

An Uncommon Call: Prospect for a New Dialogue with Islam?

*Douglas Pratt*¹

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse and discuss the text of a most significant Muslim letter of 2007 addressed to the Christian Church, and the evidence of its reception within the Christian community in the year since it was delivered. It will also discuss some of the theological issues and challenges raised by the letter. Has a new era for dialogue with Islam been inaugurated by this epistolary event? What might the letter portend for the immediate and longer-term future of Christian relations with Islam? What does it raise in terms of theological issues and challenges? What challenges does this document signal for the ongoing quest of theology and interfaith engagement?

1. Introduction

In October of 2007 an ‘Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders’ was issued to the Christian Church. This seminal letter, signed by some 138 Muslim clerics and academics, 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, “Leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere”². Entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, this is a significant document in terms of the context and pressing issues of Christian–Muslim relations and, indeed, of the wider arena of interfaith engagement with Islam and Muslim peoples. What is at the heart of this ‘call’, and what lies behind it? What might it portend for the immediate and longer-term future of Christian relations with Islam? What might this intimate for the future of international relations with the World of Islam? On the basis of this invitation to consider the common ‘word’ that interconnects Islam with Christianity, and also with Judaism, what is the prospect of a new theological dialogue with Islam? Following a flurry of initial reactions and responses, more measured considerations are presently underway. Colloquia and conferences

¹ Douglas Pratt is Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, and is a New Zealand Associate of the UNESCO Chair for Intercultural and Interreligious Relations-Asia Pacific, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

² *A Common Word Between Us and You: An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders*. Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007CE / 1428AH, 1.

have or are being convened in Europe, America and elsewhere. The task of reception of this epoch-making Muslim text is steadily progressing. This paper will present a summary and analysis of the letter; a review of some key responses thus far; and a critical examination of issues and challenges that are raised by the document and which are implicit in any theological response to it.

2. Summary and Analysis

The document is in two sections: a Summary and Abridgement of little over a page; then the substantive letter of some thirteen pages divided into three parts – (I) Love of God, (II) Love of the Neighbour, and (III) Come to a Common Word Between Us and You – followed by over four pages of Notes and the list of 138 signatories, given in alphabetical order, and covering some further eight pages. The opening paragraph of the Summary gives the pressing context for the letter: the pursuit of the peace of the world. Specifically it asserts “The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians” (p.2). Comprising, together, over half of the world’s current population, the letter is premised on the moral and theological responsibility of these two global faith communities to live up to their own precepts, especially in the context of the critical need for peaceful resolution to contemporary mutually divisive and destructive situations. And the basis for such resolution is to hand in “the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour” (ibid). These principles, which thread throughout their respective scriptural texts – two examples of which are given from the Holy Qur’an (*Al-Ikhlās*, 112:1-2; *Al-Muzzammil* 73:8) and one from the New Testament (*Mark* 12:29-31) – form the basis of “the common ground between Islam and Christianity” (ibid). Furthermore, the Summary of the letter makes pivotal reference to the Quranic injunction to Muslims to engage dialogically with Christians as well as Jews by virtue of all three being ‘Peoples of Scripture’, in order to arrive at “a common word between us and you...” in matters of fundamental theological values (*Aal ‘Imran* 3:64). This dialogical call and its justification are interlinked to the view as proffered in the letter that the two commandments of love expressed by Jesus in his citation of Torah – love of (or for) God; love of (or for) neighbour – are also embedded within Islamic scriptural text and theological sensibility. Hence the summary concludes: “in obedience to the Holy Qur’an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is essential to our faith and practice”. Love – of God and neighbour – is the basis for dialogue and the foundation of peaceful coexistence. The substantive letter then spells this out.

The title of the substantive part of the letter is preceded by the invocation of the *bismillah* – In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. This standard preface of Muslim piety is no sop to tradition: in all things the name

of God is to be remembered and recalled; all endeavours are couched within the frame of acknowledgement of our ultimate dependency on the mercy and compassion of God. Following the title, the full text of Sura *Al-Nahl*, 16:125 – the call to Muslims to engage in dialogue with their co-religionists – is cited. Then come the three sections, commencing with “Love of God”, explored first in respect to Islam (over four pages) then in respect to the Christian Bible (just two pages). The Muslim exposition commences with reference to the ‘Shahadahs’ that comprise the *sine qua non* of Islam: “There is no god but God” and “Muhammad is the messenger of God”. Their affirmation establishes essential Islamic identity; their denial signals exclusion from Islamic identity and membership of the Muslim community. The first of these is extolled by Muhammad as “the best remembrance” – that is, it is the key to the essential message, or expression of *deen* (ideational essence) of theistic religion as such. To the locution “no god but God” there is added a set of theological values and perspectives, each found in various locations within the Holy Qur’an, but brought together by Muhammad in summary fashion, as recorded in Hadith: that God is alone; without any “associate”, to whom belongs sovereignty and praise, and who possesses “power over all things” (p.4, and note ⁱⁱⁱ on p.17). This summarising Hadith is expounded in the letter. It is a critical point of hermeneutical reference – it occupies the single largest subsection within the letter, over three pages – at once seeking to establish the basis of common ground and so the call for a ‘common word’ of dialogical engagement, yet at the same time presenting a clear theological challenge: are these ‘values’ equally or differently understood across the two religions? I shall return to these below. The point of them, in terms of the message of the letter, is to assert the totality of Muslim devotion and attachment to God, which is also given as the key example that the Prophet Muhammad left for Muslims to follow whereby, in so doing, the Muslim may be assured of God’s love. Thus, for Muslims, the “call to be totally devoted and attached to God ... is in fact an injunction requiring all-embracing, constant love of God” (p.7). The concluding sub-section to the exposition of the Shahadah that “There is no god but God” is to assert that this “best remembrance” is explicated in and through the Hadith that says, in full, “There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His the praise and He hath power over all things” and which is understood to inculcate, through its ritualized repetition and by the grace of God, the devotional response of “loving and being devoted to God with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, all one’s mind, all one’s will or strength, and all one’s sentiment” (p.8). It is thus a prompt for the realization of love in and through all that a Muslim is about.

The lengthy explication of Love of God (i.e. of the human for God, as opposed to God’s love of us) within the Islamic framework of theological reflection and praxis is followed by a shorter, but quite apt, presentation of this Love

of God in respect to the Bible, specifically referring to the “first and greatest commandment”, namely the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Acknowledging its source within Jewish text and liturgy, its Christian usage is validated with reference to a citation from the Gospels (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31) in which Jesus recites the *Shema* in answer to the question: “What is the greatest commandment in the law?” And to this first Jesus adds the quintessential second – also drawn from Torah – “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. Thus Torah, endorsed by the Gospel of Christ, reinforces the love of God fully – “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” – as the first and greatest commandment. This is a universal injunction, re-echoed within Islam; it is the bedrock of common ground and the call to a common word between Muslim and Christian. Further textual references from the Bible are given to reinforce the point. The conclusion drawn is that the expression of Muhammad as given in Hadith – and itself a précis of Quranic perspective – namely, the expansion of the “best remembrance” (the essence, or *deen*, of religion as such and as testified by all preceding Prophets, including Jesus) that there is but one God, is understood to mean that the singularity (‘alone’; ‘no associate’), the inclusive scope (‘sovereignty’), the worshipfulness (‘His the praise’) and the omnipotence (‘power over all’) of the divine Being, is materially identical – or at least showing “effective similarity in meaning” – to the biblical first commandment. Parallelism of formulas is taken to infer equality of meaning, namely the “primacy of total love and devotion to God” (p.10). This is a provocative suggestion which could open up some interesting and potentially fruitful dialogical engagement.

The second substantive section of the letter addresses in a brief one-and-a-half pages “Love of Neighbour”. Once again the first sub-section looks at love of neighbour as a motif within Islam, and then within the Bible. In Islam ‘love’ is closely associated with mercy; mercy is a quality, or expression, of love. The letter simply notes the association and asserts “love of neighbour” as an essential corollary to love of God: “without love of the neighbour there is no true faith in God and no righteousness” (p.11). Two sayings of Muhammad, as recorded in Hadith, together with two citations from the Holy Qur’an (*Al-Baqarah* 2:177 and *Aal Imran* 3:92) both underscore the point and, significantly, highlight the link of this love to righteous behaviours of “generosity and self-sacrifice”. The second great dominical commandment, as already cited in Matthew 22:38-40, is reiterated together with the noting of its pedigree in Torah (Leviticus 19:17-18) and the assertion that the biblical injunction to love the neighbour likewise demands the righteous actions of generosity and self-sacrifice. The motif that the two great love commandments – love of God and of neighbour – are pivotal to the Abrahamic religious tradition (“the Law and the Prophets”) is re-emphasized.

The third and final substantive section, spanning four pages, expounds the

dialogical call: “Come to a Common Word between Us and You”. There are three sub-sections headed “A Common Word”, “Come to a Common Word!” and “Between Us and You”. Noting that there are real and formal differences between the religions of Islam and Christianity, the letter nonetheless asserts that the basis of dialogical engagement between them is the commonality of the “Two Greatest Commandments” that interlink Qur’an, Torah and the New Testament. Further, the letter asserts that these commandments, in terms of their being found in both Torah and Christian scripture, in each case “arise out of” the oneness or singularity – the letter says “Unity” – of God. Hence the letter boldly states: “Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded”. The message brought by the Prophet Muhammad is affirmed as adding nothing new to that which had been previously conveyed – and that observation is itself attested within the Qur’an (Suras *Fussilat* 41:43 and *Al-Ahqaf* 46:9). Hence the ‘common word’ – that which underlies true religion as such and is the basis for dialogue – is none other than the eternal truths or theological values: the reality of the one God; the response of love and devotion to God (love of and fidelity to the One God and so the spurning of ‘false gods’); the necessary corollary of justice in respect to our fellow human beings (love of the neighbour). Love is no mere sentiment; it is a call to right living and action.

Having established the substantive content of the ‘common word’, the letter goes on to expound on the motif of invitation: “Come to a Common Word”. The principle Muslim reference is to Sura *Aal ‘Imran* 3:64 that exhorts Muslims to invite Christians and Jews, as fellow ‘peoples of the Book’ to the worship of the One God, the preservation of the Unity of God (“ascribe no partner unto Him”) and the maintenance of theological fidelity (“none of us shall take others for lords”). Along with the assertion of the oneness of God, this call is regarded as having embedded in it the essence of the “First and Greatest Commandment” – the total unsullied love of God. And with reference to the authoritative Quranic commentary by Al-Tabiri the letter affirms that “Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them” (p.14); that is to say, in matters of religious identity and practice there is to be openness and freedom. This is endorsed by citing Sura *Al-Baqarah* 2:256 of the Holy Qur’an: “Let there be no compulsion in religion” together with the viewpoint offered that this openness and freedom in matters of religion is consonant with the second dominical commandment, the love of neighbour – and that implies the exercise of justice and the freedom of religion. The argument is clear and compelling. In inviting Christians to be mindful of the dual dominical commandment – love God; love neighbour – the Muslim signatories to the letter proclaim their positive outreach to Christians: “we are not against them ... Islam is not against them” (ibid). Difference of theological outlook and the fact

of religious plurality are acknowledged in the context of asserting the value of mutual respect and forbearance. And the rhetorical question is thus posed: “Is Christianity necessarily against Muslims?” (p.15). In the context of recognizing differences in exegetical and theological interpretation – especially in respect to understanding the person of Jesus Christ – Christians are nevertheless firmly invited “to consider Muslims *not against* and thus *with them...*” (p15; italics in original). This sub-section ends with a further invitation to Christians to join with Muslims in dialogical engagement on the basis of “the common essentials of our two religions” as found in the Holy Qur’an (*Aal ‘Imran*, 3:64), namely the worship of the One God; that God is alone God, and God alone (“*ascribe no partner unto Him*”); and the loyalty and fidelity to the One God (“*none of us shall take others for lords beside God*”) as earlier explicated. Citing in full *Al-Baqarah*, 2:136-137 with its intimation of theological plurality between the Abrahamic faiths, and with reference to Matthew 22:40, the letter boldly states: “Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us, for our common ground is that on which hangs *all the Law and the Prophets*” (p.15).

The third and final sub-section – “Between Us and You” – returns to the motivating theme of the epistle: dialogue is not to be limited to a polite exchange of the elite. Rather, noting that the two faiths between them comprise some 55% of the global population, a stark truth is enunciated: if the people of these two faiths are not at peace with each other, “the world cannot be at peace” (p.15). The intertwining of Christians and Muslims in terms of global social realities and international relations means the arena of Christian–Muslim dialogue is not simply a matter of interreligious nicety: “our common future is at stake” (p.16). The eschatological motif is indeed deepened. As well as pressing practical realities and issues of inter-communal, even global, peace; the suggestion – reinforced by Quranic and biblical reference – is that the future and integrity of both Christians and Muslims is at stake, lest “we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony” (ibid). The letter concludes on a hortatory note – let differences not be the cause of strife; let the pursuit of “righteousness and good works” be the only just basis of rivalry and comparison; let mutual respect, fairness, justice and kindness rule in the quest for peace, harmony and reciprocal goodwill. And this is summed and capped by the quoting of *Sura Al-Ma’idah*, 5:48 – religious plurality is a consequence of God the Creator who could have chosen to make everyone the same, but did not; yet all difference and variety is, in the end, resolved by virtue that God is both our common beginning and our encompassing ending. The letter itself is not particularly long; it is not some massive tome. It is an invitation; a foretaste; an announcement of being open for the business of dialogue. As such it is an event that has occasioned much interest and reaction – the overwhelming majority of which is fully positive. And so a trajectory of the phenomenon of

reception of this text is now emerging in its own right.

3. Some Key Responses

The official website of A Common Word is an interactive repository of response documents and related material.³ As at the beginning of November, 2008, some 60 formal Christian responses from leaders, organisations, and individuals may be accessed on the site together with some Jewish responses and nearly 500 recorded news items; a dozen audio-visual items and some 180 personal comments recorded. Further, around 20 ‘new fruits’ of interfaith developments are listed as having been initiated as a direct result of the letter. This is an impressive amount of activity to have taken place in a little over a year since the letter was released. Furthermore, the original 138 signatories to the letter have now more than doubled and this is likely to increase.⁴ Clearly the letter and its reception has become already a land-mark event in terms of Christian–Muslim relations. It is also a signal event in terms of the interaction of Islam with the wider world more generally. In order to review and comment upon the Christian responses, I have grouped them into four categories: the Vatican and other Catholic responses (the letter arose out of the earlier reaction to the now infamous ‘Regensburg’ address given by Benedict XVI, and he is the figure to whom it is initially and primarily addressed); Orthodox Church responses; Other Christian Churches, institutions and councils, including the formal response by the Archbishop of Canterbury; sundry responses from various organisations, groups and individuals.

3.1 Catholic Responses

A number of responses are listed from Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. They include his immediate reaction of welcoming the letter as a “very encouraging sign” and “an eloquent example of dialogue among spiritualities” among other comments and press releases.⁵ *Inter alia*, he is on record as portraying something of a cautious attitude in respect to noting very real hermeneutical difficulties and the limits to dialogue that exist. But I suggest this is a mark of interfaith realism; dialogical engagement is a process not a panacea, and the Vatican has clearly welcomed this new Muslim initiative for the process. Indeed, the gratitude of Pope Benedict for the letter was formally given by the Secretary of State, Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, on November 19, 2007 in which the Pope’s appreciation for the “positive spirit which inspired the text” is conveyed.⁶ Belief in the one God – though differing understood – is at the core of the quest

³ See <http://www.acommonword.com/>

⁴ To 277 as at November 4, 2008; 280 as at November 6 – and climbing!

⁵ See, for example, <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=6>

⁶ See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/letter-from-the-vatican.pdf>

for the common ‘word’ between Christians and Muslims. The principle that “without ignoring or downplaying our differences as Christians and Muslims, we can and therefore should look to what unites us” was clearly expressed. Pope Benedict’s remarks to Muslim representatives, given at Cologne on August 20, 2005, were also included: “I am profoundly convinced that we ... must affirm the values of mutual respect, solidarity and peace. The life of every human being is sacred, both for Christians and for Muslims. There is plenty of scope for us to act together in the service of fundamental moral values”. By March 2008 an agreement had been reached to establish “The Catholic-Muslim Forum” with the first seminar to be held in Rome in November 2008 with some 24 religious leaders and scholars from each side participating.⁷ The overall seminar theme is “Love of God, Love of Neighbour” with the sub-themes ‘Theological and Spiritual Foundations’ and ‘Human Dignity and Mutual Respect’ being specifically addressed. This is a significant new development for which we await its fruit with interest.

The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), a leading Catholic institution in respect to relations with Islam and Muslims, has recorded its appreciation of the Muslim leaders’ letter.⁸ This response states that the “long an diligent association with the cultural and religious patrimony of Islam, as well as our regular contacts with members of the Muslim community enables us to take note of the originality of this gesture and entitles us to draw attention of non-Muslims to its qualities”. Among a number of salient positive observations made in respect to the text of the letter, the PISAI response comments in particular on “the special treatment (given) to the supreme point of reference that undergirds ‘the other’ as Jew or Christian, namely, the dual commandment of love of God and neighbour ... The willingness to acknowledge another person in the deepest desire of what he or she wants to be seems to us one of the key points of this document”.

A number of leading Catholic scholars have also made individual responses, among them Professor Daniel Madigan SJ from Georgetown University, a member of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. He sets the Muslim letter, and its Catholic response, in the context of Vatican II and its pivotal document, *Nostra Aetate*, which marks the commencement of the search for ‘a common word’. Madigan notes the letter “forms part of a larger project, focussed in Jordan, to develop an authoritative consensus on what it means to be Muslim in our time” and that the intent of the letter is to promote a peace building process.⁹ Furthermore, the Muslim letter clearly regards “the reactionary and intransigent ideologies that drive terrorism and puritanical repression are not drawing on the whole of the Islamic tradition,

⁷ Press Release of the Vatican, March 5th, 2008.

⁸ See: <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=27>

⁹ See: <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=51>

but rather a truncated and impoverished reading of it". An internal Islamic critique that is here signalled bodes well for a dialogical process that seeks to address issues of peace and social harmony. Madigan also makes the point that although a rationale for the letter and its invitation is peace between the two great religions of Islam and Christianity – qua avoidance of hostility – in fact each religion “has had its own internal conflicts that have claimed and continue to claim many more lives” than has occurred with respect to any hostility between them.

3.2 Orthodox Responses

A number of responses to the Muslim letter have been forthcoming from various senior figures within the family of Orthodox Churches. They include, for example, letters from the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, from the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, and a statement of endorsement supported by a number of Arab Orthodox Christian leaders – Coptic, Maronite, Melkite, Armenian and Syriac.¹⁰ There is a moving acknowledgement of the very long-standing relation between Armenian Christians and Muslims – positive with respect to Arab Muslims; negative with respect to Turkish Muslims of the Ottoman Empire – given in a letter on behalf of His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. This response also asserts:

We therefore deem it imperative to begin a true dialogue among the monotheistic religions, the aim of which should be the strengthening of eternal and common human values, the reinforcement of relationships between different faiths, and the protection of all that God has created. We also remain hopeful that this would contribute to better understanding each other, including strengthening mutual respect for one another’s spiritual, national and cultural traditions and heritage.¹¹

His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia in the Armenian Orthodox Church, and a former Moderator of the World Council of Churches, gives voice to a widely-felt positive response to the Muslim letter. He affirms the prospect of Christians and Muslims dialogically engaged for the greater good and so stresses the theme of common humanity and community: “We belong to one humanity and one world under one sovereign God”.¹²

¹⁰ This statement – the Final Communiqué of the Third International Conference, “Coexistence and Peace Making” held in Jordan in January, 2008 (<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=newcontent&item=1>), also bears the signatures of Roman, Syriac, Coptic and Melkite Catholic Patriarchs.

¹¹ See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=57> accessed November 4, 2008.

¹² See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Aram-I-Armenian-Orthodox-Catholicos.pdf>

3.3 Other Christian Church Responses

There is a raft of responses now recorded from leaders, councils, and institutions, both denominational and ecumenical. Among the more substantial is a carefully considered response by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams. After an initial positive message of response in a Press Release¹³ in which he “welcomed the letter as a clear reaffirmation of the potential for further development of existing dialogue and common action between Christians and Muslims and other faith communities”, Williams undertook a wide-ranging ecumenical consultation before composing his formal reply. The Archbishop’s document – entitled ‘A Common Word for the Common Good’ – is addressed to “the Muslim Religious Leaders and Scholars who have signed *A Common Word Between Us and You* and to Muslim brothers and sisters everywhere”.¹⁴ This Anglican response has been endorsed by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.¹⁵ Williams’ missive notes the Muslim letter’s spirit of “a helpful generosity of intention” (p.1) and interprets the Muslim invitation to Christians as not seeking a facile quick accord but the more modest quest to “find a way of recognising that on some matters we are speaking enough of a common language for us to be able to pursue both exploratory dialogue and peaceful co-operation with integrity and without compromising fundamental beliefs” (p.2). Indeed, the Muslim invitation is “a powerful call to dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims” for which the “very wide geographical (43 countries) and theological diversity represented among the signatories ... provides a unique impetus to deepen and extend the encounters” (p.15). Williams identifies five areas for further exploration: i) understanding “the love of God”; ii) practical implications of “love of neighbour”; iii) the nature, interpretation and use made of respective scriptural texts; iv) relating from the basis of humble piety – “from the heart of our lives of faith before God” (p.3); v) the common awareness that, despite real differences, there is a shared “responsibility before God that we shall seek to hold before us as a vision worthy of our best efforts” (ibid).

The two substantive sections of Williams’ document echo the structure of the Muslim letter. The first – ‘The One God Who Is Love’ – incorporates a Christian apologia of Trinitarian theology as being “all the more important for the sake of open and careful dialogue (in that we try to clarify what we do and do not mean by it” (p.5). Here Williams asserts that for Christianity love, as demonstrated and realised through the Christ event, is the essence of the Divine reality. Thus it is of the essence of faith that there is a response to

¹³ Press Release from Lambeth Palace, Thursday 11th October, 2007. (<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=11> accessed November 6, 2008).

¹⁴ See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/Common-Good-Canterbury-FINAL-assent-14-7-08-1.pdf>

¹⁵ See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/documents/World-Alliance-of-Reformed-Churches.pdf>

the gift of divine love which involves love of neighbour. On this latter point Williams anticipates a focal theme of further in-depth dialogical discussion: “We support the clear affirmation in your letter, through texts from the Qur’an and the Bible, of the importance of love for the neighbour. Indeed, your letter can be considered an encouraging example of this love” (p.10). Gospel examples that challenge any narrow definition of ‘neighbour’ are touched on, giving evidence that the love of neighbour is, indeed, premised on the love of God: “Where love replaces enmity we can recognise the work and way of God” (p.11). This leads into the second main section in which Williams touches on aspects of ‘Seeking the Common Good in the Way of God’. He commences with a discussion around, and extending, the Muslim letter’s references to “peacemaking, religious freedom and the avoidance of violence” (p.12).

Religious violence suggests an underlying religious insecurity. When different communities have the same sort of conviction of the absolute truth of their perspective, there is certainly an intellectual and spiritual challenge to be met; but the logic of this belief ought to make it plain that there can be no justification for the sort of violent contest in which any means, however inhuman, can be justified by appeal to the need to “protect God’s interests” (ibid).

Williams observes that

the more we as people of genuine faith are serious about the truth of our convictions, the more likely we will be to turn away from violence in the name of faith; to trust that God, the truly real, will remain true, divine and unchanging, whatever the failures and successes of human society and history. And we will be aware that to try and compel religious allegiance through violence is really a way of seeking to replace divine power with human; hence the Qur’anic insistence that there can be no compulsion in matters of religious faith (*al-Baqarah*, 2:256)... What we need as a vision for our dialogue is to break the current cycles of violence, to show the world that faith and faith alone can truly ground a commitment to peace which definitively abandons the tempting but lethal cycle of retaliation in which we simply imitate each other’s violence (p.13).

With reference to the four-fold typology of interfaith dialogues – life, action, theological exchange, religious experience – Williams enunciates three imperatives for dialogical engagement between Christians and Muslims: to strengthen practical programmes; intensify intellectual endeavours by way of research and colloquia; to foster deeper mutual appreciation to the life of faith of each other. He goes on to identify three possible outcomes: 1) maintaining and strengthening momentum for engagement; 2) the creation of safe dialogical discursive space to enable the problematic deep divergences to be explored; 3) that such engagements need to have a wide impact of relevance – they are not just the edification of participants. “Seeking the common good is a purpose

around which Christians and Muslims can unite”; at the same time this quest is likely to lead “into all kinds of complex territory as we seek to find ways of acting effectively in the world” (p.17). The applied focus with which Williams draws his paper to an end affirms mutual education, the continued engagement in living practical issues, and the commitment to a long-haul process as being of the essence of the practical response to the Muslim letter: thus “to your invitation to enter more deeply into dialogue and collaboration as a part of our faithful response to the revelation of God’s purposes for humankind, we say: Yes! Amen” (ibid). Already a follow-through in terms of the intentions signalled by William’s response can be seen in the communiqué to emerge from a conference on ‘A Common Word’ held in October 2008 at Cambridge University, England, and of which he was a host.¹⁶ This conference which in itself represented one of the most significant gatherings of international Muslim leaders ever to take place in the UK, attempted to engage the Muslim invitation to dialogue at depth and in humility. And across the Atlantic, at Yale University, another conference took place in July 2008. Participants at this conference agreed that

1. Muslims and Christians affirm the unity and absoluteness of God. We recognize that God’s merciful love is infinite, eternal and embraces all things. This love is central to both our religions and is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheistic heritage.
2. We recognize that all human beings have the right to the preservation of life, religion, property, intellect, and dignity. No Muslim or Christian should deny the other these rights, nor should they tolerate the denigration or desecration of one another’s sacred symbols, founding figures, or places of worship.
3. We are committed to these principles and to furthering them through continuous dialogue. We thank God for bringing us together in this historic endeavor and ask that He purify our intentions and grant us success through His all-encompassing Mercy and Love.
4. We Christian and Muslim participants meeting together at Yale for the historic *A Common Word* conference denounce and deplore threats made against those who engage in interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is not a departure from faith; it is a legitimate means of expression and an essential tool in the quest for the common good.¹⁷

The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA provides an ecumenical response that welcomes the intent of the Muslim letter “to engage seriously with Christians in dialogue ... grounded in the authentic religious

¹⁶ See: <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/16-conferences/16-communiqué-from-a-common-word-conference.html>

¹⁷ See: <http://acommonword.com/lib/documents/Yale%20draft%20statement.8.pdf>

convictions of our respective communities”.¹⁸ This response highlights themes of hospitality and peacemaking as expressions of neighbourly love. The experience of Christian ecumenical dialogue opens out to interfaith dialogue and the quest for building upon common theological ground: “we can walk forward together with mutual appreciation in acceptance of the commandment to love God with our whole being, and in belief that love for God leads to and is demonstrated in love for one another”. A stress is placed upon the Christian doctrine of Trinity as expressive of both the inherent relationality of God and also the relational interaction between humanity and God; among the human family; and within the whole of creation: “Because communion with God and God’s people and God’s creation is ultimately the content of salvation, as human beings sojourn in this life we are driven by an inner impulse to reach out in community to one another”. Practical expressions of Christian-Muslim engagement and mutual education are noted and encouraged. Most significant and challenging is the recognition that the Muslim letter affirms that Muslims are not necessarily against Christians; indeed, Christians may consider Muslims as “*with us*, and that this togetherness bears upon the state of the world... we similarly affirm that Christianity is not against Islam”.

By contrast, the World Evangelical Alliance, in response to the Muslim ‘call’ interpreted as implying that Christians ought “to become Muslims by worshipping God without ascribing to him a partner”, reciprocate by inviting Muslims to put their “faith in God, who forgives our opposition to him and sin through what his son Jesus Christ did for us...” because “we are as convinced of the truth of our faith as you are” (p.2).¹⁹ This response goes on to assert that the deep theological divergence over God (Trinity) means “we cannot accept your invitation” but at the same time the World Evangelical Alliance urges Muslims “to consider joining us in ... discussions” aimed at resolving theological misunderstandings. By contrast, organisations such as the Danish National Council of Churches, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) – Britain Yearly Meeting, the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue organisation and the Mennonite Church, USA, are among those Christian responses which are decidedly positive about the letter and open towards Muslims in terms of outcomes. The highly influential publication, *The Christian Century*, proclaimed in a lead article on November 13, 2007: “The most impressive thing about (the Muslim letter) is that it exists. The second most impressive thing is the economy of its argument. The scholars resist the innate desire to touch on everything pertinent to Christian-Muslim dialogue and instead invite Christians

¹⁸ See: <http://acommonword.com/en/christian-responses/11-an-ecumenical-response-to-a-common-word-between-us-and-you.html>

¹⁹ Accessible at: http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/We_Too_Want_to_Live_in_Love_Peace_Freedom_and_Justice.pdf

to remember Jesus' words about loving God and neighbour".²⁰ And in a letter of March 2008 the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Samuel Kobia, expressed his positive response to the Muslim letter on behalf of the WCC. Kobia stated that he read the letter "as a representative expression of the Muslim will to engage with the Christian community in dialogue for the sake of justice and world peace" and he indicates he has "asked our Inter-religious Dialogue and Cooperation programme staff to make a response to your initiative a top priority".

3.4 Sundry Responses

Finally, in this review of responses to the Muslim letter, notice needs to be taken of a range of sundry organisations, groups and individuals. Peter Ochs, Co-founder of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, and Sir Sigmund Sternberg on behalf of the Three Faiths Forum, represent two Jewish voices in the chorus of overwhelmingly positive responses and reflections.²¹ Support and endorsement was also forthcoming from the joint Evangelical Christian-Muslim Dialogue conference held in Tripoli, January 2008. In February 2008 the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations made their reply and, in March, The World Community for Christian Meditation gave theirs. There are many others available on the official website of A Common Word. Perhaps one of the more intriguing is the paid advertisement placed in the New York Times (Nov 18, 2007) in which some 300 Christian scholars and leaders published their agreed text in full.²² The text concludes:

Given the deep fissures in the relations between Christians and Muslims today, the task before us is daunting. And the stakes are great. The future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace. If we fail to make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony you correctly remind us that "our eternal souls" are at stake as well.

We are persuaded that our next step should be for our leaders at every level 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. It is with humility and hope that we receive your generous letter, and we commit ourselves to labor together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.

John Esposito, the renowned American scholar of Islam, in his letter of endorsement states of the Muslim document that it "is a crystal-clear message of peace and tolerance". David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the

²⁰ See: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3808>

²¹ See: <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=jewish-responses&item=8> and <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=jewish-responses&item=34>

²² See: <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf>

University of Cambridge, England, who has the honour of being the first be listed on the Christian Responses section of the official web-site, affirms the supreme importance of the Muslim initiative. He states of the Muslim letter that its

significance is not that it offers anything novel but that it selects so wisely from the riches of both scriptures and opens them up in a way that is highly relevant to the present situation. I found myself deeply moved by its vision of what it calls ‘the all-embracing, constant and active love of God’ and ‘the necessity and paramount importance of love for – and mercy towards – the neighbour’, and by its concern not only for that half of the world’s population who are Muslim or Christian but also for every single other person and the whole of creation.²³

Among the many other individuals who have responded to the Muslim letter, I would note that of the widely-respected author, Karen Armstrong. She wrote in October 2007:

The initiative of the Common Word is sorely needed by the entire world. All too often, religion is associated with violence and intolerance, and the compassionate ethos, which lies at the heart of every major faith, gets pushed to the sidelines. The assertion of the principle of love, which is so central to both the Muslim and the Christian traditions, should be paradigmatic of the religious response to the fearful realities of our time. We must reclaim our traditions from the extremists. Unless the major faiths emphasize those teachings which insist upon the absolute holiness of the “other”, they will fail the test of the 21st century. The coming together of Muslims and Christians, who have such an unhappy history of hostility, is a beacon of hope and an example to the whole of humanity.²⁴

Finally, mention must be made of the joint response issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbis of Israel in the context of their second meeting, which took place in Israel on October 31, 2007.²⁵ In their comment they noted the Muslim letter signals “very positive developments which are a clear sign of determination to create structures that can advance principled cooperation and moral solidarity among the Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other religious communities” and they stated:

The ‘Common Word’, though addressed to Christian Churches, also makes clear its respect for Hebrew scripture in citing directly from

²³ See: <http://acommonword.com/lib/media/Regius-Professor-of-Divinity.pdf>

²⁴ See: <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=35>

²⁵ See: <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=37>

the Book of Deuteronomy and in acknowledging the inspiration that this provided for their understanding of the Quranic teachings on the unity and love of God and of neighbour. In promoting these values we commit ourselves and encourage all religious leaders to ensure that no materials are disseminated by our communities that work against this vision. We have agreed that in responding to the Common Word, it will be important to consider carefully together how the perspectives of Christians and Jews are properly held together.

4. Issues and Challenges

Having analyzed the content of the letter, and discussed some of the responses that have been made to it, what may be said further by way of a Christian comment? The first thing I notice, and that seems to me to signal cause for a hopeful future of dialogue between Christians and Muslims – and by implication and direct allusion made, a wider dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims – is the fact that (a) it does not start from the premise of Abrahamic commonality but rather (b) it highlights indisputable theological principles and values as the bedrock of interreligious connectedness and so the basis of dialogical engagement: love of God and love of neighbour. On this basis the call to “come to a common word between us” – which is not a call to surrender distinctive understanding and identity, nor an invitation to reductive unanimity – is certainly well-grounded and invites, by way of response, careful and respectful consideration and reply. *Inter alia*, it is inescapably the case that the preface and qualification of ‘Unity’, with which Islamic discourse imbues its theological articulation, requires some unpacking and consideration for, *prima facie*, it could be taken as a hegemonic hermeneutic embedded within the terms of an irresistible invitation. Teasing out a response to the stress upon the unity of God as representing a key reference point for the presumption of commonality needs to occur both as part of a Christian response to the letter, and as a signal to further work as part of the theological agenda that could be pursued within the context of any dialogical ‘coming to a common word’.

Of course, Christians affirm with Islam that there is but One God: *Say: He is God, the One!* (*Al-Ikhlās* 112:1) poses no theological problem in principle for Christians when taken at face value. There is only one God. And, yes, God is also a unity within God’s self: Divinity is neither divided nor divisible. Once again, in terms of primary metaphysical principle, we would concur. Indeed, this would be well attested by way of the doctrine of Divine Simplicity. Nevertheless, the Word of God which Muslims apprehend through the Qur’an, Christians have apprehended through Jesus the Christ: the revelation of God is manifestly communicated, received, interpreted and so believed, differing across our two faith communities. Upon the singularity and essential unity of God we

certainly agree; the unity of God necessarily precedes and proscribes any reflective and responsive development of understanding about the nature and being of God.²⁶ But the manifestly different ways in which the revelatory ‘word’, or ‘message’, of the One God has been responded to in terms of structures of belief, teaching and doctrine, requires to be acknowledged. For it is important that, in the context of any dialogical engagement, the quest to comprehend that ‘common word’ is not foreclosed by theological presumption from one side toward the other.

Christians and Muslims believe, worship, and submit to the One and the Same God, yet that One God is differently revealed and responded to. Thus in our response to God we find both the basis and initial agenda for meaningful theological dialogue. Theological differences must be addressed in dialogue alongside, and in mutual deepening of, the common understanding and affirmations we otherwise assert. Thus the singularity of God can issue in an affirmation of ontological integrity upon which Christians and Muslims may agree – God does not exist as a member of a divine community (polytheism) nor in some sort of federated association (there are no partners and associates as such; no subordinate ranks in partnership) – but it also may issue in an existential and theological integrity (the agentive expression of divine compassion, mercy and love that signals the relational initiative which properly lies with God reaching out to, and connecting with, the lived history of the peoples of God) that allows us to speak, conceive, and know God in manifold ways. And here the words of the Qur’an, as with the words of the Bible, need to be carefully weighed and interpreted such that the essential integrities are seen to be maintained and enhanced, not undermined and devalued.

The Muslim letter rightly draws attention to the exhortation of piety – that intentional devotion to God – that preserves loyalty and fidelity: we worship but One God, the Creator and Lord of All. There is no dispute here; there is rather a strong case for the grounding of further dialogue between us. And this urging of piety is reflected in eschatological and soteriological awareness (cf. p.5). We share awareness – perhaps even orientation – within the bounds of the ‘common word’ motif; yet there is also between us, and within our wider faith communities, nuanced difference of interpretation and conceptuality concerning these which need not be downplayed for the sake of discerning the deeper common word; rather, once again, there is signalled within the letter likely lines of dialogical agenda. Attention to piety is also reflected in and through references to the fear of God; ways in which the term ‘fear’ is interpreted and received could well prove a useful focus of fruitful dialogical engagement. Understood as responsive respectful awe, it signals one modality of submission; regarded as a cowering concern to avoid retributive justice, it

²⁶ Cf. Douglas Pratt, ‘Christian-Muslim Theological Encounter: the priority of *tawhid*.’ *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol 7, No 3, 1996, 271-284.

may well signal another mode of submission. The motif of the fear of God is perhaps less about God than about our response to, and relation with, God. Yet this flagging of likely difference does not diminish the import of the invitation embedded in the letter; it rather strengthens the prospect of a genuine and theologically fruitful encounter arising in consequence of accepting the invitation. In similar fashion, the depiction of the soul as the locus of “three main faculties” (p.6) is not so much an assertion of a necessary psychology as an illustration of the complex dynamic relationship that obtains between the Creator and the creature. Thus in the comprehension of the dynamic there may be room for nuanced understanding and application such that what appear at first hand to be substantive differences between us are resolved as mutually acceptable variability of particularities that yet coherently express and manifest an underlying divine commonality. The fear of God may be equally regarded as the premise for submission to God, and the basis of active loving of both God and neighbour. And both premises are arguably compatible with each of Christianity and Islam; but it would take careful dialogical engagement to put that to the test. This need not deter or detract from dialogue; rather it flags yet another strand of a prospective theological agenda for dialogue. Pietistic concerns expressed in terms of both the fear and the love of God may perhaps be regarded as intimations of faith that is intentionally focused. Dialogue challenges shallow nominalism on either side; another good reason for responding positively to this invitation.

5. Conclusion

There is much in this letter in terms of both its underlying intention and substantive content, which comes to us framed as a dialogue between textual sources, and which is cause of great encouragement. It also reflects the need for such dialogue; the call to come to a common word between us cannot be discharged by one side. It is only within the context of genuine theological dialogical encounter that the Quranic call can be truly honoured. And it is only as Christians and Muslims together search their respective scriptures and related traditions of interpretation and appropriation that the essential dynamic of deity – the Will of God – can be apprehended in and through the differing details of textual record and interpretative tradition. This letter is to be warmly welcomed and responded to, without prejudice; it provides, arguably, a door of opportunity opening into a new era of dialogical engagement with Islam.