

**International Conference on
“Christians and Muslims in Dialogue and Beyond”
Geneva, October 16-18, 2002**

**CHALLENGES FACING CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE
Introductory Remarks**

It is a great pleasure and special joy to welcome you to the Ecumenical Center. The World Council of Churches is a global fellowship of churches, which, through common reflection and action, calls the churches to closer collaboration and common witness aimed at the visible unity of the church. From its very inception, the Council has manifested a particular concern and openness towards the other living faiths. In many important meetings it has affirmed that dialogue with other religions is an integral part of its ecumenical work. The growing commitment of the WCC towards inter-faith dialogue was given concrete form in 1971 with the establishment of a department within its programmatic structure on “Dialogue with living faiths and ideologies.”

In the last thirty years the Council has played a highly significant role in promoting mutual understanding and trust between religions. The WCC has paid special attention to Christian-Muslim dialogue for three main reasons. First, Christianity and Islam share common roots and traditions as monotheistic religions; second, due to centuries of coexistence, these two religions have developed affinities and commonalities in several spheres of their life; third, in many societies Muslims and Christians live together in a common cultural, social and political life.

Globalization is spreading rapidly, pluralism is growing and fundamentalism is taking root in many societies. The critical issues and challenges that are emerging from these powerful movements make it urgent that all faiths, particularly Christians and Muslims, dialogue and collaborate. This International Conference on Christian-Muslim dialogue must be seen against the background of the WCC’s continuous commitment to Christian-Muslim dialogue and in the perspective of the renewed urgency given to Christian-Muslim relations in many parts of the world.

Today and in the coming days some of you will share with us your views concerning the present state of Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue by highlighting challenges and concerns facing these communities as they live their faith in the context of pluralistic societies. In my opening remarks I want to make the following observations to set the process and framework for our discussion:

1) *Dialogue is an invitation.* It is an invitation to reject ignorance, arrogance and pride. It is an invitation to break through our isolation, our self-centredness and our self-sufficiency. It is an invitation to recognize and accept the other. It is an invitation to live life responsibly. Living life responsibly implies being in dialogue with my neighbour, with the creation and with God. This is an essential element of Christian faith. According to Christian theology, revelation is God’s dialogue with humanity. The Christian concept

of God, humanity and creation is dialogical. Interdependence, interaction and inter-connection are signs of a humanity moving towards unity. Dialogue is a quality of life.

2) *Deepening mutual knowledge.* Although significant experience has been gained in Christian-Muslim dialogue, misconceptions, stereotypes and biased attitudes still prevail. This situation indicates that there has been something wrong in our dialogue. Knowing one another is an important component of dialogue. Mutual knowledge contributes to mutual understanding. We should not limit our knowledge about one another to only the facts of our faiths. We must take into consideration the living encounters of the people at different levels of society. Only by doing this can we deepen our mutual knowledge and face our uncertainties and fears with confidence.

3) *Trusting the “other”.* Religious identity is stronger than ethnic or cultural identity. It tends to build walls between people. However, we cannot allow these walls to stand. There are difficulties here. Our respective histories are full of contradictory experiences. Because of the absence of frank dialogue we have become suspicious of one another. Despite our differences, however, we are all part of one human community. We must live together and trust the other. This is the destiny of humanity. How can we do this? How can I trust the “other” and build morally sustainable communities? What are the most efficient ways of building trust in a new world context?

4) *Accepting our differences.* Although these two monotheistic religions have affinities, there are significant differences in their theological teachings, moral and social values and ways of life. They also have different attitudes in respect to many issues facing humanity today. We must not fall into the temptation of understating the existing differences and problems in order to effect an easy compromise. Such an approach will greatly endanger our dialogue. We must be clear in spelling out our commonalities and divergences. We must also be courageous in accepting our differences. In fact, we are different in many respects and we should remain so. We are called to make strenuous and continuous efforts to understand, accept and respect our differences. Mutual knowledge will create mutual understanding, and mutual understanding will help us to accept each other the way we are. This is the way of true dialogue.

5) *Theocentric humanity: the firm basis of our dialogue.* Christian-Muslim dialogue is not merely an intellectual and theological discourse. It is deeply rooted in our common and theocentric humanity. God is the source and the protector of our common humanity. Humanity is created by God and is accountable to Him. All aspects of human life are permeated by divine presence and action. Islam and Christianity both reject anthropocentrism in all its forms and expressions. However, the two religions have different perspectives on human stewardship, accountability and autonomy. They interpret issues related to human liberty, democratic values, divine rights and human rights differently. These different approaches have concrete implications to our communities living together in one place. These issues merit deeper exploration.

6) *Religion, civil society and state: an area claiming serious discussion.* Islam and Christianity perceive the nature and role of religion, civil society and the state quite

differently. They also differ on the nature and scope of their inter-relatedness. In light of these differences, in order to pave the future course of Christian-Muslim dialogue, we must analyze the concepts of co-citizenship, human rights and majority-minority relations. These are not simply academic issues; they are existential problems that deeply affect the co-existence of our communities. Hence, where Christians are a minority, there is a need to develop a societal order including a system of governance based on equal rights and full participation. Where Muslims are in a minority situation, broader spaces of creative interaction and wider possibilities of active participation in public life must be provided. Unless these issues are addressed seriously, Muslim-Christian community relations will continue to be characterized by feelings of inferiority, submission and intolerance. The fundamental question is: what does it mean to be co-citizens in a society in which Christians and Muslims live together?

7) *From self-understanding to interactive understanding.* Self-perception is critical in dialogue. But when it is defined and articulated in an exclusive way, it becomes a source of tension and conflict. This is true in the case of both Christianity and Islam, which have developed their self-perceptions on the basis of their understanding of divine revelation. How can we move from exclusive self-perception to an interactive and inclusive understanding of ourselves? How can we reach a level of critical self-definition? How can we see ourselves through the eyes of the other? We need to wrestle constantly with these questions.

8) *Assimilation or isolation?* People in western societies are either assimilated or isolated. How can a religious community preserve its identity and at the same time become integrated into a pluralistic and secular society? This is a question of the relationship between faith and culture. In Christianity culture is a product of society and it is always changing, while in Islam it is normative. This difference limits the creative interaction between minority Muslim communities and majority Christian communities. This lack of interaction isolates the two communities; this isolation breeds mistrust, intolerance and, potentially, violence.

9) *Towards new patterns of dialogue.* Typically, in the west, at least, Christian-Muslim relations involves a Christian West and a Muslim East, a secularized West and a conservative East, a tolerant West and an extremist East. Of course, these perceptions are erroneous. It is also erroneous to perceive Christian-Muslim relations in terms of theological dialogue only. In pluralistic societies today elements of these erroneous perceptions are found in both religions. In order to counter them, we need to explore new patterns of relations, methodologies and style of dialogue. We must restate our priorities and include all segments of society in our dialogue. Our dialogue must not be an end in itself; it must be oriented towards promoting common values and exploring common ways of working together and living together as one community. Therefore, our dialogue must be existential in its nature, realistic in its approach, and contextual in its agenda.

10) *Journeying together.* For many centuries, Christians and Muslims have been in constant contact with one other. The history of Christian-Muslim relations is full of ambiguities and complexities, tolerance and tensions. The world today is calling us to

engage in a dialogue of life. Ethnic, religious and political tensions and conflicts may disrupt our dialogue of life, but we must journey together by building bridges of creative interaction, moving from dialogical interaction to collaboration, broadening the circle of dialogue and relation, transforming stereotypes into better understanding and mutual trust, and building community sustained by commonly accepted moral values, by justice, peace and reconciliation.

We must learn from our respective histories and move forward, assessing and re-assessing our journey, identifying our priorities, addressing our common concerns and the challenges of today's world. This International Consultation is an important step forward in this journey.

Before I conclude my introductory remarks I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Konrad Raiser, who is with us and will join us in our deliberations. My appreciation also goes to Dr. Tarek Mitri for organizing this consultation. Finally, my thanks are due to all of you who have positively responded to our invitation to be part of this journey of hope.

Let us then continue our journey with renewed faith and hope in God who is the source of our existence, the sustaining power of our life and the guiding light of our journey.

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**

*10 October, 2002
Antelias, Lebanon*