

## Dialogue of Religion and Civil Society

### Aspirations for the Common Good: Working Together for Shaping a Brighter Future

#### Session Three

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Relations between religions and civil society range from relative harmony to intense tension and conflict. Pope Francis has issued an invitation to Catholics to work together with all persons of good will to shape a brighter future by building a culture of encounter based upon dialogue and the recognition of the goodness of diversity. Shortly after he issued his encyclical on care for the earth, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, he traveled to Paraguay, where he set forth this vision in an address to the leaders of civil society:

Moreover, dialogue presupposes and demands that we seek a culture of encounter; an encounter which acknowledges that diversity is not only good, it is necessary. Uniformity nullifies us, it makes us robots. The richness of life is in diversity. For this reason, the point of departure cannot be, 'I'm going to dialogue but he's wrong.' No, no, we must not presume that the other person is wrong. I dialogue with my identity but I'm going to listen to what the other person has to say, how I can be enriched by the other, who makes me realize my mistakes and see the contribution I can offer. It is a going out and a coming back, always with an open heart. If I presume that the other person is wrong, it's better to go home and not dialogue, would you not agree? Dialogue is for the common good and the common good is sought by starting from our differences, constantly leaving room for new alternatives. . . . Dialogue is about seeking the common good. Discuss, think, and discover together a better solution for everybody.<sup>1</sup>

In a number of contexts across the globe, many religious leaders have encouraged a culture of respectful encounter, but others have powerfully shaped civil society by constructing or encouraging forms of ethno-religious identity that support the dominance of one group and discrimination against others. Reciprocally, some political and cultural leaders have sought to

harness religious differences in order to foster supremacy over and oppression of other religious and ethnic communities. Such movements want one religion to dominate civil society. In the United States of America today we see a resurgence of white racist Christian nationalists who prize white Christians as the true citizens of America and disdain persons of color and those who are not Christian; in many other countries ethnoreligious nationalists believe that their group should dominate civil society, and they sometimes resort to violence to impose their will.

In each of these instances, other religious leaders of the same community have vigorously contested discriminatory programs as fundamental violations of religious values and have worked to shape a healthy community of the world's religions and cultures. Scholars have debated to what degree political leaders manipulate religious and cultural symbols and to what degree religious leaders take advantage of political and cultural forces for their own purposes; the influences can be reciprocal as religious, cultural, and political spheres intersect and overlap in civil societies; in some cases they can hardly be distinguished.

Another great danger to our civil society is the ecological crisis, the threat of global catastrophe fostered by what Pope Francis has called a technocratic paradigm that values all human activity according to its profitability and that denies the intrinsic value of non-human creation.<sup>2</sup> To a large degree, the development of contemporary civil society has relied on the unlimited exploitation of natural resources with a reckless fervor that displays little concern for the impact on the community of life. Here also religious leaders have played ambiguous roles. Some Christian leaders have proposed strongly anthropocentric visions of creation, interpreting the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis as authorizing humans to dominate and subdue the rest of creation for their own purposes without limit. It is widely known that in 1967 the intellectual historian Lynn White, Jr., proposed that some medieval Catholic understandings of creation supported the

instrumentalization of nature and the modern assault on the environment.<sup>3</sup> It is less often remembered that he concluded his famous essay by holding up the ideal of St. Francis of Assisi as an alternative model. Pope Francis has taken up the example of St. Francis of Assisi as a model of honoring all creatures as our sisters and brothers; he forcefully rejects the anthropocentric interpretation of Genesis 1, decries the reign of technocracy in our world, and appeals to the example of Francis of Assisi as a patron of ecology (*LS* 66-67). The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of Eastern Orthodox Christians, has become known as the “Green Patriarch” because of his longstanding advocacy of ecological values as flowing from Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, many Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and indigenous leaders have interpreted their respective traditions in ways that support ecological integrity. As Pope Francis notes, “Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable or remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it” (*LS* 63).

Recently Pope Francis met in Mongolia with Mongolian shamans, Buddhist monks, Muslim, Jewish, Shinto, and Russian Orthodox leaders and praised the history of Mongolian respect for religious diversity and ecological wisdom. Addressing both challenges of religious nationalism and ecology, Pope Francis invites all persons of good will to shape civil society through a culture of encounter in which all persons and their religious traditions find respect and a culture of integral ecology in which all creatures receive honor and care.<sup>5</sup> Because the challenges are global, the responses must be global. Pope Francis acknowledges that believers have not

always been “faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve,” and so he urgently calls for a return to the sources of religious traditions in order to respond to current needs (*LS* 200).

I would like to propose five areas where religious and interreligious leaders can work with leaders of civil society in shaping a constructive culture of encounter and a culture of integral ecology: Aesthetics, Academic Sharing, Spiritual Encounter, Concern for the World, and Friendship.

### Aesthetic Experience

Artists and literary writers have the potential to shape cultural and political perceptions and values for better or worse. Works of art and literature powerfully shape our experience of the world from the time we are young; many works of art and literature past and present have emerged from religious contexts. Great works of art reach across religious, cultural, and political boundaries to communicate fundamental insights into human life in the cosmos, including the intrinsic value and beauty of the natural world.

We inherit an ambiguous history. On the one hand, art and literature can express agendas of domination and discrimination against other communities; political actors can manipulate art, including religious art, to serve as propaganda. When a program of ethno-religious nationalism dominates political and cultural life, art and literature can celebrate the domination and oppression of subaltern communities, as in much imperial and colonial art and literature. Much of traditional Christian art and literature presented Jews and Muslims in negative forms as sinners who were conquered and dominated by Christian victors, or who deserved to be. On the other hand, art and

literature can also express with revolutionary power the suffering of the marginalized and invite empathy, compassion, and solidarity with them.

When a technocratic paradigm dominates cultural and political life, art and literature are valued only for their profitability. Pope Francis laments that modern technocracy objectifies all creatures as nothing more than resources for human exploitation, warping our politics and culture into patterns of behavior based on domination, manipulation, and profit seeking. However, art and literature can also celebrate our connection with nature and give voice to the subjectivity of non-human creatures, as in St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle*, which prays that God may be praised through, by, and for all creatures, including Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and our Sister, Mother Earth.

Religiously inspired art and literature have a special role to play. The world's religious traditions have fostered the appreciation of the beauty and intrinsic value of nature and of all human life in aesthetic experience. In addition to inviting reverence for the experience of the sacred in the world of nature, works of art can evoke an awareness of the transcendent and can resonate across religious, political, and cultural boundaries. Many different religious traditions tell us that ultimate truth is beyond our conceptual grasp; often the most powerful evocations come from art. Classic works of art transcend the circumstances of their production and can be present to each succeeding generation and to diverse populations around the world.

Encounters with the religious art from different traditions can become a form of interreligious dialogue, inviting us into a broader world of global awareness of the cosmos and the transcendent. In my visits to the sacred sites of many religious traditions, I have repeatedly found inspiration in the magnificent artwork. Other religious traditions of art resonate deeply with the Catholic tradition's cultivation of beauty as a form of worshipping God and celebrating creation.

There is a communication in aesthetics that is for me one of the most profound encounters between our traditions.

### Academic Exchanges

Academic life is similarly ambiguous. It can be a battleground where national, ethnic, religious, and individual egos clash in an unending series of struggles for power. Indeed, much of the history of intellectual life demonstrates that scholars can pursue knowledge in ways that support the political, military, cultural, and religious dominance of one group over others. But academic life can also be a grace-filled exploration of the wonders of a world open to transcendence and the sacred where humans acknowledge the ancient lesson that true wisdom means acknowledging our limits.

Often the most powerful influences on scholarship regarding civil society are philosophical and religious assumptions that seem self-evident and unquestionable until they are challenged by diverse perspectives. Intellectuals have played ambiguous roles in this process. By their choice of topics, scholars can exclude entire populations from serious consideration, and they can shape the information conditions for hostile actions against other ethnic and religious populations. Some scholars encounter other horizons only to intentionally or unintentionally reinforce cultural biases and religious prejudices, as in colonialism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and racism. Academics in the modern world have often claimed to be objective and neutral in their discussions of religious and cultural traditions, but critics have pointed out how subtle biases and unexamined prejudices have repeatedly shaped academic research. Professions of objectivity can go hand in hand with implicit hostility toward religious traditions and actors. Scholars of colonial and post-colonial

studies have shown how modern methods of scholarship often supported coloniality as a dangerous assaults on the dignity of colonized peoples.

However, when scholars engaged in comparative studies encounter horizons very different from their own, they find important opportunities to articulate previously unspoken assumptions so that they can be recognized and critiqued. Scholars have the opportunity to give attention to traditionally underrepresented communities, challenge received prejudices and open up new perspectives for building communities of solidarity. Respectful studies of popular religiosity have brought a new sense of the dignity and importance of indigenous communities around the world. Because scholars have realized that historic interreligious and ethnic conflicts have influenced and been influenced by biased scholarship, many are currently rewriting the history of the world's religious traditions and their relation to culture and politics. Artistic and academic expressions that give voice to the perspectives of the oppressed are among the most powerful weapons for overturning empires. Scholars describe the epistemic violence of imperial projects in terms of coloniality and seek new forms of knowledge that acknowledge the dignity, abilities, and agency of all humans.

### Spiritual Encounter

The spirituality of a religious community is one of the most powerful factors shaping its relation to civil society, and again the legacies we inherit are ambiguous. Conflicts and animosity can warp spiritual encounters. Throughout history, some religious leaders have harshly criticized the religious and spiritual practices of other traditions; political leaders have on occasion appealed to spiritual motives such as combatting idolatry and so-called "heathenism" when entering into

conflict with other peoples. In some contexts, political and religious leaders of one tradition have denied access to sacred sites for practitioners of other traditions.

Despite these dangers, interreligious spiritual encounters offer the possibility of building bridges even in times of extreme political and cultural tension. Fortunately, today many spiritual practitioners experience growing awareness and respect for the spiritual lives of their interreligious neighbors and seek healing and reconciliation. Aware that the Catholic Church has had a conflicted relationship with virtually all of the world's other religions, Pope John Paul II dramatically reversed this difficult history by inviting leaders of all the world's religious traditions in October 1986 to come to Assisi, Italy, to pray for world peace at a time of tensions in the Cold War. There had never been a religious gathering quite like it. Pope John Paul II acknowledged the need for reconciliation with followers of other religious paths, and he dramatically called Catholics to go through a purification of memory, asking forgiveness for the sins that earlier generations of Catholics had committed against followers of other religions.<sup>6</sup> His witness was extremely powerful. Recognizing the profound differences among the world's religions, Pope John Paul did not want to try to establish a common prayer, but he affirmed, "We can be present while others pray." As a Catholic, he affirmed that the power of God's Holy Spirit animates the prayers of all persons of good will in whatever religious or spiritual tradition. Precisely during the tensions of the Cold War, Pope John Paul II thought it was vital for religious leaders from many different traditions and cultures to come together in a common prayer and witness for peace. He repeated this invitation after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Spiritual practice, including shared meditation and being present while others pray, can powerfully inform a culture of encounter and of ecological integrity. Many spiritual traditions insist that academic exploration be integrated into the practice of a spiritual path.



## Concern for the World

Another area in which we can shape a culture of encounter is concern for the world, which follows directly from spiritual practice. Traditionally, Catholic and other religious leaders often placed the quest for truth at the center of their concern for the world and interreligious relations and condemned those who disagreed with their tradition's credal statements. This approach usually reinforced mistrust and misunderstanding and contributed to conflicts. At the first convening of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, James Cardinal Gibbons, the Catholic Archbishop of Baltimore, reversed the attitude of the traditional Catholic condemnations of other religions by boldly placing concern for others in the forefront of interreligious relations: "Though we differ in faith, thank God there is one platform on which we stand united, and that is the platform of charity and benevolence. . . . [N]ever do we approach nearer to our Heavenly Father than when we alleviate the sorrows of others." The Cardinal concluded his address in a similar vein by quoting "the pagan Cicero": "There is no way by which men can approach nearer to the gods than by contributing to the welfare of their fellow-creatures."<sup>7</sup> Other Catholics, as well as leaders of other religious traditions, expressed similar sentiments throughout the Parliament, offering an alternative model for shaping concern for the world through interreligious dialogue.

Concern for the world offers a basis for collaboration with practitioners of non-theistic religious traditions as well, which can be especially helpful in critiquing anthropocentrism. The Confucian scholar Tu Weiming calls the entire human community to move beyond the paradigm of the modern European Enlightenment, with its aggressive anthropocentrism that has come to dominate development in East Asia as well. While Tu Weiming recognizes the many accomplishments of this paradigm, he warns that the current ecological crisis calls us to critique

and transform this heritage: “We need to explore the spiritual resources that may help us to broaden the scope of the Enlightenment project, deepen its moral sensitivity, and, if necessary, transform creatively its genetic constraints in order to realize fully its potential as a worldview for the human condition as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> He further challenges religious and intellectual leaders to undertake new reflections on the contributions of the traditions of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, with a particular view to the role of Confucianism: “The significance of the contribution of Confucian ethics to the rise of industrial East Asia offers profound possibilities for the possible emergence of Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic forms of modernity.”<sup>9</sup>

Tu Weiming also calls attention to the resources of the indigenous religious traditions around the world, and he comments: “A distinctive feature of primal traditions is a deep experience of rootedness. Each indigenous religious tradition is embedded in a concrete place symbolizing a way of perceiving, a mode of thinking, a form of living, an attitude, and a worldview. Given the unintended disastrous consequences of the Enlightenment mentality, there are obvious lessons that the modern mind-set can learn from indigenous religious traditions.”<sup>10</sup>

Tu Weiming’s perspective resonates deeply with the comments of Pope Francis: “Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense. More specifically, it calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people” (*LS* #143). Tu Weiming laments the dangers to civil society: “The advent of the imagined, even anticipated global village is far from a cause for celebration. Never in world history has the contrast between the rich and the poor, the dominant and the marginalized, the articulate and the silenced, the included and the excluded, the informed and the uninformed, and the connected and the isolated been so markedly drawn.”<sup>11</sup>

Tu Weiming believes the crisis in civil society is not simply economic, political, or social but calls for a religious, spiritual renewal. He presents a Confucian vision of multiple belongings: “We can actually envision the Confucian perception of human flourishing, based upon the dignity of the person, in terms of a series of concentric circles: self, family, community, society, nation, world, and cosmos. . . . We embrace communal solidarity, but we have to transcend parochialism to realize its true value.”<sup>12</sup> Tu Weiming decisively rejects anthropocentrism: “We are inspired by human flourishing, but we must endeavor not to be confined by anthropocentrism, for the full meaning of humanity is anthropocosmic rather than anthropocentric.”<sup>13</sup> Tu Weiming challenges the secular humanism of the Enlightenment for being anthropocentric and proposes a new vision: “Indeed, it is in the anthropocosmic spirit that we find communication between self and community, harmony between human species and nature, and mutuality between humanity and Heaven. This integrated comprehensive vision of learning to be human serves well as a point of departure for a new discourse on the global ethic.”<sup>14</sup> The vision of Tu Weiming resonates deeply with the call of Pope Francis to follow the model of Francis of Assisi.

## Friendship

One of the greatest losses in technocratic paradigm is that there is no room for genuine friendship. Technocracy values all relationships by their profitability, measuring the usefulness of every relationship by economic criteria. When civil society is dominated by technocratic values, all relationships can be measured only by their cost basis and economic or political usefulness. Genuine friendship based on shared transcendent and human values disappears. Ancient writers including Aristotle and Cicero, as well as authors from every great religious tradition, have long known that this is not a basis for true friendship.

In healing the wounds of political and cultural strife, one of the most transformative experiences in human life is the development of friendships across traditional boundary lines. There is no easy magic wand to make the world's conflicts go away; but we can be friends to those we encounter, especially to our interreligious and intercultural neighbors. Despite the heritage of hostility that we inherit, again and again individuals have come to know and respect each other, have discovered shared values, and have developed friendships. This can happen on all levels—in neighborhoods, in schools, in the workplace. It can be especially powerful when prominent leaders form new friendships.

Particular visits of religious figures to interreligious meetings have had a transforming impact. There are countless local examples of friendship emerging among interreligious neighbors. Many broaden the understanding of friendship to include non-human creatures. Thomas Berry reflected on the need humans have for companionship with other creatures, suggesting that adults consult the experience of children of two, three, or four years of age: “We can hardly communicate with them in any meaningful way except through pictures and stories of humans and animals and fields and trees, of flowers, birds and butterflies, of sea and sky. These present to the child a world of wonder and beauty and intimacy, a world sufficiently enticing to enable the child to overcome the sorrows that they necessarily experience from their earliest years.”<sup>15</sup> Berry explains: “The child experiences the ‘friendship relation’ that exists among all things throughout the universe, the universe spoken of by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the mystical Christian Neoplatonist of the fifth or sixth century. Indeed we cannot be truly ourselves in any adequate manner without all our companion beings throughout the earth. This larger community constitutes our greater self.”<sup>16</sup>

A number of years ago the Franciscan leaders of the Graymoor Spiritual Life Center in Garrison, north of New York City, reached out to the Buddhist leaders of nearby Chuang Yen Monastery, inviting them to come to a ceremony of blessing animals in honor of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The Buddhist leaders were delighted to accept; and warm friendships developed, in which I was happy to participate. This friendship led to an annual interreligious New Year's Day of Prayer for World Peace at the Buddhist Monastery.

In the spring of 2002, I participated in the second Gethsemani Encounter, a weeklong meeting of Buddhist and Catholic monks and nuns, together with advisors like myself, in the monastery of Thomas Merton near Louisville, Kentucky. The conference examined various forms of suffering and discussed Buddhist and Catholic ways of responding. On the opening evening, Bhante Gunaratana spoke of the tremendous value of friendship for Buddhists. Friendship is a central value for Catholics as well. In the twelfth century, a Catholic Cistercian monastic leader, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote that "Christ is the third between two friends," and even stated, "*Deus amicitia est*" ("God is friendship"). At the conclusion of this encounter, Norman Zoketsu Fischer of the San Francisco Zen Center and I were asked to describe what had happened during the week. We both agreed that the most significant development was the forming of a new community of friends and companions across religious lines. One of the greatest blessings for me in interreligious dialogue has been the wonderful people I have met along the way and the friendly relationships I have developed with them.

In his encyclical on social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis turns to relations with Muslims, which have so often been fraught with difficulties. He comments on the implications of St. Francis's visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil during the Fifth Crusade and the saint's admonition to his followers when they were among Muslims: "without renouncing their own identity they were

not to ‘engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake’” (FT #3). Pope Francis stresses how remarkable this was: “In the context of the times, this was an extraordinary recommendation” (FT #3). He takes away the all-embracing lesson from his namesake: “Francis did not wage a war of words aimed at imposing doctrines; he simply spread the love of God” (FT 4).

This lesson was the inspiration for Pope Francis’s meeting with Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in 2019 and for the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” which they issued together as a program for Muslim-Christian friendship. They open their declaration by affirming: “faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need.” Aware that aggressive nationalism and religious rivalries are on the rise in many areas, and conscious of the dangers posed to the entire community of life on this planet, Pope Francis and Imam Al-Tayyeb together with many other interreligious leaders appeal to all humans to be friends and help the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, "Address to Representatives of Civil Society," Asunción, Paraguay, July 11, 2015; [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150711\\_paraguay-societa-civile.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150711_paraguay-societa-civile.html), accessed June 9, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (hereafter *LS*).

<sup>3</sup> Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson, eds. *Religion and the Ecological Crisis: The “Lynn White Thesis” at Fifty* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Bartholomew I, Patriarch of Constantinople, *Cosmic Grace + Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, ed, John Chryssavgis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (hereafter *FT*).

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> James Cardinal Gibbons, “The Needs of Humanity Supplied by the Catholic Religion,” in *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Tu Weiming, “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality,” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> Berry, "Prologue," 5.

<sup>16</sup> Berry, "Prologue," 5.