

A Response To the Letter of 138 Muslim Scholars to Christendom¹



Explanations and Background Information For Christian Readers

published by the

International Christian Network (ICN)



Since the attack on the *World Trade Center* on September 11, 2001, Islamic leaders have made efforts to let appear Islam, in the public eye, as a humane religion. Pope Benedict XVI's explicit reminder in his Regensburg (Germany) lecture of September 12, 2006 that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, even commanded his followers to spread his religion with the sword, has further intensified these efforts. In the light of this, Muslim scholars are seeking a new Muslim-Christian dialogue in which they would like to convince their dialogue partners of this single view: Islam is a religion of peace and love.

A noteworthy attempt in this vein is an open letter, inviting dialogue, which 138 leading Islamic scholars addressed on October 13, 2007 to Pope Benedict and prominent leaders of the Christian churches in the whole world as well as to all of Christendom. The letter is entitled:

*“A Common Word Between Us and You”.*²

This important letter has been widely published and has caused quite a stir. Yet, there is some confusion by the different assessments of it, even among well-known respected theologians and missiologists. Therefore, we are providing here an explanation for inquiring Christians and, at the same time, establishing our own position towards this document.

By way of introduction, the Muslim scholars point out that even Muhammad himself extended a similar invitation to Jews and Christians in Sura 3:64 of the Qur'an, which they quote as follows:

"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)."

The document begins by stating that Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world population and concludes with this urgent statement: "If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. ... our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake."

The letter names, as the basic principle of both religions, the twofold commandment of ***“Loving the one God and loving your neighbour”*** and identifies it as the common, already existent basis for related efforts for peace. This is supported by quoting texts from the Qur'an and the Bible. In doing so, the oneness of God (Allah) and the resultant necessity of serving Him alone with all our strength are emphasized as the basic condition for love of God (Allah). On the basis of this dogmatic and ethical commonality, the authors invite Christians to an inter-religious dialogue in

¹ We quote here the letter according to the version appearing on the official internet website of A Common Word www.acommonword.com/

²The document was drafted at the *Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, chaired by Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talat. — This institute maintains a website *Altafsir.com* with the section “Ask the Mufti”. Among the answers of the leading institute scholar, *Sheik Hijjawi*, there are a number of *fatwas* (legal declarations) that deal with the punishment of Muslims that have returned to Christianity. These persons should either be killed, stripped of all their rights, or treated as non-persons.

which “our differences do not cause hatred and strife between us”, but, rather, both sides strive “to live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill”.

Christian Responses To the Letter So Far

This letter has elicited different reactions among Christian readers.

- In a written response dated November 19, 2007 and addressed to Prince Ghazi, *Pope Benedict XVI* sent his thanks to the signatories by way of his state secretary, Cardinal T. Bertone. In it, he expressed his appreciation for the call to joint effort in support of world peace “without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims”. He is glad about the reference to the twofold commandment to love, which he already developed in his Papal Encyclica *Deus caritas est* (of December 25, 2005).

The pope declared his willingness to receive a select group of signatories and to organize a working meeting between this Muslim delegation and the Vatican councils responsible for dialogue.

- In joyful agreement and, at the same time, contrition was the answer published in the *New York Times* on November 18 at the initiative of the president of Yale University (U.S.A), Professor *Harold Attridge*. This letter has subsequently been signed by around 450 theologians of all denominations. The spectrum ranges from representatives of radical modern theology even to representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance. In it, the religious basis of the Muslim document, the dual commandment to love, is affirmed as well as the concrete objective, namely, an inter-religious dialogue which serves the purpose of safeguarding world peace. “We receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.”³

As a precondition for shaking hands, the signatories give at the beginning of their document a dual *confession of guilt* in the name of Christendom because of the atrocities committed by many Christians against their Muslim neighbours, especially for the Crusades in the past and for the “War on Terror” being waged today in Muslim countries. At the same time, they ask for “forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world”.⁴

- A document in opposition to this response is the comprehensive position taken by the *Barnabas Fund*⁵, an organization that supports persecuted Christians, particularly in Muslim countries. This critical analysis identifies “**A Common Word**” as a mild form of *da'wa*, namely, an appeal to the unbelievers to convert to and to submit to Islam. Historically, this has often been combined with the threat of violent occupation = *jihad*, in case it is rejected.

- *Other readers criticize the lack of Muslim self-criticism* in the letter from Jordan. For, they argue, the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been, in addition, burdened in recent years by a series of atrocious crimes such as those in New York, Madrid, and London in which many innocent people were killed in the name of Islam. For this reason, a declaration on the relationship between the two religions would have to, in any case, take a clear position on these

³Taken from the Yale University website: <http://www.yale.edu/faith/abou-commonword.htm>).

⁴(<http://www.yale.edu/faith/abou-commonword.htm>).

⁵Position statements given by the Barnabas Fund on Nov 28, 2007 and Jan 7, 2008 were published in the BF e-mail newsletter of January 28, 2008.

events. If these crimes, in the opinion of the signatories, were not committed in the name of true Islam, then it would be all the more necessary to express and explain this clearly.

● In view of the length of the letter from the 138 scholars, which presupposes in-depth knowledge of Islamic studies, the *International Christian Network* commissioned a small group of specialists in Islamic studies to draft their own shorter evaluation of the open letter, by including the thrust of the Barnabas Declaration. It has been accepted with appreciation by the Executive Committee of the ICN and is hereby published as a guideline for Christians seeking answers.

How should the letter of 138 Muslim theologians be evaluated in light of the Bible and the Qur`an?

1. The starting point of the letter is the statement that there can only be peace in the world if Muslims and Christians live in peace together.

What peace is meant here? Apparently, the authors are thinking here on two levels without making a clear distinction between these. The one is the religious level, the other is the interpersonal level of amicable agreement between Muslims and Christians.

According to *Islamic understanding*, peace is only achieved through submission to Islam.

From a *Christian viewpoint*, there can be peace with God and with fellow human beings only when sinful human beings are reconciled to God. This also creates peace with neighbors and strengthens public peace. Yet, personal and public testimony for Christ meets resistance. Christ Himself promised neither peace between religions, nor any world peace (Matthew 24:6-7). – Therefore, the premise of peace declared by the Muslim authors appears questionable to us.

2. The authors maintain that love of God and of the neighbour is the common ground between Islam and Christianity. However, this is not correct as both religions have a different understanding of love in these two relationships. Upon closer examination, this is rather an Islamic misappropriation of and reinterpretation of fundamental Biblical truths, just as in the past Muhammad did to them in the Qur`an.

3. The text and the Qur`an passages quoted make clear that, in Islam, the “love of Allah” – insofar as this is mentioned about at all in the Qur`an – exists in his gifts of creation, in the revelation of his will in the Qur`an and in his forgiveness of sins – hoped for in judgment. This is true especially for Muslims, who submit to Allah.

In the Christian faith, though, the love of God, His *agape*, for man is deeply based on the fact that, in the triune God Himself, a relationship of giving and receiving love exists, in which He wants man, who is created in His image, to participate. This begins with the fact that God, as Creator and Sustainer, extends Fatherly care for man. In this instance, there is, in fact, some commonality in the faith of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

But, according to the testimony of the New Testament, God`s love culminates in His reconciling move towards human beings in the self-sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16).

However, this deep divine love is denied by the Muslim authors when they quote numerous Qur`an passages that implicitly reject the triune nature of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. In doing so, the commonality in faith in God and in the understanding of love rooted in it is contradicted.

4. According to the text of the Letter, human love for Allah consists in recognizing his unity (“*There is no god except Allah...*”), in reverent fear of his omnipotence, in worship and devotion to him, in submission to his will (“Islam”), in gratitude for the gifts of his creation, and in hope of his mercy in judgment.

Even in the Biblical record – there are parallels again here – the relationship of the pious man towards God is characterized by reverence for His holiness, adoration and obedience due to Him.

This obedience is based on grateful love to Him in the framework of the relationship between God and man created by Him. It is the love of the child for his / her Heavenly Father.

5. The Qur'an passages quoted in the Letter make clear how very much the "love of the neighbor" is regulated by commands in Islam (for example, by the obligation of financial support of family members, orphans and the poor, and the freeing of slaves). The basis of this is already the Old Testament and Jewish understanding of good deeds for the neighbour. These deeds are summed up by the general term *zedakah* in Hebrew, *sadakah* in Arabic. When a Muslim performs a good deed for another person, then it is a *sadakah* that serves him for his own righteousness. Ultimately, this is self-love.

But, in the Christian faith, love for one's neighbor originates from the grateful response to the love God has shown us in Christ: "*We love because He first loved us*" (I John 4:19). It applies to all people and it even includes enemies. Thus, it is no accident that, for example, humanitarian aid after natural disasters such as the tsunami of December 26, 2004 predominantly came from countries molded by Christianity, even when the recipients were Muslims.

6. The authors declare "justice and religious freedom" as part of love of the neighbor. However, the context makes clear that these are not justice (equality) and freedom in the modern sense, but, rather, it is about the right of being allowed to worship Allah alone. In this sense, the authors interpret "justice" and "freedom of religion" (supposedly based on Sura 2:256) as freedom to be allowed to practice Islam without any restrictions. According to this, a "just" society would be an Islamic society.

On the other hand, the authors never mention in their letter the fact that Christians and Christian churches in almost all Islamic countries are subject to harsh restrictions in practicing their faith, and that in some countries, they are even violently persecuted minorities. Changing these conditions would be the first requirement for true religious peace between Muslims and Christians.

7. The authors always mention Muslims first before Christians and, in supporting their claims, they first quote Qur'an passages (and statements presumed to be from Muhammad) before they quote Biblical passages – which are supposed to confirm the Qur'an. This is in no way incidentally because, according to the Islamic view, Islam is the "only true religion before God" and therefore it is pre-Jewish and pre-Christian. Judaism and Christianity are seen as degenerate variants of Islam, and the Bible is viewed as a corruption of the original will of Allah. Muhammad, though, – according to the Qur'an in many places – confirmed the original will of Allah (revealed in the hypothetical "earlier books"). It is therefore clear that, in the Muslim text, only those Bible verses are quoted which do not appear to contradict the Qur'an.

8. Misappropriated reinterpretation of Biblical statements, as done by these authors, was already practiced by Muhammad in the Qur'an and also reinforced by tradition (*hadith*). The numerous statements supposedly made by of Muhammad and quoted in the text reflect the early Jewish- Christian-Islamic controversies in which Muslims make their own claims to Biblical statements. These texts, therefore, are ruled out as arguments for supposed commonalities.

9. The authors emphasize that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah in a final and unsurpassable sense. In this, they underline a fundamental difference to the testimony of the Bible, according to which Jesus is the final and surpassing Word of God (Hebrews 1:1ff.). For Christians the essence of true prophecy consists in the fact that, either in looking forward to or looking back, it points to God's revelation of salvation in Jesus Christ. This, however, Muhammad did not do at all. Therefore, Christians cannot recognize him as a prophet.

10. In all of its apparent efforts to use of Biblical language, the Letter holds firmly to Islamic positions and therefore is nothing else than a propaganda for Islam. This "call to Islam" (*da'wa*) is expressed directly by a quote from Sura 16:125.

11. That the Letter aims at adopting Jews and Christians into Islam becomes clear in the call to common ground in Sura 3:64, in which the unity of Allah and thus, implicitly, the surrender of the divinity of Jesus as a "common basis" is postulated. In this sense, it is claimed that Muslims recognize the Messianic role of Jesus, though the Qur'an makes clear (4:171) that

Muhammad understood the title “Messiah” (“only a messenger of Allah”) as something different from the Bible.

12. As a consequence of a presumed unity, it is demanded that all true worshippers of Allah (i.e., basically only Muslims and “Muslim Jews and Christians”) should have the freedom to be allowed to obey the commands of Allah independently from governmental laws. In doing so, the authors demand the establishment of the Sharia above the law of every governmental law.

13. The authors put a restriction on their “offer of peace” to Christians from the very beginning. It is valid only if Christians do not “attack” Islam. But it is a well-known fact that Christians’ explicit non-recognition of Muhammad as God’s prophet and even more their preaching to Muslims are most definitely seen as an attack on Islam. Thus the offer of peace is only valid for “Muslim” Christians who reject the divinity of Jesus.

14. The text tries to divide Christians by making a difference, according to Sura 3:113-115 (“*Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community...*”), between “the people of the Scripture” and thus are one with Muslims and those who are apparently not. The statement that Christians are not in agreement about “Christ’s nature” also goes in this direction. In this, they are unfortunately correct with respect to the shortened understanding of Christ among modern theologians! However, in the context of the text, it is not about His nature at all, but about His Messianic ministry, on which Biblically-oriented Christians agree.

15. The authors conclude their text by making the Qur’an the standard with respect to the differences between Christians and Muslims. In Sura 5:48, Muhammad is asked to make his judgment about the “people of the Book” (Jews and Christians) with the help of the Qur’an. The authors prove by this that they are not at all interested in a dialogue “at eye level”, but place the Qur’an from the very beginning above the Bible.

Conclusion

In view of the purely Islamic presuppositions the letter of the 138 Muslim scholars is based on as well as in view of the objectives expressed openly therein, we come to the following conclusion summarized below:

The "Common Word" shows itself, by a careful analysis, to be an appeal to Christians to give up Christ as the center of their faith and to concentrate their faith, limiting it, on an Islamic understanding of the love of God = Allah and of one’s neighbour.

However, for Islam, "loving God" means something fundamentally different than in the Bible. It is the submission to the Islamic deity and the acceptance of the Qur’an as well as the establishment of the *Sharia* as governmental law. We Christians can in no way agree to this unreasonable demand without denying our Lord and Saviour.

The “Common Word” is, therefore, not an offer of peaceful-tolerant agreement of Muslims with Bible-believing Christians, nor it is an expression of a respect for their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Saviour. On the contrary, it must be understood as a clever *da’wa* tract which, used in the propagation of the Islamic faith (*da’wa*), allows and even recommends “*taqiyya*” = deception with the objective of deceiving Christians about the deep contradictions in the Muslim and Christian understanding of Biblical terms.

In reality, it is the appeal to the Christians to turn from "*shirk*", i.e., the sin of polytheistic associations they are accused of. This means nothing less than this, that Christians should give up their faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who is of one essence with the Father, and should submit only to the will of Allah, as it is articulated in the Qur’an. For Islam, this is the prerequisite for peace with the Christians, but, at the same time, as the letter makes clear in an authoritarian way, it is also the prerequisite for securing threatened world peace.

This real objective, thus far, has naively not been discovered by numerous Christian readers of the “Common Word” for lack of knowledge and ability to discriminate. Perhaps this did not happen

also because some of them are already so far removed from the Biblical foundations of their own faith that they are no longer able or willing to see the decisive things that divide the two religions. This we find, e.g., in the response document from *Yale University*. It approvingly uses names and terms that get their meaning from their basis in the Islamic faith, especially the designation of Muhammad as “Prophet” and the “All-Merciful One” as God’s (= Allah’s) title. Its signatories may surely think they are serving mutual understanding and the maintenance of religious and political-social peace. But, in reality, by wiping away the contradictions, they are supporting in a negligent way the missionary intentions of committed Muslims and the struggle for power of radical-Islamic movements based on the *Sharia*.

We therefore ask all Christians, especially church leaders, whom the “Common Word” of the 138 Muslim scholars is primarily addressed to, to read it with discernment, in the light of the analysis we have presented here, and to take utmost theological care when involved in any inter-religious dialogue, clearly naming the fundamental differences between the two religions. This means neither disrespecting the personal piety of many devout Muslims (which also we admire), nor refusing to work together in the interest of protecting or restoring peace between nations – namely in areas where Muslims and Non-Muslims are entangled in bloody conflicts and suffer from them. However, it is necessary to make careful distinctions in both areas, the spiritual and the secular, and, while cooperating constructively in matters of human security and welfare, not to make any compromises in regard to faith.

For the *International Christian Network (ICN)*,
published on 1st March 2008, by:

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