

In the name of the One True God, Gracious and Merciful, Amen.

May His grace and mercy abide upon all of us and on all humanity. Amen.

Respected Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaru, Sheikh Zabarah, Your Excellencies, Your Graces, Fathers, Brothers and Sisters,

I give thanks to God for having brought us together, in this Dialogue for Muslim-Christian Friendship and Understanding organized by the Council for the World's Religions, here in Istanbul, Turkey.

I wish to express my gratitude also to the people and government of Turkey for their kindness in receiving us here in this hospitable and ancient city which has seen so many conflicts between Islam and Christianity.

Someone asked the question in one of the groups last night: Why was Istanbul chosen as the venue for this dialogue. The simple answer is that the authorities of this country have allowed us to have this dialogue here, and we were keen that the dialogue should be held in a country where Muslims are a majority, and which is close enough to other Islamic countries, and where the small minority of Christians do not constitute a threat to Islam.

You know that the Christians in this country are a dwindling minority: about 3,000 Greek Orthodox, perhaps 10 to 15 thousand Syrian Orthodox, and perhaps 50 to 60 thousand Armenian Orthodox, along with a small number of Roman Catholics, and an even smaller number of Protestants and Chaldean Christians. All together the Christians are less than a hundred thousand. As far as I know, only one among them, His Grace Bishop Mesrob Minas Mutafyan is participating with us in this dialogue. He is from the largest Christian community in this country, namely the Armenian Orthodox.

Let me first say a word about the Council for the World's Religions, and its

related body, the Inter-Religious Federation for World Peace which was formally inaugurated only last month in Seoul, Korea. I am privileged to be a Patron of the CWR and a President of the IRFWP.

Neither the CWR nor the IRFWP, are Christian organisations. Last evening Dr. Frank Kauffmann cited the inter-religious Secretary of the British Council of Churches, to the effect, that the CWR and IRFWP had done more effective work in inter-religious dialogue than the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church together.

If that statement has an element of truth in it, it is largely because CWR and IRFWP are not Christian organisations. In our work, we treat all religions as worthy of equal respect.

Especially in the IRFWP we are formally committed to the goal of world peace, a global community that embraces the whole of humanity in peace and concord, with mutual understanding and respect. We cannot allow inter-religious dialogue to become a platform for proselytizing. Our goal is that all human beings should learn to live together as children of God, as brothers and sisters, in harmony and unity.

Let me repeat what I have stated many times, the secular or non-religious people of the world are less than one billion, among the global population of more than five billions - that is less than 20% of the whole. The remaining 80% belong to the 12 religions of the world; four West Asian, namely; Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism, four South Asian, i.e. from the Indian Sub-continent; Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Sikhism, three from the Far East, namely Taoism, Shintoism and Confucianism, and one universal religion, which we should call the Primal Vision, the religion which is most ancient, shared today by various tribes of Africa, by the Native Americans of North and South America, by the native tribes of Australia and New Zealand, by the Shamans of Siberia, by the Adivasis

of India and in fact at a deeper level of our own minds, by all of us in humanity.

It is a foolish and narrow-minded perception that leads some people, Christians included, to assert that the world can be united only within a secular framework. Of course the dominant civilisation today is secular - arising from the reaction of European peoples to the oppressive authority of the Medieval Western Christian Church, as well as from the enthronement of a falsely understood human reason as final authority by the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. That secular, post-industrial, western technological civilisation, hardly three centuries old, will be seen as a passing, though significant, episode in the long course of human history. Secular people should be respected, but they cannot be allowed to run the world.

We engage in Inter Religious Dialogue to find a less self-destructive, more humane basis for human global community life. It is in that wider context that this dialogue between Muslims and Christians should be seen. Many other dialogues between Muslims and Christians have already taken place all over the world. But all of us have to take a particular line of approach, which has three parts:

First we must identify those elements which Muslims and Christians hold and cherish in common, our Abrahamic heritage. Second, we must identify those elements in which we differ and disagree; we must honestly assess the conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the past and at present. Third, we must begin to articulate some of the things we should do together in the present and in the future.

In doing these three things, we must keep four things in mind - first that no religion is uniform and each comprehends so much variety within it, so much so that most of our generalisations about any particular religion would not apply

equally to all sects and divisions within it.

Second, that both Islam and Christianity are not just religions; but they also generate civilisations. It is these civilisations, even more than our two religions that are often in conflict with each other. We must develop more understanding and respect for these civilisations, but also be able to assess the achievements and failures of each civilisation by common criteria.

Third, we must keep in mind the distinction between what each religion theoretically believes and teaches on the one hand, and what it practises. The practice always contains both the good and the bad. We should be bold enough to fight against the bad, and promote the good.

Fourth, we must also keep in mind the distinction between what the theologians and theorists hold as official doctrine and what the best among the devout believers of each religion understand and accept in their own faith. The more formal the teaching of two religions, the more easy it is to find differences. At the level of the people, there is a great desire to live together in peace and concord.

Permit me now to attempt a broad grouping of the varieties within the Christian tradition - not the usual four-fold distinction among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Main line Protestant and Sectarian Protestants, but a slightly different classification which has much to do with a Muslim-Christian dialogue.

First there is the group that puts more emphasis on mysticism and private prayer. Christian mystics and Muslim Sufis can not only find a lot of common grounds, and also refer to a wide area of common experience of union with God. Dialogue between Christians and Muslims is easiest at this level.

Second, there are people who depend on their official teachers, and do not want to depart from it. Among Christians Roman Catholics and Orthodox, and to a certain extent, Lutherans and Reformed, some have a fear of deviation, and would find it very difficult to have any dialogue with people who hold a different set of doctrines. Dialogue is more difficult between organized religions.

Third, there is a wide spectrum of liberal Christians who do not believe much more than the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood (Sisterhood) of God. For them dogma and doctrine constitute no problem. They can meet adherents of other religions or even secular people on the common ground of a vague humanism and of a commitment to social justice, international peace, human rights, concern for the environment and so on. Actually this is not so much a dialogue between religions, but a discussion among those from all religious backgrounds who have been educated in the western system and have lost most of the traditional convictions of religious people. Among Christian liberals of this kind, teachings like the Triune God and the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, do not have much appeal, but the welfare of humanity concerns them deeply. Dialogue among Christian and Muslim liberals can be easier and more productive in socio-economic consequences. But such dialogue seldom relates to the heart of the two faiths.

Then there is the fourth level - that of Fundamentalism. Perhaps it is not fair to speak of any Fundamentalism in religions other than Christianity. Christian Fundamentalism is a distinct creation of American origin in this century, in reacting against Christian Liberalism. It has now spread world wide. The chief characteristic of these groups is to adhere to a set of fairly irrational beliefs, practices and language, and to write off all those who do not so adhere as enemies and children of the devil. The element of violent aggression and murder of enemies was not in Christian Fundamentalism. It has now arisen in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Sikhism. Between Funda-

mentalists of different religions, dialogue is most difficult - practically impossible.

In a comprehensive Christian-Muslim dialogue, we should deal with all four types, and try to relate them to each other, wherever possible. What we seek is a way of understanding and respect for all religions, and a pattern of global community in which we can live together in concord and co-operation, respecting the freedom and dignity of all human beings.

There are some aspects of our past that we need to recognize. I belong to the Asian-African branch of Christianity which broke with Latin and Byzantine Christianity already at the beginning of the 7th century. I do remember the joy with which Christians in North Africa and West Asia welcomed the invasion by Islam in the 7th century. Islam was to these Christians a liberator offering freedom from the socio-economic, religious and cultural oppressions from an anti-Asian-African, Roman-Byzantine-Hellenistic, Imperial Christian Church. This aspect of Islam as liberator from European domination is something that Christians and Muslims should study together.

A second aspect that I can only mention here is that Byzantine and Asian-African Christians suffered along with the Muslims of the Middle East during the aggressive crusades of Latin Christendom. Some of the greedy plunder, desecration of holy places and atrocities perpetrated on Christian churches and peoples in this city and elsewhere by our crusading Christian brethren from the West should perhaps be studied again.

A third aspect of the past - and there is no time here to go into details, is the role played by Islam in making the European Renaissance of the 13th century possible. I will just mention the names of Ibn-Sinai or Avicenna and Ibn-Rashd or Averroes, who gave back Plato and Aristotle to the West and made the Renais-

sance possible, rekindling the western Christian Church with new knowledge, and the basis for a new civilization.

There are other stories of unhappy Christian-Muslim encounters to be commonly studied with some objectivity - the Armenian Massacre at the end of the first World War, the developments in the treatment of Christians by Islam, sometimes with great respect, at other times with heavy-handed persecution, the story of Islam in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Nigeria, Greece, Albania and Spain and so on. We should be able to look at this painful past with equanimity, without rancour or bitterness, in a spirit of trying to heal the wounds of the past, and not in the spirit of recrimination and self-justification, but calmly and prayerfully.

Among present problems, one can only mention a few - a Middle East Settlement that is fair to Jews, Christians and Muslims and is not oriented to fostering western interests; a just settlement of the Cyprus conflict between Greeks and Turks; between human rights for the Muslims in the north of Greece, and for the Armenian, Syrian and Greek and other Christians in Turkey; the socio-economic oppression of the world's second largest Islamic community, the 100 million Muslims in India by the 'majority' community; peace between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines; the oppression of Muslim minorities in the Christian countries of the west and Christian minorities in Islamic countries; the plight of Muslims in Bosnia, Yugoslavia and in Albania and so on.

I shall be very brief in making some suggestions about things we can do together.

1) I hope this dialogue will lead to the formation of a Muslim-Christian Friendship Association on an international level, with well organized national and local chapters. They should meet regularly, both internationally, but also regionally, nationally and locally. There should be teams of open-minded Muslims and Christians who could go to areas of conflict between people of the two religions, and in co-operation with local leaders, trying to bring about peaceful

solutions to conflicts.

2) I think it will be a great gesture if all nations could make an effort to restore ancient places of worship which have been converted or made into museums and theatres. Such a gesture would bring about a sigh of relief and an atmosphere of mutual respect among the religions.

3) It is important to promote a better understanding of other religions among religious leaders, and teachers of religion under training. Some Christian theological seminaries already have arrangements for teachers of other religions to come and give lectures to theological students and to pastors and priests under training. It is important that religious teachers should not promote their own religion by vilifying and caricaturing of other religions. Every religious teacher should promote greater harmony and mutual understanding among all religions.

4) God does not need human beings to defend Him. He can defend Himself - if that were necessary at all. God loves all human beings and all other beings whom He has created. By attacking, oppressing and killing other beings, we are not honouring or defending God, but paining Him. He is the God of love, peace and mercy. All religions should help their believers to be the agents of God, and should never ask them to do evil or violence or dishonour to people of other religions. All religions should revise their religious teachings to promote love and respect to other religions.

It is God who has brought us together in this very important meeting. We invoke Abraham, the Friend of God and our common Father in God, to be our Guardian and Guide to lead us into all peace and concord.

May the Blessed Name of God our Lord be praised and glorified, for ever and ever.
Amen.

(Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios, Metropolitan of Delhi, India)