

The Promise of “A Common Word”

by

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In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

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In an era of hateful, vengeful, and destructive discourses, every human community, religious or otherwise, is called upon, for the sake of God, and for the sake of our common humanity, to develop, articulate, and clearly proclaim alternative discourses; discourses that are loving, forgiving, and constructive.

Discourses directly affect actions, and, are as a matter of fact, already an important category of actions. Discourses that are hateful, vengeful, and destructive, can only lead to actions of grotesque cruelty and mayhem. Discourses that are loving, forgiving, and constructive, can only lead to actions marked by compassionate gentleness and harmony.

The deeper the creedal roots of a discourse, the more potency and efficacy it has in the arena of action. Hateful and destructive creedal discourse is catastrophically destructive to humanity. Loving and constructive creedal discourse is wholesome and nourishing.

Again, the more authoritative the source of the discourse is, the more potency and efficacy it has, at the level of action. Discourses coming from a community’s leadership are of utter importance, and effectiveness. They have an immediate effect on teaching, preaching, and individual and communal conduct.

The Muslim community, like any other human community, is called upon, for the sake of God and His beloved creatures, to articulate a wholesome creedal discourse that is truly in line with its God-assigned duty on earth, and that leads to proper loving conduct towards God’s beloved creatures.

Such wholesome Muslim creedal discourse must not be that of a few scattered individuals. It must be a communal discourse built upon communal consensus, and rooted in the revelatory sources of Islam: the Qur’an and the Sunnah (tradition) of the Prophet of God, Muhammad (peace be upon him), and in the communally inherited and transmitted example of his blessed companions, and righteous kinship and followers. Furthermore, it must clearly and unanimously come from the very leadership of the Muslim community.

The criteria of wholesome creedal discourse have been endowed to us by God Himself in the glorious Qur'an:

“See you not how God sets forth a parable? — a goodly word as a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the sky (i.e. very high). Giving its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord and God sets forth parables for mankind in order that they may remember” (14: 24-25).

Thus all proper and wholesome creedal discourse must be:

1. Rooted.
2. Open-ended.
3. Ever fresh and fruitful.

Muslim creedal discourse today must strive to abide by these divine criteria. It must be firmly rooted in: the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the Ijma' of the Ummah. It must be open-ended through the dialectical and respectful dialogue with other religions and philosophies. It must be constantly refreshed and focused on bearing fruits that can serve the community and humanity at large.

In an unprecedented, and immensely important, communal consensus (constituting a spiritual, moral, and juridical normative ijma' or accord), one hundred and thirty eight prominent Muslim leaders got together and planted a wholesome seed for such a wholesome tree: a healing creedal discourse of “Love of the One God, and Love of the Neighbor”.

The one hundred and thirty leaders, collectively guiding and influencing millions of Muslims all over the globe, include religious authorities, scholars, teachers, intellectuals, and media leaders, from Sunni, Shi'a (*Ja'fari, Zaidi, and Isma'ili*), and Ibadi schools.

They jointly launched the document as an “Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders” addressed to the heads of all prominent Christian Churches, and to the “leaders of Christian Churches, everywhere”. They titled the document, following a Qur'anic phrasing, “A Common Word between Us and You”.

The hope-giving promise of this ‘Common Word’ is worthy of deep reflection, and is of immense importance for at least the following ten reasons:

1. It is addressed by leaders who collectively guide and influence millions of Muslims to leaders who guide and influence millions of Christians.
2. It is deeply rooted in the Scriptures of both Islam and Christianity, and as such, already uses a dialogical scriptural reasoning from the very start. This is solid foundation of all sorts of dialogical engagements in future stages.
3. It goes back to the very foundations, and with utter and humble simplicity reinvigorates, rehabilitates, and re-proclaims the simple but immensely powerful theology of love of the One God, and love of the neighbor.
4. It appeals to foundational revelatory and scriptural consensus upon which sensible human beings can agree, and that can serve as the solid basis for further elaborations and constructs.
5. It retrieves the gentle invitational mode of discourse that is founded in the true recognition of the other, and that truly revives the proper Muslim discourse of “wisdom and fair exhortation” that is mandated by God in the Qur'an.

6. It speaks prophetically and invokes the collective prophetic and revelatory inheritance of all of humanity. Thus, it restores and heals prophetic kinship between the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.

7. By invoking both Torah and the New Testament, it addresses Christians, but already prepares the ground for a much-needed further discourse towards healing relations with the Jews.

8. The document retrieves the very roots of a proper Muslim theology of gratitude. By invoking the saving efficacy of Divine compassionate- grace (*rahma*), and seeing all of religiosity as an attitude of thanks- giving and appreciation of Divine generosity, the document lays a solid foundation for grace-filled theology, teaching, and preaching that will result in grace-based actions in our troubled world.

9. “A Common Word” definitively and authoritatively retrieves and rearticulates a solid Muslim theology that responds to divine graceful generosity with sincere devotion and exclusive worship of the One God; but a theology that also sees that such response to God must concretely manifest itself in the love of our neighbors and all of God’s creatures.

10. Finally, the document invokes key realities and notions that will be the seed for much further theological and spiritual elaboration in future documents: the heart, wisdom, paradigmatic example-following, divine remembrance, and divinely-endowed human dignity and freedom.

Finally, I whole-heartly believe that the true promise of this vital document, “A Common Word”, is that it is a first, but monumental step, toward retrieving and reliving the true Muslim way that was vividly described, long ago, by a spiritual master called Sidi Ahmed al-Rifa’i:

Master Ibrahim al-Azab (may God be pleased with him) said: “I said to Master Ahmed (al-Rifa’i): “My Master, the seekers discussed the way to God, and had many opinions”. He replied: “My son, the ways to God are as many as the breaths of creatures! Oh Ibrahim, your grandfather (referring to himself) left no way without exploring (except those ways that God did not will for him). Oh Ibrahim, I explored all ways, and found no way closer, more-giving, more- hopeful, and more-lovely than the way of meekness (*ajz*), brokenness (*inkisar*), bewilderment (*hayra*), and poverty (*iftiqar*) (before God).” ¹¹

The document reopens precisely this way to God, the way of utter devotion to the One God, and utter love for His creatures.

Such a simple, but profound way consists of:

1. Continuously remembering God and His compassion towards us.
 2. Living in gratitude for God's compassion, through total devotion to Him.
 3. Living as intensely as possible in mutual compassion (*tarahum*) with our neighbors.
- The sooner we Muslims rehabilitate and mend our classical networks and institutions, and reconnect them with the rest of humanity in sincere and humble dialogue, the more able we will be to serve God and humanity. This “Common Word” is a great first step along the way.

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