

## **Christian-Muslim Relations—A Road to Understanding Circular Paper #5**

[Previous papers #1, #2 and #3 in this series can be found on the Association's web site, [www.maltausa.org](http://www.maltausa.org), with past issues of the Hospitallers newsletter. Look in the "News and Events" section; open the Association Newsletters section to find the prior issues. The fourth circular paper was a "book-in-brief," *Who Speaks for Islam? What A Billion Muslims Really Think*, which the Association has only in printed form and was mailed to members three months ago. This paper is based significantly on chapter 7 in *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.]

### **RECENT MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN THE USA**

John Borelli

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#### **Opening Comment on the Term "Dialogue"**

This review of recent Muslim-Catholic Dialogue in the United States is obviously from a Catholic perspective. As such, it is difficult not to say something about the Second Vatican Council when the term "dialogue" was first introduced into documents of the Holy See and official Catholic teaching. Lest there be any confusion, it is important to note from the start that two different understandings of this term "dialogue" have developed in the more than 40 years since the close of the council in 1965. These two distinct understandings can be complementary in service to the mission of the church; but, because they involve differing emphases, goals, methods, and even values, there can be confusion, misunderstanding and possibly resentment when care is not taken when they overlap.

Let me be more specific. Some in the Catholic Church use “dialogue” to refer to building relationships of trust and mutuality. Because this form of dialogue involves sharing religious beliefs, practices, symbols, and spiritual insights, this form of dialogue is more properly “interreligious,” characterizing the basic relationship between persons of differing faith traditions who encounter one another as persons of faith. The goals of this dialogue are mutual understanding, respect, growth in faith and practice, mutual edification and insight, and giving glory to God. This form of dialogue can characterize everyday relationships between friends and neighbors or it can apply to formal gatherings of scholars, representatives, and teams of experts.

Others use “dialogue” differently to refer to coalitions, social action committees and associations, “ad hoc” groups addressing particular needs, and other task oriented affiliations in the sphere of social action. When these groups involve persons of differing faith traditions, they are often marked as “interfaith,” “religious,” “multi-religious,” or “interreligious.” We can think of all sorts of examples from neighborhood and civic groups, to state, national and international associations and organizations. A famous example in the United States is the National Council of Christians and Jews which came into being after late in 1927 as Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for President was beginning his campaign. A resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and various forms of racial and religious hatred were in much evidence, and Jews and Christian leaders, some of whom were Catholics, formed the NCCJ to combat bigotry. The Vatican tolerated Catholic participation in this form of dialogue because it was civic oriented without, at least in its origins, the sharing of beliefs, theological dialogue, and services of prayer. Forty years later, Vatican II changed this for Catholics and encouraged them to enter into interreligious relations.

We have these two understandings of dialogue for several reasons. I would suggest that the original reason is because the same commission was responsible for key texts involving the two usages of the term “dialogue” at the Second Vatican Council. In 1960, in preparation for the council and so that his council would have an ecumenical dimension, John XXIII established a Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, nowadays the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. This is the commission, composed of curial officials and bishops from around the world, and served by theologians and other experts, that prepared the draft that became the Decree on Ecumenism, finalized in 1964. The decree was promulgated at the council on the same day as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and both documents reflected a new orientation of the Catholic Church towards other Christians through a theology of shared communion.

The Dogmatic Constitution proclaimed that Catholics share degrees of communion with other Christians, and the Decree on Ecumenism was the document that guided Catholic in the means towards restoring greater communion with other Christians in the years to come, mainly through dialogue. Paul VI said at the time that the ecumenical interpretation of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church would be the Decree on Ecumenism. The same Secretariat was also responsible for preparing a text on the Church’s relationship with the Jews, but the bishops attending the council decided to expand that draft into a broader statement promoting interreligious dialogue not only with Jews but also with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all peoples of other faiths. The result was the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, promulgated in 1965 and based on the same vision of degrees of

communion that we share with all humanity and increasingly with people of other faiths, especially monotheists and most especially with Jews because of the shared heritage and scriptures with Jews and, of course, the origins of Christianity. The term “dialogue” in both the ecumenical decree and the interreligious declaration was used in terms of mutuality, sharing of values and beliefs, and spiritual companionship, but the declaration also acknowledged that peace, public values, religious liberty, and care for the poor and needy were also benefits of interreligious conversation and cooperation.

The Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity was responsible for yet another extraordinary document resulting from Vatican II, the Declaration on Religious Liberty, promulgated also in 1965, a month after the interreligious declaration. In this second declaration, the Catholic Church committed itself to the opportunities of the public square, being made more and more available to Catholics and all peoples of faith through the growth of democracy as a form of government. This was another change of heart for the Catholic Church in which the benefits of religious pluralism hand-in-hand with democracy, as in the United States, were acknowledged and extolled. This declaration was closely linked to yet another constitution, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, promulgated on the same day in 1965, in the final acts of the council. In these two texts, the term “dialogue” also appears, but here it is the sort of engagement among peoples of faith as citizens of the towns, cities, countries, and one world in which we all live. This is public engagement where justice, freedom, the elimination of poverty and other highly desirable goals are emphasized. Catholics join with others in events and associations to improve the conditions of all. Whereas trust and mutual understanding will develop over time, these groups depend on negotiation, pressure, mobilization, and other forms of social activity to guarantee true reciprocity and equality in society.

Both forms of dialogue, the one promoting mutuality and the other promoting reciprocity, are based on a gospel understanding of Christian mission. On the one hand, the gospel tells us to go the extra mile, give beyond what is required, and be of service with no regard to getting anything in return, as Jesus was a witness to others. On the other hand, we are told that how we treat the poor, the sick, the needy, and the imprisoned is how we orientate ourselves towards salvation. Balancing these two spheres of activity when it comes to dialogue is very important lest there be misunderstanding, especially when it comes to Christian-Muslim relations. Reaching out to Muslims in your neighborhood and city to improve mutual understanding and to promote a shared relationship of faith and spiritual values is quite different from engaging Muslim leaders to address common concerns about situations of injustice. Obviously, it truly helps if Catholics understand that Muslims value justice just as much as they do. That comes through sharing. Getting something done for the sake of justice is very important and requires conversations, activities, and coalitions that need to be effective. Not unrelated but following a more patient strategy is personal growth and edification through mutual understanding and spiritual companionship.

### **Where To Begin?**

While teaching undergraduates at the College of Mount St. Vincent, on the edge of New York City in the early 1980's, I once told a class that the material we were then taking up on

Islam would figure significantly in their lives. As my generation was sent off to Southeast Asia, their generation, I predicted, would serve in the Middle East and would have to think seriously about Islam. I had no special insights at the time about the future role of Afghanistan or Iraq in American history and had even predicted at the time that it might be Syria where they would serve. I could speak to them only as someone who had been drafted out of graduate school in 1969 and had served most of 1970 in Vietnam, in an arena where Buddhism, Catholicism and Marxism intertwined in the lives of the people. Yet, these suggestions were doubly distant to the students—the unforeseeable future and serving in a far-off land.

If we think about incidents of recent years that have shattered our sense of security in the United States, two events stand out, the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, and the events of September 11, 2001. These particular dates have personal meaning for me. My wife and I have three adult children. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, two were in lower Manhattan. They saw the second tower collapse with their own eyes and, I am sure, will never forget what they saw that day. Our middle child, our older daughter, was in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, one mile north and in the direction of the blast that devastated the Murrah Building. When the so-called experts on terrorism showed up in the media soon afterwards observing that the bombing in Oklahoma City looked like the work of Middle East Arab terrorists, they made Arab and Muslim Americans additional victims of that bombing. Their misreading of a crime, soon shown to be perpetrated by white supremacists against the Federal Government and global attitudes, was irresponsible but also insightful as to the particular set of problems many Americans face when trying to understand Islam. It is true that there had been a failed bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, but the Oklahoma City event demonstrated that others besides Middle Eastern Muslims would perpetrate indiscriminate bombings. Tragically, the events of 9/11 were the result of terrorists from the Middle East, but innocent Middle Easterners and Muslims died in the conflagration. In addition, numerous American Muslims, joining Muslims worldwide, spoke out immediately that such acts and the ideology behind it was condemnable on the basis of Islamic doctrine. Another set of problems Americans face in understanding Islam is what the media chooses to cover because few of these statements were reported and coverage promoted the association of violence with Islam. Americans should keep in mind that Muslims associate Christianity with the United States and violence with Christianity when they look at the military actions taken in the Middle East by our forces.

The United States invaded the Middle East, belligerently entering Iraq for the second time in 12 years and also deploying troops in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East backing up these military actions. The events of 9/11 and the aftermath, especially the second Iraq war and the reactions among many in the world today, both positive and negative, constitute the world in which the present generation of young adults will conduct their professional work. These defining events will shape their attitudes and how they approach the world. Many in my generation were shaped by a considerable optimism inspired by John F. Kennedy and his youth and idealism, the civil rights movement, the war on poverty, and, as Catholics, by the fresh air flowing in through the windows of the church. With the Second Vatican Council, laypersons began to see that this was just as much our church as it was the church of the clergy, and we began to assume greater responsibility in a church now viewed as the people of God.

John XXIII not only called the council but also struggled to make it a council open to the modern world. When bishops meet in the first period, during the fall 1962, the United States came to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. At the conclusion to his 1963 encyclical on peace, issued a few months before his death and widely received as a sign of new times for Catholic engagement with the modern world, John XXIII exhorted us with these words:

Once again, we exhort our children to take an active part in public life, and to contribute towards the attainment of the common good of the entire human family as well as to that of their own country. They should endeavor, therefore, in the light of the Faith and with the strength of love, to ensure that the various institutions—whether economic, social, cultural or political in purpose—should be such as not to create obstacles, but rather to facilitate or render less arduous man’s “perfecting” of himself both in the natural order as well as in the supernatural. (*Pacem in Terris* 146)

John died not even two months later having seen only the first of the four periods of Vatican II, and Paul VI was elected his successor. In Paul’s first address to the council as pope, he made it clear that he was going to move the agenda of John XXIII forward. Here is an excerpt from that address that directed the assembled bishops to ponder the field of interreligious relations:

The Catholic Church looks into the distance, beyond the confines of the Christian horizon; how could she place limits on her love, if this very love is to be that of God the Father who showers his favors upon everyone (cf. Mt 5:45), and who so loved the world that for it he gave his only Son (cf. Jn 3:16)? Look therefore beyond your own sphere and observe those other religions that uphold the meaning and 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.<sup>1</sup>

This paragraph represents the beginning of official Catholic reflection on religious pluralism in modern times, and it is important to know that the first citation to John XXIII emphasized dialogue in the public square and the second citation to Paul VI implied dialogue in terms of mutuality and growth in spiritual companionship.

The present society in the United States is far more pluralistic in religious terms than it was a generation ago. In my youth, in the 1950s and 1960s, religious pluralism in America was defined as “Protestant, Catholic, and Jew.” Few thought about the small religious minorities, and sadly, this meant that few took account of Native Americans as religious peoples. Today, one of our great strengths as a nation is our religious pluralism although there are some who are unwilling to admit it. One of the contemporary challenges for theology is religious pluralism, a term used in a number of ways. In this context, I mean by religious pluralism nothing more than the fact that there exists a variety of religious traditions and that persons identifying with these traditions interact with one another in such ways that the traditions themselves are affected by this interaction. Thus, more precisely, religious pluralism means engaged diversity. Christians among themselves have much to discuss about religious pluralism in this sense of engaged religious diversity.<sup>2</sup> John Paul II uses the term religious pluralism in this way. For example, he

wrote in his first letter of the new millennium: “In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this [interreligious] dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread spectre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history.” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* 55)<sup>3</sup>

I have already given a 1963 quotation from John XXIII, the motivator for the Catholic Church to respond to the modern world. Here is quotation from another author of that time:

If it becomes evident that Islam possesses or is capable of solving our basic problems, of granting us a comprehensive social justice, of restoring for us justice in government, in economics, in opportunities and in punishment. . . then without doubt it will be more capable, than any other system we may seek to borrow or imitate, to work in our nation.<sup>4</sup>

These words were written in 1959, the time of John XXIII’s papacy, by Sayyid Qutb, about whom it has been written, “few Muslim thinkers have had as significant an impact on the reformulation of contemporary Islamic thought as him”<sup>5</sup> and who has been called “the nonpareil exemplar of collective protest against those deemed to be the enemies of Islam.”<sup>6</sup> Writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, Paul Berman entitled his article on Qutb, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror.” Here is a key paragraph from Berman’s article:

Qutb’s analysis was soulful and heartfelt. It was a theological analysis, but in its cultural emphases, it reflected the style of 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy. The analysis asked some genuinely perplexing questions about the division between mind and body in Western thought; about the difficulties in striking a balance between sensual experience and spiritual elevation; about the steely impersonality of modern power and technological innovation; about social injustice. But, though Qutb plainly followed some main trends of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western social criticism and philosophy, he poured his ideas through a filter of Koranic commentary, and the filter gave his commentary a grainy new texture, authentically Muslim, which allowed him to make a series of points that no Western thinker was likely to propose.<sup>7</sup>

Sayyid Qutb was hanged by President Gamal Nasr of Egypt in 1966. Egypt, though an ally of the United States since President Sadat through out the Russians in 1976, should be a democracy but is not.

My reference to Sayyid Qutb is not to stir up animosity against so-called Islamic fundamentalists; rather I want call to mind that a desire for modernization or updating, *aggiornamento*, as Pope John XXIII called it, for a more authentic and socially responsible religious life has been a significant theme in both Christianity and Islam in recent decades. One area of theological dialogue between Catholics and Muslim involves our relationship as people of faith to the contemporary world. *Pacem in Terris* and the Second Vatican Council mark a beginning for Catholics in addressing the modern world. Sayyid Qutb also represents an initial voice of Islamist reflection on the modern world. Here in the United States, protected as we are by the religious pluralism guaranteed by the Constitution, we have an ideal situation for

engaging in this discussion. We need, first of all, to ensure that respect for religious freedom and human rights remains a principle of our democracy and then to make use of this advantageous situation for interreligious dialogue, particularly on topics with difficult political and social implications.

### **Theology and Questions of Revelation and other Religions**

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council will always be the most remarkable example of revitalization and change. A spirit of renewal and updating took hold of the assembled bishops in 1962-65 and major steps were taken in numerous areas of public life. One such step concerned interreligious relations. In the history of the Church there had been nothing like the Council's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non Christian Religions*. Yet this document cannot be taken by itself as marking a revolution in Catholic teaching on this point; it should be read together with the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and with Pope Paul VI's encyclical on the church, *Ecclesiam Suam*, which appeared in 1964. *Ecclesiam Suam* was the first church document to use the term "dialogue," and Paul VI used the term more than 75 times.

Relations with Muslims, therefore, were first understood within the context of a Catholic understanding of the church and the values shared with all humanity in the building the reign of God, in fulfilling every true desire for union with God, and in ministering to the needs of all. In declaration on interreligious dialogue that would emerge from the council, the bishops said the following about Islam:

The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to people. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the Day of Judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. (3)

Several theological questions on the similarities and differences Muslims and Christians have follow from these statements. Muslims believe that Muhammad is a messenger, that is, a prophet to whom God gave guidance, and the Qur'an is "Revealed Guidance in Divine Words," as our Muslim partners in dialogue tell us. We can at least say that Muhammad was prophet, like many public leaders, in that he heard God's words and acted in such a way that his life was an example of the justice that God wills for the world. That is not enough for our Muslim friends; they would like us to say more to satisfy their understanding of Muhammad as the last of the prophets and seal of divine revelation. They say that Jesus received guidance, embodied in the Gospel (*injl*), and we, of course, explain that their understanding of the Gospel as a book and our understanding of the Gospel as preached word of God are not the same. We need to go beyond

mutual correction to a deeper level of discussion. The goal of interreligious theological dialogue is not to urge our partners to change their beliefs to match ours. Such dialogue is not debate or argument. There is a need for each side to comprehend as much as possible and understand correctly the beliefs of the other side in their own terms. That is a first step beyond mutual correction. Then by understanding their views of revelation and prophecy, to name two overlapping categories in both Islam and Christianity, we can pursue the deeper goal of understanding our own views, and theirs too, through unexpected or neglected insights through mutual exploration.

When I began serving at the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1987 in the capacity of the first full-time staff member who would give a substantial portion of his time and energy to interreligious relations, I was well aware that the bishops wanted me to begin building rapport and a record of exchanges with Muslims in the United States and their leaders. I operated through the model of dialogue promoting mutuality. There were other offices too at the bishops' conference that from time to time touched on questions and issues, the understanding and resolution of which could be enhanced by relationships with Muslims. In particular, I worked at times closely with the staff of the Department of International Justice and Peace. Their model for dialogue was one that emphasized cooperation and reciprocity, and the rapport that I was gradually building with Muslim leaders through the model of mutuality was helpful in many instances. Yet, these were two different enterprises, the one more short-term in outlook in getting something accomplished in the public sphere and the other far more long-term in scope in seeking to influence the history of understanding between Catholics and Muslims.

For my specific projects in promoting mutuality, the bishop advisor for interreligious relations, Bishop Joseph J. Gerry of Portland, Maine, and I first convened Catholic scholars and experts for a few years seeking their advice and help in understanding the nature of our work. Then, by the time of the first Iraq war, Bishop Gerry convened Catholics and Muslims in dialogue from various parts of the country to begin working on a national agenda to improve understanding. Although there were Muslim counterparts to the bishops' conference, none of these developing national organizations for American Muslim community were able to devote the time and funds for dialogue. They had fewer resources which naturally needed to be devoted to strengthening ties among American Muslims and assisting communities in getting started. Like every other religious community that has come to America with the immigrants, Muslims devote their precious funds and time to establishing Islamic centers for the education of youth, the maintenance of the community especially during special times of prayer and celebration, and for providing a place to gather the community, especially those who had been lost in the great diversity of American society.

Thus we needed a new format for meeting that would not stress the funds and energy of Muslim organizations but would provide opportunity for ongoing, face-to-face dialogue beyond the short-term coalitions addressing immediate problems. Thus from 1996 into the new millennium, we at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), with the assistance of diocesan staff, set up "regional dialogues" with Muslims. The main purpose of these dialogues on a regional level was to connect with both national and local Islamic leadership and thereby engage the diversity of the Muslim population in the U.S. We would identify an

Islamic organization or association in a certain region to be our partner in planning and setting up a dialogue in the city where that organization is located. Working with our Islamic partners, we would invite Catholics and Muslims from cities within a manageable commuting area to be part of the dialogue. We depended on diocesan staff to co-host meetings with an Islamic partner and to identify Muslim partners to attend the dialogue.

Regional dialogues met annually in a retreat environment for two or three days. The first of these began in Indianapolis in 1996 with the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). Bishop Kevin Britt, Bishop of Grand Rapids and now deceased, served as the Catholic Co-Chairman, and Dr. Sayyid M. Syeed, Secretary General of ISNA, was the Muslim Co-Chairman for most of the meetings. After an initial meeting, we settled on the topic, “the word of God.” We Christians spoke of Christ as the Word of God, and Muslims spoke of the Qur’an as the “Words of God.” Jesus is also called “the word of God” in the Qur’an, but this name indicates how he came into existence. God spoke Jesus into existence. The real parallel is between Christ and the Qur’an. We expanded our discussion to the broader topic of revelation, and we began preparing a tool for introducing Muslims and Christians to one another through the core beliefs regarding revelation.

We learned something important. Muslims were willing to acknowledge that most of the themes of the New Testament, which we highlighted in our discussions, resonated with them. We disagree of course on the Incarnation, and they remain suspicious of our explanation of one God and three persons. The warnings in the Qur’an against the Christian beliefs in the Incarnation and the Trinity are just too strong to be set aside. Together we agreed that both the Bible and the Qur’an can be abused in the sense that they can be interpreted to suit personal purposes. Interpretation is a communal, and by that I mean traditional, effort. Muslims locate texts within the whole of the Qur’an. They then interpret these words and passages in the context of the prophet’s life, in the order of the Qur’anic passages as they were received, and what the commentaries have said about these passages through the ages. We Christians have our methods of interpretation too. There is much that can be explored between Christian and Muslim scholars on the topic of scriptural interpretation.

Another topic which arises from this discussion is the nature of revelation itself. At present, we Christians would not place the Qur’an in the same categories as the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. We understand the fullness of revelation coming through Jesus Christ, a fullness that sheds light on the revelation given to Israel through the ages. When we meet a scripture whose content is similar in many ways to that of the Bible and to our understanding of God and God’s interaction with humanity, we are faced with a question about the nature of divine revelation itself. Muhammad lived more than five centuries after the apostolic church. What can we say about his experience of God, the experience that he mediated to the Arab tribes who gathered around him, and his role in the lives of Muslims to the present? The Qur’an offers a unique challenge to us as we reflect on divine revelation. We can ignore it, as we have pretty much done for fourteen centuries, or we can finally address these challenges.

## Theological Discussion, Not Debate and Confrontation

After learning that the regional model could work in the Midwest, we turned to the Mid-Atlantic region and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), with its headquarters in Queens, New York, to explore the possibility of a second regional dialogue. ICNA has served American Muslims of South Asian origin although its membership is gradually including a more diverse population. Bishop Ignatius Catanello, Auxiliary Bishop of Brooklyn, co-chaired this dialogue. It has met annually since 1998 in the New York City area, apart from one year at St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia. This dialogue studied various aspects of marriage and family life with the hope of a publication in a few years which will outline our values and practices and be of help to an anticipated increase of marriages between Christians and Muslims. An additional value of this project is to generate discussion between Muslim couples and Christian couples on the values we each hold with regard to marriage and family.

Finally, in 2000, we established a regional dialogue on the west coast. Bishop Carlos Sevilla, S.J., Bishop of the Diocese of Yakima, co-chaired this dialogue, and our partner was a collection of west coast Islamic *shura* or advisory councils. We met in Orange, California, and we started by examining the theme of surrender/obedience to God. We concluded our fourth meeting in February 2003 and issued a statement after that discussion. We had settled on the theme of John Paul II's 2002 World Day of Peace message in which he had said there is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness. Our dialogue concluded with these points of consensus:

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 the others' rights to believe in the 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.<sup>8</sup>

A document entitled *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.<sup>9</sup>

All three regional dialogues were well along in conversation before 9/11. After that date, for each of the dialogues, time was set aside to discuss reactions to these tragic events. In two of the dialogues, the topic of religion and violence was addressed for an entire meeting. Building upon trust and good will already in place from previous meetings, we drew closer together in candid and sincere conversation about this single topic, which had been the source of so much ill will and animosity between Christians and Muslims. Many Muslims expressed gratitude for the assistance offered to them by Christians when they experienced hate crimes and attacks. In one instance, Catholic school children wrote letters of friendship to the Muslim children in the same grade at the neighboring Islamic school.

Dialogue in the future will be shaped by the changing landscape of Christian and Muslim organizations in the United States. I left the bishops' conference at the end of 2003 for my present position as special assistant for interreligious initiatives to President John J. DeGioia of Georgetown University. Soon thereafter, the Provincials of the U. S. Jesuit Conference asked me to serve as their national coordinator for interreligious dialogue, a position I hold in conjunction with my work at Georgetown. In 1995, at their 34<sup>th</sup> General Congregation, Jesuits worldwide committed themselves to interreligious dialogue as a fundamental aspect of their ministry in service to the mission of the church. As an example of my Jesuit work, I convened a number of Muslims who teach theology and religion at U.S. Jesuit Universities.<sup>10</sup> Georgetown University already had a record of research and promotion of Christian-Muslim relations with its Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. Working with the Alwaleed Center and with a similar center at Hartford Seminary, originally a Congregationalist seminary but with the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations that was established in 1893, I have offered an annual week-long summer institute on Christian-Muslim relations. This was first aimed at pastors and pastoral workers of all churches, but now in its fifth year, the institute offers a line for Muslim leaders and imams to study Christianity and to join the Christian participants in joint sessions on Christian-Muslim relations.

My point with these two examples of Catholic institutions, one a university and another a religious order, is that responsibility for promoting dialogue will be taken up more and more outside the bishops conferences and diocesan offices. The Order of Malta might consider a role here. As Vatican II invited the entire people of God to assume responsibility in promoting the mission of the church, so now there will continue to be expanding opportunities for Catholic institutions and associations to take up the work of dialogue and engagement.

### **Lessons from Dialogue**

After these three regional dialogues since 1996 described briefly above and so many other dialogues in the sixteen years I served at the USCCB and the opportunities I have had since 2003 at Georgetown University, what have I learned from my Muslim friends and the experience of dialogue with Muslims? My reflections can be distilled into ten points:

1) For too many centuries, from the beginning of the encounters between Arab Muslims and Christians outside of the Arabian Peninsula, Christians have made outlandish statements about Islam, Muhammad, and Muslims in general due to a simple lack of knowledge. Therefore, even today, Muslims feel compelled to lecture Christians about the basics of Islam in order to correct this long history of mistaken views. They are particularly eager to tell Christians that they believe Islam is not a new religion and that they venerate all the prophets, including Jesus and his mother Mary. This happens all the time and is why Christians sense that Muslims are giving them a basic course on Islam when they meet them for the first time. It is important for Muslims to say what they feel is necessary and for Christians to be patient so that dialogue can begin once this is done.

2) Muslims and Christians both have a tendency to generalize about other religious groups. Muslims may offer praise or criticism of these other groups. What they are truly looking for in religious individuals is “God-consciousness” or, in a Christian technical terms though it lacks meaning today, “fear of the Lord.” This is a Christian virtue. They expect Christians to be conscious of God in all that they say, do and think.

3) Christians and Muslims often use the same religious terms. Consequently, we often talk past one another because we presume the other understands the words being used in our sense. We need to be patient and clear with one another to ensure that we understand each other’s use of terms like revelation, the word of God, Son of God, begotten, and Gospel. It is wonderful that we share these words and much more that emerged from ancient Near Eastern cultures out of which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emerged.

4) Muslims generally look upon Christians as one group. A few Muslims are aware of the variety among Christians, just as a few Christians can distinguish different groups of Muslims beyond the Sunni/Shi’i distinction. Consequently, if a Christian says or does something negative with regard to Islam, Muslims expect other Christians to correct that person. Silence is taken as an expression of agreement. Christians may not feel they need to dissociate themselves from a Christian who is not even remotely related to their particular church, but that is not the perception of Muslims. The same applies when a Muslim says something negative about Christians or Christianity. The Christian perception is that other Muslims should correct that Muslims even if they feel no association with the Muslim perpetrators.

5) Muslims expect Christians to live according to their moral standards, taking care of the needy, to be honest, faithful, not to steal, not to kill, etc. The reason for this is that in their understanding God’s revelation is a moral message, whether in the Torah, Gospel, or Qur’ān. Muslims appreciate those passages in the bible that emphasize justice and other social virtues. Although Muslims disagree with Christians on many religious doctrines, they expect Christians to be moral persons.

6) Muslims are particularly eager to tell Christians about their respect for Jesus and cannot understand why Christians can be negative or distrustful towards them. Their

understanding of Jesus is not the same as the Christian doctrines about Jesus, but they would never malign Jesus or be intolerant of blasphemous portrayal of Jesus.

7) The word “mission” functions in the same way among Muslims as the word “jihad” functions among Christians. Both words have beautiful meanings but they carry connotations of violence, intolerance, subjugation and disrespect. The problem for Christian-Muslim conversation is that in a thorough discussion of our faith these words are difficult to avoid using.

8) Christianity is a highly structured religion. Whether we are Catholics, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Orthodox, Baptists, Lutherans or whatever, we have identifiable instruments of authority and communion. This kind of structure is not so prominent in Islam. There are structures of authority among both Christians and Muslims, but they function in different ways. Thus, we each make the mistake of misperceiving the statements of some as authoritative for all Muslims or for all Christians.

9) On the level of everyday experiences, Muslims and Christians can and do relate very well. Women’s groups continue to meet in spite of political developments because they more easily share personal experiences and concerns. In a retreat environment, Christians and Muslims relate well together when they maintain their prayers, sit silently and appreciatively in one another’s times of prayer, and join in discussions on issues of mutual importance. Reading the Scriptures together is a fruitful exercise. Hearing how Muslims hear our passages and how we hear their passages often helps in expanding our interpretation.

10) Christians and Muslims often judge one another by their extremists. This can happen between any two groups, but because of the particular history of Christian-Muslim relations and the way strife has been emphasized in the teaching of our relations, we each make the mistake of judging the other’s worst by our best. Unfortunately, the media creates opportunities for extremists to do the talking and thus to capture public attention. The “Amman Process,” which produced a number of broad consensus statements by Muslims, especially the invitation to Christians for theological dialogue, “A Common Word Between Us and You, is an effort by Muslims worldwide, under the sponsorship of the King of Jordan, to restore the voice from the center of Islam in the public sphere. With its appearance in 2007, a shift occurred in Christian-Muslim relations, the first big shift since Vatican II. While once the effort of the Catholic Church with Vatican II and subsequently was the engine driving Christian-Muslim relations, now Muslim institutions are the engine driving relations. This could have been a hope-for goal of the fathers of Vatican II, namely, that Muslims worldwide would respond to their invitation for dialogue.

I would add some further considerations of a general nature.

Interreligious dialogue for the sake of mutuality is by no means based on compromise whereby parties negotiate a common ground, each giving up a little, to reach a reciprocally

beneficial position. Compromise is important for society to work as well as it does, but giving up essential doctrines and practices is not what interreligious dialogue based on mutuality is about: there is no attempt to reduce two sets of belief to one or to harmonize irreconcilable differences. Nor is interreligious dialogue a debate or argument over who is right and who is wrong. These distinctions are particularly important for Christian-Muslim conversations because of our history. We have had debates in the past, and we have attempted to correct the beliefs of one another. Christian-Muslim dialogue needs to re-capture a theological character so that both Christians and Muslims can grow in their understanding of the faith that they hold.

Interreligious dialogue refers to a religious attitude that encompasses both obedience to truth and respect for freedom of conscience. Participants are free to speak what they believe is true in matters of faith and morals and seek to understand and respect the perspective of others as much as is possible. Second, interreligious dialogue involves both witness of one's faith to another and mutual exploration of religious convictions. Third, the environment for interreligious dialogue is one that promotes holiness. Prayer and religious practices accompany the sharing of beliefs and the common search for the truth. Fourth, among the several goals of interreligious dialogue are these that are distinctively religious: mutual understanding and respect for one another as religious persons; common action for accomplishing what one's religious faith considers to be true and good; and spiritual growth and a deeper understanding of one's beliefs and those of another. In the dialogue aimed at common action, debate, negotiation, compromise and prudence have roles for short-term solutions to immediate needs.

In an interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the partners clarify for one another how they understand God's revelation. Christians and Muslims know they have very great differences on matters of theological faith but they do not seek to minimize these nor explain them away. Together they seek to understand the mystery of the oneness of God and the meaning of divine revelation to humanity. Christians and Muslims can agree that God calls them to interreligious dialogue and that it is through God's guidance that they come together to do the will of God.

Dialogue remains a new experience for many Christians and Muslims, despite the fact that many in their communities have been attending dialogues for a number of years. There are shining examples in the long history of Christian-Muslim relations too. Christian-Muslim dialogues follow their own logic and depend on different circumstances. Many on both sides need to be convinced of the need for dialogue even if they understand that it does not involve the compromise of beliefs. Many Christians and Muslims are too aware of the wounds of the past to expose their feelings through dialogue.

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.

I began this essay by suggesting that that we are at the beginning of a new period for all of us, Christians and for Muslims. There were references to two voices, one Catholic and one Muslim, in the mid-twentieth century urging their co-religionists to come to terms with the modern world. We are now in a post-9/11 world in which a new generation of leaders will work. If Christians and Muslims are to move beyond their confrontations and their bafflement with one another, then we must begin where we are now. We Christians begin first with ourselves and learn about Islam to move beyond generalities and stereotypes. We hope that Muslims will do the same, to move beyond what they have heard said about Christianity to understand us better. This is beginning to happen. From time to time, Christians and Muslims will join in coalitions for the common good, but for an improved long-term relationship, dialogue based on mutuality needs to be nurtured.

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1. Published in *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church*, edited by Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), p. 117.

2. This is how the term “religious pluralism” was used in the project “Confessing Christian Faith in a Pluralistic Society,” Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research (Collegeville, MN 56321-6188), 1995. One sentence in particular demonstrates this meaning: “We can no longer think and act without attention to our neighbors from other traditions.” (11) The project was sponsored and facilitated by the interreligious offices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of Churches along with the staff of the Institute at Collegeville.

3. *Apostolic Letter “Novo Millennio Ineunte,”* 55, published in *Origins*, CNS Documentary Service, 30/31 (January 18, 2001): 506.

4. Sayyid Qutb, quoted in “Sayyid Qutb, Ideologue of Islamic Revival,” by Yvonne Y. Haddad, published in *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, edited by John Esposito (New York: Oxford, 1983) p. 70.

5. Haddad, p. 67.

6. Shahrough Akhavi, “Sayyid Qutb,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Modern Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford, 1995), p. 404.

7. Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror,” *The New York Times Magazine* (March 23, 2002): 29.

8. These points appear in a news release on the USCCB website, dated March 10, 2003: <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2003/03-056.htm>.

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9. The report, dated December 2003, appears on the USCCB website under official dialogues of the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs department: <http://www.usccb.org/seia/friends.htm>. It also appears in *Islamochristiana*, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d' Islamitica, 30 (2004): 171-87.

10. See the article reporting this meeting by Thomas Michel, S.J., "An Unusual Partnership," *America* (September 15, 2008): 32-34.