

## Pope Francis, Catholics, Jews, and Protestants

Frank Kaufmann

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The missions and responsibilities of religious leaders are complex and manifold. They must protect, preserve, and develop their tradition; they must care for the faithful in their communities; they must interact in a constructive dialogue with the secular world, including politics, entertainment, health and science, and much more; and they must seek to maintain and develop positive and progressive relations with other religions.

Since news media are predominantly secular, the first news we hear about Pope Francis comes from concerns and assessments of secular people. He buys his own newspaper, he rides the bus, he has just one lung.

Next we hear his views on hot button social issues, abortion (no), gay marriage (no). Then a tiny bit about faith direction, but only that related to hot button social issues, women clergy (no), married clergy (no).

Of the four major responsibilities of religious leaders, the areas the general public tend to know least about are the purely religious ones, doctrine and the preservation of faith and tradition, pastoral initiatives and the care of the faithful, and interreligious impulses, namely how does this person relate to a world full of others who live and believe differently, in other communities of faith.

The positions, utterances, and behaviors by religious leaders about other religions are more important than most people think. These easily can influence war and peace, and by extension, determine lives lost or preserved. Views, statements, and behavior about other religions are especially important when the leader in question heads the largest religious community in the world.

Pope Benedict XVI had some good interreligious impulses, especially vis a vis the very important matter of Christian Jewish relations. But also he made some serious gaffes in this arena, most notably vis a vis Catholic Muslim relations; not good, especially in this time when tensions are high.

All of interfaith is important, but the greatest internal tensions in religious relations arise among religions that have an interwoven theological and cultural history. In the Western world, two of the most central junctures and religious divides involve Christianity and Judaism, separated around 33 CE, and Catholicism and Protestantism, separated around 1517 CE (meaning Common Era, a term now used to replace the Christian-dominated phrase AD).

The fact that Jesus challenged Judaism, claiming to be its fulfillment, and that Jews did not accept this, is what makes Jewish-Christian relations especially delicate and important. Similarly, Luther challenged the Vatican, leading to what Protestants came feel is a better Christianity than Roman Catholicism. Obviously the 1.2 billion Roman Catholics in the world disagree, and this is what makes Catholic Protestant relations also delicate and important.

The key to why these paired relations are especially challenging lies in the fact that it is far more painful and difficult when someone from within my own family tells me I am wrong than when an outsider criticizes me.

It is one thing to have a stranger oppose me, but it is something altogether different when rejection and accusation comes from within my own family. Christianity came from within Judaism. Jesus is born and raised a Jew. Lutheranism came from within Catholicism. Luther was a Catholic monk, and a Catholic professor of theology.

We know that we can find a way to continue in loving relationships with family members who believe we live in the wrong way. Even though it is difficult and requires hard work, it is still possible.

The same is true for religions. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, members of the same family, suggest the others are false and wrong simply by the religious path they choose. This can lead to horrible outcomes. But as hard as it is, it still is possible for people so divided to get along and do wonderful things together. It is the hardest thing in the world, but it is possible.

Do we know anything about Pope Francis in this regard? Does he play well with others?

Excitingly, almost instantly, two very important documents were released from the faith communities I mention above. These communities have special importance to the work of Catholicism in the world.

These writings are not likely to make front pages anywhere, but in our conflict ridden world, perhaps they should.

Josh Tobin, in Commentary, one of Judaism's preeminent pages of record, writes:

***Especially under the leadership of Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II, the church has become a beacon of conviction against anti-Semitism. As a disciple of John Paul II and someone who had warm relations with Argentine Jewry, Pope Francis appears to be very much part of that movement. While that might appear to be a parochial concern for Jews, it is actually very significant.***

In his expression of gratitude and hopefulness for the known interfaith record of Pope Francis, Tobin calls upon all believers to "join with Catholics to pray for Francis's success and to hope that the church will remain steadfast in its mission as a force for good."

This is a wonderful, promising beacon for cooperation and collaboration between to extremely important groups.

Similarly Rev. Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) immediately issued a formal press release from the ELCA News Service, to say he is "encouraged that Pope Francis has worked with Lutherans in Argentina."

Hanson says:

***"As we approach the commemoration of the 500th (observance) of the Lutheran Reformation, we share a deep commitment to our ongoing dialogues with the Catholic Church internationally and in the United States.***

***"His choice of the name Francis is a strong sign of his commitment to a life of prayer, simplicity, humility and solidarity with those who live on the margins of society. May the gifts of the Holy Spirit sustain him as we enter this holy calling,"***

Now these are, as I've written above, some of the hardest frontiers of interreligious relations.

It is common for religious leaders to write generic statements wishing each other well on the occasion of new leader appointments, but both commentaries from Lutherans and Jews here are not pro forma.

They both make concrete reference to Pope Francis's record of positive efforts and relations in his home Argentina. This is a hopeful sign.

We pray for success of this vital frontier of Pope Francis's mission.