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# ANSARI INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGION

Crossroad of Religions

STRATEGIC PLAN 2021-2026

RAFAT AND ZOREEN

# ANSARI INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGION





# VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

Inaugurated in 2018, the [Rafat and Zoreen Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion](#) is dedicated to studying, learning from, and collaborating with religious communities worldwide. A vital part of the University of Notre Dame's [Keough School of Global Affairs](#), the Ansari Institute embraces wide-ranging work, including research, teaching, outreach, and interaction with religious communities, faith and civic leaders, academics and journalists, and the general public.

Together, these efforts enable the Ansari Institute to contribute to the Keough School's mission to advance [integral human development](#), a holistic model of human flourishing articulated in Catholic social teaching and resonant in multiple religious, humanistic, and philosophical traditions worldwide. Whereas "development" can be understood in purely economic or material terms along a single path, "integral" is rooted in an awareness that effective and ethical approaches to development also require attention to the specific religious, cultural, and historical dimensions of a given society.

This comprehensive approach to the demands of human dignity, in turn, demands engaging with and learning from various disciplines, sectors, faith communities, and, in a deliberate way, with "all people of good will." A core value of the Ansari Institute is [narrative empathy](#), defined as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's

situation and condition." As such, the institute invites immersive engagement with the variety of religious and cultural worlds that humans inhabit.

Accordingly, the institute embraces diverse faith traditions, partners respectfully with local and global actors, and collaborates across disciplines in order to foster deliberation, offer training in culturally appropriate modes of dialogue, and implement transformative educational programs. It also helps to generate ideas about how religious actors and institutions can enhance their capacity to fulfill their respective missions and advance human flourishing. The institute enhances its effectiveness by partnering with universities, NGOs, and other civil society actors, as well as governments and intergovernmental organizations.

The institute's logo depicts its inclusive and hopeful approach to a world replete with complementary and contradictory expressions of faith, power, and identity. The logo's different colors also suggest the world's many religions, each of which brings their unique wellsprings of wisdom to bear on the question of what constitutes "human flourishing" and how it might be realized in different historical and cultural settings.

Today, the human family is at a crossroads between dystopia—ethnonationalism, climate catastrophe, extremism, nuclear holocaust, extinction—and a future that embraces the well-being of every living being. Paths intersect at a crossroads. Metaphorically, a crossroads signifies a meeting place of potential consequence. The Ansari Institute's slogan, *Crossroad of Religions*, derives from a term used by [Pope John Paul II](#) addressing the potential for peacebuilding in the Middle East, which, he said, should be a place of "cultural dialogue between East and West." Indiana adopted the motto *Crossroads of America* to indicate the importance of the state's location in the heartland of the United

States. The Ansari Institute embraces Notre Dame's geography and aims to serve as a home to diverse interpretations of and aspirations for dignity, while also recognizing its contemporary context at the crossroads of fragility and resilience, peril and possibility.

In pursuing their respective missions, religions enact their visions with and through bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions, and grapple with the internal diversity of their own traditions and histories. The Ansari Institute amplifies a range of religious voices and perspectives, including those that are broadly recognized as institutionally authoritative within religious traditions, those of everyday practitioners, and those coming from the margins.

Within this range of possibilities, the institute endeavors to elevate voices and perspectives that are deeply rooted in the genuine promise for a better world that faith provides. Faith traditions rooted in the true, the good, and the beautiful are received sources of wisdom that deserve a place at the table in scholarly debates about global affairs. Indeed, advances in our understanding of religion and global affairs are impoverished if we fail to bring such voices to the table in a credible way.

The word "engagement" initially denoted the act of making pledges ("gages") to one another in order to set the terms of shared life together as a community. To engage or be engaged implies a willingness to place one's ideas, one's possessions, one's sense of self in service to a more inclusive collaboration for the common good. The institute's grammar of engagement animates its research initiatives, education and training programs, and outreach beyond the Keough School.



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# RESEARCH

The Ansari Institute promotes systematic research about, and reflection upon, the practices of religious engagement by faith actors and engagement with religion by academic, civil society, and state actors.

The following questions are illustrative of the institute's research interests: How do people of faith, religious communities, and faith-based organizations impact the world? How do they work with each other? And how do civic institutions, nation-states, the media, and secular organizations work with them for both material and spiritual development? What promises, pledges, or covenants do they call into action when they make their engagements? How do faith-inspired initiatives translate into secular contexts and institutions? Which actors and voices tend to be more or less effective than

others? Which are deemed "good" or "bad," and from whose perspective? How do such encounters transform religious traditions over time?

The institute recognizes that religious thought is complex and contested: It evolves through time and ultimately becomes embodied in the world of lived experience. The institute's research engages religious voices and communities, bearing in mind that identities and motivations are rarely singular, and that certain voices have tended to dominate the conversation over others. In what issues, and among which kinds of actors, are there overlapping visions of the good where interreligious cooperation, or cooperation between the sacred and the secular, is more likely to bear fruit? Where there seems to be unhealthy competition



between traditions, how might the negative dynamic be transformed into a more constructive one?

In addressing these questions, the Ansari Institute aims to support research informed by an array of ethnographical, social scientific, historical, and theological methods of inquiry regarding both the leading ideas and lived experiences of religions around the world. The scholarship produced by such research will inevitably have as its audiences not merely other scholars of religion but also religious practitioners, educators, and other civil society actors seeking to be better informed about the patterns and dynamics of religious engagement.

Research of this kind typically involves interaction with a range of partners: scholarly peers who collaborate in the generation of new knowledge, civil society actors, communities of faith, and stakeholders who believe in and support the institute's work. **By 2026, the Ansari Institute commits to dedicating a line of research funding for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.** The amount may be conceived of as a single annual signature award, as multiple awards that support more than one research project, or as a symposium around a great book, argument, or idea that furthers the Ansari Institute's vision.



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# OUTREACH

The Ansari Institute is committed to engaging religions on their own terms, as well as to performing the vital task of enhancing religious literacy through public education. Its partners in this practice include other centers, programs, and institutes within and beyond Notre Dame, which collaborate with the institute in the disciplined listening and conversation with religious communities, with both narrative empathy and what Atalia Omer, professor of religion, conflict, and peace studies at the University of Notre Dame, calls “critical caretaking.”

Within Notre Dame, for example, the Ansari Institute has partnered with the John W. Gullivan Program in Journalism, Ethics, and Democracy to bring together religious actors, media professionals, and scholars to find ways to make public discourse about religion more accurate, insightful, and informed—that is, to draw on vocabulary used by the Kroc Institute’s Contending Modernities research initiative, “to change the conversation about religion.” The institute also aims to strengthen its partnerships with the Keough School, its many institutes with their multifaceted regional and thematic foci, and its Global Policy Initiative.

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Beyond campus, the Ansari Institute brings together voices of faith along the religious spectrum in respectful conversation and dialogue. The institute partners with local faith organizations such as Interfaith Action, a southwest Michigan peace and justice collaborative, and the United Religious Community of St. Joseph County. Over the next

five years, the institute will expand its circle of outreach through Notre Dame International and its many centers and gateways. **As its resources grow, the Ansari Institute will add two regular faculty positions (rank and track to be determined) to strengthen its capacity in outreach, research, and teaching.**





# *Looking Forward*

## WITH THE ANSARI INSTITUTE

The Ansari Institute welcomes the support of foundations and individuals who believe in its vision. Additional support may be directed to any aspect of our programs and operations, including:





**FACULTY**

Adding regular faculty members to the team

**INTERNATIONAL**

Supporting transformative cross-cultural experiences for students

**SIGNATURE INITIATIVE**

Cultivating a "fellowship of faiths" to advance integral human development



**ENDOWMENT**

Enhancing overall capacity and impact by endowing the directorship and facilitating senior hires

**RESEARCH**

Generating new knowledge on the relevance of religion to global affairs

**MULTIFAITH**

Programming in interreligious dialogue with narrative empathy

**EDUCATION**

Training and workshops in religious literacy to change the conversation about religion



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# EDUCATION

The Ansari Institute's research and outreach initiatives will provide the foundation for an array of curricular and extracurricular programs within and beyond the Keough School. These programs will include new courses in global engagement with religion as well as opportunities for experiential learning outside the classroom.

First and foremost, the institute is committed to curating a coherent menu of courses for students in the Keough School's Master of Global Affairs program

who seek to graduate with an emphasis in global religion. Equal thought will be given to courses for undergraduates who specialize in religion and global affairs while enrolled in the Keough School's supplementary major and, in due time, its standalone major in global affairs.

The courses offered by teachers affiliated with the institute include a wide range of critical and interdisciplinary offerings with multiple perspectives on the study of religion in the world. In addition to selecting from a broad array of electives

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From 2021 to 2023, the institute will conduct religious literacy workshops with support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

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already on offer through various units at the University, Ansari Institute students will have the opportunity for international travel, interaction with real communities in lived contexts, participation in colloquia on special topics, internships with external partners, and supporting faculty research or institute operations to enhance their learning experiences.

In addition to providing educational content for Notre Dame students, the institute offers courses and seminars tailored for the local South Bend community and general public, as well as specialized online courses targeting national and international audiences. Yet another format for delivering education is training workshops in religious literacy for multiple audiences, including academics, journalists, and faith actors. From 2021 to 2023, the institute will

conduct such workshops with support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

The Ansari Institute's educational programs invite students at Notre Dame and beyond to approach religions as sources for wisdom. Such an effort is warranted by the ever-increasing interconnectedness of our lives, but also by the teachings of the Catholic Church, which resonates in the teachings of other faiths, as proclaimed in *Nostra Aetate*: "Religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing 'ways,' comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions."

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# SIGNATURE STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

Over the next five years, the Ansari Institute aims to become an important center for multifaith engagement with the concept and practice of integral human development. While the term derives from Catholic social teachings, it represents a desire and capacity for human flourishing that is universal, as the Keough School notes, “through our work, our cultural identities, our artistic creativity, our religious and spiritual practices, and our relationships with others around the world—our families, our communities, and all of humanity.”

The Ansari Institute’s signature initiative, in effect, aims to provide a platform for a public and generative conversation on “the world as it should be,” as envisioned, and as contested, by the diverse religious and wisdom traditions of the world.

To that end, the Ansari Institute aims to cultivate a “fellowship of faiths,” consisting of individuals whose faith is a centering feature of their identity. To borrow from Peter Ochs, the Edgar M. Bronfman Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia and



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pioneer of the practice of [scriptural reasoning](#), the fellowship will “first and foremost . . . be enjoyable for its own sake.” Consisting of prominent intellectuals whose work is informed by their faith, and practitioners whose faith is informed by credible academic research, the fellowship, once it naturally matures, will be a body that responds “in publicly significant ways” to issues of common concern in local and global affairs, adding its voice among the prophetic voices of our time to guide the human family into a better future.

Pope Francis’s encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, “on fraternity and social friendship,” comes as a gift for the Ansari Institute. Inspired by the example of St. Francis of Assisi, and encouraged by Pope Francis’s growing friendship with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, *Fratelli Tutti* is at first an invitation to dream “as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the

same earth that is our common home.” It is also a critique of a global system, of “new forms of cultural colonization” and “economic powers that demand quick profits,” which leaves multitudes behind in “despair and discouragement.” It is a challenge to take up “grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.” And it offers a roadmap, “new paths of hope,” to help us realize a better world together.

The Pope’s call resonates beyond the Abrahamic traditions. Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, Jesuit priest, theologian, and president of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, writes that *Fratelli Tutti* offers a [restatement](#) of concepts in traditional African religions: “A person is a person through other persons,” or “I am because we are.” The Dalai Lama echoes this sentiment in his 2020 message on [Earth Day](#): “We have been born on this earth as part of one great family.”





Whereas the appeal of *Populorum Progressio*, another encyclical on “the development of peoples” is echoed in [The Global Marshal Plan](#) of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, led by Rabbi Michael Lerner, the cry of *Laudato Si’* is echoed in the [Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change](#), which “calls on the people of all nations and their leaders to set in motion a fresh model of well-being, based on an alternative to the current financial model, which depletes resources, degrades the environment, and deepens inequality.”

The Ansari Institute acknowledges that these grand religious calls already speak to, with, and through one another, and wishes not only to amplify and deepen this conversation, but also to ask: How do these bold statements translate into operational principles that have real-world effect in institutions for global governance? And how might their influence be cooperatively enhanced?

Religious actors have recently begun to be taken more seriously at the [United Nations](#). At the dawn of the 21st



century, the UN declared 2001 a year for the “dialogue of civilizations.” The UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development was founded just a decade ago in 2010, and its Multi-Faith Advisory Council was constituted even more recently in 2018. These efforts have come to fruition through the tireless efforts of civil society actors such as Religions for Peace, the world’s most representative multi-religious coalition, founded in 1970.

The Ansari Institute’s “fellowship of faiths” will learn from, and stand alongside, these and similar initiatives. As it does so, it will inquire: Which voices are present at the table, and which are absent? How is the agenda for these bodies set? What visible and invisible mechanisms control the range of discourse? How can the contributions of these bodies be kept safe from being

instrumentalized by conventional power interests? Can it play a part in making the conversation more representative and more effective?

In response to Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, showed us another way, a way in which we would let our differences be a source not of degradation, but of dignity: “*The Dignity of Difference* is a plea,” he exhorted, “for tolerance in an age of extremism.” The capacity of religion to be a source of systemic and structural good in a manner that is relevant to global affairs, argued the rabbi, “is far too little tried.” The Ansari Institute is here to add to the growing number of initiatives that are making the attempt. As such, this strategic initiative will shape the institute’s distinctive identity

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among the family of institutions on global engagement with religion, generating a wide-ranging multifaith conversation on "the world as it should be."

The Ansari Institute is moved by the joint call of the Shaykh of Azhar and Pope Francis, in their Document on Human Fraternity, to engage religions "for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet . . . to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay, and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing."

The urgency of this call is shared by religious and spiritual leaders from east to west. Faith traditions orient the lives of billions of people around the world. The Ansari Institute seeks to draw upon the wisdom curated by the great religious and spiritual traditions of the world in reckoning with our past, assessing the causes for our fragile present, and contributing toward a shared and resilient future. Where traditions agree, there are avenues to cooperate and build. Where they disagree, there is an opportunity for dialogue. Where they are uncertain, there is the opportunity to imagine, explore, and co-evolve.







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