

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

On “A Common Word”

Much has been made of “A Common Word,” the recent initiative by a group of 138 Muslim scholars and leaders seeking conversation with the Christian church. Surely all people of good will would want to applaud this effort to the extent that it works for genuine religious understanding and world peace.

At the same time, it is important for those who would engage in this conversation not to be naive. While the admirable conclusion is that we should all love God and love neighbor, the stated premise of the entire effort is that we all believe in the unity of God. “The Unity of God ... is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.” But what does this mean?

The problem with this basis for the initiative is that the unity of God means two different things for Islam and for Christianity. Therefore, even though it is the same word, it cannot be a common word. Treating the unity of God as if it were a word held in common by Islam and Christianity would involve either self-deception or abandonment of the faith.

Christians understand that the unity of God is the oneness shared by the three persons of the Trinity, one God forever and ever. God the Father is eternally the Father of the Son, God the Son is eternally the Son of the Father, and the Holy Spirit is eternally the Spirit of them both. This means, in part, that Jesus Christ is God, always has been God, and always will be God.

Muslims, on the other hand, mean by the unity of God precisely that God is not a Trinity of three persons. They mean that God is not Father, was not Father, and will not be Father. They mean that Jesus is not Son, was not Son, and will not be Son. They mean that there is no Spirit, that there was no Spirit, and that there will be no Spirit. In particular, they mean by the unity of God that Jesus Christ is not God, has never been God, and never shall be God.

This should not be surprising. This is the Muslim faith. We should not expect any other. But we must see by this contrast that the one word “God” has such radically and exclusively different meanings in and for the two faiths that it would make no sense at all to attempt to carry on a conversation as if the two uses of the one word meant the same thing. Consequently the assumed premise of shared belief in the unity of God is not at all a common word.

Surely conversation between Christians and Muslims is good and important. But we cannot engage in such a conversation by agreeing to initial terms that give away the entire Christian faith. Neither should Muslims be expected to begin a conversation by abandoning their faith. We can no more ask Christians to begin the conversation by becoming Muslims in their view of God than we can ask Muslims to begin the conversation by acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Let me offer a counterproposal. Instead of starting with the unity of God, let us begin a conversation around this premise: Jesus Christ is a true prophet of God. That is not everything we want to say about him, but that may be a more productive starting point. And it may provide a better basis for reaching the mutually desired love of neighbor.

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