

Dialogue without Compromise: Report on the Common Word Workshop and Conference

by Rick Love

Background

One hundred and thirty-eight Muslim scholars from every corner of the Muslim world, representing every major school of Islamic thought (e.g., Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, etc.) sent an open letter "to leaders of Christian churches, everywhere" (Oct. 13, 2007). This noteworthy group of Muslim scholars and clerics maintained that the common ground between Muslims and Christians centers on the commands to love God and to love one's neighbor. Proposing this as a basis for dialogue, they invited Christian leaders from around the world to meet and facilitate the important work of reconciliation between these two great religious communities. This invitation is referred to as "A Common Word between Us and You"—henceforth "A Common Word" (see www.acommonword.com).

"A Common Word" is viewed by many as the most important interfaith document in nearly half a century, opening an unprecedented door of opportunity for substantive dialogue between leading Muslims and Christians. For this reason, the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, along with other members of the Yale Divinity School community, responded with the publication of "Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'" (henceforth "the Yale response"). The Yale response was released several days after "A Common Word," and was published as a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* on November 13, 2007 over the signatures of approximately 130 prominent Christian leaders and scholars. The Yale Center for Faith and Culture's Reconciliation Program then hosted this dialogue at Yale University on July 24-31, 2008.

The Yale Dialogue

Sheik Tamimi, the Chief Justice of Palestine, does a good job summarizing my thoughts on the dialogue:

The Common Word was unlike any other dialogue I have ever attended. I have been to many dialogues. But none reflected the intellectual rigor and gracious spirit exhibited by the participants. Warm relationships were developed and important differences were addressed in a beautiful way.

Editor's Note: This paper is based on a presentation given at the 2008 meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Denver, Colorado, September 27-28.

Rick Love has served over 25 years among Muslims. He specializes in coaching faith-based organizations in cross-cultural communication and Christian-Muslim relationships.

Many of the Muslim guests marveled at the hospitality shown them during the Common Word conference. The team at the Yale Reconciliation Program worked tirelessly to serve their Muslim guests. Hospitality rooms—with a variety of Middle Eastern snacks and drinks—were set up at each venue so participants could informally discuss issues and build relationships. By showing hospitality in this way, hearts were opened and more able to address challenging theological and practical topics. Love paved the way for the truth!

Evangelical critics feared the gospel would be compromised and important doctrines of the Christian faith would not be discussed. But they were wrong! In the midst of positive and robust dialogue, the truth of the gospel was communicated. Joseph Cumming, Director of the Yale Reconciliation Program, gave a paper about the Trinity and the cross. John Stackhouse of Regent College presented a paper on the Good Samaritan—which included the gospel story as the context for understanding “neighbor love.” Miroslav Volf of Yale graciously and cogently spoke about the Trinity. Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, gave a strong keynote address about the evangelical faith.

Dialogue, however, is a two-way street. We Christians heard some profound and moving presentations about Islam. Because of the broad spectrum of Muslims attending and the intellectual rigor of the participants, some of my views of what Muslims believe changed—and I have focused on Muslim-Christian relations for 30 years! For example, I was fascinated to learn that the Sufi form of Islam is much more pervasive than I imagined. I think the impact of Sufism on other forms of Islam can be compared to how the Charismatic movement has permeated Evangelicalism. The Sufi mystical emphasis on the love of God makes Sufis more open to peacemaking than many other forms of Islam (e.g., the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia).

It also makes them more resistant to Islamism and terrorism. I went away from this dialogue sensing that Evangelicals have more in common with Sufi Muslims than most other sects and have much to gain by pursuing relationships with Sufis.¹

But dialogue is not just about sharing viewpoints, it is also about connecting with people. I met a number of stimulating, devout and open-minded Muslims. I look forward to continuing friendships—and dialogue—with many of these men.



Here is how one of my new Muslims friends, Hisham Hellyer, described the Common Word. In an opinion piece, Hellyer, a consultant in West-Muslim relations (he advises the British Government about terrorism), welcomed the “strong evangelical component” at the meeting. In a commentary published by *The National*, a newspaper based in the United Arab Emirates, Hellyer said, “These were religious people; they weren’t interested in diluting their faiths. And in that, a type of sincerity emerged that was perhaps the greatest benefit of the initiative.”

There were many informal “discussions about freedom of religion.” I had the privilege of helping facilitate one such meeting on this topic. There were tense moments, deep sharing and greater mutual understanding. One Muslim leader said, “I never realized that evangelism was a major pillar of the Christian faith!” It is clear that one of the outcomes of this conference was

that Muslims began to understand our evangelical tenets. We will continue to talk about “freedom of religion” in the future.

Three formal statements came out of the dialogue: A Declaration, Practical Outcomes and a Denouncement (quoted in full in the next three sections).

The Final Declaration (from the Conference)

A Common Word—an open letter addressed by Muslim leaders to Christian leaders—began with a desire by Muslim leaders to follow the Qur’anic commandment to speak to Christians and Jews, *Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him* (3:64). The intention behind *A Common Word* is not to foist the theology of one religion upon another or to attempt conversion. Neither does it seek to reduce both our religions to an artificial union based upon the Two Commandments.

Nevertheless, in *A Common Word*, Muslims recognized that Islam and Christianity do share an essential common ground: the love of God and love of the neighbor described in the Two Greatest Commandments of the Gospel, rooted in the Torah ‘*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,*’ and, ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ The response of over 500 Christian leaders initiated by Yale University reaffirmed that this common ground is real and is a basis for dialogue between our two religions.

A Common Word is rooted in our sacred texts, arising from within, not imposed from without. Love of God and love of the neighbor are part of our common Abrahamic heritage. Based upon this principle, ours is an effort to ensure that religions heal rather than wound, nourish the human soul rather than poison human relations. These Two Commandments teach us both what we must demand of ourselves

and what we should expect from the other in what we *do*, what we *say*, and what we *are*.

Participants in the conference discussed a range of theological and practical issues in an open manner characterized by honesty and good will. The theological issues discussed included different understandings of the Unity of God, of Jesus Christ and his passion, and of the love of God. The practical issues included world poverty, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation in Palestine and Israel, the dangers of further wars, and the freedom of religion.

Participants of the conference agreed that:

1. Muslims and Christians affirm the unity and absoluteness of God. We recognize that God's merciful love is infinite, eternal and embraces all things. This love is central to both our religions and is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic heritage.
2. We recognize that all human beings have the right to the preservation of life, religion, property, intellect, and dignity. No Muslim or Christian should deny the other these rights, nor should they tolerate the denigration or desecration of one another's sacred symbols, founding figures, or places of worship.
3. We are committed to these principles and to furthering them through continuous dialogue. We thank God for bringing us together in this historic endeavor and ask that He purify our intentions and grant us success through His all-encompassing Mercy and Love.

Some Practical Outcomes (from the Conference)

1. A Common Word website whereby Christians will recommend books on Christianity and Muslims will recommend books on Islam that are appropriate for different ages and address a range of topics.

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2. Ongoing contact high-level group(s) facilitated by Yale University or Aal al-Bayt Institute.
3. A week every year where Muslims and Christian religious figures are urged to emphasize the good in the other tradition.
4. We plan to publish two books on the Common Word initiative. The first one will be a widely circulated study guide that will address frequently asked questions about the Common Word. The second book will include the proceedings of the Yale Conference.
5. We will carry this message of a Common Word—the message of our shared love of God and love of neighbor—which we have explored and discussed together over the past week back to our communities, to our congregations, to our neighbors and friends. Other conferences in Cambridge in October 2008, Vatican in November 2008, Georgetown in March 2009, and [Jesus'] Baptism Site in Jordan in December 2009 will carry this dialogue forward.

A Denouncement (from the Conference)

We the Muslim and Christian participants meeting together at Yale for the historic A Common Word conference denounce and deplore the recent threat made against His Majesty King Abdullah bin Abd Al-Aziz the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques for having sponsored the recent important interfaith gathering in Madrid. Such threats are directed not towards His Majesty alone but against all of those who work towards peace through dialogue and cooperation. Dialogue

is not a departure from faith, it is a legitimate means of its expression, and an essential tool in the quest for the common good.

So Where Do We Go from Here?

The majority of participants at Yale sense the immense potential of the Common Word Dialogue for mending relationships between Muslims and Christians. Certainly as followers of Christ, we rejoice over the opportunity to dialogue with Muslims about loving God and neighbor. We also found that discussing the implications of loving God and neighbor open up a number of issues that can lead to peace... and ultimately point to the Prince of Peace. **IJFM**

References Cited

- Hellyer, H. A.
2008 At Yale, We Muslims and Christians Found a Kind of Sincerity. *The National*, August 2, 2008. <<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20080802/OPINION/748480863/1080&profile=1080>>

Endnote

1. I am presently reading a book that seems to confirm what I have been thinking: *The Other Islam: Sufism and the Road to Global Harmony* by Stephen Schwartz. I look forward to learning more about Sufism and seeing if it does in fact provide a road to global harmony.