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**Foundations for Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Peacemaking:  
Ideas about God, Faith, and Prayer<sup>1</sup>**

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*In this essay, I discuss God, faith, and sacred texts (including the Bible, Quran, and Hadith), and some ways that they constitute foundations for peacemaking between Christians and Muslims. The essay presents my personal, ethnic, and religious background in order to contextualize the ideas which the essay analyzes, and then describes three Christian theological approaches to non-Christian religions. Those approaches are particularist (or exclusivist), inclusivist, and pluralist. The essay discusses the historical background and significance of Vatican II, which took place between 1962 and 1965, and Nostra Aetate, published in 1965. The essay then analyzes three theological principles which undergird Nostra Aetate, and that document's description of Islam. The essay reflects on God, faith, and prayer in Christianity and Islam, concluding with some observations about the possibilities for peace between Christians and Muslims.*

My ancestors, including my parents, were born in Iran, and many of my ancestors were Muslims. Approximately three or four generations ago, many of my ancestors converted to Christianity as a result of the work of American Presbyterian missionaries in Iran. My great uncle taught history, Christianity, world religions and a number of other subjects as a professor at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota from 1946 to 1974. He and his wife were Christians, my parents are Christians and many of the people in my extended family are Christians. I am an ordained Presbyterian minister as part of and in addition to my position as Professor of Theology at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. During much of my life, I knew that one of the motivations of the missionaries in Iran was to convert people to Christianity because at least some of those missionaries believed that if a person remained a non-Christian, she or he would be condemned to hell. According to this type of Protestant belief, a person would be granted eternal life in heaven if she or he accepted Jesus Christ (Race, 1983; Knitter, 2003).

Throughout my life, I have known that there is more than one Christian approach to non-Christians. I have also known that there are some conservative Christians, who maintain the belief that Christians go to heaven, and everyone else goes to hell. At the same time, I have also known, because I grew up in a household and in an extended family which included many persons with sophisticated perspectives, that Christians could take other approaches to non-Christians that were not so dualistic and strict. Broadly speaking, there are three Christian approaches to non-Christian religions, with variations within each approach. One of these three is the particularistic approach, which is the most conservative approach, that maintains Christians will be granted eternal life in heaven and everyone else will be condemned to hell. The particularistic approach is often called the exclusivist approach. Particularists want everyone to convert to Christianity and they believe that Jesus Christ and/or the Christian church constitute the exclusive means by which a person can enter heaven.

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A second Christian approach to non-Christians is an inclusivist approach, and that approach suggests that Christianity, or if one wants to put it this way, Jesus Christ, is on a higher level than other religions. According to this approach, Christians still have an obligation to learn about non-Christian religions. The third approach is pluralist, a subcategory of which contends that all religions, at their core, teach the same ideas, although religions may appear different in their outward manifestations (Race, 1983; Knitter, 2003).

Because I grew up as a Protestant, Protestantism played a significant role in terms of the development of my theological perspective. I was born in the 1960's and although I have been a Protestant during my entire life, I have been, from an early age, familiar with the Second Vatican Council which took place between 1962 and 1965 that introduced many significant changes in the Roman Catholic Church (Cory & Hollerich, 2009). In this vein, my mother, her twin sister, and triplet brother, attended a Catholic school in a French-speaking part of Switzerland. One of several ways that I learned about the Catholic church was through my mother. For instance, through my knowledge of history and my mother's experiences, I learned that throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church until Vatican II, Latin was the language of Catholic masses (Cory & Hollerich, 2009). Even though I was born in the mid 1960's and am a Protestant, I saw some of the changes that were occurring in the Catholic Church as a result of Vatican II, because one of those changes involved the implementation of Vatican II's policy that the Catholic mass must be celebrated in the languages of the people. Although there continue to be Catholic masses that are celebrated in Latin, those constitute the exception and not the rule.

One of many significant changes that occurred as a result of Vatican II was the promulgation of the conciliar document entitled *Nostra Aetate*, which can be translated into English as the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965, p. 569). This document articulates Christian theological principles related to constructive interreligious engagement. *Nostra Aetate* specifically mentions Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism, while approaching these and other religions in an inclusivist manner. In composing *Nostra Aetate*, its writers asked several questions including: (1) How should Christians approach non-Christians?; (2) When Christians reflect on their own beliefs, which Christian theological ideas can they adopt that would make their engagement with non-Christians meaningful?; and (3) Which elements within Christianity can guide Christians in their approach non-Christians? (Cory & Hollerich, 2009)

Within the context of these questions, *Nostra Aetate* articulates three Christian theological foundations for Christians' engagement with non-Christians. First, all humans both Christians and non-Christians, are descended from Eve and Adam (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). In this vein, it does not matter whether a person believes Eve and Adam were real people or not. The point is that, either mythically or literally, Christians believe that Eve and Adam were humans' great, great, grandparents, multiplied by many generations. If a person is a Christian literalist and believes that the world was created in six twenty-four-hour days, then that person could subscribe to the idea that all humans are descended from Eve and Adam. In contrast, if one believes that Eve and Adam were symbolic figures, one could subscribe to the idea that all humans are descended from those figures as well. Yet, one theological thrust of Genesis chapters one through three, where Eve and Adam are significant characters, is the idea that all humans have a common lineage, whether that lineage is literal or symbolic. One lesson here is that

humans should treat each other in a good way as people in a family do, and not in a bad way as people in a family do.

A second Christian principle, which undergirds *Nostra Aetate*, is that all humans, both Christians and non-Christians, have been created in the image of God (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). The teaching here is that as humans look at the faces of their fellow humans, they see God's image reflected at them. Then, maybe as humans look in the mirror, they also see God's image reflected at them. This lesson continues by suggesting that if Christians see God's image in other persons' faces and in their own faces, then Christians should treat other persons as lovingly as they would treat God, whether or not those other persons are Christians.

A third Christian principle, which undergirds *Nostra Aetate*, is that God's creation is good (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). In several verses in the Bible, both within and outside Genesis 1, God declares that creation is good, a principle which *Nostra Aetate* affirms and develops. Because various religions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism) are part of God's good creation, then we as humans can consider them to possess goodness also. The principles that humans are descendants of Eve and Adam, are made in God's image, and that God's creation is good, constitute some of the deepest and most familiar concepts, which Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians embrace. *Nostra Aetate* articulates these concepts in constructive ways. At the same time, that document provides specific explanations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism, while providing pathways for Christians to engage adherents of those religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965).

*Nostra Aetate* articulates creative convergences with all those religions, including Islam. A close reading of that document's description of Islam is helpful at this point. The beginning of *Nostra Aetate*'s first paragraph describing Islam states, "The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965, p. 571). That sentence explicitly emphasizes the similarities between Christians and Muslims with respect to their belief in God and their ideas related to God's characteristics such as God's mercy, power, and relationship with humans. *Nostra Aetate* continues by stating, "[Muslims] endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965, p. 571) Abraham is present in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while he appears in the Bible and in the Quran and Hadith, both of which are Muslim sacred texts. For Jews and Christians, one of the reasons that Abraham is important is because he received the covenant of land, progeny, and blessing from God (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham is important for Muslims, in part, because God commanded him and his son Ishmael to build the Kaaba, the large black cubic structure in Mecca, which is the direction toward which Muslims pray and a destination of the hajj, a religious pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are required to make at least once in their lifetimes, if they are able (Quran 2:125-29; 22:26-27).

*Nostra Aetate* continues, "Although not acknowledging him as God, [Muslims] venerate Jesus as a prophet" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965, p. 571). Muslims have great respect for Jesus as a prophet and he appears in the Quran and Hadith as well. Muslims believe that Jesus prophesied about Muhammad, and that Jesus was an excellent example of love, forgiveness, and generosity

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(Khalidi, 2001; Saritoprak, 2014). With respect to the Virgin Mary, Nostra Aetate states, “[Jesus’s] virgin Mother [Muslims] also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead” (Nostra Aetate, 1965, p. 571). Muslims believe that the Virgin Mary was an excellent model of faith, obedience, righteousness and chastity (Stowasser, 1994).

In a manner similar to Judaism and Christianity, Islam teaches that at the end of time God will judge who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. Nostra Aetate elucidates this principle of the Day of Judgment in Islam, “Further, [Muslims] await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead,” meaning the good and faithful ones will go to heaven (Nostra Aetate, 1965, p. 571).

With respect to obligatory financial contributions and fasting in Islam, Nostra Aetate states, “[Muslims] highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer alms-deeds and fasting” (Nostra Aetate, 1965, p. 571). Sunni Muslims believe that they are obligated to contribute annually at minimum 2.5% of all their total assets to charity, while Shia Muslims believe that they are obligated to contribute annually at least 20% of their total assets to charity (Sachedina, 1980; Denny, 2006). These contributions function in a somewhat similar manner in Islam as tithing does in Christianity (Murray, 2002). Also, Muslims are required to fast during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan, which is somewhat similar to historic Christian rituals related to fasting, such as during Lent (McKnight, 2009). Nostra Aetate expands on these conciliatory ideas with respect to Christian-Muslim relations, highlighting some ethical principles which are important in both religions, “Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred council now pleads with all to forget the past and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (Nostra Aetate, 1965, p. 571).

Within this context, I would like to further describe three religious concepts, that Nostra Aetate articulates, which Christians and Muslims have in common, namely God, faith, and prayer. With respect to God, Christians and Muslims both believe that God is one, a single unity. However, one significant difference on this point between Christians, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, is that while Christians believe in the trinity and that this concept upholds their belief in God’s unity, Muslims reject the trinity because they believe that this concept comes dangerously close to polytheism, although Muslims recognize that Christians are monotheists (Denny, 2006; Cory & Hollerich, 2009). Indeed, of several beliefs that Muslims and Jews have in common is that they assert the oneness of God, while rejecting the trinity (Lapide & Moltmann, 1981).

With respect to the second religious concept, faith, Christians and Muslims believe that humans’ faith in God is a crucial component for being granted eternal life in heaven. Faith in God has potentially positive ramifications for one’s life, because faith can give a person hope, strength, direction, and meaning. Some Muslims believe that faith in God is adequate for eternal life, although those very same Muslims believe that they must do everything that Islam teaches, such as praying five times per day, giving generous financial contributions, fasting during Ramadan, participating in the pilgrimage to Mecca if one is able, and adhering to Islam’s dietary

regulations, for example. Other Muslims believe that having faith in God *and* doing everything that Islam teaches are *both* essential for Muslims being granted eternal life in heaven.

With respect to faith, one of the crucial differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants has involved the relationship between faith, on the one hand, and good works, on the other. Roman Catholicism teaches that good works perfect faith and that both faith and good works are essential for being granted eternal life in heaven. Protestantism teaches that faith alone is essential for eternal life in heaven although, at the same time, it is important for Christians to do good works. In this regard, Catholics choose a certain set of texts from the Bible and the Christian tradition, which support their belief about faith and good works being essential for salvation, while Protestants choose other texts from the Bible and the Christian tradition which support their belief that a Christian's faith alone is essential for salvation (Cory & Hollerich, 2009).

A third religious concept that Christians and Muslims share, which *Nostra Aetate* emphasizes, is prayer. Muslims are obligated to pray five times per day: before the sun rises, when the sun is at its zenith, in the afternoon, at dusk, and at night after the sun has set. Each prayer is approximately 10 to 20 minutes long and the words of each prayer are prescribed (Denny, 2006). In addition to those prayers, Muslims can pray whenever they would like to do so, as can Jews and Christians.

At the same time, Christianity has different types of prayer. One, for example, is what Roman Catholics often call the "Our Father," which Protestants often call the "Lord's Prayer," that typically begins with the words "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. . . ." Many Christians believe that the words of this prayer reflect what Jesus said, and touch on a few important theological themes related to prayer in Christianity. In view of the fact that this Christian prayer is prescribed, it is similar to the prayers which Muslims recite five times per day because the actual words of both types of prayer are known in advance and people memorize them (McGrath, 2012).

In Christianity, there are prayers related to sacraments. Roman Catholicism has seven sacraments, while most branches of Protestantism typically have two. For instance, in both of those branches of Christianity, the priest or minister offers specific prayers before the wafer (or bread) and wine (or grape juice) are offered to the people during Eucharist or Communion (Jasper & Cuming, 1987; Thompson, 1988).<sup>2</sup> There are also prayers which a priest or minister says during baptism, which is the Christian ritual of initiation (Witczak, 2011). Muslims and Christians have some kinds of prayers in common which include (1) prayers of praise to God where Muslims and Christians may exalt the greatness of God; (2) prayers of thanksgiving to God where Muslims and Christians may thank God for positive occurrences in their lives; and (3) intercessory prayer where Muslims and Christians may ask God to intervene constructively in difficult situations, such as when someone may be sick (Marshall & Mosher, 2013).

In conclusion, one of this conference's themes relates to peacemaking. In this regard, I do not have any significant solutions to suggest. Yet, I believe that on an interpersonal level, Christians and Muslims, who are inclined to have conversations and friendships with each other, and have an understanding of their similarities and differences, can use those common understandings to

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promote constructive discussions. I have difficulty addressing circumstances related to close-minded people, whether or not they are religious, because if a person is absolutely convinced she or he is right in her or his hostilities and that those hostilities are fully justified, I do not know how one have a conversation with that person (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2005; Juergensmeyer, 2008). That is an area about which I continue to wonder. However, I believe that if people were to have a greater knowledge of various religions and understand their similarities and differences, then maybe some people who harbor hostilities may harbor less of them as a result of understanding the similarities and differences (Merkle, 2003; Phan, 2004; Volf et al., 2010). Along these lines, humans have a capacity, if they want to use it, to be able to understand people who are different from them, and this capacity could constitute one of several foundations for peacemaking (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014; Sanneh, 2016).

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>This is a revised version of a transcript of Jon Armajani's presentation entitled "Foundations for Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Peacemaking: Ideas about God, Faith, and Sacred Texts," which he gave at the Thirty-First Annual Peace Studies Conference entitled *Religion, Politics, and Peacemaking: Perspectives from Haigazian University, Lebanon, and the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University*, which took place at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota USA on October 29, 2018. This conference was sponsored by the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at Saint John's University, the Department of Peace Studies at the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University which serves the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John's University (CSB/SJU) community, and Haigazian University, with funding provided by the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota. Each speaker was allotted twenty-five minutes for her or his presentation.

<sup>2</sup>The seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic church are Baptism; Confirmation; Eucharist; Penance; Anointing of the Sick; Holy Orders; and Matrimony (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1995, para. 1210). Two sacraments in Protestantism are typically Baptism and Eucharist or Communion (McGrath, 2012).

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