

A Common Word FAQs

On October 13, 2007, on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, the feast following Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, 138 Muslim scholars from every corner of the Muslim world, and representing every major school of Islamic thought (e.g. Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, etc.) sent an open letter "to leaders of Christian churches, everywhere." This noteworthy group of Muslim scholars and clerics maintains that the common ground between Muslims and Christians centers on the commands to love God and to love our neighbor. Proposing this as a basis for dialogue, they invite Christian leaders from around the world to engage with them in discussion that supports the important work of reconciliation between these two great religious communities. This invitation is referred to as "A Common Word between Us and You" – henceforth "A Common Word" (see www.acommonword.com).

"A Common Word" is viewed by many as the most important interfaith document in nearly half a century, and it opens a noteworthy and potentially unprecedented door of opportunity for substantive dialogue between leading Muslims and Christians. For this reason, the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, along with other members of the Yale Divinity School community, have responded with the publication of "Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'" (henceforth "the Yale response"). The Yale reply was released several days after "A Common Word," and it was published as a full-page advertisement in The New York Times on November 13, 2007 over the signatures of approximately 130 prominent Christian leaders and scholars. Since that time, the Yale Center for Faith and Culture's Reconciliation Program has been working to help organize and facilitate upcoming conferences and other dialogue events that involve top Muslim and Christian leaders (including many signatories to both letters), as well as Jewish leaders.

Since the publication of the Yale response, we have received a substantial volume of correspondence, and a range of public reactions have appeared in the media. Some of the most frequently asked questions are discussed below.

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Q: Does the Qur'an really emphasize love as strongly as the Bible does? Is the description of Islam in the "Common Word" letter accurate?

Q: Why aren't Jews included in this dialogue?

Q: What do you hope to gain from this dialogue?

Q: Shouldn't the basis of our dialogue with Muslims center on the person and work of Christ rather than the command to love God and neighbor?

Q: Does a commitment to the "Common Word" dialogue mean that the signatories are renouncing evangelism?

Q: The Yale Response seems to imply that Allah is the same God that Christians worship. Is this true?

Q: The Common Word letter asserts that love for God and neighbor is the common ground between Muslims and Christians. But is the Muslim and the Christian understanding of love really the same?

Q: Why did we ask for forgiveness for the Crusades and the excesses of the "war on terror?" Don't Muslims have a lot more to apologize for than Christians do?

Q: Some Christians assert that some of the signatories of the "Common Word" letter have a record of slandering the Christian faith and promoting persecution of Christians in their countries. How can we engage in meaningful dialogue about freedom of religion with people like this?

Q: Why did you use the Muslim-sounding name for God, “The All-Merciful One,” in offering your apology?”

Q: Does the Qur’an really emphasize love as strongly as the Bible does? Is the description of Islam in the “Common Word” letter accurate?

A: It is true that many Christians would not interpret Islam as it is described in “A Common Word.” Many Christians would not see love as being the heart of the message of the Qur’an. But if Muslim leaders of the world determine publicly to situate love at the center of their faith – as the touchstone of true religion – and to initiate dialogue on that basis, then surely Christians should welcome that move. If the Muslim leaders of the world say to their fellow Muslims, “Your chief duty toward Christians is to love them,” we should welcome that with enthusiasm. If Muslim leaders say (as they do twice in their letter) that freedom of religion is “a crucial part of that love,” we should be overjoyed. Nonetheless, this does not assume that Muslims and Christians mean exactly the same thing as each other when we speak of “loving God and neighbor.” See below for more information on this question. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Why aren’t Jews included in this dialogue?

A: They are! The “Common Word” letter was addressed specifically to “leaders of Christian churches everywhere” in order to address certain concrete issues and problems between Muslims and Christians, and we therefore felt it appropriate to reply as Christians. But the Yale response emphasizes in its very opening paragraph that the call to love God and neighbor also “lies at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism.” And the Muslim leaders behind “A Common Word” and the Christians at Yale agreed from the outset that Jewish leaders and scholars should be invited as observers to the dialogue meetings which we intend to organize together.

The World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace, held every year in Seville, Spain, is a meeting designed to address issues specific to the Muslim-Jewish relationship. As Christians we do not feel “excluded” by that annual meeting, but rather we recognize that certain issues are of particular concern to the Muslim and Jewish communities. Similarly the “Common Word” initiative arose in the context of certain specific problems between Muslims and Christians, some of which may or may not be of interest to the Jewish community (though we believe that the Jewish community would welcome a world in which Muslims and Christians make peace on the basis of the command to love God and love our neighbors – including our Jewish neighbors). Nonetheless, because of the historic tendency of both Christians and Muslims to exclude the Jewish community at times, we believe it is important to be proactive in inviting Jewish leaders and scholars to participate in our discussions, even if those discussions may at times be of marginal interest to the Jewish community. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: What do you hope to gain from this dialogue?

A: As noted in our response, peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century, and perhaps of the whole present epoch. In many respects the future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace. As Hans Küng affirms, “there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There can be no peace among the religions without dialogue”¹. The Yale response and upcoming dialogues take seriously God’s admonition to us through Paul: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people” (Rom 12:18).

Thus, in obedience to God, the pursuit of peace becomes a major focus of this dialogue. In addition, we pray that our Muslim neighbors will see the beauty of Jesus in us and that Muslims and Christians alike may learn more about the love of Jesus. In these ways we hope to demonstrate our love for God by loving our Muslim neighbor in deed and truth. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Shouldn’t the basis of our dialogue with Muslims center on the person and work of Christ rather than the command to love God and neighbor?

A: The “Common Word” letter and the Yale response merely articulate the starting point for

dialogue. The command to love God and neighbor provides a strong theological bridge that both parties can affirm. This is only a first step, but it is a big step.

We are persuaded that substantive dialogue is absolutely crucial – dialogue that allows all parties to hold onto their convictions even as they seek reconciliation. Such substantive dialogue with our Muslim neighbors is absolutely crucial if we are to fulfill our calling as peacemakers in a post-9/11 globalized world. Substantive dialogue among religious leaders at this level can build trust relationships that ultimately shape the course of international events in ways that mere political engagement can not. And such dialogue has potential to bring about change in the overall spiritual climate in which Muslims and Christians share their respective faiths with one another – opening doors for Christians to bear witness to the Gospel and for Muslims to bear witness to Islam. Ultimately Christians expect to bear witness respectfully, graciously and cordially to our beliefs about Jesus Christ, and we expect Muslims to bear witness to their own distinctive beliefs. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Does a commitment to the “Common Word” dialogue mean that the signatories are renouncing evangelism?

A: The Yale response itself neither promotes nor renounces evangelism. It merely responds to an invitation to dialogue. The signatories of the Yale response represent a broad spectrum of Christian belief, in the same way that the signatories to the “Common Word” letter represent a broad spectrum of Muslim belief. Among both the Muslim and Christian signatories to the letters are those who would oppose both Christian evangelism and Islamic da’wa (literally “inviting” or “calling”), as well as conversion from one religion to another. But the majority of signatories on both sides recognize that Islam and Christianity are both missionary faiths which by their very nature bear witness to a message which they believe is meaningful to the whole world. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: The Yale Response seems to imply that Allah is the same God that Christians worship. Is this true?

A: Implicit in this question are two sub-questions: 1) whether it is appropriate for Christians to call the God of the Bible “Allah,” and 2) whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Regarding the first question, we do not hesitate to refer to the God of the Bible as Allah, as Arab Christians and Arabic-speaking Jews since long before the time of Muhammad have used the name Allah to refer to God. There is clearly nothing wrong or evil in the name “Allah” – it is simply the Arabic word for God. Indeed there is no other word in Arabic for “God.” Thus all Arabic Christian Bible translations of John 3:16 say “For Allah so loved the world...” In Acts 2:11, when Arab visitors to Jerusalem heard the Apostles “declaring the mighty works of God” in Arabic, the Apostles can only have used the word “Allah” (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) to declare those works. Furthermore the Arabic word “Allah” is the cognate of the Aramaic word “Alaha,” which the Syriac Peshitta Bible uses for God. And that same Aramaic word for God (pronounced with a Canaanite-shifted accent) was used by Jesus on the cross when he cried out “Alohi, Alohi, lama sabachthani?” This same word is also cognate with the Hebrew divine names “El,” “Elohim,” etc.

The second question is a bit more complex, though the Qur’an is quite clear in Surat al-‘Ankabut (29):46 that “Our God and your God is one.” It seems clear that Christian and Muslim views of God are similar but not identical. They are similar in that we both claim to worship the one true God, creator of the heavens and the earth. We both believe that this God is merciful and compassionate and that God rules the universe and guides the affairs of humankind. We both believe God will judge all people at the end of history. We both believe God has sent prophets into the world to guide God’s people. We both believe that God inspired some of those prophets to write holy Books which we consider to be sacred Scripture. Christian and Muslim views of God differ regarding the Trinity and regarding the Person of Jesus Christ, whom Christians see as God’s ultimate self-revelation.

These differences are substantial. This is one of the reasons why the Muslims’ “Common Word” letter said that “Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions, and... there is no minimizing some of their formal differences.” The Yale reply similarly referred to “undeniable differences” between the two faiths.

Though these differences are important, they are similar to the differences between Judaism

and Christianity, and few Christians today would assert that Jews are worshiping a different god or an idol. Furthermore the New Testament, in a number of places, refers to people who “worship God” though they do not believe in Christ or the Trinity. This includes both Jews and Gentiles, and it includes both people whose worship is described as “empty” and people whose worship was accepted by God. References include Acts 10:2; 13:50; 16:14; 17:4; 17:17; 18:7; and Matthew 10:40 and Luke 10:16.

We believe that Muslims and Christians share enough in their perspectives about God to serve as the foundation for a meaningful and constructive dialogue between them. Indeed it is only by talking face-to-face that we may find out whether any common ground might be found even on the theological issues which have historically divided us. Jesus said that God desires people to worship in spirit and truth, and we are persuaded that whether or not Muslims’ and Christians’ understandings of God are identical, we share enough common understanding of the true God to sit down at the table and discuss both our areas of agreement and disagreement in regard to God. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: The Common Word letter asserts that love for God and neighbor is the common ground between Muslims and Christians. But is the Muslim and the Christian understanding of love really the same?

A: As indicated above, we make no assumptions one way or the other about this question. One thing is certain, however: if we rely only on caricatures of one another’s faiths, then we will never be able to answer this question in a meaningful way. If we never sit down at the table to talk together face-to-face, it will be impossible to clarify the similarities and differences in our perspectives.

It is precisely for this reason that in the Yale reply we invite our Muslim correspondents to meet together and begin the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another. This is also why the Yale response sets forth some of the core convictions which Christians hold about the meaning of love – its unconditional character, its rootedness in God’s own being as love, and its ultimate expression in Christ’s self-giving forgiveness of his enemies on the Cross.

Some Christians argue that God’s love in the Bible is unconditional, whereas God’s love in the Qur’an is conditional. It seems to us that we should allow Muslim scholars to tell us for themselves how they understand their sacred texts, just as we would expect them to respect our exegesis of the Bible. In any case it is clear that there must be serious theological and exegetical reflection together on this very question as we seek to move forward in a substantive way.

The difficulties we experienced in translating the Yale response into Arabic highlighted the nature of the questions which need to be addressed. Is calling God “al-Wadud” the same as saying that God is “agape”? Is “ikhlas” (sincere devotion to God) the same as “agape” toward God? Is God’s love conditional or unconditional? Is it self-giving? Is our love for each other conditional or unconditional? We clearly have only just begun the conversations and interactions on these crucial matters of love of God and of neighbor – this exchange of letters is only the first step in an ongoing and sustained dialogue. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Why did we ask for forgiveness for the Crusades and the excesses of the “war on terror?” Don’t Muslims have a lot more to apologize for than Christians do?

A: Some people have been troubled by the apology to the worldwide Muslim community that is found in the second paragraph of the Yale response. The apology consists of the following statement: “Since Jesus Christ says, ‘First take the log out your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye’ (Matthew 7:5), we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g. in the Crusades) and in the present (e.g. in excesses of the ‘war on terror’) many Christians have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors.” In the paragraphs that follow, we seek to address some of the questions that have arisen regarding this apology.

First, some have expressed concern that this apology dangerously equates the behavior of so-called “Christian civilization” or of specific Western governments with the behavior of the church. In the Yale response, we were very careful to specify that it was “many Christians”

who were guilty of sinning against their Muslim neighbors, both at the time of the Crusades and then later, in the ongoing “war on terror.” In choosing this language, we were not saying either that the entire church or that all Christians were guilty of these sins, nor were we declaring the church as a whole guilty of the sins of our own or any other governments, even if those sins were committed in the name of Christ or the church. We were simply acknowledging the uncontested fact that some Christians have been guilty of sinning against their Muslim neighbors, both then and now.

Even given this clarification, however, others have objected to the fact that we, as modern followers of Jesus, should see fit to apologize for Christians who lived hundreds of years ago in far-off lands, or for Christians in our own age who have acted sinfully toward Muslims without any direct support from us. While it is true that we may not as individual Christians have personally committed these sins, we nonetheless are numbered with our Christian brothers and sisters who do bear direct responsibility for them. Jeremiah 14:20; Lamentations 5:7 and Daniel 9:3ff. are just a few among the many examples in Scripture of individually innocent believers repenting of the sins of their people and the sins of believers of past generations. Recognizing that we are one body, and that when one member sins, we all suffer; and recognizing that the impact of one member’s sin affects the reputation of the entire church, the signatories to the Yale response, as members of the church, offer a good-faith gesture of acknowledgement and apology to the Muslim community; and before God and our Muslim neighbors, we ask God’s mercy.

Others have asked whether apology for the Crusades was not redundant, since Pope John Paul II and other prominent Christian leaders have apologized for the Crusades in the past. Unfortunately many – if not most – Muslims are unaware of these apologies. Just as many Christians, for example, are unaware of all of the Muslim leaders who have denounced the 9/11 attacks, so also many Muslims are unaware that Christians today do not believe that the Crusades faithfully represented the love of Jesus Christ.

Still others have expressed concern that many Muslims have also been similarly guilty of sinning against Christians, both during the Crusades and in other times, including our own. In offering an apology for wrongdoing by Christians, we are in no way minimizing wrongs done by Muslims against Christians. Rather, we are doing what Jesus says is the prerequisite for addressing wrongs done by our neighbors. As followers of Christ, we are called first to take the log out of our own eye (Matt 7:3-5), and only then to address the faults and sins of others. In any conflict (whether in the family, the church, the community or the world) we are responsible to deal with our own sins first, and Jesus says we must do so whether or not the other party also apologizes. While there have indeed been sins by each community against the other, and while we continue to sin against one another in serious ways, the debate about who wronged whom in the history of Christian-Muslim relations is endless. We are persuaded that until and unless one party is willing to acknowledge their own wrong first, there will be no healing of the relationship.

Nonetheless, Jesus also says that removing the logs from our own eyes will help us to see more clearly to help others with specks in theirs. Having offered a sincere apology to our Muslim neighbors, we will, with firmness and respect, speak frankly in private to them about the ways in which Muslims, both in the past and the present, have sinned against Christians. By offering a sincere apology to our Muslim friends, we do not support or condone their sins – we simply affirm that reconciliation must begin with humility and repentance. Certainly both Christians and Muslims have perpetrated serious evil against one another. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Some Christians assert that some of the signatories of the “Common Word” letter have a record of slandering the Christian faith and promoting persecution of Christians in their countries. How can we engage in meaningful dialogue about freedom of religion with people like this?

A: Various prominent Muslim leaders have indeed gone on record in very unconstructive ways regarding religious freedom, the Christian faith, and other matters, as also some Christian leaders have said unhelpful things about Islam and Muslims. In our experience, however, we have found that even people who have held to harsh positions will often look for legitimate, more moderate positions within their own scriptural tradition once they are engaged in warm, personal relations with someone from another faith. The only sure way we can both ascertain

and influence anyone's intentions is to meet face-to-face to discuss these crucial issues. We have every reason to believe that the majority of Muslim signatories are sincere in their pursuit of peace (private conversations with many of them have confirmed this). It is our hope that Muslim leaders who have been harsh toward Christians in the past will be led to change their positions, in part as a result of having gone on record publicly in support of love of God and of neighbor in "A Common Word." Similarly, we hope for Christian signatories (and non-signatories) to grow in their understanding of what Jesus requires of us in regard to both loving our Muslim neighbors and loving our Muslim enemies.

Our response to the Common Word is just the first word in a long conversation, not the only word we can say nor the final word we want to say. Thus, engaging with the "Common Word" initiative is an initial step towards addressing the suffering of fellow Christians in Muslim countries, just as we expect Muslims leaders to address the sufferings that Muslims experience in the West.

It is noteworthy that the "Common Word" letter twice mentions the importance of freedom of religion as "a crucial part of love." We applaud our Muslim colleagues for explicitly mentioning this. Ultimately we believe Muslims who live in the West should be free to respectfully express and share their faith. Christians who live in the Muslim world should be equally free to respectfully express and share their faith. There should be no double standards. We are deeply committed to promoting the substance of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

In the end, we see this exchange of letters as the beginning of a conversation in which leaders from both communities will bear respectful witness to their deepest convictions, and in which issues arising from Christian evangelism, Islamic da'wa and conversion in both directions can be discussed in an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity. (Return to list of questions.)

Q: Why did you use the Muslim-sounding name for God, "The All-Merciful One," in offering your apology?"

A: Actually this was a Christian and Jewish name for God long before the birth of Muhammad. The rabbis of the Talmud and of Midrash Rabbah asserted that the divine Name (the Tetragrammaton) specifically denoted God's character as the Merciful One. They based this on Exodus 34:6, in which God proclaimed the divine Name as "YHWH, YHWH: God Merciful and Compassionate." This text is at the heart of Jewish Selihot prayers and it forms the basis for the Jewish doctrine of the Thirteen Middot, or divine attributes of mercy. New Testament texts like James 5:11 and Ephesians 2:4 allude to Exodus 34:6 when they refer to God as "The Lord Merciful and Compassionate." Pre-Islamic Christian inscriptions from South Arabia show that "Rahman" (the Merciful One) was the name for God used by Yemeni Christians before the time of Muhammad in invocations "In the name of the Merciful One and his Messiah and the Holy Spirit." In Luke 6:36 Jesus tells us we should be merciful just as God our heavenly Father is merciful. In referring to God by this name, which is common to both the Qur'an and the Bible, we are simply seeking to communicate respectfully our understanding of God to our Muslim correspondents using a name for God that is meaningful to them. (Return to list of questions.)