



The challenges of Abrahamic dialogue according to Thomas Banchoff

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In a recent article for *Commonweal*, Thomas Banchoff analyses the new challenges posed by the war between Israel and Hamas to the interfaith diplomacy of Pope Francis and the Vatican.

Thomas Banchoff is Director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University (Washington D.C.), where he is also Vice President for global engagement. In February 2024, he published a judicious analysis of the new challenges posed to Vatican diplomacy by the war between Israel and Hamas[1].

Banchoff begins by recalling the signing in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Al-Tayeb of Al-Azhar of a [Document on Human Fraternity](#), (2019) 'an event that marked a high point in international religious diplomacy'. Four years later, religious leaders from around the world gathered in the United Arab Emirates for the opening of the House of the Abrahamic Family, 'a soaring multi-faith complex encompassing a mosque, a church and a synagogue'. But a year later, these efforts at Abrahamic dialogue were compromised by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

In response to the Hamas massacre of around 1,200 civilians in Israel on 7 October 2023, Imam Al-Tayeb praised the Hamas fighters who died in the attack as 'great martyrs of Palestine'. Like many Muslim leaders, he criticised Israel's reaction, which he interpreted as a campaign of genocide against the Palestinians. On the Vatican side, Secretary of State Pietro Parolin denounced the 'terrorist attack' by Hamas and called for a proportionate response. Pope Francis is said to have told Israeli President Isaac Herzog in private that it was 'forbidden to respond to terror with terror', a statement he later repeated publicly.

Banchoff points out that 'high-level interreligious dialogue', such as that practised by the Vatican, 'has only a limited impact amid clashing territorial claims, rival historical grievances and brutal violence'. While Jews, Muslims and Christians regard Abraham as a common ancestor, they have radically different visions of the land of Israel-Palestine: 'For religious Jews, the land of Israel is a divine inheritance', he writes, while the sanctity of Jerusalem in the Islamic tradition reinforces Muslim solidarity with the Palestinians. Christians are caught between solidarity with their Palestinian co-religionists and recognition of Israel as a Jewish homeland that developed after the Holocaust in predominantly Christian Europe.

Banchoff reviews Pope Francis' approach to interreligious dialogue. It is based on a 'culture of encounter marked by dialogue and cooperation across religious, national and ideological divides', without refusing to tackle 'divisive issues'. Francis also insists on 'global humanity as a frame of reference', calling for a united response to the climate crisis and other global challenges (war and terrorism, refugees, social inequality, the Covid-19 pandemic).

The Vatican's openness towards Muslims is a result of this approach. Just think of Pope Francis' trip to Cairo and Al-Azhar in 2017, and above all to the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity in 2019. It affirms that '[t]he pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, gender, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom' - an idea expressed directly in the Koran, Banchoff

points out, but not in the Bible. He also notes that Pope Francis, in his encyclical [Fratelli tutti](#), 'makes multiple positive references to the document and to Al-Tayeb personally, an unprecedented interfaith gesture in an encyclical'.

The importance of Pope Francis' personal and institutional relations with Jews is well known: his close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, his visit to Yad Vashem and his prayer at the Western Wall (2014), his visit to the synagogue in Rome (2016). His support for Jewish-Catholic dialogue, his defence of human dignity and peace, and his denunciation of the global upsurge in anti-Semitism in recent years also characterise his attitude towards the Jewish world.

However, Pope Francis' approach is being put to the test by the war between Israel and Hamas, continues Banchoff. The Vatican's diplomatic response is in line with previous positions on the rejection of violence and support for a two-state solution, the protection of religious freedom and Christian minorities, and access to the holy sites of Jerusalem for the three Abrahamic faiths... But, he adds, 'new challenges arising from the specific character of the current war - the Hamas massacre and the scale of the Israeli military response - have generated two different sets of interfaith tensions'.

Although the Pope and the Vatican strongly condemned the attack on 7 October 2023, Jewish leaders strongly criticised the warning, 'that Israel should not fight terror with terror', and Pope Francis' insistence 'on meeting at the Vatican not only with the families of the Israeli hostages, but also with the Palestinians whose family members are suffering in Gaza'. Vatican diplomacy does not use the word 'genocide' to describe Israel's reaction, but, says Banchoff, the fact that it has not clearly condemned its use by others 'may burden Catholic-Jewish relations into the future'.

Different problems arise in relations with Muslims. The main question here is the attitude of Al-Azhar, which has raised to the rank of 'martyrs' the Hamas fighters who died while taking part in the massacre of Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, and which speaks of Israel as a terrorist and genocidal entity. This rhetoric contradicts the Document on Human Fraternity's opposition to any religious incitement to violence. The Vatican refrained from commenting, presumably in order not to poison matters and to protect its relationship with Al-Azhar. But such a wide gap, Banchoff points out, 'demonstrates the fragility of interfaith diplomacy'.

Despite these challenges, the author believes that interfaith dialogue should not be abandoned. He believes that such dialogue 'may serve as one of the foundations for a lasting peace' after the current war. Progress towards 'a two-state solution with mutual security guarantees' could lead to a normalisation of relations between Israel and several countries with Arab-Muslim majorities, 'providing an impetus for a "culture of peace" supported by the leaders across the three Abrahamic communities'.

Banchoff points out that efforts at dialogue are sometimes more successful at the local level, but nevertheless believes that 'international interfaith meetings and declarations do matter in the long run by providing a normative framework and point of reference for such efforts'.

The author concludes by noting that Pope Francis' approach is designed for the long term and 'involves patience in the face of complex and stubborn realities'. It is this Pope who advocates in [Evangilii gaudium](#) 'actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events'. Even if it is difficult, perseverance in interreligious dialogue, as a force for peace, is, according to Banchoff, 'the only way forward'.

For the FULL ARTICLE by Thomas Banchoff see [here](#)