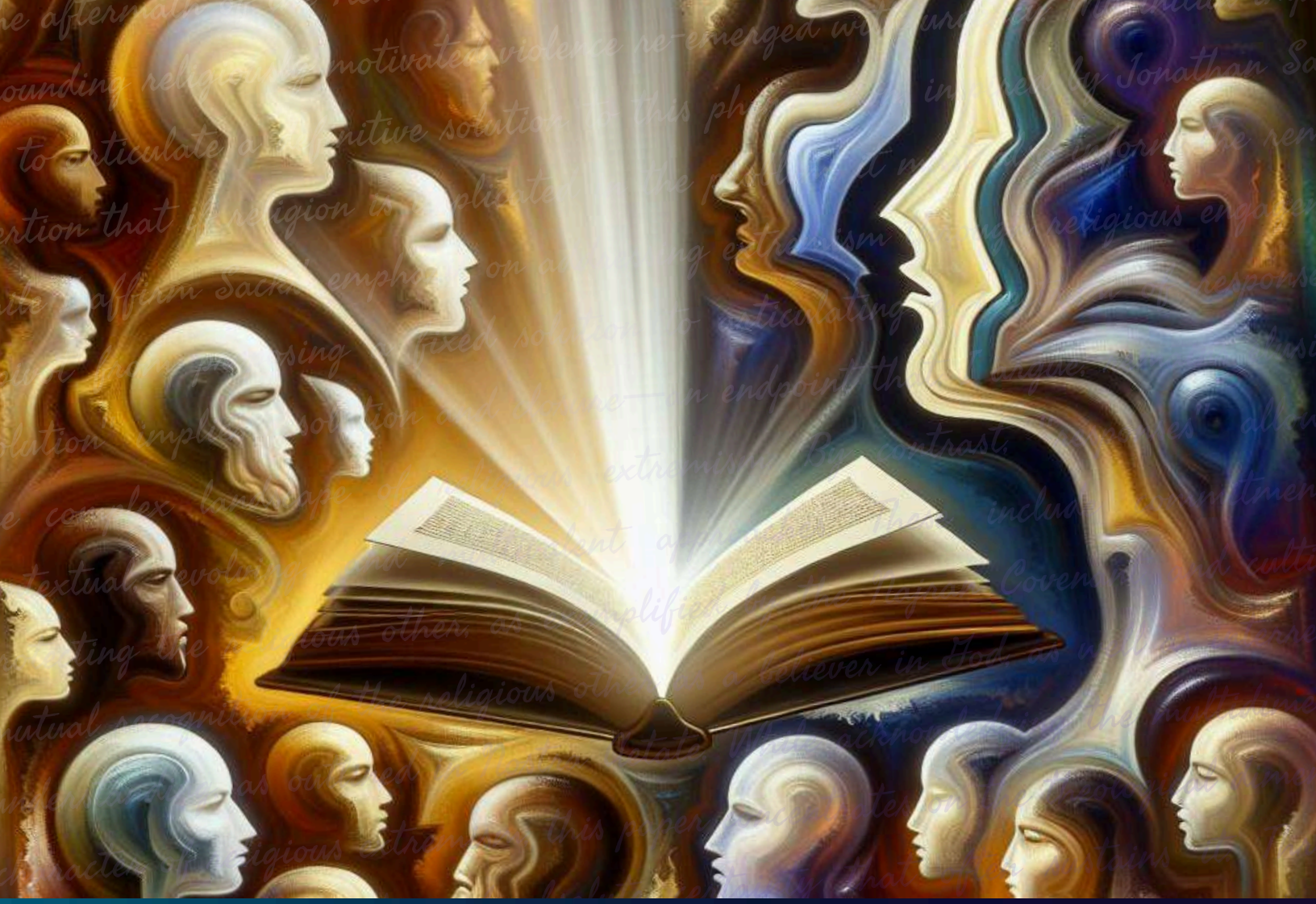

Challenging Religious Extremism:

Theological Responses from the Najran Covenant and Nostra Aetate

Fr. Francis Afu
Research Fellow

Center for Faith Identity & Globalization

May 2025

rumiforum.org/cfig

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization
1050 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20036
T (202) 429-1690
E cfig@rumiforum.org

This publication can be downloaded for free at **https://www.rumiforum.org/cfig.** Limited print copies are also available. To request a copy, send an e-mail to cfig@rumiforum.org.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect or represent the official opinions or positions of the Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG), its members, or its inspiration. Any content provided in this research was not sponsored by any religious or ethnic group, organization, nation-state government, company, or individual. The prescriptions made in this publication and the facts presented therein are not meant to detract from the political neutrality of the CFIG and are incorporated only insofar as the integrity of that political neutrality is not compromised. The reader is encouraged to arrive at his or her own conclusions and interact firsthand with sources and information presented in this research. The reader is also encouraged to understand that the views presented hereafter are those of the author and fellow collaborators and that the condition of facts presented is complex, dynamic, and ever-changing. Thank you for your assistance in acknowledging and helping to preserve the political neutrality of the CFIG while allowing it to support the research of its fellows, associates, and contributors.

Challenging Religious Extremism:

Theological Responses from the Najran Covenant and Nostra Aetate

Fr. Francis Afu

Abstract

In the aftermath of the New Orleans terrorist attack on January 1, 2025, the discourse surrounding religiously motivated violence re-emerged with urgency. My initial impulse was to articulate a definitive solution to this phenomenon, inspired by Jonathan Sacks' assertion that if religion is implicated in the problem, it must also inform the remedy. While I affirm Sacks' emphasis on addressing extremism through religious engagement, I pivot from proposing a fixed solution to articulating a spectrum of responses. A "solution" implies resolution and closure—an endpoint that, I argue, remains elusive in the complex landscape of religious extremism. By contrast, "responses" allow for contextual, evolving, and multivalent approaches. These include commitments to protecting the religious other, as exemplified by the *Najran Covenant*, and cultivating mutual recognition of the religious other as a believer in God, as well as interreligious understanding, as outlined in *Nostra Aetate*. While acknowledging the multidimensional character of religious extremism, this paper concentrates on the theological dimension —specifically, the narrative of absolute certainty that often sustains it. Through a thematic analysis of the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*, I examine the theological resources these texts offer for cultivating pluralistic and constructive responses within both Islamic and Christian traditions.

Keywords: *Theological Extremism, Religious Other, Covenantal Partnership, Najran Covenant, Nostra Aetate*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction:

In an era marked by unprecedented patterns of migration and displacement, the religious "other" is no longer a distant abstraction consigned to geopolitical discourse or ethnographic research, but a proximate reality—increasingly a neighbour at our doorsteps.

This shifting landscape of encounter—from "out there" to "in here"—requires more than the familiar language of *tolerance*; it calls for a reimagining of *interreligious engagement* as a theologically grounded discipline based on mutual recognition, dialogical hospitality, and shared vulnerability. Such an approach resists the binaries of relativism and triumphalism, instead aiming for a relational integrity that can welcome, sustain, and protect the other who is different.

However, proximity alone does not ensure solidarity and social cohesion, nor does it guarantee the coexistence of diverse religious communities and beliefs; it also introduces new theological and ethical challenges. How are we to live with *radical difference*, especially when the *religious other* appears not merely unfamiliar but incommensurable with our religious tradition?

Although significant efforts have been made to promote interreligious understanding, they are frequently undermined by a hermeneutic of certainty: a narrative in which one's faith is construed as the singular repository of truth, to be preserved and defended in its purity. Within this paradigm, the other is not simply different but perceived as a threat—someone to be condemned, excluded, or even eradicated in the name of protecting one's religious purity and identity.

The 2019 Christchurch (New Zealand) shooting and the 2025 New Orleans (USA) terrorist attack, though separated by time and ideological motivation, both sent shockwaves through their respective communities and provided sobering lessons to the global public about the fragility of religious pluralism.[1]

[1] Paul Billingham and Jonathan Chaplin, "Diverse Religious Responses to Pluralism," *Political Theology* 21, no. 4 (2020): 279–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2020.1773673.

"The 2019 *Christchurch* (New Zealand) shooting and the 2025 *New Orleans* (USA) terrorist attack,..., both sent shockwaves through their respective communities and provided sobering lessons to the global public about the fragility of *religious pluralism*."

Each occurred within Western democratic contexts—societies often assumed to uphold religious freedom—and yet both revealed the latent volatility that emerges when the religious "other" is seen not as a neighbour, but as an existential threat. While the Christchurch attack targeted Muslims and the New Orleans attack was carried out by a recent convert to Islam, these incidents converge in their unsettling impact on the social fabric that supports pluralistic societies. They highlight how acts of violence, regardless of intent, expose the fragility of liberal commitments to religious coexistence, especially when strained by exclusionary ideologies.

Notably, in both cases, policy responses have tended to prioritise security and deradicalization strategies while overlooking the theological currents underpinning such extremism. This paper proposes a different perspective: these are not merely acts of terror, but examples of *theological absolutism*—violent expressions of religiously grounded narratives of certainty.

"This paper examines the underlying logic of...a worldview rooted in a theology of *absolute certainty*..."

In the case of Shamsud-Din Jabbar, the perpetrator of the New Orleans attack, reports suggest he was motivated by a desire for uncompromising purity rooted in his interpretation of divine will and a duty to purge perceived moral corruption.[2] Such a worldview functions within stark binaries—obedience or destruction, purity or punishment—making transgression not only sinful but an existential threat. It is this logic, founded on a *theology of absolute certainty*, that this paper aims to examine and address through more pluralistic, dialogue-based theological approaches.

---

[2] Susan Bishai, "Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years after ISIS's Genocide," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, September 2024, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/2024%20Iraq%20Genocide%20Issue%20Brief.pdf

In light of the preceding analysis, this paper unfolds in three interrelated movements. The first section interrogates the concept of *extremism*, with particular emphasis on its theological frameworks, especially the narrative of *absolute certainty* that often fuels exclusionary religious ideologies. It analyses how these frameworks perceive the *religious other* not as a dialogue partner but as an existential enemy whose presence is believed to threaten doctrinal purity and community cohesion.[3]

The second section focuses on two historically distinct yet theologically related texts—the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*. Through close thematic analysis and comparative theological reflection, this section examines how these documents present alternative visions of *interreligious engagement*, offering models of recognition, hospitality, and covenantal responsibility that transcend confessional boundaries while preserving theological differences. The aim is not to unify their positions into a single ethic, but to draw on resources from each tradition for a pluralistic, tradition-affirming theological response capable of resisting the absolutist logics that underpin extremist ideologies.

The final section examines the contemporary relevance of these insights, exploring their potential application in contexts marked by increased *religious proximity* and *plurality*, as well as the growing *sociopolitical polarization*. Throughout, the paper is guided by a key question: in what ways might the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* function as theologically compelling responses to the ongoing challenge of religious extremism and violence?

2. Constructing the Enemy: Theological Extremism

Extremism, like language, is a learned response—often developed during confrontations with the "other," whose presence unsettles one's sense of *identity*, *belief*, and *cultural continuity*. These encounters do not inherently cause division; instead, when governed by *fear*, *suspicion*, or *disengagement*, diversity risks transforming from a source of strength into a fault line of instability. *Theological extremism* thrives in such fractures, especially where social integration fails and difference is viewed not as a space for *mutual growth* but as an *existential threat*.

[3] Alkhaldy Ayman and Alhrahsheh R. Rakan, "Religious Extremism in a Multifaceted Context," *Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion* 13 (2022): 227–228.

Jonathan Sacks warns that, under these conditions, diversity can lead to "altruistic evil"—a moral logic that paradoxically justifies exclusion or violence when communities feel culturally besieged.[4] Similarly, Rakib Ehsan's research on segregated Islamic communities in Great Britain illustrates how *isolation*, intensified by exclusionary narratives of *absolute certainty*, fosters radicalization and recasts the religious other as a threat—or even an enemy.[5] Importantly, this is not unique to Islam: Christian fundamentalists, Hindu nationalists, and militant atheists alike have built rigid identity boundaries and sacralised claims to exclusive truth. In all cases, the "Us vs. Them" divide is more than ideological; it becomes theological, casting the other as theologically wrong and a danger.[6] Yet, diversity is not the problem; it is the lack of meaningful integration and dialogue that enables fragmentation, allowing exclusive enclaves to reject pluralism and weaponise religious identity to vilify difference. In this context, theological extremism is not a deviation from religion but a distortion—one that hijacks sacred narratives to justify religious superiority. Scholars such as Douglas Pratt have critically examined the ideological and theological foundations of Christian extremism and terrorism, demonstrating how exclusivist interpretations of scripture and biblical motifs can legitimize acts of violence under the guise of *divine obedience*. Pratt identifies *exclusivism*—the belief that only one's theological view is legitimate—as a key hermeneutical lens through which theological extremism emerges, often marked by rigid dogmatism, sacralised certainty, and an uncompromising rejection of pluralism and interpretative nuance.[7]

"Extremism,..., is a *learned response*—often developed during confrontations with the "other"...

"...*theological extremism* is not a *deviation* from religion but a *distortion*—one that hijacks sacred narratives to justify *religious superiority*."

---

[4] Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (Bloomsbury, 2003), 22.

[5] Rakib Ehsan, *Muslim Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Great Britain*, (The Henry Jackson Society, 2020), accessed March 15, 2022, https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HJS-British-Muslim-Anti-Semitism-Report-web-1.pdf.

[6] Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (Routledge, 1992), 2–22.

[7] Douglas Pratt, "Terrorism and Religion: Christian Fundamentalism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, November 20, 2018, accessed July 5, 2025, https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-692.

This absolutist stance turns specific doctrines into non-negotiable truths, viewing dissenting voices and theological others as threats to divine order. Significantly, this approach extends beyond Christianity, offering analytical insights across religious traditions where exclusivist logic prevails, thereby legitimising exclusionary practices and fostering hostility towards religious diversity. Similarly, Astrid Bötticher's research on radicalism and extremism enhances this understanding by emphasising how theological extremism facilitates the symbolic and rhetorical portrayal of the religious other as an enemy, transforming faith from mere devotion into a weaponised identity system driven by preservation and superiority.[8] Together, these perspectives provide a strong conceptualization of theological extremism as a transreligious phenomenon—rooted not only in belief but also in the politicization and moral absolutization of belief, which are used to justify *domination*, *exclusion*, and *aggression*.

"...*theological extremism* as a *transreligious phenomenon* —[*is*] rooted not only in belief but also in the *politicization* and *moral absolutization* of belief..."

While Douglas Pratt and Astrid Bötticher provide insightful models for understanding theological extremism—particularly through the lens of *exclusivist interpretation* and the *rhetorical construction* of the *religious other*—their approaches invite critique for privileging ideological abstraction over contextual complexity. Pratt's identification of exclusivism as a key interpretive mechanism risks conflating deeply held theological convictions with radicalization, without sufficiently considering how *sociopolitical*, *historical*, and *material conditions* influence extremist trajectories. For example, the Catholic Church maintains specific exclusivist claims, such as "Apostolic Succession," while also promoting coexistence and reform, indicating a more complex spectrum of theological engagement than Pratt's framework might initially suggest. Similarly, Bötticher's structural analysis, though effective in policy and counterterrorism contexts, may overlook the internal spiritual dimensions of faith—such as *moral anxiety*, *eschatological urgency*, or *existential grief*—that often underpin seemingly dogmatic stances. Additionally, by applying the concept of theological extremism broadly across traditions, both scholars sometimes ignore the internal diversity and capacity for self-criticism within faith communities. Nonetheless, their contributions remain essential.

---

[8] Astrid Bötticher, "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (2017): 73–77.

"...the *Catholic Church* maintains specific *exclusivist claims*, such as "Apostolic Succession," while also *promoting coexistence* and *reform*..."

Pratt's emphasis on *sacralised certainty* illuminates how *theological rigidity* can serve as a discursive tool for exclusion, which, in turn, becomes a source of theological extremism, particularly when faith narratives are used to uphold power. Bötticher's focus on the symbolic construction of the enemy provides a sharp understanding of how theological language—when devoid of ethical nuance—can fuel *polarization* and *violence*.

Consequently, within theological extremism, the construction of the enemy is anchored less in any empirical threat than in a perceived symbolic violation, where the enemy represents an existential challenge to a *sacralized identity* and an *imagined moral order*. This dynamic is starkly illustrated by both the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre and the 2025 New Orleans attack, each of which deployed quasi-theological narratives to legitimize violence. In Christchurch, Brenton Tarrant depicted non-Europeans and non-Christians as desecrators of a sacred civilization, sacralizing race, culture, and territorial purity in a way that fused theology with ethnonationalism. As Graham Macklin notes, Tarrant's manifesto invoked pseudo-scientific racial theories and biological determinism to recast demographic change as a narrative of *divine erosion*, positioning immigrants as agents of "white genocide." His attack—especially the targeting of mosques during Friday prayers—can be viewed as *ritualised violence*, meant to convey that multiculturalism is heresy to be rejected and to express his belief in violence as a means of *moral restoration*.[9] Similarly, the New Orleans attack, perpetrated by Shamsud-Din Jabbar under the ideological influence of ISIS,[10] reframed *Western secularism* and *cultural pluralism* as forms of *theological apostasy*. Jabbar's targeting of New Year celebrations and use of ISIS symbols can be interpreted as a deliberate rejection of *shared public space*, portraying the *religious other* not simply as *deviant*, but as an *ontological impurity*.

---

[9] Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (June/July 2018): 18.

[10] Edgar Sandoval, Eduardo Medina, Adam Goldman, and Rukmini Callimachi," 'I Joined ISIS': The New Orleans Attacker's Secret Radicalization," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2025, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/04/us/new-orleans-attack-shamsud-din-jabbar-isis.html.

"...both the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre and the 2025 New Orleans attack,...deployed *quasi-theological narratives* to *legitimize violence*."

In both cases, the enemy is defined not by concrete actions, but by their symbolic contradiction to a sacralized worldview, where *identity* is seen as *divine*, *pluralism* is viewed as a *corruption*, and *violence* is seen as a form of *redemption*. These cases exemplify theological extremism as a system of *moral absolutism*, in which purification is imagined to require the elimination of the *religious other*, and difference is cast as an intolerable defilement of the sacred.

Rubina's story offers another compelling illustration of how theological extremism can manifest not through overt violence but through quieter, often overlooked processes of *relational breakdown* and *social alienation*. Rubina, a Pakistani Christian, was married to a Pakistani Muslim.[11] While theological extremism is often linked to dramatic acts of violence, it can also operate subtly and insidiously, fracturing families and communities when exclusivist interpretations of faith erode *mutual recognition* and *respect*.

At first, Rubina's interfaith marriage flourished on the promise of *pluralistic harmony*, with religious differences embraced as enriching elements of their shared domestic life. However, as their children matured, external societal pressures began to impose a new rigidity on the household's theological landscape. Gradually, the children distanced themselves from their mother's Christian faith, leaning instead towards a more socially accepted Islamic stance. This shift, driven by *communal mockery* and *doctrinal absolutism*, gradually cast Rubina's faith as a source of *vulnerability* and *shame*, undermining not only her relationship with her children but also the cohesion of the family. Her husband's passive acceptance of this change further illustrated how *theological certainty*—detached from *empathy* and *dialogue*—can become a tool of *exclusion*, even within close relationships. Ultimately, Rubina faced a form of *emotional exile*.

---

[11] This paper adapts and reconstructs insights from Salma Sardar, "Inter-Religious Marriage: Christian Women Marrying Muslim Men in Pakistan," Transformation 19, no. 1 (January 2002): 45, to explore the complexities of interfaith marriage and the possible manifestation of theological extremism within such a marriage. The original narrative has been modified to align with the analytical objectives of this paper.

"...*theological extremism* as a system of *moral absolutism*, in which *purification* is imagined to require the *elimination* of the *religious other*,..."

Once a central figure in a pluralistic household, she found herself increasingly isolated by the very faith commitments that had once been negotiated with care and consideration. Her story highlights the importance of recognising theological extremism not only in its overt or violent forms, but also in the quieter ruptures it can cause within everyday life.

Although this paper centres on theological extremism in Christianity and Islam, it is critical to acknowledge its presence within other faith traditions, including *African Traditional Religions* (ATR). Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* provides a compelling literary framework through which we can examine the interplay between *theological absolutism* and *sociological acceptance*. In the *Umuofia* clan, theological tensions emerge when Christian converts commit a *perceived sacrilege*—the killing of a python regarded as sacred within ATR cosmology. This act provokes profound *religious unease* and the potential for *extremist reaction*, as it transgresses symbolic boundaries of the community's *sacred order*. However, the elders' response introduces a *countervailing dynamic*. Rather than mobilising theological conviction for *retaliation*, they articulate a *restraint* rooted in ATR's internal theological logic: "It is not our custom to fight for our gods ... If a god will avenge his insult, he will do it himself."[12]

This reaction exemplifies how theological extremism—characterized by *sacred offense* and *moral absolutism*—can be tempered by sociological mechanisms of *inclusion* and *procedural restraint*. The *Umuofia* elders do not endorse the sacrilegious act, but they also resist constructing the religious "other" as a categorical enemy. Achebe thus presents a case where *theological exclusivism* coexists with an *ethic of accommodation*, highlighting that religious traditions are not closed systems but sites of *negotiation*, where *extremism* and *acceptance* interact within complex moral economies.

"...*Things Fall Apart* provides a...*literary framework* through which we can examine the interplay between *theological absolutism* and *sociological acceptance*."

[12] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Penguin Books, 1959), 158.

Given these examples, *theological extremism* can be best understood not as a static or monolithic belief system, but as a contextually dynamic phenomenon shaped by both *ideological conviction* and *social embeddedness*. As Alkhaldy Ayman and Alhrahsheh R. Rakan observe, individuals or groups may adopt extremist positions in one domain—be it *theological*, *political*, or *socio-economic*—while maintaining moderate or even dialogical stances in others. This multidimensionality complicates reductive categorizations of *extremism* and highlights the importance of *context*, suggesting that *engagement* and *intervention* must be equally nuanced.[13]

Such complexity challenges the assumption that extremism is rooted solely in *doctrinal rigidity*, instead inviting analysis that considers broader *relational*, *psychological*, and *institutional factors*. Expanding on this, Laurence R. Iannaccone and Eli Berman argue that *religious extremism* often thrives not merely because of *theological fervour*. However, also due to the provision of "club goods"—communal resources such as *identity*, *solidarity*, and *material support* that reinforce *group exclusivity* and *reward loyalty*.[14]

"...Laurence R. Iannaccone and Eli Berman argue that *religious extremism* often thrives not merely because of *theological fervour*. However, also due to...communal resources such as *identity*, *solidarity*, and *material support* that *reinforce group exclusivity* and *reward loyalty*."

In this light, *theological absolutism* can serve as both a deeply held *spiritual conviction* and an *organizational strategy*, incentivizing *cohesion* and discouraging *dissent* within the group. Taken together, these perspectives reveal theological extremism as a lived and adaptive configuration of belief and belonging, capable of producing both *radical exclusion* and, under certain conditions, the seeds of *reform* or *moderation*. However, these insights also raise a more difficult question: if extremism is so deeply intertwined with *social context* and *collective needs*, how might it be meaningfully *addressed* or *transformed*?

---

[13] Ayman and Rakan, "Religious Extremism in a Multifaceted Context," 225–226.

[14] Laurence R. Iannaccone and Eli Berman, "Religious Extremism: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly," *Public Choice* 128, no. 1/2 (July 2006): 116-119.

3. Theological Comparison: The *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*

Long before the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*, the theological challenge of engaging the *religious other*—especially in contexts of *doctrinal conflict* and *communal division*—was central to the thought of Saint Augustine. In his engagement with the *Donatist* schism in North Africa, Augustine encountered a movement that rejected the Catholic Church's *sacramental authority* and cultivated a posture marked by *ecclesial exclusivism* and *rhetorical rigidity*—features that align with contemporary definitions of *theological extremism*. Nonetheless, his response was not governed by *reciprocal hostility* or *boundary-enforcing polemic*; rather, it was shaped by *pastoral compassion* and *theological humility*.

In his sermon on Psalm 32 (33), Augustine exhorts believers to pray for the *Donatists*, declaring: "We entreat you then to pray for them, for they are weak ... but yet they are our brothers. They celebrate the same sacraments as we, not indeed with us, but still the same. They respond with the same Amen, not with us, but still the same. And so, pour out your hearts for them in prayer to God."[15]

This appeal reframes *theological divergence* not as grounds for alienation but as an occasion for *relational grace*, constructing the *religious other* not as an *existential threat* but as an *estranged sibling* within a *shared sacramental horizon*. Thus, Augustine's approach could function as a *hermeneutical lens* for analysing both the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*. These texts similarly resist *reductive constructions* of the religious "other," instead affirming the distinct traditions of different faiths as part of a *divine will*, deserving of *understanding* and protection within a *covenant framework*. Therefore, by comparing these documents through their shared treatment of the religious "other," this paper examines how they articulate *constructive responses* to *theological extremism*.

"[*The Najran Covenant and Nostra Aetate*] similarly resist *reductive constructions* of the religious 'other,' "...

[15] Saint Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos, Psalm 32 (33), Sermon 29, in Corpus Christianorum Latinorum 38 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 272–273; cited in Roman Office of Readings, Tuesday of the 14th Week in Ordinary Time.

3.1 The *Najran Covenant*

As a preliminary consideration, Qur'anic commentators such as Caner K. Dagli suggest that the Prophet Muhammad's engagement with the Christians of Najran constitutes the immediate historical context for the revelation of Qur'an 3:61–64.[16] Despite marked *theological divergence*—particularly concerning the Trinity, often categorised in Islamic theology as *shirk*—the Prophet did not respond with *exclusion* or *denunciation*. Instead, as recorded by *Ibn Ishaq*, he permitted the Christians to perform their prayers within his mosque according to their *liturgical traditions*.[17]

"...[*the Prophet*] permitted the Christians to perform their prayers within his mosque according to their *liturgical traditions*."

This act exceeded the bounds of *symbolic tolerance*; it embodied a principled ethic of *coexistence* grounded in *reciprocal recognition* rather than *doctrinal conformity*. More significantly, it reveals the Prophet's willingness to engage the religious "other," in this case, Christians, not as *antagonists* to be dismissed, but as *covenantal partners* within a shared *moral* and *religious horizon*. The respectful tenor of this encounter, despite irreconcilable theological disagreement concerning the divinity of Jesus, culminated in the *Najran Covenant*: a formal pact that guaranteed the *peaceful residence*, *communal autonomy*, and *religious protection* of the Christian community under Islamic governance. In its structure and ethos, the Covenant resonates with the juridical framework of *dhimma*, which *safeguarded* non-Muslim communities who fulfilled *civic obligations* and demonstrated *moral integrity*. Here, the *Christian other* was not constructed as an *existential threat*, but as a *trustworthy interlocutor* whose record of *promise-keeping* merited *theological respect* and *political inclusion*.[18] This episode thus offers a compelling paradigm for *interreligious ethics*—one that eschews *reductive binaries* between *belief* and *unbelief*. It also affirms *coexistence* through *covenantal responsibility*, *mutual accountability*, and *principled diplomacy*.

---

[16] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015), 147–148.

[17] See Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of the Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans., Alfred Guillaume (Oxford University Press, 1987), 271.

[18] Muhammad ibn Abdullah, *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of His Time: The Primary Documents*, ed. John Andrew Morrow (Covenants Press, 2015), 26 and 30.

The text of the *Najran Covenant* begins with the Prophet Muhammad's declaration of his *divine commission*, in which he identifies himself as the Messenger of God, tasked as a *warner*, *bearer of glad tidings*, and *guardian of public welfare*. Central to this introduction is the recurring term "people," whose referential scope invites hermeneutical scrutiny.[19] Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil's translation of the text of the *Najran Covenant* uses the term "people" without qualification, thereby leaving the concept ambiguous. Does "people" designate exclusively the Muslim community, or does it include all humanity? John Andrew Morrow, in his translation, addresses this ambiguity by translating "people" as "humanity," a choice that supports the Covenant's universalistic tone.[20]

This interpretive shift is not merely linguistic; it foregrounds the Prophet's intention to situate the Covenant within a *moral framework* that extends beyond *sectarian divides*. The explicit reference to Prophethood as the *source of authority* adds *theological weight* to the document, making its *normative claims* more than *mere political statements*. This is emphasised by the Prophet's characterization of the Covenant as a binding pact (*'ahdan mar'iyyan*), a just decree, a model of the *Sunna*, and an enduring protection (*dhimma maḥfūẓa*). According to Charles Upton, the text has acquired a *quasi-canonical* status, functioning as a "third foundational source" of Islam alongside the Qur'an and Hadith."[21] By linking the Covenant to the *Sunna*,[22] the Prophet presents its observance not as *optional* but as a r*eligious duty*, affirming that those who uphold it are *true* Muslims. At the same time, those who violate it *transgress* divine commands.

"...the Prophet's characterization of the Covenant [*is*] a *binding pact*, a *just decree*, a *model of the Sunna*, and an *enduring protection*."

---

[19] Ibrahim Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad: From Shared Historical Memory to Peaceful Coexistence* (Routledge, 2023), 111.

[20] See John Andrew Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2013), 132.

[21] Charles Upton, *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of His Time: The Primary Documents*, ed., John Andrew Morrow (Covenants Press, 2015), Forward, Kindle.

[22] Zein and El-Wakil, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad*, 111–112.

Structurally, the Covenant operates as a *bilateral agreement*, articulating reciprocal responsibilities between the Muslim polity and the Christian community of Najran. The Prophet Muhammad assumes the role of both *initiator* and *guarantor*,[23] explicitly committing to *protect* Christian places of worship, *safeguard* clerical authority, and *defend* the community against harm, injustice, or reprisal—duties presented not as *diplomatic concessions* but as *divinely mandated obligations* rooted in *prophetic authority* and reinforced by *theological sanction*. By describing this protection as the most stringent ever required of any prophet and extending its force until the Day of Judgment, the text situates the Covenant within a *sacred temporal framework*, affirming its *enduring validity* and *jurisprudential significance*.[24]

"The Prophet Muhammad assumes the role of both *initiator* and *guarantor*, explicitly committing to *protect* Christian places of worship, *safeguard* clerical authority, and *defend* the community against harm, injustice, or reprisal..."

In this context, Christians are not constructed as *subordinates* or *peripheral actors*, but as *covenantal partners* whose presence within the Islamic order activates *theological responsibility* rather than *suspicion*. The inclusion of explicit duties for the Christian community—such as Christians are not to befriend the enemies of Islam, and fight against Muslims as well as Christians are expected to provide shelter for Muslims during times of war and guarantee their safety—further reflects a view of Christians not as *passive beneficiaries* but as *morally responsible agents* capable of upholding their side of the agreement. In this case, the *Najran Covenant* can be seen as a *legal-theological framework* that redefines the Christian community not as *outsiders* to be *merely tolerated* but as *dignified participants* in a *covenantal structure* grounded in *mutual trust*, *theological respect*, and *sustained moral engagement*. The Covenant articulates an *explicit prohibition* against coercing Christians into accepting Islam, echoing Qur'anic injunctions such as "there is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256) and foregrounding faith as an *act of volition* rather than *imposition*. This stance resists *reductive* classifications of Christians as *kuffār* to be *reformed* or *subdued*, instead affirming their *theological integrity* within a *moral framework* of *divine accountability*.[25]

---

[23] Ibid., 112.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Mubasher Hussain, "Reviewed Work(s): The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World by John Andrew Morrow," *Islamic Research Institute* 57, no. 3/4 (2018): 315.

However, this posture is not without friction: classical jurists such as *al-Shāfiʿī* and *Ibn Taymiyyah* held more circumscribed views on *interreligious boundaries* and the *legal status* of non-Muslims, revealing tensions between the text of the *Najran Covenant* and later legal codifications. Furthermore, the Covenant entrusts *disciplinary authority* solely to the Prophet, precluding *vigilantism* and repudiating any communal justification for *retaliatory violence*, especially when Christians go astray and cause trouble,[26] a restriction that has not always been preserved with the rise of extremism and religious violence. In the same vein, it prohibits *forced marriage*, especially of Christian women, insisting on *mutual consent* and asserting that any Muslim who attempts to *impose conversion* within marriage violates both the Covenant and the divine trust.

The Muslim spouse is not only forbidden from pressuring their Christian partner but is enjoined to support the Christian's *religious observance*, *education*, and *obligations*. Such a provision appears to contradict dominant Islamic *daʿwa* paradigms, which valorise inviting non-Muslims to the faith, and challenges proselytic impulses often deemed virtuous in other contexts. Violation of these terms renders the offender a "liar before God"—a dramatic elevation of *covenantal fidelity* to *theological accountability*.[27] Within this *covenantal framework*, the *Christian other* ceases to be a *target of conversion* and becomes a *morally serious covenantal subject* whose *agency*, *dignity*, and *religious identity* are safeguarded by *prophetic decree*, even as interpretive tensions remain within the Islamic legal and theological traditions.

"...dominant Islamic *daʿwa* paradigms...valorise inviting non-Muslims to the faith, and challenges *proselytic impulses* often deemed virtuous in other contexts."

3.2 *Nostra Aetate*

Nostra Aetate, the landmark declaration of the Second Vatican Council, begins by affirming the presence of *truth* and *holiness* in non-Christian religions, explicitly naming Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. This inclusive framing signals a significant theological departure from the pre-conciliar axiom *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the Church there is no salvation"), moving towards a paradigm that affirms the possibility of *salvation* within other religious traditions.

---

[26] John Andrew Morrow, ed., *Islam and the People of the Book Volumes 1-3: Critical Studies on the Covenants of the Prophet* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 259.

[27] See Zein and El-Wakil, The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad, 114.

Of greater significance is the fact that the document respectfully acknowledges Islam, noting that Muslims "adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself."[28] Past hostilities are lamented as "quarrels of the past," and Christians and Muslims are urged "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."[29] Nevertheless, this affirmation operates within a *Christocentric* framework that arguably reasserts *Christian theological superiority*. Scholars such as Gavin D'Costa and Rita George-Tvrtković have critiqued this dynamic.

While D'Costa warns against conflating *theological generosity* with *political* or *epistemic parity*,[30] George-Tvrtković contends that the document retains latent *supersessionist* tones that inhibit *mutuality*.[31] Nonetheless, some argue that the document's genre and ecclesial context necessarily shape its *theological posture*—David Ford, for example, maintains that constructive Christian-Muslim dialogue need not require *doctrinal relativism*, but rather a deepening of each tradition's *internal commitments* in the presence of the *other*, which makes possible *social cohesion*.[32] This paper, therefore, interrogates the layered construction of Islam within *Nostra Aetate*—not merely as a *respected faith tradition* but as a *theological other* whose recognition is calibrated by proximity to *Christian soteriological* and *revelatory claims*.

Given the *theological complexity* and *historical contours* of *Nostra Aetate*, this paper does not aim to trace and analyse the document's full doctrinal scope. Instead, it concentrates on the representational logic of the third paragraph, examining how the Muslim is construed not as a *theological adversary* but as a *dialogical other*. Central to this analysis is the synod's call:

---

[28] Vatican Council II, Nostra Aetate, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (October 28, 1965), n. 3., in Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (T&T Clark, 2000), 19–22.

[31] Rita George-Tvrtković, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History* (Paulist Press, 2018), 109-134.

[32] David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 299–324.

> Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all 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]

The phrasing signals a significant *recalibration*—acknowledging the mutuality of past *conflict* without privileging either narrative of *grievance*—and invites a mode of *ethical co-agency* rather than *polemical reengagement*. Joseph Ellul aptly notes that "Christians in general, both Eastern and Western, first encountered Muslims as conquerors," just as Muslims encountered Christians as *colonisers*, *imperialists*, and *crusaders*.[34]

In this context, calling for *collective forgetting* and *collaboration* is not a naïve *erasure of history*, but a potentially generative act of *re-narration*. As Paul Ricoeur warns, we risk repeating the past when we *forget without transforming*; we must *ethically curate* memory to prevent the reenactment of historical antagonisms.[35] *Nostra Aetate*'s gesture, while omitting complete *doctrinal reconciliation*—especially around contested issues such as the divinity of Christ—nonetheless advances an ethic of *shared responsibility*. Considering this, *Nostra Aetate* reframes Muslims as *co-workers* in advancing *social justice* and *peace*, reflecting a decisive *ecclesial shift*: Islam is no longer construed as a *theological threat* to be resisted, but as a religion with which the Catholic Church can *engage* in a mutual commitment to *human flourishing*.

This ecclesial shift, inaugurated by *Nostra Aetate*, represents a deliberate and profound reconfiguration of the Catholic Church's *theological grammar*—moving from a posture of *doctrinal insularity* toward a *relational language* grounded in *recognition*, *ethical solidarity*, and *dialogical mission*, particularly with Muslims. Anchored in the Church's *Christocentric self-understanding*, the document recalibrates the concept of *mission*: no longer conceived as *unilateral proclamation*, it becomes a *collaborative* and *transformative endeavor* in which Christian witness is not only expressed to the *religious other* but existentially enriched through *authentic engagement* with Muslims.

---

[33] *Nostra Aetate*, n. 3.

[34] Joseph Ellul, "The Issue of Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Nostra Aetate Revisited," *Angelicum* 84, no. 2 (2007): 361.

[35] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), Pt. 3, Ch. 3, Kindle.

"...Islam is no longer construed as a *theological threat* to be resisted, but as a religion with which the Catholic Church can *engage* in a mutual commitment to *human flourishing*."

In reframing Muslims not as *adversaries* but as *co-labourers* in the pursuit of peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values, *Nostra Aetate* inaugurates a significant *ethical shift*, redefining theological proximity through *shared mission* rather than *asymmetrical conviction*. Notably, although the document lacks specific methods to implement this vision of collaboration, its fundamental shift emphasises *mutual respect*, *shared responsibility*, and *dialogical transformation* rather than *condescension* or *simple tolerance*. By displacing *inherited hierarchies* and affirming *reciprocal dignity*, the Church is drawn into a *dialogical anthropology* that recognises the *religious other*, Muslims, not simply as a *passive interlocutor* but as a *theological agent* whose presence invites deeper *moral* and *spiritual accountability*. This shift does not *dilute* Christian identity; instead, it *reimagines missiology* as an ecclesial vocation that sees interfaith encounter not as *ancillary*, but as *integral* to the Church's fidelity to the Gospel, especially within the context of an increasingly *pluralistic* and *ethically interdependent* world. However, the notably *irenic* tone of *Nostra Aetate* has provoked careful scholarly reflection on its apparent silence regarding *theological extremism*. This silence becomes particularly resonant when situated within the volatile socio-political climate that surrounded the Second Vatican Council. Though framed as a *gesture of reconciliation*, the document emerged amid episodes of *religiously inflected violence* and *ideological polarization*, most conspicuously illustrated by the Algerian War (1954–62). During that conflict, Catholic identity—particularly among French colonial actors—was frequently entangled with nationalist resistance to Algerian independence, a dynamic explored by scholars such as Todd Shepard.[36]

"...*Nostra Aetate* inaugurates a significant *ethical shift*, redefining *theological proximity* through shared mission rather than *asymmetrical conviction*."

[36] Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 91–120.

While the Church did not officially sanction such appropriation, factions within the *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS) mobilized *Catholic symbolism* to legitimize their campaign of terror, revealing the unsettling proximity between *religious allegiance* and *political violence*. On the contrary, figures like Louis Massignon advanced a *spiritually expansive* understanding of Islam;[37] nonetheless, such approaches seemed to have encountered resistance within more conservative currents of French Catholic thought.

Against this backdrop, *Nostra Aetate*'s call to "forget the past" and "work sincerely for mutual understanding" resists reduction to *mere optimism* or *rhetorical balm*; rather, its silence appears strategically calibrated to recenter the *religious other* not as an *adversary*, an *object of critique*, but as a *partner* in *moral* and *spiritual renewal*. The document's refusal to reassert *condemnatory frames* may thus be read as a form of *theological resistance*—an attempt to reconceive *interfaith encounter* not as *concession*, but as *ecclesial vocation* rooted in *humility*, *relational attentiveness*, and *shared moral agency*. Its enduring significance lies in the way it reorients both *theological discourse* and the architecture of *religious engagement*, relocating Islam from the periphery of *suspicion* to the center of Christian *ethical* and *missiological partnership*.

"[*Nostra Aetate`s*] enduring significance lies in the way it reorients both *theological discourse* and the architecture of *religious engagement*..."

4. Making Comparisons, Framing Responses

By way of comparison, the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* exemplify distinct yet mutually illuminating approaches to conceptualising the *religious other*, offering a comparative perspective that prioritises their rhetorical and theological grammars over their contextual differences. Central to this analysis is how each text constructs the presence and role of the religious other. The *Najran Covenant*, articulated in legal and theological language and grounded in prophetic authority, confers a defined status upon the Christian community of Najran as *covenantal partners* within the Islamic polity.

[37] Anthony O'Mahony, "Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council," *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1016 (2007): 387-390.

Their doctrinal distinctiveness is neither concealed nor problematized; instead, it is formally acknowledged and protected through a juridical framework that both prohibits *coercion* and guarantees *religious autonomy*, while also delineating communal responsibilities. In this sense, peaceful coexistence is not merely a matter of informal tolerance but is rather sanctified through *structured legal recognition* and *integration*. *Nostra Aetate*, by contrast, dispenses with juridical classifications, adopting a *conciliatory, dialogical tone* that envisions the religious other not as a subject within a prescribed religious and political order, but as a *theological interlocutor*. Its exhortation to "forget the past" and "work sincerely for mutual understanding" invites Muslims into *a partnership as participants* in a shared pursuit of *theological recognition* and *social justice*, without the conferral of any formal legal agreement. While both texts reconfigure the *religious other* as a partner rather than adversary, they do so through different conceptual mechanisms: the *Najran Covenant* embeds the *other* within a *legally integrated framework* that codifies *difference* and *belonging*, whereas *Nostra Aetate* constructs the *other* as a *relational presence* whose theological encounter remains open and necessary for the *common good*.

Furthermore, a comparative reading of the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* reveals that both texts, as previously mentioned, transcend the logic of mere *tolerance*; each envisions the *religious other* not as an anomaly to be managed but as an integral presence within a broader *divine-human horizon*, where difference becomes a source of *theological reflection* and *institutional negotiation*. Read together, they challenge *exclusionary frameworks* and point toward a *vision of solidarity* founded on *sacred pluralism*. Drawing on Saulo de Freitas Araujo and Lisa M. Osbeck, this involves recognising and honouring diverse views and perspectives, allowing them to coexist distinctly without attempting to reduce them to one or the other.[38] In this case, what makes this comparison especially illuminating, however, is that each document not only defines the *other* but also reshapes its understanding of *religious authority* through the process.

"...a comparative reading of the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* reveals that both texts...transcend the logic of mere *tolerance*;..."

[38] See Saulo de Freitas Araujo and Lisa M. Osbeck, Ever Not Quite: Pluralism(s) in *William James and Contemporary Psychology* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 8–10.

In the *Najran Covenant*, the recognition of the Christian community stems not from *doctrinal unity*, but rather from the fact that Islam, in its early prophetic phase, is depicted as a religion confident enough to establish and protect the *other*, who is radically different, in a legal-theological text.

In this context, one can argue that religious or moral authority is not weakened by accommodating others; rather, inclusive leadership consolidates it, as *prophetic sovereignty* expands to encompass *structured differences*. *Nostra Aetate*, by contrast, demonstrates a more *subversive* but *pluralistic and dialogic* worldview. Its outreach to Islam does not readily affirm *Catholic magisterial certitude*—it unsettles it. In carving out space for the *Muslim other* within Catholic theological discourse, the document tacitly acknowledges the limitations of past *triumphalist and insular* approaches. Islam is not summoned to confirm Catholic teaching, but rather to provoke *doctrinal reassessment* and *ecclesial renewal*. In this shift, *Nostra Aetate* moves from *authority as boundary* to *authority as collaboration*, where it sees the *Muslim other* as a partner with whom to work in realising *human flourishing*, reframing *theological legitimacy* not as the *management of alterity* but as the *capacity to be transformed* in its presence.

Returning to Jonathan Sacks' assertion that if religion is part of the problem, then it must also be part of the solution,[39] this paper resists the urgency of proposing strict prescriptions. Instead, it aims to frame responses. Accordingly, it refocuses on its central question: in what ways might the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* serve as theologically compelling responses to the persistent challenge of *theological extremism and violence*? As previously noted, extremism, like language, is not innate—it is learned, often formed in *moments of confrontation* with the "other," whose presence disrupts inherited certainties of *identity*, *belief*, and *cultural continuity*. Arguing that extremism is acquired through habituated responses to difference, then any meaningful theological counter-response must likewise be learned through exposure to alternative imaginaries that present *coexistence* not as an *exception*, but as a *theological endeavour*.

"In carving out space for the *Muslim other* within Catholic theological discourse, [*Nostra Aetate*] tacitly acknowledges the limitations of past *triumphalist* and *insular* approaches."

[39] Jonathan Sacks, "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations," *Sacred Heart University Review* 25, no. 1 (2009): 21.

In this light, the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* do more than embody *tolerant* dispositions; they model learned ways of perceiving the *religious other* as an integral part of one's *theological landscape*. Both texts offer distinct *pedagogies of encounter*: one rooted in *legal-theological covenant* and *prophetic confidence*, the other in *mutual understanding* and *collaboration for justice*. What binds them is their rejection of *reductionist* framings of theological difference as *threat*, and their willingness to *construct* grammars where difference is *structurally sustained* without collapsing into violence. Such grammars do not eliminate *tension* but re-channel it toward *integration*, *recognition*, and the possibility of shared theological *habitation*.

"...[*extremism`s*] presence disrupts inherited certainties of *identity*, *belief*, and *cultural continuity*."

Within this framework, countering extremism begins not with *denunciation*, but with a reassessment of how theological authority is constituted in the presence of radical difference. In this regard, moments like the Christchurch incident—where immigration was interpreted through apocalyptic lenses—can be re-read through the contrasting logics of the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*: not as reactions to the *other's* theological *distinctiveness*, but as reflections of the *religious self*'s confidence in sustaining *identity* amid difference. Here, the response to *otherness* becomes an occasion for *self-interrogation* and *theological renewal*.

In the same vein, when both documents are interpreted alongside Saint Augustine's pastoral engagement with the *Donatists*—a Christian sect exhibiting tendencies that might today be characterized as theological extremism—they reveal complementary modes of theological response. The issuance of the *Najran Covenant* by the Prophet Muhammad may be read as a *proactive intervention*: a *preventive act* that forestalled the hardening of religious boundaries into militant postures. Despite explicit theological disagreement between Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran, the *covenantal framework* integrated the *religious other* before exclusionary patterns could *ossify* and before extremism could be *learned* and *perpetuated*. In this sense, the *Najran Covenant* serves as a *preventive response*, providing both Muslims and Christians with a framework through which they can become agents of resisting *theological extremism*, underscoring the adage that prevention is preferable to cure.

"...moments like the Christchurch incident...can be re-read through the contrasting logics of the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*...as reflections of the *religious self's confidence* in sustaining *identity* amid difference."

Nostra Aetate, conversely, responds to a long-standing legacy of *theological estrangement*; it operates as a *curative gesture* while also providing a *forward-looking* grammar of *engagement* that resists future regressions into *doctrinal insularity* by calling for *mutual understanding* and *collaboration*, to work together to promote the benefit of all, fostering peace and freedom. Together, these texts embody a *dual logic*—*anticipatory inclusion* and *retrospective correction*—that challenges reactive paradigms of extremism and reframes the *religious other* as a catalyst for *theological transformation*. When we apply this framework to events such as the New Orleans attack, we see its immediate relevance: if the perpetrator had embraced a theological narrative grounded in *integration* and *prophetic confidence*—rather than one shaped by apocalyptic exclusion—religious leaders and educators might have disrupted the ideological infrastructure that enabled the violence. In this light, neither text offers a definitive solution, but both furnish *conceptual resources* for recalibrating *theological imagination* before extremism congeals into praxis.

A similar impulse surfaces in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the village elders' response to *sacred provocation* articulates a *theological logic* that actively resists escalation. Confronted with *religious insult*—an instance that in other contexts might precipitate theological extremism—they refrain from translating *divine offense* into *human retaliation*, invoking instead a restraint rooted in *African Traditional Religion* (ATR): "It is not our custom to fight for our gods … If a god will avenge his insult, he will do it himself." This posture conveys not *passivity* but *theological confidence*—an embedded cosmology wherein divine agency is autonomous and human intervention in sacred matters neither required nor desired. As an alternative paradigm, it challenges normative expectations within Christian and Islamic traditions, where *defense of the sacred* has often been entangled with *juridical* or *militant* response.

"*Nostra Aetate*, conversely, responds to a long-standing legacy of *theological estrangement*;...

When placed in dialogue with the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate*, Achebe's narrative illuminates a shared grammar of *restraint*, *stability*, and *social cohesion*. The *Najran Covenant*, through prophetic authority, embeds doctrinal differences within a juridical framework that not only affirms *religious coexistence* but also instructs Muslims to *defer judgment to God* when Christians err,[40] thereby forestalling *vigilante impulses* and echoing ATR's theological posture.

Nostra Aetate, shaped by centuries of estrangement, reframes *religious alterity* as a locus of *potential truth*, recognising "the seeds of the Word" in Islam and inviting Muslims into a mutual pursuit of *justice* and *human flourishing*. Across these texts, the *religious other* is not *feared*, *managed*, or *suppressed*, but *theologically situated* and rendered *livable*. Achebe's elders, the Prophet Muhammad's covenant with the Christians of Najran, and the conciliar voice of *Nostra Aetate* converge in affirming a mode of authority grounded not in the *control* of the sacred, but in the capacity to establish a *space* where the sacred is entrusted to *act*, *speak*, or *remain silent*, without recourse to violence.

"Across these texts, the religious other is not feared, managed, or suppressed, but theologically situated and rendered livable."

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the guiding question has been: In what ways might the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* serve as theologically compelling responses to the persistent challenge of theological extremism and violence? Rather than offering doctrinal prescriptions, the analysis frames *theological extremism* as a learned posture —manifested not only in ideological rigidity, but also in reactive encounters with difference that rupture communal bonds and spiritual cohesion. Through the lens of real-world incidents such as the Christchurch attack of 2019 and the New Orleans shooting of January 1, 2025, the paper has illustrated how theological violence often crystallises at the nexus of *sacred grievance*, *perceived purity*, and the unsettling presence of the *religious other*.

[40] Morrow, *Islam and the People of the Book*, 259.

"Through the lens of real-world incidents..., the paper has illustrated how *theological violence* often crystallises at the nexus of *sacred grievance*, *perceived purity*, and the unsettling presence of the *religious other*."

Addressing this complexity necessitated a comparative theological approach attentive not to superficial parallels, but to the deeper conceptual logics animating each text. In their distinct contexts, both the *Najran Covenant* and *Nostra Aetate* articulate modes of response: the former offers a *proactive juridical framework*, embedding religious difference within prophetic oversight to forestall antagonism before it hardens; the latter performs a *retrospective doctrinal recalibration*, recognizing the "seeds of the Word" in Islam and reframing alterity as a space for mutual understanding, and recognition of the Muslims as collaborators in pursuit of the justice.

Together, these documents articulate a composite response to extremism, particularly theological extremism, which is first, *preventive*, by structuring inclusion before conflict arises; second, *curative*, by revising inherited frameworks of estrangement; and third, *restraining*, by modeling authority through confident non-retaliation. This triadic vision is deepened by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in which the elders' invocation of divine autonomy—"If a god will avenge his insult, he will do it himself"—reflects a *theology of restraint* embedded in communal cosmology. Rather than enacting violence in defense of the sacred, these texts point toward alternative grammars of stability in which the sacred is entrusted to act independently of human coercion. Placed in dialogue, the *Najran Covenant*, *Nostra Aetate*, and Achebe's narrative coalesce around a shared commitment to structuring theological authority as a *space for difference*—not as rupture, but as a condition for more profound truth.

This means that if extremism is acquired through a habituated fear of the *other*, then countering responses must be cultivated through texts, traditions, and practices that teach *inclusion* not as a *concession*, but as a *vocation*. In so doing, *theological authority* is exercised through restraint and the creation of conditions that allow the sacred—whether *divine agency*, *prophetic wisdom*, or *doctrinal and theological truth*—to manifest itself without being weaponised. The integrity of the sacred is thus preserved not by forceful defense, but by the quiet strength of a theological imagination that refuses to violate in order to validate.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Penguin Books, 1959.

Araujo, Saulo de Freitas, and Lisa M. Osbeck. *Ever Not Quite: Pluralism(s) in William James and Contemporary Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Augustine of Hippo. *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Psalm 32 (33), Sermon 29. In *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 38, 272–273. Turnhout: Brepols, 1956. Cited in *Roman Office of Readings*, Tuesday of the 14th Week in Ordinary Time.

Ayman, Alkhaldy and Alhrahsheh R. Rakan. "Religious Extremism in a Multifaceted Context," *Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion* 13 (2022): 225–228.

Billingham, Paul and Jonathan Chaplin. "Diverse Religious Responses to Pluralism," *Political Theology* 21, no. 4 (2020): 279–283.

Bishai, Susan. "Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years after ISIS's Genocide," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, September 2024, accessed May 10, 2025.

Bötticher, Astrid. "Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (August 2017): 73–77.

D'Costa, Gavin. *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.

Ehsan, Rakib. *Muslim Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Great Britain*, (London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2020), accessed March 15, 2022.

Ellul, Joseph. "The Issue of Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Nostra Aetate Revisited," *Angelicum* 84, no. 2 (2007): 361–381.

Ford, David F. *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Gellner, Ernest. *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London: Routledge, 1992.

George-Tvrtković, Rita. *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History*. New York: Paulist Press, 2018.

Hussain, Mubasher. “Reviewed Work(s): The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World by John Andrew Morrow,” *Islamic Research Institute* 57, no. 3/4 (2018): 311–322.

Iannaccone, Laurence R. and Eli Berman. “Religious Extremism: The Good, the Bad, and the Deadly,” *Public Choice* 128, no. 1–2 (July 2006): 109–129.

Ibn Abdullah, Muhammad. *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of His Time: The Primary Documents*, ed. John Andrew Morrow (Kettering: Covenants Press, 2015), 26 and 30.

Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad. *The Life of the Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah*. Translated by Alfred Guillaume. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Macklin, Graham. "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 6 (July 2019): 18–29.

Morrow, John Andrew. *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*. Kettering: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2013.

Morrow, John Andrew. ed., *Islam and the People of the Book Volumes 1-3: Critical Studies on the Covenants of the Prophet*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne, 2015.

O’Mahony, Anthony. “Catholic Theological Perspectives on Islam at the Second Vatican Council,” *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1016 (2007): 229–245.

Pratt, Douglas. “Terrorism and Religion: Christian Fundamentalism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, November 20, 2018, accessed July 5, 2025.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Sacks, Jonathan. *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.

Sacks, Jonathan. “The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid a Clash of Civilizations.” *Sacred Heart University Review* 25, no. 1 (2009): Article 2.

Sandoval, Edgar, Eduardo Medina, Adam Goldman, and Rukmini Callimachi. "'I Joined ISIS': The New Orleans Attacker's Secret Radicalization," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2025, accessed May 10, 2025.

Sardar, Salma. “Inter-Religious Marriage: Christian Women Marrying Muslim Men in Pakistan,” *Transformation* 19, no. 1 (January 2002): 44–48.

Shepard, Todd. *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

Upton, Charles. *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of His Time: The Primary Documents*, edited by John Andrew Morrow. Kettering: Covenants Press, 2015.

Vatican Council II. *Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, October 28, 1965, no. 3. In Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, edited by Austin Flannery. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1980.

Zein, Ibrahim and Ahmed El-Wakil. *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad: From Shared Historical Memory to Peaceful Co-Existence*. London: Routledge, 2023.

About the CFIG

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFIG) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFIG contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating semi-academic analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFIG's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Author

Fr. Francis Afu is a Catholic priest and a Ph.D. student in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at *Georgetown University*. He holds bachelor's degrees in philosophy and theology from the *Pontifical Urbaniana University* in Rome, a Graduate Certificate in research methodology from the *University of Divinity* in Melbourne, and a Master of Islamic Studies from *Charles Sturt University*`s Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA), where his thesis focused on Muslim-Christian relations through the lens of the Prophet Muhammad's Covenants. His doctoral research aims to further explore the theological and socio-political implications of the Prophet's Covenants—particularly the Covenant with the Christians of Najran—in dialogue with *Nostra Aetate*, to address contemporary challenges of religious extremism and interfaith relations. An accomplished writer and speaker, Fr. Francis is the author of "Capsule for the Day" (2020), a devotional aimed at offering hope in a fractured world, and a regular contributor to Where Peter Is. He is currently serving as a "Priest in Residence" at the Church of the Annunciation, Archdiocese of Washington, DC, and remains deeply engaged in intercultural and interreligious dialogue across academic and pastoral contexts.

Ideas at their best when they interact.

Center for
Faith
Identity &
Globalization

rumiforum.org/cfig