

In Search for a Common Word

Explorations in Muslim-Christian Interfaith Ventures

Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith

Much of Muslim-Christian dialogue in the last half century has been informal and local. Recently more formal dialogue efforts have grown across Christian denominations. Muslim initiative is also taking place, including a notable international effort begun in 2007.

It is difficult to imagine a time in American history at which there is greater need for serious interfaith engagement than this moment. Right up to the time of the 2008 presidential elections, relations between Christians and Muslims became increasingly polarized, fanned by anti-Islamic rhetoric and fear-mongering. Such sentiments are one byproduct of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent need for the United States to find an alternative “other” as the enemy. Islam was already in process of becoming that other when 9/11 occurred, and the apparatus put in place by the government for protecting national security against fundamentalist, terrorist, jihadist Islam sealed the deal.

Meanwhile, for many Christians the doors of ecumenism have been opened in an attempt to promote understanding among Christians and Muslims. But not all Christian denominations have responded to Islam and Muslims in the same way,

Yvonne Haddad, Ph.D., is professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University.

Jane I. Smith, Ph.D., is professor of Islamic Studies and co-director, Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary.

with certain groups retreating into polemical and reductionist stances. Dispassionate, reasonable, and well-informed dialogue between American Christians and Muslims is essential, and through a number of combined efforts it is already well underway.

While a number of verses in the Qur'an call for treating Christians and Jews with respect as recipients of God's divine message, in reality most Muslims have found it difficult not to see Christians as polytheists. For their part, Christians have traditionally viewed the Qur'an as fraudulent and Muhammad as an imposter. Throughout the nearly fifteen centuries of Muslim-Christian encounter, individual adherents of both traditions have often lived peaceably with each other. At the same time, Muslim expansion into Christian territories and Christian penetration

into Muslim lands through mission activity and Western imperialism have fostered damning rhetoric on both sides. The events of September 11, 2001, and the resulting American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan have led to ugly commentary reminiscent of medieval hyperbole. Right-wing Evangelical rhetoric against Islam has been fueled by incidents of international terrorism involving Muslims. Prominent Christian leaders have referred to Muhammad as a terrorist, a brigand, and a demon-possessed pedophile, while Islam is accused of being a violent and even a satanic religion (Smith, 53).

For seven years American Muslims, caught in a painful position, have decried the acts of the 9/11 terrorists and defended Islam as a religion of peace. At the same time they understand and are pained by the reality that because of American policies in the Middle East, including unwavering support for the state of Israel at the neglect of the

worsening plight of the Palestinians, anti-Western (in the eyes of many Muslims equated with anti-Christian) feelings are increasing in many parts of the world. American Muslims want to exercise their constitutional rights to free speech to express their objection to certain American foreign policies, at the same time that they fear the consequences of the Patriot Act and other assaults on their civil liberties.

American Muslims, despite their diverse cultures, ethnicities, and sectarian perspectives, often come from cultures in which Islam is the dominant religion. In the United States they are dealing with the reality of living as members of a minority religion in a land where Christianity is the dominant faith. Americans, at the same time, are struggling to understand that the Muslims with whom they interact

Much of the Muslim-Christian dialogue that has taken place over the last half century in the United States has been informal.

in businesses, schools, and neighborhoods are somehow different from the Muslim warriors and extremists who are calling for even more dire measures against the United States. This is the general context in which Christian-Muslim dialogue is now taking place and to which it must address itself if it is to be effective.

Local Interfaith Initiatives

Much of the Muslim-Christian dialogue that has taken place over the last half century in the United States has been informal, initiated by individuals or groups who recognized the importance of learning more about each other in a nation growing more religiously plural. Since the 1980s many local ecumenical councils have acknowledged the importance of inviting Muslims to join existing Christian-Jewish dialogue groups and have come to redefine themselves as interfaith as well as ecumenical organizations.

Until recently most dialogue has been initiated by Christians who come to the table with the experience of having engaged in dialogue with Jews since World War II. Muslims who join these conversations are relatively new to the game, although there are some dialogue groups in the Arab world. Sometimes the only kind of dialogue with which they are familiar is that of confrontation, where the atmosphere is charged and the goal is to prove one's own position right and the other's wrong. Muslims admit that they are a bit behind in knowing the protocols of nonconfrontational dialogue. Concerned that they have yet to develop a language of discourse, some are urging that discussion about the foundations of dialogue—rules, regulations, methods, and guidelines—should be on the agenda of local and national Muslim organizations.

The most common kind of local dialogue is simply a gathering whose goal is getting acquainted and learning some basics about the other's faith. The conversations usually promote good fellowship and lead to Christians learning a bit more about Islam, but seldom do they have much staying power. In some instances planners are more intentional about focusing on some particular issue or concern, such as ethics or spirituality. Participants may observe or even share in each other's religious rituals. Over the history of Christian-Muslim relations, to the rare extent that dialogues ever took place, they were scriptural and theological, with each side arguing from the authority of its own texts. Locally initiated dialogues seldom venture very far into theology, often because the participants do not feel personally qualified to represent the intricacies of theological interpretation within their own religious traditions.

Various efforts are being extended around the country to engage the process of Christian-Muslim encounter. Many Protestant denominations have made formal statements to foster a more tolerant, and even appreciative, stance in relation to Islam. Programs are being set up to bring Muslims from overseas to American

churches to help members see Islam from a personal perspective. The Presbyterian “Interfaith Listening Program,” for example, sends teams of one Muslim and one Christian to visit churches, colleges, and other groups to demonstrate working together for peace.

A number of specific initiatives cut across denominational and confessional lines. THE ISLAM PROJECT is one of a growing number of cooperative Christian-Muslim ventures designed to promote dialogue and understanding. Begun in 2001, the project has fostered a variety of campaigns in major U.S. cities. A “train the trainer” component helps leaders return to work with specific communities on dialogue and Christian-Muslim understanding (Smith, 145). Christian-Muslim interaction is often set in the context of three-way or “Abrahamic” encounters, which are being held regularly in many American cities and towns and can take the form of everything from dialogues to cooperative work projects and marches for peace.

Denominational Christian Interfaith Initiatives

Both Roman Catholics and Protestants have formalized their dialogue efforts through organizations such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC). In the more structured dialogues that have resulted, thinking about topics theologically has been much more the order of the day, especially for the Roman Catholics.

Catholics have been pioneers and innovators in working on interfaith relations in the United States. The Second Vatican Council, 1962–65, with its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, seemed to open the door to new possibilities for understanding non-Christian religions. It expresses the esteem with which the church regards Islam and commends Islam for its theism, belief in one God, veneration of Jesus as a prophet, and belief in the final judgment. With this pronouncement Pope Paul VI established an extremely significant link between Christianity and Islam. While Catholic theologians have not all been in agreement about the full implications of this statement, most understand it to be revolutionary in terms of Christian approach to relations with Muslims. Paul Knitter, who credits Karl Rahner as the chief engineer of Vatican II, calls it “a watershed in Christian attitudes toward other religions” (Knitter, 74).

Subsequent writings, such as Paul VI’s position of the church toward non-Christian religions in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), make it clear that religious conversation with representatives of other faiths aims to bring non-Christians to Christianity (see EV, no. 53). On September 5, 2000, the Vatican issued the statement *Dominus Jesus*, which clarifies that all religions do not have equal status, and that the Catholic Church is a necessary vehicle for salvation. As Michael Fitzgerald and John Borelli state in their study of Catholic views of interfaith

dialogue, “[Vatican II] never puts [other religions] on a par with the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church” (Fitzgerald and Borelli, 41).

The USCCB, under the leadership of John Borelli, worked for over a decade in partnership with the largest Muslim American organization, the Islamic Society of North America, to organize Muslim-Christian dialogues on the East Coast, the West Coast, and in the Midwest. Groups made up primarily of priests and imams meet regularly to discuss a wide range of theological issues. The first group to organize was the Midwest Dialogue in 1996 in the Indianapolis area. It was followed two years later by the Mid-Atlantic Dialogue in New York. In 2000 the Orange County Shura Advisory Council worked with the USCCB to form the third dialogue group. The continuity of these groups in the same geographical areas and the preparedness of the participants allow the pursuit of significant theological exchange. Papers presented for discussion focus on highlighting similarities and differences between the two traditions. Worship offers opportunities for partners in dialogue either to observe or join in certain aspects of their respective services.

Protestants thus far have had less tangible results than Catholics in actually putting on dialogues. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Presbyterian Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ have produced some interfaith publications, events, and dialogue initiatives. They generally agree that American pluralism necessitates the understanding of Islam and Muslims and have decried the public anti-Muslim rhetoric of some of their more conservative Christian brothers and sisters.

The National Council of Churches of Christ/USA includes mainline Protestant and Orthodox denominations but not Roman Catholics. The NCCC began formal interfaith work in the 1970s, focusing on educating Christians about Jews and Muslims. Its Task Force on Christian-Muslim Relations encouraged local conversations between Christians and Muslims. In the early days working for a national bilateral dialogue was not emphasized. The task force office, first located at Hartford Seminary, moved in 1992 to New York City. Former “Christian-Muslim” and “Christian-Jewish” task forces were restructured into an Interfaith Relations Commission. September 11, 2001, was the impetus for the NCCC and many of its member churches to redouble efforts toward dialogue with Muslims and Islamic organizations. Since that time a number of issues related to Christian-Muslim relations have engaged the Commission. These include: (1) setting up local conversations;

*Catholics have
been pioneers
and innovators in
working on interfaith
relations in the
United States.*

(2) relating to the African American Muslim community; (3) working with Muslim leaders to establish guidelines for dialogue; (4) setting up a national consultation on Christian and Muslim understandings of law and human rights; (5) working with Muslims to counter negative media images of Islam.

The Commission has recently announced a national Muslim-Christian initiative created through the cooperation of Christian leaders within the National Council of Churches and American Muslim leaders. With the goals of mutual understanding, respect, appreciation, and support, the initiative will work to encourage local churches and mosques to engage with each other, to educate within religious communities for better knowledge of the other, to work toward healing the pain caused by a history of difficult interaction, to establish a mechanism for response in case of negative events or emergencies, and to publicize the work of the initiative so as to encourage positive interaction between the two communities (“An Ecumenical Response,” 2008).

Despite all these organized activities by Catholic and Protestant denominations and collectivities, and the many local efforts put forth to foster better understanding between Christians and Muslims, public voices are still heard on radio, TV, and in videos defaming the Prophet and his religion. While the more moderate wings of some Protestant denominations have opened wide the doors of ecumenism in an attempt to promote further understanding between Christians and Muslims, other more conservative branches of the same denominations have officially closed the door to dialogue. Certain groups have retreated into polemical, reductionist stances vis-à-vis Islam, characterizing Muslims as the enemy of the Gospel, to the point where major rifts within denominations have opened precisely on the issue of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Several videos have recently been produced propagating the myth that Muslims indoctrinate their children into a “culture of hatred,” as portrayed, for example, in the 2008 video *Obsession: Radical Islam’s War on the West*. Millions of copies of the video, in which radical Islam is equated with Nazism under the convenient label “Islamofascism,” have been distributed free of charge. The Commission on Interfaith Relations of the NCCC has issued a formal statement condemning the video and other hate propaganda against Islam.

Muslim Dialogue Initiatives

For many decades in the United States, efforts at Christian-Muslim dialogue have been initiated and carried through by Christians. Muslims have been the invitees and generally have had to make do with whatever agenda their hosts determined for them. Increasingly, Christians are coming to realize that a more successful dialogue can be achieved if Muslims are drawn in at the beginning stages to determine the goal of the dialogue, the format, and the appropriate

participants. Local ecumenical groups turned interfaith are taking advantage of the resources presented for cooperative planning and execution of dialogues.

As they become aware of the importance of seeing that a range of Muslim voices is heard—and not simply those who happen to be known by Christian initiators—Muslims have been forced to become more proactive. The events of 9/11 and the resulting impetus for Muslims to help other Americans know who Muslims really are and what Islam is all about have served to speed up the process of Muslim initiation of dialogue. Reluctant Muslims, suspicious about Christian motives, are increasingly encouraged by their fellow Muslims to see such conversations as an opportunity to educate Americans about their faith.

Not long after September 11, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a watchdog civil rights organization, started a project in which individual mosques were called on to offer “open house” opportunities at their local houses of worship. CAIR urged as many mosques in America as possible to take the opportunity to invite Christians, Jews, and others to come on a specified day to visit their facilities in order to learn *in situ* about how Muslims worship, carry out their educational tasks, and function as religious communities. A careful list suggesting things that should and should not be done was circulated in preparation for these visits to help make visitors feel welcome and comfortable. While not as many mosques ended up participating in this effort as had originally been hoped, a great many did. Most were able to report that they felt visitors left with a much better understanding of their Muslim neighbors.

A number of Muslim organizations are now inviting Christians to observe, and sometimes participate in, local and national conventions. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), and the Ministry of (the late) Warith Deen Mohammed have all invited Christians to be part of their annual conventions, which last several days and draw large numbers of attendees. Sometimes special interfaith dialogue sessions are scheduled as part of the program. The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) has also taken the initiative to organize interfaith meetings and has specifically invited members of the NCCC and the USCCB, along with those from Jewish organizations, to participate in dialogue sessions (Nimir, 174).

Over the past eight or more years Muslim Students Association (MSA) groups on a number of college and university campuses have become interested in reaching

*Christians are
coming to realize
that a more
successful dialogue
can be achieved if
Muslims are drawn
in at the beginning
stages.*

out to non-Muslim students. Starting several years ago with Islam Awareness Week, geared to acquaint non-Muslim students with their faith, Muslim young people on some campuses have invited fellow students to attend special celebrations for Muslim holidays, sponsored talks on various aspects of Islam, and become much more open and vocal in their attempts to forge links with other campus religious groups. To some extent, especially in the last several years and especially on East Coast campuses, these efforts have been facilitated by the presence of Muslim chaplains. A number of local MSA chapters hold “Fastathons” during the month of Ramadan, in which non-Muslim students are invited to fast for a day with their Muslim friends and to contribute the money they would have spent on food to a local charity. Such efforts promote “dialogue in action,” a mode of inter-faith exchange that is often more popular with students than simply talking.

“A Common Word”

One of the most notable international efforts on the part of Muslims to reach out to Christians was the October 2007 document entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*. Initiated by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, Jordan, it was signed by 138 prominent Muslim leaders, both Sunni and Shi‘i, from the major Islamic countries in the world. The message came in the form of a letter to heads of Christian communions, inviting Christians to join with Muslims in promoting peace in these deeply troubled times. It was addressed primarily to Pope Benedict, followed by numerous Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs, heads of several Protestant denominations, and generally to leaders of Christian churches everywhere.

The Common Word (CW) document is generally understood as a response to Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 address at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in which he made comments construed by Muslims to have been derogatory of the Prophet and Islam. It consists of three sections: (1) the scriptural basis for the call to love God in both religions, (2) the common theme of loving the neighbor, and (3) an invitation to both Christians and Muslims to dialogue. If the world is to be at peace, the document says, it is essential that Muslims and Christians engage each other peacefully. The theme of a “common word” comes from the Qur’anic verse 3:64: “Say: O People of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you. . . .” The implications of the invitation offered in the CW document, such as the call for justice and freedom of religion, were not fully developed, although they have been engaged by many of those who have responded to the letter.

While many American Christian communions received the document with enthusiasm, others have been more tentative. Episcopalians generally have followed the lead of Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams, a supporter of dialogue efforts, who saw the CW as an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to explore their

distinctive understandings together. Other Episcopalians concerned with the rise of political Islam have been less enthusiastic. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America welcomed the initiative as hopeful and encouraging, as did the Presbyterian Church (USA). The NCCC expressed its appreciation for the missive and saw it as validating the long-standing work that the NCCC has done over the years in fostering Christian-Muslim relations. Conservative Christians have been somewhat less enthusiastic in their reception of the CW, based primarily on their interest in religious freedom for Christians in Muslim countries. The Baptist World Alliance and the Mennonites expressed concern for Christians anywhere who are denied full religious liberty. Some, such as the Southern Baptists, have worried that the emphasis on commonality in the CW disregards the clear theological differences between Muslims and Christians and that the gesture may be part of an ongoing attempt by Muslims to “Islamize” Christianity.

Yale Divinity School took the occasion of the CW to take out a full-page spread in *The New York Times*, to which a number of scholars, theologians, and clergy have subsequently signed on. The gist of the Yale response was an emphasis on the common ground that exists between the two faiths in their fundamentals. The final version (November 2007) was slightly more theologically conservative than the initial one. Some of the more conservative signatories to the response, such as the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, were criticized by their sponsoring agencies.

To the disappointment of the Muslim signatories of the CW, the Vatican was somewhat cool in its initial reaction. Meanwhile the USCCB responded on October 13, 2007, giving several positive but nonetheless general comments about the CW. The Vatican’s Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone eventually replied to Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, head of the Aal al-Bayt Institute, and invited a small group of Muslim signatories to come to the Vatican for a meeting in November 2008. While the theme of the CW is primarily love of God and of neighbor, the Vatican is concerned with respect for human dignity and basic human rights such as religious freedom.

It remains to be seen how the conversation between the Muslim delegation and the papal committee will proceed. At a conference on The Common Word at Georgetown University on March 13–14, 2008, Roman Catholic Professor Daniel Madigan expressed his appreciation of the growing group of Muslims who are trying to enter seriously into a relationship of mutual theological hospitality. Stressing the

*If the world is to
be at peace, the
document says, it
is essential that
Muslims and
Christians engage
each other peacefully.*

importance of theological clarity, however, he lamented the fact that Christians have not yet found a convincing way to express the fundamentals of faith—including Trinity, Christology, sin, and redemption—to the Muslim population and that neither community has succeeded in living up to its ideals of peace, justice, and service.

Hope for the Future

There is no doubt that the occasion of 9/11 and its aftermath have had serious consequences for Christian-Muslim relations in the United States. Clearly it served as the occasion for Muslims to think seriously about their approach to other religions. Motivated by the need to take every opportunity to share with non-Muslims their understanding of Islam as a peaceful religion, many Muslims who had previously avoided dialogue have found themselves drawn into and even initiating it. Major Islamic organizations are including interfaith exchange as a significant part of their current agendas. American Catholics, while leaders in establishing Christian-Muslim dialogues, have heard the response of the Vatican to any possible misinterpretation of Vatican II and in concerns of *Dominus Jesus* that interfaith relations must not lead to theological pluralism. Other Christian denominations have differed in their responses, with many stepping up efforts to be in communication with Muslims and others retreating into positions of fear of Islamic extremism and even vituperative public denunciation of Islam as a dangerous ideology.

Some hope may reasonably be put on the continuation of the USCCB regional dialogue initiatives, on the planned national dialogue efforts of the NCCC in collaboration with Muslim organizations, and in the various responses that have been made to the Common Word letter and the conversations that have been engendered by it. At the same time, small intimate interfaith conversations among people in local communities who know that they must live and work together, and solve problems together, may finally be the best hope.

References

Fitzgerald, Michael L., and John Borelli. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006.

Knitter, Paul F. *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985.

National Council of Churches of Christ. "An Ecumenical Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You' by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA." October 8, 2008. <http://www.acommonword.com> (accessed January 19, 2009).

Nimr, Mohammed. "Muslims in American Public Life." In Yvonne Haddad, ed., *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 169–86.

Smith, Jane I. *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.