

Between us and them: A Common Word

From the Editors in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

The most impressive thing about “[A Common Word Between Us and You](#),” an open letter to the world’s Christian leaders signed by 138 Muslim scholars, is that it exists. ([See news report.](#)) The second most impressive thing is the economy of its argument. The scholars resist the innate desire to touch on everything pertinent to Christian-Muslim dialogue and instead invite Christians to remember Jesus’ words about loving God and neighbor. They argue that the twin commandments to love God and to love neighbor provide a clear basis for interfaith peace and understanding.

The writers go on to describe the nature of God and the love that is due God, and offer pointed words about neighbor love: “If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace.” The text reveals an immense respect for Christian faith—though not for the foreign policies of some of the countries where that faith is espoused—and for Christian scriptures. The scholars engage in a detailed biblical word study that would shame most Christians (how many Christian scholars could do similar work on the Qur’an in Arabic?).

“A Common Word” goes on to show the similarity between the New Testament’s twin love commandments and certain injunctions in the Qur’an, citing this verse: “Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God.” The unity of reverence for God and love of neighbor is clear to the authors. (The prohibition against a “partner” for God may be taken as a Muslim critique of the Trinity—but Christians might reply that Father, Son and Spirit are not exactly “partners,” since the three together are one God and more closely united than any three created things could ever be.) The phrase “none of us shall take others for lords beside God” is taken by the Muslims (by a roundabout route) to refer to love of neighbor. “This relates to the Second Commandment because justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbor.” That is, neighbor love

is expressed in keeping religious belief free of political coercion.

No Christian would disagree on this point—though it is a point on which Christians might have serious questions for Muslims, since Christian minorities in Muslim countries are often hard-pressed, sometimes officially repressed, while Muslims flourish in the U.S. and are welcomed in most of Western Europe. The existence of more Muslim states in which minority religions are protected would sharply undercut the arguments of those who think that human rights can come to the Middle East only at the point of the gun.

Nevertheless, the graciousness of this open letter is such that Western Christians hardly deserve it. May it mark a new chapter of Muslim-Christian relationship and help that relationship be a blessing to the world.