

A COMMON WORD FOR A COMMON FUTURE

Dear Friends,

As the Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture at the Yale Divinity School, which has organized this conference, I want to welcome you all warmly to New Haven and to Yale University. To come and participate actively in this conference, many of you have taken upon yourselves the inconvenience of traveling long distances while leaving at home important and often urgent work. We are honored that you have responded to our invitation, and we are delighted by your presence. We hope that you will feel at home with us, especially those of you who have traveled from afar. The staff of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and many others at the Divinity School and the larger University have worked very hard to make this conference possible, and we have received dedicated and able assistance from the staff of my good friend HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, who is co-hosting this conference. We received invaluable help also from the students of Hartford Seminary. I want to express my deepest gratitude to all of them, but especially to

the director of the Reconciliation Program of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Joseph Cumming. I want to assure you that the whole staff of the Center, including myself, are committed to making your stay here pleasant. Please, let us know if you have any questions or problems.

But why this conference? Why have you responded to our invitation and come? One reason is, I surmise, that you, like me, see a heavy and dangerous storm of Christian–Muslim tensions menacing the world in which we all live. Since the Crusades, relations between these two faiths, which comprise more than half of humanity, have rarely been at a lower point than they are today. Tensions, deep conflicts, and often murderous violence between our two communities are leaving a trail of blood and tears as well as a large and mounting deposit of deeply painful memories. They also undermine the hopes and efforts of many to live in peace, flourishing as individuals and as communities. And as we know, stunted lives enveloped in hopelessness throw people even deeper into violence. You have come, I take it, because you are worried about these tensions and clashes, and are seeking ways to overcome them.

I hope, however, that you have come to this conference also because you sense that a new wind of hope is beginning to blow and that rays of sun are penetrating the stormy darkness around us. A Common

Word Between Us and You—likely the most important interfaith document to appear in the past 40 years or so—is one such ray, shining through the barely parting clouds. The thesis of this Muslim letter, endorsed by some of the most prominent Muslim leaders worldwide and addressed to Christian leaders across the globe, is as simple as it is profound: What binds Muslims and Christians together is their common belief in the Oneness of God and the commitment to love God and love neighbor. And this same belief and the same commitment, of course, bind Christians and Muslims to their older sibling, the original Abrahamic faith, Judaism—the faith which transmitted to the world these two commandments in the first place.

Let me remind you that A Common Word was written not just in an atmosphere of stormy relations between Muslims and Christians but as a response to what many Muslims have experienced as a Christian provocation. Its occasion was the famous Regensburg address of the Pope Benedict XVI delivered in 2005. In it, the Pope quoted the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologos who, in a debate with a learned Persian Muslim, said: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” Many devout Muslims across the world felt insulted.

Yet despite tensions between Muslims and Christians—no: because of these tensions—key Muslim leaders gathered around the Common Word did not respond in kind. Notwithstanding the present conflicts, they chose a path of benevolence and beneficence, not of hatred and revenge. They insisted that the commitment to love God and neighbor binds together members of these two great faiths (as well as their older sibling, Judaism). It has been said that God knows how to write straight even on crooked lines. The signatories of the Common Word and above all my dear friend, HRH Prince Ghazi—a man of deep devotion to God and extraordinary practical wisdom, who spearheaded the initiative—also wrote “straight” on the crooked line provided them by the present situation. The whole Christian community, indeed the whole world, ought to be grateful to them for living up to that challenge.

I trust that you will not take it as self-serving if I say that another, much smaller ray of sun penetrated the stormy clouds of Christian-Muslim relations. It was the Yale response to the Common Word, Loving God and Neighbor Together. What was significant about the Yale Response, of course, was not so much that it was written; what was significant was that it was endorsed by over 500 Christian leaders, many of whom are heads of large world-wide constituencies comprising

literally hundreds of millions of Christians. They endorsed it because their Holy Book tells them to live in peace with all people. They endorsed it also because they sensed a danger of global proportions if a just peace between Muslims and Christians did not win over the tensions and injustice between them. The Yale Response was, though early and widely endorsed, is not the only response to the Common Word. Many Christians from all corners of the world have responded favorably as well, most recently the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. The broad support for the Common Word in the Muslim community and the favorable response to it in the Christian community suggest that we are poised for a major change in Muslim-Christian relations.

This is what the present conference is all about: Its goal is to contribute to the historic task of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians world-wide, to help us transition from clashes to mutually beneficial co-existence.

But can one bring about a shift from what feels like a clash of civilizations to a conviviality of faith traditions by promoting what some people may deem as an esoteric feeling of human devotion to God and soft and nebulous emotion of love? Should we not be grappling with the hard realities of life? Should we not be discussing poverty and economic

development, freedom of expression, education, stewardship of the environment, pluralism and democracy, the balance of power, resistance to extremists of all stripes, modes of countering violence with effective force? If religion has anything to do with the conflicts between Christians and Muslims, the critics may continue, religious passions, the single-minded devotion to God as the champion of one's own cause, is their source not a means to overcome them. Less religion is what we need, not more. Take God out of it all, critics will conclude, and let people keep religious devotion locked in the privacy of their hearts, and the virtues and delights of love restricted to friendship and family. Individual and national interests as well as the balance of power, tempered by the claims of hard-nosed justice, should regulate worldly affairs.

So what worldly good can come of discussing the love of God and love of neighbor? Why did we organize a major international conference on the topic? Partly because, properly understood, love is not a soft and a nebulous emotion, but a tough practical virtue of benevolence and beneficence toward all, a virtue of which justice is an absolutely integral part. And religious faith is not impractical at all! For people of faith, God is a motivating and sustaining power, the Holy One who gives meaning, weight, and direction to their life; in modern terminology, faith is what makes them tick.

But it is not just love's toughness and the orienting character of faith that makes them socially important. Consider the undiminished vibrancy of faith in the contemporary world. To the surprise of many, notably those who believe that religion will gradually retreat before the light of reason and the wonders of technological development, the world today is becoming a more religious rather than a less religious place.¹ The data clearly shows that the world is not progressively secularizing; to the contrary, it is de-secularizing, and this trend is likely to continue in foreseeable future.

Religious faiths, notably Christianity and Islam, are reasserting themselves in two important senses. First, the number of their adherents in the world is growing in absolute and in relative terms, as compared to non-religious world-views. Second, religious people increasingly don't consider their faith to be simply a private affair but as a significant shaper of their public engagements. Religion matters profoundly, and it matters in the public as well as the private spheres. I hope that you will not hear in this claim a statement of religious triumphalism. I am aware that religion is often employed to wrap base causes in the aura of the sacred,

¹ One of the consequences of this social trend is that both in America and in most of the Muslim world ordinary citizens trust their religious leaders more than they trust their political leaders.

and to legitimize, even promote, violence. My point is not to deny this obvious fact. It is rather to remind you that religion matters and point to a significant and unavoidable consequence of this. What is this consequence? Negatively, if religion matters, no peace between religious people will be achieved by pretending that it is merely a veil obscuring the undeniable economic or political interests; positively, if religion matters, we have to find resources for the conviviality of religious people within each faith tradition itself.

This is where the Common Word initiation becomes significant. Let me remind you: First, the Common Word points both Muslims and Christians to what is undeniably essential to each faith and common to both—love of God and love of neighbor. Second, it shows how that which is essential to each faith and common to both has the power to bind the two together because it encourages—indeed, demands—that they seek the good of others, and not just their own good. If it is true that the dual commandment of love binds these two faiths together the consequences are revolutionary in the best sense of the word. We will no longer be able to say, “The deeper your faith is, the more at odds with others you will be!” (provided, of course, that “deep faith” means not just “strong faith,” but “intelligent and informed faith.”) On the contrary, we will have to say:

“The deeper your faith is, the more in harmony with others you will live!”

A deep faith no longer leads to clashes; a deep faith fosters conviviality.

Lest someone think that this is a too quick and somewhat cheap triumph of religion over conflict, let me make plain what I am not saying about the significance of finding commonality between Christianity and Islam in the dual command of love. First, to have the dual commandment of love in common, does not mean to be amalgamated into the same religion. Even if there is significant agreement on the love of God and neighbor, many other differences remain, differences that are not accidental to each faith but which define them. For instance, Christians continue to believe that the One and Unique God who is utterly exalted above all created being, is the Holy Trinity and that God has shown unconditional love for humanity in that Jesus Christ as God’s Lamb bore the sins of the world; Muslims do not share these beliefs. Similarly, Muslims revere the Prophet Muhammad as the “seal of the prophets” and the Holy Qur’an as sacred Scripture, whereas Christians do not. An agreement on the love of God and neighbor does not erase differences. It enables people to accept others in their differences, leads them to get to know each other in their differences, and helps them live together harmoniously notwithstanding their differences.

Second, to agree on the dual commandment of love is not to say that all the practical problems causing tensions between these two communities have now been resolved. Many thorny issues remain—large and small wars in which Christians and Muslims are involved, persecution and the lack of full religious freedom, problems around evangelism and da'wa, and many others. Our common commitment to the love of God and neighbor does not eliminate all conflicts. What it does is this: it provides a basis on which they can be productively discussed.

Equally significantly, our agreement on the dual commandment of love offers a way to hold each other accountable to our best intentions. A Muslim who is the target of Christian verbal attacks can now say to a Christian, “How can you claim that you love me when you only speak ill of my God, malign my Prophet, and despise my way of life?” A Christian, a convert from Islam, can now say to a hostile Muslim, “How can you say that you love me if you want to kill me because I have followed my conscience and embraced the Christian faith?” A common commitment to the love of neighbor has real consequences on the ground. If practiced, it would defuse many serious conflicts of global reach, as the example of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad illustrates.

What some people deride as an impractical and soft commitment to love God and neighbor—but what is really the attachment to the Source of all reality and the practice of beneficence—has real-life effects in defusing conflicts and fostering conviviality. It makes possible what would otherwise remain unreachable in a world of vibrant and socially assertive faiths. We can both embrace deep faith and respect the rights of those who do not share it. Deep faith expresses itself in love, and love, understood as benevolence and beneficence, leads to respect of and struggle for others' rights. Put differently and maybe surprisingly to some, a commitment to a properly understood love of God and of neighbor makes deeply religious persons, just because they are deeply religious, into dedicated social pluralists. When Christians and Muslims commit themselves to practice the dual commandment of love, they are not satisfying some private religious fancy; instead, they are actively fostering conviviality in our ineradicably pluralistic world plagued by deep divisions. They are making possible the constructive collaboration of people of different faiths in the common public space for the common good.

I don't think that it is too much to say that The Common Word process has the potential to mark a paradigm shift, re-defining the relations between the two numerically largest faiths in the world today for

the good of all humanity. Whether it will actually become historic or not will depend on what all of us, Muslims as well as Christians, do with it. Will the Common Word be a seed that has fallen on unfertile ground and dies? Or will it grow into a great tree under whose branches many will be able to find shade? Will it remain just a document which gathers the mounting dust of history? Or will it become a common platform from which to address effectively many of the areas of tension between Muslims and Christians as well as many of the burning issues in our interconnected world.

Which of these possibilities will be realized? That will depend on the reception of the document in Muslim and Christian communities. I hope that this conference will become one important milestone in the reception of the Common Word—a contribution to helping our commitment to the love of God and neighbor open up a new future for Muslim, Christian, and Jewish people, a future in which swords will be turned into plowshares and clashes replaced by conviviality. A Common Word about joint love of God and neighbor will then have become a catalyst for a better common future.