

ARTICLE

Christian-Muslim Relations after the “A Common Word” Initiative of 2007: Towards a Muslim Self-Understanding in Relation to Christianity

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Abstract

This paper explores an Islamic theology of religions that considers the theological borders of interreligious dialogue, emphasizes reciprocal relationship, and recognizes the dynamic of a dialogical relationship (i.e., going forth and coming back) to address intra-religious and interreligious dynamics in grappling with religious diversity. The “A Common Word Between Us and You” initiative of 2007 serves as a case study.

Keywords

Islam, theology of religions, A Common Word, Christian-Muslim relations

Interreligious dialogue necessitates an account of one’s self-understanding in relation to the dialogue partner. Before we seek to understand what Muslims and Christians have in common, we must first identify what is distinctly precious to us as Muslims or as Christians. Without grounding fully “who I am” and “who you are,” any fellowship is difficult to sustain. A crucial example of this principle in action exists in the Catholic church, where a theology of religions was developed in the documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate* to enable a dialogical relationship with believers

of other religions.¹ A similar moment exists in the history of Christian-Muslim relations when 138 Muslim religious leaders addressed a letter titled *A Common Word between Us and You* to the Catholic Pope and 26 other Church leaders. It has been interpreted by Vebjørn Horsfjord as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*.² This is a moment of distinctly Islamic leadership producing constructive interreligious relations. It is significant because, through the document, Muslims established a theology for relationship building with Christians. Furthermore, *A Common Word* provides a valuable case study for the operation of interreligious dialogue. I argue that any form of interreligious dialogue requires a certain theology of religions to be fruitful.³ I assert that, the goal of interreligious dialogue of mutual understanding (including the way one religion relates to the other—that is, theology of religions) is aided when theological exchange is centered, as opposed to other kinds of exchange (that is, dialogue of life, action and spirituality).⁴ The interpretation of the model of interreligious dialogue displayed in and after the letter, specifically about theology and the nature of relationship building between Christians and Muslims, is an asset for better understanding Christian-Muslim dialogue and how to pursue it. Ultimately, this paper puts forward that this initiative constitutes an (inclusivist) Islamic theology of religions, one that considers how Muslims view their involvement in interreligious dialogue with Christians. In other words, *A Common Word* is an attempt to articulate a Muslim theological understanding of what it means to be in dialogue with Christianity and identifies those theological issues that relate to a Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity.

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- 1 *Nostra Aetate* is the declaration on the relation of the Church to Non-Christian religions. For reference, see the document archives at www.vatican.va.
 - 2 Vebjørn Horsfjord has suggested that *A Common Word* could be taken as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*. See: Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, “A Common Word Between Us and You—a Carrier of Hope,” *Concilium* 4 (2020): 22–33; Vebjørn L. Horsfjord, “A Common Word,” in *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, edited by David Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2018).
 - 3 I argue that *A Common Word* is compelling for establishing a theological account of relationship building with Christians (that is, theology of religions). Theology of religions is the branch which explores the relationship between one religion to the other. For interreligious dialogue this branch appears as an account of how religious traditions have developed a theological rationale for how to relate to believers of another religion. For more on the theology of religions, see: Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002); Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V, 2011).
 - 4 These forms of dialogue emerged as the standard Catholic teaching of dialogue. See: *Dialogue and Proclamation* (May 19, 1991), 42, <https://www.vatican.va>.

First, I summarize the content of *A Common Word*. Second, I interpret the results of the dialogue process initiated by this open letter. In this section, I display the limitations of such dialogue and explore the possibilities it opens. Following a brief discussion of the dialogue as envisaged by the signatories of *A Common Word*, I consider the criticisms to make some conclusive observations on its vital importance to future Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Content of the *A Common Word* Initiative

It is important to note that the initiative known as *A Common Word* followed another similar action. One year prior to issuing *A Common Word*, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, joined by 37 other Muslim leaders from around the world, published the Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI as a joint response to Pope Benedict's Regensburg Lecture (hereafter: RL) from 2006.⁵ As a direct follow-up, and because of the lack of response from the Vatican, the work on another initiative began.⁶ Exactly one year after issuing the first letter, the author of the Open Letter increased the number of signatories to 138 and issued the new letter, titled *A Common Word between Us and You*.⁷

Near the end of the month of Ramadan in 2007, *A Common Word between Us and You* was signed by 138 Muslim scholars. It was addressed first and foremost to the Pope and to 26 other senior church leaders; it called for the two faiths to unite around the principles of "love of God and love of neighbor."⁸ The letter is divided into three parts. The first section explores

5 The "Open Letter" appeared on October 13, 2006. See: "A Open Letter to the Pope" at <https://ammanmessage.com>.

6 Tim Winter notes, "The Vatican's reply was dilatory enough to provoke Prince Ghazi into crafting a much longer open letter" (Tim Winter, "The Inception of A Common Word," in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (ed. Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 22.

7 H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan is the author of the documents. See: HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition* (Amman: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), 252.

8 See: "A Common Word Between Us and You": <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>. As Douglas Pratt helpfully summarizes, this letter "was addressed to Pope Benedict XVI; the Patriarch of Constantinople, His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, and a further 19 named heads of Eastern (Orthodox) Churches; together with the Archbishop of Canterbury and four heads of Western Churches including the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches and, indeed,

Christian-Muslim ideas and scriptural parallels pertaining to the love of God. The second section speaks about the concept of love of neighbor in Christianity and Islam. The final section issues a call to Christian leaders to come to a common ground, to build relationships, and to open the door to interreligious dialogue and collaboration. The core claim of *A Common Word* is “The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.”⁹ This is followed by the list of 138 signatories, given in alphabetical order. The signatures are integral to its message and shows that the letter was supported by scholars, clerics, and intellectuals, representing all significant denominations and schools of thought in Islam.

A Common Word recognizes the common ground between Christianity and Islam based on the two foundational principles which they share: love of God and love of neighbor. It identifies Q 3:64 as expressive of this idea. The authors contend that this common ground between Christians and Muslims can be found in the holy scriptures of both traditions.¹⁰ Hence, it may be said that *A Common Word* rests not only on the Qur’ān; it also grounds itself in some key Biblical passages.¹¹ In this regard, its use of scripture is quite unique and arguably a step forward in interfaith dialogue.¹² Islamic scholars treated the Christian scripture with benevolence and intellectual seriousness. Lejla Demiri praises it for its “graciousness” in “addressing the ‘Other’” and in “hearing of the Other’s” scriptures. Demiri confirms that the text is not written with a polemic edge. Rather, the aim is to direct the attention of the reader to what grounds Christians and Muslims have for a theological engagement shaped by mutual trust and friendship.¹³

‘Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere’” (Douglas Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910* [Leiden: Brill, 2017], 212).

9 *A Common Word Between Us and You* (October 18, 2007), Summary and Abridgement, <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>.

10 Horsfjord, “A Common Word between Us and You—A Carrier of Hope,” 23.

11 To quote Vebjørn Horsfjord: “The text, which has the flavour of a theological treatise, contains extensive quotes from the Qur’ān (30 percent of the entire text) and the Bible (10 percent) as well as number of Hadiths” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 23).

12 To quote Lejla Demiri: “What makes it quite exceptionally refreshing, for all its imperfections and the criticisms which it has attracted, are the striking graciousness of its language in addressing the ‘Other’ and its openness to a balanced and fair hearing of the Other’s sacred scriptures” (Lejla Demiri, “Introduction,” in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word* (ed. by Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 2.

13 Demiri, *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*, 2–3.

It is important to recognize that *A Common Word* uses Qur'ānic scripture as its primary framework for engagement with Christians.¹⁴ For example, the title of the letter is taken from the verse mentioned above, which reads:

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 to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him). [Q 3.64]¹⁵

This verse supports Muslim engagement with Christians (and Jews), indeed, requires it by Qur'ānic command. Peter Colwell confirms that the letter uses the Qur'ānic message here as a framework of engagement, stating, “we can therefore see that the framework being set out here for Muslims to engage with Christians is one the signatories believe is authorized by the Qur'ān.”¹⁶

It is significant that *A Common Word* cites not only the Qur'ān, but also the Bible.¹⁷ In *A Common Word*, several central quotes from the Qur'ān and hadith are interpreted considering Biblical concepts. For instance, in the final paragraph of the first section of the text that deals with love of God, it states,

...we can now perhaps understand the words [by Muhammad] “The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me” as equating the blessed formula “There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things” precisely with

14 To quote Peter Colwell: “It is important to recognise from the outset that for Muslims the Qur'ān is the source of direct revealed authority and therefore the letter ‘A Common Word’ begins with an appeal to the Qur'ān and addresses Christian leaders within a framework already set down in the Qur'ān” (Peter Colwell, *Above Us and Between Us: An Introduction and Resource on the letter ... A Common Word Between Us and You ... signed by 138 Muslim Scholars* [London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2008], 8–9).

15 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 39.

16 Colwell, *Above Us and Between Us*, 5–7.

17 As Vebjørn Horsfjord states, “it is novel that a text that carries the authority of a wide collection of Islamic scholars consistently uses concepts that have their origin in the Bible as a prism to understand the Qur'ān” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 24).

the “First and Greatest Commandment” to love God, with all one’s heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible.¹⁸

In the same section, the author understands the hadith through a Biblical context in stating, “that the Prophet Muhammad was perhaps, through inspiration, restating and alluding to the Bible’s First Commandment. God knows best, but certainly we have seen their effective similarity in meaning.”¹⁹ *A Common Word* reinterpreted this hadith in light of Biblical concepts to establish the common ground on which Christians and Muslims stand.²⁰ Another example of reinterpretation of Islamic sources through a Biblical lens is to be found in the second section of the letter, when the author attempts to reinforce the Islamic tradition’s equivalent of the commandment to love neighbor, “[N]one of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.”²¹ According to *A Common Word*, the Islamic tradition’s equivalent of the commandment to love neighbors is to be found in this hadith. Strikingly, the two hadiths are equivalent to the Biblical principles of “love of God and love of neighbour.”²²

It is suggested that *A Common Word* may be an attempt to speak to Christians by appealing to the Bible and not just to Islamic sources. But the letter does more than appeal to Christians based on their own scriptures; it actually embraces certain Biblical principles as Islamic.²³ It is this scriptural

18 *A Common Word*, I.

19 *A Common Word*, I.

20 The exegetical efforts have helped for the dialogue initiative, but it has been also criticised for not treating exegetical efforts with methods of historical criticism. Lutz Berger’s article gives an excellent account of the criticism the letter has attracted for the “(mis)use” of Qur’ānic passages. See Lutz Richter-Bernburg, “A Common Word Between Us and You: Observations on the (mis)uses of Koranic Exegesis in Interreligious Dialogue,” *42nd Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA)*, Washington, DC, 22–25 November 2008.

21 *A Common Word*, II; Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: “Although this does not literally command love for neighbour, it is a rare example in Islamic scriptures of relating the words ‘love’ and ‘neighbour’ to each other” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 24).

22 With regard to the author of *A Common Word* in the format of a letter, Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: “from the beginning, it was assumed that the document to a large extent had been written by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, King Abdullah II’s cousin and the director of the Aal Al-Bayt Institute. Later Ghazi let it be known that he was not only a leading author, but *A Common Word*’s sole author” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 25).

23 As Vebjørn Horsfjord states: “The substantive and theological significance of the Biblical principles equivalence is reinforced with a reference to the Islamic

appeal to both religions that is critical to advance interreligious relations. It is necessary for Muslims to be mindful of the centrality of the principle of “love of God and love of neighbor” and for Christians to think of the dual commandment as a call for collaboration with Muslims. Thus, the twin love commandments form the basis for interreligious understanding between Christians and Muslims in *A Common Word*.

In sum, *A Common Word* is a call based on the Qur’ānic message [Q 3:64] to come to “a common word.” It suggests that to dialogue with Christians is part of what it means to be a Muslim, because the call for relationship building has a Divine origin. The aim of this common word is to promote dialogue and cooperation in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect. It allows for religious commonalities based on scripture that testifies to the strong desire to build bridges. It is a witness that Christianity and Islam together hold resources for collaborating on the basis of the twin commandments and on issues of justice and peace. It has served as a key to opening the door for many into the world of interreligious dialogue and paved the way for theological discussion on the suggested common ground (the shared principles of the two love commandments). However, it has been criticized for its treatment of the common ground in theological terms from certain Christian quarters. This will be discussed in greater detail later. There are many reasons why believers of various religions should dialogue with one another. Overall, *A Common Word* offers a specifically theological argument for why Muslims engage in dialogue activities, viz., that Christians and Muslims believe in the One God and embrace the twin commandments. However, as implicitly stated in *A Common Word* formatted as a letter, this theological openness on a common ground between Christianity and Islam is driven out of socio-political concerns.

I would like to examine the background of *A Common Word* as a 2007 initiative and, in doing so, consider causes for tension, both political and theological, in Christian-Muslim relations. A full discussion of this topic cannot be adequately done here. Therefore, let me summarize the main points. First, the letter introducing *A Common Word* justifies the timing of its message, stating that “our common future is at stake”.²⁴ The history of

conviction that the central characters of Jewish and Christian tradition, including Moses and Jesus, were prophets sent by God, and that Muhammad as the final messenger in principle brought ‘nothing new’” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 24).

24 *A Common Word*, III; Prince Ghazi, in speaking about *A Common Word*, lists causes from both sides leading to tensions between Christian and Muslims (or West and Islam). He says, “On the Western side are the fear of terrorism; a

Muslim and Christian encounter is marked by mutual misunderstanding and incidents of war and conflict in both distant past and present. Current day theological and cultural misunderstandings are deeply rooted in the conflictual memory of the past (for example, the Crusades and the expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia) and current social and political issues arise that carry a religious aspect (such as the meaning of Muslim identity in Europe).

Second, *A Common Word* as an initiative serves as a counter narrative to that of the “clash of civilizations” argument. It attempted to define Islam against an increasingly negative global image of the tradition. I assert that *A Common Word* was responding to a vision of religious violence represented by the “clash of civilization” thesis.²⁵ Huntington’s thesis claims that future conflicts will erupt around religious and cultural fault lines. *A Common Word*, however, provides a compelling counter discourse to that of a “clash of civilizations” and increasing interfaith tensions.²⁶

loathing of religious coercion; suspicion of the unfamiliar; and deep historical misunderstandings. On the Islamic side is first and foremost the situation in Palestine: despite the denial of certain parties, Palestine is a grievance rooted in faith (since Muslim holy sites lie occupied). Added are discontentment with Western foreign policy (especially the Iraq War and Occupation 2003-09); fear and resentment of the massive missionary movements launched from the West into the Islamic World; wounded pride arising from the colonial experience, poverty and unemployment, illiteracy, ignorance of true Islam and of the Arabic language, social and political oppression, and a technology gap” (HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, “On ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’,” in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, edited by Miroslav Volf, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, Melissa Yarrington [Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010], 6).

25 The term “clash of civilizations” was popularized by political scientist Samuel Huntington in a controversial article (S.P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993). Huntington later developed the main ideas of this article into a book: S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). In recent scholarship it is noted that the “Clash of Civilization” thesis served to place Islam and the West as adversaries. Douglas Pratt notes, it “began to surface, coalescing around the idea of ‘Islam, the new enemy.’ [...] the phrase ‘clash of civilizations’ can be traced some years further back; it became common currency in the wake of the publication of Samuel Huntington’s article of that title in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1993” (Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam*, 7).

26 Similarly, Vebjørn Horsfjord notes: “This shows in fact that those behind ACW and the Christian leaders who involved themselves in the subsequent conferences and exchange of documents created a counter narrative to that of a clash of civilisations or religions” (Horsfjord, “A Carrier of Hope,” 31).

Third, to understand the genesis of *A Common Word* and the context in which it arose, it is also important to consider the accomplishments of the *Amman Message* of 2005.²⁷ One must take into account that the *Amman Message* is an important precursor to *A Common Word* and that this intra-Islamic initiative was consequential during the lead-up to *A Common Word*. While I cannot explore the significance of the *Amman Message* in detail, I will note that *A Common Word* grew out of what began as an intrafaith exploration of theological principles regarding the representation of Islam, resulting in the document that became the *Amman Message*. This sequence highlights an important progression in interfaith dialogue as a process: specifically, the precedence of self-knowledge to the invitation to dialogue of the other.

In the next section, I explore why the initiative insists on a theologically derived argument for “a common word” between Christians and Muslims and consider the criticisms to make some conclusive observations on its vital importance for the future of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Interpreting Interreligious Dialogue in “A Common Word”

Any dialogue presupposes a certain understanding of oneself and the relation of one dialogue partner to the other. A productive dialogical relationship needs to be open, clear, and unambiguous to build trust between the partners. For the signatories of *A Common Word*, the misinterpretation of Islam by prominent members and communities of the Christian tradition was so profound that no form of dialogue (dialogue of life, action, spirituality) could be sustained without first initiating a dialogue of theological exchange. Even if the initiative was driven by socio-political concerns, the argument is theological, and so the exchange with Christians was primarily a theological conversation. *A Common Word* is significant for its articulation of a distinctly inclusivist Islamic theology of religions.²⁸ In

27 *The Amman Message*, Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007. Available at: <https://ammanmessage.com>

28 One type of inclusivism (open inclusivism) asserts that “religious traditions are genuinely different but therefore not incommensurable...inclusivists affirm that religions do make truth claims and that at least some of those truth claims are not already found in (their) traditions. So, open inclusivists affirm the possibility of interreligious learning” (John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2020], 68–69). For further reference on inclusivism, see John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and other Religions: Selected Readings* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 19–38; Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*

other words, *A Common Word* is an attempt to articulate a Muslim theological understanding of what it means to be in dialogue with Christianity and identifies those theological issues that relate to a Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity. The aim of this section is to assess how *A Common Word* as an initiative contributes to our understanding of interreligious dialogue. That is, to see what kind of dialogue this initiative envisioned, how it pursued its purpose, and what were the results. The question is then: what type of dialogue did the signatories envision, and to what did the claims about common ground in the letter lead?

In short, the dialogue envisioned by the signatories of the letter is that of a dialogue based on assumed common theological ground between Christianity and Islam. The intention is to show that within the revelatory content of the Islamic traditions are teachings promoting peaceful coexistence with other faith communities. It does so by suggesting that Islam shares the twin commandments found within the Biblical texts (Deuteronomy 6:4–5; Leviticus 19:17–18; Mark 12:28–31), and it invites Christians to agree on this common ground to work together for a more peaceful future. Thus, *A Common Word* intends a theological exchange between Christians and Muslims and suggests this dialogue ought to be based on mutual theological ground of love of God and love of neighbor. In doing so, the *A Common Word* initiative galvanized a new era of Christian-Muslim interaction. As I will demonstrate, the claims put forward in the letter have led to a model for expressing Muslim self-understanding in relation to Christianity, which leads to different possibilities of relating to each other.

It must be noted that much of the impact of *A Common Word* itself is dialogical in character. The significance of the letter as a dialogical model grew out of the involvement of Christian leaders who responded to the Muslim call. Horsfjord notes that the letter, together with the responses, forms and informs the *dialogue process* of *A Common Word*. He states,

A Common Word between Us and You would have been an interesting document even without the many responses from church leaders and others, but it would not have *fulfilled the expectations of its drafters* [...] The numerous Christian responses' interaction with the Muslim letter makes it meaningful to speak of a Common Word *dialogue process* that is of greater interest than the sum of the texts seen independently of each other.²⁹

(Oxford Blackwell, 1986), 80–115.

29 Vejbjørn L. Horsfjord, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Study of Texts from the Common Word Dialogue Process* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 55. Emphasis mine.

That is to say that the subsequent exchange of the responses is integral to the initiative overall. Horsford calls the letter from Yale Divinity School “a prime example of a response text to *A Common Word*, which, in the process of responding, enhances the significance of the original dialogue initiative itself.”³⁰ On its own, *A Common Word* would have expressed a compelling Muslim self-understanding of dialogue; however, without the responses from Christian leaders, dialogue could not have taken place and the purpose of the letter to initiate dialogue based on authentic knowledge of self and other would have been unfulfilled.

A vast majority of responses were published on the official *A Common Word* website (www.acommonword.com) and most of the early responses to the initiative were positive.³¹ However, the subsequent dialogue process has generated a huge amount of debate and criticism. As Demiri notes,

By no means has every response been fully approving of its tone, language or content. Plenty of critics have interrogated its choice of scriptural passages, its theology, its style and its vocabulary. [...] Some respondents have taken issue with Muslim doctrinal or contextual presuppositions which they find to be present and problematic in the ACW document. Yet virtually all respondents acknowledged the genuineness of its call for dialogue, receiving it

30 Horsford, *Common Words in Muslim-Christian Dialogue*, 96. Lejla Demiri notes, “The letter, entitled ‘Loving God and Neighbour Together’ was written and coordinated by Miroslav Volf of the Yale Divinity School, and was published as a full-page in the *New York Times* in November 2007” (Demiri, *A Common Word*, x).

31 Douglas Pratt notes, “The official ACW website is an interactive repository of response documents and related material. It includes formal Christian responses from leaders, organisations, and individuals together with some Jewish responses” (Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam*, 219). Leading Christian figures of different denominations have positively responded to *A Common Word*. As Lejla Demiri helpfully summarizes, the list includes: “Pope Benedict XVI, the late Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei II, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams, the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran World Federation Bishop Mark Hanson, the President and General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reform Churches, the President of the World Baptist Alliance, the President of World Council of Churches, the Council of Bishops of Methodist Churches, the Head of the World Evangelical Alliance, the Mennonite Church, Quaker leaders and a number of other Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs, Catholic Cardinals, archbishops, heads of national churches, deans of theological seminaries, well-known preachers, professors and leading Christian scholars of Islam” (Demiri, *A Common Word*, x).

as an honest and gracious invitation to promote peace and social justice in a time of international mistrust and turmoil.³²

Most of the Christian respondents “have taken issue with Muslim doctrinal or contextual presuppositions which they find to be present and problematic” and have emphasized that the suggested theological common ground is impossible for Christians to accept.³³ The criticisms in the responses have led to several slightly different possibilities of interreligious relation, and in some ways, as I argue, enhanced the significance of the original letter itself. With this in mind, to what does the claim of a dialogue on a common ground lead? What were the responses to the Muslim led claims about the common ground between the religions and how does the interaction contribute to our understanding of interreligious dialogue?

In the responses from Christians to the letter, one can see that *A Common Word* fulfils its purpose to initiate discourse between Muslim and Christian religious leaders. Many responses were positive and appreciative of *A Common Word* for its genuine effort to reach out to Christians. As Horsford states, “most church leaders and Christian scholars have accepted that *A Common Word* is meant as a genuine invitation to respectful dialogue between representatives of the two faiths.”³⁴ However, the issue lies on the specific understanding of the common theological ground. The central question is the relationship between the unity of God as understood in the *A Common Word* letter and Christian understanding of the Trinity. *A Common Word* seeks to link the Islamic doctrine of God’s unity to love of God. However, the recipients of the letter were concerned that *A Common Word* ignored essential Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, redemption in Jesus Christ, and Christian theological anthropology. However, as *Nostra Aetate* rightfully observes, Muslims “do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet.”³⁵ As a result, *A Common Word* reflects this understanding of Jesus as prophet. The disagreements on the presuppositions contained in the Muslims’ letter are behind much of the criticisms emanating from certain Christians.³⁶ While the shared scriptural understanding described in the

32 Demiri, *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue*, 1–2.

33 Jon Hoover, “A Common Word ‘More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox,’” *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2009): 50–77, 76.

34 Horsford, “A Common Word,” 262.

35 *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

36 A frequently referenced Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation* reads: “an open and positive approach to other religious traditions cannot overlook the

letter sets an agenda for how Muslims can relate to Christians, it does not sufficiently consider the areas of division between them. As Sarah Snyder notes, “in this way the letter has been heavily criticised by some for skimming over fundamental differences [...] not least concerning the very nature of God, love and neighbour.”³⁷ What is essential to both Islam and Christianity, in the view of *A Common Word*, is God’s unity, love of God, and love of neighbor. There is consensus between Muslims and most Christians that they believe in the same God.³⁸ However, belief in the unity of God does not entail a same understanding of the concepts of God, love, and neighbor. Christian respondents have emphasized that the role of Jesus Christ as a person of the triune God is at the foreground of what it means to love God and neighbor. Thus, a major objection from Christians is with the common ground suggested by *A Common Word*.³⁹

To offer a detailed example of one such objection, Jon Hoover states that the invitation issued to Christians by *A Common Word* “is predicated on accepting a theological ‘common ground’ that relegates core Christian doctrines to non-essential.”⁴⁰ He further observes that *A Common Word*

contradictions which may exist between them and Christian revelation. It must, where necessary, recognize that there is incompatibility between some fundamental elements of the Christian religion and some aspects of such tradition.” *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 31.

- 37 Sarah Snyder, “An Overview of Christian Responses to A Common Word,” in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*, edited by Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.
- 38 This is the standard Catholic teaching after the proclamation of *Nostra Aetate*. See *Nostra Aetate*, 3. Furthermore, Miroslav Volf’s: *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper One, 2011) is evident of a change of attitude to these questions.
- 39 Although the suggested theological common ground was not accepted, there remains a possibility for other theological commonality. Daniel Madigan, for instance, suggests a different common ground that could be achieved. If the common ground is the unity of God and the twin commandments, then as mentioned earlier there is a tendency to confirm Muslims in their belief of Jesus as a merely human messenger. The emphasis should rather be on the *Word of God*, as a shared principle of the respective religions. A focus on the *Word of God*, allows for the individuality of both religions, since it is understood in Islam as the Qur’ān the revealed Word to Muhammad and for Christians the living Word in Jesus Christ. See Daniel A. Madigan, “Mutual Theological Hospitality: Doing Theology in the Presence of the ‘Other’,” in *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of ‘A Common Word*,” edited by Waleed El-Ansary and David K. Linnan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 62–64.
- 40 Hoover, “A Common Word: More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox,” 76.

“speaks to Christians in a language that they might appreciate... [and] permits a less polemical approach toward Christian Doctrine.”⁴¹ He argues that, in articulating such a view, there is still an implicit suggestion of the supremacy of Islam. The point he takes issue with is that, according to *A Common Word*, the essence of “all true religion” is the unity of God and the two love commandments. However, prior to that, *A Common Word* states that “there is no minimising some of their formal differences.”⁴² Thus, for Hoover, *A Common Word* relegates difference in doctrine “to the domain of formal or non-essential differences.” That reading of *A Common Word* asserts that it ignores essential Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, redemption in Jesus Christ, and Christian theological anthropology—all of which are related to the unity of God and the two love commandments as understood by Christians. In order to sustain dialogue, Hoover suggests that Christians and Muslims would do better by acknowledging these differences in doctrine.

It is my aim in this paper to acknowledge the content of these objections over doctrinal differences as important. Notwithstanding, I wish to point out that the existence of differences is not an obstacle to constructive dialogue. Rather, they serve for clarification of authentic knowledge of self in relation to the other. Although the suggested theological common ground is not possible for Christians to accept, I argue that *A Common Word* is helping to nurture an Islamic discourse on theology of religions, one which requires careful consideration of one’s own religious commitments in the process. Hoover is responding to Sohail Nakhooda’s article in which he argues that *A Common Word* is a “more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox” approach to religious pluralism.⁴³ By modelling an articulation of Islamic teaching and subsequent Muslim identity that not only allows but requires dialogue with Christians, the letter then prompted a related internal inquiry and self-articulation on the part of Christian respondents. I conclude that *A Common Word* addresses the theological connection by building a relationship with Christians that is indeed “more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox” and which is consistent with an inclusivist theology of religions and serves the goal of mutual understanding in interreligious dialogue.

The criticisms of *A Common Word* must be read in creative tension with this initiative’s purpose: improvement of Christian-Muslim relations through

41 Hoover, “A Common Word: More Positive and Open, yet Mainstream and Orthodox,” 52.

42 *A Common Word*, III.

43 Sohail Nakhooda, “The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word,” *Jordanian Foreign Ministry*, 4th Annual Ambassadors’ Forum, Amman, December 30, 2008.

initiation of dialogue between religious leaders. The responses are important for the dialogue process itself because, through these criticisms, *dialogue* between Christian and Muslim leaders in its literal sense took place. The dialogue process, the letter, and the responses *A Common Word* provoked may be read as an example of the interreligious dialogue it hoped to achieve. In that regard, these responses serve as a model of engagement between Muslim and Christians wherein the criticisms—rather than being an obstacle to dialogue—acknowledge the theological self-understanding expressed by the Muslim signatories of the letter and accept that articulation of self while also putting forward a Christian theological self-understanding. This model of exchange answers the basic requirement of dialogue for authentic and mutual expression of self to other. In this exchange, as a result, critiques lead to clarified self-understanding, where Muslims and Christians discover more deeply themselves in dialogue.

It was important to display an understanding of the limitations to the dialogue envisaged by *A Common Word*, as well as the possibilities it opens. In the subsequent dialogue process, and the actual meetings and conferences which followed, many theological issues that divide Muslims and Christians were discussed. In this way, *A Common Word*, together with the emerging dialogue process through the responses and conferences, allowed at once for dialogical engagement and theological differences. For instance, the first Catholic-Muslim forum was held in Rome from November 4–6, 2008, under the theme “Love of God, Love of Neighbour.” The meeting was attended by twenty-four Christian and Muslim participants, including some of the signatories as well as the main addressee, the Pope. The meeting was concluded by a final declaration, affirming jointly held views regarding human dignity.⁴⁴ Agreement on theological issues such as the proposed common ground might have not been reached. However, *A Common Word* and its reception has helped us to imagine what might be gained if Muslims and Christian sought to reflect on God, love and devotion to God, and love of neighbour in the presence of, and in relation to, each other.

I have reviewed one way *A Common Word* envisioned interreligious dialogue, how the initiative has been received, and what limitations are inherent to the dialogue as envisioned by it. However, there are other ways to interpret the dialogue process and the understanding of dialogue specifically laid out in the letter for future Christian-Muslim engagement. Horsfjord identifies three. In the first reading, which we have already discussed, the

44 Final Declaration, See: HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition* (Amman: RISSC, 2012), 245–48.

letter suggests dialogue based on an already established common ground and invites Christians to enter into dialogue and cooperation on the assumption that agreement exists. The explicit *call* to come to “a common word” suggests that the signatories behind the letter had envisioned this particular kind of dialogue. However, it has been noted earlier that much criticism emanating from Christian quarters was on the suggested common ground itself. In a second interpretation, *A Common Word* could be seen as an invitation to explore *together* God’s Oneness, love of God, and love of neighbor.⁴⁵ In this view, the recipients of the letter recognize the serious intent of *A Common Word* and accepted its invitation to dialogue on issues of common concern. This form of dialogical engagement was evident in some of the key conferences which followed the initiative.⁴⁶ The success of that dialogue process was that Muslims and Christians together could reach recognition of what they hold in common with sufficient integrity to allow them to cooperate. Finally, another reading of *A Common Word* is that the signatories developed a Qur’ānic hermeneutic of interreligious relations to show how Muslims view their involvement in dialogue. Horsfjord suggests this interpretation to be most compatible with its purpose, where *A Common Word* could be seen as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*. According to this interpretation, *A Common Word* and *Nostra Aetate* function in a similar

45 An example of the reception of *A Common Word* as initiating substantive theological exchange can be seen in a comment from Anglican Bishop of London Richard Chartres, in which he states that “well-articulated response will help stimulate both conversation and cooperation between the two religions” (Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, “The Quest for ‘A Common Word’: Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4 [2009]: 377). See also: Richard Chartres, “A global conversation on the love of God,” October 11, 2007. Michael Lewis Fitzgerald praises the letter for its attempt of theological exchange and finds the letter refreshing considering some of the other ongoing dialogue initiatives between Christians and Muslims. He says, “theological exchange is impossible if that means that Christians and Muslims to reach full agreement about their respective beliefs. But if by theology we mean ‘faith seeking understanding’, then surely we can speak theologically to one another. We can help one another to understand the logic of our respective belief systems. We can come to a less dismissive and more respectful attitude to one another. The ACW document is a stimulus to engage in this type of theological dialogue, which is still somewhat uncommon” (Michael Lewis Fitzgerald, “*A Common Word* Leading to Uncommon Dialogue,” in *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*, eds. Yazid Said and Lejla Demiri [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 57).

46 For a list of the major events including conferences such as in Yale, Cambridge and Rome held between July 2008 and October 2008, see: <https://www.acommonword.com/major-events/>.

way and could be said to belong to the same genre of engagement of one religious community with others.⁴⁷ In my view, *A Common Word* is a necessary corollary to *Nostra Aetate*. Sustained religious dialogue is a call and response. *Nostra Aetate* on its own does not constitute interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. But *Nostra Aetate* followed by *A Common Word* together represent the plurality of voices needed to give the word *dialogue* its meaning. I believe that this final reading is the most essential. It is the reading most compatible with my analysis of dialogue in *A Common Word*. This reading has the potential to expand the possibilities for productive relationship building between Christians and Muslims. As Haddad and Smith note, “just as Vatican II changed the way Catholics viewed other religions, so CW clearly indicates that Muslims leaders are committed to fresh thinking about the relationship between Islam and Christianity.”⁴⁸ It marks a step forward in the official Muslim approach to other people of faith and the reconciliation of traditional Islamic orthodoxy with religious pluralism.

The letter recognizes the tensions to which religious misunderstanding can give rise and seeks to outline that which is common to all religions, especially with Christianity. While the letter aims at greater recognition of commonality with Christianity, nevertheless it maintains Islamic supremacy. Christianity and its essential doctrines of faith are tolerated only in so far as they maintain God’s unity without emphasizing the Trinity or Jesus’ role as redeemer. In other words, *A Common Word* does insist on a Muslim understanding of the unity of God and builds a relation to Christianity on the premise of the essential doctrine of God’s unity as understood by Muslims. It is important to recognize that even though the signatories

47 *A Common Word* is similar to *Nostra Aetate* in that it does not speak about core theological differences. Other noteworthy differences are: *A Common Word* focuses on Christian-Muslim dialogue, while *Nostra Aetate* is primarily concerned with Jewish-Christian relations. It does not address Muhammad or Islam directly but refers to Muslims, whereas the *A Common Word* explicitly engages with Jesus and Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* does not reference Islamic scriptures, while *A Common Word* includes Christian scripture. Moreover, *A Common Word* actively involves Christian scholars and theologians, while *Nostra Aetate* is more a Christian declaration regarding Judaism and Islam. *Nostra Aetate* highlights figures like Mary and Abraham as shared between Christians and Muslims, while *A Common Word* emphasizes principles like “love of God” and “love of neighbor.” *Nostra Aetate* shows Christian interaction with Muslims by acknowledging the devotion of many Muslims to Mary, even referencing the pilgrimage site Meryem Ana Evi in Turkey. The signatories of *A Common Word* also engaged with Christians, though their engagement appears to be more textual in nature.

48 Haddad and Smith, “The Quest for ‘A Common Word’: Initial Christian Responses to a Muslim Initiative,” 374.

engage with Christian scripture seriously and generously, they privilege the Qur'ān. This is important because doing so is consistent with the theology of religions present in the letter. That is, that the signatories are self-consciously and explicitly Muslim *and* want to engage Christians, nonetheless. Like *Nostra Aetate*, it does not expect Christians to agree on a Muslim theological understanding of God. Rather, it puts forward how Muslims view their involvement in interreligious dialogue with Christians. Through this interpretation one could say that *A Common Word* established an inclusivist *Islamic* theology of religions and theological relationship to Christianity. Its inclusivist Islamic theology of religions considers the theological borders of interreligious dialogue and the limitations of the proposal of a common ground between Christianity and Islam on the twin commandments. Furthermore, it still emphasizes reciprocal relationship and the value of interreligious dialogue, without which the purpose of the letter could not have been fulfilled. On its own, *A Common Word* expresses a compelling Muslim self-understanding of interreligious dialogue; however, the subsequent dialogue (based on authentic knowledge of self and other) is exactly the kind of encounter religious leaders must build the capacity to engage, repeat, and sustain for the sake of global religious diversity. In this regard, *A Common Word* is a watershed moment in the history of Muslim engagement with Christianity and for Muslim leadership in not only modelling strategies for interreligious engagement suited to the needs of a religious plural world, but also facilitating their performance.

Conclusion

Globally, in 2007, the time of rising tensions in Christian-Muslim relations provided the necessary impulse for the initiative now known as *A Common Word*. The movers behind *A Common Word* attempted to counteract the negative images of Islam, to correct misunderstandings of Islam, and to demonstrate that Islam and Christianity are not fundamentally opposed. Taking the form of a letter, *A Common Word* is not only a document about cooperation (although cooperation is an outcome) or the need for peace. Specifically, it is about sharing a theological commitment to creating a culture of dialogue. What prompts the present essay, written in 2024, is the question of its impact.

Especially at this time in history, when Islam is associated with terrorist acts and religious hostilities seem intractable, it is worth sitting up and paying attention to how Muslims construe their relationship to non-Muslims and a religiously plural global order from a theological point of view. The fact

that *A Common Word* is not talked of or seems to have no impact today feeds a subtle, but persistent, dynamic in which it is assumed that Islam has nothing to say about peace and reconciliation. Moments like these are easily ignored because the effort to engage with the Other and to examine the Self is difficult and not immediately rewarding. However, failing to examine efforts that are foundational for peace, or specifically ignoring Muslim efforts of constructive interreligious engagement, is a problem. Thus, I return to *A Common Word* itself and to the subsequent engagement of that letter to reflect upon what Muslim leadership for mutual religious understanding can look like and to ponder where to go from here.

A Common Word does not consider the differences with Christianity as much as it should. As a result, it bases its description of the unity of God on a specifically Islamic theology. This limits the accuracy of the claim of *A Common Word* that it identifies common ground with Christians. The criticisms are legitimate; but, if *A Common Word* is read as an Islamic *Nostra Aetate*, then it is significant as a specifically Muslim understanding of Muslim involvement in interreligious relations. Just like *Nostra Aetate* III or *Lumen Gentium* XVI—which do not give a full position of the Islamic tradition, including the revelatory status of the Qur’ān and the Prophetic status of Muhammad—*A Common Word* does not claim to make theological statements on the person of Jesus Christ as understood by Christians. Rather, it is derived from an understanding held by Muslims and serves as an outreach to Christians to achieve some commonality and shared language for interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Hence, *A Common Word* is, in effect, an internal theological document for Muslims. However, its significance as an opportunity for greater collaboration between Christians and Muslims must be recognized. *A Common Word* models how theological exchange is a crucial foundation to all other forms of interreligious dialogue (dialogues of life, action, spirituality), to enable deeper mutual understanding, and to greater collaboration. However, this initiative is most effective in pursuing dialogue—not on the premise of the common ground identified in the document itself, but as an act of outreach from Muslims to Christians. Primarily, *A Common Word between Us and You* ought to be recognized for its theologically grounded articulation of Muslim involvement in interreligious dialogue. These features of the initiative make it and its dialogue process a crucial and historic step in Muslim-Christian relations.⁴⁹ It is an attempt to represent Islam for what

49 Central features as suggested by Lombard: (1) grounding in scripture; (2) acceptance of theological difference: it is not seeking to bring Christianity and Islam together at the margins of their historical identity and it does not aim to find common ground by bartering away central tenets; (3) participation of religious

it is, but also to present Islam in a language accessible for Christians to understand. Its core achievement is to create a culture of dialogue involving common theological reflection (if not a “common word”) between Christians and Muslims. The remaining question is then what kind of dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims will be built in the future.

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leaders of the highest rank. See: Joseph Lumbard, “The Uncommonality of ‘A Common Word,’” *Crown Papers* 3 (2009): 32.