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How Muslims and Christians Can Practice Wilayat (Support) toward Each Other? A Response to *Nostra Aetate*¹

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Introduction

All the Abrahamic religions consist of theology, moral values, mysticism, and canon law, in different degrees of emphasis, thus we cannot reduce them to just one. The aim of religion seems to transcend each of these aspects; it wants to form the entirety of a human being according to truth throughout living, promoting, and expanding experiences of religious life. Neither Jesus nor Muhammad wanted to present a system of theology. Although they greatly contributed in the promotion of both private and public virtues and linked morals to spirituality, they are much more than mere ethical instructors. The same thing is true about mysticism and canon law. There are two examples which manifest the real nature of Jesus and Muhammad with regards to people:

"I am the way and the truth and the life."²

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²*The New American Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), John 14:6.

“O prophet! Truly we have sent you as a witness, a bearer of glad tidings, and Warner; and a caller to God by his permission, and as a lamp spreading light.”³

The way is the same as the truth and also the life. Clearly it is not an ordinary way alongside many other ways; it is identical with the truth and the life. Also it is not simply a metaphysical truth because it is the life and the life entails both metaphysics and physics. This life, in addition, is not the already given life to humanity because the distinction between current life and ideal life is an initial starting step of faith. The usual life is open to many paths and neutral regarding the truth if not confusing and more comfortable with ignoring the truth. The particular way is something relevant to the essence and true nature of the way, the truth, and the life which requires totally a new self-identification and self-realization like a new-birth in faith. There is a very significant story told about the Prophet Muhammad by the great Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi. He shows surprise that people used to ask the Prophet about when the resurrection day is to appear. Rumi highlights the irony by saying that asking the [the Prophet] about the Resurrection Day is like asking a present person about when he will be present! The Prophet was embodying resurrection and people did not understand that in looking for a promised resurrection day!⁴ A similar thing can be said about Jesus. He is the living way to the truth but theology wants to stabilize the living truth to fixed concepts and system. Of course, theology is related to Jesus but does not equal Jesus. The same story is about the Prophet Muhammad. This is the critical question in Islamic faith: How can a Muslim experience the Prophet as a witness to his or her life? Could theology give this impression? How can Islamic theology reflect the Call of the Prophet by its polemical nature?

Surely, the richness and vitality of Islamic “guidance” and Christian “salvation” cannot be fulfilled through merely theology or ethical instructions. It requires a real meeting with the resurrected truth which shakes entirely a human being as well. Such a meeting does not occur without leaving already-established boundaries and openness to new experiences; experiencing the presence of Jesus or Muhammad, the truth and the witness, wherever and whenever through either known or unknown manifestation. This is the significant moment of moving from theological discourse of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to

³*The Noble Quran*, (Medina: King Fahad Complex, 1420 A. H.). Translation from Arabic is my own.

⁴Rumi, Jalal ud-din. *The Mathnawi of Jalal ud-din Rumi*, (Trans and Ed) Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Tehran: Research Center of Booteh Publication Co. 1381/2002), 6:750-753.

constructive and positive co-existence among the faithful within many religions including Islam and Christianity. This division and pluralist approach based on it wants to suggest a reasonable theory of possibility of salvation through multiple faiths, while the fundamental purpose of faith is more than reasonable theory and several faiths do not focus on theologizing. From the outside it does not explain the real differences among religions. For example political activities appeared as a part of Muhammad's mission while the church instead emphasizes a separation of church and state. Also all Islamic authorities after the Prophet (and after Infallible Imams in Shia denomination) are recognized with two significant features: fallibility as well as lack of hierarchy. Hinduism tolerates everything from monotheism to polytheism and a personal God is not relevant to many non-Abrahamic faiths. How can these clear differences be ignored and be reduced to the same message?

From the inside, it also does not satisfy the quest of the faithful within each particular faith and causes a lack of fidelity to their own faith because they hold their own faith as unique. The later model of Paul Knitter categorizing this issue into four sections, namely replacement, fulfillment, mutuality, and acceptance cannot effectively touch the heart of faith;⁵ replacement and fulfillment respectively are close to exclusivism and inclusivism and so face the same criticism. Mutuality calls for continued dialogue on many levels including philosophical-historical, mystical and prophetic, and gradual movement toward convergence based on praxis. Although Knitter advocated this model, he was aware of dangers of creeping imperialism, creeping relativism, and the potential for a lack of fidelity to the Christian faith. The acceptance model acknowledges the fundamental differences among religions and ignores any common ground. This model highlights the comparative theology instead of theologies of religions in order to deepen and understand one's own faith. By this model each single faith mirrors a unique and unparalleled state with regards to its own origin and end and thus it celebrates the major differences.

Mirroring is naturally part of religion because it is related directly to those addressed. There is an explicit Quranic verse stating, "we did not send any messenger but with the language of his people".⁶ Although the language here refers to all cultural and intellectual atmospheres, there is no doubt that religion in addition encourages transcending pre-existing

⁵Hogan John P. and MacLean George F., eds., *Multiple Paths to God: Nostra Aetate, 40 Years Later* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005), p. 5-6.

⁶*The Quran*, 14:4.

boundaries including cultural, traditional, and intellectual and reach the universal ethical and spiritual values.⁷ How to harmonize these two poles makes the dynamic of faith and keeps the nature of faith living and inspires the faithful to engage this issue existentially. However, each faith also wants to reflect back the substance of the person and also one's relation to God.

There is a beautiful story narrated by Rumi. He states that two different people came to the Prophet and described him as they liked. The first, who was enemy to the Prophet described him as an ugly ambitious man and the second who was a friend as unique and handsome. The Prophet affirmed both attributions. The people were shocked asking how it is possible to affirm two opposite qualifications of the same person. Rumi concludes,

They that were present said, 'O king, why didst thou call both of them truth-tellers when they contradicted each other?' He replied, 'I am a mirror polished by the (Divine) hand: Turcoman and Indian behold in me that which exists (in themselves).'⁸

Mirroring is merely a part of religion for it wants to redefine and reestablish the person by faith, in presence of the truth or God. Faith has much more than mirroring the current and ideal situation of a man, his culture, or limited circumstances. Thus the theology regarding the other religions cannot be reduced to self-reflection. As much as Jesus and Muhammad are open to previous faiths, theologies must operate in the same direction. Also the shared fundamental values and visions among major religions convince us that the acceptance model does not fit reality, unity in plurality. However, Knitter rightly looks for a "complementary of absolutes" focusing on both comparative theology and theologies of religions although beyond the theoretical, namely to practical problems of interreligious conflict, global hunger, and war and peace. This perspective is insufficient as well because it tends to reduce the variety of faiths to various practices as well as to reduce faith to theology. The majority of the faithful within all religions have no clear and distinct theological concepts and they tolerate diverse praxes. Nevertheless they show more passion in the faith and to a great extent sacrifice for it. Of course all Christians and Muslims explore the highest degree of ethical virtues and religious values in Christ and Muhammad, but they observe them more. They learn so much from these inspiring sources but they consider them beyond theologians, in both broad Christian meaning and narrow Islamic definition. To get closer to this meaning, it is well to emphasize the Second

⁷Ibid, see 7:157; 34:28 and 21:107

⁸Rumi, Ibid, 1: 2369-2370.

Vatican Council's teaching because in it *Nostra Aetate* connects us with an acceptable theory of faith in contemporary times.

Reflection on *Nostra Aetate*

Nostra Aetate is indeed a significant move beyond a merely theological discourse to expose the nature of faith. It touches the profound enigma of humanity "which encompasses our existence" including the meaning of human being, purpose of life, nature of good and sin, genuine happiness, death and judgment.⁹

"Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture," it continues, "found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ways, comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. It regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men."¹⁰

The spirit of *Nostra Aetate* (In our Time) is more than updating the faith to other religions; it is about living humans who change and experience time and movement with all their beings. Time here is not only a cosmological and physical time but is an existential time which offers humanity "resurrection", in Islam, and "the Risen one" in Christianity. It also addresses existential features of humankind which "day by day is being drawn ever closer together," the critical qualities which integrated with human existence. We as people challenge within our own heart and life particularly during boundary occasions, like unexpected major happy or sad events, the question of meaningfulness of life, sin, eternity and true justice which is related to the Judgment Day, genuine happiness and the like. Therefore we find that salvation, happiness, eternity, and true justice are more than speculative and theological examinations within the

⁹*Nostra Aetate*, in *Ecumenism and Nostra Aetate in the 12th Century*, George McLean and John p. Hogan (Ed), (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington D.C., 2005). P. 65.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p. 66.

“restlessness of the human heart”. It is similar to verse 28 chapter 13 of the Quran which relates the peace of heart to the remembrance of God. It is obvious that it is not a speculative of theological memory that comes from the mind or brain, because many scholars of faith are suffering from restlessness, stress, and anxiety like other people. This is an existential remembrance which ties to the bottom of the heart each single moment of life to God, the source of confidence and providence.

This document apparently celebrates “differences” and diversity of “ways” without falling down into relativism or leaving the unity. There are “comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites” which link humanity to God “One.” It thus “rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” because “those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings [...] often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”¹¹ It is not relativism for these multiple ways all are reflections and manifestations of the same Truth and therefore can be in interrelation with other ones and contribute together in enriching humans’ life with meaning and inspiration. The polemical relations shift to constructive relations; the former aims to overcome the other and celebrates its victory; the latter endeavors to support and celebrates the “salvation” or “guidance” of humanity “in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.”

The Quranic *Wilayat* and *Hidayat*

Two fundamental concepts in the Quran greatly inspire this effort: *Wilayat* (supporting alliance) and *Hidayat* (God’s guidance). The elaboration of *Wilayat* shaped the major split of Islam into two divisions Sunni and Shia. This term in different forms of speech appears in the Quran around one hundred times. It reflects through various stories and conditions the same common meaning: alliance and support. This is the true and common relationship between children to parents,¹² friends,¹³ relatives,¹⁴ lord,¹⁵ gods,¹⁶ and gracious friends.¹⁷ However, the Quran characterizes the relationship within the faithful using the term *Wilayat*, meaning as follows,

¹¹Ibid.

¹²*The Quran*, 19:4-6.

¹³Ibid, 17:111

¹⁴Ibid, 29:22

¹⁵Ibid, 6:14

¹⁶Ibid, 29:41

¹⁷Ibid, 3:28, Yasrebi, Sayed Yahya, *Tafsir-e Rooz* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 2011), the introduction.

“And the faithful, men and women, are supporting alliance one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey God and his messenger. As for these, God will have mercy on them. Surely God is mighty, wise.”¹⁸

At the first glance it might seem odd to apply the model Wilayat or supporting the alliance to the people of the Book rather than limiting its use among Muslim faithful. The term “faith” intentionally used here rather than “belief” is a translation of the Arabic term “Iman” which means faith and *Mumin* the faithful. The Arabic term for belief (*itiqad*) comes from A-Q-D meaning tying and clinging. All Quranic applications of *aqd*, refers to that meaning, a fixed and static state, and do not mention faith which is flexible and dynamic.¹⁹ However, the Quran describes mainly the people of the Book as faithful rather than infidel *Kafir*. The first verses of chapter 2 of the Quran address faithful and most exegetes elaborated that they address people of the Book because they share with Muslims articles of faith; the only difference is about the details.²⁰ These common articles of faith indeed lay the foundation for calling upon the common word.²¹ Thus using the term *Kafir* with regards to people of the book in the Quran does not mean infidel. The Quran applied term K-F-R to people of the Book²² but it is necessary to know K-F-R in its literal meaning means covering. It is used in the Quran also in its literal meaning.²³ It is used to describe being ungrateful as well.²⁴ Another Quranic implication is declaring oneself to be clear of somebody or something.²⁵ Moreover, verse 57 chapter 5 clearly distinguishes between infidels and people of the Book. Finally, the Quranic chapter Rome (30) reveals to the Prophet to tell him and Muslims that they are sharing in the camp of the faithful with the people of the Book and give them good tiding that the Christian faithful will overcome the enemies of the people of the Book.²⁶ This clarifies what is narrated that the Prophet was accustomed to act in harmony with the people of the Book when there was

¹⁸ *The Quran*, 9:71.

¹⁹ For instance, see the Quran, 4:33; 5:89.

²⁰ Ibn Kathir, Abi al-Fida Islamil, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim*. Eds by Sami bin Muhammad al-Salamah. (Riyadh: Dar Rayyiba, 1999), 1:170-171, also see 2: 121; 3:199; 4:159.

²¹ *The Quran*, 3:64.

²² 3:70 & 98

²³ Ibid, 5:12; 14:7.

²⁴ 2: 34 & 152; 4:155-161; 26:19-20.

²⁵ 60:4.

²⁶ Al-Suyuti, Jalal ad-Din. *Asbab al-Nuzul* (Beirut: Muassisa al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyyah, 2002), p. 201.

no revelation on the matter.²⁷ Considering people of the Book, thus K-F-R in the Quran refers to its literal meaning, being ingratitude or covered, which is used in other places of the Quran as well. In another word, the Quran uses two different terms to articulate the position of faithful to others: Mu'min (faithful) which contradicts Kafir (infidel), and Muslim, in narrow meaning, which disagrees with Jew and Christians (Islam in a broad way means submission to God, either His religion [*Sharia*] by free will or His creation by nature, so it entails all creatures).²⁸ The basics for faith are acknowledging the origin and the end, God and Judgment Day. Thus people of the Book are inside the camp of faith and Muslims should treat them as their supporting alliance. This is what the chapter Rome announced and the Prophet used to operate.

Still there is a controversy because there are several Quranic verses which seem to discourage Muslims from friendly ties with People of the Book. To be clear, these verses are subject to several conditions in order to inspire Muslims in managing their situations carefully. As Muslims who are not alike in practicing faith or supporting their friends in faith, so are people of the Book. The Quran explicitly differentiates between people of the Book and does not oversimplify by placing them in one category. Oversimplification of faith is among the dangerous attitudes common today in Mass Media, shaping the mentality of people toward others in the current global climate. Non-Believers do it about the faithful, extremist Muslims do it about people of the Book, and some people of the Book do it about Islamic faith. The Quran in many places distinguishes among faithful people of the Book to suggest insight for audiences on the issue. One example follows:

“They are not all alike; of the people of the book there is an upright party; they recite God’s communications in the nighttime and they adore (him). They believe in God and the last day, and they enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and they strive with one another in hastening to good deeds, and those are among the good. And whatever good they do, they shall not be denied it, and God knows those who guard (against evil).”²⁹

The common factions among Abrahamic religions which are emphasized repeatedly in the Quran inspire them to learn from each other and support each other in sacred experiences and building a better community. Of

²⁷ Al-Bukhari, Imam Abi Abdullah Muhammad, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Bairut and Demascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2002), 1490.

²⁸ See *the Quran*, 2:128; 3:20 & 83; 7:111.

²⁹ *The Quran*, 3:113-115.

course when the constructive and mutual coalition is replaced with a disrespectful and polemical state, the field for supporting an alliance is destroyed. This is the situation when the Quran warns Muslims to distance themselves from other faithful:

“O you who are faithful! do not take for guardians (Wali) those who take your religion for a mockery and a joke, from among those who were given the book before you and the unbelievers; and be careful of (your duty to) God if you are faithful.”³⁰

This verse obviously distinguishes People of the Book from unbelievers by addressing two groups separately. It also gives an account why this friendship is dangerous because in this case the mutual respect is lost. It means if there is a mutual respect and willingness to learn from each other, there is no prohibition and thus they can contribute together to promote virtue and justice within community. Additional Quranic verses stress this distinction:

“God does not forbid you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of (your) religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely God loves the doers of justice. God only forbids you respecting those who made war upon you on account of (your) religion, and drove you forth from your homes and backed up (others) in your expulsion, that you make friends (Wali) with them, and whoever makes friends with them, these are the unjust.”³¹

Thus, the verses referring to not take them Wali highlight several conditions destroying the common ground necessary for shared work like belittling, fighting against, and preventing the fundamental needs of humanity like freedom of residence (to learn more about the suggested Quranic model of relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims see my paper at *Immigration and Hospitality*). It is worth mentioning that the verse before states that God might bring friendship between the faithful and their previous enemies; because He is powerful, forgiving, and merciful.³² The context, before and after the discussion is about unbelievers (Kafirs) and so it is a step ahead and broader than the Vatican's call to overcome the centuries of quarrels and hostilities between Christians and Moslems, “to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.”³³

³⁰Ibid, 5:57.

³¹Ibid, 60: 8-9.

³²Ibid, 60:7.

³³*Nostra Aetate*, p. 67.

Since politicized and extremist Muslims and politicized encounters highlight the Quranic verse “let not the faithful take the unbelievers for guardians [Awliya] rather than faithful.”³⁴ It is important to mention several points. First, there is no clear and textual sign to demonstrate that unbelievers here refer to people of the Book.³⁵ Second, many current governments are secular which makes them indifferent to belief or lack of belief in God and it is not easy to consider them an infidel system. Finally, from context here Wali means guardian rather than friend. Verse 25 discusses God’s total operating authority on Judgment Day, verse 26 His omnipotence which gives power or weakness, and verse 27 His power over the day and night and the living and dead. Then it says that the faithful are not allowed to take unbelievers for their guardians and remain oppressed because God is their true guardian and protector and it is against piety. The two next verses continue with mentioning God’s omniscience and His power to do justice on Judgment Day. It is another form of Quranic statement³⁶ which gives confidence to Muslims to operate their rights to govern themselves. It may be regarded as another version of Immanuel Kant’s call for the Enlightenment “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” so Muslims and faithful are encouraged to reach their maturity and take responsibility for their government. Hence, this warning is not related to supporting an alliance in terms of faith to explore God’s mercy and promote justice, benevolence and love.

In contrast to these conditional statements warning about supporting alliance between Muslims and people of the Book, in terms of the Quran there are many encouragements to work together that establish among the faithful the state of Wilayat, supporting alliance to promote love, knowledge, kindness, and qualified public and private life. The most significant is the calling upon the common word³⁷ consisting of the very foundational principles of both Muslims and people of the Book, love of the One God, and love of neighbor, as it is detailed in “An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders to” his holiness Pope Benedict XVI.”

A suggested model of the relationship between Muslims and other faithful is articulating the issue of Wilayat, meaning alliance and support. It in addition allows us to understand better how to apply calling upon the common word. While this meaning of Wilayat is common among several

³⁴ *The Quran*, 3:28.

³⁵ see 3:21

³⁶ 4:141.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 3:64.

grades of that case, it is also the average of an analogical reality which begins with love and ends with guardianship. It is an analogical and graded entity because the faith has the same quality; faith simultaneously consists of various levels including controversial, rational, and intuitive levels, for less dedication to high dedication, and so on. Many verses of the Quran motivate the faithful to attain a higher degree of faith.³⁸ There is no place here for thinking that the current state of faith is the final step. The analogical nature of faith and constant inspiration for further steps caused the Quran to consider the prophets different in their levels, though the same in nature.³⁹ Also because Muslims and people of the Book are not considered the same, the differences are highlighted, they cannot reach to the level of guardianship. However, the average meaning of Wilayat, alliance and support, facilitates us with enough means to enrich the faith of the faithful including Muslims and Christians, as well as to promote faith and related values among humanity in general regardless of their culture, religion, and ideology.

The concept of Wilayat among the faithful highlights many common values among Muslims and Christians and thus it is totally applicable. It is helpful to examine the verse which articulates how to apply Wilayat among the faithful. Accordingly, the Wilayat or supporting alliance between the faithful features the following characteristics: (A) enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong, (B) establishing worship, (C) paying the poor-due, and (D) obeying God and his messenger. Subsequently, these people meet God's mercy because God is mighty and wise.⁴⁰ The faithful operate the desired relationship considering public and private life. Regarding public life, the faithful should support their alliances together to serve humanity particularly needy. It is a part of their duty rather than an arbitrary thing. It enjoins each other toward goods and forbids each other from evil. With regards to private life they support true dedication to God and helping each other to get rid of much stressful technological life. They help each other to see God's power, wisdom and mercy behind all phenomena no matter if pleasant or unpleasant. Worshiping God is not merely visiting the worship places and participating in prayers, that is a means to experiencing self-confidence by leaving anything to God, the most merciful and the most compassionate who watches for us and takes care of all, "Surely by God's remembrance are the hearts set at rest."⁴¹ Obeying God and his messenger

³⁸Ibid, 8:2; 48:4; 3:173; 33:22.

³⁹2:253 & 285.

⁴⁰9:71.

⁴¹13:28.

suggests experiencing freedom from all idols which capture the modern mind like that which changes a person into a consumer. The true meaning of obedience to God in Islam is liberation from all other authorities which are not established by humanity, as is the case of democratic society. Rumi the great Sufi explains the meaning of Wali exactly in this way which connects the essence of the prophethood to the Wilayat. He wrote,

“Who is the “protector” [Wali]? He that sets you free and removes the fetters of servitude from your feet. Since prophethood is the guide to freedom, freedom is bestowed on true believers by the prophets. Rejoice, O community of true believers: show yourselves to be “free” as the cypress and the lily.”⁴²

This is a very sad irony in Islam that the painkiller changed to pain-creator. God revealed Shariah to free human mind from idolism and human life from oppression and unjust rules in order to celebrate human free will and rationality,⁴³ not to create new chains and to keep people immature with textualism. However, freedom here also refers to leaving final judgment about the sophisticated faith to God.⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning that God’s dialogue with Jesus in the Quran about the Trinity took place in a very elegant form of speech. It follows a very beautiful story which suggests the high spiritual position of Jesus in Islam. Jesus’ disciples asked him for heavenly food to straighten their faith. Subsequently, this food was asked from God by Jesus to make “an ever-recurring happiness and celebration to the first and the last” followers of him. And God sent it on condition that they don’t disbelieve in God.⁴⁵ This is a very spiritual context which draws attention to heavenly food, perpetual celebration, and self-confidence about faith which inspire Muslims to think of multiple degrees of faith and consider Jesus with the ascension. In this very spiritual context and intuitional state, far from conceptualizing reason, the issue of the Trinity is referred to elegantly. The non-propositional statement and conceptual context from one side and the last prayer of Jesus “if you should chastise them, then surely they are your servants; and if you should forgive them, then surely you are the mighty, the wise”⁴⁶ (to be returned to later in this paper) and the following verse (119) instigate Muslims to contemplate the Trinity fully separated from polytheism because other verses clarified that God does not forgive polytheism.⁴⁷

⁴²Rumi, 6:4540-4542.

⁴³Yasrebi, 2011.

⁴⁴*The Quran*, 22:17.

⁴⁵*Ibid*, 7:112-115.

⁴⁶*The Quran*, 7:118.

⁴⁷*Ibid*, 4:48 & 116.

Thus the supporting alliance among faithful or Wilayat suggests the faithful must try to help each other to explore the heart of Jesus and Muhammad, beyond outward and superficial features, particularly in the era dominated by unfaithful wills and materialistic individualism. This verse implies if they are supporting each other to promote in faith, in goodness, and serving humanity they are under God's mercy and wisdom. Talking about *Nostra Aetate* within this Quranic concept, heartens us to think to implement a supporting alliance among faithful in terms of "In our Time." First of all it requires spreading the word among both religious leaders and religious ordinary people. Second, to understand how enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong can take place in democratic communities and an individualistic world. How could modern institutions and associations help faithful to work together and criticize materialistic reductionism? How do modern concerns, styles of life, and habits ask for a new subject of focus and a new method of encountering? Although the features of worship and prayers in Islam are more or less restricted insofar as they are limited to obligatory acts of worship, there is much room for other prayers that Muslims and Christians can learn from each other. Many charities by the faithful are active among various nations; the faithful from different backgrounds can join each other and also work alongside for social justice and the elimination of poverty. There are many golden chains in modern times which create modern slavery; the faithful in this context could work together for public awareness and human dignity. Acknowledging each other, and working together with regards to realities of our time bring the faithful under God's mercy because God is mighty and wise.

There is one more Islamic fundamental concept which suggests how attempting to find the right path toward God is supported by God. It is God's guidance (*Hidayat*). Of course the common attempt among faithful to progress in faith is recommended. The position of guidance in Islam is the same of salvation in Christianity. God in the Quran describes himself as "as guide and a helper."⁴⁸ All physical things are created and guided in their natural order (20:50); all nations are gifted with a guide;⁴⁹ the position of humanity is who is guided but he or she decides to be grateful or ungrateful.⁵⁰ As seen above in the first verses of chapter 2, the Quran recognizes people of the Book as faithful alongside Muslims and continues

⁴⁸ *The Quran*, 25:31.

⁴⁹ 13:7; 34:28.

⁵⁰ 76:3.

“these are guided by their lord; these surely are the prosperous.”⁵¹ The point is that the guidance like faith is an analogical fact⁵² because as much as there are more levels of faith to be accomplished, there is more room to explore God’s mercy. Also this verse clearly states if people ask for guidance God guides them. Another verse declares that this quest is based on exertion and struggle (*Jihad*). It states, “Those who struggle in our cause, we will surely guide them to our ways; and God is with those who do good.”⁵³ This struggle is left unconditioned to include struggle with inner temptation, satanic inspiration and outer evil.⁵⁴ To add some extra points: the Arabic term Jihad meaning struggling primarily is used in Mecca time not as referring to war, but to ethical attempts to reform the faithful’s own character. Second, the term “Those who” also is used to include all strugglers for the truth, benevolence, and good. It is not limited to particular denominations or faiths. Moreover, this verse is a conclusion to the chapter started with “do men think that they will be left alone on saying, we believe, and not be tried?”⁵⁵ It addresses all humanity with various faith and links true faith with examination which can be passed easily with supporting alliance. Finally, the struggle covers both individual and collective efforts to create better people and community. Therefore the Quranic concept of Wilayat and God’s support for honest lookers of the guidance encourage the faithful, Muslims and Christians, to work with the other, and learn from each other. This co-working and sharing their faithful findings provide them with the chance to explore God’s guidance in a broader scope, grace in a more extended way, and light in a more comprehensive meaning; of course it is a grade of salvation and guidance.

From Theological to Existential Accomplishment

As the supporting alliance among the faithful is not a political and social entity per se, reducing ecumenism to cultural, social, and in worse cases, to political and economical aspects, thus means losing the spirit of Nostra Aetate. This kind of reduction means reducing humanity to a selective phenomenon; the whole to the particular; living dynamic reality to a stable and static entity. This is to ignore these socio-cultural aspects, but it is highlighting the significance of Nostra Aetate’s spirit, suggesting the

⁵¹2:5, also see 64:11.

⁵²47:17.

⁵³29:69.

⁵⁴Al-Zamakhshari, Jar Allah. *Al-Kashshaf*, Ed. by Adil Ahmad Abd al-Mawjud and Ali Muhammad Muawwadh (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Abikan, 1998), 4:562.

⁵⁵*The Quran*, 29:29.

the “resurrection” or “raised one” in order to acquire an existential change from an “ordinary person” to a faithful one who experiences transcendence as immanence. In other words, “favored” and “perfect” is an ideal state which Muslims and Christians are directed towards. This is the duty of Church and Ulema to intermediate between the current and the ideal states without limiting their mission to theology, ethics or law. Church and Mosque have to provide the field in which the faithful find their authentic share of holy experiences of Jesus and Muhammad in order to open his heart to spiritual worlds.

During the age of globalization, there is an unparalleled chance to both faiths to discover other aspects of the beloved figures through, first, recognizing the vision of the other, and second, borrowing the other’s glasses. This is the major reason we celebrate *Nostra Aetate* and see it as a miraculous event and liberating phenomenon. It reflects the true nature of spiritual leadership as Rumi interpreted the significant verse of the Prophet. The Prophet called himself *Wali*, friend and protector, which is also called the proper relationship among the faithful in many verses of the *Quran*. Regarding its highest degree which is described as the shared quality of the Prophet and *Ali Ibn Abitalib*, Rumi reads it as a capacity to free people, as discussed earlier.

Moreover, while traditionally the orthodox perspective in faith has been calling people to abandon their sinful nature, in both theological and moral aspects, *Nostra Aetate* goes a step further calling upon people to make their static theology flexible; the essence of faith is more related to movement rather than to firmness; a continuing rebirth in deeper level of faith. This significant quotation of Jesus is narrated by New Testament and Islamic source, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”⁶¹ The majesty and limitlessness of God’s kingdom require a dedicated and purified heart like of our common father, Abraham.⁶²

Interestingly, the seeing of God’s Kingdom by Abraham in the *Quran* is narrated by his move among many faces of faith.⁶³ However, the Kingdom’s splendor and richness is so astonishing an opening that the enduring faithful explores a new spirit step by step. The path toward acquiring perfection in God’s Kingdom cannot be finished so the Muslims are recommended to pray at least ten times a day, “show us the straight path.”⁶⁴ In Islamic wisdom this process of accomplishment within

⁶¹ *The New American Bible*, John, 3:4.

⁶² *The Quran*, 6:75.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 6:76-79.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 1:6.

continuing new birth resembles the constant shedding of previous skin and getting a new one by the snake.⁶⁵ Of course, one great skin is a fixed theology. However, the critical point is that this is not only a call for peaceful co-existence, but a step further, a calling for active and cooperative co-existence to explore a higher level of religious life. The peaceful life, mutual respect, and social values are fundamentals for exercising a spiritual life which aims for the realization of the grace or guidance within humanity. Reducing religious objectives to these fundamentals means equating religion to ethics which is only a part of religious mission and also can be fulfilled, to some extent, without faith. As the result, the religious call for the faithful from diverse faiths to coexistence and sharing the faithful efforts consists of emphasizing two aspects simultaneously: similarity and distinction. These aspects are more related to existential inspiration rather than merely theological, ethical, or external features. The faithful have to explore first the common spirit of all faiths and then realize our special share of faith with my our own existential relation and quest to my own faith. The Muslim has to first discover the commonality of Jesus and Muhammad and then realize one's own share of Muhammad's spiritual quality.

Particular Reflections

If I want to turn from textual theory to historical fact and then to engaging the truth, Islamic and Christian history must be shown to appear in opposite ways. Islam appeared very pluralistic and the Prophet and the Righteous Caliphs functioned in that way. Plus to the Quranic verses, the Constitution of Medina recognized all freedom for Jews and "The Prophet's Covenant to the Christians of Najran (Yemen)" is unprecedented recognition of other faiths by a religious builder in power. There is a translation of that Covenant worth to be considered.

"In the Name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful

This is a security document from Allah and His Messenger to those who have been given the Book (Bible) from among the Christians, those who follow the creed of Najran and whoever follows the beliefs of Christianity written to them by Muhammad son of Abdullah, the Messenger of Allah to all people, a covenant to them from Allah and His Messenger.

⁶⁵Ibn Sina, *Resaleh al-Tair*, Commentated by Umar bin Sahlan Sawi, Ed. by Muhammad Hussain Akbari (Tehran: Al-Zahra, 1370); Motahheri, Mortaza, *Kulliyat-e Uloom-e Islami* (Tehran: Sadra.1382), 2:104.

It is a covenant which is entrusted to the Muslims after him (after the Prophet's demise) and which they must comprehend, recognize and safeguard for them. Neither a ruler nor any man who is strengthened by the authority of a ruler has the right to revoke it, nor to replace it with something else, nor to over-burden the believers (Muslims) with anything other than the terms stated in this document. Anyone who safeguards it, observes it and fulfills its contents is surely on the straightforward covenant and is loyal to his commitment to the Messenger of Allah. And anyone who reneges on it or changes it to something else or substitutes it with something else shall bear the burden of his sin, and he is one who betrays the trust of Allah, who reneges on his pledge, who disobeys Him and disobeys His Messenger, and he is counted by Allah among the liars:

FIRST: That I protect them—the Christians—and defend them, their churches, places of worship, places of their prayers, places of the monks, the (sacred) areas which they tour wherever they may be in a mountain or a valley or a cave or a city or a plain or a sandy track.

SECOND: That I guard their religion and their faith wherever they may be, on dry land or on a sea, east or west, with whatever I guard my own self and whatever belongs to me and the followers of Islam from my creed.

THIRD: That I include them in my trust, in my covenant, in my security against any harm or anything shunned or any burden or any responsibility, and that I shall be behind them to protect them from any enemy that intends to harm me and their own selves, to do so with my own self, with my supporters, with my followers, with the people who follow my creed.

FOURTH: That I keep away from them any harm of burdens which people who perform *jihad* bear, from any assault or *kharaj* (land tax) other than what they willingly pay without being forced or coerced into doing any such thing.

FIFTH: That I do not remove a bishop from his bishopric, nor a monk from his monastery, nor a pilgrim from his pilgrimage, nor demolish any of their churches, nor let any construction of a mosque infringe on their own buildings, nor should any house of the Muslims do so; anyone who does any of these things reneges from his covenant with Allah, disobeys His Messenger and swerves from the covenant of Allah.

SIXTH: Neither a monk nor a bishop, nor any of them who worships or wears woolen clothes or seeks solitude in the mountains or in areas

that are isolated from cities should ever be required to pay any *jizya* (protection tax) or *kharaj*.

SEVENTH: Whoever follows the Christian faith must not be forced into becoming a Muslim; mercy must be spread for them and anything harmful must be kept away from them wherever they may be in the land.

EIGHTH: If any Christian commits a crime or a serious offense, the Muslims must help him, prevent harm from reaching him, protect him and not let him bear the brunt of what he commits; rather, reconciliation must be established between him and his victim: He must either be pardoned or ransom is paid on his behalf.

NINTH: They (Christians) must not be rejected, betrayed or neglected because I have given them Allah's covenant that they should have what the Muslims have and be obligated to the Muslims' obligations.

TENTH: Muslims must carry out their obligations towards the pact which the covenant obligates; they should protect sanctities, and they should keep away every harm from them (Christians) so they may become partners with the Muslims: They have what the Muslims have and are obligated to what the Muslims are obligated.

ELEVENTH: They may, if they need repairs to their churches and places of worship or anything related to their interests and creed, get assistance from the Muslims to make such repairs; they must be assisted, and this must not be regarded as a debt against them but as support in the interest of their religion and as the fulfillment of the covenant of the Messenger of Allah, as a gift to them and a boon from Allah and His Messenger to them.⁶⁶

After the death of the Prophet the four Righteous Caliphs (abu Bakr, Omar, Osman and Ali) sent a letter to the people of Najran stating that they will be treated with the Covenant of the Prophet⁶⁷ However distancing themselves from the Prophet's commitment, Muslims started to detach themselves from the People of the Book. Also, they started to misunderstand their faith and the content of the Bible. Muslims began to use the word *kafir* (infidel) to the People of the Book. Unfortunately, many

⁶⁶Al-Jibouri, Yasin T. (trans.), *Prophet's Covenant to the Christians of Najran*, July 26, 2015 available at https://www.academia.edu/4259962/Prophets_Covenant_to_the_Christians_of_Najran, also see, Hameed Allah, *Majmuah al-Wathaeq al-Siyasiyyah ll-Ahd al-Nabawi wa al-Khilafat al-Rashidah* (Beirut: Dar al-Nafa'is,1987), Pp.186-190; Al-Ahmadi Ali, *Makateeb al-Rasool*, (Tehran: Dar al-Hadith Press, 1998).

⁶⁷Hameed Allah, Pp. 191-199.

extremist Muslims with loud voices started to identify Islam and modernity of the Western countries through the prism of the crusade.

Here is the irony: When some Western media insult the Prophet Muhammad extremist Muslims show very rash demonstrations, and even brutal attacks, but when the other prophets including Jesus and Moses are insulted they do not demonstrate even soft criticism; the Quran and Shariah consider both insults the same sin. However, examining the true meaning of *kafir* and *mushrik* (polytheist) is necessary to prevent misconception and mis-application of the terms to People of the Book. As we discussed, the People of the Book are neither *kafir* or *mushrik* in technical meaning of the Quranic terminology. People of the Book are faithful (*mu'min*) as Abraham is considered a Muslim in the Quran (1:128; 3:67). Applying Islamic fundamental concepts out of it, Abrahamic context and spirit is both achronological and illogical.

In opposition, Christianity started with a very exclusivist view, at least in terms of Islam, and reached the following declaration by *Nostra Aetate*.

“The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary [...]. In addition, they await the day of judgment [...]. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.”

Then with accepting the sad and hostile long history between Christians and Moslems, “urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding.”

This is a clear recognition of Islamic spirituality and call for mutual understanding and faithful coalition. Although still the idea of salvation only through Jesus might seem problematic, the seed of “anonymous Christians” in *Nostra Aetate* cannot be ignored. Moreover, we as Muslims must keep in mind that this pluralistic approach appears from within a historical big tradition of faith as well as related to a faith which came after it.

Conclusion

The Vatican Second Document *Nostra Aetate* mirrors the true nature of religion, much more than a socio-historical phenomenon. It encourages living faith rather than only believing and confessing it. Our time more than ever requires supporting alliance among faithful. The concept “supporting alliance among Abrahamic faith” is recognized in the Quran by the

terminology of Wilayat; as Muslims must learn and work together, the same is true with regards to Muslims' relation to Jews and Christians. This support can contribute enormously to betterment of the community in the Middle East among these people. Simultaneously it entails a respect for the uniqueness of each faith and plurality of life. I would like to conclude with three stories of the Quran. Once Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Medina each boasted that they had the very best faith. Verses 123-4 chapter 4 were revealed and said the criteria for salvation is good deeds, not wishes and ambitions.⁶⁸ In this context we can also understand the story (about 2:62) which recognizes religious pluralism when Salam Farsi, the great companion of the Prophet asked him about his precious friends in other faiths.⁶⁹ It inspires Muslims and Christians to exercise approaching God instead arguing about Him; to support each other in obtaining more religious experiences and building a qualified community than focusing the theological distinctions and speculative explorations. Finally, it is narrated that the Prophet repeated Jesus' prayer⁷⁰ for Muslims a whole night asking forgiveness for his people.⁷¹ Muslims explicitly do not believe in trinity and the Prophet is not asked for that by God. So why did he repeat that verse? What is hidden commonality under apparent difference?

⁶⁸al-Suyuti, 92-3; Al-Tabarsi, Abi Ali al-Fadhl, *Majma al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Quran* (Bairut: Dar al-Murtaza, 2006), 3:164.

⁶⁹Al-Suyuti, 14-15. This verse is repeated with a little change in 5:69.

⁷⁰*The Quran*, 5:118.

⁷¹Al-Ghazzali, Abu Hamid, *Ihya al-Uloom al-Din*, Ed. by Badawi Tabanah, (Indonesia: Kariata Futra, No Date), p, 283; also see Ibn Kathir, 3:234-235.

interaction among various aspects around that spirit, and then exploring that spirit in the light of the Quranic approach. It goes to a deeper conversion among religions—a mystagogy in which all partners in the dialogue deepen their search for understanding God within a deeper aspect of humanity; an awareness of subjectivity which comes after the abandonment of ideologies and of hopes that humankind could save itself. Touching the heart of the religious call of self-realization in witnessing God, *Nostra Aetate* attempts to change inter-religious competition and conflict to inter-religious constructive and positive dialogue, not only among scholars but within people who live religiously and exercise participation in holy experiences; this is exactly what supporting alliance among the faithful in the Quran means.

If Jesus and Muhammad gather in a place and meet each other, what would they discuss? Would they want to convince each other to follow one another? The Quran clearly states, “We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of his messengers”⁵⁶ and “of these messengers, we have preferred some above others.”⁵⁷ This is similar to what is said in the Gospel, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”⁵⁸ In both texts, the similarity is associated with a uniqueness; the sameness with differences; the Quran suggested “preference” and the gospel “fulfillment.” The competition and conflict among religions occur when firstly the preference and accomplishment is taken separated from all prophetic contexts, and secondly, when it deforms on a merely theological approach. One can relate to this point both as an outsider and insider. As a philosopher, an outsider’s view to faith, there is a distinct difference between a nominalist understanding of reality as composed of single atomic entities opposed to each other, and a Platonic vision that understands reality in terms of a unity that is translucent and joyful.⁵⁹ The second approach joins the religious vision and considers different religions as diverse manifestations of the same while the first keeps them separated and far from each other. From an insider’s perspective, there are several Hadiths that the Prophet said to not consider him above the prophets like Jonah and Moses.⁶⁰ As the result, the sameness and differences come together to help the faithful in facing

⁵⁶ *The Quran*, 2:285.

⁵⁷ 2:253.

⁵⁸ *The New American Bible*, Matthew, 5:17.

⁵⁹ Hogan John P. and MacLean George F., eds., *Multiple Paths to God: Nostra Aetate, 40 Years Later*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Al-Bukhari, 2002, 843 & 845.