

Alexander González García

IN SEARCH OF
A COMMON BASE
FOR INTERRELIGIOUS
DIALOGUE

*Beyond "A Common Word" between
Muslims and Christians*



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IN SEARCH OF A COMMON BASE
FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Beyond "A Common Word" between Muslims and Christians

By Alexander González García

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*For my Jesuits friends who taught me
the importance of interreligious dialogue*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	11
Introduction	17
Chapter 1	
Muslim proposal for a common base for interreligious dialogue	21
1. The muslim proposal	24
2. A muslim consensus	30
3. A common attitude	31
4. Use of vocabulary	33
5. Use of the bible	37
6. Searching for a universal common base	38

Chapter 2

Catholic proposal for a common base
for interreligious dialogue 41

1. The catholic proposal 45
2. The ontological element of natural law 46
3. The epistemological element of natural law 59
4. Natural law and human rights 52
5. Natural law and interreligious dialogue 56

Chapter 3

Beyond "A Common Word" stands "A Common Work" 61

1. The muslim approach towards "A Common Work" 65
2. The catholic approach towards "A Common Work" 71
3. "A Common Work" as "A Common Base" 77

Conclusion 79

Bibliography 83



Foreword

It is a great joy and honour for me to write an introduction to this study. It is a joy because I have the privilege of knowing the author since we studied theology together in London just over ten years ago. We were part of the same community and I got to know Dr Alexander Gonzalez as a friend. I got to know him as person with a heart for the people of the Maghreb region and for their lives, language, and faith. These people of faith made a deep impression on him and his study found its birth here in an attempt not only to understand them and their faith better but to find ways in which he as Catholic-Christian may engage and work with them. He has discovered in his rich humanity that differences need not mean that one must bring the other to one's own way. This led him to uncover a deeper dimension to faith as an invitation to enter deeper into the Greater Mystery of God in whom one may trust fully



FOREWORD

as one sees and experiences Him in one's own tradition without having thereby to judge and exclude the other and their way. It is this spirit that is sorely lacking in our world today, where everything is locked in an either-or logic that allows only one winner. This deprives us not only of truth but impoverishes our humanity and our faith in the Divine.

While I am happy for this study to be published, because of the heart of the author and in honour of the people who inspired and enabled him to complete this task, I am honoured because it is an academic work of high quality. It is especially in his approach and methodology where he brings something new—an approach and methodology not of demonizing but of honesty, respect and a broader vision of faith combined with a realistic practicality. His methodology does not only tear apart by demonizing the other but tries to understand and give the best possible interpretation to what the texts of Islam says. In this he goes right to the original sources of the Quran and even studied it in its original Arabic that he mastered. This speaks of his deep respect for Islam and for the people who live according to her tenets. He learns from them and brings the good to the fore. He builds bridges also in that he shows how Christianity and Islam agree on some core beliefs. His honesty, however, does not try



to hide differences and as such he does not hesitate to show conflicts of interpretation within Islam. In this he acknowledges that it is a fluid faith. He does not do it the injustice of seeing it as a static fundamentalist faith that does not discuss. He does us a service by lifting the veil to a religion that popular culture too easily sees as rigid. I think his contribution lies then not only so much in what he says but in the spirit in which he conducts his investigation and dialogue and in this we find a way forward that gives us hope and a model that provides fruit. In the end his honesty does not allow him to compromise but instead of finding in a fundamental disagreement an opportunity to demonize or cut off dialogue and contact he ventures further and beyond the theoretical realm to search for ways in our practical lives where we may find common ground. He searches for this by seeking for ways to work together and there he finds a unity not so much as an expression of either (theoretical) relativism or (dogmatic) truth, but in the transcendental realm that we all aim and search for, namely the Good that is shared and that is foundational to all of humanity. This Good provides for him the parameters that point toward a way to find common ground. However, in case someone thinks this is too esoteric he suggests that we search together in something like the natural law, (which is again fundamental to all humanity in that we



are intelligent creatures), for justice that is open to all in virtue of its intelligibility. Here he reveals something of his own belief in humanity and his vision that, in something so deep as faith, we can think further and beyond our own understanding and in this process enrich our common humanity by working together in common or in communion for people who are poor and suffering.

In his address to the participants in the International Peace Conference held at the Al-Azhar Conference Centre in Cairo (28-29 April 2017), Pope Francis said on Friday, 28 April 2017:

Precisely in the field of dialogue, particularly inter-religious dialogue, we are constantly called to walk together, in the conviction that the future also depends on the encounter of religions and cultures. [...] Three basic areas, if properly linked to one another, can assist in this dialogue: the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions. (2017a)

This work is an embodiment of these principles and as such a light that leads the way into how we may grow together as a humanity with our differences and distinctive identities, with mutual respect for each other and for



ourselves, with the courage to be honest, with our integrity intact and even enhanced, and, with these, an openness to each other that allows us to grow closer to each other through a process of dialogue and common action.

I hope the reader may find this study therefore not only instructive on the theological and inter-religious level but especially as a personal transformative experience.

John Enslin sj



INTRODUCTION

Religions are like musical instruments. To be played together in an orchestra, they must be tuned to the right tone or pitch. The first requirement is the desire to be in tune with the other instruments. The second one is to find a common reference or tone, usually given by the oboe that plays a fixed pitch (A = 440 Hz). Then all other instruments will be adjusted according to this common pitch using different methods because of the different ways in which sounds are produced. The task of interreligious dialogue, using this analogy, is to find that common reference or pitch that allow all religions to play together in peace and harmony.

I found that the first requirement for tuning our religions is already present. Several important documents such as *Nostra Aetate* and *A Common Word between Us and You* are



signs of a real desire for falling in the right pitch. However, religions are still searching for the second requirement, the pitch to which the whole orchestra will be tuned. This study hopes to contribute to this search by presenting a common pitch to which religions can tune themselves to build harmonious relations with each other, i.e., a common base for interreligious dialogue. The desire for a common base is expressed in the dialogue between Muslims and Christians, established by the Muslim text *A Common Word between Us and You*, (2007). Therefore, I shall focus my study on the documents of both religions expressing this idea.

The first chapter presents an analysis of this relevant document. Muslim leaders and scholars suggest that meaningful peace can be brought about between Islam and Christianity because both traditions share a fundamental belief. This revolutionary initiative has been admired by many Christian leaders. Nevertheless, we will see that according to the analogy of the orchestra, *A Common Word* does not propose a universal pitch that will allow tuning all religions. I propose going beyond “A Common Word” between Muslims and Christians.



The second chapter studies another proposal for a common universal base for interreligious dialogue. In several documents, the Catholic Church introduces the idea of natural law as a common base for all people because God has provided humanity with reason, leading people towards righteous behavior. Even though natural law has been criticized from several angles, I hold that it is still a valuable means to foster interfaith relations.

The third chapter shows that the common bases for interreligious dialogue, as proposed by Muslims and Catholics, are worthy only if they push us to concrete actions that will enhance harmony among all people. Each proposal contains various ways of justifying righteous actions. However, in my perspective, those actions geared towards the respect for human dignity and the protection of fundamental rights are more important than the ways we use to justify them. I conclude by suggesting a universal and common universal pitch to which all religions can be in tune.

The search for a common base for interreligious dialogue is an essential task for today's society. Our cultures face extremes positions, deliberately avoiding or even demonizing religions other than theirs. Therefore,



INTRODUCTION

we urgently need to find a base where believers and non-believers can meet with each other to overcome the tensions among us, and where reconciliation can turn from hope into reality. Let us start with the Muslim proposal.



CHAPTER I

MUSLIM PROPOSAL FOR A COMMON BASE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

*There will be no peace among the nations
without peace among the religions.*

*There will be no peace among the religions
without dialogue among the religions.*

Hans Küng (2005)

On October 13, 2007, on Eid al-Fitr al-Mubarak 1428 A.H., Muslim leaders and scholars sent Christian leaders a historic letter concerning interreligious dialogue and human rights. The open letter was titled *A Common Word between Us and You* (ACW, 2007) and initially signed by 138 Muslims, but since then, many more signatories



have adhered. With this document, the world's two major religions were invited to search for real peace and harmony based on what is common and essential to both faiths. This letter proposes that love of the One God and love of the neighbor are common traditional teachings of both Islam and Christianity. This common ground stems from the foundational principles of both faiths, as expressed in the Qur'an and the Bible.

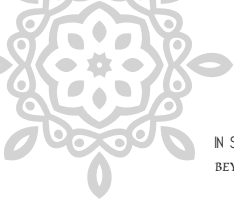
This initiative had its origins in the *Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI* (OLH, 2006) sent by 38 Muslim scholars to Pope Benedict XVI, one month after the controversial lecture he gave on September 13 in Regensburg, Germany. This first open letter wanted to discuss and correct some mistakes of the Pope's lecture. According to the principal political force behind these documents, H. R. G. Prince Ghazi bin Muḥammad of Jordan (2010), the Vatican's reply was not satisfactory to Muslim scholars and, therefore, on the anniversary of the first letter, ACW was sent. The number of signatories symbolically increased by 100, meaning that Muslims are a force to be reckoned with and not easily dispensed with.

The first letter concluded that Catholics and Muslims share a frank and sincere dialogue, and from this attitude, it is possible to build peaceful and friendly relationships

between both religions because Christianity and Islam rely on the same Abrahamic tradition, notably the two commandments of love (OLH, 2006). ACW focuses on elaborating this idea, showing how love of God and love of the neighbor is the fundamental base for each religion and how, from this common ground, all Muslims and Christians are invited to make meaningful peace.

For the H. R. G. Prince Ghazi bin Muhhammad, this second letter was written to “stop the drumbeat of what we feared was a growing popular consensus (on both sides) for worldwide (and thus cataclysmic and perhaps apocalyptic) Muslim-Christian jihad/crusade” (2010, p. 9). Human harmony between these two religions will be reached not only by peaceful efforts but also by proper basic knowledge of Islam. The open letter wants to spread this knowledge globally through the world’s most influential Christian leaders. This document is so powerful that for some scholars such as M. Amin Abdullah (2016), Muslims should read and interpret the Qur’an from this new perspective.

In 1,400 years of history between Christianity and Islam, it is the first time that the two commandments of love have been emphasized so strongly, which is a positive approach that provides new foundations for interfaith encounters



and the promotion of human rights. Most of the Christian responses to ACW were impressed with the spirit of healing and reconciliation that the document contains.¹

In this chapter, I analyze the Muslim proposal for a common base for interreligious dialogue. First of all, I present the proposal made in ACW. Second, I elucidate valuable aspects that this initiative contains, which can help facilitate peaceful interfaith encounters. Third, I explore some ambiguities of this proposal that may cause difficulties in interreligious dialogue. To conclude, I introduce the idea that the Muslim proposal should move towards a more inclusive base for interreligious dialogue that includes believers and non-believers.

1. The Muslim proposal

ACW, based on Islamic and Christian sacred texts, shows that love of God and love of the neighbor are fundamental to both faiths. The first part focuses on love of God and presents this commandment from the Qur'an and the Bible. In Islam, love of God is expressed in the first testimony of faith: "There is no god but God..." (ACW, 2007, p. 4), which is confirmed by several qur'anic verses such as:

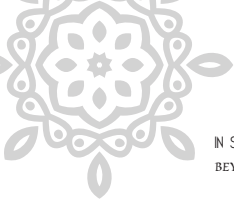
¹ See Attridge et al. (2007).

Yet there are men who take rivals unto God: they love them as they should love God. But those of faith are more intense in their love for God... (Al-Baqarah, 2:165). Indeed, [T]heir flesh and their hearts soften unto the remembrance of God... (Al-Zumar, 39:23). (ACW, 2007, p. 4, emphasis in original)

And if thou wert to ask them: Who created the heavens and the earth, and constrained the sun and the moon (to their appointed work)? they would say: God. How then are they turned away? / God maketh the provision wide for whom He will of His servants, and straiteneth it for whom (He will). Lo! God is Aware of all things. / And if thou wert to ask them: Who causeth water to come down from the sky, and therewith reviveth the earth after its death? they verily would say: God. Say: Praise be to God! But most of them have no sense (Al-'Ankabut, 29:61-63). (ACW, 2007, p. 5)

From these and other qur'anic verses,² the letter deduces that love of God in Islam is not a mere momentary or superficial emotion, but forms the heart of the complete and total devotion to God. Thus, to be a Muslim means to be completely attached and devoted to God in love (ACW, 2007, p. 4).

² See Q. 1:1-7, 2:194-5, 3:31, 6:162-164, 9:38-39, 14:32-34, 19:96, 64:16.



The open letter then goes on to compare how love of God is present in Christianity. Quoting from the Bible, it shows that for Christians, love of God is the first and greatest commandment. In the Old Testament, Moses said in the Shema of the Book of Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! / You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt. 6:4-5) (ACW, 2007, p. 8). In the New Testament, Jesus was asked about the Greatest Commandment:

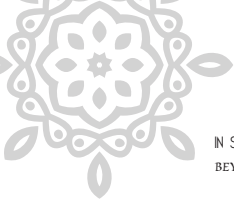
But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:34-40). (ACW, 2007, p. 9)

Moreover, the open letter shows that in the Old and New Testaments there are many other verses that affirm love of God.³ The authors of ACW clarify that despite language differences between these verses, the common idea that love of God is the first and greatest commandment given to humankind remains. This part concludes by saying that Muslims and Christians share the same belief in the first and greatest commandment (ACW, 2007, p. 10)

The second part of the open letter explains how love of the neighbor is essential to both Muslims and Christians. In Islam, the letter explains,

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. The Prophet Muhammad said: “None of you has faith until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.” And: “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.” (ACW, 2007, p. 11)

³ See Dt. 4:29, 10:12, 11:13, 13:3, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6, 30:10; Jos. 22:5; Mk. 12:32-33, and Lk. 10:27-28.



The letter supports the idea of religious freedom as an expression of the neighbor's love, as stated in the Qur'an:

Let there be no compulsion in religion... (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:256). (...) God forbiddeth you not in regard to those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! God loveth the just dealers." (*Al-Mumtahinah*, 60:8). (ACW, 2007, p. 14)

Regarding love of the neighbor in Christianity, the open letter clarifies that it is also a basic lesson of the Bible. The Old Testament reads: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Lv. 19:17-18) (ACW, 2007, p. 12). This teaching is confirmed by the New Testament: "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mk 12:31) (ACW, 2007, p. 12).

In this way, the open letter states that love of God and love of the neighbor form the common ground between the Torah, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. Consequently, focusing on the two commandments of love, it can lead

towards a new understanding of relations between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (ACW, 2007, p. 13).

In the third part of the letter, it is concluded from the above analysis that this common ground between these three religions can form the base for interreligious dialogue, especially between Muslims and Christians. The letter recognizes that Muslims are not hostile towards Christians:

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 (in accordance with the verse of the Holy Qur'an [Al-Mumtahinah, 60:8]). (ACW, 2007, p. 14)

The authors are aware that “if Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace” (ACW, 2007, p. 16) since believers of both religions make up more than half of the world’s population. Therefore, interfaith dialogue between these two major religions is not an option, and, according to this document, if it is based on what is fundamental and common to both faiths, it will be possible.



2. A Muslim consensus

A critical aspect of ACW is the level and number of its signatories. According to the analysis of several Christian scholars, such as Khalil (2007) and Troll (2007), this letter expresses an ecumenical movement in Islam. It started with 138 signatories, but today it has 405 signatories. This number represents over 43 nations and includes significant denominations in Islam, such as Sunni, Shiite, Ismailites, Jafaarites, Ribadites, among others. Although this letter does not represent an agreement between all Muslims, it shows a concerted move towards what Islam calls *ijma'* (إجماع, consensus) (Khalil, 2007).

For Sunni Muslims, who total about 85 % of the Muslim population, the *ijma'* is the third essential source of Shari'ah, after the Qur'an and the Sunna. This idea of the *ijma'* is based on one of the Hadith spoken by Muhammad: "My community will never agree upon an error." The open letter constitutes a normative *ijma'* by ummah scholars. If regarded as such, it might have significant authority in the Muslim community. For this reason, this consensus must be increasingly consolidated with the support of more Muslims signing and upholding it.

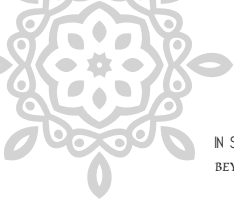
On the other hand, the list of signatories from all parts of the world, for Troll (2007), reminds us that there are no longer separate Islamic and Christian worlds in the geographic sense and, consequently, the open letter can be read as tangible recognition of this fact. Besides, the new stage in the dialogue of which ACW is part can be seen as a positive result of globalization (Chia, 2016).

3. A common attitude

ACW was born to live in a spirit of truly open and respectful dialogue. Pope Francis also promotes this attitude: "Turning to mutual respect in interreligious relations, especially between Christians and Muslims, we are called to respect the religion of the other, its teachings, its symbols, its values" (2013).

In the history of the Catholic Church, a similar initiative appeared fifty-two years ago. Over two thousand Catholic bishops approved the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*. In this document, the bishops concluded:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems.
They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself;



merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. (Pope Paul VI, 1965)

To achieve that purpose, the Church invited Christians and Muslims to overcome the quarrels and hostilities between them throughout history. The Church also enticed them to "to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" (Pope Paul VI, 1965). In this manner, the Second Vatican Council affirms that God acts beyond the boundaries of the Church (Latinovic, Mannion, & Phan, 2016).

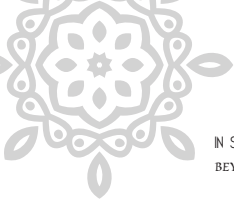
It is possible to read ACW as a response to *Nostra Aetate* (Madigan, 2008). This open letter and the Catholic Declaration of 1965 adopted the same approach; with

an attitude of dialogue and openness, they search for peace between both traditions and want to confirm their common beliefs instead of highlighting their differences only. Although it might have to face some obstacles before it would be accepted to the same degree as *Nostra Aetate* was, ACW is expected to be accepted eventually as an authoritative document that will help to improve interfaith relations.

4. Use of vocabulary

The open letter is characterized by a Christian vocabulary instead of a Muslim one. The terminology used is a rapprochement to the Christian way of speaking and, for scholars such as Khalil (2007), this is considered a sign of real desire on the part of Muslims for interreligious dialogue. However, ACW contains some weak points worthy of analysis, especially in essential terms such as love, neighbor, God, and Jesus Christ.

The word “love” is widely used in the Bible, but not in the Qur’an. Although love of God is found abundantly in Sufism, it is not part of the everyday discourse in Islam (Khalil, 2007). Muslims usually say God is the greatest (الله اكبر, *Allah Akbar*) rather than God is love (الله محبة, *Allah mahaba*). Moreover, in the Qur’an, God as “the Loving”



(الودود, Al-Wadud) is only described two times: "And He is the Oft-Forgiving, full of loving-kindness" (Q. 85:14) and "But ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn unto Him (in repentance): for my Lord is indeed full of mercy and loving-kindness" (Q. 11:90). Shah-Kazemi (2010) explains that, even if "love" is not part of the canonical names of God in Islam, it does not mean that Muslims exclude this name from God. Based on intellectual evidence, it is possible to conclude that God is love because everything good is beloved by Him.

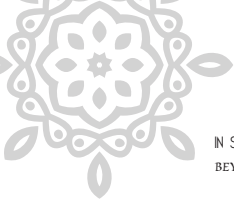
The word "neighbor," used for brethren in Christianity, is typical of the New Testament and does not exist in the Qur'an. This is probably why the Arabic version of the letter uses the word *jar* (جار), a neighbor in its geographical meaning, and not *qarib* (قريب), which for Christians has the sense of the brotherhood of all people (Khalil, 2007).

The use of the word "God" (الله) in the open letter might cause readers to think that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God because both traditions believe in the unity of God. However, there is a big difference in the respective visions of the One God. It is not enough to declare that both traditions are monotheistic to confess that we believe in the same God. Muslims adore God, the Unique, who is in front of them as they pray in the Al-Fatiha: "Thee do we worship

and thine aid we seek” (Q. 1:5), but Christians believe in God that was revealed by Jesus Christ who said: “I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn. 15:15). Moreover, the Trinity, which is a central dogma of faith in Christianity, is explicitly denied by the Qur’an as it says: “Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for God is one God” (Q. 4:171). Thus, God is perceived differently in both traditions (Jourdan, 2001).

The word Jesus Christ appears in the open letter ambiguously. In the official English, French, Italian, Spanish versions of the letter, one would be pardoned for thinking that ACW talks about Jesus Christ as Christians understand him. However, the Arabic version of the letter refers to Jesus Christ in the sense of him being a prophet as written in the Qur’an ‘Aisa Al-Messih (عيسى المسيح)⁴. Nevertheless, the belief of Jesus Christ as the Son of God is expressed in the Arabic language by Christians as Iesua Al-Messih (يسوع المسيح). When the open letter in Arabic uses ‘Aisa Al-Messih to quote the Gospel, it gives the impression that Jesus Christ speaks in it as a prophet of Islam. For instance, the following Arabic expression in the open letter

⁴ Q. 3:45-47, 3:52-58, 4: 157-159, 5:114-118, 6:85, 9:30, 13:38.



can be misinterpreted: Ua fi Al-ahad Al-gedid, iaqul 'Aisa Al-Messih 'Alihi Al-Salam... (وفي العهد الجديد، يقول عيسى المسيح... عليه السلام, In the New Testament, the Muslim prophet Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, said...⁵). This sentence in Arabic conveys the sense that Jesus Christ talks in the Gospel as a Muslim. It is confusing to think about Jesus, as a prophet of Islam, saying in the Gospel that He is the Son of God⁶. Christians believe that in the Gospel, Jesus is neither a Muslim nor a prophet, but the Son of God.

These language clarifications are essential to avoid reading Christian scriptures in a Muslim way or establishing interreligious dialogue based on ambiguities. Interfaith encounters should be based not only on common points among believers, but should always include awareness of the differences in traditions, anthropologies, and theologies. In this way, Pope Francis affirmed: "as experience has shown, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be grounded in a full and forthright presentation of our respective convictions" (2015a). Based on the elements that unite us and separate us, it will be possible to establish a transparent and reliable dialogue.

⁵ My translation.

⁶ See Jn. 1:14, 3:16, 3:18, Mk. 1:1, Mt. 14:33, Lk. 22:70.

5. Use of the Bible

The use of the Bible throughout the document seems problematic. For Islamic doctrine, the Sacred Scriptures of the Jews and Christians are manipulated either by falsification or distortion of their meaning. Thus, Muslims generally have not recognized it as a shared base for dialogue. Troll (2007) asks whether the authors of the letter understand the biblical texts they have quoted in their own authentically biblical context or whether they have accepted these biblical texts only because they correspond with the message of the Qur'an.

Khalil (2007) complements Troll's view stating that the letter quotes the Qur'an with the formula "God said," but when the quotation comes from the Bible, it only affirms: "as found in the New Testament" or "as read in the Gospel." This form of quoting implies that the use of the Qur'an is from a believer in Islam and the use of the Bible is a studious scholarly approach.

Even if the use of Christian vocabulary and the Bible appears problematic throughout the letter, it is, nevertheless, a sign of a real fraternal dialogue with Christianity. This new attitude from the writers and signatories of ACW might



contribute to improving relations between both Islam and Christianity.

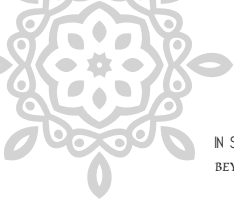
6. Searching for a universal common base

ACW, based on the Qur'an, Hadiths, and the Bible, has stated that love of God and love of the neighbor are not only common themes but fundamental beliefs of both Islam and Christianity. From this common ground, human harmony will be possible if both traditions obey God's two greatest commandments.

These commandments can form a common base for dialogue between Islam and Christianity but remain specific to these two traditions only. Therefore, these themes do not provide a universal base for dialogue with other religions and non-believers. The reason the open letter has this approach is that it makes sense to begin with the two major, most intertwined, and yet most conflicting religions in the world and try to help there first. However, interreligious dialogue in which not everybody can participate because they do not have the same theological and scriptural base, as Muslims and Christians do, might not, in the end, bring healing and reconciliation among all people.

What is missing in ACW is the desire to re-establish peaceful relations with believers of other religions, secularists, and non-believers. For Khalil, the idea that Christians and Muslims represent more than half of the world's population can be read as "by reaching an agreement we could almost impose peace in the world. This is a tactical, political approach" (2007, p. 3). As explained by this scholar, Cardinal Tauran pointed out that the open letter "is interesting, it opens new roads in both its method and contents, but it needs to be explored more deeply to make it more objective and non-selective, to render it more universal and less political" (2007, p. 3).

Pope Benedict XVI suggests that a common universal base for dialogue with everyone can be found in the idea of universal ethics based on natural law. From the Catholic point of view, this base ought to be built not on the Bible nor the Qur'an, nor any other sacred text, since it would exclude non-believers. The pontiff proposes that natural law is "accessible to any rational creature, with this doctrine the foundations are laid to enter into dialogue with all people of good will and more generally, with civil and secular society" (Pope Benedict XVI, 2007, p. 4). Pope Francis confirms this vision of interfaith encounters since "the Catholic Church is open to dialogue with philosophical thought" (2015 b).



In this chapter, I have presented an analysis of an important document, ACW, which was released in 2007. Muslim leaders and scholars suggest that meaningful peace can be found between Islam and Christianity because both these traditions share the two commandments of love as a common fundamental belief, which is a revolutionary idea admired by many Christian leaders.

Although ACW contains a pioneering initiative for reconciliation between Muslims and Christians, it is not a proposal inclusive of every human being. It is necessary to find a universal base in which everybody will be included. The search for a common base for interreligious dialogue is an essential task for promoting human rights. Our cultures face extreme positions, deliberately avoiding or even demonizing religions other than theirs. Therefore, we urgently need to search for a base where believers and non-believers can overcome the tensions among us, and where reconciliation can be turned from hope into reality.

الله محبنا

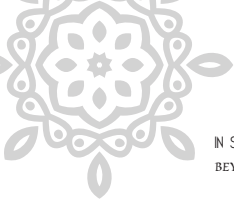
CHAPTER 2

CATHOLIC PROPOSAL FOR A COMMON BASE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

*Ce n'est ni ma maison, ni celle de mon voisin
qui constituent le point de la rencontre ;
celle-ci se trouve à la croisée des chemins, hors les murs,
là où nous pourrions éventuellement décider de planter
une tente pour le temps présent⁷.*

Raimon Panikkar (as cited in Levrat, 2003, p. 14)

⁷ My translation: "It is not in my house or in my neighbour's house that we are going to find our meeting point; it can be only found where our paths intersect, beyond our walls, and in that place, we can decide, perhaps, to put up a tent for now."



*The natural law is nothing other than
the light of understanding infused in us by God,
whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided
God gave this light and this law to man at creation.*

St. Thomas Aquinas (1274/2005, p. 245)

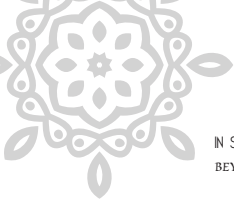
During the Second Vatican Council, the Church suggested that natural law might be used as the common base for interreligious dialogue: "In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship" (Pope Paul VI, 1965). As far as I know, there has not yet been an official document exploring this idea; however, one can find some crucial guidelines here and there in some encyclicals and speeches given by the recent popes on the Church's understanding of natural law and the importance of it for interreligious dialogue.

In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II (1993) stated that: "the moral order, as established by the natural law, is in principle accessible to human reason... such investigation is well-suited to meeting the demands of dialogue and cooperation with non-Christians and non-believers" This Pope further insisted on this idea in two different speeches: "The natural law itself offers a basis

for dialogue with persons who come from another cultural orientation or formation in the search for the common good” (2002a, p. 3) and,

I want to encourage your reflection on the natural moral law and natural rights with the hope that from your discussion will come fresh zeal for establishing the true good of the human being and a just and peaceful social order. It is always by returning to the deep roots of human dignity and of the true good of the human being, and by building on the foundation of what exists as everlasting and essential in man, that a fruitful dialogue can take place with men of every culture in order to build a society inspired by the values of justice and brotherhood. (Pope John Paul II, 2002b, p. 4)

Pope Benedict XVI’s approach to interreligious dialogue builds on the same elements of his predecessor (Gross, 2007). This Pope champions the idea of searching a common base for interreligious dialogue in natural law in his message on the World Day of Peace 2007: “today too, recognition and respect for natural law represent the foundation for a dialogue between the followers of the different religions and between believers and non-believers” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006).



In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI insisted yet again on this idea in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

In all cultures there are examples of ethical convergence, some isolated, some interrelated, as an expression of the one human nature, willed by the Creator; the tradition of ethical wisdom knows this as the natural law common quest for truth, goodness and God. Thus, adherence to the law etched on human hearts is the precondition for all constructive social cooperation common quest for truth, goodness and God. Thus adherence to the law etched on human hearts is the precondition for all constructive social cooperation. (2009, p. 39)

Pope Francis, in his meeting with the members of the general assembly of the United Nations, also affirms the importance of natural law for humanity:

The defence of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 155), and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions. (Pope Francis, 2015c, p. 5)

With these and other words, the popes orient us towards something that could act as a common base for interreligious dialogue. In this chapter, I analyze how the Catholic perspective of natural law and human rights as its concrete expression can act as a common universal ground for interreligious dialogue. First, it is necessary to understand natural law theory itself. Then, I explore how we can deduce human rights from natural law. Finally, I evaluate the contribution of this Catholic approach to interreligious dialogue.

1. The Catholic proposal

Natural law has been explained from various angles throughout human history.⁸ For the sake of brevity, we focus on the Catholic understanding of natural law. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, 1994) understands it as follows:

Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good. The natural law expresses the original moral sense which

⁸ See Aristotle (1992) and Locke (1924).



enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie. (para. 1954)

This law is universal because it is a series of common principles related to human beings, which are not affected by conditions of life, cultures, or circumstances. This law, in principle, is also immutable and remains historically valid since it is part of the essence of human beings (CCC, 1994, para. 1956-1958).

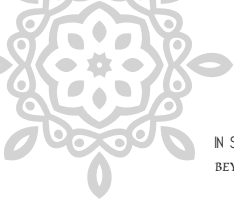
This understanding of natural law by the Catholic Church summarized here goes back to the most influential writer of natural law in the Christian era, Thomas Aquinas. In order to delve into the analysis of the Catholic perspective on natural law, it is necessary, according to Maritain (2001), to distinguish between the ontological element and the epistemological element of natural law.

2. The ontological element of natural law

For the ontological analysis of natural law, according to Maritain (2001), we should take for granted that all human beings share human nature. What we have in common is that we are gifted with intelligence and, therefore, can understand not only what we are doing but also the purpose and consequences of our actions. Based on these

presuppositions, Maritain (2001) explains that all human beings pursue ends according to their nature, which are the same for all. Using an analogy of something created by human hands, this scholar explains that, for instance, all pianos have as their end the production of musical sounds. If there is a piano, which does not produce the right kind of sounds, it should be tuned or discarded as worthless. Everything produced by humans, such as pianos, has their own “natural law” that is related to their purpose and usual way of functioning. The same applies to natural beings. For example, a plant, a cat, a rabbit, each has its natural law, that is, “the proper way in which, by reason of its specific structure and specific ends, it should achieve fullness of being either in its growth or in its behavior” (Maritain, 2001, p. 28). However, because natural beings do not enjoy free will, their natural law is part of the tendencies and regulations of their nature.

In the case of human beings who are gifted with intelligence and can determine their ends, we are required to regulate ourselves according to the ends necessarily demanded by our nature. Human nature has natural dispositions which can be discovered by human reason and according to which the human will must act to adjust itself to the essential and necessary ends of human beings



(Maritain, 2001, p. 27). It is like the piano above that needs tuning to be an actual piano. We need as well to tune ourselves to our humanity. It is of paramount importance to understand that for human beings, the natural law is necessarily moral because we are free, and "because human behavior pertains to a particular, privileged order which is irreducible to the general order of the cosmos and tends to a final end superior to the immanent common good of the universe" (Maritain, 2001, p. 29). This unwritten law is nothing else than natural law.

Nevertheless, for the Catholic Church, the concept of natural law, in its ontological aspect, reaches its full sense only when the meaning of eternal law is established. Eternal law is, for Aquinas, the reality that God is the first cause of being, activating and governing all beings. Thus, eternal law is "nothing other than the exemplar of divine wisdom insofar as this wisdom directs all the actions and movements of things" (Aquinas, 1963, I-II, 1, 93).

It is evident, according to Aquinas (1963), that human beings have recourse to eternal law by searching natural law because:

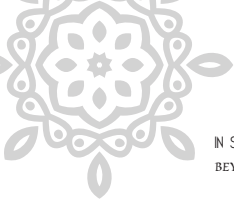
Law is a measure and a rule, and hence is found in him who rules, and also in that which is measured and ruled,

for a thing is ruled and measured insofar as it participates in the measure and rule existing in the one who rules. Now, since all things are ruled and measured by the eternal law, we must conclude that they participate in this law insofar as they derive from it the inclinations through which they tend naturally toward their proper operations and ends. (I-II, 2, 91).

For Aquinas (1963), all human beings, using their rational capacity, can participate in the eternal reason by acknowledging natural law. So, the first fundamental aspect of natural law is the ontological element, which is the normality of functioning grounded in the hearts of all human beings as participation in eternal law (Rm. 2:14-15).

3. The epistemological element of natural law

The epistemological aspect of natural law is also central because it comes with force when known and expressed in the assertions of practical reason. For Aquinas, it is possible to derive knowledge of natural law from the knowledge of our human inclinations. Since natural law is not produced by human beings, we can know and express natural law with greater or lesser difficulty, and to differing degrees, running the risk of being mistaken or just inaccurate. Maritain (2001) explains that even if for some



cultures, as Montaigne remarked, incest and thievery were considered righteous actions, it does not prove anything against natural law since "the mistakes of certain primitive peoples, for whom the stars were holes in the tent which covered the world, prove nothing against astronomy" (p. 32).

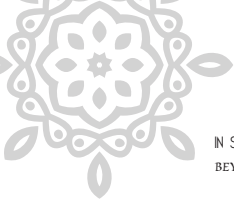
For Maritain (2001), human knowledge of natural law increases gradually during the development of the moral conscience. This knowledge remains imperfect, but will continue to develop and become more purified throughout our entire existence. Human beings, according to this scholar, will know natural law entirely only when the Gospel has penetrated the depths of human hearts and only then, "natural law will appear in its flower and its perfection" (Maritain, 2001, p. 33).

The way that human reason discovers the regulations of natural law is not by means of an abstract operation or part of a theoretical reflection, as if we were working out the result of a mathematical equation. For Aquinas, the only way in which reason can acknowledge natural law is through rational knowledge and inclinations. In other words, although we use our reason and reflect, as we do in mathematics, we incorporate deeper "non-rational" human

elements, such as our inclinations, desires, emotions, values, into our reflections.

Human beings, using their reason, can discover what might be the best for them to fulfill the purpose to which their nature inclines. It is necessary to know, first, what it is that God, as the Creator, has ordained human nature to be inclined towards. Aquinas identifies three sets of natural inclinations, which are central to the concept of human essence: "First, there is in human beings an inclination or disposition based upon the aspect of human nature which is shared with all living things; this is that everything according to its own nature tends to preserve its own being... Second, there are in human beings inclinations or dispositions towards more restricted goods, which are based upon the fact that human nature has common properties with other animals... Third, there is in human beings an inclination or disposition to know the true propositions about God and concerning those necessities required for living in a human society" (Aquinas, 1963, I-II. 94 a. 2).

All these dispositions tend towards an end, and each end is good because it comes from God, who is good. Therefore, "there are as many goods as there are ends,



and there are as many ends as there are dispositional properties to be developed in an essence" (Lisska, 1996, p. 97). Thus, human beings can know the common good by knowing the dispositions written in their human nature. The knowledge of each inclination leads human beings to a judgment not reached through concepts, but as the expression of the found conformity between reason and the tendencies to which human beings are inclined (Maritain, 2001). However, this knowledge does not come naturally with human existence. It is the result of a historically progressive awareness shaped by the inclinations of human nature. It was initially expressed as the most basic commandment around which the most ancient communities formed their societies. For example, the Decalogue can be seen as shaped by the community of Israel. For the Catholic Church, the result of this knowledge can be found today in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (UDHR).

4. Natural law and human rights

Popes John XXIII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis recognize that the UDHR is a contemporary expression of natural law. These popes have presented the intrinsic relation between natural law and human rights and its

importance for today's society. For instance, Benedict XVI (2008b) writes :

Human rights are increasingly being presented as the common language and the ethical substratum of international relations. At the same time, the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights all serve as guarantees safeguarding human dignity. It is evident, though, that the rights recognized and expounded in the Declaration apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high-point of God's creative design for the world and for history. They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks. This great variety of viewpoints must not be allowed to obscure the fact that not only rights are universal, but so too is the human person, the subject of those rights. (2008b, p. 3).

Some philosophers such as Finnis (2005), Lisska (1996), and Maritain (2001) support the Catholic understanding

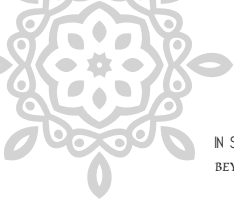


of human rights based on natural law. Lisska (1995), in a critical study, shows us how the theory of human rights can be derived from Aquinas' explanation of natural law. This study is valuable because it helps to remove the doubts that human rights are based on Christian values and, consequently, a way to promote Western imperialism in other cultures, like some Muslims argue.

Lisska (1996) suggests that human rights are the result of human reason in the way that Aquinas understood it. Although Aquinas does not speak about rights in the modern political sense, it is possible, for Lisska (1996), to draw a consistent theory of rights based on the set of dispositions that make up human nature because dispositions establish duties, and duties determine rights. This derivation is supported by Finnis (2005), who suggests that the concept of rights comes from the concept of duties, and duties are based upon dispositions which define human nature. As a concrete example, one might look at the human nature that discovers itself to be so incredible that it demands respect (a deep inclination). When respect is granted to itself, it becomes my duty to respect the other, and from there, the other's right to be respected with dignity.

For Aquinas, the sets of natural dispositions are fundamental to the understanding of the human essence. The dispositions can be gathered into three major groups: living, sensitive, and rational. From these dispositions, one can derive a set of duties. These duties are obligations that one has towards oneself and others. Lisska (1996) clarifies this with the following examples: a person must protect his/her existence, which comes from the natural disposition “to continue in existence” (p. 235). A person also must protect the integrity of his/her bodily composition since it is derived from the disposition to have sensations and perceptions. A person also must seek after the truth because he/she has the natural disposition to know what is true. Human rights can be understood as a way of protecting our human duties, which comes from our human dispositions. As Lisska (1996) explains: “the theoretical derivation of human rights is from the basic set of duties which in turn are derived from the set of dispositional properties which determine the content of a human essence” (p. 239).

From the analysis of the derivation of rights proposed by Lisska (1996), one can conclude that human rights are what they are due to the dispositions of human beings. This assertion is essential because it clarifies that human rights do not depend on or come from any government or



political party or religion. These rights come naturally with the human essence and, consequently, must be respected. Thus, the objective foundation of human rights is natural law theory itself, and my sketching of Lisska's theory can probably be a way to understand this intrinsic relation between them from a Catholic perspective.

5. Natural law and interreligious dialogue

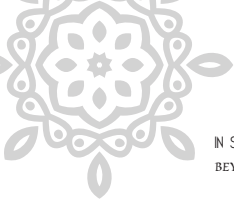
Human rights derived from natural law and, as a result, are universal and immanent to human nature. These rights are not based on a theology or a sacred text, but in the capacity of human beings to govern themselves. All people, believers from any religious tradition or non-believers alike, can participate in this a dialogue because it is not exclusive to some religions but, on the contrary, is open to every rational creature. This Catholic proposal is not against or in contradiction with the Muslim ACW proposal because human rights are an integral expression of our love for God and neighbors. However, the Catholic proposal goes beyond "A Common Word between Muslims and Christians" by universalizing the base for interreligious dialogue.

Natural law as a common base directs interreligious dialogue towards the respect for human dignity and in

pursuit of the common good. It means that the base for interreligious dialogue is not only the act of sharing contents among the participants involved in the dialogue, but the base is also the goal of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, because natural law is not a law worked out and written down by human hands once and for all (like mathematics might be), it has to be discovered anew. As said, natural law has been in a process of discovery since the beginning of our human experience. We need to continue this process of refinement as new situations are continually confronting our humanity. Therefore, we need each other to continue this process since the human implementation of natural law needs to be continuously improved using human reason. However, human reason at its best does not work alone. It is not a singular activity but works “in dialogue” with others. The process of discovery and implementation needs others because we are interdependent.

One of the advantages of the Catholic proposal for natural law as a common base for interfaith encounters is that this idea is not far away from the Muslim tradition, as the Hanafi jurist, Imam Sarakhsi, who died in 1090 put it:

Upon creating human beings, God graciously bestowed upon them intelligence and the capability to carry



responsibilities and rights. This was to make them ready for duties and rights determined by God. Then He granted them the right to inviolability, freedom, and property to let them continue their lives so that they can perform the duties they have shouldered. Then these rights to carry responsibility and enjoy rights, freedom, and property exist with a human being when he is born. The insane/child and the sane/adult are the same concerning these rights. This is how the proper personhood is given to him when he is born for God to charge him the rights and duties when he is born. In this regard, the insane/child and sane/adult are equal. (As cited in Şentürk et al., 2015., p. 74)

Muslims can support the idea of interreligious dialogue based on the universal language of human reason because Islam considers itself pre-eminently the religion of reason which comes from a reasonable God, and because reason (عقل, 'aql) has always been the faculty granted to human beings by God (Nusseibeh, 2016). However, fractions of Islam regard human rights as a way of imposing Christian values on other religions (An-Na'im& Henkin, 2000).

On the other hand, the Church is aware of the many arguments of today's society against natural law. Pope John Paul II (1993) discusses some of them. Some people see a conflict in the relationship between freedom and law,

others argue that moral laws are merely biological laws, others again disagree with the universality and immutability of natural law and some even question “the existence of objective norms of morality” (No. 46, 47, and 51). Nevertheless, the Church believes that her understanding of natural law can lead humanity towards greater harmony among peoples and cultures.

Returning to the analogy of the orchestra, we might say that like a piano and other instruments that have to be tuned to the right pitch in order to fulfill its purpose; human beings need to search for the correct tune to which all people can live in peace. So, the task of today’s interreligious dialogue is to find the right pitch to which human beings are going to play that beautiful harmony written in our hearts by the most beautiful composer, God. How are we going to find it? This is the theme of the next chapter.

طريق السلامة:

CHAPTER III

BEYOND "A COMMON WORD" STANDS "A COMMON WORK"

لا يؤمن أحدكم حتى يحب لأخيه ما يحب لنفسه

The Prophet Mohammed (Al'Bukhari, Vol. 1, book 1, N. 7)⁹

Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it
Jesus Christ (Lk. 11:28)

Muslim and Catholic proposals to establish a common base for interreligious dialogue, as we have seen, harbor both advantages and disadvantages. I do not, however, see these proposals in competition with each other. I am not looking for the best of them. Instead, my emphasis is on the shared purpose that these ideas strive after, namely, to establish meaningful peace among all peoples. To enter

⁹ My translation: "None of you is a real believer until you desire for your brother what you desire for yourself."

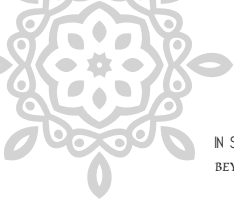


into interreligious dialogue with these proposals might be a good beginning if they lead us to concrete actions that will contribute to greater harmony among all people.

From a theological viewpoint, ACW proposes love of God and love of the neighbor as a common base between Islam and Christianity. Muslims and Christians agree that the fullest expression of love requires necessarily an incarnation beyond words in deeds as the New Testament testifies "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17) and the Qur'an says: "on those who believe and work deeds of righteousness will (God) Most Gracious bestow love" (Q. 19:96). On the other hand, from a philosophical perspective, the Catholic Church proposes natural law as a common base for interreligious dialogue. It suggests that natural law is shared commonly between believers and non-believers alike. This proposal leads us also towards righteous actions, as the universal principle of natural law commands: "good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided" (Aquinas, 1963, S.T. I-II No. 90a. 2). Therefore, both proposals direct our dialogue towards deeds which will add to the development of harmonious relations among people.

In this line, the first seminar of the Catholic-Muslim Forum held in November 2008, almost one year after the appearance of ACW, presented some guidelines that might direct our actions. Official representatives of both religions emphasized the respect for human dignity as the direction that interreligious dialogue should be following. Pope Benedict XVI also affirmed this issue in his address at the end of the forum:

We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways. There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage. Only by starting with the recognition of the centrality of the person and the dignity of each human being, respecting and defending life which is the gift of God, and is thus created for Christians and for Muslims alike – only on the basis of this recognition, can we find a common ground for building a more fraternal world, a world in which confrontation and differences are peacefully settled, and the devastating power of ideologies is neutralized. (2008a, p. 2).



The focus is not on the theological or philosophical ideas behind proposals but on the works we are going to undertake together toward the respect for human dignity, which is confirmed by Pope Francis in his address in Al-Azhar University in Cairo: "in order to prevent conflicts and build peace, it is essential that we spare no effort in eliminating situation of poverty and exploitation where extremism more easily takes root" (2017a, p. 5). To achieve that purpose, the works that we need to perform together are recognizing religious freedom and equal rights for both men and women, educating young people in their religious traditions and those of others, rejecting any oppression or violence, and eradicating social injustice structures. I propose gathering these deeds under an umbrella concept called "A Common Work."

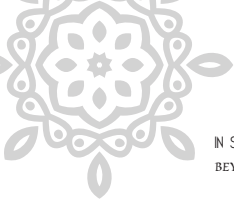
In this final chapter, I argue that these actions towards peace are more important than how we justify it. First, I expound the Muslim and Catholic ways of justifying the respect for human dignity. In both cases, I use religious freedom as an example of the challenges that fundamental rights have posed to our religious traditions because, as Pope Francis says: "religious freedom, including freedom of conscience, rooted in the dignity of the person, is the cornerstone of all other freedoms" (2017b, p. 6). To

conclude, I suggest that beyond "A Common Word," it is possible to find "A Common Work" as a common base for interreligious dialogue.

1. The Muslim approach towards "A Common Work"

ACW is the result of a Muslim reflection on sacred texts such as the Qur'an, the Hadiths, and the Bible. In this important document, Muslim scholars demonstrated that, in the Qur'an and the Hadiths, God had revealed the two commandments of love as the essential practice in Islam. Moreover, the open letter shows that the two commandments of love given by Jesus Christ in the New Testament are also regarded as the essence of Christianity. The letter, therefore, invites Muslims and Christians to love God and their neighbor in being faithful to what is revealed in their sacred texts.

It seems that this approach from the writers of ACW represents a common Islamic understanding of its sacred texts and how Muslims apply it to reality. In other words, according to the open letter, we love God and our neighbors because these commandments are written in our sacred texts, which is a way of proceeding (or "method") that comes, probably, from the centrality that the Qur'an has



in Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an contains the full revelation they should obey and, for this reason, they need to refer regularly to this book.

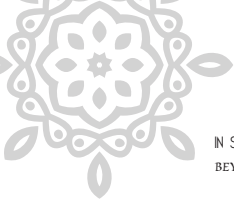
One can see this method also operating in other Muslim practices. For instance, God reveals in the Hadith Al-Muslim and Al-Bukhari the five pillars of Islam (2003, Vol. 1, Book 2, No. 7): professing their faith, prayers, fasting, giving, and pilgrimaging to Mecca. Therefore, Muslims around the world obey this revelation and practice them faithfully. Another example of this Muslim approach, as applied to a completely different field, is the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation [OIC], 1990). This declaration states that Muslims should protect and respect these rights because God gave them, as expressed in Article 25: "The Islamic Shari'ah is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification of any of the articles of this Declaration." The Shari'ah is the Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the Hadiths.¹⁰ So, it seems that for Muslims the actions they undertake in life are guided by the revelation given by God in their sacred

10 The Egyptian scholar, Mohammad Sa'id Al Ashmawi explains that Shari'ah viewed as legal law is contrary to the ethical mission of the Prophet Mohammed. He explains that the word mercy (رحم, *rahm*) appears in the Qur'an seventy-nine times, while the term Shari'ah appears only four times. The prophet of Islam defined his mission by saying: "I am the prophet of mercy." Therefore, Shari'ah only means way or path in a general spiritual and ethical sense. See Nettler (1995).

texts, such as the two commandments of love, the five pillars of Islam, or the protection of human rights in Islam.

It seems that from this way of proceeding, Muslim will promote "A Common Work" because the Qur'an and the Hadiths point in this direction. However, from this method, the promotion of fundamental rights, such as the right of religious freedom, is problematic.

The Iranian scholar Mohsen Kadivar (2003) shows us that religious freedom has been restricted in many ways in several Islamic countries. For instance, a Muslim cannot change his/her religion for any reason; if he/she does so, he/she becomes an apostate and will be severely punished, put in prison or even executed. Furthermore, a Muslim is not free to deny the religious knowledge that has evolved through custom and tradition. Avicenna was one of the outstanding Muslim scholars who have been accused of apostasy for questioning Islamic religious knowledge, yet this practice remains until today. Besides, a young person whose father is Muslim, and the mother is not, must remain a Muslim after reaching puberty. If he/she chooses not to become a Muslim, he/she becomes an apostate and will be punished accordingly.



Regarding the situation of the People of the Book (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabians) in Muslim countries, Kadivar (2003) testifies that they are not free to build churches, synagogues, monasteries, or temples, they are not allowed to propagate and promote their religion, and they cannot practice what it is permissible in their religion, but prohibited in Islam such as eating or selling pork. My experience has shown me that Kadivar does not exaggerate in his presentation of religious freedom in Arab countries (I lived two years in Algeria, two years in Egypt, and two years in Lebanon). For instance, in Algeria, there is a campaign against Christianity. Foreign priests and evangelical pastors cannot get an entry visa because they are accused of engaging in proselytism. Moreover, Algerian Muslims that have converted to Christianity are rejected by their society, can lose their jobs, and Islamists have even killed some of them. Consequently, the few Algerian Christians remain hidden, living like delinquents in their own country.

According to Kadivar (2003), the reason most of the available interpretations of Islam do not accept religious freedom is the evidence of numerous Hadiths who make statements like: "Kill anyone who changes his religion" or "A Muslim who converts to Christianity must be killed, and

his repentance will not be accepted" or "A Muslim woman who becomes an apostate shall not be killed but given life imprisonment with hard labour and must be deprived of all food and water except what is necessary to be kept alive" (as cited in Kadivar, 2003, p. 128). Some Qur'anic verses also support the rejection of religious freedom; for instance:

Ye who believe take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them for friendship is of them. Verily God guideth not a people unjust. (Q. 5:54).

Fight those who believe not in God, nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and his Apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the people of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (Q. 9:29).

These Qur'anic texts and others¹¹ can support the Islamist mentality against fundamental rights. Nevertheless, for some distinguished Muslim scholars such as Kadivar (2003), Talbi (1985, 2010, 2011), Ramadan (2009, 2017),

¹¹ See: Q. 5:51, 5:54, 8:39, 8:12, 9:123, 9:29, 9:14, 9:29, 9:30.



and Saeed (2017), the idea of using the verses quoted above to negate religious freedom contradicts the spirit of the Qur'an. Other qur'anic verses support the notion of freedom of religion and belief, such as the verse quoted in ACW: "there is no compulsion in religion" (as cited in ACW, 2007, p. 14). For some scholars, this verse was revealed due to the forced conversion of a servant to Islam by an Ansar member. Others believe that this verse was revealed in response to a query made by one of the Prophet's apostles named Abulhussien, an Ansar member whose merchant sons had converted to Christianity. From any of these understandings, it is possible to conclude, according to Kadivar (2003), that to force somebody to remain Muslim or to believe in Islam contradicts this verse.

Other verses also show that to choose a religion is a personal decision. For instance, "The Truth is from your Lord, so let him who please believe and let him who please disbelieve" (Q. 18:29) or "We have truly shown him the way, he may be thankful or unthankful" (Q. 76:3). Based on these and other verses,¹² Aziz concludes that Muslims must only communicate the message of Islam, but they cannot force anybody to embrace Islam or to remain in this faith, as the Qur'an states: "if they accepted Islam, then indeed they follow the right way, and if they turn back, your

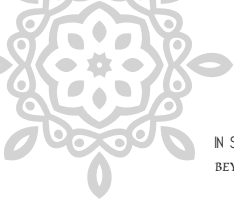
12 See Q. 6:104, 17:7.

duty (O prophet) is only to deliver the message" (Q. 3:20). This Islamic duty is repeated in several verses throughout the Qur'an.¹³ These scholars support the idea that religious freedom is found in the Qur'an and, even more, as Talbi says: "among all the other revealed texts, only the Qur'an stresses religious liberty in such an accurate and unambiguous way" (1985, p. 103). Nevertheless, this worthy interpretation is contradicted by the sad reality. From 38 countries that do not respect religious freedom, 27 are Muslim (AED, 2016).

2. The Catholic approach towards "A Common Work"

The Catholic proposal towards a common base for interreligious dialogue, as shown before, is natural law. The Church relates it to the capacity of human beings to govern themselves. This law is universal and immutable and given by God to everybody. Historically, human beings have been discovering natural law through their own reason. During the papacy of John XXIII, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), the Church recognized that the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 is a contemporary expression of natural law.

13 See Q. 5:92, 6:107, 10:108, 13:40, 24:54, 39:41, 64:12.



In this proposal, the Church emphasizes the use of human reason, instead of sacred texts because the Church, on the one hand, is aware that if we base interreligious dialogue on sacred texts, we will exclude non-believers. On the other hand, we do not relate to our sacred scriptures in the same way that Muslims do. This second point needs clarification.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an contains the whole revelation of God. However, Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is the sum of God's revelations (Pope Paul VI, 1965). Christians refer to their Scriptures from this understanding of revelation, which is confirmed by the CCC (1994) when he says: "all Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ" (No. 134.) Therefore, Islam and Christianity have two different concepts of revelation and, consequently, two diverse ways to relate to sacred texts. This explanation is crucial because with the Muslim proposal of ACW, Christians could enter, without awareness, into a Muslim way of reading their sacred texts.

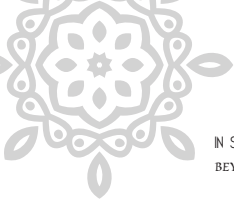
Returning to natural law as a common base for interreligious dialogue, the Church believes that human reason can provide a righteous moral law based on natural

law since it participates in eternal law at the same time. Pope Benedict XVI elucidates this point as follow:

Human reason is capable of discerning this moral norm, at least in its fundamental requirements, and thus ascending to the creative reason of God which is at the origin of all things. The moral norm must be the rule for decisions of conscience and the guide for all human behavior. (2008c, p. 5).

The importance of reason for the Catholic Church does not mean that it operates independently of faith. Pope John Paul II (1998) at the beginning of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* clarified that faith and reason are "like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth." In other words, human beings can come to the knowledge of God's revelation through reason only because creation has occurred by God's reason (Logos) and we take part in it because we are created in His image and likeness.

In this part, I shall endeavor to show how it is possible to arrive at what I called earlier "A Common work" from the Catholic understanding of natural law. As with the section



above dealing with the Muslim arrival to "A Common work," I shall explain it regarding the right of religious freedom.

In chapter two, we saw that for Aquinas, it is possible to discover natural law combining the uses of reason with the knowledge of our human inclinations. It seems that the Church sees religious freedom as a natural human inclination. This recognition is acknowledged in the introduction of the "Declaration on Religious Liberty," *Dignitatis Humanae*:

A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man, and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. (Second Vatican Council, 1966, No. 1)

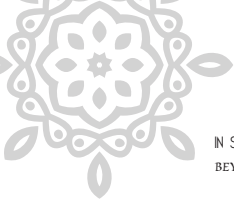
Religious freedom has its foundation in the dignity of the human person, as it is known in the light of revelation and reason, because God puts in human hearts the inclination towards freedom and religious liberty is an expression of it. Since everybody has this natural inclination, every human person must also protect this freedom for him/herself and others. Moreover, if I have this duty towards others, I

am implicitly saying that I owe them their freedom. Thus, religious freedom becomes both at the same time a right and a duty for every human person. This right comes from human nature itself and cannot be restricted by any government, religion, or human power. In this sense the conciliar Fathers state:

This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. (Second Vatican Council, 1966, No. 2).

From natural law, the Church can affirm the fundamental rights of the human person. Nevertheless, this is a recent phenomenon in the Church. For many centuries, the Church rejected human rights. For instance, in the times of Pope Gregory XVI, the Church rejected religious liberty, as his encyclical *Mirari Vos* condemns:

Now we consider another abundant source of the evils with which the Church is afflicted at present: indifferentism. This perverse opinion is spread on all sides by the fraud



of the wicked who claim that it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion, as long as morality is maintained. Surely, in so clear a matter, you will drive this deadly error far from the people committed to your care. (1832, No. 13, emphasis in original)

This Pope also rejected freedom of conscience, freedom to publish, and the idea to separate the Church from the State (Pope Gregory XVI, 1832, No. 14, 15, 20). Pope Pius IX (1855), Gregory's successor, also supported the idea of Catholicism as the only official state religion. He listed as this statement as an error: "in the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship" (No. 77). According to Franco Biffi, the rejection of human rights at this time came from the idea that the Catholic Church is the only true religion. Because it is good for people to remain in the truth, the state was obliged to promote Catholic teaching and establish Catholicism as the only religion of the state. The Church took a long time to become aware of the importance of human rights and arrive at her current position of backing these rights. Natural law was one of the active means in this process of the Church's conversion.

3. "A Common work" as "A Common Base"

Muslims, as stated, have a particular way to relate to God, among themselves, with their neighbors and with the world, which is all in turn determined by their interpretations of Islamic texts. This approach becomes problematic when it comes to fundamental human rights, as shown with regards to religious freedom because some interpretations deny the validity of some rights, while others actively support and promote respect for them.

My idea is not to change or impose another method that will see Muslims arriving at the protection of human rights. I believe that their way of proceeding provides sufficient resources that could enable them to elaborate further on the importance of protecting fundamental rights. In this light, the challenge for Muslims today would therefore be to rediscover a "new Islam," as Nettler suggests, which "is not only consonant with the modern world, but embodies the original essence or core of their tradition" (2005, p. 50). Thus, in the rediscovery of this new Islam "A Common work" will be reached and, perhaps, modern thinkers such as Kadivar, Aziz, and Talbi, will help Muslims in this direction.



On the other hand, we have seen that the Catholic Church, through natural law, accepts and proclaims the respect for fundamental rights. However, this is a recent development in the history of the Church. Other religions can learn from the experience of the Church. To think that natural law is the only way in which other religions and cultures will come to respect human dignity is inaccurate. Helped by natural law, the Church found a particular way to overcome her earlier rejection of human rights and pursue "A Common work," which does not mean that other religions should follow the same path.

It is necessary to avoid the pitfall of forcing one religion to adopt the particular procedure of another religion. For this reason, I suggest that the focus of interreligious dialogue should be on "A Common work." The diverse ways of each religion and non-believers that justify and encourage the respect for human dignity are less critical. In other words, how everybody arrives at the conclusion that, for instance, religious freedom should be tolerated and promoted depend on his/her religious education or interpretation of the sacred text or use of reason. However, the most essential is the real respect for fundamental rights for all people.

CONCLUSION

My aim in undertaking this study was to make a concrete contribution to interreligious dialogue. To this end, I desired to search for a common base that would enhance this dialogue. I looked concretely at Catholic-Muslim dialogue as it was initiated by ACW. The two commandments of love seen as forming a common base for both traditions are revolutionary, which has not only given new insights into our relations but rekindled the dying embers of the Christian-Muslim dialogue. This truly respectful attitude from the Muslim signatories gives us hope for interreligious dialogue. However, this base effectively excludes other religions that do not share the same belief. For this reason, one needs a universal base available to all peoples.

With this in mind, we turned to the Catholic proposal for a common base. Although natural law has not yet



CONCLUSION

been declared as the official position of the Vatican, it is nevertheless possible to deduce it from the documents of the Church as presented in Chapter 2. This proposal is more global than ACW and invites all people to engage in dialogue from our human nature that is basic to everyone.

Both these proposals are valuable only if they lead us into concrete actions towards promoting and living the respect for human dignity. Muslims and Christians agree that the respect for humans will only be possible when fundamental rights are protected. The third Catholic-Muslim Forum in 2014 gave some concrete proposals towards “A Common work” between Muslims and Christians. I have shown that both these two religions justify this common work from different perspectives. From Muslims, one can work together towards the respect for human dignity because the sacred texts give this instruction. For Catholics, this common work is justified because human reason is enlightened by God and can direct us towards righteous actions for the common good of all people. These different ways of proceeding come from our different anthropologies and theologies.

The risk of interreligious dialogue is the imposition (consciously or unconsciously) of a particular way of proceeding from one religion on the other. To avoid this



difficulty, I suggest that "A Common work" can be a better base for interreligious dialogue. My emphasis here is not on the way of proceeding or method that we use to justify our positions, but the concrete works that we are going to perform together.

Therefore, like musical instruments that need tuning to play with others, each tradition can use whatever tools they desire in tuning their instrument, but the most important is to be in tune to achieve harmony together. The task of interfaith encounters is to support and respect each other's tools and method of tuning. The challenge for interreligious dialogue is to go beyond "A Common Word" between Muslims and Christians by encouraging all people—believers and non-believers alike—towards "A Common work."

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