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Themes Which Shaped My Professional Journey

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III. Themes Which Shaped My Professional Journey

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By the emergence of the new conditions of fast communication among diverse communities today, we are witnessing many changes in social, political, economic, and other aspects of modern societies. With mass communication and social media, the barriers among nations are falling, thus giving opportunities for openness and better understanding — but also to misleading and deceptive information. Therefore, these changes demand redefinition and re-evaluation of the newly emerged conditions and accordingly adjustments to the new circumstances. Issues related to religion, ethnicity, and nationality are particularly complex and sensitive matters that can bridge but also divide people; therefore, they require thorough attentiveness. Any issue that is related to defining people's identities requires well-informed assessments.

These new developments of communication, combined with the resettlement of people around the world, are pushing us to review and develop narratives about our own identities. This could be expressed by a fear that our identities are under threat from external forces, but also it could be understood as a normal process that in various historical situations societies have gone through. The current global situation — with conflict zones, civil wars, dictatorial regimes, and the refugee crisis — requires new and immediate approaches to help us in understanding and accordingly dealing with the problems of the contemporary world. We are witnessing rhetoric that promotes nationalism, regionalism, and revival of religious fanaticism among many nations.

People's religious, social, or ethnic identity deliberations vary based on time and place, but at the foundation of these deliberations is a common principle: protecting something which is "ours." These discussions can intensify particularly when people feel that their national and/or religious markers are under threat. The ideas of protecting identities usually are within boundaries that are a product of our own perception, which sometimes can be fictional. Therefore, it becomes challenging for modern societies to rethink these narratives, reconstruct approaches based on hope and not fear, and place emphasis on people as the elementary discourse.

I believe that we should incorporate common human values and visions, and we have enough basis to do so. But first, we need to depart from the limitations of our perceptions, which can

lead us to regard our own narrative as the only true and the correct one. Once we do so, we can initiate conversations that will help us to build harmony with human dignity, freedom, and mutual respect. Facing new emerging identities with which we are not very familiar leads us to the concept of diversity. Diversity implies acceptance and respect of differences in ethnicity, gender, religion, social rank, and so many other viewpoints. To achieve the objectives of diversity, societies need to critically review their existing theoretical policies first, then observe their practical applications. Doing so is a prerequisite for creating a mechanism that will continuously review and advance equity, justice, and inclusiveness.

As a religious scholar, I emphasize the need for studying the religious values that promote cultural and religious diversity. Religion is a transcendental force that can be a source for social justice and human dignity. Religions are an integral part of so many cultures and societies. Though their influence on society varies from one society to another, religions can help to increase tolerance and pluralism. Knowing about others means knowing about values that are sacred to others; this eventually helps in understanding the power of sacredness.

While today many media outlets are producing fake and negative news that can deteriorate relations, it is important that we also recognize positive developments. In this context, we can mention the Muslim initiative that comes from Jordan, called “A Common Word.” In October 2007, one-hundred thirty-eight Muslim scholars and other religious leaders from around the globe signed an open letter addressed to Christian leaders and scholars. Signatories to this letter eventually reached 405. Given that followers of Islam and Christianity constitute about the half of the world’s population, this initiative is groundbreaking in connecting the world’s two largest religious communities. Promoting, advertising, and advancing such initiatives will help in creating a better climate among believers of these faiths. Of course, including members of other traditions with similar initiatives is of high importance.

One term that is used to describe the dialogue among monotheistic traditions is called Abrahamic ecumenism. Abrahamic ecumenism is a concept some scholars use to define Christian, Jewish, and Muslim relationships based on their common origin in Abraham. Whether we call it ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, or interfaith relations, the essential component is the cross-cultural education in better knowing, understanding, and respecting each other.

Mutual appreciation starts through dialogue. Dialogue lays emphasis on our determination to build bridges of understanding and fight prejudices and hostilities between and among diverse

communities. Dialogue also implies openness and sincere communication, something so important in the present day, when misunderstanding and confusion are very prevalent. Patient and compassionate listening is one of the first steps of genuine dialogue among friends and not adversaries. Dialogue helps us to recognize and respect differences. Through dialogue, we try to learn about our own possible predispositions and identify flaws that result in our negative judgments. Thus, dialogue can help us discover not only new positive insights about others, but also how we are seen by others.

Honest interreligious dialogue is strongly connected to our moral commitment to promoting the common good based on justice and peace. We recognize difficulties that we sometimes face in our efforts to break the barriers of prejudice, but by handling difficult issues with sensitivity, honesty, courage, and modesty, we can make progress in combating stereotypes and reducing tensions and disputes.

The demonization of the “other” should not be tolerable. We know that there are minorities within all traditions who are violating the principles of their own beliefs. They are not representatives of the whole, and they cannot be the basis for developing arguments against an entire community. Verdicts based on what some practitioners think or do should not be applied to the entire entity. Humane and benevolent voices are always present, but their concerns are not always adequately heard. Therefore, we need to participate in breaking imaginary stereotypes, re-examine our common human values, reread our scriptural sources, and reconsider our intellectual heritage. Being aware of our shared destinies, we can together overcome obstacles.

Religions have the potential to encourage and influence their members to work for the common good. Love for others can narrow or close the chasm between suspicion and trust; we can trace its instructions in the Biblical and Qur’anic teachings.

Being a part of a Catholic institution requires understanding the teachings of its leaders. Hence, let me share with you the Sermon of his Holiness Pope John Paul II at the inauguration of his pontificate on October 22, 1978, in St. Peter’s square:

To the See of Peter in Rome there succeeds today a Bishop who is not a Roman. A Bishop who is a son of Poland. ... The absolute and yet sweet and gentle power of the Lord responds to the whole depths of the human person, to his loftiest aspirations of intellect, will and heart. It does not speak the language of force but expresses itself in charity and truth. ... What shall I say to you who have come from my Krakow, from the See of St. Stanislaus of whom I was the unworthy

successor for fourteen years? What shall I say? Everything that I could say would fade into insignificance compared with what my heart feels, and your hearts feel, at this moment.

In the same sermon, the Pope speaks something that is so relevant to the present, when he says:

Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid.

Pope John Paul II asserts that he came from Poland — a socialist nation at that time — but he became a Pope in Italy, in another country where he was a stranger but became the supreme leader of all Catholics around the world. Moreover, Pope John Paul II highlights that if we have confidence in our faith, then we will be open to others. He urges his followers to open their gates of compassion and share without fear with those in need.

Diversity, however, is not just a notion that we write and read about. Diversity is about putting into action our own deeds and displaying our constructive and inclusive attitude by promoting and applying it in our daily routines. Inclusiveness, therefore, should be efficient in practice everywhere — in our homes, workplaces, schools, and public or private spheres. There is a story of a Muslim when he was asked if he was a pious, a good religious person. He replied: “I do not know; ask my neighbors.” People are social creatures, and they accomplish a great deal in cooperation with others.

Currently the world is facing the problem of refugees and displaced persons for variety of reasons. We should remind ourselves that the problem of refugees is as old as the world itself. We also need to remember that the United States is a land of refugees. Besides, there are many important people in history who were refugees themselves. Prophet Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina. He was not able to institute his ideal society in his native city, but he found generosity and hospitality among people about whom he knew so little. Also, Jalalud-din Rumi’s family — one of the greatest poets in the world — escaped the atrocities of the Mongol invasion from their native Afghanistan and found peace in Turkey. His poetry for centuries has bridged cultures and civilizations. Apple founder Steve Jobs’ biological father, an Arab from Syria, immigrated to the United States. Albert Einstein was forced to migrate from Germany and settled to the United States. All 2016 American Nobel laureates are immigrants.

Diversity on our campus among students is I think the most important since students are our future. Many times, I notice students of the same ethnic background sitting together in the classroom. International students of the same ethnicity also sit together, next to each other. I encourage them to sit separately, near other students. That way I think they would make new friends but also be able to fight any possible stereotype. However, maybe they feel more comfortable to be closer to each other, and usually, that's how it is. I also tell international students that during Thanksgiving, for example, they should go to American families and see these moments of joy when families come together. That way they can feel the experience of hospitality firsthand. I also encourage my American students to go to the houses of international students during the Eid or any other celebration. In that way, people of different cultures can know each other better and establish stronger relationships. Sharing the table in such important celebrations would have a very positive impact.

Because I teach religion, I also talk about charity, not just as material assistance, but also about the charity of knowledge. I encourage those for whom English is native language to help international students in editing their papers. That way they can open new channels of positive communication.

As a religious scholar, I ask myself and my colleagues of other faiths: Do monotheistic believers believe in the same God? It is an important theological question. I also discuss this question with students sometimes. Some students think that monotheist believers believe in the same God, and only the name is different. But some think that we believe in different gods. Last fall semester for example, in one of my classes, I asked my students this question: "Do you think that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God?" Five students said that no, they do not believe in the same God; three students said that yes, they believe in the same God. My second question was: "Would you ask a member of the other religious tradition to pray for you or a member of your family in case of some trouble or hardship — such as a dangerous health issue?" Again, five students said they would not ask nor want those of different faiths to pray for them because in that way they would accept that their God is the true god and equal to their own. Three students said they would agree to accept the prayers of others for them. I admit that the first question is more complex issue even for religious scholars, but I was little surprised at why they would hesitate or reject prayers of some good people who members of different faiths are.

I believe we need to remember and remind each other that we are equal in creation. I did study the story of Adam in the Qur'an and compared it Genesis in the Bible. There are many similarities. We need to explore more thoughtfully such similarities that exist in our common heritage.

Because people can be sensitive about their religious feelings, bringing negative concepts and associating them with one particular faith or ethnic background can be very painful, and we need to avoid.

We should promote tolerance, but we also need to talk about acceptance. Tolerance has a sense of supremacy, because tolerance does not mean we fully approve something. We let it be, but we don't say that it is correct. Therefore, we need to advance our mutual relations and talk about acceptance. Acceptance is seeing the other as equal with us; we are different, but we are equal.

Just simple words can be powerful, but sometimes silence is beautiful. What a nice quote: "Losing a debate is better than losing a friend." Sometimes, instead of responding with anger, a simple silence can be hospitable.

