

# Religious Collaboration: Seeds of peace

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## Two intertwining global crises

We live at the juncture of two major interconnected global crises. On one hand, a planetary ecological/economic crisis is exemplified, five years before the deadline, by the fact that no country is on track to meet the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The central promise of the 2030 Agenda to "leave no one behind" has not been kept in the face of the enormous existential challenges of poverty, discrimination, environmental degradation and resource access. These SDGs have become an empty acronym.

On the other, a geopolitical crisis with proliferating wars is creating atrocities and devastation, endangering what remains of multilateral systems of cooperation and international humanitarian law that were, with all their limitations, an important positive conquest built on the tragic ruins of World War II and the Holocaust.

The intertwining of these two great crises is multifaceted.

Global climate change, for example, disproportionately impacts the poor and religious minorities – already marginalized and discriminated against because of their faith – are among the world's most vulnerable peoples. As a result, they end up suffering more, relative to access to healthcare, education, food, clean water, sanitation and decent work. They are forced to work in insecure, low-paid economic sectors that leave many economically marginalized and impoverished.

All this makes it more difficult to live together in diversity and peace. It could be said that our 21<sup>st</sup> century global political crisis is a crisis of dis-unity and one that also includes a global religious crisis.

## **A new era of interreligious solidarity**

Against this sometimes gloomy background, however, one can also see growing seeds of hope for unity through a new, developing era of interreligious solidarity at both a global and local level. Although it is not a clamorous kind of development, and it is difficult to characterize, there has been a notable increase in efforts by religious leaders and communities to respond to violence and political tensions through interfaith dialogue and collaboration. The historic Document on Human Fraternity, co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, in 2019 in Abu-Dhabi, and by Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq in 2021, was a particularly strong and decisive moment in this new trend.

With this document, these religious leaders sent a powerful message in favor of political inclusion and against minority discrimination, especially in countries where Islam or Christianity represent the majority religion. If we are all brothers and sisters, then each person in need of recognition and respect, including participation in public life, as citizens with full rights, freedom and responsibilities.

This unprecedented interfaith initiative has sown seeds of hope for unity and peace in a troubled world, a world struck by crises of disunity and war. And I would go as far as to argue, perhaps provocatively, that these narratives of interreligious solidarity and human fraternity today are bearers of global hope for unity and universalism, more than any other secular political discourse and narrative.

## **A strategic multifaceted resource for peace**

Interreligious dialogue includes many forms of interaction ranging from theological exchanges to daily socialization and shared social initiatives by individuals of different religions on specific issues (whether a dialogue of life, of action, of religious experiences, or a dialogue of theological exchange). Such dialogue, as a sustained global practice, is a relatively new phenomenon that has seen significant development over the last two decades. The most significant trend in this growth involves a steady shift of interreligious dialogue from theology to practical collaboration.

Those forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration that have the greatest potential relative to peacebuilding and inclusive societies are ones that recognize and respect differences. They also involve those 'challenging' religious actors that go beyond the usual participants in dialogue movements for decades. Additionally, it is interesting to note that interreligious dialogue and collaboration probably represent one of the most dynamic and promising areas of active citizen participation and new socio-political

leadership. This is especially true among young people and women and is often set against the backdrop of a contemporary crisis scenario of democracy marked by disengagement, disenchantment, rejection of public responsibility and a search for the common good.

Today, politicians worldwide are increasingly recognizing that interfaith dialogue and collaboration can be part of the solution and a strategic resource in fostering peacebuilding, human rights and sustainable development. There is a huge unexplored heritage of cultural and religious resources and topics with which to build a more just and environmentally sustainable economic system and to combat discrimination within and between religious traditions.

### **From challenge to promise**

The shift from understanding religion's political role in global affairs as primarily a security issue, to fuller engagement with religious communities with a eye towards broader human development goals, is not easy. But it brings with it the promise of a realistic new politics of hope for peace and unity. The Covid-19 crisis highlighted the significant potential of faith-based communities and organizations. Their engagement in acts of solidarity built resilience and responded to the needs of vulnerable members of society, from spearheading food banks to mental health support, from combating loneliness and intolerance to supporting the elderly, etc.

Through such initiatives, these religious players reached out to the poor, marginalized, ignored and forgotten on the fringe of society, while also ensuring that every citizen can participate in public discussion and decision-making. To this end, the *empowerment* of local communities for sustainable development in ways that respect cultural values and involve shared decision-making processes, is fundamental.

This engaged interreligious collaboration creates what Pope Francis defined in his recent encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, as social friendship in pursuit of common goals of development, to fight against what he called the "throwaway culture."

It is important to be aware of the mission that belongs to religions, a mission to bring hope and to build unity. More and more creativity will be needed to actualize this prophetic vision of unity and peace, because this vision is needed in today's world, now more than ever.