

Globalization and Inter-Religious Dialogue

TEXTOS DE REFERÊNCIA

In the Name of the most high
**Globalization and
Inter-Religious Dialogue**

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This paper shall deal with the issue of “globalization and inter-religious dialogue”, two of the most important and universal topics of our times. The subject will be discussed in five sections. It should also be pointed out that what follows is, for the most part, derived from my own practical experiences in dialogue between religions and civilizations and I would be delighted to hear the views of the esteemed participants in this regard.

1. Inter-Religious Dialogue: The Historical Background

The history of inter-religious dialogue, in its present form, goes back to the late 1980s and the early 1990s, though dialogue among adherents of different faiths goes back hundreds or even thousands of years. However, in the form it exists today it is a recent phenomenon and in order to understand its meaning, dimensions and results, one must understand the conditions that prevailed in the decade of the 1990s.

The most important of these conditions was the vacuum created by the rapid and unexpected collapse of the Eastern Block and all the consequences this breakdown entailed. The prevailing international political order collapsed and cultural, ethnic and historical realities generally rooted in

religious tradition arose. In the Eastern Block and the ex-Soviet Union these changes were very extensive, rapid and decisive. Setting aside these elements, the world was inexorably becoming interconnected and interdependent and witnessed great emigrations of the workforce and also emigration caused by civil wars and disorders. At the same time, the inclination of those who had emigrated to Europe after the Second World War to preserve their religious and cultural values was increasing. This phenomenon was both surprising and at the same time attracted public attention and gave rise to new political, legal and social issues. Even more significantly, the notion of defending the rights of minorities and incorporating these rights in the existing social, political and legal structures was becoming ever stronger. There was a clear inclination towards a multicultural society and world, so much so that during the decade the subjects of multiculturalism and minority rights preoccupied the minds of intellectuals and the existing political parties.

The world had emerged from the more or less stable conditions of the 1960s and the 1970s. Everything was in flux. It was in such circumstances that the idea of dialogue, whether between religions or between different branches of a particular religion, whether between monotheistic faiths or between Christian denominations, was born.

These dialogues were, in their own place, quite effective. Although among the followers and leaders of different faiths, individuals may be found who do not consider such dialogues effective and criticize them, the fact of the matter is that if they did not exist we would have been in far worse circumstances today. Alleviation of the very tense relations

between the Catholic and the Orthodox churches in the early, and even the middle of the decade of 1990s was brought about, to a large extent, by these very dialogues, and the same may also be said of other cases, for example, that of the relations between Islam and Christianity.

Beside all that was mentioned above, these dialogues were appropriate and effective responses to popular demand. The adherents of different religions needed to see their leaders alongside the leaders of other faiths, engaged in dialogue under the same roof. This gave them serenity and a sense of inner security and still does so today. Furthermore, these discussions gave peace and inner certitude to the religious leaders as well, since, before the 1990s, they could rarely meet and exchange ideas with their counterparts from other faiths. Now, not only there were no obstacles preventing such meetings, discussions, dialogues and exchanges of view, but also they were in fact encouraged and supported. In practice, such actions were very effective in preservation of peace and harmony in the 1990s.

This, in a nutshell, is the present position of religious dialogue, which must, undoubtedly, continue. However, in view of the present conditions and the new threats, it must be become more serious, direct and methodological, and its more ceremonial and formal aspects must be de-emphasized in favor of constructive dialogue.

2. The Reality of Globalization Necessitates Dialogue

Setting aside the question of the nature of globalization and its causes, the fact remains that our world has comple-

tely changed and fundamental concepts have undergone radical transformation. Such concepts as power, national territory, ownership, sovereignty and security have changed and so have the meaning of the notions associated with them. For example, today, the degree of influence is not proportionate to the degree of power and the mechanism of converting power into influence is entirely different from what it was in the past. Thus, it is not possible to satisfactorily solve the problems of today by relying on past methods alone.

In such circumstances, dialogue and the attempt to solve difficulties in this manner have assumed strategic significance. In an unprecedented manner, everyone, whether powerful or weak, rich or poor, developed and developing has an effective role in determining the outcome of all the big or small issues facing us today and it is practically impossible to ignore any segment of the international community, and the best way to include them and gain their cooperation is by relying on the logic of dialogue. Thus, from this perspective, “religious dialogue” is a response in harmony with the requirements, or even the very nature, of the age of globalization, and is in fact another step in its path of development.

3. Globalization and Religion: The Role and Importance of Religious Dialogue

Although globalization presents religion with certain opportunities, it can be said that it constitutes the most significant challenge religion has faced in the whole of the con-

temporary period, a challenge that has begun recently and will expand and intensify and must therefore be taken seriously. We must put our minds together and cooperate in order to understand its nature and various dimensions and the manner of dealing with it. Religious dialogue can help all religions in this regard.

The most significant characteristic of globalization that probably has the greatest contact with religion is mutual effect and the need to find an interpretation of religion that is appropriate to the age of globalization and its requirements and demands. As it has already been pointed out, today we live in a world in which we are inexorably affected by one another and influence each other's destiny. This has always been true from the philosophical and theoretical point of view and has now emerged as a powerful fact in the field of action as well. Under the present conditions, no country or group can attain happiness and enjoy absolute peace and security in isolation. This is no longer possible. In fact, we are reaching a point where we have to contemplate plans that benefit everyone. Thinking only of ourselves and ignoring others is no longer either fruitful or possible.

The situation, as far as it applies to religion, is as follow: in order to preserve our religion we cannot think only about our co-religionists. We shall succeed only if adherents of other faiths also have the opportunity to believe in their respective religious teachings and to perform their religious observances and practices. In other words, in order to protect our religion we must think about making a world in which the followers of all faiths can practice the teachings of their religions. That world is ideal or can be ideal in

which believers in every religion can adhere to the principles and tents of their own faith. If this point is accepted, a great opportunity for dialogue and cooperation will be provided, and even more importantly, a real, appropriate and sustainable foundation for theoretical and practical exchanges will be provided, for dialogue cannot continue simply on the basis of good will and intentions. It requires a tangible and sustainable base.

Religion must set forth an interpretation in harmony with the characteristics and requirements of the age of globalization, and this is a most difficult and delicate task, facing everyone, irrespective of whether they live in rich industrial countries or poor developing ones. The point to keep in mind here is that even advanced societies of pre-globalization period were closed ones in comparison to the societies of the post-globalization one. They were closed in the sense that they saw and evaluated the world and other societies from the perspective of their own national or group interests, irrespective of whether the group in question was small or large, a religious branch or social group, or a large socioeconomic block, or even an extensive historical, cultural and religious unit.

The reality of the age of globalization does not allow such a viewpoint. A new perspective is required, and religion, of course, must offer its own particular interpretation. Undoubtedly, the idea of the inseparability of the destiny of religions in the new age and the effort of increase consultation in an attempt to discover more appropriate responses to new requirements shall also provide another suitable context for religious dialogue.

4. Religious Dialogue and Mutual Expectations

These days, and especially in the wake of the developments of the last few months, much is being said about mutual expectations, from both the social and political aspect and the religious and ideological one. This is an important subject and will continue to be so. Moreover, it is necessary that it should first be discussed and examined by religious scholars, for if such discussions do not occur, political, social and even religious tension may ensue and the situation may become more complicated.

That every religion must set forth its contemporary interpretation in the light of the totality of the facts and requirements it confronts cannot be denied, neither can the fact that such an interpretation is beneficial for that religion, its adherents, other faiths and general peace and stability. The issue is, however, that no religion can set forth an interpretation that contradicts its fundamental beliefs and principles and its accepted and legitimate methods. Moreover, any interpretation of religion that does not possess these characteristics can neither attract the loyalty of the masses of its adherents nor continue to have a viable existence. Every believer accepts his religion because of the truth it embodies and will therefore not be receptive to any element lacking religious legitimacy and credibility, and would in fact react to it in a negative manner. The question as to which elements or methods are credible, authentic and legitimate is ultimately settled by reference to the internal system of the religion in question and nothing else.

All great religions possess the necessary capacity, principles and tools to reconstruct themselves in the light of new

conditions and it is precisely due to this characteristic that they have continued. Thus, our expectation from them should not and cannot exceed what this collection necessitates or requires. Undoubtedly this subject, only the most important points of which have been mentioned here, is one of the best and most authentic contexts for religious dialogue and can contribute far more to public peace and harmony than unilateral and prejudiced political and media-oriented advice and recommendations. It is neither comprehensible nor acceptable for outsiders to tell the followers of another religion how to understand, interpret and propagate their faith. This contradicts common senses, scientific methodology and even the “logic of dialogue”.

5. Fields of Cooperation

As it has already been pointed out, globalization is the most important challenge that religion has faced in modern history. Moreover, it is a challenge facing all religions and not any one particular faith. This situation presents the best field for cooperation. Such a cooperation, of course, necessitates arriving at a common understanding of what is, or could be, a threat.

The rapidity of the rise and progress of globalization and the fact that public attention is focused on daily political and social events has prevented a deeper examination of the phenomenon itself. The same is also true of biotechnology and developments in the field of genetic engineering.

We face a world in which we exercise less control over our children’s education and character formation than pa-

rents have in any previous historical period. They grow up more or less cut off from their history and culture and, more significantly, in the light of the great developments taking place in the field of genetic engineering, it is not clear what the human being of the future will be like.

Setting aside the various consequences of the very rapid developments in genetic engineering, the problem is that legal authority pertaining to all these cases is weakening to such a degree that it seems, in the near future, we shall face a deep vacuum in this regard, and this is a completely new phenomenon. Throughout modern history, developments have been such that, in all events, did not go beyond the existing legal frameworks, and these frameworks were continuously being formed on the basis of society's existing ethical, legal and traditional concepts and principles. It seems, however, that we are rapidly confronting conditions in which existing legal systems are unable to respond to real and present needs.

The truth of the matter is that such fateful and momentous developments have never occurred before, and even more significantly, never have the world's religions been so indifferent to scientific and technological developments. Historically speaking, even in periods when religion occupied a much weaker position in comparison with science, it still reacted to scientific developments, irrespective of whether these responses were accepted or not. Today, however, it seems that everyone is in a state of stupor and no one reacts to what is taking place, despite the fact that many more ears are willing to listen to what religion has to say, at least concerning these cases. As it happens, and for obvious reasons, it has much more to say than others do.

Religious cooperation can be very effective in regard to the issues mentioned above. The new threats are universal and affect us all. Similarly, this type of cooperation can benefit everyone, both in that by providing a concrete and tangible context for theoretical and practical cooperation it, in a very practical sense, prepares the groundwork for greater mutual understanding and sympathy, but also because it confronts the aforementioned threats and tries to preserve the position of “legal and official authority” and stop developments from taking place in a legal vacuum.

In conclusion, it may perhaps be appropriate to mention some examples of the cooperation that took place in the mid 1990s. At that time dialogue and cooperation between Islam and Christianity made it possible to confront extreme modernist views. In international conferences sponsored by the United Nations in Cairo, Peking, Copenhagen and Istanbul, those who held such views demanded ratification of positions that were against accepted ethical and religious principles and historical traditions. Moreover, they did not want only their ratification and were planning in the next stage to impose them and they expressed this intention openly. The cooperation just alluded to prevent all these things from occurring. The way in which this was accomplished is in itself a long story.