

Western Christian Dhimmitude Versus Islamic Intransigence

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By Jacob Thomas

On Sunday, 16 November, 2008, an article appeared in the online edition of the Wall Street Journal with this headline: “**A Common What? Yale hosts a Christian-Muslim ‘reconciliation’ conference – behind closed doors.**” The author, Sarah Ruden, who is a visiting scholar at Yale Divinity School (YDS), expressed shock at the school's requirement that everybody on the campus behave properly during the Conference toward its Muslim guests by exhibiting deference to their sensitivities!

Before I comment on her article, some necessary background about the conference is needed.

Back on 13 September, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI made a reference to Islam in his address at Regensburg, Germany. A month later, 138 Muslim scholars addressed the Christian World in an open letter entitled, “*A Common Word Between Us and You.*” One Christian response to the “*Common Word*” overture came from scholars of the Yale Divinity School. They released a statement “*warmly embracing the open letter ‘A Common Word between Us and You.’*” It was entitled, “*Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You.*” Here is a sample of the flowery language used in that response:

.....’Let this common ground’—the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbour – ‘be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us,’ your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree.”

The authors of the Yale Divinity School Response asked others to sign on to its “Response” and gathered many signatures throughout the USA. Some responses were surprising because they came from conservative Protestant institutions that typically are not willing to cooperate with organizations like YDS which they deem to be theologically liberal. But other Christian leaders saw through the YDS Response, regarding it as a weak and evasive document that served only the Islamic cause and did not reflect even basic Christian points of doctrinal difference with Islam. The YDS Response was seen as submitting needlessly to the Muslim scholar’s terms of engagement. Even without expressly stating it, they brought to light the fact that those signing on to the Response acted just like *dhimmi*s, meekly and obediently agreeing to the terms for dialogue set forth by the Islamic scholars.

The July, 2008 “**Christian-Muslim ‘reconciliation’ conference.**” was the first formal meeting since the “*Common Word*” initiative was launched in October, 2006. The WSJ

article, offered a needed critique from one woman's dissident standpoint of a Conference that was definitely less than stellar. Once again, apparently, the fundamental issues that separate Christianity from Islam were not sufficiently on display.

What now follows is Sarah Ruden's thoughts on the Conference, about which I will reflect upon in due course:

"I'm a visiting scholar at Yale Divinity School, not a student, and as a Quaker I can't be ordained, so I delete most of the institutional email notices unread. But I eagerly read the announcement that came in July of this year about the first conference to follow from the document called **"A Common Word between Us and You."** That public expression by Muslim leaders of their solidarity with Christians had received a warm response from Western churches and universities, and now the conference was warmly entitled **"Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims."**

"I recalled my excitement about the many luminaries' denial that there was any need for Christians and Muslims to be at each other's throats; I had been proud of the role played by Yale religious scholars. I now wanted to attend the conference and help to assure the guests of Christian goodwill, but also ask some of the hard questions that Quakers in South Africa, my second home, had been asking for decades, especially since the failures of the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission.**

"But as I learned to my anger, neither I nor any other ordinary members of the Divinity School community could attend any panels of **"Loving God and Neighbor."** All of them were closed—extremely unusual for this institution. The purpose of Dean Harold Attridge's email was not invitation but warning: *"I am writing today to let you know how these events might impact life on the [Yale Divinity School] Quad" (his emphasis).*

He continued in normal font. *"Firstly, some of you have been asking about any adjustments regarding dress or behavior that might make both you and our guests feel more comfortable during their visit here. I have attached for your information a document prepared by the Reconciliation Program at YCFC [Yale Center for Faith and Culture] to guide all staff directly associated with the upcoming workshop and conference in regard to dress and behavior."*

"My anger grew as I read the attachment ...

"Because we seek to have a ministry of reconciliation, it is our aim to defer to our guests' [author's emphasis] sense of propriety whenever possible, by behaving and dressing in a manner that reflects the honor and dignity we wish to bestow upon our guests. In this specific context, Muslims and Christians are working together to organize this conference, but Christians are the primary hosts, meaning that during this conference we deferentially choose to define "decency," "honor" and "modesty" by what our Muslim guests consider "decent," "honorable" and "modest" (rather than by our own culture's definitions), giving new cultural expression to the dignity and respectability with which we normally conduct ourselves."

“[H]ere we were being asked to *‘defer’* in all *‘definitions’*—not just in our actions, that is, but in our thoughts. . . . We were to do this merely to allow meetings between some of our associates and people who would not, for fear of defilement, enter the same building we entered in our usual clothes and with our usual manners.

“But it isn't simply that I was ticked off (though I was) at being asked not to wear sandals or speak at any length to any male or even smile at one or shake one's hand, in order to accommodate a gathering I was excluded from, though it was held in my workplace. It's that the Western leaders of what may be the major push for Christian-Muslim reconciliation appear to be so single-mindedly zealous, so prone to create impressions in conflict with reality, and so oblivious of what this could lead to, that a mere waste of time and money might be the best outcome.

“It is natural to suspect (especially because of the much greater secrecy) that both sides of the **‘Common Word’** project have motivations—if only careerism—beyond the desire to see Christians and Muslims kill each other less often. And it somehow makes sense that ordinary people world-wide are not gushing in letters to the editor and in coffee houses, ‘Thank goodness that they're talking to each other! Now everything will be OK.’

“The cost of a phony love-fest between Christian and Muslim leaders could be high. There is already a great imbalance in knowledge or respect, if not both. As part of our confirmation course, when I was a teenage Methodist in rural Ohio in the 1970s, we were taken not only to a synagogue but to a mosque and learned the basics of both faiths. But the Muslim cleric who lectured to us clearly disapproved of Christianity, and the minister misled him to keep the peace. We don't want to be called Mohammedans, the Muslim huffed; we don't worship Mohammed, who was a man. The minister jumped in to assure him that we were just the same—we didn't call ourselves Jesus-ans or anything like that. I nearly gasped at the lie, but I wasn't bold enough to challenge it.

“I'm bolder now. And truth in theology while theology approaches politics is worth a bold defense. Essential to Muslim extremism is the notion that the West is decadent and not attached to its professed values. Not to speak up for Christianity with complete honesty sends our Muslim interlocutors home with a time-bomb version of us: either that we have no objection to being like them, or that we are in essence like them already. America has made the mistake of assuming our values are universal, and we may be encouraging the same kind of assumption about ourselves.”

Perhaps Ms. Rudin was not the best person to reflect on this conference because her arguments are not as effective as they could be. She exhibits some flippancy and over-personalizes the situation and appears to be a theological liberal. She was perturbed about the demand that all the westerners show decency, modesty and honor in their attire at the Conference based on Islamic terms. Not being allowed to wear “sandals” bothered her as well. It should be noted, however, that conservative Christians also believe in dressing with decency, modesty and honor. Of course, that would not mean being forced to wear a hijab in the presence of a Muslim, but there should be no undue concern about wanting to honor guests by dressing appropriately. For instance, I would hope Ms. Rudin would

agree that one wouldn't go into the presence of the Queen of England in shorts and sandals. What is worth noting about the issue though is that the YDS seems quite willing to overlook such virtues in the Christian theological tradition by making no similar code for its own scholars in their normal daily attire on the campus. Yet it is willing to impose such a code upon its scholars if they wish to attend the Conference because they must show deference to Muslims. So they are not really as interested in decency, modesty and honor as they are in being politically correct and deferential to Islam.

A more serious flaw, however, was the YDS demand that the American women at the Conference had to be careful how they interacted with male Muslims. Doesn't this attempt by the YDS to placate Muslim malehood indicate an almost amusing example of Dhimmitude in action? What the YDS would never for a moment dare to implement at its own school it has allowed Muslim scholars to achieve. To placate the Muslim men's Islamic faith the YDS allowed them to show their utter disrespect for Western women, particularly Americans, by making sure Muslims weren't offended by having to interact with free, Western women at the Conference by any supposed misstep any such women might make in interrelating with them. What an egregious view of women these Islamic scholars hold! Why were they allowed to practice their peculiar disrespect toward women while the hosts set aside their own codes of honor toward women that apply in all other instances on the Yale campus? The hosts truly make themselves look ridiculous, showing an almost criminal disregard for and disobedience of all the rules of decency, dignity and honor toward women which they so willingly comply with at all other times.

Of even more significant concern, however, is the attitude the Yale Divinity School displays when dialoguing with representatives of Islamic organizations. They almost totally gloss over the real obstacles standing in the way of genuine dialogue. There are numerous theological differences that are simply incapable of being softened or toned down to comport with Islamic demands. But the YDS is representative of a type of Christianity that does not necessarily hold to the historic Christian faith and is open to the idea that all religions are equally valid. Most Christians would not agree with the YDS interpretation of Christianity. Therefore they are not considered the best types of people to even be dialoguing with Muslims.

In the "Common Word initiative" Muslims were insistent on attempting to prove that there were subjects that are supposedly "common" to both faiths. This is a theory needing much elaboration and explanation before one can note "common" themes in both religions. Certainly, some simple things are similar but when explaining the overall beliefs of Christianity, most serious issues are definitely not "common". This Conference gave Muslims another opportunity to press their claims in this regard and perhaps even go further in attempting to ever more subtly put the YDS types of liberal Christians into more compromising positions. And the Christian hosts of the Conference showed their willingness to bow down to the demands of their Muslim guests in creating a campus milieu at Yale University that would abide by Islamic rules. This attitude is reminiscent of others throughout history that were subjected to and complied with the Qur'anic requirement that *dhimmis* must not only pay the Jizya tax, but should do so with utter humility and self-abnegation!

I wonder! Are these Western scholars, who regard themselves as representatives of Christianity, really aware of the authoritative texts of Islam that require submission of all non-Muslims to Allah's religion? And what about their knowledge of the history of the last 1400 years when the Islamic *Futuh* brought into the orbit of Daru'l Islam, large areas of the world from Indonesia to Morocco? And if the American hosts at YDS don't yet feel the pressure of the Muslim population in the USA, would a visit to Paris, Marseilles, Amsterdam, Brussels, London, and Berlin open their eyes as they observe how the growing Muslim populations are making ever more strident demands that, if heeded, would alter forever the democratic nature of those societies.

I write these words mindful of two recent Arabic articles, one from the *Alawan*, and the other from the *Elaph* sites, telling the unbelievable accounts of ethnic-religious cleansing that is going on in Mosul, Iraq against Christian communities. Christians are being driven from their homes and forced to flee for their lives by organized Islamist gangs.

In the rarified atmosphere of Yale Divinity School, such present-day tragedies are ignored because they don't fit the alternative reality the YDS are attempting to instill on those gullible enough to accept them. Christians are forever reminded of and must apologize for the Crusades but the long, bloody history of Islam's attempt at world domination is downplayed, if not totally ignored.

The scholars of YDS, while claiming that they are in the forefront of a movement that will bring reconciliation between Christians and Muslims, close their eyes to the fact that, throughout history, aggression has more often come from the Islamic side. Honesty must always surround discussions between opposing parties. Ignoring the lessons of history, and covering over the radical differences between Christianity and Islam, does not advance the cause of peace. Rather it increases the sufferings of Christians who live within Daru'l Islam.

Let us hope there will be more like Sarah Ruden willing to critique the inroads of political correctness on divinity school campuses and elsewhere in America. We need to be cognizant of any future conversations between those who launched the "**Common Word**" initiative and their gullible friends among the YDS faculty and elsewhere.