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POPE FRANCIS' DIALOGUE INITIATIVES WITH MUSLIMS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Salih Yucel* and Muhammad Tahir**

Abstract: Pope Francis' dialogue activities with the Muslim world have been welcomed by the majority of Muslims and covered extensively in media. His visits to Muslim countries, meetings with heads of state and official religious authorities, and encouraging Catholics for dialogue activities can contribute to world peace. This article focuses on *Nostra Aetate*, which is considered one of the most critical turning points in the history of Catholic–Muslim relations. This study has two arguments. The first is that Pope Francis' statements about the practice of dialogue can contribute to world peace if applied within institutions and at the grassroots. The second is that if Pope Francis' dialogue activities involve only religious leaders officially appointed by governments in the Muslim world and exclude independent religious leaders, the impact will be significantly lessened. This paper also proposes that, for fruitful dialogue activities, Catholics and Muslims should focus on moral qualities rather than theological differences.

Keywords: *Qur'ān, interfaith dialogue, Pope Francis, People of the Book, Nostra Aetate*

INTRODUCTION

During his cardinalship and papacy, Pope Francis' friendly approach towards Islam and Muslims has been warmly welcomed by Muslims. The declaration *Nostra Aetate* made by the Second Vatican Council in October 1963, the dialogue initiatives of Pope John Paul II and those of Pope Francis with Muslims are three crucial factors in the history of the Catholic Church. Since he was elected, Pope Francis has visited 14 Muslim countries. This is more than any other pope in the history. Pope Francis' visit to Al-Azhar in Egypt would be the first-ever visit by a Roman Catholic Pope to Sunni Islam's oldest religious institution.¹ He addressed Muslims as brothers during his visit to Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Morocco. The spokesman for Al-Azhar University, Ahmed Zarea, said “the papal visit is considered historic in terms of timing and significance, and is a very important step to enhancing dialogue between

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¹ Mahmoud Aziz, 'Pope Francis visits Egypt with Message of Peace', Ahramonline, April 27, 2020, accessed March 18, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/266683/Egypt/Politics-/Pope-Francis-visits-Egypt-with-message-of-peace-.aspx>

religions.”² Pope Francis and the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad Tayyeb, signed a document called “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.” Such initiatives have contributed to understanding despite sharp criticism by the fundamentalists and opponents of dialogue among the adherents of both faiths. However, because of the degree of fear and mistrust between adherents of the two faiths, there is a risk of failure if the dialogue does not also occur at grassroots level between Catholics and Muslims.

Said Nursi (d.1960) argues that the fear between Christians and Muslims is from a “deceptive imagination” related to the extremities.³ This imaginary deceptive fear is promoted by extremists, whose voices are heard in the media more than those of mainstream Muslims. A simple analysis of the historical record proves that greater wars have been fought internally among Christians in Europe and Muslims in the Muslim world. In other words, the internal wars among co-religionists far outweigh all the wars and conflicts between Christians and Muslims.⁴

Conflicts between Catholics and Protestants are more numerous and far-reaching than conflicts between Catholics and Muslims. After the inception of Islam, there were 481 wars that European kingdoms or nations were involved in. Out of these, only about 55 involved Muslim Arabs, Turks and Persian kingdoms. It should be noted that most of the wars entered by the Christians and Muslims were defensive. The spread of Islam in Christian lands, particularly in the Middle East, caused fear of Islam in Christendom. This fear weakened after colonisation but came to surface again after the collapse of Communism in the early 1990s. This fear increased further after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Fear of Islam and Muslims, more than of any other faith or tradition, dominates Western media and Christian societies.

The fear of Islam in modern times is human made. Edward Said argues it was created by Orientalism and is “imaginative,”⁵ supporting Nursi’s view. This fear at times becomes the driving force for societies and civilisations; their rhetoric propagates and uses the fear as a tool to achieve political and social power.⁶ Pope Francis also noted the existence of fear between various religious traditions, particularly in secularised society.⁷

Pope Francis’ approach and the warm welcoming of his dialogue initiatives by Muslims can reduce the negative impact of that imaginative fear. To overcome the fear, dialogue is necessary between Catholics and Muslims. We believe Pope Francis is fully aware of this fear and he is taking initiatives to reduce its severity. He says, “our respect for true followers of Islam should lead us to avoid hateful generalisations, for authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran

² Ibid.

³ Said Nursi, *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur’an’s Eloquence* (New Jersey: Tugrah Books, 2008), 4.

⁴ For details, see The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “List of Wars,” *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, July 10, 2015, accessed December 15, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-wars-2031197>.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 10.

⁶ William Eckhardt, “Civilizations, Empires, and Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 1 (1990): 15.

⁷ Michael L. Fitzgerald, “*Nostra Aetate*: Dialogue and Dialogues,” in *Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths: Vatican II and its Impact*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Jason Welle (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 29.

are opposed to every form of violence.”⁸ Contrary to mainstream media in the West, Pope Francis indicates that “identifying Islam with violence is ‘not right and not true,’ as there is ‘always a little fundamentalist group’ in every religion.”⁹ Pope John Paul II further states that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, though they differ about Jesus’ divinity.¹⁰

For Muslims, there is the foundation of dialogue. Islamic sacred texts recognise Christianity as a divinely revealed religion and Jesus as one of the greatest prophets (*ulu’l azm*) of God. Christians are called “*Ahl al-Kitab*.” The word “*ahl*” can be translated as a “family.” For example, in the Qur’ān 28:12, the family of the infant Moses is described by the word *ahl*; Moses’ family is again referred to by the term *ahl* in the Qur’ān 28:29. The word “*al-Kitab*” is used to denote the Qur’ān, the *Tawrat* (Torah) and the *Injeel* (Gospel).¹¹ Hence, when “*Ahl al-Kitab*” is rendered as the “Family of the Book,” the sense of the respectful, ecumenical meaning of the title is better conveyed.¹²

Ismail Albayrak asserts “it is important to note that the concept of ‘*Ahl al-Kitab*’ in the Qur’an is characterised by a degree of lack of rigidity and an overall attitude of amity and even a degree of respect.”¹³ The Qur’ān describes the people of *Ahl al-Kitab* as “*ummah muqtasidah*” (moderate nation).¹⁴ This is an honorary title. However, there are different views among Muslim scholars as to whether this term includes all the People of the Book.

Through dialogue, Catholics will learn about Islam and Muslims, and Muslims will learn about Catholics, going beyond images propagated by mass media, which mostly distort and sensationalise Islam and Muslims. The media also sensationalises the poor reputation of Catholics arising from child sex abuse in the Church. Interfaith dialogue between adherents of both faiths can reduce the degree of fear and mistrust.

NOSTRA AETATE: A TURNING POINT

Nostra Aetate has been considered one of the most critical turning points in the history of Catholic–Muslim relations. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, *Nostra Aetate* is the Magna Carta of the Catholic Church in terms of Muslim–Christian relations.¹⁵ Since 1967,

⁸ Gerard Mannion, “Catholicism Embracing its Religious Others,” in *Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths: Vatican II and its Impact*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Jason Welle (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 10.

⁹ Gretel Kauffmann, “Why Pope Francis won’t Link Islam with Terrorism?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 1, 2016.

¹⁰ Anthony O’Mahony, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council,” *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1016 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2006.00132.x>.

¹¹ Qur’ān 3:64; 3:75; 3:199; 9:111; 29:46. Ali Unal’s *The Qur’an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* is used for this article.

¹² Mark Anthony Stone, “The Children of Adam: A Study of the Islamic Understanding of Community (Umma) from the Classical to Contemporary Ages” (unpublished PhD diss., Monash University, 2014), 11.

¹³ Ismail Albayrak “The People of the Book in the Qur’ān,” *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008).

¹⁴ Qur’ān 5:66.

¹⁵ John Borelli, “Interreligious Dialogue as a Spiritual Practice” (paper presented at the Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement conference, Washington, D.C.,

popes have congratulated Muslims on *Eid al-Fitr* after the month of Ramadan. In 1974, the Vatican formed the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. In 1976, the Vatican co-organised the Christian-Islam Congress in Tripoli with the World Islamic Call Society. In 1990, the Vatican established the *Nostra Aetate* Foundation. In 1994, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) led a conference with the Muslim World League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Muslim World Congress in Cairo. In 1995, the Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee was set up with four international Muslim organisations. The Permanent Committee for Dialogue set up a joint committee with Al-Azhar University's Monotheist Religions Committee in 1998 with the signing of an agreement in Rome.

In 2001, Pope John Paul II visited Umayyad Mosque, "the first pope to visit a mosque, 1,363 years after Caliph Umar ibn Khattab (586-644) visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem."¹⁶ In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and leaders signed an open letter called "A Common Word between Us and You" addressed to Pope Benedict XVI in response to the Pope's remarks in a lecture at the University of Regensburg. In 2008, in Iran, the PCID and the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation made a joint declaration. In February 2011, the Vatican and Al-Azhar University's Joint Committee for Dialogue signed a declaration promoting a culture of peace. Pope Francis visited Iraq in March 2020 and met with the Shia spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. His visit shows he also includes Shia Muslims in his dialogue initiative. The visit created some political disturbance when a map of Kurdistan, which includes parts of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq, was given to him. It was perceived as a step towards recognition of an independent Kurdish state.

In Catholic archdioceses in many countries, a commission is devoted to interfaith relations. These are all fruits of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration. Interfaith dialogue needs to be institutionalised and collaboration must take place through joint projects for there to be any effectual dialogue in the current atmosphere of scepticism. As mentioned above, some steps have been taken by the Vatican and Muslim religious leaders for the institutionalisation of dialogue, but these are not enough. Without the institutionalisation of dialogue and showing its benefits to Christians and Muslims in general, there will be vigorous opponents and this will lessen the positive effect. However, if interfaith dialogue is used for political, mission or *da'wah* (proselytisation) purposes instead of understanding and accepting each other, it can transform dialogue activity into an interfaith socialising club. As Thomas Michel, who led the office for engagement with Islam within the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, argues, it will be "a clubby brotherhood."¹⁷

Anthony O'Mahoney argues the "teaching of the Second Vatican Council has provided a solid basis for the remarkable development in Christian-Muslim relations throughout the world,

November 14-15, 2008), <http://en.fgulen.com/conference-papers-en/gulen-conference-in-washington/interreligious-dialogue-as-a-spiritual-practice>.

¹⁶ For details, see Salih Yucel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue: *Nostra Aetate* and Fethullah Gulen's Philosophy of Dialogue," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 20, no. 3 (2013): 202.

¹⁷ Thomas Michel, "Toward a Dialogue of Liberation with Muslims," *CTC Bulletin*, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://cca.org.hk/ctc/ctc02-01/ctc0201d.htm>.

yet there has been little change in the official teaching of the Church as regards the theological evaluation of Islam.”¹⁸

Michael L. Fitzgerald recapitulates the Vatican’s previous positions about Islam. He shows how categorical theological evaluations happened in the Catholic Church from the inception of Islam. Islam was seen variously as Satanic, a false religion, heretical in the classical period, a merely natural religion in the modern period, and as Abrahamic, monotheistic, and finally a scriptural religion since *Nostra Aetate*.¹⁹ Since colonisation, the image of Christians, including Catholics, worsened in the Muslim world. The new World Order and the War on Terror created great mistrust in Muslim societies. It can be said the portrayal of Christians in the classical period was better than today in Muslim societies.

The Second Vatican Council spoke about Muslims but not about Islam. O’Mahoney states “this is true insofar as the Council did not intend to give a full description of Islam or to enter into a comprehensive theological assessment.”²⁰ However, the statements by John Paul II showed an increasing theological evolution toward Islam and Muslims. He said to young Moroccans in Casablanca on 19 August 1986, “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.”²¹ Similar statements were made during his visits to other areas of the Muslim world. The Vatican’s warm approach towards Muslims almost came to a standstill during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI. Pope Francis took up John Paul II’s warm approach towards Islam and Muslims. Like John Paul II, he stressed that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. He also said, “Our relationship with the followers of Islam has taken on great importance since they are now significantly present in many traditionally Christian countries, where they can freely worship and fully become a part of society.”²² Jordan Denari asserts that Pope Francis broached new theological topics concerning Islam and moved beyond *Nostra Aetate*.²³ In commenting on how the Vatican positions changed towards Jews, Maureen Fiedler argues that “*Nostra Aetate* shows that the change is possible.”²⁴ This can also be the case in relation to Muslims.

During his speech to the International Peace Conference in Egypt on 28 April 2017, Pope Francis reflected on the nature of authentic religion but did not mention Islam by name.²⁵ This

¹⁸ O’Mahony, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam.”

¹⁹ Michael L. Fitzgerald, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam and Christian Muslims Relations Since Vatican II until Today,” *Theologica* 8 (2018).

²⁰ O’Mahony, “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mannion, “Catholicism Embracing its Religious Others,” 10.

²³ Dawn M. Nothwehr, “A Model for Muslim-Christian Dialogue on Care for the Earth: Vatican II, St. Francis and the Sultan, and Pope Francis,” in *Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths: Vatican II and its Impact*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Jason Welle (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁴ Maureen Fiedler, “*Nostra Aetate* Proves that Change is Possible,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 26, 2015, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/nostra-aetate-proves-change-possible>.

²⁵ “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Participants in the International Peace Conference,” The Holy See, April 28, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/april/documents/papa-francesco_20170428_egitto-conferenza-pace.html.

is a step back. In addition, how far Pope Francis' message is reaching 'grassroots' Catholics is another question. Rev. Patrick McInerney, speaking about dialogue initiatives, states that "cordiality and concord remain mostly at the level of the leaders and do not reach the followers in the congregations."²⁶

There are some challenges that Pope Francis and proponents of dialogue in the Muslim world must face. First, there is no hierarchy and an elected spiritual leader like the Pope in the Muslim world. But there are religious leaders assigned by governments or rulers. Generally, these appointed religious authorities have no grassroots support in society since they are aligned with the injustice, corruption and tyranny of the rulers.²⁷ Their function is more political than religious, as they are obliged to defend the rulers' policy through their legal directives. The offices of assigned religious leaders have been and are manipulated by states, particularly from colonial times and up to the present. Under the impact of states, particularly undemocratic ones, dialogue in the Muslim world is channelled into serving the state ideology with an Islamic mask. Thus, no person or institution represents Muslims throughout the world nor is there any agreement on who should represent the adherents of this faith.²⁸ Having dialogue only between state alliance religious leaders and the Pope causes more suspicions at the grassroots of the Muslim world because state alliance religious leaders support oppressors or are silent about their corruption, nepotism, corruption and undemocratic ruling.²⁹ Thus, dialogue becomes political rather than religious. The political dialogue of the Vatican with the Muslim majority countries mostly focuses on national interests. On the other hand, if the Vatican was to conduct dialogue with independent religious leaders in the Muslim world, the governments and rulers of the Muslim world would not accept it. It could even bring about diplomatic crises between the Vatican and Muslim states. Thus, Pope Francis having dialogue with political and state alliance religious leaders and neglecting independent Muslim spiritual leaders is a double-edged sword.

OPPONENTS OF DIALOGUE

Not all Muslims and Christians accept *Nostra Aetate*.³⁰ Far-right groups, Evangelicals and some in the Catholic Church sharply criticise dialogue initiatives with Muslims. In 1970, Evangelicals convened in Frankfurt, Germany, and signed a declaration called the "Frankfurt Declaration," underlining the mission of Christ and harshly criticising organised dialogue as a "betrayal of the universality of Christ."³¹ William Kilpatrick, a former professor at Boston

²⁶ Patrick McInerney, "From the Editor," *Bridges* 85 (2019): 1.

²⁷ Salih Yucel, "Human Rights and Guilt by Association Said Nursi's Renewal Approach," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 24.

²⁸ Yvonne Haddad and Wadi Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gensville: University Press of Florida, 1995), xv.

²⁹ See Ihsan Yilmaz and Ismail Albayrak, "Instrumentalization of Religious Conspiracy Theories in Politics of Victimhood: Narrative of Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs," *Religions* 12 (2021).

³⁰ See Yucel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue," 202-205.

³¹ Haddad and Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, xiii.

College, severely criticises Pope Francis' approach to Islam and Muslims.³² The Bishop of Astana, Athanasius Schneider, refutes Pope Francis' "diversity of religions" and argues that "Christianity is the only valid and God-willed religion."³³ John Lemont calls dialogue with Muslims "directly contrary to the Catholic faith."³⁴ In the *Dialogue and Mission* statement by the Secretariat for non-Christians in the Vatican in 1984 and *Dialogue and Proclamation* in 1991, dialogue is placed within the mission of the Church, the building of God's kingdom,³⁵ thereby arousing apprehension on the part of Muslims. Ataulah Siddiqui argues this created a problem among those who believe that dialogue is primarily a human concern and that mission—as we understand it—is not the principal objective of *Redemptoris Missio*.³⁶ This somewhat inspires confidence for the future of dialogue. In response to the critics of dialogue, Pope Francis said he is not afraid of criticism and welcomes constructive criticism.³⁷

Nonetheless, it should be stated that some Muslim thinkers often brought polemics to the table, asking that they are resolved before genuine dialogue takes place. In his response to Pope Paul VI's letter regarding Peace Day, Abu 'Ala Mawdudi (d.1979), founder of the Islamic revivalist party in Pakistan Jamaat al-Islami, asked that the Pope use all his influence to remove that which poisons the relations between the two faith groups, such as the attacks on Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'ān made by Christian scholars. When the Second Vatican Council was discussing the idea of moving on from the historical disputes between Muslims and Christians, the French-Indian Muslim leader, Professor Muhammad Hamidullah (d. 2002), in France responded with a letter to the Pope, requesting that the Vatican officially disavow the Church's past unjustifiable and anti-Islamic resolutions of councils and synods. One viewpoint among Muslim thinkers is that forgetting the past is "a way of getting us to disarm ourselves."³⁸ In 2005, the rector of Al-Azhar University asked the Vatican to apologise for the Crusades.³⁹ There was scepticism regarding dialogue and fear it would be used as a missionary tool and for the Vatican's political agendas. Bayram Sevinc argues the term "Abrahamic Religions," which is commonly used in dialogue, is fabricated and does not exist in the Islamic sacred texts. It

³² Although William Kilpatrick's doctorate is about counselling and psychology, most of his articles in *Crisis Magazine: A Voice for the Faithful Catholic Laity* are about Islam and Muslims. His views and comments on Islam and Muslims are extreme. His articles are politically motivated and promote fear of Islam and Muslims. See <https://www.crisismagazine.com/author/william-kilpatrick>.

³³ Athanasius Schneider, "The Christian Faith is the Only Valid and the Only God-Willed Religion," *Catholicism* 101, February 8, 2019, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://onepeterfive.com/schneider-christian-god-willed/>.

³⁴ Luiz Sérgio Solimeo, "Theological and Canonical Implications of the Declaration signed by Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi," *The American FTP*, February 27, 2019, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.tfp.org/theological-and-canonical-implications-of-the-declaration-signed-by-pope-francis-in-abu-dhabi/>.

³⁵ Edward Idris Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 148-150.

³⁶ Ataulah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 172.

³⁷ Nicole Winfield, "Pope says US Critics use 'Rigid' Ideology' to Mask Failings," *AP News*, September 11, 2019, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://apnews.com/7078a805c9ea4585874cd22559f0046a>; Hannah Brockhaus and Ed Pentin, "Pope Francis says he Welcomes Constructive Criticism," *Catholic News Agency*, September 10, 2019, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-says-he-welcomes-constructive-criticism-89485>.

³⁸ Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 55.

³⁹ Yucel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue," 205

was used for the first time by Louis Massignon (d.1962), a French Catholic.⁴⁰ Mehmet Bayraktar, a professor at the Faculty of Divinity at Ankara University, claims the aim of using the term “Abrahamic Religions” is to swallow up Islamic identity in a universal pot.⁴¹ He further claims that interfaith dialogue is used as a disguise to bring about the defeat of Islam from within.⁴² Some of the Muslim critics of dialogue argue that interfaith dialogue is a barrier to propagating Islam.⁴³

Pope Francis’ dialogue initiative will face challenges and create scepticism among some Muslims because of the history of Catholic–Muslim conflict. The role of the Catholic Church in colonisation of the Muslim world is another great challenge. After colonisation, a shift occurred between the classical period and modern scholars regarding the “People of the Book.” Religion was politicised and used as a tool by nationalists and some religious groups to defend countries against colonial powers and invaders. Some scholars harshly criticised Christians as *kafirs* (infidels) and *mushriks* (polytheists), just as Christians had called Muslim pagans, idolaters and heathens in the past. Such expressions are still used by extremists of both faiths.

ETHIC-CENTRIC DIALOGUE

Catholics and Muslims comprise more than 38% of the population of the world.⁴⁴ Historically, there have been hostilities between adherents of the two faiths. It is a fact there is fear of each other for various reasons. The extent and basis of this fear needs further research. For fruitful dialogue, it is essential to redefine the concepts of “us” and “other.”⁴⁵ If these concepts are defined according to Catholic and Islamic theology, there is a huge gap between the two faiths and it will be difficult to have fruitful dialogue. Both faiths differ about the concept of God, Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity, salvation, Prophet Muhammed, the Holy Books and life in the hereafter. However, if “us” and “other” is redefined based on the moral principles of Islam and Catholicism, and reflected in teaching, then sustainable dialogue is possible. This dialogue should be ethic-centric rather than theology-centric, at least in the contemporary diverse socio-political conditions of the world.

Despite all the obstacles to dialogue that Pope Francis and Muslims face today, we believe the Pontiff’s initiatives regarding dialogue are important for world peace. At least, it will reduce tension between adherents of the two faiths. The Pope stated the ‘Third World War’ is going on in some regions and countries. He said, “I am convinced that we are experiencing a Third

⁴⁰ Bayram Sevinc, *Diyalog ve Korku: Postmodern Bir Dilemma* [Dialogue and Fear: A Postmodern Dilemma] (Istanbul: Iz Yayinlari, 2012), 74.

⁴¹ Ismail Albayrak, “Challenges in Inter-Religious Dialogue: Initiatives and Activities of the Gülen (Hizmet) Movement in Turkey,” in *The Art of Coexistence: Pioneering Role of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement*, ed. Ismail Albayrak and Salih Yucel (New Jersey: Tughra Books), 74.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “The Global Catholic Population,” Pew Research Center, February 13, 2013, accessed August 14, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.

⁴⁵ Yucel, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” 204.

World War [fought] piecemeal, a war in chapters, everywhere.”⁴⁶ The former dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and Assistant Secretary of State in the US, Joseph S. Nye, supports the Pope’s claim about the current political situation and argues that “...international relations are anarchic and there is no world government to provide order.”⁴⁷ Former US Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, a Senior Fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, points out the new political discourse of Donald Trump and many other world political leaders is causing “authoritarianism,” “white nationalism” and racism in many countries including the US. The US disparagement of the European Union and European NATO members and the trade conflicts with China have made the world an unsafe place. Freeman argues that unpredictable and uncontrolled political and social wars can develop in the future.⁴⁸ The recent Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic issue can collapse the health system and economy in many countries. This can lead the world into chaos and maybe wars.

In such political, social and military confrontation and civil wars in a globalised world, dialogue is essential. Otherwise, the cost of the Third World War, mainly if spread out to the developed countries, will be disastrous and more destructive than ever in the history of humanity.⁴⁹ Ethic-centric dialogue between Catholics and Muslims can contribute to a peaceful world more than political and theological dialogue because there is more commonality than in theology and politics.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we analysed how the theology of Catholic Church has evolved since *Nostra Aetate*. In addition, we discussed challenges for Catholics and Muslims regarding dialogue. We argued, despite obstacles between Catholic and Muslim adherents, Pope Francis’ dialogue initiatives could reduce tension and contribute to peace if applied at the grassroots and in teaching. We also propose that dialogue should be ethic-centric rather than theological.

To clear the air of hidden agendas, religious leaders on both sides of the dialogue need to undertake theological reasoning to reduce the concept of the “dialogue mission” and “dialogue *da’wah*” – that is, the use of dialogue for covert proselytism.⁵⁰ While it is not possible to completely erase concealed intentions, whether they may be religious, political or cultural, it is necessary to decrease these and continue the dialogue by focusing on and building from

⁴⁶ Felix Machado, “Fifty Years of *Nostra Aetate*: Opportunities to Transcend Differences,” in *Catholicism Engaging Other Faiths: Vatican II and its Impact*, ed. Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Jason Welle (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47.

⁴⁷ Joseph S. Nye, “What is a Moral Foreign Policy?,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 1 (2019), accessed January 19, 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2019/11/what-is-a-moral-foreign-policy/>.

⁴⁸ Chas W. Freeman, “Deglobalization and its Discontents,” Chas W. Freeman, Jr., September 26, 2019, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://chasfreeman.net/deglobalization-and-its-discontents/>.

⁴⁹ We thank Professor Ismail Albayrak, Professor Raymond Canning and Associate Professor John Dupuche for their valuable feedback about this article.

⁵⁰ Yucel, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue,” 205.

common ground. For Muslims, engaging in dialogue evokes hope and arouses fear at the same time.⁵¹ This needs further study to understand the roots of this issue.

In his book, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, John Allen, who is a Catholic, asserts that the Catholic Church has come to see the Jews as her “elder brothers in the faith [for nineteen centuries they were called Christ-killers].” So, he writes, “Muslims could come to be seen as ‘younger brothers’ in the faith.”⁵² For Muslims, it is time to leave polemics behind. It is the right time for Pope Francis, his team and Muslims to take the ongoing dialogue further for a better and peaceful world.

⁵¹ Haddad and Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, xiv.

⁵² John L. Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Image, 2013).

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