



## To Be Bettered by Difference: Learning through the Religious Other

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# To Be Bettered by Difference:

Learning through the Religious Other

Tamara Sonn, Ph.D.

**M**y involvement in Muslim-Christian dialogue began while studying Thomas Aquinas's critiques of Islam in *Summa Contra Gentiles* at the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto.

Historian of philosophy and Aquinas translator Anton C. Pegis (d. 1978) encouraged me to study Arabic to read Islamic sources and understand them in their own light rather than filtered through Christian lenses. I took a leave from my graduate studies in Toronto and found a warm welcome and excellent teachers in Jordan. With their help, I experienced the first of several paradigm shifts that would guide my studies. Few Americans were studying Arabic then, so my host community was curious about my interests. When I told people I wanted to learn Arabic to read Muslim philosophers in the original language, they asked me why I wanted to do that. I told them it was because I wanted to learn about Islam from Muslims, rather than from Christian commentators.

Repeatedly, that answer raised the same response: "But I thought you were interested in Islam. Why do you want to study the philosophers?" I tried to explain that I had been studying the great medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas for a deeper understanding of Christianity, and now I wanted to study his counterparts, Ibn Sina (*Avicenna*) and Ibn Rushd (*Averroes*), in Arabic so I could understand Islam. It took some time for me to understand the error of assuming that philosophers hold the key to essential teachings in Islam as it does in Christianity. While the core discipline in Christianity is philosophical theology, that is not the case in Islam. In Islam, as in Judaism, the core discipline is law. If I wanted to study Islam, I needed to study *Shari'ah*.

**“While the core discipline in *Christianity* is *philosophical theology*, that is not the case in *Islam*. In *Islam*, as in *Judaism*, the core discipline is *law*.”**

Studying *Shari’ah* involved a second paradigm shift. I learned that, yes, *Shari’ah* is Islamic law. However, it is not simply a list of regulations and codes, as in Canon Law. In the words of my mentor, Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), at the University of Chicago, where I subsequently went to study Islam, *Shari’ah* is not the law in the modern Euro-American sense “since much of it embodies moral and quasi-moral precepts not enforceable in any court.” It is “on closer examination a body of legal opinions or, as *Shari’ah* expert David Santillana (d. 1931) put it, ‘an endless discussion of the duties of a Muslim’ rather than a neatly formulated code or codes.”<sup>1</sup>

*Shari’ah* is Sacred Law, God’s revealed will for humanity. Those aspects of *Shari’ah* that pertain to individuals’ duties, such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and charity, are certain; they are fixed for all time. However, it is humanity’s job in every generation to determine how best to apply the aspects of *Shari’ah* that are expressed as collective commands, such as “establish justice” (e.g., Q 4:136), “do good” and “struggle in the path of God” (Q 22:77-78). Legal scholars are responsible for interpreting what would constitute justice, goodness, and struggle in the path of God in specific circumstances. But human beings are fallible. Although authoritative, given their expertise, scholars’ opinions are subject to change in light of differing historical conditions. Fazlur Rahman taught me that if I wanted to understand Islam, I needed to study not just legal codes but also the roots and history of the ongoing process of interpreting *Shari’ah* in diverse circumstances throughout the ages and across the globe. That set the course for my future work, described in this chapter.

**“...human beings are *fallible*. Although *authoritative*, given their expertise, scholars’ opinions are *subject to change* in light of differing historical conditions.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 32.

## Seeing Through the Eyes of Others

My teachers, host family, and the larger Jordanian community were predominantly Muslims and eager to help me in my new undertaking. But it soon became apparent that they knew far more about my religion and culture than I knew about theirs. Having been educated in competitive private schools and accustomed to characterizations of America as “developed” by contrast to the “Third World,” this was a humbling but critically important awakening. However, again, *Vatican II* was a helpful guide. After all, learning to see ourselves as others see us was one of its inspirations.

It was as Apostolic Delegate to Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey (1931-1944) that Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli saw first-hand the results of anti-Semitism. When he became Pope John XXIII (1958) he committed the Church to addressing the roots of anti-Semitism in Christian teachings. That was the original intent of *Nostra Aetate* before its agenda was broadened to include all non-Christians. Pope John XXIII established a *Secretariat for Christian Unity* (1960) to help prepare for the Council’s work. Its remit ultimately included the Church’s relations with non-Christians. To that end, he advised its president to consult with the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, an expert on the subject. Many other non-Christians were also consulted in the preparation of the document.

**“When [*Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli*] became Pope John XXIII (1958) he committed the Church to addressing the roots of *anti-Semitism in Christian teachings*. ”**

The disparity between my vague familiarity with Islam and Muslims’ knowledge of and respect for Christianity was indeed challenging. How had I been certified “well educated” while knowing virtually nothing about Islam? How did I not know that Muslims are taught respect for all monotheistic traditions and especially honor Jesus, Mary, and the Gospels? How did I not know that the core of that respect is the belief that all true teachings come from the one God and share common values? And how did I not know that paramount among those values is the commitment to social justice in response to recognition of the one God who created all people equal? But recognizing my own ignorance was an opportunity for further learning. What else did I not know? A great deal, as it happened.

## Pursuing Communal Affinities

My discovery that respect for other religions, a *Vatican II* innovation for Catholics, was foundational to Islam, called for further study. Shifting to Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago, I found confirmation of what I had experienced in Jordan and Palestine. The Qur'an says, "Those who believe – Jews, Christians, and Sabeans – whoever believes in God and the Final [Judgement] and does good works, they shall have their reward from their Lord and shall have nothing to fear, no shall they come to grief. (Q 2:62)

Referring frequently to the patriarchs and prophets of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, Psalms, Gospels, and Jesus and Mary, the Qur'an places itself in the same tradition: "[God] has decreed [*shara'a*] for you as religion [*din*] what He decreed for Noah, and what We have revealed to you, and what We enjoined for Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Establish the *din*, and do not separate over it.'" (Q 42:14) It affirms that God has revealed many scriptures, and they are all based on Truth. "This [the Qur'an] is a blessed scripture We have revealed, confirming what was sent before it." (Q 6:93) Muhammad is told to say, "I believe in every scripture God has revealed." (Q 42:15) The Qur'an acknowledges disagreements about scriptures and corrects what it presents as misinterpretations.

**“Muhammad is told to say, “I believe in every scripture God has revealed.” (Q 42:15) *The Qur'an acknowledges disagreements about scriptures and corrects what it presents as misinterpretations.*”**

It affirms that God chose the Israelites above all others for revelation but rejects the interpretation that the message of revelation was meant for them alone. (Q 2:122-3)

It chastises the people of Israel for rejecting the mission of Jesus. (Q 61:6) It affirms the virgin birth of Jesus (Q 3:47) and his Ascension (Q 4:158) and refers to him as the Word and Messiah. (Q 3:45) But it rejects the interpretation that Jesus is more than a prophet and the idea that anyone's death can serve as expiation for others' sins. (Q 4:171 and 2:123) The Qur'an affirms that "islam [submission to the will of God] is the best *din*," which many Muslims interpret as asserting that Islam, the religion institutionalized as distinct from Judaism and Christianity, is superior to other religions.

Nevertheless, the Qur'an leaves judgment on differences of belief up to God. "We will be accountable for our deeds and you for yours." (Q 2:139) Moreover, it calls for shared commitment among all communities to do the will of God. "To each [religious community] We have ordained a code of law and a way of life. If God had willed He [would have] made you a one community, but [He did not] to test you in what he has given you. So compete with one another in doing good. To God you will all return and then He will inform you regarding your differences." (Q 5:48)

Commitment to interfaith solidarity despite differences in matters of belief is unique to Islam. However, the focus on good works manifesting true belief was reassuringly familiar and shared across Abrahamic traditions. It is an abiding theme of the Hebrew Bible shown, for example, in the *Book of Isaiah* (58:6-7): "[L]oosen the fetters of injustice...undo the thongs of the yoke...set free those who are oppressed... share your bread with the hungry and...offer shelter to the homeless poor...clothe the naked." Moreover, it is a constant theme in the New Testament. The good *Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur* and those of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary had informed our consciences with teachings such as those of *Matthew*, who relates that Jesus taught us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned, and welcome the stranger. For, "Whatever you [do] for one of the least of these brethren of mine, you [do] for me." (Matthew 25:40) The uniquely Christian expression of the message is its focus on good deeds as a reflection of the love of God.

**“Commitment to *interfaith solidarity* despite differences in matters of belief is unique to *Islam*. However, the focus on *good works* manifesting true belief was reassuringly familiar and shared across *Abrahamic traditions*.”**

Asked what are the greatest commandments, Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12: 30-31; Luke 10:27) John tells us that Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do." (John 14:12) "[L]ove one another as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Indeed, "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." (I John 4:16) Paul tells the *Corinthians*, "There are three things that endure: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love." (I Corinthians 13)

With this focus in mind, I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on the work of a Palestinian Orthodox Christian historian of Islam, Bandali al-Jawzi (d. 1943). Al-Jawzi published his *History of Intellectual Movements in Islam (Min Tarikh al-Harakat al-Fikriyyat fi'l-Islam)* in Jerusalem in 1928. At the time, he was teaching in Baku, Azerbaijan, a part of the Soviet Union. His history pivoted on his description of Islam as fundamentally a movement for social justice. He reevaluated classical Muslim heresiography, presenting diverse rebellions against the state as justice-seeking reform movements. Because of his historical context, his history is often characterized as Marxist. In fact, however, he does not discuss Marx and shows profound respect for religion. His family reports that he had actually considered the priesthood before switching to Islamic and Arabic studies at Kazan University in Russia. In addition, he firmly, if indirectly criticized Marx's perception of pre-industrial "Asiatic" societies as incapable of the kind of reform he advocated. In his words:

[T]he history of the East, the social and intellectual life of its people in general and that of the Islamic people in particular, are subject to the same laws and factors to which the life and history of the Western nations are subject. The nations of the East have passed and will continue to pass through the same social stages and changes as Western nations. For there is no difference in this sense between the East and the West and one is not innately superior to the other.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Jawzi presents Islam as a religion essentially concerned with what Christians call the social gospel. As such, it contrasts directly with the modernist notion of religion as a set of beliefs and practices concerning the Sacred and quite distinct from secular concerns. At the same time, it reflects the same concerns that impressed students of *Vatican II. Gaudium et Spes* teaches that everyone must treat their neighbors "without exception as another self, taking into account first of all [their] li[ves] and the means necessary to living...with dignity"<sup>3</sup> and that we must struggle "to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are connected with individual and social discrimination."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tamara Sonn (tr.), *Interpreting Islam: Bandali Jawzi's Islamic Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Church-Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City, 1965), 27 in Ch. II.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 66 in Ch. III, Sect. 1.



**“...we must struggle ‘to remove as quickly as possible the immense economic inequalities, which now exist and in many cases are growing and which are connected with individual and social discrimination.’ ”**

We are “obliged to come to the relief of the poor.”<sup>5</sup> We “should cooperate willingly and wholeheartedly in establishing an international order that includes a genuine respect for all freedoms and amicable brotherhood between all. This is all the more pressing since the greater part of the world is still suffering from so much poverty that it is as if Christ Himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of the disciples.”<sup>6</sup> In 1968, Jesuit Superior General Fr. Pedro Arrupe, present at a post-Council meeting I was privileged to address as a student delegate, spoke of the “apostolic concern for the poor and working classes.” These are views that have been confirmed in the intervening years. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, issued by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004, asserted that “love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.”<sup>7</sup> In 2020 Pope Francis’s *Evangelii Gaudium* once again reaffirmed the centrality of the “preferential option for the poor.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Learning from Interfaith Activists: Dialogue of Action in South Africa**

As I began teaching, focusing on social justice front and center, it was gratifying to find appreciation among the Muslim students in my courses for “getting it right.” Theology and law in service of the divine command to struggle for justice reflected their understanding of their faith.

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<sup>5</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), 69 in Ch. III, Sect. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 88 in Ch. V, Sect. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Catholic Church-Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City, 2004), 182 in Ch. Four, Sect. III (c).

<sup>8</sup> Catholic Church-The Joy of the Gospel. *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), 199 in Ch. Four, Sect. II.

It also created a new challenge for my learning trajectory: finding examples of contemporary Muslim communities engaged in social justice struggles that resonated with American students. Countless Muslims were struggling, along with Christians and Jews, for justice in Palestinian lands, but that struggle has been tainted in popular opinion by terrorism. However, many South African Muslims figured prominently in the struggle against Apartheid, a struggle with which American students could identify. So, I embarked on a study of that community and its interfaith engagement in the service of shared values. In that community, I discovered a stunning manifestation of the dual focus on social justice and respect for religious diversity: working with the religious other in the service of shared values.

The South African Muslim community is small – under 2% of the population. It is diverse, primarily composed of people brought as forced labor from what is now India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka by Dutch colonizers in the 17th century and, later, indentured laborers and trades-people brought by the British from India. The majority of South Africa’s Muslim community traces itself to Southeast Asian and South Asian immigrants. Indigenous African converts and their descendants comprise a smaller identifiable group of Muslims. All were distinguished from the colonizing Dutch and British based on their skin tone in the racist system that would be called Apartheid, officially institutionalized in 1948. Southeast Asians were identified as “Coloreds,” South Asians were categorized as “Asians” or “Asiatics,” and indigenous Africans were “Black.” In other countries, European colonizers often categorized people by religion.

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This was very much the case in British-controlled India, for example, where Muslims and Hindus were effectively pitted against one another, the residual effects of which are as palpable today as when the “divide and conquer” agenda was established over a century ago. In South Africa, by contrast, the privileging of racist categories imposed on the population, regardless of religious identity, provided an opportunity for interreligious solidarity.

Inter-communal activism began early in the European colonies that would be called South Africa when they were formed into a single commonwealth in 1910. South Asians came together in 1894 to form the *Natal Indian Congress* (NIC) to protest efforts to deny their voting rights. The group included Hindus, Muslims, and Christians and was co-founded by Mohandas Gandhi, who had been hired for legal services by Natal Muslims in 1893. Although he was accustomed to colonial discrimination in India, in South Africa, he experienced oppression at an unprecedented level. He was beaten for sitting in the wrong place on public transport, later refused access to public transport altogether, and kicked for walking in the wrong place on a public footpath, among other indignities shared with all non-whites in Southern Africa. He spent over 20 years there, defending the rights of those discriminated against for their skin color. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography of his experience in Natal, “Here it was that the religious spirit within me came to a living force...”<sup>9</sup>

**“Although [*Gandhi*] was accustomed to *colonial discrimination* in India, in South Africa, he experienced *oppression* at an unprecedented level.”**

The Natal Indian Congress focused on passive resistance to oppression. They and other regional organizations, such as the *Transvaal Indian Congress* and the *Cape British Indian Council*, joined to form the *South African Indian Congress* in 1921, continuing to resist unjust policies. They succeeded, for example, in opposing efforts to limit Indian land ownership to specified areas (the “Ghetto Act”) in 1946. In 1947, they expanded their collaborations to include the *African National Congress* (ANC), which was established in 1912 to defeat racism and intolerance.

In 1955, the two organizations organized a gathering of racially and religiously diverse anti-Apartheid activists called the *Congress of the People*, who approved a document called the *Freedom Charter*. Representatives of groups across the country had drafted the *Freedom Charter* based on the demands expressed by their constituents. Despite arrests with treason charges, the group managed to ratify the charter. The charter represented a significant step in the anti-Apartheid struggle.

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<sup>9</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi (tr., Mahadev Desai), *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover Publications, 1983), Part II, “Preparation for the Case.”

Moving beyond protests of specific restrictive regulations, it called for dismantling the racist institutions altogether. It demanded democracy, nationalization of resources and land reform, and guarantees of equal rights for all, “without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief.” This document continued to guide the anti-Apartheid struggle and shape the post-Apartheid government.

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Researching Muslim participation in the anti-Apartheid struggle, I visited South Africa both before and after the first all-race elections in 1994. Among the many impressive individuals I was privileged to meet was Zuleikha Mayat. Denied higher education due to her skin color, she nonetheless studied widely, became a journalist, and dedicated herself to assisting those suffering from the racist system. She co-founded the *Women’s Cultural Group (WCG)* in 1954, bringing together like-minded women regardless of race or religion. The group raised money for their efforts by selling Mayat’s famous cookbook, *Indian Delights*, and other writings. Deeply religious, she published meditations on the teachings of Islam in her 1966 *Quranic Lights*, which also sold widely. The funds were used to support disadvantaged students, clothing and bedding for the poor, soup kitchens, educational and training programs for women, and cultural events. Mayat also worked with the iconic *Black Sash* movement, established by a group of White women in 1955 to protest Apartheid restrictions through regular, peaceful demonstrations (at which they wore black sashes, prefiguring Israel’s *Women in Black*, founded in 1988) and efforts to raise awareness of the system’s injustices. Zuleikha and her husband, an equally selfless physician who served people experiencing poverty regardless of race, opened their home to anti-Apartheid activists trying to avoid arrest. Nelson Mandela was among them.


**“Zuleikha [*Mayat*] and her husband, an equally selfless physician who served people experiencing poverty regardless of race, opened their home to anti-Apartheid activists trying to avoid arrest. Nelson Mandela was among them.”**

One evening in 1979, the Mayats and their niece and Zuleikha's sister, were returning from a family outing. A van operated by a drunk driver crashed into them, killing the sister and severely injuring Dr. Mayat. An ambulance took him to a nearby hospital, but he was refused treatment due to his skin color. He died before they could reach a hospital for Blacks, while the white driver of the responsible vehicle was not charged.

Nevertheless, Zuleikha continued her work on behalf of people experiencing poverty and all those suffering under the oppression of racism, as well as for Palestinian rights. She was interviewed in 2020 when, at age 94 she was launching her latest book. She summarized her outlook: "Live every moment of your life to the fullest. Love all humanity. Above all stay true to yourself."<sup>10</sup>

Zuleikha Mayat's work exemplifies the kind of religious solidarity in the service of justice that resonates with American students. Her efforts in the anti-Apartheid struggle were not unique. Many South African Muslims were involved in the anti-Apartheid struggle. Ahmed Kathrada (d. 2017), for example, was a close associate of Mandela and served over 25 years in prison like him. Following the end of Apartheid, he was elected to parliament and served as a political advisor to Mandela.

Abdullah Mohamed ("Dulla") Omar (d. 2004), like other human rights advocates, was "banned" (prohibited by the Apartheid government from traveling, meeting with associates, publishing, or speaking publicly) and frequently detained for his efforts. Nevertheless, "Dulla" Omar continued using his legal training to defend anti-Apartheid activists. In 1994, Mandela appointed him South Africa's first Minister of Justice after the end of Apartheid. These well-known activists provided human faces to welcome American students into the Islamic interfaith dialogue of action. Several Muslim organizations, formed nationwide in the 1960s to 1980s, allowed students to glimpse the theological bases of Islamic social justice activism. In addition to coordinating resistance activities, members of these groups engaged in discussions about the religious roots of interfaith solidarity.

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Qalam, "Dr. Zuleikha Mayat (94): 'Live every moment, love all humanity, stay true,'" May 19, 2020.

Given the unique structure of Apartheid society described above, diverse communities had become accustomed to associating exclusively with members of their own communities, and some preferred to keep it that way. However, those motivated to make a common cause with the religious others drew upon the Quran's commitment to religious pluralism to support their activism. Their articles discussing Islamic pluralism in the service of social justice in publications such as *Muslim News* (established in the 1960s) and *Al-Qalam* (established in the 1970s) provide rich sources for my students.

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## Learning from the Religious Other

The *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* (PCID), in its 1991 *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, identified the kind of interreligious struggles exemplified by South Africans in the anti-Apartheid struggle as “dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.”<sup>11</sup> The document stressed the need for dialogue of action given the deplorable conditions under which so many people suffer. “There is need [for local Churches] to stand up for human rights, proclaim the demands of justice, and denounce injustice not only when their own members are victimized, but independently of the religious allegiance of the victims. There is also need to join together in trying to solve the great problems facing society and the world, as well as in education for justice and peace.”<sup>12</sup>

**“The [*Dialogue and Proclamation*] stressed the need for dialogue of action given the deplorable conditions under which so many people suffer.**

<sup>11</sup> Catholic Church-Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Vatican City, 1991), 42. *The forms of dialogue*.

<sup>12</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), 44. Dialogue and human liberation.

The need to witness faith in social action was stressed in St. John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, which lays out human rights, including the right to practice religion in accordance with one's own conscience.<sup>13</sup> But it also states that "it is useless to admit that a [person] has a right to the necessities of life, unless we also do all in our power to supply him with means sufficient for his livelihood."<sup>14</sup> It, therefore, speaks of integrating faith and action. "[T]his is the age in which each of us is required to make his own contribution to the universal common good. Daily is borne in us the need to make the reality of social life conform better to the requirements of justice."<sup>15</sup>

In his 2020 *Political Religion: How Christianity and Islam Shape the World*, Felix Körner describes the essential link between faith and action in solidarity with the religious other, again drawing upon *Pacem in Terris*:

[T]he putting of these principles into effect frequently involves extensive co-operation between Catholics and those Christians who are separated from this Apostolic See. It even involves the cooperation of Catholics with [people] who may not be Christians but who nevertheless are reasonable [people], and [people] of natural moral integrity. 'In such circumstances they must, of course, bear themselves as Catholics, and do nothing to compromise religion and morality. Yet at the same time they should show themselves animated by a spirit of understanding and unselfishness, ready to co-operate loyally in achieving objects which are good in themselves, or conducive to good.'<sup>16</sup>

Körner also draws attention to St. Pope Paul VI's 1965 Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*: "marking out unjust social patterns, and contributing to their transformation."<sup>17</sup> Laying out the essential role of the laity in witnessing the Gospels, the document says:

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<sup>13</sup> Catholic Church-Peace on Earth. *Pacem in Terris*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII, (Catholic Truth Society, 1963), 14-The Right to Worship God According to One's Conscience.

<sup>14</sup> *Pacem in Terris* (1963), 31-Mutual Collaboration.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-Constant Endeavor.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-Relations Between Catholics and Non-Catholics in Social and Economic Affairs (quoting from John XXIII's 1961 Encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* of 239).

<sup>17</sup> Felix Körner, *Political Religion: How Christianity and Islam Shape the World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020), p. 200.

The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice of God's kingdom. The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that, without detriment to its own proper laws, it may be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life and adapted to the shifting circumstances of time, place, and peoples. Preeminent among the works of this type of apostolate is that of Christian social action which the sacred synod desires to see extended to the whole temporal sphere, including culture.<sup>18</sup>

This theme was also amplified in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) which teaches, "The social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more human balance." More specifically, "Therefore there must be made available to all [people] everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious."<sup>19</sup> The Church considers dialogue in general and putting faith into action by struggling for justice (dialogue of action) to be evangelization, bearing witness to the faith. It demonstrates the teachings of the Gospel to the religious other.

**“ ‘The social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more human balance.’ ”**

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<sup>18</sup> Catholic Church-Vatican II. Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity: *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Vatican City, 1965), 7 in Ch. II-Objectives.

<sup>19</sup> Catholic Church-Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City, 1965), 26 in Ch. II.-The Community of Mankind.



This kind of evangelization also has distinctly practical implications, furthering the shared religious conviction that we are called to intervene in the suffering of the disadvantaged and oppressed. “Whatever you [do] for one of the least of these brethren of mine, you [do] for me.” (Matthew 25:40) But there is a further benefit of dialogue.

Together with dialogue of life (“where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit”), dialogue of theological exchange (“where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages”), and dialogue of religious experience (“where persons...share their spiritual riches, for instance concerning prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute”), dialogue of action helps people not only to understand the values of other religious traditions but to deepen their convictions. As *Dialogue and Proclamation* says, “In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment... Sincere dialogue implies, on the one hand, mutual acceptance of differences, or even of contradictions, and on the other, respect for the free decision of persons taken according to the dictates of their conscience.”<sup>20</sup>

The ability to learn from the religious other is a stunning observation emerging from Vatican II and amplified in *Dialogue and Proclamation*.

While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified...Far from weakening their own faith, true dialogue will deepen it. They will become increasingly aware of their Christian identity and perceive more clearly the distinctive elements of the Christian message. Their faith will gain new dimensions as they discover the active presence of the mystery of Jesus Christ beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and of the Christian fold.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Catholic Church–Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (Vatican City, 1991), 40–Collaborate with the Holy Spirit and 41–Conversion to God.

<sup>21</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), 49–Openness to truth and 50–New dimensions of faith.

It also corresponds with my experience and that of many of my students. Classroom discussions frequently evolved from specifics of the historical contexts of the examples studied to more profound observations about the nature of living fully one's religious identity. *Nostra Aetate* taught: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in [other] religions. She 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 [people]."<sup>22</sup> Dialogue allows us to discover other "rays of light," letting go of the notion that anyone can fully possess the truth. It allows us to engage in what *Dialogue and Proclamation* calls the "unending process" of allowing ourselves to be possessed by the truth.<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis reflected this notion in his 2020 *Let Us Dream*: "I like to think that we do not possess the truth so much as the truth possesses us, constantly attracting us by means of beauty and goodness."<sup>24</sup>

**“ ‘I—[Pope Francis]—like to think that we do not possess the truth so much as the truth possesses us, constantly attracting us by means of beauty and goodness.’ ”**

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## Conclusion

However, as I indicated in the introduction, the universality of truth, the idea that the Divine is present in and works through all communities, is not a position universally shared among Christians, particularly as evidenced in today's rise of Christian identity politics. Religious identity politics of any kind is, by nature, exclusivist. Where religious identity is a mark of political belonging, those who do not share the dominant religious identity are outsiders. The kind of Christian identity politics that has recently taken center stage in the U.S., Brazil, Israel, India, and elsewhere holds that enjoying full rights in the country in question is the birthright only of those sharing the specific religious identity.

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<sup>22</sup> Catholic Church-Vatican II. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican City, 1965), 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), 49-Openness to truth.

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (Simon & Schuster, 2022), p. 56.

Moreover, according to the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, there are many Catholics who believe that “Vatican II documents are permeated with heresy. Hence, beginning with Paul VI, the holders of the papal office in Rome are deemed heretics.”<sup>25</sup> Ecumenism and respect for non-Catholic religions are high on the list of heresies. For Catholics who believe in this way, it remains the case that outside of the pre-*Vatican II* Roman Catholic Church, there is no salvation.

This position starkly contrasts with the notion of evangelization expressed in interreligious dialogue. It reflects what Pope Francis has called an approach to religion as a set of ideas or an “ideology rather than a lived set of values.”<sup>26</sup> The Pontiff seems to be referring to the intellectual certainty that comes with acceptance of officially recognized doctrines. Intellectual certainty can be very comforting, particularly in today’s frightening world of pandemic disease, increasingly destructive climate events, the widening gap between the rich and poor, and almost constant warfare. And it can provide a firm foundation for manifesting faith in action. But on its own, intellectual certainty is only part of the process of evangelization, as Pope Francis expressed in his 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium*. There, living the Gospel “entails taking seriously each person and God’s plan for his or her life.”<sup>27</sup> “It would not be right,” the document continues, to see living the Gospel with the religious other “exclusively or primarily in terms of doctrinal formation.” Rather than calling on others to believe in specific ways, the emphasis is on demonstrating in our own behavior “the first and the greatest of the commandments...’This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12). Whenever the New Testament authors want to present the heart of the Christian moral message, they present the essential requirement of love for one’s neighbour: ‘The one who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the whole law...therefore love of neighbour is the fulfilling of the law’ (Romans 13: 8,10).”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, faith in action, “fulfilling of the law,” requires interacting with others. That can take us out of our comfort zone of intellectual certainty. It entails taking risks, allowing for challenges, and even the possibility of rejection. There are inevitably moments of doubt and even fear.

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<sup>25</sup> Frank K. Flinn, “Sedevacantism.” *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, 2nd Edition (Boston, MA: Credo Reference, 2016), p. 566.

<sup>26</sup> The Guardian, “Pope chides ‘backward’ conservatives in US for replacing faith with ideology”, August 29, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Catholic Church-The Joy of the Gospel. *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), 160 in Ch. 3, IV.

<sup>28</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 161 in Ch. 3, IV.

But, in my experience, the rewards outweigh the risks. As *Dialogue and Proclamation* notes, dialogue can be an occasion for deepening one's faith commitment in solidarity with others. This idea is reflected in the title of this chapter, taken from "Remarks on the Opening of the Wilfred and Muriel Smith Collection at the Oviatt Library of the California State University at Northridge, April 14, 2000" (unpublished) by the great historian of religion's son Brian Cantwell Smith. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000) was not only a great scholar of religions but also a pioneer in interfaith outreach, focusing particularly on Islam. His son summarized his father's approach this way:

[H]is example – what he lived, taught, recommended, and inspired – was to stay firmly grounded in one's own tradition...and, from there, to reach across to those in other traditions – to speak to them, to love them, to celebrate life's personal plurality. To be bettered, not lessened, by differences.

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## About the CFGI

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

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