

# A Common Word and the Future of Christian-Muslim Relations

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## *How Commentators of the Qur'an Define "Common Word"*

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The past four decades have witnessed major global changes in Muslim-Christian relations. Some changes have helped this relationship to grow while others have damaged its growth. These changes may be clearly observed in the public attitudes towards the Islamic world of the last two Roman Catholic popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. John Paul II, during his 27 years as pope, met with Muslim scholars, intellectuals and youths, in an effort to develop a positive relationship between Islam and the Catholic Church. Even the devastating events of September 11, 2001 in the United States were unable to destroy the positive relationship between the two faiths nourished by these efforts. On the part of Muslims, the relationship between these two faiths is rooted in the core teaching of the Qur'an, as a Qur'anic command. Therefore, they have worked for conversation and dialogue with the Christian world for centuries. Muslim leaders demonstrated this aspect of their faith by joining publicly with the members of the Catholic Church in mourning the death of John Paul II at his funeral in 2005.

After all these positive developments nurtured by the former pope, one can imagine how Muslims were shocked by the comments of Benedict XVI made less than two years after he succeeded John Paul II as pope. The speech of Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in Germany on September 12, 2006, one day after the anniversary of the September 11 attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, created tension between the two faiths and ultimately caused a negative shift in the relationship. The damage done by the pope's speech in Germany was repaired, at least partially, by his visit to Turkey a few months later, where he joined the Müftü of Istanbul in silent prayer at the Blue Mosque. More is necessary, however, in order to continue to develop a positive relationship between adherents of these two religions, a relationship which is essential for the future, not only of these two faiths, but also of the entire human race.

There have been many attempts to develop a relationship between Muslims and Christians, from the time of the Prophet to the ninth century theological debates in the palace of the Abbasid caliphs and to the interfaith cooperation advocated by twentieth century Muslim leaders such as Bediüzzaman Said Nursi.<sup>1</sup> Muslims attempting to build a relationship with Christians were echoing the Qur'anic invitation to the People of the Book, Christians and Jews, to come

together with Muslims on a "common word" (*kalima-tun sawa*). There is a long tradition of employing this phrase in interfaith dialogue: even the Prophet of Islam quotes this verse in his letter to Heracles, the Byzantine Emperor, in which he invited the Christian emperor to become a Muslim.<sup>2</sup> The "A Common Word" initiative can be considered a continuation of this earlier tradition. Recognizing this, many Muslim scholars and intellectuals have joined the initiative.

### A "Common Word"

"A common word" is a Qur'anic term through which the prophet was commanded to invite the People of the Book into dialogue. Although the Qur'an describes the "common word" as the mutual agreement "to worship only one God," it does not limit the application of the term to only this single concept but treats this concept as the most important element of a "common word." Therefore, any initiative that promotes understanding and cooperation between Christians, Jews and Muslims can be understood to be a part of this Qur'anic invitation. The "A Common Word" initiative has selected only two of many possible themes for a "common word" between Muslims and Christians, "love for God" and "love for neighbors."

Since the phrase *kalima-tun sawa*, "common word," comes directly from the Qur'an, my attempt in this paper is to examine the approach of various Muslim commentators on the Qur'anic verse which introduces the phrase as an invitation to the People of the Book. As we will see, some commentators are fairly exclusivist in their interpretations of the verse, while other commentators are more inclusive, elaborating on the verse in a larger scope to include other common themes of ethics and justice. Some commentators limit the Qur'anic invitation to the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) to only those who share the Abrahamic tradition. Others, however, interpret the expression "People of the Book" to include adherents of religions other than Judaism and Christianity. The Qur'an commands the Prophet as follows:

Say this [O Muhammad]: 'O People of the Book, come to a common word between us: that all of us worship none but God, that we ascribe to God no partners, and that we take no one as Lord except God.' If the people reject your invitation, you shall say to them, 'be witness, then, that we [believers] are submitting ourselves to God.'<sup>3</sup> (3:64)

Can this Qur'anic verse on the relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book be considered as a starting point for a contemporary Muslim-Christian dialogue? The obvious meaning of the verse is to indicate clearly that worship is only to be directed to God. Many Muslim commentators understand this verse to be a rejection of the foundational tenet of Christianity, which claims the

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divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, understood by some as ascribing a partner to God.<sup>4</sup> Despite this common understanding among Muslim commentators, one can also observe in the gentleness of this invitation a sincerity about establishing good relations between Muslims, Christians and Jews.

Muslim commentators have interpreted this Qur'anic verse, particularly the phrase *kalima-tun sawa* ("a common word"), in a variety of ways. In the following, I will examine some Muslim commentators' interpretations of this particular phrase and its implications for Muslim-Christian relations. I have chosen the most well-known Qur'anic commentators, whose commentaries have generally established the Islamic understanding of the Qur'an, in an attempt to establish a theological foundation for the "A Common Word" initiative.

Literally, the phrase *kalima-tun sawa* means "a mutual word" or "a mutually agreed word." The word *kalima*, in Arabic, can be used not only to mean "word," but also "message" or "statement." The word *kalima* (or its plural form, *kalimāt*), appears approximately 41 times in the Qur'an. In most places where it appears, the word takes the form of an indefinite noun: that is to say, not necessarily "the word," (*al- kalima*) but "a word" (*kalima-tun*). The use of the word as indefinite suggests the large scope of the statement over which Muslims and Christians can come together. The Arabic grammar of the indefinite article or "nunnation" serves mostly to make the object larger and more encompassing, rather than specific and definitive. Therefore, even the very grammatical nature of "common word" is open to a wide variety of concepts that Muslims and Christians share.

The word *kalima* has a variety of meanings in the Qur'an. In the story of Adam, the word comes from God and is a message of forgiveness. Adam eats from the forbidden tree and asks forgiveness for his mistake, "And Adam received, from his Lord, *kalimāt* and his Lord accepted his repentance. His Lord is the One who Accepts Repentance, and the Merciful" (2:37). While the words given to Adam are words of forgiveness and grace, for Abraham those words are a challenge. "Abraham's Lord tested him with some *kalimāt*, and he fulfilled them" (2:124).

The term *kalimāt* is also employed in the Qur'an to indicate that God never breaks His promises, as in the following verse: "There is no change in the *kalimāt* of Allah" (10:64). *Kalima* also describes the word of God in the person of the Messiah, as confirmed by John the Baptist (3:39), and witnessed by Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary is told that she will be the mother of a *kalima* from God (3:45), an idea which has resonance with the Christian understanding of Jesus as *Logos*, the Word. The verse inviting the People of the Book – Christians among them – to a "common word," (using this same word, *kalima*) appears later in this very same chapter.

### Commentarial Tradition

One of the earliest historians and commentators of the Qur'an, the prolific tenth-century scholar Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), believes that the People of the Book addressed in this passage are both the people of the Torah and the people of the Gospel; that is, Jews and Christians. Al-Tabari suggests several possibilities with regard to the occasion for the revelation of this verse. One of these stories relates to a group of Christians who came to the Prophet from the region of Najran. According to this story, these Christians debated with the Prophet about the nature of Jesus, and were unwilling to accept Muhammad's invitation to consider Jesus as purely human, rather than divine. The Qur'anic Jesus is "a messenger of God and *kalima* from God, which was sent into Mary..." He is not God: "Believe in God and God's messengers, but do not say 'Three'" (4:171). According to al-Tabari, upon the Najran Christians' unwillingness to accept this Islamic understanding of Jesus, God asked the prophet to offer them a suggestion that would be easier (*aysar*) for them to accept. This suggestion is to call the Christians to *kalima-tun sawa*, a common ground between them: the belief in the one God.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that this story refers only to particular Christians, al-Tabari argues that the verse includes all Jews and Christians: "It is necessary that by *ahl al-kitab* every individual member of the People of the Book is meant. That is because to have God as the sole object of worship and to believe sincerely in the oneness of God is a requirement of all responsible creatures of God."<sup>6</sup> According to al-Tabari, some commentators interpreted the phrase *kalima-tun sawa* as the first part of the shahadah, which is "there is no deity but God [*Lā ilāha illa Allah*]."<sup>7</sup>

It can be understood from this historical context of the Qur'anic revelation that modern-day Muslims and Christians, for the sake of cooperation, should focus on shared ideas, rather than the ideas on which they differ. Muslims can learn here from Tabari's suggestion of an "easier" way to come together. Since cooperation is essential and debating differences might affect the possibility of such cooperation, common themes are the starting ground for the future of Muslim-Christian relations. The idea here is not to deny the differences between the faiths, but rather, to acknowledge for the sake of dialogue that these groups should first consider the many beliefs that they share.

The term *kalima-tun sawa* is an appropriate choice for this sort of interfaith dialogue because of its roots in the Qur'an. However, this particular phrase can create some complications in understanding, because the context in which it was revealed allows for a variety of interpretations. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) highlights this context in his commentary on the verse in question. Accordingly, the Christians of Najran, when they debated with the Prophet about the nature of Jesus, were unwilling to accept the Prophet's perspective. The prophet, attempting to convince them of the truth of his message, invited them to *mubahala*: to gather together

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and ask God to curse the ones who were wrong. The Christians of Najran, sensing honesty in the Prophet, were afraid to enter into *mubahala* with him, so they made a treaty with him instead. The phrase *kalima-tun sawa*, emerging from this context of debate and concession, is therefore interpreted by some as emphasizing the need for conversion of Christians and Jews to Islam. An initiative which chooses this phrase as its title, therefore, should be conscious of this context. Some contemporary Muslim writers insist that those who interpret *kalima-tun sawa* without this emphasis on conversion are, in fact, distorting and corrupting the meaning of the text.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Razi, however, understands the *kalima-tun sawa* as an expression of fairness, emerging from the prophet's compassion for those who he feared would be punished for their unbelief. "This verse came," says al-Razi, "as if God said to the prophet, 'avoid this way of arguing and debating; turn to a better way, the fairness of which will be witnessed by every sound reason and pure human nature.'" Al-Razi says that the phrase is an invitation to "come to a word that contains fairness (*insaf*), of one of us to the other, and there shall be no inclination of one against their neighbor."<sup>9</sup>

The commentary of al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) suggests that part of this "common word" between faiths is the common heritage in Abraham shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Al-Qurtubi refers to the story of the Christians of Najran and the Jews of Medina arguing with the Prophet, and with each other, over which religion could claim Abraham. The Qur'an says in response, "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian; he was a pure muslim [*hanifan musliman*]" (3:67). Al-Qurtubi goes on to say that the Prophet, by submitting to the will of God, is the one who followed Abraham most closely, and the religion of Islam is therefore the continuation of the way of Abraham. The Prophet was, al-Qurtubi says, "in the religion and the path of Abraham."<sup>10</sup> Christians and Jews, as part of the Abrahamic tradition, share this "common word" with Islam.

Some other commentators, in a similar vein, believe that this particular verse encourages the People of Book to follow their own Books – the Hebrew and Christian Bibles – with care. For example, Abu Hayyan (d. 1353), in his *Bahr al-Muhit*, mentions that the Qur'an, by calling them "the People of the Book," reminds them that they have their Books and they should listen to them because they are the divine revelations which preceded the Qur'an. Therefore, Abu Hayyan says, the People of the Book should be able as well to follow the Book of God, the Qur'an, which is the final fulfillment of their Books.

Abu Hayyan is one of the few commentators who believes that the addressees of this particular verse were the Christians of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia), rather than the Christians of Najran. According to the story, the Prophet sent his followers in the early seventh century to the Christian king of Abyssinia, Negus Ashama, who offered them protection from persecution at the hands of the

Meccans. This early offer of protection and support became a love for Islam on the part of the Abyssinian Christians. The Qur'an praises those Christians, describing them as "the closest in love to Muslims... when they listen to what has been revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflow with tears because of their recognition of the Truth" (5:82-83). As a result, the Muslims who fled to Abyssinia considered the Christian king of Abyssinia so much a part of the Muslim community that when he died, the Prophet organized a funeral in absentia honoring his support and protection for the earliest Muslims.

This context provides a fascinating interpretation of the idea of *kalima-tun sawa*. If the "common word" between Christians and Muslims develops into a relationship such as the one described between the Abyssinian Christians and the Muslims of Medina, this provides a valuable model for interfaith relations today. Despite the fact that Abu Hayyan believes that the first addressees of this verse were Christians, he also indicates that the term *Ahl al-Kitab* should be understood as referring to all people who have received a Book from God.<sup>11</sup>

The Syrian commentator Ismail Ibn Kathir (d. 1372), a contemporary of Abu Hayyan, similarly expands the definition of "People of the Book," saying, "This address is for all People of the Book, be they Jews or Christians, or *those who are considered similar to them*."<sup>12</sup> Ibn Kathir, a member of the religiously diverse metropolitan community of Damascus, also argues that this verse should apply to contemporary life. The phrase *kalima-tun sawa*, he says, should not be limited in history to the time of the Prophet, but also applies to the present. For him, the word *kalima-tun* does not mean simply "a word," but rather "a meaningful statement." Ibn Kathir describes this "meaningful statement" as "a just and fair statement in which we and you are all equal." The statement of a "common word" is then interpreted by him to mean "that we worship none but God, and do not associate anyone with God." He goes on to name some "associates" specifically, saying that "not to associate anything with God [means] no idols, nor cross, nor images, nor Evil One, nor fire; nothing." According to Ibn Kathir, the "meaningful statement" of this divine invitation "was the invitation of all previous prophets;" that is, those prior to Islam as well as the Prophet himself.<sup>13</sup>

This idea that the Qur'anic statement is universally applicable is shared by the commentator Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi (d. 1470), who indicates that the term *sawa*, "common," is an invitation to Christians to dialogue on certain values that are shared by all human beings. Therefore, according to al-Tha'alibi, the "common word" meant in this verse is not only a point of theological agreement between Christians and Muslims, but in fact a set of values shared universally by all human beings. As al-Tha'alibi says, "certainly this word [*sawa*] deserves to be interpreted with a specific meaning in this case: the Qur'an invites Christians to an understanding in which all human beings are equals."<sup>14</sup>

## How Commentators of the Qur'an Define "Common Word"

The issues of equality and justice are still a central concern in commentaries written several centuries later. In Yemen, where a Jewish minority lived closely with the Muslim community, Muhammad al-Shawkani (d. 1834), a prominent scholar and reformer, also believed that the invitation to the People of the Book should apply to the present. "This is a general invitation," he says, "and not limited to those who debated with the Prophet." Al-Shawkani also suggests that Ibn Mas'ud, a well-known companion of the Prophet, expresses the phrase, not as *kalima-tun sawa*, but in fact, *kalima-tun adl*, "a word of justice." Therefore, al-Shawkani believes that *kalima-tun sawa* can be understood, in its essence, as an invitation to come together around questions of righteousness and justice.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation can be particularly valuable for our time, when issues of justice are so crucial for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

Mahmud al-Alusi (d. 1924), a modern commentator born in Baghdad, focuses on spirituality, more than justice. For al-Alusi, the phrase *kalima-tun sawa* expresses the universality of "the oneness of God, abandoning the obedience to desire, abandoning the inclination towards worldly life." Al-Alusi states that "all prophets and Scriptures agreed on this *kalima-tun sawa*."<sup>16</sup> This statement of Al-Alusi is very important for developing spiritual connections between Muslims, Christians and Jews. Because Islamic spirituality is so open to this universality, Muslim Sufis have been particularly open to interfaith relations and spiritual understanding. Because, as al-Alusi points out, this spiritual agreement has been the desire of all prophets, such cooperation will help not only the faiths of Abraham, but will also improve the spiritual development of all human beings.

Modern Turkish commentator Hamdi Yazir (d. 1942) returns to earlier interpretations in his commentary, in which he argues that this verse is a common invitation, not only for Jews and Christians, but for all nations and people of all religions and Books. "Here there is an invitation," he writes, "for a variety of consciences, nations, religions and Books to come together around a foundational consciousness and one Word of Truth."<sup>17</sup> He suggests that Islam has successfully united all of these divergent elements and therefore presents for humanity a "wide, clear and straight road of guidance," which is in its essence "the law of freedom." It is clear that for Hamdi Yazir, such a religion, though revealed in Arabic, cannot be limited to Arabs, but is meant for all people. He says that the essence of all freedom and equality is based on this one Word, which can be found in the depth of conscience of every human being. Instead of focusing on the phrase *kalima-tun sawa*, he focuses on the second part of the verse, "take no one as Lord except God," and says that this idea is the key to freedom and equality in Islam. In his time, issues of political and economic equality were of central concern, and likely influenced his choice to focus on this part of the verse.<sup>18</sup>



Egyptian commentator Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), though he is known in the West mostly for his ideologies of political Islam, is known in the Islamic world as one of the greatest modern commentators of the Qur'an. In his commentary, Qutb says that the phrase *kalima-tun sawa* is "surely a fair invitation, with no doubt, an invitation in which the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) did not want to show superiority of himself, or of those Muslims with him, over the People of the Book." In this way, Qutb, like other commentators before him, emphasizes the idea of equality inherent in the verse. "The invitation is only to 'a common word,' before which all will be equal. No one will claim superiority over others, and none will enslave others. It is an invitation that no one rejects except the stubborn and the corrupt who won't be willing to incline toward the straight path of truth."<sup>19</sup>

Qutb's commentary makes a great effort to connect this verse to the verses that precede it, which tell the story of Jesus and Mary. He is particularly concerned that the invitation to Christians be tempered by the insistence that no man should be considered divine: "This is an invitation to the worship of God alone. No one should associate anything with God; neither human beings nor stones. This is an invitation to consider none as Lord other than God; neither prophets nor messengers. All of them are servants of God; God has chosen them only to convey God's self, and not to be God's partners in divinity or in sovereignty."<sup>20</sup>

### *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960) is probably one of the leading scholars who contributed greatly to Muslim-Christian relations in the twentieth century. He is one of the earliest Muslim intellectuals in this century who advocated positive relationship between Muslim and Christians for the future of world peace. Contrary to all previous commentators as interpretation of this verse is unique and highly inclusive. To Nursi, the invitation in the time of the prophet was to the *Ahl al-Kitab*, but in our time this invitation much more inclusively is to the *ahl al-maktab* (educated people). Considering the common root word for both *kitab* and *maktab*, Nursi indicates that the addressees of the Qur'an in this century are the people of knowledge and the Qur'an by issuing such invitation for them, present its message to those educated people. He also addresses the question of dialogue between Muslims and Christians. For Nursi, coming together on mutual, agreeable things and avoiding the discussion of subjects upon which they disagree is a must for Muslims and Christians. In one of his commentaries on the first verses of the Qur'an, he says that the Qur'an does not invite the People of the Book to reject all their previous faith, but instead it invites them to build on the Scripture in their own traditions, as if the Qur'an were to say, "O People of the Book, as you believe in the past prophets and the divine books, believe in Muhammad and the Qur'an as well. That is because the

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early prophets and their scriptures give good news of his coming. The proofs that show the truthfulness of those prophets and their books are truthfully and spiritually found in the Qur'an and in the personality of Muhammad."<sup>21</sup>

In the beginning of the twentieth century, when he addressed his famous Damascus Sermon at the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, in Modern Syria, he greatly expressed the importance of Muslim-Christian relations, and was very hopeful that the western idea of freedom and reason would bring a greater rapprochement between Islam and Christianity, because in Islam there was nothing to be against reason, and therefore open-minded Westerners would find nothing in it opposed to their logic which will result in openness. In his later writings, in his private letters to his students, he was much more specific in his encouragement to his students to come together with spiritual leaders of Christianity to work together for the betterment of humanity against the "northern threat," Communism, which recognized no religion at all. To him, the time was so important and crucial that Muslims and Christians should put all their efforts and focus towards finding common ground rather than elaborating on their differences. He also says that certain threats loom for adherents of both religions: if Christianity and Islam do not come together, each will be defeated individually by the modern threat of irreligiosity. It is, therefore, for the benefit of both to come together and serve world peace on the common ground that both share.

## *More Recent Times and Hopes for the Future*

Despite these enthusiastic approaches, there is no doubt that in both religious traditions there has been opposition to such a dialogue and cooperation, but also the adherents of both religions have shown great enthusiasm towards this mutual understanding. For example, one can see that some Muslim religious leaders are strongly opposing the idea of rapprochement between Christians and Muslims. According to some extremist groups, the idea on which "A Common Word" is based is a distortion of the Qur'anic verse. In this, they ignore the Qur'anic verse which says, "Debate with the People of the Book in the most beautiful manner" (16:125). Where we find hope is that the Muslims promoting dialogue and cooperation are considerably rooted in the main teaching of Islam, and they are highly respected in their communities in comparison to those than those who oppose dialogue.

For example, one of the prominent figures of our century, Fethullah Gülen, has been advocating the importance of Muslim-Christian relations, both in Turkey and around the world, and particularly in the United States.<sup>22</sup> In the Arab world in Jordan, including the founders of this initiative, in Egypt there are many prominent figures who are promoting dialogue and positive relationships with the world of Christianity. To give a specific example, the leader of the Islamic Community of

Lebanon, Faisal Mawlawi, is among the supporters of efforts for dialogue between Muslims and Christians. He refers to the Qur'anic verse which says, "Invite to the way of your Lord through wisdom and beautiful admonition" (16:125), and to another Qur'anic verse that says, "O human beings, we have created you from male and female, and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other" (49:13). He believes that today, as Muslims we cannot have constructive relations with someone that we hate. Therefore Muslims should consider the divine name al-Rahim, "the Most Compassionate," in their communication with their neighbors of other faiths. The Qur'anic invitation cannot be based on hatred. He also says, "It is the duty of Muslims to set a good example of the ethics and morality in their society."<sup>23</sup>

As indicated above, today there is a great need for dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and all peoples that are doing good works in helping humanity and coming together for the betterment of society. Considering the Prophet as the most important example for Muslims, one can refer to his involvement in pre-Islamic organization for doing activities for the betterment of his own society in Mecca. The famous organization was known as *Hilfal-Fudhul*, established by three famous figures of Mecca whose names started with al-Fadhl (plural is al-Fudhul). This organization can be labeled as an "Alliance for Virtue" due to the words' literal meaning and to the group's actions. The Prophet who involved in his twenties with this organization worked to support the weak against the strong and the oppressed against the oppressor. After the emergence of Islam, he would praise the establishment of this alliance by saying, "If I am invited to join such an alliance today, I will again respond positively." The Prophet continues to say, addressing his companions and for that purpose all Muslims, "Make alliances to return the properties of the oppressed back and to prevent the oppressor's aggression against the oppressed."<sup>24</sup> This behavior of the Prophet sets an example for Muslims to participate in any alliance that has the aim of doing good, justice and what is beautiful for humanity. In reference to the importance of such dialogue and alliance one can remember the striking legal opinions that I found highly interesting in Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1448), who says when he speaks of the story of the Christians of Najran, "in this there is permission for dialogue (he uses the term debate, as the Qur'an says, 'debate in the most beautiful manner') with the People of the Book, and in fact, this sometimes may be a mandate (*wajib*) where the welfare of the people is concerned."<sup>25</sup> Hence, to me this is a mandated duty upon Muslims to have positive relationships and dialogue with the People of the Book. As the above mentioned Qur'anic injunction suggests.

Therefore, *kalima-tun sawa*, or the "A Common Word" initiative should not be limited to only the two specific things named as love of God and love of neighbors, but rather much more inclusive. I consider "A Common Word" as a

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positive step in the direction of Muslim-Christian relations. The scope of this initiative can be enlarged to include more things that are considered essential in both the Qur'an and the Bible. Today, humanity in general and the worlds of Christianity and Islam in particular face many problems. Such an initiative, with good intentions, from both sides will provide a ground for the remedy for spiritual, social and economic maladies. Therefore, I would humbly suggest that the efforts of early scholars who have been working in this direction should be cited and praised. Scholars, intellectuals, and religious leaders from both sides such as John Paul II, Fethullah Gülen, and others should be highlighted.

My hope is that the "A Common Word" initiative will serve in the development of more harmonious relationships between Muslims and Christians and will enlarge the scope of the themes that are common to both religions. It represents a very important step for building bridges of dialogue between these two great world religions to bring them together in peace.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Zeki Saritoprak, "Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: a Case Study of Islamic Social Policy in the Early Twentieth Century," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11, no. 3 (2000), 319-332.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami li Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 4, ed. Ahmad abd al-Alim al-Barduni (Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b, 1952), 105-106. The organization known as Muslims for Jesus includes this letter of the prophet among the documents that they value for its commentary on dialogue with the People of the Book. For more on this organization, see [www.MuslimsforJesus.org](http://www.MuslimsforJesus.org).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Arabic and Turkish are the author's.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad al-Shawkani, for example, suggests that the phrase in the verse, "we take no one as Lord except God" implies a "reproach for those who believe in the divinity of Jesus and Uzeyir [Ezra]," referring to Qur'anic verse 9:30: "And Jews say Uzeyir is the son of God, and Christians say Christ is the son of God. This is the statement of their own mouths. In this they imitate the claims of the pagans of old." *Fath al-Qadir* (Cairo, 1931), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, 9/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami'al-Bayan*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1978), 301-303.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, al-Sharif Muhammad bin Hussein al-Samadani, "Ru'ya Shar'iyya fi'l-Jidal Wa'l-Hiwar Ma'a Ahl al-Kitab," *al-Durar al-Saniyyah*, Accessed 9/2/08, [www.dorar.net](http://www.dorar.net).

- <sup>9</sup> Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (Beirut, 1976), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>10</sup> Al-Qurtubi, *Ibid.*, 109.
- <sup>11</sup> Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi, *Bhar al-Muhit* (Beirut, 1983), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>12</sup> Ismail bin Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1980) 372 (my emphasis).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Abd al-Malik bin Muhammad bin Ismail Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi, *al-Jawahir al-Hisan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar Al Kutub, 1996), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/21/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* This perspective is echoed by al-Tabari as well: cf. al-Tabari, 303.
- <sup>16</sup> Sayyid Mahmoud al-Alusi, *Ruh al-ma'ani* (Beirut), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>17</sup> Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* (Ankara: Akcag Yayinlari, 1995).
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Sayyid al-Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1997), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/22/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Işarat ul-I'jaz*, in Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyati* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayinlari, 2002), 1175. See also Zeki Saritoprak, "Said Nursi on Muslim-Christian Relations Leading to World Peace," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, no. 1 (January 2008), 25-37.
- <sup>22</sup> For more on Gülen's perspective on Muslim-Christian relations, see Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, "Fethullah Gülen and the 'People of the Book': A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue," *The Muslim World* 95, no. 3 (July 2005), 329-340.
- <sup>23</sup> Faisil Mawlawi, *Mafahim Islamiyyah* <http://arabic.islamicweb.com/Christianity/Mafahim.doc>. Accessed on 9/10/08.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibn Hisham, *al-Siyrah al-Nabawiyyah*, ed. Mustafa Abd al-Wahid. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1971), vol. 1, pp.258-9. <http://www.yasoob.com/books> accessed on 9/10/08.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, vol. 8 (Beirut: Dar al-Jayl, 1976), 95.

- <sup>9</sup> Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Mafatih al-Ghayb* (Beirut, 1976), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>10</sup> Al-Qurtubi, *Ibid.*, 109.
- <sup>11</sup> Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi, *Bhar al-Muhit* (Beirut, 1983), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>12</sup> Ismail bin Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1980) 372 (my emphasis).
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Abd al-Malik bin Muhammad bin Ismail Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi, *al-Jawahir al-Hisan Fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar Al Kutub, 1996), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/21/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* This perspective is echoed by al-Tabari as well: cf. al-Tabari, 303.
- <sup>16</sup> Sayyid Mahmud al-Alusi, *Rubal-ma'ani* (Beirut), *Tafsir Online Qur'anic Reference*, accessed 8/20/08, [www.altafsir.com](http://www.altafsir.com).
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- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
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