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A Common Word Between Us and You

A response by Professor David Ford, Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme

This historic statement gives the right keynote for relations between Muslims and Christians in the 21st century. It is what we have been missing since 9/11/2001. The most impressive list of signatories from all the main Muslim traditions and countries have made a clear and powerful proclamation of love for God and for all neighbours. The message is rich and deep, and it goes to the heart of Muslim faith as expressed in the Quran. It also goes to the heart of the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament.

There are three main reasons why this is so important.

First, it is unprecedented in bringing together so many of the leading religious authorities and scholars of Islam and uniting them in a positive, substantial affirmation. This is an astonishing achievement of solidarity, one that can be built on in the future.

Second, it is addressed to Christians in the form of a friendly word, it engages respectfully and carefully with the Christian scriptures, and it finds common ground in what Jesus himself said is central: love of God and love of neighbour. I like its modesty – it does not claim to be the final word but to be ‘a common word’, one that Muslims and Christians (and, I would also add, Jews and many others) can share with integrity. This is shared ground, mutual ground, where there is the possibility of working further on issues that unite and divide us. This common word does not pretend that there are no differences between Muslims and Christians (for example, on the Christian teaching *about* Jesus rather than the teaching *of* Jesus). It takes a vital step forward, and wisely does this by concentrating mainly on each tradition’s scriptures, those core texts that are so often misused but which, in my experience, also have the resources for enabling deeper mutual understanding and trust.

Third, it opens a way forward that is more hopeful for the world than most others at present in the public sphere. Its combination of Islamic solidarity around core teaching together with friendly address to Christians should be seen as setting a direction for the twenty-first century. It challenges Muslims and Christians to live up to their own teachings and seek political and educational as well as personal ways to do this for the sake of the common good. It invites them to go deeper into their own faith at the same time as going deeper into each other’s. It cries out to be followed through by many initiatives in the same spirit. These should be

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among Muslims, among Christians, between Muslims and Christians, and between them and those of other faiths and no faith. They should be in many spheres of life and at all levels - local, regional and global. It is deeply encouraging that the Royal Academy of Jordan has had the courage, imagination and practical capacity to achieve this. Now the Royal Academy needs to be joined by many others in following this through.

An obvious question is: but will this have any impact on the violent extremism that afflicts the world? I do not think that problem has a simple one-off solution. But any long-term solution will have to include four elements:

- Muslim solidarity around an understanding of their faith that clearly excludes violent, uncompassionate acts, programmes and language;
- better Christian understanding of Islam;
- deeper engagement between Muslims and Christians that makes use of the resources at the heart of their faith, such as their scriptures;
- a concern for the flourishing of the whole human family and the whole planet.

I find all four in 'A Common Word'. If sufficient people and groups heed this statement and act on it then the atmosphere will be changed into one in which violent extremists cannot flourish.

I think that many people have longed for a statement like this. Its significance is not that it offers anything novel but that it selects so wisely from the riches of both scriptures and opens them up in a way that is highly relevant to the present situation. I found myself deeply moved by its vision of what it calls 'the all-embracing, constant and active love of God' and 'the necessity and paramount importance of love for – and mercy towards – the neighbour', and by its concern not only for that half of the world's population who are Muslim or Christian but also for every single other person and the whole of creation.

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The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme is dedicated to engagement with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with their interrelations, and with their relations to other religions and to secular understandings and forces. Besides academic research and teaching it is developing a programme of public education.