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In October 2007, 138 Muslim scholars from around the world took a courageous and pioneering step when they signed and published “A Common Word Between Us and You.” “A Common Word” sees the basis for peace and understanding between Muslims and Christians in the foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God and love of the neighbor. In obedience to the Holy Qur’an, the authors invite Christians to come together with them on a basis of what is most essential to our shared faith and practice: the two commandments of love.¹

Several significant events precipitated this historic outreach. Of course, September 11th continues to motivate efforts at Muslim-Christian dialogue around the world, but the more proximate stimulus was Pope Benedict XVI’s speech at Regensburg in 2006. A month afterward, thirty-eight Muslim scholars sent the pope an open letter expressing their desire for sincere and frank dialogue, despite the numerous mistakes and errors they identify in his treatment of Islam. These Muslims, along with an additional one hundred signatories, signed “A Common Word” a year later and addressed it to the leaders of all the world’s churches and to all Christians everywhere.

The Christian reaction was predictably positive. Christians appreciated the breadth of Islamic thought among the signatories, from every Muslim school of thought and every major Muslim country in the world. Further, the final form of the document was presented at the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, Jordan, an institute famous for its work on intra-religious dialogue within the Muslim community.² Thus, the braintrust behind “A Common Word” also works for peace and understanding between and among Muslims built on respect and tolerance for legitimate diversity, not on false or illusory consensus. Hundreds of

²“The Amman Message” calls all Muslims to recognize the validity of all eight major legal schools of Sunni, Shia, and Ibadhi Islam, to forbid declarations of takfir, or apostasy, between Muslims, and to set forth preconditions for the proper issuance of fatwas, thus exposing illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam.
leading Muslim scholars have endorsed both documents, and both initiatives maintain well-kept websites with news, downloads, lists of signatories, and other helpful information.

Four scholars at Yale produced the most significant Christian response to “A Common Word,” a letter called “Loving God and Neighbor Together” now signed by over 300 Christian scholars. After asking Muslims for forgiveness for Christian failures of the past and praising the Muslim initiative at this historic moment, their letter lauds the fact that Muslim scholars found common ground in “some of the fundamentals of the faith,” something that is not “marginal,” nor “merely important” to each community, but “something absolutely central to both.” The Yale scholars acknowledge that many Christians will react with surprise to the claim that love of God and neighbor is a “foundational principle” of Islam. However, few Christians have asked whether these are, in fact, foundational principles for Christianity. Perhaps our Muslim brothers and sisters rightfully prompt us to reexamine freshly whether love of God and neighbor are truly fundamental for Christian life and what this claim might mean.

In a sense, even asking whether love of God and neighbor is fundamental seems rather flippant. “Fundamental,” “foundational” and “essential are elusive words and difficult to quantify. Can we have 613 foundational principles, or must we limit it to ten, or three or one? This inquiry risks repeating the well-worn and maddening quest of Adolf von Harnack, stripping away layer after layer in search of the core of the Gospel but not knowing when to stop, all the while knowing that many Christians on the street, if asked to summarize their faith, might respond that being Christian means loving God and loving neighbor. However, the question comes from no less a source than Daniel Madigan, a Jesuit scholar of the Qur’an on the

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Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. In his response to “A Common Word,” Madigan bluntly asks:

Does the Word became incarnate simply to remind us of a few important verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, verses that some of Jesus’ contemporaries among the rabbis would also have recognized as summing up ‘the Law and the Prophets’? Is Jesus’ mission primarily to remind us of an obligation already revealed centuries before? Is all the rest of his living, dying, and rising somehow only ancillary to this?4

The context of Jesus’ teaching, stories in which Jesus’ interlocutors try to trap him, further mitigates its centrality. “The cautious answer to a trick question can hardly be considered the foundation of a religion.” The parable of the Good Samaritan also results from an attempt to trap Jesus, and “A Common Word” never acknowledges the parable’s extension of the love commandment to include the enemy, an extension Jesus elsewhere makes explicit in both Matthew (5:44) and Luke (6:35). Thus, Madigan emphasizes the foundational Christian experience of God’s love through the person and work of Jesus. God loved us first, through Jesus, which transforms us and enables us to love God and our neighbor. If we are to remain in this love, i.e., if we are to persevere in our commitment to behave rightly toward God and neighbor, we must remain connected to the “nutrient sap” of the true vine who loved us first. This free, gratuitous divine love is foundational; any commandment God gives us and enables us to obey is a corollary. Any response to God’s initiative on our part is a contingent consequence.

Madigan’s incisive and thought-provoking response finds a unique partner in Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a leader and scholar with a longstanding personal interest in Islam. When he was asked to lecture on “What is Christianity” to the Islamic University of Islamabad in 2005, he began by discussing the two prominent, distinctive, and

potentially misunderstood features of Christian prayer: “Our Father” and “through Christ our Lord.” 5 He then clarified for his Muslim audience the meaning of Jesus’ divine sonship and the doctrine of the Trinity; all doctrines or practices that could be considered “fundamental” to Christianity. Two years later, Williams greeted “A Common Word” with greater vigor and creativity than most Christian leaders, penning a remarkable and in-depth letter nine months after its publication and convening a conference at Cambridge in October 2008, at which he gave the opening address. In his letter, Williams speaks optimistically about the mutual intelligibility in certain aspects of the way Muslims and Christians talk about God. 6 He attempts to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity and the Christian claim that “God is love” with continual reference to the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. 7 Jesus Christ reveals that God’s love is unconditional, gratuitous, uncaused, and self-sacrificial. Jesus Christ offers a free, vulnerable love in advance of any human response, and this love makes human goodness possible. Our loving response to God’s initiative is a free response, for authentic love cannot be commanded—it must be truly voluntary.

Williams’ letter paved the way for his creative and daring address at the Cambridge conference last October. He begins by rejecting the common assumption of modern secularists, articulated and deconstructed by Charles Taylor, that one can recover the “essentially human” through a process of subtraction, through deletion of the unnecessary and dangerous additions that religion has layered on top of human existence. In Williams’ view, the instinct to prize the most pure and primitive attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a group can poison interreligious dialogue. If Muslims and Christians believe that God has spoken through history, it seems

inappropriate to attempt to unlearn that history. Particular events give our communities identity and distinctiveness. Williams cautions against approaching the Common Word initiative with the strategy of subtraction, paring down both traditions to a neutral common basis upon which ancillary and unnecessary accretions have unfortunately adhered.

Here, Williams enters into what Christians call “narrative theology,” the attempt to take seriously the formative and constitutive quality that stories have for the religious experience of persons and communities. Whether one argues that narrative plays a central function in identity formation for all human beings,8 a growing number of Christian theologians has become convinced that homo religiosus est homo narrativus. Andrew Greeley connects this to sacramental imagination, arguing that especially among the Catholic faithful, any conflict between sacramental imagery and propositional teaching will always be resolved in favor of the former.9 In some sense, “stories save us,” even if we haven’t settled on how or why stories save us.10 Williams himself raises the question about how a “dialogue of stories” might take place. Persons can enter into dialogue, and in a sense doctrines can enter into a dialogue, but how do stories dialogue? Two theologians suffice to illustrate the challenge and promise of narrative for interreligious dialogue: George Lindbeck and David Tracy. Lindbeck sees religions as cultural systems governed by their own rules of grammar, like linguistic systems. Thus, he steps above the debate among theorists of religions between propositionalists and experiential-expressivists.

Rather than focusing on either cognitive propositions or on nondiscursive symbols, Lindbeck’s

8 For example, Paul Ricoeur famously argued that story-telling helps human beings make sense of their existence and enplot the events in their lives. Jose Mario C. Francisco, S.J., “The Mediating Role of Narrative in Interreligious Dialogue: Implications and Illustrations from the Philippine Context,” East Asian Pastoral Review 41.2 (2004): 163.
cultural-linguistic paradigm sees narratives as “communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.” The Church is a story-shaped Church, and this story is logically prior to specific concepts, theories, images, or doctrines. We have no access to any generic or primal human story other than the particular story of the Church in which we find ourselves. Hearing this story repeatedly shapes us in its language and symbol system, a language somehow impenetrable to outsiders because one only understands its grammar by living in it. Doctrines do not present first-order propositional truths. They define the intrasystematic rules of this grammar and contribute to the story’s overall coherence. By contrast, Tracy’s understanding of narrative offers greater resources for a dialogue of stories. Heavily influenced by his colleague Mircea Eliade, Tracy’s phenomenological approach finds sacred mystery in a plurality of texts, traditions, and experiences. This sacred mystery is not some primordial essence separate from the particular or accidental. Sacred mystery exists only in and through the particular, to which we must open our eyes. Theologians must not tame this pluralism with a grand monotheory, but acknowledge the many possible modes of being-in-the-world. Tracy’s analogical imagination uses “possibility” as a primary category, because the disclosure of possibility recognizes and respects difference while affirming the possibility of similarity in difference. Eliade was convinced that only through encountering the other can we understand ourselves; Tracy identifies conversation as the pluralist strategy par excellence for reading our world and our lives. These conversations do not yield a vague, spiritless inclusiveness. If accompanied by solidarity in social practices, they lead to more just and humane modes of being in the world and a deeper self-understanding. We listen to the other’s story, and eventually, we retell the other’s story, learning our story through the other. While Lindbeck sees the theologian as a more

11 Holland 75
12 Holland 89
13 Holland 88
internally-focused guardian of a community’s canon, keeping the community’s story straight, Tracy sees the theologian as refining the community’s story through the clarifying aid of encounters with the other, an encounter that prevents the theologian from using the safety of a cloistered text or story as shelter from the buzzing, blooming world of confusion.\textsuperscript{14} For today’s theologian, mastering one’s own canon is not sufficient.

Even if the possibility of a dialogue of stories seems exciting for Christians, the venture might not stimulate Muslims. One need not read the \textit{Arabian Nights} to witness the affection for story-telling that characterizes many cultures, past and present, across the Islamic world. However, the Muslim religious experience might lend itself less easily to this type of reflection. The Qur’an contains very little narrative material and the scant narratives present bear a much different character than those of the Hebrew Bible or the canonical gospels. The science of Qur’an and hadith involves considering the context in which different suras were revealed and in which the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) behaved, but Muslims haven’t tended to reflect on the nature of narrative the way Christians do. Muslim \textit{kalam}, insofar as one can compare it to Christian theology, has tended to be dialectic and scholastic, in a style that served Christian theologians well at points in the Church’s history but fell from prominence.

Perhaps a conference on “A Common Word” convened at Yale last summer before the Cambridge conference may illuminate this point.\textsuperscript{15} The Yale event was well-balanced between Muslim and Christian speakers, and they spoke in a one-for-one correspondence on the same themes: love of God, love of neighbor, the nature of religious speech, or other topics. Muslim speakers almost never resorted to story-telling to explain their understanding of these themes. Generally, they expounded the relevant passages from Qur’an and hadith with clarity and

\textsuperscript{14} Holland 101.
\textsuperscript{15} Webcasts of all the conference papers are available at \url{http://www.yale.edu/divinity/video/commonword/video.shtml}
precision, occasionally bolstered by philosophical discourse. Some Christians used similar methods, but generally speaking, most Christian speakers felt unable to express their perspective without at some point stopping to tell a story. Loving neighbor is the prime example: a Christian can’t talk about this without telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Obviously, this parable lends itself to this, because Jesus told it to address the question directly. However, watching presentations by diverse representatives from both communities, the difference did not lie in deciding which stories to tell, but in whether to tell a story at all.

This evidence could be merely anecdotal, or it could point to substantial differences in these two communities’ loci for what is “fundamental” or “essential” to their religious experience. Muslim scholars tried to reach out to Christians in the center of the field of Christian discourse, but perhaps Christians do not intuitively look to ethical norms like love of neighbor or interior dispositions like love of God as their foundation at all. If the foundation of Christianity lies in the story of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth and in participation in this narrative as members of Christ’s body, how could Christians bring this narrative into dialogue with a community that posits its foundation in a different way altogether: in doctrinal claims, ethical norms, or some other manner? Such a chasm of categories threatens the future of dialogue.

If Muslims embrace the category of narrative, successful peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao provide positive prospects for the future. Jose Mario Francisco reports that amid great tensions and frequent violence, Muslim and Christian peace advocates in the Southern Philippines have used narratives to mediate at the grass-roots level. A story-telling focus on scripture, hagiography, and local history liberates both communities from doctrinal

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16 For example, David Burrell, C.S.C., expounded “God is love” with reference to medieval notions of divine freedom, the poverty of creation, contingency, goodness, and subsequent Christian reflection on these concepts.
fundamentalism and moral legalism. This works because narratives contain their own rationality, governed neither by chronology nor by doctrine, but related to cooperation in praxis. Interestingly, Rowan Williams does not make this move. Rather than embrace the particularity of narrative on the theoretical level or embrace joint cooperation for social projects on the practical level, Williams turns his attention to the metanarrative of each tradition. He suggests that the foundational story of Christianity involves kenotic love, accepting weakness, rejection, and failure. This master story grounds practices of asceticism that confuse or repulse Muslims, as well as a model of neighbor-love that relativises or dismisses the human instinct toward self-protection. Williams intuits in Islam a fundamental narrative of trial and triumph, a struggle followed by ultimate historical victory. These typologies are crude, to be sure: Muslims obviously value martyrdom and Christians obviously identify with the victory of Christ’s resurrection. However, Williams argues that coming to understand and appreciate one’s own foundational narrative, the master story lying behind the particular stories, could provide both communities an insightful way to go forward together.

Perhaps Muslims and Christians should allow our contemporary lived reality to speak to our theory, with a nod to Charles Taylor. Against postmodern philosophers proclaiming the death of grand narratives, Taylor insists that the only way out of a bad master narrative is to create a better one. He rejects popular “statial theories” and the subtraction stories mentioned earlier because he observes in human beings a tremendous capacity to reform and reconstruct their understanding of themselves. This reconstruction results from many factors over a long period of time. It is not predictable but it somehow happens; look at Muslim-Christian dialogue today. Fourteen hundred years together have produced some tales of cooperation and

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18 Francisco 166.
convivencia, but more of violence, distrust, and mutual condemnation. More recently, brutal terrorist attacks and pundits proclaiming a clash of civilizations have not prevented some kind of reform and reconstruction from already occurring. We know this because the Common Word initiative, broadly accepted by leading figures across the spectrum in both communities, acknowledges in the dialogue partner not just theoretical points of doctrinal agreement, but marks of personal holiness. Muslims and Christians recognize not only that each other’s texts exhort love of God and neighbor, but that they somehow see the effects of these beliefs in the dialogue partner. The mutual intelligibility of Muslim and Christian God-talk leads to some convergence about what a human life in relationship to God looks like. The language about God in these families of faith shares similar grammar, habits of argument, and style of metaphor. “A Common Word” demonstrates clearly that traditions are not closed wholes.¹⁹ A critical mass of Muslim scholars implicitly criticize Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic paradigm when it proclaims that it does not see Christian life and practice as hopelessly opaque. A critical mass of Christian scholars has accepted the olive branch, seeing Muslim life and practice not just as accessible, but as somehow reflecting the divine. Complete access to the other community’s ways of thinking and feeling will always elude us, but we recall that even our own traditions are not completely transparent to us. One finds the true foundation for a fruitful dialogue between Muslims and Christians when one avoids the extremes of complete identification with the other and a categorical rejection of mutual comprehension. For dialogue, hope abides.

Love of God and love of neighbor: how common have Christians found it? In light of Madigan and Williams, I find narrative a more helpful category for Christians to articulate Christian foundations. The Common Word initiative cannot and should not be undone, but to be

authentic to themselves, Christians should articulate that common word in narrative discourse. While story-telling creates a different set of challenges, these challenges can be answered. Past initiatives have already suggested the potential fruits of a narrative approach on the practical level, and the thought of David Tracy provides an ample theoretical framework for why this approach can work. What is love? From the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew: “Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about” (1:18).
WORKS CITED


