Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC)

The Necessity of Inter-Faith Diplomacy: The Catholic/Muslim Dialogue

Fr. James L. Heft

MEDAC
Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies
University of Malta

Malta, November 2011

Med Agenda — New Series

MEDAC Publications in Mediterranean IR and Diplomacy

The Necessity of Inter-Faith Diplomacy: The Catholic/Muslim Dialogue

by **Fr. James L. Heft, , S.M. (Marianist)**
Alton Brooks Professor of Religion
USC, Los Angeles, U.S.A.Director, MEDAC

The First Sheridan-Campbell Lecture
Given at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies
Malta, May 20th, 2011

Introduction

What I have to say today is somewhat personal, but also theological. It is personal since I had had to learn a lot in the past few years about interreligious dialogue. It is also theological, since what I have to say will draw upon important research projects of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California. I am the president of that Institute. Our fundamental purpose is to support the research of scholars from many disciplines and faith traditions from around the world who wish to deepen their understanding of Catholic intellectual traditions and life. The Institute is, then, committed to ecumenical and interfaith research, dialogue and conversation.

I was trained as a medievalist—as a student of the Christian Middle Ages—and have for decades been deeply involved in the work of Catholic higher education in the United States. I am not a specialist in Islam, but I have come to see the critical importance of the dialogue between Islam and the west, and more specifically between Islam and Christianity, and especially between Islam and

Catholicism, since Catholicism is the largest Christian Church which counts well over a billion members. I have learned a number of important lessons about interreligious dialogue these past few years. It is those that I wish to share with you now.

Over the past five years, the Institute has organized three major international trialogues, that is, conferences in which Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars came together to explore a theme of common interest and urgency. All of these conferences received funding from Jewish, Muslim and Christian organizations and individuals. The first conference, held in 2003, explored the issue of "religion and violence," and focused especially on how religiously committed Jews, Christians and Muslims, precisely because they are deeply religious, can and are compelled to work for justice and peace. This causal relationship—between being deeply religious and therefore working for justice and peace—is rarely reported in the media. Instead, the media almost exclusively focuses on religious fanatics and religious violence. The major papers from that conference were published in 2004 by Fordham University Press, entitled ***Beyond Violence: Religious Sources for Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.*** It has since been used as a textbook in several universities in the United States, and is now translated into French.

Our second trialogue brought together another international group of Jews, Christians and Muslims, all from north Atlantic countries (e.g., Europe, the United States and Canada) to deal with the difficult challenge of passing on their faith traditions to the next generation, to their children and grandchildren. There are many distinctive things about western culture. Some of these, I believe, have been very positive: the separation of the state and religion, religious freedom and free enterprise. However, there are also some negative developments: such as secularism, relativism and a consumer-oriented culture that results in a spiritually suffocating materialism. As a consequence, one of the challenges that believers in all three religions traditions face in the north Atlantic is the

way modern western culture can weaken religious traditions. How can religious believers protect, deepen and pass on their religious traditions in the midst of negative cultural forces? Again, using the major papers presented at that conference, we published a book, ***Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians and Muslims*** (Fordham University Press, 2006). It has also been well received and has been featured at national meetings of theologians and religious educators in the United States.

We were very pleased with these conferences which brought together representatives from the three major religious traditions of the west. In fact, we were so pleased that the Jewish, Christian and Muslims leaders of the first two trialogues wanted to organize still another trialogue, one that would go deeper into the theological understanding within their three traditions. A small planning group that included a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim, decided that a very important and again timely theme for all three religions would be that of "learned ignorance," or the "***docta ignorantia***" as it was called in the medieval tradition of Latin Christianity. I realize the meaning of this term is not immediately clear—I will spend some time defining it and explaining its importance to my topic later in my remarks. Again, we brought together an international group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars, including scholars from North Africa, Palestine, Poland, Holland and many other countries. It was important to us that the scholars not just be competent academics, but also committed religious believers in their respective traditions. Moreover, we wanted scholars who have been working in their fields for a long time, but also those who were younger as well. We met at Harvard in the summer of 2006 for several days to get to know each other and to begin to think about how each of us might approach from within our own religious tradition the theme of "learned ignorance." We then met the following year for a week at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem to discuss the papers that we had written during the intervening year and had circulated a month before we met at Tantur. We had intense discussions at Tantur and subsequently revised our

papers in the light of what we learned in our conversations with each other. These papers will be published by Oxford University Press in June of 2011with the title, ***Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility Among Jews, Christians and Muslims.***

What I would like to do during the rest of my remarks is to speak about some of the major insights that I have gained through these trialogues. Then I would like to explain further the theme of the third interfaith research project of the Institute.

Some Insights into Dialogue

Except for some rare periods in history (e.g., the so-called time of ***Convivencia*** that took place among Jews, Christians and Muslims in southern Spain in the 14th and 15th centuries), believers in these three religious traditions either, at best, kept their distance from one another, or were in conflict. There has been very little genuine dialogue between these three religions. And while in the Middle Ages the writings of some gifted scholars from the three Abrahamic religions (e.g., al Ghazali [d. 1111], Moses Maimonides [d. 1204] and Thomas Aquinas [d. 1274]) influenced one another in mutually illuminating ways, such cross-fertilization was very rare. Instead, the sad reality has been that most of the time Jews, Muslims and Christians have remained ignorant about each other, or worse, especially in the case of Christians and Muslims, attacked each other.

It was only well into the 20th century that my own Church, the Catholic Church, preceded by a number of Protestants who were concerned to overcome the many divisions among themselves, became positively disposed to the ecumenical movement, that is, the effort of Christians to find theological common ground. And it was only at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that the Catholic Church officially addressed in a positive way its relationship to other world religions, beginning with Judaism. The ground breaking document of Vatican II, **Nostra aetate**, after speaking about Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, had this to say about Islam:

> The Church has also high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and mighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting (par. 3).

Vatican II was convened by Pope John XXIII mainly as an ecumenical council, that is, one primarily concerned with the unification of the diverse Christian communities. It was not as concerned immediately with the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. As a consequence, the first conversations to begin in earnest after the Council were those with other Christians—with the goal of finding common theological ground. Interreligious conversations were not as widespread at first. The Catholic Church in the west did however put its greatest energy in the 1960s and 1970s into its dialogue with the Jews. It was not really until the 1980s that the Catholic Church's dialogue with Islam began to receive the energy it deserves. But that dialogue has been especially difficult, not only because of the long and sad history of conflict between Christians and Muslims and because of western colonial practices, but also more recently because of the political policies, the U. S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the terrorism that has consumed the Middle East, and especially the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 made it clear to me that the Catholic Church had to join with Muslims to build bridges of communication, trust, mutual understanding and cooperation between the Muslim world

and the west. It was at that time especially that I realized that this relationship had to be one of the important areas of research for the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies. I also believed that it would prove fruitful, even if difficult given the political realities of the day, to include Jewish scholars in all these conversations.

But well before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, I had been thinking about interreligious dialogue. About twenty years ago, I wrote a short article that was published in a journal read by over 100,000 teachers who taught religion in Catholic high schools throughout the United States. That article sketched four possible ways to think about interreligious dialogue. At the two extremes were what I called "absolutism" and "relativism." A person who espouses absolutism thinks that his religion is the only true religion and all other religions are simply false. The person who espouses relativism believes that all religions are equally true and false, and that therefore it doesn't make much difference what one believes, as long as it doesn't lead to violence. I stated that both of these approaches, for what I hope are obvious reasons, were unacceptable. Nevertheless, let me make those reasons explicit: first, absolutism is unacceptable since all three Abrahamic religions acknowledged that sincere believers of the other Religions of the Book could be saved. Second, a thorough going relativism is unacceptable because it is just another form of absolutism.

I then described my two other positions. I used rather awkward ways of naming those two positions. One I called "confessional systematic" and the other "confessional dialogic." By "confessional systematic," I tried to describe persons who believe that their religion is the truest religion, but that other religions had at least some elements of the truth. The "systematic" part meant that these believers felt confident that they could, without further dialogue and study, know just how the other religion measured up to their own—how it was clearly deficient, but still to be respected. By "confessional dialogic," the last of my four approaches to interreligious dialogue, I wanted to describe those persons (really

myself) who are convinced and committed Christians, but who are still largely ignorant about other religious traditions. As a consequence, my emphasis for them was on dialogue—getting to know and understand what other believers affirmed as true before making any judgments about the validity of their beliefs. I thought then (and still believe) that it is premature to attempt to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of other religious traditions unless one spends a great deal of time tying to understand them.

At the time, I had no idea that I was then recommending an approach to interreligious dialogue that I now know is called "comparative theology." The "confessional systematic" approach is called the "theology of religions," one that the documents of Vatican II represent when they wrote about the Church's relationship to other religions. I am not opposed to the "theology of religions" approach, since inevitably we think within our own tradition and necessarily also, at some point, will make normative judgments. I just think that we now need to spend a great deal more time trying to understand ourselves and each other before we feel confident that we are in a position to calibrate one another's theological adequacy.[1]

So far, I have described two lessons about interreligious dialogue. First, a positive Catholic dialogue with Islam is historically only very recent. Second, I have said that we need to spend much more time than we have trying to understand each others' religious beliefs.

I think there is a third point about interreligious dialogue that needs to be emphasized. Academics in the west tend to talk about "religion." "Religion" is a general category that has been created mainly by thinkers influenced by the Enlightenment. But I must confess that I never quite know what is meant by "religion." The religious people whom I know don't believe in "religion." They believe in Jesus, or the Torah or the Qur'an; they are Christians, Jews

1 James Heft, "Is Christ the Only Way?" ***The Catechist*** 22.6 (February 1989): 10-12.

and Muslims. Therefore, I don't think it is possible for me to have a dialogue with Islam or Judaism. It is possible, however, for me to have a dialogue with Muslims and Jews. In other words, the interpersonal dimensions of interreligious dialogue are very important. In the introduction to the first trialogue book, I wrote that "as important as interreligious dialogue is, it may well be the case that even more important is the formation of friendships with people of other religions" (***Beyond Violence***, p. 13). Friends share everything, including hurts. And historically, we Christians and Muslims have many hurts which we need to confess and for which we need to repent.

There is a second reason why I am uncomfortable with the word "religion." Most Enlightenment thinkers implied, when they used that word, that it would be possible separate religion from the rest of life. They thought they could create public and private dimensions of life. The public dimension—the dimension of reason—is concerned with government, economy, education and the military. The private dimension—the dimension of faith—was concerned with religion, with one's private life and one's family. Governments were responsible for justice, religions for charity.

I must confess that I do not think this separation between private religion and public life makes much sense. While I believe in the separation of religion and the state, I do not believe that religious influence belongs only in the private sphere. Religions, for example, also need to address issues of the justice, including the economy and the military. There is no reason, I might also add, that religious people should not be able to influence the forms and practices of government. Note, I said influence, not control. Again, I believe in the separation of religion from the state, but not the separation of religious influences from public life.

This brings me to my fourth and last point about interreligious dialogue. Most of the hurts that we have inflicted upon each another come from pathologies, personal, religious and political. A friend of mine and an expert in Islamic thought, Daniel

Madigan recently put it this way:

> We live in a world of various pathologies, but we delude ourselves if we think it is only "those other people" who have them, and that the way to resolve our ills is by denigrating the others or even getting rid of them. Our pathologies interrelate. Pathologies have long histories and very imaginative memories. The situation of the Palestinian suicide bombers is pathological: young people in the prime of their lives blowing themselves up. They have grown up in a pathological situation of oppression and occupation—a policy that has itself grown out of another pathology—the fear endemic in Israeli society. But then you ask: well, where does that come from? The reaction of the state of Israel following the truly pathological holocaust. But where does that come from? The pathology of Nazism. And that? The leftovers of World War I, the resentment born of the humiliation of the German people, and the long history of anti-Semitism in Christian Europe. There is a history of interacting pathologies.[2]

In the face of all such pathologies, John Paul II sought the purification of memories, and did so by preparing for the year 2,000 by making public statements of repentance for the wrongs that Christians have done over the centuries—sins against other Christians, against believers in other religions, for intolerance and violence in the service of truth. Unlike the controversial Vatican document of the year 2,000, ***Dominus Iesus,*** in which the authors asserted that "in the course of the centuries, the Church has proclaimed and ***witnessed with fidelity*** to the Gospel of Jesus Christ," (par. 2, italics mine), John Paul II himself recognized clearly that the Church has not always witnessed to the Gospel with fidelity, and therefore acknowledged the need for Catholics to repent. The failure to witness faithfully weakens whatever proclamation we who are Christians attempt to make. Perhaps then, as my fourth and last point about interreligious dialogue, we would all do

2 Daniel Madigan, S.J., "Muslims and Christians: Where Do We Stand?", in ***Woodstock Report***, March 2009, p. 5.

well to remember that genuine repentance—not just in how we think but also in how we have acted towards each other—will do much to advance mutual understanding.

"Learned Ignorance" and Interreligious Dialogue

Allow me now to turn to the second part of my presentation. I want to discuss the importance of the idea of "learned ignorance" for interreligious dialogue. It is commonly said that the truly wise person knows that he does not know. This quality of wisdom is sometimes described as "intellectual humility," a quality absent, I must admit, in most academics, but present, we would all agree, in the wisest of scholars. A person who displays intellectual humility is not presumptuous, rash or arrogant.

But none of these interpretations get at the deeper theological meaning of "learned ignorance." In any effort to understand God, believers should experience "learned ignorance," that is, an awareness of their inability to express fully who God is.

In the Christian tradition, the phrase "learned ignorance" appeared as the title of the first and most important book, ***De docta ignorantia*** (1440), written by the fifteenth century Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), whose openness to Islam, in the wake of the fall of Constantinople, is legendary. Nicholas actually borrowed the term from Augustine, who in turn probably borrowed it from Socrates. It is best to let Nicholas himself explain what he meant by "learned ignorance":

> …Socrates believed he knew nothing except that he did not know. The very wise Solomon declared that all things are difficult and cannot be explained in words (Eccl. 1), and another thinker of the divine spirit says that wisdom and the seat of understanding lie hidden 'from the eyes of all the living' (Job 28). Likewise, the very profound Aristotle, in the First Philosophy, asserts that with things most evident by

Rev. Fr. Heft visited Malta as guest of former U.S. Ambassador Douglas Kmiec (addressing the gathering). The event took the form of an interfaith dialogue with the representatives of various faiths in Malta. It was attended by MEDAC students and a number of distinguished guests.

Rev. Fr. James L. Heft (2nd from left; far left Amb. Douglas Kmiec) delivering a presentation at MEDAC on the theme “A Catholic Contribution to the Dialogue with Islam and Judaism.”

> nature we encounter the same difficulty as a night owl trying to look at the sun. If all this is true, since the desire in us for knowledge is not in vain, surely then it is our desire to know that we do not know. If we can attain this completely, we will attain learned ignorance. For nothing more perfect comes to a person, even the learned, the more one knows that one is ignorant. It is toward this end that I have undertaken the task of writing a few words on learned ignorance.[3]

How should we understand this paragraph from Nicholas? Why is "learned ignorance" important for a dialogue between the west and Islam? Couldn't a stress on "not knowing" run the risk of leading to relativism, to an inability to come to any reliable conclusions about the nature of reality? Could it not also lead to despair about ever reaching any reliable knowledge about God? Wouldn't some people use it as an excuse for intellectual laziness, and even assert that all learning is, in the last analysis, mere wind and vanity? Or, if we can't really know anything about God, wouldn't some people use this as an excuse never to witness publicly to their faith? These are very real questions.

It is at this point that we must remember that the inability to understand something fully is not the same thing as saying that we are unable to understand anything. The sacred writings of Judaism,

3 Nicholas of Cusa, ***De docta ignorantia***, I, 1, par. 4 (English translation by H. Lawrence Bond in ***Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*** (NewYork: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 88-89. Bond notes that Cusa has over the centuries been subject to widely varying descriptions: "He has been characterized simultaneously as a humanist and a counter-Renaissance figure; as a heretic and a conservative; as a Gnostic and an agnostic; as a scientist and a pseudo-scientist; as a papal monarchist and a conciliarist; as a reformer and an opportunist in need of reforming; as a peacemaker and a belligerent; as a politician and a pastor; and as a philosopher and a theologian" (p. 15). Though Bond suggests that these different appraisals "often reveal more about the measurers than the measured," he also describes that while there was a fundamental continuity in Cusa's writings, ecclesial and political circumstances changed significantly during his life and contributed to different emphases in his writings.

Christianity and Islam certainly make statements that claim to speak truthfully about God and exhort believers to continue to seek true knowledge, and to spread it. David Burrell, one of the organizers of the conference on "learned ignorance," opens the way to understanding how our inescapably limited knowledge does not have to lead to relativism when he writes:

> In assessing the truth of statements of faith, we ought not to approach them as though they offer explanation, but rather for what they are: convictions. Convictions that there is a sense to it all; not that ***we*** can make sense of it all. What fuels that conviction is one's growing capacity to use a language which helps us progressively gain our bearings in the midst of a journey.[4]

If we follow Burrell's suggestion as to how to think of statements of faith, we might say that dogmas, the most authoritative statements of the faith for Catholics, are not primarily explanations, and even less proofs, but are rather affirmations or, in Burrell's words, convictions. Those convictions, it should be added, are not just emotional statements or mere expressions of personal feelings; they are believed to have real cognitive content. That is, such convictions actually say something about reality—but in the light of "learned ignorance," they still capture only inadequately the reality they attempt to express.

St. Paul does not hesitate to say, when speaking of "deeply interior encounters with the inexpressible," that he has "thoughts too deep for words," that he knows of "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." Or in the words of the Christian novelist, Marilynne Robinson: "This primary intuition of the strangeness of it all, of our single selves as unspeakably fragile and brilliant observers of a grandeur for which we have tried through all our generations to find words, this is the experience that seems to me to underlie

4 David Burrell, **Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective** (Blackwell, 2004), p. 245.

religion."[5] The difficulty of finding words to express genuine religious experiences also applies to the experience we have of ourselves, created as we are in the image and likeness of God—that experience can also leave us searching for words to express who we are.

The term "intellectual humility," therefore, does not quite get at the deeper meaning of learned ignorance, at least as we used that concept in our trialogue. For believers realize that what they try to understand—namely, God, and the ways of God—constantly transcends their ability to grasp fully and articulate adequately what they believe they have experienced and desire to affirm. In other words, learned ignorance has more to do with a realization arrived at after thinking carefully about the focus of one's intellectual efforts—God—than it is a description of an attitude of persons who know that their grasp of earthly realities is limited. Cusa tells us that at "the root of learned ignorance" is the realization that "God is not able to be known as God is."[6] Having stressed our verbal inadequacy before God, I should add, however, that learned ignorance does not preclude saying something positive. An awareness of learned ignorance leads one deeper into one's own tradition, perhaps complicating the task of articulation still further, but perhaps also leading to understandings that help persons of other traditions understand not only your tradition, but their own more fully as well.

An emphasis on learned ignorance, or the realization among learned people that their grasp of reality is inescapably limited, prevents all forms of absolutism, which itself is based on the presumption that ultimate reality can be fully understood, and fully in the possession of true believers. I call these people

5 Marilynne Robinson, "Credo: Reverence First and Then Belief," in ***Harvard Divinity Bulletin***, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring 2008, p. 29.

6 Bond, "Introduction," p. 31. It should be added that Cusa did not rest in the ***via negativa***; that is, he did not think it sufficient to stress only what cannot be known about God. Especially in his later life, he emphasized that one had to pass beyond the ***via negativa*** and say more. And for Cusa, the condition that allows the Christian theologian to "say more" is the reality of Jesus Christ (again, see Bond, pp. 33-34).

fundamentalists. The authors who contributed to our volume on learned ignorance do not believe that God can be fully understood. They affirm that God alone is absolute; all human affirmations about God and God's revelation are inescapably limited. Religious believers with this perspective can enrich public dialogue and diplomacy.

New Hope for the Muslim Dialogue with the West

You are all probably familiar with the amazing sequence of events for Catholics and Muslims, beginning in September 2006, when Pope Benedict gave an academic address in Regensburg. In that address, he inappropriately quoted a medieval Christian polemicist, emperor Paleologus, who was attacking Mohammed. The address immediately provoked anger among many Muslims. But what has happened since then gives me great hope for Islam's relationship to Catholicism and to the west.

In less than a month, thirty-eight Muslim scholars responded by reminding the pope not only of medieval Christianity's dependence on Muslim thinkers, but also the polemical nature of Paleologus' remarks. They also stated clearly that any Muslim thinker who marginalizes the role of reason is not representative of Islamic thought. A year after that, one hundred and thirty-eight Muslim thinkers addressed all Christians of the West through a carefully drafted document entitled, "A Common Word Between Us." Drawing upon the Scriptures of the three religions traditions—that is, from the Hebrew Scriptures (especially the Book of Deuteronomy), the New Testament and the Qur'an—their document develops a "common word" about the importance of loving God and one's neighbor. What I found particularly important about the document is its affirmation that at stake is not only peaceful relations among adherents to the three religions, but also their eternal salvation. Their document concludes by referring to text in the Qur'an which is often repeated in interreligious dialogues that God allowed the existence of many religions so that the followers of them can compete with each other in doing good works (Q. 5:48).

Discussion of Imam Mohamed El Sadi (2nd from right). Onlooking (L to R) Former U.S. Ambassador Douglas Kmiec, Rev. Fr. James L. Heft, Professor Stephen Calleya.

Group photo (L to R): Rev. Fr. Dionisius Mintoff, Former U.S. Ambassador Douglas Kmiec, Rabbi Admor Dov Beer HaCohen, Rev. Fr. James L. Heft, Imam Mohamed El Sadi, Rector Professor Juanito Camilleri, Rev. Fr. Hilary Tagliaferro and Professor Stephen Calleya, MEDAC Director.

Catholic scholar of Islam and Jesuit Thomas Michel, a veteran of the Catholic/Muslim dialogue, stated that this 2007 international Muslim statement represents a watershed moment in the dialogue between Muslims and Christians for three reasons: (1) it was signed by a very broad spectrum of Muslim leaders from forty countries who had to put aside intra-Muslim conflicts; (2) it moves the conversation off of geopolitical conflicts and firmly onto theological grounds; and (3) it comes not from "westernized" Muslims, but from Muslims who live in the heart of Arab Muslim countries.[7]

More recent trialogues have taken place: in Qatar and Madrid in 2008. The trialogue held in Qatar, known as the Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, issued a common statement that called for tolerance among religions and a respect for all human life, and reported that the participants not only discussed values they held in common, but also "some of the difficult and tragic issues which disfigure our world and create violence and injustice in so many countries."[8] The Madrid conference was sponsored by the Guardian of the Holy Sites Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The Madrid conference issued a three-page statement which underscores the "value of dialogue as the best way for mutual understanding and cooperation," and condemns terrorism as "one of the most serious obstacles to dialogue and coexistence."[9] I was invited to participate in a conference in Cairo in the summer of 2009 organized by Al Azhar University.

Specifically in response to the Muslim text, "A Common Word," follow up dialogues have taken place at the University of Southern California, at the Vatican, at Cambridge, at Georgetown University and in Jordan.[10] Then, Pope Benedict spent a week in the

7 Reported by John L. Allen in his column, "All Things Catholic," Feb. 1, 2008, (Vol. 7, No. 21), p. 3.

8 See "Signs of the Times," ***America***, June 9-16, 2008, p. 6.

9 See Robert Mickens, "Mixed Reaction to Saudi Olive Branch," in ***The Tablet***, July 26, 2008, p. 36.

10 Muslim scholars in recent years have explored the qur'anic grounds for interreligious dialogue. For example, Abdulaziz Sachedina,

Middle East. All of this activity has led one veteran of the Christian-Muslim dialogue to say that in the past four years, there has been more positive dialogue between Christians and Muslims than in the previous one thousand.

Such promising conversations between Christians and Muslims have continued to take place. What direction they will take given the current movements in several Muslim countries in northern African and the Middle East remains to be seen.

Conclusion

But all efforts at understanding others are difficult, especially when we have been separated by centuries of conflict and mutual recriminations. We need patience and persistence. I am especially encouraged by the impressive and most welcome invitations to a deeper dialogue by the worldwide Muslim leaders who signed

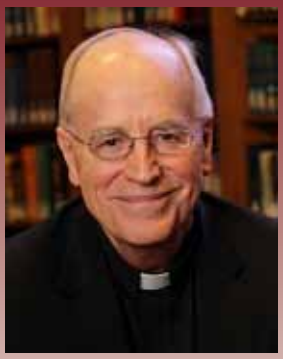
a professor at the University of Virginia, explores the principles for co-existence among different religious communities (see his "The Qur'an and Other Religions," in ***The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an,*** edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 290-309. See also Asma Afsaruddin's "The Hermeneutics of Inter-Faith Relations: Retrieving Moderation and Pluralism as Universal Principles in Qur'anic Exegeses," in ***Journal of Religious Ethics***, 37 (2009), pp. 331-354. She begins her article with the following paragraph: "Muslims through time have been accustomed to regarding themselves as constituting a 'middle' or 'moderate nation/community' (Ar. ***umma wasat***) on the basis of Qur'an 2:143, which applies this designation to them. This designation has been enthusiastically adopted by Muslims both as an indication of divinely conferred distinction upon them and as a divine mandate to avoid extremes in one's belief and conduct. What is less well known, however, is that this verse has its parallel in Qur'an 5:66 in which righteous Jews and Christians are also described as constituting a 'balanced' or 'moderate community' (Ar. ***umma muqtasida***). The Qur'an thus clearly suggests in these two verses that moderation inheres in righteous conduct independent of theological doctrine or denominational affiliation. Such a view transcends sectarianism and paves the way for Muslims to retrieve a divine mandate for religious pluralism from the Qur'anic text and its exegeses" (p. 331).

the “Common Word” document. I am encouraged also by the response of the leadership of my own Catholic Church to these invitations to dialogue. But there is much work to do if the mutual understanding between Muslims and the west is to increase, since much of the western press perpetuates stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists. Working together, we pray that in time, a deeper and better understanding of each other will prevail. If our knowledge of God is always limited and we are created in God’s image, then we should also be aware that our knowledge of each other will also be necessarily limited--all the more reason for reverence and respect, patient dialogue, and working together for the justice and peace that we all seek.

Fr. James L. Heft, S.M. (Marianist)
Alton Brooks Professor of Religion
President of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of
Southern California, Los Angeles, U.S.A.

About the author

Fr. James L. Heft, S.M. (Marianist)



❑ **Fr. James L. Heft**

Fr. Heft is a priest in the Society of Mary, an educator, author, and leader in Catholic higher education. After finishing his doctoral studies in historical theology at the University of Toronto, he spent the next 29 years at the University of Dayton, a Catholic University run by the Marianists. There, he served as chair of the Theology Department for six years, Provost of the University for eight years, and most recently, chancellor of the University for ten years. After discussions with the leadership of the University of Southern California, the Board of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (www.ifacs.com), and his own religious superiors, he left the University of Dayton in the summer of 2006 to begin a full time effort to establish the Institute at USC, where he now holds the Alton Brooks Professorship in Religion.

He has been deeply involved in the leadership of Catholic higher education in the United States, serving on the board of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) for nearly a decade, and chairing that board from 1999-2001. Along with three other leaders in Catholic higher education, he founded in 1996 ***Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice***. He has published and edited eight books and written over 150 articles and book chapters. He is the recipient of four honorary degrees.

The purpose of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, of which he is the founder and President, can be stated simply. The Institute exists to make it possible for more intellectuals to take seriously the study of religious, and in particular, of Catholicism, in an ecumenical and inter-faith context.

Fr. Heft's most recent books are:

1. Engineering Education and Practice: Embracing a Catholic Vision (ND Studies in Ethics and Culture) by James L. Heft S.M. and Kevin Hallinan (Nov 30, 2011)
2. Catholicism and Interreligious Dialogue by James L. Heft S. M. (Nov 21, 2011)
3. Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities by James L. Heft S.M. (Nov 17, 2011)
4. Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians and Muslims by James L. Heft, Reuven Firestone and Omid Safi (Aug 1, 2011). *This book contains papers that grew out of a week's meeting in Jerusalem in 2007 among Jewish, Catholic and Muslim Scholars.*
5. Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Abrahamic Dialogues) James L. Heft (Editor), 2007

About MEDAC

The Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies (MEDAC) is an institution of higher learning offering advanced degrees in diplomacy with a focus on Mediterranean issues. The programme consists of courses in International Law, International Economics, International Relations, Diplomatic History and the practice of diplomacy.

MEDAC was established in 1990 pursuant to an agreement between the governments of Malta and Switzerland. The Geneva Graduate Institute of International Studies (HEI) was among its first foreign partners.

With Malta's membership in the European Union and with the financial support of the Arab League MEDAC, more than ever, is emphasizing the Euro-Mediterranean dimension by building bridges between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. MEDAC is a member of the European Diplomatic Training Initiative (EDTI), a group of EU diplomatic academies training EU personnel. Our institution is also part of the Advisory Board of the journal Europe's World. MEDAC has established close strategic relationships with a large number of prestigious international diplomatic institutions including the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, the Institute for Diplomatic Studies in Cairo, Centre for European Integration Studies (ZEI) of the University in Bonn, Germany as well as Wilton Park – UK, Spanish Diplomatic School, Madrid, Spain, and Department of Mediterranean Studies, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece.

Academy Courses

- Master of Arts in Diplomatic Studies (M.A.)
- Master of Diplomacy (M. Dip.)
- **NEW** Joint M.A. with George Mason University (Virginia, USA) on Conflict Resolution and Mediterranean Security
- Diploma in Diplomacy (DDS)

The programme of Master of Diplomacy (M.Dip.) course is designed for junior diplomats with some field experience. They are instructed in the same core disciplines as the M.A. students (Diplomatic History, International Relations, International Economics, International Law as well as selected lectures in diplomacy) but with a special emphasis on diplomatic practice, languages, public speaking and on-line skills.

The course covers two semesters, from October to June, and includes field trips to Switzerland and to Germany. (See details of all courses on our website: **www.MED-ACademy.org**)