

## **Complexities of the world urge religions to move from co-existing to acting together**

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In a recent letter to the editor of the *International Herald Tribune*, a reader wrote: «The fundamental problems we are facing today derive from religion. Most of the terrorism and the counter terrorism in the world are based on religious fanaticism and extreme belief systems». <sup>1</sup> Around the same time, a faithful of my church wrote to me the following view: "We are tired of violence and hate; the world is moving towards moral and spiritual destruction. Only religion can lead humanity to peace and justice, love and reconciliation". While contradictory perceptions of religion such as these are not new in the history of humanity, the expression of such views has increased noticeably during the last decade.

Two salient features of religion capture our attention:

### **1. Religion as a transforming and destabilizing force**

In the 20th century, Marxism in the Soviet Union and secularism in the west pushed religion to the periphery of public life. Religion has now emerged as a major public player. Many thinkers predict that the 21st century will become "the age of religion". Already, religion is strongly affecting world affairs. It has become integral to our daily life, impacting our private lives, our communities and the public spheres of our societies, even in those countries that have traditionally and constitutionally established clear separation between state and religion. There is a growing awareness of the special place that religion has in peoples' lives. In a world dominated by a culture of death, people are seeking life in religion. In a society torn apart by brokenness and hopelessness, people are looking for hope and meaning in religion.

The relationship between religion and politics is volatile. For some, the political role of religion is integral to its nature and vocation. For others, there are no clear demarcation lines separating religion from politics. There are also those for whom religion is a private affair. These approaches and trends have created confusion more or less in all religions. Hence, in some countries religion is exploited for political ends, and in others it is used to advocate false ideologies and perpetuate unjust structures.

As a reaction to the uncontrolled dominance of anthropocentric cultures, the revival of religiosity is sometimes expressed by blind conservatism and militant fundamentalism,

the dangers of which are far-reaching. Narrow-minded and exclusivist interpretations of religion are gaining ground more or less in all religions. Indeed, religion is going through a time of test and trial. Its presence in societal life is becoming ambiguous, and the gap between religion as a concept and religion lived by its followers is becoming enormous. These contradictory images and functions of religion, first as a moral force and catalyst of social and political transformation and, second, as a destabilizing force, create confusion and ambivalence. A critical assessment of religion's self-understanding and vocation is called for.

## **2. Religious plurality as a source of fear and hope**

In many regions, the growing role of religion in public life is accompanied by considerable changes in the religious landscape. Religiously homogenous societies are being replaced by multi-religious societies. Now that religions are living in permanent and close interaction with each other, religious plurality is no longer a conceptual issue; it affects the very texture of societal life and creates new paradigms, new ways of life, and a new self-understanding. It also shapes multiple-relationships and multiple belonging within our institutions, our families and even within ourselves.

While some fear the potential for syncretism, others see religious plurality as an opportunity to deepen and enrich their faith. From one perspective, plurality encourages dialogue and interaction, thus creating enrichment and progress; from the other perspective, it fosters the resurgence of narrow loyalties and fanaticism, thus creating tension and polarization. Are we then entering an age of uncertainty, full of fear and anxiety, contradictions and conflicts? Are we becoming a community of neighbors or strangers? Indeed, the co-existence of religions in many parts of the world has become shaky. Religions may generate mistrust and intolerance, and even fuel ethnic and political conflicts unless a common ground for a harmonious co-existence is found among them. Therefore, inter-religious collaboration, undergirded by a serious theological dialogue, is imperative and urgent. Furthermore, the churches and the ecumenical movement must seek a deeper theological understanding of religious plurality, which shapes the very context in which the church is called to witness to God in Christ.

Our ecumenical vision embraces the whole humanity, including other religions. In our *Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC* we clearly expressed our commitment "to foster dialogue and cooperation with people of other faiths in order to build viable human communities". In *Our Ecumenical Vision* we said: "We open ourselves for a culture of dialogue and solidarity, sharing life with strangers and seeking encounter with those of other faiths". In fact, the "dialogical co-existence" with other religions is affecting our theological perceptions, our relationships and the way we articulate and live out the Christian faith. In my last report I grappled with the question of "being church" in a globalized world, namely, the ecclesiological implications of globalization. In this report, I will tackle the question of "being church" in pluralistic societies and its impact on the ecclesiological self-understanding and missionary vocation of the church.

## INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: A CONTINUING ECUMENICAL CONCERN

During the centuries that the church has lived among people of different faiths, dialogue with other religions has been a permanent feature and a continuing concern in the life of the church. From the very inception, the modern ecumenical movement has treated the Christian approach to other religious traditions as an important issue.

### 1. 50 years of ecumenical experience

The first major event of the modern ecumenical movement, the World Missionary Conference (Edinburgh 1910), dealt with the issue of other religions as one of its major topics. The next Missionary Conference (Jerusalem 1928) debated the question of the understanding of and relationship with other religions. This Conference stressed the uniqueness and universality of Christ and also called all religions to work together to confront the consequences of secularization. Fearing the "syncretistic thinking" of Asian theologians, western theologians insisted on the uniqueness of biblical faith based on divine revelation through Jesus Christ. Although non-western theologians stressed on the uniqueness and revelatory character of the Christ-event, they acknowledged the presence of signs of God's revelation in other religions.

The Amsterdam and Evanston Assemblies of the WCC continued the discussion. At the New Delhi Assembly, the issue of inter-religious dialogue began to take shape and with the Uppsala Assembly it was included as a separate item in the Council's agenda. 1969 was a turning point. The Central Committee Meeting of 1969 recommended a consultation on Dialogue in Ajaltoun (Lebanon) in 1970. The *Ajaltoun Memorandum* became the basis on which the Central Committee, meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (1971), created a new sub-unit on **Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies**. The Nairobi Assembly then became a focal point in the dialogue debate. It stressed the need to clarify further the nature, purpose and limits of dialogue. The Vancouver Assembly paid particular attention to the theology of religions, which generated a critical discussion. The study project on *"My Neighbour's Faith and Mine: Theological Discoveries through Inter-faith Dialogue"* was an attempt to reflect further on questions and issues raised by the Vancouver Assembly. The Canberra and Harare Assemblies, and San Antonio (1989) and Bahia (1996) CWME Conferences opened new dimensions in the on-going debate.

In 1979 the Council developed *"Guidelines for a Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies"*. In view of emerging realities affecting the nature and scope of dialogue, these guidelines were revised in 2002 by this Central Committee. It is important to note that in the last decade inter-religious dialogue has marked a shift from academic topics to issues and areas touching societal life. Further, it has become a Council-wide concern. In one way or another, nearly all programmes of the Council addressed matters and challenges pertaining to dialogue, relations and collaboration with other religions. Many regional and national councils of churches and ecumenical structures, in response to the changing global realities and religious landscape of their environments, made dialogue an important part of their agenda and some even integrated it within their programmatic framework.

Inter-religious dialogue has also acquired an important place in the theological thinking and witness of the Roman Catholic Church. With the Vatican II Council, dialogue became integral to the Church's formal agenda. Pope Paul VI established a Special Secretariat (later Pontifical Council) for relationships with other religions. Since then, a number of papal encyclicals and proclamations have spelled out the special significance of inter-religious relations and dialogue for the life and mission of the church in a changing world. The call of Pope Jean-Paul II for religious leaders to come together to pray for peace in 1986 and 2002 in Assisi, and other steps of inter-religious nature taken by the Pope, have given a new stimulus to inter-religious rapprochement.

It must be noted that in view of the current situation in the world, Christian-Muslim relations, which have always been a concern within the ecumenical movement, are receiving priority attention. The common Abrahamic roots and the long history of coexistence of Christians and Muslims are an asset to this dialogue. At the same time, global realities are producing new tensions that need to be addressed with urgency and determination.

A close look at the major developments in inter-religious dialogue of the last half a century leads us inevitably to the following conclusions: First, the ecumenical movement has always been conscious of the need to develop an appropriate approach to the reality of religious traditions. There were, however, differences of approach and emphasis among the churches. Second, while developing Guidelines and Ecumenical Considerations, the Council has repeatedly stated that it can neither provide a theology of dialogue nor set a comprehensive policy for dialogue since the churches live in different contexts and have gained different experiences of dialogue with people of different faiths. Third, dialogue has caused controversy in and among the churches. Some have expressed fear about the objectives of dialogue and others have raised questions about the validity of other faiths. Dialogue remains the most complex and controversial dimension of the ecumenical movement.

## **2. Emergence of common perspectives on dialogue**

In the last fifty years we have discussed with other religions the basis, nature and purpose of dialogue. We have made statements and established guidelines. What are the common perspectives and experiences that have been gained, and what are the emerging realities and challenges?

a) Dialogue is a search for *truth*. All religions are, in a sense, bearers of truth but in different ways, and each religion has its own perceptions and claims of truth. Dialogue gives a religion the sense of being incomplete without the other. This does not imply a lack of fullness or deficiency. Dialogue is a learning-and-listening process. It may lead to the discovery of new dimensions of truth. It may also challenge a religion to redefine and reaffirm the truth it holds.

b) Dialogue does not *compromise* one's faith. Rather, it helps those involved in dialogue to grow in their faith experience. Hence, dialogue does not mean avoiding issues; it means going deeper into the issues, not in order to remove differences, but to challenge

the partners to approach these differences holistically. This is, indeed, the basis and the driving force of dialogue. Respecting the integrity, the claims and beliefs of each religion is a *sine qua non* condition for any solid, frank and critical dialogue.

c) The aim of dialogue is not *negotiation*; its aim is mutual empowerment and deepening mutual trust. Dialogue should raise questions and ensure broader perspectives and a fresh understanding. In dialogue, differences do not disappear; they are explained honestly, perceived correctly and accepted in confidence. Dialogue may create both divergence and convergence; it may lead to even greater ambiguities. Yet, it may also open new spaces of creative interaction and greater rapprochement. Dialogue is always a creative and risky process.

d) Dialogue carried on in the spirit of mutual respect generates *hope* in the midst of hopelessness and despair. In conflicts or emergency situations, dialogue may become a last resort in pointing the way forward. In situations of distrust, it may play an instrumental role in reducing fear and suspicion and in creating an atmosphere of mutual confidence. In fact, in frank dialogue mutual stereotypes are replaced by better understanding and thus dialogue becomes a sign of hope and a promising way towards peace and reconciliation.

e) *Exclusive* approach, *confrontational* language and *judgmental* spirit have no place in dialogue. True dialogue is a frank sharing of information, convictions and experiences. Dialogue implies mutual challenging and questioning. Transparency, simplicity and humility will make dialogue an even more genuine process of deepening mutual knowledge and enhancing mutual understanding and respect. Through dialogue we come to know the other from within by having entered into the other's experience.

When looking at the present inter-religious predicament, it is important to consider the following points: First, dialogue is no longer an academic activity involving only historians, scholars and theologians. People from all walks of life are engaged in a living dialogue. We are experiencing a *dialogue of life*, which embraces all aspects and spheres of human life. Therefore, dialogue is no longer a matter of simply exchanging views; it is the experience of living together, reflecting together and working together. Second, dialogue must be contextualized. Churches and communities living in different environments are faced with different issues and concerns emerging from living with people of other faiths. This reality calls for a dialogue at many levels and in different forms. It also calls for specific agendas pertaining to concrete situations.

### **3. A renewed interest towards dialogue**

In the last few years, ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism and their attendant violence have increased alarmingly. In response, inter-religious initiatives have proliferated. Most of these inter-religious activities are geared towards conflict resolution and peace making. Some of them are aimed at developing a common ethical framework on the basis of shared values and perspectives. Others, organized in conjunction with global or regional events and processes, are attempting to encourage the participation of religions. Religious leaders are sometimes invited to provide support to major social, economic, scientific and even political gatherings. Nearly all these initiatives are one-

time events, lack focus and have only a short-term impact. There is a clear need to provide context and substance to inter-religious activities, and to seek inter-connection and harmony between bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogues.

The reports and statements of inter-religious meetings and activities speak of "unfinished task". The task is not only unfinished but is now more critical and complex. Indeed, we are living in a fragile world, ecologically, politically, economically and morally. So far religions have not gone beyond expressing unilaterally, and in some cases multilaterally, their deep concern over issues and developments affecting the life of societies. The enfolding realities and crises of the world urge all religions to move from mere reaction to common response. "Being ecumenical" is a challenge to all religions. Dialogue is the only way for religions to become pro-active, the only way for them to articulate their common voice concretely and to participate actively in the transformation of society. The Ajaltoun inter-religious meeting stated: "We do not yet see the way through".<sup>2</sup> As Christians today do we see "the way through"? I doubt it. In 1971, the Central Committee declared: "There is need for frank and continuing discussion among the churches on the nature and meaning of dialogue as well as on the experiences and insights gained".<sup>3</sup> These words still hold true. There is no alternative to a dialogue that challenges all religions to go beyond their institutional and dogmatic boundaries to seek a common ground for living, reflecting and working together. With this understanding and vision our churches are called to re-engage responsibly in this "common adventure".<sup>4</sup> Given the complex and sensitive nature of inter-religious dialogue, the engagement of the churches must be constantly reviewed and re-assessed in a critical and realistic manner.

## **IS A HOLISTIC AND INCLUSIVE THEOLOGY POSSIBLE?**

The church's involvement in dialogue must be placed in a proper theological perspective; otherwise, it may become confusing and risky. What are the acceptable boundaries of dialogue for the church? Christians engaged in theological dialogue with people of other faiths must learn how to approach the other religions and the parameters of their discussion appropriately. In light of my report, the Central Committee in its last meeting recommended that Faith and Order, together with CWME and Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue Office, study "the appropriate theological approaches on the relationship of Christianity and other religions".<sup>5</sup> Multi-religious societies provide a new context for Christian theology; they call for new ways of doing theology. The theological approach to and dialogue with other religions must necessarily include the following entry points and dimensions:

### **1. The Christological dimension**

Christology, particularly the economy of salvation, has played a pivotal role in shaping the Christian attitude towards other religions. Where are the people of other faiths in the salvific act of God in history? Christian theologians have wrestled with this critical question from several perspectives. The claim for uniqueness and universality of Christ, which is at the center of Christian teachings, remains a controversial topic in dialogue. Some theologians are rather categorical on this point: they argue that all religions outside Christ are devoid of the truth. Others think that God's salvific act goes beyond the boundaries of institutional Christianity and that, therefore, we must not "stand in

judgment of others".<sup>6</sup> They believe that it is possible to consider other religions as integral to God's universal plan of salvation if their claims are not in basic contradiction to God's revelation in Christ.

The ecumenical movement has broadened the scope of our Christological thinking. The focus of God's saving economy is the Christ-event, but it cannot be confined to its unfolding in history; it embraces the entire humanity and creation and is expressed in different ways.<sup>7</sup> However, this does not in any way compromise the uniqueness and universality of Christ. In fact, "In Christ all will be brought to life" (1 Cor. 15:22) and the church is the sacrament, the first fruits of all humanity called to salvation. In this context some have spoken of "unknown" or "hidden Christ" (Panikkar, MM. Thomas), who is present in one form or other in every human being. Others have developed the concept of "anonymous Christian" (Karl Rahner). Some have proposed "Christocentric syncretism" (Samartha). Others have referred to "complementarity and convergence" between Christianity and other religions (J. Dupuis). What is the relationship of God's economy of salvation in Christ to the economy of His presence and activity in other religions?<sup>8</sup> This critical question requires serious scrutiny. The concept of what is referred to by eastern church fathers as "Logos theology" may help us to see God's economy of salvation in Christ in a cosmic perspective. In fact, the "logos theology" was developed not only out of the philosophical outlooks of eastern fathers; it also emerged out of the existential experiences of the Orthodox Churches with heathens, Jews and, later, with Muslims. Hence, the "logos theology," which takes God's economy beyond historical limitations, may open new avenues of creative theological interplay with other religions.

## 2. The Pneumatological dimension

Patristic theology has laid a special emphasis on pneumatology, considering it an efficient way of articulating the catholicity of God's economy in Christ. The Holy Spirits' economy is distinct from that of the Son; but it must be seen in the context of the salvific economy of the Triune God, not parallel to or outside of God's action in Christ. The Holy Spirit "blows where it wills" (Jn. 3: 8); we only see its "signs". The work of the Holy Spirit has been perceived by the Orthodox pneumatology as being cosmic, continuous, invisible and mysterious. In God's act of creation and recreation, the specific function of the Holy Spirit is one of "completing", "perfecting", "guiding", "governing", "freeing", "renewing" and "fulfilling", as described by the Church Fathers.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, pneumatology broadens our theological vision and enables us to identify the ways that the Spirit of God is at work in the lives of people of other religions. The Canberra Assembly, with its theme: *Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation*, has made a significant contribution in terms of enlarging the scope of our theological thinking. However, the same Assembly has also created a huge controversy over the way the nature and the function of the Holy Spirit are perceived by those churches living in inter-religious contexts. The work of the Holy Spirit embraces the whole creation and the entire history of humanity and leads us to discern God's other activities in history apart from the Christ-event. It takes Christ beyond the historical Jesus and beyond the limits of the church. The statement of *Dominus Iesus* on this point is significant: "The salvific action of Jesus Christ with and through his Spirit extends beyond the visible boundaries

of the church to all humanity".<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Holy Spirit leads us to all truth. I believe that with the "logos theology" and with the particular emphasis on pneumatology, Orthodox theologians can and should contribute in a special way to the theological understanding of religious pluralism.

### **3. The Missiological dimension**

Christians are "sent to the end of the earth" (Mat.28: 18-19). We cannot compromise mission because it is not ours; it is God's. But in the midst of pluralistic societies, we are bound to review and re-evaluate our prevailing missiological perceptions, strategies and methodologies. A new missionary self-understanding will help us to resolve the continuing dichotomy between dialogue and mission. In fact, dialogue is neither the end of mission nor a new instrument for mission. It is, in a sense, an outreach aimed not at converting the other, but of witnessing our faith in interaction with the other.

Christian mission is rooted in God's salvific act. God's saving work transcends the church's boundaries and reveals itself in history in manifold ways. Religions respond to God's offer of salvation in quite different ways as well. An inclusive understanding of God's salvific act will lead the church to consider other religions as part of God's plan of salvation and not as mere "mission fields". In our missionary strategy we should not, particularly in pluralistic environments, seek to add new members; rather we should seek to identify "the Christic values in other religions" and "awaken the Christ who sleeps in the night of the religions".<sup>11</sup> We should perceive the church's missionary outreach as God's *particular* not *exclusive* salvific action. San Antonio was clear on this point: "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ, at the same time, we cannot set limits to the saving power of God". And referring to the "tension" existing between these contradictory convictions, it declared: "We appreciate this tension and do not attempt to resolve it".<sup>12</sup> *Dominus Iesus* has also addressed this issue by pointing out the necessity of keeping these two truths together, namely "the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation".<sup>13</sup> It is my conviction that this missiological self-perception and self-articulation of the church will not jeopardize *missio dei*; rather it should open it to new horizons.

### **4. The Eschatological dimension**

Eschatology is basic to biblical teachings. The Holy Spirit is leading humanity and creation towards their final consummation in Christ. The church is not an established reality; it is on the way towards parousia. The church is the sacrament of future unity. According to Christian theology, eschatology is a reality "here and now" and will reach its fulfillment in parousia. Three points deserve our attention: first, eschatology offers a perception of Christian faith that is future-oriented and open to God's transformative action; second, eschatology gives a broader perspective to the Christian claim of exclusivity since "all things" are moving towards the eschaton and "will be united in Christ" (Eph. 1: 9-10); and, third, eschatology creates the space for a dynamic interaction with other religions in the context of God's salvific plan for the whole humanity and creation.

Religions are not self-centered and self-sufficient institutions solely concerned with their perpetuation. They look beyond themselves and strive in different forms and ways to attain their goals. Hence, all religions potentially contain, in all aspects of their life, elements of eschatological vision. Is it safe then to look at religions as provisional realities moving towards eschatological convergence, towards God's future? Is it correct then to consider dialogue as the way leading the religions to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation (Eph. 1: 10)?

Religious plurality is God's gift. God speaks to other religions through the "hidden Christ". Christological, pneumatological, missiological and eschatological approaches in their inter-relatedness will help us to discern God's ways outside the church by which He intends to fulfill His purpose for the whole humanity. Therefore, these four entry points must, in my judgment, constitute the framework of our theological dialogue with other religions.

Religious plurality challenges our theology to re-assess its paradigms and stereotypes, and develop a new hermeneutic in order to enter into a meaningful dialogue with other religions. Such a serious effort would involve first, elaboration of a *holistic* theology that provides broader perspectives and opens new avenues in its relations to other religions; second, a *dynamic* theological framework that can, in creative interaction, hold the universality of God's salvation for all humanity and particularity of His revelation in Christ; third, an *inclusive* theological language that maintains the specificity and integrity of Christian faith and moves it from Christocentrism to theocentrism in order to foster critical relations with other religious thoughts; and, fourth, a *responsive* theology that is dialogical in nature and sensitive in its approach to new realities and changing contexts. I believe that only through such an all-embracing theology can we bring together the mutually exclusive claims of religions in dialogical interaction, and challenge them to understand themselves as being "on the way" to God's eschatological future. Only through such a theology can we grapple seriously with the basic ecumenical question of what "being" church in the context of pluralist societies means. Indeed, we need to seek fresh ways of understanding the Gospel and relating it to changing realities. We need to explore with other religions the credible and reliable ways that can help us to live together responsibly and peacefully.

## **LIVING TOGETHER WITH OUR DIFFERENCES**

Globalization is drawing people together irrespective of religion, race or culture. In the "global village" we must live together. Dialogue is no longer merely a theological question; it is essentially an existential challenge of living together. For centuries religions have built their own communities, their own spiritual ethos, their own theological, ethical and legalistic walls to protect themselves. Today a new culture of co-existence is taking shape as people belonging to different religions are increasingly becoming aware of their common brokenness and common destiny before God. In fact, this sense of commonality and mutuality is developing what I call a "spirituality of living together", which is expressed in diverse forms and ways. Parallel to this growing trend, we are also experiencing a deepening tension between identity and plurality, which is leading many societies to confrontation and disintegration. Indeed, new "walls of separation" are being built in a world that is in the process of destroying the old walls. A

disintegrated plurality, coupled with religious conservatism, may eventually become a source of mistrust and new divisions if it is not transformed into a sharing and integrated community.

The necessity to live together does not only arise from globalization. Life together is a gift of God. We all belong to the one household of God. Living as community is integral to all religions. It must be noted that from the very inception of dialogue with other religions, the WCC has emphasized community both as the context and the aim of dialogue. I believe that this approach needs to be further explored and strengthened in a world in which communities are constantly and directly exposed to the dangers of losing their identity and integrity. The question is: What kind of community shall we seek with our neighbors? Living together as community raises complex problems and critical issues that need to be properly addressed by all religions.

### **1. Providing space for the "other"**

Community may either protect or absorb identity. Identity, in turn, may divide, isolate and exclude; it may even destroy community. Threats to identity fuel conflict. For all these reasons, we need to build communities that enhance identities and at the same time allow them to interact with each other through a mutual learning-and-sharing process. I want to make the following observations:

a) Religion provides a profound sense of identity and belonging. In some societies religion is the most powerful expression of identity and a distinctive mark of differentiation. Because religious identity is narrow and exclusive, it may lead to mistrust, alienation and intolerance. Religious identity is often opposed to plurality and thus religious plurality is perceived as a potential source of conflict. This is the case presently in many societies, and religions must face this reality with utmost sensitivity.

b) "Being different" is God's gift, and being human means to accept God's gift in humility and gratitude. By defining ourselves in isolation from the other, we reject the other. Living together is to define our identity in relation to the other. Religious identity should not lead to exclusive and absolutist self-understanding. This will isolate a religion, and isolation breeds hate and violence. Because we cannot change our differences, we should learn to live with each other the way we are. We should respect the "dignity of difference"<sup>14</sup> and make space for the other, a space where identities dialogue, not where they confront each other.

c) Religious communities are called to reject exclusive and self-contained perceptions of community and to examine their stereotypes. This approach will certainly create trust that in turn will build community. Living together as community challenges the members of that community to rediscover and re-articulate their identity and strive for a greater and credible one. A religiously and ethnically distinct local community that remains isolated within a broader community may develop a fundamentalist mentality. In globalized and pluralistic communities the "other" must become a neighbor, not an isolated foreigner. If we accept the "otherness" of the other, we can transform mutual hostility into mutual creativity and growth and thereby built a harmonious community.

d) Living together as community calls for a perception of identity that promotes integration and does not produce disintegration or alienation; an understanding of identity that embraces the other instead of rejecting him or her, gives space to the "other" instead of occupying the other's space. How can we affirm our *self*-understanding and move forward together with our neighbors to define our *common* understanding? More and more, globalization will create a profound crisis of identity. The only force strong enough to stand up to this threat and protect identity is religion. Through dialogue people of faith must come to see their identity within one household of God and as part of one common identity in God. Otherwise, the growing plurality and the forces of globalization and secularization will sooner or later lead particularly religiously dominated societies to become submerged in conflicts of identities.

## **2. From dialogue in community to dialogue for community**

In pluralistic societies there are majority and minority relationships. In order to survive as a community, minority groups often remain strongly attached to their religious and cultural identity and exclude other communities. These communities are fertile ground for the forces of exclusion, oppression and polarization, which are often hidden behind religious convictions and practices and are exploited for ethnic and political ends. To counter these forces, religious communities must build bridges of trust and live together peacefully and harmoniously and with the sense of mutual responsibility and accountability. Community building is more urgent than ever before, and religions are called to make it a high priority on their agenda. They need to develop a broader vision of community and a new paradigm for community building. The following factors and approaches may help this process.

a) Through His Spirit, God constantly draws peoples together as a community. Community building implies relationship with God, with each other and with nature. These dimensions are crucial for building and sustaining community. We do not attain community simply by sharing a particular geographical locality. We attain it through those shared values that determine these relations and strengthen trust-building and mutual acceptance. A pluralist community that lacks reference to a common moral basis will collapse or at least remain disintegrated and disoriented. Indeed, the absence of basic moral values, needed to sustain and govern the life of human society, causes many of the evils that jeopardize the integrity and security of communities.

b) The prevailing tension between acceptance and rejection, tolerance and extremism appears in different ways and forms in societies. By itself, a common ethical framework will not defuse the tension. What we urgently need is a culture of mutual trust, the *sine qua non* condition for a true community. If we are to live together as neighbors, we must enter into a trust-building relationship based on a more genuine appreciation of each other's faith. This will become possible only if we reject negative attitudes and strive to truly understand other religions. We do not dialogue by simply talking to each other; we dialogue by building trust and community across ethnic, religious and cultural barriers. The real dialogue breaks the mistrust.

c) In order to overcome the suspicion and tension that religious plurality creates between specific identity and the wider identity, dialoguing parties must build a sense of mutual belonging. Unjust and false communities advocate precarious balances of identities, which, in turn, do not promote mutual and common belonging. In a true community, identities grow together with a profound sense of belonging to each other. In fact, living as community does not mean providing only geographical space but also spiritual, intellectual, political, social and economic space for each other.

d) The existence of majority-minority relationships within a community can easily break that community. To avoid this eventuality, the community-building process must foster a sense of partnership, participation and mutual accountability. It must create awareness of the common obligations and rights based on co-citizenship. This awareness can then strengthen the dialoguing parties to hold together faith communities and ethnic groups within the broader community, and can challenge them to share mutual concerns and joy and to face together common issues with a sense of common responsibility.

e) There is no community without diversity. In a real community the majority accepts diversity, and minorities consider themselves as an integral and inseparable part of the whole. Accepting diversity means inclusion, a sense of mutual belonging, and equal participation. Integrated and coherent diversities can keep a community from falling into tribalism and encourage it to replace mistrust by trust, alienation by rapprochement and tension by reconciliation. In fact, diversity is the rejection of exclusiveness, which is the source of unilateralism, fundamentalism, racism, ethnocentrism and similar evils that destroy the community and the moral foundations of society.

f) A common affirmation of the sanctity of life is key to community building. Values that promote fullness, integrity and dignity of life constitute the guiding principles of all attempts aimed at community building. Community is essentially a quality of life sustained by moral and spiritual values. The sanctity of life belongs to the *esse* of religion. Hence, religions should care for life in all its forms and expressions; they should affirm a holistic vision of life and promote a culture that works for a sustainable society and ecological system, and has a deep respect for life.

g) For the Church, the Christ-event is the foundation of a new community; in Christ, God restores the creation and humanity to their wholeness, integrity and dignity. The church is the ferment and the sign of the community to be fulfilled in parousia. Therefore, community building is a God-given mission for the church. What are the implications of our community in Christ to the broader community that we share with our neighbors? The concept of "community of communities", which was launched in the ecumenical movement during 1980's, must be revisited in a new world context. Search for community must remain at the heart of the Council's inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. How can people of different faiths live together as one community, accepting and respecting their God-given differences, rights and obligations? How can the church, together with other religions, transform the "living together" into a "wider community"? Plurality calls the church for a new missionary self-understanding and engagement. I trust that the forthcoming CWME Conference in 2005 will deal with this critical issue properly.

## **EXPLORING NEW WAYS OF WITNESSING TOGETHER**

Dialoguing and community building imply working together. The troubled world is looking for guidance from religions. That guidance will not come from what religions can say together but from what they can *do* together. Can religions formulate a common vision of humanity that will enable them to give perspective and substance to their common witness? We must be realistic. We must spell out clearly what we can do together and what we cannot do together. Dialogue should re-affirm and deepen what unites the religions. It should also identify divisive issues, not through confrontational approach, but in the spirit of mutual understanding and respect. Reactionary, apologetic and defensive attitudes will never ensure credibility for religions. Religions must become pro-active. Complexities and polarizations of the present world urge religions to go beyond conceptual divergences to convergence in action on fundamental issues. I believe that the primary responsibility of religions is to address those common areas and issues that touch the basic values and principles governing the life of societies. I want to point out three specific areas where organized and efficacious inter-religious collaboration is indispensable.

### **1. For a transforming and integrated religious education**

In multi-religious societies religious education is crucial. It may both encourage and hinder the ability to live and witness together. Plurality is a challenge and an opportunity for inter-religious learning. It calls for a non-parochial religious education, one that is critically open to its environment. To attain this sort of education, the existing educational systems must be revised and religious education must become more relevant and contextual. Different religions have different perceptions of education; yet they agree on its basic aim, to provide spiritual growth and moral formation. The following perspectives may help religions re-organize religious education in pluralistic societies.

a) The primary goal of education is to provide accurate, objective and comprehensive knowledge about religions, the way they are and not the way we perceive them. Knowing each other helps removing mutual fear, approaches and considerations that encourage fanatic and insensitive attitudes towards each other. Ignorance leads to prejudice and misconception, while mutual knowledge generates mutual confidence. Religious education could become an effective instrument for nurturing relationships, cultivating friendship and developing shared responsibility.

b) Religious education must promote a culture of diversity by combating exclusivism and extremism. Such a process becomes possible by discovering and affirming common values and identifying common concerns, on the one hand, and by rediscovering and reaffirming one's own particularity, on the other hand. We must aim at an educational system and policy where particularity and plurality are in creative interplay.

c) Religious education must be geared towards community building. Within this context, respecting the otherness of other, avoiding absolute claims that question the legitimacy of the other, creating safe space for communication and learning are crucial. Such an open

and dynamic process of education will significantly contribute towards deepening the sense of community.

d) Religions must strive to create a holistic educational system and vision. While respecting the particularity of each religion, this approach must aim at a formation and learning process that is inclusive and interactive. Religion is a liberating, renewing and transforming factor; it may also become an oppressive force. Education is a strong tool that may be used for both ends. Religions are urged to make religious education a transforming and integrating process.

## **2. Religion as agent of healing and reconciliation**

Humanity and creation are broken, fragmented and polarized. They need healing, wholeness and reconciliation. Religion, which sometimes is exploited for division and confrontation, is called, in faithful obedience to its very nature and vocation, to act as an agent of healing and reconciliation. Particularly in situations of brokenness, religion must become trust-builder and reconciler.

a) In this world of increasing alienation and confrontation, religions should work together to address situations in which religion is being exploited to fuel ethnic and political tensions. These situations distort the very image of religion and bring its credibility into question. Religions must help each other to defuse potential conflicts. Dialogue could serve as an effective preventive measure by leading religions towards an active healing and reconciling ministry, something urgently needed in the world today.

b) Through a process of common reflection and action, religions can work together to promote the values of healing, wholeness and sustainability. It is vitally important that religions concretely manifest in their own life and witness their intrinsic values of life and love, forgiveness and humility. As Christians, we believe that God is reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ; and the church is called to the ministry of hope and reconciliation (2nd Cor. 5:18).

## **3. Towards an active prophetic role**

Unless religions act together prophetically on issues of common concern, the inter-religious dialogue will lose much of its significance, and the credibility of religion will be at stake. The prophetic role, a unique mark common to all religions, calls them to move beyond their confines and self-interests and to engage themselves in the service of a common cause. By assuming such a prophetic role, the religions are engaging in spiritual combat against evil forces that constantly endeavour to establish their dominance in all spheres of human life. By acting together to assume this role, religions will become the strong voice of the voiceless and the moral force holding the communities together and leading them towards a common future. The prophetic role of religions calls for a concerted action particularly in the following areas:

a) Together with the other players of society, religions must work for a civil society sustained by spiritual and moral values, a society built on principles of responsibility and

participation, rights and obligations, justice and accountability; a society led by a transparent, accountable and just governance.

b) Religious fundamentalism, which is generally considered as a reaction to secularism and an effort to return to the roots of religion, has become the greatest enemy of religion and the most dangerous force of our times. All religions potentially contain fundamentalist elements. Overcoming fundamentalism and particularly its militant expression is an urgent and top priority for all religions.

c) Religion is a peacemaker; it is also a justice-promoter by its very vocation. Therefore, religion cannot be passive towards issues of justice and peace. These are universal values that apply across the categories of religions, nations, class and gender. By taking sides with the oppressed, the religions defend not only human rights, but also the credibility and relevance of religion. Indeed, struggling for peace with justice is one of the major tasks of religions.

d) Preventive approach is another important dimension of the prophetic role of religion. Through awareness building, monitoring and advocacy, religions must seek to preempt the misuse of religion, which has become a major cause for so many of the tragedies and conflicts that have affected several communities and regions.

e) Violence is one of the most deeply disturbing features of contemporary societies. Much of this violence is invoked by the concepts of anti-secularism and anti-globalization. Some sectors in each religion have embraced these concepts; others have abhorred them. Often religion is invoked as a justification for violence. Indeed, violence becomes more frightful when its legitimacy is rooted in religion. Non-violence is at the heart of all religions. Therefore, we must seek to remove the root causes of violence by promoting life, dignity and justice and by working for a global culture of peace. In this way, religions could give a common witness to the world.

## **DIALOGUE WITH OTHER RELIGIONS: AN ECUMENICAL PRIORITY**

As a response to new global developments and unfolding events impacting the life of churches, societies and religions during the last few years, the WCC renewed its emphasis on dialogue. I strongly believe that as we continue the re-evaluation of the programmatic structures of the Council and prepare ourselves to embark on a process of "a new ecumenical configuration for the 21st century", dialogue, relations and collaboration with other religions must occupy a high priority in the Council's ecumenical witness. To this effect I want to make the following observations.

1. With its more than 50 years of rich experience, the Council should seek to become an efficient instrument of networking and advocacy on global issues of inter-religious concern. In this context the Council's task could be twofold: to strengthen and intensify inter-religious bilateral and multilateral dialogues on the global level, and encourage, facilitate and support similar activities on the regional and national levels. Many churches, NGO's, major institutions of other religions and even some governments expect

such initiatives from the WCC. In fact, CUV clearly indicates that inter-religious dialogue and collaboration is integral to the Council's ecumenical vocation.

2. The ecumenical movement must reflect critically on the ecclesiological and missiological implications of religious plurality. In fact, *"The Nature and Purpose of the Church"* and *"theological anthropology"* studies of Faith and Order, the theme of 2005 CWME Conference, *"Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities"*, and *"Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV)"* and *"Caring for Life"*, one of the major foci of the Council adopted after the Harare Assembly, will significantly contribute to this process.

3. Inter-religious dialogue must not be used as a last resort to political negotiations or only in emergency situations. Theological dialogue must have its own integrity, agenda and methodology. The Council is called to give quality and direction to its ever-growing inter-religious activities. In this context and in light of our experiences of the last few years, the following points need to be given special consideration: first, the agenda of dialogue must not be repetitious; it must include timely, critical and even controversial issues pertaining to concrete situations that touch the life of religions, and religion-society relations; second, with the active participation of key leaders, clergy and laity, and in close collaboration with religious institutions and public players concerned with issues of dialogue, the Council must make its inter-religious initiatives more efficient, organized and comprehensive; third, inter-religious dialogues must not be one-time events; they must become part of the Council's global agenda and on-going ecumenical witness.

4. Christian education in multi-religious societies must remain a high priority for the Council. The rich experiences that the Council has gained during the last decade should help the churches to raise awareness among Christians on how a Christian should affirm his or her identity in openness to others, and how the churches should identify new models and methodologies of effective teaching in pluralistic contexts. Particular attention should be given to the inter-religious dimension in the churches' continuing attempt to redefine the nature and role of theological education and ministerial formation in the midst of pluralistic societies.

5. Under the impact of global changes, the churches have started to invest more time and energy on inter-religious dialogue, which has moved to the forefront of the churches' ecumenical agenda. The interest in dialogue is so intense, particularly in some regions that some may even interpret it as a shift from inter-church ecumenism to inter-religious ecumenism, or what is called "wider ecumenism". In this respect two points deserve our attention: first, most of our churches are unprepared to engage in inter-religious dialogue and face the concrete repercussions of plurality for the life of the church on the local level. Therefore, through seminars and other initiatives they have a major responsibility to give clear guidance to their faithful who are involved in daily and existential dialogue with their neighbors. The Council may help the churches in this process. Second, our churches must avoid, as far as possible, becoming part of arbitrary, isolated and selective inter-religious activities on local, regional or international levels. In similar cases consultation with local churches, national or regional ecumenical structures and the WCC is vitally important to ensure a coherent and effective Christian participation.

## MOVING FORWARD

In a world in which hopelessness is growing and moral and spiritual values are decaying, religions are urged to engage in a critical process of self-assessment and self-purification in order to transform the ambivalent role of religion. Religions are called to re-articulate their common values and renew their common affirmations and commitments by providing a moral foundation to global order and governance, and a clear vision for a just and sustainable world. Any religion that aims for power loses its *raison d'être*. God is the owner, protector, sustainer and reconciler of the whole humanity and creation. Religion is the servant and agent of God's universal plan.

Living, reflecting and working with people of other faiths is a risky yet hopeful process. The Christian fear of syncretism and betrayal of the Gospel will always remain with us, and ambiguities and uncertainties will continue to surround us. Furthermore, we may not reach a common perspective on many issues; yet dialogue is an irreversible process. We must, therefore, take the challenge of living our faith and proclaiming Christ in pluralistic communities responsibly and faithfully. We must also take the opportunity to dialogue and witness with other faiths seriously and courageously. As *Our Ecumenical Vision* reminds us, "our task is to embody, here and now, the vision of what God's people are willed to be". We have different faith-claims and convictions. Yet, our common origin, our common humanity and our common goal impel us to be together "on the way" to God's future. Let us, as Christians, engage ourselves with people of living faiths in this journey of discovery and rediscovery of our common roots, common truths and common calling. Let us engage with other religions in a creative process of renewal and transformation towards the eschatological fulfillment and reconciliation of the whole humanity and creation.

ARAM I  
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA

August 2003  
Antelias, Lebanon

### NOTES

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