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**CNS Story:**

### Pope made important overtures to non-Christian religions

By Jerry Filteau  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- More than any pontiff in modern history, Pope John Paul II made important overtures to non-Christian religions, using documents, prayer meetings and personal visits to open the doors of dialogue.

Pope John Paul advanced the church's sometimes-difficult relations with Islam by visiting a mosque, speaking to Muslim groups on his foreign trips and insisting on full religious freedom in countries under Islamic law.

His special efforts on Catholic relations with Jews and Judaism -- unique among other religions as elder brother of Christianity, with its own ongoing, irrevocable covenant with God -- will be remembered as a hallmark of his papacy.

Pope John Paul was convinced that prayer could bring believers together, an idea that inspired the 1986 World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Italy.

That unprecedented gathering at the pope's invitation drew leaders of Jews, Buddhists, Shintoists, Muslims, Zoroastrians, Hindus, Unitarians, traditional African and Native American religions and many others. Together, under the roof of the Basilica of St. Francis, they all prayed, side by side, with Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders for world peace.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States by extremists acting in the name of Islam, the pope convened another Assisi meeting in early 2002 and told more than 200 spiritual leaders: "Terrorism never again." The participants issued a joint condemnation of all violence in the name of religion.

In scores of other encounters and speeches over more than two decades, Pope John Paul sought to draw representatives of all religions into deeper mutual understanding, respect and dialogue about shared values and beliefs.

At the same time, he insisted that Catholics engaged in dialogue be true to their core beliefs and the spread of the Gospel.

In 2000, he approved a controversial Vatican document emphasizing Jesus Christ's unique place as savior of humanity, the universal and absolute value of Christianity and the "gravely deficient situation" of those outside the church.

The pope's dialogue efforts focused especially on Islam -- the other great monotheistic faith that, like Christianity and Judaism, claims Abraham as its father in faith and the God of Abraham as its God.

The church's relations with Islam under Pope John Paul were conditioned by political realities in many countries across the globe.

In recent years, the pope made special efforts to assure Muslims that the church did not view global terrorism and the efforts to curb it as a "religious war" between Islam and Christianity.

One of his first trips abroad was to Turkey, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, in 1979.

In a talk to the tiny Catholic minority there he urged respect for the

religious and moral values of Islam. In Istanbul he visited Santa Sophia -- then a museum, but historically one of the greatest churches in the world under the Byzantine Empire and one of the greatest mosques in the world during the Ottoman Empire.

In August 1985, when he visited Morocco at the invitation of King Hassan II, he became the first pope to visit an officially Islamic country at the invitation of its religious leader.

There, at a historic meeting with thousands of Muslim youths in Casablanca Stadium, he emphasized that "we believe in the same God, the one God, the living God."

In May 2001, the pope became the first pontiff in history to enter a Muslim place of worship when he visited the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, Syria. He paused to pray at a memorial to St. John the Baptist inside the mosque in an event that was televised around much of the Muslim world.

Official Catholic-Muslim dialogue expanded during his papacy, including ties between the Vatican and the Islamic clerics of Cairo's al-Azhar University, whom the pope met during a trip to Egypt in 2000.

But vast gulfs remained, chief among them the persecution of Christians in parts of Africa and Asia under Islamic religious law.

The pope repeatedly preached respect for the rights of Muslims to practice their faith, but often lamented the fact that in many countries -- chief among them, Saudi Arabia -- Christians had no similar rights, and even the possession of a Bible was considered a crime.

Visiting Muslim-dominated places like Sudan, the pope publicly called for mutual respect for religious freedom.

The slaying of a bishop and other missionaries in Algeria, presumably by Muslim extremists, prompted the pope to denounce all those who would kill in the name of God.

Pope John Paul met several times with the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists, and with Buddhist, Shintoist, Zen and other Eastern religious representatives.

In Thailand in 1984, he visited the country's 87-year-old supreme Buddhist patriarch, Vasana Tara, as the patriarch meditated in front of a golden statue of Buddha.

Ten years later, however, the pope's description of Buddhism as "in large measure an 'atheistic' system" occasioned criticism by some Buddhist leaders.

The Vatican had to reiterate the pope's deep respect for the religion.

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Contributing to this story was John Thavis at the Vatican.

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