

HH BARTHOLOMEW IST

Archbishop of Constantinople - New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch

Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Honorable Participants,
Dear Thierry de Montbrial,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

We would like to warmly thank the organizers of the 2021 World Policy Conference for inviting me to participate once again in its indispensable work and giving us the opportunity to meet, which inspires us so much to carry on with our common "good fight". The organizers are to be commended for planning this conference, ensuring the attendance of many leading figures and choosing a topical, multi-faceted theme.

Even a quick, succinct glance at the state of the world today can only give rise to a sense of fear. Not only are we still battered by the health crisis that hit the world over a year and a half ago, but new geopolitical reconfigurations, the challenge of fundamentalism and the climate and environmental crises are all sources of uncertainty and concern. However, there is no point in preaching doom and gloom by focusing solely on the difficulties around us. These times of crisis are putting our world to the test. The word "crisis", *κρίσις* in Greek, evokes a difficult situation while at the same time underscoring that we will be judged and assessed based on our reaction and response to this challenge.

Cooperation and joint action are imperative in the face of this towering contemporary crisis. No state, religion, institution, leader or science alone can face major problems without the collaboration of other bodies. We really need each other. We must build bridges and work together. Our future and the road leading to it are common.

Dialogue is the basis of collaboration. It is in itself a gesture of solidarity and a source of deeper solidarity. It produces mutual trust and acceptance. It is important to understand that dialogue is different from negotiation, debate, confrontation, criticism, etc. The best definition is certainly this magnificent sentence by Claude Lévi Strauss: "There is not, nor can there be, a world civilization in the absolute sense that this term is often given, since civilization implies the coexistence of cultures offering each other maximum diversity and consists even in this coexistence." Dialogue seems like a paradoxical tension between coexistence and exposure to maximum diversity.

This lesson also applies to us in the interreligious field, where dialogue is theoretical while being a *praxis* of coexistence. By this we mean that dialogue cannot be conceived only as a



means, an exchange of words. It is also an end in itself whose only objective is the encounter in its transformative capacity. When dialogue becomes transformative, it acquires all its density. Dialogue helps to fight against prejudice. It breaks down barriers. It puts people in touch with each other. It allows us to think differently about our relationship to otherness. Today, more than at any other time in its history, humanity really has the chance and the ability to bring about many changes through communication and dialogue.

On reflection, what some commentators for thirty years have called the “return of religion” is just the transposition of a much older phenomenon, a “diplomatic ecumenicalism” that developed in the context of the Cold War and aimed to reach out to Christians trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Since 1948, the World Council of Churches has paved the way for many real advances by building bridges on both sides of Europe. Let us recall Pope John Paul II’s commitment to peace, notably at the first meeting in Assisi in 1986. It was the first interreligious meeting on such a scale. That same year, the United Nations proclaimed 1986 “international year of peace” even as the East-West divide still polarized the planet and the war in Lebanon raged. The year 1986, then, was decisive on the interreligious and international front.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) is another example. While this forum for ecumenical dialogue focuses on bringing churches closer together, it has not lost sight of the importance of other religions. In its 2016 open letter “What Future for Europe?” the CEC stressed the importance of “a positive attitude towards adherents of different religions, cultures and world views”. On the issue of recognizing and respecting diversity, the letter notes: “Throughout its history, there was never a homogenous (Christian) Europe, and the Europe of the future will also be pluralist. In the past, Islam has helped shape culture, especially in the Iberian Peninsula and parts of the Balkans, and during the past few decades waves of immigration have brought Islam and other religions to many parts of Europe.”

Dialogue is then a principle of inclusion to which our churches and all religious players are called to contribute. What is true for Europe is also true for the international scene. Interreligious dialogue has become a pivotal part of peace processes between States and within societies. The migratory crisis is a prime example of this double-sided dimension.

The rise of religious fundamentalism as a phenomenon cutting across all religious traditions is a reality. It has certain specificities such as the literal interpretation of sacred texts, moral rigor, political instrumentalization and fierce opposition to any form of ecumenical or interreligious dialogue. Extremism and radicalization aim to privatize the truth by stoking confrontation. Dialogue then appears as the only means to build bridges that allow us to work for peace and mutual understanding. To quote from an address we made in Cairo in April 2017:

“For this reason, inter-religious dialogue recognizes the differences of religious traditions and promotes peaceful coexistence and cooperation between people and cultures. Inter-religious dialogue does not mean to deny one’s own faith, but rather to change one’s mind or attitude towards the other. It can also heal and disperse prejudices and contribute to a mutual comprehension and the pacific resolution of conflicts. Biases and prejudices come from the misrepresentation of religion. By our



presence today, during this important Conference, we would like to oppose at least one prejudice: Islam does not equal terrorism, because terrorism is a stranger to any religion. This is why inter-religious dialogue can chase away fear and suspicion. It is central for peace, but only in a spirit of mutual confidence and respect.”¹

This is the voice of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, a center of dialogue that promotes inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian, interreligious and intercultural dialogue and fruitful discussions with secular institutions, philosophy, science and environmentalists. It thrusts the dialogue “project” onto the world stage. The last time was at an interreligious G20 in Bologna, Italy. All dialogue is in the service of human dignity, peace and the future of humanity. Engaging in dialogue is a consequence of our faith that always strengthens our bearing witness in the world. What threatens our faith is not openness and dialogue, but dry monologue, asocial introversion and the rejection of communication. Once again we stress this point: we do not risk losing our identity through sincere dialogue. On the contrary, we are enriched and gain a deeper self-awareness.

It is our conviction that the traditions of religions are treasuries filled with central existential truths that have a special meaning in our times of moral dilemmas and axiological upheavals. The contemporary crisis calls on religions to bear witness to this truth by contributing to peace, reconciliation, the promotion of brotherhood and solidarity and respect for human dignity. Peace is not the obvious outcome of economic and cultural development, scientific and technological progress or quality of life. Peace is always a duty. It requires vision, effort, sacrifice and patience. As Hans Küng said: “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.” In this dialogue, he added, the fundamental moral values in the traditions of religions can be theorized and discussed as a “global ethic” that supports peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies while allowing specific cultural identities to develop.

This is why the Ecumenical Patriarchate steadfastly supports interreligious dialogue and participates in many interreligious gatherings. Our dialogue with Judaism officially began in 1977 and with Islam in 1986. In 1994 we initiated tripartite conferences with Judaism and Islam and we resolutely continue cooperating with KAICIID, the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Societies and other institutions. The Brussels Declaration, “The Peace of God in the World: Towards Peaceful Coexistence and Collaboration Among the Three Monotheistic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam” (12/20/2001), released shortly after the tragic September 11 attacks, was a decisive step in our Church's commitment to dialogue and peace between religions. Here are articles 1 and 8 of the declaration:

1. The will of God is for the peace of heaven to reign on earth. The peace of God is not the mere absence of war; it is the gift of abundant life. There is indeed an immediate and inseparable connection between peace and justice. Thus we pray constantly for peace to prevail in the world and for peaceful living together among the faithful of all religions in our modern, multicultural, and multi-ethnic global society.

¹ <https://fr.zenit.org/articles/la-religion-element-cle-du-processus-de-paix-par-le-patriarce-bartholomee-traduction-complexe/> (last consultation November 10, 2017)



8. We unanimously reject the assumption that religion contributes to an inevitable clash of civilizations. On the contrary we affirm the constructive and instructive role of religion in the dialogue among civilizations.

The June 2016 encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church is also very important. It expresses the ten participating Churches' joint commitment to interreligious dialogue as a key dimension in the search for peace. Here is an important passage from the encyclical:

*“Today we are experiencing an increase of violence in the name of God. The explosions of fundamentalism within religious communities threaten to create the view that fundamentalism belongs to the essence of the phenomenon of religion. The truth, however, is that *fundamentalism*, as “zeal not based on knowledge” (Rom. 10.2), *constitutes an expression of morbid religiosity*. A true Christian, following the example of the crucified Lord, sacrifices himself and does not sacrifice others, and for this reason true Christian faith is the most stringent critic of fundamentalism of whatever provenance. Honest interfaith dialogue contributes to the development of mutual trust and to the promotion of peace and reconciliation. The Church strives to make “the peace from on high” more tangibly felt on earth. True peace is not achieved by force of arms, but only through love that “does not seek its own” (1 Cor. 13.5). The oil of faith must be used to soothe and heal the old wounds of others, not to rekindle new fires of hatred.”*

In this perspective, we view the current global crisis as an opportunity for solidarity, openness, dialogue, responsibility and joint action. It is on this note that we will end this modest contribution. We thank you for your invitation and look forward to participating in the discussions.

Thank you for your attention.