

# SCENE ONE

## MEET THE PLAYERS

**Pope Francis:** Since becoming Pope in 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, known as Pope Francis, has significantly impacted ecumenical and interfaith relations. His inclusive approach, based on dialogue and respect, seeks to connect different Christian churches and various religions. A landmark moment in his papacy was the 2016 meeting with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the first such encounter in almost 1000 years, underscoring his commitment to Catholic-Orthodox unity. Pope Francis has actively engaged in interfaith dialogue, notably with Jewish and Muslim leaders, emphasizing shared values and respect. His 2019 visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the signing of the “Document on Human Fraternity for World



*Pope Francis during a 2014 pastoral visit to Korea. (Photo: Republic of Korea/Korea.net/CreativeCommons)*

Peace and Living Together” with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar highlight his efforts towards a cooperative and peaceful coexistence among diverse faith communities.



*Pope Francis waves to the crowd in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in 2019. (Photo: Anthony Sajdler, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons)*

Pope Francis believes strongly in the importance of love and helping others, which is central to his approach to working with different religious groups. He emphasizes that even though there are different beliefs and ideas in religion, these differences shouldn't stop everyone from working together to spread love, peace, and help people in need.

**President Salih:** Barham Salih, who served as the President of Iraq, is known for his advocacy of a united and inclusive Iraq. Throughout his political career, Salih has emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and the coexistence of Iraq's diverse religious and ethnic communities. Given Iraq's complex mosaic of Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and other groups, his commitment to inclusivity has been seen as an essential vision for the nation's stability and progress.



Barham Salih, president of Iraq from 2018-2022. (Photo: Giorgi Abdaladze, Official Photographer of the Administration of the President of Georgia, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons ))

One of Salih's notable ecumenical efforts was his support for the reconstruction of religious sites that were destroyed during the conflicts in Iraq. This initiative was not just about rebuilding physical structures but also mending the social fabric of the nation.

Further, his administration was marked by an openness to international interfaith initiatives. The historic visit of Pope Francis to Iraq in 2021 stands as a testament to Salih's vision for an Iraq where different faiths can dialogue and collaborate for the common good. Throughout his tenure, Salih consistently championed the concept that coexistence and diversity should be seen as sources of strength and cohesion. He believed that honoring the rich tapestry of cultures and beliefs is essential for paving the way toward a prosperous and peaceful future.

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## DIVE IN

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Catholic-Muslim relations in the 20th and 21st centuries have experienced both tension and notable progress in dialogue and mutual understanding. A pivotal moment came with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), in particular *Nostra Aetate* which highlights the spiritual commonalities between Christians and Muslims and underscores the need for mutual respect and understanding. The declaration calls for joint efforts to advance social justice, moral welfare, peace, and freedom for all people.

Pope John Paul II significantly advanced interfaith dialogue, notably through his speech to young Muslims in Morocco on August 19, 1985, which stands as one of the best Catholic understandings of the Islamic faith. His visits to Muslim-majority countries demonstrated the Church's commitment to peaceful cooperation. Although the 9/11 attacks posed challenges to these relations, they

prompted both Christian and Muslim leaders to denounce religious violence and reaffirm the importance of dialogue.

The 21st century has seen continued efforts to strengthen these ties. Pope Francis has been at the forefront of fostering Catholic-Muslim dialogue. His visit to the UAE in 2019, where he and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, signed the "Document on Human Fraternity," was a testament to this commitment. This document calls for peace, tolerance, and coexistence among followers of different religions.

Despite the challenges, the modern era has been marked by increased institutional dialogues, scholarly exchanges, and grassroots initiatives aimed at fostering understanding between these two world religions, reflecting a commitment to peace and mutual respect.

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## DID YOU KNOW?

### *Convivencia: A Beacon of Interfaith Harmony in Medieval Spain*

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One of the most harmonious periods for Christians, Jews, and Muslims coexisting was during the “Convivencia” in Muslim-ruled Spain (711-1492 AD).

After the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the early 8th century, Islamic rulers implemented a level of religious tolerance not typically seen in other parts of medieval Europe. Christians, Jews, and Muslims coexisted, collaborated, and thrived under a series of Muslim rulers, especially during the Umayyad Caliphate and the early periods of the Taifa Kingdoms.



A replica of an Elizabethan painting depicts the Moorish ambassador's 1600 visit to Queen Elizabeth I, proposing a Spain alliance. The original, housed at the University of Birmingham, England, is the earliest known English portrait of a Muslim sitter.

During this period, scholars from the three religions exchanged knowledge, resulting in advancements in medicine, mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy. The city of Toledo, for instance, became a vibrant center of translation, where Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars collaborated to translate ancient Greek and Roman works into Arabic and later into Latin, playing a foundational role in the European Renaissance.

It's important to note, however, that while there was a significant level of tolerance during certain periods, the situation was complex and varied. There were instances of persecution and violence towards religious minorities by both Muslim and Christian rulers, especially as power dynamics shifted throughout the centuries.

Nevertheless, the Convivencia stands as a notable example of a time when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived side by side, contributing to a rich tapestry of intellectual and cultural life.

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## DIALOGUE IN ACTION

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What's one thing you want people to know about your faith?
2. What factors contributed to the collapse of harmony between the Abrahamic faiths?
3. What do you think are the greatest barriers to achieving interfaith peace?

### ACTIVITY:

List three beliefs you hold about the two Abrahamic faiths you don't belong to. Additionally, write down three misconceptions you think others might have about your own faith. Share and discuss your responses.

