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## The Second Vatican Council and the Culture of Dialogue: The Role of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary

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#### ABSTRACT:

In the light of an increased population of Muslim communities in the United States and the long history of animosity between Islam and West Christianity, the essay notes the necessity for Christian-Muslim dialogue for world peace. Using Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegetown as the case study, the author explains the need for incorporating courses in Islam in Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary's curriculum. Interfaith theology would prepare the students to engage in interreligious dialogue and be agents for world peace.

# The Second Vatican Council and the Culture of Dialogue

## The Role of Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary

by Janice Kristani

One feature that makes the Second Vatican Council distinct from other ecumenical councils in the past is the council's positive attitude towards engaging in an inter-religious dialogue between the church and non-Christian religions in the modern world. The council continued to consider "other religions as 'preparation for the gospel,' rather than alternative or additional paths to salvation."<sup>1</sup> In the Declaration on The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), the Council oriented the document into an inclusive understanding of Christian and non-Christian relationship:

*In our day, when people are drawing more closely together, and the bonds of friendship between different people are being strengthened, the church examines more carefully its relations with non-Christian religions. (#1)*

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1 John L. Esposito, "Foreword" in *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), xii



## BRIDGING THE GAP

by Katryna Bertucci

The Church explicitly acknowledges the reality of the interreligious context in which the modern man and woman are living today. Fostering relationships with those who have different faiths becomes a concern of the Council; therefore, the interfaith dialogue is a category within the Church's theology. The interfaith dialogue has multifaceted realities ranging from day-to-day coexistence with neighbors from different religions to the rise of comparative theology in theological schools. At the heart of it, is the Church's persistent encouragement to Christians to "enter in prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions." (*Nostra Aetate*, #2). Carrying the vision of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II stated in *Redemptoris Missio*: "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same day." (#56).

A further question would be, "With a lot of religions in the world, what religion should one begin to study?" There are many answers to this question, but one can begin by looking at the context of where one stands. In this paper, I will use the United States of America as a locus of interfaith dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam. Why Islam? As a commonly misunderstood religion, the careful study of Islam would increase one's understanding of that faith and further one's interfaith understanding. I argue that courses in Islam should have a critical place in the curriculum in Catholic theological schools and seminaries. On that note, I state that courses in Islam would benefit the students of Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary (SOT-SEM) by introducing the students to the right understanding of Islam, with the hope of promoting dialogue with non-Christian neighbors. By offering such courses, the school would promote the culture of dialogue in academia that potentially would shape the students' pastoral ministry. Also, I will demonstrate how the particular issue of terrorism has heavily skewed the perception of Islam. Finally, I will discuss relevant work by two experts in interfaith relations from both the Catholic Church and Islam: Thomas Michel and Eboo Patel, following the rationale that fostering interreligious dialogue is imperative for the mission of the Church.



## THE LOW ROAD

by Katryna Bertucci

## I. WHY ISLAM?

Pope John Paul II is known as a world traveler who crossed the threshold of cultures and religions like none of his predecessors. The pope further implemented the pedagogy of interreligious dialogue as “common prayer, coming together before the Source and Final Goal of our religious journey.”<sup>2</sup> His words are consistent with his action of interfaith dialogue, making John Paul II the first pope visiting a mosque since 2001. Substantively, interreligious dialogue is not a “mere talking” among intellectuals that mimic a tea party.<sup>3</sup> The Church must foster such a *culture of dialogue* to open up both Christians and non-Christians to see the good in each other’s faith tradition. Focusing mainly on Islam, the Second Vatican Council (in *Nostra Aetate*) presents an explicit view of Muslims:

*The church also has high regard for the Muslim...Over the centuries, many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred council now pleads with all 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. (#3)*

From the statement, one can draw a commentary that the council hopes for the partnership with Muslims for the sake of “peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values” in the highly secularized world. This kind of optimistic vision of interfaith relationship is grounded in the council’s inclusive understanding of God and human salvation in *Lumen Gentium*:

*“But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Moslems: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day.” (#16)*

Following the authoritative teachings of Vatican II concerning interfaith, the needs of studying Islam in a theological school are assumed for the actualization of such a partnership. The theological formation is critical for the

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2 Thomas Mitchel, “Creating a Culture of Dialogue” in *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 18

3 Ibid.

interreligious vision of the Church that engages the commonality of prayer and religious journey, starting from classrooms and moving to congregations.

The attacks of 9/11 in the United States have increased anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia throughout North America and Europe. Because of Osama Bin Laden, ISIS, and the Taliban, Islam has been otherized<sup>4</sup> and viewed as a religion of terror. Moreover, the recent attacks and the killing of general Qasem Soleimani have brought back memories of crusades and Christianity's long held resistance to coexistence with Muslims. Yet, notwithstanding the oppressive American attitude towards Muslims, Islam is still the fastest-growing religion in the United States and also the world in general. Pew Research Center (2017) found:

*Muslims will grow more than twice as fast as the overall world population between 2015 and 2060 and, in the second half of this century, will likely surpass Christians as the world's largest religious group.*<sup>5</sup>

These recent statistical findings must be introduced to Christians, so they are aware of their current contextual condition. In light of these statistic, an Islamophobic attitude and defensive apologetic dialogue from the Church would do no benefit for today and the future. Knowing the current status of the culture, the need for interfaith dialogue, particularly with Islam, is imperative.

## II. THE RELIGION OF VIOLENCE? TERRORISM REVISITED

Due to the acts of terrorism that are still present today, associating Islam with terrorism seems “normal.” This kind of normalization of Islam as a religion of violence/terrorism is fueled by the misconception of Islamic teaching on jihad. Eboo Patel-an American interfaith activist explained that mistake: “What was not changed, however, is the notion that Islam is a religion whose adherents have been embroiled in a perpetual state of holy war or *jihad*...”<sup>6</sup> Does jihad teach Muslims to terrorize non-Muslims? What does Islam teach about jihad? Tracing jihad to its Arabic roots, the word jihad literally means “a struggle.”

4 Reza Aslan, *No god But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2005), xvi

5 Michael Lipka and Conrad Hackett, “Why Muslims are the world’s fastest-growing religious group,” *Fact Tank News in the Numbers* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2017), visit: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/>

6 Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, (New York, N.Y.: Random House, 2005), 81

One should note that Islam categorizes two kinds of jihad: the greater jihad and the lesser jihad. The greater jihad means a struggle of one's soul to overcome "sinful obstacles."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps one can compare this understanding of greater jihad with the Christian teaching of "dying to one's self." The lesser jihad is what is usually associated with war. Lesser jihad can be understood as "fight in the way of God" that allows for military power used for protection against oppression and tyranny. Lesser jihad should be interpreted in relation to a greater jihad and the context of how it was written to protect the early Muslim community (ummah) from Quraysh in Mecca in 624 C.E.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, the Islamic doctrine of jihad has been misinterpreted and manipulated for a political agenda. Such an extremist approach to Islam is seen in Osama bin Laden who founded a terror-based organization Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden (and his organization, al Quaida) gave rise to Jihadism (*jahadiyyah*) – a movement that radicalizes the teaching of jihad. This type of organization was responsible for the 9/11 suicide attack and sadly has become the representation of Islamic faith ever since. Taking into account historical animosity between the Christian West and Islam, 21st-century terrorism has brought back much negative nostalgia. How does Christianity (particularly the Catholic Church) embrace the call to dialogue with Muslims if the concept of Islam as the religion of violence is still present? Whether Christians know the genuine Islamic teachings? In the light of the ongoing political issues between the United States and the Middle East, a greater knowledge in history and Islamic theology would counter any misconceptions about Islam as a religion of terror.

### III. MODELS OF DIALOGUE

The interfaith dialogue that promulgated by the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II requires a mutual work from both Christians and Muslims. One prominent figure from the Catholic Church is Thomas Michel, S.J., an internationally recognized scholar and Christian-Muslim relations expert. Thomas Michel served on the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and was Head of the Office for Islam in 1988. Thomas Michel, S.J. asserted:

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7 Ibid., 82

8 Ibid., 83





## STRENGTH

by Katryna Bertucci

*In this perspective, the long history of conflict, oppression, violence, and war between Christians and Muslims must be understood as acts perpetrated by Muslims and Christians who failed to live accordingly to the genuine teaching of their respective faiths...<sup>9</sup>*

Michel's statement oriented his reader to not come to interfaith dialogue with an attitude of "What is wrong with Islam?" Instead, he encourages his reader to see the problem caused by specific individuals. Concerning the terrorist attack of 9/11 and war on terrorism, Thomas Michel insisted that Muslims can no longer regard the peaceful nature of Islam as self-evident.<sup>10</sup> This kind of awareness is essential for Muslims to take into account the perception of people from different faith and work together towards a better understanding. Henceforth, Muslims ought to work with Christians to counter a "common" reputation of Islam as a religion of violence, not peace. By doing so, Muslims demonstrate how Islam does work for the world's peace.

Looking at the ongoing conflicts between Muslims and Christians (particularly in the United States), interfaith dialogue is "a need that must be pursued in the midst of and despite the tensions and conflicts of our time."<sup>11</sup> One recognized education-based forum for interfaith dialogue is the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Composed of the distinguished scholars from Christian and Islamic traditions, the center provides tools and resources for "academic training in the issues that have long divided the Christians and Muslim worlds."<sup>12</sup> From a leading figure-Thomas Michel and the education platform done by Georgetown University, Christian and Muslim dialogue is not a naïve slogan of "let's get along together." Substantive research, day-to-day interaction, and teaching and writing are used for the realization of its mission.

Eboo Patel is another leading advocate for interfaith relations in the United States. Patel founded the Interfaith Youth Core, a network that provides curriculums that promote interreligious cooperation and friendship on college campuses. Patel believes that diversity alone is not enough; it needs to be

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9 Thomas Michel, "Islam and Terrorism" in *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 153

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 155

12 Ibid., 154

transformed into pluralism. Patel argues pluralism is what enables leaders to engage the difference and works towards the common good. His philosophy is aligned with his understanding of interfaith leaders as stated in his book *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*: “Interfaith leaders are people who have the ability to lead individuals and communities that orient around religion differently toward understanding and cooperation.”<sup>13</sup> Responding to the context of the United States as one of the most religiously diverse countries, Patel’s work focuses on incorporating the interfaith program into the colleges’ systems, which would be beneficial for the young generation.

#### IV. UPDATED CURRICULUM?

Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary grounded in the Benedictine and Roman Catholic tradition has its rich liturgical and theological history and has long been a leader in the ecumenical movement. According to the school’s mission is:

*We commit ourselves to be academic, spiritual, pastoral, and professional formation so we might serve the church in lay and ordained ministry and thus use our diverse gifts for the transformation of our world.*<sup>14</sup>

While focusing on the church, the mission presents a theological understanding of the relationship between the church and the world.

*And while there is a rare and palpable rhythm to life on campus involving daily prayer, life in community, and hospitality, Saint John’s is not a place to retreat from the world, but rather a place that prepares men and women to engage the world.*

How does the world look in the present day? According to the Pews Institute, it is increasingly Muslim.<sup>15</sup> To prepare its students for such a world, a course in Islam is critical for students’ theological formation and leadership formation in the future. The fact that Saint John’s School of Theology and

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13 Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, (Boston, M.A.: Beacon Press, 2016), 4

14 Saint John’s School of Theology, “Mission,” visit: <https://www.cbsju.edu/sot/about>

15 Michael Lipka and Conrad Hackett, “Why Muslims are the world’s fastest-growing religious group,” *Fact Tank News in the Numbers* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2017), visit: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/>

Seminary (SOT-SEM) does not offer a course on Islam (unless it is done as an independent study) raises a theological question about the curriculum.

Connecting to the common misconception of Islam as a “religion of violence,” a course would significantly expose students to authentic Islamic thoughts and history that are far greater than the extremist point of view. Without a class, how do the students know the opening verse in most books of Koran says, “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most *Merciful*”? How do the students have access to the right information concerning Islamic theology amid Islamophobic society? With the development of internet culture that contains memes and polemic Twitter posts, the need for interreligious from education platforms is highly essential for the preparation of students after graduation. Highlighting the fact of controversial blog posts and memes concerning Christian Crusaders, and “Islam as heresy,” the SOT-SEM curriculum must address the need to “read the signs of times” by equipping the students to rightly assess information available on the internet.

Recalling the painful memories of 9/11, the school must provide interfaith tools and training for students to engage in this kind of conversation. Back to the explanation of Jihadism, SOT-SEM should care whether its students unintentionally equate Islam with Jihadism or any other extreme terrorist movement such as ISIS. A class in Islam would not only educate students about the fundamental doctrines of Islam concerning God and His names but also expand one’s perception of Islam in its similarities with and distinctions from Christianity (mainly the Catholic Church). Often, Christians get fixated on the Islamic teaching of Jesus as a mere prophet, not God. While such teaching does not make Christianity less accurate, instead, Christians need to go further and recognize on Islam regards Jesus as the second-most important prophet instead of rejecting Jesus altogether. Knowing the history of how Islam has grown to be the second-largest religion in the world and its contact with the West requires at least a semester-long class taught by a theologian, not mere online information from Google.

Finally, having a course on Islam would complement one’s understanding of the Church post-Vatican II. Recalling *Nostra Aetate*’s explicit teachings of interreligious dialogue and its esteem for Muslims, providing a course on Islam

would actualize the Church's mission to not only work for ecumenism but also interfaith relations. The council's hope to have "mutual understanding" can be achieved starting in the classroom, then moving to parishes, and other workforce settings. The call to foster interfaith dialogue through "common prayer, coming together before the Source and Final Goal of our religious journey"<sup>16</sup> can only be achieved by students when the school provides the means to do so.

## V. CONCLUSION

Interreligious dialogue should be a lifelong commitment by the adherents of the world's religions. In the light of globalization and migration, the need to co-exist peacefully and work for the world's welfare is expressed daily. Focusing on Stearns County Minnesota, for example, the growing of Somali population (mostly Muslims) is changing the demographics and cultural and religious context of the place. One evident example of such interfaith work is Jay Phillips Center at CSB/SJU. While Jay Phillips sometimes collaborate with SOT-SEM on a specific topic of lectures, the need to further collaborate and integrate the interreligious dimension of education in the theological curriculum remains until today. One particular example is the Interfaith Love Poems discussion that I moderated in fall 2019. I read poems and asked my colleagues to guess what faith tradition (Christian or Islamic) do the poems belong to. Most of the time, my colleagues gave wrong answers. The main reason was because the language of love or aesthetic symbol presented is similar between Christian and Muslim poets. At the end of the discussion, we shared how reading love poems has expanded their views of Islam, particularly with the common language for love of God and neighbor. Learning from this experience, I have encountered the need to engage in interfaith dialogues through poems and other forms of art in theological schools. Tracing the overlapping interaction between Christian and Islamic intellectual traditions such as a philosopher, Avicenna and a theologian and philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, or Hafiz and Rumi's influence on German poetry presents another reason for the necessity to study Islam.

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16 Thomas Mitchel, "Creating a Culture of Dialogue" in *A Christian View of Islam: Essays on Dialogue*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 18

Multifaceted ministry ranging from lay ecclesial ministers in parishes, hospital chaplain, priests, to college instructors need interfaith formation to prepare students to engage and dialogue with non-Christians in the world. Responding to the current socio-political situation, it seems expected of the religious leaders wherever they are also to be interfaith leaders. One needs to translate the magisterial teachings of the Second Vatican Council concerning the culture of interreligious dialogue into their lives and ministry. By doing so, one can genuinely participate in the transformation of the world and furthering the Church's mission in the modern world.

