



MAIN ARTICLES

Pope Francis's Legacy of Encounter: Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Recognition, and Fraternity

O legado de encontro do papa Francisco: diálogo cristão-muçulmano, reconhecimento e fraternidade

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ABSTRACT: This article reassesses Pope Francis's contribution to Catholic-Muslim dialogue on the first anniversary of his death. It situates his legacy within post-*Nostra aetate* developments and highlights his focus on the culture of encounter and universal fraternity, central to *Fratelli tutti* and the Document on Human Fraternity. For Francis, dialogue is an ethical vocation grounded in recognition, humility, and shared responsibility. The study places his vision alongside al-Kindi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd, whose philosophies also affirm openness to the other. Their convergence reframes difference as a path to truth and justice. The article argues that Francis's approach offers tools to confront islamophobia and nationalism, providing a normative framework to resist exclusion and foster a more just, dialogical global order.

KEYWORDS: Pope Francis. Interreligious Dialogue. Fraternity. Islamic Philosophy. Encounter.

RESUMO: A comemoração do primeiro aniversário da morte do Papa Francisco convida a reavaliar sua contribuição ao diálogo inter-religioso com os muçulmanos. O artigo insere seu legado na trajetória do ensino católico desde *Nostra aetate* e destaca sua ênfase na cultura do encontro e na fraternidade universal, centrais em *Fratelli tutti* e no Documento sobre a Fraternidade Humana. Para Francisco, o diálogo é uma vocação ética fundada no reconhecimento, na humildade e na

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responsabilidade compartilhada. O estudo o coloca em diálogo com al-Kindi, al-Ghazali e Ibn Rushd, cujas filosofias também defendem abertura ao outro. Essa convergência vê a diferença como via para a verdade e a justiça. O texto argumenta que a cultura do encontro oferece recursos para enfrentar a islamofobia e o nacionalismo, propondo um marco normativo capaz de resistir à exclusão e promover uma ordem global mais justa e dialogal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Papa Francisco. Diálogo inter-religioso. Fraternidade. Filosofia islâmica. Encontro.

Introduction

The death of Pope Francis has prompted renewed attention to his enduring legacy, not only within the Catholic Church but also in the wider field of interreligious dialogue. Among the defining features of his pontificate was the consistent effort to build bridges with Muslims, an endeavor that he pursued both conceptually and practically. In contrast to earlier models of interreligious engagement that often emphasized tolerance in the minimal sense of forbearance, Francis articulated a more demanding vision rooted in the culture of encounter and the principle of universal fraternity. These notions framed dialogue as an ethical vocation of recognition, humility, and shared responsibility, and they found concrete expression in his pastoral visits, symbolic gestures, and collaborative initiatives with Muslim leaders.

This paper argues that Pope Francis's interreligious legacy is best understood as a model of encounter that seeks to transform the relationship between Christians and Muslims from one of mere coexistence to one of mutual recognition and cooperation. To support this claim, the paper situates Francis's vision within the trajectory of Catholic teaching since *Nostra aetate* (1965), highlights its concrete enactments in documents such as *Fratelli tutti* (2020) and the Document on Human Fraternity (2019), and brings it into conversation with the classical Islamic philosophical tradition. The latter is especially illuminating because major thinkers such as al-Kindi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd articulated attitudes toward "the other" that transcend toleration, insisting instead on epistemic openness and ethical responsibility. Their approaches exemplify a philosophical ethos of humility and engagement that resonates strongly with Francis's insistence on encounter as a condition of fraternity.

While scholarship on Pope Francis has already underscored his distinctive role in interreligious engagement, much of the literature has approached it from theological or pastoral perspectives. Studies such as Cornille (2008) and Race and Hedges (2008) emphasize the importance of comparative theology and dialogue in Christian thought, while more

recent works have examined Francis's papacy in light of Catholic social teaching and the Second Vatican Council (Faggioli, 2021; Gaillardetz, 2020). Moreover, Kućko (2021) has also explored Francis's teaching on fraternity as a theological and social principle. Within the field of interfaith relations, particular attention has been given to the Document on Human Fraternity (Abu Dhabi, 2019), often interpreted as a milestone in Catholic-Muslim relations (Ayoub, 2022). Yet relatively little has been written that situates Francis's legacy in dialogue with Islamic philosophical traditions, especially the classical models of epistemic openness and ethical responsibility articulated by thinkers such as al-Kindi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd. By bridging this gap, the paper contributes to a more philosophically grounded understanding of Francis's vision and demonstrates how classical Islamic philosophy can enrich contemporary debates on coexistence and fraternity.

By weaving together these Catholic and Islamic resources, this paper makes two contributions. First, it provides a philosophical framework for understanding Francis's interreligious legacy beyond the language of pastoral diplomacy, emphasizing its normative and conceptual dimensions. Second, it demonstrates how Islamic philosophy offers parallel and complementary insights that can enrich contemporary discussions of coexistence and recognition.

The argument unfolds in three stages. The first section examines the conceptual foundations of Francis's interreligious vision and situates them within Catholic teaching. The second explores how this vision was enacted in his encounters with Muslims, focusing on major documents and symbolic actions. The third provides a critical assessment of the limitations of his approach and reflects on its relevance for present challenges such as Islamophobia and nationalism. The paper concludes by suggesting how Francis's legacy can continue to serve as a resource for deepening Christian-Muslim cooperation and cultivating a more just and dialogical global order.

1 Conceptual Foundations of Dialogue and Fraternity

A central feature of Pope Francis's interreligious vision is his insistence that dialogue must move beyond minimal tolerance toward a genuine culture of encounter. By this expression, which recurs throughout his homilies, audiences, and writings, Francis conveys the conviction that difference is not a threat to be managed but an opportunity for recognition, enrichment, and shared responsibility. As he states in *Fratelli tutti* (n. 213):

The dignity of others is to be respected in all circumstances, not because that dignity is something we have invented or imagined, but because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent

situations. This requires that they be treated differently. That every human being possesses an inalienable dignity is a truth that corresponds to human nature apart from all cultural change. For this reason, human beings have the same inviolable dignity in every age of history and no one can consider himself or herself authorized by particular situations to deny this conviction or to act against it. The intellect can investigate the reality of things through reflection, experience and dialogue, and come to recognize in that reality, which transcends it, the basis of certain universal moral demands.

This passage highlights the philosophical depth underlying Francis's notion of encounter. His insistence on the intrinsic dignity of every human being provides the foundation for dialogue that transcends cultural, religious, and historical boundaries. Difference, for Francis, is not an obstacle to be overcome but a condition for realizing the richness of human existence. When he speaks of dignity as "inalienable" and "independent of cultural change," he is making a universal claim, that is, dignity is not contingent on identity, status, or affiliation but is woven into the very fabric of human nature. From this premise, dialogue ceases to be a concession offered by the majority to the minority, or by the powerful to the weak. Instead, it becomes a mutual recognition of a shared worth that obliges both parties to engage one another sincerely.

By grounding fraternity in universal dignity, Francis also shields dialogue from the charge of relativism. He does not suggest that all differences are trivial, nor that religious traditions are interchangeable. Rather, he affirms that beneath these differences lies a common moral horizon that commands respect. This explains why Francis can embrace interreligious cooperation without abandoning the particular claims of Catholic theology. In this sense, fraternity is not about diluting truth but about creating the conditions in which truth can be sought together. In this way, his vision offers a corrective to models of tolerance that operate by mere forbearance, where the other is endured but not valued. Francis's perspective instead promotes an ethos of enrichment and responsibility, where the presence of the other is seen as a gift that deepens one's own understanding of truth and justice.

The idea of universal fraternity constitutes the broader horizon within which encounter is situated. In *Fratelli tutti* (2020), Francis identifies fraternity and social friendship as indispensable conditions for peace and justice in a fractured world. He writes that "without openness to the Father of all, there will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity" (FT, n. 272), thereby grounding social ethics in theological conviction. This insistence reflects not a departure from Catholic tradition but an extension of it, especially of the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra aetate* (1965). In this landmark text, the Council declared:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of

heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting (NA, n. 3)

This recognition of the shared monotheistic heritage of Christians and Muslims indicated a decisive shift in Catholic attitudes. By affirming esteem for Islam's devotion to the one God, its reverence for prophets and Mary, and its practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the Council reframed the religious other not as a rival to be opposed but as a community with whom Christians share a profound spiritual bond. Francis builds upon this affirmation but extends it further: where *Nostra aetate* opened the door to recognition and respect, Francis insists that fraternity requires active engagement, mutual responsibility, and collaborative action. His culture of encounter does not stop at acknowledging commonalities; it frames difference itself as a horizon for growth, enrichment, and solidarity.

This extension of conciliar teaching found its clearest embodiment in the Document on Human Fraternity, signed jointly with Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi in 2019. The document affirms that religious diversity is part of the divine will, and it calls for believers to work together to uphold justice, safeguard human dignity, and promote peace. Its significance lies not only in its content but also in its symbolic enactment, as the Bishop of Rome and one of the most prominent Muslim leaders together presented a common vision for humanity. For Francis, dialogue thus entails a double commitment that involves recognizing shared human dignity and embracing the practical responsibility to act in solidarity across religious divides.

Altogether, these foundations show that Francis situates dialogue within a theological anthropology of universal dignity and a tradition of ecclesial openness inaugurated by *Nostra aetate*. Yet he advances this legacy by rejecting models of tolerance that merely endure difference. Instead, he insists on an ethos of encounter, where the other is not only respected but welcomed as a partner in the pursuit of justice and truth. This move from tolerance to encounter is what marks Francis's contribution as distinctive, and it prepares the ground for a fruitful comparison with classical Islamic philosophy, where thinkers such as al-Kindi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd articulated similar attitudes of humility, recognition, and responsibility toward "the other."

Al-Kindi's framework establishes a universal standard of inquiry that transcends confessional boundaries and prioritizes the intrinsic value of

truth over inherited loyalties or doctrinal positions. In this light, engagement with “the other” becomes not a concession or a passive act of toleration, but a necessary condition of philosophical integrity. If truth can emerge from any source, then openness to alternative perspectives, regardless of their religious or intellectual provenance, is not optional but essential. This conviction is articulated straightforwardly in *On First Philosophy*, where he writes:

It is required by justice that we do not disparage those who are the cause of even our minor, trivial benefits – so how much more for those who are the cause of our great, true, and serious benefits ... Therefore, we ought to express profound gratitude to those who bring even a small portion of truth (*haqq*), let alone those who contribute much of it ... We ought not to feel ashamed in esteeming the truth and acquiring it from wherever it comes, even if it should come from distant nations and alien peoples. For nothing is more worthy of the seeker of truth than truth itself. One must not belittle the truth, nor the one who brings it (Abu Rida, 1950, p. 102-103, the translation is the author’s own).

Al-Kindi’s view reveals a clear epistemic orientation toward truth (*haqq*) as the philosopher’s ultimate compass. What matters in the pursuit of knowledge is not who speaks, but what is said. Truth does not acquire value from the identity of its source, whether Arab or non-Arab, Muslim or non-Muslim, but from its intrinsic clarity and correspondence to reality. Philosophical inquiry therefore demands methodological humility, a readiness to acknowledge that insight may come from those distant from us in language, culture, or creed. His call to accept truth even from “distant nations and alien peoples” rejects any form of epistemic chauvinism that privileges sameness or familiarity. In modern terms, he advocates a form of epistemic generosity in which even fragments of truth, such as “a small portion of truth,” warrant gratitude and recognition.

Placed alongside Francis’s vision, al-Kindi’s stance demonstrates a remarkable resonance across traditions. Just as Francis insists that difference is not a threat but an opportunity for enrichment and shared responsibility, al-Kindi frames difference as a necessary condition for the pursuit of truth. Both perspectives refuse to reduce the other to a tolerated outsider; instead, they treat the presence of the other as a philosophical and ethical gift. Francis’s culture of encounter and al-Kindi’s ethics of truth from any source converge in affirming that the search for truth cannot be confined within inherited boundaries. Rather, it requires openness, humility, and gratitude toward those who expand our horizons. In this sense, al-Kindi provides an early Islamic articulation of the same principle that Francis embodied; the other is not an obstacle to overcome, but a partner in the journey toward truth and justice.

If al-Kindi grounded openness to the other in a philosophical commitment to truth wherever it may be found, al-Ghazali complements this

with an explicitly ethical and theological concern. What matters for him is not only the content of what the other says, but the manner in which one engages those who differ. In this paper, my concern is al-Ghazali's stance toward the other in general, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, and how his reflections reveal a consistent ethic of humility and responsibility in engagement. In *Moderation in Belief*, he makes this point with clarity:

Such people must be approached with gentleness, seeking to draw them toward the truth and guide them to correct belief—not in a spirit of disputation or fanaticism. For that only strengthens the causes of error and stirs the motives for persistence and obstinacy. Most forms of ignorance have taken root in the hearts of the masses because certain ignorant partisans of the truth have presented it in a manner of challenge and self-assertion, looking upon the weaker opponents with an eye of contempt and disdain (al-Ghazali, 2019, p. 110, the translation is the author's own).

Al-Ghazali's remarks make clear that his ethical stance toward "the other" is not confined to intra-Muslim disagreements but extends equally to non-Muslims. His counsel to "approach them with gentleness ... not in a spirit of disputation or fanaticism" demonstrates that truth cannot be advanced through coercion or humiliation. Polemics and contempt, he warns, only harden error, while respectful engagement creates the space where genuine understanding becomes possible. Ethically, he resists the tendency to frame the religious other as an enemy to be overcome. Instead, he urges empathy, compassion, and moral responsibility. In this line of thought, he states that "we must abandon hatred and resentment, and look upon all of God's creation with an eye of compassion" (al-Ghazali, 2019, p. 110, the translation is the author's own).

This logic resonates closely with Pope Francis's culture of encounter. Both thinkers reject the idea that difference should be endured reluctantly under the rubric of tolerance. Instead, they present difference as an arena for recognition, compassion, and shared responsibility. For al-Ghazali, as for Francis, the other is not an adversary whose error justifies disdain, but a partner whose dignity demands respect and whose presence may serve as a catalyst for deepening truth. In this way, al-Ghazali develops al-Kindi's philosophical openness into a more theologically structured ethic of dialogue, one that insists that disagreement, whether with philosophers, sectarians, or non-Muslims, is not the breakdown of discourse but its necessary condition.

If al-Kindi emphasized the universality of truth and al-Ghazali underscored the ethical manner of engaging others, Ibn Rushd brought these themes into a systematic vision of intellectual humility and pluralism. For him, human reason is never self-sufficient; it is always dependent on prior generations and other communities. This conviction leads him to argue that even the most brilliant minds cannot arrive at truth alone but

must rely on the accumulated efforts of others, including those outside their own tradition. He writes in *Fasl al-Maqal*:

For if we were to suppose that the science of geometry in our time had ceased to exist, and likewise the science of astronomy, and a single person attempted on their own to determine the magnitudes of the celestial bodies, their shapes, and their distances from one another, it would not be possible for them to do so—even if they were the most intelligent of human beings ... Therefore, we must examine what those who preceded us from among other nations have written, and the demonstrations they have set forth in their books. What accords with the truth we accept from them, rejoice in it, and thank them for it; and what does not accord with the truth, we point out and warn against, while excusing them (Ibn Rushd, 1968, p. 32-33, the translation is the author's own).

This passage illustrates Ibn Rushd's epistemic generosity. Truth is not confined to one community, culture, or era but is the product of a shared human endeavor that spans across nations and traditions. What matters is not the origin of an idea but its correspondence to reality and its capacity to advance knowledge. Hence his counsel to rejoice in truths received from others, to thank them for their contributions, and to excuse their errors. Ethically, this posture avoids arrogance and cultivates gratitude. It acknowledges that the pursuit of knowledge is a collective undertaking, where even mistakes are part of the broader process of learning.

Placed alongside Pope Francis's culture of encounter, Ibn Rushd's reasoning resonates strongly. Both figures reject insularity and suspicion of the other, affirming instead that difference is a condition for enrichment. Francis insists that religious and cultural diversity is part of the divine will, calling believers to recognize dignity in every human being and to act in solidarity across divides. Ibn Rushd, centuries earlier, articulated a comparable insight. That is, truth is discovered not in isolation but in engagement with others, and even when disagreement arises, it must be met with fairness, gratitude, and excusal rather than hostility. Both perspectives therefore affirm that dialogue with the other is not a pragmatic concession but a moral and epistemic obligation.

Thus, these reflections reveal a striking convergence between Pope Francis and the classical Islamic philosophical tradition. Francis situates dialogue within a theological anthropology of universal dignity, extending the legacy of *Nostra aetate* into a vision of fraternity and encounter. Al-Kindi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd, each in their own way, argued that truth transcends inherited boundaries and that engagement with the other is not a threat to be managed but an opportunity for growth, recognition, and shared responsibility. For al-Kindi, openness to "distant nations and alien peoples" was a mark of philosophical integrity; for al-Ghazali, gentleness and compassion were essential to guiding others toward truth; for Ibn Rushd, gratitude and excusal characterized the scholar's attitude

toward predecessors and other traditions. These positions anticipate the same conviction that Francis advanced, namely that the other is not an adversary to be endured but a partner in the shared pursuit of truth and justice. In this continuity of reasoning across traditions, we find a common ethos of humility, responsibility, and encounter, an ethos that remains urgently relevant to the fractured world of today.

2 Francis in Practice and Encounters with Muslims

Concepts such as fraternity and encounter acquire their real significance only when enacted. One of the distinctive features of Pope Francis's pontificate was his ability to translate theological conviction into symbolic and practical action. His legacy in Christian-Muslim dialogue is therefore not limited to texts but is equally embodied in moments of presence, gestures of solidarity, and words spoken directly to Muslim communities.

The most emblematic expression of Francis's commitment to encounter is the Document on Human Fraternity, signed in Abu Dhabi in 2019 with Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyeb. In its preamble, the two leaders affirm:

The firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice and love; and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of law (DHF, 2019, unpaginated).

This declaration captures the theological depth of Francis's vision. Fraternity here is not presented as a pragmatic arrangement for peaceful coexistence but as a demand of religious truth itself. By rooting fraternity in "authentic teachings of religions," the document elevates interreligious cooperation to a spiritual and ethical imperative. Its call to defend justice, love, and wisdom against the dehumanizing forces of materialism and violence links dialogue directly to the moral crises of the contemporary world.

The significance of this moment lies not only in its eloquence but in its enactment. The Bishop of Rome and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar stood together before the world, demonstrating that traditions often portrayed as locked in rivalry could articulate a shared moral charter. Pope Francis thereby advanced beyond the respectful recognition of *Nostra aetate* toward a model of joint responsibility and common action. The document thus embodies his conviction that encounter is not a matter of courtesy but a theological mandate, one that requires Christians and Muslims alike to become partners in addressing global challenges.

Another powerful example of this vision in practice was Francis's visit to Iraq in 2021, where he met with Muslim and Christian leaders at the Plain of Ur, the traditional birthplace of Abraham. There he mentioned that "this blessed place brings us back to our origins, to the sources of God's work, to the birth of our religions. ... We are the fruits of that call and that journey" (Francis, 2021, unpaginated). By situating Jews, Christians, and Muslims within a shared Abrahamic lineage, Francis transformed an interreligious gathering into a theological affirmation of common origin. In the context of a land scarred by sectarian violence, his words underscored that difference need not lead to division. Instead, he reinterpreted plurality as continuity, showing that distinct faiths can recognize themselves as heirs of a single divine summons. Ethically, his presence in Mosul, among ruins left by terrorism, conveyed that true fraternity must be lived where wounds are deepest. Here encounter was not abstract but incarnated in gestures of mourning, solidarity, and hope.

Similarly, in Indonesia (2024), he praised the symbolic "Tunnel of Friendship" linking the Istiqlal Mosque with the cathedral, praying that all who pass through it may do so "in a spirit of friendship, harmony and fraternity" (Francis, 2024). This architectural image captures Francis's theological conviction: religions, though distinct, can be connected in ways that transform difference into mutual enrichment. His blessing of this passage between sacred spaces dramatized his idea that encounter must be embodied in everyday life.

Francis also articulated the disposition required for such dialogue: "An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides" (Francis, 2013). Here, the epistemic and ethical dimensions converge, showing that encounter is not about erasing difference but about cultivating humility, listening, and receptivity. This resonates strongly with the classical Islamic philosophers' insistence that the other may harbor truth and must be approached with respect.

Viewed as a whole, Francis's declarations, visits, and gestures reveal a consistent pattern in which difference is not managed through distance but embraced as an opportunity for recognition and solidarity. His praxis embodies the culture of encounter, where fraternity is lived in shared commitments, symbolic actions, and mutual care. The same reasoning found in al-Kindi's openness to truth, al-Ghazali's ethic of gentleness, and Ibn Rushd's intellectual generosity reappears in Francis's public ministry. For him, dialogue with Muslims is not peripheral but central to a vision of peace rooted in dignity and justice.

Francis reiterated this ethos during his 2024 visit to Indonesia, when he entered the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta and blessed the "Tunnel of

Friendship” linking the mosque to the nearby cathedral. He prayed: “I pray ... that everyone who will pass through this Tunnel in the years to come may do so in a spirit of friendship, harmony and fraternity” (Francis, 2024). The symbolic power of a tunnel connecting two houses of worship captures Francis’s vision with remarkable clarity. Just as the tunnel physically joins spaces once kept apart, so encounter, for Francis, binds traditions without erasing their distinctiveness. His words expressed the conviction that interreligious relations must not be reduced to polite dialogue at official tables but should permeate the ordinary spaces of life, cultivating friendship across boundaries.

From Abu Dhabi to Ur, from Mosul to Jakarta, Pope Francis consistently embodied his conviction that dialogue with Muslims is both a theological mandate and a moral necessity. Through documents, speeches, and symbolic gestures, he moved Catholic teaching from tolerance to encounter, from recognition to shared responsibility. His actions demonstrate that religious difference, far from being a source of fear, is a space for enrichment and solidarity. In this sense, Francis’s practice reflects the same ethos found in classical Islamic philosophy. That is, the other is not a threat to be silenced but a partner in the common search for truth and justice. This convergence between Catholic and Islamic traditions sets the stage for a critical assessment of Francis’s legacy in light of today’s pressing challenges.

3 Contemporary Challenges: Islamophobia and Nationalism

The preceding discussion has shown that Pope Francis’s legacy of interreligious dialogue is rooted in a theological anthropology of universal dignity and is enacted in gestures of encounter with Muslims worldwide. Yet, the real measure of this vision lies in its capacity to confront the challenges that threaten the very possibility of encounter. Two of the most pressing obstacles in today’s world are Islamophobia and Nationalism. Both are not merely political or cultural issues but embody deeper epistemic distortions and ethical failures. They misrepresent truth, foster exclusion, and undermine the recognition of shared humanity. Addressing them requires a careful philosophical approach that defines their nature, exposes their consequences, and evaluates how Francis’s culture of encounter provides a corrective.

3.1 Islamophobia

Islamophobia can be defined as “a system of structures, practices, and discourses that position Islam and Muslims as a problem to be managed, excluded, or eliminated” (Sayyid, 2014, p. 5). It operates both at the level

of individual prejudice and at the structural level, shaping media narratives, public policies, and cultural attitudes (Allen, 2010). Epistemically, Islamophobia functions through distortions as it reduces a diverse faith to monolithic stereotypes of violence, backwardness, or extremism. Ethically, it normalizes exclusion and hostility, presenting Muslims as perpetual outsiders in societies where they live as citizens.

From an epistemic perspective, Islamophobia represents a failure of intellectual responsibility. It refuses the obligation to seek truth about the other and instead perpetuates ignorance under the guise of knowledge. As al-Kindi warned, truth must be sought “from wherever it comes, even from distant nations and alien peoples” (Abu Rida, 1950, p. 103). To reject Muslim voices, experiences, and contributions simply on the basis of their religious identity is a form of epistemic chauvinism. Pope Francis consistently resisted this distortion. In *Fratelli tutti*, he lamented how “things that until a few years ago could not be said by anyone without risking the loss of universal respect can now be said with impunity, and in the crudest of terms” (n. 45). His insistence that “the different religions, based on their respect for each human person as a creature called to be a child of God, contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society” (FT, n. 271) directly challenges the Islamophobic narrative that religion, and particularly Islam, is inherently divisive.

Ethically, Islamophobia is a form of injustice. It violates the inviolable dignity that Francis describes as the basis of fraternity. His denunciation of the persecution of Muslims in Myanmar and his repeated appeals against anti-Muslim prejudice in Europe exemplify his conviction that fraternity requires solidarity with marginalized groups, even when they are outside one’s own tradition. Al-Ghazali’s counsel to “approach them with gentleness ... not in a spirit of disputation or fanaticism” (al-Ghazali, 2019, p. 110) mirrors this stance. Both figures recognize that contempt only entrenches error and that compassion is a moral necessity. The ethical failure of Islamophobia lies precisely in its refusal of compassion and its cultivation of disdain.

Thus, Islamophobia is not simply a political problem but an epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). It denies Muslims credibility as knowers and legitimacy as participants in public discourse. Francis’s response seeks to undo this injustice by affirming Muslims as partners in the search for truth and justice. His culture of encounter provides both an epistemic correction by insisting that the other has something to teach and an ethical correction by grounding dignity in the universal gift of God.

3.2 Nationalism

Nationalism, like Islamophobia, is multifaceted. While it can express a benign love of one’s community, it often assumes an exclusionary form

that privileges the nation over universal values. As Calhoun (2017) notes, nationalism constructs identity by drawing rigid boundaries between insiders and outsiders, often leading to suspicion or hostility toward difference. In its contemporary populist forms, nationalism elevates cultural or religious homogeneity as a political ideal, casting minorities as threats to national cohesion.

Epistemically, nationalism fosters what we might call “epistemic closure.” It privileges inherited identity and tradition over openness to truth, echoing the very chauvinism that Ibn Rushd rejected when he counseled gratitude even for truths discovered by “other nations.” When national belonging is treated as the ultimate criterion of truth, dialogue across boundaries becomes impossible. Francis directly critiques this tendency in *Fratelli tutti*, where he warns against “myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism” (n. 11) that undermines fraternity and blinds communities to the dignity of outsiders.

Ethically, nationalism violates the principle of universal dignity by reducing moral responsibility to one’s own group. Francis insists that “the true worth of the different countries of our world is measured by their ability to think not simply as a country but also as part of the larger human family” (FT, n. 141). His vision directly resists the narrowing of solidarity to ethnic or national lines. Similarly, al-Ghazali’s insistence on compassion for “all of God’s creation” (2019, p. 110) refuses to limit ethical responsibility to one’s own community. Nationalism’s ethical failure lies in its deliberate shrinking of the moral horizon, replacing fraternity with exclusion.

In this sense, nationalism is not only a political ideology but also an epistemic and ethical distortion. It warps our perception of truth by privileging sameness and undermines justice by denying the equal dignity of others. Francis’s counter-vision reorients both dimensions by calling, epistemically, for humility and openness to the wisdom of others and, ethically, for recognition of every person as a brother or sister. His insistence that “no one is saved alone” (FT, n. 32) directly challenges nationalist isolationism and reframes belonging in relational rather than exclusionary terms.

Islamophobia and Nationalism represent two of the most viral challenges to interreligious dialogue in our time. Both distort reality epistemically and corrode solidarity ethically. They thrive by portraying the other as a threat to be feared or excluded, thereby undermining the possibility of encounter. Pope Francis’s legacy, however, offers a philosophical and theological counter-narrative. By grounding fraternity in universal dignity and practicing a culture of encounter, he provides resources for resisting these distortions. His approach resonates with the classical Islamic philosophers who likewise insisted that the other is not to be silenced but engaged with humility, gratitude, and compassion.

The enduring significance of Francis's legacy lies not only in his words or gestures but also in the framework he leaves behind, a vision of encounter capable of addressing the epistemic injustices and ethical failures of our age. If Islamophobia and Nationalism seek to close the door on dialogue, Francis's culture of encounter and its resonance with Islamic thought affirm that dialogue is the very path through which truth, justice, and fraternity can be realized.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Pope Francis's legacy in Christian-Muslim relations is best captured by his culture of encounter, a theologically grounded commitment to universal dignity that reframes interreligious engagement in terms of recognition, humility, and shared responsibility. Conceptually, this vision extends the opening made by *Nostra aetate* and is given systematic expression in *Fratelli tutti* and the Document on Human Fraternity. Practically, it is embodied in gestures and visits such as Abu Dhabi, the Plain of Ur in Iraq, and the "Tunnel of Friendship" in Jakarta, which translate conviction into public acts of solidarity. Through these steps, Francis moves Catholic discourse from mere tolerance to fraternity, binding believers to one another in truth-seeking and common action.

Placed in dialogue with classical Islamic philosophy, Francis's approach resonates with a long-standing intellectual and ethical horizon in which the other is never reduced to a tolerated outsider. Al-Kindi's ethic of receiving truth from "distant nations," al-Ghazali's counsel of gentleness and compassion in disagreement, and Ibn Rushd's call to gratitude and excusal toward predecessors all exemplify a philosophical and moral stance that treats difference as a gift. Seen through this comparative lens, Francis's insistence on encounter is clarified. Engagement with the other is not a concession to pluralism but a necessary condition for discovering and enacting truth and justice.

The challenges of Islamophobia and exclusionary Nationalism put this vision to the test. Islamophobia distorts reality and legitimizes exclusion, while Nationalism narrows belonging and undermines solidarity. Francis's counter-vision offers a corrective to both, fostering epistemic openness that expects to learn from others and ethical responsibility that recognizes the dignity of every human being. In this sense, his legacy provides a coherent and practical paradigm in which Christians and Muslims can act as co-workers in the pursuit of justice and peace.

Future studies would do well to explore how this framework can be expanded and applied in interreligious dialogue, especially in confronting

contemporary challenges such as prejudice, populism, and political polarization. Finally, this paper would not only preserve the memory of Francis's contribution but also carry forward the spirit of encounter he championed, ensuring that dialogue remains a living and transformative practice.

Abbreviations

- FT = Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*
DHF = Document on Human Fraternity
NA = Declaration *Nostra Aetate*

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The data underlying the research text are contained in the article.