

REACHING FOR THE RESET BUTTON FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Recent Developments in the Common Word Process

Introduction

The open letter “A Common Word Between Us and You,” signed by 138 Muslim leaders and addressed to the pope and a range of other senior church leaders was published on Eid al Fitr, on 13 October 2007. Within the first year of its publication a large number of Christian leaders responded in the form of other open letters and statements to this call for dialogue, and a number of high level conferences were called. The document came at a time of severely strained relations between Muslims and Christians and must be seen as an attempt by Muslim leaders to press the “reset button”—to find a new starting point for Muslim-Christian relations. Now, several years later, the continuing significance of the Common Word process depends on its ability to speak to the imagination of ordinary Muslims and Christians and influence how they see each other.

Early 2011 saw the publication of the latest booklet dedicated to the Common Word process, *A Common Word: Text and Reflections. A Resource for Parishes and Mosques* (Demiri 2011), whose subtitle suggests that the document ought to be studied by ordinary Muslims and Christians. At the same time, the first “World Interfaith Harmony Week” was celebrated across the globe, having been established through a UN General Assembly resolution proposed by those behind “A Common Word.” The same group also produced an initiative to deepen Muslim-Buddhist relations: the “Common Ground initiative.”

In this article I will assess these recent developments within the broadly defined Common Word process against the background of a presentation of the original document itself and some of the responses that have come from the churches.

A Common Word Between Us and You

Many who have commented on “A Common Word” have used the word “timely,” and part of the reason for the considerable interest with which “A Common Word” was met is clearly linked to the current state of Muslim-Christian

relations. I will return to this later. But there are at least two important features of the letter itself that have caused interest and set this initiative apart from other contemporary dialogue initiatives: first, the broad and varied support in the Muslim world for the letter and, second, the novel proposition the signatories make about what Muslims and Christians share in the realm of ethics and theology.

The 138 signatories include some of the world's most senior Muslim leaders from all major Muslim traditions. On the list are Sunnis and Shias; they are grand muftis, ayatollahs, royal individuals, respected scholars and Sufi sheikhs, and we find representatives from all continents. After its first publication, the list of signatories was opened to other leading Muslim representatives, and the number soon reached 300.¹

The main proposition in "A Common Word" was seen to be novel, by its authors as well as by many recipients and commentators. Using extensive quotations from the Qur'an, *Hadiths*, and the Bible, the letter argues that love for God and love for neighbour form a "common ground" for Christians and Muslims. Underlying this argument, and animating the discussions both in the document and in the process of response letters and conferences that ensued, are questions of grave concern to religious and political leaders alike: What is the proper role of religion in the world today? How do religions relate to secularisation and secularism? What room is there for reason in religious traditions? To what extent are religions forces for conflict and for peace?

Origin and Outline

"A Common Word Between Us and You" originated in Jordan at the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and appears to have been written mainly by the institute's chairperson, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammed. A group of senior *ulama*, including Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa (Egypt), Sheikh Abd Allah bin Bayyah (Mauritania), Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti (Syria), Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić (Bosnia), Habib Umar bin Hafith (Yemen), and Abdel Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter) (UK), checked and approved the work (Volf, Muhammad, and Yarrington 2010: 172). Their external motivation is given in the opening paragraph:

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. (2)

¹ A list of original and later signatories together with much other information is available on the initiative's official website www.acommonword.com.

Their motivation from within Islamic theology is their stated conviction that the Qur'anic injunction to show complete devotion to God (e.g., Al-Muzzammil, 73:8), together with *Hadiths* such as "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself"² is a direct parallel to Jesus' commandments to love God and to love one's neighbour as oneself (for example, Mark 12:29-31) (2).³

The letter is structured so as to support the main contention that love of God and love of neighbour are "founding principles of both faiths" (2) and to invite a dialogue on this basis. The first main section (4-8) deals with "Love of God in Islam" followed by a section on "Love of God as the *First and Greatest Commandment* in the Bible" (8-10; emphasis in original). A parallel, but shorter structure follows in "Love of the Neighbour in Islam" (11) and "Love of the Neighbour in the Bible" (11-12). The last section, "Come to a Common Word between Us and You," contains a discussion of the issues raised in the previous sections and a more explicit invitation to dialogue and to living peacefully together: "Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works" (16). Throughout the letter, quotes from the Qur'an, *Hadiths* and the Bible make up substantial parts, and much of the text gives interpretations of these passages.

The discussion in the letter is clearly theological. For Christian-Muslim dialogue, two themes in the letter stand out: the unity of God and the nature and meaning of love. The text starts with the core teaching of Islam, with the *Shahadah* (the confession of faith): "There is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God." This is followed by a discussion of the words "There is no god but God. He Alone, He hath no associate ..." (4), which, according to the text, "remind Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls ..." (4). There is no reference to Christian understandings of the trinity and unity of God.

The claim that the *tawhid* principle leads to love for God illustrates how the issue of love is brought into the discussion. One strategy appears to be to interpret a variety of words from the Qur'an and *Hadiths* as commands to love, although the word "love" appears infrequently in these scriptures. Thus, devotion, gratefulness, and praise directed to God are all expressions of love for God, and generosity and self-sacrifice are expressions of love for neighbour.

² In endnote xix in "A Common Word," the reference for this *Hadith* is given as "Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman 67-1, Hadith no. 45." Leirvik (2010) discusses this particular *Hadith* and its versions and use in "A Common Word" in detail and refers to another numbering of the *Hadiths* in question.

³ Numbers in brackets refer to page numbers of the text in question.

Ghazi bin Muhammed commented on this aspect of “A Common Word” at a conference in 2008:

Indeed, the Holy Qur’an uses over fifty near-synonyms for love; English does not have the same linguistic riches and connotations.... Our use of the language of love in “A Common Word” is simply, then, a recognition that human beings have the same souls everywhere, however pure or corrupted, and thus that the experience of love must have something in common everywhere. (Volf, Muhammed, and Yarrington 2010: 12)

While recognising that Islam and Christianity “are obviously different religions,” the concern of the document is to identify “common ground.” Two strategies to establish commonality between Islam and Christianity are employed, one traditional and one novel. The idea that Christians and Jews are “people of the book” (*Ahl al-Kitab*) whose religion is closer to the truth than other faiths is well established within Muslim tradition and has been the basis for granting certain privileges to these groups.⁴ The discussion in “A Common Word” on the nature of God exemplifies this traditional interpretative strategy: the authors highlight elements in Christian tradition that are deemed to show sufficient correspondence with the teaching of Islam. Here Islam itself is the starting point. The discussion of love, however, exemplifies a more novel interpretative strategy that somehow moves in the opposite direction: the authors take elements that are central in Christian tradition and find correspondences in Islam. The basic argument of “A Common Word” is built around the twin commandment traditionally more central in Christian than in Muslim teaching. The extensive use of biblical quotes appears to be part of the same new strategy for reflection on how Islam relates to Christianity.

The stated aim of the document is to contribute to “meaningful peace in the world” (2), but “A Common Word” does not refer to the historical context or the current political situation. This can be read as an attempt to shift the focus of dialogue from concrete issues of the day (or the immediate past) in order to establish together a common ground from which these concrete issues can be discussed and understood better. With this reading, “A Common Word” is an intentional break with the past. The reset function of the document becomes clearer when we look at its immediate background.

“A Common Word” is a direct follow-up to the “Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI” published exactly one year earlier, on 12 October 2006, and originally signed by 38 Muslim leaders and scholars. In that letter, the authors, also associated with the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute, discuss in a scholarly fashion some

⁴ Interestingly, Muhammad Hashim Kamali introduces the notion of *Ahl al-Kitab* is introduced into a discussion on Muslim-Buddhist relations where the question is if Buddhists can be seen as “people of the book” in another document originating at the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan (Shah-Kazemi 2010: xix)

of the content of the pope's lecture in Regensburg on 12 September 2006. In that lecture, "Glaube, Vernunft und Universität: Erinnerungen und Reflexionen" the pope had used language and examples that many Muslims found offensive. The quote-within-a-quote of Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad had only brought violence received the most attention. Also problematic was the apparent suggestion that Islam lacked a rationality that is present in Christianity. The authors of the "Open Letter" had, with good reason, seen their letter as extending a hand in response to what many Muslims had interpreted as a blow. But the reply (or absence of such) from the Vatican caused new disappointment (Volf, Muhammad, and Yarrington 2010: 8). At the time of "A Common Word," relations between Muslim leaders and the Vatican were at a low point. The same could be said for the relationship of Islam with wider (Western) Christianity, also with reference to, *inter alia*, the cartoon crisis in early 2006 and the controversy in Germany following the publication of a new policy statement by the German Protestant Churches (EKD) on their relationship with Islam, *Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft*, which took a more critical view of Islam than had been the tendency for some time.

A wider textual context for "A Common Word" includes the pope's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, signed on 25 December 2005, and the 2006 "Amman Message" on intra-Muslim relations. The wider political context of strained relations between Muslims and Christians in Europe and America, as well as in other parts of the world, needs no further elaboration here.

Early Responses

The months following the publication of "A Common Word" saw numerous responses from Christian leaders, church bodies, and commentators. Although the majority of the addressees listed in "A Common Word" are leaders in the Orthodox churches, many with their bases in or close to western Asia, the greater number of substantial responses and comments to "A Common Word" came from Europe and North America.

On 18 November 2007, readers of *The New York Times* could read a full page advertisement called "Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You." The text originated at Yale Divinity School's Center for Faith and Culture. By the time of its publication, around 300 Christian leaders and scholars had already endorsed it. The document was highly significant for two distinct reasons and may well have been decisive for the further interest in and life for "A Common Word" itself. First, the four authors of "Loving God and Neighbor Together," among whom Miroslav Volf appears to have been the driving force, succeeded in securing support not only from church leaders who were traditionally well disposed towards interreligious dialogue but also from broad sections of the evangelical

community that were less inclined towards such activities. Second, the loud and clear welcoming of “A Common Word,” underlining its timeliness and interpreting it as “a Muslim hand of conviviality extended to Christians worldwide” sent a clear message to the public as well as to other Christian and Muslim leaders that the Muslim letter was to be taken seriously and on face value.

Other Christian responses followed, the more substantial of which include those of Orthodox leaders Aram I and Patriarch Alexy II and, not least, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’ 17-page “A Common Word for the Common Good,” which was the fruit of international ecumenical consultations. A series of conferences also followed, often at the intersection of church and university such as at Yale, Cambridge, and Georgetown, as well as at the Vatican at what was called the “Catholic-Muslim Forum.” This brought the Roman Catholic Church into the process without any substantial formal written reply by that church. The World Council of Churches did not produce a formal response but sent a document from a working group of scholars and experts, “Learning to Explore Love Together” to member churches to aid each church’s work with “A Common Word.”⁵

The overall tendency of church statements on “A Common Word” is to follow the line of the Yale response: they find “A Common Word” to be a timely initiative, recognise its good intention, and generally affirm its main message of the potential to find common ground between Christianity and Islam. They also display an almost unanimous will to search for more concrete ways of moving forward in dialogue, to move “from words to action,” and to facilitate concrete encounters between Christians and Muslims. Several church statements seize on the reference in “A Common Word” to freedom of religion and express a wish to explore this further, also as regards the situation of Christians in Muslim majority countries.

While official church responses as well as comments from political leaders to “A Common Word” have been overwhelmingly positive, the blogosphere has been the arena for guarded, negative, or hostile responses. Bloggers offer “the truth about “A Common Word” and highlight passages they claim assert Muslim superiority over Christians. Some focus on the choice of passages from the

⁵ Haddad and Smith 2009 gives an overview of documents and conferences that followed from “A Common Word” the first year after its publication. Amos 2009 gives an introduction to the context and content of Archbishop Rowan Williams’ response. Volf, Muhammad, and Yarrington 2010 is the first book dedicated to “A Common Word” and contains material from the conference held at Yale in July 2008 at which Ghazi bin Muhammad and Miroslav Volf played a prominent role, while El-Ansary and Linnan 2010 provide material with new perspectives from a conference at South Carolina University in March 2009.

Qur'an and seek to place conciliatory statements from the Qur'an "in context," which means drawing attention to other Qur'anic texts that seem to give another message. One such example is a blog that was established two days after the publication of "A Common Word" and had regular new postings throughout the following year. The purpose of the blog, according to the author, who is identified only by his/her pseudonym "Dajjal," is "to alert Western Civilization to the imminent danger posed by Islam by dissection & analysis of the demonic letter [A Common Word Between Us and You]" (<http://totheulama.wordpress.com/about/>). According to the blog's own statistics, 7500 people had accessed the site by May 2011, presumably most of them in 2007 and 2008, when it was updated regularly.

The website "The Investigative Project on Terrorism" also, in a post on 15 October 2007, seizes on the Qur'anic verse that gave "A Common Word" its title: Aal 'Imran 3:64. After a discussion of various English renderings of these words and extensive quotes from the same *sura*, the author concludes:

In full context, it is clear that this section of the Quran, including 3:64, is a condemnation of Christianity and Judaism and a call for conversion. Why would this verse be included in a call for peace and understanding between Islam and Christianity? The authors and signatories of this letter are among the most learned scholars of Islam in the world. They know the context of 3:64 and its true message, which is exactly why they included it. This letter is not a call for peace. It is a call for conversion.

The author sees a conspiracy behind "A Common Word":

Some of these Muslim scholars may have indeed had good intentions in writing and signing this letter, but they understood the context of this verse and—more importantly—they understood that the recipients of this letter would not.

The article on the website concludes: "Common ground is a noble idea. Why can't it be pursued honestly?"

While some comments seem to build on fear of violent Islam, others are primarily concerned with protecting what they understand to be traditional (often evangelical) Christian faith. In a long article highly critical of those evangelical leaders who signed the Yale response, the website "Let Us Reason Ministries" links "A Common Word" to syncretism, a widespread fear among some of those skeptical about dialogue:

In *A Common Word Between Us and You*, it is hoped that this document will provide a common constitution for the many worthy organizations and individuals who are carrying out interfaith dialogue all over the world. The emphasis is on not only dialogue but an eventual uniting together.

A detailed analysis of the blogosphere goes far beyond the scope of this article. But it deserves much closer scholarly scrutiny with regard to its content, its representativity, and its ability to form public opinion. While many blogs are patently anti-Muslim, others may represent a necessary corrective or a channel

for alternative viewpoints to the official line of political authorities and church bodies. In the case of responses to “A Common Word,” the overarching and laudable aim of promoting peaceful Christian-Muslim relations may lead responsible leaders to focus less on problematic or questionable elements in the Muslim initiative than a disinterested reading might otherwise have done.

The response from the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) thus stands out among official church responses for its more confrontational tone. The document “We Too Want to Live in Peace, Freedom and Justice” issued on 2 April 2008 is emphatic about the need for peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians and appreciates the will expressed in “A Common Word” to achieve the same end. But the WEA’s reading of the text of the open letter is more critical:

In your opening summary, you commence with what is obviously a “call to Christians” to become Muslims by worshipping God without ascribing to him a partner. May we, in return, invite you to put your faith in God, who forgives our opposition to him and sin through what his son Jesus Christ did for us at the cross? (p.2)

The letter lists seven points that characterise the Christian understanding of love and ends with three concerns. First, they point to the importance of distinguishing between Christianity and “the Western world” as the authors are often “grieved by the immorality that we see in the Western world.” Second, they quote the statement of “A Common Word” that Islam is not against Christianity “so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes ...” and ask what realities this line might refer to. Third, they take up the absence of freedom of religion for many Christians in Muslim-majority environments.

The WEA response is worth noting for two distinct reasons: the organisation claims to represent several hundred million evangelical Christians around the globe, a constituency that to a certain extent is also speaking through the very different Yale response. Second, while the World Evangelical Alliance also expresses their wish for improved relations between the religions, their interpretative strategy differs from that of most other church bodies. Whereas Yale, Williams, and several others make an effort to offer interpretations that harmonise “A Common Word” with their own thinking, WEA applies a hermeneutic of suspicion. The example given above concerning ascribing a partner to God is illustrative: where Rowan Williams sees a starting point for common exploration, “[I]t is important to state unequivocally that the association of any other being with God is expressly rejected by the Christian theological tradition ...” (Williams 2008: 1), WEA sees a call for Christians to abandon the doctrine of the trinity. Soon after the WEA letter, the organisation’s European chapter, the European Evangelical Alliance, issued another letter, “Beyond Polite Dialogue,” to its members in which they defend the Yale response and as-

sure Christians that those who signed Yale's "Loving God and Neighbor Together" stood on firm evangelical ground.

New Developments

"A Common Word Between Us and You" speaks about "meaningful peace" to a world where tensions between Muslim and Christian communities seem to be on the increase. But it is also a world where these issues are being addressed through a number of interreligious dialogue initiatives. In recent years, the Alliance of Civilizations, started on the initiative of the Spanish and Turkish governments and linked to the UN system, has promoted meetings and dialogue between representatives of Muslim and Christian communities. The World Public Forum Dialogue of Civilizations headquartered in Vienna with a strong Russian link shares some of the same aims. Soon after the publication of "A Common Word," Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and the Spanish king sponsored a dialogue conference in Madrid in July 2008. In addition, there is the well-established multilateral organisation Religions for Peace together with numerous regional or more ad hoc dialogue initiatives operating within the same sphere.

Each initiative has its own distinct features. What appears to be special with the Common Word process is that it is driven by religious leaders rather than by political authorities and that it addresses theological questions in unapologetically religious language. This could be its strength: in matters concerning how they should meet people of another faith, ordinary Muslims and Christians may be more inclined to listen to their religious leaders and be swayed by arguments from within their traditions than to listen to the wishes of political leaders expressed in more general terms.

Hugh Goddard suggests that research on Christian-Muslim relations in the future would benefit from a cross-fertilisation of insights from textual studies and community-focused research (Goddard 2000: 209). "A Common Word" clearly illustrates this need: not only is this "dialogue process" to a large degree a textual process, but the original document as well as many of the responses engage primarily with texts from the two religious traditions. At the same time, the stated objective is to achieve better relations on the community level, among ordinary Muslims and Christians around the world. A challenge—for those involved in the Common Word process and for those who study it—is to find a bridge from text to community or, rather, to understand how texts work in communities and how communities work in, on, and with texts and to draw practical consequences from this understanding.

This is why the latest publication dedicated to "A Common Word" is an interesting development. The booklet, *A Common Word: Texts and Reflections. A Resource for Parishes and Mosques* (Demiri 2011), was published by the Mus-

lim Academic Trust in Cambridge. In the words of the editor, it “seeks to place the *Common Word* in the hands of a wide spectrum of mosque and church communities” (xii).

The book contains the full text of “A Common Word,” including the many notes and the full list of signatories. This text is preceded by an introduction by the editor, Lejla Demiri, and followed by essays by David Burrell and Abdel Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter), both of whom have featured prominently in the process surrounding “A Common Word.” Murad was involved in the drafting process, and Burrell was a contributor at the first “Common Word” conference at Yale in July 2008. Burrell’s essay in the book is an address given to the Catholic Chaplaincy at Cambridge University, and Murad’s essay is his address at the first Catholic-Muslim Forum in Rome in November 2008.

Demiri’s introduction opens with the assertion that “A Common Word” “has become the leading initiative in interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in today’s globalised world” (VII). The summary of the open letter captures its most important points, and the introduction to the process of responses and conferences is informative and up-to-date. Thus a reader who is unacquainted with “A Common Word” will get the necessary background for understanding the document better.

Burrell’s essay “Christians and Muslims Breathe a New Spirit” interestingly uses Pope Benedict’s Regensburg lecture as a starting point. Conceding that the pope at best “made a gaffe” (52) Burrell seeks to explore the pope’s concern about religion and reason. His discussion revolves around a distinction between “meaning” and “truth” and a perceived tension between “dialogue” and “proclamation.” Burrell suggests that reasoned exploration of faith—i.e. theology—can and must also develop through interreligious encounters. The doctrine of the trinity, which—as I have shown above—is a difficult issue in “A Common Word,” is one example where Christian theology benefits from discussion with Islam: “The fact remains that our faith is indeed ‘trinitarian’ while theirs is not, yet the process of dialogue will have brought us to a better articulation of our respective understandings of *trinity* and of *unity* in God” (58; emphasis his).

Murad’s essay “Human Dignity and Mutual Respect” also explores the theme of religion and reason but starts from another angle. He sees a crisis following from “a postmodern relativism of the most virulent kind” that is affecting Europe (66). The decline of Christian faith in Britain is also a challenge to Muslims because “in fact what is dying is a set of monotheistic convictions and a life of prayer and human giving that as Muslims we wish to see thrive around us” (67). His own involvement with “A Common Word” arises from this analysis: “This sense of loss motivates my own particular commitment to the *Common Word* process” (67). The hope Murad finds in “A Common Word”

is its establishment of a common ground of love based on the teaching and reasoned reflection within both traditions: "Our mutual respect can be based on the practice of shared rational confrontation of Europe's disease" (69). Towards the end of his essay, Murad looks beyond the European scene and addresses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other conflicts such as Darfur and the Great Lakes region of Africa. He also highlights natural disasters, environmental challenges, hunger, and poverty as issues on which Muslims and Christians ought to work together.

As essays on the Common Word process, Burrell's and Murad's reflections are worth reading. The question, however, is why they have been chosen as reading for people in local congregations who want to engage "A Common Word." One is also left wondering if the intended readership will appreciate the essays that, after all, have a distinct scholarly air and if the essays address the themes within "A Common Word" that are of greatest significance for life in parishes and mosques. I am forced to conclude that, for "A Common Word" to become a topic of discussion in parishes and mosques or any local congregation, higher quality study material adapted to their needs is required.

A very different initiative that aims at bringing the message of "A Common Word" to ordinary people was the successful bid to make a unanimous UN General Assembly adopt, on 20 October 2011, a resolution that makes the first week of February the annual "World Interfaith Harmony Week."⁶ The resolution, introduced by Jordan and written by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammed, contains an explicit reference to "A Common Word" and encourages all states to support "interfaith harmony ... based on love of God and love of one's neighbour or on love of the good and love of one's neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions." Thus the core message of "A Common Word" is universalised by providing an opening for the substitution of "love of the good" for "love of God."

Although Prince Ghazi seems to be the architect behind the World Interfaith Harmony Week, he has offered reflections in another context that may question this universalising approach. In 2010 the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute initiated yet another interreligious initiative, the Common Ground project, to promote harmony and understanding between Muslims and Buddhists. A 170-page book entitled *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Shah-Kazemi 2010) with introductions by the Dalai Lama, Prince Ghazi, and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, explores the ground on which Buddhists and Muslims can start dialogue. Unlike in the case of "A Common Word," the initiators did not invite endorsements before publication. But it is quite possible that it will

⁶ The resolution is available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/65/L.5 (accessed 24 May 2011).

prove to be a valuable resource in an area of bilateral interreligious exploration that has received far less attention than dialogues involving Christians.

In explaining why the starting point in Muslim-Buddhist dialogue must be different from that of “A Common Word,” Prince Ghazi explains in his introduction:

[W]ithout the First “Golden” Commandment [“Love thy God”], the Second Commandment on its own [“Love thy neighbour”] inherently risks being spiritually devoid of truth, and thus risks descending into a superficial sentimentalism without true virtue and goodness; it risks being a secular ethic taking its stance on moods which we can conjure up to ourselves on occasion, requiring nothing from the soul, risking nothing, changing nothing, deceiving all. (Kazemi 2010: xi)

The catchphrase for the World Interfaith Harmony Week may be laudable in its intention to engage people of every religion as well as those who do not belong to a religion. But, for exactly the reasons Prince Ghazi gives, detached from concrete living traditions, it does not appear as much more than a platitude. In other words, the potential of the World Interfaith Harmony Week is linked more to the appeal of doing things simultaneously—and thus creating a notion of doing it together—rather than in providing new insights into how religions interrelate.

By February 2011 the initiators of the UN resolution had established a website (www.worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com) and a Facebook profile that share information on the background of the week, numerous support letters from political and religious dignitaries, and information on a considerable number of local celebrations of the week organised by individual groups around the world.

The Way from Here

Commenting on “A Common Word” a few days after its publication, John Esposito remarked that the common question “Where are the moderate Muslim voices?” had received a crystal clear answer in the document. Prince Ghazi too recognises that Muslims with other messages may often be more visible: “The fundamentalists are better organized, more experienced, better coordinated, and more motivated. They have more stratagems, more institutes, more people, more money, more power, more influence” (Volf, Muhammad, and Yarrington 2010: 6). As I have shown, the Muslim leaders who endorsed “A Common Word” have now received a wide hearing as well. Others, however, may raise another question: Are those who engage with “A Common Word”—Muslims and Christians—not simply those regularly involved in dialogue who push liberal agendas? My overview suggests that this is not the case.

Although several of the signatories of “A Common Word” are well known from the international dialogue scene, this is not the case for the majority. The same goes for the Christian side: many of the immediate responses were from

scholars and church leaders well acquainted with interreligious dialogue, but mainstream leaders soon followed. The Yale initiative gathered support from many evangelicals whose experience with Muslim-Christian dialogue is limited, and the ambiguous responses from within the World Evangelical Alliance may suggest that intrareligious processes were set in motion. Even the fact that the World Council of Churches decided not to seek a consensus position may indicate that the member churches have engaged seriously with the issues and have not taken “A Common Word Between Us and You” lightly.

Does the Common Word process push liberal agendas? An overview suggests, rather, that those involved may have many different agendas. Cooperation is a common denominator. Many want to cooperate to promote peace and harmony but are less concrete about how to achieve it. Rowan Williams follows up on the references to poverty and justice contained in “A Common Word” and suggests, for example, that Christians and Muslims cooperate to promote the UN Millennium Development Goals. The Yale response, followed by many others, suggests that religious freedom be pursued further, an issue that is often introduced into Christian-Muslim dialogue by evangelicals and Roman Catholics alike. Others, such as Murad and Patriarch Alexy II, see potential for interreligious alliance building to counter what they understand to be aggressive secular agendas.⁷

The recent rather diverse developments within the broadly defined Common Word process—the booklet attempting to offer resources to parishes and mosques, the adoption of the resolution to introduce the World Interfaith Harmony Week, and the launch of the Common Ground initiative to further Muslim-Buddhist dialogue—suggest that “A Common Word” may still have traction while attention is shifting from formal responses by Christian leaders to practical responses in communities of Christians and Muslims. This move, which highlights the need to work both with textual and community approaches, is perhaps also captured by some of the central terminology of the Common Word process. The original document, and therefore references to the process that followed, used the term “common word” in the title (with a reference to a quote from the Qur’an), but the term “common ground” appears to be more central in the argument in the original document as well as in the ensuing dialogue process. While the former leads our thoughts to texts, historical and current, the latter may point rather towards the space where communities constantly negotiate their living together.⁸

⁷ Patriarch Alexy II died later in 2008, but his attitude is shared by his successor Patriarch Kirill who, as Chairman for the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate at the time of the publication of “A Common Word,” had a central position in advising Alexy II on these issues.

⁸ Paul L. Heck (2009), taking his cue from “A Common Word,” explores concrete

For the Common Word process to move on, I suggest that three issues must be addressed by those involved. First, there is a need to devise ways of actually engaging local congregations of various sorts and to provide them with material that can make “A Common Word” as well as key Christian responses suitable for study groups and useful for those who prepare sermons. The general media does not give attention to this kind of work, so information must be disseminated through the faith communities themselves in ways that speak to the imagination of ordinary believers. Second, those involved must get a better grip on what it actually means to “move from words to action,” which they so often call for in the process. Action always takes place in concrete contexts, involving concrete communities. Modest local projects, of the kind that get attention through the World Interfaith Harmony Week, may have a greater chance of reaching the aims than grand schemes that seldom materialise. Third, the common ground that dialogue partners appear to identify must be used to address the difficult questions as well. “A Common Word” and many of the Christian responses are often harmonising in their approach. Having established a level of trust—having found the reset button for Muslim-Christian relations—Christians and Muslims must take the risk involved in actually realising the words of “A Common Word” that their relations should be “not simply [be] a matter of polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders” (“A Common Word,” 2007: 15).

Last, but not least, like so many other things concerning Muslim-Christian relations, a lot depends on where current developments in western Asia may lead. Despite the broad support, also geographically, for “A Common Word,” the driving force has been closely linked to the Jordanian government. If this situation were to change, “A Common Word” is not doomed to fail, but the responsibility for all others involved in the process to bring it forward would be even greater than it already is.

LITERATURE

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