

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful
May Peace and Blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad*

Eugen Biser Award Ceremony Speech

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“A Common Word Between Us and You”:
Theological Motives and Expectations

Professor Dr. Eugen Biser; Your Highnesses, Eminencies and Excellencies; dear friends; ladies and gentlemen,

Al-Salaamu Alaykum, Pax Vobiscum;

In the middle of the eastern Jordanian desert, in a place called *Safawi*, miles away from anything, from any landmark or any human traces, there stands a unique, solitary tree. This tree is around 1500 years old and there are no other trees to be seen for dozens of miles in any direction. Despite its age and breadth, it is only about 6-8 meters tall. It is a *butum* tree, a kind of pistachio tree to be found in our part of the world. I will come back to the significance of this tree in a few moments, God Willing, but for now I want to say that it was in fact under this tree that *A Common Word* was born. For in September 2007, one month before the launch of *A Common Word*, I had

the privilege to visit this tree twice, once in the company of a number of the scholars behind the Common Word initiative (including Shaykh Habib Ali, who is here today), and it was under this tree that we prayed to God (or at least I did) to grant *A Common Word* success.

I have been asked now to speak about “*A Common Word Between Us and You*”: *Theological Motives and Expectations*. So let me address these three elements in order, starting with an explanation and a review of “*A Common Word Between Us and You*”, then discussing the Theological Motives behind it, and finally revealing our expectations in issuing it.

(Part I) “*A Common Word Between Us and You*”:

A Review One Year On.

Over the last year since the *A Common Word* initiative was launched, I do not think it is an exaggeration to say it has become the world’s leading interfaith dialogue initiative between Christians and Muslims specifically. It was launched on October 13th 2007 initially as an open letter signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars and intellectuals (including such figures as the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bosnia, Russia and Istanbul) to the leaders of the Christian Churches and denominations of the entire world, including His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. In essence it proposed, based on verses from the Holy Qur’an and the Holy Bible, that Islam and Christianity share, at their core, the twin ‘golden’ commandments of the paramount importance of loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Based on this joint common ground, it called for peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims worldwide.

Since its launch in October 2007, over 60 leading Christian figures gradually responded to it in one form or another, including His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI; His Beatitude Orthodox Patriarch Alexi II of Russia; Archbishop of Canterbury the Very Reverend Dr Rowan Williams, and the head of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Mark Hanson (see: ‘Christian Responses’ at www.acommonword.com). On November 2007, over 300 leading US Evangelical leaders also responded to it in an open letter in the *New York Times*, and over the course of 2008 the Muslim Scholars signing the initiative swelled to around 300, with over 460 Islamic organizations and associations also endorsing it. It 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, Bangladesh, Canada, the USA, and Great Britain (see: ‘New Fruits’ at www.acommonword.com), and we keep hearing informal reports of other activities based upon it in various parts of the globe. It has been the subject of major international conferences at Yale University, and at Cambridge University and Lambeth Palace, and has been studied in such gatherings as the World Economic Forum in Spring 2008 and the Mediterranean Dialogue of Cultures in France in November 2008. It was also the basis for the historic First Annual Catholic-Muslim Forum held recently at the Vatican, in November 2008. Moreover, it was the central impetus of the Wamp-Ellison Resolution of 2008 in the U.S. House of Representatives. It also received the UK’s Association of Muslim Social Scientist 2008 Building Bridges Award, and today it receives Eugen Biser Award of 2008.

There is an equal barrage of activity planned for 2009, including a major documentary film, three books that we know of so far (Yale, Georgetown and perhaps Oxford University Press); a joint Christian-Muslim sensitivity manual, an important political conference planned at Georgetown University, Washington DC; a large religious conference planned in Malaysia and possibly a third in the Philippines. Also planned are two high-level meetings between Muslims and the Orthodox Churches, and between Muslims and the World Council of Churches; a multi-lingual Muslim-Christian ‘recommended reading list’ joint website with Yale, Lambeth Palace and possibly also the Vatican (to serve as a voluntary basis for school and university curricula); a Muslim Theological Press Conference in Spain; a major European-based global Christian-Muslim peace institute with *A Common Word* ensconced in its charter; a University campus-based Common Word student initiative in the USA; a joint-design *Common Word* Muslim-Christian string of Prayer-beads; a number of ‘trickledown’ projects to try to bring the Common Word to Churches and Mosques all over the world; and finally the continuation of the practical work planned at the meetings in Yale, Cambridge/Lambeth Palace and the Vatican. In short, I think one may fairly say that in its first year *A Common Word* achieved—by the Grace of God, *Al-HamduLillah*, historically unprecedented ‘global traction’, and is hoping in its second year—with the Will of God, *in sha Allah*—to achieve historically unprecedented ‘global trickledown’. God is Bounteous! *Allah Karim!*

(Part II) The Theological Motives behind *A Common Word*

Exactly one month after His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI's controversial Regensburg lecture on September 13th 2006, an international group of 38 Muslim Scholars and intellectuals (including the three of us assembled here today) issued an *Open Letter to His Holiness* in what we thought was a very gentle and polite way of pointing out some of His Holiness factual mistakes in his lecture. We did not get a satisfactory answer from the Vatican beyond a perfunctory courtesy visit to me, a month later, from some Vatican officials. So exactly a year after our first letter (and thus a year and a month after the Regensburg lecture) we increased our number by exactly 100, to 138, (symbolically saying that we are many and that we are not going away) and issued, based on the Holy Qur'an, "*A Common Word between Us and You*". To ensure a more favorable response this time and to set the proper tone and appropriate momentum we hired a Public Relations firm and co-ordinated with a number of our important Christian friends to publicize some early positive, Christian responses from them. This led, by the Grace of God, to all that I have just mentioned.

We had honestly—as is evident from the genesis of this story, and as is evident I believe in the very text of *A Common Word* itself—only one motive: peace. We were aiming to try to spread peace and harmony between Christians and Muslims all over the world, not through governments and treaties but on the all-important popular and mass level, through the world's most influential popular leaders precisely—that is to say through the leaders of the two religions. We wanted to stop the drumbeat of what we feared was a growing popular consensus (on both sides) for world-wide (and thus cataclysmic and perhaps apocalyptic) Muslim-Christian jihad/crusade. We were keenly aware, however, that peace efforts required also another element: knowledge. We thus aimed to try spread proper basic knowledge of

our religion in order to correct and abate the constant and unjust vilification of Islam, in the West especially.

I need hardly go over all the factors leading us to believe in a Muslim-Christian global ‘Clash of Civilizations’, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. These include: (1) Jerusalem and the Palestine question, (2) Discontentment with US Foreign Policy (especially the war in Iraq), (3) terrorism, (4) fundamentalism and fundamentalist propaganda (on both sides), (5) missionary activity (also on both sides), and (6) deeply rooted, historical, cultural and racial, misunderstanding, suspicion and even loathing. Thus now, according to the results of the largest international religious surveys in history (as outlined in a recently-published seminal book by Professor John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed), 60% of Christians harbour prejudice against Muslims and 30% of Muslims reciprocate. Quite clearly the grounds for fear of war and religious genocides—as the Grand Mufti of Bosnia here today will personally attest—are starkly real.

Having said what our motive was, I want to emphasize what our motives *were not*, in view of some of the strange suspicions and speculations we have read about on the internet. I repeat some of my words at Yale University:

1. *A Common Word* was not intended—as some have misconstrued—to trick Christians or to foist Muslim Theology on them, or even to convert them to Islam.

2. *A Common Word* was not intended to reduce both our religions to an artificial union based on the Two Commandments: indeed in Matthew 22:40 Jesus Christ the Messiah (*‘alahi Al-Salaam*) was quite specific (“*On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*” (Matthew

22:40): “*Hang*” not “*are* (reduced to)”. It was simply an attempt to find a theologically correct pre-existing *essential* common ground (albeit interpreted perhaps differently) between Islam and Christianity, rooted in our sacred texts and in their common Abrahamic origin, in order to stop our deep-rooted religious mutual suspicions from being an impediment to behaving properly towards each other. It was, and is, an effort to ensure that religions behave as part of the solution, and are not misused to become part of the problem. Indeed, the Two Commandments give us guidelines and a concrete, shared standard of behaviour not only to what to expect from the other but also to how we must ourselves *behave* and *be*. We believe we can and must hold ourselves and each other to this shared standard.

3. *A Common Word* was not intended to deny that God loved us first, as some Christians have opined. The knowledge that God loved man before man loved God is so obvious in Islam that we did not think we had to make it explicit. It is obvious because God obviously existed before His creation of the world and man. It is also evident in the very sacred formula that starts every chapter in the Holy Qur’an but one, and that begins every single legitimate act of any Muslim’s entire life—*Bism Allah Al-Rahman Al-Rahim, In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*. Indeed, there is a *hadith qudsi* (a ‘holy saying’¹), wherein God says that His Name is *Al-Rahman* (the Lovingly Compassionate) and that the word for ‘womb’ (*Al-Rahm*) comes from His Name, and thus implying that God created the world out of an internal overflowing of love. Indeed, creation out of *Rahmah* (Loving Compassion) is also seen in the Holy Qur’an in beginning in the *Sura of Al-Rahman*, which says:

¹ *Sunan Al-Tirmithi*, no.1907.

*Al-Rahman / Hath Taught the Quran / He hath created Man /
He hath taught him speech. (Al-Rahman, 55:1-4)*

In other words, the very Divine Name *Al-Rahman* should be understood as containing the meaning of ‘The Creator-through-Love’, and the Divine Name *Al-Rahim* should be understood as containing the meaning of ‘The Saviour through Mercy’.

4. *A Common Word* was not intended to exclude Judaism as such or diminish from its importance. We started with Christianity bilaterally simply because Islam and Christianity are the two largest religions in the world and in history, and so in that sense, Islamic-Christian dialogue is the most critical: for there are about 2 billion Christians in the world and 1.5 billion Muslims and only 25 million Jews. But this does not preclude our having as Muslims other conversations with those of any other faith, bilaterally or multilaterally, or even with those of no faith at all. Moreover, Muslims do not object to the idea of a Judeo-Christian tradition (even though all 3 religions share the same Abrahamic origins and traditions), and do not object to not being invited to all the Jewish-Christian dialogues, so there is no need for Jews to feel excluded by a Muslim-Christian conversation. For that matter there is no need for Christians to feel excluded by a Judeo-Islamic dialogue. We can all, however, understand Jewish fears about this dialogue, and note that there have been Jewish observers invited at the conferences in Yale and Cambridge.

On the other hand, I would like to say also that *A Common Word* does not signal that Muslims are prepared to deviate from or concede one iota of any their convictions in reaching out to Christians—nor, I expect, the

opposite. Let us be crystal-clear: *A Common Word* is about equal peace, NOT about capitulation.

Indeed, some have suggested that framing our extended hand in the language of “love” is such a concession, but I assure you that this is not at all accurate, nor is it a ‘concession’: rather, it has been a particular pleasure to be able to focus in our initiative on this frequently underestimated aspect of our religion: the Grand Principle of Love. Indeed, we have over 50 near-synonyms for love in the Holy Qur’an — English does not have the same linguistic riches and connotations. If Muslims do not usually use the same language of love as Christians in English, it is perhaps because the word ‘love’ for Muslims frequently implies different things for Muslims than it does Christians.

Our use of the language of ‘love’ in *A Common Word* is simply then a recognition that human beings have the same souls everywhere—however, corrupted or pure—and thus that the experience of love must have something in common everywhere, even if the objects of love are different, and even if the ultimate love of God is stronger than all other loves. God says in the Holy Qur’an:

Yet of mankind are some who take unto themselves (objects of worship which they set as) rivals to God, loving them with a love like (that which is the due) of God (only) - [but] those who believe are stauncher in their love for God.... (Al-Baqarah, 2:165)

(Part III) The Expectations behind *A Common Word*

Despite our prayers for success—in truth I remember praying to God to grant success beyond ‘what can possibly be imagined’ for the initiative—we had no expectations whatsoever, only some hope in God’s generosity, and we were all resolved to accept a complete failure. This prayer itself was a gift from God, for it is not within man’s power to achieve sincerity and detachment if God does not grant them to him—*with man this is impossible, with God all things are possible*. However, I have to say, *Praise God, Al-HamduLillah*, that I am continually astonished by the spectacular way God has answered the prayer that was His gift in the first place. I suppose that is one of the great wonders of God’s love for man: He rewards human beings for gifts he has given them in the first place. He keeps giving and giving, and all that He requires from us is to accept! *Subhan Allah!* Glory be to God!

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Now I want to return to the tree that I mentioned at the start of my talk, the tree under which prayers were offered for *A Common Word*. Despite today being in a completely desolate place, there lay until the last century not far from this tree the clear remains of an ancient Roman Road and of a later but also ancient Byzantine Monastery. And according to the earliest Islamic historical sources, some 1400 years, on one of the caravan roads from Arabia to Syria, a nine-year-old Meccan boy named Muhammad bin Abdullah from the clan of Hashem (may peace and blessing be upon him) travelled with his uncle Abu Talib to Syria from his home in Eastern Arabia. A cloud hung over him wherever he went, and when he sat under a tree in the desert, the tree too lowered its branches to shield him from the desert heat. A local Christian monk named *Bahira*, noticed these two miracles from a little distance, and summoned the caravan and the boy, and

after courteously examining and speaking to him, *Bahira* witnessed the boy as a future Prophet to his people. The monk had a book with him that led him to expect a Prophet among the Arabs, who were descended from Ishmael the eldest son of the Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him). Perhaps it was the Torah, for Genesis 49:10 and Deuteronomy 18:15 seem to predict a prophet that is not the Messiah and not Judah but from the ‘brethren’ of the Jews, but we do not know. Howbeit, what is most important here is that the selfsame blessed tree underneath which *A Common Word* was born, also itself gave rise, 1400 years ago to the first harmonious contact between the founder of Islam and Christianity! Indeed, it is immensely significant that God draws a direct analogy between a good word and a good tree (and both their fruits) in the Holy Qur’an as follows:

Seest thou not how God coineth a similitude: A good word is as a good tree, its root set firm, its branches in heaven, / Giving its fruit at every season by permission of its Lord ? God coineth the similitudes for mankind in order that they may reflect. / And the similitude of a bad word is as a bad tree, uprooted from upon the ground, possessing no stability. / God confirmeth those who believe by a firm saying in the life of the world and in the Hereafter, and God sendeth wrong-doers astray. And God doeth what He will. (Ibrahim, 14:24-27)

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Finally, I would like to say something about what you are all doing here today, as I see it. You are honouring strange people, whom you do not know, from far parts of the world that you have never been to, and from a religion that has always been considered by your own to be heretical at best. You have each taken much effort, time and money to do this and to be here today. You are giving them your treasure, the treasure of the Eugen Biser Foundation, that is to say its award. And since *where your treasure is, there*

will your heart be also (Matthew, 6:21), I know that you are giving something from the heart, for indeed you are not obliged to do so. You are meeting our open hands with even more open hearts, for you all know there may be many other Christians who will criticize you for doing this, yet you do so anyway out of conviction. This applies to everyone here starting with their excellencies Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, the German Federal Minister of the Interior; Bavarian State Minister Siegfried Schneider; and Mayor of the City of Munich Christian Ude (who have all taken time out of their busy schedules to be here today); to His Royal Highness the Duke of Bavaria and Her Highness the Countess Rose Von Konigsdorff, who have supported this prize; to the companies who have sponsored it; to the journalists who seek to promote it; to the guests who have generously come to share this joy with us, and most of all to Professor Dr. Eugen Biser himself; and to his colleagues working with the Biser Foundation: Professor Dr. Paul Kirchhof; Professor Dr. Richard Heinzmann; Dr. Heiner Köster; Madame Marianne Koster; Bishop Dr. Johannes Friedrich; Bishop Dr. Hans-Jochen Jaschke, and all those others who volunteer their time and efforts to make this event possible. I personally witnessed these intentions in the discussions with the friends from the Biser Foundation who came to my house in Jordan a few months ago to discuss the award. I thus say to you all that you have all, today at least, *loved the neighbour as yourselves* as called for in the Gospel² by Jesus Christ (may peace and blessings be upon him) and have even *loved the stranger as thyself* as called for in *Leviticus* (19:34). You have today *fulfilled the law* spoken of by St. Paul in *Romans* (13:8), and you have accepted the *Common Word between Us and You* called for by the Holy Qur'an. So may

² In *Matthew* [22:34-40], *Mark* [12:29-31] and *John* [13:35; 15:12 and 17],

God bless you as peacemakers and reward your beautiful intentions.
Jazakum Allah kulli Khair. Wal-Salaamu Alaykum wa Rahmat Allah wa Barakatuhu.

Thank-you.