Christian Reflects on *A Common Word*

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Perhaps the best place to begin trying to understand the motivation of *A Common Word* is at the end. The authors note that, since together we make up more than half the world's population, there will be no peace in the world unless Muslims and Christians find a way to live at peace with one another. They surely echo the feelings of many when they say that "our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake." In a world increasingly ready to see our current situation as a winner-takes-all struggle between two incompatible civilisations, this is a welcome reminder that there is an alternative: we can still try to envision a common future.

The signatories rightly believe that the resolution of our conflicts lies not merely in political negotiation but in finding a common theological basis that can ground our mutual commitments and give them an authority beyond the calculations of temporary expediency. So they undertake to demonstrate the common ground we share in our belief in the unity of God, in the necessity of complete devotion to God and of love towards the neighbour. They quite rightly refuse to accept the idea, all too often expressed even by members of the Roman Curia, that Muslims are incapable of entering into theological dialogue.

A Longer Timeline

However dramatic may be the current world context that prompted it, this open letter to Christian leaders by 138 Muslim scholars and authorities should probably be read against a longer timeline. Forty-some years ago over two thousand Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council approved an epoch-making statement that, as Pope Benedict has several times reaffirmed, remains the official position of the Church with regard to Muslims. Though it did not deal with some of the more substantial differences between our faiths, *Nostra Aetate*, as it was entitled, focussed on the things we have in common, which are the basis for the esteem for Muslims that the Council professed. The bishops concluded: "Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and

Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget [‘transcend’ or ‘overcome’ might have been better words to choose] the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all humanity social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”

Authority and Consensus

The Catholic Church has a well-defined authority structure that makes possible the enunciation of such a clear change in policy, and its implementation through control over the training of priests and the appointment of bishops. Even so, the Council’s positions, especially with regard to Muslims, are still not broadly enough known or accepted. They are sometimes dismissed as just outdated pastoral advice appropriate for the optimistic 60s, but hopelessly out of touch with twenty-first century realities.

No other religious community, Christian or not, has such an authority structure. Everywhere else authority is more diffuse; we might even say democratic. It has to be negotiated painstakingly and binding consensus is often elusive. We should be particularly grateful to this group of Muslim scholars therefore that they have succeeded in arriving at a statement like this, subscribed to by such a broad representation. One might read their letter as a first collective Muslim response to *Nostra Aetate*, a response that agrees to adopt the same approach as the Council: the bracketing of differences in order to affirm common beliefs and an appeal to work together for justice and peace in the world.

A Common Word forms part of a larger project, focused in Jordan, to develop an authoritative consensus on what it means to be Muslim in our time. In so doing, the Amman project seeks to fill a vacuum in the leadership of the worldwide Muslim community; a vacuum that has in recent years been filled by the extremist voices only too well known to us through the world’s media. In media terms, such reasoned and scholarly voices may be no match for the sabre-rattling diatribes that make for good television, but they deserve to be taken seriously and given the widest possible diffusion. We can only hope that this letter, though it may well have to struggle as *Nostra Aetate* does to be accepted as authoritative, will favour just as momentous a change of mentality.

"Moderate" Muslims?

The authors are not the mythical "moderate Muslims" with whom everyone professes to be ready to dialogue. What a patronising term that is! We seem to be looking for Muslims who "don't take it all too seriously" and who are ready to tell us what we want to hear. It is against "moderates" of this kind in the Catholic Church that bishops fulminate at election time. "Cafeteria Catholics" – take the bits you like and leave the rest – are roundly condemned, but similarly picky Muslims are celebrated. The presumption seems to be that a commitment that takes seriously the whole Islamic tradition is incapable of dealing with the modern world. In fact the opposite would seem to be the case: the reactionary and intransigent ideologies that drive terrorism and puritanical repression are not drawing on the whole of the Islamic tradition, but rather a truncated and impoverished reading of it. The group of scholars behind *A Common Word* are ignorant neither of the breadth and depth of the Islamic tradition, nor of Christianity. Among them are people like Mustafa Cerić, Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, who knows both the Western academic world and traditional Islamic learning, as well has having firsthand experience of the genocidal rage driving some Christians. We would be mistaken to think that they are pushovers who will settle for a ceremonial acknowledgement of fellowship without a serious intellectual and spiritual engagement, and frank political talk. In their patient but insistent correspondence since Regensburg they have shown a determination to pursue this discussion with seriousness and respect.

For several decades, of course, it was the Church that made much of the running in interreligious dialogue, but our interlocutors feel that in recent years our pace has faltered somewhat and that, at least in Rome, there is no great energy for dialogue even if we still profess a commitment to it. It may be discomfiting for us, but the initiative seems now to be in the hands of others.

Another Audience

Though addressed to a long list of popes, patriarchs and other church leaders, *A Common Word* surely has another audience as well. In keeping with the aim of the Amman project, it is implicitly addressed to Muslims, modelling for them a methodology and a mode of discourse appropriate to a dialogical approach to relations

with other believers, and also providing the authoritative textual underpinnings for it. The letter spends much of its energy on outlining the obligation on Muslims to be devoted completely to God, to love God and to be grateful for all God has given. In this context, one might have hoped for a more explicit recognition of the political implications of such devotion: the relativising of all power, ideologies and political projects. However good and divinely-sanctioned they may seem to us, they are not God, and therefore are not ultimate. This will be an essential element in further dialogue; it is the theological key that takes us beyond mere disagreement about power relations and political alternatives.

I tend to bristle when I hear the words "all religions." They usually accompany a hasty generalisation that owes more to wishful thinking or projection than to attentive observation of what the various religions do actually claim or profess. It is surprising and disappointing to note how often even academic writing falls back on such pieties and each religion is reduced to a particular variation on the generic theme of religion. *A Common Word* does not quite fall into that trap, since it confines itself to speaking only of the Abrahamic traditions of Christianity and Islam (with Judaism unfortunately only making the occasional, parenthetical appearance). Yet the letter does open itself to a reductionist reading – one that Christians might want to examine more closely – when it says in Part III, "Thus the Unity of God, love of Him and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded." There has been a slide from the unexceptionable affirmation earlier in the paragraph that the obligation to love God and one's neighbour is a common element in the sacred texts of our traditions, to the more questionable claim that the dual commandment of love is the *foundation* of all three.

In fairness to our Muslim colleagues, it should be admitted that many Christians too will propose a shorthand rendition of Jesus' saying about the greatest commandments as the kernel of his teaching and the foundation of Christianity. But are they right? Is that all there is to the Gospel? Does the Word become incarnate simply to remind us of a few important verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, verses that some of Jesus' contemporaries among the rabbis would also have recognised as summing up "the Law and the Prophets"? Is Jesus' mission primarily to remind us of an obligation already revealed centuries before? Is all the rest of his living, dying and rising somehow only ancillary to this?

A Trick Question

We should note that when Jesus gives his answer to the question of the greatest commandment, it is always in the context of controversy. Matthew (Matt 22:35) and Luke (Lk 10:25) both note that it was a question intended to trap him. The cautious answer to a trick question can hardly be considered the foundation of a religion. If the subject under discussion is commandments, then surely those two are the greatest. But is there nothing to the Good News other than commandment and obligation? When the lawyer who poses the commandment question in Mark's gospel warmly reaffirms Jesus' reply, Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mk 12:34). Not far from it, but not quite there. Commandments are fine as far as they go but the Kingdom goes further than that. The Gospel is not a simple cut-and-paste job on the Torah with a more pithy selection of commandments. Before all else it is about what God has done for love of us. What we are to do flows from that and is made possible by it.

God's Love for Us

When *A Common Word* speaks of "the love of God," it means our love *for* God, and that almost always in terms of obligation; as witness the repeated use of 'must' and 'should' in Part I. Yet personal experience is enough to make us realise that true love cannot be commanded or conditioned; it is freely given and received.

No New Testament writer has devoted more attention to the question of divine love than the one known there as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and whom we call John. In his first letter he says, "This is what love is: not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us …" (1 Jn 4:10). "We love," John tells us, "because God first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Throughout John's work there is a constant outward movement of love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9). "Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). That is Jesus' "new commandment," given to his disciples just before his death. A command not to love him or the Father, but rather to dwell in the love he bears us. Dwelling in that love means allowing it to transform us so that we in our turn love others. In this context Jesus uses the telling image of a vine and its branches. The nutrient sap of the vine enables the branches to produce fruit, yet the fruit is for the benefit neither of the vine nor of the branches; it is for others.

All love originates in God and flows ever outward from there, transforming all who will allow themselves to be suffused by it. It does not turn back on itself, demanding reciprocation, but pours itself out for the beloved; even for the ungrateful.

Both John and Paul recognise the central importance of the fact that it was not on the basis of our perfection or even repentance that God's love for us was manifested but while we were still sinners (1 Jn 4:10; Rom 5:6). If there is a foundation to Christian faith this is surely a major pillar of it.

A similar understanding of divine love is not entirely lacking in the Islamic tradition but it does not find a place in *A Common Word,* possibly because it confines itself to quoting Qur'an and Hadith in order to address the broadest possible Muslim audience. Still, it might have appealed to the verse Q. 5:54 in which it is said that "God will bring a new people: He will love them, and they will love Him." Commenting on this verse some sufi writers have observed that God's love for human beings precedes their love for God, and if it were not for the fact that God had favoured us by his primordial love, mercy and compassion, humanity could never have loved God and his creatures. In this lies an important point for our continuing theological dialogue.

Who Is My Neighbour?

Just as there are reservations about how foundational for Christianity is the commandment to love God, so also one must question whether the commandment to love one's neighbour is fundamental. There are two elements in the gospels that relativise it. The first comes from Luke's gospel where Jesus' questioner, having failed to trap him with the commandment question, has another try and asks, "And who is my neighbour?" (Lk 10:29). The parable Jesus tells in response – the Good Samaritan – actually turns the man's question on its head. After having described the extraordinarily generous and compassionate response of this religious outsider to a Jew in need, after two of the victim's own religious leaders had already failed him, Jesus asks, "Which of these three *proved himself a neighbour* to the man attacked by robbers?" The question is no longer who is to be included in the category of neighbour and so what are the limits of my obligation to love. It is rather: how can I show myself a neighbour to others by responding to them in love?

The second and more striking element in the gospels occurs in both Matthew and Luke in slightly different forms. Here is Matthew's version:

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 children of your Father in heaven. For He makes his sun to rise on the evil as well as the good, and his rain to fall on the righteous and unrighteous alike. (Matt 5:43-45)

Luke reports that it was in this context that Jesus said,

If anyone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.… Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk 6:29-31, 35–6)

For Luke this exaggerated and disinterested generosity is the imitation of God's mercy; for Matthew it is even more. It is the very definition of God's perfection: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48). Our perfection lies in loving our enemies just as God's perfection is shown in his loving us with a self-emptying love. God revealed that love in Jesus even while we were still sinners, preferring alienation from God to the peace with God that was our original human state.

"God Bless Our Enemies"

This infinitely expanded definition of the neighbour and brother to include even enemies and attackers has not been easy for Christians to assimilate. We quickly fall back into a generic religious mindset where God loves only the righteous and we, who of course *are* the righteous, are entitled to hate those who are not. Just how radical is the demand placed upon us by Jesus' teaching can be seen if we could imagine the ubiquitous "God Bless Our Troops" bumper-stickers in the US replaced by ones that read "God Bless Osama." Or could

we imagine banners in Occupied Palestine that wished life and blessing on Israel and the United States rather than annihilation? Transformations like these do not happen easily, yet one witnesses them again and again on a small scale. These are the seeds of the Kingdom taking root and sprouting here and there, but too often they are trampled underfoot by "realism" or the desire for retribution. Perhaps our dialogue could focus on the words of Q. 60:7, "Perhaps God will create friendship between you and those you consider your enemies. God is powerful, infinitely forgiving, most merciful." Where love replaces enmity, it is surely God at work, not just us.

Some Difficult Points

A Common Word does not hide some rather problematic points, though perhaps their implications could be missed. The major example of this is where Christians are assured in Part III that Muslims "are not against them and that Islam is not against them." Then come the conditions (stipulated in Q. 60:8): "so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes." Though the original context is Mecca which oppressed its first Muslim citizens, the verse is given broad contemporary application. Many extremists will use precisely this verse to justify enmity towards Israel and anyone who supports it. George Bush's catastrophic military adventure in Iraq and his so-called "War on Terrorism" are easily interpreted as attacks on Islam. Given the religious rhetoric he employs for political advantage and the outspokenness of many of his evangelical supporters, his wars can easily be portrayed as Christian wars and thus put in jeopardy all Christians. Even Western cultural hegemony is sometimes read as aggression and so taken as legitimising a violent response against any members of that culture. The letter's reassurance that Islam and Muslims are not against Christians entails a fairly major conditional clause. This is surely an important focus for our continuing dialogue with the group of 138 and other Muslims.

Personal Encounter

Although I suggested at the beginning that we might read this letter against the background of *Nostra Aetate* with its appeal to common elements of faith and practice, that should not be taken to imply that our dialogue will best proceed by a series of letters, however authori-

tative. These documents are important touchstones but we know from the history of Vatican II that they only grow out of reflection on experience. Many of the signatories of *A Common Word* have long experience of an interfaith dialogue that goes beyond mere ceremony and requires commitment and openness. Documents like these not only grow out of personal encounter, ideally they also open the way to further interaction.

Dialogue of Repentance

Both *Nostra Aetate* and *A Common Word* focus on positive common elements, and this is certainly a useful beginning. We do need to understand and appreciate each other at the level of ideals and norms, especially those we have in common. However, we also have in common our personal and communal failure to live up to those ideals. Speaking of our obligation to love God and neighbour is relatively easy. Even to speak about loving one's enemies is not that difficult. Talk, as they say, is cheap. It takes much more courage to acknowledge to each other our failures in loving, but that is where the real breakthrough will come: when the proud façades crumble and reveal a contrite heart.

Of course we are both quite sure that the other has plenty of which to repent compared to our high ideals and minor failings. Perhaps we both need to listen again to Jesus' advice about taking the plank out of our own eye before offering to remove the speck from another's eye (Matt 7:3-5). The dialogue of mutual repentance is the most difficult, yet most necessary of all, if we wish to move ahead.

A Clash of Civilisations?

Though the discourse of *A Common Word* is framed in terms of conflict between Muslims and Christians, an honest examination of conscience will not permit us to forget that our future is not threatened only by conflict between us. Over the centuries of undeniable conflict and contestation between members of our two traditions, each group has had its own internal conflicts that have claimed and continue to claim many more lives than inter-confessional strife. More Muslims are killed daily by other Muslims than by Christians or anyone else. The huge numbers who went to their deaths in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s were virtually all Muslims, as were those who killed them.

Scarcely any of the tens of millions of Christians who have died in European wars over the centuries were killed by Muslims. The greatest shame of the last century was the killing of millions of Jews by Christians conditioned by their own long tradition of anti-Semitism and seduced by a virulently nationalist and racist new ideology. The last 15 years in Africa have seen millions of Christians slaughtered in horrendous civil wars by their fellow believers. It seems from the statistics maintained about Catholic missionaries that one is much more likely to be killed in largely Catholic Latin America than anywhere in the Muslim world.

The Cry of the Poor

So let us not be misled into thinking either that Muslim-Christian conflict is the world's greatest conflict or even that war is the most serious threat to the human future. What of the millions of African children who die every year for want of some clean water or a few cents worth of vaccines? What of the world's poor who live under crushing burdens of foreign debt and corrupt domestic tyranny? What of the devastating effects on the earth of our poor stewardship of its resources? The new stage in Muslim-Christian dialogue represented by *A Common Word* should not become the occasion for a further narrowing of our attention and a greater obsession with ourselves. If we wish to talk of love, we will not be able to ignore the cry of the poor.