

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 text of *A Common Word Between Us and You* appears at www.acommonword.com.

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 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. Events will be posted at www.yale.edu/faith, where readers can also view the complete list of signatories as well as add their names to the list.

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 of 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.

“Peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century...”

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 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.

***Harold W. Attridge**, Dean and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament, Yale Divinity School
***Joseph Cumming**, Director of the Reconciliation Program, Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Yale Divinity School
***Emilie M. Townes**, Andrew Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology, Yale Divinity School, and President-elect of the American Academy of Religion
***Miroslav Volf**, Founder and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology, Yale Divinity School

Martin Accad, Academic Dean, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (Lebanon)
Scott C. Alexander, Director, Catholic-Muslim Studies, Catholic Theological Union
Roger Allen, Chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania
Leith Anderson, President, National Association of Evangelicals
Ray Bakke, Convening Chair, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding
Camillo Ballin, Bishop, Vicar Apostolic of Kuwait (Roman Catholic)
Barry Beisner, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Northern California
Federico Bertuzzi, President, PM Internacional, Latin America
James A. Beverley, Tyndale Seminary, Canada
Jonathan Bonk, Executive Director, Overseas Ministries Study Center
Gerhard Böwering, Yale University
Joseph Britton, Dean, Berkeley Divinity School at Yale
John M. Buchanan, Editor/Publisher, *The Christian Century*
Joe Goodwin Burnett, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska
Samuel G. Candler, Dean, Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta
Juan Carlos Cárdenas, Instituto Iberoamericano de Estudios Transculturales, Spain
Joseph Castleberry, President, Northwest University
Colin Chapman, Author
David Yonggi Cho, Founder and Senior Pastor, Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea
Richard Cizik, Vice President, National Association of Evangelicals
Corneliu Constantineanu, Dean, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Croatia
Robert E. Cooley, President Emeritus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Harvey Cox, Harvard Divinity School
John D'Alton, President, Melbourne Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Australia
André Delbecq, University of Santa Clara
Keith DeRose, Yale University
Andrés Alonso Duncan, CEO, Latinoamerica Global, A.C.

Diana L. Eck, Harvard University
Bertil Ekstrom, Executive Director, Mission Commission, World Evangelical Alliance
Mark U. Edwards, Jr., Senior Advisor to the Dean, Harvard Divinity School
John Esposito, Director Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University
David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity, Cambridge University
Timothy George, Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University
Roberto S. Goizueta, Boston College
Bruce Gordon, University of St. Andrews
William A. Graham, Dean, Harvard Divinity School
Lynn Green, International Chairman, YWAM
Frank Griffel, Yale University
Edwin F. Gulick, Jr., Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Kentucky
David P. Gushee, President, Evangelicals for Human Rights
Kim B. Gustafson, President, Common Ground
Elie Haddad, Provost, Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Lebanon
L. Ann Hallisey, Hallisey Consulting and Counseling
Paul D. Hanson, Harvard Divinity School
Heidi Hadsell, President, Hartford Seminary
David Heim, Executive Editor, *The Christian Century*
Norman A. Hjelm, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, retired
Carl R. Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Emory University
Joseph Hough, President, Union Theological Seminary, NY
Bill Hybels, Founder and Senior Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church
Nabeel T. Jabbour, Consultant, Professor, Colorado
Shannon Sherwood Johnston, Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Virginia
David Colin Jones, Bishop Suffragan, Episcopal Diocese of Virginia
Stanton L. Jones, Provost, Wheaton College, IL
Tony Jones, National Coordinator, Emergent Village
Riad A. Kassis, Theologian, Author, Consultant
Paul Knitter, Union Theological Seminary, NY
Manfred W. Kohl, Vice President of Overseas Council International, USA
James A. Kowalski, Dean, Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, NY
Sharon Kugler, University Chaplain, Yale University
Peter Kuzmich, President, Evangelical Theological Faculty Osijek, Croatia
Peter J. Lee, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Virginia
Linda LeSourd Lader, President, Renaissance Institute

Tim Lewis, President, William Carey Int'l University
John B. Lindner, Yale Divinity School
Duane Litfin, President, Wheaton College
Greg Livingstone, Founder, Frontiers
Albert C. Lobe, Interim Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee
Rick Love, International Director, Frontiers
Douglas Magnuson, Bethel University
Peter Maiden, International Coordinator, OM
Danut Manastireanu, World Vision International, Iasi, Romania
Harold Masback, III, Senior Minister, The Congregational Church of New Canaan, New Canaan, CT
Donald M. McCoid, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
C. Douglas McConnell, Dean, School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary
Don McCurry, President, Ministries to Muslims
Brian D. McLaren, Author, Speaker, Activist
Kathleen E. McVey, Princeton Theological Seminary
Judith Mendelsohn Rood, Biola University
Steve Moore, President and CEO, The Mission Exchange (formerly EFMA)
Douglas Morgan, Director, Adventist Peace Fellowship
Richard Mounsey, President, Fuller Theological Seminary
Salim J. Munnayer, Academic Dean, Bethlehem Bible College, Jerusalem
Rich Nathan, Senior Pastor, Vineyard Church of Columbus
David Neff, Editor in Chief and Vice-President, *Christianity Today* Media Group
Alexander Negrov, President, St. Petersburg Christian University, Russia
Richard R. Osmer, Princeton Theological Seminary
George E. Packard, Bishop Suffragan for Chaplaincies of the Episcopal Church
Greg H. Parsons, General Director, U.S. Center for World Mission
Doug Pennoyer, Dean, School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University
Douglas Petersen, Vanguard University of Southern California
Sally Promey, Yale Divinity School
Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., Loyola Marymount University
David A. Reed, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto
Neil Rees, International Director, World Horizons
Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., Fuller Theological Seminary
Leonard Rogers, Executive Director, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding
William L. Sachs, Director, Center for Reconciliation and Mission, Richmond
Lamin Sanneh, Yale Divinity School

Andrew Saperstein, Yale Center for Faith and Culture
Robert Schuller, Founder, Crystal Cathedral and Hour of Power
Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Harvard Divinity School
Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Harvard Divinity School
William Schweiker, University of Chicago
Donald Senior, C.P., President, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago
C. L. Scow, Princeton Theological Seminary
Imad Nicola Shehadeh, President, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary
David W. and K. Grace Shenk, Eastern Mennonite Missions
Marguerite Shuster, Fuller Theological Seminary
John G. Stackhouse, Jr., Regent College, Vancouver
Glen Stassen, Fuller Theological Seminary
Andrea Zaki Stephanous, Vice President, Protestant Church in Egypt
Wilbur P. Stone, Bethel University, MN
John Stott, Rector Emeritus, All Souls Church, London
Frederick J. Streets, Yeshiva University
William Taylor, Global Ambassador, World Evangelical Alliance
John Thomas, President and General Minister, United Church of Christ
Iain Torrance, President, Princeton Theological Seminary
Michael W. Treener, International President, The Navigators, CO
Geoff Tunnicliffe, International Director, World Evangelical Alliance
George Verwer, Founder and former International Director, OM
Harold Vogelaar, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Berten A. Waggoner, National Director, Association of Vineyard Churches
Jim Wallis, President, Sojourners
Rick Warren, Founder and Senior Pastor, Saddleback Church, and The Purpose Driven Life, Lake Forest, CA
J. Dudley Woodberry, Dean Emeritus, Fuller School of International Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary
Christopher J.H. Wright, International Director, Langham Partnership, London
Robert R. Wilson, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Yale Divinity School
Nicholas Wolterstorff, University of Virginia
Godfrey Yogarajah, General Secretary, Evangelical Fellowship in Asia
Community Council of the Sisters of the Precious Blood, Dayton, OH.