Culture
News
Pope Francis shakes hands with Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar mosq

Pope Francis shakes hands with Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's al-Azhar mosque and university, during a document signing at an interreligious meeting at the Founder's Memorial in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in this Feb. 4, 2019, file photo. The trip is captured in the new documentary film "Amen-Amen-Amen." (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis' landmark 2019 document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" is widely considered a major advancement in the Catholic Church's relationship with the Muslim world. The document, which was signed in Abu Dhabi when Francis became the first pope to visit the Arabian Peninsula, calls for a "culture of mutual respect" — and has been heralded by Islamic, Jewish and Christian leaders around the globe.

Documentary filmmaker Tom Gallagher was on hand for that historic occasion and in his new documentary film "Amen-Amen-Amen," Gallagher takes viewers inside life in the United Arab Emirates and how new currents in the Arab nation have come to

encapsulate Pope Francis' vision in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* of fraternity, dialogue and mutual friendship.

In particular, the documentary chronicles how for the first time in history, a Torah scroll was created and gifted to a Muslim leader. In conjunction with the film's release, NCR spoke with Gallagher (a former NCR contributor) about why he believes this gesture gives a lived expression to Pope Francis' call for religious pluralism.

NCR: **You're a Roman Catholic. Why did you want to tell the story of an Arab nation's relationship with its Jewish inhabitants?**

Gallagher: In December 2018, I was in Abu Dhabi speaking at a peace forum and afterwards met up with [retired New York University President] John Sexton and a group he was hosting at NYU Abu Dhabi. When John shared with me the news that the Jewish community of the Emirates wanted to gift a Torah scroll to His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi, I just knew instantly as a storyteller that this story had to be turned into a documentary.

It wasn't until much later that I realized that having a Catholic tell this story was probably the best way to do it. No one could accuse me of tilting toward one side or another, and as a Christian I was fixated on getting the details of Islam and Judaism correct, and conveying their teachings and history and this story to a wider audience.

I also felt this story needed to be told because Christians in the West generally do not have a good understanding of the Middle East. I want this film to address, in part, that misunderstanding.

Trailer for "Amen-Amen-Amen" (YouTube/Religion Media Company)

You were in the UAE for Pope Francis' historic trip there in February 2019, which of course is captured in this film. What do you recall from those two days and how do you assess that trip's long-term effect on Muslim-Jewish relations on the peninsula?

There was definitely excitement in the air in the days ahead of the pope's arrival and upon his arrival. It's important to remember that Emiratis make up just 10% of the total UAE population. So 90% of the population is non-Emiratis who come from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines and other countries. It's a very diverse country.

This diversity and welcoming atmosphere undergirds the burgeoning Muslim-Jewish relations in the Gulf. The pope's visit brought all this to the forefront. Remember, he was the first pope ever to visit the Arabian Peninsula, and celebrate Mass there. That visit really showed the world the religious diversity of the UAE. Our documentary focuses on one particular aspect of that diversity, the Jewish presence, which is especially remarkable.

The late Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the UAE, made "welcoming the stranger" a core civic virtue in the UAE. In fact, in February 2021, a new organization was formed called the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities to foster the development of Jewish life in the Gulf region. So the region is well along the path of deepening positive Jewish-Muslim relations.



The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (Courtesy of Tom Gallagher)

The human fraternity document has prompted backlash from conservative Catholics, including some of Francis' own cardinals. Have you seen any

comparable backlash in the Jewish or Arab world?

One of the most important outcomes of Pope Francis' historic trip to the UAE was the signing of the human fraternity document. I was there at the signing ceremony. What struck me was the warm relationship between Pope Francis and Dr. Ahmad el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar of Egypt, the Sunni religious leader and scholar. In fact, Dr. el-Tayeb [was] at the Vatican [in October] with Pope Francis and other religious leaders on the urgent issue of climate change.

I have not seen any comparable backlash in the Jewish or Arab world. In a global environment of rising anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sectarian violence and growing nationalism, the repeated coming together of Pope Francis and Dr. el-Tayeb should serve as a tangible example of peace, friendship and cooperation among people of different faith traditions.

One of the most important lessons of this film is that from the perspective of history, relations between Jews and Muslims have been better than relations between Christians and Jews, and Christians and Muslims. The conflicts and tensions of the last few decades are more of an historic anomaly, and this human fraternity document is something that Jews and Muslims would see as consistent with their long shared history.



Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar mosque and university, sign documents during an interreligious meeting Feb. 4, 2019, at the Founder's Memorial in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The Abrahamic Family House will soon open as a monument to the three great Abrahamic faith traditions. Do you see this as a physical manifestation of what Pope Francis was talking about in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*?

No question about it. And I'd point out that the Abrahamic Family House is going to be an active campus of three religious traditions practicing their faith traditions. These iconic houses of worship are not going to be museums to walk through and admire, but active, thriving congregations in such close proximity to each other that "social and peaceful encounter" among Jews, Muslims and Christians will naturally take place. These houses of worship on one campus will certainly become destinations for religious tourists, but they will be fundamentally active congregations.

Very early in *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis highlights "the life of Saint Francis that shows his openness of heart, which knew no bounds and transcended differences of origin, nationality, colour or religion. It was his visit to Sultan Malik-el-Kamil, in Egypt. …" Here Pope Francis is pointing the way to a love of God that has no boundaries and welcomes people of different faith traditions. It would be wonderful and fitting if the church of the Abrahamic Family House is named after St. Francis of Assisi.

I'd also just say that visually, the section on the Abrahamic Family House is the most riveting. It's amazing to see the rendering of these three houses of worship — a mosque, a synagogue and a church — all built on the same site in the same style but all inspired by elements of their own religious and cultural traditions. It's going to be stunning.

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We've just marked the one-year anniversary of the Abraham Accords. The Vatican was relatively silent on this. As they continue to take effect and deepen, do you expect stronger vocal support to come for the Holy See on this front?

The normalization of relations among Israel, the UAE and Bahrain is an important step in the Gulf region. No doubt about it. The Abraham Accords is, however, a continuation in modern times of the normalization among people of many faiths and some 200 nationalities living in the UAE. There are over 40 faith traditions in the UAE dating back to over 50 years.

The first Catholic church in the UAE, St. Joseph's Cathedral, was opened in 1965 on 11 acres of land donated by the Muslim ruler of Abu Dhabi. Jews have lived in the UAE for decades. Bishop Paul Hinder, who leads the Apostolic Vicariates of Northern and Southern Arabia, is a visible presence in the UAE and in the broader region.

When one looks at the whole of Pope Francis' engagement with the UAE, his friendship and collaboration with Dr. el-Teyab, with the signing of the document on human fraternity, and the upcoming establishment of the church as part of the Abrahamic Family House, it strikes me that the Vatican is appropriately invested in the Gulf region and in developing a constructive relationship with Muslims both in the Gulf, as well as around the world. And Pope Francis is raising up the example of

St. Francis of Assisi in *Fratelli Tutti* as our model of friendship with people of different faith traditions, especially with Muslims.