

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



*The Easter Sunday of 2019*

*Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina  
Hankering For Peace and Harmony*

*On The Possibility of Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*

*Pope Francis' Dialogue with Islam*

*Pope Francis and Muslims*

*To My Fellow Christian Brothers and Sisters*

*The Co-existence of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Communities in Jerusalem*

*Engaging with our Muslim Neighbors*

*Hussain's Leadership without Political Power: Lessons for Today*

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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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**Vol. 43**

**APRIL 2022**

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

## INFORMATION

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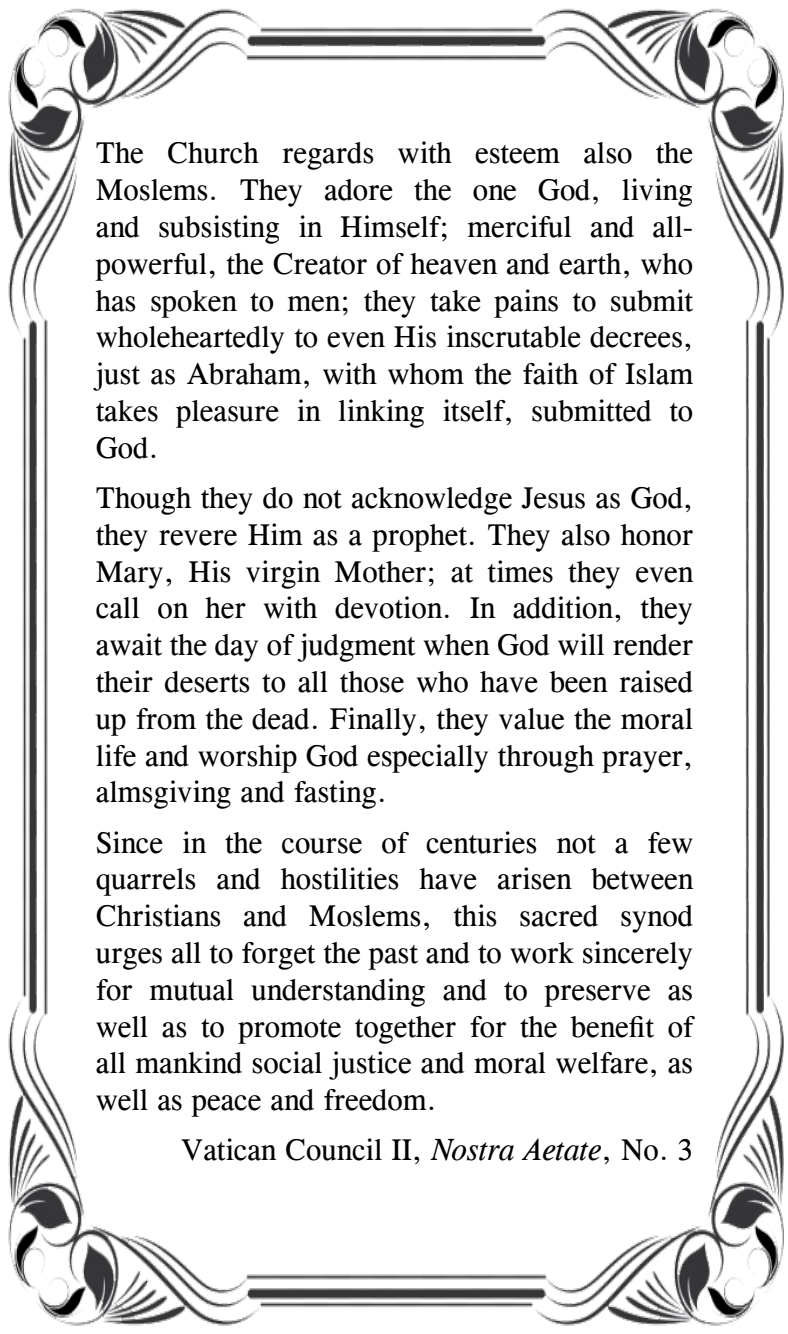
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.

Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

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

# Editorial

## CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS TRULY RISEN!

I write this little note on Easter Day, 17 April 2022. I wish all Happy Easter.

May you remain blessed!

Yesterday evening, I attended the Easter vigil service at the Jesuit chapel of Saint Xavier's School. Keeping vigil for the Lord (Ex 12. 42) in the Jewish scriptures reflects in the Gospel admonition (Luke 12. 35-37). The faithful, carrying lighted lamps in their hands, should be like those looking for the Lord when he returns, so that at his coming he may find them awake and have them sit at his table.

This is one of the most ancient traditions in the Church. I felt I am so beautifully connected with our Abrahamic cousins, the Jewish people. As a student of Christian-Muslim relations I joyfully remembered that Muslims celebrate the night on which the first verses of the Qur'an (Q. 97. 3-5) 'descended' as *Laylat al-Qadr* (the night of power/destiny) during the month of Ramadan. They believe that this night is better than a thousand months. Many Muslims spend this night in prayer, with the deep hope that their prayers will be heard.

Keeping vigil for the Lord brings us Abrahamic cousins closer together spiritually. It is obvious that keeping the vigil for the Lord in this world can be meaningful only when we rise above our 'fear of the other', work for peace and reconciliation, undergirding these on the foundation of justice for all, especially for the poor, the sick, and refugees.

As I reflected on 'Easter vigil', I was aware of the distress that I have been through these days. As there is some respite from the

Corona virus, once again ‘the virus of hate and divisiveness’ has raised its ugly head. I am deeply worried as our nation is becoming more intolerant day by day. In the editorial page essay (*The Indian Express*, 16 April, 2022, page 8) ‘A virus rages among us’, Sonia Gandhi, President of the Congress Party, writes:

Vigorous debate, discussion and virtually any form of interaction where an alternative point of view is welcomed has become a thing of the past and we are all the poorer for it. Even academia, once respected for encouraging fresh thought, is under the scanner for interacting with counterparts from other parts of the world. As vilification of faiths and condemnation of entire communities become the norm, it is becoming commonplace to see divisive politics affecting not just the workplace, but also entering neighborhoods and indeed people’s homes. Never before has this country seen hatred as the basis of the day to day choices.

For those who spread hatred and animosity, the ‘other’ is an enemy to be conquered and subdued, no more a ‘brother, sister or a neighbor’ to be loved and treasured.

I am worried, as I said, but as a Christian believer I am not bereft of hope. Our hope is founded in Christ. A Christian understands Christ the Risen One as the foundation for a new phase in human history. The Risen Christ is the new Adam in whom the distorted image of the human person is restored. Humanity is renewed in the risen Christ. We Christians acknowledge that as Christ’s disciples, we are members of his mystical body, through our faith in the risen one. We also believe that through the free action of God’s grace, every human person is a member of this renewed humanity, and together we walk towards a common humanum. Faith in Christ is, ultimately, faith in God’s intervention in ‘history and flesh’ that is the ‘togetherness of all people committed to their respective faiths and deeply respectful towards the faith convictions of one another.

Faith leads us to committed actions that bring people together for working together for peace and justice. In the month of March 2022, the Islamic Studies Association (ISA) and its members engaged in a number of conversations in building up interfaith relations.

- On 6 March, the present writer and Jesuit Father Anil Almeida, with their friend Fr. Yann Vagneux, had an engaging meeting with Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the Apostolic Nuncio to India, at his residence. They had a focused conversation on interfaith relations in India. While the present writer apprised the Nuncio of Christian-Muslim relations in India and challenges and new openings, Anil Almeida presented his views on Christian-Hindu relations.
- On 9 March 2022, the editor of this quarterly gave an online talk on Christian-Muslim relations to the faculty and students of the Department of Christian and Islamic Culture, Jaffna University, Sri Lanka.
- On 20 March 2022, ISA organized a half-day training programme in Human Rights and the Right to Information Act for students of law. These students hail from socially marginalised families. At the end of the programme, course books were provided by to the participants.
- On 24 March, 2022, ISA organized the 5<sup>th</sup> Victor Courtois Memorial Lecture at Arul Anandar College, Karumathur, Madurai. Ms. Naaz Khair, a scholar and activist in the Pasmanda Muslim movement, presented the lecture, on “Christian-Muslim Relations: *Pasmanda* Dimension”. The lecture was well received.
- The Secretary of ISA gave two online talks, on “Understanding Islam” and “Catholic Teaching on Dialogue”, at the Collaborative Learning Café (an initiative of the friends of Jesuits of the Goa Jesuit Province). The talks were well appreciated.
- On 29 March 2022, ISA, in collaboration with Iran Culture House, New Delhi, and Who is Hussain, Bangalore, organized

a online Book Talk on “Imam Hussain and the Struggle for Justice” by author Dr. Chris Hewer (UK). Prof. Fr. Christopher Clohessy, of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (Rome) and Prof. Syed Mahdi Alizadeh Musavi of the University of Religion, Qom, Iran, made some brilliant responses. The webinar was a spiritual and intellectual treat for those who attended.

I wish you peace!

Joseph Victor Edwin SJ



“In this context, and precisely here in the land of encounter and dialogue, and before this distinguished audience, I wish to reaffirm the Catholic Church’s respect for Islam, for authentic Islam: the Islam that prays, that is concerned for those in need. Recalling the errors of the past, including the most recent past, all believers ought to unite their efforts to ensure that God is never made the hostage of human ambitions. Hatred, fanaticism and terrorism profane the name of God and disfigure the true image of man.”

*John Paul II, address on Culture, Art and Science, Astana, Kazakhstan, September 24, 2001*



# **THE EASTER SUNDAY OF 2019: HOW A KIND CHRISTIAN RESURRECTED MY FAITH IN HUMANITY!**

By Nigar Ataulla

Easter this year will appear at the same time as the Muslim fasting month of Ramzan. My heart and mind go back to the Easter of 2019. My heart is filled with mixed feelings when I think of that day.

The Easter Sunday of 2019 was the last Sunday I saw my father alive. He had been taken to hospital, getting weaker and weaker by the day. So, I recall that with a feeling of sadness. But I shall always remember that same Easter Sunday with joy too, because of a Christian! Yes, really! My sadness dissolves into joy when I think of the kind Christian friend who did a great deed of kindness to me that day which I really do not know how many of us would be able or willing to do.

Throughout my father's hospital stay, I managed to stay with him and attend to him, but that Easter Sunday, I had to leave him for a few hours and be elsewhere. I needed someone who was known to my father to be with him in the hospital till I returned. I could think of nobody else but Sampath.

Sampath, who is of Catholic background, is a sort of all-errands man. He washes cars in apartments, cleans water tanks, helps families shifting houses and does many other such jobs. Wearing his trademark cap, he drives around on his scooter fetching groceries for the apartment folks. All these are his means of earning for his family.

I have known Sampath for some years now. I remember him telling me that even at midnight if there was an emergency for my father that I should call him.

That Easter Sunday, with some guilt and hesitation, I called up Sampath and asked him if he could spare some time to be with my father at the hospital till I returned in the evening. He replied that he would go to church, as it was Easter Sunday, and would then be at the hospital. I did say sorry to him as it was a festive day for him and he had to be with his family. He replied “No problem, I will be with *Appa*”, or words to that effect.

Sampath arrived at the hospital in the morning after going to church. Before leaving the hospital, I requested him to have his lunch there and I left to go to see a friend. I was not at all anxious as I knew Sampath would take care of my father.

At about 4 in the evening, I called Sampath to say that I was in the autorickshaw, returning to the hospital. He told me that all was well and that many visitors had come over to see my father. If I think back now, I wonder how I would have handled those visitors had I been there then. It would have been emotionally overwhelming for me. See how God had put Sampath there that day to handle them!

I returned to the hospital and thanked Sampath for being there with my father on Easter Sunday, which he might have liked to spend with his family and friends, with a good festive lunch. It so happened that Sampath had not even eaten lunch at the hospital, and only had some tea.

I felt very grateful to Sampath. If I think back now, I honestly wonder, if someone had asked me to miss the Eid festival and feast and be at a hospital to take care of someone who was not even part of my family, would I do what Sampath did? May be not!

Sampath is not, in conventional terms, ‘well-educated’. He is a poor man. He lives in a crowded locality. He is a hard worker, waking up early in the morning, setting off to wash cars and do other such tasks to earn his bread. What a heart of gold he has! A true Christian is what he is, full of kindness, care and compassion, going beyond thinking of only his family. He really did not need to do what he did

by staying by my father's side on Easter Sunday in a hospital, but his Christian heart, or his humane heart, spontaneously made him do this act of kindness.

That Easter Sunday, of 2019, will remain memorable for me because of Sampath's kindness!

Christians across the world will be celebrating, with joy and hope, the memory of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) this Easter Sunday. For me, I will also remember Easter Sunday as a day of goodness that brings to mind kind Christians like Sampath whose hearts open out to humanity and reach out selflessly beyond family!

I wish all my Christian friends a happy Easter!

“Awakening to faith is not a one-time event, but a continuously unfolding reality. The journey of faith is not a race, but a marathon of love that each person walks at a different pace.”

— *A. Helwa, Secrets of Divine Love: A Spiritual Journey into the Heart of Islam*



# **CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF CROATIA AND BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA**

By Mate Žaja, SJ

In this paper, I will primarily reflect on the current challenges and opportunities regarding Christian-Muslim dialogue in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Even though I was born and raised in Croatia, my parents come from B&H, Croatia's neighboring country, constituted of three peoples—Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs and Muslims (Bosniaks). Muslims are a majority in B&H, while in Croatia they make up a minority of less than 2%.

A history marked by wars, bloodshed and divisions has a major influence on Christian-Muslim dialogue in these parts of Europe. Recent migrations of people from overwhelmingly Muslim countries of the Middle East represent a challenge and another opportunity for dialogue, but for some they also pose a threat to the Christian identity of Europe.

## **On Present Situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

I was born in 1985 in Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia, which at that time was one of the socialist republics of the communist Yugoslavia. My parents, as I mentioned above, come from neighboring B&H, which is also a former socialist republic of the now non-existent Yugoslavia. Today B&H is a Confederation with two entities, the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska, plus the separate Brčko District. This division is the fruit of the war that took place in the first half of 1990s.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the Republic of Croatia has a Muslim minority, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has a Muslim majority. This is due to historical reasons, and I will get back to that later. Northern Bosnia-Herzegovina lately unwillingly became a “waiting room” for a large number of migrants, most of them from

Pakistan and Afghanistan. In migrant camps and squats in so-called “jungle,” they wait for their opportunity to illegally cross the border with Croatia and continue their way to France, UK, Germany, Belgium, Sweden or some other country in Western Europe.

Since the first migrants from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq appeared on the so-called Balkan route in 2015, some suspected that this migrant crisis was just an orchestrated invasion of Christian Europe. Hundreds of thousands of young healthy men were and still are trying to enter the European Union. Some people are bothered by their appearance, noticing that these young men look well fed, well dressed and well equipped, with their smart phones and suspiciously large amounts of cash in their pockets. For some, they do not look like poor people who left their homeland out of dire need. Instead, they doubt that these migrants may be backed up by rich Arabs who might pull the strings behind this whole story of recent migrations towards Europe.

It is true that young men are in overwhelming majority in the migrants’ ranks, but this could be easily explained by the complexity and length of the journey they are forced to take to reach Europe. A small number of them dare to take their wives and children with them on this venture.

### **A Little Bit of History**

To my doubting compatriots these hordes of migrants could easily be reminiscent of the Ottoman army that conquered the medieval Bosnian kingdom and parts of Croatia in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. While Bosnia was completely overtaken, Croatian territory was reduced to what historians call “the remnants of remnants.” Turkish conquerors did not leave a positive impression in the minds of Christian Croats and Serbs. There was bloodshed and violence, as often accompanies military conquest. People abandoned their villages and towns. Croats and their allies fought Turks on the borders of the newly-conquered territories for centuries. A large number of Christians in the conquered territories converted to

Islam, some forcibly and some voluntarily. Children were taken in captivity, converted to Islam and raised as members of an elite army unit known as Janissaries, and this practice lasted for three centuries in the Ottoman Empire.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey was forced to hand over territories of today's Croatia and B&H to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Turks left behind a significant cultural impact, still felt today, among other things, in the local cuisine, architecture, vocabulary and music. They also left behind a large population of Muslims, and in the minds of remaining Christians, not so fond memory of their reign.

As I mentioned above, my mother and father come from B&H. My father was born and raised near the western border with Croatia. As he was growing up, he did not have much contact with Muslims because his surroundings were almost exclusively inhabited by Croats. He just heard stories about Muslims, usually referred to as "Turks", in which they were regularly portrayed in the worst light. My mother, on the other hand, had a lot of contacts with Muslims because they made up a significant portion of the population in her county. She and her family had Muslim friends and neighbours. She even worked for a Muslim family when she was just a teenager, along with her aunt, and she has fond memories from that period. My maternal grandfather's close friend was a Muslim physician. I forget his name, but I remember how my grandfather was moved every time he would recall the moments when he and his buddy drank and cracked jokes together. Just below my grandparents' house was a Muslim village, and Muslims and Croats nurtured good neighborly relations there until the war came in the early 1990's.

Soon after Croatia and B&H proclaimed independence from Yugoslavia, war broke out. Croats and Muslims in B&H at first fought together against the Serbs, but the situation changed at the beginning of 1993, when yesterday's neighbors and comrades-in-arms became enemies. Atrocities were committed on both sides, and so, even after the war, good neighborly relations could not be

easily reestablished. People found it very difficult to start all over and to forget what had happened. Tortured and murdered members of families and friends, relatives held in captivity for months in inhumane conditions, burned and pillaged villages, raped women, bombarded houses, destroyed churches and mosques, forced displacements, years in exile...All this and more still occupies their minds and fuels the fire of division.

### **Current State of Affairs**

Today, more than 25 years after the end of the war in Croatia and B&H, Muslims, Serbs and Croats still live in their separate communities. In my mother's county, where good neighborly relations were once an everyday occurrence and maybe even taken for granted, it is unthinkable now that Muslim and Croatian children would go to the same school. Sharing a meal or drinking coffee together, a significant ritual in maintaining friendships, today very rarely occurs between Muslims and Croats, especially in areas where the worst atrocities were committed. All this does not make fruitful ground for Christian-Muslim dialogue, but there are some hope-giving positive examples where Muslims and Croats in B&H lend each other a helping hand. These are not numerous, but maybe their number will grow in time and the quality of Christian-Muslim relations will get better.

At this point I would like to go back to the migrants from Middle East, stranded in northern B&H, and share some of experiences I gained while volunteering for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) there. One of conclusions I can make from this experience is that there is a difference between mere pondering on Islam, on the one hand, and meeting a Muslim, on the other. When I met some of these young men for the first time, I did not stress myself over the fact that they were Muslims and that, as a faithful Christian and a future priest, I should try to convert them. The words of St. Mother Teresa, shared in one of her interviews, are very close to my heart. She expressed her desire that everyone gets to know Jesus Christ, but, at the same time, she expressed her awareness that no one can be forced into

relationship with Christ. First and foremost, we Christians should do our best to know Jesus, make Him a constant companion on our life path and with His grace, try to live the Gospel. I would like to dedicate my life to this.

I was struck with the life conditions of the migrants in northern B&H, in poorly equipped migrant camps or in abandoned buildings. It was winter and it was very cold. Snow was falling. Those living in the “jungle”, as they call it, in bushes under improvised “tents” or in some abandoned house, did not even have hot water, and so, they would come and knock on the door of the JRS office, or the apartment above, where two Missionaries of Charity lived, or the second floor, where I lived with several other volunteers. Regardless of their life conditions and all the hardships they were going through, the majority of these men seemed hopeful about the future.

I remember one young man who came to our door asking for some hot water. It was snowing outside. He turned to me, and with a smile on his face, said, “Look, it’s snowing!” I was moved because in midst of this cold weather, while asking for some hot water so he could wash himself, this young man still had enough strength for wonder and admiration at the sight of snow!

As a physician, I had the opportunity to take care of their wounds, whether they would come with blisters, skin infections, scabies or something else. I can’t help but recall Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. In these people I recognized face of Jesus who is sick, hungry, thirsty, naked and without proper shelter. I tried to help, and maybe I could have done more. While I was taking care of the foot wound, caused by a blister, of one of these young men, I was moved how the others showed their concern and willingness to help. Their love and sense of brotherhood were admirable.

In one of my visits to the squats, when I was delivering medications to some young men in an abandoned country house, I was invited to join them for tea. There were more than ten of them. They were all



from Peshawar, a Pakistani city near the border with Afghanistan. They were fleeing from insecurity caused by frequent violence and territorial conflicts. We all sat on the floor. They had a small stove built by a group of carpenters from Berlin, and it was quite cozy regardless of the cold outside. Even before the tea was ready, they had opened two boxes of two different kinds of biscuits and put both right before me, like I was going to eat it all by myself! I was moved by their generosity and hospitality. I smiled. It was a pleasant afternoon, and we had a friendly conversation, trying to overcome the language barrier all the way.

In the end, I would like to mention one kind lady who worked in the bakery. In the part of B&H where I volunteered, migrants who were not accompanied by government or NGO officials, namely those who lived outside the official camps, were not allowed to use taxis or enter stores, bars, restaurants, diners or bakeries. One kind lady could not comply to such regulations. She allowed them to enter the bakery, get what they needed, and even to stay there to warm themselves, regardless of the occasional complaint from other customers. She felt deep compassion for them, and she acted accordingly. The part of B&H I am talking about is populated by an overwhelmingly Muslim majority, but not many of the locals followed the lady from the bakery in her generosity, hospitality and compassion towards their coreligionists.

## **Conclusion**

As, a Christian I believe that God is the Father of all of us. In B&H, it was easy for me to see the migrants as my brothers. In them I also saw fellow human beings in need. When someone is freezing or sick, the only humane thing is to help the person according to one's capabilities. I do not know whether they were part of some large conspiracy in quest of conquering and Islamizing Europe. It doesn't seem to me that this is the case. They really seem like people in search of a better future, willing to suffer cold, hunger, thirst and lousy accommodation so that someday, they could help their families. If we turn our back on them, we are not the followers

of Christ, who uttered the words “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) and “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).

I believe that God is Love. I believe that love is the only way and that the testimony of love in our lives is irreplaceable in our proclamation of the Gospel. In the process, we can also humbly learn from the examples of our brothers and sisters who do not belong to the same believing community but try to live out what we preach. It is part of God’s mysterious ways, I would say.



## HANKERING FOR PEACE AND HARMONY

By Rolly B. Revilla

When His Eminence Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope on March 13, 2013 and took his papal title after St. Francis of Assisi of Italy, the Church saw a new dawn of hope. Elected as the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church, His Holiness expressed his desire for unity and brotherhood among all. In his first ever speech as a pontiff he said, “And now let us begin this journey... which presides in charity over all the Churches, a journey of brotherhood in love, of mutual trust”. This statement commenced a fresh endeavor of the Church towards peace, unity and progress. Pope Francis gave the people of God an overview of the Church’s mission and vision.

Faithful to his words, Pope Francis started to walk his talk. He gave importance to the Church’s relationship towards other religions. This led him to seek to awaken the spirit of achieving genuine peace and harmony through interfaith and interreligious dialogue. Pope Francis is determined to shape Christian-Muslim relations in the direction of peace and harmony. This is manifested in his undying desire for dialogue with the adherents of Islam. He is ever ready and willing to cross borders and break barriers to come up with a fruitful discourse.

### ***Fratelli Tutti*: A “Co-Authored” Encyclical Towards Peace And Harmony**

On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt’s al-Azhar university, arrives for an interreligious meeting at the Founder’s Memorial in Abu Dhabi. This particular meeting became the inspiration for Pope Francis in writing and publishing his third encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* signed on October 3, 2020 and made public on the feast of St Francis of Assisi of October 4, 2020, this encyclical speaks of brotherhood, fraternity, social friendship and, significantly, made mentioned about the influence of Pope Francis’s interaction with

the grand Imam in Abu Dhabi on writing the encyclical. Thus, this encyclical is an inspiration that emerges from a dialogue. In fact, we can definitely sense that the conclusion of the encyclical is a rhetorically powerful series of quotations from the “Document on Human Fraternity” issued jointly by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Al-Tayyeb when they met in Abu Dhabi. We note that in no. 258 of the said encyclical, there is a mutual declaration that says “we resolutely [declared] that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood”.

The encyclical is one of the strongest and solid foundations in proving that His Holiness Pope Francis has been faithful and true to the mission of the Church to promote unity, peace and harmony. He does not stop there, though. His recent visit to Iraq despite the coronavirus pandemic shows the world how dedicated he is in unifying Muslims and Christians. I personally sense the risky act of the pontiff but I also knew by heart his genuine intention. It is very beautiful to reflect on how Pope Francis sets all things well, with God’s grace and God’s help. His mind and heart are indeed attuned to Christ’s heart that all maybe saved and united.

### **Good Relations Despite Differences**

Pope Francis acknowledges that Islam has a different perspective on life and spirituality. However, this is not a deterrent for him to reach over and to be in harmony with Muslims. His passion for dialogue enables the Church to maintain and further build bridges with our Muslim brothers and sisters. For Pope Francis, respect is one of the major ingredients in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

Respect is, in fact, significant in all of our endeavors in life as we live in a world that is filled with varieties of people having their own particular views, personalities, beliefs and priorities. Respecting each other enables one to live in peaceful life. Peace and harmony have thus always a central point of concern. This is because man ought to live a chaos-free life. One cannot imagine living a life that

is forever filled with conflict, hatred and disorder. Thus, to achieve this goal, a certain act must be done – and that is, dialogue! The purpose of dialogue is to recognize differences and to come up with the most possible way to integrate these differences to avoid conflict.

When we respect others, we also listen to them. We need to listen to our Muslim brothers and sisters. This has been Pope Francis disposition and stance ever since he began his papacy. He is a listening pope, eager to listen to people of other religions. He is true and faithful to what the word ‘obedience’ means in relation to listening. To obey is to listen. The word ‘obedience’ comes from the Latin word *obediare*, to listen. Pope Francis’ listening heart attracts and encourages other Christians to listen to and respect others.

### **St. Francis Of Assisi And Pope Francis’ Commonality On Christian-Muslim Relations**

When we look at history, there was a point in time when St. Francis visited a certain Muslim area for a mission. In a class discussion with Fr. Victor Edwin SJ, I found out that St Francis tried to go to Syria in the year 1212 and in the year 1214 to Morocco (these two countries were once colonized by the Roman empire but later on became largely Muslim due to Arab conquests). This shows that St. Francis, as a missionary, also endeavoured for peace and harmony. This must be one of the reasons why he was also known as patron saint of peace and tranquility. His well-known prayer mentions asking the Lord to make him a channel of Christ’s peace. Today, most of the virtues of St. Francis of Assisi are very evident in our dearest Holy Father Pope Francis. Their resemblance is very obvious. Pope Francis has probably been greatly inspired by St. Francis’ disposition towards our Muslim brothers and sisters and his quest for peace, unity and harmony. We see how Pope Francis is continually living the way of life of St. Francis of Assisi. In his homily at the Basilica of Francis on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, he said “Let us not be instruments of destruction! Let us respect each human being. May there be an end to armed conflicts which

cover the earth with blood; may the clash of arms be silenced; and everywhere may hatred yield to love, injury to pardon, and discord to unity. Let us listen to the cry of all those who are weeping, who are suffering and who are dying because of violence, terrorism or war, in the Holy Land, so dear to Saint Francis, in Syria, throughout the Middle East and everywhere in the world.”

As a future and aspiring priest, it is important for me to seriously understand and know the mind and soul of Pope Francis in relation to Muslims so that I may also become open to adherents of belief systems, especially Muslims. I must be friendly and welcoming to them at all times, listening and communicating to them in a spirit of peace, unity and harmony.



“...It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God. But the converse is also true: it is not possible to establish true links with God, while ignoring other people. Hence it is important to intensify dialogue among the various religions, and I am thinking particularly of dialogue with Islam. At the Mass marking the beginning of my ministry, I greatly appreciated the presence of so many civil and religious leaders from the Islamic world...”

*Francis, Address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, March 22, 2013 (excerpt)*

# ON THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

By Peter Nsamba

## Introduction

We live in a world of multiple religions, of religious diversity. Beside Christianity, we encounter the spiritually rich and sophisticated religious thought systems of great world religions such as of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, each inspiring compelling visions of life's meaning in their followers and impacting on their followers in terms of how to live authentically.

Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is possible since we all profess and believe in God as our creator, although this belief is expressed in different ways of worship. Such dialogue is possible despite our political, social, economic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

## Meaning of the word 'dialogue' and why we should engage in dialogue

The word 'dialogue' comes from the Greek word *dialogos*, which expressed in Latin becomes *dialogues*. Both of these words mean a conversation between two people or, sometimes, a discourse to another. Since it is a conversation, this implies that dialogue plays an important role in human life in trying to constructively relate with different groups of people regardless of their class, gender, tribe, sex, skin colour, religion, race, and so on; all agree to reach a common goal with common understanding and respect. Hence, religious dialogue refers to constructive collaboration between people of different faiths. It is a positive, creative, transforming and mutually deepening encounter and exchange of people's religious experiences, spiritualities, norms and values, involving believers of different religions, characterized by mutual respect, sincerity, freedom and love.

## **Why we should engage in dialogue and what the possibilities of dialogue between Muslims and Christians are**

Reflecting on happenings in the world, we observe a lot of inter-religious conflicts, disagreements, hatred, tension and various forms of violence and injustice. But, deep in us, our deepest longing and yearning, no matter what our religion, is peace. Despite our different religious rituals, customs, philosophical convictions, traditions and practices, the fundamental principle we all share is peace based on mutual love, good deeds, social justice, service, sacrifice and virtuous living. Therefore, in order to build a healthy relationship regardless of our faith proclamations and convictions, we need inter-religious dialogue so that we can repudiate all forms of social injustice and corruptions that are present in our society today.

The faith convictions of both Christians and Muslims make available the possibility of dialogue. Both Muslims and Christians understand God as Creator and Sustainer, as just and merciful, as a God who reveals His word and who will call people to account for their stewardship over creation. Both believe in love of one's neighbor. Both seek justice in the society. Both call for providing for people in need and living together in peace and harmony in society. Such points of convergence between Christians and Muslims should attract their followers to engage in dialogue so as to initiate eco-justice projects ('eco-justice' means the action of being just and fair to the environment around us by also showing due appreciation of it) and protect and promote the life of all created beings.

There is a need people to liberate conventional understandings of religion from narrow interests and geared towards involvement in promoting human rights and social and political justice, leading to a peaceful resolution of conflicts. This too underscores the possibility of, and need for, dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Respect for differences and particularities and safeguarding of religious liberties provides the foundation for the possibility of



dialogue between Muslims and Christians, since their religions stress human dignity and freedom.

In many cases, globalization has made it possible for people from different religious backgrounds to interact with one another on a greater level than before. This underscores the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue, which could greatly help people develop a common globalized consciousness. Such dialogue can be potentially very helpful for marginalized sections of a society such as its women, who can gain from insights and experiences from the experiences of women in other societies.

Muslim-Christian dialogue also flows from the need to share spiritual insights with each other. Through learning about the spiritual experiences others, we can be able to discover at greater depth certain aspects or dimensions of the divine mystery that we have perceived less clearly previously and that may have been communicated less clearly by our traditions. This surprising encounter will often raise questions, which will force us to revise unjustified assumptions and destroy deep rooted prejudices about other religions. This, in turn, can help us become more humane, more sensitive to the needs of others and more obedient to doing always God's will. The desire to grow spiritually in this way, too, is yet another reason for Muslim-Christian dialogue.

### **Challenges for Dialogue**

Dialogue places us at a common level allows us to each reach across boundaries, gain a friendly understanding of one another, live more fully accordingly and establish a more solid foundation for community of life and action among people of various traditions, However, there are observable factors which make dialogue difficult, if not impossible.

Both Christianity and Islam are, in outlook and practice, missionary-oriented religions. This makes their adherents believe that they have a divine call to invite others to join their respective faiths and adopt

their religious convictions and beliefs. This makes them to compete for converts by emphasizing their doctrines and beliefs. This often leads to a tendency towards monologue, rather than dialogue. It can lead to dialogue been viewed negatively.

Another challenge to Muslim-Christian dialogue are the doctrinal differences between Islam and Christianity. Focussing on these differences often acts as a stumbling block to dialogue if the commonalities between the faiths is ignored.

In addition to the above, the presence of high level of radicalization (which is based on numerous prejudices, false and distorted images of the other, misinformed, distorted ideas, stereotypes) leads Muslims and Christians to engage in useless polemical and apologetic debates based on ignorance and prejudices and biases rooted in misinformation (which creates misinformed beliefs, as, for instance that ‘Muslims are intolerant and violent’ and ‘Christians worship idols, not God;). Such conflicts make it sometime impossible for dialogue to be achieved.

The misuse of mass media contributes to this. Some media channels have been used to give misinformed information in their reports about a certain religion and to reinforce negative stereotypes about certain religious communities. This creates disharmony, insecurity, revenge and violence directed against people on the basis of their religion. Such kinds of behavior sometimes make interreligious dialogue very difficult.

## **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, as the African proverb says: if you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. This justifies the need for dialogue between Christians and Muslims as the only way we can listen to and learn from each other, live in an open and neighborly spirit, share each other’s joys and sorrows, appreciate each other’s spiritual values and also rejoice in the richness of our diversity.

# POPE FRANCIS' DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM

By Sumera Richard

Even before the start of his papacy, Pope Francis had long sought to build relationships with the Islamic world. When he was the archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had developed strong ties with the Islamic community there, with visits to *Centro Islamico* in Buenos Aires. His interest in Christian-Muslim relations continued in his papacy as shown in his *Magisterium*, documents, dialogue, and physical encounters with Muslim leaders. Somehow, Pope Francis taking the name of Francis of Assisi when he became pope was, in many ways, a statement of intent concerning openness to the Muslim world.

## **Pope Francis' interactions with Muslim leaders and communities**

Pope Francis's interactions with our Muslim brothers and sisters did not stop when he was elected pope in 2013. Instead, his interest and focus towards cultivating mutually enriching relationships between Muslims and Christians (without excluding others) intensified as this issue was faced with a difficult predicament in the previous papacy. His desire to promote dialogue and improve Catholic-Muslim relations was expressed in his many visits to countries with a Muslim majority: Turkey in November 2014, the Central African Republic in 2015, Azerbaijan in 2016, Egypt in 2017, Bangladesh in 2017, United Arab Emirates and Morocco in 2019, and Iraq in 2021. In many of his speeches in his visits to these Muslim-majority countries, Pope Francis emphasized some fundamental points regarding interreligious dialogue with Islam in particular: "the role of religion in our societies, the criterion of authentic religiosity, and the concrete way to walk as brothers and sisters to build peace."

Through these interventions, Pope Francis emphasizes the role of religiosity in a world inclined towards consumerism and secularism,

“where there is a tendency to relegate faith to the private sphere.” Authentic religiosity for Pope Francis means that our adoration of God is in union with our love for all people around us. He also points out the need for all religions to walk together to promote peace, justice, and compassion for all, especially the poor, marginalized, and those who had been sidelined for so long. Amidst people’s differences, all of us are called to walk together to be “artisans of peace and justice.”

## **Pope Francis’ Documents and Encyclicals on Muslim-Christian Relations**

Pope Francis’ efforts to promote and strengthen Muslim-Catholic relations through dialogue with the global Muslim community resonate with the Second Vatican Council’s spirit of human fraternity, understanding, and encounter. Two documents produced in the Second Vatican Council—*Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*—explicitly express that “the Church regards with esteem also the Moslems” (*Nostra Aetate* no. 3) and that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator... the Muslims” (*Lumen Gentium* no. 16). These documents were a response to the misunderstandings between the Muslims and the Catholics and the fruit of many dialogues and conferences with Muslim scholars to build understanding and reduce tensions.

The Second Vatican Council suggested that to understand the other, one must be faithful to the encounter and the dialogue, to have a perspective of how the other sees the world. This authentic encounter with the other is what Pope Francis is hoping for the Catholic faithful to rekindle, embrace, and live out.

A few months after being elected to the papacy, Pope Francis released *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he urged the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful to embark on interreligious dialogue with the followers of Islam (*Evangelii Gaudium* no.

252) and reaffirmed the call of the Second Vatican Council for evangelization and dialogue. Pope Francis called on the faithful the need for interreligious dialogue especially because “they (Muslims) are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries where they can freely worship and become fully a part of society” (*Evangelii Gaudium* no. 252). His invitation is to embrace Muslims as part of our community and to respect the practice of their faith. In the same document, Pope Francis expressed the need to “avoid hateful generalizations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence” (*Evangelii Gaudium* no. 253). When he affirms that the foundation of Islam is built on peace and respect, the possibility of interreligious dialogue and harmony between the Muslims and the Christians is much strengthened and encouraged. In a way, this also discourages Catholics from making hateful baseless generalizations about Islam and our Muslim brothers and sisters.

In the same document, Pope Francis clarifies that violent religious fundamentalism is not a unique phenomenon in non-Catholic religions but that it is also present in Christianity. Therefore, Islam is not an enemy, but violent religious fundamentalism is, which is present in any form of religion.

In his second papal encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis beautifully quoted the Muslim spiritual writer Ali al-Khawwas, “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (*Laudato Si* no. 233). This act of quoting a Muslim mystic in a papal encyclical confirms Pope Francis’ desire to foster ecumenical and interfaith dialogue about shared spirituality. It is an invitation for all human beings to go beyond themselves and improve our relationships and interconnectedness with other people, with the Earth, and with God. In the document, this view is greatly emphasized by Pope Francis: “Everything is

interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity” (*Laudato Si* no. 240). So, to advocate for greater care of our common home, all of us people of different faiths must join together in “a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”

Together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Pope Francis signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* in Abu Dhabi, UAE in 2019. The document was considered a milestone, for it provided “a blueprint indicating the way to a culture of dialogue and collaboration between faiths,” such that it was not limited only to Christian-Muslim relations. The first sentence of the document summarizes it succinctly: “Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved” (*Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, paragraph #1).

When we encounter another person as our own brother and sister, this breaks all boundaries of religious and societal beliefs and expresses the same love and affection we share with our own families towards anyone of different a belief system, faith, race, and culture. When we see another as our own brother or sister, we do not engage or support war and violence against them. Rather, we desire to live with them in a culture of tolerance and peace. We share what we have with them—our natural resources, food, shelter, space, and time. We allow them to be nourished and to develop their capacities, the same as what we would hope for our own brothers and sisters. As the document puts it: “profound hope in a bright future for all human beings” (*Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, paragraph #3).

In his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, published in 2020, Pope Francis confirms that he was “particularly encouraged by the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom [he] met in Abu Dhabi,

where [they] declared that ‘God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties, and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters’ (*Fratelli Tutti* # 5). Pope Francis also mentioned that the encyclical’s central themes of fraternity and social friendship were greatly influenced by his interaction with the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb such that he was mentioned four more times in the document: #’s 29, 136, 192, and 285. It is also of significance to note that Pope Francis concluded the document with several quotations from the *Document on Human Fraternity* mentioned above. In this document, Pope Francis stressed that to provide solutions to the many societal problems and conflicts in the modern world, there must be a continuing mutual desire for dialogue, mutual cooperation, and reciprocal understanding (*Fratelli Tutti* # 285).

Hollenbach, SJ, comments that “Pope Francis’ dialogue with the grand imam exemplifies in action the encyclical’s central theme of solidarity and interreligious collaboration.” He continues that “Francis not only talks the talk about the importance of ‘fraternity and social friendship,’ he walks the talk by actively pursuing these values though collaboration with Muslim leaders.”

## **Conclusion**

Rooted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis brings to light the need for authentic and lived-out interreligious dialogue between Catholics and Muslims. His interactions with the Muslim communities when he was still the Archbishop of Argentina, and more convincingly when he became the pope, actively exhibited the teachings of his magisterium and papal encyclicals.

Pope Francis models for us how to be in solidarity and interconnectedness with our Muslim brothers and sisters. It is through active collaboration and exchange of not only the ideas and beliefs of the mind but rather an exchange of what is in our hearts—

love and compassion for each other. Sharing this love with another, as we would do with our brothers and sisters, will melt the many barriers, biases and prejudices which separate and divide us. It is through living together with others in harmony, peace, respect and understanding that we can find solutions to the many issues we face in the world today.

“...Faith in the one God must bring all believers closer, impelling them to work together for the defense and promotion of fundamental human values. Among the universal rights, religious freedom and freedom of conscience play a fundamental role, because they constitute the basis of the other freedoms. Defense of other rights that stem from the dignity of the person and of peoples particularly the promotion of the safeguarding of life, of justice and of solidarity must be, in turn, the object of true collaboration. Moreover, as I have often had the opportunity to emphasize, it is an urgent necessity of our time to stabilize cordial relations among believers of different religions, in order to construct a world that is more human and in greater harmony with God’s plan for Creation. I am therefore pleased with the existence of the regular meetings, on themes of common interest, organized regularly and jointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and The Organization of Culture and Islamic Relations. By contributing to the common search for what is just and true, meetings of this kind allow everyone to grow in reciprocal knowledge and to cooperate in reflecting on the important issues concerning human life...”

***Benedict XVI, to H.E. Mr. Ali Akbar Naseri, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Holy See, October 29, 2009***



## POPE FRANCIS AND MUSLIMS

By Anyembe Kevin Makokha

This paper reflects on some issues highlighted by Pope Francis concerning Muslims. When Pope Francis went on a historical visit to Iraq, he said, “Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion.” He added that there could never be peace as long as Iraqis viewed people of different faiths as the other.

There is a common thread linking three important interventions of Pope Francis regarding interreligious dialogue, and dialogue with Islam in particular. It is a magisterium that indicates a road map with three fundamental points of reference: the role of religion in our societies, the criterion of authentic religiosity, and the concrete way to walk as brothers and sisters to build peace. We find them in the speeches that the Pope gave in Azerbaijan in 2016, in Egypt in 2017, and during his historic trip to Iraq in the unforgettable meeting in Ur of the Chaldeans, the city of Abraham.

The call of the Pope is not an approach that forgets differences and identities in order to equalize all. Instead, it is a call to be faithful to one’s own religious identity in order to reject any instrumentalization of religion to foment hatred, division, terrorism and discrimination, and, at the same time, to witness before increasingly secularized societies that we need God. In Cairo, the Pope said that Mount Sinai “reminds us above all that authentic covenants on earth cannot ignore heaven, that human beings cannot attempt to encounter one another in peace by eliminating God from the horizon, nor can they climb the mountain to appropriate God for themselves.” This was a very timely message in the face of what the Pope called a “dangerous paradox”—namely, on the one hand, the tendency to relegate religion only to the private sphere “as if it were not an essential dimension of the human person and society”, and on the other, the inappropriate confusion between the religious and political spheres.

Pope Francis also explained that “no incitement to violence will guarantee peace” and that “in order to prevent conflicts and build peace, it is essential that we spare no effort in eliminating situations of poverty and exploitation where extremism more easily takes root.” These words were also echoed in his Ur speech: “There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable. There will be no peace unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples.”

The three papal interventions thus indicate the role that religiosity has today in a world where consumerism and rejection of the sacred prevail and where there is a tendency to relegate faith to the private sphere. There is a need, Pope Francis explains, for an authentic religiosity, one that never separates adoration of God from love of our brothers and sisters. He also indicates a way for religions to contribute to the good of our societies, recalling the need for commitment to the cause of peace and to respond to the problems and concrete needs of the least, the poor, the defenseless. It is a proposal to walk side by side with all brethren in order to be concrete artisans of peace and justice, beyond differences and respecting our respective identities.

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis stresses on the fact that he learned about Christian-Muslim solidarity through his interactions with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt. He proclaims that efforts to overcome the world’s conflicts should follow the path dialogue, adopt a code of mutual cooperation and follow a method of reciprocal understanding. If the world’s religious communities were to follow this path, they would be living in fidelity to their own beliefs and simultaneously contributing to the peace and justice the world urgently needs. The encyclical is a sign of hope that mutual understanding between great religious traditions is possible despite the violence between faith communities we witness too frequently. Just as the Pope and the Grand Imam have achieved a shared commitment to the common humanity of all people, the encyclical

calls on Christians and indeed on all people to work for solidarity across the conflicts dividing today's world, including religious conflicts. "Just as the Samaritan reached across the religious and ethnic boundaries that separated him from a wounded by the roadside, Christians and indeed all people are called to become neighbors to those who have been harmed".

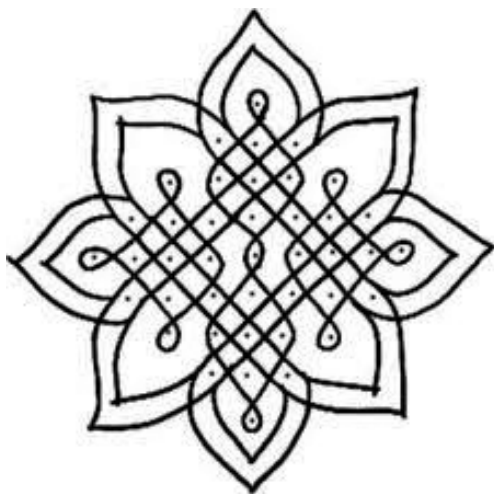
The Pope urged Iraq's Muslim and Christian religious leaders to put aside animosities and work together for peace and unity during an interfaith meeting in what is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, father of their faiths. He said: "This is true religiosity; to worship God and to love our neighbor". He added that peace does not demand winners or losers, but, rather, brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity. In his speech Pope Francis also stressed that it is good for the Christians of Iraq, as well as all Iraqis, to have senior leaders come together and stress the importance of coexistence.

The Catholic Church really committed to dialogue and positive engagement at the Second Vatican Council, with the famous declaration on the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions, *Nostra Aetate*. There is a paragraph in there dedicated to Islam and opening up possibilities for good, positive relationships with Muslims. Of course, that was prefigured by some important historical figures in the Church, who found ways to engage with Islam. St. Francis of Assisi was one of the key figures here. Pope Francis' assuming the name of Francis after St. Francis of Assisi when he became Pope was in many ways a statement of intent with regard to openness to the Muslim world. I think that is now being seen very clearly. One could also point to several other people in the Catholic tradition who have been very open to the Muslim world, who have overcome some of the prejudices of their age and who reached out to Muslims.

With Pope Francis there is a desire to understand religious extremism in all its forms. There is an acknowledgment, right from

the beginning of his pontificate, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he refers to religious fundamentalism as a phenomenon not only in other religions but also in Christianity. It has been quite a helpful thing to point this out because it means that the enemy is not any particular religion as such.

Pope Francis is convinced that warmth and mutual understanding can in the long term actually change relationships. Islam and Christianity have had a mixed relationship over the centuries. Often, these two traditions have taken an exclusivist position, portraying the other in negative terms. Muslims and Christians have often lived in tension with each other over many issues, such as mission and *dawah*, political and religious oppression, as well as mutual vilification. Increasingly in the last few decades, there have been calls for dialogue from both religious traditions to be undertaken at the level of scripture, religious leadership and socio-cultural traditions. Christian and Muslim communities have begun to come together in the spirit of pluralism and mutual recognition. It is this spirit that must guide each of us to understand the importance of a new way of reading sacred texts, one which is cognizant of, and responsive to, the pluralistic realities of the twenty-first century.



## TO MY FELLOW CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Muslims around the world have begun the month of Ramzan with fasting, prayer and almsgiving. They will be fasting from dawn to dusk for the next 29/30 days, till May 2/3, 2022.

It may be of interest for Christian friends to know that the Muslim months follow the lunar calendar. A lunar year is approximately eleven days shorter than the solar year. Thus, the month of Ramzan moves through the seasons. With summer days longer and hot, it will be physically challenging to fast during these days. Over the next few years, as Ramzan moves further into hot and humid months, this challenge may continue to intensify.

The Quran (Q. 2.183-187) says that it is for God and for the benefit of human beings that Muslims fast. Eating, drinking and sexual relations are normal activities of human life. They are natural instincts of people. However, it is believed that God wills that these normal activities be suspended during the fasting hours to discipline oneself. Fasting builds up inner strength to resist temptations that take men and women away from the path of God. One of the greatest Christian theologians of the Western Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas, teaches that fasting is to be practiced, first, to control the lusts of the flesh; secondly, in order that the mind may arise more freely to the contemplation of heavenly things; and thirdly, in order to repent for one's sins and to be converted to God with all one's heart.

The renowned Sufi, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273), describes this differently:

There is nourishment like bread that feeds one part of your life, nourishment like light for another. There are many rules about restraint with the former, but only one rule for the latter.

‘Never be satisfied’. Eat and drink the soul substance as a wick does with the oil it soaks in. Give light to the company.

(Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks, *A Year With Rumi*).

Fasting is a family event. In many Muslims families that I know, every member of the family fasts, except children and elderly persons and perhaps a sick person. The normal rhythm of life is altered as fasting members of the family rise early to eat and drink something before the fasting hour begins, and as they rest a while in the afternoon. They support and encourage one another in the later hours of fasting as the body pines for a drink and food. Often, I have heard from Muslim friends that they fast in order to obey God and to please God.

For Muslims, the month of Ramzan is a month when they take stock of their spiritual lives. It is the time to examine their conscience. They ask themselves how they have spent time and money during the year and if they have they restrained their tongues. They repent for their sins and reorient themselves towards God and learn to grow in God-consciousness or *taqwa*. *Taqwa* is a positive experience of the ‘fear of God’, a genuine effort made to bend one’s will to the will of God. They seek forgiveness from God as they believe God’s forgiveness is superabundant in the month of Ramzan.

Christians who live among Muslims could at least symbolically fast for a day or two to share in the experience of Muslims.

Ramzan is very special for Muslims sine they believe that in 610 CE in this very month the first verses of the Qur’an ‘descended’ upon Muhammad through the agency of Gabriel as guidance for all humanity.

How can a Christian respond to this belief of Muslims that the Qur’an is guidance for all humanity? Is the Qur’an an inspired word of God for Christians? Robert Caspar (d. 2007), one of the eminent Catholic theologians in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations and the founder of the GRIC (Islam-Christian Research Group), in the

light of the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* that recognized ‘a ray of truth’ in other sacred texts, emphasizes that Christians should no longer think, as in former times, that the Qur’an is of purely human origin. However, it must be noted that The Roman Catholic International Theological Commission restricts the use of the term ‘inspiration’ to the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Here, one can turn to scholar-mystics like Blessed Christian De Chergé (d. 1996), who affirms that the Qur’an cultivates within him a taste for God and it was a gift given to him as a Christian. In the spirit of the mystical experience of Blessed Chergé, a Christian could venture into the reading of the Qur’an. Muslims celebrate the night on which the first verses of the Qur’an (Q. 97. 3-5) ‘descended’ as ‘*Laylat al-Qadr*’ (the night of power/destiny). They believe that this night is better than a thousand months. Many Muslims spend this night in prayers with the deep hope that their prayers will be heard.

A spiritual practice prevalent among Muslims during this month one is *tarawih*, the recitation of the Qur’an by a *qari*, a skilled reciter of the book. Many Muslims in South Asia do not understand the meaning of the Qur’an, for the book is in Arabic, which is not their mother-tongue. However, reading the book (even though they may not understand it) or listening to its recitation is believed to help them to engage with what they regard as the word of God.

Another second spiritual practice during this month is *i’tikaf*. Some Muslims stay the last ten days of the month of Ramzan in a mosque, spending time in solitude, praying and meditating on the verses of the Qur’an.

The month of Ramzan also provides Muslims an occasion for community celebration. When the sun dips in the West, Muslims who have fasted break their fast with a light meal, traditionally with a couple of dates and a soft drink, often along with families, friends and neighbors. After prayers, social calls are sometimes made. Numerous Muslim groups have begun making *iftar* an occasion for building Muslim-Christian friendship.

Let us make efforts to meet with Muslims and listen to their experiences. One may also visit a mosque during the *iftar* and participate in the fast-breaking.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must remember that the Church looks upon Muslims with respect, since they worship the One God who is living and self-subsistent and merciful and almighty. Muslims venerate Jesus as a prophet and they honour his mother. Furthermore, they await the Day of Judgment. They have regard for moral life and worship God especially in prayer, almsgiving and fasting (Cf. *Nostra Aetate* no.3). Pope Francis affirms that “Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters, and we must act as such”. Let us, during in this month of Ramzan, pray for spiritual closeness with Muslims so that we can together work for justice and peace in the world.

Your brother in Christ,

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3 April 2022.





# **THE CO-EXISTENCE OF JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN JERUSALEM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

By David Mao SJ

Islamic Studies Association, Delhi and Secretariat for Service of Faith, Delhi jointly organised a webinar on **The Co-existence of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Communities in Jerusalem: Challenges and opportunities** by Father David Mark Neuhaus SJ. Fr. Neuhaus is an Israeli Jesuit priest. He serves as superior of the Jesuits in the Holy Land. He teaches Scripture in various institutions.

Fr. Neuhaus, drawing from his 45 years of experience of living in Jerusalem, presented the picture of Jerusalem that is standing at the cross roads of political conflicts often camouflaged in religious and cultural apparel. Any meaningful dialogue must be rooted in reality, and the context is: 'occupation' of Palestinian lands by Jewish settlers and discrimination practiced by Israeli authorities against Arab Muslims and Christians, he said. Though three faith communities, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, live side-by-side we cannot call it a true co-existence since no real life-giving and life-promoting contacts exist among them.

## **Conflict and Discrimination**

The state of Israel was established in 1948. The west part of Jerusalem is in Israel since 1948. Since 1967 the Eastern part of Jerusalem was forcefully occupied by Israel. Having East Jerusalem as the capital for Palestinians remain an elusive dream at this moment. Further, more and more of Palestinian land is forcefully and illegally occupied in order to settle Jewish communities. Israeli authorities privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians. Israel is exercise control over demographics, political power, and

land relentlessly by dispossessing, confining, forcefully separating and subjugating Palestinians. These deprivations are so severe in Palestinian areas that they amount to the crime against humanity of apartheid.

### **Dialogue born in the manger of Resistance and Resistance to Dialogue**

Muslims, Christians and many Jewish people together are committed to collaborate with one another to fight this occupation and discrimination. In this collective resistance, dialogue takes birth. Many Muslims and many Christians reject any dialogue with Jews. The pressure of living under Israeli occupation and discrimination has generated tendencies in some Muslims and they oppose dialogue and take to extremism and some other Muslims project Islam as the only solution and propagate Islamic idealism and imagine a monochromatic society. The Christians who oppose dialogue with Jews and Muslims either withdrew into ghettos, since for them either the world is too scary or no light on the horizon and settle into 'Christian-only' neighborhood. One might notice here that resistance to occupation and discrimination provides a platform for dialogue between all who promote human dignity and freedom against occupation and discrimination while another form of resistance born of the fatigue of living under occupation that leads either to different forms of terrorism or unrealistic hope of Islam providing the final solution. Does belief in dialogue and engaged coexistence not indicate hope in God and hope in the good will of all who strive for equality and justice in a real need in places like the Holy Land?

### **Pseudo Dialogues: Leading nowhere**

The State of Israel likes to present a narrative about itself as a democracy rooted in tolerance and secularism. The Israeli State sponsors 'interfaith dialogue', where the participants are 'guided'

to discuss commonalities in religions. Similarly some Palestinians seek out anti-Israel voices like the ultra-orthodox groups that oppose Zionism as dialogue partners. Both these forms of dialogue lead nowhere. These dialogues are fruitless since they do not touch the vital issues but tip-toe around issues. They resist recognising the political underpinnings of the problems, by treating this as merely a religious debate. It is like losing a key elsewhere, but search for it where there is light, instead of taking the light into the dark quarters where the key is lost.

### **Real Dialogue: Embers of Hope**

There are efforts from committed social, political and cultural activists, who are historians, writers, film makers, lawyers and students to engage with one another for Justice and Peace. Today they are few, but the hope is that many more may join and push towards a Critical Mass to bring about a new possibility of justice, equality, coexistence and peace.

A culture based co-existence and partnership that take seriously the fact that each group have their roots in Arab/Islamic Civilization. Christians and Jews who originate in the Arab world have contributed much to Muslim Arab civilization. Therefore, reclaiming that cultural identity is the key to see beyond the present predicament.

There is also dialogue sponsored by foreign bodies. Jerusalem needs neutral places where all parties can speak to each other in truth (which may not be possible in a local setting or space).

Fr. Neuhaus ended his lecture with a thought on the life and mission of the citizens of Jerusalem. He said: Jerusalemites need to realise the privilege of living in Jerusalem. It is a dream for those who don't live there. They need to take the responsibility as custodians of Jerusalem city seriously. So, put aside the sectarian division and seriously take the responsibility of stewardship of Jerusalem-

that all can live together in peace rather than in contempt. And thus, promote peaceful co-existence. This must be based on the recognition that each group – Jews, Christians and Muslims –are an essential part of the city and city would not be Jerusalem without any one of them.



“No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness: this is what in this Message I wish to say to believers and unbelievers alike, to all men and women of good will who are concerned for the good of the human family and for its future.

“No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness: this is what I wish to say to those responsible for the future of the human community, entreating them to be guided in their weighty and difficult decisions by the light of man’s true good, always with a view to the common good.

“No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness: I shall not tire of repeating this warning to those who, for one reason or another, nourish feelings of hatred, a desire for revenge or the will to destroy.”

*John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace,  
January 1, 2002*

# ENGAGING WITH OUR MUSLIM NEIGHBORS

By Jaison Lobo SJ

The Islamic Studies Association, Delhi organized a webinar on Indian Muslims in the Modern World. The webinar discussed the Prophet Muhammad's life – A Beautiful Model for Muslims, the universal message of the Quran, and Maulana Wahiddudin Khan: a modern Muslim thinker. Dr. Farida Khanam, Fathima Sarah and Shabina Ali from the CPS (Centre for Peace and Spirituality, Delhi) were the speakers.

CPS International, the Centre for Peace and Spirituality, was founded by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, an Islamic scholar who has adopted peace, spirituality, and inter-faith harmony as his life's mission. This centre helps inquisitive minds, intellectuals, and seekers find their purpose in life.

Having deep experience in the field of Muslim studies, the speakers highlighted the rational need to find the answers to questions about faith. They spoke about being positive in mind and heart to become peacemakers in the world. Speakers mainly highlighted the following points;

## **The message of peace in the Quran:**

Islam is a religion of peace in the fullest sense of the word. Even the Prophet Muhammad preached and served people and lived in peace. He is a model peacemaker. However, many of us have misunderstood some of the concepts of Islam; many understand Islam as a religion of violence. The Quran calls its way 'the paths of peace'. It describes reconciliation as the best policy and states that God abhors any disturbance of the peace.

The Quran presents <universality> as a model characterized by harmony and peace. When God created heaven and earth, he ordered that each part perform its function peacefully without clashing with any other part. For example, the Quran tells us that the sun is not

allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each in its own orbit runs. The speakers gave many examples and references to show Islam's great importance in adhering to peace.

### **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan: an ambassador of peace:**

According to the Maulana, peace and spirituality are two aspects of the one truth. Positive thinking at an individual level is called spirituality; when this positive thinking reaches a collective level in society, it culminates in peace. Maulana has addressed individuals to reengineer their minds to bring about the kind of spiritual revolution in them, which will convert them into positive and peace-loving, spiritual beings. The listeners appreciated the Gandhian thought that finds a place in the reflections of Maulana Khan.

The speakers of this webinar briefly explained the ideas of peace and justice in Islam and explored their more profound significance in the life of a Muslim. They highlighted the different aspects of Prophet Muhammad's life and deeds concerning peace. He always took peaceful circumstances as an opportunity to work for justice and did not attempt to derive justice directly from peace. The life of the Prophet is a reference point, the role model. His speeches demonstrated that he desired to see all humankind from the lens of kindness, modesty, justice, liberty, generosity, and love. Islam believes in peace for the sake of peace. That is, ignore the problems and thus focus concretely on the opportunities for peace. According to Islam, justice is not the direct result of peace. Peace only provides a framework within which we work towards justice.

Affirming and appreciating the CPS's understanding of Peace, Joseph Victor Edwin, SJ drew the attention of the listeners to the teachings of St. Pope Paul VI on the Justice-Peace continuum. In his message for the celebration of the Day of Peace on 1 January 1972, Pope Paul VI alerted his audience with his call: 'If you want Peace, work for Justice'. On that occasion his holiness wrote: "It is difficult, but essential, to form a genuine idea of Peace. It is difficult for one who closes his eyes to his innate intuition of it,

which tells him that Peace is something very human. This is the right way to come to the genuine discovery of Peace: if we look for its true source, we find that it is rooted in a sincere feeling for man. A Peace that is not the result of true respect for man is not true Peace. And what do we call this sincere feeling for man? We call it Justice". Such reflections lead to mutual enrichment of thoughts and thoughts leading to action that promotes justice and co-existence, felt one participant of the seminar.



## **IT IS HOLY GROUND, I REMOVE MY SHOES**

*(Islamic Studies Association, Delhi, Iran Culture House, New Delhi and Who is Hussain, Bengaluru, jointly organized a book-talk on Hussain and the Struggle for Justice: The Epic Story of the Grandson of the Prophet Muhammad Re-told by a Christian Theologian [Contemporary Thoughts Press: London, 2021], authored by Dr. Chris Hewer on 29 March 2022)*

Chris Hewer is a leading figure in the field of Christian-Muslim relations in the United Kingdom and Ireland. He worked at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations in Birmingham and served the Bishop of Birmingham as advisor on interfaith relations. He has engaged with Muslims in the UK and around the world for decades. He is currently involved in teaching and writing.

After the presentation on the book by the author, Prof. Christopher Clohessy (Pontifical Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, Rome) and Prof. Syed Mahdi Alizadeh Musavi, (Professor, University of Religions, Qom, Iran) made brief responses.

(Editor: The following text is based on the response of Prof. Clohessy.)



# HUSSAIN'S LEADERSHIP WITHOUT POLITICAL POWER: LESSONS FOR TODAY

By Christopher Clohessy

I am more than delighted to be part of this conversation about Chris Hewer's publication about Hussain and his struggle for justice. I am delighted that Chris is adding to the rapidly growing body of writings on the person of Hussain, who, through books like Chris' and also through extraordinary works of charity and other such public service done in his name, has progressively become more visible and known outside the circle of just one particular faith family.

I am also delighted because Chris is, in my opinion, a genuine academic. A genuine academic is one who not only thoroughly researches his subject matter and has the information at his finger tips, so to speak, but is also able to make that research accessible to a much wider and diverse audience, rather than to just some small specialist group. That is an enviable gift.

Chris underscores in his work an aspect that is becoming progressively clearer—that if it is true that Hussain is in reality a model of justice and an exemplar of what it means to refuse to compromise the moral or ethical life; if it is true that he is in reality an archetype of that peace that only comes when people work for justice; if it is true that he is in reality a paradigm of integrity, then he has to be all these things for a much broader and much more universal following, because if justice and morality and integrity, taken together, are universal human values and virtues (rather than just 'religious' ones), then Hussain cannot be restricted to one particular religious family or to one particular nation, culture or language group. He is a universal icon.

In his book, *Hussain and the Struggle for Justice: The Epic Story of the Grandson of the Prophet Muhammad Re-told by a Christian Theologian* Chris beautifully accentuates an aspect of this iconic

role in Hussain's leadership without political power. The leadership that the *imamat* implies goes far beyond the temporal political maneuverings of people like Ibn Ziyad and Yazid. Chris emphasizes leadership in the face of tyranny as Hussain takes up his rightful role against tyrants and oppressors of his day and turns the issue around, and so, it becomes tyranny trying to survive in the face of leadership, a leadership which only a son of Ali bin Talib could have provided.

Chris has presented a human Hussain, a loving brother to his sister, the beloved Zainab, and a loving father to his son Zainul Abideen, but most of all, a human being who utterly refused to compromise, no matter what the price. That is an easy thing to say in a podcast or in a conversation like this—that we should not compromise, no matter what the cost. But the reality is far more brutal, and considering how easy, how undemanding, compromise, actually is, how easily you and I easily concede daily even in small ways, it only makes the personality and the figure of Hussain more powerful and attractive.

We should not imagine even for a second that Al Hussain faced things that we will never have to face—tyrants, Yazids in every single generation. Sometimes, just the person living next door or the local bully in the school, or a family member, or someone at the workplace or college are the ones we spend all our lives and energy trying to avoid! The tyrants, the Yazids and the Ibn Ziyads, even live inside of us, in the form of envy, jealousy or vengeance.

We could spend our lives avoiding tyrants and tyrannical things. After all, Al Hussain could have easily not gone to Karbala and gone the other way. But he did not. Some people do spend their lives and energy addressing uncomfortable issues that demand that changes be made. The truth is that nobody has ever found peace by avoiding life. And sometimes, we have to do just what Hussain did—turn around and face reality—face the bullies who need to be challenged in life—and face ourselves, the tyrants within us, the things in us that make everyone around us miserable.

Chris has not failed to underscore Hussain's sufferings, both physical and mental—not only the bodily pain he suffered, but also, for example, the fickleness of his supporters in Kufa and the betrayal by his own associates. Nor has Chris failed to include a crucial but easily omitted acknowledgement of the women who journeyed with Hussain and who, without hesitation, were there with him in all his discomfort, and so, were part of his struggle.

Another factor that makes this book so rich is Chris' own theological training which permits him to make some crucial comments about the real meaning of trust in God, a virtue that is quite justifiably attributed to Hussain. In fact, trust in God is better described in being seen in a single human being like Hussain than in words in a thousand books. In Hussain, this complete trust is driven by the whole Islamic ethic, which insists that the most important relationship in life is our relationship with God, a relationship of trust in God that is characterized by a reverential fear of God and awareness of the *yaum al-hisab*, the Day of Reckoning, when all things will be reckoned before God.

The Hussain that Chris describes for us in the pages of this book, the portrait that he paints with such careful and well imagined strokes of the brush, is not just the model of martyrdom of dying well in the path of God but also a model of living well, living reverently before God and before humanity in every aspect.

Thanks, Chris, for a great contribution to Hussainian scholarship and studies. Thanks for making Hussain increasingly accessible to a wider audience. And thanks for the honour of being able to say a few words about your book!



## **EMILIO PLATTI OP (1943–2021)**

### **A DOMINICAN CATHOLIC PRIEST, AN ISLAMIC SCHOLAR, AND A FRIEND TO ALL**

By Sunil Tirkey OP

Emilio Platti was born on January 2, 1943, in Ronse, Belgium. He passed away on the night of 24-25 October 2021. He was the only child of his parents, an Italian worker who emigrated to Belgium and a Belgian woman of Flemish descent. He was international in his descent and was destined to be a friend of the world through his encounter with people of all walks of life. He was indeed a worthy son of St. Dominic, an Islamic scholar and a friend to all. His academic interests were not confined to Christianity alone. He was always interested in exploring the concept of God in other religions and cultures. The theoretical elaboration and practical experience of a “theology of the destiny of God’s universal salvation,” as Emilio calls it, was the guiding thread of his life as a Dominican friar preacher. This desire was kindled in him by Professor Frank De Graeve SJ (d. 1993), who encouraged him to do a doctoral study focusing on Islam. To pursue his studies on Islam, he visited the Dominican Institute of Oriental Studies (IDEO) in Cairo in 1972. Since then, he had been an active member of IDEO.

At IDEO, the renowned Egyptian Islamic scholar and Dominican friar Georges Anawati (d.1994) recommended him to study the manuscripts of Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī (d. 974), a Christian theologian-philosopher. Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī is now considered the leader of the Aristotelian “Baghdad School” and the representative of an elite group of Jews, Muslims, and Christians who were in constant interaction based on their knowledge of the Greek philosophical heritage, then translated into Arabic. In 1980, Emilio Platti completed his doctoral thesis in Orientalism, entitled ‘The Theology of Incarnation in the Works of Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī: Texts and Study’,

under the supervision of George Anawati and Professor Albert Van Roey. In the 1980s, Emilio taught Arabic at the Institute of Modern Languages (ILT) and the Center for Modern Languages (CLT) in Leuven. In the 1990s, he taught courses on Islam at various universities, such as the Catholic University of Leuven (UCL), the Catholic Institute of Paris (ICP), and the KU Leuven. And in the year 2004, he was promoted to a full professor in the KU Leuven.

In addition to being a researcher, Emilio was a sought-after lecturer and interpreter, as he was fluent in Dutch, Italian, French, English and Arabic. After becoming a professor emeritus in 2008, his activity in research and teaching never remained stagnant; instead, he grew further internationally. For example, he had been a visiting professor at the University of Saint Tomas (UST) in Manila and Dar Comboni: Institute for Arabic Studies in Cairo (Egypt). And he regularly contributed to the journal *Philippiniana Sacra* and the Periodical *MIDEO (Miscellanies of the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo)*. He focused his teaching on Christian-Muslim relations. To promote Christian-Muslim relations, he was also a member of the Union of European Arabists and Islamicists, the Belgian Society for Oriental Studies and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Islam in the Contemporary World. He gave numerous courses and lectures on Christian-Muslim relations. His teaching and writings expressed his ability to popularize his views with clarity. He wrote books about Islam in Dutch, which have been translated into French and English. His books include *Islam... vreemd?* (1996), *Islam, van nature eenvijand?* (2003, translated into English as *Islam, Friend or Foe?*, 2008); and his most recent book *L'islamisme* (2016).

Platti's views on Islam can be found in his interview with Father Charles Delhez, former editor of the newspaper *Dimanche* for the magazine *Rive Dieu*, in 2016. Below are some snippets of the interview:

*Father Emilio Platti, in two words, is Jihadism Islam?*

No. Islamism (Political Islam or Islamic fundamentalism)—and even more so Jihadism— is not Islam. Islamism focuses on the detail, only on one dimension of Islam: the law or the Sharia. It is a literalist application to establish an Islamic state. Its members want to restore Islam, to return to its medieval form. It must be distinguished from Salafism, which also wants to restore the Muslim community of the early days of Medina, when the prophet, with the first companions, fled Mecca (622–632).

*You invite us to “think Islam differently” ...*

Islam must indeed renew its religious discourse and live an “aggiornamento” (internal spiritual renewal and external adaptation of laws and institutions to the changing times), as Catholics did at the time of Vatican II. It is urgent to leave the domain of law, the fatwas, and legal casuistry and find the other dimensions of Islam. Islam has known a great deal of diversity since its first century; Islamism denies it. It reduces Islam to a way of life that becomes unique even for the whole of humanity, forgetting that man creates his history. In a modern state of law, one can no longer live with the casuistry of the Middle Ages, just as, in Europe, one no longer applies the rule of Louis XIV.

*What is the logic of Islamism?*

In Islamism, we are in a perverse logic: God is one; he leads man to salvation, but in a unique way. This discourse is contradicted by modernity and leads to a clash of theologies. It is a monotheism pushed to the extreme, where God crushes the human being. There were two great Muslim schools in the Middle Ages: one insisted on reason and freedom, and the other on predetermination. The latter, adopted by Islamism, comes into sharp conflict with modernity.

*Is Islam humanism?*

Islamism is certainly not, but Islam is. It does indeed give man

hope of salvation. Islam is a biblical religion. The Qur'ān is steeped in the Bible but not in the New Testament. Islam misses out on the revolution brought about by Jesus and St. Paul, the liberation from the law. Arab Christian theologians have opposed Muslim theologians and Qur'ānic predetermination on this very point.

*In the Qur'ān, there are some violent verses. How do you relate to them?*

I have never had much difficulty with these verses. The context allows us to understand that Muḥammad, seeing the violent opposition to him (they wanted to assassinate him), reacted with certain violence, and he won. But one cannot generalize. What Islamism does, precisely, is to generalize and thus enter into a violent logic. On the other hand, devout Muslims realize that this generalization is unwarranted. These violent verses are, in fact, tempered by other verses that Islam has always valued. The tolerant verses are major principles, while the sword verses are about particular events. Islamism reverses this hierarchy.

*Is the meeting between a Muslim and a Christian believer possible?*

Islam is the organization of life by the Sharia. But faith in God is common to us. The whole question is to understand Islam from God and not from Sharia. Then an encounter is possible. Our common faith in God allows us to root ourselves in respect for human beings. Perhaps too much emphasis has been put on theological debate instead of developing the encounter of faith. But we can be together because of our faith in God.

## **Reflection**

Platti's views show that he always believed in Christian-Muslim relations because of our faith in God. Those who knew him considered him an 'eternal seeker' who always lived with the hope for a better understanding between Christians and Muslims. Rightly, the Catholic Church has gradually overcome the conflicting views or misunderstandings about Muslims since the end of the

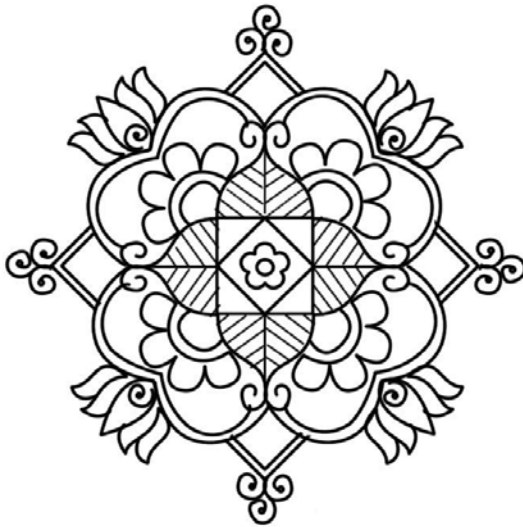
seventeenth century, particularly with the Second Vatican Council. In the wake of steps taken by Pope John XXIII, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council approved the conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, and its promulgation by Pope Paul VI in 1965 became a foundational text for inter-religious dialogue and marked a turning point in bringing about an irreversible change in the attitude of Catholicism towards non-Christian religions. Since then, the Catholic Church and the popes, notably John Paul II and Francis, have been actively involved in understanding the other and have promoted inter-religious dialogue.

Platti was never shy of presenting his views against the critics of Islam who reduced it to a radical or political Islam. Instead, he held that one should not be too quick in reading Islam and making conclusions. Moreover, he stated that reading the Qur'ān, the history of Islam and of the Middle East is much more complex to grasp. Therefore, he always tried to explain Islam and the Middle East with its complexities and nuances. As an Islamic scholar, he presented Islam in the light of Christian-Muslim dialogue. With his study of Islam and his experience of being and working in collaboration with Muslims, he had profound respect for Islam, Muslims and their rich traditions, just like some Christians, popes and monks, among whom St. Francis of Assisi is well known. He appreciated the diversity found in religions in their religious practices. He was always inspired by a passion for concrete people: Christians in the Middle East, Muslims worldwide and ordinary people. For example, whenever he visited Cairo, he would always meet his friends (Christians and Muslims) of humble backgrounds coming from poor quarters in Cairo. He listened to them, shared in their joys and struggles, and was one with them, both young and old.

In August 2021, a few months before he passed away, he insisted on coming to Cairo to attend the wedding of Bassem, the youngest son of his dear Muslim friend Mahmud, who had been a support staff at our priory in Cairo for more than forty years.



Like a religious anthropologist, he too had special interests in popular devotional gatherings around Sufi saints. He would observe and do a careful study of Sufi practices around the tombs of Muslim saints, which is a significant part of Islam. As a Dominican friar, he loved his confreres, especially the young ones, and was always available to render his help. For instance, whenever young Dominicans came to Leuven for studies, he would take them to exotic places in Belgium. Finally, one can say that Platti was a man for all and a friend of all without any distinction.



## **PROFESSOR J.S. BANDUKWALA:**

### **A GREAT CITIZEN, EDUCATOR, SOCIAL ACTIVIST, AND DEMOCRATIC DISSENTER**

By Lancy Lobo

The inter-religious dialogue we speak about is more effective at the dialogue of life, rather than at the level of doctrinal tenets, beliefs and liturgies. Indeed, we need more of inter-religious dialogue especially of life and work in a multi-religious country like India.

J.S. Bandukwala, a Bohra Muslim, had been an elder brother to me ever since I met him twenty years ago, when he was looking for a highly credible trustee for the Centre for Culture and Development, Vadodara, a social science research centre. It was Professor Priya vadan Patel of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, who introduced me to him. He was the founding trustee of the Centre and remained an honored trustee until he could no longer physically move out of his house.

We met often, sometimes weekly, and talked on the phone regularly. Over the phone, his conversations usually began with the sentence ‘What can I do, my brother?’ We discussed and shared a lot of issues: personal, familial, and political. A highly respected academic, he studied at St. Xavier’s School and College, Mumbai and obtained his doctorate in physics from the USA. On receiving his doctoral degree, he met a Catholic nun at a meeting who asked him about his future plans. She told him, “Go back to India and serve your people”. He took that counsel seriously, came back to Vadodara and taught physics at the M.S. University, Baroda until his retirement.

In fact, his retirement was no retirement. He was a Gandhian at heart and fought for the rights of Dalits and tribals. He was a liberal Muslim and inclusive in his values. It was no wonder that he had friends from every religion and every strata of society. A God-fearing person, he prayed, read the Quran and also the Bible during

the month of Ramzan. He may not have been pietistic but certainly he lived by the core values of Islam. He was a reformer in his own Bohra Muslim sect and often faced the ire of the authorities therein.

Prof. Bandukwala was as tough as stone when it came to fighting injustice but soft as a flower to the downtrodden. His mannerisms were extremely refined and delicate. He believed in dialogue even with his opponents. It was two days after he went to address an RSS organized gathering that his house was vandalized and burnt down in the year 2002. He and his daughter barely escaped with their lives as a couple of friends protected them. Barkha Datt's interview on NDTV with Bandukwala and his daughter on the above issue brought tears to many.

Politically, he was constantly asking, "Do we want a Gandhian India or a Godse's India"? As a matter of fact, he was rather disheartened about the political developments in the country. He read much and had great regard for Abraham Lincoln. Prof. Bandukwala wrote letters often to newspaper editors and had a collection of several hundreds of such letters. Till he was physically able, he often wrote articles on critical issues in the *Indian Express*.

He was the PUCL president of Gujarat unit and fought many a battles against atrocities and injustices meted out especially to the poor. It was a known fact that he took up the cause of the residents of Kalyannagar in Vadodara, a slum evicted by the Corporation, and he saw to it that they got alternative housing to move into for living. A compassionate man, he very often dragged himself to government offices despite his ill health.

His reflections on his life and changes in the mainstream society made him focus on his Muslim community, which was less literate and poor. He often said that education is the only highway for Muslims as they cannot rely on the Government sources. He began a Trust called *Zidnillma* where he collected yearly donations both as *Zakat* and *Lilla* to the tune of 90 lakhs during Ramzan and invited applications for scholarships from all over Gujarat. He

personally ploughed through the applications and selected students for scholarships from his Trust. This kept him busy and engaged for several years.

When his daughter married a Hindu, he faced flak from his own community. However, he weathered the storm and upheld the values of the Republic and the freedom of choice of the individual.

He was often invited to speak to people from all backgrounds and he willingly went to these functions. The Christian seminary at Vadodara, Sevasi, invited him to give the inaugural address. The Centre for Culture and Development, Vadodara, whose founding Trustee he was and continued for nearly twenty years dedicated its conference hall in his name. Whenever anyone required his assistance and service, he was always available. We at the centre always celebrated his birthday, but lately it was celebrated at his house where he was confined. He passed away on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 2022 at the age of 77 years.

He lived alone as both his children were in the USA but communicated with them regularly. Bandukwala was known for his simplicity and was hospitable to all, especially to the poor, for whom he was always available. His loss of hearing did not deter him from being in touch with visitors. For the last year or two, he was a victim of Covid-19, which debilitated him and he was confined to his home completely and lately he was hospitalized.

*It was not very long ago that I had typed and sent him a few very inspiring verses from the Quran which he had given me in his handwriting some years back. He told me, "Now I am asking Allah to call me home". It is with anguish that I say that I have lost a great friend, an elder brother and a great citizen of this country who respected its Constitution and lived by it. May he rest in peace, and I know that he will most certainly, for a life exceedingly well lived. But, he may not be at peace at the direction in which the Republic is forced to move.*

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**Pope Francis and Shiite Muslim leader  
Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf,  
Iraq, Saturday, March 6, 2021.**

