

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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**“..... that they.....  
may be one.....”**

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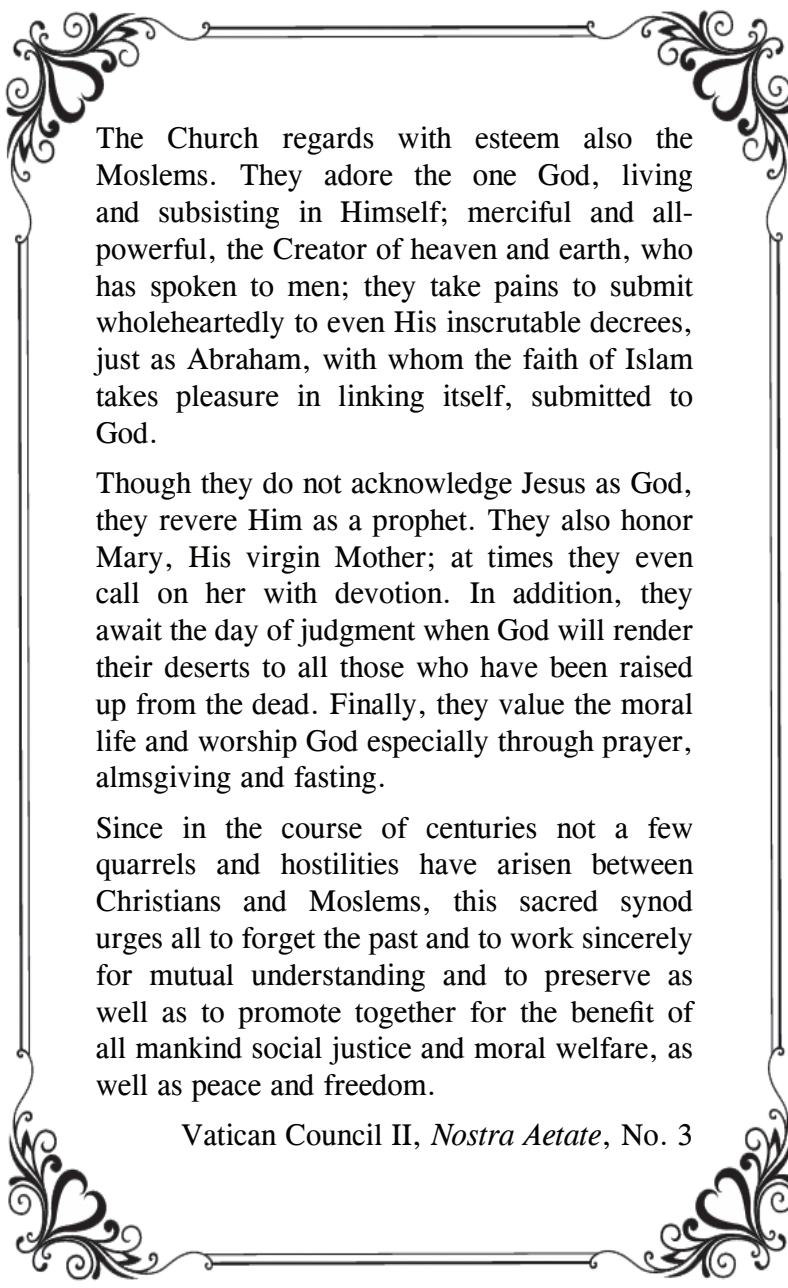
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable 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.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, No. 3

# Editorial

I apologize for the delay in the July 2025, October 2025, and January 2026 issues of *Salaam* and I would like to explain the reasons for the delay. One reason is that I have been engaged in organizing interfaith events for students. Besides, together with friends and scholars like Dr. Herman Roborgh and Fr. James Kroeger, we edited two books: *'A Vision for Christian-Muslim Relations: Experiences and Reflections'* and *'Fostering Interfaith Relations: Nostra Aetate at Sixty'*. I also managed to publish another volume entitled *'Pilgrims in Conversation,'* which consists of interviews with Christian and Muslim scholars interested in dialogue between the two faiths. Additionally, I was visiting theological institutes where I continue to teach Christian-Muslim relations.

But my busy schedule came to a halt on a cool November morning, exactly on the day of my 25th ordination anniversary, when I faced an unexpected medical emergency. A routine checkup revealed that I had four major blockages in my arteries and the cardiologist and his team recommended that I undergo a Coronary Artery Bypass Graft (CABG) operation. After consultation with the cardiologists' team, my Superiors recommended that I should undergo the CABG procedure. When this decision was announced by the Rector of the Vidyajyoti Jesuit Community, of which I am a member, I experienced a profound sense of consolation in my heart with the result that I found myself neither anxious nor afraid.

According to Ignatian spirituality, consolation represents an internal movement of the soul—a deep spiritual experience of love, faith, hope, and peace that brings an individual closer to God. It is more than mere happiness because it results in an “enhancement of faith, hope, and charity” that helps a person to trust in God and leads to acts of service, kindness and gratitude. I can honestly say that I experienced a sense of deep gratitude to God and remembered a prayer that Pedro Arrupe SJ composed during his illness: “More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have desired throughout my life, ever since my youth. However, there is now a distinction: the initiative rests entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so completely in God’s hands.” With humility and trust in God, I took his words as my own and was filled with gratitude. During my months of recovery, I was enveloped by the love, affection,

and prayers of my Jesuit companions, my family and cherished friends. I am convinced that their prayers have provided me with spiritual comfort and shielded me from despair.

On 7<sup>th</sup> February 2026, I received the sorrowful news about the passing of our beloved friend Khwaja Syed Mohammad Nizami. He was an esteemed Indian Muslim scholar and served as the Chief Sajjadanshin (Chief Patron) of the Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah Shrine. He was the nephew of Khwaja Hasan Sani Nizami and had been his successor at the Dargah Shrine since 2015. He was a good friend of members and friends of the *Islamic Studies Association*. When I received the news, I offered a silent prayer by repeating the words that Muslims utter upon learning of a fellow Muslim's passing: *Inna Lillahi Wa Inna Ilayhi Raji'un* (Q. 2: 156) which, translated means: "Indeed, we belong to Allah and to Him we shall return." The Christian equivalent is as follows: "May he rest in peace and may everlasting light shine upon him."

Over the years, I had the privilege of accompanying our students to the Shrine to meet him. He was always generous with his time by welcoming us, sharing his experiences with us and offering us warm hospitality. I felt that he was a man of God and often observed tears streaming down his face as he spoke about the love of God and the unity of humanity. One of the religious sisters who joined us on these visits said that she felt immense peace while sitting in the shrine and listening to him. She further said that she believed God could utilize Islam to draw individuals to Himself in extraordinary ways. She emphasized that this would not be the result of Christian influences or Christian doctrinal elements but would be the result of Christ's Spirit working through Islam to bring our Muslim brothers and sisters closer to God and closer to us Christians. I was pleased at her remarks but also a little surprised by what she said. I told her that her thoughts echoed those of Louis Massignon (d. 1962), who was renowned for his studies in Arabic and Islamic mysticism.

I pray that God will continue to guide all of us, both Muslims and Christians, in nurturing positive relationships with all people of goodwill even in the face of the hatred and suspicion that taints our global community at this time. May our efforts to bring peace and harmony, firmly grounded on love and justice, be blessed by God, who is the source of all love, justice, peace and harmony.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

# THE HEART OF ABRAHAMIC RELIGION

*Herman Roborgh*

Some time ago, a well-known professor of Sufism in Lahore told me that the heart (*qalb*) had a very significant role to play in Sufism. He asked me whether the heart (*qalb*) had any significant role in Christianity. What follows is my attempt to respond to his question.

Sufism is the inner (esoteric) dimension of Islam that has helped us to understand the Qur'an since the time of its revelation. Sufism does not disregard or oppose the external (exoteric) expressions of Islam (such as the five pillars) but explains their meaning for our daily lives. Nor is Sufism a movement that ignores the significance of the Shari'ah because most Sufis recognize that we need the law to guide and nourish our faith. As believers, we need to find the right balance between the inner and outer (esoteric and exoteric) aspects of our faith in order to understand and live according to the true message of the Qur'an.

In Christianity, there is a similar struggle to find the right balance between the inner and outer dimensions of the faith. The outer aspect of Christian life could be described as attending church on Sundays and acceptance of the doctrines about Jesus Christ such as those expressed in the Nicene Creed, a summary of the Christian faith dating from the early centuries of Christianity. The outer aspects of Christianity would also consist of the "works of mercy", that is, caring for those in need.

Is there such a thing as an inner dimension to Christianity, parallel to what we find in Sufism? The inner dimension of Christianity is known as its spirituality. Like Sufism in Islam, the spirituality of Christianity belongs to the core message of the religion. In fact, the teaching of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, was almost totally directed against the mistaken view of many of his fellow Jews who emphasized the outer expression of religion without paying attention to its inner demands. Jesus was critical of their failure to find a balance between the inner and outer. He rejected neither the inner nor the outer dimensions of religion but he did

stress the inner (esoteric) dimension in response to the context and culture of his times.

Why was Jesus so critical of the Jewish religious leaders he encountered in Palestine? The reason was that these leaders separated religion from the evident needs of the people. By means of his parables and miracles (or signs), Jesus tried to make his listeners aware that religious law and ritual (the exoteric aspect of religion) could wrongly be used to neglect or to dismiss the real issues that people were facing in their daily lives. Jesus exposed the way religion was being misused by certain people to justify their own concerns and attitudes. He taught that true religion should be sensitive to the needs of people and address the daily tensions they faced. Jesus showed how faith could heal not only physical illness but social and psychological diseases, which were much in evidence in Jewish society at that time.

There are many signs of social and psychological tensions in the social expectations of our own society as well. For example, the family of a close relative who has died must provide a meal for many people who come to the funeral (*jenazah*) of the dead person. This may demand having to ask for a big loan. Again, when a person marries, the family must invite people for a meal which they may not be able to afford. These are social customs that oppress people and become heavy burdens for them. Another example is the fear of not being respected (*izzat*) or the fear of gossip, which puts pressure on people to buy expensive clothes and ornaments they cannot afford. Similarly, certain social customs about the social role of women (*pardah*) can cause women to remain isolated from society. Social customs and expectations regarding women could even result in girls not being able to attend school (as happens in Afghanistan).

Moreover, in Pakistan we usually think of others in terms of their social status and judge people according to their social and socio-economic status in society. But this is a warped view of other people. For instance, we stereotype groups of people according to their sexual orientation (“transgenders”) and their occupation (“sweepers”) and identify people according to caste and tribe (Jatt,

Butt, Khaan, Aaraen, Meu, Rana, Punjabi, Sindhi, Balochi etc.) Moreover, we think in religious categories (Isaai, Chuhrra, etc.) and divide people into sects (Barelwi, Deobandi, Shia, Jamaat al-Dawah, Sipaah Sahabah, etc.). It is also the common practice to think of men and women according to very distinct social categories.

A similar situation existed at the time of Jesus Christ. Take, for example, the story about Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John. According to the prevalent Jewish custom, Jews could not speak with Samaritans because they belonged to different sects in Judaism. It was also not the custom for a man to speak with a woman in public. But Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a public well and asked her for a drink. A conversation developed. In this way, Jesus went against the custom of Jewish society and broke the social taboo regarding the relationship of Jews and Samaritans and the social customs separating men and women, which were even sanctioned by religion at that time. His disciples were very surprised at the behaviour of Jesus.

The Gospel has other similar examples. When Jesus healed a person on the Sabbath Day, the Jewish day of rest, he was criticized by the Jewish religious leaders for not respecting the law regarding the Sabbath Day. But Jesus replied that serving a person in need does not break the law. He wanted to show that the law could also be used to make us blind to the needs of others.

The healing of the blind man illustrates the fact that we are all in need of healing in order to see, understand and act correctly. The Jewish leaders brought a man to Jesus who had been blind from birth and asked him: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” (John 9.2) Their question indicated that it was customary to consider blindness as the result of past sinfulness. But by healing the blind man, Jesus was pointing to the blindness of the religious leaders themselves. In fact, the healing miracle was not just an act of power but was a “sign” for people living at that time and for us today to examine ourselves. We are also blind when we think of people according to their social classes and religious sects. Jesus introduced an alternative value system that broke down the divisions in society between the sick and the healthy, the rich

and the poor, the righteous and sinners, the pure and the impure, between men and women and between religious divisions such as Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus also criticized the purity system of the Jews, which defined people as either pure or impure on the basis of their religious observance. Jesus did not agree that religion should be used in this way and stated that we should focus on the purity of the HEART, which would lead naturally to good relations with others. To illustrate this teaching, Jesus went and had meals with people who were regarded by society as “sinners” because he felt that religious leaders had no right to label people as sinners. This was not the task of religion. In contrast, religion should bring peace and harmony to society. Jesus brought an alternative value system, which promoted inclusiveness and harmony, which is very similar to the teaching of Sufi Islam.

A final example is the woman caught in adultery whom the religious leaders brought to Jesus and asked him what they should do with her. According to their interpretation of the law, this woman should be stoned to death. But Jesus went beyond their way of thinking and asked her accusers to begin by examining themselves. He asked them: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8.7). After that, Jesus forgave the woman and restored her dignity and freedom. The message here again is that Jesus looks into the HEART of a person whereas the Jewish religious leaders only regarded a person’s behaviour from the outside and failed to examine their own HEARTS.

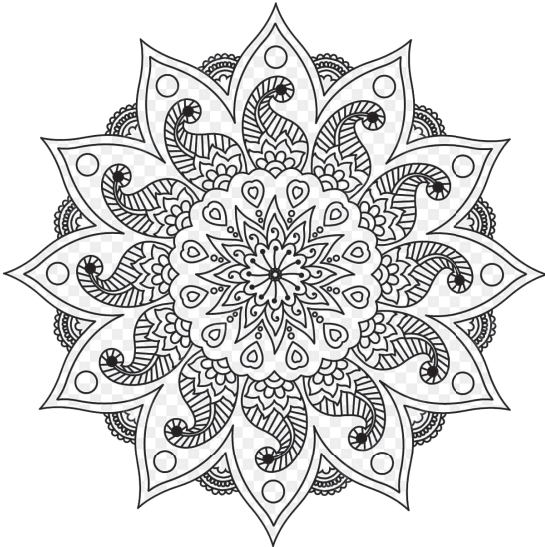
When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your HEART, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12.30). Jesus was very critical of those who disregarded the HEART.

This people honors me with their lips, but their HEARTS are far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. (Mark 7.6-7)

Jesus also said:

You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's HEART has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their HEART and turn - and I would heal them. (Matt. 13.14-15)

The heart (*qalb*) is the symbol of the inner (esoteric) aspect of religion, which the Abrahamic religions share in common.



# CHARLES DE FOUCAULD, A WITNESS TO CHRIST AMONG MUSLIMS

*Aissah Akoule*

Nicknamed ‘Servant of Christ’ (*Abd Isa*), or ‘The Marabout’, Charles de Foucauld was a missionary whose view of other religions and cultures, especially those of Muslim-majority North Africa, influenced the Church’s vision of other religions. Canonised on 15 May 2022, along with six other blessed souls, Charles de Foucauld continues to inspire the people of our time and remains a master who shows us the path to true dialogue, which is silence. But who was he really? How does his life inspire us today?

Born into an aristocratic family on 15 September 1858, the young Charles did not have the chance to live with his parents for long. Orphaned at the age of six, he was educated by the Jesuits. He continued his studies at the Saint Cyr military academy (1876-1878), graduating as an officer. Travelling to the East was one of his main projects. And so, in early June 1882, after months of negotiations and waiting, he set foot on Algerian soil as a traveller and explorer. He began to learn Arabic and the history of the peoples he planned to visit. On his return to Paris, he converted to Christianity, was baptised and sought to learn more about Jesus and the Church. “From the very first contact, Charles was moved and led to make ‘religion a love’ rather than an intellectual approach.”<sup>1</sup> In November 1897, he revealed his desire to enter religious life. To de Castries, he wrote: “As soon as I believed that there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing else but live for Him: my religious vocation dates from the same moment as my faith: God is so great! There is such a difference between God and everything that is not Him.”<sup>2</sup> Giving absolute meaning to his life in absolute obedience to God’s will was the next step in his life plan, after his career as a soldier and explorer. In February 1888, he ended his career as an explorer

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<sup>1</sup> P. Sourisseau, *Charles de Foucauld 1858-1916, Biographie*, Salvator, Paris, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Lettre du 14 Aout 1901, in lettres à Henry de Castries, ed. 1938, p. 96-97. P. Sourisseau, p.145-146.

with the publication of a work entitled *Reconnaissance in Morocco*.

His entry into the religious life marked a new direction in his life. A life dedicated to serving others in order to bear witness to the Gospel. If Charles de Foucauld left a lasting impression on many people, it was not because of his military exploits or his achievements as an explorer. He touched the lives of his contemporaries by being a living witness to the Gospel among non-Christians.

### **Charles de Foucauld, a Monk and Living Witness to the Gospel**

During his stay in North Africa, Charles de Foucauld had the opportunity to learn from Muslims. This intellectual pursuit and curiosity marked the beginning of an adventure. He detached himself from romantic relationships with women and read the Koran, remembering the devotion of the Muslims of the Maghreb. “Islam caused a profound upheaval in me,” he later wrote in a letter to Henri de Castries in 1901. He continued: “Observing this faith and these souls living with God as a constant presence allowed me to glimpse something greater and truer than worldly pursuits.”<sup>3</sup> But he did not consider Islam to be a divine revelation and was highly critical of the prophet of Islam.

Silence was one of the tools used by the desert hermit monk. Charles de Foucauld led a contemplative life that inspires many people. Pope Francis presented him as a “model of brotherhood and social friendship”. He wanted to be the “universal brother”. In silence and contemplation, he chose to proclaim the Gospel through his actions. He proclaimed Christ in silence. This spirituality came to him from the story of the Visitation of Mary. And it was in silence that he united himself with God, his brothers and Muslims. Silence was, therefore, an important element in his mission and spirituality. His concern and his prayer were to be a brother to all. Being a ‘universal brother’ was his main concern, as he said: “I want all inhabitants — Christians, Muslims and Jews — to consider me their brother, the universal brother.” Thus, as a hermit, he devoted his life to others by developing a culture of caring for others, nursing the sick and

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<sup>3</sup> J. V- Edwin, *Brother to All, The Life and Witness of St. Charles de Foucauld*, orbi boudque. pp.5-6.

feeding the poor without distinction of religion.

### **Missionary in the Service of Colonization?**

The canonization of Saint Charles de Foucauld sparked many debates, even among his followers. Some claimed that his relationships with the French military — who were present for political, not religious, reasons — made him a colonizer. As one Western newspaper put it: “In Algeria, school textbooks describe him as a tool of colonialism, a spy working for military intelligence, determined to convert the Muslims of North Africa, which was Christian before Islam.”<sup>4</sup> As a soldier, he served in the French army in Algeria during the colonial period. Even though he was later dismissed for disciplinary reasons, the time he went back to Algeria as a monk, he maintained good relations with some of his former military companions. Their exchanges reveal his views on colonization.

Although he discovered many positive values among the people he called ‘indigenous’, Charles de Foucauld believed that colonisation could benefit them. In the list of advice given to Moussa, a local collaborator of the administration, we can understand his vision for these people. Speaking about the language of the colonial administrators, he wrote: “*Teach French vigorously to your people, so that they may become naturalised French, not our subjects but our equals...*”<sup>5</sup> This shows that what mattered for Foucauld was the supposed advantages that colonization could bring to the indigenous populations. Yet, beyond a superficial reading, his intention was indeed their good.

Charles de Foucauld embodies the image of a benevolent missionary rather than that of an agent serving a colonial project. His missionary commitment becomes clear when he denounced abuses and excesses committed by colonial authorities. He promoted justice and called for fairness and respect in relations between the French and the Tuaregs. In a letter to Laperrine, he highlighted serious

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Tincq, « Charles de Foucauld, un « marabout » au Sahara » in, [https://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2005/11/13/charles-de-foucauld-un-marabout-au-sahara\\_709614\\_3208.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2005/11/13/charles-de-foucauld-un-marabout-au-sahara_709614_3208.html), consulté le 10/11/2025.

<sup>5</sup> P. Sourisseau, *Charles de Foucauld 1858-1916, Biographie*, op.cit., p. 552.

violations concerning human dignity in a French-controlled region: “They want the perpetuation of old abuses, injustice, ignorance and barbarism. We want the exact opposite.”<sup>6</sup> This makes it clear that Foucauld’s goal was not domination, but the promotion of moral values and human dignity. His chosen way of life directly contradicted colonial ambition, which was based on domination. He truly wanted to be a brother to all.

### **Charles de Foucauld, the Christian Marabout**

One of the nicknames Charles de Foucauld received was “The Marabout of Tamanrasset.” For the Tuareg people, a marabout is someone who opens his doors to travellers, welcomes strangers, intercedes when there are problems, and serves the poor. The marabout plays a significant role in African Islam. “Originally, the term marabout referred to a virtuous man charged with teaching: his vocation was therefore to instruct and educate; he served as a master and spiritual guide to his students.”<sup>7</sup>

This spiritual figure was recognised in the actions of the monk who had mastered the language and culture of the Tuaregs. This nickname was given by the local population because he lived like a spiritual hermit in the Sahara Desert, in a way similar to Islamic spiritual masters. Foucauld succeeded in his mission among Muslims, who saw in him a man of God. He became a mediator of peace and a protector of the vulnerable, exercising a religious and social role similar to that of a marabout — yet in a Christian spirit of service and love

### **Christian-Muslim Dialogue Inspired by Charles de Foucauld**

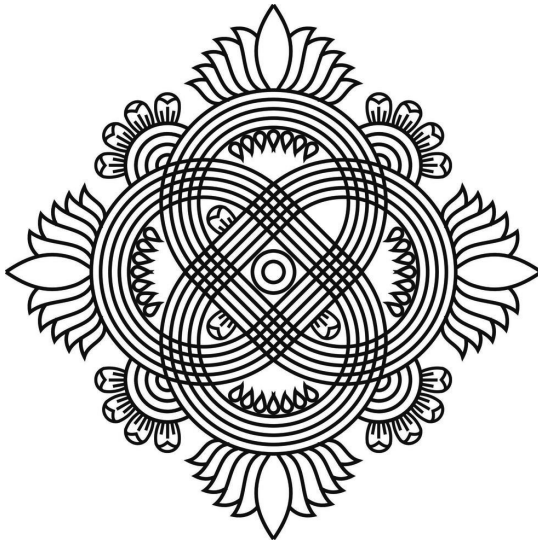
Charles de Foucauld inspires us through his vision of mission: proclaiming Christ through life and concrete acts. Adopting Foucauld’s approach helps us live our faith while respecting religious diversity. His mission among Muslims was not to convert them, but to show that we are brothers and sisters. He believed in

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<sup>6</sup> P. Sourisseau, *Charles de Foucauld 1858-1916, Biographie*, op.cit., p. 551.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Salah Bâ, « Ces Marabouts qui font honte à l’islam ! », in *An-Nasr*, n°21, 11 Juin 2004, p. 1-2.

the salvation of Muslims. Therefore, our goal should be the dialogue of life: being closer to the poorest together, joining efforts for environmental protection and caring for our common home, as Pope Francis urges in *Fratelli Tutti*. Living among Muslims in a spirit of brotherhood, Charles de Foucauld shows us that proclaiming the Gospel begins with love and respect for others. The Church, through *Nostra Aetate*, invites Christians to regard Muslims with esteem. Charles de Foucauld's life of silence, service and dialogue remains a model for building true peace between religions today, especially in environments where religious fundamentalism is inimical to peaceful coexistence. More than a missionary, he was a universal brother: a witness to Christ at the heart of humanity.



## Notice

### **Islamic Studies Association joins the Network of Centres for Christian-Muslim Relations (NCCMR)**

The Director of NCCMR writes:

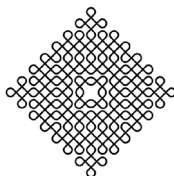
Dear Fr. Joseph,

On behalf of the entire Network of Centres for Christian-Muslim Relations (NCCMR), it is with great joy and deep respect that I welcome you as a full member of our growing fellowship. Your centre's mission, values, and contributions were thoughtfully reviewed by our Steering Committee and leadership team, and we are truly honoured to have you join this collaborative network. Your presence enriches our collective vision and strengthens our shared commitment to fostering mutual understanding and building peaceful, resilient communities among Christians and Muslims—especially in these times when our world longs for healing, justice, and unity.

Once again, welcome aboard—we are truly delighted to have you with us.

With warm regards,

Dr Wageeh Mikhail, Director, NCCMR



## News Update

### **HUMAN FRATERNITY MOVEMENT: FIRST STATE CONVENTION**

The Human Fraternity Movement for Children organised its first state convention and seminar at the Multipurpose Social Service Society Hall in Thanjavur on 15 May 2025. Approximately 80 students, parents, and teachers participated in the seminar.

This movement is inspired by the Human Fraternity Document co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azar Al-Sharif, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayyib, which calls upon all people of goodwill to work towards peace and harmony founded on justice for the poor. The movement focuses on two important points: helping students esteem the faith of others by understanding the beliefs and practices of fellow religious adherents and respecting the religious freedom of others.

The movement, which began in Devakottai through the efforts of Jesuit Father Cyril three years ago, has spread to a number of schools in the southern part of Tamil Nadu and has attracted several veteran teachers as volunteers to guide the student movement. The student members learn about the faith of others by listening to their friends and visiting the places of worship of diverse believers. “Our efforts are like sowing seeds of peace in the hearts and minds of young children in the context of growing religious hatred spun out by some sections of political leadership in the country,” said the coordinator of the movement, Fr. Cyril.

At the state-level convention, Ms. Tamil Arasi, Ms. Vimala, Cyril SJ, and Joseph Victor Edwin SJ addressed the gathering of children, parents, and teachers on the relevance and urgency of peace initiatives in our country.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*

## DISCOVERING WHAT THE HEART SEEKS

The Summer School of Christian-Muslim Relations 2025 (May 5-10), organised by the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, took place at the Arrupe Renewal Centre (ARC) in Mawshohroh, Meghalaya. This serene location is tucked away in the woods, providing a peaceful respite from the noise and distractions of nearby Shillong. Around 45 students from different colleges of theology.

The Summer School is designed to help Christian theology students understand that Muslims are genuine worshipers of God and merit our respect for the truth and goodness present in their faith (Cf Ecclesiam Suam, 107). This fresh perspective contrasts sharply with the conflicts and disagreements of the past, and it encourages both Christians and Muslims to engage in heartfelt collaboration aimed at fostering peace, freedom, social justice, and moral values (Cf Nostra Aetate, 3).

The sessions provided a comprehensive exploration of key topics related to the foundations of Islam, specifically focusing on the Qur'an and Hadith as primary sources of Islamic teachings. The presentations delved into various essential aspects of Muslim beliefs and practices, including the Five Pillars of Islam—Shahada (faith), Salah (prayer), Zakat (charity), Sawm (fasting during Ramadan), and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). Additionally, the discussions covered significant events and observances such as major Islamic festivals and ceremonies that play a vital role in the community's spiritual life.

The sessions also examined the diversity within the Islamic faith, highlighting the different sects and schools of thought, as well as exploring the mystical dimensions of Islam. Furthermore, the participants engaged with topics surrounding Islamic law (Sharia) and its implications for daily life, alongside a historical and theological analysis of Christian-Muslim relations, offering insights into the interconnections and dialogues between these two faiths throughout history.

Each presentation was followed by a dynamic question-and-answer segment, allowing attendees to engage in meaningful discussions and seek clarification on the topics presented. This interactive format encouraged an exchange of ideas, promoting a deeper understanding of the complex and rich tapestry of Islamic beliefs and practices.

During the program, we had the opportunity to visit the Madina Mosque in Shillong, where we met with Alhaj Sayeedullah Nongrum, the leader of the Shillong Muslim Union and the person responsible for the mosque. It was Friday, and before the congregational prayer, we were introduced as “peace pilgrims.” After the prayer, we were escorted to a spacious hall where we enjoyed tea and snacks, along with engaging discussions about interfaith relations. On our way back, one of the students shared with me that he had previously held many prejudices about Muslims, but after meeting and conversing with them, he found that many of those biases faded away. He remarked that his experience at the mosque had taught him to look for the good in others, stating, “If you search for good, you will find it.” I, the program coordinator, then related a similar experience from the life of a prominent Islamic scholar, Louis Massignon. A Christian apologist remarked to Louis Massignon that throughout his extended stay in Algeria, he had never encountered a genuine Muslim judge. In response, Massignon noted that individuals tend to discover only what their hearts seek, asserting that had the apologist sought God’s goodness in the first judge he met, he would have uncovered a word of truth.

The visit from His Grace Geevarghese Mar Yulios, the Metropolitan Bishop of Kunnukulam and Chairperson of the Henry Martyr Institute, along with Rev. Dr. Packiam T. Samuel, the Institute’s director, was truly inspiring for us. On the final day, Rev. Packiam graced the event and personally handed out certificates to all the participants, making the occasion even more special.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*

## EMBRACING PEACE: THE DARGAH OF BIBI FATIMA SAM

The Dargah of Bibi Fatima Sam, a revered Sufi saint, is nestled within a residential area in Kaka Nagar, serving as a tranquil refuge amid the city's chaos, located just a few kilometers from the Khan Market Metro Station. Bibi Fatimah was regarded as the adopted sister of Baba Farid, one of the most significant mystics of that era.

This afternoon, Brother Muhammad Asad Khan and I undertook a pilgrimage to the Mazar of this esteemed woman saint.

Bibi Fatimah lived during the thirteenth century of the Common Era. Bibi Fatima Sam was known for her deep piety, and both Baba Farid and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya frequently visited her Dargah in search of profound peace.

The marble slab at by the side of the maqbara pointed out that she was equated with Rabiah al Basari, a famous woman sufi saint of the 8th century Common Era: *Mazar-e-mubarak, Rabiah dilli hazarat bibi fatima saam* (RA) (The blessed grave of Rabiah of Delhi, Hazarat bibi fatimah saam).

The Persian sentence expressed her holiness and indicted that she is alive with God enjoying the fullness of life. *Tamish az khurshid wa mah tabintah tar ... Khaq qabrish az man wa tu zindah tar* (She is more pure than the sun and the moon... The soil of her grave is more alive than you and me).

The engraved words reminded me of the conviction of the Blessed Christian de Cherge, who was convinced that already in God, a Christian-Muslim communion of saints exists, and that is embodied here now in Christian-Muslim friendships, prayer, learning, hospitality, and mutual self-donation.

Brother Asad, who was seated next to me, recited a chapter of the Qur'an melodiously, while I, being seated next to him, felt an ever-strengthening personal attachment to Christ and because of that attachment an ever expanding horizon of encounter with God beyond the visible limits of the Church.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*

## **BRIDGING FAITHS: THEOLOGY STUDENTS AND MUSLIM DIALOGUE**

In August 2025, a group of students accompanied by two of us from the faculty of theology, Vidyajyoti made a trip to Lucknow for an immersion in the Muslim ambience. The main objective of this event was to cultivate a genuine interest among Theology students in participating in dialogue with Muslims. It serves as an invitation to discern God's path in the lives of our Muslim friends. The event aims to instruct students that cordiality and transparency are essential foundations for enduring friendships with Muslims. It is hoped that the program will impart to students the importance of objectivity, a scientific approach, and empathy as they endeavour to comprehend the beliefs and practices of Muslims.

Students engaged in the program come to recognize that there exist numerous distinctions at both the normative and doctrinal levels, which must be acknowledged; neglecting this would result in syncretism rather than authentic dialogue.

We dedicated time to interacting with the scholars at Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama. The narrative of its establishment underscores the significance of this institution, which educates Muslim religious scholars in religious studies while also accommodating modern educational practices.

Historical records indicate that following the uprising of 1857 CE, the British suppressed Muslims, believing they were responsible for igniting the rebellion. Muslims were apprehensive that the British aimed to obliterate their cultures, faith, and religious customs.

In response, some religious leaders founded Darul Uloom, Deoband in 1886 CE. This institution concentrated solely on Theology, prompting another faction of Muslim intellectuals to create the Oriental Muhamadan College (OMC) in Aligarh, which eventually evolved into the Aligarh Muslim University. This Aligarh institution primarily emphasized modern education, largely neglecting religious instruction.

Recognizing the disparity between these two educational philosophies, another segment of Muslim leadership established the Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow in 1898 which focussed on religious education without any prejudice for modern education.

Our second visit took us to another significant institution known as Firangi Mahal. We had the opportunity to meet Maulana Khalid Rasheed Firangi Mahli, the youngest member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. During his address, he shared with us how his predecessors, who were esteemed scholars, developed the curriculum for madrasa education over three centuries ago, a framework that continues to be beneficial today. He also highlighted the ways in which Firangi Mahal supports the underprivileged and fosters religious harmony. Furthermore, he elaborated on the current situation in India, where religious sentiments are often exploited for political gain.

On the second day of the program, we visited the Sibtainabad Imambara located in the Hazarat Ganj area of Lucknow. A youthful group of Shii Muslims, led by Ms. Alina Kauser, organized all the necessary arrangements. A Shii Imam discussed the five fundamental principles of Shii Islam, emphasizing that justice and imamat hold particular significance for Shii Muslims. He noted that following the final prophet Muhammad, it is the Imams who provide guidance to Shii Muslims. In her presentation, Ms. Amina underscored the importance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and its relevance to contemporary issues. Following the program, an engaging discussion on martyrdom and the significance of suffering for the pursuit of justice fostered a sense of closeness among the participants.

One of the most important lessons we derive from these programs is that the Triune God interacts with humanity in various ways. Faith, hope, and charity enable every Christian to coexist harmoniously with individuals of different faiths, allowing them to discern God's presence in the lives of people from diverse backgrounds, particularly our Muslim brothers, and thereby to cultivate a relationship with the Triune God.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*

## BONGIOVANNI'S INSIGHTS ON THE POWER OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

**“Dialogue is fundamentally transformative”:** Prof. Ambrogio Bongiovanni presents the 8th Victor Courtois Memorial Lecture.

Professor Ambrogio Bongiovanni, director of the Gregorian Centre for Interreligious Studies and a full professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, delivered the 8th Victor Courtois Memorial Lecture titled “Fostering Interfaith Relations: Nostra Aetate at Sixty” at the Lawrence Sundaram Hall of Loyola College in Chennai on 26 July 2025. Loyola College organized this event in collaboration with the Islamic Studies Association in Delhi, the Institute for Dialogue between Religions and Cultures, and the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, with coordination by the School of Human Excellence at Loyola College.

Victor Courtois SJ (d. 1960) was a Belgian Jesuit who dedicated much of his life to India, significantly reshaping the dynamic between Christians and Muslims. He is regarded as a pioneer in Christian-Muslim relations within the country.

In his lecture, Bongiovanni emphasised that, in our modern world, the goal of dialogue among people of various faiths is not only to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence but also to engage in a profound process of seeking truth. This process is not about grasping truth, but humbly allowing truth to envelop us, making dialogue inherently transformational. He pointed out that dialogue possesses a unique “soft power” that helps individuals confront longstanding prejudices and prepare for collaboration towards the common good.

Bongiovanni highlighted the inherently relational aspect of dialogue, noting that God embodies relationality. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are designed to be relational beings. As such, our human calling is to act as healers of relationships, particularly

in contexts where relational bonds are weakened and animosity and hatred arise. He observed that interreligious spirituality functions as a cohesive force in the mission of dialogue.

In his lecture, he explained that “deep dialogue” is based on two essential principles. The first is theological, asserting that God desires all people to find salvation in Christ and, in ways known only to God, brings all individuals to salvation through their respective faith traditions via the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The second is anthropological, which upholds the dignity and freedom of each individual to pursue truth and, upon discovering it, to commit to it without coercion. Ignoring these principles can lead to dialogue that is naive and superficial.

Bongiovanni also warned about certain risks in dialogue settings. He cautioned that superficial “show-off” models of dialogue, often promoted by individuals with corporate backgrounds, weaken genuine dialogue principles and distract participants from core values of honesty and truth. His lecture emphasised that dialogue is a call to explore more deeply, to think beyond surface interactions, and to engage with others in a way that respects their dignity.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



## RAKHI MILAN: A CELEBRATION OF SISTERHOOD AND LEARNING

**The Aspire India Foundation**, in collaboration with the Vision India Welfare Trust and the Islamic Studies Association, hosted a Rakhi Milan and Women Empowerment Day on August 10, 2025, at the Preparatory School Hall of St. Xavier’s School in Delhi.

The event featured Riya, Astha, and Ishika, who are law students and participants in the program, sharing their experiences of celebrating Rakhi—a festival symbolizing sisterly and brotherly affection that fosters joy within families. They brought sweets to distribute among the attendees of the program.

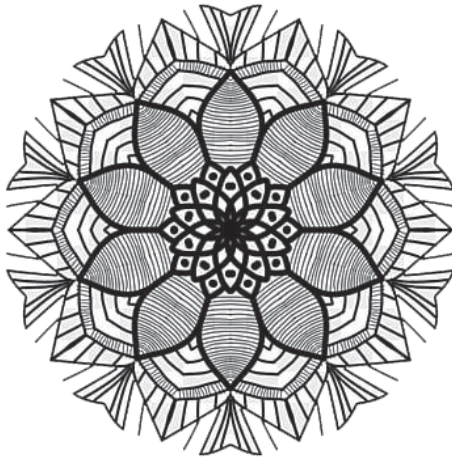
The program included two significant guest speakers. Mr. Altamash Vakil addressed the ethics surrounding Artificial Intelligence, explaining its functionality and the importance of effective prompting—by posing five essential questions: Why, What, When, How, and Where—when utilizing ChatGPT to achieve optimal results. He warned against the dangers of accepting ChatGPT-generated information without verification through these same five inquiries. Additionally, he showcased tools that students could employ while engaging with video lectures to maximize their study efficiency, such as generating transcriptions and summaries.

Mr. Kashif Iqbal discussed MSME (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises), which are regarded as the backbone of the Indian economy. The Indian Government is actively working to enhance the viability of MSMEs, thereby creating substantial opportunities for students to participate—conducting surveys of MSME units, gaining invaluable exposure, and understanding MSME compliance requirements. Notably, students can also earn a significant income, which can assist in covering their college expenses. Thus, MSMEs provide earning opportunities that enable students to finance their own education. MSME surveys hold particular significance for law students.

A notable aspect of the program was the recognition of our Law Graduates. Ms. Sangeeta Singh and Maulana Tausif Ahmad received plaques in honor of their achievements. They recounted the challenges they encountered on their paths to graduation. Ms. Sangeeta is currently engaged in stimulating projects and is actively participating in court activities as an Associate within a burgeoning legal team. Maulana Tausif Ahmad is adeptly managing both his madrassa and legal responsibilities. Both individuals conveyed their profound appreciation to Mission Law Education for offering them the opportunity to pursue their legal careers.

We were particularly privileged that Advocate Anastasia Gill, a prominent human rights advocate, took the time to honor our Law Graduates and address the necessity of fostering a legal profession that is secure for women lawyers. She also distributed new semester textbooks to our law students. Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, the secretary of Islamic Studies Association made all arrangements.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



## BOOK LAUNCH

### A VISION FOR UNITY: EXPLORING MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Professor Akhtarul Wasey, a professor emeritus of Islamic Studies, released the book titled *A Vision for Muslim-Christian Cooperation*, edited by scholars Herman Roborgh and Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, both well-versed in the field of Muslim-Christian relations, on 16 August 2025, at the Indian Social Institute. The event saw the participation of members from the Minhaj Interfaith and Welfare Foundation, alongside theology students from Vidyajyoti. The book is dedicated to Shaykh-ul-Islam, Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, whose vision for fostering friendship and collaboration between Muslims and Christians continues to yield positive outcomes.

In his remarks, Professor Wasey emphasised that the contributors to this collection are a dedicated group of both Muslims and Christians who are passionately committed to their faiths. They have put in considerable effort to understand one another's beliefs, asserting that collaboration is not merely a goal but a necessity as both communities navigate their shared journey. The writers advocate for genuine dialogue between the two faiths, aiming to dispel prevalent prejudices and misconceptions. They encourage Muslims, Christians, and followers of other religions to come together as engaged citizens for the greater good. Importantly, the authors urge readers to strengthen their connections with those holding diverse beliefs, stressing that nurturing relationships founded on peace, harmony, and justice is crucial for fruitful dialogue.

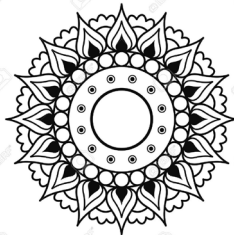
In a recorded video message, one of the book's editors, Professor Herman Roborgh, noted that the contributors of the essays are dedicated Christians and Muslims experienced in engaging with one another. He pointed out that the book does not delve into the theological aspects of how Islam and Christianity interact in the abstract; rather, it focuses on the real-life experiences of encounters

between Christians and Muslims who remain rooted in their faith yet open to learning from others. The essence of the book lies in exploring the possibilities of coexisting harmoniously as Christians and Muslims.

Muhammad Asad Khan, a doctoral student in philosophy, and Julius Tudu SJ, a Jesuit theology student, reflected on the book, emphasizing the urgent need for rigorous scholarship to combat ignorance and promote mutual understanding. This, they believe, will prepare both Muslims and Christians to respect the religious freedom of all. They highlighted that the authors of this volume, comprising individuals from both faiths, have shown a genuine interest in understanding each other's beliefs. They have committed themselves to an intensive study of their own religions as well as those of others, engaging directly with fellow believers and familiarizing themselves with each other's sacred texts. In today's multi-religious landscape, simply knowing one's own beliefs is insufficient; we must also strive to understand the beliefs and practices of others. Such meaningful exchanges can help eliminate prejudices and misconceptions, ultimately creating opportunities for shared learning and growth.

Mrs. Lakshmi Menon, a member of the Delhi Province Dialogue Commission, conducted the program with grace. It concluded with the heartfelt singing of the national anthem.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



## A WEEK IN DHAKA: EXPLORING INTERFAITH CONNECTIONS

In August 2025, I received an invitation from the Dicastery for Dialogue in Rome and the Apostolic Nunciature in Bangladesh to join a delegation from Rome during its visit to Dhaka, Bangladesh, for a week-long programme on engaging in dialogue with people of other faiths, particularly Muslims. This esteemed group included His Eminence George Jacob Cardinal Koovacad, the Cardinal Prefect; Monsignor Indunil Kodithavakku, the secretary of the Dicastery; and Fr. Marcus Solo SVD, who oversees the Islam Desk for Asia and Pacific at the Dicastery. The programme was jointly organised by the Dicastery for Dialogue, Rome, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, and the Apostolic Nunciature in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Among the scheduled activities was a visit to a mosque, which added a meaningful element to our itinerary.

It was truly a significant occasion for us, the Christian delegation, to receive a warm welcome in this hallowed space. This gesture of hospitality carries profound historical importance. The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, graciously received a Christian delegation during his lifetime. In more contemporary times, we have witnessed prominent figures such as Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis visiting mosques. Notably, Pope John Paul II made history as the first pope to enter a mosque during his visit to Syria in 2001. The sight of him, a frail figure, entering the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus with deep reverence, was a pivotal moment in enhancing relations between our faiths. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI visited the Al-Hussein Bin Talal Mosque in Jordan, underscoring the significance of acknowledging both Muslims and Christians as sincere worshipers of God. Pope Francis has continued this path of unity by visiting the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi in 2019 for an interfaith gathering, where he emphasized the necessity of tolerance and respect among individuals of diverse faiths. Earlier, during his visit to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul in 2014, he addressed the themes of unity and peace among humanity,

and just last year at the Istiqlal Mosque, he called upon all people of goodwill to foster harmony and engage in dialogue for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

The actions of Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis reflect the principles outlined in *Nostra Aetate*, an important document from Vatican II that conveys a profound respect for Muslims. Each of these popes engaged with Islam and its followers in meaningful ways. Pope Paul VI made it clear that differences in faith should not lead to conflict, asserting that Islam is not an enemy of Christianity. He emphasized that other religions pose no threat to Christianity and urged Christians to foster an environment conducive to dialogue among all faiths. Similarly, Pope John Paul II positioned himself as a bridge builder between Christianity and Islam, recognizing that the Spirit of God is also active in different religious traditions. Pope Benedict XVI promoted authentic dialogue aimed at both purification and enrichment, encouraging quality interactions among prominent thinkers. Meanwhile, Pope Francis exemplified how every person of faith should behave, providing fresh inspiration for Christian engagement with Muslims. He called on all people of goodwill to respect and love one another as brothers and sisters, to empathize with the suffering of others, and prayed that no one would misuse the name of God to perpetrate violence, urging collective efforts towards justice and peace. As I entered Baitul Mukkaram mosque, I felt a wave of consolation remembering the teachings of these recent popes.

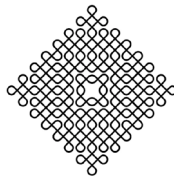
I had the privilege of studying at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) and Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), where I earned my Master's in Islamic Studies from AMU and went on to receive a doctorate in the same field from JMI in New Delhi. My doctoral thesis was supervised by the esteemed Islamic scholar, Professor Akhtarul Wasey.

Throughout my time in Aligarh and Delhi, as a student of Islamic Studies, I engaged in meaningful dialogues with my peers, often

meeting at a tea stall on campus or gathering beneath the shade of a tree near one of the mosques. During those quieter moments near the mosque, I found myself reflecting on the nature of God and humanity, often inspired by the Mihrab. The Mihrab acts as a guide for Muslims, directing their prayers five times a day. I frequently contemplated its significance for me as a Christian. While it directs Muslims to worship one God, who has “spoken to men and women” through the prophets, culminating in Muhammad, peace be upon him, it also resonates with my faith in God’s revelation to humanity through Christ. I view the Mihrab as a beacon illuminating my conviction in Christian truth. Are we not both devoted worshipers of God? In that understanding, I find comfort knowing that we seek to worship one God, despite our significant differences in belief.

In closing, I want to emphasise my strong belief that personal engagement with Muslims fosters mutual understanding and unveils our shared humanity and desire for peace. I am convinced that regular interactions with people from diverse backgrounds can gradually cultivate a culture of dialogue. Cardinal Fitzgerald, a prominent authority on Christian-Muslim relations, explains that *Nostra Aetate* illustrates how “Christians and Muslims collectively uphold peace, freedom, social justice, and ethical values.” He elaborates on this by stating that “the scope is broad and can encompass vital issues such as the protection of life, marriage, family, environmental stewardship, and endeavors toward nuclear disarmament.” To me, dialogue is a conscious decision to rise above our differences, fostering goodwill and a spirit of collaboration for the common good.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



## THE POWER OF DIALOGUE: INSIGHTS FROM MEERUT EVENT

On 13th September 2025, the program “Building Bridges: Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims” was successfully held at St. Joseph’s Inter College, Meerut. Jointly organized by the Meerut Diocese and the Islamic Studies Association (ISA) of Vidyajyoti College, Delhi, the event aimed to foster mutual understanding and explore the rich history and shared values between the two faith traditions. The program featured keynote addresses, panel discussions, and multimedia presentations, attracting an audience primarily composed of Catholic priests and nuns involved in education.

The event commenced with a warm welcome address by Fr. John Cheeman. This was followed by a keynote speech from Bishop Bhaskar Jesuraj, who set the tone for the day by emphasizing the importance of interreligious dialogue in building a harmonious society.

Session 1: Historical Context of Christian-Muslim Relations Fr. Victor Edwin, SJ provided a comprehensive historical overview of Christian-Muslim relations. His presentation traced the evolution of this engagement, highlighting the significant modern developments within the Catholic tradition. He detailed the Church’s deepened commitment to dialogue, starting from the Second Vatican Council and continuing through the numerous encyclicals and teachings of Pope Francis.

Session 2: Personal Narratives from the Muslim Community A panel of four Muslim speakers shared powerful personal testimonies on how Islam shapes and enriches their lives:

- Sr. Farheen Ansari emphasized the lived reality of Islam, crediting her mother for imparting the faith’s core values and demonstrating how to be a conscientious Muslim in the modern world.
- Mr. Mohammad Asad Khan described Islam’s influence on his philosophical journey. He explained how the Islamic principle of the «unity of all knowledge»—which rejects a strict separation between the secular and the religious—has allowed him to perceive the world as a unified, coherent whole.

- Ms. Naaz Khair, a social activist and educationist, explained how her faith grounds her daily life in principles of respect and tolerance, even in the face of adversity. She cited Quranic teachings and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, referencing a hadith that promotes abandoning argumentation for the sake of harmony. She also highlighted a profound historical example of interfaith harmony: the Prophet Muhammad’s invitation to the Christian delegation from Najran to pray in his mosque in Medina.

Prof. Khurshid articulated the role of Sufism as the essential core of Islam that promotes an egalitarian society. Quoting Frank Jackson’s definition that «a Sufi is one who brings people together,» she argued that true religiosity is found more in an all-embracing spirit of mercy than in doctrinal ritualism.

Film Screening - “The Sultan and the Saint” The panel discussion was followed by a screening of the film “The Sultan and the Saint.” This documentary powerfully illustrated the remarkable spiritual encounter between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil during the Crusades, serving as a timeless example of peaceful dialogue amidst conflict.

The final session, facilitated by Fr. Robin S. Seelan, SJ, involved active participation from the audience. Attendees reflected on the day’s themes and shared their own personal experiences with interfaith exchanges—both positive and challenging. This open dialogue reinforced the program’s core objective of building genuine understanding.

The “Building Bridges” program was a significant and successful initiative that provided a platform for open, respectful, and insightful dialogue between Christian and Muslim communities. By combining historical context, personal narrative, and spiritual reflection, the event effectively promoted a message of mutual respect and shared humanity. The personal stories from Muslim speakers, in particular, offered a valuable perspective on the lived experience of Islam, deeply enriching the understanding of all participants.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*

## **FEMINIST REINTERPRETATIONS OF THE HOLY QUR'AN STRESSES GOD'S JUSTICE**

On the 19th of September, Dr. Nayla Tabbara delivered a webinar addressing Islamic Feminism and the deconstruction of patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. This event was organized as a component of our Islamic Studies academic program.

Dr. Tabbara pointed out that women have consistently played a vital role in the dissemination of religious knowledge, yet they have been largely excluded from the roles of production and interpretation. She noted that women's insights are particularly necessary in three key areas: the interpretation of sacred texts, the analysis of personal and family laws, and the historical reinterpretation of religious contexts. While male judges may exhibit justice and empathy, they may not fully comprehend the unique challenges that women face in family matters. Hence, the presence of women judges is essential for a more just system.

Islamic feminism emerged prominently during the 1980s when Muslim women began to revisit the Qur'an and Hadith from a gender-just standpoint. Dr. Tabbara remarked that secular feminists have often dismissed religion as misogynistic, while believing Muslim women have countered this narrative by proposing that it is not religion that is misogynistic, but the patriarchal interpretations that have dominated societal views.

She clarified that Sharia is frequently misconstrued as divine law, whereas a significant portion of it is actually Fiqh, or human interpretations by male scholars. Feminist scholars are now reinterpreting texts in a holistic manner, contesting patriarchal readings, and uncovering inauthentic Hadiths. She cited scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, who challenged fabricated Hadiths, Amina Wadud, who was a pioneer in gender-inclusive Qur'anic interpretation and led a mixed-gender prayer, Asma Barlas, who called for "unreading" patriarchal interpretations, and Asma Lamrabet, who regarded Islamic feminism as a form of liberation theology.

Dr. Tabbara pointed out that feminist reinterpretations emphasize God's justice, affirm the equal dignity of men and women, and rectify misinterpretations of creation, the Fall, and revelation. The Qur'an asserts that all human beings are created from "one living entity," from which both men and women were formed. Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an does not state that Eve was created from Adam's rib; this concept was introduced into Islam through later interpretations and Hadiths. Similarly, in the narrative of the Fall, the Qur'an does not assign blame solely to Eve, but rather holds both Adam and Eve responsible.

Additionally, the Qur'an directly addresses women, using terms such as "believing men and believing women," "devout men and devout women," and others. This inclusivity, as tradition suggests, was revealed after one of the Prophet's wives questioned why women were not explicitly mentioned. She also elaborated on how verses regarding polygamy, marriage, the veil, and inheritance have been reinterpreted to promote equality and justice.

To conclude, Dr. Tabbara stated that Islamic feminism does not oppose religion but rather challenges unjust interpretations. She emphasized that God is just, and thus men and women are equal before God in terms of dignity, law, and practice.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, the Islamic Studies tutor who facilitated the webinar, pointed out that Dr. Nayla Tabbara's presentation allowed us to see the Holy Qur'an as a hidden treasure. The Holy Book is obscured by numerous interpretations, primarily from those with a patriarchal viewpoint. To engage with the Qur'an and the Holy Book in a new and refreshed way, it is essential to remove these layers of patriarchal interpretations.

As one embarks on this exploration, the reader who contemplates the text will recognize that God's Justice is the key to revealing the treasures within the Holy Qur'an that speak to humanity.

*Sr. Vilnisha*

## NOSTRA AETATE CONFERENCE, ROME

The Gregorian University in Rome will hold an international conference on the Vatican II decree on the Church's relationship with other religions.

The October 27-29 conference will rethink on "Nostra Aetate" (In Our Time) 60 years after its promulgation and address "theological developments, decades of interreligious encounters, and the changing global context."

The conference on the theme, "Towards the Future. Re-Thinking Nostra Aetate Today," is organized by the Center for Interreligious Studies and the Cardinal Bea Centre at the Pontifical Gregorian University, with the support of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue and the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

The opening session at 10 am, will feature the participation of the rector of the Gregorian University, Father Mark Lewis; Cardinals George Jacob Koovakad of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, and Kurt Koch of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity; along with Elias El Halabi, moderator of the Interreligious Dialogue Reference Group of the World Council of Churches.

"The introduction of interreligious dialogue as an integral part of the Church's universal mission was an epochal change," notes Ambrogio Bongiovanni, director of the Center for Interreligious Studies at the Gregorian: "A change not without obstacles—yet gradually, many of them have been overcome. In particular, relations with the Islamic world have borne visible fruit, even in areas of conflict and despite tensions caused by various forms of fundamentalism."

From the perspective of Jewish-Christian relations, "This conference takes place in a historical moment that has experienced—and continues to experience—considerable difficulties," adds Massimo Gargiulo, director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Jewish Studies.

“The new openings that now seem to be emerging align with the non-ceremonial character we wanted to give this gathering. While acknowledging the progress made over the past sixty years, as well as the setbacks, the presentations will address present and future challenges in a world that continues to evolve,” he added.

*Midhun J Francis SJ*



## **BOOK TO ADVANCE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS LAUNCHED**

In an era often marked by religious polarization, a new book titled “Pilgrims in Conversation” was launched to build bridges of understanding between Christians and Muslims.

The compilation of interviews by Jesuit Father Joseph Victor Edwin was released on November 9, 2025 by Maulana Asghar Imam Mehdi Salafi, *Amire Jamiate Ahle Hadith*, at the Indian Social Institute in New Delhi.

The event began with readings from the Qur’an, the Gita, and the Bible, setting a symbolic stage for a discussion on the vital role of dialogue in contemporary society.

The book is dedicated to the vision of Professor Akhtarul Wasey, a renowned Islamic scholar whose life’s work has been a source of inspiration for fostering amity between the two faiths.

Father Edwin noted that Professor Wasey’s commitment to Muslim-Christian friendship and cooperation is a continuing inspiration. Professor Wasey, an emeritus professor of Islamic Studies, is a Padma Shri awardee. Wasey was honored for his contributions to Islamic studies and interfaith understanding.

Maulana Asghar Imam Mehdi Salafi, the Ameer of Markazi Jamiat Ahle Hadees Hind, is a prominent Islamic scholar known for his leadership and deep knowledge of the Salafi tradition. His participation in launching a book on Christian-Muslim dialogue was seen by many as a significant gesture of goodwill and a powerful endorsement of the book's mission.

Saurabh Shahi, a journalist with experience covering the Middle East, addressed the gathering, emphasizing the crucial role of literature and honest reporting in promoting respectful coexistence. He highlighted its importance as a counter-narrative to the growing spread of hatred and division.

Recounting his experience in Syria, Shahi spoke of three ancient villages that were among the last places in the world where Aramaic, the language of Jesus, was still spoken. He described how a cherished statue of Mother Mary, which overlooked the scenic villages, was destroyed along with the communities by Al-Qaeda affiliates.

“The world knew when it was destroyed,” Shahi stated, noting the widespread media coverage of the desecration. He then shared the lesser-known epilogue: the villages and the sacred sites were later charitably restored by the wife of President Assad, a Muslim. “But when it was restored,” he lamented, “and that too by a Muslim, no one knew.”

The program was moderated by Lakshmi Menon, a member of the Delhi Jesuit Province Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, an arm of the Jesuit mission focused on specialized ministries of dialogue and research.

Written comments from Ute Kemmerling, a researcher specializing in the history of Islam in India and Sufi pilgrimage site of Ajmer, were shared with the attendees. She praised the book for its timely and significant contribution to interreligious understanding.

“At a time when religious belonging is, in many places, once again perceived as something that divides, this book reminds us that dialogue and knowledge are essential allies,” Kemmerling wrote. She lauded Father Edwin for bringing together a remarkably diverse group of Christian and Muslim scholars and practitioners.

Her review highlighted the book’s broad thematic scope, which addresses “traditions and mutual respect, gender roles and social inequalities, the role of religion in politics and society – and, time and again, the importance of knowledge as the foundation of dialogue and understanding.”

“Pilgrims in Conversation,” through its diverse perspectives, ultimately shows, in Kemmerling’s words, that “understanding does not arise from uniformity, but from attentive listening and a genuine interest in the other.” The launch served not just as a release of a new publication, but as a reaffirmation of the power of conversation to build a more harmonious world.

*Melvil Jose*

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## **CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS: A SHARED COMMITMENT TO HOLINESS**

As part of my one-year Theology program at Vidyajoti College of Religious Studies, I enrolled in an introductory course on Islam.

Before this academic engagement, my understanding of Islam had been shaped largely by second-hand narratives—particularly those conveyed through the media—which often presented distorted or incomplete representations. My classmates expressed similar sentiments, revealing that many carried unexamined assumptions or inclinations.

Initially, I questioned the relevance of studying other religions within a Christian theological program. However, as the course progressed, I came to appreciate the pedagogical and ecclesial importance of such study. Knowledge, I realised, facilitates understanding, and understanding opens the path to genuine love and respect.

This learning process enabled me to align my outlook with the teaching of the Church, which “rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions” and invites Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, to acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, as well as their social life and culture (NA 2).

A significant component of the course was a visit to a dargah, organized by Jesuit Father Joseph Victor Edwin, the tutor of the course, whom some of us call ‘Muslim Father.’ As I entered the dargah, the words of Vatican II resonated deeply: “together with us they adore the one merciful God.”

This prompted a sincere desire within me to understand how this shared orientation toward the Divine is lived out within the Islamic tradition. At the dargah, we engaged in dialogue with a sufi teacher who received us with notable hospitality and openness. He explained essential aspects of Sufi belief and practice and responded to our questions with clarity and patience.

I was particularly struck by the profound sense of submission to God—*tawhid* and *taslim*—that permeates the life of devout Muslims. This submission is expressed not only in prayer and ritual but also in ethical practice, fasting, charity, and simplicity of life.

I was surprised by the numerous convergences between Islamic and Christian belief and practice. Muslims, like Christians, affirm the Resurrection, the final Judgment, and the necessity of prayer and vigilance. Their emphasis during Ramadan on being spiritually prepared for the Day of Judgment closely parallels the Christian exhortations to “watch and pray” (Mt 25:13; Mk 13:33).

Additional similarities—resembling, in some respects, the practices of the Missionaries of Charity—include a structured rhythm of daily prayer, a deep reliance on Divine Providence, a commitment to humility among those in leadership, and sustained acts of charity, particularly toward the vulnerable. Their culture of hospitality was especially evident during our visit.

Toward the end of the encounter, I asked the younger sufi about the challenges Muslims face in the current socio-political context of India, including experiences of persecution. His response reflected remarkable serenity and trust in God. His confidence was reminiscent of the Pauline assurance: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31).

As we walked around the place, I tried to take in every detail—the attitude of those praying and singing, their reactions toward us, and the atmosphere as a whole. My identity as a Missionary of Charity influenced the encounter. The curiosity and respect shown by our hosts highlighted the importance of simple presence in interreligious dialogue.

This encounter significantly transformed my understanding of Islam and encouraged me to deepen my own Christian discipleship. A Sufi teaching states that anyone who meets a Sufi should leave as a better person. Mother Teresa expressed a similar conviction regarding Christians; she used to say that they need not change their religion, but they must walk away better persons.

So, I pray that everyone who meets a Christian may walk away a better person, even if they don’t belong to our same faith—may they feel welcomed, understood, and above all, loved and accepted. I hope that such encounters may continue to foster mutual respect, understanding, and a shared commitment to what is true and holy.

*Sr. France Marie MC*



## **EMBRACING DIVERSITY: LESSONS FROM INTERFAITH EXPOSURE**

A group of eight students from the Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad visited Delhi for an interfaith exposure program, and I was delighted to facilitate the programme in November 2025.

Our first meeting was with the members of the Centre for Peace and Spirituality (CPS) in Delhi. The Centre was established by the efforts of Maulana Wahiddudin Khan in January 2001. This non-political, non-profit, non-governmental organization aims to showcase the true essence of Islam, which is rooted in peace and spirituality. Maulana Khan, who passed away in 2021, was a highly respected Islamic scholar recognized for presenting Islam in a modern context.

Maulana Khan articulated that peace and spirituality are two sides of the same coin. He defined spirituality as the practice of positive thinking, on an individual level; when this positive mindset radiates throughout society, it transforms into peace. Through the Centre, Maulana Khan aimed to guide individuals toward embracing a positive, God-centered way of life. The members of CPS strive to spread love for God and promote goodwill among all people. Maulana Khan emphasized that Islam did not endorse a confrontational approach and highlighted the importance of respecting diverse beliefs. While acknowledging our differences in faith, he believed that what unites us is our shared ethical outlook as human beings, where reason and faith complement each other. He often reiterated his famous saying: “Follow one (your religion) and respect all (the religions of the world).”

### **Shaping the Future of the World in Peace: Reflection from CPS, Delhi**

One of the fascinating ideas of Maulana Khan about human beings is his/her place in the ‘Creation Plan of God (CPG)’. He argued that the CPG do not demand Muslims to establish an ideal society,

but rather CPG invites Muslims to live out the essence of human freedom fruitfully. Humans have been granted full freedom of speech and action during their time on Earth, as they are placed here by the Almighty to undergo a test. As part of this trial, individuals possess the freedom to deny God and oppose the messengers of truth. If human freedom were completely withdrawn, it would become possible to establish an ideal society. However, according to CPG, God would never withdraw the gift of human freedom under any circumstances.

Accordingly, Maulana Khan highlighted that, according to divine design, the true purpose of our world is not to create a perfect society but to develop ideal individuals. God is not seeking the formation of a perfect community; instead, He desires human beings to endure challenges and uphold their faith. Individuals face tests through hardships that shape their character. People are granted the freedom to choose between good and evil, and this plan encourages them to use that freedom wisely to earn a place in Paradise.

Maulana Khan taught that a perfect society will not be realized in this life but in the Hereafter, which the Qur'an refers to as Darus Salam, or the Home of Peace. The primary hurdle to forming an ideal society in this world is the presence of rebellious and insolent individuals. In the heavenly society of the Hereafter, all wrongdoers will be separated from the righteous, resulting in a community composed solely of virtuous souls. Only in heaven will it be possible to realize the vision of an ideal society.

As we explore this fascinating concept, it's important to acknowledge that Christians share a common foundation for dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters. This foundation is rooted in the human freedom that arises from the inalienable dignity of every person. The Catholic Church emphasizes that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the individual serves as the cornerstone of a moral vision for society. Together, Muslims and Christians can deepen our understanding of the human person.

Muslims may be interested in knowing that the Church speaks of 'the Kingdom of God.' This phrase appears in the Gospels more than 90 times and reflects the new vision for society that Jesus offers. This vision is rooted in principles of freedom, community, and justice. Biblical scholars emphasize that the phrase 'Kingdom of God' is uniquely associated with Jesus, reflecting his distinct sense of mission and his personal encounters with God. Drawing from his profound relationship with God as 'Abba,' Jesus not only embraced this understanding but also encouraged others to see every person as a loving brother or sister. This radical openness that Jesus displayed towards all humanity stems from his deep experience of God as a nurturing Father. This naturally leads us to acknowledge everyone around us as brothers and sisters, deserving of our acceptance and love.

### **Sufis: Religion of the Heart**

Our next destination was the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, one of the most renowned Sufi saints in the Indian subcontinent. Sufis - a mystic dimension of Islam - emphasize that love is the key to realizing God, stating that genuine love for God naturally translates into love for humanity.

Muhammad Nizami Saheb, a spiritual guide at the shrine, emphasised that Sufism is fundamentally a religion of the heart. Sufis respond to hatred not with anger, but with love and compassion. He also highlighted that the hadith of Prophet Muhammad teaches the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, which holds even greater significance today than they did in the Prophet's time. Sufis do not discriminate against one another; rather, they prioritize serving those in need, considering it as the fastest path to heaven. Sufis emphasise that ethical praxis is key to the life of any Muslim. Sufis deeply embrace the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and go beyond the surface in their understanding of the Qur'an. A long conversation followed by a meal was a wonderful experience.

## Many Lessons: From A Closed View to an Open View

The students and I recognised that this engagement helped us to understand our Muslim brothers and sisters better. Frequently, we encounter the notion that Islam is a singular, unchanging entity that fails to adapt to new realities. However, our interactions with members of CPS, our Sufi teacher and other devotees at the shrine revealed to us that Muslims are diverse in their understanding and practice of Islam, and we felt delighted to recognise that many Muslims are forward-thinking. Muslims and Christians can share values that intersect with their religions and cultures. Anyone interested in Christian-Muslim relations can glean valuable insights from such experiences. The students pointed out that they learned from these interactions:

- Islam should not be viewed as a barbaric, irrational, or primitive faith, as it is often misrepresented in the media, but rather as a unique tradition that is different, not deficient.
- Islam ought to be seen not as a violent or aggressive religion embroiled in a clash of civilizations, but as a potential ally in collaborative efforts to tackle common issues.
- Islam should not be viewed as a political ideology, but as a genuine religious belief that is lived by its followers in depth, often not seen or observed by others.

From these two encounters, I drew a clear conclusion: “Authentic believers from different faiths can learn from each other and together they can shape a more peaceful future for all”.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



## **JAMIA Conference (2025), Colombo**

The JAMIA (Jesuits Among Muslims in Asia) Conference was held at the Caritas National Centre in Colombo Sri Lanka from 27 to 30 December 2025. The Sri Lanka Jesuit Province played host to the Assembly, with Joseph Victor Edwin SJ as the overall convenor. The Conference brought together Jesuits and their collaborators from Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, India and Pakistan.

The Conference provided ample opportunity to deeply reflect of the engagement of the Society of Jesus with Muslims, given the complexities and challenges of Asia. There were two overarching themes: i) Presenting Christ in Islamic Contexts and ii) Muslims and Christians in Multireligious Contexts. Scholarly papers interspersed with grassroots engagements were presented by the participants on inter-related dimensions. There was a session on Jesuits who pioneered dialogue with Muslims in various ways and how we should learn from the rich legacy they have left us.

During the in-depth spiritual conversations, the participants shared with each other their consolations and desolations, the challenges they faced and what more needs to be done in keeping with the directives of 'Nostra Aetate', subsequent Church teaching and mandate entrusted by the Society.

There were several positive points which emerged from the Conference; among them were: the need and importance of building bridges/ deepening the bonds with Muslims in every possible way; to strengthen JAMIA as network; to get more younger Jesuits engaged in this ministry.

Among the several highlights of the Conference was a meaningful and impacting day of exposure. The day included a visit to The Tulana Research Centre for Encounter and Dialogue founded (in 1974) by Jesuit Fr. Aloysius Pieris, the Asian liberation theologian and a profound interaction with him; to the famed Jami Ul-Alfar

Masjid (the Red Mosque) and meeting with the Imams there; and to the Kelaniya Buddhist Temple (Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara) is a sacred Buddhist site.

For all present it was a very enriching Conference with a renewed commitment to make JAMIA more relevant today!

*Cedric Prakash SJ (GUJ)*



## **JESUITS AMONG MUSLIMS IN ASIA (JAMIA) & THE ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION (ISA) SEND EID AL-FITR GREETINGS TO ALL OUR MUSLIM BROTHERS AND SISTERS**

Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad, Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, expressed his “closeness, solidarity and respect” in a message to “Muslim brothers and sisters” ahead of Eid Al-Fitr, the closing of Ramadan. In his message, the Cardinal said, “This year, through a providential convergence of calendars, Christians observe their period of fasting and devotion alongside you during the holy season of Lent, which leads the Church toward the celebration of Easter. During this spiritually intense period, we seek to follow God’s will more faithfully.” Moreover, he called upon Christians and Muslims, together with all people of goodwill, “to imagine and to open new paths by which life may be renewed” and said that “this renewal is made possible through a creativity nourished by prayer and the discipline of fasting that clears our inner vision and concrete acts of charity.”

He conveyed his sense of spiritual closeness with Muslims, especially with those “who struggle or suffer in body or spirit because of their thirst for justice, equality, dignity and freedom”.

He affirmed in his message that the Catholic Church stands in solidarity with all who thirst for justice, peace and harmony and said: “We are united not only by our shared experience of trial but also by the sacred task of restoring peace to our broken world.” The Cardinal noted that peace is a gift from God and that it is nurtured by defusing hostility through dialogue, practising justice, and expressing forgiveness. He expressed his desire that through the shared season of Ramadan and Lent, Christians and Muslims would experience inner transformation and become a catalyst for a renewed world where the weapons of war give way to the courage of peace.

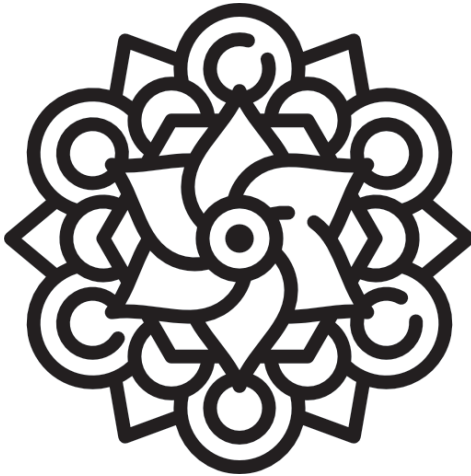
The spirit of his message is rooted in the spirit of the document issued by Second Vatican Council in 1965 entitled *Nostra Aetate* (On the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions). *Nostra Aetate* clearly states that “the Church rejects nothing true and holy in (other) religions” and promotes interreligious dialogue. While addressing Islam, the document expresses the Church’s “esteem” for Muslims and identifies several commonalities that Islam and Christianity share in common, including belief in Almighty God who is Creator, Merciful, and Revealer. It also mentions other beliefs shared by Christians and Muslims such as convictions regarding judgment and the resurrection of the body; similar practices such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving and the veneration of certain figures, including Mary. The document concludes with an appeal for dialogue and collaboration with Muslims on issues of peace and social justice.

Since Christianity and Islam are the two largest global religions, it is particularly important for Christians and Muslims to heed this call for cooperation in pursuit of the common good of all humanity. In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, Christians join their Muslim brothers and sisters as they engage in fasting, live out a profound commitment to prayer and practice almsgiving. Together with Muslim brothers and sisters, Christians also share values such as patience, gratitude, compassion and humility.

During Ramadan, Muslims often welcome Christians and others to come together during Iftar (the breaking of the fast) and Eid al-Fitr (the festival days). Such gatherings help to dispel misconceptions and they foster friendship and trust. Moreover, the festival days serve as an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to develop good relations with each other that will result in mutual understanding.

We join our Muslim brothers and sisters during the occasion of Eid al-Fitr to praise and thank Almighty God and to strengthen the bonds of respect that lead to collaboration for the common good. Especially during these days, we join our Muslim brothers and sisters in praying for peace throughout the world.

*Joseph Victor Edwin SJ*



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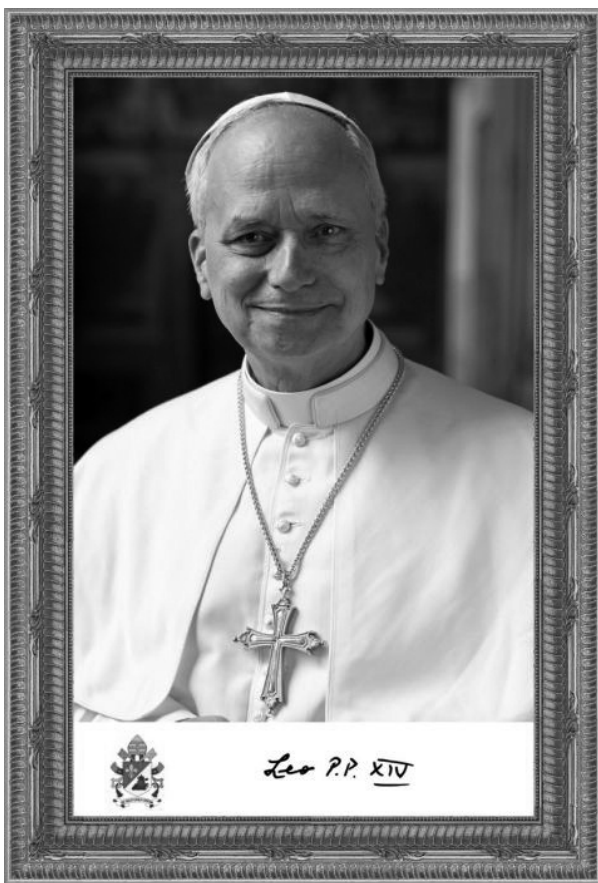
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