

**“A COMMON WORD?”**  
**REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE**  
**Larry Poston, Nyack College**

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“A Common Word Between Us and You”—Background

On September 13, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI addressed an audience at the University of Regensburg on the topic of “Faith, Reason, and the University.” While his message focused on the necessity of maintaining a religious faith based upon and commensurate with Reason, a quotation early in the speech from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus (1350-1425) produced a highly negative reaction from Muslims around the world. In a discussion with a Persian scholar on the subject of Christianity’s relationship to Islam, the emperor had challenged his Muslim colleague to “show...just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” The citation was meant to be nothing more than a preface to a plea for rational discussion regarding religion, but many Muslims were incensed, considering the quotation to be further evidence of Christianity’s continuing “crusader mentality.”

In late September of 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and clergymen issued a response to the Regensburg address. The document was entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” and was designed to promote “open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding” between the world’s Christian and Muslim communities. A website was established for public review of the document (see <http://www.acommonword.com/>), and to this site has been added a variety of responses from Christian individuals and groups. Among the more notable of these was a letter penned by a panel of scholars at the Yale Divinity School’s Center for Faith and Culture. This document, entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” was published in the New York Times along with the names of 135 Christians who endorsed the sentiments expressed therein. Many of the signatories are Evangelical scholars, pastors, and missionary statesmen.

Summary and Analysis of “A Common Word”

Essentially, the Muslim document proposes that the basis for peace and understanding between Christianity and Islam already exists: “the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the Neighbor form a common ground upon which Islam and Christianity (and Judaism) are founded.” The Muslim *shahadah* (“*There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger*”) and one of Islam’s traditions (“*None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself*”) are considered to be the Islamic equivalents of Jesus’ teaching regarding the two greatest commandments (“*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength*” and “[love] your neighbor as yourself”).

The authors of “A Common Word” claim that Muhammad was actually “through inspiration” repeating the Bible’s first and greatest commandment, and he thus “brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new” to humankind. Muslims, Christians and Jews should all be “free to follow what God commanded them, and not have to prostrate before kings and the like.” Christians are to be assured that neither the authors nor the adherents of Islam in general are against them, as long as the Christian community does not wage war against or oppress Muslims.

Islam recognizes Jesus as the Messiah; Muslims are therefore *with* Christians, not against them. Concluding the document is an invitation to recognize and honor this “common ground,” and to “vie with each other only in righteousness and good works,” respecting each other, being fair, just, and kind to one another, and living in “sincere peace, harmony, and mutual goodwill.”

There are several issues that may be raised with respect to “A Common Word,” five of which may be viewed as particularly significant:

- First, does “the unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbor” truly comprise an essential “common ground” between Christianity and Islam? While it may be true that “the two religions have these three things in common,” are these the only items that ecumenicity should be built upon? Are there not other aspects of each faith that should be taken into consideration as well?
- Was Muhammad actually “through inspiration” re-stating the Bible’s first commandment?
- If “God confirms in the Qur’an that Muhammad brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new,” why then did Islam arise as a new and competitive world religion?
- What is to be done about the significant differences in the areas of theology and praxis that have historically divided the two communities? Are these to be overlooked, forgotten, or presumed not to exist?
- If “finding common ground is not [to be considered] simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders,” what, practically speaking, are the Muslim authors asking for?

### 1. Concerning “Unity, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor”

When Christians speak of “the unity of God,” do they mean what Muslims historically have meant by this phrase? Perhaps even more to the point is the question as to whether the Muslim authors of “A Common Word” are reflecting the historic *Muslim* view of this concept.

The text of the document states that “the words: *He hath no associate*, remind Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls...”<sup>1</sup> These words are from a *hadith*—a tradition—and consequently carry less weight for most Muslims than would a Quranic citation. But further on in the document there is a quotation from Surah 3:64, which forbids the ascribing of partners to God. This passage is said by the authors to be indicative of no more than the need to acknowledge the Oneness of God. But traditionally this passage has been used to condemn *shirk*, arguably the greatest sin in Islam. *Shirk* is a denial of *tawhid*—the absolute Oneness of God, and for 1400 years the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity has been considered to be a form of *shirk*. In the eyes of a majority of Muslims, Trinitarianism is a limited polytheism, and as such is condemned by the Qur’an. Surah 5:73 states that “*They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.*”

“A Common Word” states that “Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, not in the same way Christians do...” A small portion of Surah 4:171 is then cited in a very accommodating fashion. But this passage in its entirety is an exhortation to the “People of the Book” to “*commit no excesses in your religion; nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary... Say not “Trinity:” desist; it will be better for you; for Allah is One*

*God... (Far Exalted is He) above having a son.*” Orthodox Christianity can give no approval whatsoever to this passage, since it denies the doctrines of the Trinity and the sonship of Jesus directly, and by implication rejects His deity and incarnation as well.

With respect to “love of God,” the document makes it clear that Muslims are commanded to “love God uniquely.” They are forbidden to love any “associate” of God, citing Surah 2:165: *“Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God.”* Traditionally this is yet another passage which has been interpreted to be a rejection of Trinitarianism. The Christian view of Jesus as a member of the Godhead makes Him an “associate” of God. As such, He is a legitimate object of worship for Christians, but regarding such a practice, Surah 5:116 presents the following scenario: *“Allah will say, ‘O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, ‘worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?’ He will say: ‘Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right to say.’”*

In the New Testament, however, Jesus accepted the worshipful confession of Peter that He was *“the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:16). He accepted the worship of the women after His resurrection (Matthew 28:9), of Thomas who called Him *“Lord”* and *“God”* (John 20:28), and of his disciples on the Mount of Olives prior to His ascension (Matthew 28:17). No orthodox Muslim can give credence to these accounts or give approval of the actions of these persons—and no Christian can deny them.

The historic Christian view of “the oneness of God” does not at all conform to what Muslims believe. To claim that Christians and Muslims share “a common ground” in this area is patently false—unless, of course, the authors of “A Common Word” are willing to concede the falsity of the Quranic passages quoted above, or Christians are willing to deny the historic Christian doctrine of the Triune essence of God.

## 2. Muhammad’s “Inspiration”

Was the text of the Qur’an received by Muhammad “through inspiration,” and were his words in actuality “re-stating the Bible’s first commandment?” Our answer to the second of these questions would be in the negative, for the reasons that we gave above in response to Question 1. Since the Muslims in their document have chosen to stress the absolute Oneness of the God who is to be loved to the exclusion of all associates, and since they have historically viewed the Christian belief in the Triune God as “attributing partners” to Him, Christians who *“love the Lord their God”* cannot be said to be worshipping with the same mental constructs of God as Muslims have.

Christians have historically denied that Muhammad spoke “under inspiration”—if by this term we mean “inspiration of God.” The inscripturated revelation of God ended with the letters and Revelation of the Apostle John at the end of the first century CE. Canonical literature was thus “closed” at that time, and the Bible in its present form was ratified by the Church at the end of the fourth century. No additional scriptural revelation has occurred, meaning that Muhammad’s words may not be seen as such. Indeed, the historic view of Christians has been that since Muhammad’s teachings deviate so widely from the canonical writings of both Israel (i.e., the Old Testament) and the Church (i.e., the New Testament), his “revelation” must be seen to be included in the genre of teachings about which the Apostle Paul gave such stern warnings (see Galatians 1:8).

In addition, the commands to “love God” and “love one’s neighbor” taken by themselves fall far short of the full range of New Testament requirements for the salvation of a human being

and the new birth of his/her spiritual aspect. The New Testament requires that one “*confess that Jesus is Lord,*” and that one “*believe that God has raised Him from the dead*” (Romans 10:9). This passage is in actuality the *true* “shahadah” of the New Testament Christian. Muslims deny *both* parts of Romans 10:9; for them Jesus is neither Lord nor has He been raised from the dead. Consequently, they can know nothing of the salvation that is available in Christ. Furthermore, a person is unable to *truly* “love God and his neighbor” apart from the new birth which is attained through the above confessions. Certainly one can in an external sense *appear* to “love God and neighbor,” in ways that may be culturally sanctioned and even applauded. But Jesus warned that a person can preach in His name, cast out demons in His name, and even perform miracles in His name—and still be unknown to Him from the standpoint of salvation. Such a person is considered to be an “evildoer” (see Matthew 7:22-23).

### 3. Nothing New?

If, as the Muslim document claims, “God confirms in the Qur’an that Muhammad brought nothing fundamentally or essentially new,” we would ask why Islam ever arose as a new and competitive world religion. The Muslim signatories cite Surah 46:9 in support of their contention, in which Muhammad claims that he is “...*no bringer of new-fangled doctrine among the messengers...*” But Muslims have always claimed that both the Old Testament and the New Testament as they currently appear are corrupt and untrustworthy.<sup>2</sup> These books no longer contain the Tawrah and the Injil that the Qur’an speaks of; they do not express the words of God as previously revealed. So while it may be claimed that Muhammad brought nothing that had not been revealed before, a Muslim must hold that what Muhammad taught was indeed “new” to the people of his time, since no one had access to uncorrupted revelation.

“A Common Word” insists that because they are all considered “People of the Book,” “Muslims, Christians, and Jews should be free to follow what God commanded them, and not have to prostrate before kings and the like.” Here the authors cite the command of Sura 2:256 that “*there is to be no compulsion in religion*” and champion the concept of “freedom of religion.” However, the statement as it stands is inherently contradictory, in that its literal application on the part of Christians would undermine the Muslims’ intent. They cite Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50: “*For he who is not against us is on our side*”—and therefore invite Christians to “consider Muslims *not against* and thus *with them...*” But if Christians are “free to follow what God commanded them,” they must at some point engage the adherents of Islam evangelistically, fulfilling the commands of God to “*preach the good news to all creation*” (Mark 16:15); to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*” (i.e., the Trinity; Matthew 28:19); to call upon people to “*confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised Him from the dead*”—and thus be “saved” (Romans 10:9); and to acknowledge the truth that “*no one who denies the Son has the Father*” (1 John 2:23). If Christians follow what God has commanded them, they will be seeking to bring about the new birth of Muslims from out of their state of Islamic unbelief and into the light of New Testament faith.

### 4. Obviously Different Religions

“A Common Word” recognizes that “Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions” and concedes that “there is no minimizing some of their formal differences.” The

document concludes with a plea to “let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us; let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works.” A significant question, however, is whether the alleged Muslim and Christian emphasis on “love of God and neighbor” is sufficient to overcome these “formal differences that cannot be minimized.” Is it truly possible to consider religions in a phenomenological fashion, culling out those aspects judged to be “alike” and bypassing substantial differences? Does such a procedure promote understanding and peaceful relations that are rooted in reality, or does this approach actually do no more than “gut” the religions in question and promote a unity of hollow facades?

Hendrik Kraemer, the author of *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, speaks of the impossibility of dealing with religious systems in piecemeal fashion:

Every religion is an indivisible, and not to be divided, unity of existential apprehension. It is not a series of tenets, dogmas, prescriptions, institutions, and practices that can be taken one by one as independent items of religious life, conception or organization, and that can arbitrarily be compared with, and somehow related to, and grafted upon, the similar item of another religion.<sup>3</sup>

Christians and Muslims may not simply pull two items out of their respective religious systems and expect that any true ecumenical unity can result on the basis of these two items alone. There are, quite simply, far too many other aspects where the two groups would stand in complete disagreement; items concerning which neither side has ever been willing to compromise.

## 5. More Than Dialogue?

What do the authors of “A Common Word” actually want from Christians if “polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders” is deemed an insufficient goal? Muslim-Christian dialogue, of course, has been occurring for centuries. Very little substantial progress has been made, however, due mainly to the religions’ irreconcilable differences alluded to in the previous sections. Are the authors of “A Common Word,” then, advocating that both sides abandon the theological convictions that have prevented dialogue from going past a certain point? What would such an advocacy mean, practically speaking? We suggest that it would lead at least to the following, with respect to the single area of Christology:

- a) Muslims would have to abandon their belief that Jesus is *not* the “only-begotten Son of God,” thereby denying those passages of the Qur’an that clearly state that He was not; and thereby denying the inspiration of their scriptures. Or...Christians would have to abandon their belief that Jesus *is* the “only begotten Son of God,” thereby denying those passages of the Bible that clearly state that He is, and thereby denying the inspiration of their Scriptures.
- b) Muslims would have to abandon their belief that the One True God is *not* Triune, thereby denying those passages of the Qur’an that clearly state that He is not; and thereby denying the inspiration of their scriptures. Or...Christians would have to abandon their belief that the One True God *is* Triune, thereby denying those passages

of the Bible that indicate that He is, and thereby denying the inspiration of their Scriptures.

- c) Muslims would have to abandon their belief that Jesus was *not* crucified and therefore did *not* rise from the dead, thereby denying those passages of the Qur'an that clearly state that He was not; and thereby denying the inspiration of their scriptures. Or...Christians would have to abandon their belief that Jesus *was* crucified and *did* in fact rise from the dead, thereby denying those passages of the Bible that indicate that He was and did, and thereby denying the inspiration of their Scriptures.
- d) Muslims would have to abandon their belief that Jesus did *not* atone for the sins of humankind, thereby denying those passages of the Qur'an that clearly state that He did not; and thereby denying the inspiration of their scriptures. Or...Christians would have to abandon their belief that Jesus *did* atone for the sins of humankind, thereby denying those passages of the Bible that indicate that He did, and thereby denying the inspiration of their Scriptures.

It should be clear that we have reached an impasse here. It is unimaginable that either side will concede the truth of its opposite number in any one of the above areas—not to mention the dozens of others that could be suggested. While it is understandable that many persons on both sides would want to move beyond the limited results of “polite ecumenical dialogue,” it is inconceivable that such a move could actually occur without abandoning the most central doctrines of one or the other or both of the religions.

#### The Christian Response to “A Common Word”

In response to “A Common Word,” scholars at Yale Divinity School’s Center for Faith and Culture penned a treatise entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together.” On the occasion of its publication in the *New York Times*, it had been endorsed by nearly 300 Christian theologians and leaders, including many Evangelicals.

This document begins with the currently obligatory apology for the Crusades and the “overzealousness of the present war on terror.” It then proceeds to identify several points of agreement with the Muslims and mentions no points of disagreement whatsoever—an omission that has led to a number of criticisms from within the Evangelical community, both of the Christian document itself and of its signatories.<sup>4</sup> The response speaks in vague terms and in a placating manner about things that will almost certainly prove to be ultimately impractical, both at the level of the street and in the halls of academia. Problematic points include the following:

First, “[t]hat this common ground consists in love of God and of neighbor gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities.” Deep cooperation concerning what? Certainly not in the things that matter the most to Evangelicals, such as “preaching Christ crucified,” an atonement for the sins of humankind, the resurrected Lord of the Universe, the only-begotten Son of God, the incarnation of God, the Messiah whose name includes the term “Mighty God,” and the like. Muslims and Christians will certainly not cooperate in the establishment of the Church as the assembly of God’s called-out, chosen people who have experienced the new birth as the necessary prerequisite for seeing the Kingdom of Heaven. We will certainly not be cooperating together in fulfilling Christ’s Great

Commission to make disciples in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded.

Second, “[w]hen justice is lacking, neither love of God nor love of the neighbor can be present. When freedom to worship God according to one’s conscience is curtailed, God is dishonored, the neighbor oppressed, and neither God nor neighbor is loved.” Christians would agree wholeheartedly with these sentiments, for they express the ethos of democratic political philosophy and the essence of Thomas Jefferson’s advocacy of an “open playing field” for the expression of religious beliefs. But such an open field exists in relatively few Muslim countries, where complete freedom to worship God according to the dictates of one’s conscience most often does *not* exist for Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Ahmadi, or other minorities. The judgmental legacies of Wahhabi fundamentalism as seen in Saudi Arabia, the extremism of the Afghani Taliban, the narrowness of the Iranian Shi’ite regimes—each of these is a far cry from the Quranically-required tolerance of the *ahl al-dhimma* – the “protected people” – the monotheistic communities that Muslims are commanded to guard and defend. Can the signatories of “A Common Word” promise a future trend of religious tolerance in Muslim countries, or are they expressing no more than a liberal hope that will be confined to academic circles only?

Third, “...we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other’s good.” These are, once again, positive and affirming words. When it comes to practical application, however, we must ask for further clarification. What is the “good” that we as Evangelicals are to seek for Muslims? If our answer does not include the new birth, the salvation of Muslims from the wrath of God, and the assurance of their entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven based on their acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord and belief in His resurrection from the dead (Romans 10:9), then we are sub-Biblical in our definition of “good.” If by “the good” we mean only an earthly bettering of Muslims’ conditions in the here and now (*al-dunya*), ignoring or bypassing our Biblical responsibilities toward them with respect to the hereafter (*al-akhira*), then we have not actually sought “their good” at all. But if we as Christians take seriously our responsibility to bring Muslims under the Lordship of Christ and to an acknowledgment of His crucifixion, atonement, and resurrection from the dead, we may be sure that Muslims will reject these core tenets of the Christian faith and instead seek to promote “our good” as Christians by proclaiming to us their own works-based approach to the spiritual life, centered around a God whose love is purely conditional upon our obedience to His commands.

Fourth, and most disturbing of all, is the statement that “if we fail to make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony you correctly remind us that ‘our eternal souls’ are at stake as well.” What, practically speaking, could this claim possibly mean? That failure to make peace and live in harmony with Muslims will bring about loss of salvation on the part of Christians? That followers of Christ will not be permitted to enter God’s eternal rest if they do not enter into dialogue and come to a mutual understanding with Muslims? If such is the intent of the authors, we would again find such a belief to be completely lacking in Biblical validity. We acknowledge that the Bible commands that “*if it is possible, as far as it depends on [us, we are] to live at peace with everyone*” (Romans 12:18). But such efforts should certainly not be made out of fear that “our eternal souls” are in any way “at stake” if we do not do so.

### Sociological Versus Theological Pluralism

It has been 25 years now since Os Guinness exhorted Evangelicals to become much more sophisticated in analyzing and addressing social and cultural contexts.<sup>5</sup> One area where we could begin to make progress is in that of *pluralism*. The way of Wisdom requires us to make a distinction between “*sociological pluralism*” and “*theological pluralism*.” Sociological pluralism may be defined as “the creation and maintenance of an ‘open playing field’ with respect to the diversity of religious truth-claims that are extant in any given multi-cultural situation.” Put more simply, we recognize that there are several religions and philosophies circulating among various people groups in any and all global contexts, and we realize the impossibility of legislating politically from “the top downward” a requirement that all adhere to one specific option. In the West, we take the Jeffersonian position that “truth will stand out for itself;” consequently we allow any and all competitors to come out onto “the field” and make their claims. In creating the first nation in history with a constitutionally mandated separation of Church and State, the founding fathers sought to *protect* religious beliefs by “walling them off” from governmental interference. Sociological pluralism in this sense is one of the greatest advances in human history, and it is an advancement that every adherent of every religion should hold dear and do all that he or she can do to protect and defend. Indeed, the Qur’an exhibits this same impulse in Surah 2:256, which commands “*Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error...*”

Theological pluralism, on the other hand, holds that each and every religious system may be seen as a valid means for approaching God in whatever form one may see Him/Her/It. Theological pluralism denies that any one religion has a corner on truth, and disallows the favor of one particular system above all others. This concept seeks to mitigate or erase conflicting truth claims either by ignoring, denying, or eliminating them completely.

A Christian characterized by maturity and sophistication will approach a document such as “A Common Word” on two levels. From the standpoint of *sociological pluralism*, one may consider that such an overture on the part of Muslims carries with it very definite advantages or benefits. Whenever the adherents of a competing truth system call for a laying down of hostilities (be they hostilities involving words or weapons), this should be seen as a positive step. As the old adage says: “If people are talking, they are not fighting.” If the goal of Christians is to be able to “*boldly proclaim the Word of God*” (Acts 4:29), they will need to be in a context where such proclamation is possible. If they are invited by members of another faith system to enter into such an environment, should they not respond with earnestness and thanksgiving?

Seen from the perspective of *sociological pluralism*, then, “A Common Word” sets the stage for discussion and dialogue regarding some very fundamental concepts of the Christian faith. Who is this God that we are to love? What exactly do we mean by His Oneness, and where does the historical figure of Jesus as understood by Christians fit into this definition? Once we have discussed these issues, we can then proceed to the question of *how* we are to love Him. While we may agree that both Christians and Muslims are worshiping the One True God, a more fundamental issue is whether our respective worship is *acceptable* to Him. The prophet Isaiah makes it clear that one can be worshiping the “right” God, in the “right” ways, but this worship may be completely *unacceptable* if one’s inner being is not fundamentally changed by an internal and personal conversion experience (see Isaiah 1:11-17).

Theological pluralism, however, encounters several problems within any particular religious system. There is first the *revelational problem*. Many of the world’s religions are exclusivistic with respect to their truth claims, based upon inscripturated precepts. If passages such as “*salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men*

by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12) have *not* been revealed by God, then all other scriptural passages become suspect as well. It is impossible to consistently hold the position that one’s canon is divinely inspired and without error if certain aspects (i.e., exclusivity) are held to be mistaken and untrue.

Secondly, there is the *problem of conflicting truth claims*. Theological pluralism holds that the doctrinal beliefs and ritual practices of all the major religions are equally valid. But such a contention is logically impossible. One cannot, for instance, hold that Jesus was the incarnation of God, the “*only begotten son of God*” (John 3:16), and at the same time contend that “*it is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son*” (Surah 19:35). It cannot be that Jesus “*himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...*” (1 Peter 2:24), and at the same time be true that “*no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another*” (Surah 53:38). It cannot be true that “*no one who denies the Son has the Father*” (1 John 2:23), and at the same time be true that the adherents of Islam—who deny the Bible’s claims regarding all that the Son is—are able to bypass “the Son” and yet be considered as having a relationship with the Father. In each of these cases, it is logically possible for one to be right and the other wrong, or for both to be wrong, but it is *not* possible for both to be right.

### Making Distinctions

Many of the Christian signatories of “Loving God and Neighbor Together” have been criticized for their alleged naivete in endorsing the document. Some of these criticisms raise important points which should be considered. At the same time, it is relatively easy for those who have never had much contact with adherents of Islam to criticize those who have tried, and who are trying, to develop such contacts for the purpose of sharing the Gospel message. Those who have experienced the immense frustration of consistent failure to gain and maintain contacts are understandably optimistic and even excited when such opportunities appear to present themselves.

But it would surely have been helpful, and would have eliminated a great deal of criticism, if the signatories of the Christian response to the Muslim document had been able to declare themselves proponents and advocates of *sociological pluralism* in contradistinction to *theological pluralism*. As sociological pluralists they could legitimately welcome the Muslims’ invitation to discuss what the latter see to be “a common word between us and them,” just as Jesus accepted the invitation of prominent Jewish leaders to dine in their homes (Luke 11:37, 14:1). They could champion the Muslims’ desire to come out onto “the open playing field” and declare their beliefs to others. They could agree that since together Muslims and Christians make up more than 55% of the world’s population, “if [they] are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace.” They could acknowledge that the Muslim authors of “A Common Word” are to be commended for their desire that the world know and practice the “love of God” and “the love of neighbor.”

As persons who realize the impossibility of a consistent *theological pluralism*, however, the signatories would seek to communicate at every level the Biblically-based tenets of the historic Christian faith. They may, as the Apostle Paul did so well in his message to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens, emphasize the apparent “commonalities” between religious systems: “*I see that you are very religious;*” “*What you are already worshiping as unknown;*” “*The God who made from one all nations of men;*” “*He is not far from any of us;*” “*In Him we live and move and have our being;*” “*We are also His offspring.*”

But eventually it became necessary for Paul to move into areas that are decidedly *non-pluralistic*: “*What you and people like you have been doing is ignorance;*” “*Overlooked in the past, but no longer; now you must repent of that ignorance;*” “*God has fixed a day for judgment, through a Man, the authority of which He has attested by raising that Man from the dead.*” These aspects of the Mars Hill sermon had no ecumenical “softness” or pluralistic “niceness.” Such phrases certainly made people sit up, take notice, and make decisions. There is a “sting” to the Gospel that is unavoidable. And therefore, “[w]hen they heard about the resurrection, some scoffed...”

So it will be when Christians speak with Muslims. We may talk about “a common word between us and them” as a preface, as a means of generating a discussion—but at some point we will find it necessary to introduce “the sting”—the unpalatable parts of our Gospel—in order to be true to the commandment of Jesus to “*teach them to obey all that I have commanded you...*” Only in presenting the Gospel in its fullness will we truly be “*loving our [Muslim] neighbors as ourselves.*”

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<sup>1</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Bad’ al-Khalq, Bab Sifat Iblis wa Junudihi, Hadith #3329.

<sup>2</sup> “Just as the Tawrah is not the Old Testament, or the Pentateuch, as now received by the Jews and Christians, so the Injil mentioned in the Qur’an is certainly not the New Testament, and it is not the four Gospels, as now received by the Christian Church...” Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*, New Edition (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1998), p. 291.

<sup>3</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1938), p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, John Piper’s critique at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTY-9FY13kw> .

<sup>5</sup> Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).