

Article

From Dawah to Shahādah: A Move beyond Vatican II and the Common Word

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Abstract: The Second Vatican Council and the Common Word document constitute turning points in the history of Christian–Muslim Relations. *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* appealed to a shared Abrahamic heritage between Christianity and Islam, and the Common Word appealed to a God-based theology, as opposed to the long-standing Prophet-based theology. Authorities in both traditions did so in the search for a shared theological foundation. While the article recognizes the vitality of the two steps, it equally recognizes that there is still much that can be done to advance Christian–Muslim relations. In this context, this article aims to achieve three primary goals: first, to demonstrate the successes of the two initiatives; second, to critically engage with them by examining their limitations; and third, to suggest “practical theology” as a medium through which the aspirations of Vatican II and the Common Word can reach a greater audience. In doing so, it proposes the concept of *shahādah* “bearing witness”, as opposed to the Islamic concept of *da‘wah* “making invitation” and the Christian concepts of preaching and messianism.

Keywords: second Vatican council; Common Word document; shahādah; bearing witness; da‘wah; making invitation; preaching; messianism; practical theology



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1. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) is the most recent ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. In the autumn of each of the four years 1962 to 1965, the Council gathered in Vatican City, with each session lasting between eight and twelve weeks. Although the Council began in 1962, preparation for it started as early as the summer of 1959. Sensing the need to respond to the challenges of the twentieth century and identifying the place of the Church in an increasingly secularizing world, Pope John XXIII called the Council. While many participants were in affinity with the Pope’s vision and supported it, other participants were not of the same vision and hence resisted. However, the persistence of change outweighed resistance to it. Hence, sixteen magisterial documents, addressing various topics, were produced. One of the key subjects of those documents was the Church’s relation to Islam, documented in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*. For relevance, it is worth quoting the two documents verbatim here:

1. *Lumen gentium* 2:16: But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind;
(*Lumen gentium*, Vatican Website, 13 February 2024)

2. *Nostra aetate* 2 and 3: The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth

which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

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.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom. (*Nostra Aetate n.d.*, Vatican Website, 13 February 2024)

While several Muslim theologians did not see that the Second Vatican Council advanced any seriously positive statements about Islam (see Ataullah Siddiqui 1997), it is argued here that, despite the fact that the author does not see any discontinuity between Vatican II and the preceding Catholic tradition (see Gavin D’Costa 2013), the Council advanced Christian–Muslim relations in an important domain, that is methodology. By this, I refer to the methodological framework it furnishes in terms of adopting dialogue as a medium and the pursuit of truth, in its ultimate sense, as a desideratum.

The phrase “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” is transformative in its repercussions. It takes only looking at the doctrines, language, and teachings of the First Vatican Council (1869) to see how different the Second Council is. Placing “truth” at the centre of the conversation is in and of itself a door opener. One may argue that the whole field of “theology of religions,” which is particularly concerned with the question of truth, was one of the active responses to the open clause contained in the Council’s emphasis on truth. In doing so, it charts the path for dialogue, for to understand the multiple ways of experiencing and interpreting God, a unifying hermeneutic tool is needed. The concept of “truth” seems to have offered itself as a step towards neutrality and inclusivity in this context.

Many Muslim theologians have taken the Council’s emphasis on salvation as an implication of a supremacy of the Christian idea of salvation, as may be seen in *Lumen Gentium*. However, this critique seems to underestimate the fact that the Council aimed in the first place to situate the Church’s positioning of *itself* in relation to non-Catholic traditions. Hence, the aim was not to diagnose those traditions and distil their most essential facts and figures, but primarily how the Church relates *itself* to those traditions. Therefore, it is only natural that the Council emphasizes the elements that go hand in hand with the Catholic tradition, highlighting the similarities to the content of the respective faiths of Muslims and Christians. This becomes clearer when we look at the immediate context of Vatican II, especially after World War II and the changing political landscape, when attempts intensified, both biblically and theologically, to evaluate other religions from a Christian perspective (Esra A. Dag 2017, p. 88).

With a history that highlighted points of dissonance instead, highlighting the areas of resonance should not be taken for granted. For the first time in the history of Christianity, in this Council, non-Christian religions were officially considered as entities which Christians should regard and seek to discover. To appreciate the boldness of the Second Vatican's proposal, one needs only to look at its immediate reception in wider Christian circles. That is to say that various Churches viewed the Second Vatican Council as a compromise; a step towards prioritizing dialogue over mission and downsizing the uniqueness of Jesus and, by extension, of the Church's mission to save the souls of non-Christians, which is its own *raison d'être*. For example, in 1970, by way of putting pressure on the Catholic Church to return to the missionary understanding of dialogue, the Evangelical Churches met in Germany and produced what is known as the *Frankfurt Declaration*. To accentuate this, one of the commentators on the Council wrote the following:

A large number of practising missionaries were disturbed about the all too favourable judgement on non-Christian religions and the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, especially in *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*, they asked for a clear statement on these problems and an official pronouncement on the necessity of the missions even after the Council (H. [Vorglimler 1969](#), p. 122).

Various theologians argued that Vatican II not only ignored any mention of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad but also did not explicitly associate Prophet Muhammad to Prophet Abraham; it merely compared Muslims' submission to the submissive act of Abraham, which does not mean "it accepts the spiritual lineage of Muhammad (peace be upon him), through Ishmael to Abraham" (Ataullah [Siddiqui 1997](#), p. 35). Such critiques make sense if we understand the Second Vatican Council only in terms of syncretism, which neither Muslims nor Christians would aspire to. A great bastion of dialogue, Pope Francis, draws our attention to this fact over 40 years later, in his renowned apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he wrote: "A facile syncretism would ultimately be a totalitarian gesture on the part of those who would ignore greater values of which they are not the masters. True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being 'open to understanding those of the other party' and 'knowing that dialogue can enrich each side'". He then adds: "What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says 'yes' to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others" (*Evangelii Gaudium* n.d., Vatican Website, 13 February 2024).

Adopting dialogue as a mode and truth as an end led us to a point where Pope Francis went beyond the limitations of the Second Vatican Council. That is, he specifically references the Quran when he wrote: "the sacred writings of Islam have retained some Christian teachings" (*Evangelii Gaudium* n.d., Vatican Website, 13 February 2024). By mentioning how the Quran maintains some Christian teachings, as well as by highlighting elements of resonance, Francis is pointing out more "rays of Truth" than *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* did. He actually advances the conversation even further by talking not only about Muslims but also about Islam when he said that Catholics must "sustain dialogue with Islam." While such papal statements do not hold the same authority as that of an ecumenical council, they do signify that the Catholic position on Islam has significantly developed beyond Vatican II and could likely be updated in a future third Vatican Council!

Moving from Vatican II to the Common Word, the first thing that one may observe is the context of the latter. That is to say that it did not come as a direct response to Vatican Council II. In fact, it was more of a response to the seismic tensions between Christians and Muslims in the wake of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, various terrorist attacks that involved both Muslims and non-Muslims across the Globe, and the Regensburg Lecture in 2006. Probably nothing epitomizes this period better than the report of The Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2006, which said: "Many in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance. Meanwhile, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerners as

selfish, immoral and greedy—as well as violent and fanatical.” Similar observations were prophesied in S. P. Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, where he puts it this way: “The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future” (Huntington 1993, p. 22).

The Common Word came to the light in October 2007, whereby 138 Muslim scholars signed a document entitled “A Common Word between Us and You”, addressing a number of 28 Christian leaders across the Globe, inviting them to a common ground. The initiative takes its morale and rationale from Q. 3:64, which states “Say, ‘People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.’ If they turn away, say, ‘Witness our devotion to Him.’” The verse invites both groups to affirm that they shall worship none but God, that they shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of them will take others for lords beside God. Equally, it invites Christians to remember the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 12: 29–31), where it says: “the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Both verses affirm the oneness of God.

Daniel Madigan was one of the first scholars to link the Common Word to the Second Vatican Council. In 2008, he wrote: “One might read their letter as a first collective Muslim response to *Nostra Aetate*, a response that agrees to adopt the same approach as the Council: the bracketing of differences in order to affirm common beliefs and an appeal to work together for justice and peace in the world” (Troll et al. 2010, p. 178). Madigan then goes on to enumerate the similarities between the two initiatives. So, he begins by saying that *Nostra Aetate* and ACW both highlight the key things upon which Christians and Muslims agree, rather than the more common approach which focuses on the differences. Both documents are important cornerstones in the history of Christian–Muslim relations, and they have grown out of reflection and experience. Moreover, as NA struggled to be recognised by Catholics, the signatories of ACW should expect to go through the same process, i.e., it will face resistance and hence it requires persistence (Troll et al. 2010, p. 178). While Madigan is acutely aware of the difference in the structure of authority in both traditions, which may make the two documents of a different nature, he adds this comment: “No other religious community, Christian or not, has such an authority structure [i.e., the Catholic structure]. Everywhere else authority is more diffuse; we might even say democratic. It has to be negotiated painstakingly and binding consensus is often elusive. We should be particularly grateful to this group of Muslim scholars therefore that they have succeeded in arriving at a statement like this, subscribed to by such a broad representation” (Troll et al. 2010, p. 178).

2. The Limitations of Vatican II and the Common Word

Having said that, for the conversations and relations to go forward, much is still needed from both sides: Christians and Muslims. The Second Vatican Council seems to have taken a “minimalist approach” towards Islam, which is commendable as a starting point but it ought to be followed by a “maximalist” one that engages Islam and Muslims more deeply. By deepening the engagement, I refer not only to the future but also to the past. That is to say that the Council’s plea with all “to forget the past” needs some revisitation. The past is part of who we are. If we cannot reconcile with the past, we will hardly be able to reconcile with the present or even the future, for the past is part of our memories; our memories are our identities. They can be put aside for some time, but, left unresolved, they may well come back on us to explode in our faces.

The invitation here is not to revive the quarrels of the past, but to restudy them in the light of their own contexts and distil normative Islam and normative Christianity from historical Islam and historical Christianity. While it is understandable that the Council is inviting all not to see the past as a chain on our necks that ignites hatred and prejudice, putting it under the carpet is not helpful either, especially when there are still areas of recent history under whose implications we still live. By this, I refer to the fact that many Muslims

and Christians identify one another with colonialisation, violence, terrorism, crusades, conquest, secularism, and missionary activities. Those factors are real and should not be sidelined. In her, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings-Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700–1900*, Susan Bayly tells us that, while the Christian Church existed from the very first century of the Christian calendar in India, Muslims' arrival in the country did not disrupt or disturb the relations of the two communities, but rather the arrival of the Western colonial powers did (S. Bayly 1989, pp. 260–61).

With Muslims, even though they have welcomed dialogue and commended mutual understanding, they have not yet developed a full-fledged, authoritative, and coherent theology of dialogue and theological pluralism. While they have been able to create various platforms for dialogue and individually produced some original writings on theological pluralism, rarely have they produced a systemic theology of pluralism that can provide the theological base for Muslims' theological worldview in the twenty-first century. As a result of this, Muslims' engagement in dialogue has been on an ad hoc basis at best and reactionary at worst. Driven by Islam's appreciation of dialogue and taking knowing the other as an Islamic imperative, whenever invited to dialogue, they would simply respond, but often they come unprepared theologically and unclear methodologically.

Nevertheless, the weight of the Common Word should not be underestimated for three primary reasons. First, it came at a time of dichotomization and polarization where reactionary voices in each tradition decry one another in various parts of the world. Second, with the Common Word basing itself on Q. 3:64, which talks about the definition of Islam/Muslims, it amounts to defining, theologically, what it means to be a Muslim in our day and which religious group is walking on the Straight Path (*al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*), which have always been essential questions for Muslims. Third, it reinterpreted a verse that has often been sidelined in interfaith conversation, if not used for opposite purposes. That is to say that this verse has often been cited by Muslim scholars to counter Christians who associate Christ with God and affirm three eternal and equal essences: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 8, pp. 94–95). These are valuable contributions that should not be underestimated.

3. Bearing Witness as a Move Forward

The above presentation shows that Vatican II and the Common Word have somehow proven elusive when one comes to measuring their impact in real terms. In his *Bearing witness: Reframing Christian-Muslim encounter in light of the refugee crisis*, Joshau Ralston tells us that “Even topics of apparent shared commitment such as belief in the One God, the doctrine of creation, or the call of Abraham are interpreted in vastly divergent ways that are intertwined with the distinct claims that each tradition makes about Jesus, Muhammad, God, and Scripture” (Ralston 2017, p. 29; Mohammed Gamal Abdelnour 2022). This suggests that this “shared reflection” on our theological traditions ought to be accompanied by a “shared action”. No chance to play this role is more evident and timelier than the current political realities of our world, more particularly the one in the Holy Land.

As the essence of Christian-Muslim relations, despite the ecumenical and conciliatory efforts exerted by the two sides, is the fact that Muslims and Christians have often understood each other to be of a missionary nature. What is more is that, even when we resorted to dialogue, dialogue was often understood, not as a purpose per se, but rather as a procedure to practice messianism in a soft manner, in a way that goes in line with the spirit of the age and does not challenge the sensitivities of the modern man. What I aim to do with the remaining part of this article is to put the concept of *shahādah* “bearing witness” forward, as opposed to the concept of *daʿwah*, which is the Arabic word for missionary activities.

Bearing witness “Shahādah” is one of the central concepts of the Bible and the Quran. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptizer is described as one who is sent to bear witness to the Light (John 1: 6–8). In a similar vein, in both Matthew 28 and Acts 1, the disciples are tasked with bearing witness to Jesus Christ. In Q. 3:18 God bears witness that there is no deity except Him. Q. 7:172–173 tells us that God is said to have taken the children of Adam

and “made them bear witness” to His Oneness. The verses say: “And remember when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have testified.’ [This]—lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were of this unaware.’”

However, in the Islamic tradition, the concept has largely been reduced in the Muslim imagination to a formality. That is to say that the vast majority of Muslims regard it as one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is often taken as the first and probably the most essential ritual for a newcomer to it (Vincent J. Cornell 2007, p. 1400). While this is understandable, the concept of *shahādah* has a lot more to it than just being a formality that Muslims need to observe in such important moments in their spiritual life. A quick revisitation of the Common Word will reveal that the Document is anchored upon Q. 3:64, which contains a reference to the term *shahādah* but in a unique sense. What is particularly interesting about the mention of “bearing witness” in this verse is that it does not invite Christians and Jews to forsake their own traditions, but rather to share a common ground with Muslims. If a common ground is not reached, then the relationship becomes one of bearing witness to one another, rather than converting each other. With this in mind, it is not surprising that Prophet Muhammad himself used this verse in his encounter with the Christians of his day. Al-Bukhārī narrates that Heraclius asked for the letter which was forwarded to him by Prophet Muhammad to read. The contents of the letter were as follows:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful (This letter is) from Muhammad the worshipper of Allah and His Apostle to Heraclius the ruler of Byzantine. Peace be upon him, who follows the right path. Furthermore, I invite you to Islam, and if you become a Muslim, you will be safe, and Allah will double your reward, and if you reject this invitation of Islam, you will be committing a sin of the followers of Aruis. And (Allah’s Statement:) “O people of the scripture! Come to a word common to you and us that we worship none but Allah and that we associate nothing in worship with Him, and that none of us shall take others as Lords beside God. Then, if they turn away, say: Bear witness that we are submitters to God” (al-Bukhārī, book 1, ḥadīth 7).

The concept of bearing witness in Q. 3:64 is transformative in various ways. First, it recognizes the particularity of the Jewish and Christian traditions. This is reflected in the fact that they are the only community in the Quran that was invited to a common ground, while the Quran often views its relationship with non-Muslims in an either–or framework. Secondly, it offers itself as an alternative to the traditions involved when they fail to arrive at a common word that unites them all, which is probably our own situation today. Thirdly, *shahādah*, as opposed to *da’wah* which has an extrospective connotation, has an introspective function. That is to say that the concept of *shahādah* invites the “other”, in this case Jews and Christians, to look into the claimer, i.e., Muslims, with a view to bearing witness to whether Muslims are real submitters to God or not. The concept of *da’wah* often does the opposite, as it wholeheartedly presupposes that the “other” is on the wrong side. Hence, the “other” becomes an object of invitation and is in need of being saved from the crooked path they are leading.

The result of being in a position of bearing witness is that one tends to become more self-critical and avoids feelings of religious complacency, which often accompany missionary activities. What accentuates this observation is the fact that the Qur’ān encourages Muslims to be self-critical (and justly critical of others). Q. 4:123–124 reflect this principle, where it states: “It will not be in accordance with your desires nor the desires of the People of the Book. Whosoever does evil shall be requited for it, and he will find no protector or helper for himself apart from God. And whosoever performs righteous deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, such shall enter the Garden, and they shall not be wronged so much as the speck on a date stone.” The renowned Quran commentator, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) reported that these verses refer to a quarrel that took place between a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims as to which is more privileged in the sight of God or truer. The Quran dispels these claims, asserting that there is reward and punishment in the

Hereafter, and it will be based not merely on membership of a certain religious group, but upon individual faith and the performance of good deeds. The verses then set the principle that “whosoever” does evil shall be punished for it, and “whosoever” does good deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer in God, such will be in Heaven (al-Ṭabarī 1994, vol. 2, pp. 564–69). So, the verse in essence invites the three groups to look into themselves and measure their attitude against this practical yardstick, which is what “bearing witness” is essentially about.

Along the same lines goes Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) in his *Tafsīr al-manār*. He makes use of the tradition that says that faith is what is firmly established in the heart and is *verified* by practice (*al-īmān mā waqara fī-l-qalb wa ṣaddaqaḥu al-‘amal*). ‘Abduh is convinced that faith alone is not enough for one’s salvation but good practice too is a key condition, arguing that neglecting deeds is what prompted many Muslims to see non-Islamic religions as inferior to Islam, hence ending up *privatizing* and *racializing* Islam (Abduh and Riḍā 1947, vol. 1, pp. 336–37; p. 112). Not only did ‘Abduh place good practice on equal footing with correct faith, but he also de-linked good deeds from correct faith, contending that a good deed is rewardable in the Hereafter no matter whether its doer was a believer or not, taking verses Q. 99:7–8, which read: ‘Whoever does an atom’s weight of good, will see it. And whoever does an atom’s weight of evil will see it;’ at their face value, he emphasized that the alleged consensus of the Qur’ān commentators’ on particularizing the generality of these verses should not be followed (Muhammad Imāra 1993, vol. 5, p. 463).

Deepening the impact of bearing witness to dialogue, the Qur’ān in 34:24–25 leaves us with an interesting observation. The verses say: “Say [Muhammad] ‘Who provides for you from the heavens and the earth?’ Say, ‘God. And surely either we [Believers] or you [Disbelievers] are upon guidance *or* in manifest error.’” Al-Rāzī reflected on this verse in a way that shows the importance of bearing witness through one’s action, for he, unlike other commentators, took the verse at its face value and maintained that the verse means, “Either we are astray or guided, or you are astray or guided,” leaving us with this telling comment: “In this verse, there is an instruction from God to Prophet Muhammad to guide his scholarly and non-scholarly debates. Otherwise, if one of the debaters says to the other ‘what you say is false and you are misguided,’ this will trigger their anger, and anger precludes constructive thinking. When constructive thinking is precluded, there is no hope in understanding, and, therefore, the goal [of dialogue] is missed . . . However, if they say: ‘let us, for the sake of Truth, practice reasoning to know which one of us is mistaken,’ then their counterpart will be well-positioned to reflect and abandon prejudice” (al-Rāzī 1981, vol. 25, p. 258). This slight and subtle point is then understood as a gentle invitation to embrace a genuine open-ended dialogue that is free from priori judgments, indicating that bearing witness leaves ample room for cross-examination and mutual learning.

Furthermore, the concept of *shahādah* has the capacity to balance our encounter between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, by directing our attention a little from speculative theology to practical theology. This is because *shahādah* requires an observation not only of one’s theological statements but equally an observation of one’s commitment to the truth and the moral values that lie at the heart of the traditions involved. This essentially means one’s orthopraxy becomes a defining factor on whether the various competing groups embody what they call for or not. Looking at this from the prism of political theology, Ralston critiques Christian political theology of Islam in light of the refugee crisis, contending that to “continue to talk about and treat Muslim refugees primarily as a security issue is not only to bear false witness against our neighbour, it also amounts to a false witness to the Gospel” (Ralston 2017, p. 33). If this is established, Ralston added:

It is not enough, then, to bear witness to theological ideas. One is called to bear witness to a vision of God’s rule or kingdom that combines truth and justice, what in Arabic is called *ḥaqq*. By challenging false witness, Christians are invited not only into dialogue for the sake of theological conversion and learning, but primarily in order to bear witness to God and God’s rule as an alternative to the cycles of fear, death, poverty, war, tyranny, and terrorism that are crushing the world and human beings (Ralston 2017, p. 34).

Ralston reminds us that, while the category of “bearing witness” might invoke negative images of proselytizing and polemics, a deeper understanding of the nature of “bearing witness” dispels such an interpretation. This is because bearing witness is neither to play polemics nor apologetics. Rather, “witness is an act of humble and confident trust that points toward God and trusts in the power of God, not human argument” (Ralston 2017, p. 32). John Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion*, while drawing on the coherence of the Scripture, contends that the Scripture alone will not persuade in isolation from the work of the Spirit. Similarly, in his *God is Beautiful*, Navid Kermani reads the Islamic tradition along the same lines, arguing that the primary way in which the early Muslims received and communicated was not through argumentation, nor migration, but rather the “Qur’an’s self-authenticating power and the beauty of the transcendent God revealed in the rhythm of recitation that drew people into the community. The agent of conversion then, in both of these theological renderings, remains God” (Ralston 2017, p. 32). Q. 28:56 conforms to this where it says: “Indeed, [O Muhammad, you do not guide whom you like, but God guides whom He wills. And He is most knowing of the guided.”

On top of that, the Quran denies prophets three key claims that are often employed by preachers and callers to God. First, it denies prophets any controlling authority. Q. 88:22 says: “You are not there to control them.” Second, it denies them any authority to compel, as Q. 51:45 indicates when it says: “We know best what the disbelievers say. You are not there to force them, so remind, with this Quran, those who may fear my warning.” Third, it denies them any guardianship over people, where Q. 6:107 states: “If it had been God’s will, they would not have done so, but We have not made you their guardian, nor are you their keeper.” As a result, the human task is simply to witness to the Divine, which Q. 2:143 summarizes in the following: “And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you.”

If the above is conceded, the primary task for both Christians and Muslims then is not to adopt either defensive, or offensive positions towards one another, but to stand as living witnesses to the truth, beauty, and justice of God. This position requires moving from having a certain prophet at the centre of one’s faith tradition to rather having God instead, in accordance with Q. 3:79–80, which states: “be God-centred by virtue of what you have taught of the Scripture and because of what you have studied—Nor would He order you to take the angels and prophets as lords. Would He order you to disbelief after you had been submitters?”

What is more is that this posture puts the “other” in a more reflective mode, as opposed to the defensive one. Ralston brilliantly puts the impact of this posture in the following: “The witness of Muslims, for instance, to the mercy and compassion of God recited in the *bismillah* challenges Christian theology to better articulate our own understandings of the atonement, even as this dialogue serves as a corrective to Christian misunderstandings of Islamic ideas of God as merely a judge or lawgiver” (Ralston 2017, pp. 23–33). Equally, the witness of Christians being committed to reconciling monotheism with the Trinity acts as a corrective to the common Muslim imagination that tends to ridicule Trinitarian monotheism, inviting them to, at least, not underestimate the depth and complex nature of the figure of Jesus; a figure that the Quran itself attests to its uniqueness, even if it introduces him as a prophet only. In this context, Q. 3:49 says: “And [make him] a messenger to the Children of Israel, [who will say], ‘Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord in that I design for you from clay [that which is] like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of God. And I cure the blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead—by permission of God. And I inform you of what you eat and what you store in your houses. Indeed, in that is a sign for you, if you are believers.’”

With that being said, will “bearing witness” help us solve our theological puzzles? It probably will not, but it will do what is more intrinsic, namely, reforming how we relate to our theologies by way of providing a more fertile land for reflection, positive engagement, and mutual learning. This will naturally lead to celebrating the diversity with which God has blessed this world, but we do not seem yet to fully appreciate the beauty of this

diversity due to our vested interest in our exclusivistic claims. Q. 11:118–119 state: “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ—Except whom your Lord has given mercy, and for that He created them.”

What is more is that not only will the concept of bearing witness help us be in a more reflective mode but it will also act as a distinguisher between true witnesses of God and false ones, especially when we live in a time of misinformation, misrepresentation, and misconceptions. Muslims, more particularly, are in need of this position, as they are the ones who suffer the most from those who speak in its name without having any authentic access to the tradition. Khalid Abou El Fadl illustrates this extensively in his *Speaking in God's Name* (Abou El Fadl 2001). More traditionally, Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1347) makes this even clearer when he wrote: “Sharia is all about wisdom and achieving people’s welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Sharia, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation” (Jasser Auda 2008, p. 51). In the same context, Ralston puts this even clearer when he wrote: “The Qur’an claims that ‘there is no compulsion in religion’ (Surat al-Baqirah, 2:256) and that Christians are ‘nearest in affection’ (Surat al-Ma’idah, 5:82), but this does not match the witness of many Muslims toward Christians in Egypt and Iraq” (Ralston 2017, p. 33), nor do many Muslims engage with Christians in the “most virtuous manner” in accordance with Q. 29:46.

With the absence of a “bearing witness” attitude, many Muslims have opted for an easier option in their missionary activities. That is, when a Muslim encounters a non-Muslim and starts to convey the message of Islam to them, they often follow the invitation up with the following qualifying statement: “Do not look at me; I am not perfect, but Islam is” (see: <https://sunnahconscious.com/en-gb/products/islam-is-perfect-but-i-am-not>, accessed on 7 February 2024). I see this attitude as one that avoids the role of witnessing and empties Islam of any real representation. Hence, Islam becomes more of a ritualistic and formalistic tradition that fails to find responsive Muslims who can act as witnesses to its truth.

4. Conclusions

In this investigation, the aim was to reintroduce the statements of the Second Vatican Council in relation to Islam and those of the Common Word Document. The article recognizes the significant contributions that those two initiatives brought about and considers them as critical milestones that have deepened the theological encounters between Christians and Muslims living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Both documents acted as stimuli to a better interfaith environment not only in terms of reflection but also in terms of action.

To deepen interfaith reflection and facilitate interfaith action, the article proposed the concept of “bearing witness” as a foundational principle in both traditions. The article argued that “bearing witness”, as opposed to the Islamic concept of *da’wah* “making invitation” and the Christian concepts of preaching and messianism, is better equipped to move the conversation forward and help Christians and Muslims accompany their speculative theology with a practical one that is more apt to engage with our problems today. Bearing witness was put forward due to its introspective nature and its ability to cultivate criticality in the self and a more reflective mode in the other.

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