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**Remarks by Professor Miroslav Volf at the 2018 Templeton Prize Ceremony  
Washington National Cathedral, November 13, 2018**

Your Majesty, King Abdullah II,  
Your Excellency, Secretary-General Guterres,  
President Templeton Dill,  
Esteemed guests and dear friends,

The accomplishments in the domain of religion which His Majesty has spearheaded, are many, and they are weighty. I will extol the virtues of only one, the one I know the best.

9/11 threw the relations between Christians and Muslims into a tailspin; four years later they were at a historic low. The Iraq war was spreading death and desolation and stoking the suppressed anger of many Muslims. With the publication of the Danish cartoons in September of 2005 that anger burst into the open. Kofi Annan, then the General Secretary of the UN, had to intervene. A year later, in a public speech, the leader of 1.3 billion Christians, Pope Benedict XVI, put the “cartoons into words,” as one Muslim critic put it. He quoted, *seemingly* with approval, an ancient Byzantine emperor who said: “Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.” The reaction of the “Muslim street” was swift and in many places extremely violent. At the beginning of the third millennium, Muslims and Christians together let the worst of their instincts create a climate of misunderstanding, recrimination, and outright violence.

It took a bold vision and a deep knowledge of religion to sketch a road out of the confrontation. It took political courage and diplomatic skill to get some 150 of the most prominent Muslim religious leaders to start walking on that road. With a single short text, today’s honoree and his team accomplished this extraordinary feat. I am referring to *A Common Word Between Us and You*. Two days before its official release, my friend Tim Collins sent me an embargoed copy. As I read it deep into the night, I remembered the feeling I had when at the end of my speech on reconciliation at the UN I was informed that the first of the Twin Towers had been hit, and I decided on the spot to write a response. Together with the team at the Yale Center for Faith & Culture, we produced what became known as the “Yale Response,” a text endorsed by hundreds of the most

prominent Christians from around the world. This was one of the first bridges from the Christian side that *A Common Word* inspired. Hundreds of others followed.

A key concern of *A Common Word* was to change the way Muslims and Christians engage each other. The title of the document sums up the character of the change. It is taken directly from the verse in the Quran which reads: "O people of the book, come to a common word between us and you" (*Ali 'Imran*, 3:64). Instead of hurling threats, the document issues an invitation ("O, people of the book, come"). Instead of keeping the two sides at an angry distance ("us vs. them") it seeks direct engagement ("us *and* you"). Instead of shaking fists, it proposes a truth-seeking dialogue ("a common *word*"). Instead of recounting fundamental differences and past injustices, it zeroes in on commonalities without compromising identities ("a *common word*"). Underlying the call was a fundamental conviction: the only instruments powerful enough to resolve conflicts between Muslims and Christians are seemingly impotent and ineffectual *words*; weapons are inadequate.

The invitation to a truth-seeking dialogue was crucial to the document. But its genius lies elsewhere. After all, dialogues are ubiquitous. And they aren't new. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the fear of Ottoman armies gripped the entirety of Europe. As Pope Pius II was busily planning a new crusade, his close friend and one of the greatest Christian minds of all times, Cardinal Nicolas of Cusa, was trying to persuade him that what he called "conference" was better than crusade. But "conference" or dialogue, as we would say, about what?

The main argument of *A Common Word* was that what binds both faiths together is what matters most to each: the command to love God and neighbor. The simple and brilliant suggestion was to place what is at the center of the two religions at the center of the dialogue between them! Informed by the joint struggle to understand what love of God and neighbor means, the dialogue can then address thorny issues in their mutual relations, such as deep disagreements about evangelism, religious freedom, and blasphemy that continue to be sources of great suffering (as the example of Asia Bibi in Pakistan shows).

*A Common Word* addressed the greatest religious clash of our time, potentially involving almost half of the human race. Today's major global tensions are, however, not about religion but about nation. Nationalisms are surging across the globe. Only a few decades ago, nationalism seemed a marginal phenomenon, as though a passing reaction to the pace of globalization. It has now become the main alternative to unsustainable global arrangements. Nationalists are not satisfied with love for their own nation in the community of all nations. They assert the superiority of their own tribe, cut themselves loose from universal moral commitments while doggedly pursuing self-interest alone, and act on the principle of international exceptionalism. Such nationalism is one of the most dangerous forces in the world.

*A Common Word*, with its stress on the love of God and neighbor, has acquired new relevance today. First, to make love of God and love of neighbor one's highest value is to embrace a pan-human creed. By definition,

the one God is the God of the whole of humanity; and the neighbor can be any human being anywhere. Second, *A Common Word* points to sources of meaning that are deeper than basking in national glory and wallowing in economic prosperity. By themselves, wealth and glory are empty goals; the more they matter to us, the emptier we ourselves become. We need to return to having love for God and neighbor matter more than national glory.

The great and largely unrecognized challenge of our time is forgetfulness of what matters the most, turning away from the life that's truly worth living. For centuries, that question was the heartbeat of the great religious and philosophical traditions. Yet today, we are too busy acquiring resources for life – things like money, skills, or fame – to pay attention to the purpose of our lives. Faced with global threats, we urgently need to revive a truth-seeking conversation about what matters the most. The issue is personal: at stake is the significance of our lives. The issue is also political: at stake is the future of humanity.

Your Majesty, with the *Common Word* you have proclaimed powerfully the truth which none of us should ever forget: peace among religions is inseparable from dialogue about love of God and love of neighbor. Truth-seeking conversations about what matters the most are not an expendable luxury; they are a cultural necessity. Without them, we, diverse denizens of the blue planet and creatures of the One God, won't be able to walk into our common human future.

We, Muslims and Christians together, must take the dialogue about what matters the most into local mosques and churches. But we should not keep it in the circle of the pious. We must let it inform our civic engagement and international relations, our business exchanges and the work of media. All great tasks require prodigious and prolonged struggle. Let's commit to this grand cause our time, imagination, and resources.

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