

The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue

“DIALOGUE AND COEXISTENCE.”

An Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant

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1. In the firm belief in coexistence between Muslims and Christians in a society where freedom, justice, equality, and the rights of citizenship prevail; cogniscent of the need to work together in facing the internal concerns and external dangers that threaten the people, Muslims and Christians, of the one Arab homeland; and aware of the obligation of people of faith to reflect the duty to their Arab nation and homeland which their religious belief dictates, to share in the strengthening of national unity and of belonging to one homeland, which encompasses all of its people with their different religious adherences and which through them rises above confessional and ethnic bigotry so that all their efforts may be for the whole nation; a number of prominent Arab Muslims and Christians—intellectuals, religious scholars, and people engaged in public life—met together in Beirut in May 1995. The Middle East Council of Churches facilitated this meeting, and it resulted in founding “The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue”, including members from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, the Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

2. Every member of the working group is moved to participate in it because of personal conviction and does not pretend to officially represent anything else. The activity of each member springs solely from his or her religious commitment, aims only to realize the general well-being, and in so doing has regard to the whole nation, not to any one section, community, confession, party or the like. The consensus of the group’s members is that the dialogue they are engaged in is a “dialogue of life” which will be achieved through intellectual research, and programs of work conducted jointly by the adherents of both faiths so as to facilitate a common stance against the dangers faced by the nation in the social, educational, moral and cultural spheres.

Muslim-Christian dialogue is, in the view of the Working Group, not merely a dialogue between those who, as fellow citizens, belong to the national group as such. It is also a dialogue among believers. They perceive this endeavor as a practical expression of their religious values, values which give substance to the meaning of pluralism, mutual awareness, and the unqualified dignity of the human being, and of the values of justice, fairness, truth, decency, fellow feeling, affection, mercy and the stewardship of creation.

3. Taking as its key these defining ideas, the Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue has launched several related initiatives. It has convened several seminars which dealt with topics as various as citizenship, equality, pluralism, political participation, coexistence, and the Abrahamic heritage. It also called together an Arab conference, the first of its kind, on the cause of Jerusalem. Its participants were the cream of the Christian and Muslim intellectual and religious leadership in the Arab world. The group also initiated several other events among the most important of which have been meetings of Muslim and Christian in Egypt and Lebanon.

4. Drawing upon its growing experience and upon the products of conferences and activities over the past years, the Working Group thought it good to prepare this document on dialogue and coexistence so as to articulate principles and broad guidelines which might help give wider

currency to the culture of dialogue, mutual understanding, coexistence and common action. It might encourage the development of a society of shared citizenship, justice and freedom, and enable people to confront those dangers which threaten to unravel the national fabric.

5. The Arab Working Group on Dialogue observes that securing coexistence is a necessity informed by a single set of national and social concerns and objectives, one historical and cultural context, and a common destiny. These are core issues that bring everyone together; obligations and rights and their consequences do not involve just one party. Religious differences do not cancel out the fact of belonging all together to the Arab Islamic culture, in whose making Christians and Muslims participated side by side.

6. The Working Group sees the need to strengthen national unity in the face of external interference and efforts to assert domination over the Arab world. While external interference in internal unrest sometimes taking on religious coloration is a fact, it is a mistake to make light of the internal factors and circumstances which lend themselves to exploitation by foreign forces for their own ends. For this reason, addressing and solving internal problems through dialogue and cooperation between compatriots, both Muslims and Christians, is the precondition for frustrating foreign interference which only aggravates the situation, sows suspicions and breeds mutual fear. If making light of the effect which internal problems have in damaging national unity, so too making too much of them can provoke similar damage. Among Muslims and Christians, citizens of one nation, it can stimulate a generalized atmosphere of panic, fear and self-isolation.

All of this mandates strengthening and sustaining dialogue, translating it into a pragmatic program directed toward giving firm foundation to coexistence and treating the root problems and causes of confessional unrest. Much of this unrest may be attributed to political, economic, social and cultural circumstances which conspire to breed an atmosphere of general malaise which may manifest itself in many guises, one of which is religious unrest. Obviously these objective factors do not have an impact upon only one religious community; their burden and bane falls upon the whole of society without exception.

7. Another thing that may be claimed for dialogue is that it is a way of resolving the confusion between genuine religiosity and fanaticism which leads to violence and extremism. Fanaticism, which is a severity of thinking which excludes all other views, and violence, a behavioral tendency seeking to impose one's ideas on others by force, are not necessarily linked to or characteristic of religious commitment. Rather they are phenomena produced by a variety of circumstances and factors of a general political, social, economic and cultural nature. Fanaticism and violence can manifest themselves in a wide variety of guises and belief structures. A wrong understanding of what it means to be religious can lend itself to fanaticism. It abandons moderation in favor of forms of behavior which are unacceptable to genuine religiosity and true religious values. In light of this, one aim of dialogue as it works to encourage coexistence is to strip from the notion of religious devotion the idea that it must be extremist, to display prominently its high spiritual and humanitarian values as well as its high intention to serve the common good and respond to the social and developmental problems that confront all groups in society, and to affirm that a correct understanding religious commitment includes an acceptance of and living with others of different faiths in respect for their religious sufficiency and their specific rites and practices.

8. Thus dialogue is a prerequisite for coexistence, for national unity, and for constructive social interaction between the citizens of one nation. Furthermore, it is a spiritual, moral and cultural requirement mandated by the principle of mutual understanding among believers. This principle nurtures values of mutual respect, strengthens the bonds of friendship, and corrects the distorted and stereotypical images that make for mutual alienation and fear. Difference and variety are human facts. Indeed, they are signs from God to humanity and creation. Dialogue, mutual recognition and outdoing one another in good deeds can enrich

everybody. They keep people from picking fights with each other, from isolating themselves, from getting into conflict situations and from alienating each other.

9. Muslim-Christian dialogue also sets out fully aware that the logic which portrays a “bloody barrier” standing between Christianity and Islam worldwide is dangerous. This logic is founded upon the idea of a clash of civilizations; it gives a religious patina to the reality of western domination. Over against this, the Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue seeks to affirm a united Muslim-Christian position on the world stage, defending common Arab causes, first among which is the cause of Jerusalem. Also in this context, Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue has something to contribute to the dialogue between cultures, civilizations and religions worldwide. To do this it must distinguish between Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue, on the one hand, and the dialogue of Arabs—both Muslims and Christians—with the western and other civilizations, on the other hand.

10. Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue gains added significance in light of a number of phenomena, factors and obstacles which affect relations between Muslim and Christian Arabs. In fact they constitute, in the view of the Working Group, an added incentive for dialogue and common action.

11. The lack of respect for cultural and religious distinctiveness and the unsatisfactory management of diversity in Arab societies has led to a relative restriction of the scope for intermingling, uniting, meeting, interacting and cooperating. This applies to residential districts, to educational institutions (especially private ones), to professional, cultural and political institutions, and to clubs. The impact of this is to weaken the institutions of civil society which ought to be a uniting force for the national body politic. To resolve this, the dialogue propounded by the Working Group strives for a concept of full citizenship and emancipation of participation in public life from the confessional shackles which have shaken national unity and opened the doors for external interference and hindered democratic development.

12. In some Arab environments there has been a retreat from a culture of mutual understanding and recognition built upon calm and diligent dialogue which draws upon reliable sources. Instead there has emerged a religious rhetoric—contentious, injurious, provocative—which exacerbates doubts and fears and has no grounding in serious understanding. This has had the effect of augmenting verbal and symbolic violence. This phenomenon requires a response based on frank and sincere speaking, bold encounter, persistent attention and positive mutual understanding among the followers of the two faiths. This is what the Working Group calls for and for which it works in all its activities.

13. Fear for the future is another observable phenomenon. Its cause is a conflation of economic, social and political circumstances, among the most important being the Israeli threat, the absence of democracy, the suppression of freedom and crises in employment. These are frequently blamed on relations between adherents of religious groups so as to exaggerate fear with the fantasy that one religious group is threatening the other. This affects majorities and minorities alike. Confronting this the Working Group has turned to common action in the form of summer camps for young people which provide occasions for learning to know the other in a natural environment such as was widespread in the whole of society in the past. They grew without mutual fear with its harmful effects on coexistence.

14. Furthermore it is to be noted that some have a propensity to attribute national and confessional conflicts in the world to internal relations between component elements of the body politic, Muslim and Christian. This scenario portrays the local situation as an extension of the putative worldwide confrontation between Islam and Christianity, and has the effect of deepening doubts and fears between Muslims and Christians in our Arab countries. This may

hinder cooperation with one's compatriots and fellow citizens on the grounds that they stand accused of complicity in a religious conspiracy, unless they explicitly renounce specific positions adopted by fellow believers in an external national or confessional conflict. We believe that Muslim-Christian dialogue can help deter the threat posed by national and sectarian conflicts elsewhere in the world to the process of coexistence in our local environment, and its being used by outside forces to inflame mutual doubts and fears, so that it loses its destructive effect on the relations between the people of the nation, Muslims and Christians.

This dialogue also intends to affirm that both Muslim and Christian believers are committed to the absolute character of justice. They stand with the oppressed and persecuted no matter their religious affiliation and without bias in favor of the oppressors and persecutors by reason of their religious identity. This may effectively affirm the integrity of our national fabric and strengthen the values of coexistence between Muslim and Christian believers.

15. Dialogue is disciplined toward sharing information, reaching understanding, always listening the one to the other and speaking frankly. It eschews that which incites emotions and wounding speech. It expresses uprightness in thought and ethics as people interact. It adheres to principles of justice and honesty. It provides the opportunity to correct ideas and examine distorted images of one another. Moreover, it is an opportunity to examine one's self. Similarly, dialogue leads to the building of trust and the establishment of relations of friendship and amity in a context of respect for the boundaries and differences between the religions and the principles of life and action of the participants and the appropriate demands of citizenship.

16. The desired Muslim-Christian dialogue is not, according to the Arab Working Group, a tool for evangelism or proselytism, nor is it an attempt to unify the religions or syncretistically to patch them together. Rather it arises out of respect for the belief of the other and a desire to strengthen the religious foundations of coexistence in the one homeland. It is an opportunity for a meeting of the hearts and minds of believers in a sense of national and cultural belonging, in a sense of shared destiny, in a focus upon common issues and challenges.

17. The dialogue being sought is not concerned with doctrinal debates or religious polemics, nor does it make comparisons or show preference. It is not governed by the need to affirm one's self over against the other, or by the attempt to show supremacy and superiority.

18. It is not an effort to negotiate between two power blocks, one Muslim and the other Christian, on the assumption that each is internally homogeneous. Propensities, proclivities, opinions, interpretations, and religious dictums naturally diverge among adherents of any religion, but this does not impugn their adherence to shared fundamentals.

19. This dialogue that is desired does not prefer the path of least resistance or try to say nice things, masking and ignoring differences. Nor does it fall into the trap of dissimulation and deception. It is not a prerequisite of effective and constructive dialogue or of common action that either party concede anything having to do with doctrine or faith.

20. First among the standards by which the authenticity of dialogue will be judged is intellectual integrity. Just because this may seem banal, it does not mean that we should not affirm it here. Intellectual integrity assumes that, at need, a person can liberate one's self from inherited and stereotypical images as well as from the influences of popular imagination. What is required is a serious examination of the heritage of the other religion using its own sources and self-definition, as well as examination of the sources of such false images in both religions. This demands serious scholarly analysis of the cultural, social, historical and psychological factors which conspire to create feelings of mutual fear and distrust.

21. This effort requires that one manner of speaking must be adopted in the furtherance of Christian-Muslim relations, not two where we tend to use one language within the group to which we belong, and a second when addressing the other group. In the cause of frankness and avoiding dissimulation, those involved in dialogue must liberate themselves from the temptation to resort to this double standard in language which only impugns the integrity of dialogue and detracts from its gains.

22. The Working Group considers that one cannot separate religion from public affairs or downplay its role within them. On the contrary, one is to be guided by religious values in administering public affairs, in achieving beneficial things, in strengthening liberties, in achieving justice and renewing creation. Religion protects against corruption and deviation and encourages activity for the nation and the homeland. Therefore religion must not be exploited in the service of narrow political and partisan interests, nor to exacerbate political and social conflict which, basically, denies the message of religion, its spirit and its very essence, transforming it into an secondary tool and not a guiding and wisdom-giving resource.

23. Without respect for Muslim and Christian religious sensibilities, symbols and sacred things, dialogue and coexistence will be deficient. This is not limited to how the adherents of the two religions act toward each other. This attitude of respect expresses itself through the two parties standing together against the desecration of the sanctities of either group no matter the source.

24. While affirming religious liberty as a human right enshrined in the sources of the religions themselves, we stand together as Muslims and Christians against all forms of material or moral pressure, and all instruments of religious theft or seduction which may be employed under the pretext of religious freedom to alienate Muslims and Christians from their respective religions. We urge religious scholars, people of culture and the intelligentsia of both Islam and Christianity to seek out the common spiritual and humanitarian values in the heritage of both religions and in the life-styles of their adherents. We urge them to highlight the positive and bright examples of how people can live together, stand in solidarity with each other, express mutual respect, and show each other affection. This will enliven the broad spectrum of society with the spirit of dialogue and tolerance in public life. Wisdom is what believers always seek, and they are called to assess things using the measure of justice and honest scales, not debasing the things of others.

36. The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, agreeing upon the above principles and general guidelines, considers them all together as constituting a guide or a foundation for designing practical plans and launching programs in many areas of public information, education, culture and society which can be translated into real coexistence: religious communications, religious education, and the publication of relevant books; meetings organized between scholars of religion and clergy; youth activities; social and voluntary activities; clubs and cultural platforms; solidarity campaigns; defense of human rights and religious and political liberties; strengthening political cooperation and the institutions of civil society. These and other sorts of initiatives and common efforts to implement practical program certainly must be tailored to fit the varied spectrum of Arab society and environments. The Working Group will expend its utmost efforts in this cause, and it hopes that these principles and considerations may act as a call to the people, a witness among them, and a covenant for Arab Muslim-Christian action.