



## **An Interfaith Response to War**

As I write this letter, the United States and Israel have begun a war with Iran. What is an interfaith response to war? I don't think there is just one way to answer that question. But it is the work of ICJS to ask such big questions, to closely examine our religious traditions in search of answers, and to have the messy conversations that are needed to build a shared life in our brutal and broken world.

While we do not know how this war will unfold in the days and weeks ahead—or what this war will mean for the region in the realm of politics, economics, or security—we do know that war is always horrific. There is consensus amongst our religious traditions on that point. Even if a war is considered just or necessary, with the loss of human life and the destruction of cities and communities comes grief and pain. As Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, [reminds us](#), war is never something to celebrate. Right now, there is reason to fear and there is a need to mourn. Our religious traditions can help us navigate fear, pain, and grief. That is one interfaith response to war.

Another interfaith response to war is to be aware of when religious bias and bigotry is happening in news analysis and commentary. We all should think twice about the narratives that we are consuming around this war. There are already Islamophobic slurs being directed against Iranians, and antisemitic smears being leveled against Israelis. There are those who frame this conflict as a "clash of civilizations" between "Judeo-Christians" and "Muslims." And these are only the most overt examples. Wars invite bigotries to thrive and conspiracies to take root in our imaginations. We must be vigilant in our discussions about this conflict and be willing to disrupt religious bias when talking with friends, family, and colleagues.

Our religious traditions also call for us to be peacemakers, and to cultivate hope, especially in times of darkness and uncertainty. This is another interfaith response to war. And at ICJS we do the work of peacemaking and hope-making in dialogue with our

neighbors, with the end goal of living together in community. In the shadow of war, such hope may seem simple or naive, and the vision of an interreligious society impossible. But I don't think that it is.

ICJS relies on our five [Organizational Values](#) to guide our work in moments of crisis and uncertainty. Recently, I have been thinking about our organizational commitment to building resilient interreligious **community**:

*Responsible civic life requires more than tolerance and coexistence. It requires participation in community, respectful dialogue, mutual understanding, and flexibility with resources and positions. We build robust interreligious communities that interweave the civic, educational, and religious dimensions of our lives together.*

At ICJS, interreligious engagement is both a this-worldly project and an other-worldly project. I think sometimes when people hear “interfaith dialogue” or “interreligious relations,” they think that such efforts are abstract or extraneous—nice-to-do, but not necessary or relevant to the problems of today. There’s often a pull toward thinking interfaith/interreligious is all about the eschatological, the end times, or some kind of utopian vision of what harmony across religions might look like. This is a misconception that ICJS challenges—we see interfaith learning and interreligious dialogue as being both a sacred and a civic project. It is work that is vital, urgent, and capable of addressing what divides us, especially in times of war, fear, intimidation, misinformation, and distrust. Interfaith learning and interreligious dialogue is necessary to the work of dismantling religious bias and bigotry. It is necessary to the work of building robust interreligious communities. It is necessary to the work of ending wars.

In thinking about this war with Iran, I have returned to Pope Francis, and the Encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#) that he issued five years ago in October 2020. Fratelli Tutti was the first major papal document to arise from an interreligious friendship and to embrace both de facto religious pluralism as the context for Catholic theological reflection, and dialogue as the primary theological response to our religiously diverse world. This encyclical developed out of an interreligious dialogue and growing friendship between Pope Francis and Grand Imam of Al-Ahzar Ahmed al-Tayyeb of Egypt. The framework these two religious leaders developed is one of mutuality, respect, dialogue, and cooperation on shared concerns and global problems. It is an encyclical that soberly assesses the threats humanity faces—from war, from disease, from corporate greed, from political instability, and from

climate catastrophe—and commits to imagining a different future through interreligious dialogue and collaboration.

The encyclical asserts that today's challenges cannot be addressed exclusively through a secularized humanitarian framework, but that our challenges also require an interreligious imagination, grounded in a shared sense of divine purpose. Human cooperation that promotes love, flourishing, and care for creation is doing God's will, it is enacting what God desires for the human family. While Fratelli Tutti was born of Christian-Muslim dialogue, Pope Francis does not limit his encyclical to these two religious communities. Instead, he called for universal cooperation among all people of good will. With Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis builds upon this important legacy of Vatican II, prioritizing dialogues that create and sustain cultures of encounter. He writes:

*Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word "dialogue." If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue. There is no need for me to stress the benefits of dialogue. I have only to think of what our world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine.* **Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, §198**

Committing to dialogue, and community-building, is an interfaith response to war that I can be a part of here at ICJS. That is the hopeful work we can do together. That is what I am leaning on right now.

Sincerely,



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