



NETWORKING TOWARDS A COMMON WORD

by AREF ALI NAYED

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THIS MONOGRAPH IS DEDICATED TO
HRH PRINCE GHAZI BIN MUHAMMAD
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With deep respect and appreciation

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Networking Towards a Common Word

by AREF ALI NAYED

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IN AN ERA OF HATEFUL, VENGEFUL, and destructive discourses, every human community, religious or otherwise, is called upon, for the sake of God, and for the sake of our common humanity, to develop, articulate, and clearly proclaim alternative discourses; discourses that are loving, forgiving, and constructive.

Discourses directly affect actions, and, are as a matter of fact, already an important category of actions. Discourses that are hateful, vengeful, and destructive, can only lead to actions of grotesque cruelty and mayhem. Discourses that are loving, forgiving, and constructive, can only lead to actions marked by compassionate gentleness and harmony.

The deeper the creedal roots of a discourse, the more potency and efficacy it has in the arena of action. Hateful and destructive creedal discourse is catastrophically destructive to humanity. Loving and constructive creedal discourse is wholesome and nourishing.

Again, the more authoritative the source of the discourse is, the more potency and efficacy it has, at the level of action. Discourses coming from a community's leadership are of utter importance, and effectiveness. They have an immediate effect on teaching, preaching, and individual and communal conduct.

The Muslim community, like any other human community, is called upon, for the sake of God and His beloved creatures, to articulate a wholesome creedal discourse that is truly in line with its God-assigned duty on earth, and that leads to proper loving conduct towards God's beloved creatures.

Such wholesome Muslim creedal discourse must not be that of a few scattered individuals. It must be a communal discourse built upon communal consensus, and rooted in the revelatory sources of Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunnah (tradition) of the Prophet of God, Muhammad (peace be upon him), and in the communally inherited and transmitted example of his blessed companions, and righteous kinship and followers. Furthermore, it must clearly and unanimously come from the very leadership of the Muslim community.

The criteria of wholesome creedal discourse have been endowed to us by God Himself in the glorious Qur'an:

See you not how God sets forth a parable? a goodly word as a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky (i.e. very high). Giving its fruit at all

times, by the leave of its Lord and God sets forth parables for mankind in order that they may remember. (14: 24–25)

Thus all proper and wholesome creedal discourse must be:

1. Rooted.
2. Open-ended.
3. Ever fresh and fruitful.

Muslim creedal discourse today must strive to abide by these divine criteria. It must be firmly rooted in: the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Ijma' of the Ummah. It must be open-ended through the dialectical and respectful dialogue with other religions and philosophies. It must be constantly refreshed and focused on bearing fruits that can serve the community and humanity at large.

In an unprecedented, and important, communal consensus (constituting a spiritual, moral, and juridical normative ijma' or accord), one hundred and thirty eight prominent Muslim leaders got together and planted a wholesome seed for such a wholesome tree: a healing creedal discourse of Love of the One God, and Love of the Neighbour”.

The one hundred and thirty leaders, collectively guiding and influencing millions of Muslims all over the globe, include religious authorities, scholars, teachers, intellectuals, and media leaders, from Sunni, Shi'a (Ja'fari, Zaidi, and Isma'ili), and Ibadi schools.

They jointly launched the document as an “Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders” addressed to the heads of all prominent Christian Churches, and to the “leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere”. They titled the document, following a Qur'anic phrasing, “A Common Word between Us and You”.

The hope-giving promise of this ‘Common Word’ is worthy of deep reflection, and is of immense importance for at least the following ten reasons:

1. It is addressed by leaders who collectively guide and influence millions of Muslims to leaders who guide and influence millions of Christians.
2. It is deeply rooted in the Scriptures of both Islam and Christianity, and as such, already uses a dialogical scriptural reasoning from the very start. This is solid foundation of all sorts of dialogical engagements in future stages.
3. It goes back to the very foundations, and with utter and humble simplicity reinvigorates, rehabilitates, and re-proclaims the simple but immensely powerful theology of love of the One God, and love of the neighbor.
4. It appeals to foundational revelatory and scriptural consensus upon which sensible human beings can agree, and that can serve as the solid basis for further elaborations and constructs.
5. It retrieves the gentle invitational mode of discourse that is founded in the true recognition of the other, and that truly revives the proper Muslim discourse of “wisdom and fair exhortation” that is mandated by God in the Qur'an.
6. It speaks prophetically and invokes the collective prophetic and revelatory inheritance of all of humanity. Thus, it restores and heals prophetic kinship between the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.
7. By invoking both Torah and the New Testament, it addresses Christians, but already prepares the ground for a much-needed further discourse towards healing relations with the Jews.

8. The document retrieves the very roots of a proper Muslim theology of gratitude. By invoking the saving efficacy of Divine compassionate grace (*rahma*), and seeing all of religiosity as an attitude of thanksgiving and appreciation of Divine generosity, the document lays a solid foundation for grace-filled theology, teaching, and preaching that will result in grace-based actions in our troubled world.

9. “A Common Word” definitively and authoritatively retrieves and rearticulates a solid Muslim theology that responds to divine graceful generosity with sincere devotion and exclusive worship of the One God; but a theology that also sees that such response to God must concretely manifest itself in the love of our neighbors and all of God’s creatures.

10. Finally, the document invokes key realities and notions that will be the seed for much further theological and spiritual elaboration in future documents: the heart, wisdom, paradigmatic example-following, divine remembrance, and divinely-endowed human dignity and freedom.

Finally, I wholeheartedly believe that the true promise of this vital document, “A Common Word”, is that it is a first, but monumental step, toward retrieving and reliving the true Muslim way that was vividly described, long ago, by a spiritual master called Sidi Ahmed al-Rifa’i:

Master Ibrahim al-Azab (may God be pleased with him) said: “I said to Master Ahmed (al-Rifa’i): “My Master, the seekers discussed the way to God, and had many opinions”. He replied: “My son, the ways to God are as many as the breaths of creatures! Oh Ibrahim, your grandfather (referring to himself) left no way without exploring (except those ways that God did not will for him). Oh Ibrahim, I explored all ways, and found no way closer, more giving, more hopeful, and more lovely than the way of meekness (*ajz*), brokenness (*inkisar*), bewilderment (*hayra*), and poverty (*iftiqar*) (before God).”¹

The document reopens precisely this way to God, the way of utter devotion to the One God, and utter love for His creatures. Such a simple, but profound way consists of:

1. Continuously remembering God and His compassion towards us.
2. Living in gratitude for God’s compassion, through total devotion to Him.
3. Living as intensely as possible in mutual compassion (*tarahum*) with our neighbors.

The sooner we Muslims rehabilitate and mend our classical networks and institutions, and reconnect them with the rest of humanity in sincere and humble dialogue, the more able we will be to serve God and humanity. This “Common Word” is a great first step along the way.

A Common Word Initiative

In response to the deeply offensive Regensburg Lecture, 38 Muslims sent a systematic theological reply to **Pope Benedict XVI**. A year passed, and the Pope did not respond. The offense was compounded, and many Muslim scholars resolved to boycott the **Vatican** until the Pope issued a proper apology. However, there were other Muslim scholars who courageously, and quite controversially (within the Muslim community) decided to write to the Pope, yet again, this time not with a defensive message, but with a positive and loving

one—one that addressed not just the Pope, but the whole global Christian leadership. The idea was to send as much goodness as possible, and to appeal to, and invoke, the widest and deepest theological and spiritual resources of goodness in the other. So 138 Muslim scholars from both genders, *all* Muslim theological and juridical schools, and from both traditional and modern educational backgrounds, sent a letter to *all* Christian leaders from *all* theological and denominational schools. The message was kept very simple yet deep: Let us come together in Love of God, and Love of Neighbour.

“A Common Word” was immediately criticized by some voices within the Muslim community, and the scholars who signed it were accused of selling out to the West, at a time when Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine were under bombardment. They were also accused of being unrealistic, naïve, and deaf to the cries for justice and sense of deep grievance that many Muslims were expressing. Some even accused the scholars of infidelity and treason against the Muslim faith. Some were even accused of being agents of the Vatican. “A Common Word” was also immediately criticized by some voices in the West. There were articles that argued that it was an appeal to Christians to convert to Islam. There were also accusations of double-talk and deceit, and even of making a tacit threat.

Nothing daunted the signatories, though there was admittedly some wavering by some, and at the conclusion of a major conference on “Love in the Qur’an”, these scholars signed the document out of a deep sense of love and compassion that stems from the very root of Islam.² The letter truly emerged out of deep love, and that is why it was indeed received with deep love. It did not set any conditions, it did not demand anything back, it did not complain, and it did not demand justice. It simply, and unconditionally, extended a hand out and expressed, and appealed for, love of God, and love of Neighbour.

The gesture of forgiveness, love, and compassion had its affect. The reaction from the various Christian Churches was overwhelming. **The Anglican Church** was the first to respond, and with tremendous love. Not only did the **Bishop of London, Rt. Rev’d. Richard Chartres**, and **Professor David Ford** help in the very launch of the letter to the press, but the former **Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams**, was the very first to reply with a beautiful letter of love and support.³ That early response was crucial because it set a courageous and loving example for others to follow.

Then, there was a response of a nature and scale that was totally unexpected: over three hundred **Protestant leaders**, mainly **Evangelicals**, purchased a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, and published a vital historical document entitled “Loving God and Neighbour Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You” that not only expressed love, but also addressed some important Muslim grievances.⁴ Muslim scholars were so taken by the responses of Rowan Williams and the **evangelical leaders**, that they sent a delegation to personally thank the Archbishop of Canterbury, and held a special news conference in **Abu Dhabi** to thank the Protestant leaders for their **Yale Statement**, to which they also invited **Professor Miroslav Wolf**, who led the Yale initiative.⁵ Muslim scholars then worked, through **Tabah Foundation** of Abu Dhabi, to send an unprecedented Christmas greeting that was published during Christmas 2007 in over a dozen international newspapers, in order to collectively thank all for the positive responses that were sent. There have been so many such responses, it is best to consult *www.acommonword.com* in order to read them.

The Common Word website gives an idea of the scale of the follow-up developments that have emerged out of the mirroring in goodness that the initiative triggered. Entire ecologies of local initiatives have sprouted all over the world. Vital conferences were held

at **Yale University, Cambridge University, the Vatican, and Georgetown.**⁶ I cannot possibly map the rich ecologies that did emerge. However, I do want to reflect on some of the important conditions of possibility for their emergence.

First, there was the sincerity and intentionality of the initiative. The architect and author of the letter itself, **HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad**, and the signatories who signed it, and the promoters who promoted it, were all sincerely intent on serving God and Humanity through appealing to, and spreading, Love of God, and Love of Neighbour. God, in His infinite compassion, empowered the initiative through His very Love and Compassion, and blessed it with success.

Second, there were the set of very deep and trusting friendships that sustained the initiative from its incubation to its sprouting out, and to its full growth, and that also protected during difficult times. These included friendships within the Muslim community and friendships across communities. The friendships between **HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad**, and **Habib Ali al-Jifri**, **Sheikh Nuh al-Qudat**, former **Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa**, the late **Sheikh Said Ramadan al-Buti**, **Habib Umar bin Abdul Hafid**, **Mufti Mustafa Ceric**, **Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, **Sheikh Amr Khaled** and **Ibrahim Kalin**—have offered great ground for cultivating “A Common Word” ecologies. The friendships with **Professor David Ford**, and through him, with such key figures as **Miroslav Wolf of Yale**, **Iain Torrance of Princeton**, and **John DeGioia of Georgetown**, have been vital for sustaining these ecologies. Friendships with key Catholic figures such as **Cardinal McCarrick**, **Bishop Martinelli**, **Father Thomas Michel**, **Father Dan Madigan**, **Father Etienne Renault**, **Father Michel Lagarde**, and **Father Miguel Ayuso** sustained these ecologies, especially at the very difficult early stages when there was skepticism and resistance in the Vatican. Friendships between several Muslim scholars, most notably **Dr Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali** and former **Archbishop Rowan Williams**, enabled the initiative to enjoy his crucial early support. Friendships with Jewish scholars, though they were not specifically addressed by the letter, were vital for the welcoming respect that the initiative received in the **Jewish community**. **Professor Peter Ochs** wrote an early reception that set the trend of Jewish receptions.⁷ It is that positive reaction that is now sustaining ongoing efforts to address a letter to Jewish scholars, despite the dreadful political realities of Israeli-Palestinian strife.

It is interesting that just as such friendships sustained the Common Word initiative, the initiative is now not only sustaining these friendships, but is actually making them grow and spread in unforeseen ways! New friendships are sprouting up through conferences, meetings, workshops, and news conferences.⁸ Friendships with such professional and thoughtful journalists as **Tom Heneghan** have proven vital for sustaining a publically positive atmosphere around the “A Common Word” ecologies.⁹

The emergence of these key seed friendships is a divine gift, but it does need a lot of diligent human preparation and grateful reception, and often works out in unpredictable and unexpected ways. Years ago, the **Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI)** invited me to join the staff of the Institute, even though I was a Muslim. The friendships built during those years were very important in re-building Muslim-Catholic trust and confidence after Regensburg. In May 2007, in the midst of the post-Regensburg cold-war-like atmosphere, PISAI invited me to deliver the **Bradley Lecture**.¹⁰ They even facilitated a key meeting with the Vatican’s Secretary of State in which I conveyed the dismay of Muslim scholars at not receiving a response to their first letter, and at the subsuming of the **Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue** under another Pontifical Council.

Later on, PISAI courageously published an Open Letter of support for “A Common Word” at a time when cynical skepticism dominated the atmosphere of Vatican-Muslim relations. That letter encouraged Muslim scholars, and also signaled, internally to the Vatican, a better way of responding. If PISAI did not exist as an institution that quietly fostered knowledge and friendships with the other, such trust and friendship resources would not have been available when they were needed.¹¹

The same is true of the process, and institution, of the “**Building Bridges**” seminars chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Those important seminars have been building friendships, confidence, and mutual-knowledge between Anglican and Muslim scholars for years.¹² I attended two of those seminars, and the walks and talks that many of us, the Muslim participants, had with Rowan Williams were vital in building the trust that made possible not only his response to “A Common Word”, but also the Muslim understanding of the significance of that response.¹³

The **Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (CIP)** is another example. Despite being daunted by still quite limited endowments, the CIP, with a very small staff, and limited resources, has been able to achieve a great deal, mainly because of its big heart.¹⁴ Friendships with **David Ford, Ben Quash, Catriona Laing, Nick Adams**, and now with **Barbara Bennett and Miriam Lorie**, have been quite important in supporting the ecologies of ‘A Common Word’. The fact that the United Arab Emirates had the vision to support the position of **Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter)**, as Sheikh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the **Faculty of Divinity** enabled CIP to make a valuable contribution to ‘A Common Word’ process.

Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad actually headed our first delegation to the Vatican that led to the establishment of a permanent **Catholic-Muslim Forum**.¹⁵ That Forum met successfully for the first time in Rome on 4–6 November 2008 for a series of extensive theological and frank socio-political discussions, culminating with an important meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in which he gave a beautiful speech that went a long way towards mending Catholic-Muslim relations.¹⁶ Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad has been instrumental in the establishment of the **Cambridge Muslim College**, which will undoubtedly play a crucial role in the formation of a new cadre of young Muslim religious leaders and scholars and in the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion, and blessing.¹⁷

There was also the generous gift by **HM the late Sultan Qaboos** of a new Chair at CIP dedicated to the Abrahamic religions. This meant that CIP was able to continue to grow as a major hub in the network of networks of mutual-compassion and mutual-understanding between the Abrahamic religions. The exchanges between Oman and Cambridge proved to be a great source for joint wisdom in the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion and understanding. CIP just celebrated its 20th anniversary of inter-faith work, thanks to such wise patronage.

The **Reconciliation Programme at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture** has been very important in rallying American theologians, especially Evangelicals, to the support of such ecologies. Its ongoing Project on ‘human flourishing’ will sustain the flourishing of such ecologies. **Professor Peter Ochs** of the **University of Virginia**, who is himself a great institution, combining Rabbinic wisdom and spirituality with philosophical and logical rigour, has been planting incubators for such flourishings everywhere he goes. Scriptural Reasoning groups that foster friendships around Scriptures and their interpretation and understanding are now well-established in hundreds of cities and towns.¹⁸

The **University of Balamand**, based on the beautiful vision of **Metropolitan George**

Khodr, and now **Minister Tarek Mitri**, managed to build a significant network of Muslim-Orthodox friendships. **The World Council of Churches** facilitated a series of Consultations that resulted in the important document entitled “Learning to Explore Love Together: Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to ‘A Common Word’”.¹⁹ They are now planning for major meetings and events, and have taken the gracious step of involving Muslims in the very planning of these events.

President **Iain Torrance** of the **Princeton Theological Seminary**, invited to his Inauguration a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, and thus signaled total support for inter-faith work. His early support of “A Common Word” was very important.²⁰ We are now in the early stages of planning an event on Karl Barth and Islam to encourage deep theological engagement between the two traditions.

Muslim institutions that have fostered and encouraged dialogue over the years have also been vital for the emergence of refreshing ecologies of peace and compassion. **Al-Azhar**, the greatest seat of Sunni Muslim learning has been leading several dialogue initiatives, and has taken important steps towards the training of dialogue-oriented Ulama. **The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan** has been quietly and effectively building intra-Islamic consensus, as well as inter-faith goodwill.

Dar al-Mustafa in Yemen has been graduating serious young Muslim scholars with a balance of proper theology, deep spirituality, and balanced jurisprudence. **Habib Ali al-Jifri’s Tabah Foundation** in the United Arab Emirates has been able to bring the best of that Yemeni faith and wisdom to a wider global audience. Tabah Foundation worked very hard with **Sheikh Amr Khaled** on containing the damage created by the Denmark Cartoons crisis, and managed over the years to build entire networks and ecologies of love and trust within and outside the Muslim community.

Former **Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa**, with the help of a most impressive circle of young scholars, such as **Sheikh Usama al-Sayyid**, has managed to re-build the **Dar al-Ifta’** institution into an up-to-date and organized network of scholars. The former Grand Mufti also revived the deeply spiritual practice of scholarly circles in the **Azhar** mosque itself. His commitment to inter-faith work has been a great sustaining spiritual and intellectual factor in the emergence of ecologies of peace and compassion.

The World Islamic Call Society and College in Libya have been involved in inter-faith work, especially with the Vatican, since 1976, and have built an amazingly wide network of scholars committed to dialogue. Their recent efforts towards dialogue with Evangelicals have already resulted in three successful meetings, and their support for ‘A Common Word’ has been unfailing and continuous. Iran has also supported several inter-faith and inter-civilization dialogues, and its efforts enabled the presence of major Shi’i scholars amongst the signatories of ‘A Common Word’.

Turkey, especially the **Faculty of Divinity at Marmara University**, trained, over many years, top theological talents who are also spiritually oriented towards dialogue. The efforts of **Professor Bekir Karliga** and his students are noteworthy. **The Said Nursi movement** and its ramifications, have also made massive efforts towards the flourishing of love and understanding within humanity. Turkey recently partnered with **Spain** and other countries for a **Dialogue of Civilizations**. There is now a **Saudi dialogue initiative** as well. All these institutional efforts, and I only managed to name some, enable ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing to emerge. Their perspective is long-term, and at times they may seem ineffective. However, it is precisely this long-term institutional work that enables compassion spirals to emerge when there is an urgent need for them.

There is a need today for institutions that are specifically designed to make even more rapid responses. It is important to set “rapid deployment” peace teams that can quickly prevent or handle inter-religious crises. It is important to also build “crisis room” or “situation room” mechanisms to quickly manage crises when they do occur. It is also vital to set up “disaster-recovery” centers that can repair and mend the massive damages that inter-religious strife often causes. It is encouraging that a structure that may enable such institutions to emerge is being set up under the name “C-1 World Dialogue”. Under the capable leadership of the former Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Bishop of London this exciting initiative may make a huge contribution in the years to come.

There have been additional path-breaking inter-faith initiatives since the Common Word process such as the **Marrakesh Declaration**, the **Alliance of Virtue**, the **Peace Forum**, and the **Declaration on Human Fraternity**, all which shall be detailed further by co-panelists today.

However, no matter how many institutions we manage to build, the key to reconciliation and peace is the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing that ultimately stem from love and forgiveness. We must learn to love and forgive, and educate our children to appreciate the beauty and importance of compassion, compassion that is so vast, it can forgive.

The most important element of such a wholesome education is the teaching of forgiveness. It is not so difficult to be compassionate when one is not injured and has nothing to forgive. However, when one is injured, compassionate conduct becomes difficult because it requires genuine forgiveness, which is often difficult and even painful. Most cruelty today is practiced in the name of justice based on grievances, real or perceived, and supported by a logic of reciprocity that often degenerates into a tit-for-tat of endless cruelty spirals. When one is unforgiving, one can easily become self-righteously cruel.

All major wisdom traditions Jewish, Christian, Muslims, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and Humanist, clearly value forgiveness. Alas, we are not very good parishioners of it. Here is what the Qur’an tells a Muslim to do:

Repel evil with what is better, for We know best what they describe.

(The Holy Qur’an, 23:96)

Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel [evil] with what is better; you will see that he with whom you had enmity has become your dearest friend. (The Holy Qur’an, 41:34)

Let not those who are blessed with favours and means among you swear that they will not give to their kindred and to the needy and to emigrants in the cause of Allah; let them rather forgive and be indulgent. Do you not wish that Allah forgives you? And Allah is Forgiving, Compassionate. (The Holy Qur’an, 24:22)

Here is what the Bible tells the Christian to do:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow

from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Matthew 5:38-47, English Standard Version)

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says: 'Connect with the one who cuts you off, give to the one who deprives you, and forgive the one who treats you with injustice.' (Ahmed, no. 17122)

Yet, Christians and Muslims can be so amazingly unforgiving of each other! We may very well need new hearts that can forgive, love, and cherish all others, even our so called "enemies". Only our Compassionate God can grant us such new forgiving and loving hearts. However, gatherings like this one can help 'prepare the way for the Lord' by opening our injured and pained hearts, with all their wounds, faults, and incapacities, to the creative and transformative healing that comes from God alone. Great luminescent signs of hope are at hand: With God's permission, ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing are already flourishing in both heavenly and earthly gardens.

May the Lord always grant us the loving company of "*those who believe, and counsel one another to patience, and counsel one another to mercy*" (The Holy Qur'an, 90:17).

Moses (peace be upon him) prays in the Holy Qur'an: "*My Lord! Have mercy on me and on my brother; bring us into Your mercy. You are the Most Merciful of the merciful!*" (The Holy Qur'an, 7:151)

Our Challenge Today

Today, we are daunted, and even haunted, by cycles and spirals of violence that stem from the fact that our communities mirror each other's cruelty and evil. We need to break these vicious cycles and spirals, and get on with mirroring each other's compassion and goodness. Only the building up of spirals of compassion will lead to the emergence of a "Compassion Architecture" consisting of a network of networks of wholesome goodness and joyful compassion.²¹ Here are some of the key attitudinal seeds for growing such ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing that can spiral, in goodness, unto heaven:

1. Let us break the cycles and spirals of cruelty with sudden, unexpected, unassuming, and free acts of love and compassion;
2. Let us stop being fixated on our own grievances, no matter how legitimate they happen to be, and reach out to heal the grievances of the other, no matter how undeserving we feel that other to be;
3. Let us stop complaining, and let us start dreaming, together, of better futures for all of us, and for all our children. Say, "I have a dream!", not "I have a complaint!" (quoting Sheikh Mustafa Ceric);²²
4. Let us invoke deep forgiveness of each other, and let us extend that forgiveness unilaterally and freely, without any obsessions, with "reciprocity";
5. Forgiving love and compassion is grander and more effective than any justice-obsessed discourse that demands reciprocity, important as justice may, of course, be; Such discourse often degenerates into tit-for-tat cycles that make the spirals of cruelty even worse;

6. Prepare the conditions of possibility that enable and facilitate of the rise of compassion spirals. These conditions include:
- a. Nourishing personal friendships within, and across, communities that incubate relations of deep trust and deep resources for healing and mending. These seeds of trust are vital for breaking the very roots of cruelty spirals, and giving a chance for compassion spirals to grow;
 - b. Sustaining patient and persistent activities and institutions that continue to ‘build bridges’, even when there is no present traffic to use the bridges. Inevitably, there comes a day when the bridges will be very much needed. The building bridges must be with, and across, communities. Inner bridges are often necessary for sustaining outer bridges;
 - c. Preparing ‘rapid deployment’, ‘crisis centers’ and ‘disaster-recovery’ infrastructures, with hybrid joint teams, ready for ‘preemptive peace’ that can quickly respond in times of crises and that can help thwart ‘preemptive wars’, as well as teams that can intervene to mitigate and reverse the effects of disastrous conflict when they do occur.

The list of compassion seeds just made may sound like wishful thinking. However, they are very much practical, viable, and effective. The recent poesies and emergence of the ecology of peace, compassion and blessing called “A Common Word” offers a very interesting case for meditation and celebration!

May the Lord encompass *all* with His infinite compassion.

And God knows best. ❁

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- ¹ Muhammad Abul-Huda al-Siadi, *Qiladat al-Jawahir*. Maktabat al-Rifa'i. Cairo, 2004.
- ² The “Love in The Holy Qur’an” Conference was organized by the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute in Amman, Jordan and held on 4-7 September 2007. For more details on this groundbreaking event and the proceedings of the conference see, <http://www.aalabayt.org/en/newsconference14.html>
- ³ For the initial response by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, after the launch of “A Common Word”, see <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=11>
- ⁴ For the full text of the document, published on 18 November 2007, see <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf>
- ⁵ See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=new&item=3>
- ⁶ For the proceedings of the Common Word conferences at Yale, Cambridge/Lambeth, Vatican and Georgetown, see www.acommonword.com
- ⁷ A different group of Muslim scholars did draft a resolution similar to ‘A Common Word’, see <http://www.mujca.com/muslimsandjews.htm>. The reception of this resolution was minimal, and a more sustained theological document for Muslim-Jewish relations is still in the making by figures associated with “A Common Word”, and will require an equally solid consensus as the “A Common Word” document had, in order to trigger an theological and spiritual perspective change in inter-faith relations between the two faith communities.
- ⁸ For a summary of key events and accomplishments of “A Common Word” see, <http://www.acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/2-general/161-qa-common-wordq-accomplishments-2007-2009.html>.
- ⁹ Tom Heneghan, the Religious Affairs editor for Reuters, has regularly covered key events related to “A Common Word” initiative in his blog. See, <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/>. There is a convenient “A Common Word” tag for accessing all the pieces in sequence.
- ¹⁰ For the text of the Bradley Lecture, see Aref Ali Nayed, “Compassion and Understanding in Islam”, in *Islamochristiana*, vol.33, 2007, pp.137-148.
- ¹¹ For PISAI’s response to “A Common Word”, see <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=27>
- ¹² The Building Bridges Seminar was first launched in 2002 by Lord Carey and it is a unique annual series bringing together Christian and Muslim scholars for an intensive study of key Biblical and Qur’anic texts. The seminars have been

held at the Lambeth Palace and also in Doha, Sarajevo, Washington DC, Singapore and Rome. The Proceedings of the seminars have been published as separate volumes, all edited by Michael Ipgrave: *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Lambeth, 2002); *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together* (Doha, 2003); *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur'anic Perspectives* (Georgetown, 2004); and *Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good* (Sarajevo, 2005). For a summary of the various seminars, see <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2198>. There is also an interesting video clip on [youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq5A4U_TVA) where Muslim and Christian participants at the Building Bridges seminar in Rome in May 2008: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq5A4U_TVA

¹³ A sustained theological and meditative response was presented by Dr Rowan Williams at the Common Word conference held at Cambridge and Lambeth Palace in October 2008, see <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1892>

¹⁴ See <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/cip/>

¹⁵ For Abdal Hakim Murad's reflections on the meeting with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican that led to the establishment of a permanent Catholic-Muslim Forum, see <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/vatican/AH-Murad-Statement.pdf>

¹⁶ For Pope Benedict XVI's speech at the First Catholic-Muslim Forum, see <http://acommonword.com/en/conferences/20-rome-november-2008/105-address-of-his-holiness-benedict-xvi-to-participants-in-the-seminar-organized-by-the-catholic-muslim-forumq.html>. Other presentations at the Forum are also found on the same website. Pope Benedict XVI followed this with an important Papal visit to Jordan in May 2009 where he gave a public address at the King Hussein bin Talal Mosque in Amman, further cementing of relations between the two faith communities and also citing the Amman Inter-Faith Message and the Common Word initiative. For the address by Pope Benedict XVI and the key welcoming address by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, see <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/11-new-fruits-of-a-common-word/257-pope-benedict-xvi-visits-jordan.html>.

¹⁷ "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". See <http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/>

¹⁸ On the Scriptural Reasoning project led by Peter Ochs, see materials on Scriptural Reasoning on the University of Virginia Website. Also, Peter Ochs, "Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together", address given at the Inauguration of Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, March 2005, <http://www.ptsem.edu/Inaugural/pdf/Ochs%20address-3-10-05.pdf>

¹⁹ For the full text of the document, see http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p6/Learning_to_Explore_Love_Together.pdf

²⁰ See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=7>

²¹ For more on the notion of a "Compassion Architecture", see Aref Nayef, "From "security" to compassion—a needed shift for Obama government", <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/tag/inter-faith/>

²² See <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081113/FOREIGN/371646091-1/NEWS>

APPENDICES

Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION. *What is this document really about?*

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

QUESTION. *Why now?*

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

QUESTION. *Isn't it too late?*

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

QUESTION. *Is the group of signatures representative?*

ANSWER. Yes, it is. It includes people with different profiles: religious authorities, scholars, intellectuals, media experts, professionals, etc ... It also includes people from different schools of mainstream Islam: Sunni, Shi'a (J'afari, Ziadi, Isma'ili), and Ibadi.

QUESTION. *How representative can a mere 138 persons be?*

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

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

ANSWER. This is deliberate. It ensures a mixture of ages, experiences, and backgrounds. No one profile can singlehandedly engage the issues we face today. Jointly, the team is quite effective.

QUESTION. *Who is the author of this document?*

ANSWER. The author is the joint dedication of all its signatories. It is a collective effort.

QUESTION. *What were the mechanics of its production?*

ANSWER. Momentum for it started with the Amman Message and the Amman Interfaith Message. The momentum continued to grow through several gatherings and conferences, the last of which was one on "Love in the Qur'an". The final draft emerged out of that

conference, and the process of signing began. The experience of having worked out a document in union to respond to the Pope last year made this year's document easier to achieve.

QUESTION. *So, is this document really a consensus?*

ANSWER. Yes, it is. It constitutes a normative "ijma" by the scholars of the Ummah. This consensus will get stronger and stronger as more people sign it and uphold it. The mechanism for doing so, through the Common Word website, is already in place.

QUESTION. *Is this a Jordanian government document?*

ANSWER. No, it is not. It is a joint document by the Ummah's scholars. Jordan is indeed a welcoming and respected nexus of peace and harmony, which makes it an ideal place of consensus building. The leadership of Jordan has indeed been supportive.

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

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

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

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

QUESTION. *Why is it that Jews are not addressed?*

ANSWER. Jewish scriptures are invoked repeatedly and respectfully in the document by way of preparing the ground for a further document specifically addressed to Jewish scholars. It is quite normal for documents to be bilateral without implying the exclusion of others.

QUESTION. *Why is it not addressed to people of other religions, for example Hindus and Buddhists?*

ANSWER. Again, we selected the approach of bilateral documents. More documents will be coming.

QUESTION. *Are you deliberately excluding secularists and non-believers?*

ANSWER. We are concerned about all of humanity, and now that we have a mechanism for net-working and working together, we will perfect it, and use it to address all of humanity in a systematic manner.

QUESTION. *Is this document an attack on the Pope so as to pressure him, in that he never answered your first document last year?*

ANSWER. We have no such intention. Even though the Pope did not answer last year's document, we still addressed him first. This is in obedience to the direction of our own religion. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches us to still connect with those who cut us off.

QUESTION. *What if the Pope ignores the letter? Will you address him again?*

ANSWER. Yes, of course, we are extending our hand in love, and we will keep extending it a thousand times in obedience to God and for the sake of humanity. We are not hung up on reciprocity or tit-for-tat. We do this in answer to the religious and moral imperative we feel in our hearts.

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

ANSWER. We will have to keep trying to get through. That is a religious duty for the sake of God and humanity, no matter what the response is like.

QUESTION. *What if the response is negative?*

ANSWER. We will then respond with more gentleness, compassion, and love. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches to ward off bad with good.

QUESTION. *Don't you think that you should fix your problems first and stop your inner fighting before you address others?*

ANSWER. We have already started the process of inner-healing with the Amman message. The two tasks are not mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, sometimes addressing others unites our hearts in ways that can be healing to our own inner wounds. Only God's compassion can unite us. The more compassion we show the others, the more inner compassion we will have.

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

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

QUESTION. *Your stark warning about the future of the world is so exaggerated. Don't you think that you have over done it?*

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

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

ANSWER. No, it is a compassionate plea for peace. Any one who claims that it is a threat is either being paranoid or cynical or both!

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

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

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

ANSWER. This document is a humble first step, but one that strives to lay a solid foundation for the construction of many worthy edifices. The document can not be expected to do everything at once.

QUESTION. *Isn't this document just another form of propaganda?*

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

QUESTION. *Are you willing to address a similar message to Muslim? They surely need it. Look at Iraq!*

ANSWER. Yes, this message is addressed to all of humanity. Love God and Love of neighbor is something that we all need to practice. The Amman Message was already an internal message.

QUESTION. *How will you follow up on this?*

ANSWER. Through institution-building that can stabilize the networking and processes that lead to it, developing outreach programs to achieve communal effectiveness, working on related research programs, and meeting with others for genuine and deep heart-to-heart discussions. Media, publishing, and web tools must be used to widen the efficacy and increase the momentum for goodness and for peace. ❀

Rome Press Conference

[On March 3rd 2008, Muslim representatives of the “A Common Word Initiative” met with Vatican officials in Rome for two days to agree on a way forward to establish a meaningful engagement between Muslim and Catholic scholars. Muslim participants at the meeting were Dr Aref Ali Nayed, Dr Ibrahim Kalin, Timothy Winter, Sheikh Yahya Pallavicini, and Sohail Nakhooda. The Vatican participants were Cardinal Tauran, Archbishop Pier Luigi Celata, Msgr. Khaled Akasheh, Father Miguel Ayuso Guixot, and Father Christian W. Troll. The Muslim delegation held a press conference in the evening led by Dr Aref Nayed. Below is the transcript of his comments at the press conference.]

AREF NAYED: We are really happy to have you here, and it gives us great courage and hope that the media is so interested in this process of the common word initiative. I just want to clarify what we’re trying to achieve in this particular gathering.

We will be briefing you about what has transpired over the last two days in terms of preparatory discussions with the Vatican, but we’d also like to take this opportunity to brief you about the overall Common World Initiative: where we’re at and what other tracks we’re following, so that we can address the initiative globally and then we can speak about the particular meetings we had over the past two days.

There has been a joint communiqué that was jointly released by the Vatican and by our group, and we’ve made this press release available to you. It outlines the structure of the forthcoming events and the participants and so on.

If I may just preface all our discussions and questions and answers with a summary of the Common Word Initiative and where we’re at exactly; some of you are very familiar with it and some are new to it.

We have an unprecedented gathering—kind of a network—of Muslim scholars from mainstream schools, including: Sunni, Shi’i and ‘Ibadi scholars; and these scholars gathered together in a unique manner in order in a sense to give back to the mainstream its voice and to re-articulate once again what mainstream Islam is about. And this group of scholars thought that a great way of starting this was to go back to the very basics of what the

faith is about. And we launched a document which is called 'A common word between us and you' which is taken from a Qur'anic verse and there is a website acommonword.com which contains a complete briefing about this document and its history as well as the massive responses it's getting.

What we are trying to achieve with this initiative is to go back to the very basic simple foundations of the faith which unfortunately often gets buried in intricate theological discourses or social-political discourses; so we want to go back to the basics of love of God, love of neighbour, a sentiment that is shared with our brethren and sisters be they jews or Christians who share this love of God and love of neighbour so that we can build upon that which is shared.

Since the launch of the document, which was announced simultaneously in Abu Dhabi with Tabah Foundation led by a great scholar from Yemen, Habib Ali al-Jifri, and also in London with myself and the Bishop of London and David Ford of Cambridge, as well as in Georgetown University with the help of professor Esposito and professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The response has been incredibly positive and quite heartening in many ways. We received on the very same day a positive response from the Archbishop of Canterbury; furthermore, we've had a lot of responses from protestant churches including 300 evangelical leaders who published a full page of their support who were not normally in dialogue with Muslims.

We were so happy that muslim scholars held a press conference in Abu Dhabi in order to thank the Christian leaders for that. There has also been a very warm and positive response from orthodox churches including the orthodox church of Russia and also Orthodox churches in the Middle East.

The scholars gathered in this initiative are working with their Christian counterparts on their many tracks. A conference is planed at Yale University along with Harvard Divinity school along with the Princeton theological seminary; there is also a conference planned at Cambridge in 2008 in which we expect the archbishop of Canterbury to participate which we look forward to because of its special focus on scripture and issues related to interpretation and hermeneutics. We will also have an event in January in 2009 with Georgetown University that addresses geopolitical issues and issues centering around faith and world politics. This is in addition to a track with the Orthodox churches which is being held locally as well as an international event in Jordan.

The track of engaging the Catholic church is very important. the pope leads a billion christians; however, our engagement is with various tracks and they are all important to us because different muslim communities have different relations and live in different contexts; and it is important to keep working with all of these tracks.

For the track with the Catholic church we were very pleased to get some early responses from individual Catholic scholars such as Professor Dan Madigan and Professor Thomas Michel and also from the leaders and professors of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) who wrote a beautiful statement which was very encouraging to many Muslim scholars

Subsequently his holiness the Pope wrote through the good offices of Cardinal Bertone and in that letter it was suggested that a group of Muslims come and organise the technical and logistical set-up for meetings, and that is what brings us to Rome.

We met with the Vatican over two days, and we concluded with some important consequences. First of all, the atmosphere was quite positive and welcoming and it was very nice to be with our counterparts from the Catholic Church; furthermore, by the end of

the meetings, we emerged with a permanent structure that will ensure that the Catholic-Muslim engagement and dialogue will continue into the future to work out issues and to work out interchangeable opinions about important matters. So we together established the Catholic-Muslim Forum which will meet every two years: one year in Rome and the subsequent meeting in Amman or Abu Dhabi, etc. This structure ensures that this is not just a momentary event but a process that begins with love of God and love of neighbour and continues to build upon this main theme that we gather around to address real issues that concern humanity today. So we are very pleased with the establishment of this Catholic-Muslim Forum; and we are also pleased that we have been able to jointly decide the theme which will be love of God and love of neighbour and we take that as a clear endorsement of the common word initiative and we thank the Vatican for that.

Furthermore we have decided on the first sub-theme which will be on theological-spiritual foundations for this initiative, which is very important so that we're not just engaged in socio-political discourse but in deed discourse. And the second day theme will be on the dignity of human beings and mutual respect and educating the youth about respect between us.

We will conclude with an open session on the third day and we expect it to include a meeting between his holiness the pope and our eminent excellencies, the scholars of Islam so that there can be a clear symbol of hope and of agreement and we can go forward in a positive manner. We are grateful to our host the Vatican for the hospitality they have shown.

QUESTION: What do you say to those who say that theological dialogue not possible?

AREF NAYED: I think there was some of a misunderstanding which was clarified. Some people interpreted theological dialogue as escaping from social-political issues; but what we mean is that addressing social and political issues should be rooted in the revelation of God and in the theological teachings of our two communities; that we cannot just do social-political discussion devoid of theology, but that our social-political doctrine and preaching is based on our revelation and our tradition and our theology. And we gave that clarification and it was well taken, and as a result, the first day of the seminar in November will be on the theological-spiritual foundations and the second day will branch out into social-political issues like human dignity and human respect. Of course we have chosen the most foundational and in many ways neutral things to begin with; but the forum will go on for years, and I'm sure we'll address more difficult issues as we go along.

QUESTION: The wounds of Reagan's war are still open and given the pace of the world today, is meeting once every two years enough?

AREF NAYED: You see: this whole initiative is about healing. It is about healing the wounds of a very pained and in many ways destroyed world. We have cruelty all over the place, we have wars, famines, massacres, terrorist acts, torture, we have people who are kidnapped—and I take this opportunity to express our heartfelt prayers for the release of the archbishop of the Chaldean who was kidnapped recently in Iraq—and for all prisoners of wars and prisoners of politics and prisoners of nonsense and prisoners of cruelty. There are tens of thousands of prisoners in Iraq and in Palestine and in many other places, and we pray for the release of all prisoners. We also take this time to remind our fellow Muslims that it is against the Prophet's teaching to even touch religious leaders and monks and priests because these people don't only just represent themselves as human beings who are

dignified and worthy of the highest respect and sanctity, but also the fact that sometimes these people represent millions and even billions of people. religious persons and religious leaders and religious symbols must be respected; and we are very happy that Al-Azhar and Vatican released a very important statement condemning the insulting of religious symbols. And we pray for the release of the archbishop and for all political prisoners and pray to God to give this world piece; and we hope this initiative is part of the healing.

You asked me if the Muslims have healed from the German lecture. Some of them still feel offended quite deeply. Just because we are part of this initiative doesn't mean that we are not hurt by this. However, we must not only dwell on the negative but dwell on the positive.

There have been some recent positive moves by the Vatican which are much appreciated: this joint statement regarding religious symbols is very important for us, because Muhammad, peace be upon him, our Prophet, and the holy Qur'an are extremely important; and it's very encouraging to see the Vatican standing by us at a moment some people think it is part of free speech to humiliate the sacred; so such moves by the Vatican are very encouraging for us.

Also, recent moves by the Vatican in terms of the visit to Istanbul which was conducted with the highest and utmost mutual respect by both communities; all of these events help, some clarification statements help. So we would like to dwell on the positive because we need hope and we need to build up trust instead of mistrust. We have systematically replied to the claims made in the German lecture both at the individual level by various scholars and also collectively in a paper signed by 38 muslim scholars. and we take those replies to stand because there has not been any substantial reply to such comments. and we feel that scholarly discussion should be met with scholarly response rather than violence or agitation or anything like that.

We are in a healing process. We were treated with dignity and respect these two days in Rome and our delegation was treated with the utmost courtesy and we appreciate that and we want to build upon it.

QUESTION: Religious freedom for christian minorities, what is your message to leaders in these countries?

AREF NAYED: It's very tempting to make inter-religious encounters into what i call "grievances list" exchange. I mean, we Muslims have many, many grievances about the situations of Muslim minorities in predominantly Catholic countries, for example, and I'm sure the Catholics have grievances in some countries. But the point is that if I bring my grievance list and they bring their grievance list we're not going to get anywhere.

I think we need to do is to call for sanctity of life, dignity of the human being, freedom of the human being—and not discriminate be it Jew or Catholic or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim; the human being should be respected as such. And believe me, in many cases of oppression, you'll find that everyone is oppressed in that particular country, i'm not mentioning any country by name, but in some countries you'll find that oppression is general and it's very natural for minorities to feel that they're being picked on, and this happens across communities throughout the world.

So we know that the pope is concerned about religious freedom and about the dignity of the human being, but we also know that they don't mean to make it specific to the catholics; rather it is something which is completely shared. We also uphold the religious freedom and the dignity of the human being. So long as we don't self-righteously pick on

each other and accuse each other, i think that we can make great progress by seeing each other as allies in facing oppression and cruelty and the limitations on such freedoms.

QUESTION: *What do you hope would be achieved? Since you say you represent mainstream or moderate islam, how will that effect less mainstream?*

AREF NAYED: Regarding the first part of the question: when you are in a very dark cave a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel or from above is extremely important in keeping your spirits up and for getting you out of the darkness. Humanity today suffers tremendously from cruelty, it suffers from violence, from disrespect, from torment. We need signs of hope. So when you ask, what are we trying to achieve by meeting with the Pope—and not just the pope, but other religious sym-bols like Patriarch Alexy II of Russia or the Archbishop of Canterbury or the evangilical learders of the united states—we want the sight of these leaders with our leaders and scholars standing together in love of God and love of neighbour, so that we have signs of hope so that reli-gious communities can be a help in getting humanity out of the cruelty cycle that it is in rather than being a cause for the cycle.

With regard to the second part: how do we bring this mainstream message to the extreme. There is a most unfortunate phenomenon—and with all do respect to the media, the media tends to focus on the spectacular, and when that spectacular is negative or destructive, they give it more attention. And the net result is that we have this misrepresentation, so that loud, violent, cruel minorities are taken to represent entire communities. The mainstream that I'm talking about represents not less than 95% to 97% of humans who call themselves Muslim. so if we can achieve peace amongst that community and the counterpart, that itself will give great help and help us deal with the issues of extremism and violent minorities.

Part of the amazing sort of negative dialectic, is that by focusing on the negative all the time we make the negative grow. and we need to refocus on the positive and the good so that the good can grow amongst us.

QUESTION: *Will the pope actually participate in the proceedings?*

AREF NAYED: The protocol of the visit will be detailed in the weeks to come. We have expressed clearly to the Vatican that the scholars expect parity and symmetry in the meetings. Of course we recognise that the Vatican has a long tradition of protocol and processes. So it will take some weeks to finalise all the protocol details, but the idea that we have is that we must demonstrate to the world parity and symmetry and equality before God, so that we can build together rather than have one party shown to dominate. That will take some time. The participation of his holiness the Pope depends entirely on what he and the Vatican decide. Of course Muslim scholars love the contributions of scholars—and the Pope is a scholar—but we do recognise that he is also a sovereign of the Vatican and he has other functions, so it is entirely up to the Catholics to decide the extent of the involvement of the Pope. What we ask is for parity and symmetry so whatever involvement he has, the most senior of the Muslim scholar also has.

QUESTION: *Will you prepare a meeting with the Jewish communities?*

AREF NAYED: We have said from the outset that our addressing of the Christian leaders is in no way meant to exclude our Jewish brothers and sisters. as a matter of fact, in the selection of the texts we have made sure that texts that are acceptable and normative to our

Jewish brothers and sisters are included in the text; but it is very natural for religious communities to deal with each other in a bilateral manner. Just as the Vatican deals with the Jewish community in a separate track from the Muslim community. This particular document was addressed to the Christians. We have already started preparing a document that is addressed to Jewish rabbis and leaders, and it is a work in progress, and we are diligently working on that.

We feel that the political situation in the Middle East has for too long been allowed to dominate the religious relationship between Muslims and Jews and we do hope that building consensus amongst Muslim and Jewish leaders will actually contribute to peace.

QUESTION: Professor Troll wrote about the relationship within the Muslim community after the publication of the Common Word, what is the situation within the Muslim community?

AREF NAYED: There is a very ancient theological focal point which is called *tawhid al-qibla* 'the unity of direction of Makkah', which was throughout the ages seen as essential for the various Muslim communities. So although the Sunnis and the Shi'is and the Ibadis differ in some doctrinal notions; there is a unity of intentionality and direction. All this initiative is doing is simply re-activating and re-articulating this. And this process started in Amman with the Amman Message which is a very important document that was signed by all of the authoritative schools of Islam, and it continued in several initiatives by several Muslim scholars, especially around the Tabah Foundation and the Sheikh Habib Ali al-Jifri in the United Arab Emirates with no less than three documents being released. So there is a kind of re-articulating of theological unity that unites all the Muslims. And it is very significant that we are uniting around love of God and love of neighbour; if we cannot love our Shi'i neighbour or our 'Ibadi neighbour, how can we love our Christian or Jewish neighbour? So our inner unity is what gives us the capacity to unite with all others, and there is no contradiction between the unity of the Muslims and being in respectful and loving relations with other communities. It is unity which gives us the strength to be able to be open to all others.

If I may just add regarding the number of signatories. First of all, the level of representation of each person on that list is different. Someone at the head of the Muhammadiyah Movement in Indonesia has millions of followers, and the Mufti of Egypt has millions of followers, whereas academic circles might be smaller, but they might be stronger. The inclusion of Imam Yahya in the signatories and not having more Italians in the signatories does not indicate that other Italian Muslim leaders don't want to sign the document or be included. As a matter of fact we have planned immediately after the Vatican seminar we've planned to hold Friday prayers at the Rome mosque, and we hope that the leaders of the Muslim community in Italy will join us and help us to endorse this, and also to help to bring it into the preaching into the mosque and the daily activities in communities. And we're not only doing this in Italy, we're doing this in Nigeria and with communities in Pakistan and India.

It is like cologne: to make a diluted preachable form, you have to have the essence first. And what this document was is having the essence of religiosity as love of God and love of neighbour, then it can be preached in mosques and in madrasas and throughout the world through the efforts of community leaders; and we are quite fortunate to have Imam Yahya with us here in Italy because he has the advantage of being close to the Muslim community and also being close to the Catholic community and the political community,

and he represents youth in Italy, so we feel that like figures like Imam Yahya can help us reach all of the rest of the muslim community in Italy and in other places.

The President of al-Azhar University, Professor Dr Ahmed al-Tayyib—who is one of the most eminent theologians of Islam today—is a signature of this; this is in addition to his excellency the former Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gomaa who has a great stature and is held with the utmost respect in the community. If I just may just add: the initiative of al-Azhar with the Vatican we very much stand by it and there is total coordination between this group and al-Azhar

QUESTION: Do you think Catholic-Muslim Forum could act as a rapid response to cases such as the cartoon crisis, by issuing declarations and promoting a common initiative to stop such crisis?

AREF NAYED: Yes of course because such structures, especially permanent structures in which communication continues, and when we say we're going to meet every two years does not mean that we'll communicate only every two years—we might communicate every month or every week. When communication channels are open, it is like hotlines so that communities can reach each other and respond to crises and not let things escalate.

QUESTION: Do you think the Vatican underestimated the importance of Islam and Muslims? As you know Archbishop Fitzgerald's department was downgraded. Then we had Regensburg and then they suddenly decided that this is important and that Muslims exists and now they have a Cardinal leading the department again. Do you think that was a mistake?

AREF NAYED: First of all, I would like to say that since Vatican II and since *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican has held Islam in the highest esteem and has continued to make great efforts to have dialogue with Muslims; and we cannot let one or two bad instances tarnish the history of very hard work done by people like the Pontifical Institute for Islamic Studies, and various other efforts done in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Tunisia, in Algeria over many, many years that are well documented in journal called *Islamochristiana*.

So we do not think that the Vatican ever underestimates the importance of Islam and we do believe that they hold Islam with the highest esteem, and we take the doctrinal statements of *Nostra Aetate* as foundational for the Vatican and every single Pope that has come since then has reaffirmed the importance of *Nostra Aetate* including the most recent Pope Benedict XVI. What happened in Germany I personally believe was a huge mistake, but we all make mistakes; some of them are quite spectacular and they tend to be in accord with one's stature—so the one with a big stature the mistakes are very big.

But we must go beyond this. There is a tradition of our Prophet, peace be upon him, which says that every human being makes mistakes, but the best human being is the one who repent and go back to the truth. So so long as we are willing to correct mistakes and learn from each other and love each other in God and go forward, I believe that that is the spirit we should have, rather than just lamentation in grievances.

So I believe that the Vatican takes Islam seriously, and they obviously take this initiative very seriously. The statement of al-Azhar included love of god and love of neighbour in the middle of the statement, and the theme of this particular upcoming seminar is the very theme of the Common World, which means that they take the group of scholars and ulema and Islam seriously; and we likewise take them seriously and that's why we're here.

QUESTION: *Is the initiative speaking in the name of the whole Islamic world?*

AREF NAYED: I'll give you a technological paradigm or metaphor: the internet is a network of networks and every node in the internet is very weak in itself, and every node in the internet does not represent the internet completely, but the network of network is very strong, very resilient, because if something is down another part comes up.

In islam, religious authority is distributed; it is very much networked; and it is a network of networks. What we have tried to do is build a network of mainstream Muslim scholars cross the board across regions and across schools. And we believe that with God's help and grace we have succeed in doing this; and we do intend on dropping the network or neglecting it. We intend on keeping hard work on building more works to connect to it. How representative of this? I believe that it is very, very representative: because of the people who have signed and because of the nature of the discourse. We believe that it is very important not to see the distribution of authority in Islam as a weakness—because some people say, you have a problem you don't have a pope. On the contrary, we believe that we are very strong even though we don't have a Pope. Islam functions perfectly without a centralised figure because of this phenomenon of distributed authority. It is God who meant it to be for us this way, and we respect each other across the sects, we respect each other across our theological and sectarian differences; and we can speak collectively—not because me or him or Imam Yahya Pallavicini or Sohail Nakhoda—but because of the totality of the group. And we thank our great scholars for the confidence that they've given us to participate in these meetings.

QUESTION: *Will Tareq Ramadan be one of the participants in the first meeting?*

AREF NAYED: The date was set for this meeting over the last two days and we have yet to ask the various signatories for their availability during that time. There is also a question of selectiveness and the priorities of different people; and also the distribution of the scholars amongst the various initiatives because some people have to go to Canterbury or to Cambridge to meet the archbishop and some people have to go to Yale, so we still have to distribute the names and so on, and this is done in a consultive manner which is called shura in arabic, so we will have a full list at the later stage.

QUESTION: *Are there attempts on both sides to make sure women scholars are involved?*

AREF NAYED: Yes indeed: We see our sister scholars as great contributors to this. There are already women signatories to the common word document and we foresee that all of our delegations be it to the Vatican or to Cambridge or to Yale or to Georgetown will include women scholars—not because they're women but because they're great scholars. It is quite an honour to have such scholars as Ingrid Mattson or Aisha Manai'i of Qatar amongst our teams. ❀

APPENDIX THREE

Interview on “A Common Word” Initiative with Catholic News Service

Interview with Aref Ali Nayed by Cindy Wooden

Following the delivery of “A Common Word”, the ground-breaking and historic open letter to Christian clergy, scholars and leaders calling for peace and greater goodwill between Muslims and Christians, responses varied from open acceptance to soft rejection. Cindy Wooden of the Catholic News Service spoke with Aref Ali Nayed, the chief spokesperson on behalf of the open letter, about what he believes will be achieved by this interfaith initiative, what theological foundation dialogue between Muslims and Christians should rest on, and how Muslim and Christian scriptures are windows rather than walls for increased understanding.

CINDY WOODEN: *How would you describe the dialogue the “A Common Word” project hopes to initiate?*

AREF NAYED: The dialogue, or rather set of dialogues, we hope “A Common Word” will initiate are multifaceted, multilayered, multi-disciplinary, and multilateral. It is more a set or matrix of polyphonic discourses that are united through their exclusive focus: Loving worship of the One God, and Love of our neighbors. The matrix includes theological, spiritual, scriptural, juridical, and ethical discourses. It is to be conducted in cooperation with a broad range of partners from all active Christian Churches and denominations including the Catholic, Protestant (both traditional and evangelical), and the Orthodox communities. The discourses will be with Church leaders, centers of theological studies, spiritual communities, scriptural reasoning and reading groups, and grassroots organizations. We are very much encouraged by the fact that positive responses have already come in abundance from such a multiplicity of nodes of Christian communal life including top Christian leaders, and the world’s top Theology, Divinity, and Islamic Studies centers.

CINDY WOODEN: *Would you make a distinction between a “theological” dialogue and a dialogue focused on common moral values and social concerns?*

AREF NAYED: Of course, there is a distinction between theological dialogue and ethical/social dialogue. However, for people who believe in divine revelation as the ultimate font and ground for righteous living, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims do, theology and theological dialogue must be the foundational ground of all other forms of dialogue. Mere ethical/social dialogue is useful, and is very much needed. However, dialogue of that kind happens everyday, through purely secular institutions such as the United Nations and its organizations. If religious revelation-based communities are to truly contribute to humanity, their dialogue must be ultimately theologically and spiritually grounded. Many Muslim theologians are not just interested in mere ethical dialogue of “cultures” or “civilizations”. We take our Qur’anic/ Prophetic revelation solemnly and seriously, as the very foundation of all our living and all our discourses. Islam is a great deal more than a “culture” or a “civilization”. It is a prophetic revelatory religion and heartfelt faith that has been the rich font of multiple cultures and civilizations. If dialogue is to be serious, it must be theologically and spiritually deep.

CINDY WOODEN: *What is your reaction to Cardinal Tauran's statement about Muslims' understanding of the Qur'an?*

AREF NAYED: Cardinal Tauran’s statement to *Le Croix* was very disappointing indeed. It came at a time of high expectation of responsiveness, and on the eve of the important Naples Sant’Egidio encounter. Many people were expecting Pope Benedict XVI to say something positive about the Muslim scholars’ initiative. Alas, a truly historic opportunity for a loving embrace was simply missed.

Instead, the Cardinal’s statement deeply discouraged Muslim scholars, and annoyed many Muslim believers at the grassroots level. Many such believers blamed their leaders for still approaching the Vatican, given the Cardinal’s attitude and the Vatican’s non-responsiveness to Muslim scholars last year. The Cardinal’s statement was quickly propagated through the press, and almost derailed the whole initiative. Muslim scholars already expressed their views on the Cardinal’s statement in their Communiqué to the Naples encounter. However, the content of the Cardinal’s statement does need to be addressed theologically and hermeneutically.

The ill-founded claim of the Cardinal (that dialogue is hindered by Muslim belief that the Qur’an is the very speech of God (exalted) clearly suffers from being stuck in a double bind: First, the bind of misunderstanding and misrepresenting Islamic teachings regarding the Qur’an. Second, the bind of misrepresenting, through false contrast, the Catholic doctrine on Christian Scriptures. Let me explain how this double bind works.

The Qur’an, is the very discourse (*kalam*) of our Exalted One God (Allah), as revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and as faithfully preserved through uninterrupted communal transmission (*tawatur*). The Qur’an is eternal (*qadim*) in essence, origin, and as essential divine discourse competence (*kalamullah* as *kalam nafsi*). It is, however, also historical in its unfolding, as revelatory performance (*kalamullah* as *kalam lafzi*), and was revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in intimate engagement with the historical and living circumstances and events of the Muslim community (*tanzil* and *tanjim*). (For more on this, see *Al-Insaf* and *Al-Tamhid* of Imam Abu Bakr Al-Baqillani, d. 1013 CE).

Muslim scholars have always based their interpretations and exegeses of the Qur’an on the bases of several historical and philological sciences, including the science of the

“circumstances of revelation” (*asbabulnuzul*), the science of the history of the Qur’an (*tarikh ul-qur’an*), and the sciences that carefully study the linguistic modes familiar to the Arabs around the time of revelation (*ulum al-lugha*). Muslim scholars developed a comprehensive apparatus of historical-critical-linguistic methodologies for understanding the Qur’an (*ulumulqur’an*). (For more on this, see *Al-Itqan* of Imam Jalaluddin Al-Suyuti (c. 1445–1505 CE).

Muslim scholars were always aware of the fact that the activities of interpretation, understanding, and exegesis (of God’s eternal dis-course) are forms of human strenuous striving (*ijtihad*) that must be dutifully renewed in every believing generation. Solemn belief in the eternity and divine authorship of the Qur’an never prevented Muslim scholars from dealing with it historically and linguistically. On the contrary, belief in the revelatory truth of the Qur’an was the very motivation for spending life-times in close scholarly study of God’s discourse. (For more on this see *Jami’ Bayan Al-Ilm* of Imam Ibn Abd Al-Barr, b. 978 CE)

Massive libraries of interpretative and exegetical discourses, theological, juridical, ethical, and spiritual were worked out by the successive generations of Muslim scholars from the earliest times and up to today. It is precisely on the basis of their solemn belief that the Qur’an is the very speech of God that Muslim scholars, through the ages, dialogically engaged Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Hindu, Buddhist, and even skeptical and naturalist scholars. All the major manuals of Muslim theology be they Maturidi, Ash’ari, Mu’tazili, Ja’fari, Isma’ili, or Ibadi, exhibit remarkable broadness of vision and actively engage the beliefs of Philosophers, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Hindus and Buddhists.

Interestingly, the exegetical Muslim historical-critical-linguistic apparatus, in synthesis with ancient Talmudic methodologies (such as the hermeneutic rules of Hillel and Rabbi Ishmael), was transmitted through Sephardic Jewish scholars like Hasdai ben Abraham Crescas (c. 1340–1410/1411 CE) and Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) to the earliest Protestant hermeneutical masters (like Johann August Ernesti (1707–1781). The “High Criticism” and “Historical-Critical Method” that stemmed from Protestant Reformation Hermeneutics were directly influenced by Spinoza’s ultimately Andalusian Talmudic Hermeneutics, which was steeped in the Qur’anic Hermeneutics of Andalusian Muslim scholars.

It is also interesting to note that the methodologies and conclusions of the Protestant High Criticism were, for several centuries, rejected by the Catholic Church. This rejection was most systematic and explicit in Pope Leo XIII’s *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) and Pope Pius X’s Anti-Modernist *Pascendi Dominica Gregis* (1907).

Under the tremendous pressures of Protestant biblical scholarship, the Catholic Church finally, but only grudgingly, partially, and conditionally accepted some aspects of the historical-critical method. Pope Benedict XV did start this process of conditional acceptance in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), but it was not until Pope Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritus* (1943) that Catholic scholars were finally allowed to catch up with the advanced state of Protestant biblical studies.

Thus, it is quite ironic that Cardinal Tauran now accuses Muslims of an imaginary theological/hermeneutical closure that is more appropriately attributable to the Vatican’s own pre-1943 closure to historical-critical methodologies.

What is even more ironic is the fact that Cardinal Tauran, not only imagines such Muslim closure, but goes on to attribute it to the Muslim belief in the divine authorship of the Qur’an (i.e. that the Qur’an is the very speech of God). This is very strange indeed,

and comes down to thinking that one who believes in the divine authorship of a sacred text cannot possibly be a dialogue partner on theological matters.

In making this strange claim about the Muslim creed regarding the Qur'an, the Cardinal seems to forget the Roman Catholic dogmatic position regarding Christian Scriptures. Since at least the Council of Trent, the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church has again-and-again re-affirmed a very strong, dictation-like, position regarding divine revelation, and has always maintained that "For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-20, 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself." (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, Chapter III.)

Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) makes it clear that a strong belief in the divine authorship of the Christian Scriptures has been "perpetually held and professed" by the Church. "This supernatural revelation, according to the belief of the universal Church, is contained both in unwritten Tradition, and in written Books, which are therefore called sacred and canonical because, "being written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author and as such have been delivered to the Church". This belief has been perpetually held and professed by the Church in regard to the Books of both Testaments; and there are well-known documents of the gravest kind, coming down to us from the earliest times, which proclaim that God, Who spoke first by the Prophets, then by His own mouth, and lastly by the Apostles, composed also the Canonical Scriptures), and that these are His own oracles and words—a Letter, written by our heavenly Father, and transmitted by the sacred writers to the human race in its pilgrimage so far from its heavenly country".

It is true that the Catholic Church since 1943, and especially since Vatican II, and in light of the findings of historical-critical scholarship, began to also stress the involvement of the human authors of the Christian Scriptures. However, and even in *De Verbum*, God's own inerrant authorship has always been affirmed by the Church. Even Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritus* (1943) re-affirms the same creed, and expands rather than cancels the scriptural creeds of Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893).

Therefore, given the dogmas of the Catholic Church regarding Christian Scriptures, it is strange, and ironic indeed, that Cardinal Tauran holds that upholding the divine authorship of a sacred text is a hindrance to theological dialogue! If such belief in divine authorship prevents its adherents from theological dialogue, then the Cardinal would have the same dialogical inhibitions that he imagines Muslim scholars to have.

Unfortunately, Cardinal Tauran's statement turns out to be based on ill-founded "Islam versus Christianity" "contrast tables" developed and advocated by some "Islam experts". Rather than unilaterally declaring the impossibility of theological dialogue with Muslims, Cardinal Tauran would have been wiser to ask Muslim scholars themselves as to what kind of dialogue they feel is possible, from their point of view. To unilaterally pre-determine what is possible and not possible for the other, on behalf of the other, is one sure way of achieving closure in matters dialogical.

CINDY WOODEN: *What is your hope for the next step in the conversation?*

AREF NAYED: Our hope is for a multifaceted and multidimensional matrix of discourses with multiple nodes of Christian leadership, scholarship and wisdom. That matrix is

already rapidly emerging, as is evident by the multiple positive responses and initiatives (documented on the open letter's official website). Muslim scholars are most appreciative of such great responses. There is already advanced Muslim-Christian planning for multiple workshops, seminars, meetings, and conferences. May our One God bless the efforts of all men and women of good will, as they strive to sincerely live together in Love of God and Love of all neighbours.

God knows best! ♣

CINDY WOODEN is a reporter for the Catholic News Service, which is an editorially independent and financially self-sustaining division of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It is the main news agency serving Catholic newspapers in the United States and Canada.



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