

A Common Word in Pakistani Context

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First, I express my gratitude to the organisers for putting emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asia; the areas where the number and influence of Christian and Muslim communities has increased significantly. Their evaluation of the "Open Letter and Call of Muslim Religious Leaders" the so-called Letter of 138, published by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought in Amman, Jordan, written on 13 October 2007, is very important. The Muslims and Christians of these areas have an important role to play in bringing peace and harmony in the world. It will help to improve mutual relations between Christians and Muslims in these areas and also it will have a positive impact on the entire world. Christians and Muslims have a lot in common and to offer one another for the betterment of humanity. There are also our differences, as Prof. Syed Hossein Nasr said in Rome, which have providentially kept Christianity and Islam distinct and separate. However when the common elements are recognised, appreciated and collaborate with one another, they can play a significant role in promoting peace and interfaith harmony in the world. I am sure that by coming together in Cadenabbia from Asia and Africa our meeting will bear many positive results for building good will and good relations among the followers of these religions.

When we look at the numerical and political situation of Muslims and Christians in South and South-East Asian countries, we find that there is a great diversity. In some countries, Muslims are in the majority and Christians are a small minority, such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei etc. In other countries, Christians are in the majority and Muslims are a minority, such as in the Philippines and East Timor. While in several other countries, both Muslims and Christians are in the minority, such as in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, China, Japan and Taiwan etc. Christians and Muslims are present throughout the Asian continent. On the whole Christianity remains a minority in Asia with around 3% of the total population, and Muslims are many more than Christians. However encounter, positive

understanding, interfaith dialogue and respect between them and respect for the differences among them are very important for peace in Asia and in fact in the world.

Evaluation and Remarks About the Open Letter

A letter entitled "*A Common Word Between Us and You*" (ACW) signed by 138 prominent Muslim scholars and religious leaders was sent to Pope Benedict XVI and several other Christian religious leaders around the world. This letter was sent at a crucial time when some misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims developed after the lecture of Pope Benedict in Regensburg, Germany, delivered on 12 September 2006. The quotation used by the Pope in his lecture in Regensburg caused unrest among some Muslims in the world. Some Muslims felt offended, while a few other Muslims perceived it to be a step backward in Christian-Muslim dialogue which had developed for the past number of decades, especially since the Second Vatican Council.

ACW was timely and brought a message of healing and reconciliation. It was written so as to build a strong bridge of understanding between Christians and Muslims. It offers a big step forward that we must get out of the age of polemics and enter into the age of mutual understanding and dialogue. It sets a tone of tolerance and respect for the religious beliefs and practices of the other. The differences should also be respected. It carries an initiative and positive approach based on the love of God and love of neighbour; such an emphasis was never placed so strongly in the past 1400 years. These concepts are based on the sacred scriptures and traditions of Christianity and Islam. It provides a guideline on the common word between Christianity and Islam.

ACW is a concrete response from the Muslims to the initiative taken by the Catholic Church, particularly by the Second Vatican Council and by the Secretariat for Non-Christians in Rome, which later on became the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. Also a step forward from what Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II had been and Pope Benedict XVI is doing to bring harmony, respect and dialogue among brothers and sister of various religions. We are also aware that there has been a dialogue between Christians and Muslims from the 7th century. There have been clashes as well.

It is a fact that in our time Muslims and Christians cannot afford to ignore one another. Christians are 2.3 billion and form 35% of the world population, and Muslims are 1.5 billion and comprise 20% thereof. Together they are over half of the world population, at 55%. The urgent need for dialogue at all levels of life has been rightly emphasised by both Christians and Muslims, especially by religious leaders, scholars, human rights' activists and promoters of peace and interfaith dialogue. The United Nations is also playing an important role and making a lot of effort in bringing harmony and positive understanding, collaboration and mutual respect among religions for the betterment of humanity. The UN has declared 2009 the Year of Reconciliation. This positive understanding of one another's religion plays an integral role in solving the issues and challenges which are faced by humanity, especially during this 21st century. There are the issues of hunger, poverty, illiteracy, refugees and internally displaced people. There is the issue of the violation of human rights and the dignity of the human person. There is religiously-motivated violence in some South Asian countries. There is the issue of discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, sex and religion. In some countries there is a strong wave of fanaticism, extremism and militancy. In Pakistan, the rise of terrorism, the Taliban and militancy have put the stability of the country at stake and these things have brought a lot of misery, uncertainty and fear among the people. Suicide bombings and terrorist attacks are common, which have resulted in the killing of thousands of innocent people and have caused grave pain and concern, not only for Pakistan but for the entire world as well. In such a situation, our liberal/secular-minded and moderate citizens, and particularly religious minorities, feel very insecure and look to the government to provide protection for their lives, property, religious freedom and dignity. The Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Baha'i and Zoroastrian religious minorities in Pakistan are going through this kind of fear and uncertainty. Some of them have opted to leave their homeland to save their lives and have sought asylum in Europe, Australia, Canada and USA.

There is a danger of the spread of such types of extremism in some other countries as well. There is a lack of religious freedom in some countries of Asia. I believe that if Christians and Muslims will join together, they can fight against these issues. They will be able to create a more human world. There will be peace in the world and the love of God and love of neighbour will be put into practice.

This Open Letter and Call from the Muslim religious leaders and scholars to Christian religious leaders on the topic of "A *Common Word between Us and You*" appeared at an appropriate time to create more positive understanding among Christians and Muslims. The theme of the love of God and love of neighbour in Islam and Christianity is well chosen. Love of God and love of neighbour are fundamental teachings and beliefs both for Christians and Muslims. It is the first time in history that such a theme has been brought up so strongly to provide a firm foundation for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

This Open Letter starts with a positive note and the basic teachings of Islam and Christianity, focussing on the love of God and love of neighbour. For example on the love of God, the letter gives the following quotations from the Holy Qur'an.

He hath no associate, reminds Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God (Al-Baqarah, 2:165). Indeed, [T]heir flesh and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God ... (Al-Zumar, 39:23).

And that Muslims should be truly grateful to him in loving God is the forgiveness of sins: Say, (O Muhammad, to mankind): If ye love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is Forgiving, Merciful. (Aal 'Imran, 3:31)

This Open Letter also give quotations from the Holy Bible that the love of God is the first and greatest commandment.

The Shema in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5), a centrepiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy, says: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Likewise, in the New Testament, when Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is asked about the greatest commandment, he answers:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. / Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, / "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" / Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' / This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40)

On the love of the neighbour the Open Letter gives several references from Islam such as,

There are numerous injunctions in Islam about the necessity and paramount importance of love for – and mercy towards – the neighbour. Love of the neighbour is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God because in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God and no righteousness. The Prophet Muhammad [May God bless him and grant him peace] said: "None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself." And: "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself."

While writing on the love of neighbour in the Bible, the Open Letter says,

We have already cited the words of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, about the paramount importance, second only to the love of God, of the love of the neighbour:

This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:38-40)

And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31)

So A *Common Word* between us is that there is one God and we should love God with all our heart, soul and mind. To love God is

the first and greatest of commandments. There is also freedom of religion mentioned in the Qur'an, "Let there be no compulsion in religion". (Q. 2:256)

In this letter there is a recognition that Muslims are not against Christians. The letter says,

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an). (Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8)

This letter also proposes that Christians can interpret in the light of the Holy Gospels that Muslims are not against them. The letter gives the following quotations from the holy gospels.

In the Gospel Jesus Christ [Peace be with him] says:

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:30)

For he who is not against us is on our side. (Mark 9:40)

... for he who is not against us is on our side. (Luke 9:50)

The Open Letter invites Christians, in the light of the above verses to consider Muslims not against them. There is an invitation to come together on common essentials of the two great religions: Christianity and Islam. The common ground is very strong: making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. The letter rightly concludes that, "If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace." It is very true that Muslims and Christians have an important role to play for world peace. If they are not at peace with one another, there cannot be peace in the world. There are 57 Muslim countries and, as mentioned earlier, Muslims and Christians together make up 55% of the world's population.

This Open Letter, as the Final Statement from Yale University, puts it,

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, says:

"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."

This is a very important point; to discern that it is not for the conversion of the other nor does it reduce our religions to an artificial union. Christianity and Islam are missionary religions; in favour of evangelisation and *daw'a*. These are an integral part of their mission to invite other people to join their religion. This should also carry on. However, such conversions are not the aim of this type of dialogue. Conversion of the heart is needed to reach out to the other for mutual respect and understanding. In the approach of ACW, the differences are respected and a positive understanding and appreciation is sought from each other. Both Christians and Muslims share a common ground which is the love of God and love of neighbour, 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 neighbour as yourself.' The Yale Statement, being a response of 500 Christian leaders, says that this common ground is real and is a basis for dialogue between our two religions. It is a part of our common Abrahamic heritage.

Such an understanding, when studied in the South and South-East Asian context, can bear a lot of positive results. For that there is a grave need to bring Muslim and Christian scholars of this area to a joint conference and study these concepts. There is a need of an open-mindedness and honesty to discuss a range of theological issues. The theological issues discussed, as the Yale Statement puts it, included different understandings of the Unity of God, of Jesus Christ and his passion, and of the love of God. It is also important to discuss the practical issues with which we are confronted, such as poverty, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the situation in Palestine and Israel, the dangers of further wars and freedom of religion.

In the existing situation of South Asia it will be important to include in these issues the war in Afghanistan, war against terrorism, and radical Islamists and the Taliban in Pakistan. The issue, of 60 years'

duration, of Kashmir, in which over 85,000 people have been killed, cannot be ignored. We can also address the issues of poverty, hunger, illiteracy, internally displaced people and refugees. The sufferings of religious minorities and violence carried out against the Christian minority in Pakistan and both Muslim and Christian minorities in India for instance, can be discussed in the search for possible remedies. The violation of human rights and human dignity can also be discussed. The Yale Statement has agreed that,

We recognise 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.

Although Christianity and Islam are different religions, the two commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, Torah and the New Testament. In the Qur'an, God Most High tells Muslims to issue a call of *A Common Word* to Christians (and Jews – the People of the Scripture). Both believe in the unity of God and worship him. There is no intention to make one religion out of the two. There is an element of respect for the identity of the other's religion and that they worship the same God. As the Yale Statement puts it, "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." This letter also brings this out strongly when it states,

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an (Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8).

This letter brings out the point of religious freedom, "Let there be no compulsion in religion..." (Q. 2:256). The love of God and love of neighbour are made common ground of all future interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims – this is common ground on which hangs *all the Law and the Prophets* (Matthew 22:40). This dialogue between Muslims and Christians is not, as the letter states,

a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christianity and Islam are the largest and second largest religions in the world and in history. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively... If Christians and Muslims are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace.

There is a respect for the differences and not to look down upon the other because of the difference.

So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.

This Open Letter is taken positively and seriously both by the Christians and Muslims. It calls for and invites a renewal and intensification of Christian-Muslim dialogue. The fact that this letter has been discussed by various universities and groups manifests how important and significant it is to study this Open Letter and move forward with positive thinking for promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue. The theological faculty of Yale University organised a workshop and conference on *A Common Word* 24-31 July 2008, followed by "A Common Word Conference" at the University of Cambridge from 12-15 October 2008, with the Opening Address by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the colloquium organised by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome from 4-6 November 2008, in which Pope Benedict XVI addressed the participants, and now this International Conference on Muslim-Christian Dialogue in Cadenabbia, Italy 1-4 October 2009. I anticipate that many more conferences will be organised on the theme of *A Common Word*.

This understanding and concept of the love God and love of neighbour in Christianity and Islam are well summarised and presented in the final declaration of the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum, in Rome 4-6 November 2008. In this declaration we read,

For Christians the source and example of love of God and neighbour is the love of Christ for his Father, for humanity and for each person. 'God is Love' (1 Jn 4, 16) and "God so loved the world that He gave

his only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3,16). God's love is placed in the human heart through the Holy Spirit. It is God who first loves us thereby enabling us to love Him in return. Love does not harm one's neighbour but rather seeks to do to the other what one would want done to oneself (Cf. 1 Cor 13, 4-7). Love is the foundation and sum of all the commandments (Cf. Gal 5, 14). Love of neighbour cannot be separated from love of God, because it is an expression of our love for God. This is the new commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' (Jn 15, 12) Grounded in Christ's sacrificial love, Christian love is forgiving and excludes no one; it therefore also includes one's enemies. It should be not just words but deeds (Cf. 1 Jn, 4, 18). This is the sign of its genuineness.

For Muslims, as set out in A Common Word, love is a timeless transcendent power which guides and transforms human mutual regard. This love, as indicated by the Holy and Beloved Prophet Muhammad, is prior to the human love for the One True God. A Hadith indicates that God's loving compassion for humanity is even greater than that of a mother for her child (Muslim, Bab al-Tawba: 21); it therefore exists before and independently of the human response to the One who is 'The Loving'. So immense is this love and compassion that God has intervened to guide and save humanity in a perfect way many times and in many places, by sending prophets and scriptures. The last of these books, the Qur'an, portrays a world of signs, a marvellous cosmos of Divine artistry, which calls forth our utter love and devotion, so that 'those who have faith, have most love of God' (2:165), and 'those that believe, and do good works, the Merciful shall engender love among them.' (19:96) In a Hadith we read that 'Not one of you has faith until he loves for his neighbour what he loves for himself'. (Bukhari, Bab al-Iman: 13). (§ 1)

In these paragraphs we note how the love of God and love of neighbour are understood by Christians and Muslims. Their understanding is different on the love of God and how he manifests it. The difference of understanding and interpretation must be respected. This is important to manifest and declare in our Christian-Muslim relations in Asia. This is also so in the light of what Pope Benedict XVI emphasised when he addressed the participants of the Catholic-Muslim Forum in Rome on 6 November 2008. His Holiness said,

I am well aware that Muslims and Christians have different approaches in matters regarding God. Yet we can and must be worshippers of the one God who created us and is concerned about each person in every corner of the world. Together we must show, by our mutual respect and solidarity, that we consider ourselves members of one family: the family that God has loved and gathered together from the creation of the world to the end of human history.

The same declaration also brings several other points which are relevant to the situation of Muslims and Christians in Asia, for example when it says, "Human life is a most precious gift of God to each person. It should be preserved and honoured." Yes it is important to preserve and honour human life. It challenges us to work with much more zeal to bring this concept into our situation, for example in Pakistan. If it enters into the minds of the people there will be no more killing of innocent people. There will be no more suicide attacks and bomb explosions. There will no more public lashing of women by the Taliban. Men will not be forced to grow beards and women will be respected and will be free to play their full role for the betterment of society. Such teaching of the Holy Qur'an and Holy Bible needs to get into the minds of the fanatics and militants: to love God and love your neighbour. If these teachings get across to all Muslims and Christians, then there will be a great respect for one's own life and the life of the other as well. So it is important to get these ideas across to those people who have a narrow understanding and interpretation of their religion.

This type of approach is connected with the next point of this Rome Declaration that, "Human dignity is derived from the fact that every human person is created by God and has been endowed with the gifts of reason and free will, and therefore, enabled to love God and others. Respect for the human dignity of all, both male and female." This is another important factor; that all human persons are respected and equal opportunities are provided to them, to make use of their talents which are given by God. Pope Benedict XVI in his address said,

I was pleased to learn that you were able at this meeting to adopt a common position on the need to worship God totally and to love our fellow men and women disinterestedly, especially those in distress and need. God calls us to work together on behalf of the victims of disease, hunger, injustice and violence.

Yet another point in the declaration is relevant when we speak of the love of God and love of our neighbour; this is to respect every person who is around us and that there should not be any discrimination in the name of religion. It is a fact that in some countries there is discrimination in the name of religion. The Rome Declaration says,

Religious minorities are entitled to be respected in their own religious convictions and practices. They are also entitled to their own places of worship, and their founding figures and symbols they consider sacred. Both Catholics and Muslims are called to be the instruments of love and harmony among religions, and for humanity as a whole.

This will help to overcome violence and terrorism, with which we are faced in some countries. It is a fact that in some countries of Asia, such as Pakistan and India, the places of worship of minorities have been desecrated, houses burnt, believers killed and schools belonging to minorities have been destroyed by the militants. There is a need to work together against such aggression and religiously motivated violence.

In the Rome Declaration we read,

We profess that Catholics and Muslims are called to be instruments of love and harmony among believers, and for humanity as a whole, renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism, especially that committed in the name of religion, and upholding the principle of justice for all. (§ 11)

There is another important point to improve the situation and join hands to overcome poverty, promote the just distribution of food and thus overcome hunger. The Declaration continues,

We call upon believers to work for an ethical financial system in which the regulatory mechanisms consider the situation of the poor and disadvantaged, both as individuals, and as indebted nations. We call upon the privileged of the world to consider the plight of those afflicted most severely by the current crisis in food production and distribution, and ask religious believers of all denominations and all people of good will to work together to alleviate the suffering of the hungry, and to eliminate its causes. (§ 12)

Some Suggestions, Recommendations and Future Plans

There is an invitation to prepare young people and give them formation in such a way that they know about their own religion and other religions as well; we emphasise this a lot in Pakistan. The future of the world rests in the hands of young people. They must be formed in such a way that there is respect for all and room for the religious freedom of each human person. We have been stressing a lot in this regard that in Pakistan our curricula should be such as to promote interfaith harmony, peace and respect for all. In the Rome Declaration we read,

Young people are the future of religious communities and of societies as a whole. Increasingly, they will be living in multicultural and multi-religious societies. It is essential that they be well formed in their own religious traditions and well informed about other cultures and religions. (§ 13)

In the Open Letter, there is a strong mention of justice for all,

God says in the Holy Qur'an: Lo! God enjoineeth justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbiddeth lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorteth you in order that ye may take heed (Al Nahl, 16:90). Jesus Christ [Peace be with him] said: Blessed are the peacemakers(Matthew 5:9), and also: For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? (Matthew 16:26).

In Pakistan it is imperative to work for the safeguarding of human rights and the human dignity of all. There are Muslim and Christian groups which are already working for human rights, peace and justice. There are some groups which work jointly, such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. There are groups working for the rights of women, such as Women Action Forum. There are organisations which are active for the rights of workers and labourers, and to eliminate child labour. There are other organisations that are vocal against discriminatory laws in the country, e.g. the Joint Action Committee (JAC).

In this conference we have two well-known Muslim scholars, human rights' activists, promoters of peace, inter-faith and Christian-Muslim

dialogue from Pakistan: Mr Abid Hasan Minto and Mr Kazy Javed Hussain. They are and will be contributing immensely to promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue in Pakistan and in the rest of the world. They can also play a great role in bringing ACW to reach out to others, especially Muslim scholars and intellectuals.

There is a need to make the ACW Open Letter and the various responses to it better known to the general public; so far they are not. They should be known by university faculties focused on the world religions and interfaith dialogue. The Vatican documents, such as *Nostra Aetate* and speeches of the recent and current Popes and the documents published by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches on inter-religious dialogue should also be made available and translated into different languages so that they can reach the general public. There could also be talk-shows on television channels and the public forums of various newspapers on this topic. The youth can also be involved to study these documents and write articles on them.

The government of Pakistan has established the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. There is a Ministry of Minorities Affairs, established by the government of Pakistan. Last year a Christian, Mr Shahbaz Bhatti, was appointed as Federal Minister for Minorities' Affairs. He is working to bring equality among all citizens. Recently a 5% quota was reserved for the minorities in all spheres of life. Addressing a convention for solidarity with the minorities on 28 May 2009 in Islamabad, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani said, "A Minorities Commission had been set up to protect rights of minorities and asked them to ensure implementation of five percent quota for minorities in the government services." Mr Gillani also said that interreligious harmony needs to be promoted as, with greater understanding, the country would be strengthened and be able to face the challenges that present themselves. In the same convention, Mr Gillani announced that an interfaith complex would soon be set up in Islamabad to serve as a centre to work for interfaith harmony.

There are several organisations that are working to promote interfaith harmony and peace. The National Commission for Interfaith Dialogue and Ecumenism of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan (NCIDE) has been active for the last 25 years to promote interfaith

and Christian-Muslim Dialogue. The Minhaj ul-Qur'an of Dr Tahir ul-Qadri has established the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum. The Pakistan Association of Inter-religious Dialogue (PAIRD) is active for the past 25 years. The United Religions Initiative (URI) is another organisation that has been working since 1998 to promote dialogue, reconciliation and peace among religions and cultures at all levels of life; particularly at grassroots levels. The URI has established over 37 groups in the country for youth, children, men and women, to educate them for Christian-Muslim and interreligious dialogue. It has arranged programmes on the International Day of Peace for people of various religions and from various walks of lives. The electronic and print media are also playing an active role.

It is also true that at this moment my country, Pakistan, is going through a crucial time with over three million people being internally displaced. They were forced to leave their homes due to the military operation against the Taliban and militants in the Swat Valley. The Taliban have a radical and narrow interpretation of the Islamic Shari'a. They want to impose the strictest form of Islam. They are not in favour of the education of women. They are against any social, political or media role for women in public life. Towards that end, they have destroyed over 150 girls' schools with bombs and over 100 boys' schools as well. They are against the shrines of saints and mystics and thus have destroyed shrines of famous sufi mystics and poets, such as that of Rehman Baba. One reason that they gave was that women go to these shrines and seek the intercession of saints, therefore these shrines should be destroyed. They levied the *jizya* tax on minorities. They do not accept parliament and are totally against democracy. These militants disregard the high courts and the Supreme Court and want to bring in their own *qadis* (judges). The Pakistan nation as a whole, and in particular civil society and liberal minded people, have strongly reacted against this form of Islamisation and the Taliban. They staged rallies and addressed press conferences to condemn their form of interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic Shari'a. The minorities have joined them. In such a situation, it is important that Muslim religious leaders play a role to bring about positive change in the society based on the love of God and love of neighbour to save this nation from the grip of the Taliban and extremists. In my opinion these extremists need to be educated in schools and colleges and be opened up towards modern sciences and the world.

The government of Pakistan has started a military operation, *Rahe Rast*, against these militants and has succeeded to a great extent. A large number of internally displaced people have started returning to their homes in Swat and other places. The girls' and boys' schools are being re-opened and the Taliban chased away (about 2,000 of them killed and many arrested). The bold step of the government and army action against these militants has brought relief to the public in general. There is no need and there is no room for such kind of radicalism in our country.

There is a strong wave of promoting interfaith dialogue in the country. Several students from Islamabad University, Quaid-e-Azam University, Karachi University and Forman College University, Lahore are doing research on interfaith and Christian-Muslim dialogue. The faculties of religion have taken interfaith dialogue as an integral part of their studies. The professors of these universities have invited Christian scholars and advocates of interfaith and Christian-Muslim dialogue into the universities to give lectures to the staff and students. They have realised that dialogue is a dire necessity at the stage of history through which we are going. It is a good step towards bringing harmony and understanding among Christians and Muslims, and to know exactly the beliefs of the other; thus to respect the differences and work jointly for the issues with which our countries are faced. Dialogue at all levels, such as the dialogue of life, the dialogue of development works, the dialogue of religious experience and the dialogue of words between scholars, is of prime importance.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference Pakistan and Major Superiors' Leadership Conference Pakistan issued a Joint Statement on 12 November 2008. It was issued in response to the strong wave of terrorism and extremism with which our country is confronted. The statement says:

Realizing that this has created complex difficulties in all walks of life, it was also realized that we are called to be signs of hope for all. In order to be so, we have decided to take the following concrete steps:

- Promote faith formation of our communities through catechesis, Bible studies, prayer by means of media and train our lay-leaders.

- Organise awareness programs in Parishes, Institutions, families etc in order to bring about peace, harmony and better understanding among diverse faith communities.
- Work for inter-religious dialogue of life and ecumenism.

In the light of this statement we see the Catholic Church in Pakistan is committed to promoting peace, harmony and inter-religious dialogue.

The Church of Pakistan Bishops (Protestant) are also on the front-line in promoting peace and harmony among religions. The Rt Revd Dr Alexander John Malik, Bishop of Lahore, and the Rt Revd Samuel Robert Azriah, Bishop of Raiwind and Moderator of the Church of Pakistan, have established inter-religious dialogue committees. They are ardent promoters of Christian-Muslim, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue.

In September 2009, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, and Bishops of the Church of Pakistan along with the Major Superiors' Leadership Conference of Pakistan and several other small churches established the Pakistan Christian Action Forum to address the present wave of violence against Christians in various cities such as Gojra, Korian Wala, Bamni Wala and Sambarial. In several, there was religiously motivated violence against Christians from June to September 2009, seven Christians were burnt alive, including women and children, and over 300 houses of Christians and churches have been destroyed in mob hysteria following the false accusation of blasphemy and desecration of the Holy Qur'an. The Pakistan Action Forum is determined to bring healing between Christians and Muslims and make our society a more humane one, where every person is respected.

The Pakistan nation on the whole is in favour of democracy and being a democratic state. Significant numbers of the citizens of Pakistan have always voted in favour of liberal or secular parties and rejected religious political parties. These religious political parties have managed to get only a few seats in the parliament. The public of Pakistan in general is scared of the hardliners and militants. The general public want to breathe in a free, liberal and secular Pakistan. The so-called religious parties have been creating hurdles in the progress and prosperity of the country. This is what

has happened to Pakistan since the 9/11 incident. The radicals have carried out many terrorist attacks on public places, institutes, police and military academies and head quarters.

It would be great if this Open Letter could be translated into various languages in Pakistan, such as Urdu, Sindhi, Balochi, Pushto and Punjabi. There is an attempt to translate it into Urdu but it is necessary to do it properly. There is a need to make this letter available to the general public. It would be great if it could also be published in our newspapers and made known on the electronic media. As there are several interfaith groups working in the country, this letter can guide us to get to know each other better and promote interfaith harmony between Christians and Muslims.

This Open Letter is not known to the public in general. Therefore I would strongly recommend that this Open Letter should be made known to a wide range of readers. It would be good if we take the initiative and organise seminars and workshops on this theme. It would also be a great help to Muslims and Christians to collaborate with one another, to bring these themes to conferences. The content of this letter could also become part of the curriculum of schools, *madrasas*, colleges and universities. It would also be good to form groups of religious leaders, scholars, students, intellectuals and promoters of peace and interfaith harmony to study this document and make it known to the general public. Such a document could also be discussed during television shows and in newspaper forums.

Muslims and Christians together can fight against the issues they are faced with in our region, such as poverty, illiteracy, religious freedom and human dignity. Pope Benedict XVI said in his speech to the delegates of the Common Word Conference in Rome on 6 November 2008.

My hope, once again, is that these fundamental human rights will be protected for all people everywhere. Political and religious leaders have the duty of ensuring the free exercise of these rights in full respect for each individual's freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict further said that,

The discrimination and violence which even today religious people experience throughout the world, and the often violent persecutions to which they are subject, represent unacceptable and unjustified acts, all the more grave and deplorable when they are carried out in the name of God. God's name can only be a name of peace and fraternity, justice and love.

The Holy Father has challenged us to spread the message of harmony and mutual understanding by saying,

We are challenged to demonstrate, by our words and above all by our deeds, that the message of our religions is unfailingly a message of harmony and mutual understanding.

It would be great to make a network of scholars from the South and South-East Asia region and have conferences, seminars and workshops on this topic. It would be good to identify funds for this purpose so that harmony, Christian-Muslim dialogue and peace are promoted.

Let the outcome and statements of the conferences in Yale, Cambridge, Rome and Cadenabbia be made available to the general public. It will certainly remove a lot of misconceptions and trust will be built.

It would be helpful to establish Christian-Muslim dialogue groups at continental, national and provincial levels in Asia, to work jointly on social, economic, religious and political problems.

There is a grave need to establish Christian-Muslim dialogue and peace centres in our countries. These will offer research facilities and organise programmes to promote dialogue among Muslims and Christians at all levels of life.

The Dominican friars in Pakistan have started the construction of a Peace Centre in Lahore. It will be completed by mid-2010. It will be the first Peace Centre in the Archdiocese of Lahore and most probably in Pakistan as well. This centre is being built to hold seminars, conferences and workshops on inter-religious dialogue and peace. It will also be a place to publish articles and brochures on creating good will, tolerance and positive understanding among

people of various religions, especially Christians and Muslims. The International Day of Peace celebrations will be held in it as well. There will be programmes and seminars for youth, women and children, as well as with media personnel, religious scholars and human rights activities. This Peace Centre will be interlinked with other organisations and groups at national and international levels which are working for similar aims and objectives. I am planning to organise and host an international conference on ACW next year in this Peace Centre.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I am sure that in the light of the Open Letter and positive responses from various parts of the world, from religious leaders and scholars alike, there will be a change in society. There will be a positive change in the attitude of Muslims and Christians, and if they had negative attitudes towards one another, this letter and its responses will help to concentrate more on what unites us rather than what divides us.