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**FINAL PAPER**

“Common Word: Principles of Respect:  
Transforming Interfaith Dialogue to Interreligious Solidarity for Justice”

By: Robert D. Crane, Ph.D  
(Independent Researcher & Scholar, Washington, VA)

Recognition of the essential commonalities among the world religions, and especially among the three Abrahamic religions, as well as perspective on the differences, require above all respect for each other. The last five years of the third millennium's first decade, from 2005 through 2009, witnessed an unprecedented movement toward mutual understanding and practical cooperation in addressing issues of conscience.

This movement culminated in what is known as the “Common Word,” which was the equivalent of a universal Muslim fatwa of guidance for both intra-faith and inter-faith cooperation. I was invited to critique this process at the annual convention of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists held at the Harvard Divinity School on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008, in my presentation entitled “Transforming Interfaith Dialogue to Interfaith Solidarity for Justice.”

This bold venture in interfaith cooperation started in response to Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg speech of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, which was widely perceived as an attack on Islam as a religion and as a radical change from the interfaith outreach of his predecessor, John Paul II. This helped to spark intra-faith conferences that year, following the Amman Message of July, 2005, at which the leading Islamic scholars of the world convened in Amman, Jordan, to

condemn the growing practice, known as *takfir*, among Muslim extremists to condemn as apostates those who disagree with them.

This was the first such universal fatwa by all six of the Islamic schools of law in many decades. This was designed to launch a global process of intra-faith dialogue and cooperation among Muslims. It was obvious that the first step in inter-faith understanding and cooperation must be intra-faith cooperation within each of the major world religions, based on understanding that the real clash of civilizations is not among civilizations but within each of them.

The first initiative at the inter-faith level following this intra-faith opening was the Open Letter to the Pope on October 12, 2006, in which thirty-eight authoritative scholars from every branch of Islam for the first time spoke comprehensively with one voice about the true teachings of Islam. This was followed by a letter of September 13, 2007, from 138 authoritative Islamic scholars, entitled “A Common Word Between Us and You,” which was even more inclusive than the first one and for the first time since the days of the Prophet Muhammad, *salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa salam*, declared the “common ground” between Christianity and Islam.

In November, 2007, a group of scholars at Yale Divinity School drafted a reply to A Common Word, entitled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to ‘A Common Word Between Us and You’,” which was endorsed by more than 300 leading Christian scholars in an effort to reorient Muslim-Christian relations away from “a clash of civilizations.” This, in turn, led to the first of a series of conferences beginning at Yale University on July 24<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2008, which were followed by four more at Cambridge University, The Vatican, Georgetown, and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Jordan. This pioneering process was enriched by parallel efforts, beginning with the conference held by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Madrid at the end of July, 2008, to bring Jewish scholars into the process for the first time.

The success of this global movement, which is unique in the history of the Abrahamic religions, depends first of all on the role of respect among the followers of these religions for each other. The Qur'anic guidelines focus on three basic principles emphasized throughout the Qur'an.

The three principles, which are pervasive throughout the Qur'an, are:

- 1) Freedom of religion, which includes equality in human dignity, unity in diversity, universal conditions for salvation, and equality of the prophets;
- 2) Love, which includes one's personal relationship with God, forgiveness, and peaceful reconciliation; and
- 3) Compassionate justice, which includes personal righteousness and normative law.

Together these three lead to respect for Jews and Christians and to acceptance of them as fellow peoples of the book.

## **Freedom of Religion**

### **1. Equality in Human Dignity**

Immediately following the “throne verse,” which is the most beautiful verse describing the attributes of God, in the second surah, *Surah al Baqara*, is verse 257. It states simply, “Let there be no compulsion in religion (*la ikraha fi al din*).”

This is axiomatic because absolute truth does exist and it is human instinct to seek it, but no person or community can know more than a portion of this truth. Certainly no one should claim to possess it to the exclusion of others, because this would be the same as claiming to be God. This is clear from scholarly interpretation of the statement in the throne verse, “He knows all that lies open before men and all that is hidden from them, whereas they cannot attain to

any of his knowledge except what He wills [them to attain]." Some scholars consider that this refers to earth and heaven, but the meaning is essentially the same.

The word *din* used here for religion is the broadest of several related terms and refers to the unchanging spiritual truths that have been preached by every one of God's prophets. Twice the Qur'an refers to the *shar'*, which refers to the normative jurisprudential principles common to Judaism, Christianity, and all human communities. The term *din* in reference to freedom of religion includes also the more restrictive terms *minhaj*, which refers to an entire way of life based on one's own conscience and the wisdom of one's community, and *shar'ah*, which refers to the governing laws of the particular community. The still more restrictive term, *shari'ah*, is reserved for the normative principles and specific regulations that are binding only on those who profess to be Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad, *salla Allahu 'alayhi wa salam*, was specifically ordered to treat all people equally regardless of their religion. Shortly after the throne verse we find Verse 2:272, which reads, "It is not for you, O Prophet, to bring people to the path of right guidance, since it is God [alone] who guides whom He will." The circumstance of this revelation was the Prophet's advice to his companions to give charity only to his own followers in Medina who were poor. The above revelation came immediately, whereupon the Prophet enjoined his followers to disburse charity based on personal need without regard to religion. Freedom of religion means freedom for all persons to be treated equally in dignity as human beings.

The reason for this requirement of equal treatment is the requirement of respect for every person's free will. Surah Yunus 10:99-100 reads: "If God had willed, everyone would have believed. Will you then compel humankind to believe against their will? No soul will ever attain to faith except by the Will of God." As a moral being, every person is free to discriminate and choose between right and wrong and to use one's reason in conforming to one's God-willed nature, but this is possible only through the grace of God.

## **2. Unity in Diversity**

Throughout the Qur'an, we are asked to see the coherence of the universe in the diversity that points to its Creator. If uniformity were the norm, there would be only one standard tree, one standard cloud, and one uniform sunset all over the world. Furthermore, we are directed to see that all beings are created to form pairs and with a nature that seeks community. This communal nature applies also to religion.

Sur'ah al Ma'ida 5:48 reads thus: "To you have we given the scriptures, just as we have given scriptures to people before you. We have protected your scripture [the Qur'an] in its entirety. So, judge among people from what knowledge has come to you, and do not be carried over by your vain desires. Unto every one of you We have appointed a [different] governing system of law (*shir'ah*) and a [different] way of life (*minhaj*). If God had so willed, all humanity would have been a single community. God's plan is to test you in what each one of you has received [in both scriptures and inspiration]. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of all people is to God. God [alone] will tell you the truth about matters over which you dispute."

This is why the immediately preceding verse, 5:47, states: "Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed in it, for those who do not judge in the light of what God has bestowed from on high are truly the iniquitous." In other words unity in diversity can come only when the diverse paths are respected as legitimate in the plan of God, even though the most comprehensive expression of truth may be found in the Qur'an, after which no further revelation is necessary.

## **3. Universal Conditions for Salvation**

One of the clearest and most insistent messages throughout the Qur'an and in the teachings and practice of the Prophet Muhammad was the universality of

salvation within the various religions that have developed in various times and places.

Only three conditions are given as the requirements for salvation. These are: 1) belief in One God; 2) belief in the justice of God both in this world and the next; and 3) the practice of good works.

Near the beginning of the Qur'an in the second surah, Baqarah 2:62, we have the standard formulation: "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish Scriptures, the Christians (those who follow the teachings of the Gospel), and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward from their Lord, and they need have no fear, nor shall they grieve."

The Sabians may refer to a specific people, but, like much of the Qur'an, probably is more generic in referring to all monotheistic peoples, as well as to every individual who follows his own human nature and recognizes the essence of what all the prophets have taught. Muslims in the East, from Persia to the Pacific, have always included the Lord Buddha in this category. One of the early revelations in the Qur'an, Surah al Tin, refers symbolically to four religions. According to many commentators, this surah takes its title from the first symbol, namely, the Bo Tree (Tin) under which The Buddha received enlightenment.

In Surah al Baqara 2:112 an even more generic formulation is given: "Everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve." The literal translation is "everyone who surrenders his face unto God," which is classical Arabic for one's whole being. Whoever does so is a Muslim and it is in this sense that the terms *islam* (the religion) and *muslim* (the person who surrenders to God) are used throughout the Qur'an.

#### **4. Equality of Prophets**

A central teaching in Islam is that God has provided a prophet for every people, beginning with the cavemen millions of years ago, and probably has done so for all the sentient beings on the perhaps millions of other inhabitable planets in the universe. The Qur'an states that no community has been left without a prophet. The hadith suggest that the number of prophets is 124,000, which means numerous beyond count.

Since all prophets taught essentially the same thing, the Qur'an specifically says that they are all equal, even though they may have had different emphases depending on their audiences. This equality of prophets mirrors the Qur'anic emphasis on the equality of believers in the different religious traditions.

The standard formulation is first found in Surah al Baqara 2:136: "Say: 'We believe in God, and in what has been bestowed upon us from on high, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction among any of them. And it is unto Him that we [all of us] surrender ourselves (literally "unto Him we are Muslims')."

This is repeated verbatim in the next surah, Surah Ali Imran 3:84, and is preceded by the rhetorical question in 3:83, "Do they seek perchance a faith other than in God, although it is unto Him that whatever is in the heavens and on earth surrenders itself, willingly or unwillingly, since unto Him all must return." The standard formulation is followed in 3:85 by the warning, "For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God (literally "other than the *din* of Islam"), it will never be accepted from Him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost."

This emphasis on the equality of prophets as representatives of God is why a Muslim is not a Muslim unless he believes in the holy scriptures given to the Jews and Christians.

## **Love**

### **1. The Personal Relationship with God**

The most pervasive teaching in the Islamic religion is the centrality of love. Oddly, this is precisely the concept that its detractors insist does not and cannot exist. Unfortunately, Islam has more than its share of professed adherents who share the conclusions of its detractors and accordingly exhibit arrogance toward God and exude hatred rather than love for Jews and Christians. Such hatred is the origin both of terrorism and of terroristic counter-terrorism.

The word *islam* means submission to God but implies both love as the means to submission and peace as the result. The Qur'an often uses the term *taqwa*, which means loving awareness of God. The common word for love, *hubb*, as the basis for the reciprocal relationship of love intended between God and the human person first appears near the beginning of the Qur'an in the second chapter, *Surah al Baqara 2: 165*: "Those who have attained to faith love Allah more than all else."

The combination of God's love and mercy first appears in the next chapter, *Surah Ali Imran 3:31*, which introduces the Virgin Mary and the "Word from God," Jesus, whose message is renewed by Muhammad. The Prophet Muhammad is instructed to say, "If you love God (*in tubibbuna Allaha*), follow me, and God will love you (*yuhbibkum Allahu*) and forgive you your sins, for God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace." The term *hubb* is first used in conjunction with *taqwa* in 3:76, *fa ina Allaha yubibu al mutaqin* "for God loves those who live in awe of God's love."

The first complete listing in English of all terms in the Qur'an referring to love may be found in the *Concordance of the Qur'an in English* by H. E. Kassis, University of California Press. In addition to *hubb* it also lists the related terms *radiya*, *shaghata*, and *wadud* (*waada* and *wadda*).

The favorite prayer of the Prophet Muhammad, and of millions of Muslims after him, is *Allahumma, asaluka hubbaka wa hubba man yuhibuka wa hubba kuli 'amali yuqaribuni ila hubbika*, “Oh Allah, I ask you for Your love, and for the love of those who love You, and for the love of everything that will bring me closer to your love.”

## **2. Forgiveness**

Compassion and mercy are the essence of Allah in his name *Al Rahman* and are manifested in his attribute of action *Al Rahim*. Almost every surah in the Qur'an begins with the invocation “Bi ismi Allah, al Rahman al Rahim,” as does every prayer by practicing Muslims.

*Surah Fatir* 35:45 concludes with the statement that if it were not for the mercy of Allah not a single living creature would enter heaven.

This is why kindness and forgiveness are encouraged throughout the Qur'an, which states about those who forgive transgressors, “Their reward is with God, for God loves those who exercise restraint and forgive.”

Forgiveness is also an essential part of Islamic law. The well-known punishments of retribution are covered in Surah al Ma'ida 5:45, “We ordained in the Torah a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, and an ear for a ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and a similar retribution for wounds, but he who shall forego it out of charity will atone thereby for some of his past sins.”

The same applies to the prescribed punishment for theft, which is cutting off the thief's hand. This is waived in times and in societies where poverty reduces the freedom of the individual to maintain a moral life based on truth. This reflects the Prophet Muhammad's warning, “Poverty may well turn into a denial of the truth.” This means that those who must exert all their energy merely to survive have no dignity, no freedom, and no spiritual progress. This can drive whole communities into materialism and away from love of God. This is why the

second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al Khattab, gave a blanket waiver and eliminated the particular *hadd* of cutting off hands during a time of hunger.

This aspect of Islamic law reflects the basic Islamic teaching that the economic well-being of the individual is essential. If the functioning of societal institutions does not provide adequate material well-being through the community’s duty to protect its members, it has no right to apply the full punishment for theft. In a fully functioning Islamic society, however, theft by one person from another is considered to be an attack on all of society and deserves full *hudud*. In this case, the thief may be pardoned only if he repents and returns the stolen goods before apprehension, because at least from the standpoint of society he does not otherwise merit mercy and forgiveness.

### **3. Reconciliation and Peace**

The opposite of love and forgiveness is the ascription of collective guilt to another community because of the sins of some of its members. This leads to war. The Qur'an specifically condemns collective guilt as the origin of politically inspired *hiraba*, which is the closest Arabic equivalent to "terrorism." Collective guilt is used as the justification for blowing up Jewish babies and "driving the Jews into the sea." Of course, extremists among Jews would like to do the same to all Palestinians in response to the perceived collective guilt of the entire world for the *shoah* or holocaust. And extremist Christians would like to nuke Mecca now rather than later as retaliation against the incineration of thousands of innocent people in the towers of the World Trade Center. But one crime of collective guilt does not justify another in an unending chain of destruction.

In the universal principles of Islamic jurisprudence the right to life is next in importance to freedom of religion, so much so that both the Jewish and Islamic scriptures compare slaying another human being to killing all of humanity. As in the holocaust, quantity becomes somewhat irrelevant compared to the evil of the crime, which in the *shoah* was unprecedented in human history. Near the beginning of Surah al Ma’ida, 5:32, we read, "If anyone slays a human being –

unless it be [in punishment] for murder or for spreading corruption on earth (*fasad fi al 'ardi*) – it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.”

Long before the beginning of international law in Europe, Islamic scholars developed a sophisticated set of criteria for the just war similar to that now universally accepted at least in theory throughout the world. Islam does not preach pacifism because the Prophet Muhammad warned his sometimes reluctant followers that under certain conditions one must oppose aggressors with force, because otherwise not a single synagogue, church, or mosque would remain standing. A permanent state of war, as advocated by many Muslim extremists today, however, is both unnecessary and forbidden.

The limits of just war are the same as the limits for the *jihad al asghar* or Lesser Jihad. The aims must be approved by legitimate authority and must be limited to the defense of human rights for oneself and others. The amount of force must be held to the minimum required for victory in order to avoid harm to non-combatants and property. “Fight in the cause of God [to defend justice] against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God does not love transgressors” *Surah Baqara 2:190*. Furthermore the expected benefit from war must be greater than its inevitable harm. And all measures short of war must have been exhausted in the search for justice.

Among the measures short of war are the other two forms of jihad. These are the *jihad al akbar* or Greatest Jihad and the *jihad al kabir* or Great Jihad. The greatest jihad is the purification of the self spiritually so that one will always seek peace. The greatest and lesser jihads are found in the hadith or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The great jihad, which is the only one mentioned in the Qur'an (*Surah al Furqan 25:52*) reads, *wa jabidhim bifi jihadan kabiran*, “strive with it (divine revelation) in a great jihad.” This is the intellectual jihad needed especially during times when one’s soul and body are relatively secure. This is the struggle of

*tajdid* or societal renewal in order to promote greater justice at all levels of human community, since injustice is the major cause of war.

According to the Grand Mufti of Syria, Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro, who headed one of the Naqshbandi Sufi orders until his death at an advanced age, “The Great Jihad is to acquaint ourselves and others with our Lord, with His greatness, wisdom, justice, mercy, and love. It is to reflect all of His attributes, as we can conceive of them, in our own lives so that we become instruments of His purpose. And the Great Jihad is to acquaint ourselves and others with the models of Allah’s attributes to be found in the Prophets and Messengers of Allah and in their common message in all its purity and fullness in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.”

Good translations and annotations of the Qur'an are now becoming available free, such as that by Muhammad Asad from The Book Foundation. A profound tafsir or commentary on the Qur'an is now nearing completion by The Traditionalist Foundation under the direction of Syed Hossein Nasr, who has long been University Professor in Islamic Studies at George Washington University and over the past half century has published a score of excellent books on Islam for both scholars and inquisitive teenagers. Recently he has augmented the wealth of good books on Islam by his introductory volume, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*.<sup>1</sup>

## **Compassionate Justice**

### **1. Righteousness**

The third of the principles that lead to respect among all people of faith, other than freedom of religion and love, is compassionate justice. This includes both individual righteousness, known as *qist*, and social justice, known as *'adl*.

Islamic teaching and practice distinguish between righteousness and justice. This is shown by the use of both terms in Surah al Nisaa 4:135: “Be ever steadfast

in upholding equity (*qist*). ... Do not follow your own desires lest you swerve from justice ('*adl*)." What is translated as equity refers to a set of responsibilities in the practice of individual virtue, because virtue at the individual level is the essential foundation of justice at the level of the community. This is why the portion of Surah al Nisaa leading up to verse 135 deals with one's personal spiritual life (verses 105 to 126) followed by responsibilities and rights in social behavior (verses 127 to 130), including a strong moral but not legal restriction on plural marriage in verse 129 as part of the rights of women.

Equity or *qist*, though usually not differentiated from justice, includes the five pillars of Islam, which are submission to God and divine revelation, prayer, charity, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca in the hajj. These are essential means to go beyond the level of *islam*, which may be defined as belief in the Islamic creed or '*aqida* (belief in the infinite power of God, ultimate justice, angels, divine revelation, and prophets) to the higher level of *iman* or faith so that one can become fully human. God's supreme gift to every person is one's endowment with a conscious soul, referred to in the Qur'an as the *rub* or spirit, which God breathes into every person as a "breath of His own spirit." Every person's identity is the person God intends him to be, so the pursuit of *iman* is to become that person. At the highest level, known as *ibsan*, which is the goal of Sufis, one's subjective impression, though not the absolute reality, is that only God exists, because everything else is relatively irrelevant. This is a foretaste of heaven.

## **2. Justice**

Justice is the most universal value in all civilizations. Justice assumes the existence of a truth higher than man-made or positivist law. In fact, justice is merely an expression of this truth. Thus God reveals in Surah al An'am 6:115 of the Qur'an, *wa tamaat kalimatu rabika sidqan wa 'adlan*, "The word of your Lord is fulfilled and perfected in truth and in justice."

The purpose of all religion is to empower the truth. Justice is important for Muslims because they consider that it is the translation of truth into practice and that therefore justice is nothing more than the Will of God. Its nature and substance, however, must be sought out through deduction from divine revelation, natural law (known by Muslims as the *sunnat Allabi*), and human intellectual processing of the first two sources. In other words, justice is heuristic in the sense that it constantly seeks knowledge about the sources, nature and practice of justice, with the challenges lying more in the present as a means to build on the best of the past in search of a better future.

Justice requires us to recognize that there is such a thing as the *furqan* or difference between right and wrong at an absolute level of truth and that we are not the ultimate arbiters of it. The major purpose of prophets as intermediaries between God and humankind is to raise our natural awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of reality. Jesus, whom Muslims call the Prophet of Love and a Word from God through the Holy Spirit (*Ruh al Quddus*), taught that as a manifestation of the divine he was an essential link. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” This statement of ultimate reality and of the means to access it is just as true today as it was when Jesus spoke it 2,000 years ago and is perhaps even more needed, now that we have entered the most militantly polytheistic period of human history.

The above three principles of respect, namely, freedom of religion, love, and compassionate justice, constitute the essence of Islam and the paradigmatic framework for human rights in all higher religion.

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<sup>i</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, HarperCollins, 2002, 338 pages.