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Laurie Johnston
Emmanuel College, Boston

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Recommended Citation

Johnston, Laurie () "Friendship with all – but especially with Muslims," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, 19-22.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss1/5

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Friendship with all – but especially with Muslims

Laurie Johnston
Emmanuel College, Boston

The call for fraternal friendship in Fratelli Tutti (FT) is one that embraces all of humanity. Yet there is a particular friendship which receives special focus in this encyclical: friendship between Christians and Muslims. From the opening paragraphs, Pope Francis offers examples of such friendship – his own with the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, and St. Francis of Assisi’s dialogue with Sultan Malik-el-Kamil. And in his closing paragraph of FT, Francis offers us the example of Bl. Charles de Foucauld, who sought to become a “brother to every human being” (FT, no. 287) by living out his vocation amongst Muslims in Algeria.

Why is friendship between Christians and Muslims the paradigmatic example of human fraternity in Pope Francis’ imagination? Why is it *this* divide, *this* boundary that he seems most eager to overcome? The most obvious reason is simply the fact that so many Christians and Muslims around the world continue to live in tense or conflictual relationships. In many contexts, vilification of Islam has become a means for politicians to incite fear and gain followers. From ex-President Trump’s “Muslim ban” to the veil bans in Europe, hostility to what is sometimes called “Islamization” is a stain on the politics of all too many countries. In my own US context, I find that many Christians have failed to realize that this anti-Islamic rhetoric has real world consequences well beyond the US, too. As Muslims make up only about 1% of the US population, most Americans have never met a Muslim and do not know what Ramadan is; thus they have little sense that their words and actions could hurt a real person. Meanwhile, [Cardinal Bo of Myanmar has blamed](#) “Western manipulation of Islamophobia” for aggravating Muslim-Christian tensions in Asia and Africa and causing deaths among adherents of both religions.¹

Painful rivalry among the Abrahamic peoples is not new, of course, though many aspects of modern life have made it more grave. Pope Francis reminds us that the time when St. Francis traveled to Egypt was also a dangerous time of division. And yet, as Pope Francis writes, this journey was “an episode in the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, color or religion.... That journey, undertaken at the time of the Crusades, further demonstrated the breadth and grandeur of his love, which sought to embrace everyone....” (FT, no 3). This desire to embrace everyone is clear in what Pope Francis writes as well – and also in his actions.

Like St. Francis in the midst of the Crusades, Pope Francis has also taken some dangerous journeys for the sake of fraternity with Muslims – including Muslims who are under attack by fellow Christians. Francis became the first Pope in modern history to visit an active war zone when he traveled to the Central African Republic in 2015. There, he inaugurated the Jubilee Year of Mercy at the cathedral in Bangui – and also paid a visit to a mosque. It was, in, a mosque that was in the midst of being besieged by Christian militias. The Koudoukou mosque was housing many Muslims displaced by the violence. Once inside, the pope told his listeners: “Christians and Muslims are brothers and sisters.” To us, it may seem preposterous to make such a statement in those circumstances. But as [The Guardian reported](#), Pope Francis’s words seem to have found a

welcoming audience: a spokesman for the displaced Muslims said, “We are very proud to welcome him. The pope is not only for the Christians, he is a servant of God for all Central Africans.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The pope’s example of friendship with Muslims is most clear, however, in his relationship with Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Like his namesake who befriended the Egyptian sultan, Pope Francis has befriended a contemporary Egyptian. Together they authored the remarkable [*Document on Human Fraternity*](#). *Fratelli Tutti* is in many ways simply an elaboration of that document. It is the first encyclical to ever include a Muslim among the speakers at its formal presentation – Judge Mohamed Mahmoud Abdel Salam, Secretary General for the Higher Committee for Human Fraternity. Together, Francis and Al-Tayyeb are modeling for us precisely what they have preached – the kind of personal friendship and dialogue that moves far beyond mere “digital connectivity [which] is not enough to build bridges” (FT, no. 43).

It is sad that this friendship comes as such a surprise to us. After all, it is more than 50 years since *Nostra Aetate*’s declaration that the Church “regards with esteem also the Moslems,” and its call for Muslims and Catholics to “work sincerely for mutual understanding.” Too many Catholics are unaware of the Church’s teaching on Islam – a pastoral and educational challenge for Catholic leaders. Even for those who have read *Nostra Aetate*, it is not always clear how to live it out, particularly in situations of social conflict. A recent document from the International Theological Commission describes well the challenge that people of faith often feel when they try to practice genuine esteem for and fraternity with those of other religions:

Seeking a full commitment to the truth of one’s own religion, and a genuine attitude of respect for other religions, can generate tensions within the conscience of an individual, and within a religious community.... The capacity to hold together a care for the integrity of one’s faith, respect for conflicts of conscience, and a commitment to nurture peace in society—this calls for personal maturity and shared wisdom, which must be earnestly requested as a gift of grace from on high (International Theological Commission, 2019; author’s translation from the Italian).

This tension between fidelity to one’s own tradition and respect for that of others is also made more difficult by many aspects of the modern world. *Fratelli Tutti* points out how the global economic and the rise of social media have made our world ever more fractured even while claiming to unite it; nationalist politicians try to create a false sense of solidarity while promoting policy that “sows hatred and fear towards other nations in the name of its own country’s welfare” (FT, no. 11).

What Pope Francis is challenging us to embrace is a conception of identity that is not zero sum. Openness to the other need not come at the cost of fidelity to one’s own religion; “a healthy openness never threatens one’s own identity,” he writes (FT, no. 148). The most important thing about a Muslim is *not* that they are a non-Catholic. The most vital fact about a Catholic person is *not* that they are a non-Muslim. Rather, what is most important is our shared humanity. Pope Francis does not elide the differences between Christianity and Islam, nor between a citizen of one country and a citizen of another. However, these differences need not be an obstacle to friendship, provided we cultivate “a love capable of welcoming differences” (FT, no. 191). To be sure,

“Disagreements may well give rise to conflicts, but uniformity proves stifling and leads to cultural decay. May we not be content with being enclosed in one fragment of reality” (FT, no. 191).

Indeed, humans too often mistake one fragment of reality for the whole of it, and this is an obstacle to peace in society. Humility is perhaps the best way to overcome such an obstacle. This is why Pope Francis offers St. Francis of Assisi as an example of someone who was able to “welcome true peace into his heart and free himself of the desire to wield power over others. He became one of the poor and sought to live in harmony with all” (FT, no. 4). And the figure with whom Pope Francis closes the encyclical, Bl. Charles de Foucauld, is also someone who sought a humble life among the poor: “by identifying with the least did he come at last to be the brother of all.” Foucauld is not only a helpful example of genuine fraternity, however. He is also an example – no coincidence – of the fruitfulness of friendship between Muslims and Christians. His own Christian conversion was inspired by his encounter with Muslims when he was a young soldier in Algeria: “Islam really shook me to the core. The sight of such faith, of these people living in the continual presence of God, made me glimpse something greater, truer than worldly concerns.”ⁱⁱⁱ Foucauld’s presence in the encyclical is just one more way that Pope Francis makes this message clear: Christians and Muslims are called to journey together towards deeper friendship, and in so doing, will draw nearer to God.

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