

## The Abu Dhabi Document: summary and response

# Human fraternity for peace and coexistence

Rita Moussallem

The *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* is proposed as an "object of research and reflection" for every field of study. Here, the author offers both an introduction and summary of the document's key points as well as a look at the response from both the Catholic and Muslim worlds. The author, originally from Lebanon, is a past director of the Focolare Movement's work in Jordan and Iraq, and is currently co-coordinator of the Movement's International Center for Interreligious Dialogue.

The *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and Imam Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar mosque-university<sup>1</sup>, was defined as a historic milestone in Christian-Islamic relations by experts and observers. It carries with it a powerful international impact, also because of the particular context in which the signing took place, during the *Global Conference of Human Fraternity* interreligious conference promoted by the Muslim Council of Elders (founded in the United Arab Emirates in 2014). More than five hundred global religious leaders were present, including Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and representatives of various Orthodox and Western Christian Churches (including World Council of Churches' Secretary General Olav Fykse Tveit), as well as Muslim and Catholic leaders.

The Document's significance and strength can be grasped by the mere fact that it was jointly conceived and written by Christians and Muslims, fruit of a year-long process of work and discussion between teams representing the Pope and the Imam. It is steeped in references to Christian and Islamic faith and draws on the two faith traditions. It is a shared narrative, a message with two signatories and addressed together to one another's faithful after joint consultation. It is a commitment rooted in shared human and moral values, free of ambiguity and syncretism.<sup>2</sup> "The Document was prepared with much reflection and also praying," Pope Francis said during his in-flight press conference returning from Abu Dhabi.<sup>3</sup>

### ▲ Key Points

The declaration begins with the statement that faith in God, the Creator, is the foundation of fraternity, and describes as a "great divine grace". It goes on to propose a humanism rooted in the intrinsic dignity of every human being, believer or non-believer. Then, on that basis, dialogue can become a shared calling to work in many crucial areas of contemporary society.

#### *Commitment to a culture of dialogue and peace*

After a series of invocations beginning in the name of God and calling us to arise from our suffering, tormented humanity and respond to the call for human dignity, justice, and mercy. Al-Azhar and the Catholic Church declare the adoption of:

- "... a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard."

The two leaders call upon both themselves and the leaders of the world "to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing."

#### *Causes of the world crisis and extremism*

The text looks at the divided and contrasted East and West, where one part of the world is increasingly

globalized and developed, while the other continues to face an uphill battle in building its own future, thus serving only to fuel a dangerous spiral of war and violence, further poverty, and forced migration.

It underlines the "moral deterioration that influences international action and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility [...], a desensitized human conscience [...] a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies . . . "

There is also a critique of "deviation from religious teachings, the political manipulation of religion and even the interpretations of religious groups "who take advantage of the power of religious sentiment for worldly political and economic motives.

Similarly, there is also a strong denunciation of "policies linked to hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression and pride" that wound fraternity and lead many to fall "into a vortex of atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism, or into blind and fanatic extremism . . . "

The family's essential role is emphasized together with the importance "of awakening religious awareness" especially in youth, and to "confront tendencies that are individualistic, selfish, conflicting, and address radicalism and blind extremism in all its forms and expressions."

*Condemnation of terrorism and violence in the name of religion*

The declaration states that one cannot both believe in God the creator and Lord, and at the same time harm the life of his creatures. Therefore, they condemn "those practices that are a threat to life such as genocide, acts of terrorism, forced displacement, human organ trafficking, abortion and euthanasia. We likewise condemn the policies that promote these practices."

They call upon everyone to "stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression"; imploring the necessity to "stop supporting terrorist movements fueled by financing, the provision of weapons and strategy, and by attempts to justify these movements even using the media. All these must be regarded as international crimes that threaten security and world peace. Such terrorism must be condemned in all its forms and expressions . . . "

*Defending and promoting rights and core values*

It needs to be kept in mind that the Document is aimed at persons of very different religions and cultures. Its reception may differ substantially if we consider that in certain areas some rights are not respected, nor are they even considered as such. This, more than anything else illustrates profound value and significance of these shared, though not at all obvious, statements. Here are a few of these important points:

- Freedom (of thought, expression and action) as the right of every person. Pluralism and diversity of religion, color, sex, race and language ... "Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept."

- Protection of places of worship: synagogues, churches and mosques.

- The concept of citizenship is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship and reject the discriminatory use of the term minorities which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority.

- Dialogue between believers which means "coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for."

- The right of women to education and employment, and to recognize their freedom to exercise their own political rights.

- Protection of the fundamental rights of children. Condemnation of violations against their dignity and rights.

- Protection of the rights of the elderly, the weak, the disabled and the oppressed.

In conclusion, al-Azhar and the Catholic Church ask that this Document become "the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities and institutes of formation" in order to help create new generations that bring "goodness and peace to others, and to be defenders everywhere of the rights of the oppressed and of the least of our brothers and sisters."

## ▲ Reaction to the Document

### *Among Muslims*

There were positive echoes from Muslims involved in dialogue as well as from many educated citizens who have sensed the importance, through communication by an authoritative voice, of helping the world understand the lives and beliefs of a majority of Muslims today.

A coordination of European Muslim religious authorities engaged in interreligious dialogue and intercultural education - EuLeMa - has declared its "heartfelt support and concrete accompaniment to this noble initiative and to the contents of this historical message".

There are, however, more than a few obstacles, beginning first from the fractures within the Sunni Muslim world itself. This was already evident during the Pope's journey, which was [criticized](#) by the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), an organization is dedicated to bringing together Muslim

scholars and other intellectuals more closely aligned with Islamic culture.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the Pope for the Catholic world, co-signer Imam al-Tayyeb does not have particular magisterial authority, despite the weight of his position. In the Sunni Islamic world, authority is widespread and not organized hierarchically. Al-Tayyeb's involvement in the current political situation in Egypt and stance in favor of [Qatar's isolation](#), means he is a controversial figure for some.

Meanwhile, the Abu Dhabi declaration has already been republished by *Sawt al-Azhar*, the weekly al-Azhar University mosque magazine. If this commitment continues, it can be extended to include others. Not surprisingly, an IUMS member who challenged the papal trip to Abu Dhabi [called on](#) the pontiff to open an "international dialogue between civilizations"<sup>5</sup>.

The greatest challenge to the Document's acceptance may be enabling its message to reach, and enter into the educational structures of the everyday citizen living on the outskirts. In this way, it will effect a change in mentality and teachings that allows them to be permeated with the reality of universal fraternity.

*In the Catholic world*

In general, there has been appreciation for the Abu Dhabi Document. Among other things it was sent by the Congregation for Eastern Churches to heads of the Eastern Catholic Churches, where it was received positively following the request that it be circulated within each of their respective communities.

At the same time, there has also been some reservation and skepticism from those who see the Document as a kind of submissiveness on the part of the Catholic world. Pope Francis himself acknowledged this, saying: "If someone feels bad, I understand it, it's not an everyday thing . . . not a step back, it's a step forward", he said during the return flight press conference.<sup>6</sup>

He explained:

"They accuse me of being exploited by everyone [...]. But there is one thing, yes, I would like to say. I openly reaffirm this: from the Catholic point of view the Document does not move one millimeter away from the Second Vatican Council. [. . .] The Document was crafted in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. [. . .] It is a step forward, but one that comes after 50 years, from the Council, which must be developed. Historians say that for a Council to sink its roots in the Church it takes 100 years. We are halfway there. [. . .] In the Islamic world there are different opinions; some are more radical, others not. [. . .] It is a process, and processes mature, like flowers, like fruit."<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> In recent years this prestigious mosque-university in Cairo, one of the oldest active universities and the main center of teaching for Sunni Islam in the world, has enjoyed increasing visibility. The role of Imam al-Tayyeb was further strengthened through his relationship with Pope Francis and the support of the Emirates, resulting in his selection as president of who wanted him as president of the Muslim Council of Elders (cf. Michele Brignone, *Abu Dhabi re-launches the role of al-Azhar*, in "Oasis", 21 March 2019).

<sup>2</sup> "This is a capital shift of importance: from the point of view of the social imaginary, in fact, shared narratives represent the basis on which communities (religious, cultural, national, etc.) develop their own identity and the horizon also values within which solutions to problems are sought and assessed" (G. Costa sj, *Religions and the courage of otherness: the Joint Declaration of Abu Dhabi*, in "Social Updates" 70 [2019/3] pp. 181 -188).

<sup>3</sup> *Press conference on the return flight from Abu Dhabi*, 5 February 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Islam* refers to a set of ideologies that believe that Islam should guide social and political life as well as personal life. It is therefore an essentially political conception of Islam.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Brignone, *Papa Francesco negli Emirati: un percorso su cui scommettere* (Pope Francis in the Emirates: a trusted path), in «Oasis», 7 February 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Press conference on the return flight from Abu Dhabi*, February 5, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* For a deepening in theological perspective on this topic in this same issue of *Ekklesia*, see also MC Biagioni's reprinted Religious Information Service interview with Msgr. Piero Coda: *Religions Together, Prophecy of a New Humanity*.