Introduction

Lejla Demiri

A decade has passed since the promulgation of *A Common Word Between Us and You*. One of the major interfaith initiatives of our time, this open letter from Muslim leaders comprised an ambitious call for a better understanding between Muslims and Christians worldwide and an invitation to work for the common good in the interests of a wider humanity. Since its launch on 13 October 2007 the *ACW* document has prompted a remarkably fecund response in the form of joint statements, gatherings of religious scholars, academic events, conferences, workshops, seminars and grassroots community activities. It has inspired the publication of a great number of papers, books, dissertations and other academic and non-academic writings. Of strikingly broad interest and appeal, *ACW* has been discussed both in university settings and in interfaith gatherings locally and internationally. The official *ACW* website offers an exhaustive account of these dialogical 'fruits of *A Common Word*'.[1]

What is it that made this initiative so cathartic? By no means has every response been fully approving of its tone, language or content. Plenty of critics have interrogated its choice of scriptural passages, its theology, its style and its vocabulary, as evidenced by some of the contributions to the present volume. Some respondents have taken issue with Muslim doctrinal or contextual presuppositions which they find to be present and problematic in the *ACW* document. Yet virtually all respondents acknowledged the genuineness of its call for dialogue, receiving it as an

[1] www.acommonword.com. See also Sarah Markiewicz, *World Peace through Christian–Muslim Understanding: The Genesis and Fruits of the Open Letter 'A Common Word Between Us and You'* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2016), pp. 203–64.

honest and gracious invitation to promote peace and social justice in a time of international mistrust and turmoil. Further, it has been generally recognised that much of the success of *ACW*'s impact lies in its global character and remit. This was not the call of a few Muslim individuals working in a regional context. Instead, for the first time in the history of Muslim–Christian relations, Muslims of different theological schools from around the globe addressed a peaceable invitation to dialogue towards all Christians worldwide. This international and cross-denominational character lent enormous weight to the document. Rooted in global Islam, the impact of *ACW* has also been global.

Since the earliest days of the Islamic religion, and despite political realities which were often difficult and competitive, Muslims and Christians found ways to consider each other and to discuss their distinctive theologies. These encounters generated a vast and many-genred literature on both sides. The modern *Christian–Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* project[2] bears witness to this: the mere identification and mapping of all the writings of Christians and Muslims about each other's religion, in a wide diversity of languages, from the emergence of Islam until 1700, has filled the pages of eleven large volumes, and more documents and books continue to come to light.[3] Despite their sometimes distressing limitations and failings, these historical writings are an important heritage for modern-day Muslim–Christian relations and remain relevant to interfaith discussions and theological conversations today, especially for thinkers able to consider history not as 'a burden on the memory, but an illumination of the soul'.[4]

Against the background of this long narrative of engagement, *ACW* is hardly unique in its desire to enable interfaith conversation. But what makes it quite exceptionally refreshing, for all its imperfections and the criticisms which it has attracted, are the striking graciousness of its language in addressing the 'Other' and its openness to a balanced and fair hearing of the Other's sacred scriptures. Readers note quickly that the text is not written in a polemical spirit. Nor does it have an apologetic purpose or engage in any kind of one-upmanship. The aim is evidently to direct our attention to what it finds to be common ground, namely, the

[2] For more on the project, see www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/research/projects/CMR1900/index.aspx.
[3] For details of the series, see www.brill.com/publications/christian-muslim-relations-bibliographical-history.
[4] John Edward Emerich Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 317.

two shared principles of love of God and love of neighbour, on the basis of which we may venture a theological engagement shaped by mutual trust and friendship. Yet *ACW* does not look for a lowest common denominator, nor does it reach any shallow and concordist verdict which sets aside the weighty theological differences that exist between the Muslim and Christian worlds of thought.

The present volume, which continues this exegetic and discursive process, is dedicated to a close reading and study of the text, context and reception of *A Common Word*, and has been divided into five parts.

Part I, which seeks to shed light on the document's genesis, opens with Tim Winter's chapter, which tries to understand the text in a context of political trauma shaped by 'the West's military and economic interventions in the Muslim world'. It was these which ultimately galvanised the birth of the *ACW* document, 'one of our era's most significant initiatives in the field of interreligious engagement', as the author suggests. The chapter reflects on *ACW*'s purpose, language and approach to scripture, and its theological repercussions for Muslims and Christians living in today's context of globalisation and rapid change. Islam and Christianity, Winter concludes, though 'plurivocal traditions with evolving and conflicting theologies' which offer different understandings of the Divine nature and the love of God, witness to the fact that, through the *Common Word*, 'some words at least are recognisably held in common'.

Winter's essay is followed by Jonathan Kearney's chapter, which offers a critical analysis of *ACW* in relation to the earlier *Amman Message* (*AM*). The chapter looks at *AM* not only as 'a necessary precursor and vital companion to *ACW*', but also as a significant tool for non-Muslims in their understanding of, and engagement with, Islam and Muslims today. After a brief outline of *AM* and its context, some observations on its genetic relationship to *ACW* are proposed. The chapter concludes with a critical analysis of the document and its methodology, at the same time acknowledging 'the motivating spirit behind both the *AM* and *ACW* – one of mutual respect, tolerance and, above all, the need to always talk to and listen to one another', hoping that this effort 'will positively transform and enrich the lives of people everywhere'.

Chapter 3 is by Michael L.ouis Fitzgerald, who considers some formal dialogue meetings held between Christians and Muslims from the time of the Second Vatican Council until the *ACW* initiative, demonstrating that the latter was not a creation *ex nihilo*. A brief account is given of the events leading up to *ACW*, and then attention is turned to the Muslim–Catholic meetings that have followed this initiative. The chapter further

underlines the 'spirit of openness' of *ACW*, while also highlighting certain weaknesses. Here the author summarises the analysis made by Maurice Borrmans, who has been highly critical of *ACW* and yet welcomes it as 'the dawn of a new stage in Muslim–Christian dialogue'. In conclusion, Fitzgerald acknowledges the *ACW* document as 'a stimulus to engage' in theological dialogue through which 'we can help one another to understand the logic of our respective belief systems'. But he suggests that *ACW* has had a disappointingly limited impact, particularly in the Arabic-speaking world.

Part II of our collection showcases some responses and reactions to *ACW*. It opens with '*A Common Word* for the Common Good', the official response of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury when *A Common Word* was issued, whose text, although it appears on his website, has never before appeared in print. Many see it as the most substantial Christian response to *ACW*, reflecting a consultation with 'church representatives and Christian scholars' from around the world. Williams welcomes *ACW* as a 'recognition that the ways in which we as Christians and Muslims speak about God and humanity are not simply mutually unintelligible systems'. He celebrates key points of convergence, but does not hesitate to raise sensitive issues such as love in relation to Christian understandings of God as Trinity, the problems of human failure, defeat and suffering and the relation of religion to violence. The chapter concludes by proposing a range of ways and principles for dialogue that should help Christians and Muslims to seek together 'the common good in the way of God'.

The following chapter, by Ingrid Mattson, takes the form of a Muslim reflection on Williams' chapter, reflecting on ways in which *ACW* has empowered communities to engage in interfaith dialogue. Mattson finds Williams' response to be generous, hospitable and affable, albeit from her perspective 'unduly focused on religiously justified violence by Muslims, with little interrogation of violence perpetrated and justified by Christians'. However, she does acknowledge that 'Williams has elsewhere written and spoken about the history and ongoing existence of violence, including economic violence, in his own society', thus suggesting that Williams' response to *ACW* should not be considered 'the sum total of his views on the matter'. Commenting on Williams' recommendations in the section entitled 'Seeking together in the way of God', she highlights the value of *ACW* as 'primarily pastoral'. She calls it a 'permission slip for ordinary Christians and Muslims' in their aim 'to be good neighbours'. As Mattson concludes, '*ACW* liberates good-hearted Christians and

Muslims to be mutually hospitable and to collaborate in good works.' Thus the value of *ACW* and the positive Christian responses to it lies in the fact that they 'simply cleared the path of hate and suspicion that had seeped into their religious communities'.

The subsequent chapter, by Reuven Firestone, consists of a response to *ACW* coming from his Jewish tradition, which, as has often been observed, is not directly addressed by the open letter. Firestone problematises the assumption of loving one's neighbour by analysing the birth pangs of religion and the resulting complexity of historical relationships between 'the established religion' and 'the newly emerging religion'. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the author argues, experienced both their own religious birth and the birth of religious competitors, and the trauma of both experiences has become deeply embedded in their religious worldviews. Most religious believers are unaware of the profound influence these narratives have on their perspective towards the religious 'Other'. Greater awareness of this phenomenology of religious parturition can be of significant service in realising the goals of *ACW*. Firestone offers some suggestions for addressing this problem: to work within our communities and with those outside our own spiritual circles, to promote 'a more compassionate perspective towards the religious "Other"' and 'to transcend our ingrown fear, born of the trauma of religious parturition, so that we can recognise the dignity and love of the religious "Other"'.

Sarah Snyder's chapter presents a descriptive analysis of the official responses to *ACW* from different church leaders and communities, and the controversies that sometimes followed them concerning 'the nature of God', 'love of God and neighbour', the definition of 'neighbour' and the 'relevance of *ACW* to today's context'. The chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the leading Christian responses (from churches and church institutions throughout Europe and the United States as well as from individuals in Nairobi, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Beirut, Tripoli, Cambridge, Frankfurt, Melbourne, Yale and elsewhere) and notes certain patterns of internal difference. It concludes with a reflection on canons of dialogue whose objective, according to the author, should be about 'discovering a *better quality of disagreement*, rather than seeking common ground'.

In the last chapter of Part II, Peter Admirand highlights 'the need of self-critique and humility within interfaith dialogue', using *ACW* as a case study. He examines *ACW* 'through a Christological lens to gauge whether the positive call of inviting Christians to dialogue was thwarted or hampered by an insufficiently developed and nuanced

Christology within that invitation'. The chapter takes the Gospel parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector as a guide for humility and self-critique. Taking the author's 'Catholic tradition into account, it examines the historical tenor and current state of Catholicism's openness to self-critique and change'. Finally, the chapter seeks similar space for humility and self-critique in *ACW*, as it argues for the relevance of Christian belief in Christ to be expressed more clearly within the document. While praising *ACW* for having 'drawn Christians and Muslims together', the chapter's critical reading is meant to challenge both sides in the conversation.

Part III is given over to some critical readings of the use of scripture in the *ACW* document. In Chapter 9, Asma Afsaruddin scrutinises the reading of Qur'anic texts in the interfaith dialogue environment. Warning that 'interfaith dialogue can be both a richly rewarding learning experience and a minefield', the author raises two questions. First, how is one to establish a general protocol for a respectful and candid dialogue that is mutually beneficial and illuminating? Second, what sources can be invoked to establish an authentic dialogue and define its guiding principles? Focusing on the Muslim scripture, the chapter discusses the exegeses of three sets of Qur'anic verses that specifically deal with the mechanics of interfaith dialogue and commend respect for religious sensibilities. The chapter consults a number of major exegetical works from pre-modern and modern periods that have allowed diverse and historically contingent perspectives to emerge that nevertheless continue to exercise considerable pressure in the modern context. Her piece concludes with 'a reflection upon the further implications of these exegeses for fostering better interfaith understanding between Muslims and their dialogue partners in today's globalising world, implications that could not have been evident to our pre-modern predecessors, who inhabited a very different world'.

In the following chapter, Daniel A. Madigan, taking seriously the double commandment of love that constitutes the kernel of *ACW*'s call for dialogue, argues that the heart of the Gospel lies not in the commandments, but rather in a recognition of the graciousness of God towards us in spite of our signal failure to live the ideals that those commandments represent. He asserts that the Gospel ought to elicit from us first of all an acknowledgement of failure – a *mea culpa*. He further proposes that dialogue matures when it is based on a mutual acknowledgement of failure rather than an exchange about shared ideals, allowing him to conclude that real and fertile dialogue happens when we 'acknowledge our need

for forgiveness – from God and each other' and 'recognise our common reliance on nothing else but God's mercy at work in us and through us'.

In Chapter 11, Pim Valkenberg draws attention to a problem which, he thinks, has sometimes hindered *ACW* from being an effective dialogical instrument. This relates to the translation of the words *kalima sawāʾ* in Q 3:64 as 'a common word', which seems to suggest the possibility of a common ground between Christians and Muslims as a prerequisite or goal of their dialogue. The chapter scrutinises, first, the historical context of this verse and the history of its interpretation. Second, it proposes an alternative interfaith hermeneutic which would avoid the notion of a common ground. Third, it refers to the Netherlands as a case that shows why *ACW* might fail to work in certain contexts unless it is interpreted differently. An alternative rendering of *kalima sawāʾ* as 'a word of justice' or 'an equitable word', according to Valkenberg, 'may open up new possibilities for a dialogue between Muslims and Christians that centres on matters of peace and justice rather than on dogmatic statements', and might help to broaden the Christian reception of *ACW*.

The section concludes with a chapter by Clare Amos, whose primary concern is to assess the Biblical texts used in *ACW*, the criteria which might have guided their selection and the rules by which they are interpreted. It also looks at the terminology used to describe Christian scripture in both the English and Arabic versions of the document, and asks what this might suggest about the intended difference in the readership of the two versions. Some attention is also given to ways in which the treatment of Muslim and Christian scripture differs in the document. The conclusion reached is that though Biblical texts are treated respectfully by the Muslim authors of *ACW*, the selection of passages and the interpretative principles employed underline the Muslim provenance of the document. Some comparison is also made with the treatment of scripture in the process known as 'Scriptural Reasoning' (SR), although differences with SR are also noted, notably the fact that SR's method of dialogical conversation is not recognisably present in *ACW*.

Part IV considers the reception of *ACW*. The chapter by Rusmir Mahmutćehajić opens with a theoretical reflection on the definition of the 'Other'. The author argues that the concept of another human being exists only as reflected in the concrete self that bears it; every 'self' has the right to its own representation; there is no independent, objectively existing concept determining the existence of particular individuals. With respect to the *ACW* document, the chapter holds, Christian and Muslim individuals need to be seen as microcosms of individuality

without reducing them to instances of opposed global entities in interaction. The chapter examines a number of questions as to how *ACW* should be viewed, given Muslim cultural and political diversity and the all-too-widespread conflict in the so-called Muslim world. How can one's representations of the 'Other' be liberated from framings intended to benefit political power? After sketching Bosnian pluralism in history, the chapter concentrates on the reception and interpretation of *ACW* within the social, cultural and political milieu of Bosnia. The author then concludes that initiatives like *ACW* can help us to reach for the 'ethically based recognition of our common essence', though 'they can equally be abused by those who view dialogue as a tool for managing division'.

In Chapter 14, Mustafa Abu Sway addresses the Biblical and Qur'anic principle of 'love of neighbour' in the *ACW* document and the conditions that render the implementation of this sublime virtue unattainable under certain circumstances. After reviewing the Islamic theological and juridical roots of the status of the 'People of the Book' qua neighbours and the nature of normative relationships, he investigates the details of life in the Middle East, and most especially the Holy Land. *A Common Word*, according to Abu Sway, shows the clear need for 'a new practical pact between the major religions, a pact to end all forms of injustice'. Emphasising the importance of upholding justice, the author further argues that 'the inability to administer justice by loving the neighbour is detrimental to a wholesome relationship with God, even if you pay lip service and profess faith in His Oneness'.

In his own chapter, Matthias Böhm reflects on the reception history of *ACW* in Germany. Despite growing scholarly interest in *ACW* in German academia, the author states that 'on the ground, in parishes and mosques, *ACW* remains no more than a marginal document'. The chapter reflects on this low level of *ACW* awareness in Germany, exploring the factors that ensure that the document is still 'an unknown word' there. In doing this, the chapter also discusses the history of the Muslim presence in Germany with its figures, diverse institutions and official representatives. It also examines the wider lack of knowledge of Islam in German society, concluding with some suggestions for creating a greater awareness of *ACW* among the country's Christian and Muslim populations. For although in parishes and mosques *ACW* has remained mostly 'a marginal note', the author strongly believes that 'its implications for more practical

and pastoral questions are important in trying to foster neighbourly and peaceful relations.'

Considering *ACW* 'a call to action and its lengthy theological content a mere preamble', Amir Dastmalchian's chapter is focused on the implications of *ACW* for musical interaction between Muslims and Christians. The chapter explores the potential for using music in Christian–Muslim engagements, since 'in some contexts, non-discursive dialogue can be more effective than discursive dialogue', and because 'music is a particularly powerful means of expression'. While acknowledging Muslim reservations surrounding the term 'music', the author argues that three genres of aural art – the recitation of the Qur'an, the call to prayer and the recitation of liturgy – offer scope for all Muslims to participate in interreligious dialogue by means of music. Similarly, he contends that Gregorian, Ambrosian, Mozarabic and other forms of Christian liturgical chant offer scope for Christians to share in this form of dialogue. Musical dialogue initiatives offer, the chapter concludes, 'the opportunity for the spirit of dialogue to touch the lives of those whom it may otherwise never reach'.

Part V, comprising two chapters, discusses the future of Christian–Muslim dialogue in relation to *ACW*. Marianne Farina's chapter offers 'suggestions for developing a new phase of *ACW* discussions'. The author proposes a contextual theological model as a crucial tool for future *ACW* deliberations. Contextual theology, recognising three critical sources for theological study – scripture, tradition and socio-political context – would draw participants from local communities and the academy together in the discussion of sacred texts. The author argues that a contextual model for *ACW* would foster full engagement in four critical dialogues: life, social justice projects, spiritual experiences and theological study. Further, it would offer a forum that goes beyond formal gatherings and academic settings into Christian and Muslim faith communities. The author also proposes that *ACW* discussions should encourage intra-religious exchanges, for dialogue with co-religionists is crucial for an honest exchange with people of other faiths. Finally the chapter recommends 'an inductive, inclusive and evaluative process for the study of, and dialogue about, "our common word" that, like God's word itself, is ongoing'.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Yazid Said which reflects on two major themes which have arisen throughout the book. First, we are to acknowledge the importance of our doctrinal differences by not taking a reductionist view of *ACW*. Second, we should recognise common goals

and common marks of faith as we seek the good of our world. The chapter then turns to explore ways in which *ACW* connects with classical sources of Islam and Christianity, focusing on the works of Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and St Augustine of Hippo. Emphasising that these medieval sources are 'more than just a museum piece', the chapter examines how their reflections on the subject of love may enrich our current debate and our engagement for the future, providing us with the tools for an honest and profound dialogic groundwork. Rather than simply converging on love of God and neighbour as a neutral and dry abstraction, the chapter aptly concludes that we should confess in heartfelt human terms that 'humility is the much-needed common word for our world today'.

The importance of this volume lies in the fact that its contributors evince a commitment to a rigorous academic engagement while keeping in view the broader framework of the significance of theology, religious studies and *ACW* for the common good. This team of experienced academics builds on a variety of perspectives, a vast wealth of critical scholarship and years of practical experience with communities. The chapters thus examine appropriate ways of understanding and addressing the call of *ACW* in its contextual evolution, interrogate past methods of dialogue and open up the prospect of shaping a future rooted in the best of the tradition of Muslim–Christian engagement down the centuries. Our book is thus intended for academics as well as practitioners in pastoral and religious callings who are involved or concerned with conversations across the religious divide. It also aims to offer a set of resources and readings for theology students engaged in interreligious studies and the history of this dialogue, which is probably the most important inter-cultural conversation taking place in our troubled, but not hopeless, times.