

To: Signatories of Loving God and Neighbor Together
From: Miroslav Volf
Date: January 7, 2008

Dear Friends,

Nearly two months have passed since Loving God and Neighbor was published in The New York Times. I am writing first to thank you for your willingness to endorse the document, in some cases even to endorse it despite pressure from your constituencies to do otherwise. In the meantime, our text has been widely disseminated and discussed. It has also been translated into Arabic and published, in both Arabic and English, in a number of prominent Arabic newspapers. I myself went to Abu Dhabi to participate in a press conference organized in conjunction with the publication of the Arabic translation, and on that trip I had extensive conversations with some principal actors behind the Common Word (for the text and responses, see acommonword.com) in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

As I look back over the past weeks—and over the run-up to the publication of our response, as we were gathering endorsements—I cannot but be immensely grateful for the warm, even enthusiastic, reception that the response has found both among both Christians and Muslims of widely different backgrounds. I hope that I am not wide off the mark to think of this as a sign of God's being at work.

What I have consistently heard from Muslims is how deeply they appreciated the generous spirit with which our text was written as it both embraced the hand of friendship offered by them and unmistakably affirmed the substance of the Christian faith (including where it differs profoundly from Islam!). They were deeply touched by our apology, and they appreciated it even more when I explained that the apology flows from one of the pillars of the Christian faith, highlighted in our response, namely that the God we worship is the one who justifies the ungodly so that we apologize as those who have been both forgiven and called to love even our enemies. One very influential Muslim leader looked at me with tears in his eyes and thanked me for what we have written! Many Muslims were very pleasantly surprised, even amazed, that such prominent Christian leaders as all of you are have taken a stance that is both so generous and so deeply rooted in the very foundations of your faith. They felt honored, even loved.

In the meantime, many Christian leaders have added their signatures to our response, and some have written expressing enthusiastic support of our initiative and offering help as we contemplate future initiatives on the long and exciting road before us. But there have also been Christians who, for various reasons, felt unable to sign Loving God and Neighbor, some even who think that the whole initiative was wrong-headed. Responding as positively as we did to A Common Word, have we not betrayed Christians discriminated against and even persecuted in some Muslim countries? Have we not given up on convictions that define classical Christianity, such as that the Word became flesh or that the One God is the most Holy Trinity? Is not love of God and neighbor a marginal rather than central theme in Islam, and does not “love” mean different things in Islam and Christianity in any case? We have received many such questions—some simple inquiries of those seeking to understand better what we were after, as well as other more forceful challenges. (By the way, A Common Word drafters and signatories have their own detractors and have been criticized by fundamentalists in their own ranks for having betrayed Islam.)

It is important, I believe, for all these critical voices to be heard, to be taken seriously, and to be engaged in a patient, respectful, and theologically responsible manner. (Incidentally, soon some of our answers to questions posed by Christian detractors of our response will be posted at the yale.edu/faith.) My colleagues at the Reconciliation Program of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Joseph Cumming and Andrew Saperstein, and I are committed to interpreting the objections of Christian critics of Loving God and Neighbor charitably and responding to them truthfully and respectfully (just as we are committed to do the same in relation to Muslims, whether friends or detractors of the Common Word). These issues are too important for us to allow heated and tendentious quarrels to sidetrack us from clear and constructive arguments.

As I am thanking you for endorsing Loving God and Neighbor and supporting the whole initiative, permit me also to ask you to do two things. First, I urge you to take time to engage in discussions with as many constituencies as you can surrounding the issues raised by both A Common Word and by our response. As you do so, I trust that you will foster among the participants in these discussions the practice of “speaking the truth in love,” as the Apostle Paul urges us to do in Ephesians—and do so both in regard to Muslim interlocutors and Christian detractors of our initiative. Second, we are still soliciting endorsements of our response. Would you, please, urge your colleagues,

your parishioners, or your constituencies to read *Loving God and Neighbor*, reflect on it, and, if possible, endorse it? The best way to do so is through the website of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture (yale.edu/faith).

You and I know that in *Loving God and Neighbor* we have not stated everything that can be and that needs to be said in response to *A Common Word* (let alone everything that needs to be said by the way of a Christian response to Islam!). Our document is just one “word” in a long conversation yet to be undertaken! Along those lines, we are planning a number of events in which we will have the opportunity to ask and respond to hard questions as we seek to speak the truth in love with our Muslim interlocutors. We will keep you informed about those initiatives. For now I should give you a heads up that a large conference is planned for the end of the Spring or the beginning of the Summer (partly in collaboration with Harvard University and Princeton Theological Seminary); you’ll hear more about it and receive an invitation to it shortly. This and other events that we at the Center are planning are part of a series of events intended to deepen our mutual understanding and foster the reconciliation spurred by the *Common Word* (similarly to those spearheaded by Cambridge University or Georgetown University, as well as the major culminating conference in Jordan).

In the hope that you have had a blessed season of celebrating God’s advent to us in Jesus Christ and with prayer for a year of flourishing for you and yours.

Miroslav Volf
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