A Common Word between us and you (ACW) is an open letter signed by 138 Muslim scholars. It was published on the occasion of ʿĪd al-fitr in 2007 (13 October) and addressed to Pope Benedict XVI and 26 other senior church leaders from most major Christian denominations. Its significance in Christian–Muslim relations arises from a combination of the broad spectrum and high standing of its signatories, its innovative way of inviting Christian leaders to dialogue and the broadly welcoming response it received, which led to a series of high level conferences and other follow-up events. Among lasting fruits are the Catholic–Muslim Forum that first met in 2008 and the UN General Assembly resolution in 2010 to designate the first week of February every year as the ‘World Interfaith Harmony Week’.

The letter was drafted by Jordan’s Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad and is related to other dialogue initiatives emanating from the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT) in Amman. The 138 Muslim signatories spanned 40 countries in four continents. They represented all major Islamic traditions and law schools and included senior Islamic clerics from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, to mention but a few important Muslim-majority countries. Among academics in European and North American universities who signed were Ingrid Mattson, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Timothy Winter. After ACW’s publication the list of signatories, available on the initiative’s official website, www.acommonword.com, has grown beyond 400. Although 20 of the 27 named addressees are leaders of Orthodox churches, many of whom reside in the east of Europe and the Middle East, the letter received widest attention in western Europe and North America. Among those who responded substantially and positively were the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and all Russia and the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Samuel Kobia, in addition to a range of noted Christian scholars including John Esposito, David Ford and Miroslav Volf.

The central contention in the text of about 15 pages (in addition to four pages of endnotes) is that Muslims and Christians share a ‘common ground’ consisting of faith in the oneness of God and the twin commandment to love God and neighbour (ACW: 2). This, the letter says, should be the basis for all future dialogue between Muslims and Christians (ACW: 15). Improved interreligious relations are essential since ‘peace in the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians’ (ACW: 2). The letter does not discuss concrete situations of conflict between Muslims and Christians, but asserts that justice and freedom of religion are crucial elements of neighbourly love (ACW: 3). The remainder of this article will first present the background of the
letter followed by a more detailed analysis of its contents. The last section will briefly present its reception among Christian leaders. It could be argued that *A Common Word* has been more significant for the impulse it has given to renewed Christian–Muslim relations than for its concrete propositions regarding Islamic and Christian theological understanding.

**Background**

The list of names attached to the original letter does not privilege any one of the 138 signatories over the rest. This in itself is a significant part of the strategy behind the letter: it is meant to represent the voice of a cross-section of leading Islamic clerics and scholars. Initially Ghazi played down his role as author in order to underline the collective ownership of the final text (Ghazi bin Muhammad 2007; Ghazi bin Muhammad 2012: 133). Later he let it be known that he had not only drafted the letter but that he was indeed its sole author (Ghazi bin Muhammad 2012: 131). *A Common Word* itself does not anchor the discussion in a particular geographical context. The opening greeting, however, says that it is sent on the first anniversary of ‘the Open Letter of 38 Muslim scholars’ to Pope Benedict XVI. This points to the immediate background against which the text must be read.1

The previous *Open Letter* was prompted by the pope’s lecture at the University of Regensburg on 12 September 2006 in which he was heard to claim that Islam was closely associated with violence. In contrast to widespread violent reactions to the lecture, the RABIIT under Ghazi’s leadership produced a measured response that set out to correct what the 38 signatories held to be the pope’s misrepresentation of Islam. Ghazi later said that, in retrospect, it had served as a ‘trial run’ for *A Common Word* (Ghazi bin Muhammad 2010: 8). In its closing paragraphs the *Open Letter* introduces what became central elements in *A Common Word*: the claim that peaceful relations between Christians and Muslims are the key to peace in the world; the proposal that God’s oneness and the twin love commandments are the shared basis of the two faiths; and a call to further dialogue. The lack of a response from the Vatican disappointed Ghazi, who subsequently began work on *A Common Word*. Despite the close relationship between the two texts, *A Common Word* is different in both style and its line of argument. Whereas the *Open Letter* is reactive and backward-looking (discussing the Regensburg lecture specifically), *A Common Word* is proactive, innovative and forward-looking and focuses on matters of theological principle.

Although there runs a direct line from the pope’s Regensburg lecture via the *Open Letter* to *A Common Word*, the document should also be understood against the broader background of tensions in Christian–Muslim relations in the mid-2000s. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a growing sense of victimisation among Muslims in the wake of the so-called ‘war on terror’ are central in this picture. In addition come intra-Islamic tensions between Shīʿīs and Sunnīs and between mainstream and extremist elements within both of these traditions.

Scholars have pointed out the close relationship between *A Common Word* and the *Amman Message of 2005* (Lumbard 2009: 6; Browers 2011: 955). This is a cluster of texts about intra-Islamic relations, and it sets out criteria for the declaration of *takfīr* (declaration of apostasy) and for issuing *fatwās*. Like ACW, it was developed at RABIIT and promoted under the aegis of Jordan’s King Abdullah II. A central function of the text is to present mainstream and tolerant Islam as an antidote to those images of Islam that often dominate western discourse. In the process it also positions the Hashemites of Jordan as central representatives of this form of Islam. Both are important fruits also of *A Common Word* two years later.

When drafting *A Common Word* in the first half of 2007, Ghazi consulted a small circle of senior Islamic scholars that included Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa of Egypt, Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah of Mauritania, Sheikh Sa’īd Ramadan al-Buti of Syria, Grand Mufti Mustaфа Ceric of Bosnia,
Habib Umar bin Hafith of Yemen, Ayatollah Damad, Timothy Winter and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Ghazi bin Muhammad and Nayed 2010: 172). The text was drafted in English and translated into Arabic in the consultation process (Markiewicz 2014: 186). Cambridge theology professor David Ford was also consulted about the text well in advance of its publication (Markiewicz 2014: 186). Many of the 138 signatures were collected at a conference on ‘Love in the Qurʾān’ organised by RABIT in early September 2007 (Ghazi bin Muhammad 2012: 132). Other networks were also mobilised to reach the desired number of 138 signatories, 100 more than those who had signed the Open Letter a year earlier.

A Common Word’s central contention that monotheistic faith and the twin love commandments provide the common ground for mutual understanding between Christians, Muslims and Jews is also found in Feisal Abdul Rauf’s book What is right with Islam (2004). Rauf is among the signatories to A Common Word, but scholarly literature has not established any clear connection between his book and the argument found in ACW.

The London-based public relations company Bell Pottinger was hired (and paid for by King Abdullah II) to coordinate the launch, which included events in London and Washington DC (Ghazi bin Muhammad 2012: 133; Markiewicz 2014: 189). Immediate attention in mainstream media was ensured through welcoming statements from Tony Blair, Archbishop Rowan Williams and the bishop of London, Richard Chartres. The official A Common Word website has been central in the subsequent promotion of the dialogue initiative. Thus A Common Word demonstrates a complex interplay between traditional modes of interreligious interaction and modern forms of communication in a globalised environment.

Structure and content

The notion in the title of ‘a Common Word’ between Muslims and Christians comes from Q 3:64, which is quoted several times in the text, though the metaphor of common ground is more important in the letter’s argument. The common ground which Muslims and Christians share, the text says, is God’s unity and the commandment to love God and neighbour.

Close to 30 per cent of A Common Word consists of quotes from the Qurʾān, and another 10 per cent are quotes from the Bible. A number of Ḥadīths are also quoted. The first part of the text deals with the commandment to love God, first in Islamic tradition and then in the Bible. The next much briefer part establishes a similar parallelism between neighbourly love in Islam and the Bible. The last part outlines what the signatories take to be the necessary consequences of their identification of common ground and extends an invitation to Christians which concludes: ‘So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to one another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill’ (ACW:16).

A Common Word, the Qurʾān and the Bible

A Common Word’s use of biblical concepts as a prism to interpret Islamic tradition represents a novel approach in Islamic scholars’ interpretation of the Christian tradition. The parallel between the two traditions is explicitly laid out in the concluding paragraph of the part of the text that deals with love for God:

[W]e can now perhaps understand the words [by Muḥammad] ‘The best that I have said – myself, and the prophets that came before me’ as equating the blessed formula ‘There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and...
His is the praise and He hath power over all things’ precisely with the ‘First and Greatest Commandment’ to love God with all one’s heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible.

(ACW:10)

The explicit commandment to love God is not found in Islamic tradition. Of the many passages from the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth cited in order to show the centrality of love for God in Islam, many are exultations that praise God for God’s greatness and goodness towards human beings or that command total devotion or even fear of God, for example Q 9:36 ‘and know that God is with those who fear Him’ (ACW:6). The notion that God loves human beings is not present in A Common Word. Ghazi later explained that this is so self-evident that there was no reason to mention it (2010: 10).

In the brief section that deals with neighbourly love in Islam, the argument rests on Q 2:177 and 3:92, and most importantly – as it is the only quote that brings ‘neighbour’ and ‘love’ in close textual proximity of each other – the Ḥadīth ‘[N]one of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself’ and ‘[N]one of you has faith until you love for your neighbour what you love for yourself’, which is quoted in both the brother and neighbour versions without further comment (see Leirvik (2010) for further details).

Although A Common Word takes its central vocabulary from the Bible, it has a distinctly Islamic approach to the topics under discussion. This can also be recognised in detail in its treatment of the Qur’ān and the Bible. The Qur’ān is consistently called ‘the Holy Qur’ān’, whereas no similar designation is used for the Bible. Likewise, God is repeatedly said to speak through the words of the Qur’ān, whereas much vaguer wording is used about the biblical material. Nevertheless, A Common Word displays deep respect for the Bible, and there is no hint of the popular doctrine that Christians have corrupted the word of God.

The central hermeneutical principle in A Common Word’s use of the Qur’ān seems to be to give open interpretations that allow for appreciative evaluation of important aspects of Christian teaching. Some commentators have, however, questioned whether the qur’ānic interpretation is sound according to Islam’s own terms. For example, most traditional interpretations of Q 3:64 have seen it as part of a confrontation with Christian perceptions of God (Richter-Bernburg 2008: 3).

A Common Word displays a positive and open attitude to the Bible, but its treatment of love in the Bible is somewhat eclectic. The most prominent biblical material is the parallel texts Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–31 where Jesus refers to Deuteronomy and affirms the two love commandments. Pauline and Johannine texts that frame the notions of love (for God, for neighbour and God’s love for human beings) within an economy of salvation are not given mention. Thus, what appears under the headings ‘love in the Bible’ is the biblical material that best corresponds with Islamic teaching rather than a more comprehensive presentation of how this topic is treated in the Bible.

The same eclecticism colours the image of Jesus in A Common Word: through the choice of biblical texts Jesus is depicted as a prophet who proclaims God’s commandments. His function is seen as similar to that of Muḥammad, but a distinction which conforms to mainstream Islamic conventions is upheld in the use of the salawāt, ‘may Allah honour him and grant him peace’, that is accorded to Muḥammad, and the simpler ‘peace be upon him’ that is accorded to Jesus. Although it builds on the Bible, A Common Word only presents one part of the image of Jesus that emerges from the biblical texts (see also the discussion about taʿdhīd in a later section).

A Common Word is entirely focussed on the sacred texts of the two traditions; there are only a couple of references to Christian and Islamic authorities after the founding periods of the two faiths. This enhances the text’s ability to speak on behalf of a broad cross-section of Islamic
traditions and likewise to address leaders of a wide range of Christian churches with their diverse postbiblical histories and authority figures. In this process, however, its anchoring in concrete current discussions is reduced.

**A Common Word, human rights, justice and peace**

The express raison d’être for *A Common Word* is current tensions between Muslims and Christians and the need to resolve these in order to attain ‘meaningful peace in the world’ (ACW:2). Despite this interest that could be termed ‘political’, the language and argument are primarily theological, and there is no analysis of concrete situations of Christian–Muslim animosity. The text relates peace closely to justice, which in turn is seen as a crucial fruit of neighbourly love. Very significantly there are two references to religious freedom which is understood to be ‘a crucial part’ of neighbourly love (ACW:14).

One particular sentence towards the end of the text has drawn wide and very varied interest from Christian commentators: ‘As Muslims we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them — so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes’ (ACW:14). Some readers, for example the authors of the Yale response (see more on this later) have emphasised the first half of the sentence, finding here an assurance of peaceful intentions. Others, for example the World Evangelical Alliance, have been more hesitant and asked which concrete situations the authors might have had in mind where Christians wage war on Muslims *qua* Muslims and which consequences they might draw in these situations. Daniel Madigan, a Jesuit scholar who warmly welcomed ACW, called the sentence ‘a fairly major conditional clause’ (Madigan 2008: 5).

**A Common Word and tawḥīd**

Radical monotheism and the proclamation of the oneness of God, *tawḥīd*, are at the core of Islamic theology (Thomas 2013: 149). This topic pervades *A Common Word*. Recognising it is seen as a core element in humans’ love for God, and it is counted as a third part of the ‘common ground’ shared by Christians and Muslims alongside the two love commandments. Islamic tradition contains numerous warnings against ‘ascripting a partner’ to God. These have often been interpreted as directed against Christian Trinitarian teaching. *A Common Word* quotes the words ‘we shall ascribe no partner’ from Q 3:64 (the Qurʾān verse from which the document also derives its title) five times. The similar assertion in Q 6:163 ‘he hath no partner’ is quoted twice. The words to a similar effect, ‘he hath no associate’, are quoted eight times in the main text and an additional six times in the endnotes. However, Qurʾān quotes that appear more explicitly directed against Christian teaching are omitted. For example, *A Common Word* quotes the first part of Q 4:171, but stops before the words ‘so believe in God and His Messengers, and say not “Three”. Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God. Glory be to Him — that He should have a son!’

*A Common Word* is open to differing interpretations regarding its understanding of Christian teaching and *tawḥīd*. Its open tone towards Christians invites the interpretation that Christian teaching does not contradict God’s radical oneness, especially as this oneness is said to be part of the two faiths’ ‘common ground’. On the other hand, the repeated insistence on this controversial theme without any explicit acknowledgment of Christianity’s acceptability in this regard is ambiguous. This ambiguity is further underlined by later comments from Ghazi that this theological approach to Christian–Muslim tensions was necessary precisely because Muslims and Christians – unlike Muslims and Jews – do *not* share an understanding of God’s oneness (Ghazi bin Muhammad and Nayed 2010: 174).
A Common Word and Muslim–Christian dialogue

In the opening greeting A Common Word uses the self-designation ‘call from Muslim Religious Leaders’, but it does not specify what its Christian addressees are called to. Some Christian readers have taken the emphasis on God’s oneness to be a call to Christians to reconsider Trinitarian teaching or even to convert to Islam. Among these are the World Evangelical Alliance and Michael Nazir-Ali, a senior Church of England bishop with considerable experience from Muslim–Christian dialogue.

However, most church leaders and Christian scholars have accepted that A Common Word is meant as a genuine invitation to respectful dialogue between representatives of the two faiths. The question is then: What type of dialogue do the signatories envisage, and what is the status of the claims they put forward in the letter? There are several slightly different possibilities. The elaborate arguments in the text based primarily on sacred scriptures could invite further theologically oriented dialogue in which Christians and Muslims together explore their scriptures and traditions and explain to each other how they understand God’s unity and love. Such dialogue would have some affinity with the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, a form of dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews that came to prominence in the early 2000s and is centred on reading sacred texts together. The point, practitioners of scriptural reasoning maintain, is not to reach agreement but to gain a deeper and more respectful understanding of the differences between the faiths. A problem with this reading of A Common Word is that it disregards the letter’s apparent claim that ‘the common ground’ has already been identified.

The centrality of the Qur’ān quote ‘Come to a common word between us and you’ (Q 3:64) suggests that the Muslim leaders assume that there already is agreement on the central themes of God’s oneness and love. In that case, A Common Word invites dialogue not on these specific topics but on other matters based on the assumption of a shared theological starting point. This could lead to Christian–Muslim dialogue that is much broader in scope than strictly theologically oriented explorations, and it could have as its main focus the ways in which Christians and Muslims together can contribute to a more peaceful world. A problem with this reading is that it does not invite Christians to present their own interpretation of how God’s unity and love are understood in their tradition(s).

Yet another way to understand A Common Word is to tone down the element of call. Rather than an invitation to dialogue on the specific understanding of the relationship between Christians and Muslims that the text outlines or as an invitation to Christians to concur with the Muslim scholars’ understanding of the Christian tradition, it could be seen as an expression of an Islamic theology of religions. According to this reading, the text outlines an Islamic understanding of the relationship between the two faiths and provides a basis on which Muslims can approach their Christian counterparts with both respect for the other and confidence in their own tradition. Christians would not be required to agree or even to discuss the theology of the document in much detail. In this case A Common Word could be seen as reciprocating Nostra aetate, the declaration from the Second Vatican Council which outlines a Christian (Catholic) understanding of other religions, including Islam. Nostra aetate does not invite Muslims to agree, which they clearly could not do since the document puts forward a distinctly Christian theology, but it invites them to recognise that the Catholic Church conducts its relations with Muslims on the basis of the theological understanding expressed in the document. A similar authoritative document about an Islamic basis for interreligious dialogue has not existed before. With the very broad collection of signatories, A Common Word could fill this role. Claims about love in the Bible would then be seen as an expression of how far Islamic theologians in good conscience can reach out towards Christians’ understanding of the same topic. Attention to tawḥīd would be
A Common Word

an expression of an Islamic ideal which Christians do not quite live up to even if they deserve recognition for striving in the right direction. This would be a mirror image of Nostra aetate’s description of Muslims: ‘The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself . . . Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother’ (Nostra aetate: article 3, in Flannery 1996). It is not clear that A Common Word should be read in this light, but it is a reading of the document that resolves some of the challenges for dialogue that otherwise arise.

Dialogue process

The ambiguities of A Common Word can be seen as a resource. Dialogue in the wake of its publication has tended to focus less on the document’s concrete content and much more on its function as ‘a hand of conviviality’, to quote a response from 300 Christian leaders that was published as an advertisement in the New York Times on 18 November 2007. The letter has been influential more for what it does – its symbolic importance at a crucial time of Christian–Muslim tensions – than for its precise content. The text printed in the newspaper was written by scholars at Yale Divinity School. Among the signatories were many senior evangelical leaders. The Yale response therefore sparked controversy in evangelical circles, but it was crucial in promoting knowledge of the Muslim initiative in wider circles in the West. Yale Divinity School also hosted the first high level international conference on A Common Word in which senior Christian and Muslim leaders participated. Other conferences have taken place in Cambridge (October 2008), Washington DC (Georgetown) (2009) and Geneva (2010).

The Vatican’s response to A Common Word was slow and muted at first. However, in March 2008 a delegation of signatories visited the Vatican, and it was decided to set up a Catholic–Muslim Forum that first met in November 2008 and later in 2011 and 2014. When Pope Benedict XVI visited Jordan and the Holy Land in 2009, he used key concepts from A Common Word in his speeches. The World Council of Churches did not produce a specific response to A Common Word, but through a study document, Learning to explore love together, they invited member churches to engage with the Muslim initiative. WCC also developed its relationship with RABIIT and Ghazi further, and in 2012 Ghazi and WCC general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit went on a joint mission to Nigeria to address Christian–Muslim tensions in the country.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, took a particularly active role in the dialogue process in the wake of A Common Word. Having responded with a press release on the day A Common Word was launched, he soon initiated a process to produce a joint ecumenical response. In October 2008 he hosted a conference in Cambridge dedicated to A Common Word with broad participation from its signatories and addressees. A joint ecumenical response did not materialise, but based on discussions at a conference in June 2008 with representatives of all those directly addressed by the Muslim letter, Williams issued a 17-page open letter to the A Common Word signatories called A Common Word for the common good. This is the theologically most substantial response from the Christian side. Recognising the Muslim leaders’ concern to ‘ground what we say in the Scriptures of our traditions’ (Williams 2008: 3) Williams reciprocates A Common Word’s attention to biblical and Qur’anic material. In an open tone he affirms much of what he finds in A Common Word and also directs attention to other parts of the two traditions’ sacred scriptures that may need further attention in Christian–Muslim dialogue. Building on A Common Word’s discussion of love for neighbour, he proposes a programme for enhanced Muslim–Christian cooperation for the common good exemplified in further attention to religious freedom and joint action for the UN’s Millennium Development Goals.
At the 2010 UN General Assembly Jordan introduced a proposal for an annual celebration of interreligious cooperation. The resolution, which was passed unanimously, designates the first week of February every year as the World Interfaith Harmony Week. Its reliance on *A Common Word* is evident when it says that the week should be based on ‘love of God and love of one’s neighbour or on love of the good and love of one’s neighbour’.

**Conclusion**

*A Common Word*’s outline of ‘a common ground’ between Muslims and Christians is highly ambiguous. Its lasting impact is a function of the dialogical openness displayed by its key promoters on the one hand and a willingness among many Christian leaders to accept it in good faith on the other. Muslim and Christian leaders have chosen to make it a sign of their desire to build harmonious relationships. Most Christian respondents have focussed more on what the letter says about neighbourly love than its elaboration on love for God and God’s oneness.

*A Common Word* and the dialogue process which it sparked provide examples that can inspire Christians and Muslims to improve their relationships in their concrete contexts. This is its success. It is of lesser significance as a contribution towards a better theological understanding of love and God’s oneness in the two traditions.

**Note**

1 The title *Open letter* can be confusing in this context. In the introductory greeting, the author of *A Common Word* also calls that text an ‘open letter’. In this article *Open Letter* refers to the first of the two texts, the one directly prompted by the Regensburg lecture.

**References**


Further reading


