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# John Paul II Lecture on Interfaith Understanding

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## *A Dialogue of Love: Inter/Multi-religious Cooperation & Global Well-Being*

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**JTS**

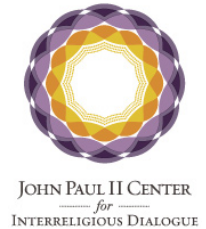


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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE



# A Dialogue Of Love: Inter/Multi-Religious Cooperation and Global Well-Being

*"It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" - Lewis Carroll [Alice in Wonderland]*

I am deeply honoured by the invitation to speak at the 2020 ["John Paul II Lecture on Interfaith Understanding."](#) I am very grateful to the co-sponsors – the Jewish Theological Seminary and the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome, as well as grateful to the generous support of the Russell Berrie Foundation. I am most especially grateful to Rabbi Burton Visotzky and his wondrous team at the Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as to Ruth Salzman and Prof. Adam Afterman.

## I- INTRODUCTION

### *GETTING CLARITY ON TERMINOLOGY*

“Religions,” as intended here, refers to the realms inclusive of diverse religious leaders, religious institutions, religious communities, and religiously inspired Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The latter are also referred to as faith-based or faith-inspired organisations, thus FBOs. Clearly, these realms are vast, and thus difficult to speak of in any universalized, generalized, or essentialized manner. And yet the mistake is often made to speak of “religion and development,” “religion and gender,” “religion and environment,” religion and foreign policy,” and so on. This form of essentialization creates multiple opportunities for misunderstanding, especially – albeit not only – when ‘religion’ is also being used to refer to terrorism, fundamentalism, or political violence, as part of this “religion and...” mix.

For the purposes of clarification therefore, bear with me as I too, commit this faux pas, as I seek to share some experiential narratives. As a development



practitioner - literally someone who worked on designing and implementing projects on health, education, democratization, women's rights, in diverse organisations and different parts of the world, as a former diplomat, and as scholar of "religion and development," I try, not always with success, to both do the work, and to think about it.

## WHAT IS GLOBAL WELL-BEING?

Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate, is credited with saying that "[E]conomic growth without investment in human development is unsustainable – and unethical." For much of the last century the most common measurement of people's well-being has been focused on money, using measures like Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But more and more organisations – and even one country (Bhutan) around the world are now measuring well-being in a different way – using data beyond GDP to look at wider social and environmental measures, as well as economic ones.

In their [Global Analysis of Wellbeing Report 2017](#), the Oxford Foundation for Knowledge Exchange considers some of the different ways that well-being is being measured. Early concerns about measurement of well-being focus on the environmental and social consequences of economic activity that were not well reflected by monetary measures. Two approaches have emerged as increasingly important in economic work. One, developed by Amartya Sen, attempts to reorient analysis to measuring the quality of life. The formation of this took part, soon after the UN's Human Development Index was launched, and became one of the first successful international efforts to go beyond GDP.

A second approach to measuring well-being which attracts both research as well as policy circles, is work that focuses on subjective assessments of well-being. There are a number of measures or variables that have been used, ranging from satisfaction with life overall to anxiety. This approach to measuring well-being covers 7 (seven) features:

1. Taking multiple domains into account when measuring the quality of life, such as work, family and home, community and physical environment;
2. Factoring in multiple stakeholders -- people in their roles as citizens, and/or service consumers;



3. Involving the whole of the life-cycle -- or all age groups in the above settings (work, family and home, community and physical environment);
4. Reviewing abilities and constraints;
5. Using measures of 'happiness;'
6. Using data developed by the people being assessed, themselves; and
7. Standardizing some of the measures at national and international levels, in order to facilitate international comparisons.

With these in mind, I add the aspect relevant to bringing about well-being, one which can be related to the notion of "universal peace" as enshrined in the UN Charter. Namely, in Article 1, where the purposes of the United Nations are identified, among other things as

To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and

To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends<sup>1</sup>.

The above is in fact, how I understand and approach the work of inter-religious cooperation, or partnerships with religious actors around peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.

Allow me to clarify a couple of my 'biases', or positions, here:

Well-being is what our respective faith traditions, as well as belief systems, should help us realise not just for ourselves, but for our wider human and eco-system. I also see the United Nations, particularly its work in and with religion, and with faith-based organisations, to be important influencers - and detractors - of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html>



inter-religious collaboration. In other words, the way(s) the United Nations system and faith-based actors interact and engage, can determine many aspects of global well-being.

I believe in the values of the United Nations as it upholds, defends, and seeks to implement, i.e. universal human rights.

I believe these values are inherent in each and all faith traditions, and indeed emanate from that which is common to all of them.

I also believe that if we did not have the United Nations system today, we would have needed to build it. I am not sure, however, that with the current geopolitical, financial, and global health dynamics (including the health of our very climate), we would be able to.

As a veteran of the journey within the United Nations system to inform the why and how and enable engagement with religious actors for two decades, I will therefore begin by situating the dialogue of love which unfolded – and continues to unfold -- as multi-religious collaboration, through reviewing what it is that was done in, through and with, the United Nations.

## II – HIGHLIGHTS OF THE UNITED NATIONS WORK WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS, IN THE LAST DECADE

*“Curiouser and curiouser!” - Lewis Carroll (Alice in Wonderland)*

The United Nations is composed of 193 government members. Many of these are internally losing plenty of credibility and legitimacy among their own populations, as they struggle to deliver on basic social contracts. The Corona virus has seriously attacked these governments’ ‘pre-existing conditions’ of institutional weakness and loss of credibility, and rendered many of them even weaker and more heavily dependent on ‘ventilators’ – meaning their security apparatuses of armies and police. Even the most democratic among them is struggling to uphold a passable record of human rights observance, let alone human well-being. Examples of this abound in almost all corners of the world.

When some of these governments come together in the UN, especially in its key decision-making body of the Security Council, this group of political actors set



political tones which are seriously discordant, and can be out of line with the mission, values, and principles of the world's largest and oldest multilateral entity.

All the more reason then, to appreciate – and be in awe of -- what is harmonious within such a space. That is why we must appreciate the significance of the moment when the UN General Assembly met to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. There were tears running down the cheeks of some of the most stolid diplomats and staff members of this system in that moment; for they had, together, succeeded against all odds. Our otherwise seriously dysfunctional international system has actually adopted – meaning they agreed to hold themselves, and each other, accountable to – a global agenda of shared goals and indicators. In addition to that, the SDGs actually put into measurable bits and pieces, all the objectives of the three main foundations which the United Nations system itself is supposed to uphold, maintain, and serve, namely: peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development.

Indeed, the SDGs, or Agenda 2030 as they often interchangeably referred to, are not limited to 'human development' (read: health, education, nutrition, sanitation, poverty, housing, employment, water, land, etc.), but also encompass all aspects of life on the planet (building peaceful, just and inclusive societies) as well as of the planet (all aspects of environment and climate change), as well as the modus operandi to realise the three pillars of the international system, i.e. partnerships. Human rights are not a stand-alone set of goals and objectives but are the foundation of the conceptual and practical indicators (169 of them), which the 193 governments, also agreed to.

So when I share the story of how the UN system engaged with religious voices around peace writ large; I speak to the processes which took place in, around, and about Agenda 2030, since this is the comprehensive agenda of "Peace" as defined by 193 governments, within, and by, their one and only multilateral mechanism.

## WHAT'S GLOBAL WELL-BEING?

But why would the UN, or even any governmental entity, need to work with religions? Notably, because of the following six reasons or 'truths':





1. Religious actors are social and cultural gatekeepers in all societies. Transformations in behaviours and attitudes (i.e. in social and cultural norms) in most parts of the world where religion and faith still matter, need religious leaders and institutions to speak from their respective pulpits and advocate for those changes. Only then are the changes that were required (e.g. around how to stay safe and healthy during this pandemic), possible to realise.

Apart from Western Europe, the rest of the world has maintained faith as a central part of how peoples think, believe, and behave. For too long, the UN system has operated (and still does) with a western European mindset. Thus, it marginalized (or simply was blind to) the roles and impact of religious influences.

2. Religious institutions (e.g. Churches, Mosques, Temples) are the largest, oldest, and most far reaching social service providers. They serve people's needs in health, education, nutrition, sanitation, environmental conservation, and so much more.
3. Religious institutions and FBOs (e.g. Caritas, WorldVision, Islamic Relief, Bread for the World, and many others) are the first responders in humanitarian crisis. Indeed, at least 4 out of the top 10 global humanitarian NGOs are religiously inspired. Moreover, religious sites are often the first 'go-to' spaces in natural or man-made humanitarian crisis (e.g. armed conflicts).
4. Religious leaders - in their capacity as leaders of major religious institutions and communities – are heavily vested actors in and with politicians/politics and political leaders today, in many parts of the world. Religious leaders are either active partners in politics and/or inciters of political actions, and/or “spiritual advisors”, sometimes working alongside, or within, political parties.
5. Religious institutions, as well as many religiously affiliated or inspired NGOs, are among the most creatively self-resourced institutions in the world. Their networks of volunteers (human resources), as well as fund-raising capacities (financial resources), far outweigh several other secular NGO counterpart. Think of charitable donations/giving in Christian, Buddhist, Hindu contexts; think Islamic Zakat and Islamic financing institutions, as well as the Vatican Bank, etc.



6. Last but by no means least: if religions are identified as the source of terrorism/ violence or extremism; and if religious reasons are given as reasons to either ignore international human rights norms, and laws, or to violate any of them, then how can religious actors **NOT** be engaged? If some of those realms are the cause or source of harm and pain, how can we not seek to find the remedies within these spaces?

The usual pushback to the above rationale is to note that not all religious actors work in accordance with all human rights. In fact, some may be actively counteracting some human rights (particularly on matters related to sexual and reproductive health, gender, and/or as regards women's leadership of religious congregations).

While this is true in some cases and in some religious spaces, this reality is precisely why the engagement with the realms of religion (which are far bigger, wider and more diverse than **ANY** other realm of human existence) cannot and should not be ruled out. Rather, any 'engagement' with religious actors, must be considered, cautious, and principled. Secular institutions should seek to work with religious actors who affirm the values and intersections of/with human rights. The fact is that all human rights as we know them, are actually derived from the values common to all religious traditions. Moreover, those religious actors who see and struggle for human rights – and I am convinced those are the majority even if they do not self-identify as such – are also the ones who can articulate those rights and advocate for them, most efficiently and effectively among all communities, since they are seen, spoken of, and served as part of religious values and commitments.

The challenge is that some religious institutions (and leaders) will make a claim to exceptionalism which is supposed to position them above the responsibilities and obligations enshrined in international human rights norms and laws. This claim to exceptionalism is understandable because Holy Scriptures have long predated any and all human rights as articulated today, and some would argue, they may well outlive all our legislation. Nevertheless, this claim to exceptionalism should not nullify the fact that all of humanity's actions anyway require a temporal method of 'judgement,' a standard, if you will. And this standard cannot vary by interpretation of diverse religious scriptures or traditions, nor is it conceivable that only religious standards should be used to judge all humanity. The latter would be





diverse forms of communalism. Rather, these standards have to apply to all those who live in and on this planet, which is dynamically, irremediably, and eternally co-dependent. I believe these standards are our international yardstick: human rights, which, in turn, are (or should be) the foundation for global law and order. I therefore believe that where and when religious reasons are used to oppress, subordinate, mete out any injustice, or violate the dignity of any human being (and their necessary eco-system), these reasons are not consonant with international human rights norms and standards. Therefore, they are not consonant with global well-being.

*Religions for Peace's* worldview – mirroring my own convictions – for half a century is this: oppression, subordination, injustice, and any and all violations of human dignity, and damage to our ecosystem, are inconsistent with both the letter and spirit of religious doctrines. No religion advocates for the indignity of a fellow human being or for the destruction of the very life and livelihood of all humankind (our natural ecosphere). At the same time, no amount of secular argumentation and dedicated service to communities and nations working alone and without alignment with diverse religious institution, has been sufficient to eradicate the multiple forms of oppression and injustice perpetuated over decades. Racism and extremism are cases in point.

More dangerously, when and where we leave religious institutions and actors marginalized, many of these communities can also become marginalizing. Religious institutions are habituated to power – political, social, and economic - since time immemorial. Believing they can be set aside or used on a “need to only” basis, bespeaks an attitude of arrogance and ignorance. Instead, the dialogue and praxis of working with religious actors is a sine qua non of human and environmental sustainability.

It is only when we engage in conversation, discussions, debates, and actual partnerships to serve together that we build collectively-owned social capital, as we also establish a more knowledgeable, inclusive, and effective capacity of all institutions (secular and religious). This is the required global infrastructure we need to ensure all human rights are protected. Working together means we widen the number of like-minded actors towards the common good. Keeping human rights as the focus of principled engagement means we are working towards the same ends. By working with religious actors, we widen the circle of mutual understanding of one another's worldviews, as well as modes of operation. We reach more people



in our respective societies and can then “build better,” as we are hearing articulated now.

If the Covid-19 pandemic teaches us one thing it is this: none of our existing infrastructure, in any one country, is sufficient to deal with the multiple and escalating challenges we all face, in a siloed manner. Each of our institutions working in our own spaces and old ways, is nowhere near enough to stem infections nor deaths. It is time for a different set of approaches. SDG 17 provides a clarion call for the means of operation: partnerships, across all sectors, nations, and institutions. Now.

SDG 17 (“revitalize the global partnership”), was adopted by religious leaders, as one of Religions for Peace’s top 6 priorities. The other 5 are also fully consonant with the rest of the SDG agenda. The religious institutions who are represented in Religions for Peace adopted the SDG priorities – and some of the indicators – as their own, in their Strategic Plan from 2020-2025.

Covid has required an adaptation of the modus operandi of Religions for Peace’s global movement with over 90 Inter-Religious Councils present in-country. This adaptation is in the form of a [Multi-Religious Humanitarian Support Fund/MRH Fund](#). Religions for Peace put its money where its mouth is: collaborate across your religious silos, and there is seed support to help you do so.

## JOINING THE UNITED NATIONS

*“oppression, subordination, injustice, and any and all violations of human dignity, and damage to our ecosystem, are inconsistent with both the letter and spirit of religious doctrines. No religion advocates for the indignity of a fellow human being or for the destruction of the very life and livelihood of all humankind”*

I joined UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) in 2004, only to be told that “we don’t do religion.” After four years of serving a regional Arab Bureau which produced one of the most sought after and heavily quoted UN documents – the Arab Human Development Reports - and the only UN and research body which had accurately predicted in 2006 that [Arab youth](#) would be causing a



revolution – I left UNDP to join UNFPA (the UN Population Fund) as its only Senior Advisor on Culture. Guided and firmly supported by the only Saudi Arabian woman serving as UN Undersecretary General and Executive Director (Dr. Thoraya Obaid), my UNFPA colleagues and I convened the first UN-FBO (Faith Based Organizations) global consultation. The first [UN Global Forum on Strengthening Partnerships for Development](#) also established a [Global Interfaith Network](#) of almost 600 faith-based and faith-inspired NGOs/ FBOs, all with a track record of UN partnerships at country, regional and global levels.

In 2008, I worked with UNFPA's over 100 Country Offices and faith based partners convened in the Global Forum, to develop [Guidelines for Engaging Faith-Based Organisations \(FBOs\) as Cultural Agents of Change](#), which set out some of the principles of outreach and partnership. That same year, I worked with my UNAIDS counterpart to develop the first strategy on engaging with faith-based actors around prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. I advised UNDP and UNICEF (UN Children's Fund) colleagues on the modality of using questionnaires to their own country offices, which fed into the respective guidance notes they elaborated and developed in partnership with their own FBO partners.

Also starting in 2008, I urged UNDESA (UN Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs) to ensure that other UN system actors (other than UNESCO [UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization] and DESA) contribute to the Secretary General's Report on the Promotion of a Culture of Peace and Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. This still remains the UN's only comprehensive overview containing several UN entities' annual engagements around religion and culture. I also ensured that UNFPA itself had an annual "faith engagement report and analysis;" and collated and prepared the UN Interagency Task Force's Annual Report on its faith engagement work. The latter also contained analysis of trends in 2019 and 2020, together with inputs from the Chairs of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council of the UN Interagency Task Force.

In 2010, with the blessing and active support of UNFPA's Executive Director, I founded and Chaired/Convened the [UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development](#) (UN Task Force) which grew from 6 to 22 UN system entities by the time I departed the UN system in 2020. As the Convenor, I hosted several consultations (seminars, policy roundtables, conferences) with UN member states, as well as with diverse FBO partners. The first of these took place in 2007. These consultations



were designed to serve and inform common development, human rights, and peace and security-related objectives; and were held alongside the key intergovernmental gathering ‘moments’ of the UN Member States. These UN - faith-based consultations took place on an almost monthly basis, with some months seeing several consultations. Some of these included the following:

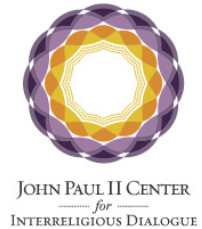
- Global Interfaith Harmony Week - February
- The UN Commission on the Status of Women/CSW - March
- The UN Commission on Population and Development/CPD- April
- The UN High Level Political Forum/HLPF – July
- The UN General Assembly/UNGA – September

Also in 2010, working with the UN System Staff College (UNSSC) I co-developed and co-facilitated (with UNAIDS) and FBO partners, the UN Strategic Learning Exchanges (SLE) on Religion, Development and International Affairs. These SLEs were provided the first “peer-to-peer learning exchanges” based on practical case studies which examined actual initiatives taken by UN and FBO actors together. By insisting on the peer-to-peer modality, I sought, successfully, to challenge the UN’s culture of power relations in which civil society actors are the poorer relatives who have something to learn from the “better” UN folks. In each of these SLEs, one governmental partner took part as co-sponsor as well.

As the Convenor of the UN Task Force, I served as an advisory hub for FBOs and other governmental entities which had an interest in partnering with the UN system, to support their efforts to connect, interact, design programmes, and collaborate on development-related initiatives. In turn, this has enabled me to study, and even to track UN system-wide partnerships with FBOs, and to harvest some critical institutional memory – and learnings – from within and around the UN system’s varied engagements with myriad religious actors.

In total, I calculated, conservatively, that per year, I served the UN system in:

- Organizing/hosting an average of 10-12 consultations (either conferences, seminars or policy roundtables), including at least one SLE/capacity building training with an average of 70 UN and FBO participants;
- Advising between 10-15 diverse FBO partners and at least 5 of the UN entities; and
- Preparing at least 2 extensive reports.



In 2018, at the urging of several FBO partners who were growing disgruntled with years of UN convening, but no avenue or vehicle to engage collectively and advise the UN system, I stewarded the foundation of the first Multi-Faith Advisory Council (MFAC) in UN history. Over forty CEOs of the world's largest FBOs, and key research institutions, committed to multi-faith dialogue for and with human rights, were convened to act as Advisors to the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development.

Together, the Multi-Faith Advisory Council launched the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings, which became the first of several yearly collaborative events co-organised and co-sponsored by the Council members. In 2018, the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings took place during the UN General Assembly, and in 2019 they were expanded to a two-day event co-sponsored by three Member States and involved 6 UN entities working together, during the UN's High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). It is worthy of note that after my departure in March 2020, the MFAC continues to thrive with the structure I stewarded with my UN colleagues, and the FBO members selected as a result of their dedication to serve the UN (during the 2020 Covid social distancing times, the MFAC hosted a successful half day virtual event to commemorate the UN's 75th Anniversary).

### III - COMING HOME: WORKING FOR WELL-BEING FROM *RELIGIONS FOR PEACE*

*"Why it's simply impassible! Alice: Why, don't you mean impossible?  
Door: No, I do mean impassible. (chuckles) Nothing's impossible!"*

*- Lewis Carroll*

Since rejoining Religions for Peace in March 2020, I implemented three lessons I learned from my UN experience, into this 'UN of religious institutions,' geared towards building global peace.

Lesson one was that the UN, at large, remains relatively hampered when it comes to multi-religious engagement. The UN Interagency Task Force guidelines insist that for the UN entity, no matter where or on what mandate or issue, the engagement and outreach with religious actors must be done in a way that does not prioritise one religious group over another, or engage with only one religious



community. Instead, to fulfill the UN's mandates and its principles, UN entities must work with all religious groups and do so simultaneously. Otherwise, the risk of appearing to 'favour' one religion over another, can create a great many problems.

But, because the galaxies of the religious universe far outweigh those of the UN, the average UN staffer or even entire office, has limited abilities to properly map and engage the range of religious actors in any comprehensive or even accurate way in any one country. In fact, the UN offices are not renowned for their ability to work well with civil society in general. Far from it - the mistakes of identifying a limited select pool of CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) which become UN partners, continues to create challenges for UN work in countries (as the example of the Arab Spring demonstrated that few UN entities even recognized many of the civil actors who took to the Arab streets). This is due, in large measure, to the ignorance, instrumentalization and/or suppression of civil societies, that many governments themselves are guilty of.

Any UN office in a country can refine its ability to identify and partner with civil society (including religious actors), only insofar as the government of that country guides them, or allows them, to do so. This fact is lost on many observers who critique the UN impact in any one country. Several UN representatives have been declared persona non grata (PNG) if a government deems they have gone too far out

*“Any UN office in a country can refine its ability to identify and partner with civil society (including religious actors), only insofar as the government of that country guides them, or allows them, to do so”*

*“In countries where religious institutions, FBOs, and religious leaders are already part of the conflictual (or consensual in cahoots) relationship with the governments, the UN knowledge, or ignorance, and/or outreach to these actors, will be shaped by those dynamics. No wonder, therefore, that many UN entities, prefer not to get involved with religious actors at all.”*

of the “approved diameter” of engaging with non-governmental actors. To be PNG'd is not only to be kicked out of the country, but to have an entire UN office, its services, and its capacities to exist, seriously curtailed. Any UN office is limited to how much, how well, and how efficiently it can engage civil society actors,





by the very governments on whom they depend on for their existence. In countries where religious institutions, FBOs, and religious leaders are already part of the conflictual (or consensual in cahoots) relationship with the governments, the UN knowledge, or ignorance, and/ or outreach to these actors, will be shaped by those dynamics. No wonder, therefore, that many UN entities, prefer not to get involved with religious actors at all.

Enter Religions for Peace's Inter-Religious Councils (IRCs): *Religions for Peace* (RfP) has legally registered/incorporated NGOs, each made up of representatives of religious institutions and communities in the country, working together with respective grassroots youth and women's networks on social development projects and programmes, as well as humanitarian relief where and when needed. These RfP IRCs are an easy-to-identify multi-religious advocacy and service delivery counterpart to the locally based governmental and intergovernmental actors. The IRCs' existence means that multi-religious representative leadership, as well as grassroots networks of faith and youth, do not need to be looked for and created, but they are already there, active, functional, accountable to government institutions and fellow civil society members.

The second lesson I learned from the experience of more than 20 UN system entities working with religious actors of diverse hues and natures, for nearly 20 years, is that even today, the UN still errs on the side of working much more with one-religion: (Christian) actors. Try as I did from within the UN system to urge UN actors to be inclusive and to diversify their partnerships, it would seem that the mantra used to justify is "this world of religion is too complicated, Christian actors are far easier to identify [because of their centralized and relatively easier to identify structures], and they fit the 'religion bill,' so we are working with them." Of course, this is never said openly. And in most cases, even the best and the brightest in the UN system seem not to realise this. But the fact that out of each average gathering of religious actors organized by many UN entities, there is a clearly over-weighted scale towards the diverse range of Christian actors, is unjustifiable. Look at participants' lists of any UN system actor, and/or assess the range of co-sponsors to many UN-system co-hosted events (see, e.g. UNEP's ongoing Faith for Earth Programme just this week), to see how many more diverse Christian representatives are in that space – often at the expense of the same diversity of any other religion (Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or even interfaith).



***Peace cannot be built by prioritizing one religious group/ community /institution over another;*** especially when many of the conflicts taking place in the world are either taking themselves or being attributed to religious aspects and/or affiliation. The more intense the discourse around, about, and by religion, the more complicated and intense social discord becomes. Appearing to be more knowledgeable of, more engaged with, and more comfortable with certain religious communities, threatens the UN's ability to be neutral, and to appear unbiased, in general, and in times of crisis tinged by religious affiliations, in particular.

By being diligently multi-faith, we are not just observing a luxury or considering an afterthought, it is a fundamental act of peacemaking and peace-building, with and through religious discourses, institutions, and the diverse range of practitioners. Multi-faith is where religious dogma cannot take root, and where the discourse of human rights provides the basis with which to define the success of collaboration.

This brings me to the third lesson: why the multi-religious is a site where love thrives. Here I will share two stories. One about the Multi-Religious Advisory Council and one about a unique exercise in multi-religious strategic thinking and commitment. Both stories concern religious actors working together, to plan about and to realise, how to work more together.

#### STORY ONE: NORMALISING A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

*"We were remarking with wonder and pleasure, at how well we work together" - Member of the UN's Multi-Faith Advisory Council, October 2020*

In April 2017, acting on behalf of the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, I organised a strategic retreat of over 65 FBO partners of the various UN system entities. The selection of FBOs invited was done according to the Guidelines established in 2008 – including ensuring that each religion was represented, that each area of UN work was covered, that each of the members of the UN Task Force had at least 3 FBO partners at the table, that there was an equal number of men and women convened, and that between them, the FBOs' work covered engagement in all the areas of the world.



Unbeknownst to any of the UN or FBO partners, this was my 100<sup>th</sup> meeting organized for faith-based NGOs in 15 years of working with them, since emigrating to New York (to work with Religions for Peace) in October 2000. Also unknown to all who were convened, it was the first time that over 15 UN system entities actually congregated with the gathered FBOs – and one another – on the nexus of religion and religious intersections with development, peace, security, and human rights.

By then, at least 3 initiatives had already emerged out of the various UN Interagency Task Force engagements with religious actors, since January 2010. These were: the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, which came together in 2012; the Moral Imperative hosted and convened by the World Bank, and launched in 2015 alongside the UN General Assembly; and the International Partnership for Religion and Development (PaRD), sponsored and launched by the German Ministry of Development Cooperation and its implementing partner, the GIZ, in 2016. The same FBO members were more or less on each and all of the three initiatives – because these were the very same FBOs which the UN Interagency Task Force had been working with and convening regularly.

*“The culture of encounter created by the UN’s quintessential convening role, has yielded a multi-religious body of committed NGOs and CEOs who invest in working with, and for, the United Nations”*

So, by April of 2017, the FBOs had become increasingly used to coming together, and some personal friendships and professional partnerships were

beginning to emerge among them. Furthermore, between each of them and myself, I felt a definite sense of camaraderie, and I would say also a sense of these FBOs became part of my ‘adopted family’, since beginning this work.

*“Multi-faith is where religious dogma cannot take root, and where the discourse of human rights provides the basis with which to define the success of collaboration.”*

Also, by April 2017, hundreds of UN colleagues, not only in UN Headquarters in Geneva, New York, and Rome, but in almost each corner of the world, had been trained in and through the Strategic Learning Exchanges. The constant engagement and discussions had created a new sense of ‘normal’ not only in the discussions on



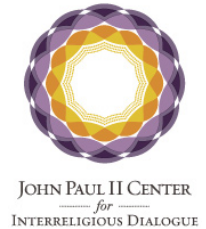
and around religion and development, but there was now a culture of encounter between FBOs and between diverse UN system entities and FBO partners.

This culture of encounter is what prompted, indeed encouraged, the FBOs to be vocal in holding the UN – myself included – accountable in the April retreat. Emboldened by the multiple encounters and the emerging initiatives, the FBO UN partners demanded a mechanism which would enable them to provide an input into the UN’s work. “You need to listen more diligently to what we have to say,” was expressed by the most critical among them. “We are prepared to support you more, and better, in your work with religion for the SDGs,” said another. It was the latter reflection which garnered agreement among many of the gathered FBOs and was reiterated in their respective evaluations of the retreat.

Thus, in consultation with the largest international FBO partners of the UN, and the members of the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, we developed the Terms of Reference (ToRs) of what became the Multi-Faith Advisory Council (MFAC). These ToRs laid out the rationale, the purpose, and objectives, as well as the method of operation of this first entity of its kind. The FBOs were to be nominated by the UN members of the Task Force, each UN entity had 3 nominees. Based on these ToRs, I followed through with the nearly 20 UN system members of the UN Interagency Task Force – each of whom had to also revert to their respective leaderships - to compile a list of their recommendations of FBOs to serve on the MFAC.

The first list of recommendations exceeded 100 FBOs. I worked with the Guidelines, and multiple discussions with myriad UN colleagues, to create a short-list of 45. There are many stories within this story that shall remain untold. It would not be an exaggeration to share that, ultimately, the members of the MFAC were diligently and lovingly, handpicked. The one most significant criteria added as icing on the cake of all the other criteria, was that the CEOs of the FBOs on the UN’s Database of more than 600, were people whom the most active among the UN Task Force members, felt comfortable with professionally – *and personally*.

By September 2018, these esteemed CEOs were convened to officially launch the MFAC of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, alongside the UN General Assembly meetings. Some had travelled significant distances at the costs of their own organisations, underlining the depth of their commitment to



serving the UN. Those who could not travel to NY joined by Skype – which was an innovation in UN-FBO meeting modalities then, the pre-Covid-19 days.

In October 2020, I can say that the culture of encounter has fully succeeded. Why? Because these same CEOs today are marveling at how well they work together, and most voice pride - publicly - in their membership of this MFAC. Moreover, many are still investing their institutional resources (their own time) to ensure they can continue to work together. The culture of encounter created by the UN's quintessential convening role, has yielded a multi-religious body of committed NGOs and CEOs who invest in working with, and for, the United Nations. But this is not the only thing that the multi-religious encounter has led to.

## STORY TWO: TRUE GRIT

*"One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth the doing is what we do for others." - Lewis Carroll*

As shared earlier, *Religions for Peace* is the only multi-religious organization bringing together and representing all religious institutions of the world – including Indigenous peoples - with interfaith youth and women's networks, with the widest reach and most diverse of voices, and with in-country presence in over 90 countries. It is also the only organization that has committed its own strategic plan to be in sync with the SDGs, and with a clear and unequivocal voice that these religious institutions are working to realise gender equality and women's empowerment.

But how was it possible, that the representatives of the world's largest (Vatican, Al-Azhar, Orthodox Church) and ostensibly 'conservative' religious institutions, would even agree to having gender equality as a goal to work towards together? Especially when most scholars, UN entities, and even religious actors themselves, have noted that gender is an issue of intense contention between and among FBOs? Religions for Peace's story is a testament to another historic first: to jointly convene, reflect, and produce a new strategic plan for the movement with 250 religious leaders and representatives of religious and interreligious organisations.

Five decades of multi-religious encounter, coupled with joint action at country, regional, and global levels, and facilitated with love and hard work, can and did yield this miracle. After three long days of discussions, debates, reflections, and



breaking of bread together, the gathering of august religious leaders and representatives was about to draw to a close. They had already, over the first two days, met in regional clusters, as well as thematic ones, and they had reviewed together all the SDGs. They had gathered the poverty and employment and health-related SDGs into one cluster on building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. They had collated all the SDGs related to water, earth, and air together into one goal on nurturing and stewarding a healthy environment. They added interreligious education to the SDG on education and kept that as is. And they viewed gender equality through the lens of women's empowerment and affirmed the need to ensure girls and women were not only protected; but they vowed to work to have more women leaders in their own institutions and movements. On day three, an hour before closure, one Bishop from the Caribbean stood up and asked them all this question: "how are we going to conclude our strategic direction and commitments for the next five years, without addressing LGBTIQ issues... how can we do that in good faith?" Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, male and female leaders from each corner of the world, were silent - for what felt like an eternity.

Worried that this may be a bridge too far which would lose this remarkable movement many hard-won efforts to achieve consensus, I asked, "what if you agree to host discussions on and about and with LGBTIQ communities, within the next five years, at your own pace, in your own ways, and with your own languages and concerns... would you agree to that as one of the actions you can commit to?" Another silence followed which felt interminable. Then one Latin America-based woman leader and veteran of Religions for Peace, who represents not only the organization, but the movement of religions working together for peace in its broadest sense, a woman known for her compassion, wisdom, and a legacy of activism around environmental issues, raised her hand. "We commit to that in our regional Council," she said. "We will include LGBTIQ people, and their issues, in our work. And we commit to sharing with all our movement members here how we do that and what the lessons learned are... because we all believe that regardless of what religion we work in the name of together, no one is immune to God's love and no one should be left out of that love..."

I let the words sink in, also giving time for the translators to say them. "Can you all accept that?" I asked, literally holding my breath. It seemed to me most heads were nodding. Still unsure, and determined not to brush over any issues, I asked





again, “If you do agree with this, this brings us to the conclusion of our strategic plan priorities. To indicate your affirmation of all the priority areas over the next 5 years, can you please stand up?” They all, all 250 of them, stood up. And thus it was that on December 5, 2019, 250 faith leaders representing their institutions and their communities, stood up to signal their agreement on a plan they had co-developed, and which affirmed gender equality and women’s empowerment as one of their shared commitments.

#### IV - LOVE OF THE DIVINE IN THE INTER/ MULTI RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER: THE OLDEST FORM OF DIPLOMACY

*“Tell me who you love, I will tell you who you are.” - African Proverb*

The multi-religious, or interreligious, is a space where two kinds of interactions take place: humility –indeed the lack of propriety of statements of orthodoxy and dogma - and the welcoming of Divine mercy. And interreligious encounter is where Divine mercy enables gender justice.

As the nearly one thousand participants from around the globe who took part in the conversations in the first *Women, Faith and Diplomacy Assembly* (Nov 10-13, 2020) noted, women of faith challenge narratives of dominance and subordination, as they serve in the leadership of their communities. They enact their ‘obligations’ and duties, and as they do so, they claim agency to their own self-determination. But far from doing so from a point of contention which posits women versus men, or indeed, women versus women who think and live differently, this is a position of lived engagement in service to all, and therefore a position of love. As women of faith serve, so they love. As they encounter the other in loving giving, they realise – and offer, and affirm – a spiritual dignity.

Surat al-Maida (Sura 5, verse/Ayah 48) – reads thus: Bismillahi al Rahman al Rahim

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمَنْهَاجًا ۗ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ ۗ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

To thee We sent the Scripture in truth confirming the Scripture that came before it and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed and follow not their vain desires diverging from the truth that hath



come to thee. To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute [Surat al-Ma'ida/5: 48- Translation Yusuf Ali]

In acknowledgment of this, theologians tell us that Muslims are called upon to have an inner love and compassion for people of all faiths, races, and nations, for they consider them as the manifestations of God in this world and treat them with an heartfelt respect and love. This is the very basis of communities administered by Islamic morality.

people of faith, we are called upon, in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, not only to love the Divine, but to “accustom ourselves” to “*continually ... make many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul...*”

And lest we forget and fall into the trap of making such acts for those who think and believe only as we do, St. Thomas Aquinas - an Italian Dominican friar, philosopher, Catholic priest, Doctor of the Church, and jurist in the tradition of scholasticism, reminds us that: “[W]e must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject, for both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in finding it”.

But how do we love the Divine? I find an answer in the Talmud – from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88b:

The Sages taught: About those who are insulted and do not insult, who hear their shame and do not respond, who act out of love and are joyful in suffering, of them the verse says: “And they that love Him are as the sun going forth in its might”([Judges 5:31](#)).

So let me share a very humble reflection with you based on this beautiful chain of wisdom and the experience of seeking to serve this love inside multilateral and multi-religious spaces: the freedom to love the Divine – as reflected in each and every living thing (including human, as well as living and breathing of the earth, of/in the water and of/in the skies), is **not a choice we make. It is an obsession we must have**. The love of the Divine is magnified, enabled, illuminated, when there is freedom



to see the reflection of the Divine in each and every human being and living thing—including those who may not believe in any Divine.

I end with the inspiration to love which I find in the words of St. Teresa of Avila:

*“You pay God a compliment by asking great things of Him”*

At each moment of working with religious actors – leaders, FBOs, communities - we ask the Divine great things: to be able to work together in spite of differences in doctrine, worldviews, methods of working, territoriality, national contexts, humanitarian disasters, and increasingly, geopolitics which have normalized hate based on our differences.

Working multi-religiously, as noted by Bishop Mounib Younan in the Assembly on *Women Faith and Diplomacy* is “the oldest form of diplomacy.” And so it is that working multi-religiously is the oldest form of managing the human encounter. In each of these encounters of humankind, we pay God a compliment. And in so doing, we give, and take, love.

I end with a recitation about and inspired by the latest encyclical of His Holiness Pope Francis:

Referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Pope says this is an "ever new" call from Jesus to "rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond". It invites the reader to an introspection of his/ her inner struggle between one's own security and personal sacrifices required by living with permanent empathy. The Pope notes that the parable "speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: we were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love."