

Notes for Christians on Understanding *A Common Word Between Us and You*

By Mark Durie

January 2008

These notes have been prepared on *A Common Word between Us and You* to assist Christians to interpret this important letter from Muslims to Christians.

They are **not** offered as a response **to** Muslims, but as a resource **for** Christians.

The author may be contacted at mjdurie@gmail.com

SUMMARY OF THIS DOCUMENT

A Common Word Between Us and You is a letter addressed to Christians by 138 Muslim scholars. It invites Christians to agree on certain 'common ground' with Muslims as the foundation of interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding, for the sake of peace in the world. Key points addressed in these notes include:

- The letter presupposes that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.
- It has the appearance of being an exercise in *da'wa* or Islamic proselytism.
- The letter uses a 'bait and switch' tactic whereby Christians are invited to agree with Muslims on loving God and loving one's neighbour, but this is exchanged by the end of the letter for an invitation to agree on *tawhid*, the Islamic understanding of the unity of Allah. In effect, Christians are being asked to accept Islamic monotheism as the foundation for interfaith dialogue and peaceful relationships.
- However Islamic monotheism explicitly denies the incarnation, and is incompatible with other aspects of Christian belief.
- This letter appears to be an attempt to Islamicize Christian-Muslim dialogue. True dialogue can only proceed by respecting the integrity of the other's position.
- The letter misleadingly offers the Islamic Jesus (Isa) as evidence of Muslims' good will towards Christians.
- The letter overlooks calls in the Qur'an to fight Christians, and the reality of human rights abuses against Christians in so many Muslim countries.
- The discussion of 'love thy neighbour' is particularly weak. In Islam, calls to do good for one's neighbour are traditionally taken to refer to one's **Muslim** neighbour only.
- The letter makes no reference to God's love for humankind as a whole.
- Crucial verses are cited without acknowledging traditional anti-Christian interpretations. For example:
 - the 'common word' theme verse of the letter (Sura 3:64) is associated with a declaration of war against the Byzantines, and is part of an anti-Christian polemic in the Qur'an,
 - the Sura *Al-Fatihah* is presented as the 'greatest chapter' in the Qur'an, but this chapter denounces Christians as those who have been 'led astray',
 - verses which are cited as ones which speak well of Christians (Sura 3:113-115) are traditionally understood to refer converts to Islam,
 - the important Sura 112 – the Islamic *Shema* – is cited only in part, omitting the verses which denounce Trinitarian faith.
- The letter's warnings of conflict if the invitation is not accepted could be read as a threat. This is unfortunate. Christians should be wary of accepting the presuppositions behind these warnings.

A Common Word Between Us and You is an open letter signed by 138 Muslim leaders, and produced under the auspices of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought of Jordan. Dated 13 October 2007, it is addressed to the Pope, and other Christian leaders throughout the world. What should Christians make of it, and how should they respond?

A Common Word ostensibly seeks to build a bridge over which Muslims and Christians may approach each other. It is important for Christians to consider carefully what is the nature of this bridge, and what are the implications of walking out upon it.

On the one hand, the letter invites Christians to join together with Muslims to establish a sound basis for harmonious dialogue. According to the letter itself, the context it addresses is a potential impending disaster on a massive scale, a global conflict between Christians and Muslims: ‘the very survival of the world is perhaps at stake’. (p.16) To avert this threat, the letter proposes a way to avoid hatred and strife through reaching out and securing common theological ground, which Christians and Muslims should agree on, which could provide a basis for communication and cooperation.

On the other hand, the common ground which *A Common Word* invites Christians to agree on, includes **Islamic** doctrine, particularly *tawhid*, which is the Islamic understanding of the unity of Allah. The message of *tawhid* is one of the two core principles of Islam, the other being the prophethood of Muhammad.

1.Unpacking the Themes of the Common Word

1.1 Da‘wa: an invitation to Islam

This letter is, at its heart, an **invitation** or **call** to Christians to agree with Muslims on certain Islamic teachings.

The letter itself commences (p.4) with a citation from the Qur’an:

Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and contend with them in the fairest way. Lo! Thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is Best Aware of those who go aright (Sura 16:125).

Likewise, the introductory summary to the letter concludes with these words:

‘...in obedience to the Holy Qur’an, we as Muslims **invite** Christians to come together with us...’

Beginnings are very important in Islamic rhetoric, so the fact that the concept of **invitation** is highlighted at the start is a key to understanding the whole letter.

What is the significance of ‘invitation’ in Islam? The Arabic word *da‘wa*, which may be translated ‘invitation’, ‘call’ or ‘summons’, refers to the task of spreading Islam in the world.

Da‘wa is the technical term in Islam for proselytism.

Sura 16:125, which heads the letter, is a famous proof text for *da‘wa*, and as such it frames and determines the meaning of what follows. To commence the letter in this way is a clear

announcement that this is an exercise in *da'wa*. This formal opening to the letter declares that *A Common Word* is a **call** (a *da'wa*) for Christians to come to Allah's way, i.e. to Islam. The highly regarded Qur'anic commentary of Ibn Kathir (see tafsir.com) comments on this verse '... if any of them want to debate and argue, then let that be in the best manner, with kindness, gentleness and good speech', and to make the point clearer, Ibn Kathir also cites Sura 20:44 in explaining 16:125: 'And speak to him mildly, perhaps he may accept admonition and fear (Allah)'. - Thus the standard understanding of Sura 16:125, the framing verse for the whole letter, is that non-Muslims are to be called in a beautiful and welcoming way to come to Islam. *Da'wa* is a broad concept, and invitations to Islam may be issued in a variety of different ways. One way is through a call to peaceful dialogue, and the words of Sura 16:125 certainly do encourage Muslims to call others to Islam using skill, wisdom, and appealing arguments. At the same time, Islam has strong precedents for backing invitations with threats. Even Sura 16:125 itself was originally part of a letter to Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor, which was effectively a declaration of war. In that letter Muhammad announced to the Byzantines *aslim taslam* 'embrace Islam and you will be safe'.

1.2 Bait and switch: tawhid for love

The document is formally structured around the two themes of loving God and loving one's neighbour.

This approach has proved attractive to some Christians, because the gospel is centrally a declaration of God's love for mankind, demonstrated in the love of Christ. In response to this demonstration of God's love, the Bible invites people to express love for each other, which is the 'new commandment' of John 13:34:

'... God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world to that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another.' (1 John 4:8-11)

The gospel teaches love for all people, not just fellow Christians. Christ himself taught that just as God loves all, so his children should love all people including their enemies (Matthew 5:43-45; see also Romans 12:14-21).

The *Common Word* letter uses this theme of **love** as an attractive device to invite Christians to agree on a **common word** with Muslims. However the letter then does a switch, and clarifies that the common ground being offered is in fact the **unity of Allah**: that 'we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God' (Sura 3:64; pp.13-14 of *A Common Word*). This call to agree on the **Unity** of Allah – the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* — provides the central theological thrust of the letter. As Anglican Bishop Nazir Ali rightly states:

The letter is intensely and mainly concerned about a particular understanding of the unity of God. Christians ... are called to dialogue on the basis of such an understanding, having set aside their errors of 'ascribing partners with God'. -

This is a ‘bait and switch’ strategy. The bait offered is love of God and neighbour, but the switch is to Islamic monotheism.

Let us consider how the letter accomplishes this.

1.3 Love for God

The first major section is entitled ‘Love of God’. This section justifies the switch by saying that the loving God and accepting Islamic monotheism are really just the same thing.

This section has two subsections, one on Islam, and the other on Christianity. The letter defines love as devotion, and expounds the theme of devotion to God with reference to the Qur’an and hadiths (traditions of Muhammad’s life and teaching), as well as to the Bible. The argument is developed in the form of a discussion of a famous hadith on the unity of Allah (i.e. on *tawhid*):

The best that I have said – myself, and the prophets that came before me – is: ‘*There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*’. (p.4)

The explanation of this hadith takes up the whole of the major section on the ‘Love of God in Islam’. The argument, in essence, is that to love God means to be devoted to Him, and this means to adhere to the Islamic doctrine of the unity of Allah. In other words, loving God is equivalent to acknowledging his unity, as Islam understands it.

So this whole section, ostensibly on ‘loving God’, is in fact a presentation of the doctrine of *tawhid* as worked out in the life of the believer. Loving God is considered to be a consequence of embracing the doctrine of *tawhid*.

The subsection on loving God in Islam concludes:

In other words, the blessed remembrance, ‘*There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things*’ not only requires and implies that Muslims must be totally devoted to God and love Him with their whole hearts and their whole souls and all that is in them, but provides a way, like its beginning (the testimony of faith) – through its frequent repetition – for them to realise this love with everything that they are’ (p.8)

The conclusion to the whole section on ‘loving God’ is that this hadith, which is a statement of the doctrine of *tawhid*, has an ‘effective similarity in meaning’ (p.10) with the Bible’s call to love God with all one’s heart and soul (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 22:34-40). So, if Christians accept that they should love God, they must also agree with Muslims on the Islamic formulations of *tawhid*. The challenge is that these formulations are incompatible with Trinitarian faith.

1.4 Love One’s Neighbour

The second section of the letter is entitled ‘Love of the Neighbour’. The idea that one should love one’s neighbour is of enormous significance for Christian – Muslim relations. Despite the

importance of this theme, it receives much less attention. The explanation of the ‘Love of God’ takes up seven pages of the *Common Word*. In contrast, the ‘Love of the Neighbour’ takes up barely more than a page.

Again the writers look to the teaching of Muhammad, in the form of two similar hadiths:

‘None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.’ and
‘None⁴ of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself.’
(p.11)⁻

The meaning of these hadiths is explained briefly with reference to two Qur’anic verses (2:177 and 3:92), and reference is also made to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ from the Bible (Mark 12:31, Leviticus 19:17-18).

In essence what is offered to Christians here is that devoted faith in Allah demands generosity and self-sacrifice in one’s dealings with others.

1.5 The ‘Common Word’

The third section of the letter is entitled ‘Come to a Common Word between us and you’. This sums up the call to endorse common theological ground.

In this section the nature of the *da’wa* comes into clear focus, for it is the Unity of God which now occupies the centre of attention. The Two Commandments, it is argued, arise from the doctrine of the Unity of God:

What prefaces the Two Commandments in the Torah and the New Testament, and **what they arise out of**, is the Unity of God — that there is only one God. (p.13)

What *A Common Word* is saying is that if you believe in loving God and loving your neighbour, you must also accept *tawhid*. The letter then proposes:

Thus Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbour form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded. (p.13).

The ‘common ground’ then is not merely love for God and love for one’s neighbour, but *tawhid* itself, the central Islamic doctrine of the Unity of God. Moreover, as the letter has already explained that *tawhid* is the fundamental doctrine upon which the principles of love are based, the foundational *common word* which Christians are called to is in fact Islamic monotheism, with love for God and for one’s neighbours being corollaries of this core position.

1.6 Muslim-Christian relations

After issuing a concluding call to Christians to come to this ‘common ground’ there follow a series of observations about relations between Christians and Muslims:

Muslims need not be against Christians.

Because of this common ground, Islam and Muslims are not against Christians, as long as the Christians do not ‘wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes’ (citing Sura 60:8).

Christians should not be against Muslims.

The letter asks ‘Is Christianity necessarily against Muslims?’ ‘No’, because Muslims recognize Jesus as the Messiah (citing Sura 4:171). Therefore Christians should not consider Muslims to be against them, and thus, according to Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50 – ‘he who is not against us is on our side’ – Christians should regard Muslims as being on their side.

This section also includes a warning of potential catastrophe if Christians and Muslims do not come together to dialogue.

1.7 The Letter’s Conclusion

In its conclusion, the letter brings its readers right back to its central message, calling Christians to accept ‘the common essentials of our two religions’. The switch is complete. **References to loving God and one’s neighbour are dispensed with**, and the focus is entirely on the doctrine of *Tawhid*, which is proposed as the common ground for ‘all future interfaith dialogue’ between Muslims and Christians:

Finally, as Muslims, and in obedience to the Holy Qur’an, we ask Christians to come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions ... that we worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God ... (Aal ‘Imran, 3:64) **Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us...** (p.15)

Of course, for Christians, contemplation of the Bible’s teachings on loving God and loving one’s neighbour does not lead as a necessary conclusion to Islamic *tawhid*, and the truth of Sura 3:64, which is pure Islamic monotheism, cannot be presupposed as the sole starting point for Christian-Muslim discussion.

As a postscript to this, the letter adds a subsection ‘Between Us and You’ which is a plea for harmony between Muslims and Christians, for the sake of the whole world:

Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill. (p.16).

It is suggested that for these two faiths to agree on what they share together theologically would be the greatest contribution possible to world peace.

2. Critical issues

There are a number of critical issues which Christians should be aware of in evaluating and responding to this invitation, which appears to be gracious and affirming of the other, but only at the cost of stepping around some rather large ‘elephants in the room’. What is not said is at least important as what is said.

2.1 Which One God?

Both Christians and Muslims agree that there is only one God. The Muslims’ letter presupposes that this is the same one God, that Allah of the Qur’an is Yahweh of the Bible. This is a cornerstone of the ‘common word’ offered to Christians as the foundation for dialogue, and more generally it is a lynchpin of Islamic *da‘wa* to Christians. To accept the ‘common word’, as offered, means accepting that we do both worship the same God.

There are of course deep problems with accepting this presupposition. The One God Christians worship is the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and no Muslim would confess that this is their Allah. The question of the identity of God should therefore be allowed to remain for discussion.

2.2 Tawhid by the back door

As we have seen, the letter clearly puts forward *tawhid* as the common ground between Muslims and Christians, yet it offers this to Christians in the wrapping paper of loving God and loving one’s neighbour, which are central Christian values. The intention seems to be that this will make it easier for Christians to say ‘yes’ to *tawhid*.

This is an attempt to Islamicize the Christian-Muslim dialogue, whilst giving the impression that the dialogue is being Christianized. Such indirectness is not helpful, and could be confusing. True dialogue can only proceed by respecting the integrity of the others’ position, not by projecting one’s own dogma and offering it up as the ‘common ground’ which each side should agree on. Respectful mutual listening is impossible if the dialogue itself is Islamicized.

2.3 Islam as the foundation of Christianity and Judaism

To fully understand the Muslims’ position on the status of Christianity (and Judaism), it is necessary to be quite clear that, according to Islam, Muhammad brought no new message (Sura 46:9). The authors of *A Common Word* take pains to cite this verse, and point out that, according to this teaching, Muhammad’s message **must** be the same as the message of the Bible. So from the Islamic point of view, it is entirely legitimate to regard Muhammad’s message of monotheism as the foundational message of both Jesus Christ and Moses. To call Christians (and Jews) to accept Islamic monotheism is in fact to invite them back to their own religion, and to the faith of their own prophets.

This is the orthodox Islamic position on Christianity and Judaism, that they are derivatives of the Islam of Christ and Moses. The Qur'an presents it as the duty of Muslims to call Christians and Jews back to their original faith. Thus the 'common ground' shared by Islam and Christianity is Islam itself.

This belief system explains why the letter's strategy of inviting Christians to endorse the 'common ground' shared with Islam can be considered to be a *da'wa* strategy which is in effect an invitation for Christians to endorse Islam. The intended ultimate consequence of this endorsement is for Christians to acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet of God, and to embrace his religion.

2.4 The Islamic Jesus (Isa) is no basis for unity

The letter is dismissive of Christian beliefs about Christ, on the grounds that 'Christians themselves anyway have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ's nature' (p.15). The intended implication is that Christians should not regard disbelief in the incarnation and rejection of the sonship of Christ as a rejection of Christianity. It is suggested that, as Muslims believe Jesus was the Messiah, Christians should not regard them as being 'against' Christians. Yet the letter ignores the proactive eschatological role which the Islamic Jesus is supposed to play against the Christian church, destroying 'the cross' and bearing witness at the last judgement against Christians who believe in the crucifixion (Sura 4:155-159).

The Qur'an states clearly that the doctrine of the incarnation is disbelief and ultimate failure and a terrible doom awaits those who believe it:

Christians call Christ the son of Allah. That is a saying from their mouth; (in this) they but imitate what the unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth! (Sura 9:30)

They say: 'Allah hath begotten a son!' ... No warrant have ye for this! Say ye about Allah what ye know not? Say: 'Those who invent a lie against Allah will never prosper.' A little enjoyment in this world — and then, to Us will be their return, then shall We make them taste the severest penalty for their blasphemies. (Sura 10:69-70)

The Islamic Jesus is presented in the Qur'an as a preacher of Islamic monotheism who declares hell fire to be the destiny of all who 'associate' anything with Allah:

They are unbelievers who say: 'Allah is the Messiah, Mary's Son.' For the Messiah said: 'Children of Israel, serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Verily whoso associates with Allah anything, Allah shall prohibit him entrance to Paradise, and his refuge shall be the Fire; and wrongdoers shall have no helpers.' They are unbelievers who say: Allah is the third of three: for there is no god except One Allah. If they refrain not from what they say, there shall afflict those of them that disbelieve a painful chastisement. (Sura 5:72-73)

2.5 Jihad against Christians in the Qur'an

The letter deliberately overlooks the call in the Qur'an for Muslims to fight against Christians and Jews (as 'people of the Book') until they surrender and are humbled by Islamic rule:

Fight those who believe not in Allah and the Last Day and do not forbid what Allah and His Messenger have forbidden – such as practise not the religion of truth, being of those who have been given the Book – until they pay the tribute out of hand and have been humbled. (Q9:29)

This verse, which was never abrogated, but instead has been considered to have abrogated many other verses, has been used to justify untold misery down the ages, providing the Qur'anic basis for the system of dhimmitude, which determined second-class status for Christians and other non-Muslims after Islamic conquests. The worldview projected by this verse continues to be used to support human rights abuses against Christians living in Muslim societies. In the light of this verse and the history of its application, it gives a false impression to blithely invite Christians to consider Muslims as being 'not against' but 'with' Christians merely because Muslims respect the Islamic Christ.

2.5 The subtext: Qur'anic objections to Christianity

The overt strategy of this letter is to focus on what can be believed to be shared – the 'common ground' – between Islam and Christianity. In laying out this common ground, the Muslim authors of the letter make no direct, upfront acknowledgement that Islam has profound objections to Christian beliefs.

The problem at the heart of this strategy of indirectness, is that the Qur'an rejects Trinitarian doctrine, and specifically the incarnation, in no uncertain terms, as being *shirk* 'association', something entirely incompatible with *tawhid*. Christians are repeatedly charged in the Qur'an with ascribing partners to Allah, and the most dire punishments of hell are announced against them for this. Although *A Common Word* does not lay this charge explicitly against Christians, the whole letter is peppered with citations from the Qur'an which reject association in general terms.

This makes a response difficult. The letter invites Christians to make *tawhid* their common ground with Muslims. This is quite clear in the way the whole letter is built around the 'common word' verse (Sura 3:64), which includes the statement that 'we shall ascribe no partner' to God. However, in orthodox Muslim understanding, to affirm that God has no partner is to deny the Trinity. So on the one hand, the letter offers *tawhid* as the 'common ground' and foundation for 'all future interfaith dialogue between us', and even the key to world peace. On the other hand, from the Islamic perspective, affirming this common ground means renouncing Trinitarian faith. The Muslims who signed this letter are not fools. They are fully aware that the doctrine of the incarnation is incompatible with the 'common ground' they are offering to Christians as the basis for interfaith dialogue. That is why it is helpful to regard this letter, not merely as an invitation to dialogue, but as an invitation to Islam itself, as *da'wa*.

Any Christian response to this letter needs to be aware of this tension, and to avoid accepting without qualification the proffered ‘common ground’ of Islamic monotheism. It would be necessary to make clear that while Christians believe in the unity of God, they understand this unity in a different way from Islam’s *tawhid*.

2.6 Love thy neighbour?

A number of questions can be raised about *A Common Word*’s discussion of loving one’s neighbour (or brother):

Not in the Qur’an

The Islamic authorities offered for ‘loving one’s neighbour’ are weak. The main basis offered for this teaching is the hadiths, not the Qur’an. Apparently Muslim scholars can provide no clear call from the Qur’an to love one’s neighbour.

Not the same thing as love

The two Qur’anic verses which are offered in support of hadiths in fact take us in other directions. The first (Sura 2:177) promotes justice, and the second (Sura 3:92) instructs Muslims to spend their resources to support righteousness. These are attempts to ground the principle of loving others in the Qur’an, but in this they fall well short.

Who is my neighbour: the hadiths?

A traditional Islamic understanding of the hadiths cited by *A Common Word* restrict the ‘neighbour’ and ‘brother’ to Muslims. This is reflected, for example, in the collections of Bukhari and Muslim. In the standard English translation of Bukhari, the translator adds ‘(Muslim)’ to make clear that it is love for fellow Muslims which is meant:

The Prophet said, ‘None of you will have faith till he likes for his **(Muslim)** brother what he likes for himself.’⁵

Likewise in the English translation of Muslim’s hadith collection, the equivalent hadith is listed under a section headed: *Concerning the fact that it is one of the characteristics of Iman [faith] that one should like the same thing for one’s **brother-in-Islam** as one likes for one’s self.*⁶

To which the translator remarks in a footnote: ‘A true believer has a strong sense of fellow-feeling and inculcates love for his brother-in-Islam.’⁷

If in Islamic tradition one’s ‘brother’ or one’s ‘neighbour’ whose good is to be promoted is only one’s fellow Muslim, then this teaching falls far short of the message of Christ.

Who is my neighbour: Jesus' answer

It is striking that *A Common Word* includes citations from Matthew and Mark for 'loving one's neighbour', but not the crucial Luke reference (Luke 10:27-37), where Jesus provides the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain the saying. Jesus' point was that even though Jews and Samaritans were sworn enemies, the Samaritan was the true neighbour in the story. This crucial clarification, that my enemy is my neighbour (found also in the Sermon on the Mount, e.g. Luke 6:27-8), is of enormous importance for Christian-Muslim relations. The letter's silence on this point is telling, for it stops well short of advocating an inclusive understanding of 'neighbour'. Whereas Jesus makes clear that loving one's neighbour means loving one's enemies, the Muslim scholars behind *A Common Word* have been unable to offer a clear foundation in the example and teaching for Muhammad (or in the Qur'an) for loving people who are not even of one's own religion.

2.7 God's relational love?

Strikingly, the letter makes no reference to the love of God for humanity as a whole. There are only a few passing references to God's love for those who submit to him (pp.6-7).

Love **for** God is defined as being complete devotion – i.e. submission to God in all things – presented as a mandatory response to the Unity of God. This means that the Muslims' concept of love for God, as presented in this letter, requires no reference to God's love for humanity as a whole, nor to any idea of God being love. The 'love of God' is limited to the concept of devoted *islam* or 'submission' to Allah.

In stark contrast to the Islamic view, the Christian understanding of loving God is relational: love for God is first and foremost a response to God's love for us: 'we love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19) for 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16).

3. Verses and their contexts

It will be immediately obvious to informed readers that several of the Qur'anic passages cited in *A Common Word* have traditional interpretations which explicitly reject Christianity, and as such they would appear to undermine the message of the good will which *A Common Word* seeks to offer. The Muslim leaders who signed the letter should be well aware of this. Here are seven examples:

3.1 The Common Word verse

The theme verse for the whole letter, Sura 3:64 is most problematic. It is cited here in the translation of Yusuf Ali:

Say: 'O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah.' If then they turn back, say ye: 'Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will).'

There are three considerations which make this verse a poor starting point for dialogue with Christians.

Historical context: a word against Heraclius

First, the original context of this verse was a letter written by Muhammad as a declaration of war to the Byzantine Caesar, Heraclius. Bukhari's collection of hadiths, the most prestigious in Sunni Islam, gives the text of this letter in the *Book of Jihad*, hadith No. 2940:

In the name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful. (This letter is) from Muhammad, the slave of Allah, and His Messenger, to Heraclius, the Ruler of the Byzantines. Peace be upon him, who follows the (true) guidance. Now then, I invite you to Islam (i.e. surrender to Allah), embrace Islam and you will be safe [*aslim taslam*]; embrace Islam and Allah will bestow on you a double reward. But if you reject this invitation of Islam, you shall be responsible for misguiding the peasants (i.e. your nation). *O people of the Scriptures (Jews and Christians)! Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah, and that we associate no partners with him; and that none of us shall take lords besides Allah. Then if they turn away, say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.* (3.64)⁸

This hadith is included in the Book of Jihad because it illustrates Muhammad's principle that, before attacking non-Muslims, it was necessary first to invite them to embrace Islam. The message *aslim taslam* 'surrender (or 'embrace Islam') and you will be safe' is an essential component of a declaration of war in Islam.

This is reflected in hadith 2946 from Bukhari's *Book of Jihad*, in which Muhammad announces that:

'I have been ordered (by Allah) to fight against the people till they say *La ilaha illallah* [There is no god but Allah], and whoever said *La ilaha illallah*, he saved his life and property from me ...'⁹

Scriptural context: an anti-Christian polemic

When we consider its context in the Qur'an, we find that this verse comes in an extended set of passages (Sura 3:1-80) which Islamic tradition links to a visit of Christians from Najran to Medina. Ibn Kathir writes:

'... a delegation from the Christians of Janran (in Yemen) came to Al-Madinah to argue about Isa, claiming that he was divine and the son of Allah. Allah sent down the beginning of this Sura until here, to refute their claims...'¹⁰

In other words, the context in the Qur'an of Sura 3:64 is an extended polemic against the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Thus for example, verse 58 states 'It befits not Allah that he should beget a Son', and verse 61 invokes a curse on Christians for believing in the incarnation.

Coming after these verses, the ‘common word’ verse of Sura 3:63, can only be interpreted as a clear rejection of Christian Trinitarian theology.

Not only the preceding verses, but also the immediately following verses are polemical. They discuss the religion of Abraham, and assert that he was ‘neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim’ (3:67). This passage makes clear that only Islam, in contrast to Judaism and Christianity, can claim the title of ‘Abrahamic faith’, for ‘Verily, among mankind who have the best claim to Ibrahim [Abraham] are those who followed him, and this Prophet [Muhammad] and those who have believed [in Muhammad’s message]. (3:68).

The fact that Sura 3:67 forms part of an aggressive anti-Christian polemic within the Qur’an, and is associated with a declaration of war against the Byzantines, makes it unsuitable for use as a foundation for a loving, peaceful dialogue with Christians.

3.2 The ‘greatest chapter’ of the Qur’an

The letter names Al-Fatihah, as ‘the greatest chapter in the Holy Qur’an’. This, the first Sura in the Qur’an, is recited at least seventeen times daily by every faithful Muslim in their prayers. It includes the words ‘Guide us upon the straight path. The path of those on whom is Thy Grace, not those who deserve anger nor those who are astray’.

Who are the people who ‘deserve anger’ or have gone ‘astray’? The great Qur’anic exegete Ibn Kathir explains:

These two paths are the paths of the Christians and Jews, a fact that the believer should beware of so that he avoids them. ... the Jews abandoned practicing the religion, while the Christians lost the true knowledge. This is why ‘anger’ descended upon the Jews, while being described as ‘led astray’ is more appropriate of the Christians. ... The attribute that the Christians deserve most is that of being led astray, just as Allah said about them, ‘Who went astray before and who misled many, and strayed (themselves) from the right path’ (5:77).¹¹—

In support of this interpretation, Ibn Kathir cites a hadith in which Muhammad states: ‘Those who have earned the anger are the Jews and those who are led astray are the Christians.’¹²—

The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, which is the originator of *A Common Word* includes on its website (www.acommonword.com) links to many commentaries on the Qur’an, which can be consulted to confirm this interpretation of *Al-Fatihah*, and of the other Qur’anic verses discussed here. For example it includes the commentary of Ibn Abbas, who wrote:

It is also said that ‘the path of those whom Thou hast favoured’ refers to the prophets .¹³ not the religion of the Jews ... nor the religion of the Christians who erred from Islam.—

For anyone trained in Islam, the promotion of this Sura to Christians in this context is very revealing. It is known to informed trained Muslims that they denounce Christianity many times every day by reciting this verse, so to include a reference to this passage as part of the ‘common ground’ which Christians are being asked to accept sends the clear signal that the longed-for harmony will come when Christians finally submit to Islam, and the common ground is Islam itself.

3.3 Jihad as an act of love?

As an illustration of total devotion to God, that is to say, of loving God, *A Common Word* cites Sura 9:38-39 ‘Go forth in the way of God. If ye not go forth, he will afflict you with a painful doom’ (p.6).

This verse occurs just after Sura 9:29, the general call to wage jihad against Christians and Jews, and it ironically falls within a passage referring to the expedition of Tabuk, which was the first time Muhammad’s forces took up arms against Christians. To ‘go forth in the way of God’ means going out to battle. It is both revealing and ironic that this verse, with its origins as a text inciting Muslims to go on an anti-Christian jihad campaign, should be used to teach Christians that Islam promotes the highest values of loving God with all your heart.

3.4 Who are the good Christians?

Another ironic citation occurs in the final paragraphs of *A Common Word*, where it is argued that Muslims are not against Christians. The verse cited is:

They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the night season, falling prostrate (before Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie one with another in good works. These are of the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied the meed thereof. Allah is Aware of those who ward off (evil).
(Sura 3:113-115)

These verses appear to be commending Christians, and they are used in *A Common Word* to give precisely that impression, but the traditional interpretation is that they refer to Christians who are converting to Islam. This is reminiscent of Grand Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar University’s comment that ‘[A]ll Jews are not the same. The good ones become Muslims.’¹⁴—
Sura 3:113-115 follows immediately after a passage which declares the supremacy of Muslims over Jews and Christians:

Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah. And if the People of the Scripture had believed it had been better for them. Some of them are believers; but most of them are evil-livers. (Sura 3:110).

Verses 113-115 – the ones cited by *A Common Word* – then follow. They qualify 3:110 by making the point that a **minority** of People of the Book (‘some of them are believers’) are not the ‘evil-livers’ that 3:110 speaks of. The key question to ask is ‘Who are these good Christians?’

The standard interpretation is that verses 113-115 refer to those among the People of the Book who are becoming believers, embracing Islam. Ibn Kathir makes this clear when he introduces his comments on these verses with the heading *Virtues of the People of Scriptures Who Embrace Islam*.

Likewise, Ibn Ishaq, in his biography of Muhammad, reports that the context for verses 113-115 being 'sent down' by Allah was the conversion of some rabbis to the faith of Muhammad. Other Jews said they were 'bad Jews', but Allah's reply to this was 'No! It is the good Jews who become Muslims':

When Abdullah b. Salam, Tha'labah b. Sa'ya, and Usayd b. Sa'ya, and Asad b. 'Ubayd and other Jews became Muslims and believed and were earnest and firm in Islam, the rabbis who disbelieved said that it was only the bad Jews who believed in Muhammad and followed him. Had they been good men they would not have forsaken the religion of their fathers and adopted another. So God sent down concerning what they had said: *'They are not (all) alike: of the scripture folk there is an upright community who read God's verses in the night season prostrating themselves. They believe in God and the last day and enjoin good conduct and forbid evil and vie with one another in good works. Those are the righteous.'* [Sura 3:110]³—

Just to make remove any ambiguity, the immediately following verse, Sura 3:116, declares that the rest of the People of the Book – those who do not enter Islam – are destined for the fires of Hell.

Then comes the famous warning to Muslims not to befriend unbelievers (in this context, Jews):

O ye who believe! **Take not for intimates others than your own folk**, who would spare no pains to ruin you; they love to hamper you. Hatred is revealed by (the utterance of) their mouths, but that which their breasts hide is greater. Lo! ye are those who love them though they love you not, and ye believe in all the Scripture. When they fall in with you they say: We believe; but when they go apart they bite their finger-tips at you, for rage. Say: 'Perish in your rage! Lo! Allah is Aware of what is hidden in (your) breasts.' (Sura 3:118-119)

When considered in its context, these verses, cited as evidence that Muslims are not against Christians, in fact refer to Christians who convert to Islam. It is misleading for *A Common Word* to imply that because of these verses, Muslims must be considered to be well-disposed to Christians. The best that can be said is that these verses promote positive regard for Christians who are converting to Islam.

3.5 Are Muslims against Christians?

In the same context *A Common Word* asserts that Muslims are 'not against' Christians, 'so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes' (Sura 60:8). What was the context of this verse?

According to hadiths, this verse was revealed to Muhammad when Asma', daughter of Abu Bakr, was being visited by her mother, who at the time was still a pagan. At first Asma' did not want to receive her mother, but Muhammad corrected her, uttering Sura 60:8. Thus Muslims are not forbidden from being kind to non-Muslims who are not actively opposing them.

However, Sura 60 as a whole incites enmity between Muslims and non-believers, particularly those who are related. The context for the whole chapter was a family connection between a Muslim in Medina and a pagan Meccan, which threatened to undermine Muhammad's military strategy for defeating Mecca.

In verse 4 of Sura 60, Abraham is named as good example of hatred and hostility towards one's own relatives:

There is a goodly pattern for you in Abraham and those with him, when they told their folk: 'Lo! we are guiltless of you and all that ye worship beside Allah. We have done with you. And **there hath arisen between us and you hostility and hate for ever until ye believe in Allah only** - save that which Abraham promised his father (when he said): I will ask forgiveness for thee, though I own nothing for thee from Allah ...' (Sura 60:4) [Emphasis added]

When read in its proper context, Sura 60:8, which gives permission to Muslims show kindness to certain unbelievers, can hardly be considered to be evidence that Muslims are 'with' Christians, as *A Common Word* would have us believe.

3.6 Sura 112 – the Islamic Shema

Both the summary introduction and the body of the text of *A Common Word* cite Sura 112 (pp.3, 13) as the Islamic equivalent of the Hebrew *Shema*. This very short chapter of the Qur'an is a famous text which is frequently recited by Muslims, who are very familiar with all its contents. Muhammad said of this Sura that it was worth a third of the Qur'an. *A Common Word* cites only the first two verses. Here is the text of the whole Sura, including (in bold) the omitted verses:

Say: He, God, is One. God, the Self-Sufficient Besought of all. **He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him.** (Sura 112)

This Sura is regarded in Islam as a central statement of the doctrine of *tawhid*, and it includes a specific denial of the possibility of God having a son. Yet *A Common Word* declares immediately after citing the first part of this Sura that '... the Unity of God ...' forms '... a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.' This is only true if the incarnation is not one of the foundational beliefs of Christians!

The Muslims are here being true to their belief that Christianity derives from Islamic roots, and as Muslims they calling Christians back to their original faith, which is Islam. What they are not doing is offering solid common ground for interfaith dialogue.

3.7 Rejecting 'association' (shirk)

In Islamic teaching, *shirk* or 'association' is the sin of making anything to be comparable with Allah. Saying that something is like Allah, or that something else deserves worship besides Allah is *shirk*. Specifically the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, or saying that Jesus is the Son of God, is *shirk*. The principal theological error of Christians – and indeed of non-Muslims in general – is said to be that they are 'associaters'.

It is significant therefore that verses cited in *A Common Word* clearly denounce association, including Sura 2:165 (p.4), which claims that whoever adheres to *tawhid* loves God better than the associaters do. This verse implies that Muslims are more devoted to God than Christians. Likewise Sura 6:162-164 (p.7) declares of Allah that ‘He hath no partners’.

Both these passages will be understood by anyone knowledgeable about Islam as clear rejections of Trinitarian faith, yet they are cited as part of the ‘common ground’ which Christians are asked to give assent to.

4. An invitation or a threat?

Although *A Common Word* is presented as an invitation, it contains a warning of devastating conflict if the invitation is rejected. This is reminiscent of Muhammad’s approach to *da‘wa*, and should be evaluated in the light of his example.

4.1 Phases of da‘wa

It is important to understand *da‘wa* in its larger context. Some Muslim exponents of *da‘wa* have proposed what are known as the *phases of da‘wa*. According to this view, *da‘wa* can have a variety of stages. Based upon Muhammad’s own example, there can be a quiet or even hidden phase of building a community of believers. These people may need to move – to emigrate – to escape oppression. After a time of consolidation, during which Islam’s followers are prepared, ultimately there should come forceful action to assume ‘just power’ in the name of Allah. An initial approach in the phases of *da‘wa* can be to invite non-Muslims to Islam peacefully, as Muhammad did in Mecca. This is the method described in Sura 16:125. This is especially advisable if, as was the case in Muhammad’s early prophetic career, Muslims are out-numbered and vulnerable.

Following the model of Muhammad’s life, as the development of Islam goes through various stages, the methods used to propagate it will vary accordingly. When Islam is well-established and in a politically powerful position, the circumstances may lend themselves to a more forceful mode of invitation.

Islam comes to Ta’if

An example of an evolving *da‘wa* strategy is the story of how Islam came to Ta’if. When Muhammad first brought his message to the Arabs of Ta’if, his biographer Ibn Ishaq reports that he ‘sat with them and invited them to accept Islam’,¹⁶ but they refused his invitation. Later Muhammad returned to Ta’if with siege weapons and an army. During the siege of Ta’if, one of the Muslims, Ka’b bin Malik, re-issued Muhammad’s invitation to Islam, but on very different terms:

‘If you offer peace we will accept it
And make you partners in peace and war [i.e. as fellow Muslims].
If you refuse we will fight you doggedly...

We shall fight as long as we live
Till you turn to Islam, humbly seeking refuge.
We will fight not caring whom we meet ...
... we cut off their noses and ears
With our fine polished Indian swords,
Driving them violently before us to the command of God and Islam,
Until religion is established, just and straight ...¹⁷—

This more forceful mode of invitation was successful, for after the siege, the inhabitants of Ta'if accepted the call the Islam.

We must acknowledge that it was the same Muhammad in each case, and essentially the same call to Islam. At one point Muhammad sat and dialogued, and then later he took up his sword and fought to impose Islam with it. The desired outcome was the same in each case, that the people should embrace Islam, but the methods and terms offered were different.

‘Umayr summons the Meccans to Islam

Muhammad's example influenced his followers. One of his companions 'Umayr bin Wahb, a former persecutor of Muslims, asked Muhammad for permission to use coercion to invite people to Islam:

[‘Umayr bin Wahb said] ‘I used to be active in extinguishing the light of God and in persecuting those who followed God's religion. I should like you to give me permission to go to Mecca to summon them to God and His apostle and to Islam that perhaps God may guide them; and if not I will persecute them in their religion.’ The apostle agreed and he went to Mecca. ... When ‘Umayr came to Mecca he stayed there summoning people to Islam and treating those who opposed him violently so that through him many became Muslims.¹⁸—

Islam comes to Najran

Muhammad's famous general, Khalid, also known as the ‘Sword of Allah’, was the one who brought Islam to Najran, which had earlier been the source of an important delegation of Christians to Muhammad. Here too, the method is invitation backed by threats. The same offer is made as in Muhammad's letter to Heraclius: *aslim taslam* ‘if you accept Islam you will be safe’.

Then the apostle sent Khalid b. al-Walid in the month of Rabi ‘u'l-Akhir or Jumada'l-Ula in the year 10 [AH] to the B. al-Harith b. Ka ‘b in Najran, and ordered him to invite them to Islam three days before he attacked them. If they accepted then he was to accept it from them; and if they declined he was to fight them. So Khalid set out and came to them, and sent out riders in all directions inviting the people to Islam, saying, ‘**If you accept Islam you will be safe,**’ so the men accepted Islam as they were invited. Khalid stayed with them teaching them Islam and the book of God and the sunna of His prophet, for that was what the apostle of God had ordered him to do if they accepted Islam and did not fight.¹⁹—

4.2 Consider the Signatories

Because of these considerations, one should not be surprised if at least some of the signatories of this letter also support the concept of inviting people to Islam under more forceful circumstances, as at the siege of Ta'if.

Justice Muhammad Taqi Usmani, an internationally prominent Muslim scholar, who is deputy chair of the Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) Council of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, is one of the signatories. Usmani has argued in his *Islam and Modernism* that expansionary jihad is a good thing which should be continued by Muslims in the present day, for jihad is 'commendable for establishing the grandeur of the religion of Allah.'²⁰ He also argues that Muslims should live peacefully in countries such as Britain, taking advantage of their freedom to practice Islam, but only until such time as they gain enough power to engage in battle.

Any Christian reading of this letter must take into account that at least some among the signatories will be sympathetic with Usmani's position, and the letter must be read in this light.

An implication of the teaching that *da'wa* has different modes which vary according to the circumstances, is that just because the signatories to this letter are seeking a peaceful and respectful dialogue with Christians does not mean that, under other circumstances, they would all forgo a more forceful invitation. Although some of the signatories to *A Common Word* espouse liberal positions, other eminent figures, like Usmani, support the global jihad. The point to grasp is that, because of the doctrine of the phases of *da'wa*, the peaceful approach of *A Common Word* does not imply a renunciation of more forceful approaches to spreading Islam, such as military jihad, if the circumstances call for it. A call to peaceful dialogue may be only a first step.

4.3 Warning or threat?

We have already considered that Muhammad's message to his dialogue partners was *aslim taslam* 'accept Islam and you will be safe'. There is a sense in which *A Common Word* promotes this message, however subtly, to the Christian world. Christians are informed that Muslims are not against Christians, as long as they do not fight against Muslims. More significantly, *A Common Word* implies that there will continue to be conflict between Muslims and Christians – potentially on a large enough scale to threaten the whole planet – unless Christians join together with Muslims to endorse what is offered in this letter. This is rather like saying 'What will it be? Join us, or reap the whirlwind.'

4.4 Reasons for caution

There are good reasons for Christians to be wary about agreeing to dialogue under conditions of threat.

High-level religious dialogue is no silver bullet to militancy

First of all, it is wrong to imply that religious dialogue will avert the spectre of Islamist terrorism. Usama Bin Ladin is not a signatory to *A Common Word*, nor is he likely to become one. Friendly dialogue with the Muslims behind this initiative is no magic bullet to deal with Islamist hostility against Christians and the West. It is also hard to see how current jihads currently being waged in Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir, Chechenya, Kosovo, Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nigeria, Algeria, the United Kingdom, and so forth, will settle down because Christian and Muslim theologians talk to each other at Al-Azhar or the Vatican.

The church does not command armies

The Muslim signatories to *A Common Word*, perhaps misled by Islam's politicized theology, overestimate the power of Christians to shape the military forces of the West. When western governments fight the 'war on terror', it is not the church doing this. America may be a majority Christian country, but it is a secular state and theologians do not drive its military policies. Despite the widespread Muslim view that there is a 'Christian' conspiracy to destroy Islam, most western nations which have been involved in military action against Muslims (in Iraq or Afghanistan, for example) have not been driven by Christian theological principles, much less by a specifically Christian rejection of Islam.

Opposition to Islam is not a specifically Christian issue

Another consideration is that the evidence of growing antagonism towards Islam – with growing resentment among non-Muslims towards calls for sharia-implementation – is not a distinctively Christian phenomenon. Some of the strongest anti-sharia voices in the west are atheists or convinced secularists such as Christopher Hitchens, author of *God is not Great*, and Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith*.

The issue of one-sided religious conflict

Christians should reject any implication that the widespread manifestations of Islamic jihads in the world are in any way due to Christian theological positions, or to theological ill-will shown by Christians towards Islam. Many Muslims consider themselves to be engaged in jihad conflicts today in Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, pagan, Jewish, post-communist, secularist, and Islamic contexts. To Muslims these conflicts may have a religious character. Indeed in orthodox Islamic theology, all just wars are religious by definition. However their adversaries in most cases do not fight on a religious basis (with a few notable exceptions). For example, some Muslims consider themselves to be fighting a religious jihad against 'crusaders' in Iraq, but the United Kingdom and the USA do not consider their military actions against jihadi insurgents in Iraq to be a Christian holy war.

Theological unity cannot be allowed to be a precondition for peaceful coexistence

A Common Word seems to imply that because Christians and Muslims share common theological ground, this should enable them to live at peace with each other in one world. At first sight this logic may have some appeal, but it is fundamentally flawed.

On the one hand, the idea that theological consensus can bring peace would imply that if people do **not** share theological common ground, conflict is unavoidable. *A Common Word* appears to hold out the hand of peace to Christians on a theological basis, including monotheism, that would seem to exclude Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and pagans. Does this mean that we must abandon hope for peace between Muslims and Hindus, or between Christians and Buddhists?

On the other hand, if we accept the principle that theological conformity will bring peace, how much conformity is enough? History offers many examples of opposing groups whose ideologies have been very similar yet they have still gone to war. Sunnis and Shi'ites have fought wars despite far closer on the fundamentals than Christians and Muslims could ever be, so how will a partial theological consensus between Christians and Muslims bring peace?

If the discussion was just about theology, there would be no problem: the issue is the Muslim leaders' suggestion that our peace will depend upon achieving theological assent. If we accept this, then we may end up sacralizing war. We cannot afford to lend any support to the idea that theological differences could justify going to war.

If war is to be avoided, let peace come when people agree to respect each other as human beings, when they renounce greed and the will to dominate the other, when fundamental human rights are honoured, and when the will to be reconciled triumphs over self-vindication, hatred and revenge. Let peace come when people can agree that theological differences are **no** basis for going to war.

5. Conclusions

There are essentially two ways to take *A Common Word*.

One is that it is a friendly, inclusive step, opening the door for dialogue in a climate of tension and mutual suspicion. The other is that it is an exercise in *da'wa*, inviting Christians to endorse the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid*.

Whatever view the Christian reader takes, much care and thought is needed before any response. The danger for many Christians is that if they are ignorant of Islam, they will endorse *A Common Word* without first making the effort to understand it, leading to an Islamicized dialogue.

A question to be asked is: Is this bridge which Muslims have built for us to walk upon together a reasonable basis for improved mutual understanding and communication, or is it in fact a carefully constructed pathway for crossing over into Islam?

The authors of *A Common Word* have taken pains to avoid overt and direct opposition to Christian beliefs which Islam rejects, such as the incarnation and the crucifixion. In doing this, the letter appears to take seriously its own task of finding common ground.

On the other hand, many of the Qur'anic references cited in the letter cannot be separated from Islam's traditional anti-Christian polemic. This can be seen, for example, in the repeated pronouncements against *shirk* 'association, such as 'He hath no associates'. Virtually all Muslims would understand these statements to be a clear repudiation of the doctrine of the incarnation, yet Christians are asked to endorse *A Common Word* without this being made clear to them. In order to walk upon **this** bridge, Christians would be paying a heavy toll, the denial or marginalization of their own core beliefs in the eyes of their Muslim interlocutors.

Despite the invitational approach of this letter, Christians should be under no illusion about the fundamental theological package which is being offered. This letter is not an unambiguous departure from Islam's classical position that Christianity is an abrogated religion.

There are two basic strategies which Christians could follow in responding. One is to respond in kind, not directly challenging any Islamic positions, but instead presenting core Christian beliefs as winsomely as possible, citing Islamic sources which support them where this is possible, and inviting Muslims to agree with these doctrines, all without directly rejecting any of the presentations of *tawhid* in *A Common Word*. Such an approach would at least keep the door open for dialogue.

On the other hand, there would still be elephants in the room, and ultimately, they cannot be allowed to remain hidden. People suffer when that is allowed to happen, because some of these elephants are large animals, and it is good to know about them, and where they are, so you don't get trodden on. So the second approach is simply to 'out' the elephants. For those who wish to go down this path, these notes are offered as a resource.

The best model for interfaith dialogue, it is suggested, is not to begin by asking the other party to agree with one's own chief doctrines. Effective dialogue can only proceed by respecting the integrity of the other's position, and not by trying to redefine it into something approximating one's own.

Whatever approach is taken, Christians should not make the mistake of handing over to Muslims what *A Common Word* has not itself offered to Christians. The Muslim authors are not offering reconciliation. There is no suggestion in the letter that the Muslims leaders wish to apologize for the jihad, or acknowledge its damaging consequences for humanity. Instead, they keep silent about militant verses in the Qur'an, and imply that, where Muslims have been against Christians, this has only been because of Christians' prior oppression of Muslims (p.14). This means that a Christian response which abandons fundamental principles of reciprocity and responds to the letter by apologizing to Muslims for oppressing them, will set the stage for a very unequal dialogue, in which one of the founding principles will be the validation of the Islamic view that the historic anti-Christian jihad, resulting in the military occupation of most of the Christian world (excepting Western Europe) was a righteous process which need not be regarded by Christians as an obstacle to dialogue.

Perhaps the wisest response is the one which the Pope has followed. Noting that deep differences do exist between Islamic and Christian theological positions, and acknowledging that there are some common points of faith between Christianity and Islam – but not necessarily those offered by *A Common Word* – the Pope has simply invited Muslims to come and talk with his representatives.

- [1](#) *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Vol 5:545-6. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [2](#) *The Church of England Newspaper*, October 25, 2007.
- [3](#) It is striking that *A Common Word* attributes this hadith to Al-Timirdhi, the *Book of Da'awat* (i.e. of 'proselytization'), hadith no. 3934.
- [4](#) *A Common Word* cites *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the Book of Faith, hadiths no.13,45.
- [5](#) *The translation of the meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*. Vol 1: pp.60-61. Trans. Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [6](#) *Sahih Muslim*. Vol 1:38. Trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan.
- [7](#) *Sahih Muslim*. Vol 1:38. Trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan.
- [8](#) *The translation of the meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*. Vol 4: pp.120ff. Trans. Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [9](#) *The translation of the meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*. Vol 4: p.126. Trans. Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [10](#) *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Vol 2: 176. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [11](#) *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Vol 1: 87. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [12](#) *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Vol 1: 88. Riyadh: Darussalam.
- [13](#) See www.altafsir.com.
- [14](#) *Banu Isra'il fi al-Qur'an wa al-Sunna* [Jews in the Koran and the Traditions], 1986. English translation by Dr. Michael Schub.
- [15](#) *The Life of Muhammad*, p.262. Trans of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* by A. Guillaume. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- [16](#) Guillaume, A. 1967. *The life of Muhammad: a translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, p.192.
- [17](#) Guillaume, A. 1967. *The life of Muhammad: a translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, pp.587-8.
- [18](#) Guillaume, A. 1967. *The life of Muhammad: a translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, p.319.
- [19](#) Guillaume, A. 1967. *The life of Muhammad: a translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, p.645.
- [20](#) 'Our followers must live in peace until strong enough to wage jihad', by Andrew Norfolk in *The Times* of London, which published extracts from Usmani's writings on jihad, Saturday, September 8, 2007. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article2409833.ece>