

An Unprecedented Breakthrough?

Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You*

by Harold W. Attridge, Miroslav Volf, Joseph Cumming and Emilie M. Townes

In the name of the Infinitely Good God whom we should love with all our being

Preamble

As members of the worldwide Christian community, we were deeply encouraged and challenged by the recent historic open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals from around the world. *A Common Word Between Us and You* identifies some core common ground between Christianity and Islam which lies at the heart of our respective faiths as well as at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism. Jesus Christ's call to love God and neighbor was rooted in the divine revelation to the people of Israel embodied in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). We receive the open letter 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.

Muslims and Christians have not always shaken hands in friendship; their relations have sometimes been tense, even characterized by outright hostility. Since Jesus Christ says, "First take the log out your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5), we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g., in the Crusades) and in the present (e.g., in excesses of the war on terror) many Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors. Before we "shake your hand" in responding to your letter, we ask forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.

Religious Peace—World Peace

"Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world." We share the sentiment of the Muslim signatories expressed in these opening lines of their open letter.

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This response by scholars at Yale University to "A Common Word Between Us and You" is reprinted, with permission, from the Yale Center for Faith and Culture website: (www.yale.edu/faith/about-commonword.htm).

Peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century, and perhaps of the whole present epoch. Though tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Christians and Muslims stand against each other are not primarily religious in character, they possess an undeniable religious dimension. If we can achieve religious peace between these two religious communities, peace in the world will clearly be easier to attain. It is therefore no exaggeration to say, as you have in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, that “the future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Common Ground

What is so extraordinary about *A Common Word Between Us and You* is not that its signatories recognize the critical character of the present moment in relations between Muslims and Christians. It is rather a deep insight and courage with which they have identified the common ground between the Muslim and Christian religious communities. What is common between us lies not in something marginal nor in something merely important to each. It lies, rather, in something absolutely central to both: love of God and love of neighbor. Surprisingly for many Christians, your letter considers the dual command of love to be the foundational principle not just of the Christian faith, but of Islam as well.

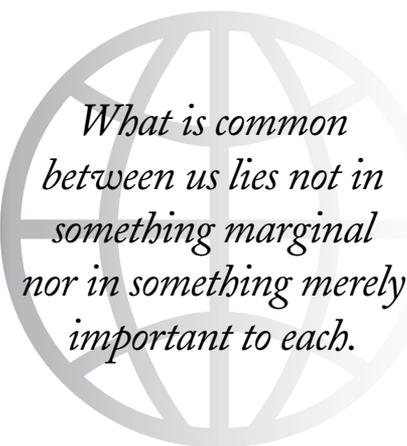
That *so much* common ground exists—common ground in some of the fundamentals of faith—gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us cannot overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together. That this common ground consists in *love* of God and of neighbor, gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities.

Love of God

We applaud that *A Common Word Between Us and You* stresses so insis-

tently the unique devotion to one God, indeed the love of God, as the primary duty of every believer. God alone rightly commands our ultimate allegiance. When anyone or anything besides God commands our ultimate allegiance—a ruler, a nation, economic progress, or anything else—we end up serving idols and inevitably get mired in deep and deadly conflicts.

We find it equally heartening that the God whom we should love above all things is described as being Love. In the Muslim tradition, God, “the Lord of the worlds,” is “The Infinitely



Good and All-Merciful.” And the New Testament states clearly that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Since God’s goodness is infinite and not bound by anything, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” according to the words of Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospel (Matthew 5:45).

For Christians, humanity’s love of God and God’s love of humanity are intimately linked. As we read in the New Testament: “We love because he [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Our love of God springs from and is nourished by God’s love for us. It cannot be otherwise, since the Creator who has power over all things is infinitely good.

Love of Neighbor

We find deep affinities with our own Christian faith when *A Common Word Between Us and You* insists that love

is the pinnacle of our duties toward our neighbors. “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself,” the Prophet Muhammad said. In the New Testament we similarly read, “whoever does not love [the neighbor] does not know God” (1 John 4:8) and “whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). God is love, and our highest calling as human beings is to imitate the One whom we worship.

We applaud when you state that “justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part” of the love of neighbor. When justice is lacking, neither love of God nor love of the neighbor can be present. When freedom to worship God according to one’s conscience is curtailed, God is dishonored, the neighbor oppressed, and neither God nor neighbor is loved.

Since Muslims seek to love their Christian neighbors, they are not against them, the document encouragingly states. Instead, Muslims are *with* them. As Christians we resonate deeply with this sentiment. Our faith teaches that we must be with our neighbors—indeed, that we must act in their favor—even when our neighbors turn out to be our enemies. “But I say unto you,” says Jesus Christ, “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 rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:44–45).

Our love, Jesus Christ says, must imitate the love of the infinitely good Creator; our love must be as unconditional as is God’s—extending to brothers, sisters, neighbors, and even enemies. At the end of his life, Jesus Christ himself prayed for his enemies: “Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The Prophet Muhammad did similarly when he was violently rejected and stoned by the people of Ta’if, saying, “The most virtuous behavior is to engage those who sever relations, to give to those who withhold from you,

and to forgive those who wrong you.” (It is perhaps significant that after the Prophet Muhammad was driven out of Ta’if, it was the Christian slave ‘Addas who went out to Muhammad, brought him food, kissed him, and embraced him.)

The Task Before Us

“Let this common ground”—the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbor—“be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us,” your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree. Abandoning all “hatred and strife,” we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other’s good, for the one God unceasingly seeks our good. Indeed, together with you we believe that we need to move beyond “a polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders” and work diligently together to reshape relations between our communities and our nations so that they

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genuinely reflect our common love for God and for one another.

Given the deep fissures in the relations between Christians and Muslims today, the task before us is daunting. And the stakes are great. The future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace. If we fail to make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony you correctly remind us that “our eternal souls” are at stake as well.

We are persuaded that our next step should be for our leaders at every level to meet together and begin the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another. It is with humility and hope that we receive your

generous letter, and we commit ourselves to labor together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.

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