Promoting a Climate
of Mutual Understanding and Respect
between Communities through Service:
Ways and Means

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I will start my reflections on this theme with the conclusion of the World Council of Churches' report on the *Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of other Religions*.

> *"In the many pluralist societies where they live, Christians and people of other religions are bound together in a dialogue of life, with all its difficulties but also its riches and promises. They gain new insights about their own faith and that of others. They discover afresh resources which will help them become more humane and make the world a better place for living together. They learn how to be more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of others and more obedient to God's will for all creation."* [1]

What is Pluralism?

The first question that comes to our mind as we read this passage is: what do we mean by pluralism? Pluralism is "[a] state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of common civilization."[2] We will restrict our definition of pluralism to the religious aspect for the purpose of this paper. The autonomous participation in the concept of pluralism entails a strong sense of positive identity, i.e. an identity that expresses itself in action, and therefore is not restrained or receding.

There is a dialectic relationship between pluralism and identity. Pluralist society legitimates the quest for identity; in fact, this quest often becomes even more compelling in a context of close multi-confessional contact. However, if we restrict our concept of identity to a religious component, and in some instances to the denominational one, we will be planting the seeds of segregation, sectarianism and conflict, all of which may become volatile and explosive if not addressed adequately.[3] We should not underestimate the role of religion in shaping our identity, especially in the Middle East where the

three main monotheistic religions were born. But, at the same time, we must not let the quest for identity justify hostility, injustice or discrimination in any form.

Pluralism in Holy Scriptures

Most religions put forward a holistic and comprehensive approach to the relationship between the creation and the Creator. Each approach is exclusive because it promises heavenly rewards to the ones that follow it, but at the same time is universal because it calls all human beings to God. Christians are called to bring the *Evan Galion* – the Good News – to the world; likewise, Muslims are called to spread the *da' wa* – to propagate Islam to all nations.

Nevertheless, there are many references in the Holy *Qur'an* and the Holy Bible to the concept of pluralism. Take an example from the Holy *Qur'an*: "O Mankind, We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other" (*Qur'an* 49:19). And from the Holy Bible: "Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Many regard their religious affiliation as part of a social or cultural heritage, and not as a belief system that governs all aspects of their life and directs their relationship with others. These are considered 'non-practicing' believers.

Islam makes a clear distinction between Muslims – *Al Muslimun* – and believers – *Al Mu'minun*. It is crucial at this juncture to differentiate between religion and faith. Faith is the essence of religion. Many find great difficulties in trying to disclose the true message behind the religious rituals and expressions.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the common denominator of all religions. In fact, such spirituality can transcend the rigidity of dogma. Religion can be likened to a path through the wilderness. The wilderness is God's saving revelation to all peoples; the path must necessarily pave the way to liberation.

The personal benefit of spirituality is a more enriching relationship to the Creator, acting through the created, and for the welfare of the creation.

> "The interfaith movement needs to be erected on the foundation of spirituality, not of religion… Spirituality integrates the salvation of the individual with the transformation of the society….Shared spirituality …shifts the focus from the efficacy of individual salvation to the collective destiny of our species. In the process the spirit of competition is replaced by the spirit of a shared sense of mission." [4]

Some consider pluralism to be a synonym of religious diversity. Pluralism is not mere coexistence. Tolerance and acceptance are preliminary stages in the process of erecting a culture of pluralism. Religious communities may co-exist in a certain geographical territory but lack any kind of interaction; frequently, physically 'close' communities seem unimaginably 'far' apart. Religious diversity may be a given reality but pluralism denotes the way we make use of it.[5] Pluralism is a means rather than an end.

Diversity as Development

This diversity could be (and is already) a source of community development, personal emancipation, good stewardship and common welfare, but only if taken in the context of pluralism. Otherwise, religious diversity may generate enmity, mistrust and may even intensify and exacerbate conflicts. In this era of globalisation, conflicts have also become globalised; even extending to distant emigrant communities or into previously

untouched domains such as the internet, chat rooms, and campuses. Communities are integrated (sometimes coerced) into the global system, all the while increasingly separated from each other. A good metaphor for this is the reality that millions of individuals watching the same television program are completely isolated from one another.

Religions are dragged strongly into these conflicts and there are increasing calls for religions to play an active role in the public domain and in peace-building initiatives. How, then, can we promote this atmosphere of understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths?[6] And how can we do this without losing sight of our separate and unique identities?

The Trinity and Pluralism

In the Christian faith there is an image of a Trinitarian God. There are three unique Hypostasis (Persons) yet they form one God[7]. Therefore, the unique denominational differences do not need to disappear, but can be positively expressed through the "quest for identity" and nurtured in a truly pluralist context.

Step towards interreligious communication

It is crucial to start by acknowledging that we are owned by God and do not own God. Salvation is a divine gift bestowed by God on whomever He sees worthy of it in His divine knowledge and judgment. In addition, we have to affirm the conviction that "God is not without witness among any people or at any time," (Acts 14:17).[8]

The second step is to engage in all areas of interreligious communication. These encounters can take place in neighbourhoods, schools, work, and even public transportation.[9] It is preferable to speak of interreligious encounters rather than dialogue at this stage for many reasons. The first reason is that many understand dialogue as the theoretical and academic discourse on theology and dogmas. The second reason is that it leaves out two major actors in those encounters: women and youth.[10] They have to be allowed to get involved on their own terms and fields of interest and expertise.

Going through such encounters in a spirit of humility and respect, the various actors involved will be able to discern their common interests and values. Most religions call for peace, justice and fairness to all. These must remain universal values not subject to compromise and intolerant of double standards.

Moreover, we have to refrain from proselytism and denounce all forms of syncretism or double

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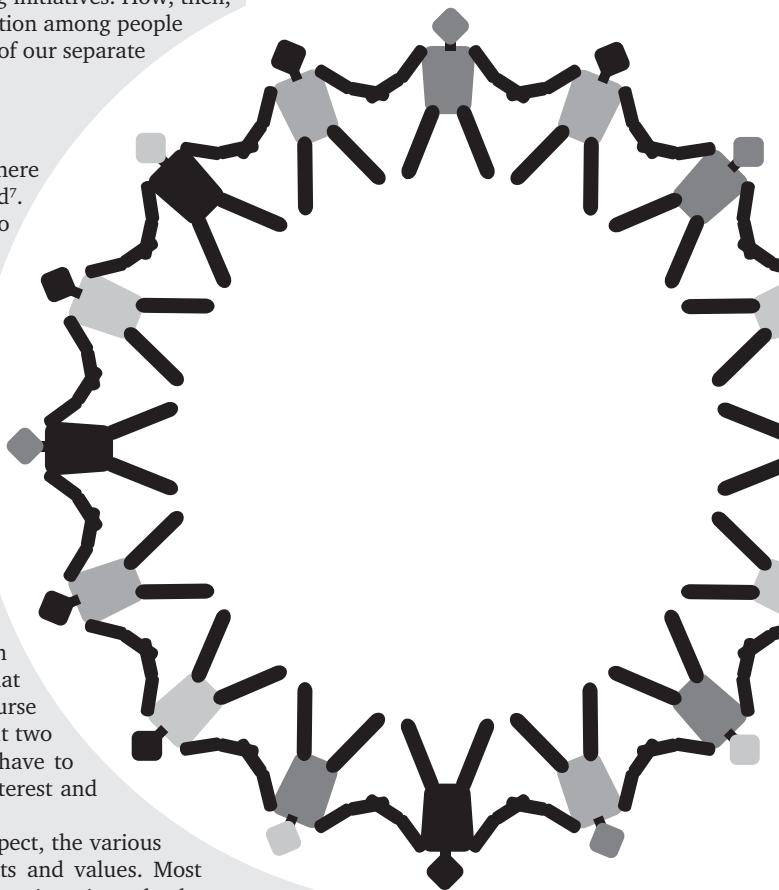
language. All these interactions have to be conducted in an atmosphere of transparency and be open to clarifications and constructive criticism. These are the building blocks of the bridge of trust requisite for any joint initiative at the community level.[11] We need to bring emphasis to faith and spirituality above religious differences and, at the same time, ensure that the quest for identity is not cut short by easy syncretism or mere tolerance.

There are a few points to take into consideration as we proceed in that joint venture:

Partnership:
All parties involved shall enjoy full partnership in any joint action. This partnership starts from detecting the need or threat to the level of diagnoses and treatment until the stage of evolution. It is collective ownership.

Determination:
All parties shall show a high level of perseverance and strong patience. They have to expect attacks, abuse, manipulations and sometimes failures. We may lose a battle but we shall win the war.

Continuity:
It shall be of great interest to promote a second class of committed and experienced leaders who will insure that there will be no breach or break. There has to be a commitment to make this "dialogue of life" a central aspect of our faith, and not merely an intellectual pursuit, something on the sidelines or occasional.

Incorporation:
Media plays a crucial role in propagating news about conflicts which may have negative repercussions on interreligious interactions. It is imperative to "recognize those newspapers, journalists or programme makers who actually want to act with a degree of responsibility and impartiality, cooperate with them by involving them in our work …"[12] In the same context, it is advantageous to get all the social strata and influential groups involved.

Creativity:
There are no ready made recipes or tested medicines that can be safely applied. It always advisable to look into past experiences for critical assessment and to draw on the positive elements. Moreover, a contextual analysis that takes into account the actors involved, their relationship to each other and to the political authorities as well as any other relevant factors is needed.

In conclusion, we have to keep in mind that each and every human being is a unique cosmos. In order to navigate in it safely, we have to have the precise knowledge of its space and to respect its laws of gravity.

> Moreover, we have to refrain from proselytism and denounce all forms of syncretism or double language.

(Endnotes)
1   WCC, 'Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of other Religions: Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 guidelines,' *Current Dialogue*, no. 40 December 2002, 16.
2   *Webster's Nine New collegiate Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster Inc,1991)
3   'Current Dialogue, no. 40 December 2002, 17.
4   Swami Agnivesh, `Applied Spirituality A Spiritual Vision for the Dialogue of Religions,` *Current Dialogue*, no. 45 July 2005, 35.
5   WCC, 'Report of a Consultation What Difference Does Religious Plurality Make? Bossey ecumenical institute17-22 April 1999,' *Current Dialogue*, no. 34 2 1999, 60.
6   *Current Dialogue*, no. 40 December 2002, 16.
7   Hypostaisis in Greek language means:"who stands underneath, who sustains". For more details refer to: Vocabulaire Theologique orthodoxe , Cerf, Paris 1985, 151.
8   *Current Dialogue*, no. 40 December 2002,17.
9   John D'Arcy May, `The Dialogue of Religions: Source of Knowledge? Means of Peace? ` *Current Dialogue*, no. 35, 17.
10   Christy Lohr, ` Interreligious Education Equipping People to be Citizens of the World`, *Current Dialogue*, no. 35 ,11.
11   For more details refer to the guiding principles , WCC, 'Guidelines for Dialogue and Relations with People of other Religions: Taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 guidelines,' *Current Dialogue*, no. 40 December 2002, 19.
12   Jørgen S. Neilsen, ` The Contribution of Interfaith Dialogue towards a Culture of Peace` *Current Dialogue*, no. 36 December 2000, 25.