

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO 'A COMMON WORD': Why I Signed the Yale Response

Colin Chapman, 3 March, 2008

Published under "Featured Article" at [www.globalmissiology.org](http://www.globalmissiology.org), April 2008

It's not an exaggeration to say that *A Common Word* (ACW) has split Christians – and especially evangelical Christians - down the middle. There have of course always been differences of approach over how we should think about Islam and engage with Muslims. But this Open Letter, signed in October 2007 by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars and addressed to 'Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere', has brought these differences out into the open in a very obvious way.

Let me begin by explaining why I felt positive about ACW when it first appeared and why I signed the Yale Response. I will then summarise the main arguments developed in several recent Christian statements which have been critical of *both* ACW itself *and* the Yale Letter (e.g. by Patrick Sookhdeo of the Barnabas Fund and Mark Durie, [www.acommonword.blogspot.com](http://www.acommonword.blogspot.com)). Finally I will explain why I disagree with these cautious and critical responses.

### *Reasons for a Positive Response*

- The signatories represent many different kinds of Islam, and include leaders and scholars from many different countries. Never before has such a wide cross-section of Muslim leaders come together to issue an appeal of this kind.
- Since ACW is an invitation to Christians to engage in further dialogue, we either *accept* the invitation, *decline* it or *ignore* it. Declining or ignoring an invitation as serious as this sends a very unhelpful message to the Muslim world.
- It recognises the seriousness of the political issues dividing the world, suggesting that 'our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.' This is no exercise in detached, philosophical or theological dialogue.
- In emphasising 'the primacy of total love and devotion to God' and 'all-embracing constant and active love of God', it uses Jewish and Christian scripture to sum up ideas which are seen as fundamental also in Islam. It is extraordinary that Muslims are attempting to summarise some of their key beliefs not in traditional Islamic language but in language drawn from Jewish and Christian scriptures.
- It avoids polemical approaches by recognising the common ground as well as differences between the two faiths, and expresses the hope that 'this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us ...'
- It recognises the importance of human rights issues, saying that 'justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour'.
- By suggesting that 'the Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is ... the common ground between Christianity

and Islam', it seems to recognise that Christians acknowledge the oneness of God and might be genuine monotheists.

- It also seems to recognise that Christian beliefs about Jesus may not amount to the cardinal sin of *shirk* (association, i.e. putting a created being on the level of the Creator). 'Taking other lords beside God' is interpreted to mean that 'Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God has commanded them, and not have "to prostrate before kings and the like" ...'

### *Reasons for Cautious Or Critical Responses*

- The interpretation of several Qur'anic verses in ACW is significantly different from traditional interpretations. For example the key verse from which the title, *A Common Word*, is taken, ('O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God ...' 3:64), in its original context is not an invitation to an open-ended dialogue, but rather a plea for Jews and Christians to accept an Islamic formula about the oneness of God.
- The letter is an example of *taqiyya* (usually translated 'dissimulation'), the principle which, in the words of Patrick Sookhdeo, 'allows Muslims to practise deception in certain circumstance. Mark Durie speaks of the Letter's 'indirectness', implying that it is not entirely honest in its presentation and intentions.
- Far from being an invitation to genuine dialogue, it amounts to a missionary call, inviting Christians to accept an Islamic understanding of the oneness of God as the basis for dialogue. In the words of Mark Durie, 'Christians are being asked to accept Islamic monotheism as the foundation for interfaith dialogue and peaceful relationships'. Similarly, Patrick Sookhdeo writes: 'Although presented as interfaith dialogue, the letter can equally be viewed as a classical example of Islamic *da'wa* (mission). It is a call to accept the Muslim concept of the unity of God (*tawhid*) and therefore to reject the incompatible Christian views of the Trinity and the deity of Christ... The message is that if Christians will accept Islam's concept of the unity of God (thus denying the basic doctrines of the Trinity and deity of Christ), Muslims will accept the Christian values of love for God and neighbour as central to Islam. Thus a radical revolutionary change in Christianity is demanded in exchange for a superficial change of emphasis in Islamic perceptions.'
- There are so many things that are *not* mentioned in ACW. There is no reference, for example, to the militant verses in the Qur'an, no acknowledgement of God's love for humankind as a whole, no recognition of human rights abuses against Christians in Islamic countries, and no apology for the crimes of Muslims against non-Muslims.
- Positive responses to ACW from Christians will have a harmful effect on Christians living in Islamic countries. Mark Durie believes that 'the tone adopted in the Yale Response will come across as capitulation, and it will signal abandonment of the cause of their persecuted brother and sisters in Christ.'

### *Responses to These Concerns*

- Observations about the interpretation of Qur'anic verses are entirely valid. I have made similar points about the interpretation of key Qur'anic verses in a chapter 'The Qur'anic View of Christian' in my *Cross and Crescent responding to the challenges of Islam* (IVP, 2007). At the same time I believe that the best way for Christians to respond to ACW is to accept the invitation, and, in the context of serious discussion with Muslims, go on to ask all the hard questions we want. Instead of using all the difficulties in the letter as reasons for not taking the invitation at its face value, they should be reserved for serious discussion *after* we have accepted the invitation. If you've had a difficult relationship with your neighbours in the past and they suddenly invite you to their home, the culturally appropriate thing to do – at least in any Muslim context - is to accept the invitation and visit them. While you're drinking tea or coffee and if you're establishing some kind of relationship, you can raise your concerns at the appropriate time. Raising all sorts of very legitimate and relevant questions about the wording of the invitation - and thus in effect ignoring the invitation or turning it down – sends the wrong signal to the Muslim world.
- My reading of ACW is not that Muslims are asking Christians to accept an Islamic understanding of the oneness of God as the basis and pre-condition of dialogue, even though this is certainly the original thrust of the key verse in 3:64. I suspect rather that they *may* genuinely be prepared to believe that we Christians think of ourselves as monotheists and that, in spite of our beliefs about Jesus, we do have our own understanding of the oneness of God. I say 'may' deliberately, and one of the first questions that I have raised in discussing the document with Muslims is: 'Do you accept that we are monotheists? And do you or do you not believe that we are guilty of *shirk* because of what we believe about Jesus?' If I'm wrong in giving the authors of ACW the benefit of the doubt, I have at least cleared the air right at the beginning of the discussion and we know exactly where we stand.
- If, as everyone seems to acknowledge, there is a highly significant change in tone and emphasis in ACW, there are two possible ways of interpreting this change. The first is to be suspicious and conclude that there is an element of disingenuousness, of not deception, in this new approach. The second is to believe the best about the Muslim authors and accept that they may genuinely want to turn over a new leaf and thus start a new chapter in Christian-Muslim relations. I don't want to be in the position of assuming that Muslims can never change their ideas or make any new approaches to Christians and Christianity.
- In my understanding, ACW is deliberately turning away from traditional polemical attacks on Christian beliefs, and while not ignoring the very significant differences between Muslims and Christians in their beliefs about God and Jesus, trying to approach these controversial questions from a new angle. This approach seems to me to be very close to the dialogical method that I have outlined in a chapter on 'Exploring Dialogue' in *Cross and Crescent*. Using the diagram of two overlapping circles, I have written seven simple propositions in the area of overlap: God creates, God is one, God reveals, God loves, God judges, God forgives, and God rules. The point here is that while Christians and Muslims can agree on the propositions themselves, they need to share with each other their different understandings of these simple sentences. Mark Durie believes that 'True dialogue can only proceed by

respecting the integrity of the other's position', and concludes that ACW is trying to force Christians to accept an Islamic understanding of the Oneness of God and of Jesus. I agree with him that 'The Muslims who signed this letter are not fools.' But unlike him, I would like to believe that ACW is genuinely trying to respect the integrity of the Christian position, and starting from areas where Christians and Muslims can agree, go on to discuss where we disagree.

- It is absolutely right to point out that the Arabic word *da'wa* can mean *both* 'invitation' and 'mission'. I don't for one moment doubt that many, if not all, of the Muslim signatories of ACW see it as part of their efforts to share their faith with the Christian world. I am always surprised when Muslims do *not* seem to want to convert me to Islam. But it saddens me when I am made to feel that I must turn down a very genuine invitation (*da'wa*) simply because the word *da'wa* can also mean 'mission'. A Shi'ite in Lebanon told me some years ago that one of my students had said to him, 'I love you so much that I wish you would become a Christian!' Far from being upset, he was delighted that this student was passionate enough about his faith to want to share it with him. Having two missionary faiths which believe that they have a message for the world provides a good basis for serious dialogue!
- It seems to me to be quite unreasonable to criticise the document for what it does *not* say. An open letter of this kind can hardly be expected to cover *every* possible subject that concerns Christian-Muslim relationships. Since ACW is offered as an overture, extending a hand of friendship to the Christian world, it should not be criticised for not containing every possible subject that needs to be explored. While it says very little about human rights concerns, for example, it *does* recognise the importance of 'justice and freedom of religion'.
- Having spent some time with one of the prime movers behind ACW at a dialogue meeting between Evangelical Christians and Muslims in Libya in January, 2008, I believe I now have the freedom to put to him (at the appropriate time) all the difficult questions I like – whether it's about the content of ACW, about the persecution of Christians or about what we believe about the person and work of Jesus. If I had presented him with ten reasons for not accepting the invitation to dialogue, I might have soured the relationship from the very beginning. As it is, a genuine relationship has been established in which I can now go on to bear my witness to Jesus.

I suggest, therefore, that the best way to test the genuineness of this remarkable invitation is to accept it with enthusiasm, and then, having done our homework thoroughly, start (or continue) the dialogue face to face. In responding in this way, I don't think I'm being naïve or making things difficult for other Christians. Mark Durie believes that the Yale Response 'has made *A Common Word* to be a source of division and disharmony among Christians.' My answer is that while the Yale Response isn't perfect, it has highlighted differences of attitude and approach which have been with us for a long time. And instead of slamming the door shut, keeps it wide open, providing new opportunities at a very significant time in history for thoughtful and sensitive Christian witness to the Muslim world.

Colin Chapman worked for 17 years at different periods in the Middle East, mostly in Egypt and Lebanon, where his last post was lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. In the UK he has taught at Trinity College, Bristol, and at Crowther Hall, Selly Oak, Birmingham. He is now enjoying active semi-retirement in Cambridge, England. His books include 'The Case for Christianity', 'Whose Promised Land?', 'Whose Holy City? Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', and 'Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam' (revised edition, IVP USA February 2008).