

Faithful Peace: Why the Journey to Build Resilience is Multi-Religious

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 Religions *for* Peace





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Foreword

To Serve, Together, is to Live, Together, in Peace

*Accustom yourself continually to make many acts of love, for they
enkindle and*

melt the soul. - Saint Teresa of Avila

*There was a time, when I blamed my companion if his religion did
not resemble mine. Now, however, my heart accepts every form....Love
alone is my religion. - Ibn Arabi*

The belief of *Religions for Peace* - if one must define such for a secular entity serving multi-religious collaboration - is simple, yet profound. It is best encapsulated in three points:

1. Global consciousness is necessary, for without it, we continue to see, to live, and to serve, in silos, which benefit some, but not all. And yet it is but one planet we live on, and whether we like it or not, we are dependent on one another, and on this planet, to survive, let alone to thrive.
2. Global consciousness is not, and will not be, served by individual religious institutions, or religious leaders, or faith communities, working independently, even when and where they serve diverse peoples. Global consciousness is raised, and served, when all faiths work together to serve all peoples.
3. Raising global consciousness for collective actions is not a luxury. Rather, it is an imperative in a world where hunger, thirst, multiple wars, diseases (and pandemics), horrendous inequalities, coexist, despite the most advanced financial, political, technological and industrial progress humanity has ever known. We have nuclear weapons which can decimate all life, and we have people dying of poverty and preventable illnesses every minute of every day. All this happening in spite of laws, conventions and regulations, and in spite of institutions, and in spite of good will. Something is very wrong in the way we have worked, and served, to date.

The Background: Faith-based Organisations and Sustainable Development

In September 2015, as 193 government leaders were meeting to adopt a new global development agenda (the Sustainable Development Goals/SDGs), UNAIDS and UNFPA cohosted forty international faith-based development and humanitarian, non governmental organisations (FBOs). The objective of the meeting was to raise the voice of these critical development and humanitarian leaders, to speak to all governmental and faith leaders, urging them to ensure that interdependent, interlinked and indivisible human rights were front and center of global consciousness. The reason this was perhaps one of the most noteworthy gatherings of FBOs is due to the fact that these organisations, together, represent a significant number of global humanitarian relief and social development services to hundreds of millions of people in every corner of the world.

Inspired by diverse faith traditions, and experts in handling the challenges of actually serving the needs of people (as opposed to speaking about the need and value added), these FBOs spelled out their common position against all forms of violence, especially those leveraged against women and children, urging the governments of the world, to uphold the dignity of each and every human being.

While some of those gathered were faith leaders, the majority were executives and programme coordinators in charge of actually getting services to people in need, in different corners of the world. This was a moment for those delivering actual care in all its diverse forms, inspired by their faith, to speak out against the harm done in the name of their faith.

The Statement issued, composed by all the FBOs, repeated one seminal phrase over and over: “Not in Our Name.” The powerful resonance of their combined voice was based on a very simple idea and intent: a refusal to accept, or abide by, any act of violence or injustice, being justified in the name of faith.

And yet these and many other seminal efforts, and raised voices, and multiple statements, in spite of being hosted and coordinated under the aegis of the world’s premier and largest multilateral entity (the United Nations), remain but drops in an ocean. Nevertheless, the point here is to note a trend in international affairs, where faith actors themselves are both designing and serving, together, a global public *consciousness* which is determined to realise peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

Interfaith dialogue, in the sense of gatherings where each faith representative speaks to their respective wisdom, and to compare and evolve common ground in terms of beliefs, is one of the oldest forms of human endeavors. But interfaith, or multi-faith actions, remain a path less traversed. And while each of the FBOs serve hundreds of millions of people, assessing their joint cooperation remains a challenge. Not because they do not collaborate to serve –for the story of *Religions for Peace* proves they do– but because it remains a relatively less known, or noticed, global phenomena. And since perception is reality, then we need a significant reality check.

The field of multi-religious, or interfaith, is increasingly populated by new organisations and initiatives, on an almost daily basis. The amount of literature documenting what each faith tradition says about itself, and about social development, social injustice, foreign policies, civil society, etc., today provides reams of substance not only for academia in all corners of the world, but indeed even for profit-making businesses in international consultancies and development sectors.

Religions working together for Positive Peace

In alignment with one of our partners and contributors to the work of *Religions for Peace*, the Institute for Economics and Peace, we understand Positive Peace as societal attitudes that foster peace, as well as sustainable investments in economic development and institutions. Positive Peace can be used to gauge the resilience of a society, or its ability to absorb shocks without falling, or relapsing, into conflict. Positive Peace processes identify and deliberately avoid structures, and means, which advocate for, or indeed, cause, any form of violence (spoken, written, and/or practiced).

For over fifty years, *Religions for Peace* has sought to support local and national efforts to evolve precisely those structures that convene believers in peace: Interreligious Platforms. While other organisations also bring such believers together in diverse formats, *Religions for Peace* specifically seeks faith leaders and representatives of religious institutions.

In December 2019, 250 faith leaders, representing every faith tradition, from each corner of the world, came together to evolve a common strategic vision, and chart paths of collective action, to ensure that their work together, counts as part of the realisation of sustainable human development.

This came to be the Strategic Plan developed by and for the *Religions for Peace* global movement. As many of the faith leaders, each heading major religious institutions and communities of the faithful –far more deeply rooted and representative of societies than any multilateral entity could ever aspire to be– maintained, the global goals are what religious actors have already served, for centuries. The original social service sectors of our world, after all, are religious institutions. And to this today, in most corners of the world, FBOs continue to serve basic primary health care, education, humanitarian, and public advocacy. *Religions for Peace* has served for over fifty years to convene the platforms which bring faith leaders together across their diverse spectrums, on a level playing field, to serve the common good, together. Many of the faith leaders involved, have honed their skills of not just advocacy or preaching togetherness, but indeed, refining the means of joint collaboration and service delivery. These leaders are as special as each and every faith leader, but they have an additional set of skills, which can only be learned with the trials and errors of shared collaboration.

Indeed, there are many experts on religion(s) and its/their relevant realities. And they have existed since time immemorial. In fact, ancient libraries have been set up, burned and reconstructed with a bulk of just such literature and knowledge. But again, there are few experts on *what it is within each faith tradition that makes it imperative to serve as religions working together for peace*, in a comparative, global, normative and yet operational, manner. And this is what this volume begins to explore.

Bird's Eye View of this Volume

It is wise to be reminded that this is but volume one, dealing with some faith traditions, and not all.

The overarching values which emerge from the rich learning shared here point to how generosity, working together towards future progress, equality, compassion, and addressing skepticism, are among the most shared. In fact, sharing itself, and the reciprocity thereof, are at the core of what each faith advocates –hence the imperative to serve together.

Most authors explicitly acknowledge the fact that there are sacred texts from all traditions which stress, if not encourage, interreligious endeavors and interactions. All authors identify the limitations of working exclusively within each faith tradition, while pointing how each provides powerful incentives, and plentiful examples, to work collaboratively.

Dr. Lilian J. Sison and Dr. Luigi De Salvia, both Catholic, draw on *Nostra Aetate*, with Dr. De Salvia explaining its role in his personal faith transformation, that he moved from a state of being agnostic, toward connecting with greater spirituality, and thereby also to an added appreciation for interfaith relationships. While he acknowledges that there are components of faith traditions which are reluctant to engage in dialogue and cooperation with those who believe in other traditions, he argues that those components are contained within the more insular perimeters. Modernity, he maintains, lends itself to tolerance and new cultural approaches, as well as demands for sensitivities to other faiths amongst which we must coexist for positive peace to be realised.

Dr. Nayla Tabbara, Dr. Sison, as well as Dr. Pritpal Kaur Ahluwalia, specifically focus on the role of interfaith work in developing and serving the common good. Spiritual traditions, they argue, are as much about compelling goodness upon others, as much as oneself.

Ms. Pascale Frémond, like Dr. De Salvia, highlights the 1986 Assisi meeting as the door opener to Indigenous voices within the interreligious efforts of the Catholic church. Dr. Kaur and Dr. Anantanand Rambachan speak to the oneness of humanity, and the necessary reality of equity, which interreligious efforts are built on. Dr. Rambachan specifies that modern religious diversity creates novel conditions in which interfaith work emerges as uniquely plausible, and possible. Dr. Kaur outlines the mandate for interreligious efforts within the Sikh tradition, citing the very beginning of Sikh faith as precisely a call to this as a practice of faith.

Dr. Rambachan also addresses the limitations of individual theologies, while noting that Gandhi modeled an inclusive and religiously diverse community, finding a centring force around cooperation for the benefit of the poor and oppressed. He notes how religious traditions have a tendency to, at best, tolerate those who follow other traditions because there is no sensed need for them to enrich their tradition with the theology of another. In turn, he notes that rather than providing reasons to celebrate the presence of other traditions, other traditions become of instrumental value to demonstrate, at best, peaceful coexistence. The place to start, he argues, is a recognition of the shared divinity which no one human can grasp, regardless of the tradition. We all have a limited relationship with God, he notes, which justifies our need for each other. Indeed, our theologies call for us to learn from one another.

Dr. Johannes Lähnemann also speaks to a limitation – arguing that Christian tradition can use the Gospel and Jesus’s singularity as God’s only son, often resulting in a sense of exclusivity which may undermine other traditions. But, he argues that Jesus’s own life and actions illustrate how to move beyond these apparent theological limitations. The way to do so in everyday life, he argues, is to re-examine the foundations of our own faith, as well as evaluate the history of how communities coexisted related to faith. Dr. Lähnemann emphasises religious education as a means to find the words to explain faith and beliefs to those who might be skeptical, or different. Children, he argues, are central to a process whereby the principles of each faith can become a means of learning to dialogue while living together, eventually developing to a learned habitus where even topics where individuals are unfamiliar or might disagree, can be matters of engagement through dialogue, rather than the boundaries of otherness and silencing of difference.

Dr. Tabbara argues inspiration for interreligious connections can be found within the text of the Qur'an. She notes that most religious leaders engage people of good will by offering up a call to collaborate and join together as God's brothers and sisters. This is a clear statement towards a great future; other Islamic scholars have echoed this in order to continue to inspire good deeds, she notes. Dr. Tabbara goes a step further, however, as she illustrates how the Lebanese based Adyan Foundation (*Religions for Peace's* Arab regional affiliate), has actually championed Religious Social Responsibility, as a term and a practice, which removes the experience of serving or observing one's faith from the private or strictly similar religious community, to the means of serving positive peace in the broad public sphere.

Dr. Kaur notes that equality and oneness of creation, are significant themes throughout the Guru Granth Sahib (sacred Sikh text). Every human being must be treated equally because God is present within them. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, she relates, founded the tradition of *Langar*, free vegetarian food that is available at all Gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship). The *Langar* is a key illustration of multi-religious engagement and social justice work which breaks down barriers of identity and status divisions. All Gurdwaras have an open-door policy, welcoming everyone to the space of equality. The practice of compassion, Kaur emphasises, urges Sikhs to work multi-religiously, indeed, she notes that Sikhs pray constantly for the welfare of all humanity. She gives the example of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ), a Sikh faith-based organisation, which has continuously committed itself to a stance of multi-faith engagement and collaboration, even in the face of criticism.

Dr. Sison emphasises how "*Nostra Aetate*," the declaration by Pope Paul VI in 1965, is concerned with dialogue between religions and the universal brotherhood and respect that should be cultivated amongst all people. Three reasons are put forth as to why dialogue is essential: how we all belong to one human family, are all gifted with a sense of spirituality, and have "a shared responsibility for the common good." Dr. Sison notes how the 1986 meeting in Assisi (also mentioned in Ms. Frémond's paper) became a symbol for the promotion of peace through dialogue and interreligious collaboration. This commitment to interfaith dialogue was continued in the 2019 Abu Dhabi meeting and signing of a Document on Human Fraternity, between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb (both represented on *Religions for Peace's* World Council). This Document was followed by Pope Francis' 2020 letter, "*Fratelli Tutti*," which promotes universal fraternity. Dr. Sison argues that peacebuilding and social action (positive peace) are a manifestation of faith in action for religious actors.

Ms. Pascale Frémond talks about transformation within historically colonised Indigenous People from Christian influence, to more traditional beliefs and system of spirituality. She notes that many Indigenous spiritual traditions were, historically, changed and impacted by the influence of Christianity. She describes how many Indigenous communities are today returning to, or continuing, their traditional practices of spirituality, in which a focus on self-sufficiency, and the contribution of every being to the maintenance of the world, and ways of life, is deeply significant.

This can mean, Ms. Frémond argues, that groups have developed mutual aid practices and an overall commitment to generosity, and cultivated a profound sense of community between peoples, nature, and “the world of spiritual powers.”

Ms. Frémond notes that Indigenous communities, although often left out of interfaith dialogues, are nevertheless open to listening and understanding others of different faiths. The idea of the “circle of life” is significant as it exemplifies the Amerindian vision of the world and is the foundation for the engagement of First Peoples’ in interreligious, interspiritual and intercultural cooperation. “Self-history” refers to the idea that only Amerindians can validate their history and values. This, she points out, is a conscious push back on the centuries of colonisation and appropriation that Native peoples have faced.

Rabbi Dr. Burton Visotzky, also a veteran of interfaith work for decades, narrates how the rabbis from the third to the fifth century, were contending with the differing creation stories in Genesis, and offering insight into the development of humanity (including differing religions). Human interaction is mediated by the relationship with God, he explains, “We often need to be reminded that we are better than no person, and no person is better than us in the eyes of our Creator regardless of religion, nation, etc.” Ancient rabbis taught that because humanity was created by one person, divisions cannot be drawn in a supremacy of ancestry. As with Dr. Rambachan, Dr. Visotzky argues that we must recognise the divine in ourselves and in others.

He explains that while “be holy” was stated to mean “be separate” in early commentary, it held a deeper meaning: as God is merciful and compassionate, we too must act with mercy and compassion. There are consistent mentions in Rabbinic texts of loving the other as yourself, even if we fail to see how alike to others we are. Dr. Visotzky argues that Judaism commands the care for all other humans. This, he explains, can practically mean wealth distribution, humanitarian aid and work, or efforts for multireligious collaboration and peace building. As illustrated, Dr. Visotzky points to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and other Jewish organisations’ relief and development work, as part of their “Jewish obligation to interreligious engagement.”

The above is but a sampling, and an incomplete one at that. You really should read this whole labour of love.

New York, August 2022

Azza Karam
Secretary General,
Religions for Peace

The Political and the Theological: Hindu Justifications for Interreligious Engagement



Anantanand Rambachan

Co-President, *Religions for Peace*



Our world has always been characterised by religious diversity, both across and within religious traditions. Human beings have held different beliefs and engaged in different ritual practices for as long as we know. Diversity has not suddenly become a new characteristic of our present age. What is new about our religious diversity is the fact that it is rapidly becoming a feature of many societies which were religiously homogenous or where diversity was largely internal to a particular religion. Our awareness of other religions has never been as great as it is today.

People of other traditions are not the objects of distant curiosity. We encounter them personally in our daily lives. We live or we will all live in communities that are diverse and, for all that we can see, determined to stay so. Our lives are, each day, rapidly becoming intertwined with people of other faiths and no faith. We will all live our lives, religious, social, and professional in the context of religious diversity. "No longer," as W.C. Smith wrote many years ago, "are people of other persuasions peripheral or distant, the idle curiosities of travelers' tale. The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbours, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians and Hindus, Buddhist, and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street. Increasingly, not only is our civilisation's destiny affected by their actions, but we drink coffee with them personally as well." [1]

In addition to our increasing interaction with people of different religions in our communities and places of work, we have much better access to knowledge of other traditions. Our bookstores and the world wide web offer us translations of the sacred texts of the world's religions as well as secondary writings by scholars and practitioners of those traditions. This knowledge comes in forms accessible to the interested lay person as well as the religious specialist.

[1] W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 11.

This awareness also comes with challenges. Each day the news makes us increasingly aware of fear, hatred, and intolerance in our global and national communities, directed at other religions. Many believe that faithfulness and commitment to their own traditions require rejection of other faiths and their practitioners. All of our traditions, at some time and in some place, have been the objects of hate and all have been employed to justify hate.

The religious map of the United States continues to be radically transformed by the opening of its doors to immigrants from Asia. Today, people of other religions are our neighbours, friends, colleagues, and competitors. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the doors of the United States were virtually shut to immigrants from Asia. In 1965, a new immigration law, initiated by John F. Kennedy, abolished quotas based on national origins and opened the United States to immigrants from Asia. Today a Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim can find a place of worship, prayer, or meditation in almost every major city in the United States and there are growing communities of Sikhs, Jains, and Zoroastrians. When the first Hindu teacher to the western world, Swami Vivekananda, traveled across the United States in 1893, he delivered most of his addresses to Christian audiences in Unitarian Churches. If Vivekananda could visit the United States today, he would sit on the altars of Hindu temples and address the children and grandchildren of Hindu immigrants.

We cannot think of the religious diversity in our communities as a temporary phenomenon. We are growing in the realisation, some more slowly than others, that this diversity is here to stay. There are no realistic prospects that human beings will be brought under a single tradition. Our modern era is witness to a new vitality and resurgence in many of traditions of our world and especially the traditions that originated in South and Southeast Asia. These have emerged from colonialism with a renewed sense of purpose and universal relevance. They are ready to share their insights and to participate in the shaping of our world. I mention this fact because

our response to diversity depends, in part, on whether we see diversity as an unwelcome problem to be overcome or as an opportunity for enrichment, growth and even religious revitalisation.

Unless we individualise and privatise our understanding and practice of religion, we cannot ignore the challenges and implications of living in a religiously diverse community. All of our religious traditions, in addition to what they proclaim and teach about individual human destiny and fulfillment, also imagine, and include a social vision of the ideal human community characterised by justice, peace, prosperity and freedom from violence, exploitation and fear. In the *Ramacharitamanas*, his re-telling of the life-story of Rama, Tulasidasa speaks of this utopian community as *Ramarajya* (the kingdom of Rama). In this community “there is no premature death or suffering of any kind; everyone enjoys beauty and health. No one is poor, sorrowful or in want; no one is ignorant.” The community is free from hate and violence and nature flourishes. “The trees in the forests,” wrote Tulasidasa, “bloom and bear fruit throughout the year; the elephant and lion live together as friends; birds and beasts of every kind are no longer hostile and live in harmony with one another.”[2]

Any religious tradition which is today concerned about the social order and its transformation is challenged to reach across historical borders, find common ground and values with people of other faiths and strive together to confront and overcome the causes of human suffering and conflict. Our hopes for just and peaceful communities will only be realised together or not at all. Interreligious deliberations and engagement are not a luxury for the starry-eyed among us, but have become a real and practical necessity in our communities of diversity. In the task of community building, we must be ready to labour with women and men of every faith and with those who have none.

Political scientist, Ashutosh Varshney (2003) examined the factors that might explain what caused certain cities in

[2]See, Sri Ramacaritamansa, trans. R.C. Prasad (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991. See Uttarakanda (Final Chapter) 704-707 for full description of Ramarajya.

India to remain peaceful and others to explode violently when Hindu-Muslim conflicts broke out. Varshney discovered that the explanation may be found in what he terms “networks of engagement,” or associations between religiously diverse communities. Where these relationships were strong and involved participation in common activities, such communities were able to avoid the violence and hostility that ravaged other neighbouring communities.[3] Such relationships, however, are not easy to develop after communities erupt in tension and violence and when mistrust and suspicion are widespread. We must invest our energies in building relationships as a long-term strategy.

The hope for peaceful communities, free from violence, is central to the Hindu tradition. One of the most popular of all Hindu prayers expresses this aspiration:

*Sarve bhavantu sukhinah / Sarve santu
nirāmayah
Sarve bhadrāni paśyanti
Om śhāntiḥ śhāntiḥ śhāntiḥ*

*Peace peace peace.
May all be happy. May all be free from
disease.*

*May all know that which is good. May no
one suffer*

Every Hindu prayer ends with a threefold recitation of the word peace, *śhāntiḥ*.

The repetition of the word *śhāntiḥ* expresses the Hindu hope for peace in the natural world, in the human community and in one’s own heart, while emphasising the interrelatedness of all three spheres. We will not attain peace in a world in which there is violence and injustice in human communities and in which nature is plundered and recklessly exploited. At the same time, we cannot be effective agents of peace in the world if we lack peace within ourselves.

The foremost ethical value in Hinduism is *ahimsa* (non-violence), regarded in the Hindu tradition as the foremost of virtues. In his understanding of the meaning of *ahimsa*, Gandhi explained that in its negative form it means abstention from injury to living beings. In its positive form, *ahimsa* is the

practice of love and compassion (*daya*) for all. For Gandhi, *ahimsa* also means justice towards everyone and abstention from all forms of exploitation.

One of my inspirations in the field of interreligious engagement, Mahatma Gandhi, understood these truths well. The solution to India’s problems, he saw clearly, needed the cooperative engagement of all of India’s religious communities. He formed inclusive communities (*ashramas*) with persons from all of India’s diverse religious traditions, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Jews. He hoped that these small communities could show what is possible at a national level. Gandhian inspired interfaith action lives on in many communities in India.[4]

Gandhi believed in the absolute oneness of God and the singleness of the human community. “I believe,” wrote Gandhi, “in the absolute oneness of God, and, therefore, of humanity.”[5] There are many names but only one divine reality. This is an ancient Hindu teaching articulated for the first time in the Rg Veda 1.164.46, “The One Being the wise speak of in many ways.”

Call Him Ishwara, Allah, God, Abura Mazda. His names are as innumerable as there are men. He is one without a second. He alone is great. There is none greater than He. He is timeless, formless, stainless. Such is my Rama. He alone is my Lord and Master.[6]

For Gandhi, understanding this teaching is conducive to building communities across our diversity and even to worshipping together. His *ashramas* were special spaces to live out this truth and his evening worship was always interreligious with songs and readings from different traditions.

Gandhi invited members of these diverse faiths into cooperative action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

The justification that I articulated above falls into the category of political arguments for interreligious dialogue and cooperation. These are much easier to articulate and to describe. In the

[3] Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, Ashram 2003).

[4] “Shanti Ashram,” Shanti Ashram Charitable Society, Accessed on July 18, 2022, <https://www.shantiaashram.org/>.

[5] Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers*, ed. Krishna Kripalani, (New York: Continuum, 2001), 57.

[6] Mahatma Gandhi, “Weekly Letter,” *Harijan*, Volume 10, (Ahmedabad, India), 409. See, Gandhi quoted in

interdependent context of our lives, it should not be too difficult to understand the necessity for interreligious engagement to solve major social challenges. The political justification for interreligious dialogue, however, must be complemented by theological justifications, if we are to move beyond necessity to a deeper value for our neighbours of other religious traditions.

Our religious traditions often present themselves as self-sufficient entities, with little or no need theologically for other traditions. Other traditions may be represented as entirely wrong or only partially true. Such theological arguments do not provide spaces for mutually enriching interreligious relations. They lead, at best, to “tolerance” of neighbours born of necessity. Religious engagement is better-secured, and interreligious relations more meaningful, when theological arguments enrich the political arguments. Without theological arguments, other traditions may have instrumental value for us; we are content as long as they maintain the peace and do not disrupt our lives. We have no reasons, however, to celebrate their presence among us.

We begin to think theologically about religious diversity when we ask, not about the political value of others, but about their religious value. What is the religious value of having a world in which there are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, and Jains? How is our world diminished in the absence of any one of these? Do we have a religious need for each other? As a Muslim, or Christian what is your theological value to me? Does it matter religiously that there are Muslims and Christians in our world? Would it make any difference if they were absent? Such questions are not easy ones to answer, but they are certainly among the most important ones that we can ask today in the context of our encounter with people of other religions. Each tradition will have to pursue these questions in its own distinctive ways.

Perhaps there is a place where we can all start. We can all start by acknowledging that the ultimate in our traditions, whether spoken of as God or Truth, is beyond the scope of all words and symbols and never fully grasped in the

finite human mind. The Taittiriya Upanishad (2.9.1) speaks of *brahman* as “that from which all words, along with the mind, turn back, having failed to grasp.” The Kena Upanishad (2:3) expresses the impossibility of comprehending the infinite as one does a limited object by delighting in the language of paradox.

It is known to him to whom It is unknown; he does not know It to whom It is Known. It is unknown to those who know well, and known to those who do not know.

The point of such texts is not to demean human language or to negate its value, but to remind us of its limits and of our limits in relation to God. It is a central Hindu conviction that our words are inadequate and that the One is always more than we could define, describe, or understand with our finite minds. A God whose nature and essence could be captured in our words or who could be contained within the boundaries of the human mind will not be the absolute proclaimed in any of our traditions. Equating God completely with our words and images would constitute idolatry.

If our theologies cannot limit the limitless, we can all learn and be enriched by the ways in which others have experienced and apprehended the absolute and by the values they have derived from such encounters and experiences. The acknowledgement of the limits of our human understanding in relation to God is a deep source and justification for humility, openness, and dialogue in our relationships with people of other faiths. This acknowledgement is also a profound justification of our need for each other.

Humility is also grounded in the core Hindu teaching that the divine is present equally in every being; everyone and everything is enfolded most intimately in God. Nothing exists outside of God, and nothing exists but for the fact that it receives the gift of moment-to-moment sustenance from God. In the words of the sacred Bhagavadgita, everything rests in the divine like radiant jewels strung on a single thread. Every human encounter

is, in fact, an encounter with the divine. Every human relationship is a relationship with God. In the face of every being we behold the divine.

This truth of divinity abiding in all hearts is the most fundamental source and ground of the intrinsic dignity and equal worth of every human being.

It is our theological antibody to the instrumentalisation of human beings and the denial of their personhood. We cannot claim, as so many across traditions and institutions do today, to acknowledge and to honour the divine while dishonouring and demeaning human beings. We cannot be indifferent towards or give support to historical structures that oppress, exploit, and impede the ability of human beings to flourish and to joyfully celebrate existence.

Personally speaking, my own religious life as a Hindu has been and continues to be immensely enriched and stirred by my encounters with practitioners of other traditions. For over forty years, I have participated in the dialogue programmes of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. I have benefited immeasurably from the opportunity to converse and interact with people of other faiths, and I know that my religious poverty would be much greater without the wealth I have received from people of other traditions. I continue to learn about other traditions and see my own with greater clarity. We need each other to help us see and understand ourselves better. Without the voice of the religious other, our human proclivity to self-centeredness and self-righteousness may go unchallenged and arrogance rather than humility may become the dominant values of our existence.

What does this mean for us? While our traditions are precious to us, we can only profess our commitments with humility, with reverence for people of other faiths, and with openness to the possibility of learning from and being enriched by them. Admitting the limits of our understanding is not limiting. It opens for us the possibility of valuing and learning from the distinctive insights of other religious traditions. Knowing the

limits of our theology should open our hearts and minds to the richness of other theologies and their potential to deepening our understanding. Religious diversity enriches our world theologically, and we are all diminished by its absence or when we seek to silence diversity or make it invisible.

I believe that our theologies in their importantly different ways call us to recognise that we all have more to learn from each other. Even if we think that the teachings of our traditions embody the highest truths, we must be ready to admit that our understanding and articulation of these truths will always be incomplete.

As a Hindu scholar and practitioner, having written several books on Hindu non-dualism, I continue to try to understand what it means to describe the relationship between the God and the world as not-two and I benefit in this search from my engagement with friends of other traditions.

I need my neighbours of other faiths; not only politically, but in gratitude for the beautiful ways in which they embody their traditions and enrich our world. In the light of the ultimate mystery of the divine, all human understanding falls short. Yet each tradition is precious and deepens our understanding of the divine. Other traditions enrich and help to open our hearts and minds to the inexhaustible divine nature. We have a theological need for each other.

Religions for Peace is a gift for religious engagement, politically and theologically, that aims to enrich us as human beings and to enable us to work together for the good life for all.

The Church in Dialogue: From ‘*Nostra Aetate*’ to ‘*Fratelli Tutti*’



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For the past fifty years, the Pontiffs who occupied the Chair of St. Peter in Rome as the head of the Catholic Church fostered a spirit of dialogue that is held important in the whole of Catholic Tradition. They promoted a dialogue based on the teachings and practice clearly defined by the conciliar document of Vatican II - ‘*Nostra Aetate*’ the declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions proclaimed by Pope Paul VI in 1965. *Nostra Aetate* significantly changed Catholicism’s approach toward non-Christian religions and is considered a foundational text that opened the path for dialogue, fraternity and friendship with people of other religions.

‘*Nostra Aetate*’ (‘In Our Times’) is a document on *dialogue between religions*. It affirms that all men, especially those of living faith, should respect each other, should rise above all discrimination, should live in harmony and serve the universal brotherhood.[1] The Declaration focused on the Church’s relationship with Judaism. It highlights the Jewish root of the Christian faith and the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews and recommends “*mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.*”[2] As the document developed it expanded to clarify ideas of the Church’s respect for the spiritual, moral and cultural values of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The encyclical ‘*rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.*’ The Church regards with sincere reverence “*those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men and women.*”[3] To the adherents of Islam, the Church “*shows particular attention to the believing Muslims, given their faith in the one God, their sense of prayer, and their esteem for the moral life. It desires that Christians and Muslims together promote harmony for all men, social justice, moral values, peace, liberty.*” [4]

[1]Pope Paul VI, “Declaration on the Relation of The Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* Proclaimed by His Holiness,” Vatican, October 28, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

The respect and esteem to non-Christian religions expressed in the document left an indelible mark in the history of the Catholic Church.

In the years following the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* significant steps in dialogue particularly with the Islamic world were taken by various Popes.[5] Among them were the words spoken by Paul VI in his address to the Dignitaries and Representatives of Islam, in Uganda in 1969. The Pope paid homage to the first African Christian martyrs, making a comparison that associated “the confessors of the Muslim faith” with the martyrdom suffered at the hands of the sovereigns of local tribes: “*We feel sure to be in communion with you,*” he said, *when we implore the Almighty to arouse in the hearts of all believers of Africa the desire for pardon and reconciliation, so often commended in the Gospels and in the Koran.*”[6]

This fraternal gesture was succeeded by St. Pope John Paul II in his Speech to Young Muslims in Morocco in August 1985, reaffirming the Church’s esteem for Muslims “*We Christians and Muslims have many things in common, as believers and as human beings,*” he said on that occasion. “*We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created our world and brings His creatures to their perfection.*”[7] The Pope emphasised, that dialogue between Christians and Muslims is today more necessary than ever.

Following that year, on 27 October 1986, St Pope John Paul II invited representatives of the various Christian denominations and world religions to come to Assisi to pray for peace. The Assisi meeting became a symbol for dialogue and common commitment among believers of different faiths. “*The coming together of so many religious leaders to pray,*” the Pope said on that occasion “*is in itself an invitation today to the world to become aware that there exists another dimension of peace and*

another way of promoting it which is not a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining. It is the result of prayer, which, in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone.”[8] In 2011, his successor, Pope Benedict XVI presided a meeting of over 300 religious leaders to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace.

Most recently in Abu Dhabi, on 4 February 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahamad al Tayyeb, signed the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which reflects the continuing promise and progress of interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims. This declaration called for “*the leaders of the world, as well as the architects of international policy and world economy, to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing.*”[9]

Following this meeting in Abu Dhabi, Pope Francis launched on 3 October 2020 his encyclical letter “*Fratelli Tutti.*” The encyclical is an invitation to renewed social friendship and universal fraternity. It provides a starting point for renewing our commitment to caring for our neighbour and a global society built on justice and the common good.[10]

Implication of *Nostra Aetate* and *Fratelli Tutti* on dialogue and social harmony

Nostra Aetate gives us three fundamental reasons why dialogue is essential in the life of the Church.[11] First is the conviction that ‘We All belong to one Human Family’– a principle widely shared by religions all over the world. Dialogue is imperative in understanding

[5]Tornielli, Andrea, “Nostra Aetate: Opening the path to interreligious dialogue,” Vatican News, 18 June, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-06/nostra-aetate-opening-the-path-to-interreligious-dialogue.html>
[6]Pope Paul VI, “Address of Paul VI to the Dignitaries and Representatives of Islam,” 1 August 1969, <http://www.vatican.va/speeches>Uganda>
[7]Pope John Paul II, “Address of His Holiness John Paul II to Young Muslims,” 19 August 1985, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850819_giovani-stadio-casablanca.html
[8]Pope John Paul II, “Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions,” 27 October 1986, <http://www.vatican.va/1986-octobers-documents>
[9] “A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” Vatican, 4 February 2019, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/04/190204.html>
[10]Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Friendship,” Vatican, 3 October 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html
[11] Gaccia, Archbishop Gabriele Giordano, (unpublished material) “Interreligious Dialogue: Path to Harmony,” Keynote Address of the Papal Nuncio given during the gathering of UNIHARMON Partners Philippines at the Iran Embassy Manila Cultural Section, 15 October 2018.

the various spiritual and faith traditions. We must seek the common ground of shared values among diverse faiths to show that despite diversity we are one human family with the same fundamental aspirations for mutual respect, for acceptance and for living in peace.

The second reason – “We are all gifted with a sense of spirituality.” Every human being has a spiritual sense, a sense of the divine – expressed in different ways according to different faith traditions. Even non-believers are gifted with this sense as evidenced by recent advances in neural and cognitive science which support the idea that the spiritual or the sacred is fundamental to human experience and flourishing.[12] Spirituality is the entry point of dialogue and through interreligious dialogue we could share stories on how our experiences on divine love, our spirituality, promote attitudes that move us to action towards the attainment of shared values such as justice and lasting peace.

The third reason for interreligious dialogue is based on the universal principle that “we have a shared responsibility for the common good” – With Faith as our wellspring, our capacity to work together for the common good can come only through compassion and mercy and the ability to empathise with one another, especially those who are in need. We live in a world with underlying chaos at multiple fronts and there is a myriad of activities where believers of different faiths can work together towards common goals, taking a step closer to peace and prosperity and spread equity of treatment and make a positive change in the world.

This principle of shared responsibility is reaffirmed in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* in the context of *Nostra Aetate’s* exhortation for universal friendship. In this encyclical, the current Pope calls upon us, especially we, people of Faith, to take risks together for the transformation of the World. He is exhorting us to create different spaces, economic, political and social –where we can encounter one another face to face, where we can regard each other as

children of the same God and begin the difficult journey of love. The encyclical invites religions to be models of dialogue, brokers of peace and bearers of the message of transcendent love to a ‘wounded’ world. Peace, accordingly, comes about in a thousand little acts in daily life and the artisans of peace are us, the men and women, brothers and sisters of diverse faiths bound by fraternal love.

Faith in Action: Peacebuilding and Dialogue with the ‘Other’

Religious people’ engagement on peacebuilding efforts and social action is often a clear manifestation of their Faith in action. For example, the Christian members of *Religions for Peace-Philippines*, draw inspiration from sacred scriptures, the encyclicals and in the magnanimity of religious teachings in carrying out their advocacy work.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ himself is the model of peace when he said “*Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*” – **John 14:27**

And the first step in peacebuilding and working harmoniously with people from diverse faiths is the authentic desire of inclusiveness and welcoming the other. Within the New Testament of the Christian Bible (2011) the most often cited passage dealing with welcoming the stranger is from **Matthew 25: 31-40**.

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” This is further reinforced in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**) a gospel story at the heart of *Fratelli Tutti* - “*A Stranger on the Road.*” It is the story of the foreigner who acts as a true neighbour to the man robbed and beaten by the side of the road. In this encyclical, Pope Francis is calling us to embody the love of the Good Samaritan in a new social ethic where “*we are called to rebuild our hurting world to form a community of men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others who reject the creation of a society of exclusion and act instead as neighbours lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good.*” [13]

[12] Templeton Foundation, “2015 Foundation Report,” A Science of Spirituality for the 21st Century,

<https://www.4x3.net/jtf6/>

[13] Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti.”

As we draw inspiration from scriptures and religious tradition, we in *Religions for Peace*-Philippines, plant the seeds of peace more concretely through peacebuilding and dialogue. We have committed to advancing multi-religious cooperation to promote harmony and peace among all groups, including seeking an honest and just solutions to the conflicts in the Deep South and to social issues affecting local communities where we adopted a grassroots strategy of trauma healing and capacity building to the women and children displaced by the conflict in Central Mindanao, or in protecting the children of upland dwellers through birth registration programmes, or in providing relief goods to victims of conflicts, natural calamities, the COVID-19 pandemic, or in helping communities gain resilience from extreme weather or in afforestation projects in mitigating climate change. These Faith principles also guide us in reaching out to people of other Faiths through solidarity messages, through multi-faith forums, conferences in raising public awareness on global issues such as climate change, gender equality, modern day slavery, and the pandemic. We view the success of these activities from our persistent efforts in building partnerships and social friendships for sustainable engagement in advancing inter-religious collaboration and in peacebuilding activities.

In principle, we see our involvement in peace-building activities as an expression of our Faith in action in the context of shared humanity and shared security. Faith provides the moral lens for prompting us into action and signals to others a commitment to the common good and to shared values such as compassion, forgiveness, justice, altruism and respect for larger-than-life issues. We strive to nurture community work grounded on love and unity, building our stock of what *Robert Putnam* calls ‘social capital’^[14] enabling us to experience human flourishing and the richness of our humanity.

In conclusion, one might ask: What can one do to express his or her solidarity with the human race? The only answer I can find from the lens of our Christian Faith and through our experience in *Religions for Peace*, is to emulate the Good

Samaritan in the Bible; respecting our differences, we embrace the ‘other’ as one of our own. An inspiration which re-echoes the words of Pope Francis during the 50th anniversary of **Nostra Aetate** “*Indifference and opposition have changed into cooperation and benevolence. From enemies and strangers, we have become friends and brothers.*”^[15]

[14]Smidt, Corwin E. 2003. Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003).

[15]Pope Francis, “Interreligious General Audience, On the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Declaration ‘Nostra Aetate,’” Vatican, 28 October 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20151028_udienza-generale.html

Working Multireligiously for the Common Good: An Islamic Perspective



Nayla Tabbara

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Scriptural and official arguments Islamically and throughout the Qur'an, righteousness and doing good deeds is one of the main criteria of leading a good life that pleases God, and it comes just after the belief in God and the belief in the last Day, meaning the belief that we are responsible for our actions, and that we will stand before God to be judged for our actions. For some, righteousness is understood as meaning doing religious practices and helping only the persons from our faith. Yet the Qur'an itself widens this view of righteousness in the verse that defines it, and is commonly known as the verse of righteousness (*Ayat al Birr*): *“Righteousness is not (merely) that you turn your faces to the East and the West (towards the Qibla); but righteousness is that one believes in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Book and the Prophets, and gives wealth, despite (his) love for it, to relatives, and to orphans, the helpless, the wayfarer, and to those who ask, and (spends) in (freeing) slaves and observes prayer and gives alms. (It is also the act of) those who fulfill their covenant when they enter into a covenant, and, of course, those who are patient in hardship and suffering and when in battle! Those are the ones who are truthful, and those are the God-fearing.”*[1]

Righteousness is thus a whole system of belief beyond oneself, of being faithful and dependable, of being attuned to the needs of others and of overcoming attachment to what we possess through giving it to those in need, from whatever background they may be. In a deeper spiritual sense, everything we think we possess is not our possession, but is entrusted to us by God so that we do good with it, to our family and community, but also to all those in need that cross our path. Surat al Ma'un expresses clearly that prayer without aid to those in need, is actually a denial of religion:

*Have you seen him who denies Religion?
That is he who repels the orphan
and does not urge the feeding of the
needy.
So woe to them who pray,
those who are heedless of their prayers,
those who make a pretense,
and deny aid.*[2]

In all those verses, aid and righteousness are not addressed to Muslims only but to all humans in need, or those who are suffering injustice. And aid in turn comes not only as giving money or support, but also comes as creating systems to reverse injustice.

Muslim organisations worldwide do provide aid and support not only to Muslims but to others, whatever their faith is. Even religious authorities have been known throughout history and until today to give Zakat (the almsgiving), of Muslims to non-Muslims in times of need. All this is of course based on the fact that according to the Qur'an, we all belong to one human family, no matter our faith, ethnicity, ability, or gender, as we have all been created from a single soul.[3] Yet, is there something in our scriptures that goes beyond helping those who are different in faith and belief and that considers the other, from another faith or belief, as a partner with whom we can work for the benefit of society?

One of the most important scriptural arguments from within Islam towards working together multireligiously for the common good is the verse: *"Help one another to righteousness and consciousness of God (taqwa)."*[4] Another verse says that the diversity of religions is according to the will of God: *"To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one community, but that He may try you in what He has given to you. So vie with one another in good works; to God you shall all return, and He will then inform you of that in which you differed."*[5] In this verse, not only does God tell us that He willed us to be of different faiths, but, He calls upon us not to waste time in theological argumentation to prove who is right and who is wrong in their dogma, but commands us on the contrary to spend our time on this earth in inspiring each other to do good deeds. That same message is also found in Al Baqara 2:148 : *"Every person has their direction to which they turn, so vie with one another in good works. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together; surely God has power over all things."*[6]

In addition to that, the verse 40 of Surat al Hajj (22) says that: *"Were it not for God's causing some people to support others, destruction would have befallen the monasteries, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which God's Name is mentioned greatly."*[7] This verse shows that interreligious solidarity is actually inspired by God. So, we become more instruments of God when we support each other from different faiths to preserve our diverse religious heritage willed by God. We also become true instruments of God when we support each other to preserve our common home, as the verse 251 of Surat al Baqara says: *"Had God not supported some people by others, the earth would have surely been corrupted."*[8]

This compelling to work for the good, together with people from other faiths is also found in the Human Fraternity Document signed by the Grand Imam Ahmad al Tayyeb, with Pope Francis on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi. Towards the end of the document, we read that they want this Declaration to be "a sign of the closeness between East and West, between North and South, and between all who believe that God has created us to understand one another, cooperate with one another and live as brothers and sisters who love one another." Although the document is signed by representatives of two major religions, their call goes beyond Christians and Muslims, to all believers as well as to all "people of good will." [9]

Previously, in 2017, Al Azhar, the leading Sunni Muslim authority in the world, in a declaration for Citizenship and Coexistence, called Christians and Muslims to work together for the benefit of their shared societies: "We are people that live on the same ship and within one society: we face common dangers which threaten our lives, our societies, our states and all our religions. We want, with a common will, a common sense of belonging and a common destiny, to contribute, working seriously to save our societies and our states, correcting our relations with the world, to give our sons and

[3] "O people, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women" (Al Nisa' 4:1)

[4] al Maida 5:2.

[5] Al Ma'ida 5:48.

[6] Al Baqara 2:148.

[7] Surat al Hajj 22:40.

[8] Al Baqara 2:251.

[9] Francis I, A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together [Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis the United Arab Emirates], 4 February 2019, accessed 18 July 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

daughters the opportunity of a promising future and a better life.”[10]

Ten years earlier, a document entitled “A Common Word” drafted at the initiative of Prince Ghazi of Jordan and signed originally by 138 Islamic scholars from around the world also called for inspiring each other to do good deeds: “So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.”[11]

Examples from the work of Adyan Foundation

The Adyan Foundation was created in 2006 in Lebanon by five Christian and Muslim founding members who believed that we need to work together for the common good based on the values that we uphold in both of our religions. Yet we also called it Adyan, meaning religions in the plural, to convey that all religions as well as non-religious people are called to work together for the same values of public life.

Adyan developed in fact the concept of Religious Social Responsibility that transports the faith experience from the private sectarian sphere to the public social sphere, where believers can translate their values into a sincere engagement in the service of others to achieve justice and peace. Activists from different religious or civil backgrounds meet around their common belief in human dignity and the common good without discrimination.

This understanding of religious social responsibility strengthens the bonds of cooperation between the different social components on the basis of respecting diversity and fostering solidarity, proceeding from shared values and universal human responsibility. Through religious social responsibility, religions are no longer seen as narrow sectarian groups but as part of the social context and the broader humanistic framework.

Between 2014 and 2017, Adyan worked with all religious authorities in Lebanon, Christian and Muslim to include in Christian and Muslim education these values, proposing lessons on the Value of Diversity, of the Common Good, of

Human Dignity, of Responsibility, of Forgiveness, of honouring pacts and abiding by laws, of Justice and of Solidarity, from both Muslim and Christian perspectives, and suggesting also sermons and homilies on these values.

Adyan also offers trainings for religious leaders and faith-based actors in project development, and proposes seed funding for faith-based actors to implement these projects, within a network called the Forum for Religious Social Responsibility that gathers 100 religious figures. The forum was created after a series of trainings given to religious leaders, men and women, Christian and Muslim, in Lebanon, about political and social engagement. It started with a course on Political and Human Rights literacy for Religious Leaders. Following that, the religious leaders asked for more training, that would allow them to work together in project implementation and in promoting new discourses about diversity and intercommunal solidarity in the media, which led to the creation of a network of all these religious leaders that want to learn together and work together.

Adyan also has been implementing for the last twelve years, a programme in schools in Lebanon, from different religious backgrounds, for education on active and inclusive citizenship. At the end of the programme, students, Christian and Muslim, work together to design and implement community service projects. During the first year, the students learn about identity dynamics, social representations, collective memory, religious diversity, building trust and conflict transformation, fundamentals of citizenship, and they also learn about the Lebanese heritage. They meet each other from different schools and hold sessions together, and they go on a day trip together with students from different schools and different religious and social and regional backgrounds. During the second year, they learn how to measure the needs of a community, and how to design and implement a project that answers those needs, in collaboration with other schools from a different background. Around 500 students

[10] “There are no minorities, only citizens,” Christians and Muslims in the Global World, Oasis International Foundation, 22 April 2022, <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/there-are-no-minorities-only-citizens>.

[11] “The ACW Letter: A Common Word Between Us and You,” A Common Word, The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007 <https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>.

graduate yearly from this programme. A large number of them want to continue being active in interfaith solidarity through Adyan, which led us to create a Youth Network for them.

Adyan also has been implementing online courses for Faith Based Activism, that convey the basis for Religious Social Responsibility, and for a new hermeneutical understanding of religiosity at the service of citizenship, diversity and the common good, to faith-based actors, mainly Muslims, from the different Arab countries. Following the two-months online course, faith-based actors are also given seed funding for initiatives for the common good. Within the course, they learn the fundamentals of citizenship and public life values, and about diversity and how we as humans tend to deal with it, but they also reflect and analyse how different hermeneutical approaches affect us: between a traditional piecemeal legalistic approach and an approach that considers the finality of the law, being the preservation of humanity and of creation. The final focuses on the hermeneutics and allows them to delve into social issues and new religious interpretations concerning our roles as believers.

Through its online platform called Taadudiya (Pluralism) that aims to promote pluralism in the Arab world, Adyan also strives to showcase examples of cross communal solidarity, through two-minute films in a series entitled "What is your story?". One of these films showcases the example of Yassir, a young man from a Muslim family in Najaf, the predominantly Shiite city in Iraq, who set up a Christmas tree and organised Christmas celebrations for Christians living in Najaf where there is usually a predominance of Muslim Shiite symbols in the public sphere.[12]

Another film is about a Sunni-Shi'a initiative in Iraq to promote the knowledge of the diversity of their country.[13]

A third film showcases the initiative of Sameh, a Christian young man, and Hanna, a Muslim young woman who

sadly passed away two years after the film was made. Sameh and Hanna are both from Upper Egypt where strong tensions between Muslims and Christians happen chronically. They decided to open a summer school for Christian and Muslim children to play together and learn together. By that they were able to face many of the taboos of their society: namely interreligious collaboration and gender collaboration, as well as the role of women in public life, and allow the children's parents to start believing in interreligious initiatives.[14] Following this film, the initiative received from the Ministry of youth and sports in Egypt the Best Local Initiative award.

Adyan believes in fact that faith-based actors are ready for such shared initiatives, they just need some encouragement and some funding, and once they do implement them, the majority of the people consider them as examples to follow and to highlight. By multiplying these examples and showcasing them, especially on social media, we reduce the salience of fanatic and extremist messages, and promote not only beautiful words, but also real initiatives of multifaith action and solidarity.

Religions for Peace

The example that we were able to set up in the Middle East, for interfaith solidarity and intercommunal engagement, finds its larger scale implementation in *Religions for Peace*.

I find myself honoured to be part of such a worldwide coalition of most religions and spiritualities of the world, that come together not to promote themselves or to compete with one another, but to join forces for the common good, based on a lucid reading of reality and what it expects from us.

In *Religions for Peace*, I see how we can work together not only from different religions or sects within one religion, but also as persons having different interpretations within the same religion, be they traditional, liberal. or more fundamental. I see also that we are able

[12] "#WhatsYourStory Iraq," Pluralism – Taadudiya, 29 July 2017, https://www.taadudiya.com/%D8%B4%D9%88_%D9%82%D8%B5%D8%AA%D9%83-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82.

[13] "What's Your Story? Mosul, Iraq," YouTube, Taadudiya, 31 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_zCQVB7JE.

[14] "What's Your Story? Egypt," YouTube, Taadudiya, 7 February 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8iaA7tqPvM&list=PLP-PcySIAf_5cJ9EosInEDHvaS7rSQ3MH&index=40.

to promote women as religious leaders on the same footing as male religious leaders, in many of the religions and spiritualities present.

In *Religions for Peace*, we focus on public life values, and on the values of human rights, and build coalitions between religions and international bodies such as UN bodies, to join forces to work for these values, share best practices and learn from each other.

In *Religions for Peace*, we also learn from each other's faiths in issues that some of us have more focus on. One striking example is listening and learning from Indigenous spiritualities when it comes to climate issues, preserving the Earth and the environment.

In short, in *Religions for Peace*, I see how we can work together, believers from different faiths and spiritualities, from all around the world, to testify together to what is best in us humans, in the service of sisters and brothers in humanity, and of the world we live in and have a responsibility to save and preserve.

Jesus Opening Limits: The Relevance of the Gospel for Religious and Interreligious Learning



Johannes Lähnemann

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Standing Commission**



Traditionally, Christian churches have often enough taken the “good news” of Jesus Christ to establish limits: The belief in Jesus Christ’s singularity as God’s only son, as the only saviour, has led to the assumption that all other ways are wrong and that everybody else follows wrong ideals and goals.

It is true that the relation to Jesus and the way he reveals God as his father, as Creator of the world and the Father of humankind—including His own way of helping the suffering and living at their side, His passion, the crucifixion and the resurrection, are the core themes of Christianity—in all Christian confessions

My aim is to show that the assumption of exclusivity restricts the global relevance of the gospel – gospel in the sense of “good news” of what Jesus said and did, and what we should recognise as the significance of his way and his person – and what this means for religious and interreligious learning.[1]

Quite the opposite: The principles of the gospel are of central relevance -

- for understanding the meaning of life, and for being rooted in a faith which gives confidence and guidance for the different experiences in life
- for a foundation of ethics
- for learning in community, in exchange and in mutual respect with people of different faiths and convictions.[2]

The basis from which I start is the conviction that it is possible to gain a historically sound impression of Jesus as he is presented in the synoptic Gospels of Marc, Mathew and Luke and, with some differences, in the Gospel of John –in spite of disagreements among theologians regarding certain points.[3]

Therefore, I will explain where I see that Jesus is opening limits–

- as a Jew living in Galilee during the Roman occupation

[1] This paper is a summary of the central chapter “Wegweisung durch das Evangelium” in my book “Evangelische Religionspädagogik in interreligiöser Perspektive”, Göttingen 1998.

[2] John Hull, “Christliche Erziehung in einem pluralistischen und multireligiösen Europa,” ökumenische Zeitschrift für den Religionsunterricht 26, no.3 (1996).

[3] Cf. for the actual state of scientific discussion J. Roloff: Jesus. München 2012 (5th ed.); G. Theißen, A. Merz: Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch. Göttingen 2011 (4th ed.).

- in His teaching of God's will
- in His acts representing the signs of the coming kingdom of God
- in His solidarity with the weak and the suffering – and at last the way to the cross and to new life at Easter.

Jesus as a Jew from Galilee

Jesus grew up as a carpenter in the little town of Nazareth, educated in the traditions of his people, familiar with them and lived according to them. He was familiar with the Torah and the way and art of Rabbinic teaching and arguing. On the other hand, Galilee was always a region on the borderline, with a pluralistic population, open to Hellenistic influence, the “Galilee of the Gentiles,” from the point of view of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem.[4] As an itinerant preacher, Jesus was often in a situation of crossing borders: to the East Jordan district (under the prince Philip) and to the gentile district of Tyre and Sidon, perhaps sometimes to flee from Herod Antipas, the prince of Galilee.[5] He lived on the border in both senses: on a border of cultures as well as crossing borders, being without a stable home. Another feature of Galilee is its comparatively green landscape, good agriculture and the sea of Galilee with the fishermen living and working there. The imagery of God's creation is present in Jesus' preaching. God as creator of the whole world and as Father of all people is more important in the thinking and preaching of Jesus than God as giver of the law. An example is how He interprets the strong regulations for the Sabbath when He healed people on this holy day: “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.”[6]

Therefore, a Christian existence that takes its orientation from Jesus should be prepared to expose itself to broader experiences, should be open to dynamic interpretation of the inherited religion – and should see cultural diversity as a positive challenge for learning across the generations and especially with children.

Jesus and the nearness of God

The predominant expectation of Judaism at Jesus' time was the expectation of the

Kingdom of God, the Messianic hope that God would save and free Israel – through a “Messiah” sent by God as a spiritual and political leader. Jesus lived in the horizon of this hope. He was evidently influenced by the prophecy of John the Baptist who criticised the nationalist Messianic expectations and called for repentance. But for Jesus, the rule of God was absolutely near, in his teaching and acting. And this rule is dominated by the nearness, the mercifulness and the love of God. This is explained in many famous texts of the gospels. I recall three: 1) The prayer “Our father” in which Jesus offers to come to God as the “Abba,” the loving father who listens to the requests of the believers as to requests with which little children ask their beloved “daddy” for help.[7] 2) The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15,11-32) in which the father receives the lost son like the favoured guest of the house, and also tries to convince the elder brother to share the joy about the return of his younger brother.[8] Jesus uses human images and examples to show: God is like the father in this parable –full of unconventional mercy, full of imagination. And his claim is to make clear that in the light of the coming kingdom of God, no one is valued for power and efficiency but according to the need and ability to be loved. In a time in which childhood is mainly seen as a period of deficiency, he places a child in the midst of his disciples. It is the openness and humbleness of children which is needed: “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”[9] This has implications for education: The openness of children and their need for assistance necessitates to begin education by giving children the experience of acceptance and of being loved.

Opening up new horizons – the pedagogy of the Gospel

The gospel is full of examples where Jesus communicates God's nearness to all people He encountered and especially for whom this comes

[4] Matthew 4:15, according to Isaiah 9:1-2. (New International Version Bible; all subsequent citations are from this version)

[5] Luke 13:31.

[6] Mark 2:27.

[7] Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13.

[8] Luke 15:11-32.

[9] Matthew 18:4.

unexpected. It starts when He calls his disciples: poor fisherman at first, then publicans who are recognised as great sinners. When he eats together with publicans, he shows that they are part of his community – and of God’s, because each meal for a pious Jew has the character of a religious service.

In this way, Jesus opens boundaries -

- for women who have been seen as sinners, like the woman at the table of the Pharisee[10]
- for sick people who have been excluded from society when he heals the lepers[11]
- for people from other nations and with another religious orientation, like the Centurion of Capernaum (Matthew 8, 5-12) or the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7, 24-30)[12]

Let me explain this commentary to the story of the Syrophenician woman. It is one of the most remarkable acts on Jesus’ way. Whilst in a gentile environment (the region of Tyre and Sidon North West of Galilee), Jesus is asked by this woman to free her daughter from a demon. Jesus at first refuses because he sees himself primarily sent to the “lost sheep” in Israel. He uses the hard word: “Let the children (e.g. the Israeli people) first be filled: for it is not good to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.” But she answers: “Yes, Lord; yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.” This humble response impresses Jesus and changes his mind. Jesus is willing to learn from a gentile woman that he is not only sent to the lost people in Israel. He answers: “Go your way; the demon is gone out of your daughter.” And the daughter is healed in this hour. This story makes clear that Jesus teaches and acts in a real world with its borders and limitations and shows the crossing of those borders, and that the gospel is developed in genuine encounter and dialogue that opens up for new horizons.

The frame for this opening of limits can be found in the beatitudes as the opening of the Sermon on the Mount and in the Commandment “love your enemies.” When Jesus blesses the poor, those who mourn, the hungry, and those who are persecuted, he promises the kingdom of God to the weak and simple people who

are the main audience of His teachings, and he expects that these people are thirsty for righteousness and working for peace. The commandment “love your enemies” is a consequence of what is said in the beatitudes: Who has experienced God’s love without having really deserved it, should extend his love not only to his neighbour, but also to his enemy. And the special provocation is that this commandment also includes the political and religious opponent. The parable of the good Samaritan shows that everyone can end up in a situation in which only the love of an enemy (in this case a person regarded as a religious heretic) can save their life.

This very parable is an excellent pedagogical example: It teaches to consider an alternative point of view, to identify with those who seem strange, to show where in every one’s life it can be necessary to act and to think outside traditional limits.

The way of Jesus as the way of God

It is clear that already in the oldest layers of the gospel tradition (where Jesus is not yet called God’s son or saviour) there is an extraordinary close relation of Jesus and God. What Jesus teaches and does are the deeds of God, the signs of the coming kingdom of God. Jesus is representing God himself: His will, His love, His mercifulness, forgiveness and reconciliation.

On the other side, the way of Jesus as the way of God includes the passion, the suffering, the death at the cross – and the resurrection. That Jesus is betrayed, that he is captured, that he is confronted with wrong accusations, that he is tortured, that he is crucified among criminals –all of this is the greatest provocation of the Gospel, and at the same time the sign that no kind of suffering, loneliness and despair is alien to God himself.

The gospel includes a realistic sight and experience of the world as it is with its dark sides, with human weakness as well as with the misuse of power, with persecution and betrayal and offers constructive ways to deal with human failures, guilt and sin by way of forgiveness, reconciliation and grace. At the same time the Gospel preserves the

[10] Luke 7:36-50.

[11] Luke 17:11-20.

[12] Mark 7:24-30.

picture of Jesus who even in the situation of complete despair remains faithful to his mission and prays for his enemies.[13]

The experience of Easter which the disciples received against all their expectations is that the crucified lives, that the powers of darkness cannot hold Jesus, that God through him has broken the power of death and that the Gospel is valid for the whole world.

This charges the disciples and the young Christian congregation with breaking the limits of selfishness, of exclusivism and nationalism, of suppression of the poor, of excluding the sick and the handicapped. When in John 14,6 Jesus Christ says “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes unto the Father, but by me,” it is this way at the side of the weak and the suffering that brings truth and life! It is important to look at this verse which is often used to justify the exclusivity of Christian belief in in the context of the gospel and in the situation in which it is said: as a consolation for the disciples when Jesus is going to leave them – and with the contextual word: “In my Father’s home are many mansions.”[14]

Consequences for Religious and Interreligious Dialogue and Education

Recalling the way of Jesus Christ as the centre of Christian belief shows that in the focus of Christian identity, there is an openness for transgressing traditional limits and learning about new horizons.

It has become clear that by reflecting the “Gospel of Jesus Christ” as the core of the Christian faith, we find a way which gives Christian education a direction and underpinning through God’s love made flesh in Jesus.

This pedagogy opens barriers, opening itself for learning by encounter with people of different faiths and cultures. From a theological and educational point of view, this presents a number of tasks -

- to make a fresh attempt to examine and expound the foundations of one’s own faith and knowledge clearly and intelligibly;
- to use the foundations of one’s own faith to handle in a self-critical way one’s own history and one’s own faith community today;
- to work towards a “theology of the

religions” and an “education for encounter” in which the foundations of one’s own faith allow the development of “Identity and Understanding” (Identität und Verständigung: title of a memorandum on religious education by the Protestant Churches in Germany).

Teaching the Gospel in the framework of an open Religious Education

Religious Education—as all education—has the task to assist young people for a life guided by fundamental values and in solidarity with the other and the environment in a broad sense: the motivations, traditions and experiences of the religions ensure that they have a crucial role to play in helping people find direction, helping people in their lives and helping people in their actions.

Helping people find direction. By this I mean that within the general field of religions and religious movements, religious education plays an essential part in cognitive learning. When people are well-informed, use their knowledge critically and are able to question and analyse, they are less likely to be deceived or duped.

When people understand the way in which religious faiths relate to life and meaning, they are able to empathise with others’ views and see through the mechanisms that cause fanaticism, they will be more resistant to ethnic and religious fanaticism.

Helping people in their lives. By this I mean that religious education teaches about the sources of life and of values that transcend superficial pleasures. It teaches how all living things are related and mutually interdependent. Religious education can give strength, support, comfort and courage.

Helping people in their actions. By this I mean that the religious communities offer examples of living together in solidarity, living for one another, speaking up for the weak and disadvantaged, and this can teach us to cope with the problems in life, with a sense of mutual responsibility.

[13] Luke 23:34-46.

[14] John 14:2.

The background for this kind of education is an inner renewal of the religious denominations themselves. The driving force for this renewal lies in the central experiences of each religion (the way of Jesus Christ for Christians, Lord Buddha's way for Buddhists, the Torah for Jews, the peace message of the Qur'an for Muslims, etc.).

It is therefore essential for Religious/Ethical Education to assume the task of familiarising adolescents with their respective faiths as a "system of responsibility." When people feel at home in their own faith, which is open to others, and when they are familiar with the roots of their own religion and culture, can they provide the basis to begin a serious dialogue.

At the same time all Religious/Ethical Education should be accompanied by a new way of encounter which respects people of other faiths, their values and ways of life. Adolescents should be prepared for a way of living together without the burden of barriers caused by prejudices, but rather in listening to and learning from one another, which opens up new horizons on all sides. This means that dialogue partners must try to learn about the various faiths from one another's perspective and must search sensitively for understanding in the religious traditions and writings of the partner.

At the same time, one must make a clear distinction between the common and the dividing elements so as to avoid syncretism or apparent warding-off.

I should like to illustrate this with the example of believing in God in Christianity and Islam: In both religions (as well as in Judaism), believing in the one God who has created the world and men, and who guides the men mercifully is the basis which shows the close relations between Christians and Muslims.

When we look at the differences between the religions, we always have to ask for the context of these different conceptions and for the experiences which are to be found in the different points of view. There are conceptions in Christian and Muslim belief which are partly different

but which can correspond: such as believing in God as the loving Father as Jesus announces Him in a context where God mainly is taught as a just and distant God - and believing in God as the exalted and almighty, as the Qur'an teaches about Him in a context where the many Gods in the Kaaba seemed to be available for the merchants in Mecca.

And there are differences which cannot be ignored such as the Christian reading of God who comes to mankind in Jesus himself as the saviour, and the Muslim reading of the authentic revelation of God which is completely to be found in the Qur'an.

Indigenous Spiritualities: Theological and Spiritual Foundations of First Peoples' Engagement in Interfaith Cooperation



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"It was foretold that the time would come when the voice of the Indigenous peoples would rise again, after five hundred years of silence and oppression, to lead us into an eternal fire of peace, love and brotherhood among all nations."

-Anishinabe Legend of the "7 Fires"

In Canada, the term "First Peoples" refers to First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. According to Smith, the religions of these First Peoples "are very diverse and constitute a complex set of social and cultural customs with reference to the sacred and the supernatural."^[1] The influence of Christianity from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries generated hybrid religious practices in some Indigenous communities, while in others, "European religion has entirely replaced traditional spiritual practices."^[2] However, many contemporary Indigenous communities have reconnected with, or continue to practice, their traditional spirituality in an Indigenous spiritual revival pioneered by Elders, including Black Elk Elder in the United States.^[3]

According to Dolorès Contré, who comes from the Aninishinaabe tradition and is a lecturer on Native Spiritual Traditions at the Institute of Religious Studies of the University of Montreal, "Amerindian spiritualities are ways of life that are integrated with the environment in observance of an ethic that has its own laws, in order to respect the Cosmos and Mother Earth."^[4]

Among the values of Aboriginal peoples, Ms. Contré notes adaptability, an ability to "develop a self-sufficient way of life imbued with cultural customs" that motivate and dictate conduct on an individual, family and collective level. She writes, "The perception of the powers of the Great Mystery (Kijé-Manito), small or large, that surrounded the world and were part of it and thanks to which the Universe, the Earth or the Creation functioned, built a unique vision of the world in interrelation where each living being, from the smallest to the largest, contributes to the maintenance of the Circle of Life (Pimadiziwin)."^[5]

[1] Derek G. Smith, "Religion and Sirltuality of Indigenous Peoples in Canada," The Canadian Dictionary, last modified April 19th, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/religion-of-aboriginal-people#>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Pascale Fremond, interview by Contre Dolores, April 21, 2022.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Dolores Contré, "How Makwa the Bear teaches us About Kindness," *Possibles* 43, no. 1, Spring 2019): 71-89

In this spirit, Aboriginal groups have developed mutual aid, sharing and generosity, and thus a sense of community, creating alliances between humans, between all living beings in nature and with the world of spiritual powers, in an awareness of the Great Mystery that watches over all and an awareness of oneself, others and the universe. They use an approach to communication ethics based on traditional Aboriginal values: the Sharing Circle, in which each participant takes turns speaking with the talking stick, and is listened to with kindness, openness of heart and mind, and without judgment. [6]

Achiel Peelman, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and professor at St. Paul University in Ottawa, is a specialist in what Caloz calls “the traditional religion of the First Nations of Canada.” In 2005, along with twenty-four other Catholic experts from North and South America, Asia and Oceania, Peelman was invited to Rome by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue for a colloquium on “traditional religions and their contribution to peace.” In his interview with Jean-Pierre Caloz, Peelman points out that “traditional religions everywhere have a very similar conception of peace. Peace is much more than an absence of war and conflict, but is understood as the full realisation of life.” [7] He also noted that members of these traditional religions were “totally open to listening to others.” Peelman places the beginning of interreligious dialogue within Catholicism at the Assisi meeting in 1986. Prior to that, the Catholic Church was in dialogue only with representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Christianity’s dialogue with traditional religions is of two kinds: interreligious dialogue between Christianity and non-Christian members of these religions; and intrareligious dialogue between Christians who come from these religions and hold to their heritage. Peelman quotes Chief

Harry Lafond, a Cree leader who addressed Pope John Paul II at the Synod of Bishops for America in 1997, whom he considered a “true Elder.” The Cree leader invited the Church “to continue to walk together, relying on one another” and to “ordain as priests the spiritual men who are emerging in our cultures.” [8]

In Canada, Elder William Commanda (1913-2011) created the “Circle of All Nations,” “a global eco-community united by Elder Commanda’s unwavering belief that, in a very fundamental way, as daughters and sons of Mother Earth, we are all connected, regardless of race, creed or culture.” [9] William Commanda was the great-grandson of Pakinawatik, the hereditary chief of the Algonquins, and the keeper of three important and sacred wampum belts. A respected spiritual leader, he led the Sunbow Five Walk for Mother Earth and lectured extensively, including at the United Nations Spiritual Vigils for Peace. His commitment to promoting interracial and intercultural harmony, social justice and respect for Mother Earth has earned him worldwide recognition. He said, “We must come together as one heart, one mind, one love and one determination.” [10]

In his review of Georges Sioui’s book *Pour une autohistoire amérindienne*, Yvan Simonis, from the Department of Anthropology at Laval University, highlights two key notions put forward by Sioui, the “circle of life” and “self-history.” [11] The “circle of life” speaks of the Amerindian vision of the world and self-history is the idea that only Amerindians can make their history and values credible. In 1989, Sioui advocated a “reappropriation by Native Americans of their own thinking, a systematic delegitimation of the vision of the colonisers from yesterday to today,” in a “desire to posit the worldview of Native Americans as the guide best suited to the needs of present-day America.”

[6] Ibid.

[7] Peelman, Achiel, “Achiel Peelman, OMI. An untraditional commitment. Interview with Achiel Peelman, omi,” interview by Jean-Pierre Caloz, OMIworld, Accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.omeworld.org/interview/achiel-peelman-omi/>

[8] Ibid.

[9] Commanda, William. n.d. “A Circle of All Nations,” Accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.angelfire.com/ns/circleofallnations/page3.html>

[10] Ibid.

[11] Simonis, Yvan, “Georges F. SIOUI: Pour une Autohistoire Amérindienne. Essai sur les Fondements D’une Morale Sociale, Préface by Bruce G. Trigger, Québec, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1989, 157 p., Appendix, Bibliogr.” *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 15, no. 1, 145-145.

In a 1991 interview with Yolande Ricard, Georges Sioui introduced himself as “a traditional Huron-Wendat living in the Amerindian community of Wendaké” in Quebec. He was editor of two magazines dealing with Amerindian arts, cultures and philosophy. According to him, at the time, there was no “true history of the Amerindians.”[12] Sioui explained that “for the traditional Amerindian, life is an impenetrable mystery, something that is given to him: to be able to contemplate and taste the earth during a brief stay. Every form of life is an expression of the will of the Great Spirit, [...] every manifestation of life is essential to the maintenance of a marvelous and virtually elusive Order, which humans can only admire and try to understand.”[13] The vision of the “Great Circle of Life, to which humans are privileged to belong” speaks of the intelligence and rights of all human beings to communicate their needs, their joys and sorrows, and their fraternal solidarity.

The Indigenous spiritual perspective of human beings as an integral part of nature in living connection with a great cosmic Whole, in an interrelated world “where every living being, from the smallest to the largest, contributes to the maintenance of the Circle of Life,” according to “the will of the Great Spirit,” is the very foundation of the engagement of First Peoples’ communities in interreligious, interspiritual and intercultural cooperation.

[12] Georges E. Sioui, “Georges E. Sioui: interview / For an Amerindian Autohistory. Essai sur les Fondements D’une Morale Sociale Georges E. Sioui, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, Québec, 1989, 157 p.,” interview by Yolande Ricard. Québec Français 80, 1991.

[13] *Ibid.*

Interfaith Experience and Personal Religious Identity



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My interfaith experience and commitment began about twenty years ago when I invited representatives of different traditions to meet in the hospital where I was working (the *Ophthalmic Hospital* of Rome), and share with them approaches and concepts when confronting human suffering, according to their tradition teachings. Many people participated to this first meeting and asked to continue this experience of interfaith dialogue facing the more relevant existential questions particularly urgent in conditions of severe illness. Indeed this meeting was followed by further encounters which were much appreciated by the participants, people of different beliefs and cultural convictions.

The mutual respect and propositve attitude of the representatives of different religions showed me that, without hiding differences in doctrine and historical identity, nevertheless, it's possible to find common values and perspectives regarding existential and ethical questions. As a consequence, it became possible to experience that the interfaith dialogue and cooperation can give a consistent support in caring about human suffering and promoting human dignity, equity and common good in a broader sense.

I have to say that from my twenties I gradually stopped my religious practice, due to cultural, philosophical and political challenges in the historical context of the sixties and seventies in Italy and worldwide. I was focused on my medical profession where I tried to behave according to the teachings I had received during my previous religious and family education, which can be summarised in the so called *golden rule*.

Also, as an agnostic, I always respected religious people and practice and intimately I perceived the persistent feeling of love and gratitude toward Jesus, the key-person of the Christianity.

Over time, when I was about fifty, I felt the need of living again in a religious dimension of prayer and deepening of the meaning of my tradition. Very soon, this adult spiritual change was combined in my person with the need of an open attitude toward ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. That's why, I guess, I was spontaneously prone to the interfaith initiative I experienced within my hospital

community, as described above. After that first interfaith experience, I was involved in new initiatives with friends of other religious traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist) until I met members of the Italian Chapter of *Religions for Peace* (then WCRP) who proposed that I enter the association, and I accepted. In 2006 I participated as delegate of the Italian Chapter to the *8th World Assembly of WCRP* held in *Kyoto* (Japan) and since then my commitment within *Religions for Peace* increased more and more at national and European level on voluntary basis in several fields of interfaith dialogue and action.

Regarding the relation between my interreligious commitment and my faith tradition (*Roman-Catholic*), I have to say that I didn't find any contradictions. We know that historically there was poor tolerance and respect among different religions; in the most of cases they tended to be exclusive and competitive, and even in positive exceptions, they barely coexisted, and lacked dignity.

Now, the situation is very different despite the fact that more or less in every main religious tradition, there are relevant practitioners that are reluctant to dialogue and cooperate with believers of other traditions; these believers feel themselves self-sufficient and remain closed in their presumed orthodox perimeters.

After the *Vatican II Council* (1963-1965), the *Roman Catholic Church* had a deep change in its relationship with the modernity and its new cultural approaches and sensitivities and, very important, with the other main world religions.

The conciliar declaration *NOSTRA AETATE* promulgated in 1965 just before the end of the Council, opened to *Judaism*, overcoming the traditional attitude of refusal and contempt, but also to *Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism*.^[1] I think it was one of the extraordinary steps forward in the process of "healing" of relations among different religious traditions.

The historical interfaith encounter of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi on 27 October 1986, represents for the *Roman Catholic Church* the sign of its deep progressive change towards an ecumenical

and Interreligious perspective.

That's why I do not feel any contradiction between my interfaith commitment and my religious identity.

[1] Paul VI, *Nostra aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions], October 28, 1965, accessed July 18, 2022, [nostra_aetate \(vatican.va\)](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pope_paul_vi/encyclicals/nostra_aetate/nostra_aetate.html)

Equality and Compassion: Reflections on Foundational Principles for Multi-Religious Engagement, from a Sikh *Dharam* Perspective



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The Sikh *Dharam*, is the world's fifth largest religion, originating from Punjab, South Asia. The Sikh *Dharam* has ten Gurus who laid the foundations of the faith. The Gurus lived successively from 1469 to 1708 after which the tenth Guru bestowed the perpetual and eternal Guruship to the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh sacred scripture. In fact, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji (which was compiled during the Gurus' lifetimes under their direction) is itself a unique embodiment of interfaith teachings. In the spirit of encompassing wisdom, and in creating a repository of teaching for humanity, the Gurus not only included verses of Sikh Gurus, but also those of Hindu and Muslim Saints whose message of the 'oneness of creation' resonated with their teachings.

Sikhs find that they have a strong foundation for understanding, respecting, engaging with and even sacrificing for other religions. These teachings can be drawn from Sikh sacred scripture (*Gurbani*), from historical examples set by the Gurus (*Gurmat*) and other Sikh institutions/traditions which have developed from the Gurus' teachings.

The first 'argument' that justifies and compels Sikh efforts to work multi-religiously is equality, and the need to put equality into practice. This is underpinned by the Sikh teaching of the oneness of creation. Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh *Dharam*, described God in the *Mool Mantar*, which is the central message for Sikh belief and teachings and the opening verse of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji:

God is One — all is His creation.[1]

Sikhs believe that every human being, regardless of which path they follow, must be treated equally because God, as the Creator, is present within them. This message is echoed in many verses throughout the Guru Granth Sahib. For example, the following verse reiterates that God's creative light is within all human beings:

There is only one breath; all are made of the same clay; the light within all is the same. The One Light pervades all the many and various beings.[2]

[1] Guru Granth Sahib, 1983 (reprint) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p.1.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.96.

The teachings of subsequent Gurus further emphasise these messages from Guru Nanak Dev Ji. The tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, underscored the equality of all humans regardless of their outward label of religion in the following verse:

God is in the temple as He is in the mosque; He is in the Hindu worship as He is in the Muslim prayer, People are one though they appear different. The Hindus and the Muslims are all one, each have the habits of different environments, But all men have the same eyes, the same body. Thus, the Abhekkh of the Hindus and the Allah of the Muslims are one, The Qura'n and the Purānas praise the same Lord. They are all of one form, The One God made them all.[3]

Furthermore, the following verse calls for Sikhs to recognise the entire human race as one large family:

*Recognise all humankind as one
The same God is the Creator and
nourisher of all
Recognise no distinction among them
The temple and mosque are the same
So are the Hindu worship and Muslim
prayer. People are all one.*[4]

Throughout their lives, the Gurus not only espoused the importance of equality, but demonstrated the importance of it to be put into practice.

The Sikh *Dharam* has a close relationship with Punjab (South Asia), since it was the birthplace of Guru Nanak in 1469, and was the base for some of the subsequent Gurus. In 1526, Emperor Babur invaded India and founded the Mughal empire. The rise and fall of the Mughal dynasty ran in parallel to the ten Sikh Gurus and Sikhs and Hindus faced religious oppression. In some countries Gurdwaras and Sikh communities continue to face religious oppression; for example, in October 2021, the Sikh community sought to flee from extremist persecution in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

In a climate that was rife with social injustices, caste discrimination and religious oppression, Guru Nanak Dev Ji founded the tradition of *Langar*, free vegetarian food, which is distributed

from all *Gurdwaras* (Sikh houses of worship) around the world. *Langar* was and still is revolutionary in its creation of social justice and as a model of multi-religious engagement. It serves all without discrimination since everyone eats the same food, on the same level in the same space regardless of their identity or status. In fact, all *Gurdwaras* (Sikh houses of worship) around the world have an 'open-door' policy welcoming Sikhs and non-Sikhs into a shared space in the same spirit of equality. The foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar, India, was laid by a Muslim Saint at the invitation of the fifth Guru (Guru Arjan Dev Ji). It was also designed with four entrances, embracing people from all walks of life. As a testament to this, 100,000 meals of *Langar* are served at Harmandir Sahib daily, every day of the year, to anyone who enters, irrespective of who they are.

The second 'argument' that justifies and compels Sikh efforts to work multi-religiously is the need for practicing compassion toward others. Sikhs constantly pray for "Sarbat da Bhalla," the welfare of all humanity, and each formal prayer that Sikhs make, ends in this phrase to invoke God's blessings on everyone, regardless of who they are.

*Those who remember God are
altruistic and generous towards others.*[5]

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji (the ninth Guru), demonstrated compassion towards a group of Hindu Pandits from Kashmir who approached the Guru for help from the religious persecution that they were facing. The Guru stood up to the Mughal authorities by resisting their efforts to convert him. He willingly offered his life to spare the Hindu Pandits, even though he was the leader of a different religion. He was subsequently beheaded for refusing to convert in 1675 in Delhi, India, where the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib now stands to commemorate the Guru's supreme sacrifice.

The story of Bhai Kanhaiya Ji, a Sikh water carrier during the time of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, who would give water to the wounded on the battlefield, is also cherished by Sikhs as a reminder to put compassion towards others into practice, regardless of their identity.

[3] Guru Gobind Singh (reprint), Akal Ustat in Dasam Granth, 2011, Amritsar: Bhai Chatter Singh-Jiwan Singh, verse 86.

[4] Guru Gobind Singh, op.cit, p.270.

[5] Guru Granth Sahib, 1983 (reprint) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p.263.

Complaints had reached the Guru that Bhai Kanhaiya Ji was feeding water to everyone on the battlefield; not just to the Sikhs but also to enemy soldiers. When the Guru asked Bhai Kanhaiya Ji why he was doing this, he replied: 'I don't see any enemies or strangers. All I see is God's light in everyone'. The Guru was so pleased with Bhai Kanhaiya Ji that he gave his blessings to carry on his work and also gave him bandages and ointment to be able to tend to those who were injured.

The third 'argument' that justifies and compels Sikh efforts to work multi-religiously is the urgent need to work together to achieve common goals for humanity. The opening phrase of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, which states that *God is One — all is His creation*, not only illustrates equality, but also commonality. Humanity shares the same planet, and faces the same common issues of climate change, war, economic hardships, social injustices and political upheaval to name a few. Over 550 years since its founding, the Sikh *Dharam* today is a vibrant religion with over 25 million followers, and with communities practicing across the diaspora. Sikhs are called to practice the Gurus' teachings in their everyday lives, and there is a moral imperative to respond in solidarity to the challenges and injustices that the world faces today through multi-religious efforts grounded in equality and compassion.

*Truth is higher than everything, but
higher still is truthful living.*[6]

The teachings of the Sikh *Dharam* have inspired many collaborative projects for Sikhs and Sikh organisations that are grounded in the practice of equality and compassion. For example, the *Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha* (GNNSJ), a Sikh faith-based organisation and registered charity headquartered in the UK, has served 25,000 meals of *Langar* a week for the past forty-four years, and has also held continuous readings of the Guru Granth Sahib for *Sarbat da Bhalla* (the welfare of all) since its founding in 1978. It has engaged in dialogue and engagement through hosting conferences locally and globally, and facilitated pilgrimages to Amritsar, India with organisations such as Birmingham Faith

Leaders Group and the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders to strengthen inter-religious ties.

An interesting case study is that of the start of GNNSJ's multi-faith engagement in *Langar* in August 2001. This was to provide *Langar* to 10,000 people every day for a nine days festival being organised by the Hindu Council of Birmingham, UK. This 'Ram Katha' festival featured Shri Morari Babu, renowned for his exposition of the Hindu Ram Charit Manas and for reciting Ram Kathas. The purpose of the event was to build relationships amongst communities and cultures for greater harmony, peace and active citizenship.

Once the advertising for the event launched, some members of the wider Sikh community did not support this collaboration and raised objections about Sikhs supporting a Hindu event.

GNNSJ's Chairman, Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, articulated the need to support the event and engage in multi-religious collaboration to build cohesion, but some Sikhs still remained entrenched in their positions; community tensions rose so high that Bhai Sahib Ji's life was threatened if they proceeded. Bhai Sahib Ji remained undeterred, and continued to support the large-scale event, which was ultimately successful despite community opposition. This demonstrates that steadfast and visionary leadership is required to initiate community change and that there are instances where communities must 'swim against the tide' in order to engage in multi-religious collaboration.

Since setting a precedent for multi-religious engagement through *Langar* at the Ram Katha event, the GNNSJ has continued to serve *Langar* at landmark events such as the *Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions* (CPWR), one of the largest interfaith gatherings internationally. At this CPWR event in Barcelona, Spain (2004) they served nearly 7,000 people daily in the spirit of equality. They also carried on the tradition of *Langar* at the CPWR event in Salt Lake City, USA (2015). Most recently during the pandemic, *Langar* was served to local communities in need

[6] *Ibid.*, p.62.

in the UK, through *Nishkam SWAT*.

The next example is one I was personally involved in as a *Faiths Act Fellow* from 2009-2010, which was a project run by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and the Interfaith Youth Core (now Interfaith America). This endeavour brought together thirty youths of different religious traditions from across the UK, America and Canada. Each individual was paired with someone who was of a different faith to them, and put in community host organisations to engage in grass roots interfaith work towards the then UN's Millennium Development Goals. The focus was on goal six, which was eradicating deaths due to malaria, and the goal was to think global, but act local. We were to create awareness about malaria, and to raise funds for global resources using compassion as the catalyst.

Going on this shared journey, engaging in common action, towards a common goal, was transformative for me, the other Fellows, and also the communities we worked with, because it was an opportunity to put the values of equality and compassion into practice. However, it was more powerful because we were putting those values into practice *together*, and the results were multiplied.

The local impact was the imprint of the multi-religious collaboration and the networks built between local religious communities, which remained for future multi-religious engagement. The global impact was that over \$300,000 raised, 40,000 people had been reached to raise awareness about malaria, over 10,000 people had been inspired to act, contributing to charities such as Malaria no More, Spread the Net, and Project Muso. The Fellows are still in a close network with each other as a result of the friendships developed, and many of them have gone on to work for development non-profits and faith-based organisations. It is now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which need to be addressed with this solidarity. GNNSJ, and other Sikh organisations such as Khalsa Aid (a relief organisation), and EcoSikh (an organisation addressing climate change) are continuously working on addressing these evolving challenges.

The alignment of *Religions for Peace's* strategic plan with the Sustainable Development Goals, and the opportunity to address these urgent global issues through equality and compassion in unison through multi-religious partnerships and efforts, is what compels me to serve as a World Council member, and working member of the Standing Commission on Interreligious Education.

The pursuit of peace, both internally in our own minds, and in the external environment around us, is a theme which resonates strongly in the teachings of the Sikh *Dharam*:

The whole world is ablaze and suffering, engulfed in the flames of human vices. We plead to you, God, through your ever-present mercy, forgiveness and grace, to protect and save it.

No matter which door, sanctuary or place of worship we reach towards, take us into your fold and refuge and safeguard us, through whatever means possible.

The True Enlightener shows the way to peace, by contemplating the teachings of sacred wisdom.

Says Nanak, we turn to no other than You, our Universal and Forgiving Creator.[7]

I conclude by sharing a quote from Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, GNNSJ's Chairman and also a long-standing World Council member, which speaks passionately about the need for interfaith leadership in implementing the vision of *Religions for Peace*:

"It is incumbent on all of us within the interfaith context to take the lead in educating both our members as well as members of other faiths, about the commonalities between the faiths and the need to love and serve all of humanity.

This will ensure that we are not just tolerant of the other, but that we are prepared to accept and respect, both our and others' beliefs. Indeed, that we are able to sacrifice the self for the other. Such a deep spiritual bond is the best way to ensure that this century becomes the century of peace."[8]

[7] Guru Granth Sahib, 1983 (reprint) Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, p.853.

[8] Extract from a speech by Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, given at the 20th Anniversary of the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group on 12th September 2021 in Birmingham, UK.

"For my sake, the world was created."



Burton L. Visotzky

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"God said, 'Let Us make humanity in Our image . . . 'So, God created humanity in God's image, God created him in the image of God, male and female God created them'"
(Genesis 1:26-27).

In the beginning, Adam and Eve were inseparable. Adam had Eve's back, and she had his—literally. They were, in the words of an early-fifth century rabbinic Midrashic commentary, "androgynous." For history to unfold, God needed to perform a bit of surgery, separating them from one another into two distinct, sentient creatures; each made in the image of their Creator. This was the view of certain rabbis of the Land of Israel in the third through fifth century.[1] While they were trying to solve the textual crux presented by the two differing creation stories in Genesis, the rabbis offer us insight into the development of humanity and so, the various religions we practice.[2]

Our relationship with our fellow humans was and remains mediated through our relationship with our Creator. This requires that we recognise the divine reflection of our fellow humans, and to honor and love it. One of the earliest rabbinic texts sweetly dilates on this notion when it teaches: "It was an act of love that God created humanity in God's image and likeness. It was an act of even greater love that God revealed to humanity that we were created in God's image and likeness." [3]

Seeing the godly in our fellow humans is often a challenge, but on occasion it is numinously clear. Some folks lord it over others, they pretend to be holier than thou. Others "walk humbly with their God." [4] For most of us, we need to be reminded that we are all equal in the eyes of our Creator, and that none of us is better than any other: no person, no tribe, no nation, no religion.

In the late-second century, the ancient rabbis taught, "humanity was created as a single individual . . . for the sake of peace among humanity, that none might say to his or her fellow, 'my ancestor was greater than your ancestor.'" [5]

[1] See Genesis Rabbah 8:1 ed. J. Theodor (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965, 2nd ed.), p. 55ff. for these and other imaginative (re)readings of the biblical creation narrative.

[2] See Genesis 1:27-28 and Genesis 2:7, 18-25.

[3] Mishnah Pirke Avot 3:14, early 3rd century, in Eliezer Levi, Mishnah Meforeshet vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1961).

[4] See Micah 6:8.

[5] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 in Eliezer Levi, Mishnah Meforeshet vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1961).

This embrace of universalism was sufficiently strong that the Mishnah, which is the seminal text of rabbinic Judaism, concludes that section by saying, "Therefore, each and every individual is obligated to say, 'For my sake the world was created.'"

What seems at first blush to be non-sequitur is, in essence, a demand that we recognise the divine in ourselves ("for my sake"), and in doing so, perforce, recognise it in all others as well. This adage is based on the ways in which the ancient rabbis interpreted two commandments in the biblical book of Leviticus. Each seems transparent on the surface, yet quickly turns towards opaque as one wonders how to actually obey them. The first of these commandments is, "Be holy, (*kedoshim*), as I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:3). The second, "Love your neighbour as yourself, I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18).

The earliest rabbinic commentary on the Lev. 19:3 passage starkly states "be holy' means be separate." [6] In truth, the vast complex of rabbinic Jewish law in some very real sense achieves this separation. Yet the rabbis knew that beneath the technical rituals of "holiness as separation," there was a profound moral message. "Be holy (*kedoshim*), as I the Lord your God am holy" is understood to mean: "just as God is merciful and compassionate, so we must strive to act with mercy and compassion." [7]

In the Middle Ages, we find the interpretation of this command as follows: "by loving your neighbour you come to see the ways he is like you." [8] But it is insufficient to love those who are "like you." Leviticus also commands, "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be like of your own; *you shall love him as yourself*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I God am your Lord." [9]

In the biblical book of Exodus, the Israelites are commanded in an even stronger fashion: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall help him to lift it up." [10] And to be clear, it's not just the donkey, it's our enemy for whom we are commanded to show compassion, rather "if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink." [11]

When the eponymous ancestor of the Jews, Jacob who was renamed Israel, reencounters his enemy, his hated brother, after years of exile. Jacob-Israel arrives bearing gifts of propitiation. Yet Esau has grown in those years and replies generously with a hug and kiss. He waves off his brother's offerings saying, "I have plenty." [12] Jacob's response is a stunning reminder of how we all must live. He tells his brother, "Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God." [13] Would that we each could live with that realisation when we behold the Other.

Indeed, the earliest rabbinic commentary on Deuteronomy explicitly equates the love of God with the love of humanity. It is written. "Love the Lord your God and walk in all God's ways, cling to God." In commenting on this commandment, the rabbis teach: "Just as God is merciful (*rahum*) and compassionate (*hanun*), so you should be merciful and compassionate...just as God is righteous (*tzadig*) and loving (*hesed*), so you should be righteous and loving." [14] In another early commentary, this move toward identification with radical, divine compassion is reiterated: "Abba Shaul said, 'Resemble God! As God is Merciful and compassionate, so you be merciful and compassionate.'" [15] For rabbinic Jews, then, *imitatio dei* is synonymous with compassion and mercy for God's creatures.

[6] Sifra, ad loc. Ed. I. H. Weiss, Sifra deBei Rab (Wein: Om Publishing, 1946).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Kallah Rabbati ch. 4, in Babylonian Talmud (Vilna: 1886).

[9] Leviticus 19:33-34. This is but one of many examples. Cf. e. g. Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:15; Deut. 27:19.

[10] Exodus 23:4-5.

[11] Proverbs 25:21.

[12] Gen. 33:9.

[13] Gen. 33:10.

[14] Deut. 11:22, apud Sifre to Deuteronomy, ad loc. Ed. L. Finkelstein (New York, 1969).

[15] Mekilta Beshalah 3, ed. H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin, Mechilta D'Rabbi Ishmael (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1970).

Practically, this means that Jews are commanded to care for all other humans. The working assumption is that God is the Creator of the world, so everything belongs to God. As the Psalmist puts it: “The earth is the Lord’s, all that is in it.”[16] This is enacted in the sweeping redistribution of wealth commanded in Leviticus 19. The Torah requires Jews at harvest time to leave the corners of the field,[17] any dropped or fallen produce, and even the forgotten sheaves of harvest for the Jewish poor to glean. It belongs to God and not the farmer; so, God can command the farmer to give what is God’s to another of God’s creatures. The rabbis expanded their understanding of this commandment to require “if the non-Jewish poor wish to partake of that boon, we do not withhold it, in the interests of peace with the broader community.”[18]

“In the interests of peace” with our neighbours, the rabbis go so far as to say that in a city that had both Jewish and non-Jewish populations, which is to say, most cities, “the rabbinic charity officers would collect from and distribute to their non-Jewish neighbours alongside the Jews, in the interests of peace.”[19] Further, “One should bury non-Jewish dead and mourn them and offer condolence to their families, in the interests of peace. So too, one must visit the sick among the non-Jews and also dower their brides.”[20] Jews are enjoined to acknowledge their non-Jewish neighbours and ask after their welfare, in the interests of peace.[21] Jews are further expected to offer greetings of “Shalom” to their non-Jewish neighbours, even for their non-Jewish holidays, “in the interests of peace!”[22]

This push-pull between the particularist ethos of caring for fellow Jews, and then extending it to our non-Jewish neighbours was not only a phenomenon of late antiquity or the middle ages. Mark Hetfield, President and CEO of the Hebrewity (HIAS) writes,

“HIAS, the oldest refugee agency in the world, has evolved from helping refugees because *they* were Jewish to helping refugees because *we* are Jewish.”[23]

So, we find HIAS doing relief and development work as part of their Jewish obligation to interreligious engagement. This is also often expressed as a commitment to human rights. As another international interreligious organisation, the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) expresses it, “AJWS—a community inspired by Jewish values of justice and a universal commitment to human rights. Together we’re working to build a more just and equitable world for all.”[24]

The global humanitarian organisation, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) sees its mission in the same vein, “When natural disasters or other calamities strike, we are the Jewish hands who help communities of all backgrounds and faiths rebuild. From Indonesia to Nepal, the Philippines to India, we mobilise when disaster strikes, working with communities not just to recover but truly rebuild. We develop innovative, sustainable solutions to ensure that the most vulnerable people in the hardest-hit places come back stronger than ever.”[25]

Each of these Jewish organisations works internationally across religious boundaries “in the interests of peace.” On a much smaller scale, it motivates my own work, as well. Once, in a dialogue with New York’s Archbishop Timothy Cardinal Dolan commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council and its landmark reformulation of religious relations with the Jews *Nostra Aetate*, His Eminence remarked that it was time to end a “dialogue of grievance.” He wisely suggested that Jews and Catholics move instead to a positive dialogue of working side by side to do God’s will: feeding the

[16]Psalm 24:1.

[17]Lev. 19:9-10.

[18]Mishnah Gittin 5, in Eliezer Levi, ed., Mishnah Meforeshet vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1961).

[19]Tosefta Gittin. 3, in S. Lieberman, ed., Tosefta (New York: JTS: 1973).

[20]Mishnah Gittin 5 n Eliezer Levi, ed., Mishnah Meforeshet vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1961).

[21]Mishnah Shevit, 4 and end ch. 5 n Eliezer Levi, ed., Mishnah Meforeshet vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1961)..

[22]Tosefta Avodah Zarah 1:3 in S. Lieberman, ed., Tosefta (New York: JTS: 1973). For a treatment of these ancient rabbinic sources in the context of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim conversation, see, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rev. Chloe Breyer, and Dr. Hussein Rashid, “Love, Actually,” in *The Crisis of Connection: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions* Eds., Ali, Gilligan, Noguera, and Way (NYU Press, 2018) 444-465. I take this opportunity to correct my reference there for greeting non-Jews on their holidays from the

Mishnah to the Tosefta text referred to at the outset of this footnote.

[23]Hetfield, Mark. “Jewish, Diverse, and Inclusive: HIAS’ Core Values,” HIAS, retrieved Feb 8, 2022,

<https://www.hias.org/blog/jewish-diverse-and-inclusive-hias-core-values>.

HIAS was founded in 1881 to assist Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe.

[24] “Home,” American Jewish World Society, retrieved Feb. 8, 2022, <https://ajws.org/>.

[25] “Home,” American Jewish World Society, retrieved Feb. 8, 2022, <https://ajws.org/>.

hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the unhoused, and doing so in friendship. To Cardinal Dolan's plea, I respond, "Amen!"

This charge deeply informs my work as director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue at the Jewish Theological Seminary and beyond. It complements the texts I teach my rabbinical and graduate students. Whether I am serving in a New York soup kitchen, supporting Faiths4Vaccines,[26] speaking as a rabbi in Abu Dhabi, or sitting on committees for the United Nations or *Religions for Peace*, I try to live and act in recognition that we all are created in God's image and we all share a common ancestor. In my modest efforts to achieve even a small spark of holiness, I must recognise the divine image and holiness in others. When I do so, then, and perhaps only then, I might be allowed to say, "For my sake the world was created."

[26]"Home," Faiths4Vaccines, retrieved May 20, 2022, Faiths4Vaccines.org.

Author Biographies



Azza Karam
Secretary General, Religions for Peace

Prof. Dr. Azza Karam (PhD) serves as the Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*. She holds a Professorship of Religion and Development at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (The Netherlands) - of which she is a citizen. Dr. Karam currently is a member of the United Nations Secretary General's 'High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism'. Prior to joining *Religions for Peace*, she served for nearly two decades in the United Nations (UNDP and UNFPA), including as a Coordinator of the Arab Human Development Reports, a Senior Advisor on Culture, and Lead Facilitator/Trainer for the UN Strategic Learning Exchanges on Religion, Development and Diplomacy. During her time in the UN, she founded and was Convenor of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development as well as the Multi-Faith Advisory Council of that Task Force. She has worked internationally since 1980s, including with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA), the OECD and the EU, and has taught and lectured in various academic institutions in Europe, North America (including the United States Military Academy/West Point), and in the Arab region. Her Ph.D. (in 1996), focused on Political Islam, and became her first book in Arabic and English. She has since published widely, in several languages, on international political dynamics, including democratisation, human rights, peace and security, gender, religious engagement, and sustainable development. Dr. Karam received many awards over the years, including an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from John Cabot University (Rome, Italy). She was born in Egypt, lived and worked in many continents, and now resides in the United States.

Anantanand Rambachan
Co-President, Religions for Peace

Dr. Anantanand Rambachan is Professor of Religion at Saint Olaf College, Minnesota. He was also Visiting Professor at the Academy for the Study of World Religions at the University of Hamburg in Germany (2013-2017). He has published extensively in the fields of Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta tradition, Hindu ethics, Hindu liberation theology, and interreligious dialogue. His most recent book is *Pathways to Hindu-Christian Dialogue*. The British Broadcasting Corporation transmitted a series of twenty-five lectures on Hinduism by Dr. Rambachan around the world. Dr. Rambachan has been involved in interreligious relations and dialogue for over forty



years, as a Hindu contributor and analyst. He is active in the dialogue programmes of the World Council of Churches and the consultations of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican. He serves as the President of the Board, Arigatou International NY, a global organisation advocating for the rights of children and mobilising the resources of religions to overcome violence against children. He is also a Co-President of *Religions for Peace* and Chairs the Board of the Minnesota Multifaith Network.

Author Biographies

Lilian J. Sison

President, Religions for Peace-Philippines | Co-Founder, UNIHARMONY PARTNERS, Philippines



Dr. Lilian Sison is a full professor and formerly the Dean of the Graduate School of the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas in Manila (2000-2013) and currently its Director of International Relations and Programmes. She holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Chemistry and has published in the fields of chemistry, university education and inter-religious dialogue. As part of her advocacy, she has been engaged in multi-faith humanitarian work advocating on women issues, the protection of children, and the protection of the environment. She currently serves as the President of *Religions for Peace-Philippines*; immediate past

member of the World Council of *Religions for Peace*, Co-Chair of *Religions for Peace's* International Women Coordinating Committee (2014-2019), immediate past Co-President of *Religions for Peace-Asia* and Chair of the Asia Pacific Women of Faith Network (2008-2021). She is the co-founder of UNIHARMONY PARTNERS Philippines, a coalition of twenty-five faith-based organisations engaged in interreligious dialogue.

Nayla Tabbara

Co-President, Religions for Peace | Co-Founder, Adyan Institute

Dr. Nayla Tabbara is the President and co-founder of Adyan, Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity. She is also a Co-President of *Religions for Peace*, and member of the Executive Committee of its World Council. She holds a Ph.D. in Science of Religions from Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Sorbonne-Paris) and Saint Joseph University (Beirut) and is a University Professor in Religious and Islamic Studies at Saint Joseph University, Beirut. She is also a Muslim woman theologian and has publications in the fields of Islamic theology of religious diversity, Islamic feminism, Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic Social Responsibility and Sufism.



She works on curricula development (formal and non-formal) on multifaith education, inclusive citizenship and Freedom of Religion or Belief and has publications on education on interreligious and intercultural diversity. Between 2011 and 2020, she Directed the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management at Adyan Foundation. She has received the Gold Medal of the French Renaissance Award for all her work and the Special Jury award of the Fr. Jacques Hamel Prize, the Ecritures et Spiritualités Award and the Academie des Sciences d'Outre mer award for her book *L'islam pensé par une femme* (Bayard, 2018).

Author Biographies

Johannes Lähnemann

Chairman, Peace Education Standing Commission



Dr. Johannes Lähnemann studied Protestant theology in Bethel, Heidelberg, Vienna and Münster and passed his first and second theological exams in 1965 and 1969. He received his doctorate in 1968 at the University of Münster under Willi Marxsen with a thesis on Colossians and was a research assistant in Münster from 1968 to 1973. From 1973 to 1980 he was a councilor at the Lüneburg University of Education. During his time there, he habilitated in 1977 in practical theology/religious education in Bern with a thesis on world religions in class. In 1981 he received the chair for Protestant religious education and didactics of Protestant religious education at the

Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, which he held until his retirement in 2007. Dr. Lähnemann's main areas of work and research are world religions in the classroom and interreligious learning. Among other things, he set up the Interdisciplinary Center for Islamic Religious Education and, together with Klaus Hock and Wolfram Reiss, carried out the research project "The Representation of Christianity in School Books in Islamic Countries". In 2008 he received the Federal Cross of Merit and the Chelebi Peace Prize for services in Christian-Islamic dialogue. Professor Lähnemann is Chairman of the Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC) of *Religions for Peace*, Board Member of the German Section of *Religions for Peace* and Member of the Round Table of Religions in Germany. He is the initiator and co-organiser of the "Nuremberg Forums," which take place every three years.

Pascale Frémond

President, Religions for Peace-Canada | Religions pour la Paix-Québec

President of *Religions pour la Paix-Québec*, and of *Religions for Peace-Canada*, Pascale Frémond has been working for many years in interfaith and multicultural fields. Passionate about spirituality and everything that concerns the human being, she recently completed a Master's in Religious Studies at the University of Montreal. The subject of her thesis was: The importance of Light and the *spiritual laser* in the teaching of Master Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov (1900-1986). She is presently working on her doctoral thesis which will focus on the timeless ideal of universal brotherhood, studied particularly in five contemporary faith communities in Quebec and in Ontario. She is keenly interested in expanding interreligious dialogue to include new religious movements and anything that can foster a sense of unity in the human family, following Pope Francis' lead in *Fratelli Tutti*.



Author Biographies

Pritpal Kaur Ahluwalia

Co-President, Religions for Peace | Education Director, Sikh Coalition



Dr. Pritpal Kaur Ahluwalia currently serves as Faith and Religious Education Lead for the Nishkam School Trust (UK) and is also a Co-President for the World Council of *Religions for Peace*. She holds a Ph.D. in Sikh Studies and has a keen interest in multi-religious engagement and education. She was one of the inaugural Faiths Act Fellows for an interfaith programme run by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and the Interfaith Youth Core, which harnessed interfaith action towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals; and also one of the Interfaith Youth Core's Interfaith Innovation Fellows. She

previously served as Education Director at the Kaur Foundation and then at the Sikh Coalition, the largest Sikh civil rights organisation in North America, before returning to the UK.

Luigi De Salvia

President, Religions for Peace-Italia | President, Religions for Peace-Europe

In 2002, Dr. Luigi De Salvia graduated in Catholic Theological Culture. Since 2003, he has been involved in interreligious experiences. From 2007 to 2016, he served as the Secretary General of *Religions for Peace-Italia*. In 2008 he founded the Association "Ascoltare le Sofferenze" ("Listening to the Sufferings") for Interreligious cooperation in Medicine and Health Care. In 2010 he was the Coordinator of the "Religions, Cultures and Human Rights: a complex relationship in evolution" international conference held in Rome at the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs. Since February 2010, Dr. De Salvia has promoted



projects that work towards welcoming different religious and cultural traditions cultural traditions within hospitals and health facilities. From 2011 to 2018, he was a Professor of Cultural and Religious Mediation within the Master organised at Pontifical Salesian University in Rome. He is the head of delegations of *Religions for Peace-Italia* visits to Israel, Palestine, India, Nepal, China, Myanmar. Since December 2016, he has served as the President of *Religions for Peace-Italia*. He is a Co-President of *Religions for Peace-Europe* and since 25 January 2022, he has served as the President of European National Interreligious Bodies (ENIB) *Religions for Peace-Europe*.

Author Biographies

Burton L. Visotzky

Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies Emeritus | Director, Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue Jewish Theological Seminary



Rabbi Dr. Burton L. Visotzky serves as Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies Emeritus at the Jewish Theological Seminary. There, he continues as the Director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue. He also is on the board of governors and executive committee of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations. Rabbi Visotzky is on the steering committee of the United Nations Special Advisor's "Plan of Action...to Prevent Genocide," as well as the UN Multifaith Advisory Council. He is the author of ten books and editor of seven other volumes.

Karen Leslie Hernandez

Programme Officer in Partnerships and Interreligious Education, Religions for Peace

Dr. Karen Leslie Hernandez started at *Religions for Peace* in August of 2021, just after graduating with her Doctor of Ministry in Spiritual Renewal, Contemplative Practice, and Strategic Leadership, with a focus in Interfaith Peacebuilding and Restorative/Transformative Justice. Dr. Hernandez also has a Master of Sacred Theology in Theology, Philosophy and Ethics with a focus in Religion and Conflict Transformation from Boston University School of Theology '12, as well as a Master of Theological Research in Christian-Muslim Understanding from Andover Newton Theological



School '07. Dr. Hernandez did her BA at Wellesley College, graduating with honors in her major, Peace and Justice Studies, '05. With extensive interfaith and interreligious expertise and experience, including in social services, Dr. Hernandez also worked at United Religions Initiative for over seven years, at Habitat for Humanity for almost three years, and at St. Anthony's in the Tenderloin, San Francisco, for two and a half years. Dr. Hernandez's interfaith and interreligious expertise concentrates in the areas of restorative/transformative justice, theological coexistence, theological responses to religious extremism, human rights in sacred texts, trauma informed responses to conflict/violence, as well as peacebuilding—locally and internationally. Finally, a proud Chicana with Indigenous Mexican roots, Dr. Hernandez is the only Latina interfaith practitioner working at this level of expertise in the United States. Along with her theological and peacebuilding work, Dr. Hernandez is also a certified domestic violence advocate and mandated reporter.

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