. Yet in offering this focus on love of God and neighbour, you identify what could be the centre of a sense of shared calling and shared responsibility—an awareness of what God calls for from all his human creatures to whom he has given special responsibility in creation. 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.

This response therefore looks in several directions. It seeks to encourage more reflection within the Christian community, as well as to promote honest encounter between Christian and Muslim believers; and it asks about the possible foundations for shared work in the world and a shared challenge to all those things which obscure God's purpose for humanity.

THE ONE GOD WHO IS LOVE

At the origins of the history of God's people, as Jewish and Christian Scripture record it, is the command given to Moses to communicate to the people—the *Shema*, as it has long been known, from its opening word in Hebrew:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the
LORD is one!*

*You shall love the LORD your God with all your
heart, and with all your soul, and with all your
strength.*³ (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)⁴

Such an imperative, as your letter makes clear, is of central authority for Muslims too.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!: The *tawhid* principle⁵ is held out in your letter as one of the bases for agreement. In addition to the passages you quote to demonstrate *tawhid*, we read in the Qur'an:

*God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful.*⁶ (*al-Baqara*, 2:255)⁷

He is God the One, God the eternal. He fathered no one nor was he fathered. No one is comparable to Him. (*al-Ikhlās*, 112:1-4)

This last text reminds the Christian that this great affirmation of the uniqueness of God is what has often caused Muslims to look with suspicion at the Christian doctrines of God. Christian belief about the Trinity—God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—appears at once to compromise the belief that God has no other being associated with him. How can we call God *al-Qayyum*, the Self-sufficient, if he is not alone? So we read in the Qur'an

The East and the West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is His Face.

God is all pervading and all knowing. They have asserted, "God has a child."

May He be exalted! No! Everything in the heavens

*and earth belongs to Him,
everything devoutly obeys His will. He is the
Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when
He decrees something, He says only "Be," and it is.
(al-Baqara, 2:115-117)*

Muslims see the belief that God could have a son as suggesting that God is somehow limited as we are limited, bound to physical processes and needing the cooperation of others. How can such a God be truly free and sovereign—qualities both Christianity and Islam claim to affirm, for we know that God is able to bring the world into being by his word alone?

Here it is important to state unequivocally that the association of any other being with God is expressly rejected by the Christian theological tradition. Since the earliest Councils of the Church, Christian thinkers sought to clarify how, when we speak of the Father 'begetting' the Son, we must put out of our minds any suggestion that this is a physical thing, a process or event like the processes and events that happen in the world. They insisted that the name 'God' is not the name of a person like a human person, a limited being with a father and mother and a place that they inhabit within the world. 'God' is the name of a kind of life, a 'nature' or

essence—eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing. But that life is lived, so Christians have always held, eternally and simultaneously as three inter-related agencies are made known to us in the history of God's revelation to the Hebrew people and in the life of Jesus and what flows from it. God is at once the source of divine life, the expression of that life and the active power that communicates that life. This takes us at once into consideration of the Trinitarian language used by Christians to speak of God. We recognise that this is difficult, sometimes offensive, to Muslims; but it is all the more important for the sake of open and careful dialogue that we try to clarify what we do and do not mean by it, and so trust that what follows will be read in this spirit.

In human language, in the light of what our Scripture says, we speak of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power. So there is indeed one God, the Living and Self-subsistent, associated with no other; but what God is and does is not different from the life which is eternally and simultaneously the threefold pattern of life: source and expression and sharing. Since God's life is always an intelligent, purposeful and loving life, it is possible to think of each of these dimensions of divine life as, in important ways, like a centre of mind and

love, a person; but this does not mean that God ‘contains’ three different individuals, separate from each other as human individuals are.

Christians believe that in a mysterious manner we have a limited share in the characteristics of divine life.⁸ Through the death and rising to life of Jesus, God takes away our evildoing and our guilt, he forgives us and sets us free. And our Scriptures go on to say⁹ that he breathes new life into us, as he breathed life into Adam at the first, so that God’s spirit is alive in us. The presence and action of the Holy Spirit is thus God in his action of sharing life with us.¹⁰ As we become mature in our new life, our lives become closer and closer (so we pray and hope) to the central and perfect expression of divine life, the Word whom we encounter in Jesus—though we never become simply equal to him. And because Jesus prayed to the source of his life as ‘Father’,¹¹ we call the eternal and perfect expression of God’s life not only the Word but also the ‘Son’. We pray to the source of divine life in the way that Jesus taught us, and we say ‘Father’ to this divine reality. And in calling the eternal word the ‘Son’ of God, we remind ourselves that he is in no way different in nature from the Father: there is only one divine nature and reality.

Because God exists in this threefold pattern of inter-

dependent action, the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one in which there is always a 'giving place' to each other, each standing back so that the other may act. The only human language we have for this is love: the three dimensions of divine life relate to each other in self-sacrifice or self-giving. The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of explaining why we say that God is love, not only that he shows love.

When God acts towards us in compassion to liberate us from evil, to deal with the consequences of our rebellion against him and to make us able to call upon him with confidence, it is a natural (but not automatic) flowing outwards of his own everlasting action. The mutual self-giving love that is the very life of God is made real for our sake in the self-giving love of Jesus. And it is because of God's prior love for us that we are enabled and enjoined to love God.¹² Through our loving response, we can begin to comprehend something of God's nature and God's will for humankind:

"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

So Christians go further than simply saying that God is a loving God or that love is one of his attributes among others. We say that God does not love simply because he

decides to love. God is always, eternally, loving—the very nature and definition of God is love, and the full understanding of his unity is for Christians bound up with this.

Understanding the “*breadth and length and height and depth*” of the love of God¹³ is a lifetime’s journey; so it is not remotely possible to consider it with satisfactory thoroughness within the confines of this letter. However, it is necessary at this point to stress two qualities of God’s love that are crucially important for the Christian: it is unconditional,¹⁴ given gratuitously and without cause; and it is self-sacrificial.¹⁵

In the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the loving nature of God is revealed. We see how Jesus, both in his ministry and in his acceptance of a sacrificial death at the hands of his enemies, offers a love that is given in advance of any human response; it is not a reward for goodness—rather it is what makes human goodness possible, as we change our lives in gratitude to God for his free gift. In the words of a well-known English hymn, it is “Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be”.¹⁶ And because of this, it is also a love that is vulnerable. God does not convert us and transform us by exercising his divine power alone. So infinite is that power, and so inseparable from love, that no defeat

or suffering, even the terrible suffering of Jesus on the cross, can overcome God's purpose.

So, when we seek to live our lives in love of God and neighbour, we as Christians pray that we may be given strength to love God even when God does not seem to give us what we think we want or seems far off (a major theme in the writings of many Christian mystics, who often speak of those moments of our experience when God does not seem to love us as we should want to be loved); and we pray too for the strength to love those who do not seem to deserve our love, to love those who reject our love, to love those who have not yet made any move in love towards us.

We seek to show in our lives some of the characteristics of God's own love. We know that this may mean putting ourselves at risk; to love where we can see no possibility of love being returned is to be vulnerable, and we can only dare to do this in the power of God's Holy Spirit, creating in us some echo, some share, of Christ's own love. And in the light of all this, one area where dialogue between Christians and Muslims will surely be fruitful is in clarifying how far Muslims can in good conscience go in seeing the love of God powerfully at work in circumstances where the world sees only failure or suffering—but also, to anticipate the challenge that some

Muslims might make in answer, how far the Christian tradition of accepting suffering on this basis may sometimes lead to a passive attitude to suffering and a failure to try and transform situations in the name of God's justice.

Thus, as Christians, we would say that our worship of God as threefold has never compromised the unity of God, which we affirm as wholeheartedly as Jews and Muslims. Indeed, by understanding God as a unity of love we see ourselves intensifying and enriching our belief in the unity of God. This indivisible unity is again expressed in the ancient theological formula, which we can trace back to the North African theologian Saint Augustine, *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*—all the actions of the Trinity outside itself are indivisible. So, although the Trinity has been a point of dispute with Jews and Muslims, and will no doubt continue to be so, we are encouraged that *A Common Word Between Us and You* does not simply assume that Christians believe in more than one god.¹⁷ We are, therefore, encouraged in the belief that what both our faiths say concerning the nature of God is not totally diverse—there are points of communication and overlap in the way we think about the divine nature that make our continued exploration of these issues worthwhile, despite the important issues

around whether we can say that God is love in his very nature.

It was, therefore, appropriate that Cardinal Bertone, in his letter to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal welcoming *A Common Word Between Us and You* on behalf of Pope Benedict XVI, wrote: “Without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should look to what unites us, namely, belief in the one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge who at the end of time will deal with each person according to his or her actions. We are all called to commit ourselves totally to him and to obey his sacred will.”¹⁸

To what extent do the Christian conviction of God as Love and the all-important Islamic conviction that God is “the Compassionate, the Merciful” (*ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*) represent common ground, and to what extent do differences need to be spelled out further? This is a very significant area for further work. But your letter—and many of the Christian responses to it—do make it clear that we have a basis on which we can explore such matters together in a spirit of genuine—and truly neighbourly!—love.

RESPONDING TO THE GIFT OF LOVE

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

(1John 4:7-12)

God will bring a new people: He will love them, and they will love Him.

(*al-Ma'ida*, 5:54).

What has been said so far is intended to highlight the way in which we as Christians see love as first and foremost a gift from God to us which makes possible for us a new level of relation with God and one another. By God's outpouring of love, we come to share in the kind of life that is characteristic of God's own eternal life. Our love

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of God appears as a response to God's prior love for us in its absolute gratuity and causelessness.

Thus to speak of our love for God is before all else to speak in words of praise and gratitude. And for both Jews and Christians, that language of praise has been shaped by and centred upon the Psalms of David:

*¹ I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.*

*² Every day I will bless you, and praise your
name forever and ever.*

*³ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be
praised; his greatness is unsearchable.*

...

*¹⁵ The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their
food in due season.*

*¹⁶ You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every
living thing.*

...

*²¹ My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever
and ever. (Psalm 145)*

In words like these, we hear many resonances with the language of your letter, suggesting a similar kind of devotion expressed in words of love, praise and thanks. The

language of the Psalms, like the language you have used, looks to a God of ultimate creative power who is loving and compassionate, generous, faithful and merciful, and upholds justice. In the Psalms, generation after generation has found inspiration and encouragement in the heights, depths and ordinariness of human life. Countless Christians and Jews use them daily. They show, in the words of your letter, how worshippers “must be grateful to God and trust Him with all their sentiments and emotions”, and that “the call to be totally devoted and attached to God heart and soul, far from being a call for a mere emotion or for a mood, is in fact an injunction requiring all-embracing, constant and active love of God. It demands a love in which the innermost spiritual heart and the whole of the soul—with its intelligence, will and feeling—participate through devotion.”¹⁹

The Psalms are the songs of a worshipping community, not only of individuals, a community taken up into love and adoration of God, yet acknowledging all the unwelcome and unpalatable aspects of the world we live in—individual suffering and corporate disaster, betrayal, injustice and sin. They are cries of pain as well as of joy, of bewilderment as well as trust, laments for God’s apparent absence as well as celebrations of his presence. They are a challenge to find words to praise God in all

circumstances. Your letter, in opening up for us some of the riches of the devotion of the Qur'an helps us appreciate afresh the riches of the Psalms. Perhaps in future the statement in the Qur'an, "*to David We gave the Psalms*" (4:163), might encourage us to explore further together our traditions and practices of praise and how in our diverse ways we seek to bring to God the whole of our human imagination and sensitivity in a unified act of praise.

The Psalms teach us that the name of God, God's full, personal, mysterious and unsearchable reality, is to be continually celebrated and the life of faith is to be filled with praise of God.²⁰ We love God first not for what he has done for us but 'for his name's sake'—because of who God *is*. Even in the midst of terrible suffering or doubt it is possible, with Job, to say: "*Blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21). In the prayer which Jesus taught to his disciples the leading petition is: "*Hallowed be your name*" (Matthew 6:9). This means not only that honouring and blessing God is the first and most comprehensive activity of those who follow Jesus; it also encourages Christians to give thanks for all the ways in which God's name is proclaimed as holy and to be held in honour—by Christians, by people of other faiths and indeed by the whole order of creation which

proclaims the glory of God.²¹

⁹ Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

¹⁰ Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

¹² Young men and women alike, old and young together!

¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. (Psalm 148)

So, with all creation, we join together in this chorus of universal praise—echoed so vividly in some of the phrases quoted in your letter.^{22, 23}

Jesus said “*I came that they [we] may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10) and offering such praise and honour to God is in many ways the heart of the new life. The conviction that the love of God lives in us through his Holy Spirit, that to God we owe the very breath of life within us, is the motivation for our response to God’s love—both in loving God and loving neighbour. We know from personal experience that true love

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can not be commanded or conditioned; it is freely given and received. Our love of God, as already indicated, is first and foremost a response of gratitude enabling us to grow in holiness—to become closer and closer in our actions and thoughts to the complete self-giving that always exists perfectly in God's life and is shown in the life and death of Jesus.

Towards this fullness we are all called to travel and grow and we shall want to learn from you more about the understandings of love of God in Islam as we continue this journey, exploring the implications of this love in our lives and our relationships with each other. Jesus, on the night before he died, said, *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."* (John 13:34). Responding to this new commandment to dwell in the love he bears us means allowing it to transform us and, so transformed, to love others—irrespective of their response.

LOVE OF OUR NEIGHBOUR

[Jesus said:] *'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your*

Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’ (Matthew 5:43-48)

We support the clear affirmation in your letter, through texts from the Qur’an and the Bible, of the importance of love for the neighbour. Indeed, your letter can be considered an encouraging example of this love. We endorse the emphasis on generosity and self-sacrifice, and trust that these might be mutual marks of our continuing relationship with each other. The section in your letter on love for the neighbour is relatively brief, so we look forward to developing further the ways in which the theme is worked out within our traditions. We believe we have much to learn from each other in this matter, drawing on resources of wisdom, law, prophecy, poetry and narrative, both within and beyond our canonical scriptures²⁴ to help each other come to a richer vision of being loving neighbours today.

For Christians, our love for God is always a response to God's prior free love of humankind (and all creation). Enabled by this gift of love, our love becomes by grace something that mirrors the character of God's love and so can be offered to the stranger and the other. A full exploration of the significance of this will only be possible as we grow in our encounters together but, within the confines of this letter, we would want to draw attention to two aspects of the love of neighbour that are important for Christians.

The first is illustrated in St Luke's gospel when Jesus, having given the Dual Commandment of love as the response to the question "what must I do to inherit eternal life?", goes on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan when asked to explain "who is my neighbour?".²⁵ Commentary on this parable frequently points to the way in which Jesus challenges the assumptions of the question; instead of defining a necessarily limited group of people who might fit the category of 'neighbours' to whom love should be shown, he speaks of the need to prove ourselves neighbours by compassion to whoever is before us in need or pain, whether or not they are akin to us, approved by us, safe for us to be with or whatever else. Such neighbourliness will mean crossing religious and ethnic divisions and transcending ancient enmities. So

the ‘neighbour’ of the original Torah is defined by Jesus as whoever the ‘other’ is who specifically and concretely requires self-forgetful attention and care in any moment. Thus to be a neighbour is a challenge that continually comes at us in new ways. We cannot define its demands securely in advance; it demands that we be ready to go beyond the boundaries of our familiar structures of kinship and obligation, whether these are local, racial or religious. For that reason—developing a helpful symbolic reading of this parable—Christian thinkers have often said that Jesus himself is our first ‘neighbour’, the one who comes alongside every human being in need.²⁶ We look forward to the opportunity to explore with you how this teaching about being a neighbour relates to the Qur’anic imperative to care for neighbour and stranger (an imperative that seems to be derived here from the worship of God).²⁷

The second aspect, already mentioned above, is Jesus’ teaching about the love of those who do not necessarily love you. We have quoted above the version attributed to St Matthew, but the Gospel according to Luke contains a similar passage:

*If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;
and from anyone who takes away your coat do not*

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withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you ... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:29-31, 35-36)

This radical teaching, which Jesus presents precisely as a higher interpretation of what it means to love the neighbour, is grounded, as we have seen, in the way in which God loves.²⁸ It teaches us to recognise as neighbours even those who set themselves against us. This is partly required by humility before the design of God in history and the limited nature of our perspective, for we do not know, as Christians have often said, who among those who confront us in hostility today will turn out to be our friends on the last day, when we stand before our Judge. It is partly, too, ‘that we may be children of our Father in heaven’,²⁹ learning to share the perspective of God, who reaches out and seeks to win all his creatures to his love, even those who turn away from it. This resonates with what is said in the Qur’an: “*God may still bring about*

affection between you and your present enemies—God is all powerful, God is most forgiving and merciful” (Al-Mumtahana, 60:7). Where love replaces enmity we can recognise the work and way of God.

SEEKING THE COMMON GOOD
IN THE WAY OF GOD

The Common Good

“Love works no ill to his neighbour” (Romans 13:10)

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers” (Hebrews 13:1-2)

There are many practical implications that flow from our understandings of love of God and love of neighbour, including those mentioned in your letter regarding peacemaking, religious freedom and the avoidance of violence.³⁰ In response we should like to offer a vision, grounded in absolute faithfulness to our respective religious convictions, that we believe we can share in offering to our fellow believers and our neighbours (in the widest sense).

To believe in an absolute religious truth is to believe that the object of our belief is not vulnerable to the contingencies of human history: God’s mind and character

cannot be changed by what happens here in the world. Thus an apparent defeat in the world for our belief cannot be definitive; God does not fail just because we fail to persuade others or because our communities fail to win some kind of power. If we were to believe that our failure is a failure or defeat for God, then the temptation will be to seek for any means possible to avoid such an outcome. But that way lies terrorism and religious war and persecution. 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.

Religious violence suggests an underlying religious insecurity. When different communities have the same sort of conviction of the absolute truth of their perspective, there is certainly an intellectual and spiritual challenge to be met; but the logic of this belief ought to make it plain that there can be no justification for the sort of violent contest in which any means, however inhuman, can be justified by appeal to the need to 'protect God's interests'. Even to express it in those terms is to show how absurd it is. The eternal God cannot need 'protec-

tion' by the tactics of human violence. This point is captured in the words of Jesus before the Roman governor: "*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight*" (John 19.36).

So we can conclude that the more we as people of genuine faith are serious about the truth of our convictions, the more likely we will be to turn away from violence in the name of faith; to trust that God, the truly real, will remain true, divine and unchanging, whatever the failures and successes of human society and history. And we will be aware that to try and compel religious allegiance through violence is really a way of seeking to replace divine power with human; hence the Qur'anic insistence that there can be no compulsion in matters of religious faith (*al-Baqarah*, 2:256³¹) and the endorsement in your letter of "freedom of religion". It is crucial to faith in a really existing and absolute transcendent agency that we should understand it as being what it is quite independently of any lesser power: the most disturbing form of secularisation is when this is forgotten or misunderstood.

This has, indeed, been forgotten or misunderstood in so many contexts over the millennia. Religious identity has often been confused with cultural or national integrity, with structures of social control, with class and

regional identities, with empire; and it has been imposed in the interest of all these and other forms of power. Despite Jesus' words in John's gospel, Christianity has been promoted at the point of the sword and legally supported by extreme sanctions;³² despite the Qur'anic axiom, Islam has been supported in the same way, with extreme penalties 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.

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.³³ Building on our understanding of God's love for us and, in response, our love for God and neighbour we can speak of a particular quality to the Christian approach to peace and peace-making: the moment of unconditioned positive response, the risk of offering something to one whom you have no absolutely secure reason to trust.

Many Christians have said that your letter represents such an offering—a gift with no certainty of what might be the response. We want to acknowledge the courage of

such a move, and respond in kind. Let us explore together how this dimension of Christian language, born of the unconditional and self-sacrificial love of neighbour, can be correlated with the language of the Qur'an.

Such an approach can take us beyond a bland affirmation that we are at peace with those who are at peace with us to a place where our religious convictions can be a vehicle for creating peace where it is absent.

Such a commitment to seek together the common good can, we are convinced, sit alongside a fundamental recognition that, even with our commitments to love God and neighbour, we cannot expect to find some 'neutral' positions beyond the traditions of our faith that would allow us to broker some sort of union between our diverse 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; and if no other value is absolute,

no other value can claim the right to unconditional defence by any means and at all costs.

So, even if we accept that our systems of religious belief cannot be reconciled by 'rational' argument because they depend on the gift of revelation, we rule out, by that very notion, any assumption that coercive human power is the ultimate authority and arbiter in our world. Given, as we have acknowledged, that Christian history contains too many examples of Christians betraying that initial turning away from the cycle of retaliation, we can only put forward such a vision in the form of a challenge to Christians as much as Muslims: how did we ever come to think that the truly transcendent can ever be imagined or proclaimed in a pattern of endless and sterile repetition of force?

And here we can together suggest a way in which religious plurality can be seen as serving the cause of social unity and acting as a force for the common good. As people of faith, we can never claim that social harmony can be established by uncontrolled coercive power. This means that we are not obliged to defend and argue for the legitimacy and righteousness of any social order. As the world now is, diverse religious traditions very frequently inhabit one territory, one nation, one social unit (and that may be a relatively small unit like a school, or a housing

co-operative or even a business). In such a setting, we cannot avoid the pragmatic and secular question of ‘common security’: what is needed for our convictions to flourish is bound up with what is needed for the convictions of other groups to flourish. We learn that we can best defend ourselves by defending others. In a plural society, Christians secure their religious liberty by advocacy for 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.

And we can extend this still further. If we are in the habit of defending each other, we ought to be able to learn to defend other groups and communities as well. We can together speak for those who have no voice or leverage in society—for the poorest, the most despised, the least powerful, for women and children, for migrants and minorities; and even to speak together for that great encompassing reality which has no ‘voice’ or power of its own—our injured and abused material environment, which both our traditions of faith tell us we should honour and care for.

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.

Seeking together in the way of God

A Common Word Between Us and You issues a powerful call to dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims. A great deal is already happening in this sphere on many levels, but the very wide geographical (43 countries) and theological diversity represented among the signatories of your letter provides a unique impetus to deepen and extend the encounters. As part of the common shape and structure of our language about God we can acknowledge a shared commitment to truth and a desire to discern how our lives may come to be lived in accordance with eternal truth. As we have noted above, the Christian understanding of love, coupled with our common acknowledgement of the absolute transcendence of the divine, encourages us towards a vision of radical and transformative non-violence. We are committed to reflecting and working together, with you and

all our human neighbours, with a view both to practical action and service and to a long term dedication to all that will lead to a true common good for human beings before God.

This is a good moment to attempt to coordinate a way forward for our dialogue. We suggest an approach drawing on *Dialogue and Proclamation*, a 1991 Vatican document whose four categories of inter-religious dialogue have been found widely helpful. They are:

- a) *the dialogue of life*, “where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit”;
- b) *the dialogue of action*, “in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people”;
- c) *the dialogue of theological exchange*, “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages”; and
- d) *the dialogue of religious experience*, “where persons rooted in their own religious traditions share their spiritual riches”.

This typology can be applied more generally to the whole pattern of encounter between Christians and Muslims, even where this is not directly described as ‘dialogue’.

Three imperatives are suggested by this:

- a) to strengthen grass-roots partnerships and programmes between our communities that will work for justice, peace and the common good of human society the world over;
- b) to intensify the shared theological discussions and researches of religious leaders and scholars who are seeking clearer insight into divine truth, and to realise this through building and sustaining of groups marked by a sense of collegiality, mutual esteem, and trust;³⁴
- c) to deepen the appreciation of Christian and Muslim believers for each other's religious practice and experience, as they come to recognise one another as people whose lives are oriented towards God in love.³⁵

These different kinds of encounter need to be held together to ensure a balanced and effective pattern of encounter. The approach of your letter shows the importance of shared and attentive study of Biblical and Qur'anic texts as a way of ensuring both that all dimensions of encounter are present and also that Christians and Muslims are held accountable to, and draw on the

riches of, their respective traditions of faith whilst recognising the limitations—at least initially—in our ability to comment authoritatively on the others' scriptures.³⁶

As we noted earlier, the role of the Qu'ran in Islam is not really parallel to the role of the Bible in Christianity. For Christians, God's Word was made flesh in Jesus Christ. Our understanding of the Scriptures is that they witness to and draw their authority from Christ, describing the witness of prophets and apostles to his saving work. They are the voice of his living Spirit who, Christians believe, dwells among us and within us. Nevertheless, 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. And for Christians and Muslims together addressing our scriptures in this way, it is essential also to take account of the place of the Jewish people and of the Hebrew scriptures in our encounter, since we both look to our origins in that history of divine revelation and action.

The use of scriptures in inter-religious dialogue has considerable potential, but there are also risks in this approach when we think we know or understand

another's sacred texts but in fact are reading them exclusively through our own spectacles. We hope that one early outcome of studying and discussing together will be to work out wise guidelines, practices and educational resources for this element of our engagement.

Given the variety of forms of encounter which are to be held together as we deepen our engagement with each other, we can identify three main outcomes which we might seek together. They will depend on the establishment and maintenance of credible and durable structures of collegiality, trust and respect between key individuals and communities in our two faiths. The three outcomes are:

Maintaining and strengthening the momentum of what is already happening in Christian-Muslim encounter. An important stream flowing into this will be the continuing conversations around your letter and the Christian responses to it. Reaching back before that also, there has been a growing corpus of action and reflection in this area at least from *Nostra Aetate* (1965) onwards. The recent gathering of Muslim religious leaders and scholars in Mecca and the subsequent convening of a conference in Madrid, for example, is another promising development. It is important that any new initiatives acknowledge this wider picture of Christian-Muslim

encounter, and position themselves in relation to it, learning from both its achievements and set-backs.

Finding safe spaces within which the differences—as well as the convergences—between Christians and Muslims can be honestly and creatively articulated and explored. Our two faiths have differed deeply on points of central importance to both of us, points of belief as well as points of practice. It is essential for the health of our encounter that we should find ways of talking freely yet courteously about those differences; indeed, honesty of this kind has been described as the most certain sign of maturity in dialogue.

Ensuring that our encounters are not for the sake of participants alone, but are capable of having an influence which affects people more widely—Christians and Muslims at the level of all our local communities, and also those engaged in the wider realities of our societies and our world. Seeking the common good is a purpose around which Christians and Muslims can unite, and in leads us into all kinds of complex territory as we seek to find ways of acting effectively in the world of modern global and democratic politics.

Within the wide diversity of patterns of encounter and participation, it will be desirable to establish some broad priorities in order to keep Christian-Muslim rela-

tions focused and effective around a number of core themes. Again, three steps seem worth establishing here:

First, there is an urgent need in both our traditions for education about one another. We are all influenced by prejudices and misunderstandings inherited from the past—and often renewed in the present through the power of media stereotyping. Teaching and learning about the reality and diversity of Islam as Muslims practise their faith should be a priority as important to Christians as understanding of actual Christianity should be to Muslims. In concrete terms, such educational programmes might be initially be focused on those preparing clergy and imams respectively for public inter-faith roles and on those providing religious education to young people.

Second, opportunities for lived encounter with people of different faiths, both within and across national boundaries, need to be multiplied and developed in an atmosphere of trust and respect. These should take place on many different levels and in many different settings. Such opportunities might usefully be focused on educational projects, efforts towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals and shared work for re-conciliation in situations of conflict and historic enmities.

Finally, for encounters to be sustainable over a long period of time, there needs to be commitment to the process and to one another on the part of all participants. 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.

We believe that *A Common Word Between Us and You* opens the way for these steps to be approached in a new spirit. The limitations of making further statements or sending further letters in advance of meeting together are obvious, however good and friendly the intentions. We greatly look forward therefore to discussing face to face some of the questions arising from these exchanges of letters, exploring—as was said earlier—both the concepts that have been sketched and the new possibilities for creative work together for the good of our world.

So to your invitation to enter more deeply into dialogue and collaboration as a part of our faithful response to the revelation of God's purpose for humankind, we say: Yes! Amen.

In the love of God,
+ ROWAN CANTUAR

14 July 2008

NOTES

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¹ As the staff of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies wrote in their appreciation of your letter: “We are pleased to see that the biblical and Gospel quotations used in this document come from the sources and that explanations given are on occasion based on the original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. This is evidence of deep respect and genuine attentiveness to others, while at the same time of a true scientific spirit.”(issued by Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d’Islamistica [PISAI], Rome, 25th October 2007)

² Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together: Recreating Society* (London: Continuum, 2007)

³ Taken from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, quotations from the Bible are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA)

⁵ *tawhid*: that God is one, monotheism. *shirk*: the association of God with other beings who are not divine, whether other ‘gods’, saints, mediators of various kinds.

⁶ *al Qayyum* can also be translated as “Self-subsistent” and “Self-sufficient”.

⁷ Unless otherwise stated all quotations from the Qur’an are taken from *A new translation* by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

⁸ *God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him* (1John 4:16); see also 2Peter 1.4: *Thus [God] has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape*

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from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.

⁹ as in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, 15.45-49 and the Letter to the Galatians, 4.6, for example.

¹⁰ *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us* (Romans 5:5)

¹¹ In Matthew 6:9-15 Jesus says: "*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*"

¹² Something similar seems to be implied by the ordering of the loves in the Qur'anic verse 5:54 in which it is said that "*God will bring a new people: He will love them, and they will love Him.*"

¹³ *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* (Ephesians 3:18-19)

¹⁴ One of the most influential and beloved New Testament texts illuminating the love of God is the parable of the Prodigal Son—sometimes called the parable of the Loving Father (Luke 15:11-32)

¹⁵ "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16)

¹⁶ in "My song is love unknown" by Samuel Crossman (1664).

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¹⁷ We understand that this is the reading given to the Qur'anic verse al-Zumar 29:46 (“*our God and your God are one [and the same]*”) and al-‘Imran, 3:113–115, quoted in your letter. It is also our interpretation of the passage in your letter that reads: ‘Clearly, the blessed words: *we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* relate to the Unity of God. Clearly also, *worshipping none but God*, relates to being totally devoted to God and hence to the *First and Greatest Commandment*. According to one of the oldest and most authoritative commentaries (*tafsir*) on the Holy Qur’an—the *Jami’ Al-Bayan fi Ta’wil Al-Qur’an* of Abu Ja’far Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari (d. 310 AH / 923 CE)—*that none of us shall take others for lords beside God*, means “that none of us should obey in disobedience to what God has commanded, nor glorify them by prostrating to them in the same way as they prostrate to God”. In other words, that Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them, and not have “to prostrate before kings and the like”; for God says elsewhere in the Holy Qur’an: *Let there be no compulsion in religion ... (Al-Baqarah, 2:256)*. This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbour of which justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part.’

¹⁸ Letter dated 19 November 2007.

¹⁹ Psalm 145:1 quoted above and, e.g., Psalm 113:1–6:

¹ *Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD.*

² *Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and for evermore.*

³ *From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised.*

⁴ *The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above*

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the heavens.

⁵ *Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high,*

⁶ *who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?*

²⁰ Amongst many examples see Psalm 148:9–13 quoted above and

¹ *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament
proclaims his handiwork.*

² *Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares
knowledge. (Psalm 19.1–2)*

²¹ “The words: *His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*, when taken all together, remind Muslims that just as everything in creation glorifies God, everything that is in their souls must be devoted to God: *All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifieth God ... (al-Taghabun, 64:1)*”

²² “God says in one of the very first revelations in the Holy Qur’an: *So invoke the Name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with a complete devotion (al-Muzzammil, 73:8)*”

²³ The stories of saints and other exemplary people can often be of special value in conveying the quality of love.

²⁴ *Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’*

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away,

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leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' (Luke 10:25-37)

²⁵ Cf. Karl Barth's similarly reversing reading of this parable: 'The primary and true form of the neighbour is that he faces us as the bearer and representative of the divine compassion,' *Church Dogmatics*, volume I/2, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) p.416.

²⁶ "*Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbours near and far, to travellers in need, and to your slaves.*"(4:36)

²⁷ Cf. Matthew 5:45.

²⁸ Among the many items for this agenda one respondent, Colin Chapman, suggests:

- **Our histories:** we need to recognise the legacy of 1400 years of sometimes difficult relationships between Christians and Muslims. Both faiths have at different times and in different places been associated with conquest and empire. And while there have been times of peaceful co-existence, conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the

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past (and present) have left their mark on the collective memory of both communities.

- **The wide variety of reasons for tensions in different situations today:** while there are some common factors in all situations where Muslims and Christians live side by side, in each situation there is also likely to be a unique set of factors—political, economic, cultural or social—which contribute to these tensions.

- **Christians and Muslims as minorities:** we recognise that 25% of Muslims worldwide are living in minority situations, and Christians also in many parts of the world find themselves as minorities. In contexts like these both Christians and Muslims face similar dilemmas and may have more in common with each other than with their secular neighbours.

- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict** is at or near the top of the list of issues that concern both Christians and Muslims all over the world. This conflict is quite unique in the way that religion and politics are so thoroughly intertwined. Christian and Muslim leaders therefore have a special responsibility both to educate their own communities about ‘the things that make for peace’ and to appeal to their political leaders to work for a just resolution of the conflict.

Love of the neighbour, as *A Common Word* suggests, provides a firm basis on which to address many of these immediate issues that affect Christian—Muslim relations all over the world. When Muslims point to the saying of Muhammad “None of you has faith until you love for your brother (or neighbour) what you love for yourself”, Christians point to the Golden Rule as taught by Jesus: *‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets’* (Matthew 7:12). 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

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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.

²⁹ *There is no compulsion in religion*

³⁰ There has been, and continues to be, a tradition within Christianity that has argued the moral rightness of using force in certain carefully defined circumstances, most notably through the application of the “just war” criteria formulated by St Augustine of Hippo and developed by St Thomas Aquinas.

³¹ And here we must recognise, in the words of the initial reflections on *A Common Word* offered by Daniel Madigan SJ “... an honest examination of conscience will not permit us to forget that our future is not threatened only by conflict between us. Over the centuries of undeniable conflict and contestation between members of our two traditions, each group has had its own internal conflicts that have claimed and continue to claim many more lives than interconfessional strife. 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. 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 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

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that Muslim-Christian conflict is the world's greatest conflict, or even that war is the most serious threat to the human future.”

³² While such colloquia should be characterised by a high degree of academic rigour, they should also draw on and express the personal commitment of religious leaders and scholars to their respective faiths.

³³ This will require spending time in each other's presence, exploring the depth of each other's spirituality, and acknowledging both the variety and the depth of prayer, remembrance and celebration in both faiths.

³⁴ The Christian Bible, Old and New Testaments together, forms a large narrative (with, admittedly, many subordinate parts some of which do not well fit the 'narrative' model) from creation to new creation, from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem which comes down from heaven to earth. Within this narrative, Jesus Christ is presented as the climax of the story of the world's creation on the one hand and of the call of Abraham on the other: the stories of Jesus are not *just* 'stories of Jesus' but 'stories of Jesus seen as the fulfilment of covenant and creation'. The multiple teachings which are found variously throughout the Bible—doctrine about God, rules for behaviour, religious practices etc.—are set, and best understood, within that overall story. It would be worth exploring in some detail how Muslims see these aspects of Christian scripture and whether there are ways in which such a perception would create new kinds of possibilities for dialogue.

RESPONSE BY HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
*Address to participants in the First Seminar
of the Catholic-Muslim Forum*

Clementine Hall Thursday, 6 November 2008

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to receive you this morning and I greet all of you most cordially. I thank especially Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran as well as Shaykh Mustafa Ceric and Mr Seyyed Hossein Nasr for their words. Our meeting takes place at the conclusion of the important Seminar organized by the “Catholic-Muslim Forum” established between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and representatives of the 138 Muslim leaders who signed the Open Letter to Christian leaders of 13 October 2007. This gathering is a clear sign of our mutual esteem and our desire to listen respectfully to one another. I can assure you that I have prayerfully followed the progress of your meeting, conscious that it represents one more step along the way towards greater understanding between Muslims and Christians within the framework of other regular encounters which the Holy See promotes with various Muslim groups. The Open

Letter “A Common Word between us and you” has received numerous responses, and has given rise to dialogue, specific initiatives and meetings, aimed at helping us to know one another more deeply and to grow in esteem for our shared values. The great interest which the present Seminar has awakened is an incentive for us to ensure that the reflections and the positive developments which emerge from Muslim-Christian dialogue are not limited to a small group of experts and scholars, but are passed on as a precious legacy to be placed at the service of all, to bear fruit in the way we live each day.

The theme which you have chosen for your meeting—“Love of God, Love of Neighbour: The Dignity of the Human Person and Mutual Respect”—is particularly significant. It was taken from the Open Letter, which presents love of God and love of neighbour as the heart of Islam and Christianity alike. This theme highlights even more clearly the theological and spiritual foundations of a central teaching of our respective religions.

The Christian tradition proclaims that God is Love (cf. 1 *Jn* 4:16). It was out of love that he created the whole universe, and by his love he becomes present in human history. The love of God became visible, manifested fully and definitively in Jesus Christ. He thus came down to meet man and, while remaining God, took on our nature.

He gave himself in order to restore full dignity to each person and to bring us salvation. How could we ever explain the mystery of the incarnation and the redemption except by Love? This infinite and eternal love enables us to respond by giving all our love in return: love for God and love for neighbour. This truth, which we consider foundational, was what I wished to emphasize in my first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, since this is a central teaching of the Christian faith. Our calling and mission is to share freely with others the love which God lavishes upon us without any merit of our own.

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.

I was pleased to learn that you were able at this meeting to adopt a common position on the need to worship God totally and to love our fellow men and women disinterestedly, especially those in distress and need. God calls us to work together on behalf of the victims of dis-

ease, hunger, poverty, injustice and violence. For Christians, the love of God is inseparably bound to the love of our brothers and sisters, of all men and women, without distinction of race and culture. As Saint John writes: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 *Jn* 4:20).

The Muslim tradition is also quite clear in encouraging practical commitment in serving the most needy, and readily recalls the “Golden Rule” in its own version: your faith will not be perfect, unless you do unto others that which you wish for yourselves. 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. 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.

My hope, once again, is that these fundamental human rights will be protected for all people everywhere. Political and religious leaders have the duty of ensuring the free exercise of these rights in full respect for each individual's freedom of conscience and freedom 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.

I pray that the "Catholic-Muslim Forum", now confidently taking its first steps, can become ever more a space for dialogue, and assist us in treading together the path to an ever fuller knowledge of Truth. The present meeting

is also a privileged occasion for committing ourselves to a more heartfelt quest for love of God and love of neighbour, the indispensable condition for offering the men and women of our time an authentic service of reconciliation and peace.

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. May God sustain us in our good intentions, and enable our communities to live consistently the truth of love, which constitutes the heart of the religious man, and is the basis of respect for the dignity of each person. May God, the merciful and compassionate One, assist us in this challenging mission, protect us, bless us and enlighten us always with the power of his love.

ADDRESS BY PROFESSOR
SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR
*at the Papal Audience at the
First Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum*

Clementine Hall Thursday, 6 November 2008

We and You—Let us Meet in God’s Love

Bismi’llah Rahman al-Rahim

In the Name of God, the All-Good, the Infinitely Merciful, and blessings and peace be upon the Prophet Muhammad and upon all the prophets and messengers.

*Your Holiness, Eminences, Excellencies,
Distinguished Scholars:*

It is asserted by the Word of God, which for us Muslims is the Noble Qur’an, “And God summons to the Abode of Peace,” and by Christ (may peace be upon him), who is the Word of God in Christianity and also a prophet of the highest order in Islam, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” The goal of attaining peace is thus common between our two religions and we are here precisely with the hope of attaining peace between Christianity and Islam. In fact,

what can be more important and foundational in the quest for peace than creating peace between our religions—for only through this peace will it be possible to establish peace between peoples and nations, more specifically the Islamic world and the West. 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.

As Muslims, our lives have been punctuated since the advent of the Qur'anic revelation by the repetition of the Islamic testimony of faith, *La ilaha illa 'Llah* (There is no divinity but God), the One God proclaimed also in the *Shema* in the Torah, which we both accept as revealed scripture since we and you are both members of the family of Abrahamic monotheism. We are also aware that for nearly two millennia Catholic Christians have recited *credo in unum Deum*. For both us and you, God is at once transcendent and immanent, creator and sustainer of the world, the alpha and omega of existence—the Almighty whose Will prevails in our lives, the Loving whose love embraces the whole of the created order.

He is also just and therefore we both yearn for justice

in our individual lives as well as in society. We both believe in the immortality of the soul, the ethical content of human actions, in our responsibilities before God from which our rights issue. Furthermore, all the faithful, Christian and Muslim alike, believe that one day we shall stand before God and be judged by Him for our actions here below while we also beseech His Mercy. We both believe in the reality of sanctity and our histories bear witness to the lives of saints, whom Muslims call friends of God, men and women who have smelled the perfume of Divine Proximity. We both value faith above all else and pray to God, certain that He hears us.

When we look at the full spectrum of our theological traditions, we observe therein many diverse understandings of the relation between faith and reason, the question of the inscrutability of the Divine Will or Its knowability, of free will and determinism, the meaning of evil, and so many other crucial theological issues.

What is remarkable is how the theological positions in one tradition have their correspondence in the other, *mutatis mutandis*. Our religions have both created major civilizations with their arts and sciences imbued with the presence of the sacred, and also we both claim universality for our message.

And yes, both our histories have been intermingled

with periods of violence, and when religion has been strong in our societies various political forces have carried out violence in its name and in certain cases this violence has received legitimacy by religious authorities. Certainly we cannot claim that violence is the monopoly of only one religion.

With so many profound similarities, why then have we had such a long history of confrontation and opposition? The answer is that we of course also have our differences which have providentially kept Christianity and Islam distinct and separate. Let us mention just a few of them. We emphasize Divine Unity and reject the idea of a triune God, while you emphasize the Trinity while believing God to be One. We and you both revere Christ but in a different manner, and we do not accept the Christian account of the end of his earthly life. And yet, we Muslims also accept Christ as the Messiah (*al-Masih*) and expect his second coming at the end of the history of present humanity. We emphasize Divine Law (*al-Shari'ah*) as rooted in the Qur'anic revelation, while Christ asserted his break with the Law in the name of the Spirit. Therefore, Christians do not have the same conception of Divine Law as do Jews and Muslims. Nor do Christians have a sacred language as does Islam, but have used, and some still do use, several liturgical languages.

A COMMON WORD

You and we, we both believe in religious freedom, but we Muslims do not allow an aggressive proselytizing 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 desacralizing 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.

It is with full awareness of both our shared beliefs and our differences, and also in light of the contemporary situation of the followers of our religions, that we as Muslims from different schools of Islamic thought and countries have come together here to extend to you our hand of friendship, seeking to meet you in God's love, beyond all our theological differences and memories of historical confrontations. Surely we, who respect and love Christ as you do, can meet and come together with you under the banner of what he has stated to be the two

supreme commandments: to love God and to love the neighbor. We can also seek to extend, often in harmony with each other, the border of the definition of neighbor to include not only you and us but the whole of humanity, and even beyond that the rest of God's creation. As the Holy Bible asserts, "With God, all things are possible." We submit to Him, and ask for His help and affirmation in carrying out this momentous task of meeting with you in friendship and peace under the banner of that Common Word that unites us. There can be no more blessed act in our times than the creation of deep accord between God's religions, especially the two religions that have the largest numbers of followers in the world, namely Christianity and Islam. Indeed, God summons us to the Abode of Peace, and blessed are the peace-makers.

FINAL DECLARATION
*Issued at the conclusion of the
First Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum*

Rome, 6 November 2008

The Catholic Muslim Forum was formed by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and a delegation of the 138 Muslim signatories of the open letter called *A Common Word*, in the light of the same document and the response of His Holiness Benedict XVI through his Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. Its first Seminar was held in Rome from 4-6 November 2008. Twenty four participants and five advisors from each religion took part in the meeting. The theme of the Seminar was Love of God, Love of Neighbour.

The discussion, conducted in a warm and convivial spirit, focused on two great themes: Theological and Spiritual Foundations and Human Dignity and Mutual Respect. Points of similarity and of diversity emerged, reflecting the distinctive specific genius of the two religions.

1. For Christians the source and example of love of

God and neighbour is the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for each person. God is Love (1 Jn 4,16) and “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3,16). God’s love is placed in the human heart through the Holy Spirit. It is God who first loves us thereby enabling us to love Him in return. Love does not harm one’s neighbour but rather seeks to do to the other what one would want done to oneself (Cf. 1 Cor 13, 4-7). Love is the foundation and sum of all the commandments (Cf. Gal 5,14). Love of neighbour cannot be separated from love of God, because it is an expression of our love for God. This is the new commandment, Love one another as I have loved you. (Jn 15,12) Grounded in Christ’s sacrificial love, Christian love is forgiving and excludes no one; it therefore also includes one’s enemies. It should be not just words but deeds (Cf. 1 Jn, 4,18). This is the sign of its genuineness.

For Muslims, as set out in *A Common Word*, love is a timeless transcendent power which guides and transforms human mutual regard. This love, as indicated by the Holy and Beloved Prophet Muhammad, is prior to the human love for the One True God. A Hadith indicates that God’s loving compassion for humanity is even greater than that of a mother for her child (Muslim,

Bab al Tawba: 21); it therefore exists before and independently of the human response to the One who is 'The Loving'. So immense is this love and compassion that God has intervened to guide and save humanity in a perfect way many times and in many places, by sending prophets and scriptures. The last of these books, the Qur'an, portrays a world of signs, a marvellous cosmos of Divine artistry, which calls forth our utter love and devotion, so that 'those who have faith, have most love of God' (2:165), and 'those that believe, and do good works, the Merciful shall engender love among them.' (19:96) In a Hadith we read that 'Not one of you has faith until he loves for his neighbour what he loves for himself' (Bukhari, Bab al Iman: 13)

2. Human life is a most precious gift of God to each person. It should therefore be preserved and honoured in all its stages.

3. Human dignity is derived from the fact that every human person is created by a loving God, and has been endowed with the gifts of reason and free will, and therefore enabled to love God and others. On the firm basis of these principles, the person requires the respect of his or her original dignity and his or her human vocation. Therefore, he or she is entitled to full recognition of his or her identity and freedom by individuals, communi-

ties and governments, supported by civil legislation that assures equal rights and full citizenship.

4. We affirm that God's creation of humanity has two great aspects: the male and the female human person, and we commit ourselves jointly to ensuring that human dignity and respect are extended on an equal basis to both men and women.

5. Genuine love of neighbour implies respect of the person and her or his choices in matters of conscience and religion. It includes the right of individuals and communities to practice their religion in private and public.

6. 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.

7. As Catholic and Muslim believers, we are aware of the summons and imperative to bear witness to the transcendent dimension of life, through a spirituality nourished by prayer, in a world which is becoming more and more secularized and materialistic.

8. We affirm that no religion and its followers should be excluded from society. Each should be able to make its indispensable contribution to the good of society, especially in service to the most needy.

9. We recognize that God's creation in its plurality of cultures, civilizations, languages and peoples is a source of richness and should therefore never become a cause of tension and conflict.

10. We are convinced that Catholics and Muslims have the duty to provide a sound education in human, civic, religious and moral values for their respective members and to promote accurate information about each other's religions.

11. 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.

12. We call upon believers to work for an ethical financial system in which the regulatory mechanisms consider the situation of the poor and disadvantaged, both as individuals, and as indebted nations. We call upon the privileged of the world to consider the plight of those afflicted most severely by the current crisis in food production and distribution, and ask religious believers of all denominations and all people of good will to work together to alleviate the suffering of the hungry, and to eliminate its causes.

CATHOLIC-MUSLIM FORUM DECLARATION

13. Young people are the future of religious communities and of societies as a whole. Increasingly, they will be living in multicultural and multireligious societies. It is essential that they be well formed in their own religious traditions and well informed about other cultures and religions.

14. We have agreed to explore the possibility of establishing a permanent Catholic Muslim committee to coordinate responses to conflicts and other emergency situations.

15. We look forward to the second Seminar of the Catholic Muslim Forum to be convened in approximately two years in a Muslim majority country yet to be determined.

All participants felt gratitude to God for the gift of their time together and for an enriching exchange.

At the end of the Seminar His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI received the participants and, following addresses by Professor Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and H.E. Grand Mufti Dr. Mustafa Ceric, spoke to the group. All present expressed satisfaction with the results of the Seminar and their expectation for further productive dialogue.

RESPONSE BY REV. DR. SAMUEL KOBIA
General Secretary
World Council of Churches

Your Royal Highness, Eminent signatories of *A Common Word Between Us and You*,

Greetings in the name of the One God, whom we love and who loves us.

I received your letter to Christian leaders, *A Common Word*, with great joy and hope. I read it as a representative expression of the Muslim will to engage with the Christian community in dialogue for the sake of justice and world peace. I recognize and welcome the serious intent of *A Common Word* and your invitation to explore our shared concerns and visions for our common humanity.

The member churches of the World Council of Churches have for several decades been engaged in relationships with people of other faiths, especially with Muslims. The outcomes of the joint work include *Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action* (2001), which notes

While it is true that the complex history of Christian-Muslim relations has known much rivalry and war, it is often forgotten that there were rich and

fertile encounters in the realms of life and ideas alike. Unfortunately, one of the features of our historical memories has been the way in which conflicts overshadow peaceful experiences and accusations drown the voices of understanding. Something similar happens at the level of religious views, when perceptions of difference displace common or shared principles.

The WCC welcomes the initiative and opportunity *A Common Word* represents, and will encourage our member churches and ecumenical partners to engage constructively and positively with their Muslim neighbours in the various local situations throughout the world, and in the light of your letter we confidently look forward to you and your colleagues to reciprocate. *Striving Together* confirms that

Relations between Muslims and Christians are usually strongly influenced by local and regional histories and events. But broader developments also have a significant impact, especially when they contribute to destabilizing societies previously characterized by peaceful relations of mutual acceptance. In situations where uncertainties of change begin to be felt, suspicion and fear can build

up between communities leading to tension and possibly conflict.

...[W]e have commenced consultations with member churches and ecumenical partners, a number of whom responded with great enthusiasm. In the spirit of your invitation to a shared endeavour, I called a meeting of scholars engaged in the field of Christian–Muslim relations, representing member churches and wider ecumenical circles. Their deliberations produced a document entitled *Learning to Explore Love Together*, which I have sent to the member churches. This document is intended to encourage the churches to read and reflect on your Letter and engage constructively with their Muslim neighbours in exploring common concerns.

I have also offered the World Council of Churches' good offices to support our member churches' engagement with their Muslim neighbours. Specifically, I have asked our Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation programme staff to make a response to your initiative a top priority.

I want to take this opportunity to initiate a conversation with you about face-to-face dialogue events between you, the authors of *A Common Word*, and your Christian counterparts in order to expand and deepen the understanding between us of loving God and loving neighbour.

RESPONSE BY SAMUEL KOBIA

As a first step in preparing for such dialogue events, I would like to suggest that we together create a joint Muslim-Christian working group that will produce the plans, create the agendas and issue invitations.

I have instructed my programme staff in Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation to be in contact with your staff to explore further how a constructive cooperation might take shape so that we may move into the next phase of our relationship based on shared principles and a shared agenda. [...]

REV. DR. SAMUEL KOBIA

General Secretary

World Council of Churches

RESPONSE BY THE WORLD ALLIANCE
OF REFORMED CHURCHES

15th October 2007

**World Alliance of Reformed Churches's (WARC)
response to "A Common Word Between
Us and You," a letter of peace from the
Muslim community**

Dear friends,

Response to "A Common Word Between Us and You".

It is with a sense of appreciation that we received the invitation from you with this title. Your call is very timely and we agree that people of faith have the capacity, and indeed have a responsibility to draw from the resources of our different faith traditions to work together for peace—in a world in which religious sentiments have been wrongly used to foment conflict and war.

We appreciate the passages you referred to in both the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches welcomes this initiative. We do have an interest in furthering a dialogue based on our common commitments to love God and neighbour. In

RESPONSE BY THE REFORMED CHURCHES

the year 2002, we called an interfaith meeting specifically around the conflicts in parts of Indonesia and have reiterated our commitment to positive interfaith relations for peace and justice in our world at our General Council in Accra, Ghana, in 2004.

We look forward to continuing to work together along these lines.

Sincerely yours,

REV. DR CLIFTON KIRKPATRICK

President

REV. DR SETRI NYOMI

General Secretary

A COMMON WORD

RESPONSE BY THE
BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE

23rd December 2008

From The Baptist World Alliance
To the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars
who have written or signed *A Common Word*
Between Us and You
May Grace and Peace be Yours in Abundance

Preface

Dear Friends,

Let our first word be one of our appreciation for the generous initiative you have taken, and of our delight in the eirenic and constructive spirit in which your letter has been written. Many of us have hoped for the kind of dialogue between Muslims and Christians that you offer, and now we have your invitation, opening up the way for conversation and deeper friendship. We believe that this letter is a unique moment in the history of Christian-Muslim relations. There have been similar efforts in the past, but none has been endorsed by so many Muslim scholars and religious leaders, representing such diverse

traditions and groups within the Islamic faith. In the same way, the response so far by Christian leaders has been representative of a very broad spectrum of Christians, all expressing a warm reception of your invitation. In adding our voices to theirs, we want to embrace your conviction that it is only the movement of human hearts and minds towards love and worship of the One God, creator of us all, that will begin to resolve the huge needs for peace, justice and love of neighbours in our world today. Your letter, then, is not only creative but timely.

The Baptist World Alliance has already made a brief response through its President, the Revd David Coffey, welcoming your letter. However, we now wish to make a more extensive reply from a wide group of Christian leaders within our Alliance, setting out some of the considerations that lay behind our initial response of appreciation. At the Annual Meeting of the Baptist World Alliance, gathered in Prague July 21-25, 2008, leaders from Baptist Unions and Conventions in 66 countries discussed your letter in an open forum. Many of them came from areas of the world in which they have experienced distressing religious conflicts, but there was a common desire to respond positively to your invitation, and a recognition of the friendly and hospitable intentions that lie behind it. They have therefore commis-

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sioned this response, and we who are writing and signing it have listened carefully to their experiences and views. We have also read and learned from written responses sent by leaders of Baptist churches in the regions of Asia-Pacific, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and North America.

At the very beginning of our reply, we want to affirm that you are right in identifying the double command to love God and neighbour as being at the heart of the message of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. We want to say 'yes' to your invitation to 'come together' with you to live in peace, respect and kindness. We wish to collaborate with you, wherever possible, in local projects for peace, justice and the giving of aid to those who are suffering and in need. And we do agree with you that future dialogue between us can be based on the 'common ground' of our obedience, within our own faiths, to the double love command, together with our fundamental confession of the unity of God.

In saying all this with a full heart, however, we want to clarify what we mean by saying that we have a 'common ground' in the commandments to love God and our neighbour. We do not understand it to mean that this double command is the sum total of our two faiths: we do not think that the whole range of our beliefs about the

relation between God and the world He creates and redeems can be reduced to this double command. We do not even need to assume at the beginning of our dialogue that we mean exactly the same thing by ‘love of God’ and ‘love of neighbour’. Rather, we understand ‘common ground’ to mean that this double command to love opens up a space or area (‘ground’) in which we can live together, talk with each other, share our experiences, work together to enable the flourishing of human life and explore the eternal truths to which our respective faiths bear witness. We can inhabit this ‘common ground’ together, of course, because we recognize that there is a *sufficient* overlap between the way Christians and Muslims speak about love of God and humanity for us to understand each other and open ourselves to mutual exploration. In this sense the ‘common ground’ is also a ‘common word’. Moreover, this common ground is not just a strategy for dialogue, but a gift of God to us all. In the end, it is God who gives the ground on which we stand, and God who opens up the space in which we can meet. We read your letter as having a similar view of what ‘common ground’ means, because you say:

Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences—it is clear the

Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah and the New Testament.

Part of the character of the common ground is its making of a 'link' between the Scriptures of three faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—which acknowledge their roots in the faith of Abraham. On this ground the scriptures intersect in some way. We wish to follow your example of encouraging each other to read and reflect on passages from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an. It is by reading each other's Scriptures that we shall come to understand each other better and learn better how we both speak of God. Moreover, we wish to express our appreciation that you have given such a central place to passages from the Gospels in marking out the borders of the 'common ground' between us. It is in the words of Jesus recorded in Mark 12:28-31 (parallel in Matthew 22:34-40, cf. Luke 10:25-28) that the two love commands are brought together concisely into one saying. Here, when asked what is the 'first commandment', Jesus integrates two passages from the Hebrew Bible:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The second [commandment] is this,”You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:7-8) There is no other commandment greater than these.

The Torah itself does not bring the two commands together in one place, and neither—it appears—is there an *explicit* instance in the Qur’an. There are certainly examples of the double love command in Jewish writings of an early period, and in the Gospel of Luke the saying about ‘the first and second commandments’ is found on the lips of a Jewish scribe, whom Jesus approves; but the only instances of the saying in the sacred Scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths are in the New Testament. We consider it to be a move of the deepest courtesy on your part, therefore, to define the ‘common ground’ in a way that is so familiar to your Christian audience.

However, your letter amply illustrates that the Qur’an and the Hadith contain commands to love both God and neighbour, and one particular saying of the Prophet Muhammad (on ‘the best that I have said’) seems, as you suggest, to echo Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the *Shema*). You explain that love of the neighbour is always *implied* in love of God, since without love of neighbour there can be no true faith in God. As the Prophet Muhammad said:

None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.¹

This is akin to the verse in the New Testament:

Those who do not love a brother and sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen' (I John 4:20).

A verse from the Qur'an clearly brings together the worship of God with doing good to the neighbour, which seems to be a close parallel to the double love command:

Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbours near and far, to travellers in need, and to your slaves (Al-Nisa' 4:36).²

Further, you point out that the summons from the Qur'an (Aal 'Imran 3:64) to Christians to 'come to a common word' implies not only a call to love of God ('worship none but God') but also to love of neighbour; you argue that the command 'that none of us shall take others for lords beside him' is concerned with the religious freedom of all people in the face of human rulers, and that justice and freedom are a crucial part of love of the neighbour:

Say: O People of the 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. And if they turn away, then say: bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).

As Christians in the Baptist tradition, we have from our origin been passionately concerned to defend freedom of religion for all people, not for Christians alone, and so we find it poignant that you associate love for neighbour so directly with this freedom. We wish to say more about this below, but it suffices for now to say that there can be no doubt that the appeal to the double love command places us on 'common ground'.

In what follows, we wish to start the process of exploration that is facilitated by standing and walking together on the 'common ground'. We hope that there will be opportunities, on a local or regional level, to continue this conversation face to face. When this happens, we hope that our present response will be used, alongside your original letter, as a set of guidelines for discussion. Here, then, we would like to suggest what may be fruitful lines of enquiry for such a dialogue among Muslims and Christians together in a variety of settings, to increase

mutual understanding, and to lay a foundation for partnerships and shared programmes at the grass-roots of our communities.

God's initiative of love

While the common ground we share with you is a familiar space, we find less familiar the emphasis you lay on love as obedience, devotion and constant praise to God. That these are indeed elements of love has been a welcome reminder to us from an Islamic perspective, and we have been prompted to think through again the words of Jesus and the *Shema*, to which you draw attention, that love is a matter of the 'heart, mind, soul and strength'. We have learned a good deal from the way that you find love to be a matter of acknowledging the uniqueness, sovereignty and praise of God as summed up in the word of the Prophet Muhammad that:

The best that I have said—myself and the prophets that came before me—is: 'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things.'³

As you put it, 'The words "His is the praise" remind Muslims that they must be grateful to God and trust him

with their sentiments and emotions'. You remind us that the call to love is not a mere emotion or mood, but is a summons to an intentional devotion in which 'the whole of the soul—with its intelligence, will and feeling' participates, and that this will have an impact on the practice of everyday life. We are reminded here of the way that the New Testament urges us to link our praise of God with practical living according to the will of God:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is ... be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father ... (Eph. 5:15-20).

In the light of this human response of love for God, the question which arises between us, however, is the way in which we understand the love of God Himself as a free gift which gets all human love started. Christians want to emphasize that the very nature of God is love, and this is always prior to *our* love for God. Indeed, we are only able to love God and each other because God has poured out His love towards us, lifting us to a new level of life in

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which love is possible. For Christians, this love is supremely displayed in the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Through the love of God shown in Christ and in his self-sacrifice, we are enabled to love God and others. The power of the initiating or prevenient love of God, freely given, is expressed in such New Testament texts as this:

Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love ... Beloved, since God loved us* so much, we ought also to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and *his love is perfected in us* (1 Jn. 4:7-12).

On first sight, this stress on the initiating love of God seems to be striking a different note from the text you quote from the Qur'an, where the love of God seems to be a consequence or reward of our love and obedience to God:

Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): if ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful (Aal 'Imran, 3: 31).

The impression of this saying is reinforced by your comment that God enjoins Muslims who truly love God to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad, 'in

order in turn to be loved by God'. However, we notice that the final emphasis of the saying is on the given fact that God *is* eternally forgiving and merciful, and does not acquire these properties when we are obedient. Moreover, you quote a highly relevant saying from the Prophet Muhammad in a footnote elsewhere:

God has one hundred mercies. He has sent down one of them between genii and human beings and beasts and animals and because of it they feel with each other; and through it they have mercy on each other; and through it, the wild animal feels for its offspring. And God has delayed ninety-nine mercies through which he will have mercy on his servants on the Day of Judgement. (Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Tawbah; 2109/4; no. 2752).

Here, just one of a hundred divine mercies is freely given to the whole creation, but it is enough to enable all the empathetic love ('feeling') and mercy that creatures show towards each other. Perhaps, then, the situation envisaged is one where divine mercy gets human love going, and then the exercise of love for God results in still more love from God (the 'ninety-nine mercies' reserved for the Day of Judgement); it is as if the prevenient mercy of God demands responsible obedience. Christians,

while stressing the prevenient love of God, have always recognized that there is a complex and often baffling relation between divine initiative and human response. We should not forget here the words of Jesus in John 14:23, that ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them...’ which seems to make God’s love conditional on the following of the commands of Christ. Also, in the Lord’s Prayer we are taught to say, ‘forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive* those who trespass against us’.

A discussion about the respective meanings of the love of God and the mercy and compassion of God in Christianity and Islam may then prove mutually illuminating as we wrestle with the mystery of the relation between grace and obedience. Moreover, as Christians we greatly appreciate the Islamic insight that the mercy of God is distributed throughout the created order and creates mercy not just among human beings but in the whole of the animal kingdom. There is a key ingredient here for a theology of peace and justice in the natural world.

The oneness of God and the love of God

While Christians are familiar with the double love command of Jesus, you give us a salutary reminder that the first and greatest commandment (‘You shall love the Lord

your God’) is quoted by Jesus from the Jewish *Shema*, which begins with a declaration of the oneness of God: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’. This is made explicit in Mark 12:28–31, while it is implicit in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. You therefore urge that the ‘common ground’ is not just the two greatest commandments, but the confession of the Unity of God in which they are rooted and out of which they arise. The threefold common ground you propose is the Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him and the necessity of love of the neighbour.

While, as Baptist Christians, we affirm both the Oneness of God and the love of God, the fact that we do not often explicitly link them together gives us pause for thought. By ‘Oneness’ we understand a range of affirmations about God. These include the fact that there *is* only one God (monotheism) and that this God is sovereign, but ‘oneness’ also means that God is unique and unclassifiable, unlike all objects in the world. The uniqueness of this One God means that God must be mysterious to human minds, and so human language will finally fail in describing God. As God declares through the Prophet Isaiah ‘To whom then will you compare me?’ (Isa. 40:25) and ‘my thoughts are not your thoughts’ (Isa. 55:8). Your letter links love and oneness mainly in terms of praise for

the sovereignty of God, but there are also regions of thought to be explored which link love with the depths of the mystery of God.

There is room for exploration here in ways that are illuminating but not contentious. However, when we speak of the love and mystery of God we must open out an area of belief that we know will be troubling to you, but which is absolutely essential for us in confessing the Oneness of God: we mean the doctrine of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are well aware that Muslims believe the Christian idea of the Trinity contradicts the affirmation that God has no other being in association with Him. There are many texts in the Qur'an which affirm that 'we shall ascribe no partner unto him',⁴ and we may add the declarations that 'He fathered no one nor was he fathered'⁵ and the denial that 'God has a child'.⁶

We want to make clear that in holding to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian church has always denied that there are any other beings alongside the One God. In using the traditional word 'person' (*hypostasis* or 'distinct reality') of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the church has never thought that it is speaking of three personal beings like any persons we know in the world. Nor does it think that God has fathered a child with the same physi-

cal process that we see in the world around us. Rather, the church is attempting to express the truth that there are mysterious, unknowable depths to the personal nature of God. It is also aiming to be faithful to the truth of God which has been disclosed in the event of Jesus Christ in history.

The church confesses that the life of God, who exists only from God's self and from no other cause, is composed eternally of loving relationships which have some likeness to the relationships we know between a Father and a Son, or a parent and a child, and which are being opened up continually to new depths of love and hope by a reality that our Scriptures call 'Spirit'. While the 'persons' in God cannot be compared to beings in the world, there is some likeness between relationships of love in God and the world, since 'God is love'. We can know these relations, not by observing them or examining them, but only by participating in them as God calls us to share His life. Christians think that this is made possible for us through Jesus Christ: this is because the eternal Father-Son relation in God was fully displayed and actualized in the relation of Jesus to the God whom he called Father, and whom Jesus taught his disciples to call 'Father' as well. Christians see this vision of God as hinted at in a prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John, that:

A COMMON WORD

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they [who believe in me] also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know what you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-3)

This is not the place for a fuller exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and nor have we said as much as we have in order to try and convince you of its truth. We write in order to make clear that we ourselves cannot think of God as love *except* in terms of an eternal communion or fellowship whose unity is dynamic and relational. While we rejoice to confess with you that there is one God, it is not possible for us to speak of the One God without also speaking of Trinity. It is, for us, because God lives in relations of self-giving and sacrificial love that we can say that God 'is' love as well as that God is 'loving'. It is this love which overflows in astonishing generosity to us and draws us into participation in the divine life: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'

(Rom. 5:5), and ‘when we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... and joint heirs with Christ.’ (Rom. 8:15-16).

We have also written about our belief in God as Trinity to explain why we think that we can inhabit a ‘common ground’ which is marked out by belief in the Unity of God, and why we can confess with you that ‘God has no associate’. It would be good to explore the way in which you and we occupy this ground from our different perspectives. It would be particularly useful to explore the impact that our different confessional stances make upon our actual practice of love and justice, in the everyday life in which—as we have seen—we are called to praise and obey God. We are encouraged to think that this kind of conversation is possible because, in your courtesy to us, you have refrained from interpreting the prohibitions of the Qur’an against ascribing any partner to God as a critique of the doctrine of the Trinity (especially in your comments on the appeal to ‘come to a common word’, Aal ‘Imran 3:64).

The extent of love for neighbour

We have already remarked on your declaration that ‘in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith

in God'. But, with the scribe of Luke 10:25-8, we may ask 'who is my neighbour'? This teacher of the law had already asked Jesus 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' and had then answered his own question with the double love command, to love God and neighbour. When Jesus commended his answer, he went on to query the identity of the neighbour. Jesus' own answer was contained in a story which has come to be known as 'The Good Samaritan', and whose point is essentially that our neighbour is anyone who is in need of our help, regardless of any boundaries of race, religion or class.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead [A priest and a temple-servant from the man's own people pass him by] ... A Samaritan, when travelling, came near him; and when he saw him he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He said, 'The one who showed him mercy'.

We wonder whether the orphan, the needy, the ‘way-farer’ and the slave in your quotation from the Qur’an (Al-Baqarah 2:177) may be interpreted, like the man in Jesus’ story, as anyone from any race or religion. We read in Al-Mumtahinah 60:8 that the Qur’an bids Muslims to ‘show kindness and deal justly’ with all non-Muslims who do not resort to violence. We have already quoted above a saying from the Qur’an, in Al-Nisa’ 4:36:

Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbours near and far off, to travellers in need, and to your slaves.

It would be good to know how you understand the ‘neighbour who is far off’ in this command. It would also be helpful to know how the universality of the neighbour relates in your understanding to the Islamic ideal of the *umma*, or the world-wide community of Muslims which transcends national boundaries. We should say that Christians hear the story of Jesus as a word of judgement upon them, as they have so often failed to be the Good Samaritan throughout the history of the church.

There is a foundation for the idea of the ‘universal neighbour’ in the conviction, held within all three Abrahamic religions, that the creation of humankind by God

points to the relation of all human beings with the Creator, and to their responsibility and accountability to God for their stewardship in the world. This can also be expressed in the idea of the creation of all humanity in the image of God. As you observe in a footnote, Christianity and Islam have comparable conceptions of human beings being created ‘in the best stature’ (Al-Tin, 95:1-8) and ‘from God’s own breath’ (Sad, 38:72). After quoting from Gen. 1:27 and Gen. 2:7, you recall the words of the Prophet Muhammad which occur many times in the Hadith: ‘Verily God created Adam in His own image’.⁷ The consequent responsibility of human beings is portrayed in a passage from the Qur’an (Al-Baqarah, 2:30-35) where God announces to the angels that He intends to place Adam as a ‘viceroys’ in the earth, a scene akin to Psalm 8 (and quoted in Heb. 2:7-8):

You have made [human beings] only a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honour.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hand; you have put all things under their feet

...

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In Gen. 2:19-20 Adam names the animals, while in the Qur'an (Al-Baqarah, 2:30-35) he is given special knowledge of their names by God. Both texts understand the naming, or knowledge of the names, of the animals as a symbol of the responsibility given to Adam. We are all too aware how this God-given stewardship ('dominion') has become a *domination* and exploitation of the animals and the whole natural world, but human beings retain their dignity and value in God's eyes regardless of their failure.

Should we not then regard creation by God and accountability to God as part of our 'common ground'? All human beings are to be held as of equal worth because of the equal responsibility and privilege given to all by the Creator God. Love for neighbour is thus rooted both in God's love for us and God's purpose in creation. We see here a common commitment to respect all fellow human beings, in face of their diversities of race, culture and religion. In this shared vision we have a common project to work out our responsibility for the world before God in promoting the common good of society, the development of human life and care for the whole creation. It is when we work on such projects together that we feel the sense of being part of one human community, and are able to explore the spiritual concerns

that have motivated us and the truths that have inspired us. In our very practice we find our feet on the common ground beneath us.

The costliness of love for neighbour

In the section of your letter on love of neighbour, you affirm that sympathy must be accompanied by something more—by ‘self-sacrifice’ and by ‘giving to the neighbour what we ourselves love’. These words seem to us to penetrate deeply into the meaning of neighbour-love, and we would like to set alongside them some words of Jesus in the Gospels which we think express these qualities. At their best, Christians have followed Jesus in commending a love which is vulnerable, which does not expect a return from the person loved, which persists even in the face of rejection of our love, and which is therefore love of enemies as well as those who do good to us.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not

even tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? . . . Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:43-48)

In a passage just before the one above, Jesus speaks some very hard words: 'I say to you, Do not resist an evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.' Jesus is really saying that we ourselves cannot lay down any limits to what love may demand. As the Apostle Paul says later, in the context of relations with the state, 'Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another' (Rom. 13:8). We ourselves are not to draw the line. In some circumstances, love may *even* demand non-resistance (or at least non-violent resistance) to those who want to harm us. The difficulty is knowing when these circumstances are. While some Christians have thus taken up a completely pacifist position, others have espoused a 'just war' theory which includes proportionate means for justifiable self-defence. Such 'just war' is not to be confused with a 'holy war' to advance the cause of Christianity, which we utterly repudiate.

However, underlying these differences of view there is a common principle that we are to go beyond simply being at peace with those who are at peace with us; we are

to be peace-makers, and love may demand self-sacrifice in this attempt. We are to break cycles of violence by generous actions. For Christians, this view of the costly nature of love stems from a vision of the triune God, where the 'persons' are ceaselessly engaged in self-emptying for the sake of the other, and whose self-giving love overflows into sacrifice in the world. The history of human warfare has, nevertheless, shown the constant failure of Christian people to embody the nature of God in this way, and sadly at times in relation to their Muslim neighbours.

It would be good, then, to discuss with you the implications of your appeal to 'self-sacrifice' in love of neighbour. It would be especially valuable to reflect further on the saying from the Qur'an that 'Ye will not attain unto righteousness until ye expend of that which ye love' (Aal 'Imran, 3:92), which you explain as: 'without giving the neighbour what we ourselves love, we do not truly love God.' This seems to us to be a profound reflection on the command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' which is found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. It has far-reaching implications if we do not restrict 'what we ourselves love' to material goods, but consider all the things we love—including our security, our expectations, our status and our very selves. We look forward to reading these

passages from our Scriptures together, as we agree with you that ‘if Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace’.

The imperative of religious freedom

We are impressed by the case you advance for religious freedom, and for the frequency with which you return to the issue in your letter. You refer, for instance, to the saying ‘let there be no compulsion in religion’ (Al-Baqarah 2:256) and the principle that God wills there to be variety in belief (‘Had God willed He could have made you one community’: Al-Ma’idah 5:48). Most helpfully, you connect the need for freedom of religion with the supremacy of the sovereignty of God above all human power. The saying in Aal ‘Imran 3:64 makes an appeal to ‘come to a common word’ that we ‘shall worship none but God’; the linked command to ‘ascribe no partner to God’ is interpreted as meaning that none should be forced to disobey God’s commands at the behest of human rulers who pretend to be lords alongside God, and this is expanded to mean that ‘Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to follow what God has commanded them’. In this way, a link is made between the command to love God and the command to love one’s neighbour, understood as including justice and freedom of religion.

As Baptist Christians, we have always defended the right of religious freedom for all people, regardless of their religion, grounding this theologically in the sovereignty of God.⁸ All people are responsible to God alone for their faith or lack of faith, and not to human powers. Key texts from the New Testament to which we have appealed have been Acts 5:29, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority', and Romans 14:

Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall ... Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Rom. 14:4, 10-12)

The appeal to the final judgement of God on human belief is reflected, it seems to us, in several sayings from the Qur'an, such as 'God is the Hearer, the Knower' (Al-Baqarah 2:137) and 'Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ' (Al-Ma'idah 5:48):

For each we have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed He could have made you one community. But that he might try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ.

It seems to us that you are directing your argument in the first place to a defence of the right of Christians, Muslims and Jews to practice freely the religion in which they have been born, or which they already hold—‘to follow what God has commanded them’. This is obviously of critical importance, and we can think of many local situations where tensions would be eased if this were more widely understood. It is not altogether clear to us whether you think that this principle can also cover the freedom of people to change their religion, or to move from a community of one faith to another of a different faith. As Baptist Christians, we believe that the same principle of accountability to the sovereign God gives freedom to make such a change, from Christianity to Islam or from Islam to Christianity. Of course, we are concerned here with a person’s *own* conviction that God is calling them into a different community of faith (‘to follow what God has commanded them’), not with

unjust human means of persuasion, inducement or compulsion.

We recognize, therefore, that both Islam and Christianity are 'missionary faiths'. We affirm that there is a legitimate kind of mission in which people can, in appropriate ways, share their beliefs with others, and in which people seeking God should have the freedom to explore the way that God is calling them into faith. We believe that as Christians and Muslims we are faced by an important challenge in this age of globalization: that each tradition should develop further its ethical approach to mission, and that we should do this together wherever possible. We would like to engage in discussion on this matter, looking at specific local examples where tension or conflict has arisen between our two communities, and placing these in the context of our Scriptures.

A way forward

We hope that our comments on your remarkable letter have made clear how much it has caused us to think, and how it has caused us to return with new insight to our own Scriptures. It has also prompted us to seek to become more familiar with the Qur'an than we have been. How, then, shall we build on this exciting and generous initiative?

First, throughout this response we have drawn atten-

tion to matters that we have said we would like to discuss further with you. We believe that this is best done, not by a central commission of the Baptist World Alliance, but by encouraging our regional unions and conventions of churches to engage in joint conversations and practical projects for aid and development with their Muslim neighbours, in ways that are appropriate for their own area. We will aim to encourage these local activities to give attention to the 'common ground' that we have both identified, and specifically to use your letter and our response in doing so. Wherever possible, we would like to share ecumenically with other Christian churches in these events. We promise, as an Alliance, to keep ourselves informed of what is happening on a local level in inter-faith dialogue and cooperation, to make sure that already existing projects are known about widely in our churches, and to encourage new initiatives where necessary.

Second, we have a deep concern for education, both of religious teachers and of the members of local congregations and mosques. We hope that both our communities might encourage a study, within our own training institutions, of the principles and the methodology that are contained in your letter, together with a reflection on some of the questions that we have raised in our res-

ponse. In this way our two documents might well be of use in our own communities of faith, as well as addressed to each other. At the same time, we hope that opportunities can be found for joint study courses in our theological colleges, in which students from both faiths can participate.

It is, however, too easy to keep a dialogue going at the high level of theological conversation alone. Somehow the theological vision which enlivens us must be received at the grassroots and change attitudes and prejudices there. Somehow the members of our communities need to be gripped by the value of respect and honour for all people because of the creation of all by the One God, and because of His love and mercy towards them, however wrong the beliefs of others may seem.

Just one way this may happen is for religious teachers in both faiths to be careful about the rhetoric they use, which may have unintended effects on followers who are less aware of theological nuances, and which may even lead to violence. To be concrete, we have one suggestion for Baptist Christians, that they avoid words to describe evangelism (or telling the Gospel story) which appear threatening to others, such as 'evangelistic crusades'. Nor is it necessary to be critical of another faith in order to commend what we believe to be true in ours; the story

RESPONSE BY THE BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE

of Jesus has power to persuade in its own right. It is easy to slip into a violent rhetoric which arouses unpleasant memories of conflicts in the past. We do not venture to suggest examples of unhelpful rhetoric to you, our Muslim friends, but hope that you might be able to identify some for yourselves. Let our rhetoric be that of love, as you have already shown.

In this way, and in many others, we aim to show obedience to the two great commandments of love for God and for our neighbour. We have found this quality in your letter to us, and we hope that you can discern it in this response to you.

May God's grace and love be always with you.

Signed by

THE REVD. DAVID COFFEY

President of the Baptist World Alliance

THE REVD. NEVILLE CALLAM

General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance

THE REVD. PROF. PAUL S. FIDDES

*Chair of the Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church
Cooperation of the Baptist World Alliance*

THE REVD. REGINA CLAAS

*Chair of the Commission on Freedom and Justice
of the Baptist World Alliance*

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NOTES

¹ Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, 67-1, Hadith no. 45.

² Translation from *A New Translation* by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

³ Sunan Al-Tirmidhi, Kitab Al-Da'awat, Bab al-Du'a fi Yawm 'Arafah, Hadith no. 3934.

⁴ More than ninety times in the Qur'an, e.g. 3:64; 4:36; 4:116; 5:72; 6:163.

⁵ Al 'Ikhlas 112:1-4.

⁶ Al-Baqara 2:115-17.

⁷ E.g. Sahih Al-Bukhari, Kitab Al-Isti'than, 1; Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Birr 115; Musnad Ibn Hanbal, 2: 244, 251, 315, 323 et al.

⁸ Thomas Helwys, pastor of the first Baptist Church in England, wrote: 'for men's religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure': Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (Amsterdam, 1612), p. 69.

RESPONSE BY THE MENNONITE CHURCH

5th November 2007

To the Muslim Religious Leaders who signed the October 13, 2007 letter “A Common Word between Us and You” addressed to Leaders of Christian churches throughout the world:

As one of the historic peace churches, we in Mennonite Church USA heartily thank the signatories of “A Common Word between Us and You” for recognizing that Christians worship one God and take Jesus’ commands to love God and love our neighbors as central to our lives of faith. We appreciate the affirmation that Muslims and Christians hold important theological and ethical foundations in common, and we welcome the call for sincere dialogue between Christians and Muslims wherever we meet around the world.

We also respect “A Common Word” as a courageous expression of goodwill in the midst of less charitable Muslim voices and in the face of recurrent Christian hostility toward Muslims and misunderstanding of Islam. We repent for our role in perpetrating these unchristian actions and ask your patience and forgiveness

as we grow in understanding you, our Muslim neighbors, and in practicing Christian love with you.

We understand the character of this love to be shaped by the teaching and personal example of Jesus. In addition to loving God and our neighbors, this means that we aim to love even enemies and, like Jesus, we choose against using violence as a response to difference and conflict. We believe that Jesus has modeled for us a life of faithful obedience to God based on love, truth, reconciliation and justice. We seek the same, in response to God's love for all humankind expressed in innumerable acts of salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness and guidance and most fully in Jesus Christ (the Messiah). In sum, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In our faltering attempts to love as the Messiah loved, we thank God for the gift of his Spirit who enables us to live our lives focused on God.

God has given each person the precious gift of choice, even the freedom to believe in God or turn to unbelief. In our Mennonite churches, adult baptism is a sign of the individual's decision to believe in and follow the Messiah. For that reason we baptize only after a person has made a mature decision to believe and to turn away from the ways of the world.

Our life as a church thereby witnesses to society and

RESPONSE BY THE MENNONITE CHURCH

government, that each person has the responsibility and freedom to choose their faith. We believe that in any society, the love of neighbor that you have so eloquently written about includes respect for that person's freedom to believe or not to believe, to choose his or her faith and religion. We would indeed welcome opportunity to talk more with Muslim friends and leaders about the implications of religious freedom for this matter is of profound significance.

With you, we embrace the goal of loving our neighbors, while also recognizing that both Muslims and Christians often fall short of the ideal. We recognize that even today in too many situations Muslims are threatened by Christians, and in other situations, individual Christians or communities of Christians in Muslim regions experience restrictions and sometimes hostility. Let us repent of such actions toward one another and work together to assure the integrity and freedom for both communities, Christian and Muslim.

Many Mennonite Christians have enjoyed friendship with Muslims and cooperated together in a wide range of activities through the years. We in Mennonite Church USA continue to commend such interaction and strongly encourage Christians and Muslims around the world to meet, develop friendships, and cooperate in endeavors

A COMMON WORD

of mutual concern as we discuss and bear witness to the theological and ethical foundations of our faith and life.

We thank those who have issued “A Common Word,” and assure you that we will continue to pray and work for Christian-Muslim understanding, cooperation, and peacemaking.

Sincerely,

JAMES SCHRAG

Executive Director, Mennonite Church USA

RESPONSE FROM ARCHBISHOP YEZNIK
PETROSYAN ON BEHALF OF HIS HOLINESS
KAREKIN II, SUPREME PATRIARCH AND
CATHOLICOS OF ALL ARMENIANS

2nd April 2008

**Press Release of the Mother See
of Holy Etchmiadzin**

In late 2007, 138 Muslim leaders and scholars addressed an open letter entitled “A Common Word between Us and You” to the leaders of traditional Christian Churches throughout the world. His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, was one of the 22 Church heads to whom the letter was addressed.

The Chancellery of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin has released the following letter in reply to the scholars, signed by His Eminence Archbishop Yeznik Petrosian, General Secretary for Inter-Church Relations:

***H.R.H. Prince Dr. Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal
Amman, Jordan***

Beloved brother,

We extend to you the greetings and best wishes of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos

A COMMON WORD

of All Armenians, from the spiritual center of all Armenians—the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin.

The open letter entitled “A Common Word between Us and You”, signed by 138 Muslim scholars and addressed to Christian leaders throughout the world, was received in Holy Etchmiadzin. We welcome the expressions of goodwill from Islam’s religious leaders and scholars, aimed at the promotion of peace and fraternal love among the leaders and faithful of the great monotheistic religions of the world, for the sake of mankind and loyal to the commandments of the one and only True God.

Ties between Armenian Christians and many Muslim nations exist since the 7th century, when in the year 652, Muawiyah I, founder of the Umayyad Dynasty, and Theodoros R’shtouni, ruler of Armenia, signed a mutual agreement, the fourth point of which concerned religious freedom. Less than one century later, the Catholicos of All Armenians, St. John of Odzun met with the Arabian Chief Emir, Omar in 720 and exchanged thoughts on faith, including the Chief Emir’s respectful appreciation of the Christian leader’s homily on a life made worthy by examples of Christian values and virtues.

In our more recent history, the predominantly

RESPONSE BY ARMENIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Muslim countries of the Middle East were the first to receive, shelter, and support the millions of refugees fleeing the Genocide of the Armenians perpetrated by Ottoman Turkey from 1915 to 1923. After the annihilation of 1.5 million of our sons and daughters during the First World War, the remnants of our nation witnessed the caring love and attention of our Arab brothers, which can serve today as the best example of how Christians and Muslims can live together in harmony, support one another in times of hardship, and enjoy the God-given benefits of a peaceful and creative life.

Our Lord Jesus Christ says, “Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God” (St. Matthew 5:9). The Armenian Church therefore blesses and exhorts her faithful children to continue and maintain a spirit of love, friendship and brotherhood, as a means of guaranteeing reconciliation and peace to our world.

Tragically, in spite of dialogue and mutual respect among Armenians and our neighbors, our history has also seen the tragedies, adversities and manifold sufferings resulting from intolerance, lack of understanding, hatred and evil. We have truly witnessed that indeed, God is love; but also that Satan is the one who deceives all.

A COMMON WORD

In the Holy Bible, St. Paul in his letter to the Romans says, “Love works no ill to his neighbor” (Romans 13: 10). Our world today is troubled by violence, war, poverty, acts of terror and countless other calamities. We confirm yet again that these are not the paths that benefit humanity. These are not the virtues that lead to prosperity and security. These are not the visions of nations that wish to live in peace, in happiness and with confidence in the future. We deny and renounce violence and enmity, as our forefathers have done in the past, and our successors shall do so in the future.

We offer thanks and glory to the Almighty in heaven, for the imperatives to establish and reinforce friendship and reconciliation in situations of conflict have triumphed again over hostility in our present times as well. In 1994, through the combined efforts of Catholicos of All Armenians Vasken I of blessed memory, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia His Holiness Alexy II, Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II, and leader of the Muslims of the Caucasus Sheikh Al-Islam Allah-Shakhur Bashazada, a quadrilateral dialogue was commenced, aimed at finding solutions to existing problems in this region utilizing peaceful means and through our love and faith in God. This dialogue continues through our present day.

RESPONSE BY ARMENIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, in his message addressed to politicians and leaders of states and religions, reflected on the words of St. Paul the Apostle, “Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers” (Hebrews 13:1-2), and stated,

“Today, being dispersed all over the world, the children of our nation and Church remain loyal to this commandment, always respecting other traditions and religions, walking on the path of cooperation and good deeds together with other nations. For we believe that where there is love, God dwells there with His blessings and peace.” (September 2006, Astana)

We therefore deem it imperative to begin a true dialogue among the monotheistic religions, the aim of which should be the strengthening of eternal and common human values, the reinforcement of relationships between different faiths, and the protection of all that God has created. We also remain hopeful that this would contribute to better understanding each other, including strengthening mutual respect for one another’s spiritual, national and cultural traditions and heritage. The prevention of violations and exploitations of spiritual and cultural monuments, art, symbols and shrines would be one benefit of such an endeavor.

A COMMON WORD

We constantly pray and remain hopeful for the establishment of peace in the Caucasus and Middle East—the origin of life, the cradle of ancient civilizations and the birthplace of the world's largest monotheistic religions. May God hear our prayers and help our efforts to achieve an atmosphere where dialogue and cooperation will lead to trust and love. We also pray that God's spirit of peace and reconciliation lead all of us, decorating our daily lives with His infinite blessings.

Prayerfully,

ARCHBISHOP YEZNIK PETROSYAN

Secretary for Inter Church Relations

RESPONSE BY FORMER BRITISH PRIME
MINISTER, RT. HON. TONY BLAIR

12th October 2007

Last night Tony Blair, the former prime minister, welcomed the letter. He said: “This is the only way, in the modern world, to make sense of different history and culture, so that, instead of defining ourselves by reference to difference, we learn to recognise the values we share and define a shared future.”

RESPONSE BY HIS HOLINESS
PATRIARCHY ALEXY II OF MOSCOW
AND ALL RUSSIA

14th April 2008

**Response to the open letter
of 138 Muslim Theologians**

I would like to thank all the Muslim religious leaders and scholars who sent an open letter to representatives of Christian Churches and organizations including the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Christians and Muslims have many similar aims, and we can unite our efforts to achieve them. However, this unity will not occur if we fail to clarify our understanding of each other's religious values. In this connection I welcome the desire of the Muslim community to begin a sincere and open dialogue with representatives of Christians churches on a serious scholarly and intellectual level.

Christianity and Islam are engaged today in a very important task in the world. They seek to remind humanity of the existence of God and of the spiritual dimen-

sion present both in man and the world. We bear witness to the interdependence of peace and justice, morality and law, truth and love.

As you rightly put in your letter, Christians and Muslims are drawn together first of all by the commandment of the love of God and the love of one's neighbor. At the same time, I do not think it is worthwhile for us to identify a certain minimum that seems to fix our convergences in faith and to be theologically sufficient for the individual's religious life. Any doctrinal affirmation in Christianity or Islam cannot be viewed in isolation from its unique place in the integral theological system. Otherwise, one's religious identity will be obliterated to give rise to a danger of moving along the path of blending the faiths. It seems to be more fruitful, therefore, to study the integral faith of each side and to compare them.

In Christianity, a discourse about love of God and love of one's neighbor is impossible without a discourse about God. According to the New Testament revelation, God is revealed to human beings as Love. "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8). "And so we know and rely on the love of God has for us, God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and god in him" (1 John 4:16). One cannot help seeing in

this an indication that the Divine nature itself also has love as its most essential, characteristic and important property.

A lonely isolated essence of love can only love itself: self-love is not love. Love always presupposes the existence of the other. Just as an individual cannot be aware of himself as personality but only through communication with other personalities, there cannot be personal being in God but through love of another personal being. This is why the New Testament speaks of God as one Being in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is the unity of three Persons who have the same divine nature, which belongs to each of them in its fullness so that they are not three but one God. God the Trinity is the fullness of love with each hypostatic Person bespeaking love towards the other two hypostatic Persons. The Persons of the Trinity are aware of themselves as “I, and you”: just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21), Christ says to the father. “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you”, Christ says about the Holy Spirit (John 16:114). Therefore, every Hypostasis in the Trinity refers to the other Hypostasis, and, according to St. Maxim the Confessor, it is “eternal movement [of the Trinity] in love”.

It is only through the knowledge of God as love that the individual can come to the true knowledge of His being and His other properties. The love of god, not any other property of Divine nature, is the main principle and the main driving force of the Divine Providence for humanity in the cause of its salvation: “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Christian teaching on the incarnation of God the Word in Jesus Christ is also a natural manifestation of God’s love of human beings. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved god but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

Man created in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), is able to experience Him in himself and, thus, come to know the love that God has for him. God’s love is communicated to human beings to become their inner property, their living force that determines, penetrates and forms their whole lives. Love in man arises in response to God’s love. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1). God expects from man

not so much a slave's devotion as filial feeling of love. Therefore the main prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ has taught Christians to say (Luke 11:2), man appeals to God as his Heavenly Father.

The manifestation of man's true love of God is possible only if man is free. This freedom makes it possible to do good by fulfilling the will of God by choice, not only out of fear or for the sake of reward. The love of God inspires in man the selfless desire to fulfill His commandments. For, according to St Isaac the Syrian, "Because of His great love, God was not pleased to restrict our freedom but was pleased to draw us near Him through the love of our own heart". Therefore, human freedom increases, extends and grows stronger as human beings grow in love of God, which is the core of human religious and moral perfection. Those who love God seek to emulate their Creator in their actions: "Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

My letter does not have the aim of setting forth the entire Christian theology. I only offer an example of reflection on God's love of man and man's love of God, which underlie the whole theological system of Christianity and which cannot be reduced to a few laconic formulations. It is my conviction that Christians and Muslim thinkers would benefit from regular studies of

each other's doctrines in their fullness. In this connection, it seems desirable to develop a doctrine of Christian-Islamic dialogue to broaden academic and research cooperation, to study doctrinal affirmations, to create an in-depth basis for developing multifaceted cooperation between our two religious communities.

The doctrinal dialogue between the Orthodox Church and Islam has considerably intensified recently. This happened not only because we have to communicate more intensively and to build societal life together, but also because Christians and Muslims have come to face the same challenges which are impossible to meet on one's own. We have together encountered a pressure from the anti-religious worldview that claims universally and seeks to subject all the spheres of life in society. We are also witness to attempts to assert a 'new morality' that contradicts the moral norms supported by traditional religions. We should together face these challenges.

Some people among both Christians and Muslims have expressed fears that the development of interreligious dialogue may lead to the religious syncretism, a review of the doctrines and obliterated borders between religious traditions. Time has shown however that a reasonable system of cooperation between religions helps to preserve and emphasize the unique nature and identity

of each of them. Moreover, the development of appropriate forms of interreligious dialogue in itself has proved to be a serious obstacle for manipulations aimed to establish a kind of universal super-religion.

Unfortunately, I have to state that our religions do have enemies who would like to see Christians and Muslims clash, on the one hand, or to bring them to a false 'unity' based on religious and moral indifference, thus giving priority to purely secular concerns, on the other. Therefore we as religious leaders need each other, so that our faithful may preserve their identity in the changing world.

Noteworthy in this connection is the experience of co-existence between Christianity and Islam in Russia. The traditional religions in our country have never come into conflict while preserving their identity for a thousand years. Russia is one of those rare multi-religious and multinational states whose history has not known the religious wars that have plagued various regions of the world.

The basic religious and ethical principles held by the traditional faiths in Russia invariably guided their followers toward cooperation with people of other religions and beliefs in the spirit of peace and harmony. Various religious communities lived side-by-side, working toge-

ther and defending together their common Motherland. Nevertheless, they stood firm in the faith of their forefather, safeguarding it against encroachments from outside and often doing so together in the face of invaders from other countries. To this day, our compatriots have not come into any real conflict between them based on religious grounds. In this way, an affective system of interreligious relations based on mutual respect and good-neighborliness was established in Russia.

In today's Russia, there is an important mechanism for interreligious dialogue, namely, the Interreligious Council in Russia, which has been working fruitfully and successfully for over ten years now. Its example and experience have proved to be attractive for the independent states, which have been formed in the post-Soviet space. Religious leaders in these countries have formed a CIS Interreligious Council. Through these two bodies, together we seek to meet the various challenges of today and to show the whole world a positive experience of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Orthodox Christians and Muslims who have lived in the same society for centuries. As is known, in other Christian countries, too, Muslims have had opportunities for developing their religious life freely.

In many Muslim countries, Christians have enjoyed

invariable support and have the freedom to live according to their own religious rules. But in some Islamic countries, the legislation prohibits the construction of churches, worship services and free Christian preaching. I hope that the letter of Islamic religious leaders and scholars proposing to intensify dialogue between our two religions will contribute to establishing better conditions for Christian minorities in such countries.

Doctrinally our dialogue could deal with such important themes as the teaching of God, man and the world. At the same time, on the practical plane the Christian-Muslim cooperation could be aimed at safeguarding the role of religion in public life, struggling with the defamation of religion, overcoming intolerance and xenophobia, protecting holy places, preserving places of worship and promoting joint peace initiatives.

It is my conviction that it is precisely the Christians and the Muslims who should initiate inter-religious dialogue on regional and global levels. Therefore, in the framework of international organizations, it seems useful to create mechanisms that make it possible to be more sensitive to the spiritual and cultural traditions of various peoples.

Once again I would like to thank all the Muslim scholars and religious leaders for their open letter. I hope for

RESPONSE BY PATRIARCHY ALEXY II

further fruitful cooperation both in theological dialogue and the social sphere.

+ ALEXY

Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia

RESPONSE BY HIS BEATITUDE
CHRISOSTOMOS, ARCHBISHOP OF CYPRUS

10th November 2008

A reply to the open letter of 138 Muslim leaders

Honorable sirs,

By the 13th of October we received and studied carefully your open invitation letter and we sincerely congratulate you for this initiative.

We surely agree that peace between Christians and Muslims contributes to the prevalence of peace all over the World. Of course, our wish is that peace and cooperation among religious communities prevails universally among followers of all religions.

We also agree that the common fundamental values of Christianity and Islam, such as monotheism and love to others, impose common work, to face the big social problems such as violence, war, destruction of the environment, starvation and the violation of human rights. This effort obligates us to develop mutual respect for all sides when theological differences arise but it does

not necessarily compose the beginning or part of a theological dialogue.

It is the main teaching of Christianity that every human is made in the mirror of God and indiscriminately of tribe or religion is the subject of love. Consequently, religious experiences of the others, language, cultural and religious pluralism, are self-evidently respectable during the 13 centuries of coexistence of especially Eastern Christianity with Islam, in a common geographical place.

The long, for centuries, coexistence of Eastern Christianity with Islam has created, among others, a common cultural ground and the study and rise of it is possible to lead to a common effort for peace. We mention indicatively the fields of architecture, music, adoration and monasticism.

We absolutely agree with the necessity of respect of religious differences and of course we disapprove every effort of limitation of religious freedom of Muslims or anyone else who lives in a nation with a majority in Christian population. Of course, the same respect is demanded for Christian minorities in Muslim countries and especially local Churches, which exist in majority Muslim nations.

Particularly we feel the necessity to emphasize that

the Turkish invasion in Cyprus has wounded rudely the mutual respect of religion traditions and freedoms. Lastly, the Turkish side attempts to use religious differences between the members of the two communities in Cyprus, something, which is surely opposite with the meaning of your letter and your initiative.

It is historically proven that relationships between Christians and Muslims in Cyprus, according to 450 years of coexistence, were absolutely harmonious in both levels of people and religious leadership. It is also known that the Republic of Cyprus and the Cypriots kept and still keep friendly connections with all the nations and the people of the Middle East, which are mainly Muslims. Unfortunately, the same can not be said for Turkey, who invaded Cyprus in 1974 and created between others the conditions for deprivation of main religious rights to the members of our Church, spoliation of churches, destruction of religious artifacts, offense of religious symbols, etc. We are hopeful that your initiative will contribute positively to change this unacceptable situation.

We greet again your effort and we are waiting for its materialization with concrete steps and we assure you that we are ready to contribute to its realization.

IV. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What is this document really about?

Simply, it is about Love of God; Love of Neighbor, and an invitation to join hands with Christians on such a basis, for the sake of God and world-peace.

2. Why now?

The world is living in turmoil that threatens to get even worse. We need peace.

3. Is it not it too late?

Better late than never. The various signatories, and other Muslims, have been vocal before, but individually or in small groups. What is new is the successful getting together to speak with one voice, a voice of mainstream Islam.

4. Is the group of signatures representative?

Yes, in that it includes people with different profiles: religious authorities, scholars, intellectuals, media experts, professionals, etc. It also includes people from different schools of mainstream Islam: Sunni (from Salafis to Sufis), Shi'i (Ja'fari, Zaidi, Isma'ili), and Ibadi. It

includes figures from Chad to Uzbekistan, from Indonesia to Mauritania and from Canada to Sudan.

5. How representative can a mere 138 persons be?

Many of the individual signatories guide or influence millions of Muslims and hold positions of religious, social, and political responsibility. The accumulated influence of the signatories is too significant to ignore.

6. The composition of the 138 seems to be really mixed from the prominent to the junior?

Most are very prominent. There is value in a mixture of ages, experiences, and backgrounds. No one profile can single-handedly engage the issues we face today. Jointly, the group is quite effective.

7. Who is the author of this document?

H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad is the author of the document. The document was thoroughly checked and approved by a group of senior *ulema* including Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Sheikh Abd Allah bin Bayyah and Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti and signed by all 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals.

8. What were the mechanics of its production?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Momentum for it started with the Amman Message and its interfaith components. Then the idea was mentioned in summary in the October 2006. ‘Open Letter to the Pope’. The momentum continued to grow through several gatherings and conferences, the last of which was on ‘Love in the Qur’an’. The final draft emerged out of that conference, and the process of signing began. The experience of having worked out a document in union to respond to the Pope made this document easier to achieve.

9. So, is this document really a consensus?

Yes, in the sense that it constitutes a normative ‘*ijma*’ by the ummah’s scholars. This consensus will get stronger and stronger as more people sign it and uphold it. The mechanism for doing so, through the Common Word website, is already in place.

10. Is this a Jordanian government document?

No, it is not. It is a joint document by the ummah’s scholars. Jordan is indeed a welcoming and respected nexus of peace and harmony, which makes it an ideal place of consensus-building. Jordan's King Abdullah II has indeed been extremely supportive, and this would not have been possible without his help.

11. Is this a document of the Royal Al al-Bayt Academy?

Yes, but only in so far as that Academy includes 100 scholars who offered a core base of signatories and supporters that could be expanded, and helped in the networking needed for achieving the document.

12. How will the gains made in consensus building and peace making be safeguarded against erosion and dispersal?

Plans are already underway for the institution-building for supporting the networking that made this achievement possible through a dedicated think-tank called the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center (RISSC).

13. Why are certain Eastern Patriarchs not addressed? Why are many Protestant Churches not mentioned?

The Eastern Patriarchs who are not mentioned (e.g. the Melkite, Maronite and Chaldaean Patriarchs all recognize the Primacy of the Pope and are in Communion with the Catholic Church: they are therefore addressed through the person of the Pope. The mainline Protestant churches are mentioned, but since there are over 30,000

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

churches nowadays, it was evidently easier to address everyone with the phrase ‘Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere’. Thus everyone is indeed included.

14. Why is it that Jews are not addressed?

Jewish scriptures are invoked repeatedly and respectfully in the document by way of preparing the ground for a further document specifically addressed to Jewish scholars. It is quite normal for documents to be bilateral without implying the exclusion of others. Moreover, this is a theological document and the problems between Jews and Muslims are essentially political not theological.

15. Why is it not addressed to people of other faiths, for example Hindus and Buddhists?

It makes sense to start with the two biggest, most intertwined and yet most conflicting religions in the world and try to help there first. More documents will be forthcoming, God Willing.

16. Are you deliberately excluding secularists and non-believers?

Muslims are concerned about all of humanity, but again it makes sense to start here first.

17. What if no one pays attention to this? What if it is simply ignored?

Muslims will have to keep trying to get through. That is a religious duty for all Muslims to wish the best for humanity, no matter what the response is like. That is part of Love of the Neighbor, precisely.

18. What if the response is negative?

Muslims should still strive to respond with more gentleness, compassion, and love. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches to ward off bad with good.

19. Should you not fix your own problems first and stop your inner fighting before you address others?

The basis of inner-healing and reconciliation has already started with the Amman Message and the historical consensus on its ‘3 Points’ (*see*: www.ammanmessage.com). The two tasks are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, sometimes addressing others unites Muslim hearts in ways that can be healing to our own inner wounds. Only God’s compassion can unite people. The more compassion Muslims show others, the more inner compassion they will have.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

20. Why do you think a document between religions is so important? Religions always fought each other, but the world still spun on its axis.

Religion is too important a factor in human history and life to ignore. It has tremendous energies that can have positive or negative consequences. It is very important to unite positive religious energies for the good of humanity.

21. Your stark warning about the future of the world is so exaggerated. Do you not think that you have overdone it?

No, not if you consider that we jointly constitute half of humanity and consider the amount of weaponry combined with huge misunderstandings and mutual-stereotyping.

22. Is your reference to the danger to world peace a disguised threat?

No, it is a compassionate plea for peace. Anyone who claims that it is a threat cannot have read the document properly.

23. What use is this if terrorists are not going to heed your words?

A COMMON WORD

God Willing, this will influence young people, and will create an atmosphere in which hatred is less likely to thrive. There is no quick fix to problems, and a patient wholesome discourse is very much needed as a foundation for a better future.

24. Why is it that the document doesn't address real issues like violence, religious freedom, women's issues, democracy, etc ... ?

This document is a first step, but one that strives to lay a solid foundation for the construction of many worthy edifices. The document can not be expected to do everything at once. Moreover, many of these issues were already addressed in the Amman Message (*see*: www.amman-message.com).

25. Is this document just another form of propaganda?

If you mean by that witnessing and proclaiming one's faith with compassion and gentleness, then yes. If you mean forcing one's views on others, then no.

26. How will you follow up on this?
Stay tuned and find out!

والحمد لله رب العالمين

And praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds



ENGLISH SERIES - BOOK 4
ISBN 978-9957-428-30-3