

The future of the world

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On 13 October 2007 — coinciding with the Islamic occasion of *Eid el Fitr*, the end of the religious month of Ramadan — the *Open letter and call to Muslim religious leaders*, addressed to the Pope and other leaders of Christian denominations, was published. The title of the document was *A common word between us and you* and its publication echoed in the European and North American media, giving rise to comments and analyses by the main leaders.

The introduction starts by stating that “Muslims and Christians together make up over half the world’s population and that without peace and justice between the two religious communities there can be no meaningful peace in the world”. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.

The text sustains that the basis for this peace and understanding already exists, as it is a part of the foundational principles of both faiths, namely: love of One God and love of the neighbour. These principles, it points out, “are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour”, it reiterates, “is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity”. It states that in the Qur’an God orders the Muslims to issue to both Christians and Jews — the “People of the Scripture” — the following call:

Say: 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, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).¹

The main body of the letter is made up of two parts. The first is titled *Love of God*, which in turn is divided in two sections: *In Islam* and *The First and greatest Commandment in the Bible*. The first section — with citations from the Qur’an — is a text of a theological, doctrinal and ethical nature. In brief, *The First and Greatest Commandment in the Bible* attempts — with the comparison — to explore the similarities through citations from both the New

¹ Sura 3, verse 64.

and Old Testaments.

The second part, *Love of the Neighbour*, describes its sense in Islam and then in Christianity, both with citations. The text concludes with a third part titled: *Come to a common word between us and you*. It clarifies that there are differences between both denominations, but that the bases of the common ground are already asserted, and include in the community of principles not only the New Testament but also the Torah. The text presents a study that undoubtedly deserves to be explored in more depth, by us and by them. Let us have a look at who it is addressed to and by whom it is signed.

The Pope heads the list of recipients, as he is the temporal head of the Catholic Church, seen as the most numerous and influential. It also addresses leaders of Eastern Churches — both the Orthodox and the Catholic of the Eastern Rite — for example, the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria and All Africa, of Antioch and All the East, of the Holy City of Jerusalem, of Moscow and All of Russia, among others. It is addressed also to leaders of other Christian Churches, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States of America and the President of the Lutheran World Federation, the General Secretary of the World Methodist Council, the President of the Baptist World Alliance, the Secretary General of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches and “leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere”.

The level of recipients was representative but incomplete, given the great number of existing denominations, especially — but not only — in the United States of America. The general criterion seems to have been in favour of the Churches rooted in time and in tradition. Nevertheless, the criterion that prevailed was inclusive rather than exclusive.

More notable is the variety of origin, status, representativeness, professions, *etc.* among the signatories of the letter. Among them are signatories of 40 nationalities, including the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Yemen, Pakistan, Malaysia, Iraq, Palestine, Nigeria, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Lebanon and Kosovo. They are of different professions and varied status with regard to their degree of influence within their own communities. This heterogeneity should be of no surprise. In fact, the Christian Churches — each in their own way — maintain their hierarchies, whereas the Islamic communities — despite the existence of higher levels — did not undergo a notable concentration regarding their hierarchical unity.

Let us look at a few cases among the principal leaders of the main Islamic countries of several continents: member of the Committee of Senior Ullamas (scholars) of Saudi Arabia; Mufti (judge) of Istanbul, Turkey; Grand Judge and Head of Ulema of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Dean of the

Department of Islamic Studies, The Academy of Sciences of Iran; Grand Mufti of Russia; Minister of Religious Affairs of Algeria; Grand Mufti of the Republic of Syria; Chief Islamic Justice of Jordan; Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC); Grand Mufti of the Republic of Egypt; Secretary General of the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, Saudi Arabia; founder of the Ulema Organisation of Iraq; Grand Mufti of the Kingdom of Jordan; Imam of the Blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque, and many other professors, scholars, prestigious officials, members of religious orders, judges, politicians. The total number of original signatories was 138 and by the end of 2007 they were more than 200.

It took three years of work to come together in this common text signed by so many representatives. The work was extremely meticulous, having to save complex cultural, linguistic, doctrinal and theological differences — all this within a context of relative political urgency, so to speak, due to the growing tension from 2001 onward.

The text was published by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, with the direct intervention of its director, Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad — member of the Royal Family of Jordan — who for the three years (and more years before) devoted himself to the difficult task of reaching a consensus of common ideas and texts. One of the most complex matters lay in the question: who is Muslim? Who has the right to assume authority and issue legal regulations (the famous *fatwas*)? Is it allowed to assume the authority to declare someone apostate (*takfir*)? And other hardly less preliminary questions.

Such an effort, one that brings together members of various Churches and denominations generically named Christian in order to agree on a document of basic coincidences addressed to another denomination — whichever it is — has not yet been done. There are those of each Church (the Catholic, the Protestants), but not one that brings several of them together.

This document is an invitation to a theological dialogue — the first — and to a communion of criteria in the development of faith with Muslims.

Let us consider the text. The title itself should be given emphasis, as it is inspired by a *sura*, verse 64: a common word. Historically — and it is convenient here to go deeper into the history of Islam than thus far — the context of that common word is related to the visit of a delegation of Christians to Mohammed, near the end of his days. There they were exhorted to worship only God, as well as not to worship any other gods. It is a manifesto of absolute monotheism.

The document strives to avoid controversy, unlike the age-old disputes between them. Some may be of the opinion that trying to assume points of agreement is beyond reasonable. Nevertheless, this document is a kind of new beginning, a new starting point. Some have already stated this

opinion. The main sense is that of response, urgency, necessity, a common voice — at least among all or a substantial majority of Muslims — regarding what they understand to be essential about their own faith, in order to counteract — among themselves — extremists that preach violence, hate and intolerance.

We must remember that the Council Fathers of Vatican II, celebrated over 40 years ago, exhorted parishioners to acknowledge, conserve and promote the good things — spiritual and moral — as well as the sociocultural values found in the followers of other religions, through dialogue and cooperation. Since then the dialogue between Christians and Muslims has developed with intermittence, with back and forths. The novelty in all of it, the lack of structures, as they existed or were created with other denominations, the main political advances — particularly in the Middle East — have led to the effort not being maintained constantly. Hence the value of this letter.

The most well-known response was that of Pope Benedict XVI — through the intermediary of the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone — addressed to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, President of the Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. It says:

His Holiness the Pope has asked me to convey his gratitude to Your Royal Highness, and to all those that signed the letter. He would like to express, furthermore, his deep appreciation for this gesture, for the positive spirit that inspired the text and for the call for a common effort to promote peace in the world. Without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should pay attention to what unites us; namely, faith in the one God, the provident Creator and universal Judge who at the end of time will consider each person according to his or her actions. His Holiness was particularly impressed by the attention given in the letter to the twofold commandment to love of God and of man. As you may know, at the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI stated: 'I am profoundly convinced that we must not yield to the negative pressures in our midst, but must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values... Such common ground allows us to base dialogue on effective respect for the dignity of every human person, on objective knowledge of the religion of the other, on the sharing of religious experience and, finally, on common commitment to promoting mutual respect and acceptance among the younger generation. The Pope is confident that, once this is achieved, it will be possible to cooperate in a productive way in the areas of culture and society, and

for the promotion of justice and peace in a society and throughout the world. With a view to encouraging your praiseworthy initiative, I am pleased to communicate that His Holiness would be most willing to receive Your Royal Highness and a restricted group of signatories of the *Open Letter*, chosen by you. At the same time, a working meeting could be organised between your delegation and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, with the cooperation of some specialised Pontifical Institutes (such as the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and the Pontifical Gregorian University).

It is worth bearing in mind the exceptional nature of this invitation by the Pope.

It is interesting to see some of the considerations by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who presides over the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. He described the document as significant, among other things, because it is signed by both Sunni and Shiite personalities and because of the use of parallel expressions from the Bible and the Qur'an, both of which are unusual.

For the Cardinal, the Holy See's response represents progress in the relations between the Catholic Church and the Islamic world on a new basis, although it should not be seen by the Catholics as a Copernican revolution, he says.

Tauran anticipates that which could become the contents of a fruitful dialogue with Islam. He says that beyond the strictly theological dialogue — which has not yet begun and which undoubtedly presents many difficulties — he believes that the dialogue of cultures and charity and the dialogue about spirituality can be very fruitful. Together with Islam we can certainly contribute to the safeguard of some values such as the sacredness of human life, the dignity of family and the promotion of peace. It is essential to start getting to know each other. We, Christians and Muslims, always have something to learn from each other.

He brings up some examples of learning: we can appreciate in them, he says, the dimension of the importance of God and faith itself in public life. From us, on the other hand, Muslims can learn the value of a healthy laicism.

The Cardinal adds that there are still distances with regard to religious rights and freedom, where there are notable differences. But above all, he believes there is hope to continue from now on with a fruitful dialogue on this particular subject, as the open process includes mutual trust between the parties. It will contribute at least, Tauran insists, to the debate on this topic, although it will without a doubt be a long process. The Church itself, with the Council's document *Dignitatis Humanae*, has rediscovered the principle that no person can be forced to practice or not practice a religion.

The desire and augury is for Islam to also rediscover this principle.

For the director of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme of the University of Cambridge, Professor David Ford, the significance of the document lies in that it is based on three main reasons:

First, it is unprecedented in bringing together so many of the leading religious authorities and scholars of Islam and uniting them in a positive, substantial affirmation. This is an astonishing achievement of solidarity, one that can be built on in the future.

Second, it is addressed to Christians in the form of a friendly word, it engages respectfully and carefully with the Christian scriptures, and it finds common ground in what Jesus himself said is central: love of God and love of neighbour. I like its modesty — it does not claim to be the final word but to be 'a common word', one that Muslims and Christians... can share with integrity. This is shared ground, mutual ground, where there is the possibility of working further on issues that unite and divide us. This common word does not pretend that there are no differences between Muslims and Christians (for example, on the Christian teaching about Jesus rather than the teaching of Jesus).

Third, it opens a way forward that is more hopeful for the world than most others at present in the public sphere. Its combination of Islamic solidarity around core teaching together with friendly address to Christians should be seen as setting a direction for the twenty-first century. It challenges Muslims and Christians to live up to their own teachings and seek political and educational as well as personal ways to do this for the sake of the common good. It invites them to go deeper into their own faith at the same time as going deeper into each other's.

Ford adds that any long-term solution will have to include four elements:

1. Muslim solidarity around an understanding of their faith that clearly excludes violent, uncompassionate acts, programmes and language.
2. A better Christian understanding of Islam.
3. A deeper engagement between Muslims and Christians that makes use of the resources at the heart of their faith, such as their scriptures.
4. A concern for the flourishing of the whole human family and the whole planet.

It is worth highlighting the Conference on 15 November 2007, by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Apostolic Nuncio, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations — from the University of Notre Dame (United States of America) — titled: *Catholicism and Islam. Points of convergence and divergence, encounter and cooperation*. Among his ideas he mentions citations by theologian Hans Küng, starting by the famous slogan: “No world peace without religious peace”, and the more recent one taken from the monumental *Islam, past, present and future* that says:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.²

Migliore adds that the then Cardinal Ratzinger, a year before being elected as Pope — in a conference commemorating the 60th anniversary of D-Day (6 June 1944) — referred to Küng’s statement saying:

Modifying a statement of Hans Küng, I would say that without true peace between reason and faith there can’t be peace at the world level, because without peace between reason and religion, the very sources of morals and the rule of law dry out.

Lastly, it is worth adding another citation — used by Archbishop Migliore — of Libyan theologian Aref Ali Nayed, chief spokesperson on behalf of the *Open Letter*, as expressed to the Catholic News Service. He says:

The dialogue, or rather, set of dialogues, we hope *A common word* will initiate are multifaceted, multilayered, multidisciplinary, and multilateral. It is more a set or matrix of polyphonic discourses that are united through their exclusive focus: loving worship of the One God, and Love of our neighbours. The matrix includes theological, spiritual, scriptural, juridical, and ethical discourses. It is to be conducted in cooperation with a broad range of partners from all active Christian Churches and denominations including the Catholic, Protestant (both traditional and evangelical), and the Orthodox communities. The discourses will be with Church leaders, centres of theological studies, spiritual communities, scriptural reasoning and reading groups, and grassroots organisations.

² Hans Küng, *Islam, past, present and future* (Oxford: One World, 2007).

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An arduous task is ahead for those parties that are able to become involved — a task that cannot be tackled without an essential good faith that will gradually consolidate mutual trust. It takes wisdom and another equally important understanding: courage.

(Translated by Clara Tilve)

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