

JOHN BORELLI

Uncommon overture

When 138 leading Muslim scholars issued a statement last week addressing Christians around the world, responses varied from warm to cautious, while some claimed that 'A Common Word Between Us and You' is a necessary step on the road to world peace. What is clear is that dialogue between the faiths has vital new opportunities for progress

In the era of email, text messaging and blogging, taking a month, let alone a year, to compose a statement, or an invitation, or dialogue, seems remarkable to many people.

But last week's invitation to theological dialogue from a widely representative group of 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders to Christians appears to have been in the making for three years. And yet for all the long hours of work, the scholarship, and the care taken, there is an undoubted urgency about it. "Our very eternal souls are all also at stake if we fail," the scholars tell those who relish conflict and destruction.

"A Common Word Between Us and You" was released on Thursday 11 October, and dated 13 October for the feast of Eid al-Fitr concluding the Ramadan fast. Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman had dedicated more than three years to making this happen. The work will almost certainly have involved Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, the Royal Institute's chairman and a member of the Jordanian royal family. He and others have been busy building consensus among Muslims for several years. Prince Ghazi has provided a commentary on the "Amman Message", first released in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan and his scholars, and then supported by Muslim scholars of 50 countries who dealt with three key questions: Who is a Muslim? Who has the right to undertake issuing a legal ruling (fatwa)? Is it permissible to declare someone an apostate (*takfir*)? The commentary was presented on 11 September 2006, the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and, paradoxically, the day before Pope Benedict's famed address at the University of Regensburg.

But "A Common Word" is not simply a response to the Regensburg speech, nor is it sole-

ly addressed to Pope Benedict. A response to that speech was issued on 13 October 2006 and signed by 38 scholars and religious leaders whose names appear in these other documents. This does explain how so many senior and recognised Muslim scholars and religious leaders could construct a theologically nuanced response to the Pope within one month. Respectful, corrective and engaging, the 2006 "Open Letter to the Pope" is but one facet of a major effort by Muslims for "intellectual exchange and mutual understanding" with Christians.

'A Common Word' is a response to the urgent need for a united voice from Muslims on the essentials of their faith to counteract voices of extremists

By contrast, last week's "A Common Word" is addressed to the Pope and many others: 14 Orthodox patriarchs, five heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Presidents of the Lutheran World Federation and the Baptist World Alliance, the General Secretaries of the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the World Council of Churches, and to "Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere". Like the Amman message and other documents, the signatories are offering consensus, a technical term in Islam (*ijma*), referring usually to the studied agreement of scholars and the foundational belief that the whole community will not agree on error. "A Common Word" and

its predecessor documents are both invitations to theological dialogue and to a common articulation of faith developing among Muslims.

Quoting the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad, "A Common Word" builds a case for love of the One God and love of neighbour as fundamental principles for peace and mutual understanding. To support this, the text also cites passages in the Old and New Testaments. The only other sources cited are two traditional commentaries.

"A Common Word" receives its title from the third sura (chapter) of the Qur'an, verse 64. The context is the visit of a Christian delegation near the end of Muhammad's life. The verse exhorts all to worship none but God, nor to ascribe any partner to God, and not to take others for lords besides God. Following al-Tabari, a ninth-to-tenth century Persian historian and exegete of the Qur'an, "A Common Word" agrees that "Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to follow what God commanded them," by citing another Qur'anic verse, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." (That verse, Sura 2:256, the 38 Muslim respondents to Pope Benedict last year said that he had incorrectly identified as a sura of "the early period", which he drew from Theodore Khoury's translation of a dialogue between Emperor Manuel II and "an educated Persian.")

Despite this subtle point and the not-so-subtle references to the oneness of God throughout, passages often used against the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, "A Common Word" is not polemical like the centuries-long arguments and debates between Christians and Muslims. Some may feel that it goes too far in outlining common terms for agreement and interpreting Christian and Jewish Scriptures. Others may not agree with the way Scriptural and commentarial citations are used. Still, even with its traditional aspects, "A Common Word" is a new departure. It is a response to the urgent need for a united voice from Muslims on the essentials of their faith to counteract voices of extremists and those preaching violence and hatred.

While "The Amman Message" of 2004 is a response to "those who through distortion and fabrication try to portray Islam as an enemy to them" and to those "who claim affiliation with Islam and commit irresponsible acts in its name", this new text, on the other hand, is an invitation to interreligious dialogue — "a sure basis for peace and warding off the

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dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history”, as Pope John Paul II declared in early 2001. At the Second Vatican Council, he and other Catholic bishops had urged Christians and Muslims to mutual understanding and to joint efforts fostering social justice, moral welfare, and peace and freedom for all. They also exhorted Catholics “to recognise, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions”, especially through dialogue and collaboration.

On an international level, Christian-Muslim dialogue has moved by spurts and starts in the last 40 years. The newness of the approach, lack of parallel structures, and political developments, especially in the Middle East, have made lasting efforts difficult to maintain. The most productive record for the Vatican’s office for interreligious dialogue was under Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald’s leadership with Jordan’s Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute, but that was not exactly a theological dialogue. More recently, Pope Benedict has coupled “inter-religious” with “intercultural” when referring to this dialogue. The change was noticeable the day after his April 2005 election and more evident when he spoke directly to Muslims four months later in Cologne, where he dwelt on terrorism and its effects. He did quote the words of the Second Vatican Council and asserted that this interreligious and intercultural dialogue “cannot be reduced to an optional extra”. That dialogue, he and curial officials have emphasised, is to be only on public issues and not a theological one characteristic of “A Common Word”.

There is another reason why “A Common Word” is so important. It might just be the first widely represented theological response by Muslims to Christian invitations to dialogue since the time of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who now leads interreligious dialogue for the Vatican, has recognised its newness in this respect and its lack of polemics, use of Scriptural citations, and meditative nature. Archbishop Rowan Williams described it as indicative of the relationship for which we yearn in all parts of the world. Bishop Mark Hanson, President of the Lutheran World Federation, has encouraged reading the beauty of the collected passages and studying the vision of fidelity and fellowship. But these are acknowledgements and not responses. Those will take longer, perhaps years.

“A Common Word” declares that the purpose of the text is not “polite dialogue between selected religious leaders”. The more immediate response is for Christians and Muslims to be in touch in all societies, and through reading and studying together this text and their sources of theology, they might build a basis for a common word between them.

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MONA SIDDIQUI

‘Peace comes about when we make peaceful coexistence our goal’



Last weekend, Muslims all over the world celebrated Eid, the day marking the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. At such celebratory moments it’s common for believers of one faith to reach out to other faiths and talk of shared values. Last weekend 138 Muslims from all over the world sent an open letter to Christian leaders, with Pope Benedict at the top of the list. This letter comes a year after that other letter sent to the Pope signed by 38 Muslims, trying to appease the growing tension after his controversial speech at Regensburg.

So how significant is this? In my opinion, very little. It’s true that any reply coming from the Vatican will carry some relevance not only for the Catholic hierarchy but also for those of us who live and breathe in the small world of interreligious theology. But in the Muslim world, such signatures look almost random. And even if they were carefully chosen from a wide range of Sunni and Shia traditions, most of these names are not surprisingly the usual suspects. There is something quaint but almost medieval in the concept of a letter being sent in this way. In our fast-moving world where instant communication is everything, a letter gives the reader time to deliberate but it hardly captures a sense of urgency or the public imagination for very long.

My main reservation is whether we really need prominent thinkers and scholars from one religion to tell prominent theologians from another that we need to love our neighbour. Will the conflicts and oppression in this world be reduced if Muslims and Christians understand each other’s theologies a little better? Does the careful juxtaposition of passages from the New Testament and the Qur’an really make people think how close the two faiths are on issues of God’s love, his unity and the nature of revelation?

Interreligious work in the West has assumed many different faces. As one who is involved I am well aware that faith speaks to faith in multiple ways. But to extract verses and passages in such a way does very little to appease the anxieties of

those who see that faith not in the pages of a book but in the hard realities of society and politics. For many Christians, their reservation about Islam is that Muslim societies have been unable to nourish individual liberties and freedoms despite making theological cases for it. This then leads to concerns around religious freedoms for non-Muslims in such societies. Then of course there is that other most potent concern – religious fanaticism and how the reality of terrorism sustains itself through the powerful aspiration of gaining global Islamic dominance. For many Muslims, Christianity’s revisioning of itself as a Western religion in which Christianity and liberalism go hand in hand is seen quite simply as blatant hypocrisy. Western Christianity’s frequent amnesia about its own violent history, the gradual rise of fundamentalist theologies in Christianity, its own ambivalence to issues of religious and other freedoms are not minor concerns; scratch the surface of many polite conversations and these tensions jump out.

This is not to say that symbolism doesn’t matter – sometimes symbolic gestures are important but their importance is very short-lived. But let’s not make this letter a landmark document through which we have a greater understanding of peace. Peace doesn’t come about through the absence of conflict; it is not some passive state. Peace comes about when we each make peaceful coexistence our goal throughout our life and develop this ethos through our politics and our relationships. We have to be able to create societies where the faith of the other is neither an obstacle nor a cause for our friendships. We reach out to others quite simply because we have no choice. We don’t have to love one another or display grand gestures, but we do need to act with a little selflessness and humility. I am often reminded of that passage from the Qur’an: “If all the trees on earth were pens and the oceans were ink with seven oceans to replenish it, yet would not the words of God be exhausted” (31:27). However much we talk about God, it will never be adequate because we will never be able to do justice to his majesty or his mercy. But we must do what little we can do for one another, and maybe all that’s needed.

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