

The Common Word: The Principle of Love as the Key to Peacemaking  
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Let me begin by expressing my thanks to the State of Qatar – Emir, government and people – and also to the Brookings Institution for their leadership in organizing this important conference, and for their warm hospitality which makes us all feel that we are among our brothers and sisters.

Muslims, Christians and Jews constitute among them 55% of the human race. Through the last fourteen centuries of history, our relations have often been far from peaceful. And the events of these first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have made clear that if the followers of the Abrahamic faiths do not learn to live with each other in love, then we may not be able to live at all. But if Muslims, Christians and Jews can learn to love each other as we read in the Torah and in the teachings of Jesus and the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, then world peace will be much easier to attain.

On Eid al-Fitr 2007, 138 of the most prominent Muslim religious leaders and scholars in the world published an open letter titled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” in which they proposed to place Muslim-Christian relations on a new footing by putting at the center of that relationship the two commandments to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Many Christians, when we received it, immediately recognized it as potentially a watershed moment in the history of Muslim-Christian relations. In a moment I will explain why we saw this as a potential historic watershed, and what will be necessary for it to fulfill that potential. But first let me place it in context.

I trust that all of us attending this conference have come because we care deeply about making peace between the U.S. and the Muslim world. If we are serious about making peace, then it is critically important that we not ignore the religious dimension of the peacemaking process. The large majority of the population both of the U.S. and of the Muslim countries of the world (many with Christian or Jewish minorities) are practicing followers of Abrahamic faiths. Opinion polls consistently show that both Americans and Muslims trust their religious leaders more than they trust their political leaders. If we want peace between the American people and the peoples of the Muslim world, then it is imperative that we work with – not against – the religious convictions of these people.

Often diplomats, politicians, scholars and journalists see religious faith as part of the problem, not as part of the solution. In recent years bestselling books have been written arguing that religion “ruins everything.” Religion, some writers argue, is the root cause of violence and conflict in the world today. To these people the solution is to have *less* religion. If only the people of the world would become less religious, then we could make peace.

As a practical matter, this proposal will not work. First, it will not work because it is clear that with each passing year the people of the world are becoming *more* religious, not less, and in both the U.S. and the Muslim world most religious believers want to take their faith convictions into account when they are making political decisions. Second, it will not work because the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated that atheist ideologies like communism and secular nationalist ideologies like fascism have generated more violence between them than any religious belief system ever could.

But if we work with people's religious convictions – not against them – we discover that the Abrahamic faith traditions and their teachings on peace can be an extremely powerful force for good in the world. Indeed what we need is not less religious faith, but more of the right kind of faith, that is, faith rightly understood.

When Christians think about peace, we immediately think of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also” (Luke 6:27-29). “Be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). Christians also think about how Jesus modeled that peacemaking love when he laid down his life for his enemies and prayed for their forgiveness. Muslim and Jewish participants in this conference will think of similar texts in their own sacred Scriptures.

But when we look around us in the world, we see that Christians, Muslims and Jews are not always practicing these teachings. Some time before the worldwide scandal broke at Abu Ghraib prison, the military policeman who was the chief perpetrator of the atrocities there wrote a letter to his family in which he said: “The Christian in me knows that it is wrong, but the law enforcement officer in me loves to make a grown man piss his pants.” We know now that nearly all of the “interrogation techniques” which he used at Abu Ghraib had been specifically authorized by the Secretary of Defense, and that this military policeman believed that he was doing what his superiors wanted. So his conscience as a Christian came into conflict with his role as a military policeman, and the military policeman in him was able to suppress his Christian conscience. The problem here was not that he had too *much* faith. The problem was that he had too *little* faith – specifically that he had been taught to compartmentalize his faith and keep it away from the practice of his profession.

Similarly, when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurds of Halabja, the problem was not that he had too *much* faith as a Muslim; it was that he had too *little* faith, if any. Many other examples could be cited of Christians, Muslims and Jews who have perpetrated acts of violence contrary to the peaceful teachings of the faiths which they profess to hold.

Muslims, Christians and Jews have something in common: they each believe that their own faith teaches love and peaceful coexistence with others. And they each worry about whether perhaps the other faiths may not really teach love and peace in the same way.

Into this context the “Common Word” letter came like a ray of light in a dark world. This letter was important, first, because of the senior rank and broad representation of the leaders who signed it. Every major branch of Islam was represented among the signatories, as were many

nations across the Muslim world. And the signatories included many of the very highest-ranking and most influential Muslim religious leaders and scholars in the world. These were not just “liberal” Muslims who would tell Western Christians what they wanted to hear. These were high-ranking, mainstream, traditionalist Muslim leaders who command the loyalty of the masses.

The letter was important, second, because although it had a political goal – making peace – it took time to give careful attention to the theological and exegetical basis for peacemaking. If religious believers feel that they are being asked to ignore their Scriptures in order to make peace without reference to Scripture, then any commitment they make to peace will be shallow. The Common Word letter engaged in serious exegetical reflection on the Torah, on the Gospel, and on the Qur’an and Hadith, to demonstrate that the principle of love lies at the heart of these Scriptures, and to consider what implications that principle has for the way we treat one another. And in a remarkable display of generosity the authors of the Common Word letter engaged the Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions on the texts of the Torah and Gospel in a manner that demonstrated deep respect for the significance of these texts for Jews and Christians. Jewish and Christian readers found themselves saying, “Yes, that is what that text means to my community.”

The letter was important, third, because it did not ignore or minimize the real differences which do exist between the faiths. Religious believers will not trust an initiative in which they feel they are being asked to give up the historic convictions of their faith tradition in order to make a lowest-common-denominator peace. But they do welcome an initiative which points out what common ground does exist and which demonstrates how that common ground can form a basis for living together in peace amidst our differences.

The letter was important, fourth, because it twice mentioned that religious liberty is a crucial part of love of neighbor. The principle of religious liberty is extremely important to the Christian community, and Christians rejoiced to see this emphasis.

The letter was important, fifth, because it proposed to place what it called the two “Greatest Commandments” – to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves – at the center of the relationship between our religious communities. It emphasized that Jesus taught that these two commandments summarize all the Law and the Prophets. Many Christians were pleasantly surprised to see Muslim leaders placing the dual love command at the center of the teachings of Islam. But Christians certainly agreed that Jesus placed it at the center of the Christian faith. And readers familiar with Rabbi Hillel’s standing-on-one-foot teaching recognized that this understanding of the Torah is thoroughly at home in Judaism as well.

As Muslim and Christian readers hastened to assure one another that love does indeed lie at the heart of our respective faiths, those who were honest had to acknowledge at the same time that we do not, in fact, love one another as we should. That means that we need to repent (a word not often used in political and diplomatic circles!). And this is, in turn, what creates the potential for a watershed moment in the history of Muslim-Christian relations.

A number of Christian responses to the Common Word letter have been written by a variety of churches and Christian communities. Probably the most prominent and broadly representative of these was written by a group of scholars at Yale University Divinity School and was signed by

more than 300 prominent Christian leaders from every major branch of Christianity. These included senior Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and mainline Protestant leaders, and for the first time in history included the very top tier of Evangelical Protestant leaders from the U.S. and around the world. This response, titled “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” but commonly referred to as the “Yale response” gave a warm welcome to the Muslims’ initiative and sought to open a discussion about the meaning of that love of which we speak.

The release of the official Arabic translation of the Yale response prompted an electric reaction in the Arab press. Arab journalists spoke of being deeply moved, especially, by the fact that the Yale response included an apology for the Crusades. Some Arab writers urged that Muslim leaders should also apologize for wrongs committed against Christians and Jews.

This exchange of letters has launched a series of high-level dialogue meetings bringing together Muslim and Christian leaders to explore these matters more deeply. The first of these was held at Yale University and also included prominent Jewish leaders. Other noteworthy meetings have included a meeting at Cambridge University (involving the leadership of the Anglican Church) and at the Vatican in Rome. A major summit meeting is planned for the future in Jordan. At these meetings the Muslim, Christian and Jewish participants have often been surprised to discover more hope for peace among us than they had expected to find.

I stated at the outset that the Common Word initiative was “potentially” a watershed moment in the history of Muslim-Christian relations. I believe it is *potentially* the most important interfaith document that has been published since Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* in the 1960s. But there is no guarantee that that potential will be fulfilled. At least two things will be necessary if we are to “operationalize” the potential in the Common Word initiative: 1) Muslim and Christian leaders will need to set forth just what they mean by “love” in a manner that is highly practical, and 2) communication will need to take place within each faith community, so that ordinary believers in churches and mosques (and synagogues, as well) are included in the process and feel a sense of ownership.

To speak of “love” is to take the meaning of peace to a deeper level. The word “peace” can mean simply the absence of conflict. If we separate from each other, so that we are not killing each other, then we have a certain kind of peace. But if our vision of true peace involves loving God with all of our being and loving one another as we love ourselves, then this requires a very different kind of behavior from mere separation.

People hesitate to speak about love in the international arena. This is perhaps partly because they fear that the word “love” is not a practical word. One hears politicians speak of “peace,” but I cannot recall ever hearing any politician (with the single exception of President Jimmy Carter) speak of “love.” The word “love” sounds nice, but what practical implications does it have in every day life? What would a “policy of love” look like?

Perhaps another reason why people hesitate to speak about love in the international arena is that the word “love” has different meanings to different people, so it is unclear what we mean when we say it. In 2003, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, I participated in several demonstrations against the war. At these demonstrations I saw young people holding up signs which said, “Make

love, not war,” by which I believe they meant (at least in part) “Engage in sexual promiscuity, instead of war.” I agreed with them that love is the correct alternative to war, but I strongly disagreed with their interpretation of what “love” means. Instead my own children made a sign on which they wrote: “President Bush: What would Jesus do?” by which they meant that Jesus – who taught us to turn the other cheek, and who laid down his life in forgiving love for his enemies – would not invade a country which had not attacked him. I believe that this is a better understanding of the meaning of true love.

If the idea of “love” is to be practically useful in the international political arena, then the religious leaders who use this word will need to explain what we mean by it in very concrete terms. And Muslims, Christians and Jews will need to discuss with each other whether they mean the same things as each other when they use this word.

For example, one question which many Christians have asked is whether we should understand love as being unconditional. Does God call us to love everyone, whether righteous or unrighteous, and whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish or other? Does God call us to love even our enemies? Or does God call us to love only certain people?

In the dialogue meetings which have been held, the Muslim signatories of the Common Word letter have affirmed that when the Prophet said, “Your Islam is not complete until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself,” he was speaking not only of Muslim neighbors but also of non-Muslim neighbors. They have pointed out that at the time when the Prophet spoke this *hadith* and other *hadiths* about the rights of neighbors, most of the Muslim community – whether in Mecca or Medina – had Jewish, Christian and pagan neighbors. The Prophet himself had non-Muslim neighbors.

Similarly, when Jesus was asked what was the greatest of all of God’s commands, he replied, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Then the questioner asked him, “But who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied with a story about a man who showed love toward a needy person who was from another country and another religion (Luke 10:27ff.). In other words Jesus says that we must unconditionally love all people, regardless of their nationality or religion. And, yes, Jesus says that we must love our enemies (Luke 6:27).

Of course both Christians and Muslims have often failed in putting this unconditional love into practice. But the principle in both of our faiths is clear. And this very discussion itself brings Muslims and Christians alike to a point of repentance, and that can lead to a watershed in our relations.

But suppose that we have a very practical understanding of what it means to love one another, and suppose that we agree that if we practice that love, world peace will be much easier to achieve. If that conversation occurs only among senior leaders and scholars, and does not draw in ordinary believers, then there will be no watershed in our lifetime.

This means that extensive discussions need to take place *within* each faith community about these matters, so that ordinary believers can own the process. Those discussions are already beginning to take place, but this is a slow process and will take time.

One thing that could greatly accelerate the process would be if we communicated more effectively with the news media and helped them to see why this is an interesting story to report.

Every time some relatively marginal Christian leader says some outrageously offensive thing about Islam and Muslims, and every time some relatively marginal Muslim leader issues an offensive fatwa against non-Muslims, the story is front-page news in both the Western press and the Muslim press. But when the most senior, mainstream Muslim and Christian leaders come together and commit themselves to love one another, the news story is mostly buried on the religion page deep inside the newspaper, if it is covered at all.

*Christianity Today* magazine (the flagship publication of American Evangelicalism) recently listed the “top 10 news stories” of 2008, and they placed the Common Word initiative near the top. The Christian and Muslim blogosphere in 2008 were filled with fevered discussion about the Common Word initiative. But the secular news media almost completely ignored the story. This would make sense if they had similarly ignored negative stories about violence and anger between Muslims and Christians, but they did not.

Of course controversy sells more newspapers than peacemaking. But the Common Word initiative has generated plenty of controversy within the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities which would make interesting stories to report. Somehow we who are involved in the Common Word process have failed to communicate effectively with the secular news media to help them understand why this process is potentially so historic and why the story would be interesting to their readers.

Certainly anyone can see that if ordinary Muslims and Christians believe that it is their duty to fight one another, then world peace will be impossible to achieve, but if ordinary Muslims and Christians believe that it is their duty to love one another as they love themselves, and if they think in very practical terms about the implications which that has for how they treat one another, and if they repent of their unloving treatment of one another, then world peace will be much easier to attain.

The peace of the Lord be with you all.