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**Editorial: To Dialogue or Not to Dialogue: That is the Question. By Roy Oksnevad**  
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Muslims have drafted an open letter entitled, "A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US" (<http://www.acommonword.com/>), expressing a desire to dialogue with Christians. Christians have responded with their own letter (<http://www.yale.edu/faith/abou-commonword.htm>). Does this mean Muslims have come to a new understanding in wanting relations with Christians? Should Christians consider this open letter as an open door to dialogue, or should we remain overly cautious? (see [http://www.barnabasfund.org/news/archives/text.php?ID\\_news\\_items=342](http://www.barnabasfund.org/news/archives/text.php?ID_news_items=342))

### **Personal Experience with Dialogue**

I was at an interfaith dialogue in New York City with high officials from the Muslim world. Their idea of "interfaith dialogue" was to tell Christians that if we believe as the Qur'an states we should believe, there is no difference between us. I was offended by these pre-prepared statements; they had no feel or understanding of Christian doctrine or what Christians believe. This was not dialogue; it was monologue, with an occasional real interchange.

Is this Open Letter a sincere desire from Muslims to have dialogue which has no hidden agenda? Even the title—"A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US" (Surah 3:64 read 61-72)—comes from a very offensive verse in the Qur'an which is a call for Christians to become Muslim. Muslims are, however, recognizing that there is a war for the soul and reputation of Islam. They perceive the threat coming from two fronts—from *within* Islam, expressed through "puritan" Islam which perpetrates the ugly expressions of Islam and from *the media and Evangelical Christians* who highlight evil, hate and destruction perpetrated in the name of Islam. Moderate Muslims need to dialogue with the world for their very survival.

This letter is unprecedented in that it seems to be a call to dialogue with Christians about two subjects: (1) the love of God and (2) the love of neighbor. Who else but Evangelical Christians are the ones to speak on these topics? I say, let's dialogue. However, we should not be naive in coming to the table to talk. We should define the love of God and the love of neighbor in a biblical sense, not an Islamic sense. The love of neighbor should include not calling Christians and Jews names and not misrepresenting Christian doctrine. Even the practice of cursing Jews and Christians after *Juma* (Friday noon) prayers in Palestine needs to be addressed. Common practices that dehumanize the "other" such as *ridda* (apostasy), *dhimmi* (second-class citizens), *murtadd* (apostate), *kufr* (a negative term for unbeliever) and *takfir* (pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever) should be talked about. Jesus' admonition about judging others, religious freedom for Muslims to change their faith and women's and human rights should be topics of dialogue. These topics are recognized in the "Amman Message" ([http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=74](http://ammanmessage.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=74)), which tries to defend itself from this very common practice of judging other Muslims as infidels. The two principles of the love of God and neighbor are great themes to dialogue on. However, dialogue without clear steps to change agreed-upon grievances is futile and discourages Christian interaction with Muslims.

### **Dialogue Defined**

Dialogue by definition recognizes the legitimacy of the other person. If Muslims want dialogue, they must come face-to-face with what Christians *really* believe, not what the Qur'an *says* Christians believe. If they cannot, they are not ready for dialogue. Christians should realize that if Muslim leaders accept our

definitions of faith, then they must face their own people who refuse to accept the legitimacy of the other. We should help to call them upward to God's standard of love.

Will true dialogue happen? Don't expect it. However, Evangelical Christians must be present for Muslims to hear a clear gospel message; liberal Christians will not give them one. If Muslims want to talk, we should talk in a manner filled with compassion, love and an uncompromising belief in the Christian faith. Our love to openly dialogue with them must be modeled for them. This will only happen when we talk. So let's talk.

### **Views from a Former Muslim**

I interviewed a Muslim Background Believer, who initiated dialogues between Muslims and Christians for ten years while he himself was still a Muslim. After asking him his opinion on dialogues with Muslims, he said that dialogue is difficult because many people, particularly Muslims, are not sincere and honest in wanting to dialogue. Muslims need to be honest with themselves about Islam and the Qur'an before they will be honest with us. This MBB explained that Muslims prefer not to dialogue on a theological level, but on a social level, or in the area that some call "religious humanism."<sup>1</sup> He speculated three possible motivations for Muslims wanting dialogue with Christians:

1. Moderate Muslims want to present a good face of Islam to the West.
2. Muslims want to express their concern of the threat of Christian missionaries.
3. Moderate Muslims want to give hope to disillusioned Muslims that there is good in Islam.

When asked what role dialogue played in his coming to Christ, the MBB replied that only the interaction with Evangelical Christians made an impact on his life; dialogues with liberal Christians did not.

### **Conclusion**

Muslims have requested dialogue with Christians. The topics for discussion suggested by Muslims are the love of God and the love of neighbor. Is this a great place to start discussion with Muslims? Yes indeed! Do Muslims understand the biblical definition of these two topics? No. Is it possible that Muslims have a hidden agenda? Probable. Should Christians refuse to talk with Muslims under these two topics? If we don't, who will? Moderate Muslims want to talk. Let's talk.

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<sup>1</sup> In Khaled Abou el Fadl's book, [The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists](#), he lays his thesis for "Moderate" Islam which he describes as anchoring Islam in a humanistic understanding of their religion to gain the moral and ethical direction Allah has given.