

A Muscat Manifesto

Seeking Inter-Faith Wisdom

BY PROFESSOR DAVID F. FORD



THE CAMBRIDGE INTER-FAITH PROGRAMME
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



KALAM RESEARCH & MEDIA
KNOWLEDGE VILLAGE, DUBAI

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Preface

THE TWO LECTURES in this publication were given at the invitation of HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Sultanate of Oman, and I am immensely grateful to him, not only for the opportunity to deliver them, but also for his personal hospitality and for allowing me to experience so many aspects of Oman during my stay as his guest. I came to appreciate deeply the quality of the atmosphere of lively diversity and mutual respect that the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has enabled.

It was both a delightful and an instructive time, with many fascinating conversations and visits. Dr Abdulrahman Al Salmi, Editor of the journal *Al-Tasamoh (Tolerance)*, in which these lectures have now been published, was my constant companion, scholarly interlocutor and adviser, and I am deeply thankful to him for that and for our continuing conversation and collaboration. Revd Michael Bos, Director of Al Amana Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, whose inter-faith studies and practical work I have come to appreciate over many years, was likewise essential to the visit, and I owe him a great debt of gratitude.

Especially warm thanks are due to HE Abdulaziz Al Rowas (Cultural Affairs Adviser to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos) for interpreting Oman to me, exploring inter-faith relations and hosting a delightful dinner; to HE Dr Omar Al Zawawi (Special Adviser to His Majesty) for our wide-ranging conversation; to HH Virginia Al-Said for a tea party whose guests represented so many aspects of Omani life; to Professor Ridwan Al Sayyid for our television interview and for translating the lecture in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque; to Sheikh Ziyad Al-Mawali and all the staff and students at the Institute of Shariah Studies who were such a responsive audience; to Dr Hamed Suleiman Al-Salmi, Mr Salahaddin Al Saadi, Dr Mohsin Humood Al-Kindi, and Dr Auhoud Said Albulushi who introduced me to the Sultan Qaboos University; to Dr Kahlan Al Kharosi, Mr Ahmed Ali Al-Mukhaini and many others with whom I had memorable meals; and to the British Ambassador, Dr Noel Guckian, for his hospitality.

It was an added delight that Dr Aref Nayed was able to come to Oman for the final days of my visit. His friendship and wisdom have been of incalculable value over many years. He and his colleague, Professor Dr Najib Hsadi, had collaborated in translating the lectures into Arabic, and as Director of Kalam Research and Media he has now enabled its publication as separate volumes. Mr Sohail Nakhlooda, Research and Publication Manager at Kalam Research and Media, has dedicated a great deal of time and energy to designing and presiding over the publication, and it has been a delight to work with him.

In Cambridge I have been especially grateful to Mr Stuart Laing, Master of Corpus Christi College, and Mrs Sibella Laing for their support and helpful knowledge of Oman, and to Dr Kate Pretty, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, for her warm encouragement of the growing links between Cambridge and Oman.

Behind both the visit and the publication stand the staff of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. Ms Barbara Bennett, Administrator, has been an utterly safe pair of hands for all the complexities involved. Dr Simeon Zahl, Research Assistant, has been continually helpful in researching and commenting. Dr Nicholas Adams, Academic Director, has been a tower of strength in taking over my duties in CIP to enable the sabbatical leave during which the visit to Oman took place, and he also commented perceptively on early drafts of the lectures.

The invitation to Oman came as a welcome opportunity during a sabbatical year to reflect and summarise what I have learnt during many years of theological study and inter-faith engagement. It is a field with great and urgent challenges—spiritual, intellectual, ethical, imaginative, practical and institutional. I hope that readers will be blessed with the desire to seek further wisdom on these matters and, above all, to strengthen the bonds of respect, understanding, friendship and blessing across the boundaries of faiths. It was deeply encouraging to find in Oman.

DAVID F. FORD
Cambridge

Seeking Muslim, Christian and Jewish Wisdom in the Fifteenth, Twenty-first and Fifty-eighth Centuries: A Muscat Manifesto

by DAVID F. FORD

Lecture at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Muscat, Oman

MONDAY 20TH APRIL 2009

I AM VERY HONOURED to speak in one of the finest mosques in the world, and I am inspired by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said's leadership in creating a space where understanding between cultures and religions can be advanced. I am also deeply grateful to HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, for his invitation and hospitality. I would also like to thank all those who have helped in the organisation of my visit and of the two lectures, especially Michael Bos, whose work has done so much for Muslim-Christian relations, and Dr Abdulrahman Al Salmi, editor of the journal *Tolerance*. I bring warm greetings from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, Professor Alison Richard: we greatly value Cambridge's very close links with Oman and trust that they can become even closer in the years ahead. Three days ago His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, was in Cambridge and was delighted to hear of this visit: he too asked me to convey his warm greetings.

Seeking the Wisdom of God: A triple dynamic

My theme in this lecture is seeking the wisdom we need for living in our time, which according to the Muslim, Christian and Jewish calendars is the fifteenth, twenty-first and fifty-eighth centuries. There are many rich traditions of wisdom in our world, among which I will focus on these three, whose members together make up around half of the world's population.

We are siblings who share a great deal, and we are also very different. We need to be able to find shared ground. But 'shared ground' is a static image, and even more important is the spirit that blows over both what we share and what divides us. It is possible for us to face and discuss our differences without resolving them, while at the same time deepening our mutual respect and friendship. I want to suggest that the spirit we most need is one that seeks wisdom above all, the wisdom of the God of wisdom, compassion and blessing. In the Book of Proverbs in the Bible wisdom makes a passionate appeal to us:

*Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice ...
Beside the gates, in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
'To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live ...
Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
For wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire
cannot compare with her ...'*

(PROVERBS 1:20; 8:3, 4, 10, 11)

That is a manifesto! What might wisdom urge us to do today? I suggest: *first*, to search as deeply as possible within our own scriptures, traditions and understanding of our world today; *second*, to share with each other what we find, as we study, discuss, explore and argue together—deep differences call for wisdom in how to question and dispute; and, *third*, to collaborate together for the common good of our world in ways that please God—which above all means for the sake of more wisdom, compassion and peace.

So the core vision is of this triple dynamic between the Abrahamic faiths: deeper into our own faith, deeper into understanding the two others, and deeper into engagement with the world for its good.

This is a moment of great danger in the history of our three faiths and of our world. There are tensions, crises and conflicts, and widespread misunderstandings and suspicions. But there are signs of hope too, and we must believe that God wants us to create many more such signs.

One sign is the fact that I, a Christian theologian, have received your invitation to speak here this evening in the Grand Mosque and lectured in the Institute of Shariah Studies on its magnificent new campus earlier today. In your invitation you asked me to say what I as a Christian have learned from my own tradition that might be of value to Muslims and their relations with Christians. So in the rest of this lecture, while always assuming that the best relations between any two of the Abrahamic faiths will be formed when the third is also involved, I will largely concentrate on Muslim-Christian relations. That is a central global challenge of this century, one that has only begun to be addressed, and it deserves our urgent attention and dedication.

Christian Resources for the Challenge

I will first explore some of the theological resources Christianity might draw upon to meet this challenge.

For over twenty years part of my academic work has been editing a textbook, *The Modern Theologians*, now over 800 pages in its third edition, about Christian theology since 1918.¹ It has been one of the most valuable parts of my education. I have had to ask questions such as: Who are the leading Christian theologians of the past hundred years? What are the most important movements? How have different theologies responded to modernity? What has been happening in Christian thinking in Asia, in Africa, in North and

¹ David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians—An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

South America, and among Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainstream Protestants and Anglicans? What have been the main developments in the interpretation of scripture? Which philosophies have been most influential? What about theology that engages with the natural sciences, the social sciences, economics and politics? How has theology thought about the visual arts, music and film? And what about pastoral and practical theology, and theology of prayer and spirituality?

I have come to the conclusion that the past century has in fact been one of the richest and most fruitful in the whole two thousand years of Christian theology. Why is that? There are many factors that help to explain it. In line with the explosion of education at all levels, far more people have been studying and writing theology, and there has been a huge increase around the world in seminaries, institutes, universities and courses for congregations and lay Christians. Whole new groups of people who previously were largely excluded from theology can now study it, and many of them go on to teach and write it—think of women, black Americans and Africans, lower caste Indians, lay Roman Catholics, and many others. These groups have often shown a passion for learning and for working out theologies that connect strongly with their lives and contexts.

There are other reasons too for this flourishing of Christian theology, perhaps above all the stimulus of responding to unprecedented changes and challenges. The historian Philip Jenkins has described how many signs of energetic life and thought there are in European Christianity at present, as it copes with secular forces and the growth of other faiths. He says that the church that can survive Europe can survive anything! He also raises a fascinating question: are the pressures on European Islam having similar beneficial effects, as European Muslims develop a ‘form of faith that can cope with social change without compromising basic beliefs.’² Some of my most moving conversations with Muslim friends and colleagues have arisen from sharing how each can learn from the other in responding to modern understanding, to academic disciplines, and to religious, social, political and economic pressures.

Europe is at present like a laboratory for exploring what wise, faithful and creative responses might be possible. In Cambridge my colleague in the University of Cambridge Faculty of Divinity and the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,³ Abdal Hakim Murad (T. J. Winter) has this year begun with others a new Muslim theological college. This, for the first time in the University’s 800-year history, adds to the rich Cambridge academic environment an independent Muslim institution that is connected to the University.⁴ In that environment we hope that the wisdom of different traditions can be studied, tested and worked out in practical ways.

² Philip Jenkins, *God’s Continent. Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.287.

³ The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk) promotes research and teaching which leads to deeper mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic traditions. It has four principal aims: 1) studying actual encounters between the three traditions, in the past and today; 2) bringing together the world’s best current and future scholars working on materials in those traditions, in a way that fosters collaboration; 3) translating the core texts of those traditions for the use of their members in study; and 4) promoting engagement, dialogue and collaboration between the three faiths, and public understanding of them. In the area of public understanding and education CIP’s major initiative is the Cambridge Abraham Project, in collaboration with the Coexist Foundation and others, aiming to develop in London a major resource relating the three faiths.

⁴ ‘The Cambridge Muslim College supports the development of training and Islamic scholarship to help meet the many challenges facing Britain today. The college is dedicated to maintaining academic excellence and pushing the boundaries of Islamic learning in the West. Drawing on resources and expertise in Cambridge and beyond, the college’s mission is to help translate the many existing strengths of British Muslims into stronger, more dynamic institutions and communities’ (www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/about.html). For further information, visit www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org.

Key Elements in Wise Theology

What about the quality of all this theology? In editing *The Modern Theologians*, I, and those many people with whom I have consulted, have faced again and again the difficult questions: Which theologies should be included? Which are the best? What is it that makes a theology wise and creative? I want to share with you my answer to that last question, about the ingredients in wise and creative theology, and then give an example of one development in Christian theology that has many lessons for Muslim-Christian relations.

So, what are the key elements in a wise Christian theology? I propose four.

First comes wise and creative understanding, interpretation and application of the Bible and Christian traditions. The more I continue as a theologian the more I am convinced that wise interpretation of the scriptures is the most fruitful source of theology, prayer and Christian living. The Bible is in many ways a difficult book, and it can be, and is frequently, dangerously and terribly misused. As the saying goes: ‘The corruption of the best is the worst’. So the sense of gratitude to those who intelligently and faithfully interpret the Bible is immense. Augustine said that any interpretation of scripture that goes against love is false, and the final criterion of true biblical interpretation is whether it is in line with the love of God. I am at present writing a book on the future of Christian theology, with a parallel book on the future of Muslim theology being written by my friend, the scholar Dr Aref Nayed.⁵ Dr Nayed reminds me of Augustine when he says that the main criterion of true Qur’anic interpretation is whether it is in line with the mercy and compassion of God. His theology springs from those infinitely rich words that the Qur’an repeats so often: *Bism Illah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim*, ‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’. He is working out in Muslim terms something that has deep resonances with what I see in the first element in Christian theology: wise and loving retrieval of our sources, above all our scriptures.

The second element is lively engagement in the present with both God and the world. Wise theology requires constant prayer. The God who is worshipped is the living God, who is in constant interaction with people and the whole world, and invites us to take a responsible part in fulfilling his purposes now.

Modern life is extraordinarily diverse and complex, throwing up one challenge after another. Christianity cannot thrive if it tries simply to repeat the past or reject the present. Contemporary life is not all good and not all bad. It is a complex mixture, which means that we must constantly ask questions, explore possibilities, search the past with sensitivity, and listen to many other people in order to arrive at responsible discernments, judgements and decisions before God. Then we are able to avoid the two extremes of uncritical assimilation to modernity and uncritical rejection of it.

The theologians of all traditions, especially Jewish, Muslim and Christian, from whom I have learned most, have searched long and hard to discern the purposes of God in relation to the great problems and possibilities of our world. They have offered theology that is creative in the sense that it responds to new situations by seeking the wisdom of the Creator God, who desires to draw us into a good future which is very different from the past and present.

The third element is deeply involved in the first two: wise and creative thinking. I have in mind the great ideas that sum up and develop Christian understanding further. God’s

⁵ There is also a third parallel book on the future of Jewish theology being written by Professor Steven Kepnes of Colgate University. They are to be published by Blackwell of Oxford in their Manifesto series.

knowledge and wisdom are superabundant and endless and we can only ever fathom a tiny fraction of it. But we believe God wants to draw us deeper and deeper into this wisdom. It stretches and expands us in every way—in prayer and adoration, in study and discussion, in imagination and in action. Good theologians produce generative ideas that enable us to do fuller justice to scriptures and traditions and at the same time to respond better to the world today—its sciences, its philosophies, its religions, its cultures, its ethical dilemmas, its politics and its economics. The challenge of wise and creative thinking has never been greater.

Then, fourth and finally, there is the way Christian theology is expressed and communicated in all directions to all sorts of people. There is, I believe, in most people a hunger and thirst for deep meaning and wisdom. It is sad that so much of what we are offered concerning religion, not only by the media but also by religious communities and by educational institutions, is either ‘junk food’ or good food that is indigestible. The situation is not all bad, but it is serious enough to see the immense need for the best theology to be communicated as widely as possible in appropriate ways.

I vividly remember the impact on me as a fifteen-year old schoolboy in Dublin when I happened to come upon some of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed in 1945 for plotting against Hitler. I had never realised such writing existed—it gripped me, stretched my thinking, gave a sense of the reality of God and the power of the Gospel, and opened up some of our age’s major questions. Years later, as I edited *The Modern Theologians*, I came to realise that Bonhoeffer has all the key elements of theological wisdom and creativity: he is a perceptive interpreter of Christian scripture and tradition; he was utterly engaged with God and with the events and issues of his time in church and in society, both in his own country and internationally; he generated marvellously illuminating ideas; and he communicated powerfully not only in academic writings but also in lecturing, broadcasting, sermons, letters, conversation, poetry, and drama—and he even began a novel.

What might these four elements mean to Muslims? As a Christian, I am not the person to answer that. I simply offer them now as a gift, drawn from the Christian experience of theologians seeking wisdom today. As you unwrap it, I will be watching and listening very eagerly for your response.

The Christian Ecumenical Movement as a Model for Inter-Faith Engagement

Out of the riches of the past century of Christian theology I want now to concentrate on one that has many lessons for the present century’s inter-faith engagements. This is the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century.⁶ There are, of course, many differences between attempts at bringing Christians together and attempts to bring different religions together, but there are enough parallels and comparable questions to make it very worthwhile.

The history of the ecumenical movement is remarkable. I do not think that anyone a hundred years ago could have imagined it happening. Never before in history had major religious communities, with hundreds of millions of members, moved from a history of much hostile and suspicious confrontation, sometimes involving conflict and even killing, to a situation in which there was conversation, collaboration and even in some cases

⁶ For an introduction to the Christian ecumenical movement and its theology, see Mary Tanner, ‘Ecumenical Theology’ in *The Modern Theologians*, third edition, pp.56–71.

federation or union. Yet that is what happened between many of the main Christian churches in the twentieth century. There is still a long way to go, but the change in atmosphere has been dramatic.

As an Irish Anglican member of a 3% Protestant minority in Dublin I experienced the great changes for the better in relations between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland that came largely as a result of the support given to the ecumenical movement by the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In all the troubles that happened in Northern Ireland after 1968, better relations between the main churches were a major element making for peace and, I believe, a key factor in avoiding the large-scale bloodshed that has happened in many other places.

How did the ecumenical movement happen? It had courageous pioneers, who often formed friendships that crossed church divisions. It required enormous amounts of theological work, the best of which has all four of the elements just mentioned: reinterpretations of the Bible, traditions and historical events, above all those such as the Reformation which led to splits in the church; patient engagement in prayer, conversations, debates and joint projects; inspired thinking that allowed each side to move beyond blockages and see each other as genuinely Christian, despite their deep differences and often very painful histories; and persuasive communication, especially in educational settings, but also through the whole range of media within and beyond the churches.

The ecumenical movement has been like an ecology with many habitats. It has needed engagements at all levels: international, national, regional and local. There have been networks and groups, large and small, of ordinary Christians from different churches who have met together, prayed together, studied the Bible together, and worked for common causes together. One of the most encouraging things has been the amount of cooperation in serving the common good of society through charities, and through practical movements, such as Jubilee 2000 that campaigned for international debt relief.

There has also been institutional creativity at all levels, with new organisations and centres, and transformations of older bodies. I have been especially concerned with these in the area of education. In Cambridge those of us involved in helping to bring to birth the new Muslim theological college have had as a model the Cambridge Theological Federation, which is independent but linked to the University and has members from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Reformed and Orthodox traditions, as well as centres for Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim relations.

I believe one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first (or fifteenth or fifty-eighth) century is to bring about a change in consciousness among the world's Muslims, Christians and Jews (and, of course, others too) that can be compared to that achieved by the Christian ecumenical movement. We need to move beyond our often terrible histories and misunderstandings, and shift from suspicion, confrontation and conflict towards trust, conversation and collaboration, even as we acknowledge our real differences. The vision, energy and courage needed for this is even greater than that required by the ecumenical movement, and it will also require a range of dimensions comparable to those just mentioned. There are already some hopeful signs of this beginning to happen.

Signs of Hope

Among the most important and best known⁷ in recent years have been two daring Muslim

⁷ There have also been many other initiatives, among the most significant of which have been new organizations, such

initiatives: the letter *A Common Word between Us and You* sent by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to all the Christian churches;⁸ and the inter-faith gatherings initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. These are very different and very important, and they should be seen as complementary to each other.

In the brief time available I will focus on *A Common Word*. I see it as the most important inter-faith statement in the past forty years.⁹ Do visit the website, www.acommonword.com, to read this remarkable letter on love of God and love of neighbour, and the fascinating replies by church bodies, individual Christians, Jews and others. It continues to be fruitful.¹⁰ Just three weeks ago in London I attended the inaugural meeting of a new body, provisionally called the C-1 World Dialogue. It is co-chaired by the Anglican Bishop of

as the Three Faiths Forum (www.threefaithsforum.org.uk), and new foundations, such as the Coexist Foundation (www.coexistfoundation.net) and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org).

⁸ For more information on *A Common Word*, including the text of the document in several languages, visit www.acommonword.com.

⁹ That is, since the Second Vatican Council's landmark statement on the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of other faiths in its decree *Nostra Aetate*. The text of the decree can be found in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996), pp. 569–74.

¹⁰ HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan has recently summed up the responses to the letter:

'Since its launch 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 grassroots and community level-initiatives all over the world 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 English alone.

Over 200,000 people have visited the Official Website of *A Common Word* for more details.

Over 6000 people have 'fully endorsed' *A Common Word* online alone.

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 Harvard University, the Theological Seminary at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and the Center for Studies of Islam in the U.K.).

A Common Word has been the subject of major international conferences at Yale University, USA, and at Cambridge University (UK) and Lambeth Palace, and studies at World Economic Forum in Spring 2008 and the Mediterranean dialogue of Cultures in November 2008.

A Common Word was the central impetus behind the Wamp-Ellison Resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives which passed in 2008, and it was commended in this Resolution.

A Common Word received the U.K.'s Association of Muslim Social Scientist 2008 *Building Bridges Award*, and Germany's *Eugen Biser Award* of 2008.

Finally, *A Common Word* was even cited at the traditional Post-Inauguration Service at the National Cathedral for President Obama on January 21st, 2009 during the main sermon by Reverend Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, the *General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* in the US and Canada, as follows:

Recently Muslim scholars from around the world released a document, known as "A Common Word Between Us." It proposes a common basis for building a world at peace. That common basis? Love of God and love of neighbor! What we just read in the Gospel of Matthew!

... There is a barrage of activity planned for 2009, including a major documentary film, three books, a joint Christian-Muslim sensitivity manual, an important political conference planned at Georgetown University, Washington DC; a large religious conference planned in Malaysia and possibly a third in the Philippines. Also planned are two high-level meetings between Muslims and the Orthodox Churches, and between Muslims and the World Council of Churches; a multi-lingual Muslim-Christian "recommended reading list", a joint website with Yale, Lambeth Palace and possibly also the Vatican (to serve as a voluntary basis for school and university curricula); a Muslim Theological Press Conference in Spain; a major European-based but global and multi-stakeholder Christian-Muslim peace Institute / Foundation with *A Common Word* enshrined in its charter—this is precisely the C-1 world Dialogue —; a University campus-based *Common Word* student initiative in the USA; a joint-design *Common Word* Muslim-Christian string of Prayer-beads; a number of "trickledown" projects to try to bring the Common Word to Churches and Mosques all over the world; and finally the continuation of the practical work planned at the meetings in Yale, Cambridge / Lambeth Palace and the Vatican. In short, we think we may fairly say that in its first year *A Common Word* achieved—by the Grace of God, *Al-Hamdu Lillah*, historically unprecedented "global traction", and is hoping in its second year—with the Will of God, *in sha Allah*—to achieve historically unprecedented

London, Rt Revd Richard Chartres, and by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, and when I told them of this visit to Oman they both sent their warm greetings. The C-1 has been largely inspired by *A Common Word*, and HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan has been a leading figure in both. It is dedicated to sponsoring Muslim-Christian engagement and collaboration for the common good at all levels. The atmosphere at the meeting reminded me of the early days of the ecumenical movement, and I was encouraged that it saw the need for something of comparable scope and intensity. Let us pray that it flourishes.

As a theologian I am impressed by the way *A Common Word between Us and You* has all those elements of wisdom and creativity that I have been discussing. It communicates clearly. It has one big wise idea: the centrality of love and compassion to both of our traditions. It shows passionate devotion to God, and it courageously and generously engages with Christians and with the current global situation. Most striking of all, it draws on the Qur'an and the Bible together.

Let me explain why I find this reading together of the Qur'an and the Bible especially important. For the past fifteen years I have taken part in Scriptural Reasoning.¹¹ This involves Muslims, Christians and Jews studying our scriptures together, and it can also be practised between any pair of those faiths.¹² At the heart of it are reading and conversation around the texts that are central to our faith, worship and living. Scriptural Reasoning is now practised in many countries and different settings: universities; seminaries; schools; local congregations; and regional, national and international gatherings. It allows members of different faiths to practice mutual hospitality around the texts they love most, being hosts in relations to their own scripture and guests in relation to the other two scriptures. For me as a Christian it has been a remarkable experience to be able, year after year, to engage deeply with Jews, Muslims and fellow-Christians, and to see this generate mutual understanding, arguments, friendships, educational initiatives and collaborations. I have not found a better way of actualising the triple dynamic of going deeper into one's own faith, into the faith of others and into the contemporary world.

So it was a special delight in October 2008 when we in the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme joined with the Archbishop of Canterbury to host a conference on *A Common Word*.¹³ He had earlier in the summer of 2008 written the most substantial response so far,

“global trickledown”. God is Bounteous!” (from a draft version of H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, ‘Concept of Dialogue: On “A Common Word Between Us and You”’ in *Annual Dialogue Report on Religion and Values of the C-1 World Dialogue 2009*, ed. Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff and Roland Schatz (Boston, Beirut, Pretoria, Tianjin, Zurich: Innovation Publishing, 2009), pp.17–19).

¹¹ For further information about Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>. For some of the best print resources on Scriptural Reasoning, see Chapter 8 in David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.273–303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Peter Ochs, ‘Reading Scripture Together in Sight of Our Open Doors’ in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26, no.1, new series (2005), pp.36–47; and Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Studying the ‘Other’, Understanding the ‘Self’: Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

¹² A good example of this is the on-going Christian-Muslim ‘Building Bridges Seminar’, hosted annually by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Some of the proceedings from the second meeting of the seminar, in Doha in 2003, can be found in Michael Igrave (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur’an Together* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

¹³ The participants included, on the Muslim side: H.E. Shaykh Prof. Dr. Ali Gomaa Mohamed Abdel Wahab (Grand Mufti, Egypt), Prof. Shaykh Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan Al-Buti (Dean, Department of Religion, University of Damascus, Syria), H.E. Prof. Shaykh Abd Allah bin Mahfuz bin Bayyah (Professor, King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia; Vice President of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, Mauritania), Shaykh Al-Habib Umar bin Muhammad bin Salim bin Hafith (Dean, Dar Al-Mustafa, Yemen), H.E. Shaykh Dr. Mustafa Ceri (Grand Mufti, Bosnia), H.R.H. Prof. Dr. Prince

A Common Word for the Common Good. It was the most distinguished group of Muslim scholars and leaders ever to have gathered in Britain. Central to the conference was discussion of *A Common Word* and the study of the Qur'an and the Bible together. The communiqué issued at the end of it by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said:

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

If we want to act on this recommendation, as I suggest we should, it must be done in partnership—and this is, indeed, already happening.

One further comment on *A Common Word* needs to be added. It is important not just for relations between Muslims and Christians. It also greatly helps internal relations within each faith community. Many Muslims have seen *A Common Word* as a major achievement in Muslim unity across traditions of Islam and across global regions; likewise, a

Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal (Personal Envoy and Special Advisor of H.M. King Abdullah II, Chairman of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan), Prof. Dr. Ingrid Mattson (Professor of Islamic Studies, Hartford Seminary, USA; President, Islamic Society of North America), Shaykh Al-Habib Ali Zain Al-Abidin Al-Jifri (Founder and Director, Taba Institute, United Arab Emirates), Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad Winter (Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge; Director of the Muslim Academic Trust, UK), Prof. Dr. Aref Ali Nayed (Former Professor, Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies; Senior Advisor, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme; Libya), Dr Ibrahim Kalin (Director, SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey; Asst. Professor, Georgetown University), Shaykh Amr Mohamed Helmy Khaled (Islamic Missionary, Preacher and Broadcaster; Founder and Chairman, Right Start Foundation International, Egypt), Ayatollah Prof. Dr. Seyyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmad Abadi Damad (Dean of Department of Islamic Studies, The Academy of Science of Iran; Professor of Law and Islamic Philosophy, Tehran University, Iran), H.E. Dr. Abdulaziz Otham Al-Twajiri (Director-General, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Saudi Arabia), Prof. Dr. Abderrahmane Taha (President, Wisdom Circle for Thinkers and Researchers, Morocco), Dr. Muhammad Suheyl Umar (Director, Iqbal Academy, Pakistan); Mr. Sohail Nakhoda (Editor-in-Chief, *Islamica Magazine*, Jordan), and Mr. Fuad Nahdi (President, Radical Middle Way; Specialist Member, Christian Muslim Forum, UK).

Participants on the Christian side included: The Most Revd and Right Hon. Dr. Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury, UK), His Beatitude Gregorios III Laham (Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem), Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim (Metropolitan, Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo, Syria), The Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali (Bishop of Rochester, Church of England; Co-President of the Anglican Communion's Network for Inter-Faith Concerns), The Rt Revd David Hamid (Bishop in Europe, Church of England), The Rt Revd Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon (Bishop of Kaduna, Nigeria; Co-President of the Anglican Communion's Network for Inter-Faith Concerns), Professor Iain Torrance (President, Princeton Theological Seminary, USA), Professor Frances Young (Professor Emeritus, Formerly Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham, UK), Professor David Ford (Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge; Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, UK), Professor Miroslav Volf (Professor of Systematic Theology, Yale Divinity School; Director, Yale Center for Faith and Culture, USA), Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik (Professor of Interreligious Studies, University of Oslo, Norway), Prof. Fr Emmanuel Clapsis (Professor Ordinarius, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, USA; Ecumenical Patriarch), Abbot Timoty Wright OSB (Advisor on Inter-religious Affairs to the Abbot Primate of the Order of St. Benedict), The Revd Prof. Christian Troll SJ (Honorary Professor, Kolleg St. Georgen, Germany), The Revd Dr. Daniel Madigan SJ (Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University, USA), Dr. Nicholas Adams (Academic Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, UK), Revd Dr. Mindawati Perangin-angin (Head of the Ecumenical Bureau of the Karo Batah Protestant Church of Indonesia), Pfrin. Susanna Faust (Representative for Interreligious Dialogue, Ecumenical Center, Evangelical Church of Germany), and Revd Canon Anthony Ball (Archbishop of Canterbury's Secretary for International and Inter-Religious Relations, UK).

remarkably varied set of Christians have converged in responding to it.¹⁴ One of the most exciting religious prospects for our century is that inter-faith and intra-faith engagements might mutually reinforce each other. This has already begun to be realised by the most significant initiative within Christian ecumenism in the past decade, that of Receptive Ecumenism, led by the Centre for Catholic Studies in the University of Durham.¹⁵ In its last major conference in Durham in January 2009 Receptive Ecumenism engaged in dialogue with Scriptural Reasoning in order to develop a complementary practice among Christian churches. Wise reading of our scriptures remains the central, demanding task for Muslims, for Christians, and for both together.

Future Abrahamic Relations: A Manifesto

I will now sum up this lecture (including some things only hinted at in the lecture but dealt with elsewhere¹⁶) in a set of basic guidelines for improving inter-faith relations and the contribution of our faiths to the rest of the world.¹⁷ This is the manifesto, in nine points.

Let us aim to:

Love of God and Neighbour

Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation

A Triple Dynamic

Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good

Sources of Wisdom

Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom

Engaging with the Modern World

Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it

¹⁴ The preparation for the Archbishop of Canterbury's response, *A Common Word for the Common Good*, included a great deal of consultation, culminating in a gathering in Lambeth Palace on Sunday June 1st 2008 of scholars from different churches, who next day were joined in Church House, London, by about fifty leaders of churches, including World Council of Churches, Roman Catholic, several Orthodox (including leaders from the Middle East), Methodist, Reformed, Evangelical, and others. They had a draft of Dr Williams' response and agreed that he should send one in line with what they unanimously approved. The Yale-sponsored statement welcoming *A Common Word* and published as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* in November 2007 also had a wider range of Christian signatories, including many leading Evangelicals. The World Council of Churches held a meeting of representatives of member churches in January 2008 to discuss *A Common Word* and later issued a statement, 'Learning to Explore Love Together: Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to 'A Common Word''. In each case there were close links between intra-Christian engagement and later Christian-Muslim meetings. In each case also there was strong collaboration between church leaders and academics. The internal workings of the Roman Catholic Church are not in the public domain, but it is clear that there was considerable debate before the decision to set up the Catholic-Muslim Forum between the Vatican and the signatories of *A Common Word*, which met for the first time in Rome in November 2008.

¹⁵ See the Receptive Ecumenism website, <http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/?cat=6>, as well as the recent volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ See especially Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, and David F. Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

¹⁷ These provide a broad framework. A more detailed proposal for Christian-Muslim relations is given in the final section of the Archbishop of Canterbury's response, *A Common Word for the Common Good*. This is the most comprehensive template to have been proposed in recent years by a religious leader and it deserves thorough discussion and implementation.

Partnerships of Difference

Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local

Creative Communication

Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources

An Ecology across Generations

Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all

Signs of Hope

Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it

God and God's Purposes

Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes¹⁸

There is a Muscat Manifesto. Let us pray that God will bless our efforts and generously surprise us! ✿

¹⁸ For a Christian understanding of the significance of 'for God's sake' see Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, Chapters 3, 4, and 7.



Professor David Ford speaking at the Institute of Shariah Studies in Muscat



Distinguished scholars and guests at the Institute of Shariah Studies lecture



Professor Ridwan Al Sayyid with Professor David Ford at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque

What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?

by DAVID F. FORD

Lecture at the Institute of Shariah Studies, Muscat, Oman

MONDAY 20TH APRIL 2009

IT IS AN HONOUR AND A DELIGHT to be with you here today in the Institute of Shariah Studies, and to be able to lecture in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque this evening. I deeply appreciate the invitation of HE Shaykh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, to visit Oman for the first time. I am most grateful to all those who have helped to organise the visit, in particular Michael Bos, whose work here has been so important for Christian-Muslim relations, and Dr. Abdulrahman Al Salmi, editor of the journal *Tolerance*. I also bring a message from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. When he was with us in Cambridge three days ago he was delighted to hear of this visit and asked me to give you his warm greetings.

Many Types of Religious Leaders

I understand that many of you who take a degree here will go on to become religious leaders, mostly in this country, but that some of you will go into a range of other careers. I see my title question, ‘What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?’ applying to both groups. Responsibility for religious leadership is of course carried by those who are called imams, or who have publicly recognised positions as teachers or religious leaders; but that responsibility is also carried by those whose callings are less officially religious. I myself am what Christians call a ‘lay person’—I am an ordinary Anglican, a member of the Church of England (I was born into the Irish Anglican Church, called the Church of Ireland). I am not a priest or bishop, and have no official role in the church organisation, but through being a theologian and involved in the church through teaching, contributions to meetings and deliberations at various levels, and service on boards of theological colleges I could be seen as having a leadership role. Yet, just as important, I also see that role being exercised as a professor in the University of Cambridge, together with people of all faiths and none. That can be at least as complicated and theologically demanding as being a church leader.

Likewise, I see Christians, Muslims and other people of faith in God who take responsibility in any sphere of life—business, politics, law, civil service, non-governmental

organisations, and so on—as serving God there and so in a sense exercising religious leadership. In other words, religious leadership can be exercised very visibly when focussed explicitly through the official bodies of a religious community; but it can also be exercised in less obvious ways, distributed across the whole of a society in every walk of life. Both types are important.

Offering a Gift

What can I, as a Christian, say to you who study here and prepare, as Muslims, to take on responsibilities of many sorts? There is a wealth of wisdom that you can learn here within your tradition, and you and your teachers know that far better than I. So I will not try to comment on that, but will take it for granted. My approach will be to think as a Christian about my own understanding of religious leadership today and offer it to you as a gift in order to open a conversation. My approach, of course, has also been influenced by Muslims and others—one of the privileges of being Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme is that I have had many opportunities to engage with those of other faiths. After this lecture, and perhaps also at another time during my time here in Oman, and even possibly over many years to come, we can have that conversation in order to learn from each other, discussing how our approaches relate to each other, and perhaps even having a respectful dispute. My hope is not so much that we will agree on everything but that we will bring a blessing to each other.

Leadership and Blessing

Blessing is where I want to begin. The more I have thought about leadership the more important blessing has become.

(i) Abraham and Blessing

In the book of Genesis in the Bible there is the story of Abraham (at that time called Abram) being called by God: ‘*Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*’ (Genesis 12:1–3)

This is an amazing promise of blessing for ‘all the families of the earth’, and it opens up the horizon of the global common good within which we are called to think and act. Abraham, like many leaders, faces a fundamental challenge to his faith: will he trust in God’s promise and leave his home for ever? For Abraham himself there is the promise that God will bless him and that he himself will be a blessing. This is what I wish to concentrate on for a little while: the leader as one who receives blessing in order to be a blessing and bless others.

(ii) Receiving Blessing

How does a leader receive blessing? Utterly central to this is the relationship with God. The life of faith might be seen as a dynamic, God-centred ecology of blessing. God is the source of all blessing, and then it circulates in all directions: God blesses us and all creation, we bless God, we bless each other, creation blesses God, we bless creation.¹ All this blessing

¹ In the Bible this is especially clear in the book of Psalms.

is not just something general and indefinite: each blessing is particular, and each of the Abrahamic traditions is full of specific blessings for particular occasions and uses. To become a leader is to be blessed in particular ways, and each of our traditions has developed procedures through which we try to discern whether particular people are or are not blessed in ways that suit them to bear the responsibilities of leadership. (Perhaps part of our conversation might be about the different modes of discernment through which our traditions choose leaders—this has been one of the most controversial matters among Christians of different churches.)

God is the ultimate source of these blessings, but mostly they come through other people. The journey towards religious leadership usually leads through key relationships, often with parents, friends, spiritual guides and teachers. I wonder what your journeys have been like. I have been deeply impressed by the importance of successions of teachers in Islam—I remember hearing the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, talking about the ‘chains’ of which he is a part (which, he emphasised, include several women scholars in earlier periods). One way of looking at a chain is as a lineage of blessings being passed on across the generations. I am sure most of you could tell of people in such chains who have been formative for you and have been a blessing to you. This is what often gives the deepest motivation for taking on religious responsibilities: gratitude for the blessings received from others, kindling the desire in your turn to be a blessing. I would go so far as to say that one requirement of being a religious leader is to be part of such a person-to-person lineage—we cannot be formed only through the internet, through books or even through being taught in classes. In my own church an essential part of every priest’s training is being apprenticed to an older priest in a parish or other setting.

(iii) Learning to Bless Wisely

But when we look at those who have been a blessing to us and to others, especially those who have most fully communicated God and God’s purposes through their lives as well as their words, we also see how costly and demanding it can be to be a leader. This evening in the Grand Mosque I will speak of the elements required for Christian theology to be wise and creative today, and all that will be said then is relevant to what is required for Christian leadership. I take it for granted that Christian leaders need to be formed in those four aspects of good theology, and I will be interested to hear how far you think that these coincide with the essential areas in which Muslim leaders should be formed.

So, first, Christian leaders should aim to be wise interpreters of scripture and tradition, understanding how to draw on the treasures of the past. Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew says: *‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’* (Matthew 13:52)

Second, therefore, they should also constantly engage in the present with God in prayer and with what is new in our changing world. The past is not to be simply repeated, and God is drawing people towards a future that is very different from the present. So every day there are fresh discernments, judgements and decisions to be made about what in the contemporary world is to be rejected, what is to be welcomed, and what is to be criticised and transformed.

Third, these discernments, judgements and decisions stretch all of a leader’s capacities, and require creative and intelligent thinking, grounded in appreciation of the best available understanding.

Fourth, the leader has to be able to communicate effectively, and so far as possible to listen attentively and to speak and write well.

Those four requirements are not of a sort that can ever be fully met—a leader can always communicate better, think more wisely and creatively, engage more deeply with God and with our world, and understand scripture and tradition more adequately. So more important than having actually achieved them is the dedicated, passionate desire for them, which I name the desire for wisdom. That is the foundation for the most important thing of all: the leader being a blessing in each situation.

I think that ‘wise blessing’ is a better way to talk about Christian leadership than more secular talk of the exercise of power and authority (from the sphere of politics), or effectiveness in organising and managing (from the sphere of business), both of which are common in some Christian circles today. Indeed, I am not completely happy with the concept of leadership itself, which is probably best understood as a form of responsible and accountable service, inseparable from being a good follower.² ‘Wise blessing’ does not deny the importance of power, authority or effectiveness, but emphasises their distinctively theological character.

(iv) Ministry of Blessing

A great many of the activities of a Christian leader involve blessing. In my own tradition this includes blessing the bread and wine in the central celebration variously called the Eucharist, Mass, Holy Communion or Lord’s Supper, and giving blessings after confession of sins and at baptisms, ordinations, weddings, funerals and other occasions. But what I have in mind is far broader than that and not only specific to Christianity. When a community is deliberating over a course of action and the leaders agree to it, this can best be seen as them giving their blessing to it. That is different from having thought it up or being a main supporter of it or being responsible for carrying it out. It is rather the crucial matter of seeking, as the community’s recognised representatives, to discern before God a wise course for the community in this matter. Likewise, the withholding of blessing rejects or delays following a particular course. The same is true when individuals seek guidance. Most Christian leaders do not have power to enforce spiritual, ethical or political advice. Their power is better seen as the power to grant or withhold their blessing. It is perhaps in the matter of whether to support particular people, groups and causes in the wider society that these blessings arouse most concern—one thinks of the great importance attached in American elections to the backing of religious leaders.

A great deal in our world, therefore, can be affected by the blessing given by those with religious responsibility. This is evident in shaping their own communities, in guiding individuals, and in their contribution to the wider society. It is also worth remembering what I called the second type of religious leader—the one who is not the public face of his or her community but whose responsibility is exercised in government, business, education or some other sphere of society. For all of them their vocations as leaders might be summed up as centring on questions of whether to bless, who to bless, what to bless, when to bless, how to bless and what content a blessing should have.

So whether their blessings are wise or not is of great importance. Their activity in blessing might at its best be seen as a performance combining all four of the elements of

² Jesus said: ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’ (Mark 9:35).

wise and creative theology: it should ring true with wise interpretation of scripture and tradition; it should spring from deep engagement with God and discerning involvement with the contemporary world; it should be informed by wise and imaginative thinking; and it should be communicated as effectively and creatively as possible. Undergirding all this is dedication to the blessing, hallowing and glorifying of God. The leading, embracing petition of the main Christian prayer taught by Jesus is *'Hallowed be your Name'*.³

Wise and Creative Inter-Faith Leadership

So, the performance of wise blessing in each situation is what is to be desired and pursued wholeheartedly. I now want to concentrate on a particular situation, the one in which we now are at this moment: Christian-Muslim encounter. When I speak about this in the Grand Mosque yesterday I will sum up the main guidelines for Christian-Muslim relations in a nine-point Muscat Manifesto that states:

Let us aim to:

Love of God and Neighbour

Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation

A Triple Dynamic

Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good

Sources of Wisdom

Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom

Engaging with the Modern World

Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it

Partnerships of Difference

Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local

Creative Communication

Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources

An Ecology across Generations

Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all

Signs of Hope

Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it⁴

³ The whole prayer according to Matthew's Gospel reads: *'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'* (Matthew 6:9-13).

⁴ For more on this document, see footnote 6.

God and God's Purposes

Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes

I want to develop further a few of those points as they relate especially to your calling as Muslim leaders. The question I will try to answer is: what are the three things I would most strongly recommend that you do in the coming years for Christian-Muslim relations? I look forward to discussing with you soon whether you think these are acceptable suggestions.

Before I name the three, let me return to an event a little later in the story of Abraham.

'King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said:

"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

Maker of heaven and earth;

And blessed be God Most High,

Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!"

(GENESIS 14:18–20)

This shows Abraham receiving hospitality and a blessing from a religious leader of another tradition who acknowledges the Creator God. At the heart of Abrahamic inter-faith relations is the giving and receiving of blessings, always in the context of blessing the God who is the source of all blessings. Three of these blessings are friendships across traditions, reading our scriptures together, and building inter-faith organisations together.

Friendship

I begin with the most personal matter. In studying the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century (of which I will speak further this evening in the Grand Mosque) it is striking how many of the most fruitful developments had at their centre friendships that crossed traditions. I find the same is true in the best inter-faith engagements. It is possible for a faithful Muslim and a faithful Christian to have deep differences over such matters as the naming of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible and the Qur'an, the significance of the Prophet Mohammed, the nature of salvation, and much else, and also to have very different practices regarding, for example, prayer, fasting, holy times, marriage, money, law, and education, yet to be good friends who understand, respect, trust and love each other. Such friendships are an immense blessing, and I am deeply grateful for those Muslim friends who have been given to me.

A friendship is not something that one can plan to make at will, but one can pray for it to be given and be open to it happening. *I suggest that each of you pray to be a blessing to those of other faiths and to receive blessings from them, and also that, if it is God's will, you may find one or two friends among those with whom you have exchanged blessings.*

Scripture

One of the greatest blessings we have been given is our scriptures, so it is not surprising that one of the main ways we are able to bless each other is by sharing them. In the Grand Mosque yesterday I spoke of how for the past fifteen years the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, which gathers Muslims, Christians and Jews (or sometimes just two of those traditions) to read and discuss their scriptures, has been the single most important element in my inter-faith experience and that of an increasing number of people in various spheres

of life.⁵ It is really a matter of common sense that if we want to understand each other more deeply we should study our scriptures together. This has become increasingly recognised in inter-faith engagements, and it has many advantages. Above all, it allows for long term collegiality among the participants, since conversation need never come to an end: the scriptures are endlessly abundant in meaning and there is always a sense that one is just beginning to open up their riches. I have not found anything else that serves so well to sustain ongoing, faith-centred engagement among the Abrahamic traditions.

One of the most important inspirations for joint study of scripture between Muslims and Christians is, as I will discuss this evening, the Muslim letter *A Common Word Between Us and You*.⁶ In particular the statement, signed by the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury, that emerged from the October 2008 conference on *A Common Word* in Cambridge University and Lambeth Palace, acts as a blessing on the practice when it says:

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

I suggest that each of you resolve to engage in shared study of scriptures, as the Grand Mufti and the Archbishop recommend, if the opportunity arises, and that you also bear this in mind as something you might initiate in the future.

If you do, you may find, as I did, that it is also the way into inter-faith friendships.

Organisation

If one of the great challenges of our century is in relations between Muslims and Christians, then we can be sure that it will not be met successfully without inter-faith organisations. I direct one such organisation in the sphere of education and public understanding, the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,⁷ and it is gratifying to see a blossoming of other organi-

⁵ For further information about Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>). For some of the best print resources on Scriptural Reasoning, see Chapter 8 in David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 273–303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Peter Ochs, 'Reading Scripture Together in Sight of Our Open Doors' in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26, no. 1, new series (2005), pp. 36–47; and Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Studying the 'Other', Understanding the 'Self': Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁶ The letter *A Common Word between Us and You* was sent in October 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to all the Christian churches. I believe it to be the most important inter-faith statement in the past forty years, since the Second Vatican Council. The letter has one big wise idea, the centrality of love and compassion to both Christian and Muslim traditions, and it uses this as a starting point to engage with Christians and with the current global situation. Most striking of all, it draws on the Qur'an and the Bible together. The text of the letter, along with many of the numerous Christian responses to *A Common Word*, can be found at the official website, www.acommonword.com.

⁷ The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk) promotes research and teaching which leads to deeper mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic traditions. It has four principal aims: 1) studying actual encounters between the three traditions, in the past and today; 2) bringing together the world's best current and future scholars working on materials in those traditions, in a way that fosters collaboration; 3) translating the core texts of those

sations in these spheres.⁸ Just in the past three weeks I was present in London when a new body was formed, provisionally called the C-1 World Dialogue, co-chaired by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, and the Bishop of London, Rt. Revd Richard Chartres, which it is hoped will be the main coordinator of the *Common Word* process, involving leaders from the areas of religion, the academy, business, politics, non-governmental organisations, and media. When I spoke with Dr Gomaa and Bishop Chartres about this visit to Oman they both asked that I bring you their warm greetings.

I suggest that each of you consider how you can lend your support and leadership abilities to inter-faith organisations and networks, and if possible be willing to join in founding new ones.

Dangers

Friendships, sharing scriptures and building organisations are among the good possibilities in inter-faith relations, just as blessing wisely is at the heart of good leadership. Yet ‘the corruption of the best is the worst’, and there can be misunderstanding, disappointment and even betrayal in friendships; the scriptures can be used in terrible and violent ways; and organisations can misuse power and fail in their aims. Leadership itself is one of the most dangerous and corruptible roles. It is worth considering how as religious leaders you can guard against the main threats, which I suspect are similar whether you are Muslim or Christian. Here are just three of many possible suggestions that might help in beginning to develop appropriate vigilance regarding leadership.

Each of our scriptures and traditions has many resources helpful in showing what can go wrong in leadership. Study these, and know the history of the bad examples of leadership as well as the good. In my own Anglican tradition we especially value biographies of leaders by authors who are willing to be critical as well as appreciative.

Face your fears. Our enemies most often win, not by defeating us, but by dominating our lives with fears. Fear can lead people into horrific attitudes and actions, and above all is hostile to compassion and love. At a recent meeting of the Brookings’ 6th US-Muslim World Forum in Doha, Qatar, Dr Aref Nayed represented the signatories of *A Common Word* in replying to the US CentCom Commander General David Petraeus who expounded the features of a “network of networks” that constituted a “Security Architecture” for the Middle East region. Dr Nayed responded with a proposal for a ‘Compassion Architecture’ aiming to be ‘constructive, mending, and healing’ and not dominated by fear and considerations of security. His basic principle is: ‘*Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.*’⁹ You will often be tempted to act more from fear than from compassion, and learning to resist that temptation will transform your

traditions for the use of their members in study; and 4) promoting engagement, dialogue and collaboration between the three faiths, and public understanding of them. In the area of public understanding and education CIP’s major initiative is the Cambridge Abraham Project, in collaboration with the Coexist Foundation and others, aiming to build in London a major resource relating the three faiths.

⁸ Among these are Yale University’s Center for Faith and Culture, the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Al Azhar University, the Tabah Foundation in Abu Dhabi, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, the Coexist Foundation and Kalam Research and Media.

⁹ The relevant passage in his address is: ‘The training we truly need is training in compassionate dialogue between all of us, and training in compassionate living amongst each other. The tools and equipment we truly need are tools and equipment of compassionate communication and understanding. The information-sharing we truly need is the honest sharing of, and witnessing to, our loftiest ideals and values, and the cooperative shedding of dark stereotypes and caricatures of others. The infra-structures we truly need to build are infrastructures of public and shared spaces in which we respectfully appreciate and cherish each other just as we stand firmly rooted in our respective traditions.’

leadership. Above all, trust in the blessing of God gives confidence that God will have the last word. Note in the Abraham story that God says: ‘*The one who curses you I will curse*’ (Genesis 12:3), not: ‘The one who curses you, you are to curse in return.’

Watch the way you hold your faith. Both the Bible and the Qur’an are full of questioning, the opening up of possibilities, and passionate desires, as well as many assertions and commands. Yet many current forms of both our faiths are dominated by clear, definite and certain assertions and commands that do not allow for the questioning, the range of possibilities, and the overwhelming desire for God and God’s future. One of the dangers of being a religious leader is that you come to think you know too much and therefore can have unquestioning certainty. Humility about the limits of our knowledge is built into both our faiths. Judging all our assertions, guidance and commands is the infinite wisdom of God, who has set us in a history where there is much mystery, much that is unknown, and much that is desired in trust and hope without being clear and certain.

Most Important of All

In conclusion, there is the most important matter of all, as has just been affirmed in the final guideline: *Do all this for the sake of God and God’s good purposes.*

I recently spent more than ten years writing a book called ‘*Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*’,¹⁰ and at the end of it I was, of course, much more aware of the narrow limits of my own understanding and wisdom. But studying what the scriptures and Christian thinkers have to teach about wisdom has given me some of their pearls, and I want to conclude with two of them.

The first is the relation of wisdom to cries. In the Bible wisdom cries out to us to make her our leading desire, and in the midst our world’s cries of suffering and protest, gratitude and joy, God’s wisdom calls us to a discernment of cries and to responding to them with love and compassion in God’s name.

And God’s name is the supreme pearl. We do it all for the sake of God and God’s purposes of wise love and compassion. God is the incomparable reality, whose name is to be hallowed, glorified, praised, adored and loved. As Christians and Muslims we do this very differently, and the deepest and most difficult theological questions are opened up by our worship of God. But at the same time there is opened up the possibility of our deepest engagement with each other for the sake of the God of Abraham. As Melchizedek, out of his very different tradition, said to Abraham: ‘*Blessed be God Most High!*’ (Genesis 14:20)¹¹ ❀

The Obama presidency does *not* need more of the same “Security Architecture” inherited from the destructive, divisive, and corrosive years of the Bush presidencies. Rather, it urgently needs a fresh “Compassion Architecture” that is constructive, mending, and healing. Such a Compassion Architecture can only be communal and cooperative, and all religious, spiritual, and philosophical communities, Muslims included, must contribute to it.

Compassion Architecture is built on the theological fact that true ‘security’ can only come from God’s own compassion towards humanity and the compassion of humans towards humans. *Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.*⁷

¹⁰ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹ And what about the rest of that verse: ‘... *who has delivered your enemies into your hand*’? We need to be aware also of the potentially violent, dangerous aspects of our scriptures, which need to be interpreted always in line with the love and compassion of God. The trust is that God’s main way of delivering our enemies into our hands is through making them friends, or at least through bringing about reconciliation, and that this, rather than revenge and violence, is certainly the way we are to follow.



PROFESSOR DAVID F. FORD

David F. Ford is the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (focusing on Judaism, Christianity and Islam). He first read Classics at Trinity College Dublin, and then studied Theology in Cambridge, Yale, and Tübingen. From 1976–1991 he taught in the University of Birmingham. Prof Ford co-founded the Scriptural Reasoning movement and is a Trustee of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. He is a member of the Executive Committee of the C-1 World Dialogue and of its Education Commission.

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Professor Ford's books include: *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (2007), *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (2007), *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God* with Daniel W. Hardy (2nd edition 2005), *The Shape of Living* (2002), *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000), *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (1999), *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* with Frances M. Young (1987, 2008), *Barth and God's Story* (1981). He has edited *Musics of Belonging: The Poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail* (2006), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (2006), *The Modern Theologians. An introduction to Christian theology since 1918* (3rd edition 2005), *Fields of Faith—Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (2005), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (2003), *Essentials of Christian Community* (1996). ♣

A MUSCAT MANIFESTO

Love of God and Neighbour

Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation.

A Triple Dynamic

Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good.

Sources of Wisdom

Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom.

Engaging with the Modern World

Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it.

Partnerships of Difference

Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local.

Creative Communication

Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources.

An Ecology across Generations

Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all.

Signs of Hope

Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it.

God and God's Purposes

Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes.



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