

Introducing A Common Word Between Us and You

Presented at the Inaugural A Common Word Conference of *Companions in Dialogue*

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On October 13th 2006, one month to the day after Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address of September 13th 2006, 38 Islamic authorities and scholars from around the world, representing all denominations and schools of thought, joined together to deliver an answer to the Pope in the spirit of open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding. In their open letter, the Muslim Scholars started it as follows:

Your Holiness,

With regards to your lecture at the University of Regensburg in Germany on September 12th, 2006, we thought it appropriate, in the spirit of open exchange, to address your use of a debate between the Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a "learned Persian" as the starting point for a discourse on the relationship between reason and faith. While we applaud your efforts to oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life, we must point out some errors in the way you mentioned Islam as a counterpoint to the proper use of reason, as well as some mistakes in the assertions you put forward in support of your argument.

Exactly one year after that letter, on October 13th 2007, on the day of Islam's major religious celebration - 'Eid ul-fitr - Muslims expanded their message. In *A Common Word Between Us and You*, 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals have unanimously come together for the first time since the days of the Prophet to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam. Like the *Open Letter*, the signatories to this message come from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Every major Islamic country or region in the world is represented in this message, which is addressed to the leaders of all the world's churches, and indeed to all Christians everywhere.

The final form of the letter was presented at a conference in September 2007 held under the theme of “Love in the Quran,” by the *Royal Academy of The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, under the Patronage of H.M. King Abdullah II. Indeed, the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, and the best basis for future dialogue and understanding, is the love of God and the love of the neighbor.

Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.¹

I am in a privileged position to know about this single most important initiative in calling for inter-religious harmony, because it was initiated by one of my Teachers and mentor, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf of Zaytuna Institute based in Berkeley, California. I would like to acknowledge him and pray to God Almighty for his good health and prosperity, for he is, in our time a shining star and a Renewer of Faith for humanity. The document is a benchmark for the modern world in setting the highest standards for inter-religious relations that can and should be expanded and adopted to include faiths other than Islam and Christianity.

And this process has already begun. The second meeting of the Chief Rabbis of Israel and the Archbishop of Canterbury took place in Jerusalem on 31st October 2007 according to the provisions of the Joint Declaration signed by them on 5th September 2006/12th Elul 5766. It read:

... we noted the recent letter from Muslim scholars and religious leaders to the Christian Churches. The 'Common Word', though addressed to Christian Churches, also makes clear its respect for Hebrew scripture in citing directly from the Book of Deuteronomy and in acknowledging the inspiration that this provided for their understanding of the Qur'anic teachings on the unity and love of God and of neighbour. In promoting these values we

¹ The few paragraphs above is excerpted from the official website of A Common word, at <http://acommonword.com>

commit ourselves and encourage all religious leaders to ensure that no materials are disseminated by our communities that work against this vision.²

This initiative of Muslim Scholars led to the first Catholic-Muslim forum in November 2008 in Rome, where the many Muslim Scholars who had worked hard to bring reason to uphold faith, met with his holiness Pope Benedict.

In his speech, Pope Benedict said:

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.³

He concluded by saying:

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.⁴

² Ibid.

³ <http://acommonword.com/en/conferences/20-rome-november-2008/105-address-of-his-holiness-benedict-xvi-to-participants-in-the-seminar-organized-by-the-qatholic-muslim-forumq.html>

⁴ Ibid.

The “A Common Word” initiative of the Muslim Scholars is based explicitly and directly on the Qur’anic Guidance:

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).⁵

Finally, it is apt to conclude with the Common Words of Christianity and Islam that is the benchmark of the “A Common Word” initiative – the necessity of total love of God and the necessity to love one’s neighbor:

For Islam, the Qur’an states, on the necessity of total love of God:

So invoke the Name of your Lord and devote yourself to Him with a complete devotion.⁶

It might be important to highlight that the word used to describe “devotion of love” (*tabteel*) in this verse, is the very same word used in Islamic language of Arabic to refer to Mary, Mother of Jesus, peace of God be upon them both.

Of the necessity of love for the neighbour, the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing of God be upon him, said:

“None of you has true faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.”⁷

⁵ Qur’an [3:64]

⁶ Qur’an [73:8]

⁷ Prophetic Tradition- *Saheeh Muslim*

For Christianity, Jesus, son of Mary states:

*"... The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and 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.' "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*⁸

Companions in Dialogue is an association of women and men of different religions and cultural traditions committed to principles of respect and compassion as echoed in *A Common Word Between Us and You*. The introduction of this document to the wider Australian society through this conference and various other activities of Companions in Dialogue is an important and further step towards advocacy for a common voice for inter-religious harmony in Australia.

⁸ New Testament- Gospel of Mark [12:28-31]