

Love of the One God, and Love of the neighbour.

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In the name of God, The Infinitely Good, The Most Merciful

I'm most grateful to The Venerable Sheila Watson, for the kind invitation to speak here. In this address I aim to share with you what underpins my vision of my work through The Oxford Foundation and why I believe it is so important.

I want to begin though, on this the 26th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, by remembering all the victims and their families of that terrible event.¹ We remember too all those in places of conflict, and pray for peace, reconciliation and healing.

In my final year of reading Theology, I majored in Islam and the West. With hindsight, that was one of the best choices I made. As time has progressed, the knowledge that I gained during my undergraduate years of the historical relationship between two of the world's great religious traditions – Christianity and Islam - supplemented by the major events of the modern era, such as the Balkans conflict, the Gulf wars, the atrocities of 9/11 and many other barbarous acts of terrorism, motivate me to pursue my work

¹ <https://srebrenica.org.uk/>

for peace, interfaith understanding, and mutual respect. The past of competition, confrontation and outright conflict, is not an option in our modern world. As a British Muslim, one who inhabits and draws together, these two great civilisations and multiple sets of identities, in a single multifaceted identity, I see my role as one of embracing the best of both worlds. To seeking out the common good of all and to shaping a society rooted in love, understanding and mutual respect.

There are two significant initiatives of the 21st century that I think are seminal in laying down the foundations for a world of mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation. The first, relates to intra-faith relationships within the Islamic world and the other between Christianity and Islam. Both have been born out of the conflicts of the last four decades that have resulted in terrible human suffering and the unleashing of extremist forces that have caused havoc in the world including terrorist acts of barbarity on European soil. The first initiative, entitled, the Amman Message², brought together the different denominations within Islam to reach a consensus on what constituted being a Muslim? The core aim was to accept as Muslims all the major schools of law and theology within Sunni and Shi'ah Islam. One of the key aims of this was to end the terrible sectarian violence unleashed following the second Gulf war and to end the proliferation of 'Takfiri' ideology, that is a violent extremist ideology that excommunicates fellow Muslims and then justifies violence against them.

The second, is one of the major interfaith initiatives between Christianity and Islam, in history.

² <https://ammanmessage.com/>

This was the open letter dated 13th October 2007, entitled, ‘A Common Word: Between Us and You’³ (ACW) signed by 138 Muslim leaders, representing all the major streams of the global Islamic community, addressed to Pope Benedict and all the heads of major Christian denominations, and as the document states, ‘leaders of Christian churches everywhere.’ It is also worthy of note that the unity of the Muslim leadership, across sectarian divides, had emerged through the ‘Amman Message’ initiative as noted above and that paved the way for the ACW declaration to take place.

The signatories state that their motivation for the ‘A Common Word’ initiative was:

Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.⁴

They cite many different passages from the Bible and the Qur’an and conclude that:

The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of

³ Download full document here: https://www.acommonword.com/downloads/CW-Booklet-Final-v6_8-1-09.pdf. All references in relation to the ‘A Common Word’ (ACW) document are taken from this downloadable document.

⁴ ACW, p. 6.

both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity.⁵

All the major Christian leaders responded positively, ‘including the Patriarch of Russia, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the World Council of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance and the president of the Lutheran World Federation.’⁶ Of particular note was the response, of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury after consulting ‘church representatives and Christian scholars’ from across the world.⁷ He lays out a number of significant principles for dialogue and for co-operation between Muslims and Christians for seeking out ‘the common good in the way of God’.⁸ For our purposes, I want to note here the three imperatives that he enumerates. First, to build stronger partnerships and co-operation between Christians and Muslims at the grass-roots level. This should work for ‘justice, peace and the common good of human society the world over.’ Second, intensify discussions between religious leaders and scholars of

⁵ ACW, p. 6.

⁶ Winter, T. (2018) “The Inception of A Common Word,” in Said, Y. and Demiri, L. (eds) *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.13-30 doi: 10.1017/9781316466834.002.

⁷ Demiri, L. (2018) “Introduction,” in Said, Y. and Demiri, L. (eds) *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim-Christian Encounters through A Common Word*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–10. doi: 10.1017/9781316466834.001.

⁸ Ibid. p.4.

both faiths. Third, to develop deeper understanding and appreciation for each other's religious experience and practice.

In addition, to the 'foundational principles' to Love God and to love the neighbour, I would add the following Qur'anic verse that for me enthuses my work. The Qur'an states:

- 'We have bestowed dignity upon the Children of Adam..' (17:70)

This verse for me spells out two fundamental imperatives. First, that human dignity is a God given right of each and every human being and this is beautifully articulated in the words of the Qur'anic commentator, Mahmud al-Alusi, he states, that 'everyone and all members of the human race, including the pious and the sinner, are endowed with dignity, nobility and honour, which cannot be exclusively expounded and identified.' [Mahmud al-Alusi (d.1270/1854), *Rūh al-Ma'ānī fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, vol. XV, p.117]. Intrinsically related to this is the belief articulated in the above verse that all human beings are one single family by virtue of being the Children of Adam. A Prophetic tradition emphasises this point in the following words, "People are God's children and those dearest to God are the ones who treat His children kindly.' [Mishkāt].

The core foundational principles that I have noted thus far are not just ideas or beliefs, that we imbibe in our beings but one's that we are called to live out and impact on the people, communities and world around us.

I founded The Oxford Foundation⁹ in 2009 with the aim of deepening understanding between the diverse faiths and cultures in our country. Its roots were laid with my educational programme aimed at young Muslims, primarily aged 14-16 in secondary schools. I developed the programme at Eton College and it was piloted successfully at a school in Oxford, following which it was nationally highlighted.¹⁰

It has the following key components: theology, poetry, interfaith dialogue, drama, art, music, storytelling, successful role models and 1-2-1 mentoring.

Theology:

- ⇒ Islam, Iman, Ihsan – Surrendering to the will of God – Having Faith in God – Doing the beautiful. The end outcome should be ‘doing the beautiful’. Ihsan is derived from the word ‘husn’ meaning beauty, harmony, excellence.
- ⇒ Challenge the theology of separateness and division. Great and vibrant traditions disagree respectfully. The Amman message demonstrates the rich diversity and the acceptance of that diversity by major Muslim leaders.
- ⇒ Hence the importance of the Amman message and A Common Word initiative.
- ⇒ Interfaith Dialogue – young people meeting each other in dialogue, develops understanding and mutual respect

⁹ <https://www.theoxfordfoundation.com/> [accessed 10th July 2021]

¹⁰ Please download the full educational programme here: https://1295a061-8980-2583-9d3e-f1321b17d32a.filesusr.com/ugd/42624e_87f8dc238b28e220a745dd5cc3ce799e.pdf
This discusses in detail the theological model and responses to suicide bombings, etc.

⇒ Drama – exploring sensitive issues through drama. For example, Drama exploring radicalisation, both extremist Islamic and far right groups. Drama is a powerful medium through which to engage young people and explore sensitive issues. We have also developed a play exploring child sexual exploitation.

Art

Music

Storytelling

Role Models – Successful Muslim role models, sharing their stories of success and failure, thereby inspiring young people.

One World Festival – Ashmolean Museum – drawing diverse communities together to celebrate their rich cultures, through music, storytelling, art, singing, etc.¹¹

United for Peace – creating shared spaces for people of faith and no faith, to come together for prayer, silence, sharing stories of the impact of terrorist and extremist violence, interspersed with beautiful songs and music.¹²

The true reflection or measure of whether we are living out the Love of God and the love of the neighbour, that we're called out to do, as Christians and Muslims, is the positive impact we have on the lives of our fellow human beings, our communities and the world at large. Thank you.

¹¹ Please visit for a taste of the 'One World Festival' concept:

<https://www.ashmolean.org/oneworld#/>

¹² For booklets of events held across the country and more details about this initiative, please visit: <https://www.theoxfordfoundation.com/united-for-peace>