

FROM COEXISTING TO LIVING TOGETHER^(*)

1) **Pluralism** is a salient feature of modern society. Nations, cultures, religions and civilizations do not simply coexist as self-centered and self-sufficient entities; they interact, condition and challenge each other. **Religion** is at the heart of human society. In some countries, religion is the center of gravity around which community life evolves. In other countries religion has been identified with the national ethos. While in the West religion and state are clearly separated, in many countries of the East religion enjoys state protection and privileges. In some places religion is part of ethnic or political conflicts. It is even used as a weapon for destructive purposes. In other places, religion bridges the gap between antagonists. Many emerging trends and realities indicate that religion will increasingly acquire a crucial importance in the life of modern society.

2) In the context of multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies, **dialogue** between religions is indispensable. Religions must open themselves to each other and to the world at large. However, because each religion is unique and believes itself to be universal, dialogue between religions is not easy. The language, symbols and value judgments of each religion are deeply rooted in that religion's ethos and history. Inter-religious dialogue must make room for different perceptions, different traditions and experiences. It must be realistic and contextual. Religions should explore ways of transcending their differences; they should work together to discover those things they have in common and build on them. Religions engaged in a serious dialogue must: a) consider diversity as a richness, a complementing rather than a conflicting factor; b) review their prevailing prejudices and stereotypes, and, thereby, replace biased attitudes, false interpretations and face-value judgments with greater knowledge, accurate information and a realistic evaluation; c) reject attempts towards syncretism and feelings of superiority, and avoid making false compromises or exclusivist claims; d) engage in a critical and creative process of seeking to understand each other's spiritual, theological and intellectual resources and experiences with mutual respect, understanding and trust.

A serious, open and frank dialogue will not endanger the specificities of religions; nor will it compromise their values and teachings. Rather, it will help to destroy the walls of prejudice, reaffirm each religion's integrity and credibility and generate mutual accountability and responsibility.

3) An unbroken link has always existed between the three monotheistic religions of **Judaism, Christianity** and **Islam**. Their sacred books have much in common. Theological and cultural affinities and centuries of coexistence have drawn them close together in many areas of their life. They have developed, particularly in the Middle East, a unique model of coexistence that is existential in nature and all-encompassing; this

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model, with its interaction of ideas, experiences and values, takes place within the framework of life, not *in abstracto*. In fact, different types of coexistence have emerged from this dialogue of life at different times and in different socio-political contexts. Inter-religious coexistence has sometimes been peaceful, dominated by mutual tolerance and understanding. At other times it has been characterized by tensions and conflicts, particularly when religion has been exploited for political and ethnic ends and when non-religious factors have overwhelmed inter-religious relations. Is this not true today in many regions and contexts?

4) The present globalized world with its manifold challenges calls for a new model of *living together*, a model that will promote **an integrated and coherent way of life**, where religious, cultural, ethnic and political specificities, civil obligations and democratic values are fully respected. One such model is Lebanon. Such a model of living together requires the following: a) it must emerge from and be responsive to concrete realities of a given place; b) it must strongly challenge all exclusive and inclusive tendencies and enhance common values that might transform inter-religious coexistence into a peaceful and meaningful way of living together; c) it must promote a quality of life that rejects alienation and distrust and promotes sharing together, suffering together and struggling together for the common good; d) it must become a source of hope, trust and reconciliation. Only with such a responsible and responsive way of living together can we build community based on participation and mutual accountability.

5) Coexisting is not an end in itself. It calls for living together as one community. The three religions have the potential to live together as one community. They must move from mere coexistence to **community-building**. They must do more than simply organize "dialogues". Using the common source of their faiths as a basis, they must reorganize and reshape their coexistence so that it becomes a source of hope and commitment for a better future. This process calls for a serious collaboration between the religions. This is not an easy process. It involves a multitude of complexities, complications and sensitivities. Yet, in a world in search of meaning, direction and hope, it is an imperative. How can we discern "common signs" existing among these religions and transform those signs into "common grounds"? How can coexistence provide the proper context for common reflection and action?

6) We all belong to *one household (oikumene)*, and that household is in danger. The ambiguities inherent in progress, technology and power have greatly undermined the relevance and credibility of moral and spiritual values. The ecosystem is in jeopardy due to its uncontrolled exploitation. Aggressive consumerism has created an alarming scarcity of natural resources. Values guiding humanity-creation-God relations are in decay. The management of our common household is indeed a common concern and a common responsibility. In order to guide our intra-national and international relations, we must work to rediscover the **common moral values** basic to all religions. Only by developing such a global ethical framework will religions be able to address the roots, not just the symptoms, of concerns and conflicts facing humanity. By being based on shared values and common goals, and by transcending narrow definitions of religious and national interests, the global ethical framework can establish a new quality of relationship

between nations, and challenge them to move from self-contained existence to dialogical interaction, from polarization to reconciliation, from coexistence to a genuine world community.

What are the essential ingredients of this ethical framework?

A) Religions must develop a **culture of active non-violence** by challenging the motives that generate violence and by transforming structures that cause injustice. In fact, the arrogance of power, the accumulated wealth of a nation, the language of threat, the logic of terrorism breed more violence and injustice. Religion should not be a source of conflict, hatred and violence, but one of love and tolerance. Cases and situations where religion is simply exploited are growing. The religions caught in this complex situation should articulate their common perceptions on the question of violence and non-violence clearly. They must not only react to violence or condemn it; they must overcome it in all of its forms by promoting values of justice and by working to build mutual trust. Acts of terrorism and various forms of conflict and injustices have ripped the fabric of coexistence in many societies. This critical situation requires serious collaboration between religions. The "Decade to Overcome Violence" (2001-2010) launched by the World Council of Churches must be taken seriously by all religions.

B) Religions must commit themselves to **building peace with justice**. Peace-making and justice-promoting are essential to the vocation of religion. They are intimately interconnected. Peace-building cannot ignore issues pertaining to human rights and justice. Religions are morally obligated to adopt a preventive approach to conflicts and a pro-active advocacy of promoting and defending the basic human rights and the good life for all. Religions should ensure that the doctrine of national security is replaced by that of common security, national interests by common interests and state interests by people's interest. No nation can feel secure by itself if others are insecure. This approach calls for a new vision of security, based on social, economic and political justice for all, peace for all and security for all. This approach should constitute a strategy, and be rooted in the basic ethical principles of active non-violence and peace with justice. With their inner spiritual resources, religions can offer opportunities for repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

C) Democratic institutions and even religions often monopolize and legitimize power, rather than serving it for the needs of people. The **responsible use of power** should become a major principle of a global ethical framework. Any expression of power that does not carry with it responsibility and accountability is a source of evil. Any use of power that is not geared towards justice, peace and participation, is not justifiable. All powers are temporary. History has always proved the truth of this basic ethical principle. Therefore, all nations are vulnerable, all systems are fragile. Not only should all nations live together as one community, they should work together as equal partners and with a sense of mutual accountability.

D) We live in a world where life is in danger. Technology and globalization have made all life vulnerable. Life is a gift of God; it is sacred. All acts that harm or destroy life are

contrary to the will of God. This is a basic teaching in all religions. Therefore, religions must defend the **sacredness and integrity of life** by promoting values that guide the relations of nations and by providing an ethical framework that may sustain humanity-creation relations.

E) Finally, we must work to reaffirm the presence of **transcendence** in modern societies. The growing anthropocentrism must be constantly checked by spiritual and moral values, that remind all people of their limits as human beings, of the need to balance human excesses with nature and, finally, of their accountability to God. This is the only way to restore humanity's true vocation, the centrality of God in the life of humanity and the creation and humanity's total dependence on God. We will achieve hope and progress, mutual understanding and trust only by "living together" responsibly as one community, sustained by common moral values. By "living together," as one integrated community, we can defeat the fear and anxiety that dominate the life of so many of the world's societies.

I want to conclude this brief presentation with a quotation from one of my recent books: "Living together in diversity, and living our diversities together has become an urgent imperative in a world where people of different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds are bound together as neighbors in one community" (*In Search of Ecumenical Vision*, Antelias, 2001, p. 285). Are we ready to move responsibly from coexisting to living together as one community in each and every place? This is the message that the world expects from religions. This is the commitment that we must make at this crucial juncture of human history.

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