

# Comment on *A Common Word* and the Keynote Papers

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Many positive comments have been made about ACW and nothing should detract from that sentiment, it may be taken as read here. Some of the comments since the publication have taken rather a lot for granted. Al-Tayib draws attention to the letter as being part of the Hashemite project and Wasey notes the way in which it provoked a response from the Saudis; partly we have here a play for public leadership amongst different Muslim groups. The timing of the letter and the fact that it was sent in the full glare of public attention meant that Christian leadership organisations could hardly avoid a response. Any letter sent out for wide subscription needs necessarily to be somewhat ambiguous so that people can consider how they wish to read it before appending their signature. It need not have been done in this manner; a decision could have been made to write an edited book with a small number of acknowledged authors contributing detailed articles to which they could be held to account, or a series of single-author monographs. Such a methodology would have given readers a clear understanding of just what lies in the minds of the authors. Instead of a book, a small delegation could have been formed to engage in high-level but discreet private discussions before something tangible reached the public sphere. As Mbillah points out, the letter was not addressed to the Christian leadership of African Churches, where many of the issues between Muslims and Christians are real and pressing, but rather it sought to provoke a reaction from Rome, Geneva, Canterbury, Constantinople and so on. The mere existence of this conference is part of that provoked response, which shows that it was successful in one of its aims.

Many fulsome comments have been made about the fact that ACW quotes from the Bible and the question is raised; does this betoken a change in the traditional doctrine of *tahrif*? As Al-Tayib points out, such a conclusion is by no means justified. One can quote from a document with seriousness and respect without thereby subscribing to its authenticity; Christians do this with the Qur'an on a regular

basis. It would be wholly in keeping with the classical position that the Christians might have preserved some of the original *Injil* sent down (*tanzil*) to Prophet Jesus and the way to test this would be by *al-furqan*, the Qur'an as the ultimate, definitive and divinely protected text; anything that agrees with it therefore has a high likelihood of being authentic even though it is contained amidst some/many fabrications and corruptions. Modern Christian biblical scholarship would not be at all fazed by the citation from Enoch Powell, may God be merciful to him and forgive him his sins, indeed he would be regarded as rather a tame exegete by modern standards. Is it not central to our on-going discussion that we recognise the fundamentally different positions occupied in our respective paradigms by the Qur'an in Islam and the Gospels in Christianity; the former being the direct literal revelation of God to Prophet Muhammad and the latter being the divinely inspired writings of human authors within a particular theological schema as an expression of the faith of the believing community and a witness to the revelation of the Word Incarnate in Jesus?

ACW stresses the worship of the one God alone and has good Qur'anic grounds for this emphasis where Christians and Jews are concerned. However there is a difference between saying that "Christians worship God" and that "Christians worship God in a way that is acceptable to God after the coming of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad". We await the detailed justification for the latter position, if that is what we are to understand, as a departure from the classical *tafsir* of Q. 3:85 by the substantial majority of scholars. Are we in danger of reading a "do" for a "should" in the meaning of the text? The latter reading is underlined by the repeated use in ACW of the Hadith of the infallible, sinless Muhammad: "The best that I have said – myself and the Prophets that came before me – is: There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate..." Might this not have been read by some at least of the signatories to reinforce that Jesus taught exactly the same doctrine of *tawhid* that was taught by Muhammad, if only the Christians recognised the authentic teaching of their Prophet, and thus, as classical Islam would hold, that Christians should recognise the correction given in the final revelation and the last and universal Prophet? As Mbillah points out, we have significantly different theologies of the one God in whom both communities believe. Suseno draws attention to the theological nature of ACW, but is it written with cognisance and acceptance of a Christian theo-

logical paradigm or a reading of Christianity through a Muslim paradigm, which would be consonant with classical Islam?

Great use is made of the citation of Q. 3:64, which is indeed an invitation for Christians and Muslims to come to a just agreement and enter into dialogue in the best manner possible, as being Qur'anically mandated and endorsed by the *sunna* of the Prophet but without reference to the context of the *mubahala*, and the way that the verse has been interpreted classically. The Prophet, in his various letters, e.g. that to Heraclius, at least in the text before me, used the verse within the context of announcing his divinely appointed Prophethood and the invitation to embrace Islam or else the responsibility will be yours alone (the Prophet having performed his task of giving the invitation and warning).

The centrality of the Dual Commandment in the Christian tradition has been stressed in many reactions over the last two years and indeed it is right to see it as the core of the Christian ethical system. However, with reference to Madigan, surely Christianity believes that the action of God in Christ was something more than just the repetition of two verses from the Hebrew Bible that could have been, and were, recited by an elderly contemporary rabbi whilst standing on one leg. As Kukah and Mbillah point out, the first part is devoid of its core meaning without reference to the prior action of God within the loving reality of the Trinity, which Christians, in the power of the Spirit, are called to emulate by loving their neighbour. As Mbillah rightly asks within an African context, are followers of African traditional religions, or even idol-worshippers (let alone enemies – Madigan), who happen to live next-door, neighbours within Muslim and Christian understandings?

The Dual Commandment of love may be the heart of the Christian ethical system but al-Tayib rightly draws attention to the intrinsic human values which are shared: of peace, justice, equality, freedom and human dignity. Might not justice be seen within the Muslim paradigm to be the core ethical value towards which human beings are to strive, and then peace, human dignity, equality and so on flow from this? And yet, are we not taught to pray: Ya Allah, judge me according to your mercy and not according to your justice? There are dedications of *rahman* and *rahim* at the opening of all but one chapter of the Qur'an, not *'adl*.

Wherein then lies the importance of ACW for our contemporary world? It is precisely in its call to the two major religious communities of the world to enter into discussions to promote justice and peace on earth; as in the well known adage of Hans Küng: "No peace between peoples without peace between religions". The call to action is the paramount out-working of the document by which it is to be judged (Madigan – talk is cheap, and Mbillah – the need for action and not talk on the parts of both signatories and recipients). This, as al-Tayib rightly points out, is one of the failings of the process so far; ACW contains no practical objectives or a road map towards the future. It has taken an important initial step of opening a conversation but no more. That conversation of course, as Suseno notes, is opening up dialogue between Muslims (and between Christians) as well as between the faiths.

The reality of the impact of ACW outside the tiny group of "leaders" is clear from many sources, including Channon, Mbillah and others, viz. that the document is hardly known at all and hardly any tangible interest, let alone consequences, can be seen two years later. Channon draws attention to the dire need for study of the document and the areas that it opens up in the training of clergy and imams. Uwais calls for something deeper as a preliminary, which is an assessment of the qualities needed in a religious leader or teacher in the present age, drawing attention to knowledge and humility above all else. Humility being of particular importance in bringing out the rich diversity inherent within the Islamic (and Christian) traditions rather than the prevailing narrowness, especially of imported forms of religion (Mbillah).

The potentially huge role that can be played in Africa and South and South-East Asia is highlighted: the natural African respect for others irrespective of their religious affiliation (Mbillah), the importance of the Indonesian culture with its historic openness and tolerance as exemplified by *Pancasila* (Mulia), and the natural diversity and tolerance of the Indian Subcontinent (Wasey). Indeed this gives us something to live up to in an idealised way (Wasey), whilst not escaping the gulf between ideals and realities (Madigan). Kukah draws attention to the colonial history and legacy as key to understanding developments in Africa; must we not go on to add that the riches of the northern hemisphere are founded on the poverty of the southern and that no amount of talk between religions can make progress without

international social and economic justice? Al-Tayib raises the question of the influence of world politics on the way forward; to this we surely need to add the question of the exploitation and sharing of resources such as energy, food and water, plus the growing awareness of the impending ecological catastrophe. Channan rightly draws attention to the need to honour and respect all human life; with humility must Western Christians not accept that immoralities of global economic exploitation and the conduct of warfare without regard to civilian casualties gives the lie to any talk of seeking peace and respect for all human life? Finally Kukah raises the important question of secularity as a structure for allowing human flourishing as opposed to secularism as an anti-religious force; this all the more important coming from an African context as opposed to the habitual discourse within Europe and other post-Christian lands.