

# Intergenerational Dialogue on 'Learning from Leaders' Considerations & Experiences in the current Global Context



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## Models of Encounter in Interfaith Work: A Few Observations with a Nod to St. Francis



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A Few Observations with a Nod to Saint Francis***

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Some twenty years ago I was asked at the Harvard Catholic Student Center to share some reflections on how young Catholics could engage with religious pluralism. That is, models of encounter for young Catholic women and men with people from different faiths—with the diversity of world religions—as well as with committed humanists who pursue the common good from a non-religious angle.

I was asked to do so on a dual capacity: as the Harvard Faculty Advisor to the Catholic Student Center, and as a scholar of Religion and Literature who also happened to be involved in interreligious work.

When Dr. Aram invited me early this week to talk to you today, I went back to my old notes for that occasion out of sheer curiosity. That informal talk 20 years ago was addressed primarily to young Catholics at the university, but whatever thoughts I then had about these issues had been forged in the early crucible of my formative experiences with interreligious work, my first involvement with such initiatives in 1992 when I met Vinu and her beloved parents, Dr. Aram and Ma, first in Coimbatore and later in Italy. Vinu and I had met through the Youth Branch of an UN based organization now called Religions for Peace: an international group of young women and men from different traditions of faith that came together to collaborate on areas of overlapping moral commitment across religious and cultural boundaries (Vinu still serves its leadership body as the ever-youthful co-moderator). I was a PhD candidate at the time and that was my first international experience with interfaith work.

Ten years after that, I spoke to those Catholic students. I was no longer a PhD candidate but an early career member of the Faculty mining those early experiments for insights into what it meant to engage with a religiously plural world: an inter-generational dialogue on the promotion of the common good. Here I am now, twenty years later, reconnecting with Shanti Ashram and looking back at those notes. Very basic reflections that were rooted in, inspired by, the life-long friendships forged back then with inspiring women and men—Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Taoist, Christian, Shintoist, Bahai, etc.—in the crucible of that movement.

Of course, much happens in one's life in thirty years or even in one: our thoughts evolve, our ideas are refined, our lives are enriched with sorrows and joys, with transformative experiences that deepen both our self-understanding and our relationship to fellow travellers. However, I still find some early intuitions in these old notes from my younger self that I hope might offer some useful fodder for further thought in this forum. What I will do today very briefly is to go over some of the observations I shared with them, reflections from a scholar who happened to be Catholic addressing young university students who also happened to be Catholic, and gloss them in relationship to what interreligious work might mean to a culture of encounter for such a diverse group as ours: a religiously, culturally, linguistically diverse group of fellows.

**I will proceed in three steps:**

**First**, I will review very briefly the Catholic context for that talk – the historical background to the Catholic church's changing attitudes to religious diversity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This part is Catholic focused only because that was the personal context where I started, as a young Catholic scholar from the Hispanic world, and a Franciscan to boot.

**Second**, I will go over four tentative approaches to religious pluralism that have framed my cumulative experiences with interfaith work over the past thirty years.

**Finally**, I will share two anecdotes from the life of St. Francis – the Italian Christian saint so much admired by Gandhi – that capture for me the running thread across these various models of interreligious engagement.

And allow me yet one more caveat, if I may. This is not a scholarly presentation. I am not a scholar of interfaith work. I am a religious historian and a literature scholar with an expertise in the medieval past. So, I am not presenting in here a carefully wrought piece. These are rather basic observations from those early experiences that I put together in the past couple of days, walking down memory lane to reconnect with my younger self.

## PART I

### What was the point of departure for that early talk?

My first goal at the time was to provide for those young Catholics some historical context for how the Catholic church in due course came to embrace interreligious work.

When I was speaking to those students in the early 1990s, recent events—recent at the time—had brought to public attention the Catholic church's complicated response to the pressing challenge of religious diversity. Some of those events were very positive. They were cause for celebration: a timely encyclical on Christian ecumenism by pope John Paul II (*Ut unum sint*), the Church's overtures of good will with Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders in the 80s and the 90s, interreligious prayers such as the 1986 gathering in Assisi, the recent establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Vatican, and the Church's active collaboration with international interreligious bodies such as the World Conference on Religion and Peace at the United Nations (as Religions for Peace used to be called). Now, if I were speaking to Catholic students today, I could add even more uplifting ones, including Pope Francis's own prophetic testimony through his personal example and in such encyclicals as *Laudato Sii* on the environmental crisis and the care of our common home, or the stunning *Fratelli Tutti* on collaborative models of fraternity and social friendship across religious borders.

But there were also some negative events back then, painful sources of disappointment among Catholics and non-Catholics alike for those of us who were involved in interreligious work: the unfelicitous depiction of Buddhism in John Paul II's 1994 "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," or the intense controversies over the thorny legacy of Pius IX and Pius XII in the history of Jewish – Christian relations, especially with the Church's response to the Holocaust and other such atrocities perpetrated against the Jews.

Contemporary responses to these events were framed, of course, by the Catholic church's evolving, much more positive appreciation of other religions in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. It is not a trite exaggeration to describe the Catholic church's change in attitude after Vatican II as unprecedented and momentous. For the first half of the twentieth century, the Catholic church had formally rejected any dialogical venture with other communities of faith. This attitude was perfectly embodied in Pius XI's stern rebuff of the ecumenical movement in his 1928 encyclical *Mortalium Animos*. Indeed, until the papacy of John XXIII, the Catholic church had never acknowledged a Protestant church, not to mention a non-Christian religion, as a legitimate religious body with which to engage in dialogue at any level of parity. Catholics were strictly forbidden even to enter a Protestant temple. None of the pre-Conciliar popes in that century would have looked approvingly on religious pluralism in civic society as an opportunity to be cherished. And despite a few notable exceptions and precedents, the traditional Catholic interpretation of *nulla salus extra ecclesia* (the claim that "there was no salvation outside of the Church") was exclusivist and historically inimical to a positive reconnaissance of other religious faiths (a point that struck me recently as I was reading through Gandhi's recollection of his first encounter with Christian missionaries during his pivotal years in South Africa).

It was only with John XXIII's celebrated encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth") that Catholics encountered the first explicit nod in a major papal document to religious diversity as a positive fact of human experience. John XXIII's ecumenical gesture heralded a sweeping vision of reform that crystallized in the two conciliar statements redefining the relationship of the Catholic Church to other world religions: *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis humanae*. In *Nostra Aetate*, a brief declaration originally forged over the Council's dispute about Christian-Jewish relations, the Father of the Council affirmed, and quote, that it "rejects nothing of what is true and holy in all religions." The declaration highlighted with exceeding carefulness some of the attributes that the Church extolled in individual religions—the Hindu philosophical tradition and its contemplative paths, the Buddhist ideal of human perfection through enlightenment, the piety of Islam and its veneration of Jesus as prophet and Mary as his Virgin mother. Finally, *Nostra Aetate* offered the Catholic church's proclamation of the inviolability of the Mosaic covenant and its first official denunciation of all forms of anti-Semitism as sinful (a formidable pronouncement against the multiseular history of Christianity's role in anti-Jewish violence). *Dignitatis Humanae*, on the other hand, the Council's landmark proclamation of the universal right to religious freedom, redefined the Church's relationship to other religions in the framework of its social tradition. It reaffirmed the inviolable rights of the human person and the protected status of people from all

faiths, or none, as worthy conversation partners in a pluralist society mindful of such diversity. Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aestate* and *Dignitatis Humanae* during Vatican II, the Catholic church has put itself to task with renewed strength as an active participant in interreligious affairs.

Now I have focused on the Catholic context, which I know best, and only a part of it at that, but the broader challenge for any of us has other counterparts that each of you would know better.

How do any of us can move beyond the comfort zone—the lulling safety—of our personal beliefs, our sense of meaning, in order to encounter with an open heart people of other cultures and faiths and do so just where they are, in their own terms?

How can Hindus and Muslims, Buddhists and Christians and Sikhs reimagine religious diversity not as a threat or a source of discomfort, but as an invitation for growth, collaboration, deep learning, and life-long friendships?  
How do any of us find resources in our respective traditions of thought and faith to engage with people of good will across religious boundaries and muster the courage to work together for the promotion of the common good?

How do we countenance the interpretations in our respective traditions that have given rise to conflict, interreligious strife, and violence with the best that our traditions can summon as a powerful force for good through collective action in concert with each other?

## **PART II**

This brings me to my second point: competing models of interreligious work.

Having reviewed with my students the broad historical comments I just shared, we took a look from a Catholic angle at four ways of engaging the diversity of religions, four constructive responses to religious pluralism that I described at the time as theological, ethical, educational, and mystical.

Now such categories tend to be simplistic and not all of these are equally relevant to our various traditions of faith, but I still find this fourfold scheme very useful *grosso modo* to organize my thoughts on the subject.

### **A-Theological**

What do I mean by theology?

The term is rooted in Christian intellectual history, but I use it here in a broader sense: the religious self-understanding of an individual as an object of sustained reflection, “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*, Anselm of Canterbury).

How do Hindus, Christians, or Muslims come to understand themselves and the worlds they inhabit from the perspective of their own faith? When it comes to religious diversity, one may ask more precisely: what resources can we muster in our respective traditions—what language can we use as Muslims, Christians, Hindus or Jains—to make theological sense of the simple fact that there are people of different faiths, other religions with competing claims to absolute Truth about the divine?

How does a Hindu Shaivite philosopher, a Shiite Muslim ‘ālim, a Japanese Buddhist monk, or an Orthodox Christian theologian find a space within their theologies to come to grips with religious diversity as an object of reflection in all its complexity?

Of course, the theological approach represents a more pressing challenge for some religious traditions than others, especially historical traditions of faith with a more delimited concept of salvation, such as Christianity. Hindu and Buddhist theologians of various strands with an universalist outlook have a more expansive frame to accommodate religious diversity (my experience, for example, with the revered monks from the Ramakrishna order that serve as Hindu chaplains at my own university).

That was certainly the case with my Catholic students.

Christianity's distinctive claim about the uniqueness of Christ posed a distinctive challenge to a Christian reconnaissance of religious diversity. How can Christians fully committed to an orthodox understanding of "salvation through Christ" come to appreciate religious pluralism not as something to be decried in the name of evangelical zeal but as an opportunity to grow in grateful appreciation for the active presence of God beyond the Church's visible boundaries?

In my own reflections at the time, I went over some of the Christian theological paradigms –inclusivist, pluralist, etc. – covering a broad spectrum between a particularist model of the Christian faith, with its concomitant profession of Christianity's pre-eminence, and a pluralist understanding of Christianity within the family of world religions, what the British theologian John Hicks once termed a Copernican revolution that placed world

religions as different planets gravitating towards the Truth as their heliocentric pivot. Of course, there are several nuanced attempts at striking a balance between these poles and I shared with the students those that I found particularly promising in my own experience (especially Francis X. Clooney on comparative theology and Yves Congar on a Catholic theology of the Holy Spirit). However, I do not need to burden you today with that part of our conversation.

It suffices to say that we can all probe our respective traditions for theological resources to make sense of other traditions of faith with integrity, generosity, and hope.

## **B-Ethical**

This ethical approach is the model that hewed most closely to my own experience with the World Conference on Religion and Peace: active cooperation on areas of overlapping moral commitment across the theological boundaries of faith.

This was also an easier model to explain to my students at the time.

Interreligious collaboration for these young Catholics could be presented as an extension of a broader mandate: become agents of social justice as a constitutive part of their faith. The Catholic social tradition, expounded in a distinguished body of papal encyclicals from Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* to Francis's recent *Fratelli Tutti*, and some of its local implementations by episcopal conferences, along with the Latin American tradition of liberation theology, had reaffirmed a historical commitment to social justice and the concomitant fight against the structures of poverty as a constitutive part of what it meant to be a Christian: not a luxury, not a superfluous accretion, but an integral element of faithful discipleship. This approach, which I labelled "ethical," had also been the guiding principle for the Vatican's collaboration with some of the most effective international interreligious bodies such as the World Conference on Religions and Peace.

It is also a model that truly speaks across boundaries of faith, for it is premised on what we can do together in spite of our religious differences. As an Italian saint once put it: *Figlioli, cercate piu quello che unisce che quello che divide* (John XXIII "Little children, search more what unites than what divides").

The premise behind this approach is straightforward. Notwithstanding our theological discrepancies and an honest disavowal of facile irenisms, religious leaders and communities can and should act jointly upon shared moral commitments—e.g. human rights, conflict resolution, economic and social justice, environmental policy, health care, sustainable development, the empowerment of women, the rights of children, the promotion of human dignity, and the fight to eradicate racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia. Many interreligious efforts have been criticized for facile irenic gestures, for glossing over differences and reducing the shared core of the world religions to a minimalist ethics across cultural boundaries. Ethical reductionism does no justice to the unique richness and genius of our various spiritual traditions. Such scruples, however, do not override the ethical imperative to transform the world from within

with the alleviation of poverty and the unswerving pursuit of justice. And all of our religious traditions have deep reservoirs of ethical wisdom at the service of the common good.

This exalted model of interfaith collaboration is also the one that I have had the privilege of witnessing over the past few days in Shanti Ashram: the humbling work that you all do on behalf of children, women, and youth. Gandhi's appreciation for religious mutuality in his vision of Sarvodaya provided its beloved founders with the spiritual motivation for their multipronged initiatives: constructive social action, the promotion of health and education, and the empowerment of local communities in this corner of Tamil Nadu.

### **C-Education**

The third model—the educational approach—is one particularly close to my heart as a scholar and a teacher: interreligious encounters as deep learning across traditions.

There can be no creative engagement with religious pluralism without a sound, historically and culturally informed appreciation of other traditions. Scapegoating, stereotyping, sheer ignorance are the most intractable sources of hatred among religious people. All who are engaged in interreligious work should aim not only to be informed about their own faith—which is in itself very important—but also to cultivate at least a modicum of understanding about the faith of their friends: some non-superficial knowledge about their religious self-understanding, the history, spirituality and internal diversity of their religious communities; something about their traditions of belief and practice, their artistic legacy, intellectual life, and cultural expressions, or about the life story of their great sages, prophets and saints.

This is not merely an academic exercise—the “sit together, stand apart” way of many “dialogue” groups. It is about learning to see the world through someone else's eyes as the foundation of deep friendships across religious borders. How, for example, can we hope to counteract the increasing demonization of Islam in Western media without some basic appreciation of Islamic history, its philosophical, theological and cultural traditions from the Balkans to Varanasi, from the Arab world to Indonesia, its spiritual resources, towering figures, and internal diversity as a world religion? Or how much do we know about the vastly diverse indigenous traditions of religious practice and belief in Africa, Latin America, the Pacific Islands? How can we counter popular misrepresentations of Buddhism without a minimal appreciation for the various forms that the tradition attained as it moved from India to Tibet to China to Japan and to Korea? Or how can we dispel Western caricatures of Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and the other great traditions of India without some sense of their inner diversity and riches, as I have experienced again and again with the friends I have made and from which I have learned every time that I come to this country? (Here I am, for example, in Tamil Nadu learning more about the Hindu traditions of South India, not as a scholar of Indian religions but as the grateful friend of my dear Vinu).

A commitment to interreligious education has also been central to my own scholarly career. I come here today as a comparative literature scholar with a religious studies background, and a historical expertise in medieval and early modern Iberia. I teach and write about the cultural exchanges between Iberian Muslims, Christians, and Jews and their literary archives in Arabic, Hebrew, and Spanish. The focus of my research is medieval but a historical purview about the intellectual traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism deeply informs my appreciation for friends and colleagues across the three traditions.

One of my dear friends in college was Don Seeman, a Jewish student leader of Harvard's Hillel community and now a rabbi and professor at Emory University. He was my first Jewish friendship (I had met no Jews in Puerto Rico growing up before going to Cambridge, Mass. in 1984). Through Don I fell in love with the spiritual treasures of Judaism. I became fascinated with Judaism, I was riveted, almost obsessed to the point where I ended up learning Hebrew and Aramaic so I could peruse the Hebrew Bible, study rabbinic literature, and probe the cultural legacy of Sephardic Jews—their poets, philosophers, mystics, and scholars—all in the original languages.

Likewise, my first Muslim friendships inspired me to go to Morocco, where I learned Arabic, both fuṣḥā and Morocco's ad-dārija, so that I could deepen in my knowledge of the Qur'ān and the tafsīr, Islamic philosophy and taṣawwuf, Islamic history in its diversity and the Arabo-Andalusian heritage of the Iberian peninsula.

In sum, my theological self-understanding has been enriched ever since by the range of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources that I teach about within the “secular” humanities. The same goes for the intellectual and spiritual riches of the other great traditions of faith—Hindu, Buddhist, Shinto, Sikh—not as a scholar of the same with comparable expertise, but through the blessings of friendship and the drive of the eternal student.

Let me be clear, though. We need not become scholars in order to engage in interfaith work. We all have different vocations, different calls in life. My point in here is a tad simpler. Making an effort to become informed, going beyond platitudes and vapid notions, opens a window into the heart of friends and colleagues from other faiths.

## **D-Mystical**

This is the other beating heart of the interfaith tradition: to delve into the spiritual traditions that nurture people of faith with a deeper realization of God in their lives, the balsam of grace, the experience of the sacred, the search for enlightenment on this side of eternity. The other three models I have sketched so far— theological reflection, interfaith social action, and deep religious learning—all three derive their strength from the wells of faith of their practitioners, the habits of prayer that console them, the spiritual practices that animate pursuing vocations of service.

Talking to those students in the nineties, I reminded them about the mystical center of gravity of our faith: the imitation of Christ as the fruition of love—the love of God and of all His creatures—the realization of God, of His presence in our lives, as an object of experience in contemplative prayer and our love for one another. *Inquietus est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*, as St. Augustine once put it (“Our hearts are restless until they rest in You”). The spiritual life—I continued—was a pillar of our vocation, the habits of prayers, devotion, and sacramental worship that gave us the strength to do the hard work and the reassurance that we are not alone in facing our daily struggles: the realization, in sum, of God’s indwelling presence within us.

A felt appreciation for holiness, for the life of the spirit in prayer, has nurtured as well this mystic model: interfaith efforts to engage with our enduring traditions of worship. These initiatives have included interfaith opportunities to learn from, be welcome at, even participate, in each other’s traditions of liturgical and ritual worship, whether in Jewish synagogues or Christian churches, Buddhist and Hindu temples, Islamic mosques or Shinto shrines. They have also included inter-monastic encounters where Buddhist, Christian and Hindu monks, Jain monks, Taoist and Sufi practitioners probe jointly their spiritual practices: contemplative prayer, silent meditation, the litanic repetition of divine names, etc. And one could include as well the loving orchestration of interfaith prayer that frame our collaborative ventures (the case every morning here at the Shanti Ashram).

Most significantly, our religious traditions have produced great exemplars of holiness, towering mystics, sages, and saints, in whose lives and teachings we recognize sterling models of virtue, selfless compassion, the deepest wisdom, and, above all, the abiding presence of God. Teaching my seminar on mysticism, I am constantly bedazzled by the luminous writings of these spiritual giants, as I read them side by side with my beloved students. And of course, blessed are those who have had the great fortune of meeting living saints in their own times: those who have experienced first-hand the living presence of God among us.

Such exemplars of holiness, past and present, challenge us with a simple fact: that no tradition has a monopoly on holiness and sainthood, that God’s grace cannot be confined to the visible boundaries of our communities. Probing the spiritual legacy of world religions through those who embody their very best is a powerful corrective against our spiritual myopia: our impoverished delusions of grandeur.

## **PART III**

Allow me to end with a final note drawn from my own tradition of Catholic piety as a lay Franciscan: two complementary anecdotes from the stirring life of St. Francis.

St. Francis’s Testament to his brothers, written in the final days of his life in 1226, opens simply with a taut account of his conversion to the itinerant life of a friar.

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world.

His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, writing barely two years after Francis' passing, recalls as well this touching confession and further fleshes out the moving story behind it:

“For he used to say that the sight of lepers was so bitter to him that in the days of his vanity when he saw their houses even two miles away, he would cover his nose with his hands. When he started thinking of holy and useful matters with the grace and strength of the Most High, while still in the clothes of the world, he met a leper one day. Made stronger than himself he came up and kissed him. He then began to consider himself less and less, until by the mercy of the Redeemer, he came to complete victory over himself.”

Subsequent admirers of Francis would further embellish the story as a hagiographic miracle. The leper, in later versions, is none other than Christ himself in disguise. Christ is the one standing by the side of a lonely Umbrian Road. He is the one patiently waiting for Francis to overcome his scruples and showcase his heroic mettle. In such versions, once Francis embraces and kisses the leper, he vanishes into thin air: nothing but a divine gesture to usher him into a life of penance.

The simplicity of Francis' confession is powerful enough without the miraculous varnish of later retellings. But the hagiographers do not betray Francis' understanding of his own experience as they build upon a core theme of his religious life: seeing Christ in that very leper. Seeing Him in anyone and everyone who is broken, suffering, afflicted, persecuted, dispossessed, anyone and everyone who is standing on the margins of the circle of life.

A similar conviction with a twist guided an equally famous episode in the life story of St. Francis. In September of 1219, as the Fifth Crusade raged on and Christians and Muslims fought over Damietta, Francis stepped into the camp of the Ayyubid sultan al- Malik al-Kāmil in hopes for a peaceful truce. It truly warms the cockles of my heart to picture the charismatic young friar in Egypt meeting face to face with the formidable Kurdish ruler. Al-Kāmil was an impressive Muslim leader, a learned, sophisticated man, spiritually inclined, very close in age to Francis and committed like his Christian peer to negotiating a peace that seemed ever so elusive. Now for most medieval Christians there

were only two imaginable outcomes to this remarkable meeting: either Francis would convert the Sultan or else die a martyr trying. There was no middle point between martyrdom or conversion for his contemporaries. And yet, neither of these two occurred. The Sultan did not convert to Christianity; Francis was not executed for his bravado. The Sultan, instead, took a great liking to the Christian holy man, they enjoyed each other's company; and Francis' intervention led to the eventual establishment of a Franciscan presence as shared custodians in the Holy Land.

Muslims may have loomed large as embodiments of evil in the medieval Christian imagination and yet, at the heights of the Crusades Francis struck an unthinkable bond with a Muslim sagely prince. As with the leper, Francis also learned to see Christ in his Muslim brother. Could he have visited a mosque? Could he have seen other Muslims in prayer to the same God that he worshipped? Perhaps. We do not know. But we do know from the historical record that, upon returning to Italy, Francis enjoined the friars in his first rule, the 1221 Regula non bullata, not to betray the Gospel in non-Christian lands through violence and proselitism but rather embody its message in lived kindness, humility and virtue amidst their sisters and brothers. This is a stunning milestone in the premodern history of interfaith dialogue.

At a time when people of various faiths are demonized across the world and the “skeletal leer of war” defies us, when immigrants find their hopes betrayed and the poor and the infirm are ostracized, when the outcasts of the world are driven by bigotry over the brink of despair, may we learn from Francis to embrace the Sultan and the Leper, that we may experience the presence of God in every daughter and son of the human family without exception.





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