

The Significance of the Amman Message and the Common Word

By Sohail Nakhooda

At a lecture given in Amman on 30th December 2008 at the 4th Annual Ambassadors' Forum organized by the Jordanian Foreign Ministry, Sohail Nakhooda discusses the importance and key achievements of two initiatives that are redefining intra-Muslim unity and interfaith relations.

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Your Excellencies

Assalam alaykum warahtullahi wabarakatuh. I am delighted to be here among such a distinguished gathering of Ambassadors and Diplomats of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to discuss two very special initiatives, which have their provenance in this country, and which are triggering a systemic change in Muslim religious discourse and outlook and in the relations between Islam and the West—namely the **Amman Message** and the **Common Word** initiatives.

Following a popular Chinese proverb, there are those today that think that we live in *interesting* times. I am rather of the opinion that we live in very *difficult* times. This is not to say that I subscribe to the pessimist school that sees no hope for the future, but I am rather one of those, like all of you as practitioners of the ancient art of diplomacy, who like to caution their optimism with an appropriate dose of realism. Both the **Amman Message** and the **Common Word**, are perfect examples of messages that

carry hope for the future, but are also based on a realistic assessment of the world we confront at the moment. They harbour no illusions, rather they help us face seemingly intractable problems and provide us ways of surmounting them.

We do not live in a golden age. Our world is changing at such a staggering pace that even *we* have difficulty keeping up with it. The promises of industrialization, urbanization, and scientific progress have not lived up to their expectations but ended up instead creating new, and more intractable problems. We now live in a world that is increasingly typified by three complex conditions: 1) **Complex disparities**: We have extreme disparities in income, health, education, social customs, access to employment and opportunity and political governance; 2) **Complex interdependence**: breathtaking developments in technology, travel and communication have revolutionized interaction between individuals, communities and societies; and 3) **Complex ignorance**: ignorance and fear of the “other” pervades communities. Islamophobia is alarmingly on the increase and so are other forms of xenophobia and also exclusivism, all of which have their roots on ignorance of the “other”.

But this is not all. The three conditions I have described above have, and will, generate a whole host of difficulties for humanity but when we couple this with aggressive foreign policy by powerful governments that do not distinguish friend from foe, then you have a cataclysmic scenario in the making that will lead to serious political and religious extremism and tension. And that is what we are facing today. An aggressive and stubborn neocon foreign policy, in the wake of the tragedy of 9/11, coupled with an equally stubborn and growing radical religious discourse from trans-national movements such as Al-Qaeda and other extremist branches of

reformist Islam, that have created hot spots in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine, and elsewhere. We are all too aware of the bloodshed, destruction and hatred that wars have caused in the last decade. And in the recent days the tragedy facing Gaza is no doubt going to stay in the conscience of people, and particularly Muslims around the world. The ability of conventional media to relay life situations in real time to our living rooms is giving rise to heightened feelings of anxiety and frustration.

The crisis of the last decade has led to internal turmoil in the Muslim ummah and the rise of radical Islamist movements (whether of the Sunni, Salafi and Shi'a varieties) have threatened traditional Muslim orthodoxy and its institutions that have for centuries defined the religious mainstream and sustained peace within and without. Islam is a religion of peace, first and foremost, and it gave rise to a glorious civilization—it is not a manifesto for violent political upheaval. With Islamist and puritanical religious groups capturing the frustration of the disenfranchised young (who in many Muslim countries form a substantial majority of the population); with the unrestrained unleashing of irresponsible fatwas from unqualified individuals; with the idolising of individuals who have neither authentic religious authority nor training but call for the killing of innocent people, Muslim or non-Muslim, with impunity—*it is time for bold measures and sustained engagement to reclaim the middle ground.*

It is this explosive scenario, that if unchecked, could have the makings of future world wars. With so many states possessing nuclear arsenals, we cannot even conceive of its ramifications. It is precisely in this historical moment that religious and political leaders need to play a leading role to stem the tide. And that answer came in the form of the **Amman Message**.

It came at a time when the Iraq situation threatened to implode, and shatter the delicate balance of Sunni and Shi'a unity, and the extremist rhetoric from marginal Muslim groups threatened to create internal schisms within the whole Ummah. There was an urgent need to rescue our religion from those who wished to institutionalize violence and terrorism.

You have already heard a brief history from Dr. Farouk Jarrar about the Amman Message promulgated by His Majesty King Abdullah II on November 9th, 2004 (during 27th Ramadan 1424 of the hijri calendar). The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute, under the leadership of His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, played a pivotal role in its shaping and development. The launch of The Amman Message was a defining moment in Muslim history. This is exactly what the Muslim communities needed: it *affirmed, articulated and delivered* a firm message on what is *True Islam and what is not*. It firmly upheld that terrorism or violence had no place in the faith. Through the crystallizing of the Three Points that followed, namely: 1) the recognition of the validity of the eight madhhabs in Islam along with the recognition of traditional Islamic theology (Asha'ism), Islamic Mysticism (Sufism) and moderate Salafism; 2) that it was forbidden to declare apostasy (takfir) on any one who followed the above; and 3) that fatwas could only be given by those qualified to do so and only within the interpretative boundaries of the eight madhhabs. These were the "checks and balances" that our communities desperately needed in order to combat distortion and sedition in its midst that was hijacking the image of Islam. It called for tolerance and unity in the Muslim world. It re-emphasized Islam's core values of compassion, mutual respect, tolerance, acceptance and freedom of religion. It was the first ever formal "pluralistic mutual inter-recognition" in Islam.

This, *in of itself*, was good news enough for world peace, but there was something too that was perhaps even more significant and that came about with the Amman Message: *a near universal consensus (ijma) on a theological and moral issue*. Islam has tremendous diversity of opinion within its theological, legal, and mystical schools, it does not have a *magisterium* or a central authority or a Pope—so the coalescing of a venerable consensus of such magnitude around the Amman Message was practically unheard of in our religion for centuries. Over thirty fatwas by all major Muslim religious scholars were prepared on the issue, and through a succession of conferences and summits around the Muslim world, and through the months that followed its publication, over 500 endorsements of the Amman Message and its three points from religious, political, and civic authorities, were achieved. Sheikh Muhammad Tantawi, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Mufti Taqi Usmani, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah, Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, Ayatolla Sistani, and others and grand muftis from several Muslim countries—are some of the luminaries who endorsed it. This is no small feat. Such a consensus was facilitated by the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute, whose Fellows include over one hundred of the most respected and most senior religious scholars and leaders from the Muslim world. In Jordan, we have the mechanism and the infrastructure, and the authority of the noble lineage of the Hashemites, to make such a historic *ijma* (consensus) possible. No one, hitherto, and certainly no country, has been able to achieve this.

The religious, social and political implications of the Amman Message are many. It is making its impact felt in inter-Islamic treaties, in national and international legislation, in teaching curricula in schools and universities, and even in sermons in mosques and madrasas. It is our hope that the Amman Message becomes an indispensable factor in the formation of the

religious attitude of each Muslim and a means by which we can heal communities who have been destroyed by political and religious strife. As George Yeo, the Foreign Minister of Singapore, declared in the 60th Session of the U.N. General Assembly (about the Amman Message): “Without this clarification, the war against terrorism would be much harder to fight.”

The theological robustness and fecundity of the **Amman Message** gave rise to yet another, and no less historic, development—the **Common Word** initiative. The Amman Message already had the seeds of an interfaith message to the world that would be a reflection of the respect that moderate, traditional and orthodox Islam has for other religious traditions. What gave it impetus, however, was the unfortunate lecture that Pope Benedict XVI delivered in Regensburg on September 12, 2006. You are well aware of what followed next and the stress it caused in the Muslim streets, so soon after the Danish cartoon incident. That the leader of the largest Christian denomination should legitimize the caricaturing of Islam with unreason and violence, was felt to be by most Muslim religious leaders and scholars a serious and unjust provocation.

In such critical situations, at such momentous junctures, communities can either take the easiest human option, that is to aggravate the problem with more provocation in return, or they can choose the harder but more noble road of dialogue as a way to resolve differences. And our Muslim leaders took the latter option: they wrote an Open Letter to Pope Benedict and signed by 38 interdenominational Muslim leaders. This was yet another initiative in which H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad played a pivotal role along with Jordan’s Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute. The consensus platform was made possible yet again because of the infrastructure that

had already been developed by the Amman Message and the leadership and vision that the Hashemite Kingdom had provided and here it was beginning to bear fruit in helping the mainstream voices of Islam come together and furnish articulate responses that bore the stamp of wisdom and theological sophistication to issues which are critical.

The impact of the Open Letter was unprecedented. It received worldwide coverage and praise for its willingness to help diffuse tensions with the Vatican and build better relations for the future. The Vatican did not know what to make of it, for once it was taken aback, this was not the kind of rhetoric they were used to and it silenced internal critics who encouraged greater confrontation with the Muslim world. But there was more to be done, and what followed was even more significant.

H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad took upon the onerous task of writing a comprehensive and detailed document entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* that called Muslims and Christians to a common foundation and human fraternity based on the dual commandments of Love of God and Love of Neighbour. The document was theologically rigorous and was thoroughly checked and approved by some of the most senior and authoritative Muslim ulema and was published on October 13th 2007 along with 138 signatories (now almost 300) and addressed to the leaders of Christian Churches and denominations all over the world. What followed was nothing short of Providential. It led to an epistemic change in Muslim-Christian relations as we know it. Nothing more, nothing less. It became a fully fledged and the biggest and most influential international interfaith initiative that gained traction in both the Muslim, Christian and secular worlds.

At the heart of this document was the recognition that Muslims and Christians form almost half of humankind and that peaceful relations between them have a positive effect on world peace. Muslims and Christians need to be ambassadors to the noblest ideals of their faith and work together on common grounds to promote the well being of the planet by mobilizing their spiritual, moral and social resources. Global Peace and avoiding a possible “clash of civilisations” are the primary focus of the initiative.

Prior to the coming of the **Common Word**, Christian-Muslim relations, as we know it, in its formal set up, faced an identity crisis. There was skepticism among the Muslim and Christian laity about its effectiveness and relevance. It was an ivory-tower endeavour, an exclusive club, a meeting ground for the same people endlessly discussing the same doctrinal issues. There was no shortage of interfaith initiatives nationally and internationally but it was always a case of lots of motion but no movement. The **Common Word** initiative did not suffer from the same problems. It was built on consensus, just like the **Amman Message**, and it brought together not marginal or ultra progressive figures, but the most authoritative and influential Muslim religious leaders who carried enormous influence in the streets of the Muslim world and in their communities. Its significance was that it was a call from the Centre and not from the Periphery of Muslim discourse and so everyone had to take notice. Its message commanded attention.

The Common Word took everyone by surprise. Good ideas always have an element of surprise. It captured the hearts and minds of religious leaders,

academics and the wider public and it became a formidable brand. Here are some key developments that are important to reiterate:

1. Since the launch of *A Common Word* in October 2007, over 60 leading Christian figures have responded to it in one form or another, including Pope Benedict XVI, Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II of Russia, and the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams.
2. On November 2007, over 300 leading U.S. Evangelical leaders also responded in an open letter in the *New York Times*. This was an unprecedented show of support.
3. Muslim Scholars signing the initiative increased to around 300, with over 460 Islamic organizations and associations endorsing it.
4. *A Common Word* has led to a number of spontaneous local grass-roots and community level-initiatives all over the world in places as far apart as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Canada, South Africa, the USA, and the UK.
5. Over 600 articles—carried by thousands of press outlets—have been written about *A Common Word* in English alone.
6. Around 200,000 people have visited the Official Website of *A Common Word* for further details.
7. *A Common Word* has already been the subject of graduate dissertations in Western universities in various countries (including at Harvard University, the Theological Seminary at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and the Center for Studies of Islam in the UK).
8. *A Common Word* has been the subject of major international conferences at Yale University, USA, and at Cambridge University (UK) and Lambeth Palace, and studied at World Economic Forum in Spring 2008 and the Mediterranean dialogue of Cultures in November 2008. The Yale Conference was particularly significant in

that it brought leading American Evangelical figures to discuss interfaith issues with Muslim leaders, many for the first time. Given the influence of Evangelical leaders in American government, such engagement can only herald positive outcomes for the future and build trust and cooperation.

9. *A Common Word* was also the basis for the First Annual Catholic-Muslim forum held at the Vatican in November 2008.
10. *A Common Word* was the central impetus behind the Wamp-Ellison Resolution in the U.S. House of Representatives which passed in 2008, and it was commended in this Resolution.
11. *A Common Word* received the U.K.'s Association of Muslim Social Scientist 2008 *Building Bridges Award*, and Germany's *Eugen Biser Award* of 2008.

And this is just the beginning. The Common Word initiative has a packed agenda for the coming years and set of projects that it will be developing with various Christian communities throughout the world that will further strengthen its message and foster better interfaith relations and these will include film documentaries; book publishing and translation; training; a possible European-based peace institute with the Common Word enshrined in its charter; further regional high level conferences; and a variety of grass roots initiatives. Also, through the number of other projects that are now strategically affiliated to the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute such as Altafsir.com, WISE University, Islamica Magazine, etc—the principles of the Amman Message and the Common Word will reach an ever-increasing nexus of influential people, God willing.

The implications of both the Amman Message and the Common Word I am sure are obvious to you all. Religion does and will continue to play a vital

role in the life of individuals, communities and nations. Is religion an important part of one's life? In many Muslim countries the answers are as high as 80-90%. In the US it is 70%, in the UK/Europe around 40%. Clearly religion matters but we, in our capacities as leaders, scholars, ambassadors and diplomats, have to ensure that it does not become a cause for fear or hatred. A recent Gallup Poll showed that most Christians want better relations between Christianity and Islam but believe most Muslims don't. Most Muslims want better relations but believe most Christians don't. Most Americans think most Muslims do not accept other religions. Actually most Muslims say they want greater, not lesser interaction between religions.

Both the **Amman Message** and the **Common Word** are helping to institutionalise a more positive and open, yet mainstream and orthodox, discourse that will, God willing, empower our Muslim communities and allow them to engage positively with the world and ease the tensions and frustrations that so malign our present condition. Religion has to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

On a personal note, I do not believe the success of either of the two projects could have been achieved elsewhere. The Malaysian Islam Hadari initiative went nowhere. The Saudi interfaith initiative that culminated in a meeting at the UN this November, was colourful, yet it is already succumbing to considerable criticism because Saudi Arabia does not share a solid enough experience of religious diversity. The Jordanian monarchy, on the other hand, not only commands the respect from the Muslim world for its noble Hashemite lineage and for its political wisdom, but it also has a tremendous and deeply-rooted respect for religious plurality within the

Islamic tradition and a track record of coexistence and respect for the rights of Christians.

Your Excellencies

We hope that you will be able to promote the principles of the Amman Message and the Common Word initiatives in the countries where you are presently serving.

1. Both messages can play a critical role in the development of the mainstream and moderate voices within the Muslim community but also provide Muslims with the tools to reach out to their Christian neighbours and begin taking the first steps to mutual cooperation and harmony. It is important that you are able to share it with mainstream Muslim and Christian community leaders in your country and convey to them the progress and developments that have been taking place.
2. Organising small seminars to introduce key Muslim leaders to both messages and encouraging them to also endorse it online (www.ammanmessage.com, and www.acommonword.com). This would bring not only Muslim leaders but also social activists and interfaith practitioners discussing the two initiatives. We need to reach mosques and churches in each country to develop a common approach.
3. You should ensure that you make references to the Amman Message and Common Word initiatives when possible in media briefings. We need to engage more local and national media to cover both initiatives and be aware of their impact.

4. Encourage key journalists in radio, newspapers, magazines, and the blogosphere, to write about the two initiatives. Journalists are always looking for stories!
5. There is a tremendous need for such initiatives to take root in every country and it is our firm belief that it could help ease tensions in countries as diverse as the US, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Malaysia. In cases where there is antagonism and fear, or there is a serious breakdown in relations, urging Muslim leaders to adopt it in key conflict scenarios could be an important step in conflict resolution.
6. The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute has several key publications on the Amman Message and the Common Word and those should be available in sufficient quantities in your respective diplomatic mission offices. Also, both of its websites (www.ammanmessage.com, and www.acommonword.com) have extensive resources of benefit to scholar, student, media professional, etc. The websites are regularly updated and all key developments related to the Amman Message and the Common Word can be found there.
7. Promote other Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute projects such as the Altafsir.com, Islamica Magazine, WISE University, etc, that further both messages and which reach specific audiences and help popularize them.
8. It is important that the spirit of the Amman Message and the Common Word trickle-down to the masses and to religious and civil society institutions. We need to push for a sea-change in the way that our communities—Muslim and Christian—understand the importance of co-existence and mutual responsibility.

May God Most High bless both initiatives and may it become a source of hope and reconciliation for Muslims, Christians and the whole world.

Thank you.

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