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**ENSURING RESPECT FOR AND PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE BETWEEN ALL RELIGIOUS
COMMUNITIES AND BELIEFS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD**

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Introduction

Mutual understanding among cultures and religions is indispensable for the peaceful coexistence of the people of the world, both globally and within countries. In today's globalized world, the different cultures and religions are in closer contact than ever before.

People migrate and live their beliefs and practices in a new environment which may be suspicious of newcomers. The Internet transports the whole range of different belief systems to remote places. Local events previously unnoticed in other parts of the world become known immediately throughout the world. Companies and institutions are entering cultural and religious spaces other than the ones they originated in. These dynamics lead to an unprecedented interaction between different cultural customs and religious beliefs. This new level of real or virtual global contacts does not always go without suspicion and, unfortunately, sometimes substantiated fear. While in many places the peaceful coexistence between religious communities is a reality, in others these relations are dominated by mistrust, resulting in discrimination, hate and violence. Whether they are rooted in interpretations of religion, or in economic, political or ethnic problems, violent conflicts tend to reinforce existing prejudice on a global level.

Trust building is one of the necessary instruments in ensuring respect for and peaceful coexistence between religious communities and beliefs. Dialogue among representatives of religious communities is important to stress the common message of peace they all contain. To advance trust where it is lacking, in addition to dialogue among religious communities, practical cooperation between religious communities - based on mutual respect - may well be necessary. It is through practical cooperation that prejudice can be unveiled, common interests determined and shared values discovered.

1. Unsolved conflicts

Unsolved conflicts are among the main obstacles impeding the peaceful coexistence between religious communities, well beyond the particular area where specific conflicts take place. It is important to stress that many, if not most conflicts, are not rooted in religion. But many a conflict can exacerbate strife between religious communities around the world. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a continuing, unsolved conflict, is only one, albeit prominent example of a situation which can jeopardize the peaceful coexistence between religious communities far away. The persistence of conflicts in which followers of different religions are involved is a major obstacle to peaceful coexistence.

2. Measures on the national level: hate speech and hate crime legislation

Many countries around the world have set limits to the freedom of expression in the form of so-called hate speech or hate crime legislation. Hate speech laws penalize public incitement to hatred of certain groups, such as a particular religious community. In some cases, the mere expression of contempt or hatred is regarded as a crime. Most hate speech laws also penalize the denial of proven genocides on the grounds that allowing such calamities to be forgotten would prepare the ground for new disasters. Hate crime laws increase a criminal sentence if it can be proven that the crime of which the offender was found guilty was motivated by hatred of the victims because of their race, religion, sex, or other similar factor.

Hate speech legislation is controversial. It is under attack mainly from two sides: on the one hand there are advocates of freedom of expression who want this freedom to be absolute, and on the other, there are critics who argue that hate speech legislation draws too much attention to hate speech and by so doing accentuates it.

3. Two case studies

(a) The case of Jordan

Jordan is a Muslim country, with 95 per cent of its population made up of Muslims living in harmony with Christians (5 per cent) for over 15 centuries now.

Islam is based on belief in one God and the message of His Prophet. Its principles find common ground among different faiths and peoples. The origin of divine religions is one, and Muslims believe in all messengers of God; denying the message of any of them is a deviation from Islam. This furnishes a wide platform upon which peoples of different faiths can come together, with respect for others' ideas and faiths, and work together in the service of human society:

- Articles 6/1, 14 and 19 of the Jordanian Constitution provide for equality of citizens, freedom of religions and the right of each group to have its own schools; it prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of religion.
- Article 6/1 stipulates that: Jordanians shall be equal before the law. There shall be no discrimination between them as regards their rights and duties on grounds of race, language or religion.
- Article 14 provides that: The State shall safeguard the free exercise of all forms for worship and religious rites in accordance with the customs observed in the kingdom, unless such practices are inconsistent with public order or morality.
- Article 19 stipulates that: Congregations shall have the right to establish and maintain their own schools for the education of their own members provided that they comply with the general provisions of the law and be subject to the control of Government in matters relating to their curricula and orientation.

Tradition and election law (Law no. 55 of 1947) provides for representation of Jordanian Christians in the Cabinet, Senate and House of Representatives on a quota basis.

Although legal instruments are important, the real-life situation is more expressive of truth. Throughout Jordan, churches and mosques are found in close proximity. In Jordan, coexistence is a reality and a way of life.

Religious holidays are enjoyed by Jordanians, be they Christian or Muslim holidays, including Christmas and New Year.

Jordan is also active in the field of Muslim-Christian dialogue on the local, regional and international levels. In this context, Aal al-Bayt Foundation for Islamic Thought organized twenty international conferences between 1984 and 1999, with the Independent Commission on Christian-Muslim Relations (Deanery of Windsor/Windsor, U.K), the Catholic Church represented by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican, the Orthodox Church represented by the Orthodox Centre, Chambésy, Switzerland and the Evangelical Church of Germany, represented by its offices in Hannover, Germany. These Muslim-Christian Consultations serve several purposes, inter alia to help in cementing the solid foundations of coexistence between Muslims and Christians, especially in communities where the followers of either faith are a minority.

At the international level, Jordan has ratified 14 international conventions and covenants, such as the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

(b) The case of Switzerland

Switzerland, as a country made up of different cultures and religions, has had to learn how to achieve peaceful coexistence in its small territory. It has had to overcome divergences of denomination, language and economic interests in order to create national unity. Its history has been marked by violent confrontations between followers of different faiths. Those confrontations ended a century and a half ago, thanks largely to a collective determination to concentrate on ideas uniting the different communities in practice, rather than focusing on those setting them apart in theory.

The prerequisite for success was respect for difference, and the conviction that every latent conflict can be resolved by dialogue. Democratic consultation, strong measures to protect the rights of minorities, and constant efforts to achieve compromise were indispensable instruments for the construction of the country. Today, the different cultures of which Swiss society is composed are seen as a boon for the country, with each culture contributing a different worldview.

The Swiss Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. At all levels it strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. Article 15 of the Constitution provides for freedom of creed and conscience, and the Federal Penal Code prohibits any form of debasement or discrimination of any religion or any religious followers.

There is no official State church; religious matters are handled by the cantons, pursuant to Article 72 of the Constitution. Most of the 26 cantons (with the exception of Geneva and Neuchâtel, where church and State are separate) financially support at least one of the three traditional communities – the Roman Catholic Church, the Old Catholic Church and the Protestant Church – with funds collected through taxation. Of the 14 political parties represented in the Federal Parliament, only 4 (the Christian Democratic Party, the Evangelical People's Party, the Federal Democratic Union, and the Christian Social Party) subscribe to a religious philosophy. There have been no reports of individuals being excluded from a political party because of their religious beliefs.

In present-day Switzerland, the rapid growth of the Muslim community has altered the balance between the religious communities and posed a number of challenges to Swiss society and legislation. In none of Switzerland's cantons, Islam has as yet been officially recognized as a religious community in the sense of a body of public law. That does not mean that Islam as a religion or Islamic religious ceremonies are prohibited. Rather it has fiscal and legal consequences, such as Muslim employees' rights to Islamic holidays or school canteens' obligation to serve halal meat or instituting Islamic religious teachings at public schools. Many of these rights are already implemented in practice but are as yet without legal foundation.

4. Initiatives at the international level

Various initiatives at the international level offer valuable contributions, such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the Bali Declaration on Building Interfaith Harmony within the International Community, the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures, the strategy of Enlightened Moderation, the Informal Meeting of Leaders on Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and the Islam-Christianity Dialogue, which are all mutually inclusive, reinforcing and interrelated.

Of particular importance at the global level is the report of the High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations mandated by the Secretary General of the United Nations to present an analysis of cross-cultural issues with an emphasis on relations between the West and the predominantly Muslim world. The report, which presented to the Secretary General in Istanbul, Turkey on 13 November 2006, focuses on the issues of education, youth, immigration, women, and media. The report includes a research-based action plan for implementation at the institutional and civil society levels.

5. Conclusions

All States have an obligation to work towards the goal of respect for and peaceful coexistence of all religious groups within their territory by upholding the tenets of international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in general, and by applying principles such as the principle of non-discrimination in the formulation of their policies. These same principles must also be observed in the area of foreign policy if misunderstandings or even aggression in the name of religion are to be prevented in the future.

In multilateral fora such as the newly established United Nations Human Rights Council, governments can be often observed to coordinate their positions within like-minded "clubs" and act or vote accordingly. This way of doing things is understandable in many regards and favours a clarification of opinions within these groups. Many of these groups have grown out of regional, cultural and religious commonalities. The coordination of opinions within such groupings tends to yield results which underscore these commonalities as opposed to other groupings with different geographical, cultural or religious backgrounds.

However, it may prove worthwhile to overcome this traditional like-minded approach and promote cooperation between countries of different regions and cultural and religious identities.

Inter-party consultation on important legislation is a common feature of parliamentary politics. Cross border partnerships, which include different cultural and religious backgrounds, should also be encouraged with regard to relations between religious communities, both on the national and international levels. The importance of parliaments and their work in this context cannot be underestimated.

In their daily work of drafting sound domestic laws in accordance with international law, it is the particular obligation of parliaments and their members to defend, promote and protect the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, thereby creating a world in which every individual enjoys all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Parliaments should also help to facilitate understanding and cooperation among peoples and promote dialogue, tolerance, mutual respect and understanding among civilizations. It is also important for parliaments to support efforts by international organizations and national governments to resolve disputes that endanger peaceful co-existence between religious communities and to contribute to the resolution of such disputes by engaging in direct talks with parliamentarians of the countries concerned and by discussing such matters in parliaments and proposing ideas for the resolution of disputes to their governments. Thus they could contribute to the prevention and countering of armed conflicts and terrorism. In addition to their legislative work, parliaments should therefore try to influence their governments' foreign policies along the above-mentioned lines and promote dialogue between different religious communities.