

“DIALOGUE AND COEXISTENCE”
An Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant

Adopted in Cairo: Shawwâl 1422/December 2001

by

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1. 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.” The group included members from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, the Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

They shared a firm belief in coexistence between Muslims and Christians in a society where freedom, justice, equality, and the rights of citizenship prevail.

They were cognizant of the need to work together in addressing internal concerns and in facing the external dangers that threaten the people, Muslims and Christians, of the one Arab homeland;

And they were aware that people of faith, following the dictates of their respective beliefs, must form an alliance to fulfill their obligation toward their Arab nation and homeland, an alliance to help foster national unity and to strengthen a sense of belonging to one nation embracing all its citizens no matter their religious affiliations, helping them transcend confessional or clannish partisanship so that, all together, they might work for the nation as a whole.

2. The motive of all members of the working group was and continues to be their personal convictions. None pretend officially to represent any particular body. That which moved and still moves them to work within the group is their religious commitment, and their desire to achieve only that which serves the common good. In this they keep in view the nation as a whole, not simply one segment of it, one group, one sect, one party or any other thing of that sort. The members have agreed that theirs is to be a “dialogue of life,” a dialogue they will pursue through intellectual discussion and action programs which bring together adherents of both religions in order that they might stand together in the face of those things which socially, educationally, morally and culturally challenge the nation.

In the group’s view, Muslim-Christian dialogue is not simply a dialogue between compatriots who belong to the same national group. It is also a dialogue among believers who perceive in this effort of theirs an applied expression of their religious principles, principles that give substance to the meaning of pluralism, mutual recognition, the unqualified dignity of the human being, and 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 a series of 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 organized a conference on Jerusalem in June, 1996. The first of its kind, this conference brought together Muslim and Christian decision-makers and the cream of Arab intellectuals. The group also initiated several other events among the most important of which have been meetings between Muslim and Christian youth in Egypt and Lebanon.

4. Drawing upon its growing experience and upon the results of conferences and activities over past years, the group thought it good to prepare this document on dialogue and coexistence. It articulates principles and broad guidelines that might help give wider currency to a culture of dialogue, mutual understanding, coexistence and common action to nurture a patriotic, just and free society equipped to face the dangers that threaten to unravel the national fabric.
5. The Arab Working Group on Dialogue observes that the effort to give firm foundation to a sense of coexistence is mandated by shared national and social concerns and aims, by a single historical and cultural process, and by a sense of common destiny. These are core issues that bring everyone together. The duties, rights and consequences they imply are not the domain of just one faction. Religious differences do not cancel out the fact of belonging all together to an Arab Islamic culture, in whose making Christians and Muslims participate side by side.
6. In the face of foreign interventions and designs for asserting domination over the Arab world, the group sees the strengthening national unity as imperative. Sensitive to how external intervention can precipitate internal unrest that can take on a religious coloration, it is not right to make light of how internal factors and circumstances can be manipulated and exploited by foreign powers to serve their own interests.

The citizens of the united nation, both Muslim and Christian, must join in dialogue and work together to address internal issues and to solve the problems they raise. This is the prerequisite to frustrating foreign interference that only aggravates the situation and nurtures suspicions and mutual fear. But if making light of how internal problems can inflict great damage on national unity, so too making too much of them can provoke similar damage. Among Muslim and Christian citizens of one nation, exaggerations can foster a generalized atmosphere of panic, fear and self-isolation.

All of this mandates strengthening and sustaining dialogue. It must be translated into practical program aimed at giving firm foundation to coexistence and treating the root causes of confessional religious unrest. Political, economic, social and cultural circumstances account for much of this unrest. These objective factors conspire to breed an atmosphere of general malaise that may manifest itself in many guises, one of which is religious unrest. Obviously they do not have an impact upon only one religious community; their bane and the burden of addressing them fall upon the whole of society.

7. Another thing that may be claimed for dialogue is that it is a way of resolving the confusion between genuine religiosity and the objectionable extremism that leads to violence and fanaticism. Extremism (a harshness of mind that sees only self and no other) and violence (a behavioral distortion intending to impose one's views by force on those who differ), are not inexorably linked to or typical of religious commitment. What helps give rise to them is a complex of circumstances and political, social, economic and broad cultural factors. Out of these extremism or violence can manifest themselves in various guises and contradictory doctrines. A wrong understanding of what it means to be religious can strengthen the reaction to those circumstances. Moderation is abandoned for types of behavior that true religiosity and authentic religious values cannot accept.

In light of this as it works to foster coexistence, one aim of dialogue is to raise the standard of the debate through 'that which is best,' and bring to the fore values of spiritual devotion and lofty humanitarianism. Dialogue is directed toward the high purpose of realizing the public good and responding to social and developmental problems that confront all groups in society. It affirms that a valid understanding of religious devotion includes accepting the religiously different 'other,' living with that 'other,' and respecting his or her religious convictions, and the private nature of his or her rites and religious laws.

8. Given that the underpinnings of coexistence, the interests of a united country, the social interaction of citizens of a single nation presuppose dialogue, it is also a spiritual, moral and cultural requirement for promoting the virtue of believers getting to know each other. That can only contribute toward deepening mutual respect, strengthening the bonds of affection, and correcting distorting or erroneous stereotypes that give rise to reciprocal alienation and fear.

Difference and variety are facts of human life. Indeed, they are signs from God manifested in human beings and in creation. Dialogue, getting to know one another, and competing in the doing of good have a way of mobilizing difference and variety as sources of social enrichment, inhibiting their being twisted to stimulate fear, feuding, conflict and mutual alienation.

9. Muslim-Christian dialogue also sets out fully aware of the dangers in the argument that 'bloody frontiers' divide Christianity and Islam worldwide. This an argument based upon the notion of the clash of civilizations, masking with a religious patina western plans for domination. Over against this, on the world stage, Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue intends to affirm a united Arab position, both Muslim and Christian, defending common Arab causes, first among which is the cause of Jerusalem. But a distinction must be made between Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue, and the dialogue between Arabs – Christians and Muslims – and other cultures, western and non-western.
10. Arab Muslim-Christian dialogue gains added significance in light of a number of phenomena, factors and obstacles which are peculiar to relations between Arab Muslims and Christians. In fact, as the working group sees it, these constitute an added incentive for dialogue and common action.
11. Lack of respect for cultural and religious distinctiveness and the poor management of pluralism in Arab societies has, to some extent and in specific countries, restricted areas in which Muslims and Christians can intermingle, join with each other, meet, work together and cooperate. This restriction has affected residential districts, educational institutions (especially private ones), professional, cultural and political institutions, and clubs. The effect of this has been to weaken the institutions of civil society that ought to be a uniting force for the national body politic. Addressing this, the dialogue envisioned by the working group strives to foster full citizenship and participation in public life freed from the shackles of confessionalism that, by their nature, undermine national unity, open doors to foreign interference and obstruct democratic development.
12. Some Arab environments now witness a retreat from a culture of understanding one another, of mutual recognition built upon calm and diligent dialogue, and of seeking information in original documents. This has been replaced by polemical, injurious and inflammatory rhetoric that, having no grounding in serious knowledge, only exacerbates doubts and fears, and stimulates increased verbal and symbolic violence. This manifestation demands a firm response founded upon sincere frankness, bold opposition, persistent awareness-building, and constructive efforts to help adherents of the two religions get to know each other. This is what the working group has stood for and, in all its activities, this is what it has been working toward.
13. There is another observable phenomenon. It is fear about the future that arises out of economic, social and political conditions. Among the most prominent of these is Israeli aggression, the lack of democracy, the curbing of freedoms, and crises having to do with the quality of life. Frequently this fear is laid at the door of the relationship between Muslims and Christians, a factor which builds it into a major fear of fantastic proportions. Evident equally among the majority and the minority, it pictures one religious group threatening the future of the other. To counter this fear, the working group has been encouraging joint efforts in summer work camps for youth. These offer

opportunity for everyone to get to know the other in a natural environment – the sort of thing that, in the past, was common in society as a whole and forestalled the appearance of mutual fear with its harmful effect upon coexistence.

14. Observable as well is a tendency on some people's part to link national and sectarian struggles elsewhere in the world with internal relations between the constituent Muslim and Christian strands of the national fabric. They picture the local situation to be an extension of a supposed worldwide struggle between Christianity and Islam. This serves to deepen doubts and fears between Muslims and Christians in our Arab countries. This can undermine 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 the specific positions adopted by fellow believers in a foreign national or confessional conflict. The working group believes that Muslim-Christian dialogue can help avert the threatened repercussions upon the process of coexistence in our local environment posed by national and sectarian conflicts elsewhere in the world. It can help prevent foreign powers using them to inflame mutual doubts and fears. At least it can expose this exploitation, neutralizing it of its corrosive effect upon relations between brothers and sisters, Muslims and Christians, fellow citizens of the nation.

Furthermore, Muslim-Christian dialogue intends to affirm the principle of absolute justice. Religiously committed people, both Muslims and Christians, are bound to support the cause of the persecuted and downtrodden, no matter what their religion, and no matter the religious affiliation of those who oppress and persecute them. This will effectively affirm the integrity of the national fabric and strengthen the values of coexistence between Muslim and Christian believers.

15. Dialogue is disciplined toward gaining comprehension, mutual understanding, always listening to one another and speaking frankly. It eschews inflammatory and wounding speech. It is an expression of intellectual and ethical integrity when dealing with the 'other', and is committed to the principles of justice and fairness. It allows latitude for correcting one's views, examining distorting stereotypes of the 'other', as well as examining one's self. Respecting the variations and differences between religions, the principles of coexistence and cooperation, and the equalitarian demands of citizenship, this dialogue is also a tool for building confidence, for nurturing genuine relationships, and for cultivating friendship.
16. The working group understands that Muslim-Christian dialogue is not a tool for proselytism or evangelism. It is not an endeavor to unify religions or somehow piece them together. It begins by respecting the right of others to their beliefs, and by strengthening the religious foundations for coexistence in one nation. It is the opportunity for believers to unite their hearts and minds in a sense of shared national and cultural belonging, in a sense of common destiny, as they focus upon common issues and challenges.
17. The desired dialogue is not directed toward self-serving debates or argumentative religious polemics. It does not call for comparisons or determining which is better. Nor is it governed by the urge to control so as to affirm one's self over against the other, or display superiority and mastery, or pride, superior competence and self-sufficiency.
18. What is desired in this dialogue is not a coup in negotiations between two power blocks, the Muslim and the Christian, on the assumption that each is a homogeneous whole. Although they share a core of commonly held fundamentals, adherents of any one religion represent a variety of differences in outlook, tendencies, views, interpretations and doctrinal positions.
19. This dialogue is not built upon accommodation or the kind of politeness that masks or ignores differences. It does not fall into the trap of dissimulation or deception. Effective

and constructive dialogue and cooperation do not presuppose that one party must back down on any point of doctrine or faith.

20. The principal standard for authentic dialogue is intellectual integrity. Just because this should be obvious does not mean we should not lay stress upon it. It assumes that, whenever necessary, we can cut loose from some of our inherited images or stereotypes of the 'other'. We can liberate ourselves from popular mythology. Intellectual integrity demands that, when we look at others' heritage, we use their sources and their self-definitions. This requires that we critically examine the distorted images each side has drawn of the other. And it demands a serious scholarly analysis of the cultural, social, historical and psychological factors that conspire to create feelings of mutual fear and suspicion.
21. Related to this is the effort to use one language in addressing Christian-Muslim relations, not two. The tendency is to use one language when addressing your own group, and another language when addressing another's group. For the sake of frankness and in order to avoid dissimulation, parties in dialogue must free themselves from those things which cause them to resort to ambiguous language that only discredits the dialogue's authenticity, and cancels out its achievements.
22. The working group believes that religion cannot be banished from public life; its constructive role therein cannot be denigrated. In the administration of the people's affairs, in achieving good things, in nurturing freedom, in supporting liberty, and in renewing creation, there is no substitute for religious values. They guard against corruption and deviation; they promote patriotic effort. This being said, religion must not be exploited for narrow political or partisan interests, or for instigating political and social conflict. This would be a denial of its role, its spiritual mission, and its very integrity. This would make of it an ancillary tool, not source of wisdom and guidance.
23. Dialogue and efforts at encouraging coexistence would have no integrity without respect being given to the religious particularities, sensibilities, symbols and sanctities of both Islam and Christianity. This is not to be limited to how adherents of the two religions treat each other. It must express itself also in both parties standing together against desecration of the things they each hold sacred by any party whatsoever.
24. While we affirm that religious liberty is a human right enshrined in the teachings of the religions themselves, as Muslims and Christians we stand together against any kind of material or moral pressure, or any means of coercion or seduction which may be used under the pretext of religious freedom to alienate Muslims and Christians from their respective religions. We urge Muslim and Christian religious scholars, people of culture, and intellectuals to look for the spiritual and humanitarian values held in common in the heritage both religions and in the life styles of their adherents, as well as for those positive and glowing examples of coexistence, solidarity, compassion, mutual affection, and hold them up to highlight dialogue and tolerance as it is practiced in society as a whole. Faithful people long for wisdom, and they are called to weigh matters on the honest scales of justice. Without it whatever they have is debased.
25. The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, agreeing upon the above principles and general guidelines. Considered as a whole, it sees them as constituting a guide or a basis for practical programs and steps in the cause of coexistence and in various other areas of public information, education, culture and society: 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.

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