Neighbor-Love as a Keystone to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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Neighbor-love as a Keystone to Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Brian Stiltner

In most parts of the world, Christian-Muslim relations are typified less by outright conflict and simmering tension than by lack of knowledge and interaction. Broadly characterizing where these relations stand today, I would say that scholars in both religious communities have engaged in a good deal of substantive exchange, religious leaders have made promising initial efforts, and lay members are receptive but have much to learn about each other. Public opinion data from various Pew Forum studies support this characterization of the lay members of both faiths. In the United States, 53 percent of non-Muslim Americans have a favorable view of Muslims, while 29 percent have an unfavorable view. But most Americans (58 percent) admit to knowing little about Islam and a large number (70 percent) say that Islam is very different from their own religion. The Pew Forum’s 2010 study of Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa found that members of each religion tended to think mostly positively of the other group. Yet, “by their own reckoning, neither group knows much about the other, and significantly more people in most [sub-Saharan

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1 A version of this paper was presented at Catholic Theological Ethicists in the World Church, Trento, Italy, July 27, 2010. I appreciate the feedback I received from the attendees at that conference, and from Onoride Ekeh, Richard Grigg, Christopher Kelly, Marinus Iwuchukwu, Daniel Madigan, Daniel Sheridan, and Edward Wallace.

African] countries say the two religions are very different than say the two faiths have a lot in common.3

Christians and Muslims need to learn more about each other, and they need to know that hands of friendship have been extended. Unfortunately, many lay members of both communities seem to know little about the teachings of their own faith regarding the status of other religions. Still less do they know what other religions believe in any detail, or how other religionists live their lives. Many Christians and Muslims have not heard or taken to heart what their religious leaders teach; others have been actively educated to believe that tolerance is wrong. The situation is better in some places than others, but it is fair to say that every religious community has a lot more work to do.

I approach this work—which I will describe later as the three projects of interreligious dialogue—as a Catholic-Christian theological ethicist from the United States. Scholars within the Christian community (anywhere in the world, though in a leading way in America) could contribute to interreligious dialogue through their critical work on extramural and intramural efforts as described in the preface to this book. Christian scholars can model critical yet constructive dialogue with Muslim scholars; we can press the leaders in our faith communities to reach out to other communities, providing them doctrinal rationales and effective “tools” for doing so; and we can teach the members of our communities about the challenges of dialogue and the opportunities to be found there. In this chapter, I set out the key challenges and opportunities, as I see

them as a Christian ethicist. When I speak normatively about how people ought to think and act, I address myself to the Christian community. However, I hope and expect that the three tasks of interreligious dialogue that I develop in this chapter suggest a similar normative agenda for the Muslim community.

Both of these great religious traditions place love of God and love of neighbor at the center of their faith. In this chapter, I will be describing Islam and Christianity broadly. Given my choice of texts, it is the Sunni tradition of Islam and the Catholic branch of Christianity that most inform the views discussed here. I believe that my characterizations of each religion’s views of love adequately represent the broadly held views in each religion, though it is important to acknowledge that there is great diversity within each religion in addition to differences between them. For instance, Islam foregrounds utter devotion to God in a way that is stronger and more encompassing than many contemporary Christians are comfortable with in their own practice of faith. The Sufi tradition encourages the believer to feel and express a passionate, indeed romantic, love for God—something that is often distasteful to other Muslims. Some Christians devotionally approach Jesus as a friend, a stance that strikes other Christians as too informal, and that might strike some Muslims as not respectful enough. Christianity has traditionally emphasized love of neighbor as an ethical principle more than Islam has. Despite these variations, in both religions love is a key virtue for people of faith. For a Muslim, it would make absolutely no sense to say, “There is a faithful Muslim who is not loving,” just as, for a Christian, it would be ridiculous to claim, “That’s a devoted Christian, who happens to be unloving.”
Since my focus is ethics, love of neighbor is the lens through which I will explore why we should dialogue with the other and how that dialogue can change and improve us. As we will see, this form of love cannot, in principle, be separated from loving God—neither for Christianity nor for Islam. This lens was suggested to me by the fact that Muslim and Catholic leaders have already framed their approach to dialogue in this way. A fruitful advance in interreligious dialogue was made in 2007 when 138 Muslim leaders and scholars issued the open letter to Christians, *A Common Word between Us and You (ACW)*. ACW names love of God and neighbor as the heart of both Islam and Christianity, and therefore as the common ground for future dialogue between the two religions. ACW's emphasis on love suggests comparisons to Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est (DCE)*. Putting the two documents in dialogue will help us enumerate the possibilities, challenges, and future tasks for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Since space is limited, my focus is on the theological-ethical claims being advanced by leaders of these religions in the contemporary world.

It is clear that many more steps are needed for the high principles of ACW and DCE to become operational. As other chapters in this book demonstrate, the principles are being put in practice in various ways. I suggest that ACW, as a high-level document, represents a significant step forward. It is serving as something like Catholicism's 1965 document *Nostra Aetate*: a charter for interreligious dialogue that can legitimize grassroots efforts and gradually serve an educational role in Muslim communities. As my community is Christian, I will conclude by describing some ways that American Christians could concretely show love for their Muslim neighbors.
“We Invite Christians”—A Common Word

The writing of ACW was prompted by Pope Benedict’s September 2006 speech at Regensburg. As is well known, Benedict’s quote of a Byzantine emperor’s statement about Islam—while meant by him as a launching pad to criticize any religion’s irrational use of violence—was immediately controversial to Muslims worldwide. Most Muslims felt slighted at best and some of them felt directly attacked. The Vatican’s initial reaction was to apologize for being misunderstood, a disclaimer that failed fully to satisfy most Muslims. Some Christians felt the Pope had been insensitive and impolitic, while others Christians defended him for raising a frank question about Islam. A month after the speech, 38 leaders and scholars from the Muslim community wrote an open letter to the Pope. According to the lead author and organizer of the letter, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, the group wrote “in what we thought was a very gentle and polite way of pointing out some factual mistakes in His Holiness’s lecture.” But the authors did not receive what they considered a sufficient response, and so a year later, the group, now increased by one hundred, issued ACW. The message was now

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5 For instance, the Catholic conservative George Weigel defended the Pope’s Regensburg speech. But he also welcomed the constructive response by some Muslim leaders and the letter that eventually became “A Common Word.” See Weigel, “Some Muslims Want Dialogue with the Pope,” Newsweek/Washington Post online, November 27, 2006.
an open letter to Christians and addressed to Pope Benedict and twenty-six other Christian leaders by name.

*ACW* is a civil and constructive response to the ruckus occasioned by the Pope’s remarks. The signatories had a larger and more important goal in mind than responding to the pope. As Prince Ghazi says, “Our goal was very clear. We wanted—and want—to avoid a greater conflict between Muslims and the West. We wanted to—and must—resolve all our current crises. To do both, we had—and have—to find a *modus vivendi* to live and let live, to ‘love thy neighbor’; this idea must be expressed from within our religious scriptures, and must then be applied everywhere.”7

The *ACW* authors “invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the *Two Commandments* of love” (29).8 They go on to explain, for about a third of the total length of the letter, how love of God (i.e. human love toward God) is central to Islam. Qur’anic passages are proffered to show that love is “part of complete and total devotion to God... not a mere fleeting, partial emotion” (37). One’s relationship to God engages one’s complete self and brings joy and wholeness to one’s life. This section of *ACW* reflects the Qur’anic source material by describing God’s love toward humans and human love toward God in terms of God’s majesty and goodness. Since God is source of all that is, including human life, God is the source of all goodness. Creation is a gift showing how God cares for humans. God is supremely good and supremely worthy of worship. For these

7 Ghazi bin Muhammad in Volf, 8.

8 *A Common Word between Us and You* is available at [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com). My parenthetical references in the text are to the pages of the version published in Volf, 28-50.
reasons, humans have a responsibility to be grateful and devoted to God. The God-person relationship, ACW suggests, can be characterized as one of “love” as a shorthand for this dynamic of God’s goodness and majesty as a form of care, prompting human gratitude and devotion. This account of love seems squarely in the mainstream Sunni tradition of Islam. The lead author, Prince Ghazi, is from Jordan, a Sunni country. Likewise, almost all of initial 138 signatories are from predominantly Sunni countries or seem to be representatives of Sunni communities.9

After comparing the Islamic treatment to the parallel treatment in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament—“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength”—ACW turns to love of neighbor. The letter says, “there are numerous injunctions in Islam about the necessity and paramount importance of love for—and mercy towards—the neighbor. Love of the neighbor is an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God because in Islam without love of the neighbor there is no true faith in God and no righteousness” (43–44). ACW cites two particular injunctions from the Qur’an (2:177 and 3:92) and notes the parallels to Jesus’ Great Commandment (Mt. 22:38-40) and to God’s commandment in Leviticus (19:17-18). The authors conclude, “it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament” (45). ACW closes by describing the interreligious project as one of peaceful understanding, dialogue, and cooperation. The authors encourage Christians “to consider Muslims not against and thus

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9 This characterization includes Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, who penned a foreword for this book.
with them, in accordance with Jesus Christ’s words” (48). They invite “Christians to come together with us on the common essentials of our two religions” and proclaim: “Let this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us” (49).

“Love is Possible”—Deus Caritas Est

Although Pope Benedict’s controversial lecture prompted the authors ACW, his first encyclical letter Deus Caritas Est (DCE), published on Christmas nine months before Regensburg, is the place to look for insight into contemporary Catholic teaching about love. Because of its profound treatment of love and its authoritative status as a papal encyclical, DCE is an excellent text to compare to ACW.

The first half of DCE is an account of the unity of love of God and love of neighbor. Benedict notes the foundations of the Christian understanding of love in the Torah, and like ACW, he quotes the Shema as an important formulation of the nature of God and the love that we should have for God (9). Benedict explores how “the world of the Bible [that is, the Hebrew Bible] presents us with a new image of God”—a God who is personal, caring, and intimately available to us (9). Benedict notes that “the Prophets, particularly Hosea and Ezekiel, described God’s passion for his people using boldly

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10 Just prior to this statement, ACW engaged in a brief exegesis of Matthew 12:30, Mark 9:40, and Luke 9:50 to argue that Jesus does not consider those who recognize him as messiah—as Muslims do, though not in the same fashion as Christians—to be against him.

11 The Shema is mentioned four times in ACW.

12 Benedict XVI, God is Love: Deus Caritas Est (Washington, DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). Also available by searching at www.vatican.va. My parenthetical references to DCE are to its numbered sections.
erotic images” (9). God’s concern for his people Israel, conveyed in the language of romance and marriage, provides a powerful insight into the depth, power, and personal nature of God’s love for humans. Benedict thinks that the Greek concept of eros fittingly expresses this dimension of God’s love, yet, he continues, “God’s eros for man is also totally agape. This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but also because it is love which forgives” (10).

Forgiveness provides a transition for Benedict from the Hebrew scriptures to the New Testament. Jesus Christ is, for Christians, the decisive revelation of God’s love in embodied form. Jesus showed the depths of God’s forgiving love in his ministry and his passion. Jesus also taught new and dramatic things about God’s love. Benedict gives special emphasis to the nature of agape that Jesus teaches about in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). With a picture of active agape set up by the parable, the Pope explains in the second half of DCE how love must flow into the actions of the institutional Church and of lay Christians. The Pope indicates that the Church serves the common good in three broad ways: by its charitable programs; by its lay members engaging in the work of justice and politics through their competence in secular roles, while informed by the teachings of their faith; and by sharing the insights of its social doctrine “in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live” (28).

Although DCE is addressed specifically to Catholics, it certainly can and should be read by other Christians and people of other faiths. The Pope’s concept of love—starting with the New Testament’s assertion that God is love—is typically
Christian. The Pope’s emphasis on the unity of love, leading to his assertion that “love of neighbor is a path that leads us to the encounter with God” (16), is distinctively Catholic in comparison to Protestant thought. But the Christian and Catholic characteristics are not a bar to interreligious dialogue about love; they could rather be part of that dialogue. Benedict says he wanted to write about God’s love because, “in a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant” (1). He concludes: “Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend” (39). The authors of *A Common Word* were, in essence, taking up that invitation, choosing to look beyond their anger at the Regensburg lecture and to respond in a spirit that matches Benedict’s in *God is Love*.

After the publication of *ACW*, leaders from many Christian denominations and branches wrote friendly and affirming letters in response. The *ACW* website catalogues over 70 such responses through 2010, plus three from Jewish leaders. (Judaism, incidentally, is an important partner in the dialogue of Western religions, and its conceptual role will be mentioned briefly below. However, owing to the focus of both *ACW* and of this book, I limit my focus here to Christianity and Islam.) So in the past five years, leaders in Islam and Christianity have extended invitations to dialogue—inquiries based on the profound experience of “the peoples of the Book” that God

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cares for humans, that people are invited to love God, and that people should love their neighbors. What can Christians learn from these invitations, and how can Christian theologians and ethicists fruitfully respond?

**Dialogue Project 1—Tending the Common Ground**

Comparing *ACW* and *DCE* contributes to a rich agenda for interreligious dialogue in the years ahead. The dialogue's agenda can be organized into three projects. The first is tending the common ground between the two religions. The second is the constructive work of comparative theology and ethics. The third is addressing challenges to the dialogue.

First is "tending the common ground," by which I mean identifying, strengthening, and communicating to multiple publics the existing common values shared between Christians and Muslims. It is by no means anodyne for Christian thinkers to take part in celebrating the common ground that exists with Muslims. As both the Pope and the authors of *ACW* point out, there is great tension in the world centering on religious identity and much misunderstanding among Christians and Muslims. I noted earlier that many lay Christians and Muslims do not know about the positive teachings of their religious leaders regarding the other faith. Dialogue by leaders centered on common ground can be helpful for good interreligious relations at the local level if the leaders do their utmost to communicate to their rank-and-file members. Important in this work have been the contributions of religious scholars from both traditions in exploring, defining, and communicating the shared values of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Scholars work within their traditions to open the space and to articulate the rationales that pave the way to official religious statements such as *A Common Word* and *Nostra Aetate*. After the promulgation of
such documents, scholars help advance interreligious relations, laboring simultaneously both inside their faith communities and in interfaith contexts.

A good example of such work by Christian religious scholars was the “Yale Response” to *ACW*, published in the *New York Times* one month after the Muslim letter was released. Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf was the key author and promoter of this early, positive response from Christians. Later, many Christian scholars, denominational leaders and bishops, and pastors signed the Christian open letter, titled “Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response.”14 The authors express their thanks and encouragement to the authors of *ACW*, saying “we receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians world-wide.”15 In return, the Christian authors extend their own hand, describing how they, too, see the double love command as the foundation of “so much common ground” between the two communities.16 They, too, are hopeful that frank and friendly dialogue can strengthen the prospects for global peace.

In addition to communicating the good news about common ground, my field of theological ethics can work to conceptualize and strengthen the common ground between Christianity and Islam. Among various areas, there are social-

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14 “A Christian Response” is reprinted in the *Common Word* book, 51–56. Three fellow professors, including Harold Attridge, the first Catholic dean of Yale Divinity School, signed the initial letter. A list of later signatories is in Appendix 2 of the book. Catholic leaders resist signing common statements and open letters unless these have been officially developed by the Catholic Church. Therefore the Catholic signatories to the Christian letter are mostly academics.
15 “Christian Response” in Volf, 52.
ethical contributions and spiritual contributions to make to the dialogue, and I will mention a few ideas about each. The social-ethical role of Christian ethics in any interreligious dialogue starts with peaceful coexistence. Augustine articulated the Church’s stake in such cooperation:

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced.\footnote{Augustine, City of God XIX.17.}

Christians have at least a pragmatic reason for cooperating with others, but the Catholic vision of the common good is even more robust. It is a vision intimated by Augustine when, continuing this quote, he writes that the heavenly city “makes this earthly peace bear upon the peace of heaven.” I interpret this to mean that the benefits of a peaceful common social life are not just a way to “get by” in this waiting time before heaven, but they bear upon, they facilitate, each individual’s and religious community’s flourishing. My use of Augustine here is definitely a modern extrapolation, but it is one consonant with Christian and Catholic theologizing that presents Jews and
Muslims as children of the same God, on a common religious journey.

Not just theology, but official church teachings support this stance. My confidence is supported by the boldness of Nostra Aetate, which, though groundbreaking, is not without excellent anchors of support in the tradition—in crucial teachings of Augustine, Aquinas, and others, and in the respect for the dignity of others practiced by missionaries such as Bartolomé de Las Casas and Benoît Truffet. Christians should be hopeful about the possibilities of cooperating with all others—but especially with other peoples of faith—for the common good. Christians should applaud ACW’s statement that “justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour” (29) and then explore with Muslims what this statement implies for our relationship and our common social life.

Related to all of this is a spiritual task for Christian theologians and ethicists when celebrating and shoring up the common ground. Like the social task, the starting point can be modest and then advance toward something more robust. In interreligious dialogue and in their own internal teaching and preaching, Christians should express respect for Muslims’ quest for the Divine, as does Nostra Aetate when it says the Church regards Muslims “with esteem,” for “they adore the one God,” they revere Jesus as a prophet, honor Mary, await the day of

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18 On Aquinas, I have in mind his use of Muslim authors to articulate parts of his theology and, more substantively, his theologizing about faith, natural law, and the common good that, in my opinion, take to a further conclusion the Augustinian insight I described. See Joseph Kenny’s use of Aquinas in the second chapter of this book. On Truffet, see the previous chapter in this book by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu.

19 The language of “applause” in relation to this statement is used by “A Christian Response” in Volf, 54.
judgment, and "value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting." Most Christian scholars are university and seminary teachers, and often they have the opportunity to teach students about other religions. Indeed, they have the obligation, even if they are not tasked with teaching introduction to religion courses. Given the lack of understanding about Muslims suggested by the survey data cited above, there is much work to do in informing students about the basic beliefs of Islam and what the Catholic Church and other Christian denomination sees as their spiritual common ground with Islam. Even Christian theologians should educate themselves and then teach at various times about Islamic theology and ethics. If they take the time to get beyond basic information about Islam, then they can pay Islam the respect of engaging its doctrines and its interpreters both critically and constructively. They will not simply be informing students about the range of Muslim opinions, but will be encouraging them to regard Muslims with respect and to see them as brothers and sisters in a spiritual heritage. Given contemporary American students' odd mixture of cultural relativism and confusion about the complex intersections of religion and culture, this is not easy task. Yet is one that theologians must face as they explore Islamic thought in a comparative perspective.

Dialogue Project 2—Exploring Comparative Theology and Ethics

The second project for interreligious dialogue is doing the constructive work of comparative theology and ethics. In the years ahead, Christian scholars must increasingly engage in

comparative theology and ethics; not everyone needs to be an expert in comparative theology, but everyone should be conversant with its main ideas and methods. Comparative theology is a forward-looking enterprise, even though it relies on careful historical and textual studies. An influential definition of the field by John Renard highlights the constructive dimension of comparative theology, for he defines the field as “the study of how theological change has taken place historically in the context of inter-religious relations, and of the implications of serious interchange between and among religious traditions for the future of Christian theology.”\(^{21}\) A robust comparative theology of neighbor-love would treat a wide range of topics, such as the natures of God and of the human being, the nature of love itself, concepts of how the two loves are linked, to what extent love is a commanded obligation and a spontaneous response, and more.

Comparative theology is a challenging enterprise because it requires detailed work in two traditions and nuance when making comparisons. Volf and the Yale theologians state:

> A fundamental question for both “A Common Word” and any Christian response to it... is whether Muslims and Christians mean the same thing by “love of God” and “love of neighbor,” and indeed whether they mean the same thing by “God” and “neighbor.” What is meant by these terms when used by a Christian may be partially

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or even radically different from what is meant when used by a Muslim.\textsuperscript{22}

They note that there may well be differences between the use of terms by scholars and by lay people, and there are definitely differences within each religion. Given the nature of their document, the authors of \textit{ACW} do not delve into these differences. What is notable is that they \textit{elide} the potential differences with Christianity on these matters. This elision is not necessarily illegitimate. Christian commentators on \textit{ACW} from the Yale group address this point well. In response to the potential concern that love might not really be so central in Islam as \textit{ACW} portrays, they say that before Christians "confidently assert the substance of Islam, it is appropriate for us to permit members of the Muslim community to interpret their own faith and sacred texts. Beyond our doing so, however, if Muslim leaders of the world determine publicly to situate love of the center of their faith—as the touchstone of true religion—and to initiate dialogue on that basis, then surely Christians should welcome that move."\textsuperscript{23} So, while this is speculative on my part, \textit{ACW} might be an early sign of theological developments in Islam that will result in the Islamic and Christian notions of love drawing even closer together over time through dialogue.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Miroslav Volf, Joseph Cummings, and Melissa Yarrington in Volf, 65–66.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Andrew Saperstein, Rick Love, and Joseph Cummings, "Answers to Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Yale Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You,'" in Volf, 178-79.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Essays by four Muslim authors in Part 2 of the Volf volume are one resource for this theologizing. So are works by scholars of Sufism such as Alan Godlas (http://islam.uga.edu/profbio.html) and Henry Bayman (\textit{The Secret of Islam: Love and Law in the Religion of Ethics} [Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003]). See also William C. Chittick, "Divine and Human Love in Islam," in \textit{Divine Love: Perspectives from the World's}
\end{itemize}
To read *ACW* alongside *DCE* suggests the topics listed a moment ago, as well as one other—the *scope* of neighbor-love. The authors of *ACW* cite two passages from the Qurʾan in order to describe love of neighbor, one of which reads:

> It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due. And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the pious.\(^25\)

Notable about this passage are three features. First, righteousness is defined, not as the keeping of mere ritual, but as authentic concern for others and for pleasing God. Second, the passage casts righteousness as a concern for the well being of other people, issuing in concrete acts of service and justice. Third, the people indicated are not only nearby neighbors, but anyone in need, including those who are outside the scope of kinship. The wayfarer and the slave are vulnerable persons, and the travelling wayfarer is not necessarily of the Muslim community.\(^26\)

\(^{25}\) Qurʾan 2:177, as quoted in *ACW*, 44.

\(^{26}\) These themes are found in other verses of the Qurʾan (such as 4:36) and in Hadith that describe the kindness with which the prophet Muhammad treated his neighbors, including neighbors who were rude to
Christian readers of these passages notice a similarity with their own faith’s teachings about love of neighbor—that our love must be inclusive and universal in scope and it must issue in concrete, charitable actions. A Christian would tend to see in the phrase “for love of Him” a close echo of Jesus’ principle, “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:40 NAB); it may be, however, that such a reading is too quick a jump toward similarity. So comparative readings of common texts elicit intriguing topics for dialogue and for mutual study. One of the most important texts on neighbor-love in the Christian tradition is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Benedict reads the parable in light of his theology of love. He states that “the concept of ‘neighbor’ is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now” (15).

Developing the notion of universal-yet-concrete love of neighbor is an important task for comparative theological ethics. Both these religions, as well as Judaism, challenge their adherents to have active concern for others beyond the boundaries of routine interaction and self-interest. The contemporary project of interreligious dialogue will benefit from studies of how teachings about concern for the neighbor developed in the three religions, tracing possible sharing of

him. Other texts show explicit concern for the religious other, as when Muhammad’s household cooked a sheep and he asked them whether they gave part of it as a present to a Jewish neighbor. For these examples, see Judge Bola Abdul Jabbar Ajibola, “The Concept of Loving Neighbor in the Qur’an and Hadith,” in Volf, 118-121.

27 Dan Madigan commented to me that the phrase “for love of Him” is a common mistranslation and should probably be rendered “in spite of one’s love of wealth.”
ideas across the traditions. Of particular interest are texts and teachings about the religious “other” as a neighbor. To show that this concern has been long-standing in each faith—even if imperfectly practiced—will create important theological implications of the interchange among religious traditions, which refers to the second part of Renard’s definition.

Whatever the results, undertaking such studies and then dialoguing about them will likely enrich each religion’s understanding and practice of neighbor-love. The dialogue is likely to help each religious community become more committed to peaceful coexistence. I agree with (but cannot here defend) Miroslav Volf’s proposal that “commitment to the properly understood love of God and neighbor makes deeply religious persons, precisely because they are religious, into dedicated social pluralists.” Muslims, Christians, and Jews are still seeking truly to plumb and take seriously the implications of “love your neighbor as yourself” and to make the journey toward full acceptance of everyone who is other. The journey can be made more pleasant and more successful if undertaken together with our neighbors in the other faiths.

Dialogue Project 3—Addressing Challenges in Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue involves many risks. The participants need to overcome fears of the unknown, fears of not knowing what to say to the others, fears of stretching themselves to consider new ideas and uncomfortable challenges spoken by the others. Christian leaders and scholars and their counterparts in the Muslim community can help by naming

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these fears and risks and showing how they might be handled. An initial concern is fear of losing one's identity, a fear that could be eased with a clear understanding of dialogue. Comparative ethicist Irene Oh writes:

Allowing others to define themselves... does not require that we adopt their perspectives as our own.... One need neither lose the ability to critique another perspective nor fall into the abyss of moral relativism by entering into a conversation reflective of all possible views. Rather, through the process of dialogue, interlocutors come to understand better a shared subject matter.29

No doubt the authors of ACW and the Christian leaders who responded to the letter have heard this concern from their constituencies. Prince Ghazi addressed it directly, stating that the letter “does not signal that Muslims are prepared to deviate from, or concede one iota of, any of their convictions in order to reach out to Christians—and we expect the reverse is true. Let us be crystal clear: ‘A Common Word’ is about equal peace, not capitulation.”30 As a matter of respect, participants in dialogue must allow the others to be themselves.

Interreligious dialogue must always be respectful, but in its full flower it also honest and tough-minded. Indeed, it is not genuine respect for the others to patronize them and to shy away from conflict. Much like any familial or ecclesial relationship, Christian-Muslim dialogue in principle should allow for expression of concerns and grievances, for the risk of

30 Ghazi bin Muhammad in Volf, 11.
apologizing and grace of forgiveness, for fraternal correction. All of this is hard work and it only happens over a period of time through continual discussion. While *ACW* and the Christian responses were by no means the very first statements of Muslim-Christian dialogue, they are still at an early stage, considering the sweep of history. Muslims and Christians are starting to move beyond the stage of the first handshakes, the stage of still getting to understand each other's basic views.

In the current stage of Muslim-Christian dialogue, there have been important steps forward, which include apology. In Catholicism, Pope John Paul II launched a new era in the last years of his pontificate by apologizing to various religious communities for the past actions of Catholics, including to Muslims over the Crusades. The Yale Response to *ACW* states,

> we want to begin by acknowledging that in the past (e.g. the Crusades) and in the present (e.g. the 'war on terror') many Christian have been guilty of sinning against our Muslim neighbors. Before we 'shake your hand' in responding to your letter, we ask the forgiveness of the All-Merciful One and of the Muslim community around the world.\(^{31}\)

Acts of apologizing open doors, they unblock conversations, they enable others to take the risk of responding in kind.\(^ {32}\) Apologizing and forgiving are acts of love.

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\(^{31}\) "Christian Response" in Volf, 52.

\(^{32}\) This is not to say that apologizing is free of risk and controversy. For an account of the varied reactions to Pope John Paul II's several apologies, see Tom Bethell, "Is the Pope Overdoing the Apologies?" *Beliefnet*, 2000, http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Catholic/2000/03/Is-The-Pope-Overdoing-The-Apologies.aspx?p=1.
Christian-Muslim dialogue has to face many challenges, including the sore feelings over past and present conflicts between the members of the religions. One such example was Pope Benedict’s Regensburg lecture; others have been conflicts over evangelization and religious freedom in Africa and Asia, terrorism and anti-terrorist policies, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and others. On many geopolitical issues, the Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations have taken stands that are congenial to Muslims and respectful of their concerns and interests, but these stands by themselves can only go so far in promoting good will. People in all parts of the world are tempted to lump others together. For example, it is tragic though not surprising that Afghans’ experience of the American military presence encourage many to have animus toward Christianity, perceived as the religion of American imperialism. Many Americans were tempted to think negatively about all Muslims after 9/11. Only the patient work of interreligious dialogue can undermine the temptation to stereotype and blame.

Moving forward, the challenge will be to maintain civility while being frank about the specific problems. While there is high-level outreach among leaders of all the world’s great religions, the specifics will look different in each country and locale. At the more local level, dialogues can be geared to concrete problems of common living. As a Christian ethicist from the United States, I want to conclude with a few thoughts about next steps for the American Christian community.

Loving Our Muslim Neighbors

As indicated earlier, the American context is characterized less by tension than by lack of interaction. So the Christian and Muslim communities in the U.S. can really be
great pioneers. Their pioneering theme, following *ACW* and *DCE*, should be about concretely loving one’s neighbors. Recall Pope Benedict’s insight: “Despite being extended to all mankind, [love] is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.” The challenge for American Christians is not about possessing a generic goodwill—most tend to have that—but about finding ways to express that goodwill in practical commitment.

The prerequisite will be getting to know their Muslim neighbors. To become familiar with others face-to-face creates the possibility for true civility and affection. Initiatives from local churches and mosques will be most effective, but other civic groups, public schools, and local governments can play a facilitating role. Those pastors and imams who are involved in local interfaith councils or social advocacy networks have ready avenues to explore. Often, but not always, the leaders of the religious communities have to make the outreach and organize their own members to get involved. Certainly, little advancement can be made without the support of imams and pastors. This point suggests some difficulty on the Christian side, for, compared to imams, pastors have less of an immediate motivation and perhaps less support in their communities to engage in this work. Pastors in some denominations will be constrained by the church hierarchies above them. All these challenges can be overcome, but not without a lot of effort. For local churches to get started and move forward in interreligious dialogue, it is very helpful to have the explicit support of their

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33 For examples of interreligious dialogue in religious, academic, and civic settings, see the chapters in this book by Marcia Hemansen and Zeki Saritoprak.
local or regional leaders, who should themselves be establishing interfaith initiatives at citywide, statewide, and regional levels.

Christian academic institutions have many contributions to make, such as educating Christians about Muslims and creating programs that engage in comparative studies and substantial interreligious dialogue. Christian universities and seminaries in the U.S. host important centers for interreligious relations, such as the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. While Catholic universities and interdenominational seminaries have been the center of such activities up to now, it will become increasingly important for secondary and even primary Christian schools to plant the first seeds of interfaith relations. Another crucial and potentially very effective institution for interfaith dialogue are the religious media and the church's savvy use of secular media.\(^3^4\)

A healthy expression of interfaith relations in a local community is when Christians, Muslims, and others collaborate on community service projects, as an expression of the mutual loving concern for those served. Good examples include the "Interfaith Builds" that local Habitat for Humanity chapters have organized around the country, in which Christian, Muslim, and Jewish houses of worship (and possibly others) sponsor the building of a house and organize volunteers to labor together.\(^3^5\) The benefits of interfaith volunteerism are many: people in need are helped, friendly affection is created among the volunteers,


\(^3^5\) For more information, see www.habitat.org/cr/interfaith.aspx.
and a positive message is sent to the congregations and to the local community.

On a more challenging level, for Christians to love their Muslim neighbors will mean taking to heart the concerns and criticisms expressed by the neighbors. After paths of communication are opened, all members in dialogue must be willing to risk looking at themselves and hearing how they may have contributed to poor relations in the past. A similar implication is that Christians should be open to taking on some of the causes that matter to their Muslim neighbors, for example, criticizing improper ethnic-profiling practices.

A final idea, and perhaps the most challenging one, is Christians and Muslims sharing in prayer. Worship services that meet on the common ground between any two religious groups have been a powerful way to express and enjoy good interfaith relations. More often these are in the context of memorial services, public dedications, or events such as Holocaust remembrance. Interfaith services are more likely to happen on a college campus than in a local church. Christian participation in such exercises has come more from mainline Protestants than from evangelicals or Catholics. Obviously this is a complex and conflicted issue, but it is one that must be explored. Pope Benedict, whose encyclical paves the ways for interreligious dialogue about love, has not been as impressive in actual outreach to Muslims and others.\(^{36}\) His predecessor, Pope John Paul II, was much bolder. A high water mark was when John

\(^{36}\) Pope Benedict made a move that distressed supporters of interreligious dialogue. Far in advance of the October 2011 event commemorating the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's interreligious prayer for peace in Assisi, Benedict made it clear that there would be no shared prayer at the gathering, only a joint signing onto a statement about peace. "Assisi Meeting Won't Include Interfaith Prayer: Vatican," Catholic News 61, no. 8 (April 24, 2011), http://www.catholicnews.sg/.
Paul sponsored an interfaith gathering for peace in Assisi in 1986. There, he prayed together with representatives of several religions. If Pope John Paul II and his interfaith guests could feel comfortable praying together 25 years ago, there is no reason for Christians and Muslims today to feel uncomfortable participating in properly organized and conducted interfaith prayer services. These initiatives could be aided by guidelines and encouragement from mosques and denominational bodies.

These are some of the ways for the Christian community to take to heart the requirement to love our neighbors, including our Muslim neighbors. I have written mostly about love of neighbor, which obviously matters so much to the ethical character of social life today and in the future. Yet what will also be found as Christians and Muslims explore the dynamism of love is that God’s love is always interwoven in every experience of human love. The ultimate promise of interreligious dialogue is that we could more deeply experience joy—the joy of God’s love and the joy of sharing love with others.