

# Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



*Called to Heal Wounds: Pope Francis and Islam*  
*Pope Francis and Muslims*  
*A Catholic Priest Among Muslims: What I have Learned*  
*A Catholic Priest at an Islamic University in Indonesia*  
*The Heart and Soul of Creating Safe Spaces*  
*My Journey To Dialogue*  
*My Experience with my Muslim Neighbours and Friends*  
*Eid Mubarak!*

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**ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

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

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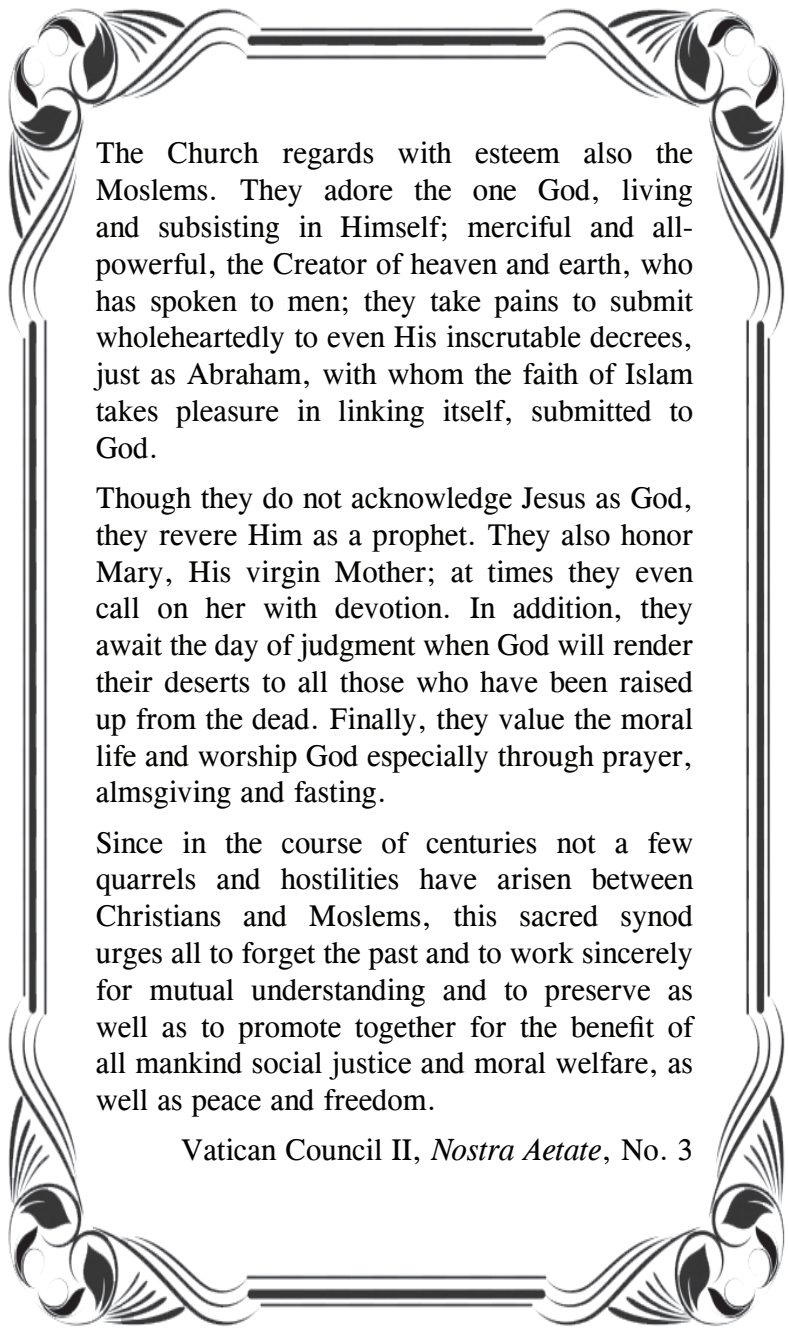
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The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable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

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

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

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

# Editorial

We live in a religiously plural world. Today, more than ever before, we are deeply aware of this diversity. This awareness raises important theological questions such as: What it is to be a Christian in a world that is characterised by diverse religious traditions? What are the criteria for theological interaction with peoples' beliefs and faiths?

Today, more than any time before in history, people move from one part of the world to another for work and leisure. In this context, meeting people from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds has become increasingly commonplace. Being a citizen of a global village requires one to be familiar with the religions and cultures of other people and to respect and learn from them. In the last two centuries or so, scholars have amassed a large store of details concerning the beliefs, rituals, and faith practices of the world's faiths. In the light of this knowledge, being ignorant of one's neighbours' faith can only be regarded as culpable ignorance. This ignorance cannot be condoned when one comes to face theological problems with regard to relations between people of different faiths. In addition to this, there is renewed mission awareness among different faiths. Thus, religious pluralism is forced on the Christian mind and heart today, calling for a response that necessitates changes in our lifestyles and practices.

With *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church opened a new era for dialogue with other faiths. Today, she advocates a fourfold dialogue with people of other faiths. These four dimensions are as follows: Firstly, 'The dialogue of life', where people from different faith backgrounds strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their

human problems and concerns. Secondly, 'The dialogue of action', in which Christians and others collaborate, through joint ventures, on common projects. Thirdly, 'The dialogue of religious experience', where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches with one another and respectfully listen to one another. Finally, 'The dialogue of theological exchange', wherein specialists seek to deepen their understandings of their respective religious heritages and appreciate one another.

St. Ignatius had evolved a new way of being Jesuit and introduced into the Church a new way of being religious. He presented his followers with a large Vision and Mission, namely, to become active partners with Jesus to re-create a *Kingdom community* on earth. The Jesuit charism *expanded* from an initial focus on promotion of faith to promotion of *faith that does justice* (GC 32). GC 34 introduced another dimension, with the focus on *inculturation and inter-religious dialogue* as a non-negotiable constituent of the Jesuit charism and mission. GC 35 added commitment to engage in promoting *reconciliation and community building* as a mission imperative.

The Jesuit tradition and ethos had, in the past, inspired us to respond with great courage and heroism to the *Magis* dimensions of our charism. Today, we are challenged, invited and, in fact, *mandated* by our charism and tradition to think and vision *large* and to cross our small borders by exploring new and larger frontiers. Pope Francis is a beautiful model for us in this regard. Through his servant leadership, he demonstrates that interfaith dialogue demands the interlocutor to be faithful to their religious identity and reject any instrumentalization of religion that foments hatred, division, terrorism and discrimination. He explains that authentic religiosity never separates adoration of God from love for our brothers and sisters. Finally, he indicates a way for religions to contribute to the good of our societies,

recalling the need for commitment to the cause of peace and responding to the problems and concrete needs of the least, the poor, the defenseless.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Pope Francis practices the four forms of dialogue mentioned above in an authentic manner by honouring God and dignifying the human person. May we all be inspired by his example in this regard.

We wish all readers peace and joy.

**Joseph Victor Edwin SJ**



# **CALLED TO HEAL WOUNDS: POPE FRANCIS AND ISLAM**

By Michael D. Calabria OFM

In this essay, I would like to share some of my impressions of Pope Francis's interactions with Muslim communities worldwide. What I say here is obviously only partial and is not the final word because, thanks be to God, Pope Francis is still with us and he continues to work tirelessly for peace in the world, for peace among and between all peoples, so that all peoples of faith may live in peace with one another, for the good of one another and for the good of the world.

I have titled my article 'Called to Heal Wounds', this being a phrase that St. Francis of Assisi used as an important component of his ministry. He said to the brothers that we are called to heal wounds, and I think very much that this is Pope Francis's understanding of his own ministry in the world—to heal wounds within the Church and between the Church and other faith communities.

When we look at the pontificate of Pope Francis since he was elected as pope (in 2013), we note that he has travelled to numerous countries with large Muslim populations, if not Muslim majorities (including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Israel, Jordan, The Palestinian Territories, Bosnia & Herzegovina, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Albania, the Central African Republic, Egypt and Morocco). Of course, on all of these trips he was not simply reaching out to Muslims alone. He was reaching out to Christians in those countries as well. Whenever possible, he took the opportunity to meet with faith leaders of various religious traditions in those countries, including with Muslims. His critics might argue that in doing this he was simply being 'politically correct', but when one looks at the life of Pope Francis in its totality, we see that this



interest in engaging Muslims worldwide preceded his election as pope. It goes back to the time when he was Auxiliary Bishop in Buenos Aires, in Argentina.

At that time, in the 1990s, there were violent attacks by terrorists against Israeli-affiliated institutions in Buenos Aires. This led to a wave of Islamophobia in Buenos Aires and Argentina as a whole. Troubled by all this, Bishop Bergoglio (later Pope Francis) wanted to do something about the situation. And so, he began to meet, on a regular basis, with Muslim leaders in Buenos Aires. He had regular meetings with Omar Aboud, from the Islamic Centre there. Omar Aboud said something very interesting about Bishop Bergoglio at that time—that he had learnt about Islamic mercy from him:

Bergoglio was the one who showed us and taught us about dialogue...How can a Muslim learn from a Catholic priest? I learned the dynamic of Islamic mercy through his words...From Bergoglio it was a whole lesson in the exercise of mercy, in improving your view of the other by putting yourself in their shoes.

That is a profound statement for a Muslim to make—that he learnt Islamic mercy from the actions of a Catholic priest. This concept of mercy is obviously one that has characterized Pope Francis's pontificate, but we see it already in his time as Bishop in Buenos Aires, which came to the attention of Muslims there. It was also at this time that Bishop Bergoglio co-authored a book, titled *On Heaven and Earth*, with a Jewish rabbi, Abraham Skorka. In the Introduction of the book we read:

Dialogue is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It supposes that we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their

opinion and their proposals. Dialogue entails a warm reception and not a preemptive condemnation. To dialogue, one must lower the defenses, to open the doors of one's home and to offer warmth. (*Introduction, xiv*)

So, we already see, even before his election as pope, Bishop Bergoglio's understanding of how he is to evangelize in the world—by opening up his heart, by opening up his 'home', by opening up his mind, to the other person, with the idea that we engage in interreligious dialogue beginning with the assumption that the other person of faith has something to share with us and that we need not be afraid of it and that we need to listen and open our heart and mind to them. That is really what interreligious dialogue from Pope Francis's perspective is all about.

In 2013, on being elected as pope, Bishop Bergoglio chose the name 'Francis' for himself. Because of his Jesuit identity, many people assumed that he was taking the name from Francis Xavier, but Pope Francis quickly clarified for us the reasons for choosing the name 'Francis'. He had taken the name from St. Francis of Assisi. He explained that St. Francis was a man of the poor, and Pope Francis wanted the Church to be a Church of the poor. St. Francis was someone who loved the creation, and by all means in this day and age, we need to inculcate and establish a love for the creation since we are doing irreparable damage to the Earth. And, finally, Pope Francis said that St. Francis had been a man of peace, and in this he was alluding particularly to that remarkable meeting that took place in the year 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, when St. Francis met with Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil in the midst of horrible warfare. These two men of faith were able to look at one another not as enemies, not as people from different cultures and different lands, but through the eyes of faith, recognizing in each other true signs of faith.

This is particularly inspiring for Pope Francis and it has really become an integral part of his pontificate.

Pope Francis undoubtedly was drawing from St. Francis's example but also from St. Francis's words. When St. Francis returned to Europe after his meeting with the Sultan, he wrote a rule for friars, and in the chapter in which he talks about the friars on mission, he exhorted the friars not to engage in arguments or disputes but to "be subject to every human for God's sake," and to acknowledge that they are Christians.

From the perspective of both St. Francis and Pope Francis, the concept of being on mission is not to engage in arguments. It is not to provoke the other. Rather, it is to be subject to the person we are evangelizing by the example of our own lives. St. Francis says, we use words only when we see "it pleases the Lord". That is why we need to undergo a discernment process before we actually resort to words.

Very early in his pontificate, in November 2013, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation titled *Evangelii Gaudium*, which was about the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world. This remarkable document shows quite clearly that at the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis saw himself as not only speaking to the Catholic community worldwide but to all people of faith worldwide.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis spoke, among other issues, about prayer. Now, ostensibly, he was speaking to the Catholic community about prayer but he also mentions Muslims:

[...] it is admirable to see how Muslims, both young and old, men and women, make time for daily prayer and faithfully take part in religious services. Many of them also have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God. They also

acknowledge the need to respond to God with an ethical commitment and with mercy towards those in need.

This is really quite remarkable. Here, Pope Francis is ostensibly exhorting Catholic people, young and old, men and women, to make a more concerted effort to pray and commit their lives to God and, in this regard, he raises up faithful Muslims as an example for them to be inspired by. This is truly remarkable.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis also indicates the danger of generalizing from Islamist extremism and terrorism to Muslims generally. He said:

Faced with disconcerting episodes of violent fundamentalism, our respect for true followers of Islam should lead us to avoid hateful generalizations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Qu'ran are opposed to every form of violence. (253)

One of Pope Francis's early trips during his pontificate was to the Holy Land, in May 2014. There, he really hoped that his visit would help to advance and strengthen good and cordial relations between Muslims and Christians. At this time, he made a visit to a wall, built by the Israelis, that snakes through the West Bank and that really presents great hardships for Palestinians, preventing them from easy access to educational and medical facilities, markets, etc. Pope Francis clearly sees this wall as problematic for peace and justice. He actually went to a portion of the wall and prayed there. He also went to the Al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, where he met with Muslim leaders, whom he addressed as 'brothers'—which is something that, I think, comes from his real affinity for St. Francis and the Franciscan tradition. He also spoke about 'this sacred space', acknowledging that the ground that he walked on is holy ground. Additionally, he spoke consistently

about ‘our father Abraham’—linking Jews, Christians and Muslims through the figure of Abraham. We see this same commitment to the understanding of Abrahamic traditions during the same visit, when Pope Francis went to the Western Wall and prayed there with Jews and Muslims.

Pope Francis seeks to bring the Abrahamic traditions together, in a very particular way. It is not that he is uninterested in other faith traditions, but he sees that particularly in today’s world, especially in the Middle East, it is vital that Christians, Jews and Muslims understand that they are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham.

In November 2014, Pope Francis visited Turkey. He went to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, where the imam offered a prayer and Pope Francis respectfully prayed alongside him, in his own fashion and in his own tradition.

In January 2015, on the way to the Philippines, Pope Francis stopped in Sri Lanka and met with representatives of that country’s religious communities. There, he said something that is really vital for today’s world as far as interfaith relations are concerned:

Certainly, such dialogue will accentuate how varied our beliefs, traditions and practices are. But if we are honest in presenting our convictions, we will be able to see more clearly what we hold in common. New avenues will be opened for mutual esteem, cooperation and indeed friendship.

I have to say that this is very much the way that I personally approach interfaith relations. We know that people of different faiths have differences in the way we speak about God and worship God. That much is clear. But because we have not engaged in deep conversations, what is less clear is how much we actually share in common. For Pope Francis, I think,

interreligious dialogue needs to affirm that common ground, based on our common humanity and the common faith that ultimately, we pray to the One God, who created us all. We use different names for the One God and have different forms of worship, but we are, in fact, bound together as sons and daughters of the One God.

Towards the end of the year 2015, Pope Francis proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (8<sup>th</sup> December, 2015—20<sup>th</sup> November, 2016). He said that this would be a holy year of mercy. Here again he showed himself as not only a spiritual leader to Catholics but, in fact, as a spiritual leader to all peoples. In the document *Misericordiae Vultus* in which he proclaimed this jubilee of mercy, Pope Francis says:

There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes...Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are "Merciful and Kind." This invocation is often on the lips faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open.

Again, as he had done earlier, with *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis here draws examples from Islam in order to explicate for the Catholic community what prayer and mercy mean for many followers of Islam, and he sees that they can inspire Catholics as well.

Amongst all of the world leaders, Pope Francis has been one of the most vocal in speaking out against the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. In February 2017, referring to the Rohingyas, he said: They have been suffering, they are being tortured and killed, simply because they uphold their

Muslim faith. Would that many other world leaders had the courage and conviction that Pope Francis has to speak out against this horrible genocide.

In May 2015, Pope Francis promulgated his remarkable encyclical *Laudato Si* ('On Care For Our Common Home'). Again, this was very much inspired by the example of St. Francis, with the title of the encyclical itself being taken from a canticle of St. Francis. Among the truly remarkable things about this encyclical in which Pope Francis talks about creation and ecological justice is that he cites (in a footnote) a Muslim Sufi author in order to highlight similarities or commonalities between Islamic and Christian spiritualities of creation. Here, he appeals to the mysticism that runs commonly through the Islamic and Christian traditions. Again, he highlights how much Christians and Muslims have in common, with Christian and Muslim traditions both stressing creation as having been brought into being by God and reflecting God, thus highlighting the need for human beings to take care of it.

In 2015, Pope Francis visited the USA and went to the Ground Zero Memorial in New York, the site of the attacks of 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001, in which thousands of people were killed. He held a prayer service at this location, very remarkably bringing together representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities as well. He made an extraordinary speech there, and I think it is really important for us to hear it again today, for its contemporary relevance. In his speech, he said:

For all our differences and disagreements, we can experience a world of peace. In opposing every attempt to create a rigid uniformity, we can and must build unity on the basis of our diversity of languages, cultures and religions, and lift our voices against everything which would stand in the way of such unity. Together we are called to say “no” to every attempt to

impose uniformity and “yes” to a diversity accepted and reconciled. This can only happen if we uproot from our hearts all feelings of hatred, vengeance and resentment.

These words are of immense contemporary relevance, at a time when we are witnessing terrible divisions between different ethnicities and faith communities.

In November 2015, Pope Francis visited the Central African Republic. There was a terrible war that that was really based on politics but was expressed along sectarian lines, between Christians and Muslims. There were really heinous attacks by Christians on Muslims. Pope Francis went there and facilitated a peace agreement between Christians and Muslims. During his visit, he said:

Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters. We must therefore consider ourselves and conduct ourselves as such... Together, we must say no to hatred, no to revenge and no to violence, particularly that violence which is perpetrated in the name of a religion or of God himself. God is peace, God salam.

Again here, Pope Francis was trying to draw commonalities between good, faithful people in both the Christian and Islamic faith communities. On Holy Thursday 2016, Pope Francis did something remarkable, something that we might imitate in our own worship. He gathered people from different faith communities on that day and washed their feet. When asked about this practice of gathering non-Catholics, he said: We are Muslims, Hindus, Copts, Evangelicals and Catholics, but we are all brothers and children of the same God who wants us to live in peace, integrated.

In 2016, Pope Francis met Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, one of the world’s leading centres for Sunni



Islamic learning. At this time, details of their meeting were not disclosed, but I love what Pope Francis said when asked what the meeting was about. He said, “The meeting is the message.”

I think this is something that we could also say about the meeting, several centuries ago, between St. Francis and the Sultan since we do not know what happened at that meeting, but we do know that there was a peaceful meeting in which the two people respected, and perhaps even admired, one another. That coming together of two individuals, first in 1219 and then in 2016, really sends out a very powerful message as far as Muslim-Christian relations, or inter-community relations more generally, are concerned.

Pope Francis thereafter visited Egypt (in April 2017), and what I loved particularly about the picture that was made for the visit was that it contained the image of a crescent (standing for Islam) and a cross (standing for Christianity) together. This was drawn from a flag that had been used at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Egyptian nationalists (who included both Muslims and Christians) working to free Egypt from British colonial domination to indicate the unity of country’s Muslims and Christians in their struggle against colonialism. In the picture issued on the occasion of Pope Francis’s visit to Egypt, the cross and the crescent together signified the unity needed among Muslims and Christians in contemporary Egypt.

Shortly before Pope Francis began his visit to Egypt, there was a terrorist attack on a Coptic church in the country, in which a large number of people were killed. Pope Francis does not excuse the terrorism that is perpetrated in the name of any religion. He condemns all forms of terrorism, but he is aware of the need to distance true believers from these acts of terrorism. He has said that if some people who call

themselves Muslims have engaged in terrorism, the fact is also that some people who call themselves Christians have also engaged in terrorism. Thus, terrorism thus is not something specific to any one particular religion or religious community.

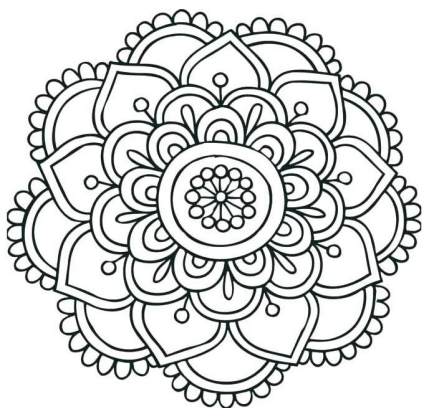
During his visit to Egypt, Pope Francis visited Al-Azhar, where he said something that I think is very important—that interreligious dialogue is needed “in order to transform competition into cooperation”. In other words, people of different faiths should see each other as true sisters and brothers, not as adversaries, foes or competitors.

In 2019, Pope Francis travelled to Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, where again he met with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and together they issued *The Document on Human Fraternity*, which lays out the common values that Christians and Muslims share, and our common concerns as well. It really provides a model for Christian-Muslim dialogue.

In October 2020, Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. It is centred on fraternity and social friendship. At the very beginning of this encyclical, Pope Francis invoked the example of St. Francis and says: There is an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik al-Kamil. It is clear that the Document on Human Fraternity, jointly issued by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, was the foundation for *Fratelli Tutti* and that all of this is built on this example of St. Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kamil.

Fairly recently—in March 2021—Pope Francis visited Iraq, where he met with Muslim leaders as well as Christians, recognizing that if Iraq is to rebuild and go forward after a terrible war, it is necessary that Christians and Muslims work

together to create peace. I loved the poster that was created for the Pope's visit, in which these words of Imam Ali were quoted: People are of two kinds, they are either your brothers in faith or your equals in humanity. I think Pope Francis very much reflects these words in his pontificate, not only with regard to Muslims, but with people of all faiths.



## POPE FRANCIS AND MUSLIMS

By Thomas Machuki

Pope Francis continues calling upon the Christian faithful to appreciate the spirituality of Muslims as they live it out in their personal lives and have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God. His encouragement of positive relations between Christianity and Islam is essential for unity and peace-building because their shared faith is the foundation of dialogue and cooperation. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis talks about friendship and a culture promoting good relations for true peace and harmony as one God's people. It is a spiritual effort to live in peace with God and one's neighbor.

Pope Francis follows the Second Vatican Council's deep conviction that the way to progress in this relationship will be through human fraternity, understanding, and encounter. He encourages Christians to stop analyzing Islam from the outside and to engage with Muslims to have a glimpse of their faith life. Pope Francis inspires all people of goodwill to work assiduously in order to enter into dialogue of life to promote understanding and to experience solidarity. He thinks that partnership positively affects people's lives. He hopes that what Christians and Muslims possess in common serves to unite them in an ever closer way in an authentic fraternity. His courageous effort to encourage dialogue with Muslims seems to be bearing fruit.

In Baku, Azerbaijan, before the Sheikh of the Muslims of the Caucasus and representatives of other religious communities in the country, Pope Francis recalled the excellent task of religions accompanying men and women. The focus is looking for the meaning of life, helping people understand that the limited capacities of human beings and the goods of this

world must never become absolutes. In addition, the Pope highlighted that the task of religions in helping “to discern the good and put it into practice through deeds, prayer, and diligent cultivation of the inner life. Thus, for instance, during conflict, religions must be dawns of peace, seeds of rebirth amid the devastation of death, echoes of dialogue resounding unceasingly, paths to encounter, and reconciliation reaching even those places where official mediation efforts seem not to have borne fruit.

Pope Francis not only talks the talk about the importance of “fraternity and social friendship”, he walks the walk by actively pursuing these values through cooperation with Muslim leaders. He has been in a very positive and quite brave public relationship with the Sunni leader, the grand imam of *al-Azhar*. Pope Francis’ dialogue with the grand imam exemplifies in action the encyclical’s central theme of solidarity and interfaith collaboration. In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Francis refers to the influence of the grand imam who may bring a significant advance in Christian-Muslim relations, for the Pope has learned much about Christian-Muslim solidarity through his interactions (nos. 29, 136, 192, and 285). I recognize that the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is a sign of hope that mutual understanding between great religious traditions is possible despite the violent divisions between faith communities we witness too frequently. It is significant the Pope and the grand imam have achieved a shared commitment to the common humanity of all people to work for solidarity across the conflicts dividing today’s world that include religious disputes.

Pope Francis proclaims that efforts to overcome the world’s conflicts should follow the path of dialogue, adopt a code of cooperation, and follow a method of mutual understanding (no. 285). It is clear that if the world’s religious communities were to follow this path, they would live in fidelity to their own

deep beliefs and contribute to peace and justice beyond differences and respect the respective identities of Christians and Muslims.

Pope Francis' continuous dialogue with Muslims hopes to bring consolation, healing and peace to people, especially those devastated by war and poverty. It is a special call to Christians and Muslims to remember that creation symbolizes peace and harmony. Peace, harmony, goodness, and wellbeing come to people as gifts of God in design. The Pope insists that the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves means not only loving those who are close to us but challenges all religions to expand their frontiers and to put love into action across both religious and national barriers (nos. 83-85).

In Egypt, he had explained that “no incitement to violence will guarantee peace” and that “to prevent conflicts and build peace, we must spare no effort in eliminating situations of poverty and exploitation where extremism more easily takes root.” At Ur (Iraq), he reiterated similar words, that “There will be no peace without sharing and acceptance, without a justice that ensures equity and advancement for all, beginning with those most vulnerable unless peoples extend a hand to other peoples.” He recalled that if a man “excludes God, he ends up worshipping the things of this earth,” inviting him to raise “his eyes to Heaven” and defining as “true religiosity,” that which worships God and loves one’s neighbor. 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 the traditional birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, father of their faiths. The pontiff asked leaders to “denounce violations of human dignity and human rights, to expose attempts to justify every form of hatred in the name of religion, and to condemn these attempts as idolatrous

caricatures of God.” Therefore, the proper relationship between God and humankind and nature is at the very heart of God’s creation. Everyone must care for every other person in the community.

In conclusion, Francis explains a need for authentic religiosity, one that never separates adoration of God from love for our brothers and sisters. He shows us that Christianity can help move us toward the solidarity and peace we long to achieve. Interfaith dialogue can contribute to the good of our societies, recalling the need for a commitment to the cause of peace and responding to the problems and concrete conditions of the least, the poor, the defenseless. Therefore, Muslims and Christians can learn from each other and the world the need for a new way of looking at the problematic realities that confront us.



## **A CATHOLIC PRIEST AMONG MUSLIMS: WHAT I HAVE LEARNED**

By Tom Michel SJ

I want to share some of the things that I have learnt during the many years that I have lived and worked with Muslims.

I am a Catholic priest and a Jesuit. For the past 40 years or so, I spent my time involved with Muslims. About half of this time I spent teaching Islamic Studies at Christian and secular universities, and around half the time, teaching Christian theology in Muslim institutions—in Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, Libya and Kirghizstan. I have sometimes lived in places where I was almost the only Christian and where for the Muslim students that I taught I was the first Christian that they had ever met.

It was actually at the suggestion of Muslims that I got into this work of Christian-Muslim dialogue. This began when I was in Indonesia, where I was teaching. I landed up in Indonesia because I was ordained a diocesan priest at St Louis in the USA. I was working in a parish, and my bishop had been at a council with a bishop from Indonesia who asked my bishop if he could send him a priest to teach English at a seminary and a teachers' college that we have in Indonesia. So, I went to Indonesia and began teaching English. I really loved it there and wanted to stay. And so, my bishop suggested that it might be a good idea if I joined a religious order. And so, I joined the Jesuits in Indonesia, and that is how I happen to be a member of the Indonesian Province of the Jesuits.

When I was in Indonesia, my provincial advised me to start asking around, to talk to people and see what the needs of the Province were and see how I could contribute. So, I began doing that, was asking different people, including my students. About half my students were Muslims, almost half



were Christians, and the rest were Hindus and Buddhists. Some of my Muslim students had an idea. They said, “Why don’t you study Islam? That way you can help Christians and others to come to a better understanding of what Islam is about, and you can also help Muslims to know Christianity better.”

I liked the idea. In the days and weeks that followed, I spent lot of time thinking about this and praying. I got my copy of the document of the Second Vatican Council. It was still a new copy, because the Council had only ended about four years previously. I opened it up to see what the Council said about Muslims.

There were three phrases in the document that really struck me and stayed with me during the forty years since. This was in 1969.

The first one said that the Church looks upon Muslims with esteem. I thought, “We do?” I had nothing against Muslims. I did not know any Muslims before I went to Indonesia, but I did not know that we Catholics were supposed to esteem Muslims and why. And from this I got an idea, my first clue really of what direction my life would take: I would try to find out the reasons for this esteem that we should have for Muslims and I would learn to communicate this esteem to others.

The second phrase in the document that struck me was that Muslims worship with us (Christians) the One God. I had never really averted to the implications of Muslims and Christians together worshipping the same God. How can we be enemies, how can we see each other as rivals, if we are both standing in worship before the One God?

But it is the third phrase I came across in the document that I think has had the most influence on my subsequent life—and these were the final words in the statement *Nostra*

Aetate about Muslims. It says that even though in the course of history there have been many conflicts between Muslims and Christians, this synod (meaning, the Council) urges all to move beyond the past and to work together for the common good in the areas of peace, social justice, moral values and human freedom.

Now, the implications of this are really sweeping! When you think of it, it means that Muslims and Christians together have a task, a common task in our modern world, to work together in four key areas of modern life—to build peace together, to work together for social justice, to defend moral values together and to work together for true human freedom.

This was a project I wanted to be part of, and it pretty well describes what I have been doing for the past forty years or so. My life has been rather unusual for a Catholic priest, in that I have spent most of my life in dialogue with Muslims, sharing life with them and reflecting on relations as two communities of faith standing before the One God.

I am a product of the Second Vatican Council, including its decrees on interfaith dialogue. Maybe I would have been open-minded with regard to Muslims even without having read what the documents of the Council said about Muslims—I already liked my Muslim students before having read those documents. But I don't think I would have come to the idea of seeing Christian-Muslim dialogue as a kind of mission or of thinking of a common task for Muslims and Christians in the world building or esteem for Islam on my own.

### **Things I've Learnt**

The most basic thing I have learnt I think in these forty years is that Islam is a faith. It is a way of living before God, of responding to the daily commands of the Creator. We will never understand Muslims and what is happening in

the Muslim world unless we realise that for Muslims, God stands at the centre. God is the driving force of all that occurs. Whatever constructs we come up with about Islam as a civilisation, as a sociological phenomenon, as a cultural tradition, as a historical movement, or as a geopolitical force, they will all miss the mark and not address Muslims' identity and self-understanding if we forget the Muslims' commitment to God as the centre of human life and as the formative core of human community.

Consider the following example to illustrate this point. Like me, I think that many of you watched the protests in Egypt unfold last year. What struck me as I watched the live coverage on TV was how at noon time and mid afternoon at the call to prayer, these tens and thousands of protesters, without discussion or fuss or trying to make a statement, silently formed lines across the Tahrir Square in Cairo, faced Makkah and worshipped God. The police who were patrolling the Square to maintain order lined up side by side with the protestors and performed the prayer. Afterwards, the protestors stood up and resumed their claim to their democratic rights. The interesting thing is that they were aware of their obligations to God even in the midst of their calls for dignity and justice.

## **Challenges**

Now, what I have said so far is very positive, but I cannot pretend that there are not serious problems and real challenges to our living together. The worldwide Muslim community, has like its Christian counterpart (and, in fact all human communities), its hypocrites and its miscreants. It has its share of those who are motivated by anger and resentment. It has those who believe that they, and only they, possess truth and that others are in error. But what religious community, including our own does not possess such people? Moreover, I am aware that some of the grievances that Muslims feel towards Christians, towards Western nations are justified. Resentment does not arise out

of nothing. It comes from people feeling that they have been robbed, that others have imposed their will on them and have treated their most sacred beliefs with disrespect. So, if some Christians feel that Muslims are a problem but don't realise that equally we are a problem, too, then I think real harmony and understanding will never be achieved.

I have also learnt through the years that not everyone wants interfaith harmony. Some Muslims, like some Christians, are violent, and some of them try to offer religious justification for violence. We should be careful not to exaggerate, though. In real life, those who support and follow the path of violence are extremely few. Still, I had good Christian friends who were proponents of dialogue who were killed. But I also acknowledge the heroism of a 26-year old Muslim clerk, father of two, who died removing a bomb from a church in Indonesia, when tens of thousands of Muslims in his Islamic youth organisation had committed themselves to protecting Christian places of worship.

This was in 1998. Somebody sent a threat that there would be a bomb in one of the churches before Christmas. This was to frighten the Christians. So, the largest Islamic youth organisation in the country, that of the Nahdatul Ulama, said, "We will protect the churches. We will do two things—before the Christmas services, or midnight mass in Catholic churches, we will sweep the churches and make sure that there are no bombs. And secondly, we will form a human cordon around the churches, making sure nobody gets in who is not supposed to."

One of the members of this Islamic youth organisation, a young man named Rianto, did in fact find a bomb—the only bomb—and as he was carrying it gingerly out of the church, past the parking lot and was about to throw it in a ditch outside, it exploded and he died.

Another time, when I was teaching in the Southern Philippines, rebels armed with sub-machine guns came to class. They stood at the back of the classroom and were saying, "We want this foreigner to come with us". I thought, "Oh my goodness, what am I going to do now?" But fortunately for me, there was a middle-aged Muslim woman in the class, and she turned around and spoke to the men really strongly in her language. And then the men sheepishly backed away and went off. Afterwards I said to her, "What did you say to them that made them leave?" She said to them that this was education, that this was something serious, and so they should go back, which they did.

My point is that in the world we live in, violence and heroism, peacemakers and villains, saints and troublemakers are all part of the terrain, and in this, Muslims are no different from anyone else. But I have to say also that the vast majority of Muslims whom I have known and lived with over the past forty years (and there are literally thousands and probably closer to tens of thousands of them) with whom I have worked, interacted, shared a meal and laughed, professed Islam as a religion of peace. They have welcomed me, an American Christian priest, with hospitality, warmth, and I am not exaggerating, with love. Their lives, from birth to death, and those of their children and grandchildren are peaceful and untouched by violence. These are the people who have borne witness to me that Islam is a religion of peace.

### **Some Thoughts on Dialogue**

Let me explain what I mean by the term 'dialogue', which I think sometimes can give the wrong impression of what we are about.

'Dialogue' can sometimes conjure up the idea of an interfaith sharing of coffee and cookies with Rabbi X and Cardinal Y and Imam Z sitting down to make small talk, all nervously

trying to avoid any issues or comments that might explode in their faces. Or, at a more academic level, we could imagine dialogue as an interfaith collection of intellectuals, university professors, columnists and politicians discussing the affairs of the day.

Now, these are definitely types of dialogue, and they do have a long-term value, but they are somewhat rarefied types of encounter and they don't affect many people or make real changes in society. By contrast, I will offer this example I have taken from the Southern Philippines, of a different kind of dialogue that we promoted and that is actually still going on now. It is called MUCHARD. The word is an acronym that means Muslim Christian Agency for Rural Development.

MUCHARD is an umbrella organisation, made up of mosque- and church-based associations in more than 120 villages in the island of Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. It has been operating quietly and effectively since 1984.

In each village, an interreligious committee operates independently and chooses its projects according to local needs. Muslims and Christians came together after the violence that occurred in the 1970s. They intuited that by working together for the benefit of everyone, they could also overcome ethnic and religious suspicion and strife. In the beginning, they started with simple projects—such as all-weather roads, pick-up trucks to take the fish to the market, seminars to teach crop rotation or introduce new type of seed and animal species, day-care centres for working mothers and income generation projects for village women.

Over the years, their approach has become more sophisticated, with projects for combating climate change, providing safe water supply, developing integrated agro-forestry and microfinance for small enterprises, all the while promoting peace and harmony between diverse communities.

Now, it is important to note that MUCHARD is not just another rural development agency. It is an organisation that is consciously rooted in the mosques and churches, in worship of God, promoted in Friday and Sunday sermons and carried forward in lectures and workshops about each other's religion, moments of joint fellowship and the common celebration of religious and national holidays.

MUCHARD is just one of the many examples I could have chosen. It is a rural-based organisation of agricultural and fishing villages, but it has its urban counterparts where Muslims and Christians work together to respond to the needs of slum dwellers and day labourers. This Philippine dialogue movement has its counterparts elsewhere. In Indonesia, for example, people were shocked at the communal violence that took place in some parts of the country during the late 1990s, after which many people came together in efforts at conflict-prevention, to build and reinforce harmony before any outbreak of hostilities could occur. A recently-published directory I was looking at listed over 300 distinct dialogue associations in Indonesia that are aimed variously at reconciliation, communal harmony and social service on an explicitly religious basis.

Last year, I was in Jombang in East Java, Indonesia, with a group of Muslims and Christians on the occasion of the Chinese New Year. We paid a friendly visit to the Chinese temple and shared a meal with Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist neighbours. The Chinese, I saw, are equally welcome at the city's mosques and churches. The religious communities in Jombang have appealed to the government to have their city declared officially as a City of Harmony.

### **Role of Religious Leaders in Dialogue and Peace-Building**

There is a particular role that religious leaders can play in peacemaking and peace-building. In countries as diverse as

Sierra Leone, in West Africa, and Indonesia and Philippines, in South-East Asia, it was the religious leaders who were able to broker a peace agreement in situations of conflict and civil war. In many contexts, religious leaders are in a kind of especially good place to do this. They have the mobility to bring together the views and concerns of all the parties and to establish and maintain a peace agreement. So, a typical day for some such religious leaders might include a breakfast meeting with farmers or factory workers, lunch at a women's cooperative and dinner with government officials or military leaders. Moreover, in many countries, religious leaders are often closer to the preoccupations of the common people than are government officials or army officers and are more trusted as spokespersons who will faithfully represent the concerns of those in the community.

However, it is possible for the religious leaders from different faith communities to act together as effective builders of peace only when they already know and trust each other. And this is what is done through dialogue meetings, lunches, coffee parties or such other functions. For example, in the Philippines, the Bishops-Ulama Conference, made up of Catholic and Protestant church leaders and members of the council of Muslim religious scholars and imams, has been the single most effective association for maintaining the peace in Mindanao, by studying and reflecting on the needs of the region and representing their concerns with a common voice to the central government. They have been meeting now for 13 years every two weeks and they have studied every possible aspect of life in the Southern Philippines—economic and educational issues, questions of youth, of drugs, of smuggling, of ecology, and so on. They are some of the most well-informed and best-prepared religious leaders that I know anywhere in the world and they have really made a difference. A major reason for this is because they have been focussing on the underlying causes that resulted in unrest.



Another example is from Indonesia in the 1990s. I was there then. There was some terrible fighting in parts of Indonesia then, and I am convinced that the main reason why the fighting did not spread to the other islands (and that would have been really disastrous, because some of those other islands are much more populous) is that the religious leaders kept making joint statements in favour of peace, saying, “Do not fight, this is not what Islam teaches” or ‘This is not what Christianity teaches”, and trying to get people to lay down arms and stop fighting. It is hard to judge what would have happened if something else had not happened, but I am convinced that things were really heading towards a big conflagration in Indonesia and that it was prevented by the cooperation of Muslim and Christian leaders.

The Catholic Church has done much to promote interfaith dialogue, including between Christians and Muslims. But one big weakness that we have in the Catholic Church (and here I include the different Church organizations I have worked with) is that I don't think we are very good at publicizing and multiplying the good things that we do. As a result, people do not hear about them, and so, their impact is limited. For instance, we've had a lot of really good meetings, not only with Muslims but also with Jews, Buddhists and others. I organized many of them myself. But hardly anyone knows about them. It's our fault, because we should be better adept at publicizing the things we do so that they can have a bigger and better impact. I think that's a real weakness in our system.

What happens at the level of the Vatican is that we get together with top leaders of other faiths and we issue a joint statement. Now, what this should lead to is impact on the formation of people at large. It should help change their attitudes. But I don't know if this happens on a very significant scale. The real work of dialogue has to be done at the local level, even at the level of the neighbourhood. What happens at the level of the

Vatican in terms of dialogue certainly does have importance in terms of people's formation, but where we really need to get to work and do much more is at the local level.

It is true that following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church got very deeply engaged in the work of interfaith dialogue. Today, there are interfaith dialogue organizations and good projects in which Christians and others are engaged in almost every country. But at the same time, this is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. There is a big mass of people everywhere who are still suspicious of people of other faiths and who still have a lot of uninformed prejudices about them. There's really so much more work that needs to be done as far as interfaith dialogue is concerned.

Another issue that needs to be considered here is the role of women. One of the most interesting interfaith organisations I know of is a women's group called WIND, which stands for 'Women in Interfaith Dialogue'. It started in Nevada, USA, and has brought together women from different faith traditions—Christians, Muslims and others. They were of the view that most interfaith dialogue programmes are organised by men and are about the kind of topics that men want to discuss and are carried on in ways that men like to do things. Because of that, women feel kind of left out, as some sort of spectators or token people who are invited for men-organised interfaith programmes that are not really theirs. And so, these women started their own organization. They get together on topics that they find of interest to them. They might invite men if they feel the topic is of interest to men, but the women will do the organizing.

Now, we don't want to make a new kind of segregation, and it isn't that men are not welcome at events organised by women, and vice versa. But I do think that there is really a very important role for women in interfaith dialogue. One reason for this is that in some societies, women relate to women

mainly. A lot of practical work in this regard has been done, for instance, in Southern Philippines by women's organizations, who have been one of the key groups in peace-building there.

Up until 20-25 years ago, there was this notion of peace-making as something imposed from above—that all the leading military and political leaders come together and reach an agreement, and then it filters down to the rest of the society. But it was later discovered that this approach does not generally work. It is now being recognised that everybody—and this includes women, too—has a role to play in peace-building and interfaith dialogue.

### **Experiences in Turkey**

So far, most of my examples have been taken from South-East Asia, where I spent much of my time in the 1980s and 1990s. But now I want to turn to a country where I was living till just a few months ago, and that is Turkey.

In the 1980s, I was working in the Vatican, in charge of Christian-Muslim relations. We have what is called an 'Office for Islam', and I was in charge of that. At that time, we got an invitation from the rector of the University of Ankara, in Turkey. He wrote to the Pope, requesting him to send them a professor of Christian theology. Since I was in charge of the Islam office, they told me to find someone to go to Turkey. Back in the 1980s, this sort of thing was still new and it was hard to find somebody. Somebody said, "I've got tenure and I can't get away". Somebody else said, "I've got a family situation, and so I can't go". Another person said, "I'm not prepared for it". And so on. So, after trying for some time, we had a meeting in the Vatican and we said, "So keep talking about dialogue and here are some people who invite us and we cannot find anyone to go!"

To make a long story short, I decided to go. I went to Turkey in 1986, and I have been going there every year since, for a longer or shorter period, most of the time for a semester. The programme in the Turkish Divinity Schools—there are 23 of them—is connected with state universities. It is a four-year programme, and they have a course in what they call ‘History of Religions’, and so, there is one module for Judaism, one module for Christianity, one module for Asian religions and so on. When I teach, I teach Christian theology.

In the beginning, some of the students wanted to do polemics. They wanted to prove their claim that Islam was better and Christianity was inferior or else they wanted to prove their claim that Islam is true and Christianity is false. But I felt that these attitudes did not go very deeply. After the novelty of my presence wore off and day after day we were drinking tea together and eating our lunch together, their attitudes changed. They really wanted to know more, and we had some really good discussions. I loved it and I really miss it!

But my work in the universities in Turkey is only a part, and may be not the most important part, of the dialogue that I carried on daily in Turkey. Mostly, it was with committed Muslims—workmen, shopkeepers, engineering students, primary school teachers and so on, for whom the desire to serve God and others was at the centre of their lives.

It was also in Turkey that I really came to know two really great Muslim thinkers, and this has really occupied lot of my scholarly research, you might say, in the past 15 or 20 years or so.

The first of these was a man called Said Nursi. He wrote a 6000 page commentary on the Quran, and already 101 years ago (in 1911 to be exact), was saying that Muslims should be united with the real Christians, who are following the teachings of Jesus, in order that we should offer to the world a common

witness of values based on the Word of God. He was talking of cooperation with Christians 50 years before the Second Vatican Council encouraged us as Catholics to do this.

Said Nursi was really quite an interesting thinker. He said that the days of the jihad of the 'sword' are over and that today the only proper method for Muslims is making efforts in the path of God through the pen or the word—in other words, by writing, talking and trying to convince or persuade people. He applied the principle of attraction, saying that Muslims should live in such a way that other people will be attracted to Islam.

One of Said Nursi's ideas, which had a lot of influence on many people, is that he said that the enemy of any modern believers are three—ignorance, poverty and disunity. He said that these are the common enemies that we all have.

Said Nursi died in 1960. Shortly before he died, he sent a copy of his Quran to Pope Pius XII, who was the pope then. The Pope wrote him a nice letter back—I have seen a copy of it. Said Nursi also visited the Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul. So, he was somebody who sincerely believed in this sort of approach to interfaith relations.

It is said that somewhere between 8 and 13 million people continue to study Said Nursi's commentary on the Quran. I know in Ankara, where I was living till just a couple of months ago, there were about 90 groups that would meet every week to discuss and reflect on his writings. I would meet with many of them. Sometimes, I would go to a couple of these groups a week, and some weeks I would go to just one. They would take a passage from Said Nursi's Quran commentary and reflect on what it meant to them, for their lives.

One of the people who was influenced by the writings of Said Nursi was another Turkish scholar, Fethullah Gulen. The real genius of Mr. Gulen was that he took up Said Nursi's idea that the real enemies of human kind are three: ignorance,

poverty and disunity. And he says what we need to have are institutions to fight these enemies.

To fight the enemy of ignorance, Mr. Gulen set up schools, based on a new kind of education, seeking to draw from what is the best of all the different types of education that are available. They seek to provide a strong scientific background, good character formation and discipline. These schools are really quite successful, including in our own country, the USA.

To fight poverty, they have set up a welfare organisation. You can look at its website: it does not look very different from what we do in Catholic Relief Services. It has got a large budget, and they have gone from relief work—of taking care of victims of drought, earthquakes or floods—to development work. For instance, they are working very hard in parts of Africa, like the Darfur region of Sudan, Somalia, Niger and Mali, to bring fresh drinking water—that is their big project.

And to fight disunity, they have set up dialogue associations in many places. In the USA alone there are over 200 of them. The idea is simply to bring people together so that they get to know each other. The idea is that it is ignorance of one another that is keeping us apart, and so, you fight disunity by bringing people together.

I was talking to a priest and he remarked to me, “These Turks have really transformed our community!” He said that the place where he met the Jewish Rabbi for the first time was at the Turkish Community Centre!

To me this is all very impressive. It shows what a small group can do if they are really committed to something good.

### **Concluding With A Story**

I want to conclude with one point that I want to illustrate with a story. Some things we only learn through dialogue:

you cannot find them out in a book, nor can you learn them through a lecture. You can only get to learn them when we share lives together.

The story I want to share happened in 1988 or 1989. I was in Konya, a town in Turkey. Konya is the ancient Iconium. It is also the place where the great Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi, or 'Mevlana', wrote his poetry. I was supposed to be teaching there and so I showed up. They gave me some money to rent an apartment. I found a nice little place in a kind of working class area. It was really clean, but it was totally empty, there wasn't a spoon or a fork, nothing! So I was thinking, "Oh, this is going to be really expensive. I am going to have to buy everything!"

I had nothing with me, not even the basic things you need to live. But somebody in the university told me, "We know some people who've got an extra bed, and if you go and ask them, they might let you use it." I thought, "Well, that's a start." So, I went down and asked the people. I said that I had just have come to town and that I had heard that they had an extra bed and could I borrow it for the next 6 months? They said, "Yes, yes, you can do that." So, right away I picked up the bottom part of the bed and started carrying it on my back to the apartment I had rented, which was still absolutely empty at that time.

It was a Saturday morning, and everybody was out. They were going to the market or coming home from the market, standing around chatting and all, and they saw this foreigner carrying a bed on his back. And so a couple of people stopped me and said, "Who are you?" I said, "I am an American professor, and I am going to be teaching here." They said, "Oh, you'll be teaching.... English?" I said, "No, I'll be in the Theology Department. Some more people were coming and it was getting like a little crowd, and they said, "Oh, you are a Muslim?", and I said, "No, I am a Christian." They said,

“Christian? Really? Welcome!” Someone asked, “Are you here with your family?”, and I said, “No, I am not married.”

Now, here I had a problem. I was speaking in my very primitive Turkish and I did not know the word in Turkish for ‘priest’. But in the Quran, there is a word, *rahib*, for monk, and I thought, “Well, that’s close, I am almost a monk”, and so, I said, “I’m a *rahib*.” “Oh really! I’ve never met a *rahib* before!” someone said.

People were very welcoming, and someone said, “Do you need anything? I said, “I need everything!” Someone said, “Chairs? You need chairs?” I said, “Yes, I need chairs.”

People started me bringing things for the apartments. For the next three days, they would come by with things. Someone brought glasses, someone else brought chinaware for the kitchen. I got two carpets. Someone gave me a little hotplate to cook my food on. Someone else brought me a small refrigerator.

On the second night, around 11 o’clock, there was a knock on the door. Two men were standing there, and they said, “We would like to see your house”. I said, “Well, come in.” They sort of ignored me and went into the kitchen and started opening the cabinets.

One man said, “Look, how is he going to prepare his food? There is no table here. Now, your sister has, in her garage, that little table that would fit right in here.” And the other man said, “Oh yeah, you’re right. I’ll get the table.”

One of the man said, “He has only three glasses. We have some extra glasses, and so we will bring them.”

They were really taking an inventory of everything I still needed! The next day, they showed up, with plastic bags containing all sorts of stuff. In this way, the house was completely furnished!



The next day was Monday, and I went for the first day to the university and came back in the evening. When I got back, I found a man sitting (outside the apartment?) on a stool. I did not know who he was, and so, we introduced ourselves. He said, "I live in the neighbourhood here. Welcome to the neighbourhood!" And he said, "My wife came by earlier today, but she could not get in, the door was locked." And I said, "I did lock the door this morning before I went to the university." He said, "Oh, you don't have to do that. The women in the neighbourhood know who comes and who goes, and if somebody is here that does not belong, they will take care of it." I thought, "What is he trying to tell me?" And, I realised that by locking the door, I was telling them that I did not trust them. So, I never locked my door again for the next six months!

It was really nice: Sometimes, I would come home in the evening and on the counter there would be sitting a covered dish, and inside it there would be some rice, some eggplant and some lamb, and it would be enough for two or three days. I would eat it and clean the dish and set it aside, and after a few days, the dish would disappear! Other days, I would come home in the afternoon and I would find that all my shirts had been washed and ironed and hanging on hangers! Some other times, I would find the house had been cleaned and swept, the newspapers gathered up in a pile and all!

This went on for six months, for a whole semester, and finally, it was time for me to leave Konya. A man came over to see goodbye and we were talking and I said, "I've got a final request", and he asked, "What is that?" I said, "For six months now, the women in the neighbourhood have been really good to me. They have been bringing me food; they have been washing my clothes; and they have been cleaning the house. I have never seen them, but I would like to meet them just once, if I could, to thank them." And his answer really surprised me. I won't ever forget it. He said "You don't

have to thank them. They did not do this for you. They did this for God, and God, who sees what we do secretly, will give them their reward.” Then he went on, he said, “The Quran says that we should be hospitable to strangers in our midst. We should be especially welcoming to *rahibs*, to monks.” And so, he said “These women were following their religion”.

I really learnt something then about the religion of Islam that I hadn't learnt in all of my graduate classes in the University of Chicago and all the books I had read—that hospitality is an act of worship to God. We read about how Middle Eastern hospitality is so important. Well, it is not by accident. It is part of their religion.

So, what I would encourage everybody is to get to know each other, take all the opportunities, and create opportunities, to know each other. Coming back to the USA, I find that many people who do not know Muslims or who have never met a Muslim, who have never had a meal in a Muslim home or who have never had a Muslim having a meal in their home tend to be prejudiced and hateful towards Muslims. But people who know Muslims personally have a very different idea.

I have been blessed. Over the course of the last 40 years that I have lived with Muslims, I am convinced that God has made me into a better person, a better Christian and a better priest through the Muslims that I have known. This also gives me lot of hope, that God, who has been so powerfully at work in my life through my encounters with Muslims, is also at work in their lives so that I can be as much a blessing to them as they to me.



# **A CATHOLIC PRIEST AT AN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY IN INDONESIA**

By Greg Soetomo SJ

This is a brief reflection on my four-year journey (2013-2017) as a Catholic priest and student of Islamic Studies at Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University, Jakarta, Indonesia. The message conveyed by the title of this article is that I was at this Islamic university not merely schooling, studying and taking exams. At the Graduate School of this university, I did not simply pursue Islamic Studies and get an academic degree. More than that, I was present among other students, mostly Muslim, living and socializing with them, making friends, building communication with people and living out friendship and brotherhood-sisterhood. In the four years that I spent there, I encountered and discovered many things that went beyond my earlier intellectual formation.

During my time at this Islamic university, I was never ridiculed because of my Catholicism or my status as a priest. My Muslim friends were very friendly. I'm not naive, though, and I know it would have been normal and understandable if there had been some fellow students who wondered, 'Why is this Catholic priest studying Islam? What is his motive?'

Why does a Catholic priest need to engage deeply with the Muslim community? Responses and answers to this question can be expressed at length, in the form of practical descriptions or conceptually and doctrinally complex theological discussions. I prefer to explain this with illustrations that are more easily captured by the senses.

In my sharing in churches and in dozens of Catholic community meetings, I would say, 'As a Catholic, I need to learn Islam and get to know Muslims because I live in Indonesia.' Most Indonesians profess to follow Islam, and so, it makes good

sense for a Catholic priest from Indonesia to have a good knowledge of this religion. Part of the calling of every Catholic is to greet and meet anyone outside the Church. Catholics, in principle, should take the initiative to communicate with anyone. This is a consequence of the proposition to open the Church's windows, in line with what the Second Vatican Council had strongly recommended, around half a century ago. As Pope Francis puts it, the Church lays bridges, not walls.

Still, some Catholics were bewildered by my decision to opt for Islamic Studies as a subject. 'Why do you study this subject? What is it for?' Others, a little anxious, asked, 'Is it safe for you to study there? Have you ever been persuaded to convert?' These questions and inquiries with a suspicious and worried tone might sound naive, but they reflect the psyche of many Catholics (and many other people in general). The 'other' is seen with distrustful eyes.

However, this kind of 'tilted' story or way of thinking was only 'half of the story'. I also experienced uplifting responses. "*Bravo, Father. You have the nerve to study this religion*", was one such response. 'The Church must communicate with Muslim scholars seriously in order to better understand the Islamic world' was another such response.

I, as a Catholic and a priest, received a lot of kindness while studying at the Graduate School of the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University from 2013 to 2017. I enjoyed emotional comfort in this community. Also, I was able to complete my Master's degree in 24 months, while my full doctorate degree took 21 months.

On my first day in the School (26<sup>th</sup> August 2013), there was an opening ceremony for the new semester, which all new students attended. The Director of the School, Prof. Azyumardi Azra, highlighted the academic nature and

intellectual formation of the educational system of the school. All students, regardless of their beliefs and religion, could study there. He also launched me on that special occasion, saying, "This time we have Father Greg Soetomo, a Catholic priest. He wants to study here. He must also be welcomed."

From that day on, this Muslim community knew my background and identity, without me having to make a big effort to explain these myself.

In February 2017, in one of the stages of the dissertation examination (work in progress), an examining professor asked one of the participants who had been researching on, and making a critical analysis of, a Qur'anic exegete: 'What capacity do you have to criticize him?' The cold and piercing tone of the professor's questioning unnerved the examinees. When it was my turn, the same examiner greeted me with a different intonation: very friendly, not like in an examination, even closer to inviting a chat. The professor even respectfully called me *romo* ('Father' in the Indonesian language).

Incidents like this happened quite often. Of the six participants queuing up to be examined on that day, I got the highest score. This put me in a state of joy, but I felt awkward at the same time since I realized that I was not the most 'knowledgeable' among the examinees.

What did I study at this School? I studied almost all aspects of Islam. The papers and articles compiled in my book *Pastor Katolik di UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta* (2017) provide an overview of Islam as seen from various angles. The topics covered in the book include the Quran, Hadith, History and Civilization, Politics, Islam-West Relations, Islamic and Christian Pluralism and Radicalism.

For my Master's degree, I worked on a thesis titled *Islamic Socialism Facing Contemporary Capitalist Culture: A*

*Study of Hassan Hanafi's Social Thought and Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism*. The study sought to make a philosophical analysis of Islamic social thought in dealing with the contemporary capitalist culture. This thesis was later published as a book entitled *Revitalizing Islamic Social Thought of Hassan Hanafi* (2015 & 2017).

For the completion of my doctoral studies, I wrote a dissertation with the title *Language, Power, and History. Marshall G.S. Hodgson's Islamic Historiography in the Perspective of Michel Foucault Studies*. Later, this Ph. D. thesis was published as a book with the title *Language and Power in Islamic History: A Historiographical Research*.

My friends, both Catholic and Muslim, frequently asked me, 'Why didn't you choose a topic focussing on the intersection of Islam and Christianity?' This was an appropriate question given my status as a Catholic priest who had been aspiring to be a bridge between these two religious traditions. This topic could cover a variety of specific issues, such as the Bible and the Quran; Christian and Muslim beliefs about Jesus and Mary; the Trinity and Tawhid; as well as the history of conflict and harmony between Christianity and Islam from classical times to the present day.

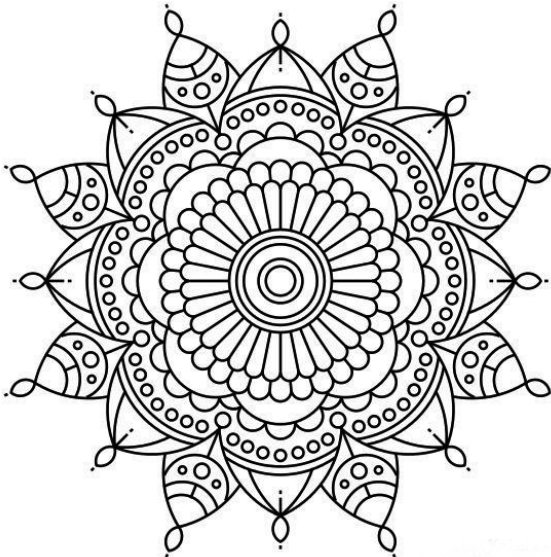
But my selection of a subject to research on was rather pragmatic. The topics above required detailed theological study, including possibly mastering the Arabic language in order to produce an 'authoritative' and high-quality academic product. My Arabic language, unfortunately, had not yet reached the level where I could understand Arabic academic and theological texts. Eventually, I followed the pragmatic view: "A good dissertation is a finished one."

I finished my doctoral studies at the School and got a doctorate in Islamic Studies. However, don't get me wrong. I am not, and have never considered myself, an expert in Islam. I am

far from being an 'expert'. 'Expert' is a complex attribute that tends to result from a social construct which is not always objective.

I would like to end this short note by quoting a snippet from my letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 to Prof. Masykuri Abdillah, Director of the Graduate School of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, where I had persevered for four years:

Many thanks to this School. It has planted in my life as a Catholic and priest rich experiences. Having been present in the midst of the academic Muslim community, this is a fruitful experience that enriches my Catholic faith.



# **THE HEART AND SOUL OF CREATING SAFE SPACES FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE**

By Marites Guingona

When Muslims and Christians can freely share with one another their beliefs and the core teachings and ideals of their faith without fear, then they would have succeeded in creating safe spaces for relationship-building.

I was born to devout Catholic parents and was raised Catholic in Mindanao, the southern region of the Philippines known to be a homeland of Muslims. Although Muslims were once a dominant group here, with around 500 years of political history and heroic resistance against western colonialism, it is a minority religion in the country today. Muslims in the Philippines number only about 4 percent, compared to the more than 86 percent Roman Catholic population. In this environment, they have had to constantly struggle for their rights. Armed resistance by Islamic rebel groups has only compounded the difficulties of their struggle and have heightened the fears of Muslims among the Christian populace, who see them in a negative light.

Like most Christians where I lived, I grew up perceiving Muslims in a negative light and felt 'safe' in my Christian community, where I took for granted that everyone was Catholic. But, one day, in 1998, while I was completing my graduate studies in Theology at the Loyola School of Theology in Manila, I experienced a conversion of heart.

I met a visiting friend from an international peacebuilding organization. As I listened to him speak about his work, I was struck not only by what I heard, but by what I saw. He was



wearing a white T-shirt, and on it was printed the image of the globe surrounded by symbols of the different religions of the world. The image struck me so much that I found myself asking: *What does it mean to be a Catholic Christian in the world today? What makes my Christian faith unique amid all the other faiths in the world? Why do people of faith fight each other in the name of God?*

As I sought for answers to those burning questions, I found myself getting deeper into the journey of seeking to find the heart of my Christian faith, a journey that took me beyond my comfort zone to meet people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions. I reached out to them in their places of worship and learned about their beliefs and practices. In the process, I found myself being enriched not only by what I learned, but also by the friendships I gained from the experience.

In 2001, together with my newfound friends, I established The Peacemakers' Circle Foundation, Inc., a non-profit multi-faith NGO based in Manila. We then began to engage in the challenging work of promoting and organizing different forms of dialogue, especially in conflict-ridden and poverty-stricken grassroots communities around Metro Manila and North Cotabato in Mindanao, where Muslims and Christians lived alongside each other as neighbours. From the experience, I learned that dialogue with people of different faiths is not merely an exchange of words but a way of being in relationship with one another.

While my colleagues and I have managed to attain success in our efforts through the years, the work was not easy. We faced many difficult challenges along the way. The biggest among them was FEAR—the fear of the “other” (of ‘non-believers’)—and attitudes of prejudice and discrimination against them that prevailed especially among fellow Catholics.

I was no stranger to fear. I had struggled with it myself even in my desire to build mutually harmonious relationships with Muslims and even while I reached out beyond my comfort zones to them in the early years of my engagement in the field of interreligious dialogue.

From my struggle I soon realized that if I was to succeed in my efforts at building peace and harmony in our midst, I needed to create “safe spaces” and “common grounds” for dialogue. These are spaces where I can meet “others” without fear so that a sense of unity can be had even amid our diversity. But this cannot be created merely through intellectual planning and strategizing, for it is not a goal out there to be reached, but a process of relationship-building that begins within me, in my mind and heart. I needed to create them in myself by clearing my mind of the fear that disabled me from seeing the “other” with the heart rightly and from making room for them to be themselves as fellow pilgrims in the journey towards fullness in God.

This led to the practice of disciplines that showed me the heart and soul of creating safe spaces for Muslim-Christian dialogue. These are the disciplines of 1) Inner Work for self-awareness and transformation, 2) Humanizing the “other”, knowing that we are all created in God’s image and likeness, and 3) Heart Listening in Dialogue and Spiritual Conversations.

Self-awareness is the practice of self-examination that calls for one to face the “enemy” within oneself. The enemy is fear. This has been and still is the biggest obstacle to peacebuilding that we face in the field. It is largely the fear among the religious faithful—especially the followers of the Abrahamic faith traditions—of relating with “others” or those who do not share their faith. The fear comes from the belief that “our” religion is the only path to salvation and that, therefore, if one engages in dialogue with ‘non-believers’, one will lose one’s faith or stray away from it or fall into “eternal damnation”.

But, years later, I learned that FEAR and LOVE are two opposing forces that cannot co-exist at the same time and in the same space. Fear contracts. Love expands. If we are to succeed in bringing together people of diverse cultures and beliefs to a common ground of dialogue and relationship-building, we need to create spaces for them to feel safe in our presence and not be afraid. Creating “safe spaces” for dialogue can only be possible when it is inspired by LOVE, not FEAR. For Christians, the power of love over fear is emphasized in 1 John 4:18, from which we learn that perfect love casts out fear.

I also learned that in addressing fear, one must begin with the mind, for it is there where fear dwells. The mind is where linear logic and reason hold sway. Anything that does not subscribe to logic and reason gives rise to a sense of uncertainty, lack of control and insecurity that characterize fear. One must take the courage to examine that which one fears to better understand its root cause. In my case, for example, I asked myself why I feared Muslims. I realized that my fear was baseless, for it was not because of an actual experience that happened to me. It was merely a belief that was not mine but was ingrained in my mind by what I heard others say about Muslims. Being able to tell apart, through self-examination and study, the fear that is triggered by actual experience from vicarious experience is a good beginning. It is in the mind where one can conquer this “enemy” that is getting in the way of our ability to live up to the highest teachings and ideals of our respective faith traditions.

I was pleasantly surprised to later learn that Muslims have a term for self-examination: *Jihad al-nafs*. *Jihad* is an Arabic term in Islam that literally means “striving” or “struggle.” *Nafs* is an Arabic word in the Quran that literally means “self,” and has been translated as “psyche,” “ego” or “soul.” In one of the simplest interpretations of the term, *jihad al-nafs* refers

to the struggle against one's lower self or base instincts—against all evil, anger, lust, and other negative propensities in humans—in order to become a better person. This awakened me to a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, Islam, and I found in the idea of *Jihad al-nafs* a common ground for creating safe spaces for interreligious dialogue where I was able to foster lasting bonds of friendship with Muslims.

Humanize the “other”, knowing that we are all created in God's image and likeness: This is another discipline that I realized is essential to the process of creating safe spaces for Muslim-Christian relationship-building. If we are to overcome FEAR, we must learn to tune-in to the non-linear, intuitive and transcendent forces of the heart from which we are able to see the various expressions and manifestations of what Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, called the *transcendent truth* which binds us together<sup>[1]</sup>, the truth being that no matter what our differences in practices and beliefs, we come from the same Source or Origin and are created in God's image and likeness. Knowing that we human beings are the “visible image of the invisible God”, we can be more patient with one another in our frailties and imperfections; we can HUMANIZE, NOT DEMONIZE, each other despite our differences and find ourselves able to appreciate one another while being enriched by our diverse ways of relating to and worshipping God.

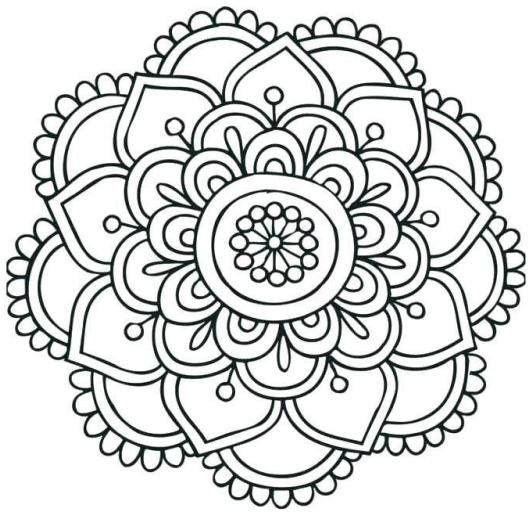
I realized that for Christians, humanizing the “other” is essential to our response to the call to love in the way of Christ. This is a call not only for us to follow Christ but to embody His love for others in ourselves so that dialogue becomes a way of being and becoming Christ-like in our ways with others. This “embodying” of Christ's love was made easier for me when I began to see and understand the message in the Gospel of John 14 in a new way, a way that I felt was consistent with Christ's message of love to us. It quotes Jesus as saying: “*I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*” (John 14)

While most Christians would take this to mean that the path to salvation is only for those who follow Christ, I have come to understand this in a more universal and all-embracing light. It is saying to me that: a) Christ Jesus, Son of God, became fully human, like us, to tell us that being fully human with all our frailties and imperfections is okay and that it is the WAY to the TRUTH about who we are, b) the TRUTH being that we are in this world, but we are NOT of the world (John 15:19; 17:14-16; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:22-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:1), and that c) there is LIFE ETERNAL in God that awaits us in the Hereafter.

In this awareness, it is possible to transcend the boundaries of our fear and find safe spaces in the silence of our hearts, where we can relate to one another in conversations and various forms of dialogue with a listening heart.

Spiritual conversations is a discipline that develops in us “superhuman” capacities for human relationship-building that transcend the boundaries of our differences. While dialogue is a way of being and becoming in relationship with fellow humans that goes beyond words, and while conversation is one of the basic ways human beings relate with one another with words, both are cultivated through heart listening. Essential to listening is the practice of PACT, which stands for PRESENCE, AWARENESS, CONNECTION, and TRUTH. We listen deeply to the PRESENCE of God in ourselves and in the “other. Our AWARENESS of this “presence” inspires in us a sense of humility and respect for the unique gifts all of us bring to our togetherness. In our “awareness,” our CONNECTION to each other is kept alive and vibrant. In this “connection” we find that we can center ourselves and each other on the TRUTH about who we are as unique individuals together in the Oneness of God in every moment.

When Muslims and Christians can freely share with one another their beliefs and the core teachings and ideals of their faith without fear, then they would have succeeded in creating safe spaces for relationship-building. It is then that their friendship and ways of being with one another would become the highest form of interreligious dialogue.



## MY JOURNEY TO DIALOGUE

By Sigit Setyo Wibowo SJ

Some years ago, the Catholic Student Center in Thailand planned to organize a student camp in the southern part of Thailand, where the majority of the population is Muslim. There were many students registered for this camp. Everything was prepared well. A few days before the camp, some students canceled their registration. At the end, only three or four students confirmed to join the camp. Because there were only few students, the Catholic Student Center canceled the camp. Later, we realized that the reason for the cancellation was because students' parents were afraid of Muslims. They believed that Muslims in the southern part of Thailand were dangerous. They were afraid that something bad would happen to their children. I was surprised about this. There was a big question for me at that time: "Why are people afraid of Muslims?" This question lingered strongly in my mind for a long time. Later, I realized that their negative images and attitudes towards Muslims were because they heard negative news about Islam and Muslims, such as related to terrorism, killings, bombings, etc.. They were filled with such kind of news. Every time they hear about Islam or Muslims, they think of terrorism, killings, and bombings, even though they have never met any Muslim.

On the one hand, I felt sorry for Muslims in general. On the other hand, I understood what other people were thinking and afraid of. What I felt at that time was that their negative images of, and attitudes towards, Muslims and Islam were because they did not have enough understanding about Islam and Muslims. Or, I can say that they had a wrong understanding of Islam and Muslims. They did not see Islam and Muslims thoroughly. Yet, to be fair, some Muslims also have wrong understanding about other religions, and even about their own religion.

This small experience with students became a re-invitation and confirmation for me to study Islamology and relate to Muslims more and more. My dream is that I can share my knowledge and experience with both Muslims and non-Muslims, so that they can have a better and more authentic understanding of their religion and other religions.

Why do I call that small experience as a “re-invitation” and “confirmation” for me? I call this experience as a “re-invitation” because once, just before finishing my studies in Philosophy, my superior suggested that I should study Islamology and work for dialogue with believers of other religions, especially with Muslims. He said that our Society and our generation need someone who can work in this field. I was not sure enough if this apostolate in dialogue was really my vocation or it was just a kind of temporary interest at that time. I was also not sure if our Society really needed this kind of dialogue. Moreover, I was more interested in becoming a missionary in Thailand. Thus, I rejected that invitation and decided to go to Thailand. This small experience invited me again to be involved in this field. Moreover, I call it a “confirmation” because I had actually been interested in studying Islamology long before that experience. I used to join some activities in dialogue with believers of other religions, especially with Muslims, in Indonesia. Moreover, I had some experiences living in some madrasas or Islamic boarding houses/schools. From those experiences, I came to know many good Muslims. They were very kind, generous, and open-minded. Without disregarding the reality of terrorism, killings and bombings by some Muslims, I have to say that I personally have met Muslims who are the opposite of those in the news. My direct contacts and experiences with Muslims have made me aware that there are many good Muslims, without neglecting that there also are bad Muslims. This awareness, more or less, makes me balanced in viewing Islam and Muslims.



At the level of understanding Islamic teachings, I took some courses on Islamology when I studied for my Bachelor degree in Philosophy. Later on, I pursued my further studies in Arabic and Islamic studies in some countries, including some Muslim countries. Those studies really make me understand better Islamic teachings. Thus, real and direct contact with Muslims and better knowledge of Islam led me to have more positive images of, and attitudes towards, Islam and Muslims.

Nevertheless, my images of, and attitudes towards, Islam and Muslims were not formed from those experiences only. Actually, it began in my family. My parents were both Muslims. They became Catholic later in their lives. They were the first generation in the family to become Catholic. There are still many Muslims among my close relatives. There have been no problems for us to live together even though we have different religions, because our relationship is not based on religion but on the bond of brother-sisterhood, which almost all religions teach. Almost all of my Muslim relatives still visit us especially during Eid al-Fitr, which is a time for family gatherings in Indonesia. Besides that, we also gather together as a family (most of the family are Muslims), once a month to keep our brother-sisterhood alive. This bond of brother-sisterhood or the feeling that we are brothers and sisters is the thing that unites us. This experience since my childhood has become a strong foundation for me to have more positive images of, and attitudes towards, Islam and Muslims, and my experiences as a Jesuit, by direct contact and further studies, have further strengthened me in my interest in dialogue with believers of other religions.

From those experiences, I am aware that a strong foundation in the family, real and direct contact with believers of other religions and proper knowledge of other religions are important components for better understanding of other religions and their believers. Nonetheless, I am also aware that not all

people have the same experiences as myself. Some of them do not have a strong foundation for interfaith dialogue in the family. Some of them do not have opportunities to have direct and real contact with believers of other religions. And some of them do not have chances to have proper knowledge on other religions. It is my dream to give those opportunities and chances to people, especially to have direct contacts with believers of other religions, especially Muslims, and to have better knowledge about other religions, especially Islam. I think that by giving opportunities and chances to people to experience and know more about other religions and their believers will give them a foundation to have a better understanding of other religions, so that they have a feeling of brother-sisterhood with believers of other religions. This is why I am now involved in this Jesuit journey of dialogue with Muslims.

A few years after the cancelation of the student camp in the southern part of Thailand that I referred to earlier on in this article, I tried to organize another student camp there. Around a hundred students registered for this camp. At the end, there were around seventy students who had participated in this camp. During the camp, we sent students to stay with Muslim families so that they could have a real and direct contact with Muslims. Before that exposure, we gave them some knowledge and understanding of Islamic teachings and tradition, besides the situation of those Muslim families. What really amazed me was the reflections of the students, especially some of them who confessed that they were afraid to join the camp because of bad images of Muslims they got from other people or from the news. After meeting and staying with Muslims for a few days, they realized that Muslims they met were really good and generous people. The students learned a lot from these Muslims about life and belief.

Direct contact and real experience with other believers help students to broaden their horizon, to be more open-minded and to have better and more authentic understanding of other religions.

I believe that a journey to dialogue should begin with a real and direct experience. This small experience with students has become a kind of a confirmation for my dream in my journey to dialogue.



## **My Experience with my Muslim Neighbours and Friends**

By Midhun J Francis SJ

As a person brought up in a Christian family with Muslim and Hindu neighbours and with friends from all three religions, I have a pretty good overview of the traditions and practises of Muslims and Hindus and had a close relationship with them. In my hometown of Karikode, in Kerala, there is a church, a mosque and three 'taikavu' (small places where people are taught religious studies and that serve as places for worship) and five temples. We would start each day by hearing the "Vangu vili" (azan), the Angelus bell and temple hymns. The diversity of spiritual traditions did not disturb us in the least; on the contrary, it strengthened us to face each new day with vigour and determination.

Although I have many things to say about my experiences with Hinduism, this article will focus more on my experiences with Muslims, as I am now working among Muslims in my Jesuit mission.

The Catholic Church and the Society of Jesus have entrusted me with the responsibility of promoting "interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims". I am grateful for this responsibility, which is part of the mission of the Church. Christians and Muslims are conversing more about their spiritual traditions than ever before. I think "living together across religious boundaries" is the best expression of what we are trying to achieve through our efforts.

### **The Spiritual Journey**

I grew up in a home where most of my daily interactions were with Muslim neighbours, which continued throughout my childhood. Participating in Muslim and Christian celebrations

where food and gifts were exchanged was an unforgettable experience. Overall, it was a fantastic life- experience. I want to take this opportunity to reflect on some of the people, both Muslims and Christians, in my life who have impacted me.

During my theology studies, when we were on our way to the Vidyajyoti community in Delhi, the priest who was taking the class that day, Father Victor Edwin, approached four of us who were from different states and said, “There are many Muslims in the world who need our help; why don’t you join this mission?” This question did not impress me in the least. After some time had passed, a few months later, as I was leaving a lecture, Fr. Edwin asked me the same question again, but this time he addressed it directly to me. I explained to him that I was originally from Kerala and had always been interested in participating in the ecumenical dialogue mission. Despite having had Muslim friends and neighbours, I had not seen the need to take up this mission. Therefore, I never considered it at any point in my life. On the other hand, I always felt that ecumenical dialogue is essential in Kerala as the churches in Kerala are constantly struggling to preserve their traditions. And so, as before, I rejected Fr. Edwin’s suggestion again.

However, the question he posed to me haunted me during my prayers. I talked about it with three friends: Manu, Bastin and Raneesh (all of them are priests now). All three encouraged me to go for this mission. They continue to encourage me in my mission today. The real turning-point came when I mentioned it to my mother. She mockingly said, “I know you have a special calling for this mission, because even as a child, the imam of the nearby mosque would take you and used to accompany him to the mosque for the azan. Furthermore, you were comfortable doing so.” (This happened during our stay in Assam.)

These four people encouraged me to pursue my new mission, and I gradually agreed in my mind saying “Yes” to it.

The encouragement I received from my friends and my mother helped me believe in my mission's importance. It made me reflect on my previous encounters with Muslims. I concluded that my encounters with Muslims have generally been positive, that I have had only excellent encounters with Muslims, and that I would rate my overall relations with Muslims as satisfactory. As a Catholic priest, I have had nothing but great encounters with them over the years. I have met many Muslim people on my journey, and these Muslims have given me the most incredible peace of mind.

### **My Living Experience with Muslims**

Ansar, a Muslim and one of my best friends, attended school with me. He was a part of my first ten years of school. I later discovered that he was my best school friend. We would go to school together and walk home together. I ate at his home, and he dined at mine. Even today, his mother regards me as one of her children. Moreover, Ansar is a member of my family. My sisters regard him to be their brother. Even today, he has the freedom to contact me; it is incredible how he is the first person I see every time I enter my village. He is my gracious companion who encourages me in my mission.

My family lives right across the street from another household, who are Muslims. Even today, we consider ourselves part of the same family. Some of my Jesuit and non-Jesuit friends who have visited and seen this family have changed their views about Muslims for the better.

The grandmother of this Muslim family, affectionately called "Umma", was my guardian throughout my childhood while my mother went to some work. She was a spiritual woman. She passed away on her way back from the Hajj. When my father suffered a stroke, one of her sons, who still lives in the same house, was the first to pay for prayers in churches

and mosques. His assurance of his prayers at my ordination and throughout my life as a priest, and his request for my prayers for him and his family, are the best examples I have encountered of spiritual Islamic people. Those who visit my family as guests receive only wonderful vibrations from this Muslim family.

When I thought about the amazing experiences I've had with those Muslims, I decided that I wanted to participate in this mission. I said "Yes" to Fr. Victor, and, in fact, to the Lord, and I trust that I am called for it.

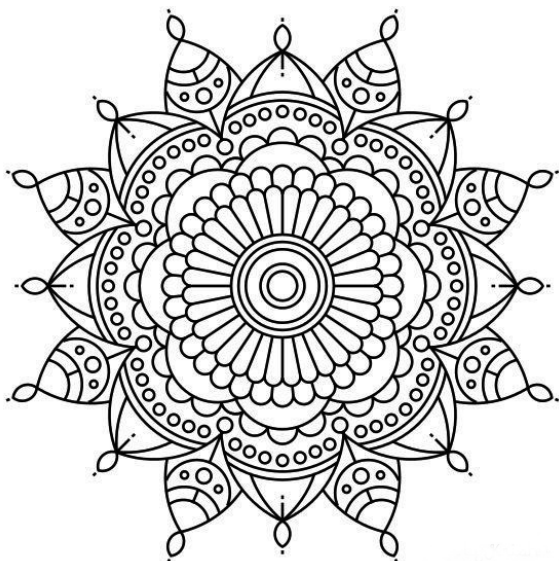
### **My Experiment With Mind: My Intellectual Journey With Muslims**

In June 2016, I had the task of reading the published writings of Fr Tom Michael, SJ. His first-hand accounts of interacting with Muslims in Asia caught my attention. From Pope Paul VI, I learned a very unusual facet of the Church's attitude towards Muslims that I found quite fascinating. According to him, Almighty God is the source of inspiration and enlightenment for every individual. He emphasised that we love our neighbour, because we believe in and profess the same God, albeit in a very particular way. As a result of the Vatican Council II, a more differentiated view of Muslims was developed. According to the Council, the Church shows great respect for Muslims. Together with Muslims, we bow only to the one and same God, who is the Creator of the universe.

My thesis was titled "Jesus in Christianity and Islam: Dialogical Pathways in the Light of Gaudium Et Spes 22a," and I defended it when I was earning my licentiate in systematic theology from the Jnana Deepa Institute of Philosophy and Theology. In this thesis, I proposed that "The Humanity of Jesus, as a common ground, allows Christians and Muslims to engage in dialogical relationships in order to undertake the

Work of Mercy.” This study made it possible for me to go on with other research on the same subject, which I am doing at Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome.

All these experiences I have had related to Muslims and Islam have prepared me to carry out the mission the Church has entrusted to me with great confidence. Islam and Christianity have several characteristic features that distinguish them from each other. In dialogue, it is essential to focus on both religions’ commonalities. The ultimate goal of interfaith dialogue is to lay the foundation for a peaceful society where people can value each other as human beings.





## **EID MUBARAK!**

Dear Christian Brothers and Sisters:

Eid Mubarak!

You must be wondering what am I saying to you. I am wishing you a happy feast. I am wishing you a happy feast of sacrifice. Muslims all over the world celebrate a feast called Eid ul Adha which is commonly called as Bakrid.

You must have heard from your Muslim friends about this feast. Some of you might have even be invited for a meal at their home. One of the five pillars of Muslim spirituality is Hajj: pilgrimage to Makkah. Many of the rights of the pilgrimage are associated with Bibilical patriarch Abraham and Hajj is the heart of the Islamic way of life. You will find a beautiful description of Hajj in the Quran (Q. 22: 26-38).

The Quran teaches that a Muslim who has sufficient money and good health must make the Hajj pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in their life time.

Every year, during the Islamic month of Dhul Hijjah, the five days of the month are designated for Hajj. With modern transportation, people can easily reach on time. In the olden days, people had to travel for months on foot, camel or horse or ship to perform the Hajj.

Muslims who are performing the Hajj, before entering into the premises of the Kaaba, the square building, they enter into a particular type of dress called Ihram which is a simple dress, women too wear a simple dress with a head scarf. The Ihram comprises two pieces of unstitched cloth, one that covers the hip and one that covers the upper part of the body. This white garment that signifies the absolute equality of all men and women before God.

As I said, the rights of the pilgrimage are associated with Abraham and the first important right is called the Tawaf. Tawaf is going around the Kaaba seven times in anti clockwise direction. Muslims believe that Abraham and his son Ismael went around the Kaaba seven times worshipping one God.

The second ritual is called Sayee where the pilgrims run between two hills, Al Safa and Al Marwah. This is to remember Hagar running up and down to find some water for her child who was crying out of thirst. Then an angel appeared and showed a spring from where Hagar and her child drank the water. And then the pilgrims progress towards Mina where they stay the night and next day at sunrise proceed towards the plains of Arafat. This is a very important day as the pilgrims enter into the heart of the Hajj. Muslims believe that Adam and Eve reconciled with God at this place. And Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) delivered his final sermon at Arafat.

Muslims believe that God imposed upon himself the law of mercy (Q. 6: 12).

Every individual must take advantage of God's mercy and ask for pardon and forgiveness. It is an intense moment as the pilgrims stand on the plain of Arafat and pray for forgiveness. It is not just about asking forgiveness, the person must acknowledge and recognise one's sins, and remember the sins in front of God with humility. It is the deeper awareness that these sins must end. They must resolve that with God's help, they will not sin. They have to make a recompense and put right the bad effects of their sins and with intensity and humility ask for forgiveness. Also in Arafat, the Muslims stand as if they are anticipating the Day of Judgement (Q. 6: 21-31).

Then the pilgrims move to a place from Arafat to Muzdalifa and spend the night there. After collecting some pebbles there, the pilgrims proceed to Mina where they have to stone the three pillars, symbolically representing the satan in their

lives. By stoning the pillars, the pilgrims reject the satanic, negative traits and temptations within them.

There are several things that Christians can be inspired from this beautiful religious Islamic practice of Hajj. But I would like to narrate two beautiful stories that reflect the mind and heart of a Muslim who is preparing to make the Hajj journey.

As a student of theology, I had the opportunity to meet with Fr. Etienne Renaud, a professor at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome. He was on a visit to India and I met him at the Henry Martyn Institute. In our conversation about Hajj, he narrated to me a life transforming experience, a touching story that transformed his life. As a young priest, he went to Tunisia to learn Arabic. He was staying as a paying guest with a Muslim family and the man of the house was teaching him Arabic. Fr. Etienne said that he came to know that the man who was teaching him Arabic was preparing to go for Hajj. So he told his teacher, "I heard that you are going for Hajj, so I would like to go back to France for a few weeks and will return once you are back. "

The man said, " Father, wait a minute. Insha Allah, I'm going for Hajj, but while I am away on the Hajj, in our culture, the wife and the children go to her parents house. My wife and children will be unable to go to her parents house as they are not there at their home. As you are here, I thought I will request you to take care of my family while I am away for the Hajj. " Fr. Etienne told me that he was deeply moved by the love and trust that a Muslim family had on him.

The second story is from Delhi. I was told about a Muslim cycle rickshaw driver. I call him cycle rickshaw brother. It seems that he was saving money for many years from his meagre income because he wanted to go on the Hajj. He was single and had no family. After collecting enough money he applied for the Hajj formalities. His name was selected and all

was confirmed that he would perform the Hajj.

But a month before he was to proceed on the Hajj journey, a motorcyclist, probably in an inebriated state hit his cycle rickshaw while he was peddling. He got hurt on his knee and had a broken leg. Many of his friends were disappointed that he had made all the arrangements for the Hajj and the accident had put him in bandages.

A friend of mine visited this cycle rickshaw driver. The cycle rickshaw driver told my friend, “Inshallah, if God wills, I will go for the Hajj. “ Such tremendous trust in God!!!! When I heard the story, I was moved to tears thinking about this man’ tremendous trust and obedience to God’s will. Whatever happens is God’s Providence. The cycle rickshaw driver had surrendered himself with his heart and soul to God. Everything happens by His Providence. What a wonderful mantra for our life!

As a Christian reflecting on this Muslim practice of Hajj, my heart is drawn to the Biblical figure of Abraham. Muslims identify their God as God of Abraham. The Catholic Church in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* 16 clearly stated: “ ... Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind”. It’s a very significant point. Both traditions seeing themselves worshipping the God of Abraham shouldn’t be ignored (Paul Hedges).

St. Paul in his letter to Galatians (3:6-9) reflects on the quality of the faith of Abraham. “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Abraham is the father of all those who believe, Jews, Christians and Muslims. Why is he our father in faith? Abraham's faith consists in obedience and trust. God asks Abraham to leave his home and go to a land that He showed him (Genesis 12). Away from his community, away from his people, clan and culture, he trusted God and left everything to do God's will. God said that "I will make your descendants a great nation. This promise from God was made when Abraham was childless. But Abraham trusted God. His son Ismael is sent to the wilderness and with Isaac with him, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham was obedient and trusted him. God can raise the dead to life (Romans 4, 24). So what do we learn from Abraham's life? He allowed God to be God in his life.

The beautiful experiences that I narrated as told to me by Father Ethian and the touching story of the cycle rickshaw driver also conveys the message of how people allow God to be God in their lives. Millions of Muslims who perform Hajj every year allow God to be God in their lives. They have tremendous trust on God and His mercy.

Dear brothers and sisters, so Bakrid or the day of Eidul Adha is a beautiful day to reflect on the presence of God in our lives and the communities, to reflect on our own sinfulness and our own limitations and seek God's forgiveness in our lives.

Yours Sincerely

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## CORRESPONDENCE

Dear Editor:

I see Islam as a religion that teaches goodness and guides people to do things that help them experience salvation both in this world and in the Hereafter. I live side by side in a big family whose roots are actually in Islam. My grandparents and even my parents were not Catholic since childhood. My father was baptized when he was on duty in Kalimantan. My mother was baptized when she wanted to marry my father. Practically, we are the only Catholics in our largely Muslim extended family. And till now, we have been living in harmony, as members of one big family.

From elementary school to junior high school, I studied in a public school. Many of my friends then were Muslims. It is the same in the village: many of our neighbours are Muslims. Since childhood onwards, I have not had any difficulty relating to friends, neighbors and relatives who are Muslim. This positive experience stays with me even today. I am of the view that the Muslim people around me are good people. We can be friends, and we can work together. That said, I do not close my eyes to the fact that there are some Muslims who are hardliners and who do not want to be friends with others, both among their fellow Muslims themselves as well as non-Muslims.

In Indonesia, there have been some cases of friction involving some Christians and some Muslims. To handle such issues, we need to involve respected members of local Muslim communities. The Church certainly needs to continue to seek to cooperate with Muslims. This requires dialogue and relationship-building, both at the personal and the institutional levels. We need to build relationships with local governmental institutions around where we live and also to cooperate with security agencies.

Didik Chahyono SJ  
Indonesia (by email).

# SALAAM

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