

Interreligious Dialogue as a Spiritual Practice

John Borelli

ABSTRACT

Interreligious dialogue is not simply a twentieth century phenomenon in the history of Christianity and Islam. There were moments when Christians and Muslims met in public dialogues in the past, and some of these are rather famous. There are numerous instances of theologians, scholars, and religious leaders reaching out to one another by letter and in private conversation. Indeed, if the basic form of interreligious dialogue is considered, namely, the dialogue of life, the instances would be too numerous to count. Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in relationships of dialogue for centuries and in numerous cultural settings.

What indeed might be new in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century is the growing practice by Muslims and Christians to include interreligious dialogue as an aspect of their spiritual practice as Christians and as Muslims. In the period between promulgation of “*Nostra Aetate*,” the document of the Second Vatican Council on interreligious dialogue, in 1965 by the bishops of the Catholic Church and the release in October 2007 of the consensus invitation “*A Common Word Between Us and You*” by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders, one can detect certain instances of how this has occurred. To bring these to light, one must begin with the concept of the spirituality of interreligious dialogue and what is implied by it. There are at least three implications: spirituality as a preparation for dia-

logue, spiritual practices during dialogue, and spirituality as affected by the experience of dialogue.

Some Catholics have written on this topic in both positive and in somewhat critical ways. Examples are Jacques Dupuis, S.J., Pierre de Bethune, OSB, and Pope Benedict XVI. Muslims too have written on this topic, especially Fethullah Gülen, but others too have made suggestions. In the development of this paper, these resources will be used as well as others. This is not about “dual practice,” although there are a few limited examples of such a controversial suggestion, and this is not specifically about whether Muslims and Christians can prayer together. That is an aspect, but the topic is far greater than that. This is not about a particular set of practices, either Christian or Muslim, emerging as the better way. Interreligious dialogue is not an end in itself but, like other spiritual practices, is a means to an end in which it leads persons ultimately to union with God and in doing so enriches the spiritual companionship of those in dialogue.

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INTRODUCTION

Interreligious dialogue was not a twentieth century development in the history of relations between Christians and Muslims. There are numerous examples when Christians and Muslims joined in public dialogues, some of which are rather famous episodes in the annals of dialogue. There are these famous examples; yet, countless theologians, scholars, and religious and political leaders have met in public conversation and have communicated by letter and in private conversation down through the centuries.¹ If one considers the most common form of interreligious dialogue, namely, the dialogue of life, when believers have lived as neighbors and associates, the instances would be too numerous to count. Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in relationships of dialogue for

centuries and in numerous cultural settings. Pope John Paul II spoke eloquently of the dialogue of life on his historic visit to the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus on May 6, 2001:

Interreligious dialogue is most effective when it springs from the experience of “living with each other” from day to day within the same community and culture. In Syria, Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries, and a rich dialogue of life has gone on unceasingly. . . The positive experiences must strengthen our communities in the hope of peace; and the negative experiences should not be allowed to undermine that hope.²

Curiously, ninety years earlier, in 1911, Said Nursi delivered his famous *Damascus Sermon*, when he noted the idea of freedom and the quest for the truth, among the positive developments in the Christian world, and predicted Muslim-Christian cooperation in the future.³ For Catholics such formal cooperation between Muslims and Christians was officially encouraged in 1965 with passage of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)* during the Second Vatican Council. In the section on Muslims, the bishops of the Catholic Church offered this plea: “But now the Council pleads with all to forget the past, to make sincere efforts for mutual understanding, and so to work together for the preservation and fostering of social justice, moral welfare, and peace and freedom for all humankind.”⁴ Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, voted to approve this text in 1965. Pope Benedict XVI, himself an theological expert (*peritus*) at Second Vatican Council that issued this statement, when speaking forty years later to representatives of the Muslim community of Cologne, Germany, said: “For us, these words of the Second Vatican Council remain the *magna carta* of the dialogue with you, dear Muslim friends, and I am glad that you have spoken to us in the same spirit and have confirmed these intentions.” (*Origins* 35, 12 [September 12, 2005], 208-209)

In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars from a wide range of countries and orientations with Islam issued *A Common Word Between Us and You*, a consensus statement sponsored by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought of Amman, Jordan, inviting Christians to theological conversation based on the shared principles of love of God and love of neighbor.⁵ Actually, *A Common Word* was the first broadly representative response by Muslims to the statement of the Second Vatican Council.

Such formal statements for cooperation and dialogue by the bishops of the Catholic Church and a collection of Muslim scholars and religious leaders, brought to consensus by the Kingdom of Jordan, are true developments of the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries in the history of exchanges, dialogues, and positive influences between Christians and Muslims. But, such formal declarations give evidence of something even more novel—the growing practice by Muslims, Christians and others to incorporate interreligious dialogue as an aspect of their spiritual practice as Christians, as Muslims or as a follower of any other particular tradition. In another sense, there already was a broadly based response to the Second Vatican Council by communities of men and women, Christians, Muslims and others, who have made dialogue an essential aspect of their lives as committed believers. For Muslims, the communities of men and women following the examples and wisdom of Fethullah Gülen have long been active in promoting dialogue.

DIALOGUE AS DEVELOPED AMONG CHRISTIANS

“Dialogue” as a term came into fashion in the twentieth century, and this is despite how the twentieth century began and concluded with wars in the Balkans, pitting Muslims and Christians against themselves and one another. Yet, because of reactions to war and division, dialogue came into use from the first decade of the twentieth century. Today, dialogue encompasses more than daily interactions, cooperation for social justice and peace, or formal exchange-

es. It reaches its deepest meaning as a spiritual practice where mutual exchange and sharing of faith and practice lead to ever-deepening experiences of God working in our lives.

Christians were speaking of dialogue through the early decades of the twentieth century when growing numbers of church leaders and especially missionaries grew increasingly impatient of the scandal of Christian disunity. The first World Missionary Conference, bringing together diverse numbers of Christians from various churches for the first time, met in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910, and convened among its eight working groups a commissions on "Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity." John R. Mott, the Methodist layman, "master mind of the gathering," and future architect of the birth of the World Council of Churches in 1948, asked the gathering on the final night in 1910, "Has it not humbled us increasingly as we have discovered that the great hindrance to the expansion of Christianity lies in ourselves?"⁶

"Dialogue" would become in the literature of the ecumenical movement a common place term for how Christians seek to restore their unity. A notable exception was the Jewish writer and mystic Martin Buber who produced an essay entitled "Dialogue" in 1929.⁷ Writing in 1961, one year before the Second Vatican Council convened, the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar "acknowledged Buber as the originator of the dialogical principle."⁸ But, if we could single out one major event and one major person whose message of dialogue did the most for establishing the term, the event was the Second Vatican Council and the person was Pope Paul VI. Pope John had summoned this council with a surprise announcement in January 1959, just three months into his own papacy, and he wanted ecumenical dialogue to be one of the goals of the council.⁹ It took three years of preparations, before the council convened in October 1962, but within 9 months, Pope John would be dead. While Pope John had envisioned Christian unity as one of three major reasons for calling a council of the Catholic Church, he expanded his reasons soon after he Dr. Jules Isaac, a

notable French intellectual and Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, in audience and accepted his suggestion that the council do something for the Jews.¹⁰ John XXIII encouraged Cardinal Augustin Bea and his staff at the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity to prepare something on the church and the Jews for the bishops at the council to consider. In 1963, with only one of four eventual sessions of the council completed, John XXIII died.

Pope Paul VI replaced the much beloved Pope John XXIII. Pope Paul VI gave direction not only to this project on dialogue with the Jews, in addition to dialogue among Christians, but also made dialogue the hermeneutic for understanding the council. There is no better example of this than the first encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), in which he used the term dialogue over 70 times. Paul VI recognized that “The dialogue of salvation was opened spontaneously on the initiative of God.”¹¹ In this sense, dialogue describes revelation, prayer, and relationship between God and humanity and among humans with one another. Thus by application to the human community, dialogue among peoples of faith occurs within the larger context of God’s relationship to each of us individually and collectively in our religious traditions and in our membership in the whole of humanity.

Pope John Paul II has called *Ecclesiam Suam* “the magna carta of dialogue in its various forms.”¹² It appeared in August 1964, halfway through the Second Vatican Council. After its release, a few major conciliar texts followed promoting dialogue within the Catholic Church, among Christians, between Christians and Jews, Muslim, Hindus, Buddhist, and indeed between Christian and all people. The final document of the Second Vatican Council, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, issued in December 1965, has for its theme, the church in dialogue with the world.

But, Pope Paul VI did even more. In May 1964, before he had released his encyclical on the church, he had established another secretariat, this one for interreligious dialogue, today known as the

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In 1964, the office was known as the Secretariat for Non Christians, but Pope John Paul II chose a more appropriate title for the office when he changed its name to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. Pope Paul VI's basic intention for the office was the promotion of human relationship among believers: "No pilgrim, no matter how distant he may be religiously or geographically, no matter his country of origin, will any longer be a complete stranger in this Rome, ever faithful to the historic program the Catholic faith has reserved to it as '*patria communis*.'"¹³

If dialogue is the hermeneutic for understanding the mission of Christians in the world, then interreligious dialogue has the potential to become genuine spiritual practice that Christians should promote in their relationships with Jews, Muslims, and other believers. Inspiration for such a practice lies in this passage in the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)*: "The Church therefore exhorts her sons and daughters to recognize, preserve, and foster the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among the followers of other religions. This is done through dialogue and collaboration with them, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life."¹⁴

Interreligious dialogue, according to this text of 1965, should not only provide an opportunity for people of various faiths to grow in mutual understanding and respect and to create program of collaboration for the improvement of human society and for meeting the needs of those in need, it should also recognize, preserve, and foster spiritual values. In 1991, the office in the Vatican responsible for promoting interreligious dialogue, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, issued a document entitled *Dialogue and Proclamation* in collaboration with the office responsible for missionary activity, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. On this point of preserving and fostering spiritual values, the text says:

In this dialogue of salvation, Christians and others are called to collaborate with the Spirit of the Risen Lord who is universally present and active. Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's respective religious convictions. In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit. (40)¹⁵

EXAMPLES OF LIVING A LIFE OF DIALOGUE

To bring these suggestions to light, one must begin with the concept of the spirituality of interreligious dialogue and what is implied by it. There are at least three implications: spirituality as a preparation for dialogue, spiritual practices during dialogue, and spirituality as affected by the experience of dialogue. Those who are about to enter interreligious dialogue should come spiritually prepared, that is, ready to receive and listen to their guests from other faiths with respect and love. All religions teach this in some way. In dialogue, Christians and others do not lay aside their spiritual practices, but bring them into the relationship and conversation. This has been the case of the Catholic-Muslim regional dialogues that I planned and managed from 1996-2003:

Interreligious dialogue can offer profoundly enriching moments. In the Midwest dialogue, after we had spent some time on the nature of revelation, we began to explore more carefully how we live and venerate the message of scripture. For example, we compared *lectio divina*, the Christian spiritual practice of attentive reading of scripture, and the art of chanting the Qur'an. We also looked more carefully at prayer in scripture, and compared brief exegeses of Gospel passages on "the Lord's prayer" and the *fatiha*, the opening sura of the Qur'an, which is prayed many times a day by Muslims. The west coast dialogue shared views comparatively on peace, justice, and forgiveness, and we reached such a level of

a consensus on these three important themes of spirituality that we issued publicly our agreement, as quoted earlier. Many on the dialogues found these exchanges, comparative exercises, and prayerful exchanges very moving and convincing of the importance of Christian-Muslim relations in the present.¹⁶

For none of the dialogues, which I managed for the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops during my more than sixteen years as the interreligious dialogue coordinator, did participants check their religious practices at the door. In Catholic settings, rooms were set aside for Muslim prayers, and Catholics held their prayers, usually an evening prayer of vespers, in Muslim settings. We attended one another's prayers, and we offered prayers at the beginning and closings of our meetings. Often, the dialogue would visit a mosque and the members would join the Muslim community for evening prayers, a meal, and a program.

This latter set of circumstances happened several times in the life of the West Coast Dialogue of Catholics and Muslims. In fact, that dialogue chose spirituality as its topic and produced a resource: *Friends and Not Adversaries: A Catholic-Muslim Spiritual Journey* was completed in December 2003 and posted on the USCCB website. It indicates the progress of this dialogue and significant points of consensus. The report encourages Muslims and Christians to investigate spiritual themes in ways that are mutually beneficial.¹⁷ Of particular importance were a set of consensus points, contained in the text referenced above, to which all participants agreed in their final meeting in February 2003:

1. We, Catholics and Muslims, believe that God is the source of peace and justice, and thus we fundamentally agree on the nature of peace and justice and the essential need of all to work for peace and justice.

2. Our rich teachings and traditions of peace and justice serve as a resource and inspiration for all; however, our immediate and present actions to work together are often wanting. The need to

work together for peace and justice is a pressing demand in these troubled times.

3. We believe that it is God who forgives and that as Catholics and Muslims we are called by God to offer forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important step to moving beyond our past history if we are to preserve human dignity, to effect justice, and to work for peace.

4. We may disagree on certain points of doctrine, even as we respect others' rights to a fundamental integrity of their teachings and affirm all their human and religious rights. With love and in the pursuit of truth, we will offer our criticisms of one another when we believe there is a violation of integrity of faith in God. We must avoid demonizing one another and misrepresenting one another's teachings and traditions.

5. When we meet in dialogue and discuss matters of peace, justice, and forgiveness, while being faithful to our traditions, we have experienced a profound and moving connection on the deepest level of our faith, which must take effect in our lives.

Among Catholic Christians since the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), when Catholic bishops decided overwhelmingly to encourage interreligious dialogue as a primary way of reaching out to people of other religions, certain new movements organized and led by Catholics have adopted dialogue as a regular practice. Two of these are the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Focolare Movement. The Community of Sant'Egidio takes its name from the small church in the Trastevere quarter of Rome given to them for their community prayers and liturgies. Soon they moved well beyond Rome to other major cities of Italy and to other countries. In Rome, they often gather for prayers and liturgies at one of the most beautiful ancient churches of Rome, Santa Maria in Trastevere. Evening prayer, prayers that come around or after sundown, when Christians have traditionally gathered for thanksgiving and reflection on the day against the backdrop of the mysteries of salvation, members of the community, many of whom are young adult workers, come together in prayer. They serve the poor

in public kitchens and shelter, and they serve those in need, even those abroad in war torn regions, by promoting care for those in need and reconciliation among contending parties.

Because of their emphases on prayer and peace-building, Pope John Paul II asked the Community of Sant'Egidio to continue the practice of gathering religious leaders in prayer for peace which he had inaugurated at the first World Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi in 1986. Pope John Paul II hosted three such days during his papacy, October 1986, during the height of the Cold War, January 1993, during a particularly bloody period in the Balkans, and January 2002, after the attacks on New York and Washington, DC, and the retaliations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The Community of Sant'Egidio took up the practice of hosting religious leaders for days of prayers for peace around the fall of the year, from September to November, in various parts of the world, and the practice continues to this day with the gathering from November 17 of this year on Cyprus. At the request of Georgetown University's President John J. DeGioia, who has attended this gathering for many years, a day of prayer for peace was held on Georgetown's campus in April 2006.

The point of the Assisi style meetings is basically no different from the first one hosted by John Paul II in 1986: to reflect in silence on peace and our efforts to promote peace, to fast, to walk together, and to come together in prayer for peace. Participants gather by religious traditions to pray in their particular styles of prayers with the consensus of faith that they share with one another and then walk together to a place of prayer where, respecting their differences, they offer prayers in one another's presence. Most participants listen in silence as others pray and join their sentiments and wishes with those offering prayer. The line between listening and praying is porous.

Focolare is the word for "hearth" in Italian, and the founders of the movement during some of the darkest times in Italy during World War II took inspiration from the hearth and home of the

family of Jesus. Chiara Lubich, who only recently passed away, often reflected on the peace of the home of Jesus with Mary and Joseph as her insight to form unity among her companions around the hearth and to build community as one would build a home. Like the Community of Sant'Egidio, there are married and unmarried lay members making up the core of the movement in Focolare. Married members maintain their own homes. Unmarried men and women form communities giving themselves full-time to supporting the community and maintaining its projects. There are clergy involved in each of the movements, but what strikes one immediately is that these are largely lay movements, led by laypersons, maintained by lay persons, and populated by lay persons. Unlike the Community of Sant'Egidio which formed during the years of the Second Vatican Council, Focolare as a movement is 20 years older. But, when the Second Vatican Council occurred with its encouragement for lay participation in the leadership of the church and its universal call to holiness to all in the church, not just emphasized for those in religious life like priests, nuns, brothers and other members of religious orders, the Focolare Movement assumed an important role in the promotion of unity, dialogue, reconciliation, and understanding among Christians and among all peoples of faiths.

This is not the place to outline all the projects of these two movements, but I wish to highlight among the relationships that the Focolare Movement has inspired to special friendship and cooperation that Chiara Lubich and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed fostered between their two movements. In 1996, when Imam Mohammed accompanied Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore on a visit to Rome, when he was introduced to Pope John Paul II and visited several offices in the Vatican, a special visit to the Focolare Movement's center at Castelgandolfo was arranged. Imam Mohammed also visited the Community of Sant'Egidio on that visit too. At Castelgandolfo, Imam Mohammed spoke and then met several members of the community. Six months later, in April 1997, he hosted Chiara Lubich at the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz in Harlem, New

York. She spoke to a packed house, reading her address in Italian, followed after each few lines with an English translation, and these words were broadcast on loud speakers throughout that New York City neighborhood. The gathering in Assisi in 1986 was a nearly unimaginable sight, when the pope stood in the large basilica in the city of St. Francis with Christian leaders forming a ring to his right and other religious leaders forming a ring to his left and both rings nearly meeting where Crow Native American holy men stood across from the Rabbi of the synagogue of Rome. The event in Harlem on a sunny and cool Sunday of April 1997 was a nearly unimaginable sound—a lovely Italian voice lilting through the air of the part of New York culturally associated with African Americans. For many years later until his death in 2008, Imam Mohammed would often say, “I am a member of Focolare.”

As the members of both these movements have promoted their interreligious projects, they have emphasized prayer and dialogue. Interreligious dialogue not only has a spiritual dimension, with prayer time assigned at particular moments and with participants sharing and have their insights of faith enriched by the words and practices of others, it is also a spiritual practice in itself. People of faith join together, respecting their differences but grow in faith with one another in exchange and prayer. These experiences cannot be described adequately. One must experience this to understand what I mean by it. What distinguishes the present age of more broadly and globally experience religious pluralism through interreligious dialogue is the growing understanding among participants in dialogue that the profound sharing a faith with others is an increasingly important aspect of their spiritual life.

THE EXAMPLE OF FETHULLAH GÜLEN

On the global stage, an outstanding Muslim leader promoting interreligious dialogue is Fethullah Gülen. The movement to which his ideas and recommendations have given inspiration is one of the

primary advocacy groups for dialogue in the world today. The Gülen Movement, if we can use that expression for a diversity of projects promoted mostly by Muslims of Turkish descent, is a true Muslim counterpart to the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Focolare Movement. Writing on the Gülen Movement, Dr. Hakan Yavuz has described inspiration of Fethullah Gülen in a parallel way to Catholic movements:

Indeed, he [Gülen] was not only expanding his circles of supporters and sympathizers within Turkey, but also developing close connections with global religious networks by organizing a number of meetings on the “dialogue of civilizations” as opposed to the “clash of civilizations” emphasized by U. S. political analysts (“Medeniyetler” 1996). Within this spirit, Gülen met with Pope John Paul II and other religious leaders. This move to go global became yet another concern for the insecure secular elites of the Kemalist system.¹⁸

There were concerns about the Gülen movement within Turkey because of the emphases on spiritual practice, founded on the Nur school of Sufi practice, and on interreligious cooperation, both of which were de-emphasized by Turkish secularists attempting to build a nation state apart from Turkey’s Islamic past. But, there were also concerns outside of Turkey by those suspicious of any movement identified as Islamic for fear of Muslim designs on world domination and empire-building. These fears by non-Muslims were gradually abandoned when a primary work of the Gülen movement, the building and staffing of humanist schools, was closely observed. Berna Turam has written on this: “Rather than confirming suspicions that Turks may be trying to replace Soviet hegemony, the Gülen schools smoothly try to establish a ‘dialogue between civilizations.’”¹⁹ Turam was speaking of these schools established in Kazakhstan, which rightfully might be concerned about Turkish regional hegemony. But, the observation proved true wherever the Gülen has established schools. Similarly, Ihsan Yilmaz has shown that Fethullah Gülen had cooperative and inter-

religious principles in mind when he helped established the Journalists and Writers Foundation in 1994. Beginning in 1995, the foundation organized Ramadan dinners (*iftar*) and in 1996 it held its first international conference to which Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos spoke, whose church based in Istanbul has had severe difficulties functioning within Turkey and abroad as the Patriarch serves a first among equals of all heads of Orthodox churches and symbol of Orthodox Christian unity. Other Christian leaders spoke at the conference in 1996, including Protestant leaders and the head of the Catholic community in Turkey. Again, these conferences promoted the dialogue among civilizations.²⁰

What motivation does Fethullah Gülen suggest for those who wish to follow his ways in the practice of dialogue and charity? At the outset of a collection of essays published as *Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, in an essay entitled “Love for Humankind,” he concludes with this exhortation:

As we are all limbs of the same body, we should cease this duality that violates our very union. We should clear the way to unite people; this is one of the greatest ways in which God grants people success in this world, and how He transforms this world into a Paradise. It is in this way that the doors of Heaven will be opened wide in order to give us a warm welcome. Hence, we should remove all ideas and feelings that pull us apart, and run to embrace one another.²¹

Those who feel deep love run to embrace one another. God reaches out in dialogue with all humanity and our response begins with love of God and love of one another. In *Pearls of Wisdom*, Gülen writes of love: “Love is the most direct and safest way to human perfection.”²² One of the principles for dialogue that Gülen suggests is a challenge to his fellow Muslims to be humble and reach out to others in imitation of the Creator who reaches out to all in ways that are unimaginable:

“Judge your worth in the Creator’s sight by how much space He occupies in your heart, and your worth in people’s eyes by

how you treat them. Do not neglect the Truth even for a moment. And yet, “be a man or woman among other men or women.”²³

Fethullah Gülen has expressed his admiration for Catholics and the Catholic Church in taking a leadership role in promoting dialogue. First, he notes that Catholic scholars, such as Louis Massignon, began to turn around the general European attitude towards the faith of Muslims by a lifetime of work and scholarship. Gülen particularly liked Massignon’s brief summary of Islam, “the faith of Abraham revived with Muhammad.” He has cited the leadership of Pope Paul VI during the time of the Second Vatican Council in urging the more than 2000 bishops gathered in Rome to look beyond the horizons of Christianity to those who have preserved the concept of God as “one, Creator, provident, most high and transcendent, that worship God with acts of sincere piety and upon whose beliefs and practices the principles of moral and social life are founded.” Gülen calls attention to the vision of *Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)* of the Second Vatican Council, and expresses his admiration for Pope John Paul II for implementing it well into the new millennium. Gülen looks beyond any comments by Pope John Paul II in his private reflections published in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* that might give rise to criticisms by Muslims and calls attention to how the pope expresses his admiration for Muslims for their example of prayer.²⁴

One can observe that Fethullah Gülen received some inspiration for encouraging his followers to dialogue, cooperation, and mutual affection with Christians and others from the steps taken by Catholics in the twentieth century through the Second Vatican Council and afterwards. At the same time, Gülen is correct when he tells his Muslim associates their “beginning point must have an Islamic basis.”²⁵ In doing so, Fethullah Gülen is both trying to pull Muslims out of their understandable but outmoded reactions to invitations for dialogue and cooperation from Christians and urg-

ing them to see how the principles of Islam are dialogical in nature. He writes, “The Prophet defined true Muslims as those who harm no one with their words and actions, and who are the most trustworthy representatives of universal peace.”²⁶

In several places, a before *A Common Word Between Us and You* was made public in October 2007 by representatives of the 138 Muslim leaders and scholars who signed the statement, Fethullah Gülen had called attention to the passage in Qur’an 3:64:

For example, when the Qur’an calls the People of the Book, it says, “O People of the Book! Come to a word (that is) common between us and you.” What is that word? “Let us not worship anything but God.”²⁷

Belief in the one God who reaches out to us in dialogue and elevates every human being to this dialogue of salvation and love of God and one another is the single first principles which makes all equal. The Qur’an (3:127-128) states what Christians and many others can accept, namely, it is not for us to judge others on whether they are pleasing before God, that judgment belongs to God. Thus, Fethullah Gülen will state that today we need people who are virtuous, pure of heart, who prefer the well-being of others to their own, and who have no worldly expectations. Hence, his followers have opened schools to educate young people accordingly, have formed foundations and committees promoting dialogue and cooperation, have hosted dinners and recognized the moral and spiritual leadership of others, and have planned tours so that Christians and others in Europe and the United States can meet Muslims in their homes, especially in Turkey.²⁸

Fethullah Gülen has taken inspiration from the teachings and example of Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, and in at least one place he cites Nursî’s contemplative observation in the Bayezid Mosque in Istanbul. Reflecting on the first person plural of this line in the al-Fâtihah, “You alone do we worship, and You alone we ask for help,” he came to see how the “we” expands beyond those reciting

the prayer together in the mosque to include every individual in every mosque in the city and then to fellow Muslims throughout the world as though they were gathered at the Ka'ba in unison. But, he also realized that the "we" included all who acknowledged the one God, which humanity naturally does and from there the vision expands to all creatures and all particles in the universe.²⁹

This vision of all worshipping is an example of how religion rightly understood is a foundation for spiritual companionship. This is not about "dual practice," although there are a few limited examples of such a controversial suggestion. I know of one Christian who has written wonderfully of his experience of learning the skills to chant the Qur'an from a Muslim master and how the experience gave him insight into dimensions of Islamic faith not ordinarily understood.³⁰ Others, Christians and Muslims, have shared similar insights when reciting prayers together. But, this is not specifically about whether Muslims and Christians can pray together; rather, dedication to one another, love of one another as fellow companions in service to God, and the sharing of our deepest moments of faith are all spiritual practices. As such, they are means to an end, and that end is, ultimately, union with God. Thus, interreligious dialogue does not simply aim at mutual understanding and respect, as much as the world today needs these among all peoples; rather, interreligious dialogue reaches its deepest level in spiritual companionship when believers join with one another, though they may practice differently and hold incommensurable doctrines, in serving God and one another. Fethullah Gülen has inspired such interreligious dialogue in legions of fellow Muslims and himself stands as an example for many others too.

NOTES

- 1 The best but hardly complete collection of materials of instances of dialogue is J. M. Gaudeul, *Encounters & Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History*, 2 vols. (Rome: Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, 2000). See also: Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

- 2 *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)*, edited by Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), p. 842.
- 3 Zeki Saritoprak, "Said Nursi on Muslim-Christian Relations Leading to World Peace," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, 1 (2008): 31. See also, Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. by Ş. Vahide, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1996).
- 4 This is 2005 translation by Thomas F. Stransky, CSP, for his lectures in October of that year at Georgetown University. Fr. Stransky served on the staff that drafted and produced the final form of the text in 1965.
- 5 John Borelli, "Uncommon Overturc," *The Tablet* (20 October 2007):
- 6 *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*, edited by Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 10-11. On background for the Edinburgh meeting see: *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1917-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 2nd edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 353-362.
- 7 The original essay was entitled "Zwiesprache," and an English translation was published in 1947 by Ronald Gregor Smith. The translation appeared as: Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947).
- 8 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Martin Buber & Christianity*, translated by Alexander Dru (London: Harvill Press, 1961), p. 9. See also: Ann Michele Nolan, *A Privileged Moment: Dialogue in the Language of the Second Vatican Council 1962-65* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 161-3.
- 9 Joseph A. Komonchak, "Is Christ Divided? Dealing with Diversity and Disagreement," 2003 Common Ground Initiative Lecture, published in *Origins, CNS documentary service*, 33, 9 (July 17, 2003):141.
- 10 *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 395-6.
- 11 *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 99.
- 12 *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 306.
- 13 *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 161.
- 14 *Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 44. I am using a different translation, one that has been made available by Fr. Thomas Stransky, C.S.P., who served as staff for the document *Nostra Aetate* from 1960-65, during the Second Vatican Council. His translation of the text from Latin to English was made available during his four lectures on *Nostra Aetate* at Georgetown University in October 2006.
- 15 The complete text is readily available on the Internet: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html. It is also available in *Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 1156-89.
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- 17 The report, dated December 2003, appears on the USCCB website under official dialogues of the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs department: <http://www.>

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- 25 Fethullah Gülen: *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 248.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 See *Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, pp. 72-3, and *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 249.
- 28 *Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, p. 73.
- 29 Fethullah Gülen: *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 250.
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