# A VATICAN ENCYCLICAL AND THE ABU DHABI DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

The encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* rarely mentions explicitly the encounter between religions. Nevertheless, it is profoundly marked by the effort of mutual understanding between religions and provides important new impulses for interreligious dialogue. This article examines the dialogical structure of the encyclical and analyses central themes that the encyclical shares in common with the Abu Dhabi Declaration. These are, in particular, a theology of alterity, a decentralized ecclesiology and an anthropology of social connectivity. Finally, the extent to which these papal initiatives resonate in the Islamic context is examined.

Keywords: Interreligious dialogue, theological anthropology, connectivity, fraternity

## INTRODUCTION

The last message that he gave for Ramadan entitled: "*From Competition to Cooperation*" (Beitrage, 2018) has become the legacy of Cardinal Tauran who died in 2018. In this message, the long-time prefect of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue wished that the relationship between the religions would not be characterized by delimiting identity constructions and interreligious competition but rather by religiously based cooperation for the benefit of the common good of society. His wish has not gone unheard, as the social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, published on 3 October 2020, with the title: "An Encyclical for Tumultuous Times" (Damian, 2021), sets its own stamp on interreligious dialogue with the idea of a common good that is inter-religiously responsible. In what follows, the interreligious perspective of the encyclical will be defined in more detail. To this end, the explicit interreligious references of the document will be discussed first. Subsequently, some thematic emphases will be elaborated and the context of the encyclical will be described. The encyclical understands itself as having a close connection with the "*Joint Declaration on the Fraternity of All People*", that was signed in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar University, Ahmad at-Tayyib (Timo, 2019). Hence, the analysis of *Fratelli Tutti* will be made in close connection with the Joint Declaration (here after: Abu Dhabi Declaration).

THE DIALOGICAL STRUCTURE

The encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* is not a document on interreligious dialogue. Unlike the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium,* it does not mention Islam or Muslim believers directly. Nor does it formulate any explicitly theological perspectives on religion that would reorient a Christian interpretation of religious pluralism. And yet dialogue and especially the Christian-Islamic encounter is present in this encyclical in a novel and unusual way and the Church's attitude to other religions is also deepened and enriched by new aspects.

If we look first at the way in which interreligious encounter is explicitly addressed in *Fratelli Tutti,* three different dimensions can be identified. Quite obviously new and downright revolutionary is the fact that Pope Francis traces the entire encyclical back to the encounter with Ahmad at-Tayyib whom he had already met several times since May 2016 (Prsani, 2019) and signed the Abu Dhabi Declaration in February 2019 (the Muslim Council of Elders, 2014). The statement that Pope Francis was "inspired" to write the encyclical by at-Tayyib (§5) (Fratelli Tutti, 2020) is more than a symbolic gesture of personal appreciation. In fact, Pope Francis draws an analogy to the encyclical *Laudato Si*', which emerged from the conversation with the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew (§5).

In addition, he explicitly states that in *Fratelli Tutti* he was also "inspired by non-Catholic brothers" such as Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and many others (§ 286). Francis thus anchors dialogue in the very structure of the document. Even though Francis' encyclicals are clearly written as magisterial documents, they are not meant to be one-way communications. Rather, they grow out of communication and actually participate in such communication (Schallenberg & Tutti, 2020).

Not only does the macro-structure of the entire text already embody the dialogical concern, but the dialogical concern is also found in the text itself for Pope Francis explicitly refers to at-Tayyib five times (§ 3.4.29.136.191f.). Moreover, the eighth chapter, dedicated to "Religions in the Service of Fraternity", quotes entire passages from the Abu Dhabi Declaration, especially the introductory invocations linking God with suffering and with marginalized people (Tutti, cf. Turkson / Schalleberg, Fratelli Tutti, 2020).

The third aspect is the explicit reference to interreligious encounter on a spiritual level. Firstly, the encyclical links the leitmotif of fraternity with the person of Charles de

Foucauld. This gives the concern a concrete, personal face and links it to the man who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, placed the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam on the fundamentally new base of spiritual-mystical experience. On the other hand, Francis concludes *Fratelli Tutti* with two prayers: an "Ecumenical Prayer" is integrated with a "Prayer to the Creator", which includes non-Christian people as those who pray.

To sum up the first approach, the encyclical does not only speak about dialogue, but at the same time expresses it conceptually. This makes it an excellent example of the *side-by-side* methodology that Pope Benedict XVI added to the *face-to-face* methodology in London in 2010 (Felix & Rucken, 2014). The encounter of dialogue involves meeting those of other faiths as well as the effort to understand their faith more deeply (face-to-face). Dialogue also involves analyzing social challenges together and responding to them in a cooperative way (side-by-side). Importantly, this side-by-side encounter is more than just a religious coalition of interests in the pursuit of societal goals or even in mutual defense of spheres of influence. Rather, side-by-side encounter is grounded in a genuine recognition of the alterity of others and a shared responsibility for the common good of society. Underlying this understanding of dialogue is a theology of alterity in which respectful and productive engagement with religious difference can itself become the ferment of cohesion in a plural society (§58.93.218). Consistently, a Muslim commentary on the encyclical also speaks of "co-witnessing" (Ataullah, 2018).

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Based on the dialogical concern that characterizes the structure and methodology of the encyclical, three thematic emphases can now be identified in the encyclical and the Abu Dhabi Declaration. Firstly, both documents are characterized by an intensive discussion of the question of religious identity. It is clearly emphasized that in the interreligious encounter "no one denies his identity" (§3). At the same time, both documents distance themselves from closed and exclusive religious identity constructions. "As long as we do not obscure the sincere search for God with our ideological and expedient interests, it helps us all to understand ourselves as companions on the way" (§274) (Liberalism, Paragraph 24). Again and again the Pope discusses the tendency to compartmentalize and the temptation to form closed groups (cf. e.g. §1.3.59.62). Thus, an obvious strength of the two documents is that they clearly outline a logic of relation in contrast to a logic of separation both on a religious level and more comprehensively on a social and political level. Conviviality is more than mere coexistence.

Secondly, fundamentalism is definitely rejected and the Pope repeatedly opposes the identification of religion as a source of violence and terrorism (§281-284). For this reason, the documents repeat what Pope Francis had already said during his visit to Cairo in 2017: "God Almighty has no need to be defended by anyone; nor does he want his name to be used to terrorize people" (§285). These words indicate that the reference to the common good is by no means pointless or empty of meaning for the religions. For one thing, this statement undermines the concept of a divine rights that a state would have to protect and implement. Unlike the common good that transcends religions, a theory of divine rights cannot guarantee the unity of state and society. Consistently, both documents call not only for religious freedom (§279) but also and above all "for the concept of full citizenship to be established in our societies and for the discriminatory use of the term minorities to be renounced" (Abu Dhabi Declaration, s. §131).

This is an important new step because religious freedom is no longer based on the communitarian protection of minorities of individual religious communities, as in classical Islamic law, but on the "concept of citizenship", which is "based on equality of rights and duties" (Abu Dhabi Declaration) (Zelmansur, 61f). Secondly, the statement invokes the name of God to criticize religious-based violence. This motif runs through Francis' entire doctrinal proclamation and expresses a new accent. Whereas Pope Benedict had clearly pointed to the congruence of faith and reason as the means of healing wounds caused by religiously based violence, Pope Francis repeatedly refers to the unavailability of God's name. This emphasis on the alterity of God is the basis for a genuine appreciation of the religious other and is at the same time reflected in the self-critical confrontation with every form of religious and cultural self-assurance and self-sufficiency (§150.203).

Thirdly, two specific points in the understanding of dialogue should be emphasized. Despite the proximity manifested by Pope Francis to the thinking of Pope Paul VI, the former undermines the image of concentric circles with which the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* understands the relationship of the Catholic Church with separated Christian churches and with world religions and non-believers (cf. LG 13-16): On the one hand, Francis never tires of emphasizing that the place of the Church is the periphery (§97.219). In the encyclical, the Church on the periphery is expressed in the person of Charles de Foucauld who understood the "identification with the least and the abandoned in the vastness of the African desert" (§287) as the focus of fraternity. On the other hand, Francis can say of the supposed periphery of non-believers that "paradoxically, those who consider themselves non-believers can sometimes fulfil the

will of God better than believers." (§74) The Pope's understanding of dialogue is thus based on a decentralized ecclesiology whose symbol is not the circle but the polyhedron. This symbol is also found in *Fratelli Tutti* (§144f.190.215).

A further aspect of his decentralized ecclesiology is the way Francis expands and transforms the dialogical perspective of encounter into a perspective of inter-connectivity. It is true that Francis initially shares the perspective anchored in the philosophical anthropology of personalism (Turkson, Paragraph 3), understanding interreligious relations as a personal I-Thou encounter. The real originality of his perspective, however, is to place the personal two-way encounter within the horizon of a profound social and even cosmological inter-connectedness. Both encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti,* present an image of a human being that places the "social meaning of existence, [the] fraternal dimension of spirituality" at the center (§ 86).

The Pope comments strongly and even critically on seeing the human person as an autonomous, self-determining individual, trapped in his own self-reference, isolation and indifference (Fratelli, 163-169). Since he highly appreciates family and people, however, he does not advocate heteronomy nor does he abandon traditional structures. Instead of promoting autonomous individuality, the encyclical emphasizes that human beings live in relationship and in social inter-connectedness (§54.68.111). In the view of Francis, human beings do not first decide in self-determination to relate to other human beings but are fundamentally related to other human beings in their total physical structure (§43) (Frank, 2020).

Connectedness is, therefore, more than just a functional social *networking* or an alliance of strong assertive individuals but arises out of the fragility of human existence (§79.155.177). The fact that we depend on each other is not a weakness but precisely the beauty of human life (§32). While *Fratelli Tutti* understands such inter-connectedness from the point of view of human social existence, *Laudato Si'* broadens this perspective to include inter-connectedness with forms of non-human life. Both dimensions together are included in the term "inter-connectivity", which *Laudato Si'* introduces into the debate (cf. especially Laudato, 240). The emphasis on the fundamental inter-connectedness of life takes on a profound significance for dialogue. For dialogue is the fruit, not only of a two-way relationship but of social and even ontological connectivity. Consequently, religions should not primarily be regarded as self-contained systems that enter into a benevolent or critical relationship with each other at a second level. One world religion is somehow part of the constitution of

another because world religions are fundamentally intertwined. This anthropological and cosmological inter-connectedness is more significant than simply being a social and cultural fact because it has a theological significance in terms of revelation (Bernhardt, 2019). Francis does not specifically name the connection between anthropology and theology. But it is striking that he not only calls for praying side by side, as the aforementioned "*side by side*" perspective would suggest, but repeatedly requests that we pray for each other as well. Moreover, the inclusive element of prayer in the interreligious context (as in the prayers during his visit to Sarajevo) has not yet been adequately reflected upon or discussed. The integration of central Jewish and Islamic invocations and traditional names of God into his own way of prayer should perhaps be understood less as naïve syncretism than as a precise expression of this inter-connectedness. Thus, the concept of "inter-connectivity" has a considerable and as yet unexplored potential.

RESONANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAM

In order to appreciate the significance of the Abu Dhabi Declaration as well as the Encyclical, one could also take into account the reactions and responses of various dialogue partners. In other words, do these documents simply represent a monologue about the nature and significance of interreligious dialogue or do we hear independent voices confirming what these documents proclaim? In what follows, I will limit myself to responses given by Muslim dialogue partners.

First of all, one could mention single cases of appreciation. Hence, in addition to the positive reaction of the partners directly involved in the production of these documents, responses by the Grand Imam at-Tayyib and the jurist Mahmoud Abdel Salam in the German speaking context (Tayyab, 2021) and the statements of Ayman Mazyek, the president of the Central Council of Muslims and of Tuncay Dinçkal, whose voice represents the *Hizmet* movement founded by Fethullah Gülen, have all confirmed the contents of these documents. In the English speaking world, we could mention the positive reception of these documents by the British Islamic scholar Ataullah Siddiqui as well as the director of the Center for Dialogue and Action in Islamabad, Amineh A. Hoti (Ayman, 2018). All these affirmative reactions confirm what is stated in these documents as well as pointing to the ever-present dangers of indifference, individualism and separate existence. Moreover, the connection between the love of God and love of one's neighbor is mentioned with reference to the *Common Word* of 2008. Finally, the connection between fraternity and the common good is underlined and the aim is to transcend religious boundaries and religious group affiliations. The "*Joint Statement by Muslim Clerics on Abu* Dhabi" (Cibdo Beitrage,

2020), signed by 22 Sunni and Shiite scholars including Tim Winter and Mustafa Ceric, who advocate the notion of *sophia perennis*, is a positive recognition from one specific religious-philosophical tradition. While all these voices stress the legitimate diversity of a single revelation, they also consider the declaration to be critical of modernity and wish to emphasize the essential theo-centricity of all true brotherhood.

Reactions of a more symbolic nature could also be mentioned. For example, in the aftermath of the Abu Dhabi Declaration, the multi-religious and multi-cultural Higher Committee for Human Fraternity was established. This Higher Committee welcomed the "Celebrations of Human Fraternities", which was supported by the General Assembly of the United Nations by deciding to set 4th February as the Day of the Fraternity of All People. This Higher Committee for Human Fraternity also advocated the construction of an Abrahamic Family House in which a mosque, a church, a synagogue and an educational Centre will be built as a symbolic expression of community at a campus near the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

If the influence of a joint Egypt-Emirates (and also perhaps Saudi) image-campaign cannot be completely ruled out in these developments, one should also recognize the significance of the theological validation of interreligious citizenship contained in various declarations made by Islamic organizations. First of all, the connection between the two al-Azhar declarations (December 2014 and March 2017) and the Marrakesh Declaration (January 2016) and the Charter of Mecca (May 2019) should be mentioned (cf. Differentiated Pisani, Paragraph 7-10). These are Sunni religious institutions close to the state, united by a religious-political concern to counter the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its state supporters, and of course the influence of Iran (Fratelli, 163-169).

In terms of content, these documents are noteworthy because they do not refer to the rights of religious minorities according to the traditional *Millet* system of Islamic law but refer to the concept of citizenship (*muwāṭana*), which is held in common by all citizens of Islamic states and which bridges religious differences and guarantees equal rights. From a religious point of view, citizenship rights has always been legitimized by direct recourse to the early Medinan period, namely by the so-called "Constitution of Medina", a pact concluded shortly after the *hijra* between the Prophet Muhammad and the emigrants from Mecca as well as between the helpers (*ansar*) and the Jewish tribes in Medina. This theological legitimation can dismiss the accusation of illegitimate innovation (*bidʿa*). Viewed critically, however, such a direct recourse to the Medinan period harbors the danger of an anachronism that does not do justice to

today's challenges of intra-religious plurality and the coexistence of believers and non-believers. Moreover, it is not easy to deny the existence of an historical teleology that aimed at an Islamic-structured polity in Medina and the clear superiority of Islam (Fibler, 2021).

Reference to the "Constitution of Medina", however, could also be seen in the light of the "*Charter New Alliance of Virtues*", which was prepared at a conference in Washington in 2018 and was presented to the sixth "Forum for Promoting Peace in the Muslim World" in Abu Dhabi in December 2019. Unlike previous declarations, it does not depend for its theological legitimation on the so-called "Constitution of Medina" but to the "Covenant of Virtue (*ḥilf al-fuḍūl*)", which Meccan notables had accepted in response to an overreaching foreign merchant and which was later honored by the Prophet Muhammad himself. Since this explanation refers to an event that took place well before the first revelations took place, it finds a basis for exemplary righteousness not in the revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad but on human virtue (endorsed by prophetic tradition) and thereby, in a sense, forming a connection with natural law thinking (Alliance of Virtues, 2021). It is on this basis, despite all the remaining accusations of anachronism, that a more lasting bridge can be built to the recognition of the common good. Such a bridge will recognize religious plurality and enable the religions to make a positive contribution to the formation of modern society without implicitly presupposing a single religion as the necessary basis for social cohesion.

Hence, a significant theological step has been taken and this step allows us to affirm a genuine consonance between the Islamic interlocutors and the vision of *Fratelli Tutti* as well as the Abu Dhabi Declaration (cf. Pisani, Document, 24). The task that remains is to implement this concept practically - both in terms of political structures and in terms of the need for the widespread education of society.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

An appraisal of the interreligious profile of the Abu Dhabi Declaration and the social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* should not ignore the critical enquiries directed at the two documents. With regard to the interreligious dimension, critical remarks have been made in regard to the theological interpretation of religious plurality. The declaration refers directly to God's will and alludes to Qur'anic verses that Muslims who are engaged in dialogue as well as those more inclined towards apologetic exchanges have taken as a way to legitimize interreligious diversity (e.g. Qur'an 5:48 or Qur'an 49:13). Serious critics ask whether religious plurality is a value in itself or whether it

is not an expression of human contingency that God allows (cf. Guzelmansur, Brüderlichkei, 10-23). In addition, they question the grounds on which a definition of commonality could be made and raise issues regarding the very nature of commonality and religious difference.

While some critics feel that these documents lack sensitivity in their descriptions of religious plurality, other critics point to a conspicuous silence in these documents regarding the freedom to change one's religion and the freedom to belong to no religion. Although the Abu Dhabi Declaration refers to the "right to freedom of confession and to the freedom to be different[,]" there is little mention of the freedom to change one's religion and the freedom not to belong to any religion (cf. Guzelmansur, Brüderlichkeit, Paragraph 13-18).

On a deeper level, the absence of any mention of such freedom to change one's religion raises the question as to the relationship between anthropology and theology, a question which needs further interreligious exploration. How can the theo-centrism of the Christian and the Islamic conception of man be reconciled with the legitimate rights of non-religious anthropology? Furthermore, how can an anthropology grounded in revelation show respect for the decision to reject religious faith? On the other hand, how can it appreciate the dignity of the human being anchored in natural law precisely as a way of bridging religious differences without optimistically assuming that human beings always have an implicit religion? With regard to these questions, it does seem promising that the anthropology of the documents resonates with contemporary social philosophical approaches. Authors as diverse as Charles Taylor and Jeffrey Stout, Hartmut Rosa and Frank Vogelsang as well as Bruno Latour and Heinz Bude all raise questions about the concept of the human person that allows transgression of boundaries, environmental mastery and self-reliance to form the cornerstones of the individual. In contrast, these authors emphasize the need for a recognition of corporeality, passivity, pathos and, above all, social connectedness .

This is precisely where the potential for the interreligious inspiration of these documents lies. For they emphasize that fraternity, which they invoke repeatedly, is more than simply a moral humanitarian appeal. Rather, true fraternity goes hand in hand with a renewed vision of the human person as inseparably connected in their corporeality and vulnerability with others and with their non-human environment. I would like to conclude this discussion by quoting the beautiful words of Francis, the Latin American Pope.

This is a beautiful mystery that makes it possible to dream and to make life a beautiful adventure. No one can master life on their own [...]. It takes a community that supports us, that helps us and in which we help each other to look forward. How important it is to dream together!" (§ 8) . ∎

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