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A Common Word Between Us and You: Introduction and comments

Paper deals with the open letter *A Common Word Between Us and You* (see Quran 3:64), dated 13 October 2007, from religious leaders of the Muslim faith all around the world joined under the guidance of *The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* in Jordan, addressed to leaders of all denominations of the Christian faith with the Roman Catholic pope Benedict XVI on the top of the list, Jews are not mentioned in the list of addressers but are mentioned in the text of the open letter. This paper presents a content of the open letter *A Common Word* and shows some reactions and following discussion about the open letter. The paper also introduce to the interreligious dialogue between Christians, mainly Catholics, and Muslims today.

Key words: A common word, open letter, dialogue, Christianity, Islam, religions
Klíčová slova: Rovné slovo, otevřený dopis, dopis, křesťanství, islám, náboženství

The document *A Common Word Between Us and You* was formulated as an open letter issued on 13 October 2007. And it was addressed to leaders of the Christian faith from all denominations, and was written by leaders of the Muslim faith, also from different sects. The open letter *A Common Word* is not the first text written down by Muslim scholars and leaders to the Christians, it follows up, for instance, to *Open letter to his holiness Pope Benedict XVI* from the year 2006 (dated on 13 October 2006), which had been a response to H.H. Pope Benedict's famous lecture at the University of Regens-

burg in Germany. Main topic of his lecture, focused mainly on Christianity was a relation between the faith and the reason. The well known reaction forced by ardent journalists all around the world was fast and one of them was the *Open letter to his holiness Pope Benedict XVI*. It was signed by 38 leading Muslim Scholars and leaders from all around the world. In the year 2006 letter they also quoted and appreciated official teaching of Roman Catholic Church, namely a Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, from the year 1965, but it was just the beginning and prelude to the open letter *A Common Word*. Because, it is valued in nowadays that in *A Common Word*, 138 Islamic personalities wrote to promote interfaith dialog and to reveal and declare that there is some common ground between Islam and Christianity.

The sponsor of the letter was an international independent research institute The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It is an international Islamic non-governmental, independent institute. The purpose of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute is to serve Islam and humanity at large.

Contents of the *A Common Word Between Us and You*

What is the content of the open letter *A Common Word*? In general we can say: it calls for peace between Muslims and Christians and tries to work for a common ground among both faiths based especially on two main commandments: (1) every human being must love one and unique God; and (2) every human being must love his fellow man (his neighbour as it is said according the Christian tradition). Authors of the open letter are convinced, that two basic commandments could be found within the sacred scriptures and traditions of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The open letter *A Common Word* begins with *List of Addressees*. It is addressed at first to H.H. Pope Benedict XVI, than to His All-Holiness Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople, New Rome, then to other patriarchs of the Orthodox churches all around the world, also to bishop Kryštof, orthodox Metropolitan of the Czech and Slovak Republics, because this church is autocephalous. It is also addressed to leaders of larger Christian denominations – Methodists, Baptists, Evangelical and so on. The list of addresses is immediately followed by a chapter *Summary and Abridgement*, two pages. Then a two-fold core of the letter is given: It is the first chapter entitled *Love of God* which consists of two parts (1) the first is *Love of God in Islam*, about 5 pages and (2) the second is the chapter *Love of God as the First and Greatest Commandment in the Bible* about 3 pages. Second is the chapter *Love of the Neighbour* which also consists of two parts (1) the first is *Love of the Neighbour in Islam* one page, (2) and the second is the text *Love of the Neighbour in the Bible* also only one page. Text is summarized in the chapter named *Come to a Common Word Between Us and You* where are Christians invited (da‘wa, in the religious sense, the da‘wa is the invitation, addressed to men by God and the prophets, to accept the true religion, conf. Canard, M. (1986): II, 168a–170b) in order to accept

offered common word, i.e. offered open letter. On the very end of the letter are notes in a number of 23. There are many quotations from the Koran and hadiths, partly from Bible.

As it was mentioned before, the letter is signed by 138 prominent Muslim personalities from a large number of countries of several continents. Just a few examples: Sultan Muhammadu Sa'ad Ababakar, Leader of the Muslims of Nigeria. Prof. Dr. Abdul-Salam Al-Abadi, President of Aal Al-Bayt University in Jordan. Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, Vice President of the Fiqh Council of North America, United States of America. Prof. Dr. Abd Al-Wahhab bin Ibrahim Abu Solaiman, Member of the Committee of Senior Ulama, Saudi Arabia. Prof. Dr. Mustafa Çağrı, Mufti of Istanbul, Turkey. Sheikh Mustafa Cerić, Grand Mufti and Head of Ulema of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sheikh Ali Jum'a, Grand Mufti of the Arab Republic of Egypt. And many others. Full list of signatories is attached to the open letter. (conf. Franc, J. 2008, s. 84-88) The open letter *A Common Word* can be found on a special web side <http://www.acommonword.com>, where are visitors encouraged to "fully endorse" the document and leave some comments and suggestions. The Muslims' letter, titled "*A Common Word Between Us and You*," seeks to build on common ground shared between Muslim's and Christian's faiths. It compares texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible and the Koran to argue that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. It says that both religions believe in "the primacy of total love and devotion to God," and both value love of neighbor and a peaceful world. And it is really the crucial point of the letter. A lot of questions were consequently raised: Is there really a common ground? Is there really a common word between both religions? Let us see some comments, suggestions and reactions from the Christian world, mainly from the catholic tradition.

Reactions and responses

In general: many Christian leaders, scholars and lay persons have made public statements or replies to the letter, among the others also Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva etc. Among the noteworthy and significant is a positive replay from the Yale Divinity School's in USA, entitled "*Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word between Us and You*", released on October 12, 2007 (Yale response 2007).

The paper points out on the reactions from the Catholic theologians, bishops and the official representative body of Catholic Church the Vatican Holy See. One of the reasons for such kind of limitation is on the one hand the fact that the open letter was addressed in the first place to the Roman bishop and the Pope Benedict XVI and on the other hand the reactions from many branches within the Abrahamic religions were too large to be presented in one paper. The text of the paper continues's in tree main points: The first are responses from Arabic and Nigerian catholic bishops. The second are words from the Roman Catholic Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran, he was at the

time of the release of the open letter the President of the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* in Vatican. The third is the beginning of the new form of the religious dialogue in Christian Muslim forum in Vatican and words of H.H. Pope Banedict XVI.

Response from Arabic and Nigerian bishops

At first I will quote words of the Catholic Bishop of Arabia who published an article examining the call for dialogue made in an open letter to Christian leaders worldwide. Swiss-born Bishop Paul Hinder (*1942) is based in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. He is responsible for Catholics in the entire Arabian Peninsula and he published his words in *Oasis Journal*, the binaural magazine of the Oasis International Foundation created in 2004 as the International Centre for Study and Research by the Patriarch of Venice Angelo Scola to promote mutual knowledge and encounter between Christians and Muslims. Bishop Hinder in his article welcomes the open letter in these words: "*There is no doubt that the "Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders" on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr (October 13th, 2007) must be seen as an historic event. (...) Here are Muslims offering a hand that we should take.*" (Hinder, P. 2007). But beside the agreement to all the words about the love to God and love to neighbor contained in the open letter he also calls for more freedom and security for the Christians minority in Saudi Arabia as well as he calls for the right to freely administer the Christian communities by the Christian priest arrived from abroad. There are about 1.2 million Christians in Saudi Arabia, most of them Catholic Filipino migrant workers. And bishop Hinder asks for clarification whether the love of God and the love of neighbor have the same meaning in both religions, because in day life in Saudi Arabia it is not clearly manifested. He links Christian love of neighbor to the human dignity of each person without exceptions as well as he links it to his or her right to grow in freedom. He also notes that for Christians love of neighbor extends to love of enemy, even if that person professes a different religion. And he asks whether this concept of love to neighbor is the same as it is in tradition of Islam. And of course bishop Hinder emphasized the uniqueness of Christ against the interpretation of the open letter A Common Word, which sees Jesus Christ as one of many prophets: "*Christians cannot simply see Jesus Christ as one among other prophets, but they profess him in his divinity as the living Son of God within the belief in One God in three Persons,*" (Hinder, P. 2007).

Bishop Hinder stressed some important points and I want to emphasize only two of them. The first: Dialogue between Muslims and Christians leading in words is simply possible, but the practical dialogue, for instance in the Middle East, is still challenge. The practical level of the dialogue must come hand in hand with theoretical and academic dialogue: *We cannot speak about the love of God and love of the neighbor without taking a clear position regarding the human dignity of each individual person and his or her right to live and to grow in freedom. For Christians, love goes beyond neighbor to include the enemy too, whether that person belongs to their own religion or not.* (Hinder, P. 2007) Simply he is calling for an integrity of religious words and actions. The second: Theologi-

cal differences between Christian and Muslim teachings can not be overlooked. "There has to be further clarification about whether "the love of God" and the "love of neighbour" have the same meaning in both religions." (Hinder, P. 2007) As he indicates we do not believe and love the same God, or we do not profess the faith in the same way. For Christians the God is the One and the Most Holy Trinity, for Muslims the God is One and Unique. And Muslims could hardly sign the document endorsing and accepting the teaching about Trinity as it might be understood by Christian reader. And if he does then he becomes a Christian and he couldn't take part in the interreligious dialogue because would become a member of the same religion.

Let us also pay attention to the reaction of the second bishop which is taken from the 12th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which had been held in Vatican, October 2008. Subtitle of meeting was "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church". In one of its meetings the Nigerian bishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan (*1944), Archbishop of Abuja (Nigeria) was given to hold a short word about his experience of interreligious dialogue with Muslims. I will present just three ideas of his text. At first he quotes documents from The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* where the article n. 16 declares: "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day". Then he quotes also document *Instrumentum Laboris* article n. 56, the chapter on "Interreligious Dialogue" where is quoted passage from *Nostra Aetate* article n. 3, a text that specifically draws attention to the fact that Muslims worship the "God... who has spoken to men". So the purpose of bishop's intervention is to pay more attention to the tradition of the church, to the serious declarations of The Second Vatican Council about dialogue between Christians and Muslims and to develop deep reception of the spirit of the text.

The second: Bishop Onaiyekan is a man of practice, he is a shepherd of his Christian flock in certain place and so he follows: *I come from Nigeria, a nation where Christian-Muslim relations has been a constant challenge. I am therefore aware that the reality on the ground in many places since the last 40 years often makes one wonder if the positive and open position of the Church is not being naïve. Is there any reciprocity in our efforts at good relations?* (Onaiyekan 2008) He asks the very simple question because he is a man of daily pastoral service in streets of Nigeria and later he continues. And he follows: "Whatever we may say, dialogue with Islam is necessary, no matter how difficult it may be." (Onaiyekan 2008) In spite of different kinds of conflicts legitimized by religious language he calls for dialogue which will continue in theoretical as well as practical way.

The third: On the very end of his speech he adds words of hope and inspiration. He focuses on ongoing dialog between Christians and Muslims and he finds the open letter A Common word in a context of the developing historical process: "But it is not all bad

news. There are positive signs of the times which I think we should not overlook. In recent times, there is a growing self-criticism within the Muslim world. Furthermore, three important recent events should merit our attention: a) the open letter "A Common Word" b) the visit of the King of Saudi Arabia to the Pope, and so on and on." (Onaiyekan 2008) This is in brief a crucial idea of Nigerian bishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja presented in his speech in 2008. Christians and Muslims are in process of dialogue and in the scope of continuity of the dialogue he welcomes open letter as an important sign.

Voice of the bishops from United Arab Emirates and Nigeria is very significant, because Christians in the Middle East and Africa are "a solid bridge between the East and the West" (Khoury 2007, conf. Borrmans 2008: 7-13) as they share both Arabic or African culture as well as Western cultural tradition. Both of them the bishop Hinder and bishop Onaiyekan had some suspicions to the impact of the open letter to the life of ordinary Muslims but both of them welcome the open letter *A Common Word*, because they know that to build a better world is part of the mission of the Church and it could be done only hand in hand with others (conf. Rahner 1988: 50-71). And in order to reach the aim the Christians needs to link hands with others with whom they share the same concerns especially if they try to open a new way of cooperation. This is surely a pressing challenge for the two greatest religions on our planet – to find a common way to the better future.

Roma Catholic Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran

Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Tauran (*1943) has been since 1 September 2007 a President of the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* in the Roman Curia. He and his department are responsible for relations of the Vatican with the other religions. Cardinal Tauran is a Vatican official and he also welcomes new way of possible dialog presented in open letter *A Common Word*. He calls it "a very interesting letter", and indicates that it is "a new document because it comes from both Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims." (Tauran 2007) In his words it is also "a non-polemical document with numerous quotes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament." (Tauran 2007) Cardinal Tauran also noted that the letter is "a very encouraging sign because it shows that good will and dialogue are capable of overcoming prejudices. This is a spiritual approach to inter-religious dialogue which I would call dialogue of spirituality. Muslims and Christians must respond to one question: in your life, is God truly One?" (Tauran 2007a) But he also commented the document in critical way and says that real dialog with Muslims is really difficult. He for instance pointed out imbalances, such as opposition or limitations to the building of churches in some Muslim countries, whilst in Christian countries Muslims are free to build Mosques. But what is more important and want should be pointed out: "Muslims do not accept that one can discuss the Koran in depth, because they say it was written by dictation from God... With such an absolute interpretation, it is difficult to discuss the contents of faith." (Tauran 2007b) It was the typical academic critical reaction. However,

it must be said that Cardinal Tauran is a zealous leader of interreligious dialogue and he knows that Muslims and Christians are engaged in a substantive dialogue concerning theological and spiritual foundations. He also played important role in following discussion about the open letter *A Common Word* which took place in Vatican in 2008.

Continuity of the dialogue or the new start? Words of H. H. Pope Benedict XVI

A delegation of five Muslim signatories to the open letter *A Common Word* and the representatives of the Vatican agreed to found a permanent "Catholic-Muslim Forum" which would meet biannually and communicate on a regular basis, the agreement was signed next year after release of the open letter (March 5, 2008). The first session which was addressed by His Holiness Pope Benedict took place in November (4-6 November 2008) in Rome. At the meeting take part 24 religious leaders and scholars, twelve from each side. The themes of the first session was "*Love of God, Love of Neighbour, and Theological and Spiritual Foundation, and Human Dignity and Mutual Respect*" (Catholic-Muslim Forum 2008)

During the discussion were emerged a points of similarity and diversity, reflecting distinctive specific genius of these two religions. Final declaration published in English and French is summed up in 15 points. The second Seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum was held in will be convened approximately in two years in a Muslim majority country, date and place to be clarified later. (Catholic-Muslim Forum 2008) Pope Benedict XVI. did not attend the first meeting but he gave an audience in Clementine Hall, on Thursday, 6 November 2008 to the participants and in his short address he stressed his point of view: "*The great interest which the present Seminar has awakened is an incentive for us to ensure that the reflections and the positive developments which emerge from Muslim-Christian dialogue are not limited to a small group of experts and scholars, but are passed on as a precious legacy to be placed at the service of all, to bear fruit in the way we live each day.*" (Benedict XVI. 2008). The Pope in the beginning of his speech opens both questions of interreligious dialogue mentioned above: the dialogue of scholars and experts, as well as the dialogue of all believers in everyday life. In his speech Pope Benedict XVI stressed the words of catholic bishops and cardinal Tauran mentioned above: "*The theme which you have chosen for your meeting – "Love of God, Love of Neighbour: The Dignity of the Human Person and Mutual Respect" (...) highlights even more clearly the theological and spiritual foundations of a central teaching of our respective religions.*" (Benedict XVI. 2008) These words were used in spite of exegetical challenge of Koran in the Muslim theology as it is seen from the Catholic theology, it was also mentioned above in the paper. But he also pointed out the words of Catholic bishops (and others Catholic missionaries) about practical application of the document *A Common Word* to the everyday life: "*My hope, once again, is that these fundamental human rights will be protected for all people everywhere. Political and religious leaders have the duty of ensuring the free exercise of these rights in full respect for each individual's freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.*"

The discrimination and violence which even today religious people experience throughout the world, and the often violent persecutions to which they are subject, represent unacceptable and unjustifiable acts, all the more grave and deplorable when they are carried out in the name of God." (Benedict XVI. 2008). The Pope leads his words in harmony with tradition of the Catholic Church. Freedom of religion is inalienable and it grows from the dignity of each human person. And the Pope himself declares his position to the searching for the common ground of our religions concerning the "definition" of God: *"I am well aware that Muslims and Christians have different approaches in matters regarding God."* (Benedict XVI. 2008) But the Pope also shows a possible way of common ground and it could be the worship. *"Yet we can and must be worshippers of the one God who created us and is concerned about each person in every corner of the world."* (Benedict XVI. 2008) Relations especially to the Muslims community are presented by H. H. Pope Benedict XVI according the documents of The Second Vatican Council where the faith and religion of Muslims is respectable and considered as a partner for possible dialogue and discussion. Crucial words of the Second Vatican Council were promulgated in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate* (in latin *In our age*) proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI. on October 28, 1965. *"The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth. (...) Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honour Mary, His virgin Mother. (...) Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting."* (*Nostra aetate*, 3) And for the future relations of the both religions the document says another significant words: *"Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."* (*Nostra aetate*, 3) It is the words of the Fathers of The Catholic Church and it is also the voice of recent Pope Benedict XVI. Current Roman bishop Benedict XVI finds himself right in the middle of the tradition of the Catholic Church (conf. Gioia, F. 1994, and Gioia, F. 2006), the tradition in continuity from the first centuries until the present time. But the Roman bishop is not aware to open the new questions as a *"different approaches in matters regarding God"*, and *"the discrimination and violence which even today religious people experience throughout the world"* and others (Benedict XVI. 2008). In spite of his absence in the meeting of the commission he was taking a part on the discussion. Pope Benedict XVI is very vivid author and since his inauguration as the Supreme Pontiff he released important encyclical letters. One of them is concerning the love: *Deus Caritas Est – God is Love.* (Benedict XVI, 2005). According his own words the open letter shows some affinities with his recent encyclical letter. In his own words: *"A Common Word letter (...) echoed a theme consonant with my first encyclical: the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor, and the fundamental contradiction of resorting to violence"*

ce or exclusion in the name of God.” (Benedict XVI 2009: 7, conf. Benedict XVI 2005: 16). The very end of his speech to Seminar members was followed by personal greetings and short discussions with participant in Clementine Hall, Vatican.

Summary

And there goes also my modest notice to the open letter *A Common Word*. This document was published in Jordan and signed by 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders, but from the catholic point of view it means: It is signed by 138 Muslims; it is unofficial and for other millions Muslims not-binding document. It has been sent to the official religious leaders of whole Christian world. And it means that possible response of H. H. Pope Benedict XVI would be official word from Vatican and it would be in particular level binding in consciousness of millions Christians. H.H. Pope Benedict could hardly accept the invitation to offered word from each group of scholars formed in any place in the world. Authors of the open letter *A Common Word* are just a gathering of famous, widely recognized scholars and pious Muslims from all around the world, but on the other hand “they are offering a hand that we should take”. But still the voice of 138 Muslims signatories was not overheard, the new academic dialogue began, participant were received in Benedict’s audience and the theoretical dialogue was joined with call for dialogue and cooperation in every day life.

The document *A Common Word* aims for a search of the common ground or common word between both religions and between both cultures of the West and of the East. Reaction of the Catholic Church is cordial and open for another dialogue, which should start from questions: How can we discuss a matter of our religions if we can not discuss the exegesis of Koran? What is the meaning of the open letter *A Common Word* concerning love to God and love to neighbor? And related question: Who will supervise an application of words about love in everyday live?

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