

"Some Frequent Questions Muslims have been asked about "A Common Word"

March 2009

1. What is this document really about?

Simply put, it is about the Two Golden Commandments: Love of God and Love of Neighbours, and it is an invitation to join hands with Christians on such a basis, for the sake of God and for the sake of world peace and harmony.

2. Why now (A Common Word was launched on October 13th, 2007)?

The world is living in tension, if not turmoil, and the situation threatens to get even worse. We need peace and justice. The latest Gallup polls show that 60% of Christians world-wide harbour prejudice against Muslims and 30% of Muslims harbour prejudice against Christians. That is about 2 billion people of 4 billion Christians and Muslims in total disliking each other or misunderstanding each other (out of about 6.5 billion people on the planet). This is a recipe for world-wide combustion. Something had to be done.

3. Is it not it too late?

Better late than never; and it is never too late for hope. The various signatories, and other Muslims, have been vocal before, but individually or in small groups. What is new is the successful getting together to speak with one voice, a voice of mainstream Islam.

4. Is the group of signatures representative?

Yes, in that it includes people with different profiles: religious authorities, scholars, intellectuals, media experts, NGO leader, etc all people of knowledge (Ulama) or society leaders (ahl aqd wa hal). It also includes people from different schools of mainstream Islam: Sunni (from Salafis to Asharis and Maturidis to Sufis – of all 4 'Madhhabs' or 'Schools of Jurisprudence' – Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali), Shi'i (J'afari, Zaidi, Isma'ili), and Ibadi. It includes figures from Chad to Uzbekistan, from Indonesia to Mauritania and from Canada to Sudan.

To date (March 2009) the document has been endorsed by over 300 Islamic leaders, thousands of ordinary Muslims and endorsed by 500 or Islamic organizations.

5. How representative can a mere 138 persons be?

Many of the individual signatories guide or influence millions of Muslims and hold positions of religious, social, and political responsibility. The accumulated influence of the signatories is immense and too significant to ignore.

6. The composition of the 138 seems to be really mixed from the very prominent to the junior?

Most are very prominent. Many of the most important influential Ulama and preachers of the Islamic world have signed or supported it. There is value in a mixture of ages, experiences, and backgrounds. This is needed for prominence and influence is always in a state of flux. One must have people that look likely to be very influential in the future. No one mold of person can singlehandedly engage all the varied issues we face today. Jointly, the group is effective and important.

7. Who is the author of this document?

H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan is the author of the document, but in fact the document is mostly a careful selection of essential quotations from Christian and Muslim (and Jewish) scriptures

or scared texts. Moreover, the document was thoroughly checked and approved by a group of senior Ulama including Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa of Egypt, Sheikh AbdAllah bin Bayyah of Mauritania, Sheikh Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti of Syria, Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric of Bosnia, Habib Umar bin Hafith of the Yemen, Ayatollah Damad, T.J.Winter and Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and signed by all 138.

8. What were the mechanics of its production ?

Momentum for it started with the Amman Message and its interfaith components. Then the idea was mentioned in summary at the end of the October 2006 'Open Letter to the Pope' from 38 Muslim Scholars (following the Pope's Regensburg address of September 2006). The momentum continued to grow over the following year through several gatherings and conferences, the last of which was one on 'Love in the Qur'an' of the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, held in Jordan in September 2006. The final draft emerged out of that conference, and the process of signing began. The experience of having worked out a document in union to respond to the Pope the previous year made this year's document easier to achieve. Shaykh Habib Ali Jiffri, Professor Aref Nayed, Professor Ibrahim Kalin, Shaykh Amr Khaled, Prof Ingrid Mattson, Sohayl Nakhoda and a number of other religious scholars and leaders have been the ones building and maintaining the consensus.

9. So, is this document really a consensus?

Yes, in the sense that it constitutes a normative 'ijma' by the Ummah's scholars. This consensus will get stronger and stronger as more people sign it and uphold it. One mechanism for doing so, through the common word website (www.acommonword.com), is already in place and others are in the making.

10. Is this a Jordanian government document?

No, it is not. It is a joint document by the Ummah's scholars. Jordan is indeed a welcoming and respected nexus of peace and harmony, which makes it a good place of consensus building. The King of Jordan has indeed been extremely supportive, and this would not have been possible without his help. But the document is international in scope and from religious leaders to religious leaders.

11. Is this a document of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Academy?

Yes, but only in so far as that Royal Aal Al-Bayt Academy includes 100 leading international scholars who offered a core base of signatories and supporters that could be expanded, and helped in the networking needed for achieving the document.

12. How will the gains made in consensus building and peace making be safeguarded against erosion and dispersal?

A lot of traction has been achieved already in 2008 by way of spreading the consensus at the highest levels, with major conferences at Yale University, Cambridge University and discussions involving the Archbishop of Canterbury and the H.H. the Pope himself (the document was the basis for the first Catholic-Muslim Forum in November 4-6th 2008). Already MA theses in major universities have been written on it, and discussions have been held at the local in joint Christian-Muslim groups in a number of countries all over the world. In 2009 the Common Word initiative aims to move from 'traction' to 'trickledown' with a major independent institute being created to follow up its work; books and films being made about it; joint websites with approved Christian and Muslim reading lists being created as a basis for curricula, and a movement to bring it to political fruition, God

Willing

13. Why are certain Eastern Patriarchs not addressed? Why are many Protestant Churches not mentioned?

The Eastern Patriarchs who are not mentioned (e.g. the Melkite, Maronite and Chaldaean Patriarchs all recognize the Primacy of the Pope and are in Communion with the Catholic Church: they are therefore addressed through the person of the Pope. The mainline Protestant churches are mentioned, but since there are over 30,000 churches nowadays, it was evidently easier to address everyone with the phrase 'Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere'. Thus everyone is indeed included.

14. Why is it that Jews are not addressed?

Jewish scriptures are invoked repeatedly and respectfully in the document. It is quite normal for documents to be bilateral without implying the exclusion of others. Moreover, this is a Theological document and the problems between Jews and Muslims are essentially political and thus religious de facto and not Theological de jure, with both religions having essentially the same understanding of the Unity of the One God – as we see it at least. Also, Jewish Scholars and Rabbis have participated in the Common Word Conferences in Yale and Cambridge.

15. Why is it not addressed to people of other faiths, for example Hindus and Buddhists?

It makes sense to start with the two biggest, most intertwined and yet most conflicting religions in the world and try to help there first. More documents will be forthcoming, God Willing.

16. Are you deliberately excluding secularists and non-believers?

Muslims are concerned about all of humanity, and must respect and seek peace with every single human being, who were all made by God in the fairest image, but again it makes sense to start here first.

17. What if no one pays attention to this? What if it is simply ignored?

This has not been the case, by the Grace of God, but if it were Muslims would have to keep trying to get through. That is a religious duty for all Muslims to wish the best for humanity, no matter what the response is like. That is part of Love of the Neighbor, precisely.

18. What of the few skeptical responses?

Muslims should still strain to respond with more gentleness, compassion, and love. The Holy Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teach Muslims to ward off bad with good. We have kept a very interesting special log of the 'naysayers' on the A Common Word website (in the news section, at the end). They are a small minority, but there is still a lot of bitterness.

19. Should you not fix your own problems first and stop your inner fighting before you address others?

The basis of inner-healing and reconciliation has already started with the Amman message and the historical consensus on its '3 Points' (see: www.ammanmessage.com). The two tasks are not mutually exclusive, and in fact must go together. Indeed, addressing others unites Muslim hearts in ways that can be healing to our own inner wounds. Only God's compassion can unite people. The more compassion Muslims practice towards others, the more inner compassion they will have.

20. Why do you think a document between religions is so important?

Religions always fought each other, but the world still spun on its axis.

Religion is too important a factor in human history and life to ignore. It is the single greatest impulse in the lives of the majority of people in the world and over history. It has tremendous energies that can have positive or negative consequences. It is very important to unite positive religious energies for the good of humanity. Religions must be used as part of the solutions not misused as part of the problem – and the problem includes violence, conflict, war, injustice, hatred. Love and understanding is the solution – ‘love’, we say, not mere lust, but rather compassionate love, with wisdom. The Twin Golden Commandments of Love – and the knowledge of them – are the basis of A Common Word – this is true religious love.

21. Your stark warning about the future of the world is so exaggerated. Do you not think that you have overdone it?

No, not if you consider that we jointly constitute half of humanity and consider the amount of weaponry combined with huge misunderstandings and mutual-stereotypes. Let us remember also the Bosnian Genocide 15 years ago (where 300,000 Muslims were killed by Christians just for being Muslims), or the 9-11 attacks (and other such in the UK, Spain, Russia, India and even many Muslim countries the) or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001-2009 were over 1.5 million people have died and are still dying – I do not think it is possible to over state the case about the tragedy and ever-immanent danger of conflict and war.

22. Is your reference to the danger to world peace a disguised threat?

No, it is a compassionate plea for peace. Anyone who claims that it is a threat cannot have read the document properly and is attributing motives that are simply not there in reality.

23. What use is this if terrorists are not going to heed your words?

God Willing, this will influence young people, and will create an atmosphere in which hatred is less likely to thrive. There is no quick fix to problems, and a patient wholesome discourse is very much needed as a foundation for a better future. Whilst there will always be people who want to resort to violence for whatever grievances imaginary or real, we think that 99.9% of Christians and Muslims (and Jews of course, and all people in fact) would rather have peace, and want a way to achieve it.

24. Why is it that the document doesn't address real issues like violence, religious freedom, women's issues, democracy, etc...?

This document is a first step, but one that strives to lay a solid foundation for the construction of many worthy edifices. The document can not be expected to do everything at once. Moreover, many of these issues were already addressed in the Amman Message (see: www.ammanmessage.com).

25. Is this document just another form of propaganda?

If you mean by that it highlights the precedence Islam gives compassion and gentleness in order to achieve peace, then yes. If you mean by that is this ‘spin’ merely for the sake of a hidden political agenda, then no. God sees our hearts. We want peace. We know from the generous and loving Christian responses that most Christians do too.

Praise be to God, the Lord, the King, Who gives beyond all reckoning.