A radical change took place during the 1960s and 70s with regard to the Roman Catholic approach to Judaism and other religions. The document of the Second Vatican Council *Nostra Aetate* asked Roman Catholics to dialogue with Jews and members of other religions, which reversed an almost twenty-century tradition of monologue. Addressed especially to Jews, the document encourages Christians to seek mutual understanding and esteem with Jews. They are to do this in a number of ways: friendly talks, mutual study on scripture and theology, and formal dialogues. A controversial issue arose when the following suggestion for dialogue was proposed ten years later in a subsequent ecclesiastical document: “In whatever circumstances as shall prove possible and mutually acceptable, one might encourage a common meeting in the presence of God, in prayer and silent mediation, a highly efficacious way of finding that humility, that openness of heart and mind, necessary prerequisites for a deeper knowledge of oneself and of others.”1 This raises the question, which is still considered to be controversial: Is it theologically appropriate for a Christian to pray together with a Jew?2 What is significant in this church statement is the assertion that prayer can lead to mutual understanding and respect which is the goal of interreligious dialogue. Not only that, but also the claim is made that understanding the prayer experience of Jews will help Christians understand their

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2 For example, Pope John Paul II was criticized for holding the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi on October 28, 1986 by Archbishop Lefebvre and the Society of Saint Pius X.
own prayer tradition. Could these same claims be made also about the Muslim prayer experience?

It would be anachronistic to expect to find this attitude of mutual understanding and respect based on the experience of prayer in the middle ages. Even though we have certain preachers and writers from the Christian side who appear to be more open to members of the other faiths (for example, Francis of Assisi and Juan de Segovia), there appears to be no Christian in the middle ages who would believe that a Christian could pray with a Jew or Muslim, and that this prayer would bring about mutual understanding and respect and a greater knowledge of their own respective faith community. As

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3 On this positive approach for learning from another’s prayer experience, see the comments of Cardinal Martini of Milan about this issue in a talk given at the Gregorian University in Rome on November 4th of 2004, found on the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College’s webpage at http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl.

4 On Saint Francis of Assisi and his encounter with the Sultan of Egypt in 1219, see Kathleen A. Warren, Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek al-Kamil (Rochester, Minnesota, 2003). John of Segovia (1393–1458), a contemporary of Nicolas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Alonso de Espina, believed in what he called the “contraferentia” approach to Islam, which “is structured in three successive stages: first, the establishment and maintenance of peace with Muslim peoples; second, a deepening of cultural relations leading to neutralization of suspicion and antagonism and, finally, peaceful discussion of basic doctrines which separate the two ideologies.” Quoted from James E. Biechler, “A New Face Toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia,” in Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom, eds. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden, 1991), p. 192. Even though Juan de Segovia believed that such dialogue would lead to the conversion of Muslims, in relation to what other writers were holding in regard to Islam in the middle ages, this was revolutionary. On Juan de Segovia, Alonso de Espina, and other fifteenth-century Christian writers on Islam, see Ana Echevarria, The Fortress of Faith: The Attitude toward Muslims in Fifteenth Century Spain (Leiden, 1999).

5 Though there was no prayer together, there were laws in medieval canon law that both restricted and protected Jewish prayer spaces and times. In the eleventh chapter of Book III, “On Canon Law and the Jews” of the Fortalitium Fidei, Alonso asks the question: What are the Jews permitted according to church law? He answered, borrowing from existing canon law, that they were permitted to follow their own religious rituals and maintain their synagogues, but they were not to build new ones or make their synagogues larger or more extravagant. They were to be free from the threat of injury by Christians—in their persons, their synagogues and homes. They were not to be disturbed during their festivals or at their cemeteries, but they were not to associate with Christians on Sabbath. (But they were not to sell their wares to Christians.) Finally, they were not to be compelled to convert to Christianity. From the Muslim side, the so-called “Pact of Umar” (that originated about 637 by Umar I after the conquest of Christian Syria and Palestine) laid out the rules regarding Christian religious behavior in the lands of Muslims: they were not to build any new monastery, church, cell or hermitage; they were not to repair