

"A Common Word": How Should We Respond?

Why I Signed the Yale Response to "A Common Word between Us and You"

by Rick Love

Editor's note: In *IJFM* 24:4, we reprinted a historic letter to Christian leaders worldwide (signed by 138 prominent Muslims) and the "Yale Response" to it. Predictably, both have received mixed reviews. The latter has met with criticism from various quarters, ranging from Richard John Neuhaus in *First Things* magazine (February 2008) to John Piper in a recent video blog. Rick Love's article responds to Piper's video comments, which can be found at www.desiringgod.org/media/video/20080118_interview.mp4.

Rick Love has served over 25 years among Muslims. He specializes in coaching faith-based organizations in cross-cultural communication and Christian-Muslim relationships. He is presently on sabbatical as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture's Reconciliation Program. 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.

Thank you, John, for inviting me to respond to your recent comments on the "Yale Response" to the "Common Word between Us and You." I am honored. I pray for you often and continue to learn much from you (during a recent three-day spiritual retreat, I spent time reading and listening to your sermons).

After listening to your response, I realize that I too might have been disappointed by the Yale Response if I had only read the two documents. However, I have just begun as a Post Doctoral Fellow at Yale (as a part of my sabbatical). In the providence of God, I have been led to work in the Yale Reconciliation Program to help facilitate their response to the "Common Word."

I am writing a personal response using a Q&A format. I neither represent Frontiers, fellow signatories, nor Yale.

Q: *Does a commitment to the "Common Word" dialogue mean that the signatories are renouncing evangelism?*

A: The Yale Response itself neither promotes nor renounces evangelism. It merely responds to an invitation to dialogue. The signatories of the Yale Response represent a broad spectrum of Christian belief. Because of this, some signatories may perceive dialogue as a substitute for evangelism. I understand dialogue as the context for witness.

This is the beginning of a conversation (a number of dialogues are being planned). Lord willing, this conversation will lead to peacemaking and hopefully provide an opportunity to share the good news about Jesus cordially and graciously. The framers of the Yale Response and I agree with the Lausanne Covenant: "Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord" (#4 The Nature of Evangelism).

Q: *Shouldn't the basis of our dialogue with Muslims center on the person and work of Christ rather than the command to love God and neighbor?*

A: The "Common Word" and Yale Response merely articulate the starting point for dialogue. The command to love God and neighbor provides a strong theological bridge that both parties can affirm. This is only a first step, but it is a big step.

What I said above is worthy repeating: I expect to bear witness graciously and cordially about Jesus Christ. I expect Muslims to bear witness to their own distinctive beliefs as well.

Q: *Does the Qur'an really emphasize love as the Bible does? Is the description of Islam in the "Common Word" accurate?*

A: It is true that I would not interpret Islam as it is described in the "Common Word." I do not see love as being the heart of the message of the Qur'an. But who am I to tell Muslim leaders how to interpret their faith? If the Muslim leaders of the world want to put love at the center—as the touchstone of true religion—then we should be delighted. If love is the touchstone, then Jesus becomes irresistibly attractive. Furthermore, if the Muslim leaders of the world want to say to their fellow Muslims, "Your chief duty toward Christians is to love them," we should be delighted. If the Muslim leaders want to say (as they do twice in their letter) that freedom of religion is important, we should be overjoyed.

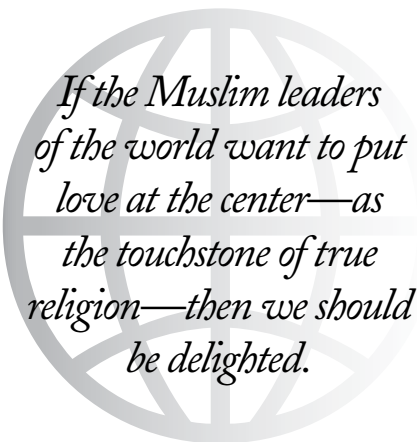
Q: *The "Common Word" asserts that love for God and neighbor is the common ground between Muslims and Christians. But is the Muslim understanding of love and the Christian understanding of love really the same?*

A: There seems to be significant differences between Muslims and Christians regarding the meaning of love. But the best way to clarify these differences is through dialogue. It appears to me that the Qur'anic concept of God's love is conditional, whereas the biblical

concept of love is unconditional. Thus, there needs to be serious theological and exegetical reflection together on that question for us to move forward in any substantive way.

Q: *The Yale Response seems to imply that Allah is the same God that Christians worship. Is this true?*

A: I do not hesitate to refer to the God of the Bible as Allah, since Arab Christians before and after the birth of Islam use the term Allah to describe the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.



Christian and Muslim views of God are similar in that we both worship the one true God, creator of the heavens and the earth. We both believe this God will judge all peoples at the end of history. We both believe this God has sent His prophets into the world to guide His people. Christian and Muslim views of God differ primarily regarding the Fatherhood of God, the Trinity, and especially regarding the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I believe that Muslims worship the true God. But I also believe that their view of God falls short of His perfections and beauty as described in the Bible. Thus, I try to model my approach to Muslims after the apostle Paul who said to the Athenians: "What you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

Muslim background believers all over the world testify that they were previ-

ously worshiping God in ignorance and now they have come to know him in Jesus Christ.

Q: *What do you hope to gain from this dialogue?*

A: As noted in our response, peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians stand as one of the central challenges of this century. The Yale Response and upcoming dialogues take seriously God's admonition to us through Paul: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people" (Rom. 12:18).

Thus, in obedience to God, the pursuit of peace becomes a major focus of this dialogue. In addition, I pray that our Muslim neighbors will see the beauty of Jesus in us and learn more about Jesus from us. **IJFM**