

# Salaam

ISSN 0970-5384

Quarterly to Promote Understanding



Moving Together in Dialogue inspired by “Nostra Aetate”

“The Church also regards Muslims with high esteem” (NA 3); Current challenges in the dialogue with Islam

Relevance of the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions for Our Times

The Ecclesial Movements as Agents of Implementation of Nostra Aetate.

From *Nostra Aetate* to *Human Fraternity*

An Islamic Perspective on Pluralism

A reflection on the Arbæen Walk

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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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**Vol. 46**

**January 2025**

**No. 1**

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

## INFORMATION

SALAAM is a Quarterly published by the Islamic Studies Association. Articles and Book Reviews meant for Publication should be emailed to [victoredwinsj@gmail.com](mailto:victoredwinsj@gmail.com)

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### SUBSCRIPTION RATES

#### ONLY FOR INDIA

Annual Subscription (4 Issues)	: Rs. 100.00
Life Subscription	: Rs. 1500.00

Please do not send subscription by DD and Cheque.

### Method of Payment

*By transfer of money through Bank*  
Name: Islamic Studies Association  
Bank: Canara Bank  
Account Number: 0346101008770  
IFSC CODE: CNRB0000346  
SAVING ACCOUNT

*By Money Order to*  
Victor Edwin SJ  
Editor, Salaam  
Vidyajyoti  
23, Raj Niwas Marg,  
Delhi-110 054

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Views expressed in the articles are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or the Editorial Committee.

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Design and Print: Bosco Society for Printing & Graphic Training, Okhla New Delhi- 25,  
Email: [boscopress@gmail.com](mailto:boscopress@gmail.com)

(For Private circulation only)

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ISSN 0970-5384

Quarterly to Promote Understanding

Vol. 46

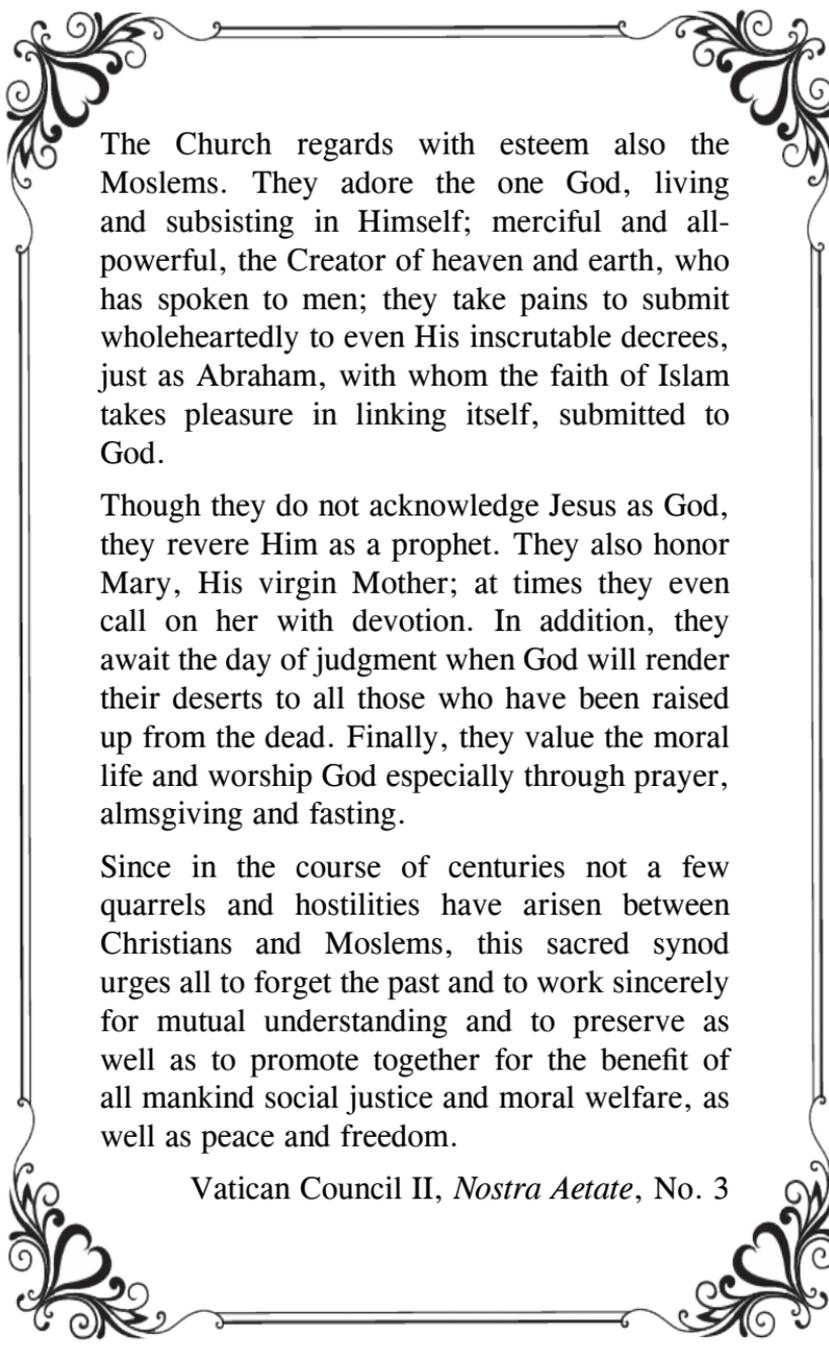
JANUARY 2025

No. 1



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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

As I write this editorial, we are nearing the end of 2024, with the dawn of 2025 just around the corner. In the new year 2025, *Nostra Aetate* marks a significant milestone, celebrating 60 years since its introduction. It is no exaggeration to say that this document has had a profound impact on the Church's relations with people of various faith traditions.

When it was presented at the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Bea highlighted the formal establishment of principles guiding how the Church interacts with followers of other religions for the very first time. The Council acknowledged that those who do not profess faith in Jesus can still achieve salvation by following their conscience. It also stressed the importance of the Church engaging in meaningful dialogue with adherents of different faiths, recognizing the moral and spiritual values inherent in their beliefs and fostering genuine respect for them.

Those who act in accordance with their rightly formed conscience are seen as united with Christ and his mystical body, the Church. In this spirit, the Church seeks to embrace the spiritual insights offered by various religions while also sharing the treasures of Christ. Through dialogue, both parties can exchange what they hold dear.

I lift my heart in gratitude to God for all that has unfolded through the activities of the Islamic Studies Association—seminars, webinars, meetings, lectures, and visits to various Muslim institutions. The central theme of these events has been Christian-Muslim relations. They have been organized for theology students in cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune.

Engaging with Muslims during these events has brought forth several profound insights. First and foremost, interreligious dialogue creates a space for individuals with significant differences to engage in conversation, fostering fresh perspectives about themselves and others. Second, traditional polemics and debates stand in stark

contrast to the essence of genuine dialogue between followers of diverse faiths. Effective discourse in this realm requires an open-minded approach that values and truly understands our differences. Lastly, all participants must set aside any claims to exclusive truth and let go of any supremacist attitudes they may harbour.

The primary aim of interreligious dialogue is to nurture mutual enrichment through shared learning and experiences. This process is indeed remarkable. Gaining insights into others' beliefs can deepen our understanding of our faith. Such a transformation occurs when I reflect on my beliefs against the backdrop of the new knowledge I acquire about both others and myself.

I want to sincerely thank Father Sebastiano D'Ambra from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) for his valuable insights, as well as Dr. Andreas Renz, whose knowledge has significantly enhanced our understanding. I also extend my gratitude to Professor Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes and Dr. Roberto Catalano for their thoughtful essays on *Nostra Aetate*, which have offered important perspectives. Furthermore, I appreciate the contributions of Professor Gaetano Sabetta, whose work has enriched our discussions even more. A special acknowledgement goes to Midhun J Francis Kochukallanvila SJ and Dr. Chris Hewer for their enlightening articles, which have brought considerable depth to the topic of Christian-Muslim Relations.

I wish you all a fruitful New Year 2025!

**Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**

“Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the person’s point of view, opinion, and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defenses, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.” On Heaven and Earth, *Sudamericana*, 2011 - **Pope Francis**

# MOVING TOGETHER IN DIALOGUE INSPIRED BY “NOSTRA AETATE”

**Fr. Sebastiano D’Ambra, PIME**

“Nostra Aetate” (NA) is the shortest declaration from the Vatican II Council, dated October 28, 1965, that addresses the Church’s relationship with non-Christians. It is, however, a document that has sparked a “revolution” within the Church. Initially intended to focus on the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Holocaust during World War II, it eventually expanded its scope to include Muslims as part of the monotheistic faiths, ultimately pushing the Church to embrace dialogue with all religions.

The document opens with an inspiring introduction that states:

“Men (and women) expect from various religions answers to the riddles of the human condition, which today, as in times past, resonate deeply within humanity. What is man (and woman)? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? What is moral good, and what is sin? What causes suffering, and what purpose does it serve? What is the path to happiness? What happens after death—Judgement and retribution? Finally, what is our existence? Where do we come from, and where are we going?” (NA 1).

This passage underscores that all people and faiths are interconnected in the quest for life’s meaning, reminding us of our shared spiritual dimension and the need to engage in dialogue. This sentiment lies at the heart of our human experience.

I was drawn to these documents and the broader challenges posed by Vatican II, which paved the way for meaningful dialogue. This spirit has steered the Church towards “new ways of mission,” emphasizing “interreligious dialogue.”

I studied theology during the Vatican II Council (1962-65) and was ordained a priest in 1966. After a decade serving in Italy as a

PIME priest in formation, I requested my superior to allow me to participate in a mission with two fellow PIME priests to explore these “new ways of mission.” We ultimately chose the Philippines, specifically Mindanao, a region rich in Christians, Muslims, indigenous peoples, and, unfortunately, conflict.

Without delving into too many details, I can say that my time there profoundly shaped my mission. After working with Christian and Indigenous communities, I made the decision to live among a Muslim community during a period of revolution and martial law. One of the revolutionary groups was active in my mission area. They were Muslims, part of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The Muslims became my friends, including the MNLF rebels who asked me to become their negotiator for the peace process with the government. Unfortunately, after two years of negotiations, going up and down from the forest to meet the MNLF group, the military ambushed me and I had to leave the country. I went to Rome, I studied at PISAI (Pontifical Institute of Studies on Arabic and Islamic Studies). It was there that I deepened my knowledge about Islam, and I discovered that the best entry point for dialogue is “spirituality” In fact even Islam has spiritual people like the Sufis. A deeper reflection connected me to the “Nostra Aetate”.

I was called back to the Philippines in 1983 and to Mindanao, Zamboanga City, where I started the Silsilah Dialogue Movement with some Christian and Muslim friends in 1984. The word “Silsilah” (chain, link) which is Arabic, was a way to emphasise the link with God and with all. Later, I became the executive secretary of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and I was able to share more about the mission of interreligious dialogue starting from “Nostra Aetate”.

We know that the Church after the declaration of “Nostra Aetate” changed the initial name of the “Secretariat for Non-Christians”

to “ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue”. This was the fruit of a deeper reflection and sensitivity. They realized that we cannot address the other religions as “Non-Christians.” They have their identity. Recently the name was changed again to “Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue” as a way to give deeper attention to the mission of interreligious dialogue.

We know that the journey of “Nostra Aetate” in the Church has been a reason for some to question the mission of evangelization. This reflection in the Church, I believe, was also providential because it helped the Church to reaffirm the mission of the Church giving priority to the witnessing aspect of the mission.

Pope Benedict XVI called the declaration, “Nostra Aetate” (NA) the “*Magna Carta of interreligious dialogue*”. It was the first official document openly encouraging Christian believers to grow into the spirit of “Interreligious Dialogue.” Thus, it laid the foundation of dialogue between Catholics and followers of other religions. In that time of reflection, the Church felt the need to clarify the relationship between dialogue and mission and in 1984 the Church came up with the document “ Dialogue and Mission.”

By coincidence, it was the same year (1984) that we started in Zamboanga City the Silsilah Dialogue Movement. For us, it was a concrete way to promote dialogue and we did this in the context of a society with a presence of Christians and Muslims during the time of conflict between the MNLF and the Martial Law declared by the government. This reminds us that in all times, even in difficult times, we can explore ways to promote interreligious dialogue. I remember I proposed at the beginning the “spirituality of Life-in-Dialogue” as a foundation of a sincere and solid dialogue inspired from the inside: “ Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God.” This reflection was the message that guided me during the experience of living, in the beginning, in a Muslim community in simplicity, prayer and building friendship and solidarity.

In more recent times, during the 50th anniversary of “Nostra Aetate” (2015), Pope Francis said: “ *Dialogue based on confident respect can bring seeds of good that in their turn may bud into friendship and cooperation in many fields, especially in service of the poor, the last, to the elderly, through welcoming migrants and attention to those who are excluded. We can care for one another and creation. All believers of every religion.* ”

Pope Francis has been consistent in promoting dialogue over the years. We can recall many prophetic signs and occasions, one of these was in Abu Dhabi on February 4, 2019, in a historical meeting with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the grand Imam of Al-Azar University. On that occasion, they signed the historical document “Human Fraternity.”

The document “Human Fraternity” also declares: “*Together with the Catholic Church and the Muslims of the East and West, declare the adoption as a culture of dialogue as the path; cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.*”

This document communicates the Church’s ongoing reflection after the “Nostra Aetate” with previous documents that have emphasized the importance of religions in constructing world peace.

In reading this declaration we in Silsilah were deeply touched because it coincides with the spirit of Silsilah. We started in 1984 promoting the Culture of Dialogue emphasizing the dialogue with God, with the self, with others and with creation as the four pillars of the spirituality of life-in-dialogue and, along the years, we have always reaffirmed that in dialogue we have to start promoting the Culture of Dialogue as a Path to Peace. Thus, peace is for us a vision that can be achieved if we move together on the path of dialogue as the “Nostra Aetate” started to present to us. This document reminds us the deeper mission of why we have to be in dialogue with all, in fact, “Nostra Aetate” tells us, “ *We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man,*

*created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8)." (NA 5)*

I hope and pray that the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of "Nostra Aetate" in 2025 will be a time of great reflection and determination. I believe the last encyclical of Pope Francis' "Dilectus nos" can be considered the most touching reflection that has guided the Church on the road to dialogue. This document also says: *"By associating with the lowest ranks of society (cf. Mt 25:31-46), "Jesus brought the great novelty of recognising the dignity of every person, especially those who were considered 'unworthy'. This new principle in human history – which emphasizes that individuals are even more 'worthy' of our respect and love when they are weak, scorned, or suffering, even to the point of losing the human 'figure' – has changed the face of the world. It has given life to institutions that take care of those who find themselves in disadvantaged conditions, such as abandoned infants, orphans, the elderly who are left without assistance, the mentally ill, people with incurable diseases or severe deformities, and those living on the streets."*

While we focus our attention on the messages of dialogue from "Nostra Aetate" up to now, we cannot ignore the reality of the world today. There are still divisions around the world using religion as a reason for "identity" with violence and power.

In our journey of dialogue in the Silsilah Dialogue Movement, we have experienced these problems and suffered especially for the death of Fr. Salvatore Carzedda, PIME, my friend, who was close to me. He was an enthusiast for promoting dialogue, but on May 20, 1992, he was our first martyr of dialogue in Mindanao, a victim of a group of terrorists who planned to destroy our dialogue among Muslims and Christians. On that occasion, many discouraged us from continuing, but we said: "Padayon" (move on), a favourite expression of Fr. Salvatore. That happened during a summer course

in Zamboanga City. It was a course for Muslims and Christians and on that occasion, in front of the coffin of Fr. Salvatore we reaffirmed our determination to PADAYON from that time on the Silsilah Dialogue Movement has moved in many ways, although we have suffered of other alumni members of the Silsilah summer course who were killed along the years. There were two priests and a bishop.

In spite of these difficulties, we continue the mission, and over the years, we have started a Catholic dialogue movement called the Emmaus Dialogue Movement, with the charism of dialogue formed by lay consecrated men and women and other Catholics: married people, priests, sisters, youth, and bishops.

Recently, the Emmaus Dialogue Movement has started an Emmaus College of Theology, offering a Bachelor of Arts in Theology, Major in Interreligious Dialogue for Catholic youth, boys and girls, who are prepared to be leaders in the spirit of dialogue.

At the end of this reflection that started from the prophetic document of Vatican II Council, “Nostra Aetate” guiding us to other steps done by the Church up to now in dialogue with leaders and members of other religions, we are invited to take with great attention the event of the Synodal Church that is still in process, but we can say also part of the new spirit promoted in the Church with “Nostra Aetate” and many other prophetic signs done by the Church along the years.

I hope that the 60th Anniversary of “Nostra Aetate” will not remain only an academic event to celebrate, but a sign of the times to guide us today.



# **“THE CHURCH ALSO REGARDS MUSLIMS WITH HIGH ESTEEM” (NA 3) CURRENT CHALLENGES IN THE DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM**

**Dr. Andreas Renz**

## **Introduction**

The declaration “Nostra aetate” (NA) “On the attitude of the Catholic Church towards non-Christian religions” may be the shortest document of the Second Vatican Council, but its content makes it one of the most significant and effective. There is probably no other subject area - apart from liturgical matters and ecumenism - where the theological and ecclesiastical turnaround was as obvious and tangible as in the concrete behavior and positioning towards other religions. A peace meeting of religions, such as the first in Assisi in 1986, would be completely unthinkable without the Council, as would a visit by a Pope to a synagogue or mosque. This is why there has been repeated talk of a “paradigm shift”, and rightly so. What was fundamental to the new attitude that the church adopted towards Muslims and others: the attitude of “high esteem” (NA 3). This new attitude is at the heart of the declaration of the Council.

From a Christian perspective, Jewish-Christian dialogue is the basis and prerequisite for dialogue with religions in general, because both religions are based on the same root. The history of NA shows that the rediscovery of Israel led to the rediscovery of other religions: “Christians find their dialogical identity in the encounter with Judaism, which makes them ready to enter into dialogue with other world religions.”<sup>1</sup> Interreligious dialogue can be bilateral, but ultimately Judaism, as an essential part of Christian identity, is always implicitly at the table. Dialogue with Islam in particular can and must always be extended to a real “dialogue” with Judaism and vice versa, as Islam is part of the history of the impact of

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1 Christian Rutishauser SJ, *Christsein im Angesicht des Judentums*, Würzburg 2008, 8.

both Judaism and Christianity. The particular proximity of these three religions has often led to bitter enmity and exclusive claims. Reconciliation between them is necessary and becomes a test case for the ability of religions to achieve peace.

For centuries, relations between Christianity and Islam were characterized by polemics, demarcation and enmity, but in many places and over long stretches there was also peaceful coexistence in everyday life and mutual learning processes. Some of the challenges of Christian-Muslim dialogue today are outlined below.

### **Steps towards dialogue**

Islam is now the second largest religion in the world after Christianity and Muslims form a significant minority with religious structures in many Western countries as a result of diverse migration processes. The Christian-Muslim dialogue has been dominated and overshadowed by security and integration policy debates since 9/11 at the latest. In turn, a large number of local and supra-regional dialogue initiatives have emerged, which have important bridging functions in the respective communities. Theological and academic dialogue has also reached a new level, thanks to the education of a down-to-earth Islamic elite in Western and Central Europe as well as in the USA, meaning that controversial topics such as mission or human rights can also be discussed openly. Dialogue forums such as “Building Bridges” in the English speaking world or the “Christian-Muslim Theological Forum” in the German-speaking countries were created at the beginning of the new millenium and still exist today.<sup>2</sup>

The “Open Letter” from 138 Muslim scholars to Christianity entitled “A Common Word” (2007), which explains the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor as the common basis of both religions, can only be seen as a first, albeit important,

2 Cf. Douglas Pratt, *Contemporary Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Two Twenty-First Century Initiatives*, London/New York 2021; <https://buildingbridges.georgetown.edu/about>; <https://www.theologisches-forum.de/>

step.<sup>3</sup> A milestone in Christian-Islamic relations was the joint declaration on “Human Fraternity” by Pope Francis and the Grand Sheikh of Azhar Ahmad M. al-Tayyeb on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi, in which both sides acknowledge the equal dignity and the equal rights (including religious freedom) and duties of all people, condemn violence and terror and commit themselves to dialogue and just action.<sup>4</sup>

### **Confronting fundamentalism**

One of the greatest common challenges for Christians and Muslims is the confrontation with fundamentalist currents in both religions. Fundamentalism is to be understood as a cross-religious protest movement with very similar structures and content, which developed primarily in the 19th and 20th centuries as a reaction to massive processes of change and alienation in modern societies and became radicalized in part in the context of national political disputes and international conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Common characteristics include an exclusive claim to truth and salvation, a literal, unhistorical and selective use of scripture, a patriarchal family and social structure as a goal, the rejection of equality and freedom rights (against the liberal and open society), conspiracy theories and images of the enemy.

Only a small minority of fundamentalist groups, including in Islam, justify or practice violence, and yet these groups significantly shape the image of Islam in the media and in people’s minds. The common task of Christian and Islamic theology and dialogue is to confront the violent texts of the traditions as well as the argumentation patterns and recruitment factors of fundamentalist movements and

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3 <https://www.acommonword.com/>

4 Document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahamad al-Tayyib (Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019) | Francis

5 Cf. Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood. Religion and the History of Violence*, New York 2015.

to develop preventive measures. Dialogue in itself is an important instrument of prevention because it counteracts the development of enemy stereotypes and simplistic interpretations of the world and instead practices and conveys respect, recognition and tolerance.

### **Overcoming patriarchalism and dialogue about scriptural hermeneutics**

The fundamentalist tendencies in Christianity and Islam are patriarchal. It is still predominantly men who are the religious authorities and who interpret and pass on religious principles. In contrast, dialogue at grassroots level, the dialogue of everyday life, is often characterized by women. This divergence needs to be overcome by listening more closely to the voices of women and taking them seriously. This includes critically questioning the male-dominated traditions of interpretation and requires awareness of the feminist approaches that also exist in Islamic theology.<sup>6</sup>

The discussion about appropriate ways of hermeneutics of the holy scriptures and religious traditions has generally become an important topic of dialogue: Christians, for example, have been calling for a historical-critical approach to the Qur'an by Muslims for years. In fact, there are now numerous representatives worldwide who have at least laid the foundations for a critical and historical interpretation of the Qur'an (Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Abdolkarim Sorush, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, Ömer Özsoy, Mouhanad Khorchide and others), even if the different status of the holy scriptures (Bible and Qur'an) in both religions must be taken into account. It should not be forgotten that there were already approaches to historical thinking in classical Quranic exegesis (differentiation between Meccan and Medinan suras, the question of occasions of revelation, abrogation, local reference, recognition of different readings) and conversely, the historical-critical method also took a long time to be officially recognized in Christianity, and even today large parts of Christianity live a rather

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6 Cf. Ednan Aslan/Marcia Hermansen/Elif Medeni (Eds.), *Muslima Theology. The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, Frankfurt a./M. 2013.

pre-modern understanding of scripture.

In current Qur'anic research, approaches that attempt to reconstruct the Qur'an as a testimony of a communication process between God, the prophet and the addressees of his message, i.e. from the context of proclamation, have proven to be enormously enlightening.<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an is understood primarily as literal speech and only then as a written text. The common challenge of Christians and Muslims today is to oppose a reductionist understanding of scripture that misuses the holy scriptures in a literal, selective and exclusivist manner for ideological purposes.

### **Dialogue on human rights and state-religion-relationship**

Another important topic of dialogue is human rights, which in turn is focused on the topic of religious freedom. It is helpful to be aware that Christianity and the churches also took a long time not only to recognize the human rights discovered in the course of the Enlightenment, but also to adopt and defend them from their own religious foundations. Of course, modern human rights also have roots in the biblical, Jewish and Christian traditions, but they cannot be derived directly and, above all, exclusively from these, but are fed by many sources, above all concrete experiences of suffering through wars and social developments especially in Europe.

The main Christian contribution was the discovery of the inalienable dignity of every human being, which the biblical tradition sees expressed in the concept of the image of God. The Qur'an does not know this concept and the Islamic tradition has hardly received it, and yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Islamic view of humanity is therefore fundamentally different from the Christian view. Here there is a structurally analogous concept, namely the idea of man as a "*khalīfa*", i.e. as God's representative on earth (cf. Sura 2:30).<sup>8</sup> Modern Islamic theologians see this title as

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7 Cf. Mouhanad Khorchide, Gottes Offenbarung in Menschenwort. Der Koran im Licht der Barmherzigkeit, Freiburg im Breisgau 2018.

8 Vgl. dazu Andreas Renz, Der Mensch unter dem An-Spruch Gottes. Offenbarungsverständnis und Menschenbild des Islam im Urteil

expressing the special task and dignity of man, namely to act and live responsibly in the world as a free, rational being. According to today's exegetical consensus, this is precisely what the biblical concept of man's likeness to God says. It would therefore also be possible for Islamic theology to attribute a God-given dignity to every human being, from which the fundamental rights of freedom and equality are derived. Numerous Muslim scholars are now arguing in precisely this direction, even if this is not yet mainstream in the Muslim world.

### **State-Religion relationship**

Closely linked to this is the discussion about the right form of government and state-religion-relationship. The frequent assertion that Islam knows no separation of religion and state merely confirms an ideological formula and demand of Islamic fundamentalists, but has little to do with history, reality and Islamic theology. The fact is that neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah prescribe a specific form of state and the classification of religion, state, politics and society in the Islamic world has always been and still is very plural and changeable. The current rise of nationalism and populism in many countries around the world is endangering democracy and the rule of law. As the largest religious communities, however, these two have a decisive responsibility for ensuring that peaceful and tolerant coexistence remains possible. Together, they face the task of helping to shape society.<sup>9</sup> A prerequisite for this is the recognition and defense of the secular constitutional state, which guarantees the basis for freedom of religion and opinion. Interreligious dialogue is also not really possible without this framework, because dialogue presupposes freedom and equality of rights.

### **Christians and Muslims as partners on a common path**

The call in NA 3 to "stand together for the protection and promotion

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gegenwärtiger christlicher Theologie, Würzburg 2002, 367-378.

9 Cf. Felix Körner SJ, Political Religion. How Christianity and Islam Shape the World, New York 2020.

of social justice, moral goods and, not least, peace and freedom for all people” can and should be understood today as a mandate for interreligious dialogue in general. Christians and members of other religions, indeed all people of good will, can and should become equal partners who stand up for each other and for others in a pluralistic society. Interreligious dialogue is not a panacea, but it can enable necessary learning processes and changes in perspective. The new attitude of the Council, which becomes clear in NA, is not superiority, but service to others: understood and implemented in this way, NA can indeed become the “compass of the Church’s faith-based action in the 21st century”.<sup>10</sup>

*Dr. Andreas Renz, Munic (Germany), Catholic Theologian and Religious Scholar, Head of the Department Interreligious Dialogue in the Archiepiscopal Ordinariate Munic and Lecturer at the LMU Munich; Co-Founder of the “Christian-Muslim Theological Forum”*



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10 Roman Siebenrock, Theologischer Kommentar zur Erklärung über die Haltung der Kirche zu den nichtchristlichen Religionen *Nostra aetate*, in: Peter Hünemann/Bernd Jochen Hilberath (Hg.), Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil. Bd. 3, Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2005, 591-693, 677.

# RELEVANCE OF THE DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON- CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS FOR OUR TIMES

Dr. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

The document on the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions also known as *Nostra Aetate* or “In Our Time” was signed and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28th, 1965. The title of this document is uniquely suited to the interfaith meetings that have been taking place between Catholics and other religious traditions. The goal of this document was not only to be more tolerant and respectful of each other religious tradition but more importantly, it was a call to promote “unity and love among men.”

This is the official declaration of Vatican II following the efforts of Pope John XXIII to open the Church up to what is known in Italian as *aggiornamento*. The main focus of the Declaration is to address the need of the Church to be more open in spirit and flesh to non-Christian religious traditions, especially in addressing the covenantal relationship with Judaism after a long history of antisemitism found within Christendom.

In the historical context of European empire buildings, many rulers used and abused the name of Christianity for their economic self-interests. This antisemitic feeling was deeply ingrained in the European soil and most surely led to the final solution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, also known to the Jews as the *Shoah* or the Holocaust.

Not only Catholics but also Protestants used Good Friday and other parts of their religious celebrations to blame the Jews for the killing of Jesus the Son of God (deicide). Even the Lutheran Church has asked for forgiveness after acknowledging the fact that we found antisemitic passages in Luther’s writings.

In the twentieth century, Catholic leaders sought the need to reconcile with the Jews. They used this opportunity to become more inclusive in their treatment and their relationships with people of other non-Christian faith traditions. As the declaration states, “His saving design extends to all men.” Under the direction of Cardinal Augustin Bea and his collaborators in preparing this document such as John M. Oesterreicher, Gregory Baum and Bruno Hussar, the final document saw too many different drafts due to the religious and political pressures put on this committee.

Conservative Catholics were suspicious that this document would get rid of the deicide charges against the Jews while Catholics living in the Middle East were concerned about the Catholic Church moving closer towards the Zionist cause after the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

Additionally, Jewish organizations sent their representatives to make sure that this document would address once and for all the problems of deicide and the mass conversion of the Jews. Among the most notable Jewish activists and scholars was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. This explains in itself why the Committee was forced to change several times the language of the document, and by the end of this process, nobody was pleased with it.

For instance, we find the following statement under Note 4 which directly addresses the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jewish people. “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in his passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.” A compromise had to be made and Heschel among others was not too happy with the final version redacted by this Committee. However, very few people had issues with the new paragraphs dealing with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. This declaration has been and is regarded as one of the most influential documents during the Second Vatican Council.

Let me start addressing possible critiques of the usage of language in this document. First, the chosen words may sound too patriarchal for our times. This is a feminist critique in need of a more inclusive language that encompasses both brotherhood and sisterhood, as we find in some Catholic and Jewish communities of learning. We find in the Introduction of this document the words “mankind” and “men.”

This document emphasizes the theistic language of faith in one God who is the creator of the universe and of all creatures. In this particular context it makes sense to address the other as a spiritual brother and as people of the Abrahamic faiths since they are specifically targeting the Jews and less attention is dedicated to the Muslims. Clearly, these three faith traditions shared the same ancestral lineage to Abraham as the father of the great monotheistic religions in the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Yet, the potential problem we may encounter in this document is that if we want to make it a universal declaration of faith it will not be well received among people of other faith traditions that do not believe in one God or they don't proclaim God to be the creator of the universe. For instance, Hindus don't believe in one God nor Buddhists believe in a personal creator of the universe. Therefore, this document can only be seen as an effective declaration in the context of a possible reconciliation with the Jewish people. But its great limitation lies in the inclusiveness model that the Second Vatican Council adopted at that time. The main reason being is not pluralistic enough.

The Catholic Church still sees herself as the depositary of God's revelation in her Mother Church as an institution and sees that all other faiths may contain some degrees of truth but only as a way of preparation to accept the full Truth which can only be found within the Catholic faith. This is why conservative Catholics fought hard to preserve the old narrative in the spirit of exclusivism while more progressive and liberal voices were trying very hard to advocate for a more inclusivist Church. Yet, this transition stage in history to

a more pluralistic Church is still a work in progress and it has not proclaimed that all other non-Christian religions are containers of the Truth because this declaration would be seen as too radical to those who want to keep the monopoly on Truth and, thereby, they can lose their power and exerted control over potential converts.

One of the greatest contributions of this declaration is that it has moved the Catholic Church forward with all its shortcomings. Today we see many interfaith dialogues promoting real unity and love among all believers without having a hidden or public agenda to convert them. It has become the norm to avoid discussing the major points of theological disagreements between faith traditions. Instead, their shared common goal is to focus on what they can do to work together so that they can prevent more hostility and violence exercised towards Jews, Muslims, and other minority groups living in the Middle East and around the globe. I believe this is an honourable goal to have if we contextualize how the Church has moved from a too exclusivist Church model to a more inclusivist Church.

As the declaration ends, we find the following statement: “The Church reproves . . . any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.” This shared sense of fellowship among people of all nations and creeds have positioned the Church as a real peacemaker diplomatic institution in trying to solve war conflicts and religious schisms.

Additionally, this document reflects the idea of bringing a sense of hope to those who want a Church that treat others as equal partners in the best spirit of seeing all brothers and sisters as children of the same infinite source of life, regardless we call it God or by some other ultimate reality. By virtue of their shared belief in one God Catholics and Muslims are enjoying more unity than in previous centuries. The declaration stated in Note 3: “The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They Adore the one God, living in 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.” The document explicitly says: “. . . 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.”

This declaration responds to the long history of religious persecution and wars between Christians and Muslims. I am not so inclined to use the language of forgetting the past because we are condemned to repeat history by our self-forgetfulness. But I fully understand the emphasis being put in this document to promote mutual understanding and respect so that we can all live in peace and enjoy the freedom that the one God wants all their children to enjoy as being part of the beloved community. Instead, the spirit of this document calls us to work together for the common good of humanity and for our common home which is God’s good creation.

So, why this declaration is so relevant in our own times? In my view this declaration aligns itself with international documents issued by the United Nations and other international agreements that have emphasized the importance of religions in the construction of world peace. Also, this declaration has addressed the urgent need to abandon the old missionary practice of extreme versions of proselytism. Therefore, nobody should try to impose any religious worldview or culture that others don’t want to accept. So, the document ends with a pledge to promote human rights so that the main values can be implemented at all levels of the international

community, whenever it is possible. As the document says, “No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned.”

In short, this declaration signed up by Pope Paul VI is an invitation to reconciliation to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. It is no wonder why this declaration is so important because it marks a turning point in the fragile coexistence between Catholics, Jews, and Muslims in the Middle East and around the globe. Also, it becomes the precursor to the third encyclical of Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti” sometimes translated as “on Fraternity and Social Friendship” published October 4th, 2020, The Council put more emphasis on the path of mutual understanding through establishing multiple dialogues at interfaith meetings, cultivating spiritual bonds with our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions, and promoting more solid friendships with people of good will. Now, we are contemplating the fruits of this laborious process by witnessing more living encounters with non-Christian leaders of different religious traditions from Popes visiting religious dignitaries as far as Asia and Africa to inviting religious representatives to Assisi (1986) to the numerous interfaith dialogues held by Pope Francis with religious leaders in all major world’s religious traditions. The spirit of *Nostra Aetate* has become the embodiment of universal brotherhood and sisterhood calling people to live together in peace by sharing the theological virtues of faith, hope, and above all, love (*caritas*).



# THE ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS AS AGENTS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF *NOSTRA AETATE*. A READING THROUGH POPE FRANCIS' MAGISTERIUM

*Dr. Roberto Catalano*

## 1. Introduction

On Wednesday, 28 October 2015, I was invited to attend the traditional weekly audience in St. Peter's Square along with many leaders and representatives of different religions. Pope Francis himself welcomed the group who surrounded him on top of the Square in front of the Basilica. Exactly half a century had passed since 28 October 1965, the day on which *Nostra Aetate* (NA) was promulgated, and the glance on the parvis of the basilica, the centre of Christianity, coloured by the different guises of the representatives of the various traditions, spoke in itself of the long journey that had been made over these decades. Pope Francis then outlined a true road-map to continue this common pilgrimage. He spoke, in fact, of a “*dialogue we need that can only be open and respectful [and] that then proves fruitful*”.<sup>1</sup> Above all, he conjugated this ‘*mutual respect*’ as the condition and end of dialogue: to respect the right of others to life, physical integrity, fundamental freedoms, that is, freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression and of religion.<sup>2</sup> From observing and guaranteeing these rights can grow seeds of good that in turn become sprouts of friendship and collaboration in many fields, and especially in service to the poor, the young, the elderly, in welcoming migrants, in caring for the excluded. We can walk together taking care of each other and of creation. All believers of every religion.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore Bergoglio recalled the centrality of mercy and compassion, sentiments dear to every religious tradition.

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1 Pope Francis, *Catechesis at the General Audience on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate*, Vatican City, 28 October 2015.

2 See *Ibidem*.

3 *Ibidem*.

Finally, he concluded by suggesting a few moments of silent prayer, each according to his or her own tradition, to adhere to the will of God, the Father, who wants us all to be brothers and sisters who make up the great human family. It was an experience that echoed NA, projecting faithful of all creeds towards a future of ‘*harmony of diversity*’. Almost ten years had passed from that Wednesday. During this time, Pope Francis missed no opportunity to emphasize the dimension of friendship and fraternity as constitutive of dialogue, without any discount to the pursuit of Truth and social justice. Progressively, dialogue has emerged as something more than a mere activity; it is an attitude, which determines a commitment and a way of living and approaching diversity.

## **2. The appearance of unexpected protagonists of dialogue**

The world has changed profoundly in the last ten years and, even more, since 1965. If, on one side, all the Popes – Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis – played a key role in implementing the recommendation of NA, among the many, we cannot ignore another unexpected phenomenon. In fact, there had been the appearance of what we can define as agents capable of contributing in practice to the actualization of the opening of the Council document. These protagonists of interfaith dialogue had been and still are today the so-called ‘new ecclesial Movements’, which have appeared in the Catholic Church immediately before and after the Vatican Council.<sup>4</sup> Among them, Sant’Egidio Community and Focolare Movement played an important role, defined by Pope Francis as ‘*revolutionary*’.<sup>5</sup> This unexpected phenomenon was

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4 For an introduction to this phenomenon see M. Faggioli, “Between Documents and Spirit: The Case of the New Catholic Movements” in J. L. Heft and J. O’Malley (ed. by), *After Vatican II. Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids MI and Cambridge, 2012, 1-22; M. Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 2014; Alberto Melloni, (ed. By), *Movements in the Church* (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 2003), 13-35.

5 For more details on this topic see R. Catalano, *Fraternità e dialogo fra le religioni. Esperienze di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova e Istituto

even more surprising as it was accompanied by the appearance of similar realities within the sphere of other religions. In fact, we can quickly refer to the Rissho Kosei-kai, among the Mahayana Japanese Buddhism; the Hizmet Movement born within the Turkish Sunni Islam and the African American followers of Imam W.D. Mohammed; the Gandhian Movements in India along the more recent Anam Prem; the Dharma Drum Mountain in the fold of the Chan Buddhism in Taiwan. And several others. The encounter - often casual - of their founders or members in different parts of the world had promoted experiences of interfaith dialogue at the grass-root level, soon followed by joint cooperation in social projects and spiritual experiences of dialogue up to the point, more recently, of engaging also in academic activities. Nevertheless, as Andrea Riccardi, founder of Sant'Egidio Community, affirms, thanks to these Movements, dialogue has grown not only as an academic fact, but, more and more, as a way of life practiced every day by thousands and thousands of believers.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, thanks to these Movements and the Church magisterium, interfaith dialogue has acquired more and more a double fold dimension: to contribute to the cause of peace and to commit to a common search for Truth.<sup>7</sup> The role of these new agents in interfaith is acknowledged not only in religious contexts but also by social and political analysts and experts of international relations.

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Universitario Sophia, Roma, 2022 and R. Catalano, *The Pact. The Spiritual Friendship between Chiara Lubich and Imam W.D. Mohammed*, New City Press, Hyde Park (NY), 2024.

- 6 Pope Francis, *Greetings to Participants to the International Interreligious Conference organized by the Focolare Movement*, Vatican City, 5 June 2024.
- 7 In this connection, we have to acknowledge the fundamental contribution offered by Benedict XVI who stated that “*all those who believe in God seek peace together, try to draw closer to one another, to go together, despite the diversity of their images of God, towards the source of Light - this is interreligious dialogue.* (Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church regarding the Excommunication of four Bishops consecrated by Arch. Lefebvre*), Vatican City, 10 March 2009.

### **3. Effects on the interfaith dimension by spiritual renewal Movements**

We can now examine some of the characteristics that these renewal movements ignited into the evolving experiences of interfaith dialogue, following the publication of NA. We propose it against the background of pope Francis' magisterium.

#### **3.1 Dialogue as a deepening of identity**

Ever since the document *Nostra Aetate* was published, the Catholic Church has clearly affirmed the need for a precise and conscious identity in order to arrive at a fruitful dialogue. It is an element repeated on many occasions by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which Pope Francis has taken up by emphasizing that it is a fundamental condition for dialogue. In fact, without a formed identity, dialogue is useless or harmful. As experience teaches, for such dialogue and encounter to be effective, it must be based on a full and frank presentation of our respective convictions. Certainly such dialogue will bring out how different our beliefs, traditions and practices are. And yet, if we are honest in presenting our beliefs, we will be able to see more clearly how much we have in common.

In this perspective, the encounter with the spiritual dimension proposed by the renewal movements has often led to a discovery or rediscovery of one's own religious roots and, almost naturally, to a more conscious return to one's own traditions, but above all to a deepening and practice of one's own scriptures. This not only among Christians, but also among believers of other religions who have found themselves involved in the experience of dialogue.

#### **3.2 Dialogue: meeting to create a culture of friendship**

Engaging in interreligious dialogue fosters a culture of encounter, an expression dear to Pope Francis. In a message addressed to the community of Sant'Egidio on the occasion of its international conference '*In the Spirit of Assisi*', held in Rome in September 2013, Bergoglio encouraged to '*to meet in order to establish in*

*the world the culture of dialogue, the culture of encounter.*<sup>8</sup> This was nothing new. Already a few days after his election, in meeting brothers and sisters of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and representatives of other religions, the pope had emphasized the centrality of the dialogue of friendship. “*The Catholic Church is aware of the importance of promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions - this I want to repeat*”.<sup>9</sup> For this to be realized, what the pope calls a ‘*tenacious, patient, strong and intelligent dialogue for which nothing is lost*’<sup>10</sup> is necessary. It is precisely a dialogue full of these characteristics carried out in daily life, often hidden, but with constant commitment by members of the various ecclesial movements that has led, over the years, to a dense network of relationships. This has given rise to a contagious friendship that constitutes a platform on which one can work together to seek common solutions to local and global problems.

### **3.3 Dialogue as pilgrimage, walking together**

The image of pilgrimage is often linked to that of dialogue. In this connection, it is almost natural to refer to NA as the starting point of this common pilgrimage which found its visual realization in the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi in October 1986 on the invitation extended to the representatives of different religions by pope John Paul II. Pope Francis, for his part, speaks very often of walking together as believers of different traditions.

Life is a journey, a long journey, but a journey one cannot walk alone. One must walk with one’s brothers in the presence of God. ... Let us be brothers, let us recognize each other as

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8 Pope Francis, *Message to the Sant’Egidio Community*, Vatican City, 1 October 2013.

9 Pope Francis, *Address to the Representatives of Other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of Other Religions*, Vatican City, 20 March 2024.

10 Pope Francis, *Message to the Sant’Egidio Community*, Vatican City, 1 October 2013.

brothers, and let us walk together. <sup>11</sup>

The idea of the pilgrimage is constantly repeated in the events of the Community of Sant'Egidio, defined as a 'peace-building site', which every year touches a new location in different parts of Europe. Jean Dominic Durand comments on the experience of these meetings.

[It is] a unique pilgrimage, especially because of the diversity of geographical and religious origins that cannot be compared with other experiences. Many come, even non-believers, to seek together a way to peaceful coexistence. ... Here lies the strength and audacity of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has been able to create a true method of dialogue and encounter'.<sup>12</sup>

### **3.4 Dialogue as purification and enrichment**

The result of this pilgrimage as a constant effort brings a twofold effect. One experiences, in fact, a great enrichment and, at the same time, a profound purification on a spiritual and mental level. Both of these elements are effectively described by the testimony of a Hindu academic active in interreligious dialogue with Christian organizations. During a conference held in Rome by the Focolare Movement she shared as follows.

Dialogue is a two-way process. Between two or more people. It can be extended to two or more currents of thought. ... Two people meet and share aspects of their respective faiths, striving to understand what is the heritage of the other. ... Another challenge is that the space dedicated to inter-religious dialogue can be misinterpreted and used to proselytize one's own religion. Sometimes religious teachers or leaders [and] ... practicing believers think that their faith is the best and that consequently more and more people should practice it. ... This is certainly not the attitude of the Focolare Movement. ... This

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11 *Ibidem.*

12 J. D. Durand, *Lo Spirito di Assisi*, I libri di Sant'Egidio, Leonardo International, Roma, 2004, 37

type of forum provides space for an impartial exchange of thoughts on one's faith.<sup>13</sup>

A true dialogical attitude prevents the danger of proselytism and it is this very attitude that makes it possible to resolve and overcome inevitable moments of difficulty. Often, in fact, during conferences and interreligious events, moments of tension occur or differences of approach to even fundamental issues emerge. It is never easy to overcome difficulties caused by comments made, sometimes without even being fully aware of the potential negative consequences. However, despite the difficulties and pain, often accompanied by tears and the strong temptation to retaliate or abandon the venture of dialogue, it is necessary to move beyond this through what Pope Francis defines in *Evangelii Gaudium* as 'a process in which, through listening to the other, both parties find purification and enrichment. Therefore, even these efforts can have the meaning of love for the truth.' (EG 250). The conclusion is, in most cases, the possibility of a clarification and, as a consequence, a step forward in the dialogue process resulting in mutual enrichment. This attitude carries Levinas' idea that it is not possible to exist without the other, whoever he or she may be. Here is the possibility of proposing the category of the 'richness of the complementarity of identities' as alternative to that of the 'clash of civilizations'.

### **3.5 A way to dialogue: incomplete thinking and empathic attitude**

The approach to the Truth can be facilitated by a basic attitude that emerges from the teaching of Pope Francis, which is rooted in his Jesuit sensibility: 'incomplete thinking'. Bergoglio has spoken of this on several occasions and explains it with the word empathy, which he made extensive use of during his several trips to Asia, particularly during his meeting with the Asian episcopate in Seoul in August 2014.

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13 M. Narsalay, *A Hindu Reflection*, International Conference 'Chiara and Religions. Together towards Unity of the Human Family, Castelgandolfo, 17th to 20th March 2014.

Finally, along with a clear sense of our own identity as Christians, authentic dialogue also requires a capacity for empathy. ... The challenge before us is not just to listen to the words that others say, but to grasp the unspoken communication of their experiences, their hopes, their aspirations, their difficulties and what they hold most dear. Such empathy must be the fruit of our spiritual gaze and personal experience, which leads us to see others as brothers and sisters, to ‘listen’, through and beyond their words and actions, to what their hearts wish to communicate.<sup>14</sup>

This empathy is a paradigm that is effectively expressed in the so-called art of loving, the dialogical methodology proposed by Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement. Lubich defines it as “*the deepest making oneself one with those in front of us*”<sup>15</sup> and considers it a fundamental requirement in the process of building dialogue relationships. It is not a tactic or an outward way of behaving. Rather, it is an attitude that inspires those who strive for an inner emptiness when faced with people of other religions and cultures. This methodology enables to realize that “*knowing the other’s religion implies getting into the other’s skin, seeing the world as the other sees it, penetrating into the meaning that it has for the other to be Buddhist, Muslim, etc.*”<sup>16</sup>. This requires constant effort in trying to enter into the other’s mindset, respecting his or her personality, but trying to fully understand his or her values and principles as he or she perceives them. “*It demands a complete emptiness of us: shifting all our thoughts, our affections, our intentions, all our plans, in order to understand the other person. ... Making one demands poor spirits, poor in spirit to be rich in love*”.<sup>17</sup> To ensure a fruitful dialogue, total openness towards the other is necessary.

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14 Pope Francis, *Address to the Bishops of Asia*, Seoul, 17 August 2014.

15 C. Lubich, *Il più profondo farsi uno*, CH Link up in M. Vandeleene (ed. by), *Conversazioni in collegamento telefonico*, Città Nuova, Roma, 1992, 451-2. (translated by the author of this article).

16 *Ibidem*.

17 *Ibidem*.

#### 4. Conclusion

Chiara Lubich already in 1981, in Tokyo, after having addressed several thousand Buddhist followers of the Rissho Kosei-kai Movement, affirmed her surprise at having encountered a reality within the Mahāyāna Buddhist world with incredible commonalities with the Focolare.

It was precisely this diversity that made us realize that the commonalities are not the result of human effort or design [...] but must be the supernatural work of God, for a purpose that God has conceived and that is not completely known to us. We say that there is something supernatural, something beyond us. It is probably a plan of God, a plan of God's providence this meeting, because it cannot be explained humanly speaking.<sup>18</sup>

That was only the beginning of a fruitful collaboration among new spiritual movements grown within the different religions. These movements seem to have come into being to help realize Paul VI's great invitation to the universal Catholic Church. '*The Church must come into dialogue with the world in which she lives. The Church becomes word; the Church becomes message; the Church becomes conversation.*' (ES 67).



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18 C. Bosquet, *Incontrarsi nell'amore. Una lettura cristiana di Nikkyo Niwano*, Città Nuova, Roma, 2009, 211, footnote 374.

**FROM *NOSTRA AETATE* TO *HUMAN*  
*FRATERNITY*:  
A 60-YEAR JOURNEY IN ISLAMIC-  
CHRISTIAN AWARENESS**

**Dr. Gaetano Sabetta**

**A breach in the dam**

The metaphor of the breach in the dam effectively encapsulates the essence of *Nostra Aetate* in the context of Christian-Muslim relations: the wall of separation, like a dam, is undermined by the first crack. Then it collapses, overwhelmed by the power of the water. While the document's Catholic provenance inevitably entails a certain degree of reflection on Catholic sentiments and aspirations, its flexibility, emphasis on unity in diversity, communion, and fraternity have enabled Muslim believers to embrace it as a call for dialogue. This initial seed of dialogue has gradually evolved into a flourishing tree of understanding, yet it continues to require nurturing and strengthening. It is essential that we identify milestones along the path of dialogue and mutual understanding, as the absence of such landmarks and guiding principles can impede our progress. The lack of clear markers on this path may result in confusion, and ultimately, an inability to navigate effectively, particularly when faced with challenges and complexities.

The shortest of the Second Vatican documents, *Nostra Aetate*, has been the subject of impassioned debate, both theological and political, and has attracted considerable global media attention. Islam has emerged as a dominant theme in these discussions, reflecting concerns that a statement on the Jews might be interpreted politically rather than religiously in the Middle East, where the boundaries between politics and religion are often blurred. The significance and contemporary relevance of *Nostra Aetate* have undergone a process of evolution since its promulgation almost 60 years ago. This has been influenced by several factors, including geopolitical conflicts and current events. These include the ongoing

Middle Eastern conflict, the resurgence of antisemitism, the rise of Islamophobia, the ascent of ethno-nationalist leaders in Asia and Africa and anti-immigrant sentiments in Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In this complex context it is still worthy recall *Nostra Aetate* vision: “In her task of promoting unity and love among men [*sic*], indeed among nations, she [the Catholic Church] considers above all in this declaration what men [*sic*] have in common and what draws them to fellowship” (NA 1).<sup>2</sup> In light of the content of *Nostra Aetate*, which specifically addresses Muslim practice and people, and the general outlook of the declaration, it is possible to identify three central concepts: relationship, fellowship and unity.<sup>3</sup>

This threefold vision, as developed by the last four pontiffs (Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis) and embraced by some representative Muslim believers, facilitates a more profound comprehension of the importance of Christian-Muslim relations in today’s world. This has resulted in another significant development in the field of Christian-Muslim dialogue: the *Document on Human Fraternity*. In contrast to earlier documents on dialogue, this one is not the product of a single party. Instead, it is the outcome of an extended and mutually beneficial exchange between different believers about the anxieties and worries that inhabit the human heart, any human heart, Muslim or Christian alike.

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1 Cf., Kail C. Ellis, “Introduction: *Nostra Aetate* and Its Relevance for Today”, in Kail C. Ellis (ed), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 1-7.

2 Second Vatican Council, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, 28 October 1965, AAS 58 (1966): 740-744.

3 Cf., Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, “*Beyond the Rays of Truth?* *Nostra Aetate*, Islam, and the Value of Difference”, in Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter, Ulrich Rosenhagen (eds), *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue. A Multireligious Conversation on Nostra Aetate* (New York: Orbis Book, 2017) [E-Book].

## Following the vision (part I)

Paul VI demonstrated a profound interest in both Muslims and Christian-Muslim relations. This interest can be understood considering aspects of his personal life, including his friendship with the renowned Islamic scholar Louis Massignon.<sup>4</sup> The concept of dialogue represented a pivotal aspect of the Paul VI pontificate, as evidenced by the prominence accorded to it in *Ecclesiam Suam*. Notably, the pontiff was the first to explicitly recognise the potential for Islamic communities to engage as partners in dialogue (ES 107).<sup>5</sup> He articulated the value of this partnership as a means of fostering mutual admiration and respect, particularly for the “good and true” aspects of Islam’s worship practices. It should not be overlooked that he was an adherent of the *Badaliya*, the prayer movement established by Massignon, comprising Catholics who had taken a vow of prayer for Muslims.

Pope John Paul II frequently invoked the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* n. 3 on Muslims throughout the duration of his papacy. He places a strong emphasis on unity and religious commonality, as evidenced in the Second Vatican Council and *Nostra Aetate*. However, he also addresses the theological and practical complexities associated with religious difference, albeit to a lesser extent. Despite this, his primary objective remains the pursuit of unity among believers of different religious traditions. In this regard, he makes a definitive statement regarding the shared beliefs of Muslims and Catholics in the existence of a single divine entity: “All of us, Christians and Muslim, live under the sun of the one merciful God”.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore,

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4 Cf. Anthony O’Mahony, “The Influence of the Life and Thought of Louis Massignon on the Catholic Church’s Relations with Islam,” *Downside Review* 126, no. 444 (2008): 169-92.

5 Paul VI, Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 6 August 1964, AAS 56 (1964): 609-659.

6 John Paul II, *Address of John Paul II to the Muslim Religious Leaders*, Kaduna (Nigeria), Sunday, 14 February 1982, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1982/february/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19820214\\_laici-nigeria.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1982/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19820214_laici-nigeria.html) (accessed on

he underscores the view of God as one, just, merciful, and all-powerful held by Muslims: “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their protection”.<sup>7</sup> In alignment with this perspective, Pope John Paul II underscores the notion of a shared universal humanity. All humans are created by God, serve God, repent to God, will be judged by God, and will undergo resurrection. Other areas of commonality that have been identified include a desire to emulate Abraham’s model of submission and a great respect for Jesus: “Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings. We live in the same world, marked by many signs of hope, but also by multiple signs of anguish. For us, Abraham is a very model of faith in God, of submission to his will and of confidence in his goodness...”.<sup>8</sup>

The strong reference to commonalities is, in John Paul II’s conception, a sure basis for venturing, on the strength of mutual human respect and commonality in God, into a dialogue capable of facing and living out differences in a mature way. This is the case with the different theological understandings of Jesus Christ and his incarnation, death and resurrection, of the Prophet Muhammad, of the idea of revelation, but also with the long-standing questions of religious freedom and the protection of human rights. Precisely to underline this unity-in-diversity, the Pope often speaks of Christians and Muslims as “a single community of believers”, which does not mean homogeneity but also diversity, like a family in which each member has his or her own particularities, but all belong to a single divine lineage: “It is important that Muslims and Christians continue to explore philosophical and theological questions together, in order to come to a more objective and comprehensive knowledge

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December 2024).

7 Id., *Address of His Holiness John Paul II to Young Muslims*, Morocco, Monday, 19 August 1985, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850819\\_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html) (accessed on December 2024).

8 *Ivi*.

of each other's religious beliefs. Better mutual understanding will surely lead, at the practical level, to a new way of presenting our two religions *not in opposition*, as has happened too often in the past, *but in partnership for the good of the human family*".<sup>9</sup>

Inspired by the vision of *Nostra Aetate*, Benedict XVI's original contribution was the understanding of interreligious dialogue based on the concept of Truth. *Nostra Aetate* n. 2 refers twice to question of truth. It affirms that religions often reflect a "ray of the Truth that enlightens all people" and that the Church is "bound to preach" the Truth, which is Christ: a good way to keep in healthy tension its inclusive character of the document with the importance of proclaiming the Good News. In Benedict XVI's thought, the longing for the truth is a common thread woven throughout the tapestry of religious traditions. Consequently, he posits that the ultimate theological foundation of interreligious dialogue is the truth of God, which Christians know in Christ. Therefore, in his view, the essence of interreligious dialogue is the common quest for the truth: "The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth. What is the origin and destiny of mankind? What are good and evil? What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence? Only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis for the peace and security of the human family, for 'wherever and whenever men and women are enlightened by the splendor of truth, they naturally set out on the path of peace'" (*Message for the 2006 World Day of Peace*, 3).<sup>10</sup>

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9 Id., *Address of the Holy Father, Meeting with the Muslim Leaders, Omayyad Great Mosque, Damascus, Sunday, 6 May 2001*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20010506\\_omayyadi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010506_omayyadi.html) (accessed on December 2024).

10 Benedict XVI, *Address to His Holiness Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives of Other Religions*, Washington, D.C., Thursday, 17 April 2008, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080417\\_other-religions.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_other-religions.html) (Accessed on December 2024).

Naturally, this widespread pursuit of truth as the foundation for interreligious discourse is predicated on the assumption, espoused by the German Pope, that every individual possesses the capacity to comprehend the essence of their existence. This capacity, (*homo capax Dei*), denotes the inherent desire and potential to grasp the profound significance of one's life in the context of a divine existence.

When considering his views on Islam in light of the *Nostra Aetate*, it is important to highlight several crucial issues.<sup>11</sup> The first point to note is that God the Creator is the common origin and destiny of humanity (NA 1). The second point is the careful affirmation that Muslims consider themselves linked to the faith of Abraham (NA 3). Therefore, both Christianity and Islam are responses to God's revelation. They are both attuned to the voice of God, like Abraham, and respond to His call and set out, seeking the fulfilment of His promises. They strive to obey His will and forge a path in their particular culture.<sup>12</sup>

Although *Nostra Aetate* addresses past enmities, it may be argued that it is also relevant to the present (NA 3). Benedict XVI was able to address the complexity of contemporary Christian-Muslim relations and even denounce forms of terrorism that, although born of the ideological manipulation of religion, are not Islamic. It follows that, on the grounds of their shared conviction in the sanctity of human life, Christians and Muslims are unable to justify the use of violence in the name of God. The primary focus of his discourse in Regensburg in 2006 was on this very point, which was

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11 Cf., Rocco Viviano, "Benedict XVI, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations," *The Downside Review* 135, no. 1 (7 November 2016): 55-75.

12 Cf., Benedict XVI, *Address at the Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue*, Jerusalem, 11 May 2009, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20090511\\_dialogo-interreligioso.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_dialogo-interreligioso.html) (Accessed on December 2009).

unfortunately misinterpreted by many Muslims.<sup>13</sup> However, the subsequent establishment of the movement known as *A Common Word* (ACW) afforded Muslims the opportunity to elucidate their perspective on the subject of interfaith dialogue. Benedict XVI frequently underscored the importance of respecting religious freedom for Christians and Muslims alike, a concept that was not as prominently featured in *Nostra Aetate*. Ultimately, Benedict XVI was able to delineate, at least initially, a potential agenda for constructive Christian-Muslim dialogue, focusing on the differences between the two religions rather than the commonalities. In his thought, two key objectives should be central to Christian-Muslim discourse to enhance mutual comprehension. Firstly, there should be a theological discourse on the spiritual connections between the two religions. Secondly, there should be a collective pursuit of truth, which necessitates an examination of the respective truth claims of both religions and calls for genuine growth in one's personal faith.

The emphasis with which Francis approaches the encounter with his Muslim brothers and sisters is one of difference rather than commonality, a difference that is a source of enrichment and growth in faith for both partners in dialogue. In contrast to *Nostra Aetate* and John Paul II himself, who focused primarily on unity, Francis, following the intuition of Benedict XVI, recognises the dignity and value of difference in dialogue as a creative source of ever new meanings capable of nourishing the faith of the dialogue partners.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* 252, Francis begins to draw upon the insights of *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 3. However, in 253, the focus shifts to the importance of “suitable training” for effective dialogue. Training is necessary to ground people in their own tradition and to

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13 Id., *Meeting with the Representatives of Science. Lecture of the Holy Father: Faith, Reason and the University Memories and Reflection*, Regensburg, Tuesday, 12 September 2006, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html) (Accessed on December 2024).

enable them to understand the other as they understand themselves. It is important to avoid imposing pre-planned schemas. This will inevitably highlight religious differences, and it is through these differences that people must learn to understand each other, accept reasonable disagreement and identify areas of common concern and action.<sup>14</sup>

A similar emphasis on education about religious differences is found in Pope Francis's address given in January 2015 to the participants at the PISAI Conference in Rome on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institute.<sup>15</sup> In Francis' thought avoiding "facile syncretism" and "valueless totalitarianism" require listening to perceive and appreciate differences and be questioned in our own spirituality. Only going deeper, it is possible to avoid superficial statements that most of the time give rise to "stereotypes and preconceptions" and seek to "investigate sources, fill in the gaps, analyze etymology, propose a hermeneutics of dialogue". It is a scientific approach inspired by "*astonishment and wonder*", which fosters mutual respect and reciprocal esteem. This is the path to be followed in "*the formation of those who promote dialogue with Muslims*".

Finally, the *Document on Human Fraternity* (February 2019) is a true experiment in dialogue for many reasons. In the first place, it is the result of an intense and fruitful encounter between dialogue partners, taking into account the common ground: human nature and faith, which "leads believers to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved". Faith is the starting point for working together to share "the joys, sorrows and problems of our contemporary world".

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14 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html#\\_ftnref198](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#_ftnref198) (Accessed on December 2024).

15 Id., *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Meeting Sponsored by the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies on the 50th Anniversary of Its Establishment in Rome* (Vatican City, 2015), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150124\\_pisai.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150124_pisai.html) (Accessed on December 2024).

It is truly an interfaith dialogue. It begins with faith, is nurtured by faith and ends with the strengthening of both faiths. Secondly, this dialogue of faith takes into account and is nourished by differences (in the way each understands God, man and creation), but they are not divisive, they do not stop the common commitment to rediscover the profound values of “peace, justice, goodness and beauty, human fraternity and coexistence ...as anchors of salvation for all”. Therefore, both Christians and Muslims: “declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard”.<sup>16</sup> Dialogue serves as a paradigmatic umbrella, providing a framework for experiencing hospitality, fostering mutual understanding, and liberating cherished religious values, thereby enabling them to serve as a source of guidance and solace for humanity in its moments of joy and adversity.

In conclusion, the latest Popes have sustained the cause of dialogue in accordance with the vision of *Nostra Aetate*. They have done so by balancing commonalities and differences in the Christian and Muslim perception of the Truth, thereby establishing the culture of dialogue (intercultural and interreligious) as a path to be followed, a code of conduct, and a standard method for reciprocal understanding and collaboration between different communities of faith.

### **Following the vision (part II)**

The inclusive and welcoming vision of *Nostra Aetate* is a source of inspiration for many Muslims, facilitating an openness to the commonalities between Christians and Muslims. These include the belief in a single, all-powerful God (tawhīd), the adherence to the faith of Ibrahim (Q. 3:67), and his recognition as a *hanif*, a fundamental tenet of Islam. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for instance,

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16 Id., *A Document on Human Fraternity. For World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html) (accessed on December 2024).

acknowledges the significance and the “opening created” by *Nostra Aetate* for Muslims and Christians. Indeed, the *A Common Word* initiative developed within an ambience influenced by the *Nostra Aetate* declaration. He asserts that a fruitful theological dialogue can only commence once the Catholic Church has examined its stance on the theological issue of the Islamic revelation occurring subsequent to Christianity, as well as the question of its authenticity for Christians. Similarly, Muslims must re-examine the Islamic doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*) in relation to Christianity and other religions. The document *Nostra Aetate* continues to present a challenge to both Christians and Muslims.<sup>17</sup> Nasr posits that this task is more straightforward for Muslims, given that the principles of the multiplicity of revelation are rooted in the Qur’an. In contrast, for Christianity, this same experience was intertwined with modernity and colonialism, and only recently, with the advent of *Nostra Aetate*, did a nascent new direction emerge. In reflecting on the matter, Nasr concedes that, it is beyond question that this document has played a pivotal role in the process of dialogue over the past half-century. It transformed the Catholic ambience for dialogue, and indirectly the Islamic one, with regard to dialogue with Christianity. Furthermore, the process led to a recognition among numerous Muslim scholars of the importance of dialogue for the Muslim community as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Sayyid N. Syyed, former President and former national director for the Office for Interfaith and Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), finds solace in the discovery of parallels between the religious plurality, which the Qur’an extols as a spiritual blessing, and the inclusivity espoused in *Nostra Aetate*. As religious freedom is a fundamental tenet of Islam

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17 Cf., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Response to His Eminence, Cardinal Touran”, in Kail C. Ellis (ed), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, 100-103.

18 Cf., Id., “Muslim Dialogue with the Church after *Nostra Aetate*”, in Kail C. Ellis (ed), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, 103-115.

(Q 2:256), *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges the presence of elements of truth and goodness in other religions. Furthermore, the declaration acknowledges the Jewish origins of Christianity, a perspective that is mirrored by Islam, which perceives itself as a continuation of the Abrahamic tradition. The concept of *tasdiq* is frequently referenced in the Qur'an, wherein it is described as a witness to the veracity of preceding revelations, including those pertaining to Christianity and Judaism. He characterises the Catholic Church, which is implementing the principles set forth in *Nostra Aetate*, as “big brother” that is facilitating the growth of American Muslim communities and providing robust support in the context of rising Islamophobia. Ultimately, he perceives *Nostra Aetate* as fostering a “natural alliance between Abrahamic faiths and other religious communities”. The advent of *Nostra Aetate* has given rise to a new spirit of interfaith collaboration. This spirit has the potential to assist all faiths in promoting the divine values enshrined in their sacred texts, and in countering those who seek to incite hatred, extremism and instability.<sup>19</sup>

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq Hussaini posits that *Nostra Aetate* reflects the authentic essence of religion, transcending the boundaries of theological discourse to elucidate the intrinsic nature of faith. It addresses the profound mysteries of the human heart (cf. NA1), the existential domain where humans engage with the divine. The declaration celebrates religious differences and spiritual unity, while avoiding the pitfalls of relativism and indifferentism. According to him, this is the best way to shift from polemical relations to constructive links. It is noteworthy that *Nostra Aetate* encourages Muslims to identify within their own religious traditions the tenets that resonate with the principles articulated in the declaration, namely, the concept of unity in diversity as a lived reality. *Jihad*, *hidayat* and *wilayat* are these qur'anic principles. The concept of

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19 Cf., Sayyid N. Syeed, “Why Muslims Celebrate *Nostra Aetate*”, in Kail C. Ellis (ed), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, 125-128.

*jihād*, understood as “ethical attempts to reform the faithful’s own character”, is a universal tenet shared by all believers, regardless of their religious affiliations. It represents a path towards truth, benevolence, and goodness. Those who embark upon the process of enhancing their faith are guided by God, as outlined in the Qur’an. It can therefore be concluded that God is the guiding force for them, or *hidayat*. The people of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) are guided by God in the Qur’an (cf. Q 2:1) and are collectively regarded as faithful.

It can therefore be concluded that God provides guidance to all humans who seek it, and that this guidance manifests as *wilayat*, or “supporting alliance”. In light of the principles set forth in the *Nostra Aetate*, it is reasonable to consider extending the concept of *wilayat* to encompass the People of the Book, rather than limiting its application exclusively to the Muslim faithful. This appears to be an application of the fundamental Islamic value that “there is no compulsion in religion” (Q 2:256). This “supporting alliance”, which transcends religious affiliations and pertains to the domain of profound spiritual conviction, entails the promotion of love and knowledge, benevolence and equity in both public and private spheres. In essence, the tenet of *Nostra Aetate*, as reflected in the Qur’anic sources, offers an invitation to the faithful from diverse faiths to embrace their respective faiths while simultaneously acknowledging the similarities and differences between them: “I as a faithful have to first explore the common spirit of all faith and then realize my special share of faith with my own existential relation and quest to my own faith. I as a Muslim have to first discover the commonality of Jesus and Muhammad and then realize my own share of Muhammad’s spiritual quality”.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Cf., Sayed Hassan Akhlaq Hussaini, “Reflection on *Nostra Aetate*”, in Kail C. Ellis (ed), *Nostra Aetate, Non-Christian Religions, and Interfaith Relations*, 146-157.

## **A new beginning**

The title of this article appears to suggest that the *Document on Human Fraternity* represents the inevitable conclusion or, at the very least, one of the pivotal points of this encounter between Christians and Muslims. It is undoubtedly a positive development, yet it also carries inherent risks, particularly if it is presented as the conclusion of dialogue or if the political significance of the event overshadows the ongoing process of reciprocal religious encounter, knowledge and understanding. Interreligious dialogue is an endless process, since it is an end in itself, not a means to something else. There are no winners or losers in interreligious dialogue, because there is no battle to be won, no choice of who is right or wrong. This is because the participants dialogue about something that is not at their disposal, they dialogue about something or someone in which they themselves are included and transcended. No one can therefore claim to be an objective and impartial judge, but all must express their differences and remain attentive and receptive to what the other side has to say, because truth happens in conversation. If human beings, like creation itself, are relationships, then dialogue on fundamental issues reveals our deepest humanity. Dialogue implies the recognition that the act of being oneself, of simply existing, necessitates a state of communion with the natural world, with one's fellow humans, and with the divine. Dialogue is different believers walking together towards Truth, towards God, while working together for the benefit of humanity.



# AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON PLURALISM

**Fr. Midhun J Francis Kochukallanvila SJ**

The pluralism in Islam is deeply rooted in the Qur'anic theology. The Qur'an acknowledges and affirms that human diversity is part of Divine will. This paper explores the theological, historical, and contemporary perspectives on pluralism, emphasising its significance in fostering interfaith harmony and societal cohesion. Drawing from key Qur'anic verses on pluralism, prophetic practices, and scholarly interpretations in the early age of Islam, it highlights Islam's recognition of diversity in race, ethnicity, and religion as a test of character and an opportunity for mutual understanding. The life of Prophet Muhammad, including the establishment of the Constitution of Medina, serves as a historical exemplar of coexistence, showcasing Islam's commitment to justice and respect for all communities. This research further examines modern thinkers' contributions to pluralism, framing it as compatible with Islam and central to its vision of a harmonious, inclusive society. By synthesising Qur'anic verses and their interpretations and a few contemporary thinkers from different parts of the world, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of pluralism's role in Islamic theology and its implications for interreligious dialogue today.

## **Diversity in Qur'an**

The Qur'an acknowledges human diversity as a fundamental aspect of God's creation, as it also affirms that all humans are created from a single soul but are endowed with differences in race, ethnicity, and beliefs. Allah says, "Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so you may know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing of you. Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware." (Q, 49:13) Jalal interpret that the word *shu'ūb* is the plural of *sha'b*, which is the broadest category of lineage (Jalal-Al-

Jalalayn 49:13). Jalal also says that God has created human beings with different nations and tribes so that each one may acquire knowledge of the customs of one another and not to boast to one another of (whose is the more) noble lineage, for pride lies only in the extent to which one has a fear of God (Jalal-Al-Jalalayn 49:13). Kathir goes further and says that God has created the human beings from a single person and made nations, comprised of the tribe. He interprets `nations refers to non-Arabs, while `tribes refers to Arabs. Therefore, all people are the descendants of ‘Adam and Hawwa’ and share this honour equally. The only difference between them is in the religion that revolves around their obedience to Allah the Exalted and their following of His Messenger (Kathir - Ibn Al Kathir). Therefore, this diversity is accepted and seen as part of God’s design in two aspects.

### **“Free Will” to Choose a Religion**

The Qur’an emphasises that belief is a matter of personal choice, stating that compulsion in religion is not permissible. It says, “There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing” (Q 2:256). This verse concerns the Ansār of Medina, who tried to compel their sons to enter into Islam. (Jalal - Al-Jalalayn 2:256 ). Abbas says that “no one from among the people of the Book and the Magians should be coerced to believe in the divine Oneness of Allah after the Arabs’ embrace of Islam” (Abbas - Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ‘Abbâs 2:256). Kathir says, “Do not force anyone to become Muslim, for Islam is plain and clear, and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear. Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to embrace Islam” (Kathir - Ibn Al Kathir 2:256).

The Qur’an also says, “For each of you, We have made a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made a single community of people, but (He did not), so that He may test you in what He has given to you. Strive, then, to excel each other in good deeds. To

Allah is the return for all of you. Then Allah shall tell you about that in which you disputed” (Q 5:48). Kashani says that God has revealed justice, the shadow of divine love, which is the shadow of His inclusive unity ( Kashani – Kashani 5:48) According to him, ‘God has appointed a divine law and a way, a watering source, such as the source-path of the soul, the source-path of the heart and the source-path of the spirit, as well as a path such as the knowledge of judgements and transactions which is attached to the heart and the wayfaring along the esoteric path that leads to the arrival at the garden of the attributes; and [another path that is] the knowledge of the affirmation of the Oneness and the witnessing which is attached to the spirit and the wayfaring along the path of annihilation that leads to the arrival at the garden of the Essence ( Kashani – Kashani 5:48). He further acknowledges that God would have created a single community, agreeing on one religion. However, He will manifest His gifts according to each person’s preparedness, resulting in varied perfections. People should vie for good works that lead to their perfection and bring them closer to God. God will inform them of their differences in preparedness, allowing them to seek one of the three gardens and be deprived of the latent perfection in their preparedness ( Kashani – Kashani 5:48).

In contrast, Jalal interprets religions as ‘divine law, way and clear path.’ Therefore, God has appointed a divine law and a way, a clear path in each religion, for them to proceed along. If God had willed, He would have made all humanity one community, following one Law, but He separated each one from the other, that He may try each person in what He has given to you, of the differing Laws, to see who among you is obedient and who is disobedient. (Jalal-Al-Jalalayn 5:48). Maududi says the answer to the different laws and regulations is that they have been derived from different sources and have different origins. They all came from Allah, who prescribed different regulations to suit different communities and different ages. (Maududi - Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi - Tafhim al-Qur’an 5: 48-50). Therefore, The real object of all the laws is the cultivation

of virtues; Allah has commanded the people to excel one another in virtues without paying heed to the apparent differences in different Laws (Maududi - Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi - Tafhim al-Qur'an 5: 48-50).

### **Religious Freedom and Justice**

Several verses advocate for peaceful coexistence and respect for other faiths, indicating that Muslims should engage with non-Muslims with kindness and justice. By recognising the plurality of faith and communities, the Quran teaches us not to impose one's faith on others; instead, it urges us to tolerate the differences. The phrase "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256) emphasises the importance of freedom of religion in matters of faith. It asserts that the truth is evident, distinguishing right from wrong, much like day from night. Belief in God is portrayed as essential for the heart's vitality, while false deities are distractions from divine truth. Those who genuinely embrace this truth and adhere to God's commands will find success and happiness in this life and the hereafter. (Qushairi - Al-Qushairi 2:256)

Shafiq Ahmed Shiekh, an author from India, says that "Allah made different faiths and religions to test the believers to what extent they contribute positively to seek His pleasure. The Qur'an commands us to use the difference of faith to do good (khayr) and to compete with people of other faiths in doing good (khayr). Differences lead to conflicts, but the responsibility of the believers is to make use of this difference in establishing such a relationship with others in which they can compete in their positive contribution to the benefit of mankind."<sup>1</sup>

### **Historical Context: The Prophet's Example**

The life of Prophet Muhammad serves as a practical model for pluralism in Islam. The prophet founded a multi-faith society at Medina as a major historical example of religious plurality. His

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1 Shafiq Ahmed Shiekh, "Pluralism in Islam: Nature and Development," Insight Islamicus 13 (2013).

early interactions included encounters with a Christian monk named Bahira, who inspired Muhammad to listen to the word of God during a trade journey to Syria, highlighting his openness to other faiths even before his prophethood.<sup>2</sup> Waraqah ibn Nawfal is another Nestorian monk who advised Muhammad to answer the call of God. “‘O Muhammad!’ And whenever he heard this, he used to flee. Waraqah ibn Nawfal advised the Prophet to remain in his place when the caller calls” (Wahidi - *Asbab Al-Nuzul* by Al-Wahidi 1: 1-7)

### **Constitution of Medina:**

The Prophet drafted the Constitution of Medina, a groundbreaking document that outlined the rights and responsibilities of all citizens, regardless of their faith. This constitution assured protection under Islamic rule and acknowledged the Jewish tribes as friends, granting them autonomy. It established mutual respect and cooperation principles, emphasising that all parties would defend the city against external threats. This constitution, therefore, described the rights and obligations of Muslims and non-Muslims, thereby fostering a cooperative society in which many groups may coexist peacefully.<sup>3</sup> The Prophet’s respectful engagement with Christians and Jews is notable.<sup>4</sup> For instance, he allowed a Christian delegation from Najran to pray in his mosque, demonstrating tolerance and mutual respect.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 151.

3 Michael Lecker, *The “Constitution of Medina”: Muhammad’s First Legal Document* (Princeton, New Jersey: Darwin Press, 2004)

4 Tumin, Anisa D. Makrufi, and Halim Purnomo, "Discourses on Religious Pluralism: Islamic Practices of Tolerance in the Classical and Modern Times," *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Sustainable Innovation 2020–Social, Humanity, and Education (ICoSIHESS 2020)*, 2021,66.

5 Mahan M. Mirza, “A Delegation of Christians from Najrān Visits the Prophet Muḥammad: Contemporary English Sirah Literature for a Western Audience,” *Islamic Studies* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2011),161.

## **Islamic Teachings on Tolerance**

Islamic teachings encourage followers to embrace pluralism to foster harmony. Ahl al-Kitab: This term refers to the “People of the Book” (Jews and Christians), who are granted certain rights within Islamic societies. Historically, non-Muslims under Islamic rule often experienced better treatment than those under non-Islamic regimes.<sup>6</sup> The Qur’an encourages cooperation in virtuous acts while discouraging collaboration in wrongdoing. Help each other in righteousness and piety, and do not help each other in sin and aggression<sup>7</sup>, highlighting the importance of ethical engagement across different communities.<sup>8</sup> The Quran says He may test you in what He has given you. Strive, then, to excel each other in good deeds.<sup>9</sup>

## **Contemporary Perspectives on Pluralism**

In modern discussions, pluralism in Islam can be viewed through various lenses.

### **Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Pluralism**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a prominent contemporary Islamic philosopher and scholar who has significantly contributed to the discourse on pluralism within Islam. His views emphasise the importance of recognising and respecting religious diversity, arguing that pluralism is compatible with Islamic teachings and a necessary component of a harmonious society. Central to Nasr’s understanding of pluralism is the concept of the perennial philosophy, which posits that all major religions share a common spiritual core despite their outward differences. Q 5:48 is his base of pluralism.

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6 Tumin, Anisa D. Makrufi, and Halim Purnomo, "Discourses on Religious Pluralism: Islamic Practices of Tolerance in the Classical and Modern Times," Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Sustainable Innovation 2020–Social, Humanity, and Education (ICoSIHESS 2020), 2021,

7 Qur'an 5:2

8 Shafiq Ahmed Shiekh, "Pluralism in Islam: Nature and Development," *Insight Islamicus* 13 (2013),63.

9 Qur'an 5:48.

In his interview with Bill Moyers in 1990, Nasr articulated his views on the coexistence of Islam with non-Muslim communities. He emphasised that while some Muslims may believe in an eschatological vision where all humanity eventually submits to God, this does not imply a mandate for conquest or forced conversion. Instead, he highlighted the importance of peaceful coexistence: “Yes, Islam can coexist with a non-Muslim world.” This statement reflects his belief that Islam’s theological framework supports pluralism and interfaith dialogue rather than exclusivity or hostility.

### **Muhammad Asad**

Muhammad Asad was a prominent Islamic thinker, translator of the Qur’an, and advocate for interfaith dialogue. His unique background as a European convert to Islam provided him with a distinctive perspective on religious pluralism. Asad’s writings emphasise the importance of recognising and respecting the diversity of faiths while maintaining a commitment to Islamic principles. He argues that the Qur’an acknowledges the existence of multiple religious communities and encourages Muslims to engage with them positively. In his translation of the Qur’an, Asad emphasises verses affirming other faiths’ validity. For example, he cites Surah Al-Baqarah (2:62): Indeed, those who have believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabians—those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteous deeds will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.” This verse illustrates Asad’s belief that Islam recognises the righteousness of individuals from other religions, challenging exclusivist interpretations that dismiss other faiths as invalid.

### **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan**

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was a prominent Indian Islamic scholar. He was a peace activist and author who advocated for a pluralistic understanding of Islam. His life and work emphasised the importance of interfaith dialogue, non-violence, and the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious communities. Wahiduddin Khan’s approach to pluralism is deeply rooted in the

Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. He argued that Islam inherently supports the idea of pluralism through its foundational principles. One of his key arguments is based on the Qur'anic verse: "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion" (Qur'an 109:6). This verse encapsulates the essence of mutual respect for different faiths, suggesting that Islam acknowledges the legitimacy of other religions. Khan believed this acknowledgement is crucial for fostering peaceful coexistence in a diverse society.

### **Conclusion**

In the context of interfaith relationships, the Qur'anic acknowledgement of diversity is the model of pluralism for each religion and culture. This model offered by the Prophet Muhammad provides outstanding insight into harmonious cohabitation across religious groups for the present society, where we see much hostility. This is theologically premised on an Islam upholding free will, tolerance, and mutual respect in acknowledging a divine purpose for human differences. It stands in great harmony with the greater Abrahamic traditions and other religious philosophies; shared efforts invite ethical collaboration and a common good. Therefore, Inter-religious dialogue finds an appropriate ally in Islamic principles by transcending division and calling people to work together to build societies with justice, compassion, and a common pursuit of truth. This shared vision reinforces the idea that diversity, far from being a barrier, is a divine call. It is to recognize our interconnectedness and to strive toward a universal fraternity that reflects God's unity in the multiplicity of His creation.

*(This paper is presented at the conference at the Vatican for the conference organised by the Dicastery of Inter-religious Dialogue and Shivagiri Madom, Varkala, Kerala)*



# WHAT WOULD THE WORLD LOOK LIKE IF GUIDED BY THE VIRTUES OF JUSTICE, EQUITY AND PEACE? A REFLECTION ON THE ARBAEEN WALK

**Dr. Chris Hewer**

In August 2024 I was invited to be part of the commemoration of Arbaeen in Karbala, Iraq. This was the site of the battle that took place in 680CE, which resulted in the massacre of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and seventy-two members of his family and companions.<sup>1</sup> Arbaeen means ‘forty’, so this is the climax of the mourning period of forty days after the date of the battle. The practice of visiting the graves of the martyrs dates back to the aftermath of the battle itself when Lady Zaynab (Husayn’s sister), Imam Zayn al-Abidin (Husayn’s only son to survive the battle), and the other women and children, who had been taken into captivity and brought to Damascus, made such a visitation on their way under military escort back to Madina.

The practice of making a visitation to the shrine built over the grave of Imam Husayn was recommended by the divinely-appointed Shi’a Imams. It is seen to be a mark of love and respect for Imam Husayn and the other martyrs, and a source of blessing from God. At times the rulers of the day have forbidden such a visitation, for example, during the time of Saddam Hussein. After his overthrow in 2003, the practice of gathering in substantial numbers for Arbaeen has been revived with renewed vigour, so much so that in recent years the number of pilgrims has been in the region of twenty-plus million people.

It is customary for pilgrims to make their way to Karbala on foot. Many walk long distances from other parts of Iraq, e.g., from Basra around five hundred kilometres away, and indeed sometimes even from places in Iran, when the distance would exceed one thousand kilometres. In general, pilgrims walk from the shrine of Imam Ali, the father of Husayn, in Najaf, which is a distance of eighty

kilometres. In August temperatures on this journey are in the region of forty-five degrees Celsius by day and around thirty degrees at night. The temperature and distance make this a strenuous exercise. Quite remarkably, pilgrims are of all ages from children in pushchairs to the elderly walking with the aid of a stick. Men and women walk side by side and infirmity is no barrier, with some pilgrims being on crutches or in wheelchairs. Most of the pilgrims are Muslims, both Shi'a and Sunni, but sometimes Christians, Jews, Hindus and people of no faith, who are attracted to the values of Husayn, take part.

Throughout the centuries, pilgrims have undertaken their journeys on foot; this was also true of the hajj to Makka. The act of walking such a distance has a significance of its own. One has time to reflect on one's own life; to enter a deeper state of contemplation and thus it is an opportunity for real spiritual growth. Walking in the heat requires physical discipline and mental strength; it can be something of a sacrifice and thus unites the pilgrims with the martyrs whose shrines they are about to visit. Such a pilgrimage is not a solitary exercise; the pilgrims gain a sense of community and common cause. They also learn from one another on the way. In our own times, when we are conscious of our impact on the environment, walking is much less detrimental than any form of motorised transport.

The whole distance from Najaf to Karbala is punctuated by wayside stations to supply the bodily needs of pilgrims: food, water, and places to rest. These stations are organised and staffed by volunteers from Iraq and from many other countries. There are specialist stations where running repairs can be made to wheelchairs, pushchairs or footwear. Medical teams come to deal with first aid, the effects of heat exposure and any other medical condition that might become evident during the walk, whilst foot massages and physiotherapy are also offered. The Iraqi government makes electricity available free of charge to the stations, but that is their sole contribution. Poor Iraqis will save during the year to be able to offer food freely to the

pilgrims. Richer supporters might pay for a consignment of water to be purchased to give away to people as they pass. Under such conditions, huge quantities of water are essential and hundreds of millions of small plastic tubs of purified water, sealed with a plastic foil, are handed out almost at every step. In addition, tea, coffee, drinking yoghurt and juices are prepared in abundance.

The seemingly endless tide of pilgrims have one goal; to reach Karbala and pay their respects to Imam Husayn on the fortieth day. Karbala city has a resident population of around two million people and they open their arms to welcome ten times that number by the climax of the walk. The crowds in and around the shrines by the time of Arbæen are truly staggering in size. They are marshalled by volunteer stewards, who attempt to direct them with wands resembling feather dusters. Day and night, there is a mass of people trying to draw close to the silver grille that surrounds the tomb of Husayn himself. They will seek to touch the grille if they can and to find a place outside of the flow of people to offer their prayers to God. In Muslim understanding, those of the highest spiritual excellence, such as the Prophets and Imams, are aware of the presence of those who come to their final resting places and are alert to hear their requests, with the plea that they might be presented before God. In this way, they act as two-way conduits to add their prayers to those of the pilgrims and to be a vehicle through which the blessings of God may flow.

The hearts of the pilgrims are filled with the love of Imam Husayn. To make such a visitation is an act of devotion. The Imam is not worshiped; worship belongs to God alone, but the love of Husayn naturally leads to the love of God, whose Friend the Imam is, and then to the love of humanity and all God's creation. Such devotion invokes the remembrance of the horrific details of the massacre of Karbala and so the pilgrims are moved to tears and a sense of anguish at what happened there. This can be expressed by some pilgrims striking their chests or heads in deep sorrow that the small company of Imam Husayn was deserted and left without support

in their hour of need. The pilgrims not only look backwards to the events of 680, but also renew their pledge to God to be worthy of the martyrs' sacrifice and to live in the future inspired by the values for which they lived and died. There is truly a sense of 'if only I had been there, I would have stood firm alongside the Imam and been a true supporter even to the point of dying alongside him.'

### **Seeking the deeper meaning**

If we ask the men, women and children who come to Karbala at Arbæen what inspires them to make this arduous walk, the answer on every lip will be 'for the love of Husayn.' But in discussion with the scholars, a deeper meaning emerges, which gives the walk and visitation an awesome, cosmic meaning. To understand this, we have to go back several steps in Muslim self-understanding.

First, God is the creator of all humankind and has sent guidance in the forms of scriptures and prophets to all the peoples of the earth at some stage in their history. The first prophet was Adam, the first man, and the last was Muhammad, but in between these two came a vast number; in one report Muhammad speaks of 124,000 prophets being sent to the earth. God is in essence just and it would be a lack of justice to guide one group of people in one way and another in a fundamentally different way. This establishes the principle that all scriptures and prophets conveyed essentially the same message. This message was to guide human beings to live in justice, equity and peace in this life, so that all may flourish and come to paradise after death. This is summed up by the term *din al-fitra*, which we can translate as 'the natural way of human living.' So, the religion of God, 'the natural way of human living', is the timeless *islam*, which was revealed from the time of Prophet Adam until its final, definitive revelation in the Qur'an sent down to the Prophet Muhammad. In this way, we can understand that Muslims see Islam, not as the religion of a particular group, but as the God-given way of life that leads to human flourishing and the final goal of paradise. Given this consistency through all ages and peoples, then the human being who encounters the essential message of

Islam with an open heart, ought to recognise it as what it is and be able to say ‘that makes sense’. We can see then that the values that lay at the core of the life of Imam Husayn are open to be appreciated by all human beings, hence the number of those of other faiths and no-faith who are attracted to join the Arbaeen Walk.

Second, all great religious leaders do not belong to just one group of people but rather they belong to God, and thus to all humankind. We can see this in the way in which Muslims have handed down reports of sayings and actions of Jesus and other earlier prophets. If we apply this to Imam Husayn, then his life and actions are a role model for all human beings and everyone has the right to access them and learn how to live ‘the natural way of human living’ from them. It follows too that those who possess this knowledge, predominantly Shi’a scholars and people, have the duty to make it available to all who have the right to it.

Third, the Qur’an conveys the guidance and principles of how to live ‘the natural way of human living’ but they are put into practice by Prophet Muhammad. He it is, in practical terms, who lays down ‘the straight path’ that leads to human flourishing and paradise. In Shi’a understanding, this guidance does not end with the death of Muhammad but he informed the Muslim community that “I leave after me two most precious things: the Qur’an and my family (the *Ahl al-Bayt*, from which all the Imams come), never shall they separate until they reach me at the threshold of paradise.” One of those Imams was Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, who was inspired to live a life that exemplified those fundamental values. In the same way, the line of divinely-appointed Imams were inspired to interpret the Qur’an and apply its guidance during their lifetimes and thus establish and reinforce ‘the straight path’ through all ages after them.

Fourth, all Muslims look forward to a future age, the last period of life on earth, in which the Mahdi, the Awaited One, will appear to seek out those who are on ‘the straight path’ and to bring all

humanity back to ‘the natural way of human living that leads to human flourishing and the goal of paradise.’ For Sunni Muslims, the identity of the Mahdi is unknown, but the Shi’a understand him to be Imam al-Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam, who will reappear after having lived a hidden life since 941. This belief in the coming of the Mahdi provides the impetus to the pilgrims at Arbaeen to rededicate their lives to follow ‘the straight path’. It also means that by living that ‘natural way’, all on the straight path act as beacons to draw others to its guidance and thus to prepare the way and hopefully hasten the appearance of the Mahdi.

### **What values promote human flourishing and how are they exemplified in the life of Imam Husayn?**

The dominant value that stands out from the story of Husayn is his stand for justice and his refusal to give in to tyranny, even at the cost of his own life and those of his family and companions. It would theoretically have been possible for him to pledge allegiance to someone that he knew to be unworthy of leadership but the consequence would have

been that those around him would have felt empowered to do the same and that would set a precedent for ages yet to come. Too often we limit justice to major events or to seeking retribution from those who have wronged us, but the concept of justice is far wider than this. We can begin with the definition of the Greek philosopher Plato, who said that justice means ‘everything in its rightful place.’ We can see then that justice is a universal value open to reason and thus applicable to all people. Religious people would relate this definition to God by saying that justice is everything in the correct relationship to God and to everything else according to the guidance of God as made clear by the scriptures and prophets. In this sense, when everything is correctly ordered, justice brings about harmony and peace within all creation, not just between people but also between us and the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms; they are not to be exploited or wantonly destroyed.

A fundamental requirement for justice is equity between all peoples. There can be no room for distinctions based on race, social status, education, gender or wealth. In the final journey of Imam Husayn, we see that all his party: men, women and children, endured equally the hardships of the desert. Those who accompanied him as servants were given their freedom before he would allow them to take the field of battle; only a free person can make the decision to accept the call to martyrdom. One such former servant was recorded to have been of darker skin. In his dying moments, Husayn went to comfort him and laid his cheek alongside his, thus signifying that skin colour did not separate them. Seventeen of those who died in the battle were blood relations of Husayn, including two of his own sons, yet kinship did not give them greater honour in dying for what was right; all the martyrs were eventually buried alongside their Imam in the precincts of the shrine in Karbala.

We have seen the intrinsic relationship between justice and peace. Peace is not merely the absence of fighting, a negotiated ceasefire or an agreement to allow an unjust situation to continue in order to avoid further bloodshed. Abiding peace can only come about when everything is in the correct relationship to everything else, or to put it another way, when justice reigns. We notice Imam Husayn rejecting all the easy options put to him, which might have saved his life and those of his companions but which would have left the unjust situation to continue and expand. He refused to turn back, to send away his family, to escape and hide in the hills, or to begin the fight when the enemy forces were at their weakest. When there is justice and equity between peoples, then there can be true peace.

At the heart of Islam lies the believer's commitment to submit their will to the will of God, whatever the consequences, knowing that God only wills good. Commitment is one of the key values of 'the natural way of human living'. Before he left Madina to travel to Makka and on to Karbala, we recall that Imam Husayn visited the grave of his grandfather and there had a dream-vision. He was told by Muhammad that his journey would end in his martyrdom and

that his family members would either be killed alongside him or be taken captive. With this knowledge in his heart, he nevertheless went on to cross the desert ultimately to see his family members and then himself butchered on the Day of Ashura.

This commitment was shared equally by the women of the company of Husayn on that fateful journey. They too endured the hardships of the desert, which were compounded by the suffering of their children. Their commitment did not waver when they prepared their menfolk to enter the field of battle, received back their mutilated bodies and watched in horror as the massacre unfolded. In like manner, they remained firm gathered around Lady Zaynab as the soldiers ransacked their camp and led them off into captivity. It was Zaynab herself who provided leadership for the survivors and repeatedly proclaimed the truth of what had happened. Her commitment remained steadfast in the court of the tyrant in Damascus, where she ‘spoke truth to power’, inspired no doubt by the Prophet’s saying that ‘the greatest *jihad* is to speak the word of truth into the face of the tyrant.’

Finally, we have a profound example of the power of goodness to turn a human heart to seek forgiveness. When Hurr, one of the captains of the opposing army, was sent with a company of soldiers to locate and shadow Imam Husayn on his journey towards Karbala, he and his men, although declared enemies, were welcomed into the Imam’s camp with a show of profound goodness, being given water in the heat and dust of the desert for both men and horses. This good act worked in the heart of Hurr ultimately causing him to break ranks with his own forces on the Day of Ashura, ride to the feet of Imam Husayn to seek forgiveness for his part in bringing him to this place of impending massacre, and, being forgiven, led him to the highest of dignities, to die as a martyr alongside his Imam.

### **The Arbaeen Walk as a living example of these godly values.**

In the light of these values, being both godly and profoundly part of ‘the natural way of human living,’ let us turn back to the walkers on

the road to reach Karbala for the commemoration of Arbaeen. We see in them a commitment to carry on and complete their pilgrimage, no matter how far there may be left to travel. They walk alongside strangers, maybe not even sharing a common language but with a single goal to reach the shrine of Imam Husayn. In spite of the heat and the hardship of the walk, there is a joy in their hearts that is reflected in their whole demeanour; there is no aggression, pushing others out of the way or complaining about waiting to receive food or water.

The conduct of the walk turns much of modern economics on its head. Instead of water being a commodity that should be sold at a profit, we find it here in copious amounts being given away free of charge. Similarly, those who come to offer their services to repair wheelchairs, pushchairs or footwear do so without thought of financial return. Likewise, the various medical personnel pay their own expenses, sometimes travelling from as far away as Europe or Australia, and neither ask nor accept payment for the attention that they give. Most remarkably, the bulk of the food is supplied by ordinary citizens of Iraq, who save during the year to be able to buy, prepare and freely distribute food to the pilgrims. Some stations along the way provide places where people can sleep, sometimes by the thousand, while others sleep in local residents' houses. There are periodic stations between Baghdad and Najaf, but certainly from Najaf onwards, pilgrims exist in a world of gifts from the bounty of God and not one of economic exploitation for profit.

Some of the larger feeding stations are run by charities from other countries where teams of women and men volunteer their time and others gather the charitable offerings to provide the ingredients, equipment and consumables needed. These can be big operations feeding tens of thousands each day. A spirit of peace and common cause permeates those waiting quietly in serried ranks to be fed. Despite heat and fatigue no-one seeks to jump the queue or assert a right to be first. The spirit of Arbaeen does not end after the days of pilgrimage for some of these charitable stations. There are always

poor people to be fed and Iraq has many orphans in need of shelter, provisions and education. Their needs are met on the basis of *sadaqa*, ‘bearing one another’s burdens’, throughout the year.

The observer’s attention is drawn to the dignity afforded to everyone on the road to Karbala. There is no shortage of people willing to take a turn pushing a wheelchair or pushchair. No-one hassles those making slow progress on crutches or walking with a stick. Women walk in total security and without interference. The poor person offering some dates is accorded due respect. So keen are people to have the honour to feed a pilgrim that they are almost pulled in off the road to partake of whatever is being offered or to refresh themselves with water. Some stations even go to the trouble and expense of making ice to cool bottles of water to be given away. Pilgrims come in all ages, a range of nationalities and languages, and every social class. In like manner those who service their needs: a senior scholar tells me that he joins his local bus drivers in their feeding station. The need for toilets is not forgotten with due provision for men and women; there is even a guidebook to direct people to a toileting station with equipment to meet their preferences. None of the distinguishing features that divide our societies seem to make any difference during these days: all share a common and equal human dignity.

Could it be that by reflecting on the conduct of people on the Arbæen Walk we can catch a glimpse of the kind of world built on justice, equity and peace in which we would all like to live? Might this even be a foretaste of the world in which ‘everything will be in its rightful place’ so that people can enjoy ‘the natural way of human living’ in the time of Imam al-Mahdi, the last age of the earth?



## BOB'S LETTER:

Dear Friends,

One early morning as I walked towards the town's vegetable bazaar my attention was arrested by an elderly man sprawled at the roadside. By motorised rickshaw, I brought him one mile to the local hospital where he was given a bed. Several days later when I visited the hospital, a nurse informed me the old fellow had recovered enough to leave. They never learned his name.

That incident was strikingly unusual for me because my efforts to assist the disabled are almost entirely focused on challenged children ten years of age or less. They can benefit from weeks of physiotherapy or by a surgical operation. While it is children I seek to help it is their parents - usually mothers - with whom I deal. Numerous children have afflictions that are scarcely improvable. Besides, many parents are unwilling to attend a hospital even though it will be without cost for them. All I can offer those parents is encouragement to dare, that is, to give hospitals a try. Oftentimes, I also give them a photo together with their precious child.

By bicycle I travel to many villages but not all travels result in children's better health. Sometimes all I can do is show sincere concern and pronounce an Islamic blessing over them. Joshim, age ten, whose brain is deeply troubled, comes to my mind. His handshake is firm and adult-like; his smile blesses me.

Between my visits to villages surrounding Holudia Bazaar, I stopped to drink tea at Jahurul Islam's tea stall. Sometimes, he refused my payment or returned the money to me. Johurul likes what I am doing to help children. One time, along with the tea, he even gave me a hug.

In village Guchugram one day I was shown three children ages three, six, and ten, all in need of expert treatment. When I returned two weeks later to follow-up the invitations I had offered their parents they had all moved elsewhere. No one could explain to me where I might trace them. What then remains for me to do for Habib, Saiful, and Rashid? Pray for them?

Three brothers conversed with me describing their foreign job experiences of yesteryear in Italy, Malaysia, and Singapore for one-half, ten, and twenty years, respectively. Circumstances had forced them to search for employment abroad. They were grateful the jobs

had worked out to benefit their families back home in Srinagar. But they rejoice now to be back home and are determined to stay.

Nazmul, the fellow who introduced me in 2022 to Srinagar - the town in which I now live - belongs to the town's press club. He and his buddies are all supportive of my services to the families of needy children. Arif, another club member, interviewed me to understand the reasons for my presence among them. The club members furnish me with a cup of tea on my every visit.

In the town's bazaar men and women walk quickly on its crowded lanes. Even the women, covered with long black garbs - many of them carrying months - old children in their arms - must bump into others in the narrow ways. Apologies are rarely spoken because everyone expects to be shaken-up while going through a town's bazaar.

In gab sessions with men my claim to be celibate astounds them and causes them to smile or laugh. It is a subject seldom discussed. I handle the subject with good cheer, but seriously too. I consider celibacy a significant sign to illustrate a "life of service and uttermost simplicity". Much revered Mahatma Gandhi reminded Christian missionaries that such a life of service and simplicity is "the best preaching" to people living in this part of the world.

Just before the Islamic Eid-ul-Fitr holiday friend Suzon came to my room to present me with a nifty dress shirt. He announced: "I just gave an identical shirt to my father. My Eid wishes are for both of you". How pleasing it is to experience peoples' affection during this my third and final year in Srinagar.

At the convent of the Salesian Sisters in Dhaka, Sister Joseph presented me a large jar of her delicious tomato jam, an annual Holy Week gift to me. Like most of the religious sisters, brothers, and priests in Bangladesh she inspires me to continue living with and for Muslim and Hindu "special children".

We all belong to God. Fraternaly,  
Bob, Bangladesh (Christmas, 2024)



## VISITS AND REPORTS

### “PULPITS & POLITICS: COLLEGE STUDENTS LEAD INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON FAITH & POLITICS DAYS BEFORE THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION”

On October 24, 2024, students at Benedictine University, located in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, led an interfaith dialogue about faith and politics that they called “Pulpits & Politics.” Benedictine University is a Catholic institution with great religious diversity, including 25% Muslims, plus significant numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Eastern Catholics, Protestants, and “nones.” The event was set up in the business school atrium, an area with busy foot traffic, with the aim of attracting interested passersby. Chairs were set up in a circle to encourage dialogue rather than monologue. The students who planned and led the event have experience in dialogue events on campus, which in the past tended to focus on religious topics like prayer and fasting. This time, they wanted their classmates to think about how their personal faith traditions and value systems might impact their political choices. They didn’t want to debate any specific issues, especially those normally considered “religious,” such as abortion, the Mideast crisis, etc. Instead, they wanted to ask participants to consider more deeply their thought processes in voting, and how that relates to faith and values. Several students began by admitting that they felt unsure if they would vote at all, since they were morally against the positions of both candidates for president. The group discussed the pros and cons of third-party candidates, given the US system. The group then discussed the fact that voting isn’t just about the presidential race, but included all levels of government, from local school boards, judges and mayors to state assembly representatives, to US Senators. Students also noted their awareness of biased news sources, and wondered where they could get good, accurate information. With the help of philosophy, political science, and theology professors on hand, students “thought out loud” about how they might approach the election. While voters aged 18-25 have historically been one of the

least politically active groups in the US, some of the students leaving the event were relieved to know that many others shared the same hesitation that they felt about the election. Others felt inspired to be a part of the political process. And they were determined to plan another student-led dialogue in Spring 2025, this time on religion and mental health.

Prof. Rita George-Tvrtković, PhD, Professor of Theology,  
Benedictine University, USA

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### **A MEMORABLE VISIT TO NADWATUL ULEMA**

On 2 November 2024, the first-year Theology students from the Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies, accompanied by Anil Almeida SJ and Joseph Victor Edwin SJ, visited the renowned Muslim educational institution, Nadwatul Ulema, in Lucknow. Established in 1898 CE, this institution has been instrumental in training Muslim scholars to adapt to the changing dynamics of contemporary society. Currently, Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama serves over two thousand students, providing education entirely free of charge and offering most students complimentary lodging and meals.

We were warmly welcomed by Maulana Faizan Nagarmi Nadwi Sahib and Maulana Mansoob Hasan Sahib, who guided us on an enlightening walking tour of the campus. They introduced us to the library, which boasts numerous reading rooms for students and houses around three hundred thousand books. After enjoying some refreshments, we had a delightful conversation with both Faizan Sahib and Mansoob Sahib, which turned out to be mutually enriching, facilitating learning for both our group and our hosts. We also had the chance to visit the manuscript room, where we marveled at several ancient manuscripts that have been remarkably preserved. Our visit wrapped up with heartfelt gratitude and joy, as we left the Muslim seminary, offering prayers for the professors and students of this esteemed institution.

Many Indian Christians often find themselves influenced by negative portrayals of Muslims. Paul Jackson, a distinguished scholar of Asian Sufism, offers a constructive perspective on this issue. He encourages Christians to draw from their own experiences of observing Muslims in everyday life, including their visible religious practices such as the five daily prayers. Many Christians are moved by the sincerity with which Muslims approach their prayers and the importance they accord to this ritual. During Ramadan, the commitment to rigorous fasting earns considerable respect. By gaining insights into Muslim beliefs and practices and nurturing personal friendships with Muslims, Christians can navigate challenging situations with greater understanding and empathy.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

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## **MEETING WITH MAULANA KHALID RASHEED FIRANGI MAHLI, THE SHAHI IMAM OF EID-GHAH**

We arrived at Firangi Mahal, eager to meet Maulana Khalid Rasheed Firangi Mahli, the Shahi Imam of Eid-Ghah in Lucknow, who was anticipating our arrival. In addition to his position as Shahi Imam, he is the youngest member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board. He also founded the Islamic Centre to promote education and social outreach initiatives and played a key role in revitalizing the renowned Madrasa Nizamia. Maulana Khalid is actively involved in various social welfare projects and interfaith activities.

Upon our arrival, we were warmly welcomed by Maulana Naeemur-Rahman, who facilitated our engagement at Firangi Mahal. He shared that the Ulema from the Firangi Mahal lineage trace their ancestry back to the family of Prophet Muhammad. Their ancestors migrated to the Indian subcontinent during the 11th century, enjoying the support and protection of local rulers. Later, the Mughal emperors acknowledged the scholarly contributions of these Ulema. In 1695, the family moved to a location previously

owned by a French merchant, which eventually became known as ‘Firangi Mahal’. As a result, they are recognized as Ulama-e-Farangi Mahal.

We were ushered into a hall where Maulana Khalid Rasheed welcomed us and expressed his appreciation for our efforts in reaching out to him. He provided a brief historical overview of Firangi Mahal, noting that the Ulama-e-Farangi Mahal gained prominence thanks to Allama Nizam-ud-din Farangi Mahli, who developed a curriculum for madrasas that has been widely adopted across the subcontinent for over three centuries, though with some modifications. The madrasa established at Firangi Mahal attracted students from countries as far-flung as China and Saudi Arabia, claiming to be the first madrasa in the region.

He also highlighted the contributions of another notable scholar from the lineage, Maulana Abdul Bari Firangi Mahli, who played an important role in both religious education and the freedom movement. He was a trailblazer in promoting Hindu-Muslim unity and was the first to voice this crucial message. Additionally, he helped establish the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-e-Hind and encouraged Muslim participation in the non-cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi against British rule.

Our enlightening discussion with Maulana Khalid Rasheed Firangi Mahli underscored the vital role religions can play in promoting unity and harmony in society. He emphasized that religious leaders have a significant responsibility to help people appreciate the richness of India’s diverse religious landscape.

Later in the day, he conveyed a reassuring message through Maulana Naeem-ur-Rahman. He expressed, “The interaction was both stimulating and enlightening. The questions posed by the students were insightful and scholarly, while Dr. Joseph’s address was particularly informative. Such interreligious and cultural exchanges are crucial for fostering mutual understanding among faiths, promoting community harmony, and encouraging interfaith

dialogue.” He added, “I wish the best for these students, who are destined to become future religious leaders, and I extend my gratitude to the management and faculty of Vidyajyoti for this commendable initiative.” Overall, it was an inspiring evening.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

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### **A MEMORABLE VISIT TO INTEGRAL UNIVERSITY**

On November 4, 2024, we had the privilege of visiting Integral University, an institution founded by Muslim intellectuals with a strong focus on fostering inclusive education. We were warmly welcomed by Mr. Ghazali Sami, the liaison officer, and Mr. Nafees, the Senior Manager at the Office of International Relations. They shared insights into the university’s vision and mission, and we were also shown a documentary that effectively demonstrated how these ideals are woven into the daily operations of the university.

The Vision of Integral University resonates deeply with me, especially due to its connections to both the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur’an. This Vision reflects the institution’s dedication to guiding young people away from ignorance and illiteracy, echoing the Biblical concept of “kindly Light” (Ex. 13:21) alongside the divine command to “Read: Thy Lord is most bounteous” (Q. 30:96). It emphasizes a commitment to educating the youth through innovative and creative methods, aiming to align their vibrant intellect and energy with the principles of decency, decorum, discipline, and dedication within a framework grounded in core values.

The documentary further highlighted the importance of preserving and promoting ‘diversity’ as a key factor in nurturing students’ openness to others, while also building a nation founded on solid secular principles, as envisioned in the Constitution of India. Through my conversations with Mr. Sami and Mr. Nafees, I learned that we can maximize students’ potential by encouraging them to engage with diverse perspectives, recognizing our interdependence,

while also celebrating the unique talents and identities of each individual.

After a brief tour of the campus, we gathered with Dr. Syed Nadeem Akhtar, the Pro Chancellor of the University. Dr. Akhtar, a Fulbright-Nehru Fellow, is a respected scholar and a remarkable person who truly embodies the university's vision. Understanding that many of us are on the path to becoming Catholic priests dedicated to serving the nation and humanity, he stressed our duty as authentic guides, helping others adhere to the divine guidance present in the Holy Scriptures. He expressed his hope that we would emerge as true ambassadors of peace and harmony, leading others to discover their own truths.

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ

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## **DELIGHTFUL EVENING AT UNITY COLLEGE, LUCKNOW**

After our fruitful visit to Integral University, we headed to our next destination—Unity College, which is run by Shia Muslims. Our goal was to connect with them and better understand their beliefs and practices. As Christians, we increasingly recognize that the authentic beliefs and practices of Muslims can be seen as divine blessings. The bus made its way through large crowds, and our driver navigated skillfully.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted warmly by our friend Janab Najmul Hasan Rizvi, who led us to a meeting room prepared for our gathering. Unity College is located on a spacious 4.75-acre green campus, providing a peaceful retreat amid the bustling, narrow streets nearby. The college was established in 1987 under the Tauheedul Muslimeen Trust, founded by the esteemed Padma Bhushan Dr. S. Kalbe Sadiq.

After some introductory remarks, we watched a short video presentation on Shia Islam, presented by the well-known speaker Sayed Ammar Nakshawani. He explained a group of early Muslims closely tied to the family of Prophet Muhammad, who believed

that Imam Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, was appointed by Muhammad to lead the Muslim community after his death. Following Muhammad's passing, the question of leadership sparked disputes, with some of his companions advocating for an elected leader, leading to division within the community. This schism deepened significantly after the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his seventy-two companions on the plains of Karbala. Today, Sunni Muslims make up over 85 percent of the global Muslim population, while Shia Muslims account for around 15 percent.

Najmul Hasan, our respected friend, shared that Shia Muslims believe the Imams have a deeper understanding of the meanings of the Qur'an, providing guidance for individuals seeking the righteous path. As the twelfth Imam remains concealed, religious scholars now take on the role of guiding the community. He also emphasized that the remembrance of the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions at Karbala plays a crucial role in shaping religious practices among Shia Muslims. Following these enlightening discussions, we enjoyed a pleasant conversation over coffee and snacks. As the hour approached six, we said our goodbyes to our Shia brothers, feeling grateful for their hospitality, and prepared to board the train to Varanasi.

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**Best wishes to everyone,  
so that in the new year,  
humanity might progress  
on the path of fraternity,  
justice and peace.**

*Pope Francis*

