

World Peace through Christian-Muslim Understanding

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World Peace through Christian-Muslim Understanding

The Genesis and Fruits of the Open Letter
“A Common Word Between Us and You”

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For Mutti

“Following a popular Chinese proverb, there are those today that think that we live in *interesting* times. I am rather of the opinion that we live in very *difficult* times. [...] I am rather one of those [...] who like to caution their optimism with an appropriate dose of realism. Both the Amman Message and the Common Word, are perfect examples of messages that carry hope for the future, but are also based on a realistic assessment of the world we confront at the moment. They harbour no illusions, rather they help us face seemingly intractable problems and provide us ways of surmounting them.”

Sohail Nakhouda,
Signatory of *A Common Word Between Us and You*
“The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word,”
speech delivered at the 4th Annual Ambassadors’ Forum organized by
the Jordanian Foreign Ministry on 30 December 2008.

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Foreword

Dialogue between faith groups is more necessary than ever and more difficult than ever. No-one could deny that we live in a period when religious identity is regularly exploited as a driver of conflict, sometimes appallingly brutal conflict, even where coexistence and a level of mutual forbearance have been common in the past. Persuading people to confront each other in a non-violent context, to struggle to get inside the mindset of another tradition, is not everything, but it is an indispensable part of moving towards something better than a cycle of slaughter. Yet at the same time, modern communications and the hunger for 'simple' readings of complex situations mean that dialogue is constantly undermined by myths and stereotypes. And because of that, a good deal of what attempts to be genuine dialogue can be hampered by an understandable nervousness about unconsciously recycling or colluding with such myths, so that good manners and blandness stifle the hard questions we need to ask each other.

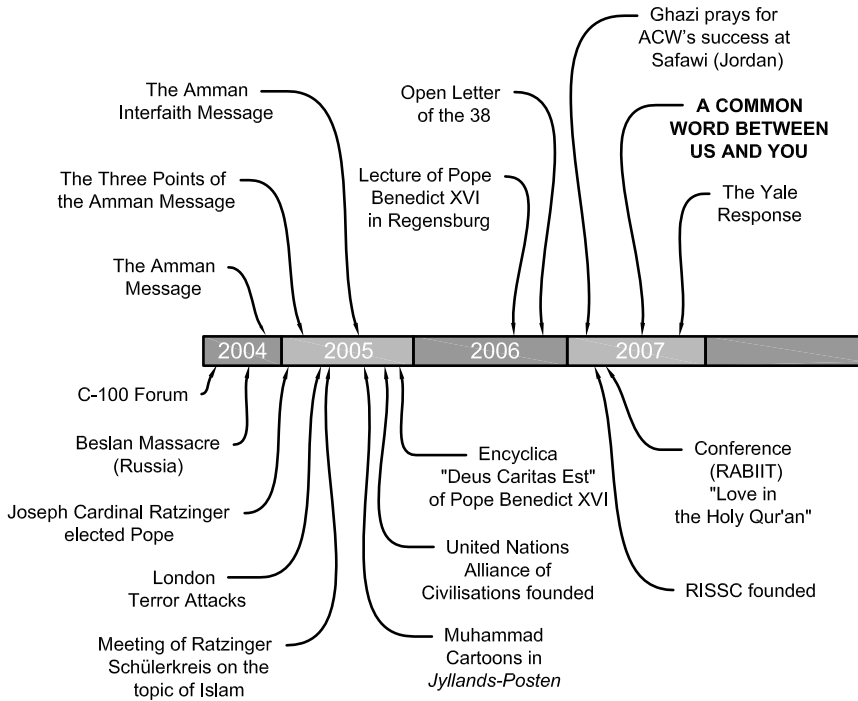
When the 'Common Word' declaration first appeared in 2007, it offered an unprecedented opportunity: a careful and eirenic statement of the Islamic foundations for exploratory and honest discussion, it made a serious effort to speak in terms accessible to non-Muslims and to set an agenda that could be shared without avoiding the undeniable and abiding divergences of conviction. In some degree it attempted to think through aspects of Islam from a Christian-inflected standpoint. The several responses it generated in turn show signs of trying to think through Christian themes from a Muslim-inflected standpoint. As the discussion developed, it was clear that all involved were working hard to hear what their words sounded like in the ears of another, but without nervousness or evasion.

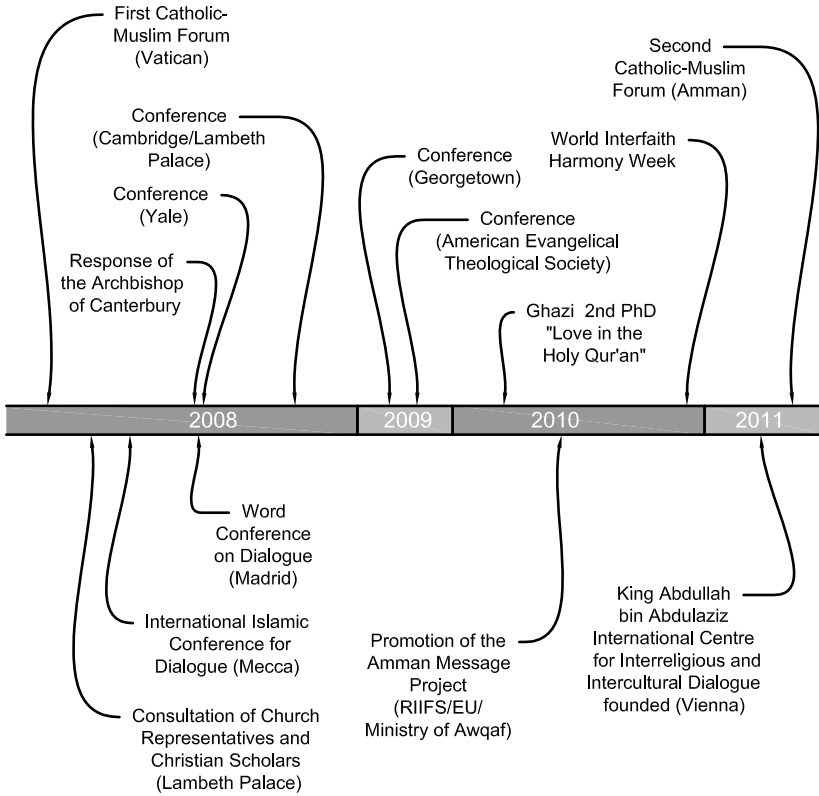
The initial document attracted large numbers of signatories, and a remarkable range of responses from Christian groups. In the years immediately following the publication of the document, a very substantial conversation unfolded, probing difficult areas of divergence and tension as well as common ground. But the initiative is in danger of being forgotten in the climate of bloodshed, terror and panic that is overwhelming the Middle East and affecting every 'Western' society

as well. A good many regard dialogue between Muslims and Christians as a waste of time or worse – as some sort of capitulation to an aggressive and alien religious tyranny. But this is dangerous nonsense – dangerous because it freezes all of us in perpetual hostility and suspicion, nonsense because it ignores the substantial work done by the authors of the declaration and many others in showing that mutually respectful – not uncritical – exploration is possible. It is high time that we revisited this discussion; we forget it at our peril. In this excellent and exceptionally thorough monograph, Dr Markiewicz gives us a close reading of the original text and the main responses, drawing extensively on personal recollection as well as documentation. It is a uniquely comprehensive account of a significant episode, perceptive, questioning and, above all, timely. I hope it will encourage many readers to look again at this moment of mutual understanding and positive expectation, and to ask how such understanding and expectation can be reborn in our current situation.

Dr Rowan Williams
Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge University
104th Archbishop of Canterbury, 2002–2012

Timeline





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List of Abbreviations

ACMCU	Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding
ACW/CW	<i>[A] Common Word Between Us and You</i> (2007) = Open Letter of the 138
ACWftCG	<i>A Common Word for the Common Good</i>
ADIC	International Union for Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Education
AIM	The Amman Interfaith Message
AM	<i>The Amman Message</i>
PAMP	Promotion of the Amman Message Project
AMSS (UK)	The Association of Muslim Social Scientists in the UK
C-1	C-1 World Dialogue initiative
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
CIBEDO	Christlich-islamische Begegnungs- und Dokumentationsstelle
CIP	Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme
EKD	The Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland)
ICDAC	International Center for Dialogue among Civilizations
KACND	King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue
KAICIID	King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Foundation
NA	<i>Nostra Aetate</i> (Document of the Second Vatican Council)
NYT	The New York Times
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Conference

Open Letter	Open Letter of 38 Muslim scholars and authority figures on October 13, 2006, addressed to Pope Benedict XVI in response to the Regensburg Lecture
OT	Old Testament
PCID	The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
RABIIT	The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought
RAICR	Royal Academy for Islamic Civilization Research
RIIFS	Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies
RISSC [MABDA]	The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, also abbreviated to MABDA after its Arabic name.
RL/RA	Regensburg Lecture/Address of Pope Benedict XVI entitled <i>Faith, Reason and University</i> at the University of Regensburg on 12 th September 2006.
[T]YR	[The] Yale Response (2007)
Three Points	The Three Points of <i>The Amman Message</i>
UNAO	United Nations Alliance of Civilisations
VELKD	The United Lutheran-Protestant Church in Germany (Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands)
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCRP	World Conference of Religions for Peace
WEF	World Economic Forum
WIHW	World Interfaith Harmony Week
[Y]DS	[Yale] Divinity School

1. Introduction

“Christian-Muslim relations over the centuries have developed on a kind of layer by layer basis: what happened in one community in one generation produced a reaction in the other community which in turn contributed to the development of formulations and attitudes in the first community in later generations. In Christian-Muslim relations, memories are long.”¹

– Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*

1.1 Abstract

On October 13, 2007, an open letter was published by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT) in Jordan, which was signed by 138 influential Muslim leaders and scholars from around the world, from a wide variety of denominations and schools of thought within Islam. This document, entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* (ACW), was addressed to the contemporary leadership of Christian Churches, federations and organizations.² The message behind ACW was an invitation to Christians (through their leaders) to enter into dialogue with Muslims (via the signatories) on the basis of two commandments common to both faiths – those of loving the one God and of loving one’s neighbor.

ACW was the first international pan-Islamic document addressed to Christians, and it elicited a number of responses from high-profile individuals or their institutions, including the Vatican, the archbishop of Canterbury, the World Baptist Union, the Yale Theological Seminary, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the World Council of Churches, to name but a few. ACW also inspired a number and variety of reactions and initiatives – collectively called “fruits.” A Catholic-Muslim Forum was established by the Vatican in 2008 with the intention of meeting every three years; over seven hundred English-language articles have been written about ACW, and universities in both predominantly

1 Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 3.

2 For a full list of the Christian addressees of ACW, see “Chapter 4: The ‘A Common Word’ Text,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition*, MABDA English Monograph Series 20 (Amman: RISSC, 2012), 51–52.

Muslim and Christian countries have now incorporated it into their courses.³ It paved the way for the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week, which was initiated in 2010. The RABIIT Chairman, HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal (henceforth “Ghazi”), states that ACW “has in many ways become the world’s leading interfaith dialogue initiative between Christians and Muslims specifically.”⁴

The majority of scholarly investigation up until the present has focused on a systematic assessment of ACW’s message – the dual commandment to love – within the context of Christian-Muslim dialogue and relations. The genesis of ACW, on the other hand, has received almost no scholarly attention. What we can deduce about ACW’s genesis has to be pieced together from isolated sayings in different texts, and even then the narrative remains incomplete.

The text of ACW states that it was published “on the One Year Anniversary of the Open Letter of 38 Muslim Scholars to H.H. Pope Benedict XVI.”⁵ The Open Letter of the 38 (“Open Letter”) was a response to remarks made by the pope during an address at the University of Regensburg on September 12, 2006. In this address, which has become known as the Regensburg Lecture (RL), Pope Benedict XVI made some remarks about Islam that were regarded by many Muslims as being highly offensive. The lecture was widely reported and resulted in a flood of reactions from Muslims and Christians, one of which was the Open Letter signed by 38 Muslim scholars and authority figures. The Open Letter was published one month after the RL, and ACW was published one year after the first Open Letter. The RL is often given as ACW’s starting point: ACW responded to a provocation, a perceived attack on Islam by the pope, and used the same open-letter format as with the Open Letter of the 38 to broaden its circle of addressees.

The present investigation intends to fill this gap in scholarship about ACW by investigating its genesis in order to piece together the history of how this document came to be written in its present form.

3 “Chapter 8: Publications and Courses,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You: 5-Year Anniversary Edition*, 122–123.

4 HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal, “On ‘A Common Word Between Us and You,’” in *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on loving God and Neighbor*. Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, Melissa Yarrington, eds., (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Publ., 2010), 13.

5 Cf. “Chapter 4: The ‘A Common Word’ Text,” 51.

1.2 The Global Encounter of Different Faiths

Although different faiths have been encountering each other from the outset of human history, modern dialogue initiatives only became popular in the second half of the twentieth century, when a unique combination of factors drew the world's attention to global religious plurality. Phillip Kennedy, in *A Modern Introduction to Theology*, lists ten recent important historical developments:

“The first development is globalization,⁶ which has brought religious traditions into much closer contact than at any previous stage in human history. The second was the First World War, which was launched by a Christian German emperor and waged between nominally Christian nations.⁷ The blood-letting of the war seriously questioned the extent to which the nations waging it were actually Christian. A third development is represented by the advent of widespread travel by jets catapulting travellers from one corner of the globe to another in relatively brief spans of time and bringing them into actual contact with previously unencountered religious aliens. Fourth, large-scale transmigrations of people from east to west and from north to south have brought religiously different people face to face. Fifth, the invention of the television readily gives people images of alien cultures and unfamiliar religious practices. Television sets can be housed in huts in the Amazon jungle or on atolls of the Pacific Ocean. [...] A sixth development mirrors the fifth: satellite and internet connections. In the seventh place, the demise of colonialism has enabled previously styled colonials to migrate and inhabit the former bases of colonial power. [...] The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 constitutes an eighth major historical catalyst for the growing awareness of religious diversity. In the new state Jews could establish centres of higher learning without fear of persecution. In ninth place, the formation of faculties of religious studies over the past twenty or thirty years has produced a new breed of scholars who are able to investigate the phenomenon of religion without being controlled by the Church. Tenth and finally, post-modern philosophies, according to which there is no truth or absolute value, challenge the notion that a religion can define absolute truth absolutely.”⁸

Kennedy's list illustrates that the twentieth century represents a new turning point in intercultural and interfaith communication. Never before in human history has communication over such long distances and to such diverse audiences been possible or so simple. We have unprecedented access to a wealth of knowledge about people, places, cultures, lifestyles, etc., foreign to our own, and access is so egalitarian: one need not be literate to learn about new cultures, nor is

6 “Expressed at its simplest, globalization is an international process by which the economies and cultures of the globe have become steadily more interconnected through satellites, television, air travel and computers.” Phillip Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology: New Questions for Old Beliefs*. (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 240.

7 Cf. HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal in discussion with the author. September 14, 2011, Amman.

8 Kennedy, *A Modern Introduction to Theology*, 244f.