

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS WORLD

The conscious acceptance of religious pluralism and the peaceful coexistence of different communities can arise from two opposite origins. First, from an *indifference* to the religious experience, or second, from a *conscious experience* of the innermost essence of Religion. On the other hand, intolerance between coexisting religious communities and cultural traditions can arise from either *religious seeds* (i.e., extreme fundamentalism) or alternately from *nonreligious roots* (i.e., political or nationalistic factors) which use religion for their own pursuits. All of these roots continue unabated in many areas of the world.

Concerning this, I would like to briefly stress six points:

1. For what appears impossible to become possible, namely the prevalence of world peace, religious communities play a central role. According to the principles that their followers draw from their religious convictions they can support or undermine peace, at a local or global level. Therefore, a necessary prerequisite for peace to become possible, is *peace between religions*. This issue is very complex and we must be clear that we are not advocating a type of syncretism. The true respect for the religious freedom of every person, for his or her human dignity, remains the solid foundation for peaceful coexistence. There are important elements and peaceful inspirations in the doctrinal layers of the great religions that must be carefully discovered, utilized, and made productive in order for a world-wide peace to be possible. The voices for peace, which come from the lungs of the global religions, must be intensified and persistently manifested by studies, sermons, lectures, and every form of communication.

2. In the majority of religious traditions we find: First, a search for inner peace. Second, we assert the curbing of aggression. The third common

characteristic is the pursuit of peaceful relations with the highest Reality, understood either as impersonal or as a Personal God. Fourth, principles are established by the religions to facilitate peaceful cohabitation within each particular social group. And fifth, efforts extend towards the maintenance of peace beyond the particular religious community to all humanity.

The obligation falls to those of us who believe in God to investigate and advance an irenic theology and anthropology, drawing from the deep resources of our religious doctrines and the best pages of the history of our religious traditions, by emphasizing each person's duty to oppose violence and work towards reconciliation and lasting peace on earth. The new generation in particular needs a conscious education for the cultivation of peace that will be nourished and inspired by religious sources.

3. The search for peace presupposes a constant defence and struggle for justice. Always throughout the span of the centuries, especially during our current age, the relationship that peace has with justice is emphasized. In many religious traditions this bond is encountered. Sincere yearning for peace, at both the local and the global level, means a true desire and struggle for justice. An unjust world cannot be peaceful. Today, peace and justice have also acquired another synonym: development. And all of us can and must contribute to the development of the poorest areas. Poverty remains the worst type of violence. When people, near or far from us, are deprived of the basic needs for their survival, it is not strange that they turn to other directions and adopt extreme religious beliefs in order to attempt achieve a just society and to discover a meaning of life and death.

More specifically, relative to the problem of terrorism, which has recently dominated, we believe that the western societies, who have economical, scientific, and military power, ought to proceed to a creative self-critique. They should see their responsibility more clearly and their debt to the new global dimensions. It would be tragic, spiritually and politically, because of indifference or arrogance, to allow a new, multiform proletariat to develop a violent revolt

through the abuse of the spiritual “atomic energy” of a concrete religious tradition.

4. Allow me to refer in particular to one specific example, *the case of Albania*. After the end of the long atheistic persecution (1991), arose the necessity for the freedom of religion within a harmonious coexistence. In Albania there are five religious communities: a majority Sunni Muslims, Bektashi, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. Many people remain completely indifferent to religion. The Christian-Muslim relations were initially based upon the assumption that in the pluralistic society of the country, where the old atheist intelligentsia maintained a strong presence and influence, the primary contribution of believers – Christians and Muslims – was to point out that religious faith has a vital role in a free democratic society. That religion is not a byproduct of the moral, rational, or emotional life of a society, but an independent and primary phenomenon, which is related to a special category: the Sacred, the Holy. That man is not independent in the universe and that the individual self-interest, the worship of money, pleasure, and power, can not become the new idols, the only criteria for success in contemporary Albanian society. In particular, the religious dialogue between the religious communities was driven by the perception of the human being and the basic acceptance of his or her religious freedom.

We agreed not to permit fundamentalist ideas of extremist circles to influence the members of our communities. Moreover we created the Interreligious Council of Albania which participates as a member of the World Council of “Religions for Peace” (New York).

5. Something that is often ignored, despite the fact that it constitutes the nucleus of peace, is that religious conscience is compelled to stress that peace begins from within, in the depth of the human existence. It is related with humility, forgiveness, freedom from hatred, from bitterness, and from jealousy. It flourishes in constant communion with the God of peace. In particular, the Christian understanding of inner peace is deeper and broader than the apathy of the Stoics or the *nirvana* of the Buddhists. It is not restricted to impassivity for what happens around us. Keeping our inner peace, we shall be able to live with

others, “if possible, so far as it depends upon us, live peacefully with all” (Rom. 12:18).

6. At the final analysis, the opposite of peace is not war but egocentrism: individual, ethnic, collective, racial, religious. Egocentrism mobilizes the various forms of violence, which kill peace through various ways. This is the inspiration and instigation of both large and small conflicts; this is what bombards human persons and communities continuously with hatred.

The antidote to egoism does not consist of general ethical advices, nor abstract legislations, or mechanisms of suppression; but the strengthening of love. A multi-dimensional unselfish love, which is not limited by borders, prejudices, and by every kind of distinction. The enormous possibility and contribution of a healthy religious conscience is located here. Unselfish love, even in conditions of long-lasting conflicts, guarantees the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. The power of love finally prevails over the love for power which destroys peace. As Saint John the Theologian surmises “God is love and he who abides in love, abides in God and God in him” (1 John 4:16).

A phrase of Einstein has been etched in my memory: “every individual carries within them a small but powerful generator of love whose energy is waiting to be released... love is the quintessence of life.” This phrase constitutes a distant echo of the wonderful hymn of love of the Apostle Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal... And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:1-13). Personally, I am convinced that the secret and sacred fuel, which drives the small but powerful “generator of love” is the Christian faith. And also that the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church has been a factory of love throughout time. And that this task remains her highest aim and responsibility throughout the ages.

It is well known that the beloved Bishop Klaus Hammerle, of blessed memory, had an abundance of this fuel of love in his entire life and ministry, developed with his vision for reconciliation and world peace. And once again I would like to express my warm thanks to the members of the Committee that gave me the opportunity to know him, a person who radiated around him the truth, the love, and the beauty of the Christian faith... "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9).