



Moral Capitalism at Work

**Business and Public Policy Round Table
September 20, 2011
University Club of St. Paul**

“A Common Word: Reflections on 9/11”

Introductory presenters: Grant Abbott, former Executive Director, St. Paul Area Council of Churches; Terence Nichols, Professor of Theology, University of St. Thomas; Asad Zaman, former Executive Director, Tarek ibn Ziyad Academy

Chair, facilitator and rapporteur: Steve Young, Global Executive Director, Caux Round Table

Participants: Kay Baker; Barb Bergseth; Catherine Guisan; Mike Harris; Nausheena Hussain; Jeanette Leehr; Mike Maxim; Nancy Maxim; Todd Otis; Dick Primuth; Al Zdrazil

Summary of comments:

Grant Abbott pointed out first that with the continuing tensions around what is the meaning of Islam's presence in the global community and given the 10th anniversary of 9/11 and the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, funding for interfaith work has been reduced and Christian seminaries are doing less on interfaith engagement. It is as if we are all retreating to the security of fundamentalisms.

We live in a time of change and an easy choice is to hold on and protect old things. There is much cognitive dissonance abroad in the culture and on the news every day. There is unease over new technologies and poor economic performance. Fear is on the rise. We can easily project on to another religion about which we know little.

Thus, A Common Word proposal that Muslims and Christians have some fundamental moral orientations in common is needed and welcome. A Common Word exists in the two fundamental commandments to love God with all your heart, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. The two are related as love of God leads to humility of self and then to openness towards one's neighbor. Moreover, God is present in the persons of our neighbors, affirmed Grant.

A Common Word document drafted by Muslim clerics and theologians and sent to Christian religious leaders is a wonderful opportunity. If we are to be “known by our fruits” as the Bible advises, than what are we doing to love and respect our neighbors in this time of uncertainty?

Asad Zaman, with training as an Islamic Imam, referred to history as a way to look at Muslim/Christian relations in our time.

First, he spoke of an event in 631 AD towards the end of the Prophet Mohammad’s life when the prophet opened his mosque for worship of a Trinitarian God by Christians visiting him from Yemen performing their mass. A portion of Qur’an was then revealed in response to this opening to Christians, which revelation does not affirm current hard-line approaches to unbelievers taken by some Muslims.

The second event shaping our time was not really theological in nature, but political. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The U.S. and the Saudis decided to arm and promote the Mujahideen to fight against the Soviets. This led to the emergence of militant believers who found success for their simplistic views in violence.

The third event was also political. In 1991, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait to annex it to Iraq. The Saudis were at a loss as to how to respond in opposition. Osama Bin Laden proposed that he be permitted to fight Saddam with the Mujahideen and the guerilla tactics that had defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan. Bin Laden demanded that U.S. troops be sent home and that no foreign soldiers be permitted to fight on the holy soil of Islam. When the Saudi rulers rejected his approach and turned to the U.S. to fight Saddam and evict his army from Kuwait, a cause was created for Bin Laden and those who thought like him.

Bin Laden then sent out a fax announcing his position. He would bankrupt the U.S. as the Mujahideen had bankrupted the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

In October 2007, leading Muslim theologians reconsidered the stance of Islam towards unbelievers and drafted A Common Word document as a guideline for engagement with Christians. Their factual starting point was that 60% of humanity is Muslims and Christians. If these believers can’t get along, the world will not be able to live in peace as God intended.

Their idea was to go back to basics and reach out to the other branches in the Abrahamic tradition. They sought an overarching mandate from God and found it in the two primary commandments. In Qur’an, one can reference Surah 98.4 which says that all religion comes from God and calls for worship with sincerity of heart, prayers and payment of our wealth to take care of our neighbors.

Prof. Terry Nichols of the University of St. Thomas observed that being guided by the Holy Spirit is marvelous for dialogue. The call for religious tolerance in the West came after the end of the 30 years war among Christians, which had brought death to one third of those living in Europe. Now, it is routine for Protestants and Catholics to work, write and teach together.

The polemics and demonization of the other between Catholics and Protestants gave way when neither could prove the other wrong. The modern ecumenical movement started with a focus on what Catholics and Protestants had in common, which is 90% of Christian beliefs and practices. Trust developed and then differences between the approaches were seen in a new light. The recent joint decree on justification has settled the number 1 issue dividing Catholics and Protestants in the wars of the Reformation.

Today, we need a new approach between Muslims and Christians away from war to the possibility of working together. Where might fruitful dialogue begin? A Common Word is a groundbreaking basis for universal collaboration.

Unfortunately, there are powerful forces on both sides demonizing the other. Why this should be so is not clear. However, it reflects more the Satanic temptation than a seeking of God's blessings. One theological root of this is to make the human church absolute and not take only God as supreme. Churchness is a subtle form of idolatry. Absolutism leads to conflict. Following God should not require absolute submission to human institutions of religious practice.

Self-righteousness becomes the source of frustration.

One participant commented that sentiment in the U.S. is at an all-time low in trust and hopeful discourse. What can be done to change this? What can citizens do? Political leaders will not take a risk for tolerance – remember Anwar Sadat and Martin Luther King? The political dynamic now is fear-based domination. Behind rhetoric are issues of seeking and keeping power.

What aspects of our identity become absolute – our nationality, our religion, our secular individuality? When we see threats, we overreact and push to the fore that part of our identity which first appears most vulnerable to the challenge and defend that at all costs.

It is, therefore, urgent to discuss A Common Word.

The problem, it was noted in discussion, is not one for Americans to solve. It is global and demands engagement of many Muslims around aspects of their practices that worry and disturb non-Muslims, such as the tradition of militant conquest, polygamy, subjugation of women and no tolerance of conversion from Islam to another faith. The voices of Muslim moderates aren't being heard. Some Christians may do bad things, but their cause is not to take over the world.

Theology tends to be harsh towards others. It divides the elect from those who do not follow some "right" way of living. History has seen such harshness with Jews and Christians towards others.

But, selective quotations are not helpful. There are differences of opinion among Muslims on many points.

If Muslims don't like the U.S., is it due to religious reasons or because of U.S. foreign policy? The Israeli/Palestinian conflict was described as the "elephant in the room." If Christians had created a safe culture for Jews, much of modern history might have been less destructive.