

Task Force on Inter-religious Dialogue and Understanding

“Encounter, Dialogue and Action in a World of Religious Plurality”

1. Introduction: a universe of differences

Our Jesuit universities inhabit a globally-linked world made up of a vastly different religious contexts. In some locations, religious plurality – where Christians may be in a minority or a majority, or where Christianity is just one of many forms of social identity – has been a normal part of daily living for centuries. That very plurality may be lived harmoniously, or be the source of social division, tension, and conflict. Many Jesuit universities and institutions of higher education are located in societies more recently affected by changes in religious makeup, due to the movement of populations, or political shifts, or changes in commonly held beliefs or practice. Some environments are affected by violence fueled by religious tensions or the rise of religious fundamentalism. Others find themselves in the middle of growing religious indifference (especially on the part of the young) or of secularization process that range from the subtle to the aggressive. Overall, religious pluralism is a growing and increasingly important feature of many societies.

Parallel to this diversity of religious contexts, our Jesuit universities likewise range tremendously in size, resources, and focus. Within any particular context, the actual or potential role of a university varies significantly. Each institution reflects a particular socio-cultural history and a set of assumptions about the ends of university education. Some of our schools were founded with the very specific remit of providing a distinctively Catholic education, in ages in which the situation of Catholics may be different from current realities. In others, especially where Christians are a social minority the major thrust of the university is providing much needed skills and high-standard education to a largely non-Catholic student body, in search of wide social benefit. For some institutions, the study of Catholic theology or doctrine has been a core element of work, while in others the opportunities of education about religion may be limited to the study of philosophy or ethics.

In each of our settings however, religious difference plays out daily, at a multitude of levels and always in particular ways: even in countries which are now moving to being effectively post-Christian, the influence of religion—as a form of culture, mindset, and manifestation of values—perdures. While each situation is unique, we also live in globally-linked societies. The spread and pace of technological development has linked humanity as never before; instantaneous communication between the 47% of the world’s population facilitates the spread of

ideas and practices across the world. The fragility of the Earth, our common home – and the effects on human flourishing - likewise make the case for increased global awareness to foster more integral action. An important part of that awareness and action is the reality of religious plurality.

The religious dimension of human life shows no sign of disappearing. It intersects with political, economic, and environmental concerns that advance in tandem with the forces of globalization. This calls us to pay increased attention to religious difference, to evaluate its positive impacts and potential as well as the challenges and possible threats it presents to many people - and to discern God's call in a world of religious difference.

2. The Jesuit University and the Common Good

Our Jesuit educational heritage can offer to this new reality our rich practices of ways of arriving at way of shared understanding, communication and action. The *Contemplation on the Incarnation* invites an awareness that is simultaneously global and local., paying equal attention to the high-level realities and the specifics of human lives. The Jesuit fourth vow *circa missiones* moves that awareness into action. Nadal's famous saying "the world is our home" shows that the Jesuit mentality from its beginnings has invited a generous, integral, and comprehensive response, not only from individual Jesuits but also from works and provinces.

Fr John O'Malley's many writings on the history of Jesuit education, and the influence of early Renaissance humanism on it, gives provides some deep Jesuit educational DNA that can usefully illuminate our current situation and provide some basic commonalities for considering our task. Among Jesuit educational characteristics that Fr. O'Malley notes, the following are particularly relevant to the role of the contemporary Jesuit university in a changing religious world:

- *encouraging students to escape from the confines of their own experience.* Jesuit education should expose students to other cultures to foster critical awareness, innovation and inventiveness by "leaving home" – i.e. exiting their comfort zones of thinking and accepted paradigms. The practices of interreligious encounter have a value that transcends the strictly religious domain and can be applied to a range of fields, including supporting democracy, ecology, and reconciliation. University education can tend to apply scientific post-Enlightenment values as the only valid standard of judgement. In areas of deep secularization, religious literacy lags behind the realities of global religious diversity. In this light, inter-religious encounter can be a prime educational tool and a value for our students, leading to enhanced

intercultural competency in a rapidly diversifying yet interconnected world.

- *Tradition and perspective.* O'Malley identifies a Jesuit conviction that we cannot understand ourselves, as individuals and members of society, unless we understand the past. A reasoned historical perspective can balance some dominant contemporary realities, including religious or political fundamentalism. Contextualizing religious experience historically can help avoid the narrow focus on idealized versions of the truth. The benefits of a historically informed religious perspective – such as a university can supply – are not only useful but necessary and have implications far beyond the specifically religious domain.
- *For and with others.* From its beginning, Jesuit education has an inbuilt ethical imperative that derives from the Formula of the Institute. This socio-ethical emphasis has received particular attention since GC 32 (e.g. Decree 4), finding focus in the key terms of GC34 (e.g. Decree 3, 13, 14). In the decades following the landmark *Nostra Aetate*, one of the most influential documents of Vatican II, models of interreligious encounter have rightly stressed finding shared values among difference, as a way. More recently, Pope Francis has stressed the need for interreligious encounter not to remain within the internal dialogue that seeks to establish shared spiritual values, but to move out into genuinely shared action for the benefit of all. Ignacio Ellacuría's description, a generation ago, of the Jesuit university as a "social force" that must "be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those without science; to provide skills for those without skills; to be a voice for those *without voices*..."¹ remains relevant today, when marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples that they are conscious of having "a voice" but need the continual support of other groups and institutions in civil society so that their voices will be heard. What is characteristic of the Jesuit university is academic rigor, translated into the action that provides that support. As such, the University is an important training ground for developing a high-level ethos for social transformation among future leaders. An intelligent and responsible attitude towards religious difference has much to say in the processes of transformation to a more just and equitable world.
- *Eloquentia Perfecta.* The Renaissance humanist concern for rhetoric that found its way into the veins of Jesuit education came from a concern for

¹ Ignacio Ellacuría SJ. <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-tradition-offerings/stories/ignacio-ellacuria-sjs-june-1982-commencement-address-santa-clara-university.html>

effective communication. Only when we have the right word do we know what we mean. Universities have specific expertise in developing precise thought in the field of interreligious dialogue, most signally in the “dialogue of experts,”² one of the four forms of dialogue articulated in the 1984 landmark document of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission*. That document stresses the integral and multifaceted nature of interreligious dialogue. In its teaching and research, the university has a particular role in fostering the precise thought that is necessary for all other forms of interreligious encounter and action and which helps engender self-reflective practice. It can be *the* institution par excellence for cultivating democracy, nurturing civilization, by bringing together people from a range of identities. On the other hand, there are many ways of communication, particularly across differences. The Jesuit university has the potential to widen the circle and include those voices who have not previously been heard.

- *Two and two does not equal four*. Human existence cannot be reduced to the rational domain. Life experiences are necessarily ambivalent and multivalent. The Catholic insistence that faith and reason complement one another suggest that the Jesuit university has particular competency in interreligious encounter. On the one hand, it takes faith (and with that, other religious experiences) seriously. On the other, as a community of rational enquiry, it can usefully apply intelligence to religion, creating more channels of understanding.

This list of characteristics is of course, neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Principles and practices will need to be developed with attention to locale. However, it does offer some potential shared ground for Jesuit universities to think together about what might constitute a normative core in this area.

3. Encounter, Dialogue, and Action: Some considerations

The theme of religious difference is broad and complex. Its terminology is still unstable, unclear, and in some circumstances and quarter, problematic.

² <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/DialogueandMission1984.pdf>

3.1 Encounter

Encounter with the religious other is an undeniable reality for most of the milieus in which Jesuit higher education happens. Christianity arrived in many parts of the world since the founding of the Society of Jesus as part of the encounter between cultures brought about by colonization – an encounter which was not equally welcomed by all parties. Whether in traditionally majority-Catholic areas of the world (e.g. Latin America), or in minority-Christian or post-Christian sectors, the Society of Jesus and its institutions in our various contexts are encountering a number of contemporary realities that are both challenges and opportunities.

- *Resurgent nationalisms and various manifestations of populism* are frequently fueled by encounter with religious difference. Deep-rooted cultural and historical allegiances are deeply interwoven with religious identities. However, these socio-cultural realities, although influenced by religious faith, may not necessarily be rooted in concern for the common good. The emotive power of religion to shape political and social action is ambiguous – and in need of intelligent and informed understanding.
- In large and historically powerful areas of the world, *Christian institutions* are encountering the reality that they *are diminishing in their influence as a cohesive social force*. Instead, they are part of a pattern of fragmenting social realities. Creating, sustaining, and deepening unity becomes more challenging as the philosophical stable center of some societies becomes more fragile. Increased polarization into such extremes as aggressive secularism or religious fundamentalism is making the search for common ground harder.
- *The proliferation of communications technology* appears to make possible wider communications across religious and social difference across wide geographical spans. In reality, social media, a globally influence - favors rapidity over depth, and virtual communication over than the more subtle, long-term work necessary for meaningful encounter. Such technology, which is increasingly the ambience that younger generations inhabit, is value-laden and tends to enshrine and promote inherent values that are largely indifferent to faith - particularly collective faith. As it spreads, communications technology *can* foster commitments to that transcend religious and geographical boundaries. It can just as equally bring about even greater secularization, social fragmentation, and to push religious practice into the regime of the private and the person. As counter-reaction to this, increased fundamentalism is likely to emerge.

- In some parts of the world, a *greater openness to religious pluralism* has emerged over the last few decades. This shift in public opinion also carries within it the threat of superficial and relativistic view of unity which ignores both the true values as well as the challenges of religious diversity, thus making the work of religious encounter seem irrelevant.
- *Population shifts and religious affiliation.* The Catholic Church is coming face-to-face with large-scale historical shifts in Christian affiliation. Evangelical, and particularly Pentecostal, churches are growing dramatically and rapidly in Latin America: 69 % of Latin American adults for example say they are Catholic, down from an estimated 90% for much of the 20th century. The second-largest Protestant population in the world is now in historically-Catholic Brazil. Such religious changes are bringing in their wake important cultural and political shifts.
- *Affiliation to organized religion in North America and Europe is on the decline*, and the most rapidly growing group, especially among young adults, is those who profess no particular religion. This sector is also moving away from indifference to active distrust of organized religion. However, despite the boost this group is receiving from people leaving Christianity and other religious groups in Europe, North America and sectors of Latin America, *the unaffiliated are projected to decline as a share of the world's total population.* Countries with a higher rate of religiosity also have a significantly higher birth rate. *The absolute number of Christians is projected to rise, though not as fast as the absolute number of Muslims*, who will also continue to increase as a proportion of the population, especially in Africa. China is home to a comparatively small proportion of the world's Christians but will soon contain the largest number of Christians in the world.

Given these trends the encounter with people who are religiously different from ourselves – other Christians, adherents of other faiths, and the religiously indifferent and affiliated, fundamentalist, or avowedly secularist - is likely to grow in intensity and frequency rather than diminish in contemporary life across the globe. It therefore calls for intelligent analysis and thoughtful response.

3.2 Dialogue

Talking about religious difference has been a feature of Christianity since its very beginnings. The internal discussions within the Jewish Christian community witnessed in the Book of Acts, the work of the early Christian Apologists, the first seven Ecumenical Councils, early Christian-Muslim theological debates, the meeting of St Francis and the Sultan of Egypt in the 12th century, are just a few

examples of a perennial concern for greater understanding to reduce interreligious tension with Islam and building common ground for mutual benefit. Jesuit involvement in what today is called interreligious dialogue can be seen in the endeavors of celebrated missionaries such as Francis Xavier, José de Acosta, Matteo Ricci, Alexandre de Rhodes and many others. Formal dialogs with the “great religions” in many cases 20th century developments, having received particular impetus after the Second Vatican Council.

Rather than such dialogue being the specialized work of missionaries alone, GC 34, Decree 5, *Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue* commends it as integral to the work of the Society. GC 34 commits the Society to the “*dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their human problems and preoccupations; *the dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people; *the dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches...; *the dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.”⁶

During the 70s and 80s, a host of initiatives in interreligious dialogue took place, at local, national, and international levels. Many of these continue, but more recently, the understanding, intention of dialogue has shifted away from explaining faith. Increased sensitivity to the legacy of colonialism, an awareness of the Western notions implicit in some notions and practices of interreligious exchange, and the questioning of the ideal of multiculturalism call for a reframing – moving beyond enrichment to a truly *mutual* transformation. Today we also have to engage in dialogue with people whose cosmovisions have not been included amongst the so-called “great religions,” including the many indigenous peoples in our world.

Being rooted in experience is characteristic of Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit education and thus has particular resonance in questions of dialog across religious divides. One problem with the university-based study of religions for example is “conceptual overload”: focussing more on the religion rather than the people (i.e. studying Buddhism rather than conversing with Buddhists) it has underplayed the inter-personal aspects of dialogue. Dialogue is a strategy to build relationship, since it is an emotional rather than an epistemological understanding that leads to unity. Hence, it is important to insist on listening to the experience of the other. Importantly, the “dialogue of experience” is now being understood to include not only specifically spiritual experience, but other facets of human existence too—especially the experience of the marginalized and powerless.

A characteristically Ignatian stance means being open to clarifying questions; simultaneously proposing one’s faith and being respectful of the other; and ongoing discernment in relationship with God and with others. This was the

practice of St. Ignatius in his “conversing about spiritual matters.” Such dialogue is also an experience of conversion toward a wider, comprehensive vision—which is an ideal more easily proposed than realized. Integrating the intellectual, spiritual and experiential domains brings Jesuit universities to wrestling with the difficult questions of religious difference: how can we avoid imposing one particular version of interreligious dialogue or the unity we seek? How do we honor and include the experience of practitioners of indigenous religions which do not have scriptures in the sense of the “world religions” who have been the main partners in the dialogue of theological exchange? In which way can interreligious dialogue be meaningful in a secularized context? How can we engage with religious partners who do not see the value of dialog?

Our current global situation calls for a reframing of dialogue. This involved considering the relationship between the various faces of dialog - particularly the relationship between reflection and action and their relative urgency in our different contexts. Dialog, conversion, and a more inclusive vision, if they are authentically Ignatian, are means to an end. Together they lead, in an Incarnational logic, into collaborating with God and others in “working the redemption of the human race” (*“Contemplation on the Incarnation”*).

3.2 Action

The university is a place of debate and research, for reflection and posing the largest and most crucial questions that can be asked about human life. We need also to work *from* the common ground of shared concerns towards shared action. *Mater et Magistra*, John XXIII’s 1961 Encyclical on Christian and Social Progress, affirmed the principle of “see, judge, act.” In a world of religious diversity, “encounter, dialogue, act,” understood as a series of successive steps seems at first glance to be an attractive and reasonable way of proceeding. Practically, however, experience in the field is suggesting that the vital questions raised in inter-religious dialog cannot be answered until the parties involves *do* something together. This involves a change from content to method and shining a light on the dialogue of action. At the local level, especially in situations of urgency, establishing a healthy “dialogue of life” is more compelling than the dialog of intellect: shared concerns are the bridge to non-believer. This approach argues that experience of working together has to be done first, and the university should get involved in practical dialogue. Out of that shared action, theological reflection emerges, responsive to and shaped by social need.

Religious pluralism, rather than the domain of a few specialists, is deeply connected to the inseparable values of *fides*, *humanitas*, *iustitia* and *utilitas*. Such action, shared with others of differing religious convictions is the fruit of God’s spirit and of human collaboration. But university “action” includes too the

specific, particular functions of a *university* as delineated in GC 34 (research and teaching, academic excellence, raising critical awareness, the service of society). The Jesuit university is – or should seek to be - as a place of radical universality of attitude, for mutual enrichment in dealing with questions about human existence and meaning. We live in a context that necessitates inter-religious action informed by not only by the Gospel, but also by global citizenship and human rights, authentically human relations, integral human development, in the comprehensive humanism of Jesuit education.

The classic sequence “see, judge, act” is in fact a cycle in which action is refined by reflection. Effective discernment happens about action, before it, in it and after it – a continuous loop in which each action brings about a deeper encounter. A constant examen should never substitute for action but effective action also demands reflective seeking God’s will in all things. “Encounter, dialogue, act” is a similar process: authentic action needs meaningful meeting with the religious other and the many forms of dialogue, and shared action. Context and circumstance determine the particular need for each of these elements. In all of them, as a community of education, the Jesuit university has contributions to teach, and things to learn and practical contributions it can make in the concrete context in which it exists.

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