



**World Council
of Churches**

The Role of Religion In Our Work for Justice and Peace

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In speaking about the role of religion in *our* work for justice and peace, my perspective goes beyond the simply sociological aspect of religions - though religion engages the major portion of the world's population. We can only speak about justice and peace for humanity, I believe, by speaking about our relationships to one another as human beings. That means our relationships among ourselves but also in relation to coming generations - and through them to the whole of creation.

Justice and peace - by whatever sensible definition we might understand them - cannot be limited to one group, one people, or all those of one belief. The work for justice and peace must be the agenda for all of us; it must be *our joint* work for justice and peace. Therefore, we should also ask and even discuss the role of religion, of religious leaders and communities, and even of the content of religious traditions for our common efforts toward justice and peace. Furthermore, it is time to ask how we use our religious values and traditions accountably in the world of today and tomorrow. There is an intrinsic and regrettable temptation for religious people to be more accountable to those who lived in the past than to those who are living today and tomorrow.

The request for a contribution to justice and peace for all from religions actually corresponds to the idea of *accountability* to God or to holy texts. The test of this accountability must be whether we are serving justice and peace for all, since all are created and in equal need of justice and peace for their well-being, safety, and happiness.

Traditional values and religious practices must show our willingness to care for all. Our accountability to God and our religions, particularly as we represent faith traditions and communities first established in certain limited contexts, must be broader, since the community has now become part of a wider and eventually a global fellowship. Faithfulness to God and traditional values must be tested by answering the questions we cannot escape: are we serving all people, and their need for justice and peace, whatever race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, generation or gender they are?

Today we know and live in this global fellowship, we the peoples of all religions, knowing well that what we do or fail to do somehow has an impact on the whole. There is no way to turn back to merely national interests, or to local or tribal realities, ignoring the global reality of our world. The examples are numerous: emissions forcing climate change are not bound by national borders; we have means of communication that can serve justice or harm human relationships immediately in almost every corner of the world; the economy in one part of the world has an immediate impact on the economy of other parts of the world.

I say this as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, representing about 345 Christian churches with more than 550 million members around the world. We are not a Western organization, but a global fellowship of Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches. Our 65 years of work have been shaped by our desire to see the Christian churches united, giving witness to the values represented by Jesus Christ, in a joint work for justice, peace and care for creation. We are now preparing our 10th Assembly in Busan, Korea, in November this year, with the theme "God of life, lead us to justice and peace!" We are committed to working with all people of faith, and all people of good will, to find how we as churches locally, nationally and globally can be accountable to God's call to let justice and peace prevail. No peace without proper justice, no sustainable justice without peace. Justice and peace shall kiss one another (as it is said in Psalm 85).

We humbly admit that our churches also represent parts of so-called Christian history that lent moral support to crusades, wars, colonization, exploitation, and the so-called doctrine of discovery. We also have to admit, unfortunately, looking at history and the present scene, that religion - and definitely not only my religion - is often employed to legitimize injustice and violence. We are sorry to see that this is an increasing problem again. Conflicts have even been defined as religious conflicts, rightly or wrongly so. This makes it even more urgent that there be an open, proper, critical and constructive reflection on the role of religion in our work for justice and peace and in our local and global life together. It must go beyond discussions about "misuse" of religion. It must also include a self-critical reflection on what our religions are teaching and representing today. History is no hiding place, not even for religious leaders representing and venerating religious traditions from the past.

We know that claiming accountability to God can free us from loyalties that actually mask the liberating truth the world might need. It is God, more than human beings, whom we have to obey. On the other hand, there must be, in the name of the whole of humanity, and

therefore in the name of God the creator of all, and in the name of the holy traditions themselves, a critique against those who claim that anything can be done in accountability to God. There is no authority given to anybody to do evil in the name of religion.

Still, we also believe that it is possible to learn, to change, and to contribute out of our accountability to God and holy traditions. Even more, we find, for example, in a joint Muslim-Christian visit to Nigeria, that the resources available in our holy books to motivate us for a joint work for peace and justice can and should be better known and utilized than they now are. We are trying to address that need, through a joint Muslim-Christian study with the Al'Beit Institute in Jordan and publications that will follow.

I believe, and I have seen, that religious faith and practice can make the most committed and powerful contributions to reconciliation and to economic justice. This faith has to be nurtured and structured and mobilized, both within religious communities and among them. It must be brought to bear on the work of our common global institutions for justice and peace. It is for the sake of our common efforts, but also for holding religious traditions accountable in the framework of our global realities and our common origin and destiny as one humanity.

I am therefore very inspired by how several UN institutions ask for our collaboration and joint efforts, as in our collaborations with UNAIDS, with ILO about decent work and social justice, with the UNHCR (now resulting in a new publication to be launched here in Geneva next week: *Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders*). There is an encouraging sense of how we as churches can contribute to joint efforts for human rights and peace.

Our work also includes the worldwide church itself. One of the exciting developments in the Christian world this year is the election of a pope who has chosen the name Francis, a sign of a commitment and a clear priority to be given by the Roman Catholic Church to justice and peace in the course of his papacy.

As the leader of the World Council of Churches, I am very willing, indeed glad, to say that I believe our role as a religious organization is not to have all the solutions ourselves – but rather to work with others, such as intergovernmental bodies and secular NGOs, to contribute to them. We can offer our work and our prayers, the most personal expression of commitment.

We also should offer a common human perspective on our shared vulnerability. This basic human vulnerability cannot be overcome by more weapons. It is on that essential premise that I believe the health not only of religion but of our world, depends.

When the World Council of Churches began, there was recognition of the failure of the churches to prevent two world wars in the 20th century. Divided among themselves, the churches did not offer enough actors for reconciliation and peace. The World Council of Churches was formed to anticipate and serve the unity of humankind by fostering

reconciliation and unity among the churches from different traditions and diverse cultural, social and political contexts. Over six decades, the WCC has contributed in many ways to the emergence of a global civil society. This is where I see our call today.

The system of the United Nations has been struggling to move from the reality of “We the states” to the vision of “We the people,” sharing life on planet Earth and caring for it. It requires the collective will and commitment of people all around the world to move states into new global economic and ecological structures and a global cooperative security system that will help to prevent war and sustain the planet. That is where I see religion – and particularly the life of the churches – having a vital role to play. The nature of religious allegiance is such that it can help to build those vital bridges between states and peoples, motivating people not simply as individuals but as members of wider, and potentially powerful, entities and in doing so contribute transformationally to the life of nations and of the global community.

This vision requires of us that we be never content with ourselves, but always go beyond ourselves reaching out to other actors in civil society and especially to other religions.

God does not need religion. We as humanity can, however, be well served by our religious traditions if they inspire us to honour God by striving for justice and peace for all of humanity and the whole creation. Therefore we pray, God of life lead *us* to justice and peace.

Geneva, June 3, 2013