



Muslim proposal towards a common base of interreligious dialogue

Abstract

Ten years ago, on 13th October 2007, on the occasion of Eid al-fitr al Mubarak 1428 A.H., Muslim leaders and scholars sent Christian leaders an historic open letter concerning interreligious dialogue and human rights known as “A Common Word between us and you”. This letter proposes that the theme of the love of the One God and the love of the Neighbour is a common basic teaching of both Islam and Christianity. This common ground stems from the foundational principles of both faiths as are expressed in the Qur’an and in the Bible. In this article, it is analysed the Muslim proposal towards a common base for interreligious dialogue. In the first place, it is presented this proposal as it is given by Muslims in the open letter. Then, it is elucidated valuable aspects that this initiative contains which can help to develop peaceful interfaith encounters. Besides, it is explored some ambiguities that this proposal contains which can cause difficulties in interreligious dialogue. Finally, it is presented the idea that the Muslim proposal should be move towards a more inclusive base for interreligious dialogue that includes believers and non-believers in order to promote widely human rights.

Key Words: interreligious dialogue, A Common Word, Islam, Christianity, human rights.

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INTRODUCTION

There will be no peace among the nations
without peace among the religions.
There will be no peace among the religions
without dialogue among the religions.

Hans Küng

Ten years ago, on 13th October 2007, on the occasion of Eid al-fitr al Mubarak 1428 A.H., Muslim leaders and scholars sent Christian leaders an historic letter concerning interreligious dialogue and human rights. The open letter was entitled “A Common Word between us and you” (ACW) and was initially signed by 138 Muslims, but since then many more signatories have been added. With this document the world’s two largest religions are invited to search for real peace and harmony on the base of what is common and essential to both faiths. This letter proposes that the theme of the love of the One God and the love of the Neighbour is a common basic teaching of both Islam and Christianity. This common ground stems from the foundational principles of both faiths as are expressed in the Qur’an and in the Bible.

This initiative had its origins in an initial letter sent by 38 Muslim scholars to Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, one month after the controversial lecture given by the Pope on 13th September 2006 in Regensburg, Germany. This first open letter wanted to discuss and correct some mistakes of the Pope’s lecture. According to the principal political force behind these documents H. R. G. Prince Ghazi bin Muḥammad of Jordan (2010), Vatican’s response to this letter was not

satisfactory for Muslims scholars and, for that reason, on the anniversary of the first letter a second letter “A Common Word” was sent. The number of signatories increased symbolically by 100, meaning that Muslims are a force to be reckoned with and not easily dispensed with.

The first letter concluded that Catholics and Muslims share a frank and sincere dialogue, and from this attitude it is possible to build peaceful and friendly relationships between these two religions. This is possible because Christianity and Islam stand in the same Abrahamic tradition and particularly the two commandments of love (Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, 12 October 2006). The second letter, “A Common Word,” focuses on developing this idea. It shows how the love of God and love of neighbour is the fundamental base of each religion and how from this common ground all Muslims and Christians are invited to reach meaningful peace.

For the H. R. G. Prince Ghazi bin Muḥammad, principal drafter of “A Common Word,” this second letter was written to “stop the drumbeat of what we feared was a growing popular consensus (on both sides) for worldwide (and thus cataclysmic and perhaps apocalyptic) Muslim-Christian jihad/crusade” (2010, p. 9). Human harmony between these two religions will be reached not only by peaceful efforts but also by a proper basic knowledge of Islam. The open letter wants to spread this knowledge on a massive scale through the world’s most influential Christian leaders.

In the 1400 years of history between Christianity and Islam, it is the first time that the theme of the two commandments of love has been emphasized so strongly. This is a positive approach that provides new foundations for interfaith encounters and the promotion of human rights. Most of the Christian responses to “A Common Word” were impressed with the spirit of healing and reconciliation that the document contains (See “Loving God and Neighbour Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’”, 2007).

In this article, I shall analyse the Muslim proposal towards a common base for interreligious dialogue. First of all, I shall present this proposal given in “A Common Word.” Second, I shall elucidate valuable aspects that this initiative contains which can help to develop peaceful interfaith encounters. Third, I shall explore some ambiguities that this proposal contains which can cause difficulties in interreligious dialogue. To conclude, I shall present the idea that the Muslim proposal should be moved towards a more inclusive base for interreligious dialogue that includes believers and non-believers.

1. Muslim Proposal

“A Common Word” based on Islamic and Christian sacred texts shows that love of God and love of the neighbour are fundamental to both faiths. The first part focuses on the love of God and presents this commandment from the Qur’an and the Bible.

In Islam love of God is expressed in the first testimony of faith: “There is no god but God...” (ACW. p. 4). This love towards God is confirmed in several quranic verses such as:

Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God (Al-Baqarah, 2:165). Indeed, [T]heir flesh and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God (Al-Zumar, 39:23).” (ACW. p. 4)

“And if thou wert to ask them: Who created the heavens and the earth, and constrained the sun and the moon (to their appointed work)? they would say: God. How then are they turned away? / God maketh the provision wide for whom He will of His servants, and straiteneth it for whom (He will). Lo! God is Aware of all things. / And if thou wert to ask them: Who causeth water to come down from the sky, and therewith reviveth the earth after its death? they verily would say: God. Say: Praise be to God! But most of them have no sense. (Al-Ankabut, 29:61-63) (ACW. p. 5).

From these and other quranic verses (See Q, 1:1-7, 2:194-5, 3:31, 6:162-164, 9:38-39, 14:32-34, 19:96, 64:16), the letter deduces that in Islam love of God is not a mere momentary or superficial emotion, but forms the heart of the complete and total devotion to God. Thus to be a Muslim means to be totally attached and devoted to God in love (ACW. p.4).

The open letter then goes on to compare how love of God is present in Christianity. It shows, quoting from the Bible, that for Christians the love of God is the first and greatest commandment: In the Old Testament, Moses said in the Shema of the Book of Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” Dt. 6:4-5 (ACW, p.8). In the New Testament, Jesus was asked about the Greatest Commandment:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. / Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, / “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” / Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ / This is the first and greatest commandment. / And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ / On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40) (ACW, p. 9).

Moreover, the open letter shows that in the Old and New Testaments there are many other verses which affirm the love of God (See Dt. 4:29, 10:12, 11:13, 13:3, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6, 30:10; Jos. 22:5; Mk. 12:32-33 and Lk. 10:27-28.). The authors of the open letter clarify that although there are language differences between these verses, the common idea remains that the love of God is the first and greatest commandment

given to mankind. This part concludes saying that Muslims and Christians share the same believe in the first and greatest commandment (ACW, p. 10).

The second part of the open letter explains how the love of the neighbour is essential to both Muslims and Christians. In Islam, the letter explains as follow:

There are numerous injunctions in Islam about the necessity and paramount Importance of love for—and mercy towards—the neighbour. Love of the neighbour is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God because in Islam without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God and no righteousness. The Prophet Muhammad said: “None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.” And: “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.” (ACW, p. 11)

The letter supports the idea of religious freedom as an expression of love of the neighbour, as it is stated in the Qur’an:

Let there be no compulsion in religion...” (Al-Baqarah, 2:256). “God forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers.” (Al- Mumtahinah, 60:8) (ACW, p. 14).

Regarding love of the neighbour in Christianity, the open letter clarifies that it is also a basic teaching of the Bible. In the Old Testament it is said: “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD (Lv 19:17-18) (ACW. p. 12). This teaching is confirmed in the New Testament: “And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12:31) (ACW,p.12)

In this manner, the open letter states that love of God and love of the neighbour form the common ground between the Torah, the New Testament and the Qur’an, and consequently, focusing on the two commandments of love can lead towards a new understanding of relations between Judaism, Christianity and Islam (ACW. p.13).

In the third part of the letter, it is concluded from the above analysis that this common ground between these three religions can form the base for interreligious dialogue in the future, especially between Muslims and Christians. This can be possible, since the letter recognizes that Muslims are not hostile towards Christians:

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes, (in accordance

with the verse of the Holy Qur’an [Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8]) (ACW. p. 14).

The letter is aware that “if Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace” (ACW. p. 16), since believers of both religions make up more than half of the world’s population. Therefore, interfaith dialogue between these two largest religions is not an option. And according to “A Common Word” if it is based on what is fundamental and common to both faiths it is a possibility.

2. A Muslim consensus

One important aspect of “A Common Word” is the level and number of its signatories. According to the analysis of several Christians scholars, like Samir Khalil (2007) and Christian Troll (2007), this letter expresses an ecumenical movement in Islam. The letter started with 138 signatories, but on 2013 it already had 405 signatories. This number represents over 43 nations and includes the major different tendencies in Islam such as: Sunni, Shiite, Ismailites, jafaarites, ribadites etc. Although this letter does not represent an agreement between all Muslims, it shows a concerted move towards what Islam calls *ijma’* (إجماع, consensus) (Khalil, 2007).

For Sunni Muslims who total about 85% of the Muslim population, the *Ijma’* is the third essential source of the Shari’ah Law, after the Qur’an and the Sunna. This idea of *Ijma’* is based on one of the Hadith spoken by Muhammad: “My community will never agree upon an error.” The open letter constitutes a normative *Ijma’*

by the Ummah's scholars. This consensus will get stronger and stronger as more people sign it and uphold it. If the open letter is regarded as such, it might have a significant authority in the Muslim community.

On the other hand, the list of signatories from all parts of the world, for Troll, reminds us that there are no longer separate Islamic and Christian worlds in the geographic sense and, consequently, the open letter can be read as a tangible recognition of this fact. The new stage in dialogue of which "A Common Word" is part can be seen as a positive result of globalization (Chia, 2016).

3. A common attitude

"A Common Word" was born to life in a spirit of truly open and respectful dialogue. This attitude is also promoted by the Pope Francis as he says: "Turning to mutual respect in interreligious relations, especially between Christians and Muslims, we are called to respect the religion of the other, its teachings, its symbols, its values" (2013).

In the history of the Catholic Church a similar initiative appeared fifty-two years ago. Over two thousand Catholic bishops approved at Vatican II the "Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions," *Nostra Aetate*. In this document the bishops concluded:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and

all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting (*Nostra Aetate*. 3, 1965).

To reach that purpose, the Church invited Christians and Muslims to overcome the quarrels and hostilities that have arisen between them during the course of history. The Church also invited them to work together "to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" (Ibid. 3). In this manner, Vatican II affirms that God acts beyond outside the boundaries of the Church (Latinovic, Mannion, & Phan, 2016).

It is possible to read "A Common Word," as Daniel Madigan suggests (2008), as a response to *Nostra Aetate*. The open letter and the catholic declaration of 1965 adopt the same approach. Both documents, in an attitude of dialogue and openness, search for peace between both traditions and want to confirm their common

beliefs instead of highlighting only differences. It is expected that the open letter, although it might have to face some obstacles before it would be accepted to the same degree as *Nostra Aetate* was, will be eventually accepted as an authoritative document that will help to improve interfaith relations.

4. Use of vocabulary

The open letter is characterized by the use of a Christian vocabulary instead of a Muslim one. The terminology used is a rapprochement to the Christian way of speaking and, for scholars like Khalil, this is considered as a sign of real desire on the part of Muslims for interreligious dialogue (2007). However the open letter contains some difficulties, which are worthy of analysis, especially in the use of important terms such as: love, neighbour, God and Jesus Christ.

The word “love” is widely used in the Bible, but not in the Qur’an. Although the theme of the love of God is found in abundance throughout Sufism, it is not part of the common discourse in Islam (Khalil 2007). Muslims usually speak of God is the greatest (“ربكنا مللا” Allah Akbar) rather than God is love (“تبحم مللا” Allah mahaba). Moreover, in the Qur’an God as “the Loving” (“ودولا” Al-Wadud) is only described two times: “And He is the Oft-Forgiving, full of loving-kindness” (Q. 85:14) and “But ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn unto Him (in repentance): for my Lord is indeed full of mercy and loving-kindness” (Q. 11:90). Reza Shah-Kazemi (2010) explains that, even if “love” is not part of the canonical names of God in

Islam, it does not mean that Muslims exclude this name from God. Based on intellectual evidence it is possible to conclude that God is love because everything that is good is beloved by Him.

The word “neighbour,” used for brethren in Christianity, is typical of the New Testament and does not exist in the Qur’an. This is probably the reason why the Arabic version of the letter uses the word jar (“راج”), which refers to neighbour in its geographical meaning and not the word qarib (“ببيرق”) that for Christians has the sense of the brotherhood of all people (Khalil, 2007).

The use of the word “God,” (للا) in the open letter might cause readers to think that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God. This can be affirmed as true, on the one hand, because both traditions believe in the unity of God. However there is, on the other hand, a big difference in our respective visions of the One God. It is not enough to declare that both traditions are monotheistic in order to confess that we believe in the same God. Muslims adore God, the Unique, who is in front of them as they pray in the Fatihah: “Thee do we worship and thine aid we seek” (Q. 1:5), but Christians believe in God that was revealed by Jesus Christ who said: “I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15). Moreover, the Trinity, which is a central dogma of faith in Christianity, is explicitly denied by the Qur’an as it says: “Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better

for you: for God is one God” (Q. 4:171). Thus, God is perceived differently in both traditions (Jourdan, 2001).

The Arabic translation of Jesus Christ in the Arabic version of the open letter appears in an ambiguous way. In the English, French, Italian, Spanish official versions of the letter, one would be pardoned in thinking that “A Common Word” talks about Jesus Christ as Christians understand him. However, the Arabic version of the letter refers to Jesus Christ with the sense of him being a prophet as it is written in the Qur’an ‘Aisa Al-Messih (“يسى ع” “حي سمل”) (See Q. 3:45-47, 3:52-58, 4: 157-159, 5:114-118, 6:85, 9:30, 13:38). Yet, the belief of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is expressed in Arabic language by Christians as Iesua Al-Messih (“حي سمل عوسى”). When the open letter in Arabic uses ‘Aisa Al-Messih to quote the Gospel it gives the impression that Jesus Christ speaks in it as a prophet of Islam. For instance, the following Arabic expression in the open letter can generate a misinterpretation: Ua fi Al-ahad Al-gedid, iaqul ‘Aisa Al-Messih ‘Alihi Al-Salam... (“لوقى ،ديدجل ده ع ل ا ي ف و...”) (“م ال س ل ا ه ي ل ع ح ي س م ل ا ي س ي ع”). In the New Testament, the Muslim prophet Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, said... (My own translation). This sentence in Arabic conveys the sense that Jesus Christ talks in the Gospel as a Muslim. It is confusing to think how Jesus as a prophet of Islam could say in the Gospel that He is the Son of God (See Jn. 1:14, 3:16, 3:18, Mk. 1:1, Mt. 14:33, Lk. 22:70). Christians believe that in the Gospel Jesus is neither a Muslim nor a prophet, but the Son of God.

These clarifications of language are important so as to avoid entering a reading of Christian scriptures in a Muslims way, or to build interreligious dialogue based on ambiguities. Interfaith encounters should be based not only on common points that believers have, but it should always also include an awareness of our differences in traditions, anthropologies and theologies. In this way, Pope Francis affirmed “as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions” (2015, a). Based on the elements that unify us and separate us it will be possible to build a transparent and solid dialogue.

5. Use of the Bible

The use of the Bible, for Troll, throughout the document seems problematic. For Islamic doctrine, the Sacred Scriptures of the Jews and Christians are regarded as a product manipulated either by falsification of the text or by distortion of the meaning of the text and, thus, Muslims in general have not recognized it as a shared base for dialogue. Troll asks whether the authors of the letter understand the biblical texts, which they have quoted, in their own authentically biblical context or have they accepted these biblical texts only because they correspond with the message of the Qur’an (Troll, 2007).

Khalil complements Troll’s view stating that the letter quotes from the Qur’an with the formula “God said,” but when the quotation comes from the Bible, it only affirms: “as it is found in the

New Testament” or “as it is read in the Gospel.” This way of quoting implies that the use of the Qur’an is from a believer in Islam and the use of the Bible is a scholarly studious approach (Khalil, 2007).

Even if the use of Christian vocabulary and the Bible appear problematic throughout the letter, it appears, nevertheless, as a sign of a real fraternal dialogue with Christianity. This new attitude from the writers and signatories of the open letter might contribute to the improvement of relations between both Islam and Christianity.

6. Search for a more universal and common base

“A Common Word,” based on the Qur’an, Hadiths and the Bible has presented that love of God and love of the neighbour are not only common themes but fundamental beliefs in both Islam and Christianity. From this common ground human harmony will be possible if both traditions obey God’s two greatest commandments.

For Christian scholars like Khalil, these two commandments can form a common base for dialogue between Islam and Christianity, but remain particular in only these two traditions. Therefore, these themes do not provide a universal base for dialogue with other religions and non-believers. The reason why the open letter has this approach is because it makes sense to begin with the two largest, most intertwined, and yet most conflicting religions in the world and try to help there first. However an interre-

ligious dialogue in which everybody cannot participate because he/she does not have the same theological and scriptural common base, as Muslims and Christians have, might not, in the end, bring healing and reconciliation among all people.

What is missing in “A Common Word,” for Khalil, is the desire to re-establish peaceful relations with believers of other religions, as well secularists and non-believers. For Khalil (2007), the idea that Christians and Muslims represent more than half of the world’s population expressed by the open letter, can be read as “by reaching an agreement we could almost impose peace in the world. This is a tactical, political approach” (p.3). This scholar explains that for that reason Cardinal Tauran pointed out that the open letter “is interesting, it opens new roads in both its method and contents, but it needs to be explored more deeply to make it more objective and non selective, to render it more universal and less political” (Ibidem).

Pope Benedict XVI suggests that a common and universal base for a dialogue with everyone can be found in the idea of a universal ethics based on the natural law. From the Catholic point of view, this base ought to be built not on the Bible nor on the Qur’an, nor on any other sacred text, since it would exclude non-believers. The pontiff proposes that natural law in itself is “accessible to any rational creature, with this doctrine the foundations are laid to enter into dialogue with all people of good will and more generally, with civil and secular society” (Pope Benedict XVI, p. 4). Pope Francis

confirms this vision of interreligious dialogue since “the Catholic Church is open to dialogue with philosophical thought” (2015, b).

In this article, we have presented an analysis of a significant document, “A Common Word” which appeared in 2007. Muslim leaders and scholars suggest that meaningful peace can be found between Islam and Christianity because both these traditions share the two commandments of love as a common and fundamental belief. This is a revolutionary idea admired by many Christian leaders.

Although “A Common Word” contains an important initiative for reconciliation between Muslims and Christians it is not a proposal inclusive of every human being. It is necessary to search for a more universal base in which everybody will be included. The search for a common base of interreligious dialogue is an important task for promoting human rights. We face in our cultures extremes positions deliberately avoiding or even demonizing religions other than itself. Therefore, we need urgently to search for a base where believers and non believers can find the space in which to overcome the tensions that live among us, and where reconciliation can be converted from hope to reality.

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