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Evaluating “A Common Word”: The Problem of “Points of Contact”

by Larry Poston

Why “points of contact” between Christianity and Islam are mythical—and why Christians must stay true to the task of missions that lies before us.

In September 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and clergymen issued a response to Pope Benedict XVI’s 2006 Regensburg address. The document was entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You” and was designed to promote “open intellectual exchange and mutual understanding” between the world’s Christian and Muslim communities. The authors claimed that the basis for peace between Christianity and Islam has always existed: the Muslim *shahadah* (“There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger”), together with a historic tradition (“None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself”), are the Islamic equivalents of Christianity’s two greatest commandments (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “[love] your neighbor as yourself”). With such an understanding, a new day can dawn for Christian-Muslim relations.

Responses to this invitation included a letter penned by scholars from Yale Divinity School. “Loving God and Neighbor Together” was published in the *New York Times* with the names of 135 signatories—including several evangelical scholars, pastors, and missionary statesmen. The Christian authors were clearly impressed “that so much common ground exists” and expressed “hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us cannot overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together.”

“Points of Contact?”

The claim that “common ground” (or “points of contact” as they are traditionally called) exists between Christianity and the non-Christian religions has been a controversial topic from the earliest years of the Church’s expansionary endeavors. There have always been communicators of the gospel who have equated the incarnation of God in Christ with the avatars of Vishnu in Hinduism. The doctrine of the Trinity has been identified with the Trimurti of Hinduism and the Trikaya of Buddhism. Missionaries have sought to build evangelistic bridges to Islam through the Muslims’ belief in the prophethood and “virgin birth” of Jesus. “Liberal” and “conservative” Christians alike have noted that Zoroastrianism includes teachings regarding the devil and hell. Daoism’s practice of *wu-wei* (“non-action”) has been compared to Jesus’ pacifistic teachings; and for some, the Sikhs’ veneration of their holy book, the *Adi Granth*, mirrors the Christian’s veneration of the Logos. The concept of “points of contact” was disputed, however, during the twentieth century. Karl Barth, for instance, stated emphatically that

In no way may theologians or missionaries seek a relationship between Christian revelation and the religions; in no way may they look for questions in the religions for which revelation supplies

the answers; in no way may they seek “points of contact.” The slightest deviation [from Christianity], the slightest concession to the religions, violates the gospel. (Knitter 1985, 84)

Hendrik Kraemer agreed:

Somehow the conviction is alive that it is possible and feasible to produce for every religion a sort of catalogue of points of contact. This ... is a misguided pursuit. Such a catalogue, based on the similarities between Christianity and the non-Christian religions...on such subjects as the idea of God and of man, the conception of the soul or of redemption, the expectation of an eternal life or the precedence of the community over the individual, etc., is an impossible thing. (1938, 134)

Are the So-called “Points of Contact” Real?

In actuality, no non-Christian religion duplicates anything found in biblical Christianity. When examined closely, the teachings and practices of every religion diverge from biblical faith at every point. What, then, are some seeing that has the appearance of “truth?” In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul indicates that human existence may be divided into the physical sphere—the “natural” world—and the metaphysical sphere—the “supernatural” or “spiritual” world. All human beings—even in their fallen state—can discover, comprehend, systematize, and utilize truths in the physical sphere. When it comes to natural laws, scientific observations, mathematical principles, chemical formulas, etc., humans can boast of many noteworthy discoveries.

With respect to the metaphysical sphere, however, fallen men and women have only a vague and distorted understanding. Having never experienced the rebirth of their human spirits (a prerequisite for “seeing the Kingdom of God”—John 3:6), and lacking the indwelling Holy Spirit (who enables men and women to correctly comprehend the metaphysical sphere—1 Cor. 2:14), accurate perceptions of reality are limited to the physical realm alone. Trying to systematize speculations regarding the metaphysical sphere, unregenerate persons build elaborate systems of religion. Paul’s characterization of these religious innovators is succinct: they are fools who have been given over by God to sin (see Rom. 1:24-32).

Confronted on his first missionary journey with worshippers of the Greco-Roman pantheon, Paul commanded them to “turn from these worthless things to the living God” (Acts 14:15). The Greek religion, and by implication its Scandinavian, Teutonic, Celtic, and Indian analogues, are all thus condemned as *mataios*: “empty, valueless, altogether worthless.” On his second journey Paul openly rejected the religious orientation of Hellenistic culture (see Acts 17:22-31). Since human beings are the living offspring of the One True God, God cannot be an idol of gold, silver, or stone, because inanimate objects can never produce living beings. Religious beliefs and practices that are derived from sources other than the special revelation of God should be dismissed as the products of “ignorance.” The offerings of pagans to “foreign gods,” Paul told the Corinthians, are actually offerings to demons (1 Cor. 10:20). The religions are, then, at best the products of ignorance, and therefore worthless. At worst, they are demonic, and as such to be avoided at all costs.

Despite the above arguments, the allure of “points of contact” appears unquenchable. Still there exists what Kraemer called “a secret conviction that a surer grasp of points of contact would

ensure a greater and easier missionary result” (1938, 132). Such was undoubtedly the hope of many of those who applauded the sentiments expressed in “A Common Word.” But can we justifiably consider the claims of this document to be valid? When examined in light of historical theology, are “the unity of God, the love of God, and the love of neighbor” truly “points of contact” between the two faith systems?

Evaluating “A Common Word”

The unity of God. Are the Muslim authors of “A Common Word” expressing what Christians mean by “the unity” or “oneness” of God? More to the point: are they reflecting the historic Islamic view of these concepts? The document states, “The words He hath no associate remind Muslims that they must love God uniquely, without rivals within their souls...” Cited in support of this statement is the Qur’an’s Surah 3:64, which forbids the ascribing of partners to God. But traditionally, Surah 3:64 has been used to condemn *shirk*, arguably the greatest sin in Islam. Whenever one believes that God shares his divine attributes with a partner, one has committed *shirk*, thereby denying the doctrine of *tawhid*—the absolute oneness of God. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has long been considered a limited polytheism, and thus a form of *shirk*. Surah 5:73 states that, “They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), a grievous penalty will befall ... them.” For Muslims, “unity of God” negates the possibility of a Trinity, while for Christians, “unity” presupposes a divine three-ness that forms a single Godhead—a concept that is blasphemy to Muslims.

“A Common Word” states that “Muslims recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah, [though] not in the same way Christians do...” A portion of Surah 4:171 is then cited in an accommodating fashion, implying that the Muslim and Christian views of Jesus are not significantly distinct from each other. But this Quranic passage is an exhortation to the “People of the Book” (i.e., Jews, Christians, and Muslims) to understand that “Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary... Say not ‘Trinity:’ desist; it will be better for you; for Allah is One God... (Far Exalted is He) above having a son.” Orthodox Christianity can give no assent to this passage since it denies the doctrines of the Trinity and the sonship of Jesus directly, and by implication rejects his deity and incarnation as well.

The love of God. “Love of God” is the next alleged commonality, and “A Common Word” makes it clear that Muslims “love God uniquely.” They are forbidden to love or worship any “associate” of God according to Surah 2:165: “Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God.” But the Christian view of Jesus as a member of the Godhead makes him an “associate” of God according to Islam, and the fact that he is a legitimate object of worship for Christians is scandalous to Muslims. Indeed, the Qur’an presents the following scenario as foundational for Islam’s rejection of Jesus’ divinity: “Allah will say, ‘O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, ‘Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?’ He will say: ‘Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right to say’” (Surah 5:116).

In the New Testament, however, Jesus accepted the worship of the women after his resurrection (Matt. 28:9), of Thomas who called him “Lord” and “God” (John 20:28), and of his disciples prior to his ascension (Matt. 28:17). No Orthodox Muslim can give credence to these accounts—

and no Christian can legitimately reject them. Consequently, we must conclude that the historic Christian view of “the oneness of God” does not conform to what Muslims believe. To claim that Christians and Muslims share “common ground” in this area is patently untrue.

The love of neighbor. Additionally, “A Common Word” insists that because Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all to be considered “People of the Book,” they “should be free to follow what God commanded them, and not have to prostrate before kings and the like.” In support of this contention, the authors cite the command of Surah 2:256 that “there is to be no compulsion in religion” and champion the concept of “freedom of religion.” However, this statement’s literal application on the part of Christians would ultimately undermine the Muslims’ ecumenical intent. If Christians are “free to follow what God commanded them,” they must fulfill his commands to “preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15); “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (i.e., the Trinity; Matt. 28:19); call upon people to “confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised him from the dead” (Rom. 10:9); and acknowledge the truth that “no one who denies the Son has the Father” (1 John 2:23). Will the adherents of Islam allow Christians to engage in evangelistic activities among Muslims in order to obey such biblical commands? If history is any indicator, they will not.

Evaluating “Loving God and Neighbor”

There are also problems with the Christian response to “A Common Word.” First, “Loving God and Neighbor” claims “[t]hat this common ground consists in love of God and of neighbor gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities.” But I would ask, “Deep cooperation with respect to what?” Certainly not with respect to the things that matter the most to evangelicals, such as “preaching Christ crucified,” an atonement for the sins of humankind, the resurrected Lord of the universe, the only-begotten Son of God, and the Messiah whose titles include the term “Mighty God.” Neither will Muslims and Christians cooperate in the establishment of the Church as the assembly of God’s called-out people who have experienced the new birth as the necessary prerequisite for seeing the Kingdom of Heaven (John 3:1-6). They will certainly not cooperate together in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission to “make disciples in all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Triune God, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Second, the authors state that “[w]hen justice is lacking, neither love of God nor love of the neighbor can be present. When freedom to worship God according to one’s conscience is curtailed, God is dishonored, the neighbor oppressed, and neither God nor neighbor is loved.” All Christians would wholeheartedly agree with these sentiments, for they express the ethos of democratic pluralism and an “open playing field” for the expression of religious beliefs. But in actuality, such openness exists in relatively few Muslim countries. Complete freedom to worship God according to the dictates of one’s conscience usually does not exist for Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Ahmadi, and other minorities residing in Islamic nations. The judgmental legacies of Wahhabi fundamentalism as seen in Saudi Arabia, the extremism of the Afghani Taliban, the narrowness of the Iranian Shi’ite regimes—each of these is a far cry from the Quranically-prescribed tolerance of the *ahl al-dhimma*, the monotheistic communities that Muslims are commanded to guard and defend. Can the signatories of “A Common Word” guarantee religious

tolerance in Muslim countries, or are they merely expressing a liberal hope that will be confined to academic circles alone?

A third problematic statement is that "...we must engage in interfaith dialogue as those who seek each other's good." But what is "the good" that evangelicals are to seek for Muslims? If our answer does not include the new birth (John 3:1-6), salvation from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9), and entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven based upon acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord and belief in his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 10:9), then the answer will be sub-biblical. If Christians take seriously their responsibility to bring the adherents of Islam under the Lordship of Christ, acknowledging his crucifixion, atonement, and resurrection from the dead, it is certain that the vast majority of Muslims will reject these core tenets of the Christian faith and instead seek to promote "the good" of Christians by proclaiming their own works-based approach to the spiritual life, centered around a God whose love is conditional upon obedience to his commands.

A fourth problem is the Christian document's statement that "if we fail to make every effort to make peace and come together in harmony, you correctly remind us that 'our eternal souls' are at stake as well." What, practically speaking, could this claim possibly mean? That failure to live in harmony with Muslims will bring about loss of eternal salvation for Christians? Such a claim is completely lacking in biblical validity. It is true that the Bible commands that "if it is possible, as far as it depends on [us, we are] to live at peace with everyone" (Rom, 12:18). But such efforts should certainly not be made out of fear that Christians' "eternal souls" are in any way at stake if they are unsuccessful.

To conclude, then, we must ask the question whether the twin emphases of "loving God and loving neighbor" are sufficient to overcome the "formal differences" existing between Islam and Christianity that are recognized by "A Common Word." Is it realistic to consider religions in a phenomenological fashion, culling out those aspects judged to be "alike" and setting aside substantial differences? Kraemer was convinced that such a procedure is impossible:

Every religion is an indivisible, and not to be divided, unity of existential apprehension. It is not a series of tenets, dogmas, prescriptions, institutions, and practices that can be taken one by one as independent items of religious life, conception, or organization, and that can arbitrarily be compared with, and somehow related to, and grafted upon, the similar item of another religion. (1938, 135)

Does the procedure advocated by "A Common Word" and "Loving God and Neighbor" truly promote understanding and peaceful relations, or does it only "gut" the religions in question of their most fundamental beliefs and promote a unity of hollow facades?

"Points of Contrast"

To serve the cause of world missions today, Christians must become adept at demonstrating the distinctions between Christianity and its competitors, rather than any alleged "points of contact." The theological, Christological, and soteriological truths contained in the Christian scriptures must be proclaimed so that contrasts with alternative religious faiths—including Islam—are emphasized. The benefits of the gospel must be clearly delineated (Ps. 103:2-5)

without mitigating in any way the “sting” of its message regarding human depravity, coming judgment, and the exclusive means of salvation provided by God in Christ (1 Cor. 1:18-25). Further, men and women must be persuaded to reject their indigenous religious practices and bow before Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 5:11 and Rom. 10:9), expressing this submission through obedience to the requirements contained in the New Testament (John 14:21).

But it appears that many evangelicals today are unwilling to abide the stigma that inheres in the exclusivism of the Bible’s teaching. They have grown weary of being castigated for their “narrowness” and are tired of being marginalized by their academic peers. But this is not a time for diluting the “teachings passed on to us” (2 Thess. 2:15). Nor may we abandon the “ministry of reconciliation” committed to us by God himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It is rather a time for tempering our will in preparation for the task that remains, asking that God would make us “as unyielding and hardened” as our competitors are—as he promised to do for Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:8-9).

“What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” Paul asks the Corinthians. Nothing. “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” None whatsoever. There is no harmony—no point of contact—between Christ and Belial. Christians are instead to adopt the exquisitely balanced attitude of Jude, who exhorted us to “be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—loathing even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” Let us no longer be deceived by the myth of “points of contact.”

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