

The Art of Encounter

Experiments and Best Practices for Engaging Religious
Diversity and Secularization in Jesuit Higher Education

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Dear Readers,

Peace!

This report is the result of an extraordinary collaborative effort by students and professors from Jesuit universities across the globe. It brings together a diverse range of educational practices—both curricular and co-curricular—that are shaped by the values of Jesuit education, in the contexts characterised by religious diversity and secularization.

The stories shared in these pages demonstrate that Jesuit spirituality and pedagogy can be lived in their fullness even in environments where the Christian faith is not universally practiced. These narratives affirm the adaptability and enduring relevance of the Jesuit educational mission in an increasingly pluralistic world.

This initiative has been guided by Prof. Brenna Moore (Fordham University), Prof. Gabrielle Bibeau (Fordham University), and Prof. Fr. Pep Mària SJ (ESADE Business and Law School). They are members of the project JHERDS (Jesuit Higher Education, Religious Diversity and Secularization). Launched in 2020 under the umbrella of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), JHERDS was created to promote rigorous interreligious dialogue within Jesuit institutions of higher education. Until now, the project has engaged faculty and staff from Jesuit Centers around the world; this publication takes a step forward and involves students from our institutions.

I extend my profound gratitude to all who contributed to this remarkable endeavor—for their dedication, creativity, and commitment to the Jesuit mission. May this work continue to inspire reflection, dialogue, and innovation across Jesuit higher education for the greater glory of God.

JOSEPH CHRISTIE SJ

Secretary of Higher Education of the Society of Jesus

President of the IAJU – International Association of Jesuit Universities Rome

INTRODUCTION

THE *HISTORY* OF this book is linked to an intensive activity that started in November 2024 and ended in July 2025. It has involved a dozen professors from Jesuit universities across the globe and an equally global group of students, under the direction of Professors Brenna Moore (Fordham, New York) Gabrielle Bibeau (Fordham, New York), and Pep Mària SJ (ESADE, Barcelona).

But this book also has a *pre-history*. It started in January 2020, when Prof. Pep Mària SJ spent a sabbatical time visiting Indian Jesuit colleges and universities. The goal was to learn how Jesuits in India were conveying Jesuit values and spirituality to professors, staff, and students who were not Christians. After an amazing journey, a project started: Jesuit Higher Education, Religious Diversity and Secularization (JHERDS). Effectively, in June 2020 we celebrated an online workshop with participants from the Philippines to California, during which the foundations for JHERDS were set. Our project would focus on practices developed in Jesuit universities in contexts of religious diversity and secularization.

Today, members of the JHERDS working group include around 50 professors and staff from all over the world who meet virtually. After two years of convening in online JHERDS seminars, a face-to-face Congress was held at ESADE in Barcelona (July 2022). The topic was Jesuit Student Formation and Religious Diversity with faculty participants from Jesuit universities all over the world. At the conference, we were struck by the remarkable range of initiatives addressing religious diversity already underway across the global Jesuit network. We encountered examples such as interfaith breakfasts, innovative programs on religious pluralism, creative retreats, and more, all designed to foster Jesuit values within secular and interreligious contexts. The diversity of campus settings was particularly striking, ranging from highly secular societies like China and Uruguay to more religious contexts such as the Philippines and India.

The 2022 Congress at ESADE was a profound experience to witness our colleagues' efforts and initiatives firsthand and feel part of a vibrant, global network committed to dialogue, justice, and student formation. We realized how valuable it would be for our own students, across the international network, to see and engage with these projects. In response, we decided to launch this collaborative research initiative. The foundation of this project began with a careful consideration of what types of initiatives we wanted to highlight: those that meaningfully addressed religious diversity, interfaith dialogue, or challenges posed by secularization. We knew from the outset that one of our central aims was to reflect a globally diverse array of projects. To achieve this, we reached out to faculty and staff at Jesuit universities around the world, inviting them to feature projects from their institutions that centered on one of these aspects. Alongside this invitation, we asked them to recommend some excellent students who could serve as interviewers and reporters for what would ultimately become a published guide aimed at inspiring students, faculty, and staff throughout the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU).

In the end, nine students joined the project, representing five continents and six Jesuit universities: Fordham University in New York (United States), Universidad Católica del Uruguay in Montevideo (Uruguay), Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines), Arrupe Jesuit University in Harare (Zimbabwe), ESADE Business and Law School of Barcelona (Spain), and St. Aloysius College in Mangaluru (India). At the heart of the project was their shared experience of international teamwork, coming together via Zoom about once a month to reflect on their progress, share their learning, and support one another in their roles.

Each student was asked to report on a project at an institution other than their own, which added a layer of cross-cultural engagement to their work. Their task involved reaching out to a designated project leader,

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usually a faculty member or staff director of the project they were assigned, to conduct a Zoom interview with them and, when possible, other relevant individuals like student participants. These conversations were the foundation for the written reports that each student prepared. After drafting their pieces, the students' reports were edited and revised to be included in this final guide.

Beyond check-ins and progress updates, a central element of our monthly Zoom meetings was the opportunity to receive formation in the values of Jesuit Higher Education and interreligious engagement, as these sessions also included theological reflection and introduced frameworks for understanding interfaith cooperation. This formation was a core component of the students' involvement, allowing them to engage intellectually and spiritually with the themes they encountered in their research and interviews.

The collaboration among students from different cultures, academic disciplines, and life experiences was, in many ways, the most transformative aspect of the entire initiative. At the end of the project, students shared their deep appreciation for this opportunity to work on a project with students from so many different cultures and regions. Many of them also commented on how the project sharpened their research and writing skills, especially the students for whom English was not their first language.

This guide is a testament to what can happen when young scholars from around the globe come together to explore the intersection of faith, education, and dialogue. The experience has been informative and transformative both for the students and, we hope, for those who read and engage with this guide.

Before we turn to the “best practices” case studies that constitute the core of this project, it is worth pausing to consider the deeper intellectual and theological foundations that animated our work. What are the guiding principles (theological, spiritual, historical) that shape our approach? How do Jesuit traditions help provide a framework for the practices we seek to examine and elevate?

To begin, we were in the final stages of this research project when Pope Francis passed away on Easter Monday, 2025. His death lent an unexpected poignancy to the closing phase of our work. The sense of shared mourning united our research team across Spain, the United States, and the Philippines, alongside student researchers from Zimbabwe, Uruguay, India, and beyond. The intellectual and theological commitments that have guided this project are, in so many ways, indebted to Pope Francis's pastoral vision and theological legacy.

In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis issues a compelling and urgent call for solidarity, and even love, across the divisions of our world, starting not with ideas but from *experiences* of encounter, from the bottom up. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he rejects both atomized individualism and the subtler violences of indifference.¹ Pope Francis's vision of “social friendship” is grounded in an ethic of connection and vulnerability, what he calls a “culture of encounter,” which constitutes both a spiritual, existential imperative for individual persons, and the foundation out of which a shared political culture can emerge. True to his Jesuit formation, Pope Francis prioritizes, in the words of former Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “contact, not concepts,” experiences rather than abstract theories.²

We are committed to the idea that Jesuit universities are uniquely positioned to foster this art of encounter at the level of practice, especially when it comes to engaging issues of religious pluralism and secularization. As part of a 500-year-old educational tradition, Jesuit colleges and universities sit in a creative tension: they

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are rooted in a confessional religious identity, yet welcome students of all faith traditions, and those without religious affiliation.³ Many Jesuit universities even explicitly state that they want students from other faith communities to grow more deeply in *their* traditions, even while studying at a Jesuit institution. But what does that look like in practice? How does one foster encounters that deepen faith and understanding across lines of religious difference? These are the animating questions of this research.

As we explored these questions, we aimed not for philosophical or theological answers in the abstract, but concrete practices on the ground. In the past, campus projects and initiatives often took the form of expert panels, curated quotations about tolerance from various sacred texts, and perhaps a staged photo opportunity. Too often, these events were held at a distance from the rhythms of everyday campus life, in conference centers, removed from the communities they were meant to serve. They also carried certain unexamined assumptions. Particularly in Western contexts, there was a persistent tendency toward what Atalia Omer has termed the “harmony business”: a well-meaning but ultimately superficial approach that framed religious intolerance as a problem “out there”—typically associated with Islamic-majority countries or the global South. Within universities, this often came with the hopeful belief that elite conversations about interreligious tolerance would “trickle down” to broader publics.⁴

In 2025, however, something notably different is emerging on Jesuit campuses. At a time when religious nationalism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and antisemitism are rising across the globe, it has become increasingly clear that these forces cannot be explained merely by ignorance or confined to particular regions. No religious tradition has ever been immune from intolerance, nor is any exempt today. Simultaneously, we find ourselves contending more fully with the homogenizing pressures of global consumer culture, which threaten to flatten distinctive religious traditions into marketable, interchangeable sameness.

Against this backdrop, we were heartened to witness a shared moral urgency across Jesuit institutions: the imperative to build relationships across lines of religious difference resonated as strongly on an urban Jesuit campus in New York City as it did among faculty, students, and staff at a smaller, rural campus in India. The contexts may differ and the particular concerns vary across the various universities, but the challenges Pope Francis names—indifference, tribalism, fundamentalism, cynicism—are unmistakably global. So too are the efforts to imagine and enact a relational alternative.

With the nine projects we highlight here, we affirm the conviction that there is no way to build a multicultural society, or what Pope Francis calls a “culture of encounter,” without the difficult, unglamorous work of people building real relationships with one another across lines of difference. Unlike the often-celebrated “harmony business,” so much invisible labor is needed to sustain social cohesion amid deep diversity. As Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*, “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.’”⁵ It is all of that, plus the logistics of internship placement in another country, paying guest speakers, establishing community partnerships, reserving rooms, ordering food, sharing meals, inviting new friends for tea,

¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020).

² Hans P. Kolvenbach SJ, “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” keynote address, Santa Clara University, October 6, 2000 <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/the-service-of-faith-and-the-promotion-of-justice/>.

³ For more on the unique role religiously-founded universities have historically played for fostering democracy and interreligious tolerance, see chapter 4 “Campus as Crucible,” in Eboo Patel, *We Need to Build: Field Notes for Diverse Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

⁴ Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peacebuilding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), para.198.

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staying in the relationship through conflict and difficulty, opening oneself up to difficult conversations, and debating about God, power, and community. This behind-the-scenes work creates the cultural fabric that can sustain a culture of encounter. We hope our students experience forms of genuine face-to-face sociality at the grassroots level, and cultivate the moral and spiritual capacities that will enable them to inhabit diverse spaces as compassionate and skilled leaders.

As we have learned about the projects on religious diversity taking place across the Jesuit network, we also note that so much of this work reflects the growing body of more recent scholarly work on interreligious encounter. Atalia Omer has recently illuminated the deep entanglement of religious peacebuilding with colonial histories, reminding us that appeals to interreligious partnerships can too easily obscure violence and sanitize painful pasts. This is work that remains unfinished. For Jesuit institutions, with their far-reaching global presence, this reckoning must include a serious engagement with their own complicities in colonial and imperial enterprises. There is still much to uncover—and much to learn—about the difficult histories of Jesuit encounters with religious difference.⁶ Yet we have seen how some of the projects we explore here do acknowledge histories that are marked by sorrow, mistakes, and, at times, violence. In what follows, for instance, we explore how a Jewish rabbi and Muslim imam helped reshape Fordham's campus ministry program in New York City, after the university realized their Jewish and Muslim students needed much more robust support during the crisis in Israel and Palestine. This is just one example, and as Pope Francis reminds us: "From our faith experience and from the wisdom accumulated over centuries, but also from lessons learned from our many weaknesses and failures, we, the believers of the different religions, know that our witness to God benefits our societies."⁷

Yet Omer also cautions against letting critiques of interfaith peacebuilding, even those whose histories are entangled with colonialist legacies, be the final word. Despite their complex, even painful pasts, many interreligious initiatives emerge from genuine, grassroots relationships forged by ordinary students, faculty, and staff working across lines of religious difference that sustain critical and substantial cultures of nonviolent *convivencia*. In a world increasingly defined by xenophobia, nationalism, and polarization, such relationships are neither nostalgic remnants of a more idealistic past nor expressions of naïve utopianism. We stand against a culture of cynicism that would see projects like those we describe here as naïve, and stand with the words of Pope Francis when he writes,

In today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat. This illusion, unmindful of the great fraternal values, leads to a sort of cynicism. For that is the temptation we face if we go down the road of disenchantment and disappointment... Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes.⁸

⁶ Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peacebuilding*, 34.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), para.274.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), para.30.

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Here Pope Francis reminds us that communities can be paralyzed by the idea that “nothing can be done” or that any efforts to try are naïve. And in truth, things *are* being done all the time. These efforts may not be sweeping or global, but they are meaningful: a retreat in Mindanao, a reading group in Uruguay, a multi-month immersion program in another culture in Barcelona, a new leadership and interfaith certificate program in Boston, and so much more. These encounters are fragile, hard-won, and precious, and need to be sustained ongoingly across the Jesuit network. Taken together, these modest actions form a collective significance.

Over the course of our research, we found that our students were eager also for intellectual, conceptual frameworks. In one of our final Zoom meetings, a student shared that he connected with the work we discussed, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* by Barbara Brown Taylor. In this work, Brown Taylor, a scholar in the United States, draws on the idea of “holy envy,” an idea first introduced by the Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl, who proposed that it is both possible and spiritually enriching to admire elements of other religious traditions without abandoning one’s own. Stendahl’s formulation also suggests that in recognizing, and even feeling a kind of envy for, a particular value in another religious tradition, a believer may come to discern that some expression of that value already exists, albeit in a different form, within their own tradition. In this way, interreligious dialogue can become a pathway to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of one’s own tradition. To be sure, what is at stake in engaging in interreligious projects is not merely the acquisition of information or the sociological analysis of religious diversity, but the cultivation of an openness to deeper understandings of the sacred that emerge through wider, more generous, and genuinely pluralistic conversations. We see glimpses of this in many of the projects we explored. For example, in Kerala, India, faculty, students, and staff, both Hindu and Christian, gather on Gita Day to read the Bhagavad Gita together and reflect on its themes of devotion to God, not simply as an academic exercise for information “about” the “other” but as a shared spiritual engagement on a topic presented beautifully, even enviously so, in a Hindu scripture. This idea of holy envy struck a particular chord with our student researchers.

In closing, Pope Francis reminds us in *Fratelli Tutti*, “Goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day. It is not possible to settle for what was achieved in the past and complacently enjoy it, as if we could somehow disregard the fact that many of our brothers and sisters still endure situations that cry out for our attention.”⁹ The Pope’s words underscore that initiatives like those we describe here are both vital and precarious, susceptible to erasure by forces seeking to reduce Jesuit campuses to enclaves of Catholic exclusivism or to spaces of secular disengagement. And there is so much more to be done as our world continues to be wracked by violence and sectarianism. We hope that the projects we describe in Spain, the United States, Uruguay, the Philippines, and India will inspire other campuses to undertake similar initiatives at their own institutions. We want them to feel encouraged, and that they don’t have to start from scratch. A foundation and a network for this work already exists, even as much remains to be done.

Finally, let us recognize that we are living in a time when authoritarian forms of power are on the rise. Pope Francis has offered us a legacy that points to a different kind of power—one that animated our work in this project. Instead of embodying the “strongman” model, Pope Francis was often seen smiling, kissing babies, offering hugs, and delivering spontaneous remarks with a down-to-earth, disarming eloquence. We caught

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), para.11, citation from Pope Francis, “Meeting with Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps,” Santiago, Chile (16 January 2018): AAS 110 (2018), 256.

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glimpses of this gentler, relational form of power in the work of the students and the projects too. We saw it when student researchers laughed together on Zoom over the quirky ways Valentine's Day is celebrated in different countries, or when they shared their weekend plans in Zimbabwe, New York, and Kerala, with casual good humor. We saw it in photographs of students from Spain embracing host families in Latin America, or of Catholic, secular, and Muslim students sharing an iftar meal on campus to break the Ramadan fast.

All of this pointed to a different understanding of power—the “art of encounter.” The phrase may sound abstract or lofty, but in practice, it often looked refreshingly ordinary, and at times, even joyful. Some might dismiss this as weakness. But we see it as a distinctive kind of strength: a countercultural form of power that reveals something transcendent in the ordinary humanity of our Jesuit universities. These small moments never make headlines, but taken together, they form the fabric of something meaningful in this particularly tumultuous moment of our shared history.

1. The Gita Project at Sameeksha, Center for Indian Spirituality and Research, Kerala, India

Just north of Kerala, on the southwestern coast of India, is Sameeksha, the Center for Indian Spirituality, a retreat and study center dedicated to interreligious understanding. Located on a four-acre campus shaded by nutmeg trees along the banks of the Poorna River, Sameeksha was founded in 1987 by Indian Jesuit Sebastian Painadath SJ. It serves as a place where people of different faiths can gather for spiritual reflection and dialogue. The name Sameeksha is drawn from the Yajur Veda, one of the oldest sacred scriptures of Hinduism, and means “integral worldview” to see the same in all, and to regard all with respect. The guiding theological principle of Sameeksha is to “respect the rich diversity of religions and recognize the deep unity in spirituality.” While the immediate area has been calm in recent years, longstanding tensions persist in India between Hindu and Muslim communities, reflecting broader conflicts across South Asia—including Sunni-Shiite hostilities in Pakistan, as well as tensions between Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka. India is a Hindu-majority nation with large numbers of Muslims, and Christians are a minority religious group.

Sameeksha is an affiliated center of Mahatma Gandhi University (MG University), a state university that serves as an umbrella institution for numerous independent colleges offering a variety of academic programs in central Kerala. The faculty members and students from various universities and schools come to Sameeksha for programming. Over the years, the Jesuits have organized a wide range of programs at Sameeksha—not only for university students, faculty, and staff, but also for members of the wider community, including the elderly, local teenagers, reading groups, and migrant laborers.



Figure 1. Students in a Gita Circle. (Source: Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ.)



Figure 2. Students writing down their points during a Gita Project meeting. (Source: Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ.)

In 2025, a new initiative called the Gita Project began. Named after the Bhagavad Gita (one of the central sacred books of the Hindu tradition), this program highlights the universal teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizing interpretations relevant across multiple faiths. The project was spearheaded by Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ, a scholar of interreligious relations and a Jesuit in residence at Sameeksha.

“The Gita Project began on January 31, 2025, with the goal of promoting and fostering an interreligious atmosphere within a university community that has remained relatively peaceful despite its multi-religious context,” Dr. Tharamel explains.

The Gita Project program involves both students and staff in meaningful dialogue through monthly seminars and weekly small-group meetings conducted in Malayalam, the language of Kerala State. Each session focuses on a particular topic or agenda (as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2), with participants engaging in discussion about sections of the Gita or one of its many interpretations, and subsequently writing reflections to foster deeper understanding and promote interreligious peace.

The goal is to facilitate dialogues on themes such as togetherness, devotion, wisdom, and ethical living. Allan P. V., a student participant, shared, “These discussions have opened my eyes to the Gita’s teachings on peace and devotion, especially the importance of respecting others.” The student continued, “The Gita project has been a learning experience in terms of a universal spiritual text and a great scripture propagating a positive outlook. The values such as interior freedom, surrender to the Divine Lord, and self-discovery are central. People with various backgrounds could listen to the talk on the Gita to draw spiritual energy. The Bhagavad Gita is a great text bringing about peace and reconciliation. This project will prepare me to embrace religious harmony.”

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The primary objective of the Gita Project is to cultivate inter-religious collaboration by addressing misconceptions about the text; the project has sparked meaningful conversations about its core values. A faculty member noted, “This initiative creates a space where we can all learn from one another, regardless of our beliefs. It changed the perspective on other religions by each participant.” So far, most participants are Christians and Hindus, but there are ongoing efforts to engage Muslim students and faculty as well. Since its inception, 35 to 45 people have attended each of the first three events. Participants range in age from 20 to 65 years old, representing a broad cross-section of the university community.

The Gita Project encourages participants to focus on shared values rather than divisions, aligning with the Jesuit values, especially and collaboration among the religions. The Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Jesuits, identified in 2019, have also been important as they emphasize journeying with the youth, leading them to God, and helping them to understand the religious other and to build up the kingdom of God. Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ elaborates, “It helps the students to become persons of the 4 C’s (Compassion, Competence, Conscience and Commitment).” A student, Alan, remarked, “Through this project, I feel more connected and committed to my peers and compassionate to other religions. It is helping me to understand our commonalities better and building my conscience to be peaceful.”

This initiative is not intended to be a one-time event; rather, it seeks to establish a foundation for future explorations of other religious texts, such as the Dhammapada and the Quran, enriching participants’ understanding of interreligious perspectives.

Other Jesuit universities could learn several valuable lessons from the Gita Project. By engaging deeply with a non-Christian text, the project moves beyond what can sometimes be a superficial approach to interreligious dialogue. As one Jesuit writer in India observes, such dialogue too often “remains little more than tokenism; whether it is the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi or a dialogue called at a national forum, the drill remains no more than a brief reading from holy books on peace, ending with a group photograph.”^[1] Initiatives like the Gita Project— committed to sustained, in-depth engagement with a specific foundational text, in which the Catholics who are present (including Jesuit leaders) are positioned as “guests” of that text— offer a more meaningful and transformative model for interreligious encounter.

Second, the Gita Project emphasizes the relevance of universal texts in promoting shared values. Universal texts like the Bible, the Quran, and the Bhagavad Gita, as seen in this context, can be used to reach out to other religions. Other Jesuit schools could adopt similar approaches by looking into foundational texts from various faiths, encouraging students to draw connections between their beliefs and those of others. This will not only foster dialogue and peace but also a deeper understanding of other religious worldviews and values. Additionally, the project highlights the significance of ongoing engagement through regular seminars and discussions. Jesuit universities could implement structured programs that are not just one-off events but encourage continuous and regular dialogue, which ensures that students remain actively involved in exploring different perspectives in life.

[1] John Dayal, “Everyone is a Victim – Therein Lies Our Hope: Fundamentalism and Inter-faith Dialogue in South Asia,” *Jivian: News and Views of Jesuits in India*, September 2019, pg 6.

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Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ, states: “It has initiated many discussions among the students and the staff regarding the values of the Bhagavad Gita. It has removed the misunderstandings regarding this universal text among the students and scholars. It has initiated some meditation frameworks, [as seen in Figure 3] in answering questions like: What is true devotion? What is true wisdom? And what are true service, duties, or responsibilities to others?”

This points to another layer of this model: rather than a workshop that provides “answers” about interreligious coexistence, or simple facts about other faiths, participants are invited to engage deeply with a sacred text, one that may be new to some, in order to explore profound theological *questions* and the *mysteries* of human experience. Dr. Tharamel explains that the Bhagavad Gita speaks of three layers of devotion, which the Gita Project has brought to life. The project fosters a form of devotion that leads individuals to respect their own bodies and those of others. It teaches that we are the temple of God, with the Divine dwelling within, leading to the realization of God’s indwelling presence. An observable outcome of the project is that students come to understand that “wisdom is not about gathering more information, but relating that information to one’s own experiences.” True wisdom, he notes, is the knowledge of ultimate reality: “The knowledge of God and the fear of Him are the beginning of wisdom.”

Overall, the Gita Project continues to serve as a dynamic platform for interreligious dialogue, enriching both the academic and personal lives of its participants. It creates an environment of mutual respect and understanding, contributing meaningfully to the development of a more harmonious community within and beyond the university. The Gita Project continues with initiatives both online and offline by participating in learning opportunities throughout Kerala. This project is just one among many initiatives at Sameeksha, a unique Jesuit institution active now for nearly 40 years in southwestern India. Although not situated within a Jesuit university, Sameeksha offers a distinctive model of engagement: Jesuit scholars collaborating with a nearby university to provide interfaith programming for faculty, staff, and students.



Figure 3. Dr. Xavier Tharamel SJ (center) with student participants in Gita Meditation.

The spirit of this collaboration is even embodied in the architecture of the center itself. At the heart of Sameeksha lies Śāntinilayam, an interreligious meditation room constructed following traditional sacred architectural principles. It features four doors, one facing each cardinal direction, symbolizing a warm welcome to seekers from all religions, cultures, castes, and denominations. At the center of the room burns an oil lamp, representing the divine presence where all spiritual paths converge. Surrounding the lamp are four sacred texts: the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada, the Bible, and the Quran. ●

2. Ignatian Spirituality Retreats at Xavier University, Ateneo de Cagayan, Philippines

Xavier University–Ateneo de Cagayan is a Jesuit university located on the northern coast of Mindanao, the second largest island in the Philippines. Approaching its centenary (the University was founded in 1933), Xavier is now a thriving academic community with roughly 15,000 students. Compared to many other Jesuit universities we describe in the project, the student body here is majority practicing Catholic, with a minority of Muslim students, reflecting the larger religious demographics of the region. In Mindanao, the southern island of the Philippines, there is a significant Muslim minority, including provinces with Muslim majorities. Mindanao itself has a long and complex history of interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding efforts. “Peace zones” across the island have worked toward deeper understanding between Muslim and Christian communities. Shaped by painful histories of historical injustice, political marginalization and sectarian and ethnic violence, along with remarkable stories of reconciliation and cooperation, these movements include both tensions and reconciliation and are ongoing.

In this context, we turn our focus to Xavier’s Campus Ministries Office (CMO), which facilitates several programs designed to shape Xavier students into agents of justice, peace, and interfaith dialogue. Two programs central to CMO’s efforts are Ignatian Spirituality Recollections and Retreats, which aim to offer Ignatian practices that speak to both Muslim and Catholic students in an effort to foster faith, reflection, and community in the student body. For over 25 years, CMO has sponsored Ignatian Spirituality Recollections and Retreats, programs which engage Xavier’s Christian and Muslim students in reflection, discernment, and community-building. Recollections and Retreats are designed to deepen students’ interior spirituality and to prepare them for responsible citizenship and interreligious understanding in an increasingly complex, globalized world.

The program begins with mandatory annual Recollections from undergraduate students’ first through third years at Xavier, culminating in a more intensive overnight Retreat during students’ senior year. Recollections are half-day on-campus experiences for first- and second-year students, and whole-day experiences for third-year students; meanwhile fourth-year Retreats consist of an overnight stay at an off-campus center. According to one Campus Minister, each program has a distinct objective so that by the end of the students’ fourth year, they are prepared to engage with the world and make positive change. First-year students are introduced to the concept of “faith that does justice” and a sense of identity and citizenship, while building community with one another. Second-year students focus on vocational discernment, while third-year students deepen this vocational calling. Fourth-year students are asked to integrate their four-year academic journey with their personal mission as they prepare for life after college. For the past five years, Recollections and Retreats for graduate students and professionals became mandatory as well.

Each Recollection and Retreat follows a similar structure. Each begins with Ignatian prayer, discernment, and contemplation, followed by small group sharing and mission integration. As one Campus Minister sees it, the heart of the Ignatian prayer, discernment, and contemplation phase is to “introduce students to God.” Group sharing aims to develop student communities marked by “harmony, peace, and social justice,” said another Campus Minister. At the end of each program, students are assembled and encouraged to reflect on

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how their in-program discernment will impact their lives outside the program.

Both Campus Ministers and Xavier students reported being profoundly touched by the group sharing phase of the program. One Campus Minister reported experiencing God's presence among their students during group sharing. The minister affirmed that the grace they felt motivates them to continue ministry work at Xavier. A Muslim student at Xavier University found group sharing to be personally cathartic, saying, "Spiritual conversation allows us to express what we feel. By letting go of those things, we can reflect on those past experiences and pick ourselves back up again." A Christian student shared that the communal accompaniment element of this phase is particularly impactful. "It's soothing to know that other students are actually on the same page as yours and that you're not alone in the journey you're on. [Group sharing] is also a great way to learn something from [other students], and learn how they maneuver through life. It gives me a better perspective of how to manage myself," the student said.

Fostering interreligious dialogue, understanding, and respect is central to the program's design. The same structure and Ignatian philosophies underpin all programs regardless of students' personal religious affiliation, but specific programming content is adapted to meet different students' religious needs. For example, the opportunity to attend Mass and the Sacrament of Reconciliation is often available to students at the end of a program, but Muslim students are not required to attend. Additionally, Muslim participants receive handouts with Islamic reflections, and facilitators of groups with Muslim students may substitute Qur'anic or hadith-based texts in place of Christian references. A Muslim student reflected that CMO "take[s] care of us Muslim students." CMO also ensures that halal options are provided and that time is carved out of the program schedule for Muslim students' *Salah*, or five daily prayers.

The Ignatian Retreat program also emphasizes Jesuit values such as *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), *magis* (the call to strive for more), discernment, and a commitment to justice and reconciliation. These values are interwoven throughout the retreat structure—from the meditative opening prompting students to connect with their "heart's deepest desires," through the reflective discussions designed to build community, and to the final closing reflection where students contemplate how best to serve their communities.

These themes resonate deeply with students. A Christian student emphasized that the retreats teach them "how to be humane rather than just human." This student described a value system that is not competitive but collective, where growth means lifting others alongside oneself. Students are taught to be competent and compassionate, "not stepping onto other people just to reach a goal," the student said. A Muslim student reflected, "I've learned to empathize with other people, regardless of their race or religion. It is important you aren't being selfish or just thinking about yourself. The world is very messed up. It is important to check up on someone you know who is having a hard time. That is in line with the Ignatian values of justice and reconciliation."

Students submit Google Form evaluations after each retreat; many report providing feedback directly to Campus Ministers. The program has evolved in response to students' feedback. During the pandemic in 2020, students expressed a desire for more community-building opportunities between students and staff during Recollections and Retreats. In response, Campus Ministers revised the structure of these programs:

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rather than having student-only discussion groups, a Campus Minister now joins each group of five to six students to guide spiritual conversations. One Campus Minister attested, “Students like this. They feel they’re being listened to, that they aren’t alone.”

By centering reflection, compassion, inclusion, and shared growth, Xavier University’s Ignatian Spirituality Recollections and Retreats offer a model for inclusive spiritual formation in a multi-faith environment. Students deepen their understanding of Jesuit values while they build authentic relationships with diverse peers to work toward a more just and humane world.

In addition to the Retreats and Recollections, Campus Ministers, with the approval of the university president, have initiated other efforts. These include creating a new prayer room for Muslim students, and facilitating immersion programs for diocesan theologians, Jesuit novices, and scholastics for a one week to one month homestay in a Muslim household, often in Marawi City, southwest of Cagayan de Oro City.

This is a mere snapshot of the Campus Ministry initiatives at a single Jesuit university in the Philippines, a complex and diverse society that is predominantly Catholic, but has a long history of peacebuilding and interfaith engagement along with histories of tensions and challenges. Xavier’s program is part of a broader network of interfaith efforts at peacebuilding and collaboration among Jesuit universities. We can situate the work of Xavier’s Campus Ministry alongside initiatives such as the Al Qalam Institute for Islamic Identities and Dialogue, affiliated with Ateneo de Davao University, another Jesuit institution in Mindanao, about four hours south of Xavier. There is no evidence that these efforts are no longer needed. Rather they demand continuous dedication and ongoing support as Xavier grows closer to its centenary celebration in 2033, and beyond. ●

3. Multifaith Campus Ministry, Fordham University, New York

Fordham University is located in New York City, one of the most religiously diverse cities in the world, a diversity increasingly reflected within the student body. About half of Fordham's students identify as Catholic, some devout and practicing, others connected to the tradition primarily through family background. The other half represents a mix of Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, and non-religious students.

Historically, Campus Ministry activities at Fordham were primarily Catholic, though often inclusive of students from other faiths. These offerings included not only masses, but also Jesuit-led retreats focused on service and reflection, open to all students. As Rev. Philip Judge SJ, Executive Director of Campus Ministry, put it, "Ignatian values are very approachable by people who are not particularly religious. Our spirituality is very world-affirming, engaging, inviting your heart to ask questions and see where it finds answers."

More recently, however, Fordham has made a more deliberate commitment to expanding its religious and spiritual resources to meet the needs of its increasingly diverse student body. This shift was motivated by a need to respond meaningfully to very real and painful moments on campus. After the events of October 7, 2023, in Israel, and the subsequent response in Palestine, Fordham's Campus Ministry organized interfaith vigils for the community. Yet many Muslim and Jewish students did not attend, sharing that they did not feel fully safe or supported in those spaces. It became clear that these students needed more than gestures of inclusion, and needed dedicated leadership, resources, and real community.

In response, Fordham welcomed Rabbi Katja Vehlow and Imam Ammar Abdul Rahman to the Campus Ministry team in early 2024, the first full non-Catholic staff in Fordham's Campus Ministry program. As Carol Gibney, Director of the Office of Campus Ministry Solidarity and Leadership, explained, even though Fordham is "rooted in Jesuit and Catholic values," the goal is to "highlight the gifts that [different] faiths offer each other, and the world—spiritual strengths, in a world where individualism is rampant." Incorporating the Rabbi and Imam has been "very positive," and Gibney noted that "the level of support for religious identity is becoming more palpable and powerful."

A core aspect of Campus Ministry is encouraging students to engage with their faith through worship, prayer, and community. Under the leadership of Rabbi Katja and Imam Ammar, along with many student groups, various fellowships and associations organize weekly or biweekly religious services, giving students opportunities not only to deepen their own faith traditions but also to explore others. These include weekly Bible Study hosted by the Fordham Christian Fellowship at Rose Hill, Imam-led Jum'ah prayers in Faber Hall, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur observances, and more.

Empowering students to experience life through their own religious traditions, while building a multi-faith community rooted in Fordham's Jesuit and Catholic identity, is central to the purpose of Fordham's Campus Ministry. Despite increasing individualism in contemporary society, the goal is to provide students with a vibrant community where they can grow, find belonging, and connect with like-minded peers, all while nurturing their values and religious commitments.



Figure 1. Iftar celebration, breaking Ramadan fast at Fordham's Rose Hill campus (2024).

While students from diverse religious backgrounds have always been welcome at campus, they were free to practice individually without formal structures of support. Now that is different: among Campus Ministry's most visible efforts are communal celebrations of holy days throughout the academic year. These include Ramadan fast-breaking iftars, Eid al-Fitr prayers and feasts, Shabbat dinners, and Holi celebrations. Most of these events are student-led, providing students with a sense of belonging they might otherwise struggle to find on campus. AsALLEYAH Camara, a Fordham Lincoln Center undergraduate student and leader in the Muslim Student Association shared, "Islamic holidays tend to have an accompanying theme—they come after a period of hard work [...] This Ramadan was a special one at Fordham. With the establishment of Fordham Muslim Life, many can now say that Ramadan and Eid at Fordham is not a lonely experience. Muslim students are offered community and understanding on the basis of faith and tradition." As another Muslim student shared at a large iftar, "This now feels more like home. I don't break my fast alone, but in community." Muslim and Jewish students also celebrated special commencement services at graduation with their families, friends, and Campus Ministry students.

Some activities are not only for students, but faculty and staff as well. One noteworthy project has been the "Jewish Texts Group," an on-campus meeting of Jewish and non-Jewish faculty and staff who gather for "spirited, convivial conversation over Jewish texts, broadly interpreted. In the past we have studied a wide gamut of sources, ranging from Levinas' Talmudic Readings, to Scholem's writings on mysticism, to selections from the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, to modern Torah commentary."

Campus Ministry serves all three of Fordham's campuses—Rose Hill (Bronx), Lincoln Center (Manhattan), and Westchester (West Harrison)—and offers programs for students, faculty, and staff alike. Among Campus Ministry's many initiatives, separate, specialized spiritual and communal support for diverse students, staff and faculty is key, but practices of fostering mutual understanding across religious traditions is also important. Through events like the Multi-Faith Matters series, which brings together Muslim, Jewish, and Catholic voices to explore shared spiritual and ethical questions, students engage in meaningful conversations and discover common values. Other programs, such as Rumbling Belly: Food, Feasting, and Fasting, invite



Figure 2. Catholic mass procession outside University Church (2024).

participants to reflect on the role of food in various faiths, while creative events like the Multi-Faith Student Film & Art Showcase demonstrate how artistic expression can bridge religious differences.

Service is a foundational pillar of Fordham’s Campus Ministry, deeply rooted in Jesuit values and the university’s mission of faith that does justice. Through Global Outreach (iGO!) programs, students participate in immersive experiences that integrate service, cultural engagement, and critical reflection locally and internationally. These initiatives foster a deeper awareness of systemic inequality and cultivate a commitment to combatting oppression and racism. Recent examples include collaboration with the Kino Border Initiative in Arizona to promote migration with dignity, and partnership with Christians for Peace in El Salvador to advance peace grounded in justice. Complementing these global initiatives, the Pedro Arrupe Volunteers program invites students to engage more fully with the needs and gifts of local communities across New York City. Together, these programs offer students concrete and transformative ways to live out their faith commitments through service, solidarity, and leadership. As two student leaders eloquently affirmed, “Because we are people of many faiths, we are committed to addressing injustice in New York City and the world. Through the Pedro Arrupe and Ignatian Mission Initiatives, we grapple with injustice, listen to the marginalized, and mobilize ourselves to co-create a more just world.”

Fordham’s Campus Ministry serves students from eighteen different faith backgrounds and fosters a community where young people are supported in their efforts to make a difference, regardless of religious identity. As Rev. Judge put it, “There’s something universal about kids, whether they’re Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim.” And as Carol Gibney observed, the Ministry helps students “to see each other through, and not see through each other.” Differences in faith backgrounds provide opportunities to enrich one another’s lives. The Ministry helps students build deeper connections—with one another, with their own traditions, and with the broader world. Against the backdrop of what has been called an epidemic of loneliness in the United States, Fordham’s Campus Ministry programs’ commitment to service, solidarity, and dialogue is a powerful way to build a diverse campus community.



Figure 3. Shabbat dinner at Fordham University with JBSA, Jewish Business Student Association (2024).

Yet this work is still unfolding. Expanding Campus Ministry at Fordham so that it can be genuinely multifaith is not without challenges. To balance an ongoing depth of engagement with Fordham's Catholic, Jesuit mission along with the commitment to diversity can be difficult; debates and disagreements are not uncommon. Moreover, the Fordham community in New York City is certainly not immune from broader forces of xenophobia, nationalism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, secularism, and indifference in the United States. To be sure, the robustly inclusive goals and initiatives of Fordham's Campus Ministry do not describe the whole atmosphere of the university, but perhaps are better understood as ideals, and these ideals are sometimes realized through the courage and commitment of students, Campus Ministry staff, and faculty. At times it feels as if these efforts are fragile and increasingly vulnerable in this moment of U.S. history, and so they are now more important than ever. ●

4. Solidarity and Development (SUD) Initiative at ESADE in Barcelona, Spain

THE CHALLENGE

ESADE is a Business and Law School based in Barcelona (Catalonia-Spain) where the majority of its 7,000 bachelor's and master's students come from middle-high income families. The student body is largely secular, and the SUD project at ESADE serves to illuminate how values distinctively rooted in the Jesuit tradition can be transformative for students of all backgrounds, including those who do not identify with any particular religion. The Jesuit values in higher education involve a holistic education: an education that not only involves educating *competent* professionals but also *conscious*, *compassionate*, and *committed* students. This is the so-called model of “the 4Cs.” The effort to educate students with the 4Cs is not always simple, because the social origins of ESADE's participants enclose them often in “bubbles” where they don't have much contact with poor or marginalized populations (“compassion”) and may end up with a vision of their professional life that ignores the challenge of contributing to a world that is hungry for social justice (“commitment”).

In this context, at a time when the world feels increasingly divided, it is inspiring to discover initiatives that not only bridge global gaps but also nurture the hearts and minds of those who participate. The ESADE Solidarity and Development (SUD) initiative is one such program, a powerful journey that pushes students beyond textbooks and boardrooms into real communities, where the lessons are raw, humbling, and transformative. Getting to know about the experiences of students and organizers who have lived the SUD journey firsthand has left the student researcher deeply moved and motivated, because the initiative shows how education can truly be a force for good.

THE PROCESS: SOLIDARITY INTERNSHIPS

ESADE SUD is an office that organizes solidarity internships, mainly for ESADE students. The process for the candidates who want to participate in the Summer Internships (June–August) starts early. Between September and December of the previous year, they need to study a course (“Global Justice in Action”), during which they are trained in Cooperation to Development and are informed in detail about the circumstances and conditions for the on-the-ground time. By Christmas, students who still wish to participate in the Summer Internships submit a document explaining the process that has led them to participate in the program. In Jesuit terms, this document summarizes their *discernment*. In January, they are assessed by a team of SUD professors. Those who are accepted are then connected to a specific country and project for the internship in February. They are trained in values and technical skills during a weekend retreat in April, and finally they travel to their internships in June. Most of the SUD internships take place in Latin America, while others are in Asia and Africa.

After the internship (between 10 and 12 weeks), students need to submit an extensive report that demonstrates a deep reflection about their experience and learning. Finally, in October they are invited to a second weekend of formation. This time, the goal is to help them integrate their learning and experiences into their values and identity according to the Jesuit pedagogical cycle of experience-reflection-action.

WITNESSES: PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

ESADE SUD is not just a service; it's a door that opens wide, inviting students to step out of their comfort zones and immerse themselves in meaningful action. With its strong foundation in Jesuit values, SUD offers opportunities to volunteer, internships, and consulting projects that aim to promote justice and equity worldwide. Whether in the bustling streets of Latin America or the quiet corners of Africa and Asia, students are encouraged to observe, reflect, and act bringing both professional skills and open hearts to the communities they serve.

For Ariadna Aliana Cano, a student who spent her summer in Bolivia, in the city of Sucre, the experience was eye-opening in ways she never imagined. She recalled how the selection process itself was a journey of consciousness and commitment. "You start with a preparatory subject between September and December, and many realize during this phase that it's not for them," she shared honestly. Those who choose to continue are then required to write a motivation letter, attend interviews, and participate in an assessment: this ensures only those who are truly committed move forward. Ariadna spoke about how she initially went to Bolivia with the intention of helping others, but soon found the tables turned. "You think you're going to teach, but you end up learning so much more from the people you meet," she said, reflecting the value of solidarity that SUD is built upon.

Inés Losada, one of the key organizers of SUD, offered a deeper look at the mission behind the program. She emphasized that SUD is about more than just professional experience; it's about recognizing our shared humanity and understanding how interconnected global suffering truly is. "We can do so much when we put our professional skills at the service of others," she said, her conviction evident. Inés pointed out that while today's students are incredibly talented, the distractions of modern digital life can sometimes make deep commitment challenging. Yet, time and again, SUD students rise to the occasion, proving that with the right mindset and guidance, true transformation in students' values is possible.

Alba Prat, another student who participated in SUD, shared her own transformative journey. For Alba, the presence of SUD was a decisive factor in choosing ESADE University. "This initiative made me want to choose ESADE 100%," she said with conviction. Alba's path took her to Urcos, a small village in Peru, where she spent three months immersed in local life. Reflecting on her time there, Alba noted, "You say you are okay, but when I came back, it was kind of like a shock. When you are in Peru, that feels like reality, but when you return home, that's when it really hits you." The re-entry experience was just as powerful as the time abroad, highlighting how deeply these journeys reshape one's perspective. You do not want to be the same person who left home. Instead, you want to grow as a whole individual.

Alba also spoke about how SUD integrates the Jesuit values of Competence, Compassion, Consciousness, and Commitment into every part of its program. "ESADE SUD doesn't just focus on professional growth," she said. "They genuinely care about emotional development and how you nurture your values as a whole. It's a very holistic approach that helps you grow not just as a professional but as a human being." Her words echoed the deep care and attention SUD places on making sure students return home changed not just in skill, but in spirit.

The mentorship provided throughout the SUD journey is another cornerstone of its success. Alba recalled how supported she felt from the very first weekend of the program, right through her time in Peru and even upon returning home. The mentors don't just guide students academically; they are there to help process the



Figure 1. Alba Prat Cunill (first on the left in the second row) with the NGO “Asociación Wayra” in Cuzco, Perú.

emotional weight of working in challenging environments, making sure that the lessons learned abroad are meaningfully integrated into students’ lives back home. Ariadna also explained that the mentors who truly helped her out, Inés Losada, Jaume Maranges, Teresa Careta, and Fr. Pep Mària SJ, brought out the best in her.

JESUIT VALUES AND SECULARIZATION

Cultural and religious sensitivity also plays a key role in the SUD experience. While ESADE may not be the most religiously diverse institution, Alba noted that the cultural differences among students and the communities they work with are vast and rich. “We might all be Catholic, but even within that, there are many differences. ESADE SUD does a great job respecting and celebrating these differences,” she said. Through courses like Global Justice and Action, students are given the tools to understand, respect, and learn from the people and cultures they encounter, fostering true dialogue and mutual respect.

Alba also mentioned that while competence is a given, SUD focuses deeply on compassion, consciousness, and commitment. Compassion grows naturally through close interaction with people living very different lives. Consciousness is built before going, helping students understand that while they may have good intentions, “they shouldn’t go in blindly.” Ariadna highlighted two key lessons: “Little things matter” and “Go there with good intentions, but without knowing anything.” These powerful reminders shaped her experience. The program is designed to make students more aware, committed, and prepared to engage meaningfully.

At university, the focus is often on grades and maximizing results. SUD interrupts that mindset, making students pause and reflect. It offers a chance to dedicate an entire summer to serving others, helping students reimagine their careers and life purpose. While the immediate impact of the projects might not be visible, SUD profoundly shifts one’s perspective, pushing them to become “more human.”

From a religious perspective, explicit Christian activities at ESADE do not draw large numbers of participants. ESADE’s atmosphere can be defined as highly secular. In this context, ESADE SUD has an excellent reputation and teaches Jesuit values while being open to students from all creeds. The training process for the candidates and interns is an occasion to promote Jesuit Spirituality (consciousness and compassion) at the service of social justice (commitment) in the context of professional internships (competence).

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CONCLUSION

Both Ariadna and Alba agreed that one of the most valuable aspects of SUD is its ability to help students stop and reflect on their paths, their values, and their role in the larger world. “It’s not about changing the world overnight,” Ariadna wisely shared.

It’s clear that ESADE SUD is not just a university program but a life-altering journey that equips students not just with knowledge and skills, but with a deeper sense of purpose and responsibility. Alba’s advice to future students summed it up beautifully: “Definitely be part of SUD. This might be your path-building experience for the future. It’s scary at first, especially if it’s your first time going abroad, but it’s worth every moment for your personal growth, your professional development.”

The SUD initiative, now with more than 20 editions under its belt, continues to evolve and impact students and communities alike. More than 1,000 students have been participating in more than 600 projects since 2003. They have contributed around 370,000 hours of social consulting, with a financial worth of about 7 million €.

For those of us learning about SUD from the outside, it stands as a powerful reminder of what education can achieve when it’s rooted in empathy, reflection, and the courage to step beyond comfort zones. ESADE’s SUD program offers a compelling model for secular campuses, one that moves beyond token volunteerism to a year-long initiative that requires dedication and commitment from students, rigorous preparation, and sustained reflection led by faculty and community partners. This deep engagement and sustained commitment create the conditions for genuine personal transformation in contexts of secularization. ●



Figure 2. Ariadna Aliana (right) working in Yotala (near Sucre, Bolivia) with the NGO Centro Juana Azurduy.

5. Religious Literacy and Peace Ethics at Arul Anandar College, Karumathur, India

THE COLLEGE

Arul Anandar College (AAC) is in the rural region of Karumathur (near the city of Madurai) in India, a predominantly Hindu area with Muslims and Christians in the minority. The school is open to students of any caste, religion, race, or ethnicity. At AAC, education is not merely about academic excellence, but about holistic development and social transformation. Despite being set in a rural setting, the college has breathed new life into the region since its foundation, driven by a clear mission to achieve the integral development of rural students and empower them to transform society.

Founded as a Jesuit college in 1972 in honor of St. John de Britto (1647–1693)—a Portuguese Jesuit missionary who once turned down a prestigious academic post in Goa to serve in the interior villages of Madurai—AAC is deeply rooted in the spirit of service and commitment to the marginalized. The administration, aware of the pressing issues of poverty, spiritual erosion, and social inequality in India, places great importance on cultivating moral and spiritual values among its students. The institution strives to act as a catalyst for social change, promoting justice and equity, both in theory and in practice.

AAC's vision goes far beyond the boundaries of formal education. Apart from the university degrees, it offers extension courses to the local population who cannot attend university: for instance, people may study at the Health Center or Veterinary Clinic, and rural children have the opportunity to take computer courses. Through all these activities, AAC seeks to impact the wider community. It forms students not only in their academic disciplines but also in areas essential to their personal and civic growth.

FOUNDATION COURSES

One of the most notable initiatives in this regard is linked to its Foundation Courses, a compulsory program within the several courses of the Department of Human Excellence. Foundation Courses are required for all first and second-year undergraduate students—around 1,500 to 1,600 annually—regardless of their field of specialization. These courses span four semesters and develop four key dimensions: Personality Development, Social Responsibility and Global Citizenship, Environmental Studies, and Religious Literacy and Peace Ethics. These components aim to shape students into socially conscious, spiritually grounded, and environmentally responsible citizens.

In order to understand the depth and significance of these Foundation Courses, one cannot overlook the contribution of Father Vincent Sekhar SJ, one of the program's founders. A Jesuit priest and a passionate advocate of interreligious dialogue, Father Vincent is among the few Christian scholars in India who have pursued advanced studies in Jain philosophy. His academic and pastoral work has consistently focused on fostering understanding between religious traditions.

RELIGIOUS LITERACY

The final module of the Foundation Courses, Religious Literacy and Peace Ethics, is a subject particularly close to Father Vincent's heart. At AAC, where approximately 75% of students are Hindus, followed by



Figure 1. The logo of the Department of Human Excellence.

Christians and Muslims, the importance of promoting Interfaith coexistence and mutual respect cannot be overstated. As Father Vincent wisely puts it, “India is a plural country, diverse in religions, but that does not prevent Indians from living in harmony.”

In a context where religion is deeply intertwined with everyday life, and at times manipulated to divide, raising awareness and promoting respectful dialogue becomes critical. This course seeks to explore the meaning and value of religion, and how it can be a force for personal, social, and environmental transformation, and how it can foster empathy, understanding, and peace.

The curriculum begins with a foundational exploration of what religion is. It is not just a set of doctrines, but a sacred relationship with the Divine, with other humans, and with the natural world. Students examine how religion shapes personal identity and find its expressions in rituals, sacred texts, art, music, and architecture, while studying its intersections with disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, and politics.

Moving further, students are invited to reflect on their personal religious experiences through prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, or reading sacred texts. These reflections are critically examined to distinguish authentic spirituality from blind faith or superstition, fostering a more mature and reasoned understanding of religious life.

The course then delves into the role of religion as a moral compass and transformative force, drawing on examples of saints and reformers from multiple traditions—such as Gandhi, Guru Nanak, Prophet Muhammad, and Saint Francis of Assisi—who lived and projected their faith as a platform for social justice and ethical leadership. At the same time, it encourages students to recognize the dangers of distorted

interpretations of religion that can fuel extremism and violence. Father Vincent cautions, “It is not the people or the religion, but its interpretation that causes harm.”

Another important dimension of the course is its engagement with social realities—such as poverty, discrimination, and environmental degradation—and how religious communities respond to these issues. Students are asked to reflect on how their own religious traditions can contribute to building a more just and compassionate society.

In its final section, the course emphasizes Peace Ethics, analyzing the causes of religious conflict and the values that all religions share—such as compassion, nonviolence, justice, and respect. It introduces students to India’s Constitutional protections for religious freedom and highlights the importance of interreligious dialogue. Practical components include visits to religious sites, interfaith round tables, and collaborative activities that students reported to find highly enriching.

Father Vincent notes that many students are initially hesitant to speak about their beliefs; and some are even unaware of the basics of their own religious traditions. The course helps bridge that gap, encouraging discovery, critical thought, and openness. Given the sensitivity of the subject, faculty members receive specific training to facilitate these discussions with care and respect.

In conclusion, the Religious Literacy and Peace Ethics as one of the Foundation Courses is a powerful example of how education can be used not just to inform minds, but to inform hearts. It is a model of inclusive, values-based education that equips young people to live harmoniously in a pluralistic world and to become agents of peace and understanding in their communities. ●



Figure 2. Fr. Vincent and students of a Foundation Course during their visit of a Hindu Temple.

6. Religion and Society at the CORE Center of Universidad Católica del Uruguay

A JESUIT UNIVERSITY IN A LARGELY SECULAR COUNTRY

As a Jesuit Catholic university in the largely secular context of Uruguay, the Universidad Católica del Uruguay (UCU) exemplifies the position in which many religiously affiliated universities around the world find themselves today. UCU has presently almost 7,000 students, divided into five schools (Law & Liberal Arts; Health Sciences; Business Administration; and Engineering & Technology). It runs 81 undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

Uruguay has a population of 3.4 million, and it is one of the most secularized countries in Latin America, following a secularization process that began in the late 19th century that continues today. This process included state rather than church control of marriage, cemeteries, education, and even secularization of holidays (As Uruguayan scholar Néstor Da Costa explains, Christmas began to be called “Family Day,” and Holy Week for Easter recast as “Tourism Week,”¹⁰ which continues today.) Dr. Valentina Pereira, a Religion and Society professor at UCU, explains that religion is a taboo topic in Uruguay, and it is not discussed in public spaces or public education. Students who do not come from a religious background themselves know very little about it. In her experience, roughly half of her students are Catholic and the other half have no personal religious background (and therefore very little knowledge of the subject). Another faculty member in the Area of Religion and Society, Professor José María Alzugaray, estimated that only 40% of his students are Catholic and the rest had no personal religious background. In this secular context, UCU promotes interreligious dialogue through its core curriculum requirement: students should take at least one course in the Area of Religion and Society from the university’s CORE Center.

CORE CENTER

CORE Center is the kernel of a group of educational activities in the field of Humanities: activities that are transversal to all the degrees of the University. It offers students a global vision and contributes to the development of a humanistic culture: creative, innovative and critical.

UCU’s CORE Center offers courses in three areas: Anthropology and Philosophy, Ethics and Citizenship, and Religion and Society. All UCU students are required to take at least one course of their choice from each area. The CORE Center offers over 30 courses per semester, 10 to 12 of which are courses in the Area of Religion and Society. About 1,400 students are enrolled in CORE courses per semester. A normal class size is about 30 students. The goal of the CORE center’s curriculum is to develop global perspectives and humanistic, creative, and critical thinking skills in students. Religion and Society professors emphasize that these courses are about exploring different perspectives and developing sound arguments, not about converting students to a particular religious perspective.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY COURSES

Religion and Society courses combine theory and experiential learning to promote interreligious dialogue and knowledge. Students read and discuss theoretical and sacred texts to learn about different traditions.

¹⁰ Néstor Da Costa. 2020. “Non-Affiliated Believers and Atheists in the Very Secular Uruguay.” *Religions* 11 (1): 50. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010050>.

CASE STUDIES

Several professors bring into the classroom practitioners of the religions studied, so that students may learn about these traditions from firsthand witnesses. As part of the course, Dr. Pereira invites her students to develop a field diary on the religious expressions they encounter in their surroundings, encouraging them to photograph these expressions and record their observations and reflections. The aim of the exercise is to help students begin to recognize the presence of religion in public spaces and its role in everyday social life. Dr. Pereira invites her students to pay attention to, and take notes on, religious expressions that are present in the streets near where they live. Other courses take students out of the classroom to visit places of worship and prayer. Professor Alzugaray has students bring news headlines that relate to the traditions they are studying in class to help students connect their learning to the real world. For their final assignment, Dr. Pereira asks students to carry out an in-depth interview with someone who identifies as religious, ideally from a tradition they know little about or hold biases against. The exercise encourages students to reflect critically on their assumptions and engage with religious diversity. At the end of the semester, Dr. Pereira invites students to interview each other about their own experiences with religion and spirituality. All of these assignments encourage interreligious dialogue both inside and outside the classroom and develop students' knowledge and critical thinking skills.

Both professors and students report transformations in their attitudes towards those with religious backgrounds that differ from their own. Dr. Pereira states: "My students often enter classes hesitant and uncomfortable, but they tend to open up more and more throughout the semester about their experiences (or lack thereof) with religion." One UCU student interviewed by the author of this report acknowledges that, despite coming from a culturally Catholic background, he initially knew little about religion in Uruguay and felt uncomfortable talking about it with others. He chose to enroll in "Religions of the World" based on a recommendation from a peer who had taken the course and found it worthwhile. Although initially apprehensive, he ultimately expressed deep appreciation for the experience, noting that the course significantly broadened his perspective on religious diversity and increased his comfort engaging with the topic. He remarked that it drew his attention to religious traditions and communities in his own environment that had previously been "invisible" to him—a reflection, he suggested, of the broader cultural tendency in Uruguay to treat religion as a taboo subject. This student also observed that many of his peers approach the Religion and Society CORE courses with skepticism, often assuming that these classes serve a catechetical or proselytizing purpose aimed at Catholic conversion. In contrast, his own experience and the testimony of faculty in the Religion and Society area at UCU suggests that students typically emerge from these courses with a more informed understanding of religion and a greater openness to interreligious dialogue.



Figure 1. The CORE Center facilities at the Universidad Católica de Uruguay.

JESUIT VALUES AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

UCU's CORE Area of Religion and Society course requirement embodies the values of Jesuit education by promoting a holistic education that forms students in all areas of their life, namely through the Four C's: Competence, Compassion, Consciousness, and Commitment. Society and Religion professors' combination of academic study and experiential learning is particularly important to student development in all of these areas. In-class exploration of theoretical and sacred texts guides students to be academically competent in the subject of religion, despite their largely secular context. Guest speakers, site visits, and out-of-class experiential assignments foster students' compassion and commitment towards those in their communities. Both the experiences inside and outside of the classroom foster students' consciousness of their own emotions and of the world around them by providing guidance and mentorship by professors and members of many religious traditions.

The integration of theoretical frameworks with experiential learning in these courses fosters two key forms of interreligious dialogue identified within the Catholic tradition: the "dialogue of life" and the "dialogue of theological exchange." Through encounters with guest speakers and visits to religious sites beyond the classroom, students, faculty, and members of the broader community actively participate in the "dialogue of life," a mode of engagement grounded in everyday interactions, mutual respect, and shared human experience across religious boundaries, "where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations."¹¹ This awareness and mutual respect allows different religious and secular communities to coexist in harmony. Through coursework and meetings with religious community members, students participate in the "dialogue of theological exchange," "where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values." They study and respectfully discuss different religious traditions and, where such affiliation exists, their own.

CONCLUSION

It is not easy to foster a positive and dialogical perception about religion in the hearts of university students. This is even more difficult in a country like Uruguay, where the Catholic faith has lost legitimacy for more than 50% of its population. Nevertheless, the thoughtful approach of the Area of Religion and Society at UCU is bearing fruit not in the form of conversions, but in the breaking down of prejudices and the awakening of a genuine interest in religion. This spirit of engagement reflects deeply Jesuit values, especially the commitment to fostering meaningful interreligious dialogue that must first begin with overcoming taboos in a country that is so deeply secular. ●

¹¹ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), para. 42.

7. The Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement (CEIE), Seattle University, Seattle, United States

Located within the heart of Seattle University, a Jesuit institution in the Pacific Northwest of the United States with just over 4,000 undergraduate students, the Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement (CEIE) serves as a vital resource for both the university community and the broader local and global public. Established in 2021, CEIE reflects a Jesuit, Catholic commitment to advancing religious literacy, fostering spiritual leadership, and strengthening interreligious collaboration. It is a place where faith traditions, academic scholarship, and lived experience come together to address pressing global and communal challenges through dialogue and action.

Led by Dr. Michael Trice, who also founded the Center, alongside a diverse team of students, alumni, faculty, and community fellows, the core commitment of CEIE is to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths and belief systems. As global challenges mount (climate change, poverty, food insecurity, and public health crises) CEIE is dedicated to the principle that religious wisdom must be part of the world's healing.

At the foundation of CEIE's mission is ecumenism, a term rooted in the Greek word *oikonomia*, or "inhabited house." CEIE interprets this both as a call for Christian unity and as an invitation to engage respectfully and authentically with the full spectrum of religious traditions in our world. This vision underlines the Center's work in cultivating unity without erasing difference.

The Center enacts this commitment to ecumenical and interreligious collaboration through its unique scholarly and praxis-based projects. One such project is CEIE's Leadership Academy, which develops low-cost and practical resources for classrooms and communities on topics related to social justice, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. These resources include a Religious Literacy Course and several self-paced formation programs.

CEIE also convenes annual symposiums for faith leaders and scholars across academic disciplines to study crucial themes for understanding and responding to challenges within local communities around the world. The Center then publishes the wisdom shared in these symposiums through their partnership with Georgetown University Press. For example, a recent publication, *Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age: An Interreligious Dialogue*, explores how people of different faiths and of no faith responded to the spiritual and ethical challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributors include Jewish, Hindu, secular, Christian, and other voices, each reflecting on their experiences during COVID-19. As this work shows, the pandemic prompted many religious communities to adapt worship practices, embrace virtual connection, and even join in interfaith prayer. Despite its challenges, the pandemic highlighted how faith communities responded to suffering with a shared moral impulse rooted in compassion, responsibility, and hope.



Figure 1: Summer 2025 participants in CEIE's Leadership Academy pursuing a certificate in Discerning Leadership

A significant challenge facing religious engagement today is the decline of institutional support for humanitarian aid, especially in the wake of funding cuts like the discontinuation of USAID support under the Trump administration. Many faith-based organizations have had to rethink their funding strategies while continuing to provide vital services like education, disaster relief, community health, and food security. The CEIE is trying to respond to this shifting landscape by seeking to build new partnerships and to develop creative and sustainable responses to this recent crisis.

Alongside its ecumenical and interreligious vision for responding to the world's needs, CEIE is also firmly committed to Jesuit educational values in its initiatives. The Center's grounding in Jesuit education ensures that all its efforts are marked by holistic formation, as students and community partners are encouraged to grow in competence through interdisciplinary education, as well as in compassion, conscience, and commitment. The Religious Literacy course, for example, is designed to help students understand global religions while cultivating their own identities as young people committed to the common good. The goal is that through engagement with this course and other programs of the Center, students will be prepared to enter a pluralistic world as reconcilers and builders of justice.

Most recently, CEIE launched a Discerning Leadership Certificate that is rooted in the tradition of Ignatian discernment. The certificate focuses on the spiritual, personal, and professional formation of current and future leaders in the public square. A fundamental component of this cohorted formation program is guidance by spiritual directors trained in Ignatian spirituality.

In a world often shaped by division, CEIE demonstrates the necessity of spiritual depth for dialogue and interfaith collaboration. It reminds us that learning across faiths is not solely an academic enterprise, it is a necessary practice in cultivating peace. ●

8. Interreligious Studies Minor, Boston College, United States

As recent social movements for racial equality and climate action have demonstrated, interfaith cooperation is essential to social change. The Interreligious Studies Minor at Boston College is designed to build on these recent movements by helping students explore the dynamics of interfaith collaboration and navigate its complexities. Boston College, with approximately 9,600 undergraduates (70% of whom identify as Catholic) is located in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. In 2024, the Theology Department created the minor in Interreligious Studies to build upon the department's existing course offerings while adding a new course on interreligious leadership. In the program, students are offered both practical skills and theoretical knowledge essential for leadership roles in interfaith social movements.

The minor incorporates students from a variety of programs at Boston College such as the Global Public Health Program, Religion and Public Life, International Studies, Theology, the Carroll School of Management, and the Pre-Health Program, to name a few. Several individuals have significantly contributed to the development and success of the Interreligious Studies Minor, particularly its director, Dr. Natana DeLong-Bas, a scholar of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies. She and Dr. Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkosky, a scholar of Jewish-Christian relations, have been instrumental in designing the curriculum. They collaborate with other faculty on an advisory committee alongside alumni who serve as mentors for current students.

The minor's development and intellectual focus have been significantly inspired by the work of Eboo Patel, who emphasizes the importance of engaging young people in service across religious traditions. Faculty led by Dr. DeLong-Bas actively integrate Patel's principles into their teaching, encouraging students to understand and respect different faiths while advocating for empathy and mutual understanding.

The minor builds on traditional courses offered within the Theology Department such as "The Church and Interreligious Dialogue," "Comparative Mysticism," and a variety of others on Islam, Judaism, and Chinese philosophy. These courses incorporate perspectives from diverse scholars and practitioners in interfaith studies, exploring topics such as religious violence, secularism, and religious nationalism.

A key component of the minor is its emphasis on experiential learning, which is why the core requirement for all students in the minor is a new course titled "Engaging Interreligious Leadership." This praxis-based course provides students with practical skills for collaboration across faith traditions while offering theoretical grounding essential to interfaith leadership.

Outside of the classroom, students are encouraged to apply their knowledge through internships, volunteer work, and community-based projects. Some recent examples of these extracurricular activities are service partnerships with local faith-based organizations, collaborations with interfaith dialogue groups, and participation in international conferences on interreligious understanding. Courses are also supported by modules focused on conflict resolution, mediation, leadership development, dialogue facilitation, and communication strategies for interfaith engagement. The practical guidance offered within the minor is meant to bridge the gap between academic study and real-world application.

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The minor also addresses the challenges inherent in interreligious leadership. Students are encouraged to grapple with the ethical implications of religious and cultural differences, including the demands of deep listening and mutual respect required for meaningful dialogue. This holistic approach enhances critical thinking and moves beyond stereotypical representations of different faiths.

A developing dimension of the minor involves greater attention to secular and non-religious perspectives. While the curriculum acknowledges these viewpoints, expanding these areas would further enhance the program's inclusivity and comprehensiveness. This effort aligns with broader calls within interfaith studies to include a wide range of worldviews beyond religious traditions.

As Boston College continues to develop and refine the Interreligious Studies Minor, several potential future directions are emerging. Increased use of digital platforms may facilitate global interfaith exchanges, expanding experiential learning opportunities beyond the Boston area. The university also hopes to strengthen partnerships with international organizations dedicated to interfaith dialogue. Technology will likely be integrated into the curriculum to support these types of initiatives that cross geographic boundaries.

Dr. DeLong-Bas firmly believes that the minor enhances the theological mission of Jesuit universities, noting that it “actually fulfills the 1995 34th General Congregation’s commitment to interreligious dialogue as a priority for the 21st century.” As Dr. DeLong-Bas also reflects, “Peacekeeping is about more than ending violence. It’s about building healthy communities, and that begins with relationships that necessarily include multiple religions.”

The increasing polarization of religious and political discourse presents a significant challenge to interreligious cooperation. Issues such as intolerance, secularism, discrimination, and religious extremism persist globally. The minor’s ongoing evolution—shaped by faculty, students, and alumni—positions the program to continue advancing interfaith understanding and cultivating effective leadership for a more just and peaceful world. ●

9. Theological Hour at Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

Ateneo de Manila University is one of the oldest Catholic universities in the Philippines, currently serving nearly 10,000 undergraduate students, the vast majority of whom are Catholic. Loyola School of Theology (LST) sits on Ateneo's campus and is affiliated with the university, serving as a seminary and school of theology for Jesuits in formation alongside lay students.

Every month or two, LST hosts a "Theological Hour" for students and members of the wider community that addresses current topics from various theological perspectives. These events are guided by guest speakers who may be professors, religious leaders, or experts on social and cultural issues. A strength of the program is that it is not just about discussing ideas but also sharing faith experiences and ways of praying and seeking God from various traditions.

Anjon Fredrick, a religious seminarian of the Society of St. Paul and a program organizer, notes that the Theological Hour does not seek to replace traditional classes. Rather, it offers a complementary space to explore contemporary topics that often do not have a place in the regular curriculum.

Over time, topics such as artificial intelligence and spirituality, Indigenous religions, or dialogue with Islam have been addressed, among others. Notably, the event is organized by a student committee that proposes the topics, selects the speakers, and manages the logistics. This also provides students with formative experience in leadership, teamwork, and event planning. The gatherings are held at the LST campus and, though primarily aimed at students, they are also attended by faculty, religious figures, and people from outside the university. Some sessions have drawn up to 150 attendees.

Anjon emphasizes that the Theological Hour aims to create a safe space where people can listen and understand rather than impose truths. Great care is taken in choosing topics that are relevant, with the intent to avoid unnecessary controversy while still addressing meaningful issues. The key aspect of the program is always respectful dialogue and active listening, which connects deeply with the Jesuit tradition of communal discernment. As Anjon notes:

This becomes a space of dialogue. This becomes a space of hearing the other, of hearing a person, of listening to their experiences, of listening to what they're going through, in listening to how they live their life.



Figure 1. Theological Hour presentation by Fr. Felipe Balingit Jr. of the Russian Orthodox Church in Manila (February 2025)

One of the most powerful aspects of the program is seeing how theology can connect with everyday life. As Anjon suggests, emotions can open one to the spiritual dimension, a space that transcends the purely intellectual. In that sense, Theological Hour proposes a theology that is also felt, that is not merely conceptual but also affectively embodied..

This approach embodies values central to Jesuit education, especially the development of the “4Cs”: forming individuals who are conscious, competent, compassionate, and committed. Theological Hour is a space where these dimensions are nurtured and strengthened, encouraging critical thinking and openness to others.

Moreover, the inclusion of people from different religious traditions, or those who do not identify with any specific faith, reflects a genuine openness to pluralism. The program emphasizes that living spirituality in diverse contexts is key to respecting others and being willing to be challenged by others’ experiences.

Among the examples Anjon shared, one of the most meaningful was a session with the Orthodox Church held in February 2025. He notes that this particular program helped many students to reflect on their prejudices and to discover possible meeting points among different ways of living Christianity. Anjon also highlighted another session with a Muslim leader that generated great interest among students.

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Although there is no formal evaluation system, the topics discussed during the activity often resonate afterwards, sparking conversations in classrooms or in other spaces, which testifies to the impact of the program.

The program's open format and participatory approach make it a valuable model for promoting religious literacy and holistic education. The program is built upon the principle that authentic dialogue is not about convincing or debating, but about being open to listening, sharing doubts, bearing witness with humility, and being moved by another person's experience. As Anjon says:

It's always been done in the spirit of wanting to learn about the other. This other isn't really someone dangerous, someone strange to me, but this other is someone who believes in something bigger than themselves. And I think that's how we should engage in dialogue.

In a world that moves so fast, marked by noise, disagreement, prejudice, and division, spaces like Theological Hour invite students to pause, to truly listen, and to see others not as threats but as interlocutors from whom one might also learn.



Figure 2. Group photo with presenter and participants at Theological Hour (February 2025)

Epilogue I: Interreligious Encounters

AMIR HUSSAIN, LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

“... So tell the tale, so that they may reflect” Qur’an 7:176

I begin with some words to set my remarks on this magnificent project in context. I am a Canadian Muslim who for two decades has had the privilege of teaching in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), the Jesuit university in Los Angeles. Two events are key to the integration of Jesuit pedagogy in my own personal and professional life. The first was in 2020, when I became chair of our department during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had been teaching at LMU for 15 years at that point, and realized I finally needed to take the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. I was able to do that in the 19th Annotation under the guidance of Fr. Randy Roche SJ. The second was in 2022, when I was invited to Barcelona (with side trips to Montserrat and Manresa) to be part of the JHERDS conference on “Jesuit Student Formation and Religious Diversity”. That it took me 17 years of teaching at a Jesuit institution to finally “get” Jesuit pedagogy helped me to better appreciate the time it takes before a Jesuit is invited to profess his final vows.

I also had the extraordinary privilege of being mentored by the blessed Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the greatest Canadian scholar of religion in the 20th century, and one of the key figures in the development of comparative theology. In 1940, when Wilfred, a conservative Protestant, began to do graduate work on Islam, he went to the country with the most Muslims. In 1940, before Partition, that was India. That was part of Wilfred’s genius. He wanted to learn about Islam, so to him, it was obvious, that he had to go and live for years with Muslims (who were scarce then in his native Toronto, but are commonplace now). In the Catholic world, for almost 60 years (as of this writing, and longer than I have been alive), *Nostra Aetate*, or the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions, has been an official declaration of the Second Vatican Council. The Jesuits, at least since their 34th General Congregation in 1995, have described their mission as “service of faith that does justice in dialogue with religions and cultures”.

Unfortunately, so many of our theology departments in Jesuit universities in the United States aren’t even in the 20th century, but instead are firmly ensconced in the 19th century, with its then-current doctrine of Manifest Destiny. They don’t need to learn about the “other,” they just need to go deeper into themselves. Their claim is that there is no time for comparative work when one must focus on Christology, and historical theology, and moral theology, and systematics. By contrast, as this marvelous report shows us, Jesuit institutions in Africa or Asia do not have the luxury to share this American exceptionalism. With the exception of the Philippines, they must work in a world where the day to day lived reality is more likely to be with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or practitioners of traditional religions than with fellow Christians (let alone other Catholics). Perhaps we in America might one day be able to learn this truth, that there is more to theological vision than is contained in any one religious tradition. Or that the goal of interfaith dialogue is not that we seek to convert each other, but that we help each other to find what is meaningful in our own religious traditions.

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Another important feature of the JHERDS project was the collaborations between students and professors, not just to facilitate deeper learning for the participants, but to continue the work for generations to come. Just as I can carry on the teachings of my mentor in the 21st century, these students, through the students that they will in turn teach, can bring the work into the 22nd century. Again, this is in keeping with the history and traditions of the Church, and reminds me of one of its favorite mottos, “We think in centuries.”

There is an extraordinary power in Jesuit education that needs to be passed along, not just to future generations, but into a world in which there are, unfortunately, fewer and fewer Jesuits. It is these lay people, including some of us who aren’t Catholic, or even Christian, who can continue to transmit the extraordinary gift that is Jesuit pedagogy.

Epilogue II: Jesuit Universities at the Boundaries

KENJIE I. CORTEZ, ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

Reflecting on the Jesuit mission in the 21st century, the late Roger Haight SJ, once invoked the metaphor of a “boundary.”¹¹ Such is often the case, he observed, as the Jesuit mission often finds itself “between two places or facing opposing faces.” This speaks of the reality that Jesuits and their collaborators often find themselves to “straddle many boundaries, because they engage so many issues in a wide variety of ministries.” Certainly, boundaries are usually fraught spaces. Yet it is precisely at these domains where we come to recognize how polarities demand thoughtful responses—ones that are not only timely, but also tradition-thick, and for those of us enriched by the powerful witness of St. Ignatius of Loyola, truly rooted in core Jesuit values.

As I reflect on my involvement in this project, I cannot help but recall Fr. Haight’s metaphor, not only because of many polarities that mark our lives within and beyond Jesuit campuses today, but even more so because of the promises that emerge from those tensions. The fact that this project centers on *best practices* and *experiments* attests to the presence of a wide-range of opportunities that abound across Jesuit campuses. While facing squarely the complex boundaries particular to each Jesuit school, the men and women behind the concrete initiatives featured in this research show how our collective hope for a more just and compassionate world takes root at the edges. With the aim of fostering greater familiarity with these practices, this project culminates the months of interactions, albeit remote, among students from various Jesuit institutions. Their case studies and reports testify that, although Jesuit institutions are all heirs to the same Jesuit tradition, it is their varied and multifaceted contexts that uniquely give shape to their shared identity and mission.

From the Gita Project at Sameeksha and the Ignatian retreats at Xavier University (Ateneo de Cagayan), to Fordham University’s Campus Ministry programs, the Theological Hour at the Loyola School of Theology (Ateneo de Manila), and Seattle University’s Center for Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagement, we see glimpses of the efforts within Jesuit institutions to engage meaningfully across religious and cultural lines. This same spirit of inclusive formation is evident in the holistic curriculum of Arul Anandar College, the humanistic core courses at Universidad Católica del Uruguay, the Interreligious Studies Minor at Boston College, and ESADE’s solidarity internships—each grounded in a commitment to form students who are attentive to the demands of global justice and cross-cultural engagement. Taken together, these initiatives offer concrete expressions of how Jesuit education finds itself at the borders, forming individuals who are morally grounded, culturally sensitive, and, above all, committed to being *persons with and for others*.

¹¹ Roger Haight, “The American Jesuit Theologian” in *Jesuit Postmodern: Scholarship, Vocation, and Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Francis Clooney (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), 99.

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Both in its vision and methodology, this project bears witness to how bridges can be built between communities and across boundaries. Despite the challenges of geographical, cultural, and religious distance, this initiative is grounded in the conviction that Jesuit schools can learn from and depend on one another in meaningful ways. Without claiming to speak conclusively about the reality of diversity in their assigned institutions, each student's report invites readers to appreciate the varied and deeply incarnational *ways of proceeding*—the depth of which can only be glimpsed through their unique embodiment within each campus. In many ways, this endeavor mirrors Pope Francis's ecclesial vision of synodality—one that is “born of encounter and engagement, contemplation and service, receptive solitude and life in community, cheerful sobriety and the struggle for justice.”¹² In carrying this vision forward, this research documents *best practices* and *experiments*, and at the same time offers a testament of how Jesuit institutions can journey together across boundaries toward a more inclusive and genuinely multicultural society.

¹² Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Amazon Region), February 2, 2020, para. 77.

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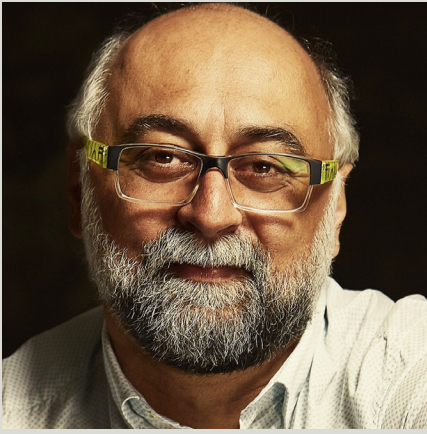


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