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The use of Sūra 3:64 in interfaith appeals: dialogue or da‘wa?

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I ‘A Common Word’

During the first decade of the 21st century, one of the most highly publicized events in Christian-Muslim encounter was the release of the Muslim statement, ‘A Common Word between Us and You’. The statement was posted on the internet by the Jordanian Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought on October 13, 2007,¹ and quickly became the centrepiece of a flourishing discussion among Christian leaders in the West.²

1 ‘A Common Word between Us and You’, The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan, 2007, viewed 27 November 2015, <http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>.

2 One of the best known of these is the response of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, ‘Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to “A Common Word between Us and You”’, October 12, 2007, viewed 28 November 2015, <http://www.acommonword.com/loving-god-and-neighbor-together-a-christian-response-to-a-common-word-between-us-and-you/>.

‘A Common Word’ appeals to Christians on the basis of a claim of what Christian and Muslim faith have in common. In seeking to establish that the common belief is love for God and the neighbour, the Muslim statement appeals to both Christian and Muslim scripture. One of the key texts brought into use from the Qur’an is Sūra 3, verse 64.³ The verse is quoted in full in the document’s opening ‘Summary and Abridgement’, and again at the start of its appeal section. Both passages add free exegesis from the authors. The verse appears a third time in the document’s final call to Christians to ‘come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions’:

Say: ‘People of the Book! Come now

3 Michael Nazir-Ali called Sura 3:64 the ‘centre-piece’ of the statement’s argument. ‘Lingering questions about the Muslim letter’, *The Church of England Newspaper*, October 25, 2007, viewed 27 November 2015, <http://anglicanmainstream.org/lingering-questions-about-the-muslim-letter-bishop-nazir-ali/>.

to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but Allah, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from Allah.' And if they turn their backs, say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.'⁴

II Sūra 3, verse 64 in Context

Several prominent responses to 'A Common Word' seem to have shown little interest in the question of how Qur'anic passages used in the statement have been understood by Muslims. Yet this would seem to be an essential component of becoming familiar with meanings and intentions in dialogue with Muslims. For most Muslims, the Qur'an comes along with a tradition about how it is to be understood. This is especially important for the 'Common Word' statement, because the Aal al-Bayt Institute represents Islamic Traditionalism, not Modernism or Islamism.⁵ The docu-

ment itself signals this orthodox reflex when it brings in the classical exegete al-Tabari (d. 923/310)⁶ to help explain the meaning of Sura 3:64.⁷

The principle that Qur'anic texts come together with a tradition of interpretation is further articulated in another 2007 publication of the Aal al-Bayt Institute. Often misunderstandings about the Qur'an can be easily cleared up by referring to the classical and recognized Qur'anic commentaries, such as those of al-Tabari (*Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil ayat al-Qur'an*), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (*Mafatih al-Ghayb*, or *al-Tafsir al-Kabir*), Ibn Kathir (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*), al-Qurtubi (*al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an*), al-Baydawi (*Tafsir al-Baydawi*), al-Zamakhshari (*al-Kashshaf 'an Haqa'iq al-Tanzil*), and many others who are well known to the scholarly tradition, and which are our starting point.⁸

This short essay takes the question of the meaning of Sūra 3:64 into the classical Muslim commentaries recommended by the Aal al-Bayt Institute as supplying clear understandings of the Qur'an. Among the many interesting details in these explanations, attention will be focused on how traditional Muslim tafsir has characterized the terms of the interfaith encounter to which commentators understand the verse to

⁴ Translations from the Qur'an, unless otherwise indicated, are those of Arthur Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960). Here and throughout this study I have put 'Allah' in place of Arberry's 'God', because neither the context of Sūra 3:64 nor the Islamic interpretive tradition on the verse indicates a generic understanding of 'God'. In fact, this would seem to be one of the main points of Sūra 3:64 as well as of many other verses in the Qur'an.

⁵ Jon Hoover, 'A Common Word: More positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox', *Theological Review*, vol. 30, 2009, 50-77, here 55. Jon Hoover (53-57) explains that one of the reasons for the organized effort behind the 'Common Word' statement was a desire to wrest control of discourse about Islam away from Islamists and Islamic modernists.

⁶ This indicates the year of al-Tabari's death in both A.D. and A.H. ('Anno Hegirae'—lunar years dated from the hijra in 622 A.D.).

⁷ 'A Common Word between Us and You', immediately on pages 2-3, and more fully on page 14.

⁸ Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, *Jihad and the Islamic Law of War* (Amman, 2007), p. 77, nt. 5.

refer.⁹ The subsequent discussion will explore the range of possible Christian responses to 'A Common Word', coming out of a thorough familiarity with the Islamic interpretive tradition on Sūra 3:64.

III Traditional Narrative of the First Recitation of Q 3:64

The 'common word' verse and its Qur'ānic context come together in Muslim thought with a very strong tradition about its so-called 'occasion of revelation'. Muslim commentators are generally agreed that the first eighty or so verses of Sūrat Āl 'Imrān were recited in response to a delegation of Christians who came to Madina from Najrān.¹⁰ This is the claim of the earliest Muslim biography of Muhammad, the *Sirat al-nabi* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767/150).¹¹ The best-known Muslim work of the 'occasions of revelation' of Qur'ānic verses, the *Asbāb al-nuzūl* of al-Wāhidi (d. 1076/468), supports this dating of the passage.¹² This tradition is also offered by many Muslim com-

mentaries on the Qur'ān, including the earliest complete extant commentary, the *Tafsir* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767/150).¹³

Ibn Ishāq enclosed the entire text of Āl 'Imrān 1-64 in a narrative about the encounter of Muhammad with the Najrān Christians. The Christians, writes Ibn Ishāq, attempt to make a case for the deity of Jesus to Muhammad. They confess, 'he is Allah', 'he is the son of Allah', and 'he is the third of three'. Muhammad commands the Christians to 'submit'. At this point, according to Ibn Ishāq, Allah sends down the first 80 verses of Āl 'Imrān.¹⁴ Many Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān offered the story of the delegation of Christians from Najrān closer to their explanations of Sūra 3:64. Muqātil began his narrative of the Najrān visit at verse 59 and continued it through his interpretation of verse 64. His interpretation of these six verses could be said to be completely within the narrative. For Muqātil, the antagonists were the Christians until verse 65, where he turned abruptly to include the leading Jews of Madina.

The traditional narrative of the visit of the Christians from Najrān is that a delegation comes to Madina from the Yemen to make terms with Muhammad when his conquest of the Arabian Peninsula seems unavoidable.¹⁵ The Christians explain to Muhammad their

9 Greater detail on the Islamic interpretive tradition on Sūra 3:64, as well as on the context of the verse, is provided in Gordon Nickel, "A Common Word" in Context: Toward the roots of polemics between Christians and Muslims in Early Islam', *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, vol. 6, 2009, pp. 167-200.

10 Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters*, Vol. II, *The House of 'Imrān*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 1.

11 Ibn Ishāq, *Sirat al-nabi*, ed. Muḥammad Muhiyā al-Dīn 'Abd al-Hamid, ed. (Cairo: Maktaba Muḥammad 'Alī Sabīh wa Awlād, 1963), II:415.

12 Abū al-Hasan al-Nisābūri al-Wāhidi, *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), 50.

13 *Tafsir Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. Abd Allāh Mahmūd Shihāta (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Ta'rikh al-'Arabiyya, 2002), I:261.

14 Ibn Ishāq, II: 414-415.

15 Ibn Ishāq, II:412-422. English translation Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), 270-277.

belief in the deity of Jesus, and Muhammad denies their claims. At the end of Muḥammad's recitation of Sūra 3:1-64, according to Ibn Ishāq, Allah commands Muhammad to challenge the Christians to mutual invocation of a curse (*mulā 'ana*).¹⁶ The Christians discuss the matter among themselves and decide not to participate in the cursing ceremony. Instead they leave Muḥammad in his religion and return to Najrān to practise their own religion.¹⁷

IV Interpretations during the early Muslim Centuries

The great Muslim commentators of the Islamic interpretive tradition had much to say about Sūrat Āl 'Imrān in general, as well as about Sūra 3:64 in particular. As noted above, Muqātil interpreted Sūra 3:64 in the midst of his narrative about the delegation of Christians from Najrān. In the verse immediately preceding, Muqātil understood the Christians to be 'the workers of corruption' (*mufsidūn*); he completed the scriptural phrase by adding '...in the earth through rebellion' (*al-ma'āsi*).¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibn Ishāq, II:422. Widely known in Muslim tradition as the mubāhala. R. Strothmann, 'Die Mubāhala in Tradition und Liturgie', *Der Islam*, (1957), 33:5-29.

¹⁷ Ibn Ishāq, II:422. The earliest Muslim sources offer a diversity of details of the discussion which occurs among the Najrān Christians in response to Muhammad's mubāhala challenge. See Gordon Nickel, "We Will Make Peace With You": The Christians of Najrān in Muqātil's Tafsīr', *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, (2006) 3:171-188.

¹⁸ Plural of ma'siya. The verb 'asā carries the sense of disobedience, rebellion, opposition and resistance. (Edward William Lane,

These strongly negative descriptions connected in the mind of Muqātil to the Christian refusal in the story to give up their belief in the deity of Jesus and accept *tawhīd*. When he came to Sūra 3:64, the exegete understood 'a word common' (*kalimatīn sawā'in*) to mean 'a word of justice ('adl)'.¹⁹ On the phrase, 'and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from Allah', Muqātil explained, 'Because [the Christians] took 'isā as a lord'.²⁰ 'If they turn' means 'if they reject (*abā*) *tawhīd*'.

Al-Ṭabarī, the first of the great Muslim exegetes of the classical period, signalled his approach to Sūra 3:64 already at the beginning of his comments on the third *sūra*. He wrote that the message of the verse applies to the Christians of Najrān as well as to any other people 'who share in their rejection of faith (*kufīr*) in Allah by taking another being beside Him as a lord and a god and a deity (*ma'būd*)'.²¹

At the end of the third Islamic century, al-Ṭabarī knew traditions which connected Sūra 3:64 with the Jews of Madīna, as well as traditions which identified the Christians from Najrān.²² al-Ṭabarī concluded that the verse concerns the 'people of two books', because both the people of the Torah and

An Arabic-English Lexicon: Derived from the best and most copious Eastern sources (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), book I, part 5:2069).

¹⁹ Muqātil, I:281. The noun 'adl can have a number of other senses, including equity, rectitude, equivalence, and balance. Lane, Book I, 5:1974.

²⁰ Muqātil, I:281.

²¹ al-Ṭabarī, VI:151.

²² al-Ṭabarī, VI:483-5.

the people of the Gospel were intended by this call.²³ From the expression 'a word common (*sawā*)', al-Tabari understood a 'just (*ʿadl*)' word.²⁴

al-Ṭabari's discussion of theological issues begins at the start of his comments on the verse and continues throughout. The 'just word' that the verse is referring to is that 'we declare Allah to be one, and not worship other than him, and remain free from every deity except him, and not associate anything with him.' In his preliminary paraphrase of 'we do not take one another as lords', he wrote, 'we do not owe obedience to one another, by which we would defy (*maʿāsi*) Allah, and magnify [another] by worshipping him in the way the Lord is worshipped.'²⁵

To support his point, al-Ṭabari brought in a cross reference from Sūra 9:31: 'They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from Allah, and the Messiah, Mary's son—and they were commanded to serve but One God; there is no god but He; glory be to Him, above that they associate.' By quoting this verse in connection with Sūra 3:64, al-Ṭabari made explicit that he had in mind not only religious leaders, but also Jesus. He transmitted a tradition that through such worship, Jews and Christians commit acts of disobedience (*maʿsiya*) against Allah.²⁶ His concerns, and those of his authori-

ties, are that no other being except Allah be obeyed, bowed down to, worshipped, or prayed to.²⁷ What the opponents are 'turning away from' is the oneness (*tawhīd*) of Allah, and loyal worship of him.

al-Zamakhshari (d. 538 A.H./1144 A.D.) was another major Muslim exegete who understood Sūra 3:64 to be addressed to 'the people of the two books'—the delegation of Christians from Najrān and the Jews of Madina.²⁸ The expression, 'common between us and you', he took to mean 'on the same level (*mustawiya*) between us and you', concerning which the Qurʾān, Torah and Gospel do not disagree. This 'word', wrote al-Zamakhshari, is then explained by the rest of the verse. He immediately wrote that the call in these words means that 'we not say that Ezra is the son of Allah or that the Messiah is the son of Allah'.

Here the exegete is using the wording of Sūra 9:30, a verse which strongly assails Jews and Christians for making these confessions. Neither Ezra nor the Messiah may be called the son of Allah, 'because each of them is a human being (*bashar*) like us'.²⁹ al-Zamakhshari's concern was wrong authority and obedience: he wrote that the verse is a call to not obey the rabbis in their 'innovations of prohibition and permission without recourse to what Allah has prescribed'.³⁰

23 al-Tabari, VI:485.

24 al-Tabari, VI:483, 486, 487.

25 al-Tabari, VI:483.

26 al-Tabari, VI:488, trad. 7200. The term *maʿsiya* also carries the sense of 'insubordination, refractoriness; insurrection, revolt, sedition'. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (4th edition) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), 723.

27 al-Ṭabari, VI:488 (obey, worship, pray) & 489 (bow down).

28 Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Mahmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshāf ʿan haqāʾiq al-tanzīl wa ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2006), I:363.

29 al-Zamakhshari, I:364.

30 al-Zamakhshari, I:364.

In support of his argument al-Zamakhshari then quoted Sura 9:31, with its specification of taking rabbis, monks or the Messiah as lords. He apparently agreed with the claim of Muqātil and al-Tabari that the Christian confession of Messiah as Lord clashes with the worship of one God.

V Letter to the Byzantine Emperor

Born at the opposite end of the Muslim Empire, the Spanish exegete al-Qurtubi (d. 1272/671) seemed interested mainly in the legal implications of Sūra 3:64.³¹ He mentioned that the verse had been connected with a document (*kitāb*) which Muhammad is reported to have sent to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.³² Though this story is not cited in the commentaries surveyed to this point, it is offered as a *ḥadīth* in the *kitāb al-tafsīr* in the collection of al-Bukhārī.³³ The letter, according to al-Qurtubi, contains a charge to 'the mighty one of Rome' to submit and embrace Islam. 'Then Allah would grant you a double reward. But if you turn away, you will have to bear the sin (*ithm*) of the *Arīsiyyīn*.'³⁴ Following this charge, the text of Sūra 3:64 is included in the letter.³⁵

In his explanation of the phrase, 'and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from Allah', al-Qurtubi seemed concerned about the founda-

tion of authority for law. '[This phrase] means that we not follow them in making lawful or unlawful except what Allah has made lawful.'³⁶ The exegete brought in Sūra 9:31 for cross reference: 'They have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God....' The Jews and Christians gave their rabbis and monks the same status as their Lord in accepting their prohibitions and sanctions when Allah had neither forbidden nor permitted these.³⁷ Apart from Allah, wrote al-Qurtubi, people must not take anyone as lord, 'not Jesus and not Ezra and not the angels' (which connects partly to Sūra 9:30). These have no status to determine law, 'because they are human (*bashar*) like us'.³⁸

VI Meaning and Response

A survey of other traditional interpretations of Sūra 3:64 reveals a remarkable consensus among Muslim exegetes during the formative and classical periods of Islam that the verse and its Qur'anic context were to be understood as part of a polemical challenge to non-Muslims. All of the commentaries, from the earliest in existence through to the present day,³⁹ understand Q 3:64 to be addressed to people who have a false concept of deity. They

31 al-Qurtubi, IV:105-107.

32 al-Qurtubi, IV:105.

33 Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mughira al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābi al-Halabī wa Awlād, 1926), *kitāb al-tafsīr*.

34 al-Qurtubi, IV:105-106.

35 al-Qurtubi, IV:106.

36 al-Qurtubi, IV:106.

37 al-Qurtubi, IV:106.

38 al-Qurtubi, IV:107.

39 The direction of interpretation of 3:64 in popular modern Muslim commentaries is indicated in Gordon Nickel, "A Common Word" in Qur'anic Context and Commentary', The Centre for Islamic Studies & Muslim-Christian Relations, *Occasional Paper* no. 9, August 2009, 13.

perceive the challenge of Sūra 3:64 to be a call to the Muslim concept of deity, summarized by the term *tawhīd*.

None of the Muslim commentators surveyed in this study—and recommended by the Aal al-Bayt Institute—understood the expression *sawā* 'in Q 3:64 to refer to a theological concept held 'in common' by Muslims, Christians and Jews. Some of the exegetes saw the verse to be part of an exemplary argument for the Muslim view of Jesus. However, two of the commentators took the verse in a political direction. By bringing in the story of a letter sent by Muhammad to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, al-Qurtubi and also Ibn Kathir appear to have associated Sūra 3:64 with military negotiations related to the expansion of the Muslim Empire.⁴⁰

These findings raise two questions related to the meaning of 'A Common Word' and an appropriate response to it: What does the 'Common Word' document mean when it makes prominent use of Sūra 3:64? How are Christians to respond authentically to the document knowing the Islamic interpretive tradition on this verse?

The Aal al-Bayt Institute has stated that the Islamic interpretive tradition represented by the commentaries examined in this study is the 'starting point' for a clear understanding of the Qur'ān.⁴¹ How then are non-Muslims to understand the use of Sūra 3:64 in the 'Common Word' appeal? To assume

that the Aal al-Bayt scholars were not familiar with the interpretive tradition on Sūra 3:64 seems problematic and possibly insulting. That they did indeed know the tradition is suggested by their reference to al-Ṭabari's interpretation of Sūra 3:64 within the document.⁴²

The Aal al-Bayt Institute is Traditionalist by its own self-identification, and the larger project of which 'A Common Word' is a part seeks to reassert the priority of traditionalist scholarly authority.⁴³ On the other hand, for non-Muslims to assume that the statement's authors are simply taking a 'Protestant' or post-modern freedom to interpret the verse in a new way seems unhelpful—this freedom is exactly what traditionalist Muslims repudiate.

Christians who are familiar with the Islamic interpretive tradition described in this essay will wonder about the prominence of Sūra 3:64 in the Muslim appeal. This could lead to a wide range of responses. To interact vigorously with the content of 'A Common Word' seems to suit the spirit of the classical commentaries on Sūra 3:64, as well as the story which Muslim exegetes have indicated as its 'occasion of revelation'. It must be noted that medieval commentators did not understand making a strong theological case to be an act of disrespect toward the partner in the dialogue. In fact, al-Rāzī seems to have seen the content of Sūra 3:64 and the strength of Muḥammad's theological argument to be proofs of re-

40 On the story of Muḥammad's letter and its meaning, see Gordon Nickel, 'Conquest and Controversy: Intertwined themes in the Islamic interpretive tradition', *Numen*, (2011)58:232-258.

41 *Jihad and the Islamic Law of War*, 77, nt. 5.

42 'A Common Word between Us and You', p. 14.

43 Hoover, 'A Common Word', 55-57.

spect for Christians.⁴⁴

VII Possible Christian Responses

One possible response to 'A Common Word'—on the basis of its use of Sūra 3:64—would be to treat the entire document with suspicion. The Barnabas Fund drew attention to the prominence of Sūra 3:64, described traditional Muslim understandings of the verse, and characterized the letter as a classic expression of Islamic mission (*da'wa*).⁴⁵

Another possibility would be to respond to an undercurrent in 'A Common Word'—neither hidden nor explicitly declared—of a dictation of the terms of the dialogue. Michael Nazir-Ali, for example, found the document to be calling for dialogue on the basis of the Muslim concept of the unity of God. The document implies that Christians have compromised their monotheism, said Nazir-Ali, by referring to verses which have traditionally been understood to deny Christian beliefs about Jesus. Nazir-Ali rightly pointed out that Sūra 3:64 has been associated with Sūra 9:30-31 in the Islamic interpretive tradition—verses which explicitly criticize Christians for confessing Jesus

as Son of God and Lord. He called for 'mutual witness and learning' in place of the 'one-way street' he perceived in the Muslim appeal.⁴⁶

In a similar response to Nazir-Ali's, Jon Hoover wrote that even apart from its use of Sūra 3:64, 'A Common Word' strikes an overall tone of what he calls 'the inclusive supremacy of Islam'.⁴⁷ The Muslim document in fact appeals to Christians to change the way they conceive their faith, but not in the traditional way of simply calling Christian faith false. Rather, 'A Common Word' does this 'obliquely' by classifying central aspects of Christian faith as 'formal' rather than essential.⁴⁸ But the document does not address, and certainly does not countenance, essential differences between the two faiths. Hoover suggested that participants in the 'Common Word' discussions at least acknowledge the difficulty of this 'supremacy' approach so that the conversation can move ahead meaningfully.

With the interpretive tradition of Sūra 3:64 in mind, some Christians have also sought to respond to the perceived polemical challenge in 'A Common Word' by affirming the truth of the gospel. The response of the World Evangelical Alliance, after expressing gratitude for the Muslim initiative, acknowledged the call to Christians in the document 'to become Muslims', then responded in kind. 'May we...invite you to put your faith in God, who forgives our opposition to him and sin

44 al-Rāzī, vol. VIII, pp. 85-86. One wonders whether at least some of the traditionalist authors of 'A Common Word' were not anticipating a more vigorous response from Christians.

45 Barnabas Fund, 'Response to open letter and call from Muslim religious leaders to Christian leaders', 13 October 2007, viewed 27 November 2015, http://www.quranandinjil.org/downloads_files/Response_to_open_letter_and_call_from_Muslim_religious_leaders_to_Christian_leaders_13_October_2007.pdf.

46 Nazir-Ali, 'Lingering questions about the Muslim letter'.

47 Hoover, 'A Common Word', 76.

48 Hoover, 'A Common Word', 73, referring to 'A Common Word', 13.

through what his son Jesus Christ did for us at the cross?⁴⁹

Along with this, a Christian response may want to question and perhaps challenge the use of scripture in other parts of the document. This naturally leads to a questioning of the document's claim to common beliefs, built as it is upon its treatment of those scriptures. It seems remarkable that several prominent responses to 'A Common Word' apparently declined to probe the statement's claim that love of God and neighbour is a central theme in Islam—especially considering that there is no command in the Qur'an to love either God or people, and that the verses incidentally referring to human love for God are limited to a maximum of five.⁵⁰ Approaching the mild end of the spectrum of possible responses might be an affirmation of the Muslim statement's indication of love as a central theme in Christianity and a request to Muslims to seek to understand Christian meanings. Beirut New Testament professor Johnny Awad wrote that when 'A Common Word' claims that Muslims and Christians share a belief in love for God and love for neighbour, Christians must be clear about who they believe God to be, and what they mean by divine love.

Awad quoted Hebrews 1:1-4 and

concluded that from a Christian perspective, '*I come to know God as He revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, not through the commandment or through a text.*'⁵¹ At the heart of God's self-revelation in Jesus, wrote Awad, is the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus. '*The cross and resurrection reveal the Love of God for us, and consequently the knowledge that God is Love.*'⁵² Further, Awad explained that people are to love their neighbour, which in the teaching of Jesus extends to the enemy, '*because we were loved by God when we were still enemies of God.*'⁵³ Awad based his statement on Romans 5:6, 8 & 10:

...When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly....But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Fully appreciative of the Muslim initiative, Awad invited the writers of 'A Common Word' to put aside Muslim preconceptions and to begin to look at Christianity the way Christians understand it.

49 'We Too Want to Live in Love, Peace, Freedom and Justice', p. 2, viewed 27 November 2015, http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/We_Too_Want_to_Live_in_Love_Peace_Freedom_and_Justice.pdf.

50 A careful survey of the Qur'anic vocabulary of love is Gordon Nickel, 'The Language of Love in Qur'an and Gospel', in *Sacred Text: Explorations in Lexicography*, eds. Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala and Angel Urban (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 229-235.

51 Johnny B. Awad, 'Who is My God and Who is My neighbor? A Response to "A Common Word Between Us and You"', *Theological Review*, (2009), 30:81. (Italics Awad's.)

52 Awad, 'Who is My God', 82. (Italics Awad's.)

53 Awad, 'Who is My God', 86. (Italics Awad's.)

VIII Greater Honesty and Effectiveness in Dialogue

Christian responses which have found ambiguity in 'A Common Word' and have raised questions about meanings and intentions should not automatically be seen as contrary to the goal of authentic dialogue. As Michael Nazir-Ali suggested, 'The letter writers are theologically serious and Christians owe it to them to respond with equal seriousness.'⁵⁴ On the wider phenomenon of interfaith dialogue, both Christians and Muslims have criticized some official statements and gatherings as not actually representing orthodox believers in either Christianity or Islam, and thus not addressing the important differences between the two faiths.⁵⁵

Lamin Sanneh has further suggested that the separation of dialogue from witness by some leaders in the West has cut off important dimensions which a missionary tradition can contribute. 'Witness would demand making an effort to understand and be understood by others, with persuasion the rule in intercultural relations.'⁵⁶ Seen in this way, some of the strongest

interrogative responses to 'A Common Word' may actually facilitate interfaith mutuality more effectively.

Christians seek to abide by the exhortation: '*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*' (Romans 12:18). Whenever and wherever Christians fail to obey this command in relationship with Muslims, there should be apology and repentance. But beyond even peaceful coexistence is the peace of the gospel, which comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus. '*He himself is our peace*' (Ephesians 2:14). The peace which reconciles people to God and to each other comes '*through his blood, shed on the cross*' (Colossians 2:20).

When Christians put gospel witness to the side, even for the goals of friendly relations and interfaith dialogue, they risk losing the only message which can lead to true peace with God and neighbour. A commitment to gospel peace cannot mean abandoning the truths of the gospel upon which peace is built. Therefore, coming out of a familiarity with the Islamic interpretive tradition, a reasonable and appropriate Christian response to 'A Common Word' could include a combination of components: an expression of gratitude to the Aal al-Bayt Institute for taking the initiative; a respect for the partner in the dialogue; a return query concerning meanings and intentions; a lively loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; and a freedom to affirm the gospel distinctives which are essential to biblical faith.

⁵⁴ Nazir-Ali, 'Lingering questions about the Muslim letter'.

⁵⁵ One charge against dialogue, as Lamin Sanneh has described it, is 'attempting to create a speculative syncretism in order to undermine faith in the interests of interfaith harmony'. *Piety & Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 6-12, here p. 6.

⁵⁶ Sanneh, *Piety & Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 9.