

THE WORD OF GOD—THE BRIDGE  
BETWEEN HIM, YOU AND US

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr

## ABSTRACT

The common word means not only the acceptance of Divine Unity but also attachment to the One with our whole being and therefore including love of the One and moreover the love of His creation or the neighbor for the neighbor comes from the One and returns to It. Consequently, one can say that not only Divine Unity is a common word between us and you but that there is also a single *kalimah* or Logos in its principal reality in which we believe jointly except that for you the Word is identified with Christ and for us with the Qur'an. It would bring us closer to each other if we realize that we are bound together not only by the doctrine of the One but also by the "doctrine of the Word". Needless to say different understandings of *kalimah* or *logos* have existed also within each tradition as we see in the formulation of different types of Christology and also different understandings of the meaning of the Qur'an as Word of God. In this context of similarities and contrasts we each follow the teachings of a religion that claims to have a universal message for the whole of humanity. For the purpose of our present discourse in the same way that it is not necessary to enter into contentious theological discussions about the nature of God. To live fully as a Muslim or Christian does not require anything less of us than loving the neighbor, whether he or she be Muslim or Christian, and to ask not "is he or she one of us," but "is he or she one of His."

*Say, O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you, that we shall worship none but God, and shall not associate aught with Him, and shall not take one another as lords apart from God. (Qur'ān, 3:65)*

The common word to which the chapter of the Qur'an "The House of 'Imrān" refers and from which the title of the document "A Common Word between Us and You" has been taken has been interpreted by such major traditional commentators as Zamakhsharī, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and Ibn 'Arabī as referring to Divine Unity or *al-Tawhīd*. Surely this is its basic meaning as the Unity of the Divine Principle is what is common between all the Us's and all the You's who follow the sacred teachings at the heart of all authentic religions. The common word means not only the acceptance of Divine Unity but also attachment to the One with our whole being and therefore including love of the One and moreover the love of His creation or the neighbor for the neighbor comes from the One and returns to It. The common word stated in the Qur'an contains, therefore, within itself implicitly the two commandments of Christ announced in chapter 12 of the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament. The consequence of our realization of our ontological dependence upon the One as absolute regarding Him and also regarding what issues from Him in light of the ontological dependence of all of creation upon Him cannot but include His two commandments.

There is furthermore a second possible interpretation of "the common word" which can bring you and us, or more particularly Christians and Muslims, even closer together by embracing the instrument or the means by which the One has revealed Himself to all of us, Christian and Muslim alike. The second interpretation has to do with the meaning of the term "word" itself. In the original Arabic of the verse from "The House of 'Imrān" the term that is used is *kalimah*. Now the Noble Qur'an is known among Muslims as *kalām Allah* or *kalimat Allah* meaning literally Word of God while the term is also used in connection with Moses and Jesus. It is precisely this term that corresponds to the word *logos* in Christian Greek sources contrary to what some have claimed the doctrine of the *logos* exists as much in Islam as it does in Christianity albeit with different interpretations resulting from the different receptacles for which a religion is meant and also the diversity of Divine

manifestations. As Islamic sources assert, *kullu yawmin Huwa fi 'l-sha'n*, that is, “every day He manifests Himself in a different state.” Furthermore, while the Gospel of John asserts that it was by the Word that all things were made, the chapter *Yā Sin* in the Qur’an exclaims that God said “be!” (*kun*) and there was. There is therefore again a similarity of cosmogonic function in the two religions as far as the Word is concerned.

Consequently, one can say that not only Divine Unity is a common word between us and you but that there is also a single *kalimah* or Logos in its principal reality in which we believe jointly except that for you the Word is identified with Christ and for us with the Qur’an. It would bring us closer to each other if we realized that we are bound together not only by the doctrine of the One but also by the “doctrine of the Word” if we fix our gaze upon the metahistorical and principal Word/Logos and not upon one of its particular historical manifestations. There *were*, however, particular manifestations of this reality and hence the creation of Christianity and Islam, as well as other religions, especially Judaism if we confine ourselves within the Abrahamic family of religions, religions in which there are universal elements that unify and bind and formal aspects and particularities that separate. Needless to say different understandings of *kalimah* or *logos* have existed also within each tradition as we see in the formulation of different types of Christology and also different understandings of the meaning of the Qur’an as Word of God.

Obviously the common word as related to Divine Unity followed by the Word as *kalimah* or *Logos* in its metaphysical sense and the resulting love of God and neighbor are the most important elements that unify and bind us together. The traditional Catholic credo begins with *credo in unum Deum* which conveys the same meaning as *la ilāha Wallāh*. Furthermore, we both accept the revelatory agency of the Word, however different might be our understanding of the form that the Word taken in this world and our interpretation of the process of revelation itself. From this similarity of doctrine issues the role played by Christ in Christianity as the perfect model to emulate, hence *imitatio Christi* and the similar role played by the Prophet, the recipient of the Divine Word in Islam and the most perfect of men for Muslims although not considered as divine.

The list of similarities that bind us on the basis of these basic doctrines and that bring Christians and Muslims close together are too many to enumerate here. But let us mention just a few: acceptance of sacred scripture, belief in the reality and pre-eminence of the Spirit within and in the spiritual world beyond our

subjectivism, the immortality of the soul, the efficacy of prayer and other religious rites, the necessity of the ethical character of human life here on earth and its consequences for life after death, ultimate judgment by God and eschatological realities, the reality of good and evil, interplay of the Mercy and Justice of God, the reflection of the Wisdom of God in His creation, and the existence of a path in this life to march towards God as seen in the mysticism of the two religions. Even in matters of the relation of faith to reason, Christianity and Islam have developed many parallel doctrines. In fact in contrast to what some Christian sources have asserted, there is a Muslim parallel practically for *every* Christian position on the issue from Tertullian, St. Augustine, Anselm, and St. Thomas to Calvin and Luther and more recently Barth and Tillich and vice versa. When one ponders over even this incomplete list of shared elements, one becomes aware of how many basic doctrines and practices do indeed unite us especially if our religions were to be compared to what is held to be central in secular society. Nor can one side accuse the other of being opposed to the use of reason in matters of religion or lacking love.

Of course there are also walls that separate us. Otherwise Islam and Christianity would not have survived as separate religions as they have done providentially but the two seas would have commingled into a single ocean. God's Will seems to have commanded otherwise. In the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Din Rumī God addresses Moses and says, "Thou hast come to unify and not to separate." Surely, our task today and tomorrow is to follow this command but we cannot simply neglect the differences by pretending they do not exist. We hope that the common word between us and you will bring us closer together not because differences do not exist but in spite of their existence. As Frithjof Schuon once said, "Accord between religions is not possible in the human atmosphere but only in the Divine stratosphere." Our hope is that while being aware of the human atmosphere where different religious ideas and forms do exist willed by God, we can ascend through the love and knowledge of God and also sapience to the stratosphere where we can reach accord.

Meanwhile in this human atmosphere where we reside we see such apparently insurmountable differences as the emphasis of Islam on Divine Unity and negation of Trinity (at least as understood in the Qur'ān) and the Christian emphasis on the Trinity which is even transposed into the domain of Unity itself. We disagree on the episodes at the end of the life of Christ and of course his divinity in contrast to his being a major prophet of God. We do not see eye to eye about the relation between canonical law and secular law on the

one hand and *al-Shari'ah* and *al-qānun* on the other. While much of our ethics is similar we do have different views concerning sexuality and its relation to original sin, that is central to much of Christian thought but rejected by Islam.

In this context of similarities and contrasts we each follow the teachings of a religion that claims to have a universal message for the whole of humanity and this claim has played no small role in the long history of animosity between the two religions. It has led to religious wars, crusades, coercive missionary activity and much else that has colored and still colors the relation between the two religions. Christians accuse Muslims of violence without paying attention to their own history and to what the Native Americans of New England would have said about the relation of Christianity to violence had they survived to attend this conference. Muslims accuse Christians of not paying enough attention to the social teachings of religion based on justice while not pointing out sufficiently the unjust practices that go on in parts of the Islamic world. A number of people on both sides also tend to paint the other with the color of an extremist fringe, Christians using terrorism and Muslims the blasphemy against Islam, the Qur'ān and the Prophet and what has come to be known more generally as Islamophobia. Needless to say both terrorism in the Islamic world and Islamophobia do remain real but they do not determine the whole reality of Islamic-Christian understanding. Meanwhile, both sides accuse the other of not practicing what they preach.

Yes, these and many other impediments that have to be confronted head on and not simply ignored. On the social and political levels the two religions have to be also self-critical of their own societies and not simply surrender to the political forces of the two worlds in which they form a majority. On the theological level there must be in-depth dialogue if more external issues are to be solved. Without truth religious dialogue becomes simply political expediency and it is then better to leave it in the hands of diplomats rather than committed scholars of religion and theologians. Deep theological dialogue does not necessarily mean the surrender of one side to the other; it does, however, mean better understanding of the other and greater mutual respect. At least one can agree to disagree rather than casting anathema upon the other side. Of course the ideal would be to transcend the formal order altogether to reach the transcendent truth of which theological doctrines are so many crystallizations. That truth resides in the world of meaning beyond forms, in what Rūmi calls the "spiritual retreat of God." But until we get there we must be able to come together, to know each other, to

love one another, and to face together the many challenges posed by a world based on the forgetfulness of God. And it is precisely in this situation that a common word between us and you can play such a crucial role if there is sincerity and correct intention on both sides.

In light of a long history of contentions and confrontations, of theological differences irreducible on the theological level and the need to realize this fact, and of the unprecedented global crisis in which accord or discord between religions has become crucial, it becomes clear why the common word between us and you is of such significance. Surely “the common word” is a most efficacious way to bring about amity between Christianity and Islam without either side sacrificing the truth upon which it stands. And what can be more important to a religion than truth without which religion divorces itself from its very source. Did not Christ call himself the Truth and reference is made to God in the Qur’ān as *al-Haqq*, the Truth? It is of the utmost importance for us assembled here to realize that “the common word” that we are asked to accept and share does not at the same time demand of us to forgo the truth or to relativize it in the name of religious accord as happens in so much of the shallow ecumenism prevalent today that is willing to sacrifice truth for the sake of expediency.

The necessity of acceptance of the two commandments of the love of God and of the neighbor on the basis of the saying of Christ and hence Christian truth is evident to Christians. As for Muslims, the two principles are mentioned in the Qur’ān and *Hadith* and their acceptance is therefore necessary and is moreover seen by Muslims to be based solidly on Islamic teachings. Furthermore, it must be remembered that according to Islamic beliefs what has been brought by an earlier prophet and not explicitly abrogated by a later revelation still stands as an expression of truth and God’s commandment to and will for Muslims. In light of this belief, the two commandments of Christ are also commandments for Muslims even if they had been neither confirmed nor abrogated in the Qur’ān and *Hadith*. Christ is after all not only the founder of Christianity, but also a major Islamic prophet.

Coming now to the meaning of the two commandments, three related issues come to mind and need to be explained: the meaning of God, the meaning of love and the meaning of the love of God and neighbor. Without some accord on these issues, we would be attacked by those who stand against mutual harmony and comprehension on the subject of the very terms we are using in “the common word.” There are already those on the Christian side who assert that the Christian God is not the same as Allah, who is an

Arabic lunar deity or something like that. Such people who usually combine sheer ignorance with bigotry should attend a Sunday mass in Arabic in Bethlehem, Beirut, Amman or Cairo and see what Arabic term the Christians of these cities use for the Christian God. Nor is God simply to be identified with a member of the Christian Trinity as part of three divinities that some Muslims believe wrongly that Christians worship. Allah or God is none other than the One God of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. In speaking of the love of God, let us not accuse each other of referring to different gods. How can one study the Bible, including both the Old and the New Testament, and the Qur'ān, without accepting that we are all breathing throughout all the worlds created by these sacred scriptures within the same universe of Abrahamic monotheism? What could be more insidious or even demonic than trying to undercut the binding effect of Christ's two commandments by claiming that Christians and Muslims are referring to two different gods and not the single God "whose mercy embraces all," as the Qur'ān asserts?

As for love, it is a reality that transcends whatever one writes about it. As Rūmī said, when it came to love the pen broke and the ink dried. And yet so much has been written about the subject. One can either write nothing or fill libraries about love but finally one must experience love to know what it is. Love attaches the lover to the beloved, carries the lover through dales and valleys of joy and sorrow and finally leads to a union that is also a kind of death for *amor est mors*. The love of God is not only the highest form of love but in reality the only love of which all other loves are but shadows. To love God fully is to give ourselves wholly to Him, body, soul and mind not to speak of will and intelligence. We must give up our limited ego as that which defines us. The end of such love is what the Christian mystics call mystical union and to which Sufis refer in a somewhat different language but concerning the same reality as being consumed by the fire of love as a moth is immolated by the divine flame of the divine candle.

For the purpose of our present discourse in the same way that it is not necessary to enter into contentious theological discussions about the nature of God, there is no need to enter into an analysis of the modes, stages and states of love. Let us love God and leave the mystery of this attachment of each soul to its Creator to the Creator Himself. At all costs we should avoid considering our love of God to be superior to the love of the other for God. Such an illusory contention arises from our mistaking our own understanding of the love for God for that love itself and absolutizing that



understanding and of thereby inflating our egos in the guise of religious devotion and righteousness. Let us love God and leave Him to decide on the intensity and sincerity of our loves as well as of our differing views of Him. The Qur'ān invites Muslims explicitly to live at peace with followers of other religions and let God decide on the Day of Judgment concerning the truth or falsehood of wherein they differed.

As for the love of the neighbor, this command has been understood in a different manner over the ages. Today, it cannot include only our Muslim neighbor for Muslims, Christian neighbors for Christians or Jewish neighbors for Jews. It must also include followers of other religious communities, even non-religious communities and especially the non-human world. In fact if Muslims and Christians, not to speak of other groups, do not extend their love of the neighbor to the natural world, the consequences of the environmental crisis caused in fact by the lack of love of the neighbor in its larger reality will make other efforts more or less irrelevant.

The Qur'ān asserts that God created all of humanity from a single soul (*nafs wāhidah*). Nevertheless, strife even within a single family not to speak of between religions and nations continues to manifest itself. One might say that as a result of what Muslims call the fall (*hubūt*) and Christians original sin the state of confrontation and strife is endemic to the human condition. But God has also given us the means of transcending the abode of strife for one of peace, of overcoming that religious and ideological exclusivism which now endangers human existence in favor of that inclusivism of which we gathered here are partisans.

It is not, however, enough to speak of a common word between us and you or even to accept its tenets with our tongue. We must also have the correct intention and live these commandments within ourselves while setting examples for others. Let us love God with all our being which means also to accept His Unity and the unity of His Word that unite us. And let us love the neighbor, and more specifically our Muslim and Christian neighbors, not on the basis of mere sentimentality which can weaken or strengthen in time but on the never changing foundation of the Truth.

To live fully as a Muslim or Christian does not require anything less of us than loving the neighbor, whether he or she be Muslim or Christian, and to ask not “is he or she one of us,” but “is he or she one of His.”