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# **A MUSLIM LETTER TO CHRISTIANS**

BY [**EMILY FLYNN VENCAT**](https://www.newsweek.com/authors/emily-flynn)ON 10/10/07 AT 8:00 PM EDT

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Getting religious leaders to agree on anything is notoriously difficult. So this morning's announcement—that 138 of the world's most powerful Muslim clerics, scholars and intellectuals from all branches of Islam (Sunni and Shia, Salafi and Sufi, liberal and conservative) had come together to write a letter to the world's Christian leaders—is being hailed as something of a miracle.

In a display of unprecedented unity, the letter—which calls for peace between the world's Christians and Muslims—is signed by no fewer than 19 current and former grand ayatollahs and grand muftis from countries as diverse as Egypt, Turkey, Russia, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq. It is addressed to Christianity's most powerful leaders, including the pope, the archbishop of Canterbury and the heads of the Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist churches, and, in 15 pages laced with Qur'anic and Biblical scriptures, argues that the most fundamental tenets of Islam and Christianity are identical: love of one (and the same) God, and love of one's neighbor.

On this basis, the letter, entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," reasons that harmony between the two religions is not only necessary for world peace, it is natural. "As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them—so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes … Our very eternal souls are all at stake if we fail to sincerely make every effort to make peace," the letter reads. "It's an astonishing achievement of solidarity," says David Ford, director of the Cambridge University's Interfaith Program. "I hope it will be able to set the right key note for relations between Muslims and Christians in the 21st century, which have been lacking since September 11."

One profound obstacle to establishing positive relations among mainstream Muslim and Christian groups, argues Ford, has been the lack of a single, authoritative Muslim voice to participate in such a dialogue. This letter changes that. "It proves that Islam can have an unambiguous, unified voice," says Aref Ali Nayed, a leading Islamic scholar and one of the letter's authors.

Getting the letter written was no mean feat. Highly placed and extremely well-connected leaders at Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman have been working for more than three years to make it happen. The institute won't say who was the driving force behind the effort—if indeed it was any single person—because that would undermine its collaborative nature. But Nayed, whom experts believe was one of the key draftsmen, says that the country of Jordan and its leaders played a very important role. "Jordan is the Switzerland of the Middle East," Nayed says. The Royal Institute was responsible for the widely read Open Letter to the Pope following his controversial speech last year, which was signed by 38 high-level Muslim leaders.

Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammed, the Royal Institute's chairman, was likely instrumental in bringing the signatories together this time. As a member of the Jordanian royal family, Prince Ghazi is a powerful politician, and he is also considered by Muslims to be a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. "The contacts wouldn't be an issue [for him]," says John Esposito, Director of the Center for Muslim and Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

Early responses indicate that Christian leaders are welcoming the "Common Word" with open arms. In Britain the bishop of London told NEWSWEEK that the letter would "invite" young people to view the world as "a place where dialogue is possible, instead of a place full of threats." America's evangelical Christian leaders are being similarly positive. Rod Parsley, senior pastor of the World Harvest Church in Ohio, says, "My prayer is that this letter begins a dialogue that results in Muslims and Christians uniting around the love we have for each other as God's children."

Even with such endorsements, the question remains: Will the letter have any practical impact? Could it possibly help reduce the incidence of violent extremism and terrorism? Experts hope that because the letter's authors have millions of followers in both the Muslim and Christian worlds the answer is a (very qualified) yes. "Given that there's no simple one-off solution to terrorism," says Cambridge's Ford, "this letter does have all the elements necessary to move in that direction." Among those elements are the authors' solidarity on the subject of nonviolence and their clear plea for greater understanding between followers of the two faiths.

Jordan's Royal Institute sees the letter as the first step in a long process of opening up peaceful dialogue between Muslims and other religions around the world. A letter to the Jews is already in the works; the seeds of the next effort are evident in the current letter's quotations not only from the New Testament but also from the Torah. Eventually, says Nayed, the Muslim signatories plan to write a missive to the secular community. "The world is a garden," says Nayed. "We can focus on the weeds or we can focus on the fruit. And we are choosing to focus on the fruit."