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# **Islam and Inter-religious Coexistence on the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the cardinal issues engrossing prominent scholars and intellectuals and focusing the attention of prospective studies specialists as well as all those concerned with the fate of civilizational race on all levels is inter-religious coexistence. Such engrossment is ascribed to the intricate nature of the subject, as it ramifies into complex issues and generates formidable challenges that, for the most part, go beyond the religious, civilizational and cultural scope, posing broader questions pertaining to thought and opinion at large.

The considerable impact of the issue of inter-religious coexistence on the life of humans entails that Islamic thought adopt a clear-cut stance in this connection. The required stance must build on a body of judicious opinions that lay bare the truth and determine principles after dispelling dubious ideas and confuting fallacies.

Hence the importance of the subject of this paper. It will address the topic of Islam and inter-religious coexistence, showing the stance of Islam vis-à-vis coexistence in its own right, it being one of the loftiest human values, and vis-à-vis inter-religious coexistence in view of its sovereign importance. Deep pondering is needed, here, till we arrive at a crystal-clear position that expresses, in essence, the spirit of our civilization, tallies with our mission and reflects our earnest will to deal equitably with the other religions, cultures, and civilizations.

## On the Concept of Coexistence

Satisfactory analysis of the relationship between Islam and inter-religious coexistence hinges on an accurate definition of the term «coexistence» since the concept constitutes the backbone of the whole study.

Looking into the lexical meaning of the term “*ta’ayush*” (coexistence), from which the concept of coexistence actually originates, we find in the Al-Wasit Dictionary: “*ta’ayashu,*” meaning they lived in a climate of communion and amity -tantamount to peaceful coexistence-, then the term «*aayashahu,*» that is to say he lived with him, with “*aaysh*” meaning here life, and thereby all the means of subsistence, including food, drink and income.<sup>(1)</sup>

Beyond the lexical meanings of this widespread term, which emerged concurrently with the flare-up of conflict between the Eastern and Western blocks that ripped the world into two antagonistic camps before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a close examination of the broad semantic spectrum of the term reveals a number of connotations, each loaded with conflicting concepts, which as yet can be grouped into three levels:

**First level:** Political and ideological. It involves the meaning of putting an end to conflict, bridging the former ideological rift between socialist and capitalist blocks, and endeavoring to contain or monitor this conflict by opening communication and interaction channels as mandated by the requirements

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(1) **Al-Mu’jam Al-Wasit**, Arabic Language Foundation, Vol. 2, pp. 639-640, Dar Al-Fikr Publishing House.

of civil and military life. In fact, coexistence was first known under this level.

**Second level:** Economic. It encompasses the cooperation relations knitted by governments and peoples on matters pertaining directly or indirectly to legal, economic or commercial concerns.

**Third level:** Religious, cultural and civilizational. This is the most recent level. It specifically covers the concept of religious or civilizational coexistence. Under this level, the aim is to muster up the will of followers of the Divinely Revealed Religions and of the various civilizations to achieve the common purpose of disseminating peace and security worldwide so that mankind may live in a climate of fraternity, cooperation and well-being.

It is on this third level, and in the light of the conceptual elements thus evolved, that the concept of «coexistence» will be mooted and its dimensions and scope explored.

Analysis of the conceptual elements involved in this level shows that religious dialogue, or more accurately inter-religious dialogue, must build on four bases. They are:

**First basis:** Free common will. The yearning for coexistence must spring from the self. It must not be subject to any pressures, or depend on fulfillment of some conditions, whatever the reason.

**Second basis:** Common approval of the goals set forth. This will give a practical dimension to coexistence in the best interest of both parties. In this respect, coexistence must seek, in essence, to achieve noble humanitarian goals and vital

interests. On the forefront of these are the maintenance of peace and security worldwide, the eradication of the causes of wars and conflicts, the repelling of all forms of aggression, injustice and persecution perpetrated against individuals and communities, the deprecation of all policies and practices that trample on the rights of peoples under any form, the combating of racism and the uprooting of the simple-minded, fallacious ideas of racial superiority.

**Third basis:** Cooperation for the achievement of the objectives agreed upon in consonance with the implementation plans laid down by the parties resolved to establish coexistence.

Fourth basis: Preservation of coexistence by enhancing mutual respect and trust. The aim is to avoid the derailing of coexistence from its set track whatever the reason, and check the preponderance of individual interest. To this end, recourse has to be made constantly to the common denominators, the shared receptacle of uncontested values, ideals and principles that are not subject to controversy. This course will be further strengthened by the commitment of both parties to the legal principles carved out collectively by the international community, for they represent the product of the evolution of political thought, inspired from the values of the Revealed Religions throughout history.

In international politics, the widespread expression “peaceful coexistence” means the establishment of cooperation among States on the basis of mutual understanding and exchange of economic and commercial interests. The expression was coined in the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent cleavage of the world into two conflicting blocks of diametrically opposed ideologies. The call for a policy of “peaceful coexistence” emerged with the specter

of atomic terror as a result of the proliferation in both blocks of massive destruction weapons, such as the atomic bomb. The rise of a third block, called the group of non-partisan or non-aligned states, reflected a desire to make peaceful coexistence the means of coordination of international relations worldwide, leading to the rejection of cold war and its cortege of bellicose practices and policies, such as the threat to use massive destruction weapons.<sup>(2)</sup>

It is stated in **Al-Mawsu'a Al-Siyasiya** that Nikita Khrouchtchev was the first one to launch the motto of peaceful coexistence, construed not in the sense of reneging on the express objectives of his country -the USSR-, but rather as an attempt to achieve these very goals in a way consistent with the developments witnessed at the time on the international arena, such as the balance of terror. The same encyclopedia maintains that the West prefers to view peaceful coexistence from the perspective of the maxim "live and let live."<sup>(3)</sup> However, this concept seemingly differs from the first one in terms of political and ideological purport in the first place.

But if take the first concept and interpolate it in the field of inter-religious cooperation within the specified bounds and bases, it can be safely affirmed that the subsequent inter-religious coexistence will become one of the prerequisites of life on earth. In addition to carrying out the pressing religious ordinance of achieving well-being and repelling misfeasance, it will respond perfectly to the urges of the sound, natural human disposition that quests life in peace, security and serenity. In this vein, the ultimate aim of

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(2) Ahmad 'Atiyatu Allah. **Al-Qamus Al-Siyasiy**, p. 310, Third Edition, 1968, Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya Publishing House, Cairo.

(3) **Al-Mawsu'a Al-Siyasiya**, p. 108, Arab Institution for Studies and Publishing, First Edition, Beirut, 1974.

enabling humans to civilize the earth in the broad civilizational and humanitarian sense will have been achieved.

This objective approach to the nature and mission of coexistence shows that coexistence is essentially an agreement between two parties, by virtue of which they not only elect to dispose the means of living among themselves in accordance with specific rules determined by themselves, but they also pave the way for a sustainable life on these lines. There is, indeed, a fundamental difference between life in isolation and life in coexistence with others. In the latter case, the interested party decides to enter into an exchange process with one or more parties, provided that the process be based on a set of approved common interests, objectives or needs.

As for inter-religious coexistence, it cannot, at any rate, flourish outside this general framework, or else it would lose its specificities and forfeit its goals. There is need to lay a sturdy groundwork upon which the edifice of inter-religious coexistence can be erected. But this is highly contingent on the mission of each religion, its principles and the values and ideals it advocates.

At this point, it would be pertinent to make a concise presentation of the characteristics of Islam, specially its principles that call for humane fraternity in its broad acceptance and vast prospects.

## **Islam, a Universal Message**

Islam is the religion revealed by Almighty Allah to His Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad Ben Abdullah, may peace and blessing be upon him, through the Quran that gives credence to the Torah and the Gospel. The seal of all religions, Islam is the all-encompassing divine message geared to the well-being and good fortune of humans,

not only in this world but also in the Hereafter. Almighty Allah had sent Muhammad (PBUH) as a Messenger to the entire mankind, not exclusively to his Arab kinsmen. Says Almighty Allah in the Holy Quran: *[We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not]*<sup>(4)</sup>, *[O Prophet! Truly We have sent thee as a Witness, a Bearer of Glad Tidings, and a Warner,]*<sup>(5)</sup> and *[Say: O men! I am sent unto you all, as the Apostle of Allah.]*<sup>(6)</sup>

Affirming the unity of the human species, the Islamic message upholds the equality of all human races, peoples and tribes. Almighty Allah says: *[O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you.]*<sup>(7)</sup> The same message was conveyed by the Prophet (PBUH) in the Farewell Pilgrimage, when he recited that verse and maintained: «No Arab is better than a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab better than an Arab, or a black than a red, or a red better than a black, except in piety.»<sup>(8)</sup> The unity of the human species calls, therefore, for amity through mutual acquaintance, not enmity because of difference.<sup>(9)</sup>

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(4) The *Saba' Surah*, verse 28.

(5) The *Al-Ahzab Surah*, verse 45.

(6) The *Al-A'raf Surah*, verse 158.

(7) The *Al-Hujuraat Surah*, verse 49.

(8) Related by Al-'Adda' Ben Khaled in Al-Tabarani's **Al-Mu'jam Al-Kabir**.

(9) Muhammad Rashid Reda. **Al-Wahyu Al-Muhammadi**, p. 169, Cairo Library, Sixth Edition, 1960. Full title of this book: **Al-Wahyu Al-Muhammadi: Thubutu Al-Nubuwwati bil Qur'an wa Da'watu Shu'ubi Al-Madaniyyati ila Al-Islam Diinu Al-Ukhuwwati wa Ssalam.**

Islam has enjoined people to believe in all the Messengers of Allah without distinction: [*The Apostle believeth in what hath been revealed to him from his Lord, as do the men of faith. Each one (of them) believeth in Allah, His angels, His books, and His apostles. We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of His apostles.*]<sup>(10)</sup> It admonished that discrimination among them in matters of belief was an act of sheer infidelity, and that belief in them all without distinction was tantamount to true belief in Allah. This bears cogent testimony to the universality of the Islamic message, and entrenches the humanitarian vocation of this religion. As advocated by Sheikh Muhammad Rashid Reda, the rationale of such a position on the part of Islam stems from belief that the Divine Message entrusted by Almighty Allah to all His Messengers is one and only in terms of fundamentals and goals. It is geared to guide humans, promote their uprightness and bring about their happiness in this world and in the Hereafter.

The difference lies, in fact, in the forms of worship and the regulations, which varied according to the frame of mind of peoples and the requirements of time and place, until the Seal of Messengers was assigned to convey the basic principles that suited all times and places, authorizing all the while independent work and judgment in matters doomed to change with the change of situations and circumstances. It is a fact that this just, comprehensive outlook was a feature peculiar to Muslims, to the exclusion of followers of other religions and rites. It was a tribute paid by Almighty Allah to the human species, which paves the way for mutual affection and humane fraternity.<sup>(11)</sup>

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(10) The *Al-Baqara Surah*, verse 285.

(11) *Al-Wahyu Al-Muhammadi*, p. 153.

The universality of Islam makes the Islamic culture and civilization open to other civilizations and responsive to the cultures of other peoples in a way mutually beneficial. Islam rejects, indeed, the idea of “civilizational centrality” aimed to turn the world into a single, uniform civilization by waging civilizational struggles conducive to the application of a sole civilizational pattern worldwide. The stance of the Islamic religion is explained by the fact that Islam wants the world to be a “forum of civilizations”, varied and distinct. However, coercive civilizational centrality must not be supplanted by fanaticism in the swap. Islam rather seeks interaction and mutual assistance among all civilizations for the general benefit of humankind.<sup>(12)</sup>

If Islam is a universal religion, it does not for the matter profess “religious centrality” to the effect of making the world embrace one and only religion. Rejecting religious centrality, Islam views the multiplicity of religious rites as one of the manifestations of the divine will to create religious concord and avoid dispersion: *[To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah has so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His Plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues,]*<sup>(13)</sup> and *[If thy Lord has so willed, He would have made mankind One People: but they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: And for this did He create them.]*<sup>(14)</sup>

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(12) Dr. Muhammad ‘Imara, *Al-’Atau Al-Hadariyu li Al-Islam*, p. 121, Dar Al-Ma’arif, Cairo, 1997.

(13) The *Al-Maida Surah*, verse 51.

(14) The *Hud Surah*, verses 118-119.

Mankind has been created different by the Almighty aware as He is of the richness and complementarity of difference. However, Allah wants all religions and rites to come under a broad framework that contains and regulates all differences and varieties, a framework that affirms unity in the worship of the Creator, in the belief in the Hereafter and in the performance of righteous deeds. Such are, indeed, the fundamentals of the divine religion as agreed by all religions and messages, from the times of Adam and Abraham, Moses, Jesus, to Muhammad, may they all be blessed by Almighty Allah.<sup>(15)</sup>

The principle of the universality of Islam is one of the firm Islamic principles. It is, in fact, the immutable basis upon which the relations of Muslims with followers of other revealed religions is grounded. It is, also, the source of the outlook of Islam on interaction with non-Muslims. But the faith of a Muslim is only complete when he believes in all the Messengers, without distinction. This humane dimension gives to the Islamic concept of tolerance a broader scope. Almighty Allah says: [*And He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the Criterion (of Judgment between right wrong)*]<sup>(16)</sup>, and [*I am the apostle of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me.*]<sup>(17)</sup>

Such humane tolerance, set by Islam as a firm groundwork for the relations of Muslims with non-Muslims, must not be construed as a desertion, or a predisposition to dissolve into any entity

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(15) *Al-'Atau Al-Hadariyu li Al-Islam*, pp. 119-120.

(16) The *Al-'Imran Sura*, verse 4.

(17) The *Al-Saff Surah*, verse 6.

even if inconsistent with the essence of this religion. Tolerance does not abrogate differences; it rather builds bases for knitting sound humanitarian relations much willed by Islam. Affirmation of ideological, civilizational and cultural specificities cannot in any way be renounced. Yet, Islam does not want these specificities to preclude mutual acquaintance and close cooperation among peoples and nations.

It is an established truth that Islam puts the religious bond above any other tie, whether of kinship, region, race or class. A Muslim is brother of another Muslim. He is nearer to him than any disbeliever. Likewise, Muslims are staunch protectors of weaker Muslims. They stand united in the face of others. It must be noted, though, that this specific trait is not peculiar to Islam, and may be found in other religions and creeds.<sup>(18)</sup>

## Islam and Coexistence

To trace the contours of the principle of coexistence and its dimensions, in the Islamic sense, nothing is more eloquent and relevant than the holy verse: [*Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you'*]<sup>(19)</sup>. So vast indeed is the common denominator between Muslims and the People of the Book. Since Islam has instilled in the hearts of Muslims the seeds of a predisposition for coexistence with the entire humankind, it is naturally more inclined to foster coexistence among the believers

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(18) Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi. **Fiqhu Al-Dawlati fi Al-Islam : Makanatuha, Ma'alimuha, Tabi'atuha, Mawqifuha mina Al-Dimuqratiya wa Al-Ta'addudiyati wa Al-Mar'a wa Ghayru Al-Muslimiin**, p. 197, Dar Al-Shuruuq, Cairo, First Edition, 1997.

(19) The *Al-'Imraan Surah*, verse 64.

in Allah. But coexistence, from this perspective, does not mean a mandatory agreement on all matters. However, as a general rule, if I put the condition not to administer good treatment except to those who are like me (Muslims or non-Muslims), this means that I am utterly selfish, and that difference means enmity!<sup>(20)</sup>

Coexistence in Islam is grounded on an ideological basis, taking root in the faith. For this reason, the concept of coexistence from an Islamic perspective does not belong to the modern, positive concepts underlying the rules of international law.

Muslims believe that the divine guidance was relayed through a long series of messages and prophecies, the last of which were Judaism, then Christianity and finally Islam. It is, therefore, only natural that the three religions should be nearer to one another than to the rest of religions. The Quran refers to the Christians and the Jews as the “People of the Book,” because Almighty Allah had revealed the Torah to Moses and the Gospel to Jesus (may the peace be upon them) before Muhammad (PBUH) received the integral Message giving credence to the former messages, and putting right all matters pertaining to the law, religious observances and ethics. The Holy Quran is the only sacred book that has remained intact, in the very original language in which it was revealed, in word and character.<sup>(21)</sup>

One of the most salient manifestations of coexistence in the Islamic civilization throughout ages is reflected in Islam’s sustained perception of Jews and Christians as followers of God-revealed

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(20) **Risaalatun ila Al-'Aqli Al-'Arabiyyi Al-Muslimi**, p. 154.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 154.

religions, although such consideration is not required all the time. Notwithstanding the fact that denial of the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) is, by our standards, a grave transgression, indeed an offense that starkly demarcates its perpetrators, it must be noted that Islam has contained controversy in this connection, not by belittling it or making ideological concessions, but rather by bringing it under the chapter of permissible relations irrespective of religious denomination and belief.<sup>(22)</sup>

But is not coexistence among nations and peoples, of course in the noblest sense of fair and equal treatment, is it not one of the very manifestations of this justice ? At any rate, it is in this sense that the Muslims construe the concept of justice enshrined in the holy verse: *[We sent aforetime Our apostles with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong), that men may stand forth in justice.]*<sup>(23)</sup> The Muslims gave substance to justice in the way most befitting the status of humans. This is clearly reflected in their treatment of those who do not believe in Islam and its principles, in their endeavor to purify society from evil, in their performance of humanitarian services and in their close cooperation for the dissemination of virtue and righteousness. History attests that the treatment administered by Muslims to non-Muslims in conquered lands was a paradigm of tolerance unmatched in history. The extent of the nobility of Islamic stances contrasts strikingly with the conditions of Muslim minorities living in territories under the domination of Jews, Christians and infidels in general.<sup>(24)</sup>

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(22) Ibid., p. 155.

(23) The *Al-Hadid Surah*, verse 25.

(24) *Hawla Al-Ta'siil Al-Islami li Al-'Ulumi Al-Ijtima'iyah*, p. 82.

The passage describing what happened during the entry of Caliph Omar, may Allah be pleased with him, into Al-Quds, can be rightly termed as a shining example of Islamic tolerance that further strengthened the foundations of religious, civilizational and cultural coexistence. When Omar entered Al-Quds, he was received by the Patriarch who toured with him the town till they arrived at the Church of Resurrection and entered. At prayer time, Omar told the Patriarch that he wanted to perform prayer. The Patriarch answered: «*You may pray where you are sitting.*» On seeing that he was sitting in the very middle of the Church, Omar feared that Muslims would follow suit. They would say: «*Since Omar has prayed here, we are all entitled to pray here too.*» They might even take the Church by force in violation of the provisions of the Omar Covenant<sup>(25)</sup> that stipulated respect for Christians' churches which had to be left to the Christians. They would think that what Omar had done with the consent of the Patriarch was an amendment of the conditions stipulated in the Covenant. Omar came out of the Church and prayed on its threshold. Yet, he ordered to stipulate in writing that no collective prayer be performed on that spot, nor a call to prayer be made therein. Omar then went to the Rock, and built the Mosque of the Rock.<sup>(26)</sup>

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25) See detailed story of Omar's conquest of Al-Quds in **Tarikh Al-Umam wal Muluk by Al-Tabari**, Vol. 4, p. 159, in **Tarikh Ibn Khaldun**, Vol. 5, p. 184, in **Al-Kamil fi Al-Tarikh**, by Ibn Al-Athir, Vol. 10, p. 190, in **Kitabu Al-Gharb**, under "The Arab Civilization" by Gustave Le Pont, p. 287, trans. Adel Zeitar, and in **A Brief History of the Middle East**, by Wells.

(26) Counselor Ali Ali Mansur. **Islamic Shariah and International Public Law**, p. 379, Dar Al-Qalam, Cairo, undated.

As mentioned earlier, reference has been made to this episode in the history of Islamic-Christian relations in order to bring to the fore a clear-cut historical fact, notably that, in Islam, tolerance constitutes not only a firm creed turned into courteous behavior, but also a private and public way of life practiced by Muslims. Naturally enough, the latter's relation with followers of other religions represented an unmatched, lofty paradigm of coexistence. This bears ample testimony to the fact that Muslims are pioneers in the field of coexistence, and that they possess, in all circumstances, a potential for coexistence with the willing followers of other creeds. This potential must not, however, be viewed as a predisposition to relinquish the slightest constituent of their identity, renounce any one of their beliefs or waive the smallest right. The sought coexistence is one which serves noble humanitarian goals through mutual understanding, cooperation and joint action in fields likely to help achieve these goals.

## **Coexistence within a non-Muslim Framework**

We cannot deny the great efforts of the Catholic Church in order to promote tolerance and Christian-Muslim understanding. A new development has indeed taken place, divorcing with the past habits since the days of Urubain II in 1095. The document of *Nostra Aetati*, issued by the second ecumenical assembly in the epoch of Pope Paul VI, in 1965, describing the position of the Church vis-à-vis non-Christians, states about Muslims: *«The Church holds in high esteem the Muslims who worship the One and Only God, the Merciful, the Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who has addressed his message to the humankind. The Muslims show full obedience to God's ordinances, even His implicit injunctions, as did Abraham from whose faith the Muslims derived theirs. The Muslims pay as well due respect and veneration*

*to Jesus as a prophet, although they do not recognize him as a god. They hold in high esteem his mother Virgin Mary, whom they treat with humbleness and veneration. They are, above all, awaiting the Judgment Day when the Almighty will resurrect humankind for the Reckoning. The Muslims attach importance to ethics, and worship God alone, particularly through regular prayer, Zakat and Fasting.»<sup>(27)</sup>*

Yet, in a new papal document, we find material that impels us to balk at the idea of «inter-religious dialogue» or «inter-religious coexistence,» not to renege on the application of the principle of dialogue and coexistence, but to ponder deeply the significance of this position and its repercussions on the moves undertaken by the Western Catholic Church in its call for dialogue and coexistence. The following example is relevant to our discussion of the perception of coexistence by non-Muslims, specifically the Christians, or more exactly the Christians with allegiance to the Western Church, not the Arab Christians who have been living in coexistence with us for centuries long, within the Islamic civilization. Under the sub-title of «Dialogue with our brothers from other religions,» in Chapter V of the Letter of the Redeemer<sup>(28)</sup>, about which Pope Paul II said that it enshrined his opinion and position vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, we read the following: «*Dialogue among religions constitutes part and parcel*

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(27) Quoted from **Risaalatun ila Al-'Aqli Al-'Arabiyyi Al-Muslimi**, pp. 169-170, Dr. Hassan Hathut. The book was originally written in English and distributed in USA. We are using the Arabic version published by Dar Al-Maarif, Cairo, 1998.

(28) On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, announced to the whole world the new apostolic letter. It is the tenth apostolic letter of Pope John Paul VI since he acceded to papal office in 1978. Quoted from **The Evangelization of the World**, by Dr. Zeineb Abdulaziz (see footnote 38).

*of the mission of the evangelist church. As both a way and a means of mutual acquaintance and enrichment, it is not inconsistent with our mission towards the nations. On the contrary, it is closely linked to this mission, in a special manner, and is an expression thereof.»* The document then points out: *«Redemption comes from the Christ, and dialogue does not absolve us from evangelization.»* Rather, *«the Church does not consider that there is any contradiction whatsoever between evangelization and inter-religious dialogue.»*<sup>(29)</sup>

## **Inter-religious Coexistence: How and Why?**

As stated earlier, coexistence is a type of cooperation based on mutual confidence and respect and aimed to achieve the goals agreed upon by parties that not only desire coexistence, but practice it with full conviction and free will and choice. How then is coexistence achieved? What are its ways and means? What are its channels? And what are its goals?

It must be pointed out in a clear-cut manner, at the outset, that coexistence, as we understand and welcome it, does not mean at all a dilution of positions, nor a manipulation of ideas or a fusion of creeds into the same mold may it even be an indubitably humanitarian mold as claimed. Followers of the authentic, sound creeds cannot accept this dubious, vague confusion and refuse conscientiously to renounce their specificities and values just for fear of being taxed as fanatics or to win the title of complex-free individuals. A coexistence that would strip the Muslim of his identity, shake his balance and disrupt his whole being has nothing to do with

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(29) Dr. Zeineb Abdulaziz. **The Evangelization of the World: Discussion of the Message of Pope John Paul VI**, p. 106, Al-Wafa Printing and Publication House, Cairo, First Edition, 1995.

coexistence; it is rather a form of perfidy, base maneuvering, and downright deceit.

But if coexistence is construed in the sense that each party will keep its religion complete and inalienable and adhere to its identity in its entirety, that is indeed the goal targeted and the type of relation we are seeking to set up with non-Muslims.

Coexistence between Muslims and followers of other religions must be based, in the first place, on mutual confidence and respect as well as on the desire to cooperate in fields of mutual interest for the well-being of humankind, not in useless, inane matters.

Perhaps the framework of coexistence set by the late Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali represents an ideal pattern of the aspired coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. The late Sheikh al-Ghazali laid down three principles for coexistence and dialogue:

**First:** To agree on discarding any term prejudicial to the glory and might of Allah. I and you must first agree that Allah's knowledge is infinite, that nothing can resist His power in the heavens or on earth, that His mercy knows no bounds, that He is above any shortcomings or insufficiencies rife among humans, etc.

**Second:** To agree that Allah elects His Messengers from among the humans renowned for their sincerity, trustworthiness and judiciousness.

**Third:** To refer controversial issues to the uncontested heritage in order to gradually lay a groundwork common to religions.<sup>(30)</sup>

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30) Ibid., p. 29.

These principles should constitute our point of departure in the actions aimed to enhance joint scientific research to arrive at results likely to foster the foundations of coexistence in the sense of cooperation among the faithful to achieve the well-being of humankind. It must be noted that unbiased scientific research on past contacts among religions and the impact of such contacts would be a good step towards the international peace and humane fraternity aspired by religions and philosophical trends since the dawn of intellectual activity. It is still yearned for by righteous individuals in society.

This research will broaden the perspective of religion-minded people and orient them to the finest aspects of the practice of their religion. At the same time, it is a scientific duty serving truth, provided it is undertaken by researchers in the comparative history of religions.<sup>(31)</sup>

Joint scientific and cultural action in this field will yield benefits to all believers in Allah since these efforts are all geared to strengthening understanding among followers of all religions, disseminating humanitarian values and building bridges of rapprochement on humanitarian bases that surpass intellectual and cultural bases.

One vast field for the promotion of coexistence among the faithful is cooperation among followers of all religions in the preservation of environmental safety, combat of serious diseases, eradication of racial discrimination and removal of the injustice besetting peoples, groups and communities suffering persecution.

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(31) Dr. Amin Al-Khuli. **Relation of Islam to the Reform of Christianity**, p. 17. Book 9 of his complete works. General Egyptian Publications House, Cairo, 1993.

Inter-religious coexistence must, likewise, include joint action for combating atheism, moral decadence, family disintegration and juvenile delinquency, in addition to all plagues and banes threatening the individual and the community, and thereby human life.

The concept of inter-religious coexistence must extend to include also the removal of causes of tension, turmoil, and instability in many parts of the world, such as Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Kashmir, Philippines, and other regions in Africa and Asia. Action in this area will be a good example of useful and fruitful action with a strong impact on people's lives. Inter-religious coexistence will thus become an efficient instrument for supporting the efforts directed to the achievement of peace, the knitting of sound relations among peoples and nations under the scope of international law, the respect for human rights and the concretization of the basic freedoms stipulated in international covenants, treaties and agreements.

Inter-religious coexistence must be geared toward supporting all the people subject to injustice and unfavorable circumstances without exception, compelling the perpetrators of injustice, persecution and terrorism at state, community or individual level, to observe the rules of international law and abide by the teachings of the revealed religions.

Coexistence among religions must not overshadow the mission of combating injustice, aggression and seizure of other people's land by force under any plea, nor must it show leniency to perpetrators of these crimes under the pretext of refraining from delving into political issues. This is only natural since one of the objectives of inter-religious coexistence is to endeavor to entrench the principles of right, justice and respect for the dignity of humans as

humans. These principles and teachings are, indeed, the common denominator of all religions.

Inter-religious coexistence must be a driving force that boosts the munificent efforts exerted by the international community with a view to supporting civilizational and cultural coexistence among nations and peoples. It must further develop, enrich and broaden the scope of these efforts. To serve a just and sustainable peace, the parties to inter-religious coexistence have to rid themselves of all constraints, pressures and ties that are inconsistent with the principles and objectives of this coexistence.

If inter-religious coexistence, which is at the same time a coexistence among cultures and civilizations, is not geared to the service of lofty humanitarian goals, it will lose its fine edge. It will become more akin to propagandist moves and empty slogans than sincere actions aimed to better the life of modern man. Consequently, we, the Muslims, must put under close scrutiny the goals of the calls to dialogue among religions, cultures and civilizations made by certain parties. The aim is to avoid being victims of cultural and religious duplicity, which is more lethal than commercial and industrial fraud.

Being aware of the magnitude of the threats leveled at mankind at this special juncture, we believe that coexistence among religions, in particular, is one of pressing necessities dictated by the urge to preserve humankind and ensure for them a life in freedom and dignity on this globe.

There is no doubt that the need for inter-religious coexistence will become even more pressing in the near future. All indicators signal that our Century is the stage of overwhelming crises on the political, economic, civilizational and cultural levels altogether. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that the mission of the revealed

religions will gain in importance just as the responsibility of the faithful will be heightened as they will give impetus to the process of inter-religious coexistence in the right direction in accordance with the divine ordinance: [*Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to a common word as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah.'* If then they turn back, say ye: '*Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's will).*']<sup>(32)</sup>

From this holy verse, we can infer a legal provision that determines the position of Islam as to coexistence among religions. The “common terms”<sup>32</sup> to which Almighty Allah has enjoined His Messenger (PBUH) to call the People of the Book may be broken down into three elements. Although all of these elements revolve around monotheism and recognition of the divinity and lordship of Allah alone, an inspired analysis may derive therefrom deep indications related to the reality and life of humankind. They are:

**First:** To worship none but Allah;

**Second:** To associate no partner with Him;

**Third:** To refrain from proclaiming from amongst ourselves gods other than Allah alone.

This verse is, indeed, the golden rule of inter-religious coexistence for it enjoins all creatures to worship none but Allah, to associate no partner with Him, and to reject tyranny, despotism, arrogance and hegemony by not erecting from among themselves gods other

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(32) The *Al-'Imran Sura*, verse 64.

than Allah, gods from whom they would receive guidelines and principles, and whom they would utterly dread in view of their ruthless power.

Inter-religious coexistence must be directed, therefore, to the satisfaction of Almighty Allah alone, in order to ensure for humankind a free, dignified life in a world pervaded with faith, righteousness and virtue.