

# Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Nostra Aetate and Fethullah Gülen's Philosophy of Dialogue

Salih Yucel

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**Abstract:** *Through the turbulent era leading up to the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the climax of European colonization, one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the 20th century, Said Nursi, called for dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims 54 years before the Nostra Aetate. Despite the authoritarian tendencies of the time, Nursi knew that humanity would make a fresh call for reconciliation, understanding and cooperation, and that this would work through dialogue. Mainly due to the prevailing political and cultural circumstances in his time and as well as living a life of house-arrest in exile, Nursi's opportunities to apply his theory were greatly restricted. His eyes looked towards the future generations who would fulfil this call. Fethullah Gülen, one of Nursi's most influential followers and a leader of a global spiritual and educational movement, adopted and applied Nursi's philosophy, despite severe criticism from both extremes of the religious spectrum. Contrary to Samuel Huntington's postulation of a clash of civilizations, Gülen advocated a cooperation of civilizations, which attracted political and academic interest. He encouraged people both to engage in dialogue, and to establish centres of dialogue in order to meet this global imperative. This paper will examine Nostra Aetate and Gülen's views regarding an advanced stage of institutionalizing dialogue and the fostering of cultural acceptance.*

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**Key Words:** *Nostra Aetate; Fethullah Gülen; Said Nursi; dialogue*

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**A**t a time when half of the Ottoman Empire's lands were occupied by Russia, Italy, England, and France, Said Nursi proposed dialogue and collaboration between Muslims and Christians before a congregation of over 10,000 Muslims, including 100 prominent religious scholars, in the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus.<sup>1</sup> The strength of Nursi's proposal comes from his foresight when other Muslim thinkers were on the defensive against the invading colonial forces. Nursi held this approach even after the Ottoman Empire had collapsed after a turbulent conflict between the Empire and Europe.

Nursi strongly believed that the source of international aggression is materialistic philosophy. The problem was not East vs. West or Christian vs. Muslim, but the philosophy that he regarded as "the evil of civilization." For Nursi, there are two types of Europe: "the first follows the sciences which serve justice and activities beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity." The second is "corrupt, through the darkness of the philosophy of naturalism ... which has driven humankind to

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<sup>1</sup> Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şâmiye (Damascus Sermon)*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Publication, 1996), 18.

vice and misguidance.”<sup>2</sup> This philosophy drives people to greed, which then causes major conflicts from individual to global levels.

This was the reasoning behind his call for unity and collaboration between followers of the two major faiths, Muslims and Christians. Both have common enemies, such as the problems of poverty, ignorance, and enmity. “Believers should now unite, not only with their Muslim fellow-believers, but with truly religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them, for absolute disbelief is on the attack.”<sup>3</sup> Nursi faced imprisonment, political exile, and home arrest during the second half of his life, making him unable to put his vision in practice.

It was over half-a-century after Nursi’s proposal that the Second Vatican Council declared *Nostra Aetate*, “The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” in 1965. The declaration was originally intended to deal with the Catholic theological standing towards Judaism. It was not until Arab Catholic, Maronite, and Coptic bishops argued that a statement which ignored Muslims was not politically viable that Muslims were included in the declaration.<sup>4</sup> *Nostra Aetate* is a significant document that challenges Roman Catholics as well as Protestant Churches to open up, rethink their attitudes towards other religions, and reflect on the fact that all human beings are “but one community.”<sup>5</sup>

*Nostra Aetate* has been considered one of the most important turning points in the history of Catholic-Muslim relations.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> Since 1967, the 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 (CRRM). In 1976, the Vatican co-organized the Christian-Islam Congress in Tripoli with the World Islamic Call Society (WICS). 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 organizations. 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, the previous Pope, John Paul II, visited the Umayyad Mosque as the first pope to visit a mosque, 1,363 years after Caliph ‘Umar ibn Khattab (586-644) who visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. 2007 was the year 138 Muslim scholars

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<sup>2</sup> Said Nursi, *Lemalar (The Flashes)*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications 1996) 161.

<sup>3</sup> Nursi, *Lemalar*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> Kail Ellis, “Vatican II and the Contemporary Islam”, *New Catholic World*, 23/1386 (Nov/Dec. 1988), 269ff, and Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 127.

<sup>5</sup> Atallah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press 1997), 34

<sup>6</sup> Scott C. Alexander, “We go way back: The history of Muslim-Catholic relations is one of both confrontation and dialogue”, *U.S. Catholic* (February 2007): 18-22.

<sup>7</sup> John Borelli, “Interreligious Dialogue as a Spiritual Practice”, Georgetown University international conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gülen Movement Conference*. Available at <http://en.fgulen.com/conference-papers/gulen-conference-in-washington-dc/3100-interreligious-dialogue-as-a-spiritual-practice>.

and leaders signed an open letter called “A Common Word between Us and You” to Pope Benedict XVI as a response to the Pope’s remarks at the University of Regensburg lecture. In 2008, the PCID and the Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation made a joint declaration in Iran. Last February, the Vatican and al-Azhar University’s Joint Committee for Dialogue signed a declaration promoting a culture of peace. In Catholic archdioceses in many countries, there is a committee devoted to interfaith relations. These are all fruits of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration.

## GÜLEN’S APPROACH

Both Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen were aware that the theology of dialogue between Christians and Muslims precedes this declaration by centuries. Dialogue between the two communities, in fact, goes back to the beginning of Islam, and the Qur’an itself invites Christians to dialogue *with fair words* in order to adore the one God (Qur’an 3:64) and invites Muslims to converse with Christians in a courteous manner (Qur’an 26:46).<sup>8</sup> However, this fact, together with historical and current Muslim-initiated dialogue activities is not as well publicized as *Nostra Aetate* due to the lack of a religious hierarchy in Islam. Therefore, Muslim leaders attempt to “offer authoritative statements based on scholarly and sectarian credentials.”<sup>9</sup>

Leading Muslim thinker and the spiritual leader of a global movement, Fethullah Gülen, studied Nursi’s approach to other religions, specifically Christianity, and applied Nursi’s philosophy beyond *Nostra Aetate*. In 1986, Gülen asked his followers to engage in dialogue with people from all the diverse segments of Turkish society, from the left to the right wing, and the secular to the agnostic or atheist. He inspired his followers to establish the Journalists’ and Writers’ Foundation in 1994 and other dialogue centres with this aim,<sup>10</sup> thereby becoming the first leading person behind the institutionalization of dialogue in the Turkish context.

Gülen has been called “one of the most persuasive and influential voices in the Muslim community” calling for dialogue.<sup>11</sup> Gülen regards interfaith cooperation as “compulsory for Muslims to support peace”<sup>12</sup> relying on the basic Islamic sources to affirm this point.<sup>13</sup> Enes Ergene, a pupil of Gülen’s study circle, writes that Gülen does not rely on

<sup>8</sup> Khaled Akasheh, “Nostra Aetate: 40 Years Later”, *L’Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), 28 June (2006): 8. Also: “And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best” (Qur’an 26:49).

<sup>9</sup> Turan Kayaoglu, “Preachers of Dialogue: International Relations and Interfaith Theology”, international conference proceedings, *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gulen Movement*, (Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007), 511-525, at 521.

<sup>10</sup> In the US alone, there are over 50 interfaith dialogue centres whose establishment was inspired by Gulen. Thomas Michel, SJ, “Fighting Poverty with Kimse Yok Mu?” Georgetown University international conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement Conference*. Now there are more than 200 hundreds throughout the world.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Michel, SJ, “Two Frontrunners for Peace: John Paul II and Fethullah Gulen”, <http://en.fgulen.com/content/view/1944/13/> accessed May, 19, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Zeki Saritoprak, “An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence: A Turkish Experience,” *The Muslim World*, 95/3 (2005): 413-427 at 423.

<sup>13</sup> Ismail Albayrak, “The Juxtaposition of Islam and Violence” in Robert Hunt and Yuksel Aslandogan, *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gulen Movement* (Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2007), 133-44; and M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gulen Movement: The Turkish Puritans”, in M.Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 19-47.

theological sources alone. “These two concepts [tolerance and dialogue], first developed on a small scale, have turned into a search for a culture of reconciliation on a world scale.... Gülen strengthens this search with religious, legal, and philosophical foundations.”<sup>14</sup> In his view, a human being is related to everything in the cosmos; to engage in dialogue with other related beings is therefore part of human nature.

Another of Gülen’s students, Mehmet Seker, posits that Gülen has two aims for interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Firstly, he seeks a world in which civilisations do not clash. Secondly, he pictures a world where religious, cultural and linguistic differences are not denied or repressed, but rather expressed freely in the form of a civilisation of love. He dreams of a world without conflict and enmity. In such a world, people avoid hurting or annoying each other.<sup>15</sup>

From the establishment of the Republic of Turkey up until around 1990, the meeting of Muslim and non-Muslim leaders was considered unacceptable. However, Gülen broke this unwritten rule and met with the Chief Rabbi of Turkey David Pinto, the Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, Christian Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos in Istanbul, and former Vatican Representative Monsignor George Marowich, who then arranged Gülen’s meeting with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in 1998. During his meeting with the Pope, Gülen proposed the establishment of a joint school of Divinity in Urfa, Turkey, the birthplace of Abraham, to disprove the idea of “a clash of civilizations.”<sup>16</sup> While such meetings may be welcomed today, it was almost taboo during the 1990s in the political and religious atmosphere in Turkey. The meetings, especially with the Pope, were harshly criticized by ultra-secularists and some Islamists. A group of young Islamists argued that Gülen should not have humiliated himself to the extent of going to the Vatican and meeting with the Pope. Gülen, however, responded to this kind of reductionism by saying that humility was an attribute of Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

In 1999, Gülen travelled to the US to seek medical attention, and remained there due to the political conditions in Turkey. His followers in the US have been active in realizing his vision, especially after 9/11. With his encouragement, over 50 dialogue centres were established in North America by his followers and supporters. Although no official count has taken place, it is possible that the number exceeds 100 in the Americas, Europe, and Australia. Other Muslim organizations or groups have put effort into interfaith relations, but Gülen’s followers and supporters have actually established dialogue centres, and have given more time, funds, and efforts to this sector.

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<sup>14</sup> Enes Ergene, “The Gulen Movement, Dialogue, and Tolerance”, 5 Aug 2008, <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/about-fethullah-gulen/an-analysis-of-the-gulen-movement/3022-the-gulen-movement-dialogue-and-tolerance.html>, accessed May 20, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Mehmet Seker, *Musbet Hareket* (Istanbul: Isik Yayinlari, 2006), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Loye Ashton and Tamer Balci, “A Contextual Analysis of the Supporters and Critics of the Gulen/Hizmet Movement”, Georgetown University international conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement Conference*, 84 available at <http://en.fgulen.com/conference-papers/gulen-conference-in-washington-dc/3123-a-contextual-analysis-of-the-supporters-and-critics-of-the-gulen-movement>.

<sup>17</sup> Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, “Fethullah Gülen and the ‘People of the Book’: A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue,” *The Muslim World* 95/3 (2005): 329-341.

One reason for the success of the Gülen Movement (also known as the Hizmet Movement in Western countries) is the universal nature of Gülen's vision, exemplified by his nonviolent and tolerant approach during a time marked by fear of religious extremism. Based on personal examination of some of these centre's activities via the Internet<sup>18</sup>, it is evident that these dialogue centres do not engage with the religious segment alone. Besides the usual dialogue activities such as dinners, seminars, and conferences, these centres organize joint projects, such as food drives, interfaith education curriculum design, and trips to holy sites in Istanbul, Jerusalem, Rome, and London. They have entered the academic sector and published articles, magazines, and books. Through high school and university student exchange programs, these centres are reaching out to the younger demographic in order to achieve their aim of the cultural acceptance of dialogue.

Over the course of time, the activities of the Movement eventually gained more attention through public relations works and general publicity. It attracted the attention of the academic world which slowly began studying its global projects and productions. After some years of study, Gülen's followers and admirers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, founded tertiary institutes devoted to the study and research of interfaith relations, faith, and spirituality. Among these are the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University in Ohio, the Fethullah Gülen Chair in the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Australia, the Fethullah Gülen Chair at Syarif Hidayetullah Islam University, Indonesia, Gülen Institute at Houston University and Fethullah Gülen Chair for Intercultural Studies at Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

## INSTITUTIONALISING OF DIALOGUE

In *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*, Ataullah Siddiqui analyses the definitions and methods of prominent Muslim scholars in the case of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is understood as meeting and communicating with other faiths, sharing thoughts and exchanging views, and reaching mutual understanding and respect through focusing on common ground.<sup>19</sup>

However, Nursi and Gülen go beyond this understanding of dialogue. Interfaith dialogue needs to be institutionalized and collaboration must take place through joint projects for there to be any effectual dialogue in the current atmosphere of scepticism. Dialogue programs occur at a local level with small projects on the part of other Muslim organizations, but larger-scale programs and projects that attract public attention are needed.<sup>20</sup>

It is for this purpose that during his meeting with the Pope, Gülen proposed the establishment of a joint divinity school, student exchange programs between divinity schools, and joint trips to holy sites. There was no response from the Vatican, possibly due

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<sup>18</sup> Some of these websites: <http://www.interfaithdialog.org/>; <http://www.idcnj.org/>; <http://www.interfaithdialog.org/>; <http://www.guleninstitute.org/>; <http://www.intercultural.org.au/>; [www.rumiforum.org](http://www.rumiforum.org/); [www.rumiforum.pk](http://www.rumiforum.pk).

<sup>19</sup> Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 163-169.

<sup>20</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Goals and Obstacles" *The Muslim World* 94/3 (2004): 313-320.

to political conditions in Turkey. If this project had become a reality, it would have been a first and original institution, serving as a model in the world.

The silence from the Vatican did not discourage Gülen since he was aiming for more than a Turkey-Vatican dialogue. When Samuel Huntington's wrote about "the clash of civilizations," Gülen put forth his ideas on the cooperation of civilizations. Gülen is working for an inter-civilizational dialogue,<sup>21</sup> one that transgresses beyond religious identity. This point is another significant difference in Gülen's understanding of current dialogue activities. He bases dialogue not entirely on the grounds of faith, but on *muhabbet*, love. Gülen's social philosophy revolves around the idea of serving humanity, and institutions should serve this purpose. Institutes formed by one group will not be all-embracing, but those formed by a coalition of groups, such as interfaith groups, will serve a greater population.

## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

*Nostra Aetate* was the first step in promoting the culture of dialogue with Muslims. Despite the mention of shared values between the two faiths and the urge to promote social justice and moral welfare, there are no specifics in terms of collaboration and institutionalization. Most of the joint declarations and committees with Muslims after *Nostra Aetate* could not bring interfaith collaboration into institutionalized dialogue with other Muslim groups apart from the Hizmet Movement. However, it is observed that all Muslim-Christian dialogue has so far achieved is the recognition of the Abrahamic roots of the two faiths.<sup>22</sup>

Not all Muslims and Christians embraced the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*. In 1970, evangelicals convened in Frankfurt, Germany, and signed a declaration called the *Frankfurt Declaration*, underlining the mission of Christ, and harshly criticizing organized dialogue as a "betrayal of the universality of Christ."<sup>23</sup> In both the *Dialogue and Mission* statement by the Secretariat for non-Christians in the Vatican in 1984 and in *Dialogue and Proclamation* in 1991, dialogue is placed within the mission of the Church, the building of God's kingdom,<sup>24</sup> thereby evoking apprehension on the part of Muslims.

Nonetheless, it should be stated that Muslim thinkers often brought polemics to the table, asking that they be resolved before genuine dialogue takes place. In his response to Pope Paul VI's letter regarding Peace Day, Abu 'Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979), 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'an made by Christian scholars. When the Second Vatican Council was discussing the idea of forgetting the historical troubles between Muslims and Christians, French-Indian Muslim leader Professor Muhammad Hamidullah 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

<sup>21</sup> Saritoprak and Griffith, "Fethullah Gülen", 329-341.

<sup>22</sup> Liyakatali Takim, "From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 9-11 America," *The Muslim World* 94/3; (2004): 343-357.

<sup>23</sup> Yvonne Haddad and Wadi Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gensville: University Press of Florida, 1995), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue*, 148-150.

and Synods. One viewpoint among Muslim thinkers is that forgetting the past is “a way of getting us to disarm ourselves.”<sup>25</sup>

Other major thinkers, such as Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi (1921-1986), Mahmoud Ayoub, Hasan Askari, Khurshid Ahmad, Mohammed Talbi, and many other Muslim scholars, placed some conditions before dialogue. There was scepticism regarding dialogue, and fear that it would be used as a missionary tool and carried political agendas. Khurshid Ahmad posited that the West did not view Islam as a religion or civilization, but “merely as a rival political power,”<sup>26</sup> thus making dialogue unbalanced. In the basket was the general mistrust of Muslims due to the negative reputation of missionaries in Muslim lands and the double-standards of the West. For example, Ahmad points out how the West accepts everything from the “bikini to the evening dress” as natural, but sees the *hijab* (head scarf) as unnatural and threatening local culture. In 2005, the rector of Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious religious institution in Sunni Islam, asked the Vatican to apologise for the Crusades.<sup>27</sup>

Looking at the most prominent Muslim leaders and thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we see Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen, each of whom put sincere interfaith dialogue and collaboration at the forefront, along with the condition of leaving polemics behind and focusing on common points.<sup>28</sup> For Nursi and Gülen to come out with the request for unconditional dialogue is remarkable and bold. If dialogue is institutionalized, it is possible that it will thereby reduce mistrust and criticism.

The establishment of many interfaith dialogue and cultural centres and academic institutes created scepticism and received criticism in Turkey and abroad. Some opponents accuse the Gülen Movement of concealing a political agenda to change Turkey as a secular republic while others see the Movement as an American project to use soft Islam to control the Muslim world. These opponents range from the ultra-nationalists, radical political Islamists, and ideological leftists in Turkey and some Evangelists and neo-conservatives in the US and around the world.

According to Paul Stenhouse, Gülen seems to be promoting tolerance, understanding, peace and interfaith dialogue, but in reality, he is secretly establishing a caliphate. On the establishment of the Fethullah Gülen Chair of Islamic Studies and Interfaith Dialogue, within the Centre of Inter-Religious Dialogue at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Stenhouse raised questions about Gülen, and implied that the Gülen Movement is a “group that is ex professo dedicated to promoting an Islamist ideology.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Ismail R. Al-Faruqi, “Common Bases between the Two Religions in Regard to Convictions, and Points of Agreement in the Spheres of Life”, Seminar of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue (1976). Tripoli: Popular Office of Foreign Relations, Socialist Peoples’ Libyan Arab Jamhariya (1981), 243 as cited in Ataulah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997) 130.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Spencer, “A Vatican Apology for the Crusades?”, [www.frontpagemagazine.com](http://www.frontpagemagazine.com), March 22, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Fethullah Gülen, *Essays, Perspectives, Opinion* (Rutherford, NJ: The Light Publication, 2002) 34.

<sup>29</sup> As cited in Dogan Koc, “Strategic Defamation of Fethullah Gülen - English Vs Turkish,” *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies* 4/1 (2011): 189-244, at 191.

However Greg Barton<sup>30</sup> and David Tittensor<sup>31</sup> have dismissed these claims. Reporting in *The Australian* newspaper, Barton dismissed Stenhouse's article as "not particularly well argued" and further stated, "Father Stenhouse conflates this quiescent Sufism with some of the rare examples of Sufi militantism".

Former Vatican Representative in Istanbul Monsignor George Marowich, who has known Gülen for over a decade, bears a special admiration toward Gülen for his pioneering efforts in dialogue. "He is the Mevlana (Rumi)<sup>32</sup> of our age," he would say.<sup>33</sup>

While Gülen is accused of being Islam's Trojan horse in the Western Christian World, in the Turkish world, he is paradoxically accused of being the Pope's Trojan Horse.<sup>34</sup> Gülen and his followers have also been accused of being "bad representatives" of Islam, and "cater(ing) to" Jews and Christians.<sup>35</sup> Mehmet Sevket Eygi, syndicated columnist for *Milli Gazete*, a publication aligned to former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party, questioned Gülen and his followers on their dialogue activities and representation of Muslims. He did not approve of the activities as it opened the doors to missionaries, and went as far as calling interfaith dialogue un-Islamic and unlawful based on religious texts.

Despite such accusations, Gülen's continuation of dialogue is admirable. In his message at the Parliament of the World's Religions Gülen wrote that dialogue with the adherents of other religious traditions is an integral part of an Islamic ethic that has been long neglected.<sup>36</sup>

Seker argues that Gülen's dialogue work is not unislamic or something new to Islam, but is rather based on the the spirit of the *Medina Charter*, an agreement drawn up between the Muslims and non-Muslims (Jews and pagans) in Medina that granted rights and respect towards non-Muslims. Seker adds that Gülen also draws from the spirit of the final sermon of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jill Rowbotham, "Catholic hits Islamic chair", *The Australian*, 16 January, 2008 <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/catholic-hits-islamic-chair/story-e6frgcjx-111115325> accessed on July 23, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> David Tittensor, "The Gulen Movement and the Case of a Secret Agenda: Putting the Debate in Perspective" *Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23/2 (2012): 163- 179.

<sup>32</sup> Mevlana Jalal ad-Din Muhammad (1207-1273) was a Persian poet, mystic and theologian who is known in the Western world as Rumi and is revered for his spiritual legacy in Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and South Asia. The themes in his works transcended national borders with universal values of love, tolerance, compassion and spiritual ecstasy. His works have been translated into many languages. He has been described as the "most popular poet in America" (BBC, Charles Haviland, 30 September 2007, "The roar of Rumi, 800 years on", [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7016090.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7016090.stm)).

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Harun Tokak, "A Lonely Man in A Rest Home", <http://en.fgulen.com/press-room/columns/3280-a-lonely-man-in-a-rest-home>, accessed July 21, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Koc, "Strategic Defamation of Fethullah Gülen", 189-244.

<sup>35</sup> This was by two opponents, Haydar Bas, Turkish academic, leader of a small religious community, and politician associated with the Independent Turkey Party (BTP), and Sevki Yilmaz, former parliamentary representative of former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party in Turkey. In Loye Ashton & Tamer Balci, "A Contextual Analysis of the Supporters and Critics of the Gulen/Hizmet Movement", Georgetown University international conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement Conference*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Fethullah Gulen, *The Necessity of Dialogue*, <http://www.fethullahgulen.org/about-fethullah-gulen/messages/972-the-necessity-of-interfaith-dialogue-a-muslim-approach.html> accessed January 6, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Seker, *Musbet Hareket*, 83.

The important issue these criticisms raise is one that fails to receive enough attention: that there is no body or institution representing Muslims all over the world, nor is there any agreement on who should represent the adherents of this faith.<sup>38</sup> Interfaith dialogue by Muslims is carried out by government-appointed scholars who are limited in their approaches, leaders of spiritual groups, or small groups and individuals.<sup>39</sup> This makes it difficult for Christians, because it leaves them to engage in dialogue with a variety of Muslim nations, institutions, groups, and spiritual leaders. Moreover this draws criticism from Muslims who feel that the Christian world is not engaging with the right organization or person. In order to overcome this missing link of representation, Muslims and Christians need to establish joint institutions and social welfare organizations.

In 1993, Pope John Paul II in Rome appealed for peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina and called for a special prayer day at Assisi. Forty two delegates, including two Bosnian Muslims, attended the prayer service for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim participants.<sup>40</sup> It is possible that this and similar services inspired cooperation in 1996 when a group of Catholic and Muslim religious people met to discuss how they could support the building of a new water system that would serve both the Muslim community in Fojnica and the Croatian community of Kiseljak, two cities that experienced major violence during the Muslim-Croat fighting in 1993-1994. However, due to lack of local personnel and expertise to supervise volunteers, this project was never realized, despite the genuine interest and efforts of local clergy.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We have yet to witness another prominent Muslim leader pronouncing dialogue as an “obligation” apart from Gülen, who holds that dialogue is the duty of Muslims in the struggle to make our world a more peaceful place.<sup>42</sup> Gülen believes that dialogue is among the duties of Muslims on earth because of what it contributes to the promotion of peace and safety in our world.

Both the declaration of *Nostra Aetate* and the vision of Gülen have pushed religious persons to open their doors to each other. Yet, it is only when theories and ideas are applied that they gain credibility and give benefit. Interfaith dialogue faces boundaries of mistrust and scepticism, especially among radical religious people, due to historical relations between the East and West, a lack of credibility and results, and political imbalance between the two sides.

*Nostra Aetate* was a commendable step. Yet, it was declared over 48 years ago. Vatican and Muslim organizations need to take steps in order to remove the perception of

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<sup>38</sup> Haddad and Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> Cassidy, *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue*, 142.

<sup>41</sup> David Steele, “Contributions of Interfaith Dialogue to Peace building in the Former Yugoslavia” in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace building*, David R. Smock ed. (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002), 85.

<sup>42</sup> Saritoprak and Griffith, “Fethullah Gülen”, 329-341.

interfaith dialogue as a twentieth-century fashion<sup>43</sup> and “a clubby brotherhood.”<sup>44</sup> For any Vatican or Christian initiatives to be successful, Muslim leaders and participants in dialogue need to leave behind historical grudges when engaging in dialogue, even if they do not wish to forget the past. Both Christians and Muslims are equal partners, and not opponents, in dialogue. In addition, the issue of representation on behalf of Muslims must be addressed, possibly by forming a pluralist council where members are democratically elected, representing every nation of the *Ummah*, the Muslim community. While this may not be applicable in current global political, social, and religious conditions in the Muslim world, it is a feasible possibility that could be politically and culturally accepted.

In order to clear the air of hidden agendas, leaders on both sides of the dialogue need to undertake theological reasoning to reduce the concept of the “dialogue mission” and “dialogue *da’wa*”- that is, the use of dialogue for covert proselytism. 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 common ground. For Muslims, engaging in dialogue evokes hope and arouses fear at the same time.<sup>45</sup> This needs further study in order to understand the roots of this issue.

Institution-oriented dialogue grants opportunities for adherents of different faiths to see the world and each other from different windows. This is one aim and meaning of dialogue: creating a common base to combat materialistic philosophy and aggressive secularism, and working together for social welfare and justice projects. The more this is implemented beyond declarations and discussions, the greater will be its cultural acceptance. This move to institutionalizing dialogue will gain trust once the joint projects produce visible and measurable results that go beyond the common desire for peace. The goal of interfaith dialogue and collaboration between different peoples is the exploration of new dynamics that will benefit all humanity.

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**Author:** *Salih Yucel is a senior lecturer in Islamic studies at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology at the School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies at Monash University. He is the advisor for the Islamic Studies program at Charles Stuart University.*

Email: [salih.yucel@monash.edu](mailto:salih.yucel@monash.edu)

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<sup>43</sup> John Borelli, “Interreligious Dialogue as a Spiritual Practice”, Georgetown University international conference proceedings, *Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement Conference*, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Michel, SJ, “Toward a Dialogue of Liberation with Muslims”, <http://www.sjweb.info/dialogo/index.cfm>, accessed 20 May, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Haddad and Haddad, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, xiv.