

YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL News Release

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YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL SCHOLARS RESPOND TO “A *COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU*”

NEW HAVEN, CT – Four Yale Divinity School scholars, including the dean and the president-elect of the American Academy of Religion, have released a statement warmly embracing the open letter “A Common Word between Us and You,” released worldwide today and signed by 138 Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals.

The statement from the Yale scholars, entitled *Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You* (see below) says, “We receive it [A Common Word] as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.”

The statement was issued by Harold Attridge, dean of Yale Divinity School and Lillian Claus Prof of New Testament; Miroslav Volf, director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture and Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology; Joseph Cumming, director of the Reconciliation Program at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture; and Emilie M. Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology and president-elect of the American Academy of Religion. More scholars are expected to endorse the statement as it is circulated at Yale Divinity School and at other academic institutions across the country.

The Yale scholars note, “A *Common Word between Us and You* identifies some core common ground between Christianity and Islam which lies at the heart of our respective faiths as well as at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism. Jesus Christ’s call to love God and neighbor was rooted in the divine revelation to the people of Israel embodied in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).”

Volf, whose latest book is *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, said he was “deeply encouraged and challenged” by the open letter, which he called “historic, courageous, and marked by deep insight and generosity of spirit.” The Yale authors praised the depth of “A Common Word,” particularly the degree to which the signatories identified important common ground between Muslim and Christian communities, in a time when relations

between these communities are so often strained. While the Yale reply acknowledges the undeniable differences between Islam and Christianity, Volf believes that *A Common Word* “opens new possibilities for dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians.”

“A Common Word,” the Yale scholars hope, will lead to a new level of open communication and honest cooperation between Muslims and Christians, although much work remains. The Yale statement concludes, “We are persuaded that our next step should be for our leaders at every level to meet together and begin the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another. It is with humility and hope that we receive your generous letter, and we commit ourselves to labor together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.”

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Yale Divinity School is an interdenominational school of theological education that draws its faculty from the major Christian traditions, preparing students for service in lay and ordained ministries, other professions, and academic careers. It is one of 11 graduate and professional schools at Yale University. Each year, some 140 students graduate with one of three degrees offered by the school: Master of Divinity, Master of Arts in Religion, and Master of Sacred Theology. The school’s mission statement says, “Yale Divinity School has an enduring commitment to foster the knowledge and love of God through critical engagement with the traditions of the Christian churches in the context of the contemporary world.”

<http://www.yale.edu/divinity>

The mission of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture is “to promote the practice of faith in all spheres of life through theological research and leadership development.”

<http://www.yale.edu/faith>

The goal of the Reconciliation Program is to “promote reconciliation between Muslims and Christians, and between Muslim nations and the West, drawing on the resources of the Abrahamic faiths and the teachings and person of Jesus.”

<http://www.yale.edu/faith/reconciliation>

The Initiative on Religion and Politics at Yale seeks to foster thoughtful activism, enrich scholarly discourse, and deepen public conversation on the place of religion in public life, both nationally and internationally.

<http://www.yale.edu/religionandpolitics/>

In the name of the Infinitely Good God whom we should love with all our being

LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR TOGETHER:

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO *A COMMON WORD BETWEEN US AND YOU*

Preamble

As members of the worldwide Christian community, we were deeply encouraged and challenged by the recent historic open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals from around the world. *A Common Word Between Us and You* identifies some core common ground between Christianity and Islam which lies at the heart of our respective faiths as well as at the heart of the most ancient Abrahamic faith, Judaism. Jesus Christ's (Peace Be Upon Him) call to love God and neighbor was rooted in the divine revelation to the people of Israel embodied in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). We receive it as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.

Muslims and Christians have not always shaken hands in friendship; their relations have sometimes been tense, even characterized by outright hostility. Since Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) says, "First take the log out your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take a speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5), we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g. the Crusades) and in the present (e.g. the war in Iraq) Christians have been guilty of sinning against our

Muslim neighbors. Before we “shake your hand” in responding to your letter, we ask forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.

Religious Peace—World Peace

“Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world.” We share the sentiment of the Muslim signatories expressed in these opening lines of their open letter. Peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century, and perhaps of the whole present epoch. Though tensions, conflicts, and even wars in which Christians and Muslims stand against each other are not primarily religious in character, they possess an undeniable religious dimension. If we can achieve religious peace between these two religious communities, peace in the world will clearly be easier to attain. It is therefore no exaggeration to say, as you have in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, that “the future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Common Ground

What is so extraordinary about *A Common Word Between Us and You* is not that its signatories recognize the critical character of the present moment in relations between Muslims and Christians. It is rather a deep insight and courage with which they have identified the common ground between the Muslim and Christian religious communities. What is common between us lies not in something marginal nor in something merely important to each. It lies, rather, in something absolutely central to both: love of God and love of neighbor. Surprisingly for many Christians, your letter considers the dual command of love to be the foundational principle not just of the Christian faith, but of

Islam as well. That *so much* common ground exists—common ground in some of the fundamentals of faith—gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us can not overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together. That 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.

Love of God

We applaud that *A Common Word Between Us and You* stresses so insistently the unique devotion to one God, indeed the love of God, as the primary duty of every believer. God alone rightly commands our ultimate allegiance. When anyone or anything besides God commands our ultimate allegiance— a ruler, a nation, economic progress, or anything else—we end up serving idols and inevitably get mired in deep and deadly conflicts.

We find it equally heartening that the God whom we should love above all things is described as being Love. In the Muslim tradition, God, “the Lord of the worlds,” is “The Infinitely Good and All-Merciful.” And the New Testament states clearly that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Since God’s goodness is infinite and not bound by anything, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” according to the words of Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) recorded in the Gospel (Matthew 5:45).

For Christians, humanity’s love of God and God’s love of humanity are intimately linked. As we read in the New Testament: “We love because he [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Our love of God springs from and is nourished by God’s love for us. It cannot be otherwise, since the Creator who has power over all things is infinitely good.

Love of Neighbor

We find deep affinities with our own Christian faith when *A Common Witness Between Us and You* insists that love is the pinnacle of our duties toward our neighbors. “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself,” the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) said. In the New Testament we similarly read, “whoever does not love [the neighbor] does not know God” (1 John 4:8) and “whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). God is love, and our highest calling as human beings is to imitate the One whom we worship.

We applaud when you state that “justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part” of the love of neighbor. When 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.

Since Muslims seek to love their Christian neighbors, they are not against them, the document encouragingly states. Instead, Muslims are *with* them. As Christians we resonate deeply with this sentiment. Our faith teaches that we must be with our neighbors—indeed, that we must act in their favor—even when our neighbors turn out to be our enemies. “But I say unto you,” says Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him), “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:44-45). Our love, Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) says, must imitate the love of the infinitely good Creator; our love must be as unconditional as is God’s—extending to brothers, sisters, neighbors, and even enemies. At the end of his life, Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) himself prayed for his enemies: “forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) did similarly when he was violently

rejected and stoned by the people of Ta'if, saying, "The most virtuous behavior is to engage those who sever relations, to give to those who withhold from you, and to forgive those who wrong you." (It is perhaps significant that after the Prophet Muhammad was driven out of Ta'if, it was the Christian slave 'Addas who went out to Muhammad, brought him food, kissed him, and embraced him.)

The Task Before Us

"Let this common ground"—the dual common ground of love of God and of neighbor—"be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us," your courageous letter urges. Indeed, in the generosity with which the letter is written you embody what you call for. We most heartily agree. Abandoning all "hatred and strife," we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other's good, for the one God unceasingly seeks our good. Indeed, together with you we believe that we need to move beyond "a polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders" and work diligently together to reshape relations between our communities and our nations so that they genuinely reflect our common love for God and for one another.

Given the deep fissures in the relations between Christians and Muslims today, the task before us is daunting. And the stakes are great. The future of the world depends on our ability as Christians and Muslims to live together in peace. 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.

We are persuaded that our next step should be for our leaders at every level to meet together and begin the earnest work of determining how God would have us fulfill the requirement that we love God and one another. It is with humility and hope that we receive your generous letter, and we

commit ourselves to labor together in heart, soul, mind and strength for the objectives you so appropriately propose.

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