

Re-Visiting the “Common Word” Initiative

By Bassam Michael Madany

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Twelve years ago, Pope Benedict XVI referred critically to Islam, in his Regensburg address on 13 September 2006. A month later, 138 Muslim scholars responded to the Pope’s words. The text of their answer can be accessed on the website of a Jordanian organization, <http://www.acommonword.com/>

Continuing their campaign to win the good will of the West, Muslim scholars addressed the Christian World in a message entitled, “*A Common Word Between Us and You.*” The following excerpts from this message, illustrate the Muslims’ concept and purpose of this initiative:

“The final form of the letter was presented at a conference in September 2007, held under the theme of “Love in the Quran,” by the Royal Academy of The Royal Aal al-Bayt^t Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan, under the Patronage of H.M. King Abdullah II. Indeed, the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, and the best basis for future dialogue and understanding, is the love of God and the love of the neighbor.

“Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.

“It is hoped that this document will provide a common constitution for the many worthy organizations and individuals who are carrying out interfaith dialogue all over the world. Often these groups are unaware of each other and duplicate each other’s efforts. Not only can ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’ give them a starting point for cooperation and worldwide co-ordination, but it does so on the most solid theological ground possible: the teachings of the Qur’an and the Prophet, and the commandments described by Jesus Christ in the Bible. Thus, despite their differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two greatest commandments.”

Quoted from “The Amman Message Islamica Magazine,” *The Great Tafsiir Project of the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute R.I.S.S.C.* 2007 C.E. 1428 A.H.

One Christian response to the “*Common Word*” overture came from scholars of the Yale Divinity School. They released a statement “*warmly embracing the open letter ‘A Common Word between Us and You.’*” It was entitled, “*Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You.*” Here are excerpts:

"We receive it [A Common Word] as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings, we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors."

"The statement was issued by Harold Attridge, dean of Yale Divinity School and Lillian Claus Prof of New Testament, Miroslav Volf, director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, and Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology, Joseph Cumming, director of the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, and Emilie M. Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology, and president-elect of the American Academy of Religion. More scholars are expected to endorse the statement as it is circulated at Yale Divinity School and at other academic institutions across the country."

The Yale Divinity School Response gathered many signatures throughout the USA, including some who are associated with conservative Protestants. Since that time, a controversy has surfaced among the Evangelical circles, leading some signatories to announce the withdrawal of their support for the Yale Response.

Mark Tooley, the director of United Methodist Action at the *Institute for Religion and Democracy*, contributed an article entitled, *A Dialogue in Bad Faith*, on 10 January 2008. Here are excerpts:

<http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=29463>

"Controversy continues to swirl around the predominantly Religious Left and Evangelical Left response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You,' the statement issued by 138 Islamic authorities in October.

"The Muslim declaration was relatively moderate and invited dialogue with Christians. Mostly left-leaning religious studies faculty from the Ivy League organized 'Loving God and Neighbor Together' as a 'Christian Response.' It offered regrets for the Crusades and the War on Terror, while eagerly accepting the invite to dialogue with Islam. The Muslim statement, of course, offered no apologies for Islamist conquests or terror.

"Predictable Evangelical Left activists such as Jim Wallis signed as well as more moderate Evangelicals, including the president of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) Leith Anderson and the NAE's increasingly left-leaning Washington spokesman, Richard Cizik. Rev. Anderson hoped that his signature would be 'especially helpful to Christians who live and minister in Muslim-majority countries.' And he likewise expressed concern that 'not signing could be damaging to these Christian brothers and sisters who live

among Muslims.'

"On January 3, a publication of James Dobson's conservative 'Focus on the Family' criticized evangelicals who endorsed 'Loving God and Neighbor Together.' It quoted Southern Baptist theologian Albert Mohler, who slammed the statement's 'naiveté,' including the Crusades apology. 'I just have to wonder how intellectually honest this is,' he said. 'Are these people suggesting that they wish the military conflict with Islam had ended differently - that Islam had conquered Europe?'"

"In response to the 'Focus on the Family' critique, 'emerging church' guru Brian McLaren vigorously responded with his own op-ed for Jim Wallis' Sojourners. He likened the troubles between Christendom and Islam to an unpleasant domestic dispute between spouses who are in need of good counseling.

"McLaren wondered about his fellow Christians: 'How can we not apologize for our sins? Should we claim we have no sins? Or should we knowingly refuse to acknowledge them? Isn't the humility to confess sins a Christian virtue?' In an analogy that would surprise persecuted Christian minorities in Islamic countries, he portrayed Muslims as ostracized outsiders in need of Christian inclusion: 'I'm sorry when anyone feels alienated by those of us who try to follow Jesus' command to be peacemakers and to treat others as we would be treated, but didn't Jesus, when faced with a choice of reaching out to those considered untouchable outsiders by the Pharisees, side with the excluded?'"

"Was McLaren implying moral equivalence between the U.S. and al Qaeda's radical Islamist allies? If so, he would not be entirely alone among many signers of 'Loving God and Neighbor Together,' who are desperately anxious to separate themselves from U.S. policies or conservative evangelicals who support them. Many of these signers are pacifist absolutists and genuinely see no ethical distinctions between terrorist strikes and a U.S. military response to them.

"The NAE's Leith Anderson admitted 'there were lines in the Christian letter that were not quite what I would write' and 'sometimes we all sign onto things that are not all that we would like them to be.' But he hoped that the Christian response to the Islamic overture would foster 'mutual respect between the two largest religions on the globe' and broader religious liberty.

“Anderson expressed fear that Christians in Muslim lands might suffer if he declined to sign. Endorsing Christian apologies to Islam to protect Christians from being persecuted or killed by Islamic authorities or mobs, hardly bodes well for constructive Christian-Islamic dialogue.”

Having begun their initiative of dialogue with Christians, the Muslim side continued their efforts, by sending “*Seasons’ Greetings to Christians.*” On the last day of December 2007, they purchased a half-page ad in *The Wall Street Journal*, that ran as follows:

A Muslim Message of Thanks and of Christmas and New Year Greetings,
December 2007

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
May God bless Muhammad and his kin and bless Abraham and his kin
Al-Salaam Aleikum; Peace be upon you; Pax Vobiscum*

Peace be upon Jesus Christ who says: Peace is upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am resurrected
(Chapter of Mary; the Holy Qur’an, 19:33).

During these joyful holidays we write to you, our Christian neighbors all over the world, to express our thanks for the beautiful and gracious responses that we Muslims have been receiving from the very first day we issued our invitation to come together to ‘A Common Word’ based on ‘Love of God and love of Neighbor’

We thank you and wish you all a joyous and peaceful Christmas Holiday Season commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, may peace be upon him.

We Muslims bear witness that: *There is no god but God, without associate, and that Muhammad is Servant and Messenger, and that Jesus Christ is His Servant, His Messenger, His Word cast to Mary, and a Spirit from Him ...*
(*Sahih Bukhari, Kitab Ahadith al-Anbiya’*)

The *Christmas and New Year Greetings*, continued by referring to the coincidence in 2007, between Muslim and Christian feasts: (*Haji, Christmas and New Year*), and called attention to the patriarch Abraham who was not allowed by God to sacrifice his son, thus affirming and proclaiming the sanctity of human life. Then in an attempt to assume a moral high ground by making Islam eminently “*Pro Life,*” it referred to those “*Muslim scholars who issued a historic declaration affirming the sanctity of human life – of every human life – as an essential and foundational teaching in Islam upon which all Muslim scholars are in unanimous agreement* (see details at www.duaatalislam.com).” The “*Message*” ended with these words:

“May the coming year be one in which the sanctity and dignity of human life is upheld by all. May it be a year of humble repentance before God, and mutual forgiveness within and between communities.

“Praise be to God, the Lord of the world.”

The WSJ advertisement coming on 31 December 2007, claimed to be a “Season’s Greetings” addressed to the Christian World. It was prompted by *“the beautiful and gracious responses that we Muslims have been receiving from the very first day we issued our invitation to come together to ‘A Common Word’ based on ‘Love of God and love of Neighbor.’*

At this point, I would like to address the translation of the Qur’anic words, ‘*kalimaton sawa*’ as “A Common Word.” While ‘*kalimaton*’ means a *word*, the choice of ‘*common*’ for ‘*sawa*’ is debatable. Reading the Arabic text does not lead to the choice of the term, “*common*.” The standard *Hans Wehr’s “A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic,”* (edited by J. Milton Cowan, and published in 1961 by Otto Harrassowitz, in Wiesbaden, Germany) translates ‘*Sawa*’ as: *equal, equality, equally, indiscriminately, without distinction, in like manner, evenly*. The word ‘*common*’ is not among them.

I realize that no word, in any language, can be understood simply based on its etymology. According to the universally accepted rules of hermeneutics, the context is extremely important in determining the exact meaning of a word. This is especially the case, as we attempt to translate a word from Arabic into a European language. Thus, to understand the meaning of the Muslim’s “Christmas and New Year Greeting,” it is necessary to reflect on the context of the “*Common Word*” message, taken from Chapter 3 of the Qur’an, *Surat Al-‘Imran*. This passage sets forth “*The Conditions for Dialogue*” between Muslims and Christians. Reading Chapter 3 makes it clear that dialogue with non-Muslims can only take place based on the normative teachings of the Qur’an.

Here are some verses from *Surat Al- ‘Imran*, in Arberry’s *Translation of the Qur’an*:

Say: ‘People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.’ And if they turn their backs, say: ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims.’ V. 64

No; Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim and one pure of faith; certainly, he was never of the idolaters. V. 67

People of the Book! Why do you disbelieve in God's signs, which you yourselves witness? People of the Book! Why do you confound the truth with vanity, and conceal the truth and that wittingly? V. 70,71

Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers. V.85

Those Muslims who issued the invitation to dialogue, and adopted the term, "A Common Word" (*kalimatun sawa'on baynana wa-baynakom,*) from the Qur'an, declared their complete adherence to the teachings of their sacred book. Furthermore, it must be noted that the tone of the texts from Chapter III is decidedly polemical. Christians are charged with the sin of **shirk**, i.e. in claiming that Allah had associates! Then they are exhorted to "serve none but God." Thus, if Christians engaged in dialogue with Muslims, they are expected first to renounce their belief in the Trinity.

Another Islamic requirement is to accept the authenticity of the Qur'anic version of Sacred History. This implies the rejection, for example, of the Biblical accounts of Abraham's life. Thus verse 67 of Chapter III, categorically states: "*ma kana Ibraheemu Yahudiyyan wala Nasraniyyan, walaken kana Hanifan Musliman ...*" (Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Nazarene, but he was a Hanif, and a Muslim...) [Translation mine] ⁱⁱ

Hanif, a term that refers to Arabs living before the rise of Islam, who rejected idolatry, and professed the unity of God.

Verses 70 and 71 address the Christians, as those who mix truth with vanity, and who refuse to believe in Allah's signs. A bad trait for those who are to dialogue with Muslims!

Finally, the exclusivist nature of Islam is seen in verse 85:

"Waman yabtaghi ghayr'l Islami deenan, falan yuqbala minhu, wahua fil'akhirati min'al khasereen." (He who seeks a religion other than Islam, that will not be acceptable of him, and at the Last Day, he will be among the Lost.) [Translation mine]

Having dealt with the Qur'anic context of "A Common Word," I turn to the text of the 31 December "Greeting." I find it very difficult to receive it as a *bona fide* "Season's Greetings." While its title seems genuine, as one proceeds to analyze its contents, it reveals expressions and views that are thoroughly alien to the history of Christianity as recorded in the Bible, a book that antedates the Qur'an by several centuries.

For example, the reference to Jesus Christ is taken from the text of the Qur'an. It naively assumes that Christians would gladly accept it, rather than stick to the authentic accounts of the life of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. These words from *Surat Maryam* 19:33, make Jesus say, "*Peace is upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am resurrected.*" It is rather ludicrous to quote from this chapter regarding Jesus Christ. Among other things it recounts a Mary who was alone under a palm tree, about to give birth to Jesus; who after he was born, addressed the critics of his mother for her supposedly immoral conduct, while yet a baby! Did those who drafted the "*Message*" really expect Christians to be that gullible and prefer that bizarre account, to the ones given in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke?!

The "*Message*" continued, "We Muslims bear witness that: *There is no god but God, without associate, and that Muhammad is Servant and Messenger, and that Jesus Christ is His Servant, His Messenger, His Word cast to Mary, and a Spirit from Him*"ⁱⁱⁱ (*Sahih Bukhari, Kitab Ahadith al-Anbiya*)

All Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant,) subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the deity of Jesus Christ. Arabic-speaking Christians begin their prayers by invoking the name of God in this way: "*Bismil Aab, wal Ibn, wal Ruh al Qodos, Ilah Wahed, Amen.*" (In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.) They would not regard it as a compliment, or a basis for dialogue, that Muslims consider Jesus Christ merely as "*Servant, or as Messenger.*"

The "*Muslim Message of Thanks and of Christmas and New Year Greetings,*" was a genre of Islamic propaganda aimed at Western people. The drafters of the "*Season's Greetings*" hoped that their attempt would bear fruit among Christians. After all, who would ignore at that time of the year, such a gesture of good will? Here are Muslims who publicly declare that they honor and recognize Jesus as a prophet, isn't that great? But who is this Jesus they honor? He is certainly not the Jesus Christ whose birth Christians celebrate on the 25th day of December. He is a pale shadow of the Biblical Christ; in fact, he is a pseudo-Messiah. He is the Messiah of *Surat Maryam* (19) that contains an intensive polemic against the historical Messiah of the Bible.

I don't know how many readers of the 31 December 2007 *Wall Street Journal* received the "*Message of Thanks*" at its face value! Some may have welcomed it as an expression of good will. On the other hand, readers who have done their homework on the history and sacred texts of Islam, would have realized that the ad, is contradicted by the concrete facts of history.

Postscript

On 29 January 2018, William Kilpatrick published an article on “*The Common Word Initiative*” in Crisis Magazine. Here are excerpts showing the continued relevance of the subject:

“What Catholic leaders need to ponder is why they’ve allowed themselves to get roped into what might be called the “common word” approach to Christian-Islamic relations. The [Common Word Initiative](#) began in 2007 with an open letter to the Christian world signed by 138 Muslim scholars. The letter was entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” and its purpose was “to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam.” As the Common Ground website maintains, “despite their differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two greatest commandments.”

Mr. Kilpatrick summed up his article with these trenchant words:

“Listen, Christians! Agree with us that Jesus is not the Son of God, and that God is not a Trinity, and then we can talk. That is the price of entry into the Common Word club.”

<https://www.crisismagazine.com/2018/common-word-versus-common-sense>

ⁱ *Royal Academy of The Royal Aal al-Bayt*: A Jordanian academy under the auspices of King Abdullah II. The term, ***Aal al-Bayt***, refers to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, who was of the ***Hashem clan***, of the ***Quraysh tribe***. Literally, ***Aal al-Bayt***, signifies, ***Members of the House, of Hashem***. The kings of Jordan are descendants of ***Sharif Hussein*** of Mecca, who claimed descent from Muhammad. During WWI, he allied himself with the British against the Ottoman Turks. After the war, his son ***Faysal*** became king of Iraq, and his son, ***Abdullah***, prince of Transjordan. After the birth of Israel in 1948, Abdullah became king of “***The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan***.”

ⁱⁱ https://www.academia.edu/35334782/The_Myth_of_the_Three_Abrahamic_Religions_5_December_2017.docx
Muslims claim Abraham as their ancestor, however this belief is not substantiated according to the research of two Arab scholars mentioned in the above article.

ⁱⁱⁱ ***Sahih Bukhari***: Refers to a collection of ***Hadiths*** (Traditions of Muhammad's life and sayings) that are regarded as authentic. Many of the collected *Traditions* were spurious. Bukhari's collection is considered as containing authentic (in Arabic, ***Sahih***,) sayings of Muhammad.