



# ECOLOGIES OF WISDOM

*Christian and Muslim Horizons*

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by DAVID F. FORD & AREF ALI NAYED



THE CAMBRIDGE INTER-FAITH PROGRAMME  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



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*To the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (CIP),  
in celebration of its 20th Anniversary*



# *Foreword*

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by PROFESSOR ESRA ÖZYÜREK

*Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values at the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, and Academic Director of the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme (CIP)*

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**I**N 2009, PROFESSOR DAVID FORD, my predecessor as a director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, travelled to Oman at the invitation of His Eminence Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammad Al-Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs. He faced the honored and somewhat daunting task of addressing generations of Muslim scholars at the Institute of Shariah Studies and in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. For each audience, he drew upon the wisdom of his own tradition and position (Christian, lay, Anglican) to offer indications about what might make for good leadership and for good inter-faith relations. He distilled this wisdom into a series of recommendations which he termed a “Muscat Manifesto”. Six months later, the University of Cambridge welcomed a reciprocal event as esteemed scholar and long-term advisor to our Cambridge Inter-faith Programme Dr Aref Nayed delivered a Muslim response to that manifesto, the “Ecologies of Peace”.

Thirteen years have passed. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme that Professor Ford founded, it is my turn to be daunted. The invitation is as great an honour: to deliver a Foreword to this special edition of the three talks, entitled *Ecologies of Wisdom*. As those who turn straight to the picture pages will soon discover, this is a celebratory edition that captures important moments and people in the history of Cambridge Inter-faith Programme (as it is now known) with marvellous detail. The invitation demands first that I look back on a history to which I did not yet belong, and at the same time it encourages me to look forward and to shine a light on what may, I very much hope, come next.

In their talks, Professor Ford and Dr Nayed spoke of pioneers and lineage, of cultivation, compassion and flourishing. Each of them—or perhaps more exactly, they jointly—have pioneered much of what CIP has become. They have built friendships and trust, entered into deep engagement and debate in terms that allowed them to face difference without the need to overcome it, and they have done so largely as theologians and with the study of scriptures as their foundation. In the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, they have learned to

inquire together into one another's traditions, to query, quiz and push for greater understanding. That practice, I shall admit, is something that puzzles and confounds me. I am neither a theologian, nor a natural student of scripture. Rather my apprenticeship has been in anthropology: I read people, I quiz people, I push for greater understanding of people. Fortunately, and it must be fortunately, since I have inherited the great project that Cambridge Inter-faith Programme represents, I think these acts of reading can be complementary.

In reading people, I attend most especially to the ways that relations between religions are lived. It can be productive here to make a distinction between *inter-religious relations* (what happens daily, in and between households, neighbourhoods, communities, and to some extent nations) and *inter-faith relations*. The former have been the substance of many anthropological works, and are a component of my own studies—for example, in relation to the experience of Muslims living in Germany and Turkey, and those who have chosen a religion not inherited from their grandparents. The latter, inter-faith relations, are, it seems to me, a product of the modern era: fostered intentionally and in pursuit of better mutual living. As an anthropologist, I am curious to study the people and contexts that foster and produce inter-faith relations, to better understand what they intend and how, where and why they might (or might not) be achieving it. But that is work for the future.

One initial observation I can share: very often if one scrutinises the who and how of inter-faith relations, one sees men. As a Muslim woman, I notice this. I am sure that other women notice this too. And it gives me hope that I, a Muslim woman, have been granted admission not only to the University of Cambridge but to a significant professorship. I find it hard to imagine that that would have happened as recently as 2002 (when the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme was founded) and perhaps it could not yet have happened without the very manifest commitment to fostering good relations between the Abrahamic Faiths that Cambridge Inter-faith Programme has willed into being. Is it wrong to find a little of myself in Professor Ford's opening text?

*Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice ...*  
— Proverbs 1:20 [emphasis added]

Of course, I do not write wholly in jest.

Those 2009 lectures were important for another reason: Dr Nayed delivered his lecture on an auspicious day. Visiting Cambridge with him was His Excellency Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammad Al-Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs for the Sultanate of Oman. His Excellency bore an important message: His Majesty (the late) Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id had determined to endow a permanent Chair in Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values. It is that endowment that fetched me to Cambridge two years ago, and that investment that supports my vision as Academic Director of Cambridge Inter-faith Programme today.

The lectures you can read below give an indication of what our Programme had achieved by 2009. Of great significance was the work of Professor Ford and Dr Nayed in encouraging publication of “A Common Word”, an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI from 138 Muslim signatories, acknowledging the shared commitment to love of God and love of neighbour. That approach stimulated rich discussion and thoughtful response, catalysing a new era of dialogue and the establishment of initiatives in Muslim-Christian relations

that continue to inspire and influence much that is good. Professor Ford draws out a connection between those moves and earlier work within the Christian world, especially the rapprochement of historically-divided Christians as an outworking of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

Since 2009, the work of Cambridge Inter-faith Programme has continued. An ever-changing team has curated activities ranging from high-profile exhibitions, workshops, and training programmes to academic conferences, research projects, classroom resources and syllabi. Through a process of continuing evaluation and discernment, the team has been humble enough, and bold enough, to recognise where others had grown in capability and were more suited to take forward particular initiatives. Where the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme once served as the hub for Scriptural Reasoning in the UK and beyond, the Rose Castle Foundation (established in 2015) is now the primary base for coordination, training and facilitation in this important practice. We have similar positive relations with other external partners, including Faith in Leadership. Our work has evolved in other ways: alumni of Cambridge Inter-faith Programme's Summer programmes speak in passionate terms about the influence on their lives. This is as true for those who staffed residential summer schools as those who attended as participants. As of 2021, we have established an academic summer school programme, supporting international students—from a range of stages and contexts—to advance their understanding of inter-faith relations in terms of methods and practice. A conversation with my co-convenors will readily convince you of the significance of this intensive work for those who study and learn together—even as pandemic circumstance forced such activity online.

Dr Nayed refers to a passage from the Qur'an that characterises a good word as a tree, firmly rooted and branching out (cf. Surah 14). He quickly acknowledges that to grow wisdom, we want trees, and indeed whole forests, "akin to Qur'anic gardens". The diverse organisations not simply branching off from but establishing separate identities from our Programme are, I trust, a healthy example of seedlings rising to independent stature, the foreshadowing of a blossoming forest.

*What then, comes next?* At the time of my appointment to the Sultan Qaboos Chair, I brought with me a vision: the Religion and Global Challenges Initiative. The world of the 2020s resembles the 2000s in many respects. Yet we must concede that certain challenges press upon us with increasing urgency: climate change and its implications for all who cohabit planet earth—but most especially those in the developing world who feel its impacts most harshly; migration, whether provoked by conflict, economic necessity or choice, and the pressurised intercultural and inter-religious encounter that often results; discrimination on grounds of gender, race, sexuality, and religion and perceptible increases in identity politics and oppression of minorities, to give just a few examples.

Since religion is a global phenomenon, we must not shy away from tackling these global challenges in terms that make sense of and take seriously the role of religions—that harness the power of religious communities even—to create the change the world needs. It is, as Dr Nayed has said, "vital for theological ecologies to be fruitful and to be of service to people". Acknowledging the arrival of Cambridge Muslim College, Professor Ford speculated about the capacity of Europe to be "a laboratory for exploring what wise, faithful and creative responses might be possible". For him, the challenges have been as much intellectual as practical, and that is to be expected given the considerable seat of learning which he has occupied. I hope though, that we will collectively turn our intellects, our creative powers and our wisdom to seeing what inter-faith and inter-religious studies

can offer in the face of the great challenges of our time, and that we will do so in a way that is necessarily empirical but also radically rooted in the diverse international contexts of all whose trees can be nourished with the compost of Cambridge learning.

Meanwhile, I invite you to read on and to glean nourishment from the theological contribution of my predecessors, and to celebrate with me the great generosity of these scholars and all who have contributed to the first twenty years of Cambridge Inter-faith Programme. \*

# Seeking Muslim, Christian and Jewish Wisdom in the Fifteenth, Twenty-first and Fifty-eighth Centuries: A Muscat Manifesto

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by DAVID F. FORD

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*Lecture at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Muscat, Oman*

MONDAY 20TH APRIL 2009

I AM VERY HONOURED to speak in one of the finest mosques in the world, and I am inspired by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said's leadership in creating a space where understanding between cultures and religions can be advanced. I am also deeply grateful to HE Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, for his invitation and hospitality. I would also like to thank all those who have helped in the organisation of my visit and of the two lectures, especially Michael Bos, whose work has done so much for Muslim-Christian relations, and Dr Abdulrahman Al-Salmi, editor of the journal *Tolerance*. I bring warm greetings from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, Professor Alison Richard: we greatly value Cambridge's very close links with Oman and trust that they can become even closer in the years ahead. Three days ago His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, was in Cambridge and was delighted to hear of this visit: he too asked me to convey his warm greetings.

## Seeking the Wisdom of God: A triple dynamic

My theme in this lecture is seeking the wisdom we need for living in our time, which according to the Muslim, Christian and Jewish calendars is the fifteenth, twenty-first and fifty-eighth centuries. There are many rich traditions of wisdom in our world, among which I will focus on these three, whose members together make up around half of the world's population.

We are siblings who share a great deal, and we are also very different. We need to be able to find shared ground. But 'shared ground' is a static image, and even more important is the spirit that blows over both what we share and what divides us. It is possible for us to face and discuss our differences without resolving them, while at the same time deepening our mutual respect and friendship. I want to suggest that the spirit we most need is one that seeks wisdom above all, the wisdom of the God of wisdom, compassion and blessing. In the Book of Proverbs in the Bible wisdom makes a passionate appeal to us:

*Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice ...  
Beside the gates, in front of the town,  
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
'To you, O people, I call,  
and my cry is to all that live ...  
Take my instruction instead of silver,  
and knowledge rather than choice gold;  
For wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire  
cannot compare with her ...'*

(PROVERBS 1:20; 8:3, 4, 10, 11)

That is a manifesto! What might wisdom urge us to do today? I suggest: *first*, to search as deeply as possible within our own scriptures, traditions and understanding of our world today; *second*, to share with each other what we find, as we study, discuss, explore and argue together—deep differences call for wisdom in how to question and dispute; and, *third*, to collaborate together for the common good of our world in ways that please God—which above all means for the sake of more wisdom, compassion and peace.

So the core vision is of this triple dynamic between the Abrahamic faiths: deeper into our own faith, deeper into understanding the two others, and deeper into engagement with the world for its good.

This is a moment of great danger in the history of our three faiths and of our world. There are tensions, crises and conflicts, and widespread misunderstandings and suspicions. But there are signs of hope too, and we must believe that God wants us to create many more such signs.

One sign is the fact that I, a Christian theologian, have received your invitation to speak here this evening in the Grand Mosque and lectured in the Institute of Shariah Studies on its magnificent new campus earlier today. In your invitation you asked me to say what I as a Christian have learned from my own tradition that might be of value to Muslims and their relations with Christians. So in the rest of this lecture, while always assuming that the best relations between any two of the Abrahamic faiths will be formed when the third is also involved, I will largely concentrate on Muslim-Christian relations. That is a central global challenge of this century, one that has only begun to be addressed, and it deserves our urgent attention and dedication.

### **Christian Resources for the Challenge**

I will first explore some of the theological resources Christianity might draw upon to meet this challenge.

For over twenty years part of my academic work has been editing a textbook, *The Modern Theologians*, now over 800 pages in its third edition, about Christian theology since 1918.<sup>1</sup> It has been one of the most valuable parts of my education. I have had to ask questions such as: Who are the leading Christian theologians of the past hundred years? What are the most important movements? How have different theologies responded to modernity? What has been happening in Christian thinking in Asia, in Africa, in North and South America, and among Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, mainstream Protestants and Anglicans? What have been the main developments in the interpretation of scripture? Which philosophies have been most influential?

What about theology that engages with the natural sciences, the social sciences, economics and politics? How has theology thought about the visual arts, music and film? And what about pastoral and practical theology, and theology of prayer and spirituality?

I have come to the conclusion that the past century has in fact been one of the richest and most fruitful in the whole two thousand years of Christian theology. Why is that? There are many factors that help to explain it. In line with the explosion of education at all levels, far more people have been studying and writing theology, and there has been a huge increase around the world in seminaries, institutes, universities and courses for congregations and lay Christians. Whole new groups of people who previously were largely excluded from theology can now study it, and many of them go on to teach and write it—think of women, black Americans and Africans, lower caste Indians, lay Roman Catholics, and many others. These groups have often shown a passion for learning and for working out theologies that connect strongly with their lives and contexts.

There are other reasons too for this flourishing of Christian theology, perhaps above all the stimulus of responding to unprecedented changes and challenges. The historian Philip Jenkins has described how many signs of energetic life and thought there are in European Christianity at present, as it copes with secular forces and the growth of other faiths. He says that the church that can survive Europe can survive anything! He also raises a fascinating question: are the pressures on European Islam having similar beneficial effects, as European Muslims develop a ‘form of faith that can cope with social change without compromising basic beliefs.’<sup>2</sup> Some of my most moving conversations with Muslim friends and colleagues have arisen from sharing how each can learn from the other in responding to modern understanding, to academic disciplines, and to religious, social, political and economic pressures.

Europe is at present like a laboratory for exploring what wise, faithful and creative responses might be possible. In Cambridge my colleague in the University of Cambridge Faculty of Divinity and the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,<sup>3</sup> Abdal Hakim Murad (T. J. Winter) has this year begun with others a new Muslim theological college. This, for the first time in the University’s 800-year history, adds to the rich Cambridge academic environment an independent Muslim institution that is connected to the University.<sup>4</sup> In that environment we hope that the wisdom of different traditions can be studied, tested and worked out in practical ways.

### Key Elements in Wise Theology

What about the quality of all this theology? In editing *The Modern Theologians*, I, and those many people with whom I have consulted, have faced again and again the difficult questions: Which theologies should be included? Which are the best? What is it that makes a theology wise and creative? I want to share with you my answer to that last question, about the ingredients in wise and creative theology, and then give an example of one development in Christian theology that has many lessons for Muslim-Christian relations.

So, what are the key elements in a wise Christian theology? I propose four.

First comes wise and creative understanding, interpretation and application of the Bible and Christian traditions. The more I continue as a theologian the more I am convinced that wise interpretation of the scriptures is the most fruitful source of theology, prayer and Christian living. The Bible is in many ways a difficult book, and it can be, and is frequently, dangerously and terribly misused. As the saying goes: ‘The corruption of the best is the worst’. So the sense of gratitude to those who intelligently and faithfully interpret the Bible

is immense. Augustine said that any interpretation of scripture that goes against love is false, and the final criterion of true biblical interpretation is whether it is in line with the love of God. I am at present writing a book on the future of Christian theology, with a parallel book on the future of Muslim theology being written by my friend, the scholar Dr Aref Nayed.<sup>5</sup> Dr Nayed reminds me of Augustine when he says that the main criterion of true Qur'anic interpretation is whether it is in line with the mercy and compassion of God. His theology springs from those infinitely rich words that the Qur'an repeats so often: *Bism Illah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim*, 'In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'. He is working out in Muslim terms something that has deep resonances with what I see in the first element in Christian theology: wise and loving retrieval of our sources, above all our scriptures.

The second element is lively engagement in the present with both God and the world. Wise theology requires constant prayer. The God who is worshipped is the living God, who is in constant interaction with people and the whole world, and invites us to take a responsible part in fulfilling his purposes now.

Modern life is extraordinarily diverse and complex, throwing up one challenge after another. Christianity cannot thrive if it tries simply to repeat the past or reject the present. Contemporary life is not all good and not all bad. It is a complex mixture, which means that we must constantly ask questions, explore possibilities, search the past with sensitivity, and listen to many other people in order to arrive at responsible discernments, judgements and decisions before God. Then we are able to avoid the two extremes of uncritical assimilation to modernity and uncritical rejection of it.

The theologians of all traditions, especially Jewish, Muslim and Christian, from whom I have learned most, have searched long and hard to discern the purposes of God in relation to the great problems and possibilities of our world. They have offered theology that is creative in the sense that it responds to new situations by seeking the wisdom of the Creator God, who desires to draw us into a good future which is very different from the past and present.

The third element is deeply involved in the first two: wise and creative thinking. I have in mind the great ideas that sum up and develop Christian understanding further. God's knowledge and wisdom are superabundant and endless and we can only ever fathom a tiny fraction of it. But we believe God wants to draw us deeper and deeper into this wisdom. It stretches and expands us in every way—in prayer and adoration, in study and discussion, in imagination and in action. Good theologians produce generative ideas that enable us to do fuller justice to scriptures and traditions and at the same time to respond better to the world today—its sciences, its philosophies, its religions, its cultures, its ethical dilemmas, its politics and its economics. The challenge of wise and creative thinking has never been greater.

Then, fourth and finally, there is the way Christian theology is expressed and communicated in all directions to all sorts of people. There is, I believe, in most people a hunger and thirst for deep meaning and wisdom. It is sad that so much of what we are offered concerning religion, not only by the media but also by religious communities and by educational institutions, is either 'junk food' or good food that is indigestible. The situation is not all bad, but it is serious enough to see the immense need for the best theology to be communicated as widely as possible in appropriate ways.

I vividly remember the impact on me as a fifteen-year old schoolboy in Dublin when I happened to come upon some of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed

in 1945 for plotting against Hitler. I had never realised such writing existed—it gripped me, stretched my thinking, gave a sense of the reality of God and the power of the Gospel, and opened up some of our age's major questions. Years later, as I edited *The Modern Theologians*, I came to realise that Bonhoeffer has all the key elements of theological wisdom and creativity: he is a perceptive interpreter of Christian scripture and tradition; he was utterly engaged with God and with the events and issues of his time in church and in society, both in his own country and internationally; he generated marvellously illuminating ideas; and he communicated powerfully not only in academic writings but also in lecturing, broadcasting, sermons, letters, conversation, poetry, and drama—and he even began a novel.

What might these four elements mean to Muslims? As a Christian, I am not the person to answer that. I simply offer them now as a gift, drawn from the Christian experience of theologians seeking wisdom today. As you unwrap it, I will be watching and listening very eagerly for your response.

### **The Christian Ecumenical Movement as a Model for Inter-Faith Engagement**

Out of the riches of the past century of Christian theology I want now to concentrate on one that has many lessons for the present century's inter-faith engagements. This is the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> There are, of course, many differences between attempts at bringing Christians together and attempts to bring different religions together, but there are enough parallels and comparable questions to make it very worthwhile.

The history of the ecumenical movement is remarkable. I do not think that anyone a hundred years ago could have imagined it happening. Never before in history had major religious communities, with hundreds of millions of members, moved from a history of much hostile and suspicious confrontation, sometimes involving conflict and even killing, to a situation in which there was conversation, collaboration and even in some cases federation or union. Yet that is what happened between many of the main Christian churches in the twentieth century. There is still a long way to go, but the change in atmosphere has been dramatic.

As an Irish Anglican member of a 3% Protestant minority in Dublin I experienced the great changes for the better in relations between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland that came largely as a result of the support given to the ecumenical movement by the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In all the troubles that happened in Northern Ireland after 1968, better relations between the main churches were a major element making for peace and, I believe, a key factor in avoiding the large-scale bloodshed that has happened in many other places.

How did the ecumenical movement happen? It had courageous pioneers, who often formed friendships that crossed church divisions. It required enormous amounts of theological work, the best of which has all four of the elements just mentioned: reinterpretations of the Bible, traditions and historical events, above all those such as the Reformation which led to splits in the church; patient engagement in prayer, conversations, debates and joint projects; inspired thinking that allowed each side to move beyond blockages and see each other as genuinely Christian, despite their deep differences and often very painful histories; and persuasive communication, especially in educational settings, but also through the whole range of media within and beyond the churches.

The ecumenical movement has been like an ecology with many habitats. It has needed

engagements at all levels: international, national, regional and local. There have been networks and groups, large and small, of ordinary Christians from different churches who have met together, prayed together, studied the Bible together, and worked for common causes together. One of the most encouraging things has been the amount of cooperation in serving the common good of society through charities, and through practical movements, such as Jubilee 2000 that campaigned for international debt relief.

There has also been institutional creativity at all levels, with new organisations and centres, and transformations of older bodies. I have been especially concerned with these in the area of education. In Cambridge those of us involved in helping to bring to birth the new Muslim theological college have had as a model the Cambridge Theological Federation, which is independent but linked to the University and has members from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Reformed and Orthodox traditions, as well as centres for Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim relations.

I believe one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first (or fifteenth or fifty-eighth) century is to bring about a change in consciousness among the world's Muslims, Christians and Jews (and, of course, others too) that can be compared to that achieved by the Christian ecumenical movement. We need to move beyond our often terrible histories and misunderstandings, and shift from suspicion, confrontation and conflict towards trust, conversation and collaboration, even as we acknowledge our real differences. The vision, energy and courage needed for this is even greater than that required by the ecumenical movement, and it will also require a range of dimensions comparable to those just mentioned. There are already some hopeful signs of this beginning to happen.

### **Signs of Hope**

Among the most important and best known<sup>7</sup> in recent years have been two daring Muslim initiatives: the letter *A Common Word between Us and You* sent by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to all the Christian churches;<sup>8</sup> and the inter-faith gatherings initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. These are very different and very important, and they should be seen as complementary to each other.

In the brief time available I will focus on *A Common Word*. I see it as the most important inter-faith statement in the past forty years.<sup>9</sup> Do visit the website, [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com), to read this remarkable letter on love of God and love of neighbour, and the fascinating replies by church bodies, individual Christians, Jews and others. It continues to be fruitful.<sup>10</sup> Just three weeks ago in London I attended the inaugural meeting of a new body, provisionally called the C-1 World Dialogue. It is co-chaired by the Anglican Bishop of London, Rt Revd Richard Chartres, and by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, and when I told them of this visit to Oman they both sent their warm greetings. The C-1 has been largely inspired by *A Common Word*, and HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan has been a leading figure in both. It is dedicated to sponsoring Muslim-Christian engagement and collaboration for the common good at all levels. The atmosphere at the meeting reminded me of the early days of the ecumenical movement, and I was encouraged that it saw the need for something of comparable scope and intensity. Let us pray that it flourishes.

As a theologian I am impressed by the way *A Common Word between Us and You* has all those elements of wisdom and creativity that I have been discussing. It communicates clearly. It has one big wise idea: the centrality of love and compassion to both of our traditions. It shows passionate devotion to God, and it courageously and generously engages

with Christians and with the current global situation. Most striking of all, it draws on the Qur'an and the Bible together.

Let me explain why I find this reading together of the Qur'an and the Bible especially important. For the past fifteen years I have taken part in Scriptural Reasoning.<sup>11</sup> This involves Muslims, Christians and Jews studying our scriptures together, and it can also be practised between any pair of those faiths.<sup>12</sup> At the heart of it are reading and conversation around the texts that are central to our faith, worship and living. Scriptural Reasoning is now practised in many countries and different settings: universities; seminaries; schools; local congregations; and regional, national and international gatherings. It allows members of different faiths to practice mutual hospitality around the texts they love most, being hosts in relations to their own scripture and guests in relation to the other two scriptures. For me as a Christian it has been a remarkable experience to be able, year after year, to engage deeply with Jews, Muslims and fellow-Christians, and to see this generate mutual understanding, arguments, friendships, educational initiatives and collaborations. I have not found a better way of actualising the triple dynamic of going deeper into one's own faith, into the faith of others and into the contemporary world.

So it was a special delight in October 2008 when we in the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme joined with the Archbishop of Canterbury to host a conference on *A Common Word*.<sup>13</sup> He had earlier in the summer of 2008 written the most substantial response so far, *A Common Word for the Common Good*. It was the most distinguished group of Muslim scholars and leaders ever to have gathered in Britain. Central to the conference was discussion of *A Common Word* and the study of the Qur'an and the Bible together. The communiqué issued at the end of it by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said:

One of the most moving elements of our encounter has been the opportunity to study together passages from our scriptures. We have felt ourselves to have been together before God and this has given us each a greater appreciation for the richness of the other's heritage as well as an awareness of the potential value in being joined by Jewish believers in a journey of mutual discovery and attentiveness to the texts we hold sacred. We *wish* to repeat the experience of a shared study of scriptural texts as one of the ways in which we can come, concretely, to develop our understanding of how the other understands and lives their own faith. We *commend* this experience to others.

If we want to act on this recommendation, as I suggest we should, it must be done in partnership—and this is, indeed, already happening.

One further comment on *A Common Word* needs to be added. It is important not just for relations between Muslims and Christians. It also greatly helps internal relations within each faith community. Many Muslims have seen *A Common Word* as a major achievement in Muslim unity across traditions of Islam and across global regions; likewise, a remarkably varied set of Christians have converged in responding to it.<sup>14</sup> One of the most exciting religious prospects for our century is that inter-faith and intra-faith engagements might mutually reinforce each other. This has already begun to be realised by the most significant initiative within Christian ecumenism in the past decade, that of Receptive Ecumenism, led by the Centre for Catholic Studies in the University of Durham.<sup>15</sup> In its last major conference in Durham in January 2009 Receptive Ecumenism engaged in dialogue

with Scriptural Reasoning in order to develop a complementary practice among Christian churches. Wise reading of our scriptures remains the central, demanding task for Muslims, for Christians, and for both together.

### **Future Abrahamic Relations: A Manifesto**

I will now sum up this lecture (including some things only hinted at in the lecture but dealt with elsewhere<sup>16</sup>) in a set of basic guidelines for improving inter-faith relations and the contribution of our faiths to the rest of the world.<sup>17</sup> This is the manifesto, in nine points.

*Let us aim to:*

#### **Love of God and Neighbour**

*Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation*

#### **A Triple Dynamic**

*Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good*

#### **Sources of Wisdom**

*Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom*

#### **Engaging with the Modern World**

*Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it*

#### **Partnerships of Difference**

*Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local*

#### **Creative Communication**

*Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources*

#### **An Ecology across Generations**

*Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all*

#### **Signs of Hope**

*Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it*

#### **God and God's Purposes**

*Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes<sup>18</sup>*

There is a Muscat Manifesto. Let us pray that God will bless our efforts and generously surprise us! ♣

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians—An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent. Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.287.

<sup>3</sup> The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme ([www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk)) promotes research and teaching which leads to deeper mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic traditions. It has four principal aims: 1) studying actual encounters between the three traditions, in the past and today; 2) bringing together the world's best current and future scholars working on materials in those traditions, in a way that fosters collaboration; 3) translating the core texts of those traditions for the use of their members in study; and 4) promoting engagement, dialogue and collaboration between the three faiths, and public understanding of them. In the area of public understanding and education CIP's major initiative is the Cambridge Abraham Project, in collaboration with the Coexist Foundation and others, aiming to develop in London a major resource relating the three faiths.

<sup>4</sup> The Cambridge Muslim College supports the development of training and Islamic scholarship to help meet the many challenges facing Britain today. The college is dedicated to maintaining academic excellence and pushing the boundaries of Islamic learning in the West. Drawing on resources and expertise in Cambridge and beyond, the college's mission is to help translate the many existing strengths of British Muslims into stronger, more dynamic institutions and communities' ([www.cambridgeMuslimCollege.org/about.html](http://www.cambridgeMuslimCollege.org/about.html)). For further information, visit [www.cambridgeMuslimCollege.org](http://www.cambridgeMuslimCollege.org).

<sup>5</sup> There is also a third parallel book on the future of Jewish theology being written by Professor Steven Kepnes of Colgate University. They are to be published by Blackwell of Oxford in their Manifesto series.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to the Christian ecumenical movement and its theology, see Mary Tanner, 'Ecumenical Theology' in *The Modern Theologians*, third edition, pp.556–71.

<sup>7</sup> There have also been many other initiatives, among the most significant of which have been new organizations, such as the Three Faiths Forum ([www.threefaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk)), and new foundations, such as the Coexist Foundation ([www.coexistfoundation.net](http://www.coexistfoundation.net)) and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation ([www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org](http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org)).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on *A Common Word*, including the text of the document in several languages, visit [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com).

<sup>9</sup> That is, since the Second Vatican Council's landmark statement on the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of other faiths in its decree *Nostra Aetate*. The text of the decree can be found in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996), pp. 569–74,

<sup>10</sup> HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan has recently summed up the responses to the letter:

'Since its launch in October 2007, over 60 leading Christian figures have responded to it in one form or another, including H.H. Pope Benedict XVI, H.B. Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II of Russia, the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams, and the Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Mark Hanson (see: 'Christian Responses' at [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)). On November 2007, over 300 leading U.S. Evangelical leaders also responded in an open letter in the *New York Times*. In the meantime, the Muslim Scholars signing the initiative increased to around 300, with over 460 Islamic organizations and associations endorsing it.'

*A Common Word* has led to a number of spontaneous local grassroots and community level-initiatives all over the world in places as far apart as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Canada, South Africa, the USA, and Great Britain (see: 'New Fruits' at [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)).

Over 600 Articles—carried by thousands of press outlets—have been written about *A Common Word* in English alone.

Over 200,000 people have visited the Official Website of *A Common Word* for more details.

Over 6000 people have 'fully endorsed' *A Common Word* online alone.

*A Common Word* has already been the subject of a number of M.A. and M. Phil. Dissertations in Western universities in various countries (including Harvard University, the Theological Seminary at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and the Center for Studies of Islam in the U.K.).

*A Common Word* has been the subject of major international conferences at Yale University, USA, and at Cambridge University (UK) and Lambeth Palace, and studies at World Economic Forum in Spring 2008 and the Mediterranean dialogue of Cultures in November 2008.

*A Common Word* was the central impetus behind the Wamp-Ellison Resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives which passed in 2008, and it was commended in this Resolution.

*A Common Word* received the U.K.'s Association of Muslim Social Scientist 2008 *Building Bridges Award*, and Germany's *Eugen Biser Award* of 2008.

Finally, *A Common Word* was even cited at the traditional Post-Inauguration Service at the National Cathedral for President Obama on January 21st, 2009 during the main sermon by Reverend Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, the *General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* in the US and Canada, as follows:

Recently Muslim scholars from around the world released a document, known as "A Common Word Between Us." It proposes a common basis for building a world at peace. That common basis? Love of God and love of neighbor! What we just read in the Gospel of Matthew!

... There is a barrage of activity planned for 2009, including a major documentary film, three books, a joint Christian-Muslim sensitivity manual, an important political conference planned at Georgetown University, Washington DC; a large religious conference planned in Malaysia and possibly a third in the Philippines. Also planned are two high-level meetings between Muslims and the Orthodox Churches, and between Muslims and the World Council of Churches; a multi-lingual Muslim-Christian "recommended reading list", a joint website with Yale, Lambeth Palace and possibly also the Vatican (to

serve as a voluntary basis for school and university curricula); a Muslim Theological Press Conference in Spain; a major European-based but global and multi-stakeholder Christian-Muslim peace Institute / Foundation with *A Common Word* ensconced in its charter—this is precisely the C-1 world Dialogue —; a University campus-based *Common Word* student initiative in the USA; a joint-design *Common Word* Muslim-Christian string of Prayer-beads; a number of “trickledown” projects to try to bring the *Common Word* to Churches and Mosques all over the world; and finally the continuation of the practical work planned at the meetings in Yale, Cambridge / Lambeth Palace and the Vatican. In short, we think we may fairly say that in its first year *A Common Word* achieved—by the Grace of God, *Al-HamduLillah*, historically unprecedented “global traction”, and is hoping in its second year—with the Will of God, *in sha Allah*—to achieve historically unprecedented “global trickledown”. God is Bounteous! (from a draft version of H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, ‘Concept of Dialogue: On “A Common Word Between Us and You”’ in *Annual Dialogue Report on Religion and Values of the C-1 World Dialogue* 2009, ed. Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff and Roland Schatz [Boston, Beirut, Pretoria, Tianjin, Zurich: Innovation Publishing, 2009], pp.17–19).

<sup>11</sup> For further information about Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>. For some of the best print resources on Scriptural Reasoning, see Chapter 8 in David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.273–303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Peter Ochs, ‘Reading Scripture Together in Sight of Our Open Doors’ in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26, no.1, new series (2005), pp.36–47; and Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Studying the ‘Other’, Understanding the ‘Self’: Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> A good example of this is the on-going Christian-Muslim ‘Building Bridges Seminar’, hosted annually by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Some of the proceedings from the second meeting of the seminar, in Doha in 2003, can be found in Michael Ipgrave (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> The participants included, on the Muslim side: H.E. Sheikh Prof. Dr. Ali Gomaa Mohamed Abdel Wahab (Grand Mufti, Egypt), Prof. Sheikh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan Al-Buti (Dean, Department of Religion, University of Damascus, Syria), H.E. Prof Sheikh Abd Allah bin Mahfuz bin Bayyah (Professor, King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia; Vice President of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, Mauritania), Sheikh Al-Habib Umar bin Muhammad bin Salim bin Hafith (Dean, Dar Al-Mustafa, Yemen), H.E. Sheikh Dr. Mustafa Ceric (Grand Mufti, Bosnia), H.R.H. Prof. Dr. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal (Personal Envoy and Special Advisor of H.M. King Abdullah II, Chairman of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, Jordan), Prof. Dr. Ingrid Mattson (Professor of Islamic Studies, Hartford Seminary, USA; President, Islamic Society of North America), Sheikh Al-Habib Ali Zain Al-Abidin Al-Jifri (Founder and Director, Taba Institute, United Arab Emirates), Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad Winter (Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge; Director of the Muslim Academic Trust, UK), Prof. Dr. Aref Ali Nayed (Former Professor, Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies; Senior Advisor, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme; Libya), Dr Ibrahim Kalin (Director, SETA Foundation, Ankara, Turkey; Asst. Professor, Georgetown University), Sheikh Amr Mohamed Helmy Khaled (Islamic Missionary, Preacher and Broadcaster; Founder and Chairman, Right Start Foundation International, Egypt), Ayatollah Prof. Dr. Seyyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmadi Abadi Damad (Dean of Department of Islamic Studies, The Academy of Science of Iran; Professor of Law and Islamic Philosophy, Tehran University, Iran), H.E. Dr. Abdulaziz Otham Al-Twaijri (Director-General, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Saudi Arabia), Prof. Dr. Abderrahmane Taha (President, Wisdom Circle for Thinkers and Researchers, Morocco), Dr. Muhammad Suheyl Umar (Director, Iqbal Academy, Pakistan); Mr. Sohail Nakhooda (Editor-in-Chief, *Islamica Magazine*, Jordan), and Mr. Fuad Nahdi (President, Radical Middle Way; Specialist Member, Christian Muslim Forum, UK).

Participants on the Christian side included: The Most Revd and Right Hon. Dr. Rowan Williams (Archbishop of Canterbury, UK), His Beatitude Gregorios III Laham (Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem), Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim (Metropolitan, Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo, Syria), The Rt Revd Michael Nazir-Ali (Bishop of Rochester, Church of England; Co-President of the Anglican Communion’s Network for Inter-Faith Concerns), The Rt Revd David Hamid (Bishop in Europe, Church of England), The Rt Revd Dr Josiah Idowu-Fearon (Bishop of Kaduna, Nigeria; Co-President of the Anglican Communion’s Network for Inter-Faith Concerns), Professor Iain Torrance (President, Princeton Theological Seminary, USA), Professor Frances Young (Professor Emeritus, Formerly Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham, UK), Professor David Ford (Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge; Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, UK), Professor Miroslav Volf (Professor of Systematic Theology, Yale Divinity School; Director, Yale Center for Faith and Culture, USA), Prof. Oddbjørn Leirvik (Professor of Interreligious Studies, University of Oslo, Norway), Prof. Fr Emmanuel Clapsis (Professor Ordinarius, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, USA; Ecumenical Patriarch), Abbot Timothy Wright OSB (Advisor on Inter-religious Affairs to the Abbot Primate of the Order of St. Benedict), The Revd Prof. Christian Troll SJ (Honorary Professor, Kolleg St. Georgen, Germany), The Revd Dr. Daniel Madigan SJ (Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University, USA), Dr. Nicholas Adams (Academic Director, Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, UK), Revd Dr. Mindawati Perangin-angin (Head of the Ecumenical Bureau of the Karo Batak Protestant Church of Indonesia), Pfrin. Susanna Faust (Representative for Interreligious Dialogue, Ecumenical Center, Evangelical Church of Germany), and Revd Canon Anthony Ball (Archbishop of Canterbury’s Secretary for International and Inter-Religious Relations, UK).

<sup>14</sup> The preparation for the Archbishop of Canterbury’s response, *A Common Word for the Common Good*, included a great deal of consultation, culminating in a gathering in Lambeth Palace on Sunday June 1st 2008 of scholars from different churches, who next day were joined in Church House, London, by about fifty leaders of churches, including World Council of Churches, Roman Catholic, several Orthodox (including leaders from the Middle East), Methodist, Reformed, Evangelical, and others. They had a draft of Dr Williams’ response and agreed that he should send one in line with what they

unanimously approved. The Yale-sponsored statement welcoming *A Common Word* and published as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* in November 2007 also had a wider range of Christian signatories, including many leading Evangelicals. The World Council of Churches held a meeting of representatives of member churches in January 2008 to discuss *A Common Word* and later issued a statement, ‘Learning to Explore Love Together. Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to ‘A Common Word’’. In each case there were close links between intra-Christian engagement and later Christian-Muslim meetings. In each case also there was strong collaboration between church leaders and academics. The internal workings of the Roman Catholic Church are not in the public domain, but it is clear that there was considerable debate before the decision to set up the Catholic-Muslim Forum between the Vatican and the signatories of *A Common Word*, which met for the first time in Rome in November 2008.

<sup>15</sup> See the Receptive Ecumenism website, <http://www.centreforcatholicstudies.co.uk/?cat=6>, as well as the recent volume *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See especially Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, and David F. Ford, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> These provide a broad framework. A more detailed proposal for Christian-Muslim relations is given in the final section of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s response, *A Common Word for the Common Good*. This is the most comprehensive template to have been proposed in recent years by a religious leader and it deserves thorough discussion and implementation.

<sup>18</sup> For a Christian understanding of ‘for God’s sake’ see Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, Chapters 3, 4, and 7.



Professor David Ford speaking at the Institute of Shariah Studies in Muscat



Distinguished scholars and guests at the Institute of Shariah Studies lecture



Professor Ridwan Al Sayyid with Professor David Ford at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque

# What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?

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by DAVID F. FORD

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*Lecture at the Institute of Shariah Studies, Muscat, Oman*

MONDAY 20TH APRIL 2009

IT IS AN HONOUR AND A DELIGHT to be with you here today in the Institute of Shariah Studies, and to be able to lecture in the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque this evening. I deeply appreciate the invitation of HE Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Salmi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, to visit Oman for the first time. I am most grateful to all those who have helped to organise the visit, in particular Michael Bos, whose work here has been so important for Christian-Muslim relations, and Dr. Abdulrahman Al-Salmi, editor of the journal *Tolerance*. I also bring a message from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. When he was with us in Cambridge three days ago he was delighted to hear of this visit and asked me to give you his warm greetings.

## Many Types of Religious Leaders

I understand that many of you who take a degree here will go on to become religious leaders, mostly in this country, but that some of you will go into a range of other careers. I see my title question, ‘What is Required of a Religious Leader Today?’ applying to both groups. Responsibility for religious leadership is of course carried by those who are called imams, or who have publicly recognised positions as teachers or religious leaders; but that responsibility is also carried by those whose callings are less officially religious. I myself am what Christians call a ‘lay person’—I am an ordinary Anglican, a member of the Church of England (I was born into the Irish Anglican Church, called the Church of Ireland). I am not a priest or bishop, and have no official role in the church organisation, but through being a theologian and involved in the church through teaching, contributions to meetings and deliberations at various levels, and service on boards of theological colleges I could be seen as having a leadership role. Yet, just as important, I also see that role being exercised as a professor in the University of Cambridge, together with people of all faiths and none. That can be at least as complicated and theologically demanding as being a church leader.

Likewise, I see Christians, Muslims and other people of faith in God who take responsibility in any sphere of life—business, politics, law, civil service, non-governmental

organisations, and so on—as serving God there and so in a sense exercising religious leadership. In other words, religious leadership can be exercised very visibly when focussed explicitly through the official bodies of a religious community; but it can also be exercised in less obvious ways, distributed across the whole of a society in every walk of life. Both types are important.

### Offering a Gift

What can I, as a Christian, say to you who study here and prepare, as Muslims, to take on responsibilities of many sorts? There is a wealth of wisdom that you can learn here within your tradition, and you and your teachers know that far better than I. So I will not try to comment on that, but will take it for granted. My approach will be to think as a Christian about my own understanding of religious leadership today and offer it to you as a gift in order to open a conversation. My approach, of course, has also been influenced by Muslims and others—one of the privileges of being Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme is that I have had many opportunities to engage with those of other faiths. After this lecture, and perhaps also at another time during my time here in Oman, and even possibly over many years to come, we can have that conversation in order to learn from each other, discussing how our approaches relate to each other, and perhaps even having a respectful dispute. My hope is not so much that we will agree on everything but that we will bring a blessing to each other.

### Leadership and Blessing

Blessing is where I want to begin. The more I have thought about leadership the more important blessing has become.

#### (i) Abraham and Blessing

In the book of Genesis in the Bible there is the story of Abraham (at that time called Abram) being called by God: ‘*Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*’ (Genesis 12:1–3)

This is an amazing promise of blessing for ‘all the families of the earth’, and it opens up the horizon of the global common good within which we are called to think and act. Abraham, like many leaders, faces a fundamental challenge to his faith: will he trust in God’s promise and leave his home for ever? For Abraham himself there is the promise that God will bless him and that he himself will be a blessing. This is what I wish to concentrate on for a little while: the leader as one who receives blessing in order to be a blessing and bless others.

#### (ii) Receiving Blessing

How does a leader receive blessing? Utterly central to this is the relationship with God. The life of faith might be seen as a dynamic, God-centred ecology of blessing. God is the source of all blessing, and then it circulates in all directions: God blesses us and all creation, we bless God, we bless each other, creation blesses God, we bless creation.<sup>1</sup> All this blessing is not just something general and indefinite: each blessing is particular, and each of the Abrahamic traditions is full of specific blessings for particular occasions and uses. To become a leader is to be blessed in particular ways, and each of our traditions has developed

ped procedures through which we try to discern whether particular people are or are not blessed in ways that suit them to bear the responsibilities of leadership. (Perhaps part of our conversation might be about the different modes of discernment through which our traditions choose leaders—this has been one of the most controversial matters among Christians of different churches.)

God is the ultimate source of these blessings, but mostly they come through other people. The journey towards religious leadership usually leads through key relationships, often with parents, friends, spiritual guides and teachers. I wonder what your journeys have been like. I have been deeply impressed by the importance of successions of teachers in Islam—I remember hearing the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, talking about the ‘chains’ of which he is a part (which, he emphasised, include several women scholars in earlier periods). One way of looking at a chain is as a lineage of blessings being passed on across the generations. I am sure most of you could tell of people in such chains who have been formative for you and have been a blessing to you. This is what often gives the deepest motivation for taking on religious responsibilities: gratitude for the blessings received from others, kindling the desire in your turn to be a blessing. I would go so far as to say that one requirement of being a religious leader is to be part of such a person-to-person lineage—we cannot be formed only through the internet, through books or even through being taught in classes. In my own church an essential part of every priest’s training is being apprenticed to an older priest in a parish or other setting.

### *(iii) Learning to Bless Wisely*

But when we look at those who have been a blessing to us and to others, especially those who have most fully communicated God and God’s purposes through their lives as well as their words, we also see how costly and demanding it can be to be a leader. This evening in the Grand Mosque I will speak of the elements required for Christian theology to be wise and creative today, and all that will be said then is relevant to what is required for Christian leadership. I take it for granted that Christian leaders need to be formed in those four aspects of good theology, and I will be interested to hear how far you think that these coincide with the essential areas in which Muslim leaders should be formed.

So, first, Christian leaders should aim to be wise interpreters of scripture and tradition, understanding how to draw on the treasures of the past. Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew says: *‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’* (Matthew 13:52)

Second, therefore, they should also constantly engage in the present with God in prayer and with what is new in our changing world. The past is not to be simply repeated, and God is drawing people towards a future that is very different from the present. So every day there are fresh discernments, judgements and decisions to be made about what in the contemporary world is to be rejected, what is to be welcomed, and what is to be criticised and transformed.

Third, these discernments, judgements and decisions stretch all of a leader’s capacities, and require creative and intelligent thinking, grounded in appreciation of the best available understanding.

Fourth, the leader has to be able to communicate effectively, and so far as possible to listen attentively and to speak and write well.

Those four requirements are not of a sort that can ever be fully met—a leader can always

communicate better, think more wisely and creatively, engage more deeply with God and with our world, and understand scripture and tradition more adequately. So more important than having actually achieved them is the dedicated, passionate desire for them, which I name the desire for wisdom. That is the foundation for the most important thing of all: the leader being a blessing in each situation.

I think that ‘wise blessing’ is a better way to talk about Christian leadership than more secular talk of the exercise of power and authority (from the sphere of politics), or effectiveness in organising and managing (from the sphere of business), both of which are common in some Christian circles today. Indeed, I am not completely happy with the concept of leadership itself, which is probably best understood as a form of responsible and accountable service, inseparable from being a good follower.<sup>2</sup> ‘Wise blessing’ does not deny the importance of power, authority or effectiveness, but emphasises their distinctively theological character.

#### *(iv) Ministry of Blessing*

A great many of the activities of a Christian leader involve blessing. In my own tradition this includes blessing the bread and wine in the central celebration variously called the Eucharist, Mass, Holy Communion or Lord’s Supper, and giving blessings after confession of sins and at baptisms, ordinations, weddings, funerals and other occasions. But what I have in mind is far broader than that and not only specific to Christianity. When a community is deliberating over a course of action and the leaders agree to it, this can best be seen as them giving their blessing to it. That is different from having thought it up or being a main supporter of it or being responsible for carrying it out. It is rather the crucial matter of seeking, as the community’s recognised representatives, to discern before God a wise course for the community in this matter. Likewise, the withholding of blessing rejects or delays following a particular course. The same is true when individuals seek guidance. Most Christian leaders do not have power to enforce spiritual, ethical or political advice. Their power is better seen as the power to grant or withhold their blessing. It is perhaps in the matter of whether to support particular people, groups and causes in the wider society that these blessings arouse most concern—one thinks of the great importance attached in American elections to the backing of religious leaders.

A great deal in our world, therefore, can be affected by the blessing given by those with religious responsibility. This is evident in shaping their own communities, in guiding individuals, and in their contribution to the wider society. It is also worth remembering what I called the second type of religious leader—the one who is not the public face of his or her community but whose responsibility is exercised in government, business, education or some other sphere of society. For all of them their vocations as leaders might be summed up as centring on questions of whether to bless, who to bless, what to bless, when to bless, how to bless and what content a blessing should have.

So whether their blessings are wise or not is of great importance. Their activity in blessing might at its best be seen as a performance combining all four of the elements of wise and creative theology: it should ring true with wise interpretation of scripture and tradition; it should spring from deep engagement with God and discerning involvement with the contemporary world; it should be informed by wise and imaginative thinking; and it should be communicated as effectively and creatively as possible. Undergirding all this is dedication to the blessing, hallowing and glorifying of God. The leading, embracing petition of the main Christian prayer taught by Jesus is ‘*Hallowed be your Name*’.<sup>3</sup>

## **Wise and Creative Inter-Faith Leadership**

So, the performance of wise blessing in each situation is what is to be desired and pursued wholeheartedly. I now want to concentrate on a particular situation, the one in which we now are at this moment: Christian-Muslim encounter. When I speak about this in the Grand Mosque yesterday I will sum up the main guidelines for Christian-Muslim relations in a nine-point Muscat Manifesto that states:

*Let us aim to:*

### **Love of God and Neighbour**

*Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation*

### **A Triple Dynamic**

*Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good*

### **Sources of Wisdom**

*Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom*

### **Engaging with the Modern World**

*Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it*

### **Partnerships of Difference**

*Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local*

### **Creative Communication**

*Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources*

### **An Ecology across Generations**

*Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all*

### **Signs of Hope**

*Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it<sup>4</sup>*

### **God and God's Purposes**

*Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes*

I want to develop further a few of those points as they relate especially to your calling as Muslim leaders. The question I will try to answer is: what are the three things I would most strongly recommend that you do in the coming years for Christian-Muslim relations? I look forward to discussing with you soon whether you think these are acceptable suggestions.

Before I name the three, let me return to an event a little later in the story of Abraham.

*'King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most*

*High. He blessed him and said:  
“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
    Maker of heaven and earth;  
And blessed be God Most High,  
    Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”*  
(GENESIS 14:18-20)

This shows Abraham receiving hospitality and a blessing from a religious leader of another tradition who acknowledges the Creator God. At the heart of Abrahamic inter-faith relations is the giving and receiving of blessings, always in the context of blessing the God who is the source of all blessings. Three of these blessings are friendships across traditions, reading our scriptures together, and building inter-faith organisations together.

### *Friendship*

I begin with the most personal matter. In studying the Christian ecumenical movement of the twentieth century (of which I will speak further this evening in the Grand Mosque) it is striking how many of the most fruitful developments had at their centre friendships that crossed traditions. I find the same is true in the best inter-faith engagements. It is possible for a faithful Muslim and a faithful Christian to have deep differences over such matters as the naming of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible and the Qur'an, the significance of the Prophet Mohammed, the nature of salvation, and much else, and also to have very different practices regarding, for example, prayer, fasting, holy times, marriage, money, law, and education, yet to be good friends who understand, respect, trust and love each other. Such friendships are an immense blessing, and I am deeply grateful for those Muslim friends who have been given to me.

A friendship is not something that one can plan to make at will, but one can pray for it to be given and be open to it happening. *I suggest that each of you pray to be a blessing to those of other faiths and to receive blessings from them, and also that, if it is God's will, you may find one or two friends among those with whom you have exchanged blessings.*

### *Scripture*

One of the greatest blessings we have been given is our scriptures, so it is not surprising that one of the main ways we are able to bless each other is by sharing them. In the Grand Mosque yesterday I spoke of how for the past fifteen years the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, which gathers Muslims, Christians and Jews (or sometimes just two of those traditions) to read and discuss their scriptures, has been the single most important element in my inter-faith experience and that of an increasing number of people in various spheres of life.<sup>5</sup> It is really a matter of common sense that if we want to understand each other more deeply we should study our scriptures together. This has become increasingly recognised in inter-faith engagements, and it has many advantages. Above all, it allows for long term collegiality among the participants, since conversation need never come to an end: the scriptures are endlessly abundant in meaning and there is always a sense that one is just beginning to open up their riches. I have not found anything else that serves so well to sustain ongoing, faith-centred engagement among the Abrahamic traditions.

One of the most important inspirations for joint study of scripture between Muslims and Christians is, as I will discuss this evening, the Muslim letter *A Common Word Between Us and You*.<sup>6</sup> In particular the statement, signed by the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury, that emerged from the October 2008 conference on *A Common*

*Word* in Cambridge University and Lambeth Palace, acts as a blessing on the practice when it says:

One of the most moving elements of our encounter has been the opportunity to study together passages from our scriptures. We have felt ourselves to have been together before God and this has given us each a greater appreciation for the richness of the other's heritage as well as an awareness of the potential value in being joined by Jewish believers in a journey of mutual discovery and attentiveness to the texts we hold sacred. We *wish* to repeat the experience of a shared study of scriptural texts as one of the ways in which we can come, concretely, to develop our understanding of how the other understands and lives their own faith. We *commend* this experience to others.

*I suggest that each of you resolve to engage in shared study of scriptures, as the Grand Mufti and the Archbishop recommend, if the opportunity arises, and that you also bear this in mind as something you might initiate in the future.*

If you do, you may find, as I did, that it is also the way into inter-faith friendships.

### *Organisation*

If one of the great challenges of our century is in relations between Muslims and Christians, then we can be sure that it will not be met successfully without inter-faith organisations. I direct one such organisation in the sphere of education and public understanding, the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,<sup>7</sup> and it is gratifying to see a blossoming of other organisations in these spheres.<sup>8</sup> Just in the past three weeks I was present in London when a new body was formed, provisionally called the C-1 World Dialogue, co-chaired by the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa, and the Bishop of London, Rt. Revd Richard Chartres, which it is hoped will be the main coordinator of the *Common Word* process, involving leaders from the areas of religion, the academy, business, politics, non-governmental organisations, and media. When I spoke with Dr Gomaa and Bishop Chartres about this visit to Oman they both asked that I bring you their warm greetings.

*I suggest that each of you consider how you can lend your support and leadership abilities to inter-faith organisations and networks, and if possible be willing to join in founding new ones.*

### **Dangers**

Friendships, sharing scriptures and building organisations are among the good possibilities in inter-faith relations, just as blessing wisely is at the heart of good leadership. Yet 'the corruption of the best is the worst', and there can be misunderstanding, disappointment and even betrayal in friendships; the scriptures can be used in terrible and violent ways; and organisations can misuse power and fail in their aims. Leadership itself is one of the most dangerous and corruptible roles. It is worth considering how as religious leaders you can guard against the main threats, which I suspect are similar whether you are Muslim or Christian. Here are just three of many possible suggestions that might help in beginning to develop appropriate vigilance regarding leadership.

Each of our scriptures and traditions has many resources helpful in showing what can go wrong in leadership. Study these, and know the history of the bad examples of leadership as well as the good. In my own Anglican tradition we especially value biographies of leaders by authors who are willing to be critical as well as appreciative.

Face your fears. Our enemies most often win, not by defeating us, but by dominating our lives with fears. Fear can lead people into horrific attitudes and actions, and above all is hostile to compassion and love. At a recent meeting of the Brookings' 6th US-Muslim World Forum in Doha, Qatar, Dr Aref Nayed represented the signatories of *A Common Word* in replying to the US CentCom Commander General David Petraeus who expounded the features of a “network of networks” that constituted a “Security Architecture” for the Middle East region. Dr Nayed responded with a proposal for a ‘Compassion Architecture’ aiming to be ‘constructive, mending, and healing’ and not dominated by fear and considerations of security. His basic principle is: ‘*Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.*’<sup>9</sup> You will often be tempted to act more from fear than from compassion, and learning to resist that temptation will transform your leadership. Above all, trust in the blessing of God gives confidence that God will have the last word. Note in the Abraham story that God says: ‘*The one who curses you I will curse*’ (Genesis 12:3), not: ‘The one who curses you, you are to curse in return.’

Watch the way you hold your faith. Both the Bible and the Qur'an are full of questioning, the opening up of possibilities, and passionate desires, as well as many assertions and commands. Yet many current forms of both our faiths are dominated by clear, definite and certain assertions and commands that do not allow for the questioning, the range of possibilities, and the overwhelming desire for God and God's future. One of the dangers of being a religious leader is that you come to think you know too much and therefore can have unquestioning certainty. Humility about the limits of our knowledge is built into both our faiths. Judging all our assertions, guidance and commands is the infinite wisdom of God, who has set us in a history where there is much mystery, much that is unknown, and much that is desired in trust and hope without being clear and certain.

### Most Important of All

In conclusion, there is the most important matter of all, as has just been affirmed in the final guideline: *Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes.*

I recently spent more than ten years writing a book called ‘*Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*’,<sup>10</sup> and at the end of it I was, of course, much more aware of the narrow limits of my own understanding and wisdom. But studying what the scriptures and Christian thinkers have to teach about wisdom has given me some of their pearls, and I want to conclude with two of them.

The first is the relation of wisdom to cries. In the Bible wisdom cries out to us to make her our leading desire, and in the midst our world's cries of suffering and protest, gratitude and joy, God's wisdom calls us to a discernment of cries and to responding to them with love and compassion in God's name.

And God's name is the supreme pearl. We do it all for the sake of God and God's purposes of wise love and compassion. God is the incomparable reality, whose name is to be hallowed, glorified, praised, adored and loved. As Christians and Muslims we do this very differently, and the deepest and most difficult theological questions are opened up by our worship of God. But at the same time there is opened up the possibility of our deepest engagement with each other for the sake of the God of Abraham. As Melchizedek, out of his very different tradition, said to Abraham: ‘*Blessed be God Most High!*’ (Genesis 14:20)<sup>11</sup> ♣

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> In the Bible this is especially clear in the book of Psalms.
- <sup>2</sup> Jesus said: ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all’ (Mark 9:35).
- <sup>3</sup> The whole prayer according to Matthew’s Gospel reads: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one’ (Matthew 6:9-13).
- <sup>4</sup> For more on this document, see footnote 6.
- <sup>5</sup> For further information about Scriptural Reasoning, see the website of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>. For some of the best print resources on Scriptural Reasoning, see Chapter 8 in David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 273-303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); Peter Ochs, ‘Reading Scripture Together in Sight of Our Open Doors’ in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 26, no. 1, new series (2005), pp. 36-47; and Steven Kepnes and Basit Bilal Koshul (eds.), *Studying the ‘Other’, Understanding the ‘Self’: Scripture, Reason and the Contemporary Islam-West Encounter* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> The letter *A Common Word between Us and You* was sent in October 2007 by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to all the Christian churches. I believe it to be the most important inter-faith statement in the past forty years, since the Second Vatican Council. The letter has one big wise idea, the centrality of love and compassion to both Christian and Muslim traditions, and it uses this as a starting point to engage with Christians and with the current global situation. Most striking of all, it draws on the Qur'an and the Bible together. The text of the letter, along with many of the numerous Christian responses to *A Common Word*, can be found at the official website, [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com).
- <sup>7</sup> The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme ([www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cip.divinity.cam.ac.uk)) promotes research and teaching which leads to deeper mutual understanding between the three Abrahamic traditions. It has four principal aims: 1) studying actual encounters between the three traditions, in the past and today; 2) bringing together the world’s best current and future scholars working on materials in those traditions, in a way that fosters collaboration; 3) translating the core texts of those traditions for the use of their members in study; and 4) promoting engagement, dialogue and collaboration between the three faiths, and public understanding of them. In the area of public understanding and education CIP’s major initiative is the Cambridge Abraham Project, in collaboration with the Coexist Foundation and others, aiming to build in London a major resource relating the three faiths.
- <sup>8</sup> Among these are Yale University’s Center for Faith and Culture, the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, Al Azhar University, the Tabah Foundation in Abu Dhabi, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, the Coexist Foundation and Kalam Research and Media.
- <sup>9</sup> The relevant passage in his address is: ‘The training we truly need is training in compassionate dialogue between all of us, and training in compassionate living amongst each other. The tools and equipment we truly need are tools and equipment of compassionate communication and understanding. The information-sharing we truly need is the honest sharing of, and witnessing to, our loftiest ideals and values, and the cooperative shedding of dark stereotypes and caricatures of others. The infra-structures we truly need to build are infrastructures of public and shared spaces in which we respectfully appreciate and cherish each other just as we stand firmly rooted in our respective traditions.
- The Obama presidency does *not* need more of the same “Security Architecture” inherited from the destructive, divisive, and corrosive years of the Bush presidencies. Rather, it urgently needs a fresh “Compassion Architecture” that is constructive, mending, and healing. Such a Compassion Architecture can only be communal and cooperative, and all religious, spiritual, and philosophical communities, Muslims included, must contribute to it.
- Compassion Architecture is built on the theological fact that true ‘security’ can only come from God’s own compassion towards humanity and the compassion of humans towards humans. *Compassion is the condition of possibility of true security.*<sup>10</sup>
- <sup>10</sup> David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- <sup>11</sup> And what about the rest of that verse: ‘... who has delivered your enemies into your hand?’ We need to be aware also of the potentially violent, dangerous aspects of our scriptures, which need to be interpreted always in line with the love and compassion of God. The trust is that God’s main way of delivering our enemies into our hands is through making them friends, or at least through bringing about reconciliation, and that this, rather than revenge and violence, is certainly the way we are to follow.

## A MUSCAT MANIFESTO

### **Love of God and Neighbour**

*Love God and each other, and have compassion for all God's creation.*

### **A Triple Dynamic**

*Go deeper into our own faith, into each other's, and into commitment to the common good.*

### **Sources of Wisdom**

*Seek wisdom through our own scripture, history and theology, through each other's, and through engagement with the arts, sciences, philosophy, and other sources of wisdom.*

### **Engaging with the Modern World**

*Beware of assimilating to modernity and of rejecting it; seek to heal and transform it.*

### **Partnerships of Difference**

*Form personal relationships, groups, networks and organisations dedicated to inter-faith conversation, collaboration and education at all levels, from international to local.*

### **Creative Communication**

*Encourage the best communicators, artists, writers and teachers to spread the message of love of God and neighbour, drawing on the richest sources.*

### **An Ecology across Generations**

*Cultivate a long-term vision of a habitable world, created and sustained by God for the good of all.*

### **Signs of Hope**

*Create signs of hope within and between our faiths, inspired by A Common Word and the responses to it.*

### **God and God's Purposes**

*Do all this for the sake of God and God's good purposes.*

# *Opening Address*

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*by H.E. SHEIKH ABDULLAH BIN MOHAMMAD AL-SALMI  
Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Sultanate of Oman*

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*Address at the Opening Session of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme,  
Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University  
WEDNESDAY 21ST OCTOBER 2009*

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful*

*Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters*

PROFESSOR FORD'S INITIATIVE has provoked a good deal of attention, optimism and approval. He came to Muscat at the invitation of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and delivered a lecture at the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. In this speech he mentioned a number of points and issues, entitling it 'A Muscat Manifesto of Dialogue between Abrahamic Religions'.

When I received his invitation to attend this event, I thought it necessary, at this starting-point of our collaboration, to begin with some initial observations and to propose some relevant mechanisms, to increase the fruitfulness of our discussion and to enable us all to move through the present important stage with the internal calm necessary to enable us to progress and to achieve our goals.

We support this Manifesto, and are considering it the basis for discussion and for developing further ties. We hope that it will be, thanks to Professor Ford's efforts, a beneficial initiative, and an intellectual and methodological contribution to improving relations between the Abrahamic religions.

It seems to me that this present stage is important for two reasons. Firstly, there are unfavourable international conditions—phrases such as the 'Clash of Civilisations' or the 'Green Peril' abound—and they indicate a worsening relationship. Secondly, four decades of interaction have led to a closed horizon—this has been due to weakness of will and to mistakes of approach and purpose.

We seek to combine two goals: mutual acknowledgment; and mutual compassion. The first of these goals, mutual acknowledgment, has been defined by Almighty God as an objective in human relations, irrespective of human distinction in created form, in beliefs, in customs, and in habits. This is stated in the verse:

*O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you into peoples and tribes, that you might come to know one another. The noblest of you in God's sight is the one who fears Him most.* (The Holy Qur'an, 49:13)

In this text we find difference in created form ('male and female'), and difference in social organisation ('peoples and tribes'). Despite this, or because of it, the objective must be to overcome disputes that arise from difference; and this by means of 'mutual knowledge'. This, in turn, takes the form of three steps: knowledge, then understanding, and then recognition.

Knowledge signifies coming to know the Other realistically, objectively, and responsibly; it also signifies coming to know his particularity, his ways of thought, his behaviour, and his interests. There is no clear line between knowledge and understanding, although the latter entails an active dimension, which takes the form of empathy and the desire to grow closer. Empathy reaches its highest point with positive recognition of the fact of difference and of the Other's still ongoing separate pathway. It is not possible for human nature to abandon its own identity, however great one's empathy with and admiration for the Other, but recognising difference and the legitimacy of the Other's otherness is a high accomplishment that raises our humanity and our faith and ethics.

The repercussions and various dimensions of the Qur'anic process of mutual acknowledgment, whether in its individual or social dimensions, have not been studied and understood by Muslims or by others. This is because of the unfavourable circumstances that have prevailed in the relations between nations in the last century, and also the unfavourable conditions that have governed Muslim-Western relations for two centuries. Because of the absence of mutual knowledge, or any attempt to achieve it, mutual rivalry prevailed, rendering it difficult for both sides to act outside the context of power relationships. After this, extremists and radicals took control on both sides, making it hard to intervene, let alone to improve knowledge and recognition.

If recognition is a rich process of knowledge, understanding, and acknowledgement, then its highest degree, or its ultimate outcome, is the second of our goals: compassion itself, or that which Professor Ford called in his Oman lecture 'Blessing'. Almighty God says: '*We have sent you only as a compassion to the worlds*'; and the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: 'I am nothing but a compassion bestowed'. So the summit of knowledge, or mutual appreciation and understanding, is compassion, which, through the humanity of man, brings them to broad and rich regions which, when reached, preclude disputatiousness and contention.

It is clear that what is meant by mutual compassion is relationships between individuals, first of all, but it can, through persistence, constancy, and a strong desire to love, continue until it supplies a moral framework for the relations between religions, cultures and nations. Mutual knowledge and recognition are a right, and mutual compassion is a virtue and a duty, as well as a right.

These two goals (mutual knowledge and mutual compassion) require the initiative to be taken by the believers, who are the adherents of the Abrahamic religions, on the basis of two principles defined by the Holy Qur'an in its address to the People of the Book:

*Say, O people of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you, that we shall worship none but God, and that none of us shall take others as lords beside God; and if they turn away, then say: bear witness that we are Muslims.* (The Holy Qur'an, 3:64)

This comprehensive Qur'anic invitation incorporates several particular terms, or keys: a common word, worship of none but God, rejecting attribution of lordship to others, maintaining submission to God. If others reject any partnership on the basis of these principles, the 'common word' defines the method: careful adherence to uprightness, equality and justice in addressing the Other and acknowledging him.

Worshipping God alone means uniting in responsible humanity before the single Divine Essence. Rejecting religious self-exaltation is the consequence of upholding the unity of the Creator and His power and lordship. But even if the People of the Book were to decline to meet on the basis of these principles, this would not provide an excuse for enmity or dispute; rather, what would be needed in this case would be openly to state one's submission to God, and to insist on the path of mutual acknowledgment, understanding and compassion.

The path of mutual acknowledgment and compassion is a comprehensive human path, and constitutes a principle addressed to the entire human race. But the aspiration of the Holy Qur'an is that the Abrahamic religions should lead the rest of humanity in the direction of mutual acknowledgment and compassion because of the large shared issues which unite them, 'on a common word', in affirming divine unity, and in denying the attribution of lordship to what is not God.

For this reason a conscious agreement on this should serve the followers of the Abrahamic religions, and then all of humanity. The issue is simply whether we people of faith command the ability to take the initiative or not. The 'common word' and professing the unity of God are the most accessible ways of providing mutual understanding and compassion.

Relations between the followers of the Abrahamic religions have witnessed various episodes of slackening, dispute, and failure. Self-apotheosis, or claiming mastery and victory, were the main causes underlying failure to come to a 'common word between us and you'; and if this was so, how then could humanity be summoned to mutual knowledge and compassion?

In 1999 the Taliban destroyed the two historic Buddha statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. I remember the Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama said that the Christians and Muslims, during past centuries when they ruled the whole world, did not follow amongst themselves, or towards other religions and cultures, the way of recognition and justice; instead, their concern was always with taking control and power, and violent conquest!

Crisis has dominated relations between Muslims and Christians for the past two decades, particularly in Muslim-Protestant relations. The reason is attributable to two factors: firstly, the worsening of some political problems which had religious, cultural and symbolic dimensions, such as the Palestine issue, and the situation of Muslim communities in the West; and secondly, a negative public opinion of Islam, reciprocated among some Muslims with negativity and also with violence.

Over the past ten years I have pursued these issues in the course of many discussions with intellectual and political leaders in West and East. As a result of consultations, reflections, experiences and discussion, I have suggested a method to recover a proper trajectory via religious ethics, in three cognitive processes: intellect, justice, and morality.

Scholarly interaction with the Holy Qur'an is either through exegesis, that is to say, direct understanding, or through hermeneutics, in other words, indirect understanding. There is no doubt that the ethical and mental processes that I mentioned (mind, justice and morality) are hermeneutically rooted in the holy texts of the Abrahamic religions. In addi-

tion to this perception I have wanted these steps to constitute our method. As we have already spoken about goals and principles, we will constantly be committed to the principles of the Abrahamic religions.

As part of our engagement in this initiative of recovery and new beginnings, we launched the Magazine *Tolerance*. Twenty-six volumes have already appeared. Its goal is to promote the practice and implementation of toleration, with critical reflections, to clarify related concepts and to combat false ideas.

Similarly, in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman, we have in the past eight years organised an annual Cultural Season to which we have invited around a hundred Western religious, political and economic thinkers and lecturers (about fifteen coming each year), to discuss issues on which we differ and the values of tolerance and progress, and Muslim-Western relations in the religious, political, economic and cultural domains.

By intellect we mean to implement practical reviews of concepts, goals, and interests, by intelligently grasping and managing problems, proposing definitions and ways out of difficulties, seeking to clarify roads to effective and constructive dialogue, and to discover new and constantly renewed means and methods of finding knowledge and cooperation with others.

It is said in the Gospels that knowledge makes us free. This is indeed true; but to be actualised it needs to be coupled with criticism, self-reflection, and the redefinition of concepts using critical faculties.

We have two Muslim thinkers who lived as contemporaries in the ninth Gregorian century: Al-Muhasibi (d.243 AH), and al-Kindi (d.252 AH). Kindi embraced Aristotle's view on the nature of the intellect and its functions, saying that it was an indivisible substance whose function was detached perception and the assessment of entities. Muhasibi took the view that the intellect is an innate tendency or a light that increases and grows stronger through learning and experience.

Through knowledge, learning, acquisition and research, we are always capable of growth and of putting things in their right places, as long as we do not lose sight of the goals of mutual knowledge and compassion.

As for the second step, or the other comparison, as part of this orientation, it comprises justice. By justice we mean impartiality in our judgements and evaluations, and also justice in the way we behave and conduct ourselves. If we in this context consider the intellect to be a moral and human value characterised by detachment, then justice is the instrument the intellect uses in correcting discursive thought, and in motivating us to a particular mental or practical activity.

Then comes the third step, morality, which from one angle connects us to the principle of divine unity and the rejection of self-apotheosis, and from another perspective connects us to the two objectives of mutual knowledge and subjugation.

One of the benefits of this three-step method is that on the one hand it links us to the theology of the Abrahamic religions, and on the other to the other cultures and faiths. '*Let none of us take each other as lords besides God*'. And let us not ignore the supreme value of mutual knowledge and compassion. This connects us without any great intellectual or behavioural difficulty to the path of '*racing each other to good works*', or positive and free competition in such works, as God says in the Holy Qur'an: 'And vie with one another in good works'. The importance of this is that sacred good works are autonomous values that can be attained by Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic individuals.

*Ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters*

It is said that the world of the first half at least of the twenty-first century will be a world of religion.

There are some religious believers who judge the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries as an age of impulses that were in revolt against religion and morality. But our view of the last century is that the religions too were used to provoke divisions. Professor Hans Küng said, in the nineties of the last century, that peace in the world depends on peace between the religions, and that there can be no peace between the religions except through dialogue between them.

My underlying purpose in offering these observations has been to help the process of discovering a new way for religions and cultures to be in dialogue, which will be of service in fostering the peace, security and stability of the world.

We are embarking upon our cooperation with the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme in the form of the Chair gifted to this university by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id, may God protect and preserve him.

The text of the 'Muscat Manifesto' will be one of the first things on which we shall collaborate, as we discuss, support and reflect. It is my hope that these reflections will also play a part in facilitating the process of cooperation and dialogue. \*

*Thank you.*

*Peace be upon you and the compassion of God*



# Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing: A Muslim Response to ‘A Muscat Manifesto’

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by AREF ALI NAYED

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*Lecture at the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, Faculty of Divinity  
University of Cambridge*

WEDNESDAY 21ST OCTOBER 2009

*In the Name of God, Compassionate, Kind. Blessings upon the Prophets of God*

**I**N THE WELCOMING SETTING OF Oman’s distinguished theological faculty, and the sublime beauty of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Professor David Ford of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity offered Muslim scholars a gift. He named the gift ‘A Muscat Manifesto’, and distilled in it the wisdom of decades of deep theological work and experience.<sup>1</sup> The gift consisted of good advice on the features of good theology, the characteristics of good religious leadership, and guidelines for inter-faith relations. Professor Ford, of course, spoke from the depths of his own Christian wisdom tradition, but his advice, coming from a sincere and loving heart, did transcend inter-faith boundaries, and touched the hearts of many Muslim scholars.<sup>2</sup> What comes from the heart enters hearts. I pray that I can respond to ‘A Muscat Manifesto’ from the heart. Of course, the best heart-felt response to a gift is gratitude. So, it is my honour to publicly thank Professor Ford for his wonderful gift, and to elaborate the ‘thank you’ theologically, as best as I can.

‘A Muscat Manifesto’ provides the features or ‘key elements’ for ‘wise theology’. It also provides the characteristics for a more engaging religious leadership. It then goes on to provide guidelines for inter-faith relations. Let us start with the features of a wise theology. Professor Ford offers four such features:

1. Wise theology is based on wise interpretation and understanding of scripture and tradition;
2. Wise theology is doubly engaged, in the present: with God (in prayer); and with our changing world (in living);
3. Wise theology is intelligent and creative in its understanding of things, divine and worldly;
4. Wise theology communicates itself to others effectively.<sup>3</sup>

As a Muslim working on reviving and articulating a wise Islamic theology, or wise *Kalam*, for today, I take Professor Ford's advice to heart. Indeed, a renewed *Kalam* must be firmly rooted in the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the tradition of the Muslim community or *Umma*. A renewed *Kalam* must be thoroughly soaked in a sincere, prayer-filled engagement with Allah, as the living God, and with Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the living exemplar of love and guidance. However, such a *Kalam* must also be in a realistic and caring engagement with the complexities of our world (or rather *worlds*), in these difficult and troubled times. A renewed *Kalam* must aim for the utmost intelligent and respectful God-invoking creativity, and must articulate itself as lucidly as possible.

It is interesting to note that the features of wise theology as outlined by Professor Ford actually coincide largely with the features of a 'good word' (*kalima tayyiba*) as described in the Holy Qur'an. God Exalted says:

*Have you not seen how Allah gave an example? A good word is as a good tree whose root is firm and its branches are in heaven,*

*Its gives its fruit every while, by leave of its Lord. Allah gives examples to people that they may remember. (The Holy Qur'an, 14:24-25)\**

Thus, today, if an Islamic theology or *Kalam* aims to be a truly 'good word', as per Qur'anic standards, it must aim to be:

1. Firmly rooted;
2. Open-ended;
3. Fruitful;
4. Ever-invoking divine guidance and permission.

A renewed *Kalam* must be deeply and firmly rooted in the Divine and Prophetic guidance provided by the Qur'an, the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and in the tremendous polyphonic traditions that were worked out and articulated by scholars and sages, lovingly devoting themselves to living out the Prophetic example.

A renewed *Kalam* must stretch out to heaven in pray-fully seeking out divine guidance, but must also reach out to others in respectfully seeking out human engagement and mutual knowledge and understanding (*ta'ruf*):

*O mankind! We have created you from a male and female, and then rendered you nations and tribes so that you might know one another. The most honourable among you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most pious. Allah is indeed Knowing, Aware. (The Holy Qur'an, 49:13)*

A renewed *Kalam* must be practically fruitful and thoroughly service-oriented (*khidma*). Such a *Kalam* must realize the fact that the best way to God's love is the practice of love towards, and service of, His creatures. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says: 'Creatures are God's dependants: whoever is more helpful to His dependants is more loved by Him' (Abu Ya'la, no. 3318). It is important to remember that, in his prayers, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to seek refuge in God from knowledge that is of no practical use ('ilm la yanfa') (Muslim, no. 6856). An Islamic theology that does not place itself at the service of all of God's creatures is not truly Islamic. Prophet Muhammad's guidance (peace be upon him) clearly indicates that a *Kalam* that truly seeks

God must seek Him through serving His needy creatures: the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, and the frightened (Muslim, no. 6508).

A renewed *Kalam* must be set in the deep realization that no guidance or salvation is possible without God's own saving guidance and deliverance. No healthy and divinely minded *Kalam* is possible without the sincere and humble seeking of divine guidance and permission. This divine guidance and permission must be sought daily through heart-felt prayer and devotion to God Himself (Exalted is He), invocations of blessings upon His Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and respectful discipleship and apprenticeship to devout scholars and sages, who are the true heirs of Muhammad (peace be upon him), in unbroken chains of scholarly and spiritual transmission (Bukhari, Chapter on 'knowing before saying and doing').

God's guidance is an expression of His compassion (*rahma*) towards humanity. Without this divine compassion, no one can be saved, not even Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)! Though he himself is a 'gifted compassion' of God (*rahma muhda*), the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: 'No one will enter paradise through one's own deeds, but through the compassion (*rahma*) of God.' His Companions said: 'Not even you O Messenger of God?' He insisted: 'Not even I, unless God embraces me with His Compassion' (Muslim, no. 7071). Renewed *Kalam* must be rooted in this vital realization. It is the living practice of compassion that is conducive to receiving divine compassion. Islamic theology must be rooted in compassion at the theoretical, practical, and constructive levels: *theoria, praxis, and poesis*.<sup>4</sup> The 'leave of the Lord' that permits a good tree to bear fruit is indeed a divine compassion that can best be invoked through living in mutual compassion.

Thus, it is important to seek a renewed and wise Islamic theology (*Kalam*) that is like the Qur'anic good tree. However, it is important to point out that healthy renewed *Kalam* would not be just one good tree, but whole forests! Healthy *Kalam* would be entire ecologies of goodness that are akin to Qur'anic gardens (*janaat*). Throughout its history, whenever Islamic theology thrived it was typified as marvelously complex gardens of theologies, rather than a single theology. In the Qur'an, God celebrates and expects us to marvel at, and also celebrate, complex diversity, even as it stems from the same source:

*And on the earth are neighbouring tracts, vineyards and ploughed lands, and palms in pairs and palms single; watered with one water; and some of them We make better than others to eat. In that are signs for those who understand.* (The Holy Qur'an, 13:4)

Just as the same water gives rise to a variety of palms, the same Qur'an and Prophetic tradition gives rise to a variety of approaches to, and schools of, Islamic theology (*Kalam*). Such a variety and diversity is not to be lamented, but rather celebrated.

*Have you not seen that Allah causes water to fall from the sky, and We produce therewith fruit of diverse hues; and among the hills are streaks white and red, of diverse hues and [others] raven-black;*

*And among men and beasts and cattle there are those of diverse hues? Only the learned among His servants fear Allah. And Allah is August, Forgiving.* (The Holy Qur'an, 35:27-28)

Sunni *Kalam* (be it Ash'ari, Maturidi, or Hanbali) cannot be revived and renewed without being in meaningful and mutually respectful discussion and engagement with renewed

*Shi'i Kalam* (be it Ithna-Ashri, Zaydi, or Isma'ili), as well as with Ibadi *Kalam*. Sunni *Kalam* cannot be revived and renewed without respectful inter-faith engagement with Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu theologies of today. This is in addition to considerate engagement with the renewed expressions of Mu'tazili, philosophical, naturalistic, skeptical, and even atheistic schools of thought. God's very creativity is the very source of the reality of pluralistic variety and diversity. No renewed Islamic theology will thrive in splendid isolation from the God-decreed complexities of theological diversity.<sup>5</sup>

In periods of theological thriving, even a single theological school, like Ash'arism, exhibited and celebrated marvelous variety. Consider the rich polyphony and diversity that emerges when reading Ash'ari, Baqillani, Juwayni, Ghazali, Razi, and 'Iji. These scholars are all Ash'aris, and yet their writings exhibit incredibly complex patterns akin to the intricate patterns of beautiful gardens or splendid Persian carpets. In periods of theological stagnation, polyphony becomes monotonic, and dialogues reduce to repetitive monologues.<sup>6</sup>

Now, the Qur'an has a great deal to teach about the cultivation of ecologies or gardens. As God often does, He teaches us through Qur'anic parables. There is a parable in the Chapter of the Cave:

*And give them the example of two men, to one of whom We gave two vineyards, surrounded with date palms; in between them We grew other plants.*

*Each of the two gardens yielded its produce and did not fail any wise [in yielding its produce]. In the midst of them We caused a river to gush forth.*

*This man had an abundant produce and he said to his companion while conversing with him: 'I am richer than you and mightier in men.'*

*And when, having thus wronged his soul he entered his vineyard, he said: 'I do not think that this will ever perish.*

*'Nor do I believe that the Hour [of Judgement] will ever come; and even if I am returned to my Lord I should surely find better than this as a resort.'*

*His companion said, while he was conversing with him: 'Have you disbelieved in Him who created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop and then fashioned you into a man?*

*'But [as for myself, I know that] Allah alone is my Lord and I set up no partners with Him.*

*'When you entered your garden you should have said: "That which Allah wills [will surely come to pass], there is no power but with Allah" Though you see me poorer than yourself, with fewer children ...' (The Holy Qur'an, 18:32-39)*

There are many lessons that can be learned from this parable. In seeking to articulate a renewed Islamic theology or *Kalam*, I learn from it at least the following:

1. The flourishing of richness and variety in our gardens, including theological ones, is a gift from God Himself;
2. The fruitfulness of our theological gardens is God-dependant;
3. We must not become arrogant about the flourishing of our theological gardens,

- and should never be intoxicated into thinking that they will last forever. All die, including theologies, and only God *is* forever;
4. God's ultimate judgment is the only true and final judgment. No one has any guarantees. All must stand humbly, especially theologians, before His ultimate judgment;
  5. The key to theological authenticity and salvation is the total dedication to God, alone;
  6. There is no true capacity or true power, except in God Himself.

Just as the parable of the two men with the two gardens teaches us not to take our theological ecologies or gardens for granted, another Qur'anic parable teaches us not to despair when there are no ecologies or gardens, but mere desert!

*Or [have you heard] of he who, when passing by a ruined and desolate city, exclaimed: 'How can Allah give life to this city, now that it is dead?' And Allah caused him to die, and after a hundred years, brought him back to life. He said: 'How long have you stayed away?' 'A day,' he answered, 'or part of a day.' Then Allah said: 'Know then that you have stayed away a hundred years. Yet look at your food and drink, they have not rotted. And look at your donkey! We will make you a sign to mankind. And look at the bones, see how We raise them and clothe them with flesh!' And when it became clear to him, he said: 'I know now that Allah is Able to do all things.'* (The Holy Qur'an, 2:259)

In periods of theological desolateness, it is very easy to fall into cynicism and despair. When a tradition fails to produce major theologians and theologies for tens or even hundreds of years, it is quite tempting to think that the tradition is dead and that nothing will grow or flourish from it.

However, such cynical despair is wrongheaded, and wrong-hearted. It is wrongheaded in that it fails to remember the incredible number of revivals, renewals, and re-awakenings that religious life has exhibited over the centuries in all major religious communities. It is also wrong-hearted in that it fails to appreciate the amazing creativity of God, and His astonishing power to create anew. The great scholar and sage Sidi Ahmed Zarruq used to say that he learned hope from the incredible Qur'anic verse:<sup>7</sup>

*Do you not see that Allah has created the heavens and the earth with the truth? If He Will, He can remove you and bring you a new creation.* (The Holy Qur'an, 14:19)

No one should ever despair of God's creative power. No tradition should ever be declared dead. Every tradition, if God wills it, can flourish again. Just as theological flourishing must not be taken for granted, theological flourishing must not be despised of. God teaches us in the Qur'an that renewal and creating anew is always possible:

*O Mankind! If you are in doubt concerning the Resurrection, [consider that] We created you of dust, then of semen, then of a clot of blood, then of a lump of flesh shaped and unshaped, so that We may make clear to you. And We keep in the wombs what We please to an appointed term, then We bring you forth as infants, then We cause you to grow up, that you may reach your prime. And among you some die [young] and some are sent back to the feeblest old age so that they know nothing after they had knowledge. You sometimes see the earth still. But where We pour down rain on it, it quivers, and swells, and grows of every pleasant pair.* (The Holy Qur'an, 22:5)

A landscape barren of theological ecologies can quickly be transformed, God willing, into a landscape of rich flourishing variety. Theological schools, and even entire traditions, can be created, pass through embryonic and infant-like stages, and then grow to amazing strength in their prime, only to eventually die, or grow feeble, to the point of forgetting all that they once knew. Nevertheless, revival, renewal, and even a new creation, are always possible, and one must never despair of God's creative power. In Islam, renewal (*tajdid*), and scholarly spiritual striving (*ijtihad*) are well-established traditions. Such renewal and striving, however, is not just 'work' that is to be done through our own efforts. It is rather a divine 'grace' that is divinely gifted when we humbly seek it and prepare for it.

It is precisely in the humble heart-felt invoking of God's creative power that the key to theological renewal can be located. It is significant that the good man advises the arrogant garden owner in the parable above to say '*That which Allah wills [will surely come to pass], there is no power but with Allah*'. The key is to remember that it is God Himself who wills the flourishing of gardens, be they physical, spiritual, intellectual, or theological. The key is to remember that there is no true creative power except in, through, and from God Himself.

As the great sage Ibn Ata'illah al-Iskandari emphasizes: 'Nothing is easy if you seek it through your ego, and nothing is hard if you seek it through your Lord'<sup>8</sup>

The phrase 'There is no capacity or power except through God!' is a vital Muslim prayer. It is said to be the main discourse of angels! (Kanz al-Ummal, no. 1954) Interestingly, it is also called the 'seedling (*ghiras*) of heavenly garden (*janna*)'. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches that there are vast terrains in the heavenly gardens that are empty, and that need to be planted (Ahmed, no. 23167). The remembrance of God, especially the remembrance of God's creative power, through the meditative prayer that repeats the phrase 'There is no capacity or power except through God!' (*la hawl wa la quwa illa bi Allah*), actually fills those heavenly terrains with fresh plants, and thus transforms them into gardens. The invocation of God's creative power enables us to participate in the very making of heavenly gardens!

As a matter of fact, one can say that precisely because, and to the extent that we do, participate in the planting of heavenly gardens, we are empowered by God to participate in the flourishing of theological gardens here on earth and in our various communities. No true renewal of *Kalam* is possible without sincerely and solemnly invoking God's own creative power to renew and create anew.

In a sense, our very confidence in the value and importance of theological renewal must come from the 'front' or the 'not-yet'.<sup>9</sup> It is from the planting of heavenly gardens that our planting here on earth stems. Perhaps this is the reason Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches us to continue planting trees even as the Hour or the day of judgement comes! He says: 'If the Hour comes and one of you has a baby palm (*fasila*) in his hand, and he can still plant it before he stands up, let him plant it' (Ahmed, no. 12689). That means that, ultimately, theological ecologies or gardens are not really this-worldly as such. Rather, they are other-worldly first, and enter the world in so far as this word is the 'farm' or 'plantation' (*mazra*) of the world to come (Kashf al-khafa, no. 1320).

Of course, this is not to say that the theological ecologies that one cultivates here are of no worldly use. On the contrary, as we said above, it is vital for theological ecologies to be fruitful and to be of service to people, as well as other creatures. The Prophet Muhammad promises that 'whoever plants a plant, from which a human, bird, wild-animal, or beast eats has a good deed counted' (Ahmed, no. 14902). Thus, working out theological eco-

logies that are fruitful and nourishing to our fellow humans and creatures is of the utmost importance and value. Yet, the valuation that creates this value is a valuation that is other-worldly. It is a valuation that stems from the not-yet. Thus theological ecologies are valuable to the extent to which, and insofar as, they are granted value by our God, and in light of His ultimate divine, and other-worldly, judgement.

Belief in an ultimate, not-yet (*akhira*) judgment of God is important to keep in mind, and in the Qur'an, God grants it equal importance to belief in Him. So the formula 'believe in God and the hereafter' is often repeated in the Qur'an. This not-yet judgment (*hukm*), also involves a not-yet arbitration (*takhim*) of all disputes about God and His ways.

*And to you We have sent down the Book with the truth, confirming whatever Books were before it and a witness over them. So judge between them by that which Allah has sent down, and follow not their passions away from the truth which has come to you. For each of you We have appointed a [Divine] law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community, but, so that He may try you by that which He has given you [He has made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. To Allah you will all be returned, and He will then inform you of that wherein you disputed. (The Holy Qur'an, 5:48)*

This postponed not-yet arbitration does not entail the suspension of all judgment in this life. It is neither a skeptical '*epoché*' nor an irresponsible deferment (*irja*). We, of course, have to make judgments, as part of everyday living, based on the true revelation that we have received through Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), and follow the way that we solemnly believe to be truly conducive to salvation. However, this postponed not-yet arbitration does entail the human suspension of claims about ultimate divine judgment. No one knows how he himself will end, let alone others. No one knows if she herself will be saved, let alone others. No one should ever dare to judge another on behalf of God (*ta'ali al-Allah*) (Kanz al-Ummal, no. 7899).

As communities and schools with different doctrines and theologies we must, of course, witness to that which we believe and know to be true. We will, therefore, disagree and argue. However, we must do so humbly and meekly, and keep true to the Qur'anic guidance:

*Call to the path of your Lord with wisdom and kindly exhortation, and reason with them in the most courteous manner. For your Lord knows best those who have strayed from His path, and He knows best who are rightly-guided. (The Holy Qur'an, 16:125)*

When we encounter disputes that are simply irresolvable, let us state and acknowledge our differences, and trust in God's ultimate not-yet arbitration, while patiently wait and pray for it. He alone can make all things clear, beyond all disputes.

Suspending ultimate divine judgment and arbitration, we still need to actively cultivate theological ecologies. Such theologies, at the very end of time, can provide refuge to people who are utterly shattered and confused by their troubled world. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) advises desperate people, who lose all points of reference and orientation in the end of times, to hold on to the 'trunk of a tree' even 'with their teeth'. In such troubled times, it is important to plant trees, for people, including ourselves, to hold on to, even with our teeth! (Ahmed, no. 16818, and 23043)

Such trees, however, cannot be cultivated through power-theologies, but through meek-

theologies. In my own life, I found the best teachers of such theologies to be simple, down-to-earth sages. Here is what I learned from such a sage from Benghazi, Sidi Rajab al-Turki. I once said to Sidi Rajab: ‘Sidi (Master), I give up on improving myself. I am not strong enough for the way of striving (*mujahada*). I cannot overcome my ego (*nafs*), no matter how hard I try. I keep failing every time I try. Please help me!’ He smiled and said: ‘Son, what you need is “the way of the crippled”! I asked: ‘What is the way of the crippled, Sidi?’ He said: ‘The way of the crippled is the way of Sidi Ahmed Rifa‘i. Sidi Rifa‘i promised: “I am the Sheikh of the crippled! Come to me limping and broken!”’ ‘Sidi Rifa‘i understood, my son, that we cannot save ourselves, and that only God can save us, through the mediation of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Simply admit your incapacity (*ajz*), and put it before God. Ask him for compassion, for mercy, for grace, and ask Him, through Muhammad (God’s compassion towards us).

‘The way of Sidi Rif‘ai is the way indicated by one of the Prophet’s Companions who says: “Incapacity to comprehend is itself a comprehension” (Al-Durr al-Thamin, *umm al-qu‘id*). Recognize and admit your fundamental incapacity, and you shall receive capacity-in-God.’

Today, a renewed *Kalam* must be a meek *Kalam* of Incapacity, a theology that humbly seeks capacity-in-God, and not in itself. A theology that can truly bear (*haml*) the full transformative and healing power of divine revelation.

For centuries great scholars, following Baqillani and Jurjani, have expounded theories of the ‘inimitability’ of the Qur‘an. Under the title of ‘*I‘jaz al-Qur‘an*’ such scholars explain the inability of humans to imitate even a single verse of the Qur‘an, and how such inability emerges. They see the incapacity (*ajz*), inherent in the incapacitating (*i‘jaz*), as an incapacity to imitate the Qur‘an.

In addition to such traditionally conceived incapacitating (*i‘jaz*), there is a more radical incapacitating that consists in the cracking of the heart. The bearing (*haml*) of the Qur‘an is the very cracking under Qur‘anic revelatory compassionate efficacy. Such bearing is utter incapacity (*ajz*). The miraculous incapacitating performed by the Qur‘an is the existential condition of possibility of receiving divine compassion.

When a rock is cracked water may indeed gush forth, but caves may also result. Many caves are nothing but cracks in the rock. Now, the Qur‘an as it engages the heart sometimes makes caves into it. Further, Qur‘anic operative signs (*ayat*) then inhabit such caves.

The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) says that a heart without Qur‘an is like a deserted ruined house (Ibn Abi Shayba, no. 25758). The caves made through the compassionate cracking of hearts become the homes of Qur‘anic revelatory transformative signs, and not mere empty houses. Bearing the Qur‘an consists in the heart being inhabited by divine revelation. From this dwelling in the heart, the Qur‘an transforms the very character and *habitus* of its bearer. When the Prophet’s wife Aisha was asked about his character, she simply said: ‘His character was the Qur‘an’ (Ahmed, no. 24208). Meek theologies are theologies that allow for, and enable, the transformation of character through the bearing of compassionate and healing divine revelation, and attention to divine operative signs (*ayat*).

From the cave in the heart, the Qur‘an bearer (*hamil al-Qur‘an*) must strive to keep her heart-sight on God throughout the commotion and flux she sees in her outer and inner travels because she sees everything around her, the totality of which constitutes her ‘environment’, as an *aya* (or operative sign) of God. The Qur‘an, itself a sequence of *ayat* (operative signs), speaks about and illustrates the transformative power of *ayat* on every

page. The Qur'an teaches us to see the mountains, the heavens, and the earth as *ayat* of God. It teaches us how to see processes of alteration and growth as *ayat*. It teaches us to see the Prophets of God and the heavenly books as *ayat*. It illustrates the operative capacity of God's *ayat* by calling the staff (*asa*) of Musa (Moses) that becomes a snake, and that opens up the sea an 'aya'. We must strive to see the operative signs of our Lord everywhere. We must strive to be constantly aware of God's presence.

The Qur'an further teaches us that, besides the outer *ayat* (*ayat* of the horizons) there are also inner *ayat* (*ayat* within persons). The more one manages to bear the Qur'an in the cave of his heart, the more he becomes a wonder-struck watcher of the signs of his Lord that operate within and upon his own soul. One's appreciation of the *ayat* within him leads one to wonder about and appreciate the operative *ayat* in the persons around him. One, then, comes to see others too as divine signs.

The world, one's soul, and all other persons become an ocean with an incredible variety of *ayat*. One learns from the Qur'an to live concretely the realization that diversity is a wonderful gift, and to experience, first-hand, the Lord's celebration of the variety present in things ranging from trees, to different types of honey, to clouds, to people themselves.

Seeing variety as a divinely gifted operative sign in things and persons, moves us to respect it, cherish it, and celebrate it. This seeing increasingly becomes a seeing 'with the eye of compassion' (*bi'ayn al-rahma*) (Marqat al-Mafatih, bab al-rahman al-rahim). It is this seeing that is the condition of possibility for the renewal of *Kalam*, as a meek theology of peace, compassion and blessing.

It is such meek theologies that will provide us with the not-yet and end-of-time trees that we so desperately need. Being grounded in the humility of our intrinsic incapacity will help us cultivate good trees, and avoid inadvertently growing bad ones. We have to bear in mind that 'bad trees' are also possible, and must be avoided. God, the Exalted, contrasts the 'good word' that is like a 'good tree' with the 'bad word' that is like the 'bad tree'. Just as there are good theologies that are rooted, open-ended, fruitful, and God-invoking, there are also bad theologies that are superficial, dead-ended, fruitless (or generative of thorns, even), and evil-invoking. God says in the Qur'an:

*And the likeness of an evil word is that of an evil tree, torn out of the earth, lacking stability. (The Holy Qur'an, 14:26)*

How does one distinguish between good and bad words, good and bad theologies, good and bad trees? Two criteria: rootedness and fruitfulness. Good theologies are authentically rooted in the tradition, and are abundantly fruitful of goodness for humanity. Bad theologies are superficially connected to, or even cut off from, the tradition, and produce nothing but thorns that injure humanity. Theologies that are conducive to peace, compassion and blessing are good. Theologies conducive to strife, cruelty, and cursing are bad. God is quite clear in the Qur'an:

*Allah enjoins justice and excellence [in all things] and charity to kinsmen, and forbids indecency, wickedness and oppression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed. (The Holy Qur'an, 16:90)*

Another sage, an elderly fellow-Matrafi/Wirfalli tribesman named Muftah bin 'Ali, once taught me a very simple criterion for recognizing truly 'Muhammadan' matters. He said: 'Wherever you find compassion, there is Muhammad!' 'Wherever you find cruelty, there is no Muhammad!' My Master's criterion is, of course, Qur'anically based on the verses

above, and many others, but it is also existentially based in a very palpable knowledge and experience of Muhammadan love.

Trees that grow from divine compassion give fruits of compassion. Trees that grow from evil can only give fruits of evil. Trees that grow from divine compassion are trees of light that come from light, and give light. They are like the luminescent tree that is described in the Qur'an that is said to transcend geographic limitation in that it is 'neither of the east nor of the west':

*Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is that of a niche in which is a Lamp. The Lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a glittering star, lighted from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east, nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow forth, even if no fire touched it, light upon Light. Allah guides whom He wills to His light, and gives examples to the people; and Allah knows everything. (The Holy Qur'an, 24:35)*

Thus, good trees are trees that are 'light upon light'. Such trees greet us in our very hearts and being with Islam's ultimate greeting of peace: the 'Peace' formula: 'God's peace, compassion, and blessing are upon you'. Such trees are trees of peace, compassion, and blessing. Such ecologies are ecologies of peace, compassion, and blessing.

One of God's sublime names in Islam is 'Al-Salam' which literally means 'The Peace'. Thus peace as such is of God. All peace comes from Him. All peace goes to Him. All peace is in Him. Though Al-Salam is His name, it is also the name of His greeting: the phrase 'God's peace, compassion, and blessings are upon you'. Muhammad (peace be upon him) guides us to the very essence of faith when he says: 'You will not enter paradise unless you believe, and you will not believe unless you love one another. Shall I guide you to what leads to your love of one another? Spread the peace between yourselves!' (Muslim, no. 157) This 'spreading of the peace' (*ifsha al-salam*) is absolutely essential to true religiosity. '*Ifsha*' is more than just spreading or dispersing—it is also cultivating and nourishing. We are all called upon to spread, cultivate, and nourish peace.

We are called upon to grow ecologies of peace, gardens of peace. Islam itself is essentially peace, and it is a vital fact that *Islam* and *Salam* are both from the etymological root SLM. As a matter of fact, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) defines the 'Muslim' as one who grants safety (SLM) to others, from his tongue and his hand (i.e. who does no harm to others) (Ahmed, no. 7066). It is also an important fact to remember that the very culmination of all daily prayers is the '*Tashahhud*' or witnessing formula:

*All worships are for God. God's peace is upon you, O Prophet, and His compassion and blessings. Peace is upon us, and upon all righteous servants of God. I bear witness that there is no one worthy of worship except God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.*

Thus the culmination of every prayer amounts to a greeting of peace involving God, His Prophet, all good servants of God, and ourselves. The 'Peace' formula—'God's peace, compassion, and blessings are upon you'—is central to Muslim prayer as such. As a matter of fact, all Muslim daily prayers end with a nod to the right and then to the left while uttering the 'Peace' formula. Even when no one is around, one still greets the angels, with peace.

The 'Peace' formula invokes God's compassion (*rahma*). This is actually an invocation

of God in so far as He is ‘*Al-Rahman*’ (The Compassionate). The divine name al-Rahman is related to ‘*rahma*’. This word is very important, and is worthy of some attention. ‘*Rahma*’ is derived from the root ‘RHM’, which also means the motherly ‘womb’. In fact Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) teaches us that the name of the womb is derived from the divine name al-Rahman! (Ahmed, 10244). This trilateral root RHM gives rise to a host of words including the word for one’s kinship or loved-ones, and the words that suggest the semantic fields of ‘tenderness’, ‘kindness’, ‘gentleness’, ‘mercifulness’ and ‘benevolence’.

Now, God has many names. They are all beautiful, and they can all be used to call upon Him. The tradition hands down ninety nine beautiful names. *Rahma* or compassion is involved in two very important names of God: ‘*Al-Rahman*’ and ‘*Al-Rahim*’. Both of these two names come from the root ‘RHM’ that we just mentioned.

*Al-Rahman* is a name that is exclusively used for God Himself, and cannot be used as the name of a human being. A human being can be called ‘*Abd Al-Rahman*’, i.e. ‘Servant of *Al-Rahman*’, but not ‘*Al-Rahman*’. This is because the name *Al-Rahman* does not only mean The Compassionate, but also The Source of All Compassion. It is significant that it is this name: ‘*Al-Rahman*’ that is said to be fully interchangeable with the name ‘*Allah*’. God says in the Qur’an: ‘Call upon *Allah* or call upon *Al-Rahman* for all the beautiful names are His.’

*Al-Rahim* also means ‘The Compassionate’, and is a frequently used name of God. However, this name can be shared by human beings. A human being can, and should be *rahim*, i.e. compassionate. It is significant to note that while God reserves the status of being The Source of Compassion to Himself, He expects us to share with Him the quality of being compassionate. He demands it of us. Of course, as human beings we can never be compassionate the way He is compassionate, but we can still be humanly compassionate.

It is also significant that one of the names of Prophet Muhammad is *Rahim*. It is God Himself who gave him that name when He said of Muhammad in the Qur’an that he is gentle (*ra’uf*) and compassionate (*rahim*):

*There has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves, grievous to whom is your suffering, concerned for you, to the believers gentle and compassionate. (The Holy Qur'an 9:128)*

What is interesting about Prophet Muhammad, and all the other Prophets of God, including Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, Zakaria, and Isa (peace be upon them), is that they are all both compassionate beings and living ‘compassions’ of God. Each Prophet is compassion because he is sent to his community by God, who, as *the* Compassionate Source of All Compassion, wishes to save humanity and to show them the way back to their Maker.

The Qur'an considers each Prophet a ‘compassion’ (*rahma*) of His, and each Heavenly Book sent with each Prophet, in order to guide people, is also a compassion (see The Holy Qur'an 19:21; 21:107; 46:12; and other verses). God calls the Qur'an, in the Qur'an itself, ‘*a guidance (huda) and a compassion (rahma) ...*’ (The Holy Qur'an 7:203).

God’s giving of His many compassions as Prophets and as Heavenly Books comes from His very Essence as *Al-Rahman*, and is the fulfillment of a commitment which He primordially made to Himself to be compassionate. As He says in the Qur'an: ‘*Your Lord has prescribed Himself mercy (rahma) ...*’ (The Holy Quran 6:54) It is on the basis of this commitment that God demands that we ourselves, as far as is humanly possible, respond to His compassion. Our responding to God’s compassion must be in the very living and exercise of compassion towards His creatures.

In the Qur'an God's compassion is said to be so broad as to be all-encompassing: 'My mercy (*rahma*) embraces all things ...' (The Holy Qur'an 7:156) It is on the basis of the broadness of His compassion that God demands that we ourselves, as far as is humanly possible, should embrace as many of God's creatures as we can with our compassion.

It is very clear from the Qur'an and the Hadith of God's Prophet (peace be upon him) that dealing with others in compassion is a condition for our very salvation. The Prophet says: 'No compassion will be shown (by God) to one who is not compassionate.' To enjoy God's compassion, we must treat others with compassion (Muslim, no. 5981).

A good number of Hadiths of the Prophet make clear that God will regard any cruelty towards His creatures as a cruelty against Himself. God is said to regard the withholding of water and food from a human being as the withholding of them from God Himself (Muslim, no. 6508). God is also said to consider the starvation of a single cat to be sufficient grounds for eternal damnation, and the saving of a single thirsty dog to be sufficient grounds for eternal salvation (Bukhari, no. 3407, and 2423). God says that the murdering of a single human soul is equivalent to the slaughter of the whole of humanity.

In an important Hadith of the Prophet, it is said that when God created the world, He kept with Himself 99% of His Compassion (as Al-Rahman, The Source of Compassion), and spread 1% of it in His creation. Even the animals are said to have a share of this divine compassion. Thus even the compassion that keeps a horse from stepping or kicking its offspring is said to come from that 1% of God's total Compassion. As for the 99% of the compassion we are promised that it will be available for humanity on the Day of Judgement (Muslim, no. 6921, and Ahmed, no. 18446).

The Hadith is significant for it says that each one of us has a manifestation of God's very own essential compassion within him or her, and that each one of us has the opportunity, and the duty, to cultivate and actualize that divine compassion in his or her life, and in his or her dealings with others. Thus, the cruelty that we sadly practice and witness every day consists in nothing short of the forsaking of the most precious trust God has put into our hearts when He created us: His very own compassion (*rahma*).

What are we to do with this compassion that has been primordially and essentially gifted to us? We must build it into the very centre of our theological ecologies, and make it the very centre of our living together. An authentic renewal of *Kalam* that seeks to be a truly good word for today must centre around, and cultivate, compassion. Such a renewed Islamic theology of compassion or *Kalam Rahmani* would foster a truly spiritual life characterized by such worshipful attitudes as follows:

1. Continuously remembering God and His compassion towards us (*dhikr*);
2. Living in gratitude (*shukr*) for God's compassion;
3. Longing and asking for more of God's compassion (*du'a*);
4. Seeking divine forgiveness for our forgetfulness and cruelty (*istigfar/tawba*);
5. Striving to live with fellow humans and creatures in mutual compassion (*tarahum*).

Such a Theology of Compassion (*Kalam Rahmani*) would be divinely blessed, and a blessing for us, and for others.

In the Muslim tradition, there is a revered practice of transmitting Prophetic utterances from one teacher to another in a chain that authentically links us with Muhammad, the Prophet of Compassion (peace be upon him). There is also a practice of transmitting and receiving the very first hadith one learns from one's teacher. This is called the 'chain of firstness' (*al-musalsal bil-awaliya*).

The first hadith I learned from my Sheikh al-Sayyid Muhammd al-Alawi al-Maliki of the Hijaz (mercy be upon him), from my Sheikh Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa of Egypt, from my Sheikh Al-Habib Ali al-Jifri of Yemen, and from my Sheikh Hussein Ramadan al-Sa'dawi of Tripoli, with continuous chains all the way back to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is foundational in Islam:

The compassionate shall be shown compassion by The Compassionate (Blessed and Exalted is He). Have compassion upon those on earth, and the One in heaven shall have compassion upon you. (Bayhaqi, no. 18272, and Ahmed, no. 6478)

For generations the compassionate teachings of Muhammad (peace be upon him) were successfully transmitted in Muslim communities through a revered and balanced tradition that combined doctrine (*'aqida* covering *iman*), jurisprudence (*fiqh* covering *islam*), and spirituality (*tasawwuf* covering *ihsan*). The institutions of transmission, that traditionally safeguarded the compassionate and true teaching of Islam, unfortunately suffered multiple attacks first by the forces of inner decay and stagnation, then by colonial powers, and then by secularizing nationalist ideologues and rulers.

The confiscation of religious foundations (*awqaf*), in some Muslim countries, also led to the loss of the independent economic base for these institutions. The advent of legalistic, overly politicized, and spiritually poor distortions of Islam have all further weakened the traditional institutions of compassion and wisdom transmission.

Today, there is an urgent need to repair, rehabilitate, and maintain the scholarly and spiritual institutions that preserve and grow compassion in the hearts of youth. This is a challenge that is faced by all traditional communities striving to preserve their wisdom in the midst of an increasingly, and viciously, cruel and materialistic world. Dialogue with other religions and philosophies is a key to growing healthy ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing. As in the case with all religions, the wholesome and compassionate teachings of the true Islamic tradition were sometimes distorted, and warped. In some cases malignant theological mutations resulted in grotesque actions. Bad trees do bear bad fruits, and even thorns!

Just as the peace-loving teaching of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) was sometimes warped and invoked to unleash cruel actions, the peace-loving teaching of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sometimes also warped and invoked to unleash cruel attacks on fellow human beings, such as in the grotesque terrorist attacks of recent times.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to crazed cruelty against God's beloved creatures, no tradition is immune from distortion. We must all be on vigilant guard against abusive and distorting mutilations of our traditions. We must all unite in condemning all cruelty against even a single soul of God's creatures, for that is equivalent to attacking all of humanity. We must unite in compassion against all cruelty, wherever it comes from, and whoever happens to practice it. We must strive to cultivate and grow theologies and ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing.

However, each one of us is especially, theologically and morally, responsible to condemn and repudiate all cruelty perpetrated in the name of his or her religious tradition.<sup>11</sup> When it comes to theological mutilations and distortions, we humans tend to be very good at detecting them in others. It is very easy for all of us to fall into self-righteous and judgemental modes. Here it is important to point out that, as a Muslim, I do take to heart, with utter respect, the following passages from Christian Scriptures, of which we should all be constantly reminded:

*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.* [Matthew 7:1–5, English Standard Version]

One of the key gifts of dialogue is that it can help us keep each other honest. The Prophet (peace be upon him) says: ‘The believer is the mirror of his fellow believer’ (Bayhaqi, no. 17016). By being mirrors for each other, we keep each other focused on the true and sincere service to the One God, and help each other cure the eye-troubles that impair our spiritual sight (Fayd al-Qadir, no. 9142). I am grateful to Professor David Ford, and to my other Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and even skeptical friends for helping me with my impaired sight.

Through mirroring each other, we can better see our faults so that we can work on repairing them. Through mirroring each other we can also better see our gifts so that we can be grateful for them and grow them. This phenomenon of humans mirroring each other is worthy of a great deal of consideration, for just as it is responsible for a great deal of emulation in cruelty and evil, it can be turned into a real constructive factor through the emulation in compassion and goodness.

Today, we are daunted, and even haunted, by cycles and spirals of violence that stem from the fact that our communities mirror each other’s cruelty and evil. We need to break these vicious cycles and spirals, and get on with mirroring each other’s compassion and goodness. Only the building up of spirals of compassion will lead to the emergence of a ‘Compassion Architecture’ consisting of a network of networks of wholesome goodness and joyful compassion.<sup>12</sup> Here are some of the key attitudinal seeds for growing such ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing that can spiral, in goodness, unto heaven:

1. Let us break the cycles and spirals of cruelty with sudden, unexpected, unassuming, and free acts of love and compassion;
2. Let us stop being fixated on our own grievances, no matter how legitimate they happen to be, and reach out to heal the grievances of the other, no matter how undeserving we feel that other to be;
3. Let us stop complaining, and let us start dreaming, together, of better futures for all of us, and for all our children. Say, ‘I have a dream!’, not ‘I have a complaint!’ (quoting Sheikh Mustafa Ceric);<sup>13</sup>
4. Let us invoke deep forgiveness of each other, and let us extend that forgiveness unilaterally and freely, without any obsessions, with ‘reciprocity’;
5. Forgiving love and compassion is grander and more effective than any justice-obsessed discourse that demands reciprocity, important as justice may, of course, be; Such discourse often degenerates into tit-for-tat cycles that make the spirals of cruelty even worse;
6. Prepare the conditions of possibility that enable and facilitate of the rise of compassion spirals. These conditions include:
  - a. Nourishing personal friendships within, and across, communities that incubate relations of deep trust and deep resources for healing and mending. These seeds

- of trust are vital for breaking the very roots of cruelty spirals, and giving a chance for compassion spirals to grow;
- b. Sustaining patient and persistent activities and institutions that continue to ‘build bridges’, even when there is no present traffic to use the bridges. Inevitably, there comes a day when the bridges will be very much needed. The building bridges must be with, and across, communities. Inner bridges are often necessary for sustaining outer bridges;
- c. Preparing ‘rapid deployment’, ‘crisis centers’ and ‘disaster-recovery’ infrastructures, with hybrid joint teams, ready for ‘preemptive peace’ that can quickly respond in times of crises and that can help thwart ‘preemptive wars’, as well as teams that can intervene to mitigate and reverse the effects of disastrous conflict when they do occur.

The list of compassion seeds just made may sound like wishful thinking. However, they are very much practical, viable, and effective. The recent poesies and emergence of the ecology of peace, compassion and blessing called ‘A Common Word’ offers a very interesting case for meditation and celebration!

In response to the deeply offensive Regensburg Lecture, 38 Muslims sent a systematic theological reply to Pope Benedict XVI. A year passed, and the Pope did not respond. The offense was compounded, and many Muslim scholars resolved to boycott the Vatican until the Pope issued a proper apology. However, there were other Muslim scholars who courageously, and quite controversially (within the Muslim community) decided to write to the Pope, yet again, this time not with a defensive message, but with a positive and loving one—one that addressed not just the Pope, but the whole global Christian leadership. The idea was to send as much goodness as possible, and to appeal to, and invoke, the widest and deepest theological and spiritual resources of goodness in the other. So 138 Muslim scholars from both genders, *all* Muslim theological and juridical schools, and from both traditional and modern educational backgrounds, sent a letter to *all* Christian leaders from *all* theological and denominational schools. The message was kept very simple yet deep: Let us come together in Love of God, and Love of Neighbour!

‘A Common Word’ was immediately criticized by some voices within the Muslim community, and the scholars who signed it were accused of selling out to the West, at a time when Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine were under bombardment. They were also accused of being unrealistic, naïve, and deaf to the cries for justice and sense of deep grievance that many Muslims were expressing. Some even accused the scholars of infidelity and treason against the Muslim faith! Some were even accused of being agents of the Vatican! ‘A Common Word’ was also immediately criticized by some voices in the West. There were articles that argued that it was an appeal to Christians to convert to Islam. There were also accusations of double-talk and deceit, and even of making a tacit-threat!

Nothing daunted the signatories, though there was admittedly some wavering by some, and at the conclusion of a major conference on ‘Love in the Qur'an’, these scholars signed the document out of a deep sense of love and compassion that stems from the very root of Islam.<sup>14</sup> The letter truly emerged out of deep love, and that is why it was indeed received with deep love. It did not set any conditions, it did not demand anything back, it did not complain, and it did not demand justice. It simply, and unconditionally, extended a hand out and expressed, and appealed for, love of God, and love of Neighbour.

The gesture of forgiveness, love, and compassion had its affect. The reaction from the

various Christian Churches was overwhelming! The Anglican Church was the first to respond, and with tremendous love! Not only did the Bishop of London, Rt. Rev'd. Richard Charters, and Professor David Ford help in the very launch of the letter to the press, but the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, was the very first to reply with a beautiful letter of love and support.<sup>15</sup> That early response was crucial because it set a courageous and loving example for others to follow.

Then, there was a response of a nature and scale that was totally unexpected: over three hundred Protestant leaders, mainly Evangelicals, purchased a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, and published a vital historical document entitled ‘Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You’ that not only expressed love, but also addressed some important Muslim grievances!<sup>16</sup> Muslim scholars were so taken by the responses of Rowan Williams and the evangelical leaders, that they sent a delegation to personally thank the Archbishop of Canterbury, and held a special news conference in Abu Dhabi to thank the Protestant leaders for their Yale statement, to which they also invited Professor Miroslav Wolf, who led the Yale initiative.<sup>17</sup> Muslim scholars then worked, through Tabah Foundation of Abu Dhabi, to send an unprecedented Christmas greeting that was published during Christmas 2007 in over a dozen international newspapers, in order to collectively thank all for the positive responses that were sent. There have been so many such responses, it is best to consult [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com) in order to read them.

The Common Word website gives an idea of the scale of the follow-up developments that have emerged out of the mirroring in goodness that the initiative triggered. Entire ecologies of local initiatives have sprouted all over the world. Vital conferences were held at Yale University, Cambridge University, the Vatican, and Georgetown.<sup>18</sup> I cannot possibly map the rich ecologies that did emerge. However, I do want to reflect on some of the important conditions of possibility for their emergence.

First, there was the sincerity and intentionality of the initiative. The architect and author of the letter itself, H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, and the signatories who signed it, and the promoters who promoted it, were all sincerely intent on serving God and Humanity through appealing to, and spreading, Love of God, and Love of Neighbour. God, in His infinite compassion, empowered the initiative through His very Love and Compassion, and blessed it with success.

Second, there were the set of very deep and trusting friendships that sustained the initiative from its incubation to its sprouting out, and to its full growth, and that also protected during difficult times. These included friendships within the Muslim community and friendships across communities. The friendships between H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Habib Ali al-Jifri, Sheikh Nuh al-Qudat, Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, Sheikh Said Ramadan al-Buti, Habib Umar bin Abdul Hafid, Mufti Mustafa Ceric, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Sheikh Amr Khaled and Ibrahim Kalin—have offered great ground for cultivating ‘A Common Word’ ecologies. The friendships with Professor David Ford, and through him, with such key figures as Miroslav Wolf of Yale, Iain Torrance of Princeton, and John DeGioia of Georgetown, have been vital for sustaining these ecologies. Friendships with key Catholic figures such as Cardinal McCarrick, Bishop Martinelli, Father Thomas Michel, Father Dan Madigan, Father Etienne Renault, Father Michel Lagarde, and Father Miguel Ayuso sustained these ecologies, especially at the very difficult early stages when there was skepticism and resistance in the Vatican. Friendships between several Muslim scholars, most notably Dr Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali and Archbishop

Rowan Williams, enabled the initiative to enjoy his crucial early support. Friendships with Jewish scholars, though they were not specifically addressed by the letter, were vital for the welcoming respect that the initiative received in the Jewish community. Professor Peter Ochs wrote an early reception that set the trend of Jewish receptions.<sup>19</sup> It is that positive reaction that is now sustaining ongoing efforts to address a letter to Jewish scholars, despite the dreadful political realities of Israeli-Palestinian strife.

It is interesting that just as such friendships sustained the Common Word initiative, the initiative is now not only sustaining these friendships, but is actually making them grow and spread in unforeseen ways! New friendships are sprouting up through conferences, meetings, workshops, and news conferences.<sup>20</sup> Friendships with such professional and thoughtful journalists as Tom Heneghan have proven vital for sustaining a publically positive atmosphere around the ‘A Common Word’ ecologies.<sup>21</sup>

The emergence of these key seed friendships is a divine gift, but it does need a lot of diligent human preparation and grateful reception, and often works out in unpredictable and unexpected ways. Years ago, the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) invited me to join the staff of the Institute, even though I was a Muslim. The friendships built during those years were very important in re-building Muslim-Catholic trust and confidence after Regensburg. In May 2007, in the midst of the post-Regensburg cold-war-like atmosphere, PISAI invited me to deliver the Bradley Lecture.<sup>22</sup> They even facilitated a key meeting with the Vatican’s Secretary of State in which I conveyed the dismay of Muslim scholars at not receiving a response to their first letter, and at the subsuming of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue under another Pontifical Council. Later on, PISAI courageously published an Open Letter of support for ‘A Common Word’ at a time when cynical skepticism dominated the atmosphere of Vatican-Muslim relations. That letter encouraged Muslim scholars, and also signaled, internally to the Vatican, a better way of responding. If PISAI did not exist as an institution that quietly fostered knowledge and friendships with the other, such trust and friendship resources would not have been available when they were needed.<sup>23</sup>

The same is true of the process, and institution, of the ‘Building Bridges’ seminars chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Those important seminars have been building friendships, confidence, and mutual-knowledge between Anglican and Muslim scholars for years.<sup>24</sup> I attended two of those seminars, and the walks and talks that many of us, the Muslim participants, had with Rowan Williams were vital in building the trust that made possible not only his response to ‘A Common Word’, but also the Muslim understanding of the significance of that response.<sup>25</sup>

The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (CIP) is another example. Despite being daunted by still quite limited endowments, the CIP, with a very small staff, and limited resources, has been able to achieve a great deal, mainly because of its big heart.<sup>26</sup> Friendships with David Ford, Ben Quash, Catriona Laing, Nick Adams, and now with Barbara Bennett and Miriam Lorie, have been quite important in supporting the ecologies of ‘A Common Word’. The fact that the United Arab Emirates had the vision to support the position of Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter), as Sheikh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Faculty of Divinity enabled CIP to make a valuable contribution to ‘A Common Word’ process.

Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad actually headed our first delegation to the Vatican that led to the establishment of a permanent Catholic-Muslim Forum.<sup>27</sup> That Forum met successfully for the first time in Rome on 4–6 November 2008 for a series of extensive theological

and frank socio-political discussions, culminating with an important meeting with Pope Benedict XVI in which he gave a beautiful speech that went a long way towards mending Catholic-Muslim relations.<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad has been instrumental in the establishment of the Cambridge Muslim College, which will undoubtedly play a crucial role in the formation of a new cadre of young Muslim religious leaders and scholars and in the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion, and blessing.<sup>29</sup>

The great news we heard earlier today from His Excellency the Minister of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos (may God keep him in the best of health), about His Majesty's generous gift of a new Chair at CIP means that CIP will indeed continue to grow, God willing, as a major hub in the network of networks of mutual-compassion and mutual-understanding between the Abrahamic religions. As a Muslim and as a Senior Advisor to CIP, I wholeheartedly thank His Majesty, His Excellency, and the people of Oman. The planned exchanges between Oman and Cambridge will, God willing, prove to be a great source for joint wisdom in the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion and understanding.

The Reconciliation Programme at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture has been very important in rallying American theologians, especially Evangelicals, to the support of such ecologies. Its ongoing Project on 'human flourishing' will sustain the flourishing of such ecologies. Professor Peter Ochs of the University of Virginia, who is himself a great institution, combining Rabbinic wisdom and spirituality with philosophical and logical rigour, has been planting incubators for such flourishings everywhere he goes. Scriptural Reasoning groups that foster friendships around Scriptures and their interpretation and understanding are now well-established in hundreds of cities and towns.<sup>30</sup>

The University of Balamand, based on the beautiful vision of Metropolitan George Khodr, and now Minister Tarek Mitri, managed to build a significant network of Muslim-Orthodox friendships. The World Council of Churches facilitated a series of Consultations that resulted in the important document entitled 'Learning to Explore Love Together: Suggestions to the Churches for Responding to "A Common Word"'.<sup>31</sup> They are now planning for major meetings and events, and have taken the gracious step of involving Muslims in the very planning of these events.

President Iain Torrance of the Princeton Theological Seminary, invited to his Inauguration a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, and thus signaled total support for inter-faith work. His early support of 'A Common Word' was very important.<sup>32</sup> We are now in the early stages of planning an event on Karl Barth and Islam to encourage deep theological engagement between the two traditions.

Muslim institutions that have fostered and encouraged dialogue over the years have also been vital for the emergence of refreshing ecologies of peace and compassion. Al-Azhar, the greatest seat of Sunni Muslim learning has been leading several dialogue initiatives, and has taken important steps towards the training of dialogue-oriented Ulama. The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan has been quietly and effectively building intra-Islamic consensus, as well as inter-faith goodwill.

Dar al-Mustafa in Yemen has been graduating serious young Muslim scholars with a balance of proper theology, deep spirituality, and balanced jurisprudence. Habib Ali al-Jifri's Tabah Foundation in the United Arab Emirates has been able to bring the best of that Yemeni faith and wisdom to a wider global audience. Tabah Foundation worked very hard with Sheikh Amr Khaled on containing the damage created by the Denmark Cartoons crisis, and managed over the years to build entire networks and ecologies of love and trust within and outside the Muslim community.

Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, with the help of a most impressive circle of young scholars, such as Sheikh Usama al-Sayyid, has managed to re-build the Dar al-Ifta' institution into an up-to-date and organized network of scholars. The Grand Mufti also revived, with the help of his able students, the deeply spiritual practice of scholarly circles in the Azhar mosque itself. His commitment to inter-faith work has been a great sustaining spiritual and intellectual factor in the emergence of ecologies of peace and compassion.

The World Islamic Call Society and College have been involved in inter-faith work, especially with the Vatican, since 1976, and have built an amazingly wide network of scholars committed to dialogue. Their recent efforts towards dialogue with Evangelicals have already resulted in three successful meetings, and their support for 'A Common Word' has been unfailing and continuous. Iran has also supported several inter-faith and inter-civilization dialogues, and its efforts enabled the presence of major Shi'i scholars amongst the signatories of 'A Common Word'.

Turkey, especially the Faculty of Divinity at Marmara University, trained, over many years, top theological talents who are also spiritually oriented towards dialogue. The efforts of Professor Bekir Karliga and his students are noteworthy. The Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen movements have also made massive efforts towards the flourishing of love and understanding within humanity. Turkey recently partnered with Spain and other countries for a Dialogue of Civilizations. There is now a Saudi dialogue initiative as well. All these institutional efforts, and I only managed to name some, enable ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing to emerge. Their perspective is long-term, and at times they may seem ineffective. However, it is precisely this long-term institutional work that enables compassion spirals to emerge when there is an urgent need for them.

There is a need today for institutions that are specifically designed to make even more rapid responses. It is important to set 'rapid deployment' peace teams that can quickly prevent or handle inter-religious crises. It is important to also build 'crisis room' or 'situation room' mechanisms to quickly manage crises when they do occur. It is also vital to set up 'disaster-recovery' centers that can repair and mend the massive damages that inter-religious strife often causes. It is encouraging that a structure that may enable such institutions to emerge is being set up under the name 'C-1 World Dialogue'. Under the capable leadership of the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Bishop of London this exciting initiative may make a huge contribution in the years to come.

However, no matter how many institutions we manage to build, the key to reconciliation and peace is the growing of ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing that ultimately stem from love and forgiveness. We must learn to love and forgive, and educate our children to appreciate the beauty and importance of compassion, compassion that is so vast, it can forgive.

The most important element of such a wholesome education is the teaching of forgiveness. It is not so difficult to be compassionate when one is not injured and has nothing to forgive. However, when one is injured, compassionate conduct becomes difficult because it requires genuine forgiveness, which is often difficult and even painful. Most cruelty today is practiced in the name of justice based on grievances, real or perceived, and supported by a logic of reciprocity that often degenerates into a tit-for-tat of endless cruelty spirals. When one is unforgiving, one can easily become self-righteously cruel.

All major wisdom traditions Jewish, Christian, Muslims, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and Humanist, clearly value forgiveness. Alas, we are not very good parishioners of it. Here is what the Qur'an tells a Muslim to do:

*Repel evil with what is better, for We know best what they describe.  
(The Holy Qur'an, 23:96)*

*Good and evil deeds are not equal. Repel [evil] with what is better; you will see that he with whom you had enmity has become your dearest friend. (The Holy Qur'an, 41:34)*

*Let not those who are blessed with favours and means among you swear that they will not give to their kindred and to the needy and to emigrants in the cause of Allah; let them rather forgive and be indulgent. Do you not wish that Allah forgives you? And Allah is Forgiving, Compassionate. (The Holy Qur'an, 24:22)*

Here is what the Bible tells the Christian to do:

*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Matthew 5:38–47, English Standard Version)*

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says: ‘Connect with the one who cuts you off, give to the one who deprives you, and forgive the one who treats you with injustice.’ (Ahmed, no. 17122)

Yet, Christians and Muslims can be so amazingly unforgiving of each other! We may very well need new hearts that can forgive, love, and cherish all others, even our so called ‘enemies’. Only our Compassionate God can grant us such new forgiving and loving hearts. However, gatherings like this one can help ‘prepare the way for the Lord’ by opening our injured and pained hearts, with all their wounds, faults, and incapacities, to the creative and transformative healing that comes from God alone. Great luminescent signs of hope are at hand: With God’s permission, ecologies of peace, compassion and blessing are already flourishing in both heavenly and earthly gardens.

I am grateful to you for coming today to celebrate and further grow such gardens, and to thank Professor Ford for his hope-inspiring ‘A Muscat Manifesto’. May the Lord always grant us the loving company of ‘*those who believe, and counsel one another to patience, and counsel one another to mercy*’ (The Holy Qur'an, 90:17).

Let me conclude with a prayer that Moses (peace be upon him) prays in the Holy Qur'an:

*‘My Lord! Have mercy on me and on my brother; bring us into Your mercy. You are the Most Merciful of the merciful!’ (The Holy Qur'an, 7:151)*

May the Lord encompass *all* with His infinite compassion.

*And God knows best.* ♣

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Professor David Ford's 'A Muscat Manifesto' was published as the very first publication of Kalam Research & Media, with the kind permission of Dr Abdulrahman Al-Salmi, editor of the *Al-Tasamoh* journal, and the collaboration of the staff of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. See, *A Muscat Manifesto: Seeking Inter-Faith Wisdom*, Kalam Research & Media in collaboration with the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, Dubai, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Professor Ford's efforts to articulate theologically his Christian wisdom tradition, see his *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007; and *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2007. For his views on the development of Christian theology, see his 'Introduction to Modern Christian Theology', in David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (eds.), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005 [Third Edition].

<sup>3</sup> See *A Muscat Manifesto*, pp.10–11.

<sup>4</sup> On the three types of activity see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, World Library Classics, 2009; and *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Oxford University Press, 1924 [2 volumes].

<sup>5</sup> An 'ecumenical movement', of the kind praised by Professor Ford in 'A Muscat Manifesto', has already emerged amongst Muslims. Under the Hashemite wisdom of H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan, and his brilliant advisor and representative H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute has been able to bring different strands of Islamic theologies and juridical schools together to issue a joint and all-important 'Amman Message'. The Amman Message is the ecumenical foundation that enabled later joint initiatives such 'A Common Word' to emerge and succeed. H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad explains the genesis of the Amman Message as follows: 'The Amman Message started as a detailed statement released the eve of the 27th of Ramadan 1425 AH / 9th November 2004 CE by H.M. King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein in Amman, Jordan. It sought to declare what Islam is and what it is not, and what actions represent it and what actions do not. Its goal was to clarify to the modern world the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam.'

'In order to give this statement more religious authority, H.M. King Abdullah II then sent the following three questions to 24 of the most senior religious scholars from all around the world representing all the branches and schools of Islam: (1) Who is a Muslim? (2) Is it permissible to declare someone an apostate (takfir)? (3) Who has the right to undertake issuing fatwas (legal rulings)?'

Based on the *fatwas* provided by these great scholars (who included the Sheikh Al-Azhar; Ayatollah Sistani and Sheikh Qaradawi), in July 2005 CE, H.M. King Abdullah II convened an international Islamic conference of 200 of the world's leading Islamic scholars ('Ulama) from 50 countries. In Amman, the scholars unanimously issued a ruling on three fundamental issues (which became known as the 'Three Points of the Amman Message'):

1. They specifically recognized the validity of all 8 *Mathhab*s (legal schools) of *Sunni*, *Shi'a* and *Ibadhi* Islam; of traditional Islamic Theology (*Ash'arism*); of Islamic Mysticism (Sufism), and of true *Salafi* thought, and came to a precise definition of who is a Muslim.

2. Based upon this definition they forbade *takfir* (declarations of apostasy) between Muslims.

3. Based upon the *Mathhab* they set forth the subjective and objective preconditions for the issuing of *fatwas*, thereby exposing ignorant and illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam.

'These Three Points were then unanimously adopted by the Islamic World's political and temporal leaderships at the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit at Mecca in December 2005. And over a period of one year from July 2005 to July 2006, the Three Points were also unanimously adopted by six other international Islamic scholarly assemblies, culminating with the *International Islamic Fiqh Academy of Jeddah*, in July 2006. In total, over 500 leading Muslim scholars worldwide as can be seen on the Amman Message website unanimously endorsed the Amman Message and its Three Points.'

'This amounts to a historical, universal and unanimous religious and political consensus (*ijma'*) of the Ummah (nation) of Islam in our day, and a consolidation of traditional, orthodox Islam. The significance of this is: (1) that it is the first time in over a thousand years that the Ummah has formally and specifically come to such a pluralistic mutual inter-recognition; and (2) that such a recognition is religiously legally binding on Muslims since the Prophet (may peace and blessings be upon him) said: *My Ummah will not agree upon an error* (Ibn Majah, *Sunan*, *Kitab al-Fitan*, *Hadith* no.4085).

'This is good news not only for Muslims, for whom it provides a basis for unity and a solution to infighting, but also for non-Muslims. For the safeguarding of the legal methodologies of Islam (the *Mathhab*) necessarily means inherently preserving traditional Islam's internal "checks and balances". It thus assures balanced Islamic solutions for essential issues like human rights; women's rights; freedom of religion; legitimate jihad; good citizenship of Muslims in non-Muslim countries, and just and democratic government. It also exposes the illegitimate opinions of radical fundamentalists and terrorists from the point of view of true Islam. As George Yeo, the Foreign Minister of Singapore, declared in the 60th Session of the U.N. General Assembly (about the Amman Message): "Without this clarification, the war against terrorism would be much harder to fight."

'Finally, whilst this by the Grace of God is a historical achievement, it will clearly remain only principal unless it is put into practice everywhere. For this reason, H.M. King Abdullah II is now seeking to implement it, God willing, through various pragmatic measures, including (1) inter-Islamic treaties; (2) national and international legislation using the Three Points of the Amman Message to define Islam and forbid *takfir*; (3) the use of publishing and the multi-media in all their aspects to spread the Amman Message; (4) instituting the teaching of the Amman Message in school curricula and university courses worldwide; and (5) making it part of the training of mosque Imams and making it included in their sermons.'

God says in the Holy Qur'an says: *There is no good in much of their secret conferences save (in) whosoever enjoineth*

*charity and fairness and peace-making among the people and whoso doeth that, seeking the good pleasure of God, We shall bestow on him a vast reward.* (Al-Nisa, 4:114).<sup>5</sup> See [www.ammanmessage.com](http://www.ammanmessage.com).

For further information and study of the various fatwas issued on the three questions raised by the Amman Message and the various authorities who have endorsed it, see the exhaustive documentation prepared by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (ed), *True Islam and the Islamic Consensus on the Amman Message*, The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute, Amman, 2006 [Third Edition].

Of course, a great deal of intra-school networking and rallying had to happen and Sidi al-Habib Ali al-Jifri was able to bring together a powerful consortium of leading Ulama, most notably Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, Sheikh Said Ramadan al-Buti, and Habib Umar, as well as television and media savvy leaders such as Sheikh Amr Khaled and leading academics such as Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ibrahim Kalin. The important role of Western Muslims in the building and sustaining of this network is also noteworthy, particularly the work of scholars such as Sheikh Abd al-Hakim Murad (T.J. Winter), Ingrid Mattson, Abdallah Schleifer, Sohail Nakhooda and Sheikh Jihad Brown. Libya has also been building networks across the world, especially in Africa, and these networks were linked with the Amman Message and the ‘A Common Word’ initiative [see <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/11-new-fruits-of-a-common-word/29-more-than-460-islamic-organizations-and-associations-declare-support-for-qa-common-wordq.html>]. For the connection between the Amman Message and the Common Word and its significance and impact, see Sohail Nakhooda, ‘The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word’, <http://www.acommonword.com/The-Significance-of-the-Amman-Message-and-the-Common-Word.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> It is truly exciting to be involved in a project of ‘co-theologizing’ with a Jewish scholar, Stephen Kepnes, and a Christian scholar, David Ford, with the preparation of three parallel books on the Future of Jewish, Christian and Muslim theology to be published by Blackwell of Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> Sidi Ahmad Zarruq is vital for renewal and the fight against despair. He was one of the greatest spiritual masters of his time and played a key role in the symbiosis between law and spirituality in Islam. His spiritual heirs are the Darqawis, Alawis, Sanusis, and Madanis. He has been a strong influence on Sheikh Hamza Yusuf through his Mauritanian teachers [see <http://www.messageislam.co.za/ahmad-zarruq-hamza-yusuf-and-integral-islam/>. See also Sidi Ahmed Zarruq, ‘The Foundations of the Spiritual Path’, trans. by Hamza Yusuf, in *Seasons Journal*, Spring/Summer 2003, pp.9–16]; and Sheikh Nuh Ha-Mim Keller [see Nuh Keller’s article on Sufism at <http://ageofjahiliyah.wordpress.com/2007/10/31/what-is-sufism-shadhili-tariqa-shaykh-nuh-keller/>].

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Ata’Illah is one of the most revered spiritual masters in Islam. He is famously known for his aphorisms (*bikam*), which have been memorized and sang by Sufi communities through the ages and in various parts of the world. The subtlety of his spiritual insights and the sheer wisdom they express are vital for any sustained theological renewal. See Ibn Ata’Illah, *The Book of Wisdom*, trans. Victor Danner, the Classics of Western Spirituality Series, Paulist Press, New York, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> This terminology owes its provenance in the writings of the philosopher Ernst Bloch. See, Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, MIT Press, MA, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> It is very important to study the sources of theological pathology and malignancy. It is not sufficient to dismiss such schools as un-Islamic. The fact of the matter is they do use Islam’s Holy Book and its tradition, so they must be challenged on Islamic grounds. There is a history of pathology within Islamic history, most notably in such movements as al-Khawarij and al-Hashashin. Such history and the reasons for theological pathology must be carefully studied. The Qur’an and Sunna, like all other sacred texts, are like nuclear energy in potency: it can be used compassionately and peacefully, but it can also be used destructively. The mechanisms for properly channeling such energies are vitally important, and very little work has been done on it. Security-oriented studies are not sufficient. There is a spiritual challenge, and a spiritual battle that has to be fought. The reason the ‘war on terror’ is failing is because it never managed to tap into the deep roots of malignant theologies.

<sup>11</sup> On Muslim condemnations of Terrorism, see David Smock and Qamar-ul Huda, ‘Islamic Peacemaking Since 9/11’, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC., 2009 [<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/islamicpeacemaking.pdf>]. Further useful resources on peace efforts include can be found at Habib Ali’s website [<http://www.alhabibali.com/en/>] and at [www.AmmanMessage.com](http://www.AmmanMessage.com).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the notion of a ‘Compassion Architecture’, see Aref Nayed, ‘From “security” to compassion—a needed shift for Obama government’, <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/tag/inter-faith/>

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20081113/FOREIGN/371646091/-1/NEWS>

<sup>14</sup> The ‘Love in The Holy Qur’an’ Conference was organized by the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute in Amman, Jordan and held on 4–7 September 2007. For more details on this groundbreaking event and the proceedings of the conference see, <http://www.aalalbayt.org/en/newsconference14.html>

<sup>15</sup> For the initial response by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, after the launch of ‘A Common Word’, see <http://acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=11>

<sup>16</sup> For the full text of the document, published on 18 November 2007, see <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/downloads/fullpageadbold18.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=new&item=3>

<sup>18</sup> For the proceedings of the Common Word conferences at Yale, Cambridge/Lambeth, Vatican and Georgetown, see [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)

<sup>19</sup> A different group of Muslim scholars did draft a resolution similar to ‘A Common Word’, see <http://www.mujca.com/muslimsandjews.htm>. The reception of this resolution was minimal, and a more sustained theological document for Muslim-Jewish relations is still in the making by figures associated with ‘A Common Word’, and will require an equally solid consensus as the ‘A Common Word’ document had, in order to trigger an theological and spiritual perspective change in inter-faith relations between the two faith communities.

<sup>20</sup> For a summary of key events and accomplishments of ‘A Common Word’ see, <http://www.acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/2-general/161-qa-common-wordq-accomplishments-2007-2009.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Heneghan, the Religious Affairs editor for Reuters, has regularly covered key events related to ‘A Common Word’ initiative in his blog. See, <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/>. There is a convenient ‘A Common Word’ tag for accessing all the pieces in sequence.

<sup>22</sup> For the text of the Bradley Lecture, see Aref Ali Nayef, ‘Compassion and Understanding in Islam’, in *Islamochristiana*, vol. 33, 2007, pp. 137–148.

<sup>23</sup> For PISA’s response to ‘A Common Word’, see <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=27>

<sup>24</sup> The Building Bridges Seminar was first launched in 2002 by Lord Carey and it is a unique annual series bringing together Christian and Muslim scholars for an intensive study of key Biblical and Qur’anic texts. The seminars have been held at the Lambeth Palace and also in Doha, Sarajevo, Washington DC, Singapore and Rome. The Proceedings of the seminars have been published as separate volumes, all edited by Michael Ipgrave: *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Lambeth, 2002); *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together* (Doha, 2003); *Bearing the Word: Prophecy in Biblical and Qur’anic Perspectives* (Georgetown, 2004); and *Building a Better Bridge: Muslims, Christians, and the Common Good* (Sarajevo, 2005). For a summary of the various seminars, see <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2198>. There is also an interesting video clip on youtube.com where Muslim and Christian participants at the Building Bridges seminar in Rome in May 2008: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq5A4U\\_TVA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq5A4U_TVA)

<sup>25</sup> A sustained theological and meditative response was presented by Dr Rowan Williams at the Common Word conference held at Cambridge and Lambeth Palace in October 2008, see <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1892>

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/cip/>

<sup>27</sup> For Abdal Hakim Murad’s reflections on the meeting with the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican that led to the establishment of a permanent Catholic-Muslim Forum, see <http://www.acommonword.com/lib/vatican/AH-Murad-Statement.pdf>

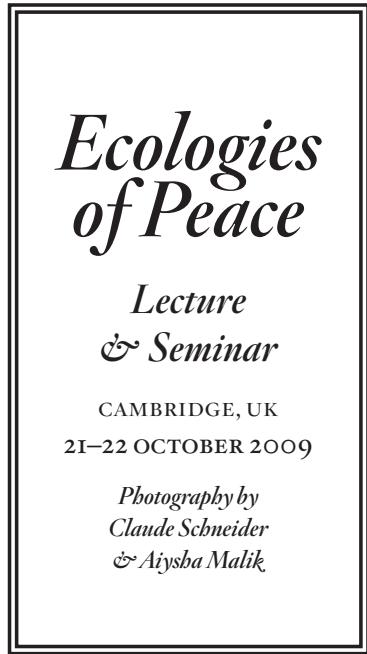
<sup>28</sup> For Pope Benedict XVI’s speech at the First Catholic-Muslim Forum, see <http://acommonword.com/en/conferences/20-rome-november-2008/105-address-of-his-holiness-benedict-xvi-to-participants-in-the-seminar-organized-by-the-qcatholic-muslim-forumq.html>. Other presentations at the Forum are also found on the same website. Pope Benedict XVI followed this with an important Papal visit to Jordan in May 2009 where he gave a public address at the King Hussein bin Talal Mosque in Amman, further cementing of relations between the two faith communities and also citing the Amman Inter-Faith Message and the Common Word initiative. For the address by Pope Benedict XVI and the key welcoming address by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, see <http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/11-new-fruits-of-a-common-word/257-pope-benedict-xvi-visits-jordan.html>.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The Cambridge Muslim College supports the development of training and Islamic scholarship to help meet the many challenges facing Britain today. The college is dedicated to maintaining academic excellence and pushing the boundaries of Islamic learning in the West’. See <http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/>

<sup>30</sup> On the Scriptural Reasoning project led by Peter Ochs, see materials on Scriptural Reasoning on the University of Virginia Website. Also, Peter Ochs, ‘Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together’, address given at the Inauguration of Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, March 2005, <http://www.ptsem.edu/Inaugural/pdf/Ochs%20address-3-10-05.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> For the full text of the document, see [http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p6/Learning\\_to\\_Explore\\_Love\\_Together.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p6/Learning_to_Explore_Love_Together.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?page=responses&item=7>





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1. Dr. Kate Pretty, Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Cambridge 2. H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammad Al-Salimi, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Sultanate of Oman 3. H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammad Al-Salimi delivering his opening address 4. Audience in the Saltmarsh Room, King's College, Cambridge 5. Aref Nayed delivering his keynote speech on Ecologies of Peace 6. (l-r) Dr Leonard Polonsky, Executive Chairman, Hansard Global Plc, Dr Georgette Bennett, President, Tanenbaum, Sibella Laing and Stuart Laing, Master of Corpus Christi, Cambridge 7. Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme 8. Aref Nayed with Professor David Ford 9. The Master's Lodge, Trinity College, Cambridge



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10. (*l-r*) Reverend Michael Bos, Nicholas Adams, Aref Nayed, Professor David Ford, H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammad Al-Salmi, Professor Abdulrahman Al-Salmi, Editor of Al-Tasamoh Journal, Professor Ridwan al-Sayed, Advisor to the Minister of Endowments & Religious Affairs, Dr Kahlan al-Kharusi, Advisor to the Grand Mufti of Oman, Reverend Richard Lloyd-Morgan, Chaplain, King's College, Cambridge 11. (*l-r*) Samir Mahmoud, Adeel Khan, Aref Nayed, Ahmed Achtar, Heythrop College, and Nicholas Adams, CIP, at the seminar on the Ecologies of Peace 12. A Qur'anic manuscript at the University Library, Cambridge 13. Rev'd Michael Bos, former Director of the Al-Amana Centre, Sultanate of Oman 14. Seminar workgroup with (*l-r*) Mike Higton, University of Exeter, Tim Winter (Abdal Hakim Murad), Sheikh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge, Barbara Bennett, Nicholas Adams, George Windsor, the Earl of St Andrews, and Professor Steven Kepnes, Colgate University 15 & 17. Participants in the seminar and workgroup 18. Professor Ridwan al-Sayed and Professor David Ford examining a manuscript at the Exhibition Room, University Library, Cambridge





## DAVID F. FORD

David F. Ford OBE is Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus in the University of Cambridge, Fellow of Selwyn College, and former Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. He read Classics at Trinity College Dublin, and then studied Theology in Cambridge, Yale, and Tübingen. Ford co-founded the Scriptural Reasoning movement and is a Trustee of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. He is a member of the Executive Committee of the C-1 World Dialogue and of its Education Commission. Professor Ford's books include: *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (2021); *A Kind of Upside-Downness: Learning Disabilities and Transformational Community*, co-edited with Deborah Hardy Ford and Ian Randall (2020); *The Drama of Living* (2014); *Interreligious Reading After Vatican II*, co-edited with Frances Clemson (2013); *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (2nd edition, 2013); *The Future of Christian Theology* (2011); *The Modern Theologians Reader*, co-edited with Mike Higton and Simeon Zahl (2011); *Musics of Belonging: The Poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail*, co-edited with Marc Caball (2006); *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (2007), *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (2007), *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God* with Daniel W. Hardy (2nd edition 2005), *The Shape of Living* (2002), *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (1999), and *Barth and God's Story* (1981). ♣



## AREF ALI NAYED

Dr. Aref Ali Nayed is a former Libyan Ambassador and Envoy, and Chairman of Kalam Research & Media (KRM) and the Libya Institute for Advanced Studies (LIAS). He is Senior Advisor to the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme; Higher Academic Council Member of the Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities, UAE; Visiting Senior Research Affiliate of Religious Studies of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, USA; and Fellow of the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute in Jordan. He received his BSc in Engineering, MA in the Philosophy of Science, and a PhD in Hermeneutics from the University of Guelph (Canada). He also studied at the University of Toronto and the Pontifical Gregorian University. He was Professor at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (Rome), and the International Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization (Malaysia). Nayed has been involved in various Inter-Faith initiatives since 1987, including the 'A Common Word' process. His published works include: *Western Engagements: Speeches in Washington DC and London* (2020); *UN Engagements: Open Letters and Statements to the Special Envoys of the UN Mission to Libya* (2020); *Russian Engagements: On Libyan Politics and Libyan-Russian Relations in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue* (2019); *Radical Engagements: Essays on Religion, Extremism, Politics, and Libya* (2017); *Vatican Engagements: A Muslim Theologian's Journey in Muslim-Catholic Dialogue* (2016); *ISIS in Libya: Winning the Propaganda War* (2015); *Overcoming ISIS Libya: A Disaster Recovery Plan* (2015); *Libya: From Revolutionary Legitimacy to Constitutional Legitimacy* (2014); *Beyond Fascism* (2013); *Operational Hermeneutics: Interpretation as the Engagement of Operational Artifacts* (2011); *Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing: A Muslim Response to 'A Muscat Manifesto'* (2010); *Duties of Proximity: Towards a Theology of Neighborliness* (2010); and co-authored with Jeff Mitscherling and Tanya Ditommaso, *The Author's Intention* (Lexington Books, 2004); ..♣





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